

THEOLOGICAL MEANING OF PAUL'S STATEMENT "FOLLOW MY EXAMPLE" IN PHILIPPIANS 3:17

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Abstract

In Philippians 3:17 the Apostle Paul declares, "Join in imitating me," a statement that could be perceived as arrogance if detached from its theological context. This study analyzes the theological meaning of this statement and finds that Paul's example is both derivative and reflective. First, the example is derivative because it is entirely rooted in the example of Christ. Paul's exhortation cannot be separated from the call to become "fellow imitators" who ultimately imitate Christ. He presents himself as a living example of a life transformed by the truth in Christ, in contrast to false teachers who rely on personal religious superiority (Philippians 3:2, 18–19). Second, this example is reflective because it reflects a pattern of life centered on the cross, the resurrection, and the hope of Christ's return. Consequently, Paul's example includes: (1) humility and spiritual striving (Philippians 3:12–14); (2) the supremacy of Christ, which regards all worldly gain as loss (Philippians 3:7–8); and (3) an eschatological outlook oriented toward the heavenly calling (Philippians 3:20–21). Therefore, the theological meaning of "imitate me" is an invitation to live in koinōnia, a shared participation in imitating Christ, with Paul's life serving as a practical illustration. This statement affirms that true theology must be manifested in a life that can be imitated. In conclusion, Paul's example functions as a bridge that connects the truth about Christ with its practical application in the life of the church.

Keywords: *Imitation, Paul, Philippians 3:17.*

INTRODUCTION

Christ is the supreme model for the life of believers. The call to follow Christ forms the foundation for the development of faith and the communal life of the church in the New Testament. Nevertheless, in Philippians 3:17 the Apostle Paul delivers an intriguing exhortation: "Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us." This statement raises a theological question, since Paul does not directly instruct the believers to imitate Christ but instead invites them to imitate himself.

Such an exhortation may lead to misunderstanding if it is not interpreted within its proper context. Why does Paul ask the church to imitate him? Is he placing himself at the center of attention? Which aspects of his life are intended to be imitated? Does he refer to his entire life journey, including the period before his conversion as Saul, or only to his life after experiencing transformation in Christ? This statement could potentially be misinterpreted as an elevation of a spiritual leader (Pattinaja et al., 2024).

Philippians 3:17 does not stand in isolation but forms part of the broader argument of Philippians 3:1–4:1. In this section Paul warns the church against false teachings, reflects on the transformation of his own life, and emphasizes that all the religious advantages he once valued are now regarded as loss for the sake of knowing Christ (Baene & Lawalata, 2023). He also contrasts those who live as enemies of the cross of Christ with those who live as citizens of heaven. Thus, the exhortation “imitate me” appears within a framework of life centered on Christ, a life that abandons self-glory and is directed toward the hope of Christ’s second coming and eternal life in heaven (Panjaitan, 2022).

From a linguistic perspective, Paul employs terminology that conveys communal and concrete imitation, referring to a life that can be observed and collectively followed. This indicates that Paul’s intent is not the glorification of his own person but the presentation of a pattern of life shaped by his relationship with Christ. Therefore, Paul’s example cannot be separated from the transforming work of Christ in his life (Cable, 2016).

The concept of imitation in Paul’s letters has been widely discussed in New Testament scholarship. However, relatively few studies have specifically examined the theological meaning of the phrase “imitate me” in Philippians 3:17 and the limits of Paul’s example, particularly in distinguishing between his life before and after conversion. Therefore, this research focuses on an exegetical analysis of Philippians 3:17 in order to formulate its theological meaning and explore its implications for the life of the church.

This study addresses several primary questions: Why does Paul use the expression “imitate me”? What is the theological meaning of this statement within the context of the Epistle to the Philippians? How should Paul’s example be understood in order to avoid misinterpretation, especially regarding the distinction between his life before and after conversion? And what are its implications for the contemporary church?

The purpose of this study is to explain the theological rationale behind Paul’s exhortation through exegetical analysis, to demonstrate the relationship between Paul’s example and Christ, and to formulate its implications for the life of the church. In doing so, this research aims to contribute to Pauline theological studies and to the church’s understanding of exemplary living in the life of faith.

Method

Research methodology provides the procedural framework through which a researcher systematically addresses the research problem. This study employs an exegetical approach using the historical-grammatical method, which seeks to understand the meaning of a text based on its

historical context, grammatical structure, and the intention of the original author (Fee & Stuart, 2014). This approach is grounded in the principle of *Sola Scriptura*, emphasizing interpretation rooted in the authority of Scripture as the primary source of theological reflection (Virkler & Ayers, 2007).

