

# 1

## Gospel greetings!

*Please read Philippians 1:1–2*

In the Old Testament world letters began with the name of the sender followed by that of the person addressed and then a greeting (see Daniel 4:1; Ezra 7:12), and that was also the standard pattern for personal letters in the first century AD. Paul here uses that literary convention but fills it with divinely revealed truth, as he does in most of his other letters. This combination of the human and the divine is a particularly good example of the character of the entire Bible as the expression of God's mind and will in human terms. God did not use a heavenly language or style to communicate with his people. Had he done so, the result would have been in unbreakable code. He condescended to use human writers and their languages. Divine revelation and human recording are therefore not incompatible. Infallibility and intelligibility are not like the proverbial oil and water. The Bible *is* the Word of God in human words (see 2 Peter 1:20–21; 2 Timothy 3:16–17)—and what could be more ordinary than a letter?

There are several matters to note in these opening verses.

**The sender (1:1)**

A comparison of these verses with the opening of Paul's letters to other churches reveals two striking items. The first is that Paul does not use the word 'apostle' with regard to himself, and the second is that he refers to himself and Timothy by a word that means 'slaves'.

It is only in writing to the churches at Philippi and Thessalonica that Paul does not designate himself as 'an apostle of Jesus Christ' in his introduction. This contrast can be highlighted even more by calling to mind that he does so designate himself in his first letter to the Thessalonian church (see 1 Thessalonians 2:6) and that his second letter contains some very emphatic assertions of the authority that belongs to the apostolic office (see 2 Thessalonians 3:4,6,14).

What does this 'omission' indicate with respect to Paul's apostleship and the church at Philippi? It says that his apostleship was recognized and respected there, unlike the church at Rome, which needed to be informed about it, or the churches in Corinth and Galatia, which needed to be reminded of it because of doubts which resulted from its being denied by his opponents. In writing to the church at Philippi there was no need for him to mention (even once) that he was an 'apostle of Christ Jesus'. He could even describe Epaphroditus as an 'apostle' (see 2:25 and comment there).

Instead he could just refer to himself and Timothy as, literally, 'slaves of Christ Jesus'. There are two things to notice here about the term Paul uses. The first arises from the fact that the word *doulos*, and not *diakonos*, is used, and so 'slave' is a better translation than 'servant'. Although 'doulos' was used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament to describe the dignity

of the prophets of the Lord and the authority of their task (see Jeremiah 7:25), it had a very different connotation in the Graeco-Roman world, where it expressed the loss of personal rights and liberty that went with being owned by a master. Paul often described himself in this way (see Romans 1:1; Galatians 1:10), and in doing so he was neither demeaning himself nor engaging in false humility. The fact that his master was '[the] Christ [who was] Jesus' meant that loss of rights and independence were swallowed up by real dignity and liberty. This is why Paul referred to himself as 'the prisoner of Christ Jesus', not of the Caesar of the day (see Ephesians 3:1, NIV; Philemon 1,9, NIV; cf. Colossians 1:24–25). His choice of the word 'slave' was to express the sense of privilege that he had in belonging to Jesus Christ and having been called into his service (see 1 Timothy 1:12–20; 4:14), for the Messiah, the 'servant of the LORD', had become a 'slave' too (see 2:7).

One further detail should, however, be noted about this term. This is that Paul uses it to describe Timothy as well as himself, and nowhere else does he do that. Wherever he refers to a colleague he normally uses the term 'brother' (see 1 Corinthians 1:1; 2 Corinthians 1:1), reserving the word 'slave' for himself. Why then this unique departure? Several suggestions have been made by way of explanation, but the one that has most to commend it is that it is related to the need of the Philippians for greater unity. At the very outset, Paul provides an example of this in the way that he brackets Timothy with himself and locates them both on the same level of lowly service (see 2:3–8).

