

## “Authentic Christianity”

“Conforming to the original”

Philippians 2:19-30

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In Germany in 1939 Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer saw the crisis that Christians in his country would face in the coming months and years.

Anyone who opposed the evil of the Hitler’s Third Reich would be prosecuted and punished.

In his desire to strengthen the resolve of the church in Germany, Bonhoeffer decided that a visit to America would help forge bonds with other believers that could help his own people in the dark days ahead.

When he got to America he was urged to stay for the next several years for his own protection.

But in a letter to an American church leader Bonhoeffer explained his need to return to Nazi Germany.

He said that the Christian church in his country would soon face the terrible choice of either wishing for victory for their own country and the destruction of civilization or the defeat of their own country and the survival of civilization.

Bonhoeffer said he knew which he would choose but he couldn’t make that choice from the safe haven of America.

He had to return to stand with the Christians of Germany.

In his concern for the welfare of his fellow Christians, Bonhoeffer lost his life.

He was executed by the Nazis just days before the end of the war.

Do you and I value each other sufficiently that we would be willing to die for each other?

Let me ask a less dramatic question but maybe a harder one.

Do you and I value each other sufficiently that we are willing to live for each other?

It's an awesome thing that one person would be willing to die for the sake of another but it is in some ways equally awesome that one person would commit his life, day-after-day, for the sake of others.

In the NT book of Philippians the Apostle Paul has given the Christians in Philippi, and thus all Christians, a high calling:

He said it this way in chapter 1:27 and 2:3,4 "Conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.... Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others."

In that, I think God calls us to one of the most difficult things for any of us:

Humbly putting the interests of others ahead of our own.

Notice it is not just putting the interests of others ahead of my own but doing so humbly.

It is not just doing the right thing but it is doing it with the right motivation.

Under the right circumstances any of us can **make** ourselves do the right thing of putting aside our desires to attend to another.

But if you look at verse 3 you see that God calls us to something much higher.

We are called to a humility that considers others better than ourselves.

"Better" not in an absolute sense but in the relative sense that we truly believe that the interests of others are more important than our own.

Earlier Paul defined the opposite of this humility as “selfish ambition” which is looking for every opportunity to promote ourselves.

And he also defined it as “vain conceit” or literally, “empty glory” which is thinking highly of ourselves without cause.

Or as I summed up the point of that passage a few weeks ago:

Pride is the poison of human relationships and humility is the antidote.

But Paul doesn't just “hit and run” with this idea of putting others first. Because it is so central to what it means to be Christian, Paul camps on the idea.

The next thing he does in his letter is use the powerful example of Jesus to illustrate the kind of humble service of others that Paul is talking about.

And so in 2:6-11 Paul describes Jesus' humble service of us.

Philippians 2:6-8

“Our attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God... made himself nothing... taking the very nature of a servant... he humbled himself and became obedient to death--even death on a cross!”

But Paul doesn't quit there.

He continues to urge this humble lifestyle on his readers and us.

But he does it in a somewhat subtle way.

Back in 1:26 Paul had written of his anticipation of visiting the Philippian Christians once he was out of jail.

Philippians 1:26 “Through my being with you again...”

Now in our text for today, beginning at 2:19, Paul picks up that issue again.

This time he explains not only his plan to visit them but the men he will send in the mean time.

But listen carefully for the way Paul stays on his theme of calling them to humbly consider the interests of others ahead of their own.

Philippians 2:19-30

“I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you. <sup>20</sup> I have no one else like him, who takes a genuine interest in your welfare. <sup>21</sup> For everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. <sup>22</sup> **(Is that not a clear echo of what he had written just verses earlier and illustrated with Jesus?)** But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel. <sup>23</sup> I hope, therefore, to send him as soon as I see how things go with me. <sup>24</sup> And I am confident in the Lord that I myself will come soon.

