

STAND FIRM, FOR THE PEACE OF GOD WILL GUARD YOU

An exegesis of Philippians 4:1-7

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for ordination in the CREC

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01 August 2022

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Philippians 4:1-7 (GNT-TRS | NASB 2020)

¹Ὡστε, ἀδελφοί μου ἀγαπητοί καὶ ἐπιποθήτοι, χαρὰ καὶ στέφανός μου, οὕτω στήκετε ἐν Κυρίῳ, ἀγαπητοί.

²Εὐδοίαν παρακαλῶ, καὶ Συντύχην παρακαλῶ, τὸ αὐτὸ φρονεῖν ἐν Κυρίῳ. ³καὶ ἔρωτῶ καὶ σε, σύζυγε γνησίῃ, συλλαμβάνου αὐταῖς, αἵτινες ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ συνηθλίσαν μοι, μετὰ καὶ Κλήμεντος, καὶ τῶν λοιπῶν συνεργῶν μου, ὧν τὰ ὀνόματα ἐν βίβλῳ ζῶῃς.

⁴Χαίρετε ἐν Κυρίῳ πάντοτε· παλιν ἔρω, χαίρετε. ⁵τὸ ἐπικεικὲς ὑμῶν γνωσθήτω πᾶσιν ἀνθρώποις. ὁ Κύριος ἐγγύς. ⁶μηδὲν μεριμνᾶτε, ἀλλ' ἐν παντὶ τῇ προσευχῇ καὶ τῇ δεήσει μετὰ εὐχαριστίας τὰ αἰτήματα ὑμῶν γνωρίζεσθαι πρὸς τὸν Θεόν. ⁷καὶ ἡ εἰρήνη τοῦ Θεοῦ, ἡ ὑπερέχουσα πάντα νοῦν, φρουρήσει τὰς καρδίας ὑμῶν καὶ τὰ νοήματα ὑμῶν ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ.¹

¹Therefore, my beloved brothers and sisters, whom I long to see, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

²I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to live in harmony in the Lord. ³Indeed, true companion, I ask you also, help these women who have shared my struggle in the cause of the gospel, together with Clement as well as the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice! ⁵Let your gentle spirit be known to all people. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and pleading with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

I INTRODUCTION

Most of the New Testament letters are *occasional* in nature, that is, they originate as a particular response to a particular set of issues among a particular group of people.² Philippians is no exception. Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart point out the hermeneutical significance of reckoning with this feature of New Testament epistles: “Above all else, [the NT epistle’s] occasional nature must be taken seriously. [...] Most of our problems in

1. *The Greek New Testament: Textus Receptus* (GNT-TRS). Stephanus’ 1550 edition of the Greek New Testament, with full diacritical marks, punctuation, and Strong’s Numbers, based upon the text compiled by Dr. Maurice A. Robinson.

2. “...every letter has a *situation*, i.e., an occasion that calls it forth, as rhetorical criticism has reminded us.” Ralph P. Martin, *Philippians*, vol. 11, Tyndale Commentary (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1987), lvi.

interpreting epistles are due to this fact of their being occasional. We have the answers, but we do not always know what the questions or problems were—or even if there was a problem.”³

3. Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 58.

4. “Where determines when...” Bruce A. Lowe, “Philippians,” in *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the New Testament: The Gospel Realized*, ed. Michael J. Kruger (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 291. Likely Rome or Ephesus, but possibly Caesarea or Corinth. On this matter, however, “Philippians itself offers no decisive clues.” Stephen Fowl, *A Commentary on Philippians*, Two Horizons New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 8.

5. D.A. Carson and Douglas Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 499.

6. Dennis E. Johnson, *Philippians*, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013), xv.

7. Moisés Silva identifies this as the “most controversial element” of background considerations related to Philippians. Moisés Silva, *Philippians*, 2nd ed., Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 5.

8. Frank Thielman, *Philippians*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 18.

9. “Epics generally are introduced with a ‘proem,’ in which the poet announces the main character and theme of his story and calls on the Muses, goddesses of poetry and speech, to help him do justice to his theme.” Peter J. Leithart, *Heroes of the City of Man: A Christian Guide to Select Ancient Literature* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 1999), 44.

10. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Gordon Teskey (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2005), lines 1-6, 22b-26.

1.1 *Authorship and date*

The apostle Paul wrote to the church at Philippi while imprisoned sometime between the mid-50s A.D. to early 60s A.D., depending on the location of his imprisonment.⁴ The letter itself claims to have been from Paul’s hand and addressed to the church at Philippi, and “no serious doubt [among scholars] is raised against this claim”⁵; thus, as Dennis E. Johnson points out, “questions of authorship and the location of the readers are moot, since a consensus exists across the theological spectrum that Paul the apostle authored the words of this epistle and that its destination was Philippi in Macedonia.”⁶ There remains, however, plenty of disagreement regarding other matters, such as the unity of the material composition (form), the location from which it was written (provenance)⁷, and the literary genre, purpose, and rhetorical strategy of the letter (content).

