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Abounding in the Work of the Lord (1 Cor 15:58): Everything We Do as Christians or Specific Gospel Work?

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One of the deepest impacts of the Reformation on Western Culture arose from the robust rearticulation of the biblical doctrines of creation and vocation. Luther may have captured the combined impact of these neglected doctrines most strongly by rejecting the enshrined sacred-secular divide that was so prevalent in medieval thought. Luther emphasised the ordinary activities of daily life ‘as examples of a Christian’s return to creation and embrace of vocation’. ¹ Luther vividly illustrates this in his reflections on marriage: ‘When a father goes ahead and washes diapers or performs some other menial task for his child, and someone ridicules him as an effeminate fool . . . God with all his angels is smiling’. ²

Contemporary evangelical theology continues to emphasise this Reformation understanding of the interrelatedness of creation and vocation. Discussions of the Christian understanding of work emphasise that *all* work is intrinsically good. ³ Books on the Christian life stress the biblical emphasis that *all* life is to be lived for God’s glory. ⁴ Is it possible, though, that in our right desire to affirm the goodness of creation and the validity of every vocation that as evangelicals we have unwittingly downplayed an equally important biblical emphasis: the eschatological *priority* for the church of Christ? While everyday tasks done to the glory of God do please him, there remains a central priority to God’s working in the world. That is, as much as God affirms the goodness (and future) of this creation and hence the validity of all work done in it, his cosmic plan *centres* on his new people created in his Son ([Eph 1:22–23](#)). Paul’s great eschatological vision is of the Son as firstborn over his transformed people ([Rom 8:29](#)) and parallels John’s vision of a great multitude standing before the throne of the Lamb ([Rev 7:9](#)). As well as considering how the goodness of creation should impact our understanding of work, we also need to ask how this *central* eschatological vision shapes our lives in the present.

These are issues that merit a full-blown study of their own. This article, however, considers just one verse which I think helpfully encapsulates the core of the debate. By considering [1 Cor 15:58](#), we see how interpreters can rightly stress the goodness of creation and yet underplay the NT’s teaching on the eschatological priority of God’s work in the world.

In [1 Cor 15:58](#), Paul concludes his great defence of the resurrection of believers by drawing the ethical implications. Given the resurrection, the Corinthians can and should devote themselves ‘to the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord [their] labour is not in vain’. ⁵ But what exactly does Paul mean by the phrase ‘the work of the Lord’? In light of the resurrection, what exactly are believers to devote themselves to? One particular interpretation reads this verse in the light of the impact that the resurrection has on the doctrine of creation.

1. The Maximal Interpretation of 1 Cor 15:58: Everything We Do As Christians in Light of the Resurrection

At a number of points in *Surprised by Hope*, Tom Wright considers Paul's exhortation in 1 Cor 15:58. He suggests that this exhortation, coming as the conclusion to Paul's great defence of the bodily resurrection of believers, implies, 'All that we do in faith, hope and love in the present, in obedience to our ascended Lord and in the power of his Spirit, will be enhanced and transformed at his appearing'.⁶ He later expands on this to specify that on the basis of this verse, 'What you *do* in the present—by painting, preaching, singing, sewing, praying, teaching, building hospitals, digging wells, campaigning for justice, writing poems, caring for the needy, loving your neighbour as yourself—all these things *will last into God's future*'.⁷ Finally, towards the end of the book he again cites 1 Cor 15:58 and concludes,

Every act of love, gratitude and kindness; every work of art or music inspired by the love of God and delight in the beauty of his creation; every minute spent teaching a severely handicapped child to read or to walk; every act of care and nurture, of comfort and support, for one's fellow human beings, and for that matter one's fellow non-human creatures; and of course every prayer, all Spirit-led teaching, every deed which spreads the gospel, builds up the church, embraces and embodies holiness rather than corruption, and makes the name of Jesus honoured in the world—all of this will find its way, through the resurrecting power of God, into the new creation which God will one day make. That is the logic of the mission of God. God's recreation of his wonderful world, which has begun with the resurrection of Jesus and continues mysteriously as God's people live in the risen Christ and in the power of his Spirit, means that what we do in Christ and by the Spirit in the present is not wasted.⁸

In particular, then, the resurrection's affirming and securing the future of creation leads Wright to draw the ethical conclusion that *everything* done in this creation is worthwhile since it will continue into eternity.

