

Chapter Fourteen

Good Citizenship in Philippians 1:27-30: A Challenge to Peaceful Christian Life in Nigeria

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In Nigeria today, the rights and privileges of some citizens in some parts of the country are trampled upon and denied either on the basis of religion or ethnicity. In a situation where these rights and privileges are denied, conflicts are bound to manifest. This is a fact of the situation of the Christians in some part of the Northern Nigeria. Christianity is negatively seen as a rival religion to Islam. Clashes are even reported between members of Christian dominations where deadly weapon are used leading to the wanton destruction of lives and property. Ignorance has been identified as the bedrock of this negative rivalry and conflicts. The call to being a good citizen and living a life in accordance with the gospel of Christ becomes not only a challenge, but a necessity. Using exegetical method, this chapter calls for peaceful coexistence and it is divided into three major parts. The first part treats some aspects of the background of the letter of Paul to the Philippians; the second part analyses the chosen text; while the third part applies the text to the Nigeria situation.

Key words: Citizenship, Philippians, Nigeria, peaceful

Introduction

The word *citizen* refers to somebody who has the right to live in a country because s/he was born there or has been legally accepted as a permanent resident. The word is often loosely used as synonymous with resident or inhabitant. This includes the duties and responsibilities that come with being a member of that community or country. State laws conferring citizenship on foreigners who have filed declarations of intension to become citizens are often regarded as conferring citizenship. A person who is naturalized is admitted to all the privileges and duties of a citizen, and naturalization automatically confers citizenship on the person's

children resident at the time in that country. A naturalized citizen is one who was originally a subject of a foreign state but has become a citizen of another state in accordance with the laws bearing on that subject.⁵⁴⁴ According to F. F. Bruce, before the Hellenistic period, citizenship did not have the rather technical political significance in the biblical world that it thereafter acquired. In the Ancient Near East (ANE) citizenship amounted to little more than birth or residence in a particular place; such privileges as it conferred were confined to freeborn males. Special prestige attached to citizenship of an outstanding city, for instance as in Psalm 87, to have been born in Jerusalem is something to be proud of. From the LXX of this Psalm, is derived in part from the New Testament concept of citizenship in the heavenly city, “Jerusalem above” (Gal. 4:26; cf. Phil. 3:20; Heb. 12:22; Rev. 3:12; 21:2, 9-27; 22:1-5). The city (*polis*) was a political entity among the Greeks, and citizens involved jealously guarded privileges.⁵⁴⁵

In Nigeria today, the rights and privileges of some citizens in some parts of the country are trampled upon and denied either on basis of religion or ethnicity. In a situation where these rights and privileges are denied, conflicts are bound to manifest. This is a fact of the situation of some Christians in some part of contemporary Northern Nigeria. Christianity is negatively seen as a rival religion to Islam. The internal rivalry between Christian denominations in some cases leaves little to be desired of the religion. Some denominations see nothing wrong in castigating and destroying the image of other denominations. Clashes are reported between members of Christian denominations where deadly weapons are used leading to the wanton destruction of lives and property. Ignorance has been identified as the bedrock of this negative rivalry. Some denominations are seen as opponents that should be destroyed using any kind of means. There can be no meaningful development in an atmosphere of conflict. Christians are united in many aspects; one God, Jesus Christ as saviour and Lord, and the Bible as the Word of God, among others. In the light of the above, the call to be a good citizen, living a life in accordance with the gospel of Christ becomes not only a challenge, but a necessity.

⁵⁴⁴ “Citizens.” Microsoft^(R) Encarta^(R) 2009 [DVD]. Redmond, WA: Microsoft Corporation, 2008.

⁵⁴⁵ F. F. Bruce, “Citizenship”, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (David Noel Freedman, ed., New York: Doubleday, 1997).

In this chapter, the meaning and implication of good citizenship in Philippians 1:27-30 is examined in its context. Furthermore, the areas covered by this text will help to challenge Christians in Nigeria and the world at large towards living worthy Christian lives in tandem with their calling. This chapter is divided into three parts, aside from the introduction and conclusion. The first part treats the background of the letter of Paul to the Philippians; the second attempts some analyses of the chosen text, while the third is an application of the text to the Nigerian situation. Suggestions on the way forward concludes this chapter.

Background of Paul's Letter to the Philippians

This part attempts some overview of the whole letter as it concerns the author, addresses of the letter and their city, date and place of writing, Paul's opponents at Philippi, purpose for writing to the Philippians, and the Christology of the letter. This overview gives us a sense of direction in understanding the message of the section under study.

