

## The Letter to the Church at Philippi

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In the thirteenth chapter of the gospel according to John, Jesus is eating a Passover meal with his disciples, the last such meal he will share with them before his death. Before they depart, he gives them some final instructions, saying: *Now I am giving you a new commandment—love one another. Just as I have loved you, you must love one another. This is how all men will know that you are my disciples, because you have such love for one another.*<sup>1</sup> This has become a reality, though not always in the way Jesus intended. We are known for how we love one another, but unfortunately, Christians in general, and Baptists in particular, have perfected a “love” that is manifested in bickering, squabbling, debating and dividing. Yet the truth is that Baptists don’t have the corner on this market, as feuds and disagreements seem to have been part of the Christian church from the outset. As we learn from Paul’s letter, the community at Philippi was no exception.

According to the book of Acts, Paul first came to Philippi as the result of a vision in which a man from Macedonia asked him to come and help (16.9-10). Paul, with Timothy and Silas, boarded a ship at Troas and sailed to Neapolis, a port city in the Roman colony of Macedonia, and then journeyed the short distance (roughly ten miles)<sup>2</sup> to the town of Philippi (16.11-12).<sup>3</sup> As Acts records the events, Paul established a gathering of believers in the home of a local merchant named Lydia (16.13-15), and continued to proclaim the gospel in the synagogue. During their time at Philippi, “a slave girl with a spirit of divination” followed them announcing, “these men are bond-servants of the Most High God, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation” (16.16-17), and after a few days Paul commanded the spirit to come out of her (16.17-18). Her owners, who exploited her to make a profit, were angered and they incited the crowds against Paul and his companions, ultimately leading to their arrest (16.19-34). After their release (16.35-39), Paul, Silas, and Timothy visited the believers at Lydia’s home and then left the city, traveling up the *Via Egnatia*—a major Roman highway—to the city of Thessalonica (16.40-17.1). Sometime after Paul’s departure, the Philippians sent one of their own, Epaphroditus, with a gift (presumably financial) to support Paul’s ministry efforts (Phil 2.25-30; 4.10-18). The specific details following this event are unclear. What we do know is that during his time with Paul Epaphroditus became ill and nearly died (2.25-30), and Paul was again arrested (1.12-14). At some point after both events Paul writes to the believers at Philippi from his prison cell.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John 13.34-35, J.B. Phillips, *The New Testament in Modern English*, (New York: Macmillan, 1958), 220.

<sup>2</sup> Raymond Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 483.

<sup>3</sup> “Located on the Via Egnatia, this small but densely populated city...[was] a center of agriculture, [and] it attracted a large number of Greek-speaking immigrants who, like Lydia (Acts 16.14), were engaged primarily in commerce or crafts,” Wayne Meeks and John T. Fitzgerald, *The Writings of Saint Paul*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2007), 87; “Because Philippi was on the Via Egnatia, the major east-west thoroughfare that passed by the city’s forum, this road served as the city’s umbilical cord to Rome and connected it by land to the provinces in the east. Rome made Philippi the political and commercial center of east Macedonia,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, rev. ed., “Philippians” by David Garland, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 177-178.

<sup>4</sup> Traditionally Paul is thought to be in prison in Rome (cf. Acts 28.16-31) though Caesarea, Ephesus and Corinth have been suggested more recently. “From wherever Paul wrote, it had to be a place where he was in prison, where there was a Roman praetorium (i.e. emperor’s palace, or a provincial governor’s official residence; see 1.12, 13), and where there were members of Caesar’s household (i.e. the royal entourage at the palace or at any provincial capital; see 4.22). Hence Rome (ca. AD 60) or Caesarea (c. AD 58) [cf. Acts 23.33-26.32] are the most

In this, the most personal of the extant Pauline letters,<sup>5</sup> Paul reveals his deep affection for the Philippian believers (1.3-11, 23-26; 2.12; 3.1, 13, 17; 4.1-3, 20-23); reports about his condition and that of his companions (1.12-26; 2.17-18, 19-30); thanks the Philippian church for their partnership in ministry (1.5; 4.3; 4.10-19); and exhorts them to “think the same thing in the Lord” (4.2; cf. 1.27b; 2.2, 5; 3.15; 4.8) and to “conduct [themselves] in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ” (1.27). To do so they must “stan[d] firm in one spirit” and “with one mind striv[e] together for the faith of the gospel” (1.27), which means they must follow the example of Christ (2.5-11) who showed them how to “do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind [to] regard another as more important than [themselves]” (2.3).<sup>6</sup>

