

Rejoice in the Lord

A GUIDED STUDY OF PHILIPPIANS



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Study Two in The Ekklesia Project's *Going Deeper* Series

This Bible study is the work of Stephen E. Fowl, Professor in the Department of Theology at Loyola College in Baltimore, MD. He is the author of *The Story of Christ in the Ethics of Paul, Reading in Communion* (with L. Gregory Jones), *Engaging Scripture*, and *Philippians* (Two Horizons New Testament Commentary).

Inagrace Dietterich, Director of Theological Research of the Center for Parish Development in Chicago, IL, developed the format of the study resource. She is a co-author of *Missional Church* and *Stormfront* as well as multiple resources for congregational study and discussion published by the Center.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	4
Objectives.....	6
Norms.....	6
Design.....	7
Session 1: Historical and Theological Context.....	9
Session 2: Giving Thanks for the Fruit of Righteousness.....	15
Session 3: Seeing Differently.....	19
Session 4: Having Confidence in the Lord.....	24
Session 5: Magnifying Christ.....	28
Session 6: Sustaining a Common Life.....	32
Session 7: Having the Mind of Christ.....	37
Session 8: Attending to Sainly Lives.....	41
Session 9: Offering a Pleasing Sacrifice.....	45
Session 10: Integrating and Learning.....	52

REJOICE IN THE LORD: A GUIDED STUDY OF PHILIPPIANS

*Rejoice in the Lord always;
again I will say, Rejoice.
Let your gentleness be known to everyone.
The Lord is near.
Do not worry about anything,
but in everything by prayer and
supplication with thanksgiving
let your requests be known to God.
And the peace that surpasses all understanding
will guard your hearts and minds in
Christ Jesus.*

Philippians 4:4-7

Introduction

Welcome to this Bible study! You are about to begin an important journey as, together with others from your congregation, you engage in a guided study of Philippians. At the heart of Paul's writing to the saints in Philippi is the admonition to "order your common life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" (1:27). During the coming weeks, we will explore together the convictions, practices and dispositions of Christian formation.

While interacting with many fields of knowledge, the specific orientation of the church is shaped by the Bible as interpreted and used throughout the ages. The biblical narratives provide a different "window on the world" than do other narratives (nationalism, individualism, consumerism, racism) which seek to tell people who they are, whose they are, and what they should be about in their lives.

The Bible offers a full and complex story of God's good creation, of humanity's rebellion, of the call of Israel to be a "blessing to the nations," of the prophetic challenge to Israel's disobedience, of God's new creation in Jesus Christ, of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and of the formation of a new community entrusted with the message of reconciliation. As Christians engage this story over the course of their lives, they gain the skills and abilities for interpreting the challenges and opportunities of the world in which they live. Further, with the help

of the Holy Spirit, they are able to live faithful lives of ever deeper love of God and neighbor.

This Bible study will not cover this entire story. Its purpose is to explore the nature and purpose of Christian community formation as expressed within the Apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians. This letter emphasizes persistence in faith in the face of opposition and the threat of death. In this respect, Paul offers himself (as well as Timothy and Epaphroditus) as examples of steadfast courage, as he also lifts up Christ's own act of self-emptying, even unto death.

Forming and maintaining a common life worthy of the gospel is the central task Paul sets before the Philippian church and contemporary Christians. Paul understands that a common life worthy of the gospel does not simply arise because he and the Philippians want it to. Rather, a common life worthy of the gospel is the result of a people being formed to think, feel, and act, in certain ways. Thus, a significant portion of this Bible study is devoted to displaying the convictions, practices and dispositions Paul desires to see formed in the Philippian Christians. These are the resources the church needs that it might order its common life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

The Nature of Our Journey Together

Thus far, you will have already worked through at least two studies as part of the Congregational Formation Initiative. This study will draw you deeper into the text of one of the New Testament's most engaging books, Paul's letter to the saints in Philippi.

Bible study is always challenging. As you will already have recognized, the members of your group come to the study of Scripture from different backgrounds and with different experiences of the church, even different experiences of the same congregation. Your previous work as part of the Congregational Formation Initiative has introduced you to each other to some degree. This study aims to build on the conversational and communal habits you have already started to develop. Nevertheless, your group is also presented with the sometimes difficult but exciting task of allowing your differences and your familiarity with each other to be enriching, and to contribute to the building up of the whole community of God's people.

Objectives

This Bible study is designed to enable participants to:

1. Engage with other members of the church in Bible study.
2. Share and explore their faith together.
3. Consider Paul's vision of Christian formation.
4. Experience Christian community through prayer, study, and conversation.
5. Reflect upon the life and ministry of the church in light of the Bible study.
6. Begin to envision how the church might more fully discover and express Paul's vision of Christian formation.

Norms

It is always helpful to revisit how we listen, talk, and interact with one another when we engage in Bible study. The following norms shape a communal study process. As a group you may want to add to the list. Let us declare that it is OK to:

1. Be informal; to call each other by first names; to create a relaxed and friendly atmosphere.
2. Participate in determining when and where the group will gather, and then support the group through responsible participation.
3. Be involved in making assignments and then complete assignments as agreed.
4. Take responsibility for our own learning, feeling free to ask questions when confused and to make contributions when inspired.
5. Share and test ideas with the group even before they are fully developed, so that others will be encouraged to share their thoughts as well.
6. Question the ideas being proposed in the group or in this study material, but also question our own ideas and assumptions.
7. Treat this study process as a wonderful and unique opportunity for spiritual growth, as a chance to think and pray together, and to clarify thoughts about who we are as the church.
8. Practice our best active listening skills, to be open and receptive to others.
9. Build on the ideas of others in the group; to help ideas stretch and grow.
10. Expect that while we will learn personally, we will also learn and grow as a group.

Design

This study resource is organized into ten sessions. The sessions will explore various aspects of the biblical vision of community. Each session contains biblical study, theological observations, and an opportunity for you to interact with the material and with other members of the group.

- Session 1: Historical and Theological Context
- Session 2: Giving Thanks for the Fruit of Righteousness
- Session 3: Seeing Differently
- Session 4: Having Confidence in the Lord
- Session 5: Magnifying Christ
- Session 6: Sustaining a Common Life
- Session 7: Having the Mind of Christ
- Session 8: Attending to Sainly Lives
- Session 9: Offering a Pleasing Sacrifice
- Session 10: Integrating and Learning

Reference Materials: There are a variety of resources to which the group can turn to answer either the questions you raise or the questions posed in each study. If you find yourselves stuck or confused or needing inspiration, you might find it helpful to look at a commentary or two.

Commentaries are best treated as contributions to an ongoing conversation. Despite the aspirations of their authors, no commentary is, or should be treated as, the last word on a topic. Various churches and denominations have their favorite commentators, which is as it should be. In addition, Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274) has a very good short commentary on Philippians that often has great insights. Many non-Catholic congregations may not be familiar with Aquinas. His commentary is basically a transcription of his lectures on Philippians to seminarians, and thus, he generally keeps matters of formation front and center. The Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth also has a short readable commentary on Philippians. The author of this study, Stephen Fowl, has recently written a commentary on Philippians published by Eerdmans. Along with clarification regarding issues which might emerge during this Bible study, you will also find information there about other modern commentaries. It should be emphasized, however, that *there is simply no substitute for reading Scripture*. Taking into account varying degrees of comfort with reading and facility with English, please encourage one another to read through Philippians at least once, and preferably several times in the course of this study.

Planning Your Journey. You are invited to work as a group and plan the way in which you will use this study resource. Each session includes an opening and closing

prayer, an introduction to the themes at hand, and selected Bible passages with discussion questions.

Keeping in mind that people have different levels of comfort with study and with speaking in a group, you are encouraged to be both pastoral and creative in your use of the resource. As the Objectives indicate, a central purpose of this Bible study is to enable participants to share their faith and to experience Christian community. Learning how to talk, read, listen, and build upon one another's insights is an important part of the process. Thus whenever possible read, think, discuss, and pray with others in the group. To stimulate creativity suggest that people bring a hymn, prayer, symbol, drawing, or other work of art to contribute to the topic at hand. Role-playing a particular text can also open up and enrich the discussion. And remember, the Bible was studied for centuries before the printing press was invented, so everyone in the group does not have to have the same facility with the English language.

And perhaps most important of all, have a good time exploring and sharing Paul's vision of forming and maintaining Christian community.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. As you read through the Objectives, Norms, and Design what catches your attention? What stimulates a question?
2. What are some of the things you hope will happen during this Bible study?
3. Why should Christians study the Bible? What have been some of your experiences with Bible study?

(Share your responses with others in the group.)

Closing Prayer (In Unison)

*Blessed Lord, you speak to us through the holy Scriptures.
Grant that we may hear, read, respect, and learn,
That we may embrace the blessed hope of everlasting life,
Which you have given us in Christ Jesus. Amen.*

Session One: Historical and Theological Context

Opening Prayer (Unison)

*Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open,
all desires known,
and from whom no secrets are hid:
Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts
by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit,
that we may perfectly love thee,
and worthily magnify thy holy name;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Before beginning our study of Philippians it is helpful to consider its historical and theological context. The biblical materials do not drop magically from the clouds, nor are they the product of a scholar working alone in his or her study. The various documents of the Old and New Testament arise from the witness of communities of people who have experienced the decisive movement of God in their midst. Inspired and empowered by the Holy Spirit, these communities give testimony to God's creative, redemptive, and reconciling activity in the midst of human history. The Apostle Paul invested his life in the formation of communities that would embody in their life and ministry the gospel of a crucified and risen Christ. The Letter of Paul to the church at Philippi was written within the context of Paul's ministry and offered counsel on the concrete issues facing the Philippians in their Christian witness within the context of their particular community.

