

## The Theme and Structure of Philippians

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Among exegetes, Philippians has been sort of a "Rubik's Cube" of the Pauline literature. Many times it has been twisted, turned, and rearranged as scholars have attempted to make the best sense they could of it. They have sensed that the book has no central theme systematically developed in a logical argument throughout the epistle. "Since the early days of historical critical research, exegetes have had difficulty finding any main theme or a line of argument in Philippians."<sup>1</sup>

While there have been exceptions,<sup>2</sup> this difficulty has generated three responses among interpreters.<sup>3</sup> With the exception of Lohmeyer,<sup>4</sup> most interpretations of the epistle can be categorized as follows.

First, many commentators hold that because of the emotional and hortatory nature of the letter, no central idea or inner logical coherence is really necessary. Being a personal and friendly letter, Paul skips from one subject to another as various topics come to mind.

To anyone reading this epistle as a familiar letter of Paul to a greatly beloved church, intended to inform them concerning his own circumstances, to thank them for their generous care for him, and to give such counsel as his knowledge of their condition might suggest, its informal and unsystematic character and its abrupt transitions from one theme to another will appear entirely natural.<sup>5</sup>

Eadie suggests, "The transitions depend upon no logical train — as the thoughts occurred they were dictated. And we can never know what suggested to the apostle the order of his topics."<sup>6</sup>

A more recent advocate of this same view is Hendriksen.

Attempts have been made repeatedly to construct a formal outline for Philippians, a central theme with its subdivisions. . . . But such themes either lack distinctiveness . . . or comprehensiveness . . . . What we have here is a genuine letter from Paul to his beloved church at Philippi. The writer passes from one subject to another just as we do today in writing to friends . . . . What holds these subjects together is not this or that central theme, but the Spirit of God, mirrored forth, by means of a multitude of spiritual graces and virtues, in the heart of the apostle, proclaiming throughout that between God, the apostle, and the believers at Philippi there exists a blessed bond of glorious fellowship.<sup>7</sup>

Most commentators who maintain that "joy in Christ" is the main theme also view the epistle as an "informal letter." This is so because few, if any, really seek to structure the epistle systematically around the concept of joy.<sup>8</sup> It is more accurate to maintain that joy is the prevailing mood of the epistle, not its central theme.

A second group of interpreters has difficulty accepting that the letter's "abrupt transitions from one theme to another . . . appear entirely natural." The epistle, they say, is best explained as the result of two or more documents being combined into one.<sup>9</sup>

If it could be shown that Philippians truly is unified by a central theme whose development generates a coherent structure, then this view would be difficult to maintain.<sup>10</sup> The reason that such a "conflated-letter" view has arisen in the first place is because most exegetes have despaired of ever finding inner coherence in the epistle.

A third approach to the problem of the epistle's structure has been proposed by Ralph P. Martin.<sup>11</sup> In a form-critical approach he follows the results of research done by John Lee White.<sup>12</sup> White, in turn, follows with some refinements, the lead of his teacher, Robert W. Funk.<sup>13</sup> Martin concludes that Philippians is a unit as it stands and feels that the overall structure of the letter displays the characteristic structural elements of the Pauline letter form.<sup>14</sup>

Though this view is innovative, it too fails to solve the problem of the structure of Philippians. Three criticisms may be

noted. First, the method accounts for the structure of the epistle by conforming it to an external set of formal criteria, not by discovering an inner thematic development and line of argument. Thus it bypasses the issue that has led to the Philippian problem in the first place. Martin holds that the epistle is a unit, but he does not see it unified internally. Second, the form critical tradition, to which Martin appeals in defense of the integrity of the epistle, has largely viewed the letter as a composite document. White, for instance, believes that 4:10-20 was originally another letter.<sup>15</sup> Schubert also has doubts about chapter 3.<sup>16</sup> Third, exegesis fails to support the scheme Martin proposes. Whether one agrees with the exegesis in this paper, it is unlikely that many will agree entirely with Martin.<sup>17</sup> The epistle simply does not unfold according to that scheme. In fact Martin's outline of the epistle makes little attempt to follow the "overall structure" of the letter he suggests.<sup>18</sup>

All three of these approaches to the book seek to explain the structure of the epistle based on something other than the systematic development of a central theme in a point-by-point argument.

By contrast the contention of this paper is that (1) Philippians has one central theme that is broad enough to explain the details of the entire epistle, and that (2) the development of this theme follows a literary structure that is as systematic, coherent, and logical as that of any New Testament epistle.

The overall structure of the epistle is this. After the salutation in 1:1-2, the first major division is the prologue (the opening thanksgiving and prayer; 1:3-11). These verses are a true epistolary prologue because they not only introduce the central theme, but they also foreshadow all the other significant motifs that are developed in the letter.

*The biographical prologue* follows in 1:12-26. It is "biographical" because it discusses Paul's personal circumstances. It is "prologue" because in the argument of the book it has close conceptual ties with both the prologue proper (1:3-11) and with the body of the epistle which begins at 1:27. Thus it serves as a conceptual link between the prologue and the body of the letter, though it is much more than a mere transition section.

*The body* of the epistle extends from 1:27 through 4:9. The contents of this section are systematically and logically arranged. *The epilogue* (4:10-20) balances the prologue (1:3-11). The book then closes with the salutation and benediction in 4:21-23.

