

An Epidemic of Good News #11

Greetings, brothers and sisters in Christ. This is the eleventh instalment of “An Epidemic of Good News,” a devotional Bible study on Paul’s letter to the Philippians. Let’s begin with a prayer.

By your word, eternal God, your creation sprang forth, and we were given the breath of life. By your word, eternal God, death is overcome, Christ is raised from the tomb, and we are given new life in the power of your Spirit. May we boldly proclaim this good news in our words and our deeds, rejoicing always in your powerful presence; through Jesus Christ, our risen Lord. Amen.

In this instalment of “An Epidemic of Good News” I want to look at a curious feature of Philippians that raises a tantalizing possibility about the letter we have before us today. To get to that, let’s go back to that faithful servant of the Gospel, diligent “deacon” of the congregation at Philippi (if not officially, then certainly in his committed service), and messenger sent from Philippi to Paul to deliver the gift that seems to have been the reason for Paul to write this letter; namely, Epaphroditus.

Toward the end of the letter, in 4:10-20, Paul finally gets around to thanking the Philippians for their gift. In that section, Paul says,

I have been paid in full and have more than enough; I am fully satisfied now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gift you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. (Philippians 4:18)

The way that Paul words this sounds like Epaphroditus arrived not too long before Paul dictated this letter to his scribe (probably Timothy). But near the beginning of the letter, Paul says this:

I hope to send Timothy to you soon, so that I may be cheered by news from you. I have no one like him... Timothy’s worth you know, how like a son with a father he has served with me in the work of the Gospel. I hope to send him as soon as I see how things go with me; and I trust in the Lord that I will also come soon. Still, I think it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother and co-worker and fellow soldier, your apostle

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and minister to my need; for he has been longing for all of you and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. He has indeed been so ill that he nearly died but God had mercy on him and on me also so that I would not have one sorrow after another. I am the more eager to send him, therefore, in order that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious. (Philippians 2:19-20, 22-28)

In this section it sounds like Epaphroditus has been with Paul for some time: long enough for him to have been ill and recovered. There is also no mention of a gift in this first section. Paul does not say, “He brought the gift and then got sick.” It sounds more like Epaphroditus was simply with Paul for some time, and because Paul doesn’t want to do without Timothy, he will send the “apostle and minister to my need” back to Philippi instead.

If you look at the letter, you can’t help but notice that it divides into two very different halves. Chapters 1 and 2 are very upbeat, full of positive encouragement for the Philippians. Chapters 3 and 4 have a more concerned feeling to them.

In chapters 1 and 2, Paul takes heart in his imprisonment and says that whether he lives or dies, the Philippians should go on doing as they are doing. The main trouble for the Philippians seems to be the persecution they face in their city.

In chapters 3 and 4, there seems to be another concern for Paul, namely the faction in Christianity that demands adherence to the Law of Moses in order to be a follower of Christ. In 3:4-6, Paul has to assert his own full Jewishness in order then to say:

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. (Philippians 3:7)

This is in the same vein as the arguments Paul mounts against this same faction in Romans and in Galatians. In Galatians 2:12, Paul refers to this faction as, “certain people from James”. It is as though the letter to the Philippians were two different letters written at two different times.

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If we look at the transition from the end of chapter 2 to the beginning of chapter 3, it also seems a bit sudden without any logical connexion between the two. In 2:30 Paul is encouraging the Philippians to receive Epaphroditus with honour, and then suddenly in 3:1 Paul says:

**Finally, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is not trouble to me and for you it is a safeguard.
(Philippians 3:1)**

It is as though someone took two different letters of Paul, both written to the people in Philippi, chopped the end off of one and the beginning off the other, and spliced them together.

Is Philippians really a short First Philippians and short Second Philippians stitched together into a single letter? It is an intriguing thought.

Is one of these halves, maybe, from when Paul was being held in Caesarea Maritima, before he was sent to Rome? And is the second half after he arrived in Rome?

Acts 24:27 tells us that Paul was held in Caesarea for over two years: plenty of time for communication and visitors to move between Philippi and there. And then in Acts 28:30 it tells us that Paul lived in Rome for two years at his own expense. Again, plenty of time for communication back and forth. It also took several months for Paul to make the journey from Caesarea to Rome, so, again, lots of time for word to get to Philippi of Paul's arrest and transfer.

