

Essential Church History

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The Incredible Spread of the Gospel

From the moment of its birth on the Day of Pentecost, the very nature of the Church as a forward-moving Body came into being. Just as a baby is born with all its talents and potential already encoded in its genes, so the Church was born with “expansion” written into its very nature. As Bruce Shelley describes it:

“The first forty years saw the infant church spread at a phenomenal rate. It sprang up in most of the major cities in the Roman Empire and was transformed from a tiny Jewish sect into a fellowship of many different peoples.”¹

What can account for such a remarkable explosion of growth? As we study this lesson, we will discover that the incredible spread of the Gospel was due to three inter-related things:

- An Incredible Message
- An Incredible Power
- An Incredible Shift in Thinking

Each of these is an intrinsic aspect of the Gospel itself:

- **The Incredible Message** was the *proclamation* of a Messiah who had been crucified, then resurrected on the third day.
- **The Incredible Power** was a *demonstration* of signs and wonders through the Holy Spirit, who had been released by the Gospel to transform and empower ordinary lives.
- **The Incredible Shift in Thinking** was a *reorientation* brought about by the Gospel itself, which was soon discovered not to be focused solely on Israel, but embraced the whole world!

▶ The Incredible Spread of the Gospel ◀

The Living Church

The Seeds of Decline

Leaven, Leaders and the Word

The Dark Ages

The New Dawn

Truth on the March

Waves of Awakenings

To the Ends of the Earth

The Church of the 21st Century



The First Century

By the end of the first century, churches had been planted through the Eastern Mediterranean, and some had been planted even as far away as Rome, Ethiopia and, possibly, Spain. The main focus of concentration, however, was in Palestine and in the Roman province of Asia Minor (where the seven churches of **Revelation 2-3** were located).

The Second Century

By the end of the second century, churches had spread further throughout the Roman world. The Eastern Mediterranean provinces of Palestine, Syria and Asia Minor, however, remained the center of gravity for the young Church over much of the second century.



The Third Century

In the midst of severe persecution, the Church grew phenomenally. By now it was present in almost every corner of the known world, and had a strong concentration at the very heart of the Roman Empire – Rome and the surrounding country areas of Italy. The shift of gravity from the Eastern Mediterranean toward Rome had already begun.

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EVENING STUDY

These three attributes of the Gospel – proclamation, demonstration and reorientation – set the pace for the early expansion of the Church. But before we examine in detail how the Gospel began to spread so dramatically across the known world, we first need to look at how God prepared the world itself for this rapid spread.

A Prepared World

The Roman world of the first century was a stage specifically set for the rapid expansion of the Church. Its history had paved the way for the spread of the Gospel. As Michael Green remarks:

“The spread of Christianity would have been inconceivable had Jesus been born half a century earlier.”²

Paul clearly indicates that God’s timing in the sending of Christ was impeccable. **Romans 5:6** tells us:

“You see, *at just the right time*, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.”

Likewise, **Galatians 4:4** informs us:

“But *when the time had fully come*, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law.”

No one would question God’s perfect timing in the sending of Jesus. But is it really true, as Michael Green claims, that the “spread of Christianity would have been inconceivable had Jesus been born half a century earlier”? How could a mere fifty years make such a difference?

Before we look at how this could be, we have in modern history a good analogy of how God prepared the way for the Gospel back in ancient times. Mao Zedong (1893-1976) had a desire to spread the ideology of communism in China, and so he built roads and airfields throughout the country. He instituted one language to be taught in the schools in place of the multiple provincial dialects found in the huge nation. He even simplified the written script, so that more of the population of China would become literate. He did all of this for the spread of communism, but without realizing it, he also paved the way for millions of Chinese to hear the message of the Lord Jesus Christ. God used a godless man to prepare an entire nation for the spread of the Gospel.

In exactly the same way, the actions of pagan emperors paved the way for the rapid spread of the Gospel throughout the Roman world in the first century. There are four factors that contributed to this spread:

Roman peace

Read Luke 2:1

Read Luke 3:1-2

Under Augustus, for the first time the whole known world was effectively under the control of one power – Rome. So the Christian Gospel entered the world at a

time of peace unparalleled in history, making travel and communications easy. It was a peace maintained by military force. As Michael Green explains:

“[The Roman army] was, broadly speaking, stationed around the boundaries of the Empire so that, with the frontiers firmly garrisoned, citizens could sleep in peace. Gaul had been conquered by Julius Caesar, Asia Minor by Pompey, and Augustus took pains to advance frontiers to the Rhine and Danube. These were picketed by legions and patrolled by naval detachments. In the East he gained diplomatic successes against the Parthians (whom, for geographical and cultural reasons, it would have been impracticable to include within the Empire) and established the frontier on the Euphrates. All within that area was pacified and Romanized.”³

This meant that people could travel between cities in the Roman empire with relatively little fear from bandits or pirates. Tacitus thus reports the common view that “the Empire was hedged in by sea, ocean or long rivers throughout. Legions, fleets, provinces – all was fully linked together.”⁴ This militarily-enforced peace was known in the first century as *Pax Romana* – the Roman Peace.

