

The Importance of Community in Philippians

- By Rev. Fr. Nilindra Gunsekera sss



1. Introduction

Writing probably between 57-63 AD from Ephesus, Paul composed Philippians and Philemon, both of which are referred to as ‘captivity epistles’ along with Colossians and Ephesians.

Philemon has a similarity of vocabulary with Colossians, and many interpreters identify both letters with Paul. However, there are also similarities between Philippians and Philemon because both seem to have been written from prison either by Paul or a close companion writing under Paul’s name. Philippians and Philemon are both documents of contemporary value because they appeal to the kind of witness or community witness that is so needed in today’s highly compartmentalized world. They urge our communities as well as those to whom they were originally addressed to face the issues that divide us, to act with an upright moral conscience, to resist divisiveness and to listen more attentively to the Holy Spirit who calls us to unity and to greater generosity.

The traditional consensus among scholars was that Philippians, Colossians, Ephesians and Philemon were written from Rome, where Paul was under house arrest (Acts. 28:16-30 cf. Eph. 3:1; 4:1; Phil. 1:7, 13; Col. 1:24; 4:10; Philemon 1:1). There are indications in Philippians that suggest a Roman origin (cf. praetorian guard – 1:13; Caesar’s household – 4:22). However, the distance between Rome and Philippi (a four to six weeks journey) poses a difficulty considering the many visits which the members of the Philippian community were able to make while Paul was in prison (Phil. 4:1-10; cf. 2:19-30). Hence, a better location is considered to be Ephesus, which is a weeks journey from Philippi, since then it would be understandable how the Philippian community was able to send envoys bearing gifts to Paul, and how Paul himself could promise to send Epaphroditus and Timothy on visits to Philippi (Phil. 2:19, 25). Acts of the Apostles does not testify to Paul’s imprisonment in Ephesus, but he testifies himself that he faced death in Asia (1 Cor. 15:30-32; 2 Cor. 1:8-10). Philippians indicates that the threat of imminent death was a very real possibility faced by Paul.

For many great people an experience of imprisonment and the threat of death only served to strengthen their commitment and resolve (Eg. St. Stephen; Thomas More). Paul, himself suffered from the uncertainty of his own future while he tenaciously held on to faith and hope. The consistent emphasis of Philippians was to strive for greater unity because they were inclined to be factious and divisive.

Two main themes dominate the letter to the Philippians: (i) the theme of community (*koinonia*), and (ii) the theme of joy, which is emphasized by the frequent imperative

‘Rejoice’ (cf. Eph. 1:4, 18, 19, 25; 2:2, 17, 18, 28, 29; 4:1, 4, 10). Paul includes Timothy in his greeting, who according to Acts 16:1-3, 10, 13; 19:22; 20:1-4) was well known to the community at Philippi. Both are designated as ‘servants’ of Jesus Christ. In other letters except 2 Thessalonians and 1 Timothy, Paul introduces himself as an ‘apostle of Jesus Christ.’ Elsewhere when he refers to himself as ‘servant of Jesus Christ’ (cf. Rom. 1:1) it is supplemented by the title ‘apostle.’ In the letter to the Philippians, Paul refers to himself as ‘servant of Christ Jesus.’ This is consistent with the message of the letter which calls upon Christians to imitate Christ in taking the ‘form of a slave’ (Phil. 2:7).

2. Timothy: The Respected Pauline Collaborator



Timothy was the son of mixed parentage (Acts 16:1-3). His mother was a Jewess (2 Tim. 1:5) and his father a Greek. Paul encouraged his circumcision and the reason as per Acts. 16:3-4 was to completely validate his mission in the eyes of Jewish Christian leaders. Yet, Paul opposes the circumcision of Titus (Gal. 2:3). It is also important to note that the circumcision of Timothy occurred after the *Jerusalem Decree* which exempted Gentile converts from the necessity of circumcision (Acts 15:22-29).

From the Pauline correspondence we gather that Paul admonished his convert Timothy not to allow his natural timidity to interfere with the forcefulness of his vocation (1 Cor 16:10-11). It would appear that Timothy experienced special gifts of prophetic utterance that qualified him as an authority in the church (1 Tim. 1:18; 4:14) despite his youth (1 Tim. 4:12). He is held in particular esteem in the Church of Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:3).

