
Justification in Philippians 3:9: By Faith in Christ or By Christ's Faithfulness?

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Abstract

This article investigates the meaning of the genitive phrase *pistis Christou* in Philippians 3:9, a phrase whose grammatical construction has long generated scholarly debate. Some interpreters argue for the subjective genitive ("faith of Christ"), while others argue for the objective genitive ("faith in Christ"), with a third view proposing that it refers to "the Christ-faith" as a system of belief. Building on the observation of Roy A. Harrisville that native Greek usage demonstrates flexibility between objective and subjective genitives, this study argues that the phrase does not possess a single fixed meaning in Pauline texts and must be determined contextually. An exegetical analysis of Philippians, considering its historical context, genre as a letter of friendship and moral exhortation, rhetorical strategies, and the structure of Philippians 3:1-11, demonstrates that in Philippians 3:9 Paul contrasts two human attitudes: one that relies on fleshly accomplishments or law-keeping for acquittal before God, and another that ultimately rests on faith in what God has accomplished through Christ. This analysis supports reading *pistis Christou* in Philippians 3:9 as an objective genitive.

Keywords: *pistis Christou*, objective genitive, subjective genitive, justification, righteousness

INTRODUCTION

When Paul wrote, “and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own, based on law, but that which is through faith in Christ [or of Christ], the righteousness from God that depends on faith” (Phil 3:9),¹ he used for the seventh time² in his corpus, a phrase (and similar) with an ambiguous genitive relationship; the phrase *pistis Christou*.³ Some have argued that in Philippians 3:9, Paul used the phrase in an objective sense to mean that justification is through faith in Christ.⁴ Others, arguing primarily from the Greek, and perhaps from a theological framework that humans do nothing to “procure” salvation,⁵ maintain that Paul used the phrase in a subjective genitive sense to mean that justification is through the faith(fulness) of Christ.⁶ These do not exhaust the options however, with a third view arguing that the phrase is best understood “as the ‘Christ-faith’...where ‘faith’ is taken to mean a system or set of beliefs, and ‘Christ’ qualifies what the system is about.”⁷

The orientation of this paper is exegetical for as Morna Hooker has noted, the debate “cannot be settled on the basis of appeals to grammatical construction alone... [but] can be settled only

¹ All Scripture references are from the Revised Standard Version unless otherwise specified.

² Rom 3:22, 26; Gal 2:16a, 16b, 20; 3:22; Phil 3:9.

³ In Phil 3:9, it is specifically *pisteōs Christou*

⁴ John Eadie and W. Young, *A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Epistle of Paul to the Colossians* (vol. 3, 5 vols.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1979), 183.

⁵ R Barry Matlock, “‘Even the Demons Believe’: Paul and Πίστις Χριστοῦ,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 64, no. 2 (2002): 310–311.

⁶ Peter Thomas O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (The New international Greek Testament commentary; Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1991), 398-400.

⁷ Kevin Grasso, “A Linguistic Analysis of Πίστις Χριστοῦ: The Case for the Third View,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 43, no. 1 (2020): 108–44.

by exegesis.”⁸ The question this paper seeks to answer is this: “is the faith that God has chosen as the means of setting things right that of Christ himself or that of human beings?”⁹ This paper argues that the meaning of *pistis Christou* in Philippians 3:9 is not necessarily determined by its usage in other Pauline texts. The phrase *pistis Christou* can function both as an objective genitive and a subjective genitive. It does not possess a single fixed sense or usage applicable in all contexts, particularly since in Paul’s time, native Greek speakers or users of the phrase did not insist on specificity in such constructions.¹⁰ Consequently, the meaning of the phrase must be determined by the context in which it is used. In Philippians 3:9 the phrase is best understood as an objective genitive, as Paul is contrasting two human attitudes: one that relies on fleshly accomplishments or law-keeping for acquittal before God, and another that ultimately rests on faith in what God has accomplished through Christ. The faith that justifies in Philippians 3:9 is, therefore, the faith of human beings, with Christ as its object.

To prove this thesis, I will first consider the use of *pistis* by some native Greek authors, after which I will examine the historical context and genre of the epistle. I will then conduct a literary and rhetorical analysis of the text to position it within the larger scriptural context and demonstrate how it fits into the broader discourse. I will also consider the structure and movement of Philippians 3:1-11. Finally, I will perform a detailed analysis of Philippians 3:9.

