

Interpretation of Philippians 2:1-11

Exegesis

Historical context

The time and culture of the author and his readers?

AD 63 (approx.)

His condition as a prisoner seems to have changed for the worse. He had enjoyed comparative liberty for the first 2 years of his imprisonment at Rome, living in his own hired house and accessible to all his friends. He had now been removed, possibly to the guardroom of the praetorian guard. Here he was in more rigorous confinement, in want and alone. Persecution has become a real issue.

You would need to consult a Bible Dictionary for some of this information

The occasion and purpose of the author?

To thank them for contributions sent by Epaphroditus, who takes back the letter.

To express Christian sympathy.

To encourage the imitation of Christ in humility and lowly love.

To encourage unity.

To prepare them for persecution.

Literary context

What is the point the author is making?

Important to note that words have meaning within sentences and sentences within paragraphs etc.

That is why we need to read a passage in the context of the surrounding verses and paragraphs. We need to seek the development of the author's thought.

We are attempting to understand 2:1-11

There are complicated issues regarding the deity of Christ here but Paul's point is not to explain these. His main point is that we should mimic the humility of Christ.

Humility is an important teaching in its own right but is this set in a context? Is this part of a flow of arguments?

In many translations this passage starts with connecting words such as "So", "Therefore", "If then". For example The English Standard Version *So if there is any encouragement...*

This reflects the content of the Greek manuscripts and gives a strong indication of a developing argument.

NB. the NIV very often does not translate connecting words even though they are there in the Greek manuscripts. A more literal translation such as the ESV does not take these liberties. This is one good reason for reading a literal Bible alongside the NIV.

So, if we look back we see that in verses 1:12-26 Paul is giving them information about himself but then there is a clear shift. Notice how the I/me/my gives way to you/your in verse 1:27. This is the start of a new section – he is now giving them instructions.

So, we need to follow the argument through from 1:27 to 2:11.

Attempt to follow his flow – why is humility such an important attribute?

Philippians 1:27 "Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ ...that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel" (ESV)

To be worthy of the gospel the Philippians must be united in spirit and mind. Unity is essential.

Philippians 1:28 “and not frightened in anything by your opponents...” (ESV)

Especially, in the face of persecution

Philippians 2:1 “So...” (ESV)

(Remember the NIV omits the conjunction (“so”) even though it is in the Greek manuscripts. This is a good illustration of why we need to consult a literal translation such as the English Standard Version)

So... they were to have the same humility that was displayed in Christ in the incarnation (Christ becoming human and coming to live amongst us)

Summary

1. To be worthy of the gospel the Philippians must be united. Unity is essential.
2. Especially, in the face of persecution
3. So they were to have the same humility that was displayed in Christ in the incarnation

So, reversing this, we could say that if the Philippians did not display the humility of Christ they would not be worthy of the gospel and the church would not be united. And if the church was not united then it would not be effective in countering persecution.

We can see that by taking Philippians 2:1-11 out of its literary context of Philippians 1:27-2:11 we still have important teaching – humility was an important requirement. But following the flow of the argument enables us to understand why humility was required which gives us a much deeper and profound understanding.

Synthesis

We should now have a good understanding of this passage (now extended from 2:1-11 to 1:27-2:11).

Does our understanding conflict with our current Biblical understanding?

If so then we need to reconsider our Exegesis and/or our current Biblical understanding.

Application

We now understand what the passage meant to the original readers (Exegesis) and our understanding of it does not conflict with our current Biblical understanding (Synthesis).

We now need to apply this to ourselves:

1. Do we share a similar life situation?
2. Is there a progressive revelation issue here?
3. Is there a cultural aspect in the passage that we need to consider?

Let's consider these three questions:

1. *Do we share a similar life situation?*

Yes – Philippians 1:1 “...To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons...”

2. *Is there a progressive revelation issue here?*

I can't see that there is.

3. *Is there a cultural aspect in the passage that we need to consider?*

I can't see that there is. Persecution was a major issue but for us, today, it is becoming more of an issue than it ever has been from 4th century onwards.

So we can apply this teaching to us here at the Sports Village Church today in the 21st century?

We will never be a completely united church unless we, as individuals, display the humility of Christ. Humility is a prerequisite for a church to remain united in spirit and mind.

Can you think of any situation in our church life that this teaching would be important?