

**Christ's Love, Paul's Love, Our Love:
The Fellowship and Joy of Humility**

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*“Do not let me hear
 Of the wisdom of old men, but rather of their folly,
 Their fear of fear and frenzy, their fear of possession,
 Of belonging to one another, or to others, or to God.
 The only wisdom we can hope to acquire
 Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless.”*
 — T.S. Eliot, “East Coker”¹

As Christians, our standing before God in Christ and our conduct within the church ought to flow together. If our lives are hidden with Christ in God (Col. 3:3), this reality should work itself out in the fruit of the Spirit, the unity of the body, and the holiness of God’s people. The disconnect that we so often experience between our justification and our sanctification reminds us of our position in the timeline of redemptive history—already secure in Christ, but not yet delivered fully from the effects of sin until He returns. Our lives within this disconnect, though, are not meant to be marked by sin or the ways of the world as we complacently wait for the restoration of all things. Rather, the Christian life is a continuous pressing on to take hold of that for which Christ took hold of us (Phil. 3:12).

So far, so much “Christianity 101.” But how are those whom Christ has redeemed supposed to pursue the fullness of life in Him? Though we must all live in this tension, one or the other of two extreme positions tend to come to the forefront of this discussion.² The first is a hard lean *into* the disconnect, a striving that seems to communicate that even if our justification is found in the sure, certain, and complete work of Christ, that our sanctification depends on our own willpower and activity. The second is more of a hard lean *away* from it—a trust and rest in our justification that takes little concern for life this side of glory (individually or corporately), thus allowing the character of Christians and the church to be shaped by the world rather than the gospel. Most followers of Christ fall somewhere between these two poles, but these positions tend to shape our approaches to sanctification, and our interpretations of key texts related to this aspect of Christ’s work of redemption in us.

Scripture consistently presents a different view—not merely a middle path between these edges, but rather a way of walking with Christ empowered by the Holy Spirit that yet still calls for our ongoing, willing involvement in the process. In short we are called to *Christ-likeness*. Scripture holds up Jesus as our example, with frequent commands to imitate or follow His pattern (ὕποδειγμα, cf. John 13:35) as the one who perfectly fulfills God’s law. Jesus, as the image of God (Col. 1:15), is the ideal human that all of us are meant to “image” as His people. At the same time, Scripture teaches that it is the indwelling Spirit that conforms us into the likeness of Christ (Rom. 8:29, etc.). We do not attain “to the measure of the stature of Christ” (Eph. 4:13) on our own. This is accomplished in us by the Spirit. Further, it is accomplished *in us*—none of us are capable of being formed into the fullness of Jesus’ likeness as individuals, but only as the body of Christ (Rom. 12:5, 1 Cor. 12:12-27, etc.). As theologian Kelly Kapic observes, “when we recognize the Spirit’s life-giving power in the church as a *community*, as a united body, we are liberated to act more faithfully and effectively.”³

¹ T.S. Eliot, “East Coker,” *Collected Poems, 1909-1962* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1963), 185.

² This is already an oversimplification, but I am attempting to simplify it further still by largely limiting the scope of this discussion to the broad Protestant traditions.

³ Kelly M. Kapic, *You’re Only Human: How Your Limits Reflect God’s Design and Why That’s Good News* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2022), 177.

Tellingly, the passages quoted thus far are from Paul's letters. Though he is often perceived as the supreme theological logician (a worthy reputation!), Paul turns again and again to emphasize a highly relational Trinitarian ethic at the heart of God's work in the world. God in Christ has redeemed a people for Himself and is uniting and forming them into the likeness of His perfect Son by the Holy Spirit. Through this paper, I will argue that Paul, particularly in his letter to the Philippians, but in selections from other letters and Old Testament texts also, teaches two foundational principles of this ethic that should guide our life together as Christians. First, that the love of God expressed in Jesus Christ and poured out on us by the Holy Spirit is the source, motive, goal, and outworking of our redeemed lives. Second, that the chief response of Christians to God's love is *humility*. In short, the ethic of the Christian life is to humble ourselves before God, as this is His chosen means by which we connect to, are filled with, long for, and pour out His love.

Context: Philippians as Letter

Paul's letter to the Philippians is, like most of his words we have preserved in Scripture, a *letter*. It follows the basic form and structure common to letters of the Greco-Roman world.⁴ Our first step in discerning its meaning—let alone any normative understandings of Christian life that might apply as much to a contemporary farmer in Andhra Pradesh or a businessman in Kansas City as to first century believers in an outpost of the Roman Empire in Macedonia—is to analyze the audience, setting, and form of the letter.