### The Prologue (1:3-11)

As stated previously, these verses serve as an epistolary prologue. What Schubert says in regard to the Pauline thanksgivings generally, is particularly true with regard to Philippians. "Generally speaking it may be said that the Pauline thanksgivings . . . serve as a rather formal introduction to the body of the letter."<sup>19</sup> More explicitly he later states, "Their province is to indicate the occasion for and the contents of the letters they introduce."<sup>20</sup> Conzelmann sharpens the point even further. "It is important to show that the epistolary thanksgiving is already part of the context and can even serve to usher in the main theme."<sup>21</sup>

This is exactly the case in Philippians. For the purpose of thematic analysis, it is convenient to look at each of the three major syntactical units of the prologue separately.<sup>22</sup>

#### THE THANKSGIVING: THE THEME INTRODUCED (1:3-6)

In this opening thanksgiving, the main theme of the entire letter is introduced and summarized. Paul joyfully thanked God for the Philippians (vv. 3-4).<sup>23</sup> However, in all his fond memories of them, one particular feature is highlighted in verse 5. Later Paul developed this as the central theme of the epistle: *the Philippians' partnership in the gospel*.

Verse 6, when properly interpreted in relation to verse 5, provides a summary statement of the entire epistle.

Having spoken of their partnership in the gospel (κοινωνία ... εἰς τὸ εὐαγγέλιον) in the past and present (v. 5), Paul then expressed his confidence that God would continue His work in them so that they might become even more effective partners. His confident hope was that God would perfect (ἐπιτελέσει) them in their work for the gospel and that it would bear fruit from then till the day of Christ. In brief, verse 6 speaks of the perfecting of the Philippians' κοινωνία ("partnership") and of them as κοινωνοί, ("partners") in the gospel.

The ἔργον ἀγαθὸν ("good work") in verse 6 must be interpreted by the κοινωνία of the previous verse. This exegetical point is frequently noted by commentators, though few of them consistently restrict it enough to this sense.<sup>24</sup> This writer holds that verse 6 refers restrictively to the perfecting of the Philippians as workers for the gospel, and to the perfecting of their works in the cause of the gospel. Many exegetes, failing to note this, have thus

failed to see that verses 3-6 contain a thematic summary of the entire epistle. When the first half of verse 6 is taken as suggested, then the rest of the verse ("perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus") should be seen as a reference to the outcome at the judgment seat of Christ, an interpretation fully in harmony with the eschatological reference in verses 10-11.

Verses 3-6, then, are a cameo of the entire epistle. They introduce the main theme, the Philippians' partnership<sup>25</sup> in the gospel. This theme is developed in the direction of God's perfecting of both them and their works for the gospel. All the rest of the letter is concerned primarily with their development as *κοινωνοί* so that they may be blessed with a temporally fruitful, eternally rewardable partnership in the gospel.

Following Schubert, Jewett correctly suggests that this thanksgiving is "a formal device serving to announce and to introduce the topics of the letter. The epistolary thanksgiving is intimately connected with each succeeding section of the letter."<sup>26</sup>

#### THE BASIS FOR CONFIDENCE IN THEM: THE THEME EXPANDED (1:7-8)

These verses give a "subjective justification of the confidence expressed in verse 6."<sup>27</sup> They also relate to the theme of partnership in the gospel. Paul associated himself with the readers as *συγκοινωνούς* ("fellow partners"). They partake together of the special enabling grace that God supplies to those who confirm and defend the gospel.<sup>28</sup>

In addition, several subthemes are introduced in verses 7-8 that are developed later.

1. Verse 7 includes the first occurrence of the verb *φρονέω*, an important concept further developed in 2:1-5; 3:15 (and v. 16 if the reading of the majority of the Greek manuscripts is accepted), 19; 4:2, 10. *Φρονέω* refers to holding a mind-set that expresses itself in right action. For partners in the common cause of the gospel who are to progress toward perfection (1:6), nothing less would be appropriate. This attitude supplies the basis for the exhortation to unity through humility in chapter 2.

2. The work of the gospel normally involves the endurance of difficulty, hardship, and persecution. Paul's present bondage as well as the numerous times he had to confirm and defend the gospel (e.g., Acts 16) prove this. In Philippians 1:7-8 (and 2:30) Paul likened the Philippians' struggles in this regard to his. Also

the phrase ἐν τῇ ἀπολογίᾳ καὶ βεβαιώσει τοῦ εὐαγγελίου clearly announces the contents of chapter 3, where both the true gospel and the true gospel lifestyle are defended against false teachers and false teaching.<sup>29</sup>

3. The concept of God's enabling grace for their labors is introduced here in 1:7-8 and expanded in 1:29-30. The adequacy of this grace is the main presupposition of and the basis for the exhortations to rejoice, given in 3:1 and 4:4.

4. Paul's desire for and joy at their progress is also seen. This motif is expressed frequently throughout the rest of the epistle (1:9-11, 25, 27-28; 2:2, 12-18; 3:16-17; 4:17).

These motifs are each related to the main theme like spokes of a wheel to their hub. They are bound together and find their meaning in the relationship they sustain to the main theme of partnership in the gospel.

#### THE PETITION: THE THEME APPLIED (1:9-11)

The contents of this prayer stand in close unity with the thematic statement in 1:5-6.<sup>30</sup> The passage moves from the general to the particular. Generally speaking, God will continue to work in them in order to perfect both them and their works for the gospel. But in response to God's work in them, it is imperative that they continue growing in the specific qualities of Christian virtue that Paul now prayed for.

His petition was for one specific thing — that they might develop an intelligent, discerning love. Their work on behalf of the gospel is true *κοινωνία* with God only to the degree that it is motivated by *ἀγάπη* ("self-sacrificing love").<sup>31</sup> If *κοινωνία* describes their activity, *ἀγάπη* is to be the motive behind the activity. In contrast are the self-seeking Christian preachers mentioned in 1:15-18, while the proper attitude and motive is exemplified by the brethren who preach Christ from correct motives.

This love must be growing in knowledge and discernment. Brethren who are abounding in love but lacking in these two qualities can often hinder a cause. *Ἐπίγνωσις* probably means practical wisdom or applied knowledge. *Ἄσθεσις* denotes correct insight that helps one assess circumstances and people rightly.

The idea of the necessity of continuing progress ("abound still more and more") is picked up from the notion of progress clearly implied in verse 6 ("He who began" and "will perfect it").