This research also utilizes the discipline of exegesis as its primary analytical instrument for interpreting the text within its literary, historical, and theological contexts. The analysis focuses on Philippians 3:17 within the argumentative unity of Philippians 3:1–4:1 so that the theological meaning of the phrase “imitate me” can be understood integrally within Paul’s line of thought.

To address the research questions, the analytical process proceeds through the following systematic stages:

First, historical and literary contextual analysis.

This stage examines the historical background of the Philippian congregation, the socio-cultural circumstances surrounding the writing of the letter, and the position of the pericope within the broader argumentative structure. The analysis considers both the immediate context and the larger literary context in order to understand the rhetorical function of Paul’s exhortation within the discourse unit.

Second, textual and grammatical analysis.

This stage involves examining sentence structure, morphological forms, syntactic relationships, and the lexical meanings of key terms in the text. Comparison of translations and analysis of the Greek terminology are conducted to identify the semantic nuances shaping the concept of imitation in Paul’s statement.

Third, rhetorical and theological analysis.

This stage explores the function of Paul’s exhortation within the argumentative strategy of the letter and its relationship to broader theological themes, such as participation in Christ, the pattern of the cross, and the eschatological orientation of the faith community.

Fourth, theological synthesis.

Textual observations are integrated in order to formulate the theological meaning of Paul’s statement about imitation, including its theological character and limits within Pauline thought.

Fifth, theological implications for the life of the church.

This stage evaluates the theological relevance of the findings for understanding the formation of faith communities, spiritual leadership, and Christian spirituality. Through these methodological stages, this research seeks to interpret the text comprehensively and to formulate its theological meaning in a systematic and academically responsible manner.

Results and Discussion

To address the research questions that have been proposed, the following analysis is conducted in stages according to the historical-grammatical exegetical approach, beginning with

the historical and literary context of the text, followed by grammatical and rhetorical analysis, and concluding with theological synthesis and its implications.

ANALYSIS OF THE HISTORICAL AND LITERARY CONTEXT

Understanding the historical context of the Philippian congregation helps clarify the theological meaning of Paul's exhortation. As a Roman colony, Philippi possessed a culture that emphasized honor, social status, and public identity (Harrison, 2018). A person's worth was often measured by achievements and social standing, and this value system shaped how society perceived success and the meaning of life (Hellerman, 2009).

Within such a context, Paul introduced a pattern of life that differed significantly from the prevailing value system. He emphasized humility, willingness to suffer, and a life orientation centered on Christ. The example he presented was not a model of social success but a model of spiritual faithfulness. Therefore, Paul's call to imitate him simultaneously functioned as a critique of the Roman world's value system, which measured life according to honor and achievement (Harrison, 2018).

Furthermore, the Epistle to the Philippians was written in the context of Paul's own suffering (Fee & Stuart, 2014). The example he presented was not merely a theoretical concept but a life that had been tested through real hardship. The congregation was called to understand faith as a way of life that remains faithful even amid pressure. Thus, Paul's example possesses a dimension of testimony arising from concrete life experience.

Analysis of the Literary Context and Argumentative Structure

After understanding the historical and social background, the next step is to examine the literary context of the pericope in order to determine the position and function of the statement within the overall argumentative flow of the letter. Philippians 3:17 cannot be understood as an isolated statement but must be interpreted as part of the broader argumentative unit of Philippians 3:1–4:1 (Silva, 2005). In this section, Paul develops a theological reflection on the orientation of the believer's life centered on Christ in contrast to a pattern of life that rejects the cross.

The exhortation to imitate him appears after Paul describes the transformation of his own life and before he warns against those who live as enemies of the cross of Christ. This literary position indicates that imitation functions as a bridge between theological reflection and pastoral warning.

Paul's line of argument progresses from a rejection of religious self-confidence to an affirmation of a new identity in Christ. Paul first exposes the inadequacy of the status, achievements, and former identity that he once valued, and then portrays the Christian life as a dynamic process moving toward a deeper knowledge of Christ. Within this framework, the call to imitate him serves as an existential concretization of the theology he has presented.

