

Counterfeit Christianities

Philippians 3:1-3

What's at stake in being able to tell the difference between a fake and the genuine article? In 1999 a group of explorers teamed up with CBS to venture 350 ft. below the surface of a small mountain lake in Austria, Lake Toplitz. There they discovered one of the longstanding secret plots of Hitler's Nazi Germany. They found hundreds of millions of pounds of counterfeit British currency, so well crafted that even trained experts would have a hard time telling them apart. Those bills that had been sitting in that lake since 1945, when German soldiers dumped them there after Germany had been defeated and Hitler had killed himself. Their plan had been to fly over major cities in England and release the money, counting on human nature to kick in and cause most people to hoard the money and spend it, even though they knew it was fake. Author and blogger Tim Challies tells this story and explains the implications of Hitler's plan. He writes:

Had the German plan succeeded, millions of citizens, banks, and shops would have been fooled into accepting this worthless money. Such a massive influx of counterfeit currency could prove fatal to a nation's economy. Shops might refuse to sell their goods, fearing that money they received for their wares would prove worthless. Banks might refuse to accept or distribute cash. Without currency, goods would not exchange hands. Panic and chaos would ensue. The economy of even a great nation could be devastated by such a devious plan.¹

The danger of a counterfeit is twofold: first, it deceives people into putting their hope and trust in something that can't deliver. "Your money's no good here." Second, it causes those who are trusting in the genuine article to become suspicious and doubt, no longer sure what to believe. "What if this money's no good either?" And if counterfeit money is deadly to a national economy, counterfeit *Christianities*—counterfeit expressions of the faith—are deadly to the spiritual wellbeing not only of individual Christians and churches, but to the whole world.

Our passage this morning in Philippians 3:1-3 sounds sharp note of warning, urging us to beware of false Christian teaching and counterfeit Christian communities. And it does so by telling us to anchor our hope and joy in the genuine article, Jesus Christ, and to take confidence that in him, we are part of the new covenant community that approaches God by the Spirit, not the flesh, and that boasts in Christ, not in family descent or personal performance.

We began our journey through the book of Philippians last fall. If you're just joining us, welcome. The book of Philippians is one of the several letters written by the apostle Paul, this one addressed to a small, fledgling church in the ancient Macedonian city of Philippi, which Paul had founded just about ten years earlier. It's perhaps best known as a book full of joy—it's filled with exhortations to *rejoice* or be *joyful*—including v. 1 in our passage this morning. The

¹ Tim Challies, *The Discipline of Spiritual Discernment* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), 14.

heartbeat of the book, though, is Paul's vision for the church to partner together *in* the gospel and *for* the gospel. And when we say gospel, we mean the good news of what God has done to establish his kingdom and deal with our sin through the life, death, and resurrection of his eternal Son, Jesus Christ. Paul wants the gospel of Jesus to shape the life and relationships of the church—our community, and he wants the church to work together as a team for the advance of that gospel into the world—our mission.

When we last looked at Philippians in early December, we saw two portraits of this kind of gospel partnership—the examples of Timothy and Epaphroditus, whose lives had been so captivated by Jesus that they were willing to lose everything for him and his mission. As we turn the page into ch. 3, Paul's going to spend this chapter clarifying what's at stake in whether or not the gospel actually stands at the center of our lives and community, whether or not the person and work of Jesus forms the basis for our relationship with God, and serves as the essential foundation and fuel for our lives and ministries.

He starts with a familiar exhortation in v. 1: "Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord!" Now remember, Paul's a preacher. So when he says "finally" here, it doesn't necessarily mean he's nearing the end of his book. Actually that word can be translated several ways—something like, "so then," or "further" (cf. NIV²⁰¹¹), would probably be better here. But there's no question that Paul is making a major point: he wants us to rejoice in the Lord. He said it before in 1:18 and 2:18. He'll say it again in 4:4. Apparently this is so important he has no problem repeating himself, as he says here: "It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again." No kidding—four times! But he goes on—"and it is a safeguard for you." What's that mean? What does Paul mean when he tells us to rejoice in the Lord, and why does that provide safety and protection for God's people?

