“Think” and “Do” Like the Role Models: Paul’s Teaching on the Christian Life in Philippians

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1 Introduction

The letter to the Philippians has several characteristics. First, Philippians was not written to a specific person, such as Timothy or Titus in the Pastoral Epistles, or Philemon in the letter bearing his name. This means that the content of this letter is primarily for the entire Christian congregation in Philippi.

Second, this letter does not focus on leading sinners to Christ. Romans and Galatians, for example, allow much space for explaining the salvation process between God and sinful humans. Ephesians and Colossians also deal with the change in church members who move from their past sinful status under God’s wrath to receiving God’s grace and salvation (Eph 2:1–11; Col 1:13–14, 21–22; 2:11–15). In Philippians, Paul never mentions human sinfulness in the process of salvation by using words like ἁμαρτία (“sin”) and its cognates. The only passage referring to such a process is Phil 3:9: “not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith” (NRSV). This passage is delivered through participial clauses inserted in the purpose clause. This means that this description is not the main flow of the argument in Phil 3:1–18, although it is an important aspect in the process of salvation. Thus, Paul’s major concern in Philippians is not how one can become a Christian, but how one can live as a Christian.

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1 I happily dedicate this paper to Dr. Stanly E. Porter, who is one of my excellent role models in academics and Christian life.

2 Even though Paul mentions other persons, such as Apphia, Archippus, and the church members gathered in Philemon’s home as the co-recipients of the letter, and uses the second person plural reference in the opening and closing (x4), the extensive use of the second person singular reference (personal pronoun: x20; verbal form: x9) throughout the letter demonstrates that Paul’s main conversation partner is Philemon. See Dunn, Colossians and Philemon, 300–301; Moo, Colossians and Philemon, 361–62.
Third, Philippians does not really set out to give doctrinal teaching. For instance, in Rom 1–8, Paul introduces the content of the gospel, and in Ephesians, he focuses on God’s ministry in salvation and on the role and nature of the church. In 1 and 2 Thessalonians and 1 Corinthians, he also deals with eschatological teaching. In Philippians, however, Paul does not focus on any specific doctrine. This is not to say that Philippians does not contain theological concepts but only that there is no main focus on doctrinal teaching in the letter. Sometimes Phil 2:6–11 is seen as an example of doctrinal teaching because it has numerous theological themes regarding Christology. However, Phil 2:5 should be considered an exhortation to “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus” (NRSV). This is an important link between Phil 2:6–11 and Phil 2:1–4 and shows that Paul’s purpose in Phil 2:6–11 is not to give a doctrinal lesson per se, but to state clearly the basis of his ethical exhortation. In this sense Philippians does not focus on doctrinal teaching.

The above characteristics of Philippians lead us to conclude that in this letter to the Christian public, Paul focuses more on Christian life than on the process of conversion or on the doctrinal teaching itself. This also leads us to notice threading principles or patterns that Paul has in mind in relation to the theme of Christian life that he wants to deliver to his readers. The goal of this essay is to identify the principles of Paul’s ethical teaching in Philippians. In order to achieve this aim, let us begin with several clues that show Paul’s intentions and strategy in his teaching.

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3 Fee lists several theological contributions of Philippians: the gospel, the Trinity as the theological key, the central role of Christ, eschatological framework, and Christian life (Philippians, 46–53). For more on theological teachings in Philippians, see Fowl, Philippians, 205–35; I. H. Marshall, “Theology of Philippians.”

4 Bockmuehl states, “Verse 5 introduces a paragraph which, from the perspectives of Christian theology and the ‘effective history’ of Philippians, is the easily the most important in this letter… It also… happens to be a passages which in the twentieth century has been the subject of an uncontainable deluge of scholarly debate, quite possibly more so than any other New Testament text” (Philippians, 115). For a detailed bibliography on this passages, see Reumann, Philippians, 377–83.

5 Fowl warns us that “the Christological richness of this passage should not lead us to forget that Paul is ultimately concerned with the shape of the common life of the Philippian church” (Philippians, 105).

6 In addition, to express heartful thanks to the readers is surely one of the important topics in Paul’s letter to the Philippians. Aune considers Philippians “a letter of gratitude and paraenesis” (New Testament in Its Literary Environment, 210).