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Exploring a missional reading of Scripture: Philippians as a case study

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Introduction

Missiologists and biblical scholars have sometimes acted like the proverbial ships passing in the night. Historically, although both were interested in the biblical text, they differed widely on how to approach it. As Michael Goheen observes, biblical scholars tended to emphasize the historical conditioning of the text and the great gap between the world of the Bible and the world in which we live. The text became something to be observed and analyzed rather than heard and obeyed. Missiologists, on the other hand, often downplayed the cultural distance, reading their own missionary concerns or strategies back into Scripture.¹ Their interest in the Bible concentrated on mining it for ‘missionary texts’ or in providing a ‘biblical basis for missions’. As a result, until relatively recently, missiologists tended to disparage the academic sterility of biblical scholarship. And biblical scholars often did not take missiologists or their reading of Scripture seriously.²

Happily, there are some encouraging signs of movement beyond the hermeneutical divide. Goheen notes three reasons for the shift:³ a broader understanding of *mission*, which is grounded in the comprehensive notion of the *missio Dei*; the challenge to historical criticism by other approaches to biblical interpretation that are more open to recognizing the missional dimensions of Scripture – recent interest in theological hermeneutics is a case in point; and the influence of scholars who have been able to merge a sophisticated grasp of both missiol-

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- 1 Michael W. Goheen. ‘Continuing Steps Towards a Missional Hermeneutic’, *Fideles* 3 (2008), 56-57.
 - 2 Michael Barram, ‘The Bible, Mission, and Social Location: Toward a Missional Hermeneutic’, *Interpretation* 43 (2007), 47-48.
 - 3 Goheen, ‘Continuing Steps’, 57-61.

ogy and biblical studies.⁴ I would add another factor. The center of gravity in global Christianity has undergone a seismic shift from the global North and West to the South and East.⁵ The result is that Western theologians and biblical scholars are becoming increasingly open to a conversation with majority world perspectives.⁶ Biblical interpreters outside of the West have tended to be more sensitive to the missional dimensions of Scripture and their implications for the church. Listening to voices from the majority world may help to expose some of the blind spots of Western biblical scholarship in regard to missiological concerns.

These historical developments have paved the way for a growing interest in what is the focus of this essay – a missional hermeneutic of Scripture. Here is the question before us: If Scripture witnesses to the *missio Dei* in some fundamental sense, then might a missional hermeneutic enable us to more faithfully read the Bible? Put differently, is the mission of God and the church's involvement in it a key for unlocking the message and purpose of Scripture? I begin by asking what a missional hermeneutic might involve. In the rest of the paper, I offer a preliminary exploration into a missional reading of Paul's letter to the Philippians.

What is a missional hermeneutic?

I use the term *missional*, not in any technical sense (e.g., the 'missional church'), but simply as 'an adjective denoting something that is related to or characterized by mission'.⁷ And *mission*, viewed comprehensively, is rooted in God's purpose to bring about God's salvation in every dimension. This includes the ultimate restoration of the whole of creation, as well as the church's participation in that

4 See especially, David Bosch, 'Mission in Biblical Perspective', *International Review of Mission* 74 (1985), 531-38; *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991); 'Hermeneutical Principles in the Biblical Foundation for Mission', *Evangelical Review of Theology* 17 (1993), 437-51, and Christopher J. H. Wright, 'Mission as a Matrix for Hermeneutics and Biblical Theology', in *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Craig Bartholomew, et al. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 102-43; *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2006).

5 See Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

6 See e.g., Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland, ed. *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006); Timothy Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church is Influencing How We Think About and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007).

7 Wright, *Mission of God*, 24. Wright argues well that the neologism 'missional' is a more appropriate term for a reading of the whole of Scripture than the terms 'missionary' or 'missiological', which tend to have a narrower focus (23-25). On a 'missionary' hermeneutic, see David J. Hesselgrave, 'A Missionary Hermeneutic: Understanding Scripture in Light of World Mission', *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 10 (1998), 17-20.

all-embracing mission. A *missional hermeneutic*, then, attempts to read Scripture in light of God's mission and from the vantage point of a people engaged in God's mission. As of now, however, no consensus has emerged on precisely what a *missional* reading of the Bible entails. George R. Hunsberger offers a helpful 'map' of various understandings of a missional hermeneutic, which emerged from a series of meetings sponsored by Gospel and Our Culture Network.⁸ He identifies four streams. Each represents a somewhat different emphasis:

