Philippians 4:2–3: An Alternative View of the Euodia-Syntyche Debate

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Philippians 4:2–3: "I encourage Euodia, and I encourage Syntyche to [pursue] the same mindset in [the] Lord." Yes, I also ask you, true comrade, to come alongside and help these women, who labored alongside me in the [work of] the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow-laborers, whose names are in [the] Book of Life. 2

In Phil 4:2–3, Paul exhorts two women, Euodia and Syntyche, to "pursue the same mindset in the Lord." Unfortunately, he does not offer enough detail to confirm the exact nature of this request. An overview of interpretations shows a range of opinions. Davorin Peterlin takes an extreme view that the entire letter is focused on disunity and quarrelling in Philippi. From Phil 1:1 on, Paul is directly addressing a church "immersed in inter-church squabbles." Peterlin fails to take seriously the tone of joy and friendship found throughout. John Reumann calls Peterlin's approach "overkill," and instead offers the more cautious interpretation that there was some sort of dispute, but that interpretations should not make "The Euodia-Syntyche affair the issue toward which the entire letter is leading." Moisés Silva calls 4:2 an "express and unquestionable rebuke" and believes this is a quarrel between two leading women that threatens the entire community. Another view is that the quarrel is instead between Paul and these two women, and Paul is urging them to come to his side.

This article offers an alternative interpretation, contending that Euodia and Syntyche, leaders of the church in Philippi, are being encouraged to pursue the vision of unity that Paul expounds throughout the letter and an unnamed "true comrade" (4:3) is asked to aid these leaders toward that end. Paul addresses them, not because of an existing quarrel, but because the unity mindset is so important to the continued advancement of the mission of God; the Philippians are facing external opposition to which having "the same mind" will be their greatest defense.

Euodia and Syntyche

Many interpreters understand these women to have played an important role in the Philippian church. Carolyn Osiek identifies them with the overseers or supervisors (episkopoi) of Phil 1:1. Others identify them among the deacons (diakonoi) of Phil 1:1. John Chrysostom (AD 347–407), in his homily on Philippians, says of these women, "Seest thou how great a testimony [Paul] beareth to their virtue? . . . These women seem to me to be the chief [kēphalaiōn] of the Church which was there." Paul counts these women as his fellow-laborers (sunerγον); this is "a title he sometimes gives to fellow itinerant missionaries (e.g., [Phil] 2:25; 1 Cor 3:9; 1 Thess. 3:2) but also to resident leaders, as here (cf. Rom 16:3; Philm 1; 3 John 8)." The title "fellow-laborer," and Chrysostom identifying them as "chief" (or "head") of the church, constitute good evidence that they may in fact be episkopoi in Philippi. At the very least they must have exercised some significant leadership in the church, for it does not make sense for Paul to single them out if their actions would not impact the rest of the community.

That Paul singles out Euodia and Syntyche at all is important. One view of this importance is that "Paul does here what he seldom does elsewhere in 'conflict' settings—he names names. . . . That he names them at all is evidence of friendship, since one of the marks of 'enmity' in polemical letters is that the enemies are left unnamed, thus denigrated by anonymity." This could be a sign of their deep friendship, which could show how serious this division truly was. But it seems to fit better if, rather than breaking with his standard practice of keeping opponents anonymous, Paul is instead encouraging two public leaders, who are on the right track, to keep up the good work.

"I Encourage," parakaleō

The word parakaleō means "to urge strongly, appeal to, urge, exhort, encourage." This word has a wide range of use and meaning. Wolfgang Schenk argues that it, "does not have the sense of admonition, but rather the character of friendly enlivening stimulation." Terrence Mullins, in his work on ancient Greek letter writing, notes that in public and private petitions four main words of urging are used: aksioun, deisthai, erōtan, and parakalein [= parakaleō]. In the order listed they take on an "increasing degree of personal concern." Therefore, erōtan and parakalein in 4:3 and 4:2 are "personal and familiar," adding to a tone of equality and friendship between Paul and those addressed. Jeffery Reed, in his Discourse Analysis of Philippians, discusses various possibilities for interpreting this petition and offers the following as one option: "a commendation of two of Paul's travelling missionaries whom he encourages to continue working together for the sake of the gospel, without reading discord into the text." Paul is urging them into something, but not commanding. The repetition of parakaleō puts both women on equal footing and serves to strengthen the exhortation. This would be true whether Paul was settling a dispute or encouraging two leaders toward a common goal.

