

Commentary
on Philippians

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PREFACE

In writing this introduction to Philippians, I do not intend to produce a detailed exegetical commentary. Rather, I intend to make clear theological teachings in this letter that are important for the cause of the kingdom of God, the health of the church of Christ, and the maturity of the saints.

Much of what is called "Christian" teaching today emphasizes the way to emotional peace and physical comfort. As D. A. Carson writes:

I would like to buy about three dollars worth of gospel, please. Not too much – just enough to make me happy, but not so much that I get addicted. I don't want so much gospel that I learn to really hate covetousness and lust. I certainly don't want so much that I start to love my enemies, cherish self-denial, and contemplate missionary service in some alien culture. I want ecstasy, not repentance; I want transcendence, not transformation. I would like to be cherished by some nice, forgiving, broad-minded people, but I myself don't want to love those from different races – especially if they smell. I would like enough gospel to make my family secure and my children well behaved, but not so much that I find my ambitions redirected or my giving too greatly enlarged. I would like about three dollars worth of gospel, please.¹

In contrast, Paul commends the Philippians for being partners in the faith with him, and encourages them to remain united by the faith, so that they may live for the faith. Paul teaches his readers to seek first the kingdom of God, even if it leads to great suffering and hardship. He says that he can be content under all circumstances by the strength that Christ gives.

Instead of using the Christian life as an excuse or a platform to pursue our own interests, this letter from Paul teaches a Christianity that promotes and pursues Christ's interests. Which kind of "Christian" are you? If you are not the kind that lives and contends for the biblical faith, then how can you say that you are a Christian at all? To have only "three dollars worth of gospel" is certainly enough to make you a damnable hypocrite, but nothing more.

¹ D. A. Carson, *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians*; Baker Books, 1996, 2002; p. 12-13.

1. FROM SINNERS TO SAINTS

ACTS 16:6-40

Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day on to Neapolis. From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days.

On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us.

Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling. This girl followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved." She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so troubled that he turned around and said to the spirit, "In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!" At that moment the spirit left her.

When the owners of the slave girl realized that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities. They brought them before the magistrates and said, "These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice." The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten. After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. Upon receiving such orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everybody's chains came loose. The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!"

The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved – you and your household." Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God – he and his whole family.

When it was daylight, the magistrates sent their officers to the jailer with the order: "Release those men." The jailer told Paul, "The magistrates have ordered that you and Silas be released. Now you can leave. Go in peace." But Paul said to the officers: "They beat us publicly without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens, and threw us into prison. And now do they want to get rid of us quietly? No! Let them come themselves and escort us out." The officers reported this to the magistrates, and when they heard that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, they were alarmed. They came to appease them and escorted them from the prison, requesting them to leave the city. After Paul and Silas came out of the prison, they went to Lydia's house, where they met with the brothers and encouraged them. Then they left.

In eternity, God decreed that he would glorify himself by the atoning work of Christ. To accomplish this, he decreed that he would manifest his mercy by redeeming those whom he has chosen for salvation, and to manifest his wrath by condemning those whom he has chosen for damnation (Romans 9:10-24). To accomplish this, he decreed that all human beings would become sinners, so that he may convert the chosen ones for salvation, and condemn the rest as reprobates. To accomplish this, he decreed that Adam would be the representative of all human beings, and that Adam would bring about the fall of mankind by his disobedience.

Then, upon Adam's disobedience, God began to execute his plan, and decreed that humanity would be divided into two groups, that is, the elect and the reprobates (Genesis 3:15). Since then, the two groups have been in constant conflict. However, God exercises his sovereignty not only in relation to groups, but also in relation to individuals. Therefore, even among the physical descendants of the elect, some have been chosen for salvation, and others for damnation, even though both may live within the covenant community, and thus the conflicts between Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob, and so on to this day.

People cannot choose themselves to be among the elect or the reprobates, but it is God who decides, or rather has decided. His choice is not based on the conditions and qualifications in the people, as if they would come about without God and then to be evaluated by God. Rather, it is God who creates each person in the first place, and God is the one who makes each person to be what he is, exercising complete control over his consciousness and circumstances, whether elect or reprobate.

Paul says that God is as a potter who has the right and the power to produce one vessel for honorable use and another for common use (Romans 9:21). The vessels do not appear by themselves, nor are they produced by someone else, and then evaluated by God as to their use. Neither does God see into the future to obtain information about the vessels to decide their fate, since it is God himself who creates both the vessels and their future.

Therefore, just as the potter decides on what he would make and then makes it, and that the clay cannot resist or influence the potter's decision, so God decides on what kind of people he would make and then makes them, and the people cannot resist or influence his decision (Romans 9:18-24). This also means that both election and reprobation are active decrees by God. Perhaps to soften the biblical doctrine, some people teach that God actively elects some for salvation, but he only "allows" the rest to be damned. However, the Bible teaches that God actively creates some people to be among the elect and actively creates other people to be among the reprobates. Neither the elect nor the reprobates appear by themselves, or out of nothing.

Thus God has decreed the identities of those whom he would save and those whom he would damn, without regard to any foreknown conditions in them, since any so-called foreknown conditions would be foreknown because God himself would have been the one who decreed these conditions in the first place. So the elect have been chosen for salvation not because God knew that they would have faith; rather, the elect receive faith from God because they have already been chosen by God for salvation even before creation.

Since the time of Adam, God has been saving his chosen ones by means of giving them faith in Christ, and salvation comes only from God, who saves only by Christ. Justification is by faith not in the sense that you can save yourself by your faith; rather, the doctrine teaches that you can do nothing to save yourself, but that you must totally depend on someone else to save you. Therefore, the doctrine is teaching justification not by faith *as such* or *by itself*, but it is teaching that justification is *by Christ* alone. It is Christ who saves you, and not faith itself. Faith has a role because it is Christ who saves you by means of giving you faith in him (Ephesians 2:8-9; Hebrews 12:2).

God had commissioned Paul to spread the gospel, but he prevented the apostle and his companions from following their original plan, and instead directed them to Philippi (v. 6-12). Not only did God control the general strategy of Paul's ministry, but he also controlled the individual preaching opportunities and the responses of the hearers. The jailer was converted only after a sovereign miracle from God that shook the very

foundations of the prison (v. 25-34). Likewise, Lydia believed on the gospel only because God sovereignly opened her mind to the message (v. 13-15).

Therefore, God is sovereign over every aspect of redemption, from the progress of the gospel in history to the most minute details of each conversion. Although he is sovereign over all, and although he can control any object or event even without the use of means, he has nevertheless decided to accomplish many of his decrees by the use of means, which he also sovereignly creates and selects. When it comes to gathering his elect to salvation by giving them faith in Christ, he has chosen to do so by means of the preaching of his ministers. In addition, he has ordained that these ministers would often have to struggle and suffer for the sake of his kingdom, as they promote the gospel in the face of opposition.

Opposition against the gospel may appear in various forms. In Philippi, demonic interference came against Paul in the form of a girl who had a spirit of divination. When reading about this in the Bible, many professing Christians may agree that there was something wrong with the girl, and that Paul was right in expelling the evil spirit from her. But some of these same people may think nothing of today's popular occult teachings and practices, partly because they have been deceived into thinking that they are compatible with or are derived from the Christian faith. In any case, if divination was demonic in Paul's day, then it is demonic in our day, but many professing Christians today even practice necromancy with the help of these occult teachers. We must confront them with the truth, and if they refuse to repent, then we will know that these are not true Christians at all.

If it is intolerant to say that only one religion is true and that all other religions are false, then the Christian faith cannot be more intolerant. God asserts through the Bible that he is the only God, that Christ is the only Savior, that Scripture is his only verbal revelation, and that the church is the only covenant community. In this sense, Christianity is intolerant, but so what? I have never heard a tolerant argument against intolerance. Those who advocate what they call "tolerance" say that it is "intolerant" to claim that only your group is right and that all the others are wrong; however, by asserting this, he is saying that only his group is right (in being "tolerant") and that all the others are wrong (in being "intolerant"). So the tolerant person can never say that it is wrong to be intolerant; otherwise, he has lost his tolerance.

There is a broader category by which we may identify oppositions against the gospel, and that is what Paul calls the "strongholds" that Christians must demolish (2 Corinthians 10:4). A correct understanding of this concept will help us gain a firm grasp on what we must do when trying to spread the gospel.

False teachers have used this term to denote figurative castles in the air constructed by demons, and to denote strategic geographical positions that these demons guard. To remove the spiritual darkness from an area, they say that we must dislodge these demons in the air from their posts. To do this, we must go through an elaborate and often mystical

process to identify these demons and then pray against them, perhaps by pointing at the sky and "binding" them in the name of Jesus. But all of this is unbiblical.

With Paul, the "strongholds" refer to unbiblical presuppositions and arguments that are stubbornly held by people. These intellectual fortresses prevent the non-Christians from coming to faith, and hinder the Christians from growing in faith. These false beliefs are not only stubbornly held by people, but they are also irrationally held by them; therefore, people with these unbiblical beliefs will not change their minds just because you win an argument against them. God alone can change the mind of man; however, it does not follow that our preaching and argumentation are useless and unprofitable. In fact, much of our responsibility in spreading the gospel consists in preaching and in arguing, and these are the means by which God will sovereignly change the minds of people and grant them faith in Christ. In other words, only God can change people, but he changes people by means of our preaching and argumentation.

Within this broad category of intellectual strongholds are false religions. By false religions I mean all non-Christian religions, including many that claim to be Christian, such as Catholicism and Mormonism. One strategy that has been used to oppose the gospel is to teach people that there is no such thing as a false religion, that there are many ways to God, even if these ways contradict one another. Of course, this belief is itself an unbiblical stronghold! Christians must recognize it for what it is, and demolish it by the power of God, through biblical argumentation. Besides false religions, there are many other types of strongholds, such as non-Christian cosmology, biology, psychology, and ethics.

Using the same metaphor, our goal is to replace unbiblical strongholds with biblical strongholds in people's minds, so that they will think in terms of biblical categories and presuppositions. You may say, "But this means that you want to impose your beliefs on me." Yes! But what is wrong with it? By what absolute and universal standard of ethics do you assert that it is wrong to "impose" my beliefs on you? Whatever you call it, Christians are doing this by God's authority – it is he who commands you to turn from your current beliefs to affirm Christianity, to agree with all that the Scripture teaches (Acts 17:30). If he has mercy on you, then he will grant you repentance and faith (2 Timothy 2:25; Ephesians 2:8); if not, you will be unable to believe the gospel, and God will condemn you to hell forever. Either way, you are completely at his mercy, and you are completely helpless without him.

However, Christians are not permitted to "impose" their beliefs on other people by physical violence, since the kingdom of Christ is not of this world (John 18:36; 2 Corinthians 10:3-4). Rather, we defend biblical teachings and refute unbiblical teachings, providing the occasions upon which God may change the minds of people according to his sovereign will. If you say that I am "imposing" my beliefs on you, then so be it; however, if you speak against what I am doing, then you would be imposing your beliefs on me! Nevertheless, you will not escape violence forever, because if you do not repent, God will send you to a place where there will be nothing but constant violence against your soul and your body (Matthew 10:28).

Non-Christians will often use political pressure to suppress biblical teachings, making it difficult for Christians to spread the gospel and mature the saints. In their attempts to do this, they will sometimes even distort the original intent of existing laws and make false accusations against believers. The slave girl was making money for her owners by a spirit of divination, and when Paul expelled that spirit from her, he also destroyed this source of income for her owners. Then, the owners dragged Paul and Silas before the authorities and made false accusations against them along with a crowd, and the magistrates ordered the preachers to be beaten.

Of course, Christians are still physically attacked in many places today. But even in places where there is supposed to be religious freedom, people often apply political pressure against Christian teachings and practices. Some of them want the government to recognize even the reading of biblical passages against homosexuality as "hate speech" that must be suppressed. Some of them sue Christians who discipline their children with the rod, accusing them of practicing "child abuse." Christians must realize that non-Christians are not good people – none of them are good.² If they can have their way, they would completely throw off any biblical restraints upon them. They wish to legislate God and Christianity out of their lives. But God laughs at these people, and he will dash them to pieces (Psalm 2).

Christians must usually obey all the laws of their government, even if these laws are unjust and oppressive. So we pay the taxes and obey other requirements that the government imposes. But when the commands of men make it impossible to obey the commands of God, then Christians must obey God instead of the government (Acts 5:29). In God's providence, there will sometimes be laws that Christians can take advantage of to grant themselves a measure of protection and convenience, so that they may continue to preach and practice the biblical faith in peace. Christians may take advantage of and participate in the available legal provisions to add, change, and enforce laws that preserve our religious freedom. This includes going to vote and running for offices.

Nevertheless, any legal advantage that the Christians may gain from the government is superficial – the power of God does not rest in politics, but in the gospel message, for it is by the gospel that he sovereignly changes the minds of men (Romans 1:16). On the other hand, any legal advantage that the non-Christians have against us is also superficial – no government can thwart God's plans. The spread of the gospel ultimately depends on divine sovereignty and not human effort or legislation, and Christ has determined that the gates of hell will not withstand against the onslaught of the church (Matthew 16:18). In any era, the light of the church may shine brighter or dimmer, according to God's sovereign plan, but he has decreed that this light will never be extinguished. In any case, our responsibility is to obey God's commands, that is, to preach the gospel with faith and persistence, and to beseech him in prayer so that his word will have free course in this world.

² Non-Christians would certainly define "good" in a way that apply to themselves, but the true definition of "good" must come from the Bible.

If God chooses to grant us as believers any legal rights by his providence, then we may take full advantage of them, but legal persecution will often occur as we faithfully preach and practice our faith (v. 35-39). When this happens, it is easy to become fearful and discouraged, but the Bible teaches us to rejoice. On what basis are we to rejoice when we are persecuted because of our faith? Scripture says that just as it is God who sovereignly grants us faith in Christ, it is God who sovereignly grants us to suffer for Christ (Philippians 1:29). But Peter reminds us that when you suffer this way, make sure that you are not being persecuted because of some crime that you have done, such as murder or theft, but it should be because of something that you have done for the gospel (1 Peter 4:15-16).

Of course, any legal persecution against Christians can occur only in the way that God has decreed it, and he can do with the situation however he pleases. In Philippi, Paul and Silas were sent to prison, but they demonstrated their faith when they began praying and singing to God. Then, God demonstrated his power by sending a great earthquake that shook the very foundations of the prison. This was no coincidence, since if God controls all things, then there are really no coincidences in this world in the sense that nothing happens by "chance" without God's active decree. In addition, all the prison doors were opened, and all the chains came loose on the prisoners. The jailer was shocked by this divine intervention, and asked Paul and Silas about the way of salvation. Then, when they were released, they met again with the converts and *encouraged them!* These men never allowed pressure and persecution to distract them from their mission – to preach the gospel and mature the saints.

PHILIPPIANS 1:1-2

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Although he faced violent opposition in Philippi, according to God's providence Paul managed to establish a church there in about 51 AD. He is writing this letter to the Philippians most likely about ten years later while he is a prisoner in Rome. By this time, what started as a small church established under turbulent circumstances has developed into a flourishing congregation. Paul is in general pleased with this church, and his main purpose for writing is not to rebuke some sin that they have committed or some heresy that they have adopted, but to thank them for a financial donation. Nevertheless, he uses this occasion to encourage them in their faith, and to remind them of several important things.