Paul's Imprisonment

Paul himself needs no introduction to Christian congregations. It is worthwhile, however, to contemplate the fact that Paul writes to his friends in Philippi while he is in prison (see 1:7, 13-14, 17; and perhaps 4:14). Paul was imprisoned numerous times. Traditionally, it is thought that Paul wrote Philippians from Rome where he was imprisoned at the end of his life (Acts 28:16-31). Acts, however, also mentions jail time in Philippi (16:23-40) and Caesarea (23:23-26:32). Moreover, in 2 Corinthians 11:23 Paul speaks of numerous imprisonments.

Philippians itself offers no decisive clues as to Paul's location. In 1:13 Paul mentions the "Praetorian guard" and in 4:22 he mentions "those of the emperor's household." These references tend to point to a Roman imprisonment. These references, however, are less clear in Greek than they may appear in English, and they might also fit with an Ephesian imprisonment. Thus, Rome and Ephesus are the two main options and each has evidence both for and against it. Rome, however, seems more likely. In this case, then, the epistle was probably written after Paul's

arrival in Rome and the initial period of Paul's imprisonment, which Luke's relates as more like house arrest (Acts 28:30-31). This would be sometime after 62 CE. While interesting to ponder, it is not clear that where exactly Paul was imprisoned makes much interpretive difference.

Although the location of Paul's imprisonment may not be crucial, the fact of his imprisonment deserves attention. According to Acts, Paul was arrested in Jerusalem because he caused a disturbance in the Temple (Acts 21:27-36). As his situation unfolds he ends up in Rome having appealed his case to Caesar. In Philippians Paul never mentions the specific charges which have landed him prison. Instead, in Phil 1:7, 13 Paul indicates that he is in prison because of his commitment to the gospel of Christ Jesus. Paul indicates that his life hangs on the outcome of his trial. This would indicate that the formal charge against him was *maiestas* or diminishing the "majesty" of the emperor and people of Rome. Although this charge would certainly have applied to explicitly treasonous activity, it also appears to have been used in a fairly wide ranging way to punish those thought to have impugned the emperor's status.

Paul repeatedly speaks of his imprisonment in terms of "chains" (Phil 1:7, 13, 14, 17). It may or may not have been the case that Paul was constantly in chains. Paul seems to have been under guard (Phil 1:13), but not necessarily chained to a guard.

Paul tells us nothing of the conditions under which he was being held. We don't know what or how much he ate, in what sort of place he was held, whether there was adequate light and sanitation. We do know in general that Roman prisons did not seek to rehabilitate people. They were more like holding tanks where prisoners were kept until the imperial authorities decided whether to execute them or release them. Conditions were often quite gruesome. It was not uncommon for prisoners to take their own lives under such conditions. The support and material help of friends was crucial to prisoners' survival. At the same time, the social stigma associated with imprisonment made it difficult, if not dangerous, to associate with prisoners. Nevertheless, Acts 28:30-31 and Philippians both indicate that in Rome Paul had access to friends who would visit him, carry epistles, take dictation, and provide him with monetary and other forms of support.

Although Paul does not tell us much about his imprisonment, he is adamant about two related points: (1) In a world in which being in chains was dangerous and degrading, in which one became utterly dependent and easily victimized, in which control over one's future was taken out one's own hands, the progress of the gospel cannot be impeded by Paul's imprisonment. (2) Paul makes it clear that being in chains is not incompatible with being in Christ. Indeed, it is what one might expect.

Friends in Christ: The Philippian Church

The Philippians seem to have had a cordial relationship with Paul. They were friends in Christ, and Philippians is in many respects a conventional letter of friendship. Paul reveals news about himself and others. He seeks news from the Philippians. He offers thanks and prayers for their continued friendship expressed in word and deed. Even so, Paul understands his friendship with the Philippians and the conventions of friendship in a thoroughly theological way. In this respect, one might say that Paul follows his own advice in 2 Corinthians 10:5 and brings every thought captive to Christ. Indeed, one of Paul's purposes is to help form in the Philippians Christians (and in us) the dispositions, habits, and skills needed to understand themselves and their world in Christ.

There does not appear to be a serious theological crisis in the church at Philippi. Although Euodia and Syntyche are called to unity in 4:2-3, we have little reason to think the Philippians suffered from internal divisions similar to those of the church in Corinth. Moreover, their relationship with Paul is in good working order.

Like Paul, the Philippians face opposition because of their convictions about Christ (1:28). We know very little about the nature of this opposition, though Paul does talk about their suffering (1:29). Throughout the epistle Paul seems dedicated to helping the Philippians “order their common life in a manner worthy of the gospel” (1:27) in a situation that is hostile to Christianity. In chapter 3 the Philippians are warned against certain kinds of people. These seem to be members of the church, but again, we have very little information beyond what Paul says. We may get some further insight into the situation of the church in Philippi by looking at the general situation of the city in the first century.

Philippi: A Roman City

From other sources we estimate that that the city of Philippi in the middle part of the first century probably had around 10,000 inhabitants. Philippi was located in northeastern Macedonia. Philippi had a history going back to the 4th century BCE. In 42 BCE Mark Antony and Octavian (later the emperor Augustus) defeated the assassins of Julius Caesar, Brutus and Cassius, in an important battle at Philippi. After Augustus secured his power over Mark Antony, he re-founded Philippi as a Roman colony. At this time numerous army veterans and Italian farmers had settled in Philippi, joining the native Thracian and Greek populace.

At this time Philippi was granted Italian legal status, exempting its colonists from various taxes and granting them citizenship and selected land rights and privileges. Agriculture dominated the economy. Trade, which had a way of diffusing power in the Roman world because it demanded interaction and cooperation across ethnic groups, played a limited role in Philippi. As a result, Romans and Roman institutions exercised an unusual amount of influence. This would have included Roman religious institutions and the emperor cult in particular. In addition, a variety of other official cults seem to have been represented in Philippi as well as more popular religious movements.

This information might be helpful as we imagine the sort of opposition and antagonism faced by Christians in Philippi. Those Philippians that became Christians withdrew from a variety of civil and social institutions in town because they would have been closely associated with the worship of the emperor. We don't need to imagine that the people of Philippi had a particularly deep and theologically rich set of convictions about the emperor's divinity. They probably did not. Rather, the worship of the emperor provided a context within which the inhabitants of Philippi could express their civic commitments. If one stopped participating in these ceremonies it would arouse concern and suspicion about one's patriotism and willingness to support and perhaps fight for Philippi's and the empire's security.

In response to their withdrawal from the various civic and religious institutions of Philippi, the Christians in Philippi would have faced various sorts of opposition. These might take economic forms in terms of being fired from one's job or having one's business boycotted. It also appears that at least some Philippian Christians found themselves in jail for the same reason Paul did: for advocating customs "which are not permissible to us Romans." We simply do not know how many Philippian Christians were subject to persecution both official and unofficial. Paul speaks of their suffering for Christ's sake in 1:29, but does not divulge any details.

Acts 16 and Philippi: The Opening of Hearts

What we know of the founding of the church in Philippi we learn from the book of Acts. Paul, and at least Timothy and Silas, were called into Macedonia through a vision granted to Paul. They arrive in Neapolis, the port closest to Philippi (about 16km away), and from there arrive in Philippi (16:11). Paul and his companions go outside the city gates to the river, to "the house of prayer" (most likely a synagogue). On their way, they begin to speak to a group of women. Among them is a Gentile woman named Lydia who was a "god-fearer," a Gentile who worshipped the God of Israel. We also learn that Lydia is a trader in "purple cloth."

As Paul spoke to her, “the Lord opened her heart.” She and her household were baptized and she offered Paul hospitality. Subsequently, as Paul and his companions were, again, on their way to the house of prayer they encounter a slave girl with a spirit of divination. She rightly divines that Paul and the others are “slaves of the most high God” and that they proclaim “the way of salvation” (16:16-17). This keeps up for several days. Finally, Paul calls the spirit out of her in the name of the Jesus Christ. Her owners, seeing the profit they made from this girl departing with the spirit of divination, bring Paul and Silas before the magistrates.

They identify Paul and Silas as Jews advocating customs “which are not permissible to us Romans” (16:21). At the urging of the crowd, the magistrates have Paul and Silas beaten and then thrown into jail. Paul and Silas, displaying the joy in suffering which is so important in the epistle, are miraculously freed from their bonds. Rather than escape, Paul preaches to the jailer. This leads to the conversion and baptism of the jailer and his family. The jailer's question to Paul and Silas, “what must I do to be saved?” may reflect several different notions of salvation. At the very least, it confirms the slave girl's announcement that Paul and his companions proclaim the way of salvation.

The next day, Paul is able to rely on his own Roman citizenship to win an apology from the magistrates. After encouraging the believers in Philippi, Paul and his companions go on their way, eventually ending up in Thessalonica (17:1).

Here in Acts are several points that will also be reflected in the epistle:

1. There is the hospitable generosity of Lydia, which is reflected in the Philippians' financial partnership with Paul noted in 4:10-20.
2. Paul is identified as a “slave of the most high God” in 4:17. In 1:1 he identifies himself (and Timothy) to the Philippians as “slaves of Christ Jesus,” the one who has the name above all names (2:9-11).
3. Paul is jailed in Philippi. Paul writes from prison to the Philippians, observing that they are in the same struggle that he is in and was in when he was with them (1:30). The civil authorities in Philippi seem as badly disposed towards Christianity among the inhabitants of the city (1:28-29) as they were when Paul and Silas first arrived.
4. Finally, the joy in the midst of suffering which Paul and Silas display in the Philippian jail is precisely the joy that Paul displays for and seeks to cultivate in the Philippians in the epistle. This account of the beginnings of Christianity in Philippi in Acts 16 can begin to tune our ears to hear the epistle Paul wrote to the “saints in Christ Jesus in Philippi.”

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

Working with other members of the group, discuss these questions.

1. What difference does it make if we recognize that Paul wrote the Letter to the Philippians while in prison?

2. Read Acts 16:11-40. What do we learn about Paul's commitment to the gospel from this text?

3. How would it affect the makeup of your congregation if people were persecuted and maybe even prosecuted for their faith?

