

## The Model and Centrality of Humility in the Body of Christ: An Exegesis of Philippians 2:1–4

Alex Muiruri  
Email: alexmuirur@gmail.com

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### Abstract

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For years, Philippians 2:1-4 has been a topic of debate among scholars. Questions regarding the believers' motivation to pursue unity, love, and service remain relevant today. Sadly, the false *quid pro quo* perspective has become the norm for believers, as it is common for them to think their call is to help only those who can help them in reciprocal magnitudes when in need. This notion leads some believers to pursue unity, love, and service not out of humility but in expectation of reciprocal outcomes. Consequently, the church is divided into classes that can reciprocate kindness, where the poor relate meaningfully with the poor while the rich are with the rich. This attitude continues to demean the gospel call for the believers (whether rich or poor) to 'do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider one another as more important than yourselves' (Phil 2:3). This exegetical analysis of Philippians 2:1–4, examines the place of humility in the body of Christ and Christ as the model of humility. Using the grammatical-historical method, this research examined how Paul's argument in Philippians 2:1–4 functions within the immediate and literary context of the book of Philippians. It draws theological implications for the church today. It shows that believers share humbling and enriching blessings of consolation, comfort, fellowship, affection, and sympathy, which make them ready to pursue unity, love, and sacrificial service in their relationships.

**Keywords:** Humility, Obedience, Kenosis, Christian Unity, Philippians 2

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### Introduction

In the New Testament, it is presumed that the believers would join the church membership, where they would emulate Christ's humility and sacrificial love as the foundation motivation for the pursuit of genuine fellowship, unity, and love. In the early church, as recorded in the book of Acts, believers were closely knit in Christ and were ready to serve the needy among them



sacrificially. It is written that “there was no one needy among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold... and it was distributed to each as any had need...” (Acts 4:34–35 ESV). Yet, in postmodern times, the motivation for pursuing unity, love, and service is primarily driven by selfish gain. This study explored humility as the motivation of the believers’ pursuit of unity, love, and selfless service by exegeting Philippians 2:1–4. In this passage, scholars, for instance Black, have argued that “Philippians 2:1–4 has an undeniable poetic structure consisting of three strophes which can be arranged under three headings: the grounds for Christian unity, the result of Christian unity, and the expression of Christian unity.”<sup>1</sup> This is based on the imperative ‘fulfil my joy’ in verse 2 and suggest that the passage has humility flowing from the trinitarian blessings of consolation, comfort, and fellowship as the motivation for unity. There are, however, two main challenges of interpreting Philippians 2:1–4 as observed by Fee, first, “it is hard to tell precisely what Paul meant by the nouns used in each of the four clauses and how each noun in each pair of nouns relates to each other. Second, there’s an obscured personal character by the compressed nature of the four phrases, leaving one to ask: who is doing what to whom ...?”<sup>2</sup> This explains why different English Bible versions differ in rendering the different Greek phrases in this section. More questions are raised regarding the extent to which believers emulate Jesus’ humility.

Furthermore, the connection between Philippians 2:1–4 and 2:6–11 is widely discussed, with verse 5 being deemed “cryptic in Greek.”<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the meaning of the phrase ἐαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν (he emptied himself) concerning the extent of believers’ emulation of Jesus’ humility is vastly debated. It is argued that ἐκένωσεν means that “the Son of God was not diminishing of deity, but an acquiring of manhood.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, the believers have no excuse whatsoever to fail in their pursuit of humility, for “imitation’ does not ordinarily mean ‘do as I did’ but be as I am.’ Jesus’ self-emptying and self-sacrifice are significant precisely because they secured redemption for humanity. He also exemplified proper selflessness and humility for us.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David Alan Black, “Paul and Christian Unity: A Formal Analysis of Philippians 2:1–4,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 28, no. 3 (September 1, 1985): 299–308.

<sup>2</sup> Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, Word Biblical Commentary 43 (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1983), 65.

<sup>3</sup> I.-Jin Loh and Eugene A. Nida, *A Translators Handbook on Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, Helps for Translators (London, New York: United Bible Societies, 1983), 55. The phrase ‘Cryptic Greek’ refers to a figurative use of phrases in the Greek language.

<sup>4</sup> D. R. W. Wood and I. Howard Marshall, eds., *New Bible Dictionary*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 504.

<sup>5</sup> Gordon D Fee, “Philippians 2:5–11: Hymn or Exalted Pauline Prose?” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 2 (1992): 38.



Believers are to consider Jesus' humble attitude in leaving the dignity and privileges of his equality with God by being born in the likeness of man and by dying on the shameful cross for our redemption. He is, therefore, the ultimate example for believers to be humble in their relationships with one another.

## **1. Exegetical Discussion of Philippians 2:1–4**

### ***1.1 Translation of Philippians 2:1–4***

1 Therefore, if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, 2 make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in Spirit, intent and one purpose. 3 Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility, consider one another as more important than yourselves. 4 do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others (NASB).

### ***1.2 Exegetical Analysis of Philippians 2:1–4***

This passage examines the matter of humility from four angles: Its possibility, its shape, its model, and its outcome. The paper follows the following outline:

1. Humility among believers is possible 2:1
2. How humility shapes relationships within the church:
  - a) Cohesion among Believers 2:2
  - b) Selflessness in Service 3–4

#### ***1. Humility Among Believers is Possible 2:1***

The conjunction οὖν introduces the four εἰ τις phrases of 2:1 (therefore), which shows the close inferential relationship between the previous section (Phil 1:27–30). That is, the believers who are instructed to conduct themselves in a manner worthy of the gospel despite threats from their opponents, and who are assured of salvation and God's comforting presence in their sufferings (1:27–30) will complete Paul's joy in 2:2. Thus, οὖν unite these two sections, 1:27–30 and 2:1–4. Furthermore, the organic retention of the theme of unity in Philippians 1:27 and 2:2 maintains the coherent flow of the sections. This means that "unity of spirit flows from humility of spirit, and self-sacrifice from a willingness to restrain self for the benefit of others."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 64.



