The Letter to the
PHILIPPIANS

G. WALTER HANSEN

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Commentaries have specific aims, and this series is no exception. Designed for serious pastors and teachers of the Bible, the Pillar commentaries seek above all to make clear the text of Scripture as we have it. The scholars writing these volumes interact with the most important informed contemporary debate, but avoid getting mired in undue technical detail. Their ideal is a blend of rigorous exegesis and exposition, with an eye alert both to biblical theology and the contemporary relevance of the Bible, without confusing the commentary and the sermon.

The rationale for this approach is that the vision of “objective scholarship” (a vain chimera) may actually be profane. God stands over against us; we do not stand in judgment of him. When God speaks to us through his Word, those who profess to know him must respond in an appropriate way, and that is certainly different from a stance in which the scholar projects an image of autonomous distance. Yet this is no surreptitious appeal for uncontrolled subjectivity. The writers of this series aim for an even-handed openness to the text that is the best kind of “objectivity” of all.

If the text is God’s Word, it is appropriate that we respond with reverence, a certain fear, a holy joy, a questing obedience. These values should be reflected in the way Christians write. With these values in place, the Pillar commentaries will be warmly welcomed not only by pastors, teachers, and students, but by general readers as well.

Casual readers of the letter to the Philippians might think that it is one of the slighter contributions penned by Paul. Here one does not find, say, the massive theological reasoning of Romans, the emotional intensity of 2 Corinthians, or the contentious apologetic of Galatians. Some might almost find it bland. Yet those who have probed this letter more closely know that the first chapter finds Paul in one of his most reflective moods as, toward
the end of his life, he contemplates the benefits of “departing” and “being with Christ” over against living on in this world to bring further gospel blessing to the churches for which he is responsible; that the second chapter includes one of the high points of New Testament Christology, the third is embroiled in contemporary debates about the New Perspective on Paul, and the fourth contains one of the most revealing pictures of the relationship between Paul and a supporting church. In all of this, the letter sings with the theme of joy and appeals to the Philippians to learn to “think the same thing.” Small wonder that this letter is so embracing when all along it keeps trumpeting the gospel.

With themes and emotions so varied, the letter to the Philippians needs a commentator with a sure grasp and a warm heart. It helps that Dr Hansen writes with admirable clarity and simplicity, even when he is unpacking notoriously complex matters. Perhaps he brings so many qualifications to the table because he himself has not only served as a pastor and a seminary professor, but as a missionary in another cultural context. Certain it is that this commentary will become “must” reading for many pastors, students, and scholars as they try to think Paul’s thoughts after him while reading this letter.

D. A. CARSON
Author’s Preface

In the process of writing this exposition of Philippians, I gained a deep appreciation for the importance of partnership not only from Paul’s development of the theme of partnership in this letter but also from my partners in this work of producing a commentary. I could not have written this book in isolation; I depended on a community of friends who invested in my life and my work. As Paul’s letter expresses his joy in his partnership with the Philippians, this preface celebrates my partnership with those who contributed significantly to this work.

Writers of previous commentaries, especially Barth, Beare, Bockmuehl, Bonnard, Fee, Fowl, Hawthorne, Martin, Müller, O’Brien, and Silva, became my constant dialogue partners in a long and exhilarating conversation about Philippians. I am deeply grateful for their insights, even at points where I respectfully disagree with them. My friends, John McEntyre and Ron Mahurin, read portions of this commentary and gave me the benefit of their thoughtful feedback. Gifted students in my courses on the Greek text of Philippians at Fuller Theological Seminary sharpened my interpretation by their tough questions and fresh perspectives. Conversations about my discoveries with numerous friends, especially the Monday lunch circle, enriched my own understanding. Ben Chang found many valuable journal articles. Annemarie Moody carefully compiled the bibliography and list of abbreviations. Nancy Bullock patiently proofread the entire manuscript. Don Carson, general editor of the Pillar New Testament Commentary, gave wise and gracious counsel for the clarification of key points. Milton Essenburg, Eerdmans editor, provided warm encouragement and meticulous attention to detail.

I express my deepest gratitude to my wife, Darlene, to whom I dedicate this book. Her joyful partnership in all aspects of our life made the process of writing this commentary an enjoyable adventure in our journey together.

I have used Today’s New International Version (TNIV) as the basis for my exposition, except in my commentary on the Christ hymn (2:6-11)
where I follow my own translation of the Greek text. For the most part, I have kept the body of the commentary free from technical language. The footnotes point to the academic research and contemporary debate related to my exposition of the text. My reason for using this style is to provide a commentary that is accessible to a wide audience of readers, especially Bible teachers and pastors. I hope that this commentary will be a way for me to enjoy a partnership with my readers as we seek to “live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ” (1:27).

G. Walter Hansen
July 2008
Abbreviations

I. ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS AND PARAPHRASES
ASV American Standard Version
KJV King James Version
NASB New American Standard Bible
NEB New English Bible
NIV New International Version
NRSV New Revised Standard Version
RSV Revised Standard Version
TNIV Today's New International Version

II. NEW TESTAMENT MANUSCRIPTS
\( \gamma^{46} \) Papyrus Chester Beatty II (ca. 200)
\( \text{R} \) London: Sinaiticus (4th c.)
\( \text{A} \) London: Alexandrinus (5th c.)
\( \text{B} \) Rome: Vaticanus (4th c.)
\( \text{C} \) Paris: Ephraemi Rescriptus (5th c.)
\( \text{D} \) Paris: Claromontanus (6th c.)
\( \text{F} \) Cambridge (9th c.)
\( \Psi \) Athos (8th-10th c.)
\( \text{M} \) The Majority Text, i.e., the text of the majority of Greek mss. (9th-15th c.)

III. APOCRYPHA
1 Macc 1 Maccabees
3 Macc 3 Maccabees
4 Macc 4 Maccabees
Sir Sirach/Ecclesiasticus

IV. RABBINIC LITERATURE
m. Avot Mishnah Avot
Abbreviations

m. Sanh. Mishnah Sanhedrin
Qidd. Qiddushin
Yevam. Yevamot

V. EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITINGS
Ignatius
   Rom. To the Romans
Polycarp
   Phil. To the Philippians

VI. CLASSICAL AND HELLENISTIC LITERATURE
Aeschylus
   Pers. Persians
Aristotle
   Eth. nic. Nicomachean Ethics
   Pol. Politics
   Rhet. Rhetoric
   Virt. vit. Virtues and Vices
Cicero
   Amic. De amicitia
   Planc. Pro Plancio
Epictetus
   Diss. Dissertationes
Homer
   Il. Iliad
Josephus
   Ant. Jewish Antiquities
   C. Ap. Contra Apionem
   J.W. The Jewish War
   Life Life of Flavius Josephus
Justinian
   Dig. Digesta
Plutarch
   Amic. mult. De amicorum multitudine
   Mor. Moralia
   Alex. fort. virt. De Alexandri magni fortuna aut virtute
   Tranq. an. De tranquillitate animi
Seneca
   Vit. beat. De vita beata
Sophocles
   Ant. Antigone
Philo
   Cher. De cherubim
   Decal. De decalogo
   Migr. De migratione Abrahami
### VII. SECONDARY WORKS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Title</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AB</td>
<td>Anchor Bible</td>
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<tr>
<td>ABD</td>
<td>Anchor Bible Dictionary</td>
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<td>ABRL</td>
<td>Anchor Bible Reference Library</td>
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<tr>
<td>ACCS</td>
<td>Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture</td>
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<tr>
<td>ATR</td>
<td>Anglican Theological Review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BECNT</td>
<td>Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bib</td>
<td>Biblica</td>
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<tr>
<td>BNTC</td>
<td>Black’s New Testament Commentaries</td>
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<tr>
<td>BSac</td>
<td>Bibliotheca sacra</td>
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<tr>
<td>BST</td>
<td>The Bible Speaks Today</td>
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<tr>
<td>BT</td>
<td>Bible Translator</td>
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<tr>
<td>BZAW</td>
<td>Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</td>
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<tr>
<td>CBQ</td>
<td>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CIL</td>
<td>Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DNTB</td>
<td>Dictionary of New Testament Background</td>
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<tr>
<td>DPL</td>
<td>Dictionary of Paul and His Letters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDNT</td>
<td>Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament</td>
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<tr>
<td>ETL</td>
<td>Ephemerides theologicae lovanienses</td>
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<td>EvJ</td>
<td>Evangelical Journal</td>
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<td>ExpT</td>
<td>Expository Times</td>
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<td>FN</td>
<td>Filología Neotestamentaria</td>
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<td>GTJ</td>
<td>Grace Theological Journal</td>
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<tr>
<td>HNT</td>
<td>Handbuch zum Neuen Testament</td>
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<tr>
<td>HTKNT</td>
<td>Herders Theologische Kommentar zum Neuen Testament</td>
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<td>HTR</td>
<td>Harvard Theological Review</td>
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<tr>
<td>IBS</td>
<td>Irish Biblical Studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>ICC</td>
<td>International Critical Commentary</td>
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<tr>
<td>Int</td>
<td>Interpretation</td>
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<tr>
<td>JBL</td>
<td>Journal of Biblical Literature</td>
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<tr>
<td>JETS</td>
<td>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</td>
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<tr>
<td>JFSR</td>
<td>Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion</td>
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<td>JGWR</td>
<td>Journal of Gender in World Religions</td>
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<td>JSNT</td>
<td>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</td>
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<tr>
<td>JSNTSup</td>
<td>Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplement Series</td>
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<td>JOT</td>
<td>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</td>
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<tr>
<td>JTC</td>
<td>Journal for Theology and the Church</td>
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<td>JTS</td>
<td>Journal of Theological Studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>KEK</td>
<td>Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament</td>
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<tr>
<td>LEC</td>
<td>Library of Early Christianity</td>
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<td>Abbreviations</td>
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<tr>
<td>LLt. Living Light</td>
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<td>LNNTS The Library of New Testament Studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>LS Louvain Studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>LSJ Liddell, H. G., R. Scott, and H. S. Jones. A Greek-English Lexicon</td>
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<td>MM Moulton, J. H., and G. Milligan. The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament</td>
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<td>Neot Neotestamentica</td>
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<td>NIB The New Interpreter’s Bible</td>
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<td>NIBCNT New International Biblical Commentary on the New Testament</td>
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<td>NICOT New International Commentary on the Old Testament</td>
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<td>NIDNTT New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology</td>
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<td>NIVAC The New International Version Application Commentary</td>
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<td>Notes Notes on Translation</td>
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<td>NovT Novum Testamentum</td>
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<td>NovTSup Novum Testamentum Supplements</td>
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<td>NSBT New Studies in Biblical Theology</td>
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<td>NTD Das Neue Testament Deutsch</td>
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<tr>
<td>NTG New Testament Guides</td>
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<tr>
<td>NTS New Testament Studies</td>
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<td>PRSt Perspectives in Religious Studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>QR Quarterly Review</td>
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<td>RevExp Review and Expositor</td>
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<tr>
<td>SBLDS Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series</td>
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<tr>
<td>SBLISBS Society of Biblical Literature Sources for Biblical Study</td>
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<tr>
<td>SBT Studies in Biblical Theology</td>
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<tr>
<td>SE Studia evangelica</td>
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<tr>
<td>SHAW Sitzungen der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften</td>
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<tr>
<td>SNTSMS Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series</td>
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<tr>
<td>SR Studies in Religion</td>
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<tr>
<td>TDNT Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</td>
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<td>Them Themelios</td>
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<td>THKNT Theologischer Handkommentar zum Neuen Testament</td>
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<td>TJ Trinity Journal</td>
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<td>TJT Toronto Journal of Theology</td>
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<tr>
<td>TLNT Theological Lexicon of the New Testament</td>
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<td>TNTC Tyndale New Testament Commentary</td>
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<td>TynBul Tyndale Bulletin</td>
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<tr>
<td>TZ Theologische Zeitschrift</td>
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<tr>
<td>WBC Word Biblical Commentary</td>
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<tr>
<td>WTJ Westminster Theological Journal</td>
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<td>WUNT Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament</td>
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<td>ZNT Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Theologie</td>
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Abbreviations

ZNW  Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche
ZThK  Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche

VIII. TECHNICAL ABBREVIATIONS

A.D.  anno Domini
B.C.  before Christ
c.   century
c.a.  circa, about
cf.  compare
ed.  editor, edition, edited by
e.g.  exempli gratia, for example
i.e.  id est, that is
LXX  Septuagint (Greek OT, 3rd c. B.C.)
ms., mss.  manuscript(s)
n.   footnote
NT   New Testament
OT   Old Testament
p    Papyrus
repr.  reprint, reprinted
rev.  revised
trans.  translated by
v (v.)  verse(s)
vol(s).  volume(s)
I. COMMENTARIES ON PHILIPPIANS

Throughout this work I have referred to commentaries on Philippians simply by author surname and page number.