Paul addresses his letter to "the saints...together with the overseers and deacons." He makes special mention of the overseers and deacons, possibly because they had a prominent role in initiating and collecting the financial donation for Paul. The overseers and deacons do not form a group outside of the other believers; rather, "the saints" consist of the entire group, with all of the church members, and within this group we find

overseers and deacons. That is, Paul is writing to the saints, "together with" or *including* the overseers and deacons.

The word "saints" refers to all Christians, and not to a select group of spiritual elite. The term stresses the fact that all Christians have been consecrated by God to serve him. Therefore, when Paul addresses his letter to "the saints...at Philippi," he means "God's consecrated people" or "God's holy people" at Philippi, referring to all the Christians there.

The word is theologically significant, since it indicates that Christians are not like other people, so that they should not think and behave like other people. God has chosen and reserved them for himself. Of course, Christians receive this special status not because they are more deserving in themselves, but because God has sovereignly decided to save them from their sin.

In contrast, all non-Christians are as dogs and pigs, and stupid beasts (Psalm 32:9, 49:20; Matthew 7:6, 15:26; Philippians 3:2; Titus 1:12; Revelation 22:15). Many professing Christians would be horrified by such a characterization of all non-Christians, but this is only because the non-Christians themselves have influenced the Christians into thinking too well of the non-Christians. Nowadays, professing Christians tend to think that non-Christians may be bad, but not too bad, and some are probably very good people. If you think this way, then you are probably not a Christian yourself, since it shows that you do not understand even a basic premise of the gospel, that all men are depraved, and that they cannot escape hellfire unless God sovereignly saves them.

If you call yourself a Christian, then why are you horrified when I use biblical expressions to describe non-Christians? It is because you have been taught how to think about non-Christians by the non-Christians themselves, and not by the Bible. Of course a non-Christian will not tell you to think of him as a dog or a pig, but what does the Bible say? In any case, if you are a Christian, then you are one of God's holy people, and you should not think and behave as the non-Christians, whom Scripture refers to as stupid brutes.

How did these Philippians become saints? Paul addresses them as "saints *in Christ Jesus*." Back in Acts 16, Lydia calls herself "a believer in the Lord" (v. 15), and Paul tells the jailer to "believe in the Lord Jesus" (v. 31). But they were able to believe only because God sovereignly changed their minds and granted them faith. Therefore, the saints are those who have been chosen by God and justified by faith. Apart from God's sovereign grace there is no access to Christ (John 6:44), and apart from faith in Christ there is no salvation (Acts 4:12). Christians are those whom God has sovereignly changed from sinners to saints.

The "overseers" are the leaders of the church, and are identical to those whom Scripture elsewhere calls the "elders." When Paul addresses the "elders" of Ephesus, he also calls them "overseers" (Acts 20:17, 28), and he uses the terms "elder" and "overseer" interchangeably in his letter to Titus (Titus 1:5-7). Likewise, Peter exhorts the "elders" to

serve as "overseers" over the flock of God (1 Peter 5:2). Whereas the term "elders" has been adapted from Jewish usage and stresses the maturity and authority of these leaders,³ the term "overseers" has been adapted from Roman usage and stresses their function and responsibility.⁴ On the other hand, "bishop" (KJV) is just another translation for "overseer," so that "elders," "overseers," and "bishops" all refer to the same group of people. In what follows, I will use only "elder" and "elders."

The apostles were eager to appoint elders wherever they established churches, and each church had multiple elders (Acts 11:30, 14:23, 20:17, 21:18; Titus 1:5). Since some people have drawn unwarranted inferences from this, we will briefly summarize the proper implications of the principle of plural leadership.

In those days believers would meet in their homes, forming what we may call "home groups" or "house churches," and when the New Testament refers to a church, it is referring to all the home groups in a city or town, and not to one home group. Therefore, to say that each "church" should have multiple elders does not require each "group" to have multiple elders.

Modern application appears to imply the following. Within one organization ("church"), there should be multiple elders. Each elder should be assigned a group of members that he oversees. As the organization grows, it should appoint additional elders to oversee the new groups that have formed. Although each group within this organization requires only one elder, if a group grows too large for one elder to handle, then the organization should appoint additional elders to adequately oversee the group.

In other words, the New Testament model does not demand that each group that meets together must have more than one elder, but that each "church" should have more than one elder. Nevertheless, the apostles did not appoint multiple elders in a church just to have more than one elder; rather, besides other possible reasons such as accountability, they did it because there was a need for multiple elders. In addition, the New Testament forbids appointing unqualified individuals as elders, and sometimes it takes years for people to develop the necessary qualifications. In these cases, having only one elder is better than handing spiritual authority to unqualified individuals who may end up destroying the church. Nevertheless, the existing elder should teach and guide the congregation with the intention to raise up qualified individuals to become elders.

Plurality in leadership does not eliminate the place for a primary elder or leader (Exodus 18:19-22). For example, although the Twelve were all apostles, Peter was consistently the main speaker in the group. Likewise, Paul was the main speaker among his companions, and James was the leader among the elders in Jerusalem (Acts 1:15, 14:12, 15:13-21;

³ Jay E. Adams, *The Use of the Rod and the Staff*; Timeless Texts, 2003; p. 4. Although many spiritually mature believers may be older people, the term "elder" stresses spiritual maturity, and does not mean that only older people can become leaders in the church. Timothy was a young elder. In any case, any candidate for leadership must satisfy biblical requirements regardless of his age.

⁴ Gene A. Getz, *Elders and Leaders*; Moody Publishers, 2003; p. 183-188.

Galatians 2:9). Accordingly, one person may function as the main leader among the elders in a church, although they are all elders.⁵

The elder's twofold task is to teach and to rule in the church (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13; 1 Timothy 5:17; Hebrews 13:7, 17). His responsibility and authority are doctrinal and directional.

Regarding doctrine, the elder must teach sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it (Titus 1:9). In contemporary terms, he must be diligent and competent in theology and apologetics. One problem with modern churches is that the leaders are weakest on precisely these two areas, and they make matters worse by minimizing their importance. They work hard at promoting social reforms, but that is only enough to make them humanists. They may advocate loving relationships, but without laying a biblical foundation, they cannot even define love. And if they ever preach about the unity of all mankind, we know that they are non-Christians, for what fellowship can light have with darkness (2 Corinthians 6:14)?

Theology must come first, and apologetics must come right along with it. If an elder fails to promote these two things, he is not performing his biblical function, and the council of elders in the church should remove him from office. If all of the elders in a church fail to promote these two things, then the entire council must be replaced with qualified men, or else the organization is not a biblical church at all. Do the elders in your church promote biblical theology and biblical apologetics? If not, then on what basis do they qualify as elders, and on what basis do they exercise authority in the church? Unless the church teaches and defends a Christian theology, you cannot be sure that it is even a Christian church.

An elder must first teach the word of God as an act of worship. As he explains the words of Scripture, he honors God's wisdom, submits to God's authority, and calls his hearers to do the same. In addition, God commands the elder to guard the gospel message – the elder must maintain its purity and ensure its perpetuity. Paul writes, "And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others" (2 Timothy 2:2; also 1 Timothy 6:20; 2 Timothy 1:14). Many elders tend to focus on the immediate and practical interests of their people, and lose sight of their broader duty, which is to preserve sound doctrine for the current generation and for future generations. The church is "the pillar and foundation of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15).

Of course, if looking after people's immediate and practical interests causes one to lose sight of his biblical duties, then most likely he is not really looking after their immediate and practical interests in a biblical manner in the first place. As Herman Hoeksema said, "If you ask me what, in our time, our people need above all, in the first place, my answer is: Doctrine! If you ask me what they need in the second place, I say: Doctrine! If you ask me what they need in the third place, I say: Doctrine!"⁶ He said this in 1922, but doctrinal

⁵ Ibid., p. 217-226.

⁶ Herman Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed*; Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1997; p. vii.

instruction is so much more desperately needed today that it is criminal to waste any resource to support churches and ministries that undermine the importance of theology. If you do not put doctrine first, then all you do will result in confusion and futility. If you are a church elder, you must practice your doctrinal ministry in a way that will preserve sound doctrine for this generation, and that will raise up elders for the next generation, who will then teach sound doctrine to their generation.

Regarding direction, Christ has given the elders authority to direct church affairs in a way that promotes and enforces right doctrine, right worship, right living, and right order, even to the point of expelling unrepentant and divisive members from the community.

Jesus says that believers should try to resolve private conflicts in private. If that fails, the believers should escalate the matter until they "tell it to the church" (Matthew 18:17). Although the word translated "church" (*ekklesia*, or "assembly") can refer to all the members in the organization, it does not always mean that; rather, the word can sometimes refer to the leaders, the representatives, or the elders among the people. The word often referred to an "assembly" of leaders in Roman usage, and the Jewish Sanhedrin in a local synagogue was a legal "assembly."⁷ What the word means in a particular instance depends on the context.

In Exodus 19, when God tells Moses to relate some instructions to "the people of Israel" (Exodus 19:3), Moses then seemingly calls only "the elders of the people" to hear the message (v. 7), and this is sufficient because the elders are the authorized representatives of the people. Something similar seems to occur in Deuteronomy 31, where the passage appears to equate "all the elders" (v. 28) to "the whole assembly of Israel" (v. 30), because the elders represent all the members of the community. Then in Acts 19, while the word "assembly" refers to an unruly crowd in verse 32, the same word refers to a legal "assembly" or city council in verse 39.

As for Matthew 18, the context seems to demand that we understand the "church" or "assembly" as the council of elders rather than all the members in the organization. This is because verses 19 and 20 indicate that when the matter has escalated to the highest level, it would be settled by as few as "two or three" people. If by "tell it to the church" Jesus means all the members in the organization, one would assume that there would be more than "two or three" to settle the issue.⁸ However, since Jesus says "two or three"

⁷ Getz, p. 197-198.

⁸ Many people try to use this passage to teach the power of "corporate prayer" or "the prayer of agreement," but the context is only about church discipline. In any case, the Bible does not teach that "corporate prayer" or "the prayer of agreement" has any advantage over individual prayer; it does not teach that God grants greater answers to prayers that come from a greater number of people. If anything, it seems that the reverse may be true, seeing that the most spectacular answers to prayer recorded in Scripture occur when only one person prays (Joshua 10:12-13; 1 Kings 18:36-38, 42-45). The point is that God answers when we pray according to his will (1 John 5:14-15), no matter how few or how many people are praying; he does not answer just because the request is popular. See also Vincent Cheung, *Prayer and Revelation*.

people would rule on the issue, it seems that by "tell it to the church," he means tell it to the elders.⁹

Therefore, we may conclude that the highest human authority in a church is the council of elders,¹⁰ and Jesus assures them that as they make their rulings, they have the Father's attention, the Son's presence, and heaven's support (v.18-20). That is, their decisions are binding. Although their authority is spiritual in nature, so that they have no authority to enforce their decisions through physical punishments or violent means, their authority is no less real and fearful, since the Father and the Son will answer the call of the elders to enforce their decisions (v. 19).

Matthew 18 starts from a personal transgression, and upon the refusal to repent, escalates the matter until it finally reaches the elders, which is the final stage in Matthew 18. But if the matter is already public knowledge (1 Corinthians 5:1), then it may go directly to the elders for a decision (v. 3). If a real transgression has indeed occurred, and the person refuses to repent, then the elders have the authority to expel the person from the community (v. 4-5).

Of course, although the elders make the final decisions, it is often appropriate to inform the church of these decisions, and to instruct them on how to act in accordance with them. For example, if the elders decide that the church would cut off an unrepentant person from fellowship, it is often necessary to instruct the whole congregation to shun this person, after which any member who disobeys become subject to church discipline.

Many people today despise authority, and they are certainly not going to honor the decisions of church elders. If that is your attitude, then maybe you should reconsider your profession of faith to see if it is genuine. The authority of the elders has been granted to them by Christ, and you cannot oppose Christ with impunity. In fact, those matters over which professing Christians sometimes sue one another should be settled by church elders instead of by pagan judges (1 Corinthians 6:1).

Just as many people fail to obey church authority, many elders fail to exercise their authority for the honor of Christ and the good of the church. For example, even some so-called conservative Christian leaders would say that the church's attitude toward homosexuals should be "welcoming but not affirming." However, depending on what one means by this, the expression is either very misleading or completely unbiblical. It is often argued that Jesus "welcomed" everyone without affirming the person's behavior or lifestyle; however, Scripture does not separate the person from his behavior, contrary to what many people think. Rather, John says, "Do not let anyone lead you astray" – the truth is that he who does what is right is righteous, and he who does what is sinful is of the devil (1 John 3:7-8). Since Scripture defines homosexuality as a sin, the unrepentant homosexual is of the devil.

⁹ Jay E. Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline*; Zondervan Publishing House, 1986; p. 69. He writes, "This is probably the meaning of 'tell it to the church': tell it to the church by telling it to the elders of the new Israel."

¹⁰ The highest authority that we have direct contact with is Scripture.

It is not true that Jesus "welcomed" everyone; rather, he welcomed only the repentant. It is true that many of those whom he welcomed had been great sinners, and this gives the careless thinker the idea that he welcomed sinners without demanding repentance. But he did demand repentance, and welcomed only those who turned from their sins, and not those who held on to them.

Likewise, the church must welcome any repentant sinner, no matter what he has done before his conversion, but it must not welcome anyone who refuses to repent. The church has no right to welcome or fellowship with a homosexual who continues to be a homosexual, and who thinks that it is acceptable to God for him to remain a homosexual. Paul insists that all homosexuals will go to hell, and warns us not to be deceived about this (1 Corinthians 6:9).

Of course, I am using the homosexual only as an example; Scripture lists many other damnable sinners, such as adulterers, thieves, slanderers, heretics, murderers, sorcerers, and liars (1 Corinthians 6:9-10; Galatians 5:19-21; Revelation 21:8). The point is that church elders must use their authority to confront these people and demand their repentance. They must do this not only when it comes to something that they consider especially vile, like child molestation, but something like an insistent denial of biblical inerrancy should be enough to expel someone from the church. In fact, the denial of biblical inerrancy is much worse than child molestation, since child molestation is wrong only because biblical precepts define it as wrong. Therefore, to deny biblical inerrancy is to defy the authority of Christ and the church, and the elders must confront this kind of rebellion.

Another sin that many elders fail to confront is how professing Christians often abuse the name of God, so that they use it as a swearword instead of reserving it for reverent prayers and conversations. Whatever the transgression – whether it is primarily doctrinal or moral – church elders have the authority to "rebuke them sharply, so that they will be sound in the faith" (Titus 1:13), and those who refuse to repent must be removed from the community.

False teachers may be exposed in public and denounced by name, since they have already made their false doctrines public (1 Timothy 1:20; 2 Timothy 2:17-18, 4:14; 3 John 9-10). Some people think that we should protect the identities of false teachers when criticizing them, and that we should separate the false teachers from their false teachings, but this is unbiblical. Scripture commands the elders to protect their people from the "savage wolves" (Acts 20:29), and that includes exposing them by name, besides explaining their false doctrines and refuting them. The elders must zealously guard the gospel message and preserve it for future generations, and that involves teaching the believers, exposing the heretics, and expelling the unrepentant.

