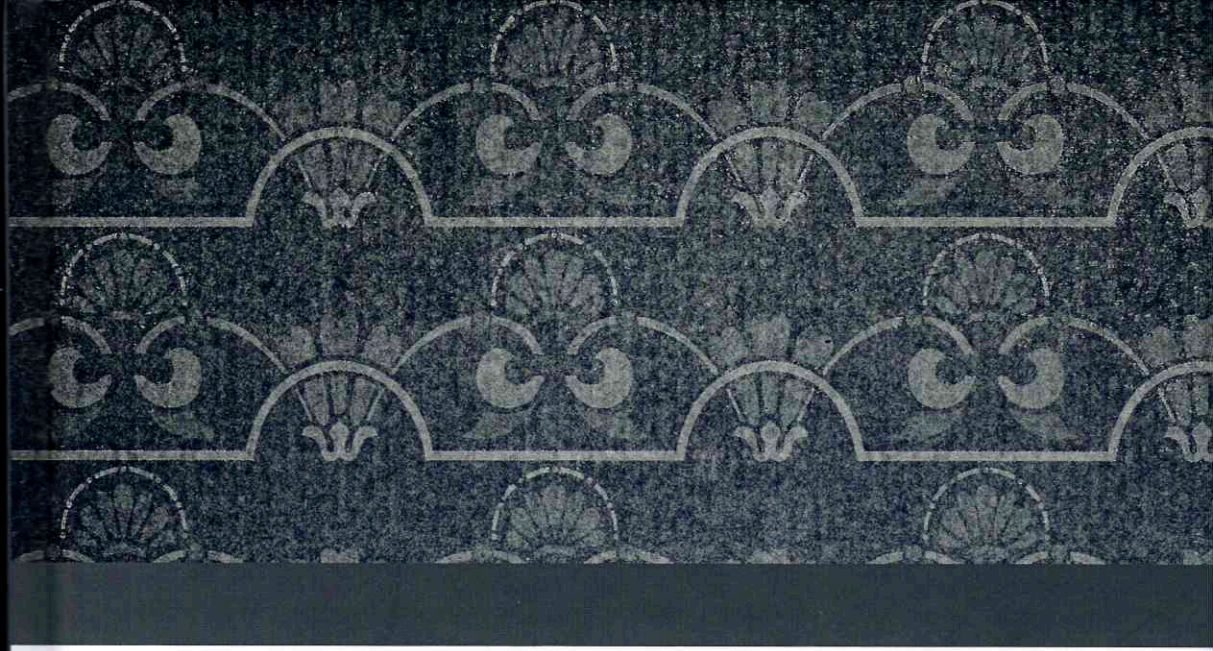

PERSONHOOD IN THE BYZANTINE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

EARLY, MEDIEVAL, AND MODERN PERSPECTIVES

Edited by
Alexis Torrance and Symeon Paschalidis

ROUTLEDGE

Personhood in the Byzantine Christian Tradition

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2018
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Torrance, Alexis, 1985– editor. | Paschalidis, Symeon, editor.
Title: Personhood in the Byzantine Christian tradition : early, medieval, and modern perspectives / edited by Alexis Torrance and Symeon Paschalidis.
Description: New York : Routledge, 2018. | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2017060120 | ISBN 9781472472786 (hardback : alk. paper) | ISBN 9781315600185 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Theological anthropology—Christianity. | Human beings. | Orthodox Eastern Church—Doctrine.
Classification: LCC BX342.9.M35 P477 2018 | DDC 233/.50882819—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2017060120

ISBN: 978-1-4724-7278-6 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-315-60018-5 (ebk)

Typeset in Times New Roman
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

MIX
Paper from responsible sources
FSC® C013056

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

1 Personal relationship as a prerequisite for moral imitation according to the Apostle Paul

Christos Karakolis

When I received the tempting proposal to read a paper on the New Testament conception of person within the framework of a conference on personhood in Orthodox theology, my first thought was to decline since the New Testament does not seem, at first view at least, to contain anything relevant to the so-called theology of the person according to modern-day Orthodox theology.[1] However, on second thought, I wondered whether the New Testament, while never using the term "person" in its later philosophical and theological sense, does contribute to this issue, although by means of a different terminology. Since in the contemporary Orthodox context a real dialogue between biblical and systematic theology is almost nonexistent,[2] I finally considered this invitation as an important opportunity and a positive challenge.