4. What is the value of learning about the theological and historical context of Philippians for our own practice?

Closing Prayer (Unison)

*Praise the LORD!
 Praise the LORD, O my soul!
 I will praise the LORD as long as I live;
 I will sing praises to my God all my life long.
 Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,
 whose hope is in the LORD their God,
 who made heaven and earth,
 the sea, and all that is in them;
 who keeps faith forever;
 who executes justice for the oppressed;
 who gives food to the hungry.
 The Lord will reign forever,
 your God, O Zion, for all generations.
 Praise the LORD! (Ps. 146: 1-2; 5-8; 10)*

Session 2: Giving Thanks for the Fruit of Righteousness (Philippians 1:1-11)

Opening Prayer

Leader: As the deer longs for flowing streams,
so our souls long for you, O God.

People: *Our souls thirst for God, for the living God.
When shall we come and behold the face of God?*

Leader: O send out your light and your truth; let them lead us.

People: *Let them bring us to your holy hill and to your dwelling.*

Leader: Then we will go to the altar of God.

People: *And will praise you with the harp, O God, my God.*

This session focuses on Phil. 1:1-11. This passage is important for our purposes because it lays out some of the particular concerns and hopes that Paul has for the Philippians, as well as some of Paul's convictions about God's work in the common life of the Philippian church. As people come to understand both Paul's hope and God's work, the importance and nature of Christian formation will become a bit clearer.

Love and Knowledge

Paul's prayer for the Philippians is that their love may abound in "knowledge and moral understanding" (1:9) is one of the most significant verses of this passage. It is interesting that "knowledge" here arises out of love and not the other way around. We tend to think that the more we know about God or about a friend the more we will love them, or at least we will love them more truly. That is, we assume that our knowledge will lead to a more mature, well-informed love. Paul's prayer for the Philippians seems to presume a different sort of ordering of love and knowledge. 1 John 2:27 and John 16:13 might help us see this. These verses remind us that the Spirit with which believers are anointed provides us with knowledge and truth and that this Spirit is *agape* or charity. "Charity" and "*agape*" are different words for love that Christians have traditionally used. In this way, love, in the person of the Spirit, precedes and leads believers into knowledge rather than knowledge leading us to love.

In more concrete terms, Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274) explains how love gives rise to knowledge: "The reason for this is that when a person has a habit [a settled disposition to act in a certain way], and if that habit is right, then right judgment of things pertaining to that habit follows from it. . . Now all things that are

done by us must be informed by charity [love]. Therefore a person with charity [love] has a correct judgment as to things knowable . . . and in regard to things done.”

If we are to follow this perspective, we will have to shift our notions of love away from the romantic and sentimentalized versions of love so common in our culture. Instead we should see love as a “habit.” Love needs to become *an established disposition within us*. This does not simply happen overnight. Rather, love becomes a habit for us as we undergo spiritual formation. Over time, through prayer, contemplation, and action we become loving people. To the extent that such a disposition becomes stable within us, we have developed the habit of love. Such love then informs our judgments and actions so that they generate knowledge and moral wisdom. In this way abounding love leads to knowledge and moral wisdom. Paul’s claim in v. 7 also demonstrates this. Remember that Paul’s wisdom and judgments about the Philippians and God’s action in their lives are expressed in the context of prayer and thanksgiving and supported by the love he has for them.

Growing in Wisdom

It should thus become clear that love, prayer, knowledge and the wisdom needed to live faithful lives are not separable components of the Christian life. Rather they are a set of interconnected habits which we must seek to cultivate and nurture over a lifetime. Growth in one of these habits will as a matter of course lead to growth in the others. Failure or frustration in one will ultimately manifest itself in more comprehensive forms of failure and frustration. The following verses of this passage will also have more to say about this.

As the prayer that comprises vv.9-11 continues, Paul desires that such growth in wisdom will allow the Philippians to discern, test and determine what is worthwhile. Paul uses similar vocabulary in Romans 2:18 where this idea of determining what is superior is linked to knowledge of the will of God. As Paul’s prayer here develops we see that abounding love leads to knowledge and wisdom, which leads to an ability to discern those things which are good and worthwhile. This ability to make moral discriminations will result in the Philippians leading lives of integrity. The purity and integrity Paul desires for the Philippians is not simply a one-time achievement. Rather, it also denotes their proper end or goal. It is to mark their lives “for the day of Christ.” Thus, we see that the spiritual formation represented by the cultivation of love, knowledge, prayer, and moral wisdom in the previous verses are all directed toward preparing us for our ultimate end in Christ: holiness.

Hearing the Biblical Passage

1. Have a member of the group read Phil. 1:1-11 aloud from his or her Bible. As the text is read, close your eyes and listen carefully. Share with the group the words or images that caught your attention as you listened.
2. Have a member of the group read the text again, following along with your own Bible. Share with the group any different words or phrases from the various translations.
3. Read the text as translated below by the author, Stephen Fowl. Notice and share any differences in translation.

(1) Paul and Timothy, slaves of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi with the overseers and the deacons: (2) Grace to you all and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (3) I thank my God because of all of my remembrances of you. (4) I always make each of my prayers for you with joy (5) because of your participation with me in the gospel from the first day until now. (6) I am also confident that the one who began a good work in you will carry it through to completion at the day of Christ. (7) It is right for me to exercise this judgment about you all because I hold you in my heart for you all are fellow sharers with me in grace, both in my chains and in the defense and establishment of the gospel. (8) For God is my witness of how I long for you all with the affection of Christ. (9) And I pray that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and all moral understanding (10) so that you may be able to discern and determine what is best in order that you might be people of sincerity and integrity for the day of Christ, (11) having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God.

4. Working as a group, use the following questions as a guide for your discussion about the meaning of Phil. 1:1-11.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How does Paul characterize his relationship with the Philippians? What is meant by “participation in the gospel” (v. 5)? What is meant by “fellow sharers in grace” (v. 7)?
2. Paul makes a dramatic claim in v. 6. What is the “good work” that has begun? How will it be brought to completion?
3. What does Paul hope and pray for the Philippians in vv. 9-11?

4. What comes to your mind when you hear the term “righteousness”? What do you think Paul means by “the fruit of righteousness”?

5. Thinking now of your congregation in light of your discussion of this passage:
 - a. How do members of your congregation think of one another? What are some of the distinctive words and images that would be used?

 - b. What would be different if we thought of our relationships with our fellow Christians (both in our congregations and more globally) in Paul’s terms? How would we think and act towards each other? How would we be accountable to each other?

 - c. What is the good work that you can confidently imagine God starting and bringing to completion in your congregation?

 - d. .Read again the prayer in vv. 9-11. Can you imagine hoping and praying these things for yourself? For each other? What would it mean for the common life of your congregation for these hopes and prayers to be fulfilled?

Closing Prayer

Let us offer our prayers of confession for the times we have tried to be self-sufficient and have denied our need for God. (Silence)

Let us confess those things which have gotten in the way of our relationship with God. (Silence)

Let us pray for grace to be poor in spirit and to lean on God and each other. (Silence)

Let us pray for all who mourn their losses. (Silence)

Let us pray for grace to mourn with those who mourn and to share their suffering. (Silence)

Let us give thanks that God is merciful and gracious, hears our prayers, and grants our requests made in Jesus’ name. (Silence)

(Here may be a time of open prayer for participants to offer aloud their own petitions.)

Unison: *Lord God, forgive us all our sins, heal all our infirmities, comfort our sorrows, and through your Spirit bring us closer to you, the one who reigns for ever and ever. Amen.*

Session 3: Seeing Differently

(Philippians 3:1-14)

Opening Prayer (Pray Responsively)

Group 1: Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you.

Group 2: *Let the nations be glad and sing for joy,
for God judges the peoples with equity
and guides the nations upon earth.*

Together: Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you.

In Session Two we looked at Paul's hopes and prayers for the Philippians. We also noted Paul's confidence in God's work in the life of the Philippian congregation. Finally, we explored the development of particular "habits" that are crucial to Christian formation.

In this session we will explore another "habit" of Christian formation. There is no single word or phrase to describe this habit. Nevertheless, this habit lies at the heart of Paul's great faith in God's work in the Philippians' common life. Paul has great confidence regarding God's work in the Philippian congregation and God's commitment to bring that work to its proper end at the day of Christ. The basis for this confidence is the fact that Paul understands both his life and the Philippians' lives (and our lives, too!) as participating in God's great drama of the salvation of the world. Now that he is in Christ Paul sees everything differently. One of his chief desires for the Philippians is that they also come to see everything differently. Such seeing will then lead them to think, act, and feel in different ways. Rather, than simply tell the Philippians, "You must look at things differently!" Paul exemplifies this habit for them.

Conforming to Christ

Paul's story of his life both before and after Christ displays a transformation in his way of seeing God, himself and the world. This transformation has enormous consequences. It is important to see that Paul's life prior to Christ was one of great achievement. The man who can say "according to the righteousness found in the law, I was blameless," does not have a self image problem! Knowing Christ does not so much erase those achievements as allow Paul to see their true value. First and foremost, Paul now sees that the proper direction and end point for his life is

knowledge of Christ, most specifically the power of Christ's resurrection. Moreover, Paul cannot achieve such an end apart from conformity to Christ's death.

Paul's knowledge of Christ shapes the way he understands his past and how he lives in the present. In this respect 3:10-11 presents us with that stable place on which Paul now stands. From this point he is able to re-tell the story of his past and the transformations Christ has worked in his life. Being in Christ provides Paul with a clear sense of his *telos*, his proper end, that towards which God is ultimately drawing him. Nevertheless, as the subsequent verses make clear, Paul's convictions about the shape and nature of his *telos* do not imply that he has already attained that end.

In the following verses Paul will assert the importance of seeing life in Christ as an ongoing journey of having our attention and affections transformed as we are drawn ever deeper into fellowship with Christ. This journey begins for Paul with a radical undermining of his past standards and manner of attending to God. His past is not so much negated and erased as it is transformed.