We are speaking of the twofold task of the elders, and specifically about their responsibility to direct the church's affairs. Of course, the elders do not always deal with extreme situations that demand drastic reactions, but their domain includes everyday

affairs. For example, they must make many strategic spiritual and financial decisions, such as those affecting church policies and programs, and various outreaches. All of their decisions must contribute to the honor of Christ and the health of the church (2 Corinthians 10:8). But our knowledge of what promotes the honor of Christ and the health of the church comes from the Scripture alone; therefore, the directional authority and responsibility of the elders in fact rest on their doctrinal authority and responsibility. So, again, doctrine must come first.

Just as the elders have the authority to rule in the church, the members have the responsibility to obey the elders. And just as the elders must feed their people with the word of God, the people must give their elders complete financial support.

Paul writes, "But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work" (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13, NASB).¹¹ And Hebrews 13:17 says, "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you." The Bible commands you to not only respect your church elders, but to obey them. If your elders affirm heretical doctrines or if they are blatantly abusing their authority for selfish purposes, then your church is not a biblical church, and you should withdraw all support from it. Otherwise, you have no excuse to disobey them.

As for financial support, Scripture says that the elders deserve "double pay" (GNT),¹² especial those who work hard at the doctrinal ministry: "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching" (1 Timothy 5:17, NASB).¹³ The next verse refers to the elders' pay as their rightful "wages," indicating that what you pay them is owed to them as a salary, and that it is not just a voluntary offering: "For the Scripture says, 'Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain,' and 'The worker deserves his wages'" (v. 18).

The twofold task of the elders is to teach doctrine and provide direction to the church; however, managing a church community also entails many practical tasks. If the elders were to perform all of these practical tasks themselves, they would be distracted from their main responsibility. This is why churches should appoint "deacons" to assist the elders, so that the elders can focus on their work.

In the secular community, the word "deacons" (*diakonoi*, or "servants") referred to those responsible for certain welfare-type duties like distributing food and other gifts. The origin of the Christian deacon is often traced to Acts 6, where we read that seven men were appointed to meet a practical need in the congregation that would have otherwise distracted the apostles from their main ministry. The apostles stated, "It would not be

¹¹ Note how verse 12 refers to the twofold task of the elders, that they "have charge over you" and "give you instruction."

¹² See Vincent Cheung, *Commentary on Malachi*, chapter 8.

¹³ Again, note the reference to the twofold task of the elders.

right for us to neglect the ministry of the word in order to wait on tables" (v. 2). In the same way, deacons are to take care of the practical tasks in the church so that the elders can focus on the ministry of the word.

The deacons exist as "servants" and assistants to the elders. They do not have the level of authority that the elders have, and they certainly do not have authority over the elders. Since this is true, it is unbiblical for a church to have a "deacon board" that rules over the "pastor" and the church. In the first place, a council that rules over the church is more properly called an "*elder* board." In addition, these "deacon boards" often consist of unspiritual businessmen who are not even qualified to serve as deacons, let alone ruling over the church as elders.

The deacons exist to meet the church's practical needs, and there can be as many of them as needed. Some people may even serve as temporary deacons, so that as a temporary practical need arises that demands more deacons than what the church already has, the elders may appoint more of them. Once this temporary need has been met, these people may stop serving as deacons. Since their biblical qualifications seem to be just as high as the qualifications for the elders (1 Timothy 3:8-12), deacons may perform a variety of tasks in the church, and may even wield a measure of delegated authority received from the elders. Nevertheless, deacons are not elders, and should not habitually perform functions that the elders themselves should do. The deacons are not there to do all the work for the elders, but mainly the practical work that would hinder the elders from attending to the ministry of preaching and teaching.

Deacons should never be appointed because the elders think that certain tasks are "below" them. After Jesus performed the lowly task of washing his disciples' feet to set an example, he says, "I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him" (John 13:5-16). Therefore, holding the office of an elder does not put one above even the most menial and humble tasks. Although an elder should generally avoid spending too much time on tasks that would distract him from the doctrinal ministry, if he thinks that he is too important to clean a toilet or mop the floor, or if he thinks that it is below him to help move heavy furniture or to serve food to the hungry, then he is not qualified to be an elder. The church has no place for such arrogant "servants"! Rather, deacons should be appointed because the elders recognize their own limitations, that they cannot do everything in the church and still remain faithful to their main ministry.

Any male believer can potentially become an elder in the church. Paul writes, "I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man" (1 Timothy 2:12). Since this prohibition corresponds to the twofold task of a church elder (teaching and ruling), the verse appears to forbid women from becoming elders. Of course, feminists are against this, but the Scripture is against the feminists. And if you do not like what the Scripture says, you can go adopt another religion and see if it will take you to heaven.

The only legitimate way to open the office of the elder to women is if you can produce a sound exegetical argument from Scripture; contemporary cultural values count for

nothing at all. That said, all churches should have sound biblical reasons for permitting and forbidding women to perform various ministries. On the one hand, we dare not allow women to do something that the Scripture forbids; on the other hand, we dare not forbid women to do something that the Scripture allows.

Now, even if it is established that women cannot become elders, it does not mean that they have no relationship at all to the office. Since a woman must function as a helper to her husband (Genesis 2:18), it is completely up to her husband to decide what tasks she is to perform to help him maximize his effectiveness, as long as Scripture does not forbid a woman to do them. Although Scripture prohibits a woman from performing certain tasks and assuming certain positions, it offers her ample room to exercise her abilities in the context of assisting her husband (Proverbs 31:10-31).

Of course, this continues to be true when the husband is a church elder, so that it is completely up to the husband to decide how his wife should assist him in maximizing his effectiveness as a church elder, provided that he does not tell her to do anything that Scripture forbids her to do. Although this principle may open to the wife many ministry related tasks, it also means that if the husband decides that the wife can best assist him by being a good housewife, that he can maximize his effectiveness as a church elder when the wife takes care of many of the things at home, then this is what the wife must do.

When it comes to the position of deacon, we must first make sure that we are using the correct definition. As mentioned, the "deacons" in some churches are in fact functioning as elders, and given this false definition of a deacon, the office would be closed to women. However, we have said that the elders are those who have the authority, and the deacons are only their assistants. In other words, the elders are the leaders and the deacons are the helpers. Given this definition of a deacon, it would seem that the elders of a church are permitted to appoint women as deacons whenever appropriate.¹⁴

Nevertheless, some theologians disagree and say that only men can be deacons. How a church decides on this matter must be settled by sound biblical exegesis, and not by capitulating to contemporary cultural values. In any case, whether women may become elders is much more important and should be settled first, since elders wield tremendous authority in a church.

Of course, just because any male believer can potentially become a church elder does not mean that any male believer can actually become one – he must meet the qualifications. The same is true with anyone who is a candidate for the position of deacon – he must meet the qualifications. Paul lists these qualifications in 1 Timothy 3:1-13 and Titus 1:6-9. Without going into details, these passages enumerate qualifications that deal with the character, doctrine, and household of the candidates. Notice that the candidates must be effectively managing their own families, which is a qualification that most likely requires the church to examine and interview the wives and children of the candidates.

¹⁴ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*; Zondervan Publishing House, 1994; p. 944-945.

It may surprise some people that the qualifications for becoming a deacon appear to be just as high as those for becoming an elder. But this should not be too shocking, since the deacons are meant to assist the elders, and appointing inferior individuals may often generate additional problems for the elders instead of reducing their burden. Nevertheless, an elder is an elder and a deacon is a deacon, and they differ in authority and responsibility. If a candidate shows promise but is deficient in some ways, the church may not immediately grant him the position of either elder or deacon, but it should consider training him so that he will be ready for a position in the future.

The desire to become an elder is good in itself, since it is an aspiration to perform a noble task. However, since an elder wields tremendous authority in the church, and especially since an elder's task involves teaching doctrine, not many believers should assume such a position (James 3:1). It can be very dangerous, both for the man and for the church, when an unqualified person becomes an elder (1 Timothy 3:6-7). So a church must make sure that a candidate meets the biblical qualifications.

If you desire to become an elder in the church, you must examine yourself to see whether it is a desire to serve Christ and his people, or whether it is a desire to seize power and gain respect. Although it is true that believers must obey their church elders (Hebrews 13:17), this authority is not given to them so that they may "lord it over" the people as unbelievers do to their people (Matthew 20:25-26). Instead, this authority is given so that the elders may effectively build up the church and serve the people (2 Corinthians 10:8).

Jesus says, "Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave" (Matthew 20:26-27). Does this mean that church leaders are not really "great" or "first" in some sense? No, since Jesus then cites himself as an example in the next verse (v. 28), and he was indeed "great" and "first." What he is saying is that, unlike pagan rulers, although church leaders have genuine authority, they must serve others instead of making others serve them. If you want to be "first," then you must work *like a slave* to advance the kingdom and perfect the saints. This is especially true of the primary leader in a ministry.

Moreover, if you desire the position of elder because you wish to derive some personal benefit or comfort from it, then you are not a true shepherd, but you would be like a worthless "hireling" who runs from the wolves, instead of following the example of Christ by giving your life to protect the sheep (John 10:12).

In any case, if you desire to become an elder because of selfish motives, you will probably be sorely disappointed. This is because, rather than respected and appreciated, church leaders are often insulted and abused, underappreciated and underpaid. Just read about the people of Israel under the leadership of Moses. Although some of them were faithful worshipers of God and respectful toward Moses, most of them were wicked and rebellious complainers, frequently threatening to turn against their leader. Of course,

most of them were not true believers, and perished in the wilderness; nevertheless, they were part of the covenant community.¹⁵

In the same way, the church is the covenant community, consisting of some mature believers, many immature believers, and many unbelievers who are false converts.¹⁶ If you wish to be a leader in the covenant community, then you must be prepared to face these immature and wicked people. Paul faced these people in his day, and they caused him much anguish, but he had genuine concern for the churches (2 Corinthians 11:28; Colossians 1:24, 2:1). In any case, one reason he commends the believers at Philippi is because they respect and support those who work for the gospel.

¹⁵ They were united by a common ancestry and profession, so that they belonged to the same "covenant community," but not all of them were saved, since not all who descended from the elect were chosen for salvation (Romans 9:6-16), and many of them made false professions of faith (Isaiah 29:13).

¹⁶ That is, like Israel, many people in our churches are there because their parents belonged to the churches (and even their parents may not have been saved), or because they have made false professions of faith.

2. PARTNERS IN THE GOSPEL

PHILIPPIANS 1:3-11, 4:10-19

I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God....

I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need. Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be credited to your account. I have received full payment and even more; I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.

After greeting the believers at Philippi, including the elders and the deacons, Paul thanks God for his "whole remembrance" of his relationship with the Philippians. All of his dealings with them have caused him only joy and no regrets.¹⁷ One of the main reasons

¹⁷ Kenneth S. Wuest, *Philippians*; William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1942; p. 31. William Barclay translates, "In all my memories of you I have cause for nothing but thanksgiving" (*The New Testament*; Westminster John Knox Press, 1999). However, for grammatical reasons, some scholars argue

for Paul's high regard of these believers is that they have been partners in the gospel with him since the beginning of their conversion. Their generosity and support appear to be rare, if not unique, among the churches (4:15).

The word translated "partnership" (*koinonia*) is sometimes translated "fellowship" or "communion." Contemporary Christians often use the word to denote the friendly social interactions between believers, but this meaning is never found in Paul's writings.¹⁸ As with many words, the precise meaning in each instance depends on the context, but we know that the main sense of the word refers to participation in something objective, and that it had commercial overtones in the first century.¹⁹ For example, two people who participate in a business venture by investing money into it have entered into a partnership, such that "the heart of true fellowship is self-sacrificing conformity to a shared vision."²⁰ In the case of Paul and the Philippians, the "shared vision" is the advancement of the gospel.

Although some people wish to think that Paul includes the meaning of a common "participation" (in the sense of possession) in *the benefits* of the gospel, the primary meaning of the word and the context of the passage favor the view that he is referring to their participation and partnership in *the advance* of the gospel, and specifically having in view the financial support that they have given to him.

That is, Paul rejoices because the Philippians have been partners in the gospel with him since the very beginning, both in the broader sense that they have done much to advance the gospel, but also in the narrower sense that they have repeatedly given him financial and practical assistance.²¹ For Paul, this eagerness to promote the gospel, which includes their willingness to provide financial support for him, signals a genuine conversion in the Philippians. Because of this, Paul is confident that God has indeed started a saving work in them, and that he will bring it to completion.

You may be one of those people who put your career and family first before the gospel and its ministers. For all you care, the elders in your church can starve before you will give up the luxuries that you and your family enjoy, take for granted, and even consider your God-given right to retain. Of course, you must take care of your family, but even that should be for the sake of the kingdom of God.

that the apostle is in fact thanking God for how the Philippians remember Paul, especially as evidenced in their most recent financial donation. Those who hold this view include D. A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien, and Ralph P. Martin, and is reflected by Moffatt's translation. Since this view does not damage the integrity or content of Paul's letter, and since this is not an exegetical commentary, I will not take the time to argue for or against it.

¹⁸ Ralph P. Martin, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Philippians*; William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987; p. 49.

¹⁹ Carson, p. 16.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., p. 48-50. Also, Gordon D. Fee, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*; William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995; p. 81-84.

The Christian is one who does all things for the glory of God, even when he is pursuing a career and raising a family. Otherwise, why are you pursuing a career? Do you do that to raise a family? But why are you raising a family? You should take care of your family so that they can worship the Lord, serve the church, and promote the gospel. Depriving the church of your money and service is certainly not the right way to do this. Or do you think that the poor widow was being a "poor steward" when she "put in all she had to live on" (Luke 21:4)? Indeed, the Philippians may have increased their own need by giving the donation to Paul (4:19; 2 Corinthians 8:1-4).²² It was an act of selfless sacrifice for the benefit of the ministry of Paul and for the gospel of Christ.

Nevertheless, not every act of generous and sacrificial giving implies genuine conversion. For example, no amount of generous and sacrificial giving to the Mormon Church or to a Buddhist temple can indicate that someone has received God's grace. In fact, the very opposite is true, so that the more generous and sacrificial you are with your money toward false religions, the more it exposes you as God's enemy.

Likewise, not every act of generous and sacrificial giving toward a purportedly "Christian" cause implies genuine conversion. Giving your money to support the church's animal rescue program, puppet ministry, and the purchase of electric equipment to play "Christian" rock music during "worship" often does more to obscure and hinder the gospel than to promote it. And if your church does many of these things, you are probably in the wrong church.

Meaningful partnership in the gospel means that you give your financial and practical support to churches and ministries that promote the gospel as an intelligible message by means such as preaching and writing. Their message must be characterized by accurate theology and strong apologetics. This is the kind of ministry that the Philippians decided to support, so that they became partners with Paul in "defending and confirming the gospel." Although this may refer to the twofold doctrinal ministry of theology and apologetics, some scholars think that "defending" and "confirming" may be legal terms that refer to Paul's trial before the imperial court.²³ Nevertheless, others maintain that the words have broader uses that are not here restricted by the passage's context.²⁴

In any case, whether Paul is speaking to the public or to the court, he is "defending and confirming *the gospel*" (v. 7), so that in either case he would be performing apologetics, that is, defending the gospel against accusations and objections. Inherent in the idea of apologetics is the positive presentation of the gospel, since any defense of the gospel includes correcting erroneous ideas about it and a positive statement of what one is defending. Therefore, doing apologetics assumes that the content of the gospel has been made clear or will be made clear; otherwise, there would be nothing to defend. If it is

²² Martin, p. 184.

