The Early Jesus Movement and Its Congregations

Their Cities, Conflicts, and Triumphs

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YBK Publishers
New York

YBK Publishers, Inc.
39 Crosby Street
New York, NY 10013
www.ybkpublishers.com

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ISBN 978-1-936411-07-8

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Eberts, Harry W., 1926-
The early Jesus movement and its congregations : their cities, conflicts, and triumphs / Harry W. Eberts, Jr., Paul R. Eberts.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.
ISBN 978-1-936411-07-8 (pbk. : alk. paper)
1. Church history–Primitive and early church, ca. 30-600. 2. Cities and towns–Rome. I. Eberts, Paul R. (Paul Robert), 1932- II. Title.
BR166.E24 2011
270.1–dc23
2011021118

Manufactured in the United States of America
or in the United Kingdom when distributed elsewhere

11-09

To Pastors in Cities
Throughout the World
Who Are Struggling for
Survival in a Highly Secular Age

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Chapter 6

Paul's Favorite Church: The Church in Philippi

A little stream runs south of the town of Philippi to the sea. This stream, called the Gaggitas River, played a part in three important events that affected the region of Philippi.

In 356 BCE, Thracian warriors attacked the little village called Krenides located near this stream. Krenides, meaning "the town of water-springs," had been established just four years before by Thasians, from the island of Thasos, under the leadership of Callistratos, an Athenian exile. Having only a few men and little materiel with which to defend themselves, the Thasians appealed to Philip, king of Macedon, for protection. He rushed to Krenides with his troops and defeated the Thracians.

Inviting Philip to Krenides to drive out the Thracians was like inviting the cat into the fish market to rout a mouse. Krenides lay on a road between Macedonia and a seaport on the Aegean Sea that connected to a trade route to Asia beyond. Philip already had in mind an attack on Asia and Krenides would provide an excellent staging area for his troops.

Looming above Krenides to the south was Mount Pangaion. Threaded through this mountain were gold mines. Philip cast greedy eyes on the gold. Philip protected Krenides from everyone but himself. With his Macedonian army, he

occupied the town, fortified it, rebuilt it like a Macedonian city, and gave his own name to it. Ever after, Krenides was known as Philippi.

Philip did not get to lead the planned assault on Asia. He was assassinated before he could begin. His son, Alexander, took his place as head of the armies. He used gold from near Philippi to fuel his march into Asia, Egypt, Persia, and beyond. This virtually unlimited source of revenue enabled Alexander to leave Europe to conquer the east and bring it what he termed the benefits of Greek civilization.

To this same stream, three centuries later in the early fall of 42 BCE, an exhausted Brutus came on a hot day. Two years before, Brutus, his friend Cassius, and other Roman noblemen conspired to assassinate Julius Caesar. As devotees of republican Rome, Brutus, Cassius, and their friends believed that Julius Caesar, by becoming Rome's dictator, was undercutting liberties for free Roman citizens like themselves. The assassination took place on the Ides of March, 44 BCE. Brutus and the others with their armies and devoted followers fled to Greece and then to Asia. Marc Antony and Caesar's adopted nephew, Octavius, followed them with their own armies. In the summer of 42, they arrived in Macedonia. Wishing to settle the matter once and for all, Brutus and Cassius left Asia and moved into an area near Philippi. With Antony and Octavius encamped at Amphipolis, the two opposing forces faced each other with only the swamps of Philippi separating them.

Brutus and Cassius believed they were defending a superior position, so they settled down in Philippi near the marshy land to await further events. The swamp seemed impenetrable. Its mosquitoes attacked anyone who ventured into it, its humidity wore out body and soul, and its uncertain footing left men and equipment trapped in its watery clutches. Brutus and Cassius, with their own food supply to Asia secure, waited for the enemy to succumb to fever and starvation.

Marc Antony did not intend to die that way. By day, he seemed to be awaiting his fateful end. By night, he sent

men into the swamp to build roads through it. Suddenly the forces of Antony and Octavius appeared before the republicans' camps. Antony routed Cassius, but Brutus beat back Octavius. In the mists and fog of battle, Cassius could not see his friend's victory. Assuming that Brutus had been defeated too, Cassius asked his adjutant to kill him. But Brutus, though distraught over his friend's death, still mustered strength enough to fortify both camps and await further developments.

How could Antony and Octavius hold out much longer? Their food was gone; their troops were exhausted. Their supply lines to Amphipolis were too long to be effective. But once more Antony drove the troops to cut more roads through the swamp. On the morning of October 23rd, 42 BCE, they again attacked the republican armies. Brutus was taken completely by surprise. His troops were overwhelmed. Worn out from the day's fighting, Brutus arrived near Philippi's little stream at evening. The only honorable action for a defeated Roman commander was to take his own life. This Brutus did. The blood of the noblest Roman of them all mingled for a little while with the waters of the river, then washed to the sea.

