

PRESENTACION

El primer artículo del presente número, por el **Dr. Pablo A. Jiménez**, continúa la discusión y contribución que está teniendo lugar en los páginas de *Apuntes* sobre la hermenéutica hispana, y cómo se aplica a la predicación. El Dr. Jiménez es Director Ejecutivo de la Asociación para la Educación Teológica Hispana.

Le sigue un artículo sobre la historia de los bautistas hispanos en Texas, por el **Dr. Ernest E. Atkinson**, quien por largos años trabajó como misionero entre hispanos, comisionado por la Junta de Misiones Nacionales de la Convención Bautista del Sur. Ahora está jubilado en Texas.

Los últimos dos artículos tratan sobre una realidad de importancia creciente en los EE.UU.: la presencia centroamericana. El **Dr. Kenneth Davis, O.F.M., Conv.**, profesor de Oblate School of Theology y director del programa doctoral en ministerios hispanos de esa institución, ofrece directrices pastorales para ayudar a la iglesia a responder a este nuevo reto. El **Dr. George Cruz**, ministro de la Iglesia Reformada en América, y actualmente misionero de la Iglesia Presbiteriana de los EE.UU. en Honduras, ofrece unas reflexiones sobre el carácter y necesidades de la predicación en América Central.

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From Text to Sermon with Philippians 1:1-6: A Hispanic Perspective

Pablo A. Jiménez

In December 1994 I was invited to preach in one of the annual retreats of my denomination, *The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)* in the United States and Canada. The topic seemed simple enough: *Our partnership in the gospel*. At first glance, the assigned text, Philippians 1:1-6, looked innocuous. These are the first six verses of the epistle. They include the traditional epistolary opening (1.1-2), that is, the verses that identify the sender (v. 1a), name the addressees (v. 1b) and convey greetings (v. 2). They also include the beginning of the section of thanksgiving that generally follows the epistolary opening (1.3-4). Therefore, my sermon began with a traditional, even romantic, perspective:

The letter of Paul to the Philippians is one of the most poignant documents in the New Testament. Written in and sent from prison, the Epistle is the Apostle's farewell. The letter was probably written from Rome (as implied by the references to the "imperial guard" [1.13] and the "emperor's household" [4.22]). Apparently, Paul did not survive this jail term.

The church at Philippi had learned of Paul's imprisonment and its members were justifiably concerned. At the time, the ruler was Nero, the fifth Emperor of Rome. Although during the first eight years of his government the Empire flourished--due mainly to the influence on the Emperor of the philosopher Seneca--Nero's conduct changed drastically after 62 A.D. He tended toward public brutality--using on occasion Christians as scapegoats for his actions. It is believed that both Peter and Paul lost their lives during his rule.

But Paul is still alive and well, preaching the Gospel of *Life* even to his would-be assassins. He knows that his life is endangered, but he also knows that life is a mystery that dwells solely in God's hands: "For to me, living is Christ, and dying is a gain" (1.21.) That is why he even dares to joke about death, asserting that he is "hard pressed" in choosing between living and dying: "I don't know what to do! I will be better off If I depart to be with Christ but you still need me. What to do? What to do? Well, don't worry. I am convinced that I will stay with you all a while longer" (compare with 1.21-25).

Evidently, Paul had a unique relationship with the Philippians. They had supported him in his missionary work (see 4.15-18) and had outdone in their generosity even wealthier churches, like the one in Corinth (I Co. 9.) Yes, they did have a close relationship. You only joke about death with your loved ones. The Philippians were his "partners" in ministry (1.5).

At this point in the sermon I became restive. Although the introduction of the sermon described the grim historic context, I thought that the picture was too

rosy. With this caveat in mind, I continued my sermon.

Paul's relationship with the Philippians is certainly inspiring. So inspiring, that I was tempted to spend the rest of my time with you extolling the virtues of partnership; encouraging each and every one of us to bask in the fellowship that the beautiful environment of this retreat center gives us; romanticizing this otherwise subversive story into a theological "Barney song": "I love you, you love me, we are a happy Campbell-Stone family". I almost fell in the trap... almost.