²³ Ibid., p.65.

²⁴ Gordon H. Clark, *Philippians*; The Trinity Foundation, 1996; p. 18.

correct to say that the defense refers to apologetics, and that the confirmation refers to theology, then Paul is in fact making this point explicit here.²⁵

In other words, Paul is commending the Philippians for supporting a ministry that is competent and courageous in doing theology and apologetics. Now, the words translated "defending" and "confirming," whether or not when used as legal terms, necessarily imply intellectual activity. This means that faithful partnership in the gospel refers to giving financial and practical assistance to a ministry that is committed to the biblical and rational defense of the Christian faith. It is worth being generous to and making sacrifices for such a ministry.

Ralph Martin writes, "We today might take the lesson to heart that the sign of our professed love for the gospel is the measure of sacrifice we are prepared to make in order to help its progress."²⁶ It may not be the only sign, but the eagerness of the Philippians to become partners in the gospel with Paul indicates that God has indeed performed a genuine work of conversion in them. Those who sincerely profess to put the gospel first, and follow through with financial and practical assistance to legitimate and competent ministries (James 2:26), can therefore gain a measure of assurance that they have indeed been chosen by God for salvation, and that what God has started, he will also bring to completion (1:6).

Most professing Christians are freeloaders; that is, they benefit from a church or ministry without sharing in its costs and responsibilities. Although they know that the church or ministry requires much financial and practical assistance, they allow other people to make the necessary sacrifices. Some of them value the church or ministry enough so that they are even willing to help if they know that it will fail without their assistance, but not before the organization has reached such a desperate condition.

If you are a freeloader, it is often difficult for other people to recognize it, especially if you appear to be very enthusiastic and supportive about the church or ministry, and this is why you are able to shamelessly remain a freeloader with that organization. But God knows what you are, and he keeps account. He knows those who are generous and those who are not, so that Paul writes, "Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously" (2 Corinthians 9:6). In fact, this is Paul's main reason for rejoicing at the generosity of the Philippians: "Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be credited to your account" (4:17).

Are you a faithful gospel-partner, or a shameless freeloader? Do you put yourself first even when the church or ministry is in great need? But perhaps you still do not have enough despite your selfishness. God says to his people through Haggai, "You earn

²⁵ J. A. Motyer, *The Message of Philippians*; InterVarsity Press, 1984; p. 46-47. However, some insist that both terms refer to defending the gospel, so that the confirmation refers to something like "vindication." Nevertheless, as mentioned, there must be something to defend, confirm, or vindicate, so that there must be a positive presentation of the gospel.

²⁶ Martin, p. 62.

wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it...What you brought home, I blew away. Why?...Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with his own house" (Haggai 1:6, 9). And so the prophet says, "Give careful thought to your ways" (v. 5, 7). You may think that it is safer to put your own needs first, but that safety is an illusion, since God himself will turn against you.

Paul rejoices that the Philippians are not freeloaders, but that they have repeatedly helped him, even at the expense of their own welfare and convenience. However, as mentioned above, Paul rejoices not just because he has received a donation, but mainly because this is one evidence of the Philippians' genuine conversion and because he knows that God will richly reward them. As for Paul himself, he says that he has learned the "secret of being content" (v. 12). He has become detached and independent of his circumstances, not by sheer willpower or resolve, but by Christ who gives him strength. (v. 13).

Now, Philippians 4:13 says, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength." This is one of the most popular but misused verses in the entire Bible – if people understand what it means, perhaps it would not be nearly so popular. People apply it to everything that they do, including relatively trivial and selfish things like sports, recreation, education, career, and anything else that they deem necessary in achieving happiness and satisfaction for themselves.

However, Paul is saying that Christ gives him strength to remain content (a Stoic word for self-sufficient indifference) even when he is hungry and poor (v. 12). He is not saying that Christ gives him strength to climb Mount Everest so that he can make a name for himself, which is the way many people tend to use verse 13 nowadays. But Christ will give you strength to endure hardship for the sake of the gospel.

So Paul is mainly concerned with the spiritual condition of the converts, and he rejoices at the signs of genuine conversion. These signs give Paul confidence that God "began a good work" in them, and that God will complete his work in them (v. 6). It is God who sovereignly justifies and sanctifies, by means of sovereignly supplied faith and perseverance, because salvation comes from God and not from man. After conversion, we must press forward for sanctification and assurance (2 Peter 1:10), and so after rejoicing at their signs of genuine conversion, Paul prays for their growth.

Paul starts by praying that the believers will grow in love. Love is the true product of the Spirit's work in a person (Galatians 5:22), and it is intimately related to sanctification and assurance. In the letter in which John addresses the topic of assurance (1 John 5:13), he bluntly states, "Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love" (1 John 4:7-8).

God commands us to walk in love, but very few people know the biblical definition of love. They tend to think that love is mainly an emotional fondness that one feels toward another. But the Bible explicitly defines love for us; it tells us what it means to love God and to love other people. John writes, "This is love for God: to obey his commands" (1 John 5:3), and also, "This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving

God and carrying out his commands" (5:2). Elsewhere, Paul explains that love obeys and performs God's commands about how we must treat other people (Romans 13:8-10).

Therefore, when God commands us to love him and other people, he is never appealing to our emotion, but he is appealing to our volition. That is, by God's sovereign grace, we must decide to obey God's commands concerning how we must treat God and other people, and this decision to love is reflected by the corresponding actions. When God commands us to love others, he is certainly not saying, "You must be emotionally fond of other people." Instead, he is saying, "You must relate to other people in accordance with the divine precepts recorded in Scripture."

Paul is not praying that the Philippians would begin to love, since they have already been demonstrating their love by being partners in the gospel. Instead, Paul is praying that they would abound in love or overflow with love. This would include greater and greater self-denial for the sake of the gospel.

How is this growth in love going to happen? If love has to do with the conscious obedience to biblical precepts and commands, then it necessitates a prior intellectual knowledge of these precepts and commands. Accordingly, Paul prays that their love will "abound more and more *in knowledge* and depth of insight" (1:9). Since the word translated "in" often means "by" or "with," it is possible to translate the sentence as, "I pray that your love abound *by means of* knowledge."²⁷ Indeed, one translation has, "I pray that your love will keep on growing *because of* your knowledge and insight" (*God's Word* translation). In any case, any translation or explanation of this verse that separates love and knowledge is mistaken.

The word translated "knowledge" occurs twenty times in the New Testament. More than a few anti-intellectual scholars try to soften or distort its meaning and implication, especially since the word appears here in close connection with love; however, the word always refers to intellectual knowledge about the things of God, a "mental grasp of spiritual truth,"²⁸ "doctrinal knowledge,"²⁹ and "theological knowledge."³⁰ Therefore, studying Scripture, hearing sermons, reading books, and engaging in theological discussions all have a direct relationship on your growth in love and obedience.

It is true that if you have knowledge without love, then you are nothing (1 Corinthians 13:2). However, many people who emphasize this do not know the biblical definition of love in the first place, so that what they mean is that you must have emotional warmth in addition to theological knowledge. But the Bible does not teach this. Further, their "remedy" is that you have to consider love (falsely defined by them) as *superior* to knowledge. But this is also false.

²⁷ Clark, p. 20.

²⁸ Martin, p. 66.

²⁹ James Montgomery Boice, *Philippians: An Expository Commentary*; Baker Books, 1971, 2000; p. 46.

³⁰ Motyer, p. 56.

Rather, since love is obedience to God's commands in all your relationships, whether with God or with other people, to have knowledge without love means that you do not obey what you know God requires of you. In addition, love is not superior to knowledge, just as your obedience to God's commands is not superior to your knowledge of God's commands, since obedience to God's commands is not even possible without knowledge of God's commands. You must first know these commands before you can consciously obey them and deliberately order your life by them. Theology makes love possible.

Jesus concludes his Sermon on the Mount by saying that we must hear his words and put them into practice (Matthew 7:24-27). If we do not first hear his words, then there is nothing for us to put into practice. To walk in a kind of "love" that is without a prior knowledge of God's commands and precepts is really to practice a sinful and arbitrary morality. Therefore, to walk in biblical love, you must have theological knowledge; otherwise, you are just fooling yourself in thinking that you are walking in love, and that God approves of you more than those who are the diligent students of theology. If you refuse to study theology, you have already shown that you do not love God.

Many people misuse 1 Corinthians 8, which says, "Knowledge puffs up" (v. 1). Pulling this out of context and ignoring other relevant verses, they have used this passage to make false contrasts between knowledge and love, and to attack theological knowledge. However, the entire verse 1 says, "Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that *we all possess knowledge*. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." To paraphrase, Paul is saying that we all know something about how to regard food sacrificed to idols, but if you are not obeying God's precepts in your relationships with others (that is, walking in love), then instead of doing something constructive with this knowledge, it is just going to make you think that you are superior to others.

That is, knowledge without obedience may make you prideful, but knowledge with obedience will build up the church. On the other hand, there are people who, because they do not have knowledge, have an unbiblical definition of love. And it is precisely by walking in this unbiblical kind of love that they think they are superior to those who have theological knowledge. So there are those who have biblical knowledge but refuse to obey it (that is, to walk in love), and then there are those who think they walk in love, but refuse to develop in biblical knowledge. The first group brings condemnation upon themselves, since they disobey what they know about God's commands, and the second group has neither knowledge nor love, and is completely in the dark.³¹ God disapproves of both kinds of people.

In any case, Paul has the highest regard for theological knowledge as it relates to life and ministry. For example, in response to a criticism about his speaking ability, he writes, "I may not be a trained speaker, but I do have knowledge" (2 Corinthians 11:6). He does not say, "But I do have love." Theological knowledge is the foundation for life, ministry, and

³¹ Since biblical love requires biblical knowledge as a prerequisite, no one can claim to be walking in biblical love without biblical knowledge. So the two unacceptable combinations are biblical knowledge without biblical love, and unbiblical love with no knowledge. The only acceptable combination is biblical knowledge with biblical love.

love. The failure to understand and accept this will result in a disfigured and crippled "Christian" life, if it can be called Christian at all.

Paul prays that the love of the Philippians would abound "in knowledge," but he says that this love should also grow in "depth of insight." The word translated "depth of insight" can mean "perception," "discrimination," or "judgment" (KJV). Paul is referring to the faculty that enables a person to discriminate between right and wrong, good and evil, and to make moral decisions. Verse 10 provides the context that confirms this understanding: "...so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ." It is the ability to make sound moral judgments that allows the believer to remain "pure and blameless." Given this context, "all discernment" (NKJV, NASB, ESV) is a better translation.

Thus Paul is praying that their love would grow in theological knowledge and in moral discernment. The contemporary idea of love often amounts to a nondiscriminating and nonjudgmental acceptance of lawlessness. However, biblical love refers to the obedience to divine commands in all our relationships, characterized by moral discrimination. Biblical love is judgmental in the sense that it makes moral judgments about people, and then it does something about it (1 Corinthians 5:3-5).

Jesus never spoke against this kind of moral discernment; rather, he spoke only against hypocritical and unbiblical judgments. He was against those who judged others but refused to judge themselves with the same standard, and he was against those who use unbiblical standards of judgment, such as human tradition. For example, he says, "You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye" (Matthew 7:5). He never says that you must not "remove the speck from your brother's eye," but only that you should "first take the plank out of your own eye." This speaks against hypocrisy and does not oppose making moral judgments.

The same is true with Paul. In Romans 2, he writes that those who pass judgment on others but who do the same things cannot escape God's judgment. But his intention is to argue for the fact that everyone is a sinner, and is in need of salvation by God's sovereign grace. For example, the Jews may judge the Gentiles as sinners because they commit murder and adultery, but the Jews themselves also commit murder and adultery; therefore, the Jews should not think that they are exempt from judgment *just because* they are Jews. But Paul does not say that their judgments are false, but merely hypocritical – he never says that murder and adultery are acceptable. In fact, he adds, "Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth" (Romans 2:2).

Once an adulterer said to me, "So I am a sinner! But you are supposed to love sinners, and you are supposed to love me." However, he referred to himself as a "sinner" only because that is what I would call him, and he never meant that as an admission that his adultery was wrong. He was certainly unlike the man in Luke 18, who says in humble repentance, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner" (v. 13). And by saying that I was

supposed to "love" him, he meant only that I should accept him *with* his adultery, and stop telling him that he was wrong.

This man was trying to use Christian terms to manipulate and silence me. I saw through the deception and exposed him, but his strategy too frequently works with Christians who try to bring sinners to repentance. We must again blame this on an ignorance of theology, since these believers would not be so easily confused, but would rather be immune to manipulation if they understand what these biblical words mean.

The next time someone demands that you "love" him, think about exactly what he means by it, and exactly what he is saying that you should do. If what he is saying is unbiblical, you are under no obligation to do it. He knows that you submit to biblical authority, and he is trying to use that authority to manipulate you by misrepresenting that authority to you. Do not be deceived – whenever it is appropriate, biblical love boldly confronts people about their transgressions, and sharply rebukes them for their heresies (Proverbs 27:5; Titus 1:13). This is not to get some self-satisfaction from belittling others, but it is to awaken and restore them. Whether gentle or harsh, confrontation is the biblical means by which God sometimes sovereignly grants repentance to sinners.

By obtaining theological knowledge that makes love possible, and by growing in moral discernment that enables this love to discriminate between right and wrong, the believer is preserved "pure and blameless" before God. "Knowing and discernment are thus basic to the whole task of Christian living, but surely especially to the duty of Christian love."³² Whereas God saved the believer when he was poor in spirit, he has now become rich in faith, and "filled with the fruit of righteousness" (v. 11). Nevertheless, all of these blessings come "through Jesus Christ." That is, only Christians can be "pure and blameless" before God, not by their own merits and efforts, but through Christ alone. And this is all for the ultimate end of "the glory and praise of God."

PHILIPPIANS 1:12-26

Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.

It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.

³² Motyer, p. 57.

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me.

The Philippians deeply care about Paul, and have repeatedly sent him financial and practical support. Paul's imprisonment has renewed their concern for him, and so the apostle responds to their interest about his welfare. Since the Philippians have been faithful partners in the gospel with Paul from the very beginning, we can easily understand why Paul rejoices about this and commends them for it. But now Paul proceeds to talk about his imprisonment. Do we expect anything from him other than bitter complaints?

But Paul is not a hypocrite. Just as he commends the Philippians for putting the gospel first, even when it demands self-denial and self-sacrifice, Paul shows that he also puts the gospel first, even when he is in prison because of the gospel. Thus he relates to the Philippians information about his situation in the context of his concern for the gospel, not for his own self-preservation. He summarizes his thoughts about his situation by saying that what has happened to him has served to "advance the gospel" (v. 12). Since this is the main concern of both Paul and the Philippians, this is Paul's way of viewing the situation and of assuring the Philippians.

