

## **The Fellowship of the Gospel: The Dual Nature of the Church's Mission in Philippians**

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### Introduction

Did Paul expect churches to join him in advancing the gospel of Christ to all nations, or was he only interested in soliciting their financial support, leaving missions to the apostles and their co-workers? If he believed churches were responsible for advancing the gospel, what were those missiological expectations?

The purpose of this article is to offer a biblical framework from Philippians for the dual nature of the churches' responsibility in missions. Churches should support missionaries financially and participate personally in preserving, proclaiming and living out the gospel in their own context. In a time of rapidly changing demographics, opportunities for cross cultural outreach abound. Embracing the dual nature of the church's mission is critical to advancing the gospel among all peoples.

Paul provides such a framework in his letter to the Philippians when he refers to their "participation (fellowship) in the gospel from the first day until now" (1:5). Being a part of the fellowship of the gospel meant Paul expected churches to join him in the advancement of the gospel through funding and direct participation through proclaiming.

Often commentators offer a narrow interpretation of Paul's use of the phrase, *fellowship of the gospel*, including only financial assistance. Paul rejoiced that the Philippians were part of the fellowship of the gospel because they have received the good news (1:7), supported Paul financially in his extension of the gospel (4:15-18), and were shining the light of the gospel to people around them by holding forth the word of life (2:15-16). Paul's burden for the church at Philippi was for the people to understand, preserve, proclaim, and live out the gospel in community, while also understanding the spiritual impact of supporting mission efforts beyond its borders—an enduring model for churches today to follow. Eckhard Schnabel observes,

Paul thanks the Christians in Philippi for their "sharing in the gospel" (Phil 1: 5). The phrase "in the gospel" (*eis to euangelion*) describes an active participation of the church in Philippi in his own missionary work. They cooperated in the preaching of the gospel not only through their financial support for Paul (Phil 4: 15-16) and through their prayers (Phil 1: 19), but also in terms of passing on the news of Jesus. Since Paul in the same context refers to the "progress of the gospel" (Phil 1: 12), the "fellowship of the gospel" is centrally connected with this progress. The believers in Philippi contribute to the "progress of the gospel" through their financial support of the apostle and through their own missionary activity in Philippi....<sup>1</sup>

Paul's overriding concern was the preservation and propagation of the gospel of Jesus Christ in and through the church. Paul wrote with a pastoral concern, but one that was nested within a theological, ecclesiological and missiological purpose—to strengthen the church through the gospel for the furtherance of the gospel.

### Background

Philippi was a strategic center for gospel ministry—a Roman city of no mean importance. It was a gateway city between East and West. During his second missionary

journey, God gave Paul a vision of a pleading man from Macedonia, redirecting him and Silas to this significant urban center (Acts 16:6-10). Years later, Paul desired to assist the maturation of the good work in Philippi. He clearly perceived the link between the advancement of the gospel by the Philippian church and its spiritual vibrancy, unity, and overall health (2:15-16). Paul's chief concerns were the edification of the church and missiological advance of the gospel through the church.

As Moisés Silva suggests, Paul was partly writing in 1:12-26 as a missionary giving a report to the church that financially supported his ministry.<sup>2</sup> However, Paul did more than give a missionary report; he sought to shape a missiological focus and gospel direction in the church. He wrote as a beloved friend, but also as an apostle to inspire a tenacious commitment to the gospel, an unyielding courage in the face of opposition, and a constant witness to Christ.

### Church Health and Gospel Advance

Since the local church is headquarters for missions, mission efforts cannot ignore the need for church development. Paul was not content to receive a financial gift from the Philippian church; he assisted them in working through their challenges for the sake of fidelity to and the progress of the gospel.

The church was undergoing difficulties. Internally, the church struggled with disunity borne of competing agendas and a lack of humility. To combat the troubling trend, Paul offered examples of humble service in the face of trials.

Paul appealed to his personal example in the letter: "Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us" (3:17). Jesus Christ serves as the ultimate example of a servant's mindset (2:5-11). In humbly and obediently persevering through the cross, Jesus set an example for this embattled church. Timothy also was an example to the church. He was genuinely concerned about their welfare, sought only the interests of Christ, and served with Paul in the furtherance of the gospel (2:19-22). Finally, Paul mentioned Epaphroditus as a brother, fellow worker, fellow soldier, messenger, and minister who risked his life for the cause of Christ (2:25-30).

