

Draft only. No reuse without author's permission.

“What Difference Does Paul Make?”

Responding to Rhetorical Constructions of Identity and Community  
Boundaries in Philippians”

“Rhetorics of Identity: Place, Race, Sex and the Person”  
Centre for Rhetoric and Hermeneutics and the New Testament Rhetoric Project  
January 2005  
Redlands, Calif.

*Joseph A. Marchal*

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul makes extensive use of unity rhetorics in addressing the community at Philippi. This kind of argumentation has distinct connections to Paul's vision for the right kind of community. Paul constructs a singular idea of communal identity in Philippians, arguing across and against certain differences. Seeking a particular adherence to his version of “one-ness,” then, the situation is constituted in terms of “thinking the one” as opposed to “thinking the other” (3:15). The argumentation is characterized by an interplay between the erasure of difference and a reaffirmation of certain differences, with the character of Paul at the heart of this interplay.

After charting the dynamics of these rhetorics, this paper repositions these rhetorics in terms of the potential audience at Philippi. Here I will consider not only how these arguments would evoke and evaluate the possible responses in terms of adherence to Paul's vision, but also how they reflect upon situations of difference in the community. This paper rethinks what matters about the differences between these community members and Paul, especially in terms of gender, place, and ethnicity. This might be specifically useful for assessing the roles of Paul, Euodia, and Syntyche in ancient Philippi as well as the roles of such biblical rhetorics in contemporary discourses on identity.

A.) *Philippians' Communal Rhetorics*

First, we must trace the dynamics of Paul's communal rhetorics in his letter to the Philippians.<sup>1</sup> Through these rhetorics Paul constructs a particular vision of identity for the audience. Therefore, as we examine these arguments, special focus will be placed on how the letter deploys ideas of boundary, difference, and identity. For example, in the opening of the letter, Paul characterizes the relationship between the community members and himself as a partnership or fellowship (*koinōnia hymōn*, 1:5; *sygkoinōnous mou*, 1:7). While this might go a long way toward establishing a sense of commonality, it also sets the tone for how differences both within the community and between Paul and the community might be deemphasized (or erased). The community members are defined in terms of how linked they are to Paul ("my partners" in 1:7). Once they are defined in this matter, Paul does not differentiate further between the audience members. He repeatedly stresses in this letter how he is addressing *all* of them (1:4, 7, 8). Paul also places this relationship within a specific timeframe "from the first day up to/until now" (1:5). Since the duration runs "up to now," it seems that Paul is hinting that this *koinōnia* might not last. What the audience does in this moment and the near future could determine whether they remain in this relationship.

Even as Paul makes claims about addressing the whole community, characterizing their relationship as one of commonality, he manages to differentiate himself in specific ways. Despite his imprisonment, Paul argues that the movement has made significant progress through his own efforts (1:12). This is known by all in the place of his imprisonment, including "the whole praetorian guard" (1:13). These arguments have a doubled significance for an understanding of these developing communities. First, Paul claims credit for progress (*prokopēn*), separate from the previous partnership he claims to enjoy with the community at Philippi. Paul is working to differentiate his role from others

---

1

in the community. Second, he specifically notes how his message reaches members of the Roman imperial system, the praetorian guard. We must ask: if the community at Paul's imprisonment site now includes such people, what does this say about "all the rest" now? How does the act of including the praetorian guard there impact the definition of community boundaries in Philippi? Has Paul stretched the boundaries of the community, or are these differences in imperial status already experienced within the community at Philippi?

Aside from these arguments about particular parties (Paul and the praetorians), the letter also attempts to define what qualities might be characteristic for a good member of this early Jesus movement(s). Throughout Philippians Paul frequently turns to an argument by anti-model to make such characteristics clear. For example, Paul differentiates those who work out of envy and rivalry from those who work from good will (1:15). This differentiation is contextualized as a matter of contentious divisiveness (*eritheias*, 1:17, see also *erin* in 1:15). Paul contends that there are those whose motivation for action is not the unity and commonality described above, but the desire for division and disruption. Since these anti-models do so to cause stress for Paul (1:17), Paul is linked with the opposite party, those who act out of love and good will (1:15-16).<sup>2</sup> Whereas the notes about the praetorian guard could be expanding the bounds of the community, these arguments sketch the limits of belonging. Paul constructs a situation where those who preach differently from him are not to be followed, as they seek only to disrupt and harm those within these bounds.