Paul claims to be the author of the letter to the Philippians (1:1), a claim that rarely has been challenged since it was first made and for good reason. In disclosing his innermost feelings (1:18-24), sharing autobiographical information (3:5, 6), describing his present situation (1:12, 13), naming his friends and co-workers (2: 19-24) and referring to gifts sent him from Philippi to Thessalonica and elsewhere (4:15, 16; cf. Acts 17:1-9; 2 Cor. 8:1-5). The author unconsciously and naturally draws a picture of himself that coincides precisely with what can be known of Paul from other sources (e.g. Acts and Galatians). In linguistic style too, "no letter can make a stronger claim to be from Paul than this."⁵⁴⁶ 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, and Galatians). "In this epistle surely, if anywhere, the two complimentary aspect of St. Paul's person and teaching ... both appear with a false definiteness which carry through conviction".⁵⁴⁷ Irenaeus (d. ca. A.D. 200), Clement of Alexandria (d. ca. A.D 215), Tertullian (d. ca. A.D. 225) and the later Fathers did not only quote from Philippians, but

⁵⁴⁶ M. S. Enslin, *Christian Beginnings: The Literature of the Christian Movement* (New York: Harper, 1956), 3, 280.

⁵⁴⁷ Lightfoot, 74.

assigned it to Paul as well. Philippians appears in the oldest extant list of New Testament writings—the Muratorian Canon (later second century) and the special canon of Marcion (d. ca. A.D. 160). There apparently never was a question in the minds of the Fathers of the Church as to the canonical authority of Philippians or about its authorship. A few modern-day scholars, however, have questioned the Pauline authorship of Philippians, in whole or in part, for example, Morton and McLeman. However, the validity of the methodology and the quality of their work have been severely criticized, while their conclusion have not been widely adopted, nor are they likely to be.⁵⁴⁸ It is safe to say the majority of contemporary New Testament scholars consider that Paul did write Philippians and that the question of its genuineness only has historical significance.

Paul addressed his letter to the Christians who resided in Philippi, including their bishops and deacons (1:1). At the time he wrote, Philippi was already an ancient and historic city. It was built and fortified between 358 and 357 BC, by Philip II of Macedon (the father of Alexander the Great), who named it after himself. The site Philip chose for his new fortification was the old Thracian city of Crenides (or Daton) in northeast Greece (Macedonia). It was located about eight miles from the sea in a very fertile region that was enriched by an abundance of springs and by the gold that was mined there.

After the Roman victory over the Persians in 168 BC, Philippi became part of the Roman Empire and belonged to the first of the four regions of Macedonia (cf. Acts 16:12). It also gained importance because it was made one of the stations along the main overland route connecting Rome with the East, stretching from the Adriatic Coast to Byzantium. Later, after a series of battles, Octavian, who took to himself the title of Augustus, defeated and rebuilt Philippi, established a military outpost there, filled it with Roman soldiers, veterans of his wars and Antony's partisans that were evicted from Italy made it a colony (*Colonia Iulia Augustus philippiensis*), and gave it the *ius Italicum*, which represented the legal quality of Roman territory in Italy—the highest privileges

⁵⁴⁸ See H. K. McArthur, "Computer Criticism," *Expository Times* 76 (1965) 367-70; "Kaiv Frequency in Greek Letters," *New Testament Studies* 15 (1969), 339-49; M. Whittaker, "A. Q. Morton and J. McLeman," *Theology* 69 (1969), 567-68.

obtainable by a provincial municipality.⁵⁴⁹ Colonists, therefore, could purchase and own or transfer property and had the right to civil lawsuits. They also were exempt both from the poll and land taxes.

Thus, when Paul made his first visit to Europe, he purposely neglected the port city of Neapolis to begin preaching the gospel in the small but more important city of Philippi, being the first district of Macedonia (Acts 16:12).⁵⁵⁰ This city was inhabited predominantly by Romans,⁵⁵¹ but many Macedonian Greeks and some Jews lived there as well. They were a people proud of their city, proud of their ties with Rome, proud to observe Roman customs and obey Roman laws, proud to be Roman citizens (cf. Acts 16:21) and proud as well. Philippi was a reproduction of Rome.

