

**Eric Liddell Missions Lecture**  
**15 July, 2011**  
**Crossway College, Brisbane, Australia**  
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**Title: Success or Obedience: the challenge for missions.**

Thesis statement: To advance the gospel and live as citizens of God's kingdom, two key temptations must be overcome: (a) the temptation to battle human authorities or institutions and (b) the temptation to follow human wisdom.

**Introduction**

"But one thing I do," declares Paul to the Philippians, "forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:13-14). In a similar vein, Eric Liddell's character in the award winning 1981 movie *Chariots of Fire* delivers the famous line, "I believe God made me for a purpose – for China – but when I run I feel his pleasure and to give it up would be to hold him in contempt." These statements vibrate with intensity and passion. They can also be twisted to indicate an arrogant triumphalism. The latter assessment is based on a failure to appreciate the core conviction of both men as to God's absolute sovereignty over their path, and their total surrender to his purposes in their lives. In this they testify that to advance the gospel and to live as citizens in God's kingdom, two key temptations must be overcome. First, Paul indicates, and Liddell (1902-1945) demonstrates, that a believer's battles are not against human institutions or authorities. Rather, Christ's work defeats evil at its root, in the spiritual realm. Second, Paul critiques the human desire for fame, power and prestige, and Liddell testifies to this hard fight against the pull of the world's veneration.

A quick examination of each man's life reveals an interesting commonality – both were imprisoned for an extensive portion of their ministry, Paul in Rome and Liddell in Weihien (Weifong), China. And in both cases, the imprisonment was based directly on their gospel ministry. Their experiences bring to the surface two questions which will occupy our time this evening. First, what did Paul and Liddell think about Empire, for it was because of imperial hopes on the part of the Romans and the Japanese that the two were imprisoned. Another way of stating this is: *What were they fighting?* Were they focused on defeating imperialism? These questions consider the hotly debated topic current in Pauline studies, namely the question of Imperial Rome's impact on Paul's thought. The question is complicated because of Paul's own Roman citizenship. Having explored the impact of Rome and the imperial cult in Paul's work, we will look at Liddell, citizen of the British Empire interned by imperial Japan, and examine his views on Empire. A second question focuses on how they understood their imprisonment; it can be stated thusly, *What were they fighting for?* Said another way, did they see their detention inhibiting God's call or their own influence for good in the world? In particular, I will delve into the siren call of celebrity culture that elevates its heroes to places of preeminence. Here is where you and I fit into the picture, as I will consider how the larger Christian community responded to their imprisonment. In the end I hope to show that it is not Paul who imagined contending with Caesar when he declared that Jesus is Lord. No, it was not Paul, but it was some in and out of the church who desired that Paul be made the celebrity that Caesar was. It is in fact some Christians today who desire their pastors, athletes, wealthy business

owners to be a Caesar in and for the world. They desire Christian celebrities, hall-of-fame contestants in the world's game of life.

### **I. What were they fighting? The Question of Imperialism in Paul and in Eric Liddell's ministries**

Turning first to the broader question of context, we are immediately faced with the role of politics in shaping religious thought and expression. In asking "what were they fighting," and in raising the question of imperialism in its Roman, British and Japanese varieties, we raise delicate and complicated questions of Christian involvement in the complex geopolitical machine. My goal is quite specific. I would like to explore Paul's views on imperial Rome as evidenced primarily in Philippians and to a lesser extent, Ephesians. The question is whether Paul exhibits an anti-imperial stance, and whether we should then use "anti-imperial" lens in viewing Paul's message. The benefit of examining Paul's perspective concerning this question is not only so that we have an accurate understanding of Paul's historical setting, but that we better appreciate his eschatological vision for believers, and for this world and the world to come. To anticipate my conclusions, I suggest that Paul did not engage directly or covertly in a specific critique of the imperial cult or of imperial Rome. And I will argue that Liddell shares a similar perspective, namely that the gospel's overarching critique of all powers and authorities which stand in opposition to God, does not focus specifically on challenging imperial powers.

#### **A. Paul and Imperial Rome**

The subject of the Roman Empire arises naturally in a study of Paul's letter to the Philippians, for several reasons. First, the city itself was a Roman colony, and had the rights and privileges of a city on Italian soil (*ius italicum*), a rare honor at the time. Second, Paul writes the letter while chained to a Roman soldier under what we would call house arrest, and in close proximity to the Praetorian Guard, the elite force protecting the emperor. Third, Paul uses explicitly civic or political terms in 1:27 (*politeuesthe*) and 3:20 (*politeuma*), and describes Jesus as Savior, an unusual term for Paul, but more commonly found describing the emperor or a victorious general. The majority of commentators mention the imperial cult as a social reality present at Philippi and thus part of the historical fabric of the young church's world.

