

BASICS FOR BELIEVERS

*THE CORE OF
CHRISTIAN FAITH AND LIFE*

D. A. CARSON



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For Peter and Mary
with profound thanks to God
for their friendship, example, and encouragement

CONTENTS

- Preface 9
1. Put the Gospel First 11
Philippians 1:1–2:6
2. Focus on the Cross 39
Philippians 1:27–2:18
3. Adopt Jesus’s Death as a Test of Your Outlook 63
Philippians 1:27–2:18
4. Emulate Worthy Christian Leaders 81
Philippians 2:19–3:21
5. Never Give Up the Christian Walk 121
Philippians 4:1–23

PREFACE

THE FIVE CHAPTERS of this book provide an introduction to a letter the apostle Paul wrote to the Philippian Christians almost two thousand years ago. The subjects he treats are so much at the core of Christian faith and life that I could think of no better summary title than *Basics for Believers*.

Originally these five chapters were prepared as four messages delivered during Holy Week 1994 at the “Word Alive” conference in Skegness, England. (Chapters 2 and 3 were formerly a shorter single message.) I am profoundly grateful for the invitation to come and participate in that ministry of Bible exposition.

Nothing would please me more than if, as a result of reading this book and consequently meditating on Philippians, many believers were to echo Paul’s words: “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” (Phil. 3:10–11).

Soli Deo gloria.

1

Put the Gospel First

Philippians 1:1–26

¹*Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,*

To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons:

²*Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

³*I thank my God every time I remember you. ⁴In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy ⁵because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, ⁶being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*

⁷*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. ⁸God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.*

⁹And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, ¹⁰so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, ¹¹filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.

¹²Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. ¹³As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. ¹⁴Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.

¹⁵It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. ¹⁶The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. ¹⁷The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. ¹⁸But 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, ¹⁹for 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. ²⁰I 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. ²¹For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. ²²If 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! ²³I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; ²⁴but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. ²⁵Convinced of this, I know that I will remain,

and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, ²⁶so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me.

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

Of course, none of us is so crass as to put it that way. But most of us have felt the temptation to opt for a domesticated version of the gospel. In some ways, this temptation is perennial. But perhaps it is especially strong today, owing to a number of developments in the Western world.

First, pressure has been building from the process of secularization. Secularization does not refer to some social impetus driving us toward the abolition of religion. Rather, secularization refers to the processes that squeeze religion to the periphery of life. The result is not that we abandon religion or banish the gospel; rather, religion is marginalized and privatized, and the gospel is rendered unimportant.

The evidence for this development is everywhere, but it can be most easily displayed by asking one question: What governs the national discourse? The answer, of course, is almost everything but the gospel: economics, politics, entertainment, sports, sleaze, who's "in" and who's "out." There is relatively little moral discourse, and almost none that has to do with eternal perspectives—how to live in the light of death and the final judgment—despite the centrality of that theme in the teaching of Jesus. So when we insist on the supreme importance of the gospel, we find many in our society skeptical and dismissive. Partly to protect ourselves from others, partly because we ourselves are heavily influenced by the culture in which we live and move and have our being, we unwittingly find ourselves formally espousing the gospel and formally confessing that biblical religion is of infinite worth, while in reality we are no longer possessed by it. Or we maintain the faith by privatizing it: it becomes uncivilized to talk about religion in polite company. We buy our three dollars worth of gospel, but it challenges us very little.

Second, the sapping influences of self-indulgence throughout the Western world wield their power in the church. For many confessing Christians, it has become more important to be comfortable and secure than to be self-sacrificing and giving. Three dollars worth of gospel, please, but no more.

Third, we are witnessing the rise of what some have called "philosophical pluralism." Certainly many Western nations, including Britain and America, are more diverse, more empirically pluralistic, than they have ever been. By almost any objective criteria, we boast a richer diversity of races, religions, moral values, and forms of cultural heritage than any of our grandparents experienced in this country. In itself that is neither

a good thing nor a bad thing. It is merely a brute fact, one that could be interpreted in quite different ways. But something more is meant by the term “philosophical pluralism.” It refers to the firm insistence that in most areas of human knowledge, and perhaps in all of them, knowledge of objective truth is impossible. Because truth is impossible, it is wrongheaded, and perhaps immoral, to claim that any ideology or any religion is superior to another. Certainly, no religion has the right to pronounce another wrong. That is the one “wrong” thing. The sole heresy has become the view that there is such a thing as heresy.

