Modelling the Gospel in Joyful Partnership: Exemplars and the Uniting Theme of Philippians

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Abstract

Most interpreters now recognize the literary unity and integrity of Paul's letter to the Philippians. This consensus has however made the question of the letter's uniting theme a matter of urgent inquiry for biblical scholars and preachers alike. Even here, significant advances have of late been made; but, questions remain. The aim of this article in the light of this progress is threefold. It will first evaluate some of the key proposals for the letter's uniting theme. Secondly, it will propose that 'modelling the gospel in joyful partnership' best represents the uniting theme of Philippians. And thirdly, it will demonstrate that Paul extensively employs positive and negative exemplars to illustrate this theme in each section of the letter. The article concludes by highlighting the contribution of Philippians to current reflections on New Testament ethics.

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[1] The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background to the problem

Tremendous strides have been made towards resolving several of the hitherto uncertain introductory questions with regard to Paul's letter to the Philippians (Bockmuehl 1997:20–35; Fee 1995:1–15; Fowl 2005:8–12; Garland 2006:178–182; Hartog 2010:475-503; Hawthorne 1983:xl–xliv; O'Brien 1991:3–39; Silva 2005:1–36; Still 2011:1–12; Witherington III 2011:1–30). Therefore, it is appropriate to summarise these consensuses as a way of setting the background for the present investigation.

Firstly, most interpreters agree that Paul wrote this letter from a Roman prison to a group of Christians in Philippi. The chief occasion for the letter, most would also agree, was the reception of a generous gift from the Philippians, for which Paul expresses his heartfelt gratitude.

Secondly, the consensus also appears to be that in its overall form, this letter was largely influenced by the ancient Mediterranean 'letter of friendship' genre. So, in accordance with this genre, Paul, in the letter alternately discusses his affairs and those of the Philippians and employs moral exhortations to fulfil goals he mutually shared with the recipients. There are competing alternatives to this consensus on the genre, such as 'letter of consolation' (Holloway 2001), or 'family letter' (Alexander 1989:87–101; cf. Witherington III 2011:14). But by-and-large, most interpreters view these other suggestions as compatible with the 'letter of friendship' genre (cf. Hartog 2010:482).

Thirdly, most interpreters are in agreement that at the time of writing, the Philippian church was faced with a complex problem made up of three facets, namely, (a) they encountered opposition from without the

fellowship, (b) there were quarrels and rivalries between some influential members of the fellowship, a situation which in Paul's view was fuelled by lack of focus on the self-sacrificial demands of the gospel of Christ, and (c) a false teaching of some sort was at least imminent to arrive in Philippi, if not already influencing the internal rivalry. Broadly granted by contemporary interpreters, these three contingencies influenced Paul's exhortations in the letter.

Finally, and regarding the long-standing question of the literary integrity of the letter, the consensus is increasingly becoming established among both conservative and non-conservative interpreters that Philippians was originally penned by the apostle in the single unit that we now have it.

Of course, there are noteworthy dissenting views to these 'consensuses'. With regard to the integrity of the letter, for example, John Reumann (2008) has recently mounted a spirited defence of the partition theory in his *Anchor Bible commentary*, unfortunately published in a truncated form due to his premature death. Reumann argued that the letter, as we have it now, was a post-Pauline composite redacted from three earlier genuine letters of Paul to the Philippians.

These genuine letters, in his view, were (a) a thanksgiving letter now in 4:10–20, which Paul sent while not in prison, written perhaps in AD 54, (b) a letter of friendship he wrote from an Ephesian prison soon after the thanksgiving letter, which is now in 1:1–3:1, and maybe also including 4:1–9 and 21–23, and (c) a third polemical letter he wrote warning the Philippians of heterodox teachers and their practices now in 3:2–21. In Reumann's reckoning, the internal literary variations, changes in tone, and the lack of a leading idea binding these sections

together undermine the notion of literary integrity of Philippians and appear to support the partition theory (2008:12–15).[2]

Reumann's contribution has not gone unchallenged by reviewers, many pointing to the paucity of the evidence that he adduces in his defence of the partition theory (e.g. Dunn 2009:1–4; Fantin 2011:373–375; Krentz 2010:253–254; Ross 2009, 428–429; Tucker 2010:456–458). In any case, though quite fresh in its presentation, the essence of Reumann's argument is by no means new. As most reviewers have pointed out, it is essentially a rehearsal of the partition theory as it was first postulated seven decades ago (Beare 1959; Marxsen 1968:61–62; Schmithals 1957:297–341). All the same, Reumann's dissenting voice reminds interpreters convinced of the integrity of Philippians that there is still work to be done in persuading others about the merits of their case.

Some of the proponents of integrity have argued that, in a way, the partition theory is misguided; for, exegetes have no choice but to accept the letter in the canonical form in which it is now found (e.g. Fowl 2005:8; Silva 2005:13). Such a dismissive view of the partition theory however, fails to grapple with the implications of the theory to the exegesis of the letter. For, if the partition theory were correct, it would mean that exegetes may not expect literary and theological coherence to the letter. This, no doubt, hampers the exegetical enterprise, along with its detrimental effects on homiletic activities based on Philippians. The

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[2] Three categories of evidence are often adduced in support of the partition theory, namely, (a) the apparent suggestion by Polycarp that Paul wrote more than one letter to the Philippians, (b) the sudden change in tone between 3:1 and 3:2, together with the apostle's use of Τὸ λοιπόν (*finally*) in 3:1, and (c) the placement of the thanksgiving statement of 4:10–20 rather late in the letter while the so called 'travel plans' are placed early, in the middle 2:19–30. For a thorough discussion of these, see Garland (1985:141–173).

task of addressing the question of the literary integrity of Philippians is therefore crucial.

1.2. The problem

The argument against the partition theory has been effectively and eloquently made by many interpreters since the beginning of the 1960s (e.g. Alexander 1989:87–101; Black 1995:16–49; DeSilva 1995:27–54; Fowl 2005:8–9; Garland 1985:141–173; Hartog 2010:479–480; Holloway 2001:7–33; Jewett 1970:40–53; O'Brien 1991:10–18; Pollard 1966–1967:57–66; Watson 1988:57–88). This has significantly contributed to the increasing consensus in favour of integrity. Yet, as Bockmuehl (1997:24) has warned, some of the methodological sophistication employed as means of defending the literary integrity of Philippians mimic the convolutions of the partition theory itself, and so 'tax credulity and in the end prove very little indeed'.

Moreover, refuting the partition theory is not nearly enough for establishing the integrity of the letter. O'Brien (1991:15) eloquently made the point: the argument in favour of the integrity of Philippians remains incomplete as far as interpreters have not established a 'leading idea' that binds the whole epistle together. In other words, until interpreters establish a consistent theme running through the letter, weaving the ideas, concepts, and language into a united whole, dissenters are unlikely to be fully persuaded that Paul originally penned the letter as one unit.

Dalton (1979:99) threw down the following challenge to interpreters more than three decades ago: it is only when 'a regular pattern of words and ideas is repeated in a way which reveals the inner movement and meaning of the text, then we have a view which the hypothesis of division will find hard to explain'". That challenge remains true today

as when he first made it. To put the problem in a sharper manner: if Philippians is a united letter, what is its uniting theme?

1.3. Evaluation of some proposals

Since the middle of the nineteenth century, several suggestions towards addressing this problem have been made. Of these, four merit evaluation, namely, (a) preparing for martyrdom, (b) joy in suffering, (c) partnership in the gospel, and (d) good heavenly citizenship.

Two main criteria to be used for evaluating these proposals are as follows: (1) how widespread in the letter is the proposed theme; (2) whether the proposal would adequately address the problems that the Philippians faced. As will shortly become evident, while none of the above proposals fully satisfies these criteria, the best uniting theme combines their insights.

1.3.1. Preparing for martyrdom

Several martyrological texts of the patristic era heavily utilized Paul's letter to the Philippians, suggesting that, at least some in early Christianity, detected a contribution of the epistle to a Christian doctrine of martyrdom (cf. Bloomquist 1993:18–26). It was, however, not until the middle of the nineteenth century that Ernst Lohmeyer (1954) proposed 'preparing for martyrdom' as the uniting theme of Philippians. As it happened, Lohmeyer's was also the very first proposal of a uniting theme for the letter (cf. Jewett 1970:49).

