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PHILIPPIANS IN LIGHT OF PAUL RICOEUR'S NARRATIVE IDENTITY THEORY

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INTRODUCTION

In his letter to the Philippians, the apostle Paul exhorts readers to "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:5). This phrase, though perhaps innocuous, imparts a fundamental truth. For Christians, it answers the question "Who am I?" or rather, "Who should I be?" However, this directive on its own neglects to provide instructions on how we are to have the mind of Christ. In light of the rest of the letter to the Philippians, the phrase becomes clearer. Paul does not give the readers an instruction manual; rather, he tells a story: the story of Jesus Christ so that readers may encounter and have their lives changed by this narrative.

This study employs Paul Ricoeur's analysis of narrative identity as a heuristic tool to illuminate how the apostle Paul uses the story of Christ to shape the moral identity of the believers at Philippi with consideration of Paul's strategy as appropriate for contemporary application. It has four parts: first, an exploration of Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity; second, the Apostle Paul's use of narrative; third, the application of that narrative in the original setting of the Philippian church; finally, the application for modern readers.

PAUL RICOEUR AND NARRATIVE IDENTITY

In defining identity, Paul Ricoeur identifies two types: *idem* (sameness) and *ipse* (selfhood). *Idem* identity involves uniqueness; no two people possess the same *idem* identity. *Idem* is also what remains throughout a person's life. I had the same *idem* identity yesterday, I have it today, and I will have it tomorrow. *Idem* identity includes a characteristic of permanence. Ricoeur explains this further using the Kantian "numerical" and "qualitative" concepts of identity. Numerical identity means that if the same thing happens twice and goes by the same name, it is not two things but one. Qualitative identity involves, in Ricoeur's words, "extreme resemblance." Ricoeur uses the example of suits being "so similar that they are interchangeable." In this case, because the substitution makes no change, the suits are the same. The two are related in that when two interchangeable things occur twice, they are the same. Both of these express *idem* identity.[1]

To further explain *idem* identity, Ricoeur uses a criminal trial. The prosecutors have a constructed idea of the perpetrator of the crime. This could include an eyewitness statement, a description of the criminal, a DNA sample, or any of the other bits of evidence. The goal of the prosecution then is to prove that this constructed identity is in fact the identity of the defendant. Without the concept of *idem* identity, the defendant could claim that while he or she was one self when the crime was committed, there has been change since then, and another self, an innocent self, is now on trial. With the idea of a solely *idem* identity also comes the idea of a non-relational self. Because *idem* is unchanging, other selves and objects have no effect on it. This comes in direct contrast with Nietzsche's and Hegel's belief that the

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[1] Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself As Another* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992): 116. This will hereafter be referred to as *Oneself*.

self could only be realized relationally, if at all. Rather, it reflects Descartes's belief in the disembodied, thinking self, untouched by time, which correlates with Ricoeru's idea of permanence in identity.

Idem identity is too limited to encapsulate a person's entire identity, however. As Valerie Nicolet-Anderson writes: "time represents a threat for identity, for it brings with it the possibility of change."[2] In response to this threat, Ricoeur explains the second part of identity. In contrast to *idem* identity, *ipse* identity is that which changes in a person's identity. *Ipse* identity allows for free will and decision-making. In the case of the criminal, while his *idem* identity allows him to be convicted—after all the sameness within the criminal is what makes him guilty—his *ipse* identity is what allows the man's identity to change from innocent child to criminal. *Ipse* identity is relational, and constantly changing. Instability characterizes it, as it constantly encounters and is shaped by factors such as time, people and conflict. Because of this fluidity, *ipse* identity contributes mostly to narrative identity, in that when we encounter texts, they shape our *ipse* identity. Another important aspect of *ipse* identity is the recognition of self and other-than-self. With this recognition comes not only the realization that the other is distinct, but also that it has its own self made up of both *idem* and *ipse* identity. Without the recognition of both, there is a lack of distinction between two selves. It takes the *ipse* dimension of identity, however, to make that acknowledgement.[3]

Ricoeur identifies character as the point where the differences between the two types of identity are indistinguishable. For Ricoeur, character is made up of habits that become traits. These habits begin as a facet of one's *ipse* identity but solidify into a trait that becomes part of one's *idem* identity. He notes that to think of someone's *idem* identity requires a

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[2] Valerie Nicolet-Anderson, "A Self Constructed," in *Constructing the Self: Thinking with Paul and Michel Foucault* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012): 127.

[3] Ricoeur, *Oneself*, 331.

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consideration of their *ipse* identity. While character might be an intrinsic part of someone, it is the habits that come from this that everyone sees, and therefore make up the perception of someone's identity.

Concern for character and, to a larger extent, morality is the primary motivation for Ricoeur's focus on identity. While most of moral philosophy focuses on the moral act, Ricoeur is much more interested in the agent performing the action, and the reasons and motivations, those parts of his or her identity, that prompt the agent to act. According to his model for identity, the agent possesses both *idem* and *ipse* identity, but it is *ipse* identity that allows the agent to perform the act, and *idem* identity that assumes responsibility for it.[4]

Included in, or perhaps enhancing Ricoeur's ideas of identity is his emphasis on narrative identity. Narratives give coherence to action: Ricoeur calls this coherence emplotment which he defines as a "synthesis of the heterogeneous."[5] Narrative provides intelligibility to one's personal history, and emplotment is the act of creating this intelligibility. James Fodor writes that "what forms the basis of the plot's intelligibility is its configurational characters; that is, its ability to 'hold together' in concordant discordance those elements of human action which, in ordinary experience, tend to be viewed as disconnected, dissimilar, and, in some cases, even contrary."[6] Motives, beliefs, personal history, and intentions play a part in every action that a human commits. These elements make up the heterogeneous that must be synthesized in order to get an ordered narrative, and therefore a narrative identity. Narrative links the past and present, giving both language and

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[4] Ricoeur, *Oneself*, 294.

