**PARTNERSHIP IN THE GOSPEL**

***14Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles.*** ***15Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only;*** ***16******for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than once when I was in need. 17Not that I desire your gifts; what I desire is that more be credited to your account.***

**Philippians 4:14-17 (NIV)**

In 4:10 Paul joyfully received the Philippians’ gift as tangible evidence that their care for him had ‘blossomed afresh.’ Since their gift met his material needs while imprisoned, it is also evidence of their being partners with him in his afflictions (4:14), and so of their partnership with him in the work of the gospel (4:15).

In 4:15,16 this partnership is expressed in the language of Greco-Roman friendship. He recounts their history of material support in terms of their having entered a ‘giving and receiving’ relationship with him, which is the first mark of friendship. ‘Giving’ is what has been renewed. But friendship presupposes reciprocation. In terms of the principle established in 1 Corinthians 9:11, their gift is already to be understood as reciprocation. But having now ‘received’ their gift, it is Paul’s turn to reciprocate, which he does beginning at 4:17. The gift itself is almost incidental. What he desires is for them to experience ‘an ever-increasing balance in their divine account’ (divine reciprocation), which in this first instance has to do with eschatological reward. Present reciprocation is promised in 4:19, now in terms of God supplying their various needs (including material needs).

‘*Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles’* (4:14). The ‘*yet’* breaks off the preceding discussion in 4:10-13 by emphasising what was important. Even though Paul’s life was not determined by ‘need,’ because he had learnt contentment whether full or hungry, (picking up the thread of 4:10), ‘what you did in my behalf was a good thing.’ In 4:10 he had described their gift as a ‘blossoming’ of their care for him. Here that is elaborated in terms of their ‘partnership/participation’ with him in his afflictions (cf. 1:7). The NIV’s ‘*troubles’* was a broader word used most often to describe afflictions suffered by believers because of their relationship to Christ. This is a well-chosen word because not only did they ‘participate’ with him in his affliction by sending their gift, but they did so in the context of their own affliction (1:29,30; 2:17).

‘*Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only;* *16for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than once when I was in need’*(4:15,16). These verses elaborate the theme of the Philippians’ partnership with Paul. He reminds them of their past ‘partnership with him in the gospel’ but that reminder is couched in the primary language of friendship in Greco-Roman society – partnership in the matter of giving and receiving.

These two verses (4:15,16) divide into three parts. The first part is more literally: ‘At the beginning of the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia.’ What Paul reminds them of first is that their partnership with him in giving and receiving has to with the gospel (referring back to their origins as believers in Christ). He is saying that (1) their friendship together had its focus not just on his and their own personal relationship, but was a three-way bond that included Christ and the gospel – the glue that cemented their relationship and gave it significance and (2) that this partnership goes back to their beginnings as Christians.

Paul reminds them that secondly, this partnership in the gospel stems from the time he set out from Macedonia, probably referring to the province. In 2 Corinthians 11:8,9 where in defence of his not having entered into such a contractual friendship with the Corinthians, Paul argues: ‘*I robbed other churches by receiving support from them to serve you. And when I was with you and needed something … the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied what I needed*.’ This ministry may or may not have continued after Paul left Corinth.

Coming back to 4:15,16’s three parts, the second reads: ‘*not one church shared with me* *in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only.’* This is the main clause and points out that they were the only church with whom Paul had entered into ‘contractual friendship.’ The nature of this arrangement is demonstrated by Paul’s wording ‘*in the matter of giving and receiving.’*  This has long been recognised as commercial language. ‘*In the matter’* from ‘*not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving’* was terminology for the Philippians ‘opening an account’ with Paul in which there was mutual ‘giving’ (credit) and ‘receiving’ (debit). That this was Paul’s thinking is corroborated in 4:17 where he writes ‘*I am looking for what may be credited to your* account’ and 4:18 ‘*I have received full payment*.’

As far as the records go, in Philippi alone among all the churches did he accept patronage while present with them. When he went to Thessalonica, he chose a different course, deliberately ‘working with his hands’ to set a model before the Thessalonians (2 Thessalonians 3:7-10). He then continued this practice when he went to Corinth (1 Corinthians 4:12). The Philippians alone entered into partnership with Paul regarding his material needs, apparently assisting him when they were able and had opportunity.

In a sense he became ‘client’ to their ‘patronage.’ But because their ‘friendship’ was predicated on their mutual belonging to Christ, this expression of patron-client relationship was levelled by mutuality and reciprocity. In any case, this is the relationship Paul is calling their attention to by way of reminder. His concern is to remind them that he has this unique relationship with them alone among all the churches.

Returning to our three-fold break-up of 4:15,16, the third part is ‘*for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than once when I was in need’* (4:16). Clearly Thessalonica did not have the same kind of contractual friendship with Paul that the Philippians had. They did not materially support him in his ministry (2 Thessalonians 3:7,8). Believers from Philippi travelled the 145 kilometres down the Egnatian Way to Thessalonica to assist with Paul ‘*when I was in need*.’ In 4:11-13 Paul felt compelled to establish that his joy over their gift was not grounded in having his needs met. He was happy whether they were met or not. But he doesn’t deny that the gift did meet his needs either.

There is good evidence from the Greco-Roman world that ‘thank you’ was not a core part of the language of friendship. True friends in their world did not need to use wording like this. What Paul is most likely doing here in keeping with social convention is expressing his ‘thank you’ indirectly by rehearsing their history in this way.

‘*Not that I desire your gifts; what I desire is that more be credited to your account*’ (4:17). Paul interrupts his gratitude with another ‘not that.’ He doesn’t want his recital of their exemplary history of friendship with him in the matter of ‘giving and receiving’ to be taken as a subtle request for more help. Now picking up on the commercial metaphor he tells them the opposite, ‘*what I desire is that more be credited to your account.*’ Their giving to him is an expression of love, of the gospel at work in their midst. For Paul, every time they gave, it was an evidence of fruitfulness, fruitfulness that had the effect of being entered on the divine ledger as interest. They themselves would be Paul’s eschatological reward (2:16; 4:1) but their gift to him would have the effect of accumulating interest toward their eschatological reward.

Paul’s interest is not in their ‘reward’ as such, but in their gift as evidence that their relationship with Christ was in good order and continuing to grow. He doesn’t negate the gift but gives here clear evidence that his ultimate concern is for them – far more than for his material needs. Their gift, which serves his physical health, serves more significantly as evidence of their spiritual health.

Without direct referencing these studies have drawn, sometimes heavily, on:

*Paul’s letter to the Philippians* (The New International Commentary on the New Testament) by Gordon Fee (William B Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1995)

*Philippians* (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries) by Ralph Martin (Inter-Varsity Press, Nottingham, England, 1987)

*The Message of Philippians* (The Bible Speaks Today Series) by Alec Motyer (Inter-Varsity Press, Nottingham, England, 1984)

*The Holy Bible (New International Version)* (International Bible Society, Colorado Springs, CO., USA, 1984)

*The Prison Letters* (Paul for Everyone) by Tom Wright (SPCK, London, 2004)

*Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* by W. E. Vine (Thomas Nelson, Nashville, TN, 1996)