Humility in Leadership as Modeled in Philippians 2:5-11: Putting People First

James D. Rose
Regent University

Philippians 2:5-11 contains the Christ hymn, what some believe to be the ultimate leadership model (Danley, 2010, p.81); a passage calling Christians and their leaders in Philippi to have the same mind as Christ. Paul and Timothy use Christ’s leadership model as a counter-cultural response to the social and cultural importance placed on status and honor within the Philippian society. Christ’s model is very challenging as Christ stepped down into humanity to become a slave and take on the cross, the most dishonorable public status and the most dishonorable public humiliation (Hellerman, 2003b, p.424). Christ’s example provides the basis of a four-aspect model of humility in leadership. This humility model includes self-emptying – relinquishing all privilege of office, serving – expecting nothing in return, lowliness – no barriers of position, and sacrificial love – being willing to give everything for others. The humility in leadership model can be summarized as putting people first. Studies demonstrate that firms that put people first, having policies and actions that demonstrate they value people, outperform firms that have had less emphasis on putting people first. An example of humbly putting people first is the elimination of barriers that separate leader and follower, barriers that distinguish leaders from followers.

Humility in Leadership as Modeled in Philippians 2:5-11

The Christ hymn in Philippians 2:5-11 is included in Paul and Timothy’s letter to the saints of Philippi and their leaders. The passage calls for the pursuit of a “Christ-likeness culture”, a giving up of the cultural attachments of society (Danley, 2010, p.79). The hymn stands in stark contrast to the “prevalent shame / honor social matrix of Roman societies” (Bekker, 2006, p.1). This call is relevant today, a call to abandon the social game of pursuing honor (Bekker, 2006, p.14).

This article reviews the Philippians passage from a leadership perspective, as it contains what some believe to be the ultimate leadership model (Danley, 2010, p.81). The review begins with a social and cultural intertexture perspective, illustrating the role and importance of power and status in Philippi. Philippi was a trading city, which combined Greek and Roman elements. The Philippian community contained a diversity of cultures influenced by these pagan roots. The Phillipi church consisted of various social strata including members from the upper class of
Philippian society (Bekker, 2006, p.3). Some members were seeking honor from society, setting a bad example (Danley, 2010, p.71).

The article reviews various leadership perspectives scholars have gleaned from the passage. A key model, based primarily on the passage, is Bekker’s (2006) mimetic Christological model for Christian leadership. Bekker’s model condenses Philippians 2:5-11 into five actions, or values, exemplified by Jesus: self-emptying (kenosis), servant posturing, humility, obedience, and embracing humanity. Bekker’s work is a key building block of a new four-element model of humility in leadership. The proposed humility in leadership model includes self-emptying – relinquishing all privilege of office, serving – expecting nothing in return, lowliness – no barriers of position, and sacrificial love – being willing to give everything for others. These attributes are based on the example of Christ found in the Christ Hymn. Specifically, Christ stepped down into humanity to become a slave and take on the cross, the most dishonorable public status and the most dishonorable public humiliation (Hellerman, 2003b, p.424). The humility in leadership model can be summarized as putting people first.

The last section of this article looks at contemporary studies, studies that have shown that humility is often a key attribute to effective leaders. The review focuses on the work of Pfeffer (1998). In summary, Pfeffer recommends that organizations ensure they put people first. Pfeffer indicates firms put people first by (a) formally stating the importance of people, (b) acting in such a way that demonstrates the importance of people, (c) using language regarding its staff that demonstrates the importance of staff members, (c) continually measuring how the organization is doing regarding people and (d) lastly, ensuring leaders in the organization have values consistent with putting people first (pp.293-300). Pfeffer provides evidence showing that firms that put people first, having policies and actions that demonstrate they value people, outperform firms that have had less emphasis on putting people first. The first example looks at banks in the US relative to banks in Germany in the 1980’s. The second example is a study regarding IPO (initial public offering) survival rates. The last example reviews a firm that has eliminated barriers separating leader and follower.