We know quite a bit about Philippi relative to some other audiences to whom Paul wrote, chiefly that it was a Roman military colony in the otherwise Greek region of Macedonia.⁵ We also have Paul's experience there recorded in Acts 16, which includes his acceptance of patronage from Lydia and his very public vindication by the Roman authorities. Perhaps this is why this church may have had the freedom and financial wherewithal to support him in his further journeys.⁶ Philippians itself speaks of being written from imprisonment (1:7, 13-14, 20-24, 30; 2:17), and has been generally thought to have been written during Paul's Roman imprisonment.⁷ It is considered by Bruce Lowe and others to be a farewell discourse in the style of many classical farewells that we have recorded, in which a person of some notoriety or means delivers a message covering the disbursement of their "estate," less concerned with material wealth so much as their relational capital, moral convictions, and connections to those to whom they were speaking or writing.⁸ As Paul considers that his earthly race may be coming to a close, he wants to ensure that this family of believers who has been supporting him physically and spiritually (cf. 1:7, 19; 4:18) will continue on in faithfulness after him and that his race has not been run in vain (cf. 2:16-17).⁹

⁴ "Whatever else, Philippians is a letter." Bruce A. Lowe, "Philippians," in *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the New Testament: The Gospel Realized*, Michael J. Kruger, ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 232.

⁵ Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1995), 25-26.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 27-28. Fee later notes, however, that the church's situation by the time of Paul's writing might have turned to one of suffering and persecution as the Empire increasingly viewed Christians as subversive opponents of Caesar. *Ibid.*, 30-31.

⁷ Other scholars favor an Ephesian, Caesarean, or even Corinthian imprisonment. These views are summed up helpfully in Peter T. O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 19-25.

⁸ Lowe, "Philippians," 228-29.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 230.

Gordon Fee and others have pointed out that the style of Philippians is that of a “hortatory friendship” letter. That is, a highly relational appeal to a beloved group to undertake some action or other in the name of that relationship, making up in absence the emotional/spiritual connection between parties through writing.¹⁰ This “friendship letter” structure for Philippians is summarized by Fee (following Loveday Alexander) as: 1) address and greeting (1:1-2), 2) prayer for the recipients (1:3-11), 3) reassurance about the sender (1:12-26), 4) request for reassurance about the recipients (1:17-2:18; 3:1-4:3), 5) Information about movements of intermediaries (2:19-30), 6) exchange of greetings with third parties (4:21-22), and 7) closing wish for health (4:23).¹¹ This needs not be in conflict with the “farewell discourse” interpretation, as both models are highly concerned with relationship and the importance of specific actions rooted in that relationship going forward.

The highly relational nature of Paul’s connection to the Philippians is also borne out in the letter the church received approximately a century later from Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna. Polycarp writes to them at their invitation “concerning righteousness” to shore up their faith. He begins by praising Paul, who “when among you, accurately and steadfastly taught the word of truth in the presence of those who were then alive. And when absent from you, he wrote you a letter, which, if you carefully study, you will find to be the means of building you up in that faith which has been given you, and which, being followed by hope, and preceded by love towards God, and Christ, and our neighbour [sic], is the mother of us all.”¹² Even 100 years on, this church is poring over Paul’s letter for reminders of Christ’s love poured out on them, in large measure through Paul’s ministry, is working itself out in their communal life.

Ben Witherington and others have suggested that Philippians also bears structural markers of rhetorical style which indicate it was intended to be read aloud to the church as a deliberative speech,¹³ and go so far as to assign Latin elements of classical rhetoric to Philippians.¹⁴ Walter Hansen, however, does not see the formal rhetorical components as taking precedence over the formal letter components in our interpretive work on the letter.¹⁵ Nevertheless, we should not be surprised that a letter to a largely Roman audience in Philippi would draw on multiple styles of communication they were familiar with, and rhetorical analysis can help us with understanding why Paul makes some of the moves he does.¹⁶

There has been a persistent undercurrent of interpretation of Philippians—as with most of Paul’s letters preserved in the New Testament—of assigning a corrective motive to the apostle’s writing. Philippians certainly includes words of correction for a group of false teachers who were harassing the church there (about which more below) as well as words of warning to the church

¹⁰ Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 12.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 3, 37-39. Fee notes that 4:4-20 do not fit this scheme, suggesting that the imperatives in 4:4-9 are a standard Pauline structure for the end of his letters, and the thanksgiving in 4:10-20 is a recapitulation of the “prayer” section in 1:3-11.

¹² Polycarp, “Epistle to the Philippians,” ch. 3. From *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, eds. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885.), Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. Accessed online at <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0136.htm>.

¹³ Ben Witherington, III, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), 13.

¹⁴ Witherington, for example, sees this structure as: 1) *exordium* (1:3-11), 2) *narration* (1:12-26), 3) *propositio* (1:27-30), 4) *probatio* (2:1-4:3), 5) *peroratio* (4:4-20), leaving 1:1-2 and 4:21-23 as letter elements given its written form. *Ibid.*, 11-20.

¹⁵ G. Walter Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 12-15

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

about these teachers. To assume a polemical basis for the letter as a whole, though, leads us to miss and misinterpret some of Paul's most pressing concerns near the end of his earthly life.¹⁷ In particular, Fee suggests that attending not only to *what* Paul says (e.g. be unified) but *how* he says it (in joy, friendship, and hope) helps us keep the bigger picture in mind instead of ferreting for opponents he is targeting.¹⁸

Purpose and Goal of Philippians

As with any letter, we want to look to the disclosure formula to assign purpose and intent to the letter, giving us a framework through which to read the rest of the letter's contents, particularly instructions, in proper context. Most scholars agree that the disclosure formula of Philippians is found in 1:12-14:

I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear (ESV, emphasis added).