Repr., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1953.

II. OTHER WORKS

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xxvi  Select Bibliography


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Peterman, Gerald W. Paul’s Gift from Philippi: Conventions of Gift Exchange and


Select Bibliography


Stockton, David. “The Founding of the Empire.” Pages 531-56 in *The Oxford


Select Bibliography


Introduction

Paul’s letter to the Philippians exudes a joyful spirit and warm affection. As a “thank you” note to his friends for their generosity, Paul’s letter wraps them in his warm embrace. Yet, as he affirms his friends, he also responds to their problems: rivalry and gossip in the church separate leaders; hostility and skepticism in the world challenge faith in Christ; and the spirituality of impressive religious teachers promoting a bogus formula for perfect success attracts recent converts. Since followers of Jesus in the twenty-first-century experience similar problems, Paul’s first-century response to the Philippians sounds strangely applicable to the present time. Paul validates the authenticity of his message by speaking honestly about his own experience in prison and openly admitting his shortcomings in his journey of faith. His letter strengthens our faith in Christ in the face of suffering and death, encourages us to resolve our conflicts in our community, and teaches us how to embody the gospel so that the world can see and hear the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Above all, Paul’s letter leads us to worship Jesus Christ as we contemplate his suffering on the cross, his exaltation as Lord, and his ultimate victory over all earthly powers.

To prepare the way for reading through this remarkable letter we will consider a few background issues: the historical setting of the church in Philippi, the nature of the letter, the occasion for the letter, and a brief preview of two major themes of the letter.

I. THE HISTORICAL SETTING OF THE CHURCH IN PHILIPPI

Philippi carried the name of Philip II, king of Macedon, since his fortification of the city in 356 B.C.\(^1\) His patronage of Greek arts contributed to the

1. For historical overviews of Philippi see David Stockton, “The Founding of the Em-
ambition of his son, Alexander the Great, to make the world conform to Greek culture. Tutored by Aristotle, Alexander founded Greek cities across western Asia to be centers of Greek language and Greek entertainment. The conquests of Alexander made koiné Greek the means of communication in government and business throughout the Hellenized world.

After Mark Antony and Octavian defeated Brutus and Cassius, Julius Caesar’s assassins, on the plains near Philippi in 42 B.C., Philippi became a Roman colony and home for discharged Roman army veterans. Antony, Octavian, and Lepidus ruled as a Triumvirate, a three-man dictatorship. But when Antony promoted Cleopatra’s son, Caesarion, as the legitimate heir of Julius Caesar, he was caricatured by Octavian as a traitor to the ideals of Rome, a renegade in thrall to the Egyptian queen. The Triumvirate expired and civil war caused social and economic chaos. After Octavian defeated Mark Antony at the battle of Actium (31 B.C.), he was welcomed as a savior who restored peace and security to the Roman world. The Pax Romana created by Augustus enabled social and economic recovery in contrast to the times of distress during the civil war. Octavian gave his own propagandist report of his accomplishments in his Res Gestae:

In my sixth and seventh consulships, after I had extinguished the civil wars, having been put in supreme possession of the whole empire by the universal consent of all, I transferred the republic from my own control into the free control of the Senate and People of Rome. For this service I received the appellation of Augustus by a decree of the Senate.

In the colony of Philippi renamed by Augustus after the Julian family (Colonia Iulia Augusta Philippensis), Roman aristocracy flourished and Roman architecture became the standard. More Roman soldiers were given allotments in Philippi. Since it was a Roman colony, the citizens of Philippi enjoyed all the privileges and rights of Roman citizens: they were exempt from taxes and governed under Roman law, the ius Italicum. Philippi was modeled after the mother city, Rome. Roman arches, bathhouses, forums, and temples dominated Philippi at the time of Paul.

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The Historical Setting of the Church in Philippi

Greek-speaking province, Latin became the official language of Philippi. Although Greek, Phrygian, and Egyptian gods had their temples in Philippi, the imperial cult was the most prominent in the city. With impressive altars and temples dedicated to the emperor and members of his family, the city’s religious life centered on the worship of the emperor. Withdrawal from participation in the imperial cult was viewed as subversive activity.

In the account of Paul’s first visit to Philippi in A.D. 49, Acts captures the essence of this historical background by describing Philippi accurately as “a Roman colony” (Acts 16:12: koló̂nia). Residents of Philippi expressed their pride in their Roman citizenship by accusing Paul and his associates of “advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice” (Acts 16:21). Paul’s complaint that he and Silas were treated unjustly as Roman citizens (Acts 16:37) also points to the high regard for Roman citizenship in this Roman colony. By reading Philippians in the light of the Roman character of Philippi and the importance of the imperial cult in this city, we gain an appreciation for the significance of Paul’s report of his witness to the “whole palace guard” while in chains (1:12-13; 4:22), his references to our heavenly “citizenship” (1:27; 3:20), his description of external opposition to the faith (1:28-30), his use of the titles of the emperor (“Lord” and “Savior”) for Christ (2:11; 3:20-21), his sorrow over those who have abandoned their faith because of the pressures of their surrounding culture (3:18-19), and his promise, not of a Pax Romana, but of the “peace of God” to guard the believers in Christ (4:7).

When Paul arrived in Philippi after walking twelve miles with Silas, Timothy, and Luke from Neapolis on the Roman road, Via Egnatia, he sought to begin his witness to Christ as usual in a Jewish place of wor-

4. While Latin predominates in the inscriptions from the period, evidence of the continued use of Greek indicates that the Greek-speaking Paul would have been sufficiently understood to undertake his ministry in Philippi. See Hendrix, “Philippi,” ABD 5:315. Evidently, Latin was an official veneer over a basically Greek culture

5. Erik M. Heen, “Phil 2:6-11 and Resistance to the Local Timocratic Rule: Isa theò̂s and the Cult of the Emperor in the East,” in Paul and the Roman Imperial Order (ed. Richard A. Horsley; Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 2004), 136: “It seems reasonable to assume that in Philippi at the mid-first century C.E., there was a flourishing imperial cult and that it had moved to the center of public discourse of the city.”


7. See the commentary on these texts below. See also Warren Carter, The Roman Empire and the New Testament (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006), 60-62; N. T. Wright, Paul in Fresh Perspective (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 70-74.

8. Since this section is one of the so-called “we” sections of Acts, most interpreters suppose that Luke, the author of Acts, was with Paul at this time.

ship. But apparently Philippi did not have a quorum of ten Jewish men necessary for the establishment of a synagogue. In this city the place he found to keep the Sabbath was not a synagogue within the city but a “place of prayer” by the river outside the city gate where some women gathered on the Sabbath (Acts 16:13). Lydia, Paul’s first convert in Philippi, was in this group of women (Acts 16:14). She was an immigrant from Thyatira, a merchant in the trade of purple cloth, and a Gentile follower of the Jewish religion (a “God-fearer”). When “the Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message,” she opened her home for the church (Acts 16:14-15).

The account of Paul’s ministry in Acts also provides a sketch of the exorcism of a slave girl by Paul’s command in the name of Jesus Christ for the spirit to depart (16:16-18). As a result of her deliverance from the spirit that gave her the ability to predict the future, her owners were enraged by their loss of income through the girl and dragged Paul and Silas before the magistrates. The charge against Paul and Silas demonstrates a strong aversion to Jewish proselytizing in Roman Philippi: “These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice” (Acts 16:20-21). Evidently, Luke frames the charge in this way to raise the question of the legitimacy of Christianity in the Roman Empire. Would the Christian religion be recognized as a religio licita, a licit religion by Roman authorities?

When the magistrates of Philippi were overwhelmed by the attack of the crowd against Paul and Silas, they stripped, beat, and imprisoned them (Acts 16:22-24). Paul’s letter to the Philippians reminds the Christians in Philippi that the suffering of the church in Philippi is the same as the suffering that Paul experienced when he was in Philippi: “you are going through the same struggle you saw I had” (1:30). This common experience of suffering for the sake of Christ forms the background for the theme of suffering in the letter. Paul writes the letter to explain how the suffering of Christ

10. Acts makes reference to Paul’s practice of attending local synagogues in the accounts of his visits to Salamis (13:4), Pisidian Antioch (13:14), Iconium (14:1), Thessalonica (17:1), Berea (17:10), Athens (17:17), and Corinth (18:4, 7).
11. The requirement of ten men to form a synagogue is stated in the Mishnah (the compilation of oral law at the close of the second century A.D.): m. Sanh. 1:6: “Whence do we learn that a congregation is made up of ten?”; m. Avot 3:6: “If ten men sit together and occupy themselves with the Law, the Divine Presence rests among them.”
12. There is some debate regarding this interpretation because the term “place of prayer” designates a synagogue in a few Jewish texts. See the discussion and references in Joseph Fitzmyer, The Acts of the Apostles (AB 31; New York: Doubleday, 1998), 585. In the light of the reports in Acts of Paul’s practice of visiting local synagogues (see note 10 above), the lack of a reference to Jews or to a synagogue in the account of Paul’s visit to Philippi indicates that Luke did not think that there was a synagogue in Philippi. Thus Luke’s reference to a “place of prayer” (Acts 16:13, 16) outside of Philippi should not be taken as a reference to a synagogue of the Jews.
14. 1 Thessalonians also refers to this persecution in Philippi: “We had previously suffered and been treated outrageously in Philippi” (1 Thess 2:2).
and the suffering of the servants of Christ lead to ultimate vindication by God’s triumphant grace.\textsuperscript{15} By God’s intervention, Paul and Silas were set free from their chains. After they led the jailer and his family to faith in the Lord Jesus (Acts 16:25-34), they went back to Lydia’s house to meet with the believers (Acts 16:40).