**Philippians 2:5-11**

Paul and Timothy wrote the book of Philippians to the saints of Philippi and their leaders (Philippians 1:1). The Philippians 2:5-11 passage (as provided in the Appendix), sometimes referred to as the “Christ Hymn” (Danley, 2010, p.42), is one of the most celebrated passages in Pauline literature (DeSilva, 2004, p.640). Communal hymns were used to teach new converts and to convey theology (Bekker, 2006, p.2). The passage calls Christians to follow Christ by having the same mind as Christ (Philippians 2:5). This article includes a social and cultural intertexture perspective to provide a better understanding of this passage, which redefines status and power (Moessner, 2009, pp. 124, 133).

**Social and Cultural Intertexture Approach**

Social and cultural intertexture allows interpretation of the text within the context of first-century society and culture. Social and cultural intertexts are elements of the rich tapestry of meaning found within the Bible and are key areas of focus within exegetical interpretation (Robbins, 1996, pp. 3, 18). This type of assessment utilizes an approach that focuses on customs and practices of the society (pp. 115-118), in this case a Mediterranean society, and assess the passage from the hearer’s perspective.
Philippi Church Members

The hearers addressed in the Philippians 2:5-11 passages were members of the Philippi church. Philippi was a city along the east to west trading route (Danley, 2010, p. 41). As such, it combined Greek and Roman elements (Marchal, 2007, p.71) at a time when the Greco-Roman-world was at its height (Danley, 2010, p.65). The Philippian community contained a diversity of cultures influenced by pagan roots and culture (Oakes, 2005, p.63). The gentiles of Philippi would typically be unfamiliar with the Judeo-Christian value system and culture. The church consisted of various social strata including members from the upper class of Philippian society (Bekker, 2006, p.3)

Importance of Honor

In Philippi, honor was important and based on status, position and power (Danley, 2010, p.33). Philippi may have been the most status- and class-conscious city in the Roman East (Hellerman, 2003b, p.427). Pursuit of honor was a “social pilgrimage for aspiring to status and acclaim in first century Roman society” (Moessner, 2009, p.124). Both Greek and Roman elements of society competed for civic honors (Marchal, 2007, p.71). The emphasis was on status and achievement (Moessner, 2009, p.133). As such, status, whether high or low, was a way of life, a mindset of living in Roman Philippi (p.131).

Implication on the Church

Upper class members of the church were caught up in the culture and society of Philippi; they were seeking honor from society and as such were setting a bad example (Danley, 2010, p.71). They were seeking status in the wrong way (p.65), proclaiming Christ out of selfish ambition (Philippians 1:27). There was a conflict between the call for humble service and Philippi’s “cultural value of pursuing public social honor” (Hellerman, 2003b, p.328). Paul’s teaching in his letter was counter-cultural (Danley, 2010, p.73), stressing the importance of elevation in the eyes of God versus society (Bekker, 2006, p.5).

Philippians 2:5-11 and Leadership

The Philippians 2:5-11 passage provides the ultimate leadership model, the perfect example of leadership (Danley, 2010, p.81). Whiteman (2003) uses the passage as a basis for leadership practices such as the need to lay aside positions of prestige and power (p.409). Bekker (2006) uses the hymn as the basis for a mimetic Christological Model for Christian Leadership (p.7). Bekker’s model condenses Philippians 2:5-11 into five actions, or values, exemplified by Jesus: self-emptying (kenosis), servant posturing, humility, obedience, and embracing humanity. Leveraging the Bekker model, a model of humility in leadership is proposed based on four elements: self-emptying – relinquishing all privilege of office, serving – expecting nothing in return, lowliness – no barriers of position, and sacrificial love – being willing to give everything for others.

Self-Emptying

The self-emptying concept developed by Bekker is based on the phrase “but emptied Himself” in Philippians 2:7. Self-emptying is relinquishment of privilege (Stagg, 1980, p.344) and self-sacrifice (Soring, 2003, p.162). Self-emptying is a viable organizational leadership attribute (Danley, 2010, p.18) allowing a leader to become a servant of their followers (Szabolcs, 2003,
Self-emptying overcomes separation between leader and follower (Papanikolaou, 2003, p.12) and removes the social and power distance between follower and leader (Bekker, 2006, p.12). Self-emptying relinquishes all privilege of office.