If these anti-models help to define how not to act as a member of the Philippian community, how would Paul claim they *should* act? For answers we can turn to two of the lengthier imperatival sentences in the letter to the Philippians (in 1:27-30 and 2:1-4, respectively). Those commonality rhetorics initially noted earlier in the letter reach their highest expression in these sections. Paul exhorts the community members at Philippi to act "in one spirit, contending together with one mind" (*en henī pneumati, mia psychē*

---

2

*synathlountes*, 1:27). Unity and single-mindedness are inextricably linked in this letter: “think the same thing, having the same love, sharing (or together) in spirit, thinking the one thing” (*to auto phronēte, tēn autēn agapēn echontes, sympsychoi, to hen phronountes*, 2:2).<sup>3</sup> A member cannot be one with the community, if s/he stands in difference and division. The importance of this boundary is stressed by the stakes for this one-ness. As before, Paul appeals to the fate of a set of anti-models (opponents, *antikeimenōn*, 1:28), who will meet with destruction (*apōleias*, 1:28). The audience can avoid such negative ramifications and gain safety/salvation (*sōtērias*, 1:28), if only they maintain their unity and one-ness. Echoing previous anti-model arguments, the path of one-ness is again contrasted with that of divisiveness (*eritheian*, 2:3). Paul’s arguments not only connect the contrasts between destruction/safety and divisiveness/one-ness, but they also gain reinforcement from the divine realm. Paul holds that the boundary between destruction and safety comes “from God” (*apo theou*, 1:28). The bounds that Paul asserts are maintained by the deity.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, though this letter sets up the course of action for all who wish to remain unified, it does so in terms of particular figures that stand out for the audience. Paul does not leave off with the above arguments from divine authority; he works to establish himself as the reason for communal action. The letter begins with Paul as the model for partnership and progress and even in these dense expressions of communal one-ness, the emphasis remains on Paul. These exhortations are presented in terms of Paul’s preferred results, in order that “I might hear” (1:27) or the audience could “complete *my* joy” (2:2, emphases added). Indeed, Paul expects that they would have “the same fight” (*ton auton agōna*, 1:30) as Paul’s (“in me,” twice in 1:30).<sup>5</sup> This focus on Paul remains throughout the letter. Calls for obedience are expressed in relation to Paul’s absence (2:12) or his desire to boast (2:16). Additional model figures like Timothy and Epaphroditus (2:19-30) are

---

3

4

5

primarily connected to Paul's own example and authority.<sup>6</sup> Even when Paul returns to anti-model arguments in the third chapter, he quickly alters the contrast between they who are "the mutilation" (*katatomē*) and we who are "the circumcision" (*ēmeis gar esmen hē peritomē*, 3:3), to focus less on the "we" and more on the extraordinary "I." Paul stands out by comparison to them (and "anyone" else, *tis* in 3:4), since he has *more* reason to be confident (than either the "we" or "the mutilation," 3:4-6). Paul's construction of communal identity highlights two kinds of differences: between insiders and outsiders and between Paul and any others. This latter difference is highlighted by the preceding divine reinforcements, the parallel drawn between Paul and Christ (in 3:7-11),<sup>7</sup> and Paul's goal of the "prize of the upward call" (3:14). Paul thinks of his relationship with the community as a kind of partnership with hierarchical differentiation.

Paul is not writing simply to establish his own preeminence in the community; he hopes that such arguments will get the community at Philippi to act in a particular way. That Paul seeks a specific response from the community is made clear by the continuing temporal aspect of his argumentation. Similar to the beginning of the letter (1:5), Paul opens with the phrase "just as you have always obeyed" (*kathōs pantote hypēkousate*, 2:12). Through these temporal notes Paul attempts to frame the audience's response as a matter of keeping up a previous state of affairs.<sup>8</sup> The question remains as to whether the community would see the letter as asking only for a continuation. Indeed, Paul seems to be anticipating that they do not. He follows this argument with a call to "do all things without grumbling or questioning" (2:14) and develops an additional anti-model argument (2:14-16). As before, the rhetorics of this letter present two ways as absolutes: one is either "a crooked and twisted generation" or "blameless and pure, children of God without fault" (2:15). The audience member's choice has consequences in at least three ways. First, it

---

6

7

8

will determine whether s/he remains within (the Paul-defined notion of) the community. Second, it can act as an assurance of safety (explicitly in 2:12), rather than destruction (implicit here, but see also 1:28; 3:1, 15, 19-20). Third, it would show that Paul's own work was not "in vain" (*eis kenon*, twice in 2:16). Paul is working hard to garner the desired-for response from the community, in this last case stooping to what some might even call "manipulative" maneuvers.<sup>9</sup> Paul defines the community, but he needs (at least some of) the community to accept this definition.

