

An Epidemic of Good News #9

Greetings, brothers and sisters in Christ, I'm Pastor Curtis Aguirre of Our Redeemer Lutheran Church in Penticton, British Columbia, and this is instalment 9 of, "An Epidemic of Good News," a devotional Bible study series on Paul's letter to the Philippians. Let's begin with a prayer.

Almighty God, your Holy Spirit equips the church with a rich variety of gifts. Grant that we may use them to bear witness to Christ in lives built on faith and love. Make us ready to live the Gospel and eager to do your will, so that we may share with all your Church in the joys of eternal life, through Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. Amen.

In this instalment of "An Epidemic of Good News," I will look at the people whom Paul names or mentions in his Letter to the Philippians and see if they can tell us anything about either the congregation in Philippi, or the young Church in general at that time.

In Philippians 1:1, it says...

Paul and Timothy, slaves of Christ Jesus: To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons...

So here we have Paul, Timothy, and the saints in Philippi, of whom some are bishops and deacons.

We know about Paul, so let's look at Timothy for a moment. We actually have a fair bit of information about Timothy—more than I want to get into here—but let me summarize his role this way. Timothy was Paul's "number one man" for a fair chunk of Paul's ministry. He travelled with Paul many times; Paul sent him on various missions; and he is mentioned as the co-author of 6 of Paul's letters: 2 Corinthians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Philemon, and of course Philippians.

Timothy gives us a window on the people Paul was reaching out to on his missionary journeys. Timothy's mother Eunice and grandmother Lois (2 Timothy 1:5) were diaspora Jews like Paul: people of Jewish heritage and faith who lived outside of the land of Israel and were therefore somewhat enculturated into the dominant culture of where they lived.

Timothy was from the city of Lystra, in the region of Lycaonia in south central Anatolia (Anatolia corresponds roughly to modern day Turkey). The common people there still spoke the native Lycaonian language that traced its roots back to the Hittites 1,000 years earlier; but Timothy's father was a Greek (Acts 16:1). This tells us two things:

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first, that the Greek language was infiltrating the region, as it had done and was doing in other regions as well, but that it had not yet displaced the native language; and second, that the strict social prohibitions against Jews marrying non-Jews that we see centuries later weren't a thing yet.

Timothy is the embodiment of the kind of Christian identity that Paul is trying to forge: both Jew and Greek, and yet, neither Jew nor Greek, but an identity completely under Christ. As Paul puts it in Colossians 3:11,

Here there is no more Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free; but Christ is all and in all!

I think one of the most telling details about Timothy and his willingness to serve is that early in his association with Paul, he allowed himself to be circumcised in order to set aside the reservations of the Jews they were preaching to (Acts 16:3). Remember, Timothy's mother was Jewish, but his father was Greek, so Timothy had never been circumcised. Now, to be clear: Paul did not believe that physical circumcision meant anything anymore (as we heard in the section from Philippians 3:2-10 in the last video), but for the sake of spreading the Gospel, Timothy underwent the procedure as an adult—or as Paul might have put it: for a spiritual prize he endured physical hardship.

The next people mentioned in 1:1 are “the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons.” Today, the word “saint” has come to mean something that it did not mean when Paul wrote these letters. The Greek word here is “hagioi,” which simply means, “holy ones.” In Biblical thinking, that which is dedicated to God is holy: the Temple, the Levitical priesthood, the people of Israel, and in the way Paul is using the term here, the believers in Philippi. Our word “saint” comes from the Latin “sanctus” which just means, “holy.” In Biblical thinking, nothing is holy in and of itself except God. Everything else is called holy insofar as it is dedicated to God's use.

When we see the words “bishops and deacons” here we also have to be careful not to impose 2,000 years of church history back onto the words. When I read this passage in the first two instalments of “An Epidemic of Good News” I translated these terms as “overseers” and “assistants” respectively to get past that long history without having to stop to unpack it. But now is the time to unpack it!

The words in the Greek here are “epískopoi” and “diákonoi”. That's in the plural. The singular would be “epískopos” and “diákonos”.

“Epískopos” is “epi-” plus “skopos”. This combination literally means “over-seer”. In English we have a term that means exactly the same thing but comes from Latin: “super-visor”—“over-seer”. But interestingly, the Latin speaking Christians of that time didn't translate the word. Instead they just borrowed it into their language as “episcopus”. The word “bishop”

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emerged in Old English as people started dropping syllables and simplifying the word, as English often does. Episcopus – piscop —bisceop —bishop. But the epískopoi weren't appointed by some higher church authority. The early Christian communities that didn't always have an apostle handy chose people from among their number to oversee the life of the community.

