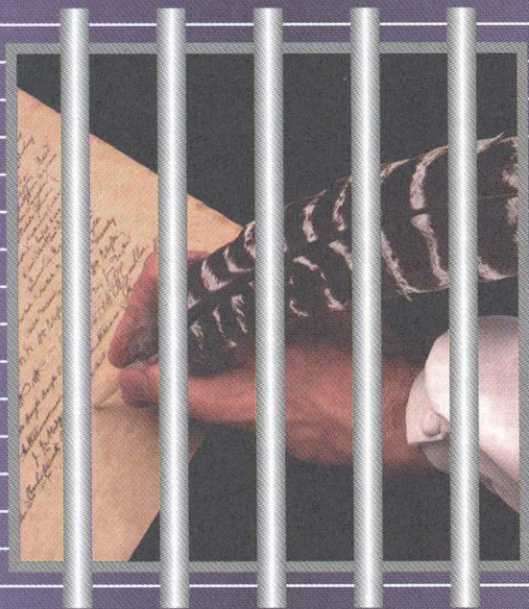




PHILIPPIANS



Allan Mitchell Parrent

PAUL'S LETTER TO THE CHRISTIANS at Philippi is a warm and personable epistle, written from prison, and aimed primarily at encouraging the Philippian Christians to live lives worthy of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He does not give much formal instruction in the Christian moral life, nor does he set forth any lengthy exposition of Christian doctrine. There seems to be an assumption on his part that further ethical and doctrinal instruction is not necessary there. It was in Philippi, a major Roman city, that Paul had founded the first Church in Europe in A.D. 50-51, while on his second missionary journey, and a century later the early church father, Polycarp, paid tribute to the still flourishing and faithful Philippian church.

The strong bond between Paul and the Philippian church is clearly reflected both in the immediate occasion for the letter and in its very affectionate language. The church at Philippi had sent one of its number, Epaphroditus, to assist Paul in prison and to take to him several gifts. During his stay and his efforts to aid the Apostle, evidently at some risk to his own life, Epaphroditus had become ill. When Epaphroditus recovered sufficiently

Paul sent him back to Philippi, partly for health reasons, and gave him this letter to deliver upon his arrival. The language of the letter attests to the reciprocal affection on Paul's part, *e.g.*, "my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown."

It may be helpful at the outset to note briefly three difficulties concerning the letter. First, biblical scholars are uncertain about where Paul was when he wrote the letter, though they are universally agreed that it was written by the Apostle while he was in prison. Second, they are uncertain about the precise date the letter was written, a problem clearly related to the first difficulty. Paul was in prison in several places at different times. And third, there is disagreement among scholars about the shape of the original letter, that is, whether Paul wrote it essentially as it is or whether it is a composite work of two or perhaps three letters from Paul put together by a later compiler.

With regard to the first two difficulties, a case can be made for each of three different locales and dates. Paul was writing from prison in either Ephesus (c. A.D. 56), Rome (c. A.D. 61-63), or Caesarea (c. A.D. 58-60), though the first two are more likely than the third. With regard to the third difficulty,

many scholars continue to see the epistle as a single letter, composed by Paul essentially in its current form. Other equally respected scholars believe the epistle to be a compilation of two or three letters of Paul. For readers who might want to read the epistle in this light, the divisions are as follows:

- I. The two-letter hypothesis: (a) 3:1b—4:20; (b) 1:1—3:1a plus 4:21-23.
- II. The three letter hypothesis: (a) 4:10-20; (b) 1:1—3:1a plus 4:4-7 and 21-23; (c) 3:1b—4:3 and 4:8-9.

In any case, given the divided state of biblical scholarship on these matters, plus the fact that they seem to have little significant effect on the content of what Paul intended to convey in the letter, readers may do best to read the letter in its present form. The structure of the letter in its present form is usually broken down along the following lines:

- A. An introductory section (1:1-11)
- B. A report on Paul's situation in and attitude toward his imprisonment (1:12-26)
- C. An appeal for unity in the face of opposition and for unity in their common life together. This section includes, in 2:5-11, the well-known pre-Pauline Christological hymn (1:27—2:18)

- D. Paul's future plans regarding Philippi (2:19—3:1a)
- E. Warnings against false teachers and libertines (3:1b—4:1)
- F. Further exhortations concerning behavior (4:2-9)
- G. Acknowledgement of gifts and final blessing (4:10-23)

Paul begins his letter by referring to himself and his co-worker, Timothy, as "slaves" of Jesus Christ (a more accurate translation than "servants"). Such a term, seen against the term "Lord" which he uses to refer to Christ, makes clear at the very beginning the strong Christological emphasis of the letter. Paul also makes clear, in his various exhortations in the letter, the importance of submission to the will of Christ and the insights that come through knowledge of him, "so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God." (1:10-11)

In spite of the fact that he is in prison, and in spite of the fact that some of those who are free and preaching the Gospel seem to be doing so with less than admirable motives (1:15-18), Paul speaks repeatedly in Philip-

prians of his "joy." He is joyful because Christ is nevertheless being preached, reflecting among other things a conviction that the power of the Gospel does not depend on the character or motivation of the preacher. He is joyful also because his imprisonment has in fact helped to spread the gospel. And he is joyful because he knows that through the prayers of the Philippians and the Spirit of Jesus Christ his deliverance will come. He is clearly not despondent.