In Romans 12:1-3 Paul urges followers of Christ to be transformed by the renewing of their minds so that they might discern the will of God. Here in the course of Phil 3:1-14 Paul speaks of the renewing of his own mind as he is captivated by Christ. Paul's attention and affections are re-directed so that he comes to understand God and God's ways with the world in profoundly different ways.

As Phil. 3:12-14 will confirm, being transformed by the renewing of one's mind is not a one-time achievement. Rather, it is a life long process of having our desires and affections and attention continually redirected and refocused by our knowledge of the crucified and resurrected Christ. Moreover, failure to engage in this process of transformation will not leave Christians in some neutral, unformed state. Rather, our affections and attention will be drawn to and shaped by other factors and forces. If, as some research indicates, we are confronted with up to 16,000 advertisements and media messages each day, it will not take long before our attention and ultimately our desires are drawn away from God and towards any number of enticements. We will no longer be friends of the cross. At best we will become strangers to it. At worst we will become enemies of the cross of Christ.

Hearing the Biblical Passage

1. Have a member of the group read Phil. 3:1-14 aloud from his or her Bible. As the text is read, close your eyes and listen carefully. Share with the group the words or images that struck you as you listened.
2. Have a member of the group read the text again, following along with your own Bible. Share with the group any different words or phrases from the various translations.
3. Read the text as translated by the author. Notice differences in translation.

(1) Finally, then, rejoice in the Lord. I do not hesitate to write the same things to you because they will help you to be steadfast. (2) Avoid "the dogs," evil workers, and "mutilators," (3) for we are the circumcision, who serve by the Spirit of God, who boast in Christ Jesus and who put no confidence in the flesh. (4) If there are some who think they have reasons to have confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel and of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, with respect to the law, I was a Pharisee; (6) with respect to my zeal, I was a persecutor of the church; with respect to the righteousness found in the law, I was blameless. (7) But these things that I used to consider to be assets, I now, because of Christ, consider to be losses. (8) Not only this, but what is more, I consider all these things to be "losses" due to the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus as my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, now considering them to be garbage, so that I may gain Christ (9) and be found in him, not having my own righteousness which comes from the law, but that which comes through the faithfulness of Christ, the righteousness of God on the basis of faith. (10) My aim here is that I may know him, both the power of his resurrection and the sharing in his sufferings, (11) with the goal that I might somehow attain the resurrection from the dead. (12) It is not that I have already attained this, nor have I reached my end. Instead I press on to take hold of that for which Christ took hold of me. (13) My brothers and sisters, I do not consider that I have already attained this end; but this one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward toward what lies ahead, (14) I press on toward the finish line so that I might win the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

4. Working as a group, use the following questions as a guide for your discussion about the meaning of Phil. 3:1-14.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How does Paul characterize his life before knowing Christ Jesus as his Lord? How does he now regard that life?
2. What difference has knowing Christ Jesus as Lord made in Paul's life?
3. In vv. 10-11, Paul speaks about those things he now cares about most. What are they? What does it mean to know the power of Christ's resurrection? How is this related to sharing in Christ's sufferings?
4. Thinking of your personal journey, how would you narrate the story of your life prior to becoming a Christian?
5. How has becoming a Christian transformed the things you care about most?
6. Read again vv. 12-14. Paul's goals for his life have been transformed. His desires have become Christ's desires for him. Can you imagine the collective desires of your congregation becoming the same as Christ's desires? What would that look like? What would need to change for this to happen?

Closing Prayer

Let us pray that we will more fully come to know Christ Jesus as Lord. (Silence)

Let us pray that we may come to see all things differently. (Silence)

Let us ask for courage and joy to pray, to speak, and to act as Christ desires. (Silence)

Let us ask God for guidance in discerning our call and in knowing how we are to be different from the world around us. (Silence)

Let us offer our prayers for the church, that its saltiness may be restored. (Silence)

Let us pray for the church, that its light may not be hidden under a basket but put on a lamp stand. (Silence)

(Here may be a time of open prayer for participants to offer aloud their own petitions)

God, be gracious to us and bless us. May your face shine upon us, that your way may be known upon earth, your saving power among all nations. Let all the ends of the earth worship you. Amen.

Session Four: Having Confidence in the Lord (Philippians 1:12-26)

Opening Prayer (Unison)

*O God, the Holy Spirit,
Come to us, and among us;
 come as the wind, and cleanse us;
 come as the fire, and burn;
 come as the dew, and refresh:
Convict, convert, and consecrate
 many hearts and lives
 to our great good
 and to thy greater glory,
And this we ask for Christ Jesus' sake. Amen*

In the last Session we examined a passage in which Paul narrates the story of his life, emphasizing the ways in which his convictions about Christ led him to reconceive his past achievements. These Christ-focused convictions also provided him with a new direction and end point for his life. Paul now perceives everything—his past, his present circumstances, and his future—in the light of his new ends and purposes in Christ. His pattern of perception will generate new patterns of living and acting in the world. The Philippians and we can see this at work in the ways in which Paul writes to the Philippians about his current circumstances in jail. This theme will be evident in the next two passages, 1:12-18 and 1:18b-26.

Paul's Place in Christ's Ongoing Story

In 1:12 Paul makes known his views about his own circumstances. It turns out, however, that these things are only indirectly about Paul. Clearly, here, as in many other places in the epistles, Paul and Paul's own story are integrated so thoroughly into the story of Christ and the gospel that it becomes difficult to separate the two. Paul has learned to see his circumstances as part of this larger ongoing story. Hence, in talking about himself he quite naturally ends up talking about the progress of that story. If one of the aims of Christian discipleship is to grow into ever deeper communion with the triune God and with others, then one of the things that contemporary Christians can learn from Paul is this: the habit of narrating the story of one's past and present circumstances from the perspective of those who have learned their place in Christ's on-going story.

Despite the intentions of those who wish to trouble Paul, he rejoices. This is because Christ is preached. The motives of the preachers (vv. 15-18), while important, seem secondary to the act of proclamation. It may appear that Paul pragmatically prefers to see the gospel preached than to wait until everybody's

motives are pure. But Paul may not see the choice in quite this way. Ultimately, because Paul is convinced that God is directing both his personal circumstances and the more general spread of the gospel, he need not be overly concerned about the motives of any particular set of preachers. Paul is able to see that, despite appearances and contrary to expectations, God is advancing the gospel. Rather than expressing a preference for preaching from selfish motives over no preaching at all, this phrase is an expression of faith in God's providential oversight of the gospel's progress.

From a theological perspective it is important to note that a very particular doctrine of providence undergirds Paul's account here. As we have already seen, Paul is confident that God will bring the good work started in his own and the Philippians' lives to its proper completion (1:6). This is not, however, the willed blindness displayed by someone like Dr. Pangloss in Voltaire's *Candide*, who proclaims through ever more serious disasters that "this is the best of all possible worlds." Paul, more than most, directly and willingly endured suffering because of his convictions about the crucified and resurrected Christ. Yet, he does not attempt to call such suffering a good in itself. Suffering is what the followers of Christ may expect as they negotiate their way through the same sort of world that crucified Jesus.

Paul's view of God's providence leads him to fit himself and his various circumstances into a larger on-going story of God's unfolding drama of salvation. Within this larger context, and only within this context, Paul's circumstances can be seen as advancing the gospel. This view of providence enables Paul to displace himself as the one who is guiding and directing his own life. Instead, Paul's sense of himself now attains its coherence and intelligibility from being part of the larger movement of God's drama of salvation. The crucified and risen Christ provides both the central point for the drama of God's salvation and central focus for Paul's own life. God is at the center of Paul's world, ordering and opening courses of action in the light of the ends and purposes of God's drama of salvation. Instead of controlling and directing circumstances, the primary tasks for Paul and the Philippians and all Christians have to do with perceiving the movements of this larger drama into which they have been drawn and in appropriately fitting themselves into that drama in word and deed.

Hearing the Biblical Passage

1. Have a member of the group read Phil. 1:12-18a aloud from his or her Bible. As the text is read, close your eyes and listen carefully. Share with the group the words or images that struck you as you listened.
2. Have a member of the group read the text again, following along with your own Bible. Share with the group any different words or phrases from the various translations.
3. Read the text as translated by the author. Notice differences in translation.

(12) I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that, contrary to what one might expect, my circumstances have worked to advance the gospel (13) so that it is recognized among the whole Praetorian Guard and by everyone else that my bonds are in Christ. (14) Moreover, most of the brothers and sisters, having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, now speak the word with greater boldness and without fear. (15) Some, however, preach Christ from envy and a spirit of strife, while others preach from pure motives. (16) These proclaim Christ out of love, knowing that I have been appointed for the defense of the gospel. (17) The others preach out of a selfish ambition. They are insincere, intending to deepen the pain of my imprisonment. (18) What should one make of all this? Just this; in every way, whether by false motives or true, Christ is proclaimed. In this I will rejoice.

4. Working as a group, use the following questions as a guide for your discussion about the meaning of Phil. 1:12-18a.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Paul begins by noting that despite his (wretched) circumstances the gospel has been advanced. By whom has it been advanced?
2. What are some of the specific ways that Paul believes the gospel has been advanced?
3. Paul shows the Philippians that being in chains is not contradictory to being in Christ. Reread 1:12-18. Who is on trial here? Paul? The gospel? What do you make of the distinction?

Closing Prayer (Unison)

*Almighty God,
you have broken the tyranny of sin
and have sent the Spirit of Truth into our hearts.
Give us grace to dedicate our freedom to your service,
that all creation may be brought
to the glorious liberty of the children of God;
Through Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen*

Session Five: Magnifying Christ

(Philippians 1:18b-26)

Opening Prayer (Unison) From a hymn by Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179)

*Holy Spirit,
 Making life alive,
 Moving in all things,
 Root of all creative being
 Cleansing the cosmos of every impurity,
 Effacing guilt,
 Anointing wounds,
 You are lustrous and praiseworthy life,
 You waken and re-awaken everything that is.
 Amen.*

Whether I Live or Die

This section of Philippians is filled with a variety of insights and perspectives which capture our attention. A key insight is found in Phil. 1:20. Here we read that the imprisoned Paul has set his desires on magnifying Christ in his body in either life or death. He realizes, however, that this hope can only be achieved through the prayers of the Philippians and God's supplying of the Spirit.

