

ALLIANCE THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF CHRISTIAN UNITY  
PHILIPPIANS 1:27- 2:11

SUBMITTED TO PROFESSOR SHAWN CRAIGMILES  
NT 737 (GREEK): PHILIPPIANS

BY  
JAY HARPER MAY 2, 2023

1:27-30 27 Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel 28 without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved--and that by God. 29 For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him, 30 since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.

2:1-11 1 Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, 2 then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. 3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, 4 not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. 5 In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: 6 Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; 7 rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death--even death on a cross! 9 Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, 10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

## PHILIPPIANS 1:27-2:11 NIV

### INTRODUCTION

Why is unity so important? Because no group of individuals or companies will ever grow and expand unless they come together as one. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary unity simply means oneness. The aim of this paper will explore why Christian unity is countercultural and why this message has changed the world. When a group of people comes together as one, they can accomplish more together than any one single individual. An example of this is found in the first book of the Bible. According to Genesis chapter 11, the whole earth was of one language

and of one speech and they began to build a tower that would reach unto heaven so that they could make a name for themselves. Interestingly, the unity of man was so great that God had to confuse people with many languages. So, this was a humanistic unity based on man's values and thinking. How do we know this? Because God's command was to multiply and fill the earth (Gen. 1:22, 28, 8:17, 9:1,7). God is not against unity, his just against the unity that is against his design and purpose of man. Again, we will explore how Christian unity is antithetical to humanistic unity and man's perception.

### **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

To get a better understanding of the text let's look at the historical background of the Thessalonian church. Unfortunately, not a lot is known. All that is known for certain is that Paul was in prison (Phil. 1:7, 13,14, 16). We also know that Philippi was a Roman colony. Like Thessalonica, Philippi was located along the Via Egnatia that connected Rome with Constantinople. According to Hawthorne and Martin, "Philippi was a reproduction of Rome"<sup>1</sup> So, Emperor worship was prevalent at this time. According to Powell, "Becoming a Christian certainly, meant a loss of esteem and social prestige."<sup>2</sup> It's possible that this church was more interested in titles and honor. So, Paul mentions the words bishops and deacons in his

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<sup>1</sup> Gerald Hawthorne and Ralph Martin, Word Biblical Commentary: Philippians, (Grand Rapids, MI Zondervan 2004), 36.

<sup>2</sup> Mark A Powell, Introducing the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI Baker publishing 2018), 395.

salutation, which he does not do in any other letter. According to Acts 16 Lydia and her family were the first converts to the Philippian church. Powell also mentions the occasion for this letter was *friendship*; “Paul’s main purpose in writing this letter is to update his friends and ministry partners on his personal situation (1:12-26), ease their minds with regard to Epaphroditus (2:25-30), and to thank them for the gift that he delivered. (4:10-20)”<sup>3</sup>

### EXEGETICAL OUTLINE OF PHILIPPIANS 1:27-30 – 2:1-11

#### DON’T BE AFRAID 1:27-30

What is Paul trying to communicate to his audience at this time? One of the themes in this letter is the word gospel. The Greek word is εὐαγγέλιον (gospel) and it means good tidings or good message.<sup>4</sup> In this case, it was the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ for the sins of the world. It is used six times in the first chapter alone. Paul talks about the *fellowship* in the gospel (1:5-6), the *confirmation* of the gospel (1:7-11), and the *furtherance* of the gospel (1:12-14). According to Acts 16, Paul found this church on his second missionary journey. Paul and Silas were beaten and thrown in jail because they preached the gospel (Acts. 16:22-24). But God miraculously delivered them (Acts. 16:25-26). Emperor worship was practiced in the first and second centuries of Rome. According to Powel, “emperors often were identified as divine figures

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<sup>3</sup> Powell, 362-363.

<sup>4</sup> Strong's Concordance, Blue-letter Bible <https://www.blueletterbible.org/tools/MultiVerse.cfm?s=0000mi>

to whom appropriate homage was due”.<sup>5</sup> Devos also stated, “The preaching of another king may well have violated imperial bans”.<sup>6</sup> So, preaching the gospel was downright dangerous. The gospel will confront people with their sins, which is why Jesus came into the world. Paul tells this church not to be afraid because their enemies will be destroyed by God (1:28). Does that mean we won’t be criticized or ostracized or even die? No! Part of believing in Christ means we will also suffer for him. One of the other themes of the letter to the Philippians is joy. The word joy or rejoice is mentioned twelve times in this letter. The Greek word is χαρᾶς (joy) and it means calm delight, gladness, or cheerfulness. Paul is writing while he is in chains, yet he tells this church to rejoice. Paul himself is an example of what it means to suffer for Christ.