Structurally, Philippians 2:1–4 is “a sentence with a compound protasis (v. 1); the apodosis explaining how the protasis will be ‘fulfilled’ and a series of modifying participles and nouns offering the means of fulfillment in contrast to some negatives (verse 2–4).”<sup>7</sup> Thus, since it is ‘grammatically one sentence with one primary imperative of verse 2a,’<sup>8</sup> it is exegetically prudent to interpret individual clauses in light of the whole sentence for logical coherence.

The four εἰ τις/τι statements are rendered differently in the English translations. In the ESV, NASB, and CSB, the helping verb “there is” is supplied. Yet, “although such a translation is grammatically correct, it may leave the impression that Paul was appealing to the (general or universal) existence of these qualities, whereas he surely had in mind the Philippians’ specific experience of them.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, the rendering of the εἰ τις/τι conditional phrases using the “since there is” translation is a better rendering that leaves the impression that such unique realities to the Philippians are universal. Furthermore, these conditional phrases are “no simple ethical summons but rather are used to exhort believers, based on supernatural and objective realities that have already occurred in their own experience.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, Paul uses the four conditional phrases to invite the believers to recall their already existing experiences flowing from their relationship with Christ.

The phrase, παράκλησις ἐν Χριστῷ, is translated as ‘encouragement in Christ’ (NIV, ESV, NASB, or ‘consolation in Christ,’ NKJV). The noun παράκλησις can “convey at least two very different ideas: first, “comfort” or “consolation” and second, “exhortation” or “encouragement.”<sup>11</sup> In ordinary Greek, it is rendered as either “comfort or consolation in few instances– that are largely exhortatory to those who sorrow, and this is the case in LXX.”<sup>12</sup> However, Calvin, after comparing the two possible meanings of παράκλησις, argues in favor of consolation rather than encouragement, as he notes:

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<sup>7</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans, 1995), 177.

<sup>8</sup> Moisés Silva, *Philippians*, The Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988), 100.

<sup>9</sup> Silva, *Philippians* (1988): 102.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Thomas O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1991), 167.

<sup>11</sup> Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 65. Here, Hawthorne uses Schmitz’s argument in the TDNT that the verb from which παράκλησις is delivered is used primarily by Paul for exhortation (cf. Rom 12:1; 15:30; 16:17; 1 Cor 1:10; 4:16, 16:15; Eph 4:1; Phil 4:2; 1 Thess 2:11–12; 5:14)

<sup>12</sup> Gerhard Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. 5: X – pa, Repr. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1983), 776–89.



If there is among you any consolation of Christ,' through which you may alleviate my griefs, and if you would afford me any consolation and relief, which you assuredly owe me in the exercise of love; if you take into view that fellowship of the Spirit, which ought to make us all one; if any feeling of humanity and mercy resides in you, which might stir you up to alleviate my miseries, fulfill ye my joy, and so on.<sup>13</sup>

Since the immediate context of Philippians 2:1 is suffering (Phil 1:29), the rendering of παράκλησις as “consolation” is more probable, as the Philippian believers, amidst suffering, are longing for it. This notion is supported by Hansen, who argues, “... although encouragement makes good sense in this context, there are good reasons (mainly contextual) to understand παράκλησις as consolation that believers have from being united in Christ.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, in context, the rendering of παράκλησις as comfort/consolation is appropriate.

The clause ἐν χριστῷ is a dative of sphere, for it metaphorically describes where believers experience consolation, namely in Christ. Thus, in this first conditional phrase, Paul invites the believers to consider their assured and already existing consolation as a means to foster humility in their relationships with one another.

In the second, the first conditional clause is εἴ τι παραμύθιον ἀγάπης (if any comfort/solace of love). The “semantic range of παραμύθιον is similar to παράκλησις.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, παράκλησις and παραμύθιον could be used interchangeably for comfort or consolation. However, since “Paul uses synonymous parallelism in the first if-clauses; the first clause appreciates the comfort experienced in the community from being united with Christ while the second values the comfort brought by love...”<sup>16</sup> Thus, although the two nouns share a semantic range in this poetic context, they are used to nuance two levels of comfort, one flowing from their union with Christ and the other from their experience of God’s love.

<sup>13</sup> John Calvin, Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians by John, n.d., 41.

<sup>14</sup> G. Walter Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 107.

<sup>15</sup> Joseph H. Hellerman, *Philippians*, ed. Andreas J. Köstenberger and Robert W. Yarbrough (Nashville, Tennessee: B & H Academic, 2015), 94. He quotes Reumann, 322, who states that One could reverse 1a and 1b, “consolation and encouragement in Christ” and “comfort and exhortation of love.” O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*: 171–72 rejects this “interchangeable” notion by arguing, “the dominant idea in Philippians 2:1 is consolation, not exhortation and since παραμύθιον is used in a more supplementary way (as is the case in 1 Cor. 14:3; 1 Thess 2:12; 5:14 and Phil 2:1). He argues that that the two nouns cannot be sharply distinguished logically. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 65 and Lightfoot, *Lightfoot’s Commentaries on the Epistles of St. Paul*, 107 agree with O’Brien’s objection.

<sup>16</sup> Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians*, 109.



The noun ἀγάπης (of love) is a genitive of agency, meaning that the agent of consolation is love. However, the source of this love, whether Paul or God, is debated first because “παραμύθιον (consolation) is never used for the love of God, and second because it is contextually consistent to suppose that it is Paul’s love that provided consolation to Philippians.”<sup>17</sup> In Philippians 1:8, 1:9, and 1:11, Paul’s love for the Philippians is evident. Thus, Paul may be setting his already-known consoling love as an example for Philippians believers to pursue humility in their relationships.