#### **i. Postcolonial Theory and Paul**

But others go further to suggest an explicit anti-imperial position in Paul's message. Of these, some stress more strongly the direct confrontation with the imperial cult they see embedded in the letter. They argue that the historical situation was such that Paul needed to encode his anti-imperial comments for fear of reprisals by government forces. Others use postcolonial hermeneutics to probe the relationship between the oppressed (Christian believers) and the oppressor (Roman imperial rule, often seen as located in the emperor and the imperial cult). This hermeneutic grew from the poststructuralist perspective on power and text. This literary theory connects the study of Philippians (or Paul's letters generally) with the current discussions of globalization and neo-colonialism. One need not embrace completely postcolonial hermeneutics to take up their questions about power and imperialism in the historical reconstruction of Paul's letters. The latter position is represented by Richard Horsley,

N. T. Wright and Warren Carter,<sup>1</sup> whose ideas I will interact with in my argument below. These men do not necessarily agree with each other in details, but all suppose that the letter to the Philippians reveals a conflict between Paul and imperial Rome, located most directly in the imperial cult. Carter argues that generally, an author from the oppressed or subjected classes such as first century Christians will employ indirect, subtle and concealed resistance. This might take the form of stories that stress the dignity of the oppressed, or a reversal of roles, or “coded” or “double” talk.<sup>2</sup> He claims that while a surface meaning suggests compliance, a deeper meaning known to insiders, invites resistance to the status quo. Carter contends that the gospel message not only challenges the imperial ideology, it also reconfigures the very image of community from one composed of a hierarchy of classes, to one which promotes equitable treatment of all. It is not simply a reversal of the status quo, but a reordering of society. Three specific verses in Philippians are usually pointed to as key indications of Paul’s view on the imperial cult and the Christian’s relationship to it: 1:27; 2:5-11; 3:20-1. Because of time constraints we will examine only chapter three.

#### ii. Phil 3:20-1 “*politeuma*” and “*sōtēr*” (Citizenship and Savior)

The center of the anti-imperial reading of Philippians is located in these verses, particularly in Paul’s use of the terms “*politeuma*” and “*sōtēr*.” Looking at 3:20, Carter suggests that Paul re-contextualizes the Philippians’ citizenship; he re-orders their perceptions about everyday values and commitments from a focus on the Empire to a focus on Jesus as Savior.<sup>3</sup> Carter suggests Paul asks implicitly those believers who are citizens to renounce their status and privilege. Wright reminds readers that a Roman colony such as Philippi promoted the ideology of their home, namely Rome. He sums up Paul’s counter message to be “Jesus is Lord,” with the unstated implication “and Caesar is not.”<sup>4</sup> Wright contends that Paul both submits to authorities as well as calls officials to account if they overstep their duty, and Paul fearlessly announces a new way in the gospel, which stresses a different allegiance.

Wright proposes that Paul’s discussion of Judaism earlier in chapter three is a coded message for the Philippians to reject their privileged status as citizens of a Roman colony, and embrace the new status as a member of God’s kingdom (although Wright elsewhere points out that not every believer would have had Roman citizenship).<sup>5</sup> Paul’s call to imitate him is a reference to giving up social status, even as did Paul within Judaism (3:17, see also 3:5-7). Paul had pride in his Jewish heritage, so too Wright argues the text implies the Philippians were in danger of having pride in their Roman status, and thus would miss the true call of the gospel of suffering, and the true victory of the returning Christ. In holding their Roman citizenship lightly, Paul encourages the Philippians to redirect their focus to Christ as Lord and Savior. Because this message asks them to be disloyal to the Emperor, Paul speaks in code. But he hints at his purpose when in 3:1 he writes that he is trying to keep them “safe” in writing as he does.

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<sup>1</sup> Warren Carter, *The Roman Empire and the New Testament: An Essential Guide* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006). See also Richard Horsley, *Paul and Roman Imperial Order* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2004); N. T. Wright, *Paul in Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Carter, *The Roman Empire*, 12.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>4</sup> Wright, *Paul*, 69.

<sup>5</sup> N.T. Wright, “Paul’s Gospel and Caesar’s Empire by N.T. Wright,” n.p. [cited 19 July 2011]. Online: <http://web.archive.org/web/20071021030904/http://www.ctinquiry.org/publications/wri... 9/03/2010>.

A second key term in 3:20-21 is *Sōtēr* or Savior. This is the only place in the undisputed Pauline letters that we find this term.<sup>6</sup> Most commentators note at least an echo of the claim that Caesar is Savior.<sup>7</sup> Those who suggest an anti-imperial reading emphasize that Paul directly challenges the imperial cult and the emperor's claims on allegiance in identifying Jesus Christ as Savior.

## **B. Evaluation of the Anti-Imperial Readings of Philippians**

### **i. Problems with Historical Reconstruction related to Benefaction**

Those who read Paul's argument as anti-imperial rightly draw attention to the proclamation of power underlying the imperial cult; however, they fail to adequately account for the prominence of benefaction that motivated worship and honor of the virtuous emperor. Benefaction was the grease that oiled the social wheels of society; a patron was honored in this honor/shame culture by clients who were duty bound to praise their benefactor. The anti-Empire readings focus too narrowly on assertion of power in the imperial cult, and simplify the interaction at the level of conflict between claims of deity (Jesus or Caesar). To use an analogy, we do not have here something like a boxing match between Jesus and Caesar, and gathered about the ring are the crowds cheering on their favorite. Instead, the imperial cult is arguably the most prominent vehicle used to honor the one who benefited the cities. The cult involved people – they were not spectators. If the inscriptions are to be believed, the end of civil wars, the relative calm and inflowing wealth to many of the cities in Italy, Greece, Asia Minor, Syria and Egypt all generated encomiums as the proper response to such largess. Benefaction's importance in the imperial cult highlights the relationship between the ruled and their ruler, the supreme patron who was honored through the cult. The relationship was governed by the protocols of honor that structured the ancient social world. One might argue that the imperial cult was inevitable, given that benefaction ordered relationships in the Roman world. It was unthinkable not to honor one who gave you a gift, and if that gift was the cessation of civil war, or a land grant, or safety from outsiders, or special honors of citizenship, it was essential that proper honor was given. Even Jews at this time honored the Emperor by offering sacrifices to God on his behalf each day in the Temple.