[5] Paul Ricoeur, "Life in Quest of Narrative" in *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretations*, ed. David Wood (London: Routledge, 1991): 72. Hereafter known as "Life."

[6] James Fodor, *Christian Hermeneutics: Paul Ricoeur and the Refiguring of Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1995): 184.

action power over time. This proves true in every person's life as well, and it is this that draws Ricoeur. He writes, "It is not by chance or by mistake that we commonly speak of stories that happen to us or of stories in which we are caught up, or simply of the story of a life."[7] When people look at their lives, they often view them in a narrative format. This format creates a narrative identity.[8] In the act of recognizing one's narrative identity, a person must examine his or her actions—what brings each action together, what synthesizes the heterogeneous. For Ricoeur, understanding each action requires understanding a network of elements that make up an action. In this network he includes "circumstances, intentions, motives, deliberations…" and more. All of these things can also be summarized into five basic questions: "Who?", "What?", "Why?", "How?", and "When?". In the past, those who studied action primarily focused on the what-why.[9] Ricoeur, however, believes that understanding action is impossible without including the "who" portion of the action. With this also comes the recognition of an act as moral or immoral, in that Ricoeur believes that the morality of an action depends not on the action itself but on the agent.[10] In these ways, narratives define action.

Even more than this, however, texts—especially narratives—inspire action. When a person reads a text he or she interprets it and the text interprets them. The act of the text interpreting the reader is realized in the effect of the narrative on the reader's actions (*Life* 26). Narratives primarily affect a reader's *ipse* identity; it is in the constant interactions between the reader and the text that actions are understood and perhaps changed. However, in

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[7] Ricoeur, "Life," 29.

[8] Ibid, 32.

[9] Ricoerur, *Oneself*, 73.

[10] Paul Ricoeur, "Narrative Identity" trans. David Wood in *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretations*, ed. David Wood (London: Routledge, 1991): 191.

recognizing a narrative identity, there is also recognition of *idem* identity—that synthesizer makes up a great part of *idem* identity. At this point, narrative is not affecting actions, but it does shed light, giving clearer dimension to a more stable aspect of the reader's identity. Because of this, narratives hold great significance for Paul Ricoeur, in that they affect both *idem* and *ipse* facets of human identity, both revealing and changing the identity of the person who encounters the narratives.

For Ricoeur, narrative identity is natural, making it even more relevant for study. He says that he:

formed the hypothesis that the constitution of narrative identity, whether it be that of an individual person or of a historical community, was the sought-after site of [the] fusion between narrative and fiction. We have an intuitive precomprehension of this state of affairs: do not human lives become more readily intelligible when they are interpreted in the light of the stories that people tell about them? And do not these 'life stories' themselves become more intelligible when what one applies to them are the narrative models—plots—borrowed from history or fiction (a play or a novel)? ("Narrative Identity" 188)

For Ricoeur, narratives are the way people naturally understand history—both their own and the history of the world in general. This makes emplotment more important than simply a term applied in the study of fiction or as applicable to identity. While a narrative form of identity does not necessarily provide an all-encompassing view of one's identity, it does provide a means for understanding it, and, to return to Ricoeur's phrase, a synthesis of the heterogeneous that makes up a person's life and any set of historical events ("Life" 28). Much of this natural instinct comes from Ricoeur's belief that actions have already been conceptualized through language. Organizing emplotment of such actions into narrative is merely the final step. Such organization, David Pellauer writes, reflects "the plot's capacity to reconfigure into narrative what was already configured in language prior to narrative through

the conceptual network that allows us already to speak meaningfully about human action."[11]

For Ricoeur, there is a direct correlation between texts and human action. As Pellauer states above, narrative ascribes meaning to human action. A holistic understanding of one's life, an understanding that includes purpose, requires text, specifically narrative, to give the various actions committed throughout life cohesive meaning.

Another aspect of this paradigm is that action has no meaning without an understanding of the agent performing the act (OA 59), and this understanding leads to recognizing *idem* and *ipse* identity. Ricoeur writes that "Action and agent belong to the same conceptual schema, containing notions such as circumstances, intentions, motives, deliberations, voluntary or involuntary motions, passiveness, constraints, intended or unintended results, and so on" (OA 57). Both action and agent have a network that defines them, and this network is only understood through narrative. Narrative orders the discordant elements into an understandable formation in which one can see the connections that bind action and agent together (i.e. motives, beliefs, intentions). Identity is therefore defined in narrative; a story gives a human's identity a concrete form.

The method in which a reader goes about developing narrative identity is also two-fold. There is a split between what Ricoeur calls sedimentation, associated with *idem* identity, and innovation, associated with *ipse* identity. "Sedimentation" refers to the sameness of genre of narrative that comes with constructing a historical identity. This sameness connects modern narratives with those of the past and creates a linear history. In the same way, it can give a reader a personal history. Sedimentation for personal narrative identity provides a build-up of actions that make up that identity: each action is different but performed by the same person. Innovation comes in the form of the differences between these actions. While there is a

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[11] David Pellauer, *Ricoeur: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2007): 72.

common agent performing each of the acts, features of this agent have changed indicating a change of motivation behind each action. The tension created by these changes concerned Ricoeur very much. In a sense, innovation also becomes a part of sedimentation. When a modification is performed upon a genre that modification often becomes a part of the genre, redefining it but not altering it completely. Narrative identity is changed in much the same way. The innovations made upon a person's identity due to his or her encounters with narrative change their identity without removing the common part of them that is present in all moments of his or her life or *ipse* identity. Sedimentation plays a part in *idem* identity, in that though actions are added to the identity of a person, that person remains the same being despite added actions or changes due to an encounter with a text. Innovation is *ipse* identity, the part of identity that changes upon encountering texts and performing different actions.[12]

Over time, as a person encounters texts, and sedimentation and innovation occur, his or her *idem* identity changes, but it is only through narrative that time in relation to humans can be understood at all. To explain his beliefs regarding time, Ricoeur primarily uses the writings of Aristotle and St. Augustine. For Augustine, time belongs to God and humans attempt to understand it psychologically, only being able to perceive time from the standpoint of the present: the past is present in memory; the future is present in expectation. The past and future do not exist outside of our minds; these tenses are merely our attempt to understand our world.[13] In this sense, time is subjective. Aristotle, however, believed time to be cosmological and outside human control.[14] Because of this, time to him was objective.

