

THE CONCEPT OF PERFECTION AS TAUGHT  
BY PAUL IN PHILIPPIANS 3:12-15

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The doctrine of perfection has been misunderstood by countless numbers of people through the Church Age. The Philippian church was no exception. Paul addresses this problem in the third chapter of his epistle to the Philippians. As one reads his instruction, he is confronted with an apparent contradiction in Paul's use of the word τέλειος. In 3:12 he uses τετελείωμαι, the perfect passive form of the verb τελειώω, which means "to bring to perfection," with a negative to indicate that he has not yet been made perfect. In the very next sentence, Paul again employs τέλειος, this time in the noun form. Here, he addresses his readers as those who are perfect and includes himself in that group. Thus, the apparent contradiction is: How can Paul admit to not yet being perfect but, in the next sentence, include himself in a group which he himself declares to be perfect?

One must understand the doctrine of perfection. It has three distinct aspects. The first is initial perfection, which takes place at the time of salvation and involves being declared righteous before God. The second aspect is that of progressive perfection or relative maturity. This begins at salvation and concludes at death. It is the striving, in this life, to be like Christ, although it must not be equated with sinless perfection. The final aspect is ultimate perfection. This commences at the time of the believer's death. It is the only one of the three which can correctly be labeled as sinless perfection.

Secondly, one must understand the context of Philippians 3:1-16. It reveals that Paul is using his past, present, and future life to explain each of these aspects of perfection. Therefore, by properly understanding the doctrine of perfection and studying the context of the passage, one realizes that there is no contradiction in Paul's use of τέλειος. In 3:12 he is explaining ultimate perfection, which he has not yet attained, and in 3:15 he is including himself in a group that is relatively mature in this life.

Accepted by the Faculty of Grace Theological Seminary  
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A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "E. William Male". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized "E" and "M".

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Adviser



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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BAGD	Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, and Danker's Greek-English Lexicon
ICC	International Critical Commentary
KJV	King James Version
LXX	Septuagint
TDNT	Theological Dictionary of the New Testament

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Included in chapter 3 of Philippians is Paul's refutation of the Judaizer's concept of perfection. In this rebuttal he uses himself as an example to show their error, as well as to teach the correct doctrine of perfection. There appears to be a contradiction, however, in 3:12-15 when Paul uses the word "perfect" (τέλειος) twice. He states in 3:12 that he has not yet been made "perfect" but in the very next sentence (3:15), he includes himself in the group that is "perfect." The question arises: How can a person be not perfect and perfect concurrently?

There is an awareness of this tension in virtually every commentary on this passage. Michael states that "this seeming inconsistency has occasioned much discussion."<sup>1</sup> Lightfoot sees the two cognates as being used in the sense of sinlessness as indicated by his interpretation of τέλειοι in verse 15 as "those of our number who pride themselves on their imagined perfection."<sup>2</sup> Michael disagrees with Lightfoot's interpretation even though he agrees that they are

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<sup>1</sup>J. Hugh Michael, The Epistle of Paul to the Philippians (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1928), p. 164.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

used similarly. He uses the translation of "mature" in verse 15 and concludes that "the only true maturity (v. 15) is to strive after fuller maturity (v. 12)."<sup>1</sup>

Both interpretations cannot be right, but is it possible that both are wrong? This writer thinks so. There is no reason why the two words must be interpreted the same simply because they are cognates and so closely aligned in the text. One must interpret the passage by means of its context and the doctrinal teaching of the New Testament in order to come to a viable conclusion. That is the goal of this thesis.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 165.

## CHAPTER II

### AN EXAMINATION OF ΤΕΛΕΙΟΣ

#### Extra-Biblical Usage

The word τέλειος was employed both by Plato (428-348 B.C.) and Aristotle (384-322 B.C.). The former considered one perfect if he had "attained firm and true views in philosophical knowledge."<sup>1</sup> The latter defined a perfect man as one who "lacks nothing of his own excellence."<sup>2</sup> In this sense the word is not primarily ethical: it is purely formal and may refer to a physician, a lawyer, or a thief.

#### Septuagint Usage

In the LXX the word means "unblemished, undivided, complete, whole; it is used as such for מלשׁ, מלל and their cognates."<sup>3</sup> מלל is translated by τέλειος in Deuteronomy 18:13 to mean "wholly or undividedly" and indicates the way in which the people were to serve the Lord. Noah is described in Genesis 6:9 as "blameless" (τέλειος) in his generation. One also finds the sense of "without bodily defect" in the requirement for the Passover lamb in Exodus 12:5.

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<sup>1</sup>TDNT, s.v. "τέλος," by Gerhard Delling, 8:69.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 72.

It should be noted that the word has taken on a strong ethical connotation by the time of the LXX writing in contrast to either Plato's or Aristotle's usage.

#### Dead Sea Scrolls Usage

The word is used in the Dead Sea Scrolls to refer to one who is "without defect in body,"<sup>1</sup> but by far the most common usage is to denote the lifestyle of an individual. A blameless walk was possible only by following the statutes of the community which were revealed to it in the Torah. To walk "perfectly" meant to observe fully the right norms, not deviating to the right hand or the left, faultless, and not transgressing one of the words of God. The understanding is clearly to total fulfillment of God's will.<sup>2</sup>

As one can readily conclude, by this time period τέλειος has a very strong sense of the ethical and although it has not lost its non-ethical meaning the idea of moral standing is a major meaning for the word.

#### New Testament Usage

In the New Testament τέλειος continues to carry a definite moral connotation, although it is used amorally as well. Τέλειος is seen forty-four times in the New Testament. Twenty-one are nouns and twenty-three are verbs. Paul uses

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

the word ten times and all are nouns except for one verb in Philippians 3:12.

### The Noun

The noun, τέλειος, carries the idea of "having attained the end or purpose, complete, or perfect."<sup>1</sup> The noun's twenty-one occurrences can be broken down into the following three categories.

#### Absolute Sinlessness

Τέλειος is found in two New Testament verses where it has reference to sinlessness. In Matthew 5:48 Jesus is concluding a sermon on personal relationships and states that "you are to be perfect (τέλειοι), as your heavenly Father is perfect (τέλειος)." It will be demonstrated later that even though this perfection will not be attained until one is released from the bondage of the sin nature, it is still a goal for every Christian in this present life. The comparison is to God's own perfection and thus must refer to absolute sinlessness. The only other reference which carries this idea is Matthew 19:21.

