**Citizenship in Heaven**

**Philippians and Colossians – #1**

**Introduction to Philippians**

**Background**

*The letter to the Philippians is one of Paul’s four Captivity Epistles, along with* [*Ephesians*](http://biblescripture.net/Ephesians.html) *(which precedes it),* [*Colossians*](http://biblescripture.net/Colossians.html) *(which follows it), and* [*Philemon*](http://biblescripture.net/Philemon.html)*. It was probably written to Philippi around 55 AD.*

*Paul, as we learn from* [*Acts*](http://biblescripture.net/Acts.html) *16:9-40, established at Philippi the first Christian community in Europe. He came to Philippi on his second missionary journey with Silas, Timothy, and Luke. His letter to the Christians at Philippi was written while he was in prison somewhere, in danger of death.*

*Paul's Letter to the Philippians is a dramatic and inspiring appeal, calls for Christian unity (Phil 1:27) and, in the beautiful hymn of (Phil 2:5-11), presents one of the most explicit and profound testimonies in the New Testament of the Divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ.*

*Chapter 3 is almost autobiographical; Philippians 3:12-14 is especially noteworthy, as Paul is picturing himself in a race, pressing on towards the goal, which, in this event, is Christ Jesus himself.*

**Major Topics**

Reading Philippians, one learns about two great contemporary topics:

1. Being a citizen in a pagan society
2. Being also a citizen of heaven

These two topics can’t be treated or looked at except in Christ.

***Exercise***

*Open your Bible to Philippians. Try to read three or even two verses together. Can you read them and not see Christ Jesus directly or hidden in them?*

**The City of Philippi (*FILL-ih-pie*)**

Philippi in north eastern Greece was the first city where Paul preached the gospel. The city was a historical site from the fourth century B.C., when it was an obscure Thracian village known by its Greek name ***Krenides*** (“springs”). Philip II of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great, was particularly interested in the gold and silver mines of nearby Pangaeus, so he annexed the entire region to his kingdom around 356 B.C. and formally established Philippi as a city bearing his own name. Philip II fortified it and provided it with a garrison of Macedonians. The extensive city wall, which still survives to day, may have originated from this time. It became a military strong point in the Thracian country he had subdued and was able to guard the nearby gold mines, which yielded him an annual revenue of a thousand talents. Philippi commanded the land route to the Hellespont (Dardanelles) and Bosporus, and so across into Asia.

The city of Philippi remained insignificant until the Roman conquest of Macedonia in 168-167 B.C when it was included in the first of four districts into which Macedon was divided for Roman administration. In 42 B.C. Philippi became famous as the place where Mark Antony and Octavian defeated the Roman Republican forces of Brutus and Cassius, the assassins of Julius Caesar. The victors settled a number of their veteran soldiers there and established Philippi as a Roman colony. Its territory included the towns of: Neapolis, Oisyme, and Apollonia.

After the battle of Actium (31 B.C.) in which Octavian defeated Antony, more settlers, including some of Antony’s disbanded troops, were settled in Philippi by order of Octavian (Augustus), who renamed the colony after himself. It finally became Colonia Iulia Augusta Philippensis. Philippi was given the highest privilege possible for a Roman provincial municipality because it was governed by Roman law. The rights of purchase, ownership, and transference of property, together with the right to civil lawsuits, were privileges done according to the Roman law. The citizens of this colony were Roman citizens, and its constitution was modeled on that of Rome itself, with two collegiate magistrates at the head referred to by Luke in (Acts 16:22,35,36,38). Latin was used, and its citizens wore Roman dress.

**Paganism**

Philippi exhibited a remarkable variety of the old gods and cults. Inscriptions and monuments reveal the imperial cult of Roman Emperors Julius, Augustus, and Claudius. Greek gods had their altars and temples in Philippi, and were known by their Latin counterparts, especially Jupiter (who was identified with the Greek Zeus), while Juno, Minerva, and Mars had their cults. Thracian devotion to the goddess Artemis under the name Bendis is attested to by Herodotus and was mainly concentrated on fertility rites in an agricultural community. There were sanctuaries to gods from Egypt, especially Isis (under whose protection Philippi was placed after Antony’s victory in 42 B.C.) and Serapis of Alexandria, as well as to the Phrygian diety Cybele, known as the great Mother-goddess.