According to this account in Acts, the first members of the church founded by Paul in Philippi included Lydia (a God-fearing, Gentile businesswoman), the members of her household, a Roman jailer, the members of his household, and perhaps a slave girl. Given the lack of evidence for a Jewish presence in Philippi, we can assume that all the members of the church were Gentile Christians. Paul’s letter to the Philippians corroborates the evidence from the account in Acts that the church planted by Paul in Roman Philippi was a Gentile church. While the letter draws extensively from the vocabulary and social structures of Greco-Roman society, very little use is made of the Jewish Scriptures (except for allusions in 1:19, 2:10-11, 15) or customs. Where Paul does refer to a dangerous influence from a Jewish-Christian source (3:2-6), he seems to indicate that the threat came from outside the social setting of the church. Furthermore, three of the members of the church in Philippi mentioned by Paul have three Greek names and one has a Roman name: Epaphroditus, Euodia, Syntyche, and Clement (4:2-4). Another indication of the Gentile nature of the church is Paul’s direct address to the Philippians with a Latin form of their name: Philippēsioi (4:15).

The account in Acts and Paul’s letter to the Philippians inform us that some of the leaders in the church Paul planted in Philippi were women. Lydia invited Paul and his team to stay in her house (Acts 16:15). As head of her household, she evidently had the financial means to own or rent a home large enough for the initial gathering of believers. Paul’s acceptance of her hospitality for himself and for the church confirmed her socially prominent position in the church. Paul’s direct address to Euodia and Syntyche indicates that they were also significant leaders in the church (Phil 4:2). If their dispute was only a private matter between themselves, Paul’s public appeal would have been unnecessarily embarrassing and inexplicable. Paul appealed to them by name because as influential leaders their personal dispute was causing a division within the church. The role of these women as leaders in the Philippian church would have been culturally acceptable in Philippi where women were well known for their religious devotion and prominent positions in society.\textsuperscript{16} Rather than rejecting their position as leaders, Paul encouraged these women to be reconciled to

\textsuperscript{15} L. Gregory Bloomquist, The Function of Suffering in Philippians (JSNTSup 78; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 194-95.

each other in their devotion to the Lord so that they would lead in a way that unified the church.

At the very beginning of the church in Philippi, the believers showed unusual commitment to support Paul in his mission to proclaim the gospel. Paul goes back to the beginning of his partnership with the Christians in Philippi to commend them for their generosity from the “first day” (1:5) and “the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel” (4:15). The Philippian church made regular contributions to Paul’s mission even after he left Philippi (4:15-18). By sending Epaphroditus with gifts to serve Paul while he was in prison, the Philippian believers demonstrated that their concern for him never wavered even though at times they had no opportunity to show it (4:10). To a large extent, Paul’s letter to the Philippians is his expression of gratitude for their constant friendship and faithful support.17

II. THE NATURE OF THE LETTER TO THE PHILIPPIANS

A. A Letter of Friendship

Paul’s use of the language of friendship throughout his letter to the Philippians comes to its climax in an accumulation of friendship terms in 4:1: “my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, dear friends.”18 On the basis of this friendship language, many interpreters...
The Nature of the Letter to the Philippians

of Philippians identify this letter as a letter of friendship. In an ancient epistolary handbook, Demetrius describes the friendly letter as the first type of letter in his presentation of twenty-one types of letters. According to this classical book on letter writing, the essential elements of a letter of friendship are “1. two people separated, 2. one person attempting to converse with the other, 3. a relationship of friendship between the two, and 4. the writer attempting to maintain that relationship with the recipient.”

A fascinating example of a letter of friendship illustrates these elements of a friendly letter. In this letter the author, Chairas, writes to his doctor-friend, Dionysius, requesting a medical prescription.

Chairas to his dearest Dionysius, many greetings and continual health. I was as much delighted at receiving a letter from you as if I had indeed been in my native place; for apart from that we have nothing. I may dispense with writing to you with a great show of thanks; for it is to those who are not friends that we must give thanks in words. I trust that I may maintain myself in some degree of serenity and be able, if not to give you an equivalent, at least to show some small return for your affection towards me. You sent me two prescription-copies, one of the Archagathian, the other of the caustic plaster. The Archagathian is rightly compounded, but the caustic does not include the relative weight of resin. Please tell me of a strong caustic which can safely be used to cauterize the soles (of the feet); for I am in urgent need. As to the dry (?) plaster, you wrote that there are two kinds. Send me the prescription for the resolvent kind; for the four-drug plaster is also dry. This letter is sealed with this (?). Farewell and remember what I have said. Year 5 of Nero the lord, month of Germanicaus 1. To Dionysius, physician.

In this first-century papyrus letter of friendship, Chairas provides an insight into a social custom of the time by explaining that friends need not express their thanks to each other in words. This insight helps us to understand why Paul does not explicitly verbalize his thanks to the Philippians for their gifts. This letter from Chairas also expresses the social obligation of repayment: “to show some small return for your affection towards me.” In his letter to the Philippians, Paul promised “repayment” from God: “my God will meet all your needs” (4:19).


22. See a detailed analysis of this letter by Peterman, “‘Thankless Thanks,’” 262-64.
Due to the complexity of Philippians, however, it is an oversimplification to restrict it to just one type of letter. Given Paul’s multiple purposes, variety of styles, ethical exhortations, and theological reflections, his letter does not conform in a strict sense to a specific epistolary type identified by the ancient epistolary theorists. But despite the mixed character of his letter, Philippians can still be appropriately identified in a broad sense as a friendship letter on the basis of the predominance of the friendship language in it. We can see why this letter is labeled as a Hellenistic letter of friendship when we observe how Paul’s use of friendship language reflects the language of friendship in his Hellenistic context. Ten expressions of friendship language in Philippians run parallel to common motifs in Hellenistic letters and essays on friendship.

1. Affection: Letters of friendship repeatedly express warm affection: “I long for you.” “I love you.” Paul intensifies his expression of affection for the Philippians by pointing to the divine source and power of his affection: “I long for you with the affection of Christ Jesus” (1:8).

2. Partnership (koinōnia): Friendship is the basis of true partnership. “All friendship,” says Aristotle, “involves koinōnia.” Partnership (koinōnia) is a major theme in Philippians (1:5, 7; 2:1, 3:10; 4:15). In Paul’s development of the meaning of partnership he moves from a koinōnia in the gospel (1:5) to the koinōnia of the Spirit (2:1) to the koinōnia in the sufferings of Christ (3:10).

3. Unity of soul and spirit: Paul’s appeal to be of one soul (1:27), fellow soul (2:2), equal soul (2:20), and one spirit (1:27) represents the desire in Greco-Roman culture for friends to be of one soul. Aristotle repeats the proverbs of his day on this subject: “Friends have one soul between them; friends’ goods are common property; friendship is equality.” In Paul’s theology, unity of soul and spirit are formed and maintained in Christ.

23. Fitzgerald, “Philippians in the Light of Ancient Friendship,” 142: “Viewed in terms of ancient epistolary theory, all of Paul’s letters are ‘mixed’ in terms of their style and content. None conforms precisely to the epistolary types and styles identified by theorists such as Ps.-Demetrius and Ps.-Libanius.” For texts and translations of ancient epistolary theorists such as Ps.-Demetrius and Ps.-Libanius, see Abraham J. Malherbe, Ancient Epistolary Theorists (SBLSSB 19; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988). Some interpreters of Philippians attempt to capture the mixed character of Philippians by calling it “primarily a friendly hortatory letter” (White, “Morality between Two Worlds,” 206), “a hortatory letter of friendship” (Stowers, “Friends and Enemies,” 107), and “a Christian hortatory letter of friendship” (Fee, 12).


27. Aristotle, Eth. nic. 9.8.2.
4. Like-mindedness: Paul’s letter sounds similar to the teaching of the Stoics on friendship when he urges the Philippian Christians to be “like-minded” and “of the same mind” (2:2, 4:2). According to Cicero, “There is no surer bond of friendship than the sympathetic union of thought and inclination.”

The “whole essence of friendship” is the “most complete agreement in policy, in pursuits and in opinions.” Paul urges the Philippians to be like-minded by having “the same attitude of mind Christ Jesus had” (2:5).

5. Yokefellow: When Paul calls upon his “true companion” (4:3: true yokefellow; gnēsie syzyge) to help the women who are quarreling to be reconciled, he is drawing on a common appellation used for famous pairs of friends in Greco-Roman literature. The metaphor of the “yoke of friendship” was used by Plutarch to depict the relationship between pairs of friends such as Theseus and Perithous, Achilles and Patocles, Orestes and Pylades, Phintias and Damon, and Epameinondas and Pelopidas. Euripides employed the metaphor “yokefellow” to depict the friendship between Orestes and Pylades. Paul’s yokefellow and co-workers are those who contended with him in the cause of the gospel (4:3).

6. Giving and receiving: Paul commends the Philippian community for the distinction of being the only church who shared with him in “the matter of giving and receiving” (4:15). Aristotle explains the ethics of “giving and getting” in the context of his treatise on friendship: “In regard to giving and getting money, the observance of the mean is liberality; the excess and deficiency are prodigality and meanness, but the prodigal man and mean man exceed and fall short in opposite ways of one another: the prodigal exceeds in giving but is deficient in getting, whereas the mean man exceeds in getting and is deficient in getting.”

7. Common struggles and joys: Friends share common struggles and common enemies. Paul reminds the Philippians of their common struggle: “you are going through the same struggle that you saw I had, and now hear that I still have” (1:30). And Paul warns against “enemies of the cross” (3:18). Plutarch expresses the view that friends share the same struggles and enemies: “Enmities follow close upon friendships, and interwoven with them, inasmuch as it is impossible for a friend not to share his friend’s wrongs or disrepute or disfavor.” Friends also share common joys. Paul tells his friends in Philippi, “I rejoice, and I share my joy with all of you. In the same way, you also should rejoice and share your joy with me” (2:17-18; my

28. Cicero, Planc. 2.5.
29. Cicero, Amic. 4.15.
31. Aristotle, Eth. nic. 2.7.4.
trans.). Dio Chrysostom expresses this view in his maxim: “Friends share one’s joys while enemies gloat over one’s misfortunes.”

8. Absence/presence: Friendship letters often refer to personal presence and absence. At strategic points in his exhortations to the Philippians, Paul comments on his absence and promises that he will soon be present (1:27; 2:12, 24).

9. Virtue friendship: Aristotle asserts that “the perfect form of friendship is that between the good, those who resemble each other in virtue.” Cicero also insists that virtue is the basis of true friendship: “Let this be ordained as the first law of friendship: ask of friends only what is honorable; do for friends only what is honorable.” Aristotle describes two types of inferior friendship as the friendship of utility and the friendship of pleasure. In these types of friendship, friends do not love each other for what they are in themselves but for some useful benefit or pleasure to be gained through the friendship. “Friendships of this kind are easily broken off, in the event of the parties themselves changing, for if no longer pleasant or useful to each other, they cease to love each other.”

Paul identifies his friendship with the Philippians as a virtue friendship by directing them to think about virtue (4:8). He corrects any misconception that he had utilitarian motives for his friendship with the Philippians by insisting that he had not written because he was in need, for he had learned to be content (4:11). Friendship based on need is viewed negatively in ancient discussions of friendships. Genuine friendship can be given and experienced only by one who is self-sufficient and content. “It is far from being true that friendship is cultivated because of need; rather it is cultivated by those who are abundantly blessed with wealth and power and especially virtue, which is man’s best defense; by those least in need of another’s help; and by those most generous and most given to acts of kindness.”