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[12] Ricoeur, *Oneself*, 122.

[13] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, Vol. 1*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984): 10. Hereafter referred to as *Time 1*.

[14] Henry Isaac Venema, Identifying Selfhood: Imagination, Narrative and Hermeneutics in the Throught of Paul Ricoeur (Albany: State University Press of New York, 2000): 96.

Ricoeur—much like he did with Descartes's and Nietzsche's views of identity—combines the two with narrative as the bonding agent. With narrative, he writes "[T]ime becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience."[15] For him, time is both psychological and cosmological. It exists outside of the human mind, but it is only through narrative configuration of the past and future that humans are able to perceive it.

Narrative configuration turns random occurrences into events with lasting significance. In Oneself as Another, Ricoeur writes "Whereas in a casual-type model, event and occurrence are indiscernible, the narrative event is defined by its relation to the very operation of configuration; it participates in the unstable structure of discordant concordance characteristic of the plot itself."[16] An occurrence becomes an event when it fits into the plot. A combination of occurrences that make up a plot, but unity must exist that, to use Ricoeur's words, brings a concordance to the discordant elements of one's life or of history, making these seemingly innocuous, even trivial, occurrences important.

Ricoeur explains the method in which narratives affect a reader using the term "mimesis", taken from Greek philosophy and typically understood as "imitation." In his book, *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur begins his description of mimesis by discussing its origins in the works of Plato and Aristotle. For both classic writers, mimesis meant imitation or representation of human action (and, for our purposes, in the form of literature), but while Plato condemned imitation as a distortion of truth, Aristotle perceived it as good. Ricoeur takes more of Aristotle's view, though he breaks mimesis down even further and relates it to human action. This breakdown consists of three levels: $mimesis_1$, $mimesis_2$, and $mimesis_3$.

[15] Ricoeur, *Time 1*, 3.

[16] Ricoeur, *Oneself*, 142.

Mimesis$_1$ involves all of the presuppositions of the reader. Ricoeur writes "every narrative presupposes a familiarity with terms such as agent, goal, means, circumstance, help, hostility, cooperation, conflict, success, failure, etc. on the part of its narrator and any listener."[17] All readers bring with them a sense of understanding of language and the world and this affects how they read and react. These presuppositions come from the time and place in which they live and the circumstances that surround them. Ricoeur writes that all agents "act and suffer in circumstances that they did not make that nevertheless do belong to the practical field, precisely inasmuch as they circumscribe the intervention of historical agents in the course of physical events and offer favorable or unfavorable occasions for their action."[18] Only with these presuppositions can a narrator write, because, as Ricoeur writes, "To imitate or represent action is first to preunderstand what human acting is, in its semantics, its symbolic system, its temporality."[19] Mimesis$_1$ takes place within both the reader and the author. Authors require their own presuppositions and an understanding that everyone has these presuppositions to write, while readers have their own presuppositions that they employ, consciously or not when they read a text. President Abraham Lincoln allegedly remarked to Harriet Beecher Stowe upon meeting her, "So you're the little lady that started the war." Regardless of the truth of this statement, her novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, certainly had an effect on its readers. Part of this impact had to deal with the presuppositions of the readers of the novel. Most of the readers in the North had very little knowledge of how plantations were run and slaves were treated. Stowe had presuppositions that affected the work as well, primarily that the treatment of slaves in the South was immoral, and these presuppositions carry over in the work, thanks to mimesis$_2$.

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[17] Ricoeur, *Time 1*, 55.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid., 64.

Mimesis$_2$ is the most important of the three for Ricoeur. He writes that "mimesis$_2$ draws its intelligibility from its faculty of mediation, which is to conduct us from one side of the text to the other, transfiguring the one side into the other through its power of configuration."[20] Mimesis$_2$ is the act of emplotment, of taking the preunderstanding of mimesis$_1$ and creating with it a story. It is the mediating act of taking the understanding of human action and communicating it to a reader or listener. In this sense, mimesis$_2$ is what allows a text to lose its temporality in that it translates the text that came from the author's presuppositions and makes it a narrative that the reader can understand and that can affect the reader's own presuppositions. In relation to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, mimesis$_2$ allowed Northern readers to understand the plight of slaves in the South, despite the barrier of space. In addition, it allowed the fictional story to become representative of the South, affecting the actions of Northern readers, demonstrated in mimesis$_3$.

The final stage of the process, mimesis$_3$, is the application portion. Ricoeur writes that "I shall say that mimesis marks the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the hearer or reader; the intersection, therefore of the world configured by the poem and the world wherein real action occurs and unfolds its specific temporality."[21] Mimesis$_3$ involves a reconfiguration of the reader's actions based on the work they have read. The act involves an interaction between mimesis$_1$ and mimesis$_2$. Published less than ten years before the Civil War began, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* played a part in inciting the Northern states to actions, with the readers supporting the Union army with a vigor borne of moral outrage.

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[20] *Time 1*, 53.

[21] Ibid., 71.

