

1-1-1997

Living the Gospel of the Cross

Mary Ellen Pereira

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven>

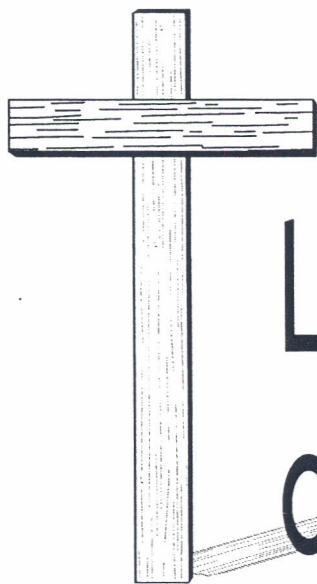


Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Pereira, Mary Ellen (1997) "Living the Gospel of the Cross," *Leaven*: Vol. 5: Iss. 4, Article 4.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol5/iss4/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Religion at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Leaven by an authorized editor of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact bailey.berry@pepperdine.edu.



Living the Gospel of the Cross

Mary Ellen Lantzer Pereira

For most of my life, I have read Paul's letter to the Philippians as if it held two separate kinds of information: teachings about faith and teachings about the practice of the church. Details about Christ's life seemed simply to be doctrine to be believed. Instructions regarding the Christian life seemed simply to be behavior to be practiced. Actually, it is true that the letter does teach us much about faith and practice. But those are not unrelated categories. For Paul, as with the other New Testament writers, there is a solid connection between Christian faith and practice.

The particular details about Christ that Paul chooses to emphasize vary from letter to letter, because he focuses on specific events in Christ's life that pertain most to the particular situation he is trying to address in the life of the church. When the church is weakened because of suffering, as in 1 Thessalonians, Paul focuses on the suffering and death of their Lord, reminding them to endure until Christ comes again. In another letter, such as Colossians, he deals much more with Christ as creator and immanent presence because of the philosophical influences that threatened the church in that place. Each letter connects particular details from Christ's life with the lives of believers. And each letter calls for believers to demonstrate in their own lives the far-reaching effects of Christ's acts of love and salvation.

Paul's letter to the Philippians yields its own particular emphasis on Christ, just as it addresses the specific problems faced by the believers there. Certain events and attitudes of their Lord are brought to bear on their lives, becoming events and attitudes that also belong to the believers. We will look more carefully at the interplay between the Philippians' situation and the way Paul addresses it throughout his letter.

The Philippian Situation

From the "early days of the gospel" (1:5; 4:15), the Philippians have shared in Paul's work both financially and relationally. They have sent financial support for his ministry "more than once" (4:16). They have held Paul in their hearts (1:7) and have remembered him in prayer (1:19). Conversely, they are a source of joy as Paul prays for them (1:4), and he clearly holds them as partners with him in the gospel and God's grace (1:7). Powerful expressions of mutual love and concern surface throughout the letter (1:8; 2:17–20, 25–26; 4:1).

Although the Philippian Christians can be commended for sharing in the work of the gospel, it is obvious that the work of the gospel is somewhat lacking in their own lives. The gospel is being proclaimed, yet it is contaminated by envy, rivalry against Paul, and selfish ambitions found among the believers (1:15–17). Their lives do not show

the effect of the gospel that they are proclaiming. They have not yet produced the righteousness that is intended to be theirs through Jesus Christ (1:11). In order to experience the fullness of Christ and the power of his resurrection, it will be necessary to become like Christ in his death: a goal toward which even Paul still strives (3:12–14). It is this problem that Paul addresses by drawing a connection between the lives of Christ and the believers.

A Life Worthy of the Gospel

At the heart of Paul's letter to the Philippians is a focus on Christ's voluntary humility and his subsequent exaltation by God to be Lord over all. The process of Christ's choices moved him from a position of equality with God to a place of equality with the lowest human being: one who is condemned to die by crucifixion (2:6–8). Throughout this process, Jesus accepted the form of a servant. His humility and obedience eventually brought him to death on a cross. But it was that death that became life for all human beings.

Paul uses the humility of Christ as a model for the Philippian believers who are absorbed in self-centeredness and rivalry. They are called to "be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. . . . Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" (2:2–5). Just as the gospel required humility from Christ, proclaiming the gospel requires an attitude of humility in Christians. It is only as they work "side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel" that they finally live "in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ," who humbled himself (1:27).

While the action of Christ serves as model for the believers, the subsequent action of God provides the motivation: Jesus Christ is now Lord over all (2:9–11). Since he is Lord, believers are to respond with obedience to him. Their obedience will require them to assume the same attitude toward each other as has already been modeled by Christ: his willingness to be humble and to act for the sake of others.

