

# Carmen Christi: The Hymn to Christ as God

The hymns sung by the church have always told of the faith that is hers. While few today dwell on what our hymns really *say*, the early church placed much more emphasis upon the *content* of her hymns. Fragments of the earliest “hymnal” are found in the text of the New Testament. We get a tantalizing glimpse at what the earliest Christians confessed in music. Probably the longest “song,” and certainly the most important, is provided by the apostle Paul in his letter to the Philippians.

Philippians 2:5–11 has been identified as the *Carmen Christi*, the “Hymn to Christ as God.” Some modern translations, such as the NIV, NRSV, TEV, and JB, set this passage apart in poetic form to indicate the fact that most scholars see in this passage something other than straight prose or teaching. Instead, what is found here may well be a section, maybe a verse or two, of an ancient Christian hymn.

If, in fact, Paul is referring believers to a commonly known song,

we can imagine the effect his words had. In our day, it is common for a minister to incorporate a reference to a well-known and well-loved hymn so as to make a strong point. Many close a sermon on the grace of God, for example, by saying, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me!" The minister doesn't need to tell us what hymn number he is referring to. He doesn't need to give us the name. Just a line or two is enough. "I once was blind, but now I see" is sufficient to bring to our minds the entire message contained in the song.

I believe that is exactly what Paul is doing in the second chapter of his letter to the Philippians. Verses 5 through 11 provide us with the "sermon illustration" Paul wishes to use. In these words he takes us to the highest points of scriptural revelation, speaking of great *eternal* truths. Yet he does so through the words of a familiar song.

A tremendous number of books and articles have been written concerning the meaning of Philippians 2:5-11. Yet many of them miss the most fundamental point of solid interpretation: context. Often the passage is separated from surrounding text and considered on its own. As we will see, the *context* of the passage will help us determine the *key* issue at stake here. And to that context we must first turn.

## HUMILITY OF MIND

In this passage, Paul did not just break into a testimony to the greatness of Christ without a reason. He was trying to encourage the Philippians to live and act in a certain manner, and he gives as his example the Lord Jesus. To what kind of behavior was Paul exhorting his listeners? Let's read:

Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not *merely* look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. (Philippians 2:1-4)

How should Christians treat one another? This is what is being addressed in this passage. The apostle reminds his readers of the encouragement they have in Christ, the loving comfort they receive from Him, the fellowship of the Spirit they all enjoy. In light of these many benefits, Paul asks them to make his joy complete by living in a manner worthy of Christian people. They are to be of the same mind, not divided, going in different directions. They are to maintain godly love among themselves, being united in spirit, all moving toward the same goal. Now, how does one keep a diverse group of people together in this way? We all know that Christians sin against one another, and in so doing they disrupt the ideal of believing fellowship. So what is the key to contented and peaceful Christian community? Paul tells us.

“Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit.” The peace of the fellowship will exist only when believers do not act in a selfish or conceited manner. That is, when we look outside of ourselves and serve others, the unity of purpose and love and compassion will be served. But when we turn in upon ourselves and seek our own good before the good of others, things will fall apart. The key is found in the next phrase: “but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves.” Here is the great secret of Christian fellowship: humble service toward others. Self-denial. Not “looking out for #1,” but “making everyone else #1, and looking out for them!” The Christian church is to be filled with people who, while equal with one another (“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus,” Galatians 3:28), are willing to put aside their own rights in service to others. The ministry of Jesus Christ is a panoramic picture of what selfless service to others is all about. And this humility of mind is what Paul preaches to his beloved Philippian congregation.