NARRATIVE IN THE LETTERS OF PAUL

Clearly, texts have an impact on their readers. Ricoeur believed that stories changed the identity of the man or woman who encountered them. Though the Apostle Paul wrote letters rather than stories, recent scholarship has identified a "narrative substructure" that illuminates the story within them.

Richard Hays elucidates the term "narrative substructure" in his book examining the narrative substructure of a passage in Paul's letters to the Galatian church, presenting "story" and "myth" as alternative labels for the substructure found in Paul's letters. Though the polemical connotation of "myth" leads Hays to reject the word, he uses Aristotle's *mythos* to describe the "narrative pattern" in Paul's letters.[22] Aristotle gives the basic structure of a plot as beginning, middle, and end, then further outlines plot as actions leading up to a recognition and reversal, with the concluding actions resulting directly from this recognition and reversal.[23] Jonathan Culler writes, "Aristotle says that plot is the most basic feature of narrative, that good stories must have a beginning, middle, and end, and that they give pleasure because of the rhythm of their ordering."[24] Stories, specifically their plot, make up the foundation of Hays' theory of narrative substructure in Paul, as "story" encapsulates both the telling and the events, while "narrative" refers only to the telling. Because of this, Hays writes that "caution on the part of the reader is demanded….Paul's gospel *is* a story, and it

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[22] Richard B. Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1-4:11*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002): 18-19.

[23] Aristotle, *Poetics*, 11.

[24] Jonathan Culler, "Narrative," in *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000): 85.

has a narrative structure, but it is not *a* narrative except when it is actually narrated, as in Phil. 2:6-11."[25]

Paul's typical epistolary format might seem to prevent a narrative reading. On the surface, the letters appear to be a communication of theological knowledge, with the only ordering framework being the particular problems of the recipients. Recent scholarship, however, has revealed an underlying narrative in the letters of Paul. Ian Scott writes ""When we pull together the individual statements which represent Paul's theological knowledge, we see that together they form an overarching narrative."[26] This story begins at creation, continues with the story of Israel, climaxes with the death and resurrection of Jesus, and has carried on with Paul and every other Christian. The story of Christ can be found throughout the past, present, and it carries into the future. Richard Hays writes that the climax, the story of Jesus "becomes for Paul the ordering framework that imparts unity and directionality to all other stories, including the story of Israel's scripture."[27] In each of his letters, Paul shares the story of Christ, both implicitly and explicitly. Richard Hays identifies this as a "narrative substructure." In Philippians, the narrative is primarily told in the second chapter, and, like almost any narrative, can be understood through the basic structure of the plot.

The story, as noted above, begins with creation, and the entrance of sin. From this point, God begins his plan for redemption, and this begins with Israel. Hays writes, "For Paul there is a story of salvation that extends from creation to eschatological redemption." He believed that Paul based his theology on a story, one that began at creation and climaxed with Jesus Christ. The story of the nation of Israel was merely leading up to the incarnated Christ and his

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[25] Hays *Faith* 19

[26] Ian W. Scott, "Part Two: The Structures of Paul's Knowledge" in *Implicit Epistemology in the Letters of Paul: Story, Experience and the Spirit* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006): 95.

[27] Richard B. Hays, "Is Paul's Gospel Narratable?" in *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 27, no. 2 (2004): 224.

death and resurrection. Hays continues, "Israel's story actually belongs to the story of Jesus (rather than vice versa), for he is the one in whom all things hold together."[28]

The rising action of the narrative of Christ is the nation of Israel. In the Christ hymn found in the second chapter, Paul mentions the role Christ had before his incarnation. Paul writes that Jesus was "in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited."[29] This indicates the existence of Jesus leading up to his time on Earth, and that the story of Christ did not emerge from a vacuum. This hearkening back to the past is also contained in verses nine through eleven. Paul writes, "Therefore God highly exalted him and gave him 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."[30] These verses reference Isaiah, revealing Paul's immersion in Scripture, and the role it played in his understanding of the story of Christ. Hays writes that, "the great stories of Israel continue to serve for him as a fund of symbols and metaphors that condition his perception of the world, of God's promised deliverance of his people, and of his own identity and calling."[31] As a Jew trained in the Scripture, the story of Israel directly affects Paul. He recognizes the significance of Israel's story for the narrative of his own life, and the story's impact on the narrative of the world.

As previously mentioned, the climax comes with the death and resurrection of Jesus, but only as it fits into a larger narrative. This narrative is one that Paul calls his readers to join. Scott writes that "For Paul, ethical reasoning is not simply a matter of trying to relive an ideal

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[28] Ibid.

[29] Phil. 2:6 NRSV

[30] Phil. 2:9-11

[31] Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989): 16.

story. It is a matter of understanding oneself within a narrative which encompasses all of history, and trying to discern how one must live if one hopes to be among the blessed when the final chapter is played out."[32] The sort of falling action of the narrative that Paul alludes to in his letters is how his readers are to respond, using him as a model. Paul did not merely hear the story of Christ and continue living as he had. Rather, "Paul both *lives from* the story of Jesus (it happened, crucially, once in history) and *lives in it*: it happens again time and again, inasmuch as Christ lives in him."[33] As Jesus' death and resurrection did not occur within a vacuum, neither does it leave one in its wake. Rather, it presents an opportunity for response so that one might have a positive role in the conclusion: Jesus' return.

This response is the focus of Paul in Philippians. Throughout the letter, Paul urges his readers to respond in various ways, writing "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus"[34], and using himself as a model telling them that he wants "to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him."[35] Paul's purpose in writing the letter is to encourage the Philippians to act correctly in response to the story of Christ.

The study of Paul from a narrative standpoint is not universally accepted, however. Francis Watson denies that the story of Jesus is a story at all, saying that it is a "divine act that lies beyond the scope of human storytelling." Watson views Christ as greater than the story of Israel and incompatible with inclusion in an overarching narrative. Watson raises an important point, as Jesus Christ's story is a unique one. However, Hays responds

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[32] Scott, 141

[33] John M. G.Barclay, "Paul's Story: Theology as Testimony," in *Narrative Dynamics in Paul: A Critical Assessment*, ed. Bruce W. Longnecker (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002): 155.