Paul appreciated Timothy’s vocation and his service to the church (Phil. 2:19-24). In Phil. 2:19-24 Paul appreciates the value of Timothy as a co-worker. Paul testifies that ‘there is no one like him.’ This is an extraordinary compliment for Timothy. He is praised primarily for one of the most attractive and sensitive traits that a mature Christian can possess. He is capable of being present, of being concerned about others’ faring well. Timothy will care for the community. This characteristic distinguishes Timothy from others (Phil. 2:21) who look out only for their own interests. Paul is Timothy’s ‘father.’ In fact Timothy was Paul’s convert. Paul also exhorts the community to receive Epaphroditus ‘in the Lord’ with all joy. Paul has sent emissaries to communities founded by him, and now asks these communities to ‘welcome them in the Lord’ (Phoebe in Rom. 16:1-2; Timothy in 1 Cor. 16:10-12; Titus in 2 Cor. 8:16-24; and Onesimus in Philemon 8-14). The phrase means: ‘Consider such people valuable. Respect and honour them.’

Timothy was also entrusted with special assignments as ‘ambassador’ for Paul (1 Thess. 3:2; 1 Cor. 4:17). Timothy accompanied Paul on his 2nd and 3rd missionary Journeys (Acts. 16:3; 20:4). According to Acts Timothy met Paul at Lystra on his way to Macedonia (Acts 16:9). There at Lystra Timothy was circumcised and then he joined Paul and Silas (Silvanus, cf. 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1). They proceeded to Philippi via Troas where Luke joined them (cf. Acts. 16:10-17; 20:5-21; 27:1-28).

Though Paul was a committed missionary who lived ‘on the edge’ (2 Cor. 4:8-9), he was appreciative of the need of collaboration.

2 Corinthians 4:8-9

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed;

He was also sensitive to the contingencies of mission (cf. Paul agrees to the circumcision of Timothy)) while being able to uphold his own theological convictions (cf. Paul resists the circumcision of Titus; Paul also separates from Barnabas – Acts 13:13; 15:39).

The challenge of the Pauline example is to be uncompromising in one’s response to God’s revelation and yet, be able to appreciate the contribution that is made by the assistant/collaborator. Paul valued the vocation of Timothy because he was able to respect his judgment, and grant him opportunities to further a mission that was begun by him. Paul was able to ‘let go’ even in mission and ministry. Paul was able to delegate responsibility and in this he is an example for Parish Priests to emulate in their dealings with assistants/collaborators.

Neither did Paul encourage a network of ‘spies’ who would report to him on the ‘doings’ of Timothy. Can we as pastors let go when we are sent/transferred to other missionary regions? Or like a ‘cookie’ on the internet, do we track every move of our successors?

Just as we agree by exalting the study of history that the past can provide valuable insights into the present, the prudent Christian is obliged to ask, ‘Are we following cultural, social and religious customs which are congruent with the Gospel of Christ?’

3. The Sanctity of the Community

Paul’s conviction of the sanctity of the Christian Community stems from his experience on the road to Damascus where he was told bluntly that in persecuting the ‘Christian Community’ he was persecuting the Risen Lord himself (Acts. 9:4-5). From this revelation flows Paul’s ecclesiology recorded in 1 Cor. 12:12-27).



1 Corinthians 12:12

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body -- Jews or Greeks, slaves or free -- and all were made to drink of one Spirit. For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If

the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the organs in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single organ, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the parts of the body which seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those parts of the body which we think less honorable we invest with the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior part, that there may be no discord in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

Paul clearly refers to Christians believers in Jerusalem and in the Pauline churches as 'saints' because of his conviction that they are members of the one body of Christ (cf. Rom. 1:7; 12:13; 15:25-26, 31; 16:2, 15; 1 Cor. 1:2; 6:1; 14:33-34; 16:1, 15; 2 Cor. 1:1; 8:4; 9:1, 12; 13:13; Eph. 1:1, 15; 3:8, 18; 4:12; 5:3; Col. 1:2, 4; 1 Tim. 5:10; Phlm. 1:5,7).

Romans 1:7

To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Romans 12:13

Contribute to the needs of the saints, practice hospitality.

Romans 15:25-26

At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem with aid for the saints. For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem;

Romans 15:31

... that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints,

Romans 16:15

Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them.

Corinthians 1:2

To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:

1 Corinthians 6:1

When one of you has a grievance against a brother, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints?

1 Corinthians 14:33-34

For God is not a God of confusion but of peace. As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silence in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as even the law says.

