

HOW DOES PAUL PASTORALLY EMPLOY HIS CHRISTOLOGY IN PHILIPPIANS 2:1-11?

Introduction

The nature of Christ is of paramount importance for the church, and indeed the individual Christian, because everything we hold to be true about who we are as sinners, how we can be reconciled to God and be brought to freedom from our sinful state relies upon who Christ is and what He has achieved. If Christ is not who He claimed to be as the Son of God, or if He was not fully incarnate as a human being, then what occurred at the cross was a beautiful demonstration of His loving compassion, but not efficacious towards our salvation.

Paul realized this dilemma throughout his writings, often noting how Christ was God and that it is through Him, and in Him, that we have salvation. In the epistle to the Philippians he took the time to explain the nature of Christ in terms of humility. In doing so he was addressing a pastoral issue that the Philippian church needed discipling on, yet he was also elucidating a theology of Christ and His nature that sought to preserve the humanity of Christ alongside the divinity of Christ.

Methodology

In this exegetical paper, I will first walk through the passage and analyze it for Christological significance and information from which I will then begin to construct a theology of Christ's nature. I will then take time to draw conclusions about Christ's nature for the Christian and the church, noting specifically the salvific implications of His deity and humanity. Finally I will conclude by drawing together the exegesis and application to note the vital nature of this topic for our world today.

Exegesis: Paul's Jesus

Context: The Fear of Persecution

The first section of the passage to be exegeted is the first four verses, which establishes the context for the Christological argument Paul is going to present:

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.¹

It is important to understand where Paul was when he wrote these words, and to understand why he wrote them. Firstly, we know that Paul was in prison when he penned this letter to the fledgling little church of Philippi, because he told them so in chapter one. He wrote this letter to them to encourage them that, despite the apparent setback of his own imprisonment, 'He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.'² Therefore, when he tells them in chapter two to be humble and united, he does so having already established the importance of not placing their security or salvation upon him, the Apostle. They don't need him to be united, nor even for the advancement of the Gospel, because his imprisonment has actually caused other brothers to be more confident in the Gospel and to begin preaching.³

His plea for their unity and growth is grounded in Paul's understanding of God. Our section actually ought to begin in verse twenty seven of chapter one, despite the misleading heading in most English translations at the start of chapter two. Paul has just said that he would be glad to die and be with Christ, but knows that he must remain on earth to be an encouragement, and then he exhorts this church to 'let your manner of life be worthy of the

¹ Philippians 2:1-4. Taken from ESV Holy Bible, Crossway: Illinois (2001), p.636. All Bible verses from ESV unless otherwise stated.

² Philippians 1:6.

³ Philippians 1:14.

Gospel of Christ.⁴ Why this exhortation, in this way? The manner of life he calls them to is one of unity, for he hopes to hear of them, ‘standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the Gospel.’⁵ The reason for Paul’s plea for unity is because of his own predicament. He, the Apostle of God, is in prison, and the church, no doubt, fear the bite of persecution and perhaps are even wavering in their faith. If God’s own messenger is in prison, how much longer will it be before the acolytes are also hounded? This is why Paul continues, hoping that they be, ‘not frightened in anything by your opponents.’⁶ Furthermore, rather than being afraid of the potential of persecution, Paul begins his argument that Christians are to expect suffering in this world, because we follow the example of Christ, and are therefore, ‘engaged in the same conflict’⁷ as Paul, and Christ before him.

Thus our passage begins with the word ‘so’, which implies a reaction to the words he closed chapter one with. Paul is arguing that, since we are to expect suffering, we are not to fear that suffering. Why? Because if there is ‘any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy’⁸ then the church should know that despite the hardship, they are shall not suffer alone, for the Spirit participates with them, and that Christ encourages them through it as demonstrated by His love. Therefore, Paul expects that there is to be no ‘rivalry or conceit’⁹ among them. Persecution should not lead to betrayal, fear and schism, but to unity, love and encouragement. Paul’s own experience is that his suffering in prison has led others to be more active in evangelism, and so he is suggesting that suffering is both to be expected, and is under God’s sovereignty for the furthering of His kingdom. Rather

⁴ Philippians 1:27

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Philippians 1:28.

⁷ Philippians 1:29.

⁸ Philippians 2:1.

⁹ Philippians 2:3.

than being caught in a quagmire of doubt and suspicion, Paul warns, use the trials to grow into a community that loves Christ and acts like Christ, by seeking ‘the interests of others’ because this is the mind of Christ and example of Christ.