One of the most succinct expressions of communal identity comes toward the end of the next chapter of Philippians. Here Paul differentiates between "us" who "think this" (*touto phronōmen*, literally "let us think this/have this mind") and "you" who "think anything other" (*ti heterōs phroneite*, 3:15). The difference-maker for belonging in the community is one's mind-set or attitude. Paul has already claimed that he thinks (*phronein*) the right way about the community (as partners in 1:7). The dense expressions of communal one-ness have also implemented this notion of mindset (*to auto phronēte ... to hen phronountes*, 2:2, *touto phroneite*, 2:5). This aspect is now stressed in terms of thinking the right thing, not something else; a concern that seems to be carrying over from the second chapter (2:14-16). Paul is so determined to keep them from thinking "anything other," that he again elicits divine authority, intoning forebodingly: "God will also reveal this to you" (3:15).<sup>10</sup> While the following clause is difficult to translate, it roughly states, "for where we have reached, stay in line in the same way" (3:16).<sup>11</sup> Through such arguments Paul attempts to define the "right" kind of community member at Philippi as one with a mind conforming to his vision of one-ness. According to this letter one cannot think something else without falling out of line or risking divine encroachment.

---

9

10

11

The rhetorics of Philippians make it clear that it is *Paul's* vision of one-ness being promulgated, since Paul himself repeatedly acts as a model for this community. Though it recurs throughout the argumentation, only after this call to not “think anything other” does the argument by Paul’s model become most explicit: “become co-imitators of me” (*symmimētai mou ginesthe*, 3:17).<sup>12</sup> The community members are to be of one mind and act together in imitating Paul; all other differences between them are erased if they simply assent to this argument.<sup>13</sup> Yet, this argument does not leave behind the preceding contrasts. Rather, it quickly turns back to a contrasting anti-model of “enemies” (3:18), destined for destruction (*apōleia*, 3:19), with their minds (*phronountes*, 3:19) on the wrong things. Unlike these anti-models, if the audience members follow the letter’s argument, they will be part of a heavenly polity (*politeuma*, 3:20). This language echoes the lengthy argument for communal one-ness in 1:27-30, which was launched by an imperatival form for being a citizen in this *politeuma* (*politeuesthe*, 1:27). Belonging in the community (“our *politeuma*”) that Paul defines here involves adherence to a message of one-ness, described as a kind of dutiful citizenship. Once again, the boundary of this citizenship is coextensive with the line between safety and destruction. While the enemies are doomed for the latter, good citizens will have Jesus as a *sōtēr* and *kyrios* (“savior” and “lord,” 3:20).<sup>14</sup>

Following the dynamics of these communal rhetorics might help to explain the frequently troubling role of Euodia and Syntyche, two women in the community at Philippi (and in the argumentation of Philippians).<sup>15</sup> After the considerable efforts to construct particular views of communal identity on his terms, Paul asks the audience to “stand thus in the lord” (4:1). Coming quick on the heels of directed appeals through anti-model and model arguments (3:17-21), this could be read as Paul’s attempt to get the Philippians to stand on the “right side,” Paul’s side. Paul is seeking a response from the community,

---

<sup>12</sup>

<sup>13</sup>

<sup>14</sup>

<sup>15</sup>

namely that of imitating him, conforming in a uniform way, and having the mindset of “good citizens.” Keeping this in mind, Paul’s exhortation for Euodia and Syntyche to “think the same thing” (*to auto phronein*, 4:2) seems to be a continuation of these arguments about communal identity. This phrase recalls the letter’s persistent focus on proper mindset (“think”) and non-divisive one-ness (“the same thing”). Since Paul has been the prime model differentiated for his definition of communal identity, it seems likely that here he is arguing for Euodia and Syntyche to think the same thing *as Paul*.