<sup>PHP 2:25</sup> But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, fellow worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs. <sup>26</sup> For he longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill. <sup>27</sup> Indeed he was ill, and almost died. But God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow. <sup>28</sup> Therefore I am all the more eager to send him, so that when you see him again you may be glad and I may have less anxiety. <sup>29</sup> Welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honor men like him, <sup>30</sup> because he almost died for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for the help you could not give me.

Some have wondered what could possibly be the value in these verses that seem to simply describe the comings and goings of three men 2000 years ago.

Therein lies the subtlety I think.

Yes, Paul is describing his plan to send Epaphroditus right away and Timothy later.

And yes, he even declares again his own expectation of being freed from prison to visit them in Philippi.

But woven into the plans are further illustrations of the kind of people God is calling Christians to be.

People who think and act like the original.

That is why I titled this message “Authentic Christianity.”

The word “authentic” is defined as “conforming to the original.”

We are urged to be conformed to the person and humility of Jesus.

And here Paul uses both Timothy and Epaphroditus as examples of what conformity to that original looks like.

Do you remember how earlier Paul defined what it means to conduct yourselves in a matter worthy of the gospel?

He said, “Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.”(2:4)

Do you think he is pressing the same point when he writes:

Philippians 2:19-21 “I hope...to send Timothy to you soon... I have no one else like him, who takes a genuine interest in your welfare. For everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.”

And do you agree that he is pressing the same point of humble service of others when he writes of Epaphroditus:

Philippians 2:30 “Because he almost died for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for the help you could not give me.”

Paul starts with Timothy.

Philippians 2:20-22 “I have no one else like him, who takes a genuine interest in your welfare. For everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. (22) But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel.”

Paul is not saying that Timothy is the only one who loves and acts like Jesus.

Just a few sentences later Paul will commend Epaphroditus in similar fashion.

As verse 22 suggests, Paul is apparently speaking of Timothy’s proven, life-long work of putting the interests of others first.

I think Paul is saying he wants us to take note of this man Timothy.

He is an example of what God is calling us to be and do.

There is an instructive parallelism in the phrases Paul uses here.

- In verse 20 he speaks of Timothy’s “interest in your welfare.”
- In verse 21 he speaks of the interests of Jesus Christ.

- In verse 22 he speaks of the “work of the gospel”  
These phrases become largely synonymous.

“Interest in your welfare” (like the earlier “looking out for the interests of others”) is not just about being nice people who do kind things for others.

“Your welfare” and “the interests of others” have to do with their **spiritual** welfare.

And conversely “the interests of Jesus” and “the work of the gospel” are not spiritual abstractions.

“Jesus’ interests” (what is important to Jesus), as he proved on the cross, have to do with our spiritual welfare.

The “work of the gospel” is about our souls.

So when God calls us to look not only to our own interests but to look humbly to the interests of others he is calling us put the spiritual welfare of others ahead of any interests of our own.

It is growing to the place where I want to cooperate with God with what he wants to do in your life, even more than I want to invest in my own selfish interests.

- Can you imagine what would result if that was truly the reason we came together to be with each other, not to get but to cooperate with what God wants to do in the life of the others?
- Can you imagine what would result if that was truly our reason for teaching, or singing or working in the various ways we do in and outside of the church?

Paul writes that Timothy is an example of that and he has proved himself over the years.

Philippians 2:22 “But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel.”

Paul says Timothy has “served” with me in the work of the gospel; he has “slaved” with me all these years in seeking the spiritual welfare of others.

As I said a couple of weeks ago, a slave’s only purpose is to serve another.

Don't get the impression that Timothy was a super-Christian.

- He was young – (1 Timothy 4:12)
- He was timid (1 Corinthians 16:10-11)
- He had stomach problems (1 Timothy 5:23)

(From Getz The Measure of a Christian, 114)

But in spite of his physical and emotional limitations, Timothy was a man of proven character; a man with a reputation for putting the interests of others ahead of his own; a man like Jesus.

- What is your and my reputation?
- What do those who know us best think of us?
- Do they see a Jesus-style selflessness that cares for their souls?