**Paul in the City of Philippi**

The religious life of Philippi at the time of Paul’s arrival was syncretistic (*combination of beliefs)*, although the official Roman imperial religion tended to dominate. The Jewish community in the city does not seem to have been large – Philippi was a colony rather than a commercial center – since there was apparently no regular synagogue congregation (for which ten men were required according to the Jewish tradition). Instead, Paul found an informal meeting place outside the city by the river Gangites where several women met on the Sabbath for prayer (Acts 16: 13).

The charge brought against Paul and Silas (Acts 16: 20-21) by the owners of the slave girl, proves that there was a kind of “SPIRITUALISM” that was going on. Paul arrived at Philippi on his second missionary journey, estimated to have been between A.D. 49 and 52. According to Luke’s account in the Book of Acts, Paul and Silas, after passing through Syria and Cilicia, they pressed on to Ephesus. Prevented from preaching the word in this province, they then turned northwards and tried to enter Bithynia. Once more they were not allowed to pursue their plans. They turned west and reached the Aegean coast at the port of (Alexandrian) Troas (Acts 15:41-16:8). Timothy had already joined Paul and Silas at Lystra. Paul had a night vision in which he saw a man of Macedonia standing and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” Paul recounted the incident to his colleagues in Acts 26:9-10, “*we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.”* The missionaries crossed by sea from Troas to Neapolis and then journeyed about ten miles along to Philippi.

**Lydia**

Consistent with his regular practice of preaching the gospel first to the Jew, Paul looked for a Jewish synagogue in Philippi but there does not appear to have been one. Instead, outside the city walls by the river Gangites, there was an informal meeting-place where a number of women, God fearers and possibly some Jewesses, assembled on the Sabbath for worship and for reading the Torah. The first Christian convert was Lydia, a God-fearing Gentile woman who had been attracted to the Jewish faith. She was a native of Thyatira in Asia Minor who traded in purple cloth, dyed from the juice of the madder root, for which her home country was famous. As Paul explained the gospel to the women present, “*the Lord opened Lydia’s heart”* to respond to the truth of what the apostle was saying (Acts 16:14). She and her household were baptized and extended hospitality to Paul and his colleagues.

**Slave Girl**

The exorcism from a slave girl of an “evil spirit” that had enabled her to predict the future got the missionaries into trouble (Acts 16:16-24). The masters of the slave girl, who made their livelihood from her fortune telling and speaking to dead spirits (demons), were enraged at Paul’s action of deliverance, since they could not make the expulsion of a spirit of soothsaying the grounds of an accusation. In fact the Roman law prohibited magic and soothsaying but this prohibition was not in force. So the masters charged Paul and Silas before the Praetors (Governors) of being Jews (thus playing on the anti-Jewish prejudices of their fellow citizens) who were causing trouble in the city and advocating customs unlawful for Romans (16:20-21)! Without inquiring into the grounds of the accusations or inviting the accused men to give their account of the matter, the magistrates had Paul and Silas beaten with the rods and thrown into prison. When those who owned the girl arrived at the prison the following morning to take custody of the two prisoners and expel them from the city, Paul and Silas protested. Roman citizens should not have been treated in the way they had been. Thus Paul’s assertion, “*They beat us publicly without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens*” (v. 37), had serious consequences for the magistrates. It was also pointedly ironical – contrast the trumped-up charge of (v. 21): they “*advocate customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice*” Paul demanded an apology from the magistrates, who begged Paul and Silas to leave their city.

**Jailer’s Conversion**

Then we have the story of the Philippian jailer’s conversion and the events surrounding it (Acts 16:25-34). Luke narrates how Paul and Silas were thrown into prison and, while they were “*praying and singing hymns to God”* in the darkness of the inner prison, an earthquake struck. The jailer’s alarm, attempted suicide, and marvelous conversion took place. The Jailer and his family were baptized. He then demonstrated his newfound faith by showing kindness to the missionaries (vv. 33-34).

