

## Paul's Letters to Philippi

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Philippians has often been thought to be a conflation of several letters; the usual recent suggestion (Beare, Reumann) is three. I here propose a four-letter model.

### Interpolations

Before turning to the Paul material, we will first need to remove any interpolations. The hymn quoted at 2:6-11 is pre-Pauline;<sup>1</sup> not, as some have proposed, extraneous. I suggest the following as *editorial* additions or amendments to Paul's letter or letters:

- 1:1b. "with the bishops and deacons" implies post-Pauline organization.<sup>2</sup>
- 2:20-23. Excessive praise of Timothy, and implied dispraise of others; neither necessary nor appropriate for the occasion. The obvious beneficiary is Timothy, and this was probably inserted by him as a member of the editorial team.<sup>3</sup>
- 4:22. "All the saints salute you, especially they of Caesar's household." "All the saints" is superfluous after "the brethren that are with me" in 4:21, and "Caesar's household" is probably meant to imply a Roman imprisonment, though an Ephesian origin for the Philippian correspondence is more likely.<sup>4</sup>

Another seeming interruption is:

- 4:2-3. "I exhort Euodia, and I exhort Syntyche, to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yea, I beseech thee, true yokefellow, help these women, for they labored with me in the Gospel, with Clement also, and the rest of my fellow-worker, whose names are in the Book of Life." Not in a million years would this have been sent to the church at Philippi; it is a private, personal note to Paul's representative there, asking him to assist in a sensitive personal matter. A visit from Timothy is envisioned at 2:19, and this was probably sent to him after his arrival. Only he could have provided it to the editorial committee. Timothy is also the likeliest person to have inserted the praise of himself in 2:20-23. All this argues for Timothy's presence on the editorial committee.

So 4:2-3 is better regarded as a letter fragment, and takes its place in this hypothesis alongside the three letters more commonly distinguished. It is thus here proposed that four Pauline elements have been combined to produce what we know as Philippians.

<sup>1</sup>Lohmeyer **Philipper** 90-99; summarized in Hunter **Paul** 40f. Paul in quoting this early hymn has added a half-line to inject his own theology of the cross, lacking in the original.

<sup>2</sup>Moffatt **Introduction** 171, "catholicizing gloss."

<sup>3</sup>One of the original letters was co-signed by Timothy, which makes his contributions to the editing of this letter than much more likely. See further below, and also Brooks **Editors**.

<sup>4</sup>Reumann 14, "An Ephesians provenance explains more . . . than any other theory."

### Discontinuities

The one most often noticed is at 3:2.<sup>5</sup> It does not resemble an epistolary beginning, and must represent a truncated letter. How far from that point can we read without encountering another discontinuity? The answer is the Timothy fragment at 4:2-3. This junction defines a segment consisting of 3:2–4:1. That segment ends thus:

**Php 4:1.** Wherefore, my brethren beloved and longed for, my joy and my crown, so stand fast in the Lord, my beloved.

This might be a letter nearing its end, but lacking a final greeting. Perhaps one will turn up, and we may for the moment reserve 3:2–4:1 for further consideration.

As the converse of discontinuity, we can look for resumed continuity. The point before the 3:2 bump, 3:1, seems to be resumed at 4:4. The keyword is “rejoice:”

**Php 3:1.** Finally, my brethren, **rejoice** in the Lord. To write the same things to you, to me indeed is not irksome, but for you it is safe.

[4:4]. **Rejoice** in the Lord always, and again I will say, **Rejoice**.

Then both 3:2–4:1 and the fragment 4:2-3 have been inserted into something else, something which was broken off at 3:1 and which resumes again at 4:4.

### Loose Ends

Taking up that resumption, and reading on past 4:4, we reach:

**Php 4:8.** Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honorable, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report, if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.[9] The things which ye both learned and received and heard and saw in me, these things do, and the God of peace shall be with you.<sup>6</sup>

. . . and we seem to be at the end of the letter that began at 1:1a. But we already had a “Finally” in 3:1 (above), at which point the 1:1a letter was seemingly in closing mode. Paul would probably not use this device twice in the same letter. We may then keep 4:4-7 as part of the 1a letter, but we will do better to put 4:8-9 elsewhere.

The “whatsoever” part of 4:8 has a parallel at:

**Php 2:1.** If there is therefore **any** exhortation in Christ, if any consolation of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any tender mercies and compassions, make full my joy, that ye be of the same mind, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind, [3] doing nothing through faction . . .

and the appeal for unity is another parallel. This further strengthens the likelihood that Php 4:8-9 belongs with another letter than the one which began at Php 1:1a and included 2:1. Then the 1:1a letter does not seem to go further than 4:4-7.