Deriving his insights from literature on martyrdom from Second Temple Judaism and second century Christianity, Lohmeyer argued that Paul's idea of martyrdom was not just the Christian witness's loss of physical life, but also, encompassed persecution that would have been in continuity with death, but does not necessarily result in death. Thus,

in Lohmeyer's reckoning, some of the persecuted Christians of Philippi who were still alive at the time would nevertheless have been regarded as martyrs. Some, indeed, became proud following their belief that they had attained 'perfection of martyrdom' (1954:4), and this resulted in the quarrels and rivalries in the fellowship. Paul's letter, then, sought to address this scenario both for the apostle himself awaiting his physical martyrdom, and the Christians in Philippi.

Within the epistle itself, Lohmeyer located specific martyrological terminologies scattered throughout the letter, for example, δοῦλοι (*slaves*) in 1:1, σωτηρίαν (*salvation*) in 2:12, τοῦ γνῶναι αὐτὸν (*that I may know him*) in 3:10, ταπεινοῦσθαι (to be abased), and περισσεύειν (*to abound*) in 4:12. Paul repeated, on several occasions in the letter, that he was aware of his impending martyrdom (e.g. 1:20–24; 2:17; 3:10–11). Similarly, some of the explicit examples that Paul lays out in the epistle, specifically of Jesus (2:6–11) and of Epaphroditus (2:25–30) are directly related to deaths in the service of the gospel. Furthermore, some of Paul's exhortations to the Philippians, Lohmeyer argued, called for living the Christian life in a sacrificial manner, and more so, in a mystical sense united with Christ as if one were martyred with him (1954:36–46).

Based on this, Lohmeyer (1954:5–6) proposed a literary structure of the letter which identified the following headings: introduction (1:1–11), Paul's martyrdom (1:12–26), the community's martyrdom (1:27–2:16), helpers in martyrdom (2:17–30), dangers in martyrdom (3:1–21), last advice on martyrdom (4:1–9), and the collection (4:10–20).

Contemporary interpreters have unanimously rejected Lohmeyer's thesis. His definition of martyrdom was rightly criticized as too complex, and heavily derived from later martyrological conceptions and not attested in New Testament times. Several of the terminologies,

which he labelled as specifically related to martyrdom, have also not attracted unanimous acceptance. And his suggestion that the source of the rivalry derived from the pride of those who believed they had attained perfection through martyrdom appears doubtful (Bloomquist 1993:50–52).

Yet, a full-scale rejection of Lohmeyer's insights is unwarranted. Though his martyrological thesis is overdone, his insistence that, at the mystical level, the Christian shares in the death and resurrection life of Christ is correct. The Christian life, as Paul stresses in his letters, is cruciform from its beginning to its completion.[3] And this idea is reflected in the self-sacrificial demands in response to the gospel which Paul underlines throughout Philippians (Gorman 2001:40; Gould 1975:93–101). In identifying this sacrificial witness theme in Philippians, Lohmeyer has underlined a key component of Paul's strategy for addressing the problems in the Philippian church.

Jewett (1970:51) is therefore correct in surmising, 'Although Lohmeyer confused the issue by inserting categories of later martyrdom ideology, he was correct in discerning continuity in the letter at the point of the references to suffering'. It is therefore paradoxical that Lohmeyer himself, and several of his former students subsequently suffered martyrdom at the hands of the Nazi persecutors of Germany (Blevins 1980:320; Martin 1959:41–42).

1.3.2. Joy in suffering

In contrast to the martyrdom thesis, most popular expositions of Philippians regard 'joy in suffering' as the best representation of the

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[3] Examples include Romans 6:6; 1 Corinthians 1:18; 2 Corinthians 13:4; Galatians 2:20–21; Ephesians 2:16; Colossians 1:20; and Philippians 3:18. For an examination of 'cross theology' in Philippians, see Gould (1975:93–101).

uniting theme of the epistle (e.g. Bickel and Jantz 2004:11–20; Hooker 2000:469; Lloyd-Jones 1999:5; MacArthur 2001:2; Swindoll 1992; Wiersbe 2008:7–10). There are very good reasons to support this approach. The verb 'rejoice', for example, occurs on nine occasions in the letter, the noun 'joy' on five occasions, and several of their cognates widely recur throughout the letter (cf. Heil 2010:1–4). Nouns and verbs related to joy are 'the singularly most frequent word group in Philippians' (Witherington III 2011:2).

In this letter, Paul repeatedly instructs the Philippians to rejoice (1:25; 2:29; 3:1; 4:4), models this same instruction (1:4, 18; 2:2, 16–18; 4:1) and on many occasions, implies that there was the lack of this quality in his, and the Philippians' opponents (1:16; 3:3, 18). The apostle, as MacArthur (2001:11) puts it; 'wanted the Philippians to share in the fullest measure his deep, abiding joy in Jesus Christ' (cf. Thurston and Ryan 2009:144). The tone of the letter itself is ebullient. As Still (2011:16) notes, even though the apostle writes from prison, he nevertheless 'expresses joyful confidence and prayerful contentment'. The several exhortations are similarly presented in a joyful and even poetic manner (e.g. 2:1–3; 4:4–9). 'Joy in suffering' certainly appears to address a major component of the problems facing the Philippians at the time, that of opposition from outside the church.

It is this feature of the epistle that earned it the unique accolade as being 'more peaceful than Galatians, more personal and affectionate than Ephesians, less anxiously controversial than Colossians, more deliberate and symmetrical than Thessalonians, and, of course, larger in its applications than the personal messages to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon' (Moule 1908:4–5). Thus, there are good grounds for subscribing to this proposal.

Moreover, this idea of 'joy in suffering' as uniting theme of Philippians has been given academic treatment, both in socio-historical and literary terms, by a number of investigators. Holloway (2001:17) has, for example, argued that Philippians should be considered as 'an ancient letter of consolation' in which Paul 'confronts [the Philippians] with a moral ideal, and, ultimately scolds them for not behaving in a manner "worthy of the gospel"' (1:27). Similarly, Bloomquist (1993:138) has argued that Philippians is 'primarily an authoritative letter of comfort in which Paul reassures the Philippian believers of the gospel's advance in the light of Paul's imprisonment.'

Also cited in support of the 'joy in suffering' idea is the fact that Paul's sentiment when he, together with Silas, were earlier imprisoned in Philippi was one of joyful praise (Acts 16:25). As Fowl (2005:13) puts it, 'the joy in the midst of suffering which Paul and Silas display in the Philippian jail is precisely the joy that Paul displays for and seeks to cultivate in the Philippians in the epistle'. Thus, the idea that 'joy in suffering' is the uniting theme of the epistle, has a lot to its merit.

Two main criticisms have however been rightly levelled against this approach. Firstly, though very common, joy is not the only recurrent theme in Philippians (cf. Hartog 2010:478; Still 2011:11). Other similarly frequent themes in the epistle are: the work of the gospel, self-sacrifice, unity, fellowship, and humility. Emphasis on these other ideas in a uniting theme is particularly important for interpreters who consider the Christ-hymn of 2:6–11 as pivotal to Paul's argument in the epistle. As it stands, the theme of joy only indirectly relates to that pericope.

Some proponents of the 'joy in suffering' approach have supposed that the idea is implicit in Christ's voluntary self-sacrifice and eventual enthronement in the hymn (e.g. Heil 2010:91–92). Yet, if 'joy in

suffering' were a primary element for the apostle, why is it not explicitly highlighted in 2:6–11?

Secondly, while it is true that moral exhortations were part of consolation letters of antiquity, it is still difficult to see how consolation *per se* addresses all aspects of the problem the congregation faced. How does 'joy in suffering', for example, address the internal rivalry in the fellowship and prepare the believers for the doctrinal deviations about to assault them, and of which Paul shows grave concerns (cf. 3:2–21)?