Moreover, insufficient account has been taken of the fact that Livia, Augustus' wife, was divinized by her grandson, Claudius and the Senate. Thus when Paul arrived at Philippi or when he wrote the letter from Rome, a woman was also part of the imperial cult and worshiped as a goddess. This suggests that it was the power, influence and benefaction of the family, not simply the power of the ruler, which was venerated. By an accident of history we have a first century inscription from Neapolis dedicated to the priestess of the imperial cult; it is a useful reminder that women participated as cult leaders, and that women were worshiped as part of the cult. Thus the picture drawn by modern historians of direct confrontation between two 'men': Caesar and Jesus, misses the important fact that the imperial cult in Paul's day would have included Livia as well.

### **ii. Inconsistent or Incomplete Interpretations of Philippians**

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<sup>6</sup> See also Eph. 5:23, 2 Tim. 1:10, Titus 1:4, 2:13, 3:6. The term is used of God the Father in 1 Tim. 1:1, 2:3, 4:10; Titus 1:3, 2:10, 3:4.

<sup>7</sup> As preserved in the Priene calendar inscription of 9 BCE. See *Orientalis Graecae Inscriptiones Selectae* (2 vols. Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1903-5; repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1960 2.48-60 [= *OGIS* 458]).

Several questions arise from the argument that Paul used coded meaning in his letter. In the first chapter, Paul declares he is boldly proclaiming the gospel in the context of a Roman imprisonment and apparently the gospel is spreading. He is not using code in a place where you might assume he would. Nor is he counseling believers to be quiet, rather he is pleased that his situation has emboldened others.

**a. Phil. 1:13 “the Whole Praetorian Guard”**

The reference to the whole Praetorian Guard in Phil. 1:13 established that Paul writes while in prison in Rome. Even more, he is imprisoned in proximity to the most elite soldiers in the Empire, the Praetorian Guard. These 9,000 soldiers protected the emperor. In other words, they had power; Paul, apparently, was not intimidated by that power. In fact, he probably preached that Jesus is Lord and Savior (Phil. 3:20). He writes that his gospel is known throughout their numbers, even more, that some believers are emboldened to speak the gospel as well. His forthrightness about the gospel suggests two weaknesses in the anti-imperial readings. First, Paul’s titles for Jesus Christ, “Lord and Savior” (see 3:20), might have been viewed as challenging Caesar’s titles,<sup>8</sup> but only up to a point. When the anti-imperial interpretation argues that the claim “Jesus is Savior” is in direct opposition to the statement Caesar is savior, it sounds as though they are assuming two competing monotheistic assertions. However, those who call Caesar their savior also might hold that Isis or Mithras saves them from the perils of death. They would worship Caesar, but also Jupiter and Roma, and their local gods and goddesses. That is, the nubby problem of polytheism complicates the issue, for inherent in Paul’s claim that Jesus is Lord is the Jewish conviction that there is one God. Paul’s statement is an indictment of polytheism and paganism – not simply of the imperial cult. In fact, this seems to be how Paul’s antagonists viewed his message, according to Luke. In Acts we read the charge against Paul and Silas, “These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us Romans to adopt or observe” (Acts 16:20-21).

Nor does Paul seem to imagine that the Philippians’ letter (or any of his letters to churches) would be “private” in the sense that no one but believers would hear it. For example, Paul’s declaration in 1 Cor. 15:24 that Christ will destroy every ruler and authority and power should not be understood as something for the believers’ ears only. One chapter earlier, Paul indicates that the Corinthians’ church service is open to those uninitiated,<sup>9</sup> and most all scholars believe that Paul’s letter was read to the entire church (1 Cor 14:16). Thus anyone could have heard this statement. This matches his actions before the imperial guard - boldly speaking the gospel.

**b. Phil 3:20 “*politeuma*” and “*sōtēr*”**

Finally, the focus on the idea that Paul wrote in code might not do justice to Paul’s discussion in Phil 3:1-21, in at least two areas. First, in Phil 3:1 the definition of the term translated as “safe” should be re-evaluated. The Greek term *asphalēs* is used only here in Paul, and while one possible definition of the term is “safe,” the other common definition of “firm or secure” carries more weight. The better translation would read, “It is no trouble for me to write

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<sup>8</sup> See for example the Thessalonians who say that Paul declared that there is another *king* named Jesus (Acts 17:6-7).

<sup>9</sup> Anthony Thisleton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text in NIGTC* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1115.

the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you.” Specifically, Paul writes that he is not hesitating or shrinking back from writing the same things to them, and as we look at the immediate context, we see that in chapter two he has praised Timothy and Epaphroditus for their public witness for the sake of Christ. He asks that they rejoice in these men’s faithful service (2:28), and encourages them again in 3:1 to rejoice.