**Paul Leaves Philippi**

Paul was forced to leave Philippi (Acts 16:40). Kicking out missionaries is not new at all. It seems that an ardent young congregation that continued to show its faithfulness to God and a loving concern for the apostle remained. Paul was able to look back to the founding of a church in which God had begun his good work in the converts’ lives (Phil. 1:6). They gave him pleasure every time he thought of them, and he was most appreciative of their unfailing kindness and affection. Luke appears to have stayed on at Philippi after Paul left: the first “we” passage concludes at Philippi (at Acts 16:17) and the second begins there (Acts 20:5). It is just possible that Luke was present in the city for the intervening seven or eight years, and some have suggested that he may be the unnamed “*true yokefellow”* whom Paul asks to help Euodia and Syntyche “*to agree in the Lord*” (Phil 4:3).

**Women in the Church**

Women seem to have played a significant role in the Philippian church, not only in terms of providing for the missionaries’ physical needs, but also in working side by side with them in preaching the gospel, as did Euodia and Syntyche (4:3). In Macedonia, of all the Greek provinces, the status and importance of women were well known. Lydia, the first convert, welcomed Paul and his colleagues into her home and provided for them at the outset of his evangelistic ministry. It has been suggested that she may have ministered among the other women and helped keep alive the cordial and intimate relations that existed between Paul and the rest of the Philippian Christians.

**Macedonian Churches**

Paul continued to maintain links with the Macedonian churches through Timothy (Acts 19:21-23; Phil 2:19-20), and he visited them on at least two other occasions – probably during the autumn of 54-55 A.D. and again in the spring of 55-56 (Acts 20:1-3). A possible visit during this period is alluded to in 1Cor. 16:5. Judging from 2 Corinthian7:5 (cf. 2:13), this was a difficult time for the apostle, for he was in the midst of the Corinthian crisis. However, warm relationships with the Macedonian churches continued throughout “this bleak time in the apostle’s life,” and he was grateful for their generosity and sincerity, something of which he boasts to other churches (2 Cor. 8:1-5). The Philippians continued to maintain their warm and lasting friendship with him, sent him gifts on several occasions, and gave further evidence of their partnership with him in the gospel. They dispatched Epaphroditus to minister to his needs, and their most recent financial support was an example of that same generous spirit which had characterized their lives from the beginning (see on 2:25-30 and 4:10-20). Significantly, fifty years later the Philippian church showed the same character in its care for Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, while he was on his way to Rome under military guard for trial that ended with martyrdom.

**The Letter in the NT Canon**

Philippians has generally been accepted as a genuine letter of Paul. The apostle’s claim to have been its author has rarely been challenged, and for good reason. The picture the writer draws of himself coincides with that known of Paul from other sources, including Galatians and Acts. So the disclosure of his inner feelings (Phil. 1:18-24), the description of his present situation (1:12-13) and the names of his friends and co-workers (2:19-24), and his references to the gifts sent to him from Philippi and Thessalonica (4:15-16; cf. Acts 17:1-9; 2 Cor 8:1-5) are consistent with what we know of him from elsewhere.

Apart from the possible hymn passages of Philippians 2:6-11 and 3:20-21 (see the relevant discussions), an abundance of special Pauline vocabulary appears throughout Philippians. Phrases, ideas and allusions to opposition of false teachers that show up here also appear in letters unquestionably written by Paul (Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians). Further, echoes of Philippians may be heard in the writings of Clement (ca. A.D. 95), Ignatius (ca. A.D. 107), Hermas (ca. AD. 140), Justin Martyr (ca. AD. 165), and others. Apparently there was never any real question in the minds of the Church Fathers about the authorship or canonical authority of Philippians, for a number of them not only quote from the letter but assign it to Paul as well. Philippians also appears in the oldest extant lists of NT writings, the Muratorian Canon (later second century) and the canon of Marcion (d. ca. A.D. 160).

The most significant challenge to the authenticity of Philippians came from F. C. Baur of the Tubingen School in the1884. He claimed that there were certain un-Pauline Gnostic ideas and expressions in the hymn of Philippians 2:6-11, that the document was repetitious, that it lacked motive or occasion as well as any indication of purpose or leading idea, that its polemical outburst of 3:2-19 was a pale imitation of 2 Cor. 11:13-15, and that the reference to the repeated gifts being received from the Philippians (4:15-16) was at variance with Paul’s stated policy (cf. 1 Cor. 9: 15-18) of not being supported financially by his converts. But these and other arguments of Baur against the Pauline authorship of Philippians have not commended themselves to later generations of NT scholarship.