Paul's language here about being "disgraced" is quite common in the Old Testament (cf. Isa. 50:7). "Disgrace" does not so much reflect an inner feeling of shame as a failure of faith (in word or deed) which brings with it a certain dishonor. Rather than being disgraced, Paul intends, with all boldness, and as he has always done heretofore, that Christ will be magnified in his body.

The notion of "magnifying the Lord" has strong links to the Psalms. Moreover, Luke uses the same word in the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55) in ascribing glory to God. The passive voice of the verb also allows Paul to make a significant distinction. While it is Paul who might be disgraced, it is Christ who will be magnified in Paul's body whether the apostle lives or dies. For Paul, Christ's being magnified in his body means not only that such magnification will happen in the future, but that Christ is regularly magnified in Paul's body in the present time. This is the force of "as I have always done." Paul's confidence is not primarily about his eternal future, but about his ability to continue, with the Spirit's help, in circumstances of extreme adversity, a practice he has carried on for some time.

Paul's claims imply that whether he dies or lives there is, in each instance, an opportunity for magnifying Christ or disgracing himself. In dying Paul could either

be disgraced or magnify Christ; in living he faces the same option. Magnifying Christ in life, however, will require a different set of practices than magnifying Christ in death.

Paul understands that in this particular matter his body will display the disposition of his character whether he lives or dies. For example, in dying in a way that disgraces himself—by recanting under torture—Paul's body would display something crucial about his character. Paul understands what virtually all ancient moral philosophers would have recognized: bodily actions and bodily responses to specific situations display elements of a person's character. It is not simply Paul's death that is being discussed here. Rather, it is the *manner* of his death and Paul's ability to describe that death as something which might give glory to God or which might bring shame on himself. In this respect Paul's claims are not particularly surprising.

On the other hand, Paul was in a situation where his control over his body was restricted. Moreover, he was facing a situation in which he might be expected to lose all control over his body. In the context of imperial imprisonment, the prisoner's body becomes an occasion to display the empire's power. In a situation where the Roman Empire would be expected to exert a great deal of control over Paul's body, Paul counters that Christ will be magnified by the way he comports himself. Whether he lives or dies, Paul's body will be, as he has always been, Christ's rather than the Empire's.

Paul's claims here remind us that our actions display aspects of our character. Christians in America may appear to have far greater control over their bodies than the imprisoned Paul. We would do well to recognize, however, that at the beginning of the twenty-first century all Americans are under unprecedented levels of surveillance. Americans' purchases, reading materials, and the form and content of their communication, are under the scrutiny of an extraordinary number of interested parties. At the very least, most of these parties seek to create and manipulate the desires of all of us and to offer alternative narratives into which we all might be tempted to fit our lives.

In light of the aims and purposes of the Roman Empire, Paul indicates that his regular practice is to magnify Christ in his body. If we, too, are called to magnify Christ in our bodies as a regular practice, in the face of all the forces seeking to exert some control over us, then we, too, must be as intentional about all aspects of our life as Paul was. The desires we manifest, our patterns of consumption, the ways in which we get, hold and distribute wealth, can all be occasions where either we are disgraced or Christ is magnified.

Surprisingly, the specific aspect of life in which Paul confidently thinks Christ can be magnified in his body is his death. Because he recognized that he had no control over the moment of his death, Paul understood the importance of living each day of his life in a way that would make his death a fitting culmination should it come that day. Because of the great advances in medical technologies in America, we appear to be offered a great deal of control over the time, place, and manner of our deaths. This tempts us to treat death as an event that is discontinuous with the rest of our life. Thus, for many, death is simply presented as the last great opportunity to exert an autonomous consumer choice, rather than an occasion in which Christ might be magnified in our bodies. One of the challenges facing contemporary American Christians, then, is to reflect theologically about death in the light of advances in death denying (and death delaying) technologies.

Hearing the Biblical Passage

1. Have a member of the group read Phil. 1:18b-26 aloud from his or her Bible. As the text is read, close your eyes and listen carefully. Share with the group the words or images that struck you as you listened.
2. Have a member of the group read the text again, following along with your own Bible. Share with the group any different words or phrases from the various translations.
3. Read the text as translated by the author. Notice differences in translation.

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, (19) because I know that this will result in my salvation through your prayers and the provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ and (20) because it is my eager expectation and hope that I will in no way be disgraced. Rather with all boldness, as I have always done, Christ will be magnified in my body whether I live or die. (21) For to me, to live is Christ; to die is gain. (22) If I am to remain in the flesh this will lead to fruitful labor for me. I do not know, however, which I will choose. (23) I am torn between two options. I would much rather die and be with Christ. (24) It is much more beneficial for you, however, that I remain in the flesh. (25) And I am convinced that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith (26) so that when I come to visit you again, I might share in your abounding boasting in Christ Jesus.

4. Working as a group, use the following questions as a guide for your discussion about the meaning of Phil. 1:12-18.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. In Phil. 1:19-26, Paul speaks directly about his imprisonment and his future. He sees himself with two choices. What are those choices?

2. What course of action does Paul pursue? Why does he choose that one?

3. What might it mean concretely and specifically to magnify Christ in our bodies?

4. How does the perspective on death offered in this passage compare with contemporary views on death and dying? How is this passage “good news”?

Closing Prayer

Let us offer our prayers to God, asking God to take away our anxiety, our fear of enemies and those who want to hurt us. (Silence)

Let us pray that God may make us as meek, gentle, and non-violent as Jesus and the Christian martyrs who trusted in God rather than avenge wrongdoing. (Silence)

Let us ask God to strengthen our commitment to non-violence and peace. (Silence)

Let us ask God to give us a hunger and a thirst for right relationships. (Silence)

Let us pray that God’s love may be present in all situations where peace and justice are needed. (Silence)

Let us pray for all those who struggle against oppression in non-violent ways. (Silence)

(Here may be a time of open prayer for participants to offer aloud their own petitions.)

O God, we commit ourselves to your way of gentleness and right relationships, of peace and justice. Help us to trust in you to act on our behalf and on behalf of all those who suffer because of others’ wrongdoing. Hold before our eyes the example of Christ Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, in whose name we pray.

Amen.

Session Six: Sustaining a Common Life in a Hostile World

(Philippians 1:27-2:4)

Opening Prayer (Responsively)

Group 1: For God alone my soul waits in silence,
from God comes my salvation.

Group 2: *God alone is our rock and our salvation,
Our fortress; we shall never be shaken.*

Together: Once God has spoken, twice have I heard this:
Power belongs to God, and
steadfast love belongs to you, O Lord.

In earlier sessions we looked at issues of formation and their relationship to the way we view God's work in the world and how we ourselves fit into that ongoing drama of salvation. Paul wants the Philippians to learn how to perceive things from a certain perspective. Mostly he does this by showing how he views God's work in relation to the Philippians' current situation (Session 3) and in relation to his life's story and his situation in prison (Session 4). This reminds us that Christian formation is as much about learning from and imitating those more advanced in the faith as it is a matter of learning doctrine. Remember, of course, that the Philippians did not have a New Testament, nor did they likely have easy access to the Old Testament. They did, however, have stories about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, like the one poetically related in Phil. 2:6-11. They also had Paul and his life. We will later come to see that others such as Timothy and Epaphroditus would also serve as models of Christian formation for the Philippians.

A Life Worthy of the Gospel

In 1:30 Paul notes that he and the Philippians are engaged in "the same struggle." Presumably, the Philippians were aware of Paul's situation. They certainly were aware of their own. What is the point of noting their sameness? Throughout his account of his own circumstances in 1:12-26 Paul has argued that despite his "struggles" the gospel has advanced. Moreover, his convictions about God's providential working in his situation has led him to manifest a particular set of dispositions and practices (1:19-26) in the face of imprisonment. In 1:27-30 he has initiated an argument that the Philippians are to have a parallel faith in God's providential ordering of their situation. He wants them to perceive their situation as he perceives his own. He also calls on them to manifest a similar set of dispositions and practices in their common life. Here at the end of the chapter the reason he

gives for this is that he and they are in the same struggle. Paul's pattern of life here is particularly exemplary for the Philippians because his situation is so much like theirs.

Indeed, one of the crucial moves Paul makes here is that he narrates and names both his suffering and the Philippians' suffering as a gracious gift from God. This must strike modern ears as very strange. Paul is not making a general claim about all suffering. Rather, his remark is about suffering willingly taken on because of one's convictions about the crucified and resurrected Christ. Moreover, Paul did not, and he does not advise the Philippians to seek out suffering. Rather, suffering is the result of being obedient to God in a world that cannot abide such obedience. Paul is quite clear that the primary activities of the Christian are focused on forming and maintaining a common life worthy of the gospel. Such a life both calls forth and results in a steadfast unity, empowered by the Spirit, in which Christians struggle together in this common vocation. Whether or not this results in suffering is largely out of our hands. To the extent, then, that such suffering is a gift from God, it is so because our common life has been worthy of the gospel. The world (particularly a nation state), being the sort of place it is, is threatened by the presence of those who find their security in God and place their allegiance in God alone.

