

## Article of the Month – November 2011

### Missiological Observations in the NT (6) – Philippians

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Paul's involvement with church members is striking if we notice words like 'all', 'every' and 'always'.<sup>1</sup> He was not a 'hit-and-run-evangelist' but one who engaged at a personal level with his converts.<sup>2</sup> Cross-cultural outreach did not go at the cost of human relationships with Paul.

Only the church in Philippi partnered often with Paul to spread the Gospel.<sup>3</sup> Even today do most churches not care for missionaries or World Missions as they should, thereby missing blessings that could be theirs.<sup>4</sup>

Paul was not merely interested in the number of converts; he wanted quality disciples, functioning as Kingdom ambassadors in unity, and not afraid to suffer opposition.<sup>5</sup> His radical Gospel did not cater for lukewarm, spineless pseudo-Christianity.

Paul is confident that Christ can make straight hits with crooked sticks. This does not mean that he lowered his standards for true discipleship, but that what his opponents meant as trouble for him did not really affect him.<sup>6</sup>

His suffering ('chains') was an advantage for the Gospel rather than a setback.<sup>7</sup> More people were now confronted with the Gospel than otherwise would have been the case.

Paul's example of being a bold witness in prison prompted *most* of the brothers – but apparently not *all* – to be more courageous in their witness.<sup>8</sup> What will *we* do when our leaders are harassed for the sake of the Gospel?

Every missionary must fight to gain sufficient courage to come to the same acceptance as Paul, when he said that he would rather be with the Lord, but for reasons of ministerial fruitfulness decided that it would be better to stay.<sup>9</sup> However, after prayerful consideration he believed that he would soon be free again. Yet, he would not mind laying down his life.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Phil. 1:3,4,7,8  
<sup>2</sup> 1 Thess. 2:7,8  
<sup>3</sup> Phil. 1:5; 4:10-14,18  
<sup>4</sup> Ps. 67:6,7; Phil. 4:17  
<sup>5</sup> 1:9,10,27-30  
<sup>6</sup> 1:15,17,18  
<sup>7</sup> 1:12,13  
<sup>8</sup> 1:14 (italics mine)  
<sup>9</sup> 1:20-24  
<sup>10</sup> 1:24-26; 2:24,17

He encouraged his church members to contend as one man for the faith of the Gospel.<sup>11</sup> This shows that he did not leave local evangelism in the hands of the church leaders but expected all members to participate in outreach to their communities.

Paul sees suffering for the Gospel as a gift, not only for himself as an apostle, but also for the church members.<sup>12</sup> In Paul's theology there was no place for escapism with regard to carrying one's cross, among a half-hearted Christendom of mediocre commitment.

The desire to build one's own empire, rather than God's Kingdom, is a bad disease in missions. Paul gives an excellent remedy against that attitude: 'Do nothing out of selfish ambition ... in humility consider others better than yourselves ... do not only look for your own interest ... but also for that of others'.<sup>13</sup>

He continues to contrast such an attitude with the one Jesus had,<sup>14</sup> which consisted of humility, servanthood and obedience. Attitude is choice, and when the Greatest of all became the humblest, who has the right to exalt himself?

This brief passage gives the history of Jesus becoming a Missionary and crossing enormous barriers: He laid down the unlimited use of His rights as Son of God; He left the sinless glory of heaven to live among sinners on earth; He left the wealth of heaven to submit Himself to poverty; He took on the use of a human body with all its limitations; He chose to be an unimpressive servant and consistently obeyed His Father until He was killed.

No missionary, regardless of the many complicated barriers he has to cross to take the Gospel elsewhere, will ever come close to the sacrifices *Jesus* made to save humanity.

The rest of this passage<sup>15</sup> is the letter's christological point of gravity: Jesus received the highest place in the Universe; He received the most eminent Name and eventually people of all times and all places, living and dead alike, will submit to Him.

There is no way around Jesus. Restoring our relationship with the Father, forgiveness of sins and our final redemption go only through Him; there will never be another way of salvation.

Following Him by being bright stars in a dark universe amidst a crooked and depraved generation, means laying down every darkness in our lives, by being blameless, pure and without fault.<sup>16</sup> *Being* precedes *doing*; *character* comes before *deeds*.