Communications

Throughout the reign of Augustus, the Romans concentrated on the development and upkeep of arterial road systems linking the many cities and towns of its Empire, making both travel and the transmission of news easy, and encouraging trade and social contact between the different nations of the Empire. Again, although this was for Augustus’ own purpose, it paved the way for the swift spread of the Gospel, for the early Christians made full use of the Roman road system.

Language and culture

Rome conquered Greece but, as the Roman orator Horace complained, “Captive Greece took Rome captive.”⁵ Due to its previous spread under Alexander the Great, Greek quickly became the common language of the Roman Empire.

Language and thought cannot be separated. If you learn a foreign language, you find you also learn about the people, their culture and how they think. So together with the Greek language came also the thinking of the Greek philosophers, such as Plato and Aristotle. These “thinkers” were disgusted by the crude and depraved behavior of the mythical gods and were groping in their minds towards the concept of a single supreme Deity. Though paganism was still rampant, the monotheistic thinking of the Greek philosophers had begun to permeate the Roman Empire in preparation for the coming message of the Gospel.

Read Acts 17:16-34

Here in the account of Paul’s visit to Athens we are given an example of Greek thinking and culture. The Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, hearing Paul “reasoning” the Gospel in the marketplace, brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus. The Epicureans had originally taught that the supreme good is happiness – but not mere momentary pleasure or temporary gratification. By Paul’s time,

however, this philosophy had degenerated into a more sensual system of thought. The Stoics taught that people should live in accord with nature, recognize their own self-sufficiency and independence, and suppress their desires.

The Areopagus was where these “thinkers” met. It had once been the place of the meeting of the Council which had governed the Greek city-state, but under Rome it retained authority only in the areas of religion and morals. Here, the philosophers liked to share and discuss any new thoughts or ideas anyone may have had. And since they considered themselves the custodians of teachings that introduced new religions and foreign gods, it was natural that they wanted to hear this “new teaching” and its “strange ideas.”

Paul met them where they were – not just in the physical building, but in their thinking. He honed in on the inscription he had seen on an altar “TO AN UNKNOWN GOD,” quoting also one of their poets, and then took them from there to an understanding of the God they did not know – the creator of heaven and earth.

The Greek that Paul used was a sensitive language, ideally suited to expressing the thoughts of some of the world’s greatest thinkers, for it had a ready-made philosophical and theological vocabulary with which Latin (the language of the Romans) could not compare. With Greek as the common language across the known world, God had prepared the way for the communication of the Gospel.

Seven Dramatic Events

Seven momentous events were instrumental in fueling the growth of the Church in the first century. These events were:

- The birth of the Church on the Day of Pentecost
- The outbreak of persecution following Stephen’s martyrdom
- The conversion of Cornelius, the first Gentile believer
- The conversion of Saul, who would become the apostle to the Gentiles
- The establishing of the missionary church at Antioch
- The council of Jerusalem, allowing Gentiles to remain uncircumcised
- The fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple

In this lesson, we will be examining each of these seven events.

The Birth of the Church

The seed of the Church’s phenomenal growth in the first three centuries can be found in the circumstances of its birth. After his resurrection, Jesus appeared to his disciples in the upper room. In this preparatory ministry, just prior to returning to his Father, he laid a four-fold foundation for what would take place ten days after his ascension.

- **Revelation of the Word** – One of the first things Jesus did was to “[open] their minds so they could understand the Scriptures” (**Luke 24:45-49**). It was this revelation of God’s Word which provided the first foundation for

the extraordinary growth of the young Church, for one of the things in which the early Church later “continued steadfastly” was “the apostle’s doctrine” (**Acts 2:42**, KJV). In fact, the expansion of the Church and the expansion of the influence of God’s Word are seen as synonymous (note **Acts 6:7; 12:24**).