The NT often uses this verb to comfort people about God's present and future saving help, and of people turning to Jesus for help. Three parallel uses that help illuminate Phil 4:2 can be found in Rom 12:1, 1 Cor 1:10, and 2 Cor 13:11. In Rom 12:1–2, Paul urges (parakaleō) the brothers and sisters in Rome to present themselves as living sacrifices; to not be conformed to the present age, but to "be transformed by the renewing of the mind." Such language, while not identical, is parallel to the sort of encouragement found in Phil 4:2. Paul does not seem to be addressing a concern over specific disagreement or disobedience but is imploping the Roman church to hold true to the gospel vision and not be conformed to the patterns around them. This
is the call of the church in every situation, not only when there exists an internal division.

Parakaleō occurs in both 1 Cor 1:10 and 2 Cor 13:11, which refer also to having "the same mind." In 1 Cor 1:10b Paul writes, "that you might be made complete in the same mind and in the same purpose." Second Corinthians 13:11 is almost verbatim with Phil 4:2—"be comforted," "have the same mind." In both Corinthian verses, Paul is addressing clear, internal problems in Corinth. In the first, Paul is dealing with division and quarrels among the members who are claiming to be "of Paul," "of Apollos," etc. In the second, Paul warns the community in harsh language to examine their lives to see if they are still living in the faith; Paul is coming soon and wants them to be found on the right side. Even though Paul utilizes similar wording, the tone in these two passages is vastly different than that found in Phil 4:2. In 1 and 2 Corinthians he explicitly names the division and warns the Corinthians to change. Euodia and Syntyche are urged to the same mindset, with no explicit mention of anything wrong. Paul's use of parakaleō in Phil 4:2 sounds more like Rom 12:1–2 where Paul is encouraging continued action without the need to correct anything specific.

"Pursue the Same Mindset," to auto phronein

Attempts to pull out the meaning behind this phrase have created much of the confusion. To get at the idea that Paul is exhorting these women toward a common vision, I have rendered it, "pursue the same mindset." David Allen argues that 4:2 is more focused on unity than an actual dispute. He writes, "maybe Paul really is giving apostolic 'advice', and the 'advice' is to be of the same mind in the Lord. The dispute itself is not addressed because it is secondary to the unity that he is seeking."27 Reumann says that to auto phronein has become a Philippian "slogan" by the time Paul writes his letter, which would make this a sort of "vision statement" for the church to pursue.28 Daniel Wallace places this verse in the category of a "general precept that has gnomic implications," explaining that such exhortations do not have a "right now, but not later" sense. His designation of "gnomic" instead refers to a timeless or general truth and here strengthens the view that this is a broader vision Paul is calling them to at all times.29

Paul uses phroneō/phronein ten times in Philippians.30 In 2:3, 2:5, and 4:2 this is a call, "to seek the same goal with a like mind."31 In the NT, to auto phronein is found in Rom 12:16, 15:2, 2 Cor 13:11, and Phil 4:2. Stephen Fowl writes that in these passages, "the phrase refers to the unity that is achieved by coming to hold the same perspective, by seeing things the same way." He goes on to state that while this begins with an "intellectual component," the like-mindedness that Paul is promoting should result in the pursuit of a "common course of action."32 For Paul, right-thinking should result in right-living.

Philippians 3:19 uses phroneō in a similar way, but states that the "enemies of the cross" are those whose minds are set not on the "one thing" from 2:2, but on "earthly things." Another interesting use comes in Phil 4:10 where twice Paul speaks of their concern (phronein) for him, referencing their financial support. Fowl translates phronein here with the phrase, "disposition of care and concern," to highlight the connection with the rest of the letter, where the believers are to have a "disposition toward a Christ-focused pattern of thinking, feeling, and acting."33 In 4:2 Paul is not necessarily pointing out a deficiency in their disposition, especially since in a few verses he is praising them for reviving it. Bringing 4:2 together with 4:10, it is as if Paul is saying, "keep pursuing the same mind . . . and indeed I have received the proof that you already are!"