Thus, imitation does not emerge as a claim to personal authority but rather as a logical consequence of the theology previously developed. Paul not only teaches the doctrine of life in Christ but also presents a pattern of life that reflects that doctrine. This literary structure emphasizes that a life worthy of imitation is a tangible expression of faith centered on Christ.

Within the flow of thought in Philippians 3, Paul communicates his teaching in a very practical manner. He not only explains the principles of faith theoretically but also presents his own life as a concrete example of the transformation brought about by Christ. In this way, theological teaching is not merely understood as a concept but is visibly demonstrated in lived experience.

This demonstrates that, for Paul, the teachings of faith must be manifested in daily actions. A life that can be imitated becomes an effective means of expressing the truth of the gospel within the communal life of believers. Therefore, Paul's exhortation to imitate him does not stand independently but forms an important part of the overall message of the letter, which seeks to demonstrate how a Christ-centered life should be lived in a concrete manner (Panjaitan, 2022).

GRAMMATICAL, SYNTACTICAL, AND LEXICAL ANALYSIS OF PHILIPPIANS 3:17

A proper understanding of the meaning of Paul's example requires particular attention to the Greek terminology used in the text. In Philippians 3:17 Paul employs the term *συνμιμηταί* (*summimētai*), which literally means "co-imitators" or "those who imitate together." The term combines the prefix *συν* (together) with *μιμητής* (imitator), indicating that imitation occurs within a shared communal context. Paul does not command individuals to imitate in isolation but invites the congregation to collectively follow the same pattern of life (Arndt et al., 2000).

In addition, Paul uses the term *τύπος* (*typos*) to refer to an "example" or "pattern of life." In Koine Greek usage, this word refers to a concrete example that can be observed and followed (Wallace, 1996). This indicates that imitation is not merely an abstract moral concept but something visibly manifested in everyday life. Paul's life is presented as a pattern that the congregation can observe and follow.

The analysis of these terms indicates that imitation in Philippians 3:17 is both communal and concrete in daily life. The imitation of faith occurs within communal life and begins with observing a pattern of life that is actually lived (Silva, 2005). The language used by Paul emphasizes that Christian faith is not merely something believed in the mind but something lived out in a way that can be seen, learned, and followed.

Grammatically, Paul's statement in Philippians 3:17 appears in the form of an imperative, indicating that his exhortation is binding rather than merely advisory. The verb form suggests a command that is both direct and continuous rather than a one-time action. The use of the present tense signifies ongoing action, so that imitation is understood as a continuous life process (Wallace, 1996). From the structure of the sentence it is evident that Paul's exhortation demands an active and concrete response from the entire congregation.

Furthermore, the plural form within the sentence indicates that the command is directed toward the whole congregation rather than toward a specific individual. The sentence structure also links the act of imitation with the act of observing a tangible pattern of life. In other words, imitation is not carried out independently but is connected with seeing and observing the examples that exist.

Thus, the linguistic structure of the text emphasizes that imitation is practiced collectively, consciously, actively, and continuously.

Overall, the analysis of the sentence structure demonstrates that Paul's command is not optional but something that the congregation is called to practice. This imperative connects theological teaching with everyday lived experience. The linguistic structure of the text therefore emphasizes that imitation is an essential component of the Christian life—namely, imitating Paul's life insofar as it is centered on Christ. Through this language, the demands of faith are expressed concretely within the life of the congregation.

Rhetorical Analysis of the Text

Grammatical analysis reveals the form and function of language within the text. However, the meaning of a text is not determined solely by linguistic structure but also by the way in which statements are used to communicate a message to readers. Therefore, the following analysis examines the rhetorical dimension of the text, particularly how the exhortation functions within the author's communicative strategy.

From the perspective of ancient rhetoric, Paul's exhortation can be understood as a form of moral instruction intended to shape the lifestyle of the congregation. This instruction is not delivered merely as theoretical teaching but through a concrete example—namely, Paul's own life. By presenting himself as an example, theological teaching becomes something that can be observed and practiced, rather than merely understood conceptually (Bible Hub, n.d.). In this way, imitation becomes a practical means of learning for the congregation. Such imitation is not merely individual in nature but contributes to the formation of a shared pattern of life within the community of faith.

The text also demonstrates a clear contrast between two ways of life: a life centered on Jesus Christ and a life that rejects the cross of Christ. This comparison helps the congregation understand their identity and determine the path of life they must choose. Paul not only presents an example to be followed but also warns against patterns of life that must be avoided. This strengthens the persuasive force of his exhortation. Paul's example is not the ultimate goal but rather the concrete expression of a Christ-centered life. Thus, the congregation imitates Paul insofar as he himself imitates Christ, so that Christ remains the normative model of the life of faith.

