

Research Paper: Unity and humility in Philippians

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Have this attitude among you what was also in Christ Jesus, who existing in form of God did not count as something to be grasped to be equal to God but he emptied himself taking the form of a slave, being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, he humiliated himself, becoming obedient to death, even to the death of the cross. This is also why, God exalted him and bestowed upon him the name which is above every name so that, in the name of Jesus, every knee in heaven, on the earth and under the earth should bow and that every tongue should acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God, the Father.
(Phil 2:5-11)¹

INTRODUCTION

We can often think, as I did before writing this paper, of the epistle of Paul to the Philippians as the “letter on humility”. I now believe that saying this implies a serious misunderstanding of Paul’s vision of humility. This title could make one think that the main goal of the epistle is to make the Philippians more humble, that humility is its proper goal. However, as we will see, Paul is not trying to convince the church in Philippi to be more modest but more likely to use humility in order to be united in the congregation.

This is the main thesis of the present assignment: humility in Philippians is not a goal in itself but rather a tool leading to unity in the Church and finally to glory.

This paper could be very long if concentrating on the whole epistle. However, because of its size, it will focus on chapter two and its specific context. I will proceed in three parts. The first will study the epistle’s historical context and key words, the second part will study chapter two exegetically linked to its proper literary context. The last part will attempt to draw out some practical applications.

1 Translation is mine.

I. PRELIMINARY THOUGHTS

1. Historical Context

In order to better understand what Paul is writing about, it is important to grasp the historical context of the Church in Philippi. Fortunately, the Bible gives the description of the founding of the Church in Acts 16. Luke² writes in Acts 16 that Paul, Silas, Timothy and probably himself³ were the planters of this Church. The first members were Lydia, the God-fearer, and her household. Then came the jailer of the city and his household and probably others while Paul continued his missionary trip. All these facts make us notice several things. First, Timothy was well-known in the Church, this is why they were looking forward to his arrival; perhaps to have him appease the conflicts. Paul However decided not to let him go but to send him later (2:17-25). Secondly, it is interesting to note that the Church had no Jews at the beginning. Some commentators consider that because of that, Paul cannot be writing about jews in chapter 3 (3:2-12). I believe, however, that it is more likely that Paul refers to Judaizers because of the expression “false circumcision” (3:2). Thirdly and lastly, Acts 16 paints a portrait of opposition to faith from the beginning. It is not surprising therefore to see encouragements to stay firm in faith despite persecution.

After the creation of the Church, Paul left Philippi for Thessalonica. Following this, tensions arose in the church. These may be linked with the “false circumcision” (3:2) and legalism. It might be a reason to why Paul insists so much on humility. The leaders of the Church, seeing this, decided to look to Paul for help. They sent Epaphroditus to Rome (according to Moisés Silva) to see Paul in prison and look for advice and probably to have him send Timothy. The idea of

² I take here as assumption that Luke is the author of Luke and Acts.

³ See D.A Carson & Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, (Michigan: Zondervan, 2005), 498-515 or Marshall (Howard I. Marshall, *Acts*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (England: IVP, 2008), 280-291 on this point. Luke probably stayed in Philippi to help start the church. This is how I understand the “we”. See note 2.

requesting Timothy was probably to have someone in Philippi who could be neutral to the conflict but that the Church would know well and love.

As a result, the situation in the Church is complicated. It is well summarized by Moisés Silva in his commentary on Philippians:

... All of those factors combined to create disagreements, distrust, and a poisonous spirit of self-seeking (Phil 2:1-4). The leadership of the church, particularly in the persons of Euodia and Syntyche, had fallen into the sin of dissension, and the general health of the church had deteriorated considerably (Phil 2:14-16, 4:2-3). Conscious of how much they were in need of the spiritual help and guidance, they dispatched Epaphroditus with the gift and asked Paul to keep him as his assistant but to send their beloved Timothy back to Philippi⁴. (...) The very difficult task that was before the apostle would draw from him, under divine inspiration, a message full of comfort and joy, rebuke and encouragement, doctrine and exhortations.⁵

2. Literary Analysis

Paul, seeing this complex situation, tries to do several things at once. It is possible to see his major emphases by looking at the most repeated words in the letter. An important focus is joy (*χαρά* and *χαίρω* occur sixteen times in the epistle) but also having a same spirit and a same thought (*φρονέω* occurs ten times), doing so by humility (*ταπεινώνω*, *ταπεινοφροσύνη* and *ταπείνωσις* occur four times⁶) which will lead to glory (*δόξα* occurs at least four times).

