

## “Emptied of Self”

Dr. D. Jay Losher, Jr.

2 October 2011 + Crosspoint Presbyterian Church

Philippians 2:5-11 + Christ emptied himself

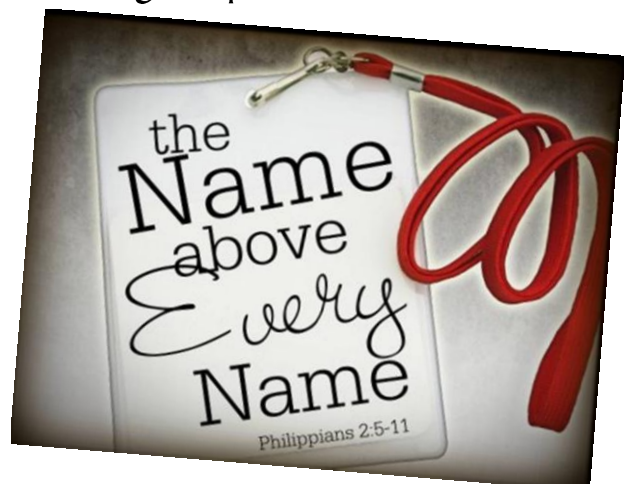
**W**hat's in a name? I shared an office for years with Nugroho Adhi before I knew that he was descended from the royal family of Solo. As a Javanese prince Nugroho could have used the title 'Raden' before his name – not as exalted as *Raden Mas* the 'Golden Prince' but high up the Javanese status ladder nonetheless. For years I never knew he was of such noble birth because he never let on.

I did not know until one of my students used that aristocratic term in addressing him. Nugroho politely asked the student to refrain from addressing him in such a manner. Nugroho was not embarrassed rather he simply never used the term himself. When he became a Christian, he left that world behind. Those worldly honorifics no longer had any meaning for him. He was now a child of God.

This is common in many parts of the world – on becoming a Christian, one's previous name is laid aside and a new one is given to fit the new estate. Following the path of the Christ means a change in the course of one's life and it is symbolized by a new Christian name.

We lay aside our former selves and we empty ourselves of our world-endowed prerogatives and status. Following the path of the Christ means something – something different. We leave things behind but we gain so very much more.

**P**aul's great Hymn to the Christ in Philippians 2 draws out the same contrast between the old person and the



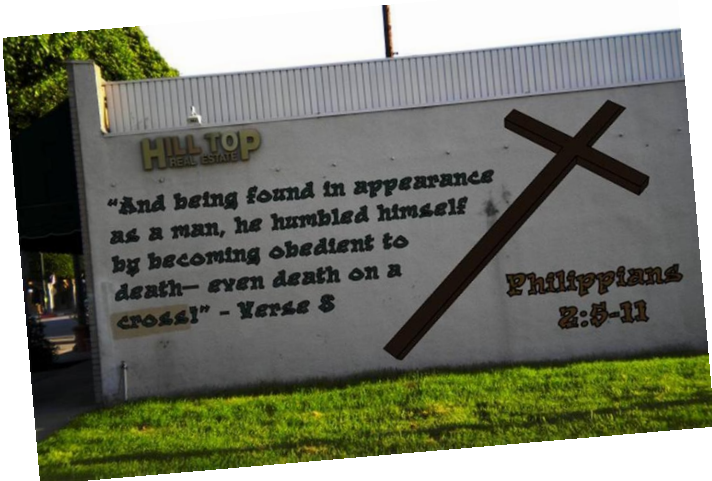
new person in Christ. Without mentioning the old person Adam even once in the passage, yet Adam is damned by faint praise. The stark contrast is here for all to see. Both Adam and Jesus of Nazareth bore the image of God as do all humans. Both existed in a human body subject to same wants, needs, desires, aspirations and hopes. However, the similarities end there:

- ~ Adam regarded equality with God something to be taken ~  
Jesus of Nazareth did not.
- ~ Adam the first human spurned being God's servant ~  
Jesus with his whole spirit freely chose being God's slave.
- ~ Adam desired to be immortal like God ~  
The Christ did not, choosing a mortal life and an ignoble death.
- ~ Adam rebelled against his human form and likeness ~  
Jesus reveled in it.
- ~ Adam exalted himself ~  
The Christ humbled himself.
- ~ Adam was disobedient unto death ~  
Jesus of Nazareth was obedient unto death.
- ~ Adam was condemned by God to a menial and mortal existence ~  
The Christ was exalted by God and made Lord of all.<sup>1</sup>

What a contrast!