However, if the observation on the possible trinitarian substructure of the passage is correct (consolation from Christ, comfort of God’s love, and fellowship of the Holy Spirit), “then Paul refers to the experience of the love of God lavished on the Philippians—and him—in Christ and shed abroad in their “hearts” by the Spirit.”<sup>18</sup> This argument appeals to the poetic nature of the context where the phrase παραμύθιον ἀγάπης is found. Additionally, ἀγάπης is always used for the highest form of God’s love towards humanity. This means that Paul is appealing to the Philippians to consider the richness and magnitude of the comfort they have experienced from God’s love.

In the third, the first conditional phrase is εἴ τις κοινωνία πνεύματος (if any fellowship of the Spirit) κοινωνία, “in the New Testament, means “fellowship” or close relationship that exists between believers.”<sup>19</sup> Paul is included as an active partaker in this “fellowship” or “a close fellowship” between believers. Yet the more difficult question has to do with the precise meaning of κοινωνία together with the significance of the genitive case, πνεύματος.”<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the complexity is also attributed to the fact that “... κοινωνία is primarily the abstract noun corresponding to κοινωνος and κοινωνεῖν, and its meaning is (the) having something in common with someone, where the ideas of participation and association are both present. The main emphasis may fall upon either, sometimes to the practical exclusion of the other.”<sup>21</sup> Therefore, since κοινωνία is abstract and is used to connote “common fellowship,” “participating with,” or

<sup>17</sup> Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 65. Here, Hawthorne argues that παραμύθιον is usually used to refer to the consolation offered by man to a fellow man and never about the consolation given to man by God. In this case, the Philippian believers have received much comfort from Paul’s enduring love, yet Paul’s concern here is his and the Philippians’ shared and transcendent love.

<sup>18</sup> Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 180–81.

<sup>19</sup> Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin, *Philippians*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger et al., Revised edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 83.

<sup>20</sup> O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 173.

<sup>21</sup> J. Y. (John Young) Campbell, “KOINΩNIA and Its Cognates in the New Testament,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 51, no. 4 (December 1, 1932): 356.



“associating with,” it is challenging to tell the exact rendering in exclusion of the genitive case πνεύματος.

Concerning the rendering of πνεύματος, it is argued that “since it has no definite article in Greek, it can be merely rendered as ‘spirit’ or ‘mind’ and the whole phrase as ‘fellowship of kindred spirits,’ ‘mutual harmony,’ or perhaps ‘spiritual fellowship.’”<sup>22</sup> This definition suggests that Paul is referring to the believers’ religious fellowship among themselves rather than the fellowship brought about by the Holy Spirit. Yet this view diminishes the transcendent sense of fellowship that flows from their common sharing in the Holy Spirit. Moreover, this view is “universally rejected on contextual grounds (namely the trinitarian nature of the passage) and on the fact that its parallel passage (2 Cor 13:13) πνεύματος refers to the Holy Spirit.”<sup>23</sup> Hence, the “anthropological interpretation of πνεύματος as ‘spirit’ to refer to the religious relationships of the community.”<sup>24</sup> This does not fit this context because Paul was not pointing the Philippians to consider their weak religious (spirit) fellowship amongst themselves, but to the fellowship flowing from the Holy Spirit who was at work among them.

The last conditional clause of verse one, εἴ τις σπλάγχνα καὶ οἰκτιρμοί (if any affection and compassion), is said to be “the most difficult of the four clauses to understand.”<sup>25</sup> The phrase has an unusually emotional appeal and structure that makes it difficult to understand. The noun σπλάγχνα refers to internal organs (bowels) as used in Acts 1:18; thus, the KJV rendering εἴ τις σπλάγχνα καὶ οἰκτιρμοί as “if any bowels and mercies.” Yet when this literal KJV translation is considered, σπλάγχνα (also present in Philippians 1:8) is rendered as “bowels of Jesus Christ,” which is not only contextually odd but also confusing. Hence, “σπλάγχνα is figuratively taken in the ancient world to refer to the seat of the emotions like the English use of the word heart.”<sup>26</sup> This explains why different translations render the word in ways that express deep feelings (for instance, ‘affection’ in ESV, RSV, NEB, ‘compassion’ in NASB, NRSB).

In conclusion, then, the four conditional phrases of Philippians 2:1 are

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<sup>22</sup> Hawthorne and Martin, *Philippians*, 84.

<sup>23</sup> O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 173.

<sup>24</sup> George H. Guthrie, *Philippians*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2023): 141–42.

<sup>25</sup> Hawthorne and Martin, *Philippians*, 84.

<sup>26</sup> Guthrie, *Philippians*, 142. Hawthorne and Martin, 84, state that the noun was used for deep feelings such as affection while MacArthur, 131, boldly states that the word was commonly used metaphorically for emotions.





The fourfold basis of Paul's exhortation is grounded in divine certainties: – the Philippians know God's comfort and salvation in Christ. They have experienced the consolation that Christ's love for them has brought in their sufferings and dangers. Theirs is the common fellowship flowing from the Holy Spirit, and they have been blessed through his gracious ministry to their hearts and lives. When God began his good work in their midst through the preaching of the gospel, they were recipients of his tender mercies and compassion. Since they have been blessed with such riches magnificently, let them hear Christ's appeal through their beloved apostle.<sup>27</sup>

Therefore, humility among believers is possible as Paul intentionally calls the Philippian believers to consider the depth of their everyday experience of consolation from their union with Christ, comfort from the love of God, divine fellowship flowing from the Holy Spirit who dwells amongst them, and the immense experience of divine mercy and compassion to plead with them to be humble in their relationships. The believers must realize that they are wholly dependent on God and that all their spiritual benefits flow not from themselves but from God. Thus, in this verse, Paul strips the Philippian believers of all self-reliance and pride, clothing them with humility as they consider their gracious experiences in Christ.

