‘Obedient to Death’: Revisiting the Rhetorical Function of Philippians 2.6–11

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Despite its significance for the study of the development of early christology, Philippians 2.6–11 sits uneasily in its epistolary context. Recent scholarship shows a welcome reluctance to separate the section from the parenetic material in 2:1–5 and 2:12–18, but has underestimated the extent to which this surrounding material deals with apparently conflicting themes. 2:1–4 appears to be an exhortation to ecclesial unity marked by humility and other regard. 2:5 is best read as a call for the Philippians’ participation in what Michael Gorman has called the pattern of ‘cruciformity’. 2:12–18 is an appeal for continued obedience to and support of Paul. For which of these motifs does the poetic material of 2:6–11 provide exemplary support? In this paper I argue that scholars have misunderstood the nature of 2:1–5 and have thereby underestimated the function of the text as a call for humility in the service of obedience. Just as Christ is obedient to God in such a way as to receive vindication, so the Philippians are to be obedient to Paul as Christ’s emissary, thus making possible Paul’s and their own vindication on the day of Christ. Paul is to be the focus of the Philippians’ other regard and this rhetorical concern is consistent with the overall purpose of Philippians.

I Introduction

Why is the “Christ hymn” there in Philippians? As is the case with so many of the simple questions that we bring to the text of the New Testament, the range of possible answers is somewhat bewildering. In this particular instance the unusual nature of the passage in question (Phil 2:6–11, the most extended single piece of Christological reflection anywhere in Paul), and its uneasy relationship with the surrounding argument of what is otherwise one of the more straightforward of Paul’s letters, results in a famously gargantuan corpus of scholarly opinion. The task of making another contribution to that body of exegesis is, inevitably, to bite off more than you can chew. But what better occasion can there be than the Annual General Meeting of the Fellowship for Biblical Studies in which to make an attempt.

My argument in this article is that there is an intimate relationship between the way that we

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1 This article is a lightly revised version of the Presidential address given to members of the Fellowship for Biblical in Melbourne on the 6th of November 2014. I record my thanks to the Fellowship for their academic hospitality over many years, their invitation to be the Fellowship’s President during 2013–14, and for their helpful feedback to this paper.

interpret the place of Philippians 2:6–11 in its epistolary context and our interpretation of the overall epistolary purpose of Philippians. Many years ago in a doctoral study I explored the latter and larger issue in some detail, but gave painfully inadequate attention to this crucial passage and its surrounding argument.³ The aim of the present article is to offer a more sustained consideration of one of the most important questions raised by the “Christ hymn”: how does it relate to and contribute to Paul’s persuasive aims in that argument? More specifically: given that the narrative of Christ’s descent from equality with God to death on the cross and subsequent elevation to God’s right hand is intended to contribute to the basically paraenetic argument that Paul is establishing throughout Philippians 1–2, what form or pattern of ethical behaviour are these verses intended to exemplify?

II From Kerygmatic to Ethical Interpretation

The scholarly debate about Philippians 2:6–11 will not be rehearsed here. It is well known that the agenda for that debate in the modern period was largely set by Ernst Lohmeyer’s monograph, Kyrios Jesus, which took an unashamedly form-critical and religionsgeschichtliche approach to the text.⁴ The interpretative trajectories initiated by Lohmeyer’s identification of 2:6–11 as a pre-Pauline hymn are well known: a focus on the christology of the material in its own terms; its possible Sitz im Leben within early Christ devotion; the use of Old Testament allusions; and the Christological import of key terms such as μορφή, ἀρπαγμός, Ἁγία θεότητι and κενόν. The main consequence of these avenues for exploration was that the passage became detached from its immediate and broader context within the argument of Philippians. Given that this context is obviously concerned with paraenesis (Phil 1:27–2:5, 2:12–18), it is no surprise to find scholars that play down its potential ethical significance. Within this overall tendency, Ernst Käsemann’s typically strident rejection of any kind of “ethical idealism” became especially influential, not least


on Ralph Martin.\textsuperscript{5} Martin, noting the apparent exegetical difficulties with the “ethical interpretation” is explicit about the necessary strategy. “Once the hymn’s significance in its original form is detached from the use Paul makes of it, we are relived of these irritating difficulties of interpretation.”\textsuperscript{6}