**First Chapter of Philippians**

**An Excursion into the Life of Apostolic Church**

***Philippians 1:1*** *Paul and Timothy, servants (Greek: slaves) of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Phi1ippi: with the bishops and deacons:*

***2****. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

**Notes**

1. The epithet “slaves” (servants) associated with the senders and the special reference to “bishops and deacons” among the addressees.
2. Only here is Timothy introduced both on a par with Paul and with the same title. In 1 Corinthians and Colossians, Paul is an apostle while Timothy is just a brother; the same differentiation is found in Philemon where only Paul is a (chained) prisoner compared to the brother Timothy. In 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Timothy is on a par with Paul; however neither has a title and Timothy comes in third position after Silvanus. In Philippians, Timothy is equal to Paul. It is the co –equality of the slaves of Jesus. This salve life and ministry will appears later in (Phil 2:6ff) where the Son of God “took the form of a slave.
3. Paul here presents himself as someone who is not free; he is a chained slave a prisoner: (vv. 1 and 9). In v.9 Paul stresses the fact that, he was actually demoted to this position while being in God s service: yet for love’s sake I prefer to appeal to you, I, Paul, an ambassador and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus.”
4. Paul’s intention is to imprint upon all “servitude to God” as the legacy to be maintained throughout one’s life. To do so, he first introduces not only himself, but also Timothy, in (2:19-24), as a “*slave of the Christ Jesus*.” Thus servitude is indeed a legacy to be maintained, and is applied all the more to “all the saints” in Philippi since their status as saints is no different than that of Paul and Timothy: it was and is secured through the Christ Jesus whose slaves the latter are.
5. This approach is not belittling according to what was known in the Roman society. Slaves were a kind of human who nearly exist as “citizens” of the Great Roman Empire. Is it fair for Paul to take their social status into consideration? Jesus who took the “form” of a “slave” contradicts the social self-abasement that was dominant in the Roman society. This “slave” Jesus is the “slave” of love and of service. Both, that is love and services define the status.
6. Paul is calling the bishops and deacons to be, and thus act as, “slaves” to their juniors as Paul himself does (1 Cor 9:19-23). Later in the letter, it becomes clear why he feels entitled to do this. When inviting, in turn, all the believers, and especially the leaders among them, to humility (Phil 2:3) and obedience (Phil 2:12), he does so by asking them to follow in the footsteps of Christ himself who humbled himself as an obedient slave (Phil 2:7-8). It is then the example of Christ that Paul himself is following. That is why, throughout the letter, whenever he offers himself as an example (1:29-30; 3:17; 4:9), he is actually understanding it in the manner of his request to the Corinthians and the Thessalonians: “*Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ*” (1 Cor 11:1); “*And you became imitators of us and of the Lord*.” (1 Thess 1:6)

**The teaching behind being a slave**

1. For Paul, anyone who has accepted the gospel that has the finalized the “law” (Greek nomos; Rom 8:2; Gal 6:2) of the last covenant and the new covenant (2 Cor 3:6) that was prophesied by Jeremiah and Ezekiel (Jer 31:31-34: Ezek 11:19; 34:25; 36:26; 37:26) and now is proclaimed to all the nations (Isa 42:1-7; 49:1-6), is bound to be a “slave unto others” (Gal 5:13). The divine call of God the Father to all the nations is to set God’s people as “holy” just as God himself is “holy.”

2. To be a “saint” is to be “slave.” This equivalence makes clear that to be called unto sanctification a saint’s behavior must respond to the call: “*To all God’s beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints*” (Rom 1:7); “*To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints*” (1 Cor 1:2); “*For God has not called us for uncleanness, but in (to) holiness*.” (1 Thess 4:7) That is why one cannot be a saint nominally, but has to take Jesus the slave, the only “true slave” as the model of life of holiness.