- **The empowering of the Spirit** – The receiving of the power of the Spirit was a vital ingredient for the spreading of the Gospel in the first century. The Greek word translated “power” here is the word *dunamin*, which is the root of English words such as dynamic, dynamism, dynamo, and dynamite. It was for this reason that Jesus instructed his disciples in **Luke 24:49** to “stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.” This power transformed them from a cowering, fear-filled group of people into a dynamic force that “turned the world upside down” (**Acts 17:6**, KJV).
- **The experience of knowing Jesus** – In **Acts 1:8**, Jesus declared that the disciples would be “my witnesses...to the ends of the earth.” A witness* is someone who has seen with his own eyes and heard with his own ears. In a court of law, only this first-hand testimony is viable. These disciples had lived with Jesus for three and a half years. They had *seen*. They had *heard*. They had *touched*.† This eye-witness experience, says John, “we proclaim to you” (**1 John 1:1-5**). Even the Church’s enemies noted this defining quality of Christian witness (**Acts 4:13**).
- **The commission to go** – Just prior to his ascension, the Lord had one final word for his disciples. Jesus said: “Go!” (**Matthew 28:19-20**). The focus of the Spirit-empowered believer, by its very dynamic, is *outward* not *inward* – for the whole purpose of the Spirit’s power is to equip disciples to be witnesses to the ends of the earth.

And so, with this heritage the Church was born into the world! But it would not be long before the dynamic of its growth hit the same fierce opposition which had originally sought to crucify the Lord of glory.

The Outbreak of Persecution

The second dramatic event that was instrumental in the spread of the Gospel was the outbreak of persecution following the martyrdom of Stephen.

Read Acts 7:54-8:4

* Although modern Christians never personally see, heard or touched Jesus, we too are called to be witnesses through our own personal experience with the risen Christ. You too qualify as a witness of Christ’s resurrection, for Peter declared in **Acts 5:32**: “We are witnesses of these things, *and so is the Holy Spirit*, whom God has given to those who obey him.” If you have the Holy Spirit in your life, you too are a witness of Christ’s resurrection!

† The very word Jesus used for “witness” entails a readiness to lay down your life for the message of the Gospel. The Greek word *martures* – translated “witness” – is where we get the English word “martyr” from. While dying for the message is not required, the early Christians assumed that their witness would potentially lead to both persecution and martyrdom.

In order to understand just how important this outbreak of persecution was to the spread of the Gospel, we need first to realize why God allowed it to happen. Through the witness of the disciples, thousands had come to the Lord in Jerusalem. The expression of love and fellowship amongst them all was wonderful.

Read Acts 4:32-35

The unity of the believers is not only wonderful but amazing when we realize the diverse make-up of that early Church. Though *all* were Jews, they were still a very mixed social group. The infant Church was made up of four main groups:

- **Galileans** – rough, uneducated “hillbillies
- **Judaeans** – more sophisticated and educated
- **Hellenists** – Greek-speaking Jews from a variety of cultural backgrounds
- A large number of **priests** (**Acts 6:7**)

Read Acts 6

It is important to note that the complaint that arose was from Hellenistic Jews concerned that their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. Their complaint was that the Aramaic-speaking believers (those who had grown up in Jerusalem) were discriminating against the Greek-speaking Jews.* This resulted in the choosing of “The Seven.”† The Seven were Hellenist believers, chosen to meet the need – a sensible, practical decision.

It is this great “mix” of Galileans, Judaeans, Hellenists and priests who “were of one heart and one soul” and had “all things in common” (**Acts 2:44; 4:32**, KJV). Who would want to leave that? It took persecution to scatter the believers beyond Jerusalem and fulfill the commission given by Jesus in **Acts 1:8** – to “be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Read Acts 6:5-7:60

Stephen was one of the Seven. As a Hellenist believer, he mixed most naturally with other Hellenist Jews, and so he quickly came into confrontation with the Synagogue of the Freedmen, a Hellenist synagogue in Jerusalem. The leaders of this synagogue (among whom was a young man named Saul) dragged Stephen before the Sanhedrin, who then condemned him to death by stoning.

Following Stephen’s death, fierce persecution broke out as Satan sought to stamp out the fledgling Church (see **Acts 8:1-3**). The believers were scattered, fleeing to safer areas in the provinces of Judea and Samaria and beyond, unwittingly following the outward arrow of **Acts 1:8**, and those “who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went” (**Acts 8:4**). As Gordon Moyes explains:

“In his history, Luke carefully records the next stage of the church’s outward growth when, like ripples on the surface of a still pond, the influence of the

* Though some have described this as the first “divide” or “split” of the church, there is no indication of this in the account. A problem arose, probably due to negligence rather than deliberate discrimination, and a wise solution was applied.