#### Relative Maturity

The most frequent meaning for τέλειος in the New Testament is that of "relative maturity." It is used with this meaning ten times. Paul contrasts mature men (τέλειοι) with children (παιδιά) in 1 Corinthians 14:20. Paul

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<sup>1</sup>BAGD, p. 809.



intimates that despite all their pride in knowledge and wisdom the Corinthians are still immature as far as judging correctly the use of tongues.<sup>1</sup> The contrast is thus between maturity and immaturity. The other passages that warrant τέλειος to be interpreted "mature" are 1 Corinthians 2:6; Ephesians 4:13; Philippians 3:15; Colossians 4:12; Hebrews 6:1; 5:14; James 1:4; 3:2; and 1 John 4:18.

### Perfect Things

There are five instances in the New Testament of τέλειος referring to an object other than a person (e.g. Heb 9:11 where the heavenly tabernacle is described as perfect--τελειοτέρω). It carries the idea of completeness or full measure.<sup>2</sup> The remaining verses which employ the word with this meaning are Romans 12:2 (will of God); 1 Corinthians 13:10 (the completed canon); Colossians 3:14 (love); James 1:17 (gift); and 1:25 (law of liberty).

### The Verb

The verb, τελειόω, means "to be complete, to bring to an end, to finish, accomplish, fulfill, or to make perfect."<sup>3</sup> It is also capable of being categorized by its contextual meaning.

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<sup>1</sup>R. C. H. Lenski, Interpretation of 1 and 2 Corinthians (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1963), p. 597.

<sup>2</sup>BAGD, p. 809.

<sup>3</sup>James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1978), p. 629.

### To Be Completed

There are many examples in the New Testament of τελειόω referring to an action or object being completed, full, or accomplished. One such case is Luke 2:43. The setting is when Jesus was a lad of twelve. He, along with his parents, went up to Jerusalem to observe the Feast of the Passover. Upon their return home, Joseph and Mary were unaware that "as they were returning, after spending the full (τελειωσάντων) number of days, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem." This verse, along with Luke 13:22; John 4:34; 5:36; 17:14; 17:23; 19:28; Acts 20:24; Hebrews 2:10; 5:9; 7:28; 10:1; James 2:22; 1 John 2:5; 4:12; 4:17; and 4:18 make up the instances where τελειόω means "to be completed."

### To Be Sinlessly Perfect

There are uses of the verb which, taken in context, refer to absolute sinlessness. One such occurrence is found in Hebrews 12:23. The author states that the readers have "come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect . . ." (NIV). The "spirits of righteous men made perfect is a reference to Old Testament saints."<sup>1</sup> They are now sinlessly perfect because of Christ's work on the cross and their glorified state. This position is or will be true of all saints of all ages after the point of

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<sup>1</sup>Homer A. Kent, The Epistle to the Hebrews (Winona Lake: BMH Books, 1972), p. 273.

physical death. The author emphasizes this concept of perfection throughout his epistle in 7:9; 9:9; 10:4; and 11:40. The only other writer in the New Testament to use this word with the meaning of sinless perfection is the Apostle Paul in Philippians 3:12. This verse will be dealt with extensively in chapter four.

### Pauline Usage

Paul uses τέλειος in its breadth of meaning. The context of each occurrence will dictate which shade of meaning it will have. The following is an exhaustive list of the instances of τέλειος in Pauline literature with brief support for some of the less clear passages.

Romans 12:2--". . . good and acceptable and perfect (τέλειον) will of God." (NASV)

1 Corinthians 2:6--"Yet we do not speak wisdom among those who are mature (τελείος)." (NASV)  
This is contrasted to babes (νηπίους) in 3:1.

1 Corinthians 13:10--"But when the perfect (τέλειον) comes." (NASV) This seems to have reference to the completed Canon.<sup>1</sup>

1 Corinthians 14:20--"Do not be babes in your thinking; be mature (τέλειοι)." (NASV)

Ephesians 4:13--". . . until we all attain . . . to the mature (τέλειον) man." (NASV)

Philippians 3:12--"Not that I have received it or have already become perfect<sup>2</sup> (τετελείωμαι). . . ." (NASV)

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<sup>1</sup>Charles R. Smith, Tongues in Biblical Perspective (Winona Lake: BMH Books, 1972), pp. 74-79.

<sup>2</sup>It will be demonstrated in chapter four that this is a reference to sinless perfection.

Philippians 3:15--"Let us therefore, as many as are mature<sup>1</sup> (τέλειοι) have this attitude."  
(NIV)

Colossians 1:28--"That we may present every man perfect (τέλειον) in Christ." (NIV) The sense is relative maturity.<sup>2</sup>

Colossians 3:14--"And beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect (τελειότητος) bond of unity." (NASV) It is love that moves them toward the goal of maturity.<sup>3</sup>

Colossians 4:12--". . . that you may stand mature (τέλειοι) and fully assured in all the will of God."<sup>4</sup>

It is the conclusion of this study that, with one exception, every time Paul uses τέλειος in reference to himself or other people it should be translated "mature." That exception to this conclusion is found in Paul's letter to the Philippian church where he states in 3:12 that he has not yet obtained perfection. This is a reference to sinless perfection. In order to come to this conclusion, one must

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<sup>1</sup>It will be demonstrated in chapter four that this is a reference to relative maturity.

<sup>2</sup>William Hendriksen, New Testament Commentary: Colossians (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), p. 93.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 159.

<sup>4</sup>This verse is seen by some to refer to a future time when believers will be made sinlessly perfect. However, σταθῆτε, the aorist passive of ἵστημι, is used intransitively here to mean "to stand firm or hold one's ground." Thus Epaphras seems to have in mind the Colossians' entire course of life, which is best understood by the use of the constative aorist. Dana and Mantey describe the constative as "that which takes an occurrence and, regardless of its extent or duration, gathers it into a single whole." Thus, what Epaphras is praying for is that they would be mature in their present Christian life with regard to God's will.

not only look at the content but also must be aware of the doctrine of perfection. There are some contexts that could lend themselves to more than one interpretation, and thus, to aid in the interpretation process, it is necessary to have a clear understanding of the Biblical teaching on the doctrine of perfection. It will be the aim of chapter three to unfold this doctrine.

CHAPTER III  
AN EXAMINATION OF THE DOCTRINE  
OF PERFECTION

The doctrine of perfection can only be understood when one sees it in its three phases of composition. The three phases of positional, progressive, and ultimate should be understood as being synonymous with the three phases of both salvation and sanctification.

