

Article

The Missional Power of the Christ-Hymn

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Abstract: Discussions of Philippians 2:6–11 consider whether it is intended kerygmatically or ethically. Kerygmatic proponents consider that Paul inserted an early hymn to narrate the story of Christ’s coming and his exaltation to encourage the worship of Christ. Ethical readers argue that the hymn aims to shape readers’ ethical posture. Others argue that both ideas are in play. This essay argues that the passage has kerygmatic power. It declares the story of Christ’s coming, self-emptying and humbling, incarnation, death, exaltation, and cosmic lordship. However, it also presents Christ as the ultimate ethical paradigm. It argues, however, that the “ethical” reading is reductionistic unless explained in the direction of social relationships (socioethically) and mission (missioethically). The passage’s missional power is then clarified. First, the broader context in the first century is missional and evangelistic. Second, the “fabric” of the letter urges engagement in gospel proclamation. Third, the movement of the passage is missional, and it succinctly proclaims the gospel of Christ. Fourth, the purpose of Christ’s exaltation is universal submission supposing the proclamation of his lordship. Finally, the hymn climaxes with worship, the end goal of all missions. As such, the hymn should be read through a missional and evangelistic lens as it invites readers to participate in God’s goal of universal submission to Jesus Christ as Lord.

Keywords: Philippians; Christ-hymn; mission; evangelism; Apostle Paul; Pauline theology



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1. Introduction

For over a century, scholars have argued whether the so-called “Christ-hymn” should be read kerygmatically as a declaration of Christ (e.g., Käsemann 1968, pp. 45–88; Barth 2002, pp. 59–68; Beare 1976, pp. 74–75) or ethically as a presentation of Christ as an ethical example (e.g., Lightfoot 1913, p. 110; Müller 1955, p. 77; Fee 1995, pp. 199–201). Some scholars challenge the typically Western “either-or” perspective and read the passage from both a kerygmatic and an ethical perspective (Silva 2005, pp. 95–98; Hansen 2009, pp. 119–22; Gorman 2001, p. 44). In this essay, I will take this third way—the passage should be read in both ways. It is a glorious proclamation of who Jesus is. It is also integral to Paul’s appeal to a Christocentric ethic for the Philippians and other Christian readers.¹

However, I will also aver that, while both approaches go some way to understanding the passage, neither reading captures the missiological intent and power of the Christ-hymn. I argue that the hymn is not merely written to declare the Christ story to the world or to appeal to the Philippians to emulate Jesus in their internal relationships. It challenges readers to evangelism and a Christoform posture as they share the gospel throughout the world. It is to be read kerygmatically, ethically, socially, and missionally/evangelistically.²

2. Kerygmatic and Ethical Perspectives on the Hymn

Contemporary Philippians 2:6–11 studies customarily ask whether the passage should be read kerygmatically or ethically. Kerygmatic readers like Ernst Käsemann consider the piece a declaration of the lordship of Christ rather than an appeal to live in a particular way. They abstract the text from its context, search for an alternative earlier *Sitz Im Leben*, and ponder its extraordinary Christology and meaning (Käsemann 1968, pp. 45–88). Kerygmatic readers are, to some degree, right in doing this. They recognize that the so-called “hymn”

(e.g., Deichgräber 1967, p. 22; Sanders 1971, pp. 1–5; Hofius 1976; Hengel 1983, pp. 78–96; Hurtado 1984, pp. 113–126; Martin 1997), or exalted prose (Fee 1992, pp. 29–46; 1995, p. 40), which I will call a “hymn” for simplicity, is an astonishing summative declaration of the person and identity of Christ, his humble service and self-sacrifice for the world, and his glorious exaltation as Lord over all spiritual and other political forces. I will comment further on this as I briefly consider the missional and liturgical implications of the hymn.

Ethical readers like Gordon Fee critique kerygmatic readers for failing to read the hymn in its context. They usually discuss its *Sitz im Leben* but recognize that such a setting remains speculative. They focus on the ethical implications of the passage for readers.³ This approach is appropriate, for Philippians 2:6–11, read in the context of the whole letter and its immediate context (particularly 2:1–4, 12), summons readers to a certain ethic. Paul is calling them to emulate the phronesis of Jesus who, in his earthly life and presently in heaven, embodies the things Paul is asking the Philippians to cultivate to end the nascent conflict between rival factions grouped around two leaders, Euodia and Syntyche (4:2–3).

They rightly recognize that, throughout, even as he moves between discussions of his context and that of the Philippians, Paul appeals for a particular ethical response. Everything in the letter is crafted to summon them away from attitudes and behaviors fueling their dispute. They are to renounce such things as envy, rivalry (1:15), selfish ambition (1:17; 2:3), causing others pain (1:17),⁴ vain (literally, “empty”)⁵ conceit (2:3), self-centeredness (2:4, 21), grumbling, disputing (2:14), and gluttony (3:19).⁶

Instead, they are to cultivate in their community such things as mutual servanthood (1:1; 2:17, 22), unity and fellowship in the gospel and Spirit (1:5; 2:1; 4:2), affection (1:8), love,⁷ goodwill (1:15), joy,⁸ prayer (1:19; 4:6–7), hope (1:20), sacrifice for the gospel (1:22–25), perseverance (1:27; 3:12, 14; 4:1), suffering (1:27–28; 3:10), encouragement, comfort, compassion, mercy (2:1, 27), humility (2:3), others-centeredness (2:4, 20, 26), obedience (2:12), blamelessness (2:15), sacrifice (2:17, 30), empathy (2:26–27), mutual honor (2:29), help (4:3), clemency (4:5), peace (4:7, 9), correct thinking (4:8), material generosity (4:10–18), contentment (4:12), and God-dependence (4:13, 19).