[34] Phil. 2:5 NRSV

[35] Phil. 3:10 NRSV

appropriately to this criticism, writing, "Paul has no doubt that the act of God can be narrated or that the death of Jesus was a specific event within human history. To say that is not to deny its transcendence significance or that is also the act of God. Rather, it is to affirm the paradigm-shifting incarnational claim that God really has acted in history…."[36] The story of Christ stands apart from any other story in its apocalyptic and transcendent nature, yet because it took place in history, it is a part of the broad story of humanity of God.

The story of Christ pervades Paul's letter to the Philippians, giving it a cohesive structure. Though the story is told neither sequentially nor holistically, it can be seen throughout. Jesus' death and resurrection has changed the story of Paul and should change the stories of his readers so that they may join, and take part of God's larger plan.

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[36] Hays, "Is Paul's Gospel Narratable?" 238

PHILIPPIANS AND THE STORY OF CHRIST

Paul's letter to the Philippian church was addressed to a people in a certain context. The Philippian way of life was unique, and the members of the church (who were, then, recipients of the letter) had their own presuppositions, and their own lens by which they viewed the world. This lens, these presuppositions, Paul Ricoeur called mimesis$_1$, a sort of established worldview. For the Philippians, this worldview was dominated by the Roman Empire and the imperial cult.

Paul's language reveals the significance of the Roman context for the Philippian church. Katherine Grieb writes that "the prominence of Philippi as a Roman colony might well have led Paul to frame his theology in political metaphor, as he does in the letter."[37] In Philippians 1:27, Paul writes "Only live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ." The word for "live" (*politeuesthe*) used here has the political undertone meaning "live as citizens" and in this instance, Paul is urging his readers to live as citizens of the body of Christ, rather than as citizens of the Roman Empire. In addition, Paul frequently uses the term *euangelion* meaning good news, typically translated as "gospel" in English. This term typically denoted good news from the emperor such as a birth, military victory, or succession.[38] The *Priene Inscription*, a declaration of the good news of Augustus on his birthday demonstrates language strikingly similar to that of Paul, saying of Augustus, "indeed there was nothing that was not crumbling and changed into ruin that he did not restore to proper form. In another way he gave a boon to all the world though it would have blithely

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[37] Katherine Grieb, "Philippians and the Politics of God" *Interpretation* 61 (2007): 260.

[38] Ibid, 262.

accepted destruction if the general blessing of all, Caesar, had not been born."[39] The emperor,

in this case Augustus, presented himself as a savior to the people of the empire, and they

worshipped him as a god. His birth, ascension, and continued rule were all hailed as

euangelion ("good news"), which signified the divinity and power of the emperor. Paul takes

this word and uses it to refer to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, juxtaposing the

risen God with the Roman emperor. N. T. Wright insists, "Politically, it cannot but have been

heard as a summons to allegiance to 'another king'…Practically, this means that Paul, in

announcing the gospel, was more like a royal herald than a religious preacher or theological

teacher."[40]

Though it first existed as a Thrasian colony, then as an independent city under the

protection of King Philip of Macedon, it is the second founding of Philippi by Octavian that

is important. After the battle in which Antony and Octavian fought with Cassius and Brutus

in which the former gained Philippi, Octavian reestablished the city, bringing in several new

colonists. From this new beginning the colony centered on a glorification of the Roman

Empire. Peter Oakes writes, "The city inevitably became a Roman colony. Its site was clearly

of high strategic value, especially being near the border with rebellious Thrace, its

agricultural resources were great, and it formed a memorial to the great battle which 'saved'

the Roman people."[41] From its inception, the colony of Philippi was centered on the Roman

Empire.

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[39] Neil Elliot, *Documents and Images for the Study of Paul* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011): 126.

[40] N. T. Wright, "Paul's Gospel and Caesar's Empire" in *Paul and Politics: Ekklesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation*, ed. Richard A Horsley (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2000): 165.

[41] Peter Oakes, *Philippians: From People to Letter* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001): 12-13.

In order to understand the significance of the colony's history, we must understand the role of the imperial cult as the primary means by which Roman power had direct bearing on the daily lives of the people of Philippi. John Dominic Crossan writes that,

> imperial power, like all social power is not so much a thing in itself as an interactive combination of four types of power: *military power*, the monopoly or control of force and violence; *economic power*, the monopoly or control of labor and production; *political power*, the monopoly or control of organization and institution; and *ideological power*, the monopoly or control of meaning and interpretation.[42]

The final power, ideological power, is perhaps the most important in understanding the imperial cult. Roman ideology was made to permeate every aspect of life for those living under their rule. Roman citizens were expected to worship their emperor as divine, because religion was based on the acquisition of power, and as emperor, the Caesar had the most.

Those with the most power were those who showed the most devotion to the emperor; to neglect to do so could mean a loss of status or protection based on the patron-client system of the Roman Empire in which the emperor was the patron and his people the clients. Every colony operated under this system. Neil Elliott writes, "The upper class in provincial cities had become enthusiastic champions of the Roman imperial cult, the chief ritual means of celebrating the blessings of Roman supremacy"[43] The upper class held the most sway in the cities and they led in worship of the emperor. Based on the patron-client system, the emperor was the ultimate patron, meaning all of his citizens received power based on his wishes. This meant that the more one worshipped the emperor, the more one received, making dedication to the imperial cult the deciding factor in one's political and social status.[44]

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[42] John Dominic Crossan, "Roman Imperial Theology" in *In the Shadow of Empire*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008): 60.