Paul’s self-sufficiency was empowered by God (4:13). And he led the Philippians to experience the same dependence on God to meet their needs (4:19).

10. Moral paradigm: Friendship is built on a moral paradigm of virtue. By calling his readers to think about the list of virtues in 4:8, Paul ele-

vates his friendship with the Philippians to the level of a virtue friendship. But thinking about a list of virtues is not the ultimate goal of friendship. Paul connects the command to think with the command to practice (4:9). The virtues to be practiced are exemplified in the paradigm presented by Paul’s message and life. The ultimate paradigm to guide true friendship is the paradigm of Christ’s “all-surpassing act of selfless love.” The self-emptying, self-humbling of Christ is replicated in Paul’s own person story (3:3-14). His life serves as an example to follow (3:17).

These ten parallels between friendship language in Philippians and Hellenistic letters of friendship and essays on friendship provide a framework for viewing Philippians as a letter of friendship. In his absence from his friends, his letter builds his friendship with them and promotes the qualities of true friendship in their church. Of course, Paul’s letter is not merely a friendly letter that fits a Hellenistic pattern. He transforms the meaning and experience of friendship by redefining each of the essential ideals of friendship given by Hellenistic essays on friendship in terms of communion with Christ and empowerment by Christ. As recipients and advocates of the gospel of Christ, Paul and his partner-friends in Philippi experience common sharing in the Spirit (2:1) and participation in the sufferings of Christ (3:10). Nevertheless, after recognizing Paul’s transformation of Hellenistic patterns and concepts, we can still gain a basic understanding of the form and function of Paul’s letter to the Philippians by viewing it as a letter of friendship.

A simple outline of Philippians can be derived by observing the formal features of a letter of friendship in Philippians.

42. William G. Doty, Letters in Primitive Christianity (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973), 21: “I argue that Paul was the person who adopted Graeco-Roman letter models for Christian purposes, that in his letters a genre or subgenre was created, and that our task is that of identifying the stages and steps in generic construction.” See also J. T. Reed, A Discourse Analysis of Philippians: Method and Rhetoric in the Debate over Literary Integrity (JSNTSup 136; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997), 176-77, for a discussion of the way that Philippians is an adaptation of the “epistolary genre to his own immediate situation” and a mix of epistolary traditions.
43. Bockmuehl, 35, appropriately notes several problems of using “friendship as the dominant social paradigm, at least in any formal and culturally documented sense.” Paul never explicitly refers to friendship with the words philos or philia; his apostolic authority is implicit; he avoids the notion of mutual reciprocity central to the concept of friendship in Hellenistic moral essays. Despite Bockmuehl’s cautionary note, however, the pervasive use of friendship language in this letter points to the basic structure of this letter. Fee, 14: “The letter reflects known first-century conventions; but the conventions themselves are mere scaffolding for Paul. He is altogether concerned for his friends in Philippi and their ongoing relationship to Christ.”
44. See Alexander, “Hellenistic Letter-Forms and the Structure of Philippians,” 87-101. These formal features are illustrated by parallels in papyrius “family letters” (a subcategory of friendly letters). My outline modifies and expands Alexander’s outline.
Although this outline needs to be amplified by close attention to other unique features in Philippians, this list of conventional features of a letter of friendship in Philippians points to the function and basic structure of the letter.

B. A Deliberative Speech

Since Paul wrote his letter to be read aloud to the church in Philippi, it is helpful to study this letter in terms of its features as a public speech. To understand Paul’s “speech” to the Philippians, scholars use a method of study called rhetorical criticism. According to Aristotle, “Rhetoric may be defined as the faculty of discovering the possible means of persuasion in reference to any subject whatever.” To explain the “means of persuasion” used by Paul in this letter rhetorical criticism seeks to describe the goal, ethos, and structure of the oratory of Paul in Philippians.

In terms of rhetorical criticism, a deliberative speech exhorts by recommending a course of action as better and dissuades by advising against behavior as worse. Since a central goal of Paul’s letter to the Philippians is to exhort believers to be “like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind” (2:2) and to warn against “selfish ambition or vain conceit” (2:3), his speech to the Philippians can be classified as an example of deliberative speech.
of deliberative rhetoric. Of course, Paul has other aims in this speech besides exhortation and dissuasion. But by interpreting Philippians as a deliberative speech, we can see how the letter was constructed to fit the goal of recommending a course of action and warning against its opposite. Paul’s first imperative — “as citizens of heaven live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ” (1:27) — sets the tone and direction of his deliberative speech. He calls for a course of action and Christ-like attitudes that will unify the church and warns against attitudes and enemies who will divide the church. His imperative to the two women in conflict — “be of the same mind” (4:2) — personalizes his call for unity heard all the way through the letter. The Christ hymn (2:5-11) serves to illustrate the choice set before the community. Just as Christ “humbled himself” (2:8), so believers must “in humility value others above [themselves]” (2:3).

An essential element in a persuasive speech is its ethos, determined by the moral character of the speaker. Paul gives an account of his good moral character in his frequent references to himself: his imprisonment “served to advance the gospel” (1:12); for him “to live is Christ” (1:21); his life was “poured out like a drink offering” (2:17); he considered everything as “loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ” (3:8); even though he was admittedly not perfect (3:12), he continued to “press on toward the goal” (3:14). All of these references attested to his role as an example and model to follow (3:17). He concludes his exhortation by appealing for his audience to put into practice all that they have learned, received, heard, and seen in him (4:9). The power of Paul’s persuasive speech depends upon his good moral character.

The understanding of Philippians as deliberative speech and the appreciation of its ethos in Paul’s ethical appeal are two useful contributions of rhetorical analyses of Philippians. Many studies have focused on the


50. Philippians cannot be restricted to one type (genus) of rhetoric. George Kennedy views the letter as epideictic rhetoric because he believes that the goal of the letter is to affirm communal values by praise and blame on the basis of what is honorable or disgraceful. See George A. Kennedy, New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 77. Watson, “A Rhetorical Analysis of Philippians,” 59-60, sees the use of epideictic rhetoric in 2:19-30. Bloomquist, The Function of Suffering in Philippians, 120, also admits that forensic and epideictic elements can be found in the letter, but thinks that the letter as a whole is an example of deliberative rhetoric.

51. Aristotle, Art of Rhetoric 1.2.4: “The orator persuades by moral character when his speech is delivered in such a manner as to render him worthy of confidence.” According to Aristotle (Art of Rhetoric 1.2.3), persuasion depends upon three factors: the moral character of the speaker (ethos), the emotions aroused in the hearers by the speech (pathos), and the logical arguments in the speech (logos). The discussion of Paul’s references to his own moral character (ethos) is a contribution of the rhetorical analysis of J. W. Marshall, “Paul’s Ethical Appeal in Philippians,” in Rhetoric and the New Testament: Essays from 1992 Heidelberg Conference (ed. S. E. Porter and T. H. Olbricht; JSNTSup 90; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 357-74.
rhetorical structure of the letter, but with divergent and contradictory results. In the practice of the rhetorical criticism of Paul’s letters, the Latin terms of classical rhetoric are used to designate the parts of the structure of the letter. With the use of these terms, three rhetorical analyses of Philippians provide three different outlines of its rhetorical structure.

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These studies of the rhetorical structure of Paul’s letter-speech to the Philippians provide valuable insights by drawing from the encyclopedic description of every conceivable feature of speech in the classical rhetorical handbooks. Nevertheless, the description of the form of Paul’s argumentation with the Latin terminology of these handbooks often tends to obfuscate rather than clarify the meaning of Paul’s letter. The significant disagreement between these studies observed in the chart above points to the difficulty of applying the canons of classical rhetoric to Philippians. When a rhetorical analysis of Paul’s letter portrays Paul as someone devoted to following the dictates of rhetoricians of his time, the methodology becomes suspect.

52. The Latin terms come from the Latin rhetorical handbooks: Rhetoric to Herennius (c. 84 B.C.); Cicero’s On Invention and Partitions of Oratory (c. 87 B.C.); and the major work of Quintilian, On the Education of the Orator (A.D. 92). These handbooks provide comprehensive instruction on the theory and practice of rhetoric in Paul’s time.


55. The probatio is divided into five parts: confirmatio (1:18b-26); exhortatio (1:27-2:18); exempla (2:19-30); reprehensio (3:1-16); and exhortatio (3:17-4:7).

56. This section includes the repetitio (4:1-9) and affectus (4:10-20).

57. The descriptive value of the system developed by the classical rhetoricians is highly regarded by many recent rhetorical critics. See, e.g., George Kennedy, New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism, 10-11.

58. As Fee, 16 n. 43, says, Bloomquist “regularly lets his (very questionable) analysis of rhetorical form dictate meaning.”

59. Bockmuehl, 39: “Despite claims to the contrary, highly precise models of rhetoric or social conventions are proving less than helpful as tools for the analysis of Philippians—not least because few of them tend to agree. What is more, the complexity of Paul’s background and the ad hoc nature of his correspondence suggest that his letters are not conceived in terms of formal ‘deliberative Graeco-Roman rhetoric’ (thus Witherington 1994:11).”
hortation in Paul’s letter. For this reason, I do not use the terminology of the classical rhetorical handbooks to define the structure of Philippians, even though I draw upon the insights of rhetorical criticism in the commentary.60

C. The Integrity of the Letter

An almost complete consensus accepts the letter’s claim to Pauline authorship (1:1).61 Paul’s disclosure of his conversion and commitment to Christ, his description of his suffering and travels, his exposition of theology, his ethical appeals, and his opposition to false teachers all correspond to other letters universally accepted as Pauline (such as Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Galatians). Early church leaders quoted from Philippians as a letter from Paul.62 Philippians is included in second-century lists of NT writings: the Muratorian canon and the canon of Marcion. For all these reasons, the authenticity of Philippians deserves the confident recognition it receives. The only serious question of authorship related to Philippians concerns the origin of the Christ hymn (2:6-11). That question is addressed in the commentary.

But while the authenticity of Philippians is commonly acclaimed, the integrity of Philippians is hotly contested. The traditional view that Philippians was composed as one letter in the form presented in the NT can no longer claim widespread support.63 Many scholars propose that the present form of Philippians is a combination of two or three different letters written at different times.

A common argument against the unity of Philippians points to the abrupt change in tone at the beginning of chapter 3. The letter turns unexpectedly from warm encouragement (3:1: “my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord!”) to harsh warning (3:2: “Watch out for those dogs”). This rupture in the line of thought leads some to suggest that another letter was inserted at this point. Paul seems to be drawing to a close with the use of the clause “finally, my brothers and sisters, rejoice” (3:1). The reference to

60. On the basis of his detailed analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of rhetorical analyses of Philippians, Reed, A Discourse Analysis of Philippians, 170-77, concludes that interpretation of Philippians will be guided best by observing Paul’s use of a mix of epistolary traditions rather than by imposing the canons of the rhetorical handbooks to the letter.

61. For a more extensive discussion of authorship with bibliography, see O’Brien, 9-10; Martin and Hawthorne, xxviii-xxx.