Paul's trouble at Philippi began when he freed a slave girl from an evil or 'familiar' spirit that enabled her to predict the future and so made money for her owners (Acts 16:19-21). Furious, these men seized Paul and Silas, dragged them before the authorities, and charge them with teaching customs that were against Roman law. Then, in case their charge should fail, they took advantage of an apparent pervasive anti-Jewish sentiment by adding, "These men are Jews" (Acts 16:19-21). Paul and Silas were whipped publicly without a trial and thrown into prison where the jailer fastened their feet between heavy stocks [or blocks of wood].⁵⁵² Although Paul would not claim Roman citizenship to spare himself physical suffering, he would and did claim it to clear Christianity from any possible reproach by the Roman government. Personal preferences should be sacrificed to make sure that future contacts between Christianity and Rome might be positive and the gospel not impeded.⁵⁵³

⁵⁴⁹ P. Lemerle, *Philippe et la Mace'donie Orientale à l' époque chre'tienne et byzantine* (Paris: E. de Boccard, 1945), 7-10.

⁵⁵⁰ See Nestle-Aland, *Novum Testament Graece*, 26 ed., for the textual data about this translation problem, and Sherwin-White, *Roman Society*, 93-95 for a good explanation and solution of the difficulty. See also B. M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (NEW York: United Bible Societies, 1971), 444-46 and G. Zuntz, "Textual Criticism of some passages of the Acts of the Apostles," *Classica et Mediaevalia* 3 (1940), 36, 37.

⁵⁵¹ Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 47.42-49.

⁵⁵² F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971), 291-304.

⁵⁵³ Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 43: Philippians* (Dallas, Texas Word Books, Publisher 1998), DVD.

Now, in the words of a contemporary writer, it seems impossible to decide the place where the Philippians epistle originated with any degree of certainty.⁵⁵⁴ For in addition to the traditional location (Rome), Caesarea, Ephesus and even Corinth have been suggested as cities from which Paul wrote Philippians, and each of these suggested cities is supported by substantial arguments.

There are, however, certain fundamental factors that need to be considered before even a tentative conclusion as to the place and dating of Philippians. Some of these include: (1) the fact that Paul was in prison when he wrote (Phil. 1:7, 13, 17); (2) the fact that Paul faced a trial that could end in death (1:19-20, 2:17) or acquittal (1:25; 2:24); (3) the fact that Paul was in prison when he wrote (Phil 1:7, 13,17); (4) the fact that Paul faced the trial that could end in his death (1:9-20, 2:17) or acquittal (1:25; 2:24); (5) the fact that the form wherever it was that Paul wrote there was the *praetorium* (1:13), and there were “those who belonged to Caesar’s household” 4:22; (6) the fact that Timothy was with Paul (1:1; 2:19-23); (7) the fact that extensive evangelistic effort were going on around Paul at the time he wrote to the Philippians (1:14-17); (8) the fact that Paul soon planned to visit Philippi if he were acquitted (2:24), and (9) the fact that several tips were made between Philippi and the place from which Paul wrote Philippians—all within the time-span of his imprisonment: (a) news travelled to Philippi of Paul’s arrest, (b) the Philippians therefore sent Epaphroditus to Paul with a gift to aid him in his distress, (c) news of Epaphroditus’ illness was sent back to Philippi, (d) word that the Philippians were greatly concerned about Epaphroditus reached Paul (see 2:25-30) and (e) Paul hoped to send Timothy to the Philippians and get encouraged back from them through him before he himself set off for Philippi (2:19, 24).

Rome, as the place from which Philippians was written (ca. A.D. 60-62) meets most of these fundamental facts and thus today still has many advocates.⁵⁵⁵ In Rome, Paul was a prisoner under house arrest (*custodia libera*) for at least two years (Acts 28:30). He had soldiers guarding him (Acts 28:16), yet he was free to send letters, to receive Jewish leaders and anyone else who came to see him or bring him gifts (Acts 28:17, 30).

⁵⁵⁴ A. Wikenuhauser, *New Testament Introduction* (Trans. J. Cunningham; New York: Herder and Herder, 1958), 436.

⁵⁵⁵ Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 43: Philippians* (1998) DVD.

He was also free to preach the gospel and he readily took advantage of this opportunity so that evangelism thrived in Rome under Paul's direction (28:31).⁵⁵⁶ The expression, "the praetorium" (Phil. 1:13) and "those of Caesar's household" (Phil. 4:22), are most easily and naturally understood if Rome is assumed as the birth place of Philippians and it is equally our take on this issue of place. More so, in Rome, there was a church sufficiently large and of sufficiently diverse composition to divide up into factions over Paul and his teaching (Phil. 1:14-17).