This specific entreaty is another occasion for Paul to argue in terms of group boundaries. Just as he previously sought for audience members to erase differences by imitating him, so now he focuses upon mitigating or suppressing whatever difference there might be between these two women and himself. That this exhortation to Euodia and Syntyche is part of an argument about belonging to the community can be confirmed by the terms invoked in the following appeals. Paul appeals to some third party, a “true yokeperson” (*gnēsie syzyge*), “to take hold with these (women)” (*syllambanou autais*, 4:3), so as to bring them into compliance with his message. The label Paul gives this third party is primarily oriented toward belongingness, a true yokeperson or comrade.<sup>16</sup> That Paul argues the two women need this comrade’s help also indicates how this third party acts as a contrast to Euodia and Syntyche. Combined with the preceding exhortation, Paul seems to see these women as not being as “well yoked” as the one who is *truly* joined to him. Such an argument confirms that the difference more likely stands between Paul and the two women, rather than between Euodia and Syntyche. Thus, this part of the letter’s argumentation seems to be a targeted instance of Paul’s constructions of communal boundary and identity.<sup>17</sup>

Overall, the letter to the Philippians is Paul’s opportunity to define the community at Philippi on his own terms. For Paul the identity of a community member is proven by the

---

<sup>16</sup>

<sup>17</sup>

appropriate mindset of “one-ness.” This mindset is achieved by working in conformity with Paul’s vision, imitating his own model. However, communal identity is as much described as what it should *not* be as what it should be. Introducing a series of anti-models, Paul stresses how standing in any other position than “the one” characterizes you as divisive, hurtful, crooked and twisted. The boundary for belonging in Paul’s polity is absolute and maintained through divine assurances of safety or destruction. Nevertheless, the letter marks only Paul’s *attempt* to found such a “pure” communal identity and implicate a certain kind of difference-making in this process.<sup>18</sup> The argumentation pushes against potential dissent or disagreement and works to elicit a response from the audience that conforms to Paul’s model alone. As a result, we can and should begin to conceive of how an audience might respond to such arguments about identity, difference, and communal boundaries.

*B.) Historical Situation: First-Century Philippi*

Being primarily a feminist rhetorical scholar of ancient texts, I am skeptical about how well we can (re)construct a historical situation for first-century Philippi. Stopping at Paul’s construction of the rhetorical situation, though, is also a distinctly unappealing option.<sup>19</sup> Doing so would perhaps only reinforce Paul’s claims to affect affairs historically. However, these letters do not simply reflect the history of this developing community at Philippi, they act(ed) as pieces of persuasion, attempting to construct the reality there.<sup>20</sup> In particular, Paul’s perspective on the community is noticeably androcentric. Therefore, an inability to move beyond the world as constructed by androcentric texts only serves to reinscribe this view of the world.<sup>21</sup> Beginning with suspicion and hoping to change the way we interact rhetorically, then, requires producing a *different* kind of historical construction.<sup>22</sup>

---

18

19

20

21

22

Thus, for a feminist scholar the task of historical situation involves searching for those whose invisibility is produced by the rhetorics in any historical context.<sup>23</sup> This brief section on historical circumstances seeks to address, from a different vantage point, what might matter about the differences between Paul and the community members in terms of gender, place, and ethnicity. This seems especially vital for an analysis of these communal rhetorics because, throughout the letter of Philippians, Paul seems to be *seeking* a particular response from the community. If we are to develop the possibilities for how the community members could have responded (alongside how we respond to similar communal identity arguments), we need to conceive of the audience not only in Paul's terms but also on historical grounds distinct from the arguments of Philippians.

By the time Paul writes to the Philippians in the middle of the first century CE, the history of Philippi involved colonization by three different groups. Mentioned as early as 490 BCE, the area was apparently first inhabited by Thracians; but by 360-356 BCE Thasians founded a mining colony on the site of Krenides.<sup>24</sup> As the Thasian settlers and these local Thracian tribes were fighting for control of the area, the Thasians called upon Philip II of Macedonia for assistance. Philip settled the dispute by taking over the region himself.<sup>25</sup> It is at this point that the settlement gains its more familiar name of Philippi, as the conquering Philip II renamed the city after himself.<sup>26</sup> Philippi would remain under the authority of Macedonian kings until 168 BCE, when Perseus, the son of Philip V, was defeated by Roman forces in what Romans called the Third Macedonian War.<sup>27</sup> Shortly thereafter, Macedonia would be officially annexed by the Romans and incorporated as a province in the empire in 146 BCE.<sup>28</sup>