Then, he provides some details about how the gospel is being advanced. First, because of his imprisonment, "the whole palace guard" has learned about the gospel. The soldiers guarding Paul are aware that he is not imprisoned for crimes like murder or robbery, but he is imprisoned for his religion. Perhaps discussions about this prisoner among themselves has resulted in more people knowing about the gospel. Second, because of Paul's courageous stand for Christ, now that he has been imprisoned, other believers are stirred to proclaim the gospel with greater boldness and diligence.

Related to his second point, Paul mentions some people who actually "preach Christ out of envy and rivalry," and "out of selfish ambition." It is possible for a minister to lose sight of his priorities, so that instead of putting the gospel first even at the expense of his own welfare and prominence, he seeks to become a greater preacher than others, and to become a celebrity. The Twelve had argued among themselves about who would be the greatest, but Christ explained to them that ministry is not about who achieves the greatest prominence, but about rendering slavish service for the sake of the gospel.

So these people have very wrong motives, since they preach Christ out of "envy," "rivalry," and "selfish ambition." However, Paul never says that they were preaching a false message, and this is certainly the reason why he never says that they should be stopped. As Martin observes, "The author of 2 Corinthians 11:4 and Galatians 1:6-9 could never have countenanced erroneous doctrine or let slip an opportunity to combat false teaching."³³ These people are not preaching false doctrine, but they are preaching biblical doctrine out of wrong motives. One commentator writes, "If they wished to distress Paul, they could have better succeeded by attacking his doctrine. They must have been somewhat stupid."³⁴ Of course they are wrong, and God would hold them accountable, but Paul never says to stop them, because "Christ is preached."

Now, many people today appear to be saying the same thing, but what they say in fact greatly differs from what Paul is saying. They may say that our differences in theology do not matter, as long as Christ is preached. But if there are differences in our theology, are we all preaching Christ? It depends on what we are disagreeing about, and that is precisely why we must argue out the points on which we disagree as to their truth and relevance. Paul never says that our theology does not matter as long as Christ is preached, since whether we are really preaching Christ depends on whether our theology is correct in the first place.

What Paul says is that people preaching with the wrong *motives* – not the wrong *theology* – may nevertheless advance the gospel, and for this he rejoices. Nowadays, people tend to do the reverse – they wish to stop those who preach from the wrong motives, but not those who preach the wrong theology. Of course, this does not mean that Paul approves of their wrong motives, but he is saying that he rejoices regardless of their wrong motives because they are still preaching a correct message, by means of which God could still save his elect. Gordon Clark relates the following incident:

In the University of Pennsylvania a professor of history read to his class Jonathan Edwards' sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." The aim of the professor was to show how harsh, disagreeable, and morose the New England Puritans were. Because of his reading, however, at least one student was converted to Christianity.³⁵

This professor was obviously reading the sermon for an immoral reason, but what he was reading nevertheless presented a biblical message, by means of which God converted at least one person in the class. Although we disapprove of the professor's motive for reading the sermon, and he was very likely a non-Christian, we nevertheless rejoice at his ill-intentioned action because of its effect. This is what Paul is trying to convey. But when it comes to theology, Paul never compromises, and neither should we.

³³ Martin, p. 76.

³⁴ Clark, p. 28.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 29.

Paul continues to say that he is confident of his "deliverance" (v. 19), but this does not necessarily mean that he thinks he will be released from prison, since he immediately begins to entertain the possibility of death. Rather, he is most likely referring to his ultimate vindication, especially before Christ, so that he "will in no way be ashamed," and that "Christ will be exalted," whether "by life or by death."

What follows are some difficult and debated verses (v. 21-26). I agree with many commentators that verse 22 does not necessarily mean that Paul has a choice between life and death. In fact, it is very unlikely that Paul is saying this, since life and death are in God's hands alone (James 4:13-15). Rather, it seems that Paul is opening a window for us to look into his thinking, and to observe the internal tension generated by the two possibilities.

For Paul, death would fulfill his lifelong desire, that is, to meet Christ. However, it is more beneficial for the believers if Paul remains. If Paul is granted the choice, what would he choose? One leads to the gaining *of Christ*, and the other leads to more labor *for Christ*. He concludes that there is additional work that he can do for the sake of the gospel, and for the believers' progress in faith. If verse 25 is indeed saying that he has confidence that he will remain, it does not appear that he has obtained this from direct revelation; rather, it appears to be the result of his reasoning process in verses 21-24. Nevertheless, verse 27 implies that he is uncertain about what would happen to him.

Although the precise meaning of these verses require a lengthier discussion, the overarching concerns that dictate Paul's thinking are obvious. That is, Paul cares relatively little about what happens to him, but he mainly cares about the glory of Christ, the advance of the gospel in the world, and the progress of faith in the believers. Paul's obsession is the gospel. What is yours?

3. UNITED BY THE GOSPEL

PHILIPPIANS 1:27-30

Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved – and that by God. For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him, since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.

People often talk about unity – about how good it is and how important it is. But around what are we supposed to unite? What similarities must we insist on? Or must we insist on none? What differences are we supposed to disregard, and what differences are unacceptable? Or are all differences acceptable? Some people tried to unite around the Tower of Babel, but God scattered them.

Just as Paul commends the Philippians for putting the gospel first, and just as he shows that he also puts the gospel first, he urges the believers to unite around this one object and one purpose – that is, the gospel and its advancement. With many people, theology is the least important factor when it comes to unity, so that all kinds of people are urged to unite even when their theologies contradict one another. On the other hand, Christian unity puts Christian theology first. If we cannot agree on theological matters, then there is no point in discussing other matters that are related to unity. If you affirm and preach a different gospel than I do, then how do we unite? Why would we unite? Any "unity" that disregards theology is superficial and meaningless.

However, once we agree on what constitutes the gospel message, and once we agree on the common purpose of advancing this gospel, then we have a biblical and meaningful basis for unity. This unity should be so strong that we would contend "as one man for the faith of the gospel." And for the sake of this gospel, we will order our lives in a way that brings it honor rather than disrepute (v. 27).

Sinners will oppose us. Just as true Christian unity has a common biblical theology as its foundation, although the sinners appear to have diverse beliefs and cultures, all sinners in fact have only one purpose – that is, to oppose the gospel. As Jesus says, "He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters" (Matthew 12:30). Of course unbelievers can appear to unite, since their differences are only superficial, whereas true Christians differ with all others at the foundational level. Ultimately, there are really two options – either unite to promote the gospel, or unite to oppose the gospel.

Their opposition against those of us who unite around the true gospel is a sign of our salvation and their damnation. That we would unite around the true gospel message and even deny our self-interests to promote it is one sign that God has chosen us for salvation and changed us for service. This is because we know that it is God who sovereignly grants us grace to believe the gospel, and then sovereignly grants us grace to suffer for the sake of the gospel.

On the other hand, that unbelievers would oppose those of us who unite around the gospel exposes them as reprobates, designated by God for everlasting damnation. Of course, some of them may be like Paul, who persecuted the church at first, but was later sovereignly changed by God. But unless that happens, anyone who opposes those who unite around the gospel exposes himself as unsaved, and doomed to destruction.

Therefore, when sinners oppose your bold stance for the gospel, rejoice that God has granted you faith to believe the gospel, and grace to suffer for the gospel. Everywhere we bring it, the gospel is life to the elect, and death to the reprobates (2 Corinthians 2:14-16). Unlike sinful humanistic unity, our unity around the gospel is not to enhance our ability for self-preservation; rather, the reverse is true, because we are giving up self-preservation for the sake of the gospel (Mark 8:35).

PHILIPPIANS 2:1-11

If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Partners in the gospel are united by the gospel; they bind themselves together to promote one message and one purpose. In doing this, they give evidence that they are indeed the chosen ones of God, and at the same time exposes all those who oppose them as those damned by God. However, stubborn sinful habits remain in people even after their conversion, and various circumstances may provoke their remaining selfishness to protect their own interests, even at the expense of others and of the gospel, thus threatening Christian unity.

Therefore, Paul makes the case for self-denial, so that they may not lose sight of what is important, and that they will remain steadfast in their unity around the gospel. Biblical sanctification does not come only by prayer or by willpower, but it comes and grows by repeatedly reminding and persuading the believers to obey God's precepts and to follow Christ's example.

Accordingly, Paul reminds them of their common participation in the gospel. As he emphasizes elsewhere, there is only one body of believers, called by God to one hope. This community is united by one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father (Ephesians 4:4-6). There is no way to achieve true unity with those outside of this one body, nor is unity with them desirable. But all those who truly share in the supreme and exclusive benefits of the gospel indeed have something important in common, and this should lead to their unity.

When "selfish ambition and vain conceit" intrude to undermine this unity, we must strive to preserve it, even at the expense of our own interests and pride. Thus Paul urges self-denial in the face of selfishness, and prescribes humility to overcome pride. We must look out not only for ourselves, but also for the interests of others. If we have been truly converted by God, that is, if we have received the benefits of the gospel, then let us unite around its one message and one purse, and thus become "like-minded." Those who are partners in the gospel, let them also be united by the gospel.

To instruct and encourage the Philippians to practice self-denial, Paul cites the example of Jesus Christ in verses 5-11. Although a precise exegesis of this passage involves some difficulties, the general meaning is clear. Jesus had always been God, but he did not seize upon this so that he refused to humble himself by taking on human attributes to redeem the elect. Rather, being God, he willingly submitted himself to the humiliation of becoming a slave. Furthermore, he was obedient to the will of the Father to the point that he willingly died a criminal's death!

Where the NIV says he "made himself nothing," the NASB says he "emptied himself," which is more literal. Some people have falsely inferred from this expression that Jesus had laid aside some of his divine attributes in his incarnation. This is called the kenosis theory or kenotic theology. Others have gone so far as to say that he functioned on this earth as a mere human being empowered by the Holy Spirit. But this is a damnable heresy. Since it is the attributes of a being that define the being, a being that lays aside any of his original essential attributes (assuming that it is possible to do this in the first place) ceases to be the original being.

That is, if Jesus had laid aside any of his divine attributes, he would have ceased to be God. Since it is precisely the divine attributes that makes God to be God, it is nonsense to say that God can be God if he has laid aside some of his divine attributes. However, God is immutable, so that if Jesus was ever God, he could never cease to be God. Therefore, those who affirm the impossible and nonsensical kenosis theory risk losing the very basis upon which they may call themselves Christians, but they have become the enemies of Christianity. Instead, Christians must affirm that Jesus has always been God, and he was

still God when he took upon himself human attributes and lived on the earth.³⁶ He never laid aside any of his divine attributes; he never existed as a mere human being empowered by the Holy Spirit.

When Paul says that Christ "emptied himself," he is not picturing Christ as a container with divine attributes that could be poured out like water, after which those attributes would not be in him anymore, at least until his resurrection or ascension. The purpose of the passage is to recall the humility and humiliation of Christ to admonish and encourage believers to practice self-denial, and thus to preserve their unity around the gospel. Christ's humiliation was not in emptying himself *of something*, but rather, he humiliated himself by "*taking*" on human attributes (v. 7). His act of "*emptying*" himself was in his act of "*taking*" on a human nature. To say that he emptied himself is thus only a metaphor, just like when Paul says, "I am being poured out like a drink offering" (v. 17), he is not saying that his internal organs or his human attributes would be poured out like liquid from a bottle (also 2 Corinthians 12:15; 2 Timothy 4:6). The point is that Christ practiced self-denial and self-sacrifice for our sake (2 Corinthians 8:9).

This is the greatest example of self-denial, and Paul calls us to adopt the same attitude, having the same readiness to deny our "selfish ambition or vain conceit" for the sake of the gospel and for the sake of other believers. As mentioned, various circumstances may provoke our remaining selfishness to protect our own interests, thus jeopardizing Christian unity. It is at such times that we must be willing to humble and humiliate ourselves for a greater cause, that is, for the one message and one purpose around which we must all unite.

Because of Christ's willing sacrifice and submission, God exalted him to the highest place, so that all must worship him. But was not Christ God to begin with? Yes, but now we are referring to his state of incarnation, since we know that Christ has retained his human attributes in his resurrection. All must bow to him, and this includes all the false gods and false prophets in the non-Christian religions. Mohammed and Joseph Smith are now forced to bow to Jesus Christ from their place in hell, in the midst of their extreme agony – not as sincere worshipers, of course, but as the defeated enemies of Christ – even as their deceived followers think that these false prophets can lead them to heaven. As Peter writes, "Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time" (1 Peter 5:6). If you will humble yourself under God, he will lift you up, although he will do that according to his time and his plan.

PHILIPPIANS 2:12-18

Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed – not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence – continue to work out your salvation with fear and

³⁶ Of course, God the Son never "lived on the earth" in the sense that he was completely restricted to his human body; otherwise, he would have indeed laid aside the divine attribute of omnipresence, which is impossible. Rather, God the Son has always been and still is omnipresent, even when he lived on the earth *according to this human nature*, and even now, his human nature is not omnipresent, although his divine nature is certainly omnipresent.

trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life – in order that I may boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor for nothing. But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. So you too should be glad and rejoice with me.

Christ left his followers the supreme example of obedience to the Father, and Paul urges the Philippians to imitate their Lord. Now, the believers at Philippi already have a long history of obedience and faithfulness, even from the first day when they obeyed the gospel of Christ as delivered by Paul. But is their obedience contingent upon the presence of this first-class apostle?

Paul is optimistic that they would obey even in his absence, not just because of his positive perception of the Philippians; rather, Paul believes that just as God has started a genuine work of grace in them, he will also complete this divine work in them by means of his sovereign power (1:6), controlling and working through their decisions and actions to effect sanctification (2:13). Just as God saved us by causing our will to affirm the gospel, he continues to control our will, by means of which God will work out his character and his purpose in our lives.

Although the will is not free, in the sense that it is never free from God's control, it is still a genuine function of the mind, so that as God works through our will to effect sanctification, we will continue to be aware of making difficult choices and conscious of struggling against temptations. It is the will of God that we go through such trials, so that when we have overcome temptations, our faith will come forth as gold, to the end that the Father and the Son may be glorified by our lives (Job 23:10; 1 Peter 1:7). Therefore, "put into action God's saving work in your lives, obeying God with deep reverence and fear" (v. 12, NLT).

Because their obedience does not depend on the apostle's immediate presence and influence, but rather on God's sovereign grace and power, Paul is confident that the Philippians could demonstrate even greater obedience than when he was there with them. By God's grace and power, Paul admonishes them to humble themselves and deny their own interests, so that they may preserve the harmony in their church and maintain their unity around their theology – that is, the gospel.

Their effort to maintain true unity is not to be an individualistic endeavor, but the community must participate in resolving the conflicts between the members (4:3). That is, a believer must ensure that he does not stir up strife, and he must deny his own personal interests to preserve the theological unity around the gospel, but in addition to

this, a mature believer must also participate in helping others resolve their conflicts. He does this not as a busybody, but as one of those who are "spiritual" (Galatians 6:1), capable of restoring other people. This implies that the duty to help others in this way should be performed by those who are more spiritually mature, especially the church elders, and not by new converts or problematic members. In any case, the principle remains that the community must help resolve individual conflicts between the members.

Thus in 4:3, Paul specifically asks one whom he designates as "loyal yokefellow" to help in the reconciliation of two women, so that they may be literally "one mind in the Lord." Again, biblical unity never ignores theological disagreements, but it is characterized by being "in one mind" and "in the Lord." Biblical unity is a unity that is founded on an essential common understanding of Christian theology. Those who say that we should somehow "unite" despite important disagreements in theology are urging not biblical unity, but humanistic unity, and thus have made themselves the enemies of Christ and the church. True unity must be based on a common and biblical theology.