1 Corinthians 16:1

Now concerning the contribution for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do.

1 Corinthians 16:15

Now, brethren, you know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints;

2 Corinthians 1:1

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother. To the church of God which is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia:

2 Corinthians 8:4

... begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints --

2 Corinthians 9:1

Now it is superfluous for me to write to you about the offering for the saints,

2 Corinthians 9:12

... for the rendering of this service not only supplies the wants of the saints but also overflows in many thanksgivings to God.

2 Corinthians 13:13

All the saints greet you.

Ephesians 1:1

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the saints who are also faithful in Christ Jesus:

Ephesians 1:15

For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints,

Ephesians 3:8

To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ,

Ephesians 3:18

... may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth,

Ephesians 4:12

... to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,

Ephesians 5:3

But fornication and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is fitting among saints.

Philippians 1:1

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons:

Philippians 4:22

All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household.

Colossians 1:2

To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

Colossians 1:4

... because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love which you have for all the saints,

1 Timothy 5:10

... and she must be well attested for her good deeds, as one who has brought up children, shown hospitality, washed the feet of the saints, relieved the afflicted, and devoted herself to doing good in every way.

Philemon 1:5

... because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and all the saints,

Philemon 1:7

For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.



In Rom. 8:28-30 Paul is more explicit in his description of the ‘saints.’

Romans 8:28

We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

In Phil. 4:10-18, Paul thanks the community for the support that has provided to him. We believe that this is an indirect reference also to the administrators, bishops and deacons in Philippi who would have been directly responsible for the collection because in Rom. 16:1-2, Paul greets the deaconess Phoebe. That Paul even indirectly thanks the administrators, bishops and deacons in Philippi adds to the importance of the focus on the sanctity of the ‘Christian Community’ (Phil. 4:10-18).

Paul considers the ‘saints’ worthy of the messianic blessing. ‘Grace and Peace’ are the messianic blessings invoked upon the ‘saints’ in Philippi. These are gifts from Yahweh, who begot Jesus who is Lord. This blessing articulated as ‘grace and peace’ combines the Jewish blessing of peace with the Greco-Latin blessing of ‘joy.’ The Pauline greeting thus reflects a process of indigenization or inculturation (cf. Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:2; Gal. 1:3; Eph. 1:2; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:2; Titus 1:4). These are blessings ‘poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit’ (Rom. 5:5) bestowed on us from Jesus (Rom. 5:1). It is important to note that the messianic blessing is invoked upon the community as a whole. The messianic blessing is not imparted to specific individuals. Therefore, the community of ‘saints’ who thus form a community centered on Christ Jesus becomes the appropriate setting in which the messianic blessing of grace and peace is to be experienced.

This blessing of grace and peace is salvation which Paul refers to in Phil. 2:12-18, by using the Greek word *Sōtērion* the basic meaning of which is physical and refers to good health. Thus, by combining the reference to salvation which has connotations of good health with the call to unity, Paul is calling upon the community to maintain healthy relationships with the community. Viewed in this manner, the effect of salvation is to be understood as growth in relationships in the community. Grace and peace is manifested in healthy mutual relationships within the community. This produces ‘goodwill’ (*Eudokia*) among the Philippians. Therefore, Paul admonishes the community against grumbling and complaining.

4. The Essential Features of Community

The letter to the Philippians demonstrates that the Pauline notion of *koinonia* also embraces fellowship in the gospel. Paul expresses his gratitude for the *koinonia* in the gospel. Community is not a simple bonding of Christians together in friendship. For Paul, community is created when believers



participate in the gospel. The community of Christians for Paul is composed of Christians responsive to and responsible for the gospel mission.

The Pauline ‘corpus’ (body) of letters is full of instances where the Early Christian Community was plagued by arguments about dietary laws (1 Cor. 8:1-13; 10:23-30) and the keeping of feasts. There were also liturgical abuses (1 Cor. 11:17-34), blatant immorality (1 Cor. 5:1-13), Christians even took their disputes to civil authorities (1 Cor. 6:1-11). The ‘weak’ Christians and the ‘strong’ Christians were mutually judgmental (1 Cor. 8:7-9; Rom. 14:1-23). There were also crises of discipleship (Gal. 2:11-14). Yet, Paul insists that the communion resulting from unity of faith is to remain the overriding factor in reconciling all members.