Paul is concerned, however, about those to whom he refers to as "the opponents" of the Christians at Philippi. He therefore strongly exhorts those to whom he is writing to stand firm, to be of one mind, and not to allow themselves to be intimidated in the face of external opposition. He is equally concerned about unity within the fellowship of the church. It is his hope that, unlike some of the other churches of which he has intimate acquaintance, they will not allow themselves to be weakened by personal rivalries or internal quarrels and divisions.

When he exhorts his readers to "live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" (1:27), Paul uses a Greek word whose root is used only twice in the New Testament, both of them in Philippians. It is the word that in

English can mean "state," "polity," "politics," "commonwealth," or as in 3:20, "citizenship." One commentary (F. W. Beare) translates the above passage as "Let your life be ordered in a manner—." The intention, of course, is to convey the idea that the church is a unity, a corporate body, a community like a political entity that is bound inextricably together, but bound not by political or cultural allegiances but by allegiance to the Gospel. As the familiar hymn says, "The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord," and it should therefore not be riven by partisanship and dissention. Paul then is really making a double exhortation here for unity, unity in the face of "opponents" beyond the Christian community and also unity within the community itself. If there is to be any rivalry at all, let it be in showing esteem for others, in looking out for the interests and rights of others, and in exhibiting genuine humility.

It is at this point in the letter that Paul inserts (2:5-11) the well-known "hymn to Christ" or "kenotic hymn" (kenosis means "self-emptying"). The hymn was probably well-known to his addressees. Its description of Christ as one who "emptied himself," who took on "the form of a slave," who "was obedient to the point of death," who was

“exalted” by God, and who is now to be confessed as “Lord” is doubtless the most famous passage in the letter to the Philippians. Yet it is almost universally considered to be pre-Pauline. It has also been the object of more scholarly examination and debate than any other passage in the letter.

This Christological hymn is inserted immediately after Paul’s earlier exhortations in order to give the ultimate illustration of what he had been saying. It begins: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Jesus Christ,” *i.e.*, let what follows in this hymn be the disposition that governs your common life. The hymn itself then describes what is basically the proclamation of the gospel story itself, through a recital of the saving acts of Jesus Christ. There are clearly ethical interpretations in the hymn in that it advocates a particular way of living and encourages certain dispositions and intentions and virtues. But more fundamentally the hymn is Christological—portraying the person and work of Christ—and soteriological—exhorting its hearers for their own salvation to proclaim that “Jesus Christ is Lord” and to follow him.

The primary point of controversy about the hymn concerns the meaning of verses 6-7. For example, does “being in the form of God”

mean the same thing as having "equality with God," as in John 1:1 ("The Word was God.")? Or does it mean being in the image of God, like Adam in Genesis 1:27, referring to a status that is something less than having equality with God? Again, was Christ already equal to God but "did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited," *i.e.*, used for his own advantage, choosing instead to take the form of a slave? Or was he given the possibility of becoming equal to God but did not "grasp" it, as Adam did? Some believe this pre-Pauline hymn portrays the incarnation of a pre-existent divine figure, whom Paul identifies as Jesus the Christ. Others believe that it portrays Christ who was in the image of God but, exemplifying the humility and obedience Paul was trying to teach, chose to humble himself (Paul probably added "even death on a cross"), with the result that he was exalted and given "the name that is above every name." This, of course, is understood to be portraying Christ as "the new Adam" in contrast to "the old Adam," who was also in the image of God but, in trying to "be like God," brought sin into the world and was cast out of Eden.

How one decides such issues as these has implications for one's Christology. This hymn

is shaped by two clear antitheses in its portrayal of Christ, the humiliation/exaltation antithesis and the slave/Lord antithesis. Both are intended to have implications for the Christian community at Philippi, and indeed for all who are "in Christ," as they "work out (their) salvation with fear and trembling" (2:12). At the conclusion of the hymn Paul reiterates his exhortation to live in unity as children of God in the midst of "a crooked and perverse generation" (2:14-15). That phrase, not coincidentally, comes from Deuteronomy 32:5, and is one of several indications that throughout this section Paul, from prison, sees his own situation as not unlike that of Moses and his farewell charge to those he has led out of bondage.

At the conclusion of the hymn Paul seems to be ending his letter to the Philippians, beginning at 2:19. He tells his beloved Philippians that he hopes eventually to send Timothy to them, one already well-known in Philippi. But more immediately he is sending back one of their own, Epaphroditus, who had come from Philippi to help Paul, had done so even at the risk of his own life, and who had become ill. Now that Epaphroditus had recovered he was being sent home with this letter from Paul.