A century later, in the autumn of 50 CE, a middle-aged traveller from the east arrived at the banks of the stream. Fired by a vision, he came on a mission. In a night not long before, a man of Macedonia had appeared to Paul in a dream and said, *"Come over and help us"* (Acts 16:9). Pursuing his God-given vocation of bringing the gospel of Jesus Christ to *"all the world,"* Paul of Tarsus set sail from Troas, landed at Neapolis, modern Kavala, and followed the Egnatian Way seven miles over the mountain to Philippi. He inquired of the whereabouts of a synagogue, where he might present his message. Learning there was none, Paul went to Philippi's stream to find a peaceful place for prayer.

On the Sabbath, a small group of women met by the water to pray and praise God. Paul introduced his Christ to them. Their leader, Lydia, heard the message and requested bap-

tism. In the stream that provided sustenance for the troops of Alexander and carried away the blood of Brutus, the baptism of Jesus Christ washed away the sins of Lydia and her friends. The living water of Jesus Christ refreshed their hearts and souls.

The City of Philippi

Philippi in Paul's day was a city small both in land area and population. Perhaps thirty thousand people lived between its acropolis and the swamp. The walls of the city encompassed an area not much larger than the agora of Corinth. Philip the Great, father of Alexander the Great, built the city and its walls for its protection. About seven miles from the sea, it was close enough to the Pangaeon Mountains to become an outpost for the gold found there. Like several Macedonian cities, Philip built his city near the unhealthy swamp probably because its wetlands provided a natural obstacle against invaders.

The city Paul saw still bore marks of Philip's builders but Romans had recently rebuilt it. When Octavius became Emperor Augustus after defeating Marc Antony at Actium and in Egypt, he took control of the entire Empire in 30 BCE. Augustus deported Antony's former partisans from Italy, resettling some in Philippi. It was a logical move. Antony's men had fought in Augustus' joint cause with Antony in the battle of Philippi and were given homes in the city they fought for. Augustus re-named the city Colonia Augusta Julia Philippensis.

Philippi's officials were set to make Philippi a little Rome, as Roman as Rome itself. Its laws were Roman, its language was Latin, its money bore Latin inscriptions. The colony was ruled by two magistrates, called "duoviri" (two men), who also acted as its judges. They were assisted in their deliberations by men of high office in the local senate.

Two kinds of Roman citizens lived in Philippi. Some were citizens by birth, formerly living in Italy or Rome. Others, not

Italian by birth, gained Roman citizenship by performing a service that assisted Roman armies in their campaigns. Speculation is that Paul's family gained its Roman citizenship in this manner. Being from Tarsus, a center of leather-working in a city on the Roman-built Egnatian Way between Rome and the Mideast, Paul's family might have gained its citizenship by supplying tents to the Roman army under Pompey before he stormed Jerusalem in 63 BCE. Roman citizenship gave many benefits to those holding it. Roman citizens were free from arrest in certain extreme cases, exempted from scourging, had some taxes forgiven, and had the right to appeal to the Emperor himself on any charge laid against them.

In addition to Roman citizens recently transported there, other populations, mainly Greek-speaking Thracians and Macedonians, dated back to the area's former rulers. Egyptians, other Asians, and some Africans also lived in the city. Since Philippi had no synagogue, the Jewish population must have been very small.

As with most Roman Empire cities, its focal point was its *forum* (in Latin) or *agora* (in Greek). Small enough to be placed in a corner of the agora of Corinth, it was about three hundred feet long and about half this size in width (the size of an American football field). It contained shops, workshops, baths, fountains, and temples. Unlike those of larger cities like Ephesus, Philippi's one agora served both government and commercial functions.

On the forum's northern edge was the Via Egnatia, the main military and commercial highway through Greece that joined the city of Rome with its eastern Empire. Uncovered by archaeologists, this marble-paved road bears the marks of wagons and chariots that rolled across it and memories of battle-ready Roman legions that marched over it. A temple stood at the west end of the forum where the road from Rome entered, and another stood on the east end where the road exited. Near this latter temple was the town library.

Government functions were concentrated in the forum's northern half. The Senate Hall, the hall of weights and mea-

sures, and meeting halls were on the west side. Touching the Egnatian Way at the most prominent location in the center of the forum was the *bema*. On this elevated rostrum, orators delivered their speeches, messengers announced the day's news, and trials like those that were to befall Paul and Silas were held. The tall acropolis rose just off the forum's northern edge beyond the Egnatian Way. Its unscaleable walls offered further protection should an enemy attack. The town prison was probably fashioned from a cave at the base of the acropolis, conveniently just north of the bema where justice was dispensed.

A line of shops on a marble road in the middle of the forum separated the commercial agora from the governmental. The shops faced south to pick up the sun's rays. Their salesrooms opened on the agora, with workrooms behind the salesrooms and owners' apartments behind the workrooms. On the southern edge was a long portico covering the whole 300-foot length of the forum. Fountains, monuments, and colonnades were scattered throughout emulating Rome on a smaller scale.

Buildings, statues, and monuments from former times were found in and around Philippi. A Greek theater built by Philip was within walking distance of the forum to the north and east. Small niches to house statuettes of gods were cut into the acropolis' rock facing, as were traces of votive reliefs. Houses and dwellings of all shapes and sizes surrounded the forum. Everything necessary for civilized living in the wilds of Macedonia was provided for the Romans living in Philippi.