Content **The Christology of Suffering**

Having clearly laid a foundation for the Philippians regarding his own suffering, Paul now aims to establish the reason and source of his comfort and confidence.

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.¹⁰

Paul elucidates further, for the Philippian church. They are to have this mind of unity and humility because, firstly, it is theirs in Christ. Rather than being fearful and backstabbing, they are one with Christ, and therefore one with each other. Secondly, they are to have this mind because of the example of Christ. The language in the English is somewhat confusing, for, colloquially, we tend to think that if something is in the ‘form’ of something, it is an imposter, such as Satan was ‘in the form’ of a serpent. But that is not the case. The Greek word, *morphe*, does have the connotation of outward appearance, but Paul is not using *morphe* to suggest that Christ is an imposter, one *like* God, but rather deliberately choosing to draw a distinction *between* God and Christ. Specifically, between God the Father, and Christ the Son. His Christology is clearly being revealed in verse six. Christ did not ‘count equality with God a thing to be grasped,’¹¹ which is what Satan’s sin ultimately was, and how our sin operates; but rather, Christ ‘made Himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.’¹² The distinction Paul has articulated is that Christ, the Son, refused to use His position as God the

¹⁰ Philippians 2:5-8.

¹¹ Philippians 2:6.

¹² Philippians 2:7.

Son as a way to avoid the will of the Father, but instead chose to make Himself nothing (literally ‘emptied himself’) and so became Jesus, the God-man. How He did this is vital: He ‘emptied Himself.’ This does not mean that He divested Himself of His divinity, but rather that He emptied Himself of the rights and privileges He was due as God the Son, and instead took on the form of a servant. Thus, as before, *morphe* does not mean an imposter. Paul is not saying that Christ was *like* a servant but secretly He wasn’t really. No, Paul is saying that He *was* a servant, yet *also* God. He added to His divinity the constraints of mortality and humanity through, or because of, the incarnation where He became fully God and fully man. His divinity was not expunged, but rather added to by His emptying Himself of the rights He deserved and becoming human.

Thus, as He was ‘found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.’¹³ And herein lies the theology behind Paul’s previous comments to the Philippian church: their model for suffering is Christ, and to a much lesser extent, Paul himself. Christ’s example is one of the utmost sacrifice, entirely giving up His own rights to authority, fealty, life and power; and allowing Himself to be attacked by the coy politics of Jewish priests and the cruel hands of Roman soldiers. One who is equal with God by nature, not by grasping it through rebellion, humbled Himself because of His love for His people to the point of death. And not merely death, but the death of a traitor. Crucifixion was deliberately abhorrent, and carefully controlled to maximize humiliation and pain before death. It could be argued that crucifixion was worth more than a legion of soldiers because of the psychological effect it brought over a state. And the irony is vast: Christ was killed as a traitor, by Roman soldiers whose commander was treacherous to justice because he was influenced by Jews treacherous to their Messiah, and all were part of a humanity treacherous to God, and who were pawns in the hands of the treacherous Satan.

¹³ Philippians 2:8.

Yet, despite all of this weakness and defeat that is visible on the outside, Paul is making the point that Christ suffered and therefore we are called to suffer with Him, because this is the mind we have ‘in Christ.’ For the Philippian church, this meant being humble and united, not being disunited or allowing dissension into their ranks. Obviously, humility requires sacrifice; it means to put someone else before yourself, and Paul says that, in their fear, they must not seek their own self-preservation, but become one body, willing to sacrifice their comfort, their pleasure, even their freedom, for the sake of their brothers and sisters, because this is exactly what Christ has done for them.

The Purpose of Suffering

If Paul were to leave his argument there, he would have spoken of a glorious truth, but it would, perhaps, leave the Philippians feeling somewhat hopeless. Rather he continues,

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed upon him the name that is above every name, so that 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 to the glory of God the Father.¹⁴

The ‘therefore’ demonstrates a causal link: the previous statement is the cause of the upcoming statement. Because Christ was humble and obedient to the Father, He has been highly exalted by the Father. Glory, we are learning, is not bought or taken, but given as a gift. Christ’s glory, although equal to the Father as fully God, became exalted further His obedience, and He was given the name above all others. Unlike us, who grasps at glory and power and authority, Christ’s obedience and humility were truly His strength. He knew the Father had a purpose and a plan for His humanity and so He obeyed, becoming a babe in a manger and a criminal on a cross so that the Father’s will would be done.

