

North American Commentary

Exhortations to Christian Living¹

At this point in the epistle, Paul turned his thoughts more directly to the false teachers and to Christian living. The epistle contains an interchange of instruction and exhortation, and here commands predominate again. They continue until [4:10](#), where Paul thanked the Philippians for their gifts to him. Two concerns occupied Paul's mind. First, certain persons attempted to undermine his ministry, and Paul had to counter them. Second, the problem of disunity demanded one final appeal, and Paul provided it with more direct and confrontational language. These two concerns form the logical divisions of the text.

Exhortation to Avoid False Teachers² [3:1-21](#)

Before addressing the concerns of the text, a brief discussion of the identity of Paul's opponents will be helpful. Two questions must be answered regarding the opponents, and scholars have been significantly divided regarding both questions. First, were these the same persons who were addressed in chapter 1? Second, were the same persons addressed throughout chapter 3? Some discussions of these matters assume that there are multiple epistles contained in this one, and therefore, the suggestions have no contextual boundaries. For advocates of these positions, the only evidence for the opponents' identity comes from the pieces of information contained in these fragments. Thus, for example, [3:1-16](#) may be totally unrelated to [3:17-21](#). The fragment hypothesis, however, leaves many unanswered questions. It is best to discuss the opponents within the context of Philippians itself.

Were the persons identified in [3:2ff.](#) the same as those of chapter 1? Major differences surface in ecclesiology and Christology. Primarily, in chapter 1 Paul accepted the opponents' message even though he objected to their motivations. They preached Christ. Here, he warned about the message, basically approaching it as non-Christian. In chapter 1 the opponents were within the church, but those of chapter 3 were outside. Further, Paul's criticisms were different. In chapter 1 he said nothing negative about their theology. In chapter 3 his criticisms focused on theology. The opponents of these two chapters could not have been the same people.

Did Paul address the same persons throughout chapter 3? That question is not as easily answered. Scholars debate whether Paul addressed one, two, or three different groups. Advocates of the one-group interpretation assume either Jewish or Jewish-Gnostic opposition. The Jewish nature of the attackers appears in their boast of circumcision ([3:2](#)); their methods of operation which reminded Paul of "dogs" ([3:2](#)); their claim to "perfection" ([3:12-14](#)); their "belly-service" ("Their god is their stomach," [3:19](#)),

1. Richard R. Melick, *New American Commentary – Volume 32: Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1991), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "Exhortations to Christian Living".

2. Richard R. Melick, *New American Commentary – Volume 32: Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1991), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 122-143.

which may refer to rituals and Jewish food laws; and their boast in their shame (3:19), which refers to circumcision. Some contend, however, that Paul did not denounce Jews by claiming they opposed the church. Others see a Jewish-Gnostic opponent. They point out that Paul's argument included the typical Gnostic themes of knowledge, perfection, and resurrection from the dead (presumably avoiding suffering); and that the nature of 3:17ff. fits a Gnostic audience better. However, Paul's argument against them assumed that they were preoccupied with the flesh and fleshly attainments (3:2).

Often interpreters contend that there were two or three groups. Evidence for two groups occurs in the differences between 3:1–16 and 3:17–21. Advocates point out that the tone changes between these two sections and that there are, in reality, two kinds of arguments. The greatest obstacle for them is the lack of transition between the two passages, which would seem appropriate if Paul changed his focus. Recently some have advocated three groups. Generally, the three are Jewish legalists who advocated strict adherence to the law (vv. 1–6), libertines who had the opposite view of law (vv. 17–21), and perfectionists who believed they had attained already (vv. 12–14). However, these verses are not necessarily mutually exclusive in the characteristics they describe. It is entirely possible that one or two groups held a theology that united these seemingly diverse positions.

The resolution of these approaches may await more evidence. Those who point to the Jewish nature of the opposition may well explain everything in the chapter. Strict legalism could easily produce a sense of perfectionism, and Paul certainly could have described them as preoccupied with their bellies and genitals and totally oriented to this life. That is easy enough to see, but the question remains, Does that answer a natural reading of the text? Strong evidence exists for either one or two groups of opponents. Since the chapter may be naturally read with these being Jewish, non-Christian opponents, that approach will be assumed. This makes the problem of Philippians similar to that of Galatians and Colossians. The Jewish reaction to the gospel made inroads into the church and threatened a syncretism between them. Thus, while Paul addressed Jews outside the church initially, he purposed to warn Christians within the church who might have been influenced by them. That caused a mixed argumentation and exhortation.