In such a world, evangelism is easily written off as grotesque proselytizing. Quiet insistence that real truth exists is commonly written off as, at best, quaint nineteenth-century epistemology and, at worst, benighted bigotry. So once again we find reasons to want only a little gospel; three dollars worth, perhaps, but don’t overdo it.

Paul recognized the insidious evil of similar pressures in the Roman Empire of his day. Like modern Western culture, the Roman Empire had begun to decay. Like ours, it was prepared to use religion for political ends but unwilling to be tamed by it—settling slowly into cultured self-indulgence, proud of the diversity in the empire and straining to keep it together by the demand for unhesitating loyalty to the emperor. Pluralism of several kinds made it unpopular to say there is only one way of salvation. Indeed, vassal peoples normally swapped gods with the Romans: the Roman pantheon took on some of the new gods, while the newly subjugated people adopted some of the Roman deities. That way no god could become too presumptuous and challenge the might of Rome.

That was Paul’s world when he wrote to the Philippians. He had founded the church in the city of Philippi in AD 51

or 52 and had visited it at least twice since then. At this point, however, he is writing from prison, probably in Rome about AD 61. So the church at Philippi is not more than ten years old. Paul perceives a variety of pressures lurking in the wings, pressures that could damage this fledgling Christian community. He cannot visit them, but he wants to encourage them to maintain basic Christian commitments and to be on guard against an array of dangers: temptations from within and seduction and opposition from without.

What a person says while unjustly incarcerated and facing the possibility of death is likely to be given more weight than would be the case if that person were both free and carefree. So Paul's decision to write from prison to the Philippians in order to remind them of some Christian basics doubtless worked out, providentially, for their good.

What, then, is his burden as he addresses the Philippians? What is God telling us by his Spirit through these same words two thousand years later?

The first thing this book emphasizes is "Put the Gospel First." It will be helpful to trace this theme in four points.

Put the Fellowship of the Gospel at the Center of Your Relationships with Believers (1:3–8)

As often in his letters, Paul begins with a warm expression of thanks to God for something in the lives of his readers. Here the grounds of his thanksgiving to God are three in number, though all three are tied to the same theme.

The first is their faithful memory of him. The NIV reads, "I thank my God every time I remember you" (1:3). But others suggest "I thank my God every time you remember me," or

something similar. The original is ambiguous. For reasons I shall not go into, I think Paul is referring to *their* remembrance of *him*. Later on he will thank the Philippians for remembering him so warmly that they sent funds to support him in his ministry. But here the vision is broader: he perceives that their interest in him is a reflection of their continued commitment to the gospel, and that is why he thanks God for them.

The point becomes explicit in the second cause of his thanksgiving: “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” (1:4–5). Their “partnership in the gospel” injects joy into Paul’s prayers of thanksgiving: “I always pray *with joy*,” he writes. The word rendered “partnership” is more commonly translated “fellowship” in the New Testament. What precisely does the word mean?

In common use “fellowship” has become somewhat debased. If you invite a pagan neighbor to your home for a cup of tea, it is friendship; if you invite a Christian neighbor, it is fellowship. If you attend a meeting at church and leave as soon as it is over, you have participated in a service; if you stay for coffee afterward, you have enjoyed some fellowship. In modern use, then, fellowship has come to mean something like warm friendship with believers.

In the first century, however, the word commonly had commercial overtones. If John and Harry buy a boat and start a fishing business, they have entered into a fellowship, a partnership. Intriguingly, even in the New Testament the word is often tied to financial matters. Thus, when the Macedonian Christians send money to help the poor Christians in Jerusalem, they are entering into fellowship with them (Rom. 15:26).