⁸ Morna D Hooker, “Pistis Christou,” *New Testament Studies* 35, no. 3 (1989): 321.

⁹ Matlock, “Even the Demons Believe,” 309.

¹⁰ So Matlock, “Even the Demons Believe,” 315-6: “With the question posed in this way, πίστις is best seen as a polysemous word from whose several senses particular linguistic contexts select the relevant sense. Thus, both πίστις itself and the genitive construction admit, at least theoretically, of two possible readings in the Pauline contexts at issue: ‘faith’ and ‘faithfulness,’ to use the familiar glosses, and the ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ genitive, to use familiar labels.”

The Use of *Pistis* by Native Greek Authors

Roy A. Harrisville has conducted an investigation into the linguistic usage of *pistis* in both pre-Christian Greek authors¹¹ and the ancient Greek church fathers.¹² In this investigation he found that in addition to its use with the subjective genitive, there is “ample evidence that πίστις plus the objective genitive is quite normal and indeed constitutes good Greek.”¹³ He then drew the following conclusion: “But such discovery only serves to emphasize the need to allow context to determine the reading of a phrase.”¹⁴ The following are some of the examples he proffered¹⁵:

Objective Genitive: Euripides

In Euripides’ tragedy *Medea*, πίστις appears in a lament by the Chorus: “...θεῶν δ’ οὐκέτι πίστις ἀραρεν...” which Harrisville translates as: “...their faith in the gods has no longer held.” This is evidently an instance of *pistis* used in an objective genitive sense.

Objective Genitive: Demosthenes

Another case of *pistis* plus the objective genitive appears in *Against Leptines* (20.17), a work of the Greek statesman and orator Demosthenes. In this work Demosthenes employed the

¹¹ R. A. Harrisville, “Before *pistis* Christou: The Objective Genitive as Good Greek,” *Novum Testamentum* 48, no. 4 (2006): 353–58.

¹² Roy A Harrisville, “*Pistis* Christou: Witness of the Fathers,” *Novum Testamentum* 36, no. 3 (1994): 240–41: “It would seem that when the Fathers talk unequivocally of a subjective faith, they do so in using the phrase πίστις αὐτοῦ. However, when employing the πίστις Χριστοῦ formulation, there is no clear and unambiguous indication of any subjective understanding. The contexts in which the phrase is found admit of no such interpretation. On the other hand, there is clear evidence in both Greek and Latin authors of an understanding of the phrase in an objective sense.”

¹³ Harrisville, “Before *pistis* Christou,” 353.

¹⁴ Harrisville, “Before *pistis* Christou,” 354.

¹⁵ In this section, I completely depend on Harrisville’s translation of the evidence he offers.

phrase “ὁ τοίνυν την πίστιν ἀφαιρῶν των δωρειων νόμο...” which Harrisville translates as, “The law, therefore, that removes faith in rewards...” After considering five other examples of *pistis* plus the objective genitive from Demosthenes, Harrisville comments: “To find that one of the most revered orators of all Greece and whose command of Greek was second to none should employ multiple objective genitival constructions with πίστις or πιστεύω is to uncover ample evidence in and of itself that such constructions were not only common, but excellent Greek.”¹⁶

Objective Genitive: Plato

Evidence of *pistis* plus the objective genitive is also found in Plato’s *Phaedrus* (275a). In Thamus’ opposition to writing, he uses the phrase: “...ατε δια πίστιν γραφή...”, translated as “faith in writing.” Clearly, this phrase is an example of the objective genitive.

Subjective Genitive: Herodotus

Pistis was also used by native Greek authors in a subjective genitive sense, as seen in Herodotus’ *Histories* (3.8.1): “σέβονται δε Ἀράβοι πίστις ανθρώπων δμοια τοίσι μάλιστα...” Harrisville, who insists that the subjective usage makes sense in the context, provides the following translation: “Arabs honor the oaths of men second to none.”