One writer has produced a book that commends "Christian" unity despite theological differences; however, the title of this book calls his attempt the construction of a "theological framework"! But what if my theological disagreements with him include this very "theological framework"? To urge a kind of unity that ignores *theological* differences, he nevertheless suggests a *theological* framework with which many people may disagree. The very title of his book contradicts and destroys his project. "Christian" unity is impossible if there are major theological differences, since it is Christian *theology* that defines what is "Christian" in the first place. Any attempt to circumvent this principle will result in false unity and false religion.

It is better to completely cut off fellowship than to compromise the gospel. On the other hand, if the conflicts involve only petty *personal* differences, instead of essential *theological* differences, then Scripture demands that we practice self-denial to preserve harmony for the sake of the gospel.

In fact, this is precisely what Paul is saying that the Philippians must do. They must put aside their personal interests, so that they may maintain true unity for the sake of the gospel. He cites Christ as the supreme example of self-denial, and expresses his confidence that they would imitate the Lord's obedience by God's grace and power. This is not just so that they may experience peace and quiet, but rather that they may be "blameless and pure" before the world, so that they may "shine like stars in the universe," in sharp contrast to this "crooked and depraved generation" consisting of the unbelievers.

However, our role is not mainly to demonstrate moral behavior and biblical unity, as some people have alleged. They say that a moral example does more to demonstrate the truth of the gospel message than a thousand sermons, but I say that one biblical sermon does more to demonstrate the truth of the gospel message than one thousand years of perfect moral example. Unless there is a clear and precise message, your biblical moral example may only inspire someone to become his own unbiblical idea of a moral person, perhaps by adopting a false religion like Islam or Buddhism. Of course, true morality

comes only as the result of faith in Christ, but that is something you need to *tell* them, not *show* them. The content of the gospel does not come by observation. It is true that God commands us to form a sharp moral contrast with the world by our holy living, but this is so that the message may have free course, and not because the moral example by itself will do much good. The moral example is for the sake of the gospel, not the reverse.

F. F. Bruce is surely mistaken when he writes, "No one would take their message seriously if their way of life was at variance with it."³⁷ *No one?! Would not even one person* believe the gospel unless believers live in full accord with the message? Of course the Holy Spirit would use our moral example as one of the means by which he calls the elect to faith in the message, but nevertheless, our moral example is not a necessary means. Only the message itself is necessary to establish an object of faith, and the Holy Spirit can and does bring many people to faith by means of the message alone, often despite the poor example of the believers.

I would have believed the gospel even if I had never seen a good and consistent believer before my conversion. Come to think of it, I am not certain that I personally knew even one such believer when I was converted. By God's sovereign grace, I knew that the message could be true even if those who claim to follow it do not live in accordance with it. There may be a whole host of reasons why they fail to live up to their faith – one of which being that most of those who claim to be Christians are false converts themselves.

To reject the gospel message or to apostatize from the faith because of hypocrites or church scandals is completely irrational. Perhaps those hypocrites have never been true Christians, or perhaps they have temporarily stumbled. And if you reject the gospel or apostatize because of them, then perhaps you are among the reprobates or false converts as well. What we can say for certain is that you are stupid.

God will hold you accountable for your attitude toward the gospel, and you will directly answer to him. How people who claim to be followers of Christ behave has no direct relationship to whether the gospel is true or false. In fact, Scripture tells you outright that there would be hypocrites in the church. Whether you think the gospel is true or false, you must directly confront its content. Now, if you think that you have rational objections against the gospel, then you should refute the biblical system of apologetics that I have articulated in my books;³⁸ otherwise, what you have is just another bad excuse. Jesus says that you are responsible to obey the word of God whether or not other people are setting good examples for you (Matthew 23:2-3).

All of this does not take away from the fact that God has commanded us to live holy lives before the world, in a way that is worthy of the gospel that we have come to believe. I am opposing only those who make our moral example more important than the gospel message, since it is something that Scripture does not teach. We strive to live in holiness and unity so that we may uncompromisingly hold forth *the word* of life – the intellectual

³⁷ F. F. Bruce, *New International Biblical Commentary: Philippians*; Hendrickson Publishers, 1983, 1989; p. 85.

³⁸ See Vincent Cheung, *Ultimate Questions and Presuppositional Confrontations*.

message that gives life. Our morality and unity *in themselves* do nothing to commend the gospel, since people would not even know why we are so moral and united unless we tell them.³⁹

Paul calls his generation of non-Christians crooked and depraved. Our own generation wants to be perceived as enlightened, liberated, open-minded, inclusive, and tolerant; however, the truth is that, like every generation of unbelievers, it is sinful, perverse, blind, indecisive, irrational, and stupid. It is not straight in its thinking and its behavior; the only solution is for us to hold forth the straight, rigid, narrow, exclusive, inflexible, and "intolerant" truth of God's word. God has no interest in "tolerating" *your* beliefs; rather, he commands you to repent and believe *his* message, and turn away from your non-Christian lifestyle and religion.

PHILIPPIANS 2:19-30

I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you. I have no one else like him, who takes a genuine interest in your welfare. For everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel. I hope, therefore, to send him as soon as I see how things go with me. And I am confident in the Lord that I myself will come soon.

But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, fellow worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs. For he longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill. Indeed he was ill, and almost died. But God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow. Therefore I am all the more eager to send him, so that when you see him again you may be glad and I may have less anxiety. Welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honor men like him, because he almost died for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for the help you could not give me.

Jesus Christ is our ultimate example of self-denial and of considering the interests of God's kingdom above our own interests. His example may appear very difficult to imitate, but this is why not many people are true Christians. Since the old sinful habits have become so much a part of you, removing them may be so painful that it feels as if you are gouging out one of your eyes or cutting off one of your limbs (Matthew 5:29-30). As much as pursuing our selfish ambitions and personal interests are part of our old way of thinking and living, so it is difficult to deny ourselves; however, it is necessary, since those who refuse to deny themselves for the sake of Christ are not Christians (Matthew 16:24-25).

Although it is difficult to imitate Christ's example of self-denial, it is possible for the genuine Christian, since it is the Spirit of Christ who enables us to do it. Indeed, the Spirit

³⁹ See Vincent Cheung, *The Light of Our Minds*, chapter 2, "By Word and Deed."

has done such a powerful work of conversion and sanctification in Timothy and Epaphroditus that Paul cannot help but commend their attitude and service, even as he writes about their travel plans. These two servants of Christ exemplify the Christian priorities that Paul wishes to reinforce in the Philippians.

Paul writes that Timothy is one who takes "genuine interests" in the believers' welfare. Whereas everyone looks out for his own interests, Timothy has proved that he is one who looks out for the interests of Jesus Christ. This is the kind of person that Paul wishes every believer would become – one who looks out for the interests of Jesus Christ. In general terms, this is the test by which we must examine every minister and every believer – does he look out for his own interests, or the interests of Jesus Christ?

Of course, wicked people wish to distort Paul's intention even on this simple point, so that they interpret the interests of Jesus Christ as our material prosperity and physical health, and some insane individuals seem to think that his main interests have to do with animal rescue and environmental protection. But these people are only trying to cast their own personal agendas in Christian terms. In reality, they are still pursuing their own personal interests, although they do not want to admit it. On the other hand, throughout his letter, Paul has made it clear that the interests of Jesus Christ have to do with the defense of the gospel and the maturity of the saints. These are the things that our church community ought to focus on, instead of letting the latest fad define out priorities.

One woman told me on the phone that she left her church because her pastor canceled the church animal rescue program due to a lack of funds. That the church had an animal rescue program in the first place astonished me, but as the woman continued spewing out her hatred for the pastor, it was clear to me that she had never been interested in the defense of the gospel and the maturity of the saints; rather, she was trying to use the church to promote what *she thought* was important, which turned out to have very little to do with believers or humanity in general, but had everything to do with animals. It appeared that she called me because she wanted me to validate her perspective. Instead, I told her that she was full of pride and bitterness, whereupon she screamed at me, and hung up. Of course, it was unlikely that she was a Christian in the first place.

We should examine our priorities and projects to see if they are truly serving to promote the interests of Christ, instead of just assuming that they are. We will probably find that many of the things that we do have very little to do with Christ, but we mention him in connection with what we are doing only to make us feel better about wasting out time on unimportant matters. Again, the interests of Christ have to do with the defense of the gospel and the maturity of the saints – never lose sight of these things.

Timothy has proved himself, not just in a general manner, but his faithfulness has been evident in the way that he served with Paul in the work of the gospel as a son serves with his father. This leads us to consider the relationship between Paul and Timothy. Now, it is true that your ultimate loyalty should be toward Christ. He is the one who died for you, and he is the only mediator between you and the Father. If it ever comes to a choice

between being loyal to God or being loyal to a man, then of course you should maintain your loyalty to God – there is no question about this.

That said, God providentially arranges human relationships in the church community so that you may find yourself coming under another believer's authority in your work for the gospel. Using marriage as an example, although Christ is a woman's only Savior and Mediator, God has also placed her under the husband's authority. And although her ultimate loyalty is to Christ, she must be also loyal to her husband.

In a similar way, although Timothy's ultimate loyalty is to Christ, God has arranged for him to have a special bond with Paul, so that he may serve with the apostle in the work of the gospel. Therefore, elsewhere Paul reminds Timothy that just as he should not be ashamed of Christ, neither should he be ashamed of Paul (2 Timothy 1:8). Timothy has proved himself by being faithful in the work of the gospel, but more than that, he has been faithful to Paul while doing the work of the gospel, as a son with his father. He does not resent God's providential arrangement, but instead submits to legitimate authority in his human relationships.

Thus he greatly differs from those who do the work of the gospel out of "envy," "rivalry," and "selfish ambition." Do you work for the gospel so that you can be some sort of celebrity, or so that you may gain power or admiration? Are you willing to labor in the shadow of someone that God has providentially placed over you? Or are you in fact motivated by ambition and jealousy? Of course, you must not compromise the gospel to serve one who is over you, but assuming that is not a problem in your case, then Scripture demands that you deny your selfish ambitions and personal interests, and be loyal to the one who has spiritual authority over you according to God's providence.

Paul also commends Epaphroditus, whose self-denial and self-sacrifice are befitting to a true gospel minister. He is distressed not because he had been ill, but because he knows that the Philippians had heard that he was ill! Rather than focusing on his own welfare, he is concerned that the Philippians would worry about him. This is also Paul's attitude, and so the apostle is sending him back to the Philippians. Epaphroditus had risked his life in helping Paul. Today, most people who claim to be Christians would not even risk losing a little sleep or a little money for a preacher, not to say their very lives! But this is what true self-denial demands. Epaphroditus had in mind not his own personal interests, but the interests of Jesus Christ, and so he was willing to risk his life for the message, and the messenger. Paul writes, "Honor men like him."

4. FROM JUSTIFIED TO SANCTIFIED

PHILIPPIANS 3:2-9

Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh. For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh – though I myself have reasons for such confidence.

If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.

But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.

As Christians, we are to be partners in the gospel, united by the gospel, and live for the gospel. We are to lay aside selfish ambition and petty bickering to preserve our harmony, so that we may unite around our one message and one purpose, and so that we may effectively present the straight and inflexible gospel to this crooked and spineless generation.

However, we must not try to maintain harmony in our community at all costs, because the only proper foundation for unity is a common biblical theology. We must lay aside our *personal* differences for the sake of the gospel without ignoring our *theological* differences. If there is no theological unity, then there is no true unity. On the other hand, if the theology that we affirm is not consistently and comprehensively biblical, then any unity around it is illusory and useless. Theology is the most important thing in a community, for it is theology that defines the community and its purpose in the first place.

Therefore, besides practicing self-denial to preserve our community's unity around a biblical theology, we must guard our theology against corruption, lest the very foundation of our unity be destroyed. False doctrine can spread like gangrene if left unchecked (2 Timothy 2:17), as "a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough" (Galatians 5:9). Church leaders must help prevent doctrinal corruption by regularly teaching biblical doctrine to their people, and repeatedly warning them about false doctrine. This summarizes their primary duty. But once the church leaders detect the intrusion of false

doctrine into the community, and if gentle persuasion fails to correct this, then they must harshly rebuke the offenders in the hopes that they may return to soundness in doctrine and practice (Titus 1:13). If the offenders refuse to repent, then the leaders must remove them from the church community altogether (1 Timothy 1:20). Scripture condemns as accomplices those who welcome or support heretics (2 John 9-11).

Paul says that those who spread false doctrine are "dogs." He is most likely thinking about those Jews who, even though they claim to acknowledge Jesus as the Christ, continue to insist that Gentiles must come under the ceremonial laws of Moses, and this is represented by undergoing circumcision (Acts 15:1, 5).⁴⁰ They say that although it is fine to have faith in Jesus Christ, it is necessary to add to this faith obedience to the ceremonial laws of Moses to be justified before God, or at least for the purpose of attaining perfection (Galatians 3:1-5).

The Jews refer to the unclean Gentiles as "dogs" (Mark 7:27), and indeed all unbelievers are as dogs, but Paul applies the insult to the Jews who contradict the true gospel, because *they* are also unsaved. This does not mean that Paul's hostile attitude is specific to the Jews, and that he would be kinder to other heretics. Instead, Scripture applies this and other insults against those who spread false doctrines and practice evil deeds (Revelation 22:15).

Paul does not say that heretics are merely those with a "different perspective," nor does he say something stupid like God reveals truths to people of different religious persuasions, so that our total understanding would increase if we would just come together in friendly exchange and dialogue. He does not say that we should be "open-minded and tolerant," or that we should "celebrate diversity." He says no such things! Rather, those who oppose the true gospel are dogs, and about this particular group of heretics, referring to circumcision, he writes, "I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!" (Galatians 5:12).

What is under attack here is the doctrine of justification by faith, which is really a doctrine that has been under constant attack throughout church history, even to this day. The sixteenth-century Reformation brought this doctrine back to the forefront, and for a while it shone brightly. But every generation must renew the fight for truth, and this is certainly the case when it comes to this doctrine, because what it teaches goes against every tendency of the unconverted.

As mentioned earlier in this book, justification is by faith not in the sense that you can save yourself by your faith; rather, the doctrine stresses that you can do nothing to save yourself, but that you must totally depend on someone else to save you. Therefore, the doctrine is teaching justification not by faith *as such* or *by itself*, but it is teaching that justification is *by Christ* alone. It is Christ that saves you, and not faith itself. Faith has a role because it is Christ who saves you by means of giving you faith in him. The doctrine

⁴⁰ Here we are distinguishing the ceremonial laws of the old covenant from the timeless moral laws that God has revealed. Whereas the ceremonial laws have been fulfilled in Christ, the moral laws continue to be binding on all people.

is offensive to the reprobate because it demands him to completely abandon his effort to save himself, and to recognize his total dependence and helplessness, whereas all he wants is to be as a god, having no one to rule over him. This means that no one will truly affirm this doctrine of justification by faith unless God sovereignly works in him to change his mind.