(1) Paul's Experience Explained 3:1–16

Paul had traveled the road the false teachers traveled. In this passage, Paul drew on his theological pilgrimage. He knew the weaknesses of a legalistic approach to salvation, and he knew the joys of coming to God through Christ. In his career he had experienced both, and he knew that one excluded the other. A subtle danger, however, was the threat that some would become legalistic Christians. In their enthusiasm they would hold together two polar theologies, their untrained theological minds allowing them to practice what threatened the existence of the church they loved. The best means of countering both was for Paul to explain his experience.

APOSTOLIC SAFEGUARD (3:1). 3:1 Paul began this section with a verse of transition. Two matters in it call for brief discussion: the use of the word “finally” and the statement that he was repeating his warning. First, the use of “finally” has been misunderstood by many. It literally means *to (toward) the rest*, and that meaning fits here. The word occurs again in 4:8. Second, Paul claimed to repeat what he had stated earlier. Some relate that repetition only to the command to rejoice, which precedes it, but that construction seems awkward, as do the defenses for it. Others understand the expression to refer to the warnings about the Jewish opponents. Previously, when present, Paul had spoken against them; now he

wrote. The Greek text does not say that Paul wrote before; that idea comes from the statement “to write the same things to you.” When did he express these concerns? Some say it was in a previous letter. Others say it occurred in some oral communication, possibly through Timothy and Epaphroditus, who carried the letter. Any of these explanations would suffice and do not violate the meaning of the text. In any case, from this warning came two observations: Paul believed this matter was significant enough to address repeatedly, and the problem most likely persisted long enough for continued communication about it. The Philippians needed to realize that Paul lived for the spiritual well-being of his converts and that his instruction was intended to prepare them for the attacks against their faith. He found it no problem to write; they would find the instruction helpful.

TRUE CIRCUMCISION ([3:2–6](#)). Immediately Paul addressed the problem. Although he focused on the message of the false teachers—circumcision— Paul also discussed their methods. In this there can be no doubt as to his conviction regarding them and their religious activities. Paul’s writing revealed his concern that the church realize the nature of its opponents. His style became graphic and picturesque, a sign of his interest in the subject. Both the terms which describe the opponents and the definition of true Christians would appeal to a Jewish audience.

Decrying the False ([3:2](#)). [3:2](#) With three rapid, terse statements Paul warned the church about the false teachers. The warnings also described the false teachers. Three times the verb “watch out for” (*blepete*) occurs. The objects of the verb also characterize the false teachers for what they really were. First, they were “dogs.” Eastern people generally hated dogs. The Jews often described Gentiles that way, but here Paul applied the term to Jews. Perhaps he envisioned the packs of ravenous dogs which roamed the countryside eating whatever they could. They were scavengers. With this definition, Paul may have implied that they were simply following him, anxious to pick up those who were not theologically grounded after his missionary activity. Obviously Paul spoke in irony, turning the tables on these false teachers.

The two other descriptions were direct plays on words with Jewish ideas. The second was “those who do evil.” These Jews, oriented to salvation by the good works of the law, had pride in their exemplary lives. Probably, like the Paul of the past, they considered themselves blameless. In reality, however, what they supposed to be good works were not. They hindered the gospel, providing a stumbling block to genuine faith. Describing their character, not their activity, Paul warned against their zealous activities. Third, they were “mutilators.” In a figure of speech employing sound-alike words, Paul turned his thoughts to their circumcision. Circumcision represented the first requirement of the law and symbolized their approach to God. They took great pride in it, as [3:19](#) reveals. Paul recognized that their circumcision was simply a cutting. It had no value apart from genuine faith in Christ.

Describing the True ([3:3–6](#)). Paul described a genuine response to God in two ways. In [3:3–4a](#) he characterized Christians generally, consciously contrasting them to his Jewish opponents. In [3:4b–6](#), he appealed to his own religious background as proof of the validity of his theology.

[3:3–4a](#) Genuine believers in Christ were the truly circumcised. Paul referred here to a spiritual circumcision rather than physical. In God’s economy, spiritual circumcision was always more important. The Old Testament said as much ([Jer 31:31–34](#); [Ezek 36:26ff.](#)), and Paul confirmed it elsewhere ([Rom 2:25–29](#)). Physical circumcision served to identify someone with the Jewish nation and had value for purposes of ministry, but it had no value in commending someone to God. Spiritual circumcision was a matter of the heart ([Col 2:11](#)).