Lewis Chafer defines the three phases of salvation as: 1) past tense, which releases from the guilt and penalty of sin, is wholly accomplished for all who believe at the time when they believe (Luke 7:50; 1 Cor 1:18; 2 Cor 2:15; 2 Tim 1:9); 2) present tense, which releases from the power of sin, is being accomplished now in those who exercise faith for it (John 17:17; Rom 6:14; 8:2; Gal 5:16; Phil 2:12-13); 3) future tense releases from the very presence of sin (Rom 13:11; Eph 5:25-27; Phil 1:6; 1 Pet 1:3-5).<sup>1</sup>

Chafer outlines the doctrine of sanctification in its three phases as: 1) positional: This is a sanctification, holiness, and sainthood which comes to the believer by the operation of God through offering of the body and

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<sup>1</sup>Lewis Sperry Chafer, Systematic Theology, vol. 7 (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), p. 273.

shed blood of the Lord Jesus Christ (Heb 10:20; Eph 4:24); 2) experiential: This phase has to do with the walk of the believer in his daily life (Rom 6:22); 3) ultimate: the ultimate phase of sanctification, which is related to one's final perfection, will be his in the glory (1 John 3:2-3).<sup>1</sup>

It will readily be seen from the following discussion on the doctrine of perfection that its three phased make-up is parallel to both sanctification and salvation and, consequently, they will be used interchangeably throughout the remainder of this thesis.

### Positional Perfection

The first phase that one needs to understand is that of positional perfection. This position is due to the believer's standing in Christ. In this respect, the believer is seen to be absolutely and infinitely perfect; indeed, as perfect as Christ Himself. It is, however, altogether due to the fact that he is in Christ and partaking of what Christ is--not to any perfection of his own.<sup>2</sup> This first phase takes place at the time of salvation. It is complete and instantaneous at that very moment (Heb 10:14). It is a total work of God apart from any human effort (Eph 2:8-9). Because of this initial act of perfection, every believer is declared to be equally righteous before a holy God.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 274-89.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 250.

### Progressive Perfection

The second phase of the doctrine of perfection is that of progressive perfection. It can be defined as "the process of being progressively set apart from sin toward a moral conformity to the image of Christ."<sup>1</sup> In this phase a believer is in the process of growing into Christlikeness (Eph 4:13; Phil 3:15; Col 1:28). Here, unlike the first or third phase, believers progress at different rates depending on such things as "knowing, reckoning, presenting, yielding, and obeying."<sup>2</sup> Since this phase of the doctrine is placed into the time frame of this current life, it carries with it the liability of a sin nature (Rom 3:12) and thus does not refer to sinless perfection.

### Ultimate Perfection

The third phase of this doctrine is ultimate perfection. Scripture contemplates that at some future time the believer will be totally conformed to the image of Jesus Christ (1 John 3:2-3). It is a work wherein God will wholly finish the process He began at salvation (Phil 1:6). This final phase will occur at the coming of Christ for His Church or at the death of the believer. The result will be an absolutely perfect man. This is the phase of the doctrine which refers to sinless perfection. As with the first phase, it

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<sup>1</sup>Charles R. Smith, "Salvation and the Christian Life Notes," class syllabus (Grace Theological Seminary, 1979, Winona Lake, IN), p. 139.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.



is a work accomplished totally by God and will be as complete for one believer as it will be for every other believer. The logical connection between the last two phases is that it is the hope of ultimate perfection that affects progressive perfection.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 141.

## CHAPTER IV

### AN EXAMINATION OF THE CONTEXT OF PHILIPPIANS 3:12-15

#### Philippians as a Whole

##### Background

Paul's letter to the Philippians is like an open window into the Apostle's heart. It is the most intimate and spontaneous of his writings.<sup>1</sup> Paul wrote to the Philippians while awaiting a verdict on his appeal to Caesar (Acts 21:15-28:31). When the members of the church at Philippi heard of his situation they sent a financial gift to him by means of Epaphroditus, who stayed with Paul for a period of time to assist him (Phil 2:25-30). Upon Epaphroditus' return to Philippi after a very serious illness (Phil 2:27), Paul wrote this affectionate letter to the Philippians to thank them as well as to warn and encourage them.

The church to which Paul wrote was founded by him on his second missionary journey. After being hindered from accomplishing his personal plans, he experienced a vision one night, which beckoned him to come into Macedonia (Acts 16:6-10). Once arriving in Macedonia, he came to Philippi and

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<sup>1</sup>D. Edmond Hiebert, The Pauline Epistles, in vol. 2 of Introduction to the New Testament (Chicago: Moody Press, 1977), p. 282.

met with some devout Jewish women at the place of prayer by the river. Through this initial contact a church was conceived. Trouble began when they exorcised from a young girl a demon. This greatly distressed the men who had used the girl for profit. The result was a whipping and a jail cell for Paul and his companion Silas. Through the providence of God, an earthquake opened the prison doors, and this supernatural event led to the conversion of the jailor and his family. Thus the church was established at Philippi--its charter members probably being Lydia, the young woman, the Philippian jailer, and his family.<sup>1</sup>

#### Theme

Many current writers, such as Wiersbe,<sup>2</sup> Gromacki,<sup>3</sup> and Tasker,<sup>4</sup> see the keynote of the book as "joy." However, one must question if this is the theme in the light of chapter three. Hendriksen states that "what we have is a genuine letter that passes from one subject to another just as

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<sup>1</sup>Joseph M. Stowell, "Oneness in the Work," sermon preached at Southgate Baptist Church, Springfield, OH, Spring 1976.

<sup>2</sup>Warren W. Wiersbe, Be Joyful: A Practical Study of Philippians (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1976), p. 6.

<sup>3</sup>Robert G. Gromacki, Stand United in Joy: An Exposition of Philippians (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), p. 16.

<sup>4</sup>R. V. G. Tasker, The Epistle of Paul to the Philippians, vol. 11, in Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1959), p. 42.

a letter does today."<sup>1</sup> The theme then must be a broad one in order to encompass the entire letter, such as Hendriksen's explanation that "The Apostle Paul pours out his heart to the Philippians whom he prizes highly and loves profoundly."<sup>2</sup> Paul reveals his heart in the following ways. In 1:1-11, he shows himself to be a joyful servant of Christ; in 1:12-30, an optimistic prisoner; in 1:1-18, a humble cross-bearer; in 2:19-30, a thoughtful administrator; in chapter 3, an indefatigable perfectionist; in 4:1-9, a tactful pastor; and in 4:10-23, a grateful recipient.<sup>3</sup> With the broad picture exposed, this thesis will now focus in on the third chapter where the apparent problem lies.

### Philippians 3:1-16 in Context

#### Critical Matters

#### The integrity of Philippians three

Within the last few years the question of the integrity of chapter three has been questioned by some. One reason is because of the opening phrase, "Finally, my brethren" (Τὸ λοιπὸν ἀδελφοί μου) in 3:1. The critics point out that Paul is concluding his letter but then begins an unexpected attack against his opposers. The thrust, they feel,

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<sup>1</sup>William Hendriksen, New Testament Commentary: Philippians (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), p. 37.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 39-40.

seems to be out of harmony with the warm affection displayed in chapters one, two, and four.