1.2 *Setting and purpose*

Paul founded the church in Philippi (Acts 16:12), and it is quite evident that he has a deep fondness for them. In fact, Philippians is considered by many to be the most affectionate of his letters, and some go so far as to say that the Philippian congregation “appears to have been Paul’s favorite church.”⁸

It is natural to expect that the introductory material of a well-crafted work of literature would contain either a direct statement of, or allusions (hints) to, the main themes that develop throughout the entire work. This feature is clearly evident among the tomes of classical literature. For example, the *Iliad* of Homer begins with the Greek word *menis*, which means “rage” or “wrath.” This one word functions as an immediate indication of the main theme around which Homer’s entire epic is structured. The rage of Achilles is central to the story; his glory has been impugned by another, and it awaits to be seen how his rage is avenged and thus, his glory restored. A similar feature is present in John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, where in the “proem”⁹ to his work he states directly his intention:

Of man’s first disobedience, and the fruit
Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste
Brought death into the world, and all our woe,
With loss of Eden, till one greater Man
Restore us, and regain the blissful seat,
Sing Heav’nly Muse....
What is in me dark
Illumine, what is low raise and support,
That to the height of this great argument
I may assert Eternal Providence
And justify the ways of God to men.¹⁰

Just as Homer's bard-poet appeals to the Muses to aid him in telling of the rage of Achilles, so Milton's calls on them to help him explain God's mysterious ways to mankind. In both cases, the opening lines function as a preface and hermeneutical (interpretive) paradigm for all that comes after it.¹¹

This early, initial establishment of thematic material in classical literature is a feature that plays prominently in biblical literature as well, including the letters of the New Testament. The opening section (or greeting) of these letters, as one might expect, follows certain conventions. These conventions are conditioned by both the rhetorical practices of first-century letter writing in the Hellenized Roman world, and also by the particular modifications made by the apostles in adapting the ancient letter's form to their own purposes. Scanning the beginning of, say, the Pauline letters, a pattern of introduction is easily detectable. Because of our familiarity with the convention, there is a tendency to gloss over the meaning that these greetings convey, and the hints they provide as to the purpose and theme of the letter. Milton's introduction give a premonition of Adam's fall and its disastrous consequences, while promising the hope of restoration through a "greater" Adam, so Paul begins his "conversation" in correspondence with the Philippian congregation with a preview of his agenda for writing. "The apostle 'tweaks' the Hellenistic epistle template to lay the groundwork on which he will build his pastoral counsel to his friends in Philippi."¹²

The writing of the letter is prompted by the *situation* of both Paul and the church at Philippi, and their special relationship to one another. There are a number of indications in the letter, both explicit and implicit, that provide evidence of the purposes for which the letter was written. Below are ten items that can reasonably be detected in the letter, detailing the primary occasion for Paul's writing to the Philippians, though other purposes are certainly possible to infer.

1. Paul *wanted* to write to them. Having such a deep affection towards them (cf. Phil. 4:1), it is easy to imagine that Paul *desired* to write to them, and when the opportunity presented itself (2:25-28), he took advantage.
2. Paul wants to instruct the believers in the essentials of the faith.¹³
3. To update the church on his status. Paul is imprisoned, is suffering, and possibly faces death, but he encourages them with rejoicing and optimistic reassurance (1:12-26; 2:24).
4. Paul writes to express his gratitude for the "gift" that they sent him (4:18).
5. Paul addresses internal divisions "arising out of rivalry, vanity, selfishness, and animosity,"¹⁴ and thus, Paul calls them to unity (1:27; 2:2-4; 4:2).

11. "A narrator typically prepares his audience with a few set-up sentences for the plot, called the 'exposition.'" Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 124. This happens at the micro level of narrative, as well.

12. Johnson, *Philippians*, 5.

13. For a helpful exposition of this theme in Philippians, see D.A. Carson, *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1996).

14. Martin, *Philippians*, lvii.

6. Paul wants to urge the Philippians to rejoice in all circumstances (Phil 2:18; 3:1; 4:4), even as he rejoices in his negative circumstances (1:18–20).¹⁵
7. False teachers. Paul warns the Philippians of dangerous and seductive ideas that run contrary to his gospel (3:2–21).¹⁶
8. Paul writes to inform the Philippians about Epaphroditus.¹⁷
9. Paul commends Timothy to the Philippians (2:19–24), perhaps to prepare the way for a visit Timothy might make to Philippi.¹⁸
10. Paul wanted to encourage the Philippian believers to stand firm in the faith amidst threat of persecution (1:28–30), and even martyrdom (2:11).¹⁹ Section 1.4 develops this topic further as a main theme of the letter.

15. *χαρά*, “joy,” and *χαίρειν*, “rejoice,” occur sixteen times in this letter.

16. Bruce A. Lowe points out that “The tendency has sometimes been to dig for controversy and division in the church at Philippi and to make these the basis for the historical background. ...[H]owever, the prospect of Paul’s death is enough to drive him to offer warnings without any such controversies being immediately present.” In other words, the presence of active false teachers in the Philippian church is not necessary to explain Paul’s warning against false teaching. Lowe, “Philippians,” 287.

17. “Epaphroditus was a common personal name in the 1st century C.E., related to the name of the Greek goddess of love, Aphrodite, and may shed light on his family background. Paul refers to an Epaphras as his fellow prisoner (Phlm. 23) and identifies an Epaphras of Colossae as a beloved fellow servant (*syndoulos*) and faithful minister (*diakonos*) and servant (*doúlos*) of Christ [p. 411] (Col. 1:7; 4:12). While the name Epaphras could be a shortened form of Epaphroditus, the latter was most likely a Philippian, not a Colossian, who, while serving as a messenger for the Philippian church and a minister to Paul, became ill almost to death, but recovered and is being sent with the letter back to Philippi.” David Noel Freeman, ed., *Eerdmans’s Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 411–412.

18. This suggests that they did not know Timothy very well.

19. “Lohmeyer...saw this as the overriding purpose for Paul’s writing to the Philippians and as a consequence considered the letter addressed to them as a tractate on martyrdom written by a martyr to a community of martyrs. His key passage was 1:7, giving maximum value to the adjective *συγκαινωνούς*, ‘sharers together with’ (26). Although Lohmeyer’s contribution had a profound impact on such Christians as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and perhaps other modern Christian martyrs, it is a thesis that cannot be wholly maintained without straining the exegesis of the text.” Martin, *Philippians*, lvi–lvii.