The Nature of the Request in Verse 3, nai erō to − kai se

In v. 3, Paul utilizes another familiar and personal request to "ask" (erōtō) a "true comrade" to help these women.34 The identity of the "legitimate, true" (gnēsie)35 "comrade, companion, fellow-soldier, or (more literally) yolk-fellow" (suzuge)36 in 4:3 is impossible to determine with certainty. Paul's wife, or Lydia from Acts 16 have been proposed. The second-third century authors Clement of Alexandria and Origen both assume this reference to be a woman.37 Silva takes the reference as a general call for the entire community to act as "loyal partners."38 Fee presents a compelling argument for Luke, taking Acts seriously as a source.39 Reumann, as well as offering a summary of many other interpretations, argues compellingly for Epaphroditus.40 For this article, it is not necessary to definitively answer who this gnēsie suzuge is. Notably, there is a linguistic connection among four words that have su(n) ("with, together") as a prefix in this verse: suzuge, sullambanou, sunēthlēsan, and sunergōn, which, in the translation above have been rendered, respectively, as, "comrade," "come alongside and help," "labored alongside," and "fellow-laborers." "True-comrade" is chosen for the way it fits in the context of actively struggling, or laboring alongside Paul in the work of the gospel, taking on either military or athletic connotations. The name Paul uses connects this person as an active partner, who labors for the gospel, and can come alongside these women as they pursue Paul's exhortation.

This true-comrade is asked to sullambanou these women. This word is a synonym of katalambanō ("grasp"), which Paul uses in Phil 3:12: "Not that I already received, or have already been perfected (resurrected), but I pursue it, if also I might grasp it, for which I have been grasped by Christ Jesus." According to the Greek-English lexicon by Louw and Nida, as synonyms, katalambanō means "to seize and take control of" and sullambanō means "to seize and to take along with."41 In Phil 4:3 sullambanō is used more in the sense of, "to help by joining in an activity or effort."42 Even so, it seems to retain some of the flavor of Phil 3:12.43 Paul knows that these women cannot be left alone in their task, and they need someone to come alongside, to "grab hold of them," and help them accomplish the goal.

Euodia and Syntyche are then described as "laboring alongside"44 (sunēthlēsan) Paul as fellow-laborers (sunergōn)45 in company with Clement and the rest. The role of these others warrants a short discussion. J. B. Lightfoot argues that "along with" ought to connect with "come alongside and help these women" (sullambanou autais) rather than with "labored alongside me" (sunēthlēsan moi).46 This would mean that Clement and the others are also being asked to aid the women. Together with the word order, the fact that sullambanō is second person, singular, with "comrade" (suzuge) as its subject, makes...
Lightfoot’s view unlikely. Silva likewise argues that the sentence places the emphasis on Clement and the others as being among those who “labored alongside” Paul; however, Silva does believe that the wider meaning is that the entire church is going to be called to help in the effort. We probably do not need to accept Lightfoot’s translation, but it does seem that Paul is highlighting the rest of the community intentionally; at some level they will all be a part of the pursuit of unity, even if grammatically Paul is not singling them out in his request.

Finally, Paul describes them as having their names in the “Book of Life.” Hansen points out the many allusions to this in Jewish Literature as well as noting that, “The reference to the book of life sounds an eschatological note consonant with the reminder of citizenship in heaven (3:20). . . . The anticipation of the Lord’s appearance from heaven is the primary motivation for unity.” Euodia and Syntyche are citizens of heaven, unlike the enemies of the cross from 3:18; their names are in the Book of Life and there is no indication or fear that they might lose that status. This is a far cry from passages like 2 Cor 1:3–5 where Paul warns the Corinthians that they might not “pass the test.”

**Purpose of the Letter**

For the above argument to hold, it is important to determine why Paul would have written this letter, if not to quell a dispute. Paul is writing to thank his partners in ministry, to update them on his situation, and to counsel and encourage them in the face of external opposition. The theme of thanksgiving and joy can be traced through Paul’s use of the Greek root which gives us the cognates “rejoice” (chara, 1:18 twice; 2:17, 18, 28; 3:1; 4:4 twice, 10), “grace” (charis, 1:2, 7; 4:23), “give thanks” (eucharisteō, 1:3), “thanksgiving” (eucharistia, 4:6), “joy” (chara, 1:1, 25; 2:2, 29; 4:1), and “give graciously” (charizomai, 1:29; 2:9). Paul thanks the Philippian for their partnership in 1:3ff. and praises God for their financial partnership in 4:10ff.; throughout, he rejoices in the Lord and implores the church to do the same. He also seeks to encourage them with news of his situation, as well as hoping to be encouraged by further updates from them.

Several times Paul exhorts the church in the way they are to think and act; this is not something they accomplish on their own, since God is the one at work in them. Peterlin believes that the many exhortations toward unity and right-living are always given in the immediate context of external opposition and suffering, rather than internal issues needing to be resolved.