63. David E. Garland, “The Composition and Unity of Philippians: Some Neglected Literary Features,” NovT 27 (1985), 141: “A crescendo of voices now maintains that there is no reasonable doubt that all four chapters were not written as part of the same letter, nor in the order in which we have them.” Garland (141-42 n. 3) lists twenty-four scholars who divide Philippians into three separate letters and six scholars who divide the letter into two separate letters. His list is only representative of a much wider scholarly perspective on this issue.
travel plans for himself and his associates in the previous section (2:19-30), usually found at the end of his letters, may also suggest that 3:1 marks the end of a letter. The contents of chapter 3 (3:1b–4:1) also seem to reflect a different situation than the background of chapters 1–2. The opponents (3:2: “dogs,” “evildoers,” “mutilators”; 3:18: “enemies of the cross”) who threaten the church appear to be quite different from the ones mentioned in 1:15-17 and 1:28. And Paul no longer refers to his chains in chapter 3 as he did in chapter 1. Was he no longer in prison when he wrote chapter 3? Perhaps 3:1b–4:1 was written as a separate letter at a different time to combat the influence of Judaizers and libertines.

Another reason to infer the insertion of a separate letter comes from the observation that Paul’s expression of gratitude for the Philippians’ gift in 4:10-20 seems to come a long time after Paul’s reception of the gift, if 4:10-20 was written at the end of the letter as we now have it. According to 2:25-30, sufficient time has passed since Epaphroditus delivered the gift for the Philippians to find out that he was sick and for Epaphroditus to hear about their concern for his health. Did Paul not communicate his gratitude to the church in Philippi for their gift during all this time when messages were being sent back and forth between Paul’s location and Philippi to communicate information about the health of Epaphroditus? Perhaps 4:10-20 was written as a separate letter to the Philippians immediately after Paul received their gift from Epaphroditus.

This line of reasoning leads to the supposition of two or three letters. According to the two-letter hypothesis, Paul’s first letter (1:1–3:1a; 4:2-7, 10-23) expressed his gratitude for the gift, the impact of his imprisonment on the advance of the gospel, and his pastoral concern for unity in the church. The second letter (3:1b–4:1, 8-9) was written after his release from prison during a time when the church was seriously threatened by false teachers.64

According to the three-letter hypothesis, Paul’s first letter (4:10-20) was a letter of thanks for the gift soon after Paul received it from Epaphroditus. The second letter (1:1–3:1; 4:2-9, 21-23) was sent with Epaphroditus on his return to Philippi to inform the Philippians of Paul’s situation and to encourage them to be reconciled and united in their relationships in the church. The third letter (3:2–4:1) was composed sometime later as a severe warning against the dangerous influence of his opponents.65 A visual presentation of these three letters is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1st letter:</th>
<th>4:10-20</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2nd letter:</td>
<td>1:1–3:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd letter:</td>
<td>3:2–4:1</td>
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<tr>
<td>4:2-9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4:21-23</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

64. Gnilka, 6-18.
In his *To the Philippians*, Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna (martyred in a.d. 155), refers to “letters” Paul wrote to them. This reference to letters is taken by some as external evidence that Paul wrote two or more letters to the church in Philippi. Perhaps a leader in the church who collected Paul’s letters combined them to make the final canonical form of the letter.

Scholars convinced of the unity of Philippians as a single letter composed on one occasion without interpolations have forged counterarguments defending the integrity of this letter. Some of these arguments depend upon imaginative reconstructions of the circumstances in Paul’s life and of Paul’s psychological condition. Perhaps Paul was interrupted in his dictation by an alarming message about the harmful influence of false teachers in his churches. Distraught and deeply disturbed by this information, Paul decides that he will not end his letter as he had planned at 3:1. Instead he fires off a highly charged warning: “Watch out for those dogs” (3:2). Such imaginative attempts to explain Paul’s situation and state of mind are intriguing but unverifiable.

Better arguments for the unity of Philippians keep their focus on the text of Philippians. A thorough review of the textual tradition of Philippians reveals no evidence to support the multiple-letters hypotheses. From the earliest manuscripts (including the late-second-century papyrus text, \(P^{46}\)) to patristic allusions and through all the later copies of the text, the complete diverse manuscript attestation to Philippians witnesses to one letter in the canonical form, without one hint that the letter contains a combination of separate letters written at different times or was ever circulated in a different form. All the theories of multiple letters rest on conjectural speculation, not on textual evidence. The special appeal to Polycarp for external support of a hypothesis of two or more letters is speculative since his reference to the “letters” of Paul can be explained in other plausible ways. Perhaps, Polycarp used the plural form of “letters” as it was sometimes used in Greek to denote an epistle of great importance, such as a king’s mandate, containing multiple directions and injunctions. Or Polycarp could have been referring to other letters of Paul, such as, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, since he alludes to these letters as if they were addressed to the Philippians (Polycarp, *Phil.* 11:3-4). Polycarp may have inferred from Philippians 3:2 (“It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again”) that Paul had written previous letters to the

66. Polycarp, *Phil.* 3:2: “For neither am I, nor is any other like me, able to follow the wisdom of the blessed and glorious Paul, who, when he was among you in the presence of the men of the time, taught accurately and steadfastly the word of truth, and also when he was absent wrote letters to you, from the study of which you will be able to build yourselves up into the faith given to you.”


68. Martin and Hawthorne, 171.

69. Silva, 14.

70. Lightfoot, 142.
Philippians. These explanations of Polycarp’s reference to “letters” obviate the necessity of taking it as proof that Philippians is a combination of two or more letters.

The case against the multiple-letter theories is strengthened by reviewing the wide diversity of these theories regarding the limits of the separate letters supposedly contained within Philippians. Is the hypothetical “third letter” 3:2–4:3, 8-9, or 3:2–4:1, or 3:1–4:9, or 3:1b–4:1, 8-9? Such inability to agree about the beginning and ending of the hypothetical fragments within Philippians instills doubt about the credibility of these multiple-letter hypotheses. Related to this inability of the hypotheses to agree on the limits of the letters is their failure to explain the methodology of the editor who combined these “letters” in Philippians. Why did the editor place the “third letter” somewhere between 3:1 and 4:9 instead of after the first and second letters? Why did the editor place the “first letter” at 4:10-20 instead of before the second and third letters? Why did the editor not smooth out the objectionable abrupt breaks in the final edition? These unresolved questions intensify doubts about these hypotheses.

When Philippians is viewed as one letter without interpolations, the remarkable thematic continuity between different sections of the letter becomes clearly apparent. For example, the themes of progress in the faith (1:25; 2:12-14; 3:12-16), standing firm in the Lord (1:27; 4:1), humility (2:2, 5-8; 3:4-8), suffering (1:29-30; 2:8; 3:10), and the final victory of Christ (2:9-11; 3:20-21) bind the letter together into one harmonious whole. Even the vocabulary employed to develop these themes ties the parts of the whole letter together. For example, the vocabulary of “citizenship,” “standing firm,” and “striving together” occur in the same order in 1:27 and in 3:20–4:3 to mark the beginning and the end of a unified section.


See also Troels Engberg-Pedersen, “Stoicism in Philippians,” in Paul in His Hellenistic Context (ed. Troels Engberg-Pedersen; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 258 n. 5: “What Paul says he will repeat is the whole set of ideas that forms the content of 1:12–2:18, (a) using Paul’s own example (1:12-26; cf. 3:4-16), as a model for (b) the desired reaction of joy and steadfastness on the part of the Philippians, (c) in the face of any supposed suffering they may have undergone. If this is right, then Paul is saying in 3:1b that he is now breaking up the smooth progression of letter topics in order to repeat the essential message of 1:12–2:18, culminating in the injunction to steadfastness (4:1, repeating 1:27). In other words, Paul himself says that he is going to do what analytics who assign the body of chapter 3 to a different letter than that of 1:12–2:18 say he cannot do!”

72. Garland, “The Composition and Unity of Philippians,” 155 n. 50, presents a chart of eighteen different suggested limits for the “third letter.”


provide a solid basis for accepting Philippians as one unified letter rather than as awkwardly disjointed fragments.  

The objection to the placement of 4:10-20 as a conclusion to a letter by the multiple-letter theorists seems to be inspired by modern etiquette for the polite way to say “thank you.” Careful analysis of ancient Hellenistic letters reveals that expressions of gratitude could be reserved for the conclusion of letters between intimate friends or omitted altogether.  
The verbal and thematic links between Paul’s prayer of thanksgiving in 1:3-11 and his expression of gratitude in 4:10-20 demonstrate that Paul did not add his “thank you” as an afterthought but as a fitting conclusion to the theme of thanksgiving introduced at the beginning of his letter.

After weighing the evidence for and against the multiple-letter theories, we can reasonably conclude that we will be on firm ground if we take our journey through the text with the assumption that Paul composed this letter as one unified message on one occasion.

### III. THE OCCASION OF THE LETTER

#### A. Paul in Chains

Paul was motivated to write this letter by two aspects of his experience in prison: the advance of the gospel while he was in chains (1:12-25) and the gift from the church in Philippi through their messenger, Epaphroditus (2:25-30; 4:10-19).

The letter includes a report that Paul’s imprisonment served to advance the gospel (1:12). His witness among the palace guard emboldened others to proclaim the gospel (1:13-14). Although some preached out of rivalry and others out of love, what mattered to Paul was that Christ was
preached (1:15-18). Facing the threat of execution and reflecting on his own death, Paul was torn between his desire to depart and be with Christ and his concern for the welfare of the church. He finally became convinced that he would remain to encourage the progress and joy in faith of the church (1:19-25).

While he was in prison, Ephaphroditus came from Philippi to take care of him and to convey a gift from the church. Unfortunately, Ephaphroditus became ill and almost died (2:25-30). Ephaphroditus was distressed when he learned that the church was worried about his health. Paul wrote this letter to express his gratitude for the support from the church (4:10-18) and to assure the church that their messenger was well and had honorably fulfilled his service. Paul urged the church to welcome Ephaphroditus back home with joy (2:29). Paul probably sent this letter with him.

Paul’s report of his imprisonment raises the question of the location of his prison. He boasted to the church in Corinth that he had “been in prison more frequently” than the other servants of Christ (2 Cor 11:23). Unfortunately, he did not list the addresses of those imprisonments. As a result, the debate regarding his location when he wrote this letter continues. A decision regarding the place of Paul’s prison inevitably determines the date of the letter.

Rome receives traditional and widespread current support as the location of Paul’s imprisonment when he wrote Philippians. The account in Acts confirms that Paul was held as a prisoner in his own rented house in Rome with a soldier to guard him (Acts 28:16). For two years, he received visitors and proclaimed the gospel unhindered (Acts 28:30-31). Paul’s references in Philippians to the evangelization of the “palace guard” (Gk. praitōrion, 1:13) and to the Christian members of “Caesar’s household” (4:22) seem to make Rome the most likely place for the composition of this letter. Although members of the “palace guard” and of “Caesar’s household” (the imperial civil service) lived throughout the provinces of the Roman Empire, they were concentrated mainly in Rome. Citizens of Philippi, a Roman colony, would certainly have been impressed by the news that the gospel had advanced among the palace guard in Rome and that members of the imperial service in the capital city had become Christians.

78. 1 Clement 5:5-6 confirms Paul’s boast of multiple imprisonments: “Through jealousy and strife Paul showed the way to the prize of endurance; seven times he was in bonds, he was exiled, he was stoned.”

