

## Operating in the Marketplace - Case Study 4 – Epaphroditus

Certain individuals stand out in the history of Christianity because they were trailblazers and because selective accounts (especially in Acts) focus on their lives and ministries. Take Saul of Tarsus, later Paul. He became a follower of Jesus Christ in spectacular circumstances and emerged as a giant of Christianity. We have substantial information in the Bible and church histories and traditions to piece together most of his life and achievements.

Others were like Aquilla and Priscilla (Acts 18), a couple who were expelled from Rome and planted churches with Paul while they all made sewed tents together for a living. They are two of the unsung heroes of church planting in the Bible. They worked full-time for a living (as did Paul, most of the time), but we have fewer details of their work for God.

Most of the first century believers are unknown to us. They came to faith in Christ, made their contributions, died and were forgotten to all but God. We have some names, but no other clues. They faced the same hunger, ostracism, threats, pain and dangers as Peter, Paul, Silas and Timothy, and eventually died for their faith, but we don't know who they were or what they did.

In a small number of cases we have snippets of data that encourage us to believe our service for Christ in the marketplace will not be forgotten. One of these was a man named Epaphroditus. You can read about him in Philippians 2:25-30 and 4:14-19. His "marketplace" was a prison. His story, and the selfless service he gave for a Christian friend, graphically illustrate the power of witness of Christ amid human suffering.

### *Background – a brief synopsis of Epaphroditus' life*

From what Scripture tells us Epaphroditus was a member of a Christian group in the city of Philippi. (Founded in the 4th century BC and renamed after King Philip of Macedon, Philippi was an important military outpost on the "Egnation Way". After the defeat of Cassius and Brutus in 42 AD, it became a Roman colony. Christianity was established there around 52 AD).

Elsewhere in the empire, the demands of Paul's ministry and his constant movement kept him relatively poor. As he travelled planting churches, he depended on those he served as much as they depended on him. Few congregations supported him. We have already noted that he spent much of his time making tents, not a highly paid job, but enough to cover expenses. Then he was arrested for preaching the Gospel and the source of his support virtually dried up.

Around this time, Epaphroditus was appointed to take a love offering to Paul in prison. He was probably not one of the leaders of the Philippian church, more like a delegate sent to spend some time with Paul and offer him and his friends practical assistance.

Paul and Epaphroditus may have known one other a long time; possibly their friendship went back to the early days, when Paul and Silas first preached the Good News in Philippi and were arrested, beaten and expelled by the authorities, leaving behind them an infant church (Acts 16:12-40). It is clear from reading about him in the Bible that Paul came to consider Epaphroditus a close friend. He called him a “brother” in Christ.

Travelling overland 2,000 kilometres from Philippi to Rome with what must have been a relatively significant amount of money, in addition to the dangers of being identified as a Christian believer when he reached Rome, must have created pressures for Epaphroditus on his own level.

The bonds of friendship grew as they hung out together in the prison where Paul was in chains. Epaphroditus’ name meant “charming”, which must have seemed ironic, because there was nothing charming about jails in ancient Rome. They were dark, filthy and disease-ridden. Prisoners had to rely on family or friends to bring blankets, food and water. There was little privacy. Guards were sadistic. Inmates were often taken out and tortured mercilessly, so the nights would have been filled with the moans of those suffering from being exposed to the biased “justice” of Rome.

These were the circumstances in which Epaphroditus arrived in Rome and starting serving as a “minister” to Paul. The Apostle called him “a fellow-worker” and a “fellow-soldier” (literally an “associate in labours and conflicts for the cause of Christ”). In our day often people want to become “ministers” because the term either denotes church leaders (ie those in charge) or Ministers of State (politicians). Most forget the word “minister” originally meant “servant”. For Epaphroditus the role was no sinecure. It involved hard work, every day of the week, all for one person. Gracian taught his followers, “Recognize the fortunate so that you may choose their company, and the unfortunate so that you may avoid them.” Jesus taught his followers that the mark of a genuine Christian was his or her preparedness to identify with the needs of others (Matthew 25:31-46). As they served them, they indirectly served Him (or failed to do so)

Every person is important. Remember “Saving Private Ryan”, the movie based on a World War II drama about US soldiers sent to rescue paratrooper Private Ryan, who was stationed behind enemy lines? He was one man, but the value of a single life made a difference. Maybe the people in your immediate spheres are a child, a work colleague, a neighbour or a cousin. Relate to them as though you are doing it for Jesus and they are supremely important to Him.