In 1:9–11 Paul’s prayer is that they would grow in knowledge and discernment, in order to “approve what is more valuable,” being “filled with the fruit of righteousness.” And in 1:12–14 he does not go on to point out any flaws, but instead begins talking about his imprisonment for Christ. In 1:27–30 Paul exhorts them to live lives worthy of the gospel and stand firm, laboring alongside one another in one mind. Again, he does not describe any internal issues they might be having with this sort of united front. Rather, the Philippian must proactively pursue unity so that they are “not intimidated in anything by the opposition, which is to them proof of destruction, but [is] your salvation” (1:28).

The rest of the letter follows the same pattern. 2:1–5 is a central exhortation, which would be true whether the church was quarreling or not, and which stretches through the Christ Hymn and into 2:12–18. “Therefore” (hōste) in 2:12 and “in order that” (hina) in 2:15 create an important conclusion to the previous eleven verses. “Therefore . . . work out your salvation (2:12) . . . in order that you may be blameless in the midst of a crooked and perverted generation” (2:15). Paul is more focused on what their mindset and actions mean in the face of enemies and persecution, and does not emphasize any internal problems. Finally, in ch. 3 Paul highlights the correct mindset through his story (3:4–11) and calls the church to imitate him (3:15–17) precisely because of people like the “dogs” of 3:2 and the “enemies of the cross” in 3:18.

Euodia and Syntyche become Paul’s application of 3:17–21. There are enemies of the cross who “set their minds on earthly things” (3:19). The community is called to join in imitating Paul (3:17) in light of those enemies (3:18) and behave as citizens of heaven (3:20). In 4:1 Paul tells the whole community to “stand firm in (the) Lord.” In 4:2 Paul urges the leaders of this church to pursue, with even more urgency, the unity of mind that can only be found in Christ. Just as Paul seems to say in places like 1:28 and 2:15, the best offensive against the church’s enemy is a united community in Christ.

**Conclusion and Application for Today’s Church**

The alternative narrative that has been proposed works as follows: Euodia and Syntyche were leaders at the church in Philippi, quite possibly the overseers (episkopoi) of the house churches in that city. Paul knows that the church is facing external opposition and is having the same struggle he faces (Phil 1:30). He has written throughout the letter about why remaining steadfast and united in the Lord is so important when facing opposition, and now he turns directly to the leaders of this community. Paul is encouraging these leaders to pursue a common vision of unity, which like 1:28, is their “proof” against their opponents and for their salvation. He then calls upon a true comrade, and perhaps indirectly the rest of the community, to come alongside and help these leaders, because pursuing unity is not a burden that only the leaders carry.

There are at least two practical applications for churches today that could come out of this reading. First, while many commentators promote the idea of Euodia and Syntyche being prominent figures in the church, this interpretation could help take it further and set them up as the leaders of churches in Philippi. It is as if Paul is telling the equivalent of today’s lead pastors to stay strong and pursue this unifying vision. Second, this could renew an emphasis on the need for unity among the churches. At all times our common mindset in the Lord must be pursued; this takes the vigilance and perseverance of leaders and members alike. If churches become complacent, waiting until tangible division is present, they have already failed. While this pursuit of a common mindset would continue to apply equally well to situations of real division and quarreling, Paul’s words to
Euodia and Syntyche could now be used to galvanize churches toward a united mindset that transcends those acute situations. At all times, and in every season, we should be pursuing the mindset that we have in Christ Jesus.

Notes

1. All translations in this article are the author's.
5. Reumann, Philippians, 632.
7. Carolyn Osiek, Philippians, Philo, and the Head (ANTC, Abingdon, 2000) 113. For more views see Reumann, Philippians, 628.
9. LSJ 945: “metaph., of persons, the head or chief.”
11. A textual variant of the phrase tōn loipōn sunergōn mou at the end of v. 3 would leave Clement and the women out of the classification of “fellow-laborer.” Most commentators reject the secondary reading (Fee, Philippians, 385n4). Though Silva discusses it as a possibility, he does not argue for it in his primary translation (Silva, Philippians, 198).
12. Osiek, Philippians, 111.
13. Osiek, Philippians, Philo, 112.
14. Fee, Philippians, 389–90. Fee then lists the following examples for anonymity: 1 Cor 4:18, 5:1–11, 14:37; cf. Gal 5:10, 6:12; Rom 16:17.
17. BDAG definition 2, 765.
22. Silva, Philippians, 198. Silva interestingly notes this softer tone in Phil 4:2 yet still claims that what Paul is saying to these women is an “unquestionable rebuke” (192).