The danger of division threatened the Philippian church. Paul reminded them in 1:27, "Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel . . ." Paul addressed disunity and self-centered motives in 2:2-4, "Make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others."

In 2:14 Paul commanded, "Do all things without grumbling or disputing," a strong indication that all was not well in the church. Two prominent women were in need of reconciliation. He addressed them in 4:2, "I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to live in harmony in the Lord."

Stress fractures also became evident because of the external pressure. From the founding of the church, opposition characterized its early growth. Paul and Silas were beaten and thrown into prison for their ministry. The apostle also identified a gospel opposition to the church at Philippi. He exhorted the believers not to be alarmed by their opponents. He assured them that even their suffering came as a gift from God (1:29-30).

The second dimension of the external pressure was more subtle. False teachers claimed to be part of the family of faith, but clearly were not. Paul warned the church of this danger in 3:1-2. Paul indicated this corrupting influence in 1:27 when he told the church to be "with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel." The "faith of the gospel" refers to the content of the gospel and not the believers' action of faith.

Paul knew spiritual renewal is not just for the sake of the church, but was necessary

for the advancement of the gospel. In the midst of turmoil Paul offered needed attitude adjustments among the members of the church. He sought the renewal of their collective lives and minds according to the truth. Their conduct was to be characterized by “one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel” (1:27). He exhorted them to have the same mind (2:2), to have humility of mind (2:3), and to have the mind of Christ (2:5). The apostle encouraged the church to have the mind (3:15) of maturity, quite the opposite of persons who set their minds (3:19) on earth things (3:18). He urged them to think of praiseworthy matters.

As an essential aspect of discipleship, Paul wanted the believers to be conformed into the image of Christ. He also sought for them to accept the missiological goal of advancing the gospel of Christ in their strategic city and beyond.

Today, when missiological strategies are engaged without reference to churches’ spiritual life, the cause of the gospel suffers, blunting the church's witness in the world. Paul called the church to a renewed mind, a new resolve and holiness in the face of opposition, and a gospel unity. He wanted them to be blamelessness in order to shine as lights in a dark place and prove worthy of their fellowship of the gospel (2:14-17).

Key themes of Paul’s exhortations are Christian identity, perseverance in holiness, godly humility in community, gospel fidelity, and the faithful advancement of the gospel in the midst of suffering. Paul defined his ministry by the progress of the church (1:25) and their perseverance in the day of divine reckoning (2:16). The apostle was confident that what God had begun, He would complete (1:6).

Through sharing his example, Paul inspires faithfulness in suffering, Christ-centered desire to advance the gospel, a belief in eternal communion with Christ, courage amid opposition, humble and self-sacrificial service toward others, a passionate pursuit of Christ and his calling, and trust in God’s provision during times of deprivation. He maintained a hope that Christ will come again and transform all believers.

At every turn Paul exhorted the church to perseverance rooted in grace and fleshed out in daily obedience. Conduct worthy of the gospel involves, in part, continually working out their salvation with fear and trembling because it is God who is at work within them both to will and to work for His good pleasure.

### The Priority of the Gospel

Joining the fellowship of the gospel means recognizing the priority of the gospel in the church's life and mission. The gospel forms a key theme in Paul's letter and demonstrates the gospel was the priority for his ministry and the church. He used the word nine times in his letter to the Philippians. He commended the church for their *fellowship in the gospel* (1:5). The apostle viewed his ministry as the defense and confirmation of the gospel (1:7, 16). He wanted the church to know that his imprisonment turned out for the greater progress of the gospel. He exhorted the church to live worthily of the gospel, striving together with one mind for the faith of the gospel (1:27).

Paul's life centered in the heart of the gospel, Christ Himself, and offered this model for gospel living to the Philippians. Paul’s design used his example to shape the same attitude towards the gospel in his audience. He rejoiced when Christ was preached, even from wrong motives, and was incensed when it was corrupted. He gave his life for the advancement of the gospel and the establishment of local churches. He expected the churches to join him in this basic apostolic work in a crooked and perverse generation (2:14-16).