The spiritually circumcised were described three ways. Each part of the description is linked together by the fact that in the Greek text the three are preceded by one article that goes with them all. The three together, therefore, characterize genuine Christians. Paul identified himself with that group, even though he also had physical circumcision. By so doing, he anticipated the discussion of the choices which became apparent when he chose Christ (3:7ff.). By stating that “we” were the true circumcision, Paul associated himself with Gentiles and Jews who relied on Christ rather than religious ritual.

The three characteristics involve worship, glory, and confidence. First, true believers worshiped by the Spirit of God. Using a term that often referred to temple service (*latreuō*), Paul identified inward, spiritual worship in contrast to the legalism of outward conformity to the law. The Spirit energizes and focuses Christian worship. Second, true believers glory in Christ Jesus. The term “glory” means to boast (*kauchaomai*), and Paul consciously contrasted the boasting of good works with boasting that is in the work of Christ. Third, true believers have no confidence in the flesh. Again he referred to a righteousness that trusts in human initiative and energy to gain spiritual blessing. Paul came to the place where he realized his own efforts were useless, and that attitude paved the way for his trust in Christ.

Following this general description of Christians, Paul appealed to his background as proof of his point. The immediate concern was “confidence in the flesh.” Since that attitude is basic to all human life—all naturally trust in their own abilities—Paul picked up that point. Further, it seemed to be the pride of the Jewish opponents and, therefore, their downfall. They trusted in their flesh to gain salvation.

Paul’s background naturally divides into two logical categories: heredity and achievement. Paul listed seven components which spoke of his background. The last three are introduced by the preposition “according to” (*kata*). They belong together since *kata* provides a standard of measurement and refers to achievements. The other four form the first group, and each identifies some part of Paul’s heredity. Clearly, though he had the best of advantages by birth and made the most of his religious opportunities, they fostered a spirit of pride which kept him away from his goal of gaining salvation.

3:4b-5a The natural attributes are identified in a list that includes four components, but their exact relationship to each other is difficult to understand. The pattern of these relationships is one of inclusion. Two statements occur. Paul was “an eighth-day person” (“circumcised on the eighth day,” NIV), and he was a “Hebrew of Hebrews.” Each of these has a modifier, and the effect is to divide them into two distinct points. First, Paul was a true Israelite. Starting at the point of their interest, he disclosed that, with reference to circumcision, he was an “eighth-day one.” If his opponents were circumcised, he was too, and his was completely in accord with the law. Further, he was of the people of Israel. This set him apart from Gentiles. Second, Paul was a Hebrew. The chiasmic arrangement (an inverted relationship between the elements of parallel phrases) places the tribe of Benjamin first. He had an enviable ancestry and remained true to that heritage. He was a Hebrew of Hebrews. On one hand, this may have meant he was not a Hellenist or Hellenist sympathizer. Since he was born in Tarsus, his opponents could have assumed that he was. On the other hand, it may have referred to Paul’s ability to read the Scriptures in Hebrew. In any case, the stress on the correct pedigree removed a potential question about Paul’s credentials when he confronted the Jewish teachers.

3:5b-6a Paul moved from heredity to achievement. He had made the correct choices as a Jewish boy and adult. Three items provide the standard to measure these achievements: the law, zeal for the nation, and righteousness. First, Paul had chosen to be a Pharisee. Each devout Jewish male would sympathize with some organized approach to the law since it was the heart of Jewish life. The Pharisees were noted

for their love for the law, strict interpretation of it, and ethical consistency. Paul obviously had excelled in all three (see [Acts 22:3ff.](#); [26:5](#)). Second, Paul had persecuted the church. This had been a matter of zeal. In the first century, Jewish men often measured their commitment to God and the nation by how they opposed foreign religion and rule. Since Paul had persecuted the church, he had put into action his love for the nation and the law. He had taken his beliefs to an extreme that even his opponents did not, using physical force to eradicate Christianity (see [Acts 9:1-2](#)).

3:6b Third, Paul had attained the righteousness of the law. Obviously Paul did not mean that he had lived perfectly in accordance with the law. In this context, he boasted of externally verifiable qualities that demonstrated the religious standing he had before he became a Christian. If the other two points regarding achievement could be verified, which was the case, this one must have the same capability. Paul's point was that he had an outwardly perfect record! He had never been accused of breaking any law and, therefore, "showed himself blameless." This does not cancel out the testimony of [Rom 7:7-12](#). At one time, he had perceived himself as "alive, apart from the law" ([Rom 7:9](#)) but that time had passed quickly. He knew his inner spiritual condition, but publicly he was above reproach. These seven characteristics of heredity and achievement reveal that Paul's accepting Christ did not occur because he was marginally Jewish. He had not failed in his own religion. He had seen a better way and had chosen to follow it.