However, I contend that “ethical” is an unsatisfactory term to describe the power of the hymn. The first issue with the ethical reading is that “ethical” in conservative Christian circles is often read in terms of personal rather than relational morality. Such a limited ethical perspective can lead to failure to appreciate the social or relational dimension of the letter’s appeal.⁹ Unlike his other letters, which cover a range of ethical matters, *all* the ethical material in this epistle is set within the context of the social relationships under strain in Philippi. There is no genuine interest in many of the moral and ethical issues that come up in the Pauline corpus, such as sexual immorality. Hence, the term “ethical” is inadequate; instead, the appeal is, more correctly, socioethical.¹⁰

With this caveat in mind, the declaration of Jesus in 2:6–8 undoubtedly has an ethical dimension. Although divine and rightfully able to claim and exploit his status of equality with God, Jesus renounced the use of rapacious force usually associated with imperial rule, emptied himself, assumed the posture of a slave, became human, and humbled himself by being obedient to the point of crucifixion. God then exalted him as Lord and the embodiment of himself, calling to mind Isaiah 45:23, where all humans bow the knee and confess his lordship. Believers are to emulate his example of self-giving for the world.¹¹

Still, I remain unsatisfied even with the qualifier “socio” added to ethical. When read in the context of Philippians, the passage is also profoundly missional. Kerygmatically, it brilliantly and succinctly declares who Jesus is and what he has done. It is then an evangelistic proclamation of Christ. It also points to the global mission that flows from the Christ event to this day, whereby the gospel will be preached to *every* human capable of hearing the word, believing, and responding by bending the knee and acknowledging Christ’s divine lordship. It invites faith-filled readers to engage in missional engagement with the posture of Christ. So, while it is ethical in its challenge to readers to take up the posture of Christ in their lives, it is not simply ethical or socioethical; it is missioethical.¹²

Paul desires the Philippians to assume a Christlike ethic in service of the defense and advance of the gospel (1:7, 12).

Furthermore, it is profoundly liturgical, as it declares who Christ is and summons all people to bend their knees to the glory of God the Father now. Its liturgical dimension flows from the hymn's missional dynamic—the mission is to declare this Jesus to the world so that every knee will bend, and every tongue acknowledge now the lordship of Jesus, to the glory of God the Father.

In what follows, I will lay out the basis for these claims by first looking at the missional aspects of the hymn, then its missional movement, and finally, its mission-liturgical dynamics.

3. Missional Aspects of the Hymn

Here, I identify six aspects that convince me that the passage can and should be read missionally and evangelistically. It summons believers to participate in God's mission and with a particular posture.

3.1. The Missional Setting in the First Century

The letter was written either in 52–55 AD or, as I prefer, in AD 62–63.¹³ Either way, this was when the church was missional to its core as it radiated out from Jerusalem to the world. Jesus' courageous mission was a recent phenomenon.¹⁴ His sacrificial death and example inspired the early Christians to a similar degree of commitment.¹⁵ Since Pentecost, after which the disciples were thrust into Spirit-empowered witness (Acts 2:1–4, cf. 1:8),¹⁶ Christians were taking the gospel with them wherever they went (e.g., Acts 8:4).

The account of Paul's traveling coworker and travel companion, Luke, confirms this evangelistic zeal.¹⁷ After Peter preached in Jerusalem, some 3000 people from the nations became believers at Pentecost and carried the gospel home north, south, east, and west (Acts 2:9–11, 42). The writer of the Philippians, Paul, then Saul, accelerated this mission through his persecution as believers driven from the city evangelized Samaria, Judea, and Syrian Antioch (Acts 8:1–40; 11:19–26).¹⁸ After his Damascus Road encounter with his coworkers, Paul took the gospel into Arabia, Cilicia, Syria, Anatolia, and the Balkans (Acts 9, 13–28; Rom 15:19; Gal 1:17–21). Others, known but largely unknown, continued the work.

Unlike Western Christianity, which has been thoroughly evangelized for centuries and is now in decline, Christianity was expanding at an incredible pace through the social networks of the Roman world. Whereas Western Christians are evangelistically quiet, the gospel's spread was in full swing at the time of the writing of Philippians. An evangelistic mindset was essential to a first-century believer.

If Philippians was written in the 50s from Ephesus, according again to Luke, it was written during a period of dramatic evangelism by Paul and his coworkers in Asia Minor, western Anatolia (Acts 19:10). It is likely in that two-to-three-year period that the churches addressed in 1 Peter 1:1 and Revelation 2–3 were established. One of those coworkers was likely Epaphras, who established the church in Colossae and probably Laodicea and Hierapolis (Col 1:6; 4:12–13, 16). If, as I argue, Philippians was written in the 60s, Paul was in Rome during a period of high evangelistic fervor among local Christians (1:12–18a) within a few years of Nero's horrific persecution and the execution of Paul and Peter (1:12–18a).¹⁹

About to face trial after his appeal to Caesar, Paul's vision for the mission was not spent. While Philippians suggests he wants to return east to Philippi to ensure they are okay, we know from Romans of his yearning to go further west to Spain to establish the gospel where it has not been preached (Rom 15:20–28). His concern expressed in the letter to continue living was partly motivated to see more fruit for the gospel, likely meaning further converts (1:22; cf. Rom 1:13) (Bowers 1987, p. 197).

His desire to return to Philippi was also missional—he wanted the Philippians for their προκοπήν καὶ χαράν τῆς πίστεως. In an intentional inclusio, earlier προκοπή was

used for the advance of the gospel. As will be discussed below, While the emphasis is the Philippians' progress and joy from the faith, the inclusio suggests that within the range of the noun is not merely their ethical advance and deepened social cohesion but further missional success as they, with refreshed unity, will stand firm in the Lord, contend for the faith of the gospel (1:27), and hold forth the word of life (2:16), as they have done in their past with Paul (cf. 4:2–3). Their joy is not that of a happy community but one into which new converts won through wise, gracious, winsome evangelism (Col 4:5–6).²⁰

Wherever he is imprisoned, the letter's writer is Paul, a missionary, passionately motivated that all the Gentiles hear the message. Contemporary Western readers accustomed to seeing a church on every corner for centuries must reorientate themselves to the mindset of the early Christians who knew of no other life than seeing the gospel expand. As such, even before considering the literary context of the letter and the Christ-hymn, we cannot think merely in ethical terms. Everything Paul writes has an evangelistic and missional edge.

