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Consider the Interests of Others:

Paul's Surprising Employment of the Substantiving Use of the Article in Philippians
to Define and Illustrate Christ-like Humility

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I. As pastors and elders—leaders within and lovers of the Church of Jesus Christ—would any of us deny the incessant practical problems associated with attaining, maintaining, maturing, and repairing interpersonal unity among God’s people? Does anything take up more of your counseling time or shepherding energies? Do your people come to you more frequently with doctrinal questions or interpersonal complaints?

This constant internal dynamic is often aggravated by external pressures, such as the dramatic strain placed upon churches on account of current political shifts and cultural displacement.¹

II. Amid this draining and at times difficult spiritual endeavor, God in his Word grants us surprisingly rich resources through Paul’s letter to the Philippians to address unity and the chief underlying Christian virtue necessary to attain it

A. We might call this resource surprising insofar as the frequent references within Philippians to joy and thanksgiving—as well as Paul’s enthusiastic commendations of this congregation—are readily evident upon even a cursory reading and often receive a preponderance of attention in understanding the letter’s theme.

So, for example, James Montgomery Boice (“The letter to the Philippians is one of the most joyous books in the Bible. All the way through the letter Paul speaks of inner joy, of inner happiness...”) & D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (“It is the most lyrical, the happiest, letter which the Apostle ever wrote...There is in it a note of happiness and joy...when he wrote this letter Paul seemed to have no reason for reprimanding the church.”)

B. And yet, careful examination of the letter as an occasional (or occasioned) document authored through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit by an expert physician of the soul demonstrates Paul’s concerns for these beloved Christians around unity, as well as his grasp of the external pressures being faced that further stress their relationships within the household of faith.

1. Examples and hints of Paul’s concern for unity include: his uniquely humble and inclusive address (1:1), his emphasis on the love of the Philippians growing and developing in discernment (1:9-10), his recruitment of Syzygus to assist the prominent women Eudoia & Syntyche in finding agreement (4:2-3), and his employment of profound theological confession for immensely practical ends (2:5-11; there is a sense in which even the grandest revealed theological truth is relatively easy to grasp while love is hard to practice!)

2. Meanwhile, examples of external pressures in Philippians include apparent poverty (4:12, 15-16, 19; see 2 Corinthians 8:2-3), theological adversity caused by the circumcision party (3:2-3, 18-19), and suffering at the hands of an antagonistic surrounding culture (1:28-30).

3. That Paul is zealous in directing the Philippians towards unity is understood and articulated by some commentators.

¹ See *The Evangelical Divide* (WORLD Magazine November 6, 2021) and *Language Barrier* (WORLD Magazine November 20, 2021). The pressure packed environment in which the church exists can be illustrated by *Breach of Trust* (WORLD Magazine October 23, 2021) documenting recent disputes at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, MN. All three articles are written by Sophia Lee.

For example, see F.F. Bruce (“But his principal purpose was evidently to encourage a spirit of unity among them.”) and Moises Silva (“More specifically, Paul focuses on the need for Christian unity, which in turn calls for selflessness and humility.”).

III. So what is the answer to the question of how to achieve Christian unity, what is the key to unlock it and what path must be followed to attain it? As hinted at by Dr. Silva, Paul shows that the prerequisite for unity is thoughtful and purposeful humility, humility which is in keeping with the parameters & principles of the Gospel (1:27) and in imitation of the redeeming work of Jesus Christ (2:5-11).

This emphasis is revealed in the very format and flow of Philippians 1 & 2:

A. Following his opening greeting & prayer, in 1:12-26 Paul reports on his imprisonment (likely that of his first imprisonment in Rome)

Through the autobiographical details of the first stage of his report, Paul gives a concrete example of...

1. Exercising Gospel freedom from the tyranny of overwhelming circumstances
2. Submitting personal desires to the chief concern of advancing the Gospel

B. In 1:27-2:18, Paul offers specific and purposeful exhortations to the Philippians which also establish principles interpreting his own experiences

Some features of these exhortations are:

1. Sanctification entirely depends upon God’s work (2:12-13; see also 1:6)
2. As such, unity is a distinguishing mark of the church under the Lordship of Jesus Christ (1:27-28, 2:11 & 14-15)
3. Far more than an external state—merely a façade or appearance of harmony—Christian unity includes and flows out of likemindedness and mutual love (2:2)

C. In 2:19-30, Paul resumes his report by looking to the upcoming travel prospects of himself and Timothy, as well as his rationale for sending their very own Epaphroditus back to them as the bearer of this letter. Why did Paul interpose theology into the middle of this extended personal communication? The resumed report “reinforces the exhortations...by setting up Timothy & Epaphroditus as examples to be followed” (Silva). As we’ll see, there are two additional concrete examples of humility leading to unity which Paul will highlight for our edification.

IV. What does humility look like and is it truly attainable?

Looking more closely at the details of the text and one key verse in particular (2:4)...

A. If not exactly a definition, a substantial and necessary aspect of this humility is found in the statement “Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others” (2:4).