Yet the question of the hymn’s place within Paul’s overall argument in Philippians refuses to go away. In actual fact, it never really faded from view. In his commentary on the letter, in the space of two sentences, Lohmeyer can move from stating that this Jewish Christian Psalm does not describe “the exemplary nature of an ethical orientation” (“an nicht von der Vorbildlichkeit einer ethischen Gesinnung”) to arguing that “Christ stands [for Paul] in this poem as an example of martyrdom” ( “Christus steht für ihn [Paulus] in diesem Gedichte als Vorbild des Martyriums”); a juxtaposition that only makes sense on the supposition that martyrdom has little or nothing to do with ethics.\textsuperscript{7} Again, Lohmeyer writes that the Psalm is “no Christological excursus, but is intimately involved with the train of thought of the letter.”\textsuperscript{8} Crucially, argues Lohmeyer, the interpreter must read on, and consider the ways that the verses that follow the “hymn” in 2:12–18 function as “ein praktischer Kommentar des Hymnus.”\textsuperscript{9} Interpreting the passage as a fragment of pre-Pauline Christological tradition is not inimical, it seems, to relating it directly to the surrounding exhortations in Philippians 2.

Again, Käsemann’s rejection of the so-called “ethical interpretation” is better understood as a reframing of the Christological and soteriological basis for Pauline paraenesis, not as the rejection of paraenesis \textit{per se}. Christ may not be \textit{Vorbild} (example), but is \textit{Urbild} (archetype). As Robert Morgan has so helpfully summarized it: “What is said here is that the World belongs to the

\textsuperscript{7} Ernst Lohmeyer, \textit{Die Briefe an die Philippfer and die Kolosser und an Philemon} (KEK 9; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1964) 98.
\textsuperscript{9} Lohmeyer, \textit{Die Briefe} 99.
Obedient one. He is Lord so that we can be obedient. We become obedient not by imitating a model but through a word that tells us that we belong to him.”

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In the light of such considerations, recent scholarship on Philippians has been more content to draw out the ethical dimensions of the hymn and precisely because of the perceived relationship between the Christological material and the parenetic exhortations of the surrounding sections of the letter.

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The claim that Paul intends the Christological material of 2:6–11 to exemplify a pattern of behaviour or attitude begs the question, of course, of what pattern of behaviour is being exemplified. And here we run into the obvious problem that the surrounding material apparently deals with different and not easily related themes, each of which generates an alternative construal of the rhetorical function of the “hymn”. Three basic possibilities can be considered.

The first is based upon the more directly soteriological reading of the hymn, and takes its starting point from a particular, and in my view convincing, account of the significance of Philippians 2:5, a verse that requires the exegete to supply additional material in order to make sense: Τούτο φρονεῖτε ἐν ὑμῖν ὡς καὶ ἐν Χριστῷ Ησσοῦ. I share the view that it is likely that ἐν Χριστῷ Ησσοῦ shares its customary technical sense, and that Paul is therefore referring to a pattern of life (φρονεῖν) that is consistent with the Philippians’ Christian identity. For earlier commentators, the insistence on a soteriological reading of 2:5b led to a consequent dismissal or downplaying of the ethical significance of the hymn. The hymn “supplies the objective facts of


redemption on which an ethical appeal may be made”, and no more. In more recent scholarship, however, the participatory emphasis of 2:5 is the very feature that renders the hymn ethically transformative. Michael Gorman has, in several recent publications, made a strong case for the notion of “cruciformity” as key to Pauline soteriology and ethics, and consequently as an important guide to the overall focus of this text. He writes:

Paul intends the exhortation to the Philippians and the narrative of Christ’s self-emptying and self-humbling to be understood as two versions of one self-renouncing, others-regarding pattern of slavery with Christ as the paradigm and the Philippians as the ‘reincarnation’.