Second, the argument that Paul uses Judaism as code for Roman citizenship does not stand up to close scrutiny. Paul holds that the teachings and practices of Judaism are based on the revelation of the one true God, and Paul defends this even as he argues for the surpassing revelation in Christ Jesus. However, from Paul’s (Jewish) perspective, the ideology behind Roman citizenship and more specifically the imperial cult, can lay no claim to truth in the sense of God’s revelation. Thus while at a superficial level both systems presented honor to its members, in Paul’s case, the honor of being a member of God’s family is rooted in a true view of the world, while the honor granted a Roman citizen belongs in a different realm, one outside the kingdom of God.

Third, the interpretation that sees Paul’s discussion of Judaism here as code for paganism in that both systems could create issues of pride in status and social prestige does not fully appreciate or take account of the pressing situation faced by Paul in his efforts to distinguish the place of the Law vis-à-vis Christ. His warning that some might come to Philippi and teach adherence to the Law was not a paranoid vision on Paul’s part, but a lived reality in churches like those in the region of Galatia, only a few days journey from Philippi. Even the Corinthians are warned that “the sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law” (1 Cor 15:56), and the Roman Christians are treated to an extensive discussion on the relationship between Law and Christ’s work in redemption. Paul’s declaration that the church represents “the circumcision” (Phil. 3:3) is best understood as proclaiming the gospel’s preeminence over against traditional teachings on the Jewish Law, and not as code for renouncing Roman citizen status.

Archaeological evidence suggests that in Paul’s time Philippi did not have a synagogue building, and Luke describes the women’s meeting on the Sabbath as *outside* the city walls. From Acts (16:11-40) we learn that Paul is denounced as a Jew, and thus not like “us Romans” (16:20-1). These bits of evidence could add up to a conclusion that Philippi in Paul’s day was more anti-Jewish than other cities around the Empire. Thus their acceptance and even love for Paul signaled sympathy towards Judaism that stood out as distinctive in the city. Perhaps Paul’s discussion of his past as a Pharisee (3:4-6) was an attempt to ward off any potential fascination with combining a Jewish identity (circumcision) with the gospel. As further support for the latter theory, it is interesting that Paul would freely talk about Judaism, the identity so offensive to many in Philippi according to Acts, and not speak about his own Roman citizenship. If the issue was about citizenship, why not simply say, “Hold your citizenship lightly as I do mine”? Such a claim could be construed as appropriately humble and modest with one’s honored status.

### **iii. Alternative Interpretations**

If not an anti-imperial reading, what other interpretations are offered? Some commentators begin their study of Phil 3:20 not with a postcolonial framework but with a word study on *politeuma*, often noting its occurrences in contemporary Jewish works. For example, Markus Bockmuehl cites Philo, a first century CE Jew from Alexandria, who uses this term to

describe Jewish communities living outside of Judea or Galilee (*Gig* 61; *Conf.* 78).<sup>10</sup> From this evidence, Bockmuehl concludes that the term for Paul means something similar to the kingdom of God. Hansen agrees but adds that Paul was also drawing a parallel with the Philippians' situation as a Roman colony, a community living outside their homeland of Italy. Alongside the word analysis of *politeuma*, commentators also focus on the grammatical structure of the passage. Paul asks the Philippians to imitate him and observe the lives of those who are following the example of Paul and his fellow workers. He then gives two reasons ("for" 3:18) for his insistence on imitation: first, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ and, second, our citizenship is in heaven. John Reumann suggests that *politeuma* is the language of the enemies of 3:18 (who are not the same people as noted in 1:15, nor the Philippian authorities of 1:28).<sup>11</sup> These enemies are fundamentally against the message of the cross and its suffering; Reumann sees them as similar to the Jewish Christian missionaries who disrupted the Galatian churches. The term, then, is not a political statement against Rome, nor is it even a term that would help us discern Paul's view of imperial Rome. It is a term used by Paul's enemies in describing their church or community.<sup>12</sup> Reumann's argument does not rule out the possibility that Paul's enemies used *politeuma* in an anti-imperial way; it only establishes that it does not serve that function here in Philippians. In an important reminder, Reumann notes that *sōtēr* does not necessarily imply deity, but could refer to heroes and human benefactors and victorious generals. For example, the title was given to the great general and nemesis of Julius Caesar, Pompey the Great. Moreover, while Augustus Caesar is described as savior of the world on the Priene calendar inscription, he is not referred to in inscriptions or literature as Caesar *Sōtēr*.<sup>13</sup> Reumann's argument demonstrates that Paul's enemies need not be Rome. Moreover, he shows how language about citizenship could function metaphorically in intra-Christian disputes with little reference to pagan or imperial claims.

To wrap up this section of my argument, I suggest that Paul's primary focus in Philippians is not a coded attack on the imperial cult, but a spirited defense, public and bold, of the gospel which relegated to secondary status any pagan claims, be they part of the imperial cult or aspects of paganism and imperial government generally. All are part of the present evil age which is passing away. From a theological perspective, the focus on imperial cult and Christianity has raised awareness for Western Christians of the political power of the West. Perhaps most obviously, postcolonial theory is used by some authors to call attention to the indiscriminate power, or even abuse of power, used by the West (Great Britain and the United States primarily). By placing modern global western powers in Roman sandals, the New Testament read through postcolonial eyes serves to critique Western hegemony. It is not entirely clear to me, however, that one needs postcolonial thought to arrive at this spot, given the clear witness in Scripture to resist oppressive human actions, whether governmental or

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<sup>10</sup> Markus Bockmuehl, *Epistle to the Philippians in Black's New Testament Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1998), 233-4.