Note that 2:3 & 4 are parallel in construction as adverbial participial phrases used instrumentally to modify the imperatival main verb “make my joy complete” in 2:2 and as

such clearly complement one another. The result clause in 2:2 formed by ἵνα expresses the goal of unity variously described (the very prospect of which fills the Apostle with joy), while the means of attaining that end are revealed in the succeeding adverbial participial phrases.²

1. “Interests” = τὰ (neuter accusative plural article). Here the article is not used to directly modify a noun, but rather as a substantiver to nominalize a phrase, so Paul’s language could literally be rendered “the things of oneself” and “the things of others” (as in the ASV & KJV; see Mounce’s *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*). While here in 2:4 Paul uses the pronouns in the genitive case (of reference/descriptive genitive) to form the nominal phrase with the article, in other instances he employs a prepositional phrase using περὶ or κατὰ to the same effect, with a slightly different emphasis on the occasion when he uses the preposition παρὰ as in 4:18.

2. The article either individualizes or categorizes (in which case it often distinguishes class from class). Paul regularly employs the substantiving article to highlight categories or classes, especially in contrast with other classes

a. Romans 8:5, “the things of the flesh” & “the things of the Spirit”³

b. 1 Corinthians 7:32-33, “the things of the Lord” & “the things of the world”⁴

c. Colossians 1:20, “the things on the earth” & “the things in the heavens”⁵

That seems to be his practice in our present verse as well.

3. At first glance, we might wonder if that’s the best Paul can do linguistically, summarizing this foundational duty with a mere article rather than more specific vocabulary (particularly words with juicy English cognates that can give us

² ³ μηδὲν κατ’ ἐριθείαν μηδὲ κατὰ κενοδοξίαν
ἀλλὰ τῇ ταπεινοφροσύνῃ ἀλλήλους ἡγούμενοι ὑπερέχοντας ἑαυτῶν,
⁴ μη τὰ ἑαυτῶν ἕκαστος σκοποῦντες
ἀλλὰ [καὶ] τὰ ἐτέρων ἕκαστοι.

The American Standard Version provides a helpful literal translation of these key verses, which I’ve put in a visual form to help keep track of the syntactical relationship of the clauses in Paul’s lengthy sentence:

^{2:1} If there is therefore any exhortation in Christ,
if any consolation of love,
if any fellowship of the Spirit,
if any tender mercies and compassions,
² make full my joy,

that ye be of the same mind,
having the same love,
being of one accord,
of one mind;

³ *doing* nothing through faction or through vainglory,
but in lowliness of mind each counting other better than himself;

⁴ not looking each of you to his own things,
but each of you also to the things of others.

³ τὰ τῆς σαρκὸς, τὰ τοῦ πνεύματος

⁴ τὰ τοῦ κυρίου, τὰ τοῦ κόσμου,

⁵ τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, τὰ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς

illustrations to use in the pulpit!). But notice how useful and practical this language actually is, because describing a class or category is unbounded and broad, rather than precise and therefore limited. Bruce writes “What ‘things’ Paul has in mind is a matter of interpretation.” However, Paul has already used this same construction in 1:12⁶ and 1:27⁷ in talking about life details and circumstances of all sorts. And thus we are warranted to understand “the things of others” as looking to or reckoning with everything that pertains to the situation of others as an act of our humility which contributes to unity.

4. It’s worth noting that “look to/consider/reckon,” fits with an overwhelming emphasis in this letter on how to think, especially regarding others. Silva tabulates Paul as using 6 occurrences of ἡγέομαι in Philippians out of 11 total in his corpus; 10 of 23 of φρονέω; 2 of 5 of σκοπέω (“look” or “examine” which is the word used in 2:4); in addition to 2 occurrences of λογίζομαι. Your love for others will never exceed the thoughts you have towards them. We need mental concentration and determination by the inward working of the Holy Spirit to humbly interact with others to preserve unity.

If that’s the definition of humility derived from the surprising use of the article, how does Paul use the article in this way to give us tangible illustrations of such humility?

B. Within the letter, Paul uses τὰ to link this principle with those persons, known to the Philippians, who are putting such humility into practice.

Exegetical sidebar #1: Is what you think you’re seeing really there in the text? How do intuition & analysis work together in seeking authorial intent?

Paul uses this form (neuter accusative plural) of the article as a substantiver approximately 40 times in his writings. While 23 other forms of the article could be examined, taking this form on its own, 11 of those times are in Philippians (while 9 are in Colossians which has similarities to Philippians and was written around the same time), an extremely high density. Furthermore, moving from grammar to meaning, excluding theological uses (like “things of the flesh”, “things of the Spirit”, “things of the world”, “things of heaven”, “things of earth”, etc.) and retaining only those uses that appear personal in nature, 11 of the 19 occurrences are in Philippians. This frequency of usage provides objective data to indicate Paul’s purposeful use of the article in this inflected form.