Paul Stevens also articulates this idea when he cites 1 Cor 15:58 as teaching that the resurrection 'is proof positive that work in this world is not resultless'.⁹ This teaching

brings new meaning to those whose toil is in so-called secular work: the arts, education, business and politics. They too are shaping the future of creation in some limited way just as are missionaries and pastors. Most people think that only religious work will not be in vain (1 Cor 15:58) but if Christ is the first-born from the grave, then all work has eternal consequences, whether homemaking or being a stockbroker. . . . [W]e are co-operating with what Christ wants to do in renewing all creation.¹⁰

Similarly, in his recent book on mission, Christopher Wright argues that because of the resurrection '[a]ll human productive work . . . has its own value and eternal significance' and that 'we know that "the work of the Lord" does not mean just "religious" work, but any work done as "unto the Lord", including even the manual labour of slaves (Col 3:22–24)'.¹¹

We could label this approach to 1 Cor 15:58 as the '*maximal* interpretation' in that it understands the 'work of the Lord' to be essentially *anything* that Christians do *because* of the resurrection. In other words, this gives weight almost exclusively to the *general* motivation that the rest of the chapter provides rather than to the *specific* meaning of the phrase itself.¹² This understanding of 'the work of the Lord' in 1 Cor 15:58 thus draws on both the doctrines of creation and resurrection. Given that the latter affirms and validates the former, Paul exhorts the Christian to work in this world since that work is 'not in vain' but has an eternal future.

2. A Specific Interpretation of 1 Cor 15:58: Evangelism and Edification

The obvious strength of the 'maximal' interpretation is that it recognizes the importance of the doctrines of creation and resurrection for Christian ethics. The resurrection's affirmation of creation is an inescapable foundation for Christian ethics.¹³ But the problem comes when this ethical reflection cuts itself loose from *specific* paraenesis in Scripture. To do so is to produce an abstract ethic that becomes just as problematic as a wooden proof-texting that merely quarries the Bible for verses which 'tell me what to do'. Ethical

reflection in light of the resurrection must go hand in hand with careful consideration of the application that the NT *itself* makes. It is not enough to read a phrase such as ‘the work of the Lord’ in light of the doctrines of creation and resurrection; we must carefully exegete it in its own context.

The rest of this article argues that with respect to the phrase ‘the work of the Lord’, Paul actually has something very specific in view. ¹⁴ When Paul tells the Corinthians to ‘abound in the work of the Lord’, he is not issuing a call to *general* Christian living in light of the resurrection. Rather, ‘the work of the Lord’ refers to *what believers do to advance the gospel among unbelievers and to establish believers in the gospel*. ¹⁵

As such, it is not the doctrines of creation and resurrection *in general* that are shaping Paul’s ethic. Rather, the eschatological *priority* of God’s work in Christ shape his ethic by producing a glorified, resurrected people who will bear the image of his Son (1 Cor 15:49). So ‘the work of the Lord’ is not a general description of the Christian life but an activity with a particular goal: more people bearing the image of the Son. The resurrection, in other words, should motivate Christians to devote themselves to the work of proclaiming the gospel to unbelievers and building believers up in that same gospel. Paul essentially makes this point *negatively* in 15:30–32. If men and women are *not* raised, what is the point of Paul’s suffering for proclaiming the gospel to them? ¹⁶ Verse 58, then, is the positive side of this. Precisely because they *will* be raised, it is worth it for Paul *and every Christian* to be devoted to the ‘work of the Lord’.