These three verses constitute one compound sentence in Greek, with the deponent verb βούλομαι (“I want”) forming the disclosure statement and the only other finite verb, ἐλήλυθεν (“has gone [forth]”) tagged to the subject of “the progress of the gospel” (προκοπήν τοῦ εὐαγγελίου). The other infinitives and participial phrases emphasize the results of the gospel going forth, both inside and outside of his imprisonment.¹⁹ Thematically, the disclosure formula could be said to run at least through 1:26, as this whole section focuses on how it is that the gospel continues to advance—through the preaching of the word from good or bad motives (i.e. that it is through the power of Christ) in 1:15-18, and through the spirit working in the prayers of the Philippian believers and in Paul to strengthen him for the work whether his part in it is ending or continuing in 1:19-26.

The disclosure formula is so central to the understanding of any letter that it can be difficult to pinpoint the transition from the central disclosure and the main body of the text. For instance, 1:27-30 seems logically ordered under the heading of things Paul wants his readers to know (v. 12).²⁰ He wants them to live a life worthy of citizens (πολιτεύεσθε, lit. “discharge your civic duty”) in the gospel in Christ, with or without his further help, and to be of one spirit and one mind as they strive for the gospel (1:27). He wants them to not be frightened by their opponents and confident in God's sign of faithfulness through their salvation (1:28). He wants them to see that the suffering they are now joining him in for Jesus' sake is a confirmation, rather than contradiction, of God's love for them (1:29-30). Indeed these themes structure much of the rest of the letter, forming the “hortatory” part of this “friendship letter” by organizing Paul's exhortations under the “one thing” (μόνον) of the gospel of Christ. As Hansen writes, “Paul does

¹⁷ Lowe, “Philippians,” 231.

¹⁸ Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 31-34.

¹⁹ Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 109.

²⁰ Here, I recognize, I am diverging from the majority view (expressed, for example, in Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 156-57) that 1:27 begins a section of exhortation extending to 2:18.

not impose a long list of rules, he presents the person of Christ. The good news of Christ, the story of Christ, is the rule for the community of believers.”²¹

Gospel as Love

Paul does not merely want to give them an update on his condition—were that the case we would expect a letter covering greater detail of his present imprisonment and travail such as we see in 2 Corinthians 11 or 2nd Timothy 4—nor does he merely hope to encourage them (though Philippians is reasonably considered a very encouraging letter). Rather he reaches out in love to secure their bonds to him and to God. What we see developing in Philippians is a complex, richly textured, appeal to a church strong in the Lord to continue in the work of the gospel and to confirm their salvation through visible obedience to the way of Christ. This plays out both in how they conduct themselves among one another and how those who would exercise authority among them see their responsibility.

God’s love flows throughout Philippians, not just explicitly, but through the word “gospel” (εὐαγγέλιον)—used here more times than in any other letter—which Paul means less as a signifier of his message or argument (as he does in other letters), and more as shorthand for their relationship to Christ.²² Fee describes a “three-way bond” in the gospel that cements the Philippians to both Paul and to Christ as “the glue that holds the letter together.”²³ Throughout the letter, as he speaks of this gospel, Paul unpacks a framework for Christlikeness as the mode in which we live. Further, it sets a standard of faithful humility which he gladly takes upon himself as surely as he uses it to exhort the believers in Philippi in chapter 2 and judge false teachers in chapter 3. To explore this theme further, we need to look at some key passages which connect love and humility as the outworking of the true gospel in the lives of the saints.

Love and Knowledge, 1:8-9

Earlier in the letter, in the prayer/thanksgiving section, Paul calls God to bear witness to his “yearning” for the Philippian church with the “affection (σπλάγχνοις, lit. “inward parts,” colloquially “compassion” or “deep feeling”) of Christ Jesus” (1:8). Commenting on this verse, Stephen Voorwinde asks, “does Paul long for the Philippians with the kind of affection that Christ Jesus has for him/them (subjective genitive), or does he long for the Philippians with the kind of affection that he has for Christ Jesus (objective genitive)?”²⁴ He concludes that it is likely best to take it as a subjective Genitive, given that the gospel writers often use the cognate verb, σπλαγγνίζομαι, to describe Jesus’ response to people he encounters (almost exclusively using the verb for Christ).²⁵ To say that Paul loves the Philippians with the love that Christ has for him—almost as if that love it is passing through him to them—fits well with the context. Paul prays in 1:9 that their “love (ἀγάπη) may abound more and more.” Though ἀγάπη has a wide range of uses, Hansen believes that Paul intends (from a context building toward Jesus as the ultimate example of self-sacrificial love) it to mean God’s love for the Philippians—which will overflow in their love for one another.²⁶

²¹ Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians*, 93-94.

²² Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 14.

²³ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁴ Stephen Voorwinde, “More of Paul’s Emotions in Philippians,” *The Reformed Theological Review* 77(1) (April 2018), 48-49.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

²⁶ Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians*, 57-58.