Divine sovereignty is emphasized in verse 6, and human responsibility is seen in verse 9.

Paul gave two reasons why the Philippians ought to develop an intelligent, discerning love (v. 10). First, this will enable them to "discern (δοκιμάζειν) what is best" (τὰ διαφέροντα) (NIV). In this context, τὰ διαφέροντα must be taken as the apprehending of what is the good, better, and best thing to do for the advancement of the gospel in any given set of circumstances. Τὰ διαφέροντα refers to the ability of the informed, insightful κοινωνός ("partner") to act in a true ἀγάπη manner as he works to extend the gospel. In short, τὰ διαφέροντα gathers into one word all that is expressed and implied in verse 9 about correct attitude and correct conduct for the κοινωνός. In verses 12-26 Paul gave concrete examples of the need to "discern what is best."

Ultimately they will be judged "sincere (pure) and blameless in the day of Christ" (v. 10b). This parallels the thought of verse 6 and further defines it. Εἰλικρινεῖς ("sincere, pure") refers to moral and spiritual purity (in contrast to the motives of selfish Christian preachers [1:15-18] and false teachers [chap. 3]). Ἀπρόσκοποι ("blameless") is best taken in the active sense of "not causing stumbling,"<sup>32</sup> referring to their effect on others. Taken this way, it clearly foreshadows the theme of Christian unity which is so important in the body of the epistle, especially in chapter 2.

In 1:11 Paul focused on the ultimate outcome for those partners whom God perfects unto the day of Christ. "Filled with the fruit of righteousness," they glorify God and contribute to His praise.

The prologue concludes with an eschatological climax. Paul and the Philippians have long passed from the earthly scene. But their works on behalf of the gospel are bearing fruit even to this day. And if Paul is to be believed, God will see to it that the partnership begun by those faithful partners will continue to bear fruit until the day of Christ, when its full harvest of righteousness is revealed to His own glory and praise.

## CONCLUSION AND SUMMARY

This prologue is a true "epistolary table of contents."<sup>33</sup> It introduces the main theme of the epistle, indicates the manner of its development, and includes foreshadowings of the important subthemes that will be developed in relation to the main theme.

## The Biographical Prologue: The Theme Exemplified (1:12-26)

This section of the letter is entitled "biographical prologue" for two reasons. First, it is obviously a biographical narrative, dealing with Paul's own circumstances. Second, it is closely related to the prologue proper in 1:3-11, in that almost every statement of this section has its conceptual genesis in 1:3-11 and expands on or illustrates an idea introduced there. In 1:12-26 Paul demonstrates how those principles for effective partnership in the gospel were working out to further the gospel in his own trying circumstances (cf. v. 7).

In the overall structure of the epistle this section bears striking resemblance to what Greco-Roman rhetoricians refer to as the *narratio* of an epistle. This is a section in which the writer stated his interest in or defended himself in relation to the subject he was writing about. This subject is introduced in an *exordium*, or epistolary introduction, which immediately preceded the *narratio*.<sup>34</sup> If this observation is valid, it is another indication of true epistolary structure and style in Philippians.

It is not surprising, then, to find the passage opening with a reference to the advancement of the gospel in verse 12, the topic sentence of the section. **Εἰς προκοπὴν τοῦ εὐαγγελίου** ("for the greater progress of the gospel") reflects the idea of the progress of the gospel introduced in verses 5-6. The second occurrence of **προκοπὴν** in verse 25 draws the entire section to a well-structured conclusion. In the verses in between, Paul exhibited the specific virtues mentioned in verses 9-11 and showed the readers how those virtues applied to his circumstances of imprisonment for the gospel (cf. "imprisonment," lit., "my bonds." in vv. 8 and 13).

In verses 12-18, the apostle "discerned what is best" (cf. v. 10) in regard to the advancement of the gospel. Rather than hindering the spread of the gospel, imprisonment had actually resulted in its progress. Among his unbelieving captors (v. 13), the reason for his bondage had become widely known. And besides the gospel having gained a wider audience, it also gained many more courageous preachers (v. 14)! Because of Paul's behavior in prison (which was "pure and blameless," v. 10) the majority of the believers, rather than becoming discouraged, gained a fresh confidence to speak the Word boldly. However, not all those Christians who were preaching Christ were operating from the best of motives (contrast ἀγάπη, v. 9). In verses 15-17 he



wisely perceived (with ἐπίγνωσις and αἴσθησις, v. 9) the motives and the intentions of both groups. In one group there was true κοινωνία in the work of the gospel because their work was based on love (v. 14). The other group had the opposite of the purity and blamelessness (v. 10) that Paul desired for the Philippians. Having looked at these circumstances and persons, he discerned what was of chief importance (v. 18). What mattered most was that Christ was proclaimed and nothing could rob him of the joy of that.

Next (vv. 18b-26) Paul "discerned what is best" with regard to his own desires and with regard to what was most necessary for the Philippians' progress in faith. The near future held only prospects of joy for Paul (καρῆσομαι, "I will rejoice" v. 18b). Whatever the outcome of his imprisonment — whether life or death — it would be an experience of "salvation" (σωτηρίαν, "deliverance") for him. As Hendriksen observes, "by reading not only verse 19 but also verse 20 it will be seen that for Paul salvation consisted in this in his own words — 'that Christ be magnified in my body whether by life or by death.'"<sup>35</sup> Paul's "deliverance," whether death or release from prison, would result in Christ being glorified.<sup>36</sup> The means to bring this about are the Holy Spirit and the prayers of the Philippians, who were his fellow partners (v. 7).

