

**MISSIONAL HERMENEUTICS:
AN ANALYSIS AND APPLICATION OF CHRIS WRIGHT'S THEORY**

By

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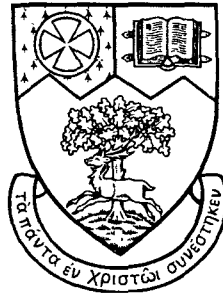
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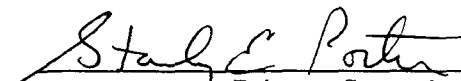
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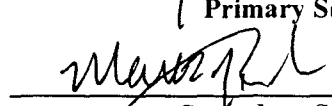
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ABSTRACT

Missional Hermeneutics: An analysis and application of Chris Wright's theory.

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Chris Wright has offered to us in the *Mission of God: Unlocking the Grand Narrative of the Bible*, a way to read the canonical text in a faithful manner. This faithful reading, as Wright calls it, is accomplished as we read the Bible with Christology and Missiology in the foreground. Wright distinguishes what he is suggesting by indicating that such a reading is the biblical expectation expressed in Luke 24:44–47 and not something that we bring to the text from some external location. Wright would suggest further that Luke 24 alerts us to the Mission of God, which is, according to Wright, to redeem and restore his creation for his glory. The development of this Mission is the primary story line or Grand Narrative which individual biblical stories nuance including the story of Jesus. This type of reading is what is meant by a missional focus. The intent of this thesis is to offer a critical examination of Wright's work and apply his model to a biblical text, in this case Philippians 1:12–2:18. By doing this it can be demonstrated that Wright is offering a corrective to biblical studies to be practised in conjunction with established hermeneutical efforts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS/DEDICATION

I wish to acknowledge the wonderful contribution to biblical studies and in particular to missional hermeneutics by Christopher Wright. His accessibility to me through this project in email form and in person has been a delight.

I would also acknowledge the incredible patience of my wife, family, and church as they have encouraged me, given me space, and given me the forum to test my thoughts. I include among this rabble, Fiona, Rebecca, Bethany, Graham and along with them Lew and Marguerite.

Finally, I acknowledge my first and second reader who several years ago promised to push me and have kept their promise.

This project, like most of my efforts, is dedicated to the One who has called me by name and to the friends and co-workers who have given their lives to make Him known among the nations. You are sorely missed.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 1 MISSIONAL HERMENEUTICS.....	6
Defining Missional Hermeneutics	6
Hermeneutics:	6
Missional: Some History	10
Missional: Today.....	14
Chris Wright On Missional Hermeneutics	17
A Hermeneutical Starting Point: Luke 24:44–47	18
Some Initial Push Back.....	20
A Hermeneutical Starting Point: A Closer Look.....	21
The Scope of the Missional Material.....	25
Chris Wright on Methodology	27
Reading the Bible as Authoritative.....	28
Reading the Bible Theologically	38
Reading the Bible Canonically	46
Using a Hermeneutical Framework or a Map	53
Conclusions Regarding Wright’s Missional Hermeneutic	60
CHAPTER 2 CHRIS WRIGHT’S MISSIONAL HERMENEUTIC IN A READING OF PHILIPPIANS	63
Introduction to Philippians.....	63
Unity	64
Occasion	66
COMMENTARY PHILIPPIANS 1:12–2:18	71
Syntactical Concerns	72
Philippians 1:12–30 Paul’s Circumstances and Perspective.....	77
Philippians 2:1–18 Walking in a Manner Worthy of the Gospel: The Example of Christ	103
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	137

INTRODUCTION

In November of 2008, both the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature hosted, among other groups, the Gospel and Our Culture Network (GOCN). This was the seventh such annual meeting trying to explore the ways in which “a missional vision leads us to new patterns of engagement with the biblical text.”¹ This most recent session was appropriately called, “Toward a Missional Hermeneutic.”

Unique to this last meeting was a paper, and responses to it, by George Hunsberger of Western Theological Seminary. In this paper, “Proposals for a Missional Hermeneutic: Mapping the Conversation,” Hunsberger clearly articulates the four dominant streams of thought regarding missional hermeneutics given over the past six years at such gatherings. Chris Wright has had a dominant influence on one of these streams and his work is examined in this thesis. It is sufficient to note at this point that within the stream associated with Wright is the claim that “the framework for biblical interpretation is the story it (that is the Bible) tells of the mission of God and the formation of a community sent to participate in it.”² Chris Wright, the Langham Partnership’s International Director, is the main proponent of this particular stream and enjoys the company of such scholars as Grant LeMarquand and Michael Goheen. Both of these scholars nuance Wright’s approach in a slightly different manner yet both acknowledge that they take their lead from Wright.³ As a network of scholars, the GOCN offers these four streams, described by Hunsberger, as complementary expressions of a missional hermeneutic. The published works of this network and the ongoing discussions it inspires are becoming more prolific

¹ Hunsberger, “Mapping the Conversation.” no pages.

² Hunsberger, “Mapping the Conversation.” no pages.

³ Hunsberger, “Mapping the Conversation.” no pages.

and increasingly more fruitful in terms of describing and implementing a missional hermeneutic.

As mentioned above, Chris Wright is an advocate for such a missional reading of the canon. Wright's most recent work on this topic, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Grand Narrative of the Bible*, is his most comprehensive expression of a missional hermeneutic. However, his chapter in *Out of Egypt*, and his book, *Old Testament Ethics and the People of God*, along with his current project on Jeremiah, a commentary, betray his commitment to a missional reading. His literature is quickly becoming part of the curriculum in Bible colleges and seminaries and Wright is often on the list of guest speakers when the term *missional* is found in the by-line. It would appear that missional hermeneutics is finding its way into the mainstream and as such is inviting some reaction. It is my intent to provide such a reaction here. This thesis will present missional hermeneutics in general but with a specific focus on the work of Chris Wright. While the adequacy of any hermeneutic can only be determined after testing it on a variety of canonical texts, such an undertaking, as valuable as it would be, is beyond the space afforded in this exercise. It is anticipated that an examination of Phil 1:12–2:18 will provide, in at least an initial way, an opportunity to explore the missional hermeneutic called for by the GOCN and specifically Chris Wright.

METHODOLOGY

It is appropriate at this point to indicate how this project will proceed. Given that Wright's work has hermeneutical implications it is important to place Wright within the spectrum of scholarship that exists within hermeneutics. In general the discipline often follows an author centered approach, such as the historical-grammatical approach, in

which meaning is believed to be in the text and must be extracted from it. Another approach is a reader centered approach in which meaning is tied to the readers themselves and may have little to do with its original meaning. The question for us is where Wright fits in this spectrum and in what way mission influences his efforts? To answer this we will examine some of the work mentioned above by Chris Wright in discussion with other scholarship that both support and object to his assumptions. By doing this we can establish what Wright is offering to the contemporary hermeneutical conversation. Is Wright, for example, offering something completely new or is he suggesting a corrective to what might be considered established practices. It will become apparent that Wright is offering a hermeneutical practice to be used in tandem with other hermeneutical principles. It is therefore necessary to distinguish between those hermeneutical practices Wright borrows and the corrective he is offering to hermeneutics in general. This will occupy the first half of this thesis and will support the conclusion that while Wright is not providing an entirely new hermeneutic, or suggesting that missional hermeneutics is the only one, he is offering a corrective. Wright offers this corrective to what might typically be considered the classic conservative approach to biblical interpretation. This corrective encourages a movement beyond the descriptive task, often associated with the historical-grammatical, or critical method, and onto the missional task to which the text itself instructs.

While the adequacy of any hermeneutic can only be determined after testing it on a variety of canonical texts, such an undertaking, as valuable as it would be, is beyond the space afforded in this exercise. It is anticipated that an examination of Phil 1:12–2:18 will provide, in at least an initial way, an opportunity to evaluate the missional hermeneutic

offered by Chris Wright. It could be argued that this text is clearly missional in nature and therefore a missional hermeneutic might be redundant. However, if a missional hermeneutic did not work in this context then the value of the hermeneutic would be severely jeopardized. In addition, given the missional nature of Philippians, we will be able to avoid lengthy contextual arguments and devote more space to the exegesis.

Given the space restrictions of this project, providing both a detailed exegesis and a reading that attends to all of Wright's hermeneutical concerns is very difficult. In light of this, I have chosen to do a detailed exegesis of the text but only include such material when it is necessary for the development of the missional reading. By exegesis, I refer to a historical-grammatical examination of the text in order to follow Wright's own approach.⁴ This hyphenated approach simply means that we will attend to the historical information available to us regarding the church at Philippi and the Apostle Paul as the author of the Philippian letter. This information can be found in the larger biblical corpus and will further enhance the missional aspects of the text. The second aspect is the grammatical one and attends to vocabulary and clause structure to access meaning. We will define missional hermeneutics as that part of the interpretive event that attends to the missional influences and expectations within the biblical text but as much as possible happens in tandem with the historical-grammatical work which makes up the task of exegesis. I intend to focus heavily on these missional aspects in keeping with Wright's hermeneutical concern that the text speaks with authority today.⁵ This will demonstrate both the familiar aspects of Wright's hermeneutical approach, such as the historical-grammatical work, and the corrective missional reading he is suggesting. In the end a

⁴ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 39.

⁵ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 61.

missional hermeneutic will assist us in maintaining the hermeneutical circle in which Scripture informs our understanding of Scripture. It will also push the efforts of biblical studies beyond the descriptive task and on to cultural engagement with the gospel. Finally it will orient us to the Scripture as a unique people with a unique calling who participate in the mission of God.

CHAPTER 1

MISSIONAL HERMENEUTICS

Perhaps the place to start in this project is with two foundational questions. The first is related to how missional hermeneutics is defined and, in this case, specifically by Chris Wright. The second and weightier is, why a missional hermeneutic? There are, of course, several answers to this second question. The first to which I will attend is the biblical expectation that we should read the Bible with an eye toward proclaiming the gospel to the nations: mission. Wright claims that this is appropriate because the text itself offers such a challenge to those who dare orient their lives around it. However, to avoid travelling too far down this path at this time, attention is given to the first question, what is meant by missional hermeneutics.

DEFINING MISSIONAL HERMENEUTICS

Hermeneutics:

A discussion regarding hermeneutics on its own could occupy a significant amount of space. However, generally speaking, in this context, hermeneutics is understood as the science and art of biblical interpretation. Henry Virkler has called it a science due in part to its orderly nature and the rules that govern it and an art because communication, written or otherwise, is flexible and fluid thereby resisting comprehensive schemes that try to control it.⁶ To further refine this, when we approach

⁶ Virkler, *Hermeneutics*, 16.

the biblical text we assume that there is an interpretive event taking place. Hermeneutics seeks to understand what is happening in that interpretive event.⁷

In the past two hundred years, a great deal of discussion and debate has taken place among scholars regarding hermeneutics. There are two streams of thought that come into play and each one, taken to various degrees, bring something helpful, and introduce certain complexities. The first stream begins with Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher (1768–1834) and Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911), who helped revive the work of Schleiermacher. The second could be identified with Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) who was building on Martin Heidegger’s (1889–1976) hermeneutical thinking.⁸ Simply put, Schleiermacher and Dilthey worked from an ideal “of the autonomous subject who successfully extricates himself from the immediate entanglements of history and the prejudices that come with that entanglement”⁹ as they work with a historical text. Schleiermacher believed that through the appropriation of tools and methodology one could objectively discover authorial intent. Gadamer, however asked, was it possible for readers to leave their own context by adopting such a posture. His answer was no.¹⁰ Today these streams are represented by those that understand the complexity of discovering authorial intent and those who reject the concept all together. Virkler suggests of the latter:

the author of the text is inaccessible to the reader; therefore hermeneutics should not, and actually cannot, attempt to arrive at the author’s intended meaning. What is available to the readers is the text.¹¹

Vanhoozer suggests that this has been intensified by postmodern thought to the point that

⁷ Marshall, *Beyond the Bible*, 12.

⁸ See Palmer, *Hermeneutics*, 33–45 for a brief trajectory of these two streams.

⁹ Linge, “Introduction,” xiv.

¹⁰ Linge, “Introduction,” xiv.

¹¹ Virkler, *Hermeneutics*, 63.

all attempts to interpret — to say ‘what it meant’ — are seen as wilful impositions, on the text and on other readers. Postmodern exegesis has become a thoroughly pluralistic and political affair where no one is able to say why one interpretative community’s reading should count more than another’s.¹²

In this current debate are those who hold to a traditional hermeneutic and the historical methods associated with it. They do so to the exclusion of any dialogue with postmodern thought. In the defence of an author-centred meaning to the text, Virkler cites the work of Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*,¹³ and Vanhoozer’s, *Is There a Meaning in this Text?*¹⁴ While these two might not be as removed from the text, as Schleiermacher would like, they are representative of that stream. There is a stunning example of this diversity in the work edited by Haynes and McKenzie entitled *To Each Its Own Meaning*.¹⁵ This work is divided into three sections. First, “The Traditional Methods of Biblical Criticism,” demonstrates the historical approaches most likely to be associated with the traditions following Schleiermacher and with a primary focus on discovering what a text meant. Second, “Expanding the Tradition,” explores methods such as social scientific, canonical, and rhetorical criticism. It is an expansion of the traditional method in that these efforts are newer, yet the focus remains on what the text meant. The third section, “Overturning the Tradition,” is where methods such as structural, narrative, reader-response, poststructuralist, feminist and socioeconomic criticisms, are treated. In this section, objective truth, consistent with postmodernist thought, is suspect and authorial intent is not part of the discussion. Care should be taken not to attach anything pejorative to the various works here. In fact, across the spectrum of analysis offered, there are rich insights

¹² Vanhoozer, “Exegesis and Hermeneutics,” 55.

¹³ Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 1–6, 44–48, 224–30.

¹⁴ See also, Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture & Hermeneutics*.

¹⁵ McKenzie and Haynes. *To Each its Own Meaning*.

into a variety of biblical texts. While it might sound like I offer a critical evaluation of the section, “Overturning the Tradition,” this is not the case. The subsection in the chapter on structuralism attends to Luke 24 and provides good insights into the text and its meaning. I only offer this as an example of the continuation of those streams mentioned earlier and their various manifestations in biblical studies. The point of this is to recognize that within the field of hermeneutics there is great diversity.¹⁶

Such diversity is also found among those working toward a missional hermeneutic. It is necessary therefore to place Chris Wright within this larger spectrum in order to understand what he means by hermeneutics. Wright lands firmly in the stream originating with Schleiermacher and as such when the term hermeneutics is used it is referencing those tools brought to bear on a text that allow us to discover what a text meant in terms of its grammar, syntactical relations and contextual concerns. Wright is also concerned with authorial intent and gives sufficient room for the text to have meaning beyond what authors may have understood themselves. This becomes important to Wright given Peter’s comments on the nature of prophecy (2 Pet 1:20–21) as an example. Wright is keenly aware of these complexities and his own approach fits the description offered by D. A. Carson of those who practise a newer hermeneutic or, in keeping with the book, *To Each its Own Meaning*, an expanded traditional approach.

Theoretically, the new hermeneutic might teach an interpreter to be a little more aware of his or her cultural location, and thus engender humility and increased interpretive sensitivity.¹⁷

¹⁶ The basic outline of this book is found in its table of contents and it should be noted that various approaches are best understood in terms of the questions they ask of the text.

¹⁷ Carson, *The Gagging of God*, 82. In his footnote, Carson notes that “in all fairness, however, the more reflective Christian thinkers have long recognized these dangers, even unaided by postmodernism: e.g., Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 5:395–08.

This cultural location mentioned by Carson is an awareness of those things, as Gadamer suggests, that we bring to the text. Within the GOCN there is indeed discussion on how those things that we as scholars bring to the text, referred to as social location,¹⁸ affects our reading of the text. In addition, later in the project there is some discussion regarding the traditional approach to biblical interpretation. Certainly, the question is being asked today if a purely historical-critical method is adequate for our efforts with the biblical text. It is sufficient at this point, however, to place Wright in the more historical-critical camp with certain sympathies for an expanded approach.

Missional: Some History

A relatively easy way to provide a definition for the word *missional* would be to cite something from *The Mission of God* by Chris Wright. Certainly, at some point, that very thing will have to be provided. However, to assume that a one-sentence definition could embrace the depth of meaning implied by the term missional is a fallacy. It is therefore necessary to frame the terminology within the larger discussion of mission that has consumed many conferences since the early 1950's. The journey back to that time is very quick. Today, perhaps one of the most significant groups discussing this term is the GOCN, now a subset of the Society of Biblical Literature. Without discussing the nuances within this group, it is sufficient to focus our attention on a common theological construct which this group, and others who in a serious discussion of mission, pay homage. The term *Missio Dei*, *Mission of God*, is at the heart of these discussions. For

¹⁸ Barram, "Social Location," 42-58.

some it might be a theological premise from which a discussion on the justification for missions will find its starting place. For others, like Chris Wright, it is far more.

Much of the scholarship that is concerned with the Mission of God points as far back as Augustine and his work on the Trinity,¹⁹ then, quickly turns its attention to the World Missions Conference held in Willingen Germany in 1952. The conference concluded with the following sentiment:

The Missionary movement of which we are a part has its source in the Triune God Himself. Out of the depths of His love for us, the Father has sent forth His own beloved Son to reconcile all things to Himself, that we and all men might, through the Spirit, be made one in Him with the Father in that perfect love which is the very nature of God.... We who have been chosen in Christ, reconciled to God through Him, made members of His Body, sharers in His Spirit, and heirs through hope of His Kingdom, are by these very facts committed to full participation in His redeeming mission. There is no participation in Christ without participation in His mission to the world. That by which the Church receives His existence is that by which it is also given its world-mission, As the Father hath sent Me, even so I send you.²⁰

Though the term *Missio Dei* or Mission of God was not used in this conference, it occurred in a subsequent report by Karl Hartenstein in which he says:

The sending of the Son to reconcile the universe through the power of the Spirit is the foundation and purpose of mission. The *missio ecclesiae* comes from the *missio Dei* alone. Thus, mission is placed within the broadest imaginable framework of salvation history and God's plan for salvation.²¹

Others report on the statement by Hartenstein with a slightly different nuance:

Mission is not just the conversion of the individual, nor just obedience to the Word of the Lord, nor just the obligation to gather the church. It is the taking part in the sending of the Son, the *Missio Dei*, with the holistic aim of establishing Christ's rule over all redeemed creation.²²

¹⁹ See Van Gelder, *Missional Church*, for a discussion on the Augustinian development of the Trinity.

²⁰ As cited by Richebacher, "Missio Dei," 589, from the official International Missions Committee minutes (Appendix A. p. 54).

²¹ Richebacher, "Missio Dei," 589.

²² Engelsviken, "Missio Dei," 482.

Reactions to Willingen were diverse but generally moved in two directions. Both begin with these statements made at the conclusion of the conference. The first follows closely to Hartenstein. Hartenstein does not negate conversion or obedience to the Word but rather broadens the meaning of mission, something most favourable in the modern scene. Richebacher observes that Hartenstein's work was equal to the sentiment of the conference. Whether or not Hartenstein had in his mind the work of Augustine is hard to tell. However, he is generally labelled as the one who, since Willingen, has coined the phrase *Missio Dei*.²³

The other stream that emerged did so a little later in the 1960's. J. C. Hoekendijk became representative of the notion that the church was but one among many forms of God's mission.²⁴ He suggested, "when one desires to speak about God's dealings with the world, the church can be mentioned only in passing and without strong emphasis."²⁵ For Hoekendijk the church is only the church to the extent that it lets itself be used as part of God's dealings with the world. Hoekendijk held that the *Missio Dei* is the effort to establish shalom or *peace*. Any endeavour, which brings this about, regardless of a salvific goal or for that matter even in the absence of Christian thought, serves the mission of God. He concludes, "church-centric missionary thinking is bound to go astray, because it revolves around an illegitimate centre"²⁶ namely the church. This parting of the

²³ The conclusion is supported by Gruder, Wright, Englesviken, Richebacher, Hunsberger, and a host of others.

²⁴ Richebacher, "Missio Dei," 591. See also Englesviken, "Missio Dei," 487–88.

²⁵ Richebacher, "Missio Dei," 591.

²⁶ Englesviken, "Missio Die," 488.

ways in defining the mission of God comes because of the way in which each stream of thought understands the Kingdom of God.²⁷

If the description of the Kingdom of God is aligned with Willingen it becomes the expression of God's work in salvation history and the church's participation in that as the institution charged with fulfilling that mission. However, aligned with the latter group, the Kingdom of God refers to the rule of God in human history. "The function of mission has been changed from the particular saving activity of God in Christ Jesus to a principle of goal oriented progress."²⁸ The former sees the Mission of God as salvific whereas the latter sees the Mission of God as the secular advancement of humanity due to God's rule over it. These two polarized views mark the landscape to this day. However, within the work of Willingen I and Willingen II there is room for explicit evangelism and social action. Chris Wright in his presentation at the 2009 National Pastors' conference in San Diego spoke about the love of God being expressed in mission, a mission concerned with both redemption and social action.

Within the GOCN, the participants clearly identify with the original thrust of Willingen. At the same time they do not restrict the church's mission to the classical idea of cross cultural evangelism or local evangelism, though this would be the ends to which other efforts serve. The missiologist, Lesslie Newbigin (1909–1998), is often quoted among the scholars of this network. A particular favourite concept is Newbigin's assertion that the church is the hermeneutic of the gospel for the world.²⁹ In this sense, the church lives its life in the public eye as it participates in the mission of God through

²⁷ Engelsviken, "Missio Dei," 483.

²⁸ Richebacher, "Missio Dei," 593.

²⁹ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 222. This is actually the title of Chapter 18 in the book.

the work of justice and compassion and yet distinctly offers a call of faith and repentance.

It is into this conversation that Wright suggests:

the Bible presents to us a portrait of God that is unquestionably purposeful. The God who walks the paths of history through the pages of the Bible pins a mission statement to every signpost on the way. A missional hermeneutic of the Bible sets out to explore that divine mission and all that lies behind it and flows from it in relation to God himself, God's people, and God's world.³⁰

Missional: Today

We turn our attention now to the more contemporary discussion of the term missional and its relation to the Mission of God. The landscape of the Western church adds a complexity to a definition. Allan Hirsch, for example, alleges that the term missional has unfortunately become synonymous with emergent and incarnational, terms attached to a modern expression of ecclesiology, causing some to abandon the term all together.³¹ One web blog solicited input from many sources hoping to define the term *missional church*. In the end, they had well over 50 suggestions distilling down to almost as many definitions.³² There is however, remarkably, even among the opinions on Maynard's blog, a common connection back to the narrative of God's own mission in the world throughout history. Hirsch offers the following:

Missional church is a community of God's people that defines itself, and organizes its life around its real purpose of being an agent of God's mission to the world. In other words, the church's true and authentic organizing principle is mission.³³

In this case, Hirsch uses missional in an adjectival sense to mission, as Wright does, acknowledging that mission is the Mission of God not some local church's budget line.

³⁰ Wright, "Mission as a Matrix," 104–105.

³¹ Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, See his introduction.

³² See the blog hosted by Maynard. <http://www.subversiveinfluence.com/2008/06/50-ways-to-define-missional-i/>

³³ Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 82.

The GOCN provides a synthesis of its contributors to the question of how we define missional hermeneutics,³⁴ including input from Wright. For Wright and the GOCN, mission is used in the broader sense of the word with regard to a long term goal or objective being intentionally pursued; in this case by God Himself and, at His invitation, the people of God. In this regard, Wright's terminology is consistent with other scholars as they discuss the relationship between mission, specifically the Mission of God, and the expressions of that mission, whether by God Himself or the people of God, to which the term missional is applied.

Missional is, according to Wright, something that has the "qualities, attributes, or dynamics of mission."³⁵ A missional reading of Exodus for example would explore its "dynamic significance in God's mission for Israel and the world and its relevance for Christian mission today."³⁶ This does not suggest that a missional hermeneutic is something done after true exegesis has been completed, says Wright, but rather a missional hermeneutic recognizes that

a text often has its origins in some issue, need, controversy or threat, which the people of God needed to address in the context of their mission. The text itself is a product of mission.³⁷

Since hermeneutics is concerned with contextual issues, the mission of God becomes significant at the exegetical level for those employing a missional hermeneutic. "The meaning of a word, a text, a *thing* or an event, is partly a function of its place in a

³⁴ A synthesis from the four dominant streams regarding missional hermeneutics expressed at SBL over the past 8 years. Contributors to the discussion are Chris Wright, Colin Yuckman, James Miller, Jim Brownson, Michael Barram, Grant LeMarquand, Mike Goheen, Darrell Guder and Ross Wagner. See Hunsberger, "Mapping the Conversation," no pages. Online resource.

³⁵ Wright, "Mission as a Matrix," 106.

³⁶ Wright, "Mission as a Matrix," 106.

³⁷ Wright, "Mission as a Matrix," 121.

context.”³⁸ In the same fashion, a biblical text, or the interpretation of it, will be best understood when consideration is given to a text’s *place* in the mission of God.

“Knowledge of the historical circumstances surrounding the composition of a book, *including its missional influences*, is crucial to a proper understanding of its meaning.”³⁹

Therefore, missional hermeneutics is concerned with what a text meant, its place in the mission of God being part of that, and what a text means, how it speaks to the church today as it too participates in the mission of God. Joel Green and Max Turner would refer to this as the two horizons of biblical interpretation.⁴⁰ As a reader, you look to one horizon to understand what a text meant. Such a view might even be obscured in some manner but none the less, you gaze. The other horizon for the reader is what the text means in his or her own local context, again possibly obscured in some fashion.

