

COMMENTARY ON PHILIPPIANS

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CONTENTS

PHILIPPIANS 1:1-2.....	4
PHILIPPIANS 1:3-11, 4:10-19	15
PHILIPPIANS 1:12-26.....	24
PHILIPPIANS 1:27-30.....	27
PHILIPPIANS 2:1-11.....	29
PHILIPPIANS 2:12-18.....	32
PHILIPPIANS 2:19-30.....	36
PHILIPPIANS 3:2-9.....	38
PHILIPPIANS 3:10-4:1	45
PHILIPPIANS 4:6-9.....	49

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.

God had directed Paul and his companions to preach the gospel in Philippi (Acts 16:6-12). They were met by a slave girl who made money for her owners by a spirit of divination (v. 16). When Paul expelled that evil spirit from her, he also destroyed this source of income for her owners. So they dragged Paul and Silas before the authorities and made false accusations against them. The preachers were beaten and thrown into prison (v. 19-23).

They were not defeated, but in prison they prayed and sang hymns as other prisoners listened. Then, God sent an earthquake and shook the whole prison. All the doors opened and everybody's chains came loose (v. 25-26). The jailer thought the prisoners had escaped. He was about to kill himself, but Paul stopped him. Paul and Silas preached to him, and he was converted (v. 27-31). When they were released, they met again with the converts and *encouraged them* (v. 40). These men did not allow persecution to distract them from their mission – to preach the gospel and mature the saints.

Although he faced violent opposition in Philippi, 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 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 embraced, 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. The overseers and deacons do not form a group outside of the other believers. "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, including the overseers and deacons.

The word "saints" refers to all Christians, 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 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 Christians would be horrified by such a characterization, but this is only because the non-Christians themselves have influenced them 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 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 them 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 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 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,¹ the term "overseers" has been adapted from Roman usage and stresses their function and responsibility.² 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."

¹ 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.

² Gene A. Getz, *Elders and Leaders*; Moody Publishers, 2003; p. 183-188.

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. Yet 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, 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.

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; Galatians 2:9). Accordingly, one person may function as the main leader among the elders in a church, although they are all elders.³

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). 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

³ Ibid., p. 217-226.

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!"⁴ He said this in 1922, but doctrinal 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, 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

⁴ Herman Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed*; Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1997; p. vii.

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."⁵ 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.⁶ However, since Jesus says "two or three" people would rule on the issue, it seems that by "tell it to the church," he means tell it to the elders.⁷

Therefore, we conclude that the elders hold the highest office in a congregation,⁸ and Jesus assures them that as they make their rulings in agreement with God's word, they have the Father's attention, the Son's presence, and heaven's support (v.18-20). 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

⁵ Getz, p. 197-198.

⁶ Many people try to use this passage to teach the power of "corporate prayer" or "the prayer of agreement," but the context is 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*.

⁷ 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."

⁸ The highest authority is God, and in effect, the Bible. Since Scripture is God's word, even his very breath (2 Timothy 3:16), its authority is identical to God's authority, and it stands higher than all human figures. Even the least of all Christians, and even if he is an infant who can barely read or talk, if he has Scripture on his side, may use it to defy any human authority that is in unbelief or rebellion.

the matter is already public (1 Corinthians 5:1), then it may go directly to the elders for a decision (v. 3). If a transgression has indeed occurred, and the person refuses to repent, then the elders have the authority to expel him 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 the members 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 him. Any member who disobeys would be 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.

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 indeed demanded 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.

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 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.

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. 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).⁹ 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.

⁹ Note how verse 12 refers to the twofold task of the elders, that they "have charge over you" and "give you instruction."

As for financial support, Scripture says that the elders deserve "double pay" (GNT),¹⁰ 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).¹¹ 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 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 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 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 serve as temporary deacons, so that as a temporary practical need arises that demands more deacons than what the church 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 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 wield a measure of authority delegated by 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.

¹⁰ See Vincent Cheung, *Commentary on Malachi*, chapter 8.

¹¹ Again, note the reference to the twofold task of the elders.

Deacons should not be appointed because the elders think that certain tasks are "below" them. After Jesus washed 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 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 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. Feminists are against this, but the Scripture is against feminists. And if you do not like what the Scripture says, you can follow 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. Churches should have biblical reasons for permitting and forbidding women to perform various ministries. On the one hand, we must not allow women to do something that the Scripture forbids; on the other hand, we must not forbid women to do something that the Scripture allows.