For Paul personally, he preferred to be with Christ. However, if he continued to live he had the prospect of more fruit in his ministry. And this is what finally settled the matter for him: it was more needful that he remain alive to help in their joy and progress in the faith (v. 25). The words "convinced of this" indicate a settled conclusion reached. Again this deliberation shows that Paul was exemplifying the ability to "discern what is best" (v. 10). Accepting what was "more necessary" (ἀναγκαιότερον) for the readers' progress (v. 24) rather than what was "very much better" (πολλῶ . . . μᾶλλον κρείσσον) for himself alone (v. 23) also reflects his ability to "discern what is best." Throughout this paragraph, Paul's desire to glorify Christ kept him spiritually pure (v. 10). His putting the needs of others above his own desires, even when those desires were entirely proper (to be with Christ!), served to keep him from any action that would stumble others (cf. ἀπορόσκοποι, v. 10). This could not be said of insincere preachers (vv. 17-18). In addition, the mutual fellowship pictured in verses 25-26 reflects motifs prominent in verses 5-6 and verses 7-8.

In summary, then, the apostle showed that he practiced (vv.

12-26) what he preached (vv. 3-11, esp. 9-11) concerning effective expansion of the gospel.

Verses 12-26, besides linking with the prologue, also point forward to succeeding sections in the epistle. Verses 23-26, for example, clearly foreshadow 2:5-11. Following Christ's example, Paul released any claim on privileges he rightly possessed in order to serve the needs of others more effectively. In that way, as well as by the mention of his anticipated coming to them (1 :27; 2:24), this section points to what lies ahead in the epistle. These verses form a smooth and natural transition to the body of the letter which begins at 1:27.

### **The Body: The Theme Particularized (1:27–4:9)**

The body of the epistle has three well-balanced sections: (a) an introductory and summary paragraph (1:27-30), (b) a central section (2:1–4:1), and (c) a concluding hortatory paragraph (4:2-9). In each of these sections, the same two subjects — unity and steadfastness are discussed.

#### **WALK WORTHY OF THE GOSPEL (1:27-30)**

This paragraph begins with the topic sentence for the entire section of 1:27–4:9. This topic sentence is "Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ."<sup>37</sup> The subject of what constitutes a worthy walk occupies the body of the epistle.

This worthy walk consists of unity (1:27c) and steadfastness (1:28-30). Standing in one spirit, and as with one soul, they are to strive as members of the same team (*συναλοῦντες*) for the furtherance of the gospel.

When they encounter opposition and persecution they must remain courageously steadfast. Such courageous "striving together for the faith of the gospel" is possible because of the provision of grace mentioned in verses 29-30 (*ἐχαρίσθη*; cf. v. 7). Just as Paul could be joyful and confident of a "salvation" (deliverance) despite his unpleasant circumstances, so also could the readers experience salvation ("deliverance," v. 28).

A "worthy walk," then, means specifically the achievement of true Christian unity among themselves, and steadfastness against enemies of the gospel. Later it will be shown that this passage is important in properly interpreting 3:1, which most interpreters regard as the most problematic verse in the entire

epistle (excluding 2:5-11). Also, 1:30 proves that the particular cause and type of suffering in view is suffering encountered because of their partnership in the gospel. This kind of trial they had seen Paul previously face in Acts 16 (the "conflict you saw in me") and this is the kind he faced now (you "now hear to be in me"). That the Philippians were his *συνκοινωνοί* in this kind of suffering for the advancement of the gospel is made clear by the words *τὸν αὐτὸν ἀγῶνα ἔχοντες* ("experiencing the same conflict"). This again is a development of the thematic statement in 1:5-6. Paul expressed confidence there that God would perfect both them and their works for the gospel. This may involve suffering, but where there are trials there is grace (1:7). But if their Christian character as partners blooms with the virtues mentioned in 1:9-11; then like Paul (1:12-26), they could expect the hardships they suffered for the sake of the gospel to be a "salvation" for them as well (1:29-30)!<sup>38</sup> In their trials this was to be a continuous source of joy for them (3:1; 4:4).

This paragraph (1:27-30), then, introduces the general topic of walking worthily of the gospel. If the readers are to become more effective partners of the gospel they must walk in unity with one another and in steadfastness against opponents of the faith.

#### WALK IN UNITY AND STEADFASTNESS (2:1-4:1)

This central section of the epistle takes up again the two topics of unity and steadfastness. Chapter 2 discusses unity, and 3:1-4:1 is concerned with steadfastness.

*Walk in unity* (chap. 2). From a structural point of view, a problem in this chapter is whether verses 19-30 are in any way an extension of the line of argument in verses 1-18. Many commentators see a major break in the letter at 2:19.<sup>39</sup> Martin, following the form-critical tradition mentioned earlier, states that this section of the letter fits a standardized form known as a "travelogue."<sup>40</sup> In it Paul discusses his future travel plans and how the readers fit into them. While such a section may have some transitional links with what precedes, rarely is it taken as tied closely in thought with it.

However, evidence indicates that verses 19-30 are more closely connected with verses 1-18 than that. While verses 19-30 may be a "travelogue," they are more. They also advance the line of argument that runs in the preceding verses. Structurally

chapter 2 is a unit. And while there is a break at 2:19, it is not a break in the argument of the chapter; it is simply a transition to another link in the chain of reasoning that supports that argument.

The chapter develops as follows.

2:1-4. The readers are urged to achieve a unity based on true humility. Each one is to be concerned for the needs of others, not merely his own. This thought of self-sacrificial regard for others' needs has already occurred in 1:22-26 and will be contrasted with the attitude mentioned in 2:21. The obvious contrast between verse 4 ("look out for . . . the interest of others") and verse 21 ("they all seek after their own interests") is a link between the sections that would be difficult for a Greek reader to miss.

2:5-11. In spite of Martin's opinion to the contrary,<sup>41</sup> this writer is convinced that Christ is presented here as an example for the believer to follow. Christ emptied Himself of any claim to glory; He humbled Himself in order to meet the needs of helpless people. For this sacrifice God honored Him above all else in the universe. It is this humble, self-emptying, self-sacrificing mind after which the Philippians are to pattern their relationships.