1. *The framework for hermeneutics is the biblical story of the mission of God and of the people of God who are sent to participate in that mission.* Here the focus is on the *biblical narrative* itself. No one has articulated this perspective more cogently than Christopher J. H. Wright.⁹ For Wright, a missional hermeneutic is one that perceives the centrality of mission for the entire biblical narrative, including the Old Testament. Instead of talking about a biblical basis for mission, he argues, we ought to think in terms of 'a missional basis of the Bible'.¹⁰ A missional hermeneutic, then, 'proceeds from the assumption that the whole Bible renders to us the story of God's mission through God's people in their engagement with God's world for the sake of the whole of God's creation'.¹¹
2. *The goal of hermeneutics is to fulfill the Scriptures' function of equipping God's people to engage in the mission of God.* This approach centers on the *purpose of Scripture* in the life of the church. Missiologist Darrell Guder is perhaps the leading proponent of this stream.¹² The aim of the New Testament documents, Guder argues, was to shape Christian communities so that they might fulfill their missional vocation. In a similar way, Scripture still serves as an agent of the *missio Dei*. 'The basic hermeneutical question', then, is: 'How did this particular text continue the formation of witnessing communities then, and how does it do that today?'¹³
3. *Christian communities read Scripture from a particular social location. Out of this context, they bring questions to the text, in service of the mission of God.* In this case, the focus is on the *community* and what it means for the people of God to read Scripture faithfully in light of their missional context. According to

8 George R. Hunsberger, 'Starting Points, Trajectories, and Outcomes in Proposals for a Missional Hermeneutic: Mapping the Conversation', presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, November 22, 2008. Accessed January 14, 2010, at <http://gocn.org/resources/articles/proposals-missional-hermeneutic-mapping-conversation>.

9 See especially, Wright, *Mission of God*; see also, Goheen, 'Continuing Steps', 60-90.

10 Wright, *Mission of God*, 29, 62.

11 Wright, 'Mission as Matrix', 122.

12 Darrell Guder, 'Missional Hermeneutics: The Missional Authority of Scripture – Interpreting Scripture as Missional Formation', *Mission Focus: Annual Review* 15 (2007), 106-24; 'Missional Hermeneutics: The Missional Vocation of the Congregation and How Scripture Shapes That Calling', *Mission Focus: Annual Review* 15 (2007), 125-46.

13 Guder, 'Missional Authority', 108.

Michael Barram, at the very heart of a missional hermeneutic is the social location of the sent community in the world.¹⁴ A missional reading intentionally asks questions of the text in order to discern the faith community's calling and task within God's mission.¹⁵

4. *The gospel functions as an interpretive matrix, which enables the canonical tradition of Scripture to engage our various cultural and social contexts.* This approach is especially connected to James Brownson, who is the first writer of whom I am aware to use the term 'missional hermeneutic'.¹⁶ Brownson is particularly concerned with the *encounter between Scripture and our diverse contexts today*. He looks to how the New Testament writers appropriate the Scriptures as a hermeneutical paradigm.

According to Brownson, the biblical gospel itself serves as an interpretive matrix, by which the Jewish and Christian traditions come to bear on new circumstances.¹⁷ The same dynamic, he claims, guides the church's interpretation of Scripture today. The canonical biblical tradition must critically engage our various human contexts in light of the Christ-centered gospel.¹⁸

Although all four of these 'streams' are relevant to missional interpretation, the first two seem to be foundational. Perhaps we can talk about two essential dimensions of a missional hermeneutic. The first relates to what Scripture is *about*. The second concerns what Scripture *does*.

Scripture as a witness to God's mission

I agree with Christopher Wright that unless we can show that mission is a pervasive emphasis in Scripture, it cannot function as an overarching framework from which to read the Bible.¹⁹ Granted, many biblical scholars have yet to be convinced that mission is a fundamental category for interpreting Scripture. However, if we ground our understanding of mission in the *missio Dei*, it is possible to view 'mission' as a point of coherence that binds the entire biblical story (which, of course, is comprised of many stories), together. Put simply, the God of Scripture is on a mission to redeem and restore a rebellious and sinful world.

14 Michael Barram, 'The Bible, Mission, and Social Location: Toward a Missional Hermeneutic', *Interpretation* 61 (2007), 58; See also, Michael Barram, 'Located Questions for a Missional Hermeneutic', accessed January 14, 2010, at <http://gocn.org/resources/articles/located-questions-missional-hermeneutic>.

15 Barram, 'Bible, Mission, and Social Location', 58.

16 James V. Brownson, 'Speaking the Truth in Love: Elements of a Missional Hermeneutic', *International Review of Mission* 83 (1994), 479-504.

17 James V. Brownson, *Speaking the Truth in Love: New Testament Resources for a Missional Hermeneutic* (Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 1998), 28-55.

18 *Ibid.*, 78-82. Elsewhere I have described this encounter under the rubric of the missiological term 'contextualization'. See Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove, Ill./Leicester, UK: InterVarsity Press/Apollos, 2005).

19 Wright, *Mission of God*, 68-69.

To that end, God calls the people of Abraham to be an instrument of blessing for all the peoples of the earth. God's mission through Israel climaxes when God the Father sends the Son into the world, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to bring about God's salvation at every level. Furthermore, the church, the redeemed and sent community, is caught up in and defined by this loving mission of God.