Even if it is established that women cannot become elders, it does not mean that they have no relationship to the office. Since a woman must function as a helper to her husband (Genesis 2:18), it is 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).

This continues to be true when the husband is a church elder, so that it is 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.¹²

Nevertheless, some theologians disagree and say that only men can be deacons. How a church decides on this matter must be settled by 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 authority in a church. Even if it is decided that women cannot hold certain positions of authority, a church should acknowledge the many ministry opportunities that remain open to them. The Bible states that all believers, whether male or female, must preach the gospel to all kinds of people, admonish one another in the church, and operate in healing, prophecy, and various miracles. Unbelief, not gender, is the greatest barrier to ministry.

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.

It may surprise some people that the qualifications for becoming a deacon appear to be 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 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 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 qualifications.

If you desire to become an elder in the church, 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). This authority is given so that the elders may effectively build up the church and serve the people (2 Corinthians 10:8).

¹² Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*; Zondervan Publishing House, 1994; p. 944-945.

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.

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 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.¹³

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.¹⁴ 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). Nevertheless, one reason he commends the believers at Philippi is because they respect and support those who work for the gospel.

¹³ 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).

¹⁴ 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.

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.¹⁵ One of the main reasons for

¹⁵ 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 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

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, perhaps even 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.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ 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."¹⁸ 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.

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.¹⁹ 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 who put your career and family 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 consider your right to retain. Of course, you must take care of your family, but even that must include the motive to support the kingdom of God.

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

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.

¹⁶ Ralph P. Martin, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Philippians*; William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987; p. 49.

¹⁷ D. A. Carson, *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians*; Baker Books, 1996, 2002; p. 16.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *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.

church of your money and service is 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).²⁰ 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, it would signify the very opposite, 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.²¹ Others maintain that the words have broader uses that are not here restricted by the passage's context.²²

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, 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 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.²³

²⁰ Martin, p. 184.

²¹ Ibid., p.65.

²² Gordon H. Clark, *Philippians*; The Trinity Foundation, 1996; p. 18.

²³ 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.

In other words, Paul is commending the Philippians for supporting a ministry that is competent and courageous in doing theology and apologetics. 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."²⁴ 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 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. 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 sacrifices. Some of them value the church or ministry enough so that they are willing to help if they know that it will fail without their assistance, but not before the organization has reached a desperate condition.

If you are a freeloader, it is often difficult for other people to recognize it, especially if you appear to be enthusiastic and supportive about the church or ministry, and this is why you are able to shamelessly remain a freeloader. 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 partner or a freeloader? Do you put yourself first even when the church or ministry is in great need? Perhaps you still do not have enough despite your selfishness. God says to his people through Haggai, "You earn 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). 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

²⁴ Martin, p. 62.

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).

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 Bible – if people understand what it means, perhaps it would not be so popular. People apply it to everything that they do, including relatively trivial things like sports, recreation, education, career, and anything else that they deem necessary in achieving happiness and satisfaction.

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. But Christ will give you strength to endure hardship for the sake of the gospel.

So Paul is 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 justifies and sanctifies, by means of the faith and perseverance that he supplies, 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 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. When John addresses the topic of assurance (1 John 5:13), he 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. The Bible defines love for us. It tells us what it means to love God and to love 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 to love people, he is not appealing to our emotion but to our volition. By God's grace, we must decide to obey his commands concerning how we must treat God and how we must treat people, and this decision to love produces corresponding actions. When God commands us to love others, he is 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. Rather, he 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 an 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."²⁵ Indeed, one translation has, "I pray that your love will keep on growing *because of* your knowledge and insight" (*God's Word* translation). Any 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,"²⁶ "doctrinal knowledge,"²⁷ and "theological knowledge."²⁸ Therefore, studying Scripture, hearing sermons, reading books, and engaging in theological discussions have a direct relationship to 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. The Bible does not teach this. Further, their "remedy" is that you have to consider love (falsely defined by them) as superior to knowledge. This is also false.

Rather, since love is obedience to God's commands in all your relationships, whether with God or with 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 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;

²⁵ Clark, p. 20.