Gorman’s reading of what he calls (problematically in my view) Paul’s “master-story” connects the contents of the hymn strongly to the exhortations in the immediately preceding material in Phil 2:1–4. We will return to these verses later, but suffice it to say that their contents are largely generative of the second kind of connection made between the hymn and Paul’s argument. For perhaps the majority of scholars these verses relate less to the internal logic of Paul’s participationist soteriology, and more obviously to the likely struggles and situation of the Philippian community. Paul’s appeal for “unity”, “humility”, and “other-regard” reflect, albeit imperfectly, internal tensions and dissensions within the Philippian church. Such an account of the letter’s “situation” connects 2:1–4 to the, purportedly similar emphasis on unity found in 1:27–30 (see 1:27, στήκετε ἐν ἑαυτῷ πνεύματι, μίας ψυχῆς συναθλοῦντες τῇ πίστει τοῦ εὐαγγελίου) and 4:2–3, Εὐωδίαν παρακαλῶ καὶ Συντύχην παρακαλῶ τὸ αὐτὸ φρονεῖν ἐν κυρίω). The hymn supports this purpose by describing Christ’s refusal to “look after his own interests” through exploitation of his equality with God, and his embracing of the path of “humility” through incarnation, servanthood and suffering. In the words of Davorin Peterlin, “if Christ did not deem it shameful to humble himself and forego the prerogatives if his status on behalf of others, neither should his Philippian followers”. A related, but differently focussed, explanation traces the lines of connection further back into the material in 1:27–30 where Paul exhorts his audience to embrace

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12 Martin, Carmen Christi 291.
the path of suffering (see 1.29, ὑμῖν ἐχαρίσθη τὸ ὑπὲρ Χριστοῦ…τὸ ὑπὲρ αὐτοῦ πάσχειν), with a view to their anticipation of God’s final vindication. Again, it is easy to see how such an appeal might make sense to the fragile Christian community living in the more or less hostile Roman colony of Philippi.¹⁵

These two explanations of the purpose of the hymn (as a central statement of the cruciform identity of God in Christ, and thus the church, or as a “story of Christ” told with one eye focussed on the problems besetting the Philippian church) can easily be reconciled. The text that is more difficult to fit into this picture is the section which follows the hymn: Phil 2:12–18. Here Paul moves away from direct mention of notions of humility, other-regard, and the suffering of the Philippian community. The connection between this passage and the hymn lies in the notion of an obedience which, depending on how we understand the implied object of the verb ὑπηκούσατε in Phil 2:12, is either immediately, or eventually connected with Paul’s apostolic ministry on behalf of the Philippians.

I propose that, for a number of reasons, we ought to begin here and that, from the perspective of this “commentary on the hymn” (Lohmeyer’s phrase), we might re-examine the material that precedes it. When we do this, I believe we gain a fresh perspective on the earlier parenesis, as well as on the focus of 2:5-11 itself. This distinctive reading, which circles around the central concept of obedience, not only makes best sense of the relationship between Christ, Paul and the Philippians in chapters 1–2, but is also aligned with a more persuasive understanding of the purpose of the letter overall.

III Philippians 2:12-18

The relationship between 2:12–18 and the preceding material is clearly established via the ὅστε of 2:12, suggesting the resumption of the imperative mood, broken off with the relative pronoun at

¹⁵ For example see Peter Oakes, Philippians: From People to Letter (SNTSMS 110; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 77–102.
2:6, and the grounding of the specific imperatives of 2:12–18 in the content of the hymn itself.

More importantly the section is replete with terms that evoke the beginning of the paraenesis in 1:27 as well as earlier parts of the letter: the presence and absence motif (2:12, μὴ ὡς ἐν τῇ παρουσίᾳ μου μόνον ἀλλὰ νῦν πολλῶς μᾶλλον ἐν τῇ ἀπουσίᾳ μου cf. 1:27; the language of σωτηρία (2:12, cf. 1:19, 28); reference to divine action in the life of the believing community (2:13, θεὸς γὰρ ἐστίν ὁ ἐνεργῶν ἐν ὑμῖν cf. 1:6 and the “divine passive” ἐξορίσθη in 1:29); mention of the unbelieving world (2:15, γενεὰ σκολιῶς καὶ διεστραμμένης cf. 1:28); an account of Paul’s apostolic labours in Philippi and beyond (2:17, ἐν καὶ σπένδομαι ἐπὶ τῇ θυσίᾳ καὶ λειτουργίᾳ τῆς πίστεως ὑμῶν cf. 1:12–13, 30). This suggests that, as many commentators have noted, the section that runs from 1:27–2:18 is to be read as a single argumentative move within the letter. It further suggests that the exhortations in 2:12–18 are in some senses summative of that argument, and that the material of 2:6–11 should be read in the light of it. So the initial question becomes, to what pattern of action, behaviour or orientation does Paul exhort the Philippians in 2:12–18?