20. Thielman, *Philippians*, 24.

1.3 Theological themes

Four foundational theological themes emerge out of this letter, and according to Frank Thielman, “each of these four themes presents a significant challenge” to the modern Christian church as it seeks to appropriate the instruction of Philippians to its own context.²⁰

1. Christian unity
2. The problem of suffering
3. The relationship between God’s grace and human works
4. The church’s relationship to the fallen world around it

Two of these themes—(1) and (2)—are addressed in our text (4:1–7).

1.4 Central message

In Section 1.2 we delineated several of Paul’s purposes for writing to the Philippians, but settling on a main idea encompassing all of these purposes proves difficult. One solution to the difficulty is simply to deny the presence of a main theme. Girolamo Zanchi long ago argued that Philippians

does not have some specific and primary theme that it treats, as is the case with the Epistle to the Romans and Galatians, which have as their theme justification through the grace of God alone and through faith in Christ; or in the Epistle to the Hebrews, where the theme is the priesthood of Christ; and several other Epistles. Instead, this is like a letter written to a friend, which contains various expressions of gratitude, a recounting of activities, rejoicing, exhortations, admonitions, commendations and other things of that kind. With these are joined various instructions on religion. In fact, in the second chapter, with marvelous brevity and skill, he included the whole doctrine of the person of Christ and his two natures, his office, humiliation and exaltation. And in the third chapter he clearly teaches wherein lies our true justification and salvation, and wherein it does not. All these things, both many and varied, aim at one and the same goal, namely, that

the Philippians be confirmed in the true doctrine of Christ, pure religion, and a zeal for the Christian life.²¹

Zanchi's analysis is consistent with the position of many modern commentators of Philippians. "The prevailing view of Philippians today is that it contains several heterogeneous themes, and that there is *no central idea* which is being addressed and discussed throughout the letter. Hence the letter is perceived as a collection of only loosely related themes with *no specific single purpose*. He simply wanted to write to them so that when an occasion for sending a letter presented itself, Paul took it."²²

Others, however, see a simple letter of friendship, "a letter from a friend to friends, a letter of spiritual counsel, written in acknowledgment of loving help,...a letter of Christian love."²³

While certainly this is true as far as it goes, Paul seems to have a more radically complex and nuanced agenda, springing directly from his complex and nuanced situation. It is quite obvious, by sheer frequency and scope of vocabulary, that the idea of partnership (*κοινωνία* | *koinōnia*)/brotherhood (*ἀδελφός* | *adelphos*) is fundamental to the message of Philippians. The framing chapters 1 and 4 focus on this idea, with the implication being that the Philippians should not give up partnering with (supporting) Paul. But at the same time, this is a letter of bereavement. Paul does not know whether he will live or die (1:27), and so his letter is preparing the Philippians for either disjunct. In light of the responsibilities of ancient leadership,²⁴ Paul is writing a potential farewell speech, not merely a personal letter. The difficulty in discovering the *main* theme of Philippians lies in figuring out how Paul holds the opposing purposes of partnership and farewell together. I propose, with Lowe, that he does this with the integrating theme of "joy."²⁵

"Joy" in its various forms (*χαίρε/χαίροις/χαίρειν*) features prominently in Philippians, functioning as a key word. A list of its occurrences will illustrate this prominence.

- 1:4b: "making my prayer with joy" should be glad and *rejoice* with me."
- 1:18b: "Christ is proclaimed, and in that I *rejoice*. Yes, and I will *rejoice*."
- 1:25b: "your... joy in the faith"
- 2:2: "complete my joy"
- 2:17, 18: "Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and *rejoice* with you all. Likewise you also
- 2:28: "that you may *rejoice*"
- 2:29: "so receive him in the Lord with all joy"
- 3:1: "Finally, my brothers, *rejoice* in the Lord"
- 4:4: "*Rejoice* in the Lord always; again I will say, *Rejoice*."
- 4:10: "I *rejoiced* in the Lord greatly."

21. "Prolegomena to Philippians," in Graham Tomlin, ed., *Philippians, Colossians*, vol. XI, Reformation Commentary on Scripture (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2013), 2 (italics mine).

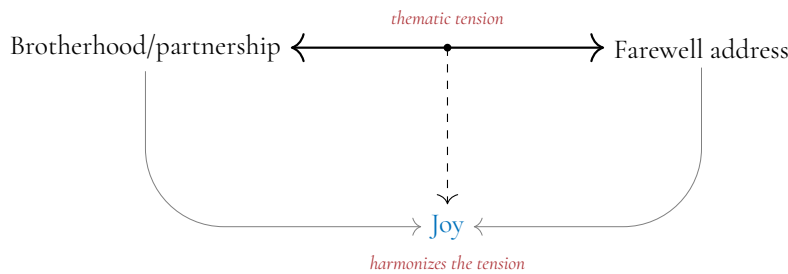
22. Davorin Peterlin, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians in Light of Disunity in the Church*, Novum Testamentum Supplement (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 1-2, cited in Lowe, "Philippians," 286 (italics mine).

23. Donald Maurice Spence-Jones and Joseph S. Exell, eds., *The Pulpit Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1985), par. 69783, 69788.

24. "In ancient times a responsible leader who knew he might leave his post would stitch stability into the social fabric of his followers in places where he thought tears might occur because of his departure (Deuteronomy 31-34; Joshua 23-24; John 13-17; Acts 20). This meant presenting a farewell speech for the gathered community and family leaders, in which the bonds of relationship were reiterated, a pointed prayer might be offered, the need for humble other-centered thinking was expounded, the prospect of a social tear was announced (along with reminders that death might be best), emotions were managed, and love and unity for the community's future were urged; also, examples to follow were given, successors were anointed, a drastic warning against false teachers (even in their midst) might be issued, there was often urging toward moral virtue, and people were directed to hope in the Lord. As a responsible leader, Paul weaves exactly the same elements into Philippians." Lowe, "Philippians," 285-286.