²⁶ Martin, p. 66.

²⁷ James Montgomery Boice, *Philippians: An Expository Commentary*; Baker Books, 1971, 2000; p. 46.

²⁸ Motyer, p. 56.

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 – if you are not 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.

Knowledge without obedience may make you prideful, but knowledge with obedience will build up the church. On the other hand, many people have an unbiblical definition of love because they do not have knowledge. And it is by walking in this unbiblical kind of love that they think they are superior to those who have 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. Those in the first group bring condemnation upon themselves, since they disobey what they know about God's commands, and those in the second group have neither knowledge nor love, and remain in the dark. 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 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 is often an acceptance of lawlessness without discrimination and judgment. 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, but 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. His intention is to show that everyone is a sinner, and is in need of salvation. 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. 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).

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 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 that I should accept him along 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 frequently works with Christians who try to bring sinners to repentance. We must blame this on an ignorance of theology. Knowledge makes believers immune to manipulation.

The next time someone demands that you "love" him, think about what he means by it, and 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 – 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 derive 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 often 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."²⁹ 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). All of these blessings come "through Jesus Christ." 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 glory and praise of God."

²⁹ Motyer, p. 57.

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.

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 him from the very beginning, we can easily understand why he rejoices about this and commends them for it. But now he proceeds to talk about his imprisonment. Do we expect anything from him other than bitter complaints?

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, he 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 the 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 his 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 "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 that ministry is not about attaining prominence, but about rendering service for the sake of the gospel.

These people have very wrong motives, since they preach Christ out of "envy," "rivalry," and "selfish ambition." But Paul does not say that they are preaching a false message, and this is why he does not say 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."³⁰ They are not preaching false doctrine, but preaching right 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."³¹ They are wrong, and God would hold them accountable, but Paul never says to stop them, because "Christ is preached."

Many people appear to say the same thing, but what they say in fact greatly differs from what Paul says. They would 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 why we must argue out the points of disagreement, to decide on what is true and what is relevant. Paul never says that our theology does not matter as long as Christ is preached, because whether we are preaching Christ depends on whether our theology about Christ is correct.

Paul means that those who preach 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 rejoices regardless of their wrong motives because they are still preaching a correct message, by means of which God could still save his chosen ones. 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

³⁰ Martin, p. 76.

³¹ Clark, p. 28.

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.³²

The professor read the sermon for a sinful reason, but it still presented a biblical message, and God used it to convert someone. Although we disapprove of the professor's motive, and he was probably a non-Christian, we can still rejoice at his action because of its effect. This is what Paul tries to convey. But when it comes to theology, he never compromises, and neither should we.

Paul continues to say that he is confident of his "deliverance" (v. 19), while he considers how "Christ will be exalted" whether "by life or by death" (v. 21-26). For Paul, death would fulfill his lifelong desire to be brought to Christ, but it is more beneficial for the believers if he remains. One leads to the gaining of Christ, and the other leads to more labor for Christ. He concludes that there is additional work for him to do for the gospel and for the believers. If verse 25 means that he has confidence that he will remain, he might not have obtained this from revelation, but it could be the conclusion to his reasoning in verses 21-24.

Paul cares little about what happens to him, but he cares about the glory of Christ, the advance of the gospel in the world, and the progress of faith in the believers. His obsession is the gospel. What is yours?

³² Ibid., p. 29.

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 individuals are urged to unite even when their theologies contradict one another. 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, 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 would 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 sinners appear to have diverse beliefs and cultures, all sinners in fact have only one purpose – 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 superficial, whereas true Christians differ with all others at the foundational level. 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. The fact 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. It is God who grants us grace to believe the gospel, and then grants us grace to suffer for the gospel.

On the other hand, the fact that non-Christians would oppose us exposes them as reprobates, designated by God for everlasting damnation. Some of them may be like Paul, who persecuted the church at first, but was later 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 faith, 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 chosen ones, and death to the reprobates (2 Corinthians 2:14-16). Unlike non-Christian unity, our unity around the gospel is not to enhance our ability for self-preservation; rather, we give up self-preservation for the sake of the gospel (Mark 8:35), but trust God to deliver us.

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. 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 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 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 form to redeem the chosen ones. 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. It is a damnable heresy.

