



A True Basis for Confidence

Philippians 3:1-11

In a number of our recent studies on Philippians we've noted the themes of joy and confidence which run through the book, making it one of the most encouraging letters written by Paul. This epistle is characterised by an absence of anger, which makes the change of tone at the beginning of chapter 3 all the more shocking.

In 3:2, Paul uses a triple-whammy of labels to leave us in no doubt about the urgency he feels with regard to the issue he is addressing. It would appear that some in the church at Philippi were insisting on the need for Christian believers to be circumcised, presumably part of a wider campaign for adherence to the Jewish law. Paul describes this faction in the church as:

- 'dogs,' a particularly ironic putdown, given that this was normally a term used by Jews to give expression to their antipathy towards Gentiles,
- 'evildoers,' and finally,
- 'those mutilators of the flesh.' In the original Greek text, this expression not only shocks but also reads as a play on words, with Paul using the word for mutilation (*katatomē*) instead of the one for circumcision (*peritomē*).

Paul then goes on to claim that the true basis on which anyone can claim to be part of the covenant community of God has to do with faith in Jesus: 'For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh' (3:3).

As far as Paul is concerned, this issue is not just about adherence to a particular religious ritual. Instead, it concerns what we are ultimately putting our confidence in. Are we more concerned with the observance of a ritual or with pledging all our allegiance to Jesus? Ultimately, this is an issue which means the gospel itself is at stake, hence the reason for Paul's passionate language.

The Apostle goes on to remind the Philippians that if observance of the law is what matters most, he can claim 'bragging rights' which are the equal of anyone. Some of the phrases Paul uses seem to be here just for dramatic effect (for example, 'a Hebrew of Hebrews') but others require some explanation. He speaks of himself as one who was born a Jew, circumcised as a baby and not an adult convert, and also a member of the tribe of Benjamin, a group who regarded themselves as having a special pedigree, given that this tribe aligned themselves with Judah and the Davidic covenant at the time when Israel divided into two kingdoms after the reign of Solomon. Paul also tells his readers of how he had been a Pharisee, part of a group committed to scrupulous observance of the law, and someone who had even taken part in the persecution of Christians.

It's important to note that Paul is not entirely dismissive of this old way of life. He does not describe Judaism as garbage (tragically, some have distorted this passage and used it as a justification for anti-Semitism). Rather, Paul is stressing here that all of his past life must now be thought of in a new way now that he has come to know Jesus. In spite of all the

satisfaction which he took from his observance of the law, Paul now considers 'everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord' (v8).

Paul may once have thought of himself as possessing a 'righteousness based on the law' (v6). But he has now discovered something far better, a righteousness which has come to him 'through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith' (v9).

In Philippians 2:1-11, we are reminded of the humility and suffering of Christ which came before his resurrection and exaltation. This week's passage concludes with the stirring declaration of verses 10 and 11, in which Paul makes speaks of what has now become his ultimate priority, an experience of resurrection power which the Apostle knows is not possible without a share in the suffering of Jesus: 'I want to know Christ – yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.'

For discussion

1. The tone which Paul adopts at the start of this chapter would strike most of us as strident, to the point of being rude and even sarcastic. Is such language always unacceptable? How can we find a balance in our own church between being polite and loving, while also honestly addressing difficult and serious issues which we are dealing with?
2. Circumcision is obviously not an issue threatening the gospel in UK Baptist churches in 2018. But can you think of other practices or patterns of thinking which creep into church life and end up becoming a kind of substitute gospel?
3. A lot of our approaches to evangelism seem to be based on the assumption that everyone who isn't a Christian is deeply unhappy (we just need to make them realise this!). But Paul speaks of his previous life as one with which he seems to have been satisfied and content. How do you feel about the way he describes his life before his conversion?
4. Many of us will have had the experience of listening to a 'testimony' in church, which often consists of someone describing how truly awful their life was before they became a Christian. However, Paul's approach in Philippians 3 seems very different. He writes, instead, about how fulfilling his previous experience was, but then says that he considers all of this 'loss for the sake of Christ' (v7). What difference would it make to our churches if we heard more testimonies like the one we find in this reading?
5. As we noted above, in verses 10 and 11 Paul contain a stirring statement by Paul on what he wants to know as he looks forward. Commenting on these verses, Fred Craddock notes: 'Paul ends his resurrection... Paul also *begins* with resurrection (v10). Again this is not uncharacteristic, for even though Paul always held before himself and his readers the hope of a resurrection like that of Christ (Rom 6:5, 8; 2 Cor 4:14; 5:1-5), he also understood Christ's resurrection as having benefits in the present life of the believer. Because Christ was raised from the dead, a new life is possible for those who die to sin (Rom 6:2-4).'¹ What do you think of as the benefits of resurrection which we can enjoy here and now?

¹ Fred Craddock, *Interpretation: Philippians*, 1985, 60