[43] Neil Elliot, "The Apostle Paul and Empire," in *In the Shadow of Empire*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008): 98.

[44] Jeph Holloway, "Cross and Community-Philippians as Pauline Political Discourse," *Christian Ethics Today* 42, no. 19 (2010): 2.

Against this patron-client system, Paul places the kingdom of God with Jesus as Lord and Savior, terms typically reserved for the emperor. According to Wright, Paul instructs the Philippians saying, "do not go along with the Caesar-cult that is currently sweeping the Eastern Mediterranean. You have one Lord and Savior, and he will vindicate and glorify you, if you hold firm to him, just as the Father vindicated and glorified him after he obeyed."[45] Paul presents a counter-narrative to the imperial cult.

From his own presuppositions and context, and aware of the context of the Philippians, Paul presents the story of Jesus Christ, with the core of the story occurring in Philippians 2:6-11. Often called the Christ hymn, this passage presents the story of Jesus Christ. Despite its centrality in the letter, most scholars today do not believe these six verses were written by Paul. Rather, as Joseph A. Marchal writes, it was "a hymn that his audience would have already known, recognized, and used in their communal gatherings."[46] Though the origin of the hymn is unknown, its context within the early church and Paul's use of it in Philippians play a significant role in understanding Paul's overarching message of the letter. In examining these aspects of the hymn, two important functions appear: and the hymn as an alternative to the imperial cult; the hymn as, to quote Marchal, "a model to be imitated."[47] To return to Paul Ricoeur, the first of these forms the basis for $mimesis_2$, the text that acts on the recipients to move them from $mimesis_1$ to $mimesis_3$, the imitation that is emphasized in Philippians.

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[45] Wright, 178

[46] Joseph A. Marchal, "Expecting a Hymn, Encountering An Argument: Introducing the Rhetoric of Philippians and Pauline Interpretation," *Interpretation* 61, no. 3 (2007): 246.

[47] Ibid, 247.

Within the hymn, this first verse has caused the most debate. Paul begins his description of Christ by saying "who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited." The word that the NRSV translates as "form" is *morphe* which can also be understood to mean "appearance" or "nature."[48] At the time Philippians was written, a literal understanding of the former was the most commonly used definition of the word, referring to God's physical, outward appearance.[49] Upon examining the word in its context, Stephen Fowl concludes that it had a greater meaning than just physical appearance, however. He writes, "It seems most adequate, then, to take the μορφή of God as a reference to the glory, radiance and splendor by which God's majesty is made visible. By locating Christ in this glory, it conveys the majesty and splendor of his pre-incarnate state."[50] In establishing this meaning, Christ is placed higher than any other, including Caesar. Jesus is God, all-powerful, and, thus worthy to be worshipped on similar terms to those that gave Caesar the right to be worshipped: power and wealth.

The next phrase destroys the congruity, however. While the emperor did all he could to promote and maintain his position as the all-powerful benefactor, Christ gave up his position with his incarnation. Ben Witherington writes, "What this seems to mean is not that he set aside his divine nature in exchange for a human one, but rather that he set aside his right to draw on his divine attributes (omniscience, omnipresence, omnipotence) while on earth. He submitted to the normal human limitations of time, space, power, and knowledge."[51] Christ

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[48] Joseph Henry Thayer, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, s.v. μορφή.

[49] Stephen Fowl, "Philippians 2:6-11" in *The Story of Christ in the Ethics of Paul*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 53.

[50] Ibid, 54.

[51] Ben Witherington, "Paul the Paradigm Setter," in *The Indelible Image: the Theological and Ethical Thought World of the New Testament* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009): 195.

did not become any less divine; he only restricted himself to the limits of humanity. The text

makes it apparent that this was a deliberate act by Jesus, using all active verbs in the first half

of the hymn: Jesus *ekenōsen* (emptied), *labōn* (having taken [the form of a servant], and

etapeinōsen (humbled).[52] While the emperor claimed power based on claimed divinity, Jesus

renounced his power and assumed the role of the lowest member of Roman society as one

accepting death on a cross, the penalty of a slave.[53] Fee notes that the phrase "death on a

cross" is widely understood as a Pauline addition to the text, because the cross was "the very

heart of Pauline theology, both of his understanding of God as such and of his understanding

of what God has done and is doing in our fallen world."[54]

Following this solemn pronouncement of Jesus' end on Earth, the hymn takes a dramatic

turn. God becomes the active party, and he exalts Jesus above all else in heaven and earth,

including Caesar. Though scholars have debated much less about the second half of the

Christ hymn, there are still some ambiguities, the most pronounced being in the ninth verse

which says, "Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above

every name." The text here does not explicitly identify the "name that is above every name."

Fee presents the two most accepted interpretations, the first being "Jesus" and the second

"Lord." He writes that the second is the most accepted, as "what favors it the most is the clear

'intertextuality' that is in process here. The twofold result clause that makes up our vv. 10

and 11 is a direct borrowing of language from Isa 45:23." As mentioned above, Paul's story

of Christ includes the Hebrew nation, and Paul's reference here back to the Old Testament

contributes to the alternative narrative he is presenting to his recipients. His invitation to take

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[52] Ibid, 193.

[53] Gordon Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995): 217.

[54] Ibid.

part in the story of Christ includes an invitation to take part in the story of Israel as it is crucial to Jesus' story. In addition, the use of "Lord" would have struck the Philippians as significant. Oakes writes that "verses 10-11 would be heard by the Philippians as depicting an Imperial figure—but one with a far wider scope of authority than the Roman Emperor."[55] Paul uses the language of the imperial cult to emphasize the much greater authority of Jesus Christ despite, or perhaps because of, his humility.