Both Objective Genitive and Subjective Genitive: Thucydides

There are instances where a single author employed both the objective and subjective genitive, as seen in Thucydides’ work *Histories*. In *Histories* (6.53.2) Thucydides writes: “...δια πονηρῶν ανθρώπων πίστιν...” which Harrisville translates as “through the testimony of wicked men.” This is clearly a subjective genitive phrase. “On the other hand, there exists an objective genitive in *Histories* 7.67.4 where there is reference to the trust of the Athenians not being in their preparations for

¹⁶ Harrisville, “Before *pistis* Christou,” 355.

war with the Syracusans (‘...καθεστήκασιν οὐ παρασκευῆς πίστει...’). Harrisville then writes: “It seems then that one and the same author is quite content to employ both the objective and subjective genitive with πίστις. The context determines the reading.”¹⁷

In view of the foregoing evidence, it becomes clear that native Greek speakers were comfortable using *pistis* in either an objective or subjective sense. “Therefore, those who wish to make St. Paul into a staunchly consistent employer of certain Greek phrases and constructions will be disappointed to hear that his predecessors in the language were themselves not so stiff in their use but rather allowed the context of the construction to determine its meaning.”¹⁸

Historical Context

Philippians was a single letter,¹⁹ written by Paul, the apostle, to a Christian community in the Roman colony of Philippi.²⁰ As Luke records in Acts 16:10-40, Paul and his entourage founded this church. Moises Silva aptly observes that “the life-setting of the document is just as important for proper interpretation” for the Epistle “did not appear out of a time-space vacuum; it was written by a historical person to a historical church in a particular historical period.”²¹ And since as Morna Hooker has

¹⁷ Harrisville, “Before *pistis* Christou,” 356.

¹⁸ Harrisville, “Before *pistis* Christou,” 356.

¹⁹ This essay recognizes the discussion over the letter’s integrity but takes the position that the book is a unity. For detailed discussion of the issues see D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (2nd ed.; AER ed.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2009), 509-510.; Andreas J. Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville, Tenn.: B & H Academic, 2009), 561-563.

²⁰ Gordon D. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians* (The new international commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995), 25-6.

²¹ Moisés Silva, *Philippians* (2nd ed.; Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament Ser; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), intro to Philippians.

observed this debate “can be settled only by exegesis,” we will therefore consider three historical factors that inform our exegesis: the church’s external struggles, its internal struggles, and its relationship with Paul.

External Struggles

At the time of writing, the church was “undergoing suffering as the result of opposition in Philippi.”²² The opposition was both pagan in origin and theological in scope. Nero, who was most likely emperor when Paul composed this epistle, was regarded by Romans as “lord and savior.”²³ Philippi, founded by Augustus Caesar owed its existence to his benevolence. Thus, Nero also commanded special devotion from the Philippians in a way that was almost God-like.²⁴ As Brown observes, “Although not an official (legal) requirement, there would have been some amount of social and political pressure to participate in the imperial cult, with this worship practice very likely considered normative.”²⁵ Christian rejection of this cult would therefore have incurred pagan hostility.

Three lines of evidence support this conclusion. First is Paul’s assertion that the church was “engaged in the same conflict which you saw and now hear to be mine” (Phil 1:30). In this regard, Gordon Fee observes that,

If we take this seriously – and literally – then the reason for the preceding ‘reflections on imprisonment’ (1:12-26) also takes shape. Paul’s suffering is both ‘for the defense of the gospel’ and at the hands of the Empire. The Philippian believers are opposed by a ‘crooked and depraved generation’

²² Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 29.

²³ Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 31-32.

²⁴ Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 31.

²⁵ Jeannine K. Brown, *Philippians: An Introduction and Commentary* (vol. II; Tyndale New Testament Commentaries; Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2022), intro.

(2:15), who are ‘destined for destruction’ (1:28). These passages can only refer to the pagan populace of Philippi, who happen also to be citizens of Rome. Thus they are the *source* of the suffering.²⁶

Second is Paul’s emphasis that these Christians with citizenship in the Roman colony of Philippi were at the same time citizens of heaven (Phil 1:28; 3:20). This is likely due to the insistence of the Christians that their allegiance was to Jesus Christ rather than to the Roman emperor who was honored by Romans not only as emperor but as “lord and savior” leading to them being considered by the fellow Philippians either as traitors or unfaithful Romans.²⁷ Fee notes that: “If this were not enough to make the citizens of Philippi begin a methodical persecution of these (now) expatriates living among them, the fact that the Christian’s ‘lord and savior’ had taken the form of a ‘slave’ in his becoming human, and in that humanity died on a cross (2:6-8), would have been the final straw.”²⁸

Third is Paul’s imperative for the church to “stand firm” and strive “for the faith of the gospel” (Phil 1:27). Moreover, the apostle mentioned that it was their lot to suffer “for the sake of Christ” (Phil 1:29). Says Fee: “While suffering is not the dominant motif in Philippians, it constitutes the church’s primary historical context in Philippi and thus underlies much of the letter.”²⁹

Internal Struggles

In addition to external opposition and suffering, the church faced internal discord. Although the precise nature of this conflict remains uncertain, the reality of the issue is explicitly mentioned in various places in the epistle and evidently lies

²⁶ Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 31.