Paul was facing opposition to himself while in prison. Strangely, this opposition came from Fellow-Christians. Paul called them "brothers" and said that even though they spoke the Word of God and preached Christ (Phil. 1:14-17), but these "brothers" did so with impure motives – envy, rivalry and selfish partisanship –hoping thereby to add to Paul's suffering (1:15-17). Although Paul could joyfully accept the results of their conduct –the fact that Christ was being preached (1:18) –it is impossible to imagine that he could have believed their attitude and actions were right. Perhaps, then, the force of Paul's personal feeling against his opponents came to the surface in his harsh words contained in 2:21: "All seek their own interests, not the interests of Jesus Christ."

One cannot say with certainty who those opponents were. Some suggested they were Christian missionaries with a divine-man theology, who believed that humanity, meekness, imprisonment, suffering, and so on, were proofs that Paul was no apostle (or divine-man), since these weaknesses which Paul experienced showed that he knew nothing of the triumphant power of Christ.⁵⁵⁷ Others have suggested that Paul's opponents, while he was in prison, were Judaizers and Jewish Christians, who taught that in addition to believing in Christ one must also keep the Jewish law including regulations about food and drink, and especially the rite of circumcision. Although it may not be possible to identify with certainty those who opposed Paul while he was in prison, it is certain, however, that Paul was not concerned about himself and the threat to his own life. He would gladly accept the consequences of Christians

⁵⁵⁶ L. Johnson, "The Pauline Letters from Caesarea." *Expository Times* 68 (1957-58), 24.

⁵⁵⁷ "The divine-man concept in the Hellenistic world assumed a correspondence between the missionary and the god he served," R. Jewett, "conflicting Movements in the Early Church as Reflected in Philippians." *Novum Testament* 12 (1970), 368.

preaching Christ for whatever motive they might do this, if only Christ would be preached (Phil. 1:18.). What concerned him was the threat to his friends at Philippi and to their faith. It was this concern that caused Paul to promise destruction (1:28; cf. 3:19) for those who opposed the Philippians, who made them afraid and who attempted to undermine their firmness in the gospel (1:27-29).⁵⁵⁸

In assuming that the letter to the church at Philippi is a unity, one is not thereby forced to conclude that Paul had only one purpose in mind when he wrote this letter. Indeed, his purpose were many but we will concern ourselves with two. Paul wrote, among other reasons to encourage the Philippians to stand firm for the faith of the gospel, to inspire in them complete dedication to the will of Christ in spite of any crucible of suffering they might find themselves in. This could have been because of persecution that might have come upon them for rejecting the message of fanatical Jewish missionaries or because of the possibility of experiencing a martyr's death for refusing to bow before any lord but Jesus (cf. 1:27-30). One may agree with Lohmeyer who saw this purpose as the overriding purpose for Paul's writing to the Philippians and as a consequence considered the letters addressed to them as a tractate on martyrdom written by a martyr to a community of martyrs.⁵⁵⁹ In addition, Paul wrote them to correct division within their ranks. He was proud of the Philippians and asked, "for nothing better than to have his work judge by the record of this one church" (2:16; 4:1). Yet he was keenly aware that all was not well within it. The fellowship was fractured, not by doctrinal but by personal differences –differences arising out of rivalry, vanity, selfishness and animosity. He repeatedly, therefore, encouraged them to bond in unity (1:27; 2:2-4; 4:2).

The Christology of the Letter

Jesus Christ was the central "fact" of Paul's life from the Damascus journey to the experience of his death, and this reality can be seen cropping up everywhere in this brief letter to the Philippians. Joachim Jeremias wrote that "the hour of Damascus is the key to Pauline

⁵⁵⁸ Hawthorne, *Word Biblical Commentary*.

⁵⁵⁹ See J. Gnilka, "Die antipaulinische Mission in Philippi." *Byzantine* 9 (1965), 258-76.