This is reinforced by the fact that Paul prays that this abundant love would overflow in knowledge and discernment. Peter O'Brien (following C.F.D. Moule) suggests that ἐπίγνωσις typically refers in the NT to knowledge of spiritual matters, given by God, not obtained by human effort.²⁷ The word translated "discernment" (αἰσθήσει) occurs only here in the New Testament, but often is used in Proverbs in the LXX to denote careful speech or attentive awareness of how to navigate a relational setting.²⁸ The use of the dative for these nouns with ἐν here, could again go more than one direction. The love of Christ abounding in them spills over into knowledge and discernment as indirect objects or that the love will abound *with* knowledge and discernment, in that growing in understanding and attentive care in relation to Christ and each other is the ground for growth in love.²⁹ In either case, it is plain that true spiritual knowledge and insight into loving people must tag together with Christ's love for us.

Indeed, the goal of love that abounds in knowledge and discernment is action (1:10-11). Paul desires the Philippians to grow in matters of eternal significance, to test themselves (δοκιμάζειν) to discover "what is excellent" (διαφέροντα, lit. "that which carries through"). In this way, the abounding love of Christ in them works itself out in obedience that looks forward to His return ("pure and blameless for the day of Christ") and "fruit of righteousness" that indicates His presence among us by His Spirit. In short, there can be no true spiritual knowledge, no true wisdom, no true obedience apart from the abundant love of Jesus.

Love and Unity, 2:1-4

Having written in 1:27-30 of the opposition and suffering faced by the Philippian church and their need to walk as "gospel citizens," Paul offers a word of comfort that shows them *how* to walk that walk. Speaking rhetorically ("So if there is..." as a way of saying "of course there is..." for the sake of comparison), Paul points to their experience of the certainty of Christ's love as the ground for obedience. The five conditions in 2:1—"encouragement," "comfort," "fellowship," "affection," and "sympathy"—should all call to mind union with Christ as each term connects us to the character of God. "Encouragement" is explicitly "in Christ" here, which suggests that the "love" that contains comfort or consolation is Christ's love. "Fellowship" or participation (κοινωνία) is explicitly "in the Spirit," "affection" (σπλάγχνα) has been discussed above as an attribute of Christ, and "sympathy" (οἰκτιρμοί) is usually used in the NT to refer to the mercy of God (cf. Rom. 12:1, 2 Cor. 1:3). From this anchor point, Paul asks them to "complete his joy" through living out Christ's love in intense spiritual unity—having "the same mind" and "same love" (presumably in context referring to Christ's mind and love) and being in "full accord" (σύμψυχοι, lit. "together in soul") and "one mind" (here more so with one another than with Christ, though these are inseparable for believers).³⁰

Every aspect of Christian unity and obedience is bound up in God's love for us. David Black sees love (both God's and ours) here as the essence of corporate life.³¹ Paul highlights love and related words—rather than doctrinal or specific moral issues—as the source of unity. Love

²⁷ O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 75-77.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 77.

²⁹ Hansen takes this latter view. Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians*, 59.

³⁰ Voorwinde suggests that love is a ground of joy. See Stephen Voorwinde, "Paul's Joy in Philippians," *The Reformed Theological Review* 76(3) (December 2017), 156. O'Brien describes this exhortation as Paul's "tactful way" of tying the struggles and needs of the Philippians into relation with his person, O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 176.

³¹ David Alan Black, "Paul and Christian Unity: A Formal Analysis of Philippians 2:1-4," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 28 (3) (September 1985), 304.

is, accordingly, the governing principle over other aspects of the life of the believer because it flows out in mutual service to *confirm* their unity.³² This is not to suggest that other issues are not also vital to unity. In other letters to other churches with other issues, Paul is quite capable of elevating other issues when they threaten the unity and progress of the gospel (e.g. Gal. 3 or much of 1 Cor.). Even in those situations, however, what Paul longs for is similar—unity of mind and mutual love brought about through Christ—so we must be careful not to confuse the *means* of unity in more polemical letters from the *goal* of Spirit-filled, loving, unity that suffuses all relationships in the church.

Paul further expands on this in 2:3-4, pivoting to describe Christian unity in light of its opposite: “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” The path of love leads to humility (ταπεινοφροσύνη, lit. “lowly mind”), which is directly connected in Greek with the “same thinking” (αὐτὸ φρονῆτε) in 2:2.³³ If we want to know what love looks like in action, it is the lifting up of others in a life of considering others’ interests and putting aside the empty glory (κενοδοξίαν) of self.

