

EXEGETICAL BRIEF: ALL ABOUT OFFERINGS— PHILIPPIANS 2:17 AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR MINISTERS OF CHRIST¹

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ἀλλὰ εἰ καὶ σπένδομαι ἐπὶ τῇ θυσίᾳ
καὶ λειτουργίᾳ τῆς πίστεως ὑμῶν . . .

To better understand the powerful imagery of a dual sacrifice that Paul employs to make his point in Philippians 2:17, one must note its connection with the images that have preceded it at the end of 2:16 and the prominent *shift in perspective* that occurs there. The apostle has been encouraging the Philippians in their life of sanctification (2:12-15ab), commending them for “shining like lights in the cosmos” (φαίνεσθε ὡς φωστῆρες) (2:15c). Then in 2:16 he suddenly directs the epistolary spotlight of attention back to himself and the godly “pride” (καύχημα) which the congregation’s active testimony instills within him. Paul continues his personal note at the end of this verse by evoking the familiar scene at a sports stadium of the day, where we must imagine a group of athletes competing (cf. 3:14). Each of them is straining hard to reach the goal, as if “running” in a race (τρέχω—common in the NT, e.g., 1 Cor. 9:24, 26; Gal. 2:2), for which all the competitors “labored” (κοπιᾶω—i.e., trained as well as contested), the verb suggests, to the point of exhaustion.² This is how Paul views his own life as a disciple of Christ, but more specifically as the Lord’s called apostle to the Gentiles, including most of his addressees, the Christians at Philippi.

¹My sincere thanks to Prof. Paul E. Zell for suggesting this passage and issue to me in a recent WLS Summer Quarter course. Prof. Zell also encouraged and sharpened my thinking on the subject in various ways.” Ernst Wendland teaches at Lusaka Lutheran Seminary.

²It is possible, perhaps even probable, that the imagery associated with Paul’s “laboring hard” (κοπιᾶω) as an apostolic emissary (cf. 1 Co 15:10, 16:16; 1 Th 5:12) is separate and distinct from his “running the race” (τρέχω) of the Christian life and ministry (cf. 3:13-14; 1 Co 9:24-25; Ga 2:2, 5:7). But it is tempting in the present context of Php. 2:16 to view them together as a composite picture of Paul’s perspective on his pastoral service among the Philippians (and others). The parallelism here would support this suggestion: οὐκ εἰς κενὸν ἔδραμον // οὐδὲ εἰς κενὸν ἐκοπίασα.

Verse 17 then manifests a dramatic *change* in the prevailing imagery, but there is at the same time an essential *continuity* of thought, as Paul brings his reflection to a climactic conclusion. Here we have a scene that is more serene and religious but just as memorable to his addressees, namely, that of making an animal sacrifice to God as an act of penitent, thankful, and/or reverential worship. Thus, the Apostle speaks of himself as being “poured out as a drink offering” (σπένδομαι) “upon the sacrifice and service” (ἐπὶ τῇ θυσίᾳ καὶ λειτουργίᾳ) “of your faith” (τῆς πίστεως ὑμῶν). This complex ritual scenario, unfamiliar to many Westerners today, would have been quite clear to Paul’s hearers. In both Jewish and pagan worship, the drink offering was the final act, the *coup de grace* as it were, to certify the completion of the central sacrificial act. To be specific, after the animal on the altar had been killed and then emolliated by fire, there was a final topping off of the ceremonial action whereby the officiant poured some wine (water, oil), either on the ground in front of the altar or on top of the burning sacrifice (e.g., Ex 29:38-41). In the latter, more graphic instance, the liquid would immediately vaporize into rising steam, symbolizing the ascent of that sacrifice into the nostrils of the deity for whom it was being offered.

But a closer look at the grammar and vocabulary of this passage is necessary in order to more fully understand Paul’s argument here:

ἀλλὰ εἰ καὶ σπένδομαι

“But even if I am being poured out like a libation . . .”

ἀλλὰ

Verse 17 presents a *contrast* in terms of temporal as well as connotative orientation with v. 16b, i.e., from a future “grounds for boasting” (καύχημα) “in view of the [glorious] day of Christ” (εἰς ἡμέραν Χριστοῦ—cf. 1:26) to Paul’s present, trying, and rather uncertain circumstances, awaiting trial under guard in Rome.