²⁷ Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 31-32.

²⁸ Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 31-32.

²⁹ Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 30.

behind such “major moments in the letter” as “the Christ story in 2:6-11 and its application in 2:12-16... the description of Timothy in 2:2—22 and parts of Paul’s story in 3:4-14, as well as the concluding imperative in 4:2-3, where Euodia and Syntyche are singled out by means of the identical imperative as in 2:2.”³⁰ Paul feared that such internal problems would undermine the church’s witness in the city. This historical situation and Paul’s concern for the church’s witness may have shaped Paul’s argument in Philippians 3 for as Gordon Fee notes it is “Paul’s ultimate concern” in that section of the letter.³¹

Paul’s Relationship with the Church

Furthermore, Paul appeared to be on friendly terms with the church.³² Almost immediately after the establishment of the church, Paul and his group managed to build a very close friendship between themselves and the church as evidenced by one of their converts hosting them in her house (Acts 16:15) and in Paul’s assertion that the church entered into a giving and receiving relationship with him (Phil 4:15). That Paul had great affection towards this group of Christians is evident in his testimony about them in 2 Corinthians 8:1-5. As Gordon Fee has noted, this display of affection is “further evidence of friendship.”³³

Genre

In addition to the foregoing historical concerns, the book’s genre has potential ramifications for interpretation. Philippians is a classic first-century letter, demonstrating “a basic epistolary structure and elements: identification of writer(s) and recipient (1:1); greeting (1:2); prayer and/or thanksgiving (1:3-11); body

³⁰ Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 32.

³¹ Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 32.

³² Brown, *Philippians*, intro.

³³ Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 28.

(1:12 – 4:20); and personal news, greetings and well-wishes (4:21-23).³⁴ However, given Paul’s friendly relationship with this church, coupled with his concern for the church’s witness in the city of Philippi, Philippians is likely “a ‘letter of friendship,’ combined with those of a ‘letter of moral exhortation.’”³⁵

A Letter of Friendship

Stanley Stowers has affirmed that Philippians’ status as a letter of friendship has long been accepted by scholars of ancient letter writing.³⁶ Moreover, Loveday Alexander’s investigation into Hellenistic letter-forms, and their relationship to Philippians revealed that at a formal level, Philippians is “like the family letters... adapted and expanded by Paul and employed with the primary purpose of strengthening the ‘family’ links between the apostle and the Christian congregation in Philippi.”³⁷ Philippians is therefore a friendly letter of the “familial type.”³⁸

After analyzing Philippians in light of Apolinaris’ second letter to his mother, Alexander identified the following similarities:

- A: Address and greeting: Phil. 1.1-2
- B: Prayer for the recipients: Phil. 1.3-11
- C: Reassurance about the sender: Phil. 1.12-26
- D: Request for reassurance about the recipients:
Phil. 1.27-2.18

³⁴ Brown, *Philippians*, intro.

³⁵ Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 2-14.

³⁶ Stanley K. Stowers, “Friends and Enemies in the Politics of Heaven: Reading Theology in Philippians,” in *Pauline Theology* (vol. I; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 107.

³⁷ Loveday Alexander, “Hellenistic Letter-Forms and the Structure of Philippians,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 12, no. 37 (1989): 94-95.

³⁸ Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 4.

E: Information about the movements of intermediaries: Phil. 2.19-30

F: Exchange of greetings with third parties: Phil. 4.21-22

G: Closing wish for health: Phil. 4.23.³⁹

It is also worth noting that philosophical discussions of friendship in the Greco-Roman world dealt primarily with relationships based on loyalty, affection, and mutual benefit.⁴⁰ While this is difficult for moderns to fully grasp, true friendship in Greco-Roman society was virtually contractual. This kind of friendship also entailed vigilance against enemies. Thus, “it was often discussed in the context of ‘enemies.’”⁴¹ These foundations of true friendship are clearly present in Philippians, where Paul expresses his affection for the Philippians (1:7-8), emphasizes the mutual benefits of their relationship (1:5; 4:14-15) and calls attention to enemies that the church was to watch out for (3:2).