At that moment I identified what was missing. I was not reading the text from my place as a Latino. I was using the exposition of the historical context to show erudition and gain the respect of the audience, not to establish a correlation between my social location and the social location of the text. Therefore, I read the text once again:

[1] Paul and Timothy, servants of Jesus Christ, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the Bishops and deacons: [2] Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. [3] I thank my God every time I remember you, [4] constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, [5] because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. [6] I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.

"Paul and Timothy.. to the saints.. who are in Philippi..." At that point the text came to life. The introduction that seemed so harmless and dull was the key to the social location of the text. Paul was a Jew. As such, he belonged to a racial-ethnic minority in the Roman Empire. He was born and raised in Tarsus, a cosmopolitan city in a main commercial route that housed one of the largest libraries in Asia Minor. For its geographical location, Tarsus was considered "the meeting place of West and East, of the Greek culture with its Oriental counterpart."¹ No wonder Paul was fluent in Aramaic and in Greek. His writings show that he was well read. He quotes documents in Hebrew as well as other writings in Greek, such as the allusion to a Meneander in 1 Corinthians 15.33. He even had two names, Saul in Aramaic and Paul in Greek. Therefore, Paul was bilingual and bicultural.

The Apostle is writing to a church located in Philippi. This city bears the name of Philip II of Macedonia, who established it in 356 BCE as the capital of the region.² Philip was the father of Alexander III, also known as Alexander the Great. As we all know, Alexander's military conquests mark the beginning of the Hellenistic Era because they triggered the process of transculturation by which Greek language and culture became normative in the Mediterranean basin.

The phrase "Paul and Timothy.. to the saints.. who are in Philippi..." lead me to establish a correlation between my social location as a Latino in the United States

¹ Harper's Dictionary of the Bible, s.v., "Tarsus" by Mark K. Milne, p. 1018.

² Harper's Dictionary of the Bible, s.v. "Philippi" by Robert A. Wild, p. 786.

of America and Paul's social location as a Jew in the Roman empire. Once the correlation was established, the innocuous, harmless and dull message of the text became a powerful prophetic voice:

"Partner" is a mighty strong term. A partner is a person with whom you share some of the most important aspects of your life. These aspects may be personal, professional, economic or legal, but partnership always implies a relationship of close cooperation in order to achieve a given goal. "Partner" is a powerful concept. A partner is an associate, a colleague, a companion... *an equal*, if you will. There is fellowship, harmony, unity between partners. In a word, there is "koinonía," that is, solidarity between people in partnership. Yes, "partner" is a mighty strong term.

If a partner is an equal, a colleague, a companion, then partnership is dangerous, precarious, subversive. A person that is in partnership with another recognizes the absolute humanity of his or her partner.

My partner is as human as I am.

My partner has the same rights that I have.

My partner has the same privileges... the same power.

A partnership is not a relationship defined by the power of one party over the other. It gives no place for control and domination of the weaker by the stronger. It has no room for the subordination of the powerless to the powerful.

In a partnership there are *no*:

master and slave
top and bottom
center and margin
upper and lower
up-town and down-town
richer and poorer
high church and low church
white and non-white

A partnership is defined by the "koinonía"; by the solidarity of the people involved in the venture. This is what the Apostle Paul emphasized in his "last will and testament."

[1] If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, [2] make my joy complete: Be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. [3] Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not for your own interests, but to the interests of others. [5] Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, [6] who, though he was in the form of God,... [7] emptied himself, taking the form of the slave,...