Since the attributes of a being define the being, a being that lays aside these essential attributes (even if it is possible to do this) ceases to be the original being. If Jesus had laid aside any of his divine attributes, he would have ceased to be God. Since the divine attributes are what make God to be God, it is nonsense to say that God can be God if he has laid aside some of his divine attributes. Moreover, God is immutable, so that if Jesus was ever God, he could never cease to be God.

Therefore, those who affirm the impossible kenosis theory loses the basis upon which they may call themselves Christians, because the doctrine amounts a denial of the deity of Christ, that he was not God when he was on the earth. Instead, Christians must affirm that Jesus has always been God, and he remained God when he took upon himself human form and lived on the earth.³³ He did not put aside his divine attributes. He never existed as a mere human being.

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 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 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 only a metaphor, as when Paul says, "I am being poured out like a drink offering" (v. 17). He does not mean that his internal organs or his human attributes would be poured out like liquid from a bottle (also 2 Corinthians 12:15;

³³ God the Son did not live on the earth in the sense that he was 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. Even now, his human nature is not omnipresent, although his divine nature is omnipresent.

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. Various circumstances may provoke our remaining selfishness to protect our own interests, jeopardizing Christian unity. It is at such times that we must be willing to humble ourselves for a greater cause, that is, for the one message and one purpose around which we must all unite.

God has exalted Christ to the highest place, so that all must worship him. He was God to begin with, but now he sits at God's right hand as one who remains fully divine and fully human, so that he can be the champion and mediator of his people. All must bow to him, including all the false deities and false prophets in the non-Christian religions. They are forced to bow to Jesus Christ from their place in hell, not as sincere worshipers, but as defeated enemies. 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.

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 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. These believers already have a long history of obedience and faithfulness, even from the first day when they obeyed the gospel of Christ. But is their obedience contingent upon the presence of this apostle?

Paul is optimistic that they would obey even in his absence, not only because of his high estimation of the Philippians, but he believes that just as God has started a work of grace in them, he will also complete this work in them by 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 direct our will as he works 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 true function of the mind, so that as God works through our will to produce sanctification, we will continue to be conscious of making difficult choices and 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).

Since their obedience does not depend on the apostle's immediate presence and influence, but 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. He 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 the gospel.

Their effort to maintain unity is not to be only a matter between individuals, but whenever appropriate, the community must participate in resolving conflicts between the members

(4:3). A believer must ensure that he does not stir up strife, and he must deny his 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 is more often performed by those who are spiritually mature, especially the church elders, and not by new converts or curious members.

Thus in 4:3, Paul asks one whom he calls a "loyal yokefellow" to help in the reconciliation of two women, so that they may be "one mind in the Lord." Again, true unity never ignores theological disagreements, but it is characterized by being "in one mind" and "in the Lord." Biblical unity is founded on a 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 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 cut off fellowship than to compromise the gospel. On the other hand, if the conflicts involve only petty personal differences, and not theological differences, then Scripture demands that we practice self-denial to preserve harmony for the sake of the gospel.

This is what Paul says 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 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" of non-Christians.

Nevertheless, our role is not mainly to demonstrate unity and holiness, 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 the truth is that one biblical message does more to demonstrate the truth of the gospel message than one thousand years of perfect example. This is because unless there is a clear message, a moral example may only inspire someone to become his own idea of a moral person, perhaps by following a false religion like Islam or Buddhism. True holiness comes only as the result of faith in Christ, but this is something

you need to tell them, not show them. The content of the gospel does not come by observation. God indeed commands us to form a sharp 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 can communicate anything.

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."³⁴ No one?! Would not even one person believe the gospel unless Christians live in full accord with the message? Of course the Holy Spirit would use our holiness as one of the means by which he moves the elect to believe the message, but it is not a necessary means. The message is the only necessary thing to establish an object of faith. The Holy Spirit brings many people to faith in Christ 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 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. Perhaps most of those who claim to be Christians are false converts.

It is irrational to reject or abandon the Christian faith because of hypocrites or church scandals. Perhaps those hypocrites have never been true Christians, or perhaps they have temporarily stumbled. If you reject or abandon the gospel because of them, then perhaps you are also among the reprobates and false converts. 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 answer to him. How people who claim to be followers of Christ behave has no relationship to whether the gospel is true or false. In fact, Scripture tells you that there would be hypocrites in the church. Whether you think the gospel is true or false, you must directly confront its content. If you think that you have rational objections against the Christian faith, then you should refute it; otherwise, you are just making a 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).