theology.”⁵⁶⁰ Yet there are some interesting restraint here as well that are characteristics of Paul elsewhere: (1) Paul never addressed Jesus Christ directly, either in a prayer or in thanksgiving. He does not call on him to bear witness to any aspect of his own conduct, nor does he direct his doxology to him. Even Paul’s final salutation: “May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirits” (4:23), seems to be a studied avoidance of any kind of direct address to Jesus. Only God the father is the object of prayer and thanksgiving (1:3; 4:6). Only God is called on to bear witness (1:8). Only God receives the doxology of praise (4:20); only God is directly addressed. (2) Paul is careful to distinguished between God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (1:2). Jesus is never called “God” in Philippians (but see 2:6, cf. Rom 9:5 and 2 Thess. 1:12). The “fruit of righteousness” is produced through Jesus Christ, but it is for the glory and praise of God (1:11; cf. 2:11). Christians are called “children of God” (2:15), not of Christ. Righteousness comes from God through faith in Christ or through the faithfulness of Christ (3:9). God calls men by Christ (3:14). God is the God of peace (4:9) who brings peace to men in/by Christ (4:7). Why this distinction? Why this restraint in vocabulary on the part of a man so obviously committed to the Lordship of Christ? Perhaps it was due to the influence of Jewish monotheism on Paul, the former Pharisee (cf. I cor. :5-6). Convinced as Paul was from the “Christ-encounter” on the Damascus Road that Jesus was divine, on a par with God himself (cf. Phil 1:1; 2:6. 11) and one to be worshiped (2:10), he, nevertheless, could not quickly or easily bring himself to transfer to Jesus a title that he regarded to be exclusively that of the Father.⁵⁶¹

Analysis of Philippians 1:27-30

After discussing his own affairs and their consequences, and after having disclosed his own innermost feelings in 1:1-26, Paul turns now, as is his custom, to give instructions to the entire community. The transition from personal matters of encouragement is quite sudden, with simply the words “only” and “always”, giving as an introduction. Immediately one

⁵⁶⁰ Joachim Jeremias, *Expository Times* 76 [1964-65] 30) as quoted by Hawthorne.

⁵⁶¹ See D. R. de Lacey, “Image and Incarnation in Pauline Christology—A search for Origins,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 30 (1979), 1-28 for helpful suggestions in this difficult area of names for Jesus.

is in the middle of a parenetic section. Words of exhortation now control his thought. The musings about life and death are gone. Hesitation between two decisions is past, and everything is now directed towards life—the rigorous life of a Christian who is called to be loyal to the faith, to fight for the faith and live worthy of the faith. Battle terms, or phrases from the athletic games, are present: “stand firm,” “struggle” [twice], “suffer” characterize this section. One is tempted to compare Paul with a commanding officer or a coach who is determined to inspire his troops, and/or encourage his contestants, as he sends them into the fray, with the hope of getting back a good report about how they conducted themselves in the fight or competition.⁵⁶²

Apparently, however, the Philippians Christians, like Paul, faced some sort of hostile opponents who were set on their destruction v. 28. The apostle sees a united firmness on behalf of the gospel, and a disciplined life of self-sacrifice as the sure and certain way to overcome all adversaries. These twin themes bind this section (1:27-30) together with that which follows it (2:1-11).⁵⁶³

In v. 27, Paul introduces this new section with the adverb “only and always”. In so doing he stresses that “the one essential thing” (cf. Gal 1:23; 2:10; 3:2) for the Christian is to live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. For them to live such worthy lives, Paul uses the special verb “live!” to issue his command and also by the subordinate idea he attaches to his verb.

Vv. 27-30 constitute a single sentence in Greek that contains only the main verb “to live out one’s life” *politeuesthe*. This verb is an unusual one, appearing only twice in the New Testament, here and in Acts 23:1, where it means little more than to live out one’s life. Originally, however, it meant “to live as a citizen of a free state”, “to take an active part in the affairs of the states”. Paul seems here to go back to this earlier meaning.⁵⁶⁴

To the ancient Greek the state was by no means merely a place to live. It was rather a sort of partnership formed with a view to having people attain the highest of all human goods. Here in the state the individual citizen developed his gifts and realizes his potential not in isolation, but in cooperation. Here he was able to maximize his abilities

⁵⁶² Ginilka, 272.

⁵⁶³ Hawthorne, *Word Biblical Commentary*.

⁵⁶⁴ Hawthorne, *Word Biblical Commentary*.

not by himself or for himself, but in community and the good of the community. As a consequence, mutuality and interdependence were important ideas adhering to the concept of the state. “To live as citizen”, therefore, meant for the Greek (and later the Roman) right and privileges, and also duties and responsibilities. To the Jew the idea of “state” had as its focal point the “city of the great king” (Ps 48:2; cf. Matt. 5:32). Originally, Jerusalem was this ideal city, localized and restricted in scope. But under the influence of the Psalmist and prophet of the “city”, this concept was expanded until Jerusalem was not only home for every member of the Commonwealth of Israel, but the spiritual fellowship into which the nations of the world eventually would enter (cf. Ps 87). It became a universal centre of fellowship of Israel’s God, who is the God of the whole earth (Isa. 66:20 LXX; Amos 9:11-12; Zech. 14:8-11).⁵⁶⁵