In a recent approach along the line of 'joy in suffering', Heil (2010:1) has attempted to address this last criticism by proposing that 'Let us rejoice in being conformed to Christ' is the best uniting theme. However, while his suggestion goes some way to address some of the above criticisms, it remains inadequate on its own.

1.3.3. Partnership in the gospel

A significant proportion of contemporary academic commentators take it that 'partnership in the gospel' best represents the uniting theme of Philippians (Bockmuehl 1997:2; Fowl 2005:8–9; Hartog 2010:478; Lyons and Malas Jr 2007:50–69; Luter 1989:1036; Swift 1984:234–254).

Several reasons have led to the popularity of this idea in academia. Firstly, Paul's epistolary thanksgiving begins with his expression of joyful thanksgiving because of the Philippians' κοινωνία (*partnership*, *communion*, or *fellowship*, 1:5) in the gospel. Given that it is Paul's usual practice to intimate some of the main themes of his letters in the thanksgiving report section (Jewett 1970:40–53; Schubert 1939:74), it may be that this statement was at least part of Paul's main theme for the epistle.

Secondly, the 'partnership in the gospel' idea fits the genre of the epistle as a letter of friendship very well. Thirdly, the language and idea of 'fellowship in the gospel' is very pervasive in the epistle. The word κοινωνία itself occurs in each of the four chapters of the epistle, associated on each occasion with a key movement of the letter (1:5, 7; 2:1; 3:10, 20; 4:14–15; cf. Swift 1984:234–254).

Similarly, the concept 'gospel' occurs more often in Philippians than any other of the apostle's epistles (1:5, 7, 12, 27ab; 2:22; 4:3, 15). Other words and their cognates which Paul uses in place of 'the gospel', such as 'work' (1:6), 'God's grace' (1:7), 'the word' (1:14), 'preach Christ' (1:17), and 'the word of life' (2:16) also recur frequently in the letter. Of course, the statement of the gospel is itself given a dramatic rendition in the Christ-hymn of 2:6–11 and again placed at the centre of Paul's polemics in chapter three.

Furthermore, many of the Christians, whom Paul identifies in the epistle, are underlined as 'co-labourers' who partner the apostle in the ministry of the gospel (e.g. 1:1, 14–16; 2:20–22, 25; 3:17; 4:2–3, 14–15). Thus, the gospel, in the form of its message, its demands, and its messengers who serve in partnership, features prominently in Paul's overall theme in the letter.

Finally, the idea of 'partnership in the gospel' would seem to directly address most of the issues in the situational context in the Philippian church at the time. It certainly underlines the need for unity, as well as the humility required for this unity. It also emphasizes Paul's concerns that it is in this united state that the church may be able to withstand the opposition it faced. Thus, largely, the common acceptance of this proposal in academia appears well earned.

However, there are two main drawbacks of the proposal. Firstly, while Paul often intimates elements of his main theme in the epistolary thanksgiving, his full statement of the purpose and theme of his epistles usually comes later in the letter, often, after the prayer-thanksgiving report and at the beginning of the body of the letter (Byrskog 1997:27–46). In other words, 'partnership in the gospel' may be intimating the uniting theme, but in itself, it is not the key statement of that theme. As I will shortly argue, Paul's statement of proposition in 1:27–30 links the 'partnership' idea with modelling of the gospel.

Secondly, the 'partnership in the gospel' idea omits a key concern of the apostle in addressing the moral issues at the heart of the quarrels and rivalries in the fellowship. As I will hopefully demonstrate, the bulk of the moral issues, Paul reckoned, was the lack of focus of the protagonists on the self-sacrificing demands of the gospel. 'Partnership in the gospel' does not directly address this fundamental issue.

1.3.4. Good heavenly citizenship

Recent epistolographic (Russell 1982:295–306), discourse (Black 1995:16–49), rhetorical (Debanne 2006:102; Watson 1988:57–88; Witherington III 2011:29) and socio-political (Geoffrion 1993; Marchal 2006; Perkins 1991; Reimer 1997:136) analyses of Philippians have all identified Philippians 1:27–30 as Paul's statement of his main purpose and theme of the epistle: the proposition of the letter. According to these verses, Paul's over-riding agenda in the letter was to exhort the Philippians to 'live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ' while striving together in unity against the opposition. In other words, 'model the gospel in Philippi with a united front against opposition.'

Based on this insight, a number of interpreters have argued that Paul's use of the distinctive politico-civic verb πολιτεύομαι (t*o behave*

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appropriately as a citizen, or *rightly administer civil affairs*)[4] in 1:27 points to the leading idea which holds the letter's exhortations together (Brewer 1954:76–83; Geoffrion 1993:23; Grieb 2007:256–269; Krentz 1993:105–127; Marchal 2006a:5-32; Schuster 1997:170–178; Zerbe 2009:193–208). In the words of Zerbe (2009:200), 'Philippians is an exhortation (discourse) on "the practice of Messianic citizenship" with 1:27 as the keynote theme'.

Geoffrion (1993:30–33) similarly identifies every word in 1:27–30 as directly related to military imagery usually associated with the maintenance of the empire, now clearly transferred by Paul to exhort the Philippians to serve Christ's kingdom. He also argues that, throughout the letter, Paul employed political *topoi*, terminology, and concepts to underpin corporate Christian identity as a 'heavenly citizenship'. The letter, he believes, is built 'chiefly upon a broad inclusive political/military concept of citizens/soldiers working together, working for each other, working for the advancement of the goals of their commonwealth (*politeuma*)' (1993:220).

In this reading, the apostle's initial identification of the readers as 'the saints in Philippi' (1:1) is meant to remind them that they constituted an alternative *polis* within the Roman colony of Philippi (Grieb 2007:260). They were to be mindful of their dual citizenship; for, they were citizens of Christ's heavenly kingdom who were temporarily resident in a hostile realm of Caesar. Their calling was to live as worthy ambassadors of the kingdom of Christ in Philippi (Oakes 2005:301–322; Thurston and Ryan 2009:8).

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[4] The TNIV's translation of 1:27a is therefore quite appropriate: 'Whatever happens, as citizens of heaven, live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ'.

The idea that Christians are citizens of the heavenly realm is explicitly repeated in 3:20, where Paul describes the Philippians as πολίτευμα ἐν οὐρανοῖς (*citizens of the heavenly commonwealth*). In contrast to the pagans who gather in expectation of Caesar's arrival at their public rallies, believers were rather awaiting the *Parousia* of Christ to transform their bodies (cf. Wright 2000:173–181). Thus, scholars have argued that these explicit politico-theological terminologies act as *inclusio* to the main body of the letter.

Interpreters who take this view also cite the repeated use of military, athletic, civic, and political administrative imageries in the epistle as consistently expressing this idea of heavenly citizenship throughout the epistle. The pointed references to the πραιτωρίῳ (*the Praetorium*, 1:13) and Καίσαρος οἰκίας (*Caesar's household*, 4:22) for example, are claimed to underline how the gospel, the message, and ethos of the kingdom of heaven had invaded the realm of the Roman Empire.

Paul's reference to his life as a σπένδομαι (*a libation*, 2:17) upon the Philippians' sacrifice is also claimed to allude to the Roman military sacrifice before a battle (Krentz 2008:259). His frequent use of the word κοινωνία is argued to allude to the language of civic alliances of the time (Schuster 1997:50–53). And the many positive exemplars in the letter are argued to be typical of statements made to encourage soldiers about to embark on military campaigns (Geoffrion 1993:33).

Other allusions to quasi-military terminologies that are claimed to be present in the epistle are στέφανός (*crown*, 4:1), συνήθλησάν (*strive or fight together*, 4:3), and φρουρήσει (*guard*, 4:7). That Philippi had a significant population of army veterans is also sometimes cited as a motivation for the apostle's use of such a theme as a means of exhorting the Philippians (Krentz 1993:127).

It is fair to say that reviewers have largely been constructive in their appraisal of this proposal, without fully endorsing some of the overtly political reading of the whole epistle. Paul's circumstances in oppressive chains of the Roman Empire would have reasonably reminded him of the conflict between his Christian ethos and those of the empire. Emphasizing the implications of this conflict in the service of the gospel to the Philippians would, therefore, have been in line with his aim to address the internal divisions, and the external opposition they faced. Moreover, the 'Romanness' (Hendrix 1992:5.315; Levick 1967:161) of Philippi would have made contrasts between Christ's kingdom and Caesar's realm very poignant to the first readers.