In addition, it is clear that Paul's call to a common life worthy of the gospel, lived in fidelity to the Lord, will tend to generate opposition. In the face of opposition, Christians in Philippi and elsewhere are to remain steadfast and courageous. Of course, the point is not to be oppositional, but to be faithful. The question then becomes whether Christians in America or elsewhere testify in word and deed to a faith substantial enough to provoke opposition from powers that are either indifferent or hostile to the Triune God? Christians in the U.S. should not assume that because the church here does not suffer state-sponsored opposition that it is because of the benevolence of the government or the protective powers of the constitution. It may be much more the case that the common life of most churches is so inadequate to the gospel, and that our disunity is so debilitating, that the State has nothing to fear from us. Should substantial numbers of Christians in America, under the Spirit's guidance and provocation, repent and take Paul's words to the Philippians seriously, then we, too, may find that we have been given that gracious gift of not simply *believing in* Christ, but in *suffering for* Christ's sake.

In this section Paul presents united, courageous and steadfast fidelity as both an essential practice of a common life worthy of the gospel of Christ and a sign of the worthiness of the life of Christian communities. This is clearly not the only practice of a common life worthy of the Gospel. Nevertheless, Paul's claims here offer a set of probing questions directed at the common life of all contemporary Christian communities. Do Christians in America, for example, consider unity (as

Paul does) to be an essential practice of the Christian life? Or have we been so schooled in the habits of individualism that we are no longer willing to form our lives in Christ in common with other believers?

It is important to understand that Paul does not desire a monochrome church. He recognizes varieties of theological views, styles of worship, and exercise of gifts in ministry. Pauline notions of unity rely on the harmonious interrelation of diverse Christians rather than a unity that is achieved through homogeneity. Moreover, Paul's churches can sustain a measure of debate and disagreement without sacrificing unity.

Paul's argument is that a common life worthy of the gospel both generates and depends on (among other things) the practice of unity among the Philippians. If Christians in America are to take this admonition to heart, the first and essential step in confronting the contradiction of our divisions is to begin to understand it and to see it in all of its ugliness. If church division represents a series of wounds to the one body of Christ, then we must stop anesthetizing ourselves to this wound. Until large numbers of Christians feel the pain of this wound, we will not seek healing. Out of that pain, our first response is to be repentance.

Hearing the Biblical Passage

1. Have a member of the group read Phil. 1:27-2:4 aloud from his or her Bible. As the text is read, close your eyes and listen carefully. Share with the group the words or images that struck you as you listened.
2. Have a member of the group read the text again, following along with your own Bible. Share with the group any different words or phrases in the various translations.
3. Read the text as translated by the author. Notice differences in translation.

(27) Do this one thing: Order your common life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ so that when I learn of your circumstances (either by coming and seeing for myself or by hearing of them) I will know that you are standing steadfast in one Spirit, with one soul striving together for the faith of the gospel. (28) Do not in any way be intimidated by your opponents, which will be a sign to them of destruction, but it is your salvation and this is from God. (29) For you have not simply been granted the grace of believing in Christ but to suffer for his sake. (30) For you now have the same struggles which you once saw I had and now hear that I have.

(1) Therefore, if in Christ there is any encouragement, if any solace of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any compassion, as, of course, there is, (2) then make my joy complete by manifesting a common pattern of thinking and acting, having the same love, being bound together by this common way of thinking and acting.

(3) You must avoid selfish ambition and vain conceit. Instead, in humility consider others as your superiors. (4) Do not attend to your own interests but rather to the interests of others.

4. Working as a group, use the following questions as a guide for your discussion about the meaning of Phil. 1:27-2:4.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What are the key components of a common life worthy of the gospel? What are the threats or barriers to this kind of common life?
2. What are some of the assumptions that “order” the common life of most congregations in the United States? What does Paul suggest? What is the difference between the two?
3. Imagine a church offering a different social or political arrangement. What would that look like? How might it generate opposition?
4. Can you imagine suffering as the result of being obedient to God? How could suffering be a gracious gift from God?
5. What might it mean concretely and specifically to attend to the interests of others rather than your own interests?
6. Why do we need Christian community to live a life worthy of the gospel?

Closing Prayer

Let us bring our prayers to God, that we might forgive as God forgives. (Silence)

Let us bring to mind those times when God and others have shown mercy to us. (Silence)

Let us pray that God will give us the grace to show mercy to those who do not deserve it.
(Silence)

Let us pray that, when it is difficult to forgive, God will show us the beginning of the path to forgiveness. (Silence)

Let us pray that we might come with clean hearts before God and the church. (Silence)

Let us pray for the commitment to know the right and to do it. (Silence)

Let us ask God to be with us always and to give us new understandings of what it means to see God. (Silence)

(Here may be a time of open prayer for participants to offer aloud their own petitions.)

Merciful God, as you have blessed us far beyond what we deserve, help us now to be merciful to others and to come with a pure heart into your presence. Amen.

Session Seven: Having the Mind of Christ

(Philippians 2:5-11)

Opening Prayer (Responsively)

The wind of the Spirit challenges us to change:

Give us courage to respond, O God.

The fire of the Spirit calls us to a passion for the kingdom:

Warm us and give us your energy, O God.

The breath of the Spirit offers us new life;

May we receive and live out the Gospel in the world.

In a world where there is need and oppression, violence and alienation:

May we bring life and love, O God.

In a world where there is meaninglessness and emptiness:

May we bring purpose and hope, O God.

Lead us forth, Spirit of God, in joy and in faith, in truth and in freedom:

In ways known and unknown, may we follow. Amen.

In the previous session we reflected on and discussed those things that make for a common life worthy of the Gospel of Christ. This involved the formation of a variety of habits and practices (e.g. “having the same love”, “striving together for the faith of the gospel” as well as avoiding and unlearning other habits and practices (e.g. “avoid selfish ambition and vain conceit”). The concluding admonition of 1:27-2:4 urged the Philippians to attend to the concerns of others.

Philippians 2:5-11, starts to unpack what this might mean. As a way of illustrating what it might mean to seek the benefits of others, Paul urges the Philippians to adopt the pattern of thinking, feeling and acting displayed by Christ. Earlier in 1:12-26 Paul had spoken of his own initial desire to “depart and be with Christ.” It was his view, however, that remaining in the flesh was more beneficial to the Philippians. Hence, that became his desire, too. The primary focus of this study will be 2:5-11. This is one of the most well-known passages in the New Testament.

Taking the Form of a Slave

Because this passage is both so important and so short our understanding of it will be significantly influenced by the way it is framed. In this respect, 2:5 is a key verse in helping us understand how we should think about 2:6-11. Unfortunately, this verse is notoriously difficult to translate. It is not that scholars don't know what the verse means. Rather, the verse is so compact that it is difficult to provide a relatively short translation that unpacks all that lies behind Paul's words here. Often English translations of 2:5 will read something like "Let this same mind [or mindset]

be in you that was in Christ Jesus." This is a fair and more elegant translation than "Let this be your pattern of thinking, acting and feeling, which was also displayed in Christ Jesus." The simpler form of English, however, tends to cover up an important point: the Greek verb [*fronein*] in this verse does not simply refer to intellectual or mental activities; rather, it refers to a more comprehensive set of capacities such as feeling and acting as well as thinking.

Paul wants the Philippians to allow Christ's pattern of thinking, feeling and acting as displayed in 2:6-11 to become their pattern of thinking, feeling and acting. What exactly do we learn about Christ in this passage? First, we learn about Christ's disposition towards "being in the form of God" and "being equal to God." As 2:6 indicates, Christ did not treat equality with God as something to be used for his own advantage. Instead he "emptied himself." This notion of self-emptying probably includes a number of aspects, but primarily illumines Christ's disposition against using equality with God for his own advantage. In this respect self-emptying does not primarily represent a decision on the part of Christ prior to incarnation. Rather, self-emptying displays something crucial about the character of God. In refusing to use his participation in the glory of the God of Israel for his own advantage, Christ is actually displaying the form of God, making the glory of God manifest to humans in the disposition of self-emptying, which includes incarnation, obedience, crucifixion, and ultimately, exaltation. The stunning message of this passage is that God in Christ willingly embraces self-emptying humiliation for the benefit of the world. This fits with Paul's claims about the wisdom of God (1Cor 1:18-25). It also fits with John's emphasis on the truth that God's glory is revealed in Christ on the cross.

Hearing the Biblical Passage

1. Have a member of the group read Phil. 2:5-11 aloud from his or her Bible. As the text is read, close your eyes and listen carefully. Share with the group the words or images that struck you as you listened.
2. Have a member of the group read the text again, following along with your own Bible. Share with the group any different words or phrases in the various translations.
3. Read the text as translated by the author. Notice differences in translation.

(5) Let this be your pattern of thinking, acting and feeling, which was also displayed in Christ Jesus, (6) who, being in the form of God, did not consider equality with God as something to be used for his own advantage. (7) Instead he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness and being found in human form, (8) he humbled himself and became obedient even to the point of death—a death on the cross. (9) That is why God highly exalted him and gave him the name above all names. (10) So that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven, on earth, and under the earth, (11) and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the father.

4. Working as a group, use the following questions as a guide for your discussion about the meaning of Phil. 2:5-11.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What was Christ's disposition towards "being in the form of God" and "being equal to God"? How is this disposition displayed? What does this tell us about God?
2. What do we learn about seeking the benefits of others from this passage?
3. How does the world respond to God's appearance in the world "in the form of a slave"?
4. How does God respond to Christ's taking on the "form of a slave" for the benefit of others?
5. What are the implications of God's response for a common life worthy of the Gospel of Christ? For our worship?

Closing Prayer (Pray Responsively)

O Great Spirit,

*whose breath gives life to the world,
and whose voice is heard in the soft breeze:*

We need your strength and wisdom.

*Cause us to walk in beauty. Give us eyes
ever to behold the red and purple sunset.*

***Make us wise so that we may understand
what you have taught us.***

*Help us learn the lessons you have hidden
in every leaf and rock.*

***Make us always ready to come to you
with clean hands and steady eyes,***
*so when life fades, like the fading sunset,
our spirits may come to you without shame.*

Amen.