I suggest that we will read Scripture more faithfully if we read it with an ear tuned to the music of God's mission. This does not mean that a missional hermeneutic will explain *everything* in our interpretation of Scripture. Nor is a missional reading exclusive of other ways of approaching biblical texts. For example, Wright affirms that we can properly speak of a messianic/christological reading that sees Christ as a hermeneutical key for our understanding of both Testaments.²⁰ Yet the work of Christ has meaning precisely within the context of the all-encompassing mission of God to reconcile all people and ultimately all things through him.²¹

A missional hermeneutic, then, reads Scripture as a witness to the gracious mission of the triune God. Understanding the 'missional basis of the Bible', as Wright puts it, will enable us to be more sensitive to how individual documents or passages may evidence that framework. Wright has convincingly shown how such an interpretive perspective 'works' in relation to the Old Testament.²² When we consider the New Testament – the focus of this study – a missional framework is even more visible. Reflecting on the overarching focus of the New Testament writings, I. Howard Marshall concludes: 'New Testament theology is essentially missionary theology'.²³ He goes on to clarify that the New Testament documents came into being precisely as a result of the kingdom mission of Jesus and the mission of his followers to call people to faith and continued commitment to Jesus Christ.²⁴ The ancient authors themselves were engaged in God's mission. They carried out their missional calling in the writing of these materials.²⁵ The New Testament writings are therefore the *product* of the early Christian mission and articulate the concerns of that mission. They bear witness throughout to the gospel of Jesus Christ and its ramifications, which lie at the very heart of the church's mission. They tell stories, instruct congregations, address problems, and cast visions, all in service of God's reconciling mission through his people, the Spirit-empowered body of Christ.

20 Ibid., 30-31.

21 As George Hunsberger recognizes, there is a certain circularity to this way of approaching a missional hermeneutic, which must be honestly acknowledged: 'from the scriptures is discerned the core narrative that becomes the key or clue for understanding the scriptures' ('Starting Points').

22 Wright, *Mission of God*.

23 I. Howard Marshall, *New Testament Theology: Many Witnesses, One Gospel* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 34.

24 Ibid., 34-35.

25 Ibid., 35.

Scripture as an instrument of God's mission

A faithful reading of the New Testament is not only concerned with what it says, but also what it *does* in the life of the church. In other words, Scripture not only tells the story of God's mission to restore his creation; it plays an active role in accomplishing that ongoing purpose of God.²⁶ From the beginning, the New Testament documents were read by people who were caught up in God's mission where they lived. The Gospels, letters, and other New Testament materials unpacked the apostolic gospel and its significance for mission communities. These writings intentionally shaped and energized God's people so that they might faithfully carry out God's mission in the Mediterranean world. Biblical texts, then, do not have to focus on evangelizing non-Christians (such as we might find in Acts) in order to reflect God's mission. Christian nurture and formation are profoundly missional, in that they equip Christian communities to engage in the loving, healing, reconciling mission of God.

What was true of the first readers is also critical to the missional function of Scripture today. 'Holy Scripture', offers Ross Wagner, 'serves as an instrument by which the Spirit calls us into fellowship with the triune God as active participants in the *missio Dei*.'²⁷ Reading the Scriptures in that light will help us to understand their present role in the life of the church. We must continually ask, 'How do these texts form and renew a missional people for participation in the ongoing story of God's mission in the world?' How do they shape Christian communities to become, as Lesslie Newbigin says, 'the hermeneutic of the gospel' in their local settings?²⁸

We can therefore only read Scripture faithfully as people who are actively engaged in God's mission, just as the original authors and readers of the New Testament were caught up in the *missio Dei*. Only as we participate in the mission of God can we hope to embody Scripture's missional intent. It is here that the third and fourth perspectives on the meaning of a missional hermeneutic, which I mentioned above, come into play. As participants in God's mission, we will bring missional questions to the text directly out of our contexts and experiences. This is the thrust of the third 'stream'. And as the fourth perspective suggests, we will allow the gospel proclaimed by Jesus and his followers and unfolded in the New Testament to speak afresh to our varied cultures and circumstances today. A missional hermeneutic sings the gospel in many different keys. In particular, we must make an effort to hear the cadences of interpretive communities that are engaged in God's mission throughout the global church. How does Scripture speak to and challenge other contexts than our own? New circumstances bring new questions and new ways of reading Scripture texts. I have learned, while

26 Goheen, 'Continuing Steps', 90.

27 J. Ross Wagner, 'Missio Dei: Envisioning an Apostolic Reading of Scripture', *Missiology* 37 (2009), 24.

28 See Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 222-33.

serving as a missionary educator, that such missional perspectives both enrich and frequently uncover the blind spots of churches in the North and West in their hermeneutical task.

In short, a missional hermeneutic attempts to read the New Testament ‘with the grain’ of the authors and first interpretive communities. This involves listening for the witness to God’s mission in the New Testament writings. It also allows Scripture to form us into faithful communities that are caught up in the *missio Dei*. What would it look like to read Scripture in light of God’s comprehensive mission and for the purpose of faithfully engaging in the mission of God? In the next section, I use Philippians as a case study of how a missional hermeneutic might help to shape our approach to the New Testament writings.