Philippians 2:6-11 is not the only reference to the imperial cult in Philippians, however. Allusions to the empire appear throughout the letter, though some are more apparent than others. The clearest occurs in the penultimate verse of the fourth chapter. Paul writes, "all the saints greet you, especially those of the emperor's household." Though this might seem to be an incidental mention of other Christians, Paul's uses this statement purposefully. Fee writes, "Paul either has found or has made disciples of the 'Lord' Jesus among members of the imperial household, who are thus on the Philippians side in the struggle against those who proclaim Caesar as Lord."[56] There are Christians at the very heart of the empire: the household of Caesar. Though the presence of believers so near Caesar may be understood as an encouragement from other Christians, it can also be seen as proof of God's supremacy over Caesar in that even those closest to Caesar worship Jesus.[57]

Paul uses language to set up a direct contrast to the imperial cult as well. As mentioned above, Paul's use of the word *euangelion* ("good news") is a direct parallel to the language that would have been used to describe an emperor's good news. One of the most direct references to the imperial cult occurs in Philippians 3:20. Paul writes, "But our citizenship is

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[55] Oakes, *Philippians*, 150.

[56] Fee, *Paul's Letter*, 460.

[57] Ibid.

in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ." Paul's language here is explicitly political. Oakes affirms the politicalization, saying, "This is reinforced because membership of this state defines the Christians' ethics (cf. verse 19). For Roman citizens, their citizenship was supposed to define their ethics, both in terms of what was permissible (Acts 16.21) and in terms of where one's real allegiance lay."[58] The imperial cult was the system by which life ran in the Roman Empire, but in verse 20, Paul calls Christians to another allegiance, one that challenged the system of the imperial cult. His use of the word *politeuma*, meaning citizen, certainly challenges the imperial system, but Paul's description of Jesus in the latter part of the verse challenges the emperor directly. Paul describes Jesus Christ as "Savior" and "Lord." Of the former, Fee writes that "the significance is highlighted by its rarity in Paul; only once heretofore (Eph 5:23) has he used this title to describe Christ. That he does so hear is almost certainly for the Philippians' sakes, since this is a common title for Caesar."[59] Though historically, the word was used as a descriptor for a variety of "saviors," including the God of the Hebrew Bible, Oakes writes that the Philippians would have recognized the title as one belonging to the emperor. As mentioned above, the same would have applied to Paul's use of "Lord."

In the Roman world, religion and loyalty were based on power of which the emperor claimed to have the most. Paul presents the story of Christ as a counter-narrative to the story of the emperor with which the empire was imbued. Though Jesus had great power, he gave it up in humility to serve, and was then exalted to his former position, claiming the "name above all names" as well as the titles of Savior and Lord. Paul clearly juxtaposes the alternative narrative of Christ with the prevailing narrative of the imperial cult. In doing so,

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[58] Oakes, *Philippians*, 138.

[59] Fee, *Paul's Letter*, 381.

the apostle creates the opportunity for what Ricoeur calls mimesis$_2$, the encounter with a narrative that provides an alternative to the world of mimesis$_1$. Before their conversion to Christianity, the lives of the Philippians were expected to be based on worship of the emperor, obtaining more power and immersion in the world created by the claims of imperial dominance. They were to take an active part in worship of the emperor through their imitation of him as they lived their lives in pursuit of higher social standing and greater affluence. Paul calls on the Philippians to turn away from this, and respond to the story of Christ with humility, and thus come to the third aspect of Ricoeur's narrative identity: mimesis$_3$.

Mimesis$_3$ is explicitly encouraged when in the letter, Paul calls on the Philippians to change based on the story of Christ through imitation. Just before the Christ hymn in the second chapter, Paul writes, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." Paul asks the recipients will respond to Christ by imitating his humility and obedience. Grieb points out that Paul emphasizes the first part of the Christ hymn which demonstrates these characteristics of obedience and says, "Paul takes pains to show that this particular pattern of self-giving that is concerned with the interests of others, initiated by God in Christ Jesus, is to be imitated by followers of Jesus, including the Philippians."[60] The Philippians were accustomed to living by the imperial cult, worshipping the emperor and attempting to gain more power and advantage over others within the patron/client system, but Paul encourages them to act in a manner like Christ.

Paul specifies what this would entail in further detail. He urges the Philippians in 2:3-4 to "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others." This

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[60] Grieb, "Politics of God," 264.

comes just before the Christ hymn, where he tells them to have the same mind as Christ. Paul specifies what it means to live in Christ both by this explicit instruction and through the story of Christ.

Paul uses his own story as an example to the Philippians as well. In the third chapter, Paul gives his own biography, explaining his status as the "Hebrew born of Hebrews," following the law, and persecuting Christ's church. He then explains losing all of his former status and sense of worth and that instead of righteousness by the law, he writes, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death if somehow I may attain resurrection from the dead." He continues later, saying "join in imitating me." Fee writes that the language of imitation "occurs in two kinds of contexts in Paul: suffering for the sake of Christ and the gospel and behavior that conforms to the gospel. In every case 'imitation' of Paul means 'as I imitate Christ.'"[61] Paul reveals his own desire to be like Christ, to imitate Jesus in his humility, and he urges the Philippians to imitate him as he follows the example of the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

This alteration of behavior that comes with mimesis$_3$ indicates a change in *ipse* identity. Though those Philippians that accepted the story of Christ would be the same people that they were the year before, their method of perception and action would be fundamentally different based on the perception and action offered by Christ through Paul. Paul telling his personal history serves a twofold purpose. In addition to using his life as an example to the Philippians as discussed above, he also reveals the importance in the act of change itself. Though he acknowledges his former self, his perception of that self, and the basis on which he views his previous actions has diametrically changed. While both the *idem* and *ipse* portions of identity contribute to moral decisions, *ipse* identity is the active part of a person during a decision.

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[61] Fee, *Paul's Letter*, 364.