It is striking that 2:12 begins with reference to past obedience. There is a division of opinion over whether obedience to God or to Paul is implied by the aorist verb ὑπηκούσατε. My own preference, in the light of the “apostolic parousia” motif is to read the verb as implying obedience to Paul’s apostolic teaching.16 This rhetorical appeal to past obedience sets up a dynamic within the verse that allows us to read the subsequent imperative as a generalised call for its continuation. The much disputed instruction τὴν ἑσυχῶν σωτηρίαν κατεργάζεσθε has been the cause for much fuss and debate. I propose that we read it as a comprehensive appeal to live out the Christian life, and thus as an equivalent imperative to that which began the section 1:27–2:18: ἀξίως τοῦ εὐαγγελίου τοῦ Χριστοῦ πολιτεύεσθε. These two imperatives thus form an inclusio around the whole section. Crucially, they align broader patterns of Christian obedience to Paul’s relationship to the community as apostle and exemplar. Just as life that is worthy of the gospel of Christ is associated with sharing in Paul’s apostolic ἀγωνί (1:30) so working out salvation is closely

16 Thus the object of the verb is implied by the μου of the immediately following clause.
connected to obedience to Paul. In 2:12, the force of the reflexive pronoun ἐστίν then lies in the idea that this command is to be obeyed in Paul’s absence. Work it out yourselves equates to work it out without me. What might obedience to this apostolic instruction look like?

Paul’s answer comes in the subsequent verses. We begin with 2:13, which grounds the Philippians’ obedience clearly in the work of God in the lives of believers. This is a key theme in Philippians. The one who “began a good work in you” is the one who will “bring it to completion on the day of Christ” (1:6) and it is God who “will fully satisfy every need of yours” (4:19). We may note that Phil 1:6 immediately follows a reference to the Philippians being “partners in the gospel [with Paul] from the first day until now” (1:5–6). The Philippians’ ability to “stand firm, striving with one mind” is later glossed with the phrase “this is God’s doing” (1:28, καὶ τὸῦτο ἀπὸ θεοῦ). Yet, we note again that the immediate context provides a more concrete account of what God does, as the Philippians come to share in apostolic sufferings (1:28–30). God’s work, it seems, is closely connected to the question of the Philippian’s faithful adherence to Paul as apostle, and participation an apostolic pattern of life shaped by terms like “gospel” and “suffering”.

There has been in the scholarship an on-going debate over the precise reference of the term ‘good pleasure’ (εὐδοκία) in 2:13, which serves as the ultimate goal of the Philippians’ “work”. The noun lacks a modifying pronoun, and it is perhaps a little too hasty to rush in, as the NRSV and many commentators do, to insist that it is God’s favour that is implied. Paul has already used the term in 1:15 to refer to those who proclaim Christ with goodwill towards Paul (διὰ εὐδοκίαν τὸν Χριστὸν κηρύσσουσιν), in contrast to those who proclaim Christ from a position of rivalry. In his earlier exhortation in 2:3 Paul has condemned action based on rivalry (ἐριθεία). Now he commends among the Philippians a life of “salvation working” expressed in and through their goodwill to their apostle. 2:12–13 is not therefore a general meditation on the tension between divine and human agency. It is Paul’s attempt to link the Philippians’ Christian existence with their orientation.

17 The τότε of this clause in 1:29 looks backwards, certainly to the whole of 1:28 but also to the imperatives of 1:27–28 to which the ὅτι clause of 1:28 is grammatically subordinate. This leaves the ὅτι of 1:29 as causal. The ability to obey the imperatives comes ἀπὸ θεοῦ because God has “graced” the Philippians.
towards and relationship with him. Paul cannot conceive of their working out their salvation in his absence outside of the context of the past history of faithful obedience and friendly relations that existed between apostle and community.

Paul’s use of Deuteronomy traditions in 2:14–15 supports this reading of the section, with πάντα ποιεῖτε again communicating the overall breadth of Paul’s instruction. Things are to be done without murmuring or arguing (γογγυσμῶν καὶ διαλογισμῶν), the former term especially hinting at the story of Israelite mumbling during the wilderness wanderings. The complaints thus evoked, are directed, as the relevant LXX texts make clear, initially at Moses and therefore ultimately against God. The relationship between the community and their leader bears witness to the state of their relationship with God. In the same way, the Philippians’ obedience to Paul provides tangible evidence of God’s work among and within them.