The purpose of Christ’s obedience is that, because of what He accomplished, everyone will one day look upon Him and bow their knee, acknowledging Him as their Lord, whether they believed in Him for salvation or not. The suffering of Christ was required for this end. Although

¹⁴ Philippians 2:9-11.

the pain was true and real and He felt isolated from the Father, it was temporary. The suffering, although necessary, was short-lived in comparison with the victory it achieved in the salvation of many. And all of this was done so that Christ's name would be exalted 'to the glory of God the Father.'¹⁵ The Father is glorified by the obedience of the Son, even through the pain of suffering, and also through the glorification of the Son by all men and created beings because of His obedience.

Christological Significance

Soteriologically

Our salvation as individual Christians rests upon the divinity of Christ. Yet it also rests upon the humanity of Christ. What Paul has articulated here in this passage is crucial, not only for the church of Philippi, but for every Christian. If Christ was not fully God then He would have been unable to bear the weight of God's wrath and justice for the sinfulness of man. Indeed, were He not God, He would not have been *viable* as the atoning sacrifice because of the Abrahamic covenant wherein God had said that *He* would be killed if either party broke the covenant. Mankind broke it, and God, in Christ, paid for it. A human being would be unable to pay for the sins of another because of his own guilt, nor would he be able to bear the wrath of God for the sins of all humanity. Ultimately therefore, as God had covenanted with Abraham, the Messiah had to be, in some way, God Himself, otherwise the atoning work would not be efficacious for salvation. Therefore, what has been shown from Philippians two is that Christ never lost His divinity.

However, Christ also had to be fully human, because He was to be a mediator on our behalf. Jesus was to be the representative of humanity, bearing the punishment for all who believe in Him on the cross. As Paul made clear in his letter to the Romans, there are two heads in this world: Adam and Christ. If Christ is to be a head of humanity, he must, by definition be a

¹⁵ Philippians 2:11.

human. He cannot represent that which He is not. And, even more crucial, He cannot heal that which He is not. If Christ were not fully human, He could not stand in our place, and therefore He could be the sacrifice God's justice demanded. If that were the case, then our sinfulness could not be forgiven, and so our broken, lost state of sinfulness could not be healed. Likewise, if He Himself was tainted by the curse and corruption of sin, His sacrifice would have been unacceptable. A blemished lamb will not suffice where an unblemished lamb is required.

Furthermore, the incarnation is how God answered the question, 'Can the immutable die?' God is eternal and therefore, by His very nature, He is unable to die. But when the Son added to his divinity the frailty and mortality of humanity, He was adding to Himself the human ability to die. Therefore, although the Son in His divine nature did not die, the God-man, Jesus, in His human nature did. Thus, by the deliberate union of the divine and human natures of the Son in Christ, Jesus was able to be the divine sacrifice and the human representative fulfilling both eternal justice and God's promises.

Paul's Christology in Philippians two is vital for us to grasp. Because Jesus was fully man, and fully obedient, *even* to death on the cross, we can be assured that He can stand in our place as an acceptable sacrifice, and as representative of our race. Because of His perfect, sinless humanity, He is able to bear our punishment and therefore to set us free from the power of sin and death. He assumed humanity fully, and is therefore able to rescue humanity fully. In His divinity, He was able to bear the punishment of our sinfulness, for only the eternal could endure the eternal wrath of God.

The incarnation was the divine Son taking upon Himself flesh and bone, and emptying Himself, therefore, of His rights as God the Son; but He was still fully God. By His obedience, Christ's actions as both God and man bought the souls of sinful men.

Ecclesiologically

Just as our individual salvation requires the full humanity of Christ alongside the divinity of Christ, so too does our communal life in the church. Bearing in mind the context, that

Paul is writing to a potentially fractious church, it is a curious thing that He appeals to the Gospel of Christ, noting specifically the nature of who Jesus is, to encourage them. Why does he do that? He does this because he knows that the church will one day be without him as their Apostle, and someday perhaps all the Apostles will be dead with Christ still to return. In such a circumstance, discouragement may grow, and faith may waver. Throw on top of that situation the imminent threat of persecution and genuine suffering, and the church could become a place of bitter fighting, jealousy and self-preservation. If that happened the name of Christ would be brought into disrepute, a thing unthinkable for Paul.