Wright also uses the terms missiology and missiological when referencing the theological, historical, contemporary and practical reflections inherent in the research of mission.⁴¹ Wright’s terminology can be understood in the following way: mission is praxis, missional is adjectival, and missiology is science.⁴²

To conclude this discussion on the definition of *missional hermeneutics* we can say that Wright is concerned with the two elements of methodology and theology. Methodology is concerned with those literary tools and resources used to examine and explicate the contextual issues of a text and its formation as a text in relation to the mission of God. The theological interpretation of those events

³⁸ Erickson, *A Beginner’s Guide to New Testament Exegesis*, 95.

³⁹ Virkler, *Hermeneutics*, 17. Italics mine.

⁴⁰ Green, Turner, *Between Two Horizons*, 3.

⁴¹ Wright, “Mission as a Matrix,” 106.

⁴² Beeby, “Missional Approach,” 278. Wright acknowledges his dependence on Dan Beeby’s work *Missional Approach* in which these terms are used.

and the texts they inspire is also methodology but here the focus is on helping the church understand its unique identity as the people of God and equipping the church to fulfill its role in the mission of God.⁴³ A missional hermeneutic is that part of the interpretive event that attends to the missional influences and expectations within the biblical text.

CHRIS WRIGHT ON MISSIONAL HERMENEUTICS

Two observations are made at this point with regard to Wright's work and these offer us an entrance point to Wright's defence of this hermeneutic. The first is that Wright's work is a biblical theology. Given the complexities of this movement, some might question if there is any warrant in the approach. Scholars such as Vanhoozer argue that a theological reading of the text is in fact essential and he represents a growing collection of scholars revisiting biblical theology. The second, which is closely related, is the objection to conceptualizing the Bible in terms of a single story. As stated, Wright sees the Mission of God as the over-arching story to the Bible or more commonly called a Grand Narrative. This grand narrative is what holds the narratives of the Bible together as one story, for Wright, and in turn provides a significant part of the contextual argument in exegesis. Postmodernists and those who reject foundational principles, such as those inherent in a grand narrative, struggle with such claims.

In light of these things, Wright has been asked if a missional reading is legitimate. To answer this question Wright articulates his own hermeneutical starting point. It is prudent to develop Wright's thought as he does himself in order to demonstrate the impetus for his premise that mission is the unifying theme in the Bible's grand narrative.

⁴³ This was presented to Wright on the 3rd of Sep 2009 for his reaction to which he responded most favourably.

A Hermeneutical Starting Point: Luke 24:44–47

The hermeneutical starting point for Chris Wright⁴⁴ is found in Luke 24. There, two travelers to Emmaus, apparently disciples, are met by Jesus along the road. The identity of Jesus is hidden from them and he begins to explain to them “the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures, beginning with Moses and with all the prophets” (v. 27). “It would appear that Luke intends us to understand the centrality of his (that is Jesus’) suffering and resurrection for hermeneutics.”⁴⁵ This Christocentric reading is often the conclusion that biblical theologies draw from this text; however, it unnecessarily restricts the Old Testament hermeneutical lesson to the passion of Christ.

Luke’s expectation that we should read the Old Testament in light of the person of Jesus Christ is matched by his concern that we read the Old Testament in light of mission. Also in chapter 24, Luke records a subsequent meeting between Jesus and his disciples where Jesus reiterates the above hermeneutical lesson with the added element of mission.

⁴⁴Now He said to them, “These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” ⁴⁵Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, ⁴⁶and He said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, ⁴⁷and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. (Luke 24:44–47, NASB95)

If it is understood that the words of Jesus regarding his death and resurrection clearly establish a hermeneutical construct for reading the Old Testament, it also follows that the second portion of the text, the proclamation of repentance and forgiveness in the

⁴⁴ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 29. “Mission as a Matrix,” 106–09. See also Goerner, *Thus it is Written*. In fact, Luke 24 is a starting place for several Biblical Theologies especially those that assume unity between Old and New Testaments with a Christological focus.

⁴⁵ Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible*, 54.

name of Jesus to the nations, would equally impact our reading of that same document.

In his commentary on Luke, Marshall agrees with Wright suggesting that:

a new element enters. If the accent so far has been on what the Scriptures prophesied concerning the Messiah, now there is a switch to the prophecy of the preaching of the gospel to all nations, starting from Jerusalem. The disciples are implicitly called to undertake this task. For they have seen the ministry of Jesus and can act as witnesses.⁴⁶

For Wright this text places the person of Jesus, and the mission he participates in, front and center to God's plans and purposes recorded in the Old Testament, inaugurated in the ministry of Christ and expressed in the life of the church.

The OpenText.org project⁴⁷ rightly portrays a single clause in 24:46–47 with a single subject explained by three embedded clauses each with an infinitive that explicates γέγραπται, *what has been written*, in the Old Testament and in turn what must be fulfilled. The infinitives are: παθεῖν *to suffer*, ἀναστῆναι *to rise up*, and κηρυχθῆναι *to proclaim*. The last of the infinitives, *to proclaim*, is then further developed with the content of the proclamation, namely: repentance and forgiveness, and to whom it is proclaimed: the nations, beginning in Jerusalem. Wright concludes that the “whole of the Scripture finds its focus and fulfillment both in the life and death and resurrection of Israel's Messiah, and in the mission to all nations, which flows out from that event.”⁴⁸

Wright goes on to suggest that Christian scholarship has been very successful in reading the Old Testament and the New Testament with a Christological focus in the sense of “finding in the Bible a whole messianic theology and eschatology which we see as fulfilled in Jesus.”⁴⁹ However, he also suggests that efforts to read the canonical text

⁴⁶ Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 903.

⁴⁷ Porter, et al. *OpenText.org*, Luke 24:46–47.

⁴⁸ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 30.

⁴⁹ Wright, “Mission as a Matrix,” 108.

missiologically have been “inadequate.”⁵⁰ We have failed, he says, “to go further because we have not grasped the Missional significance of the Messiah.”⁵¹ Wright is not asserting that a missional hermeneutic is *the hermeneutic* we bring to the scripture but rather *a hermeneutic* that has not been part of mainstream biblical studies. Wright might well be correct in his conclusions, but it is encouraging to see the work of the Gospel and our Culture Network come under the umbrella of the Society of Biblical Literature and to see the line-up of scholars giving serious thought to a missional reading of the canon, as young as such an effort is.

Some Initial Push Back

I would have to conclude that Wright is correct in his reading of Luke 24. The emphasis on fulfillment and continuity seems evident as well as a strong call for a theological reading of the Old Testament that honours both the person of Christ and mission of which he, and the church by extension, are a part.

However, a few questions arise early on in response to Wright’s work which we address at this time. The first concerns the way Wright is reading Luke: is he correct, does Luke practise such a dual reading? Is there evidence of this beyond the context of Luke 24? The concern here is that a single text serves as the lynch pin to his premise that the Bible is all about the mission of God. Also, and closely related, is that Wright’s own conclusion is that a dual reading of the Old Testament based on Luke is warranted, yet he pushes mission as the dominant framework for understanding the Bible rather than maintain equality between the two.

⁵⁰ Wright, “Mission as a Matrix,” 108.

⁵¹ Wright, “Mission as a Matrix,” 108.

Second, at the risk of making every Old Testament verse Messianic and Missional, to what degree do we read Christ and Mission into the Old Testament Text? What criterion is used to identify those texts? This second question is important because of the degree to which biblical studies are influenced by the traditional historical-critical/grammatical methods that emerged out of the Reformation era and the apparent conflict that such a dual reading will create given the importance of authorial intent inherent in these traditional methods.

Third, there is literally a plethora of special interest groups, liberationist, feminist, agrarian, each trying to elevate their own reading of the text to a place of acceptance and this begs the question: what is Wright trying to accomplish with a missional hermeneutic and what would suggest that his approach provides us with a way forward?

A Hermeneutical Starting Point: A Closer Look

I have expressed the concern that Wright bases his principle of a grand narrative on a single text. Further discussion on Luke and Acts provides a broader foundation for this assertion, though it is not contained in Wright's work. It is, however, offered here to answer, at least in part, the objection that Wright is merely proof texting. To do this we turn our attention to the current discussions regarding Luke's use of the Old Testament in the New Testament.

Segments of scholarship have observed that Luke employed the Old Testament in an act of apologetics on behalf of the person and work of Jesus. While some reject such a reading of Luke, it appears to have, none the less, garnered significant support as an

approach to Luke.⁵² Whether such an apologetic approach is pre-Lukan, as some would object, or not, it appears that Luke employed it for his redactional purposes. Luke's interest in using the Old Testament in this apologetic fashion is revealed early in both texts attributed to him. From the opening chapters of Luke, the Old Testament is appealed to by Luke as a means of establishing the identity of Jesus as the Messianic figure (1:26–38) and the catalyst to a universal mission He came to inaugurate, participate in, and commission others to carry out (2:30–32).

Similarly, in Acts the opening narratives find Peter confronting the crowds with the identity of Jesus and His mission. Luke employs texts from Joel and the Psalms to accomplish this and, if Acts 2:41 is any indication, it can be said: very effectively.⁵³ Köstenberger, in his response to Porter, adds that Luke opens with a scriptural appeal to identify Jesus and to place the proclamation of the gospel to the nations at center stage.⁵⁴ Luke keeps the pressure on, as it were, in Acts. He presents the apostles in 1:16 interpreting the events of Christ's arrest as a fulfillment of scripture. The events of Pentecost mentioned above are also a fulfillment. In Acts 8 Philip teaches the Ethiopian about Jesus beginning with Isaiah. Luke records Paul's visits to the synagogues and that

according to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ" (Acts 17:2–3, NASB95).

⁵² Porter draws this conclusion after providing a veritable who's who in this discussion; see Porter, *Hearing the Old Testament in the New Testament*, 105–06.

⁵³ For further discussion on Lukan usage of the Old Testament see Porter, "Scripture Justifies Mission," 104–26.

⁵⁴ Köstenberger, "Hearing the Old Testament in the New," 272–73.

This also appears to have been the habit of Apollos who also demonstrated in an apologetic fashion that Jesus was the Christ and did so using the Old Testament (Acts 18:28).

The second element Wright claims to be Lukan is the concern with the fulfillment of mission to the nations. Even a tertiary reading of Acts will reveal the large number of Gentiles associated with the synagogues that come to faith and the explicit claim by Barnabas and Paul that the Gospel would be preached specifically to the Gentiles. At the Jerusalem council, an event designed to deal with Gentile conversions (Acts 15), Peter indicates that this proclamation to the Gentiles is in keeping with God's plans. As Paul relates his own calling in ministry it includes specific instruction from the Lord to "go to the Gentiles" (Acts 22:21). Perhaps most significant is Luke's report of Paul's trial before Agrippa in which Paul states:

So, having obtained help from God, I stand to this day testifying both to small and great, stating nothing but what the Prophets and Moses said was going to take place; that the Christ was to suffer, and that by reason of His resurrection from the dead He would be the first to proclaim light both to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles. (Acts 26:22–23)

It appears that Luke maintains a fulfillment motif, which he leverages to demonstrate continuity between God's mission in the Old Testament and in the person of Christ and the mission He inaugurates. The death and resurrection of Christ along with the commissioning of the disciples and the good news to the gentiles is all part of the same story line, the same mission.

Kenneth Litwak, in *Echoes of Scripture in Luke–Acts*, does not agree with the

more popular fulfillment⁵⁵ approach but rather sees Luke's use of the Old Testament as a mechanism to "frame" the narratives of the gospel. Especially of note is his work on the birth narratives which generally do not fit a fulfillment scheme very well. However, as Litwak suggests,

These inter-textual echoes are used by Luke for framing in discourse. This discursive framing tells his audience to expect a narrative which shows continuity with the events and people of Israel's past.⁵⁶

Litwak sees Jesus being portrayed as a divinely commissioned individual just as Abraham, Gideon, or others were. As such, he is to be followed and in turn commissions others. These two approaches, a fulfillment motif and the discursive framing as Litwak suggests, are complementary. The first, a prophecy and fulfillment motif, tends to focus on Christology, that is, identifying who Jesus is in light of God's work amidst his creation, something essential to the proclamation of repentance and forgiveness *in Jesus' name*. The second focuses on the continuity between the work of God revealed in the Old Testament and what God is doing through Christ, placing Jesus and his mission front and center. This same dual motif can be demonstrated through Acts as well.

It appears that Luke sees the Old Testament texts as justification for both submission to Jesus as the Divine Christ and participation in the mission he initiates. This is how Porter argues in "Scripture Justifies Mission."⁵⁷ Better yet is that Luke sees Christ participating in the Mission inaugurated with the promise made to Adam and Eve (Gen 3:15) reframed with Abraham as the father of many nations and moving beyond Israel to

⁵⁵ Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 49, goes to some length to demonstrate a promise fulfillment motif in the birth narratives by appealing to the contents of the narratives themselves. The promise made to Zachariah is fulfilled at the birth of John as is the promise of the angel to Mary at the birth of Christ. While this structure exists it appears different from the larger fulfillment motif Luke uses when he appeals to Old Testament scriptures and points to their fulfillment in the person of Christ.

⁵⁶ Litwak, *Echoes of Scripture in Luke Acts*, 110.

⁵⁷ Porter, "Scripture Justifies Mission," 104–26

all the nations as both the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham (Gen 17) and the continuation of God's mission.

Wright refers to this larger ongoing mission in which Christ is a participant, though unique in his own right, as the mission of God. This mission of God is central to Wright's missional reading of the canonical text as that which binds the larger canonical narrative together into one cohesive story. This story builds toward Christ and is then propelled forward from Christ in anticipation of an eschatological hope. At the risk of introducing too much early on, it should be noted that Wright is not suggesting an interpretive grid on top of the text but rather, in a more organic way, is suggesting that mission is something that rises up out of the text and creates a framework from which the text can be understood. In turn, this emerging framework gives life to Wright's version of a grand narrative.

It appears that Wright correctly understands Luke to advocate reading the Old Testament in light of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and mission. Wright's argument is enhanced further through an examination of Acts as well. It appears that Luke does practise both a Christological and a Missiological Hermeneutic beyond the contextual lines of Luke 24. In turn, this gives Wright some impetus for adding a missional hermeneutic to his reading of the Old Testament.

The Scope of the Missional Material

We turn to the second question posed earlier: to what degree do we read Christ or mission into the Old Testament text? This can be addressed from the text in chapter 24 and Wright speaks to it himself. Wright would agree that there is no indication that Luke suggests every verse in the Old Testament is to be read Christologically or

Missiologically. To assume that it does seems to be the result of investing too much into the words πάντα τὰ γεγραμμένα, *all the things written* (Luke 24:44), which on its own might suggest everything. This tendency to over emphasize *all things* can be seen with Köstenberger's treatment of Luke.⁵⁸ However, περὶ ἐμοῦ, *about me* restricts *all things* to that which has been written about Jesus. Of course, the difficult part is then to determine which parts. Wright suggests that:

to speak of the Bible being 'all about' Christ does not (or should not) mean that we try to find Jesus of Nazareth in every verse by some feat of imagination. It means that the person and work of Jesus becomes the central hermeneutical key by which we, as Christians, articulate the overall significance of these texts in both testaments. The same is true of the missiological focus.⁵⁹

What Wright fails to do is offer some methodology for determining what constitutes a missional text or for that matter a Christological one. Wright would respond by asserting that the whole of Scripture bears witness to God's advancement of his mission and as such the whole of Scripture is missional. This is not to say that through some allegorical process every text is to have a missional turn but rather the whole of Scripture testifies to purposeful activity of God in fulfilling his mission. This is discussed in the following section with a bit more detail. We can say, however, that there seems to be evidence within the Lukan material that suggests reading the Bible through a Christological and a Missional framework is appropriate and that these dual elements serve as hermeneutical keys to understanding the Bible as a whole. However, room does not permit in this project to examine Wright's claim beyond Luke's writings though such an exercise would be of great value to his assertions.

⁵⁸ Köstenberger, "Hearing the Old Testament in the New Testament: A Response," 273. See also Goldsworthy, *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible*.

⁵⁹ Wright, "Mission as a Matrix," 108.

The final question raised earlier is in regards to Wright's methodology, and how that methodology sets his reading apart from the plethora of socially located readings available. We shall find that as we attend to this concern we can also give further insight into the concerns mentioned above.

CHRIS WRIGHT ON METHODOLOGY

The hermeneutical starting point discussed above serves as a rubric as Wright approaches the biblical text. Wright maintains that a faithful reading of the Bible will give place to the mission of God, which seems fair given what we have seen, though limited to Luke and Acts. That Wright wants us to read the Bible faithfully is not in question. The way in which this is accomplished or the methodology he employs now occupies our attention.

It was suggested earlier that two objections would be raised with regard to Wright's work. The first asks the appropriateness of a biblical theology and the second relates to his use of a Grand Narrative. Segments of scholarship might suggest that both of these practices read back into the text exactly the things that its proponents want to find. For example, is Wright's work merely a bricolage created from the fancies of a missiologist? The concern is valid especially in light of Wright's own high view of Scripture and the necessity of aligning oneself with it. However, an equally valid question would be, does Chris Wright's place as a missiologist alert him to missional elements in the text that others might not discern? Wright is certainly sensitive to other hermeneutical concerns but his place as a missiologist has added mission to the hermeneutical concerns we all face. Chris Wright, like other scholars, is concerned with

reading the biblical text faithfully in our own time. This may sound simplistic but it is not the only way scholarship approaches biblical texts.

Wright's work has three visible practices, or presuppositions. First, he places authority in the text and the events they represent. Secondly, he reads the text theologically and with a specific Christological and Missiological center. Thirdly, Wright reads the text canonically, that is, as it exists as a whole and unified document in its received form. Given the nature of these three practices, some overlap is expected.

Reading the Bible as Authoritative

We have stated that Chris Wright is not claiming that mission provides us with some sort of lens that we bring to the text but rather that the text itself provides a lens, or better, a framework that expects a missional reading. The difference, as slight as it sounds, is significant. If, for example, a missional reading is what the biblical text instructs us to do, such as that seen in Luke and Acts, then reading the bible with that missional hermeneutic is in fact investing the text with the authority to direct our reading, we are merely adhering to the expectation of the text. However, if a missional reading is imposed on the text from something external to the text, such as a political agenda, then the governance over biblical interpretation moves from the text toward some other "social location"⁶⁰ or the reader alone. This latter practice will be highly problematic for some, including Wright.

the validity of any framework for hermeneutics or for biblical theology must always be open to critique, and the one who offers it must be humble enough to recognize that ultimately it is the text that must govern the framework and not the other way around.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Barram, "Social Location." Barram uses this term to define any socio-political agenda brought to the biblical text but is not suggesting that such agendas are right or wrong; he is merely being descriptive.

⁶¹ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 68.

That Wright is bringing something to the text that influences his understanding of the text is not in question. The real question, however, is if bringing anything to the text is warranted. It is a question of authority. As we have mentioned, Gadamer would suggest that to come to the text empty handed is impossible. What then can legitimately be brought to the text and what governs that decision? Where is authority situated, in the text or with the reader? From Wright's perspective, the Bible itself governs this issue. Wright would argue that the biblical text itself expects to be read a certain way, including missionally. As a result, he would further argue that there is a biblical warrant for reading the text missionally, with an eye toward God's mission.

Wright is not alone in his concern to keep the authority rooted in the biblical text. Leaders in Israel such as Josiah appealed to the authority the nation understood to be in the text in order to bring about cultural renewal, albeit too late. Ezra appealed to the law in the same manner as he called the people to faithfulness as recorded in Nehemiah. Paul's letters are filled with appeals to the biblical text for ethics and doctrine. The church and its scholarship have struggled throughout history with the issue of where authority resides. Leading up to the council of Nicaea the fledgling church struggled with several issues. Christianity was morphing away from a sub-system of Judaism and establishing its own identity. As an example of this, consider Rome's response to the Jewish revolt of AD 135. At this time Rome crushed the revolt and dealt harshly with the Jewish community though they did not subject the Christians to the same strong arm.⁶² This demonstrates, at least to some degree, that even Rome was beginning to distinguish

⁶² Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, 160.

between Christian and Jewish groups. This was not the case earlier during the siege of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple in AD 70.

Anti-Semitism was becoming more common, including the questioning of *their* scriptures. The heretic, Marcion, rejected the Old Testament and the God it portrayed because of the apparent contrast between the Old Testament and the New Testament. Kelly claims that the “real battle in the second century centered on the position of the Old Testament”⁶³ and it was “Irenaeus who expressed that the two testaments were bestowed by one and the same God for the benefit of the human race.”⁶⁴ His work might even be called one of the first biblical theologies in his time or, dare we say, a grand narrative. He appealed to the use of the Old Testament by New Testament writers and Jesus himself, suggesting that those texts were invested with an authority.

The church’s missionary effort into the Greek culture was causing a shift in priorities away from Israel and toward a confrontation with Greek philosophies. This new missionary context created an environment where the establishment of creedal statements was a necessity in light of old and new heresies being adopted among believers. This era grappled with the formation of these creedal forms to ensure an Orthodox Christianity and it turned to the text because of the authority placed within it by the Christian community.⁶⁵

As one era struggled with the formation of the text, the next asked questions about how to interpret it because they too found authority in it and wanted to read it faithfully. Two distinct schools emerged during this period. The school at Antioch preferred the

⁶³ Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 129.

⁶⁴ Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 68.

⁶⁵ See James Sanders on the shape of the canon and its historical development in an introductory fashion. Sanders, *Canon and Community*.

historical approach to the text and Alexandria favoured an allegorical approach. It should be noted however that these schools did not just appear but rather rose up out of established traditions within Jewish scholarship. Midrash and Peshet, Jewish forms of biblical interpretation, often exercise the liberty of something other than a literal reading, which the school at Alexandria favoured. At the same time, the 13 Rules compiled by Rabbi Ishmael (90–135 CE) seem to be an amplification of the seven rules of Hillel, also Jewish rules of interpretation. A reading of these rules reveals an approach to scripture that seems much closer to the practices inherent in the historical approach favoured by the school at Antioch.

Over the next several centuries, the church and society as a whole went through significant socio-political changes and scholarship continued to practise much of the same thing. The Jewish scholar Rashi (1040–1105) practiced both the plain sense of the text and a derived meaning.

For Rashi these were two types of interpretation that synergistically faced one another, with a resulting interplay that helped maintain the ancient Eastern midrashic way of exegetical thinking amid the growing Western rationality of Rashi's world.⁶⁶

Among Christian scholars, St. Thomas Aquinas was seeking to answer the objection that “many different senses in one text produce confusion and deception and destroy all force of argument.”⁶⁷ His answer was that all understanding of the text must come from “*the literal*.”⁶⁸ However, lest Aquinas be characterized as a strict literalist, it

⁶⁶ Mead, *Biblical Theology*, 19.

⁶⁷ Mead, *Biblical Theology*, 19.

⁶⁸ Yarchin, *History of Biblical Interpretation*, 95.

should be added that Aquinas was reacting to Aristotle's view of language, in which one word has only one meaning. Aquinas did not agree with this.⁶⁹

The multiplicity of these senses does not produce equivocation or any other kind of multiplicity, seeing that these senses are not multiplied because one word signifies several things; but because things signified by the words can be themselves types of other things. Thus in Holy Scripture no confusion results, for all the senses are founded on one, the literal, from which alone any argument can be drawn.⁷⁰

While Aquinas practised a hermeneutic that was anchored to the literal meaning, he found no inconsistency in then considering the allegorical (typological), the moral (tropological), and the anagogical (eschatological), meanings within a text⁷¹ and attaching authority to them. Concern grew, however, over this allegorical approach and whether or not the proposed interpretation was truly biblical or just the fanciful insights of scholarship. If the latter, then how could one ever claim the reading to be authoritative? Prior to Luther, of course, the church claimed that authority as its right, something Luther would challenge. This too was in part due to his conviction that authority rested in the biblical text and not the pontiff. To this day a significant segment of scholarship that puts authority in the text alone is suspect of any reading other than the literal sense.

Stephen Fowl, however, points out that when we find in a single text truth about God, the church, mission, and its message, we have in fact found multiple meanings much the way Aquinas would approach the text.⁷² Fowl devotes most of his effort in "The Importance of a Multivoiced Literal Sense of the Scriptures" to a discovery of

⁶⁹ My conclusion here is highly influenced by Fowl, "The Importance of a Multivoiced Literal Sense of Scripture," and by Rich Lusk, "The Metaphor is the Message: Thomas Aquinas on Biblical Interpretation and Metaphor."

⁷⁰ Yarchin, *History of Biblical Interpretation*, 95.

⁷¹ The fourfold meaning goes at least as far back as the Monk Cassian of the fourth century. See Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*.

⁷² Fowl, "The Importance of a Multivoiced Literal Sense of Scripture," 46–47.

hermeneutical practises exercised by Aquinas, and others, and suggests that we have lost much from the abandonment of those practices.

With the enlightenment came a more, so called, scientific approach as once again questions were asked about where authority resides, in the church or in the text. The reformers, particularly Martin Luther, chanted “Sola Scriptura,” *scripture only*, as the alternative to an approach that some argued planted authority beyond the text itself, specifically, in the church. Luther stated, “Allegories are empty speculations and, as it were, the scum of Holy Scripture,”⁷³ not exactly the typical style of a rational argument one would expect from a rationalist time. For Luther the *sensus literalis*, *literal sense*, was all there is. This single sense has dominated the hermeneutical field for years effectively offering a deathblow within protestant circles to the allegorical approach. Of course Fowl and others would argue that something other than the literal sense does not negate authority as evidenced in Paul’s apparent allegory of the spiritual rock in 1 Cor 10.

