

## **Pressing On: Pauline Perspectives on Formation in Hope-filled Vocation**

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**Abstract:** Christian hope, a powerful, liberating, and embodied reality, constitutes an essential element of Christian formation, one that gains definition and perseverance on the basis of God's redemptive and liberating work through Christ. Drawing on Paul's theology of participation, I describe a theological basis for Christian hope. Subsequently, and in sustained engagement with the book of Philippians, I posit three pedagogical instantiations of such hope: exemplars of God's redemption as a pedagogical practice, kenosis as a pedagogical disposition, and "hope-filled vocation" as a pedagogical goal.

Here at the end of 2016, hope could hardly seem a more timely topic for the Religious Education Association to engage in sustained form. Within the American context, not only individuals in the communities to which Christian educators are responsible, but also the Christian educators themselves, may find that their supply of hope runs low. We are weary of violence, of extremism in all of its forms, of terror, and of institutional racism – not to mention the persistent, privileged denial that it even exists. We are weary of inflammatory rhetoric with no constructive action. We are weary of war. We are weary of ambivalence or apathy.

In response to realities faced by religious communities, and indeed the whole world, several bases of hope are on offer. We find no shortage of platitudes and vague exhortations based in general, but ungrounded, claims about humanity's inherent goodness. Other suggestions imply that communities might simply pull themselves up by their own moral and political bootstraps, as it were, suggesting that if people were just better organized, or more persuasive, they might inaugurate a day in which these problems no plague them, or, at least, not as much. Still others might invoke subtle or explicit salvation narratives that place hope for deliverance in elected officials and strategically oriented campaigns. While there are grains of truth in each such account, on their own they may ultimately prove too anemic to withstand the challenges of the present day or, indeed, any day.

For educators and ministers within the Christian tradition, hope is always something more than the province of inspirational posters and strategy sessions, because Christian hope derives its power from the work of God and in the call to participate in God's purposes. For the apostle Paul, the basis of hope is profoundly Christological, oriented by the story of God's

redemptive and liberative work in Jesus and culminating in God's kingdom fully come. Such a deeply Christological account of hope mitigates against the presumption that the capacity for hope arises from a little more effort, a little more information, a little more rhetorical skill or political power. A Christian account of sin and grace, and the Christian confession that it is ultimately *God's* liberative power that wins the day, reminds us of the real limits imposed by human fallibility, finitude, and our own (even unwitting) complicity in the operations of the powers of Sin and Death in the world.

Educators in the present day share with Paul the opportunity and challenge of supporting communities in the process of living into a Christian vocation – both its in the broadest sense of living within the kingdom of God that Christ inaugurates and in the more narrow sense of exercising ones distinct giftedness within the body of Christ. In every age, Christian communities faces challenges to their vocation – some from outside, some from within. While different Christian communities might define those problems diverging ways, each community of faith is nonetheless tasked with responding to their circumstances in a manner “worthy of the gospel of Christ” (Phil 1:27). That active response of faith requires hope - the capacity to imagine and live in light of that which you do not yet see, to lean into the anticipated future that God will bring about.

On the question of what it looks like to *form* and *be formed* in theologically grounded hope, Paul provides compelling interlocutor. As Paul makes clear, for those of us who live in the contested days between Christ's first and second coming, hope is not merely a passive disposition giving the church the courage to inactively endure. The theological basis of Christian hope does not remove the call for Christian action; by no means! Writing to Philippi in the midst of his own active struggle for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ, Paul provides an evocative account of Christian vocation as a form of participation in Christ, living in the world as hope-filled citizens of God's kingdom even in the midst of suffering, conflict, and injustice. Paul conveys to the Philippian church that he wants them to live,

“in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and are in no way intimidated by your opponents . . . For he has graciously granted you the

privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well – since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.”<sup>1</sup>