These critics also refer to the phrase "to write the same things to you . . ." in 3:1 as an indication that Paul wrote many letters to the church. Thus, the book known today as Philippians is simply, in their view, a compilation of Pauline letters.<sup>1</sup> They find their support, in the writings of Polycarp where he says, concerning Paul's writings to the Philippians, ". . . who when he was not with you wrote you letters . . ."<sup>2</sup> to conclude that the book is merely a compilation of Pauline letters to that church.

In reply to these accusations, it should be pointed out that λοιπόν does not always mean "finally." Its basic meaning is "remaining" or "as far as the rest is concerned."<sup>3</sup> It is simply a transitional word used by Paul to change subjects in his letter. Secondly, there is nothing out of the ordinary if Paul did write other letters to this church. That does not automatically mean that the book of Philippians is a collection of them. When one understands the true purpose and theme of the letter, it is quite easy to allow chapter three to remain as simply a part of the letter to the Philippian church. This writer holds to the integrity of

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<sup>1</sup>Donald Guthrie, New Testament Introduction (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1970), p. 536.

<sup>2</sup>Georg Werer Kummel, Introduction to the New Testament (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1973), p. 236.

<sup>3</sup>BAGD, p. 479.

Philippians as it stands and agrees with Hiebert when he points out that "efforts to sever its unity find no support in textual history."<sup>1</sup>

### The opposition at Philippi

It has been a strong source of contention as to whom Paul was referring in the third chapter. The traditional view is that there are two groups mentioned--the legalists in 3:2-17 and the libertines in 3:18-21.<sup>2</sup> Several recent scholars have argued for only one group of opponents. Among them is A. F. J. Klijn, who contends that they were Orthodox Jews.<sup>3</sup> The major problem with this view is that the vices enumerated in 3:18-21 did not characterize ancient Jews. Paul nowhere accuses the Jews of any type of immorality. Other possibilities for the one opponent theory include Epicurean libertines<sup>4</sup> or Judaizers.<sup>5</sup> There appears to be no dogmatic answer as to whom Paul was opposing at Philippi. However, it seems that the characteristics described by Paul

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<sup>1</sup>Hiebert, Pauline Epistles, p. 289.

<sup>2</sup>Robert Jewett, "Conflicting Movements in the Early Church as Reflected in Philippians," Novum Testamentum 12 (October 1970):362.

<sup>3</sup>A. F. J. Klijn, "Paul's Opponents in Philippians iii," Novum Testamentum 7 (October 1965):279.

<sup>4</sup>M. R. Vincent, The Epistles to the Philippians and Philemon, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1968), p. 92.

<sup>5</sup>R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Galatians, to the Ephesians, and to the Philippians (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), p. 882.

indicate the likelihood of two groups. If so, in 3:2-17, Paul is renouncing the false view of perfection held to by the legalists (Judaizers),<sup>1</sup> and in verses 18-21 he condemns the libertines, who lived for this world's pleasure. Hendriksen espouses this view<sup>2</sup> by contrasting the legalists in 3:2-17 with the "sensualists, men who catered to the flesh, gluttonous, grossly immoral people" of 3:18-21.<sup>3</sup>

#### Doctrinal Matters

Paul, in 3:2-16, contrasts two views of perfection. In 3:1-6 he uses his past life to attack the Judaizers' view of perfection, which they felt could be obtained here on earth by sheer effort. In 3:7-16 Paul teaches the Philippians the correct doctrine of perfection by again using himself as the example. He then challenges the Philippians to have the same attitude as he does regarding this teaching.

#### The Judaizers' doctrine of perfection (3:2-6)

Paul commences his attack against the perfection of the Judaizers by telling his readers to "beware" (βλεπέτε). He emphasizes his alarm by including this command three times in verse 2. The verb means "to see or to look at,"

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<sup>1</sup>For purposes of clarity, the term legalist and Judaizer will be used synonymously in this paper.

<sup>2</sup>Others holding this view are Alford, Barclay, Barnes, Ellicott, Lightfoot, and Meyer.

<sup>3</sup>Hendriksen, Philippians, p. 178.

but when it is used in the imperative, in a warning such as this, it has the force of "beware, look at closely, take heed, keep an eye on."<sup>1</sup>

Paul begins his description of his opponents by calling them dogs (κύνες). This was one of the strongest invective terms possible. It was the slanderous epithet which the Jews applied to Gentiles during this time period. Paul, in the context of Philippians 3, employed the word to compare the Judaizers with the "pariahs, large, savage, and ugly"<sup>2</sup> dogs that roamed the hills of Judea. These dogs could be seen almost everywhere, prowling about the garbage and the rubbish in the streets. The metaphor was apt, for just like these savage dogs, the Judaizers were dangerous, cunning, and vile.

Paul continues his description of the legalists by calling them evil workers (κακοὺς ἐργάτας). The word κακοὺς speaks of all that is opposite to that which is good. In this context these people were those who worked against the gospel. The Judaizers were hard workers like the Pharisees from whom they sprang, "who compassed land and sea to make one convert and made him thereby twofold the child of hell" (Matt 23:15). This adjective describes these men and their personal moral character and not merely their fruit.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Stephen Church Dearborn, "The Background and Message of the Epistle to the Philippians" (Th.D. Dissertation, Grace Theological Seminary, 1961), p. 199.

<sup>2</sup>Hendriksen, Philippians, p. 150.

<sup>3</sup>Lenski, Philippians, p. 829.



The scorching profile continues as Paul calls them the false circumcision (κατατομήν). This is the only place in the New Testament where this word is found. It refers to "mutilation or cutting to pieces."<sup>1</sup> This is in contrast to the true circumcision (περιτομή) in 3:3. The contrast is a play on words, not uncommon in Pauline literature. For example, in 2 Thessalonians 3:11 Paul contrasts "busy workers" with "busybodies." The real genius of such paronomasia (the use of words similar in sound but different in meaning) is lost in translation. A more modern example of this is found in a note by Martin Luther, addressed to the pope, calling him, "Your hellishness" instead of "Your holiness."<sup>2</sup>

These Judaizers insisted on cutting away the foreskin of the body only and leaving the heart uncircumcised. They were concerned with the outward rite to the exclusion of the inward consecration. They wanted to continue the Mosaic Law observance as obligatory for these Philippian Christians. Paul had dealt with people such as these in the Galatian churches as well. In Galatians 5:12 he says, "I would that they would mutilate themselves." They were disruptive to the Church wherever they appeared. Paul warns the Philippian church that it was to avoid this group because of its destructive nature.