<sup>11</sup> John Reumann, *Philippians in The Anchor Yale Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 594-97.

<sup>12</sup> Reumann, *Philippians*, 584-89, places the discussion about imitation squarely in the Greco-Roman gentile world as the Greeks were quite familiar with the argument from imitation. The theme of imitation fits solidly in chapter 3:4, 8, 12 and 17. Paul's point is that the Philippians should share his view of faith and Law, of suffering and future glory, and hold firmly to this course.

<sup>13</sup> Reumann, *Philippians*, 577-8.

cultural or within families. As we turn to examine Eric Liddell's experiences as a citizen of the British Empire amidst the expansion of imperial Japan, we will be alert to the concerns of citizenship and imperial claims.

### **C. Eric Liddell and Imperial Japan**

Liddell was a Scottish Congregationalist. This identification is pertinent for two reasons: first, it suggests a posture of resistance to government, especially of the monarchical sort. Second, it confirms a Reformed theology. Within the Congregationalists there was a strong commitment to martyrdom, and they preserved a martyrology of those Scots who died for their faith. In his pamphlet "The Sermon on the Mount," Liddell recalls a story from "The Life Story of John Knox" (he cites J. J. Ellis, page 53) that the Earl of Moray had restored peace to the British kingdom in the early days of the Reformation.<sup>14</sup> But it was not complete peace, and the Earl was assassinated by a man who had been shown mercy previously by the Earl. In this note Liddell reveals his knowledge of the Reformers' history and their struggles to express their faith in peace.

From his church background, then, Liddell would have absorbed a strong conviction against hierarchical church governance, and would have celebrated the local independence of each congregation. These sentiments were attached to another aspect of his identity, namely his citizenship in the British Empire. At first blush, we might imagine that these two claims on his allegiance would pull against each other. But, as we saw with Paul's Roman citizenship, more than likely Liddell's imperial citizenship played an unobtrusive part in his daily life, a benign backdrop to his efforts on the mission field. His patriotism expressed itself on the track, where his competitive spirit sought victory over other runners.

#### **i. History of Western Missionaries in the East**

As a brief aside, I should note that in the past, scholars have decried the work of western missionaries in China and elsewhere as tools of imperialism. Conventional wisdom stated that British and European businessmen, missionaries and politicians eagerly exploited resources in China, India, and Africa, and strove to conquer indigenous peoples. This reading of history relies heavily on Marxist analysis, which links western missionary efforts with capitalism and imperialism. It also relies on a false assumption that colonial rule characterizes only the eighteenth to twentieth century, and is only characteristic of western countries, for this ignores the great empires of the Moghuls in Asia and the Ch'ing dynasty in China. Finally, this reading assumes imperial rule came to an end in the 1960s with the independence of British colonies in Africa. But the Russian empire in Asia continued through the Soviet period.<sup>15</sup>

Recently the history of British imperialism has been revised based on a more careful reading of British official documents and material from the churches themselves. Sir J. R. Seeley remarked in his 1883 lectures on the "Expansion of England" that "we seem, as it were, to have conquered and peopled half the world in a fit of absence of mind."<sup>16</sup> His point reveals the historical fact that for the most part, British imperialism was not driven by lust for power and profit. Formal rule was more costly than informal influence, thus the former avenue was taken

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<sup>14</sup> Eric Liddell, "The Sermon on the Mount," 7.

<sup>15</sup> Brian Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag: Protestant Missions and British Imperialism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Leicester: Apollos, 1990), 51.

<sup>16</sup> Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag*, 45.

only as a last resort, and often to right a social wrong, such as the slave trade. Most British citizens held to imperial idealism, a belief that the British Empire had a responsibility to rule justly and for the benefit of its subject peoples.

From the mid nineteenth century, Evangelicals in Britain stressed the cross of Christ, and the importance of self-sacrifice in missions. This attitude was coupled with a strong desire to end the slave trade and other social injustices such as widow burning in India. These two convictions – self sacrifice and social justice – created moral conundrums with regard to imperial expansion and direct British rule. For example, Evangelicals rejoiced that the British flag flew over Uganda, because this ended the slave trade;<sup>17</sup> however, Cecil Rhode's incitement of the Matabele war was roundly condemned.<sup>18</sup> Overall, the hope that the British government would be a force for moral good grew among Evangelicals as did the social gospel so that by the first decade of the twentieth century, church leaders decried jingoism but saw benevolent rule as opportunity to spread the gospel.

