

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Canadian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_canadian-journal.php

The Life of Christians in the World: An Exposition of Philippians 1:1-2:4

GEORGE JOHNSTON

I

PAUL'S letter to the Church at Philippi, the chief city of Macedonia, is one of the supreme treasures of the New Testament. One recalls how, in response to a vision, the apostle had crossed from Troas to Samothrace and thence had proceeded via Neapolis to Philippi. He was accompanied by Silas, Timothy (the young half-Jew from Lystra whom Paul had called into his service and mission), and the supposed author of the travel diary which makes the latter half of Acts so interesting (Acts 16:1ff.). Philippi, named for the father of Alexander the Great, was then a Roman colony and a witness to the prestige and power of Caesar's line. Here the apostolic band had found a Jewish place of worship and made their first converts—a pattern that seems to have been typical: the Gospel was for the Jew first, and then for the Gentile (Rom. 1:16). The first church in Philippi met in the home of Lydia or the "Lydian lady." Was she the Euodia of Phil. 4:2? She had been "a worshipper of God," that is, probably a proselyte of the synagogue or one of those interested Gentiles who frequented the synagogue services. Paul and Silas were thrown into gaol quite soon, but were released after the earthquake which had burst their prison bars and led to the conversion of their warder. Before long, Paul left the city in order to continue his mission, for it was his ambition to preach in every major city of the Empire so that with his converts and those of all the other Christian missionaries the fullness of the Gentiles might be brought into the Body of Christ which is the Church (cf. Rom. 11:25; 15:14ff.). We are told in Phil. 4:10, 15-18, that the Philippians followed their founder with prayers, love, and money. They had learned the lesson, first proclaimed by the Lord Jesus himself (1 Cor. 9:14; Matt. 10:10), that the missionary who gives all his time to the cause of the Gospel and the Kingdom of God has a right to subvention and support from his congregations (cf. 2 Cor. 8:1-5; 11:9 for other references to the generosity of the Philippians towards Paul and also in "the collection for the saints" of Jerusalem, the Mother Church). It is odd that Paul's specific thank-you note is left over until chapter four of Phil., but there were reasons for this.

All through the letter we find a current of diplomatic reproof and exhortation to unity. 1:5 makes a point of mentioning the "partnership in the gospel" which the Philippians had espoused from the first day of their Christian faith (cf. 4:15). But at 1:27 Paul speaks out in favour of con-

gregational unity and urges his beloved friends and brethren (1:12; 2:12; 3:1) to show Christian fortitude and courage in the defence of the Gospel. Something was disturbing Philippi. The apostle has to suggest, very cautiously, that he cares for them all (1:1, 4, 7, 8); he is sometimes afraid that his work may go to pieces, so that, at the very End, at the Judgement Day, he may hear the awful verdict, "In vain; all was in vain" (2:16). He proposes to send Timothy to them (in spite of the fact that Timothy's name appears in the opening greeting, this is really a letter from Paul), and he takes the trouble to give young Timothy a special testimonial (2:19-24; for the possibility that this paragraph does not belong here, see Dr. J. Hugh Michael's commentary in the Moffatt series; consult also the recent commentary by the late E. F. Scott in *The Interpreter's Bible*). Next, Paul exhibits a certain diffidence about the reception likely to be accorded to Epaphroditus, the Philippian, perhaps one of their bishops, whom he is sending back. It is very probable that Epaphroditus was the one who had brought the latest gift to Rome from Philippi (4:18) and that he had been instructed to remain and render whatever help Paul might need. He is described here in magnificent language: "my brother, my colleague, my fellow-soldier; your apostle; the minister whose liturgy was my necessity" (2:25). This man had fallen ill, had perhaps risked his very life for the apostle's sake, and now he was anxious to get back home. How would he be welcomed? "Receive him like Christians (lit. 'in the Lord'), with all joyfulness; and honour men like him" (2:29f.). One would give much to know how Epaphroditus had run into danger for Paul's sake. Had he suffered at the hands of the "concision party," the "dogs, the evil-workers" of 3:2, or of those curious Christians who took advantage of Paul's bondage to preach Christ in their own way and, as they hoped, to the irritation of the imprisoned apostle? (1:15-17). Had Paul found out that certain Jews or renegade Jewish Christians were plotting against his life and had he informed the Roman authorities (see 1 Clem. 5; Cullmann's *Peter: Disciple, Apostle, Martyr*; and my book, *The Secrets of the Kingdom*)? Paul had some apprehension of his beloved converts falling prey to the people he describes as "enemies of the cross of Christ," whose god is the belly and who glory in their shame (3:18f.). So he begs them to follow his own example, to hold fast to the true faith as he had taught it, and to be united (3:17; 1:27; 2:2; 4:1ff.). Certain women especially are singled out for his appeal; and another who is either "my true yokefellow" or Syzygos (4:2f.). Clement also is named, but he is otherwise unknown. They are all bidden to maintain a joyful spirit, for Paul knew that depression is a real foe to the spiritual life (4:4-7); to rest in the assurance of God, for that is the secret of serenity; and to look with hope toward the Day of Christ (cf. 1:6, 10; 2:16; 3:20f.; 4:5?). It is only when we realise the extent of the difficulties facing both Paul and his Philippian congregation that we are rightly in a position to expound this letter.