Paul was no utilitarian. He genuinely cared for the believers at Philippi. Paul also was concerned with the progress of the gospel through the church as it magnified Christ. For this reason, Paul was thankful that this church was part of the fellowship of the gospel. Peter T. O'Brien notes,

The second reason, then, for Paul's thanksgiving to God was the Philippians’ cooperation with him in his ministry of the gospel to the Gentiles. This cooperation ... is not to be restricted to monetary assistance, . . . It probably includes the idea of their actual proclamation of the gospel to outsiders (see on 1:27, 28), their suffering along

with Paul for the gospel's sake (cf 1:30; 4:14-15), as well as their intercessory activity on his behalf (cf. 1:19) ....<sup>3</sup>

The apostle prioritized the proclamation of the gospel regardless of motivation: "What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice." Yet, the church in Philippi was in danger of compromising the mission of the gospel and the unity of the church by operating from self-interest.

The apostle's passion for the magnification of Christ in his life offers further evidence of the primary place of Christ at the center of the gospel and of his life. He wrote, "According to my earnest expectation and hope, that I will not be put to shame in anything, but *that* with all boldness, Christ will even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death." The word for magnification has a missiological implication—to bring Christ into sharper focus in order to bring people to faith.

Paul's faithfulness during his imprisonment, coupled with his proclamation of Christ, led to the conversion of many people. The gospel offered a powerful presentation of Christ. Paul also desired to know Christ in the power of His resurrection and fellowship of His sufferings. The first enabled Paul to live a life of holiness and empowers him for service. The second enabled faithful proclamation of the gospel despite trying circumstances.

### The Preservation of the Gospel

Being a partaker in the fellowship of the gospel implies the need for the church to strive together consciously for the faith of the gospel. The gospel is not only the means of conversion, but is the foundation and motivation of the Christian life expressed in a faithful incarnational witness. In the theme of the letter, Paul wrote, "Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel . . ." (1:27).

The community of faith must understand, receive, and continually affirm the gospel in order to strengthen church unity and to advance a positive gospel witness in society. Paul worked for the progress and joy in *the faith* of the church (1:25). In 2:17 he referred to himself as being "poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrifice and service of your *faith*." In both instances, *faith* is a noun, highlighting the content of the church's beliefs.

The phrase, *contend together for the faith of the gospel*, is drawn from the world of athletics. Paul also used this word to describe the prior role of Euodia and Syntche who had "shared my struggle in the cause of the gospel." While Paul certainly referred to the advancement of the gospel, he also considered the preservation of the gospel, as his warning to the church of false teachers bears witness (3:1).

Paul considered the gospel worthy of perseverance in the face of opposition. Paul experienced hostility from fellow workers who sought to harm him (1:15-17). He suffered the antagonism of the Roman state that imprisoned him for his apostolic activities. He confronted the constant harassment of false teachers. Paul knew what it meant to suffer the loss of all things for the sake of Jesus Christ.

Paul was deeply burdened for the health and direction of this church. He wrote with a deep pastoral burden to preserve unity, but not just for the sake of unity. The spiritual vibrancy of this church was crucial for the advancement of the gospel throughout the empire.

Part of the church's stewardship of the gospel rested in living out and proclaiming the gospel, as he described in 2:15-16. One key result of the church's working out of its salvation was the furthering of its witness in the world. Paul described their appearance as lights in the world. The act of holding forth or holding fast the word of life was both theological and missiological.

One dimension of having the mind of Christ is missiological. Christ humbled himself to achieve the will of the Father. Jesus said to His disciples, "As the Father has sent Me, so

send I you.” Paul offered the model of Christological humility in order to reshape the selfish attitudes of the Philippians. In part, the transformed mind of the church should lead to humble self-sacrificial service for one another and for Christ.

Paul described a gospel unity that edifies the church and extends its witness in the world. Christ provided the ultimate example of humility and obedience. Paul placed emphasis on the complete obedience of Christ as the church’s model. Through this example, Paul attempted to inculcate obedience and a single-minded focus on fulfilling the divine purpose despite the internal and external opposition, knowing God’s reward lies ahead. His purpose was ecclesiological—to transform the church’s mind on humility and unity—and missiological—to instill obedience to the gospel mission in spite of opposition.

### The Perseverance of the Church and the Gospel

Part of the fellowship of the gospel involves the fellowship of Christ's suffering. Paul established a basic missiological principle, often overlooked by current success-oriented missionary strategies. God often advances the gospel through the suffering and deprivation of His church.