Paul is not telling us to put on a happy face for God. He's not telling us to pretend that things aren't wrong in this world or in our lives, or to find the silver lining in every cloud. He's not calling us to some generic, pleasant disposition. Rather he is calling us to rejoice in, to delight in, to find our satisfaction and significance in *the Lord*, in Jesus Christ. Not in this world. Not in our circumstances. Not in each other. Not even in what Jesus gives us. But in the Lord Jesus himself. *Be satisfied and delight in Christ*. That's what it means to rejoice in the Lord. That kind of joy is what frees us to serve Christ and to partner together in his gospel with unity, humility, and love. And, as Paul says at the end of v. 1, this kind of joy in Jesus is a safeguard to us. Why?

First, because only Jesus is qualified and capable of dealing with and rescuing us from our greatest problem in life—the eternal consequences of our sinful rebellion against God. This world is messed up in all sorts of ways and filled with problems, *real* problems, but none of them compare to the gravity of offending a holy God by choosing not to follow him or treat him like God. Left to ourselves, this is the plight of all humanity. Psalm 14:2-3 says, "The LORD looks down from heaven on the children of man, to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one." That's a problem.

But we rejoice in Jesus. Only Jesus is qualified and capable of rescuing us from God's wrath and reconciling us in a joyful relationship with God. Because only Jesus is both fully God and fully

human, capable of accomplishing God’s eternal purposes by standing in the place of humanity in his life, death, and resurrection. He lived the life we couldn’t live as God’s faithful Son, in full obedience to his covenant rule. And he died the death we deserved to die, laying his life down on the cross to pay the penalty of our sin, taking God’s holy anger against our sin on himself, that by his Spirit we might be cleansed and forgiven and receive the new and eternal life of his resurrection. Jesus is our sufficient Savior. He is enough. Even now, he sits at the right hand of his Father in heaven, interceding for us as our Great High Priest. As we sang a few moments ago: “My name is graven on his hands, My name is written on his heart; I know that while in heaven he stands No tongue can bid me thence depart.”² Jesus is our safety. And he offers this security, this new life, this new identity and everlasting relationship with God to us through faith. By placing all our trust and hope in him, for he alone can bring us back to God.

But Paul has in mind an even more specific way that rejoicing in Jesus is a protection for us. He continues in vv. 2-3 to warn us against being led astray by counterfeit Christianities—teachers and communities that look like Christianity, that sound like Christianity, but in reality are a fraud, a deception that threaten to seduce us into placing our hope in their empty promises, or to doubt the genuine article, Jesus, and the new covenant community that exists through faith in him. Rejoicing in Jesus our Lord, being satisfied in him and resting all our hope and trust in his life and work for us, is what guards us from going astray. Let’s look at Paul’s specific warning.

Verse 2 (and catch the repetition, here from the ESV): “*Look out* for the dogs, *look out* for the evildoers, *look out* for those who mutilate the flesh. For we are the real circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.” Paul gives a threefold warning against counterfeits here in this verse, followed by a threefold description of the genuine article. And the tone he uses isn’t exactly friendly. He is agitated and upset, and it shows in the blunt staccato of his warning and the sharp edge of his words.

Now when you step back for a minute and you think about the rest of Philippians, and the huge emphasis that Paul puts on humility and unity and love, it’s not a little shocking to come up against these harsh words. I thought we were supposed to be humble; you sound pretty judgmental here, Paul. Certainly there are kinder words you can use to describe your opponents than dogs, evildoers, and mutilators.