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<sup>1</sup>BAGD, p. 419.

<sup>2</sup>Hendriksen, Philippians, p. 151.

He contrasts the Judaizers with the true believers, who "worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh." Flesh (σὰρξ)<sup>1</sup> refers here to all that man is and achieves aside from the Spirit of God. Paul lists his qualifications by birth and his own effort in verses 5-6 to show the false view of perfection based on the merits of this life.

The first four qualifications given by Paul are outside his control. He gained these by being born to his parents. He mentions circumcision first, possibly because this was what the Judaizers contended for most. He literally says "eight days old in circumcision." This was the proper age for a Hebrew male to be circumcised, according to Leviticus 12:3. He was in exact accordance with the Law at this point. It is quite possible that some of the legalists could not claim this privilege.

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<sup>1</sup>Hendriksen lists eight Pauline uses of σὰρξ: a) the chief substance of the body, whether of men or of animals (1 Cor 15:39); b) the body itself, in distinction from the spirit, mind, heart (Col 2:5); c) earthly existence (Gal 2:20); d) a human being, viewed as a weak, earthly, perishable creature (1 Cor 1:29; Gal 2:16). This usage depends heavily on the Hebrew (cf. Isa 40:6); e) physical descent or relationship (Rom 9:8); f) the human nature, without any disparagement (Rom 9:5); g) human worth and attainment, with emphasis on hereditary, ceremonial, legal, and moral advantages; the self apart from regenerating grace; anything apart from Christ on which one bases his hope for salvation (Phil 3:3); h) the human nature regarded as the seat and vehicle of sinful desire (Rom 7:25; 8:4-9, 12, 13; Gal 5:16, 17; 6:8).

His second characteristic gained through his birth was that he belonged to the nation of Israel. Paul was purely Jewish. He did not come from mixed stock, as would have been true of many living in the land of Palestine at this time. The word stock (γένος) indicates he was a descendant from Jacob.<sup>1</sup> It was to Jacob, after his wrestling with the Lord, that God gave the new and significant name Israel (Gen 32:28). Of this very line, Paul was a descendant. He thus belonged to the chosen people of the covenant (Exod 19:5; Num 23:9; Ps 147:19, 20; Amos 3:2; Rom 3:1, 2; 9:4, 5). It is safe to say that many of the Judaizers could not boast of the same heritage.

Thirdly, Paul gives greater detail to his family tree by naming his tribal affiliation. He belonged to the tribe of Benjamin. This tribe, although not always shown in a good light, was nonetheless still a highly productive and important tribe of Israel. This tribe was one with a rich past. It is quite possible that the Judaizers could not even identify their tribe, provided they were of Jewish stock, let alone boast in such fine accomplishments by it in Israel's history.

The last benefit of Paul's birth is his purity of lineage. He was "a Hebrew of Hebrews." He was the son of Hebrew parents. The word "Hebrew" was first used to distinguish Abraham's descendants from other nations or peoples.

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<sup>1</sup>Vincent, Philippians, p. 97.

In Paul's day, there were Hebrew and Hellenistic Jews. The latter held to Greek customs and even spoke the Greek language. This distinction can be noted in Acts 6:1 where the Hellenistic widows were being overlooked in favor of the Jewish widows. Paul was indeed a thoroughbred.

Paul has made one point perfectly clear--his family qualifications were flawless. If anyone could claim perfection based upon heredity, it was Paul. These qualifications, without question, far exceeded any "natural" qualifications which the legalists would have possessed, and yet Paul continues his list of qualities to include those which he has worked for and attained in this life in verses 5b-6.

Paul says of himself in verse 5, "as to the Law, a Pharisee." The name "Pharisees," which in its Semitic form means "the separated ones, separatists," first appeared during the reign of John Hyrcanus (135 B.C.).<sup>1</sup> Their emergence, during the Maccabean period, came about in opposition to the militarism of the Maccabees. They initially sought after a spiritual renewal in Israel. They were, in Christ's time, orthodox and patriotic in contrast to the radical Sadducees.<sup>2</sup> According to Josephus, their number at their zenith of popularity was in excess of 6,000.<sup>3</sup> They adhered

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<sup>1</sup>Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary, s.v. "Pharisees," by Lorman M. Petersen.

<sup>2</sup>Ivan French, "Life of Christ Notes," class syllabus (Grace Theological Seminary, Winona Lake, IN, 1979), p. 12.

<sup>3</sup>Petersen, "Pharisees," p. 647.

strictly to the Law, oral or written, and were looked upon as more religious than the common man. The attitudes and practices of the sect were carefully observed by its members. They pledged themselves to obey all facets of the traditions to the minutest detail and were sticklers for ceremonial purity. They would not touch the carcass of a dead animal or those who had come into contact with it. They despised those whom they did not consider their equals and were haughty and arrogant because they believed they were the only interpreters of God and His word. They truly made life difficult for themselves and bitter for others.<sup>1</sup>

The doctrines of the Pharisees included predestination, immortality of the soul, and a fundamental belief in the spirit life. They held to a belief in final rewards for doers of good works and eternal damnation for the wicked. They accepted the Old Testament and held to the typical Jewish Messianic hope, which they gave a materialistic and nationalistic twist.<sup>2</sup>

It would appear from this glance at the Pharisees that Paul would be injuring his argument against Judaistic perfectionism. However, not all Pharisees were equally corrupted outwardly. Paul, no doubt, had been a respectable Pharisee, and, thus impressed the legalists with his strict observance of the Law. Paul's argument is that if anyone

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

could reach perfection in this life, a devout Pharisee would have the best chance. He certainly knew the Law better than any of the Philippian Judaizers. Hence, this would have been another impressive fact in their eyes.

Paul does not stop here but continues in verse 6 by mentioning his earnest work for God in persecuting the church. He states that "as to zeal, (he was) a persecutor of the church." In fact, he sought to eliminate it. In Acts 9:1 it is recorded concerning Paul that "He breathed out threatenings and murder against the disciples of the Lord. . . ." The word zeal (ζήλος) means "fervor of spirit, ardor in embracing or pursuing anything."<sup>1</sup> Paul had only one consuming passion for God, and that was to exterminate the infant church. If zeal could make anyone perfect it would have done so for Paul. The Judaizers did not possess the same degree of fervor as Paul did.

He concludes his impressive list about himself with, "as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless (ἄμεμπτος)." By human standards, Paul was the ideal man. No one could point the finger at Paul and accuse him of breaking the Law. He was, in human standards, the "unblamed."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>BAGD, p. 337.

<sup>2</sup>Richard Chenevix Trench, Synonyms of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), p. 380.