Maybe Epaphroditus brought word from Caesarea that Paul was being sent to Rome, and then volunteered to carry the relief package for him on to Rome

The letters we have from Paul in the New Testament are not all the letters he ever wrote. We know that Paul wrote at least two other letters that were not preserved for posterity: there was a letter before First Corinthians which Paul mentions in I Corinthians 5:9; and a letter to the Laodiceans which Paul mentions in Colossians 4:16.

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We also know from pagan authors of this time, that when sending a letter, the writer of the letter usually kept a copy, and sometimes collated multiple letters into collections. Sometimes others preserved letters and collated them as well. We also know that it was not uncommon to excerpt material from longer works.

The earliest known collection of Paul's letters was gathered by Marcion of Sinope who lived from AD ca. 85 – ca. 160. So, it is not out of the question that in that process of preservation, something of this nature happened to Philippians.

Bishop Polycarp of Smyrna, who lived AD 69 – 155 and was thus about 15 years older than Marcion, wrote his own letter to the people in Philippi, and in it he mentions Paul's letter, saying to the people there:

For neither I nor anyone else can come up with the wisdom of the blessed and glorified Paul. He, when among you, accurately and steadfastly taught the word of truth in the presence of those who were then alive. And when absent from you he wrote you a letter, which, if you carefully study it, you will find to be the means of building up that faith. (Polycarp, Letter to the Philippians, 3:2)

This letter from Paul (or possibly collation of two letters from Paul) would have been a cherished artifact among the people of that congregation. If Paul kept copies, as was the custom at that time, and Paul died in Rome, then the Christian community there would also have had copies of his letters.

The other person likely to preserve copies of Paul's letters was the young man who co-wrote or took the dictation for many of them, namely, Timothy. In the ancient world it was common for the memory of teacher to be preserved in the writings of a disciple. In fact, we only know some people from what their disciples wrote about them or preserved of their words, such as Plato writing about Socrates or Porphyry preserving the lectures of his teacher Plotinus; and we could add, the Gospel writers preserving the words of Jesus, and maybe Timothy preserving the words of Paul.

The possibility that Philippians was originally two different letters written at two different times, maybe even from two different places, and then edited

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together into the version we now have (and that Marcion and Polycarp already had in the early 100's) raises all kinds of other issues, especially about what we think the Bible is and how divine inspiration works.

I think it is useful here to take a step back and briefly look at this this topic.

There is this idea out there that the only faithful way to understand or use the Bible is according to the tenets of modern Biblical literalism. Modern Biblical literalism can be summed up this way:

- It believes that every letter of the Bible is given by God, and that the words of the Bible are literally the words of God, even if they are given through human agency.**
- It believes that every assertion that the Bible makes about anything, be it a matter of salvation or a comment about the nature of the universe is literally true.**
- As a safeguard, this teaching has the escape clause, that these things are true for the original form of the Bible, and it acknowledges that in some places we may not have that original form.**

It may surprise some that this teaching is less than 200 years old. It was developed by a series of professors who taught at Princeton Seminary in Princeton, New Jersey between 1812 and 1921. Their names were Archibald Alexander (1772-1851, Charles Hodge (1797-1878), Archibald Alexander Hodge (1823-1886), and Benjamin Breckenridge Warfield (1851-1921).

They formulated their ideas in reaction to what they saw as the two principle attacks on the authority of the Bible in their time. The first was the new way of studying the Bible coming out of German universities called philology in which one analyzes the language of the text not only according to linguistic principles, but also to determine the layers of composition (how the text may have come into being—the very thing I have been doing with Philippians in this video). The second was the perceived challenge from Charles Darwin's "The Origin of Species."

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The ideas of these four seminary professors were picked up by the organizers of a series of Bible conference in the late 1800's called the Niagara Bible Conferences which produced a faith statement enshrining the ideas of these four men as doctrine. These ideas were also picked up by a certain publisher named Cyrus Scofield who published Bibles. In his famous Scofield Study Bible, Cyrus Scofield (1843-1921) enshrined both the new modern Biblical literalism, and the teachings of another fellow named John Nelson Darby (1800-1882), a defrocked Anglican priest from Ireland who developed the idea of dispensationalism.

