

PRINCETON THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF A NEW NAME  
IN THE MOVEMENT TOWARD CHRISTIAN UNITY

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The significance of a name extends beyond a means of identifying a person, object, or spiritual being. A name is considered to be an essential part of an individual's personality. More specifically, the recitation of a person's name commands a response from the named individual. What is the theological significance of a name? In particular, how does the notion of a name impact God's interactions with an individual or communities of believers, both intra-community and inter-community? One of the reasons for the Apostle Paul's writing of the epistle to the church at Philippi was to encourage them toward unity and to challenge them to be one in spirit and purpose for the sharing of the gospel. The focus of Paul's exhortation of the Philippians is found in the way of thinking in Christ Jesus, especially as evidenced by the Christ hymn in Phil 2:6-11 and, more specifically, in God's name-giving pattern implemented in the bestowing on Jesus the name that is above every other name.

The church at Philippi, as revealed in Phil 4, was not unified due to a conflict between Euodia and Syntyche. Paul exhorted them to agree in the Lord. What was the impact of their disagreement? Their conflict was lessening the impact of the gospel! Paul challenged the church in Phil 1:27 to let their manner of life be worthy of the gospel and to stand firm in one spirit with one mind striving side by side (συναθλοῦντες) for the faith of the gospel. He used the same phrase, side by side (συλλαμβάνου), to describe his relationship with the two women in their labor for the gospel. The description of the relationship between Paul and these two women indicated that they also worked side by

side. Returning to Phil 1, Paul stated that one result of their unity was an absence of fear by the Philippian church and an omen to those who opposed the gospel. In conclusion, the degree of their unity directly influenced the impact of the gospel.

What method did Paul employ to challenge the Philippians toward unity? He utilized a hymn, situated in the context of a challenge toward selfless living and practical applications, which described Christ Jesus' humiliation and exaltation. The purpose of the hymn reference was not to challenge the Philippians to emulate Christ's thinking or to directly imitate his acts on an individual level, but, instead, to challenge the church to a common mind in what they think about Christ.<sup>1</sup> He stated, "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus." (Phil 2:5 RSV) In other words, each person should think of each other in the way that they think about Christ and regard each other from the same perspective.<sup>2</sup> This interpretation connects with the preceding challenges that Paul states with regards to having the same mind, being harmonious, and one in purpose.

Philippians 2:6-11 is a hymn. The evidence for the hymn is found in the style and content of the text. First, the style is different than the surrounding sections. The evidence is that the text switches from the first person and second person to the third person and then back. Next, the terminology is not Pauline and the Paul's characteristic ideas, such as the resurrection, are not present. Finally, the section is composed of

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<sup>1</sup> Charles M. Laymon, ed., *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary On the Bible* (Nashville and New York: Abingdon Press), 849.

<sup>2</sup> Laymon, *Interpreter's*, 850.

phrases that fall into patterns.<sup>3</sup> The use of the hymn was meant to serve as a reference of systematic theology. The content, however, does reflect the worship of the time and does have theological implications. The descriptions reveal the movement of Christ Jesus from humbling himself to God exalting him. This serves as a starting point for the Philippians' thinking and acting. More specifically, this is a foundation for the partnership both within the community as well as among Christian communities.

The hymn initially focuses on the action of humility taken by Christ Jesus in emptying himself and being obedient to the extent of death, even death on a cross. The actor in the second part of the hymn, marked by the word "therefore", changes from Christ Jesus to God. God raised Jesus to the highest position and gave him the name that is above every name. Many commentators have written on significance of Christ Jesus' humility and obedience as the reason for Paul's inclusion of the hymn and overall challenge of harmony. However, the focus of Paul's exhortation of the Philippians toward unity is also found in God giving Jesus a new name and the relationship of this naming with the rest of the letter.

Why was it necessary for God to give Jesus a new name and what theological implications does God's pattern of name-giving have for the church at Philippi and the body of Christ? A summary of the significance of a name, historically and religiously, needs to be presented before this question can be addressed. For a person, a name is considered an essential part of that individual's personality. Various rites, throughout

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<sup>3</sup> Laymon, *Interpreter's*, 850.

history, have been used to find a name for a child. This applies to the individual as well as the family hierarchy context. For example, in some cultures, when a person dies in a family, if the child receives a name of a deceased person, he or she is designated as the one to fill the gap in the family structure caused by the death.<sup>4</sup> For a god, a personality, history, and myth are acquired when a god has a name. In addition, only when a god has a name can a human have dealings with the god, call on the god, or bring the god into play by magic.<sup>5</sup>

ὄνομα was common to in all secular Greek in the Greek world.<sup>6</sup> The Philippian audience understood the use of ὄνομα in light of the Hellenistic world in which they lived. The “Name” referred mainly to a person or thing. In Homer, it was used only with reference to men.<sup>7</sup> The name was an essential part of a person and a person’s nature was considered destroyed when a name was lost. Finally, the Greek world also understood ὄνομα as an individual’s repute.