Yet, it is difficult to see the overtly political reading of Philippians as Paul's leading idea in the epistle. The apostle, no doubt, sought to inculcate virtues and behaviours in the Philippians that exhibited the ideals of heaven to which their citizenship belonged. However, it would appear that Paul uses the civic terminologies not as a way of politicizing the Philippians, but as metaphors to sharpen his message. Evidence for this is the fact that most of the examples of cited military or civic terminologies are largely allusive.

Marchal (2006:63) has, for example, questioned whether military and civic images in Philippians would have necessarily appealed to the non-military members of the fellowship, in the prominent manner in which some interpreters suppose. One could say the same of the possibly significant proportion of slaves in the fellowship,[5] who may well not have been enchanted by the elitist and aristocratic imageries that these terminologies sometimes evoke. The overall conclusion, therefore, is

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[5] If the Philippian church were representative of the population of Philippi at the time, it would have had the following proportion of classes: 37 percent service group (artisans, craftsmen, and businessmen and women), 20 percent slaves, 20 percent colonist farmers, 2 percent poor, and 3 percent elite (cf. Oakes 2001:43–46).

that Paul's over-riding concern was the advancement of the gospel. This advancement no doubt had political ramifications for the Philippians, and for the empire. But, these ramifications were not his primary emphases.

A second difficulty that proponents of the socio-political interpretation of Philippians encounter is how to configure the role of 2:6–11 in that reading. It is reasonable to infer that Jesus' exaltation as κύριος Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς (*Lord Jesus Christ*, 2:11) was presented as an alternative contrast to the Emperor. While this is possible, this political reading nevertheless fails to explain the main point of the passage, that is, modelling the gospel as exemplified in Christ's self-sacrifice.

It is fair to conclude then, that the 'heavenly citizenship' idea is only valid in its socio-theological sense and not the political sense. Paul was certainly not setting the Philippian church up as an alternative government.

1.4. The present proposal

It is evident that each of the above proposals highlights an aspect of the uniting theme of Philippians, though none adequately summarizes it. Combining these proposals, the indication is that the uniting theme of Philippians should underline the themes of self-sacrifice for the sake of the advancement of the gospel, of joy in suffering on behalf of the gospel, of a common partnership in the service of the gospel, and of living in a manner worthy of this gospel.

One more recurring idea throughout the epistle is Paul's use of positive and negative exemplars to establish his hortatory agenda. In each chapter, for example, the apostle uses himself to exemplify the point he is establishing in that section (1:12–16; 2:17; 3:1–17; 4:9–13). He also

explicitly cites Jesus (2:6–11), Timothy (2:13–23), and Epaphroditus (2:25–30) as models of specific aspects of his exhortations to be emulated. Indeed, as will shortly be shown, the apostle, admittedly in an allusive manner, also sets forth God the Father (2:11–13; cf. 1:6), and God the Holy Spirit (2:1) as positive models of the particular virtues which he exhorts the believers to adopt.

In addition, the 'loyal yokefellow' (4:3) is by implication set out as an exemplar. So also are groups of persons such as the 'preachers with goodwill' (1:15) and the Philippians themselves (4:15). Thus, Paul's exhortation to the Philippians in 3:17 that they should 'join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do' (TNIV),[6] would seem to encapsulate a major component of Paul's theme in the epistle.

What is more, throughout the letter, Paul employs several negative exemplars in both explicit and implicit terms to sharpen his exhortations on modelling the gospel. He cites the 'envious preachers' (1:15–17), Old Testament Israel, admittedly through allusions (2:12–19), selfish Christians (2:21), the opponents of the gospel (3:2–3), the 'enemies of the cross' who caused him 'tears' (3:18), and Euodia and Syntyche (4:3), all as negative exemplars.

The title, *modelling the gospel in joyful partnership*, would therefore appear to be the most appropriate expression of the uniting theme, since it encapsulates all the themes surveyed. It is also right to conclude that exemplars are widely employed to practically model the message of the epistle.

This suggestion on exemplars in Philippians is not novel. The presence of the concept of modelling in Philippians is widely recognized by

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[6] Unless otherwise stated, all Bible quotations are from the NRSV.

interpreters. So, according to Witherington III (2011:14), for example, the letter 'is a clarion call to imitate good examples and avoid bad ones, and so to a unity of mind and purpose in the Philippian church' (cf. Debanne 2006:117; Kurz 1985:103–126).

Exemplification was, after all, a consistent rhetorical and pedagogical device in ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman literature (Clarke 1998:329–360; Fiore 1986; Gieschen 2008:3–18; Malherbe 1989:56–60; Neusner 1970:1; Stone and Bergen 1998). Moreover, elsewhere in his letters, Paul consistently implores his readers to imitate him (Martin 1999: 39–49; Plummer 2001:219–235).[7] It is therefore unsurprising that he should employ it in his exhortations in Philippians.

What the present proposal seeks to stress however, is that the exemplars of Philippians serve a wider function than as rhetorical devices. Much more, they embody the epistle's central theme of modelling the gospel in joyful partnership. In other words, in order to address the problems the Philippians faced, Paul sets out positive exemplars who model the gospel in a manner that he wished to project. And the negative exemplars enable him to sharpen this message for addressing the problems that the Philippians faced.

An exegetical summary of how Paul employs these exemplars in each of the sections of the letter to model the theme, and a brief commentary on the relevance of the proposal now follows in the subsequent chapter.

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[7] Of the eleven occasions that the explicit term of imitation occurs in the New Testament, eight are from the Pauline corpus. These are 1 Corinthians. 4:16; 11:1; Ephesians 5:1; Philippians 3:17; 1 Thessalonians 1:6; 2:14; 2 Thessalonians 3:7, 9. The rest are Hebrews 6:12; 13:7; and 3 John 1:11.

2. Models of the Gospel in Philippians

A few interpreters have argued for a chiastic structure for Philippians (e.g. Heil 2010; Porter and Reed 1998:213–231; Luter and Lee 1995:89–101), so that idea cannot be completely ruled out. However, most interpreters accept and use a linear literary structure which largely follows the apostle's albeit flexible epistolary conventions.

This structure has 1:1–11 as the introduction, 1:12–26 as Paul's narrative introduction, 1:27–30 as the main proposition, 2:1–11 as the call for unity, 2:12–18 exhortation on obedience, 2:19–30 as travel plans and missionary report, 3:1–21 as polemics against doctrinal opponents, 4:1–9 as specific exhortation towards harmony in the fellowship, 4:10–20 as thanksgiving note, and 4:21–23 as conclusion. I shall now take each section in turn.

2.1. Introduction 1:1-11

The introduction to Philippians is made up of three closely interwoven sections, namely, a salutation (1:1–2), a 'joyful' thanksgiving (1:3–8), and a prayer-report (1:9–11). As pointed out already, several commentators have argued that the thanksgiving-report intimates themes that would dominate the epistle, namely, joyful partnership in the gospel 1:4–5, the work of the gospel 1:6–8, love and unity in the fellowship 1:9, and a life of holiness as fruit of the gospel 1:10–11.

For our purposes, two of its key features require identification, namely, (a) the manner in which the passage expresses a tripartite partnership between Paul, the Philippians and God (or Christ), and (b) ideas associated with the gospel which are stated in relation to God and Paul are transferred to the Philippians in a modelling fashion (Fee 1995:73; 1999:21).

So, for example, Paul mentions the gospel explicitly on two occasions in the passage (1:5 and 1:7). On both occasions, it is underlined that Paul and the Philippians κοινωνία, participate in this gospel. Exactly what this participation or partnership practically involved, is not stated. Several interpreters reasonably take it that, in a specific sense, Paul was referring to their material support for the missionary work (4:15). In its support is the fact that Paul uses the word κοινωνία in 2 Corinthians 9:15 and its cognate in Philippians 4:15 to describe the material donation of the Philippians.