**Serving**

The service concept developed by Bekker is based on the phrase “taking the form of a slave” in Philippians 2:7. The Greek term “slave” in this passage can be interpreted in various ways, bondservant, servant, or slave; the use of slaves was widespread when this passage was written (Danley, 2010, pp. 63, 72). The term represents a person without social advantage or privilege (Macleod, 2001, p.321), the lowest member in the social ladder (Bekker, 2006, p.11). A key perspective is that slaves receive nothing in return for their service. Therefore, when one serves, as it relates to this passage, they should expect nothing in return.

**Sacrificial Love**

Bekker’s model identifies obedience as a value from Philippians 2:8, which states “and (Jesus) became obedient to the point of death on a cross”. For the purposes of the proposed model of humility, the focus of this phrase is “death on the cross”, a sacrificial act. Death on the cross represents public and social shame (Hellerman, 2003b, pp.427-428) and was intended for public humiliation (Danley, 2010, p.73). The cross calls for self-giving sacrifice, a willingness to suffer for the sake of self-giving love (Billings, 2006, pp.197-198). This is the ultimate love as “no one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends” (John 15:13, NRSV). Sacrificial love is being willing to give up everything for others.

**Lowliness**

Bekker’s model identifies “embracing humanity” as a key value identified in Philippians 2:7, which states “being born in human likeness … being found in human form”. For the purposes of the proposed humility model, the focus is on the lowliness in this passage, the lowliness associated with Christ becoming flesh (John 1:14). God becoming human is referred to as the incarnation (Whiteman, 2003, p.407). The incarnation is the divine choice to enter into human weakness and to choose lowliness (Billings, 2004, p.195). Christ’s incredible step down into humanity exemplifies the way of lowliness (p.187). Lowliness in leadership is placing one’s status at the lowest levels – no barriers of position.

**Humility**

The humility concept developed by Bekker is based on the phrase “He humbled himself” in Philippians 2:8. This passage follows an earlier call for humility in Philippians 2:3: “In humility regard one another as more important than himself”. Bekker indicates humility is voluntary rejection of symbols, systems of power, prestige and privilege; humility is an alternate vision of leadership (Bekker, 2006, pp.13-14).

**Humility in Leadership Model**

Humility drives the Philippians hymn and is a key aspect of Christ’s model (Danley, 2010, pp. 82, 85). In addition, humility interrelates with the other values found in the Philippians hymn. As such, a model of humility in leadership based on this passage is proposed. The proposed model is composed of four elements: self-emptying – relinquishing all privilege of office, serving – expecting nothing in return, lowliness – no barriers of position, and sacrificial love – being willing to give everything for others.
Interrelationship of the four elements.

The various concepts found in the Philippians hymn interrelate around the concept of humility. Christ humbled himself through self-emptying (Danley, 2010, p.82). This self-emptying allows a leader to become a servant of their followers (Szabolcs, 2003, p.10). Self-emptying is self-sacrifice (Soring, 2003, p.162) and humility is a precedent of true sacrificial leadership (Danley, 2010, p.73). The humility of Christ is linked to death on the cross and posturing as a slave (Bekker, 2006, p.13). Humility is associated to service of others (Billings, 2004, p.197) and is foundational to service-oriented leadership (Bekker, 2006, p.1). The proposed model of humility in leadership is based on this inter-relationship between the various concepts found in the Philippians hymn, as illustrated in Figure 1.

![Figure 1. Humility in leadership – Following Christ’s example in Philippians 2:5-11](image)

In summary, the proposed humility in leadership model is composed of four elements: self-emptying – relinquishing all privilege of office, serving – expecting nothing in return, lowliness – no barriers of position, and sacrificial love – being willing to give everything for others. A simple summary of humility in leadership is putting people first.

Identity with God.