Philippians 2.1-7

These are powerful words. The Prince of the Universe became a *slave!* This word has a chilling effect on me. My grandfather was a black man, the son of freed slaves that toiled in the southern part of the island of Puerto Rico. *A slave!* This word still has a chilling effect on this nation. I am now living in Atlanta, in the state of Georgia. My house is a couple of hours away from Macon, the former capital of the South. As you wander through its beautiful fields of Georgia, you notice the cast iron landmarks that remind everyone who reads them of the bloody war that defiled our sacred land. You are reminded that the blood of thousands of women and men, young and old was shed in a fratricide conflict over the right of some to classify others into:

master and slave
top and bottom
center and margin
upper and lower
up-town and down-town
richer and poorer
high church and low church
white and non-white

As early as the crib we learn that there are two kinds of people: "Us" and "Them." "Us people" are good; "Them people" are bad. "Us people" are right; "Them people" are wrong. *"Us people" do not enter in partnership with "Them people."* I learned it; you learned it too.

Paul, "a Hebrew born of Hebrews" (3.5), learned this lethal lesson early in his life. He learned that the Jews were the "Us people" and that the *"goyim"*--the non-Jews--were the "Them people." *"Us people" do not enter in partnership with "Them people"* was the motto that steered his life. Then some of "Us" (Jews) began to preach a Gospel that included "Them" (non-Jews) in a partnership with God. Paul, guided by his exclusionary motto, began to persecute, terrorize and even kill the traitors among "us." Yet, the zealous young Pharisee found--or may we say was found (Gal. 4.9)--by Jesus in the way to Damascus.

Therefore, what we find in Philippians is startling. A former "Us" person testifies that he lives in partnership with those he formerly thought as "Them people." A "subversive partnership" indeed.

As a bilingual and bicultural Hispanic man, born in New York and raised in the Caribbean, it is easy for me to identify with Paul. However, I realized that I had to avoid the pitfall of individualism. An individualistic reading would only romanticize my reading all over again. I had to keep in mind that the goal of

Hispanic theology is liberation.³ Fernando Segovia, of Vanderbilt University, correctly argues that a theology "of mixture and otherness" born out of the struggle and the pain of the Latino community "cannot but be a theology of struggle, liberation, and self determination." This goal has at least three important ramifications. First, a theology whose goal is the liberation of Hispanics calls for "an active and sustained struggle against the reigning social perceptions and conditions" exposing, thus, their oppressive character. This struggle "must also be waged in ecclesiastical and theological circles." Second, it calls for "a compelling and eschatological view of a different world with different possibilities and alternatives, a world in which human dignity, respect and rights prevail." Third, it calls for self-determination "in the retrieval and retelling of its own history, in the articulation of its own view of reality, and in the expression of its own future dreams and visions."⁴ This longing for liberation inspired the conclusion of my sermon.

"Like Paul, we learned rather early our place in society. I learned that the United States was the greatest nation of them all and that white Anglo-Saxon Protestants were the best people in the whole wide world. I also learned that I was not a genuine "American" and that--no matter how much I strive--I would never be one. I learned my place in the social power structure. I even learned that I was powerless in some settings and powerful in others... I still have to "unlearn" most of this. We all do...

We--church people--claim to be in partnership with each other. However, we must confess with much sadness that our relations are determined more by our place in the social power structure than by the message of the Gospel. God is calling us to mirror Paul's "subversive partnership" with the Philippians. I yearn to see all levels and constituencies of our denomination united in a sincere partnership. I long for the day when our practice of the faith will demonstrate that we affirm the following:

Every constituency of this Church is as human as mine.
Every constituency of this Church has the same rights as mine.
Every constituency of this Church has the same privileges... the same power.

We still have a lot to learn in order to achieve this kind of "subversive partnership." We also have a lot to "unlearn." To reach it, we even may have to find Jesus anew in the road to Damascus and convert.

³José David Rodríguez, "De apuntes a esbozo: Diez años de reflexión," *Apuntes* 10:4, (Winter 1990):78-79.

⁴Fernando Segovia, "Two Places and no Place on Which to Stand: Mixture and Otherness in Hispanic American Theology," *Listening* 27:1, (Winter 1992):33.