1. Timothy, Paul’s fellow servant and spiritual son

a. References with τὰ:

2:20, “for your welfare” = “the things concerning you”⁸

2:21, “their own interests” = “the things of themselves”⁹

⁶ τὰ κατ’ ἐμὲ

⁷ τὰ περὶ ὑμῶν

⁸ τὰ περὶ ὑμῶν

⁹ τὰ ἑαυτῶν

2:21, “those [interests] of Jesus” = “the things of Jesus”¹⁰

Connecting the links of this linguistic chain, Paul points to Timothy as being a man who sublimates his own things to pursue the things of others under the ultimate priority of the things of Jesus. His example imparts at least the following lessons:

- b. Humility consists in setting aside self-assertiveness and shifting attention from oneself
- c. Such humility is exceptional (even in the church)
- d. The “interests” of the Lord Jesus are preeminent in guiding and informing our interpersonal humility

But Timothy is not alone in being a living example of putting 2:4 into action. He is joined by:

2. Paul (who in turn points us to Epaphroditus)

- a. Relevant references with τὰ:

1:12, “what has happened to me” = “the things concerning me”¹¹

1:27, “of you” = “the things concerning you”¹²

2:19, “news of you” = “the things concerning you”¹³

2:23, “how it will go with me” = “the things concerning me”¹⁴

Paul operates so as to consider their things right alongside his own. Once again, practical lessons abound:

- b. Putting the interests of others first can actually involve purposefully testifying to your own concerns in a way that produces edification in others
- c. Putting the interests of others first can involve highlighting your own needs not selfishly but to provide others with an opportunity to be obedient to Christ in your behalf for their own sake (4:17). The question always is “What will build up the other person in faith and faith’s fruit?”
- d. Humility so fixes on the welfare of others that longing and hopeful expectancy of good news intrudes constantly upon thinking and remembering
- e. Humble ministry compels every act and decision to be for the sake of others. By alluding to his own difficult circumstances, Paul subtly points out his sacrificial service for the Gospel (described as pouring his life out as a drink offering in 2:17) including the disposition to send away his own companions

¹⁰ τὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ

¹¹ τὰ κατ’ ἐμὲ

¹² τὰ περὶ ὑμῶν

¹³ τὰ περὶ ὑμῶν

¹⁴ τὰ περὶ ἐμὲ

for the sake of the Philippians and even a willingness to continue to live for their benefit rather than depart to be with Christ. Herein lies a model for ministry that will never fail to guide and convict.

f. Humble ministry delights to highlight the example of others. Though not using τὰ, Paul's elaboration of the usefulness of and risks faced by Epaphroditus—who almost died for the work of Christ as he ministered to Paul and made up for the Philippians' absence—clearly puts this fellow soldier in the same category as himself and Timothy (2:25-30). This is doubly important because he's one of their own (4:18)! Such humility is not the sole possession of some class of spiritual elite. Therefore, the final example is...

3. The Philippians themselves

a. Vital, closing reference with τὰ:

4:18, "the gifts you sent" = "the things from you"¹⁵

b. The spiritual graces needed for unity through humility are already present in them as individuals and as a church community by the presence of the living Christ in their midst as seen in their sacrificial generosity.

c. However, such graces are to be constantly nurtured and sought after in increasing measure, for nothing short of striving after completeness befits the Gospel, the Lordship of Christ, and the resurrection power already unleashed among believers (nor does anything less than perfection satisfy the apostle, so William Hendriksen). Paul includes them as already following the command of 2:4 to show that his requirement is an issue of seeking conformity to Christ "more and more," not starting fresh with a virtue that is a novelty among them.

Exegetical sidebar #2: Am I leaning into context not only to determine the meaning of words, but also in pursuing illuminative patterns useful for interpretation and application? How do grammatical and syntactical details relate to larger contextual considerations?

Philippians provides an opportunity to practice reading the text recursively (seeing things at the beginning in light of reading through to the end) as well as reflectively (employing mirror-reading to piece together as much as possible the precipitating occasion from the details of the content and manner of Paul's communication to them; note that any tentative reconstruction of the occasion must suitably incorporate all the details of the text not only some portion of them).

Homiletically, work to insure that you are capturing full thoughts rather than even very important partial ones; or carefully link smaller units to larger thoughts; or go back and summarize to make the larger patterns clear.

V. Such living illustrations and embodiments of Christian character are important for at least two reasons:

A. The visibility of humility.

¹⁵ τὰ παρ' ὑμῶν

Paul expressly calls them to the practice of imitation, first of Jesus (2:5), then of himself (3:17 & 4:9), and finally of those who are already actively living after the apostolic example (3:17). Virtues that seem esoteric as concepts are vibrant and concrete when evidenced in others.

B. The possibility of humility.

What is impossible for man is possible for God, and what God can do he in fact has done, is doing, and will do. Cutting off our line of retreat and giving us a vision for the manifestation of the Lord in our midst (4:5), such living examples keep us from self-pity, silence our excuses, set us apart from the ways of the world, show forth the power of the Spirit in putting to death the old nature, enable us to rise above our circumstances, confirm our spoken witness, and demonstrate the resurrection power of Jesus already at work among those united to him by faith.