It is in the midst of this exhortation that we find the key verses, 2:5–11. Most often, these verses are examined as a single unit, distinct from the context around them. But it is quite clear that Paul is in no way “changing topics” between verses 4 and 5. In fact, a quick glance at verse 12 shows us that upon completing his comments about Christ, he moves right on with the practical exhortation to humility and

obedience in the Philippian assembly. Why is this so important? Because it tells us Paul's *purpose* in setting forth this section of an ancient hymn. Paul is giving a "sermon illustration," a reminder that if we are to be like Christ, we must imitate His *humility* as well. All of the *Carmen Christi* is, in fact, a means of *illustrating* what it means to act in "humility of mind," to give one's life in the service of others. This is why verse 5 says, "Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus."

The attitude of humility of mind that the Philippians are to have is best illustrated in Christ, so Paul directs them to have the same manner of thinking, the same outlook, as seen in Christ. This will become *determinative* when we look closely at the meaning of the passage itself.

### THE FORM OF GOD

The first "verse" of this ancient hymn, if we divide things along lines of thought, would comprise verses 6 and 7:

... who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, *and* being made in the likeness of men.

Here in a matter of just a few words, Paul provides us with some of the greatest insights into the nature of Christ *before* the Incarnation. Obviously, there are two ways to understand the passage, and one can find translations to fit either viewpoint. First, there are those who point to this passage as evidence that Christ is *not* truly God and was *not* divine prior to His coming to earth. Some of the translations that lean this direction include the *Today's English Version*, the *New English Bible*,<sup>1</sup> and, not surprisingly, the *New World Translation*. For example, the TEV says,

He always had the very nature of God, but did not think that by force he should try to become equal with God.

This translation assumes that Christ *was not equal* with God, and

that the attitude to be emulated is that shown by His not trying to become equal with God.

The second, and much larger, group of translations sees things quite differently. These translations make it clear that Christ was eternally *equal* with God. These include the *New International Version*, the *New Revised Standard Version*, the *Jerusalem Bible*, *Phillips Modern English*, and *The New Living Translation*. Note how, for example, the NIV renders the passage:

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

Likewise, the NRSV says,

... who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.

And the *Phillips Modern English* expresses the meaning by saying,

For he, who had always been God by nature, did not cling to his privileges as God's equal, but stripped himself of every advantage by consenting to be a slave by nature and being born a man.

We will be able to decide which translations have properly understood Paul's thrust shortly. First, a few specifics about the text itself.

Paul says that Jesus *existed* in the form of God. The Greek term used here,<sup>2</sup> just as in John 1:1, does not point to a time when Christ *entered into* this state. This is brought out by Phillips' translation, "who had *always* been God by nature." Certainly those who attempt to see in Christ a mere creature can find no solace in an assertion such as this.

What does it mean to exist *in the form of God*? The range of translations show us that the term can express a wide variety of things. The Greek term "form"<sup>3</sup> (*morphe*) means the "outward display of the inner reality or substance. Here it refers to the outward display of the divine

substance, i.e., divinity of the preexistent Christ in the display of his glory as being in the image of the Father.”<sup>4</sup> This is why a number of translations render the term “nature.” “God’s nature” would refer to the *state of being God*. This would not merely be referring to existence as a spirit, but to *divine existence*. It is hard to get away from the fact that Paul is plainly presenting the deity of the preexistent Christ. We shall see in a moment that, in fact, a later comment by the apostle leaves us with no doubt about this.

### **EQUALITY WITH GOD**

Next Paul tells us that He who (eternally) existed in the form of God did not “regard equality with God a thing to be grasped” (NASB). What does this mean? The phrase “equality with God” is not difficult to understand. Paul is talking about full divinity, a status of equal power and glory with *God*. Obviously, if this status is something that Christ *had*, the discussion over the deity of Christ is pretty well over. But obviously, those who do not believe in the deity of Christ do not agree that the passage is saying this is something Christ ever really *possessed*. In fact, they strongly assert that the point of the passage is that Christ did not “grasp for” or attempt to obtain “by force” this very equality with God. And in all fairness, the Greek term translated “to grasp”<sup>5</sup> *can* be translated in this way. So can we know with certainty how Paul would have us to understand this term? When the early Christians sang this hymn, what did they mean? We will put all of this together shortly.