25. "But there is a theme, which Paul has woven into the text to unify the two poles presented in this letter. This theme is 'joy.'" *ibid.*, 286.

“Joy” was very commonly used as both a greeting and a farewell, and the root *χαρά* denotes “the experience of gladness” or metonymically, “a person or thing that causes joy.”²⁶ In essence, the word implies a wish/prayer for well-being. “The wish/prayer for joy expressed in a greeting (or farewell) conveyed the desire for health and good circumstances upon an associate or friend.”²⁷ At the outset, Paul assures the Philippians of his well-being while telling them that he is rejoicing, but he also indicates, with subtle cleverness, the reality that things may not remain the same for him, and in this they should also rejoice (3:1: 4:4), preparing them for a bleaker outcome. In this way, “joy” functions as the fulcrum on which the counterweights of partnership and farewell are balanced.



²⁶ Frederick William Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. *χαρά*.

²⁷ Lowe, “Philippians,” 287.

Figure 1: The thematic coherence of Philippians. (My design based on Lowe’s thematic analysis.)

Pastoral Remark: The tension Paul is working through in this letter is generally reflective of the tension inherent in living in a fallen world. We face uncertainty over death, wrestle with conflicting desires regarding our circumstances, fear change of leadership and the difficult transitions they entail, and worry that God is not near in our trials. The message of Philippians reminds us of what constitutes Christian hope, and how it is manifested in community to produce perseverance and joy. As we wrestle with the tension, we look not to any man or to our circumstances, but to Christ, where true joy may be found. “The ultimate ground for our rejoicing can never be our circumstances, even though we as Christians recognize that our circumstances are providentially arranged. If our joy derives primarily from our circumstances, then when our circumstances change, we will be miserable. Our delight must be in the Lord himself.”²⁸ Nehemiah expresses it this way: “The joy of the Lord is your strength” (Neh. 8:10 ESV).

²⁸ Carson, *Basics for Believers*, 105.

2 SITUATING THE TEXT

“Everyone agrees that this is a difficult letter to outline,”²⁹ in part because there are so many different organizing principles one could follow. Figure 2 compares two content outlines that demonstrate the kind of variety that is possible when attempting to outline Philippians. Outlines tracing the *argument* of Philippians are also possible and can be very complex. However, D.A. Carson offers a very basic outline of the letter’s argument:³⁰

²⁹ Lowe, “Philippians,” 292.

³⁰ Carson, *Basics for Believers*, 98.

1. Put the gospel first.
2. Focus on the cross.
3. Adopt Jesus' death as a test of your outlook.
4. Emulate worthy Christian leaders.
5. [Never give up the Christian walk.](#)

Our text is situated near the end of the letter, and, naturally, assumes and recapitulates what has come before in various ways.

3 ANALYZING THE TEXT

therefore (ὡστε | *hōste*). In certain respects, v. 1 functions to conclude the preceding section with an appeal to “stand firm” (see notes on this phrase below) on the basis of the truths, while at the same time providing a segue into the following section. It points us backward to the themes just articulated in chapter 3 (especially 3:17: “Brothers and sisters, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us.” [NASB 2020]), and, at the same time, it points us forward to the message of chapter 4. This term indicates a transitional link from argument to application.³¹

ὡστε (*hōste*) regularly points forward in its NT usage, and may be better rendered “thus.” The term appears in John 3:16, for example, and rendered literally in English, it says, “For God *thus* loved the world that he gave his one and only Son”; “the word ‘thus’ points forward to the supreme evidence of how God loved the world.”³² So also here, Paul is saying, “Stand firm because of *what* (the truths) I just explained to you [antecedent], and stand firm in the *ways* I am about to show you [consequent].” Much of what is addressed in chapter 4 has been treated in the first three chapters, but in this final section “these themes are recast in such a way as to foster perseverance and endurance” in the faith.³³

Pastoral Remark: Here, as he is apt to do in his other letters, Paul provides a model of instruction and preaching that exhibits the coalescence of careful exegesis,³⁴ cogent argumentation, rhetorical dexterity, and clear application. Likewise, the minister of the Word in his preaching capacity is to tease out the meaning of a sermon text with the appropriate amount of exegetical precision relative to the particular passage in view, to extract theological principles by a process undergirded with sound argument, to apply those principles to the needs of a particular congregation with spiritual discernment, all in a winsome and loving way. The preaching dimension of the pastoral craft requires surgical precision in linguistics and argumentation coupled with keen spiritual insight into the truth, so that he may be able to move freely between doctrinal exposition and affirmation to practical exhortation with ease, all in order to edify the body of Christ “to

31. “This shift can be expressed in many ways: from *doctrine* to *duty*; from *creed* to *conduct*; from the Christian’s *wealth* to his *walk*; from *exposition* to *exhortation*; from the *indicative* to the *imperative*; from *high society* to a *high life*”. R. Kent Hughes, *Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), 121.