Therefore, he brings out his theological artillery and blasts them with arguably the fullest picture of the Gospel of Christ that Paul gives us. He begins by noting the danger of not being humble and servant-hearted before laying before them the reason why they should: Christ. His example was that, as God, He was so humble, so filled with love and so obedient that He gave up His rights as God the Son and instead became a servant. Not only a servant, though. He became a servant obedient unto death. And not simply death, but death on a cross. If the Son of God was willing to do that for a rebellious church such as they, how could they dare become vicious, fearful and mistrusting of God's sovereign plan. After all, did they not believe that Christ did not remain dead but was raised to life thereby validating His promise to defeat death and free them from sin? Paul is saying that, because Christ is both man and God, they are able to trust in His work and imitate what He has done.

Application

Humility

Following Paul's primary application, it is clear that our humility rests in our trust in Christ and the sovereignty of God. As he exhorted the Philippians in verse one, we too are to be challenged that because of Christ's encouragement and His love for us, we are to follow in His footsteps, knowing that our earthly trials are indeed temporary, and that one day we will bow before our Lord and Saviour as His brothers and sisters. Our trials will actually show us more of

what He did on our behalf, and how He suffered for us, whilst also preparing us for an eternity with those to whom we were meant to be humble and united.

We are to be humble which means not seeking, or passively permitting, dissension or disunity in the church. Rather, as Paul told the Philippians, we are to count others more significant than ourselves, because we have the spirit of Christ within us. This is to be our model and guide.

Obedience

Christ's example of humble obedience, even though it was painful and terrifying, led to His exaltation and, even more powerfully, the Father's glory. In our obedience, although any ramifications will be infinitely smaller, we still get to model not only Christ's actions, but also His purpose. Through our obedience, Christ is honoured and exalted, and because Christ is exalted the Father is glorified. If ever there was a privilege amid responsibility, it is the privilege of bringing God glory by fulfilling our responsibility to be obedient to His commands, as Christ so perfectly and gloriously modelled for us.

Suffering

Christ is the perfect example of suffering. Unlike us, He forsook His authority and rights, instead obeying the will of His Father. He knew the cost, and He was so terrified by it that He sought the cup to pass by, yet even in that final hour of emotional and mental frailty, His love won out and His obedience was certain. Suffering in Scripture is never glossed over. God knows, through Jesus, the full reality of suffering at the hands of other people. He knows the sting of anger as we are unjustly accused and punished, and He knows the pain of a slow, agonizing, tortured death. Yet through it all, His attitude was humble and brought glory to the Father. He died well. Even to His dying breath He thought of others, and desired that the Father be glorified above all else.

This is to be our motivation. Because Jesus was fully human, we know that suffering will come. Firstly, we know because He told us to take up our cross, implying that we will have a

cross to carry. Secondly, we know because we are human, and suffering is part and parcel of what it means to follow Christ. Luther called this certainty the theology of the cross, and he was right. Yet because of His divinity, we know that death is not the final word. Hell has been defeated, the grip of sin has been loosened and the poison of corruption has been healed. In our obedience to the Father, humbly submitting to His will, even through the horrors of suffering, we know that we will endure suffering only for a temporary season in this world before we will finally see Him face to face, fall on our knees and worship Him who saved us. And at that moment all suffering will end forevermore.

Assurance

The final application that can be drawn from this majestic passage is an assurance of our salvation. This is because we can be confident that Christ has risen from the dead, and therefore, as Paul wrote elsewhere, nothing in this world, no power, agency, government or authority, spiritual or human, can ever tear us from the hands of the One who purchased us. Thus, no matter the depth of temptation we face, nor the duration of a trial in this world, we can be assured that our God is sovereign, and remains in control, even through the bleakest appearing circumstances. Our salvation is assured, and so our confidence must be certain: God is in control and we can trust Him fully.

Conclusion

To conclude, this paper has shown that Paul's Christology is clearly formed and articulate in explaining the necessity of Jesus being both God and man. This impacts our world at the individual level, where one must believe that we need a Saviour and that Jesus is able to be that Saviour because of His ability to stand in our stead as humanity's sinless representative. It also impacts our world at the communal level where we are to live a life of humble obedience to the commands of Christ because that is the model He has set for us to bring about the glory of the Father. Our salvation requires the full divinity and full humanity of Christ. If either is missing

we can have no assurance and no certainty that our sin has been covered and that we are reconciled to God.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources

The Bible. English Standard Version. Crossway, Illinois. 2001