II

1:1-2. The opening greeting or "salutation" follows a pattern that deserves study. There is some resemblance to the letters of the time, but far more is distinctive. "Grace and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" embodies the Christian faith and provides the basis for community, friendship, and hospitality. In Paul's day this was no mere formula, but expressed a deep sense of dependence on God, thankfulness for his exceedingly gracious work in redemption, and the consequent understanding that the redeemed belong together. "Grace" like *chesed* in the OT points to the free love and loyal promise of God, from whom and to whom are all things in heaven and on earth. Grace had taken flesh in Jesus Christ, who is God's affirmative Yes to all his ancient promises (2 Cor. 1:20) and who had revealed the true nature of the divine love by his sacrificial death (Rom. 3:24f.; 5:8). Hence the source of our peace is in the prevenient work of God (Rom. 5:1). As we trust God in Christ to reconcile us to himself, to pardon our sins, and to bestow the power of his Holy Spirit, we become Christians; we are eligible for baptism, and out of that experience of "death and resurrection" we enter into the Body of Christ, the Church of the saints (Rom. 10:9; 2 Cor. 5:18; Col. 1:12-14; 1 Thess. 1:6, 9f.; 2 Thess. 2:13; Rom. 6:3-11; Col. 2:11-13, 20; 3:1-4; Phil. 3:8-11; Gal. 3:26-28; 1 Cor. 12:12ff.; Rom. 12:4-8; Col. 1:18, 22, 24). For the same reason Christians are called "saints," the word used of God's People; "they are a brotherhood dedicated and loyal to God" (C. F. D. Moule on Col. 1:2 in *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon*). And they are "in Christ Jesus," because they had been sacramentally incorporated into his larger life; he and they constituted a "Body." He the Messiah of Israel was King, and as King he embodied the nation; he the Son of God was the first-born of a great brotherhood, the sons of God who are led by the Spirit (John 15:1-17; Rom. 8:29, 14; see my exposition of the Vine in this JOURNAL for July, 1957, Vol. III, No. 3). The saints of God are the holy, catholic Church; and in this instance it is located at Philippi, a colony of the divine Kingdom (Phil. 3:20), set over against the colony of Rome and the secular, pagan life of that city. What is the witness of the Church to be in such a situation? Transpose the terms to our own day; the question remains: what is the duty and business of the catholic Church of God in Christ when it is established in Peking, Stalingrad, Lvov, Budapest, Istanbul, Amman, Nairobi, Accra, Rio de Janeiro, Santiago, Levittown, Pa., or Elliot Lake, Ont.?

Paul and Timothy are "slaves of Christ Jesus" (cf. Gal. 6:17). Notice that Paul gracefully includes the younger man as his colleague, and that, though himself in the full or technical sense an Apostle and eye-witness of the Resurrection, he is content to be known as Christ's slave (cf. Gal. 1:1, 12, 15f.; 1 Cor. 15:8f.). Those who have to share a ministry within the Church would do well to learn the secret of Paul's charity and brotherliness, for it is not easy to be a colleague.