This “statement of purpose” reveals something of Paul’s formational objectives (Smit 2013, 80). First, the context of the desired learning and living is the experience of difficulty shared by both Paul and the Philippian church. The desired outcome for the community is a striving with “one mind” to live in a manner worth of the gospel. In its use here and throughout the letter, “one mind” most likely refers to a shared practical reasoning – a form of *phronesis* (Rooms 2012, 85; Fowl 1998, 140–153). It quickly becomes clear that a *phronesis* “worthy of the Gospel of Christ” is a practical reasoning that is Christologically normed, for Paul exhorts the congregation to “let the same mind [to auto phronēte] be in you as it is in Christ Jesus.” A hymnic – even dramatic – recollection of Christ’s incarnation, passion, and exaltation in Phil 2:5-11 (Eastman 2011, 2). Paul goes on in the letter to recognize two fellow ministers for their exemplary service (3:19-30) and to share his gratitude for the Philippians partnership with him in service of the gospel (4:4-20). Paul offers an autobiographical account of his own vocation as a form of sharing or participation with Christ, and in doing so extends a purposeful vocational invitation to his readers who he hope will have the “same mind” about their calling (3:15).

When welcomed into contemporary conversations about teaching for “hope-filled vocation” (Wimberly 2005, 13), the theology of participation in Christ that undergirds Paul’s autobiographical account of vocation in Philippians 3:4b-21 both resonates and re-orient. In what follows, I highlight three evocative correspondences between the concerns and approaches present in both Paul’s letter to the Philippians and some recent literature: the function of exemplars as part of pedagogical practice, the value of kenosis as a pedagogical disposition, and the place of “hope-filled vocation” as a pedagogical goal. I also indicate places in which Paul’s theology of participation helpfully reorients the discussion around Christian claims about the basis of hope – namely, the hope engendered by the resurrected Christ and the call to live as participants in God’s kingdom.

*Exemplars of Hope: “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings”*

Anne Streaty Wimberly’s powerful pedagogical proposal in *Soul Stories* includes an explicit move to include exemplars within the African American faith tradition in pursuit of “liberating

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<sup>1</sup> Biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard version, unless otherwise

wisdom” and “hope-filled vocation.” Following engagement with the “everyday story” and a scriptural story, Wimberly proposes moving into the story of a figure from the community’s own tradition who faithfully lives into their vocation. The impetus behind this move, Wimberly says, is that “African American faith heritage stories convey a liberating wisdom and a liberation mindset that were at the center of the Christian life of African Americans in the past and that are worthy of emulation in the present.” The stories powerfully convey an “ethical stance” enacted even in difficult circumstances (Wimberly 2005, 32). An analogous interest in the role of exemplars in hope-building Christian pedagogy appears in Leah Gunning Francis’s new work on the work for justice in Ferguson. Francis (2015) offers snapshots of the participation of clergy in the work for justice, offering “sacred stories of courage and hope that might awaken in us seeds of possibility that, if nurtured, could bend our imagination and actions toward a future filled with hope” (4).

The potency of exemplars in learning is one of the oldest and most well-established pedagogical principles in the Western tradition. Imitation of exemplars was endemic to ancient Greco-Roman education across the ancient Mediterranean world, such that “the principle of imitation inspired ancient education from beginning to end” (Cribiore 2005, 132). Recent research into the function of mirror neurons adds scientific support to the common, even ancient, recognition that humans are social and imitative creatures. People imitate the behaviors of those with whom they spend time, but the imitation goes beyond mannerisms and forms of speech to include even desires and affections (Brown and Strawn 2012, 79). This element of human life, Brown and Strawn (2012) suggest, places a great deal of importance on the nature of Christian community, for imitation may be both a conscious and unconscious activity (82).