But the unity Paul speaks of is not won by throwing out truth. Rather, it’s a unity that comes from being bound together in the truth of Jesus. There can be no unity with a counterfeit because it’s not the real deal. And humility doesn’t mean that we never exercise discernment when something is wrong or even dangerous. The kinds of counterfeits Paul is warning against don’t merely differ on a few secondary issues. We want to work together in humility with genuine brothers and sisters in the faith, even if some of our secondary convictions differ. But the people Paul is warning us against aren’t promoting slightly different theologies; they’re promoting *damning* theologies—things that, if you believe them, you forfeit Christ and therefore face eternal judgment in hell. And so, while Scripture clearly tells us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (Matt. 5:44), that doesn’t mean you don’t sound the alarm when a wolf comes near the pen, especially if he’s dressed in sheep’s clothing. Paul is agitated because the flock faces a great threat. Now whether these dogs had already infiltrated the Philippian church,

² “Before the Throne of God Above,” Charitie Lees Bancroft. Cf. Heb. 2:14-18; 4:14-16; 7:23-28; Rom. 8:31-39.

or whether the threat was merely on the horizon, as a shepherd, it was Paul's duty to warn them. And his warning required strong words.

Imagine walking down the street with your three-year-old child, and foaming Rottweiler breaks its chain and begins lumbering ominously toward your kid. What kind of words are you going to use to describe that dog to your child so she understand the dangerous nature of this threat? "Oh look at the pretty little puppy"? No! "That's a big, bad, mean dog and it'll bite your head off if you go near it." The level of agitation reflects the nature of the threat.

So what is the precise counterfeit that Paul is warning them against, and what's so dangerous about it? The words he uses to describe them actually reflect a brutal irony. They were what scholars call *Judaizers*—a group of Jews who were willing to believe that Jesus was the promised Messiah and king of Israel, but claimed that to be a true follower of God you had still had to become Jewish. You had to receive the sign of the covenant, circumcision (a surgical procedure where the male foreskin is cut away), and you had to keep the law of Moses that God gave Israel at Mount Sinai. Unlike the Gentile *dogs* (that's a word first-century Jews would sometimes use to describe unclean Gentiles, people of non-Jewish descent³), who practiced *evil* instead of God's law and participated in pagan religions, which sometimes involved cutting themselves and other forms of *mutilation*, the Judaizers prided themselves in their heritage as God's people and their performance of God's law, by which they believed that they were qualified to know and worship God. So, trusting in Jesus and what he had done on the cross wasn't enough to be declared in the right with God. Instead they depended on what they themselves could do out of their own effort and flesh to keep God's law, and they boasted in their ethnic descent as Jews, people of the covenant, also known elsewhere as "the Circumcision" (cf. Gal. 2:12; Eph. 2:11).

In essence, the Judaizers created a counterfeit Christianity—not just a different theology, but a damning one. Because they missed the fact that Jesus was the fulfillment of the old covenant Law, that it all pointed to him and his life, death, and resurrection in our place, through which he established a new covenant and brought the promised blessing of God's Spirit to all nations through faith (Galatians 3:14), the Judaizers created a Christianity that, if bought into, was unable to make good on its promises of life and salvation, because it replaced faith in Christ with heritage and hard work. Moreover it threatened to stir up doubt and disillusionment among those who had placed their faith in Christ and become part of God's true family, causing them to wonder if they had done enough, if they had missed something. It was a Christianity that resulted in what Paul describes in Galatians 5:4: "You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have forfeited grace."

And so to warn the Philippians Paul turned the labels the Judaizers had used for the Gentiles onto themselves, and claimed one of their preferred titles for the true Church. Without Jesus, the Judaizers were the dogs, their law-keeping was actually an evil substitute for Christ, and their circumcision was nothing more than a pagan act of self-mutilation. On the contrary, Paul says in v. 3: "For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh." That is the mark of true Christianity.

³ E.g. Matt. 15:26-27; cf. Ps. 22:16, 20; 59:6, 14; Prov. 26:11.