Paul also mentions their partnership 'in God's grace' in relation to his imprisonment, defence, and confirmation of the gospel (1:7). This suggests that the Philippians were supportive of Paul in those circumstances, perhaps through their prayers, their friendship, and their provision of material support (Silva 2005:44).

However, it is more likely that by κοινωνία, Paul was expressing the general and wider idea that the Philippians' participation went beyond their material giving. Panikulam (1979:85) is not far from wrong when he suggests that by κοινωνία Paul had in mind 'the entire response the Philippians gave to the good news they received' (cf. Fee 1995:85).

So, in stressing the participation of the Philippians, for example, Paul was intimating that the Philippians will have to continue to maintain their share of the defence and confirmation of the gospel through their own suffering. He certainly does so when he reminds them that they had been doing so 'from the first day until now' (1:5). Their participation was not limited to their material support. They co-shared in the work of the gospel, as well as its concomitant suffering (cf. 1:30).

Also, in the letter's introduction, the gospel is identified as ἔργον ἀγαθὸν (*good work*, 1:6) which God begins, continues, and would bring

to perfection at the day of Christ (Silva 2005:45). Just as the Philippians had been continuing in their participation in the gospel 'from the first day', and so should, by implication, continue to the end, so also will God who began the gospel in them, continue until its eventual perfection when Christ returns. Hence, God, Paul, and the Philippians all participate in modelling the gospel in a continuing manner.

Later in 2:12–18, Paul would make this modelling of the gospel by God and the Philippians more explicit when he exhorts the Philippians that, as children of God, who by that virtue would be expected to imitate their Father (cf. Eph 5:1), they ought to 'continue' to work out their salvation, since God is also 'at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure'. Thus, from the introduction, Paul intimates not only his shared partnership with the Philippians in the gospel, but more so, that the gospel is being continuously modelled by God in and among the Philippians. Modelling occurs in a tripartite fashion.

A similar tripartite transference of qualities associated with the gospel occurs with the idea of love in the introduction.[8] The idea of love is first introduced in 1:7b in an ambiguous manner, so that it is difficult to tell if by ἔχειν με ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ ὑμᾶς, Paul meant 'I have you in my heart' or 'you have me in your heart'.[9] Whichever is the correct translation, this ambiguity in itself expresses the κοινωνία between Paul and the Philippians, since it indicates the bond of love mutually shared between them.

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[8] The other major theme in the introduction, i.e. bearing 'fruits of holiness' as part of the gospel, is not explicitly treated in the same tripartite manner as the other themes of joyful partnership and love and unity. It may well be that this is related to 'perfection at the day of Christ' (1:6). But this is not as explicitly elaborated as the others.

[9] See Fee (1995:90) on the grammatical difficulties.

A third party is introduced into the equation when this love is also underlined as emanating from Christ (1:8), who is thus the basis upon which Paul loves the Philippians. Paul serves as an exemplar of the love of Christ at work in the human soul. And when he turns to his petition, he prays for the transference of these qualities unto the Philippians: 'this is my prayer that your love may overflow more and more' (1:9).
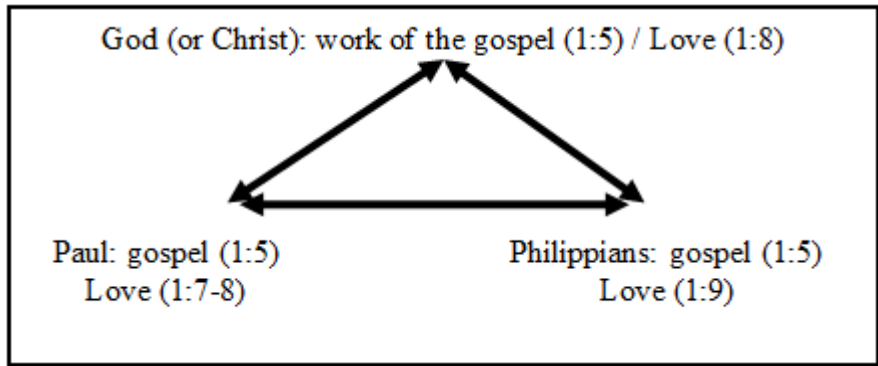
Fig 1: The Tripartite Partnership in Philippians 1:1–11

Thus, as diagrammed above, the introduction to Philippians begins a recurrent pattern in the epistle, whereby God (or Christ, and occasionally, the Holy Spirit) models a virtue related to the gospel, and this is transferred to Paul and the Philippians, either in a petition, as it is here in the introduction, or as an explicit exhortation, or by implication. The idea of modelling in Philippians is therefore tripartite based on κοινωνία of the parties.

2.2. Narrative introduction and proposition 1:12–30

As is usual with Paul's epistolographic practice, the narrative introduction (1:12–26) of Philippians leads seamlessly into the proposition (1:27–30). It is thus appropriate to discuss these two

passages together. The gist of the *narratio* in 1:12–26 is Paul's explanation to the Philippians that 'what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel' (1:12). Rhetorically, his aim in this section was to reassure the Philippians of the advancement of the gospel in the context of opposition and his suffering.

Thus, appropriately, this passage pre-empts the proposition to follow, in which Paul would exhort the Philippians to 'strive side by side' to advance the same gospel amidst opposition. The Philippians were after all 'having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have' (1:30). Paul is not only an exemplar for the Philippians. His situation also models the advancement of the gospel in the context of opposition.

In its details, the narrative introduction also cites another exemplar of the advancement of the gospel amidst opposition. Paul states that most of the believers, presumably in Rome, have been emboldened to τολμᾶν ἀφόβως τὸν λόγον λαλεῖν (*fearlessly dare to speak the word*, 1:14). Deriving encouragement and mimesis from Paul's courageous witness in the Praetorium, these believers also advance the gospel in the face of opposition. They model after Paul and serve as exemplars to the Philippians who must also advance the gospel in the hostile environment of Philippi.

Paul then cites a group of negative exemplars in 1:15–17 as a way of sharpening this model. He refers to believers, who though they preached Christ, did so out of envy, rivalry, and selfish ambition. Given that some among the Philippians exhibited such negative qualities (cf. 2:3-5; 2:13; 2:21; 4:2), Paul's exemplification here is evidently meant to describe 'how *not* to advance the gospel'.

The question as to the identity of these 'envious preachers', and how in practical terms, they could preach the gospel in a manner as to increase Paul's suffering in prison has been widely discussed by commentators (cf. Bockmuehl 1997:77–78; Fee 1995:118–120; Silva 2005:63–65). Interpreters remain generally divided on the exact identity of these preachers.

On the whole, however, these preachers are likely to be Christians who were averse to suffering for the gospel. They may well therefore have interpreted the suffering of Paul as an indication of his culpability. This motivated their preaching, and so, aggravated Paul's suffering (cf. Silva 2005:65). The Philippians were thereby being exhorted that, to advance the gospel, they must be ready to accept the afflictions that came with that enterprise. They must also continue to do so alongside others who suffered accordingly, and not worsen their suffering through envy, strife, and rivalry (1:27).

Paul's response to this 'inside opposition' also models the attitude of joyful contentment while suffering for the sake of the gospel (1:18), and continuing in fearless proclamation of it even to the point of death (1:19–20). Rather than focusing his energies on responding to the 'inside' opposition, he rather focused on the fact that 'Christ is preached' (1:18). The Philippians are to take their cue from Paul as a model of focus on the gospel, and continue in their progress in the faith (1:25).

2.3. Exhortation to unity 2:1–11

Paul's exhortation to unity in the fellowship consists of two subsections, namely, 2:1–4 and 2:5–11. Given some of the exegetical difficulties, it is appropriate to discuss these subsections separately, even though they are seamlessly linked.

2.3.1. The Godhead as source and model of unity 2:1–4

In the prelude to the Christ's-hymn (2:1–4), Paul allusively sets forth the Godhead (God the Son, God the Father, and God the Holy Spirit) as source and model of the virtues of unity of mind and purpose which he exhorts the believers to cultivate. Because of the encouragement, love, and fellowship of the Godhead, the apostle points out that the Philippians are to pursue unity of mind and purpose, each eschewing selfish ambition, but seeking the well-being of each other.