During his stay in Rome Epaphroditus became seriously sick and nearly died. We don’t know the cause, why God allowed him to suffer, or why he wasn’t restored to health quickly (after all, others were healed through the ministry of Paul); however, there is little point in speculating. Paul heard that his friends were worried about him and decided to send him home when he was strong enough to travel. In due course, he departed, carrying with him a letter we now know as “Philippians” (one of the so-called “Prison Epistles” of the New Testament, for obvious reasons).

### *The characteristics of Epaphroditus*

When we read the story of Epaphroditus, in context, one word that leaps out is "sacrifice". Paul's letter to the Philippians teaches us that there is often a nexus between sacrifice and joy, for the Christian believer. That takes faith to appropriate.

A sacrifice is an act of unselfish giving, expecting nothing of equivalence in return. For Epaphroditus this meant giving up time, comfort, family, friends, freedom and material possessions for as long as was necessary, to help Paul, when he probably knew he would receive nothing in return. Epaphroditus paid a big personal price to be with Paul – it nearly cost him his life.

Remember the woman who poured a bottle of expensive ointment on Jesus' feet prior to his suffering (see Matthew 26:6-13)? The disciples looked on, stunned at the material value of what she had done. "What a waste", they protested. This ointment could have been sold and the money given to the poor. Jesus taught them that they could expend themselves for the poor, empty the till and still have people with needs to be met. However, they would not always have Him. Her sacrifice was for Him. I have heard families and friends of men and women going out to the mission field talking about the "waste" of their lives and skills. God esteems highly those who "waste" themselves on Him, out of love. It is easy to spend our efforts on ourselves; that proves nothing, except that we are probably too materialistic and selfish.

On the other hand, if we serve simply because we see needs we will grow tired. Organizations (and even nations) that spend resources on addressing human need often suffer from "compassion fatigue". Endless effort and incalculable finances are expended, but seem to go into a "Black Hole". What made Epaphroditus stand out was that he served God first, then others. In a sense, he put serving God ahead of the needs of his Christian friends and leaders; he didn't do it for others, but for Christ. We will always have the poor and needy, but we have only one life, so motivation counts. You can be cash poor but rich in serving God. None of it is futile.

Another word is "commitment". Few people are required to make commitments to Christ that jeopardize the status quo. We hold life too closely, we find it hard to let go of what we treasure, even though most of what we esteem is of little or no eternal value (cf Matthew 16:26). Jesus challenged that attitude. He said that only those who are prepared to lose everything for Him will find it (Matthew 16:25). My anthropology professor at university used to say that there is no genuine altruism in the world. He had never read the Bible's injunction for those who know God's love to lay down their lives for one another (1 John 3:16).

The third thing that stands out about Epaphroditus is his courage in identifying with the people of God in the marketplace. He was a friend and assistant of a man facing charges that potentially carried the death penalty. Epaphroditus could have been labelled an accomplice and experienced the same fate (especially as he shared his faith in Christ, a crime at the time).

Then Epaphroditus became sick. Day after day he lay there, a long way from home, still trying to help Paul in spite of his weakness. (News of his illness reached his home church.) As friends watched, Epaphroditus' hovered at death's door, then turned the corner and slowly returned to health. It was a close call. Here was a man who was prepared to give his all for Christ. Eventually he was strong enough to travel and Paul sent him home. Not as a failure, but as a hero.