This leads us to a very important point, which is the fact that no biblical doctrine stands totally alone; rather, every biblical doctrine entails at least several other biblical doctrines that must be articulated in a way that is consistent among themselves, and consistent with the doctrine under discussion. Because no doctrine stands by itself, it is insufficient and misleading to preach justification by faith as if it is unrelated to other doctrines; that is, it is wrong to insist that people affirm justification by faith, and then tell them that they can believe whatever they want about other doctrines that are related to it and still be saved.

"Justification by faith" is shorthand for several related doctrines, and you need to have a correct view of each of these doctrines. On the one hand, it seems possible to affirm a correct view of justification even if you affirm a false view of, say, church government. On the other hand, it does matter where you think the "faith" of "justification by faith" comes from, whether from human invention or divine grace. If you think that faith comes from your own willpower or decision, without God's sovereign choice granting you that faith, then you have subverted the entire idea of justification by faith, which is total dependence on God for salvation.

One woman said to me, "I may not be a good Christian, but I am not a bad person." She told me that she will go to heaven because she has never done anything really horrendous, and she tries to help others whenever possible. But whatever she calls herself, this view makes her a humanist, not a Christian. In any case, I know this woman – she does not try to help others whenever possible. So she is at least a liar.

In addition, according to the Bible, if you are not a good Christian, then you are indeed a bad person. That she believed she was not a bad person even though she was not a good Christian shows that she did not understand the gospel, because if she was not a bad person, then she would not need the gospel at all. But the Bible makes it clear that every person is a bad person without the righteousness that comes from God through faith in Christ. She was not very different from another woman who told me that she had never sinned at all. But this means that she could not affirm justification by faith, since what she said implied that she did not need justification in the first place!

On the other hand, Paul says, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23), and John says, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8). This is what the Bible says, but since this woman insisted that she had never sinned, could she still affirm biblical inerrancy? And if she did not affirm biblical inerrancy, on what authoritative basis could she affirm that she was a Christian, or that she would go to heaven? In fact, if her position made it impossible to affirm biblical inerrancy, how could she authoritatively define sin, on the basis of which

she could affirm her sinlessness? If you have never acknowledged that you were a wretched sinner, how can you claim that you have been justified by faith?

Of course these people failed to think through these questions, but the point is that you cannot affirm only "justification by faith" and at the same time affirm heretical views about other related biblical doctrines, since affirming heretical views about other related biblical doctrines automatically makes it impossible to truly affirm "justification by faith." The above shows that to properly affirm justification by faith, you must also affirm the sovereignty of God, the depravity of man, and the inerrancy of Scripture. Now, since justification by faith is referring to faith in the redemptive work of Christ, one must also have a proper view of the atonement. Since the atonement is God's only provision for salvation, it in turn implies the exclusiveness of Christ. "Justification by faith" does not refer to faith in just anything, but faith must have a proper object.

We can now see the folly of those who say that theology does not matter as long as we agree on those things that relate to salvation, and as long as we all preach the gospel. What are the things that relate to salvation, and what are the proper views on these things? And what is the "gospel"? These questions involve more than what many people think. Now we can understand why salvation is connected with the study and knowledge of Scripture (2 Timothy 3:15). You cannot rightly affirm and preach the "gospel" without the study of theology, because the right theology is the gospel.

You can imagine that many, or even most, of those who claim to affirm justification by faith do not really know what they are saying. It is repeated so much that it has become a slogan among Christians, but many who think that they affirm and preach justification by faith in fact do not. They may in fact be referring to justification by faith *plus works*, justification by faith in "god" but not the work of Christ, or justification by a "faith" that is generated by their own willpower and not sovereignly granted by God. But what is the harm? Are we not just being picky? No, there is great harm in rejecting or misunderstanding this doctrine, and we are not just being picky, because the true doctrine of justification by faith is really the gospel itself. A false understanding of this doctrine is not the gospel at all, and therefore it cannot save anyone.

Thus Paul reserves some of his most scathing rebukes and insults for those who preach a false view of justification, and for those who believe them. Again, those who preach a different view of justification are not fellow believers who merely hold a different but acceptable perspective; rather, Paul says that they preach a "different gospel" altogether, "which is really no gospel at all," and that they will be "eternally condemned" (Galatians 1:6-9). This is how serious this is – those who preach a false view of justification will suffer forever in hell, and so will those who believe what they preach (Romans 3:28, 11:6; Galatians 3:10-11). We must not put up with different "perspectives" on this matter, because they are really different gospels, whereas there is only one true gospel (2 Corinthians 11:3-4).

Of course, this makes the way to salvation very narrow, and not many people will accept it, but this is consistent with what the Bible says about the nature of the gospel and its

reception by people: "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it" (Matthew 7:13-14; also Matthew 22:14; Luke 13:23-24; Romans 9:27). The problem is that "sometimes we don't present the gospel well enough for the non-elect to reject it."⁴¹

Modern heretical evangelists would have you believe that it is easy to be saved, but the Bible teaches that salvation is utterly impossible, *unless* God specifically chooses to save you. They think the Bible teaches that the way of salvation is so easy and simple that even "fools shall not err therein" (Isaiah 35:8, KJV), in the sense that even fools can understand the gospel and will not make a mistake about it. However, the verse is saying exactly the opposite: "And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness. The unclean will not journey on it; it will be for those who walk in that Way; wicked fools will not go about on it" (NIV). That is, "the Way" (Acts 9:2, 19:9, 23, 24:14, 22) is reserved for those whom God has chosen and Christ has redeemed,⁴² so that the unclean and the fools will not enter into it, and will not even stumble upon it or wander into it by mistake.

The true gospel is offensive to the reprobates, as it should be; however, today's heretical evangelists try to present the gospel in a way that it will not offend anyone. Thus most of the people they bring into the church are false converts. On the other hand, Christ made the "impossible" demands of the gospel clear, so that some of those who initially followed him could not endure and so left him (Matthew 19:22; John 6:60-61, 66). Of course, these were never his true disciples in the first place (John 8:31; 1 John 2:19). John MacArthur writes:

The easy path always tempts us. Sometimes we make the gospel so easy that it's no gospel at all. We Christians stew about how hard it is to follow up with new converts. One large church in America reported it had 28,000 conversions in a year, baptized 9,600 people, and had 123 join the church. The fact is that 28,000 people weren't saved if only 123 joined the church. The problem is not the difficulty of follow-up; the problem is the difficulty of conversion. We're trying to follow up with people who never were redeemed.

I remember an "evangelism in depth" effort in Ecuador some years ago. The report was that thousands were saved, but only two could be found in a church. Those weren't conversions. True believers long, like babies, for the milk of the Word and Christian worship and fellowship. They love the Lord and His People....

People defect from the gospel because they were drawn to it initially for the wrong reason. The excitement of the crowd, not the

⁴¹ John MacArthur, *Hard to Believe*; Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2003; p. 20.

⁴² God has chosen some individuals for salvation in eternity, and Christ redeemed these individuals – and only these individuals – in history. See Vincent Cheung, *Systematic Theology*.

meaning of the message, lures them at first. A lively crowd, and the production value of a worship service emphasizing showmanship rather than Scripture, wows the modern-day seeker....

Popularity didn't help. When Jesus was popular, He attracted the most shallow fun-seekers. Genuine disciples were drawn not by showbiz but by the truth, the power, and the character of His message.

Christianity has to be very careful when it is popular. The action and excitement of a crowd captivate people. They gather in a sports stadium, or a large auditorium or church, to be part of a big event. There's an energy, almost a pep-rally feel, but many of the participants are there for the crowd, not the Crown. They're looking for some miraculous intervention on their behalf, or the promise of something they can cash in on. Or just a good show....

This point deeply concerns me about most of the popular evangelical fads today. What kind of people are they attracting? Lured by the crowd and the promise of something supernatural, thinking only of earthly things with little desire for true worship, but plenty of desire for personal prosperity, they do not understand eternal issues. Until they do and confess their need, *they will never be saved.*⁴³

Do you affirm and preach the empty illusion of an easy gospel, or the harsh reality of an "impossible" gospel – one whose demands can only be met by God's sovereign grace and power (Matthew 19:25-26)? A false gospel draws the reprobates and repels the elect (John 10:4-5), but the true gospel offends the reprobates and awakens the elect (1 Corinthians 1:21-25). It has nothing to do with your eloquence or charisma, but it has everything to do with the content of your message.

The ultimate explanation for people's rejection of the gospel of justification by faith in Christ is that God has designated these people as reprobates and has sovereignly hardened their hearts against the message. Romans 9:18 says, "Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden." There is no legitimate alternative interpretation to this and the many other biblical passages stating that man's decision is under God's absolute control, even when it comes to whether he accepts or rejects the gospel. God shows his mercy to those whom he has sovereignly chosen by regenerating them, changing their minds, granting them repentance and faith, so that they may believe the gospel and be saved. On the other hand, he shows his wrath to those whom he has sovereignly damned by giving them "a spirit of stupor" (Romans 11:8), hardening their minds, so that they will not see the truth of the gospel and will refuse to accept it.

⁴³ MacArthur, p. 115-116, 162-163, 170.

One main manifestation of their hardened minds is their rejection of justification by faith in preference for their "confidence in the flesh" (v. 3). They refuse to acknowledge God's right to define good and evil (Genesis 3:5). Even if they do acknowledge God's right to define good and evil, they refuse to acknowledge their sins (1 John 1:8). Even if they do acknowledge their sins, they refuse to acknowledge their complete spiritual helplessness. Instead of depending on God's sovereign mercy to save them, they would rather depend on their own human credentials.

Paul responds that if anyone could have confidence in the flesh, he would be the one. At least according to the standard of Judaism, he has the right pedigree, the right affiliation, the right ceremonial credentials, and the right human achievements. When it comes to "legalistic righteousness," Paul says he is "faultless" (v. 5-6).

However, Paul has since discovered that mere human credentials could never save anyone, since salvation is by grace through faith, and not by the works of the law. He could not depend on both grace and works for justification, since these two ways are mutually exclusive: "And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace" (Romans 11:6).⁴⁴

Therefore, in order to depend on the sovereign grace of God, Paul has to renounce his human credentials. He has to count as "rubbish" (literally, "dung") all of his human merits, and all the things that he used to perceive as his valuable assets and achievements. He cannot consider his human credentials as merely insufficient; rather, he cannot regard them as giving him any credit at all, but as things that actually increase his debt to God. Thus he renounces them, and flings himself down at the feet of Christ in total helplessness and dependence on his mercy.

The reprobates refuse to do this. Although they have even fewer reasons for having "confidence in the flesh," they refuse to renounce their feeble human credentials, but insist on pursuing righteousness as if they can attain it by works (Romans 9:32). But since righteousness comes only by faith in Christ, these people will never be saved. Some of them have affirmed non-Christian religions for many years, and if they were to renounce these false religions, what would happen to their status, their respect, their friends, their relatives – and if they work for these religious organizations – their jobs? If they could simply add Christianity to their own religions, they would, but since this is impossible, they would rather reject Christianity than to face the prospect of having to start all over again.

"Start all over?" you may wonder, "But they have never started on the right path to begin with!" Of course you are right, but they do not see their human credentials as "dung,"

⁴⁴ We are not saying that grace *as such* contradicts works *as such*. In fact, God saves us by grace (through faith and apart from works, Romans 4:6), *so that* we may perform good works (Ephesians 2:8-10). Rather, we are saying that *dependence* on God's grace for salvation contradicts *dependence* on our works for salvation, and that the latter cannot save at all, so that dependence on God's grace is the only way to salvation.

although this is how God sees them, and so they would rather tightly hold on to their precious excrement than to "gain Christ" (v. 8). You may say, "But isn't it stupid to lose one's soul to preserve an illusion?" Of course it is stupid, but Scripture never says that the reprobates are smart.

Then, there are those who have called themselves Christians for many years, but Jesus says, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 7:21). Their profession of faith may have been false all along, maybe because they have never understood the gospel, and because God has never performed a genuine saving work in them. If they are among the reprobates, then their response will be the same when confronted with the true gospel of justification by faith; that is, they will refuse to renounce all of their previous "Christian" credentials and achievements so that they may gain Christ.

They may even claim to affirm the gospel of justification by faith, but you know that they are lying when you see them smiling at you with their faces smeared all over with dung. They do not really trust in Christ alone for their salvation, but they have "confidence in the flesh." All your righteous acts are like "filthy rags" (Isaiah 64:6) – they are no good. You must not only add Christ to your own credentials, but you must totally renounce them as a basis for your justification before God; otherwise, there is no chance that you will be saved. As Article 22 of the Belgic Confession states:

For it must necessarily follow that either all that is required for our salvation is not in Christ or, if all is in him, then he who has Christ by faith has his salvation entirely. Therefore, to say that Christ is not enough but that something else is needed as well is a most enormous blasphemy against God – for it then would follow that Jesus Christ is only half a Savior. And therefore we justly say with Paul that we are justified "by faith alone" or by faith "apart from works."

However, we do not mean, properly speaking, that it is faith itself that justifies us – for faith is only the instrument by which we embrace Christ, our righteousness. But Jesus Christ is our righteousness in making available to us all his merits and all the holy works he has done for us and in our place. And faith is the instrument that keeps us in communion with him and with all his benefits.

Few things can be more important than rightly understanding the doctrine of justification by faith, because it is impossible for a person to be saved unless he affirms such a gospel – not that there is any other (Galatians 1:6-9). On the one hand, there is the righteousness that comes from man, which does not justify at all, and on the other hand, there is the righteousness that comes from God, which is by faith and alone saves. Only by the latter

– the righteousness that comes from God through faith – can you expect to attain a resurrection like the resurrection of Christ.

Therefore, make sure that "justification by faith" is not just an empty slogan to you, but that it is your sincere affirmation based on a sound theological understanding. For the same reason, it is fitting to apply the most extreme insults to those who preach a false gospel, since they are those who "shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces"; they themselves do not enter, nor will they allow others to enter (Matthew 23:13). They are worse than dogs and pigs, and stupid beasts; this is a matter of heaven and hell, and church leaders must firmly deal with false teachers.

PHILIPPIANS 3:10-4:1

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: 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. All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained.

Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you. For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body. Therefore, my brothers, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, that is how you should stand firm in the Lord, dear friends!

Legalism is not the only enemy of justification by faith, but many people have rejected or distorted the doctrine in another way, so that they interpret justification by faith as a license to sin with impunity. This is "lawlessness," or antinomianism. Those who promote this heresy falsely reason, "If justification depends on God's grace and not my works, and if God's grace will always exceed my wickedness, then this means that I can sin all I want, and I will still be saved."

Paul anticipates this abuse and replies, "What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means!" (Romans 6:1-2). But why not? He explains, "We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?" (v. 2). So, this is what makes antinomianism inconsistent with justification by faith – something happens to us at conversion that makes it impossible for us to continue in a life of sin. Scripture says that

we have been "regenerated" (Titus 3:5), and that we have been "born again" (John 3:3). John writes, "No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God" (1 John 3:9).

Paul says that Christians have "died to sin," and that "sin shall not be your master" (Romans 6:14). He explains that since grace has set us free from being slaves to sin, we should stop obeying it. But grace does not leave us to be our own masters, because it has made us "slaves to righteousness" (Romans 6:18). Therefore, he says, "Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness" (Romans 6:19). Rather than leading to antinomianism, justification by faith leads to a righteous lifestyle and makes antinomianism impossible.