While several reasons for the letter are mentioned above, David Garland has rightly, I believe, emphasized Philippians 4.2 as the underlying issue which informs Paul’s exhortations for the congregation to be unified.<sup>7</sup> Paul mimics the approach of the prophet Nathan in his confrontation with David (cf. 2 Samuel 12.1-14) by withholding any specific names until the final section of the letter.<sup>8</sup> In order “to encourage them to adopt the proper attitudes that will solidify their unity, Paul presents exemplary paradigms” to the congregation.<sup>9</sup> The result is that by setting up both positive (1.21-26; 2.6-11, 19-30; 3.7-14) and negative (1.157-17; 2.14-15; 3.2-6, 18-19) behavioral examples,<sup>10</sup> Paul ultimately leads the believers at Philippi—particularly the

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likely places, since each had a praetorium with its royal staff, and in each Paul is reported to have been jailed,” *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, Gerald F. Hawthorne, “The Letter of Paul to the Philippians,” (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 590. Raymond Brown, however, argues for an origin in Ephesus (ca. AD 55), where Paul stayed for three years with at least a possibility of imprisonment (cf. Acts 19, especially vv 23, 41). Brown believes that the shorter journey from Ephesus to Philippi (400 miles, or 7-9 days) is more likely given the multiple interactions between Paul and the church at Philippi, and because Paul does not mention the collection for the Jerusalem church. An earlier date from Ephesus avoids the difficulty of a later date and an origin in Rome or Caesarea, which must explain why Paul does not mention the collection in Phil 4.10-20, *An Introduction*, 496-6.

<sup>5</sup> “The letter stands as an example of the finest elements in Paul’s thought and style, addressed to a community for whom he had the deepest affection,” *The Writings of Saint Paul*, 88; “Philippians has been classified as an example of the rhetoric of friendship,” Brown, *An Introduction*, 483; “There has grown up between Paul and the Philippian church a bond of friendship closer than that which existed between him and any other church,” William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible Series: The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975, rev. ed.), 5-6; “A quality of joy pervades the letter (1.4, 19; 2.2, 17-19, 28-29; 3.1; 4.1, 4, 10), a joy deriving from their special fellowship (1.5; 2.1; 3.10; 4.15)...It is a letter of friendship,” Luke T. Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 341.

<sup>6</sup> The hymn (2.5-11) is ethically driven. Paul’s “object is not to give instruction in doctrine, but to reinforce instruction in Christian living....The hymn, therefore, presents Christ as the ultimate model for moral action,” Gerald Hawthorne, *Word Biblical Commentary: Volume 43-Philippians*, (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), 79.

<sup>7</sup> Garland, *EBC*, 250, “The crux of Paul’s concern in this letter centers on his attempt to defuse the dissension generated by [Euodia and Syntyche’s] dispute. If this is correct, we witness Paul’s adroit pastoral care. He handles the issue carefully and, in effect, gently blindsides them in the way that the prophet Nathan exposed David’s sin (2 Sam 12.1-14) when they hear their names read aloud to the entire congregation.”

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 250, Earlier “he disarms them with the discussion of the suffering love of Jesus on the cross that should be etched on their hearts (2.1-11)...Now Paul throws off his covert allusions to their disagreement and speaks frankly...[and] directly and forcefully confronts both women and urges them to put aside their differences and to have the same mind in the Lord.”

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, “Paul alternates between negative foils he wants the Philippians to avoid and positive models he wants them to emulate.”

two female leaders involved in the dispute<sup>11</sup>—to a self-condemnation for acting in ways that align with the negative rather than the positive models.

Based on this reading, the dispute between Euodia and Syntyche (only revealed explicitly in 4.2) led Paul to spend the majority of the letter calling the believers to “make [his] joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, [being] united in spirit, [and] intent on one purpose” (2.2). This was to be accomplished by rejecting the self-seeking, self-centered actions set forth in the negative exemplars in order that they may emulate the selfless, other-centered actions displayed in the positive paradigm of Christ (2.5-11), and those whose life reflected his example (Paul—1.18b-26, 29-30; 2.17-18; 3.7-14, 17a; Timothy—2.19-23; Epaphroditus—2.25-30).<sup>12</sup> Paul’s exhortations are a continual call to model one’s actions on those of the Messiah. “Jesus is the model to the Philippians of how they should not ‘grasp after equality’ by seeking their own interest, but ‘empty themselves’ in service to one another...The work of the Spirit in them replicates the pattern of its work in Jesus.”<sup>13</sup> As such, the way to manifest a Jesus-looking life and to live in the realm of the Kingdom of God is found in the Christ-hymn of 2.5-11, where Paul reveals that in order to “do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit...[and to] not merely look out for your own personal interests but also for the interests of others” (2.3-4) we must accept Jesus’ way of thinking, which declares that life is found only through dying to self and living for God and neighbor.<sup>14</sup> This kind of life demonstrates the love