You can be sure there would have been some people in the church at Philippi who would have queried why he got sick and criticized Epaphroditus for "giving up" on Paul. After all, he was still in jail. Who would look after him now?

There will always be critics. It is easy to stand on the side and carp. The real honour goes to those who do the job. Theodore Roosevelt once made a headland speech, in which he made a statement that has gone down as one of the greatest of the 20<sup>th</sup> century:

*"It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly; who errs and comes short again and again; because there is not effort without error and shortcomings; but who does actually strive to do the deed; who knows the great enthusiasm, the great devotion, who spends himself in a worthy cause, who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement and who at the worst, if he fails, at least he fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat."*

In Paul's eyes, Epaphroditus was a man of God. He was "a brother, a fellow-worker, a "fellow-soldier" (*Sustratiotes*), and a minister to his practical needs. In ancient Rome if people wanted to honor a soldier, they would give him the title *Sustratiotes*. Paul honours Epaphroditus when he instructs the Philippians to, "Receive him therefore in the Lord with all gladness, and hold such men in esteem" (Philippians 2:29).

Some people serve others, learn on the job and rise to greatness. (For example, Joshua was Moses' assistant for many years and assumed the leadership of ancient Israel when he expired.) Most, however, do not. Paul was encouraging the Christians in Philippi to honour those who serve others (even when they get nothing back in return), as though they were serving Jesus.

Let's face it, in most marketplaces, showing gratitude goes against the grain. Tacitus (55-120AD) once said, "Men are more likely repay an injury than a benefit, because gratitude is a burden and revenge a pleasure". This remains the dominant thinking in the marketplace where we operate. Robert Greene, a modern management guru, suggests, "Get others to do the work for you, but always take the credit. Be wary of friends. If you have no enemies, find a way to

make them. Your enemies are an untapped gold mine that you must learn to exploit”.

As Christians, we need to recognise that we spend a lot of our time operating in a jungle; but we do not have to behave like the beasts. The example and power of Jesus Christ is the great motivating alternative.

“Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death - even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2:5-8)

In writing this way, Paul instructs the church, “Be like Jesus; be like Epaphroditus”. These are real life examples the jungle needs to see. The world says, “Aspire to be great. Outshine your master”. The Bible says, “Aspire to be humble and serve another. Reflect your Master”.

In the secular realm, my heroes are the street sweepers and garbologists who miraculously keep the city clean, those who work underground to keep the lights burning in my home, or who drive the buses and fix the telephone lines. They don't get all the kudos. They are undervalued and go unremarked and poorly rewarded; their work is despised and disregarded. No one notices them – until they stop doing what they do best. Just because they are not seen by important people does not mean their efforts are not valid.

In Christian circles, the ones and twos who do not make it to the limelight and who fade away when their days are over are usually forgotten, but not to our Heavenly Father. Regardless of who we are, how prominent or insignificant, our lives and service to God have value. And ordinary people *do* notice.

Consider the example of Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu. Never heard of her? Agnes was born in Skopje, Macedonia on 27 August 1910. Her family was of Albanian descent. At the age of twelve, she felt the call of God as a missionary, to spread the love of Christ. When she was just eighteen years old she left home and joined the Sisters of Loreto in Ireland. She was eventually sent to India.

From 1931-48 Agnes taught at a Catholic school in Calcutta, but the poverty she saw outside the school moved her so much that she sought permission to work in the slums. She set up an open-air school. Eventually people came to help her and friends sent funds to help her reach the poorest people in the neighbourhood. On 7 October 1950, Agnes received permission from her superiors to start her own order, "The Missionaries of Charity", to love and care for people nobody was prepared to look after. She spent the rest of her life in the slums. Agnes was a little lady with an obscure background. She didn't seem to have much going for her, except a desire to touch her marketplace with the love of Christ and whatever she had materially. What a marketplace! What a love!

Still not heard of her? To the rest of the world she became known simply as “Mother Teresa of Calcutta”.

The Bible says, “Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain”. (1 Corinthians 15:58).