4.a The Spirit of Charity

In Phil. 1:27-30, Paul speaks about leading a life worthy of the gospel. He describes life as being worthy of the gospel if it is one that involves ‘being in full accord and of one mind’ (Phil. 2:2), by ‘putting on the mind of Christ’ (Phil. 2:5). Paul views divisions as being intolerable. The antidote to divisiveness is ‘putting on the mind of Christ Jesus’ so that one is in full accord with one another and of one mind. This is what is meant by the reference to leading a life worthy of the gospel. Therefore, the serious internal factions at Philippi serve as a warning calling forth a common faith that will lead to reconciliation in mutual love. In this part of the letter, Paul expresses his struggle as being part of God’s plan. Therefore, Paul warns the Philippians against fearing their enemy. For Paul, conflict situation, notwithstanding the malicious intent of the opponents is neither accidental nor punishment from God, but a means by which Christ is being made known. It is in this context that Paul sees his suffering as filling what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ in terms of being a continuation of the sufferings of Christ (Col. 1:24).

Colossians 1:24

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church,

Paul is of the opinion in Phil. 2:1-5, that because we find encouragement in Christ, the community must be of the same mind. For Paul community is not a closed group but is grounded in a sharing of common faith. The Greek verb *Phronein* which is used 12 times in the letter means having harmony of mind or agreeing with one another. Paul is not merely promoting positive thinking by urging the Philippians to concentrate on unity so that disagreements disappear, they concentrate on unity because it is their focus on Christ that brings forth unity and communion. Therefore, Paul says when the Philippians have developed greater unity his own joy will be complete.

The cause of the disunity among the Philippian community is to be found in their ‘petty deceits’ and selfishness (Phil. 2:3). The remedy lies in meekness which is recognition of

one's dependence of God. This recognition of one's dependence on God renders one humble. Humility was not a virtue in the Greek world because it was always portrayed as a sign of weakness. For Paul humility enable Christians to recognize and emulate the virtue of others. Paul challenges the Philippians to appreciate one another. This is the opposite of causing friction and dissention in the community. So, having admonished the Philippians to concentrate on unity and on the gifts of one another, Paul has prepared them to take Christ as their model (Phil. 2:5). The Christological hymn of Phil. 2:6-11, articulates how they are to take on the mind of Christ Jesus. The Christological hymn suggests that believers 'empty' themselves by taking on a new form, that of a slave in the same manner that Christ Jesus who was the pre-existent Son did, when he took upon himself the 'form' of a slave while still remaining Son.

Charity enables community whereby sharing of faith overcomes differences. For Paul, charity is the love of the Spirit of God 'poured out in our hearts' (Rom. 5:5) empowering us to be reconciled, and to be ambassadors of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:20). Without the Spirit of charity differences would separate and divide the community. This is what Paul calls the great mystery of God's work in the world (Rom. 11:25). God works in the world by creating communities through a sharing of faith, creating communities capable of overcoming differences (Gal. 3:28; Eph. 2:13-14). The community of faith is greater than any differences. Such a concept of community permeates Paul's letter to the Philippians.

Despite their affection for Paul and despite their concern for Epaphroditus, and their fidelity to Paul's teaching, divisiveness threatens the Philippian community and painful disputes haunt them (Phil. 4:2-3). Therefore, Paul recalls them to the fundamental 'teaching' of the gospel – accepting the God and Father of Jesus Christ means accepting one another as brothers and sisters.

Philippians 4:2-3

I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. And I ask you also, true yokefellow, help these women, for they have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.

It is Paul's hope that 'the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). For Paul knowledge or understanding is not mere intellectual assent, but the commitment of an obedient heart. Knowledge is fidelity. So Paul hopes that the Philippian community will grow in their obedient commitment of accepting the God and Father of Jesus Christ, and therefore, accepting one another as brothers and sisters.

4.b Reading the Signs of the Times



Paul sees his imprisonment as being for the sake of Christ (Phil. 1:13). He understands that what has happened has really served to advance the gospel (Phil. 1:12). In this sense, Paul is able to read the signs of the times, and understand how

God is at work in his imprisonment. Yet, Paul is also conscious of the presence of those who preach the gospel out of envy and rivalry (Eph. 1:15), thus seeking to afflict him even while he is imprisoned (Phil. 1:17).