All of this then leads us to 2:16–17 where Paul explicitly connects the Philippians on-going adherence to himself and his teaching to his own eschatological vindication. The Philippians’ “holding fast to the word of life” (λόγου ζωῆς ἐπέχοντες) results in (εἰς) Paul’s boasting on the day of Christ (2:16). Conversely, Paul’s sacrificial ministry is viewed as that which renders the sacrificial offering of the Philippians’ own faith (2:17, ἡθωσία καὶ λειτουργία τῆς πίστεως ὑμῶν) acceptable to God. This mutuality between apostle and congregation is therefore to be expressed in shared rejoicing (2:18).

What, then, has all this got to do with the Christ hymn? We have already noted the linguistic connection via the motif of obedience. But we can now see that the hymn prepares for the exhortation at much more than the lexical level. The story of Christ connects to the instructions to the Philippians in 2:12–18 with reference to the ultimate object of obedience and the promised or anticipated consequence of obedience. Christ and, those in Christ, are obedient to God. This much is in common. Yet for Christ who is in the form of God such obedience is essentially unmediated and is constituted by Christ’s own self-determination. For the Philippians, their obedience is

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mediated through the apostolic teaching of Paul as apostle, whose own life of suffering bears witness to his own identity as one ‘in Christ’. For the Philippians, to be obedient to God is to imitate Christ as Christ is mediated to them through Paul (cf. Phil 3:17 and 1 Cor 10:11). This kind of connection also has the potential to draw out the exhortatory significance of 2:9–11 much more obviously than the “humility” reading does. For, as Käsemann pointed out long ago, Christ is not vindicated for being humble or even for suffering. There is no antecedent Jewish tradition, in my knowledge, that posits divine favour, deliverance or future vindication as the consequence of humility and suffering per se. As the second Adam, Christ is exalted as the result of his obedience to death.¹⁹ Likewise, the Philippians can anticipate that their sacrifice and offering of faith will be received by God (2:17). However, that offering is again mediated through Paul as apostle whose own sacrifice both exemplifies and makes possible the faithful obedience of his audience.

The social relationship that lies in the background here is quite clearly, in my view, that of Grec0-Roman friendship, characterised by mutual reciprocity, affection and support. A large body of recent work on the letter has concluded that a number of the main motifs in the letter are best explained in the light of the discourse of friendship in Paul’s world.²⁰ Much of Paul’s language throughout the epistle is relational, and the letter opening (1:1–11) and closing (4:10–23) are both characterized by a stark and distinct emphasis on what 2:12 refers to as “having obeyed me”: the Philippians have supported Paul financially and spiritually (1:3, 5; 19; 4:10–20), and there is evidence that in their proclamation and suffering they have come to share in the “grace” of apostolic vocation (1:7). Stanley Stowers has noted that friendship sometimes provided the context for moral instruction, including by letter in the event of physical absence between friends.²¹ We have already

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¹⁹ The notion that it is Christ’s suffering that secures vindication, but Christ’s obedience through suffering, is suggested not least by connecting the possible Adamic aspects of Phil 2:6–11 to Rom 5:18–19. For an excellent discussion of the motif of suffering in Romans see Siu Fung Wu, Suffering in Romans (Eugene: Pickwick, 2015).

²⁰ I am currently preparing a monograph on the subject of Philippians and Friendship which, I hope, will serve to confirm the appropriateness of this basic approach to the letter, but correct some important confusion about its exegetical significance in relation to Paul’s paraenesis in the letter. Section IV of this paper hints at the directions of this wider argument.

had occasion to notice how, in the exhortatory sections of the letter, Paul sets this friendship relationship into a number of different argumentative contexts, as a way of imbuing it with meaning and significance. It is set into a temporal context in which the past history of partnership is to continue and grow into the future, until the Day of Christ itself; it is placed in a theological context in which the Philippians’ adherence to Paul, his example and his teaching, is construed as obedience to God; and it is set in Christological context, in that Paul and the Philippians, through their mutual partnership, come to inhabit the pattern of life exemplified in the Christ hymn.

