

PARALLEL GUIDE 25

The Letter of Paul to the Philippians

Summary

The Letter of Paul to the Philippians is written from prison. Philippi is a garrison town, and Paul is addressing a group of military people about the nature of Christ. He also expresses his appreciation for their support and warns against false teachings.

Learning Objectives

- Read the Letter of Paul to the Philippians
- Discover the setting and intention of the letter to the Philippians
- Learn the significance of the following terms:

episcopoi
diakonos

- Explore the meaning of the Kenotic Theory of the Incarnation

Assignment to Deepen Your Understanding

1. In what way does the advice Paul offers to the congregation at Philippi become good advice to us when we face opposition and conflict?
2. In Philippians 4:8 Paul recognizes the virtues of pagan morality. In what ways do we recognize the morality and virtues in non-Christian religions today?

Preparing for Your Seminar

“Christ emptied himself on our behalf” (2:6-7) is a theme that recurs in theological exploration of the nineteenth century. What might this mean to us?

Works Cited

Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Philippians* (London: SCM, 1962).

Helmut Koester, “The Community of the New Age: Paul’s Letters as a New Political Theology for Christian Community,” *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, 27/4 (1998).

Additional Source

F. W. Beare, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Philippians*, 2nd ed. (London: A & C Black, 1969).

Chapter 25 THE LETTER OF PAUL TO THE PHILIPPIANS

Background

According to the Book of Acts, the church in the Roman colony at Philippi was Paul's first foundation in Europe (Acts 16:12-40). The colonia was largely populated by Roman army veterans, and more than one critic has noticed Paul's tendency in this letter to use military imagery, such as his picture of the Philippians "striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel" (1:27).

There was clearly a special relationship between Paul and the veterans at Philippi, reflected by the gentle tone of the letter in which expressions of affection abound (1:7, 8; 2:18; 4:1, 14). It is significant that the Philippian church supported Paul's work financially, apparently even beyond his expectations or requests (4:10-18). Alone of Paul's correspondence with churches, this letter appears to be occasioned by no major theological, moral, or disciplinary issue. Paul expresses some concern that relationships within the church not be allowed to deteriorate (4:2-3), but even here his personal affection for those involved is evident.

Paul wrote the letter from prison (1:12-14). Clearly he thought his life was in some danger, although he expected to be freed (1:19-26; 2:24). Scholars do not agree, however, about the setting of the imprisonment. Possibly it was an imprisonment of which we have no knowledge. The reference to "the emperor's household" suggests Caesarea or Rome (4:22; cf. Acts 24:26-27; 28:30).

Examining the Text

The unity of the text has been questioned, though not for reasons that are entirely compelling; however, see further below on verses 3:2 and 4:10.

Greetings and Thanksgiving 1:1-11

Of the unquestioned Pauline letters, only that to the Philippians refers to "bishops" or "overseers" (1:1, Greek: episkopoi). We cannot read into the title here the significance that it was to have in later Christian usage. Episkopos was used in koinē Greek to refer to an "overseer" or "superintendent" in pretty much the ordinary sense of those terms in English. Presumably, then, the Philippian church had provided itself with an organization of which these episkopoi were officers. Beyond that basic supposition we must admit that the reference gives us no information at all about their status or duties. The word episkopos occurs elsewhere in the NT (in the singular) only at 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:7.

The other group addressed in the Philippian church is the "deacons." Again, the context gives us little indication of who or what they were. "Deacon" or "minister" (diakonos) is a word often used by Paul in reference to his own work (1 Cor. 3:5; 2 Cor. 3:6) or that of others (Rom. 16:1; 1 Cor. 3:5). In Greek outside the New Testament, diakonos and its cognates appear to be somewhat literary words. They are often used in connection with service to the state or to a god, and have the basic sense of "work performed on behalf of or for the sake of another," with the underlying notion of being what we call a "go-between." Thus the words can be used of those

who "minister" at table, in the sense that they "go between" those who eat and the source of the food—the kitchen. Contrary to much popular supposition, however, the word diakonos is not used of "waiting at table"

in the sense of someone who is a waiter or waitress in a café or restaurant; the Greeks would use a different word for that. “Waiting at table” would only be called diakonia if it were in a temple at the table of the god, or at a king’s banquet, where perhaps a boy prince waited upon his royal father’s guests. The verb diakoneō is used in the Gospels to speak of the service of angels and women to Jesus (Mark 1:13, 30; Luke 8:3) as well as of the Messiah’s own service to the world (Mark 10:45). So far as we can surmise, to be diakonos of a church in the New Testament period implied a degree of status and authority. Beyond that it is impossible for us to know what it involved.

Paul’s opening reflects his concerns. He prays for “love” in the church and that the Philippians may “approve what is excellent,” and he expressed warmly his own affection for them (1:3-10). All Paul’s letters show from time to time the characteristics of ancient “family letters” and “letters of friendship,” but Philippians more than any other.