In the New Testament, the term *πρόσωπον*[3] should be rather understood in light of its Old Testament usage,[4] meaning physical presence, external appearance, or even just "face," but certainly not in the sense of the contemporary theological concept. For this reason, I chose to focus on the field of personal relationships since, evidently, personal relationships can only be held by persons, while by the quality of such relationships, significant conclusions can be drawn about the traits and qualities of the respective persons and at a second step also of the concept of person as a whole.

From the point of view of New Testament theology, personal relationship should not be examined on an exclusively horizontal axis – namely, with regard to the relations of the faithful to each other and to the world – but also on a vertical axis – i.e., with regard to the relations between the faithful and the Lord Jesus Christ. In the latter case, the dimension of somehow participating in Christ's Passion, as well as in his resurrection, is necessarily included. In other words, personal relationship should not only be understood as communication between different parties but also as apprenticeship, simulation, and even identification, not only on the level of behavior but also on a deeper level of organic unity.[5]

Within the narrow limits of the present chapter, it is impossible to examine all of the parameters of the issue at hand in every single relevant text of the New Testament. Such an undertaking would need the space of a monograph. Therefore, I have limited myself to the epistles of Paul, which provide us with a variety of texts that deal with the theme of this chapter. My attention was especially caught

by one of the notable Pauline concepts with regard to personal relationships – namely, that of imitation.[6] In the present chapter, I will argue that in Paul, the theological concept of imitation is a corollary of personal relationship or, conversely worded, personal relationship is a prerequisite for imitation in its theological meaning. Therefore, apprehending this concept is crucial for the clarification of the meaning and the significance of personal relations in Paul.[7]

* * *

As is evident, especially in the *praescriptiones* of his epistles, Paul understands himself as being both a slave (*δοῦλος*)[8] and an apostle (*ἀπόστολος*)[9] of Jesus Christ. In the ancient biblical context, an *ἀπόστολος* was an envoy of someone superior to him running an errand or transferring a message on his master's behalf.[10] Therefore, these envoys could well be slaves.[11] A good slave was not only supposed to be fully devoted to his master but also ideally to know the mind – i.e., the way of thinking and the ultimate will – of his master.[12] On the other hand, the receivers of the master's message would (also ideally) have to welcome the envoy as though he were the sender himself.[13] The famous phrase of Paul *ζῶ δὲ οὐκέτι ἐγώ, ζῇ δὲ ἐν ἐμοὶ χριστός* ("it is no longer I who lives, but Christ who lives in me" – Gal 2:20) does not only imply Paul's mystical union with Christ[14] but also very practically that Paul is fully identified with Christ as his authorized representative and "apostle" in the sense of his envoy in order for the recipients of his preaching to believe in it and follow it as though Christ himself would be preaching to them.[15] Paul then carries out the will of Christ, represents him, and transfers his message – namely, the gospel – to the world because he already met and got to know him personally outside of the gates of Damascus,[16] where he was assigned with the role of apostleship.

In order to express his own particular relations with the members of his communities, Paul presents himself as their spiritual father,[17] thus drawing from ancient family imagery.[18] The unique relationship of a father with his children does not begin and end with their birth, but is lifelong and includes the appropriate training of the children and their adequate preparation so that when they become adults, the children will be capable of succeeding their father, possibly as heads and protectors of their initial family, and eventually as founders of their own patriarchal families. For their part, the children have to learn their father's profession by watching him practicing it in order to be able to absorb and put into practice everything he knows. An apprenticeship of this kind is realized by means of imitating the father – an imitation that necessarily presupposes personal contact and communication between the children and their father. Only in such a way can the children witness the actions of their father, try to imitate him, and, finally, acquire his skills, thus becoming enabled to succeed him in his profession when becoming of age.[19]

Of course, the relationship between father and son is not exhausted in a simple transfer of the former's knowledge and skills to the latter. In an ideal case, such a relationship is characterized by mutual trust, love, empathy, self-sacrifice,

unselfishness, sharing, and self-overcoming, in other words all qualities that are inherent to communion (*κοινωνία*).[20] It is in this light that we should understand Paul's admonitions toward the believers to imitate him as their spiritual father. There is a number of such direct prompts or references in the Pauline texts:

- I urge you, then, be **imitators** of me (1 Cor 4:16).
- Be **imitators** of me, as I am of Christ (1 Cor 11:1).
- Brethren, join in **imitating** me, and mark those who so live as you have an example in us (Phil. 3:17).
- And you became **imitators** of us and of the Lord (1 Thess 1:6a).[21]
- For you, brethren, became **imitators** of the churches of God in Christ Jesus which are in Judea; for you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out, and displease God and oppose all men by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they may be saved (1 Thess 2:14–16).