The Church in Philippi

Previous to coming to Philippi, Paul was precluded from carrying his gospel into the Roman provinces of Asia and Bithynia. Luke described this part of the mission journey of Paul and Silas in an unusual way. *"They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the holy*

*spirit to speak the word in Asia. When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the spirit of Jesus did not allow them" (*Acts 16:6–7).

Luke's *pneumatos* ("holy spirit") description in Acts of why Peter and Silas went to Greece instead of Asia indicates that, for Paul, decisions made in church councils were decisions bearing the imprimatur of Jesus Christ. Because a council was a meeting of Christians who were witnesses to Christ's resurrection, Paul was certain that Christ determined councils' deliberations. Councils' actions could be called the actions of Christ himself. The spirit of Christ due to the Council's decision, then, prevented Paul and Silas from entering certain territories where Jews were more likely to be located. Macedonia was one location where few if any Jews were found.

This first venture of Paul into Greece was probably carried out in response to the agreement among the Christian leadership reported in Galatians 2:7–8. By the terms of this pact, Paul was instructed to bring his gospel not to the circumcised but to the uncircumcised. Philippi, a purely Roman and Greek city with hardly a Jew in its population, was a place that fit this description perfectly. Paul and Silas came to Philippi in the autumn of 50 CE (Acts 16:11 ff). Paul entered Macedonia at Neapolis (now called Kavala) by following the Egnatian Way east for seven miles or so until he came to Philippi. There being few if any Jewish people in the town, and no synagogue where they might begin their ministry, they came instead upon a group of Greek Gentile women worshiping by the Gaggitas River, the stream just behind the city's western wall. For ancient peoples, water for worship was indispensable, since worship was usually preceded by a form of ritual bath. If the selected place of prayer was also surrounded by a wall offering protection from prying eyes, so much the better.

The place the women found for their worship offered both water and privacy. After conversation with them, Paul baptized their leader Lydia and she offered the men the

use of her home as a base for spreading the Christian faith in Philippi. Lydia was a godfearer from a Jewish point of view. A native of the Asian city of Thyatira, near Ephesus, she was a dealer in purple goods. As a dealer in purple, she was probably rather wealthy. Purple cloth was the most expensive dye color of the time, usually sold exclusively to royalty and the rich. Made by extracting a single drop of color from the shell of a sea snail or oyster, the process was expensive, in both the labor required and the danger to those engaged in the work. Harvesting many sea snails and oysters required the work of a multitude of slaves, some of whom died young from their time under water and others from infections due to slashing their hands in working with recalcitrant shells. But the resulting dye-color was much sought by those wanting to wear only the most distinctive and expensive clothing.

In her native Thyatira, Lydia learned about the Jewish faith and was attracted to it. But, as a woman, she had no opportunity to become part of the covenant community. She was a householder and, since the name of her husband is not mentioned, it can be assumed she was a widow. On her baptism, she led the worship in her new faith with her friends. Her influence and wealth were undoubtedly prime factors in establishing the Philippi church.

Paul, Silas, and Lydia faced a daunting task in Philippi. Previously Paul and Silas proclaimed their faith by going to synagogues where people were already organized to meet for worship, social events, rites of passage for their youth, weddings, and other occasions they shared together. But Philippi had no synagogues or traditions for common people to come together voluntarily for whatever reason. In contrast, the city's noblemen, as usual in Roman cities, had informal organization among themselves featuring dinner parties, celebrations, entertainments, and meetings on city affairs (Weber, 1962: 105). In most cities ordinary people were excluded from such associations and the formation of organizations with regularly-scheduled gatherings such as on a Sabbath

by ordinary people might even have been looked upon as a threat to social order.

In Philippi, then, Paul and Silas had to create a whole new social organization where common people had no traditions to do so. They used a synagogue model for doing this by holding regular worship services with its repetition of creeds, prayers, blessings, and even fellowship meals. These are the things which bind people one to another and help in determining overall life goals, in this case to become the body of Jesus Christ in Philippi.

Since the church in Philippi was so new to people there, this church could also come as near as any among the early churches of the Christian movement to fulfilling the original apostolic design. Apostolic churches' charters decreed that there be no difference in treatment of *"Jews and Greeks… slave and free…male and female"* (Gal 3:28). The church in Philippi was founded by a set of women led by Lydia and was eventually made up of people drawn from all Roman and Greek strata in society. The slave, Epaphroditus became a trusted member, and the church became well enough organized to assist Paul and Silas in their efforts to proclaim the gospel in Thessalonica and Berea and wealthy enough to take up a collection for the church in Jerusalem.

Since the people of Philippi had no Jewish traditions among them and did not know Torah Law, Paul and his congregation also went about discovering a new vocabulary through which to communicate with one another. Paul's Letter to the Philippians illuminates this inner life of Philippi's congregation. In its present form, his Letter actually contains at least three short letters bound into this one document; the final letter was written from Rome about 63 CE.

4:10–20, Paul's letter of thanks to the Philippians for what they had done for him;
1:1–2:30, 4:21–23, Letter written in defense of Epaphroditus; and
3:1–4:9, Paul's last testament.