The heart of true fellowship is self-sacrificing conformity to a shared vision. Both John and Harry put their savings into the fishing boat. Now they share the vision that will put the fledgling company on its feet. *Christian* fellowship, then, is self-sacrificing conformity to the gospel. There may be overtones of warmth and intimacy, but the heart of the matter is this shared vision of what is of transcendent importance, a vision that calls forth our commitment. So when Paul gives thanks, with joy, because of the Philippians' "partnership in the gospel" or "fellowship in the gospel," he is thanking God that these brothers and sisters in Christ—from the moment of their conversion ("from the first day until now," Paul writes)—rolled up their sleeves and got involved in the advance of the gospel. They continued their witness in Philippi, they persevered in their prayers for Paul, they sent money to support him in his ministry—all testifying to their shared vision of the importance and priority of the gospel. That is more than enough reason for thanking God.

There is a third basis for Paul's thanks to God for them. It is nothing less than God's continuing work in their lives. "I thank my God," Paul begins in verse 3, and now he adds, "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" (1:6). This is almost a definition of what a real Christian is. The New Testament affords not a few examples of people who made professions of faith that were spurious, evidenced by the fact that they did not endure, they did not persevere. For example, at the end of John 2 many people believed in Jesus's name when they saw the miraculous signs he was doing. "But Jesus would not entrust himself to them" (John 2:24), we are told; he knew that their faith was not

genuine. A few chapters later, to those who had professed faith, Jesus declared, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples” (John 8:31). Or as Hebrews 3:14 puts it, “We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first.” In the parable of the sower, Jesus depicts some who “hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away” (Mark 4:16–17). Speedily they receive the word; speedily they fall away. The most promising of the crop in this case proves fickle: they start by showing signs of life, but never produce any fruit.

Not so the Philippians. Because God is preserving them, Paul is convinced that they will persevere. Paul gives thanks to God because he is entirely confident, as he has watched the Philippians, that God did indeed begin a “good work” in them (theirs was no spurious conversion), and the God who begins a good work finishes it.

It is worth pausing to reflect that as Paul gives thanks, his stance is not mechanical or merely ritualistic. Look at verse 4: “In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray *with joy*.” His words remind us of what John says in his third epistle: “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth” (3 John 4). Implicitly, such an apostolic stance asks us what gives us *our* greatest joy. Is it personal success? Some victory for our children? Acquisition of material things? “I have no greater joy,” John writes, “than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.” Paul reflects exactly the same attitude. Paul adds, “It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart” (Phil. 1:7). Probably this was written against the background of Stoic

influence that was cautious about whole-life commitments, especially if they involved the “passions.” Be cool; do not be vulnerable; do not get hurt. But that was not Paul’s way. “It is right for me to feel this way about all of you,” Paul insists, regardless of what the contemporary culture says. “I have you in my heart”: my whole life and thought are bound up with you.

Paul’s circumstances will not affect his joyful and prayerful regard for the Philippian believers. “Whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel” (1:7), he asserts, he will adopt the same stance. The clause could be taken one of two ways: (1) “Whether I am in chains or brought before the court” or (2) “Whether I am in chains or freed again and defending and articulating the gospel.” Either way, Paul delights to remind them, “All of you share in God’s grace with me” (1:7).

So strongly does he want the Philippians to recognize his devotion to them that Paul puts himself under an oath: “God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus” (1:8). The significance of the oath is not that without it he might lie. Rather, he puts himself under an oath so that the Philippians might feel the passion of his truthfulness, in exactly the same way that God puts himself under an oath in the Epistle to the Hebrews. There the point is not that otherwise God might lie but that God wants to be believed (Heb. 7:20–25). So Paul: *God is my witness* “how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.”

Here is no mere professionalism. Nor is this an act, a bit of showmanship to “turn them on” to the apostle. Rather, it is something that repeatedly bubbles through Paul’s arguments. It recurs, for example, in chapter 4: “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!" (4:1).

Both from Paul's example and from that of the Philippians, then, we must learn this first point: the fellowship of the gospel, the partnership of the gospel, must be put at the center of our relationships with other believers. That is the burden of these opening verses. Paul does not commend them for the fine times they had shared watching games in the arena. He doesn't mention their literature discussion groups or the excellent meals they had, although undoubtedly they had enjoyed some fine times together. What lies at the center of all his ties with them, doubtless including meals and discussion, is this passion for the gospel, this partnership in the gospel.