Michael and Melissa Eckdahl recently returned from a trip to Central Asia where they spent time with our staff missionaries, the Loseys.

Mike said that when he told some of his unbelieving co-workers of the difficult living and working conditions the Losey's endure, those co-workers couldn't imagine why anyone would choose to be there.

Even we, too often, fix our attention on the hardship and the risks.

We think of the threat to four little girls and their mother in such a repressive and explosive Muslim culture where Americans have to go into hiding every time some U.S. led international incident occurs .

We too, begin to think, "Is it worth it?"

**But in such questions we miss the point.**

For the Loseys personal safety is not the highest priority.

Certainly, caution and wisdom are called for.

But the highest priority is, as Paul put it, the "work of Christ", the "work of the gospel," the "interests of Christ", and the "interests of others" - namely the spiritual "welfare" of those Christ loves.

So it with the Loseys – they love the "shepherd" people.

And the “interests”, (the spiritual welfare of those people) is a higher priority than their own interests.

Someone might still object and say “what about the “interests” and the “welfare” of the Losey children?”

Putting a much more biblical definition to “interests” and “welfare” Mike Eckdahl said, “I could only wish that any children we have could have the opportunities those children are having, and could experience first-hand the Kingdom values and priorities those children are seeing lived out before them.”

In our text, Paul moves on to speak of Epaphroditus whom Paul is immediately sending back to Philippi.

You remember that Epaphroditus was a young leader in that church who had been sent on the church’s behalf to provide for and encourage Paul while he was in prison.

So Paul writes in verse 25, “But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, fellow worker and fellow soldier... (26) For he longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill. (29) “Welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honor men like him, (30) because he almost died for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for the help you could not give me. Philippians 2:25-30

Epaphroditus too is an example of the kind of humble, putting-others-first attitude that Jesus modeled.

And again I want you to notice the connection of his attitude toward the Christians in Philippi (“he longs for all of you”) and the “work of Christ.”

Again I point out that the work of Christ is not an abstraction but is the care we have, the longing we have for each other’s spiritual welfare.

- The work of Christ (like the work of the gospel) is not sermons, lessons, tasks, or meetings.
- The work of Christ is not just good things done for others.



- The work of Christ is the spiritual welfare of others, it is people, it is relationships, it is a longing for all of you.

For Paul, Epaphroditus is an example of how far one may need to go in this issue of putting others first.

Philippians 2:30 “He almost died for the work of Christ, risking his life for the help you could not give me.”

Though Paul does not describe the details he does say that Epaphroditus was willing to risk his own life in order to serve others.

Alexander Ogorodnikov was literally being chased through a woods and into a city by armed men of the KGB of the Soviet Union as they were attempting to intimidate him.

Alexander was being pursued because he was a Christian and the founder of a group called the Christian Seminar.

He had gathered a group of young Russian intellectuals committed to putting their faith into practice in a nation equally committed to stamping out real Christianity.

They were subjected to expulsions from their schools, firings from their jobs, rejection of residence permits in their cities, beatings and imprisonment in psychiatric hospitals.

Alexander himself was expelled from Moscow and out of fear for his life went underground.

He traveled by night visiting Christians in cities all over the Soviet Union to encourage and train them.

The same year that I came to Southern Gables, Alexander was arrested.

His Communist father sat in the courtroom the day Alexander was convicted and sentenced for “anti-Soviet” agitation.

His father was bewildered claiming his son hadn’t harmed anyone and in fact works hard sharing all he has with others.

Though Alexander was a political prisoner, he was thrown in with criminals who it was desired would abuse him.

But he was so likeable and proved to love the men so deeply that some became Christians.

For that he was moved to another prison in eastern Russia.

Again he was thrown into a cell with criminals and when the hardened prisoners moved to initiate Alexander with a beating, the leader unexpectedly asked Alexander, "Are you a Christian?"

When Alexander said he was the man said "Prove it."

The leader said we haven't had cigarettes for weeks.

Show us a miracle by getting us cigarettes and we'll believe God exists.