Further, Paul has already told the Corinthians that they are to ‘seek to excel’ (ζητεῖτε ἵνα περισσεύητε) in building the church (πρὸς τὴν οἰκοδομὴν τῆς ἐκκλησίας [14:12]). He also wants them to do everything for the glory of God. In doing so they are following Paul’s example and cause offence to no one—Jews, Greeks, or the church of God—so that many might be saved (10:31–11:1).

Thematically, then, understanding the ‘work of the Lord’ to consist of edification and evangelism fits with Paul’s commands to the Corinthians. But to fully establish this interpretation, I examine how ‘the work of the Lord’ fits in the immediate context of 1 Cor 15, the wider context of the letter as a whole, and the still wider context of the Pauline corpus.

2.1. The Immediate Context of 1 Cor 15

It is worth starting by considering the nature of the relationship between ‘the work’ and ‘the Lord’. Other biblical texts employ the phrase ‘the work of the Lord’ and parallel phrases (such as ‘the works of the Lord’ and ‘the work[s] of God’) in two ways:

First, when people are doing (or commanded to do) this work, the sense is that these are works that God *requires* or that people do in service to God (e.g., Num 8:11; Jer 48:10). This sense appears in John’s Gospel when the crowd asks Jesus what they must do to do ‘the works of God’ (τὰ ἔργα τοῦ θεοῦ). Jesus answers them that ‘the work of God’ (τὸ ἔργον τοῦ θεοῦ) is to believe in the one whom God has sent. In other words, the work of God here is a requirement. So in 1 Cor 15:58, Paul may simply be exhorting the Corinthians to continue to abound in the work that the Lord *requires* of them.

Second, this type of phrase occurs in texts which speak of the work that God himself has done or will do (e.g., Exod 32:16; 34:10; Deut 11:7; Ps 28:5). The second half of 1 Cor 15:58 may indicate that this is what Paul has in mind: the Lord is actively involved in this work, which is *his* work. ¹⁷ The reason that Paul gives in 15:58 that the Corinthians should continue in the work of the Lord is that they ‘know that their labour *in the Lord* [ἐν κυρίῳ] is not in vain’. Given the relative frequency and flexibility of Paul’s participatory language, it is probably wise not to rest too much theological weight on the use of ἐν κυρίῳ. Nevertheless, it is certainly *possible* that Paul’s use of the phrase indicates a conviction that as Christians work in this way, they are actually participating in the work of the risen Lord. This is, after all, how Paul understands his own ministry in Rom 15:17–19, namely, it is what Christ has accomplished through him (κατειργάσατο Χριστὸς δι’ ἐμοῦ). As Wagner notes, ‘Paul’s sense of participation in Christ lies at the root of his understanding of his own role as an apostle and missionary’. ¹⁸ So it may be that in exhorting the Corinthians to abound in the work ‘of the Lord’ and to labour ‘in the Lord’ he is not simply calling them to be active in the way that the Lord *requires* of them but that they should participate in the work that the Lord himself is doing.

In any case, the motivation to work in this way is the knowledge (εἰδότες) that their labour (κόπος) ‘is not in vain in the Lord’ (οὐκ ἔστιν κενὸς ἐν κυρίῳ). Precisely because there is a resurrection of the dead, what

they do ‘in the Lord’ has meaning and value. ¹⁹ Here the *maximal* interpretation is absolutely correct: the resurrection motivates and grounds the believers’ working for the Lord. Because of the resurrection, believers can do ‘the work of the Lord’ confident that because of the resurrection their work has meaning and eternal significance.

But by expanding on ‘work’ (ἔργον) by paralleling it with the word ‘labour’ (κόπος), Paul points to a more specific understanding. Paul uses κόπος exclusively to denote activity that requires *exertion*. ²⁰ This at least suggests that the ‘work of the Lord’ is *strenuous* work and fits with the idea that the activity is *specific* Christian ministry rather than general Christian activity. Κόπος is a ‘term for missionary work and for work in the local church’. ²¹ Throughout Paul’s letters the goal of his labour is to proclaim the gospel and establish the churches. ²² To parallel κόπος with ‘the work of the Lord’ suggests that Paul understands the latter phrase as the same sort of ‘gospel’ labour that he himself has been involved in.