Changing one's *ipse* therefore changes his or her action. It goes deeper than this, however, as *idem* and *ipse* are not so easily separated. The Philippian believers possessed a set of presuppositions and lived in a particular context that affected their identity. Because of this, Paul presents an alternative that responded directly to this identity so that, even while he asked them to fundamentally change their identity, he did not ask for complete disengagement from their former lives, an impossible task.

Within his letter, Paul addresses two Philippians specifically. I chapter 4, verse 2 he writes, "I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord." The word he uses for "be of the same mind" is phroneō, used ten other times within the letter. Paul's urging the Philippians is both general and personal. To live a life affected by the story of Christ would be to live one opposed to the imperial cult. Rather than searching for power, the Philippians were to be humble. Rather than acting for themselves, the Philippians were to act for others. Most importantly, rather than worshipping the emperor, the Philippians were to worship the resurrected Christ. Such a reform of worship entails a redirection of their lives.

CIVIL RELIGION AND THE COUNTER-NARRATIVE OF THE GOSPEL

Of course, Paul's letter Philippians does not only apply to its original setting. As part of the New Testament, the letter is read by Christians today, including those in the United States. Just as the original recipients of the letter encountered it with their own presuppositions and beliefs, their $mimesis_1$, so American readers approach the text with presuppositions, many with beliefs that reflect characteristics of American civil religion.

One crucial point to understanding American civil religion is understanding the idea of the United States as a "chosen nation." Though this idea began in England, it truly began in America with the arrival of the Puritans. Equating themselves with ancient Israel come out of Egypt, the Puritans believed only they were the pillar of righteousness standing with God against the rest of the world.[62] The myth of the chosen nation carries with it an idea of covenant comparable to the Deuteronomistic covenant outlook of the Hebrew Bible: righteousness results in God's blessing, wickedness results in God's curse, and people should act accordingly.[63]

In addition, the idea of America as specially chosen by God was both born out of and results from what is considered the creedal foundation of the United States found in the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness."[64] This creed could be "a

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[62] Richard T. Hughes, *Myths America Lives By* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003): 29-30.

[63] Ibid, 21.

[64] Ibid, 2.

constellation of ideas and standards that give a people a sense of belonging together and of being different from those of other nations and cultures."[65] Because of these ideas and standards, Americans saw themselves as set apart from the rest of the world, even as the nation contained citizens from a wide variety of countries. This idea of the United States as a Christian nation has the potential to be positive. As mentioned above, it carries with it the idea of covenant, which can lead to respect amongst people. Unfortunately, it has more often led to an attitude of superiority expressed in the notion of American exceptionalism.[66] Charles Marsh describes American Christendom as a "grotesque shrinking of salvation's sweep to the narrow agendas of individuals and groups and its presumption to know God, and God's purposes apart from Scripture, church, and tradition."[67] American civil religion has made God into a political tool to justify the nation's actions.

These concepts make up the mimesis$_1$ of many of the American readers of Paul's letter to the Philippians. While Philippians was not written to oppose American civil religion, many of Paul's challenges can apply to modern American readers as well as the original Philippian recipients.

Paul writes in Philippians 2:2-3, "be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves." As discussed above, Paul desires for the Christians at Philippi (and, as we read it today, all Christians) to follow the example of Christ, and he wants Christians to do it together, in unity. Today, Christians are all over the world and an American Christian believing in the superiority of his or her nation should at least have to ask

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[65] Sidney E. Mead, "The 'Nation with the Soul of a Church,'" in *American Civil Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974): 47.

[66] Hughes, *Myths*, 41.

[67] Charles Marsh, *Wayward Christian Soldiers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007): 74.

whether such a belief places their ecclesial identity within the body of Christ in a subordinate position to their national identity.

Understanding citizenship properly is necessary to understanding the alternative narrative Paul presents in Philippians. Marsh writes, "Christians are to be people who are defined first and foremost by citizenship in the kingdom of God."[68] In writing this, Marsh essentially echoes Paul in Philippians 3. Paul's message in his polemical language against the imperial cult in Philippians is to show his recipients that they ultimately belong to Christ and his kingdom rather than the kingdom of Caesar. In the same way, contemporary Christians need to recognize that their loyalty should ultimately belong to God, a global God—not the Americanized God of civil religion.

Mimesis$_3$ for the original Philippians and for contemporary Christians remains essentially the same. Paul urges his readers or hearers to imitate Christ in humility and obedience. Practically, this looks different in the twenty-first century compared to the first century. In addition, while the Philippians needed to be wary of worshipping the emperor, American Christians must be wary of worshipping their nation and merely using God as a tool to further particular political and social ends. Just as Paul wishes for the Philippians to change their identity and base it on the story of Christ, so modern readers should base their lives on the same story. Rather than finding significance within one's national identity, Paul encourages his readers, even the contemporary readers he does not directly address, to find significance in humility and being a servant of God.

In fact, throughout history, Paul has been used as a means for justification of the actions of the powerful. In the Civil War, his works were cited to tell slaves to obey their masters, and in churches, women are often not allowed to take part in leadership based on Paul's

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[68] Ibid, 166.

writings. This, however, misrepresents Paul who writes more of the liberation by the gospel than of subjugation by the powerful.[69]

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[69] Neil Elliot, *Liberating Paul: The Justice of God and the Politics of the Apostle* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994): 24.

CONCLUSION

The Apostle Paul's call for imitation of Jesus Christ is fundamental to understanding Christian identity. In using Paul Ricoeur's definition of narrative identity, the letter to the Philippians is illuminated, providing a greater understanding of its effects on its original recipients and the effects it can have in contemporary society. In Philippi, the recipients of Paul's letter had known lives formed by the imperial cult, a system focused on power. Paul subverts this system with the story of a humble and obedient Christ, presenting to the Philippians an alternative way to live. American Christians are shaped by civil religion, and the description of Jesus opposes this as well.

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