Paul is finished with his list of accomplishments in the flesh. According to the legalist's standard, he would seem to be perfect. He has attained the ultimate position in this life. No doubt, a legalist reading this list would be impressed with the great accomplishments of the Apostle. Paul now has his readers where he wants them. His logic cannot be overlooked. He has just shown himself to be perfect according to the legalist's doctrine. He will now show the correct doctrine of perfection in 3:7-14 and, in so doing, destroy the Judaizer's false doctrine of perfection.

Paul's teaching of the doctrine of  
perfection (3:7-14)

In 3:7-14, Paul teaches the Philippians the proper doctrine of perfection. He again utilizes his own life's example to couch this essential doctrine. Concurrently, he explains the three phases of perfection.

Initial perfection (3:7-9)

Initial perfection refers to the historical act of salvation. It involves the work of God in bringing a person from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light. This work is totally void of human effort.

Paul begins by revealing the worthlessness of his list of hereditary benefits and earthly accomplishments. He has counted them as loss (ζημίαν). Paul thus unveils a vital part of this first phase of perfection by showing that works, no matter how great, are worthless in gaining initial

perfection. Paul seems to be referring to his Damascus road experience, in Acts 9, as the time when he counted his accomplishments as loss. This is only logical since he uses the verb ἡγμά in 3:7 which indicates "a careful, deliberate evaluation, which results in a decision."<sup>1</sup> It is in the perfect tense, which implies a present result based upon a past action.<sup>2</sup> It was while Paul was on the way to Damascus to persecute Christians that God accomplished initial perfection in Paul's life. It was at this time that, in his heart and mind, he experienced a complete turnaround of all his previous values and became a child of God.

In verse eight he expands his teaching on initial perfection in two ways. First, he uses the present tense of ἡγεομαι, "I am presently counting" to indicate the continuation of the initial act of perfection. Paul counted his earthly gain as nothing after he was saved on the Damascus road, and he reveals that this decision has not waned since then. He secondly employs the aorist passive verb ἐζημιώθη, "to have been lost," referring to "all things,"<sup>3</sup> to emphasize the relationship that he has with his past life. He enlists the culminative aorist at this point, which is used when one wishes to view an event in its entirety, but

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<sup>1</sup>Dearborn, "Background," p. 210.

<sup>2</sup>J. Gresham Machen, New Testament Greek for Beginners (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1949), p. 187.

<sup>3</sup>A neuter plural subject may have its verb in the singular as it does here.



to regard it from the viewpoint of its existing results.<sup>1</sup>

Paul, in verse nine, leaves no doubt in the reader's mind as to who is responsible for this initial act of perfection. It is not a righteousness from him, but from God. The comparison is between righteousness ἐκ νόμου, "proceeding from the Law" and righteousness διὰ πίστεως Χριστοῦ, τὴν ἐκ Θεοῦ, "through faith in Christ proceeding from God." Human righteousness based on the Law is not capable of bringing anyone into a right relationship with God. The only acceptable righteousness for fallen man is Christ's own righteousness. As Vincent aptly states, "The ideal and the source of righteousness are in God. God is the source of the atoning work of Christ."<sup>2</sup>

Paul has thus exposed to the Philippian readers the first great aspect of the doctrine of perfection. He has shown that it is a past experience with continuing results, and it is a work totally accomplished by God, apart from human effort. He now moves to the second phase of perfection in verse 10, which is a natural result of this undeserved salvation.

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<sup>1</sup>H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1943), p. 196.

<sup>2</sup>Vincent, Philippians, p. 103.

### Progressive perfection (3:10)

This phase of the doctrine refers to growth in this present life towards Christlikeness. It contains the greatest emphasis on human responsibility of the three phases. Paul begins the verse with the aorist infinitive of purpose τοῦ γινῶναι "to know."<sup>1</sup> This construction sets forth the purpose of embracing the righteousness of Christ. Hendriksen correctly observes that "Paul, in verse 10, is clearly no longer speaking about his experience on the way to Damascus but to his present yearning to get to know Christ better and better right along."<sup>2</sup>

Paul's use of γινῶσκω refers to a "fullness of experiential knowledge, which is wrought by being like Him."<sup>3</sup> He expresses his desire to gain such knowledge in this present life in two areas.

Paul's first area for gaining experiential knowledge is that of τὴν δύναμιν τῆς ἀναστάσεως αὐτοῦ, "the power of his resurrection." The power that Paul desires to know by experience is not the power by which Christ was raised from the dead, nor Christ's power to raise up believers from the dead. Rather, it is the power of the risen Christ at work

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<sup>1</sup>Ernest DeWitt Burton, Syntax of the Moods and Tenses in the Greek New Testament (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1976), p. 157.

<sup>2</sup>Hendriksen, Philippians, p. 167.

<sup>3</sup>Henry Alford, Galatians--Philemon, in vol. 3 of The Greek Testament, rev. Everett E. Harrison, 4 vols (Chicago: Moody Press, 1958), p. 181.

in his life through practical knowledge enabling him to overcome the power of sin.<sup>1</sup> It is a present, continuously active force in his Christian development. With this knowledge of supernatural help by the risen Christ in his struggle to overcome sin, he can now confidently yearn to live above the dominion of sin.

The second area in which Paul desires to gain experiential knowledge of Christ is [τὴν] κοινωνίαν [τῶν] παθημάτων αὐτοῦ, "the fellowship of his suffering." Participation in the physical suffering with which Christ suffered in this mortal life is inextricably linked to a knowledge of Christ. Paul wants to know fellowship with Christ at its hardest and most decisive point--an attitude toward the world which attracts contradiction, reproach, and persecution.<sup>2</sup> In reference to this concept, Meyer affirms, "The enthusiastic feeling of drinking the cup of Christ is not possible unless a man bears in his heart the mighty assurance of resurrection through the Lord."<sup>3</sup>

The concept of fellowship with Christ's sufferings is further unfolded in Paul's desire of συμμορθεύμενος τῷ θανάτῳ αὐτοῦ, "being conformed to his death." Meyer sees

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<sup>1</sup>Vincent, Philippians, p. 104.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 105.

<sup>3</sup>Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, and Philemon, in vol. 7 of Meyer's Commentary on the New Testament (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Publishers, 1885), p. 134.

a contemplation of martyrdom on Paul's part.<sup>1</sup> There is a major reason why this does not seem to be the case.

Συμμορθεζόμενος is a present passive participle indicating a continuous process, which is brought about by someone else. Paul thus indicates his realization that this conformity to Christ's death is a continuous process, which can only increase because of God's continuous work in the believer's life. Paul manifests his desire that his life be so bound to Christ's death-submitting obedience that its outward expression conforms to His obedience.