<sup>5</sup>Comments include “interrupted” (Lightfoot 69), “as to defy explanation” (Goodspeed, quoted at Beare 3), “abrupt” (Beare 100), “abrupt, harsh imp[erati]v[e]s” (Reumann 467).

<sup>6</sup>Paul had earlier quoted the Philippi Hymn, with which he disagreed theologically, for purposes of asking obedience. 4:8 sat first seems to invite this kind of latitude, but 4:9 corrects it by urging Paul’s own Gospel. For this device in Paul, see Brooks **Insidious**.

Another point against putting 4:4-7 and 4:8-9 in the same letter is this repetition:

Php 4:7. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding . . .

Php 4:9. . . . and the God of peace shall be with you.

Again, there is nothing unPauline about “God of peace,” but once per letter is enough.

Then 4:8-9 must be the conclusion of a different letter. Which one? The note of thanks which begins at 4:10 is more social than sermonic, and this advice to the church does not fit the personal fragment 4:2-3. But the “Dogs” letter at 3:2f is an appeal for unity, and this is also the theme of the letter beginning at 1:1a. Thematic parallels between them are thus not unlikely, and I assign 4:8-9 as the ending of the “Dogs,” or better, the Unity letter, which begins at 3:2. In that letter, Paul is not yet in prison, so it probably precedes the Prison letter. The Unity letter thus now consists of segments which were separated in the process of conflation, namely 3:2–4:1 and 4:8-9.

With 4:8-9 so assigned, we come to 4:10-20, which has no beginning. It seems to be a letter of thanks for a gift brought by Epaphroditus, as implied at 2:25 and 2:30. This suggests the following event sequence:

- Letter of counsel from Ephesus (not in prison): 3:2-4:1, 4:8-9
- Paul in prison; Epaphroditus brings aid. Letter of thanks: 4:10-20
- Epaphroditus ill, returns with prison letter: 1:1a, 1:2–2:19, 2:24–3:1, 4:4-7
- Timothy follows, Paul sends him a private directive: 4:2-3

We have only three more verses to consider, 4:21-23, of which we ignore 4:22 as an editorial enhancement. They read:

**Php 4:21.** Salute every saint in Christ Jesus. The brethren that are with me salute you. [23] The **grace** of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

The only letter now left without an ending is the letter of thanks, which begins at 4:10. 4:21 is already in place as continuing that letter. If we leave it there, we have:

**Php 4:20.** Now unto our God and Father, be the glory for ever and ever. Amen.  
[21] Salute every saint in Christ Jesus. The brethren that are with me salute you.  
[23] The **grace** of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

In this arrangement, concluding references to “**grace**” are distributed among different letters, and so are references to “whatsoever things are good,” and “the God of peace.” It is easier to imagine Paul recurring to these favorite themes in several letters written at about the same time, rather than duplicating some of them within a single letter.

**Conflation Strategy** for the separation and recombination of the letters is then:

A (Unity)	3:2–4:1	4:8-9
B (Thanks)		4:10-21, 23
C (Prison)	1:1a, 1:2–2:19, 2:24–3:1	4:4-7
D (Timothy)	4:2-3	

in which the endings of letters A and C are separated and placed further toward the end of the composite letter, the body of A and fragment D are placed between C and its now separated ending, and the letter of thanks (B), with its original ending, is placed last for a happy conclusion. The “polemical” Unity letter, written to oppose Jewish practices, and the Timothy fragment, which exposes a quarrel in the church, being less happy, are retained, but muted by being put in the middle.

The editors then seem to have wished not to leave out any available Paul material, but also to shape the result to better preach Paul to the Christendom of the future. Besides minimizing friction, they wanted the composite letter to speak to that purpose. As a backbone for that message, they wanted a sermon, and the nearest thing available was the Letter from Prison (C). Its opening was retained, and the openings of the other letters were discarded, lest they make the conflation obvious. The conclusions of letters A and C were put nearer the end, to avoid an obvious violation of epistolary closing conventions. The letter of thanks (B), complete with its ending, brought the whole to a close. To the resulting single letter the editors added new material, (1) anticipating the system of bishops and deacons, which probably existed in some places as they worked; (2) supporting the myth (implicitly required by the Pastorals) that Paul had survived his Roman imprisonment to preach elsewhere, and that Philippians itself was written from Rome; and (3) praising Timothy above Paul's other colleagues, this touch being most likely a contribution of Timothy himself, as one of the editorial team.