Paul’s Situation 1:12-26

Paul speaks of his situation, which has clearly been a matter of concern to the Philippians (1:12; cf. 4:10, 18). In fact, he says, the gospel cannot be repressed, and all that has happened has turned out for its advancement in one way or another. Whether “in the whole praetorium” (1:13, NRSV margin) refers to “the whole imperial guard” (as NRSV main translation suggests), or to members of the court at Paul’s trial, or to officials of a local “Government House” in Caesarea or wherever, we do not know. Nor do we know who were the groups of whom Paul approved or those of whom he did not (1:15-18). What is clear is that in life or death, by the prayers of his friends and by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, Paul believes he will be delivered. For Paul, to die is Christ and to live is Christ; but at this point for him to live is, he believes, also “necessary” for his friends. Therefore he is confident of release and the opportunity to return to them (1:19-26).

Exhortation to the Philippian Church 1:27-2:18

In any case the Philippians must continue united (1:27) and unafraid of their opponents (1:28). By their own afflictions the Philippians experience their unity with Christ and hence with Paul (1:29-30). Members of the church must be “of the same mind” (or “like-souled”), “be in full accord,” and “have the same love” (2:2). All this is the vocabulary of friendship. It does not speak of a mindless conformity, but rather of what springs from the Philippians’ comfort “in Christ” and their “sharing in the Spirit” (2:1). Paul compares this with its opposite, marked by “selfish ambition” and “conceit” (2:3). It is not that personal projects or concerns are eliminated in the life in Christ, but they are made relative to the good of all. “Let each of you look not to your own interests,” Paul says, “but to the interests of others” (2:4). Helmut Koester has recently declared that “early Christian ethics is not at all interested in the moral individual”—perhaps with an element of twinkle in the eye, since there is obviously some connection between the moral individual and communal morality. Whether there is a twinkle in his eye or not, Koester’s declaration is still closer to the truth than those still-too-frequent descriptions of a Paul who teaches justification

by faith in such a way that it leads only to a sense of personal forgiveness and a personal ethic. For Paul, a true response to the gospel is always **ecclesial**. He does not ask whether a particular course of action or a particular gift will build up the individual. His question is always, “Will it build up the community?” Paul offers as the pattern of their fellowship the pattern of the gospel itself. The language of verses 2:6-11 possibly indicates quotation from an already existing hymn. In contrast to the first Adam, Christ did not “regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself” (2:6-7).

The Greek word here translated by the English verb “empty” is kenoō, whence the “kenotic” theories of the incarnation. Several nineteenth-century Lutheran theologians held that the divine Son “emptied himself” of the attributes of Godhead, such as omnipotence, omniscience, and cosmic sovereignty, in order to become

incarnate. This is not the place to discuss the merits of such theories, but it should be pointed out that they are not in any way implied or intended by Philippians 2:6-7. The Philippians passage simply speaks of the humility of the Son.^{top}

This is “the mind” that already belongs to the Philippians through their union with Christ in baptism. By this they must strive to live (2:5, 12). Such obedience comes about “in fear and trembling,” that is, “in startled humility, in the consciousness of having nothing to assert in one’s own favor against the others . . .” (Barth 1962, 72). Why? Because it is God at work in us (2:13), and because each of us, living, breathing, and seeking to be faithful, is by that fact a miracle.

Paul begs the Philippians to continue “blameless” in a world in which already they “shine like stars” (2:15), so that “on the day of Christ” Paul himself may be proud (2:16).

Plans and Commendations 2:19-30

Paul commends to the Philippians his helper, Timothy, whom he hopes to send soon, and their own messenger, Epaphroditus. He speaks of both in the warmest tones (2:22, 25-29). Paul hopes also to be present himself with the Philippians soon (2:24).

Warnings Against False Teaching 3:1-21

“Rejoice in the Lord!” Paul exclaims (3:1), and he seems about to end the letter. Whether what follows (3:2-21) is, as some have suggested, a fragment from another letter (Polycarp later spoke of Paul’s letters to the Philippians), or whether Paul simply decided that before closing his letter he needed to issue the warnings given here, need not concern us. What is clear is that Paul is issuing warnings against the same kind of teaching he encountered in Galatia. Paul expresses, as in the letter to the Galatians, all the irritation of the true Jew for those who are pontificating about things they do not understand (3:4-6; cf. Gal. 4:21). Preoccupied with nonessential matters, these teachers are misleading the church. They are ignoring the glory that can be truly theirs as Christians, the glory that had overwhelmed Paul even in what he regards as “gain.” Whatever gain he once had, he now counts as loss and refuses for the sake of the gain of Christ (3:8), which means “not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through the faith of Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith” (3:9, NRSV alt.).

349

This leads to knowing Christ in the Hebrew sense, that is, being in relationship with Christ. It leads, first, to knowing the power of Christ’s Resurrection, as Paul had first encountered him (3:10a). In light of that power and the promise that springs from it, it leads to sharing in Christ’s sufferings, whereby our sufferings are transformed in significance (3:10b). Finally, it leads to “becoming like [Christ] in his death, that if possible I may attain to the resurrection from the dead” (3:10c-11, NRSV alt.).