Paul has personal enemies who are malicious in their intent. They are a rival group of Christian preachers whose motives Paul questions, not because they wage a personal vendetta against him, but because they seek some personal gain (prestige, power, popularity) in their preaching. Paul says that these opponents preach Christ in pretense (Phil. 1:18). Strength to endure the injustice of his imprisonment, and the malice of the other preachers comes to Paul through his life 'in Christ' (Phil. 1:14). In this dichotomy between pretense and truth is the implicit warning against divisiveness in the community. Phil. 1:18 is the 'key' to understanding chapter one, and the whole letter. Yet, Paul is able to rejoice that whether in pretense or in truth, it is Christ who is being proclaimed (Phil. 1:18-19).

4.c Rejoicing in the Lord Always



The community is called to rejoice in the Lord always. Frequently in Philippians, Paul returns to the theme of living and rejoicing 'in the Lord' (Phil. 2: 19, 24, 29; 3:1; 4:1, 4, 10) or 'in Christ' (Phil. 1:1, 13, 26; 2:5; 3:14; 4:7, 19, 21). Paul faces adversity and advantage with peaceful equanimity because he is sustained by union with Christ. The word Joy appears twelve times in the letter, and is associated with Paul's work of the gospel. Joy is the essential characteristic of Paul's relationship with the community. Joy is always bound up with Paul's work as an apostle, even though he is contradicted and ridiculed by his opponents. Joy enables the believer to bear suffering, and even face the possibility of martyrdom. Joy becomes conviction for the believer providing the basis for optimism as expressed in Rom. 8:18-19.

Romans 8:18

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God;

In Phil. 1:19-26, Paul describes his inner turmoil. He is torn between wanting to die so that he could be fully united to the Risen Christ whom he experienced on the road to Damascus, and wanting to live for the sake of his mission. Paul also expresses anxiety of one imprisoned and therefore, whose destiny is uncertain because it is left in the hands of enemy forces. In this situation, Paul relies on the prayers of the community and the help of the Spirit of Christ (cf. Rom. 15:30; 2 Cor. 1:11; 1 Thess. 5:25). Paul is able to face up to such anxieties because he conceives his whole life as a glorification of God. Paul lives for the sake of the gospel alone.

Paul puts himself before the Philippians as one who continues to progress (cf. Phil. 1:26; 3:12). Paul is able to present himself as a model because it is Christ who lives in him (Gal. 2:20) on account of his self denial and self sacrifice called forth by the persecutions that he faces.

Galatians 2:20

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Throughout the letter, Paul exhorts the community to rejoice in the Lord, and this is also one way of imitating his life ‘in Christ’ (cf. Phil. 1:18-19; 2:17-18, 28; 3:1; 4:4, 10). In Phil. 3:1, he says that it is not irksome to him to write the same things by calling on the community to rejoice. When Paul speaks of repeating ‘the same things’ he is referring to three possibilities: first, the need to keep encouraging the community to rejoice; secondly, he continues to warn them against divisions; thirdly, he could be repeating a warning against those who were creating dissensions and divisions in the community by insisting on the observance of the Mosaic law. In this section Paul reminds the Philippians that they cannot wallow in sadness or self pity. For Paul, sufferings themselves are a source of joy (cf. Rom. 5:3; 2 Cor. 4:16-18).



4.d The Defilement of Divisiveness

Paul refers to his opponents as ‘dogs’ highlighting that in fermenting divisiveness and dissention they are a source of defilement, and therefore, despicable (Mt. 15:26; Rev. 22:15). Paul tells the Philippians that they are the ‘true circumcision.’ He gives this title a more interior and spiritual significance (cf. Rom. 2:25-29; 9:24-26; Gal. 5:2-6; 6:15; Col. 2:11). True circumcision is a matter of the heart. In the NT., it is referred to as ‘spiritual worship’ (Jn. 4:24; Rom. 8:26-27). Those of the ‘true circumcision’ are not of the flesh. Those of the ‘true circumcision’ glory in what God has done through Jesus (Phil. 3:2 cf. Rom. 3:21-26).

Romans 3:21-26

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction; since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus.

In 1 Cor. 3:1-3 Paul says, “But I, brethren, could not address you as spiritual men, but as men of the flesh, as babes in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food; for you were not ready for it; and even yet you are not ready, for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving like ordinary men?”