Rhetorically, the exhortation also possesses the character of deliberative persuasion, that is, an effort to influence the future choices of the congregation (Subedi, 2020). Paul directs the believers to adopt a particular pattern of life based on its theological consequences. Consequently, his teaching not only provides information but also encourages a transformation

of attitudes and actions. This rhetorical function demonstrates that Paul does not separate doctrinal teaching from practical life. A life that can be imitated becomes an effective means of expressing the truth of the gospel within the communal life of believers. Imitation thus serves as the medium through which faith is expressed, observed, and recognized within the life of the church.

Dialogue with Academic Interpretation

In order to situate these findings within the broader academic discussion, this analysis engages in dialogue with several New Testament scholars. A number of scholars emphasize that the concept of imitation in Paul's theology is always centered on participation in the life of Christ.

Gordon D. Fee emphasizes that the concept of imitation in Pauline theology is consistently oriented toward participation in the life of Christ. According to Fee, Paul's call to imitate him is never intended to replace Christ as the center of faith (Fee & Stuart, 2014). Rather, Paul presents himself as an example of a life that has already been shaped by Christ. Therefore, imitating Paul means participating in a pattern of life consistent with the gospel, not following Paul's personal authority.

Meanwhile, Moisés Silva highlights that the act of imitation in the Philippian congregation possesses a communal dimension (Silva, 2005). According to Silva, the language used by Paul indicates that spiritual growth occurs within shared communal life. Imitation is not a private act detached from the community but a process that takes place within the fellowship of the church. This perspective underscores the role of Paul's example in building and shaping the community of believers.

On the other hand, Paul S. Cable emphasizes the function of the believer's example in Philippians (Cable, 2016). Cable argues that Paul's pattern of life demonstrates his participation in the work of Christ. Consequently, imitating Paul is not merely related to moral behavior but is connected to a life that has been renewed through the redemptive work of Christ.

This study is consistent with these three perspectives. However, it particularly emphasizes that Paul's example possesses two complementary dimensions: first, it is rooted in Christ; and second, it reflects a pattern of life shaped by Christ's redemptive work. Through this approach, the aspects of Christ as the center, communal life within the church, and hope for the final eschatological fulfillment are understood as a unified framework for interpreting the text.

THEOLOGICAL SYNTHESIS OF EXEMPLARY CONDUCT IN PHILIPPIANS

The dialogue with scholarly interpretations reveals various emphases in understanding the concept of exemplary within the text. Based on the integration of historical, literary, grammatical, and rhetorical analyses, as well as the evaluation of academic interpretations, the following section formulates the primary theological synthesis derived from the pericope.

Derivative Exemplarity (Rooted in Christ)

The analysis indicates that Paul's example is entirely rooted in the example of Christ. Paul does not position himself as an independent source of authority or as a self-sufficient model but as one whose life has been shaped by the work of Christ (Mbevi, 2010). The call to imitate him can only be properly understood in relation to Christ as the ultimate model.

Paul's life transformation demonstrates that a new identity in Christ redirects the entire orientation of a person's life. What is to be imitated is not Paul's personal greatness but the work of Christ that has transformed him. Paul becomes a tangible example of how the gospel operates within human life. This understanding prevents readers from misunderstanding Paul's exhortation as an act of self-exaltation. Instead, Paul presents himself as an example of a person who is entirely dependent on Christ (Cable, 2016). Thus, the Christian life always derives from the work of Christ rather than from human capability.

Reflective Exemplarity (The Pattern of the Cross and Eschatology)

In addition to being derivative, Paul's example is also reflective because it mirrors a pattern of life shaped by the cross, the resurrection, and eschatological hope. It reflects a pattern of life shaped by the cross—seen in humility (Philippians 3:7–8, 12–14)—as well as by the resurrection and the hope of a future life with Christ (eschatological hope) (Panjaitan, 2022). Paul's life demonstrates a continuous process of movement toward spiritual maturity. He does not regard himself as having already attained perfection but continually strives toward the heavenly calling.

This pattern of life is manifested in humility, the struggle of faith, and a life direction oriented toward the future promised by God. Paul regards all worldly gains as insignificant in comparison with Christ. He lives with the hope of complete transformation when Christ returns. This perspective demonstrates that the Christian life possesses a clear ultimate goal: life with Christ. To imitate Paul therefore means to follow the same life orientation.