Exploring a missional reading of Philippians

Philippians as a product of God’s mission

Paul’s letter to the Philippians is a thoroughly missional document. In the first place, it is the *product* of God’s mission. As with all of Paul’s letters, it is an extension of his apostolic and gospel ministry. Although Paul is not physically present, the apostle continues to fulfill his God-given mission among the Philippians by means of written correspondence. This assumes that Paul’s ministry of the gospel is not exhausted with initial evangelism and planting communities of faith. Paul’s mission seeks to form growing and mature Christian communities (3:12-15) that are conformed to the cross-shaped life of Christ (2:1-5), even to the ‘day of Christ’ (1:6, 10). Christian formation, then, is essential to Paul’s missionary calling.²⁹ As the striking literary *inclusio* in chapter one suggests, the ‘progress of the gospel’ (1:12) is inextricably linked to the progress of the Philippians’ faith (1:25; cf. Rom. 1:13).

Philippians as a witness to God’s mission

Second, a missional hermeneutic is sensitive to how this letter *bears witness* to the grand story of God’s purpose to redeem a missional people and to reconcile all things. The defining story that Philippians tells is of God’s loving and self-giving mission in Jesus Christ in 2:6-11. It is the narrative of one who did not consider equality with God something to be exploited, but humbled himself to the extreme – dying a slave’s death on a cross, in obedience to the Father. In response, God exalted him supremely and granted him divine status as Lord of all. The story line reaches its fulfillment when all of creation unites in acknowl-

29 See Barram, ‘The Bible, Mission, and Social Location’, 53-57; Robert L. Plummer, *Paul’s Understanding of the Church’s Mission: Did the Apostle Paul Expect the Early Christian Communities to Evangelize?* Paternoster Biblical Monographs (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2006), 47, 117-21; Paul Bowers, ‘Fulfilling the Gospel: the Scope of the Pauline Mission’, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 30 (1987), 185-98.

edging Christ's lordship, to the Father's glory. It is likely that the Christ hymn of 2:6-11 reflects a theological interpretation of Isaiah 52:13-53:12 and 45:22-23.³⁰ Jesus fulfills the mission of Isaiah's suffering messianic Servant in order that he might be worshiped by the nations.

In 3:20-21, Paul revisits the ending to the story. The exalted Christ will return from heaven as Savior and Lord (3:20). He will transform human life in its wholeness, including the body. And by the power given to him by the Father, Christ will 'make *all things* subject to himself' (3:21, author's emphasis). At that time, God in Christ will fully restore his loving sovereignty over the whole of creation. This is the breathtaking goal of the *missio Dei*.

Paul makes it clear that the Philippians themselves are caught up in this story of God's redeeming purpose in Christ. God, who has begun a work of salvation in and among them, will faithfully bring it to completion on the day of Christ (1:6). God is presently working in them, empowering them to work for his good pleasure (2:13). And they live in hope of the heavenly Savior's return. At that time, the bodies of their humiliation – now like the 'humbled' and vulnerable body of their Lord while on earth (2:8) – will be conformed to his own body of glory (3:21).

Furthermore, the Philippians are active players in God's reconciling activity in the world. At the outset, Paul thanks God for their 'partnership in the gospel' from the time of their conversion (1:5). This does not simply mean that they have embraced the grand gospel narrative, but, in particular, that they have partnered *with* Paul in the ministry and advance of the gospel. In Philippians, 'the gospel' (*to euangelion*) is dynamic language.³¹ It is the 'word of life', i.e., the word that brings life and salvation (2:16). What form did this gospel partnership take? Viewing the letter as a whole, it likely includes:

- Practical support of Paul's mission, both through financial gifts (4:15-16) and by sending co-workers like Epaphroditus to aid him (2:25-30)
- Intercessory prayer on Paul's behalf (1:19)
- Suffering along with Paul for the gospel's sake (1:30; 4:14)
- Living in a way that is worthy of the gospel (1:27)
- Evangelistic witness to the gospel in Philippi (1:27, 28)³²

Moreover, they have become Paul's 'partners in grace' (*synkoinōnous mou tēs charitōs*; 1:7), not only by aiding him financially, but also by participating in the 'defense and confirmation of the gospel' themselves.³³ This shared 'grace'

30 See Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998, 56-61.

31 Paul speaks, e.g., of the gospel's 'defense' (1:7, 16) and 'confirmation' (1:7), its 'progress' (1:12), its 'work' (2:22; 4:3), and the 'beginning' of Paul's gospel mission in Philippi (4:15).

32 See Peter T. O'Brien, 'The Importance of the Gospel in Philippians', in *God Who Is Rich in Mercy. Essays presented to D. B. Knox*, ed. P. T. O'Brien and D. G. Peterson (Homebush, NSW: Lancer, 1986), 217-18.