They also chose people to do the nitty-gritty work of helping those in need, distributing food and clothing to the needy, and other things. These they called “diákonoi”. It comes from a word that has the sense of being commanded to do something or sent on an errand. These are the doers, the looking-after-the-details people; or as I like to say, the gofers.

One of these gofers might be the next person we meet in the letter, in 2:25-29, namely Epaphróditos. He is also mentioned in 4:18. Epaphróditos was sent from Philippi to bring Paul the care package, and apparently he suffered greatly for making the long trip because in 2:27-29 Paul says,

...[Epaphróditos] was indeed so ill that he nearly died. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, so that I would not have one sorrow after another. So I am the more eager to send him in order that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious. Welcome him then in the Lord with all joy, and honour such people, because he came close to death for the work of Christ, risking his life for those services that you could not give me.

We know that travel was difficult and dangerous in those days for all kinds of reasons, so you didn't undertake a long journey on a whim. Even today with straight modern roads, paved walking paths, and regular ferries, the journey on foot from Philippi to Rome would cover 1,218 km and take 215 hours or 22 days if you walked 10 hours a day.

Paul put up with the dangers of road and sea for the sake of spreading the Gospel, but he was not constantly on the road. He occasionally spent extended periods in one place, as when he stayed for a year and a half at Corinth (Acts 18:18). But he also covered a lot of ground. He would know well what Epaphróditos faced; and he was all the more appreciative that his “apostle” from Philippi, as Paul calls him (2:25), did all that just to bring a gift. Paul wants the people in Philippi to appreciate his effort too.

We don't know if Epaphróditos was officially a deacon in the congregation, but by bringing the gift to Paul—helping someone in need—he was certainly doing the work of a deacon.

The next people we meet are two women, Euodia and Synthyche. Let's read the section about them.

I urge Euodia and Synthyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion [by which Paul seems to mean Epaphróditos], help these

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women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the Gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers whose names are in the book of life.
(Philippians 4:2-3)

Whenever people have to work together for a long time on something important, conflict is bound to arise. Euodia and Syntyche are key members of that congregation. Paul calls them co-workers in the Gospel. But they are having a disagreement, and it seems to be significant enough for Paul to add a special plea for them to sort out their differences. In one way, it's unfortunate that we don't know what the disagreement was about, but in another way, it means that this passage is not burdened with the details of one particular conflict so that we can reflect more generally on conflict in the church.

When you have a smaller congregation—and these Pauline congregations would have been more like our smaller congregations today—a conflict between key people can tear the community apart because of our natural tendency to take sides. Nowadays, these conflicts are often not really resolved because in the end, someone, or several people, end up leaving the congregation. In those days that wasn't an option if you wanted to be part of the community of the Gospel—a community that sometimes faced persecution—you had to figure out a way to make it work. So Paul is keen to see them agree, and he wants Epaphróditos to help them when he gets back. No rest for Epaphróditos, I guess.

So, yes, the church in Philippi is a great group of people, very committed, prepared to go the extra mile and more; but they're still a group of people with flaws and shortcomings who still need the grace of God in their lives.

You may have noticed another name in that section about Euodia and Synthyche: Clement. I won't be dealing with him in this video because his name will spark a larger exploration of the legacy of Philippi that I will do into in a separate video.

So we end with Paul's final greetings:

Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brothers who are with me greet you. All the saints greet you, especially those in the emperor's household. (Philippians 4:21-22)

Again, we have the saints, meaning all the members of the congregation. Then Paul mentions brothers who are with him: perhaps men from the congregation in Rome that come to see him. But then Paul mentions all the saints in Rome, by which he means, all the Christians in Rome, who may have made up no more than a few dozen. But the most noteworthy thing is that some of these saints are members of the emperor's household.

Does this mean that Emperor Nero's family members are becoming Christian? Probably not. The emperor's household would have included all his slaves and servants. Paul is probably

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talking about some of these people. We know that Christianity had a special appeal to slaves and the poor because it taught that these people had worth in the eyes of God. Most ancient religions implied that if you were a slave or if hardship hit you, the gods had abandoned you or were even punishing you. Christianity proclaimed “Christ crucified,” as Paul says in many places. I promoted a simple lifestyle that saw value in faith and works of compassion—treasure in heaven, as Jesus said—and looked at earthly treasures sceptically. Is called those who follow Christ, slaves of Christ—douloi Christou, as Paul calls himself and Timothy at the beginning of Philippians.

While we can’t know for sure, it would be interesting to speculate how over the next 200 years, a lot of the spread of Christianity was driven by the word of mouth that went from slave to slave in each city, from slave market to slave market across the Roman Empire.

Life for slaves was hard. Next time on “An Epidemic of Good News” I want to go deeper into Jesus and Paul and the life of following Christ in the midst of an abusive world.

Let’s close with the Lord’s Prayer.

Our Father, who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
And for give 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.