By telling the Corinthians that they should abound (περισσεύοντες) in the work of the Lord since they know that their labour (κόπος) in the Lord is not in vain, Paul is drawing a parallel with his own apostolic labour. Already in v. 10, he has compared himself to the other apostles by saying that he laboured (ἐκοπίασα) more (περισσότερον) than any one of them. He then corrects himself in that it is not simply his own effort since the grace of God is with him (οὐκ ἐγὼ δὲ ἀλλὰ ἡ χάριτος τοῦ θεοῦ ἢ σὺν ἐμοί). Here we have the ideas of God’s gracious empowering and of abounding apostolic labour. The thematic and verbal parallels between vv. 10 and 58 suggests that the latter exhortation parallels the former description, which in turn suggests that we understand the labour and work that Paul wants the Corinthians to abound in to parallel his own apostolic labour: it is labour with the goal of the gospel progressing and Christians being built up in the gospel. That is, it consists of evangelism and edification.

As we examine Paul’s other uses of ‘work of the Lord’ and related phrases, we will see that the specific interpretation comes clearly into focus.

2.2. The Wider Context of 1 Corinthians As a Whole

In the rest of 1 Corinthians, Paul makes a number of references to work that are germane to our discussion of ‘the work of the Lord’ in 15:58. ²³

2.2.1. 1 Cor 3:9–15

So in 3:9, he describes himself and others such as Apollos as ‘fellow workers’ (συνεργοί) who belong to God (θεοῦ). ²⁴ Each one will have their work become manifest on the last day (ἐκάστου τὸ ἔργον φανερόν γενήσεται [3:13]) when the nature of each one’s work (ἐκάστου τὸ ἔργον ὁποῖόν [3:13]) will be tested ‘by fire’ leading to the worker’s suffering loss or reward (3:14–15). Though Paul does not use the phrase ‘work of the Lord’, the description of Paul and Apollos as ‘God’s workers’ connects the two passages. The work that Paul and Apollos do as God’s workers is work directed to the Christian community, whom Paul describes as ‘God’s field’ and ‘God’s building’ (3:10). Paul and Apollos do the work with the Corinthians as the object of the work: it is the work of building up the people of God (3:10). Verses 11–15 further specify the nature of the work. Again, it is the work of building the people of God, a work that is carried out on the foundation (θεμέλιος) of Jesus Christ (3:11). God’s work that Paul and Apollos are engaged in is the work of building the church.

2.2.2. 1 Cor 16:10

Then in 16:10, Paul exhorts the Corinthians to put Timothy at ease when he comes since ‘he is doing the work of the Lord’ (ἔργον κυρίου ἐργάζεται) just as Paul himself is (ὡς καὶ γώ). Paul puts himself and Timothy before the Corinthians’ eyes as those who do the work of the Lord. Again, this suggests that there is a specific goal to ‘the work of the Lord’. It is something that Paul can point to himself and Timothy doing. Paul and Timothy are involved in the work of building the church. Paul has already said that he will be sending Timothy to teach them (4:17). ²⁵ Rather than a general term, ‘the work of the Lord’ that Timothy is doing has a specific, *identifiable* goal. ²⁶ In applying it here to himself and to Timothy, Paul assumes that the term is concerned with *ministry* to other Christians.

2.2.3. 1 Cor 16:15–16

A few verses later in 16:15–16, Paul commends the household of Stephanus and tells the Corinthians that they are to be ‘subject to such as these’ and to ‘every fellow worker and labourer’ (παντὶ τῷ συνεργῶντι καὶ κοπιῶντι). Here Paul includes Stephanus, his household, and others like him in the category of ‘worker’ and ‘labourer’. As he continues he describes the household of Stephanus as ‘the first converts in Asia’ and as having ‘set themselves in service to the saints’ (εἰς διακονίαν τοῖς ἁγίοις ἔταξαν ἑαυτούς). It seems, then, that the nature of their work and labour is the service to the saints.