Membership in God's covenant community is not based on ethnic heritage or moral performance (keeping God's law, doing good works), and even less on a physical marking on the skin. As Paul says in Romans 2:29: "circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code"—the law. True Christianity serves God by the Spirit (rather than the flesh), and boasts in Jesus Christ (rather than family descent or personal performance).

True Christianity doesn't barge into God's presence and expect an audience with him based on who we are or what we've done. It's neither the religion of the privileged son nor the self-made man. Rather, it knows all too well the truth of what we mentioned earlier—that in the face of God's holiness, left to ourselves we deserve the deepest pit of hell because of our sin. And so genuine Christianity knows that the only way I can come into God's presence and walk with him in service and obedience is by the cleansing and empowering work of his Holy Spirit. And that's only available through faith in what Christ has done for us. And so our only boast is in him. Jesus is our glory—not what we have done. We put no confidence in the flesh—in who we are, what we can do—because our flesh is frail, weak, and sinful. Only by God's grace—only by God giving us the opposite of what we deserved on the basis of Christ's sacrifice for us—can we know and love God as his new covenant people. We worship by God's Spirit and we glory in Jesus Christ.

The common denominator among all counterfeit Christianities is that they try to gain an audience with God out of the flesh, and therefore *not* through Jesus Christ. As Paul says elsewhere: "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on *human tradition* and the *basic principles* of this world *rather than on Christ*" (Col. 2:8). For the Judaizers this meant first rolling the clock back as though Jesus hadn't come yet, as though God's people were still under the stipulations of Israel's old covenant law rather than the new covenant in Christ's blood, and then misusing that law as though it could be manipulated to earn God's favor.

Throughout the history of the Church, the temptation has often gone in the opposite direction—not to go back to Israel's law, but to move beyond Christ to new laws and stipulations of our own making. Like the Judaizers, we want the credit. Whether it's through a generic moralism—do enough good works for God to accept you. Or perhaps different varieties of fundamentalism—adding culturally-shaped commands to Scripture and then using those new commands as the standard of true spirituality. Or whether it's all the ways that church traditions of every variety are tempted to smuggle good works into God's grace, adding new doctrines or new rituals necessary to receive his favor or gain a hearing with God. No Christian church is immune from this temptation; and Westgate is no exception. And while some of these problems are more along the lines of imperfections than counterfeits, in that they're not necessarily looking for salvation apart from Christ, just making it unnecessarily hard to find and enjoy salvation in Christ, they do tend to stir guilt and anxiety. Left unchecked they can create panic and division, tossing church communities to and fro with what feels like every wind of doctrine.

And then there are those religious communities outside of Christianity that pose a substantial threat precisely because of their counterfeit nature. They look like Christianity. They sound like Christianity. But in their denial of Christ and his sufficiency and thus dependence upon self, they have severed themselves from grace. And their empty promises threaten to deceive God's people

or lead them into doubt and insecurity. So we need to call them what they are so that God's people can be aware. And if it feels like I'm beginning to bark too loudly, then know that the severity of my comments reflects then seriousness of the threat.

For instance, Unitarian Universalism is a counterfeit Christianity. It uses the language of Christianity, some branches claim to be Christian in their practice, their buildings look like Christian churches, but they deny the essential doctrines that make historic, orthodox, biblical Christianity what it is—the Trinity, the deity of Christ, his substitutionary atonement for our sin—the kinds of things we confessed together in the Nicene Creed earlier. That's not to say our Unitarian neighbors aren't kind people doing many good things for the community. It is to say that they are outside of saving faith, which means that we need to guard against that deception, but also that we need to minister the gospel of Jesus and his saving grace to them.