While direct instructions to imitate appear with relative rarity in the Pauline letters, the book of Philippians provides the most extended and well-developed account of imitation as formation in Christian life. Paul’s interest in the community growing in the same *phronesis* as Christ provides the first indication. In Philippians 3, Paul offers autobiographical reflections on the re-orientation and re-valuation of his own past and life in light of his encounter with Christ. Following those autobiographical reflections, he first gives the imperative – “become my co-imitators,” which I take to mean that he wants the Philippians to join him in imitating Christ.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Commentators debate Paul’s ambiguous phrase refers to the Philippians joining together in imitating Paul or joining with Paul in imitating Christ. Within the context of the letter, I prefer

He then refers to himself and some unspecified others as “types” for the community to follow (3:17). That group likely includes Timothy and Epaphroditus, ministers known to this community and lifted up as exemplary servants earlier in the letter (2:19-30). Before the letter concludes, this message is reiterated once again, as Paul exhorts them to put into practice whatever admirable behavior they have “learned and received and heard and seen” in him (4:9).

This appeal to imitation of their human teacher must, however, be understood within the the Christo-logic of the entire letter, namely, that Christ is the paradigmatic exemplar and that Christian’s are called to participate “in Christ.” Paul’s account of his own vocation conveys this theology of participation in Christ through clear semantic and theological links to the Christ hymn. The following table illustrates the correspondences.

<b>Jesus (2:6-11)</b>	<b>Paul (3:4-21)</b>
Does not consider [ <u>hēgoúmeno</u> i] his equality with God something to be “exploited” and so empties himself (2:6)	Now considers [ <u>hēgoumai</u> ] the things that were gain to be loss, or even “waste” on account of Christ (3:7).
Is “found” [ <u>heuretheis</u> ] in human form (2:7)	Wants to be “found” [ <u>heurethō</u> ] in Christ (3:9).
Takes on the form of a slave [ <u>morphēn doulou</u> ] and becomes obedient to death [ <u>thanatou</u> ] (2:7-8)	Reorients his life in hopes of knowing the power of Christ’s resurrection by first being made into – or somehow participating - the form of Christ’s death [ <u>symmorphizómenos tōi thanátōi</u> ]
Takes on the shape of humanity [ <u>chēmati</u> . . . <u>hōs anthrōpos</u> ] and humbled himself [ <u>etapeinōsen</u> ]	Citizens of heaven await the transformation [ <u>metaschēmatisei</u> ] of their “humble bodies” [to <u>sōma tēs tapeinōseōs</u> ]

The parallels make it abundantly clear that Paul sees himself as participating in the pattern of Christ’s own life and ministry. Thus, while the “type” of Christ can be effectively “mimicked” by other faithful followers, and while faithful followers can become “types” for

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the latter option. The imperative to imitate here in Philippians differs from its parallels in I Cor 4:16 and 11:1 by the addition of the sum- prefix, which appears elsewhere in the letter to indicate the unity of the Philippians with one another (1:27; 4:3a) or to indicate Paul’s common stance with them vis-à-vis Christ or another third party (1:7; 2:25 [2x]; 4:3b, 3c, 4:14).

others (3:17), the Christological reference point must consistently be claimed and reclaimed. Emphasis on Christ as the ultimate exemplar is not solely important as criteria for selecting other exemplars within with the community, though this is an important result. Paul's vocational participation in the pattern set by Christ generates hope not merely because Christ is a good moral exemplar, but because Christ is the Risen Lord exalted by the Father to whom every knee will bow (Phil 2:11) Maintaining the centrality of Christ as the ultimate exemplar provides a helpful corrective to accounts of hope that – even if only in rhetoric - place too much weight on the wobbly, uneven legs of human capability rather than Christ.

Paul's letter to the Philippians, like Wimberly's pedagogy for liberating wisdom and hope-filled vocation, assumes that exemplars present an "ethical stance" worthy of emulation by the community (Wimberly 2005, 32). In the specific case of Philippians, that "ethical stance" is a Christologically-inflected form of practical reasoning or *phronesis* that takes Christ as its model and places its confidence in Christ's resurrection and now and future reign. Paul's imagination, it seems, has been "bent . . . toward a future filled with hope," and he appears to hope that this "snapshot" of his own ministry might encourage his readers toward similar hope-filled vocation (Francis 2015, 4).

