

The Good Work” of Philippians 1:6

Participation with Paul in Furthering the Gospel Message

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INTRODUCTION

Philippians 1:6 is often taken as a reference to the work of salvation that God begins in each Christian’s life starting from the moment of belief. From that, the corollary is drawn that God will continue that work by sanctifying the believer until the time they are finally with the Lord. While it is true that God is committed to the believer’s sanctification and will seek to promote that as long as he/she is in the earthly body, this passage is not addressing the issue of “belief” followed by “sanctification.” Furthermore, a careful study of New Testament shows that there is no guarantee of a believer’s progress in sanctification. That all depends on the believer’s cooperation with the Holy Spirit while living a life of faith and obedience. The following diagram illustrates the context for this crucial verse which should help us understand the proper interpretation.

THE CONTEXT (NASB95 text)

³ I thank my God in all my remembrance of you,

⁴ always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all,

⁵ in view of your **participation in the gospel** from the first day until now.

⁶ For I am confident of this very thing,

that He who began a good work in you [or *with you*]
will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.

⁷ For it is only right for me to feel this way about you all, because I have you in my heart, since both in my imprisonment and **in the defense and confirmation of the gospel**, you all are partakers (*sugkoinōnós*) of grace with me.

Greek *koinōnía* can mean a “financial sharing” as in 2 Cor 8:4 (“begging us with much urging for the favor of participation in the support of the saints”), or even a “financial contribution” as in 2 Cor 9:13 (“Because of the proof given by this ministry, they will glorify God for your obedience to your confession of the gospel of Christ and for the liberality of your contribution to them and to all”). Cf. Rom 15:26.

Paul comes back at the close of this epistle to refer again to their financial support of his ministry using the **verb form (*koinōnéō*)** that is related to the noun *koinōnía*: “You yourselves also know, Philippians, that at the first preaching of the gospel, after I left Macedonia, no church **shared (*koinōnéō*)** with me in the matter of giving and receiving but you alone.”

Their financial backing of Paul’s ministry to promote the gospel

EXPLANATION

Paul probably wrote Philippians about AD 62 during the time of his first Roman imprisonment (note the reference to his imprisonment for the gospel in Phil 1:12-13). During his second missionary journey (ca. AD 50), Paul and Silas had come to Philippi where they had a fruitful time of sharing the gospel (Acts 16:11-40). This resulted in their being beaten and imprisoned, but God miraculously

freed them, such that even the Philippian jailer heard the gospel and believed. After departing Philippi, Paul and Silas went on to Thessalonica. While there, the new believers at Philippi sent financial support for him. In fact, Paul acknowledges that they did so “more than once” (Phil 4:15-16). Now, more than ten years later, Paul is writing his epistle to the Philippian Christians. The church had sent Epaphroditus, one of their members, to Paul in Rome along with yet another financial gift for his support (Phil 2:25; 4:18). One of his primary reasons for writing the epistle is to thank the church for their financial support, as this was a reflection of their commitment to the gospel message.

Paul’s thankfulness for their financial gift is reflected in verses 3-5: “³ I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, ⁴ always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all, ⁵ in view of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now.” The word translated “participation” is the Greek noun *koinōnía*. The general meaning is “to share in something,” and can be rendered “fellowship” in certain cases. However, *koinōnía* can also have a specialized meaning of “financial sharing,” and that is certainly the meaning here. [See the text box on the first page for examples]. In fact, at the close of his epistle, Paul uses the corresponding verb form of this word (*koinōnéō*) to acknowledge their graciousness in supporting him financially: “You yourselves also know, Philippians, that at the first preaching of the gospel, after I left Macedonia, no church shared (*koinōnéō*) with me in the matter of giving and receiving but you alone.”

In light of the above, the church’s “participation in the gospel” that Paul mentions in Philippians 1:5 is their *financial participation* in helping promote the gospel, something they had done “from the first day until now,” i.e., for many years. Their recent gift sent by the hands of Epaphroditus was yet another indication of their commitment to the gospel. In verse six, Paul refers to this gracious act of theirs as “a good work” that they had done, but it was a work that God had motivated them to do. Hence, God “began” this good work in (or with) them. Paul, however, does not stop at simply acknowledging this. He continues by saying, “He . . . will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.” The verb translated “perfect” is the Greek verb *epitéléō*, which means “to finish something begun” or “to complete” it. God had so worked in the hearts of the Philippian Christians that they were motivated to sacrificially give for Paul’s support, as this was a way of furthering the gospel. Paul then assured the Philippians that they could have the satisfaction in knowing that God would use their gift on into the future. The gospel message would continue going forward, and God Himself would see that the MISSION would be *completed* . . . even to the very “day of Christ Jesus,” that is, until the time of His return.