Scholarship has focused its attention on this single sense and as a result, we have witnessed the development of a method that seeks to permanently lodge authority within the biblical text itself, a noble effort indeed. The method that has emerged out of this so called enlightened era has become known as the historical method, with some adjective attached to it for further refinement. The historical-critical method, to choose an adjective, of exegesis now has a long history in scholarship as the standard by which biblical studies are done or at least to which they must answer. What we commonly hear and see in our current day is a belief that “books produced by historical-critical scholars

⁷³ Quotations are from Farrar, *History of Interpretation*, 328.

are far superior to those produced by those who reject the method,”⁷⁴ and that the vast majority of commentaries, dictionaries, and study aids available today either follow a historical-critical grammatical approach or at least in some way answer to it.⁷⁵

Given the objections raised by Gadamer, postmodernity, and others, scholarship is questioning the adequacy of the historical-critical approach. This does not always mean they question *if* there is authority in the text but rather they question if a purely historical approach renders a faithful reading of the text. This is partly due to the fact that much of the work done in historical-critical circles remains distant or inaccessible to the bulk of Christendom. Regardless of the lofty intent, a quick survey of exegetical commentaries will reveal a scholarship that is highly descriptive of the text with little if any insights on its relevance to the church⁷⁶ and as such is not highly accessible. Vanhoozer borrows from Kierkegaard to illustrate this current problem. Kierkegaard, in his reading of Jas 1:22–27 refers to the Bible as a mirror, “warns against the error of coming to inspect the mirror instead of seeing oneself in the mirror.”⁷⁷ He suggests that the only way to receive blessing is to move beyond the examination of the mirror and actually see oneself in it and to conform to the reality expressed in the mirror.

The reality expressed by the biblical text is very important to Wright. That reality is at the forefront when he speaks of biblical authority. In his own experience of teaching missions, he struggled with the barrage of proof texts that were used to solicit and send out missionaries. It is not that those texts, such as Matt 28, do not suggest a missionary

⁷⁴ *Faithful to Our Calling*, 77. Common expression among the faculty who have each added their own personal positions making up this document.

⁷⁵ Krentz, *The Historical Critical Method*, 63.

⁷⁶ I would cite here those works chosen to examine Philippians, NIGTC, Baker Exegetical, New American Commentary, Holman, and The New International Commentary, as examples.

⁷⁷ Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 15.

effort, rather, if we are going to commit enormous resources to the task of mission it must be built on something more than a few isolated texts. In his work *Out of Egypt* and his own seminal work *The Mission of God*, Wright quotes a host of authors⁷⁸ who follow this pattern of quoting a number of isolated texts in support of mission. Even the work by David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, “considered, *correctly*, to be the most important book published in mission studies in the last half of the 20th century,”⁷⁹ follows a similar pattern. This has led some such as Goheen to suggest that Wright’s work moves us past that; but how?

Wright suggests that a missional hermeneutic moves us past the use of isolated texts because it suggests that the whole Bible is about mission. This is a bold claim and Wright states that while one can say there is a biblical warrant for marriage one cannot say the Bible is all about marriage. However, according to Wright, the Bible is all about mission, God’s mission. The impetus for this comes from Luke 24, as we have discussed, which presents the expectation of a missional reading. However, Wright does not appeal only to Luke in support of his conclusions. He would argue that the biblical text is a testimony, both explicitly and implicitly, about God’s mission. It is explicit as seen in those texts often cited in support of a missionary endeavour, many of which are imperatives, but also in those moments of self disclosure when God reveals his missional purposes as he did to Abraham; blessing all the nations. The Bible is also implicit with regard to mission in that a given narrative can imply the purposeful activity of God without even mentioning his name, as in the case of Esther. Both the explicit and implicit references work together to form a record that bears testimony to the way things really

⁷⁸ Carey, *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians*; Blauw, *Missionary Nature of the Church*; Burnett, *God’s mission*. For a list see footnotes in *Mission as a Matrix*, 109 and *The Mission of God*, 35.

⁷⁹ Goheen, “A Critical Examination of David Bosch’s Missional Reading of Luke,” 4. Italics mine.

are, to reality. This is enhanced by what is sometimes called the hermeneutical circle. This hermeneutical circle suggests that as we become more familiar with the explicit revelation regarding mission the more the implicit becomes visible. This would be similar to the way explicit texts regarding the passion of Christ help us understand what is implicit in such texts as Isa 53.

Wright's missional hermeneutic suggests that "authority is a predicate of reality."⁸⁰ That is, the existence of God, the created order, and the trajectory of God's mission provide an authority structure within which we have freedom to act. Authority authorizes; it grants freedom to act within boundaries. A brick wall, says Wright, constitutes an authority in that you have the freedom to act on one side of it or the other. However, it exercises its authority the moment you try to run through it. The authority of the Bible is in the fact that it brings us into contact with God's reality. Wright suggests that this can be observed, for example, when God presents the law to the Hebrew nation. The Decalogue for begins with an expression of reality, "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt." Based on that reality certain expectations are in order for those who orient their lives around that reality and, some would argue, for all humanity. The Bible is filled with many texts that are not commands in form but they do represent a reality, which in turn represents an authority. For example, in Matt 6 when Jesus instructs his followers regarding acts of righteousness such as giving to the poor, fasting and prayer, there is more going on than just a conversation on spiritual disciplines. The expressions, when you give to the poor, when you fast, when you pray, assume that believers will practise these and, even though there is no imperative, there is an implied reality, which Wright suggests, constitutes an authority. Another example would be in

⁸⁰Wright, "Mission as a Matrix," 124.

Acts 17 with Paul's speech to the Areopagus. He presents to them a grand narrative in which there are no imperatives but the reality presented in the text, and rejected by the audience, is that repentance is required in order to avoid judgement.

Wright argues that many of the biblical texts find their origins in a missional conundrum, a problem the people of God are having in relating to God or the world around them. Wright concludes:

a missional hermeneutic of the whole Bible will not become obsessed with only the great mission imperatives, such as the Great Commission, or be tempted to impose on them one assumed priority or another. Rather we will set those great imperatives within the context of their foundation indicatives, namely, all that the Bible affirms about God, creation, human life in its paradox of dignity and depravity, redemption in all its comprehensive glory, and the new creation in which God will dwell with his people.⁸¹

The reality expressed through the text is the purposeful actions of God to bring about his redemptive plans. In turn, this represents the reality to which all humanity is subject. This leads Wright to what he calls a Biblical Theocentric Worldview that recognizes mission not as something we, the church, do but rather defines who we are in relation to the reality of God himself and the mission he initiates and directs. Because the Bible is a statement of reality, it calls all of us to see that reality in the mirror and depart having been conformed to our role in that reality. The question is, will a historical-critical analysis of the text be sufficient to explicate this reality? Remember, Schleiermacher suggested that this could be done in a totally objective fashion and thus purely descriptive of what is observed in the text. Gadamer was convinced that we could not come to the text empty handed and what we brought to the text would influence our work with it. Though the historical-critical approach has dominated the scene in the past, some suggest

⁸¹ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 61. See pages 51–61 for the fuller argument.

there is a need to move beyond historical-critical analysis to something more relevant. The error comes when they effectively toss the proverbial baby out with the bath water. Wright would suggest that a relevant reading of the biblical text does not preclude careful historical-critical and grammatical work; only that the work done at the contextual level should include the larger canonical framework⁸² and in turn move forward and speak to the church of *the reality* with which it must align itself. Wright believes that a missional hermeneutic will accomplish this. When Chris Wright reads the text we can say that he reads it as an authoritative text that presents the reality to which all of creation is subject. It is the explicit and implicit reality represented in the text that has authority.

Reading the Bible Theologically

Most recently at SBL several sessions were devoted to reading the canonical text from some theological location. One example was the fine work of the Scripture and Hermeneutics group that turned their attention to Ellen Davis and her work on reading the Old Testament from an agrarian perspective. The Gospel and Our Culture network did a missional reading of Philippians, but for the most part failed, much to my surprise, to place it in the larger canonical context. The Institute for Biblical Research highlighted the methodology behind Brazos and the Two Horizons commentaries, which approach the text theologically, though being very different in their own approaches. There were African hermeneutics, African-American Hermeneutics, Feminist Hermeneutics and those from a Liberationist point of view. What seemed evident is that reading the Bible theologically, or what some might refer to as a socially located readings, has become a popular practice yet remains undefined and lacking methodologies to provide evaluation

⁸² Specifically a framework that is sensitive to mission.

and steps forward in the field. Some suggest that this grows out of a desire to cast off the restriction of the historical-critical methodologies, and perhaps it does. This, however, is not indicative of everyone in this field. The consensus of these groups, paper after paper, was that a concerted effort is required to develop robust hermeneutical principles that facilitate this much sought after approach. If not, the fear is that the rising number of alternate readings will increase to the point where no objective method can control the drift toward relativism, an observation Wright makes. One of the challenges then for missional hermeneutics is to answer the challenge that it is just another, among many, socially or theologically directed readings of the Bible, something we have already begun to challenge.

First, what is meant by a theological reading of the text? Are we talking about Biblical Theology or not? The effort to define this is complicated by its close proximity to Biblical Theology and the diversity of definitions within that movement. A somewhat helpful approach is to describe the ends to which Biblical Theology is often oriented.

Biblical theology is principally concerned with the overall theological message of the whole Bible. It seeks to understand the parts in relation to the whole... (Rosner)⁸³

Biblical theology ... works inductively from the diverse texts of the Bible, seeks to uncover and articulate the unity of all the biblical texts taken together, resorting primarily to the categories of those texts themselves. (Carson)⁸⁴

Biblical theology involves the quest for the big picture, or the overview of biblical revelation. It is of the nature of biblical theology that it tells a story rather than sets out timeless principles in abstraction. (Goldsworthy)⁸⁵

⁸³ Rosner, "Biblical Theology," 3.

⁸⁴ Carson, "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," 90.

⁸⁵ Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture*, 22.

To borrow again from Kierkegaard, biblical theology tends to focus on the mirror, arranging the material in such a way as to provide coherence to the text. With regard to theological readings, Joel Green offers the two following distinctions. First,

a theological reading of Scripture takes as its starting point and central axis the theological claim that “the Bible is Scripture,” a claim that draws attention to the origin, role, and aim of these texts in God’s self-communication. It thus locates those who read the Bible as Scripture on a particular textual map, a location possessing its own assumptions, values, and norms for guiding and animating particular beliefs, dispositions, and practices constitutive of that people.⁸⁶

As committed as Wright is to a more historical approach to the text, this theological commitment is what he brings to the text without apology. Here the reader is not concerned with the *history of religion*, though the text might provide such interesting insights, but rather assumes *a submission to the text* and reads to that end. Secondly,

theological engagement with Scripture takes seriously the claim that the church is “one.” Consequently, the texts that constitute the Bible were traditioned, written, and preserved by the same people of God now faced with the task of appropriating and embodying its message; this is the same community that received this collection of texts as canon; and this is the very community to which these texts were and are addressed. That is, we locate “the meaning” of Scripture not in the distant past in a far-away land, but in the community of God’s people, past, present, and future.⁸⁷

Green is suggesting that the biblical texts provide the impetus for the church today to embody the truth of the biblical text since they are the same community that turned to them historically. The text is not locked in the past but is embodied by the church past, present, and future.

Evident in Wright’s work is a commitment to a theological reading that would ask what the Bible calls the church to and will never be content with merely the descriptive task. To do so, in Wright’s view, is a failure to read the text faithfully. This in no way

⁸⁶ Green, “Theological Interpretation,” *SBL Forum*, n.p.

⁸⁷ Green, “Theological Interpretation,” *SBL Forum*, n.p.

minimizes the historical analysis or even subjugates it as the lesser but rather is dependent upon it as a control. Green goes on to say, and Wright would agree, that the historical work done over the past two centuries prevents the text from being “domesticated” and allows it to serve as the critique of any culture.⁸⁸ In other words, the historical work that has rooted the authority of either implied or explicit expectations on the people of God is not easily dismissed because a current cultural trend might find such teachings *outdated*.

Also consistent with Green’s definition is Wright’s tendency to view the record of specific events in Israel’s history and the theological interpretation of those events as things that shaped those communities. For example, when we read of a king in Israel making a treaty with a foreign king we are not content with the description that the treaty did not end well. A theological interpretation takes the events themselves, the demise of Israel, sees that as a direct result of violating God’s commands, and stands forever as a text that teaches us that solidarity with God is the appropriate behaviour of those who align themselves with God. The text is a theological interpretation of the events they describe. In other words, the theological interpretation of events, via the inspirational direction of God, served to form a community and allowed that community to understand how it should act in light of God’s expectations.

With the goals of biblical theology and theological interpretation in view there appears to be certain commonalities in the way they are expressed. There remain some fundamental differences though in terms of methodology. As noted, biblical theology tends to focus on the arrangement of the biblical material into a unified corpus while theological interpretation seeks to understand the corpus from a particular location such

⁸⁸ Green, “Theological Interpretation,” *SBL Forum*, n.p.

as agriculture or mission. Again we are left with the question, what differentiates these various readings from Wright's missional hermeneutic? We learn something of this as we discuss what Wright is trying to achieve with a missional hermeneutic.

Beyond Multicultural Hermeneutics

We have said that Wright desires to move beyond a proof texting model or an apologetic for mission but he also desires to move beyond the multicultural hermeneutical perspectives found in our global context, that is, readings that favour a particular socio-political region or ethnicity. Some of these have been mentioned: African American, Asian, or South American hermeneutics. Wright correctly recognizes the incredible shift that is taking place within Christendom as an increasing number of Christians are found outside of the western context. This is due in part to the missionary effort which has focused on and experienced fruitful labour outside the western context. As a result, the amount of scholarship beginning to occur outside of the western context has led to a demand to read the Bible from other cultural contexts, charging the western church as having lost its corrective presence to culture due to its adoption of the culture in which it resides. To some degree even the western academy assumes a certain privilege regarding its methodologies. Philip Jenkins finds irony in the fact that current western scholarship,

which has its roots in a hermeneutical revolution, led by people who claimed the right to read Scripture independently from the prevailing hegemony of medieval Catholic scholasticism, has been slow to give ear to those of other cultures who choose to read the Scriptures through their own eyes.⁸⁹

⁸⁹ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 38.

In a recent article Michael Barram has suggested that “scholars in various fields now recognize the significance of social location; the crucial postmodern insight that human beings never enter an interpretive process as entirely impartial observers.”⁹⁰ Much of this is not new and is very similar to the hermeneutical questions raised by Gadamer.

This plurality found in multicultural readings has led Wright to conclude that if all we have is plurality then we are “consigned to a relativism that declines any evaluation.”⁹¹ Are there boundaries to reading the biblical texts and if so how are they defined? To solve this Wright feels that a missional hermeneutic is one that provides “coherence.”⁹² “The plurality of interpretative stances requires that we speak and listen to one another.”⁹³ Adam agrees, suggesting “biblical theology has grown in persistent conflict, so its adherents have tended to cast their rhetoric in terms of stark alternatives, some of which have attained the status of common place.”⁹⁴

This world of stark alternatives seems to plague the chronology of biblical theology. At the end of the day the camps align around an assumption of canonical unity or a biblical diversity that produce descriptive accounts of what a peculiar people at a specific point in time thought about God and their world. Adam suggests that the failure of biblical theology to provide something beyond the plethora of different theologies stems from “self imposed constraints on our discourse.”⁹⁵ These constraints arise from, according to Adam, a translation paradigm in scholarship that suggests there is only one best translation and therefore only one (best) meaning. In turn, each camp must defend its

⁹⁰ Barram, “The Bible, Mission, and Social Location.”

⁹¹ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 40.

⁹² Wright follows the work of James Brownson, *Speaking the Truth in Love*.

⁹³ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 40.

⁹⁴ Adam, “Poaching on Zion,” 20.

⁹⁵ Adam, “Poaching on Zion,” 22

interpretive conclusions and the methodology that produced its translation rather than entertaining other voices and methodologies. It seems only logical that many voices at the interpretive table have the potential to provide significant insight into the text.

While many cultural voices at the table may add a richness to the discussion “Once we have affirmed plurality we need also to grapple with how the Bible may provide a centre, an orienting point in the midst of such diversity.”⁹⁶ The reason that such a center is important is that if all we have is plurality then we are “consigned to a relativism that declines any evaluation”⁹⁷ which is what Wright is trying to avoid. Obviously, Wright’s commitment to a grand narrative demands this centre even though scholarship is not united in this regard. The centre for Wright is the mission of God, beginning in Genesis and completed in the Christian’s eschatological hope at the consummation of the ages. Wright is suggesting that Missional Hermeneutics moves us beyond readings that try to advance a cultural agenda to a hermeneutic of coherence oriented around the mission of God, an agenda rooted in the scriptures and not any one particular culture.⁹⁸

Beyond Advocacy Readings

Closely related to multicultural readings is the diversity of hermeneutical approaches that read the text on behalf of, or in the interest of, particular groups of people. This is common among advocacy groups such as those concerned about women’s rights, the poor, or liberation from suffering. Philip Berryman suggests that liberation theology is an interpretation of the Christian faith and its texts from the angle of

⁹⁶ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 40 quotes Brownson, *Speaking the Truth in Love*, 239.

⁹⁷ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 40.

⁹⁸ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 40–41.

suffering, struggle, and hope for the poor.⁹⁹ This particular advocacy group reads the Bible alongside those in need of liberation and as such, it is a socially located reading that produces a centre to the interpretive question. The challenge would be to ask if the Bible is all about something like women's rights or the poor. Perhaps not, but they are readings that once subjugated to the greater missional ends of God can find greater acceptance in the mainstream. There is no desire here to evaluate or even list all such readings of this type except to say that Wright's theological reading of the Bible seeks to subjugate such readings under the greater mission of God but at the same time, this theological reading prohibits him from disregarding their cries to action. Even a light reading of scripture will betray God's interest in those oppressed or victimized but such interests are seen to flow from the heart of a God who is interested in the liberation of not just humanity but also all of his creation and with a very specific end in mind. The way in which Wright finds a way forward from both multicultural readings and advocacy readings is a theological reading of the text that provides a rubric from which other readings can be measured and correctly understood. For Wright, the challenge that Missional Hermeneutics is just another reading is incorrect. For Wright it is a reading that provides coherence to all the other stories contained in the text.

We have said that Wright's work is primarily a biblical theology though he comes from a very particular theological location. As such, Wright's biblical theology faces the challenges suggested by Balla regarding the discipline:

first, the argument against confining study of the 'Bible' as defined in the canon; and secondly, the argument against the basic theological unity of the biblical authors *in light of perceived diversity among them*.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Berryman, *Liberation Theology*, 41–43.

¹⁰⁰ Balla, "Challenges to Biblical Theology," 20. Italics mine. See also Carson, "Current Issues in Biblical Theology," for the same challenges.

We have discussed, albeit briefly, Wright's view of scripture as something unique to other non-canonical texts. To some degree, the first of these objections is the result of different presuppositions. For those who see biblical scholarship as purely descriptive of religious history, the Bible itself carries no inherent superiority to other historical texts such as those found at Qumran or Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt or the Gospel of Thomas or the Quran. Such presuppositions make dialogue difficult whenever those discussion moves beyond a descriptive task. There is little to be gained by adding yet another voice that says the Bible is superior or, due to its inspiration, unique. However, this assumed superiority of the biblical text is as Green suggested earlier a product of a theological reading of the text. It is appropriate to note that this type of presupposition and its complexity comes into play later as we discuss postmodernity and its rejection of such concepts as a grand narrative. What we can say is that Wright's effort to read the Bible faithfully is guided by certain theological assumptions. Given the authority in the text, Wright assumes its unique character alongside any other document and the church's submission to it. His theological centre is the mission of God, a center that moves him past plurality to coherence.

The second issue Balla presented was that any attempt to present a theological unity to the canonical witness, given the perceived diversity within the biblical text, is in fact suspect. Wright, however, reads the biblical text as a unified corpus and asserts that the mission of God provides the one story to which all others find their home.

Reading the Bible Canonically

Biblical theology has a long history of reading the canonical text as a unified document. Such practices go back to the text itself with "summaries of 'salvation-history'

being found in both the Old Testament and the New.”¹⁰¹ It could be said that Peter’s use of Joel and Psalms in Acts 2 was his attempt to place the person and work of Christ into the larger drama of the biblical text. Scobie suggests that these summaries “trace the continuity of God’s dealings with his people”¹⁰² across the span of both testaments. It is this concept of continuity that is of interest in a conversation about Chris Wright’s grand narrative.

Wright and others come to the text with a theological assumption that it is in fact God’s word, and is unique as a document. In that its origins are uniquely associated with God himself, continuity should be a visible trait within its pages. Vanhoozer agrees and suggests that the reason for this tendency within biblical theology to focus on continuity is the theological conviction that the Old and New Testaments “mediate the truth of the one God.”¹⁰³ He quotes C. Seitz in his argument, suggesting that the ‘only reason’ for reading the Bible canonically, *or theologically*, is the theological certainty that the two testaments “have the power to witness to divine reality”¹⁰⁴ which is to say they witness to the way things really are, the divine reality or a grand narrative. This same conviction drove the pietists, Spener and Franke, to approach the text as a source of spiritual nourishment and guidance¹⁰⁵ as it bore testimony to the reality of life beyond their own reason.

This interest in the sweeping narratives of the Bible can also be seen in the early church such as our earlier example of Irenaus who, in his challenge of Marcion, asserted

¹⁰¹ Scobie, “History of Biblical Theology,” 11. Examples of this are Deut 26:5–9; Neh 9:7–37; Ps 78, 105, 106; Acts 7; Heb 11.

¹⁰² Scobie, “History of Biblical Theology,” 11.

¹⁰³ Vanhoozer, “Exegesis and Hermeneutics,” 63.

¹⁰⁴ Vanhoozer, “Exegesis and Hermeneutics,” 63. Italics mine.

¹⁰⁵ Balla, “History of Biblical Theology,” 13.

the continuity between the testaments and the inseparable link between the God of creation, Israel, and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.¹⁰⁶ In the more modern context, Mead suggests that narrative or story gained a sharper focus in the 70–80's because of work coming out of Yale by Hans Frei and George Lindbeck. While Frei questioned whether the Bible's narrative was history, Lindbeck "believed that the scripture could be studied in its own interpretive framework...as a whole in its canonical unity."¹⁰⁷ When asked how the diverse material could be viewed in this manner he is quoted as saying;

these (the diverse material) are all embraced, it would seem, in an over-arching story which has the specific literary features of realistic narrative as exemplified in diverse ways, for example, by certain kinds of parables, novels, and historical accounts.¹⁰⁸

Long before these authors sought to convey the unity they believed evident within the text, Johannes Cocceius (1603–1669) gave 'covenant' a central place and his work was influential in the development of covenant theology.¹⁰⁹ Geerhardus Vos (1867–1949) wrote his seminal work *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments*. He taught at Calvin Theological Seminary and later at Princeton where he became the school's first professor of Biblical Theology. His influence in this field continues to this day as a proponent of the history of revelation and redemptive history as a progressive expression.¹¹⁰ A contemporary of Vos, though younger, was Herman Ridderbos (1909–2007), known as one of the main developers of the redemptive-historical approach to biblical theology.¹¹¹ Bartholomew and Goheen have produced a recent work, *The Drama of Scripture*, which portrays the Bible as a single great story. Graeme Goldsworthy's work on preaching the

¹⁰⁶ See Roberts, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. I Book I Against Heresies*.

¹⁰⁷ Mead, *Biblical Theology*, 135.

¹⁰⁸ Mead, *Biblical Theology*, 135.

¹⁰⁹ Balla, "History of Biblical Theology," 12.

¹¹⁰ Vos, *Biblical Theology*.

¹¹¹ See Ridderbos, et al. *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures*.

whole Bible is yet another. Certainly, within reformed circles, perhaps due to a covenantal approach, the idea of a grand narrative is common in their church curriculums and catechism. A strong advocate of this would be Michael Goheen¹¹² as we have already mentioned. Some authors such as John Goldingay focus their attention on parts of the story while adhering to, at least conceptually, an overarching story.¹¹³ A common approach suggested by N. T. Wright, and others, tends to move through dominant biblical themes such as creation, fall, redemption, and future hope.¹¹⁴ Chris Wright however would ask how all these various themes offered by so many authors all tie together; in the end, he offers mission, God's mission, as the answer.¹¹⁵

The importance of these works, and others from the field of biblical theology, is their approach to the canonical text that tries, as Chris Wright does, to see the whole of biblical revelation as an interdependent unit. Each of these authors looks to the broader canonical whole to provide continuity to the diverse detail within the individual biblical narratives. These authors each present the smaller narratives as the support to the larger canonical narrative. In other words, the whole can only be understood as the contributing parts are assigned meaning and in turn are assembled into a larger structure. While problematic for some, such as postmodern thought, this might be considered a hermeneutical circle. Wright's work takes the detail in the smaller narratives and subjugates them to a grand narrative held together by a single theme, God's mission to redeem and restore his creation for his glory.

¹¹² See Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture* as an example of this.

¹¹³ Goldingay, *Israel's Gospel*, 17.

¹¹⁴ Wright, *Mission of God*, 64.

¹¹⁵ Wright, *Mission of God*, 64.