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, but we must not make our holiness more important than the gospel message. We strive to live in holiness and unity so that we may hold forth the word of life – the intellectual message that gives life. Our unity and holiness in themselves do nothing to commend the gospel, because people would not know why we are so united and holy unless we tell them.

Paul calls his generation of non-Christians crooked and depraved. Our generation wants to be perceived as enlightened, liberated, open-minded, inclusive, and tolerant; however, the

³⁴ F. F. Bruce, *New International Biblical Commentary: Philippians*; Hendrickson Publishers, 1983, 1989; p. 85.

truth is that, like every generation of non-Christians, 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 the ultimate example of self-denial and of considering the interests of God's kingdom above our own interests. It is possible for Christians to imitate his example, because it is the Spirit of Christ who enables us to do it. Indeed, the Spirit 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 takes "genuine interests" in the believers' welfare. Whereas everyone looks out for his own interests, Timothy looks out for the interests of Jesus Christ. Paul wishes that every Christian would become someone like this – one who looks out for the interests of Jesus Christ. 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? Throughout this letter, Paul makes it clear that the interests of Jesus Christ have to do with the defense of the gospel and the maturity of the saints.

One woman told me that she left her church because her pastor canceled the church animal rescue program due to a lack of funds. The fact 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. 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. It was unlikely that she was a Christian in the first place.

We ought to 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 might 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 our time on unimportant matters. 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. 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. It is true that your 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.

That said, God arranges human relationships among Christians so that you may find yourself coming under another believer's authority in your work for the gospel. To use marriage as an illustration, although Christ is a woman's only savior and mediator, God has also placed her under the husband's authority. Although her loyalty is to Christ, she must be also loyal to her husband.

Likewise, although Timothy's 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, and in addition to this, 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 arrangement, but submits to legitimate human authority. He differs from those who do the work of the gospel out of "envy," "rivalry," and "selfish ambition."

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 other believers 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 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."

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 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 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, and if our theology is not biblical, then any unity around it is harmful. Theology is the most important thing in a community, because it is theology that defines the community and its purpose.

Therefore, besides practicing self-denial to preserve our community's unity around our theology, we must guard our theology against corruption, lest the foundation of our unity be destroyed. False doctrine can spread like gangrene (2 Timothy 2:17), as "a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough" (Galatians 5:9). Church leaders must prevent doctrinal corruption by regularly teaching biblical doctrine to the people, and repeatedly warning them about false doctrine. This is their chief duty. When 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 they must be expelled from the community (1 Timothy 1:20). Scripture condemns 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, represented by undergoing circumcision (Acts 15:1, 5). They say that although it is fine to have faith in Jesus, it is necessary to add to this faith obedience to the ceremonial laws of Moses to be justified before God, or to attain perfection (Galatians 3:1-5).

The Jews refer to the unclean Gentiles as "dogs" (Mark 7:27). Indeed all non-Christians are dogs, and Paul applies the insult to the Jews who contradict the true gospel, because they are also unsaved. Paul's hostility is not reserved for the Jews, as if he would be kinder to other heretics. Scripture applies all kinds of 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," and he does not 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." No! Those who oppose the Christian faith 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). The doctrine of justification by faith has always been under attack, and every generation must renew the fight for truth. This is certainly the case when it comes to this doctrine, because it goes against every tendency of the unconverted.

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 is offensive to the reprobate because it means that he must abandon the effort to save himself, and to recognize his total dependence and helplessness, whereas he wishes to be god to himself. No one will truly affirm this doctrine of faith unless God works in him to change his mind.

This leads us to acknowledge that no biblical doctrine stands alone, but each one entails other doctrines that must be articulated in a way that is consistent among themselves, and consistent with the doctrine under discussion. Since no doctrine stands by itself, it is insufficient and misleading to preach justification by faith as if it is unrelated to other doctrines. It would be wrong to insist that people affirm justification by faith, and then tell them that they are free to believe whatever they want about other things and still be saved.