3.2. The Missional Fabric of the Letter

Not only was the broader context missionally shaped, but as Fee and Ware have in different ways argued (Fee 1995, pp. 47, 158–67, 244–48; 1999, pp. 20–22, 77–79, 107–109; Ware 2005, passim), and I aver at length in *Congregational Evangelism in Philippians*,²¹ the content of Philippians and the context for the Christ-hymn breathes mission.

Uniquely, Paul begins the letter by naming himself and Timothy as “slaves of Christ Jesus”. Their collaboration speaks of their father-son partnership in the gospel (2:19–23).²² It emphasizes their desire to emulate the “slave-formed” Jesus in posture and mission (2:7). The letters of Paul and Luke in Acts indicate how closely the pair worked, something that would have been well-known to the Philippians since Paul and his team evangelized the town a decade or so earlier (Acts 16) and their visit around four to five years earlier en route to Jerusalem with the Collection (Acts 20:6; 2 Cor 2:13; 7:5–8:5).²³

The thanksgiving has at its heart in 1:5, “partnership in the gospel”, a phrase that, as I have argued extensively, cannot be limited merely to financial support as some continue to espouse. Instead, it speaks of partnership in mission including at least shared faith, financial (2:25–30; 4:10–19) and prayer support (1:19), shared suffering (1:28–30), ethical witness (2:15), active evangelization amid persecution (1:27–30; 2:16a; 4:2–3), unified resistance to false gospels (3:2–21), and defending and advancing the gospel (1:27; 3:1–20) (Keown 2009, pp. 209–16; Keown 2017b, vol. 1, pp. 127–33). Although disputed and able to be read more generally of salvation, with many others, I maintain that in context, Philippians 1:6 and 7 continue the theme of mission.²⁴

Paul's report in 1:12–18e does not focus on his dramas in Roman imprisonment but on the gospel's advance at his point of imprisonment (esp. 1:12). The government officials (Osborne 2017, p. 37)²⁵ know why he is in prison (in Christ). Some are likely being converted (4:22).²⁶ Even though one group of these passionate proclaimers²⁷ is falsely motivated by envy, rivalry, selfish ambition, and malice toward Paul, the apostle rejoices that the gospel is being preached (1:18a). Indeed, it is axiomatic for Paul that the gospel is preached at all times and in every way (Keown 2017b, vol. 1, pp. 215–18; 2016, pp. 195–208). Philippians 1:18f–26 speaks of Paul's forthcoming trial and his dilemma concerning its outcome—life or death. Still, the evangelistic mission is mentioned in three ways. First, Paul rejoices that his situation will turn out for his salvation due to the Philippians' prayers and the Spirit's help or supply.²⁸ This confidence accords with his eager expectation and hope that he will not be ashamed as he faces Nero's judiciary. Mention of shame here recalls Mark 8:38 (Friedrich 1965, p. 103) and other Pauline texts where Paul declares his lack of shame in the gospel and a crucified Christ (Rom 1:16; 2 Tim 1:8, 12, 16). Instead, Paul, as always and now, will, with all courageous proclamation (ἐν πάσῃ παρρησίᾳ),²⁹ Christ will be honored in his body whether he lives or dies (v. 20).

Second, ongoing life will mean bodily life with Christ and “fruitful labor”. As in Romans 1:13, καρπός likely means further fruit from his apostolic ministry of bringing

about the obedience of faith among the Gentiles (cf. Rom 1:4). This fruit includes the strengthening of disciples and further converts (Loh and Nida 1995, p. 33).

Third, faced in some way with life or death and a choice he does not want to make known, Paul chooses to remain in the flesh for the sake of the Philippians. He desires to remain for the Philippians' joyful progress (προκοπήν καὶ χαρὰν) produced by faith (τῆς πίστεως). Such progress would seem to be ethical, but noting that προκοπή is used in 1:12 of the advance of the gospel, it should be seen here to be holistic, including virtuous lives, social relationships, and missional progress. This advance will result in worship (boasting) in Christ Jesus as the Philippian Christians and converts welcome Paul back to Philippi (1:25–26). It also includes the chorus of praise from new converts Paul will make on his trip.

The proposition of the letter (Witherington 2011, p. 96) summons the Philippians to live as heavenly citizens (cf. 3:20) worthy of the gospel (1:27a). On its own, the appeal applies to every facet of their Christian existence, whether it be worship, community wholeness, and missional engagement. Still, Paul leaves nothing to chance and ensures they recognize the appeal's missional dimensions. The sub-clauses indicate that their heavenly citizenship will result in Paul hearing of their unity as they stand as tightly bound as a Macedonian phalanx or a Roman maniple or cohort, as they defend and advance the gospel in Macedonia, as the situation demands (1:27c). Like athletes at the games, they will contend as one soul for the defense or advance of the gospel (1:27d). They are to engage in mission without being intimidated by those in the community who oppose them, for their suffering is a gift from God as is their faith. Indeed, their unwavering determination signifies their eternal salvation, just as their persecutors' antagonism indicates their endless destruction. In standing, contending, and defying their opponents, they emulate Paul, who suffered greatly in his first visit to Philippi and his current experience in Roman prison (1:28–30; Acts 16:11–40) (Keown 2009, pp. 107–24).

Philippians 2:1–4 flows from³⁰ the focus on evangelistic heavenly citizenship to the posture the Philippians are to take up as they live and conduct their mission. With literary creativity, Paul summons the Philippians to the encouragement, consolation from love, spiritual unity, gut affection, and compassion they together experience in Christ (2:1). With the nascent contention between the missionary workers Euodia and Syntyche in view (4:2–3), Paul urges the Philippians to complete his joy with unified thinking, the same love, and oneness of soul and mindset (2:3). He encourages them and the whole church to renounce selfish ambition, empty pride, and self-interest, but with a posture of humility, esteem others above themselves and look toward the interests of others (2:3–4).

The material following the hymn is launched by the inferential conjunction ὥστε, “therefore, for this reason” (Arndt et al. 2000, p. 250), and so draws out how the Philippians are to respond to the glorious declaration of Christ's humiliation and glorification. They must respond with continued obedience and work out their own salvation by God's strength and power (2:12–13).³¹ This appeal is not that they may gain salvation through their work but that they work out their status as God's saved people. Of course, their doing this will result in greater community cohesion.