*Kenosis as Pedagogical Disposition – "have the same mind in you that is in Christ Jesus"*

The *phronesis* of Christ, this way of "thinking, acting, and feeling" (Fowl 2005, 29; Rooms 2012, 87), has considerable bearing on the function of power both *in* and *resulting from* Christian formation. Christologically defined kenosis is one important component of this practical reasoning that the community ought to share. By kenosis, I mean Christ's self-emptying love demonstrated in the refusal to cling only to his equality with God but to take on human form and the nature of a slave (Phil 2:6-7). While *kenosis* remains a theological category that requires very careful qualification given some past (mis)application, the self-emptying service that it represents and requires remains a central feature of the call to follow Jesus (John 13:13-15; Matt 16:24; Mark 8:34; Phil 2:5).<sup>3</sup> Such Christological *phronesis* or practical reasoning "dominates the

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<sup>3</sup> Theologians and scholars of various kinds object to a call for *kenosis* or self-emptying, due to the extent to which such calls are all too frequently unequally or inappropriately applied to people in different subject positions in a way that can perpetuate oppression (Cornwall 2015, 6). These concerns are quite legitimate, and space does not permit the kind of in-depth response they deserve and which others have offered (Coakley 1996). In a more limited sense, teachers of all stripes likely wield some positional authority within classrooms and, at least in that limited

imperative moments of the letter” (Fee 1995, 184). For Christian teachers, the kenosis of Christ as reflected and refracted throughout the letter has direct pedagogical implications in both process and outcome.

The educational implications of Christ’s *kenosis* may be clarified by a brief turn to the function of education in Paul’s historical context, particularly since the formation called for in Paul’s letter to the Philippians offers a radical counter to imperial pedagogies of the day. In the Greco-Roman world, imitation of a master teacher provided a means of gaining social status; in other words, “mimetic education tended toward the notion of an upwardly mobile assimilation by the imitator or student to the likeness of the virtuous model” (Eastman 2008, 434). In the imagery of some Roman commentators, the intent of education was to complete a strenuous upward climb to increasingly exclusive levels of superiority (Cribiore 2005, 1).

The movement of Christ enacts radically subverts this pattern of imperial *paideia*, for Christ embodies a pedagogy of “downward mobility” by becoming human (Eastman 2011, 32). In what Eastman suggests is a “reverse mimesis” of the common pattern in which students “im-personate” the teacher through imitation, in manner of speaking Christ “im-personating” the human condition even to the point of death (Whitmarsh 2001, 93; Eastman 2008, 450). The Christ hymn presents this downwardly mobile pedagogy as *kenotic*, as self-emptying. A similar self-emptying, participatory identification with Jesus appears in Paul’s account of his desire to know Christ in “the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death” (Phil 3:10). Here, and throughout his reflections on his imprisonment, Paul presents himself as one possible mimetic instantiation of the Christological phronesis (Fowl 1998, 149). Quite practically speaking, for the community to “have the same mind as in Christ Jesus” means resisting “selfish ambition and conceit” and looking “not to [their] own interests, but to the interests of others (2:3-4).

When employing the authority they hold within educational spaces, Christian educators must also resist “selfish ambition and conceit” and look “to the interests of others.” Kenosis, understood in light of Paul’s emphasis on Christ’s participation in humanity’s situation and the

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sphere, I believe that kenosis as understood within a Pauline theology of participation offers some important guidelines. What it means for each individual with his or her own situation to teach somehow “kenotically” remains a matter of their individual discernment and, I suspect, will vary according to both person and situation.

subsequent possibility of human participation “in Christ,” offers a theological framework for participatory, student-centered use of authority in the classroom. Paul positions himself as a fellow participant with the Philippian community, whom he calls co-workers, so-soldiers, and finally co-imitators of Christ. While this theological framework may be newly applied to this aspect of teaching, the principle at work here is hardly new to educational discussions. Freire’s (1996) participatory pedagogy enacted by teacher-students and student-teachers toward the end of their mutual humanization presents a counter to domineering forms of pedagogy that reinforce oppressive conditions and tightly control status by keeping authority in the hands of teachers (61). As Groome (1991) notes, an emphasis on partnership “calls the teacher to a new self-image, away from answer person or controller of knowledge” yet it does not mean that “teachers forgo their responsibilities as enablers and resource persons” (143). The common calling to participate in Christ’s kenotic pattern ought to inform the way that Christian teachers engage students in educational contexts.