2:12-18. In the light of the preceding commands (vv. 1-4) and example (vv. 5-11), the readers are instructed to "work out" their own "salvation" (v. 12). God is the One who enables the willing and the doing of this (v. 13). What does "salvation" mean here? Positively it means achieving a unity based on imitation of the mind of Christ (vv. 1-11). Negatively it is further defined as doing "all things without murmuring and disputing" (v. 13; cf. 2:3). This is consistent with the two previous occurrences of *σωτηρία* in the book where the context suggests "deliverance" (1:19, 28).

If believers do this, they will be pure and spotless (cf. 1:10) and their testimony will shine like a lamp in a dark world (2:15). In verse 16, Paul seems to take a turn in thought away from the figure suggested in 1:15. Ἐπέχοντες almost certainly must mean "hold fast" rather than "hold forth." Rather than saying they will shine as they hold forth the Word of life, he said they will shine as they hold fast the Word of life. This is related to the subject of walking worthily of the gospel. To prevent disunity from extinguishing the testimony of a church, believers must "hold fast the Word of Life." That is, they must obediently achieve the sort of unity described previously. A true gospel witness demands a true gospel lifestyle. Only this wins approval in the day of Christ (2:16).

2:17-18. These verses are a hinge, a transition between verses 12-16 and verses 19-30. Here Paul himself exemplified the attitude he encouraged in verses 1-11. He was ready and willing to be poured out like a drink offering in order to further his readers' growth in faith. Paul rejoiced and invited them to do so as well (v. 18).

2:19-24. Like Paul (vv. 17-18), Timothy and Epaphroditus were worthy examples of the courageous, humble, others-serving mind of Christ.

Verses 19-24 include some exegetical connections with the immediately preceding context and with the beginning of the chapter. The εὐψυχῶ verse 19 ("be encouraged") is natural after the χαίρω and συγχαίρω in verses 17-18. Paul wished to be made glad when he heard how things were with them. He desired to hear that they were "holding fast the Word of life" and that he had not labored in vain (v. 16). Paul sent Timothy because, like Christ, Timothy had true concern for them; he was not concerned merely for himself (v. 20). (Cf. ἰσόψυχον here with σύμψυχοι in v. 2.) Verse 21, as mentioned, contrasts clearly with verse 4. Verse 22 mentions Timothy's proven character as shown by the fact of his συγκοινωνία ("fellow partnership") with Paul in the gospel. Thus Timothy also is an example of one who truly works out his "salvation" based on service to the Lord and to others. Timothy's service, in addition to illustrating the thought of verse 16a, also reflects the controlling idea of the body of the letter in 1:17a.

2:25-30. Like Timothy, Epaphroditus was commended because of his sacrificial service for the gospel (v. 30). That his character as a gospel worker was in view is brought immediately before the readers in verse 25 where Paul called him his "fellow-worker" and "fellow-soldier." They were to hold men such as him in the highest regard (v. 29).

In this epistle every single reference Paul makes to another person is made in connection with that person's *xomuvia*, his partnership in the gospel. Timothy and Epaphroditus, except for Paul himself, stand as the most prominent of these.

*Walk in steadfastness (3:1-4:1)* Though chapter 3 has been the traditional battleground for critics who see Philippians as a composite work, it presents almost no difficulties for the view presented here. Chapter 3 is clearly concerned with one subject--the Philippians' steadfast stance against false teaching. Verse 1 of chapter 4 is obviously a summarizing exhortation to close the section.

Paul now turned to discuss the second major topic introduced in 1:27-30, the topic of steadfastness in the face of their opponents in the faith. This has been foreshadowed clearly in 1:7, 28-30 (esp. v. 28). If this writer has been correct in interpreting 1:27-30 as an introduction and summary statement of the subjects to follow, then chapter 3 is both natural and necessary. Paul is merely following the literary blueprint sketched in 1:27-30.

Pollard has convincingly argued that chapter 3 is closely associated with chapter 2, because of parallels in terminology and concept.<sup>42</sup> Pollard's arguments have never been disproven despite attempts such as Martin's to weaken their relevance.<sup>43</sup> So both structurally and verbally chapter 3 finds a comfortable fitting in the overall arrangement of the epistle.

Three other matters must be briefly mentioned.

First, the view presented here requires that τὸ λοιπὸν ("finally," 3:1) be taken as transitional.<sup>44</sup> This is no problem, for this usage is well attested in Greek literature and is paralleled in the New Testament (cf. 1 Thess. 4: 1).

Second, the supposed roughness of transition between Philippians 3:1 and the rest of the chapter almost vanishes when it is realized that the ideas of joy and standing against opposition to the gospel have already been associated with one another earlier in the epistle. In 1:19, 28-30; 2:17-18 joy is presented as the proper reaction to such circumstances. So the readers are already prepared for the association of joy and hardship again at this point. The asyndeton of 3:2 maybe striking, but the readers have already been primed to expect what follows.

Third, notice must be taken of what is probably the most serious objection to the structural scheme presented here. As stated, this writer sees chapter 3 as the fuller discussion of the second topic (steadfastness) introduced in 1:27-30. The first topic (unity) is dealt with in chapter 2. However, in 1:28-30 the emphasis is on the persecution the Philippians could expect from their enemies, not on the seductions presented by their false teachings — which is clearly the emphasis of chapter 3. Two things may be said in response. (a) It may be assumed that the opponents of the gospel had something to substitute in its place. Persecution was not only physical. (b) How to face overt persecution is discussed in 4:4-9, where Paul gives a fuller exposition of how to rejoice in the Lord and the anxieties of persecution.

## WALK IN UNITY AND STEADFASTNESS (4:2-9)

This concluding paragraph to the body of the letter again takes up the same two topics as the previous two sections — unity and steadfastness.