---

23

24

25

26

27

28

Philippi would remain a part of the Roman Empire for centuries, a fact which would have no small effect on the city. In 42 BCE, Philippi was the location of the deciding battle between the forces of Brutus and Cassius and the victorious armies of Antony and Octavian.<sup>29</sup> After the battle Octavian and Antony settled some of their veterans at Philippi, designating the city as a colony named after the event, *Colonia Victrix Philippensium*.<sup>30</sup> More veterans were settled at Philippi in 31 BCE, after Octavian defeated his former ally Antony at Actium. Those veterans of Antony's forces which had already been settled closer to home in Italy were then displaced to the Philippian colony.<sup>31</sup> In 27 BCE the colony is yet again renamed as *Colonia Iulia Augusta Philippensis*, in honor of both Julius and Octavian (now known as Augustus).<sup>32</sup>

These events inevitably altered the political landscape of Philippi, as Roman rule and veteran settlement would have brought a host of changes. Most of these changes, however, brought benefits only to a select few.<sup>33</sup> Access to the avenues of power required at least Roman citizenship. Even then, as Craig S. DeVos points out for Philippi, "Like other Roman *coloniae*, the average citizen would have had limited political power given the strongly hierarchical and oligarchic system."<sup>34</sup> As a result, even if a resident were a Roman citizen, one only had power in the rare cases where one managed to have the wealth, property and a significant patronage network to maneuver to the top of this hierarchy. Not only were there significant differences in terms of status between Romans in first century Philippi, but there was also considerable ethnic variety in the *colonia*. As the above cursory survey of the multiple colonizations of this territory has shown, several ethnic groups resided at Philippi. Besides the Thracians, Thasians, and Macedonians, over time Philippi

---

29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34

also drew a number of migrant-workers and slaves from the Greek East.<sup>35</sup> Still, the persistence of the Thracian tribes in maintaining their identity through the multiple colonizations is remarkable and has been noted often in the literature.<sup>36</sup>

There were also great disparities in terms of socioeconomic roles in first century Philippi. Those who were at the apex of these interlocking hierarchical arrangements made up a very small portion of the population in Roman Philippi. Peter S. Oakes estimates that about 3 percent of the population in Philippi could be designated as the Roman landowning elite rulers (all adult males).<sup>37</sup> The remainder of the population was either disenfranchised since they were not citizens or, if they were citizens, they lacked the wealth and property to truly exercise influence.<sup>38</sup> Though DeVos approaches the problem of percentiles from a different vantage point than Oakes, he mostly confirms the extent to which the Roman elite dominated the political, economic and legal realms in all of the eastern colonies.<sup>39</sup> Both scholars emphasize the wide socioeconomic gap between the vast majority living marginally on a subsistence level and the small group of wealthy landowners.<sup>40</sup> Both studies also further classify the socioeconomic stratification of the colony into groups beyond this elite/non-elite differentiation. DeVos notes that the non-elite population could be further divided between other Romans, freed slaves, and native inhabitants,<sup>41</sup> while Oakes specifies landowners, farmers, service providers, slaves and the poor as the major social roles for the colonial population.<sup>42</sup>

Admittedly, the resources for seeking women's roles in first century Philippi are scant. However, the resources for non-elites are perhaps just as difficult to find and interpret, yet they are frequently represented in the models of social relations at Philippi. If

---

35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42

we follow the studies of Valerie Abrahamsen and Lillian Portefaix, however, it becomes clear that women were engaged in a range of activities. It seems that women held leadership positions in a number of cults at Philippi before, during and after the first century CE.<sup>43</sup> While the leadership and participation of women might have been highest in the exclusively female Diana cult, Philippian women also shared leadership in more mixed settings, including the Isis, Dionysus, and Thracian Horseman cults.<sup>44</sup> The popularity of empress worship within the imperial cult and the additional roles played within smaller, or more private settings fill out an already rich portrait of Philippian women's participation in cultic life.<sup>45</sup> The variety of these options and the importance of women within these cultic realms suggest that any other movement introduced to Philippi would have to contend with expectations about women's roles.<sup>46</sup>

Aside from these cults originating in Greece, Rome, and Egypt, Philippian women seemed to have played significant roles in the developing communities of the early Jesus movement(s). Acts' depiction of Paul's arrival in Philippi begins with a prominent woman named Lydia joining with him and providing him shelter.<sup>47</sup> While the Lukan narrative in Acts 16 yields little information about specific women in the community at Philippi, it does resonate with the general evidence for women in these early communities, even after the mid-to-late first century CE. In Polycarp of Smyrna's letter to the Philippians (ca. 110 CE), he singles out only two groups in seeking obedience and conformity to his authority: Docetists (6.3-7.2) and women (4.2; 5.1-3).<sup>48</sup> The apocryphal Acts of Paul (late 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE), which enthusiastically depict female adherents to an ascetic message delivered by Paul,