33 Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, BNTC (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1998), 60, 64; Dean Flemming, *NBBC, Philippians: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2009), 55-56.

involves withstanding hostility from the Romans in their own setting (1:29-30). The congregation, then, already has a proven track record of participating in God's gospel mission in Philippi. But Paul desires this gospel partnership to continue and be strengthened. This brings us to a third aspect of a missional reading of Philippians. How does this letter shape and equip its readers for their missional calling in the world?

Philippians as an instrument of God's mission

A past to recall. Paul draws upon a number of strategies in Philippians to form a missional community. The mention of their faithful 'partnership in the gospel' (1:5) in the thanksgiving section of the letter (the rhetorical *exordium*) not only previews a key theme that will be unfolded as the letter progresses. It also reinforces their continuing attachment to the gospel and its mission. Ultimately, the questions of how this letter bears witness to God's mission in Philippi and how it shapes the congregation for that mission are closely linked.

Examples to follow. Another key strategy for the formation of missional identity is Paul's use of examples. This begins early on. Paul's personal narrative in 1:12-18a gives his readers a pattern to emulate. He tells his friends that his present suffering, far from impeding the progress of the gospel, has only served to enhance it. As sharers in a common struggle with Paul, they can face their own suffering for the sake of Christ with confidence (1:29-30). If they are faithful, the power of the gospel will likewise be released in Philippi. Paul makes it clear that his incarceration under Caesar's Roman nose has enabled the gospel to penetrate into the very bloodstream of imperial power (1:13; cf. 4:22). This would surely be an encouragement to a church situated in a Roman colony.

Likewise, part of the reason that Paul continues to 'preach Christ', even in the face of personal attacks (1:15-18), is so that the Philippians will be faithful to make Christ known in their own sphere of influence.³⁴ What is more, Paul spotlights the fearless testimony of his fellow believers in Rome (1:14) as a model for his Philippian friends. They, too, should partner with him in daring to speak the word boldly, in spite of opposition.³⁵ Of course, the supreme example for shaping a missional identity is Christ himself (2:5-11). But to this we will return.

Exhortations to embody. Above all, Philippians forms the church for its missional calling in the section of pastoral exhortation that runs from 1:27 through 2:18. Verse 27 sounds the keynote for the unit, as indeed, for the entire letter: 'Live out your citizenship' (*politeuesthe*), that is, your 'public, communal life',³⁶ 'in a man-

34 Marshall, *New Testament Theology*, 360.

35 James Ware, *The Mission of the Church in Paul's Letter to the Philippians in the Context of Ancient Judaism*. NovTSup 120 (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 184-85.

36 J. Ross Wagner, 'Working Out Salvation: Holiness and Community in Philippians', in *Holiness and Ecclesiology in the New Testament*, ed. Kent E. Bower and Andy Johnson (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2007), 258.

ner worthy of the gospel of Christ'.³⁷ This is a 'mission statement', if there ever were one. It is also a highly contextualized appeal. Paul's political language (cf. 3:20) reminds the church that although they conduct their visible, common life in the setting of a Roman colony, they must do so according to a higher loyalty and a different set of practices. Whether within the church or in the *agora*, their lives must embody the good news of *Christ*.

Paul unfolds what it means to live a gospel worthy life in the rest of the section. It is a call to unity and steadfastness in the midst of hostility and suffering (1:27c-30). Facing pressure from their pagan opponents, they are to strive together 'for the faith of the gospel' (1:27). This presumably involves not only promoting and defending the truth of the gospel to outsiders (cf. 4:3), but especially refusing to compromise the gospel's integrity through unworthy living.³⁸ It is a witness of both word and deed. The Philippians' unified faithfulness becomes a two-fold 'sign' to their persecutors. It demonstrates on the one hand that their adversaries are on the highway to destruction, and on the other that God will vindicate his people in the end (1:28). Their common life 'speaks', even to those who harass them. But Paul pulls no punches. A faithful witness to the gospel is costly. It will mean embracing the severe grace of suffering on behalf of Christ, even as it has for Paul (1:29-30). Is Paul concerned that the Philippians might *not* stay firm under fire and live worthily of the gospel? Given Paul's language in 1:27-30, this is a real possibility.³⁹

Throughout Paul's exhortations, there is a vital link between the Philippians' internal and external conduct. Unity within the Christian community is inseparable from public witness and steadfastness. The 'therefore' (*oun*) in 2:1 binds Paul's appeal to Christian love, oneness, and humility in 2:1-4 to his exhortations to public faithfulness in 1:27-30. Michael J. Gorman is right that 'the exhortations to unity in the community are not intended merely to create internal harmony; they serve to insure the community's public witness to the gospel 'in one Spirit' (1:27 AT)'.⁴⁰

In 2:12-18, living worthily of the gospel entails 'working out your own salvation' through God's enabling power (2:12-13). How this 'works out' in practice is unpacked in 2:14-16. On the one hand, the congregation must learn from Israel's misadventures in the desert and forsake a pattern of grumbling and wrangling (2:14). Such internal frictions could blunt their witness before a watching world. Instead, they must live as a holy people, above reproach, in the midst of a twisted

37 Rhetorically, 1:27-30 functions as the thesis statement or *propositio* for the letter, with 1:27a as the headline imperative.