That is, the process is both strategically and personally intelligible.

So the proposed conflation is possible, but it must also be convincing. The best test of this is to display the proposed four letters, leaving readers to judge for themselves how plausible they are as original, independent letters. The proposed letters follow.

## Reconstruction

### A. LETTER URGING DOCTRINAL UNITY

*An early letter, warning of error. Not sent from prison. Opening omitted.*

[3:2] . . . Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the circumcision: [3] for we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God, and glory in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh: [4] though I myself might have confidence even in the flesh: if any other man thinketh to have confidence in the flesh, I yet more: [5] circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; [6] as touching zeal, persecuting the church; as touching the righteousness which is in the law, found blameless. [7] Howbeit what things were gain to me, these have I counted loss for Christ. [8] Yea verily, and I count all things to be loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but refuse, that I may gain Christ, [3:9] and be found in him, not having a righteousness of mine own, [even] that which is of the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith, [10] that I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, becoming conformed unto his death; [11] if by any means I may attain unto the resurrection from the dead. [12] Not that I have already obtained, or am already made perfect: but I press on, if so be that I may lay hold on that for which also I was laid hold on by Christ Jesus. [13] Brethren, I count not myself yet to have laid hold: but one thing [I do], forgetting the things which are behind, and stretching forward to the things which are before, [14] I press on toward the goal unto the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. [15] Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, be thus minded: and if in anything ye are otherwise minded, this also shall God reveal unto you: [16] only, whereunto we have attained, by that same let us walk. [17] Brethren, be ye imitators together of me, and mark them that so walk even as ye have us for an example.

[18] For many walk, of whom I told you often, and now tell you even weeping, [that they are] the enemies of the cross of Christ: [19] whose end is perdition, whose god is the belly, and [whose] glory is in their shame, who mind earthly things. [20] For our citizenship is in heaven; whence also we wait for a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ: [21] who shall fashion anew the body of our humiliation, conformed to the body of his glory, according to the working whereby he is able even to subject all things unto himself.

[4:1] Wherefore, my brethren beloved and longed for, my joy and crown, so stand fast in the Lord, my beloved. [8] **Finally**, brethren, whatsoever things are true, **whatsoever** things are honorable, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things. [9] The things which ye both learned and received and heard and saw in me, these things do: and the God of **peace** shall be with you.

#### B. LETTER ACKNOWLEDGING A GIFT FROM PHILIPPI

*Sent from prison on receipt of a gift brought by Epaphroditus. Opening omitted.*

[4:10] . . . But I rejoice in the Lord greatly, that now at length ye have revived your thought for me; wherein ye did indeed take thought, but ye lacked opportunity. [11] Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therein to be content. [12] I know how to be abased, and I know also how to abound: in everything and in all things have I learned the secret both to be filled and to be hungry, both to abound and to be in want. [13] I can do all things in him that strengtheneth me. [14]. Howbeit ye did well that ye had fellowship with my affliction. [15] And ye yourselves also know, ye Philippians, that in the beginning of the gospel, when I departed from Macedonia, no church had fellowship with me in the matter of giving and receiving but ye only; [16] for even in Thessalonica ye sent once and again unto my need. [17] Not that I seek for the gift; but I seek for the fruit that increaseth to your account. [18] But I have all things, and abound: I am filled, having received from Epaphroditus the things [that came] from you, an odor of a sweet smell, a sacrifice acceptable, well-pleasing to God. [19] And my God shall supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. [20] Now unto our God and Father [be] the glory for ever and ever. Amen. [21] Salute every saint in Christ Jesus. The brethren that are with me salute you. [23] The **grace** of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

#### C. SERMON SENT FROM PRISON TO PHILIPPI

*Carried by Epaphroditus, returning to Philippi after his recovery. Opening included.*

[1:1a] Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus that are at Philippi, [2] Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. [3] I thank my God upon all my remembrance of you, [4] always in every supplication of mine on behalf of you all making my supplication with joy, [5] for your fellowship in furtherance of the gospel from the first day until now; [6] being confident of this very thing, that he who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Jesus Christ: [7] even as it is right for me to be thus minded on behalf of you all, because I have you in my heart, inasmuch as, both in my bonds and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, ye all are partakers with me of **grace**. [8] For God is my witness, how I long after you all in the tender mercies of Christ Jesus. [9] And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and all discernment; [10] so that ye may approve the things that are excellent; that ye may be sincere and void of offence unto the day of Christ; [11] being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are through Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God.