---

43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48

include a fragmentary section set at Philippi.<sup>49</sup> There, Paul raises a woman named Frontina to life after her execution.<sup>50</sup>

It is notable how persistently women's activity and possible leadership are found affiliated with Philippi in these traditions. This remains a visible trend even further forward in time, into the early Byzantine period, since women continue to appear as leaders at Philippi.<sup>51</sup>

Though the above sketch is only partial and, like all descriptions of a historical situation, thoroughly rhetorical itself, it provides a vital avenue for reflection upon the rhetorics of communal identity in Paul's letter to the Philippians. In particular, the concepts of identity, uniformity, and difference might be relevant to the community at Philippi for at least three reasons. The historical situation of Philippi can be characterized in terms of: 1.) the impact of its tripled colonization, 2.) a degree of ethnic, socioeconomic, and political diversity, and 3.) the continuous and variegated activity of women, particular in cultic leadership. Developing this description apart from Paul's construction of communal identity could, then, facilitate the process of imagining responses, to both the letter's communal rhetorics and contemporary discourses on identity.

*C.) Responding to Uniform Identity: A Task for the 1<sup>st</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

The question remains as to how we can engage such exclusivist arguments about communal identity. Simply juxtaposing the rhetorics of Philippians (as Paul constructs it) with the historical situation at Philippi (as I have constructed it) does not immediately resolve how to grapple with arguments that assign positive identification to a univocal conformity and purity alongside a violent condemnation of anyone or thing that departs from this singular model. Yet, the attempt to configure the historical situation does remind us that it is quite unlikely that just one set of rhetorical perspectives represents all of the rhetorical perspectives of and on a particular place, time, or group. It demonstrates the care

---

49

50

51

with which we must enter into this process. Nevertheless, this (re)consideration of identity seems justified because the letter so constructs the notion of communal identity that the boundaries coincide with the *responses* to Paul's rhetorics. As a result, if we want to explain what identity looks like in this community, we need to think through the different potential responses to such argumentation.

For example, Paul develops a series of anti-models in his arguments classifying the importance difference of communal identity. In order for these arguments to be most effective, the difference between models and anti-models must be strong and distinct. This seems to be especially the case for Philippians, as these arguments are key for Paul's strategy of setting certain differences as communal boundaries. Here Paul seems to be following the trend in model (and anti-model) arguments described by Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca and Chaïm Perelman: "writers feel the necessity to embellish or blacken reality, to create heroes and monsters, all good or all bad."<sup>52</sup> This black-and-white orientation with regard to models and anti-models feeds Paul's insistence to the audience that there is no middle ground. If one does not respond with the right kind of communal identity, as defined throughout the letter by Paul and his model arguments, then one is more like the anti-models. This implies one is outside of the community, since you are not acting in accordance with the correct mindset of one-ness. Thus, the arguments by model and anti-model are firmly connected to the letter's task of defining the structure and bounds of the community.

This suggests that Paul is unhappy with how he is being perceived in the community (or at least how he perceives they are perceiving him). In a related fashion these arguments also seem to be attempting to re-define what the community should seek to be, particularly as it relates to their perception of Paul. Thus, there is an initial suggestion that the community at Philippi does not see Paul in the same way as he sees himself and/or that they

---

52

may not have related this mind-set to their own actions and attitudes in the way Paul expresses here. At the very least the argumentation indicates Paul's concern that the community at Philippi does not see him in the same way as he sees himself. Some members could be questioning his authority or even his motives, as Paul frequently turns to other authorities (like the divine) to shore up his own position. There are considerable signs that the audience may not have shared Paul's view of the appropriate frame of mind for members of the community. At least some seem *not* to be thinking the same thing as Paul, not linking their experiences to the need for imitation of, conformity with, and/or obedience to Paul.

In fact, at least two of these specific qualities for the identity of a community member at Philippi are described in a conditional way. The letter's argumentation requires the audience to act "just as you (pl.) have always obeyed" (2:12) and to "stay in line in the same way" (3:16). Paul needs a response from the community for these to be enacted. Yet, the fact that they are phrased thus emphasizes that they are not yet accepted (or accepted *enough*, for Paul) as characteristic for this identity. Paul is concerned with maintaining this kind of difference.