What ties us together? What do we talk about when we meet, even after a church service? Mere civilities? The weather? Sports? Our careers and our children? Our aches and pains?

None of these topics should be excluded from the conversation of Christians, of course. In sharing all of life, these things will inevitably come up. But what must tie us together as Christians is this passion for the gospel, this fellowship in the gospel. On the face of it, nothing else is strong enough to hold together the extraordinary diversity of people who constitute many churches: men and women, young and old, blue collar and white, healthy and ill, fit and flabby, different races, different incomes, different levels of education, different personalities. What holds us together? It is the gospel, the good news that in Jesus, God himself has reconciled us to himself. This brings about a precious God-centeredness that we share with other believers.

This means that in our conversations we ought regularly to be sharing in the gospel; that is, delighting in God, sharing with one another what we have been learning from his Word, joining in prayer for the advance of the gospel (not least in the lives of those to whom we have been bearing witness), encouraging one another in obedience and maturing discipleship, bearing one another's burdens, and growing in self-sacrificial love for one another for Christ's sake.

In short, we must put the gospel first. And that means we must put the fellowship of the gospel at the center of our relationships with fellow believers.

Put the Priorities of the Gospel at the Center of Your Prayer Life (1:9–11)

Already in verse 4 Paul has insisted that whenever he prays for the Philippians, he does so with joy and thanksgiving. Now he gives us the content of his prayers for them: “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” (1:9–11).

This is stunning. Paul's petitions reflect the priorities of the gospel. Observe three features of this prayer.

First, Paul prays that the love of the Philippians “may abound more and more.” Paul provides no specific object. He does not say “that your love *for God* may abound more and more” or “that your love *for one another* may abound more and more.” I suspect he leaves the object open precisely because

he would not want to restrict his prayer to one or the other. From a Christian point of view, growing love for God must be reflected in love for other believers (see 1 John 5:1). However wonderful this congregation has been, however faithful in its love even for the apostle himself, Paul prays that their love may abound more and more.

Second, what Paul has in mind is not mere sentimentalism or the rush of pleasure spawned, for example, by a large conference. "I pray," Paul writes, "that your love may abound more and more *in knowledge and depth of insight*." The kind of love that Paul has in mind is the love that becomes more knowledgeable. Of course, Paul is not thinking of just any kind of knowledge. He is not hoping they will learn more and more about nuclear physics or sea turtles. He has in mind the knowledge of *God*; he wants them to enjoy insight into God's words and ways, and thus to know how to live in light of them.

His assumption, evidently, is that you really cannot grow in your knowledge of God if you are full of bitterness or other self-centered sins. There is a moral element in knowing God. Of course, a person might memorize Scripture or teach Sunday School somewhere or earn a degree in theology from the local seminary or divinity faculty, but that is not necessarily the same thing as growing in the knowledge of God and gaining insight into his ways. Such growth requires repentance; it demands a lessening of our characteristic self-focus. To put it positively, it demands an increase in our love, our love for God and our love for others.

Just as knowledge of God and his Word serves as an incentive to Christian love, so love is necessary for a deepening knowledge of God, because it is exceedingly difficult to

advance in the Christian way on only one front. Christians cannot say, “I will improve my prayer life but not my morality,” “I will increase in my knowledge of God but not in my obedience,” or “I will grow in love for others but not in purity or in my knowledge of God.” They cannot do it. The Christian life embraces every facet of our existence. All of our living and doing and thinking and speaking is to be discharged in joyful submission to God and to his Son, our Savior.

So if Paul prays that the Philippians’ love “may abound more and more,” he quickly adds, “in knowledge and depth of insight.”

Third, for Paul this prayer has a further end in view. He lifts these petitions to God, he tells the Philippians, “so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ” (1:10). Clearly, Paul does not want the Philippian believers to be satisfied with mediocrity. He cannot be satisfied, in a fallen world, with the status quo. He wants these believers to move on, to become more and more discerning, proving in their own experience “what is best.” He wants them to pursue what is best in the knowledge of God, what is best in their relationships with other believers, what is best in joyful obedience. For ultimately what he wants from them is perfection: he prays that they “may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ.”