Again, this is not something we can enact completely as individuals. A church working out love toward one another is united in *mutual* humility and *mutual* lifting up, such that no one is exempt from the command to humility. Indeed, as Volker Rabens argues, the “fellowship in the Spirit” (κοινωνία πνεύματος) is the empowering mechanism of the love, unity, and humility Paul commands here.³⁴ This growing unity in the spirit—a real and transformative sanctification that leads to greater Christ-likeness—is the goal of Spirit’s work in the lives of God’s people.³⁵ Black sees 2:1-4 as the “tie of the letter,”³⁶ developing the idea of love working out in humility as the way to make the most sense of the imperatives and warnings Paul delivers. He speaks out of his own κοινωνία with his readers as the grounds for their participation in his work and his interest in their obedience and perseverance in the fulness of love.³⁷

Paul’s emphasis on these aspects of unity likewise reminds us that the outworking of Christ’s love *within*, not just *for*, the body of Christ is crucial to the story of what Christ has done and is doing in the world.³⁸ This is perhaps especially important to the Philippian church. Subsuming the gospel to Roman cultural norms and hierarchies would have been a prevalent temptation, so Paul reminded them of the priority of love, just as he did for the church at Rome (see Rom. 12:9-10, 13:8-10, 14:1-15:13).³⁹ There is a sense in which Paul in this letter plays on the Roman patronage system, but subsumes these cultural norms to the mutuality Christ’s generous love.⁴⁰ He highlights their giving and receiving together (4:15), but three times refers to God as “father” (evoking the *paterfamilias*) emphasizing that God, not Paul, is the true patron, and that he and the Philippians are mutually under God’s provision and obligated to Him. While

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Volker Rabens, *The Holy Spirit and Ethics in Paul: Transformation and Empowering for Religious-Ethical Life* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013), 135-37.

³⁵ Ibid., 255.

³⁶ Black, “Paul and Christian Unity,” 305.

³⁷ Julien M. Ogereau, “Paul’s κοινωνία with the Philippians: Societas as a Missionary Funding Strategy,” *New Testament Studies* 60 (2014), 361.

³⁸ Black, “Paul and Christian Unity,” 308.

³⁹ Ibid., 306.

⁴⁰ See, for instance, Steve Walton “Patronage and People: Paul’s Perspective in Philippians,” *Poverty in the Early Church and Today: A Conversation*, Steve Walton and Hanna Swithinbank, eds. (London: T&T Clark, 2019), 67-75.

under patronage, a client might bind himself to a patron to escape poverty, Paul and the Philippians are bound (as 4:11-13 seems to suggest) at times in mutual poverty for the sake of the Gospel, trusting together for God to supply all their needs from his riches in Christ (4:19).⁴¹

Embodied Love = Humility, 2:5-11

Of course we cannot discuss the theme of humility in Philippians without some examination of the “Christ hymn” in 2:5-11. If, as many have argued, these verses have a literary form and poetic style that separates them from Paul’s style and tone in the rest of the letter,⁴² and might predate Paul. Fee expresses serious skepticism on this view,⁴³ suggesting that even if this were true, it shouldn’t lead us to interpret it differently than if we assumed it to be of Pauline origin and native to the letter.⁴⁴ The questions of what Paul means by this paean to Christ or why he chose to incorporate an earlier one at this point in his letter it, lead us to the same place. In context, it is clearly to display Christ as the example of self-sacrificial love and humility that reinforces the commands he has given in 2:1-4. Black places 2:1-4 side-by-side with 2:5-8 to show this connection in the shared or echoed language between the two passages— ἐν Χριστῷ (2:1) / ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ (2:5); φρονῆτε and φρονοῦντες (2:2) / φρονεῖτε (2:5); ἡγούμενοι (2:3) / οὐχ ἄρπαγμὸν ἡγήσατο (2:6); κενοδοξίαν (2:3) / ἑαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν (2:7); ταπεινοφροσύνη (2:3) / ἔταπεινώσεν ἑαυτὸν (2:8).⁴⁵ Paul presents to us Jesus—who empties himself of “empty glory” and who humbles himself is, ultimately, exalted and glorified (2:9-11)—as both the standard of our life together as Christians and a reminder of the eschatological promise that our humility is a source of joy and not shame (pushing back on Greco-Roman aversions to humility).⁴⁶

Oda Wischmeyer suggests that love as figured by Christ here is “a new way of being and existence that generates its own ethos.”⁴⁷ This is a communitarian power of love (in Christ, the Holy Spirit in us) that, she says has its foundational essence “in Jesus’ handing over of his life out of love, behind which stands God’s love for human beings, and it becomes effective in the mutual appreciation for one another, the behavior of humility shaped through this, and the practical forms of life of the community members.”⁴⁸ She further suggests that the language of this passage communicates the “eschatological existence” of believers similarly to the ways Paul speaks in other passages (Rom. 6, 2 Cor. 5) of our having died to sin in Christ so that we might live in him.⁴⁹ Similarly, Gregory of Nyssa sees Christ’s humiliation, which allowed him to share in sufferings common to the human condition, as the means by which “humanity as a whole now has access to the resurrection that is anticipated by the union of divine and human natures in Christ. Through that union, humanity is transformed, and it assumes the lofty characteristics of divinity.”⁵⁰ As Fee sums this up, “in Pauline ethics, the principle is love, the pattern is Christ,

⁴¹ Ibid., 73.

⁴² Hansen provides a helpful summary of the reasons for this, as well as an outline of Ernst Lohmeyer’s 6-stanza structure in Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians*, 122-25.