Session Eight: Attending to Sainly Lives

(Philippians 2:19-30)

Opening Prayer (Unison)

*O heavenly king, Comforter
the Spirit of Truth,
present in all places and filling all things,
treasury of good things and giver of life,
come and dwell among us
and purify us from every stain,
and of your goodness save our souls. Amen.*

Examples to Live By

In Philippians 2:19-30 Paul speaks of his desire to send Timothy and Epaphroditus to the Philippians. These two have specific duties to perform for Paul and the Philippians. It is also crucial for Paul's argument that Timothy and Epaphroditus function as exemplars of the habits, practices and dispositions which Paul has displayed in regard to his own situation and which he has urged on the Philippians who find themselves engaged in the same struggle (1:30). Many interpreters approach this passage by reading behind the positive things said about each of these characters and then assuming that they reflect some failure on the part of either Epaphroditus or the Philippians more generally. This approach depends on systematic arguments from silence. Moreover, such an approach will always fail to grasp the constructive importance of the specific things Paul says about each character and how Paul's account presents them as exemplars. As 2:21 implies, Christ's activity, especially as narrated in 2:6-11, is the primary exemplar for all of these habits, dispositions and practices. Nevertheless, one cannot overestimate the importance of such live, concrete examples in helping Christians order their common life in a manner worthy of the gospel.

Although Paul would not have spoken in quite these terms, his rhetoric here reinforces both the importance of the communion of saints and the practice of narrating and attending to the lives of the saints. If we understand the saints to be those who have masterfully lived in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, those who have achieved excellence in the performance of Scripture, then their lives should play an important regulative and disciplining role in our lives. If Christians are to interpret and embody Scripture in the concrete situations in which we find ourselves, then we must attend to those saintly lives around us and as well as those saints preceding us who best embody those texts.

Thus, while Christians regularly confess their faith in the communion of saints in general, it is crucial to devote time to telling the specific stories of saints if those lives are to suggest in concrete ways how we might also live saintly lives. It is precisely this sort of narration that Paul offers in 2:19-30. He offers particular testimony about the lives of two fellow believers with whom the Philippians are soon to renew direct contact. In doing this, Paul situates their lives in relation to his own life, to the lives of the Philippians, and most importantly, within the ongoing story of God's action in the world. Both offering and wisely receiving such testimony allows the lives of the saints—both the well known and the little known—to continue to exert a regulative function within a community of contemporary believers. Hence, while it is true that in this passage Paul is relating fairly mundane matters, particularly in comparison to 2:6-11, in doing so, he himself is providing an example of a particular sort of theological practice. That is, he is narrating the lives of particular saints, making their lives imitable or exemplary for the Christians in Philippi.

Hearing the Biblical Passage

1. Have a member of the group read Phil. 2:19-30 aloud from his or her Bible. As the text is read, close your eyes and listen carefully. Share with the group the words or images that struck you as you listened.
2. Have a member of the group read the text again, following along with your own Bible. Share with the group any different words or phrases in the various translations.
3. Read the text as translated by the author. Notice differences in translation.

(19) I hope in the Lord to send Timothy to you as soon as possible in order that I might be encouraged by learning about your circumstances. (20) I do not have anyone else who both shares my loves and desires and who genuinely loves and cares for you all. (21) Everybody else is concerned about their own interests rather than the interests of Jesus Christ. (22) You, however, know Timothy's proven character, how, as a son towards a father, he has served me in the gospel. (23) I hope to send him to you as soon as I learn what will happen next with me. (24) Indeed, I am confident in the Lord that I myself will soon come.

(25) I consider it necessary to send you Epaphroditus, my brother, fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your emissary and minister to my need. (26) He has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he had been sick. Indeed, he was sick, so sick he almost died. (27) But God had mercy on him, not only on him, but on me, too, so that my sorrows would not be multiplied. (28) I am eager, therefore, to send him to you, so that you all may rejoice again at seeing him and so that I may be less anxious. (29) Welcome him, therefore, in the Lord with all joy and honor all such people (30) because he came close to death

doing the work of Christ, risking his life in order to fill up what was lacking in your service to me.

4. Working as a group, use the following questions as a guide for your discussion about the meaning of Phil. 2:19-30.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Why is Timothy commended by Paul?
2. How does the notion of seeking the interests of Christ further shape the notion of attending to the interests of others?
3. What is the nature of the relationship between Paul, Timothy, and Epaphroditus? What would need to happen in your congregation for such bonds and commitments to be cultivated?
4. What is the value of attending to saintly lives?
5. Identify people (past or present) that serve as examples of Christ's self-emptying concerns for others. How do we learn from these examples?

Closing Prayer (Pray Responsively)

One half: *Almighty God,
who on the day of Pentecost
sent your Holy Spirit to the disciples
with the wind from heaven and in tongues of flame,
filling them with joy*

Together: *and boldness to preach the gospel:*

Other Half: *fill us with the power of the same Spirit
so that we may witness to your truth
and draw all people to the fire of your love;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

Together: *Amen.*

Session Nine: Offering A Pleasing Sacrifice

(Philippians 4:10-20)

Opening Prayer (Pray in Unison)

*Almighty and everlasting God,
by the movement of your Spirit and the speaking of your Word,
you made the universe with all its marvelous order,
its atoms, worlds, and galaxies,
and the infinite complexity of living creatures:
Grant that, as we consider the mysteries of your creation,
we may come to know you more truly,
and more fully offer you praise and glory;
In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

In the previous sessions we have looked at a variety of texts in Philippians in which Paul either discusses or displays some of the habits and dispositions he wants to see formed in the Philippian congregation. The aim of all this is that they may form and display a common life worthy of the Gospel of Christ. The quality of such a common life will in the long run be judged in very practical ways by the words and deeds of these Christians in Philippi as they struggle to live faithfully before God. In this final study we will explore one of the most practical areas in which the Philippian and contemporary congregations can manifest a common life worthy of the Gospel of Christ—the giving and receiving of money.

Joy for Common Partners in the Gospel

In addition to presenting the practice of fitting each other's lives into the economy of salvation as a crucial activity of Christian friends, Philippians also indicates some of the ways in which material circumstances shape and are shaped by a common life worthy of the Gospel of Christ.

The Philippians had responded to Paul's imprisonment by sending Epaphroditus with a financial gift. In addition, Epaphroditus would have helped minister to Paul in various ways during his time with Paul. On the one hand, we have already seen that this is an exemplary case of "seeking the benefit of others" for which Paul advocates so strongly in the epistle. On the other hand, since the practice of giving and receiving gifts is shaped by such extensive social codes and expectations, Paul needs to give an alternative, theological account of the Philippians' gift if it is not to distort their friendship.

Here are some of the ways Paul does this. He never directly thanks the Philippians for their gift. To do so would invoke social conventions concerning reciprocity and the relative status of Paul and the Philippians. Givers are superior to

receivers. Instead Paul expresses joy. This works to maintain a friendship in which Paul and the Philippians are fellow slaves of Christ, common partners in God's work. The Philippians' gift clearly benefits Paul. It also deepens their relationship with the God who supplies their needs and meets Paul's needs as well.

Paul neither rebukes the Philippians for failing to send more frequent gifts, nor does he acknowledge any need (thereby implicitly requesting further gifts). God has strengthened Paul to do all things. Paul has thereby developed an attitude of contentment. The Philippians' gift deepens their sharing in Paul's afflictions.

In the Greco-Roman world, acknowledging and expressing thanks for a gift would bind the receiver to some sort of reciprocal act or risk damaging the relationship with the gift giver. Paul never commits himself to such a course of action. This is not because he wishes to insult the Philippians. Rather, it is because the money they sent to him is primarily a sacrifice offered to God. God, then, will repay the Philippians.

Rather than following the standard social conventions for acknowledging and expressing thanks for a gift, the point of this passage is to express Paul's joy and to commend the Philippians for demonstrating the dispositions Paul has been urging them to embody throughout the epistle. They have shown the sort of concern toward him that he calls them to display toward each other.

Thus, the fact that this concern involved financial gifts to Paul is, in one sense, secondary. Alternatively, because the giving and receiving of gifts is implicated in widely recognized expectations governing the relationship between giver and receiver Paul needs to comment on this practice. If he did not, the Philippians might well have understood their giving and Paul's receiving in terms of the dominant culture. This would have substantially altered their friendship with Paul.

Both the form and nature of their friendship and the quality of the common life of the Philippian Christians depend on Paul's ability to narrate the material practices of giving and receiving in ways that are congruent with the gospel, in ways that recognize that the friendship Paul and the Philippians enjoy is founded, enabled and maintained in Christ. Hence, in this passage and elsewhere Paul regularly invokes the Lord as the crucial third party in his friendship with the Philippians. This enables him to redirect the standard assumptions about reciprocity and relative status that are embedded in Greco-Roman conventions regarding giving and receiving. Paul here fits one of the basic material practices of their relationship into a new Christ-focused setting, just as he has fitted himself and the Philippians into a narrative of the economy of salvation. Moreover, Paul implicitly invites the Philippians and us to continue this sort of discerning long after the epistle has been read and digested.

We ought to expect that in the course of fitting each other's lives into the drama of God's saving purposes we will also need to give different, alternative accounts of the social and material contexts and practices in which we find ourselves. Those accounts will affect for good or ill the shape of our friendships in Christ. For example, think of the ways in which material practices related to giving and receiving financial support shape the common life of contemporary Christian communities. Consider the relationship between a minister and a congregation. Once that relationship becomes characterized as that of employee and employer, a certain set of conventions and narratives come into play shaping that relationship particularly in terms of power, status, authority and accountability. If, alternatively, the minister and the congregation are seen as fellow sharers in the gospel, each exercising diverse gifts for the proper ordering of the body of Christ, a different set of conventions and narratives will govern the relationship.