For Paul, this is not an idolatrous prayer. For some people, of course, it could become just that. For perfectionists, perfection, at least in some arenas where they excel, becomes a kind of fetish, even a large idol. But this is not the case with Paul. The excellence for which he prays, for himself and for others, is further defined in verse 11: being “filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ. . . .”

Moreover, none of this will be allowed simply to enhance our reputations—for sad to say, some people are more interested in a *reputation* for holiness and excellence than in holiness and excellence. But all such petty alternatives are swept aside in Paul's final constraint: his prayer is offered up "to the glory and praise of God" (1:11).

That is what Paul prays for. It takes only a moment's reflection to see that all these petitions are gospel-centered. These are gospel prayers. That is, they are prayers offered to advance the work of the gospel in the lives of the Philippian believers. And, by asking for gospel fruit in their lives, the *ultimate* purpose of these petitions is to bring glory to the God who redeemed them.

How much do such petitions feature in our praying? When was the last time you prayed that the brothers and sisters in Christ in your congregation would abound in love more and more in knowledge and depth of insight so that they might discern the best things and prove them out in their own experience, being filled with the fruit of righteousness, to the glory and praise of God?

What *do* you pray for? Thank God that some do pray along these lines. But many of us devote most of our praying, in private and in public, to personal matters largely removed from gospel interests: our mortgages, physical safety, good health, employment for ourselves or someone else. Doubtless these and countless other concerns are legitimate subjects for prayer. After all, we serve a God who invites us to cast *all* our cares on him because he cares for us (1 Peter 5:7). But where is our gospel focus? Read through the letters of Paul and copy out his prayers. Ask yourself what it is he asks for. Observe how consistently most of his petitions are

gospel-related. Are we being faithful to Scripture if most of our petitions are not?

Put the gospel first. And that means you must put the priorities of the gospel at the center of your prayer life.

Put the Advance of the Gospel at the Center of Your Aspirations (1:12–18a)

The flow of Paul's argument is remarkable. Apparently some of his critics thought Paul had let the side down rather badly by getting himself arrested. If, as is likely, he is writing from prison in Rome, he is awaiting trial before the emperor, and Paul is in this situation because he himself had appealed to the emperor (Acts 26). One can easily imagine the reasoning of Paul's critics. Depending on how this case turns out, Paul's appeal to the emperor could bring Christianity into ill repute. Paul is constantly rushing headlong into things where a wiser, cooler head would have been cautious. Why did he have to go up to Jerusalem and get himself arrested anyway? He knew how much he was held in contempt there. Surely there was a better way.

But Paul has few regrets: "Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel" (1:12). That is what he cares about: not his own comfort, but the advance of the gospel. He offers two reasons in defense of his judgment.

First, his arrest and imprisonment in Rome has resulted in the full Praetorian Guard hearing that he has been arrested for Christ's sake: "It has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ" (1:13). Because the full Praetorian Guard, when it

was up to full strength, numbered close to nine thousand, many commentators wryly protest that nine thousand soldiers could not have been cycled in to guard Paul so that all of them could personally hear his witness. Surely this must be hyperbolic or a reference to some small detachment of the guard. But Paul's reference to "the whole palace guard" probably has a simpler explanation. Paul proved to be such an extraordinary prisoner, and his witness so telling, that stories about him circulated very quickly. It was not that each of the Praetorian soldiers took a turn guarding Paul and therefore heard his story from his own lips. Rather, every soldier who was assigned this duty heard the gospel, and perhaps something of his testimony, and then told others. Paul was neither a hardened criminal nor a suave "white-collar" swindler. Instead of protesting his innocence or gauging his chances of impressing Caesar's court, he spent his time talking about a Jew called Jesus, who had been crucified at the eastern end of the Mediterranean and (if Paul is to be believed) had somehow risen from the dead. And according to this prisoner, not only will this Jesus be our judge on the last day, but the only hope anyone has of being accepted by God is by trusting this Jesus. In short, Paul was proving to be such an extraordinary prisoner that stories about him began to circulate around the palace—and not only stories about him, but the gospel story as well. And that, Paul insists, is wonderful. There has been an advance in the circulation of the gospel because I am in chains.