⁴³ Fee, *Paul’s letter to the Philippians*, 41-44.

⁴⁴ Gordon D. Fee, “Philippians 2:5-11: Hymn or Exalted Pauline Prose?,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 2 (1992), 42-43.

⁴⁵ Black, “Paul and Christian Unity,” 304.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Oda Wischmeyer, *Love As Agape: The Early Christian Concept and Modern Discourse*, Wayne Coppins, trans. (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2021), 153.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Synthesized from *Antirrheticus* in Mark Weedman, “Finding the Form of God in Philippians 2: Gregory of Nyssa and the Development of Pro-Nicene Exegesis,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 2(1) (2008), 26.

and the power is the Spirit, all of which have been provided for in the death and resurrection of Christ.”⁵¹ Our Christology is not a mere theological concept, but the *source* and *goal* of our communal identity as His people.⁵²

There is an additional layer of meaning here—that of Christ as *pastoral* example, especially in light of the discussion of those preaching from pure or impure motives in 1:15-18 and the false teachers in 3:2, 18-21. In the midst of ongoing Arian and Apollinarian controversies in the post-Nicene era, theologians often turned to this passage to support arguments in favor of the orthodox view of Jesus as the incarnation of the eternally existent second person of the Trinity that have implications for our understanding of ministry. Athanasius of Alexandria interpreted 2:6-7 in light of John 1, connecting Jesus “taking the form of a servant” to the word becoming flesh. He points out that in emptying Himself, Christ “has gained nothing from us for his own promotion, for the Word of God is without want.”⁵³ Christ thus models an incarnational ministry that serves others in humility rather than turning the gospel to personal gain. Gregory of Nazianzus presses directly into the pastoral implications of incarnation, suggesting that “the incarnate God is the perfect shepherd who presents in himself the tensions of pastoral labor”⁵⁴ such that the Christlike pastor will submit to a congregation’s needs for the sake of their eternal well-being. Perhaps leaders looking after the interests of others should be a key indicator of character, showing forth the “mind of Christ” in their approach to ministry.

This interpretation sheds light on Paul’s connection to the Philippian church, especially the tenderness with which he speaks of his suffering and their participation in it with him by the Spirit. It should also be noted that, just as Christ’s self-sacrifice was undertaken voluntarily, the commands here to the Philippian believers and leaders to have this “mind of Christ” assume self-sacrifice from a healthy sense of self—we cannot give sacrificially of what we do not possess. The Spirit builds us up in courage, love, and humility to enable this outpouring of love.⁵⁵

Maturity = Interconnected Humility, 2:12-16; 3:15-4:1

As Paul has explored the character fitting “citizens” in the gospel worked out in love and unity as exemplified by Christ, he turns to further instruction in how the gospel applies to the life of the church. Addressing them as “beloved,” he tells them to “work out” (κατεργάζεσθε, lit. “work from” or even “cultivate”) their salvation, not that it is not a gift (as he has stated in 1:28), but that what has been given to them is meant to be carried out as God works in them (2:13).⁵⁶ Further, they are to walk “without grumbling or disputing” (2:14), so that (just as he prayed in 1:11) they may be “blameless and innocent,” “without blemish,” shining as lights in the world (2:16) and “holding fast to the word of life.” The connection between these commands and his prayer in 1:9-11 sews so much of what we have examined together—the fruits of righteousness (love, knowledge, discernment, blamelessness in Christ, etc.) that Paul asks God to *give* them he also instructs them to *work* toward. There is no passive sanctification.

⁵¹ Fee, “Philippians 2:5-11”, 43.

⁵² See Robert A. Wortham, “Christology as Community Identity in the Philippians Hymn: The Philippians Hymn as Social Drama,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 23(3) (Fall 1996), 269-287.

⁵³ Athanasius, *Contra Arianos* I.43, cited in Weedman, “Finding the Form of God in Philippians 2,” 35.

⁵⁴ Synthesized from *Oration 12* by Brian Matz, “Philippians 2:7 as Pastoral Example in Gregory Nazianzen’s *Oration 12*,” *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 49(3-4) (2004), 279.

⁵⁵ This discussion is, interestingly, at the heart of feminist critiques of Moltmann and kenotic theology. To wit, that compulsory self-emptying is not loving, but abusive. See, for example, Hannah R. Stewart, “Self-Emptying and Sacrifice: A Feminist Critique of Kenosis in Philippians 2,” *Colloquium* 44(1) (2012), 107.

⁵⁶ “Salvation is not only something they receive; it is something they *do*.” Fee, *The Letter to the Philippians*, 234.