Paul does not speculate on how exactly the Godhead models the attitude of unity of mind and purpose. But this does not diminish the idea that the believers were to draw their source and motivation for this virtue from the Godhead.

In exegetical terms, Philippians 2:1 does not make this concept of the Godhead as model for the believers as explicitly so as has just been described. For a start, 2:1 contains four and not three clauses. Moreover, God the Father is not explicitly cited in the verse. The ambiguity of the second clause of 2:1, εἴ τι παραμύθιον ἀγάπης (if some comfort of love, 2:1b), certainly leaves it open as to whether what Paul meant was (a) Christ's love, (b) the Father's love, (c) Paul's love, or (d) love in general, without a subject.

It is possible that (d) 'love' is cited on its own without a subject in mind (so ESV, NRSV, ASV, and NKJV). However, this approach leaves the clause rather vague. Given Paul's aim to provide a motivation in 2:1 for the upcoming exhortation, this vague rendition constitutes as the least favourable of the options. Similarly, (c) 'Paul's love' is less likely since the apostle subsequently appeals to the completion of his joy in the next verse (2:2a) as an additional motivation for the Philippians to pursue unity of mind and purpose.

The likelihood, then, is that what Paul had in mind in 2:1b was (a) Christ's or (b) God's love (so, NIV, TNIV, and AMP). In favour of (a) 'Christ's love' is the fact that the preceding verses (1:29–2:1a) are focused on Christ. Also, in 1:8, Paul refers to how he longs for the Philippians with 'the affections of Christ', even though in 1:8, he also appeals to God (the Father) as witness in that context. 'Christ's love' is hence likely in 2:1b; but, to be accepted with some vacillation.

On the other hand, there are very good reasons to prefer the notion that it is (b) God's love, which Paul has in view in 2:1b. Firstly, in placing references to Christ (2:1a) and the Spirit (2:1c) side by side, with a gap in between, the indication is that Paul believed the Philippians would naturally assume that 2:1b refers to God the Father's love as the source of comfort (Fee 1999:84).

Secondly, reference to God as the source of the Philippians' salvation is made in 1:28, just before the role of Christ in this salvation history is also made in the verses that follow. Given that 2:1 draws from these preceding references to motivate the believers, the reference to the whole Godhead in 2:1 is more likely than not. Thirdly, since Paul follows 2:1–4 with a reference to the incarnation (2:6), it is likely that the reference to the Godhead in 2:1 triggered his further explanation with the Christ-hymn.

Finally, 2:1 is analogous to the Trinitarian grace in 2 Corinthians 13:13, which employs similar words and phrases as Philippians 2:1. So, if, as is likely, the Philippians were familiar with the saying, 'the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with all of you' (2 Cor 13:13), then, they would have likewise regarded 'love' in 2:1b as emanating from God the Father. There are good reasons therefore to conclude that in Philippians 2:1–4, Paul sets forth the Godhead as source and model of unity of mind and purpose.

2.3.2. Christ as model of self-sacrifice 2:5–11

In Philippians 2:6–11, Paul summarizes the core statement of the gospel, namely, the incarnation, humiliation, death, resurrection, and exaltation of Christ. Whether this poetic statement of the gospel was a pre-existing hymn which Paul cites, or the apostle himself composed it, or it was not a hymn at all, the indication from 2:5 and 2:12 is that Paul uses it for his hortatory purposes. Specifically, he wished the Philippians to model the self-sacrificial humility that is at the centre of the gospel, and in so doing, addresses the problem festering within the church (Fee 1992:29–46; Hellerman 2005; MacLeod 2001: 308–330; Tobin 2006: 91–104; Wendland 2008: 350–378).

Not all interpreters agree that Paul sets forth Christ in 2:6–11 as model for the emulation of the Philippians. Beginning from the middle of the twentieth century, when Ernst Käsemann (1968:84) protested that 'Paul did not understand the hymn as though Christ were held up to the community as an ethical example', a number of interpreters have rejected the traditional view that the Christ-hymn is employed as an exemplar to motivate the readers (e.g. Martin 1997).

They base their objections on syntactical and theological grounds that I will only summarise here.[10] The key syntactical problem depends on how best to translate 2:5 τοῦτο φρονεῖτε ἐν ὑμῖν ὃ καὶ ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ. The traditional view renders it as, for example, 'In your relationships with one another, have the same attitude of mind Christ Jesus had' (TNIV; also CEB, NKJV, NRSV, DBY, Phi, KJV, NIV). The alternative soteriological view renders 2:5 as, for example, 'Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus' (ESV).

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[10] See Silva 2005:95–98 for a fuller discussion.

Thus, while the traditional view takes the passage as presenting Jesus' attitude of self-sacrificial humility as an example to emulate, the soteriological view highlights that such an attitude is made accessible through the believer's union with Christ, and not by emulation.

This syntactical problem evidently feeds into the theological debate as to whether Paul exhorts the Philippians to simply imitate Christ, without due concerns for the nature of the relationship between the readers and Christ; or, it is solely on the basis of that relationship with Christ that the believer acquires the attitude of humility? Theologically, the distinction relates inevitably to the nature of Christian sanctification.

A number of interpreters, quite rightly, opt for a combined view. So, Silva, for example, argues extensively in favour of the soteriological view, and so translates 2:5 as 'Be so disposed toward one another as is proper for those who are united in Christ Jesus' (2005:97). Nevertheless, he roundly rejects the idea that such a translation would conflict with the traditional approach. 'Those who are united with Christ live as he did (cf. 1 John 2:6), and so the notion of Jesus as an ethical example is implicit in Philippians 2:5 by the very nature of the subject matter' so he concludes (2005:97; cf. Bloomquist 1993:164–165; Hooker 1975:151–164; Hurtado 1984:113–126; O'Brien 1991: 272–273; Strimple 1978:247–268).

There are several other indications in the passage and elsewhere in Philippians which support the traditional view that Christ's self-sacrificial humility is upheld as supreme model to be emulated by the Philippians, on the *proviso* that they are in participation with him.

Firstly, several features of the exhorted attitude in 2:1–4 are modelled in the description of Christ's humiliation in 2:6–9. Secondly, 2:12 begins with the emphatic, Ὥστε (*therefore*, or, *so that*), indicating that Paul

draws on the preceding hymn to now exhort the Philippians. Paul was not merely stating the fact of the gospel, but using it to motivate his exhortation. Thirdly, the resulting exhortation that first occupies Paul's reflections in 2:12 is the call for obedience, a virtue which, as he had just stated in the Christ-hymn (2:8), was modelled in Christ. It follows, then, that Paul explicitly draws on the Christ-hymn as an example for the Philippians.

Fourthly, and as we shall shortly discuss, Paul follows on in 2:12–30 with references to his own impending sacrifice as a 'libation' (2:17), alluding to his readiness for martyrdom. He also refers to Epaphroditus' near-death sacrifice in the service of the gospel (2:27). Thus, by implication, Paul and Epaphroditus modelled Christ's self-sacrifice in the service of the gospel.

Fifthly, Christ's self-sacrifice also serves as a model for Paul in his autobiographical account of his Christian existence (3:4–12; cf. Asumang 2011:22–25; Dalton 1979:100; DeSilva 1995:40; Fee 1999: 136; Garland 1985:157–159; Hawthorne 1996:163–179; Kurz 1985:103–126). It is evident then that the Christ-hymn is not just cited in the literary context in 2:1–11, but influences several other aspects of the idea of modelling in Philippians.[11]

Finally, the theological objection misses a key aspect of how Paul presents the idea of modelling in Philippians. At no point does Paul give the impression that anybody could model Christ. On the contrary, and as discussed with regard to the letter's introduction, modelling Christ is based on the premise of a pre-existing κοινωνία, union, or participation in Christ. Thus, the traditional view is correct, that Christ's

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[11] One would however not go as far as Perkins (1991:93–98) who argues that the hymn serves as the epistle's governing metaphor.

self-sacrifice in the gospel is held up as a supreme model to be emulated by the Philippians.