This general appeal, like the appeal for gospel-worthy citizenship in 1:27, includes worship, personal ethics, church relationships, and mission. Indeed, these elements feature in what follows as Paul works out the imperative, “work out your own salvation”.

In 2:14, with the feud between Euodia and Syntyche again in mind, Paul urges the people of the church to abandon grumbling and arguing. These destroy community cohesion. They do this for a missional purpose (ἵνα):³² so that the Philippians will be blameless and pure, unlike Israel in the wilderness (Silva 2005, pp. 123–25). Cursory readers can assume Paul's interest here is personal ethics or morality. However, the context suggests Paul's primary concern is social relationships; hence, it is socioethical. In their social relationships, they are to be spotless and pure.

In verse 15, the appeal becomes explicitly missioethical as it takes on an explicitly missional edge. The Philippians are to be united in the gospel amid the crooked and perverted world of Macedonia and the Roman Empire. In this context, they are to shine

as lights of the world.³³ This interest in the κόσμος, “world”, here moves the appeal from social ethics to missional ethics. Paul imagines the quality of the shared life of the Philippians radiating into the darkness of the region. At first blush, this appears to speak of ethical purity or spotless social relationships within the church. However, the metaphor of light includes its movement from the people of light into the world’s darkness. This missional twist brings evangelism into view as elsewhere, Paul likens the gospel of the glory of Christ proclaimed to light radiating into the world darkened by sin and evil forces. As a new creation act, this gospel shines God’s truth into the hearts, bringing enlightenment concerning the knowledge of God’s glory in the face of Christ (2 Cor 4:4–6).³⁴

As I have argued and explicated on three occasions in various writings, the outward evangelistic dynamic flows on in the debated 2:16a. Although 2:16a can be translated as “hold fast the word of life”, as is extremely common today, as most earlier commentators and a growing group today assert, it more likely calls the Philippians to “hold forth the word of life”; that is, offering the gospel to a dark, thirsty, and hungry world (Ware 2005, pp. 269–70; Murray 1998, pp. 322–23; Fee 1995, pp. 244–48; Keown 2020, pp. 98–117). Just as Paul being poured out as a libation includes his evangelistic endeavor, the “sacrifice and service” flowing from the faith of the Philippians should be read to include the same. Notably, their mutual sacrifice leads again to corporate joy.

Timothy and Epaphroditus are not mentioned merely to convey Paul’s travel plans (2:19–30). They are presented as rhetorical examples not only of godly virtue but also of evangelism. In the gospel, they partner with Paul and others who are prepared to give their lives for the gospel and other Christians. In the case of Timothy, he seeks not his interests but those of Jesus Christ, which, of course, includes the evangelization of the world (v. 21). He is tested and approved through his service for the gospel with his “father” Paul (v. 22).

Where Epaphroditus is concerned, in 2:25, Paul esteems him as a brother, coworker, and fellow soldier. All three ideas indicate his participation with Paul for the gospel (Keown 2017b, vol. 2, pp. 32–38). He is also the Philippians’ ἀπόστολος, which is traditionally read as “messenger”, but in my view, here carries the nuance “apostle” of the local church (Dickson 2003, pp. 315–17; Keown 2009, pp. 170–83; 2017b, vol. 2, pp. 38–45). He is also a servant to Paul’s needs. Paul holds him in high esteem for nearly dying to deliver financial aid to him from Philippi. Thus, the Philippians should honor him (2:26–30).

Chapter 3 is often seen as an excursus or aside. However, the chapter fits snugly into the flow of the letter, continuing the themes of phronesis, cruciformity, the gospel, and unity. The Philippians are to emulate Paul, who in turn emulates Christ (cf. 1 Cor 11:1), rather than the Judaizers who propagate a flawed gospel (3:2) and pagans and others who repudiate the foolish message of the cross (3:18–19).³⁵ The Philippians are to be united in the gospel of Christ. They must “watch out for” and reject those with false perspectives on the word of the cross. There are limits to the unity the letter espouses—those with a false gospel are to be excluded and rejected (cf. Galatians; 2 Cor 10–13). As Paul presses on to win the prize of eternal life with Christ, the Philippian heavenly citizens must also push on in Christ as they await their Savior from heaven (3:14–21).

Chapter 4 gets to the grist of the relational issue in Philippi. Two evangelistic coworkers and significant leaders, Euodia and Syntyche, are urged to find unity in the gospel and the Lord (4:2–3). In these verses, we learn why Paul started the letter at his point of imprisonment with the contrast of well-motivated and falsely motivated believers preaching the gospel. The two gospel workers are to learn from the example of the well-motivated where Paul is imprisoned (1:15–18a), and those of Christ himself (2:5–11), Timothy and Epaphroditus (2:19–30), and Paul himself (esp. 3:1–11), and partner together to continue to proclaim Christ in the world (see 3:17; 4:9). Unified evangelism is what matters, rather than the flawed ethics of the falsely motivated preachers. The one true gospel must be verbally shared in the world, not the flawed expressions of the Judaizers and enemies of the cross. The Philippians are to do so cemented together with all the ethical attributes the letter summons them to, including those that follow the direct appeal to the women (4:4–9).

The letter ends with issues of money and gospel mission as Paul commends their generosity (4:10–20). Notably, every example in the letter is evangelistic, whether the examples are negative or positive. Undeniably, the fabric of the letter is evangelistic and missional.

3.3. *The Missional Movement of the Christ-Hymn*

The story of the Christ-hymn is missional in its movement. The phrases “in the form of God” and “equality with God” speak of Christ’s prior existence as the divine Son of God (Cohick 2013, pp. 112–13). This person is the same being as “the man from heaven” (1 Cor 15:47–49), the Son God sent out from heaven, born of a woman under the law to redeem those under it (Gal 4:4), and the one who came in the form of sinful flesh (Rom 8:3). The fully divine invisible Son became human and dwelt on earth where he lived the life and died the death the hymn portrays.