Paul recognizes that these changes in attitude and actions will be difficult. But he relies on the ability of God to accomplish the work of the gospel even in the believers' lives. In fact, God is already at work in them, enabling them "both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (2:13). Paul is confident that God, who began a good work in them, will "bring it to completion by the day of

Jesus Christ" (1:6). Paul appeals to the Philippian believers throughout his letter to conform their attitudes and actions to be true reflections of the gospel at work in them.

In order to experience the fullness of Christ and the power of his resurrection, it will be necessary to become like Christ in his death.

Paul's Appeal to the Philippian Church

In his letter, Paul calls for the believers in Philippi to demonstrate the gospel of Christ's death through their lives. As is common in letters of the time, he offers himself as a model, showing by his own life and words what he desires the believers to incorporate into theirs.

As early as the letter's greeting, Paul reflects the attitude of Christ. Rather than speaking of himself as "apostle" (e.g., Gal 1:1; 2 Cor 1:1) or "called to be an apostle" (e.g., Rom 1:1; 1 Cor 1:1), Paul identifies himself and his younger co-worker Timothy simply as "servants of Christ Jesus" (1:1). Their status reflects Christ's own pattern of humility and obedience (2:7–8).

In the thanksgiving section (1:3–11), Paul introduces his themes of sharing together and incorporating the work of Christ in their own lives. It is obvious here and in other sections that Paul and the Philippian believers share a strong bond of love. They regularly pray for one another (1:3–4, 9, 19), express concern for the other (1:7–10, 24–25; 2:19–30; 4:1), join in proclamation of the gospel (1:5, 7, 12–18), and visit or send messengers (1:26–27; 2:12, 19, 23–30). In addition, believers in Philippi have significantly supported Paul's work with monetary gifts (4:10–19).

The depth of cooperation and compassion that exists between Paul and many of the Philippians is in stark contrast to relationships found in Philippi itself. There, "some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry" or "out of selfish ambition," apparently attempting to discredit Paul because of his imprisonment (1:15–17; cf. 1:12–14). These are very likely the same people who are the "evil workers" (3:2) and "live as enemies of the cross of Christ" (3:18). Their rank jealousy of Paul (1:17), pride in religious attainments

(3:2–6), and rejection of Christ’s model of humility (3:17–18; cf. 2:5–8) is in strong opposition to the model that Paul demonstrates and urges on the Philippians.

If they hope to be other than enemies of the cross, where Christ demonstrated his ultimate humility and obedience, the believers must join in imitating Paul and others who emulate Christ (3:17). The manner of life that is worthy of the gospel exhibits a conspicuous lack of envy, rivalry, selfish ambition, or conceit (1:15, 17; 2:3). It is embodied, instead, by believers who are “of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind” (2:2). They will regard themselves with humility and be considerate of others (2:3–4). Above all, they will conform their minds and actions to imitate Christ, who lowered himself to the extent of death on a cross (2:6–8). Only then will they honor the one whom God made their Lord (2:9–11).

Paul knows the difficulty of living in imitation of Christ. In his own life, he had reached enviable religious status through his pedigree and accomplishments (3:5–6). He was “circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, from the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews.” As a Pharisee, he had carefully observed the Law even in the most ordinary of daily tasks. His religious zeal had overflowed to the extent that he had become an active persecutor of those who he believed followed a false messiah. In every way that his righteousness could be measured by the Mosaic covenant, Paul had been blameless.

All that he had attained, however, Paul has put aside in order to “know Christ . . . by becoming like him in his

death” (3:10). Prestige and self-glorification have been left behind as he humbles himself in order to reach the only worthwhile goal: “to gain Christ and be found in him” (3:8–9). In order to know Christ and have the same mind as Christ, Paul has emptied himself of everything that might have kept his own status and self ambitions elevated and has obediently followed the model of his Lord.

The work of Christ is gradually becoming incorporated into Paul’s own life. It is a process, not an instantaneous outcome. Paul points out that he has not yet attained it, but he is straining forward to follow the course taken by Christ (3:10–14). It is this example that Paul invites the Philippian believers to imitate, having tested it himself and found its surpassing value (3:8, 17). To reject the path of humility and obedience would be to reject their Lord and to live as enemies of the cross of Christ.

Conclusion

Paul emphasizes the specific details of the gospel that relate most to the Philippian situation. Their arrogance and rivalries are in great contrast to the humility demonstrated by Christ in his death and in direct disobedience to the Lord whom they claim to serve. Paul urges these believers to finally conform their own attitudes and actions to the gospel that they all know and proclaim. To do so, they will need to live the gospel of the cross.

MARY ELLEN LANTZER PEREIRA teaches biblical studies at Puget Sound Christian College, Edmonds, Washington.