2.4. Exhortation to obedience 2:12–18

The Christ-hymn is followed by a passage in which Paul exhorts the Philippians to obedience, namely, to 'work out your own salvation with fear and trembling' (2:12). As stated earlier, in underlining the fact that the Philippians were 'children of God' (2:15), this passage implicitly presents God as exemplar of the work of salvation to his children.

This idea of a child imitating the parent receives further thrust when a few verses later, in 2:22; Paul describes Timothy thus, 'like a son with a father he has served with me in the work of the gospel'. Like Timothy, the Philippians' parent-child relationship with God is characterized by participation and modelling in the work of the gospel. They model God's working of salvation by working out their salvation. Also, as already described, the call to obedience in 2:12 is modelled after Christ's obedience that is stated earlier in 2:8.

In 2:17, Paul describes himself as 'being poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and the offering of your faith'. This, as has also been pointed out, models Christ's sacrifice in 2:6–11, regardless of whether by this description he meant martyrdom (so Lohmeyer 1968; Silva 2005:128) or his present suffering in prison (so Fee 1999:110).

Although allusive in its description, the passage also presents Old Testament Israel as a negative exemplar to sharpen the call on the Philippians to model the life of obedience and holiness. So, phrases such as 'fear and trembling' of 2:12 (cf. Exod 20:18–22; Deut 5:4–6), 'murmuring and arguing' of 2:14 (cf. Exod 16; Num 14), 'blameless and innocent' of 2:15a (cf. Deut 32:4–7 LXX; cf. Gen 17:1), 'stars in

the [dark] world' of 2:15c (cf. Gen 15:5; 22:17; 28:62; Dan 12:1–4), and the torch-bearers of 'the word of life' imagery in 2:16a (cf. Isa 60:1–5) all evoke comparisons and contrasts of the Philippians with Old Testament Israel.

In that case, Paul, as he does elsewhere in his letters (e.g. 1 Cor 10) utilizes the Old Testament exodus generation as negative exemplar to encourage the Philippians to a life of obedience, contentment, and holiness. If the Philippians indeed recognized this allusion, they would also have understood that many in that generation were destroyed due to their strife, murmuring, and argument. That warning also addressed the quarrelling Philippians.

2.5. The travel plans and missionary report 2:19–30

The genre of 2:19–30 is debated among interpreters, some opting to describe it as a 'travelogue' (Funk 1966:264–269) and others as a 'missionary report' (Silva 2005:134). Regardless of its genre, the passage evidently sets out to explain the delay in Epaphroditus' return, and why Timothy would soon visit the Philippians, hopefully paving the way for Paul's own later visit.

It is however evident, by the nature of the commendations in the passage, that Paul himself, Timothy, and Epaphroditus are set forth as positive exemplars of self-sacrificial service for the sake of the gospel. Indeed, for Culpepper (1980:349–358), the primary objective of the section was to employ these members of the team as exemplars who illustrate the earlier teaching on the self-sacrificial mind of Christ (cf. Fee 1999:117–128).

Timothy, for example, in Silva's words (2005:134), 'models the qualities commended in 1:27–2:18'. His commendation employs some

of the words that Paul had earlier used to exhort the Philippians in 2:1–11. So, just as Paul exhorted them to be φρονῆτε (*likeminded*, 2:2), he now says of Timothy, 'there is no one as ἰσόψυχον (*equal-minded*, 2:20) like him'.

Likewise, in 2:4, Paul exhorts the Philippians to 'Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others'. Now, he says of Timothy in 2:20–21, 'I have no one like him who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. All of them are seeking their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ'. Timothy, in other words, modelled the exhortation to pursue unity of mind and purpose through self-sacrifice. He is very much opposite to the negative exemplars who seek their own interest and not the interest of Christ (2:21).

The commendation of Epaphroditus is even more wide-ranging. Not only does Paul underline the partnership of this particular individual in the service of the gospel (2:25–25),[12] but Paul particularly underlines how he risked his life in the service of the gospel as a commendable act worthy of emulation. 'Honour such people' (2:29b), calls upon the Philippians to regard Epaphroditus' self-sacrificial bravery as a model to emulate.

2.6. Polemics against opponents 3:1–21

The difficulties associated with the interpretation of Philippians 3 are well known.[13] However, interpreters generally agree that the chapter polemically addresses theological opponents of Paul, and perhaps also

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[12] Philippians 2:25–26 employs language which model's Paul's earlier self-descriptions in 1:8 (cf. Fee 1999:121).

[13] These include the translation and implication of Τὸ λοιπόν (*finally*) of 3:1, the dramatic break in tone between 3:1 and 3:2, the identity of the opponents described as 'dogs' in 3:2, and as 'enemies of the cross' in 3:18, and the ambiguities associated with 3:12–14 (see Asumang 2011:1–38).

of the Philippians, but employs the denunciations to also exhort the believers (DeSilva 1995:52–53). While the identity of the opponents themselves remain debated,[14] it appears that by their doctrine (3:2–14) and practice (3:15–21), these opponents subscribed to a 'cross-less' gospel. Paul's aim in this chapter then was to refute these doctrines and practices, and in so doing, establish the Philippians in the life of the true gospel of Christ.

To achieve these two-pronged objectives, Paul employs an autobiographical account of his Christian existence. His intention in this account was to encourage the Philippians to imitate him: 'join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us' (3:17). Stated another way, in Philippians 3, Paul presents his beliefs, spiritual ambitions, and motivations as a model, thereby refuting the 'cross-less' gospel, while exemplifying the cruciform gospel.

In its details however, and as argued by Asumang (2011:1–38), Paul's autobiography in Philippians 3 was modelled after Christ's incarnation, humiliation, death, and exaltation which are earlier presented in 2:6–11 (cf. Fee 1999:128–129; Silva 2005:143). Christ served as a model for Paul, who then serves as a model for the Philippians. The tripartite modelling partnership espoused in the beginning of the letter thus continues.

It is also in 3:2–21 that the concept of imitation, which Paul champions in Philippians, is made more evident. Imitation, according to Paul, is not just a matter of copying what Jesus did. Imitation is not mimickery. For Paul, imitation involved participating in union with Christ in a manner as to be conformed to him and through his power modelling the

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[14] Williams (2002:54–60) discusses eighteen different possible candidates for the

gospel and its implications. In his words, 'I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death' (3:10, NIV). So, it is only in the context of participating in Christ that modelling Christ occurs.

The capstone of this language of modelling in Philippians 3 occurs in 3:21, where Paul says that at the *parousia*, Christ 'will transform our lowly bodies so that they *will be like his glorious body'* (TNIV, italics added). At that eschatological event, the modelling of believers after Christ would be complete, and the good work of salvation, which God started and continues, will then be perfected (1:6). As several interpreters have pointed out, this final perfection of the modelling process is in itself presented in 3:20–21 with language that models the description of Jesus' glorification in 2:9–11 (Lincoln 1981:88; Reumann 1986:593–609; Silva 2005:183).

Also in this regard, the opponents who are indicted in Philippians 3, act as negative exemplars; the citation of whose doctrine and practice helps sharpen the positive exemplars in the chapter. The first reference to the opponents (3:2–3) underlines their cross-less doctrine which focuses rather on circumcision. In sharp contrast to God who begins, continues, and brings to perfection the modelling of ἔργον ἀγαθὸν (*good work*; 1:6) in believers, these negative exemplars are described as κακοὺς ἐργάτας (*evil workers*, 3:2).

As many interpreters have pointed out, if these opponents were the Judaizers, then this contrast is poignant indeed (Bockmuehl 1997:188; Fee 1999:133; O'Brien 1991:355; Silva 2005:147). They claimed to obtain salvation through good works which, in Paul's view, lacked the emphasis on the gospel of the cross. But without participation in the

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identity of these opponents.

cross event, any 'good' work they performed was in fact, κακοὺς (*evil*). They were, in the words of Silva (2005:179), 'a pattern that must be avoided'.

The second reference to the opponents in the chapter describes them as living 'as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things' (3:18–19). Despite the difficulties in identifying the exact referents, it is evident that these believers avoided the self-sacrifice that the gospel of Christ demanded (cf. Fee 199:162; Silva 2005:179–182).