Not surprisingly to any of us who know the hearts of genuine servants of God, the new information reveals many missionaries as staunch defenders of their local congregants. The missionaries did not side with the colonizers, but with the indigenous people they served. This was certainly Liddell's attitude. Stories of his bravery in rescuing and saving injured Chinese who were under attack from the Japanese reveal a man with utterly selfless commitment to those God called him to serve. For example, in February, 1939, he and a Chinese believer helped a wounded Chinese man who had taken refuge in a filthy, open-air temple. To give aid was to invite retaliation by the Japanese military, who were housed only a mile from the temple. Emboldened by Luke 16:10 ("He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much: and he that is unjust in the least is also in much"), he carried the man to the hospital by cart twenty miles' journey. On the way, they detoured slightly to pick up another man whose neck had been slashed in a failed execution. The latter man survived, and became a Christian.<sup>19</sup> In this action we see selfless service – made possible in part because of his British citizenship to which others, including the Japanese, showed a greater measure of deference.

Given the elevated social status bestowed by virtue of his British citizenship, one might be tempted to argue that Liddell's actions are paternalistic, but such an evaluation misses the mark. The reality on the ground was that China was less technically advanced than western countries at the time, and so any mechanical, medical, farming, or educational assistance by a westerner would be done from an asymmetrical position. But the label 'paternal' suggests arrogance on the part of the westerner, and Liddell shows no signs of haughtiness. In his pamphlet "The Sermon on the Mount" (his notes for Sunday School teachers at the Union Church Sunday School in Tientsin, China, printed in 1936-7), he draws from Scripture and from stories of the faithful (often missionaries) to stress the virtues of humility and meekness. In examining Matt 7:12, he specifically targets the temptation to prejudge others. He speaks of self discipline as best exercised by placing oneself in the other person's shoes, so to speak. He cites Ez. 3:15 "I sat where they sat" and notes that from this humble position, the solution is

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<sup>17</sup> *Record*, 3 May 1895, 443. Quoted in D. W. Bebbington, "Atonement, Sin, and Empire, 1880-1914," Pages 14-31 in *The Imperial Horizons of British Protestant Missions, 1880-1914*, (Edited by Andrew Porter; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 27.

<sup>18</sup> *Christian World*, 29 November 1894. Quoted in D. W. Bebbington, "Atonement, Sin, and Empire, 1880-1914," 25.

<sup>19</sup> D. P. Thomson, *Eric H. Liddell: Athlete and Missionary* (Perth: Munro and Scott, Ltd., 1971), 151-53.

found to the “treatment of servants” and “the colour [sic] problem.”<sup>20</sup> When addressing Matt 5:9, “blessed are the peacemakers,” he stresses that a believer should have an “*active attitude towards the world*” (italics in the original) and follows with a list of examples which include the open ended question “What is our attitude to Chinese, those below us in social rank, etc?”<sup>21</sup> After this he points a second time in the lesson to 2 Cor 5:19-20, “that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.”

Additionally, it is entirely possible that Liddell or other British missionaries were in favor of their country’s involvement in China, however flawed it might be, because in their estimation, such involvement was far superior to the rule of the French or Portuguese, two countries interested in expanding their influence in the region. The reality of the day was that some western country would rule over China at this point in the latter’s history – perhaps Liddell believed it was better to have that authority be the British.

### **ii. Liddell’s Attitudes toward Imperialism**

Having set the stage for Liddell’s environment within China under British rule, we can now turn to specifics in his life that might shed light on his attitude toward imperialism. We will look first at his behavior which suggests that he was not preoccupied with the political events around him, or more specifically, that he accommodated himself to whatever political policies were in place. For example, as WWII heated up and the Japanese grew more powerful in China, Liddell’s pregnant wife, Florence, and their two daughters traveled to Canada, her home country. He continued preaching in interior China, now without the burden of worry for his family’s safety. One might suggest that his behavior reveals that he was uninterested theologically in the policies of secular government or imperial expansion, only concerned with “saving souls.” One might critique him for not working to make China safe from imperial claims, but rather focusing on the safety of the Chinese souls for eternity. Again, one might put forward that his acquiescing to imprisonment in the Japanese internment camp confirmed his disinterest in facing governmental evil and oppression.

This evaluation, however, does not take into account all the facts. The choice to send his daughters out of harm’s way was a joint decision by he and his wife, and given that she was pregnant with their third child, it was all the more sensible that she go with her young daughters to a place of relative safety. We should not forget that her journey across the seas and then across Canada was not a pleasure trip. Nor should we forget the reality of war that women captives are abused in ways often not meted out to male captives. These realities certainly played into the Liddells’ decision to remove their children from China. Additionally, Eric Liddell’s behavior in the internment camp speaks not of quiet compliance, but of measured opposition buoyed by a strong eschatology that held tightly to the promise of the new heavens and new earth. I offer two examples of his steadfast hope. First, the unanimous testimony of those who wrote about their experience at the Weihsien internment camp reveals a joyful Liddell whose energy and interest conveyed a genuine love for the children with him in the camp. As we are well aware, children can smell hypocrisy; if Liddell was putting on a show of

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<sup>20</sup> Liddell, “The Sermon on the Mount,” 22.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

affection with no genuine depth – the children would quickly discern that. Instead, every witness testifies to Liddell’s authentic enjoyment of their company.