### **The recipients (1:1)**

The hint about the importance of unity (just noted) is now made explicit and emphatic by the combining of 'saints' with 'overseers and deacons' and the use of the adjective 'all'—a note that is struck so often in the letter (see 1:4,7–8,25; 2:17,26;

4:21,23). Although Paul does not use the noun *ekklesia*, as he does in other letters, it was clearly 'a church' that he was addressing. But here his focus is on the people who comprised the church in Philippi, irrespective of whether they were office-bearers or not (1:1). The church had evidently developed since Paul's first visit but, unlike developments which take place in many churches after their foundation, it had remained true to its nature. There had been numerical increase, but all who belonged to it could still be addressed as 'saints', and 'overseers and deacons' were appointed from among them. Such plurality enhances the unity (see 1 Corinthians 12). A church is primarily an organism but, like every form of life, it also has an organization.

### **Saints**

Being designated as 'saints' not only marked out the Philippians as the people of God in a corporate sense, as was the case with Israel in the Old Testament (see Exodus 19:5-6), but it also points to a divine work in the heart, in keeping with the new-covenant era. Saints have been born again to a new life (see John 3:3,5; Titus 3:5). In accord with the eternal purpose of God, they have been united to Jesus Christ by faith and the work of the Holy Spirit through the gospel message (see Ephesians 1:3-14). An ineradicable separation from sin's dominion, purification from the corruption of the world and consecration to God have taken place in their hearts (see 1 Corinthians 6:11; 2 Thessalonians 2:13), although they still need to be made more holy (e.g., 1:9-10,25; 2:1-5,12-14). The church was made up of such people. 'Saints' therefore are not those who are merely baptized while living, much less those who are canonized after dying. They are those who while on earth have been quickened from spiritual death by virtue of being united to Jesus Christ through faith.

***Overseers and deacons***

The church at Philippi seems to have been fairly large when Paul wrote, because it had two kinds of functionaries, namely overseers and deacons. No other church is addressed in this way, but Timothy is given directions as to the appointment of both offices in the church at Ephesus (see 1 Timothy 3:1–13) and they are best understood in terms of the developments in church organization which are recorded in the book of Acts. ‘Overseers’ were ‘elders’ (see Acts 14:23), and not ‘bishops’ in the contemporary use of the term. This is clear from the fact that the term ‘overseer’ is in the plural in this verse and those so addressed are related to the same congregation. The word is also used of the same men along with the term ‘elders’ (see Acts 20:17,28). Clearly, a number of elders/overseers existed and functioned in the one church at Philippi, as they would later in Ephesus and Crete (see 1 Timothy 3:1–7; 5:17; Titus 1:5–9). These men watched over the spiritual life of the congregation (see Hebrews 13:17). This development was patterned after the Jewish custom referred to in the Gospels (see Matthew 27:1), which itself goes back to Old Testament times (see Exodus 18:13–26). Diaconal ministry was most probably what was inaugurated in the church at Jerusalem (see Acts 6:1–6), though the term is not used there for those appointed. The primary task of the deacons was relief of the poor and needy (see 1 Timothy 3:8–13).

**The greeting (1:2)**

The greeting that Paul expresses here and in his other letters is not only an expression of his good wishes, but is also a divinely given assurance of the blessings specified. This is because Paul, as an apostle of Christ, is his authorized and inspired spokesman. The apostles stood in succession to the Aaronic priests (see Numbers 6:22–27), and pastors succeed the apostles in this respect. The pronoun ‘you’ is in the plural and it is therefore believers in church fellowship who are greeted and,

by implication, prayed for in this salutation. The distinctively Christian aspect of these greetings, which marks them out from the Hebrew/Jewish world (not to mention the Graeco-Roman world of course!), lies, firstly, in grace being mentioned before peace, and, secondly, in the fact that the Lord Jesus Christ is associated with God, who is described as ‘our Father’. We will consider each of these in turn.

### ***Grace and peace***

In first-century personal letters the ordinary salutation was expressed by the word ‘chairein’, which means ‘greetings’. Paul substituted the word *charis* for this, which meant something very different though it sounded similar. ‘Grace’ (*charis*) pointed to God’s good will towards believers, and not human good wishes—even the best of them. ‘Peace’ (*shalom*) was the regular Hebrew greeting. It related to a person’s well-being in all its aspects—religious, physical and material—both as an individual and in the family or community. The inclusion of the physical as well as the spiritual was in keeping with the covenants made with Abraham and at Sinai which promised spiritual blessings that were represented by material benefits in a national package. There were, however, certain moral obligations that had to be discharged in order that those material blessings could be enjoyed by the nation (see Deuteronomy 28–30).

