Reformation Commentary on Scripture

New Testament XI  
Philippians, Colossians

Edited by Graham Tomlins

**Philippians 2: 12-18 LIGHTS IN THE WORLD**

12Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, 13for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. 14Do all things without grumbling or disputing, 15that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, 16holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. 17Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. 18Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.

**OVERVIEW:** Philippians 2: 12 gave the reformers something of a problem, as it was a text that seemed to suggest a version of justification by works, “working out your own salvation.” It also seemed to suggest a significant role for a human contribution to salvation, as Desiderius Erasmus gleefully points out in the passage quoted below. He argues for a synergy between divine grace and human activity, a position that most Protestant reformers avoided. Erasmus’s comments are included here to illustrate the way in which he as a figure advocating a humanist program of reform saw this passage, and as an illustration of the position against which many of the Protestant reformers were arguing, although it does find an echo in the comment from Jacobus Arminius cited below. Most of Protestant reformers are at pains to explain the passage in a way that coheres with the classic Reformation doctrine of justification by faith, and for some at least, a soteriology that ascribes as much as possible to divine rather than human activity.

Philippians 2: 15-16 occasion reflection on the nature of Christian holiness. There are different views on this among the reformers, as well as on the question of how Christians are to be distinguished from the world. Martin Luther insists that Christians are holy not in themselves, on account of any particular holiness they may have developed in their inner lives, but instead by virtue of their baptism and calling. Menno Simons stresses the calling on the church to be holy in the sense of being different, distinct and countercultural. This disagreement illustrates the range of Reformation views on the question of the way in which Christian life and discipleship is carried out, even among those who were broadly in agreement over questions of justification.

**Philippians 2: 12-13 Working Out Salvation**

**Grace and the Human Will Must Work Together.** Desiderius Erasmus:

Paul says to the Philippians, “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling,” and the same, earlier, to the Corinthians, “But it is the same God who works all things in all men.” There are hundreds more passages of this kind in holy Scripture. If man does nothing, why say, “work out”? If man does something, why say, “God works all things in all men”? If you wish to twist the one passage to support a special interpretation, man does nothing. On the other hand, if you wish to turn the other to your cause, man does it all. If man does nothing, there is no room for merits; where there is no room for merits, there is no room for punishments or rewards. If man does all, there is no room for grace, which Paul urges so many times. The Holy Spirit does not fight against himself, whose inspiration produced the canonical Scriptures. Both sides embrace and acknowledge the inviolable majesty of Scripture, but an interpretation must be found which will unravel the knot.

. . . And so these passages, which seem to be in conflict with one another, are easily brought into harmony if we join the striving of our will with the assistance of divine grace. ON THE FREEDOM OF THE WILL.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Reference

Tomlin, Graham. Philippians, Colossians (Reformation Commentary on Scripture Series) (p. 55). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

1. LCC 17:73-74, quoting 1 Cor 12:6. 2Musculus, *In Divi Pauli Epistola*, 45 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)