εἰ καὶ

εἰ introduces a first-class *condition*, comprising a *protasis* that is assumed to be true and an *apodasis* which naturally follows from that (i.e., Paul’s overall attitude of “rejoicing” in the Lord). καὶ appears to be *ascensive* here, thus emphasizing the following verb σπένδομαι. In any case, the two conjunctions together convey the semantic relationship of *concession/contra-expectation*, e.g., “even if” (cf. BAGD under εἰ, VI4, p. 220). In other words, even though Paul’s life is being expended in personal sacrifice during his ongoing ministry in behalf of the cause of Christ, he is not depressed, nor does he give up hope (as some might expect). On the contrary,

he is able to rejoice and remain content and at peace in every circumstance (cf. 3:20; 4:7, 11-13), no matter how dire or dreadful.

σπένδομαι

The present tense (“I am being poured out as a drink offering”) indicates that this was Paul’s current situation and personal experience at the time of writing this letter (i.e., this verb in context does not appear to be a prediction of his imminent martyrdom in Rome, cf. 1:19). The *imagery* being evoked is probably based on Old Testament priestly service, rather than that of corresponding pagan ritual sacrificing. Most likely, Paul’s reference is to a ceremonial “drink offering” of water, wine, or oil that was poured out at the completion of a burnt offering or a grain offering, either on the ground before or right on top of the principal sacrifice (cf. Nu 15:3-10, 28:7). This libation marked the *conclusion* of the sacrificial action of worship, whether offered in penitence, petition, and/or thanksgiving and praise.

Comments

In v. 16b Paul re-inserts himself (cf. 2:12; 1:3-8, 22-26) into his exhortations for the Philippians to faithfully live out their faith (2:12-16a). If they did that, he would be able to enjoy the fruit of his apostolic labors when Christ comes again for judgment and their vindication. Now he begins v. 17 by metaphorically referring to his own life and ministry (*topic*) as a sacrificial “drink offering” (*image*)—*the ground of comparison* being the idea of something of significant value being lost or given up in reverent devotion to God. However, the “libation” was always supplementary; it was never, either in the Old Testament or in pagan ritual, regarded as the principal “sacrifice” being offered. That item is mentioned next in this verse, as Paul continues his figurative expression of encouragement to the Philippians:

ἐπὶ τῇ θυσίᾳ καὶ λειτουργίᾳ τῆς πίστεως ὑμῶν

“ . . . upon the sacrifice and service arising from your faith . . . ”

ἐπὶ τῇ θυσίᾳ

The preposition (ἐπὶ) may have a both a spatial (literal) and a transferred sense here, that is, in keeping with the figurative imagery of this passage, it may be rendered “upon” as well as “in addition to,” “together with” (e.g., Nu 15:5; 1 Co 14:16; 2 Co 7:13), or more dynamically, “to complete” or “to complement.” Thus Paul’s “drink offering,” referred to at the beginning of v. 17, will

somehow enhance the major “sacrifice” (θυσία) being attributed to the Philippian congregation in a manner that is further specified as the verse unfolds. The *intertextual* background that Paul has in mind here is most likely the Mosaic sacrificial ritual described, for example, in Ex 29:38-41, 30:9; Lev. 7:37, 23:37 and elsewhere among the various worship regulations recorded in the Pentateuch. However, the term was also used to designate the *spiritual* sacrifice of an attitude of *penitence* (e.g., Ps. 51:17) or *praise* (e.g., Ps. 50:8) in relation to God.

καὶ λειτουργία

The definite article before θυσία governs λειτουργία as well. Thus, the two nouns may be regarded as an instance of *hendiadys*, whereby the second noun functions in a genitival relationship with the first, i.e., “sacrifice of service,” or “sacrificial service” (in this context, “service rendered to God as an act of sacrificial devotion and/or worship”). Both θυσία and λειτουργία are commonly used in the Septuagint to refer to the ritual duties of the priests and Levites in the tabernacle/temple, e.g., Exodus 28-39; Numbers 1-2; Ezekiel 40-46. In the New Testament, λειτουργία is also used on occasion to designate acts of Christian service, notably, that of Epaphroditus in relation to Paul on behalf of the Philippians (2:25, 30; cf. 2 Co 9:12).