The proposed humility in leadership model is not based on achieving honor in society, but rather the ultimate honor and identity of a believer found in God,. This identity is exemplified in Philippians 2:9-11 where Christ is “highly exalted”, “every knee shall bow”, “every tongue
confess … that … He is Lord”. Therefore, although there may be dishonor in society, there is honor in Christ and the ultimate reality (Bekker, 2006, p.14).

Contemporary Concept of Humility

In contemporary studies, humility in leadership has been shown to be a universal spiritual value (Fry, 2003, p.696). Humility is common to ethics and value-based approaches to leadership (p. 708). Humility is a value that has long been considered a spiritual ideal; however, this is an ideal that has been demonstrated to result in success in leadership (Reave, 2005, p.655).

Morris, Brotheridge, and Urbanski (2005) define humility based on three aspects: a humble self-awareness (knowing strengths and weaknesses, not an inflated sense of self), openness to others (open to new ideas, willingness to learn) and a transcendent perspective (belief in the Omnipotent; acceptance of something greater than self, a larger reality; a proper perspective on life) (p.1331).

Maxwell (2007) uses Hosea 14 to define steps to humility in leadership (pp. 1081, 1439): first, one should pursue the Lord (God is our sufficiency), confess any sin of self-sufficiency (not relying on God) and continue to remind oneself that God is in control. These steps illustrate that biblical humility is consistent with the Morris, Brotheridge and Urbanski’s (2005) transcendence aspect of humility (belief in the Omnipotent; acceptance of something greater than self).

The actions exemplified in this passage and advocated in the model go beyond Maxwell’s steps to humility. The proposed model of humility in leadership goes beyond the contemporary definition of humility. Humility in leadership is self-emptying – relinquishing all privilege of office, serving – expecting nothing in return, lowliness – no barriers of position, and sacrificial love – being willing to give everything for others.

Contemporary Examples – Putting People First

A good example of humility in leadership in a contemporary setting is the concept of putting people first. Pfeffer (1998) advocates putting people first in The Human Equation. The following summarizes Pfeffer’s steps for putting people first within an organization and provides examples where putting people first has led to business success.

Putting People First

Pfeffer (1998) provides five actions for putting people first in an organization (pp.293-300).

- An organization states the importance of people to their success in their strategy statement.
- An organization acts on these statements. For example, leaders within the organization make themselves available to all of their staff; the organization invests heavily in the training of their staff; etc.
- An organization’s language regarding its staff demonstrates the importance of people, e.g., Wal-Mart call their employees associates to convey their importance.
- An organization uses measures to track how it is doing regarding people. For example, Hewlett-Packard includes upward feedback in their assessment of managers.
Lastly, an organization should ensure people in leadership have values consistent with putting people first.

**Success Stories**

Pfeffer (1998) provides various examples of firms that have put these practices in place. Two examples cited below provide a comparison of firms that have put people first to firms that have put less emphasis on putting people first. This first example looks at banks in the US relative to banks in Germany in the 1980’s. The second example is a study regarding IPO survival rates. The last example, eliminating status barriers between followers and leaders, is well aligned with the humility in leadership model. Eliminating barriers, like self-emptying and lowliness, overcomes separation between leader and follower.

**Banks.**

Pfeffer (1998) contrasts the response of typical US banks and the response of typical German banks to increasing competition in the early 1980s (pp. 20-22). Pfeffer indicates that US bank executives essentially viewed staff as cost; they worked to improve efficiency through automation and reduced cost by cutting people. German banks, on the other hand, treated their staff as important competitive assets and profited from developing and implementing people-centered strategies. (Pfeffer points out that cutting staff in Germany is virtually impossible due to social custom, unionization, and labor regulation). German banks typically pursued strategies based on relationship banking. They invested in training, helping their staff compete on a basis of knowledge and service, not just price.

Because of the strategy of putting people first, market share of German banks improved significantly, whereas US bank market share declined significantly. German banks were able to minimize decline in demand deposits to 48% versus 22% in US banks. German bank credit card market share grew from 25% to 80% where US banks declined from 80% to 60%. German banks maintained essentially 100% of customer loans whereas US banks lost 25% of the market (pp. 20-22).

