

## **LEARNING TO COUNT**

### **Philippians 3:1-11**

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It has sometimes been said that the big mistake of the Jewish people in the Old Testament is that they forgot that they belonged to God and came to believe that God belonged to them. The prophet Jonah exemplified this exclusive way of thinking. Jonah disliked God because God liked folks that Jonah disliked.

In the New Testament, Stephen confronted and challenged people who thought like Jonah. They killed him. Stephen's sermon rocked their beliefs, so their stones rocked Stephen's body. In essence, Stephen declared what Jonah denied: God is not a Jew. By the way, God is not a member of the Church of Christ either.

In Phil 3, the Apostle Paul has something to say about pride, prejudice, and perspective. Let's look at the first eleven verses of this chapter.

<sup>1</sup>And so, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is not troublesome to me, and for you it is a safeguard.

<sup>2</sup>Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh! <sup>3</sup>For it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh—<sup>4</sup>even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh.

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: <sup>5</sup>circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the race of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; <sup>6</sup>as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

<sup>7</sup>Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. <sup>8</sup>More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as street filth, in order that I may gain Christ <sup>9</sup>and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through the faith of Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. <sup>10</sup>I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, <sup>11</sup>if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead (NRSV with modifications).

“Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh!” Wow! From “biting” metaphors to “cutting” images, Paul warns the Philippians. Although we cannot be certain, it is possible that those against whom Paul issues his

warnings are Jews of some kind who were insisting that Gentile Christians become Jewish proselytes. The word “dogs” was sometimes used by the Jews as an insulting slur for Gentiles, and the description “evildoers” is one that Jews would naturally apply to Gentiles since they did not observe the law. And whereas circumcision was understood to be the sign of the covenant between God and Abraham, mutilation—making gashes in the flesh—was something done by pagan priests. Three times over, Paul applies to a group of Jews terms that they would have thought appropriate only for outsiders: “dogs,” “evildoers,” “mutilators.” It is important to note that Paul’s bitter attack is not against Judaism itself, but is against Judaizers who were pursuing a policy of circumcising converts.

Paul’s conversion to Christ caused him to submit to a divine “audit” of his life. Using the language of profit-and-loss, Paul compares the advantages he enjoyed as a Jew with those that have come to him as a result of his being in Christ. Just as Christ considered the privileges that belonged to equality with God as something he should not exploit, and so gave them up (2:1-11), so also Paul has now abandoned all the privileges that belonged to him as a Jew, because he does not consider them of value in comparison with knowing Jesus Christ. Furthermore, Christ’s resurrection—which was the result of God’s power—is seen by Paul as the source of power in the lives of Christians.

It is all too easy for us to condemn the Judaizers whom Paul castigates and fail to see the same tendencies in ourselves. I have reworded a part of Paul’s message to reflect how I—Royce Dickinson—might speak to our religious heritage.

If anyone else has a reason to brag about their religious background, I have more: born to two Christian parents, both members of the Church of Christ, rooted in southern tradition; as to the law, sound; as to zeal, dogmatic; as to righteousness, perfect—for I obeyed the five steps of salvation and practiced the five acts of worship—the Ten Commandments of the Churches of Christ.

But all of this is worthless in comparison with knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake, I put no confidence in such things. In fact, I would gladly toss such things into the trash if they get in the way of gaining Christ, of being found in him, and of relying on his righteousness rather than my own righteousness. For I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, and thereby attain the resurrection from the dead.

I did not want to preach today. I have struggled with this sermon so much that I can’t wait until it is over. I was moody yesterday, distracted at the Valentine’s celebration last

evening, and almost in tears by the time I went to bed early this morning. Even then, I did not sleep well. You see, I plan my sermons far in advance, so the choice of this text from Philippians was made weeks ago. But this text has troubled my heart, and it has made me see that, although I thought I chose this scripture, this scripture actually chose me to preach it on this particular Sunday.

There was a time, beginning about two centuries ago, when our spiritual forefathers in the Restoration Movement were setting the American frontier on fire: revivals that sometimes got carried away, a sense of unity that was incredibly tolerant, an innovative and inspiring message, and a call to folks to leave church hierarchies that were authoritarian and based on man-made creeds. And where are we today? Many of us are downright afraid of revival. Even the clap of a hand or the raising of those hands sends chills down our spine. And God forbid that any woman be filled with the Spirit. We can't handle that. We are often intolerant, demonstrated by the countless church squabbles and splits. Our strategy has become "hold the fort" rather than "storm the heights." We walk in the "old paths" while the world passes us by on its super-highway. Our church structure has become institutionalized and franchised, and our unwritten creeds are many. Returning after twenty-five years away from Michigan, I still have not recovered from the shock that the thriving churches of my youth are, for the most part, dead or dying. I cannot avoid wondering what will be the state of the Churches of Christ in the Detroit area in another twenty-five years. For the sake of our young people, we need to either revive the patient or pull the plug. A church in hospice care is depressing.

Meanwhile, community churches are springing up almost everywhere. Some denominations are dropping their denominational names and simply calling themselves churches. It seems to me that someone has stolen our thunder! Not only are we experiencing an identity crisis in many of our churches, but some of us are actually opposing these new churches that are very much like what we once were.

I am sometimes asked, "Royce, do you believe that the Churches of Christ will someday cease to exist?" My answer, "No." I believe that God will always raise up a people to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth. But I fear that we may not be that people. I do not fear extinction; I fear becoming irrelevant. Yes, irrelevant. And when the salt loses its saltiness, God will find other salt.

Like the Apostle Paul, I am proud of my religious heritage. And like Paul, if forced to, I have much to boast about. But what Paul says in the text we have studied today, is that none of that heritage has any value unless it leads to Jesus Christ. And then in Jesus Christ, we have nothing to brag about except for Him.

I believe the Spirit is moving in the Plymouth Church of Christ. I believe that the power that raised Jesus from the dead is at work within us. I have spoken to you today with conviction, not cynicism; with feeling, not frustration; and with hopefulness, not hopelessness. And if I have stepped on your toes, I apologize. I was not aiming for your toes; I was aiming for your heart. Only when our hearts are aflame like Paul's and when our passionate craving is to know Christ, will we—like Paul— become all things to all people so that we might, by the grace of God, bring others to Christ. Only when our hearts are bursting with a love that conquers diversity and when our hearts are burdened with a longing for the lost, will we be a church of Christ. Only when we are willing to trash all of our pride, all of our prejudices, and all of our preferences, will we be Christ's church to our community. Only when we live to love, seek to serve, and sacrifice ourselves for the salvation of others, will we be a Christlike church. May God grant us the power and perseverance to become what we claim to be—a church of *Christ*.

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