

Epaphroditus...and “the work of Christ” (Philippians 2:25-30)
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Philippians 2:30 contains a most interesting phrase. Paul speaks of Epaphroditus risking *his life* “for *the work of Christ*”. Although this phrase is not simply and clearly defined anywhere in the Bible of which I am aware, there is a conceptual basis for it which I wish to propose as the depth of its meaning. An elementary grasping of the phrase needs the entire context of 2:25-30 to impress the readers with its specific importance in this letter to the Philippians, and indeed, to the saints and churches everywhere.

1. Throughout the Bible, it seems there are two aspects about God and the things of God that give a complete perspective to the thought of God. One side regards Life, the other Work. For example, God himself is Life. However, while life in itself may be complete, if it has no function it has little or no purpose. We may see a person full of life, but if he is a complete invalid, his life has nothing to do. Life must work for it to be expressed; but work done apart from the life it represents is neither valid nor purposeful. Hence, Life (within) must be purposefully expressed by Work (without). In ages past, God was not simply a composite of life. In Genesis we see this Life worked for six days and rested for one day. This was the full expression of Life and the Work of life in regard to His creation.

2. A parallel aspect of the creative Life and Work of God is His progressive, purposeful work to utilize the function of His creation by imputing His uncreated *life* in the Son for His incarnation to enter into the material world as Son of God and Son of Man. The ultimate *work* of God, therefore, is Christ. The ultimate expression of the Father is the Son and this is realized by the life of the Father indwelling the Son and the Son’s complete obedience accomplishing the work of God. Hence, Jesus said “as the Father has *life* in Himself, so has He given to the Son to have *life* in Himself” (Jn 5:26); and, on the side of *work*, said “the Father that dwells in Me, He doeth the *works*” (Jn 14:10). Hereby we see God as life was not passive. He actively became flesh and, as God in the flesh, Christ accomplished the will of God by the Father’s life (within) in His human living, death, resurrection and ascension. (without). Thus, Jesus said “this is *life* eternal...to know... God and...I have finished the *work* You gave me to do...” (John 17:2-3).

3. As God became flesh for all to see (without), so Christ became the Life-giving Spirit for believers to receive (within). To further the progress in the unfolding of the triune God to accomplish His purpose for creation, the Father not only lived in the Son, but as the Spirit expanded and multiplied both the Life and the Work of that life in the believers after the resurrection of Christ. Hence, Christ, who is *life*, now became enabled to dwell in those who believed to accomplish His unique, intentional *work* which is the church by His inner workings (within) for a visible expression to the world (without). Again, the two aspects of life and work. When Life moved, the church as the Work of Christ was birthed.

4. As God’s life actively worked to produce the physical creation (without), so the resurrection life of Christ actively worked to produce His new creation in the hearts and lives of believers (within). In Philippians, these two aspects of *life* and *work*, of outside and inside affects and effects, are abundantly clear. In 1:6 and 2:30, the “work” here refers to the Lord’s “business”, or “deed” (Gr. *ergon*); whereas in 2:13 there is the working of God “in you” by divine “energizing” (Gr. *energeo*). God’s goal with each one is a “business, a deed to accomplish”, and He does it by working within the believer to “operate”, to “energize” him divinely to accomplish that thing which is God’s goal, God’s business for and in him. On the one hand, God has a goal in the rebirth of each believer (without). On the other hand, God has a way by His divine *life* to *work* out that goal (within) the believer, thereby adding something of the divine life and nature into the believer as he becomes practically, increasingly part of the new creation in experience.

5. God's goal requires God's *work* which can be accomplished only by God's *life*. The goal of the redemption of Christ is to bring each believer into a new humanity, a new race of mankind that practically replaces the fallen race of Adam. He does this by bringing the Spirit of the Last Adam (Christ) into the daily life of each obedient believer. Collectively and consequentially, this is the producing of the church by divine life operating in the believers. The resurrection life is not passively for itself, just as the creative life of God was not for itself. As God's life created the universe, so the resurrection life created the new creation practically. (Without), there is the goal of the church. (Within), there is the supply of the Spirit to accomplish this phenomenon. (Without), there is *work*, the building up of the church; (within) there is the growth of the church as God's farm by His *life* (I Cor. 3:9, both aspects).

6. In the New Testament, there is the side of *Life*, the church as God's farm; and the side of *Work*, the church as God's building. In the church as God's farm, leadership in the church needs to emphasize shepherding and the growth in life for the maturity of the saints in love. In the church as God's building, the ministry needs to be absolutely given for the life of the church by sacrificing their own lives. On the side of *life*, each member of the church needs to feed on the Lord and shepherd one another. On the side of the *work* of building, the leadership, especially the apostles and elders, need to care for the ministry in a thorough way, meeting both obvious and sensitive needs of co-workers in the ministry for the building up of the church by truth, by life and by divinely-expressed philadelphian love.

7. In this article, we are looking specifically at Epaphroditus and how he gave his life "nearly unto death" for both the care of the church and for the need of his fellow apostle, Paul. Just as in Acts 14:14 where Barnabas is spoken of as an apostle with Paul, so here Epaphroditus is referred to as a "messenger" (Gr. *apostolos*). To Paul, he was a "companion in labor", and "fellow-soldier" (2:25); but to the church Paul said "he is your apostle" (KJV, "messenger"). To Paul, he ministered care in a way the church had lacked. To the church, Epaphroditus gave himself in a way that supplied their specific needs as a church that needed to be of one mind. In the principle of the practical building of the church, he, with Paul and Timothy, strengthened the priestly ministrations needful for building up the church, such as in Acts 2:42; Matt 16:18-19. While the apostles here tended especially the *work* of ministry, the elders needed, then and now, to shepherd a practical, functional union of the souls in the *life* of the Lord's Body.

8. Epaphroditus first gave of his "soul life" (*psyche*), as did Jesus in John 10:17-18. The goal of Jesus was to give divine life (*zoe*) in John 10:10. To accomplish the ministry of imparting divine *life* into the believers, Jesus laid down his own entire soul, which included the *work* of yielding His body to the cross. The apostle Epaphroditus here, in the same principle, was "nigh unto death, not regarding his *life* (*psyche*, 2:30b) for the *work* of Christ", which was particularly for the benefit of Paul, the "master builder" of the church. The *work* of Christ in the ministry of the apostles was to impart the *life* of Christ to unbelievers and to the church for its growth and building up. This is in the same principle by which God's life produced the creation, and here the *work* of Christ is the active, processed, sanctified, mature flowing out of the *life* of Christ for His new creation through the minister and the ministry of a commissioned member of His body.

9. We conclude, then, that the "*work of Christ*" mentioned here is twofold: first, it accomplishes, *with* the Lord, His work by a participatory, absolute availability for the care of the ministry and for the fellow ministers; second, at the risk of losing one's life, it is the sacrificing of oneself as spiritual supply for specific needs in building up the church. This spirit of absoluteness, especially among leadership, is crucial to bring all the saints into full accomplishment of God's eternal purpose by the church (Ephesians 3:4-11). Where such a *life* can work the *work* of Christ, God is wondrously glorified.

10. The yielded life of Epaphroditus was extraordinary, yet neither unique nor unusual. Those called for such ministry are not of the lesser sort who seek ease, pleasure and worldly acclaim while occasionally referring to the “sweet bye and bye”. In coordination with other co-workers in the ministry, the life of Epaphroditus was, without condition, expended for their lives; and their lives were for the producing of a church life which would fully define, explain, and express Christ specifically in Philippi, and applied elsewhere. This undoubtedly, in my view, is the “*work of Christ*” in and through this brother.