This type of canonical approach is not without its critics. James Dunn disagrees with such grand narratives and expresses the common challenge:

The problem being that the single grand narrative effectively brackets out a good deal of the data, privileges some of the data as more conducive to the story the historian wants to tell, and orders the selected data into a narrative sequence which validates the view put forward by the modern historian.¹¹⁶

Of interest here is that Dunn's book, *Jesus Remembered*, argues for a tradition of the Jesus story based on the larger corpus, which in itself is dependent on the narrative structures Dunn criticizes. Wright would also disagree and suggest that a missional hermeneutic is in fact dependent upon all of the data and provides the corrective to the historian's fancies.¹¹⁷

Disagreement also comes from other disciplines such as Systematic Theology. Systematic theologies tend to focus on very specific elements.¹¹⁸ By specific elements it is implied that a focus on soteriology, or pneumatology is not interested in a grand narrative but rather those specific topics. It is hard to develop a broad sweeping sense of the scripture when the focal point is so narrow. The hope of a missional hermeneutic and its use of a grand narrative is that it can provide both coherence and relevancy but still maintain its dependence on, and celebrate the nuances of, the particular textual concerns.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ Dunn, "On History, Memory and Eyewitnesses," 477.

¹¹⁷ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 47.

¹¹⁸ I am drawn here to Chaffer, 8 volumes discussing a host of biblical doctrines with precision, or Hodge's shorter though equally complex 3 volumes. Here you can read page after page of argument without ever encountering the text.

¹¹⁹ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 47.

Beyond Postmodern Hermeneutics

In the discussion about the canonical approach and grand narratives, an objection is going to be heard from the postmodern camp regarding the use of such narratives. This camp has been speaking into the hermeneutical discussion and Wright has expressed the need to move beyond postmodern hermeneutics. He does so by saying yes to plurality but no to relativism. “Postmodernism celebrates the local, the contextual, and the particular, though it goes on to affirm that this is all we have.”¹²⁰ Perhaps one of the loudest voices for a postmodern worldview is Jean François Lyotard. He suggests, “grand narratives have lost their credibility, regardless of what mode of unification they use.”¹²¹ This is due to what he considers the recognition of the local and particular micro narratives of which there are plenty. He would go on to say that a grand narrative, or for that matter any attempt to explain everything, is merely an oppressive power play of some sort.¹²²

Lyotard and postmodernity are not without their objectors. A common criticism is that postmodernity offers, in lieu of the grand narratives that it rejects, its own grand narrative. In the *Postmodern Condition* Lyotard suggests that it is not all such systems that are devoid of meaning, only certain ones. The problem, of course, is which ones and that in itself becomes problematic for Lyotard’s argument. In Lyotard’s worldview, which does not include a purposeful and knowable God, there is nothing left but the local or particular narratives each of us possess. If this is the case, there is no need for a grand narrative unless you are trying to move the masses to adopt some authority structure. Is there room for a grand narrative within postmodernity? The answer depends as much on where one starts as on the observations one makes. In this case, Wright begins with God

¹²⁰ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 45.

¹²¹ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 37.

¹²² Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 37–40.

as purposeful. That in itself is opposed to where others start. In Lyotard's world there is no God, or at least not one that is knowable or involved, thus there is simply no need for the grand narrative to explain God. It should be noted that Lyotard's perceived failure of grand narratives in general seems to be more of a critique on humanism and the social sciences that grew out of the enlightenment rather than an attack on biblical literature itself.

Since Christianity supports its worldview from the biblical text and since such views claim to be the true nature of reality, Christianity, along with any religious world viewpoint is likely to be criticized by a purely postmodern perspective. This is not a suggestion that postmodernity is at odds with Christianity, though this is often the case. At this point, I am only making the recognition that Wright's grand narrative is going to receive its most critical denial or at best cautious acceptance from the postmodern camp. It is not the intent here to defend or attack postmodernity, rather, as Wright suggests, acknowledging that the elements of postmodernity, variety, locality, particularity, and diversity, are all woven into the fabric of our biblical texts. This however, is where Wright parts company. Without apology, he claims that the story of the Bible is *the story* to which all of the *little* stories find their context. As Richard Bauckham put it, "This is the universal story that gives place in the sun to all the little stories."¹²³

Objections aside, Wright assumes there is authority in the text. To this hermeneutical practise Wright, beginning from Luke 24, uses the discipline of biblical theology and a canonical approach to arrange the biblical material as a document that testifies to the mission of God. This second practise, mission, is the unique element Wright offers us as a corrective to previous efforts. He then offers a theological

¹²³ Bauckham, *The Bible and Mission*, quoted by Wright, *The Mission of God*, 47.

interpretation that calls the church to live in obedience to the reality the text presents.

This is reading the Bible faithfully for Wright. To navigate this rather large landscape of biblical material, Wright speaks in terms of a hermeneutical map. This map is a metaphor that views the biblical landscape with all of its diversity and locality yet understands each as part of the whole.

Using a Hermeneutical Framework or a Map

In both the primary works, *Mission as a Matrix* and *The Mission of God*, the hermeneutic Wright is suggesting serves as a map better than a strict grid through which the text is read.

No framework can give account of every detail, just as no map can represent every tiny feature of a landscape. But like a map, a hermeneutical framework can provide a way of seeing the whole terrain, a way of navigating one's way through it, a way of observing what is most significant, a way of encountering the reality itself.¹²⁴

This map, as Wright puts it, allows us to see the larger contours of the story, to place the smaller detail within the larger context. It is appropriate at this juncture then to present those larger contours which emerge out of the missional hermeneutic he suggests.

Contours of a Missional Hermeneutic: Grand Narrative

For Chris Wright a Grand or Meta Narrative is a biblical theology, or better put, a theological reading of the canonical text. The point of such a reading is to provide, as discussed earlier, a measure of coherence and relevance to the canonical text. The validity of reading the text in this fashion is discussed later but here it is enough to say that Wright's map or framework is a theological interpretation. Wright is not alone in this approach, nor is he its originator. That the Bible tells a story is not likely to be debated,

¹²⁴ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 69.

but that the Bible tells one story and that this story is the true reality of the world will be a challenge for some.

In Chris Wright's case, he finds one theme woven through the text, the Mission of God. The intentional working out of this mission is the reality of what is going on around us; it is the *true* state of affairs, the predicate reality of authority, or the mirror into which we look and which binds the church to the same mission.

This Grand Narrative provides, as we have said, a map that allows a bird's eye view of the biblical landscape in which the unique contours of that landscape are allowed to enhance the story as a whole. The contours of his map are this, first, God with a mission, then, subsequently, humanity, Israel, Jesus, and the Church each have a mission and each is an extension of God's mission.

God with a Mission

We have already discussed at length the concept of the *Missio Dei*, though we return to it here for clarity. Wright interprets the opening chapters of Genesis as revealing a God who is personal, "purposeful, and working toward a goal, completing it with satisfaction and resting, content with the result."¹²⁵ We also discover, says Wright, that through the promise made to Abraham (Gen 12:1–3) we can assume this God to be "totally, covenantally and eternally committed to the mission of blessing the nations through the agency of the people of Abraham."¹²⁶ This blessing of the nations through Abraham is what Apostle Paul refers to as the "gospel in advance" (Gal 3:8). This is often presented as a four-point narrative: creation, fall, redemption, and future hope.

¹²⁵ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 63.

¹²⁶ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 63.

These categories would be common to Goheen, N.T. Wright and other proponents of a narrative approach.

Wright is not suggesting that the Bible has one carefully crafted story line. Rather he suggests there are many narratives, many self-contained and embedded with diverse material. However, he maintains that there is a single trajectory, a “grain” as he calls it, and reading with mission at the front is reading with the grain. There is no suppression of the smaller narratives, in fact just the opposite. It is the smaller narratives that give us insight into the other dimensions of a missional reading. For example, one can read Esther as an isolated story that gives insight and inspiration from a time in Israel’s history where it came close to extinction. With this missional grain, we also see a sovereign God who protects and ensures the continuity of his promise to Abraham thus ensuring the eventual blessing to the nations. All of this is predicated on the

affirmation that there is one God at work in the universe and in human history, and that this God has a goal, a purpose, a mission that will ultimately be accomplished by the power of God’s Word and for the glory of God’s name.¹²⁷

God’s goal is to one day look over his created order and those who abide with Him and declare it good, and that for his glory.

Humanity with a Mission

In each of the next four segments, little detail is required, though Wright develops several chapters on each, as each grows out of a Theo-centric world view that acknowledges the reality of God’s mission and his expectation for humanity to participate in it at his invitation. However, it is within the creation account that humanity finds its

¹²⁷ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 64.

own mission which is the mandate to fill the earth, subdue it, and rule over it (Gen 1:28). Ecological concerns, economic matters, and sociological issues are all worthy of humanity's efforts and are nuanced by their subjugation under the mission of God. This is also where we are introduced to the reality of what went wrong and it is the first time we are given the promise of eventual restoration.

Wright does not develop the theological construct of being created in the image of God until much later in *The Mission of God* and not at all in "Mission as a Matrix." His later dealings with humanity in the image of God are referenced primarily as the point of departure from the ideal creation because of rebellion. It could be argued, in line with Wright's view of authority, that to be created in the image of God has an implied reality or authority that we should bear that image without fault. While this is not the place to discuss the scholarship on this topic, it is important to note that part of the mission of humanity comes because of why they were created in the first place, to bear the image of God. Wright covers this aspect of God being the model which humanity is to mimic in his work, *Old Testament Ethics and the People of God*.¹²⁸ To bear the image of God as the expectation of those created in God's image is there in Wright's work but could be given more substance as a critical element on the missional side of biblical interpretation. Ultimately, this issue of God's character being seen in humanity, or the lack of it, is the central issue in what Paul calls sin. "For all have sinned and fallen short of the Glory of God" (Rom 3:23). This universal charge moves the expectation of bearing the image of God with accuracy onto all of creation and not just Israel.

¹²⁸ Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 62–75.

Israel with a Mission

Against the backdrop of human sin and shame, we find Israel being called into relationship with God and being given a mission that serves the wider purpose of God to bring blessing to all the nations. Wright points out that Israel's election was not a rejection of other nations but was explicitly for the sake of all the nations. Notice here that his missional reading of election does not nullify the particular discussions of election, general or specific, but rather sees election as a contour to the map. Election, starting with someone, is a necessary step in moving from the individual to the nations. The universality of God's purpose is the reason behind the particularity of God's chosen people. Election is then the mechanism to advance the mission, starting with someone as it were. Within Israel there are ethics, worship, redemption, eschatology, and other themes all awaiting the missiological reflection suggested by Jesus in Luke's gospel. While room does not permit the development of the missional nature of biblical law at this point, it becomes apparent in the larger scheme of God's mission that Israel was to be a light to the Gentiles. While not having a missionary mandate, their missional mandate was to demonstrate the character of God. The very task is impossible given that no one has seen God or interacted with him at a level that makes mimicking him possible. Thus, as Israel lives out the law before the nations, the nations are in turn to know God and glorify him. The failure of Israel to keep the law resulted in the opposite; the name of God was sullied among the nations.

Jesus with a Mission

Given the discussion earlier regarding Luke's gospel as it relates to the person and work of Jesus, it is no surprise to find this element in Wright's work. Wright suggests that the "mission of the Davidic messianic king was both to rule over a redeemed Israel, according to the agenda of many prophetic texts, and also to receive the nations and the ends of the earth as his inheritance."¹²⁹ The key here, in a missional hermeneutic, is to see the person and work of Jesus not as an addendum or as somehow distinct from the universal mission of God begun in Genesis, but rather as the mechanism to bring it about. Jesus' own sense of mission was to do the will of his Father who had sent him (John 5:19). Jesus also made it clear that he came to give his life as a ransom (Matt 20:28; Mark 10:45). Another dimension in Christ mission is revealed at his trial when Jesus says to Pilate that he, that is Jesus, came to testify to the truth (John 18:37) to testify to the way things truly are, reality. The mission of Christ is both salvific and testimonial. Jesus, through his teachings, declares what the real grand narrative is and how it will play out. The apostle Paul would speak extensively of God's work of reconciling the world to himself through Christ (2 Cor 5:19). The mission of Christ cannot be divorced from the plans of the Father to redeem and restore his creation for his glory.

The Church with a Mission

Once again, the mission in which the church is entangled is one that moves from God to us. In Luke 24 Jesus clearly gave the church a mission that was rooted in his identity as the victorious, crucified, and risen Messiah. It is to this risen and exalted Christ that the church bears witness. The apostle Paul understood this when he applied the singular work of the servant in Isa 49:6 to the corporate mission of the church in Acts

¹²⁹ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 66.

13:47, “this is what the Lord has commanded *us*, I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.” “Mission, from the point of view of our human endeavour, means the committed participation of God’s people in the purposes of God for the redemption *and restoration* of the whole creation. The Mission is God’s.”¹³⁰ In turn, it can be said that the churches mission is also salvific, in that it declares repentance and forgiveness in Jesus name and it lives out God’s ideal for humanity in anticipation of the consummation of the ages.

At the conclusion of this brief outline, which is only a shadow of the material Wright provides in his book *The Mission of God*, it is important to draw attention to how these elements impact Wright’s reading of the text or how they work together to nuance the missiological focus that Wright finds in the text. We could add to the list of methods previously mentioned that Wright *reads the Bible missiologically*. From the following list, which proceeds from the contours of his hermeneutical map, it is evident that to read the Bible with a missiological focus we read it in light of the following:

- God’s purpose for his whole creation, including the redemption of humanity and the creation of the new heavens and new earth;
- God’s purpose for human life in general on the planet and of all the Bible teaches about human culture, relationships, ethics and behaviour;
- God’s historical election of Israel, their identity and role in relation to the nations, and the demand he made on their worship, social ethics, and total value system;
- The centrality of Jesus of Nazareth, his messianic identity and mission in relation to Israel and the nations, his cross and resurrection;
- God’s calling of the church, the community of believing Jews and Gentiles who constitute the extended people of the Abraham covenant, to be the agent of God’s blessing to the nations in the name and for the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ.¹³¹

We have, in this rather lengthy section, examined Chris Wright’s effort to read the biblical text faithfully to the end that the church would embody the reality either

¹³⁰ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 67. See also Wright, *Truth with a Mission*, chapter four “Whose Mission is it?”

¹³¹ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 67–68.

explicitly or implicitly called for in that text. Wright's first priority is to approach the text as one that has authority over us as it presents to us reality, the way things really are.

Secondly and closely related to the first, we must engage the text theologically, that is, to read it as the church in our own context seeking to embody who it calls us to be and what it calls us to do. Thirdly, Wright reads the text canonically, that is, as a unified whole in which the sum of all the pieces form something more than a bricolage but rather the predicate of reality, the Grand Narrative to which all other stories find a home. This reality is what those who align themselves with God must seek to testify of and embody.

CONCLUSIONS REGARDING WRIGHT'S MISSIONAL HERMENEUTIC

I believe it is fair to say that Chris Wright is on sound exegetical ground to suggest that Luke, as a New Testament writer, sees the Old Testament as a document that bears witness to the person of Christ, the Christological focus, and to the Mission of God, the missiological focus. However, a further development of this as the practice of other New Testament writers would strengthen the argument. For example, John's concept of Jesus being sent, or Matthew's use of the Old Testament to demonstrate the legitimacy of Christ and the expansion of his ministry to the nations in the great commission. Further to this, Wright must address the question, why does the missional element in Luke get elevated over the Christological element when Luke puts them on equal footing? He has argued in the contours of his missional map that Christ's mission is subject to God's mission and, while I would agree, given a larger view of mission as a grand narrative, I am uncertain that Wright has demonstrated that from Luke's material alone. However, in defence of Wright's assertion, how many times does the biblical text need to instruct us

before such instruction becomes authoritative? Wright's observations are not easily dismissed.

The concern, which Wright and others have, that we read the Bible faithfully, is of great importance as suggested in this project. The ability to dialogue with different groups seems to offer hope of a renewal of biblical relevancy. However, some caution needs to be exercised here as Wright suggests. If for example the hermeneutical door is flung wide open we may well be left with little more than diversity. Wright's offer of the Mission of God as a corrective to this problem shows promise. However, the mission of God can be interpreted in a broad manner beyond the restrictions that Wright has put on it, as seen in Willigen I and II. As a result, we may be left with such diversity in the subjugated material that diversity is all that remains. Perhaps the way forward in this regard will be found if scholarship, committed to biblical studies, would give as much attention to the development of a missiological reading of the Bible as it has given to a Christological focus.

While the work of Chris Wright offers a great deal in terms of *why we should do missional hermeneutics* it has yet to offer methodology beyond the presuppositions mentioned under the heading, *Reading the Bible Faithfully*, and the list of questions that a missiological reading would be sensitive to. How does one move, for example, from the descriptive task in exegesis to something more transformative? This would be the effort of Howard Marshall in *Beyond the Bible: Moving from Scripture to Theology*. In time Wright and others will develop more than a list of questions for the text and perhaps provide a more accessible methodology for the church.

In light of the issues it would appear that a missional hermeneutic moored strictly to the Mission of God will be insufficient. Wright's efforts to demonstrate this hermeneutic as a practice of New Testament writers goes a long way in advancing the effort. I find that Wright's approach has promise; I like the way he calls us to move beyond the descriptive task of biblical studies and into the world of mission. Attending to mission, and uniquely God's mission, was highly profitable in reading Philippians.

At this point in this thesis a missional reading of the biblical text is appropriate. It is my intent that as this work progresses the missiological nuances of the text will be brought to light and, in keeping with Wright's desire, form the church into the missional community it is called to be.¹³²

¹³² Wright, *The Mission of God*, 41-42.

CHAPTER 2

CHRIS WRIGHT'S MISSIONAL HERMENEUTIC IN A READING OF PHILIPPIANS

We have defined missional hermeneutics as that part of the interpretive event that attends to the missional influences and expectations within the biblical text. As such, I intend to focus heavily on these missional aspects. Keeping with Wright's concern that the text speaks today¹³³ I will focus on the missional implications of the text both in a historical sense and in the modern church context. I offer then a missional reading of Philippians 1:12–2:18.

INTRODUCTION TO PHILIPPIANS

Over the years, I have been exposed to numerous commentaries and articles on the canonical material. A common trend is to have the introductory material deal with questions of occasion, authorship, unity, structure, and in varying degrees the social, political and historical contexts of the target community and author. Philippians is no different. For example, two monumental works on Philippians are Markus Bockmuehl's *Epistle to the Philippians* and Gordon Fee's *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*. Their introductions to Philippians are 45 and 52 pages respectively. The introductory material of Bockmuehl is very extensive with insights from archaeological and extra-biblical sources. His approach seems to be the recreation of the historical setting in which Paul writes and is rather critical of other approaches.¹³⁴ Fee, on the other hand, devotes the bulk of his material to the literary complexities and suggests that Greek and Roman styles of letter writing provide the solution to some of the interpretive controversies.

¹³³ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 61.

¹³⁴ Bockmuehl, *Epistle to the Philippians*, 42.

Eventually, I fear, most students and pastors begin to skip these lengthy sections in favour of getting to the text. While this is unfortunate, it is also understandable, as both the similarities in the data and the diversity in approaches seem staggering. To what end does all this effort go? Why produce extensive introductions, or for that matter, a rather modest dialogue, as the one offered here? One answer is to frame the offering of the scholar in a particular methodology and to nuance the biblical text in a manner that makes it accessible to the reader. As one author puts it, the introduction “tunes our ears to hear the apostle’s words”¹³⁵ as presented by the commentary in question. This *tuning of the ears* is what I hope to accomplish in this modest introduction.

Unity

Polycarp, one of three¹³⁶ well known early church fathers, having spent time with the apostles and been appointed by them as Bishop,¹³⁷ is one of the earliest to attest to Paul’s writing of a letter to the Philippian church.

He, *that is Paul*, when among you, accurately and steadfastly taught the word of truth in the presence of those who were then alive. And when absent from you, he wrote you a letter,¹³⁸ which, if you carefully study, you will find to be the means of building you up in that faith which has been given you...¹³⁹

The list of individuals who support Pauline authorship¹⁴⁰ suggests that there is very little challenge regarding its authorship. While the issue of authorship is relatively quiet, the question around the unity of the letter or letters within Philippians is not. O’Brien, Fowl,

¹³⁵ Fowl, *Philippians*, 14.

¹³⁶ Including Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Tertullian.

¹³⁷ Roberts et al., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol I, Irenaeus Against Heresies* 3.3.4, 416.

¹³⁸ The form is *plural*, but one Epistle is probably meant.

¹³⁹ Roberts et al., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol I*, 33.

¹⁴⁰ Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Tertullian, St. Chrysostom, the Muratorian Canon (later second century) and the canon of Marcion (d. ca. A.D. 160) and the work of Eusebius of Caesarea (c. A.D. 260–339).

and Melick have acknowledged the challenge raised by F. C. Baur regarding the unity of the text, but in the end, dismiss it. The discussion revolves around the apparent abruptness of the text at certain points as it progresses through a variety of topics, for example, the expression of gratitude, thought by some to be rather late in the epistle, or the harsh change in tone as Paul offers a warning regarding those mutilators of the flesh. However, there is no textual evidence for multiple letters¹⁴¹ and while the theory may solve the apparent abruptness, it creates other more significant problems.¹⁴² An example of this problem is seen when we use 3:1 as the end of one letter and 3:2 as the beginning of another. The problem that is created is in explaining why a redactor would discard the introductory material so typical to Pauline letters. Once the argument is posed that a redactor discarded material because it served his literary needs, we are in fact, no longer dealing with Pauline literature. Rapid changes, if they can be called that, can be explained in many ways without subjecting the document to an editor or a redactor. A survey of more recent scholarship dealing with the structure of Philippians¹⁴³ provides a variety of solutions to the so-called abrupt changes. O'Brien concludes that the "interpolation theory raises more problems than it solves."¹⁴⁴ Lastly, we are in possession of Philippians as it appears in the canonical text, which is itself an argument for receiving it as it is.

¹⁴¹ The earliest extant form of the epistle is the Chester Beatty Papyrus (P 46) dated about A.D. 200. If the epistle existed in fragments, it did so well before that time, and there is no textual evidence to suggest such a history. See Melick, *Philippians*, 32.

¹⁴² See Melick, *Philippians*, 31–34, and O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 13–18.

¹⁴³ See for example, Krentz, "Civic Culture and the Philippians"; Garland, "The Composition and Unity of Philippians"; Black, "The Discourse Structure of Philippians"; Watson, "A Rhetorical Analysis of Philippians"; Russell, "Pauline Letter Structure in Philippians".

¹⁴⁴ O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 18.

Occasion

Chris Wright has stated that the biblical text often has its origin in a particular internal issue or external threat which the people of God encounter as they fulfill their divinely appointed mission.¹⁴⁵ Philippians is no different and to exclude the contextual concerns of the mission of God from our introductory material is to rob ourselves of the insights it affords.

The Formation of the Church at Philippi

An examination of the formation of the church at Philippi is a testimony to the divine advancement of God's mission through Paul, not only to the Philippians but also to the whole Macedonian region. The bulk of the material required to do this is in Acts 16 where the birthing of this church is recorded.

Paul had been eager to preach the gospel in Asia and other Gentile areas. After all, Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles. He had attended the Jerusalem council (Acts 15) at which time the elders agreed that indeed the gospel had included the Gentiles as evidenced by the giving of the Spirit to them. Such an event had been the plan from the beginning. The promise to Abraham was made that all the nations would be blessed through his offspring (Gen 12:1–3). Finally, it was happening before them and Paul became clearly known as one who would make this known to the Gentile world (Acts 9:15; Rom 11:13; 2 Tim 2:7). Lest we think that the advancement of the church among the Gentiles was perpetrated solely by the apostle Paul, or the result of human industry, we need only consider this little church at Philippi.

¹⁴⁵ Wright, "Mission as a Matrix," 121.

As mentioned earlier, Paul had wanted to preach in other areas but the Spirit of God prevented him from doing so (Acts 16:6–7). Then, one evening, Paul had a vision of a man in Macedonia calling him to come and help them. Apparently, Paul shared his dream because immediately he and his companions¹⁴⁶ made out for Macedonia, concluding that God had called them to preach the gospel in that region and beginning at Philippi.¹⁴⁷

Philippi is referred to as a Roman colony. The history and the social settings of this community during the first century have been fairly well established.¹⁴⁸ Philippi had been granted *ius Italicum*, an honour conferred upon a community by the emperor. In essence, it allowed the community to function under Roman law rather than Hellenistic customs, which of course had implications on its citizens. The rights of purchase, ownership, and transference of property, together with the right to civil lawsuits and appeal, were privileges included in the *ius Italicum*.¹⁴⁹ Philippi is one of the colonies listed in the Digest (50.15) as having such privileges. “Rome had also determined two classifications of religion: legal and illegal. Legal religions were affirmed by the senate, which generally accepted the ethnic, national religions of its conquered people.”¹⁵⁰ What was not permitted was the spreading of these religions beyond their ethnic groups. It may be that Judaism, outside of its geographical restraint in Palestine, was considered illegal

¹⁴⁶ The change in the pronoun to include the narrator, [we] Acts 16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–28:16 has led some to conclude that Luke is part of the travelling band at this point.

¹⁴⁷ There is some discussion regarding πρώτη τῆς μερίδος Μακεδονίας πόλις, however little has been settled except to say that Philippi was a city with a social standing that deemed it a good place to start the Macedonian ministry.

¹⁴⁸ See Marshall, Melick and Fowl as their history of the community is much the same.

¹⁴⁹ O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 4.

¹⁵⁰ Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, 26.

as certain citizens alleged after Paul's altercation with a follower of Apollo.¹⁵¹ If this were the case, Jews would need to meet outside the city limits for their religious activities. Eventually there would be a synagogue at Philippi,¹⁵² but at this time there was no synagogue, due either to the reasons mentioned or that there were so few local Jews that a synagogue could not be formed.¹⁵³ This may well explain why Paul went out to a riverside beyond the city limits thinking he might find Jewish men gathered for prayer. However, Paul did not find a group of men, instead Paul and his companions found a group of women and began to speak with them (Acts 16:13). Paul had been in the city for several days, (Acts 16:12), and this is the first time we hear of Paul speaking publicly. His initiative is commendable and reflects the obedience typical of his commitment to serve Jesus through his participation in the mission inaugurated by Jesus. However, as fine a speaker as Paul may have been, the Lord opened Lydia's heart to attend to Paul's words (Acts 16:15). As a result, we read of not only her conversion but also the conversion and baptism of her household.