32. Carson, *Basics for Believers*, 99.

33. *ibid.*

34. Even in the writing of such a “personal” letter, Paul was doing careful exegetical work. See Brandon S. Szerlip, “Paul’s Use of the Old Testament in His Letter to the Philippians” (Ph.D. dissertation, Westminster Theological Seminary, 2020).

prepare God's people for works of service" (Eph. 4:12a NIV).³⁵ 2 Tim 4:1-2: "I solemnly exhort you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; correct, rebuke, and exhort, with great patience and instruction (doctrine) [NASB]." "Calvin says that we must not preach in the same way that 'a man should teach in a school,' that is, without searching application (indeed, there is no reason that school teaching need be devoid of application either; it's a matter of emphasis). At the same time, one must not neglect doctrine. Calvin preaches: 'It must be done with doctrine: as if he said, when we exhort, we must stand upon good reason: for otherwise we should build in the air. So then, doctrine is (as it were) the groundwork, and then, threatenings, exhortations, and all the rest, is to go on with the building.'"³⁶ This is a sobering task.

beloved (ἀγαπητος | *agapētos*); **long** (ἐπιπόθητοι | *epipothētoi*); **joy** (χαρά | *chara*); **crown** (στέφανος | *stephanos*). Here Paul "heaps together epithets of affection,"³⁷ characterizing his relationship to the Philippians in terms of endearment, using the term "beloved" twice(!), while expressing a longing for them (echoing 1:8: "For God is my witness, how I long for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus."). This affectionate bond between Paul and the Philippian church is undergirded by the "partnership" that they share.

stand firm in the Lord in this way (οὕτω στήκετε ἐν Κυρίῳ | *houtōs stēkō en kurios*). The appeal to "stand firm" harkens back to 1:27: "Only 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 about you that you are *standing firm* in *one spirit*, with *one mind* striving together for the faith of the gospel..." (NASB 2020). With this in view, it is clear that standing firm and unity go together in Paul's mind. This connection is paralleled in the relationship between 4:1 and 4:2, where Paul admonishes Euodia and Syntyche to "live in harmony"³⁸ with one another, further corroborating the relationship between these two ideas.

Pastoral Remark: Paul is calculated in his specific injunctions in order to foster perseverance. He does not merely offer doctrinal content (though this is essential), nor does he prescribe some set of simplistic moral commands. He is not satisfied with external conformity, but is interested in attitudes that foster "whole-life, long-lasting commitment to the one true God."³⁹ Pastors (and parents, for that matter) need to have the same goal in their own counsel and instruction of their flock.

35. "This is a watershed text for the doctrine of the Church. It effectively eliminates the traditional model of the local church as a 'pyramid, with the pastor perched precariously on its pinnacle, like a little pope in his own church, while the laity are arrayed beneath him in serried ranks of inferiority.' It also shoots down the model of a 'bus, in which the pastor does all the driving while the congregation are the passengers slumbering in peaceful security behind him.'" Hughes, *Ephesians*, 134, quoting John R. Stott, *God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1979), 159.

36. Joel R. Beeke, *Reformed Experiential Preaching: Proclaiming God's Word from the Heart of the Preacher to the Heart of His People*, with a foreword by Sinclair Ferguson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), Apple books loc. id: 1450466337.

37. Spence-Jones and Exell, *The Pulpit Commentary*, par. 71808.

38. τὸ αὐτὸ φρονεῖν (*to auto phronein*; lit. "to have the same mind as one another")

39. Carson, *Basics for Believers*, 99.

Euodia and Syntechē. By mentioning both individual women by name in a letter that would be read publicly suggests that (1) these two women were prominent members of the community who had a strong influence there,⁴⁰ (2) that their quarrel was significant enough to tangibly affect the entire community, and (3) that the majority of the church was already aware of their conflict.

Pastoral Remark: Dissension among church members, either public or private, greatly affects the worshiping community because it betrays the unity of the Spirit, and is “a serious wound to the body of Christ.”⁴¹ It is important to note not just *that* Paul addresses this conflict, but *how* he does it. He names names, so there would be no doubt as to whom he is referring. For these women, there will be no hiding behind vague pronoun references—their conflict is on the table (cf. 1 Thess. 5:27; Col. 4:16). Also, as a wise leader, he appoints an unidentified mediator to “help” them in this conflict. Readers often interpret this verse in a negative light, focusing solely on the fact that there was conflict between these two individuals (what church does not have this kind of conflict?). An easily overlooked dimension of this address is that Paul pays a great deal of credit to the Philippian church in his confidence that they are mature enough to handle the dispute with resolve and wisdom. By way of contrast, in writing to the Corinthians, Paul expressed great disappointment that a dispute between two believers could not be resolved but was rather taken to court: “I say this to your *shame*. Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to settle a dispute between the brothers...?” (1 Cor. 6:5 ESV). The shame was not due to the dispute itself, but rather that there was no one in the church who would *mediate* it, and call the parties to repentance and unity. According to Paul, this was a failure of leadership. “The unity and sanctity of the church is too important to consider the dispute a private matter to be settled by the women alone”⁴², so Paul appoints a mediator to navigate the issue toward a resolution. Likewise, pastors must be guardians of unity in the church and deal wisely and decisively with internal conflict.

shared my struggle (συναθλέω | *synathleō*). Paul picks up on the theme “partnership” here, reminding these two women that they both partnered with him in “the cause of the gospel,” (4:3) and thus, they have an obligation to maintain that same partnership between themselves. Though at odds with one another, Paul addresses them with this warm commendation, noting the pedigree of their service.

book of life (βιβλὸς ζωῆς | *biblos zōē*). The “book of life” appears in six places in Revelation (3:5, 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27), which allude to Daniel’s use of the same term (7:9-10 [“and the books⁴³ were opened”]; 12:1-2). This instance in Philippians may be an allusion to Dan. 12:1-2: “Everyone who is found written in the book will be rescued ... to [a resurrection of] everlasting life.”⁴⁴ A similar reference with different vocabulary is found in Luke 10:20: “...but rejoice that your names are recorded in heaven” (NASB).

40. cf. Chrysostom: “These women seem to me to be the chief of the Church which was there.”

41. Fowl, *A Commentary on Philippians*, 180.

42. Thielman, *Philippians*, 217.

43. This may refer to both the “book of life” and the “books” that record the sins of unbelievers, on the basis of which they will be judged (cf. Rev. 20:12-13; Ps. 69:28), or just to the latter.