This last passage does not seem to be fully in line with the previous ones, because it presents imitation as a process that takes place without the requirement of personal communication, since, obviously, the members of the newly established community of Thessaloniki as a whole are not personally acquainted with the Christian communities of Judea. However, Paul makes use here of a logical chain, according to which the choice of unjustly suffering as a standard attitude to be imitated, is not limited to the churches of God in Judea, but is also found in the lives of the Lord Jesus, the prophets, and, finally, Paul himself along with his collaborators. Thus although not explicitly mentioned, it is clear that the imitation of the churches of Judea on the part of the Thessalonians is inextricably linked to imitating Paul, the prophets, and the apostles. It would just seem that here the concept of imitation is not yet as theologically as developed, as in Paul's later epistles.[22]

A similar use of the concept of imitation can be found in the Deutero-pauline 2 Thess:[23]

> For you yourselves know how you ought to **imitate** us; we were not idle when we were with you, we did not eat any one's bread without paying, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not burden any of you. It was not because we have not that right, but to give you in our conduct an example to **imitate**.
>
> (2 Thess 3:7–9; emphasis added)

Because of the limits of the present chapter, I will not be able to take into account the relevant passages of Ephesians and Hebrews,[24] which differ in significant ways from the more-or-less uniform Pauline line of thought that I previously sketched. This differentiation can be explained by the fact that both Ephesians and Hebrews were not written by Paul himself, but by unknown authors, probably after the apostle's death.[25] With regard to our theme, Ephesians in particular is the

only New Testament text that speaks of the possibility of a direct imitation of God himself (Eph 5:1).[26]

Apart from these direct references, Paul formulates even more indirect exhortations that are one way or another connected with the notion of imitation.[27] In this regard, Paul tends to portray himself as the model for the faithful to follow in the moral field. Philippians is an excellent case study in this regard. In this epistle, Paul urges the Christians of Philippi to remain united and warns them of the harmful influence of heretics, projecting himself as a role model. Concretely, at the beginning of Philippians, Paul presents himself not as focusing on any self-centered interests, but as prioritizing the spreading of the gospel and the spiritual interest of all other Christians:

> I want you to know, brethren, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ; and most of the brethren have been made confident in the Lord because of my imprisonment, and are much more bold to speak the word of God without fear. Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel; the former proclaim Christ out of partisanship, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in that I rejoice.
>
> (Phil 1:12–18)

In the same line, in Philippians 3, Paul presents himself as having willingly abandoned all of his advantages as a Jew in order to find Christ:

> But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own, based on law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.
>
> (Phil 3:7–9)

If we scrutinize the interrelation between the narrative (1:12–26) and the exhortative (1:27–2:18) part of Philippians,[28] we can deduce a strong semantic and theological correlation between them. By this means, Paul urges the believers to follow in their lives (imperative) what he has already realized in his own spiritual life (indicative).[29]

Of course, Paul does not consider himself as being the ultimate target of the imitation of the faithful, as he himself imitates Christ. However, he does not imitate Christ as his father – i.e., in the way that the faithful are expected to imitate him as their spiritual father – but, according to the above analysis, as his slave. Because the believers are the (spiritual) children of Paul and because Paul

is Christ's slave, the believers are also themselves slaves of Christ, since in the ancient world, slavery was hereditary.[30] On this basis, the faithful are practically urged to imitate Christ himself as their ultimate master by following the example of Paul, their spiritual father.

In the example of Philippians, the fact that the believers are expected to ultimately imitate Christ himself is clearly stated by Paul in his exhortation to them *συμμιμηταί μου γίνεσθε καθὼς κἀγὼ χριστοῦ* ("be imitators of me as I am of Christ" – 3:17), as well as in the epistle's famous Christological hymn (2:6–11), which is embedded in the exhortatory part of the letter (1:27–2:18). Paul introduces this hymn by the following admonition: "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus" (2:5). The hymn that follows refers accordingly to the Lord Jesus Christ's unity with God the Father, his self-humiliation, and his final exaltation by God in order to demonstrate what the daily moral practice of the faithful should look like.[31]