Paul offered himself as an example of faithfulness to the calling of Christ despite difficulties: “Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel . . .” (1:12). He assured the Philippians that his imprisonment was no impediment to the gospel. He offered this perspective to encourage the Philippians not to be turned aside in their purpose.

John Calvin observed, “The design, accordingly, of this detail is, to encourage the Philippians that they may not feel deterred by the persecution endured by him.”<sup>4</sup> Paul reassured the Philippians that not only had his imprisonment led to the advancement of the gospel but it also emboldened the brethren in Rome to preach the gospel more fervently (1:14). Paul example motivated the Philippians to embody the same boldness as the new believers in Rome. Too, their fidelity to Christ in suffering would also embolden other Christians to advance the gospel of Christ and not be alarmed by their opponents (1:28). Ralph Martin defines *alarmed* “as the uncontrollable stampede of startled horses.”<sup>5</sup> The opponents of the church threatened to impede the mission of the church through intimidation.

In 1:29-30 Paul reminded them their suffering was God’s gift: “For to you it has been granted for Christ’s sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, experiencing the same conflict which you saw in me, and now hear to be in me.” Paul’s response to suffering for Christ became paradigmatic for the church. Martin concludes:

Paul makes it clear that there was a correspondence between the Philippians’ suffering and that which he was called upon to bear. *The same conflict (agon)* was endured by both apostle and church. The emphasis is undoubtedly upon the word *same*, reminding the readers by way of encouragement that they shared, in faraway Philippi, not only in the same fight for the faith and against possibly the same class of enmity (see verse 28), but also in the same grace by which they could together be more than conquerors through Him that loved them (i. 7).<sup>6</sup>

Advancing the gospel demands perseverance in the face of opposition. Chapter 3 relates another aspect of Paul's perseverance and Christ-centered abandonment. He considered his past life in Judaism to be rubbish in light of knowing Christ. He found the exchange of his former life for Christ to be completely to his advantage. His life had one all consuming passion—to know Christ in the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His suffering. He acknowledged that he was a work in progress, not yet having obtained perfection. Forgetting what was past, he strained to obtain the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. In typical Pauline fashion, he then exhorted the church to follow him as he followed Christ (3:15-17).

Paul used a distinctly Christian eschatology to keep the Philippian church focused on their missional task. In 1:5, Paul wrote about the day of Christ Jesus as the end of their

journey and encouraged them to persevere in the face of suffering for the gospel. He also addressed how their new citizenship stood in tension with their earthly citizenship. The Philippian Christians were citizens of a proud Roman colony. Paul wanted them to know once again that they bore a new citizenship not rooted on the earth, but firmly established in heaven—a loyalty bound by the gospel.

The apostle exhorted them to “conduct themselves worthy of the gospel” (1:27). The verb that Paul used was not *paripateo*, “to conduct or walk,” a common metaphor for the Christian life (3:17), but *politeuo*, which literally means, “to live as a citizen.” Gordon Fee refers to their “dual citizenship”—“of the empire by virtue of their being Philippians; of heaven by virtue of their faith in Christ and incorporation into the believing community.”<sup>7</sup> Paul reminded them of their new identity as citizens of heaven, which is the foundation of their earthly conduct during times of distress.

Their new identity and citizenship was also the basis of hope. Paul wrote, “For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself” (3:20-21). Paul’s reminder also reinforced the overarching theme of perseverance in the midst of internal and external pressures.

### Missiological Applications

Churches are the headquarters for the Great Commission. The gospel creates the church, and the church is the instrument of proclaiming the gospel. Paul modeled a commitment to the local church through his missionary endeavors. Though Jesus Christ called Paul as an apostle to the Gentiles, the Holy Spirit set him apart through the church at Antioch. The church in Philippi supported Paul financially, but he also expected their participation in living out and proclaiming the gospel in Philippi and beyond.

While the local church is God's plan for global engagement with the gospel, the worldwide enterprise of the Great Commission is larger than any one church. A need will always exist for believers to be called, trained, and equipped to proclaim the gospel across cultural lines. Through Paul, the church at Philippi had the joy of supporting the larger cooperative work of the gospel beyond its city.