Moreover, in contrast to other letters in the Pauline corpus, Paul,

studiously avoids any indication of a ‘patron-client’ (or ‘patron-protégé’) relationship, which emerges so frequently in his other letters (either in the form of ‘apostleship’ or in the imagery of ‘father’ with children). Thus he begins by identifying himself and Timothy as ‘slaves’ of Christ (1:1), who himself had become slave for all by dying on a cross (2:7-8). And though the major parts of the letter are exhortative, there is no appeal to Paul’s authority as the basis of his exhortation; rather he appeals to their mutuality in Christ (2:1) and to his own

³⁹ Alexander, “Hellenistic Letter-Forms and the Structure of Philippians,” 94.

⁴⁰ Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 4-7.

⁴¹ Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 5.

example, as he himself follows Christ's example (3:4-14; so also 1:12-26 and 4:14).⁴²

A Letter of Moral Exhortation

Within the framework of a friendly letter, Philippians is also a letter of moral exhortation since in Greco-Roman society, "moral instruction often took place in the context of friendship."⁴³ Letters of moral exhortation were written by friends or moral superiors with the design of either persuading or dissuading the recipient toward or away from certain behaviors. To achieve this goal, "the author frequently appealed to examples, including sometimes his own."⁴⁴

This feature is easily identifiable in Philippians for "the larger part of the letter is taken up with two considerable hortatory sections (1:27-2:18 and 3:1-4:3), in which the appeal is made on the basis of mutuality and friendship (2:1; cf. the 'let us' in 3:15) and the aim is to 'persuade' toward one kind of behavior and to 'dissuade' from another."⁴⁵

In Philippians 3, the chapter in which Philippians 3:9 is set, Paul explicitly states that his purpose in using himself as an "exemplary paradigm" is so that the church would join in imitating him (3:17). Thus, this section pertains to human action since it is offered as an exemplar "for the Philippians' own 'way of thinking' and of behavior appropriate to such a 'mindset.'"⁴⁶

⁴² Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 6.

⁴³ Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 11.

⁴⁴ Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 11.

⁴⁵ Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 11.

⁴⁶ Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 11.

Literary and Rhetorical Context and Analysis

Philippians as a friendly letter and a letter of moral exhortation may have been occasioned by the return of Epaphroditus to Philippi (2:25). The Philippians had sent Epaphroditus to minister to Paul in prison most likely in a bid to renew their commitment to friendship. Upon finding Paul, Epaphroditus reported to him everything that was happening in and to the church. Paul, in response, wrote this friendly letter infused with moral exhortations.

It is also likely that the church wanted assurance that Paul's imprisonment would not hinder the advancement of the gospel, which they were so eager to support (1:12-14; 4:15-18). Thus, Philippians provided Paul the opportunity to acknowledge receipt of the Philippians' gift which would have served as his own reaffirmation of friendship with the church.⁴⁷ Additionally, it allowed him to allay their fears and to assure them that their investment was not in vain since the gospel continued to advance even while he was in prison (1:12-18).

As a letter of friendship and moral exhortation, Philippians "is structured around the typical language of friendship, 'my affairs' and 'your affairs,'"⁴⁸ exhortations, and then exemplars. Paul begins with a preface that anticipates the basic structure of the letter (language of friendship, exhortations and exemplars) (1:1-11).⁴⁹ Being absent from the church, he first shares his personal affairs, reflecting on his imprisonment (1:12-26). After addressing his own circumstances, he turns to their affairs and offers the first of two major moral exhortations. If what he has heard is indeed true, their witness in the city would be in jeopardy. They must live lives worthy of Christ followers (1:27-2:4).

⁴⁷ Brown, *Philippians*, intro.

⁴⁸ Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 19.

⁴⁹ Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 12-13.

After this first exhortation, he points the church to Jesus Christ, “the pinnacle of exemplars” (2:5-18)⁵⁰ and then to Timothy (2:19-24) and Epaphroditus (2:25-30) as sub-exemplars. Characteristic of the kind of letter he is writing, the apostle then calls attention to certain enemies (3:1-2, 18-19), and offers a second major exhortation, within which he presents himself as an exemplar (3:3-17, 20-21; 4:1-3).