‘Grace’ describes the way in which God deals with sinners on the basis of the merit of Jesus Christ in his life and death. It is related to the freeness of the new covenant and opposed to the method of trying to earn, or in any way merit, spiritual blessings by means of human works of any kind (see Romans 4:4–5; Ephesians 2:8). The blessings of salvation are not bestowed because they have been earned. There can be no merging between divine grace and human works with regard to the basis on which salvation is given. ‘If it is by grace, it is no longer on

the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace' (Romans 11:6). Grace is not only undeserved favour, but favour which has been forfeited because of sin.

But grace did not begin in the New Testament, for it is the graciousness of God (see Exodus 34:6–9). *Charis* has an Old Testament equivalent, namely *chesedh*. This is a steadfast love which was exemplified in God's continued dealings with recalcitrant Israel and reflected in miniature in the life of Hosea with regard to Gomer. But it is blazoned in the new covenant and it gives priority to a person's spiritual standing and his or her moral well-being in the sight of God. In putting grace before peace, therefore, the new covenant is being given preference to the old, as is proper for an apostle of Christ, and Christians are being taught to think of their spiritual and moral well-being more highly than of anything physical or material (see 3 John 2).

'Peace' is the fruit of grace. As peace with God has been obtained through faith in Jesus Christ (see Romans 5:1), it is his peace within and between believers that is referred to here, whatever the outward circumstances (see 1:20–21; 4:7,9,11). The assurance of grace and peace points out that all that the Old Testament looked forward to has been actualized.

### **God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (1:2)**

Having been brought up as a Jew, Paul was devoutly convinced that there was only one God. This meant that he not only rejected the idol worship of the nations at large, with their heathen notions about God, but also the alleged 'blasphemy' of Christian Jews in what they claimed for Jesus of Nazareth (see Acts 26:9). After he became a Christian, his thinking about God underwent a change. He still affirmed the non-reality of other gods (see 1 Corinthians 8:4–6). But, strikingly, he now spoke of *Jesus* in the same breath as the God who was one (see

Deuteronomy 6:4; Acts 9:4–5). In this verse Jesus is designated as ‘Lord’ and associated with God, who is described as ‘Father’.

### ***Jesus as Lord and Christ***

‘Kurios’ (‘Lord’) was the word which was used for earthly dignitaries in the secular world, and the Jews used it to render the divine name ‘Jehovah’ in their translation of the Old Testament into Greek in the second century BC (the Septuagint). In using it here, Paul is not only giving Jesus a status above that of all human rulers but, by associating him with God as a joint supplier with him of grace and peace, he is putting him on the same plane as God. This is tantamount to recognition of the deity of Jesus. But he is also designated ‘Christ’—Greek for ‘Messiah’—and this term points to the deliverer God promised his people in the Old Testament who, as prophet, priest and king, would bring a better covenant into being that would be eternally permanent (see Hebrews 8:6–13).

### ***God our Father***

Though the term ‘Father’ was used of God in the Old Testament, it was only with regard to his relationship with Israel as a community, or metaphorically, with her king as his representative. As ‘the father’ of Israel, the term pointed to God’s kindly care towards his covenant people (see Exodus 4:22–23; Psalm 68:5; 103:13; Isaiah 63:16; 64:8; Jeremiah 31:9) and, as his representative (see Psalm 78:70–72), the king was to be the ‘father’ of the people, caring for them by shepherding and ruling them according to God’s word.

Both these uses of ‘Father’ in the Old Testament fall short of the New Testament use of the term which results from the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, his eternal Son, and the gift of the Holy Spirit through him to all who believe (see Luke 11:2,13; Galatians 4:4–7). No Old Testament believer ever addressed God as ‘my Father’, but Jesus taught Jews who believed in him to do



so (see Luke 11:2; John 20:17). The term is therefore lit up with extra meaning in the New Testament because all believers can address God as their Father, not only together, but individually. Each shares in his moral character because he or she has been regenerated by God (see 2 Peter 1:4) and is assured of his love by being adopted by him into his family (see Galatians 4:6-7).