3. The saints are the members of the messianic community who are called to abide by the Messiah’s law (Gal 6:2). Paul and Timothy are setting themselves as models of the True Slave so that the Philippians are called to be saints, that is, to the same obedience of the True Slave Jesus, to do God’s will. The practical conclusion – full and unequivocal submission to God’s will – comes later when Christ himself, who is introduced here as “Lord” (Phil 1:2), will be given as the ultimate example of the obedient slave: “*Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*” (Phil 2:12-13)

**Bishops and Deacons**

1. Who or what are the bishops and deacons? First and foremost, we need not to read later developments of the 4th century back into these titles.
2. The “deacon” (Greek ***diakonos***) is much more common than “bishop” in the NT. Paul uses it for himself and his colleagues. The root ***diakon*** in the NT refers to service of a lesser human being in the society. A deacon is a slave or a servant who offers his service to someone of higher rank, and thus is practically equivalent in meaning to the Greek root ***doul*** whence ***douk*** (slave) is. A good starting point is the instances where the root ***diakon*** occurs specifically to what takes place in church’s life. The most “obvious” instance is found in Luke 17:8 as a part of Jesus’ teaching, that is to say, not referring to someone in particular: “*Will any one of you, who has a servant (****doulon****) ploughing or keeping sheep, say to him when he has come in from the field, ‘Come at once and sit down at table’? Will he not rather say to him, ‘Prepare supper for me, and gird yourself and serve (****diakonei****) me, till I eat and drink; and afterward you shall eat and drink’? Does he thank the servant (****doulö****) because he did what was commanded?”* (Luke 17:7-9).
3. From that same Greek word we have inherited the Greek word ***diakonia*** and when it is used with the verb it means “service of a slave.” In the NT there was no institution that gave a status to what we call later on “deacon.” ***Diakonia*** is functional. It is the service of a slave. In the society a slave is always a slave, while a deacon in the church is not always deacon. This conclusion seems to be tangible from the Gospel of both Luke and John where we find the same general terminology in conjunction with table fellowship as in the Luke in the above passage just was quoted and here in the Gospel of John, “*Six day before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. There they made him a supper; Martha was serving (****diekonei****), and Lazarus was one of those at table with him.*” (John 12:1-2). Here, ***diakonia*** can be seen in the pericope (*pericope: an independently coherent passage in a larger verse that could be read alone*) in Acts where we read about the official institution of the ***diaconate*** in church, “*Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists murmured against the Hebrews because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution*.”
4. English translations do not help us to read the NT correctly. The same word ***diakonia*** is translated differently, giving the impression that the handling of the (gospel) word is of a different nature than that of the daily bread. Even more: it is actually the noun ***diakonia*** that is “service” which is specifically a table fellowship term, which actually defines and qualifies the so-called ***diakonia***, that is the “deacon.” In Acts, “the twelve summoned the body of the disciples and said, “*It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve (****diakonein****) tables. Therefore, brethren, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry (diakonia) of the word.”* (6:1-4). So “ministry” of the word is the same as table ministry or service what we have here is a division of the service but not two ranks. Otherwise, the ministry is to be understood against the ministry of the service of feeding, and not vice versa. Consequently, in order for the “divine word” to be indeed food for every man (Duet 8:3) it has to be administered at a table gathering. This is precisely what we find stressed repeatedly in Acts. Notice how the meal is the matrix of the following passage: “*On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the morrow; and he prolonged his speech until midnight. There were many lights in the upper chamber where we were gathered. And a young man named Eutychus was sitting in the window. He sank into a deep sleep, as Paul talked still longer; and being overcome by sleep, he fell down from the third story and was taken up dead. But Paul went down and bent over him, and embracing him said, “Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him.*” *And when Paul had gone up and had broken bread and eaten, he conversed with them a long while, until daybreak,* *and so departed. And they took the lad away alive, and were not a little comforted* (Acts 27:7-12). The death and the raising of the young man should not totally downplay gathering for a meal for this does not interrupt Paul’s teaching while breaking bread with his listeners. The centrality of the teaching at table fellowship is found in the Acts in the apostolic time, *“So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship (****koinönia****), to the breaking of bread and the prayer. And fear came upon every soul; and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common (****koina****); and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to their number those who were being saved day by day together with them.* (Acts 2:41-47)
5. The table fellowship is also found in Paul’s statement: “*The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation (****koinonia****) in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation (****koinönia****) in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.*” (1 Cor 10:16-17) What is clearly stressed in the reality of fellowship is the oneness, obviously in the sense of being “at one.” However, this oneness is not an intellectual reality only, but also is true sharing in saying the same creed formula. It is a practical oneness expressed in the oneness of the table. This is made clear later in the epistle where Paul threatens the Corinthians with God’s ultimate wrath if they do not eat together, the reason being that the oneness of the table hangs on the oneness of the Lord (1 Cor 11:17-34). Thus, duality of tables is not allowed because it is breaking the unity of the gathering.
6. In Galatians 2:1-14, we find precisely that the real test for the fellowship (***koinônia***) between the Jerusalem pillars, on the one hand, and Paul and Barnabas, on the other hand (Gal 2:9), is not another debate of words and wordings, but the actuality of the one table (vv.11- 14). It is this kind of crisis at Antioch that precipitated the break between not only Paul and Peter, but even between Paul and his co-apostle Barnabas who was on his side when the hand-shake of the ***koinonia*** was sealed!