τῆς πίστεως ὑμῶν

πίστεως (πίστις with definite article—“of the faith”) is a genitive of *source/origin*. Thus, the dynamic faith-attitude of the Philippians (cf. 1:27 “the faith of the gospel”) was the source of, or produced, or was the motivation for the sacrificial service that characterized their lives, including their generous support of the Apostle Paul (4:18). ὑμῶν is a *subjective* genitive, i.e., “you” (namely, the Philippians) believed (had faith/trust/confidence in) Jesus Christ, their Savior.

Comments

In this verse, Paul relates his life and ministry (the “drink offering”) to the faith-worked sanctified living of the Philippians (the primary “sacrifice”), who despite the hard times and persecution that they were experiencing (Php 1:29-30), were nevertheless active in ministry that manifested their “partnership” with Paul (1:5, 19, 25; 4:14-19), especially during the period when he was a prisoner in Rome (1:7,12; 2:25,30). Even though he had founded this congregation and was the human reason for its existence (Acts 16), Paul here selflessly devalues his own outstanding evan-

gelistic and pastoral efforts in order to promote and encourage what the Philippians were accomplishing as a corporate body for the sake of the gospel.

So what is the Apostle's point, one that had to be important enough not to be affected by his apparent mixing of metaphors? The closing comment above is crucial: Through this evocative, personalized imagery, Paul humbly downplays his own life and ministry in deference to the sacrificial service which sprang from the living faith of the Philippians. Paul did *not* view his potential martyr's *death* as a sacrifice, but rather his entire Christian *life* as an offering of which his inevitable demise, whether sooner or later (as he expected—cf. 1:19, 24; 2:24) would be only the final culmination. In effect then, the Apostle depicts here a *sanctified synergy*, a divinely-wrought (2:13) sacrificial working together of pastor and congregation in ministry. This mutually supportive interaction would thereby produce a *joint* offering—the Philippians being designated as the greater, Paul the lesser—of lives ultimately pleasing to God, and joy-producing for them all (συγχαίρω πᾶσιν ὑμῖν). In their labors of love on behalf of Paul (1:7; 4:14-18)³ as well as for Christ (1:27-30), they would thus also exemplify that spirit of selfless service so wonderfully displayed by their Lord in his life and death on the cross (2:6-8) and also by two men so well-known to them all—Timothy (2:19-24) and Epaphroditus (2:25-30).⁴

In the wider context of Philippians, we might restate Paul's point like this: After presenting Christ's supreme model of sacrificial service, Paul recycles his earlier exhortations for steadfastness and unity in somewhat different terms, calling on the Philippians to "work out their salvation with fear and trembling" (2:12), obeying the purposeful divine impulse within them (2:13). They must resist divisive forces and worldly influences both from within and without (2:14-15) as they hold fast to their faith and hold it out in evangelistic testimony to others (2:16a). The blessed result will be that his ministry would be vindicated when Christ comes again, and Paul would (humanly speaking) be able to take pride ("glory") on that day (2:16b), just as they would correspondingly be able to take pride in his ministry among them (cf.

³It is worth noting that Paul employs the same term for "sacrifice" (θυσία) when referring both figuratively to the Philippians' general life-style of sacrificial service (2:17) and also more specifically to their concrete gifts of support sent to him in prison via their emissary Epaphroditus (4:18).

⁴Thus, to further motivate his earnest appeals to the Philippians, Paul presents a series of personal "case studies" which serve to exemplify or concretize his pastoral concerns. The Apostle begins briefly with his own situation (2:16b-17, cf. 1:24-26, to be resumed at length in chap. 3), continues with that of his trusted emissary and co-worker Timothy (2:19-24), and concludes with a report on Epaphroditus, a son of the Philippian congregation, who had risked his life in loving service of Paul on their behalf (2:25-30).

1:16). Paul then takes a closer look at that ministry, reminding them that a great deal of effort (“labor”) and personal sacrifice was involved, as he modeled his behavior after his Lord’s own example of humble sacrificial service (2:5-11).