There is a second reason why Paul insists that his incarceration has advanced the gospel: "Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly"

(1:14). A whiff of persecution sometimes puts backbone into otherwise timid Christians. Older readers of these pages will remember the five Wheaton College graduates in the 1950s who lost their lives in an attempt to bring the gospel to the Auca Indians. Among the excellent unforeseen results was the very high number of Wheaton graduates who year after year for the next decade or two offered themselves for missionary service. Because of the death of the “Auca five,” many were “encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.”

Nevertheless, Paul is a realist. He acknowledges that not every consequence of his imprisonment is rosy in every respect. “It is true,” he writes, “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” (1:15–18a).

Who are these curious preachers who “preach Christ” but who do so out of the most astonishing motives? It is important to recognize that they are not heretics. That is, they are not preaching “another Christ” or “another gospel” that is really no gospel at all. As for those who proclaim some “gospel” other than the apostolic gospel, let them be “anathema”; we would say, “May they be damned” (see Gal. 1:8–9). The issues are too serious to play around with that kind of pluralism. Those who preach “another Jesus” are “false apostles” and must not be given the ear of the church (2 Cor. 11:4, 13–15). So Paul is not open to commending every preacher who offers some

show of piety and who preaches “Jesus.” He wants to know *which* Jesus they preach. We must constantly ask if the Jesus being pushed is the Mormon Jesus or the Jehovah’s Witness Jesus or the naturalistic, liberal Jesus or the health, wealth, and prosperity Jesus. Or is it the biblical Jesus?

So the fact that Paul can offer these preachers a sort of backhanded compliment shows that they are not heretics, not dangerous false teachers. If they had been, Paul would have exposed them. The preachers to whom Paul makes reference here are a different sort. They propound the true gospel, but sometimes do so from the strangest mix of motives. In this case, the people Paul has in mind are those that must be understood to lie behind verse 12. They think that Paul has done damage to the Christian cause by getting himself arrested. Probably they magnify their own ministry by putting Paul down. We can imagine their pompous reflections: “It really is sad that so great a man as Paul has frittered away his gospel opportunities simply because he is so inflexible. After all, I and many others manage to remain at large and preach the gospel. One must assume that Paul has a deep character flaw that puts him in the path of trouble. *My* ministry is being blessed, while *he* languishes in prison.” Thus, the more they speak, the more their own ways are justified and the more Paul is made to look foolish.

How does Paul handle this? Is he wounded? Doubtless he has feelings like everyone else. But he is a man of deep principle, and he perceives that whether by preachers like this or by preachers who align themselves with the apostle, the gospel is getting out. And that is more important than whether or not he himself achieves universal respect in the church. Not only can he say “But what does it matter? The

important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached,” but he can add “and because of this I rejoice” (1:18).

Paul’s example is impressive and clear: Put the advance of the gospel at the center of your aspirations. Our own comfort, our bruised feelings, our reputations, our misunderstood motives—all of these are insignificant in comparison with the advance and splendor of the gospel. As Christians, we are called upon to put the advance of the gospel at the very center of our aspirations.

What are your aspirations? To make money? To get married? To travel? To see your grandchildren grow up? To find a new job? To retire early? None of these is inadmissible; none is to be despised. The question is whether these aspirations become so devouring that the Christian’s *central* aspiration is squeezed to the periphery or choked out of existence entirely.

I recall a Christian some years ago who always gave the same response when he was asked the numbing vocational question “What do you do?” Invariably he would reply, “I’m a Christian.”

“Yes, but I didn’t ask your religion; I asked what you *do*.”

“I’m a Christian.”

“Do you mean that you are in vocational ministry?”

“No, I’m not in vocational ministry. But I’m a Christian, full-time.”

“But what do you do *vocationally*?”

“Oh, vocationally. Well, I’m a Christian full-time, but I pack pork to pay expenses.”

At one level, of course, his standard response was slightly perverse. Moreover, in God’s universe all morally good and

useful work is honorable and not to be dismissed as of marginal importance. Whether it's packing pork or writing computer programs or baking a pie or changing a diaper, we are to offer our work up to God. We are his, and all we say and do, including our work, must be offered up for his glory and his people's good. But having insisted on that point, there are some elements of what we do that are more directly tied to the gospel than are others. Some things we do, and only some things, have direct eternal significance.¹ As the apostle preserves gospel priorities in his prayers, so he preserves them in his aspirations. We must do the same.