Without dwelling on Jesus’ ministry details, the passage climaxes with Jesus’ self-humbling death by crucifixion, which, throughout Paul’s letters, is the sacrificial death that deals with sin, enables justification, and saves humankind.³⁶ In v. 9, Jesus is exalted to the highest place, which 3:20 tells readers is heaven.³⁷ He is given the name above all names, the name of God made known to Moses in the wilderness (Bockmuehl 1997, p. 142).³⁸ He is forever God the Son, the Lord, incarnate, and the Savior of humankind (3:20). Moreover, by this time, through the ministries of Paul, Timothy, Silas, Luke, the Jerusalem Collection group, and others who came to Philippi in the time between the church planting and the letter,³⁹ the Philippians would be aware of the whole story of Jesus’s mission. They would naturally “join the dots” as we do.⁴⁰

3.4. *The Hymn as Evangelistic Proclamation*

Those who argue for a kerygmatic reading are right to say that the hymn is a magnificent declaration of the identity and work of Jesus. Jesus is declared the main subject of vv. 6–8 in v. 6 as ὁ υἱός. The hymn then moves crisply from his preexistent divinity to humble servanthood, culminating in the cross. The passage crisply declares τὸ εὐαγγέλιον Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ. As such, it is profoundly evangelistic. It is what we might call a very succinct gospel tract. Indeed, although it may have predated Mark’s Gospel,⁴¹ it reads as a sharp summary of what Mark produced. Mark then became the foundation of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.⁴² History shows that believers experience this as they dwell on the passage and experience its lyrics speaking into our hearts the mystery of the gospel: that the Son of God in the form of God and equal in every sense to God would empty himself for humankind. That he would be born a man in a patriarchal world and yet serve people relentlessly to the point of death. That Jesus would become a human encased in mortal flesh subject to death. That Jesus was obedient to the point of dying to save the world on the cross, the most shameful death in the ancient world.

For those with ears to hear, in the hands of the Spirit (cf. Eph 6:17), it has the power to penetrate hearts as Paul’s words did for Lydia (Acts 16:14) and as prophetic proclamation can potentially do for outsiders and unbelievers (1 Cor 14:20–25). It has the power to generate faith that brings salvation (Rom 10:14–17). It is the gospel-in-cameo. It is missional in its very essence. If what we have in the passage is all or parts of a hymn,⁴³ it was a song sung in early churches; a song that, like Isaac Watts’ “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” (Watts 1707), or more recently, Graham Kendrick’s “The Servant King” (Kendrick 1983), and “In Christ Alone” (Getty and Townend 2001), that evokes faith and a desire to respond to God with service. The climax of the hymn declares the appropriate response to Jesus—to bend the knee and acknowledge him as Lord. As such, the hymn summons all people to yield to Jesus Christ as Lord to the glory of God the Father.

3.5. *The Missional Purpose of Christ’s Exaltation*

In verse 10, the hymn tells readers the purpose of God’s exaltation of Jesus, and it is missional. Having poured himself out for God’s mission to save humankind and this

world, God highly exalted Jesus and bestowed on him the highest of all possible names. This designation speaks of Christ's return to the status he had before he came, "Lord", and now with a new twist—he is also the "Savior" who has completed his work (3:20). For Paul, he is the Lord we read of in Isaiah 45 and across Israel's Scriptures.

Verse 10 explains why the *Huios tou Theou* entered the creation as the *doulos*-, *anthrōpos*-, and crucis-formed one (2:6–8). Jesus did this "so that (ἵνα) at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord" (emphasis mine). Verses 10 and 11a can be quickly read over without much thought given to the ἵνα that launches v. 10. However, a lot is happening in this conjunction. It is disputed whether this is a purpose (or final) clause: "*with the purpose that every knee will bend . . . and every tongue acknowledge*";⁴⁴ or that it is a result (or ecbatic or consecutive) clause: "*with the result that every knee will bend to the glory of God the Father*".

An excellent case can be made for this being a result ἵνα (Fee 1995, p. 223). Most notably, universal submission to God fits with Isaiah 45:23, where God swears by himself that this universal submission and confession will come to pass. If so, while this verse has been used to defend universal salvation, this does not mean universalism, as Paul has made apparent in Philippians 1:28 and 3:19 that the destiny of those opposing God's people is destruction.⁴⁵ It conveys that a day of reckoning is coming when all will bend the knee to Jesus and confess his lordship. For believers like Paul, his coworkers, and his recipients who hold firm to the end, this bending of the knee and cry of confession will be the glorious day that the Savior returns from heaven and his citizens welcome him into his world (1 Thess 4:17) with joy and new life, willingly falling prostrate before him, singing "He is Lord!" For unbelievers, this will be a day of terror as they realize their error in rejecting the gospel of Christ and face judgment (Rom 2:5–11).

An equally good case can be made for a purpose clause, the majority view in NT scholarship (Arndt et al. 2000, p. 475; Silva 2005, pp. 111–12). According to Peter Lampe, eighty-three percent of Paul's uses are purposive.⁴⁶ If we take it this way, the purpose of Christ's mission and subsequent exaltation is that all humankind will yield to Jesus Christ the Lord. As such, readers or hearers are invited to consider their own posture regarding the Lord Jesus, now declared God. Implicitly, they are challenged to bend the knee and acknowledge Christ's lordship. Moreover, when they recognize the purpose of Jesus is that every person in the world do the same, they are summoned to not only reflect on it themselves but to convey its message to the world. Elsewhere, Paul expresses God's desire for all people (πάντας ἀνθρώπους) to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Tim 2:4) (Fee 2011, p. 57).⁴⁷ If we consider the Pastorals to be non-Pauline,⁴⁸ his desire for all humankind to hear the gospel and confess the lordship of Jesus is implied across all his letters.⁴⁹ And, notably, it is "*every (πᾶν) knee*", pointing to the need to get the message of this Jesus to every nation where knees are found. Readers are summoned to global mission by its appeal. And, as I have also argued elsewhere, Paul was under no illusion that this job was nearly complete. The first-century Romans' knowledge of the extent of the world and the Christian passion that all people hear the gospel rules this out (Keown 2018, pp. 242–63).