TRUE VALUES ([3:7-11](#)). The second section of this warning explains Paul's real values. The false teachers were evil workers (see [3:2](#)). While Paul's evaluation was penetrating, he realized that their outlook was the same as his had been. In fact, the burden of this entire section is carried by a theme of Paul's life before and after Christ. The real value Paul found was in knowing Christ personally. That brought a true zeal for perfect character not found through the law.

This section is intensely theological, yet practical. After describing dissatisfaction with his natural attainments, Paul described succinctly and successively what has come to be known in the topical arrangements of classical systematic theology as "justification" (v. [9](#)), "sanctification" (v. [10](#)), and "glorification" (v. [11](#)). Since they occur together under one subject in Paul's testimony, clearly he considered them to be linked together, each growing out of the other. Further, the passage calls to mind [2:5-11](#), which combined theology and ethics. There are even verbal parallels between the two: "consider" ([2:6](#); [3:7](#), [8](#)), "form" ([2:7](#) "taking the very nature"; [3:10](#) "becoming like him"), "found" ([2:8](#); [3:9](#)), and "Lord" ([2:11](#); [3:8](#)). Paul probably linked these in his own mind, though they address two very different situations. This passage makes clear, however, that theology and life go together and that the antidote to poor living is proper theology. If the Philippians understood the richness of Paul's life, they would not follow the false teachers.

Evaluation of Paul's Former Life ([3:7-8](#)). These two verses are characterized by two consistently employed literary patterns. The first is comparison. Paul compared his pre-Christian life with his life with Christ. The second is progression. Paul described the former and the present life progressively, sometimes with the same words or cognates. This is a powerful passage. It combines personal experience with deep theology. Some have suggested that this is Paul's theology in brief statement.

[3:7–8](#) The first side of the comparison is Paul’s terminology for his former life. Three times he described it, and each is progressively more vivid. First, he considered his gains as loss. The perfect tense form of “considered” (*hēgemai*) suggests a completed evaluation with present effects. He came to realize that they were loss. Second, he continued to affirm that decision. In [3:8](#) the present tense of “consider” joins with the object “loss.” Paul meant that this was a proper appraisal and a good decision. The point receives further emphasis by the repetition of the word “loss” in a verbal form: “I have lost all things.” Third, in [3:8](#) Paul expressed his conviction more firmly with the verb “consider” and the object “rubbish” (*skybala*). There is increasing intensity, as though the mere thought of that decision brought a renewed appraisal that his former life was useless compared to what really mattered.

Paul reflected on the Damascus road experience ([Acts 9:1ff.](#)). At that time he saw the foolishness of his past life and embraced a new way. His negative appraisal, therefore, expressed an important component of salvation. No one can choose Christ who does not reach a similarly negative conclusion about his own efforts.

The other side of the contrast explains why Paul considered his heredity and achievements so useless. They did not bring him to Christ. Three times Paul expressed that the goal was Christ. First, he said it was “for the sake of Christ” ([3:7](#)). This is the idea of exchange in seed form. Second, he said it was for the sake of “the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” ([3:8](#)). The advance in this statement is that a knowledge of Jesus excelled what Paul had before. The word “surpassing” suggests something of more excellence than that to which it is compared. Therefore, knowing Christ was better than the combined value of his former life. Some interpret this knowledge in a Gnostic context and claim that Paul spoke of a general religious knowledge. This is a Jewish context, however, and the knowledge of which he spoke is probably to be understood in light of the Old Testament “knowledge of God,” now applied to Christ. Seen this way, “knowledge” means “a personal response of faith and obedience to God’s self-revelation.” Third, Paul said he counted all things as loss “that I might gain Christ” ([3:8](#)). Here Paul clearly developed the idea of exchange. It was impossible to hold on to the former values and still have Christ. It was one or the other, and Christ exceeded anything and everything else. The three statements express repentance regarding Paul’s former attitudes about salvation. He turned away from the past to gain Christ.

Aspiration of the New Life ([3:9–11](#)). Paul explained what was better. The structure of the text is somewhat confusing. First, two verbs are parallel, but one explains the other. The parallels are: “that I may gain Christ” (v. [8](#)) and “be found in him” (v. [9](#)). Second, a parenthesis explains what that means—it is having a Christian righteousness, not a legal one. Third, the idea is restated: “that I may know him” (v. [10](#), KJV). The NIV makes this a new sentence, “I want to know Christ.” Finally, the ultimate concern is expressed in v. [11](#), “to attain to the resurrection from the dead.” The section, therefore, has three movements, one for each verse division.

