Submission within the Godhead and the Church in the Epistle to the Philippians

By M. Sydney Park | Reviewed by Alan G. Padgett

This volume by Sydney Park started life as a doctoral dissertation in New Testament studies. The style of the work is very academic, and the price of the hardback means very few, if any, nonspecialists will read it. This review will be devoted primarily to explaining the author’s main argument, but I will indulge in just one critical comment toward the end.

The so-called Christ-hymn in Philippians 2:6–11 is one of the most widely studied passages in the whole Bible. Park does a good job of reviewing the research of the last three decades or so (mostly in English) and indicating those places where he disagrees with established scholars such as Ralph Martin, N. T. Wright, and James D. G. Dunn. This is a formidable task for a new scholar, and I admire his boldness in taking on these internationally respected figures. What I like about his proposal is that he has learned from the major interpretive models, but has refused to be drawn into a one-sided reading of the text. His major contribution is to provide a balanced and holistic approach to the question of the meaning of this key text and its place in the larger teaching of Paul in this letter.

There have tended to be three schools or models of the interpretation of this passage. One model, associated with Ernst Käsemann (a very famous German New Testament scholar) and Ralph Martin (formerly of Fuller Seminary), argues that the original meaning of this Christ-hymn has no ethical implications whatsoever—despite what we might think from reading Philippians 2:1–5. They focus particularly on the meaning of the passage prior to Paul’s using it in this letter. They argue that this is a fragment of an early Christian hymn to Christ, which Paul then uses in his letter later on and for his own purposes. The point of the passage is a kind of drama of salvation, not an ethical injunction we are called to imitate. Another model is developed over against this one by Dunn and Wright. They analyze the text against the background of an Adam Christology where the main point is the typological contrast between Adam (who fell, of course) and Jesus, who is the Second Adam (cf. Rom 5). Unlike the first Adam, Jesus is obedient to God and so is exalted to be the Lord of all humanity. Finally, the great British New Testament scholar C. F. D. Moule, and more recently Stephen Fowl, have argued for a return to seeing this passage in the context of the letter as a whole, and Fowl in particular argues for an ethical thrust to the text in its larger context.

Park wants to say “yes and no” to all of these arguments. He is critical of the work of others in places where he finds that their conclusions go beyond the evidence. For example, he argues that Wright reads an Adam/Christ typology too deeply into this passage. Park finds something to take
away from each scholar’s work as well. I find his general point—that the passage is about both a drama of salvation and an ethical exhortation to imitate Christ in his humble, submissive service—to make good sense of the final form of the text as we now have it. Following Fowl and many moral theologians today, Park sees ethics as involved with narrative, a highly important development for his thesis which could have been made more explicit. In any case, Park wants to say that this passage is as much about God’s identity as it is about either ethics or the story of salvation. This is where his remarks on the Trinity come in.

Park’s interpretation of the ethics of submission in Philippians draws upon the work of postmodern social theorist Michel Foucault. He is quite critical of the earlier work of postmodern critic E. A. Castelli, who also drew upon Foucault in her *Imitating Paul* (1991). In terms of the ethic of imitation, Christ himself demonstrates true submission in Philippians 2:6–11. Park argues (following Marcus Bockmuehl on this and other key points) that Paul exhorts the Christian community to follow in this same way of the cross, both in Philippians 2:1–5 and in the next chapter, 3:4–11. There is, therefore, a definite theme of the imitation of Christ in the letter as a whole. And this imitation implies a humiliation, a submission on the part of the Christian to others. For Foucault and his followers, power is radically social, practical, and embodied. Those at the top of a hierarchy do not “possess” power, rather, power is found in relations. It is a set of actions, loosely coordinated and very much at play in the complex relationships between the “higher” and “lower.” It is not so much in gross violence as in the symbolic and practical means by which governors guide and herd the free actions of the governed that power is made manifest in human societies. Park argues on this basis that any ethic of imitation must necessarily include some kind of a hierarchy and distinction. The copy can never be the full equal of the model, and the follower will never be identical with the exemplar. Yet, for him, hierarchy does not have to be oppressive. He carries out a careful exegetical study of the many places where Paul uses “imitation” language to press the point that, for Paul, his authority is not a goal in and of itself. Paul is not interested in maintaining his own personal power nor in lording it over others, but in submission to Christ for the purpose of building up the community and establishing unity in the body of Christ. For Paul, “Christ is the ethical paradigm for believers” so that “the definition of submission is primarily anchored on the mindset/action of Christ in Phil. 2:6–8” (117).

Park is right in following a few modern interpreters (like Bockmuehl) who see submission in this passage, even though the word “submission” does not appear in the text. The mindset and action of mutual submission is here, and that is the point. Since Christ is “equal with God,” we find a kind of submission within the Triune God without hierarchy. “Divine submission ensues not from hierarchy but from equality; Christ’s submission is the direct consequence of his contemplation of his equality with God (2.6)” (130 n.). Submission includes obedience, but also involves a voluntary giving up of rights, privilege, and status, which is characteristic of taking on “the form of a slave.”
Park goes on to argue that both in Christ’s humiliation and in his exaltation, God the Father exercises a unique authority. Thus, Park finds in Philippians 2 a permanent hierarchy between Father and Son. For Park, Christ’s equality is not unqualified, but “resonates undertones of hierarchy” (139). Here, we must say of Park’s extended conclusions and speculations what he says of so many others: his conclusions go beyond the exegetical evidence. Nowhere in Philippians 2 do we find anything of God exercising authority over Christ. Christ is equal with God and displays his full divinity exactly in his loving, submissive service and obedience. The obedience of Christ comes from the Son’s own love, not from the Father’s command or authority. There is no reason, therefore, to find in Philippians 2:9–11 anything less than the full equality of the name of Jesus with that of God. The exaltation of the Son back to equality with God is indeed the very thing which gives glory to the Father. Park reads his “binary hierarchy” into the text at this point. Here, his conclusions are unsound, and this mars his long conversation with egalitarian theologians. In any case, his conversation with modern theologians is only based upon Philippians, and so his extended argument is necessarily weak. Christian doctrine and ethics must be based upon the whole of the biblical canon and not merely on one text, however interesting and important it may be.

This is a stimulating monograph on a key text in New Testament Christology. Park fully justifies his claim that an ethic of submission is found in Philippians, even though the word is not used by Paul. He is right to see both soteriology and ethics at work in these passages. But his tendency to read a binary hierarchy into the God/Christ relationship in Philippians 2 undermines some of his expansive conclusions toward the end of the book. Still, any biblical scholar interested in current interpretations of Philippians 2 and 3, or in the ethic of submission in the New Testament, will want to study this monograph.

ALAN G. PADGETT is an ordained minister and professor of systematic theology at Luther Seminary in Saint Paul, Minnesota. His most recent book is As Christ Submits to the Church (Baker Academic).

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