[12] Now I would have you know, brethren, that the things [which happened] unto me have fallen out rather unto the progress of the gospel; [13] so that my bonds became manifest in Christ throughout the whole praetorian guard, and to all the rest; [14] and that most of the brethren in the Lord, being confident through my bonds, are more abundantly bold to speak the word of God without fear. [15] Some indeed preach Christ even of envy and strife; and some also of good will: [16] the one [do it] of love, knowing that I am set for the defense of the gospel; [17] but the other proclaim Christ of faction, not sincerely, thinking to raise up affliction for me in my bonds. [18] What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and therein I rejoice, yea, and will rejoice. [19] For I know that this shall turn out to my salvation, through your supplication and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, [20] according to my earnest expectation and hope, that in nothing shall I be put to shame, but [that] with all boldness, as always, [so] now also Christ shall be magnified in my body, whether by life, or by death. [21] For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. [22] But if to live in the flesh, – [if] this shall bring fruit from my work, then what I shall choose I know not. [23] But I am in a strait betwixt the two, having the desire to depart and be with Christ; for it is very far better: [24] yet to abide in the flesh is more needful for your sake. [25] And having this confidence, I know that I shall abide, yea, and abide with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith; [26] that your glorying may abound in Christ Jesus in me through my presence with you again. [27] Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ: that, whether I come and see you or be absent, I may hear of your state, that ye stand fast in one spirit, with one soul striving for the faith of the gospel; [28] and in nothing affrighted by the adversaries: which is for them an evident token of perdition, but of your salvation, and that from God; [29] because to you it hath been granted in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer in his behalf: [30] having the same conflict which ye saw in me, and now hear to be in me. [2:1] If there is therefore **any** exhortation in Christ, if any consolation of love, if **any** fellowship of the Spirit, if **any** tender mercies and compassions, [2] make full my joy, that ye be of the same mind, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind; [3] [doing] nothing through faction or through vainglory, but in lowliness of mind each counting other better than himself; [4] not looking each of you to his own things, but each of you also to the things of others.

[2:5] Have this mind in you, which was also in Christ Jesus:

- [6] who, existing in the form of God,  
counted not the being on an equality with God  
a thing to be grasped,
- [7] but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a servant,  
being made in the likeness of men;
- [8] and being found in fashion as a man,  
he humbled himself,  
becoming obedient [even] unto death, [yea, the death of the cross!]
- [9] Wherefore also God highly exalted him,  
and gave unto him the name  
which is above every name;
- [10] that in the name of Jesus  
every knee should bow,  
of [things] in heaven and [things] on earth and [things] under the earth,
- [11] and that every tongue should confess  
that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.

[12] So then, my beloved, even as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; [13] for it is God who worketh in you both to will and to work, for his good pleasure. [14] Do all things without murmurings and questionings: [15] that ye may become blameless and harmless, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom ye are seen as lights in the world, [16] holding forth the word of life; that I may have whereof to glory in the day of Christ, that I did not run in vain neither labor in vain. [17] Yea, and if I am offered upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I joy, and rejoice with you all: [18] and in the same manner do ye also joy, and rejoice with me. [19] But I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy shortly unto you, that I also may be of good comfort, when I know your state. [25] But I counted it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother and fellow-worker and fellow-soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need; [26] since he longed after you all, and was sore troubled, because ye had heard that he was sick: [27] for indeed he was sick nigh unto death: but God had mercy on him; and not on him only, but on me also, that I might not have sorrow upon sorrow. [28] I have sent him therefore the more diligently, that, when ye see him again, ye may rejoice, and that I may be the less sorrowful. [29a] Receive him therefore in the Lord with all joy; [30] because for the work of Christ he came nigh unto death, hazarding his life to supply that which was lacking in your service toward me.

[3:1] **Finally**, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you, to me indeed is not irksome, but for you it is safe. [4:4] Rejoice in the Lord always: again I will say, Rejoice. [5] Let your forbearance be known unto all men. The Lord is at hand. [6] In nothing be anxious; but in everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God. [7] And the **peace** of God, which passeth all understanding, shall guard your hearts and your thoughts in Christ Jesus.

#### D. FRAGMENT OF A PERSONAL NOTE

*Sent to Timothy at Philippi. His visit was anticipated in the previous letter at 2:19*

[4:2] I exhort Euodia, and I exhort Syntyche, to be of the same mind in the Lord. [3] Yea, I beseech thee also, true yokefellow, help these women, for they labored with me in the gospel, with Clement also, and the rest of my fellow-workers, whose names are in the Book of Life.

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