Second, he was part of a daring, ongoing information-gathering conspiracy. David Michell [sic]<sup>22</sup> recounts the chilling tale of escaped prisoners who after several months return to the area outside the camp, having procured a radio. They discover the news about Allied victories, for the war would be ending fourteen months later, and translate the information in code on a small strip of silk, encasing it in a bit of rubber. An accomplice, a coolie who cleaned the cesspools, would stuff the rubber ball up his nose, thus making the message undetectable to the Japanese guards. Once at work in the camp, the coolie would blow his nose and the pellet would fall to the ground, later to be picked up and decoded by one of the camp’s Catholic priests. The news of the Allies’ victories spread through the camp, lifting the prisoners’ spirits. Liddell was one of those who conveyed the information. Finally, while he does not accept the theological position of pacifism, he holds up William Penn as an example of a peacemaker. Moreover, he is acutely aware of the difficulties of nations getting along, stating “How easy it is to cause strife, how hard to cause peace. How much harder between people of different nations.”<sup>23</sup> This speaks strongly against any imperial conceit or paternalism.

These examples reveal a man who resisted in the way that Paul resisted – by holding fast to the reality that “to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Phil 1:21). Human governments have no power over those who do not fear death. Liddell’s resistance reveals the conviction that human enemies, in this case imperial Japan, can be resisted at the level of information gathering. Even more, they can be resisted at the supernatural level with the joy of the Lord, the confidence of sure salvation, and the hope of a secure future in the new heavens and new earth. The gospel message was not only for the here and now, nor was it only about the soul, but also was about practicing obedience in preparation for eternal life with God.

In sum, the relationship of both Paul and Eric Liddell to their citizenship is complex. Both men were citizens of an imperial power. Both saw some value in that status, but their overwhelming self identification was as citizens of God’s kingdom. This raises the question about proper conduct as a citizen of God’s kingdom, a topic to which Paul speaks in Philippians chapters 1 and 3, and throughout his letters. In particular, how did the imprisonment or internment of these men shape perception of them by their peers? In Paul’s case, we see in his Letter to the Philippians that some used the opportunity of his lengthy imprisonment to challenge Paul’s status as an apostle, as well as attack his personal integrity, “some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry,” and “other proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment” (Phil 1:15-17). Paul has an entirely different perspective on his imprisonment. He states emphatically to the Ephesians that his chains are “their glory.” I will return to this powerful and enigmatic declaration, but first, we will look at how Liddell understood his Kingdom citizenship specifically in relation to his celebrity status.

## **II. What were they fighting for?**

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<sup>22</sup> David Michelle, “Eric Liddell, 1902-1945,” n.p. [cited 19 July, 2011]. Online: [http://eglise-evangelique-colombes.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=52&Itemid=1&lang=en](http://eglise-evangelique-colombes.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=52&Itemid=1&lang=en).

<sup>23</sup> Liddell, “Sermon on the Mount,” 9.

The temptation to perform for crowds is as old as Christianity itself. Jesus was asked by his accusers to show them a sign (see for example Luke 23:8), and Paul was chastised for not speaking with the sophisticated rhetoric that his Greek and Roman listeners desired (2 Cor 10:10). Not much has changed in the intervening 2,000 years. We are still looking for the next “Caesar,” the man or woman who seems larger than life and who seems able to elevate our own status if we but jump on their bandwagon.

#### **A. Liddell and Olympic Fame**

Liddell’s gold medal secured for him international fame. Moreover, his immovable stance in refusing to compete on Sunday established beyond a doubt that he was a strong Christian. Thus from a human perspective, he demonstrated the maxim that God will honor those who honor Him. We generally add the following codicil: God will act tangibly, in the person’s lifetime, and the reward will be public. I suggest that this belief is strongly held today by many in the churches. It sounds something like this: God wants you to be successful, and will reward your obedience and faithfulness with success in the human sphere. Such logic was certainly in play in Liddell’s time. We know that he was invited or encouraged to train for the 1932 Olympics. Dr. William Toop, a child when Liddell served in China, recalls the visit in 1929 to Tientsin, China, by Otto Peltzer, a celebrated German track star who broke four world records in 1926. On the outskirts of town at the edge of the British Concession was built a large recreation facility called Min Yuon or the People’s Field. Liddell helped to design it. It was here that the two men raced, and Otto won his event, the 800 meter, while Eric won the 400 meter. The German insisted that the Scotsman return to the UK and train for the 1932 Olympics, but as Toop puts it, “Eric’s diary had no room for that.”<sup>24</sup> Yet the defeat in the 800 did not sit well with Liddell; he trained in China and eventually bested Peltzer’s record. Clearly Liddell loved to run, and still had a strong heart for competition. Moreover, he was capable of training for the Olympics, and proved that he could potentially win events. But he believed that God had put other things before training for Olympics.

If he were alive today, I think he would be pulled very strongly into a preaching circuit. Auditoriums would fill to hear the man whom God blessed with material goods for his faithfulness. In fact, while he was in college he did have a powerful preaching ministry. In 1923, the Rev. Dr. D. P. Thomson who worked for the Glasgow Students’ Evangelistic Union asked Eric to speak to a meeting of young men. He agreed, and later told Thomson this was the turning point in his life<sup>25</sup> because it was the first time that he publicly owned and presented his faith. He continued to speak to enthusiastic crowds, and 200 men took up the call to Christian ministry, and many people were persuaded to become missionaries based on his sermons.<sup>26</sup> This success and his natural teaching abilities confirmed in the Anglo-Chinese school in Tientsin, led some of his close friends to counsel him against accepting a post in rural ministry.<sup>27</sup> But he apparently was less impressed with himself than they were. In its subtle forms, in a soft hero worship sort of way, the Evangelical church loves its champions. I think there would be a great call by many people for Liddell to leave occupied China. The message would run something like

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<sup>24</sup> Dr. William Toop, “Recollections of Eric Liddell by People Who Knew Him,” n.p. [cited 18 May, 2011]. Online: <http://www.ericliddell.org/eric-liddell/recollections/williamtoop.html>.