*So, what does all this mean for us?*

If the things that happened to people in the Bible are recorded as examples for us, what do the examples of Epaphroditus (and the more recent likes of Mother Theresa) teach us about relating to our own marketplaces?

*Have the heart of a servant.*

Lots of people, in Epaphroditus’ situation, would have simply given up and gone home; few would have stuck it out. Why bother? We like our comforts. Being a “fellow-soldier” meant that Epaphroditus saw Paul and himself as being on the same side, with common adversaries. He didn’t allow resentment to get into his heart.

It's nice to know that there are people in Christian ministry in the marketplace today who are motivated by relationship and not duty or programs. “Ministry” is about people. Many modern churches have forgotten the gift of service, labouring for Christ. Epaphroditus regarded serving Paul as akin to serving Jesus. Drawing on Jesus’ own example, Paul reminded the Philippian church to use it as the model for all they did. Whether you are serving one person, as Epaphroditus did, or a thousand, it is the heart attitude, one of service, which counts. Do it as though you were doing it for God. You never know where it will lead.

*Don't limit Christian ministry to doing “spiritual” things.*

There is no record that Epaphroditus did anything else but help Paul. Some might argue that Paul would have survived with Epaphroditus’ help. We don’t know. What we do know is that Epaphroditus didn’t see it that way. He was prepared to spend himself on serving Paul. That was true friendship (cf John 15:13). Paul’s view of Epaphroditus’ suffering was that he was prepared to “die for the work of Christ” (Philippians 2:30).

It is time to correct unbiblical models of Christian service. I have, on one of my files, a copy of an old edition of *The Canberra Times* newspaper in Australia, dated 2 May 1946. The following brief article appears on page two:

*“Pious chaps not wanted for clergy.*

“The hard school of experience was best, Bishop Burgmann stated during a debate at the Anglican Synod today on a training ground for candidates to the church. What was wanted was a vigorous healthy type of young

Australian, rather than those pious anemic chaps who hang around vestries' he added."

Be wary of drawing artificial distinctions between "laity" and "clergy". Epaphroditus' "ministry" may have been simply cooking for Paul, doing his laundry, adjusting his chains, nursing his ulcers, running his errands and putting up with his moods. "Ministering" to Paul's needs consisted of "ordinary things done by an ordinary person", but they comprised spiritual service and worship that continue to preach powerfully to the Christian church. You may not be a professional evangelist, pastor or worship leader, but you can still be a servant of Christ. You can win people to Jesus, care for them and teach them how to worship God. (That's really the same thing.)

### *Have the right attitudes*

Check your attitudes, motives and relationships and be prepared to go the second mile for others. Few of us have ever been called on to go so close to death to serve someone else.

It is instructive here to think about Epaphroditus' background. His name means: "belonging to or devoted to Aphrodite." His parents were most likely non-Christians, worshipers of Aphrodite. We don't know when he was converted. Coming from a Western background, he would have grown up influenced by many of the things that motivate us today. Then he met Christ, who "emptied himself" of his position, comfort and glory and came to serve (Mark 10:45). This was the fillip for a change of lifestyle that made Epaphroditus ready to do the same for others.

### *Count the cost of serving God.*

Epaphroditus nearly died because he stepped out in obedience to God's call. Christianity in the West is largely nonchalant and complacent. However, in some parts of the world to be a follower of Jesus involves risking everything. Gracian warned, "Do not commit yourself to anybody or anything, for that is to be a slave, a slave to every man. You should prefer many people to depend on you rather than that you should depend on any single person. Above all, keep yourself free of commitments and obligations". Jesus' attitude was diametrically opposed to this. He came with the attitude of a servant of all (Philippians 2:7). If you want to be an effective minister of Christ in your marketplace, follow His example.

Serving Jesus through others isn't being a "lackey". It is a lifestyle that honours God. Encourage the "ones" and "twos" who need it. Value their contributions to the life of the Christian community and their witness to God's love in action. Be like them, for when you do so you are imitating Christ.