Both ideas appear to be combined in Paul’s studied choice of this rare verb, *politeuesthe*, over the customary verb for “living”, *peripatesomen* (Rom. 6:4; 1 Cor. 3:3; 2 Cor. 5:7; Gal. 5:16; Eph. 2:2, Phil. 3:17; 1 Thess. 2:12 etc.). Thus, to live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ means to live as a good citizen of an earthly state, fully discharging one’s duties and responsibilities to that state.⁵⁶⁶ But there is more. Through the gospel which proclaims Christ as Saviour, the Christian is made a citizen of the heavenly Jerusalem (cf. Heb. 12:22-23; Rev. 21:2-3), a partner in a spiritual fellowship, a member of a new community –the Christian commonwealth, the Church (Phil. 3:20; cf. Eph. 2:19). To live worthily of the gospel, then, also means that the Christian lives as a good citizen of this new state, governing his/her actions by the laws of this unique *politeuesthe* –righteousness, peace, faith, hope, love, mutuality, interdependence, good deeds, service to one another, worship of the living God, and so on.⁵⁶⁷ Furthermore, to live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ means that the Philippians, it is hoped, will live in harmony with each other, a meaning that springs quite naturally from the fact that they are fellow citizens of a heavenly state –partners in a new community. Thus, Paul expects to hear that his friends at Philippi are standing firm in one spirit, struggling together in one mind. Both of these

⁵⁶⁵ B. F. Westcott, “On the Social Imagery in the Epistle”, in B. F. Westcott *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapid: Eerdmans, reprinted., 1965), 384-90.

⁵⁶⁶ R. R. Brewer, “The Meaning of *Politeuesthe* in Phil. 1:27” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 73 (1954), 76-83.

⁵⁶⁷ See the use of this word in 1 Clem. 3:4; 21:1; Phil. 5:2.

expressions are intended to remind the Philippians that as Christians, they are in a battle and that a united front is the best strategy for victory.

“Stand firm” translates the Greek word *stekete*, a verb found first in the New Testament, newly formed from the perfect tense of *standai*.⁵⁶⁸ It conveys the idea of firmness or steadfastness, or unflinching courage like that possessed by soldiers who determinedly refuse to leave their posts irrespective of how severely the battle rages (cf. 1 Cor. 16:13; Gal. 5:1; Phil. 4:1; 2 Thess. 2:15; cf. also Eph. 6:13-17). Paul does not say who it is the Philippians are to stand firm against, but it is clear from the verses which follow that the Christians at Philippi are being challenged by adversaries, perhaps Jews (see chap. 3), and are in danger of being shaken.⁵⁶⁹ They can, however, resist the challenge and overcome the adversary by a joint effort that forges a united community spirit. The context, with its strong appeal to unity, and carefully constructed chiasmic form, brings the phrase “in one mind” immediately up against the phrase “in one spirit” in this sentence. The two similes combine not merely to show that the two expressions are equivalent in meaning, but to show that it is of extreme importance for Christians to coexist in community, work together in harmony and resist the common enemy with a common intention.

The two parallel phrases, therefore, serve strictly to heighten the idea that Christian harmony. “a common spirit” which believers themselves must strive for, is essential if the church at Philippi, or anywhere else, is to maintain a courageous witness against hostile opposition.⁵⁷⁰ The verb “to stand firm” is now explained by two participial phrases. The Christian best stands his ground (1) when s/he is struggling and (2) when s/he is showing a certain kind of braveness. “To struggle” again is a verb that underscores the ideas that played such an important part in this section and throughout the entire letter, that of fellowship and community, of camaraderie and mutual understanding. “To struggle,” as “to struggle along with someone.” It is a rare word, even in classical Greek, found in the New Testament only here and in Philippians 4:3. With it, Paul quickly changes the picture from soldier at battle stations to athletes working as a team, side by side, playing the game not as several individuals, but

⁵⁶⁸ “To stand”; BDF 73; Moulton, *Grammar* 2, 220, 259.

⁵⁶⁹ E. Lohmeyer, *Der Brief and die Philipper, an die Kolosser und an Philemon* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1956).

⁵⁷⁰ See Lohmeyer, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* 6, 435.

together as one person with one mind, for one goal.⁵⁷¹ Here it means to preserve and persevere in the faith brought into existence by the gospel.

