

The Interpretation of Philippians 2:5

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The Greek of this difficult phrase is: *τοῦτο φρονεῖτε ἐν ὑμῖν ὃ καὶ ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ*. The only significant textual variant is that of the Received Text, which reads: *τοῦτο γὰρ φρονείσθω*, but it is not well supported, and looks like an attempt to simplify an obscure passage. The R.V. translates:

‘Have this mind in you, which was also in Christ Jesus.’

Obviously this is a translation which cannot easily be got out of the text: this is shown by the differences among commentators as to what word exactly is to be understood in the Greek in order to get this translation. Ellicot, Alford, and Lightfoot all supply *ἐφρονεῖτο*, but Moule suggests *ἐφρονήθη*. This difficulty has led some modern commentators to adopt a completely different interpretation. It is with this modern interpretation that I am concerned in this article. As far as I know James Moffatt was the first to suggest it. At least he translates the phrase thus in his version of the N.T.:

‘Treat one another with the same spirit as you experience in Christ Jesus.’

This apparently secures the approval of Michael in his edition of *Philippians* in the Moffatt Commentaries. Even more impressive is the fact that it has captured the allegiance of the translators of the American Revised Standard Version. Their translation is:

‘Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus.’

This is of course to supply *φρονεῖτε* in the Greek, which is much easier grammatically than to supply a passive. This is no doubt the main attraction of this rendering, together with the fact that it fits in well with an ‘experience-theology’ of the Pauline Epistles.

I would like, however, to point out the grave difficulties that stand in the way of this rendering.

1. Moffatt’s rendering at least does not take full advantage of the grammatical alleviation afforded by the ‘modern’ translation,

that is to say that he does not use the same word to translate the two words *φρονεῖτε* (one in the text and one supplied). To 'treat one another' is not the same as to 'experience'. The common factor he is working with is 'spirit', which of course is not in the Greek at all. The R.S.V. seems to do better, for it uses the same word 'have' (of 'mind' of course) twice, and each time rendering an active verb, whether present or supplied. But when we come to ask what it means, we run into difficulty. The R.S.V. translation can only mean that Christians should have the same experience among themselves as their experience of Christ. But can one command religious experience to order? Surely it is something that is given one, and if artificially commanded loses its value. It might be objected that all that the R.S.V. translation means is: 'Love each other as you have experienced the love of Christ', but this is to fall back into the same grammatical difficulty as the R.V. is involved in, the verb is active in the first clause and assumed to be passive in the second.

2. An even more serious difficulty is that nowhere in the N.T. as far as I know do we find any distinction between our experience in Christ and our experience in the Christian community. Moffatt's translation certainly, and R.S.V.'s by implication, indicates that our experience in Christ is one thing and our experience in the Christian church something else. But to be 'in Christ' in Paul's theology is to be in the church. This 'modern' interpretation may be legitimately suspected of being the product of nineteenth-century individualism in theology.

3. If what Paul is saying is: 'Apply in practice what you have already realized (or recognized) in Christ', there is no need for him to go on to point to Christ's example. *Ex hypothesi* they have already understood this.

4. In the account of Christ's life and death which follows, there is no hint of our experience of Christ. It is all objective and concerns what Christ has done. The very centre of it is Christ's intention, or purpose. And it is quite plain at least why Paul cites Christ's example. He wants the Philippians to follow Christ in self-abasement and self-giving for each other. He is not, at this point at least, at all concerned with the Philippians' religious experience.

I suggest therefore that this modern interpretation of Philippians 2:5 be set aside as the product of an out-of-date theology that made the mistake of imagining the religious experience of the individual believer to be the central thing in Christianity. This conclusion does not at all detract from the very real difficulty inherent in the R.V. translation. But, as we have seen, attempts to get away from the grammatical difficulty of supplying a passive verb from an active one seem to end by smuggling in a passive somehow anyway. And I am quite sure that the R.V. translation, whatever its grammatical obscurities, does at least fit in with the lesson that Paul is teaching the Philippians in this passage.