† Although the Seven have often been referred to as deacons, because of the ministry they performed, nowhere in the text is the term “deacon” applied to them.

early Christians radiated out into the known world. Jesus had commanded his disciples to take the message into all the world. The disciples spread the message throughout Jerusalem and Judea. Philip took the message to Samaria. He was supported by Peter and John who helped the word spread in that region. Philip then took the word to the Gaza Strip and the conversion of an Ethiopian then took the message down into the North of Africa. At the same time other Christians were fleeing north into Syria and to Damascus.”⁵

When persecution finally hit, and “all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria” (**Acts 8:1**), it was the Hellenist Jews who began sharing the Gospel *beyond* the Jews to the Gentiles of the Greek-speaking world (**Acts 11:19-21**). This cross-cultural shift, as we will see in a moment, was decisive in the future history of the Church.

The Conversion of Cornelius

Read Acts 10

Not long after Stephen’s martyrdom, the Lord arranges a divine appointment for Peter – an appointment that will ultimately impact the whole world. The story of this divine appointment unfolds in two stages:

- **Cornelius gets supernatural direction (verses 1-8)** – It is very interesting to note that the angel didn’t tell Cornelius to go to Peter, but to send men to bring Peter back to him. Ah, the wisdom of the Lord! The greatest barrier to world evangelism was about to be broken – and it would not happen by a Gentile crossing the threshold of a Jew’s door, but by a Jew crossing the threshold of a Gentile’s door!
- **Peter gets supernatural direction (verses 9-16)** – Around noon (while the midday meal is being prepared and he is hungry) Peter went up on the roof to pray. He sees a vision of a sheet holding unclean animals being lowered from heaven, accompanied by the command: “Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.” As a Jew, this naturally stirs up all his religious heritage and he answers from a sense of righteous indignation: “Surely not, Lord! I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.” The Lord’s answer is very direct: “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”

Peter did not understand the vision immediately. He wondered about its meaning (**verse 17**) and was still thinking about it (**verse 19**) when the men sent by Cornelius arrived. The announcement of their arrival and the instruction to go with them came directly from the Lord. “Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them” was a very necessary directive, for no way otherwise would Peter have gone with Gentiles to a Gentile house (**verse 19-23**). His willingness to go back with them was a revolutionary event that would dramatically shape the history of the Church.

That he has finally got the message is clear in his following actions (**verses 25-28**). Firstly, he actually entered the Gentiles’ house; and secondly, he told those gathered in the house that three things had been made clear to him:

- The Gentiles had been called “clean” by God (**verses 15,27-29**)
- God has no favorites (**verse 34**)
- The Gospel is for all nations (**verse 36**)

To top it all off, God puts his seal of approval on it by pouring out his Spirit upon these Gentiles *even before Peter finishes speaking* (**verse 44-48**), thereby sealing their acceptance into the New Covenant as a divine act, not a human decision.

Peter later has to justify his actions before the brethren in Jerusalem. They, too, respond with stunned amazement: “So then, God has even granted the Gentiles repentance unto life” (**Acts 11:1-18**).

The Conversion of Saul of Tarsus

Read Acts 7:34-8:1

Read Acts 9:1-31

The fourth major event to shape the outspread of the Gospel worldwide was the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. So revolutionary and of such lasting importance was this event that three detailed accounts of it are given (see **Acts 9:1-19; 22:1-21; 26:1-23**) and Paul (as he is later known) refers to it himself numerous times in his letters (see **1 Corinthians 9:1; 15:8; Galatians 1:15-16; Ephesians 3:3; Philippians 3:12**).

Saul breaks into the pages of history at the stoning of Stephen.

Read Acts 6:8-15

Saul, coming from Tarsus, the capital of Cilicia, was probably a member of the “Synagogue of the Freedmen” (**Acts 6:9**), and so would have been amongst those who opposed Stephen, argued with him and brought him before the Sanhedrin, accusing him of blasphemy. Saul would have seen “his face was like the face of an angel” and would have heard Stephen’s eloquent defence (**Acts 7:1-53**). He would have “gnashed [his] teeth at him” and then seen and heard Stephen, “full of the Holy Spirit,” look up to heaven and proclaim: “Look...I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing on the right hand of God” (**Acts 7:55-56**). He would have been there as they dragged him out of the city. The record tells us that the witnesses against Stephen, who were required to throw the first stones in the execution, “laid their clothes at the feet of a young man called Saul” (**Acts 7:58**). And **Acts 8:1** puts it succinctly:

“And Saul was there, giving approval to his death.”