44. G.K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 284, n. 67.

rejoice...always...rejoice; let...; do not...; present... Paul fires off four exhortations in rapid succession.⁴⁵

1. **rejoice...always...rejoice.** Echoes 3:1: “Finally, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord...” Fowl aptly notes that “Joy is not so much a spontaneous emotion as a response formed in those who can read the economy of God’s activity in particular ways and are able to act in conformity with that unfolding story. Joy is the appropriate response when one rightly perceives the unfolding of God’s drama of salvation even in the midst of suffering and opposition.”⁴⁶ This is certainly Paul’s outlook, and he is calling on the Philippians to imitate him in it. See the discussion on “joy” as the theme of Philippians in [Section 1.4](#).
2. **Let your gentle spirit be known to all people.** This quality of Christian character, as manifested in life and relationships, should *be evident* to all. This term is translated in various ways: “gentleness” (NIV), “good sense” (NJB), “forbearance” (RSV), and John Knox translates it “courtesy.” This range provides a clear enough picture of what Paul is telling the Philippians to exhibit.
3. **The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything...** “The Lord is near” has two main interpretive options. (1) One way to understand this statement is *spatially*, that is, the *presence* of God is near (cf. 119:151). (2) Alternatively this could be understood in *temporal* terms, that is, with reference to the immanence of Jesus’ return (see Rom 13:12; cf. Jas 5:8; Rev 1:3; 22:10). There is no need to choose between these alternatives, since both “work” by providing a rationale for Paul’s command, “Do not be anxious...”⁴⁷ Because the Lord is near—spatially and temporally (eschatologically)—there is no need to be anxious about anything. Jesus, himself, taught his disciples the same principle of personal security because of God’s care for them (Matt. 6:25-34; Luke 12:22). One difference between Jesus’ and Paul’s respective application of this principle is that Jesus was reacting to the disciples’ concern for material possessions, whereas Paul seems to be addressing anxiety that is arising from the threat of harm. Nevertheless, the principle remains the same.

Pastoral Remark: Under both circumstances, this remains a perennial pastoral issue. We have seen in our own time increasing anxiety due to social unrest, economic instability, the breakdown of marriage and the family, moral confusion, etc. D.A. Carson corroborates this: “There is a sense in which our society demands that we worry on a broader scale than any society in the history of the human race.”⁴⁸ This teaching about the nearness of God in its various dimensions as the basis of our confidence and security is one to which we should return often in the work of comforting anxious souls under our care, from both the pulpit and the counseling chair. Harold Senkbeil reminds us that “what makes for good public preaching makes for effective individual teaching.”⁴⁹

⁴⁵ This sequence is very similar to 1 Cor. 16:13: “Be on the alert, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong,” 2 Cor. 13:11: “Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice, mend your ways, be comforted, be like-minded, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you,” and is most like 1 Thess. 5:16-22: “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus. Do not quench the Spirit, do not utterly reject prophecies, but examine everything; hold firmly to that which is good, abstain from every form of evil.” (cf. Rom. 12:9ff)

⁴⁶ Fowl, *A Commentary on Philippians*, 181.

⁴⁷ Bockmuehl notes, “...Paul’s affirmation that the Lord is near, both spatially and temporally, is the assurance that underpins the exhortations in 4.4-6 to joy and gentleness, to prayer and freedom from worry.” Cited in *ibid.*, 183.

⁴⁸ Carson, *Basics for Believers*, 112.

⁴⁹ Harold L. Senkbeil, *The Care of Souls: Cultivating a Pastor’s Heart* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019), 67.

4. ...but in everything by prayer (προσευχή | *proseuchē*) and pleading (δέησις | *deēsis*) with thanksgiving (εὐχαριστία⁵⁰ | *eucharistia*) **let your requests** (αἰτήμα | *aitēma*) be made known to God. Paul contextualizes this series of injunctions with the reminder that “the Lord is near (5b),” in both a spacial and temporal sense. Supporting the eschatological dimension of the Lord’s presence is Paul’s note in 3:20 of the expectation of the Lord’s return and of the present eschatological reality of believers: “But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ” (NASB). This is reminiscent of the prayer that Jesus himself taught (“The Lord’s Prayer”), where one finds a call not to be anxious about one’s needs (cf. Matt. 6:8; Luke 11:9-10), and both in that prayer and in Paul’s instruction here, the way one should pray is noted. “In the Lord’s prayer, the present experience of God’s grace merges with the expectation of God’s presence in the future.”⁵¹ The perspective Paul wants the Philippians to adopt and live from transcends the present/future dichotomy of their natural inclination and leans on the present and eschatological nearness of God as the source for joy and thanksgiving. The way not to be anxious is by prayer and pleading (supplication), accompanied with thanksgiving, in which God’s presence through the Son is recalled (cf. 1 Cor. 15:57: “...but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. [NASB, ESV]). “Believers are to pray with the same certainty that God is in control of the future. It is this certainty that allows us not to be anxious. The ambiguity of the phrase, ‘The Lord is near’, is then translated into the double functions of the call to thanksgiving. Remembering what God has done for us, we can continue to trust him who is the Lord of the future.”⁵²

Pastoral Remark: Thankfulness as an attitude or posture of living is far more important to God than we often realize. When Paul describes the nature of human rebellion against God, he does so in terms of ingratitude: “For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their reasonings, and their senseless hearts were darkened” (Rom 1:21). This is the opposite attitude from what a true understanding of what God has done in Christ engenders: “Whatever you do in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father” (Col 3:17 NASB). “A lack of gratitude reflects a lack of understanding of the gospel. Where gratitude is lacking the gospel is not only misunderstood but misapplied. How can we not be grateful to God for His stunning love and mercy shown to us in the gospel? How can we not be grateful to Christ for living the life we should have lived and dying the death we should have died? How can we not be grateful for the Spirit who produces His fruit in our lives and empowers us to reflect the image of Jesus Christ?”⁵³

50. “Conversation marked by the gentle cheerfulness of a grateful heart, as contrasted with the unseemly mirth of εὐτραπελία (Eph. 5:4: “...and there must be no filthiness or foolish [εὐτραπελία] talk, or vulgar joking, which were not fitting, but rather giving of thanks). William D. Mounce and Rick D. Bennett, Jr., eds., *Mounce Concise Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament* (2011), s.v. εὐχαριστία.

