

CHURCH HISTORY

The Early Jewish Church: A.D. 30-44

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Early Church History, part 4

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. For the first seven or eight years of primitive Christianity, the church was made up entirely of converted Jews, and Jerusalem was the hub of Christianity for 14 years (ca. A.D. 30-44). This portion of church history is recorded in Acts 1–12.
- B. Luke, the author of the book of Acts, informs his readers that his history simply is a continuation of Luke's Gospel. The Acts is a history recording the work of the resurrected Christ in the founding of the church, and the moving of Christ in his apostles and people to spread the gospel by the power of the Holy Spirit.
- C. Christ clearly told his disciples that their task was a spiritual one in which they would be empowered by the Holy Spirit to be a witness to Jerusalem, Judea and the ends of the world (Acts 1:8).

II. THE CHURCH AT JERUSALEM (A.D. 30-38)

- A. In the city that so violently opposed Christ, the Lord chose to establish his primitive Church; thus they were to learn to suffer for Christ (cf. John 15:18-19).
- B. Jews from all parts of the Mediterranean world were present at Jerusalem to observe the Feast of Pentecost at the time of the founding of the church (Acts 2:5-11). On the Day of Pentecost (ca. A.D. 30), the Apostles were given the gift of tongues and Jews from all over the then known world heard the gospel in their own language (Acts 2:1-6). On the Day of Pentecost at least 3,000 accepted the Lord Jesus and were baptized (Acts 2:41). In this manner that spiritual entity or organism, the invisible church, the body of the resurrected Christ, came into being in conjunction with the outward structures of the visible church.
- C. Growth in numbers was rapid for the church. Within a few weeks the church reached 5,000 in number (Acts 4:4). Multitudes became part of the church

(Acts 5:14), and many of these were Hellenistic Jews (Acts 6:1) who were in Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Pentecost. Many Jewish priests also responded to the Lord Jesus (Acts 6:7). The Holy Spirit was mightily at work, and the Christians must have been zealous witnesses, for many were being saved.

III. PERSECUTION TO THE CHURCH AT JERUSALEM

- A. The rapid growth of the early Church soon raised much controversy. The religious authorities in Jerusalem soon realized that Christianity was a major threat to Judaism. Thus the Sanhedrin (Pharisees and Sadducees), which with Roman permission supervised the civil and religious life of the state, soon brought political and social persecution to the Church.
- B. John and Peter were the first objects of persecution, but they chose to obey God rather than men (Acts 4:18-21; 5:17-29).
- C. Stephen, who was an evangelist and deacon, was the first Christian martyr. After Stephen preached to the Jews about Christ as Messiah, the only way of salvation, the Jews stoned him to death (Acts 7:54-60). Stephen's death was witnessed by Saul of Tarsus, and it is believed by some that this cruel death made an impact upon Saul which the Lord later used in Saul's conversion.
- D. The Jewish persecutions of the early Church, especially those brought by the Pharisee Saul of Tarsus, were designed by God to spread the Christians everywhere so that the gospel would be preached (Acts 8:1-4). Historically, it seems that the church always grows under persecution, and that persecution is often used by God to spread the gospel.

IV. THE NATURE OF THE EARLY CHURCH

- A. The early church originally met in the temple, but after being accused of being a Jewish cult was forced out of the temple into the homes of believers (Acts 2:42-47). The early church met in homes, and there were no church buildings until some two hundred years later.
- B. Some have used the early Church as an example of primitive communism. However, this cannot be sustained. First, their communal efforts were temporary measures designed to meet the needs of Christians who were being severely persecuted by the Jews. Something had to be done or these Christians would have starved, for they had been excommunicated from the synagogue,

around which all Jewish life centered. Secondly, this was a voluntary and not a forced situation. Christians willingly “pooled” their wealth in order to survive. Thirdly, there were some, such as Ananias and Sapphira, who had the liberty to hold or sell their property (Acts 5:3-4). Fourthly, the Bible nowhere supports communism or socialism as a way of life, just as it does not sanction free enterprise.

- C. The purity of the Church of Jerusalem was of utmost significance and the standards were high for the early Church. God disciplined Ananias and Sapphira for their lying (Acts 5:1—11). NOTE: Christian morality is essential for the Lord’s blessing on any group of Christians.

V. THE SOCIAL CONCERN OF THE EARLY CHURCH

- A. The early Church did promote social change in some major areas. Christianity brought forth the spiritual equality of the sexes, giving a woman her proper place in God’s program (Acts 9:36). Women throughout history were more or less treated as inferior until Christ raised them to their proper place in God’s order.
- B. The early Church took care of its needy, and did not permit hunger among true Christians (Acts 6:1-6).

VI. THE MESSAGE OF THE EARLY CHURCH

- A. That Jesus Christ is the predicted Messiah of the Old Testament.
- B. That Christ was to and did suffer for sin.
- C. That Christ was resurrected from the dead.
- D. That salvation is found only in receiving Christ as Lord and Saviour.

VII. MISSIONARY EFFORT OF THE EARLY CHURCH

- A. The first seven years were used in reaching Jerusalem and Judea for Christ.
- B. Philip, an evangelist, went to Samaria and preached Christ to a people who were not of pure Jewish blood (Acts 8:5-25).

- C. Philip also reached the Ethiopian eunuch with the gospel. The eunuch was a dark-skinned Gentile.
- D. Peter was used by God to bring the message to Cornelius, who was a Jewish proselyte (a converted Gentile to Judaism). The racial problem was so great between Jew and Gentile that it took a special revelation from God to show Peter that a Gentile could become a Christian (Acts 10:11).
- E. The gospel also went to Antioch, a completely Gentile city, and found great success.