## 2. *Humility Shapes Relationships Among the Believers. Philippians 2:2–4*

Since humility among believers is possible, Paul urges the Philippian believers to πληρώσατέ μου τὴν χαρὰν (make my joy complete) in the first clause of verse 2. The verb πληρώσατέ is an aorist-imperative verb from πληρόω, meaning to “bring to completion that which was already begun.”<sup>28</sup> Moreover, πληρόω carries the idea of “fill, complete, fulfill, accomplish or carry out, and it also carries the meanings: – bring in full measure, fulfill, accomplish, fill up, fill full, satisfy.”<sup>29</sup> Paul's joy at the time of writing is partly attributed to the Philippians, which is logically consistent with his prayer in Philippians chapter 1. Yet, the believers must obey this imperative, Philippians 2:2a, to satisfy Paul's joy. πληρώσατέ is a constative aorist, for it “simply expresses the command as a whole without focusing on the continuous or repetitious nature of the action.”<sup>30</sup> Upon reflecting on their universal, faith-enriching experiences from their union with Christ, the believers are to complete Paul's joy.

<sup>27</sup> O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 176.

<sup>28</sup> Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, and William Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 828.

<sup>29</sup> Brown, Colin, ed. *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology: Transl., with Additions and Revisions, from the German. 1: A – F*, Rev. ed. Exeter, Devon: Paternoster Pr. [u.a.], (1986), 733–35.

<sup>30</sup> Ngewa, *Let Us Advance Our Greek Beyond the Forms: A Study of Intermediate Greek*, Unpublished notes. 35.





The noun χαράν (joy) refers to “the joy that has its source beyond mere earthly human joy – the joy found in the Lord and, therefore, outside ourselves (as is the case in Philippians 3:1; 4:4, 10; Rom 12:12; 2 Cor 6:10).”<sup>31</sup> The suffering Philippian believers do not merely ignore their current afflictions by being happy fatalists but are to fulfill Paul’s joy through the help supplied to them by God.

Verses 2b to the end of verse 4 of Philippians 2 highlight how humility shapes believers’ relationships with one another.

#### *a) Cohesion among Believers*

In Philippians 2:2b, the conjunction ἵνα, which comes after the noun χαράν (joy) “explains the method by which the action (fulfill my joy) is achieved.”<sup>32</sup> It is, therefore, modal and is rendered as “by” in the NASB. The Philippian believers are to fulfill Paul’s and indeed the Lord’s joy first ἵνα τὸ αὐτὸ φρονῆτε (by being of the same mind). In this clause, φρονῆτε is subjunctive and it “expresses not merely an activity of the intellect, but also a movement of the will; it is both interest and decision at the same time.”<sup>33</sup> It shows that the Philippians are to set their intellects and wills towards a common interest. This is not a call for them to be robots—thinking the same as directed without questioning or thinking independently—but to align their thoughts towards a Christ-pleasing cohesion. When used with the conjunction ἵνα, the subjunctive φρονῆτε expresses purpose, which renders the phrase ἵνα τὸ αὐτὸ φρονῆτε as so that you may be of the same mind. This is a “description of the general disposition of harmony which should be the background against which the whole Christian fellowship moves,”<sup>34</sup> that is, to be committed in thought and will towards fulfilling his joy by having a humble inclination to agree with one another.

The second phrase, τὴν αὐτὴν ἀγάπην ἔχοντες (by having the same love), intensifies Paul’s imperative, πληρώσατέ μου τὴν χαράν (fulfill my joy), in 2a. ἔχοντες is a present participle active from the stem ἔχω, “meaning “to experience” (something) or “have” when used for characteristics, capabilities, and emotions.”<sup>35</sup> It is used as a modal participle to modify the

<sup>31</sup> Brown, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 1986, 359–60.

<sup>32</sup> O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 177.

<sup>33</sup> O’Brien, 178.

<sup>34</sup> Joseph Barber Lightfoot, *Philippians*, The Crossway Classic Commentaries (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1994), 108.

<sup>35</sup> Danker, Bauer, and Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 421.



action of the main verb πληρώσατέ (fulfill my joy). The Philippians are not only to fulfill Paul's joy by being of the same mind but also by having the same love. Since ἀγάπην refers to the love of God (like the ἀγάπην in Phil 2:1) upon the believers, Paul's plea here is that the believers would fulfill his joy by having an equivalent understanding and experience of divine love and demonstrating it in their relationships with one another. A humble reflection on their shared experiential benefits in Christ (Phil 2:1) would lead to divine unity and love for one another.

The third clause is the adjective σύνψυχοι, is nom. pl. masc. of σύμψυχος (lit. "souls together" [Hansen 112]), "harmonious" (BDAG 961c; "united in spirit" [C. Brown, NIDNTT 3.687]; "unity of the Church in feeling as well as in thought and action" [H. Balz & G. Schneider, EDNT 3.291a]).<sup>36</sup> It was "used in Hellenistic cultural context to describe harmonious relationships with the words "one-soul" depicting a deep, strong friendship."<sup>37</sup> The oneness of the soul in view symbolizes the joyous and harmonious relationship among friends. Since it has a parallel idea to the previous phrase, τὴν αὐτὴν ἀγάπην ἔχοντες, "it should be attached to the next phrase τὸ ἐν φρονοῦντες to render the whole phrase as striving with one mind towards a single goal (as in the NIV, ESV, and NRSV)."<sup>38</sup> In doing so, σύνψυχοι modifies the present participle φρονοῦντες, and it clarifies that the Philippians are to fulfill Paul's joy by being of the same mind, that is, being united in the soul (one accord).