According to the aforementioned, in order for the faithful to be able to imitate Christ, they must first imitate Paul, who imitates Christ by way of his life because he has personally met and gotten to know Christ as the resurrected Lord, which is not the case for the faithful of his communities. In this regard, 2 Corinthians 5:16 makes a quite important distinction in the way one has to know Christ so as to be able and willing to imitate him, and thus reach salvation. Many have already witnessed Jesus *κατὰ σάρκα* (according to the flesh), but this is obviously an inadequate knowledge. Paul does not judge anyone according to the flesh because everything has been renewed through the Christ event (2 Cor 5:17; cf. Gal 6:15).[32] Consequently, Christ can only be imitated if he is viewed as the Son of God and the true Lord. Real imitation of Christ presupposes a genuine and deep perception of his true identity.

This certainly applies to Paul himself who was personally called by the resurrected to his apostolic office. However, this does not apply to the faithful of Paul's communities who only have an indirect relationship with Christ through the mediation of Paul being their spiritual father. It is noteworthy that the situation of the faithful within the present world is characterized by Paul as *in Christ* (*ἐν χριστῷ*). This expression denotes the new life that the believer acquires in baptism, thus organically participating in the body of Christ – namely, the Church.[33] This kind of participation implies the existence of an organic link with all other believers and, on a higher level, with Christ himself as well. However, *ἐν χριστῷ* does not imply or presuppose the existence of a personal relationship with Christ. Such a relationship is signified in Paul by the expression *with Christ* (*σὺν χριστῷ*) that refers to the Parousia of the Lord, when believers are expected to meet Christ in heaven and from then on to always be with him (1 Thess 4:16f).[34]

Therefore, we should here speak of an imitation-chain. The believers are able to imitate the Apostle Paul, whom they personally know, while Paul is able to imitate and indeed does imitate the Lord Jesus Christ, whom he also personally knows. On the other hand, the believers cannot directly imitate Christ, but only through Paul, which should, however, be more than enough for them, since Paul has already reached the ultimate level of imitation, which is complete identification

with Christ: *ζῶ δὲ οὐκέτι ἐγώ, ζῇ δὲ ἐν ἐμοὶ χριστός* ("it is no longer I who lives, but Christ who lives in me" – Gal 2:20).[35]

Lastly, it is of significance that in Philippians Paul does prepare the faithful even for the worst case scenario – namely, not only a long or even permanent absence of him from the community because of imprisonment or other unforeseen events (1:27; 2:23) but also his possible death that may even precede Christ's imminent Parousia (1:20, 23). In view of such a perspective, Paul had to give a convincing answer to the question about the possibility of Christ's imitation by the newly converted faithful who had never met him personally and thus were not able to be parts of the aforementioned threefold imitation-chain (faithful-Paul-Christ). In Philippians, Paul's indirect answer to this problem is the recommendation of Timothy not only as his faithful disciple and spiritual child but also as his absolutely trustworthy envoy (2:19–23). Paul implies that Timothy has already imitated him in an excellent way, as a son who imitates his father in learning his father's profession and serving his father at it (*ὡς πατρὶ τέκνον σὺν ἐμοὶ ἐδούλευσεν εἰς τὸ εὐαγγέλιον*: "as a son with his father he has served me in the gospel" – 2:22), and is thus an exemplary case that should be followed by the members of the Philippian community.[36] This brief recommendation of Timothy clearly extends the aforementioned imitation-chain. In the absence of the apostles, the community members should search for imitation examples in the persons of the apostles' faithful disciples. At this point, Paul practically introduces the concept of imitating Christ through the imitation of the saints, and thus indirectly the long historical and spiritual imitation-chain that connects the present-day Church with her founder, the Lord Jesus Christ himself.

It is probably not coincidental that in Philippians, right after the recommendation of Timothy, Paul even includes a recommendation of Epaphroditus (2:25–30), an envoy of the Philippian community to Paul and probably the bearer of the Apostle's letter back to the Philippians.[37] Paul characterizes Epaphroditus as his *brother, fellow worker, and fellow soldier*, characterizations that position Epaphroditus among some of Paul's closest disciples and associates.[38] Furthermore, Paul urges the Philippians to receive Ephaphroditus *with all joy* and honor him, as well as other people like him *because he nearly died for the work of Christ*. Without stating it clearly, Paul presents Epaphroditus as actually imitating him in his self-sacrificial spirit for the sake of the gospel (cf. Phil 1:12–18). Epaphroditus, as an exemplary community member, could be viewed as the missing link in the imitation-chain between the apostles (Paul) and their immediate disciples (Timothy) on the one hand, and the Christian community on the other hand (the Philippian Christians).