This analysis shows that humility is not the main goal of the epistle. It is better to see it as a tool helping Churches to face conflicts. The incarnate Christ, who decided to lose his majesty in order to suffer and die on the cross is not only a great example to follow but it is also a way to fight discord.

⁴ Also see Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Let's Study Philippians* (Edinburg: Banner of Trust, 2003), 61-62

⁵ Moisés Silva, *Philippians*, The Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary (Chicago: The Moody Bible Institute, 1988), 4-5

⁶ This is one reason why we shouldn't name the epistle to the Philippians "the epistle on humility". However, it is not because the word group occurs only four times that it is not important in the letter. Paul is placing these words in strategic places showing the importance of humility (by concrete example) and its consequences.

II. EXEGESIS

1. Preliminary remarks

Now and only now that the whole context has been described, the exegesis of chapter two can begin. We begin by noting several assumptions that do not have the place to be argued but are made in this assignment. First of all, Paul is the author of the letter; the typical pauline theology is found all over the writing. Secondly, I do not believe that the fact that Polycarp speaks of “the letters to the Philippians” is very relevant to say that the letter is composed from several fragments⁷. Thirdly and lastly, I think that there is a continuity of thought in all the letter which makes impossible the fact that Philippians is not an organic letter⁸.

The first thing to notice in chapter two is the literary context. Moisés Silva, for example, underlines that 1:27 starts with *μόνον* (only). This specific word shows that what Paul is about to say is crucial. The same expression is used in Galatians 5:13. Silva comments that as the Galatians,

The Philippians were in danger of overlooking their Christian duty to maintain spiritual unity; intimidated by their opponents, they may slacken their zeal in conflict. The apostle’s injunction; must therefore be taken as a serious and fundamental concern in the leader.⁹

Immediately following this, he calls them to live in a manner “worthy of the gospel of Christ, that, whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of your state, that you stand firm in one spirit, with one soul striving for the faith of the gospel; ...” (Phil 1:27¹⁰). He then, as John Calvin would

⁷ Holloway p.10-19, see also the outline of Philippians from H. F. Bayer in the annex.

⁸ I will not enter into the discussion of whether Philippians 2:5-11 is a hymn or not. The introduction to the New Testament (D.A Carson & Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, (Michigan: Zondervan, 2005) does this very well. I personally think that there is no good reason to consider that these verses were added by someone other than Paul. What is more, there is a good flow of thoughts and unity of thinking throughout chapter two. There is therefore no reason to take this as something added after the redaction of the letter. Paul could be using a well-known song/poem in his argument but this seems unlikely to me.

⁹ Moisés Silva, *Philippians*, The Wicliffe Exegetical Commentary (Chicago: The moody Bible Institute, 1988), p.89

¹⁰ All the Bible’s citation will be quoted from the World English Bible.

say¹¹, starts his sermon on humility by humiliating himself in front of the Philippians and begging them to be united. Calvin notes that the emphasis is on unity in these verses. This is marked by the repetition of τὸ αὐτὸ (we can also add the use of σύνψυχοι, ἓν and κοινωνία). The question that comes this raises for the readers in Philippi (and now all over the world) is then how to achieve this perfect unity that God is asking us? Paul gives the answer in what follows: “Have this in your mind, which was also in Christ Jesus,” (Phil 2:5) and “in humility, each counting others better than himself;” (Phil 2:3). But again, all this, is motivated by “doing nothing through rivalry or through conceit,” (Phil 2:3).