The last phrase in verse 2, τὸ ἐν φρονοῦντες (mind the same thing), is a repetition of Paul's plea for the Philippians ἵνα τὸ αὐτὸ φρονῆτε (to have the same mind). In this clause, the verb φρονοῦντες is a modal present participle, while "τὸ ἐν (the same) describes the one aim on which the Philippians need to focus."<sup>39</sup> This idea of the oneness in the context of the whole letter of Philippians goes beyond the plea for the oneness of the mind. Based on the "letter's emphasis on the gospel (Phil 1:5, 7, 12, 16, 27, 14–18), the plea for the believers to live a life worthy of the gospel (Phil 1:27–2:18 and the subsequent pleas in Phil 2:1–2)."<sup>40</sup> Therefore, Paul's focus is for the Philippian believers to be "gospel-oriented as they relate to and care for one another."<sup>41</sup> This means that the oneness of mind and soul here is not merely mechanical, but achievable as

<sup>36</sup> Hellerman, *Philippians*, 98.

<sup>37</sup> Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians*, 112.

<sup>38</sup> Hellerman, *Philippians*, 157. O'Brien also strengthens the argument for attaching this adjective to τὸ ἐν φρονοῦντες by citing Collange, 76.

<sup>39</sup> J. B. Lightfoot, *Lightfoot's Commentaries on the Epistles of St. Paul* (Place of publication not identified: Hendrickson, 1995), 108.

<sup>40</sup> O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 179.

<sup>41</sup> O'Brien, 179.



believers immerse themselves in understanding and living out the gospel. In summary, Philippians 2:2 highlights the positive effects of humility in the body of Christ, specifically the joyful unity of mind, love, and spirit.

*b) Unselfishness in Service (verses 3–4)*

To clarify Paul's expectation for the Philippians' role in fulfilling his joy, Paul continues to describe the vices against the unity that the Philippian believers are to flee from in Philippians 2:3–4. In the first clause of verse 3, μηδὲν κατ' ἐριθείαν μηδὲ κατὰ κενοδοξίαν (literary, doing nothing according to self-interest or vain conceit), has a double negative μηδὲν... μηδὲ that adds to the comprehensive plea of making Paul's joy complete and being united. The Philippians are to pursue unity in love, spirit, and mind and demonstrate this through their unselfish deeds as they relate to one another. Since the phrase μηδὲν κατ' ἐριθείαν μηδὲ κατὰ κενοδοξίαν has no verb, it is suggested that "the independent participle φρονοῦντες (minding) or ποιοῦντες (do) be supplied to render it as either (minding nothing) or (do nothing) out of self-interest or vain conceit,"<sup>42</sup> a rendering taken by some Bible translations such as NIV, RSV, NASB, and NRSV. However, O'Brien contends that "although such an act is possible, it is unnecessary since the suppression of the verb (do) sometimes occurs in imperatival sentences, as is the case in Galatians 5:13."<sup>43</sup> This means that even without supplying either participle, the phrase μηδὲν κατ' ἐριθείαν μηδὲ κατὰ κενοδοξίαν will still have the intended "sense forcefully with, 'not do anything' (GNB) or 'do nothing' (RSV)..."<sup>44</sup> In this case, the phrase is double imperatival in the negative, introducing the vices that derail the oneness of the mind, the soul, and love, keeping with Paul's plea for believers to fulfill his joy.

The first vice derailing oneness is μηδὲν κατ' ἐριθείαν (nothing according to selfish interests). κατ' is a preposition "of reference when followed by an accusative,"<sup>45</sup> that denotes reference or respect to and is rendered as "doing nothing according to" or doing nothing concerning ... The noun ἐριθείαν is an accusative of advantage, which wars against doing things that only benefit self. It also has broad meanings from 'selfishness' (NASB), 'selfish ambition'

<sup>42</sup> Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians*, 113–14.

<sup>43</sup> O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 179.

<sup>44</sup> O'Brien, 179.

<sup>45</sup> Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament*, 9. Repr (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2001), 377. There are other uses of κατ' + Accusative as discussed by Wallace, such as the Standard, Spatial, Temporal, Distributive, and purpose. The referential use fits the context better.



(ESV, NIV), or ‘base self-seeking’<sup>46</sup> or ‘rivalry’ (Holman Christian Bible). These ideas “are not unrelated.”<sup>47</sup> They denote the vice of divisive selfishness. Furthermore, “based on Paul’s use of ἐριθείαν elsewhere (for instance, in Philippians 1:17, 2 Cor 12:20, and Gal 5:20), it appears in the list of social vices, that it is “a mercenary spirit...regarding one who works for a pay or selfish ambition which causes fractions.”<sup>48</sup> The path of humility leads to cohesion and does not abuse others.

The second vice of verse 3 is κενοδοξίαν (vain conceit), which is made from two Greek words: – κενός (empty) + δόξα (glory) to denote a “vain or exaggerated self-evaluation” not simply conceit as rendered in the NRSV and HCSB. But instead, “empty or vain conceit as rendered in the NASB and NIV...”<sup>49</sup> It is significant to note that:

κενοδοξίαν is only used here in the entire New Testament and is used in the LXX, Apocrypha, and the writings of Cynic philosophers to denote the idea of “empty opinion or error.” A person, then, who is motivated by κενοδοξία is the one who assertively, even arrogantly, claims to have the correct opinion (δόξα) but who is, in fact in error (κενός)... such a person is conceited without reason, deluded, ambitious for his reputation, challenging others to rivalry, jealous of others, ... Consequently, he is a person who will fight to prove his idea is right...<sup>50</sup>

κενοδοξίαν produces strife in the community as it drives believers to value others less and to exaggerate their importance away from the uniting message of the gospel. Paul implies that the antidote to the pursuit of vain glory is gospel humility, which reminds believers about their common benefits in Christ and the vanity of selfishness.

Thus, Paul employs these double negative phrases in verse 3a to caution the Philippians against two moral vices that hinder the unity of love, mind, and soul, and would render his joy incomplete. These moral vices ignore the precious experiences of consolation and comfort, comfort from love, common sharing in the Spirit, and tenderness and compassion from Christ.