This interpretation of the expression “the faith of the gospel” means that “the faith” here is an early example of the tendency for the word “faith” to become a technical term for “creed”, those things which the Christian believes (cf. also Tim. 3:9; 4:1, 6; 5:8; 6:10,21; Jude 3). It means that the dative of interest or advantage, to be translated “for the faith”, and not as a dative of association governed by the preposition “with” in the compound word to be translated, “with the faith”.⁵⁷² It also means that “of the gospel” is a subject genitive, meaning that the gospel is the generative power of the Christian’s creed, that the good news that God has acted in Christ for human salvation is the source and origin of the faith, the essence of what a Christian believes.

The issue here then is the Christian faith. The faith is being threatened. There are those who would nullify this faith, perhaps by proclaiming a message that is not founded on the free grace of God and the finished work of Christ to which nothing can be added by way of human effort. Thus, the plea for unity is no small matter. Only by the total cooperation of Christians striving unitedly together with each other in this fierce contest for the minds of human beings can the true gospel be preserved against distortion or destruction by its opponents.

The words which now follow—“which is to them a sign of destruction, but of your salvation”—are extraordinarily difficult to interpret.⁵⁷³ One is led on by this saying of Paul, that a Christian who is willing to stand up with other Christians for the faith of the gospel (v 27)

⁵⁷¹ V. C. Pfitzner, *Paul and the Agon Motif* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967), 116-18.

⁵⁷² D. R. Hall, “Fellow-Workers with the Gospel,” *Expository Times* 85 (1974), 119-20.

⁵⁷³ This difficulty is reflected in the translations, which either leave one still puzzled over their meaning, or add details hard to justify textually in order to try to make sense of them (cf. Phillips, GNB). Westcott and Hort found these words so disconcerting that they suggested that they and the words in v 29 be put in a parenthesis, thus enabling v. 30 to be attached directly to v 28a. Such a suggestion provides a smooth flow of thought, and treats the parenthesis as a Pauline metaphoric expression that gives a theological explanation of Christian theodicy –suffering. Perhaps, the difficulty can be resolved in a different and less radical way, resulting in a quite different interpretation of the text from the one generally accepted today.

can expect to suffer. It has always been so. Redemptive history teaches that those who believe the word of God, who uncompromisingly speak this word and unyieldingly live in accordance with it often pay for their courage and resolution with their lives –from the ancient prophets to Jesus (Matt. 5:12; 23:29-37; cf. 21:33-46). “Believing” and “suffering”, therefore, go hand in gloves now as they have always been in the past (cf. 4 Macc. 5-6; 9-15, especially 15). Paul reminds his friends at Philippi of this fact. At the same time, he encourages them by telling them, twice over, that their suffering is “for Christ”.

This prepositional phrase, “for Christ” may mean simply that the Philippians are suffering because they are on Christ’s side. They have believed the gospel of Christ (v 27_a). They have set themselves to preserve and propagate this gospel (v 27_b). They have taken their stand with Christ. As a consequence, they have put themselves on a collision course with hostile forces abroad in their world that are opposed to Christ. It is inevitable then that they suffer. “For Christ” can also mean “for the sake of Christ”. If this is the sense here, then Paul is saying that the Philippians are willing to suffer because of their love for and devotion to Christ. Christ is the moving cause or reason for their willingness to endure. Like earlier disciples, these newer ones are able to view suffering for the sake of Christ as an honour and privilege (cf. Acts 5:41).

The idea of suffering, and suffering “for Christ,” is preeminent here. But it should be noted in passing that Paul incidentally says that the act of believing Christ is also a gift of God (cf. Eph. 2:8). “To believe in” is a NT grammatical invention and is the most emphatic way of expressing absolute trust in Christ, infrequently used by Paul, but often by John.⁵⁷⁴

In v. 30, Paul concludes this section with a participial phrase that further explains the meaning of the suffering of the Philippians. Their struggle is an extension of the suffering he himself had experienced earlier at the same Philippi (Acts 16:16-24; cf. 1 Thess. 2:2), which they had seen at close range, and which he is even now enduring at Caesarea (Acts 24-25), about which they have only heard through Epaphroditus. It is a battle that results from preaching and defending the gospel, and in this battle the Philippians have joined. They together with him have formed a “fellowship of Christ’s suffering” (3:10), since the gospel is

⁵⁷⁴ G. F. Hawthorne, “The Concept of Faith in the Forth Gospel”, *Bibliotheca Sacra* 116 (1959), 116-26.

itself “the word of the cross” (1 Cor. 1:8).⁵⁷⁵ The word Paul uses here for “fight” or “battle” is the word *agona*. It originally applied to athletic contests in the arena. Eventually, it came to mean any inward or outward struggle (Col. 2:1; 1 Thess. 2:2; cf. 1 Tim. 6:12; 2 Tim. 4: 7; Heb. 12:1).