Thus, Paul has expounded the second phase of the doctrine of perfection. He models this concept before the Philippians, not as a present sinless perfection, but as an increasing experiential knowledge of God. This knowledge comes by tapping the resurrection power to overcome sin and by embracing the suffering that comes in this life, which enables one to inwardly conform to Christ and to express this attitude outwardly. This process continues throughout life and is labeled by many as Christian maturity. Paul now goes on to complete the teaching on the doctrine of perfection in 3:11-14 by addressing the third phase of the doctrine, known as ultimate perfection.

#### Ultimate perfection (3:11-14)

Ultimate perfection is the future phase of this great doctrine. At the time that a Christian passes from

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

this earthly life to be with Christ, God completes the process of perfection which He began at the moment of salvation. This is the only phase which is rightly labeled "sinless perfection."

Paul introduces this concept, in verse 11, by declaring that the goal of the maturing process is to "somehow attain resurrection out of the dead" (i.e. eternal life). Paul is not voicing distrust in God's ability to complete the work or doubt in his own salvation. Rather, he writes from the perspective of humility and a realistic distrust of himself.<sup>1</sup> Paul realizes the deceitfulness of the human heart and maintains a cautious respect for it. He does not have the attitude that boasts, "I am saved, so I can live as I please." He sees the road to ultimate perfection as a grueling footrace that requires effort to master.

He in no way wants his readers to think that he has already reached this sinless perfection attendant with the resurrection. Thus, he clarifies his statement in verses 12-14. He concedes that he has not received (ἔλαβον) ultimate perfection, as of yet. Paul makes use of the culminative aorist, which looks at an event in its entirety and views it from its existing results.<sup>2</sup> He has not attained sinless perfection at any point in his life. In the same sentence, he explains ἔλαβον more definitely by saying that

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<sup>1</sup>Hendriksen, Philippians, p. 170.

<sup>2</sup>Dana and Mantey, Manual Grammar, p. 196.

he has not "already become perfect" (τετελείωμαι).<sup>1</sup>

Τετελείωμαι is the perfect passive of τελειόω, which means "to bring to an end, finish, accomplish, to make perfect."<sup>2</sup>

The passive voice indicates that the subject is being acted upon, and, in this case, it refers to God's action upon Paul. The perfect tense is a tense of completed action.

Dana and Mantey declare that "its basal significance is the progress of an act or state to a point of culmination and the existence of its finished results. That is, it views action as a finished product."<sup>3</sup> It can be graphically represented thus: \_\_\_\_\_. Paul is therefore declaring that he has not received this perfection, which is accomplished by God.

This perfection is the culmination of positional and progressive perfection and is the only phase that can be correctly identified as sinless perfection. Paul is teaching the Philippians that this state of sinlessness will not become a reality to him, or them, until after death.

This is the first instance of τέλειος in this context. It is this writer's conclusion, based on a contextual study and exegesis, that Paul uses the word to explain the ultimate aspect of perfection. He declared that he has not yet reached this level of perfection at the time of

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<sup>1</sup>Vincent, Philippians, p. 107.

<sup>2</sup>BAGD, p. 809.

<sup>3</sup>Dana and Mantey, Manual Grammar, p. 200.

writing this letter, simply because it only becomes a reality at the time of the resurrection from the dead.

In verses 12b-14, Paul employs the familiar metaphor of the footrace to continue the teaching on ultimate perfection. The Apostle uses this metaphor in much of his writing (1 Cor 9:24; Phil 2:26; 2 Tim 4:7-8). This initially appears to be a strange picture to express this truth. The state of ultimate perfection is totally a work of God in a believer's life and one which is neither earned nor deserved. Yet Paul uses such phrases as: "I press on in order that I may lay hold of . . ." (3:12); "reaching forward" (3:13); and "I press on toward the goal . . ." (3:14) to explain his relationship to the future state of ultimate perfection. These phrases and their constructions convey the idea of continual effort and travail in reaching the objective. Hendriksen writes:

Paul was a firm believer in the doctrine of election before the foundation of the world (Eph 1:4), and accordingly also, as has been pointed out, in the possibility of assurance of salvation. But not in election apart from human responsibility, in salvation apart from human effort, or in assurance without constant recourse to the promises.<sup>1</sup>

The struggle against sin, fear, and doubt was not yet over for Paul. Furthermore, there is nothing out of order in having an unattainable goal. God has always demanded total perfection from fallen man (Matt 5:48). No other standard is acceptable to Him. Paul's purpose in his choice of words

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<sup>1</sup>Hendriksen, Philippians, p. 171.

seems to be to convey the practical relationship between progressive perfection and the final aspect of the doctrine of perfection. The knowledge of the reality that someday believers will be totally free from sin is not to be used to produce a haughty, lazy attitude concerning the Christian life. Rather, it should be viewed as a goal to strive for, thus increasing the endeavor for Christlikeness in this present life--progressive perfection.

Now that the three aspects of the doctrine of perfection have been explained by the Apostle, he moves to a more pointed application of this doctrine in verses 15-16.

Paul's application of the doctrine of  
perfection (3:15-16)

Paul uses the adverb "therefore" (οὖν) to make the transition from the doctrinal to the applicational section. He surprisingly applies the preceding section to only a select group of Christians, as can be ascertained by his use of the correlative pronoun "ὅσοι, meaning "as many as." This word limits the application in number to those whom Paul describes as perfect (τέλειοι). Τέλειοι comes from the same root as τετελείωμαι in 3:12. It is crucial to understand the construction of the verb θρονῶμεν in 3:15. It is a hortatory present subjunctive, meaning "let us keep minding." The ramification of such a translation is that Paul includes himself with the "perfect." The question immediately arises as to how Paul, after admitting



non-perfection in verse twelve, can include himself with the perfect in verse fifteen. By a process of elimination, based on the context, one can come to a proper understanding of this apparent contradiction. It is not likely that Paul is referring to the initial aspect of perfection. This would mean that some of the members of the Philippian church were not saved, since he is only addressing a select group at this point. While this is possible, it does not fit the tone of this section, nor the thrust of the book. Likewise, it is impossible for Paul to be thinking of ultimate perfection at this time. He has just taught the Philippians that this would not be reached until after the resurrection. Since he is writing to living believers, he cannot be using τέλειοι in that sense. The only logical conclusion is that Paul is using "perfect" in the sense of progressive perfection, or relative spiritual maturity. This seems to best fit the context since he does limit the command to certain individuals within the congregation, and, to be sure, they had among them new immature converts of all ages who needed the direction of the mature.<sup>1</sup>

The tension is released, therefore, when one realizes that in 3:12 Paul uses τέλειον to teach the ultimate aspect of perfection, stating that he has not reached that level yet, and in 3:15 he is addressing the τέλειοι who have

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<sup>1</sup>Lenski, Philippians, p. 852.

reached a certain level of maturity with regard to progressive perfection.<sup>1</sup>

What attitude are the readers to have? Paul uses the hortatory present subjunctive *θρονωμεν* in verse fifteen to convey the command to mimic his attitude toward perfection. They are not to have the concept that sinless perfection is possible in this life. Rather, they are to realize that initial perfection should be an incentive to grow in progressive perfection, which should be nurtured along by striving for ultimate perfection, even though it is unattainable in this life. This is the attitude of the mature.