Of course, many scholars, rightly in my view, consider that ἵνα here indicates both purpose and result (W. Michaelis 1935, p. 42; Collange 1979, p. 106). It thus speaks of the purpose of Jesus's mission, death, and exaltation—that the gospel will go forth to the world, and people will yield to Jesus as Lord in the present. It also describes the result of that mission—all humankind will submit to Jesus as Lord at the eschaton. For believers, it will be a glorious moment of joyful submission, knowing the prize that awaits them (cf. 3:14). For unbelievers, they will submit to the Lordship of Christ and then eternal destruction (1:28; 3:19).

Even if we take it ecbatically, there is a profound hortatory power in the "so that" of verse 10—if Jesus is exalted so that every knee will bow, then there is a summons in the term to join God's mission of sharing Christ to others so that they will bow before God and

his Son voluntarily; at least for those with ears to hear. Such motivation drives Paul and should, to some extent, propel all who name Jesus as Lord.

Finally, if there is any doubt that Paul wants this to occur, the hymn is framed with appeals to be missionally engaged (1:27; 2:15–16). Authentic gospel citizenship includes being actively missional and evangelistic as the Lord leads. Similarly, working out one's own salvation by God's power and leading involves shining as lights in the world and holding forth the word of life. And the context also emphasizes that the posture of those who engage in this mission must be like that of Jesus Christ.

3.6. *The Missio-Liturgical Climax to the Hymn*

The other oft-neglected function of the hymn has been hinted at throughout this essay—its liturgical power. The kerygmatic force of the hymn compels readers to worship Jesus and God the Father. Indeed, as noted earlier, many scholars hold that the passage is all or part of a hymn sung in the early church, and these scholars recognize its liturgical power (Hawthorne and Martin 2004, pp. lv–lxv).⁵⁰ This appeal should not be separated from the missional function of the hymn. As noted in the previous section, ἵνα, here, is both purposive and telic. The purpose of Christ's exaltation is that believers yield to his rule and join Christ by the Spirit in inviting others to do the same. The result of this mission, where faith is generated through the hearing of the word, is that these new believers will bow and worship Jesus as Lord to the praise and glory of God the Father (1:11; 2:11).⁵¹ The effect is like the prophetic word Paul envisages in 1 Corinthians 14:24–25 where unbelievers and outsiders fall on their faces and “worship God, proclaiming, ‘God is truly among you!’” (LEB).

The result of the mission, then, is new converts joining the already believing community of God worshiping him in the Spirit, boasting in Jesus (1:26; 3:3), rejoicing (2:18; 3:1; 4:4), and in unity (2:2), bringing glory to God. For the already believing, the glorious retelling of the story of Jesus in the hymn has liturgical power. As believers ponder it, they are drawn to their knees, declare Jesus is Lord, worship him, and God is glorified. This yearning to worship spills over into the other aspects of authentic worship, including their service as they support Paul with prayer (1:19), in contending for the gospel (1:5, 7, 27; 2:16), suffering (1:30), and more. Believers are drawn to assume the posture of an enslaved person as did Jesus and serve him, the people of their church, and outsiders and unbelievers so that they, too, may experience Jesus.

Indeed, one aspect of that is God's mission; another is loving one another as the coworkers Euodia and Syntyche are being asked to do (4:2). They are then to continue to engage in evangelistic mission, united in Christ. Readers with faith cannot help but worship and serve Jesus and his God when they read or hear the piece as they are reminded of what God has done for them in the Son.

The hymn climaxes with the worship of God (2:11c). God exalts Jesus, honoring him and glorifying him (2:9). He bestows on him the supreme name (2:10). God demonstrates the self-subjugating partnership he summons believers to in the letter by being unfazed to share his absolute power and authority with Jesus, not as another god, but as the one God expressed in the Son of God and now eternally incarnate Jesus. If readers have open eyes, hearts, and ears to truly hear, feel, and see, they will respond by bending the knee to Jesus. They acknowledge his lordship verbally and as living sacrifices devoted to worship, *koinōnia*, and are moved to give witness to him. They bow volitionally, joyfully, gratefully, and willingly. They recognize that their worship fulfills the purpose of Jesus' self-giving on our behalf.

And they do all this while giving glory to God the Father. This praise of God is the result of the mission. When a person yields to Jesus, God is exalted. Glory is a key sub-theme in Philippians. In Philippians 1:11, the readers are to love one another, resulting in them being able to discern what is best and be pure and blameless, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the *glory* and praise of God.

Conversely, in Phil 2:3, they are not to seek *κενοδοξία*, “empty *glory*”, meaning their glorification. Instead, in humility, they are to consider others more significant than themselves, consider the interests of others, and adopt the mindset of the one who died for the world in whom we believe. Such a posture brings *glory* to God the Father (2:11). Neither do believers, like the enemies of the cross, *glory* in the shame of our materialistic self-obsession and desires (3:19). Still, they eagerly await their heavenly Savior who is coming to transform their bodies of humiliation to be like Jesus’s glorious body (3:20). They know that God will supply all they need for their lives according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus (4:19). And as Paul says before his final greeting and grace, “to our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen” (4:20).

4. Conclusions

So, asking whether the Christ-hymn should be read kerygmatically or ethically is reductionist. There is so much more in this remarkable piece set within this lovely letter. The hymn is both kerygmatic and ethical. Yet, it is more—it is ethical and socioethical, urging believers to *agapē* relationships. Furthermore, it is missioethical. Through its flow and words, the Spirit calls people to participate in God’s evangelistic mission with the posture of Christ.

All that is left is to reread it repeatedly and let it feed our souls. As we read, we again bend the knee and confess Christ’s cosmic lordship. We then rise with a cross across the back and towels in hand (John 13:1–15). Led by the Spirit, we follow Jesus. We joyfully share his message through unified Christoform attitudes, actions, and speech. Then, others join the church as they hear the message, the sword of the Spirit pierces their hearts, and faith is born. They willingly fall to their knees, call on the name of the Lord (Rom. 10:13), and acknowledge the lordship of Jesus Christ. In this way, God is glorified. Amen.