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<sup>11</sup> While we are not given a specific description of the role of these women, Paul does say that they “have shared my struggle in the gospel, together with Clement also and the rest of my fellow workers” (4.3). As such, we can infer that they played a central and vital role in this community, and it is reasonable to assume that they were key leaders in this gathering of believers. As Gerald Hawthorne puts it: “Nothing is known about these two women or the nature of their quarrel...In any case, these two women appear to have been important persons within the church, among its most active workers, perhaps deaconesses; perhaps within each of their homes a separate congregation met for worship. Certainly it is clear from the Acts account that women played a noteworthy role in the founding and establishing of the Macedonian churches (Acts 16.14, 40; 17.4, 12). Thus the fact that these people in particular were quarreling as two influential women who had the potential for upsetting the harmony of the larger community caused Paul to beg each, face to face as it were, to make up their differences,” *WBC*, 179. Moreover, David M. Hay has noted that “in Philippians 1.1 Paul addresses a letter to the Philippian saints ‘with the bishops and deacons.’...In Romans 16.1-3 Paul mentions a certain Phoebe as a *diakonos* of the church at Cenchrea...Nothing specific is said about her work, but there is no indication that she is a deacon in a lesser or different sense from that of the persons addressed in Philippians 1.1.” This leaves open the very real possibility that Euodia and Syntyche were involved in leadership positions at Philippi, which would explain why Paul trumpeted the call to unity in general throughout the letter, and urges both women to be reconciled specifically, *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, “Deacon,” 158.

<sup>12</sup> cf. Garland, *EBC*, 183. See also, Murray, Robert. “Philippians.” *The Oxford Bible Commentary: CD-ROM*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

<sup>13</sup> Johnson, *The Writings*, 345. Paul’s usage of friendship/fellowship language “serves a real paraenetic [teaching] function for a community experiencing dissension because of envy and rivalry (1.15)...The vice of envy (*phthonos*) is a vice in which one seeks one’s own good at the expense of others...The language of fellowship therefore rebukes those members of the community who forget the common good because they seek their own interests...Phil 2.1-4.3 is an extended demonstration of how Christian fellowship should shape the community’s identity. A statement of principle (2.1-4) is followed by a series of examples that illustrate it: Jesus (2.6-11), Paul (2.17), Timothy (2.19-24), Epaphroditus (2.25-30), and Paul in contrast to self-seekers (3.2-16). A call to imitation of these examples (3.17-21) is followed by the specific application to individual disputants (4.2-3),” *Ibid.*, 343.

<sup>14</sup> cf. Mk 8.34-35; 12.28-31; Mt 16.24; 22.36-40; Hawthorne, *WBC*, 95, “The true nature of God is not to grasp or get or selfishly hold on to things for personal advantage, but to give them up for the enrichment of all...In the divine economy of things, by giving a person receives, by serving he is served, by losing his life he finds it, by dying he lives, by humbling himself he is exalted.”

by which everyone will know that you are a follower of the Christ and a citizen of the Kingdom of God (cf. Jn 13.1-17, 34-35; 15.12-17).

*Precisely because he was in the form of God  
he did not consider being equal with God  
grounds for grasping.*

*On the contrary, he rather poured himself out  
by taking the form of a slave,  
by being born in the likeness of human beings,  
and by being recognized as a man.*

*He humbled himself,  
by becoming obedient even to the point of  
accepting death.  
and that of all things, death on a cross.*

*As a consequence, therefore, God exalted him  
to the highest place,  
and conferred on him the name that is above every name,  
in order that before the name that Jesus bears  
every knee might bow,  
of heavenly beings,  
and of earthly beings,  
and of beings under the earth,  
and in order that every tongue might openly  
and thankfully acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord  
to the glory of God the Father.<sup>15</sup>*

## Outlines of and Commentaries on Philippians

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### Expositor's Bible Commentary<sup>16</sup>

- I. Letter Opening (1.1-11)
- II. The Meaning of Paul's Imprisonment (1.12-26)
- III. Letter Thesis: Appeal to Unity and Courage in the Face of External Foes (1.27-30)
- IV. Appeal to Humility and Obedience and the Example of Christ (2.1-18)
- V. The Exemplary Service of Timothy and Epaphroditus (2.19-30)
- VI. Positive and Negative Examples of Humility and Boasting (3.1-4.3)
- VII. Letter Closing (4.4-23)

### Raymond Brown<sup>17</sup>

#### DIVISION ACCORDING TO CONTENTS

- 1.1-11 Address/greeting and Thanksgiving
- 1.12-26 Paul's situation in prison and attitude toward death
- 1.27-2.16 Exhortation based on example of Christ (Christological hymn)
- 2.17-3.1a Paul's interest in the Philippians and planned missions to them
- 3.1b-4.1 Warning against false teachers; Paul's own behavior (a separate letter?)
- 4.2-9 Exhortation to Euodia and Syntyche: unity, joy, higher things
- 4.10-20 Paul's situation and the Philippians' generous gifts
- 4.21-23 Concluding greeting, blessing

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<sup>16</sup> Garland, *EBC*, 187.

<sup>17</sup> Brown, *An Introduction*, 484.

### **For Further Study**

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