*Restore unity (4:2-3).* Reflecting the earlier emphasis in 1:27 and 2:1-4, Paul instructed the two women mentioned here., with the help of a co-worker, to be united in the Lord. The theme of the epistle partnership in the gospel — is mentioned in 4:3. The terms παρακαλῶ ("I urge," v. 2), τὸ αὐτὸ φρονεῖν ("to live in harmony," v. 2), and the phrase ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ συνήθησάν μοι ("have shared my struggle in the gospel," v. 3) clearly reflect ideas introduced in 1:27-2:4.

*Maintain tranquility (4:4-9).* Martin is among the few commentators who recognize that this section does not address the subject of peace and freedom from anxiety in general, but in connection with the persecution and opposition the Philippians faced. He states, "The background is clearly that of a congregation facing opposition and threatened by danger from the hostile world. Paul proceeds to describe all the resources by which the Philippian Christians may win through."<sup>45</sup>

The details of the text support this. Χαίρετε ἐν κυρίῳ ("Rejoice in the Lord," v. 4) recalls 3:1. Here, however, the emphasis is on the oppression caused by opponents of the gospel, not on their teaching. The term τὸ ἐπιεικὲς ("gentleness, forbearance," v. 5) presupposes pressured circumstances where the opposite response might be expected. The reference to the nearness of the coming of the Lord (v. 5) is intended as a comfort to them. This is a clear reference back to 3:20-21 where the relief and the benefits waiting for the faithful are stated. In 4:6-7, the references to anxiety and the peace of God presuppose circumstances that would normally rob them of peace and cause anxious care. The image in verse 7 is that of an armed sentry, ready to fight off any hostile intruder. Also this segment may recall 1:28-30. The prospect of "salvation" (1:28) should be a joy to them and they need not be frightened out of their composure (cf. μηδὲν μεριμνᾶτε, "be anxious for nothing" [4:6], with μὴ πτυρόμενοι, "in no way alarmed" [1:28]). If so, this is further evidence that the subject of steadfastness is once again brought before the readers by Paul. This is not in regard to false teaching as in chapter 3, but in regard to inner anxiety and fear.

Philippians 4:8-9 serve as a conclusion to the paragraph beginning in verse 4. The reference to the God of peace reflects

"the peace of God" (v. 7). **Τὸ λοιπόν** is best translated "finally" (cf. 3:1). However, **τὸ λοιπόν** also concludes the entire epistle from 1:12 up to this point. Thus the body of the epistle which began with a topic sentence in 1:27a is drawn to a summary and a well-structured close. Philippians 4:8-9, then, is a double conclusion, concluding 4:4-9 and then also summarizing all the admonition in the letter back to 1:27a. Chapter 4, verse 9 makes it clear that Paul's conduct in 1:12-26 is also to be taken into account.

#### CONCLUSION AND SUMMARY OF THE BODY

The body of the letter begins with a topic sentence in 1:27a. The Philippian Christians, to be perfected in their partnership for the gospel, were to conduct themselves worthy of the gospel. Specifically two things are in view unity with one another and steadfastness against their opponents. They need not fear, for God will supply grace (1:27-30). Chapter 2 takes up the unity motif, and chapter 3, steadfastness. The main body of the epistle then concludes with a hortatory paragraph which again addresses the same two subjects. All this is freed from any topical "loose ends" by the summarizing double conclusion of 4:8-9,

Is it true, as Eadie suggested, that "we can never know what suggested to the Apostle the order of his topics"?<sup>46</sup> Emphatically not. Certainly Philippians is one of the most systematically structured epistles in the New Testament.

#### **The Epilogue (4:10-20)**

The evidence of careful structure does not end with the body of the letter. Verses 10-20 of chapter 4 form an epilogue to the epistle, balancing the prologue in 1:3-10.

In general, the prologue began broadly, with Paul's remembrance of all they had done in every way to share in the work of the gospel. The epilogue is more specific, mentioning their most recent financial gift to Paul.

Dalton has superbly summarized the relationship of the prologue to the epilogue.

. . . we seem to have evidence of an inclusion which binds the whole letter into one unit. First of all, the idea of partnership is strongly expressed at the beginning and the end. Thus in 1:5 Paul is "thankful for your partnership (**κοινωνία**) in the gospel"; and in 4:15 he records that "no church entered into partnership in giving and receiving except you only." This partnership is reiterated in another



parallel: in 1:7 the Philippians are sharers (συγκοινωνούς) of grace with Paul; in 4:13 they are sharers (συγκοινωνήσαντες) with him in his trouble. At both beginning and end we have the same idea expressed in different ways: the longstanding partnership of the Philippians with Paul: "from the first day until now" (1:5), and "in the beginning of the gospel" (4:15). And finally the reciprocal attitude of sympathy between Paul and the Philippians is expressed in the same phrase: in 1:7 he says "it is right for me to feel this about you" (τοῦτο φρονεῖν ὑπὲρ πάντων ὑμῶν), and in 4:10, "You have revived your concern for me" (τὸ ὑπὲρ ἐμοῦ φρονεῖν).<sup>47</sup>

Thus the beginning and the ending of the letter have four common elements. It does seem fitting that the central idea should be that of partnership, since in fact this theme dominates the whole text.

Following the epilogue are the closing greetings (4:21-22) and benediction (4:23).

### Conclusion

If the above analysis is correct, then Philippians must be considered as a masterly example of epistolary literature. A formal prologue introduces the main theme and foreshadows its development. This is followed by a biographical narrative (1:12-26) in which Paul exemplified certain qualities he had recommended to the readers in 1:3-11 and especially in verses 9-11. The body of the epistle begins with a topic sentence (1:27a) and then discusses the topics of unity and steadfastness three times. The body concludes with a summary statement in 4:8-9. The epilogue (4:10-20) artfully balances the prologue, and the closing salutation (4:21-23) balances the opening greeting in 1:1-2.