**Reading Contemporary History into the NT**

1. Once more when we read about “bishops and deacons” in the NT the greatest danger lies in reading back one’s practice and understanding of our contemporary Sunday Eucharistic gathering into New Testament times. The Acts paradigmatic compendium quoted above (2:41-47) clearly and unequivocally states that the breaking of bread took place “in their homes,” indicating that it was a regular meal and not some sort of a “religious” meal at a “religious” place. Notice the actual differentiation in Luke’s wording between two such gatherings: “*And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes* (***kat’ oikon***: at home).” This is only understandable if one recalls that the emerging Pauline “communities” were not yet part of a ***religio licita*** *(“tolerated religion” in the Roman Empire).* Consequently, these home gatherings were not just ad hoc informal meals, but factually the actual Pauline “churches” as is clear from the following instances: “*Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus … greet also the church in their house*” (Rom 16:3, 5); “*The churches of Asia send greetings. Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, send you hearty greetings in the Lord*” (1 Cor 16:19); “*Give my greetings to the brethren at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house*” (Col 4:15); “*To Philemon our beloved fellow worker … and the church in your house*.” (Philemon 1)
2. Two conclusions are in order. The first is that Paul’s frequent use of the root ***diakon****,* together with that of ***doul*** (slave), to refer to himself and his co-workers in conjunction with their apostolic activity was not fanciful on his part, but rather intended. His apostleship, as he wrote in Galatians 2, was continually tested at table fellowship whereby Jews and Gentiles were to be de facto “at one” by sharing the “one” table. The second conclusion is that the diaconate, which is the service of tables without differentiation between Jews and Gentiles or Hebrews and Hellenists (Acts 6:1-5), was an integral part of the church gatherings.