<sup>25</sup> D. P. Thomson, *Eric H. Liddell*, 37.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

this: Eric, you paid a great price in serving God in China, but you are a national treasure in the UK, and God certainly would want you to return here and preach in our churches, raising awareness of the gospel and speaking about God's goodness in your life. You are a great example of being faithful, both in refusing to run on Sunday, and in going as a missionary to China. But the really important stuff happens here, in our churches. You have a heroic story, and we want you to share it. Paul would have heard the first century equivalent.

### ***B. Paul and Lofty Words of Wisdom***

Paul's letters to the Corinthians include his strongest arguments against using human rhetoric and standards of preaching excellence to evaluate the gospel presentation. In Philippians, he acknowledges that his erudite education within the Pharisaic system provided him high status in the Jewish community, and a possible trump card in gaining status within the growing Christian community as well. Nevertheless, Paul unequivocally dismisses this "benefit" and instead insists that it is mere rubbish compared to the situation in which he finds himself – namely a believer in Christ (3:3-8). Yet some took advantage of his imprisonment to condemn his ministry or character, attempting to weaken his public position as a faithful apostle. Perhaps they sought to persuade Paul's supporters to switch their financial support to them from Paul. After all, how far can your money really go if the fellow you are supporting is stuck next to a Roman soldier, and the odds of him getting out alive are low? Why not support a winner, someone who is out in the market place preaching, visiting synagogues and city fountains, talking with travelers and shop keepers. Paul had a different vision, expressed not only in Phil 1, but also in Eph 3:7-11. In this latter text, he describes himself as a servant of the gospel who is undeserving of such responsibility as was laid upon him to preach the gospel to the gentiles. Yet the goal was not to preach to as many as he could as if he were "paid" by the numbers, for that would have made his imprisonment quite frustrating. Instead, it was to embolden the church to bear witness before the powers and principalities of this age to the grace of Christ that united Jew and gentile, slave and free, male and female. He changed the definition of victory from a numbers game, a results focus, to a call to obedience. Paul insisted that though he worked as hard as or even harder than any other apostle (1 Cor 15:10), nevertheless, it is God who gives the growth (1 Cor 3:6).

### **III. How will we know that we've won the fight?**

I have used the image of "fight" in asking the questions "what were they fighting" and "what were they fighting for" to help us think more deeply both about the relationship between Christianity and imperial government claims, be they Roman, British, or Japanese, and about the worldly pull of status on God's public spokespersons. These questions arise after contemplating the remarkable journey both men experienced that landed them in obscurity after world-wide fame. The great apostle spent at least four years imprisoned, in Caesarea and then in Rome. Liddell finished his missionary career in a Japanese internment camp that housed hundreds of children. Talk about wasting talent; what was God thinking? I am unaware that either man asked such a question, but I would be hardly surprised if their friends asked it on their behalf.

In answer to the question "What were they fighting?" Paul makes clear that our battle is not against flesh and blood, but spiritual powers and principalities (Eph 6:12). I suggest that Paul does not equate these spiritual forces with human institutions, however much the latter is corrupted by the former. Paul relegates imperial Rome to just another in a string of pagan

empires that challenged God's sovereignty. Paul does not conceal a message of rebellion against Rome between the lines of his letters. Instead, he views his own era as characteristic of human experience in the present evil age – the people of God struggling against the claims of divinity that humans have asserted since history was recorded. Liddell likewise did not focus on establishing the superiority of the Christian message over against the Japanese imperial claims.

Equally important was the answer to the question “what were they fighting for?” Paul ruled out any judgment of his ministry based on worldly standards (1 Cor 4:3-5), even if those worldly standards appear innocuous to us today. Being “out of circulation” so to speak was an advantage, argues Paul, because it allows many believers to step forward and preach the gospel (Phil 1:14). Moreover, his imprisonment was a direct result of his gospel preaching, and thus all the guards learned about his “crime” and thus heard the gospel message. His imprisonment was the Ephesians’ glory; Paul’s afflictions directly resulted in their honor, both presently as they enjoyed their salvation in Christ and in the future when they would enjoy and celebrate God’s glory as co-heirs with Christ in their glorified bodies in the new heavens and new earth. Eric Liddell was equally clear that his primary battle, if you will, was with his own rebellious will to disobey. Said more positively, Liddell declares that the “key to knowing God, to having his peace and assurance in your heart...is obedience.”<sup>28</sup> Such obedience comes as one submits to God’s will. The promises of God are not that earthly honor follows sacrificial obedience, but that obedience deepens the well of joy and peace against which no human accolades, no Olympic gold medal, no crown of laurels, compare. Liddell’s final words are reported to be: “it’s absolute surrender.” Perhaps he was also thinking of Paul’s words to Timothy, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness.”

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<sup>28</sup> Liddell, *The Disciplines of the Christian Life* (NY: Ballantine Books, 1985), 5.