4.d The Need for Ongoing Personal Conversion

In Phil. 3:8 Paul says, ‘I count everything as loss because of the surpassing greatness of knowing Jesus Christ my Lord.’ Paul experienced the Risen Christ as ‘divinity’ although his Pharisaic training schooled him in the OT. conviction which taught that a hanged man was ‘accursed by God’ (cf. Dt. 21:23).

Deuteronomy 21:22-23

And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night upon the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is accursed by God; you shall not defile your land which the Lord your God gives you for an inheritance.

Paul was ‘blinded’ by this realization that the ‘crucified’ Jesus was indeed the Son of God. Therefore, what Paul believed in prior to his conversion (Rom. 2:28-29), was overturned at this ‘revelatory encounter’ with the Risen Lord. Paul was ‘temporarily’ blinded because his theological vision was impeded by God’s sovereignty to do as He willed (Rom. 3:29; 10:12). Paul counted all that he had gained in his Pharisaic belief as loss because he had experienced the ‘divine presence’ in the person of the Risen Jesus (1 Cor. 9:20-22; 12:13; Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11). Saul the Pharisee was a Jew committed to the observance of the Law, who treasured the observance of the Law as the sole means of salvation (Acts. 22:3). Paul was a zealous Jew who upheld the Mosaic Law. In fact, Paul commenced persecuting Christians because they had opted as a matter of principle to ignore the observance of the Mosaic Law, which his Pharisaic upbringing had taught him to consider as a clear manifestation of the divine will, and therefore, a gift from God.

Romans 2:28-29

For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision which is outward in the flesh: He is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart, spiritual and not literal. His praise is not from men but from God.

Romans 3:29

Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also,

Romans 10:12

For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him.

1 Corinthians 9:20-22

To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews; to those under the law I became as one under the law -- though not being myself under the law -- that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law -- not being without law toward God but under the law of Christ -- that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.

1 Corinthians 12:13

For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body -- Jews or Greeks, slaves or free -- and all were made to drink of one Spirit.

Galatians 3:28

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Colossians 3:11

Here there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free man, but Christ is all, and in all

Acts 22:3

‘I am a Jew, born at Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, educated according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as you all are this day.’

Saul the Pharisee was a persecutor of Christians because they had chosen as a matter of principle to ignore the Mosaic Law (Acts. 9:1-19; 22:3-16; 26:4-18; Gal. 1:11-17). Yet, having been confronted by the Risen Christ and thus, having been converted, called and missioned, Paul channeled his zeal into the work of evangelization. But this work of evangelization bears the distinct hallmark of charity rather than Paul's zealous fidelity to the Mosaic Law that led to excesses of persecution. Now, Paul seeks to win the obedience of faith which we have earlier explained as being the commitment of an obedient heart (Phil. 2:12).

It is important to note that the traditionally accepted time of Paul's conversion is around 34-35 AD. Furthermore, it is understood that Judaism of the pre-70 period was not monolithic. It consisted of many different factions of which the Pharisees were the most powerful. Judaism of the pre-70 period was generally tolerant. Tensions between Judaism and Christianity escalated to actual persecutions only around 70 A.D. Yet the witness of the gospel suggests that although Pharisaic Judaism co-existed with other strands of Judaism that were more or less tolerated, Jesus and his followers were viewed

as presenting a more serious problem because not only did they claim that Jesus Christ was Messiah, they also acclaimed him as the Son of the living God, and began invoking his authority in overturning traditional and time honored laws of purity and holiness..

After his conversion, Paul's missionary zeal does not weaken, although he undergoes a metamorphosis changing roles from persecutor to victim because he has beheld the power of the cross (1 Cor. 1:18).



1 Corinthians 1:18

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

In his missionary endeavours, Jewish Christians who insisted on fidelity to the Mosaic Law began to hound Paul, opposing his ministry, notably, baptism without circumcision. Paul vehemently resisted these 'Judaizers.'

2 Corinthians 11:22-27

Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one -- I am talking like a madman -- with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I have received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I have been beaten with rods; once I was stoned. Three times I have been shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brethren; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.

There is in the example of Paul's own life a radical critique of religion. The voices of the prophets resonate with Paul's own experience (Amos. 5:21; Micah 6:6-8). Jesus himself commanded that we learn the meaning of God's word in a prophetic spirit: 'What I want is mercy, not sacrifice' (Mt. 9:13).

Paul sets forth on this new and uncharted course of seeking God, undeterred by the fact that he has not met the historical Jesus of Nazareth, but only experienced his Risen Presence on the road to Damascus.