But if Philippians is an epistle with structure, this is because it is primarily an epistle with a message, a message that calls all Christians to a walk worthy of the gospel if they expect to further the work of the gospel. The power of such a walk, combined with such a message, can make an immeasurable impact in the world. Out of Macedonia, Alexander the Great once went to conquer the Eastern world but later from Macedonia the power of the gospel went out to conquer the Western world of Paul's day. The Philippians' κοινωνία εἰς τὸ εὐαγγέλιον is still bearing fruit today.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Robert Jewett, "The Epistolary Thanksgiving and the Integrity of Philippians," *Novum Testamentum* 12 (1970):49.

<sup>2</sup> For instance, Jewett sees each section of the letter bound to the other by an apocalyptic conception of a suffering messianic apostle and community whose composure in persecution heralds the coming destruction of their enemies at the *nagovola* as well as their own perfected salvation in that day (*ibid.*, p. 51).

<sup>3</sup> Some popular works have suggested Christian unity as the main theme: Robert Gromacki, *Stand United in Joy* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980); Frank Stagg, "Philippians," in *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, ed. Clifton J. Allen, 12 vols. (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1972), 11:178-216; and Howard Vcs, *Philippians: A Study Guide* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975). See also Gerald Blazek, "Unity through Humility in Philippians" (Th.M. thesis. Dallas Theological Seminary, May 1977). The main objection to this view is that while unity is an important subtheme, it is not comprehensive enough to unify the entire epistle. This is most obvious in chapter 3 where the threat to the congregation is not presented as a threat primarily to their unity. Rather, the threat is to the maturity and perfection of the believers at Philippi. Failure to meet this threat would render them unable "to walk worthy of the gospel of Christ" (1:27). Also this view fails to note the thematic statement in the prologue of the epistle.

<sup>4</sup> Ernst Lohmeyer, *Der Briefe an die Philipper* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1954). His attempt to unify the epistle around the theme of martyrdom has been criticized both theologically and exegetically and has attracted almost no scholarly following.

<sup>5</sup> Marvin Vincent, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles to the Philippians and to Philemon* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1897), p. xxxi (italics added).

<sup>6</sup> John Eadie, *A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Epistle of Paul to the Philippians* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1896), p. xxxi.

<sup>7</sup> William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1962), pp. 37-38.

<sup>8</sup> Note, for example, Ralph P. Martin's first commentary on Philippians (*The Epistle of Paul to the Philippians: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1959], p. 43). See also J. J. Muller, *The Epistles of Paul to the Philippians and to Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955), p. 21; and H. A. W. Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Epistles to the Philippians and Colossians, and to Philemon*, 4th ed., trans. John C. Moore, rev. and ed. Wm. P. Dickson, preface and supplementary notes by Timothy Dwight (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1889), p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> The various forms this view has taken over the years are summarized concisely by Jewett ("The Epistolary Thanksgiving," pp. 40-49). Ralph P. Martin in his most recent commentary covers the same ground and updates his discussion of the book (*Philippians*, New Century Bible [London: Oliphants, 1976], pp. 10-22).

<sup>10</sup> While the issue is much too complicated to be discussed fully here, this writer feels that all these theories are subject to one basic criticism: they fail to explain the final form of the letter. The structure is a problem if the letter is a unit and is Pauline. The structure is still a problem if it is the work of an editor. What motive — doctrinal, practical, or ecclesiastical — can account for an editor's pasting it together the way he has? To say that it is all right for an editor to construct a document with an enigmatic structure, but not for an original author to do so, is not acceptable reasoning. H. A. A. Kennedy's observation is still valid today: "There must be some strong basis for such an hypothesis [i.e., as editorial redaction] derivable from the Epistle itself" ("The Epistle to the Philippians," in *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, 5 vols. [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1951], 3:409).

<sup>11</sup> Martin, *Philippians* (1976), pp. 10-22.

<sup>12</sup> *The Form and Function of the Body of the Greek Letter: A Study of the*

*Letter-Body in the Non-Literary Papyri and in Paul the Apostle*, Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1972).

<sup>13</sup> Robert W. Funk, "The Letter: Form and Function", in *Language, Hermeneutic, and the Word of God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), pp. 250-74. White basically accepts Funk's categorization of the structural elements of a Pauline letter ("Form and Function," pp. 43-45). His subsequent conclusions refine some of Funk's observations, but do not really modify them greatly.

<sup>14</sup> Martin notes his acceptance of White's scheme and its adaptation to the "overall structure" of Philippians (*Philippians* [1976], p. 63). The form criticism of Paul's letters began with Adolf Deissmann's comparisons of Paul's epistles to the common letters of the papyri. Deissmann was emphatic that the letters of Paul were in every way "common letters" and not to be considered "epistles" or "epistolary." Paul Schubert reacted against Deissmann's absolute dichotomizing of "letter" and "epistle" (*Form and Function of the Pauline Thanksgivings* [Berlin: Topelmann, 1939]) and this same direction is followed by Funk and White. See also J. T. Sanders, "The Transition from Opening Epistolary Thanksgiving to Body in the Letters of the Pauline Corpus," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 81 (1962):348-62.

<sup>15</sup> White, *Form and Function*, p. 75.

<sup>16</sup> Schubert, *Form and Function*, p. 77, ns. 1 and 2.

<sup>17</sup> For instance, Martin, following White, breaks up the close-knit argument and unity of 1:12-26 in a way few if any exegetes would agree with. Also the labeling of 1:19b-2:18 as "theological argument" and chapter 3 as "paraenesis" seems arbitrary. A good deal of paraenesis is in 1:19b-2:18 as well as theological argument in chapter 3. Further evidence that Philippians defies this scheme is seen in the fact that scholars who basically accept Funk's schema cannot agree on what is "hortatory" and what is not. With Martin, Ronald Russell sees chapter 3 as paraenetical ("Pauline Letter Structure in Philippians," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 25 [September 1982]:303-5). However, W. G. Doty feels that no exclusively "hortatory" section can be identified in the letter, whether in chapter 3 or elsewhere (*Letters in Primitive Christianity* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973], p. 43, chart).