In a fair bit of Western evangelicalism, there is a worrying tendency to focus on the periphery. I have a colleague in the Missions Department at Trinity whose analysis of his own heritage is very helpful. Dr. Paul Hiebert labored for years in India before returning to the United States to teach. He springs from Mennonite stock and analyzes his heritage in a fashion that he himself would acknowledge is something of a simplistic caricature, but a useful one nonetheless. One generation of Mennonites believed the gospel and held as well that there were certain social, economic, and political entailments. The next generation assumed the gospel, but identified with the entailments. The following generation denied the gospel: the "entailments" became everything. Assuming this sort of scheme for evangelicalism, one suspects that large swaths of the movement are lodged in the second step, with some drifting toward the third.

1. "Direct" is not perhaps the happiest term, but I cannot think of a better word at the moment. We might say that packing pork to the glory of God has *indirect* eternal significance, in that it honors the God of eternity and prepares me for eternity. But it does not have the same *direct* eternal significance that, say, fruitful evangelism or prevailing intercessory prayer does.

What we must ask one another is this: What is it in the Christian faith that excites you? What consumes your time? What turns you on? Today there are endless subgroups of confessing Christians who invest enormous quantities of time and energy in one issue or another: abortion, pornography, homeschooling, women's ordination (for or against), economic justice, a certain style of worship, the defense of a particular Bible version, and much more. The list varies from country to country, but not a few countries have a full agenda of urgent, peripheral demands. Not for a moment am I suggesting we should not think about such matters or throw our weight behind some of them. But when such matters devour most of our time and passion, each of us must ask: In what fashion am I confessing the centrality of the gospel?

This is not a subtle plea for a denuded gospel, a merely privatized gospel, a gospel without social ramifications. We wisely reread the accounts of the Evangelical Awakening in England and the Great Awakening in America and the extraordinary ministries of Howell Harris, George Whitefield, the Wesley brothers, and others. We rightly remind ourselves how under God their converts led the fights to abolish slavery, reform the penal code, begin trade unions, transform prisons, and free children from serving in the mines. All of society was transformed because soundly converted men and women saw that life must be lived under God and in a manner pleasing to him. But virtually without exception these men and women put the gospel first. They were gospel people. They reveled in it, preached it, cherished Bible reading and exposition that was Christ-centered and gospel-centered, and from that base moved out into the broader social agendas. In short, they put the gospel first, not least in their own aspirations. Not to see

this priority means we are not more than a generation away from denying the gospel.

It may be that God has called you to be a homemaker or an engineer or a chemist or a ditch digger. It may be that you will take some significant role in, say, the rising field of bioethics. But although the gospel directly affects how you will discharge your duties in each case, none of these should displace the gospel that is central to every thoughtful Christian. You will put the gospel first in your aspirations. Then you will be able to endure affliction and persecution and even misunderstanding and misrepresentation from other Christians. You will say with Paul, “I want you to know . . . that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel” (1:12).

So here is Paul’s third point: Put the advance of the gospel at the center of your aspirations.

Put the Converts of the Gospel at the Center of Your Principled Self-Denial (1:18b–26)

Once again it is the flow of Paul’s thought that is so striking. Paul has just declared that he will rejoice if Christ is preached (1:18a). But that is not the only source of Paul’s rejoicing, as wonderful as it is. “Yes, and I will continue to rejoice,” Paul hastens on, “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” (1:19). In this context “deliverance” does not mean release from imprisonment but something more important: his ultimate vindication, whether in life or in death. This will come about through their prayers. That is, owing not least to their prayers and the consequent

“help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ,” Paul will be so faithful that he will be entirely vindicated before God in the end. That Paul wants above all else to be found faithful is made clear by verse 20: “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.”

Thus Paul’s driving concern is not that he should be released from jail or that, if he must die, he should have a relatively painless departure, but that he should do nothing of which he would someday be ashamed. He wants courage, so that Christ may be exalted in his body, “whether by life or by death” (1:20). He wants to hear Christ’s blessed “Well done!” on the last day. And he openly solicits the prayers of God’s people in Philippi that he might be strengthened toward that end.