Philippi has "bishops and deacons." One must not spend time trying to define exactly who these officers were or what their duty was; because we do not know. But it is probable that the bishops were also known, perhaps in more Jewish congregations, as presbyters or elders (cf. Acts 14:23; 20:17 and 28). They may have a parallel in the superintendents of the local camps or brotherhoods of the Zadokites (the *mebaqqer* or *paqid*; cf. the Zadokite Document, C.D. 9:18; 13:7; 14:8; and the *Manual of Discipline*, 1QS 6:12, 14, 20; and the "wise man" of 1QS 3:13; 9:21). These leaders were examiners of postulants; administrators of funds; teachers and spiritual guides; but not all had the same qualifications or duties; and the true leaders were the priests. The parallel, therefore, is by no means exact. In the nature of the case, Christian congregations required local leadership (cf. 1 Thess. 5:12; 1 Cor. 16:16; Heb. 13:17; 1 Pet. 5:1; Jas. 5:14; 1 Tim. 3:1-13; Tit. 1:5ff.). It would seem that some of the apostles' authority and privileges devolved on the congregational presbytery of bishops, for the work of teaching, supervising catechumens, arranging meetings, paying rents, administering the poor funds, and presiding at services of worship, including the two sacraments. Not all bishops were teachers or preachers; some were pastoral teachers (Eph. 4:11); others may have been concerned with financial matters. As for the deacons, we can only guess, with the aid of Justin Martyr and other sources from the second and third centuries, that they assisted the bishops. It may well be significant that Paul gave the ministers this unusual place in his salutation to the church; were they not receiving the support to which he felt they were entitled?

III

1:3-11. "An apostle's prayer." First, it is set in a context of warm affection for the Philippians; for them all and not just for Paul's more intimate friends (verse 8). Ministers who have the cure of souls should, ideally, have a genuine love for their people; when they pray with and for them, they should do so in no carping or irritated spirit. Alexander Whyte somewhere says that it is in the lonely midnight that a pastor may give utterance to his real prayers for his congregation; he dare not do it in the pulpit! Then see how Paul offers his prayer "with joy." This note of joy is characteristic of our epistle (1:4, 18f.; 2:2, 29; 3:1; 4:1, 4, 10) and it is none the less wonderful in the situation of St. Paul. He was a prisoner; he felt there were undercurrents of unrest and danger and even what he considered apostasy at Philippi; his opponents were taunting him by their preaching; he was hard pressed to know if it were not far better to die than to live: and yet he rejoiced! God's being and purpose; Christ's glory and love; the inspiration of the divine Spirit; and the remembrance of all that had been accomplished in his mission field by his colleagues and himself: all rose up as items of blessing and matter for joy. Death itself did not matter. If only his converts would stand fast! One is here confronted with the authentic Christian spirit; the attitude of a David Livingstone in the African jungle, a Sadd

facing his Japanese captors, a Kaj Munk crying defiance to the Gestapo, a Bonhoeffer writing poems and theology in his concentration camp, a Mother Maria (ex-communist, Russian nun) giving her life cheerfully for the sake of a frightened young girl. The light indeed shines in the darkness. Above us rises the Cross, and lo! it is empty!

The pattern of Paul's prayer is thanksgiving and intercessory petition. "I make eucharist to my God," he writes, "at every recollection of you; always, in every petition of mine on behalf of you all, I make my petition with joyfulness." What is the content of this petition? It is (a) that God will bring to completion the good work begun by his servant among the Philippians (verse 6; RSV "I am sure" is a participle: "being confident that. . . ." The prayer is implied); (b) "that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and may be pure and blameless for the Day of Christ" (9f.); (c) that you may be filled with the harvest of righteousness, the righteousness that comes through Christ (i.e., "justification by faith"); and all "to the glory and praise of God." Here is a pattern that we may follow in our own devotions and in public worship: recollection before God of all his mercies and of our friends; petition for divine blessings, and especially for growth in Christian wisdom and insight. For it is folly to think that the Christian life can safely remain at the Sunday School level. We must know what is good and approve what is better. There is much to learn in Scripture, in the fellowship of the Church, in Colleges and schools, about God and his ways. Let us see that in Canada a deeper reverence for Christian truth and for the intellectual apprehension of it shall develop. Far too often a pious, biblicizing evangelicalism is made to do duty for an informed Christian mind; and that in a day when Christians must both out-love and out-think the enemies of the Cross!

IV

1:12-26. "An apostle's spirit." Paul explains how his very bonds have been used to further the Gospel, by making others aware that he is held "because he is a Christian." Adversity can always be turned to good account. Friends and opponents are preaching the Word, and Paul is happy no matter what his own position may be. His one concern is to do the Gospel honour, by his fidelity and his courage. For Christ lives in him (Gal. 2:20), so that his body must become Christ's servant. "Life means Christ to me, and death is a gain; and which to choose, I cannot tell" (21-23; there are two intruding glosses in 22a). He confidently hopes that the prayers of the Philippians for him (intercession for the minister is also a Christian duty) will be answered and that he will be set at liberty. He would rather die, since that would mean being "with Christ," but his own will counts for little beside God's. Here we have a most interesting clue to St Paul's expectations of life after death, and it should be contrasted with those in 1,

