

Knee-Bending Lifestyle Places Others Before Self

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The Apostle Paul tells the Christians in Philippi that every knee ought to bend at the name of the God-exalted Jesus and that every tongue ought to confess that the God-chosen Jesus is the guide and governor of all of life.

Paul isn't making a claim about what is currently the case – clearly not all knees are bending. It is pretty evident, then and even now, that relatively few of all the knees are making that move. The same goes for all the tongues confessing.

Neither is Paul making a prediction about bending knees and confessing tongues in some future time. The verb he uses is not "shall" as it applies to knees and tongues.

Paul, rather, is staking out an ethical claim.

And it isn't a restricted ethical claim. It isn't one that applies only within, say, the Christian community or church.

Knee-bending and tongue-confessing is a universal ethical claim, according to Paul. It applies to everybody – to every being that has moral agency, that is, the capacity to make and act on an ethical choice. This "ought" applies across the board – as Paul writes: "in heaven and on earth and under the earth."

If this is the nature of Paul's claim – that knee-bending and tongue-confessing about Jesus is ethical in nature – then we have every right to ask why that is the case.

But we don't have to speculate on that "why" question, because Paul has already provided an answer: all knees ought to bend and all tongues ought to confess because, in human (not divine or supernatural) expression or form, Jesus revealed and enacted what is the essential character of all reality, even at its lowest and most subservient level.

That is to say, Paul here is grounding his universal ethic in his metaphysics: that the truth about reality, at its most fundamental level, is the giving up or emptying of the "self" (to use a term particularly applicable to the human dimension of reality) in service to another or to others, even to the point of the death of the self.

A shorthand way of stating that metaphysical truth is: sacrificial love is the ultimate dimension of reality – not just human reality, not just natural reality, but even the divine reality. It is that fundamental dimension of all reality that Jesus teaches and, even more importantly, enacts in his self-giving life and death.

That's why, ethically, every knee ought to bend and every tongue ought to confess that God-chosen Jesus is the guide and governor of all of life. But let's be clear: this isn't just a theoretical ethic based on a metaphysical claim and argument; it is also a practical ethic.

In fact, in his letter to the Philippians that's his main concern. Paul only gets theoretical and philosophical as a means to back up his everyday, practical point:

"Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others." (Philippians 2: 3-4)

When that practical ethic is followed, Paul writes, you will have the "same mind" as God-chosen Jesus. (Philippians 2:5)

If I am reading Paul accurately here, it would mean that knee-bending is not so much a ritual of religious homage to the Chosen One of God who blindly followed the divine will, but more a physical sign of freely chosen discipleship to the one who, by his own freely chosen acts, decisively discloses the ultimate character of all reality. Knee-bending is a physical act that serves as an ethical symbol of the way one is choosing to live one's own life according to that revelatory life.

Knee-bending represents and re-presents symbolically what one, as a moral agent, does practically in everyday life to be a disciple of Jesus – humbly contributing to the well-being of others – who are regarded as better or of more importance than one's self – in acts of mercy and compassion, in acts of justice, reconciliation and peacemaking.

Tongue-confessing, it then follows, is the word-act of that same commitment, explaining the commitment to others and inviting others to share in that understanding, that commitment, that way of life.

The challenge of a knee-bending and tongue-confessing life is how to make it pervasive over all dimensions of one's everyday existence, not to be confined only to one's religious life but infused deep into our personal and professional, our public and political lives.