The second part of verse 3, ἀλλὰ τῇ ταπεινοφροσύνῃ ἀλλήλους ἡγούμενοι ὑπερέχοντας ἑαυτῶν (but in humility regard one another as more important than yourselves) begins with the conjunction ἀλλὰ, which is “a logical adversative conjunction which suggests a contrast or

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<sup>46</sup> Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich, and Geoffrey William Bromiley, eds. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans, 1985), Vol. 2, 266.

<sup>47</sup> Hellerman, *Philippians*, 158.

<sup>48</sup> O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 180.

<sup>49</sup> Hellerman, *Philippians*, 158.

<sup>50</sup> Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 69.



opposing thought to the idea to which is connected.”<sup>51</sup> In this case, it contrasts the double-negative attitudes of selfish ambition and vain glory as community-breaking vices to be avoided with the Christian virtues of humility and selflessness.

The noun ταπεινοφροσύνη (in humility) is a dative of manner. In Greek, it denotes two contrasting ideas – “First, the anthropocentric view of man where “lowliness was looked on as shameful, thus, was to be avoided and overcome in thought and deed and second, the theocentric view of man where man is brought into a right relationship with God and his fellow man.”<sup>52</sup> Additionally,

... although ταπεινοφροσύνη (humility) is lacking in the Septuagint, ταπεινός (‘lowly,’ ‘humble’), and its cognates turn up about 270 times, and particularly significant are those references to the LORD’s acting in history to bring down the proud and the arrogant and low... (in the OT), while in the NT it signifies the ‘lowliness’ with which one serves Christ. Acts 20:19) or relates to other Christians (Eph 4:2; 1 Pet 5:5; Phil 2:3; Col 3:12). The pattern or model is Jesus, who invited people to come to him as the one who is ‘meek and lowly (ταπεινός) in heart’ (Mt 11:29) ...<sup>53</sup>

Thus, although humility was primarily understood in God’s judgment of the proud in the Old Testament and was a shameful attribute from which to flee, it is a counter-cultural Christian attitude in the New Testament, modeled by Christ. In this case (Phil 2:3), Christ calls believers to adopt a counter-cultural posture of humility as the Christian manner of relating to one another, an attitude that contrasts with selfish interest and vain conceit.

The last phrase in verse 3, ἀλλήλους ἡγούμενοι ὑπερέχοντας ἑαυτῶν (considering each other better than yourselves), further fortifies the counter-cultural Christian attitude of humility. ἀλλήλους is a “reciprocal noun which is rightly rendered as “each other, or one another or mutually.”<sup>54</sup> In this case (Phil 2:3), the ‘one-another’ refers to a distinguished Christian community, the Philippian church, denoting their reciprocal communal relationships. Hence, ἀλλήλους “signifies ‘others’ or ‘one another’ without restriction or exception within the congregation.”<sup>55</sup> The Philippian believers are not to have sinful categories of favoritism, but are to highly esteem one another (whether young or old, Greek or Jew, rich or poor). Thus, the

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<sup>51</sup> Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics*, 671.

<sup>52</sup> Brown, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (1975) 260.

<sup>53</sup> O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 181.

<sup>54</sup> Danker, Bauer, and Arndt, *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 46.

<sup>55</sup> O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 182.



retired Roman soldiers who were believers (part of Paul’s audience in Philippians) were to use their positions and benefits (tax reliefs, societal honor, beautiful homes, and so on) to serve one another sacrificially. Rather than using their positions for self-serving ends, Paul encouraged them to inconvenience themselves by using their wealth and other benefits to serve one another humbly.

Based on the word order, ἀλλήλους is the direct object of ἡγούμενοι, which renders the two words as “be regarding one another.” The ἡγούμενοι is a modal present participle of the verb ἡγέομαι, meaning “think, consider, regard, or a consciously sure judgment resting on carefully weighed facts.”<sup>56</sup> In this case, the action of the participle ἡγούμενοι is simultaneous with ὑπερέχοντας. This means that believers, in humility, are to surpass one another and esteem each other highly. In other words, one is to love one’s neighbors as one loves oneself.

The participle ἡγούμενοι implies “a proper evaluation of others and oneself in light of the holiness of God, the Christian Gospel, and the example of Christ.”<sup>57</sup> Believers are to regard one another based on the character of God and the everyday experiences they have through their union with Christ. It is also implied that the believers would actively evaluate their oneness (Phil 2:1–2) in the gospel and purpose and consciously use the gracious yardstick of their union with Christ regarding one another.

In the last phrase of verse 3, ὑπερέχοντας ἑαυτῶν (better than yourself), ὑπερέχοντας is “a present participle from ὑπερέχω and is - rendered as be esteeming one another.”<sup>58</sup> Wallace notes that it is “a participle of indirect discourse, ... used to indicate indirect discourse after a verb of perception or communication.”<sup>59</sup> In this instance, ὑπερέχοντας explains ἡγούμενοι, that is, the believers are to esteem one another in a manner that surpasses themselves.

Regarding ὑπερέχω (where ὑπερέχοντας is derived from), it is argued, first, “that it is used to denote “superiority in status or authority as is the case in Romans 13:1, 1 Peter 2:13 which means to be in a controlling position or to have power or authority (over) or to be highly placed.”<sup>60</sup> Secondly, it means “superiority in quality or value (as is the case in Philippians

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<sup>56</sup> Hellerman, *Philippians*, 102.

<sup>57</sup> Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 70.

<sup>58</sup> Hellerman, *Philippians*, 102.

<sup>59</sup> Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics*, 645–46.

<sup>60</sup> Danker, Bauer, and Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 1033.