### **THE EMPTYING**

Before we come to some final conclusions about which way we should understand this passage, we need a few more pieces of the puzzle. The hymn says that Christ did not “grasp” His equality with God but instead did something else. He “emptied Himself” is the literal translation. What does this mean?

Note first that *Jesus did this himself*. The passage does not say that Christ *was emptied*, as if some outside force or person acted upon Him.

This is voluntary. This is something Christ did himself. As we will see, this is vitally important.

Secondly, the term "emptied" is always used by Paul in a metaphorical sense. The term is used in such places as Romans 4:14, where Paul says, "For if those who are of the Law are heirs, faith is made void (literally, "emptied") and the promise is nullified." Paul is not talking about a literal "emptying" of faith, but a metaphorical "making empty," i.e., making void.<sup>6</sup> So it is here. The *King James Version* does an excellent job by rendering it "made himself of no reputation." Paul is not saying Jesus *ceased to be God*, or in any other way stopped being equal with the Father, but that He voluntarily laid aside the privileges that were His.<sup>7</sup> When the Lord walked this earth, men did not see Him as a glorious heavenly being, for His glory was hidden, veiled. With the single exception of the Mount of Transfiguration, where a chosen few saw Him in His true glory, the rest of mankind looked upon Him who, as Isaiah had said, "has no *stately* form or majesty that we should look upon Him, nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him" (Isaiah 53:2).

The act of *emptying* is followed by an act of *taking*. He "became flesh" (John 1:14) by *taking* the form of a bond-servant and being *made* in the likeness of men. It is no mere coincidence that Paul uses the *very same term* "form" here that he used in verse 6. Just as Jesus had the *form* of God in eternity past, so He took the *form* of a bond-servant in the Incarnation.<sup>8</sup> He who had eternally *been served* by cherubim and seraphim now takes on the form of a *slave* so as to serve others! And what service is He called to? "Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." Here is ultimate obedience, ultimate service.

## SO, ETERNALLY GOD OR NOT?

We have enough of the puzzle now to go back and ask the most basic question: is this passage identifying Jesus Christ as God or not? There are two basic understandings:

1. Many liberal theologians, as well as groups that deny the deity

of Christ, assert that here we have Paul saying that the Lord Jesus was *not* equal with the Father and did not give consideration to *becoming* equal with Him, but instead took on the form of a bond-servant to die upon the cross.

2. The majority of conservative scholars and historically orthodox groups believe that Paul is teaching the eternal deity of Christ. The Lord Jesus, though equal with the Father, lays aside His privileges so as to die upon the cross.

Can we determine which view is correct? I believe we can. Remember that I originally insisted that the *context* of the passage would be determinative to finding the real answer to this question. And it is just here that it unlocks for us the door to the understanding of this ancient hymn of the church.

## TRUE HUMILITY

The apostle is presenting the grand act of humble service in the life of the Lord Jesus Christ as *the* example of what it means to walk in "humility of mind." Remember, we defined humility along the lines of having certain rights, *but giving up those rights in service to others*. Among Christians, this means that we are to look out for others rather than jealously guard our own rights and privileges. We are to *serve others*, even though we are all equals before the Lord.

In light of this, look again at Paul's example from the Lord Jesus. He tells us to "have this mind in you which was also in Christ Jesus." So here we have the ultimate example of humility. But which of the two understandings of the passage give us true humility? Let's look at each and find out.

The first viewpoint says that the Lord Jesus was not equal with the Father and did not attempt to become so. Yet, is this an example of humility? Do we regularly honor as "humble" those who hold an inferior position and do not seek to usurp the rights of someone in a superior position? Is it humble, for example, to be a newly hired employee who does not seek to immediately take over the position of the president of the company? Are you considered "humble" if you do not try to usurp your boss's authority? Do we look at the janitor at the



White House, for example, and say, "Oh my, what a humble man he is, for he did not today attempt to take over the president's job!" No, of course not. Such is not humility, it is simple common sense.