It is important to note that these are not enemies in Philippi but in the vicinity of Paul’s imprisonment (cf. 1:15-18), whom he wants the Philippians to “look out for” (3:2). Moreover, the enemies of Philippians 3 differ from those in 1:28. As Brown has observed, “It is more likely, however, that Paul is describing outsiders (unbelievers) in 1:28 and a ‘Judaizing’ element or influence from within the early church at 3:2. Paul’s reproof describing the latter as ‘those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh’ (3:2) points in this direction.”⁵¹

Following this second major exhortation, Paul as was his manner, provides a final set of commands (4:4-9). However, before closing with final greetings, he acknowledges the Philippians’ gift and pronounces blessings upon them, thereby strengthening his commitment to the friendship (4:10-20). The letter concludes with final greetings (4:21-23).

Paul’s consistent pattern of alternating between exhortations and exemplars, while characteristic of friendly letters, was also a common rhetorical strategy in the Greco-Roman context, known in the Greek as *paradeigma*.⁵² In the context of a friendly letter, this rhetorical strategy served to persuade recipients toward or away from a particular course of action.

⁵⁰ Brown, *Philippians*, intro.

⁵¹ Brown, *Philippians*, intro.

⁵² Brown, *Philippians*, intro.

Another rhetorical strategy evident in Philippians is Paul's use of reiteration and amplification.⁵³ As Matlock has observed, "Repetition is, on the very surface, a formal feature of this [3:9] (and the surrounding) text."⁵⁴ A clear example is found in 3:7-8 in which Paul "renounces his former advantages"⁵⁵ due to what he had gained in Christ in 3:7, and then in 3:8, reiterates 3:7 and gives the "how" of 3:7, all "in grand and expansive language."⁵⁶ While in Philippians 3:7 he merely states that the gains he had made in 3:4-6 were loss, in Philippians 3:8, he reiterates this idea but expands it to include not just his fleshly attainments in Judaism but "everything."⁵⁷

Moreover, while in 3:7 he considered his fleshly attainments loss "for the sake of Christ," in 3:8, he reiterates this idea in a more amplified form by saying he considers everything loss "because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (RSV). This rhetorical feature, as some have noted, is not about being "boringly *redundant*"⁵⁸ but rather about being "carefully *emphatic*."⁵⁹ In the context of a friendly letter, Paul likely employed this rhetorical strategy to solidify the community's commitment to his teaching (cf. 3:1). This rhetorical feature becomes especially important in light of Paul's further reference to faith after already noting that

⁵³ Morna D. Hooker, "The Letter to the Philippians," in *The New Interpreter's Bible. 11: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes* (vol. 11, 12 vols.; The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 527.

⁵⁴ R. Barry Matlock, "The Rhetoric of ΠΙΣΤΙΣ in Paul: Galatians 2.16, 3.22, Romans 3.22, and Philippians 3.9*," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 30, no. 2 (2007): 178.

⁵⁵ Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 315.

⁵⁶ Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 317.

⁵⁷ Frank Thielman, *Philippians: The Niv Application Commentary* (The NIV application commentary series; Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 1995), 170.

⁵⁸ Duane Frederick Watson, "Amplification Techniques in 1 John: The Interaction of Rhetorical Style and Invention," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 16, no. 51 (1993): 123.

⁵⁹ Watson, "Amplification Techniques in 1 John," 123

righteousness comes from God to humans through *pisteōs Christou* in Philippians 3:9.

Structure and Movement of Philippians 3:1-11

As already noted in the discussion on genre, Philippians is a letter of friendship and moral exhortation. As a letter of friendship, it deals with loyalty, affection and mutual benefit and draws attention to certain enemies that the recipients were to look out for. As a letter of moral exhortation, it draws on exemplars designed either to persuade or dissuade the recipients regarding particular types of behavior.

Having issued an initial exhortation and drawn on the exemplars of Jesus, Timothy and Epaphroditus to reinforce that exhortation (1:27-2:30), Paul transitions to another key exhortation, namely, to place no confidence in fleshly attainments unlike the enemies of the cross whom he wants the community to look out for (3:2, 18-19). He then uses himself as an example for the Philippians to imitate (3:17). Despite scholarly concerns over the seemingly abrupt transition in this section,⁶⁰ “all of the material in this section fits the genre of a hortatory letter of friendship.”⁶¹ Philippians should therefore be viewed as a unified composition.