* * *

On the basis of the aforementioned analysis, it would seem that the spiritual life, or else the new life in Christ according to Paul's theological terminology, presupposes the practice of imitation, which is based on personal relationships. This kind of imitation ultimately goes back to Christ himself, however always through the

individual spiritual master and father or mother who leads his or her children in Christ through his or her example toward their final salvation.

As previously mentioned, eventually, everything goes back to Christ. Every personal relationship reaches its full potential, when it is connected with the person of Christ as the perfect example. In Paul, Christology is the fundament and the source of ethics.

Personal relationships in Christ are based on humility (Phil 2:3f), following the example of Jesus Christ himself (Phil 2:5–8). Humility is inextricably connected with love, which according to Paul is the most significant virtue and the decisive criterion for the value and genuineness of all other virtues (1 Cor 13). Christian spiritual life cannot be realized unless it is truly based on such personal relationships that are characterized by humility and unconditional love.

In my previous analysis, I mentioned that a personal relationship with Christ is the presupposition of Christ's imitation, at least for Paul himself as an apostle who witnessed Christ and was called by him to his apostolic office and mission. Paul, however, awaited the coming of the Lord during his own life span.[39] To him, it was unthinkable that later Christian generations would follow in a time when all apostles would have passed away.[40] Therefore, while he did consider the possibility of Christ's imitation through personal relationship not only with an apostle but also with an apostle's disciple, he did not go as far as to speak of what has later become known as *imitatio sanctorum*, an imitation that is not only necessarily based on personal acquaintance but also on just reading the vitae of the saints or more generally by listening to narratives about them within the ecclesial social space.

I believe that the imitation of the saints, as well as the deeply rooted belief of the possibility of a mystical relationship with Christ, the apostles, and the saints, both on an individual and on a social-liturgical level is to a great extent historically and theologically based on Paul's teaching about personal relationships in Christ as the presupposition of imitation and consequently of Christian ethos and soteriology. In light of this position, it would perhaps be a gain for the contemporary Orthodox theology of personhood if it would turn its attention also to its biblical roots and in particular to the relevant Pauline teaching. Such a shift of focus would in my opinion not only be an enrichment but also could offer an additional possibility for a reorientation in a field of studies that nowadays seems to have reached a theological plateau.

Notes

1 Cf. esp. Yannaras (2007); Zizioulas (1985), as well as the critique on their positions on personhood by Williams (1972); Agourides (1990).
2 Cf. the relevant critical review by Stylianopoulos (1997), pp. 162–85. The only text known to me that criticizes the Orthodox "theology of the person" from the point of view of contemporary biblical scholarship is the aforementioned text of Agourides (1990).
3 There are 76 references of the word πρόσωπον in the New Testament, while in the LXX, it occurs over 1,200 times.