2. A specific application

There is however, for Gordon Fee¹², more to note here. Fee notices that the expression τὸ αὐτὸ φρονεῖν (or so) is used three times (2:2; 3:15; 4:2) at strategic points in the letter and plays an important role:

Forgetting the things which are behind, and stretching forward to the things which are before, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, *think this way*. *If in anything you think otherwise, God will also reveal that to you* [ὅσοι οὖν τέλειοι, **τοῦτο φρονῶμεν**· καὶ εἴ τι **ἑτέρως φρονεῖτε**, καὶ τοῦτο ὁ θεὸς ὑμῶν ἀποκαλύψει]. Nevertheless, to the extent that we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule. Let us be of the same mind. (3:13-16).¹³

I exhort Euodia, and I exhort Syntyche, to *think the same way* [**τὸ αὐτὸ φρονεῖν**] in the Lord. Yes, I beg you also, true yoke-fellow, help these women, for they labored with me in the gospel, with Clement also, and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life. (4:2-3)¹⁴

We sense that Paul is also writing so that Euodia and Syntyche feel concerned by the letter. In 4:2 he is saying something like: “You too, Euodia and Syntyche, you need to think in the same way, God will help you to see who is right (I do not want to enter the debate here) but meanwhile, you

11 Jean Calvin, *Commentaries on the epistles of Paul the apostle to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, Calvin’s Commentaries (vol. XXI) (Michigan: Baker House, 1979), 52

12 Gordon D. Fee, *Philippians*, The Inter Varsity Press New Testament Commentary Series (Illinois: IVP, 1999), 158

13 Emphasis and greek added.

14 Emphasis and greek added.

need to count the other as superior to yourself, you need to be humble and therefore have the same thought”. Gordon Fee writes in his commentary:

Paul now entreats these two leaders to *agree with each other* (*phronein* = “have the same mindset”) *in the Lord*. Given (a) the brevity of of this letter, (b) that the letter would have been read aloud in the gathered community in a single sitting, and (c) that appeals to “have the same mindset” are part of the stuff of letters of friendship, one can be sure that the present appeal is to be understood as a specific application of the earlier ones in Philippians 2:2 and 3:15. Given its position at the end, it is also probably related to the foregoing warning and appeal (3:1-21). Paul refuses to take sides, thus maintaining friendship with all... As in the immediately preceding appeal, it is qualified *in the Lord*, evidence that we are not dealing with a personal matter but with “doing the gospel” in Philippi. Having “the same mindset” *in the Lord* has been specifically spelled out in the preceding paradigmatic narratives, where Christ (2:6-11) has humbled himself by taking the “form of a slave” and thus becoming obedient unto death on a cross, and Paul (3:4-14) has expressed his longing to know Christ in a cruciform way.¹⁵

3. The final glory

Before concluding this paper by looking at the implications of this study, I would like to make a final remark that I discovered only a few months ago. As we saw in the literary analysis, the word δόξα appears at least four times in key contexts. Paul is therefore also writing on glory in his letter. He is not saying that it is something bad but that it is the consequence of humility. Taking the example of the incarnate Logos, he writes:

Who [Christ/the divine Logos], existing in the form of God, ... emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men. ... he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, yes, the death of the cross. **Therefore God also highly exalted him, and gave to him the name which is above every name; that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, those on earth, and those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.**¹⁶ (2:6-11)

15 Gordon D. Fee, *Philippians*, The Inter Varsity Press New Testament Commentary Series (Illinois: IVP, 1999), 168-169

16 Emphasis is mine. I also need to explicit something. The word δόξα is not directly linked to Jesus. My conclusion comes from two details. First, Jesus *exalted* (2:9) comes from the word ὑπερυσώ and does not have the same root than δόξα. It is, however, the same idea: Jesus-Christ is now glorious because of his humiliation (we can see this in 3:21 where it is Jesus body who is glorious). Secondly, the idea of glory is still there because it is “to the glory of God the Father” (2:11) that Jesus humiliated himself. With a quick theological thought, we can remember that Jesus’ glory and the Father’s one are shared. Therefore, if the Father is glorified by the Son’s humiliation, it is logical to link δόξα also to Jesus-Christ (who just earned his title of κύριος).