In Philippians 3:1-11 Paul calls attention to Judaizing apostles⁶² and their version of the gospel, which demanded that gentiles become Jews or perform certain acts, specifically, circumcision or what Paul refers to as “mutilating the flesh” in order to be truly saved (3:2; cf. Acts 15:1). By exhorting the church to look out for these enemies, Paul was offering “a safe

⁶⁰ Carson and Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 509-10.; Köstenberger, Kellum, and Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown*, 561-3.

⁶¹ Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 286.

⁶² Stephen E. Fowl, *Philippians* (The two horizons New Testament commentary; Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2005), 145-6 has shown that the language Paul uses in Philippians 3:2 “was used to derogate particularly unsavory Israelites.”

precaution” (3:1 WNT). “His purpose, then, is to keep the foundation of their faith free from the cracks and weaknesses he has seen develop in the commitment of other churches to the gospel.”⁶³

To counter the view of justification that the enemies held, which Paul clearly considered a theological danger, he presents himself as an exemplar. In Paul’s view, the truly circumcised person or the true Jew is one who glories in Christ Jesus and places no confidence in fleshly attainments (3:3). His was a strongly Christocentric view of salvation. Despite his impressive fleshly attainments (3:4-6), his Christocentric perspective led him to regard those attainments as excrement, in comparison to the surpassing worth of his intimate knowledge of Jesus Christ whom he called “my Lord” (3:8).

Thus, Paul’s eschatological hope was not grounded in his fleshly attainments but in being found in Christ, patterning his life after him and identifying with him in everything including in suffering and death (3:9-11). By presenting himself as an exemplar, Paul wants the Philippian community to adopt this same mindset and order their lives accordingly (cf. 3:15, 17).

Philippians 3:1-11 can therefore be outlined as follows:

- I. Paul’s call to look out for enemies (3:1-2)
- II. Paul’s view on what constitutes a true Jew (3:3)
- III. Paul’s fleshly credentials prior to his encounter with Christ (3:4-6)
- IV. Paul’s reorientation due to his encounter with Christ (3:7-11)
 - a. The worthlessness of the assets of his former life (vv. 7-8)

⁶³ Thielman, *Philippians*, 167.

- b. Being found in Christ and knowing him, the greater investments (vv. 9-11)

Detailed Analysis of Philippians 3:9

In view of the foregoing structure of Philippians 3:1-11, 3:9 falls within Paul's discussion of his change in orientation. In this section, Paul reflects on the fact that he now rejects his former achievements as worthless investments having come to realize that being found in Christ and having an intimate relationship with Christ are the much better investments. Prior to his encounter with Christ, Paul believed that his achievements would one day "help him to stand acquitted before God."⁶⁴ However, his experience with the risen Christ radically changed his outlook and made him see

that his attitude toward his privileges and attainments was wrong. They had formed the basis of his confidence that on the final day he would be acquitted, "gains" that God would honor and in light of which he would proclaim Paul righteous. But when God apprehended him, Paul saw them for what they were—fleshly and therefore fallible human efforts, tainted with sin and therefore unable to receive God's approval. They could now only be considered "loss for the sake of Christ" (v. 7).⁶⁵

Considering his fleshly attainments loss was not an indication that being a Jew and obeying the Law were inherently evil, "but that his attitude toward them was evil."⁶⁶ One outcome of this change of orientation was so that he might "gain Christ, being found in him" (3:8-9).⁶⁷ Thus, Paul could not "gain Christ, being

⁶⁴ Thielman, *Philippians*, 170.

⁶⁵ Thielman, *Philippians*, 170.

⁶⁶ Thielman, *Philippians*, 170.

⁶⁷ I translate it this way due to Moises Silva's suggestion that, "It is perhaps not too far-fetched to view the initial [kai – Gk] (kai, and) of verse 9 as

found in him” while maintaining his former attitude towards his fleshly attainments. Paul’s purpose clause here had both a present and future orientation.⁶⁸ Both in the present life and in the new creation, Paul wanted to “gain Christ, being found in him.” However, he wanted to do that “not having a righteousness of my own, based on law, but that which is through faith in [or faith of] Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.” This brings us to the central question raised at the outset: is Paul saying that he wanted to be right with God with a faith that belongs to Christ or to Paul himself?