51. David A. Pao, *Thanksgiving*, vol. 13, *New Studies in Biblical Theology* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 137. “One does not have to adopt a thorough eschatological reading of the Lord’s Prayer to affirm this point. The petitions, ‘your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven’, call upon God to allow his people to have a taste of heaven in the midst of mundane existence” (137, n. 49).

52. *ibid.*, 138.

53. Matthew S. Harmon, *Philippians*, vol. 4, *A Mentor Commentary: New Testament* (Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2015), 413

the peace of god (εἰρήνη τοῦ Θεοῦ | *eirēnē tou Theou*) **will guard your hearts and minds** (φρουρήσει τὰς καρδίας | *phrouresei tas kardias*). This is reminiscent of Isaiah 26:3: “The steadfast of mind You will keep in perfect peace [שָׁלוֹם | *shalom*], // Because he trusts in You” (NASB). εἰρήνη is a shorthand term for the resulting state of God’s eschatological salvation—a future state that breaks into present reality—and it includes the ideas of wholeness and completeness in the same way that the Hebrew שָׁלוֹם (*shalom*) does. This peace comes from God himself, and is rooted in his redemptive posture toward us. This peace is not limited to any individual, but rather can be experienced corporately when the church is marked by fervent prayer. This corporate experience of peace is pictured by the blessing that God instructed Aaron to pronounce over the people of Israel: “The LORD bless you, and keep you; // The LORD cause His face to shine on you, // And be gracious to you; // The LORD lift up His face to you, // And give you peace [שָׁלוֹם | *shalom*]” [Num. 6:24-26 NASB]. The hearts and minds of God’s people are guarded in the safety of Christ himself; he is the stronghold—the rock of our salvation—in whom we find safety from the enemy of worldly anxiety and fear. Matthew S. Harmon sums it up well:

“The promise contained here is one of the sweetest comforts for believers, as it reminds them that God’s eschatological peace has already broken into this fallen world to be experienced by those who are in Christ. Believers do not merely look forward to being found in Christ on the last day (3:9), but already are being guarded and protected with God’s peace as they are in Christ.”⁵⁴

54. Harmon, *Philippians*, 416.

4 BRIEF THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

4.1 *Doctrine or devotion?*

There is a tendency to assume a natural conflict between doctrine and devotion. In its extreme form, this bifurcation is cartoonish. “Doctrine” is associated with big books, boring conversation, obscure vocabulary, and theoretical speculation, all of which garner images of glazy-eyed congregants half-asleep while the pastor drones on in his lecture on infralapsarianism. On the other hand, “devotion” is really the realm in which “authentic” Christian living is experienced. On this view, devotion is entirely distinct from intellectual struggle or careful study; rather, it is a free expression of human emotion before God. These caricatures are unfortunate, but do represent something of a common sentiment among Christians.

The danger, however, is that in practice, this artificial breach can be unintentionally fostered if the careful balance between them is not maintained. It is certainly possible for a church to feel that they have been well *instructed* in doctrine, but remain *malnourished* in faith; or, on the other hand, feel that they have been emotionally moved, but remain doctrinally infantile, susceptible to false teaching and lacking in moral courage. But this is not a problem with the nature of doctrine or devotion *per se*, but rather a failure to recognize their relationship to each other. Without doc-

trine, what is there to be devoted to? Without devotion, who cares what, say, the ethical implications of Genesis 3 are?

The reality is that doctrine and devotion are inseparable, as is evident in Philippians (and, really, all of the NT letters, Pauline or otherwise). Consider what Paul has to say about this in Ephesians 4:13-15. Here Paul talks about the gifts that God has given to the church: "...until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles." Paul indicates that part of spiritual Christian maturity is doctrinal discernment, so that one will not be buffeted about by every new wind of doctrine that comes along. There will be a solid grasp of what is true and what is false, and therefore an ability to be doctrinally discerning. This is not just true of the ministers, but of every church member.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul is angry with the false apostles who have come to the churches in Galatia and are teaching false doctrine. He says,

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel—not that there is another gospel, but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, If any one is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed. (Gal. 1:6-9 ESV).

Paul is saying, literally, that these purveyors of false doctrine to the Galatian churches should go to hell! That is how strongly he feels about the importance of having the right teaching about Christ and about the Gospel of grace that he preached. Doctrine matters.

Finally, consider Titus 1:9. The context here is Paul's list of the qualifications to be an elder in the church. Of the various qualifications that he lists to be an elder he says in verse 9: "He must hold firm to the trustworthy Word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it" (NASB). Even if one is not an elder in the church, surely this sort of Christian maturity and these character qualities are those to be striven toward. We should want to meet as best we can this list of qualifications that goes toward being a mature Christian. Part of those qualifications are to be able to give instruction in sound doctrine, and then also to refute those who contradict it.

But devotion is tethered to this, in that right living presupposes right thinking about God. This is evident in the pattern in Paul's epistles. Typically the first half or so of the letter will be devoted to doctrinal teaching as it applies to the particular situation facing Paul and his recipients. Then in the second part of the letter he will often transition to direct practical application of the doctrinal truths he has given. For example, in Ephesians

1-3 he gives instruction in Christian doctrine. Then beginning with Ephesians 4:1 you see the transition: “I, therefore, a prisoner of the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called.” The “therefore” indicates the transition between these doctrinal truths—if these are true, therefore now live a life that is worthy of this calling that you have. This is also evident in Philippians, where Paul exhibits this balanced blend of doctrine and devotion, assuming no conflict between them, and it serves as a model for our practices in the ongoing work of discipleship—of bringing Christians along a path of incrementally greater maturity. This is precisely Paul’s posture in Philippians.