#### **UNITY IS HAVING THE RIGHT ATTITUDE AND SPIRIT 2:1-4**

What brings great joy to a teacher? It’s the fact that the students have applied what they taught them. Paul begins Chapter 2 with the word, therefore. Therefore (οὖν ) is an inference being drawn from something said before. In this instance, Paul is talking about suffering and what will happen to those who perpetrate it, and how the believer is to respond to it. In other words, when we witness about Christ, and we suffer as a result of it we’re united in Christ’s suffering vicariously. Hawthorne and Martin also state, “Harmony is essential for the Christian community

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<sup>5</sup> Powell, 27.

<sup>6</sup> Craig Steven De Vos, *Church, and Community Conflicts: The Relationship of the Thessalonians, Corinthian, and Philippian Churches with their Wider Civic Communities*, (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1999), 156.

and for an effective effort to defend the gospel”<sup>7</sup> What would give Paul more joy than knowing that this church he has founded is united with Christ in his suffering? The reason why I agree with Powell this is a *friendship letter* is because of the words and phrases Paul uses in verses 2:1-4. He uses words like united with Christ, his love, common sharing in the Spirit, tenderness, and compassion, like-mindedness, same love, one in spirit, and one mind. These words and phrases characterize those united with Christ and one another. Unity does not mean we have to all look and sound the same. Paul then uses the word rather or but (ἀλλὰ) to differentiate between selfishness and humility. Thinking only of oneself and not others will destroy unity. Moises Silva state, “The true obstacle to unity is not the presence of legitimate differences of opinion but self-centeredness. Ethnic, cultural, educational, and social status are not obstacles to unity. Shifting attention away from ourselves becomes the challenge.”<sup>8</sup> This is the countercultural attitude or mindset one must have if God’s kingdom is going to advance. The world’s attitude is to think about oneself and not others.

### **LET THIS MIND BE IN YOU 2:5-11**

Why does the church seem to be divided and God’s kingdom not advancing? That’s not an indictment on the organism but on the organization. God always has a remnant. Like the prophet Elijah thought he was the only one obeying God (I Ki. 19:13-18). But when we look at the

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<sup>7</sup> Hawthorne and Martin, 81.

<sup>8</sup> Moises Silva, *Philippians: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing, 2005), 87.

church in America we seem to be divided by politics, abortion, gun rights, homosexuality, and racism. Paul says, don't be selfish but rather think about others rather than ourselves. Why haven't the church been more effective for Christ and why is the world not seeing Christ in the believer? Also, why does the church in America seem divided? Let's look at why Christianity is countercultural and antithetical to worldly unity. First, according to Silva; "Modern scholarship questions whether verses 6-11 come originally from Paul or whether he simply made use of an already existing poem that puts us in touch with the worship and doctrine of the early church."<sup>9</sup>

This Christ hymn is the supreme model for selflessness, servanthood, and obedience. The focus will not be on whether it is a poem or not but on what attributes or qualities of Christ's life display the characteristics of humility which is the cornerstone of unity. First, to be countercultural one must be *selfless*. This is the mindset one must have if unity is to thrive. We must be concerned about the needs of others rather than ourselves or our position (1:5). In other words the imperative (have this-φρονεῖτε, τοῦτο ) is to have this same thinking or mindset (φρονεῖτε ) that Christ has. How did Christ achieve this mindset? He emptied himself by taking the form of a servant (The NIV offers "made himself nothing). The key word is *by* (ὕπὸ) which indicates the manner in which this action is carried out (as a servant). Unfortunately, we cannot exhaust these verses and break down terms like kenosis (divinity/humanity of Christ) at this time, but Hawthorne and Martin made a good point. "The phrase does not mean that Christ

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<sup>9</sup> Moises Silva, 92.