This is the gain in light of which Paul, who is not yet by any means perfect, presses on and invites the Philippians to press on with him. Those, by contrast, who seek wholeness through the means he is attacking are “set on earthly things” (3:19). He exhorts the Philippians to look for a different Savior and a different “commonwealth” or “citizenship” (*politeuma*) (3:20). It seems that Paul is using a figure particularly apt for a Roman colony that was deeply conscious of its ties with the mother city, Rome. We note Paul’s hope of resurrection rather than immortality of the soul. Christ will “change our lowly body to be like his glorious body.” The Christian hope is for a new creation.

Warnings Against Quarrels 4:1-3

The practical conclusion to what Paul has said is that leading figures in the Philippian church, such as Paul’s

“fellow-laborers” Euodia and Syntache and the “true yokefellow” whom Paul addresses directly (4:3), will “be of the same mind in the Lord” (4:2). We notice that at least two of these three leading figures are women. As always (cf. Rom. 16:1-16), Paul does not speak of them or of their work in terms any different from those that he uses when speaking of men. Were it not for the feminine names and the grammar, it would indeed be impossible to tell from his language in these sections whether he was speaking about men or women, a fact that in itself ought to give pause to those who still persist in the ill-founded myth that Paul undervalued or disliked women.

The idea of a “book of life” (4:3)—a scroll on which God has written the names of the faithful—occurs in the Hebrew Scriptures (e.g., Exod. 32:32; Ps. 69:28). In apocalyptic literature “the book” is the record by which humanity is judged at the final judgment (Dan. 12:1; Rev. 20:12-15). **Notice, however, that while the Scriptures speak of a “book of life,” there is no corresponding “book of death.”** In biblical understanding God predestines for salvation. God does not predestine for damnation (see Chapter Twenty-seven).

Final Messages, Thanks for Financial Aid, and Salutations 4:4-23

Paul suggests that the Christian community should be recognized by its “forbearance” or “gentleness” (4:5a, Greek: *epieikes*, an ethical term carrying the implications of kindness, courtesy, and thoughtful consideration of others). When Paul says, “The Lord is near” (4:5b), he speaks not only of an abiding presence, but also of a vivid expectation (cf. Luke 12:35-36).

In 4:8 it is notable that Paul claims for Christians the recognized virtues of pagan morality. None of the words used here is specifically Christian. Some are used nowhere else in the NT and some nowhere else in Paul. **“Excellence”** (Greek: *aretē*) is a comprehensive term for moral virtue and a central theme of Greek ethics. It need hardly be said that it is a virtue for which a soldier would feel it proper to aspire.

350

At 4:10 the apostle interrupts his farewell to speak again of the Philippians’ kindness to him and their generosity in his support. Some suggest that the change is too abrupt to be tolerable and that we have in 4:10-20 the body of a separate letter of thanks. This is possible although hardly certain. We might do better to see another illustration of a single theme. At 1:19-26 Paul had spoken of his own willingness to “remain in the flesh” for the sake of the Philippians; at 2:3-11, of Christ’s willing self-abandonment for the sake of the world. He speaks of the Philippians’ own concern for him, Paul (4:10), and their sharing of his troubles (4:14). All this, of course, is how he wants the Philippians to behave in their relationship with each other (cf. 2:5).

“Content” (4:11, Greek: *autarkēs*, “self-sufficient”) is a term from the **Stoic and Cynic philosophers**, for whom an important part of self-discipline was to reduce personal needs to a minimum. Unlike the Cynics, however, Paul does not value hardship for its own sake (see 4:12). His is more the “self-sufficiency” of good soldiers on active service, who will get on as best they can with the job they have been given to do, without constantly whining and complaining.

“The emperor’s household” (4:22) does not mean members of the emperor’s personal family in our sense of the word “family,” but persons employed in the imperial civil service, many of whom would be slaves or freed persons.

351

End of chapter

Recognizes the virtues of pagan morality [back](#)

Not really. It's a stretch to read that into what Paul says.

Recognize the morality ^{back}

By doing business with them, in preference to Christians?



Emptied back

We might try paraphrasing this.

Ecclesial ^{back}

Yes it's a word. "Pertaining to the church or its functions."

Book of Death [back](#)

True, but I'd always assumed that if your name wasn't in the Book of Life, you had a problem.

Excellence [back](#)

Curiously, both ἀρετή and the Latin word *virtus* come from an Indo-European root that means "male." And in English you probably wouldn't call a woman "virile." The Latin *virtus* definitely means "manliness," and couldn't be applied to a woman. So perhaps a classically-educated sexist might deny that any woman could be virtuous...

Stoic and Cynic [back](#)

Remember that by Paul's time, most Greek, Roman, and Jewish people who thought about morality tended to speak and think in Greek. So it's not at all surprising that Paul and his pagan contemporaries used similar philosophical terminology. But while Paul and his Jewish contemporaries saw morality in a religious context, the pagan moral philosophers regarded virtue as something that could be acquired through training and practice. They were deists after all, thinking only of "the gods" in the most general terms, even if they *were* the ultimate source of good.

