

Christ Our Confidence!

Philippians 3:1-21

We live in an age of declining confidence. Too many things that tend to shake our confidence have happened. On the human front, we have been rocked by government scandals, Enron, the indictment of Conrad Black, by sports icons found to be using steroids, and even by clergy, who have fallen because of various behaviors that we would never have expected. How the mighty are fallen!

There are aspiring students who are not confident that they will be able to afford to go to university. Many people are not confident that the health care system will be there for them when they need it. Others fear that the Canada Pension Plan may run out before they can draw on it. There are wealthy tycoons who are not confident that they will be able to afford to retire. This week I heard one tycoon, worth two billion dollars, say that he might not have enough money set aside for his golden years! He is worth \$2 billion and still not confident!

Many church-goers have lost confidence for a variety of reasons. They have watched the institutional church become increasingly marginalized in our culture to the point where it is often treated as being irrelevant. At the same time, they have witnessed a steady decline in church attendance, and have heard that 80% of churches in America are in decline. If we are focusing on all of these things, then it is no wonder that there is a crisis of confidence. Clearly, there needs to be a change of focus for many people.

Our friend, Paul the Apostle, speaks powerfully to us about this. He came to a personal crisis of confidence in which he had to sort out what would be the source of his confidence, what would be of value, in fact, what would have the place of primacy and supremacy in his life.

You see, the young Paul had been a supremely confident, perhaps even arrogant, man. He had been so confident in his own abilities and accomplishments, and in his self-righteousness. He says so himself! Just look at verses 4-6 of our text, where he states that he had reasons for such self-confidence. He reminds us that his credentials were impeccable. He was of the tribe of Benjamin. The tribes of Judah and Benjamin are both associated with the idea of victorious conquest of the enemy. You remember when Jacob was pronouncing his final blessing upon his sons (Gen. 49). He called Judah a lion. Out of him would come a royal scepter and a ruler's staff. Benjamin he called a wolf. The imagery is pregnant with the idea of a predator, a victorious conqueror. Paul was of that lineage.

Then, Paul was circumcised on the eighth day according to Hebrew law and custom; in fact, he was in his own words, a "Hebrew of Hebrews." Moreover, Paul was a Pharisee who had ascended to considerable heights in that sect. As for religious zeal and legalistic righteousness, Paul was in his own words "faultless" (Phil. 3:6), in a class by himself.

When we see Paul in action prior to his conversion to Christ, the imagery of the wolf, the predator, the victorious conqueror, and the religious zealot surely fits. In Acts 8, Paul rises up as a destroyer of the church (v. 3). In Acts 26, he reflects back on how he had been on a holy war to oppose this Jesus of Nazareth (vs. 9-11). Then, in Paul's first letter to young Timothy, he confesses that before coming to faith in Christ he had been a blasphemer, a persecutor and a violent man, and that he had been shown mercy because he had acted in ignorance and unbelief (1 Tim. 1:13). In fact, this very confession leads Paul to exclaim that, "*The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus*" (v. 14). Then he adds, "*Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst*" (v. 15). That is quite a confession!

It sounds very much to me like a man whose confidence in human religiosity, and whose confidence in one's professional credentials and in one's position and personal prestige has been thoroughly shaken. Such foolish, misplaced confidence is gone. No wonder he says:

“Whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ ... I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ, and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ” (Phil. 3:7-9).

Paul's focus has shifted from the things of self to the things of Christ. Consider the metamorphosis in his life:

- Paul the *destroyer* has now become Paul the *disciple*. The destroyer of the Church has become its greatest champion! He will do more than any other man - except Jesus Christ himself - to put Christianity on the map.
- Paul the *predator* has become Paul the *pastor*. No longer will he manhandle men and women of the Faith, he will mentor and nurture them in the cause of Christ.
- Paul the *proud* has become Paul the *penitent*. He has learned humility. The man who used to think of himself as a “Hebrew of Hebrews” (the ultimate Hebrew) now thinks of himself as the “worst of sinners” (the ultimate sinner). The one who used to be so impressed with his own righteousness is now enthralled with the righteousness of Christ. Here is a man whose focus has undergone an 180° turn. The man who was so full of himself is now full of Christ. The one who was so supremely self-confident is now supremely confident in Christ.

Paul does what we must all do. He carries nothing from the past except its lessons. He squarely faces the future as one in hot pursuit of Christ-likeness. Christ is now the goal of his life and the great prize of his life. Everything else fades in comparison with Jesus. Paul's direction has changed and his destiny has changed with it. Look at verses 20-21:

“But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.”

With this kind of confidence in Christ, is it any wonder that in the next chapter Paul encourages us to “*stand firm in the Lord?*” No wonder he goes on to say, “*Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*”

With this kind of confidence in our Lord, Paul concludes triumphantly, “*I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation ... I can do everything through him who gives me strength*” (Phil. 4:12-13).

These are imposing words. They are words that Paul would prove time and time again, through shipwrecks, beatings, trials, and imprisonments. He maintained his confidence in the Lord to the very end of his life when he would say, *“The time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day – and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing”* (2 Tim. 4:6-8). Let us be among that number. Let our confidence be in Christ.