Thus, in 2:17 the apostle is again reminding his hearers of the need for behavior that is “worthy of the gospel” (1:27). To sum it all up and forcefully impress his loving encouragement upon the hearts and minds of the Philippians, Paul employs the imagery of v. 17, using two types of associated sacrifice, namely, the principal *burnt offering* and the subsequent concluding *drink offering*. He associates the former with the faithful life and witness of this exemplary congregation, and the latter with his self-sacrificing mission ministry. Again, we see his self-effacing humility as he demotes his own efforts, which by then virtually all early Christians recognized were outstanding, in favor of the “sacrificial service” that he attributes to them. No doubt his hearers would have appreciated this reversal of significance in their respective roles and influence. But the ultimate result was that there would always be an underlying spirit of faith-based, salvation-oriented “joy” motivating the overt activity of “rejoicing” on Paul’s part on behalf of the Philippians (v. 17a)—and they in turn for him (v. 18b).

How often today do we hear about, let alone experience, such a harmonious working relationship and a spirit of mutual affection between pastor and congregation? Certainly it happens, but how frequently—and more importantly, how can such harmony be encouraged among us? In any case, there is always room for improvement in this regard, whether in the churches of Africa or America. The method for achieving this is patently set forth by the Apostle Paul at the very beginning of his letter to the Philippians in the relational expressions “your partnership in the gospel” (τῇ κοινωνίᾳ ὑμῶν εἰς τὸ εὐαγγέλιον) (1:5) and “partners with me of grace” (συγκοινωνοῦς μου τῆς χάριτος) (1:7). It is a corporate strategy that is made concrete later in the letter’s first imperative of 1:27: “Live as citizens of a [Christian] community” (πολιτεύεσθε) (cf. 3:20) “in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ” (ἀξίως τοῦ εὐαγγελίου τοῦ Χριστοῦ). The practice of *sanctification* is thus conjoined with the principle of justification. And how should this faith-filled fellowship operate? That is clearly specified by the apostle at the beginning of chapter 2 in the threefold principle of *unity* and *humility* in mutual *service* (2:1-4), as demonstrated above all by the Son of God—our Lord and Savior—in relation to his heavenly Father (2:5-11).

The notion of “sacrifice” is not familiar to many Western Christians today—in contrast to the living tradition of ancestral (“spirit”-related) sacrificial devotion that most African Christians must continue to resist. However, it is a key biblical concept that must be

grasped in order to adequately understand what Jesus Christ accomplished on the cross on behalf of a world of sinners. Without the shedding of blood (life), there can be no redemption or forgiveness for sin (Heb. 9:22). The whole Old Testament sacrificial ritual functioned as an active symbol system designed to continually remind God's people of this and to point them to the once-for-all self-offering of Jesus (Heb. 9:26-28). Paul pointed out this truth with the example of Christ in the present epistle, not primarily for its doctrinal content in the current context (though this poetic segment does reinforce the core of apostolic instruction), but as the ultimate illustration of humble self-sacrificing service on behalf of others, which the Philippians should also emulate as they "look not only to [their] own interests, but also to the interests of others" (2:3-5).

Paul therefore followed this Christ-like model for ministry in his own life (2:17) in the pastoral hope that it would, in turn, serve to encourage the Philippians in their state of suffering for the gospel as well as serving Christ by sacrificing to support the apostle's mission work (1:29-30). When a faithful minister of the Word and his congregation today strive to implement this same attitude of mutual sacrificial service, the gospel will be firmly established among them in both word and deed (1:27). Together then they will be empowered to resist their enemies (1:28a); they will be reassured of their common salvation (1:28b); they will be encouraged in their individual and communal life of sanctification ("working out their salvation"—2:12-13); and they will be able to pursue a joy-filled purpose (2:17-18) as they "shine like stars" with the "word of life," despite being enveloped by "the crooked and depraved generation" of this world (2:15-16).

Selfless "sacrifice" on behalf of a community of faith involves an attitude and associated behavior that is difficult for individualistic Americans to acknowledge, let alone put seriously into practice. But this is an essential part of the existential "cross" which Christ's disciples are called upon to bear as members of his Body, the Church (Mt. 10:38-39). The implication of Philippians 2:17 for pastors—for all "ministers" of Christ—is that the message must begin with them, with a Pauline attitude and a life that manifests unselfish humility in a manner that models the character of their Master.