38 I. Howard Marshall, *Philippians*, Epworth New Testament Commentaries (London: Epworth, 1991), 37.

39 So Michael J. Gorman, 'Apologetic and Missional Impulse of Phil 2:6-11 in the Context of the Letter', paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, New Orleans, 2009, 2; forthcoming in the *Journal of Theological Interpretation*. Cf. Ware, *Mission of the Church*, 222-23.

40 Gorman, 'Apologetic and Missional Impulse', 6.

and corrupt environment (cf. Deut. 32:5). If they do, their unity and embodied holiness ‘will enable them to have a light-bearing witness among their pagan contemporaries, even as they dispel the darkness around them’ (2:15; cf. Dan. 12:3).⁴¹

This brings us to the most controversial phrase in the passage. Does Paul want the Philippians to remain firm in their faith, ‘holding fast to the word of life’ (2:16; NRSV)?⁴² Or does he envision them ‘holding forth the word of life’ (see e.g., NIV) in an active, evangelistic sense (the minority view)? The disagreement over the interpretation of the verb *epechō* in verse 16 provides a window into a larger debate. Recent studies by James Ware, Robert L. Plummer, and Mark J. Keown have insisted that Paul expected the congregation in Philippi to actively evangelize and proclaim the gospel.⁴³ In contrast, Brian K. Peterson has argued that the Philippians’ mission was *not* to ‘tell [their neighbors] about Jesus’.⁴⁴ Instead, they were simply to “be the church” and let their communal life do the talking. But this is not an ‘either/or’ question. Ware’s argument that Paul envisions the Philippians spreading the gospel by ‘holding out/forth’ the life-bearing word seems to be compelling.⁴⁵ However, even if Paul is here urging the church to hold firmly *to* the gospel, this does not rule out an active mission. Being faithful to the gospel surely includes sharing the word that imparts life when the opportunity arises.⁴⁶ Furthermore, Gorman rightly asks whether we can imagine the Philippian congregation regularly worshipping Jesus as Lord, living a countercultural lifestyle in Philippi, without *ever* explaining their strange behavior or introducing their pagan friends to the story of Jesus. Can we account for such a stiff opposition to these Christians if there were *no* active and verbal aspect to their witness?⁴⁷ Finally, we have already seen that Paul’s rhetoric of example in chapter 1 suggests that he wants his friends in Philippi to join him and other Christians in courageously speaking the word in the face of adversity (1:12-18).

At the same time, ‘holding forth’ the word of life is not *simply* a matter of verbal proclamation. Paul expects his audience to hold out the good news to their

41 Flemming, *Philippians*, 134.

42 So, most recently, G. Walter Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 184-85.

43 Ware, *Mission of the Church*; Plummer, *Paul’s Understanding*, esp. 72-77; 134-35; Mark J. Keown, *Congregational Evangelism in Philippians: The Centrality of an Appeal for Gospel Proclamation to the Fabric of Philippians*. Paternoster Biblical Monographs (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2008). Ware (*Mission of the Church*, 288) argues, for instance, that Paul’s summary command to the Philippians to work out the salvation in 2:12-13 ‘functions as an exhortation to spread the gospel despite the threat of persecution and suffering’.

44 Brian K. Peterson, ‘Being the Church in Philippi’, *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 30 (2008), 163-78; here, 169. Unfortunately, Peterson seems to think that “evangelism” is primarily about numerical growth and success. See, e.g., 169-71, 177-78.

45 See Ware, *Mission of the Church*, 256-84.

46 Keown, *Congregational Evangelism*, 146.

47 Gorman, ‘Apologetic and Missional Impulse’, 8.

pagan neighbors, not only by the words they speak, but also by the lives they live (2:14-15). Later, Paul writes of the contagious influence of a gentle spirit, which refuses to retaliate in the face of pagan opposition. By letting their 'gentleness be known to everyone' (4:5), the church will bear witness to a gospel about a Savior whose unwillingness to assert his rights brought him all the way to a cross.⁴⁸ The Philippians' partnership in the gospel has both an active/verbal, as well as a lifestyle dimension.

A story to enter. It is in the midst of the mission-oriented exhortations of 1:27-30 and 2:12-18 that we find the foundational story of Jesus (2:5-11). This narrative, above all else in the letter, forms the readers' identity as a people through whom God can work. It not only tells the story of the divine mission. It also shows God's people the attitude and conduct they must embrace in order to participate in the *missio Dei*. Only by adopting the 'mindset' (*phronein*) of Christ Jesus (v 5) will they become an attractive hermeneutic of the gospel in Philippi. Only when they embody his self-giving love for others, both inside and outside the community, can they hope to live worthily of the gospel in the public square (1:27). If the good news of God's saving mission is the story of cruciform love (cf. 2:1, 2; 1 Cor. 13:5), then the Philippians must locally reenact that drama within the community and before a public audience.