"Justification by faith" is shorthand for several related doctrines, there must be a correct view on these as well. For example, why does the faith in "justification by faith" come from? Does faith come from human power or divine grace? The answer matters. If you think that faith comes from your own willpower or decision, that it is not a gift from God,

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. So she meant that she was not a bad person in herself, and not because of Christ. Whatever she calls herself, this means that she is not a Christian. In any case, I know this woman – she does not try to help others whenever possible. She is a liar.

If you are not a Christian, then you are a bad person. The fact that she believed she was not a bad person in herself shows that she did not understand the gospel. If she was not a bad person, then she would not need the gospel, but 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. She called herself a Christian, but she could not have affirmed justification by faith, because she implied that she did not need justification in the first place.

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 she insisted that she had never sinned, she could not truly affirm biblical inspiration and inerrancy. If she could not affirm biblical inspiration and inerrancy, she had no basis to affirm that she was a Christian, or that she would go to heaven. In fact, since she could not affirm biblical inspiration and inerrancy, she could not even define sin, on the basis of which she would insist that she was without sin. If you have never acknowledged that you were a wretched sinner, then you cannot claim that you have been justified by faith.

You cannot affirm "justification by faith" and at the same time affirm false views about a number of related doctrines, because affirming false views about them makes it impossible to affirm "justification by faith." We have shown that to properly affirm justification by faith, one must affirm the grace of God, the depravity of man, and the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture. Since justification by faith refers to faith in the redemptive work of Christ, one must have a correct view of the atonement. And since the atonement is God's only provision for salvation, one must also acknowledge the exclusiveness of Christ. "Justification by faith" does not refer to faith in just anything, but faith must have a proper object.

We 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.

Many who claim to affirm and preach justification by faith in fact do not. They may 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 willpower and not as a gift from God. What is the harm? Are we not being picky? There is great harm in rejecting or misunderstanding this doctrine, and we are not just being picky, because the doctrine of justification by faith is the gospel itself. A false understanding of this doctrine is not the gospel at all, and therefore it cannot save anyone.

Paul reserves some of his most scathing insults for those who preach a false view of justification, and for those who believe them. Those who preach a different view of justification are not fellow believers who merely hold a different perspective, but he says that they preach a "different gospel," "which is really no gospel at all," and that they will be "eternally condemned" (Galatians 1:6-9). This is how serious it 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 in fact different gospels, whereas there is only one true gospel (2 Corinthians 11:3-4).

This makes the way to salvation very narrow, and many people will reject it. This is consistent with what the Bible says about the nature of the gospel and its reception: "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."³⁵

Some would have you believe that it is easy to be saved, but the Bible teaches that salvation is utterly impossible, unless God 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 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). "The Way" (Acts 9:2, 19:9, 23, 24:14, 22) is reserved for those whom God has chosen and whom Christ has redeemed,³⁶ 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, but heretics 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 left him (Matthew 19:22; John 6:60-61, 66). These were never his true disciples in the first place (John 8:31; 1 John 2:19).

³⁵ John MacArthur, *Hard to Believe*; Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2003; p. 20.

³⁶ 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*.

Do you affirm and preach the illusion of an easy gospel, or the harsh reality of an "impossible" gospel – one whose demands can only be met by God's 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 biblical explanation for people's rejection of the gospel of Christ is that God has designated them as reprobates and has hardened their hearts against the message. As Romans 9:18 says, "Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden." God shows his mercy to those whom he has 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 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.

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 helplessness. Instead of depending on God's mercy to save them, they would rather depend on their own 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," he is "faultless" (v. 5-6).

However, Paul has discovered that 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, because 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).

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 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 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 followed non-Christian religions for many years, and if they were to renounce them, what would happen to their status, their respect, their friends, their relatives – and if they work for these religious organizations – their jobs? They would rather reject Christ than to start all over again.

You may wonder, "Start over? But they have never started on the right path to begin with!" You are right, but they do not see their human credentials as "dung," although this is how God sees them, and so they would rather hold on to their precious excrement than to "gain Christ" (v. 8). You may say, "Is it not stupid to lose one's soul to preserve an illusion?" Yes, as the Bible says, non-Christians are very stupid.