One day as Paul and others were leaving the city to go to the place of prayer, a regular practice, a demon-possessed girl began following them, and crying out, she said, "These men are bond-servants of the Most High God, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation" (Acts 16:17–18). The term must have stuck, as later when Paul would write to the church, he referred to himself and Timothy as slaves, bond-servants of Jesus Christ (Phil 1:1). This herald continued to cry out for several days and finally the apostle, somewhat annoyed, rebuked the demon in Jesus' name and it left her. This would be

¹⁵¹ We conclude that it is a follower of Apollo based on the evidence in the Greek text which states she had a πνεῦμα πύθωνα, *spirit of a "python"*, a tradition associated with the worship of Apollo.

¹⁵² DeSilva, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 642–643. Citing Koukouli-Chrysantaki. *Philippensis*. 14–15.

¹⁵³ A minimum of 10 men is required.

problematic for those who made a living off this poor woman, as it was the demonic influence that made her profitable for them (Acts 16:20). As this story gives rise to the next event in the establishment of the church at Philippi, we should not lose sight of the fact that the authority required to cast out the demon was not Paul's but rather it was done in Jesus' name.

Apparently, unemployment did not sit well with these individuals and they reported Paul and Silas to the authorities as men who advocated religious practices which Rome had deemed illegal, mistakenly Judaism (Acts 16:21). The mistake was common, and it was not until the Jewish revolt of 132–135 A.D. that we have clear indication that Rome saw Christianity as a distinct sect.¹⁵⁴ The charge was sufficient to provoke a physical beating, placement in the inner parts of the jail, reserved for state or dangerous criminals, and being bound in stocks. Of course, the issue was their loss of income not the teaching of Paul which had already been going on for some time. Regardless of the circumstances, these two men were not diverted from their passion to exalt Christ. We read of them singing and praising God in the midst of their circumstances (Acts 16:25). Paul will later commend this as a worthy attitude to which the Philippians should aspire (Phil 4:4). Then, most remarkably, we read of an earthquake, strong enough to shake the foundation of the prison but focused enough to cause only the doors to open and chains to fall off effectively setting the prisoners free.

If we had read at this point that Paul and Silas fled and the church was encouraged by their miraculous escape we would be content, but not Paul. Paul prevents the jailer from killing himself, out of a sense of failure on his part. The jailer, in turn, will become a follower of Jesus along with his whole household. The jailer will even tend to Paul's

¹⁵⁴ Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, 150.

wounds. Then in the morning when the city officials think they have proved their point, a twist in the events has them apologizing to Paul and Silas. This was due to the discovery that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens and should have been protected under Roman law from the very things that were done to them. As a side note here, Paul's citizenship will turn out to be advantageous. Later Paul will be told that just as he preached the gospel in Jerusalem he will preach the gospel in Rome (Acts 23:11). It is noteworthy that this series of events were not funded by a church's missions budget but rather by Rome itself. Once in Rome, Paul stayed in his own rented quarters (Acts 28:30), and whether Paul, or some benefactor, paid is unclear. As a prisoner, Paul was fed, clothed, and transported directly to Rome, at their expense.

One can only conclude that the birthing of this church in Philippi came about as a divine advancement of the mission of God through the sending of Paul to Macedonia. It is a mission that began with Israel as a unique people but, in fulfillment of a promise, expanded to include the Gentiles at Philippi and beyond. Such a start would stay with a church for a long time as both an encouragement and an apologetic to the Gospel. A missional hermeneutic attends to such insights and reminds the reader that the mission is God's, and by invitation we participate in a work that he advances.

It is also apparent that the church in Philippi was experiencing a certain level of opposition or persecution (1:29–30). It is also probable that the apostle Paul is very sensitive to the precarious nature of his very life. Combined, these two issues suggest that Paul is preparing them for that event and since he will not be around to encourage their resolve to serve Christ, he helps them orient their worldview around the eventual

vindication that will be theirs as individuals who have adopted God's depiction of reality.

With this internal motivation strong, the Philippians will stay their course.

COMMENTARY PHILIPPIANS 1:12–2:18

This project does not permit a complete commentary on the book of Philippians due to word count issues. In light of this, it was necessary to choose a portion of Philippians that would be suitable for this project. In a somewhat, though not completely arbitrary manner, I have chosen 1:12 – 2:18.

O'Brien and Fowl follow the work of other scholars¹⁵⁵ who suggest that Paul uses a common "disclosure form" at verse 12. This disclosure form, as it is called, occurs with some frequency in the New Testament and while it is fairly regular, it is not a rigid form. Mullins suggests that the nineteen papyrus examples and the nine New Testament ones demonstrate significant similarity.¹⁵⁶ The benefit in identifying verse 12 in this manner is that it clearly delineates a division in the text. The presence of this form, and the discourse marker $\delta\epsilon$, serve to indicate a change from the more formal greeting (1:1–11) to the weightier issues Paul wishes to discuss.

The end of this section is defined by a shift in content. In a rather simplistic outline, 1:12 begins with Paul's exemplary life, then shifts to the expectation that the Philippians would copy that life. In chapter two Paul continues this theme and provides three examples of individuals who truly think of others first, Christ, Timothy, and Epaphroditus. At 2:19 Paul begins a discussion on Timothy and then turns to Epaphroditus. The material on these two men, while unique in its own right, serves the

¹⁵⁵ O'Brien, *Philippians*, 86. There he quotes: T. Y. Mullins, "Disclosure," 49; and notes the following works, J. T. Sanders, "Transition," 349; J. L. White, *Form*, 121–22; D. W. Burdick, in *New Dimensions*, 353; and W. G. Doty, *Letters*, 34–35.

¹⁵⁶ Rom 1:13; 2 Cor 1:8; 1 Thess 2:1; Gal 1:11; cf. Rom 11:25; 1 Cor 10:1; 11:3; 12:1; 1 Thess 4:13.

same rhetorical ends as the material that precedes it and while I have chosen to end at verse 18, I acknowledge that such a break is artificial. In this sense, the material in question should be sufficient to demonstrate both a missional reading and Paul's rhetorical goals.¹⁵⁷

Syntactical Concerns

There are only a few syntactical and semantic concerns within the text and I have chosen to deal with them in advance to avoid a cumbersome reading later on. The first concern is in regard to Paul's usage of the expression *in Christ* and some will find it helpful to discuss this prior to working with the concept in Philippians.

In Christ: A present reality and future hope (1:1; 1:13; 2:1)

We are introduced to this construct, *in Christ*, early in Philippians. The believers at Philippi are considered to be *in Christ* (1:1) and Paul's chains are viewed in the same way (1:13). The communal benefits listed in 2:1 are also said to be *in Christ*.

It is relatively easy to translate 1:13 by using the normal English sentence structure of subject, verb, and object. The more difficult element is dealing with ἐν Χριστῷ, *in Christ*. This is how Paul's chains are now being understood: they are *in Christ*. The whole expression is "unusual if not awkward, and has led to a variety of interpretations and consequent renderings."¹⁵⁸ O'Brien suggests that *my chains in Christ have become manifest* should be rejected due to the word order. More likely, he suggests that *my chains have become manifest in Christ*. Melick¹⁵⁹ and others agree. However, in

¹⁵⁷ By rhetoric I mean the use of presentation, persuasion, and argumentation in a way that brings about an effect. In this sense one might think of all communication as rhetorical, seeking an end.

¹⁵⁸ O'Brien, *Philippians*, 91.

¹⁵⁹ Melick, *Philippians*, 70–71.

each case these commentaries, regardless of the word order chosen, provide significant theological interpretation to make sense of the phrase.

Fowl asserts that the context does little to narrow the field of meaning here.¹⁶⁰ “At the very least, “in Christ” indicates that Paul’s suffering is the result of his life in Christ, his convictions about the crucified and resurrected Jesus, rather than some criminal act.”¹⁶¹ He also adds that “in Christ” is a sort of verbal shorthand with significant theological narratives behind it. It is this idea of being *in Christ* that will be key to understanding Paul’s concerns in the passage before us.

I would assert that being *in Christ* is in fact an understanding of reality that not all people share. The adverbial expression, *in Christ*, occurs with great regularity throughout Paul’s writings and is predominantly used to express the realm or sphere in which believers live, as the preposition would suggest.¹⁶² One only has to read the last few chapters of Acts to get the sense of the narrative of Paul’s life, the reality he believes in and the behaviours that accompany it. His behavior throughout these passages is consistent with the behavior inferred here in Philippians. It is hard to read Philippians 1:12–30 and not hear the echoes of Acts 21:13–14. “For I am ready not only to be bound, but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.”

Chris Wright has used this term *reality* in relation to a grand narrative. As we have mentioned earlier in this project, a grand narrative is a theological construct that explains reality in light of God’s redemptive activity toward his created order. In Paul’s preaching he makes the attempt to orient people to that reality and when successful they

¹⁶⁰ Fowl, *Philippians*, 38–39.

¹⁶¹ Fowl, *Philippians*, 38.

¹⁶² Of the 61 Pauline occurrences of ἐν Χριστῷ over 85% of them depict being in Christ as a reality or experience.

repent but when unsuccessful the results were less than hospitable. One such attempt to orient people to this reality is Paul's sermon on Mars Hill, Acts 17:24–31.

The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all *people* life and breath and all things; and He made from one *man* every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined *their* appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His children.' Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man. Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all *people* everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.

Paul, in his view, has stepped into a new reality that God has made known through Christ. In this reality, there is a beginning to all things and there is a specific end. Jesus himself said that he came to testify to the truth (John 18:37) or to the way things really are: *reality*. This new reality in which Paul lives is what he means when he uses the phrase, "in Christ." That reality informs him that he, in repenting, is now prepared for a judgement that is yet to come. Paul has been saved from that judgement now and *when* that judgement event actually occurs, he is convinced of a favourable outcome or we could say that the belief he has held all along will be vindicated.

For Paul his location cannot be defined by prison or shipwreck, beatings or false accusations or to push even further: heaven or earth. Paul's location is always *in Christ* and as such is governed by Christ and not his personal context.¹⁶³ Being in Christ is both a present reality and a future hope. It is a present reality in that Paul lives and moves and

¹⁶³ Fowl, *Philippians*, 39.

has his being in Christ and his personal circumstances must always be understood in that context. It is a hope for the future because a day will come in which his testimony of Christ will be validated. Paul is so certain of this reality that he is thoroughly committed to fulfilling his calling to preach to the Gentiles, whatever the cost.

Vindication: more than semantics (1:19; 2:12)

The verb, ἀποβήσεται, *will turn out or work out* (1:19), is an idiom that suggests *a resultant state, to go away into, or to result in something*,¹⁶⁴ here in the future tense suggesting an expected state. Paul's circumstances will have a particular outcome. The construct leads to the question, what does Paul expect the outcome to be?

The answer is provided by the adjunct, εἰς σωτηρίαν, *for salvation*, or more fully, *this will turn out for my salvation*. There is some discussion on how to handle σωτηρίαν, *delivered or saved* from a theological perspective. The most common translation is the latter, *salvation*, in Paul's writings¹⁶⁵ and is used in terms of relational status before God both now and in an eschatological sense. The use of *deliverance* in translations seems theologically motivated to avoid conflict with Paul's language of faith alone. This may result from a very narrow understanding of the term salvation that is restricted to the new birth event. A broader view of this term allows, in this context, for an eschatological understanding or vindication. It could also be that Paul is expecting to be vindicated and set free at some pending trial.

¹⁶⁴ Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 89.41.

¹⁶⁵ Of the seven occurrences of this form, Philippians is the only usage that depicts deliverance from something.

In favour of the latter, that Paul will be set free is Paul's clear expectation that he will see the Philippians again (1:25–26; 2:24).¹⁶⁶ However, this usage of 1:26 does not take into account the immediate context, which suggests that this may not happen. The overall tone of the section though seems to convey uncertainty. It is this uncertainty that every believer throughout history must live with and that is precisely the point that Paul is building toward (1:27) when he suggests how to live with that uncertainty.

With regard to an eschatological perspective, Melick draws attention to the apparent quotation from Job 13:13–18, which contextually, in Job, has the nuance of vindication in the term but not a vindication before men but before God himself. O'Brien¹⁶⁷ agrees with Melick regarding Job and both suggest that Paul is speaking here of vindication before God.¹⁶⁸ This seems in keeping with Paul's use of the word here in Philippians. Paul is saved, and as such, he has complete confidence that he will be saved from the judgement that is yet to come. Paul is saved from this because he is in Christ and will find salvation from judgment for precisely the same reason; he is in Christ. Salvation understood this way poses no theological conundrum when Paul will instruct the Philippians, who are saved, to continue working out their salvation (2:12) in the sense of continuing to live in the reality of the way things really are which has been revealed by God and is the locale for those who are now in Christ.

The subject of Paul's thought at the beginning of verse 19 is captured in the pronoun, τοῦτό, *this*. As we will see the agency of Paul's salvation is prayer and the Spirit, but the question is what does the pronoun relate to? It is hard to have the pronoun point to the various preachers or Paul's reaction to them, as he is not in need of

¹⁶⁶ Loh and Nida, *A Handbook on Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 29.

¹⁶⁷ O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 110–11.

¹⁶⁸ Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, 80–81.

vindication before them. It is unlikely that it points back to the imprisonment because once again Paul does not look for vindication from Rome. It is best to see this as pointing back to Paul's life in Christ and all that entails, including his current circumstances. We might say in a translation, *for I know that this, my life in Christ, will all end in my vindication*. Certainly, in this sense Paul will also be vindicated, or better, his testimony of Christ will be established as true before all flesh at the judgement mentioned above.

Philippians 1:12–30 **Paul's Circumstances and Perspective**

Dr. Christina Baum, Library Director at Southern Connecticut State University, recently posted the following, “Perspective Is Everything; Change your perspective and you change reality.”¹⁶⁹ However, the Bible presents a reality from a very different perspective than that of many people in the world. A change in perspective that embraces that biblical reality will have far-reaching implications on how we view life and even the experiences in which we find ourselves. Perspective is often restricted to what can be observed in the physical, what you see is what you get, world. In our modern world of science and empiricism, anything other than the “what you see is what you get” worldview is somehow at odds with reason and therefore considered suspect. It is as if reality can only be understood through deduction. The problem of course is that such a model is always subject to change as new observations are made. The apostle Paul understood that reality is not always defined by what we see and hear, or by what is measurable and repeatable. For Paul, a devout follower of God, an understanding of reality was the result of revelation. That revelation can orient a person's perspective to a

¹⁶⁹ Baum, “Latest Quotes,” 3.

reality. God's revelation is the true depiction of what is really going on and not what Paul's eyes could see or his ears hear. Once Paul understood reality from God's perspective, it changed what his eyes saw and his ears heard or better, how he interpreted what he saw and heard. Paul would spend his life in an effort to help people understand this reality, and then in light of it, show them how to conduct themselves. For Paul, this new reality was described, in short, as being *in Christ*. A primary concern for those in Christ is to align themselves with God, his plans and purposes for humanity and the created order. This sense of camaraderie with God brings great joy into Paul's life as he witnesses the advancement of God's mission, even though at times it might seem to advance in the midst of hard circumstances. In this regard, perspective is everything. Understanding circumstances from God's perspective is to perceive reality.

Through the first two chapters of Philippians, Paul will help the church at Philippi orient themselves around this new reality and then, in light of it, give direction on how to participate effectively in the mission of God.

Verse 12

¹² Now, I want you, my brothers and sisters, to understand something; my circumstances have actually served to advance the gospel.

Immediately we are alerted here to an attempt on the apostle's part to change perspectives. O'Brien correctly suggests that while this disclosure form, as mentioned above, might be a common form, it should not be seen as something trite or mechanical.¹⁷⁰ Though the form is a literary device used to frame the material that follows it, Paul reveals that his aim is to clearly articulate the true perspective on his detention. The particular details of that detention are not really the concern here. Whether

¹⁷⁰O'Brien, *Philippians*, 86.

or not Paul was under house arrest in Rome itself or at some Praetorian Guard house is not at the heart of this discussion. While interesting, these things affect this text very little and are hard to resolve based on the available material. It is also difficult to ascertain what the Philippians may have thought regarding his imprisonment. The options are plentiful, ranging from a concern that the premier church planter was now locked up and prevented from participating in the mission of God to a removal of God's protection and blessing, to Paul being in exile. It is difficult to press any of the options, but the report has as its goal a proper understanding of Paul's detention in light of bigger issues: namely the advance of the gospel.

That Paul's circumstances, difficult or otherwise, should advance the gospel is nothing new to the Philippians; they had seen this firsthand, the providential hand of God in the formation of their own church (Acts 16). More than likely, the encouragement that comes to the Philippians from Paul's report is that just as God was with him at Philippi, advancing the mission to bring blessing to the nations, God continues to advance his mission through Paul, regardless of the circumstances. In this case the mission is advanced as a direct result of the gospel being advanced.

Space does not allow us a full treatment of what the apostle means when he uses the term the *gospel*. Predominantly there are two opinions; one suggests that Paul uses the term as Isaiah did and the other that Paul borrows it from Greek culture. The first emphasizes the good news of Israel's long awaited release from captivity as the Messiah takes his throne, whereas the second emphasizes news of victory due to the ascension of a

new king and the expectation that all citizens would worship him.¹⁷¹ N.T. Wright suggests that these are not mutually exclusive:

The more Jewish we make Paul's 'gospel', the more it confronts directly the pretensions of the Imperial cult, and indeed all other paganisms whether 'religious' or 'secular'.¹⁷²

Helpful here is the work of Zacharias Ursinus (1534–1583). This post reformation theologian offered the following in answer to the question, what is the gospel?

we may, in accordance with the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth questions of the Catechism, define the gospel to be the doctrine which God revealed first in Paradise, and afterwards published by the Patriarchs and Prophets, which he was pleased to represent by the shadows of sacrifices, and the other ceremonies of the law, and which he has accomplished by his only begotten Son; teaching that the Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, is made unto us wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption; which is to say that he is a perfect Mediator, satisfying for the sins of the human race, restoring righteousness and eternal life to all those who by a true faith are engrafted into him, and embrace his benefits.¹⁷³

Ursinus' comments are profound on many fronts but his recognition that this gospel is not new is especially significant. Paul refers to this as the gospel in advance (Gal 3:8). From Paul's perspective every person who hears the gospel represents the fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham that all the nations would be blessed (Gen 12:3). Ursinus' quote also suggests that God has been at work advancing his mission from before the foundation of the earth (Eph 1:4) and that what we now see as the church proclaiming the message of the gospel is but another step forward in that mission. Just as the election of Abraham was a mechanism to advance the missional purposes of God, so too the life, death, and resurrection of Christ advance the mission because now *in Christ* the Gentiles are included in Abraham's blessing. The gospel is the body of truth

¹⁷¹ Wright, "Gospel and Theology in Galatians," 2.

¹⁷² Wright, "Gospel and Theology in Galatians," 5.

¹⁷³ Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 101–06.

associated with the mission of God and as it is proclaimed and believed, it too advances the mission of God to redeem and restore his creation for his glory.¹⁷⁴ Paul says that his circumstances have advanced this cause, a perception that not everyone agrees with or understands.

We can gather from the latter part of Acts that Paul repeatedly tells his story which is in fact God's story over and over again. As people are introduced to the claims of the gospel, some choose to accept that reality and orient their lives around it, some reject it. In this sense the gospel is advancing or we could correctly say that the mission of God is advancing. Paul offers proof of this in the following verses.

Verses 13–14

¹³ *Insomuch as it has become evident to the whole Praetorian and to everyone else that I am in chains because I am in Christ.* ¹⁴ *On top of that, most of the brothers have a growing confidence in the Lord because of my imprisonment and boldly speak the word without fear.*

Regardless of the specific identity of the *Praetorian and everyone else*, Paul asserts that individuals within his sphere of influence have come to understand that his chains are *in Christ*. It does not necessitate that they understand all that this means, just that in some manner they understand what has led to his chains. Certainly if we see the backdrop of Philippians as the events recorded in the latter part of Acts we can get some idea of this.

An example of this would be in Acts 21:38–23:10 when Paul was mistaken as a criminal but, as the story plays out, both the Jews, who accused him, and Roman guards, who protected him, were informed of Paul's life in Christ. Paul clearly understands

¹⁷⁴ 1 Cor 15; Gal 1–2; Rom 1:16–17, 12:2; 1 Cor 15:51; Phil 3:21.

himself to be part of something far bigger than his immediate situation and has not only accepted the invitation to participate in that mission but he does so with joy.

Paul, more than most, directly and willingly endured suffering because of his convictions about the crucified and resurrected Christ. Yet, he does not attempt to call such suffering a good in itself. Suffering is what the followers of Christ may expect as they negotiate their way through the same sort of world that crucified Jesus. Paul's view of God's providence leads him to fit himself and his various circumstances into a larger ongoing story of God's unfolding economy of salvation. Within this larger context, and only within this context, Paul's circumstances can be seen as advancing the gospel. This view of providence enables Paul to displace himself as the one who is guiding and directing his own life.¹⁷⁵

Paul not only has this sense that the mission of God is unfolding before him and that he is caught up in it, but he also assumes that God is powerful, and in his providence advances his own mission. A belief in the providence of God allows Paul to see his circumstances not as the product of human or even demonic influence but rather as a direct result of God's purposeful actions. In fact, it is a mission that looks to a future day when the whole created order will exalt God's most significant participant in the fulfillment of that mission (2:10).

We also get this sense of providence from Paul's comments regarding certain believers who know that Paul has been κείμεναι, *placed*, in his circumstances for a defence of the gospel (1:16). Paul uses this term sparingly, only four times. Always, this term takes the concept, *to be appointed, set, or destined*.¹⁷⁶ Paul's sense of providence can be clearly seen in the first chapter of Philippians. Paul has expressed that God, who began a good work in the Philippians will carry that work on to completion (1:6). There is also the above mentioned text (1:16) and certainly his own assurance of vindication (1:19). His perspective changes the interpretation of the events surrounding him.

¹⁷⁵ Fowl, *Philippians*, 42.

¹⁷⁶ Arndt, Danker and Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 373.

It appears that Paul's confidence in God's superintendence over God's mission is contagious. Other believers have an increasing confidence in the Lord because of Paul's circumstances. Here *in (the) Lord*, is not to be read with *brothers*, as an identity marker, that is Christians, but rather with the adjunct *convince*, and allowing *my chains*, to be instrumental¹⁷⁷ in that construct. The following illustration helps with this.

In many countries, the proclamation of the gospel remains illegal, the transport of Bibles is suspect, and the presence of churches denounced. Yet in these same contexts, contrary to logic, Christians dare to continue their practise of preaching, teaching, and meeting. This in turn inspires, emboldens, and strengthens the church's witness. In the same way note how Paul "accumulates terms expressive of courage; πεποιθότας, *persuaded*; περισσοτέρως, *so much more*; τολμάω, *dare, have the courage*, and ἀφόβως, *fearlessly*"¹⁷⁸ to express the impact of his own confidence in the Lord on other believers.

In central Asia and the Arabian Peninsula, the Christian community has experienced martyrdom over and over again. Yet, in spite of such opposition, Christians do not flee but remain and uphold their testimony of Jesus. They continue to rise up to the challenge of providing humanitarian relief, even to those who persecute them, and share the gospel. As a result the cruciform nature of the church is becoming well known, the fame of the Christians and their Christ spreads, and many convert. Truly the quality of their faith is inspiring and their circumstances, like Paul's, advance the gospel.

Part of a missional reading of the text is the awareness of how the text portrays God as active in His mission. In this case God's mission is not hindered by the circumstances of those he calls into partnership with him but rather he uses those

¹⁷⁷ O'Brien, *Philippians*, 66.

¹⁷⁸ O'Brien, *Philippians*, 94.

circumstances as unique vehicles to carry the gospel forward. Paul will, by the end of this chapter, shift his focus from his own experience to the common experience of suffering that the Philippians now have and will suggest that such circumstances, like his own, advance the gospel. The rhetoric seems to suggest that Paul serves as an example that the Philippians should follow, not just in his behaviour but also in his perspective. His desire is that they understand their circumstances not as the controlling influence in the advancement of the gospel but rather as God's providential advancement of his purposes to which the Philippians also contribute.

In addition, a missional reading must attend to the servants of God's mission and how the text implicates them and therefore us. In this case, Paul is a wonderful example of one who humbly submits to the plans of God, recognizing that since he is *in Christ* he has a unique role to play, and in that alone he finds joy. This humble submission is a character trait that will be honoured several times as we proceed through the text.

Verses 15–18a

¹⁵ *I realize that some are preaching Christ out of envy or strife but some do so out of good will.* ¹⁶ *Those who preach out of love know that I am placed here for the defence of the gospel,* ¹⁷ *but those who proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, expecting to increase my suffering while in chains, are without pure motives.* ¹⁸ *What difference does it make though? The important thing is that in every way, whether in pretence or in truth, Christ is proclaimed and in this I rejoice.*

Just as Paul is an example, those who preach the gospel are also exemplary, though not always in a positive way. Here the indefinite pronoun, *some*, at the beginning of each clause, is used to contrast two subgroups, both of which preach Christ.¹⁷⁹ The motivation of the first group is envy and strife, and their goal, says Paul, is to increase his suffering.

¹⁷⁹ Porter, *Idioms*, 136.