In many churches in America, even if the relationship between a minister and a congregation is characterized in terms of "fellow sharers in the gospel," in *practice* the managerial model of employer and employee is what often shapes and defines this relationship. In some cases, even the rhetoric has shifted to adopt the managerial model. This is not altogether surprising when one recognizes the centrality of this model both in the dominant culture and in the daily lives of most Christians. We should not underestimate the attractiveness of this way of shaping relationships within the body of Christ. When one accepts the model as appropriate, it provides clear processes for shaping a relationship. There is a certain clarity and security in this model. In theory both parties know where each other stands, and there is less opportunity for personal considerations and judgments to influence the procedures. If one performs certain tasks well then one is appropriately compensated. If one fails to perform certain tasks to an agreed upon standard then there are consequences.

Nevertheless, the managerial model leaves several basic issues untouched. For example, it cannot address questions about whether the tasks assigned to the minister are those that will further enhance a community's prospects of ordering their common life in a manner worthy of the gospel. Further, this model pushes both parties to see the priestly or ordained ministry, and the Christian life more generally, as a set of tasks and exchanges. This is because it is much easier to quantify and assess the performance of neatly specified tasks. It provides, for example, a clear and culturally accepted way for characterizing the giving and receiving of money. Even on its own terms, however, a managerial model decisively distorts the dispersal of power and accountability within a congregation. For example, is the minister the only party who must perform certain tasks? What, beyond providing money, are the tasks of the congregation? Who evaluates whether those tasks have been met? What consequences are there for failing to perform adequately? The fact that these

questions do not appear to have adequate answers may indicate the basic unsuitability of a managerial model for shaping the relationship between minister and congregation.

One common alternative may be to supplement the managerial model with a consumerist model. Members of a congregation are not simply the minister's employers; they are also customers or consumers. They come to church with self-perceived and self-articulated needs. If those needs are met in terms that they recognize, they stay and contribute money. If not, they go elsewhere. This not only shapes the relationship between minister and congregation, it shapes relationships between congregations, making them competitors for market share.

Although Paul could not have anticipated the particular ways in which market economies in contemporary societies would shape Christian communities, he understood that material practices such as giving and receiving money are not simply natural processes governed by clearly observable laws. He understood that unless these practices were accounted for and shaped by Christians' participation in God's economy of salvation, then the conventions and narratives of the dominant culture would govern the way Christians came to understand those practices. Further, once that had happened, the Philippians would come to see their gifts to Paul in ways that would corrode their friendship.

Paul's discussion of giving and receiving money poses an immediate challenge to relatively wealthy Christians in America (like most members of mainline congregations). How do we conceive of our relations and obligations to the poor, particularly the poor we do (or, more likely, do not) encounter in the body of Christ? If we learned to re-narrate the contexts in which we find ourselves in the light of Paul's practice in Phil 4:10-20, it probably would have serious consequences for our giving, including our expectations of how that giving will be received. Indeed, the most challenging part of this passage for American Christians may be to narrate (and enact) our relationship to the poor in the universal body of Christ, along with our wealth, and our patterns of consumption and giving, in ways that indicate that we are fellow sharers in the gospel with the poor. Moreover, our baptism calls us into a common friendship in Christ within which we are called to seek the benefit of others rather than our own.

Hearing the Biblical Passage

1. Have a member of the group read Phil. 4:10-20 aloud from his or her Bible. As the text is read, close your eyes and listen carefully. Share with the group the words or images that struck you as you listened.
2. Have a member of the group read the text again, following along with your own Bible. Share with the group any different words or phrases in the various translations.
3. Read the text as translated by the author. Notice differences in translation.

(10) I rejoice greatly in the Lord because now, at last, your normal disposition of care and concern for me has bloomed again. In fact, you have always been so disposed toward me, but you have lacked opportunity for showing it. (11) To be sure, I am not claiming that I lack anything. I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to be in want and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and in all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well fed and hungry, of having plenty and of being in want. (13) I can do all things through the one who strengthens me. (14) In any case, you have done well to become partners in my tribulation. (15) For you Philippians know that from the first days of the gospel, when I went out from Macedonia no church shared with me in giving and receiving except you alone. (16) Even when I was in Thessalonica you sent gifts to meet my needs on several occasions. (17) I do not seek the gift itself but I do seek the fruit that accrues to your account. (18) I have received all that you sent and I am filled to overflowing, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant odor and pleasing sacrifice to God. (19) My God will satisfy all your needs according his glorious riches in Christ Jesus. (20) To our God and father be glory now and forever, amen.

4. Working as a group, use the following questions as a guide for your discussion about the meaning of Phil. 2:19-30.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. In what ways does Paul re-frame the issue of giving and receiving in the church?
2. Who will pay the Philippians back? How?

3. If it does not establish a relationship between debtor and creditor, how does the Philippians gift connect them to Paul?

4. How does Paul's model for giving and receiving differ from the managerial model? From the consumerist model?

5. What does it mean concretely and specifically to be fellow sharers in the gospel with the poor?

6. If we followed Paul's model, what would be different about the way congregations deal with money?

Closing Prayer (Pray Responsively)

*Holy Spirit, Creator,
In the beginning you hovered over the waters;
you breathed life into all creatures;
without you every living creature dies and returns to nothingness,
Come among us, Holy Spirit.*

*Holy Spirit, Comforter,
by you we are born again as children of God;
you make us living temples of your presence,
you pray for us with prayers too deep for words,
Come among us, Holy Spirit.*

*Holy Spirit, Lord and Giver of Life,
you are light, you bring us light;
you are goodness and the source of all goodness,
Come among us, Holy Spirit.*

*Holy Spirit, Breath of Life,
you sanctify and breathe life into the whole body of the church;
you dwell in the midst of its members,
and will one day give new life to our mortal bodies,
Come among us, Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Session Ten: Integrating and Learning

Opening Prayer (Pray in Unison)

We praise you, Holy Spirit, our Advocate and Comforter.

Help us to affirm life

in the midst of death,

supporting us as we confront the power of destruction,

urging us to hammer swords into ploughs

and spears into pruning knives;

so that wolves and sheep

live together in peace,

life is celebrated,

creation is restored

as the sphere of the living.

Holy Spirit, we praise you;

help us to affirm life

in the midst of death. Amen. (Adapted from Isa. 11:6–9)

The Formation of Christian Community

This guided study of Paul’s letter to the Philippians has had two central aims. The first aim has been to explore the lessons in Christian formation that Paul seeks to impart to the Christians in Philippi. What Paul writes to the saints in Philippi is also intended for Christians today. For the most part, Christians in the United States do not experience the same sort of hostility that was directed at the Philippian Christians. Nevertheless, Paul’s most crucial admonition to the Philippians, “order your common life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ,” (1:27) is the primary task facing churches in this country.

Forming and maintaining a common life worthy of the gospel is the central task Paul sets before the Philippians and us. Paul understands that a common life worthy of the gospel does not simply arise because he and the Philippians want it to. Rather, a common life worthy of the gospel is the result of a people being formed to think, act, and feel in certain ways. Thus, a significant portion of each of these studies has been devoted to displaying the convictions, practices and dispositions Paul desires to see formed in the Philippians. These are the resources the Philippians and we will need to order the common life of our churches in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

The second aim of this study guide has been to demonstrate both by the process of your communal study and the content of the biblical text, that Christians

in the United States cannot hope to form a common life worthy of the gospel of Christ apart from a deep and ongoing immersion in Scripture.

From the very earliest days of the church, Christian formation has been closely tied to Christians' abilities to “read, mark, learn and inwardly digest” Scripture. Participating well in this study has meant being committed to reading Scripture, and Philippians in particular, both fully and closely. Participating well in this study, then, has been intended to enhance your formation in Christ.

In a time when thoughtful people are seriously wondering if community is really possible in our fractured and polarized society, the church is called back to its roots, to its foundations in the biblical witness. In the first-century world Christian communities, like the Philippian Church, provided a powerful witness that the widest social, racial, and religious divides could be bridged among those baptized into Christ Jesus. Is it not time in this contemporary culture that Christian communities live up to the theological claim that all people baptized into Christ are indeed one?

At the heart of Paul’s desires for the Philippians is that they would develop Christ-focused patterns of thinking, feeling and acting. This is, in essence, what Christian formation is all about. What would it mean for a Christian community to live in such a way that its life together would not make sense if a gracious God did not exist?

- ◆ It would mean a people abounding in love and growing in wisdom, filled with the fruits of righteousness through Jesus Christ.
- ◆ It would mean a people who see differently because they understand their lives as participating in God’s great drama of the salvation of the world.
- ◆ It would mean a people confident in the Lord, perceiving the whole of their lives in light of the crucified and risen Christ.
- ◆ It would mean a people who magnify Christ, whether in life or in death.
- ◆ It would mean a people who sustain a common life worthy of the Gospel in the midst of a hostile world.
- ◆ It would mean a people who adopt the pattern of thinking, feeling, and acting displayed to them by Christ.
- ◆ It would mean a people who attend to saintly lives.
- ◆ It would mean a people who live faithfully before God by offering all that they have as a pleasing sacrifice.
- ◆ And most of all, it would mean a people who intentionally engage in the habits and practices that form a people “who rejoice in the Lord.”

2. Working with other members of the group, imagine what a community formed in these habits and practices would look like.

What would be going on?

What would be different?

What would people be doing?

What would people not be doing?

How would people be relating to one another?

What kinds of resources, support, and leadership would be required?

What would the community offer to the wider world?

3. What would need to happen for your congregation to more fully manifest Paul's vision of the church?

Closing Prayer

Let us offer our prayers for peace in our community and our world. (Silence)

Let us ask for boldness in acting and speaking in Christ's name that others may find peace. (Silence)

Let us ask for awareness of the Spirit's presence with us whenever we act for righteousness' sake. (Silence)

Let us pray for all those who take risks for reconciliation. (Silence)

Let us ask for God's help in discerning where we should be bringing the message of reconciliation. (Silence)

(Here may be a time of open prayer for participants to offer aloud their own petitions).

God of power and love, we thank you for your work of reconciliation in Christ Jesus, our Lord and Savior. We pray for your presence with us as we share in that reconciling task. We pray for courage to discover your will for us and to do it, in spite of the risks. We are grateful that all power belongs to you, that yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen.