

COMMENTARY

I. LETTER OPENING: PHILIPPIANS 1:1-11

BEHIND THE TEXT

During Paul's time, letters in the Greco-Roman world were comprised of three parts: a letter opening, a body, and a letter closing. The letter opening typically included the names of the sender and the receiver, a brief greeting, and sometimes a wish or prayer for good health on behalf of the recipient and/or a thanksgiving to the gods.

PHILIPPIANS
1:1-11

Examples of Ancient Letter Openings

The following letter openings from papyrus letters in Greek (second and third centuries) share common elements with Paul's letters:

- Clairemon to Serapion, greeting. Before all else I pray that you will be well, and I make your obeisance before the lord Serapis daily (*Pmich.* 8.513 in Richards 2004, 129).
- Apion to his father and lord, Epimachus, very many greetings. Before all else I pray that you are well and that you may prosper in continual health . . . I give thanks to the Lord Serapis because, when I was endangered at sea, he rescued me (*BGU II* 423 in White 1986, 159).
- Toubias to Apollonios, greeting. If you are well and if all your affairs and everything else is proceeding according to your will, many thanks to the gods; we also are well, always remembering you, as I should (*CPJ* 14 in White 1986, 39).

Paul follows these normal patterns in his letters, but he also transforms them. Paul's letter openings are never simply conventional. In a letter like Philippians, he adapts and expands the customary elements found in ancient letters in order to charge them with a powerful theological current.

Paul's thanksgiving section (1:3-11) is a prime example. Paul decisively transforms the customary prayer for health or a thanksgiving to the gods, enlisting it in the service of the gospel. Three distinctive features stand out: First, instead of being thankful for safety, health, or good fortune, Paul normally gives thanks for his readers themselves (Richards 2004, 131). Second, Paul regularly combines his thanksgiving with a prayer of intercession for the church. Third, the thanksgiving section frequently introduces some of the main themes of the letter.

The thanksgiving and prayer of Philippians (1:3-11), in particular, anticipate matters that Paul will take up as the letter unfolds. These include (partially following Witherington 1994, 36):

- joy/rejoicing (1:4; see 1:18, 25; 2:2, 17, 18, 28, 29; 3:1; 4:1, 4, 10)
- partnership/sharing (1:5, 7; see 2:1; 3:10; 4:14, 15)
- the gospel and its defense (1:5, 7; see 1:12, 16, 27; 2:22; 4:3, 15)
- God's saving work among the Philippians (1:6; see 1:28; 2:12-13; 3:20-21)
- the day of Christ (1:6, 10; see 2:16; 3:10-11, 20-21)
- the Christian mind (1:7; see 2:2, 5; 3:15; 4:2, 8, 10)
- gratitude for the Philippians and their ministry (1:3, 5; see 2:25; 4:10-20)
- Paul's imprisonment (1:7; see 1:12-18)
- love or affection (1:7-8, 9; see 1:16; 2:1-2; 4:1)
- discerning the things that matter (1:9-10; see 3:4-16; 4:8-9)
- purity/holiness (1:10, 11; see 2:15; 4:8)
- the grace and glory of God (1:7, 11; see 2:11; 4:19-20, 23)

In addition, J. B. Lightfoot is probably right that the repeated use of the word "all" (1:1, 4, 7, 8; see 1:25; 2:17; 4:21) in connection with the Philippians anticipates Paul's exhortations to Christian unity in the letter (1953, 83; see 1:27; 2:1-4; 4:2, 3, 5, 7, 9). Furthermore, Paul's prayer for the Philippians (1:9-11) previews his principal concern that the Philippians live lives that are worthy of the gospel (v 27). Paul's letter opening, then, serves as an important guide for understanding the message of Philippians as a whole.

In addition to the letter form, Paul's letters also show the influence of ancient *rhetoric*, the art of persuading an audience (see the Introduction). This is hardly surprising, since Paul wrote letters primarily to be *read aloud* to be *heard* in public, not to be read privately by individuals.

Philippians 1:3-11 corresponds to the component of rhetorical delivery called the *exordium*. Its function was to secure the goodwill of the audience and

to introduce the subjects that were about to be discussed. The latter purpose we have already seen. As for the former, Paul's report of his prayers for the Philippians (vv 3-5), his confidence in them (v 6), and his expressions of deep affection for them (vv 7-8) would surely have helped him gain a positive hearing.

Such assurances of Paul's care for his audience and his longing to be with them (vv 7-8) appeal to the audience's emotions. Rhetorically, these are arguments from *pathos* (see the Introduction). Paul also builds on *ethos*, his own credibility, in this opening section. He does this when he calls himself a **slave of Christ** (v 1) or when he refers to his "chains" for the sake of the gospel (v 7).