[3:9](#) The first statement expresses Paul's existence in relation to Christ. Being in Christ was at the heart of Paul's theology. He saw all persons as either in Adam or in Christ ([Rom 5:12–21](#)). His desire to be in Christ meant to be in union with the Lord and thus to have the covering of Christ's righteousness surrounding him and the resources of Christ available to him. Paul equated the words "gain Christ" (v. [8](#)) and "found in him" (v. [9](#)). Together they present two different points of view. From one perspective, Paul gained Christ. From another, he was found in him. The passive verb, "found in him," often has the meaning of "prove to be" or "be present." It takes the perspective of a divine investigation of one's relationships. At the great day of judgment, Paul wanted to be found in Christ.

Significantly, Paul defined being in Christ in terms of righteousness. Being found in Christ means being clothed with God's righteousness rather than one's own. This is the heart of the matter. Fellowship with God is always based on righteousness. The Old Testament makes that clear, for example in the case of Abraham ([Gen 15:6](#); see also [Ps 143:12](#)), and Paul continually affirmed it ([Rom 4:1ff.](#)). The basic question for all persons is the question of righteousness.

In Scripture, righteousness is often a legal term, not a moral one. It means that a judge would pronounce someone righteous. Naturally, the ideal was that the person would actually be righteous, but the focus is on what the judge said. The verdict did not necessarily depend on the moral realities. In accord with that, the primary question of both Judaism and Christianity was "what must a man do if God is to declare that he is in the right and so give judgment in his favour? The Jewish answer was that he must obey the Law of Moses." For Paul, a righteousness attained by the law was only a relative self-righteousness. The best that could be hoped for was the blamelessness of which he spoke in [3:6b](#), but which he nonetheless had found inadequate for gaining salvation. Thus, the law provides one approach to righteousness, but it is a flawed approach. The problem is not the law. Paul taught that the law is good ([Rom 7](#)). The problem is the sin which indwells each person ([Rom 7:13–25](#)). Clearly, no one has the kind of righteousness that will secure a verdict of innocent when God examines the life.

The alternative was God's righteousness. Twice in the context of God's righteousness "righteousness" and "faith" occur (one time "righteousness" is assumed as the subject of the clause). Although they parallel each other, one explains the other by adding to the concept to complete it. First, Paul simply stated that righteousness is through the "faith of Christ" ("faith in Christ," NIV). Further, he clarified that it is a righteousness *from God* and based upon faith.

The construction "faith of Christ" is ambiguous in Greek. Two questions emerge regarding it, one semantic and the other syntactical. The first is the meaning of the word "faith." The second is the precise meaning of the genitive Greek construction "of Christ." Regarding the meaning of the word "faith," the tension is between the semantically objective meaning (*trust*) and the semantically subjective meaning (*faithfulness*). Both are attested in Scripture (objective, [Rom 4:9](#); subjective, [Rom 3:3](#)). Normally Paul meant "faithfulness" when the word was a quality of "God" or "Christ," as it is here. The syntactical question is the nature of the statement "of Christ." It could mean belonging to Christ, produced by Christ, directed to Christ, or simply of Christ. Most likely, it is the faithfulness which is in Christ and should be read "of Christ." This first statement, therefore, appears to mean that righteousness is made available to people through the faithfulness of Christ.

Paul explicitly stated that this righteousness comes to people *from God* and *based on that faithfulness*. Paul rejected his own faithfulness to the law, realizing it was insufficient. His hope was the faithfulness of Christ. This verse, then, brings a knowledge of how God makes his righteousness available: It is through Jesus' faithfulness and a person's total reliance on him.

The passage further contrasts Christ and the law. Paul never spoke against the law. Rather, he spoke about the individual's inability to keep it. In this text he contrasted two means of coming to God: by works and by grace. If one chooses works, the law sets the standards and determines the success of that endeavor. Paul had tried that and found it unacceptable. If one chooses grace, Christ's life and death become the hope. Paul found grace and faith to be the only way to have fellowship with God. Grace means that persons cast themselves on the mercy of God, trusting that what Jesus did will be applied to them. Grace freed Paul from self-effort *to gain* salvation and enabled him to devote himself to the things that *follow* salvation. The problem with the false teachers Paul countered was that they had not learned what Paul had learned.

There is also a contrast between two "righteousnesses." Keeping the law produced an *achieved* righteousness; trusting Christ brought an *imputed* righteousness. Paul's hope was the righteousness that God gave.