This is picked up as well in chapter 3. Paul warns the Philippians sharply to avoid “evildoers” (likely “Judaizers”) who had been “dogging” churches throughout Paul’s ministry with their attempts to drag believers into pride in their own righteousness and threatened to come to Philippi also in 3:2.⁵⁷ These “walk as enemies of Christ” and are headed for destruction (3:18-19). As if to inoculate them against these false teachings, Paul recounts at length his own works (which, were the teachings of the Judaizers true, would have rendered him the pinnacle of righteousness) in 3:3-7 only to pronounce them all “loss” and “rubbish” (σκύβαλα, lit. “excrement”) compared to knowing Christ and participating in his death and resurrection (echoing the eschatological nature of true obedience) to obtain a righteousness by faith (3:8-11). Nevertheless, he does “press on” toward and “strain” forward in this righteousness (3:12-14), and he commends this attitude (τοῦτο φρονῶμεν, lit. “same thinking/wisdom” echoing his call to have “one mind” in 2:1 and the mind of Christ in 2:5) to “those who are mature” (ὅσοι...τέλειοι, lit. “as much as [you are] complete”). Paul’s vision of Christian maturity then is directly tied to a proper appraisal of oneself before God—in short, *humility* in recognizing that whatever righteousness we have is a gift of Christ born of love.

Further, he connects their obedience with his own, such that their faithfulness to the way of Christ will confirm his labor among them (2:16-18) by demonstrating the presence of Christ among them. He even invites them to imitate him, and to look to himself and other faithful leaders as an example (3:17) in contrast with the example of pride in the flesh shown by false teachers, repeating that as a summary of his teaching in the letter in 4:9: “What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things.” This theme is reflected in Polycarp’s letter to the Philippians as well, with Paul himself (decades after his death) held up as an example not because of his accomplishments, but because of his *suffering*.⁵⁸ For Polycarp, because “Paul and the other apostles did not love the present age, the Philippians should love the brotherhood and cherish one another” and by doing so “likewise reject love of the present age.”⁵⁹ This is why Paul speaks of the Philippians as participating in suffering for Christ’s sake (1:29-30) and longing with him for resurrection when our citizenship in heaven will be fully realized (3:20-21). This idea of humility in suffering also gets to the heart of his issue with these false teachers. Assuming they are connected to the promulgators of the Galatian heresy, they are characterized by the very selfish ambition and conceit (cf. 1:17; Gal. 5:25) he has cautioned them against, looking to make those they led astray into trophies of the flesh *so as to avoid persecution* for following Christ (cf. Gal. 6:12).

In all this, there is an aspect here of “reciprocal flourishing”—that Christ’s love poured out in Paul’s love for the Philippians is not complete until it is returned and then passed on to others. This is picked up in 4:1, when Paul calls his “beloved”, those he loves and longs for, to “stand firm thus in the Lord” (i.e. to endure suffering for the sake of Christ) such that they are his “joy and crown.”⁶⁰ Paul’s tone throughout remains joyful, building them up rather than rebuking them as he does the Galatians (e.g. “To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you” in 3:1). Fee suggests that this warning and contrast with false teachers fits the “hortatory friendship letter” style, picking up on Roman themes of “agonistic” friendship in

⁵⁷ Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians*, 217-219.

⁵⁸ Jonathon Lookadoo, “Polycarp, Paul, and the Letters to Timothy,” *Novum Testamentum* 59 (2017), 380.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Paul considers the faithfulness of the Philippians as, in some sense, a seal of his eschatological reward. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 447.

which struggling together through adversity or against opponents strengthens bonds of love.⁶¹ In the broader context of the letter, this comes through in that Paul's friendship with the Philippians is about their participation with him in the gospel, so a warning against false teaching (disconnected from Christ) that can hinder the progress of Christ's mission makes sense.⁶² The "opponents" and the threat they present are real, but are less the focus of the letter than a foil that strengthens the Philippians connection to Paul and to Christ as those who are mature, understanding that what ties them together is love worked out in humility.

Humility as Witness

Unlike in several other letters of Paul in which he makes more arguments from the Old Testament with the frame of "it is written," with direct quotations, Paul's interaction with the OT here is more intimate and allusive—he assumes that the Philippians are on the same page, and will catch the meaning of his intertextual echoes based on what he has taught them.⁶³ One such passage is 4:5, which reads "Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand." Reasonableness (τὸ ἐπιεικὲς) is sometimes used in the LXX to refer to God's forbearance or patience (e.g. Ps. 86:5),⁶⁴ and here seems to be an expression of humility toward those outside the church. This interpretation is lent credence by saying that "the Lord is at hand," likely an allusion to the prophetic imagery of the "day of the Lord" being near in Zeph. 1:7, 14.⁶⁵ Paul seems to highlight that the humble conduct of the Philippian believers—not meditating on their burdens (μερμνᾶτε) but thankfully and humbly submitting requests to God in 4:16—serves as part of their participation in the Gospel. They are confronting the surrounding world with a spiritual way of life which, when the Lord comes, will either call outsiders to repent and join them or confirm their just judgment (cf. 1:28). When this day comes for them, "the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (4:7), confirming them finally and fully in their membership in Christ by the Holy Spirit.