It is difficult to understand what is going on relationally between Paul and these two groups. However, as examples of good conduct, which seems to be what Paul has in mind, it is fairly clear which group Paul approves of. Those who preach Christ, as Paul does, with a sense of blessing and good will are preferred, obviously, over those who seek their own gain. This group also seems to be keenly aware of Paul's, and likely their own, providential placement in God's mission to serve its advancement accordingly. The latter group does not have the interests of others in mind, but rather they seek their own interests characterized as envy and strife. Paul considers their motives suspect. This negative behavior is prohibited later (2:3) and contrasted with the preferred attitude for the community (2:3).

This example will be demonstrated again in Christ (2:6–8), Timothy (2:20–21), and Epaphroditus (2:30) as a life that is oriented around serving others. It would appear that the behavioral manifestation, of those who are oriented to the mission of God, is serving others. Paul's convictions regarding the end goal or telos of God's mission is so vivid that anything he might gain or lose is trivial. "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Rom 18:8). Given this end, Paul is free to serve others intently¹⁸⁰ and chooses the title, slave, as a preferred one.

When Chris Wright suggests that God's calling of the church is to be the agent of God's blessing to the nations in the name and for the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ,¹⁸¹ it is a call that would have us abandon all personal gain as we seek God's glory and live in anticipation of the fulfilment of God's mission. Since God does not share his glory (Isa

¹⁸⁰ A survey of Pauline literature portrays Paul as a servant, both in title and in reality.

¹⁸¹ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 67–68.

42:8, 48:11) it seems unwise to serve God for some kind of personal gain. Such efforts are likely to be very disappointing in the end as that may be the only reward granted to such efforts. Perhaps these preachers have a greater concern for their own comfort than for the advancement of the gospel. Their perception may be limited to the here and now and not the eternal. We can begin to see emerging already in the text both perceptual concerns and ethical ones. From Paul's perspective his reward is yet future, a perspective he desires the Philippians to adopt, and nothing he could gain in this world, even his physical life, can dissuade him for serving God. Paul's conclusion, in light of his perception, is that since the gospel is being preached, regardless of motive, he will rejoice. After all, the advancement of the gospel is the advancement of the mission to which Paul has given his life.

As we draw these first few verses to a close, we have focused on the apostle's circumstances and his behaviour in the midst of them. That has been set against those who serve the mission of God with questionable motives. Woven through those behavioural patterns is a perspective tied directly to Paul's *in Christ* worldview. As we progress forward, that perspective gets clearer and will find its sharpest focus at verse 21 in his claim, "as far as I'm concerned, to live is Christ and to die is gain."

Verses 18b – 21

^{18b} *In addition to that I also rejoice¹⁹ for I know that this will turn out for my salvation, through your prayers and the aid of the Spirit of Jesus Christ.* ²⁰ *Accordingly it is with eager expectation and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but instead, with all boldness, now as always, Christ will be exalted in my body whether it is through my life or my death* ²¹ *because as far as I am concerned, to live is Christ and to die is gain.*

The construction, Ἀλλὰ καὶ χαρήσομαι, is often translated *Yes, I will rejoice*. In Paul's 26 uses of this Ἀλλὰ καὶ construct, 25 of them depict something cumulative or in

addition to.¹⁸² Not only does Paul rejoice over the proclamation of the gospel, regardless of the motives, but also in addition to that he rejoices οἶδα γὰρ ὅτι, *for I know that*, things will turn out well for him.

The further we move through this text the more focused we become on Paul's own perceptions of life in Christ and now we see how that perception informs his view of the future. Paul does not think of his own internal mental fortitude as being instrumental in this outcome. The two head terms, *prayer* and *support*, are closely related as evidenced by the sharing of the common article. This emphasises the close relationship between prayer and the role the Spirit plays in supplying Paul with what he needs to champion his situation.¹⁸³ By introducing these here, we are given some insight into how Paul sees his own contribution to the mission of God being sustained. While it is God's mission, providentially advanced by him, God has chosen, in this case Paul, to participate in its fulfillment. Paul can only see himself capable of this through the prayers of the saints, which assumes God's response and intervention, and the work of the Spirit, which has many of the same assumptions.

A missional hermeneutic causes us to ask, in what way does the biblical text implicate us as we seek to be obedient to our missional mandate? A missional hermeneutic that does not attend to this side of biblical studies is not the hermeneutic that Wright advocates. Once we move from the providential advancement of the mission to human participation in it, we by necessity must speak of partnership with one another and with God. We have clearly seen God's advancement of his mission, but what of the human role? Paul did, after all, go to Macedonia, he did preach to Lydia, rebuked the

¹⁸² Silva, *Philippians*, 69 cites Hawthorne and Arndt, Danker, and Bauer to indicate this to be appropriate.

¹⁸³ Sumney, *Philippians*, 25–26.

demon, remained a captive to preach to captives, and now as a prisoner his efforts continue to advance the gospel. It was the Spirit, however, that prevented Paul from going to Asia (Acts 16:6–7) and re-directed his efforts into Macedonia (Acts 16:9–10). When mission is at its finest, the lines between divine and human agency begin to blur a little. Perhaps in our western culture, prayer and the work of the Spirit have been replaced by marketing and theater lights, to the degree that our dependence on God has been obscured. There is much to hear at this point on participating in mission, the role of prayer and the work of the Spirit, given whose mission it actually is.

Another dimension of this is in the question: does Paul have in mind what the Spirit does in him to sustain him personally, or is it what the Spirit does through him to advance the gospel? Both would be consistent with Pauline thought and the two are not mutually exclusive. We receive the Spirit (Eph 1:13; Gal 3:5), and that same Spirit manifests himself through the believer (1 Cor 12:7). Zerwick, on the use of the genitive in either an objective or subjective fashion, as is the case here, suggests that when “interpreting the sacred text, we must beware lest we sacrifice to clarity of meaning, part of the fullness of the meaning.”¹⁸⁴ What is obvious here is that Paul’s capacity to stay his course is not the result of his own resolve but comes about through the supernatural work of God, solicited by the prayers of the saints and as the Holy Spirit works, both in him and through him.

After this brief insight on the role of prayer and the work of the Holy Spirit, Paul returns to his assurance of vindication and with such assurance, he has no reason to be intimidated or bullied into a departure from his faith. κατὰ, *accordingly*, Paul can imagine no context in which he would be ashamed. Paul’s confidence is expressed by the

¹⁸⁴ Zerwick, *Biblical Greek*, 13.

hendiadys in which a single idea is expressed by two words, *eager expectation and hope*, both of which are Paul's. O'Brien warns that:

Many commentators, taking their cue from the picturesque etymology of the word, ἀποκαραδοκίαν regard it as synonymous with ἐλπίς. H. A. A. Kennedy's definition, based on etymology, 'the concentrated intense hope which ignores other interests (ἀπό), and strains forward as with outstretched head (κάρα, δοκεῖν)', is often quoted with approval.¹⁸⁵

Yet others assert that the phrase is reflective of a theological construct,¹⁸⁶ or that it has some sophisticated narrative subtext. Once you make this conclusion, the options as to which construct begin to add up rather quickly. There is little agreement on how to handle such a little phrase *eager expectation and hope*. In spite of the picturesque etymology it seems best to simply treat this adjunct as a continuance of the primary verb. By doing this the little phrase *eager expectation and hope* is simply a way of intensifying the conviction that Paul has. The degree to which we push the etymology will continue to be debated but the intensifying nature of the adjunct seems plain. Paul knows he's right, period. It also leads us to ask the question, what does Paul expect to occur: of what is he so convinced?

The clause that answers this uses the adversative Ἀλλὰ to set up the contrast between the negative expression, "I will not be put to shame," and the positive, "Christ will be exalted."

The wording is carefully chosen, for instead of using the first person active construction of the verb μεγαλύνω [Χριστόν], which would correspond with αἰσχυνθήσομαι but which would have given undue prominence to himself, the apostle changes to the third person. Christ becomes the subject (μεγαλυνθήσεται Χριστός) and Paul is simply the instrument by which the greatness of Christ shines out: behind the passive

¹⁸⁵ O'Brien, *Philippians*, 112. Italics mine.

¹⁸⁶ O'Brien, *Philippians*, 113.

voice the activity of God is implied, with Paul being the instrument in the divine hands.¹⁸⁷

In the above quote O'Brien is trying to bring to the surface a contextual subtlety which clearly portrays the apostle as dependant on Christ and others, perhaps even more than on himself, to fulfill what the contrast implies, that Christ will be exalted. From a rhetorical perspective this verse stands as an ideal which others, through implication or direct address, are called to imitate. Paul, given his convictions about the reality of life, is set free to give himself fully to the task of exalting Christ. The goal to exalt Christ seems to be a key element for both Paul and the church as they fulfill their missional mandate, even if it costs Paul his life. Yet, as the above quotation alerts us, the passive voice may suggest that Paul is not really the agent in this exaltation. Paul is certainly the willing participant, but once again it is a humble submission to the mission of God in whatever way God chooses to advance that mission, whether life or death. The first resolve of any servant is that Christ will be exalted.

It may be difficult to think of suffering as something that glorifies or exalts Christ. However, Paul clearly sees it this way. He understood that he would suffer because Christ taught this (Matt 24; John 21:19). Paul was told it would be his portion (Acts 9:15). Paul himself says that "I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions (Col 1:24). While in our culture death or even suffering is thought of as a bad thing, we can look at the events that unfolded for Paul and for that matter, all of the early disciples, as a very positive thing. To this day, the suffering and martyrdom of early Christians remains one of the strongest apologetics the church has to the reality of the resurrection of Christ and his teachings. The early believers, including the disciples, had absolutely

¹⁸⁷ O'Brien, *Philippians*, 115.

nothing to gain by propagating the message of Christ. In fact, due to their testimony most of them died horribly. Imagine though a different story for a moment. Imagine the disciples and early church leaders gaining wealth and living in comfort from the offerings and sacrificial service of those who believed. Imagine them living to a ripe old age in this luxury and comfort. If this were true, the credibility of their testimony would be in serious question. They would have too much to gain by perpetuating a lie. Yet, because of Paul's resolve that Christ would be exalted in his body through life or death, we have today the testimony of those who gave their lives for the truth of the gospel. We might say that their lives and deaths were God's mechanism to advance the gospel, which is in essence what Paul has just said. Every historian is now faced with the challenge of the resurrection because of the existence of an early church that believed in it to the point of death, and yes, even death on a cross.¹⁸⁸ This single mindedness can be heard in Paul throughout his literature. This is the sort of steadfast resolve that we hear elsewhere in Paul's words. "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith" (2 Tim 4:7).

In the end, emphasis must fall on the concept that, regardless of what happens, Christ will be exalted (1:20) through Paul's life or death. This will be realized because Paul understands that being *in Christ* can only lead to one end, his own vindication. With nothing to lose, he commends himself to exalting Christ regardless of the implications in this life. If we go back to verses 18b–19, we understand that Paul is here expressing another reason for rejoicing. Just as Paul understood that his chains were not the final say in the advancement of the gospel, so too, even death cannot dictate the advancement of

¹⁸⁸ Tradition holds that both Peter and Andrew were crucified, Peter upside down but Andrew with two ends of the cross in the ground, thus St. Andrew's Cross.

the gospel, which is the result of God at work through his servants. Perspective is everything, and from Paul's perspective *to live is Christ and to die is gain*.

In (1:21) we are confronted with two primary clauses, which have become famous in their own right. They are closely related to the preceding paragraph, as suggested by the post positive, γὰρ, *for*. The constructs are the same with an articular infinitive serving as the verb, and the subjects being *Christ* and *gain* respectively. The dative ἑμοὶ, *to me*, as one would expect, specifies from whose perspective the comments are true, in this case Paul's. Idiomatically it might be rendered, *from my perspective* or *as far as I'm concerned to live is Christ and to die is gain*.

This little phrase has garnered much attention due to its succinct expression of Paul's outlook on life itself. If Paul continues to live, it will be a life that is *in Christ* with a primary behavioural pattern of serving others as an expression of serving Christ, and if Paul dies it would mean that he would receive the fullness of all his hope, which must also be understood as *in Christ*. Paul sees all of creation moving toward a particular end, (Rom 8:22–24) one he is prepared to participate in and to which he strives to prepare all people. From Paul's perspective it is not about living or dying, it is about Christ. In light of this Paul continues his discourse.

Verses 22–26

²²*If I continue to live I can go on serving Christ to your benefit, how can I choose* ²³*I'm torn between the two. I desire to depart and be with Christ which is better for me,* ²⁴*but, it is better for you if I remain.* ²⁵*Convinced that it is necessary for your sake, I know that I will remain and stay with all of you for your joy and progress in the faith* ²⁶*in order that your pride in Christ Jesus may increase as I return to you again.*

Paul uses a number of short, and at times difficult, clauses to allow us a brief look into a decision-making process.¹⁸⁹ With participation in God's mission as a focal point for Paul, and serving being the pinnacle of his ethic, his understanding about how his life will play out centres not on him but on others. This appears to be Paul's methodology for exalting Christ. Given the options then of life or death, how can this decision be made? Even though it is not Paul's to make, how does one choose? At first glimpse or from a strictly human perspective to choose life makes sense. There is however more at stake than Paul's own desires and wellbeing.

We can observe grammatically that Paul speaks of two possible options. The first is that he would live and if so, there are implications of that. The second is his potential death and the gratification that such a turn of events would bring to Paul. This is visible through Paul's use of, τί αἰρήσομαι, *which to choose*, (v. 22) and in (v. 23), τῶν δύο, *the two*, of which one is characterized as *better* and the other *necessary*.

We would also have to observe that Paul does have a conviction as to how this, like his circumstances mentioned earlier, will turn out and why he believes it. Paul says, *I know that I will remain and continue with you*. The phrase that follows this in verse 25 helps us see why Paul expects this outcome; primarily it would serve the Philippians' *progress and joy in the faith* (25–26). The foundation of this conviction is very important; Paul believes that the benefit of his continued service to the Philippians, and therefore to God, governs the available choices, regardless of his personal preference to depart and be with Christ. Such a commitment to serve others is a trait he expects to hear of in the Philippians (2:3) and the failure to do so has already been seen in a negative light (1:15–17). What we can conclude then is that in Paul's mind the choice to live or die, while not

¹⁸⁹ Fee, *Philippians*, 144.

in his control, will be governed by the benefit he can provide to the Philippians as a servant. Paul effectively removes himself from the decision-making process and places the needs of others center stage. This, of course, is because Paul sees himself as a servant to the unfolding divine narrative, not the author, and his part is clearly defined as apostle to the Gentiles. This is how a missional reading implicates the church today, in following Paul's model; the primary ethic is expressed in serving others.

There is nothing here that demands this to be a prophetic claim of freedom. Paul's eventual martyrdom, according to tradition,¹⁹⁰ does not negate his conviction at this time; it is merely Paul's way of trying to express his own orientation to his circumstances in light of the grand narrative, an orientation he will ask the Philippians to adopt.

Verses 27–28

²⁷Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear that you are standing firm, in one spirit, with one mind, striving together for the faith of the gospel; ²⁸in no way alarmed by your opponents—which is a sign of destruction for them, but of salvation for you, and that too, from God.

Up to this point the apostle has provided a report to the Philippians that has centred on his circumstances and his own orientation toward them. The two main points are ethical and perceptual. Paul's ethical expectation is that Christ would be exalted in his body whether he lives or dies through his humble submission to the mission of God and in his serving attitude. The perception that governs that is captured succinctly in his words, "as far as I'm concerned, to live is Christ and to die is gain." He now turns his attention toward the Philippians and their context as he calls them to the same orientation; a camaraderie as fellow servants in the mission of God and an orientation toward unity.

¹⁹⁰ Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 130.

While verse 27 has no connecting particle, the context clearly requires a continuation from the previous material. The expression at verse 27b, *whether I come and see you, or remain absent*, is a return to the content of verses 25–26 and makes the connection clear. The imperative clause, *lead your lives in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ*, is the single concern, Μόνον, *only*. O'Brien states, correctly, that:

this comprehensive exhortation stands as a rubric to the whole section 1:27–2:18, with the subsequent admonitions and statements expanding and explicating what is involved in living worthily of the gospel.¹⁹¹

While I disagree with his termination point 2:18, his assertion regarding this structure holds true and the previous material has provided the foundational piece for Paul's rhetoric, which calls the Philippians to have the same orientation to life, understanding their place in the grand narrative.

Edgar Krentz hears strong overtones of civic language, leading to the translation, *as citizens conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ*.¹⁹²

In Philippians Paul uses extensive political language, language at home in the environment of a Greek polis and/or a Roman *urbs*. Much of this language is unique to Philippians. For example, Paul uses the terms πολιτεύεσθαι and πολίτευμα only in Philippians (1:27 and 3:20). The term πολίτευμα denotes the political group to which one belongs.¹⁹³

The question is whether Paul means fine Roman citizens or citizen of heaven, as though the Philippians are somehow displaced citizens. Paul's usage in Phil 3:20 and Eph 2:19 would favour citizenship in heaven¹⁹⁴ and the argument has weight especially in light of heavenly citizenship mentioned later in Philippians. Paul also speaks of Roman

¹⁹¹ O'Brien, *Philippians*, 146.

¹⁹² O'Brien, *Philippians*, 144, see also Hendriksen and Kistemaker, *Philippians*, 80, and Lightfoot, *Philippians*, 105, as all take this route.

¹⁹³ Krentz, "Civic Culture and the Philippians," 258.

¹⁹⁴ Lightfoot, *Philippians*, 105.

citizenship though, as in Acts 16:37–38, where he appeals to his Roman citizenship in order to force a hearing with local authorities.

The verb has reference, accordingly, to Christian conduct, a manner of life that befits a citizen-soldier who belongs to the kingdom and army of Jesus Christ. Naturally, good citizens of the realm of Christ will also be good citizens of the Roman realm.¹⁹⁵

Fowl suggests that while the primary thought is citizenship in heaven Paul would naturally argue that such citizenship has implication in this world as well. Fowl then favors the dual sense by focusing on the element of community, with either a civic or religious sense, by suggesting they order their common life in a manner worthy of the gospel. Richard Hays argues that this communal life in Pauline churches is a significant issue in Pauline literature stating that the church is a “community, in its corporate life, called to embody an alternative order that stands as a sign of God’s redemptive purposes in the world. This is the concrete social manifestation of the righteousness of God.”¹⁹⁶ In this sense the church is made up citizens from a whole other realm bearing testimony to that reality. Their communal life is the window through which the world sees the reality of God and his mission to redeem and restore. Newbigin referred to this concept when he suggested that the church is the world’s hermeneutic on the gospel.¹⁹⁷

The way in which the community of faith lives and works together can be seen as a high priority throughout scripture. It is in this sense that Israel was to function missionally. God had made Israel as a nation that would exalt his name (2 Sam 7:23) yet their failure to live in humble obedience resulted in the charge that, “they have profaned my name among the nations” (Ezek 20). God had become a joke to the surrounding

¹⁹⁵ Hendriksen and Kistemaker, *Philippians*, 80–81.

¹⁹⁶ Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 196.

¹⁹⁷ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 222.

nations. Paul's concern for the church at Philippi is that as a community they walk in a manner worthy of the gospel, missionally. Ethics are not conversation points on soteriology but rather a missional conversation on how we exalt Christ as a community. Paul provides the church at Philippi with some indication as to how they should order their communal life, how they should stand and what that would look like.

That Paul has in mind loyalty *to the Lord* is clear from the context (and see 4:1), and that this firmness must be exercised *over against the opponents or adversaries* and *in the midst of persecution* appears clearly from verses 28–30. Divine *preservation* does not cancel but implies human *perseverance*.¹⁹⁸

They stand, in one spirit, in one soul, struggling as one person in the faith of the gospel.

What can be said is that *one in spirit* is to be the experience of the community. Whether it is the result of the Spirit's work or the church's determination to live in unity, it is, none the less, the context in which they are to stand. In turn, *one soul*, is clearly descriptive of the communal condition and the clause in which it rests points to a public expression of that community as they contend for the faith, its spread and growth.¹⁹⁹ The Philippians are not merely the sum of their parts; they are the visible expression of God on the earth to the degree to which they stand as that united entity. They are together in a deep unity that Paul expresses using various forms of *one* (ἐν ἐνὶ and μιᾷ). In chapter 2, Timothy is praised for this strong camaraderie with Paul as they work together to advance God's mission. In the same manner Epaphroditus and later Euodia and Syntyche receive praise for the same thing, though of course the two ladies need to work on their mutual

¹⁹⁸ Hendriksen and Kistemaker, *Philippians*, 85. see also Rom 14:4; Gal 5:1; 1 Thess 3:8; 2 Thess 2:15; and especially the beautiful passage, 1 Cor 16:13, 14.

¹⁹⁹ O'Brien, *Philippians*, 152.

camaraderie. This unity among believers is to run deep and it occurs at the point where the soul and spirit meet.²⁰⁰

Their unity in both spirit and soul breeds a sort of corporate confidence in the grand narrative they hold to, in spite of those that might, through varying forms of persecution, try to startle them.²⁰¹ Persecution by the Roman government could be harsh and is well attested to. James Dunn in his book, *Jesus Remembered*, cites the historian Suetonius as stating that “since the Jews were constantly causing disturbances at the instigation of Christ, he (Claudius) expelled them from the city (Rome).”²⁰² This was in AD 49 and by that time Nero was looking for a scapegoat to pin the burning of Rome on. Christians were brutalized then and have been ever since. To what degree this occurred in Philippi we do not know, but it is fair to assume that Rome’s attitude toward the Christians was known in Philippi. Regardless of the persecution, Paul’s encouragement is that the Philippians stand firm, not being intimidated in any way, which will serve as *a sign of destruction to those outside the church, but (it is, in fact, a sign) of your salvation and this is from God.*

In what way can a church that stands firmly united serve as a sign of destruction to those who oppose it? This question has led to two readings. The first and more traditional example is that Christian communal living even in the midst of persecution is an apologetic. In this way, the opponents see the steadfastness and may reason that the Christian testimony must be valid, in which case they either repent or, as the verse

²⁰⁰ See Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 321 (26.5), for a lengthy discussion on this.

²⁰¹ Melick, *Philippians*, 90.

²⁰² Dunn, *Jesus remembered*, 142. The material is also available at “LacusCurtius, ‘Suetonius’ Twelve Caesars.” <http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Suetonius/12Caesars/home.html>.

suggests, are destroyed. There is, however, an alternate reading provided by

Hawthorne²⁰³ and endorsed by Fowl.²⁰⁴

He then proposes that ὑμῶν applies to both ἀπωλείας and σωτηρίας, with this resulting idea: “For although they see your loyalty to truth ἥτις referring to πίστει as inevitably leading to your persecution and death ... you see it as leading through persecution to the salvation of your souls.”²⁰⁵

Fowl contends that, from the perspective of the opponents at Philippi, the Philippians’ communal life is a flagrant departure from Roman decorum and as such rightfully leads to their destruction, but, in reality, their life in Christ leads to their salvation. Here salvation is being used with the same sense of vindication that Paul used earlier. In this case we are back to perspectives and there is some contextual warrant for this. However, both Hawthorne and Fowl feel that the weakness of the traditional view is with a sign to the opponents which is in fact unintelligible to them. Christianity though has signs which can be either understood or viewed as foolishness.²⁰⁶ The validity of the sign is not undermined by the incapacity of certain individuals to understand it, even if it is for them. Regardless of the reading, the implication for the church is that suffering is not inconsistent with being in Christ just as Paul’s chains are not. We find ourselves once again in a discussion on suffering and in such contexts suffering does not rule the day, character does, and in this case, the character of the community leads through suffering to a greater purpose.

²⁰³ Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 72–74.

²⁰⁴ Fowl, *Philippians*, 68. His footnote clearly attributes the reading to Hawthorne.

²⁰⁵ Silva, *Philippians*, 90. Silva ultimately rejects this reading and suggests that the syntax is barely defensible and that the close parallel in 2 Thess 1:4–8 would make such a reading untenable

²⁰⁶ See 1 Cor 1:18 where the message of the Cross is foolishness to those who are perishing.

Verses 29–30

For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him experiencing the same conflict which you saw in me, and now hear to be in me.

The centrality of Jesus to the gospel, his messianic identity as King of Israel, his life, including suffering, death and resurrection are all points of identity for the apostle Paul. He clearly states later in Philippians that he wants to know Christ, the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings (3:10). For Paul, these are as much identity markers as circumcision was to him as a Pharisaic Jew, but Paul gladly trades the Jewish identity markers for his new life in Christ. He states, “we always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body” (2 Cor 4:10, see also Col 1:24–25; Gal. 6:17; 1 Thess 2:14–16). The words echo those of Jesus who said of Paul, “I will show him how much he must suffer for my name’s sake” (Acts 9:16) or of all believers, “Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A slave is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:20). Paul recognizes that an identity associated with Jesus’ suffering will be one identified by his glory as well (Rom 8:17). In this light, suffering is a testimony of one’s union with Christ and as such is an indicator of future glory. This is why Paul refers to the Philippians’ suffering as a gracious gift in the same way their faith in Christ is a gracious provision.

The believers at Philippi were drawn mainly from a Gentile and pagan background, and for them the idea of suffering ‘for one’s god’ was entirely new.²⁰⁷ In fact, the shift for the Philippians from their pagan roots to walking in a manner worthy of the gospel confronts many cultural norms. Fowl, for example, draws attention to the difficulty that free Romans would have in thinking of themselves as anyone’s servant²⁰⁸ which now in Christ is exactly what they are. The formation of a community that is aware of their own role in the mission of God as a sent people seems paramount to Paul as he tries to orient them around their new identity in Christ.