IV Philippians 2:1–4

It remains for us to return to the verses that introduce the Christ hymn to see whether the proposed reading of its significance can help us to make sense of these verses. We begin by noting a strange discrepancy in the scholarship that argues for the primacy of a “friendship” relationship between the Philippians and Paul as a key for interpreting Philippians. It is this: when almost all scholars come to read 2:1–4, full as it is with ongoing motifs of friendship, and associated notions of regard for others, they shift attention away from the relationship between Paul and the Philippians and read the text as an exhortation concerning mutual relationships among the Philippians. The relationship between apostle and congregation transmutes into a focus on relationships within the congregation.

In other words, 2:1–4 is always read as an exhortation to ecclesial unity. In my view, several observations support the claim that this is not the primary focus of this section, but that instead the verses treat primarily the question of the relationship between the Philippians and Paul.23

First, we note that the main exhortation in this section is to complete Paul’s joy (2:2,

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22 For a recent example of this reading see Peter-Ben Smit, Paradigms of Being in Christ: A Study of the Epistle to the Philippians (LNTS 476; London: Bloomsbury, 2013) 83–84. The focus of the passage is ‘the internal unity of the community’ with ‘the emphasis on the friendly relationship between Paul and the Philippians’ adding to the ‘effect of Paul’s appeal’. The problem with this is that the ‘friendship’ terms are embedded in the appeal itself (τὸ οὖτό φρονήτε, τὴν οὕτην ὁγάπην ἐχουσε, συμφύξοι, το ἐν φρονούσε). While it is possible that Paul assumes that his (implicit) friendship with the Philippians to be adequate grounds for their necessary friendship with each other, it is far more likely that Paul is appealing explicitly for friendship with him.

23 The full exegetical case in support of this reading needs to wait until another time, but the comments below give an initial indication of the kinds of textual features that must be taken into account in the exegesis of 2:1–4.
πληρώσατε μου τὴν χαράν). This has proved something of an embarrassment to some commentators. The imperative should be taken at face value. The request to complete Paul’s joy is an initial expression of the sentiment later expressed in 2:17: mutual partnership between congregation and apostle makes possible apostolic (and congregational) joy. The prior history of this partnership, expressed above all in the gift that the Philippians have sent, is an initial cause for Paul’s rejoicing (see 1:3, ἐυχαριστῶ; 4:10, ἐχάρην δὲ ἐν κυρίω μεγάλως). Now the Philippians are to make that joy complete.

The subsequent clauses in the carefully crafted protasis of 2:1, seem also to direct attention to the Philippians’ relationship with Paul. The ὅν indicates that the realities referred to in 2:1–2 are consequences of the Philippians joining with Paul in sharing in suffering for Christ (1:30). Thus “consolation” (παράκλησις) is best seen as a term denoting the promise of eschatological vindication that is offered to all who share in those sufferings (and which is about to spelled out in 2:5–11). The terms κοινωνία and σπλάγχνα have both been used in the letter-opening (see 1:5, 7–8) in descriptions of the mutual partnership and affection that exists between apostle and congregation. Together, these provide the basis for the exhortations to make Paul’s joy (already partially complete because of that partnership and affection), now fully complete by (ἵνα) “thinking the same thing, having the same love, (being) ‘joint-souls’, thinking the one (thing)”.

Again, we need to remind ourselves that many scholars are sure that these are friendship terms, but believe that they constitute an appeal for community harmony. There is no grammatical reason why this should be the case. The use of the neuter pronoun τὸ αὐτὸ to mean “the same thing” is commonly found, and presents the interpreter with the obvious implied question: think the same thing as whom? This prompts the further observation that in the absence of explicit lexical terms that identify the anticipated answer to this question, one must attend closely to the surrounding discourse markers that might prompt one to take a particular direction. Crucially, Paul does not use the reciprocal

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24 Thus I propose taking Paul’s usage here to be broadly consistent with that in 2 Cor 1:3–7.

25 Translation mine. The customary translation ‘be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind’ tends to presuppose that the exhortation is directed towards community disharmony.
pronoun in direct connection with these imperatives. In its absence, it is lexically possible and contextually plausible that the phrase here means, as do similar phrases in 1.27 and 4.2: “think the same thing as me”.27

Paul’s use of friendship language spells out what it might mean to make Paul’s joy complete. In my view it is highly likely that the exhortations here consitute an appeal, on the basis on the friendly relationship between Paul and the Philippians to this point, for that relationship to grow, strengthen and deepen.