Similarly, Mormonism, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, is a counterfeit Christianity. It uses all the language of Christianity, it claims to be Christianity, it's in the middle of a nationwide marketing campaign to convince you that they are part of Christianity. But again, it denies the essential doctrines of biblical Christianity—the Trinity, the eternity of Christ, substitutionary atonement. To be saved in that church is a matter of your effort; not the grace of God through the death of Jesus Christ. This probably isn't news to many of us. It's interesting to follow the dialogue sparked by Mitt Romney's presidential campaign—Romney, as many of you know, is a Mormon. Regardless of what you think about his politics, what's interesting to me is how puzzled or offended some people have been when several Christian leaders stated publically that Mormonism is a theological cult—a counterfeit Christianity.⁴ In fact, according to LifeWay Research, only three out of four Protestant pastors agree with that statement.⁵ Again, it's not to say that our Mormon friends and neighbors aren't kind, well-meaning people who do a lot of good. It is to say that because they deny the Christ revealed to us in Scripture and depend on themselves, they are outside of saving faith. And so we need to beware of the deception, and bring the gospel of Jesus into their lives.

We can add other counterfeits to the list—Christian Science, Jehovah's Witnesses, the health-and-wealth Prosperity Gospel you find on television, telling you that you can buy your salvation, your health, and your wealth by sending your tax-deductible gift to the studio because the preacher's Rolls Royce is in the shop. Any version of Christianity that depends on what we can do and takes away from the exclusivity of sufficiency of Jesus Christ in order to be in the right with God is a counterfeit Christianity. We need to beware.

But Paul's point here is that best way to be on guard against counterfeits is to rejoice in the genuine article, Jesus Christ. The point is not to avoid relationships with friends or family members that are part of these religious communities. They need the gospel of Christ just as much as us. Neither is it to pride ourselves that we're right and they're wrong. That would be to

⁴ Allison Summers, "Mormonism as a 'Theological Cult' is Not News, Says Baptist Minister," *The Christian Post*, Oct. 10, 2011, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/mormonism-as-a-theological-cult-is-not-news-says-baptist-minister-57733/>. Ibid, "Mars Hill's Mark Driscoll: Mormonism is a Cult and Mormons Worship a 'False God,'" *The Christian Post*, Oct. 19, 2011, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/mars-hills-mark-driscoll-mormonism-is-a-cult-and-mormons-worship-a-false-god-58574/>.

⁵ Ed Stezter, "Mormonism, Cults, and Christianity," Oct. 8, 2011, <http://www.edstetzer.com/2011/10/mormonism-cults-and-christiani.html>.

completely miss Paul's point—we don't glory in ourselves, our flesh—we glory in Christ and his Spirit—that's what's at stake. We find all our satisfaction and hope and significance in him. It's what he's done that makes the difference.

Apart from Jesus we have nothing. But in Jesus, and *only through faith in Jesus*, we have everything. We can rejoice and rest confidently that by his grace we are part of the God's covenant community, children of God who share in his eternal inheritance, members of God's Church, the one Body of Christ united across all nations, time, and places, who worship God by the Spirit, not the flesh, and who boast in Christ, not in family descent, or personal performance, or anything else.

May Christ be all our joy, and may we find safety in him. Amen.

Discussion Questions

1. As a group, make a list of all the reasons why falling prey to a counterfeit version of Christianity might be dangerous? Do you or does anyone you know have an experience with this?
2. Discuss again what it means to "rejoice in the Lord," according to Paul. Take a look at the different contexts in which Paul gives this command in Philippians (1:18; 2:18; 3:1; 4:4)—in what situations does he apply it, and what kind of fruit should we expect from rejoicing in Jesus?
3. What is it that made the Christianity of Paul's opponents "counterfeit" (i.e. what does Paul chastise them for)? How are we prone to make the same mistakes as the Judaizers today?
4. What do we learn in v. 3 about who we are as the people of God in Christ? How should these realities affect your daily walk with Jesus and fellowship with his people?
5. How should we interact with friends, family, or acquaintances who have been taken in by counterfeit Christianities? How does Paul's call for the church to live as a gospel-saturated community on mission help answer that question?