If Fee is correct that Paul's phrasing here connects to Zephaniah, this is particularly significant. Zephaniah, like Paul, connects the character of godliness directly to humility. At the end of the book, the Lord through Zephaniah prophesies restoration, undertaken by His own hand. In Zeph. 3 there, we see that God will (among other things):

- Purify the speech of His people so that they call on His name and obey in unity (3:9).
- Gather his worshippers (3:10).
- Forgive them their sin, removing the proud from among them and leaving the humble who seek refuge in Him (3:11-12).
- Protect them from injustice, lies, deceit and fear (3:13)
- Call them to rejoice in God's great redemption (3:14-15).
- Rejoice over the people with singing (3:17).
- Deal with oppressors and gather the weak to turn their shame into praise and renown (3:19-10).

⁶¹ Ibid, 10.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 17-18.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 406.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 408.

The resonance of this passage with the message of Philippians is clear⁶⁶—the people God saves are those who are humble before Him and call upon His name for their salvation. Their humility is a gift as surely as their obedience and salvation are. Zephaniah says that when the day of the Lord comes, one of its most notable features will be the final reality that “God opposes the proud, but shows favor to the humble” (1 Pet. 5:5 and James 4:6, cf. Prov. 3:34). The love of God creates a people for Himself who are humble, cognizant of their creatureliness and clinging to the Lord in all things. When the Philippians are living this way, Paul rejoices over them and with them just as surely as the Lord does (4:4).

If being conformed into the image of Christ is the essence and design of all humanity (cf. Col. 1:15, vis-à-vis Gen. 1:26), and our conformity to Christ is embodied in humility (cf. 2:5-11), then the true worship of the true God always takes the form of humility. By contrast, elevating oneself over the need to stand under God’s grace, which often looks in practice like lording oneself over others, is to incur his judgment. Love of God is reciprocated by love of neighbor, but also of prayer and dependence. Of course Zephaniah’s prophecy of the exaltation of the Lord’s humble ones is fulfilled in Christ’s ultimate humility in His incarnation, suffering, death, resurrection, and reign. In our union with Christ, this prophecy is fulfilled in us as well. As Jesus himself said, “he greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted” (Matt. 23:11-12).

Conclusion and Application

Though so much more can be written about the theme of love worked out in humility in Paul’s letters, pulling on this thread in Philippians illuminates the centrality of this idea to the ethical identity of God’s people. The complexity of moral and theological issues addressed at greater length by Paul elsewhere is not hereby dismissed or reduced, but rather enfolded into the simple reality that our Christ-like humility before God is the root and fruit of all our obedience.

In Galatians, covering similar themes *in response to* the effects of deception and false teaching rather than warning against it, Paul connects humility and serving one another through “the love” (τῆς ἀγαπῆς) in 5:13, and goes so far as to call mutual humble service the fulfillment of “the law of Christ” in 6:2 (cf. love as fulfillment of the law in Rom. 13:10). Descriptions of how Christ’s love works out in the church here in Philippians is less a soaring exposition of love and more of a lived parable as Paul pictures its practical outworking of it in the life of the church. Christ’s love flows through Paul to the Philippian Church, but also to them directly, and through them to him in the form of care and concern and financial support, and on to others “for the progress of the gospel” (1:12).

What should we do with this today?

First, we should remember that all of the commands given to us in Scripture are subordinated under Christ’s love. This gives us a framework to interpret and obey biblical instructions from a place of intimate connection to Christ more than from mere fear of what happens when we disobey. If maturity is found in Christ-like humility, the mature Christian is one who is learning to seek God’s wisdom in every circumstance rather than proudly assuming that our interpretations are final and confronting one another over perceived sins and errors in selfish ambition and conceit. We can learn that curiosity, patience, and mercy are the currency of humility and deal with one another in ways that reflect to the outside world that God’s Spirit is at work in our community.

⁶⁶ O’Brien connects Paul’s injunction against “selfish ambition and conceit” in 2:3 directly with Zephaniah 3 in addition to some of the other passages I’ve quoted here. O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 180.

Second, we should reject ways of leadership that confuse authority with hierarchy and effectiveness with acclaim. In the broader world, institutional structures are designed to protect and extend power, and in Christ we can sometimes faithfully inhabit these structures with love, putting them to good use. But we miss the picture that God is painting through the church when we assume that we need to adopt the structures of the world in order to make sure the gospel progresses. The mark of Christian authority, Paul shows us here, is not “leadership skill” or even biblical-theological acumen, *per se* (since true knowledge is rooted in and flows back to abundant love, cf. 1:9-10), but humility. Those whose priority is to serve the least and lowest are closest to the heart of Christ. Those who seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness will have what is lacking added to them.

Finally and most importantly, pray. While we know, at least intellectually, that the essence of the way of life of God’s people is to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves, seeing Paul’s frame of love as humility and humility as love brings clarity. Love that we generate ourselves cannot accomplish this call, but the household of faith is made up of those humble enough to know they *can’t* do it on their own and so ask God to provide the love He commands and ask others to bear the load with us through mutual prayer, encouragement, and correction. As Kelly Kapic writes, “the life of humility puts everything into God’s hands, only to realize it was already there, so you may as well trust Him for it.”⁶⁷ In Christ’s love poured out on us, we have the riches of glory that should be joyfully expressed in a communal life of love for one another under Him. May His church live as if this is true.

⁶⁷ Kapic, *You’re Only Human*, 115.

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