I agree, then, with Gorman that the role of 2:6-11 as a paradigm cannot be limited to interpersonal relationships within the community.⁴⁹ The same self-giving love that led Jesus to be faithful and obedient, even to the point of death, will compel the Philippians to faithfully bear witness to the gospel of Christ, in both word and life. What is more, the hymn implies that just as God exalted Jesus in response to his obedience unto death on a Roman cross, so also God's people, if they remain faithful in the face of suffering at the hands of the Romans, will be vindicated by God in the end (see 1:6; 3:20-21).⁵⁰ And the assurance that one day every created being will confess Jesus as Lord implicates the church in God's mission. They must proclaim and embody Christ's lordship even now, in anticipation of what is to come. They do so in a setting where declaring Jesus' lordship hurls them on a collision course with Rome, whose emperors were acclaimed 'lord of the world'.⁵¹ The story of a crucified Savior, who rules, not by universal domination, but by self-emptying love, confronts Rome's entire vision of the world. Living the story of Jesus in Caesar's colony is a risky business.

What does participation in God's mission by imitating Christ look like in prac-

48 Flemming, *Philippians*, 220.

49 Gorman, 'Apologetic and Missional Impulse', 6-7.

50 *Ibid.*, 7.

51 On the challenge to imperial sovereignty in Phil 2:9-11, see Peter Oakes, *Philippians: From People to Letter*, SNTSMS 110 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 149-50, 171-72; Joseph H. Hellerman, *Reconstructing Honor in Roman Philippi: Carmen Christi as Cursus Pudorum*, SNTSMS 132 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 152-53.

tice? To make this clearer, 'Paul parades before their eyes a series of examples for imitation, people in their own context who embody the pattern of Christ'.⁵² These include Timothy (2:21-22), Epaphroditus (2:27-30), and, above all, the apostle himself (3:4-14, 17; 4:9). Just as Jesus relinquished equality with God and became a slave for others (2:6-7), so Paul, Christ's 'slave' (1:1), 'trashes' all he once valued for the sake of knowing Christ (3:7-11). He now participates in Christ's suffering and Christ's mission.⁵³ Paul explicitly urges them to practice what they have 'heard and seen' in him (4:9). This likely includes both how Paul *lived* the gospel and *witnessed* to the gospel before them. By joyfully embodying the pattern of Christ's vulnerable love in the midst of suffering, the Philippians *are* a proclamation of the gospel in Roman Philippi⁵⁴ – in both word and deed.

Furthermore, in 4:8 Paul lists a set of virtues that were widely valued in pagan culture. He uses them to instruct the Philippians as to how they should think and live. Paul does not reject such publicly recognized virtues wholesale. Instead, he affirms them as points of contact with a pagan world, as long as they are compatible with the cruciform pattern of Christ (see 4:9). Such critical engagement with the culture will enable his audience to fulfill their calling to shine as beacons in the midst of a dark and crooked world (2:14-16).

Paul's formation of a cross-shaped community, then, enables the Philippians to *be* the visible manifestation of God's reconciling purpose for the world. Part of what that means is to actively bear witness to the word of life (2:16). But, as citizens of heaven (3:20), they are also called to publicly live out the life of heaven on earth – a life of love, unity, and holiness. They are the embodiment of the *missio Dei* on Roman streets.

Reading Philippians as missional communities

How does Paul's letter to the Philippians help equip God's people to participate in God's mission today? Let me reflect on some implications of a missional reading of Philippians for the contemporary church:

1. *Embodying God's mission as united, holy, and loving communities.* In Philippians, the church's mission is bound to its Christlike character. First, a church that lives out its shared life with a common mind-set (1:27; 2:2; 4:2), without 'complaining and arguing' (2:14) is a church whose testimony to those outside will ring true (2:15; cf. Jn 17:20-23). Conversely, divisions within the community become a stumbling block to our reconciling mission. 'The world watches, Christians bicker, the flame of witness smolders'.⁵⁵

Second, a church in mission is a church that embodies holiness (1:10-11; 2:14-15). On the one hand, our lives of integrity will stand out in a sinful and crooked world by their very difference. On the other hand, people who reflect the holy character of Christ will positively give light to their world (2:15). Christian

52 Wagner, 'Missio Dei', 25.

53 Ibid., 26.

54 Wagner, 'Working Out Salvation', 271-72.

55 Flemming, *Philippians*, 140.

families, for example, can model faithfulness and self-giving in societies where conflict, abuse, and disposable relationships are too often the norm. Christian leaders who demonstrate integrity in finances, speech, and sexuality will offer a winsome alternative to many cultural patterns of leadership.

Third, the cruciform love of Jesus Christ narrated in the Christ-hymn shapes both our gathered life in community and our scattered life in witness. Communities that are characterized by self-giving love will faithfully 'interpret' the gospel in their setting. *Agape* is contagious. And that same others-oriented love of Christ will compel us, by the power of the Spirit, to engage in God's healing and reconciling mission in the world (2 Cor. 5:14-20).