Aspects of the historical situation might help inform why these concerns were central to the rhetorics of the letter. With the considerable variety in ethnicity, status, and advantage at ancient Philippi, it would be difficult to convince audience members that there are really only two options. Daily life likely would have confirmed that there are far more than two identities in the city of Philippi.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, the claim that there can be only one way to be good citizens of Paul's polity would evoke or even echo the political structure of the time. Contrasting safety with destruction also seems to be a specifically imperial gesture, especially for the generations since the Augustan declaration of a Pax Romana

---

53

throughout the empire.<sup>54</sup> For any colonized locale it is easy to conjure a range of responses to such rhetorics.<sup>55</sup> That the vast majority would not have benefited from Roman imperial management of Philippi only makes this type of argumentation all the more provocative.

Since Paul also seems to go out of his way to mention two women in the community, Euodia and Syntyche, it would also be relevant to conceive of their potential responses to these communal rhetorics. As argued above, the aim of Paul's entreaty in 4:2-3 is to bring them into conformity with Paul's ideas (as they are presented in the letter). How they react demonstrates where they fit into the all-or-nothing scenario. If these women in the Philippian community were to respond with favor to this exhortation, they would be added as model figures in support of Paul's own model status. Euodia and Syntyche would be models for how members of the community at Philippi could properly "think this thing" (3:15). Their past inclusion in the work of the gospel (4:3) would only strengthen the efficacy of their model status, which might help to explain why they have been singled out in this instance. Again, parts of the historical situation could illuminate these dynamics. As Abrahamsen noted, the letter might be dealing with "the *assumption* that women were to be among the leaders of any religious organization."<sup>56</sup>

Yet, if Euodia and Syntyche continue to "think something other" (3:15) than "the same thing" as Paul (4:2), they will be anti-models, and can be effectively incorporated in the series of contrasts and dissociations in the letter's argumentation. Paul's rhetoric has so closely connected group identity to his own model (and a range of anti-models) that, as he has defined it, inclusion within the community requires conformity and compliance to his perspective. The argumentation of the letter insures that, no matter which way members of the Philippian community (including Euodia and Syntyche) respond, Paul's previous depiction of the situation can only label them as insiders or outsiders. This might indicate

---

54

55

56

that even Paul anticipates that there will be reactions besides whole-hearted adherence, but within the letter the oppositional picture of difference and community boundary remains.

However, this is only the vision of community boundaries as constructed by the argumentation of the letter. The picture is still developing, depending upon how the letter is received at Philippi, both by these women and by the community. If the community accepts Paul's particular view of one-ness as embodied in these model and anti-model arguments, and Euodia and Syntyche do not, the two women are effectively outside of the community. They are anti-models. If the community and these two women accept these arguments, the community is unified, but it is a unity characterized by subordination to Paul, in obedience to his model and authority. If neither the community nor these women accepted these arguments, Paul's arguments for certain communal boundaries fail to convince; the difference that Paul makes is not a difference that they accept. As specific cases, Euodia and Syntyche can be versions of what could happen to any member of the community, depending upon their reception of the letter to the Philippians.

According to the schema established within the argumentation of Philippians, there are only two options. Yet, given the combinations for different parties responding in one of the two ways set out by Paul, the options for how the community at Philippi conceived of their identity are much wider. The preceding treatment of the cases of two women leaders separate from a larger communal response demonstrates, in a rather rudimentary fashion, that there is at least one further option (if not considerably more). Indeed, the relative prominence of women in Philippi's cultic life raises the possibility that Euodia and Syntyche might not have been immediately inclined to assent to Paul's exclusive vision of communal one-ness. That is, how they might have experienced their own leadership might have disciplined more by the prevailing environment for Philippian women in cults than by the attempt at authoritative argument by Paul.

Having sketched some potential responses for the first century, the task of considering a twenty-first century response to such communal rhetorics remains. Indeed, many of the ways Paul differentiates insiders from outsiders in terms of communal identity parallel contemporary discourses in identity politics. Arguments for absolutes, enforcement of stringent boundaries, distillations of people who “purely” belong, and convictions about conformity are all familiar beyond their role in Philippians’ argumentation. Indeed, this is where critical theories could be useful both for contemporary political practice and, more specifically, for responding to these kinds of arguments for communal identity. Feminist, queer, and postcolonial theorists have expressly questioned the bounds of particularized identity, often developing more than one way to embody politicized identities.