The Bible includes numerous examples of the significant names and the naming actions. First, in the Old Testament, the act of giving someone a name created a relationship of authority and ownership towards the named entity. For example, the first man was given the task of naming in Gen 2:19. The specific description is, “so out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called

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<sup>4</sup> Hans Bietenhard, “ὄνομα”, 243.

<sup>5</sup> Hans Bietenhard, “ὄνομα”, 243.

<sup>6</sup> Hans Bietenhard, “ὄνομα”, 243.

<sup>7</sup> Hans Bietenhard, “ὄνομα”, 243.

every living creature, that was its name.” In addition, leaders provided new names in the Old Testament based on updated roles. For example, the chief eunuch gave Daniel and the other exiled servants new names that either described their assignment to a special status or their diminution to a place of dependence.<sup>8</sup> The writer of Daniel stated, “And the chief of the eunuchs gave them names: Daniel he called Belteshaz'zar, Hanani'ah he called Shadrach, Mish'a-el he called Meshach, and Azari'ah he called Abed'nego.” (Daniel 1:7 RSV).

The importance of naming by humans is displayed in these examples but there is a greater significance associated with God changing the name of a person. For example, Abram's name is changed to Abraham in Gen 17 when God initiates the covenant of circumcision. The meaning of Abraham is “father of many” and this summarizes his new purpose. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus, after calling the twelve to him, renamed Simon, James, and John. It states, “Simon whom he surnamed Peter; James the son of Zebedee and John the brother of James, whom he surnamed Bo-anerges, that is, sons of thunder;” (Mark 3:16-17 RSV). In each of these cases, and many others throughout the Old Testament (i.e. Jacob to Israel), the changing of name is a significant event in the life of the renamed.

The hymn in Phil 2:6-11 describes God as highly exalting Jesus and giving him the name that is above every other name. The Apostle Paul included the hymn in order to specifically challenge the Philippians to see their relationships with God, each other, and

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<sup>8</sup> Hans Bietenhard, “ὄνομα”, 254

other communities differently. Numerous scholars have tried to pinpoint the specific name that was given. One conjecture is that the name is “Lord”. The main evidence for this name is that the hymn includes a slave to master transition where the name “Lord” indicates that Jesus is sovereign over the universe.<sup>9</sup> In addition, the given title of κύριος represents a connection between the Septuagint reference to Yahweh as κύριος and Christ Jesus. This link provides a possible means for relating Jesus to both Jews and Gentiles using the same term. Wilhelm Bousset, in *Kyrios Christos*, responded to this notion. An article in *The Princeton Theological Review* describes Bousset’s response to the κύριος title as “first conferred upon Jesus after the church had passed over from its purely Palestinian to a Hellenistic environment, and therefore does not play a role either in the life of Jesus or in the earliest apostolic belief.”<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, Bousset emphasized that ὁ κύριος referred to a cult hero both by Christians, such as Syriac Christians, and pagan cults.<sup>11</sup> Another hypothesis is that the name simply refers to the name “Jesus”. Paul quickly moves to the name of “Jesus” in Phil 2:10. In this case, the Lordly authority is then given to Jesus of Nazareth, the historical figure. These are the two main suppositions made regarding the new name.

Paul does not provide the specific name before or after the hymn. He may have intentionally left the name ambiguous in favor of leading the reader to focus more on the response to the name rather than to trying to determine the specific name. The response

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<sup>9</sup> Laymon, *Interpreter’s*, 851.

<sup>10</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, *The Princeton Theological Review* (Philadelphia: MacCalla & Co. Inc., 1914), 12-636.

<sup>11</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, *The Princeton Theological Review* (Philadelphia: MacCalla & Co. Inc., 1914), 12-638.

to that name will be that every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. More specifically, the result of this response is glory for God the Father. Paul charges the Philippians, a mixed audience of Jews and Gentiles, to recognize the unified response to Jesus and to see the significance of God giving Jesus a new name.

God's pattern of giving names, and more significantly changing names, relates directly to his redeeming purpose for each individual. In the case of Jesus, God gave him a name after Jesus humbled himself, obeyed and was exalted. Jesus' name now displays his purpose as Lord and conduit for God's glory, even if his specific name may not be κύριος. A similar reference is made in the introductory section of Romans where Paul writes that Jesus was "designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord." (Rom 1:4 RSV). The Philippians and Romans description point to a transition that occurred after Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus is given a new name in the hymn in Philippians and he is designated Son of God in power and "our Lord" in Romans.

What implications does God giving Jesus a name, as described in the hymn, have for the Philippians? The themes in the epistle to the Philippians shed light on the significance of this specific name giving. First, in review, the hymn is introduced by the exhortation for the Philippians to think in terms of the community, which is in Christ Jesus. Furthermore, leading up this exhortation, Paul challenges them to think the same, be harmonious and have one purpose. This purpose is a unified purpose that is a summation of each individual's contribution to the community. Secondly, Paul weaves



the theme of a specific beginning and a continued, co-creating process that involves both divine and human effort. For example, Paul describes his partnership in the gospel from the first day until now and he refers to the good work that has begun that will be completed on the day of Christ Jesus. More specifically, Paul challenges the Philippians to work out their salvation with fear and trembling while recognizing that it is God's working, to will and to act according to his good purpose. Lastly, the theme of partnership runs throughout the epistle. Paul first refers to the partnership generally in Phil 1:5. Later on in Phil 1:25, he described the outcome of their continued partnership as progress and joy in the faith. All together, these themes provide a picture of the Christian faith as partnership between Christians as they work out their salvation in the context of the community of believers.

What is the starting point of this partnership? Paul, in other writings, directly describes coming to faith in Christ as being baptized into death and raised with Christ. This good work had a beginning point for the Philippians and it is represented in baptism. The Christ hymn possibly was used at baptismal services in the early church.

If the hymn has a baptismal setting, the implied exhortation in verse 5 is 'become what you already are', risen with Christ to new life, and work out in your church difficulties the new life you received at your baptism into Christ (Rom 6:1-14). This thought admirably links on to the sequel to the hymn in 2:12: 'work out your own salvation' as those who are 'in Christ' and heirs of salvation.<sup>12</sup>

Therefore, the Christian's burial with Christ in his death and rising with Christ marks the transition to being, as Paul describes it, in Christ. This connection to Christ's death and

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<sup>12</sup> Ralph Martine, *New Century Bible Commentary Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), 93.

resurrection is linked to Jesus receiving a new name after his death, resurrection, and exaltation. In a similar manner, Christians receive a new name when they are baptized and enter into the story of God's working through God's church. This new name includes a purpose for that individual. More importantly, this purpose is realized most correctly in the context of a community where each individual lives out that new purpose in Christ.

The new purpose is not fully realized immediately and may never be fully realized. The Christian life is a process. The name changes cited before are examples. Abram, Jacob, and Simon did not change immediately into the Abraham, Israel, and Peter, respectively, that God intended when he changed their names. Paul also uses himself as an example of this process in Phil 3 when he describes himself as not being made perfect but, instead, he is pressing on. Furthermore, he reminded the Philippians to only live up to what they had already attained.

What does process look like? Paul described the progression as a continual co-creating work of God and the person. The outcome is that God works to will and to act for his good pleasure. Paul listed practical steps in order to achieve this. First, he shared his prayer as an example for their prayers. The focus of that prayer in the introduction of the epistle was that they would have discernment so that they can discern the superior things (διαφέροντα) . In addition, he then challenged them to think about whatever is excellent (ἀρετῇ). This active thinking, according to the letter to the Romans, leads to the renewal of the mind and an understanding of God's will. This determination of God's

will moves the community closer toward unity as they fulfill their specific and communal purpose in the body of Christ.

In review, Paul challenged the Philippians to think the same thing in Phil 2:5. This discussion on discerning God's will and thinking about what is excellent precludes the notion that they are required to think the exact same thoughts. Instead, the meaning lies in moving toward unity by finishing Paul's joy, being harmonious and one in spirit and purpose. Overall, the result is a community that is unified, powerful in its sharing of the gospel and effective in fulfilling God's purpose. The combination of these characteristics leads to God's glory.

The Christ hymn is an important contributor to Paul's challenge and encouragement for unity in the church at Philippi. Paul utilized this hymn to further elucidate the meaning of thinking the same, especially in terms of being in Christ Jesus. The importance of Jesus receiving the name that is above every other name is tied to the community of believers in that each individual receives a new name. This new name is given when they are found in Christ through identifying with him in his death and resurrection through baptism. The result of this new name is not merely a new individual or new creation. Instead, the outcome is the addition of another part of the community of believers who is moving toward fulfilling his or her purpose in the body of Christ. A co-creating faith path characterizes this movement where the believer works out his or her salvation with fear and trembling as God works to will and act according to God's good pleasure and purpose.

Paul's use of Christ hymn was not meant to be a source of systematic theology. The hymn, however, pointed the Philippians toward unity. The combination of the utility of the hymn and the well-documented pattern of God's changing of names throughout the Bible provides evidence for the movement toward unity based on new names given to believers. The focus of Paul's exhortation of the Philippians is found in God's name-giving pattern in bestowing on Jesus the name that is above every other name and in giving each believer in Christ a new name. In conclusion, the result is unity in the body of Christ and the answer to Paul's prayer in the first chapter of Philippians which is "And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruits of righteousness which come through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God." (Phil 1:9-11 RSV).

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