The church on mission will not be without problems. For this reason, churches should seek solutions to common problems of strife and false teaching while engaged in the mission enterprise. Spiritual renewal in the church results in the advance of the gospel. As an apostle, church planter, model, and missionary, Paul demonstrated genuine care and concern for the Philippian church. He did not use them for selfish gain. The perseverance of the Philippian church in faith and witness was his reward.

Paul was grateful for his gospel partners, writing, “I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all, in view of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now” (1:3-5). Paul poured out his life for the church's progress in joy and faith. Missionaries today can follow Paul's example of not giving up on established churches that face problems, but rather seeking to assist them in spiritual development and eliciting their participation in the advancement of the gospel. Churches that we often pronounce as dead may be the dry bones God chooses to raise up as a mighty missionary force.

Even as an apostle of Jesus Christ, Paul did not assert his authority over the church by micromanaging their affairs. Instead, he appealed to them as a church that was equally valuable and responsible for the propagation of the gospel. He wrote to the whole church, including pastors and deacons, to engage all believers as valued partners in the gospel.

Paul modeled deep concern for establishing self-sustaining indigenous churches. Likewise, missionaries serve new churches best when leadership development becomes a priority in the beginning to establish local leaders to guide the congregation.

The ministry of Paul was gospel-centric and church-centric. After stating that it would be far better to depart and be with Christ, he concluded in 1:24-25, "yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in *the faith*. . . ." Paul was deeply concerned about strengthening the faith of the church in order to extend gospel witness of the church. By "faith," he referred to the content of gospel doctrine.

A diminishing dimension in current missiological practice today is the lessening importance placed on establishing churches upon solid theological foundations. Paul lived to strengthen the faith of the church. He made room for the church-strengthening missionary in his missionary strategy, and so should we. Often strategists counsel missionaries to leave new churches and quickly move to other fields. Paul desired to proclaim Christ where he had not been named, but he did not do so at the expense of other churches that needed his apostolic input. Solid churches lead to stronger and more fruitful missions. Healthy churches enabled Paul to fulfill his missional ambition to proclaim Christ in new frontiers.

Paul modeled a mission strategy that focused on the great cities of his world. He was concerned with establishing a viable gospel witness in the major metropolitan centers of the Roman Empire. In an era of mass migrations to the great cities of the world today, we can learn from Paul's burden and strategy to reach the cities.

Often in the West, evangelical churches assume that cutting edge mission strategy and vast resources will advance the gospel of Christ. Paul understood suffering also was a means of advancing the gospel. His faithfulness while in prison emboldened other believers to speak the Word of God without fear. Paul in no way diminished the suffering of the Philippian church, but acknowledged it as the gift of God (1:27-30).

For Paul, no dichotomy existed between living out the gospel and proclaiming the gospel; the former give weight to the latter. While he acknowledged it is possible to preach Christ from wrong motives, he called the church to a higher standard—one he described as living worthy of the gospel. Living worthy of the gospel is inextricably connected to effective proclamation of the gospel. The absence of bickering and quarreling enables the church to reveal who we are in Christ—holy and blameless light bearers in a crooked and perverse generation (2:14-16).

The manner of our conduct toward one another in the church directly impacts our missiological effectiveness. The missionary enterprise is not just about management of the task. The work of missions is fueled by Christ-centered living. When churches are divided through power struggles, gospel-infidelity, the pursuit of self-interests among its members, a lack of Jesus-inspired humility and obedience, or a lack of unity, the gospel will not make progress in the world.

Ecclesiology and missiology are inextricably connected. As such, the local church is the center for the advancement of the gospel to the ends of the earth.

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<sup>1</sup> Schnabel, Eckhard J. (2008-10-13). *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies and Methods* (Grand Rapids, MI: Intervarsity Press, 2008), 245.

<sup>2</sup> Moisés Silva, *Philippians*, In *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Book House, 1992), 66.

<sup>3</sup> Peter T. O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*. In *The New International Greek New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 63.

<sup>4</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Apostle Paul to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, Trans. John Pringle (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1963), 34.

<sup>5</sup> Ralph P Martin, *The Epistle of Paul to the Philippians : An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. R.V.G. Tasker, Rev. ed., 2nd ed., *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, vol. (Grand Rapids, Mi: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 1977), 86.

<sup>6</sup> Martin, *The Epistle of Paul to the Philippians*, 89-90.

<sup>7</sup> Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 161.