Application of the Text

The situation of Paul/Philippians and the picture given in our introduction of the Nigerian Christians appears to be similar. The problem of having opponents in life is part of human reality. In Nigeria as it is in most parts of the world, members of one political party are seen as opponents to the members of another party. Within religious circles, some radical Muslims (especially fundamentalist anti-establishment movements) see Christians as opponents that could be destroyed at every slightest provocation especially where they are a minority. This explains the reason for the different religious crisis in some parts of Nigeria. The killing of Christians in Nigeria by Boko Haram and Fulani Militias is a clear example. The worst opponents, in some cases, are better imagined. In this case, Christians are not immune from this general problem of religious militancy and fundamentalism. Every opportunity to pray is converted into a Christian spiritual warfare of binding and casting of imagined enemies such as ill-health, witches, sorcerers, ritualists, members of occult societies, and demonic spirits, among others. The similarity of the situation between the Pauline world and the contemporary Christian world has made it necessary for his words to be of great challenge to Christians today because they are divine and possess limitless and timeless value.

The challenge before Christians everywhere in the world is, therefore, to do their best to live as good citizens of an earthly state like Nigeria by discharging their duties and responsibilities to it. It does not end there. There is more to it as we saw in the treatment of the text. Through the gospel, which proclaims Jesus Christ Saviour, Christians everywhere are made citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem, partners in a spiritual fellowship, and members of a new community. In this community, a Christian is governed by the law of righteousness, peace,

⁵⁷⁵ A. Richardson, *An Introduction to the Theology of the NT* (London: SCM Press, 1958), 29.

faith, hope, love, mutuality, interdependence, good deeds, service to one another, and sacrifice, among others.

Another challenge for the Christian today is the danger of losing one's faith in God in the face of any danger or threat as the Philippians faced. The command here is to stand firm and not to compromise the value of the gospel notwithstanding the severity of the situation. We have had situations where Christians, because of certain challenges of religious nature, have been converted into other religions, such as Islam. To be born a Christian by a Christian family is something one cannot control. But to remain a Christian or become a Christian in a personal decision that should be made now with personal effort, decision and courage. In fact, it can become a matter of life and death, when the convert in question is a former Muslim. This struggle in resisting all dangers must not be done in isolation but with other Christians. Unity among Christians is necessary – as the saying goes “united we stand, but divided we fall”.

The new trend of proclaiming the gospel of Christ today without the Cross by some Christians should not only be avoided but resisted. Suffering for Christ should be seen by Christians everywhere as an integral part of the Christian faith. Christ suffered, Paul also suffered, and the Philippians are called upon not to run away from it but rather to embrace it as a fact, together with the challenge of the Christian faith. In embracing Christian suffering in Christ, the hope of salvation is assured.

Conclusion

Paul encourages the Philippians (and by extension, Christians of all races and generations) to live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ at all times. This means, among other things, that they will be good citizens both of the earthly state in which they live and of the heavenly state to which they will ultimately belong. It also means that the Philippians should present a united front against the common enemy. They need to be one in spirit and intent, fighting side by side for the preservation of the faith brought about by the gospel, those things most believed by the church. It means loyalty to the Christian faith, which in the eyes of their opponents, seems a foolhardy allegiance, to something that can only bring them persecution and death. In their own eyes, however, such loyalty is to something that will bring salvation. They believed that in

response to their faith, God would bring them safely to their desired end. Finally, living in the manner worthy of the gospel means that they must not fear their adversaries or grow discouraged because of the trouble heaped upon them. This is because ‘suffering for Christ’, as ‘believing in Christ’, is a gracious gift from God, for which they should be thankful. They and Paul form a community of sufferers with the suffering Christ. They can fully expect to share in the suffering of Christ because of their whole-hearted allegiance to the gospel and their total commitment to Christ. “The disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master; it is enough for the disciple to be like his master and the servant like his master” (Matt. 10:24-25; cf. Phil. 3:10). We, the Christians of this age and time are the present-day Philippians, and as we mentioned in the application of the text, Paul’s words in the Bible have limitless and timeless values, which should be adhered to. Like Paul, Christian leaders should develop the act of writing to encourage members who are facing contemporary challenges of new opponents, especially antichrist tendencies and materialism.