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 has been false all along, because they have never understood or accepted the gospel, and because God has never performed a saving work in them. If they are among the reprobates, then their response will be the same when confronted with the true gospel; that is, they will refuse to renounce all of their previous "Christian" credentials and achievements so that they may gain Christ.

They may claim to affirm the gospel of justification by faith, but you know that they are lying when they are 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). You must not only add Christ to your own credentials, but you must renounce them as having any part in your justification before God. 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.

A right understanding of the doctrine of justification by faith is most important, 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, and on the other hand, there is the righteousness that comes from God, which is by faith. Only by 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 understanding. It is appropriate 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 do not enter, and they do not 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.

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. 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). 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), 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, but he wants to know Christ better and better. He longs to know more of Christ's power that is 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.³⁷

Grace produces 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 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 decided to love you, and placed his love into you so that you could love him and others (Romans 5:5).

He did not choose to save you so that you may go on sinning with impunity, but he has appointed you to produce fruit that will endure (John 15:16; Philippians 1:11). As Paul puts it, Christ took hold of you so that you may in turn take hold of something. 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 sinless perfection in this life, which he has not attained after all these years.

Nevertheless, he refuses to pursue sanctification in a half-hearted way. He presses on to sanctification, as if straining himself to race forward in an athletic competition. He does not relax and say, "Let go and let God." Justification by faith does not exclude a conscious

³⁷ "Somehow" in verse 11 most likely refers to his uncertainty about the timing and the circumstances by which he will arrive at that point. It is a question about God's providence, and not Paul's standing before God (Romans 8:35-39).

and strenuous pursuit of knowledge and holiness. In fact, if you do not press on this way, it shows that you have not been changed by Christ, and you have never been saved. Thus in this short passage, Paul refutes 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. If your "faith" does not result in a 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, 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,³⁸ 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).

³⁸ "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).

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 you do, there is no sufficient warrant to be 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).

A sinner is born with a wicked disposition in his mind, and throughout his life, this evil disposition leads him to develop and reinforce sinful habits, so that the unbeliever sins habitually and not just occasionally (1 John 3:9).

When God converts a sinner, he regenerates him by changing his inward disposition from one that is evil to one that is good. This change often immediately produces dramatic and visible differences in one's lifestyle, so that some of the sinful habits are removed. It becomes increasingly true that the Christian now sins occasionally instead of habitually (1 John 3:9); however, other sinful habits remain. Some of these sins are stubborn, so that they even threaten our assurance of salvation, even if we have been truly saved.

We must not infer from our feelings and experiences that we will never overcome our remaining sins. God's will is that we succeed in attaining greater and greater holiness (Romans 7:21-8:14), even if this requires us to be ever stretching forward toward perfection (3:12-14). He has not left us to struggle against sin in our own power, for we have no such power in ourselves (John 15:4-5). He 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 are a Christian, there is a power in you to overcome sin that you did not have as a non-Christian, and by the grace of God, "sin shall not be your master" (Romans 6:14).

Although sanctification is ordered 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. What does this 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?

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).

He 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). A liar stops 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 opposite – you must work so that you "may have something to share with those in need" (v. 28). 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). It is not enough to stop your 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.

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). There are those who say that theology is unimportant, but that only holiness is important. This is unbiblical, and it is also logically and spiritually impossible, because 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 he is addressing his readers' anxiety about these oppositions. Consistent with the "put off / put on" procedure, he 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.

Prayer is a 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 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 tells us to "think about such things." The list would rule out many television programs, movies, and magazines, and it would 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, but on the deliberate implementation of the 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. This "putting off" of wickedness and "putting on" of 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. Indeed, we possess this kind of peace through faith in Christ, but this is often not the 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 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 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."³⁹ 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. Other examples of "peace" 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.⁴⁰

The phrase, "which transcends all understanding," must not be seen as an anti-intellectual expression. It is 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."⁴¹ We acknowledge that we are not all-wise and all-knowing. We cannot know all the implications and ramifications of every event, whereas God designs and knows all of them. Knowing that God rules over everything, we offer our prayer and thanksgiving, and we think thoughts of faith and goodness to replace our anxiety.

³⁹ Jay E. Adams, *The Christian Counselor's Commentary: Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon*; Timeless Texts, 1994; p. 160.

⁴⁰ Motyer, p. 208-209.

⁴¹ Martin, p. 172.