Three observations are important here. First, Philippians is a letter of friendship and moral exhortation, which means, it is not inconsistent with human action. As already noted, letters of moral exhortation were designed to elicit certain behaviors from their recipients. Second, as Roy Harrisville has demonstrated, the objective genitive is good Greek. Third, the context suggests the issue in Paul’s thinking (in using himself as an exemplar) is his former attitude towards his fleshly attainments and how this attitude (like the Judaizing apostles which he wanted the church to look out for) prevented him from gaining Christ and be found in him, something his change in orientation had helped him attain, albeit imperfectly (3:12).

The thrust of Philippians 3:9, therefore, lies in the contrast between two human attitudes: one that places confidence in the belief that fleshly attainments and the ability to keep the law can secure acquittal before God, and another that rests entirely on faith in what God has accomplished through Christ. The first attitude assumes that God would in light of fleshly attainments or ability to keep the law proclaim a person righteous. Paul didn’t want to stand before God having that kind of righteousness, which he called, “my own righteousness through

epexegetic of the last clause in verse 8: Paul is about to explain what it means to gain Christ (Silva, *Philippians*, iv).

⁶⁸ Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians* (1. pr.; Black’s New Testament commentary 11; Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1998), 208.

obeying the law” (Phil 3:9 NLT). The second attitude, in contrast, recognizes that right standing with God ultimately rests on a kind of righteousness that comes from God “through faith in Christ,” a phrase which Gordon Fee asserts is shorthand for “‘by grace through faith,’ where Christ’s death is the way God has graciously expressed his love in our behalf, which is realized by those who fully trust him to have so loved and accepted them – warts and all.”⁶⁹

This interpretation of the genitive is reinforced by Paul’s repetition of the word “faith” in the passage. When Paul says, “the righteousness from God that depends on faith,” he is repeating and amplifying the first clause “through faith in Christ.” As noted in the discussion on Paul’s rhetoric, this is Paul’s way of being carefully emphatic. It is not a redundancy. Paul wanted to reinforce the point of the first clause. Furthermore, as scholars note, “there is simply no analogy for ‘based on faith’ to refer to Christ’s activity, rather than ours.”⁷⁰ As such “our righteousness does not come about automatically through the obedience of Christ.”⁷¹ Human beings must appropriate what Christ has done through faith in Christ (cf. Rom 10:9-10). Hawthorne explains:

God, then, has provided for all people the required righteousness, which is his righteousness. And he has done this through Christ alone. But his wish is not that people have this righteousness thrust upon them, but that they choose to accept his gift with gladness and gratitude. This act of acceptance of God’s offer Paul calls faith... Paul saw faith (*pistis*) not as an alternative way for human beings to achieve God’s favor by their own efforts, a new kind of deserving work, but as quite the opposite of this.

⁶⁹ Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 324.

⁷⁰ Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 326.

⁷¹ Veronica Koperski, “The Meaning of *Pistis Christou* in Philippians 3:9,” *Louvain Studies* 18, no. 3 (1993): 215.

Faith is, in effect, an admission that one cannot earn God's approval by what he does, but can only take God's free offer of forgiveness and grace and love. And since God's offer is made by virtue of the life and above all by virtue of the death and resurrection of Christ, the righteousness, the condition of being truly right with God, must come *through* faith in Christ.⁷²

Moreover, since Philippians 3:8-11 is a single sentence in the Greek text, the faith that justifies in 3:9 is integrally connected with the willingness to suffer and become like Christ in his death in 3:10-11. It is altogether unlikely that Paul intended the phrase, *pisteōs Christou* in Philippians 3:9 to mean "faith of Christ," thus referring to Christ's own faithfulness in obedience to God. Thielman affirms: "For Paul to gain Christ means that he will be 'found in him' on the final day when he stands before God to give an account of himself... On that day, Paul explains, he does not want to be found clinging to the righteousness that is available through the law but to the righteousness that comes from God himself and is appropriated by faith in Christ."⁷³

Synthesis

As the preceding analyses have demonstrated, the phrase *pistis Christou* in Philippians 3:9 should be understood as an objective genitive. In this verse, Paul contrasts two human attitudes: one based on the belief that his fleshly attainments or ability to keep the law would acquit him before God, and the other grounded in faith in what God has accomplished through Christ. The faith that justifies in Philippians 3:9 is therefore the faith of human beings, with Christ as the object of that faith.

⁷² Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians* (Word Biblical Themes; Waco, Tex: Word Books, 1987), 84.

⁷³ Thielman, *Philippians*, 171.

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