As such, in the immediate context of 1 Cor 15:58, Paul identifies his fellow ‘workers’ and those doing the ‘work of the Lord’ as those who are active in ministering to and serving the needs of others in the church. In 15:58, he is calling the Corinthians to participate in this ministry, to give themselves also to the work given by the Lord of serving and building his church.

Throughout 1 Corinthians, then, ‘the work of God’ and ‘the work of the Lord’ is the particular work extending the gospel and establishing churches. Because of the resurrection, Paul gives himself to this work at great personal cost (15:30–31) and calls the Corinthians to be involved in this work (15:58).

2.3. The Wider Context of Paul’s Corpus

A similar phenomenon occurs across the rest of Paul’s letters: while Paul discusses ‘work’ in a general way (cf. Col 3:22–24), he draws attention *specifically* to Christian work that is closely tied to the work of establishing and edifying the churches.

2.3.1. Phil 2:30

Perhaps the most significant parallel text in this regard is Phil 2:30, where Paul exhorts the church to receive Epaphroditus in the Lord since he nearly died for ‘the work of Christ’ (τὸ ἔργον Χριστοῦ).²⁷ Though the precise historical details are disputed, commentators generally agree that the Philippians commissioned Epaphroditus and sent him to Paul with gifts (cf. 4:18) in order to complete what was lacking in their ministry (λειτουργίας) to Paul (2:30). In the course of fulfilling this mission, Epaphroditus falls so ill that he is at the point of death (2:27). Thankfully, God has mercy on him so that he recovers, and Paul is now sending him back to the Philippians (2:28). Paul expands on the nature of this work by stating that Epaphroditus risked his life in order to complete what was lacking in the Philippians’ ministry to Paul (ἵνα ἀναπληρώσῃ τὸ ὑμῶν ὑστέρημα τῆς πρὸς με λειτουργίας). It seems that the mode of his life-risking activity was becoming so ill that he nearly died (2:27). Paul, therefore, sees Epaphroditus’ risking his life in this way as nearly dying for ‘the work of Christ’. There is ‘a clear causal connexion between the bringing of the gift and the risking of his life’.²⁸ That is, we can identify the ‘work of Christ’ in this instance with Epaphroditus’ work in bringing the Philippians’ gift.²⁹

In this context, then, ‘the work of Christ’ means believers ministering to one another for the sake of the progress of the gospel. Epaphroditus is twinned with Timothy, whom Paul (implicitly) describes as seeking the interests of Christ (2:21) and having genuine concern for the Philippians (2:19). Thus, Epaphroditus does the work of Christ by serving Paul while Timothy shares the interests of Christ by being concerned for the welfare of the Philippians. Paul commends Epaphroditus, like Stephanus in 1 Cor 16:16, as his ‘co-worker’ (συνεργός). And like Stephanus, his church commissioned him to serve Paul (1 Cor 16:17–18).³⁰ In the context of the letter, Epaphroditus and Timothy both illustrate the attitude that Christ himself displays in 2:5–11.³¹ However, Witherington suggests that we should distinguish between Timothy and Epaphroditus: Timothy is a long-term partner of Paul and as such ‘an extension of Paul’s own ministry’, and Epaphroditus is ‘an extension of the Philippians’ participation in Paul’s ministry’.³² As Fowl notes, the response due to Epaphroditus ‘is not simply the result of his connection to the Philippian congregation. Rather, he has fulfilled exemplary Christian duties, even putting his life in danger, and his reception should befit that’. The use of ‘such ones’ indicates that Paul ‘considers Epaphroditus part of a general class of people’.³³