discarded divine substances or essence rather he put himself at the disposal of people. This goes back to 'vain conceit' (κενοδοξία) in verse 3, which describes the attitude and actions of Christ in terms of setting aside his rights and in not insisting on his own way, as by an act of seizing.”<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, people who are powerful, successful, and have positions and honor are insensitive to the needs of those around them. Secondly, not only was Christ selfless but he also became a **servant** (δούλου). The term means slave or bondservant. In a society where position and honor were important who wants to be at the bottom? People who are slaves do all the dirty work and have very little to show for it. According to William Barclay, “Some sixty million slaves existed in the Roman Empire by the middle second century. The disciples understood the position well, slaves were at the very bottom of the social order. A slave had no rights in law- both males and females were mercilessly punished for offenses.”<sup>11</sup> So why would Jesus, God in the flesh, want to become a slave? Because slaves serve with humility and sacrifice. But for the world greatness is measured by power, success, wealth, and status. Worldly unity focuses on authority over others and cares very little about people. Joe Trull state; “Jesus' word of warning to the Twelve on the final journey to Jerusalem contrasted the way of the world with the Christian way. "It will not be so among you, but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave" (Matt. 20:26-27).”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Hawthorne and Martin, 117.

<sup>11</sup> William Barclay, *The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1960), 310.

Finally, if one wants to experience this kind of countercultural unity, one must be willing to **sacrifice** for others even if it costs one's life. That is scary! Because our natural instincts tell us self-preservation is most important. Verse 8 tells us that he humbled (ἐταπείνωσεν) himself. But according to Hellerman, "humiliated is perhaps a better translation. Why? The Philippians were all too familiar with humiliation by superiors in their social, political, and economic worlds."<sup>13</sup>

How did Jesus humiliate himself? He became obedient and died on the cross. Dying on a cross was cruel and agonizing and was reserved for criminals. According to scripture, it was a curse to die on a tree (Deut. 21:23, Gal. 3:13). The definition of sacrifice means the act of giving up something of value for the sake of something that is more important. Christian unity is dynamic because God's people are united in Christ and there is nothing we wouldn't do for the Savior!

Worldly unity is about achieving the temporal while Christian unity is eternal. People are willing to sacrifice what they are devoted to and what they care about the most. Paul concludes Christ's humility by using the word *wherefore* (διὸ). In other words, his humility has exalted his name above every name. So, that every knee on earth and in heaven and every tongue will one day confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God (2:9-11). This kind of unity changed the world. Think about it, there were about 120 people in the upper room (Acts. 1:15). They didn't

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<sup>12</sup> 1. Joe E. Trull, "First place in the Kingdom: For Slaves Only," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 40, no.2 (Spring 1998): 72.

<sup>13</sup> Joseph H. Hellerman, *Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2015), 116.

have Bibles, they didn't have Facebook, they didn't have Twitter, they didn't have U-Tube, they didn't have the internet and they didn't have smartphones. How in the world could 120 people in about a generation completely change the entire culture of the world? They had a selfless, servant-oriented, and sacrificial unity; the supreme model was Jesus Christ.

### CONCLUSION

Paul is concerned about the disunity in the Philippian church. He specifically addresses two women, Euodia and Syntyche (Phil 4:2). This Christ hymn stands out as the greatest model of unity that has changed the world. Someone might make the statement that only Jesus can live that kind of life. But Paul makes it clear in verses 16-30 that Timothy, Epaphroditus, and Paul himself have exhibited these same kinds of characteristics. Christian unity is selfless. Christ emptied himself of his divine status and Craig Devos “sees this ethical posture in polemical contrast to the proud status-seeking of Greco-Roman elites.”<sup>14</sup> Paul also rejects his Jewish status (3:2-11). Christian unity also fosters servanthood. Can I truly lead others and create an atmosphere of unity when my needs are more important than others? What was so refreshing about Jesus is that “he came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many (Matt. 20:28). People talk about being a “servant leader” but what many people see today is just the opposite. Paul never wanted to burden the church even though there was an apostolic right but instead, he worked with his hands (4:11-13, 16. I Thess. 2:9, 4:11). Finally,

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<sup>14</sup> Craig Steven De Vos, 284.

unity is countercultural because the ultimate sacrifice one can make for another is to give their very life. Jesus says, “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). Jesus was willing to give his life for lost humanity even if it meant dying on the cross. Epaphroditus was faithful to the work of Christ even though he almost lost his life (2:25-30). The Bible says we are living epistles read of men (II Cor. 3:2). How we live our lives verbally and non-verbal is a witness to the unity of Christ and the proclamation of his love.

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