79. In the early second century, the Marcionite “Prologue to Philippians” states that Paul wrote to the Philippians from prison in Rome. See F. F. Bruce, The Canon of Scripture (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 142. Current support for Rome comes from Bruce, 14; Marshall, xix-xx; O’Brien 25; Silva, 8; Fee, 1; Bockmuehl, 32; Hooker, 473-75; Fitzgerald, “Epistle to the Philippians,” ABD 5:323.

Philippians was written during Paul’s imprisonment in Rome, its date of composition was about 61-62.

A problem with this view is that the distance between Rome and Philippi appears to be an obstacle to the number of journeys mentioned or implied by the letter. The letter reports four trips between Paul and Philippi and projects four more.

1. A messenger brought news to the Philippians of Paul’s imprisonment.
2. The church sent Epaphroditus with a gift to Paul.
3. The church heard the news that Epaphroditus was sick.
4. Epaphroditus was distressed when he heard that the church knew about his illness.
5. Paul plans to send Epaphroditus back to Philippi.
6. Paul plans to send Timothy to Philippi as soon as he knows the outcome of his trial.
7. Paul plans to wait for Timothy to return with a report about the church in Philippi.
8. Paul plans to visit Philippi soon.

This number of journeys seems to imply an ease of communication and a relatively short distance between Paul’s imprisonment and Philippi. From Rome to Philippi, a messenger had to travel at least 700 miles by the land route or at least 900 miles by the sea route.\footnote{81} To envision the first four journeys in this list taking over a year seems to conflict with the sense given by Philippians of messages being sent quickly back and forth.\footnote{82}

A second problem with accepting Rome as the origin of Philippians is Paul’s communication of his plan to visit Philippi soon after he is released from prison (2:24). If Paul was writing from Rome, then returning to Philippi contradicted his stated plan not to return to the east where his work was done but to go on to Spain (see Rom 15:24, 28). Paul mentions his change of previous plans in 2 Corinthians 1:15-17, but he gives no indica-


\footnote{82} Advocates of Rome suggest that the estimate of travel time could be reduced if (a) the church found out that Paul was going to be imprisoned in Rome before he got there, (b) Epaphroditus became ill on his journey and news was sent back, and (c) Epaphroditus’s distress was based not on a message but on intuition that the church would be worried about him. Or he might have received a message while still on his journey a long way from Rome. See Silva, \textit{7} n. 5.
tion in Philippians that his intention to visit Philippi after his imprison-
ment is a change of previous plans.

As an alternative to the traditional view, some scholars advocate
Caesarea as the origin of Philippians.\(^8^3\) If it was written in Caesarea, then its
date would be 59-60. The record of Acts that Paul was imprisoned in the
praetorium of Herod (Acts 23:35) fits with Paul’s reference to the praetorium
in Philippians 1:13. And as a major center of Roman power, Caesarea
would have had a concentration of the emperor’s administrative staff,
“those who belong to Caesar’s household” (4:22). Since Paul appealed to
Caesar in Caesarea (Acts 25:11-12), he could have anticipated traveling to
Rome by way of Philippi to make the visit he promised (Phil 2:24). Paul’s
harsh words against Judaizers in Philippians 3:2 may have been sparked by
the Jewish attacks against him in Jerusalem and Caesarea (Acts 22–25).

This view faces the same problem of distance: in this case over a thou-
sand miles by sea or land between Caesarea and Philippi. Even though
Paul was in Caesarea for two years, the frequency of trips between Paul’s
imprisonment and Philippi assumed by Paul’s letter to the Philippians
seems implausible given that distance.\(^8^4\) Furthermore, the connection be-
tween the account of the Jewish attacks against Paul in Acts 22–25 and
Paul’s polemic against Judaizers in Philippians 3 does not really work since
Paul seems to be warning against a threat of Jewish Christians invading his
churches.\(^8^5\) And although Paul could have visited Philippi on his way from
Caesarea to Rome, the account in Acts portrays Paul as having no hope of
ever returning to that area again (see Acts 20:25, 38). In the light of these
difficulties of positing Caesarea as the place of the composition of
Philippians, even the strongest advocate of this position exclaims, “Not all
questions can be answered or all problems solved, and to paraphrase
Origen, ‘Only God knows where Philippians was really written.’”\(^8^6\)

Ephesus receives strong support as the origin of Philippians.\(^8^7\) Since
the distance between Ephesus and Philippi was only about a hundred
miles, all of the trips mentioned in the letter would have been relatively
short and easy compared to the trips between Rome and Philippi or

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83. Hawthorne, xli-xliv.
85. See the commentary below.
86. Hawthorne, xliii.
87. See G. S. Duncan, Paul’s Ephesian Ministry: A Reconstruction with Special Reference
to the Ephesian Origin for the Imprisonment Epistles (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1929);
Murphy-O’Connor, Paul: A Critical Life, 220; Brown, Introduction, 495-96; Thielman, 19-20;
Thielman, “Ephesus and the Literary Setting of Philippians,” in New Testament Greek and
Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Gerald Hawthorne (ed. Amy M. Donaldson and Timothy B. Sailors;
Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 205-23; Koester, Paul and His World: Interpreting the New Tes-
tament in Its Context (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 72-75; Carson and Moo, Introduction, 503-
6; Paul J. Achtemeier, Joel B. Green, and Marianne Meye Thompson, Introducing the New Tes-
tament: Its Literature and Theology (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 402-3; Gnilka, 20-25;
Collange, 33-34; Müller, 16-23; Martin and Hawthorne, xxxix-l.
Caesarea and Philippi. In fact, some of the trips mentioned in Philippians may be mentioned in Acts and Paul’s letters as well. Acts and 1 Corinthians (if Timothy was sent to Corinth by way of Macedonia) indicate that Paul sent Timothy to Macedonia while he stayed in Ephesus (Acts 19:22; cf. 1 Cor 16:10; Phil 2:23). And Acts and the letters to the Corinthians state that Paul went to Macedonia after his time in Ephesus (Acts 20:1; 1 Cor 16:5; 2 Cor 1:16; 2:13; 7:5; cf. Phil 2:24). Of course, the task of connecting Paul’s letters with Acts is notoriously difficult, but these connections present a plausible way to solve the puzzle of relating Paul’s travel plans in Philippians and the evidence for his journeys in Acts and his other letters.

Neither Acts nor Paul’s letters record that Paul was imprisoned in Ephesus. But Acts describes a major riot in the city as a result of Paul’s evangelistic work there (Acts 19:23–20:1). And Paul’s letters speak of a serious threat to Paul’s life while he was in Ephesus (1 Cor 16:8; 2 Cor 1:8-10: “we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death”). Ephesus is certainly a good candidate for inclusion in Paul’s reference to his numerous imprisonments (2 Cor 11:23). In Paul’s time, Ephesus was the third largest city in the Roman Empire after Rome and Alexandria and the center of Roman military control, the Roman proconsul’s headquarters, the Romans’ communications network, and the Roman judicial courts for all of Asia.88 First-century Latin inscriptions point to the presence of the palace guard and members of Caesar’s household in Ephesus.89 All of this evidence allows for Ephesus to be an excellent prospect for the place where imperial military and administrative forces heard the gospel while Paul was in chains (Phil 1:12-13).

Another line of reasoning in support of Ephesus as the place of Paul’s imprisonment when he wrote Philippians traces the literary affinities between Philippians, Galatians, and 1 Corinthians.90 In Philippians, Paul harshly warns against the influence of Jewish Christians who circumcise Gentile Christians and bring them under the Jewish law: “Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh” (3:2). In Galatians, Paul issues a similar warning: “Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all”

89. Adolf Deissmann, Light from the Ancient East (trans. Lionel R. M. Strachan; 4th ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 238; Brown, Introduction, 495 n. 35; Contested by F. F. Bruce, 12, on the grounds that the technical meaning of the three Latin inscriptions (CIL III.6085, 7135, 7136) refers to “a former member of the praetorian guard who later discharged police duties as a stationarius on a Roman road in the province of Asia.” But Paul’s use of the term palace guard (Phil 1:13: παρατήρης) need not be limited to its technical, legal meaning. He may have used the common term in a wider sense as a reference to the Roman military personnel so prevalent in Philippi and Ephesus. See Thielman, “Ephesus and the Literary Setting of Philippians,” 222.
(Gal 5:2). In both letters, Paul recounts his own conversion from Judaism to Christ (Phil 3:4-8; Gal 1:13-17) as a way to break the influence of the Judaizers. And both letters contrast righteousness that comes from law and righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith (Phil 3:6-9; Gal 3:10-14).

In Philippians, Paul warns not only against Judaizers but also against libertines: enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is their shame (3:18-19). This warning against libertinism and moral permissiveness is strikingly similar to the warnings against the same problem in the Corinthian church (see especially 1 Corinthians 3–6). Paul’s final argument in both Philippians and 1 Corinthians against rampant immorality is the doctrine of the resurrection. Those who were seduced by the cultural philosophy — “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die” (1 Cor 15:32) — were reminded that their earthly bodies would be transformed to be like the heavenly body of the resurrected Lord Jesus (1 Cor 15:35-58). In the same way, Paul warns the Philippians not to set their minds on earthly things (Phil 3:18-19), for “our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body” (Phil 3:20-21). Both citizens in Roman Corinth and in Roman Philippi needed the strong encouragement of their heavenly citizenship to keep them from giving in to the immoral pressures of their surrounding culture.

If we place the writing of Philippians in the same place and time as the writing of Galatians and 1 Corinthians, these remarkable literary-theological parallels between these three letters make sense. Paul’s fight against Judaizers expressed in Galatians is summarized in Philippians. His warning to the Philippians about “the enemies of the cross,” whose “god is their belly,” recalls his extended polemic against the libertinism of the Corinthians who excused their immorality by chanting their slogans, “I have the right to do anything” and “food for the stomach and the stomach for food” (1 Cor 6:12-13). Philippians reflects the language and battles of the other two letters probably because it was written at the same time and place as they were: in Ephesus in the mid-50s.

91. See the commentary below for evidence that Phil 3:18-19 addresses libertines enthralled by Roman culture, not Judaizers obsessed with Jewish law, as in Phil 3:2-9.
92. See Thielman, “Ephesus and the Literary Setting of Philippians,” 223: “The battles that Paul fights in Philippians 3 are the battles of Galatians and 1 Corinthians, not those he undertook in Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians during his Roman imprisonment.”
93. The Ephesian provenance of 1 Corinthians is derived from 1 Corinthians 16:8. For defense of the Ephesian provenance of Galatians, see Murphy-O’Connor, Paul: A Critical Life, 180-82; Brown, Introduction, 474-77. For my advocacy of a mid-50s date for Galatians written to South rather than North Galatia, see G. W. Hansen, “Galatians, Letter to the,” DPL 326-29.
Unfortunately, all of this discussion about the place of the composition of this letter is speculative and therefore inconclusive. Fortunately, a decision one way or the other does not significantly affect our interpretation of the letter. What does matter for our understanding of Philippians is the indisputable evidence that Paul wrote this letter to express his joyful faith in Christ Jesus, his exalted Lord and eagerly expected Savior, while he was “in chains” (1:7, 13, 14, 17) and to communicate his appreciative love (1:7-8; 4:1, 10-18) for his generous friends in Philippi. His reports of his imprisonment and his receipt of the gift from Philippi give us a clear picture of the background of his letter in terms of his situation when he composed it. A full understanding of the occasion for the letter also needs to be derived from an investigation of problems in the church in Philippi alluded to by the letter.