What then of 2:3–4? We note first that the first term in 2:3, εριθεία, has already been used by Paul to describe those who preach the gospel in order to increase Paul’s suffering in prison (1:17). It serves as the antonym to εὐδοκία as previously noted in our discussion of 2:13. The subsequent clauses are usually translated as a series of related by stand alone imperatives. However what we actually have is a series of run-on participles (ἡγούμενοι, σκοτούντες) that continue to unpack what it means to complete Paul’s joy by being of the same mind as him. Paul’s language belongs to the standard tradition of mutuality and other-regard in friendship relations. Friends are as those who wish the good for the other or who, in Engberg-Pedersen’s words, “develop and establish the perspective of oneself-as-one-of-the others”.28 It is this overall self-awareness of “oneself-as-one-of-the-others” that Paul seeks, and while in the first clause of 2:3 the reciprocal pronoun does occur (τῇ ταπεινοφροσύνῃ ἀλλήλους ἡγούμενοι) it is directed towards the cultivation of such self-awareness. In addition, and in relation to 2:4, it is perfectly possible to see Paul as being included in the “others” whose interests the Philippians are to pursue.

Finally, we note that 1 Corinthians 10 and 11 suggest that agreement with Paul and looking after the interests of one another are not mutually exclusive ideas. In 1 Cor 10:24 Paul uses a similar

26 Cf. Rom 12:16 which does include the reciprocal pronoun (τῷ αὐτῷ εἰς ἀλλήλους φρονοῦντες) and which must therefore mean “think the same thing as each other”.

27 There is no space to consider the parallel phrases in 1:27 and 4:2 in this article, but in both cases the contextual arguments for reading them as calls for agreement with Paul is strong.

phrase in the context of whether or not to eat idol meat. “Do not seek your own advantage”, writes Paul, “but that of the other” (μηδείς τὸ ἐστιτὸν ζητεῖτω ἀλλὰ τὸ τοῦ ἑτέρου). This same sentiments are expressed in 10:32: “Give no offense to Jew or Greeks or to the church of God”. But Paul then cites his own practice in terms reminiscent of the instructions to the Philippians (10:33). Paul does not seek his “own advantage” but “that of many” (μὴ ζητῶν τὸ ἐμαυτοῦ σύμφωνον ἀλλὰ τὸ τῶν πολλῶν). Clearly, Paul is able to combine notions of mutual regard within the community with language reflecting the need for mutual regard between himself and the community. Having indicated his commitment to such values, Paul then calls the Corinthians to share with him in embodying them: “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Cor 11:1). Crucially, as in Philippians, the appeal to the example of Christ undergirds Paul’s call for diverse patterns of other-regard, including those between apostle and congregation.

My claim is that such a reading of 2:1–4 coheres more obviously and precisely with the sentiments of 2:12–18 as discussed above (as well, I suggest, with those of 1:27–30, 3:12–21, and 4:1–10). The primary rhetorical purpose of Paul’s paraenesis is not to address the problem of disunity in the Philippian church. Instead the exhortations in Philippians aim to strengthen the relationship between Paul and his audience, and to increase the adherence of Paul’s audience to the pattern of existence and behaviour that Paul exemplifies as an apostle of the Christ whose story is narrated in 2:5–11. Central to that pattern is obedience to God, expressed precisely in the ongoing partnership with Paul and consequent obedience to the imperatives in the letter itself, which serves to mediate his apostolic presence to the community. Such partnership and obedience derives its significance not merely from its capacity to strengthen the relationship between Paul and the church, but more importantly from its relationship to Christ’s own obedience to God, and the eschatological promise of final vindication already anticipated in Christ’s enthronement.

V Conclusion

In conclusion, I propose that the key pattern of ethical behaviour exemplified in 2:5–11 is that of
“obedience to death”. Union with the Christ whose “story” is narrated in these verses brings Paul’s audience into the sphere of Christ’s lordship, established through God’s response to Christ’s obedience to death. The call to the Philippians to patterns of consequent obedience is mediated primarily through the apostolic presence and instruction of Paul. Thus, they are called into deeper forms of relationship with him. It is indeed true to say that what is said in the Christ hymn is that the world belongs to the Obedient one, and that Christ’s lordship makes possible our obedience. But, when set in its paraenetic context, the hymn does more than just tell the Philippians that they belong to Christ. It tells them that obedience to Paul, after the pattern of Christ’s obedience to God, constitutes the working out of their salvation.