‘The work of Christ’ here, then, is work that is specifically related to Christ’s mission in which Paul was engaged and in which Epaphroditus and people like him could share. Paul mentions Epaphroditus partly because Epaphroditus functions as an example of what it means to have the same attitude as Christ (2:5–

11). His actions in almost dying ‘for the work of Christ’ furthered the proclamation of the gospel and the establishment of churches. It is not that Epaphroditus simply risked his life in living out the Christian life in a general way. No, it was his participation in gospel-mission that led him to risk his life. [Phil 2:30](#) is perhaps the closest parallel to [1 Cor 15:58](#) and strongly suggests that Paul has the same ‘work’ in view in both passages.

2.3.2. Eph 4:12

In Eph 4, Paul does not use ‘work of the Lord’ or a directly related phrase, but he does view the Ephesians as equipped to be involved in the work of ministry (ἔργον διακονίας [[Eph 4:12](#)]). This work’s purpose is to build up the body of Christ (εἰς οἰκοδομήν). The Ephesians are involved in precisely the same work that Paul himself gives himself to: edifying the church. This work involves the church’s articulating the truth of the gospel to one another (4:15). ³⁴ As each member does this ‘work’ (κατ’ ἐνέργειαν ἐν μέτρῳ ἑνὸς ἐκάστου [4:16]), the church is built up, and Christians share in the very same work that the Lord is doing for the church (cf. 5:29).

3. Conclusion: The Priority of Gospel Work

In exhorting the Corinthians to abound in ‘the work of the Lord’, Paul is calling on them to give themselves to the specific work of proclaiming the gospel and building the church (i.e., evangelism and edification). Throughout this letter to the Corinthians, this is precisely what Paul has exhorted them to do ([1 Cor 10:31–11:1](#); [14:12](#)). What this looks like in practice will, of course, vary. It could mean risking their lives like Epaphroditus ([Phil 2:30](#)); it could be serving the needs of other believers like Stephanus ([1 Cor 16:15](#)); and it could be speaking the truth in love like the Ephesians ([Eph 4:12](#)). But crucially the *goal* of this work is building the church, and it is this that the Corinthians are to prioritise. Because there is a resurrection and those who are ‘dead in Christ’ will be raised to bear glorious bodies like Christ, believers must give themselves to the work of calling men and women to faith in Christ and to the work of ensuring they remain in Christ.

In some contemporary evangelical circles, it is not popular to speak of priorities. To prioritise one thing is seen as demeaning and devaluing another. Writers are quick to point out that there is nothing more ‘meritorious’ or ‘valuable’ in overtly *Christian* work as opposed to *secular* work and that we should reject the idea of ‘our “secular work” in our office or laboratory as having no eternal consequences, whereas our “sacred work” in our Sunday school class has’.³⁵ But this understanding, in turn, effectively downplays any sense of eschatological priority. Unquestionably, the road sweeper and the pastor stand equal before God, and as the road sweeper does his work, he *is* serving the Lord and will be rewarded ([Col 3:23–24](#)). Whatever their employment, Christians can and must glorify the Lord through their work. The way that they do their work means that their work has meaning and significance and is valuable. We must not lose this Reformation and biblical emphasis. Nevertheless, it is also true that the work of evangelism and edification, is *the* work that the Lord is doing in the world through his people. We must not lose this priority. It is *this* work that Paul gave his life to. It is *this* work that Paul’s colleagues risked their lives for. The resurrection means that it is *this* work that *every* Christian can and must give themselves to.

[1] Robert Kolb and Charles P. Arland, *The Genius of Luther’s Theology: A Wittenberg Way of Thinking for the Contemporary Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 112.

[2] Martin Luther, ‘The Estate of Marriage, 1522,’ LW 45:50; WA 10.2:207 (cited in *ibid.*, 112).

[3] E.g., Tim Keller, *Every Good Endeavour: Connecting Your Work to God’s Plan for the World* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2012).