Paul continues in verse fifteen to talk about a "different attitude" (*ἐτέρως φρονεῖτε*). *ἑτέρως* is typically meant to describe a different kind whereas *ἄλλος* is usually used to describe something of the same kind. Alford sees *ἐτέρως* in such a light when he comments that "it gives the meaning of diversity in a bad sense."<sup>2</sup> This does not seem to be the correct interpretation here because 1) this does not seem to fit the context since Paul states that the different attitudes will come from God (would God give the Philippians a different doctrine that would cause diversity in a bad sense?); and 2) There are instances in the New Testament of these two adjectives being used interchangeably.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>For detailed definitions of the different aspects of perfection, see chapter 3.

<sup>2</sup>Alford, *Galatians--Philemon*, p. 183.

<sup>3</sup>BAGD, p. 315.

Paul is not allowing for a different doctrine. This would be totally out of harmony with the Apostle. What he is allowing for is variety in an isolated point ( $\tau\iota$ ), or individual application of the doctrine in their lives.

In 3:16, Paul cautions, however, against radical variation. There is to be no deviation from the present development of his readers' Christian maturity. They will all mature by a variety of means and at a different rate, but they must use the same structure in their endeavor. That is, they are to mature in this present life based on the initial act of perfection with the goal of reaching ultimate perfection even though it is unattainable in this life.

## CHAPTER V

### AN EXAMINATION OF THE DOCTRINE OF PERFECTION FOR TODAY'S READERS

From the context of Philippians 3, it appears that Paul expected his readers to apply what he had taught them. Since the Bible is also applicable for twentieth-century Christians, it is incumbent for today's readers to make this teaching a part of daily living, as well.

In this passage, there seems to be two major areas of application for a believer. The first is that of properly understanding the doctrine of perfection. As in the days of the writing of Philippians, so it is today that many consider good works to be the vehicle by which one gains perfection. By understanding the doctrine of perfection, one understands the correct function of good works.

One comes to realize that good deeds bear no relationship to initial perfection. No one can boast about past accomplishments and then conclude that God chose him because of his relative value. This aspect of perfection is founded solely in the hands of a sovereign God.

Good works do play a significant role in the aspect of progressive perfection. It is of fundamental importance to understand the relationship of works and perfection at

this point, since this is where many err. One who knows the three phases of perfection realizes that initial and ultimate perfection are accomplished by God without help from any human. Thus, one comes to understand that good deeds, in this center phase, are not for gaining salvation or sinlessness, but for maturing a believer into the image of Christ. Erwin Lutzer, pastor of Moody Memorial Church, relates this concept to his life by writing:

I was forced to reevaluate my priorities. What did God want me to do on earth? What was He seeking? Educated Christians? "Successful" pastors? Popular writers? No. At least, these are not number one on His list! He was seeking worshipers! He was looking for men and women who knew Him.

. . . Above all else, God is looking for people who long for communication with Him. That's why Paul said that he counted everything but dung (KJV) that he might know Christ.<sup>1</sup>

When one understands the first two phases of perfection, the third naturally follows. Ultimate perfection is understood as an act of God, at the death of a believer, when He eradicates the sin nature of the believer forever. This is the only phase that can be correctly labeled "sinless perfection." This state is the goal of Christians in this life and, thus, provides the impetus for maturing into Christlikeness.

The application of a proper understanding of perfection was one of Paul's desires for his readers of all ages.

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<sup>1</sup>Erwin W. Lutzer, Failure: The Back Door to Success (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975), p. 113.

He intended for them to understand the correct relationship of this doctrine and good works.

The second area of application for a believer is to have a proper attitude concerning this doctrine (3:15). The believer's attitude should be one that views human accomplishments, no matter how great in the world's eyes, as loss in comparison to gaining the privilege of being in the family of God. It is an attitude that craves to know Christ experientially. Because of this attitude, the believer strives to be like Him, even though the standard is absolute perfection.

While it is true that one is accepted solely on the merit of Christ, God's standard for our character, our attitudes, affections, and actions is, "Be holy, for I am holy." A proper attitude toward perfection takes this command seriously. In the words of nineteenth-century Scottish theologian John Brown, "Holiness (perfection) does not consist in mystic speculations, enthusiastic fervours, or uncommanded austerities; it consists in thinking as God thinks and willing as God wills."<sup>1</sup>

The application of Paul's teaching in Philippians 3:1-16 is not summed up in a list of do's and don'ts. Rather, his teaching takes on relevancy when the reader understands the make-up of the doctrine of perfection and,

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<sup>1</sup>Jerry Bridges, The Pursuit of Holiness (Chicago: Navpress, 1980), p. 51.

based on that understanding, has the proper attitude to consistently exercise this doctrine in daily living.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

An examination of τέλειος reveals that the basic meaning is "completeness, attainment, maturity, or perfection." Paul uses τέλειος twice in Philippians 3:12-15, in a seemingly contradictory way. In 3:12 he states that he has not yet been perfected, and in 3:15 he includes himself in the group that is perfect. In order to harmonize the two usages, one must first understand the doctrine of perfection. It involves positional, progressive, and ultimate aspects. Secondly, one must understand the context of Philippians 3:1-16. The letter is a window into the Apostle's heart. In it he reveals several characteristics about himself, including his desire, in chapter three, that his readers understand the doctrine of perfection.

Paul begins in 3:1-6 by destroying the Judaizer's concept of perfection, which taught that sinless perfection could be attained in this life. He then teaches the correct doctrine of perfection in 3:7-16. The apparent contradiction is erased when one understands that in 3:12 Paul is speaking of ultimate perfection, which cannot be attained in this life, and in 3:15 he has changed his thrust to progressive perfection, which has to do with relative maturity.



Paul's application in 3:15-16 is relevant for believers today. Although ultimate perfection is unattainable in this life, it is still the goal for the Christian. God has always demanded sinlessness. Thus, one can be "mature" (τέλειος) presently, although not yet having attained "perfection" (τέλειος), in the ultimate sense, until after the resurrection.

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