Consequently, Paul's example possesses clear theological limits. His example does not function as an independent rule but remains valid only insofar as it reflects a Christ-centered life. The purpose of imitating Paul is not to replicate his personality exactly but to participate in a life directed and shaped by Christ himself.

Implications for the Life of the Church

The theological meaning of Paul's example has direct implications for the understanding of the church. The church may be understood as a learning community, in which faith is shaped through relationships and the example of lived life (Silva, 2005). Spiritual growth does not occur solely through the teaching of doctrinal truths but also through communal life that visibly embodies the values of the gospel.

This implication is also closely related to spiritual leadership. Authority within the church does not arise merely from office or teaching ability but from a life that reflects the teachings of

Christ. Leadership consistent with the biblical model is leadership that provides an example, because the life of the leader contributes to shaping the faith of the congregation (Pattinaja et al., 2024).

Furthermore, the formation of faith cannot be limited to the transmission of theological knowledge alone. Spiritual growth requires authentic relationships in which faith can be observed, learned, and imitated. The church is therefore called to manifest the gospel not only through words but through communal life that demonstrates the work of Christ.

Methodological Reflection on Exegesis

The analysis of Philippians 3:17 demonstrates that the theological meaning of the text emerges through several interconnected stages of interpretation. The analysis of the literary context reveals that the exhortation to imitate Paul functions as a bridge between theological explanation and practical exhortation for the congregation. The lexical analysis of the text emphasizes that the act of imitation is communal and concrete in everyday life. Grammatical analysis shows that the command is binding and continuously applicable.

Furthermore, historical analysis demonstrates that Paul's example stood in contrast to the social values of the Roman world at that time. Rhetorical analysis reveals that the exhortation was intentionally designed to persuade and motivate the congregation. The theological synthesis then formulates that imitation possesses both derivative and reflective characteristics. From the overall analysis it may be concluded that Paul's example is rooted in Christ and reflects a pattern of life shaped by the work of Christ. The theological meaning of the text does not arise suddenly but emerges from the integration of multiple stages of analysis.

This step-by-step approach demonstrates that Paul's example is rooted in Christ and reflects a pattern of life shaped by Christ's work (Fee & Stuart, 2014). The method of exegesis operates by moving from observation of the text toward the formulation of theological meaning. This process ensures that the conclusions drawn are genuinely grounded in accountable analysis. Consequently, the reading of the text is conducted systematically, with careful attention to its historical context and with critical evaluation.

CONCLUSION

This study has interpreted the theological meaning of Paul of Tarsus's exhortation to imitate him in the Epistle to the Philippians (Philippians 3:17) through a historical-grammatical exegetical approach conducted in a gradual and integrated manner. The analysis of the historical context demonstrates that the exhortation emerged within a social environment that evaluated life according to honor and status. In such a context, Paul's example appears as an alternative pattern of life centered on Jesus Christ.

Within the literary context, the exhortation functions as a bridge between theological reflection on the transformation of life in Christ and an ethical warning against patterns of life that reject the cross. Grammatical and rhetorical analysis confirms that imitation is communal,

binding, and continuous, while simultaneously functioning as a pedagogical means that translates theological truth into concrete practice.

Based on the integration of all stages of analysis, this study concludes that Paul's example possesses two interrelated theological dimensions. First, imitation is derivative, because it is entirely rooted in the work of Christ as the source of Paul's transformed life. Second, imitation is reflective, because it mirrors a pattern of life shaped by the cross, the resurrection, and the hope of final fulfillment in Christ. Thus, the exhortation to imitate Paul does not point to an independent personal authority but to a life that becomes a concrete embodiment of the gospel within the lived experience of believers.

The implications of these findings affirm that the church should be understood as a community of faith formation, shaped through relationships and the example of lived life rather than merely through doctrinal transmission. Spiritual leadership gains legitimacy through the integrity of life that reflects the gospel, while the growth of faith occurs through shared participation in a Christ-centered pattern of life.

The primary contribution of this study lies in the formulation of a theological framework of Paul's example as a reality that is simultaneously derivative and reflective, integrating Christological, communal, and eschatological dimensions into a unified interpretive framework. Future research may expand this approach by examining the concept of imitation in other Pauline texts in order to deepen the understanding of faith formation within apostolic theology.

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