[4] E.g., Julian Hardyman, *Maximum Life: All for the Glory of God* (Nottingham: IVP, 2009).

[5] Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®, copyright © 2011 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

[6] Tom Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (London: SPCK, 2007), 157. Wright explains in note 13, “This is the logic behind, e.g., [1 Cor.](#)

15:58; see my *The Way of the Lord: Christian Pilgrimage in the Holy Land and Beyond* (London: SPCK; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), ch. 9, and below, Chapter 13.”

[7] *Ibid.*, 205, emphasis original.

[8] *Ibid.*, 219. In his more extensive treatment on the resurrection, N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Christian Origins and the Question of God 3; London: SPCK, 2003), Wright refers to this verse on several occasions, but his concern is not to unpack the content of the *work* and *labour* in view but to establish that Paul’s belief in a *future* resurrection results in a *present* exhortation (e.g., particularly p. 285 but also pp. 223, 231, 359).

[9] R. Paul Stevens, *The Other Six Days: Vocation, Work and Ministry in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 117.

[10] *Ibid.*, 237–38. It is not clear whether Stevens is suggesting that 1 Cor 15:58 does teach that *religious* work is not in vain or whether this is a misunderstanding of this verse. However, his earlier citation implies a maximal understanding.

[11] Christopher J. Wright, *The Mission of God’s People: A Biblical Theology of the Church’s Mission* (Biblical Theology for Life; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 229.

[12] So, for example, Tim Keller in his *Every Good Endeavour*, 29, acknowledges that in this verse Paul ‘was speaking of Christian ministry’ but argues that it ‘can ultimately be true of all work’.

[13] As argued so persuasively by Oliver O’Donovan in *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (2nd ed.; Leicester: Apollos, 1994).

[14] I concentrate on the phrase ‘the work of the Lord’ but at points consider the phrase ‘labour in the Lord’.

[15] Most of the commentators acknowledge that this is the meaning of the phrase—most clearly W. Schrage, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther* (Zurich: Benziger, 1991–2001), 4:385, and Raymond F. Collins, *First Corinthians* (SP 7; Collegeville: Liturgical, 1999), 583. Other commentators acknowledge the specific referent of the phrase but tend towards a broader application. So, for example, Gordon D. Fee (*The First Epistle to the Corinthians* [NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987], 808) suggests that while Paul frequently employs the word labour ‘to refer to the actual ministry of the gospel’, ‘the work of the Lord’ here may ‘refer more broadly to whatever one does as a Christian, both toward outsiders and fellow believers’. That is, ‘these are those kinds of activities in which believers engage that are specifically Christian, or specifically in the interest of the gospel’. Similarly, though Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner (*The First Letter to the Corinthians* [Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010], 838) suggest that what ‘is meant is Christian ministry above all’, they also concede, ‘it probably also includes any activity that would be undertaken out of commitment to Christ . . . that is, any activity that one would not naturally engage in were it not for their faith in Christ’. Cf. Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 588.

[16] Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 26: ‘Paul has repeatedly put his own life and health at risk in order to proclaim the gospel (see, e.g., 4:11–13; 2 Cor 4:8–12; 6:3–10; 11:23–33). If there is no resurrection, why should he bother?’

[17] This understands the phrase as a subjective genitive.

[18] J. Ross Wagner, *Heralds of the Good News: Isaiah and Paul “In Concert” in the Letter to the Romans* (SNT 101; Leiden: Brill, 2002), 331n94.

[19] Whether or not ἐν κυρίῳ qualifies the whole phrase does not greatly affect the meaning: whether their ‘labour in the Lord’ is not in vain or their labour ‘is not in vain in the Lord’ essentially amounts to the same thing.

[20] This nuance is explicit in 2 Cor 6:5, 11:3, 11:27; 1 Thess 2:9; 2 Thess 3:8 (cf. Rev 14:13). It is implied in 1 Cor 3:8; 2 Cor 10:15; 1 Thess 1:3; 1 Thess 3:5. Cf. BDAG, s.v.: ‘to engage in activity that is burdensome’ (cf. the related meaning of ‘trouble’ [e.g., Gal 6:17]).