**P**aul's soaring 'Hymn to the Christ' is not just a beautiful praise song and leaves it at that, but more than that, it is an exhortation to the germinating community which Paul had planted in Christ's name in

Philippi. All of the letters of Paul address some form of conflict. In the case of the Christians in Philippi, the conflict was external. There was active opposition and resistance to the Gospel. The fledgling congregation was struggling under persecution.



Addressing this, Paul exhorts the Philippian Christians to stay strong in the faith. He encourages them to turn attention away from preoccupation with their own fate toward the proclamation of the Gospel – a task to be accomplished even in the midst of suffering.

In his introduction to his great Hymn to the Christ, Paul exhorts:

**“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.”**

Why? Because that’s what Jesus would do.

**“Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.”**

Why? Because that’s what Jesus did! Then the hymn:

**“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, <sup>7</sup>but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.”**

Paul presents Jesus the Messiah as the “one who pursued honor by foregoing privilege and status in obedience to God.”<sup>2</sup>

**P**aul wants us to adopt this same lifestyle ~ a lifeway of ‘emptying.’ Paul wants us to know that in following Jesus, we are also necessarily imitators of Jesus in this. When we aspire to follow the path of Christ, we are opening ourselves to a life-long process of emptying self, emptying worldly and narrow interests. Living as a Christian means moving beyond self-centered life to living for others and for God.



We all come to God as sons of Adam and daughter of Eve, humanity with our *a natural*, self-serving egos which resist in the strongest terms this emptying process. We experience this emptying as loss of the gravest kind. Yet to lose ourselves to God is to gain so much more.

Jesus promises us that for everything we lose in emptying ourselves we gain back a hundredfold. We can trust this promise.



Jesus of Nazareth, his life, death and resurrection put all our earthly accomplishments into perspective. Jesus relativizes everything. Jesus reveals all our weaknesses and flaws. How? Through his obedience and faithfulness, he stands in stark contrast to our disobedience and faithlessness.

Even our greatest accomplishments do not stack up against his. Our achievements as proud as we are about what we can do, they have to be made empty in order for God to accomplish God's will through us.

**"I, not I, but Christ in me."** accomplishes all things, as the Apostle Paul says. [Galatians 2:20]

Without our being emptied, we find it difficult to distinguish our wants and desires from God's will for us – they are all mixed up together. If we are emptied of self and ego, God's will is clear. It is the path by which we become fully children of God.

**W**hat's in a name? Christians in Indonesia take this naming business very seriously. Royal scion Raden Nugroho Adhi – on becoming a Christian, his name was changed to fit the new estate by emptying it of worldly prerogatives. Another friend, Wayan Mastra, also had a title, the single letter 'I' before his name – just the one letter 'I' but the equivalent of 'Lord' or 'Duke.' In Hindu Bali that one letter has enormous significance.

I wonder how many of us have had such a dramatic change in our lives – how many have had a change so deep and powerful as to demand a new name. On Muslim Java and Hindu Bali, becoming a Christian has real consequences, costs and loses. No one in their right mind



would become a Christian unless the rewards were much greater.

Mastra, a convert to Christianity in his teens, rejoiced to become part of the body of Christ by happily and voluntarily emptying himself of all worldly aspirations. Like Nugroho he stripped the aristocratic title from his name – he took on a new life and a new character fit for his new estate. This emptying and opening himself to God set up God to accomplish so much through him.

What did God accomplish through Mastra?

At the time of his becoming a follower of the Way, the number of Christians in Hindu Bali was so few that they did not even register on the census – a few hundred among millions. As a young servant of the Lord, he started seven churches in as many years – each in areas of desperate need. He planted a school and an orphanage beside each church. All experienced a healthy start and steady growth. Twice he has had to flee the island under death threats, nevertheless under his leadership as Bishop the church in Bali has proven vigorous and missional – its growth is nothing short of phenomenal.

If we can but empty ourselves and take on servanthood in Christ, there is no imagining what God can accomplish.

**“It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.”**

**W**hat’s in a name?  
“the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”



<sup>1</sup> Bruce J. Malina and John J. Pilch, *Social-Science Commentary on the Letters of Paul* (2006, Augsburg) pp. 305-7

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid* p. 306