Finally, Paul turned in verse seven to explain why he had the confidence he spoke of in verse six. In his heart, he was fully assured that the Philippian Christians were partakers with him of God’s ministry of grace . . . the defense and confirmation of the gospel.

CONCLUSION

Philippians 1:6 is not addressing the issue of the dynamic of belief and sanctification in the life of an individual Christian. Rather, Paul is explaining how the “good work” of their financial support for the furthering of the gospel is being used and will continue being used by God long after the Philippian Christians have passed from the scene. The key thing is that they were faithful in their generation to see that the gospel went forth. In doing so, they have set an excellent model for those of us in our generation. May we likewise be burdened and committed to the advance of the gospel!

COMMENTARY REINFORCEMENT

For those who would like additional input, I commend the commentary on Philippians by Mark Keown in the Evangelical Exegetical Commentary series.¹ After analyzing both views (admittedly a bit technical), he concludes by giving seven reasons in support of the same position as I have presented:

The alternative view is that Paul is not speaking of the good work of salvation but is continuing the thought of 1:5 (e.g., Lightfoot, 84; H. A. W. Meyer, 19; Ellicott, 6; Fitzmyer, 249; Hawthorne and Martin, 24–25; Silva, 45–46; Bockmuehl, 62; Melick, 58–59; Schenk, 96–100; Hansen, 50; Cousar, 29–30). That is, the good work is the participation in the gospel, and it is this that God will complete through to the day of Christ. There are also good reasons for taking it in this way. **First**, the two verses are linked by a *ptc.*, *πεποιθώς* (“having been convinced of this”), suggesting continuity of thought and theme. **Second**, this continuity is reinforced by the temporal movement across the two verses, “from the first day until now” and “until the day of Christ Jesus.” **Finally**, “the good work in you” (*ἐν ὑμῖν*) can be read socially as “the good work *among you/through you/by you.*” In fact, “among you” is the more common meaning of the clause in Paul. This shifts the emphasis from internal to corporate participation, which was the theme of 1:5.

Fourth, while this does refer to the creative work of God here, the argument from creation in the OT is ambiguous in that it says nothing of what is created. As noted above, this is likely that language of the new creation God began in Christ in his ministry, and Spirit-empowered resurrection, and is through the Pentecost-empowered believers through his world. This picks up the idea of the first creation and Israel’s formation in Isaiah, God now restoring all nations through his Spirit. **Fifth**, the beginning—end motif is found of the Jerusalem collection in 2 Cor 8:6 (Reumann, 111): “so that, just he began (*προενήρξατο*), likewise also he will complete (*ἐπιτελέσει*) in you this grace.” The parallel here is uncanny and suggests a mission reading, inclusive of but not exhausted by material generosity, as it continues the thought of v. 5, which is broader than just material support. **Sixth**, the suggestion that “until the day of Christ Jesus” requires more than a mission participation reading is simply not assured. Paul has been speaking in the previous verse about the time from the beginning of the gospel in Philippi to the present. This verse *continues the temporal sequence* from the “now” to the culmination of history. An individualistic salvation perspective actually makes less sense, as some of the Philippians will not live to the return of Christ and will die before this point (1:19–23; cf. 1 Thess 4:13; 1 Cor 15:18; similarly Reumann, 112). On the other hand, the mission will go on and culminate at this point.

Seventh and crucially, the notion of “good work(s)” in Paul, *without exception*, is applied to the work of *people* and especially Christians. While *initiated and energized by God* (Eph 2:10; Phil 2:12–13; Col 1:28–29), it is not *directly* God’s work, but *his work through his people*. The most important connection point in this letter is 2:12–13, where believers are to “*work out your own salvation*” (*σωτηρίαν κατεργάζεσθε*; cf. *κακούς ἐργάτας*, 3:2). However, God is the one working (*ὁ ἐνεργῶν*) in them (*ἐν ὑμῖν*) to will and act (*ἐνεργεῖν*) according to his purpose. The work is God’s, for sure, but through his people.

¹ Keown, M. J. (2017). *Philippians* (H. W. House, W. H. Harris III, & A. W. Pitts, Eds.; Vol. 1, pp. 138–139). Lexham Press.