[21] Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission: Volume 2; Paul and the Early Church* (Leicester: Apollos, 2004), 1437.

[22] Schnabel cites 1 Cor 3:8; 2 Cor 10:15; 1 Thess 1:3; 3:5; and 1 Tim 5:17 as well as 1 Cor 15:58 in this regard.

[23] Paul can also refer to ‘work’ in a more general sense. So, in chapter 4 he defends himself and his fellow apostles in the light of what appears to be Corinthian triumphalism. In doing so, he describes how he and the other apostles ‘labour’ (κοπιῶμεν) by working with their hands (ἐργαζόμενοι ταῖς ἰδίαις χερσίν [4:12]). Similarly, in chapter 9 it seems as if the Corinthians looked down on Paul and Barnabas compared to the other apostles since Paul asks whether only he and Barnabas do not have the right to be supported (9:11–12) and not to have to work (οὐκ ἔχομεν ἐξουσίαν μὴ ἐργάζεσθαι [9:6]). Paul points out that those who work in the temple (οἱ τὰ ἱερὰ ἐργαζόμενοι) obtain their living from the temple (9:13).

[24] This understands the genitive as possessive as do Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 304, and David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker,

2003), 113. Garland notes that the two other genitives (θεοῦ) in this verse are clearly possessive.

[25] Specifically to remind them of 'his ways in Christ'. I am assuming the original unity of the letter. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 32; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 49, lists Barrett, Belleville, Bruce, Collins, Conzelmann, Fee, Garland, Hurd, Kümmel, Marxsen, Mitchell, and Murphy-O'Connor as proponents of this position.

[26] C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (2nd ed.; BNTC; London: Black, 1968), 391: 'Paul defends Timothy because "he does the Lord's work as I do myself". That is, he engages in the same task of evangelism and of building up the churches, and conducts it in the same manner as Paul'. Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians: A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 297: 'The phrase is explained by the idea of church and mission'.

[27] Moisés Silva, *Philippians* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 141, notes that the textual support for (τοῦ) Χριστοῦ is 'overwhelming'.

[28] B. S. McKay, "Further Thoughts on Philippians," *NTS* 7 (1960–1961): 169, which many commentaries cite.

[29] The specific 'ministry' was probably the provision of finance (cf. 4:16–18)—so Ben Witherington, *Friendship and Finances in Philippi: The Letter of Paul to the Philippians* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994), 79.

[30] Witherington (ibid.) thinks that this suggests that Epaphroditus was a leader in the Philippian church.

[31] Paul may also be making a specific parallel between Epaphroditus and Christ. While Christ was 'obedient unto death', Epaphroditus 'came near to death' (Walter Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians* [Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009], 208).

[32] Witherington, *Friendship and Finances*, 82.

[33] Stephen E. Fowl, *Philippians* (THNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 138.

[34] See particularly Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Pillar New Testament Commentary; Leicester: Apollos, 1999), 310–11, for a defence of this interpretation.

[35] Hardyman, *Maximum Life*, 93.

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RobbieB

Thanks Peter for a really encouraging article. An encouragement to us all, whatever we do, to keep going with God's priority of speaking the Gospel to others, reaching our generation with the Gospel, and building up the church as we speak the truth in love. It's a great truth that gospeling isn't in vain even if we don't always see immediate fruit. Praying we'll not get distracted from this priority.

Murray Wright

I have enjoyed the discussion on this critical issue but acknowledge that the theological nuances are a little challenging for me as a lay person. So may I add a slightly different perspective in relation to how we will actually reach people with the Gospel.

At the 2010 Lausanne Conference in Capetown (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v...>, Mark Greene of the LICC asked the audience to consider two approaches to evangelism:

Approach 1: ~~â€œ~~To recruit the people of God to use some of their leisure time to join the missionary

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