**The Bishops**

1. Paul’s letter was addressed to be read at a church gathering. Can our conclusion concerning the deacons be of help in determining what bishops were all about? Yes, it can and it does. One can start by surmising that their function is to take responsibility for the gathering, the “ministry (***diakonia***) of the word” (Acts 6:4). A look at the NT will readily confirm this conclusion. The Greek word for bishop is ***episkopos*** and it means “overseer,” someone who looks over with the intention of taking care of someone or something else. Here where the Greek is essential, in the NT the verb ***episkopein*** (Heb 12:14) has the same meaning as its plain cognate ***skopein***, it means: “see to it,” “pay attention to” or “be careful to” (Luke 11:35; Rom 16:17; 2 Cor 4:18; Gal 6:1; Phil 2:14; 3:17), the noun ***episkopos*** reflects the responsibility of a leader for those who are in his care, as is clear from (Acts 20:28): “*Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers (****episkopous****), to care for the church of God which he obtained with the blood of his own Son.*” This passage sheds light on the use of plural “bishops” in Philippians since the addressees in Acts are none other than the “elders” of Ephesus (Acts 20:17). However, what is more interesting for us is the link made here between overseeing and shepherding, which is also found in 1 Peter 2:5 where God himself is overseer: “*For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Bishop (****episkopon****) of your souls*.” On the other hand, ***episkope***, which refers to the activity itself of overseeing, is used to speak of the apostolic office in Acts 1:20. The three remaining occurrences of this noun speak of either the responsibility of bishop (overseer; 1 Tim 3:1) or of divine visitation for judgment as an “overseer” would do (Luke19:44; 1 Pet 2:12). The only possible bridge among all is to see a senior who “looks after.” These two facets are intertwined in Ezekiel 34 where God, in his visitation, is the shepherd who brings salvation to his sheep and harshly punishes those whom he had assigned as shepherds over them. And he does so at the same time through the prophetic word, which is both for instruction and, if not heeded, for judgment.
2. The overseer then is the NT “prophet” who continues the apostolic activity of preaching and teaching the divine word, while the deacon continues the apostolic activity of securing the oneness of the table. This understanding of the bishop as “prophet” is supported by the fact that the plural “bishops” (Phil 1:1) corresponds to the plurality of “prophets” in the one church gathering (1 Cor 14). One finds further corroboration in the Pastoral Epistles whose intent is to ensure the continuation of the apostolic activity after the Apostle’s death. Just as the prophet is second to the apostle (1 Cor 12:28), so are Timothy and Titus who, as bishops, are entrusted with a “deposit” that the apostle alone carries as the (living) “tradition” that is what has been handed over until it is laid down in an unchangeable written form (the deposit) for the ages. Furthermore, bishops are to heed and uphold the scriptural word in the same manner as was required from the elders-bishops of Ephesus, whose elder-bishop is now Timothy: “*Take heed to yourself and to your teaching; hold to that, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers*.” (1 Tim 4:16, 12, compare with the text quoted earlier: “*Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers*” in Acts 20:28). That bishops are bound by the apostolic teaching in both of its features, the teaching and the ***diakonia***, is best seen in another “testament” of Paul where he says: “*I charge 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 urgent in season and out of season, convince, rebuke, and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths. As for you, always be steady, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfil your ministry (****diakonian****)*. (2 Tim 4:1-5)
3. This route culminates in the epistle that typifies the Pauline teaching and is addressed to the church of Ephesus, where the gifts of which 1 Corinthians 12 -14 speak boil down to the following list: “*And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers*.” (Eph 4:11). Not only is the list brought down to the three primary gifts, which are related to the communication of the word (apostles, prophets, teachers), but it also expands the gift of prophecy in 1 Corinthians to include “*evangelists and pastors (shepherds).”* The first, evangelist, is used of Timothy in the above quoted passage (2 Tim 4:5) and the second, shepherds (***poimenas***), has been discussed before. And here once more, Paul’s teaching looms high in the background: already in his apologia and thus delineation of apostleship in 1 Corinthians 9, we have the seed of the view that the apostle, and thus every evangelist (carrier of the gospel teaching), is likened to a shepherd: “*Who tends (****poimainei****) a flock (****poimnen****) without getting some of the milk (of the flock;* ***tes poimnes****)?*” (V.7)

The church in Philippi succeeded in establishing the path that should be followed in the Pauline churches at the Apostle’s death and until he comes back with the Lord:

* 1. Timothy is his heir
  2. The gatherings are to be around the apostolic word expounded by bishops at the occasion of every common meal on the condition that deacons ensure the “oneness of the table”;
  3. Until the Lord’s coming all are bound to be, as Paul is and Timothy has no choice but to be, “slaves” in God’s household, obedient to his will exclusively;
  4. God’s will boils down to utter humility toward one another after the example set by God’s plenipotentiary emissary, the messiah, whose perfect image the Philippians have in “Paul in chains”.

This path is indeed a “way” that is defined by the biblical narrative since the word of God that Paul preached is nothing other than God’s word that is embedded once and for all in scripture: “*Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures.*” (Rom 1:1-2) Our acceptance of this word integrates us into the biblical narrative, as Paul taught the Gentile Corinthians:

“*I want you to know, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same supernatural food and all drank the same supernatural drink. For they drank from the supernatural Rock which followed them, and the Rock was Christ. Nevertheless with most of them God was not pleased; for they were overthrown in the wilderness. Now these things are warnings for us, not to desire evil as they did... Now these things happened to them as a warning, but they were written down for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come.* (1 Cor 10:1-6, 11)

Our acceptance of God’s word puts us on the “way” that was and is offered to the biblical Israel and, through God’s chosen one, to the nations (Is 42:1-7; 49:1-6). The beginning of that “way” is already behind us; it took place when we were lost, scattered, enslaved, in darkness, and God, for no apparent reason, “called” us out of our misery and set us “on the way” toward “a land of milk and honey” where we would find life and safety.

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