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Notes

- ¹ In my earlier work on this passage, citing O’Brien (O’Brien 1991, p. 272), I concluded that “the hymn’s emphasis is ethical: it ‘presents Christ as the ultimate model for Christian behavior and action’” (Keown 2017b, vol. 1, p. 378). On reflection, I downplayed the kerygmatic aspect of the hymn and agreed with others who hold that the hymn is both a glorious declaration of who Christ is and designed to inspire the Philippians to the pattern of the Christlife.
- ² This essay will be light on secondary literature and detailed exegesis. Readers consult my monograph (Keown 2009) and (Keown 2017b), 2 Vols for detailed discussion of the relevant aspects see throughout the commentary. Throughout, I will cross-reference to the pages of the commentary that give further analysis. I also mention some other articles I have written. This essay is the culmination of years of bemoaning the failure of biblical scholars to recognize the missiological and evangelistic aspects of the NT and Philippians where the Christ-hymn is concerned. By “missionally,” I mean the full range of Christian engagement in human society beyond the church. By “evangelistically,” I mean the verbalization of the gospel, which I believe lies at the heart of the Christian mission.
- ³ “The context makes it clear that vv. 6–8 function primarily as paradigm,” (Fee 1995, p. 196).
- ⁴ Some recognize the poor behavior of these opponents but do not draw out their heinous intent (e.g., Hansen 2009, p. 75; Bockmuehl 1997, p. 80). However, if Paul is in Roman imprisonment and death is a real threat (1:20–23), then these opponents effectively want him dead. (Keown 2017b, vol. 1, pp. 210–13).
- ⁵ The noun *κενοδοξία* compounds *κενός*, “empty, in vain,” and *δόξα*, “glory” and in context, contrasts Christ’s self-emptying (*κενώω*) (Garland 2006, p. 215).
- ⁶ Here, I am referring to *ὁ θεὸς ἡ κοιλία* (3:19), which could refer to circumcision but, in my view, more likely refer to a desire to eat, but more likely encompasses bodily desires, including sexuality and other gluttonous behaviors. It fits with Epicureanism or hedonism (Witherington 2011, p. 216).

1:9, 16; 2:1, 2; 4:1.

1:18, 25; 2:2, 17–18, 28–29; 4:1, 4.

For a fuller discussion, see (Keown 2013, pp. 301–31).

An idea I touched on in my commentary (Keown 2017b, vol. 1, pp. 167, 449, 480, 482, 484).

The link between the hymn and the ethical appeal is most obvious in the use of ὥστε, “therefore”, in v. 12, which leads into the section ending in 2:18. Moreover, the two examples, Timothy and Epaphroditus, are both presented rhetorically in part to emphasize their ethical fidelity to the Lord and gospel. However, the material leading into the Christ-hymn is also ethical (1:27–2:4).

I broach this in my commentary. See (Keown 2017b, vol. 1, pp. 166–67, 443, 450, 476, 480, 484, 511).

If written from Ephesus, the earlier date is preferable. If the traditional view is favored, the latter. See the discussion in (Keown 2017b, vol. 1, pp. 23–33). In terms of the missional zeal of Christians, the date matters little; Luke’s account in Acts and the expansion of the gospel in the first century indicates substantial missional engagement across the Roman Empire.

If Jesus’ resurrection and Pentecost were in AD 30, this is twenty-two to thirty-three years later. If AD 33 is preferred, this is nineteen to twenty-nine years later.

Their first-century writings show this commitment to the whole world. See reference to global mission and judgment in Mark 13:10, 27; 14:9; Matthew 8:11; 24:14, 31; 25:32; 16:13; 28:18–20; Luke 13:29; 24:46–49; and Acts 1:8. See also John’s interest in the world (John 1:29; 3:16–17; 4:42; 8:12; 12:47; 17:1, 23); Paul’s “full number of the gentiles” (Rom 11:25); and Revelation’s interest in all peoples on earth worshipping God (esp. Rev 7:9). While the longer ending of Mark appears to be second-century addition (The first witnesses are Irenaeus and Tertullian (Metzger and Societies 1994, p. 103), it speaks of the ongoing commitment to this task.

With Witherington and others, I accept Acts as a historical document, and its description of the early mission and Christian expansion are accurate albeit focused on key figures (Witherington 1998, pp. 24–39).

I am of the view that the “we sections” in Acts are best understood as genuine albeit selective Lukan accounts from his trips with Paul (16:10–17; 20:5–16; 21:1–18; 27:1–28:16) (Schnabel 2012, pp. 39–41).

Paul’s persecution is confirmed in his undisputed letters (1 Cor 15:9; Gal 1:13, 23; Phil 3:6).

On the situation in Rome, see (Keown 2017b, vol. 1, pp. 3–14). Shaw rejects that there was such a persecution (Shaw 2015, pp. 73–100). However, a range of other scholars have responded negatively to such a proposal; see especially (Jones 2017, pp. 146–52).

On Col 4:5–6, see (Keown 2022), <https://hail.to/laidlaw-college/publication/iOXHXeW/article/Puacv39> (accessed on 5 March 2024).

The whole book, (Keown 2009), argues Paul’s partial intent in Philippians is to urge the Philippians to continue to engage in evangelism as they have in the past.

Paul regularly uses slave ideas of Christian service. See also Rom 1:1; Gal 1:10; Col 4:12; 2 Tim 2:24; Tit 1:1.

Timothy’s partnership with Paul is extraordinary. They coauthored six letters (2 Cor 1:1; Phil 1:1; Col 1:1; 1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:1; Phlm 1), traveled together aside from specific missional journeys Paul sent Timothy on (2:19; 23, cf. 1 Cor 4:17; 16:10; 1 Thess 3:2, 6; 1 Tim 1:2–3). Indeed, aside from these trips, they were never apart in the period covered by Acts 16–28. Timothy was also a co-preacher (2 Cor 1:19), and Paul had no one else who was equal-souled with Paul like him (2:20).

As Hawthorne and Martin succinctly note, “sharing in the gospel” is the good work referred to here” (emphasis original). See (Hawthorne and Martin 2004, p. 24).

The phrase τοῖς λοιποῖς πᾶσιν refers to those in connection with his situation. As Bockmuehl suggests, “perhaps other members of the military or legal establishment?” (Bockmuehl 1997, p. 74).

While some suggest that 1:13 speaks of people knowing the reason for his imprisonment and does not suggest converts, I argue with Fee and others that 4:22 indicates that some in the context had become followers of Jesus. (Fee 1995, pp. 112–14; Keown 2017b, vol. 1, pp. 180–87).