3:8)...”<sup>61</sup> To determine the correct meaning in this case, Philippians 2:3, the cultural context sheds more light. According to Hellerman, “the honor culture of Roman Philippi commends the first option (“above yourselves” *as rendered in the NIV*); “more important” *as rendered in the NASB, CEV, HCSB*) rather than the second (“better” *as rendered in the NRSV, NLT*).”<sup>62</sup> Fee expounds on the fitting choice of the first option by arguing that “although ὑπερέχοντας can mean better, the two other occurrences of the word in Philippians 3:8 and 4:7, both adjectival, it has to do with “surpassing,” going far beyond anything else... Thus, it is not much that others in the community are to be thought of as “better than I am,” but as those whose needs and concerns “surpass” my own.”<sup>63</sup> Hence, ὑπερέχοντας is the proper antidote to selfish ambition. It refers to considering the needs of others as more worthy of consideration than an individual’s needs, and this should not be mistaken for lowering their self-worth or esteem.

The reflexive pronoun ἐαυτῶν (yourselves) that comes after ὑπερέχοντας is a reflexive, plural pronoun that is “the first in a series of alliterative pronouns in vv. 3–4 (ἐαυτῶν, ἐαυτῶν, ἕκαστος, ἑτέρων, ἕκαστοι) that highlights the contrast between self-exaltation and self-denial.”<sup>64</sup> Thus, ἐαυτῶν calls attention to the radical change from preoccupation with matters benefiting the self only to the Christian virtue of viewing the needs of others as surpassing one’s needs.

While verse 3 addresses the believers’ inner attitude, “verse 4 addresses behavior *vis-à-vis* one’s relationship with fellow Christians, explaining how one considers others superior to himself.”<sup>65</sup> Thus, the content of verse 4 indicates that selflessness in the community of believers should result in selfless acts of service, that is, acts consistent with the counter-cultural inner attitudes of humility and prioritizing the needs of others over one’s own.

The clause μὴ τὰ ἐαυτῶν ἕκαστος σκοποῦντες (let each of you look not only to his interests) in verse 4a is the first selfless virtue addressed. ἐαυτῶν (themselves) identifies the substance of the verb σκοποῦντες, namely μὴ τὰ ἐαυτῶν not the things of (your)selves.”<sup>66</sup> ἕκαστος clarifies ἐαυτῶν as “each individual and makes the exhortation here, Philippians 2:4,

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<sup>61</sup> Danker, Bauer, and Arndt, 1033.

<sup>62</sup> Hellerman, *Philippians*, 103. Italics mine.

<sup>63</sup> Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 189.

<sup>64</sup> Hellerman, *Philippians*, 102.

<sup>65</sup> John Reumann, *The Anchor Yale Bible: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 317. This notion is also supported by Fee, 190.

<sup>66</sup> Hellerman, *Philippians*, 162.





more direct and personal.”<sup>67</sup> This is reflected in the ESV, NIV, and RSV translations, rendering it “each of you.” The emphasis is on the community, though such obedience begins with the individual. Thus, “each one” among them must have “care” for “others” among them... and this reminds some within the community who seem to be out of step with others.<sup>68</sup> Thus, believers must make every effort to care for one another. Naturally, it is easier for people to look after their own desires (Philippians 2:21). Yet, Paul exhorts believers to look not only for their own interests but also for the interests of others. Thus, humility leads to selfless service as church members are concerned not only about their own needs but also about the needs of others.

The participle σκοποῦντες (looking... to) is rendered as an imperative in most English translations. For example, ‘look out’ (NASB, HCSB), ‘look ... to’ (NRSV, ESV), ‘care about’ (CEV).<sup>69</sup> However, in this context, it bears a circumstantial idea of ‘looking out not to the things of yourself.’

The verb σκοπέω (the vocabulary form of the participle σκοποῦντες) means, “... in Classical to “look critically,” as a judge might (Plato *Leg.* 11.925A), a philosopher (Plato *Cra.* 440D), the historian (Thuc. 1.1.3), to discover a propitious time (Thuc. 4.23.2), avoid danger (Aristoph. *Theism.* 580–81) or accomplish a purpose (Aristoph. *Eq.* 80–81).”<sup>70</sup> It, therefore, bears the sense that the Philippian believers are to actively and logically think not only about their needs but for the needs of others. Additionally, “the normal meaning of σκοπέω is to look at attentively or to fix one’s attention on (one’s interests).”<sup>71</sup> In this case (Phil 2:4), Paul implores the Philippian Christians to intentionally and actively set their attention not merely on their own selfish interests but on the interests of others. This implies that they are to spend their time and resources meeting the needs of others as they do their own. This participles ἡγούμενοι (esteeming), ὑπερέχοντας (surpassing) and σκοποῦντες (looking out) in verses 3 and 4 are simultaneous. This means that believers surpass one another in esteem, looking out for their own needs and those of others.

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<sup>67</sup> Reumann, *The Anchor Yale Bible*, 316.

<sup>68</sup> Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 190.

<sup>69</sup> Hellerman, *Philippians*, 102-03. When the participle bears an imperatival idea it is taken to introduce another idea that is different from the main verb as is the case of ἀποστρυφόντες (Abhor) in Romans 12:9 and ἀναλαβὼν (get) in 2 Timothy 4:11 yet in this context the circumstantial idea of the participle σκοποῦντες is more fitting.

<sup>70</sup> Reumann, *The Anchor Yale Bible*, 316.

<sup>71</sup> O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 185.