The idea which stood at the center of election theology of the OT was that 'God knows Israel' and 'True Israelites Israel know God' (Amos 3:2; Hos. 6:3; 8:2; Jer. 1:5; 31:34). To know Christ is much more than obtaining knowledge *about* Christ. Surely, Paul the persecutor knew about Jesus, but when he came to know Christ, the affective dimensions of his life and also his theological convictions that motivated his commitment radically changed. When Paul came to know Christ. Paul considered knowledge of Christ as far

surpassing all that can be considered treasure on this earth. For knowing Christ involves receiving the power of his resurrection. This is the power that enables Christians to live according to the demands of the gospel. This is the knowledge that enables and empowers Christian to share in the sufferings of Christ. Not only are we urged to believe that by his resurrection Christ became the first fruits of all who die (1 Cor. 15: 20), we are also reminded that Christ's resurrection is a promise that what happened to him will happen also to us who believe in him.

Paul says in Phil 3:12-16, 'I press on to make it (i.e. the resurrection from the dead) my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.' The Damascus Experience becomes foundational for this conviction. Despite all his suffering Paul says, 'Forgetting what lies behind, and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the call of God in Christ Jesus.' Then he calls on all mature minded Christians to do likewise.

Therefore for Paul, grace which is fundamentally fidelity to one's initial calling by God consists not so much in a particular state or condition that is static, but in a continuous striving which involves 'walking in newness of life' (Rom. 6:4; Eph. 4:12; Col. 1:28). Paul leaves behind painful memories of the privileges of his Jewish past even his persecution of the church in order to embrace a new way of life centered on the cross of Jesus. It is by embracing the cross of Jesus that he pursues the prize of knowledge of Christ.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion we surmise that to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect (Mt. 5:45-48) and to walk before God and be perfect (Gen. 17:1), the believer must necessarily experience the power of God's salvation in the cross which is the ultimate and perfect manifestation of God's wisdom and power.



In Phil 3:17-21, Paul calls upon the community to join in imitating him. He does so because he sees the 'many live as enemies of the cross of Christ.' Obviously Paul is referring to his opponents who proclaim the gospel out of envy. What is important to us to day is Paul's emphasis that those who accept the cross of Christ are able to say, 'our commonwealth is in heaven.'

Paul does not reveal the identity of his enemies. They are simply referred to as 'enemies of the cross.' They shun the 'narrow path' (Mt. 7:13-14; Lk. 13:24); they seek power, prestige, and comfort. They become a source of pain and anxiety for Paul. Whether they were of Jewish or Gentile origin, they were Christians. Yet, Paul who experienced pain and anxiety on account of their malicious manipulations does not specify their identity. In this we could draw valuable theological insights in concluding that the identity of those who wreck havoc is not as important as the call to surrender to that suffering convinced that this too, is part of God's plan in our lives. He invites Christians saying 'join in

imitating me' in this surrender to the cross of Christ experienced in wholly different ways in our lives just as Paul experienced it in unique ways during his own apostolic ministry.

That there were serious differences in the community is reflected in Paul's plea that Euodia and Synteche should reconcile their differences (Phil. 4:2). These two women were influential leaders and their quarrel had ecclesiastical repercussions. Continuing antagonism between church leaders only weakens the church and scandalizes those who look for role models among their leadership.

Once again in Phil 4:4-7 Paul says, 'Rejoice in the lord always, again I say Rejoice!' Paul urges the community to be patient. Forebearance means patience, and the cause or reason for such forbearance is the conviction 'the Lord is at hand' (Phil. 4:5). Therefore we conclude that joy is not conditioned by external circumstances. Joy does not require absence of friction, nor externals of peace. Joy must be experienced 'in all things' (Phil. 1:18). Joy is evoked that the awareness that the Lord is at hand. This 'nearness' necessitates vigilance (Mk. 13:37; 1 Thess. 5:6). Philippians may be persecuted and maligned but Paul admonishes them against fear. They should not be downcast, nor should they be bickering among themselves. This indicates a lack of faith. Therefore, joyful thanksgiving describes the constant attitude of the believer. Peace is promised to those who pray in this way. Peace is a messianic blessing (cf. Is. 11:1-11; 32:17), rooted in God. Peace belongs to those who are harassed but who maintain faith. Because Paul is attached to Christ, his serenity is based on his experience of Christ. The Lord Jesus Christ is the secret of Paul's serenity.