In the same way, *if* the Lord Jesus were merely a spirit being, a creature, how would it be "humble" of Him not to seek to become equal with God himself? Do we say someone is "humble" if they do not claim to be God? Certainly not. So if Jesus was an inferior creature, and He did not try to become equal with God, that would be no more humble than any other angelic creature abiding by their own station and not seeking to become something they were never intended to be in the first place.

On the other hand, what about the second understanding of the passage? Here we have the eternal Son of God, existing in the very form of God. He is equal with the Father, enjoying the privileges of deity itself. But He does not consider that position He has of equality something to be held on to at all costs. Instead, out of the great love He has for His people, He *voluntarily* lays aside those privileges and takes on the form of man. He becomes a servant in the fullest sense, for He lives His entire life in service to the very ones He has come to redeem. And in the ultimate act of service, He is obedient to the very point of death upon a cross.

Now, if humility consists of having privileges, and laying them aside in service to others, can we think of *any* example of humility more thrilling, more challenging, or more *clear* than this one? Certainly not! Therefore, we can reach only one conclusion: Paul is presenting this great early hymn as his highest example of humility of mind, and because of this, we *must* understand the passage to present Jesus as having eternally existed in the very form of God, having eternally possessed equality with the Father, and yet, out of His great love for us, He voluntarily laid aside those privileges so as to give His life as a "ransom for many." If context means anything at all, this is what the passage is teaching.

### THE EXALTATION OF THE SON

But we are not left with only this assertion. Paul goes on to "seal the issue," so to speak. If the direct assertion of the eternal deity of

Christ wasn't enough, he goes on to use a passage from the Old Testament to demonstrate the deity of the Father and the Son:

Therefore also God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:9-11)

Some point to verse 9 and say, "See, God highly exalted Jesus, hence, Jesus can't possibly be God." Such a statement flows from a misunderstanding of the Trinity and the simple fact that *normally* Paul speaks of the Father simply as "God," and the Son simply as "Lord." Both are titles of deity, and since we are not in any way trying to confuse the Father and the Son, we can fully understand Paul's language. It is the Father who exalted the Son, just as it was the Son, not the Father, who took on human flesh. But notice carefully what Paul does with his words. He quotes from an Old Testament passage, Isaiah 45:23, which reads,

"I have sworn by Myself, the word has gone forth from My mouth in righteousness and will not turn back, that to Me every knee will bow, every tongue will swear *allegiance*."

In context, this passage is specifically about *Yahweh*, the God of Israel (see Isaiah 45:21). Yet Paul quotes from this passage and says that it is to *Jesus* that every knee shall bow (when in Isaiah it is to *Yahweh*), to the glory of God the Father! How can Paul say this? Does he believe in more than one God? Certainly not! But he realizes that *both* the Father *and* the Son are worthy of the name *Yahweh*! To bow the knee to the Son, Jesus, is to bow to *Yahweh*. To do so is in no way to slight the Father, who, like the Son, shares the one divine name, *Yahweh*. The glorification of the Son results in the glorification of the Father as well. Perfect balance, perfect consistency with the entirety of divine revelation.

And so we understand Paul's exhortation to humility and take it

to heart. As Christ laid aside His eternal privileges to serve His people, dying as the sacrifice for their sins, so we, too, are called to give ourselves in service to others. This is the primary meaning of the passage, but it comes to us only as we understand who Christ really *was* and *is*. The example only carries its weight when we realize that the Lord Jesus *eternally existed as the Father's equal* and laid aside His divine privileges out of love for us. A quasi divine Jesus, or a mighty creature, does not fit this passage but instead destroys the entire thrust. Rather, we rejoice in the truth that the Son, though eternally equal with the Father, made himself "nothing" so that we—those who name His name, love Him, and obey Him—might have eternal life.