What is more, we noted in the Introduction that Paul draws upon the language of friendship in the Greco-Roman world throughout this letter. Here, for example, Paul speaks of his relationship with the Philippians as a "partnership [*koinōniai*] in the gospel" (v 5; see v 7, **fellowsharers**, *synkoinōnous*; see also vv 7-8). But this friendship is not simply a common bond between two parties. It is a sharing that serves the gospel and is focused on Christ.

Philippians 1:1-11 can be divided into three sections: a greeting (vv 1-2), a thanksgiving (vv 3-8), and an intercessory prayer (vv 9-11).

IN THE TEXT

A. Greeting (1:1-2)

■ **I** The letter begins by identifying both **Paul and Timothy** as the senders. Timothy, Paul's closest colleague and "son in the faith" (1 Tim 1:2; see 1 Cor 4:17), is often mentioned at the beginning of his letters (1 and 2 Thessalonians, 2 Corinthians, Philemon, Colossians). Although the practice of naming present companions as co-senders is characteristic of Paul's writings, it is extremely rare in other Greco-Roman letters. Timothy is likely not an actual co-author of Philippians, since Paul speaks throughout in the first person singular ("I"). Rather, his name probably appears because of his close ties with the church in Philippi. Acts testifies that he was involved in the founding of the church (Acts 16:1, 13) and that he returned during Paul's third missionary journey (19:22; 20:3-4). He was apparently well known and highly regarded by the Philippians (Phil 2:19-24). We simply cannot be sure whether Timothy also served as Paul's secretary and actually wrote the letter at Paul's dictation (so Fee 1995, 61).

Even more significant is how Paul expands the customary naming of the sender to give it theological meaning. Paul identifies himself and Timothy as **servants of Christ Jesus** (see also Rom 1:1; Titus 1:1). This is the only time in all his letters that Paul and his co-sender share the same title. This seems subtly to forecast Paul's emphasis on "partnership" (*koinōnia*) and mutuality throughout the letter (Lyons and Malas 2007, 61-62).

The word **servants** (*douloi*) is better translated by the term **slaves**. In the Greek OT (LXX), “servant” can be a title of honor for leaders like Moses or David who have a special relationship with God. We can assume, however, that Paul’s mainly Gentile readers would have heard this word in its more common sense of a “slave.” Slavery was as taken for granted in Paul’s day as electrical appliances are in ours.

Unlike many modern forms of slavery, slaves in the Greco-Roman world came from a wide range of social backgrounds. At times, they could even hold positions of high responsibility in a household. Nevertheless, they still “belonged” to someone else. The word “slave” communicated humility, submission, and ownership in Paul’s world (Fee 1995, 63; see the sidebar “Further Reading on First-Century Slavery” in Greathouse and Lyons 2008, 188).

It is, therefore, highly significant that Paul and Timothy are Christ’s “slaves.” They are completely at the disposal of their common master and Lord, bound to his loving service. In Philippians, the word “slave” takes on particular weight, since it later describes the attitude of Christ himself. The missionaries are slaves of the one who deliberately adopted “the form of a slave” (2:7 NRSV) for their sake (Bockmuehl 1998, 51). Already, Paul points to himself and to Timothy as examples of the kind of humility and self-giving service that is such a prominent theme in the letter.

This emphasis on lowly service may be part of the reason that Paul does not identify himself as an apostle, as he does in most of his letters. At the same time, the omission fits his warm relationship with his friends in Philippi; he does not need to remind them of his apostolic authority.

The letter is addressed to **all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi**. Three aspects of this description deserve our attention:

First, Paul identifies the recipients as **saints** (*hagioi*). This term applies to the church as a whole (**all**), not simply an elite group of especially holy Christians. Like Israel in the OT, the saints (literally, “holy ones”) are “a people holy to the LORD” (Deut 7:6; 14:2, 21; see Ps 34:9). As a community, they are chosen and set apart to belong to God in a special way (Exod 19:6). The Philippians are saints because they participate in the holiness of God. At the same time, they are set apart in order to *be* holy people, even as God is holy (Lev 11:45; 19:2; 20:7). The saints are to reflect God’s holiness in their character and everyday conduct, in contrast to the world around them. This is a theme to which Paul will consistently return in the letter (see Phil 1:10, 11; 2:1-5, 14-15; 3:17; 4:8-9).

Second, the Philippians are holy, not in themselves, but because they are **in Christ Jesus**. Of the approximately 165 times this or equivalent expressions occur in the Pauline collection of letters, 21 are in Philippians. Clearly, **in Christ** is a critical phrase for understanding Paul’s vision of the Christian life.