Feminist theorists, for example, seem to be responding to the stringency of boundaries and the exclusive one-way-ness of many arguments for and about identity when they explain the beginnings of the feminist movement as constituted by at least three different kinds of identity/practice (liberal, radical, socialist/Marxist).<sup>57</sup> Even in the field of biblical studies, feminist scholars note the difficulty and even the undesirability of choosing a single definition for feminism.<sup>58</sup> Queer theorists point out how normalizing discourses construct ideas of uniform and coherent subjects, particularly with regard to gender and sexuality. Similar to feminists, queer theorists respond to the idea of establishing one comprehensive definition of “queer,” let alone a singular queer theory or practice, with the same resistance and suspicion about any category.<sup>59</sup> Postcolonial theory recognizes that there has never been a single response to colonization, despite the desire of the colonizer to evoke only one response. Rather, the colonial and postcolonial subject develops a variety of strategies vis-à-vis colonization.<sup>60</sup> In many cases the hope for a return to some pure

---

57

58

59

60

nationalist identity in the postcolonial (or at least, anti-colonial) state only reaffirms the problematic arguments for discrete identities.<sup>61</sup>

While these theories are themselves expansive and variously overlapping, they might prove useful for conceiving responses to the identity rhetorics in Paul's letter to the Philippians. Feminist, queer, and postcolonial work encourages both suspicion about and a critique of univocal rhetorics. In addition, to do so, such theorists often show a willingness to cross boundaries that once seemed impermeable, even indisputably self-evident. Therefore, the more Paul (or anyone) is invested in creating irresolvable differences between insiders and outsiders, the more such rhetorical moves draw our attention.<sup>62</sup> Critical theories prod us to assess and critique the difference that Paul makes, and, in the end, to "do" the difference differently.

Given the influence of this kind of theory, how can I evaluate Paul's rhetorics of communal identity in the twenty first century? How do I take my lead from those theories that work toward liberation, decolonization, and/or a critique of these rhetorical practices? An instructive way to end this inquiry (for now, at least) is to look to the series of strategies developed by a postcolonial feminist scholar of biblical literature, Musa Dube. There is no single way to engage in this task, as Dube makes clear by introducing the reader to at least eleven different procedures for a postcolonial feminist interpretation.<sup>63</sup> However, one of the more straightforward approaches for an evaluative response to biblical argumentation involves asking four questions of the text:

- (a) Does this text have a clear stance against the political imperialism of its time?
- (b) Does this text encourage travel to distant and inhabited lands and how does it justify itself?
- (c) How does this text construct difference: Is there dialogue and liberating interdependence or is there condemnation of all that is foreign?

---

61

62

63

(d) Does this text employ gender and divine representations to construct relationships of subordination and domination?<sup>64</sup>

While all four questions are relevant for a response to the argumentation in Paul's letter, the third question is clearly the most pertinent for the purposes of this paper.<sup>65</sup> Paul's construction of difference specifically conflates the bounds of communal identity with the line between safety and destruction. All outside of the community are destined for a divinely maintained, negative end. According to the argumentative schema presented in Philippians, there is no room for dissent or departure from Paul's vision of one-ness. In fact, it is one of the things that characterizes the outsider to or "foreign" entity within the community. Communal identity is tied to conformity and submission to a hierarchical order.

Developing responses to these kinds of arguments about identity, whether from the potential perspectives of a first century audience or a twenty first century audience, could prove instructive whenever one thinks about organizing around identity. As in the preceding considerations, there will never be only one response. No claim to identity goes unchallenged, no demand about identity is unnegotiated, no argument for particular identity automatically holds sway; though each can be evaluated for its potential effect. Indeed, this is where the engagement with feminist, queer, and postcolonial theories can be useful for contemporary identity politics: to remind us that identity is far from stable, univocal, or coherent. Theory *can* help us with our politics. It is my hope that reflecting about past rhetorical constructions of identity is useful for our thinking and acting through our own identities. The answers lie not in making movements based on rigid belongingness, with members "blameless and pure, children without fault," but in movements of solidarity recognizing differences but converging around common interests.<sup>66</sup> If, in the process of responding to our oppression, we comprehend that there is always more than one response,

---

64

65

66

then the process itself becomes a resource for our struggles. Only then might it be possible to “make a difference” in a way different from Paul.