This Epistle [Philippians] has been called “the least dogmatic of the apostle’s letters” (Bishop Lightfoot, Preface [to his Commentary on Philippians], p. 9.). [...] But, though the doctrine is introduced incidentally, and always employed to enforce Christian practice and holiness of life; nevertheless, the whole Epistle is interpenetrated with Christian doctrine. The great doctrinal passage in the second chapter asserts most of the distinctive articles of the Christian creed. St. Paul insists upon the divinity of Christ, his preexistence, his equality with God the Father, his incarnation, his perfect humanity, his precious death upon the cross, his glorious exaltation. In the third chapter we have his resurrection, his second advent, his Divine power. In that chapter we have also a full statement of the doctrines of justification by faith, of the transitory character of the Mosaic Law, and of the Church as the city of God. Doctrine, then, is here, as elsewhere, the basis of St. Paul’s teaching; but here, as elsewhere, he enforces doctrine as bearing upon holiness of life.⁵⁵

⁵⁵. Spence-Jones and Exell, *The Pulpit Commentary*, par. 69788.

4.2 *Trinitarian unity*

Paul calls the Philippians to unity, doing so in the frame of imitation: there is unity between Paul and Christ; likewise, because of the Spirit, there is unity (partnership) between Paul and the Philippians, so, by implication, there ought to be unity in the church itself. But the most basic foundation of unity is Trinitarian. In Ephesians 4, Paul transitions in much the same way as he does here in Philippians, and in calling the Ephesians to unity of spirit while not erasing the diversity of the body’s parts, he says, “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you also were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all” (4:4-6 NASB). Many New Testament scholars believe this was an early Christian confessional hymn, and it may well have been (cf. 1 Cor. 8:6; 12:4-6). The important thing to see is that it teaches us that our unity is rooted in the Holy Trinity (“Spirit,” v. 4; “Lord,” v. 5; “God,” v. 6). Each of the seven great unities in verses 4-6 is connected with one of the Persons of the Trinity. The unity of the church reflects the unity of the Trinity, and thus, “The unity of the church is as indestructible as the unity of God himself. It is no more possible to split the church than it is possible to split the Godhead.”⁵⁶ The divine reality of the Trinity is not only the basis for Christian unity, but is also the very root of salvation itself. The work of the Father, through the Son, and by

⁵⁶. Stott, *God’s New Society*, 151, quoted in Hughes, *Ephesians*, 125.

the Holy Spirit provides the foundation for our the experience of peace that will guard our hearts and minds. Our union with Christ makes a way for us to participate in this holy communion of love for all eternity, and, as Paul instructed the Philippians to remember, this truth bears on the practical matters of our daily life. The nineteenth-century Scottish preacher, Horatius Bonar, helps us celebrate this in song:

I stand upon the mount of God
With sunlight in my soul;
I hear the storms in vales beneath,
I hear the thunders roll.
But I am calm with Thee, my God,

Beneath these glorious skies;
And to the height on which I stand,
No storms, no clouds can rise.
O, this is life! O this is joy,

My God, to find Thee so;
Thy face to see, Thy voice to hear,
And all Thy love to know.

Sample analytical outline (Hawthorne)	Looser outline based on letter structure and the example theme (Lowe)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I. Introductory section (1:1-11) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. Salutation (1:1-2) B. Thanksgiving and prayer (1:3-11) II. Information bulletin: news and instructions (1:12-2:30) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. News about Paul (1:12-26) B. Instructions for the church (1:27-2:18) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. To stability in the faith (1:27-30) ii. To harmony and humility (2:1-4) iii. Kerygmatic center of the letter: Christ, the supreme encouragement to humility and unselfishness (2:5-11) iv. Application: to obedience (2:12-18) with Paul as model C. News about Timothy and Epaphroditus (2:19-30) and their role as models <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. About Timothy (2:19-24) ii. About Epaphroditus (2:25-30) III. Digression: warning against false teachings with Paul's experience and life as a model to follow (3:1-21) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. Warning against circumcision and pride in human achievements (3:1-3) B. Paul's own life, past and present: an answer to opponents (3:4-11) C. Warning against perfection now (3:12-16) D. Paul's life: a model to imitate (3:17) E. Warning against imitating other teachers (3:18-19) F. Paul's hope in the future and unseen (3:20-21) IV. Exhortations to harmony and joy (4:1-9) V. Gratitude expressed for the Philippians' generosity (4:10-20) VI. Conclusion (4:21-23) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I. Introduction (1:1-2) II. Thanksgiving (1:3-11) III. Disclosure of Purpose (1:12) IV. Letter Body (1:13-4:7) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. Example: Paul (1:13-26) Instruction (1:27-30) B. Example: Christ (2:1-11) Instruction (2:12-18) C. Example: Timothy and Epaphroditus (2:19-30) D. Example: Paul and others (3:1-17) Instruction (3:18-4:1) E. Example: true companions (4:2-3) Instruction (4:4-7) V. Letter Close (4:8-23) Including Example 6: Don't Forget Paul (4:10-20)

Figure 2: Sample outlines of Philippians. Taken from Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, Revised and Expanded by Ralph P. Martin, vol. 43, Word Biblical Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), lix, and Bruce A. Lowe, "Philippians," in *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the New Testament: The Gospel Realized*, ed. Michael J. Kruger (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 292-293, respectively.

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