Alexander said he didn't know if the Lord would do such a thing because cigarettes are harmful but if they would all join him, he would pray that the Lord would have compassion on these lost people living in these miserable conditions.

Alexander prayed for a full 15 minutes and when he ended there was complete silence in the prison cell.

Suddenly through a small opening in the door, two packs of cigarettes flew into the room.

At that the cell leader cried out, "God exists!"

In that prison and the next, many became Christians.

The inmates treated Alexander like a chaplain, secretly doing his work for him so he could move among the men all day and evening talking to them and praying for them.

When the authorities found out, they put him in solitary confinement and pumped raw sewage into his cell.

Later he was beaten time and time again.

He was denied heat in the winter and cold in the summer.

And all the while he was offered complete amnesty if he would renounce his faith and stop his help of other Christians.

Refusing to deny his faith or betray his fellow believers, Alexander spent nearly nine years in the degrading and painful conditions I have already described.

But the worse was yet to come.

In 1987 he was released from prison.

He could hardly wait to be rejoined with his wife and son.

But the KGB had gotten to both of them and convinced Alexander's wife to divorce him.

And when he met with his son, the boy said only, "You're not my father. I don't know you, but I know you are a criminal."

Broken in body, betrayed in relationships but beloved by the Lord, Alexander risked even his life for the spiritual interests of others.

Today Alexander leads the Christian Mercy Society feeding and clothing 7000 needy people each month, he has founded a home for abandoned girls in St Petersburg, and he leads the first Christian democratic political party in Russia. (From Barbara Von der Heydt, [Candles Behind the Wall](#), chapter 2)

When I think of Timothy or Epaphroditus and I hear stories like the one I've just retold, I'm sobered.

What am I doing for the Kingdom?

I don't even have to risk my life.

I have the privilege of deciding how my time, energy and money will be used without opposition.

So how am I investing them?

Whose spiritual welfare do I care so much about that it is what I constantly pray about and strive to supply?

I will conclude with two things about this humble attitude of putting the interests of others ahead of our own interests.

First, I was struck with how much emotion is in this text describing the attitude we are to have.

The relationships Paul describes are charged with real emotions: Encouragement (19); intimacy (22); yearning and anxiety (26); sorrow (27); gladness (28); and joy (29).

- This is not a cold, clinical, doing the work of the gospel.
- These are joyful, sad, longing, hurting, encouraging, and anxious emotions felt in all combinations as we engage each other.
- You don't feel those emotions unless there is genuine concern, a love for others.

That's the kind of love that Paul, Timothy and Epaphroditus had and we are called to have.

Secondly, it caught my attention that Paul describes this humble, others-first, conduct in the context of everyday life.

My last story was about the KGB and cruel imprisonment, but Paul's words are about such common life activities as travel, letters, sickness, gifts delivered, work, and meeting together.

All are the everyday "stuff" of life in which this "putting others first" is or is not lived out.

Do you know what that looks like to me?

It looks like Tom and Pam Bayless getting up at 11:30 at night to go to the hospital to be with and pray for new friends whose daughter is very ill.

Do you know how hard it is to go out late at night after a hard day's work and knowing you have to go to work the next day as well?

But whose interests are we talking about?

It looks like John Boyer (and I could name many others) who arrives home Friday evening after being out of town nearly all week.

He's tired and needs to give attention to his family, which he does on Friday evening and Saturday.

But because of his concern for the spiritual welfare of the people of his adult community, he gives hours late on Friday night and Saturday to complete his preparation for teaching on Sunday morning.

Do you know how easy it would be rationalize calling someone else to teach or to simply "get by" with shoddy preparation?

But whose interests are we talking about?

O Christian, listen again to Paul's description of Timothy and Epaphroditus and charge to all of us:

"I have no one else like (Timothy), who takes a genuine interest in your welfare. For everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But you know that (he) has proved himself...

Epaphroditus...longs for all of you and... he almost died for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for the help you could not give me."

"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others..."