The suffering that is referred to here is said to be *for Christ*. These little words are rich in meaning and could suggest that suffering comes because of a belief in Christ or at least suffering as you stand firm in defence of the faith. Hawthorne suggests that it can also suggest, *in place of Christ*.

If this is the idea, then the phrase has reached its most profound meaning. ὑπὲρ Χριστοῦ ... πάσχειν, “suffering ... for Christ,” then would indicate that the Philippians are in some way permitted to suffer in Christ’s stead. To use the apostle’s own words: in that the Philippians are suffering, as he himself, they actually are filling up “what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s sufferings” (Col 1:24–25).²⁰⁹

John Piper in his sermon, “Filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions,” suggests that what Paul means here is this:

What’s missing is the in-person presentation of Christ’s sufferings to the people for whom he died. The afflictions are lacking in the sense that they are not seen and known among the nations. They must be carried by ministers of the gospel. And those ministers of the gospel fill up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ by extending them to others. Paul sees his

²⁰⁷ O’Brien, *Philippians*, 158.

²⁰⁸ Fowl, *Philippians*, 84–88.

²⁰⁹ Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 75.

own suffering as the visible re-enactment of the sufferings of Christ so that they will see Christ's love for them.²¹⁰

In this manner the Philippians are given the gracious privilege of trusting in Christ and, in addition to that, suffering as representatives of Christ. In this sense their suffering is an apologetic for the gospel. This new experience for the Philippians is exactly the same thing they saw happening to Paul during his stay in Philippi and now hear about during his imprisonment (v. 30). They are in every sense of the word, partners in the gospel because they not only assist Paul through the gift brought by Epaphroditus but also suffer in their presentation of Christ.

Synthesis

We stated at the beginning of this section that perception can change one's sense of reality. Certainly Paul's shift from persecutor of the church to missionary statesman is a testimony of that. Paul's perception of reality, informed by revelation, grants him a conviction as to how history will unfold and in turn gives him courage to face circumstances as nothing more than vehicles for God to advance his mission. The challenge then for the church at Philippi and today is first a perceptual one. The church must understand itself as being *in Christ* and as such subject to the current reality and future hope of that location. The second challenge is how that perception expresses itself. It appears that Paul sees himself as a servant, and if by his life or death Christ can exalt himself, then Paul's life is in his hands. If the church at Philippi is at all struggling in light of the opposition to their way of life, this perception will go a long way in motivating them to stay their course. Believers are servants who humbly submit to

²¹⁰ Piper, "Filling up what is lacking in Christ's Afflictions," a sermon. High Pointe Baptist Church, October 19, 2008.

providence with the conviction that they will exalt Christ in every situation whether in life or death and in that, they find joy. The character of the believing community, regardless of its circumstances, living in full assurance of the reality they have embraced, the reality of God's mission, will be an apologetic to the world. Perspective is everything and it has the capacity to change one's sense of reality.

Philippians 2:1–18

Walking in a Manner Worthy of the Gospel: The Example of Christ

Introductory comments

I submit the words by Markus Bockmuehl as an offering before I venture very far into this text: “none but the most conceited could claim to have mastered the secondary literature, and none but the dullest would find pleasure or interest in wading through it.”²¹¹

It is perhaps uncommon to interrupt the progression of a project with another introduction but, given the nature of Philippians 2, it seems appropriate to provide some sense of how the whole works before one tackles the parts. I take my lead here from Gordon Fee and his discussion on 2:6–11 as he seeks to understand the form, “is it a hymn or not,” and its function, “is it ethical or not.” The first issue, whether it is a hymn or not, is somewhat of a red herring.

The reason for identifying verses 6–11 as a hymn is due in part to its literary structure and the almost majestic nature of the prose. These verses were isolated as “common to worship” by the early church in the work of Lohmeyer.²¹² Many

²¹¹ Bockmuehl, “The Form of God,” 1.

²¹² Marchal, “Expecting a Hymn, Encountering an Argument,” 247.

commentators²¹³ including O'Brien, Melick, and Fowl refer to this passage as a hymn as well. In the case of those listed with O'Brien, the suggestion that it is a hymn is for the most part recognition of the work done on the text but has little bearing on its exegesis. For others the discussion seems to be prompted by the assumption that, if it is a hymn, then it likely pre-existed Paul, and if so, he made additions or deletions. An example of this would be Talbert's "Problem of pre-existence in Philippians 2:6–11."²¹⁴ In this work, the form is assumed a hymn, and it tries to identify non-Pauline elements and remove them from the analysis. But in the words of Fee, any attempt at "excision of words or lines is an exercise in exegetical futility."²¹⁵ Fee suggests that Käsemann and Martin have made this exegetical error in their treatment of this text. "In their case the meaning of the 'hymn' is to be discovered first in isolation from its present context, then that meaning is contended for as the one Paul himself intends in context"²¹⁶ because of the assumption that it would be a common reference point between Paul and the Philippians. Such an approach makes exegesis very difficult since a basic assumption in exegesis is,

all the present words are included because they contribute in some way to Paul's own concerns. To assume otherwise is a form of exegetical nihilism, in which on non-demonstrable prior grounds, one determines that an author did not mean anything by the words he uses.²¹⁷

This is perhaps the strongest argument for taking the text as it is and then, having given regard to its syntax and semantics, attempt to understand the whole within its current contextual element. Fee concludes that verses 6–11 are, in fact, not a hymn and even if it is, "in its present form it has been so thoroughly taken over by Paul as to render

²¹³ Marchal suggests that the most focused resources for information on these debates are Martin, *A Hymn of Christ: Philippians 2:5–11*; Martin and Dodd, *Where Christology Began*.

²¹⁴ Talbert, "Problem of Pre-existence in Philippians 2:6–11," 141–53.

²¹⁵ Fee, "Philippians 2:5–11," 34.

²¹⁶ Fee, "Philippians 2:5–11," 36.

²¹⁷ Fee, "Philippians 2:5–11," 34.

discussions of its prior existence as to its form, authorship, and background needless or meaningless.”²¹⁸ Fee is familiar with Fowl’s work on this text and the two of them share many of the same insights. Fowl, however, does refer to it as a hymn but in the loosest sense of the word and, as Fee suggests, attends to its final form in Philippians rather than being pre-occupied with its origins. I adopt a similar approach here.

In terms of the text’s function, Lohmeyer maintained that the text was ethical in that it called the Philippians to imitate the humility depicted in the text. The ethical interpretation held sway until the 1920’s. After that, Käsemann thought the imperative, *ῥονεῖτε*, *to have an attitude, to think in a particular manner*,²¹⁹ suggested something deeper. Käsemann held that the hymn narrates an event of mythic proportions: a descent into the world of humanity and death and an ascent into heavenly exaltation. Given the soteriological portrayal of the events, it became even more “difficult to imagine imitation as a goal, since followers could not realistically hope to repeat the redemptive act and exaltation of Christ.”²²⁰ Käsemann argued that Paul’s usage of the text was to anchor Christian conduct to the reality of being in Christ.

Fowl suggests that the letter’s most “comprehensive purpose is the shaping of a Christian community, a practical moral reasoning that is conformed to Christ’s death in hope of his resurrection.”²²¹ Paul’s use of imitation, which seems to be in view here, consistently has the sense “be as I am.”²²² Whatever else we may garner from this text, we must understand that Paul has employed it in an attempt to form their communal life in Christ. While the text, if a hymn, may have a multitude of background theological

²¹⁸ Fee, “Philippians 2:5–11,” 43.

²¹⁹ Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 324.

²²⁰ Marchal, “Expecting a Hymn, Encountering an Argument,” 247.

²²¹ Fowl, *Philippians*, 106.

²²² Fee, “Philippians 2:5–11,” 38.

implications, its primary purpose is a rhetorical one, calling the Philippians to imitate the servant hood it depicts. Käsemann fails to distinguish between the behaviours that cannot be duplicated and the attitudes behind them that the text calls us to emulate. I would argue, in agreement with Fowl, that the bulk of Philippians addresses the communal mindset at Philippi and how that mindset influences their communal interactions and in turn their public ones.

The last issue here is how we understand $\mu\omicron\rho\varphi\eta$, *form*. The term occurs in verse 6 in relation to Christ being in the form of God and then later in verse 7 with Christ being in the form of a servant. It seems only appropriate that the terms be understood in the same manner, otherwise the duplication is confusing. The discussions on how to handle this are rather long, and Lightfoot settles on the idea that, “ $\mu\omicron\rho\varphi\eta$ implies not the external accidents but the essential attributes.”²²³ O’Brien concludes that “ $\mu\omicron\rho\varphi\eta$ refers to that form which truly and fully expresses the being which underlies it.”²²⁴ Fowl also agrees²²⁵ and adds his own voice suggesting that, *in form of God*, is best interpreted against the background of the glory of God. This would be consistent with Col 2:9 and Heb 1 and whatever we attach by way of nuance to the term, *form*, it includes what is seen. This is also consistent with Jesus’ own words in John 14:9 when he says, “if you have seen me you have seen the father”. Jesus expresses in his physical form, character, and persona a perfect expression of God’s glory, his character, thoughts, mannerisms, and all that could ever be said to be descriptive of the Father. At the same time the text will tell us that Jesus also had the form of a servant, suggesting again that in the same manner Jesus expressed all that it means to be a servant. Fee warns “the choice of $\mu\omicron\rho\varphi\eta$ almost

²²³ Lightfoot, *Philippians*, 110.

²²⁴ O’Brien, *Philippians*, 210.

²²⁵ Fowl, *Philippians*, 94.

certainly has nothing to do with the long debates over its fine nuances, but rather was chosen precisely because Paul needed a word that would fit both modes of Jesus' existence."²²⁶ In other words, the issue may not be so much the form itself as the behaviour in either form. In this manner the term serves to strengthen the contrast between what Jesus would not do, *take or seize* something, and what he would do which is *pour himself out* and serve.

Verses 1–4

¹Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, ²then make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. ³Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; ⁴do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.

The imperative to walk in a manner worthy of the gospel (1:27) was followed by an indication of what that would look like. The terms standing firm, in one spirit and contending as one person for the gospel without fear capture this. Paul now returns to this imperative and through a series of rhetorical questions (Phil 2:1) explores the blessings bestowed on the Philippians because they are in Christ which uniquely qualifies them to serve one another in a missional posture.

Paul uses four first class conditional clauses here. The usage is straightforward in terms of conditional clauses. If the condition is true, and in this case it is assumed so, then certain implications should follow. In this sense, one could translate the clauses beginning with *since*, though this would not be true of other examples found in the New

²²⁶ Fee, "Philippians 2:5–11," 40.

Testament.²²⁷ Fowl suggests that if the conditional sense is to be retained in any way “it would be in terms of ironic understatement.”²²⁸

Notice should be taken of the prepositional phrase *in Christ*, found in the first of these conditional clauses, and though embedded in the first clause it serves as the context or realm in which each of the following substantives is experienced. Paul uses these conditional clauses as a way of bringing the Philippians’ place of privilege into the foreground. Paul is in essence offering a list of core benefits for those who are in Christ. Such benefits could lead to a sense of arrogance in the believer. In Eph 2:12, Paul also provides such a list, things now experienced in Christ but at one time benefits the Gentiles were denied:

remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. (Eph 2:12)

The inference is that Israel did have these things and they considered themselves privileged over other nations. Jesus tells a parable in Luke 18:9 in which he casts such an arrogant attitude in a negative light. In Rom 11:18 he warns believers not to be arrogant toward Israel given the place of privilege the church has. As a nation, Israel had been chosen, not to be above the nations but for the nations. Abraham’s election was not about the benefit to him, it was about bringing a blessing to the nations through him. Abraham’s election is a missional election in that it advances the mission of God with an end result of a blessing that moves from the individual, Abraham, to the nations. In the same way the blessings listed in Phil 1 are not to give rise to arrogance.

²²⁷ Melick, *Philippians*, 93.

²²⁸ Fowl, *Philippians*, 78.

Here the Philippians are reminded of their place of privilege. They too have been chosen and are now *in Christ*, a privileged place indeed, characterized by encouragement, love, the fellowship of the Spirit, and mercy. This place of privilege, however, is a location that should not breed arrogance toward anyone but rather motivate to serve everyone. The conclusion is a very natural one: “If then, to any extent you have all these experiences, and share in these blessings, then do the following...”²²⁹

If we take seriously the challenge that comes from Richard Hays when he says that, “the community, in its communal life, is called to embody an alternative order that stands as a sign of God's redemptive purposes in the world,”²³⁰ it follows then that certain behaviours would be manifest in the church and those behaviours may, or may not, be counter to the culture in which the church finds itself. A missional reading recognizes a direct link between the communal life of the church, its apologetic of the gospel, and its capacity to advance the gospel. Paul’s argument is that its place of privilege uniquely qualifies the church to serve as this apologetic. Before going further, we should look at the core benefits Paul has listed which in turn set the stage for the public behaviour (2:2–4).

The first of these benefits is encouragement. We can read of encouragement in Rom 15:4–5 in which the scriptures encourage and again in 1Thess 5:11 as believers encourage one another. In both cases, the encouragement comes as the believers are reminded of the perspective on reality that God has given by way of revelation.

Encouragement comes as we are confronted with our new reality, whether that reality

²²⁹ Hendriksen and Kistemaker, *Philippians*, 99.

²³⁰ Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 196.

calls us to an ethic or offers a promise or a rebuke; it has the sense of an external influence which motivates to action.

The comfort mentioned, the second communal expression, is also in Christ. Paul sought to comfort the Thessalonians with the truth of the resurrection and a rapture (1 Thess 4:18). In this case, the comfort is found in the love of Christ. To be the object of God's love rather than his wrath has got to be thought of as blessing. Once again though, the truth of the grand narrative as revealed by God informs the Philippians of this love.

The third benefit is the blessing captured in the clause, *fellowship of the Spirit*. It occurs again in the benediction of 2 Cor 13:14. If we assume this to be the Holy Spirit, which is most common, and based on the parallel in Eph 4:1–4, it seems likely that Paul is suggesting that their unity is found in the Spirit rather than in any other identity marker. 1 Cor 12:13 comes to mind here where Paul said that by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Their fellowship could never be defined by social status, heritage, or any other marker. The fellowship of which Paul speaks that provides grounding for true unity is due to the common gift of the Spirit. At the foot of the cross the ground is level and to each one is given the same Spirit. This was how the early church verified Paul's ministry to the Gentiles in the first place. As they received the Spirit the Jewish believers could draw only one conclusion: the Gentiles are fellow partakers in the faith and therefore fellow saints with them (Acts 15). In this sense fellowship of the Spirit carries with it the nuance of equality among the church's members:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise. (Acts 15:28–29)

The last benefit listed, *compassion and mercy*, employs two forms. When linked, it becomes obvious that Paul is interested in a compassion that does not just look on with some empathy but goes further and acts with mercy. In this sense the pair are not equals but rather cumulative, compassion that leads to mercy or compassion even mercy. In Rom 9:22–24 Paul suggests the receipt of mercy from God is to both Jew and Gentile and as vessels of mercy; we display the glory of God. In Eph 2:4, it is God who is rich in mercy and rather than receive wrath we who were dead are made alive in Christ.

It would give Paul great joy to see this young church, having received so much in Christ, do three things. The first is that they live in unity, which he explains as being like-minded, having the same love, being united in spirit and intent on one purpose.²³¹ The second is that they have the attitude of humility, depicted first in the negative, *do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit*, and then in the positive, *consider others more important than yourselves*. Finally, in verse 4, Paul challenges the Philippians to give equal importance to their own needs and the needs of others. Such behavior looks unmistakably like love for one another and Jesus said that through that quality, love, all men would know that we are his disciples (John 13:35).²³²

The way in which the Christian community functions then is paramount in the church's ability to fulfill its own mission. Fowl, at this point, is leery of the connection between Paul's communal language and the Greco-Roman economy of friendship that some commentators wish to make:

many Greco-Roman commentators on friendship suggest that the common striving of friends is essentially a competition for honour. Within this

²³¹ O'Brien, *Philippians*, 177.

²³² Note the injunctions to practise this in 1 Thess 3:12, 1 Pet 4:8.

economy of honour friendship reflects a competitive movement of individuals each seeking their own advantage.²³³

In light of this, he suggests, we should be wary of seeing too close a connection. “The type of concord and friendship Paul commends here is in sharp contrast to those practises.”²³⁴ That Paul is using language similar to the Greco-Roman economy of concord and friendship is visible, says Fowl; however, that seems to be where the similarities end. A criticism levelled by Fowl is that many commentators fail to see this element of honouring others first in the whole of this epistle.²³⁵ The social structures, of which Paul is an advocate, can be seen in his own struggle to remain in the flesh (1:22–23) which is settled because it is better for the Philippians if he remains. The three examples in chapter 2 also depict this: Christ who humbles himself not seeking his own benefit, and Timothy who demonstrates a genuine concern for the Philippians’ welfare as opposed to those who only seek their own advantage. Likewise, Epaphroditus is honoured as one who ministers to Paul and is also concerned for the Philippians.²³⁶ Timothy and Epaphroditus are both commended to the Philippians as men worthy of honour because they practise humility which in turn exalts Christ. Paul clearly seems to be setting these people up as worthy to be mimicked.

Early in chapter 2 we are introduced to a way of thinking, later illustrated in Christ, that understands a place of privilege not as an opportunity to advance or to receive, but as a unique place from which the gospel can be made known through the church’s communal life as they serve one another. This unity is in spite of their diversity

²³³ Fowl, *Philippians*, 86.

²³⁴ Fowl, *Philippians*, 86.

²³⁵ Fowl, *Philippians*, 86.

²³⁶ Fowl, *Philippians*, 107. He is in agreement on the role of Timothy and Epaphroditus within the structure of the book.

in earthly status, origin, or gifting, and their service to one another is to be void of rank or prestige.

Verses 5–8

⁵*Make this way of thinking, which I have described, yours, just as it was Jesus Christ's.*
⁶*Who, existing in the form of God, did not think that his equality with God was something for his advantage* ⁷*but rather emptied himself by taking the form of a servant, being born as other humans,* ⁸*and being found in the appearance of a man he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*

With verses 5–11 we find ourselves at what is perhaps one of the most commented on passages in the New Testament. Its rich Christology and symmetry has drawn a lot of attention over the years, and rightly so. According to Marchal, this so-called hymn receives much more attention from scholarship than the letter as a whole does.²³⁷ We have already, though briefly, discussed its ethical nature and the value of considering whether its origins are, to borrow from Fee, “A Hymn or Exalted Pauline Prose.” Regardless of how one views these issues, the text is magnificent and holds a place of significance in many authors’ Christologies.

Structurally there are a few things to which we should draw attention. From a broader view, this passage is divided in two parts. The shift from one to the other is most visible as we consider the subject of the two parts. In the first half, verses 6–8, the subject is Christ whose activity serves as a paradigm for us to mimic. In the second half the subject becomes God the Father who exalts Christ to the highest place.

In dealing with verse 5 we must ask the question, what does the demonstrative pronoun point to? It is clear that Τοῦτο, *this*, restricts the meaning of φρονεῖτε, *attitude*, but the question is what does this construct point to.

²³⁷ Marchal, “Expecting a Hymn, Encountering an Argument,” 245.

Some desire to see the pronoun, Τοῦτο *this*, point forward to a way of thinking that is visible in Christ's behaviours; in this sense the pronoun is introducing new material and those looking for a break at verse 5 have it. However, if the pronoun points back to φρονῆτε, *a common way of thinking*, which has already been portrayed for us earlier in chapter 2, then ὃ, *which*, lets us know that this earlier attitude is now exemplified in Christ by the following material. In this case, verse 5 serves to link verses 1–4 with what follows. The impact is primarily on the function of verse 5 and has little bearing on verses 6–11. Given these structural elements, I have chosen to attach the pronoun to the preceding material noticing Paul's dual usage of φρονῆτε in 2:2 and here again in 2:5.²³⁸ In this sense we might translate verse 5, *Make this way of thinking, which we have just mentioned, yours, just as it was Christ's.*

In the first half of verses 6–11, as mentioned above, the subject is Christ, *who in form of God existing*. Care should be taken here to honour the present participle in terms of aspect. It is the only verbal form with a present tense in verses 6–11, suggesting that Paul is emphasising either the subject itself, Christ, or the activity of the subject inherent in the verb, namely the assertion of pre-existence.

We are confronted first with what Jesus did not do (v. 6) and then through the adversative (v. 7), given the contrast in terms of what he did do.

The ἀλλὰ ἐαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν must be held in contrast to οὐχ ἄρπαγμόν ἡγήσατο as its opposite in some way. This is a typically Pauline way of setting up an argument, especially when he wants to emphasize the point of the ἀλλὰ clause.²³⁹

²³⁸ In agreement with Fowl, *Philippians*, 89, and O'Brien, *Philippians*, 205.

²³⁹ Fee, "Philippians 2:5–11," 40.

The word ἀρπαγμὸν is rare both biblically and non-biblically. It is often translated in the negative, as the act of *seizure, robbery or plunder*, or in the positive as *a piece of good fortune, windfall or prize*.²⁴⁰ Lightfoot suggested that these two represent the most common approaches; however, N. T. Wright demonstrated 17 different perspectives on how to handle the term and then categorized them into 10 groups.²⁴¹ He concludes that, and there does seem to be consensus in this regard, the expression suggests that Christ did not plunder or try to seize what his status would normally afford him.

Over against the standard picture of oriental despots, who understood their position as something to be used for their own advantage, Jesus understood his position to *mean* self-negation, the vocation described in (v. 7–8). In Moule's phrase, divine equality does not mean “getting” but “giving”: it is properly expressed in self-giving love.²⁴²

This is ultimately where O'Brien and Fowl end up as well. Fowl suggests that, in spite of controversy over ἀρπαγμὸν, a consensus seems to be forming that Christ did not use his equality with God for his advantage. According to O'Brien, this view was first argued for by Hoover and has yet to be challenged on philological grounds.²⁴³

The negative trait that is being depicted here, and therefore to be avoided, is the assumption that one's status grants the privilege to acquire, whether that is monetary or political favour. In Paul's view, there is no room for a believer to assume a position of privilege over another believer regardless of their social status, gifting, or even apostleship. In Christ's situation, he does not assert his status but rather takes the form of a servant. Herein lies the contrast, Jesus did not use his place of divine equality with God to get something, but to give something, namely himself. Fowl asserts that the divinity of

²⁴⁰ Arndt, et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 134.

²⁴¹ Wright, “ἀρπαγμὸν,” 342–43.

²⁴² Wright, “ἀρπαγμὸν,” 345.

²⁴³ O'Brien, *Philippians*, 215.

Jesus was not considered by him as something for his own gain but as something that uniquely qualified him to be the perfect saviour.²⁴⁴

We are now told what Christ did do, he *emptied* himself, or in a metaphorical sense, his equality with God was *made of no effect*.²⁴⁵ First we should avoid suggesting that Christ divested himself of his deity or that in some way he ceased being divine. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus demonstrates his capacity to know (Luke 11:17; Matt 24), and exercised authority over the elements (Matt 8), sickness (Matt 4:23), and demons (Matt 4:24; 8:16). One might suggest that the transfiguration (Matt 17:1–9; Mark 9:2–8; Luke 9:28–36) would indicate omnipresence. Secondly, the means by which his equality with God being *made of no effect* is accomplished is not by giving up but rather by taking something on, or adding to himself. This would be consistent with the theological position known as the hypostatic union in which Christ retains his divinity in its fullness and at the same time adds to that the fullness of humanity.

Jesus adds to his nature *by taking the form of a slave*, putting himself in subjection to a master, in this case the Father. The full weight of the term should be allowed to stand here. While the metaphorical sense of a slave, strong commitment, is evidenced in the New Testament, here the image is of extremes. Jesus, though God with all the rights honours and privileges, takes to himself the lowest socioeconomic status possible, which depicts the degree to which Christ makes his equality with God of no effect or better, does not demand the recognition of his status as God but rather fulfills the role of a slave. This divine contradiction carries with it the inference that the followers of Jesus,

²⁴⁴ Fowl, *Philippians*, 95–96.

²⁴⁵ O'Brien, *Philippians*, 216.

regardless of their status, ought to do the same. The image of Jesus stooping down to wash feet illustrates God's social order;

You call Me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for *so* I am. If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master, nor is one who is sent greater than the one who sent him. (John 13:13–16 NASB).

Even in his humanity Jesus never had the need to assert his divinity in the sense of defending it. Nor did he use his divinity to meet his own physical needs but always as a means to serve others. Jesus knew who he was and found no need to demand what his position would normally expect. We might call this security, in the sense that he had nothing to prove.

The first clause of verse 8, *being found in appearance as a man*, is a construction that places Jesus in an adopted context: humanity.

The aorist participle γενόμενος (derived from γίνομαι), together with the preposition ἐν, stresses the notion of 'beginning' or 'becoming', in the sense of 'coming into a position, or a state', and stands in sharp contrast to the present participle ὑπάρχων of (6).²⁴⁶

According to O'Brien the tense suggests that at a point in time Christ took the form of man, as opposed to his eternal state as God. However, by leaving the verb in the aorist or default tense the emphasis remains on earlier present tense. In this manner the emphasis that it is *God* who is being found in the appearance as a man is enhanced.

The reference here is the incarnation and once again it infers not a loss but an addition. It is not a mystical existence; Jesus was born with flesh and blood like any other human and was subject to all the same frailties, yet retains his divinity. At the same time,

²⁴⁶ O'Brien, *Philippians*, 224.

however, something is lost. Jesus makes it clear (John 17:5) that he desires to have the glory he *once had*, suggesting that something has changed. Speculations abound in terms of what that is however. Suffice to say; what we have here is an extreme contrast, that the God of heaven should become the household servant who washes feet.