The letter, however, does not end there. There is, in fact, a drastic change in its tone, beginning at 3:2. This could be an indication that this section is a fragment of another letter from Paul, an indication that the letter is simply a personal epistle rather than a well-honed essay, or the result of new information about troubling external events relayed to Paul just as the letter was being completed. Whatever the reason, it is the content that is important. Seldom do we find such passionate invective in Paul's letters. His concern seems to be two-fold. One is his concern about Jewish proselytizing among Christians, whether at Philippi or elsewhere. The other is his concern about the shameless and immoral behavior of some whose focus is solely on the material things of this world.

When Paul writes, "Beware of the dogs" (3:2), he is referring specifically to those Jews who seek to win gentile Christian converts to Judaism, and he uses against them the very term that they frequently used to refer to Gentiles. When he writes, "Beware of those who mutilate the flesh," he is referring to those who value the external rite of circumcision which is required by religious law as a necessary sign of membership in the holy community. This is a direct contradiction of

Paul's fundamental theme that righteousness comes through faith in Jesus Christ, not through works of the law. This basic point of Paul's theology is stated most fully in Galatians and Romans. When he writes, "it is we who are the circumcision," he is essentially reinterpreting and spiritualizing the whole idea of the rite of circumcision. As he writes in Galatians 6:15, "Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything, but a new creation is everything." What is important is inward faith, "circumcision of the heart." Otherwise the religious rite of circumcision is nothing more than "mutilation." Here Paul offers details of his own personal religious history and experience as testimony in support of his teaching, concluding with a moving confession of his own faith and aspirations (3:4-11).

Paul's other and opposite concern has to do with those that might be called libertines. "Their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things" (3:19). They are enemies of the cross of Christ, Paul writes, and their end is destruction. He is doubtless referring here to a group of people quite different from the proselytizers discussed above. For the latter the danger was religious legalism and righteousness based on law. For the libertines the danger is

antinomianism, the casting off of all moral constraints. Perhaps he has in mind those Christians who misinterpreted his message of Christian freedom in Christ, a strong theme in his letter to the Galatians, and who had allowed freedom to degenerate into license. Paul's warning to the Galatians, like his warning to the Philippians concerning circumcision, was to "stand fast" in their Christian freedom and not to put themselves again under the yoke of slavery to the law. His warning now, with the libertines in mind, is to "stand firm" (4:1) against the perverse abuse of freedom and not to imagine that freedom from the law means license to sin with impunity, for that also leads to slavery.

In drawing the contrast between those whose "glory is in their shame" (one need look no further than the afternoon TV talk shows for contemporary examples) and the Christians he is addressing in Philippi, Paul reminds the Philippians that "our citizenship is in heaven" (3:20). The primary loyalty of Christians is to another community and the moral norms that govern their actions in their earthly community come from that ultimate allegiance. It is noteworthy, however, that Paul speaks of heavenly citizenship and its moral implications in a letter to the same city where

he himself is described in Acts as having appealed to the moral implications of his own earthly, *i.e.*, Roman, citizenship. (See Acts 16:11-40.)

Paul is very aware here of the fact that Christians hold dual citizenship. They are citizens of the Kingdom of God and they are citizens of one of the kingdoms of this world. Christians live between the times and have legitimate, though different, rights and obligations *as Christians* deriving from both citizenships. Furthermore, those two citizenships are inextricably interwoven. Christians are not simply "resident aliens" in an evil world, nor are they to seek to Christianize the political order and create some form of theocracy. Neither are they, through a distorted interpretation of the meaning of separation of church and state, to exclude from deliberations in the public square those whose perspectives on public issues are admittedly informed by Christian convictions.

Rather, as citizens of both a heavenly and an earthly city, Christians are to speak truth relevantly in the public square, translate religiously-shaped understandings of justice and equality into culturally understandable terms, and participate with their fellow citizens in shaping and repairing the moral ethos of the

earthly city of which they are a part. While Christians are to seek a good, just, and humane society, those adjectives will be informed by a gospel that gives them some distinctive content. "Our citizenship is in heaven," yes, but precisely because of that heavenly citizenship, Christians have some guidelines for determining what earthly citizenship means.

Paul ends his letter with further exhortations about the kind of behavior that is fitting for Christians and worthy of the gospel of Jesus Christ. As he has done throughout the letter, he again repeats his theme of joy and rejoicing (4:4, 4:10). He refers to the "gentleness" of the Philippians (4:5) and also commends them to a list of virtues (4:8-9) upon which they are to meditate and take into account in their decisions and actions. In both cases it is clear that these are qualities and practices that are already operative in Philippi, doubtless another reason for Paul's joy. It is worthy of note, however, that these aspects of moral "excellence"—truth, honor, justice, etc.—are not exclusively Christian. Indeed, they are central to the highest form of the classical "pagan" ethics of the culture of the day. This seems to be an indication of Paul's openness to some degree of affinity between the Christian moral life and the general human



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capacity for moral discernment, *i.e.*, openness to points of contact between moral norms derivative from the gospel and the natural moral law tradition.

Paul closes this letter with an acknowledgement of the gifts he had received from the Christian community at Philippi and, finally with a blessing.

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