Key words in 2:17 are 'even if'. It shows total submission to God's will. Paul would gladly die for the Gospel, should God so desire. He had reached Jesus' level of obedience to death: 'Father ... not as I will, but as You will'.<sup>17</sup>

Timothy was a missionary, entirely different from the 'empire builders' mentioned earlier: Paul speaks about him as having a genuine interest in the welfare of the Philippians.<sup>18</sup> From the context we see that he is like a son and a friend, very much of one mind with Paul.

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<sup>11</sup> 1:27

<sup>12</sup> 1:29,30

<sup>13</sup> 2:3,4

<sup>14</sup> 2:5-8

<sup>15</sup> 2:9-11

<sup>16</sup> 2:15

<sup>17</sup> Matt. 26:39b,42b,44b

<sup>18</sup> 2:20-22

Chapter 2 beautifully describes Epaphroditus, another missionary.<sup>19</sup> He was willing to go where he was sent, either by his church or by Paul; he cared about the concerns his senders might have about his health and was willing to risk his life for the work of Christ.

Paul says, he should receive honour for a well-completed assignment. Do we honour our sent ones when they return from their fields?

Paul warns against the evil influence of the ‘mutilators of the flesh’, probably referring to the circumcision group.<sup>20</sup> He contrasts their teaching (salvation by works of the law) with salvation by grace through faith in Christ.<sup>21</sup> His concern is that this ‘other gospel’ is no Gospel at all<sup>22</sup> and it should not gain ground among his churches.

Years of suffering as a missionary, including losing things, getting detached from comforts, and seeing the uselessness of temporal things, helped Paul to only regard the eternal Lord and His work as worthwhile pursuing. The rest paled in comparison and became rubbish.<sup>23</sup>

Maturation in thinking made him future-oriented and gave him eschatological ‘speed’ in theology and lifestyle. This way of thinking is not typically apostolic: all spiritually mature people should eventually arrive at such total dedication to Christ.<sup>24</sup>

Having seen the advantages of Roman citizenship and on occasions owing his life to it,<sup>25</sup> he sees his heavenly citizenship<sup>26</sup> as the only thing that counts. Missionaries should not rely more on secular than on heavenly advantages.

Unity among ministry colleagues has a high priority with Paul, hence his plea with two women to come to agreement regarding differences of opinion. Earlier he had said the same to the whole church but suggests here that its leadership should set the example.<sup>27</sup>

Paul understood the fears and anxieties of missionary life well and knew what he talked about when he said ‘Do not be anxious about anything ... but pray for everything’.<sup>28</sup>

Missionary life is unpredictable and presents sometimes unpleasant situations. Paul learned: *choose* to be content always, then narrowed it down to provision. What an example for missionaries from one who never solicited funds for himself – and never accused God or man of letting him down in this area. Such an attitude makes one powerful.<sup>29</sup>

Lacking interest in material affluence, he could genuinely say to be interested more in the spiritual gain of his supporting churches than in any personal gain or comfort he might reap from them.<sup>30</sup> May his attitude in this function as a searchlight to bare wrong motives that may be hidden in our own hearts, so that we can get rid of them.

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<sup>19</sup> 2:25-30

<sup>20</sup> 3:2; Gal. 2:12

<sup>21</sup> Phil. 3:9

<sup>22</sup> Gal. 1:6,7

<sup>23</sup> Phil. 3:7-10

<sup>24</sup> 3:11-15a

<sup>25</sup> See e.g. Acts 16:37; 22:25-29; 25:10-12

<sup>26</sup> Phil. 3:20

<sup>27</sup> 4:2 & 1:27

<sup>28</sup> 4:6

<sup>29</sup> 4:11-13

<sup>30</sup> Compare 3:7-10 with 4:14-17

Paul is not afraid to say that he is amply supplied.<sup>31</sup> How often are we silent about our material blessings, fearing that this may cause people to diminish or stop their support of us? There is no clearer plea for a life of faith in the sufficiency of God's supplies for His workers, than 'My God will meet all your needs according to His glorious riches in Christ Jesus'.<sup>32</sup> When He has pledged to do that, why are we soliciting funds from lower authorities?

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<sup>31</sup> 4:18

<sup>32</sup> 4:19