2. *Living and telling the gospel story.* The pendulum of Christian mission tends to swing between a narrow focus on verbal proclamation and church planting on the one hand, and on Christian presence and loving deeds on the other. Philippians resists all such dichotomies. It invites the church to share in a mission characterized by a seamless witness of word and life. Brian Peterson is right to deny that Paul presents doing good and loving others simply as a means for the church to accomplish its real mission of conversion.⁵⁶ But he is wrong to imply that we must choose between the two. The alternative to faulty forms of evangelism is not silence. Living worthily of the gospel of Christ means 'being' the new creation of God. But it also involves confidently announcing Jesus as Lord in the midst of seemingly hopeless situations, even as we joyfully anticipate his coming rule over the whole world.

3. *Critically engaging our cultures.* The church is not called to completely reject the culture or cultures in which it is found. Paul's use of largely pagan virtues to promote Christian thinking and living (4:8) assumes that God's grace is active in the world God has created, including human cultures. We should not be afraid to celebrate what is true and beautiful in our cultures, or to enlist 'secular' ideals or art forms in the service of the gospel.

At the same time, we dare not embrace the values of the wider culture uncritically. If we are already 'citizens of heaven' (3:20), then our daily life in Philippi, Philadelphia, or the Philippines will embody the character and ideals of the kingdom of God, rather than those of the present world. Whenever the church becomes too cozy with the values of the culture around it, it forfeits any credibility to prophetically challenge that culture. 'As citizens of heaven, we will have one foot firmly planted *inside* our culture, so that we can identify with the people around us and make sense to them. At the same time, we will have one foot *outside* of the culture, as we model a cross-shaped alternative to the spirit of the world'.⁵⁷

4. *Listening to the text from both a local and a global perspective.* How Christian communities are shaped by Philippians will depend in part on their reading

56 Peterson, 'Being the Church', 171.

57 Flemming, *Philippians*, 209; cf. Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 49.

location and the questions they bring to the text. Consider Paul's exhortations about the 'grace' of suffering on behalf of Christ (e.g., Phil. 1:28-30). People who face significant persecution and suffering on a regular basis will likely hear and appropriate Paul's words differently than most Christians in the North and West, who struggle with how to handle such texts. Reading Scripture is inevitably a contextualized task.

At the same time, the *missio Dei* journeys from the local to the global, from the particular to the universal.⁵⁸ The movement that begins with Jesus of Nazareth and a handful of messianic Jews in Palestine is led by the Spirit to cross one boundary after another until the good news reaches to the ends of the earth. That global mission anticipates the gathering of saints from all the world's peoples and cultures in universal worship of the Lamb (Rev. 5:9; 7:9; cf. Phil. 2:10-11). Likewise, we must learn to interpret Scripture, not only contextually, but also *trans*contextually. This involves the practice of intercultural listening and learning. My own reading of passages about suffering for Christ expanded while teaching students in the Middle East for whom persecution was a reality of everyday life. Christians from Asian shame-based cultures, for instance, might help me to more fully grasp the shame connected with Christ's obedience even to death on a cross (2:8). We all come to the text, from our various locations, as *both* teachers and learners.

Conclusion

A missional reading of Scripture seeks to be both missiologically sensitive and biblical sound. If that is the case, then it may help to place biblical scholars and missiologists on common ground. Even more, a missional hermeneutic offers Christian communities the possibility of reading Scripture more faithfully. It helps us to view the Bible's message within a plausible overarching framework – the mission of God. At the same time, it allows us to more fully recognize the function of Scripture in the church. Scripture serves as an instrument of the *missio Dei*. It forms and energizes God's people to live in relationship with God and to be a part of his reconciling, restoring purpose for all of creation. Approaching individual texts like Philippians from this perspective might lead us not only to more faithful reading, but also more faithful *practice* of the text. We have not truly *understood* Paul's appeal to live worthily of the gospel of Christ until we allow the Spirit to shape us into loving, cruciform people and communities, who proclaim the gospel in word and life. Such an embodiment of the text is surely the goal of a Scripture-reading community in mission.

Abstract

Recent interest in reading Scripture in light of God's mission has produced no

58 See Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), *passim*.

consensus as to what a 'missional hermeneutic' entails. This essay focuses on reading Scripture both as a *witness* to the comprehensive *missio Dei* and as an *instrument* of the ongoing purpose of the triune God in the world. Furthermore, the article explores what a missional hermeneutic might look like, using Philippians as a case study. A missional reading of Philippians enables us to see more clearly how the letter bears witness to God's loving and cruciform mission in Jesus Christ. This approach also spotlights Paul's desire to form and equip a missional community, which participates in the *missio Dei* by word and deed. At the same time, such a hermeneutic helps to enable missional communities to more faithfully read and embody the text of Philippians today.

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Paul's Understanding of the Church's Mission Did the Apostle Paul Expect the Early Christian Communities to Evangelize?

Robert L. Plummer

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