B. The Church in Trouble

Paul’s letter reveals that he was concerned about three problems in the church in Philippi: (1) disunity, (2) suffering, and (3) opponents.

1. Disunity

Paul’s appeal to two women to “be of the same mind in the Lord” (4:2) does not come as a surprise but as a climactic conclusion to the letter. Selfish ambition and self-interest in the Philippian community come under Paul’s censure (2:3-4); grumbling and arguing among the children of God also receive his stern rebuke (2:14). These glimpses of conflict in the life of the church give us some understanding of the reason for Paul’s repeated appeals for the church to be united in spirit and of one mind (1:27; 2:1-5, 14; 3:17, 20; 4:2). We have to be careful not to use these frequent appeals to unity as a solid basis for extended speculation about the causes and nature of disunity in the church. Such speculation can be viewed as an example of the fallacy of “mirror-reading”: projecting the opposite of Paul’s words (a mirror-image) as a true picture of the situation. Fee makes this charge against Peterlin’s elaborate reconstruction of “the church polarized around Euodia and Syntyche who were the focus of disunity” as a result of personal power struggles, disputes for and against Paul, debates for and against the collection for Paul, and theological controversies stirred up by some perfectionist members of the church. 

94. Brown, Introduction, 496: “There is no way to decide this issue: the best arguments seem to be on the side of Ephesus, and the weakest on the side of Caesarea.”

95. Davorin Peterlin, Paul’s Letter to the Philippians in the Light of Disunity in the Church (NovTSup 79; Leiden: Brill, 1995), 221. See the criticism against Peterlin for mirror-reading by Fee, 7 n. 24; 66 n. 41.
the evidence in the text, especially in his description of an “anti-Pauline lobby” in the church. The warmth of Paul’s compliments and the depth of his gratitude for the support of the church weigh heavily against Peterlin’s hypothesis of hostility towards Paul. Nevertheless, Peterlin’s insight into the personal power struggles reflected in the text provides a valuable answer to the question of the occasion and purposes of the letter. An overarching purpose of the letter is Paul’s desire to resolve the dispute between leaders in the church by urging believers to “strive together with one accord for the faith of the gospel . . . by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind” (1:27; 2:2).

Winter suggests that the heart of Paul’s concern was that “the private disagreement between two women was in danger of spilling over into the public place.”96 He provides abundant evidence from inscriptions and papyri to show that Paul’s use of the verb “live as citizens” (1:27) reflects a widespread use of the same verb and concept in the literature of Paul’s era to convey a similar concern that citizens live in “concord” and “harmony” with one another.97 Paul’s letter was motivated by the “politics of friendship” of his day as he urges the church to “give credibility in the public place to the implications of faith created by the gospel” by standing “firm in the one Spirit, striving together with one accord” (1:27).98 Paul condemns disunity and calls for unity in the church so that it will give a clear witness to the gospel in the public square: “Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, ‘children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.’ Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky” (2:14-15).

Clearly the problem of disunity in the church in Philippi was high on Paul’s agenda as he wrote this letter. He addresses the problem not only in his direct appeal to the two women who are in conflict but also throughout the letter in his denunciations of envy, rivalry, selfish ambition, vain conceit, grumbling, and arguing and in his challenges to be one in spirit and of one mind. Above all, Paul’s sense of urgency as he attends to the problem of disunity comes from his commitment to “defending and confirming the gospel” (1:7). The integrity of the gospel is negated by disunity in the church. While Paul works “to advance the gospel” even among “the palace guard” (1:12-13), he does not want disunity in the church to ruin the advance of the gospel in Philippi. Believers must be “of one mind” so that they will shine as stars in this dark world.

97. Winter, Seek the Welfare of the City, 82-104.
98. Winter, Seek the Welfare of the City, 103.
2. Suffering

Paul’s letter to the Philippians addresses the painful, discouraging experience of suffering in the life of Christians. Suffering is a major theme through his entire discourse: he describes his experience in chains facing execution (1:12-26); he explains that Christians are called to suffer for Christ (1:29); he quotes the hymn depicting Christ’s death on a cross (2:8); he points to himself as one being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from the faith of the Philippians (2:17); he relates how Epaphroditus suffered in the course of his service on behalf of the Philippians (2:27-30); he records his loss of all things to gain Christ (3:8); he expresses his desire to share in the sufferings of Christ (3:10); and he says that he knows what it is to be in need (4:12). Paul’s emphasis on suffering has led interpreters from the early days of the church to our day to view Philippians as a letter of encouragement for martyrs. As Ignatius of Antioch (martyred 110) approached his execution, he was inspired by Paul’s attitude: “Grant me nothing more than that I shall be poured out to God, while an altar is still ready” (cf. Phil 2:17). Ignatius viewed his martyrdom as the way to perfect union with God: “Suffer me to be eaten by the beasts, through whom I can attain to God.”

In the modern era, Ernst Lohmeyer interpreted Philippians as a treatise on martyrdom giving the hope of corporeal transformation through the experience of martyrdom. Lohmeyer’s outline of the letter expresses his perspective:

I. The Martyrdom of Paul (1:12-26)
II. The Martyrdom of the Community (1:27–2:16)
III. Help in Martyrdom (2:17-30)
IV. Dangers in Martyrdom (3:1-21)
V. Final Admonitions regarding Martyrdom (4:1-9)

While Lohmeyer’s interpretation overemphasizes the theme of suffering at the expense of other themes, his approach does the service of highlighting the pervasive language of suffering in this letter. It is “a letter of consolation written to answer the Philippians’ discouragement over Paul’s imprisonment and their own suffering for the gospel.” In this letter Christians

100. Ignatius, To the Romans 2:2. See Bloomquist’s illuminating survey of the interpretation of the suffering passages in Philippians from the early church to the present time (The Function of Suffering in Philippians, 18-70).
101. Ignatius, To the Romans 4:2.
102. E. Lohmeyer, Der Brief an die Philippier; see Bloomquist, The Function of Suffering in Philippians, 50-52, for an analysis of Lohmeyer’s position.
103. Lohmeyer, 5-6.
find solace and strength by understanding how their suffering is participation in the suffering and victory of Christ. Since vindication followed suffering for Christ (2:8-9), the suffering of Christians points to the final victory accomplished by Christ, who “will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body” (3:21).

3. Opponents

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul expresses his awareness of opponents of the church who threaten and seek to destroy the faith of Christians. He urges the believers to stand “firm in the one Spirit . . . without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you” (1:27-28). He recognizes that these “children of God” live in the midst of “a warped and crooked generation” (2:15). He strongly warns the church: “Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh” (3:2). He writes with tears about “enemies of the cross”: “Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things” (3:18-19). Paul also describes opposition to himself: “some preach Christ out of . . . selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains” (1:15-17).

The identification of the opponents alluded to in Philippians is the subject of a vast amount of secondary literature. Current research proposes at least eighteen different identities for the opponents. Some of the name tags pinned on the opponents are Jewish Christians, non-Christian Jews, Gentile Christians, non-Christian Gentiles, Jewish Gnostics, Hellenistic Jewish missionaries, Jewish Judaizers, Gentile Judaizers, and Roman authorities. A complete evaluation of the widely diverse identifications of the opponents requires the major monographs and dissertations dedicated to that task. My review of some of the options appears in the context of the commentary on verses referring to opponents. Our objective in this introduction is to outline the identifications made in this commentary with the caveat that other identifications receive worthy and reputable support. The

105. Fee, 7: “The secondary literature on this issue is second only to the huge output on 2:6-11.” O’Brien, 26-27: “One of the most hotly debated issues in the contemporary study of Philippians is that of the nature and identity of the opponents to whom Paul alludes in his letter.”

following four categories of opponents defined here are described in more
detail in the commentary.

1. Preachers of Christ who suppose they can stir up trouble for Paul
(1:15-17)

Paul accuses these preachers of envy, rivalry, selfish ambition, and attempts
to stir up trouble for him. But since he does not accuse them of false teach-
ing, they do not deserve to be named as Jewish Judaizers, Gentile
Judaizers, or Jewish Gnostics. Nor do they necessarily have the same name
as those who are characterized by selfish ambition in Philippi (2:2). To take
1:15-17 as a double reference to anti-Paul parties in the place of his impris-
onment and in Philippi requires an unsubstantiated leap. All that can be
accurately said about these preachers of Christ is that they illustrate the di-
visive, destructive results of envy and self-ambition.

2. Roman opponents to the gospel who are intimidating Christians in
Philippi (1:28)

Since Paul tells the Philippians not to be frightened by these opponents in
the same paragraph that refers to the common struggle that he and the
Philippians are going through (1:29-30), he is referring to Roman authori-
ties and Roman citizens: those who imprisoned him in Philippi (“the same
struggle you saw I had”) and in his present place of imprisonment (“and
now hear that I still have”) are also frightening the church and opposing
the witness to the gospel of Christ. Paul did not underestimate the power of
imperial agents to intimidate and persecute the fledgling group of believ-
ers in Christ. He calls Philippian believers to “stand firm in the one Spirit,
striving together with one accord for the faith of the gospel” (1:27) so that
they would not be overwhelmed by Roman Philippians who thought that
subverting the imperial gospel that Caesar is Lord by proclaiming the gos-
pel that Jesus Christ is Lord is evidence enough for execution (1:28).

3. Jewish Christians who lead Gentile Christians to follow Jewish rituals
(3:2)

Paul’s harsh warning, “Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those
mutilators,” is followed by the claim for the church, “we are the [true]


108. See the commentary below for this interpretation. See also S. E. Fowl,
“Philippians 1:28b, One More Time,” in New Testament Greek and Exegesis: Essays in Honor of
Gerald F. Hawthorne (ed. Amy M. Donaldson and Timothy B. Sailors; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,
2003), 167-79: “This view reads this clause as asserting that the Philippians’ steadfast faith in the face of opposition is a sign, but it is a sign that can be read two ways. The opponents will take it as a sign of the Philippians’ imminent destruction. To the
Philippians, however, it is a sign from God of their salvation” (178).
circumcision” (3:3). This contrast between the mutilators (those who impose circumcision) and the true circumcision points to the Jewish nature of these opponents. They would not have any access to the church if they did not claim to be Christians as well. These opponents are similar to or actually the same as the Jewish Christians who infiltrated Paul’s churches in Galatia. As suggested above in the proposal that Ephesus was Paul’s place of imprisonment when he wrote Philippians, Paul’s invective against these opponents in Philippians 3:2 may have been ignited by his outburst in his letter to the Galatians against Jewish Christian agitators. Galatians and Philippians reflect the same severe censure of these troublemakers.

4. Gentile Christians who “live” (literally, are walking) “as enemies of the cross,” as a result of the pressures of the pagan culture in Roman Philippi (3:18-19)

Paul writes with tears about many who “live as enemies of the cross.” Living as a follower of Christ in a Roman colony was truly countercultural. The strong currents of pagan religions, hedonistic lifestyles, and especially the imperial cult could easily knock Christians off their feet and pull them away from walking in the way of the cross of Christ. The result of giving in to the pressures of their culture would cause Christians to live as enemies of the way of the cross: walking in the way of destruction, obeying their physical appetites as their god, making their boast in shameful activities, and setting their mind on earthly things (3:19). Instead of shining as stars “in a warped and crooked generation” (2:15), these (former? lapsed?) Christians were assimilating to their culture in Philippi in ways that denied the gospel. So Paul calls them to remember that they are citizens of heaven: “our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ” (3:20).