Finally, teaching for the formation for Christian vocation entails formation into the kenotic *phronesis* of Christ, which in relationship to the upwardly mobile aims of ancient (and modern!) education is “counter-cultural to the extreme” (Eastman 2008, 448). Stated differently, to follow Christian vocation to some extent means to be willing to become like Jesus – even like him in his death - by participating in the pattern of his life. And, indeed, such expectations of those who would follow Jesus litter the gospels. The call to service is obvious but bears repeating, particularly given that the educational frameworks that tend to dominate in Western cultures value individual success and competition over collaboration and mutual service. Indeed, “one begins to suspect that the link between crucifixion and imitation turns mimetic education upside down” (Eastman 2008, 437). Christian hope and Christian vocation both entail a certain level of holy foolishness in the willingness to follow Christ’s downwardly mobile trajectory of sacrificial service in trust in God’s redemption, exaltation, and new creation.

*Hope-Filled Vocation as Pedagogical Goal – “I press on . . . because Christ Jesus has made me his own.”*

Just before Paul enjoins the Philippians to become his co-imitators, he admits that he has not yet reached the goal of full participation with the resurrected Christ, but in light of that hope that he nonetheless presses on in the midst of unjust imprisonment and difficult circumstances. Paul’s outlook is future oriented – a forward-facing straining for the heavenly call of God in



Christ Jesus. Christian maturity, Paul claims, consists in having the same hope-filled, active *phronesis* (3:12-15). The implied metaphor of a racer's exertion, one straining forward toward an end goal in their distant line of sight, adds a further dimension to our understanding of hope. Formation for hope-filled vocation is, in some respect also formation for hope *as* vocation, hope as a form of Christian labor in response to God's call.

Christian hope, in this rendering, is hope in the power of Christ's resurrection and the final transformation of all things as part of the good and gracious kingdom of God. Paul goes on to speak about present Christian life in the language of citizenship, of a body politic that functions as an outpost of a heavenly citizenship in hostile territory (3:18-20). The language of "heaven" here may require some clarification in order to resist that language in an escapist way, as if the work of the church is to get people to heaven with negligible emphasis on addressing contemporary realities and issues. When Paul speaks of the "heavenward call of God in Christ Jesus (3:14) and of the Philippians "citizenship in heaven" (3:20), however, he is speaking about an active reality with bearing on the community's concrete, common life in their social context. Thus this is not a passive hope only in arriving at "that fair and happy land by and by" as the old hymn says, but a call to active participation in the body politic that is the body of Christ in the world.

In the midst of their difficult circumstances, Paul wants the Philippians to "live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ," and, in an effort to support that calling, Paul offers his own autobiography account of vocation as participation in Christ. He does so, explicitly recognizing that he has not already attained all that for which he hopes, yet he presses on in confidence. In the meantime, as those who recognize themselves as part of Christ's body-politic, hopeful living in the meantime requires action and labor, straining toward a future which we have not yet achieved and which we will not, in the end, achieve on our own merits but through the culmination of Christ's redemptive work. Finally, the cultivation of hope as a pedagogical goal is may well be the cultivation of a form of community property, held and stewarded by co-laborers, co-soldiers, and co-imitators in Christ.

Near the end of his account of his own vocation, Paul proclaims that he presses on that he might "take hold" of that for which he has been "taken hold of" by Christ, a subtle indication of the cooperative working of both divine and human agency that is apparent in other places in the Philippian letter (2:12-13). I would suggest that formation in hope-filled vocation is a similarly

cooperative endeavor, for Christian hope as Paul understands it is ultimately and always a reality dependent on the resurrected Lord but also modeled and cultivated within the Christian community. Teaching toward hope-filled vocation as disciples of Christ, then, requires a community of faithful exemplars, of mutual self-less service, and common participation in the pattern of Christ's life in joyful anticipation of the resurrection.

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