When God saves a person, he regenerates him by changing his inward disposition from one of love for wickedness to love for righteousness, from one of love for self to love for Christ, and from one of defiance against God to obedience toward God. Then, God grants this person faith in the gospel of Christ, and on this basis God justifies him in Christ. From then on, although this believer may stumble as he treads on the path of salvation, his lifestyle has nevertheless become one of fierce pursuit for biblical knowledge and holiness. He has been born of God, and he acts like it (1 John 3:9). Our regeneration and justification do not only change our standing before God, but they change us at the deepest level of our consciousness, producing a godly mindset and lifestyle.

Grace produces godly desire in the believer. Paul tells the Philippians that he wants to know Christ. Of course, Paul already knows Christ; he knows Christ better than any of us can know him in our lifetime. But he wants to know Christ better and better! He longs to know more of Christ's power that is now working in him to produce greater knowledge and holiness (Ephesians 1:16-23, 3:16-21). He is eager to participate deeper in Christ's suffering, and to undergo hardship for the gospel's sake, "becoming like him in his death," and to arrive at the resurrection of the dead.⁴⁵

Grace produces genuine humility in the believer. Paul admits that he has not yet attained perfection. But the same grace that saves and humbles him also gives him a drive and a zeal to pursue this perfection in Christ. Rather than becoming self-satisfied or discouraged, Paul says he presses on "to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me." If you are a Christian, it is Christ who has apprehended you. Do not think for one moment that you are the one who initiated your relationship with him, or that you somehow had the good sense to accept the gospel by your own "free will." You are a Christian today because God chose you, not because you chose him (John 15:16). You love him today because he first sovereignly decided to love you, and placed his love into you so that you could love him and others (Romans 5:5).

⁴⁵ "Somehow" in verse 11 does not imply that Paul doubts he will arrive at the resurrection, but it most likely refers to his uncertainty about the timing and the circumstances by which he will arrive at that point. Thus it is a question about God's providence, and not Paul's standing before God (Romans 8:35-39).

But contrary to antinomianism, he did not choose to save you so that you may go on sinning with impunity; rather, he appointed you to produce fruit that will endure (John 15:16; Philippians 1:11). Or, as Paul puts it here, Christ took hold of you so that you may in turn take hold of something. That is, after Paul has been justified, and indeed *because* he has been justified, he *presses on*, to the end that he may become perfectly sanctified. His focus is on pressing on and moving forward, and not on the expectation of the actual attainment of sinless perfection in this life, which he still has not attained after all these years of fierce struggle.

Nevertheless, he refuses to pursue sanctification in a half-hearted way. But he *presses on* to sanctification, as if straining himself to race forward in an athletic competition. He does not just sit there and repeat the unbiblical slogan, "Let go and let God." Justification by faith does not exclude a conscious and strenuous pursuit of knowledge and holiness. In fact, if you do not press on this way, it shows that you have never been changed by Christ, and thus you have never been saved. Thus in this short passage, Paul rejects legalism, antinomianism, perfectionism, and quietism.

Grace transforms the believer's entire lifestyle, so that in contrast to those who mind "earthly things," his life is characterized by God-centered thoughts and God-centered conversations (Malachi 3:16). As Paul writes elsewhere, "Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires" (Romans 8:5). "All of us who are mature should take such a view of things," and in any case, "let us live up to what we have already attained."

It is true that God saves you by faith alone apart from works, but if your faith is real, then you will produce good works by the Spirit's power and influence in you. Now, it is possible that you think and claim that you have real faith, but in reality your faith is not real at all. If your "faith" does not result in a basic and enduring transformation in your thoughts and actions, then you have never been saved. As Jesus warns:

Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?" Then I will tell them plainly, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!"

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew

and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash. (Matthew 7:21-27)

Only those whose "faith" produces obedience are truly saved, but "many" (v. 22) are deceived about their spiritual condition, because they do not understand the gospel message, or because their minds have been hardened against it. "Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness" (2 Timothy 2:19).

We have emphasized the importance of uniting around the gospel, and now we see that this gospel has some very specific content. Uniting around the gospel means agreeing on justification by faith and rejecting all distortions and aberrations. Then, on the basis of this theological unity, we press on to pursue complete sanctification. Although it seems that we will never attain it in this life, we forget what is behind and press forward to take hold of that for which Christ has taken hold of us. We do this not by our own power, since we have no such power in ourselves (John 15:4-5), and we do this not so that we may be justified before God; rather, we pursue sanctification because we have already been justified,⁴⁶ and because the power of God now works in us to produce sanctification. And as we do so, we will increase in the assurance of our calling and election (2 Peter 1:10).

PHILIPPIANS 4:6-9

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me – put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

If you have been justified before God through faith in Christ, then you are a citizen of heaven (3:20). If you are a citizen of heaven, then you should act like one (3:17-21), for until then, you have no sufficient biblical warrant for being sure that you have been justified before God (2 Peter 1:10). You act like a citizen of heaven by focusing your thoughts on spiritual things instead of on earthly things (3:19-20). Now, we understand that a sinner is born with a wicked basic disposition in his mind, and throughout his life, this evil disposition leads him to develop and reinforce numerous sinful habits – habits in

⁴⁶ "Since the Fall it has always been unlawful to use the law of God in hopes of establishing one's own personal merit and justification. Salvation comes by way of promise and faith; commitment to obedience is the lifestyle of faith, a token of gratitude for God's redeeming grace" (Greg L. Bahnsen in *Five Views on Law and Gospel*; Zondervan Publishing House, 1993, 1996; p. 141; edited by Wayne G. Strickland).

the brain and the body.⁴⁷ Thus the unbeliever sins *habitually* and not just *occasionally* (1 John 3:9).

When God converts a sinner, he regenerates him by changing his basic inward disposition from one that is evil to one that is good, so that Paul could say, "For in my inner being I delight in God's law" (Romans 7:22). This change in the inward disposition often quickly produces dramatic and visible differences in one's lifestyle, so that some or many of the sinful habits in the past are removed. It becomes increasingly true that this believer now sins *occasionally* instead of *habitually* (1 John 3:9); however, many other sinful habits of the brain and the body remain. Some of these sins are especially stubborn, so that they even threaten our assurance of salvation, even if we have been truly saved.

About this condition, and in connection to what Paul says in Romans 7 about sanctification, Jay Adams writes as follows:

What is this struggle like?...One finds contradictory forces at work, battling one another. With his regenerate nature he finds that he wants to do things that will please God, but nevertheless fails to practice them. On the other hand, what he has come to hate as a Christian, he discovers himself doing. Clearly, says Paul, if I do things I don't want to do, I thereby testify that the law is good (v. 16). The problem's in me, not in the law. It is no longer I (the new regenerate I) who produces sin, but the sinful practices of brain and body habituated in my members. The struggle is with the past carried over into the present by a habituated body....

His sinful nature, with which he was born, programmed the parts (members) of his body to respond to various situations in life sinfully. So, in sanctification, the problem is to reprogram them in righteous ways, presenting the same members of the body to God for righteousness. Paul finds it to be a law (a habitual occurrence; something that happens regularly) that whenever he wants to do a fine thing, he is aware of the evil tendencies with which he must struggle....People's members must become rehabilitated. The captivity of which Paul writes is the strong captivity of habit.⁴⁸

We must not infer from our feelings and experiences that we will never overcome our remaining sins; rather, it is the will of God that we succeed in our struggle to attain greater and greater holiness (Romans 7:21-8:14), even if this requires us to be ever stretching forward toward perfection (3:12-14). Nevertheless, God has not left us to

⁴⁷ Of course, the brain is part of the body. Here I am mainly distinguishing the brain from the mind to emphasize that after regeneration, although the mind has a godly disposition, the brain still retains sinful habits. Due to the connection between the mind and the body (including the brain), this at least partly explains our sinful thoughts after conversion.

⁴⁸ Jay E. Adams, *The Christian Counselor's Commentary: Romans, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and 2 Thessalonians*; Timeless Texts, 1995; p. 61-62.

struggle against sin in our own power, for we have no such power in ourselves (John 15:4-5). Instead, God has given us his Holy Spirit, as he has said, "And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws" (Ezekiel 36:27). If you have become a believer, you have a power in you to overcome sin that you have never had before as a sinner, and by the grace of God, "sin shall not be your master" (Romans 6:14).

Although sanctification itself is sovereignly controlled by God (Philippians 1:6, 2:13), he causes us to "work out" our salvation (2:12) by means of a struggle that we are aware of and a process that we are conscious of. But what does this conscious process involve? How does it work? We know that God has given us the power of the Spirit by which we can overcome sin, but how do we consciously apply this power in our lives to effect sanctification?

Now, the principle of sanctification is to replace the evil with the good. Jesus says that when an evil spirit leaves a person, if it comes back and finds the man "unoccupied," then it will take with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself to reoccupy the man, so that the final condition of the man is worse than the first (Matthew 12:43-45). Sanctification does not involve only the removal of evil deeds and habits, but the development of good deeds and habits.

Therefore, Paul teaches a "put off / put on" procedure by which we consciously cooperate with the power of God that is at work in us to produce holiness. He writes: "You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to *put off your old self*, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to *put on the new self*, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 4:22-24).

Paul then applies this to several examples, perhaps to sinful deeds that were common among the Ephesians, and that they were having trouble in overcoming. He writes, "Therefore" – because we should apply the "put off / put on" procedure – "you must *put off* falsehood." If you have been a liar, stop lying, but beyond that, you must learn to "speak truthfully" (v. 25). When has a liar stopped being a liar? Not when he stops lying, but when he starts telling the truth.

He continues, "He who has been stealing must steal no longer." If you have been a thief, stop stealing, but beyond that, you "must work, doing something useful." Whereas you have been taking from others things that do not belong to you, you must now do the exact opposite – you must work so that you "may have something to share with those in need" (v. 28). That is, replace theft with generosity.

If you have been accustomed to making "unwholesome talk," then stop it, but beyond that, you must speak "only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen" (v. 29). So it is not enough just to stop your previous evil speech, but you must replace it with edifying speech to benefit those who listen to you. Put off unwholesome speech; put on wholesome speech.

Finally, Paul says, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice" (v. 31). Put off "every form of malice," but beyond that, he says, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" (v. 32). Put off malice; put on kindness.

Above all, study theology! In the parallel passage in Colossians, Paul indicates that just as the "old self" feeds on "its practices," the "new self" is "being renewed in knowledge" (Colossians 3:9-10). Again, there are those who say that theology is unimportant, but that only holiness is important. Besides being unbiblical, this stance is logically and spiritually impossible, since it is theology that defines and feeds holy living, and makes sanctification meaningful and possible.

Paul is applying this same "put off / put on" procedure to the Philippians in 4:6-9. The gospel has many political, ideological, social, and doctrinal enemies (Acts 16:19-24; Philippians 1:28-29, 3:2; 1 Thessalonians 2:2), and it is likely that Paul is addressing his readers' anxiety about these oppositions. Consistent with the "put off / put on" procedure, Paul writes, "Do not be anxious about anything," but instead, "present your requests to God" by "prayer and petition, with thanksgiving." Stop being anxious, but start praying with thanksgiving.

But prayer is just the first step in replacing anxiety. Since anxiety is a matter of thinking, the solution must also pertain to thinking. Prayer and thanksgiving turns the anxious person's mind toward a wholly different direction, preparing him to adopt a different set of thoughts. Verse 8 does not list specific things that one should think about, but it lists the kinds of thoughts that are good and acceptable, and tells us to deliberately "think about such things." For sure, the list would rule out many television programs, movies, and magazines, but it would certainly include reflections about biblical doctrines, plans to promote the gospel, and ways to advance holiness. Again, the emphasis is not only on the removal of evil deeds, but on the conscious and deliberate implementation of the godly pattern of living that the apostle has taught and demonstrated (3:17, 4:9; also Hebrews 13:7).

The power of Christ will progressively overcome our sinful habits as we implement this program of sanctification. Of course, this strategy of "putting off" wickedness and "putting on" holiness applies to every area of life, including the other items that Paul has discussed in this letter to the Philippians. Are you a freeloader? Stop being a parasite and become a partner in the gospel by providing financial and practical assistance to worthy churches and ministries. Is your selfish ambition threatening the unity of your church community? Stop looking out for your own interests and start looking out for the interests of Christ – the defense of the gospel and the maturity of the saints. Practice a "pattern" of godly living – you must not only replace isolated sinful habits in your life, but you must implement a comprehensive program of sanctification to attain real and lasting progress.

The reward of following such a program is that "the peace of God" (v. 7) and "the God of peace" (v. 9) will be with you, guarding your heart and your mind in Christ Jesus. The

word "peace" is often understood as referring to inward emotional serenity; however, this is often not the main emphasis. The word often refers to the *relational* peace between two parties, so that having "peace" in a relationship is the opposite of being at war with each other.

For example, in Romans 5, Paul contrasts being "God's enemies" (v. 10) with having "peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 1). In the same sense, our message is called "the gospel of peace" (Ephesians 6:15). In Ephesians 2:14-16, "peace" is contrasted with "hostility"; in Colossians 1:19-21, "making peace" is contrasted with being "alienated from God," and being his "enemies." In all of these cases, "peace" refers to the objective peace that one has with God through the redemptive work of Christ, and not to the subjective peace of inward emotional serenity.

Even the often quoted verse, "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts" really refers to the relational harmony between "members of one body" (Colossians 3:15). In other words, "the passage is talking about how to get along with other Christians."⁴⁹ Many have misused this verse to teach that God guides us through a subjective "peace," so that having an inward serenity about a decision probably indicates God's approval. But the Bible does not teach this as a legitimate form of guidance from God.⁵⁰ Other examples of "peace" being used in an objective sense include 1 Thessalonians 5:23 and Hebrews 13:20-21.

The point is not difficult or elusive, but many commentators fail to acknowledge it. Motyer is an exception, for he writes:

The "God of peace" is the God who makes peace between himself and sinners...We must be careful, in stressing the inner effectiveness of this guardian peace, not to limit it to the realm of peaceful feelings – a "sense" of being at peace...It is also a relational word including (upward) "peace with God" and (outward) peaceful integration within the society of God's people.⁵¹

The phrase, "which transcends all understanding," must not be seen as an anti-intellectual expression. It is only saying that the God who establishes this peace, whether subjective or objective (but especially objective), can achieve "more than our clever forethought and ingenious plans can accomplish."⁵² We readily acknowledge that we are not all-wise and all-knowing; we cannot know all the implications and ramifications of every event,

⁴⁹ Jay E. Adams, *The Christian Counselor's Commentary: Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon*; Timeless Texts, 1994; p. 160.

⁵⁰ Passages like 2 Corinthians 2:13 are not exceptions. For example, this verse in 2 Corinthians is merely saying that Paul wanted to find Titus. It does not teach that his lack of "peace" was a signal from God to help him make a conscious decision. God does control all things, including our sense of peace or lack of it, but he also controls human lust, but having lust to do something does not mean you have God's approval to do it, since God has already told you in Scripture what to do with lust. Therefore, our emotional faculty is only a function of the mind, and is not an authorized form of divine guidance.

⁵¹ Motyer, p. 208-209.

⁵² Martin, p. 172.

whereas God designs and knows all of them. And knowing that God rules over everything, we offer our prayer and thanksgiving, and we think godly thoughts to replace our anxiety.