<sup>18</sup> Martin, *Philippians* (1976), pp. 57-58, 63.

<sup>19</sup> Schubert, *Form and Function*, p. 24.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>21</sup> *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. "εὐχαριστέω, εὐχαριστία. εὐχάριστος," by Hans Conzelmann, 9 (1974):412.

<sup>22</sup> Schubert contends that this type of Pauline thanksgiving characteristically is made up of seven formally constructed cola (*Form and Function*, pp. 56-62). However, it seems that Schubert must stretch the syntax too far to support this.

<sup>23</sup> This writer does not agree with Martin (*Philippians* [1976], pp. 63-64), who like Schubert sees ὑμῶν as a subjective genitive. Seen this way, it is the Philippians' remembrance of Paul, not his remembrance of them which is the basis of his thanks.

<sup>24</sup> Good examples are J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1913), p. 84; Martin, *Philippians* (1959), p. 61; Eadie, *Philippians*, p. 11; Vincent, *Philippians*, p. 8; Meyer, *Philippians*, p. 14. But see Dwight's notes for conclusions approaching those drawn in this paper (in Meyer, *Philippians*, pp. 47-48).

<sup>25</sup> The reference to κοινωνία should not be restricted to the gift the readers had sent to Paul. Nor does it here mean "fellowship" in the personal and subjective sense. That motif is not referred to until in verses 7-8. Here the term should be taken in the sense of "partnership" in a common enterprise. This usage is well attested and is well suited for use in a prologue where general topics were introduced which were more fully developed later in the epistle. For a defense of a view very similar to the one presented here, see George Panikulam, *Koinonia in the*

*New Testament — A Dynamic Expression of Christian Life* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1979), pp. 80-86. Both in his view of the scope of the term *κοινωνία* and in his view of the relationship of verse 6 to verse 5, Panikulam is close to the view suggested here.

<sup>26</sup> Jewett, "Epistolary Thanksgiving," p. 53.

<sup>27</sup> Meyer, *Philippians*, p. 14.

<sup>28</sup> Meyer's exegesis of verses 7-8 is enlightening, especially his recognition that grace here is grace to defend, confirm, and suffer for the gospel (*Philippians*, p. 16). See also Dwight's comments about the particular force of the verses (in Meyer, *Philippians*, pp. 48-49).

<sup>29</sup> How Schubert could miss this borders on the incredible (*Form and Function*, p. 77, n. 2).

<sup>30</sup> From a form-critical point of view Schubert also argues for the close connection of verses 9-11 with the verses before (ibid., p. 67, 71).

<sup>31</sup> Dwight catches the precise meaning of ἀγάπη in this context: "The meaning of ἀγάπη is, accordingly, love as connected with *κοινωνία*, that love which brought the Philippians into fellowship for the furtherance of the gospel. The reference does not seem to be . . . simply to their love to one another, but to Christian love which, existing as a power in each individual soul, led them to work together as the opportunity and call for such working came to them" (in Meyer, *Philippians*, p. 49).

<sup>32</sup> Dwight perceptively comments, "The prominence of the thought of *κοινωνία εἰς τὸ εὐαγγέλιον* in the paragraph . . . favors though it does not fully prove the transitive sense" (ibid., p. 50).

<sup>33</sup> Jewett, "Epistolary Thanksgiving," p. 53.

<sup>34</sup> See H. Betz, *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Churches in Galatia* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), pp. 14-15, 58-62.

<sup>35</sup> Hendriksen, *Philippians*, p. 74.

<sup>36</sup> Taken this way, *σωτηρίαν* bears the meaning it frequently has in the LXX - the general sense of "deliverance." The context must then supply the modal definition of the deliverance. For a view almost identical to this writer's view, see Zane C. Hodges, *The Gospel under Siege* (Dallas: Redencion Viva, 1981), pp. 90-94. The view of Meyer (*Philippians*, pp. 29-30) is, as far as it goes, compatible with the view presented here. It might also be noted that if the clause is a quotation from Job 13:16, then further support is given to this view.

<sup>37</sup> T. E. Pollard sees 1:27a as stating Paul's primary concern in writing to the Philippians ("The Integrity of Philippians," *New Testament Studies* 13 [1966]:65).

<sup>38</sup> Again Dwight notes, "*πάσχειν* and the 30th verse . . . make it clearly manifest that the writer has especially in mind the furtherance of the gospel by the Philippians, in, and notwithstanding, experiences similar to his own, i.e., persecution, etc." (in Meyer, *Philippians*, p. 58); cf. Martin's comments on v. 30 (*Philippians* [1976], p. 85).

<sup>39</sup> For example, Hendriksen, *Philippians*, p. 39; Lightfoot, *Philippians*, p. 69; Muller, *Philippians*, p. 18; Vincent, *Philippians*, pp. 72, 75; and Martin, *Philippians* (1976), p. 57.

<sup>40</sup> Martin, *Philippians* (1976), pp. 116-17.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., pp. 91-93. In this commentary Martin's entire discussion of 2:5-11 reveals that he has not changed his opinion since the publication of his major work *Carmen Christi: Philippians ii. 5-11 in Recent Interpretation and in the Setting of Early Christian Worship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967).

<sup>42</sup> Pollard, "The Integrity of Philippians."

<sup>43</sup> See Martin, *Philippians* (1976), p. 18.

<sup>44</sup> See C. F. D. Moule, *The Epistle to the Philippians* (reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), p. 56. Moule notes that τὸ λοιπὸν marks the transition

between the two major topics of the epistle — unity and a firm stance for the gospel.

<sup>45</sup> Martin, *Philippians* (1976), p. 154.

<sup>46</sup> Eadie, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, p. xxxi.

<sup>47</sup> William J. Dalton, "The Integrity of Philippians," *Biblica* 60 (1979):101.

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