Paul’s references to the problem of disunity in the church, the experience of suffering, and the four categories of opponents (ambitious preachers, intimidating powers, Jewish Christian teachers, and enemies of the cross) form a matrix for interpreting the theology and ethical exhortations in his letter. When we put this matrix of the problems in Philippi together with the reports Paul gives of his own situation in prison and his receipt of the gift from Philippi, we have a full picture of the occasion for his letter.

IV. A PREVIEW OF TWO THEMES

All the different aspects and subjects of this letter point to two major themes: the gospel of Christ and the community in Christ.
A. The Gospel of Christ

Paul’s driving passion in all of his work is “defending and confirming the gospel,” “to advance the gospel,” and “the defense of the gospel” (1:7, 12, and 16).\(^{109}\) He writes this letter to thank the Philippians for their “partnership in the gospel” (1:5) since the early days of their “acquaintance with the gospel” (4:15). His first and overarching imperative to the Philippians is to “live as citizens in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, . . . striving together with one accord for the faith of the gospel” (1:27). The highest commendation Paul gives of his co-workers is that they “served with me in the work of the gospel” and “contended at my side in the cause of the gospel” (2:22, 4:3). The gospel of Christ takes first place in Paul’s mission and his letter.\(^{110}\)

The content of the gospel is the good news that Jesus Christ is Lord. Pulsating with praise for the humility and the exaltation of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Christ hymn (2:6-11) is the heart of the letter. This hymn expresses in lofty, lyrical language the narrative of Christ from his pre-incarnate glory to the universal praise of him as Lord to the glory of God the Father. The pathway of this divine person is marked by his humble obedience as a human slave all the way to death on a cross. Consequently, God exalted him by giving him the name “Lord” so that all creation will worship him as the ultimate sovereign above all earthly sovereigns. The church in Philippi is called by the hymn to express their worship of Jesus Christ as Lord in their humble service to one another (2:1-5).

This gospel of Christ has special relevance for recipients in a Roman colony. To “stand firm” for the gospel of Christ against the gospel of Caesar, they need to worship Jesus Christ as the Lord and Savior above all earthly powers. But the gospel of Christ reaches far beyond a contrast between Christ and the Roman emperor. No matter what earthly powers may oppose them, Christians everywhere are called to “live in a manner worthy of the gospel.”

Living according to the gospel is a process of pressing on to apprehend the surpassing worth of Jesus Christ and being apprehended by him (3:12). Progress in the Christian life is not measured by “righteousness based on the law”; instead, it begins with the gift of “righteousness that comes from God through faith in Christ” (3:6-9). The “one thing” Paul desires to do in his life (3:13) is to know Christ, “to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings” (3:10). His pursuit of Christ serves as a model, an example, for the Philippians to follow (3:17). Paul’s


life challenges his readers to exclaim with him: “For to me, to live is Christ” (1:21). With this goal in life they will face death courageously, knowing that they will be “with Christ” (1:23). Every day of their life will be oriented toward the “day of Christ Jesus” (1:6, 10; 2:16), when “the Lord Jesus Christ, the Savior,” will come from heaven to “bring everything under his control and transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body” (3:20-21).

B. The Community in Christ

Woven inseparably together with the theme of the gospel of Christ is the theme of the community in Christ. The phrase “in Christ” has a “dominating role in Philippians,” occurring in various forms twenty-one times. Although this phrase has a range of meanings and does not always refer to corporate union with Christ, the primary focus of the phrase in Philippians is the community in Christ. When Paul addresses his letter to “all God’s holy people in Christ Jesus” (1:1), he is not simply addressing them as individual Christians. He is recognizing their corporate union with one another in their union with Christ. Paul introduces the Christ hymn by reminding them that they are a community in Christ. “Think this way among yourselves which also you think in Christ Jesus” (2:5; my trans.). My literal translation from the Greek text emphasizes the parallelism by using the same verb, “think,” in both clauses and by understanding the phrases “in you” and “in Christ Jesus” as parallel references to the corporate union of Christians with Christ. Paul is calling Christians to “think the same in your community with each other as one is obligated to think in the community in Christ.”

The community in Christ is a “partnership in the gospel” (1:5). Paul develops this concept of partnership, fellowship, in his letter to emphasize the corporate nature of life in Christ. Standing behind the English word “partnership,” the Greek word (koinōnia) connotes a variety of close relationships “involving mutual interests and sharing.” Marriage and family relationships, friendships, business partnerships, common possession of property, citizenship, and religious organizations were all considered to be examples of koinōnia in Paul’s day. Paul’s six references to partnership in this letter draw from these various nuances of partnership and contribute to the development of his theology of community in Christ. A major purpose of this letter is to transform the experience of partnership in the light of life in Christ.

112. Müller, 92. See the discussion of this verse in the commentary below.
113. BDAG, 552.
114. 1:5, 7, 2:1; 3:10; 4:14, 15.
The kind of partnership enjoyed by Paul and the Philippians in their “partnership in the gospel” (1:5) is first of all their close association as friends who shared a common faith in the gospel. The partnership formed by mutual participation in the benefits of the gospel developed into a partnership to advance the proclamation of the gospel. The partnership of Paul and the Philippians in the work of proclaiming the gospel bears striking resemblance to business partnerships in Paul’s day. The Philippians’ partnership in the appropriation and the proclamation of the gospel filled Paul with joyful thankfulness whenever he thought of them. A primary purpose of the letter was to express his gratitude to the church in Philippi for their partnership with him in the advance of the gospel.

Paul was aware that the problem of disunity in the church threatened this partnership. His partnership with the church in the mission of proclaiming the gospel would fail if members in the church were divided against each other. To strengthen the unity of the church, Paul draws on another meaning of partnership, that of common possession. Believers in Christ are heirs to the Holy Spirit; they have common possession of the Holy Spirit. They are bound together not only by their partnership to proclaim the gospel but also by their “common sharing in the Spirit” (2:1). Their “common sharing in the Spirit” is their way to experience participation in the sufferings of Christ (3:10). Paul’s development of the concept of partnership places human partnership for the sake of the common venture of advancing the gospel (1:5) within communion with the Spirit (2:1), and communion with the Spirit within participation in the sufferings of Christ (3:10). The partnership in the gospel resulting from common sharing in the Spirit leads to common sharing in the sufferings of Christ. The term “participation in his sufferings” points to the solidarity of all believers who have chosen to participate in the sufferings of Christ. Paul is not presenting his participation as an individualistic enterprise reserved only for heroic martyrs. This participation in the sufferings of Christ does not happen in isolation from others. According to Paul, all believers are called to share together in the sufferings of Christ (1:29-30). By their experience in community of participation in his sufferings, believers grow in their knowledge of Christ. The longing to know participation in his sufferings is a longing for a community experience.

When Paul turns to the practical matter of writing a receipt for the financial contributions of the Philippians (4:10-19), he commends them for partnering with him in his trials (4:14) and for being the only church to partner with him in the arrangement of giving and receiving (4:15). By dis

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closing the deeper dimensions of the partnership as a common sharing in the Spirit and participation in his sufferings, he places his references to these financial aspects of the partnership within the unbreakable bonds of community life in union with Christ.

The community in Christ is the new people of God. Paul draws a strong contrast at the beginning of chapter 3 between the people of God identified by belonging to the Jewish people and the people of God identified by belonging to Christ. In harsh warnings (3:2), he depicts Judaizers (those who proselytize Gentile Christians to bring them within the circle of Judaism) as “dogs, evildoers, and mutilators.” By contrast, those who belong to Christ are “the circumcision, serving God by his Spirit, boasting in Christ Jesus, and putting no confidence in the flesh” (3:3). Paul’s identification of the Gentile church in Philippi as “the circumcision” (a name for Israel, the Jewish people of God, because they were marked by the rite of circumcision) affirms their full inclusion in the true people of God because they are in Christ. Paul says that he considers all of his inherited privileges and moral accomplishments as a Jew (3:4-6) “a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ” (3:8). Christ is the center and circumference of the new people of God. All that matters is to “be found in him” (3:9). This radical redefinition of the community of believers in Christ as the true people of God gives the church a clear understanding of its identity before God and of its mission in the world.

Our understanding of the relationship of the community in Christ to the world is clarified by Paul’s assertion to the Philippians, “our citizenship is in heaven” (3:20). The Philippians were Roman citizens under the authority of the emperor. But they had a more fundamental allegiance: they were citizens of a heavenly colony under the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ. Because of his allegiance to the Lord in heaven, Paul faced death under the Roman emperor (1:19-24). He knew that the Philippians also faced fierce opposition from the Roman authorities for their commitment to the gospel of Christ (1:27-30). In the context of imminent execution and hostile persecution, Paul calls the church to a fearless proclamation of the gospel with the encouragement that even his imprisonment actually “served to advance the gospel, even among the whole palace guard” (1:12-13). Bold witness to the gospel that Jesus Christ is Lord brought some members of Caesar’s household into the church (4:22). Believers in Christ fulfill their mission in the world when they “live as citizens of heaven in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ” and “stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together with one accord for the faith of the gospel” (1:27; 4:1-2). By

117. See the commentary below for discussion of these terms.
118. D. A. Carson, Christ and Culture Revisited (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 166: “Inevitably, then, thoughtful Christians maintain some fundamental allegiances that set them apart from other citizens in the Empire who feel no loyalty whatsoever to a ‘citizenship...in heaven.’”
their unity with one another in Christ they give solid evidence of the reality of their “citizenship in heaven.”

Paul affirms the identity of believers as “the children of God” (2:15) by frequently referring to them as “brothers and sisters.” As a family letter, Philippians communicates news between members of the family. News about Paul’s imprisonment, the suffering endured for Christ’s sake, the illness of Epaphroditus, the plan to send Timothy, and his intention to visit are all the kinds of information shared between brothers and sisters. Paul’s appeal for sisters who are in conflict to “be of the same mind” (4:2) comes from his concern for unity in the family. Only when brothers and sisters “do everything without grumbling or arguing” will they “become blameless and pure, ‘children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation’” (2:14-15). The mission of the family of God in the world depends upon their unity with one another.

The gospel of Christ and the community in Christ motivate Paul’s exuberant outbursts of joy: he gives thanks with joy for their partnership in the gospel (1:5); he rejoices because Christ is preached and the community prays for him (1:18); he rejoices when he visualizes the children of God shining as stars and holding firmly the word of life (2:15-18); he asks the church to welcome Epaphroditus home with great joy (2:29); he calls the brothers and sisters to rejoice in the Lord (3:1; 4:4); and he rejoices greatly in the Lord because of the practical concern of the community for him while he was in prison (4:10). In a letter filled with reflections on the suffering of Paul and the Philippians, rejoicing in the Lord predominates over all the difficult circumstances of life. Like a mighty river surging through solid rock, joy flows from this letter through the suffering community of believers, giving them love for one another and the peace of God.

119. 1:12, 14; 2:25; 3:1, 13, 17; 4:1, 8, 21.