2 Thess., 1 Cor. 15, and 2 Cor. 5. In the Church, the Body of Christ, one is "in Christ" and yet is not "with Christ;" for Jesus Christ has risen from the dead and his followers have not. Death, however, means being with Christ in some sense; nevertheless Paul speaks more than once in Philippians of the Day of Christ, the Judgement Day presumably; and this may involve a resurrection (cf. Rom. 8:11). But Paul's views are not clear and it is very unwise to be dogmatic about the immediate state of the Christian believer after death or about the final Judgement. Jesus left little teaching on this subject, and in the nature of the case we cannot have much. God means us to be faithful and to be hopeful, sure that he who raised Jesus is Lord over death and life, and that his purpose of love must be successful.

This paragraph may be supplemented by Phil. 3:5-15; 2 Cor. 6; 7:5ff.; 10-13; and other autobiographical passages in the letters. We see a highly-strung man, emotional, intellectual, proud of his race, a former Pharisee, and "a man in Christ" learning the way of love. There is much for us all to emulate in this life.

V

1:27-2:4. "A life to match the Gospel." Paul returns to the situation in Philippi, and bids his friends behave themselves as good citizens of the divine Kingdom, in a manner worthy of the Gospel. By "Gospel" he means the good news of God, proclaimed by Jesus Christ and centred in the Cross of Christ where men find that the divine grace pardons sin. For Christ died and rose again "according to the scriptures," and there are many eye-witnesses to his resurrection (1 Cor. 15:3ff.). Jesus is Lord, that is what one must confess. To him the divine name, Maran, Adonai, has been given; for he is the Son of God who was sent in the fullness of the time to redeem Jewry and open the Kingdom to the whole wide world (Phil. 2:11; Gal. 4:4-6). In the Gospel story God is shown to be just and also a Saviour, to be loving to the uttermost, and yet saving his people at an infinite cost: Christ died for the ungodly. Only when we remember the cost and that we were bought "at a price" do we fully realize the obligation of love, gratitude, and service that is laid upon us (1 Cor. 3:16f.; 6:11, 15-20; Rom. 12:1f., 9ff.; 13:8-10).

But a life to match the Gospel! to meet God's goodness and grace! Manifestly that is impossible. And yet it is toward that goal that Paul and every Christian must strive, for at the end a prize awaits them, God's reward of everlasting life in his company, God's transformation of his creatures into the very image of his Son (2 Cor. 3:18; cf. 1 John 3:1-3). Only God can make it possible, but even God cannot effect the great change unless we "work out our salvation with fear and trembling."

Paul's specific request is for unity, humility, and mutual care one for another within the congregation. He was forced to concentrate on these virtues because of the local situation; but there is no period when such

virtues are out of date. Christian unity must be exhibited in the congregation, if the world is to be won. Christians who lack charity and meekness are no asset to Christ. And everyone of us knows how difficult it is to destroy the "old Adam" who likes the front seats, is conceited, needs to be patted and praised, easily takes offence, takes pride in his good deeds and advertises his offerings via the duplex envelope, is impatient and often unkind, jealous, arrogant, rude, wants his own way, gets irritated by others who are of a different mould or come from a different tradition, and so on. "Fulfil my joy," said Paul; "complete my joy," says Christ himself.

VI

Even in so sketchy an exposition as this, it is obvious that our passage presents themes for many sermons. On private prayer and public worship "to the glory and praise of God," rather than for the sake of ritual or the minister's prejudices; and to God, not directed to sentimental ditties and poems from the digests and anthologies so welcome at women's meetings. On Christian joy and hope, for a day of dark discouragement when men fear that the earth itself may be destroyed or radiation fall-out contaminate our entire living-space. On partnership in the Gospel between ministers and congregations, for the work of mission is laid on all and not on a few. On courage to face criticism and slanders. On the unity and peace of a church. On an ideal of ministry. On what to preach. There is material for sermons in the great Christian words of the passage: grace, peace, righteousness, the Spirit of Jesus Christ, life and death, the faith of the Gospel, the incentive of love. One can hardly exhaust the possibilities as men wait on the Spirit of truth for new light out of this Scripture to teach and illuminate the teaching pastors in their strategic ministry to the churches of this and every land. And may that Spirit lead and help us in study, in preaching, and in living to the praise and glory of the Father who has redeemed us in his own Son, even Jesus Christ the Lord.