Almost as if he feels he must articulate and defend this vision of what is important, Paul summarizes his values: “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” (1:21). In the context, “to live is Christ” surely means that for Paul to keep on living here means ministry, Christ-centered ministry, Christ-empowered ministry, Christ’s presence in his ministry. To die is to bring that ministry to an end. But even so there is only gain, since the ministry is not an end in itself, and it is now swallowed up in the glorious delight of the unshielded presence of the exalted Jesus himself.

What can you possibly do with Christians like that? Kill them?! You simply cannot hush them up; Christ means too much to them, the gospel is too central for them. As for Paul, it is not in his power to choose between service here and departing to be with Christ, between living and dying,

between being released from prison for more gospel ministry and paying the ultimate price—thus being released into the presence of the exalted Christ. Yet suppose he *could* choose. What would he do? “I do not know!” (1:22b), he frankly admits. That is, he has no word from the Lord as to what is going to happen and therefore what he ought to choose under such hypothetical circumstances. “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” (1:23–24). By “remain in the body” he means being acquitted before the imperial court and released from prison, for then he would be free to continue his apostolic ministry to the benefit of the Philippians and others.

What is striking about Paul’s evaluation is how deeply it is tied to the well-being of other believers, rather than to his own. Even in this respect, Paul is imitating his Master. “Convinced of this”—convinced that my remaining alive will be best for you—“I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith . . .” (1:25). Or better translated, “I know that I expect to remain and expect to continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith.”² And even this progress in the faith that Paul covets for the Philippians, he construes as a cause for their joy: “so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me” (1:26).

The lesson to be learned is startlingly clear: put the converts of the gospel at the center of your principled self-denial. Paul’s deepest hopes for his own immediate future turn neither on the bliss of immediately gaining heaven’s portals nor

2. The Greek future tense commonly signals expectation rather than mere futurity.

on returning to a fulfilling ministry and escaping the pangs of death, but on what is best for his converts. Often we are tempted to evaluate alternatives by thinking through what seems best for us. How often do we raise as a first principle what is best for the church? When faced with, say, a job offer that would take us to another city or with mortal illness that calls forth our diligent intercession, how quickly do we employ Paul's criterion here established: What would be best for the church? What would be best for my brothers and sisters in Christ?

There is a kind of asceticism that is frankly idolatrous. Some people gain a kind of spiritual "high" out of self-denial. But the self-denial that is motivated by the spiritual good of others is unqualifiedly godly. That is what Paul displays.

Here, then, is the burden of this passage: put the gospel first. In particular:

1. Put the fellowship of the gospel at the center of your relationships with believers.
2. Put the priorities of the gospel at the center of your prayer life.
3. Put the advance of the gospel at the center of your aspirations.
4. Put the converts of the gospel at the center of your principled self-denial.

Put the gospel first. Brothers and sisters in Christ, such a valuation of the gospel ought to be not the exception among us, but the rule. We are talking about the good news that reconciles lost men and women to the eternal God. We are

confessing the gospel: that God himself has provided a Redeemer who died, the just for the unjust, to bring us to himself. Without this gospel we are cut off, without hope in this world or the next, and utterly undone. Compared with this good news, what could possibly compete? Put the gospel first.

One remembers what an aging Christian said to John G. Paton in the last century when Paton was planning to go as a missionary to the South Sea Islands. "You will be eaten by Cannibals!" Paton was warned.

Paton replied, "Mr. Dickson, you are advanced in years now, and your own prospect is soon to be laid in the grave, there to be eaten by worms; I confess to you, that if I can but live and die serving and honouring the Lord Jesus, it will make no difference to me whether I am eaten by Cannibals or by worms; and in the Great Day my resurrection body will arise as fair as yours in the likeness of our risen Redeemer."³ Put the gospel first.

Only one life, 'twill soon be passed;
Only what's done for Christ will last.

Put the gospel first.

3. *John G. Paton, Missionary to the New Hebrides: An Autobiography Edited by His Brother*, ed. James Paton (New York: Revell, 1907; reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965), 56 (of the reprint edition).