**IPOs.**

Pfeffer (1998) points to a study by Welbourne and Andrews (1996) as “one of the clearest demonstrations of the casual effects” of putting people first (p.36). The study compares the survival rate of IPO firms after five years to how they handled people management. The study uses two scales to measure the importance placed on human resources. The first measure includes items such as (a) whether the firm’s mission statement states the importance of people, (b) whether company materials mention their training programs and (c) the degree the firm hires full-time versus temporary, or contract employees. The second scale is based on how the organization rewards people, whether incentive programs are group-based or individual-based. For example, whether stock options are provided to all staff or just leaders. When controlled for factors such as industry type, both scales were significantly related to the probability of IPO survival. The rewards measure in particular was telling, with an 87% survival rate for companies that had people-oriented rewards versus only 45% for those without (p.37).

**Removing status barriers.**

Elimination of status barriers between leader and followers was a key element in the success of the Toyota General Motors joint venture New United Motor Manufacturing, Inc (NUMMI).
Eliminating barriers, like self-emptying and lowliness, overcomes separation between leader and follower. The firm’s approach to barriers between leaders and follower is one of several variables MacDuffie (1995) evaluated when comparing the NUMMI plant with a similar General Motors plant, also located in Fremont. MacDuffie’s study found that the GM plant had significant status-related differences between leader and follower, scoring 1.1 on a scale of zero to four (0=extensive, 4=little) whereas the NUMMI plant had limited differences, scoring 3.4. Status differences were measured based on several factors including implementation of policies designed to break down status barriers, having common uniforms, common parking, a common cafeteria, and not wearing ties. The study found the NUMMI plant was almost 50% more productive than the GM plant and indicated policies to limit status barriers was one of the key factors contributing to this success (pp. 211-212). A weakness of the study is that the variable measuring status difference is one of several that appear to be associated with productivity. As such, the specific influence each variable has on NUMMI performance cannot be ascertained.

Conclusion

The Christ hymn in Philippians 2:5-11 provides a challenging model of humility in leadership. The passage, written to the church at Philippi, is Paul and Timothy’s counter-cultural response to the social and cultural importance placed on status and honor within Philippian society. The passage summarizes Christ’s model of leadership. Christ’s model provides the basis for a four-element model of humility in leadership. The four elements of the model include self-emptying, serving, lowliness and sacrificial love. Self-emptying relinquishes all privilege of office, as Jesus emptied himself. Serving, as Jesus served, expects nothing in return as a slave with no rights. Lowliness steps down to the lowest levels, as Jesus stepped down into humanity, having no barriers associated to position. Lastly, as Jesus was willing to endure the humiliating death on the cross, sacrificial love is willing to give up everything for others.

Contemporary studies have shown that humility is often a key attribute to effective leaders. Humility in leadership can be seen when organizations put people first. Firms that put people first, having policies and actions that demonstrate they value people, have been shown to outperform firms that have had less emphasis on putting people first. Pfeffer (1998) recommends that organizations do the following to ensure they put people first: formally state the importance of people and act in such a way that demonstrates the importance of staff members, only use language regarding its staff that demonstrates their importance, continually measure how the organization is doing regarding people and lastly, ensure leaders in the organization have values consistent with putting people first.

One example of humbly putting people first is the elimination of barriers that separate leader and follower. Examples of eliminating barriers include allowing followers to eat in same cafeteria as leaders or providing everyone the same sized office. It is recommended that elimination of barriers, and other examples of humility in leadership, be addressed more specifically in future studies such that humility is assessed in isolation. One specific approach would be to test the proposed humility in leadership model. Studies should consider how humility in leadership differs across cultures.
About the Author
Address correspondence concerning this article to James D. Rose, Email: jameros@regent.edu, Phone: 1-832-266-2819

References


Appendix

The Text of the Philippians Hymn (2:5-11)
New Revised Standard Version

2:5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
2:6 who, though He was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,
2:7 but emptied Himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form,
2:8 He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death even death on a cross.
2:9 Therefore God also highly exalted Him and gave Him the name that is above every name,
2:10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
2:11 and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.