These notions—modern Biblical literalism and dispensationalism—came together in the United States in the early 1900's to produce what I consider a toxic theological mix that has contaminated scholarly debate about the Bible, has tried to thwart the advancement of science, and has polarized the politics of that country. It also spills over into other countries, like Canada, and into other denominations like our own Lutheran Church.

The Lutheran understanding of the Bible is far more nuanced and is built on the way that the Church Fathers—those first teachers and theologians of the church from the time after the Apostles until the Second Council of Nicaea in 787—understood and used the Bible.

The Lutheran Confessions put it like this:

**We believe, teach, and confess that the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments are the only rule and norm according to which all doctrines and teachers alike must be appraised and judged...
(Formula of Concord, Epitome, Summary, Item 1)**

The Bible is normative for our teaching. In the Lutheran Confessions, the bible is also is also called the Word of God, but the phrase “Word of God” has to be understood in its larger context. First and foremost, Christ is the Word of God, as it says in John's Gospel:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into

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being through him, and without him not one thing came into being...and the Word became flesh and lived among us... (John 1:1-3a, 14)

God spoke the Word and made the world, so the creation is the first Bible, the first material record of God's speaking, proclaiming to us the glory of God, as it says in Psalm 19:

The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims God's handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. (Psalm 19:1-4a)

The human Bible, the written text, comes only much later, as a testimony of God's actions among the people, passed from generation to generation. The purpose of the Bible is to bear witness to God's actions, not abstractly, but in the context of the real-life shortcomings and failures of human beings trying to be faithful or even rejecting God's calling to them. The Bible is a vehicle for the Holy Spirit to awaken faith in people.

But remember, before the 1900's, most people in the world were illiterate. The proclamation did not come to them by reading, but by having the Word proclaimed to them. The modern obsession with the literal meaning is exactly that: a modern obsession. It arises out of a confusion of the purpose of science and the purpose of the Bible. Science is an analytical tool, a method of research and investigation, to try to figure out how things work. The Bible is to awaken faith.

Let me leave that now, and move to another related topic: who were the people who got inspired by the Holy Spirit in the long complex process by which the Bible emerged and evolved over the course of some 1,000 years? Was it only the original authors? Do editors not qualify for inspiration? Are collators excluded from God's inspiring grace? Are translators beyond the pale? And the larger community of faith in which this process took place, does it count for nothing? Was the entire process only driven by individuals closeted in their rooms secretly writing things down that God told them to write?

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No, it was many things coming together. Beyond the individuals, it was also groups of faithful people who worked together to agree on common texts and common lists of books. Isn't that what a norm is: a commonly held standard? It doesn't actually matter how the Bible came together. As I said, it was a long and complex process that in some ways is not done yet. But what we are preserving here is not some hidden message. It is the good news of God reaching out to us humans, to save us from our worst selves and shape us into people of love, mercy, and compassion, as well as of justice and responsibility. That's the point.

Or, as I have said before, it's all about faith in Christ; the rest is window dressing.

So, it may be that Philippians is a collation of two different letters. On the other hand, most Biblical scholars today don't think it is. There are various ways to account for the sudden shift in tone and the odd way that Paul doesn't thank the Philippians until the end. It may be that Paul began to dictate and had to set the letter aside while Epaphroditus recovered from his illness. By the time Paul and Timothy picked up the writing again, Paul had lost the thread and re-dictated what is now the beginning part, leaving the ending the way it was before. It wouldn't be the first example of poor editing on an author's part.

But none of that diminishes the role that this letter plays for us as people of faith. Paul gives testimony to the grace and power of God at work in his life and in the lives of the people around him. He is an example of remaining faithful to Christ even at the cost of his life. The generations of those who followed him would treasure his words and hand them on so that they could inspire again and again—or, to put it differently, the Holy Spirit chose to use this man's testimony to be the vehicle to awaken faith in others.

In the next and final instalment of "An Epidemic of Good News," I will look at the legacy of the congregation in Philippi in the centuries that followed. Let's close with the Lord's Prayer.

Our Father, who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,

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**Thy will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever.
Amen.**