In this final part, Jesus, in his new location, humbles himself before God and the mission he was sent to participate in by exercising obedience. The repetitive nature of *death, death on a cross*, emphasises the humiliation of the cross and not just death itself, especially in light of Deut 21:23, “cursed is anyone who is hung on a tree.” Often in theological conversation the significance of the cross as a brutal form of execution finds its way to the foreground. Yet the emphasis here, contextually, is not the cross itself but rather the one who hung upon it; God himself takes the form of the sacrifice. The one who will be used as judge in the eschaton has just provided the very sacrifice necessary to satisfy the scales of divine justice. No wonder Paul has confidence.

Paul has asserted that Jesus, because of his equality with God, is not a collector or a hoarder of position, power, or anything material, but rather is uniquely qualified as the ultimate giver. In the same sense, the Philippians, regardless of their place of privilege in Christ, do not announce their superiority but instead they are uniquely positioned to be servants. Jesus, even though he is divine, has no repugnancy to the role of a slave since it is in that form that he can give of himself most effectively as one who participates in the mission of God. Understanding who we are in Christ grants a security that no personal context can ever diminish. We can be the lowliest of servants and retain our place as children of God. Maintaining the proper perspective is essential in maintaining a missional outlook.

The sending of the Son is a key element in the Mission of God as discussed earlier in this project. John's gospel alone records 15 occurrences of Jesus clearly stating that the Father had sent him and it is clear from John's gospel that the purpose of that coming was the cross. An entire thesis could be offered on Jesus, the servant of God's mission. We see then in the cross an ultimate expression of Christ's submission to the Father, and at the same time the love of a God whose nature is to give. No Christian in considering their own relationship to Christ can escape the missional challenge: "as the Father has sent me so send I you" (John 20:21).

Another missional element here, given the Trinitarian theology inherent in the text, is the monotheistic message that the church proclaims. Paul here may or may not be drawing on Isa 45:23 when he declares that every knee will bow and every tongue will confess. If he is, he plugs Jesus directly into the monotheism of the Old Testament. This monotheistic worldview finds its way into the New Testament when Peter, for example, says that there is no other name under heaven given by which men will be saved, and that name is Jesus. We need to be careful in the handling of this text that we do not assert such a distinction in the Godhead that we violate the *Shema*,²⁴⁷ "Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One."

Verses 9–11

⁹Therefore God exalted him and granted him the name which is above all names ¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus every knee would bow in heaven and on the earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the Glory of God the Father.

The focus shifts at this point. First we note that the subject is now the Father and what he gives. Fowl argues convincingly that this should not be viewed in terms of a

²⁴⁷ The *Shema* is an affirmation of Judaism and a declaration of faith in one God. Deut 6:7.

reward. First, “suffering in obedience to God, can truly display the glory of the God of Israel, which is the end in mind of this whole thing, only if that suffering is vindicated.”²⁴⁸ If the story ends with the death of the messiah without vindication, “that God is not the God of Israel.”²⁴⁹

Secondly, Paul’s ironic reading of both his own situation and that of the Philippians is dependent on God’s economy of salvation, which depends ultimately on vindication, as in, ‘we were right all along’, rather than on reward. By irony I am suggesting the odd twist that, while some might think Paul has been sidelined and is no longer in service to God because of his chains, the reality is he has been placed in those chains by God for God’s service. Otherwise, Paul has no Christological basis for the ironic perspective he expects on the part of the Philippians.²⁵⁰

Thirdly, on what Fowl refers to as Trinitarian grounds, the idea of gift giving suggests a hierarchy and a struggle within the life of the Trinity. The only sense of gift giving must be seen as an un-coerced circulation of gifts flowing from a super-abundance of love rather than lack.²⁵¹

What we see in the exaltation of Christ is the logical outcome of a plan that was established a very long time ago. Jesus, in submission to that plan, not out of obligation but out of love, humbly accepts his role in the mission of God and stays the course of that mission even unto death, which is a statement not about the level of his obedience but rather about the climax of his obedience in the role of saviour. One can only think of Isaiah’s many references to the suffering servant at this point. The idea that Christ played

²⁴⁸ Fowl, *Philippians*, 101.

²⁴⁹ Fowl, *Philippians*, 101.

²⁵⁰ Fowl, *Philippians*, 101.

²⁵¹ Fowl, *Philippians*, 101.

a role is significant because it suggests that his followers also play a role in submission to the Father. In Rev 5 all of heaven mourns that none is worthy to open the book of the ages. Yet the Father and a host of heavenly beings are present. It is not until the Saviour and Lord appears that the rejoicing begins.

The exaltation of Christ is in fact the vindication of not only Christ's testimony and his ministry but of the mission of God and, according to Acts 17, the sermon on Mars Hill, the grand narrative revealed to Paul and preached by him. If Christ has not been raised then, as Paul says, we of all people are most pitied (1 Cor 15). Jesus had asked the Father to restore to him the glory he had prior to his incarnation (John 17). Now, however, Christ is redeemer, and Lord. The pattern that is depicted here is this: those who humble themselves by submitting to God's mission take on a new identity which inspires a life of servitude but its end is the declaration of that new identity. Paul is a member of a Royal Priesthood, a Holy Nation, he is a Joint Heir with the Son, and though his earthly status as a prisoner might not reflect this, his eventual vindication will. It is not so much a reward that is in view as much as the logical outcome of a life, which is *in Christ*. That outcome or end is what Paul makes clear in Phil 3:21:

²⁰ For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; ²¹ who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself.

The question then is "in what manner is Christ vindicated?" Christ receives a name. This is not in addition to the vindication but is rather parallel to it and expresses the nature of that vindication. There seems to be consensus here that the name conferred upon Christ is that of Lord from verse 11. That consensus goes on to include the fact that the name is not merely a designation, as if it were to differentiate from another but

captures both a title and expresses the essence of the one upon whom it is conferred. It is a “name which trembles on Paul’s lips but which even now he does not yet fully mention but reserves as a climax.”²⁵² In this sense the very mention of Jesus infers something majestic. So much so that at the mention of the name of Jesus, the entire created order capable of speech will bow²⁵³ on bended knee.

Finally, from the posture of submission, all of creation will declare that Jesus is Lord.

The solemnity, with which the apostle utters this full name, deserves special attention. To him and to others in the early church *this* fact was one of tremendous significance, namely, that the humble “servant” Jesus had even now been crowned with glory and honor and as the great Conqueror is even now celebrating his triumph and actively ruling all things in the interest of his people.²⁵⁴

There are no less than two missional implications here. The first is that as the created order acknowledges Christ there shall at that time be a vindication of those who have put their faith in Christ. This is the motivation Paul uses to encourage the Philippians to fulfill their own missional mandate. The second implication is that God’s missional plans include all of creation, not just those who now acknowledge Christ. The text gives us no indication of what happens subsequent to this event but none the less, all creation is present for it.

The words of Jesus to Pilate, (John 18:37) are significant here. He told Pilate that for a certain purpose he came, and that purpose was to testify to the truth, to declare to the world a particular reality, that he is in fact King. Pilate’s greatest crime was to ask the

²⁵² Hendriksen and Kistemaker, *Philippians*, 115.

²⁵³ Third person singular, aorist subjunctive κάμψῃ, *should bow*, is not to be understood as suggesting something that might occur as if there were doubt but rather seen as contingent on the exaltation of Christ. The same is true of the subjunctive in verse 11. Porter, *Idioms*, 58.

²⁵⁴ Hendriksen and Kistemaker, *Philippians*, 116.

most significant question in human history, “what is truth,” and then walk away from the one person who could answer that question. Pilate had the chance to gain the right perspective on reality, without which life is nothing more than what the best human mind can conjure up. The right perspective is everything. Make no mistake, there is a day coming when all of creation will declare what we hold to be true now, that Jesus is the King, and in that day Christ who has been vindicated will vindicate those who have held to the faith of the gospel. Our Grand Narrative, our revealed understanding of reality is that God will install his King on Zion, his holy mountain. *Kiss the Son, lest he be angry and you be destroyed in your way. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.*²⁵⁵ This is the reality that Paul calls the Philippians to embrace, a reality that inspires and gives birth to hope, it is the end goal of a life in Christ.

It is easy, amidst the incredible Christology of this text, to lose sight of its intended purpose. That purpose was to provide an example for the Philippians to follow and that is where the emphasis must land. Jesus’ place as God uniquely qualified him to be savior of the world and in turn Lord of the universe. So too, the believer’s unique place in Christ, with all its benefits, is not an occasion for conceit or selfishness but uniquely positions the believer to be the servant of all. Then, we too shall be exalted in a fashion when all of creation comes to understand reality. In other words, we can understand reality as it really is, we can believe in that reality, and it is a reality that puts expectations on us and in order to make known the person of Christ, we will serve our King by being servants just as he was.

²⁵⁵ Selections from Psalm 2:6, 12.

Verses 12–13

¹² *Therefore, my beloved brothers and sisters in Christ, just as you have always obeyed, not only in my presence but now much more in my absence, continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling* ¹³ *for it is God who works in you and through you in accordance with his good will.*

In normal fashion Paul, having given an example, returns to the ethical implications of that example. It is fair to say that much of the difficulty in this text centers on *work out your own salvation*. Some will see in this a threat to Paul's emphasis on being saved by faith. In isolation the concern might be valid but in the larger context of Philippians in which Paul is concerned with a way of thinking, providence, and a way of living, servant-hood for those who are in Christ, the fear seems misplaced. There is little doubt that Paul is at this point making ethical demands on people who are already saved, or better, are in Christ. As we have discussed, salvation has the elements of now and not yet.

The emphasis here is to push their faith to its logical ends, not to use their privilege as a reason to brag but as a place from which to serve. In other words, get on with this task, figure it out, and make Jesus visible in your communal life as you serve one another. Ethics is an apologetic available to the believer between the time of their new birth and their eventual glorification.

Paul seems to be suggesting they have been obedient in this regard, but now in his absence, without his encouragement, instruction, and *gentle* prodding, it is all the more imperative that they obey his counsel. If Paul does die, they will have to figure these apologetic principles out as it is of the utmost urgency that the gospel advances. Paul has been giving them examples to mimic. Given Paul's general disposition to imitating (1

Cor 4:16; 11:1; Phil 3:17; 2 Thess 3:7-9), it is best to assume that in Paul's view obedience to him is obedience to God.

O'Brien has linked *fear and trembling* with *for it is God who works in you*.

Contextually, the idea that God is at work in them is by no means new. Paul introduced that concept early in (1:6, 16, 29; 2:1) and it has been part of their church history.²⁵⁶ God works all things according to his will (Eph 1:11), distributes gifts as he works all things (1 Cor 12:6), works directly through Peter and Paul for different missional ends (Gal 2:8), and behind all of Paul's drive to advance the kingdom is the mighty working of God (Col 1:29). It seems fitting to link the two clauses as modifiers of the imperative rather than the motive for verses 14–18. The indicative, *God is the one working in you*, serves as the foundation to the imperative, *work out their salvation* and the posture, if you will, is with *fear and trembling*.²⁵⁷ The words are reminiscent of Isa 66:2 "This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word."

Paul adds that God's mighty work is both in the Philippians and through them. The infinitives, *to will and to work*, stand each in their own right given the presence of the article.²⁵⁸ God is both the originator of the desire, which is the beginning of any good thing, and the one who causes it to be done, the finisher. In this sense the translation, God is at work in you and through you, makes good sense of the clause. This inspiration and action is, as Lightfoot puts it, *in fulfillment of His benevolent purpose*; for God "will have all people to be saved" (1 Tim 2:4).²⁵⁹ Whether or not this last clause, according to

²⁵⁶ See the introduction to Philippians.

²⁵⁷ O'Brien, *Philippians*, 286 argues along these lines.

²⁵⁸ Sumney, *Philippians*, 53–54.

²⁵⁹ Lightfoot, *Philippians*, 116.

his good pleasure, has a salvific intent is hard to establish. What is apparent though is that this work, in and through us, is motivated by God's kind intentions.

Lightfoot makes the connection for us to Eph 1:5–9 where Paul speaks twice of God's kind intention to bring blessing to humanity. The lack of the pronoun, *his*, has led some to conclude that what is in view is human good will. It does not seem appropriate though to shift the subject away from God. Also the addition of the article, *the good will*, adds a formality and symmetry that harmonizes with the articular infinitives. "The insertion of the article where it is generally omitted from abstract nouns after a preposition, as here, necessarily brings in a reflexive sense, to be referred to the subject of the sentence."²⁶⁰

If it were merely human reason at work in us, or for that matter the best philosophy that Paul could muster, it would provide no authority outside of Paul himself. Here, however, God is the agent at work; it is a work that is depicted as being driven by kind intentions, assumedly toward humanity as a whole. These ends to which God works represent for us an authority; they in essence become our ends. Just as Paul understood God to be the agent at work in his own circumstances advancing the mission of God, so too here the Philippians are being told that God superintends his own work both in them and through them to the world around them.

Verses 14–16

¹⁴ *Do all things without grumbling or disputing;* ¹⁵ *so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world,* ¹⁶ *holding fast the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I will have reason to glory because I did not run in vain nor toil in vain.* ¹⁷ *But even if I am being poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I rejoice and share my joy with you all.*

²⁶⁰ Silva, *Philippians*, 131.

Paul has been speaking of obedience. He now turns his attention to the character of that obedience. We are confronted with material that is reminiscent of Israel's wandering in the wilderness. Whether or not the Philippians understood the parallels can only be speculated. Such concerns should not prohibit us from exploring them. Not only are the words similar, but the context is as well. Israel, the people of God, living in a hostile environment were learning to trust God, and were in fact supposed to be a light to the Gentiles.

Paul begins with the imperative in verse 14, *do everything without grumbling and complaining*. Several commentators note the parallel to the song of Moses (Deut 32) which also has as its rhetorical end the obedience of a people already in relationship with God. It is also important to note that Israel's complaints came about because they concluded that God was no longer leading them, or working among them, a concern Paul may well have for the Philippians as they look at Paul's own circumstance, but one he quickly corrects. A common conclusion in the midst of suffering is that God has abandoned his own, a tragic misconception. The command is more than fitting in light of verses 12–13 which have focused attention on obedience due in part to the fact that it is God who is at work in them from beginning to end, both in forming desire and in working these things out according to God's good pleasure.

However, a command that is complied to grudgingly or with complaint is not obedience at all. While the imperative is part of a primary clause with a full set of its own modifiers, it is, functionally if not in form, modifying the preceding imperative.²⁶¹ It

²⁶¹ O'Brien, *Philippians*, 289.

addresses the character of the obedience called for, the aim of it, the realm in which it occurs, and lastly the industry of obedience.

The character of their obedience is without grumbling or complaining. The aim is to be blameless and pure. The realm of their obedience is in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation. Finally the industry of that obedience is twofold, first they shine like stars and secondly they hold out the word of life.

While Israel may not have had a missionary mandate in terms of proselytizing, it certainly had the missional role of being a light to the Gentiles²⁶² in the sense that their communal life would give testimony to the reality of God. This seems to be Paul's goal here for the Philippians. Prior to the establishment of a priesthood, Moses was told that Israel itself would be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exod 19:6) suggesting a unique role in serving the nations. The indictment in Ezekiel is that Israel had profaned the name of the Lord among the nations because they did not keep his laws. Paul's hope is that the Philippians, by the power of God at work in them and through them, will appear as lights in the world which is exactly what Jesus called his followers (Matt 5:14–16). This focus is primarily on the ethical behaviour of the community, but their apologetic for the gospel also includes a body of truth. They *hold out the word of life*, or they hold to the word of God as true, as evidenced by their ethics and, without apology, declare the grand narrative revealed in it.²⁶³ Jesus suggested the same things when he said:

You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does *anyone* light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before

²⁶² Isa 9:2; 42:6; 49:6, 9; 51:4; 60:1–3. While some of these are viewed as Messianic it is also true that Israel saw it as something which they were to embody.

²⁶³ Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 146 and O'Brien, *Philippians*, 297 agree on the basis of contextual evidence.

men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven. (Matt 5:14–16)

The last part of this clause, *that I may boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor for nothing*, is not the reason why they should do all this but is rather the result of it. Their steadfastness to the gospel is part of Paul's eschatological perspective. The day of Christ is for Paul a day in which he will have something to boast, *καύχημα*, *the thing of which one is proud*. Paul has already made it clear that ultimately it is God who is at work in them and through them so he is not in some manner planning on taking credit for what God has done. This is Paul's orientation to the events. As the saints are numbered, Paul plans on standing tall knowing that for some of those numbered, which represent part of the goal in the mission of God, he was an agent of God's blessing. It is this *ἡμέρα Χριστοῦ*, *day of Christ* that Paul sees as a day of vindication and rejoicing. Vindication because as O'Brien suggests it is virtually interchangeable with the OT *ἡμέρα Κυρίου*, *day of the Lord* ²⁶⁴ and therefore suggests this is a time of judgment when the truth claims of Christ will be acknowledged as true. A day of rejoicing, because those who held to those truth claims will be vindicated.

Verses 17–18

¹⁷*But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service of your faith, I am glad and rejoice together with all of you.* ¹⁸*And in the same way you also should be glad and rejoice together with me.*

It seems that Fowl is correct here, that Paul has returned to a previous thought to conclude his imperatival discourse before going on to the examples of Timothy and Epaphroditus.

²⁶⁴ O'Brien, *Philippians*, 299.

Despite the obscurity of these images, taken singly commentators recognize that Paul is reflecting on his devotion to God as exemplified in his willingness to minister to the Philippians and others no matter what the personal cost.²⁶⁵

The personal cost might be Paul's life. It could be that the language of sacrifice suggests Paul's thoughts of imminent death. However the language of sacrifice here refers to the drink offering which was wine, not blood and so death is hard to press on the basis of sacrifice. However, Paul uses this expression in 2 Tim 4:6 and there the impression of Paul's death is much stronger. Fowl suggests that an argument which focuses on Paul's death misses the point. In Rom 12:1–3 the point of sacrifice was not death but rather offering oneself to God alive and for his service as an act of worship.²⁶⁶ The issue of Paul's potential life or death is not the focal point, rather whatever happens, Paul's ministry on their behalf is part of his life in Christ, the grand narrative to which he holds and in that light he has reason to rejoice just as they should.

Synthesis

Philippians 1:12–2:18 is concerned with a way of perceiving the communal life of the Christians at Philippi. That communal life is greatly impacted by perspective and purpose. We asserted that perception can change one's sense of reality. For the Philippians, that new reality is defined as a life in Christ. More than a theological construct, it is a locale, the realm in which followers of Jesus live. This perception is birthed in the Bible's grand narrative of God's own mission to redeem and restore his creation for his glory. Paul believes himself to be caught up in this unfolding story as the servant of a God who providentially advances his mission through servants that order

²⁶⁵ Fowl, *Philippians*, 128.

²⁶⁶ Fowl, *Philippians*, 129.

their communal lives in a manner worthy of the gospel. Regardless of one's circumstances, this perception of reality inspires and emboldens one to exalt Christ and, as such, these communities serve as an apologetic to the truth claim of the community.

Unlike their predecessors in the mission of God, followers of Christ recognize their place of privilege, their identity in Christ, not as an opportunity to boast, but as a unique qualification for serving. This is something they learn from Jesus, who did not use his place of privilege as God to seek his own gain but rather saw it as a unique position from which he could serve humanity by becoming both its Saviour and Lord.

To serve others is the methodology employed in their missional calling; it is the ethic, or their light, to use the metaphor, that validates the claim they make publicly of the reality God has revealed to them through his word. The posture of servitude can be deceiving since, in fact, the church is a Royal Priesthood, a people belonging to God, a Holy nation. One day all flesh will see that reality and the people of God will be vindicated in their faith claim. Given the importance of advancing the gospel, Paul challenges this church. To work out their salvation, to get on with the task at hand, as it were. Get on with the mission!

Observations from a Missional Reading of Philippians

By way of observation with regards to the book of Philippians, it can be said that a missional reading of this text has alerted us to several basic elements in the unfolding grand narrative of God's mission. Each of these on their own could occupy a lengthy project, as each of them has significant theological overtones yet to be developed. Allow then these four observations.

First, a missional reading alerts us to the providence of God. We have seen in Paul's life and in his teaching that the good work God begins he also finishes. It is remarkable to read the background to Philippians, both its birthing as a church and later as Paul writes to them. Theirs and Paul's is a story of God's superintendence over his own work to advance his mission as he propels Paul along a course chosen for him. God is truly engaged and not absent from the work.

Second, we are alerted to human and divine co-operation in God's mission. We see in Paul the principle of God's people at God's invitation engaging in God's mission. For Paul he had been placed in his circumstances as an apologetic for the gospel and he clearly understood his dependence on the prayers of the saints and the work of the Spirit to stay his course. The Philippians too, through their communal behaviour and the objective truth they hold out and hold onto, serve as an apologetic for the truth claim that Jesus is king. It is through these ethical expectations that the validity of the grand narrative is declared by the church.

Third, it alerts us to potential opposition. Certainly we read of this in Philippians (1:29–30). This should be no surprise given the devil's efforts to disqualify Christ and then eventually destroy him. It would appear that not all of the created order is on side with the church. As such, boldness and courage are called for in facing the unrelenting reality of opposition that Jesus himself faced. Even though that opposition is temporary, it is still dangerous.

Fourth, a missional reading alerts us to a new reality, to the way things really are. We are left with the conclusion that God really is in charge and nothing can thwart his plans. We also see in that reality a glimpse of who the church is. Regardless of the

current state of affairs, prison, beatings, stoning, or worse, one day the church will be vindicated with regard to its truth claim and will be seen in all her glory. We can also detect what is really going on as history unfolds. For example, was Paul's arrest in Jerusalem an act of God to get Paul all the way to Rome? Certainly, God could have told him to go, which he did, and Paul would have gone joyfully. Instead, Paul went to Rome in chains, but he did it on the Roman check book. Reading the text in this manner has forced us to look at both the grammar and syntax and yet propelled us to ask how the text implicates us. To borrow from James, we have looked into a mirror, let us be changed.

In terms of weakness, a missional hermeneutic can easily favour certain elements of a text and in turn miss others. To prevent this, missional hermeneutic cannot be the only operating hermeneutic in exegesis. Nonetheless, the hermeneutic provides a valuable contribution to Biblical Studies.

CONCLUSION

We now return to the work of Chris Wright. It has been stated that his approach to the biblical text has certain hermeneutical assumptions, some of which are not unique to Wright. He views the text as distinct from other documents, with an authority that endures. Wright also views the text as a grand narrative, a single story though diverse in its telling. These are hermeneutical assumptions made by other scholars besides Wright. However, Wright also reads the text rather uniquely when he, based on Luke 24, suggests that God's mission is a significant hermeneutical key to understanding the whole of Scripture. The question that remains is how does this key, *a missional hermeneutic*, work with the practices mentioned above and how does it impact a study of Philippians?

It has also been stated that Wright uses a canonical approach to the Scripture with God's mission as the common element tying all the various narratives together. In the study of the Philippians passage one of the benefits of Wright's method is the way in which it forced the exegesis to remain connected to the larger biblical story. Given the nature of Phil 1–2, especially the so called hymn, it is easy to become preoccupied with syntax and textual origins. For example, a great bulk of material exists on 2:5–11 in an effort to establish the text as either a hymn or pre-Pauline literature. This can easily occupy a significant part of the conversation without ever asking how the text relates to the rest of Philippians or the historical circumstances that influence the Apostles literature. Wright's canonical approach keeps that larger story of God's mission in the foreground during exegesis and therefore has a direct impact on what is considered the meaning of the text.

In a somewhat similar fashion, just as a missional hermeneutic keeps larger canonical concerns in the foreground it also brings, in a reciprocal fashion, clarity to smaller elements of the text. Here the benefit is how the larger story impacts the meaning of the smaller portions, whether a verse, clause, or even a word. By way of example I refer to the development of Paul's ministry in Acts and his corresponding remarks about his circumstances in Philippians. Paul's expression, *what has happened to me*, is clarified by the events recorded for us in Acts. In other words, what that expression meant is controlled by the events in Acts as well as the grammatical concerns in Philippians. Later, when Paul says that *he has been placed* in his current situation, assumedly by God, the meaning is again focused by the events in Acts. It is anticipated that when syntax or etymology allow for alternate readings a missional hermeneutic will help to clarify the most appropriate option. Given the benefits mentioned to this point a missional hermeneutic provides us with much the same thing one would expect from a thorough exegesis using the historical-grammatical approach. However, these two aspects form part of the hermeneutical circle in which our understanding of Scripture is enhanced by Scripture itself.

Wright is also concerned with the textual implication on the church both past and present. Wright makes the point that to read the Bible faithfully we must orient ourselves to what it expects of us and act on that. By observing how the Philippians were called to participate in God's mission the question regarding what is expected of the contemporary church can be addressed. Rather than merely observing historical events there is challenge to the church to act in our current day.

Lastly, if it is true that each of us brings to the text something of our own social location then a missional hermeneutic helps locate us as readers in a particular location. By nature of our solidarity to Christ we are participants in the same mission he was. Our location is not only as participants in God's mission but also participants in the ends that God has established for all of humanity. A missional hermeneutic helps in locating us in reality, what God is doing and what is really going on around us. Paul sought to help the Philippians understand reality, and in turn live in submission to it. A missional hermeneutic can then prevent us from allowing other social locations such as liberationist, agrarian, or social justice from becoming dominant in biblical studies. Yet, each of these concerns can find its place under the larger narrative of God's to redeem and restore his creation for his glory.

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