4 Cf. Eduard Lohse, "πρόσωπον," *TWNT* 6, pp. 771–4.
5 Cf. the characteristic example of 1 Cor 12:12–27 in which Paul presents the church as being identical with the crucified and resurrected body of Christ, and her members as organic parts of this body. See on this dimension of Pauline ecclesiology Matera (2012), pp. 136–7.
6 On the Pauline concept of imitation, see the comprehensive presentation of Burridge (2007), esp. pp. 144–8.
7 I will limit my main focus on the Pauline *Homologoumena* according to the current research consensus – namely, Rom, 1 and 2 Cor, Gal, Phil, 1 Thess, and Philem; cf. on the issue of the so-called Deutero-pauline literature Boring (2012), pp. 319–28. This focus should offer a clearer view of the understanding of the historical Paul himself.
8 Rom 1:1; Gal 1:10; Phil 1:1; cf. also the Deutero-Pauline Tit 1:1, in which the author makes a distinction between being a slave of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ.
9 1 Cor 1:1; 2 Cor 1:1; Gal 1:1; 1 Thess 2:7; cf. also the Deutero-Pauline references Eph 1:1; Col 1:1; 1 Tim 1:1; 2 Tim 1:1; Tit 1:1. The two terms are expressly combined in Rom 1:1. There are of course even more indirect references to both terms in the Pauline literature.
10 On the tradition-historical background, and the meaning of *ἀπόστολος* in Paul, see de Boer (2011), pp. 21–6.
11 Cf. Bash (1997), p. 6.
12 Cf. Harrill (2012), pp. 86–8.
13 See the relevant discussion in Orr (2014), pp. 161–74.
14 Cf. Arnold (2014), pp. 155–6.
15 Cf. Orr (2014), pp. 169–71.
16 Cf. Acts 9:3–8; 22:6–11; 26:12–19; Rom 1:1; 1 Cor 15:10; Gal 1:15–17.
17 On the other hand, it is noteworthy that Paul usually calls the faithful brethren (*ἀδελφοί*), especially when wanting to stress the fact of their common spiritual adoption by God; see the relevant discussion in Lewis (2016), pp. 97–9, with regard to the relevant references in Rom 1–5.
18 Cf. 1 Cor 4:15: "For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel" (all English translations of the Greek New Testament text have been taken from the RSV); cf. Stettler (2014), pp. 365–6.
19 Professions in antiquity were usually hereditary; cf., for instance, York (2012), p. 22; Clarke (1971), pp. 110–13.
20 A very important term not only for contemporary Orthodox theology (cf. MacDougall [2015], pp. 19–22) but also for Paul himself; cf. Rom 15:26; 1 Cor 1:9; 10:16; 2 Cor 6:14; 8:4; 9:13; 13:13; Gal 2:9; Phil 1:5; 2:1; 3:10; Philem 6. See on *κοινωνία* in Paul, Ogereau (2014), pp. 348–50; Matera (1996), pp. 175–7; Thiselton (2000), pp. 103–6, among others.
21 On the basis of the earlier analysis, the expression "through us" should be implied after the word "and." Here Paul states clearly enough that the Thessalonians should first imitate himself and then only at a second step also the Lord; contra Weima (2014), p. 90.
22 1 Thess is Paul's first epistle and the most ancient Christian document; cf. Boring (2012), pp. 209–10.
23 On the Deutero-Pauline character of 2 Thess see *ibid.*, 362–5.
24 Eph 5:1; Heb 6:12; 13:7.
25 On the problems of dating and authorship of these two epistles, see Boring (2012), pp. 345–6 and 413–21, respectively.
26 On the notion of God's imitation, see Lincoln (1990), pp. 310–11.
27 See Gerber (2005), pp. 415–20.
28 Cf. Alexander (1989), esp. pp. 94–6.
29 In my still unpublished paper 'Ο δέσμιος Παύλος και το ήθος των πιστών των Φιλίππων: Νοηματικές αντιστοιχίες και ηθική διδασκαλία στο Φιλ. 1,12–2,18' (forthcoming in the volume of the conference *Παῦλος – Φίλιπποι δύο χιλιετίες: Τό εὐρωπαϊκό ὅραμα*

τοῦ Ἀποστόλου τῶν Ἐθνῶν, which took place in Philippi from May 20 to 22, 2011), I have attempted a detailed comparative study between Phil 1:12–26 and 1:27–2:18 on the level of both semantics and ethics.

30 See Volti (2012), p. 2.

31 Being actually in a poetic form, the Christological hymn leaves a much more intense effect on its listeners than a simple narrative would do; cf. Travers (2005), p. 595.

32 Cf. Harris (2005), pp. 427–30.

33 Cf. the relevant discussion on the various nuances of *ἐν χριστῷ*, including the ecclesiological one, in Moule (1977), pp. 54–96.

34 On the use and the significance of the expression *σὺν χριστῷ* in Paul, see Dunn (1998), pp. 401–4.

35 Cf. Colijn (2010), pp. 281–2.

36 It is in this spirit that Timothy should be received by the faithful of the church community in Philippi, cf. Heil (2010), pp. 134–5.

37 Cf. O'Brien (1992), p. 278.

38 Cf. Rom 16:3.9.21.23; 1 Cor 1:1; 2 Cor 1:1; 2:13; 8:18.22f; 12:18; Phil 4:3; 1 Thess 3:2; Philem 1.7.16.20.24 as well as Eph 6:21; Col 1:1; 4:7.9.11 from the Deutero-pauline epistles.

39 Cf. characteristically Rom 13:11; 1 Cor 7:29–31; 16:22; Phil 4:5; 1 Thess 4:14–5:11.

40 On the so-called Pauline *Naherwartung*, cf. Plevnik (1997), pp. 276–81.

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