**THE GOSPEL ADVANCES OUTSIDE OF PRISON**

***It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill.*** ***16The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel.*** ***17******The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing*** ***that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains.*** ***18But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.***

**Philippians 1:15-18a (NIV)**

‘*It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill.’* ‘*Envy’* and ‘*rivalry’* occur together in the list of ‘*the acts of the sinful nature’* in Galatians 5:20,21 and Romans 1:29 where Paul describes the behaviour of those who ‘*will not inherit the kingdom of God’* (Galatians 5:21). In 1 Timothy 6:4 they appear together to describe the false teachers who were probably elders, and so former friends, whose ‘*unhealthy* *interest in controversies and* *quarrels’* resulted in ‘*envy’* and ‘*strife*.’ In our text these words describe the underlying reason for the newfound boldness of some, which could only have been directed at Paul personally. Jealousy is one of the lowest expressions of human fallenness. Out of envy toward Paul they now viewed Paul’s imprisonment as their chance to preach Christ ‘correctly.’

On the other hand there were others whose motive was ‘*goodwill*.’ ‘*The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel’*(1:16). Their ‘love’ was love for Paul. They understood Paul’s imprisonment to be appointed by God, as Paul himself did (‘*I am put here for the defense of the gospel’*), words thatanticipate the apparent tribunal referred to in 1:19,20. While those around him are free to advance the gospel, his present role includes ‘*the defense of the gospel*.’ These friends among the house churches saw their role as filling the gap in evangelism, while Paul had been divinely appointed to defend the gospel at the highest level of the empire. It takes the love of Christ to see another’s circumstances through such a prism.

From the Roman point of view, Paul was on trial over whether Christianity was no longer attached to Judaism

and so whether it should receive the same status as its parent religion; and further to this, whether those who claimed ‘Jesus is Lord’ also recognised Caesar as lord. But from Paul’s point of view, the gospel itself was on trial and his imprisonment divinely appointed ‘*for the defense of the gospel’* at the highest level.

‘*The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains’* (1:17). Their preaching Christ was from ‘*selfish ambition*,*’* aiming to score points in their personal battle against Paul. It was ‘*not sincerely*.’ They supposed ‘*that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains.’* Their thinking finished up centred in Paul, his imprisonment and his afflictions. Paul’s mind centred in the gospel, for whose defence he had been appointed. They did what they did out of impurity but God was able to even use this impurity to further the gospel.

What kind of people were they? On two matters there is certainty (1) they are members of the Christian community in the city where Paul was imprisoned (1:14) and (2) they can’t then be related (in any direct sense) to the other alleged ‘opponents’ who surface in this letter (1:27,28) who are in Philippi. Beyond this is speculation.

Assuming Paul is in Rome, a clue to those he refers to above could be in his letter to the church in Rome written some five years earlier. There he addressed some of the internal struggles, most likely related to the existence of several house churches which he knew existed in Rome even then. At issue was Jew and Gentile acceptance of one another in the same body of Christ. In that letter he tried to do two things: to see how Christ brought an end to the Torah as the means of relating to God; and to get the Gentiles to moderate their behaviour toward the Jewish believers on issues that did not ultimately count. Most of the letter was written from the perspective of the apostle to the Gentiles, showing that Christ and the Spirit have brought an end to the significance of Jewish identity markers, while the 14:1 – 15:13 section was written from the perspective of the Gentiles with regard to their acceptance of the Jews.

It is extremely possible that the Jewish Christian element were not convinced that food and circumcision had nothing to do with the kingdom of God (Romans 14:17). Since the church in Rome was not founded by Paul, these people felt no obligation of loyalty to the man. His presence in Rome under house arrest might have given them new energy for evangelism, at least to preach the gospel as they understood it. Paul recognised they were preaching out of jealousy and partisanship. While this disappointed him, at least the gospel was being preached.

This would explain why Paul could rejoice in their preaching while so strongly opposing others in other contexts who seemed to be doing something similar. All of Paul’s strong language against ‘opponents’ is directed against those who invade his Gentile churches and insist on them conforming to basic Jewish identity markers (circumcision, food laws, Jewish calendar). But not all who oppose Paul on the matter of Gentiles not keeping Torah should be thought of as ‘Judaisers’ (in the sense of invading Paul’s churches to make ‘converts’). It is quite possible that some who strongly disagree with him here, because of their Jewish sympathies, could be stirred up by Paul’s imprisonment to preach Christ – albeit out of envy and selfish ambition.

Galatians 2:6-10 makes clear that Paul recognised, and accepted, differences of opinion within the larger circle of Christian faith. The agreement hammered out there finally took the form of ‘spheres of influence.’ Paul would not reject circumcision for boys born into Jewish Christian homes. What he found intolerable were those who entered his turf (the Gentile mission) and insist on Gentile submission to Jewish ways. From his perspective, what was happening in Rome was not the same as what the ‘*mutilators of the flesh’* (3:2) had been doing in Galatia and elsewhere. In these places these men were not trying to make converts to Christ, but to make Jews out of Gentiles who were already believers in Christ. Those to whom Paul is referring in this letter were preaching Christ (1:15,17,18) and Paul could rejoice that the gospel was advancing.

The church in Philippi seems to have been undergoing some unrest. In 1:27 he exhorts them to ‘*stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel.*’ In 2:21 he remembers that some ‘*look out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ*.’ It is probable that some strife on the local scene had heightened Paul’s concern for the situation in Philippi. The 1:15-17 passage anticipates Paul’s response in 1:27 - 2:16 and 4:2,3.

‘*But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached.* *And because of this I rejoice’*(1:18a). Paul began this paragraph by explaining that his imprisonment had actually advanced the gospel. That brought him great joy. His joy was not because of his imprisonment by itself, but for what it had produced. Verses 15 to 17 were something of an aside. Some are preaching Christ ‘*from false motives’* but Paul’s joy lies in his perspective. The newly emboldened, fearless preaching of the gospel was cause for joy under any circumstances. What he wants the Philippians to hear is that the preaching that was intended at least in part to cause him pain proved to be a source of joy. ‘*But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached’* (1:18a). Paul’s focus is on evangelism. That people are hearing the good news about Christ is also good news for Paul. ‘*And because of this I rejoice’*(1:18a).

Paul had learnt, by the grace of God, to see everything from the divine perspective. His deep conviction was that God had worked out His own divine intentions through the death and resurrection of Christ, and that by His Spirit, He was carrying them out through the church, and therefore through both himself and others. He saw everything in the light of the bigger picture, even suffering and death on the way to resurrection. This theology dominates this letter in every part.

Related to this, Paul is a man with a single passion: Christ and the gospel. Everything is to be seen and done in the light of Christ. For him both life and death mean Christ. He has been ‘apprehended by Christ’ (3:12-14) and has all the passion of a single-minded man.

Paul’s passion for Christ led him to an understanding of discipleship in which the disciple took up a cross to follow the Master. Discipleship meant to Paul to participate in Christ’s sufferings (3:10,11), to be ready to be poured out as a drink offering in ministry for the sake of others (2:17). He saw his imprisonment as part of the trials we are ‘*destined’* to experience (2 Thessalonians 3:3)

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)

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