The use of τινὲς μὲν καὶ in v. 15 indicates continuity between the group in 1:14 and what follows. There are, thus, two groups who fearlessly proclaim the gospel inspired by the Lord through Paul’s example. One is well motivated, one is not. Similarly, (Hansen 2009, p. 71).

While it is tempting to see σωτηρία here as a reference to “deliverance from prison”, here, as in all Paul’s uses, it more likely indicates eschatological salvation, that is by faith, is ensured by the prayers of the Philippians and the Spirit that will enable him to boldly share Christ at his trial (Fee 1995, pp. 131–32).

The term παρρησία here indicates “‘resolute testimony’ in circumstances of intimidation, particularly intimidation by the regnant political authorities” (Cassidy 2020), C. Paul’s Potential for Death or Life (1:19–25).

Paul links 1:27–30 and 2:1–4 with the inferential οὖν, “so, therefore, consequently, accordingly, then” (Arndt et al. 2000, p. 736), indicating continuity.

While Michael and a few since have argued σωτηρία in 2:12 means “corporate wellness”, here as elsewhere in Paul, it speaks of their eschatological status as God’s people saved through faith in God and his Son (Michael 1924, pp. 439–50). For a critique, see (Fee 1995, pp. 460–64).

- 32 While ἵνα here can indicate result, here it is more likely purposive. As such, what follows indicates the missional purpose of their renunciation of grumbling and argument. See (Hawthorne and Martin 2004, p. 144).
- 33 In my earlier writings, I tended to prefer “stars in the universe”; however, I increasingly consider that there may be an allusion here to Matthew 5:16 (e.g., Keown 2017b, vol. 1, p. 486). As such, “lights of the world” seems preferable. See (Beare 1976, p. 92); H. Ritt, “φῶς”, in (Balz and Schneider 1990, vol. 3, p. 448). Either way, it is missional.
- 34 “The idea of light is dynamic and inclusive of proclamation in its use of the servant, Christ, and in Luke’s account of Paul”, see (Keown 2017b, vol. 1, p. 484). Further, the term ἄρωμα may also have a hint of the gospel as “the aroma of Christ” in 2 Cor 2:15. See (Keown 2017b, vol. 1, p. 478).
- 35 On taking 3:2 as a reference to Jewish Christians following Paul demanding gentiles adopt Jewish customs, see (Belleville 2021, p. 72). On 3:18–19, see Sandnes, pp. 136–62. I argue these could include the opponents of Phil 1:28–30. See (Keown 2011, pp. 28–45).
- 36 See, e.g., Rom 3:21–24; 5:9–10; 1 Cor 1:18; 15:1–3.
- 37 See also Rom 10:6; Eph 6:9; Col 4:1; 1 Thess 1:10; 4:16; 2 Thess 1:7.
- 38 See also Heb 1:4. This is the divine name of Exod 3:12; Isa 45:23.
- 39 See Acts 20:4; 2 Cor 1:16; 2:13; 7:5; 8:1. The “we section” that ends in Acts 16:40, Luke remained in Philippi after Paul and his team left.
- 40 While it is unpopular in some circles to accept that Mark and Luke traveled with Paul and were the writers of the second and third Gospel and Acts, I see no reason to reject the traditions concerning these documents and the Pauline authorship of Colossians just prior to Philippians. As such, with access to Mark and Luke, Paul would have been aware of the stories of Jesus. Moreover, Luke traveled with Paul to Philippi, and so we can suppose they knew well the stories of Jesus he was gathering.
- 41 Especially if it is a pre-existing hymn, see, e.g., (Martin 1997, pp. lv–lxv). I date Mark in the early 60s, so if it is Paul’s creation, it may coincide; see also (Edwards 2002, pp. 6–10).
- 42 Hence, it stimulated me to write my two-volume book on Mark from the perspective of global imperialism (Keown 2017a, vol. 1, 1:1–5).
- 43 I have suggested elsewhere that it is an intentionally broken chiasm with Jesus’s resurrection and ascension missed either because they were lacking in the original or intentionally crafted this way by Paul or an earlier writer. See (Keown 2017b, vol. 1, p. 370).
- 44 On ἐξομολογέω as “acknowledge”, see (Cohick 2013, p. 123). This idea resonates with that of Matthew Bates who notes that *pistis* can mean allegiance—faith as allegiance captures what Paul is intending here with the bending of the knee and acknowledgement of Jesus’ lordship (Bates 2019, pp. 60–63).
- 45 See also Romans 2:12; 9:22; 14:15; 1 Cor 1:18–19; 3:17; 6:13; 8:10; 15:26; 2 Cor 2:15; 4:3; 2 Thess 1:10; 2:10; 1 Tim 6:9. Some consider Paul to be soteriological universalist, e.g., (Talbot 2003, pp. 32–52). However, this is dubious, see (Marshall 2003, pp. 55–76).
- 46 P. Lampe, “ἵνα *hina* that, so that, in order that”, in (Balz and Schneider 1990, vol. 2, p. 190).
- 47 On this verse, see (Fee 2011, p. 57).
- 48 On the authorship of the Pastorals, see Mounce’s exhaustive treatment (Mounce 2000, pp. xli–cxx).
- 49 See, for example, 1 Cor 9:19–22; 1 Cor 10:33.
- 50 Even Fee, who considers the passage “exalted prose” rather than a hymn (Fee, “Philippians 2:5–11”, 29–46), states that “it obviously sings”. In the same footnote, Fee mentions Kendrick’s song, “The Servant King” and Francis Bland Tucker’s hymn, “All Praise to Thee”, which draws on the passage. See https://hymnary.org/text/all_praise_to_thee_for_thou_o_king_divin (accessed on 5 March 2024) (Tucker 1938). See (Fee 1995, 226 n42).
- 51 “Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exist because worship doesn’t . . . When this age is over and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more. It is a temporary necessity. But worship abides forever . . . It’s [worship] the gospel of mission because in missions we simply aim to bring the nations into the white-hot enjoyment of God’s glory” (Piper 2022, p. 3).

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