The last phrase in verse 4b, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὰ ἐτέρων ἕκαστοι (but each of you [should look] also to the things of others), begins with a contrasting preposition ἀλλὰ, which contrasts the negative attitude of selfishness with the positive attitude of selflessness in thoughts and actions. The function of the καὶ in this phrase is argued to have been omitted in the original manuscripts. According to Fee, “καί was perceived as awkward without μόνον in the first clause (in Paul’s original).”<sup>72</sup> Additionally, O’Brien states, “the scribes omitted καί “to make the clause consistent with the absolute negation of the first clause,” that is, “not your concerns . . . but those of others.”<sup>73</sup> Conversely, others have argued “the contrast of the phrase (where καί is rendered ‘also’ or ‘likewise’ (NASB, HCSB, ESV))”<sup>74</sup> is softened or further reinforced (by rendering it as “but actually” or “rather”) as is the case in (LXX Job 21:17; Isa. 39:4; 48:6; Ezek. 18:11; Wis. 14:22) thus, should not be omitted.”<sup>75</sup> Yet, based on the context where contrasting ἀλλὰ precedes καί, the reinforced rendering of καί as “also” is, in the opinion of this writer, more fitting. This is because Paul is not against the believers’ efforts to care for their individual needs, but rather to do so without concern for the needs of others.

The adjective ἕκαστοι is “an emphatic and earnest repetition adjective signifying ‘each and all’ that every believer in Philippi was to take the injunction to heart.”<sup>76</sup> Paul indicates that believers should consider the needs of “each without exception.”<sup>77</sup> Thus, selfishness is contrasted with generous care and a radical pursuit of things that concern themselves and others, without any discrimination or exception. Thus, gospel humility results in community cohesion and sacrificial service. The path of humility does not discriminate but values the opinions, thoughts, and needs of others higher, and this is at the heart of Paul’s desire for the Philippian church.

## Conclusion

Verse 1 contains four εἴ τις first conditional phrases that detail the believers’ universal blessings flowing from their union with Christ. These blessings, consolation in Christ, comfort from God’s love, fellowship with the Holy Spirit, and affection and sympathy from God are trinitarian and

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<sup>72</sup> Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 175.

<sup>73</sup> O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 164.

<sup>74</sup> O’Brien, 185.

<sup>75</sup> Hellerman, *Philippians*, 108. He cites Bockmuehl 113–14 who translates καί as “but actually, rather.”

<sup>76</sup> O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 185.

<sup>77</sup> Hellerman, *Philippians*, 108.



are all available to the believers. Therefore, humility among the believers is possible after reflecting on the depth of these common blessings.

The main imperative of the passage is in verse two, namely, πληρώσατέ. The clause ἵνα explains it... φρονῆτε (ἵνα plus subjunctive), which indicates purpose. This means that the Philippian believers are to fulfill Paul's joy so they may be of one mind. Moreover, this purpose is explained by two modal participles ἔχοντες (having) and φρονοῦντες (minding), which are also simultaneous to the action of the main verb πληρώσατέ. As such, the believers are to fulfill Paul's joy by having the same love and the same mind.

In verse 3, two contrasting attitudes are highlighted. First, the vices of selfish interest and vain glory are discouraged against using the prepositional phrase μηδὲν κατ' (doing nothing according to). Second, the contrasting unselfish attitude of humility is encouraged using the phrase ἀλλὰ τῇ ταπεινοφροσύνῃ (but in humility). Verse 4 further explains these two contrasting attitudes, discouraging selfishness and encouraging selflessness in service.

### Implications of the Passage Today

Most of the internal challenges of the contemporary African church majorly arise from pride. At the heart of these challenges lies, first, a blatant ignorance of the biblical call for believers to clothe themselves with Christ-like humility as they relate with one another, and second, a sinful desire for opulence, especially by the members of the clergy. As Gathogo, in his research about the challenges facing some urban Pentecostal churches, observes,

Church leaders have not been fishers of men. Instead, they have been reapers of diamond and gold in an endless mine of desperate souls in search of spiritual nourishment. Kenyans were also seen to be some of the most unfortunate peoples of the world; for “when they are not willingly being led to the slaughterhouse by political tricksters, they are willingly following, in droves, another set of con men and women ... These flashy spivs run multimillion shilling enterprises built on the back of poor and ignorant folk who buy all the claptrap spewed out by self-styled evangelists, prophets, bishops, faith-healers, money multipliers and so on who claim a direct line to God.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Julius Mutugi Gathogo, “The Challenge of Money and Wealth in Some East African Pentecostal Churches,” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 37, no. 2 (December 31, 2011): 15. Here, Gathogo quotes Macharia Gaitho, “New Year: nothing really changes,” an article published in the Daily Nation, 3 Jan 2006, 8. Although Gaitho wrote this article in 2006, matters regarding proud manipulation of believers by some spiritual leaders in Kenya has become worse today.



Pride not only distorts the gospel call for believers to relate with each other in humility but also divides the body of Christ into sinful categories of ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’ who are ready and willing to do whatever it takes to receive the blessing of more riches and wealth from their spiritual leaders. Sadly, the proud lifestyle of these spiritual leaders becomes the goal for church members, which affects the believers’ relationship with one another and tarnishes the witness of the gospel to non-believers. The biblical antidote against pride is Christ-like humility. In Philippians 2:1–4 the path of humility transforms not only the church members to care about the needs of others sacrificially but also adorns the gospel. The contemporary African church must return to its basic call to Christ-like humility in order to succeed in its mission.

Secondly, in verses 2–4, the most vivid demonstration of humility in the church is cohesion and unselfishness. This implies that divisions, quarrels, fights, and dissensions within the church are symptoms of pride and arrogance, as people consider their gifts, leadership, eloquence, and presence more significant than those of others. These vices dethrone God as the Lord over the church and enthrone individuals based on their contributions. Sadly, humility cannot be acquired artificially by arrogant individuals in the church, as true humility flows from the gospel, and its fruits are evident in the community of believers. This means that the more divided a congregation of believers is, the less concerned it is with the gospel and the more burdensome it is for brethren to agree and sacrificially serve one another. This calls pastors and church leaders to prioritize the regular preaching of the gospel as the sure way that sinful men are united with other believers, no matter how different they may be. In the gospel, all people are equal since they are all united by one Christ. This strips off pride and arrogance from the believers.

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