2.7. Specific exhortation towards harmony 4:1–9

In terms of epistolography, Philippians 4 represents the final paraenesis in the closing stages of Paul's letters in which he gives some specific but assorted exhortations to his readers. However, in Philippians, this is extensively modified so that the apostle deals with two specific issues on his agenda, namely, the discord between Euodia and Syntyche (4:1–9), and thanksgiving for the gift (4:10–20). Even so, in each case, Paul places these two objectives in the centre of exhortations to the fellowship.

It is evident that Paul regarded the discord between the two women as a very serious matter. While their exact roles in the church are not given, they must have been influential leaders.[15] After all, they were former co-workers of Paul who had 'struggled beside me in the work of the gospel' (4:3). In other words, they used to do what Paul now exhorts all the Philippians to continue doing (cf. 1:27–30). They used to be

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[15] For an examination of women leadership in the Philippian church and its implications, see Fee (1999:167–168), Koperski (1992:269–292), Luter (1996:411–420), Malinowsky (1985:60–64).

positive models of 'striving together' in the advancement of the gospel in the face of opposition. So, in naming and describing them in this fashion, Paul was publicly shaming these leaders for their discordant behaviour. By their discord, they were being negative models of the gospel.

To resolve the problem, Paul directly requests γνήσιε σύζυγε (*loyal yokefellow*, 4:3) to act as a peacemaker and reconcile the women. Interpreters have speculated on who exactly was this person.[16] Most, however, believe that γνήσιε σύζυγε did not represent the proper name of the person. If that is correct, then Paul designs his characterization of this peacemaker to include the whole fellowship in resolving the issue. This 'appellative, is in effect Paul's way of inviting the various members of the church to prove themselves loyal partners in the work of the gospel' (Silva 2005:193). In other words, γνήσιε σύζυγε (*loyal yokefellow*, 4:3) is held up to the Philippians as a positive model to be emulated.

In an allusive manner, Paul holds up Jesus as a positive model to be emulated in 4:5. So, just as in 2:1–11, the exhortation to seek the interest of others is modelled in Christ, so also in 4:5, the exhortation to let our ἐπιεικὲς (*forbearance*) be manifest to all, is exemplified in the return of Christ (cf. Fee 1999:174–175; Silva 2005:194).

2.8. Thanksgiving note and conclusion 4:10–23

In the thanksgiving note, Paul expresses his gratitude, but in such a manner as to not burden the congregation into feeling that they ought to

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[16] Suggestions have ranged from a person named Syzygos (O'Brien 1991:480–481), Paul's wife or Epaphroditus who was the bearer of the letter (cf. Silva 2005:193), and Luke (Fee 1995:394–395).

give more.[17] Even here, Paul is careful to place the thanksgiving in the context of the Philippians' participation with him in the work of the gospel (4:15). Furthermore, Paul draws out how the Philippians modelled this idea of participation in their giving to the missionary work from the beginning.

This model, he further emphasizes, imitates the sacrificial work of Christ. So, their donation, he says, was 'a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God' (4:18). In Ephesians 5:2, Paul describes the sacrificial death of Christ with similar words, as 'a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God' (TNIV). While he does not explicitly say so in Philippians, there is no doubt that Paul regarded the financial gift of the Philippians as modelling the self-sacrificial death of Jesus which is the essence of the gospel (2:5–11).[18]

Also within this section, Paul expresses his own attitude of contentment with regard to financial affairs (4:11–14; O'Brien 1991:523–525). No doubt, he does so as a way of modelling that virtue for the Philippians to emulate. 'Through [Christ] who strengthens me', Paul is enabled to model the virtue of joyful contentment (cf. 4:4–7).

In a summary, then, and as table one recaps, all sections of Philippians employ exemplars to focus on the modelling of the gospel, in a manner that reflects joyful partnership in Christ. *Modelling the gospel in joyful partnership,* therefore, fits the uniting theme of Philippians. I will now

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[17] The thanksgiving note presents interpreters with several challenges, namely, (a) why does it come so late in the letter, (b) what lies behind Paul's apparent caginess from expressing 'too much' gratitude, and (c) did the Philippians themselves feel burdened by having to support Paul, and if so why did they persist in it? For a recent discussion of these issues, see Briones (2011:47–69).

[18] Even though Paul mentions the failure of other churches to perform similar services, it is unlikely that he identifies them as negative exemplars.

briefly comment on the relevance of this proposal for the construction of New Testament ethics.

3. Modelling the Gospel: The Contribution of Philippians to New Testament Ethics

The effort to establish a paradigm through which Christian moral and social ethics can be constructed for the benefit of society has, lately, been given fresh urgency. This urgency has no doubt arisen because of the catastrophic collapse of moral and ethical standards in politics, business, and religion, both in the developed and developing countries. Many of these societies are therefore turning to religious leaders for some guidance on how to restore their moral and ethical compasses.

Passage	Gospel Theme	Positive Exemplars	Negative Exemplars
1:1–11	Joyful partnership, the gospel as God's 'work', and love and unity through the gospel	God (or Christ) and Paul	
1:12–30	Advancement of the gospel in Rome, in the face of opposition	Paul and the emboldened preachers of goodwill	The envious preachers
2:1–11	Self-sacrifice as model of the gospel	Christ, God the Father and the Holy Spirit	
2:12–18	Working out the gospel in contented obedience	God and Paul	Old Testament Israel

2:19–30	Service and self-sacrifice for the sake of the gospel	Paul, Timothy and Epaphroditus	Self-seeking Christians
3:1–21	Refuting a cross-less gospel	Jesus and Paul	The Judaizers and the 'enemies of the cross'
4:1–9	Correcting failure to strive together to advance the gospel	'Loyal yokefellow' and Christ	Euodia and Syntyche
4:10–23	Self-sacrificial giving for the work of the gospel	Philippians and Paul	

Table 1: Exemplars Modelling the Gospel in Philippians

This situation clearly offers biblical scholars excellent opportunities to influence such reflections. In this context, the debate in biblical scholarship, the correct methodological procedure for configuring the appropriate biblical ethical paradigms has been helpful, if not unduly deadlocked (cf. Zimmermann 2009:399–423).

The fact is, society cannot continue to wait while biblical scholars stalemate on investigative procedures. The exigencies of the times demand focusing our energies on making the voice of the New Testament heard on the current moral and ethical crises.

It is therefore commendable that a number of interpreters have already made very useful suggestions towards establishing this paradigm. Jan van der Watt and others (2006) have brought insights from the sociological and cognitive sciences to inform the enterprise. But that contribution seems to address more of the methodological issues.

Richard Hays (1997) places the worshipping community, the cross, and the new creation at the centre of New Testament ethical reflections. But that otherwise useful paradigm remains theoretical in its application. Richard Burridge's (2007) proposal, based on imitating the 'historical Jesus', is also an impressive concept. But, in its details, it dramatically falls short of stressing the key role of the cross for formulating such a paradigm.

In this context, it seems to me that Philippians has a very important contribution to make to these reflections. If the proposal that *modelling the gospel in joyful partnership* is the uniting theme of the letter is correct, then Philippians provides an important framework for constructing a biblically grounded Christian ethics.

The stress of the present proposal on participation in union with Christ underlines the key point that human ethical behaviour that is pleasing to God is to be grounded in the context of the gospel of Christ. The tripartite nature of this participation underlines the primary role of the communion of the saints in Christ in fostering and shaping this ethic. And the proposal's stress on imitation in this context underlines the call to discipleship and obedience to Christ who modelled the same gospel.

It is fair to say that conservative biblical scholars, certainly of a generation or so ago, have been uncertain about the concept of imitation as an ethical paradigm. The abuse of the idea during the medieval period, and its contemporary misuse outside the context of participation in Christ, has understandably led to a degree of reserve or even rejection by some.

Yet, the abuse of a biblical doctrine is not a good enough reason for its evasion. Surely, conservative Christians cannot continue to deny or

even diminish the essential role of modelling as part of the New Testament's paradigm of discipleship.

As this article has hopefully shown, Philippians certainly serves as the model for constructing a doctrine of imitation that gives thorough meaning to the cruciform nature of Christian existence, while at the same time insisting on the believer's responsibility to practically work out this truth in moral and ethical conduct.

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