The specific significance of **in Christ** varies from case to case; and interpreters have not come to full agreement about its precise meaning. At the very least, however, to be **in Christ** means that believers are in close personal union with Christ crucified and risen (see Phil 3:9-11). At the same time, it signifies that they are incorporated into the community founded by Christ through their relationship with Jesus. Consequently, “Being ‘in Christ’ refers to the experience not merely of the individual but of the community” (Gorman 2001, 37; see, e.g., Gal 3:28, “you are all one in Christ Jesus”).

Bockmuehl notes that the phrase **in Christ** carries particular importance within Philippians. This is not just because it occurs repeatedly. It is also due to the letter’s emphasis on the example of Christ (see 2:5), who determines the church’s character and communal life (1998, 53).

Third, God’s holy people are not only in Christ but are also **in Philippi**. We might easily pass over these words as no more than a geographical reference. But in the context of the letter, the phrase has more substance than that. It is in a concrete setting, the Roman colony **in Philippi**, that the church lives out its life **in Christ**.

Later Paul will remind these Christians that their true citizenship is in heaven, not in Roman Philippi, a place where the emperor is proclaimed as a divine lord and savior (3:20). Although they are situated in Philippi, their primary identity is determined by their relationship to another lord—the Lord Jesus Christ (1:2).

In addition to addressing the church as a whole, Paul singles out the **overseers and deacons** in Philippi. This is the first time in Paul’s letters that such specific leadership functions are mentioned. Moreover, after Paul draws attention to them at the outset, we hear nothing more of them in the rest of the letter. It is difficult to be certain about the precise role they played in the Philippian church.

Overseers (*episkopoi*; “bishops,” NRSV) apparently refers to those within the congregation who were engaged in a ministry of oversight and pastoral care for the fellowship. The terms “overseers” and “elders” (*presbyteroi*) are virtually interchangeable in the NT (see Titus 1:5-7; Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Pet 5:1, 2). **Deacons** (*diakonoî*) is the plural of the word for “servant” or “minister” (*diakonos*), and Paul uses the term in a variety of ways. The NT nowhere spells out the specific duties of “deacons.” But here it seems to indicate local leaders who were involved in a ministry of practical service and material care.

We can make several further observations about these church leaders:

- Paul’s mention of these two groups suggests that from early on there was some type of organized leadership structure within the Pauline churches (compare Acts 14:23).
- The terms “overseer” and “deacon” primarily represented ministry

functions. Well-defined *offices*, such as that of “bishop,” came later in the history of the church. Paul’s leadership language is flexible (see, e.g., 1 Thess 5:12). It is linked to leadership gifts that functioned within the body (e.g., “leadership” in Rom 12:8; “administration” in 1 Cor 12:28; “pastor” in Eph 4:11). Gift, function, and office are intertwined.

- Leadership in Philippi and elsewhere in Paul’s churches was apparently *collective*. There is no evidence for a single person who was “in charge” of the community or who was expected to fulfill all of the leadership functions.
- The language that introduces these leadership functions, *together with* (*syn*), is telling. As Fee points out, the overseers and deacons are addressed “alongside of” the saints. They are not *above* the church or *outside* of it, but a part of the whole (1995, 67; for more on the NT understanding of ministry, see Lightfoot 1953, 95-99, 181-269; and Flemming 1994).

Why, then, do we find this unusual mention of church leaders at the beginning of Philippians? One explanation, which goes back to John Chrysostom, is that they were especially responsible for sending Epaphroditus and the money gift from the church to Paul. A second option is that by mentioning these leaders at the start, Paul anticipates the tensions among congregational leaders he will address later (4:2-3). Yet another suggestion is tied to the issue of status: Paul models the humble attitude he will press for in this letter by giving titles of honor to the church’s leaders (overseer and deacon). This stands in contrast to his own lowly status as a slave (v 1; Hellerman 2005, 118-19). But there are simply not enough clues to solve this mystery with any measure of certainty. In any case, Paul writes this letter to the church as a whole, not just the leaders.

■ **2** Paul closes his salutation with his characteristic blessing of **grace and peace** on the community. He modifies the standard Greco-Roman letter greeting by changing the word “Greetings!” (*charein*) into the Christian term “grace” (*charis*), making a play on words. Paul then adds the traditional Jewish greeting, “peace” (*shalom*; here *eirēnē* in Greek). Both words are charged with theological content.

Grace represents the full scope of God’s loving favor toward sinful humanity in Jesus Christ. **Peace** is the blessing of reconciliation and wholeness that results from God’s gracious saving work. Paul ascribes the source of these magnificent blessings to **God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**. Sharing a common preposition in Greek (*apo*), God the Father and the Son are bound closely together in Paul’s thought. God the Father and Christ the risen Lord are “entirely at one” in bestowing the gift of salvation (Bruce 1983, 4).