The apostle is showing that it is because of Christ’s obedience and humiliation that he was exalted and given the name of YHWH himself (κύριος). Humility leads, at least in this case, to exaltation.

In echo to this passage, Paul writes this at the end of the letter:

For our citizenship is in heaven, from where we also wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; *who will change the body of our humiliation to be conformed to the body of his glory*, according to the working by which he is able even to subject all things to himself. (3:20-21)¹⁷

As Christians, we have the incredible hope that, because of our humiliation on earth, because we put our faith in Jesus who has received YHWH’s name, we will have a glorified body and live with the glorious God forever. Our eyes will see him and all this will be to the glory of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

It is, however, very important to see that there are different types of glory. Christian should not be looking for the glory from this world. As Paul said: “doing nothing through rivalry or through conceit [μηδὲν κατ’ ἐριθείαν μηδὲ κατὰ κενοδοξίαν], but in humility, each counting others better than himself;” (2:3). Even-tough Paul is showing that humility leads to glory, he does not the Church to look for vain glory because this creates division.

III. SO WHAT?

All this reminds us what to do when we find ourselves in conflict, when tensions arise in the Church. First of all, we need to remember that we are christians and that we are headed toward a goal. We should recall the goal that:

your [our] love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and all discernment; so that you [we] may approve the things that are excellent; that you [we] may be sincere and without offense to the day of Christ; being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God. (1:9-11)

¹⁷ Emphasis is mine.

Having acknowledged this, we should think again of the apostle's appeal: "Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ," (1:27). We should behave thus because we have been redeemed by our Lord Jesus-Christ. Then we should seek to look at others as being superior to ourselves (2:3). This may be the most difficult part because humans are naturally selfish because of the fall. The only way to change is to focus on the cross, on our risen king and consider that he humiliated himself saving unworthy people because he considered us as superior than to himself. What a difficult lesson to hear! We often forget it: the almighty king, the divine Logos, YHWH himself decided, for no other reason than his love, to come to earth and take the form of a defenseless baby, to wash the feet of his unfaithful disciples, to die on the cross in order to save unrighteous. Why then do we have so much difficulty to humiliate ourselves a bit? Why do we seek the admiration of people? It is because, once again, we forget to look at the glorious king and at his actions. We forget to admire our God and we become proud of ourselves. If we only considered God's majesty, holiness and might, we would realize that we shouldn't have any pride about ourselves. Paul is here saying: look at the goal and you will never fail.

CONCLUSION

As a result, it would seem to be confirmed that the epistle to the Philippians shouldn't be entitled "the epistle of humility" because humility in Philippians is there for a goal: unity. By looking to Christ, the apostle considers how everything is vain and sees that glory and appearances in this world are nothing (3:8). All this advice from Paul to the Church in Philippi must help Euodia and Syntyche - as well as modern readers - to be one in the Lord and to see that it is not always being right that matters but how we deal with disagreements.

Do you know what I have done to you? You call me, 'Teacher' and 'Lord.' You say so correctly, for so I am. If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Most assuredly I tell you, a servant is not greater than his lord, neither one who is sent greater than he who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them. (Jn 14:12-17)

ANNEX I: Outline of the letter¹⁸

1:3–11 Prooemium

1:12–26 Paul’s circumstances

I. 1:27–2:18 EXHORTATIONS towards steadfastness (s) and *humility* (h)

a. 1:27–30 Steadfastness (s)

b. 2:1–18 Humility (h)

1. Interjection: 2:19–30 examples of Paul’s fellow workers

b”. Timothy 2:19–24 (h)

a”. Epaphroditus 2:25–30 (s)

II. B. 3:1–4:1 WARNINGS against legalism and antinomianism

b’. 3:1–16 vs. Legalism (pride) (h) 3:4-11

a’. 3:17–4:1 vs. Antinomianism (licentiousness) (s)

4:2–23 Concluding exhortations

18 This outline is taken from Hans F. Bayer.

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