Following Stephen’s martyrdom Paul zealously led the persecution against the Church. “Breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples” (**Acts 9:1**), he “intensely...persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it” (**Galatians 1:13**). He “persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison” (**Acts 22:4**). According to his own words in **Acts 26:10-11**:

“...On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them.”

One of these foreign cities was Damascus. On the road to the city came the event that was to transform this zealous persecutor into the chief propagator of the Gospel and the architect of the Gentile Church. **Acts 26:13-14** takes up the story:

“About noon...as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions. We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’ Then, I asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,’ the Lord replied.”

Blinded by the brilliance of Christ’s glory, Saul was led into Damascus (**Acts 9:8**). There, Ananias was instructed in a vision to go and pray for him (**Acts 9:10-19**). You can understand Ananias’ reluctance, for he had probably been one of the ones scattered by the original persecution following Stephen’s martyrdom. But to Ananias’ credit, he obeys the Lord – only after Jesus assures him that “I will show [Saul] how much he must suffer for my name” (**Acts 9:16**). Ananias then prays for Saul and “something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again.” Saul was baptized and spent a short time with the believers there.

From the moment of his conversion, Saul became a fearless herald of the Gospel. Scales had not only fallen from his physical eyes but from his spiritual eyes also. He immediately went to the synagogues, and with his credentials, he would have been invited to instruct the people. But he surprised the synagogue officials and baffled the Jews in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the promised Messiah. Learning that the Jews were conspiring to kill him, his followers (probably won to Christ from the synagogues of Damascus) lowered him in a basket at night through an opening in the city wall.

Saul went to Arabia, where he spent three years receiving direct revelation from the Lord (see **Galatians 1:17-18**). After this, he went to Jerusalem and tried to join the disciples there. But they were all afraid of him and didn’t believe that he really was a disciple. Only Barnabas (introduced in **Acts 4:34-37** as the one who “sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles’ feet”) was willing to associate with Saul, and he took him to meet the apostles. Saul spent fifteen days with Peter, and then met with James, the Lord’s brother (**Galatians 1:18-19**). He told them of the miracle of his conversion and of the nature of the Gospel the Lord had revealed to him (**Galatians 2:2**).

The Jerusalem believers finally accepted him and again he “moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. He talked and debated with the Grecian Jews.” This was the same Synagogue of the Freedmen where he was so well known. These were the same Hellenistic Jews that had brought Stephen before the Sanhedrin to be judged (see **Acts 6:9-15**). Again “they tried to kill

him” ([Acts 9:19-30](#)). So the brothers sent him back to Tarsus for his safety. He was there for several years – and when he later appeared back on the scene, some very important changes had occurred to the makeup of the Church.

The Church at Antioch

With the outbreak of the persecution originally led by Saul, the believers of Jerusalem were scattered. But everywhere they went, they “preached” or “declared” the Gospel. Three places are mentioned by Luke in particular ([Acts 11:20](#)) – Phoenicia (a province just north of Galilee), Cyprus (a large island about 100 miles from the mainland), and Antioch (the capital of Syria). Antioch was the third largest city of the Roman Empire (only Rome and Alexandria were larger), and was a strategic center for the region. Some have estimated its population at that time to be half a million people – a cosmopolitan mix that hailed from every corner of the Empire. As Michael Green explains:

“It was the center for diplomatic relations with the [Roman] vassal states of the East, and was, in fact, a meeting point for many nationalities, a place where barriers between Jew and Gentile were very slight, so numerous were the converts to Judaism in the city, and so high the status of the Jews there – they enjoyed full citizen rights...As one of the largest cities in the Empire, and one of the great commercial centers of antiquity, with business connections all over the world, Antioch saw the coming and going of all sorts of people from every quarter of the globe. Hellenistic city, Roman city, Jewish city, it was the meeting point of the Oriental and Greek civilizations.”⁶

It is not insignificant that it is at Antioch where, for the first time, the Gospel is preached directly to Gentiles ([Acts 11:20](#)) and that it is here that the believers are first called *christianos* – Christians ([Acts 11:26](#)). This amazing shift of focus from Jew to Gentile resulted in multitudes of Gentiles in Antioch turning to Christ. Even though the Lord had told them it would happen, it still took the Church by surprise.* And it changed the course of Church history – and world history – forever.

As we follow the account of what happened in Antioch there are two distinct “waves” of Gentiles that flooded into the Church.

The first wave

The first wave of Gentile conversions came in response to the original preaching by “those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen” who had “traveled as far as...Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord” ([Acts 11:19-20](#)).

* During the time of his ministry, Jesus had said he had been sent to the lost sheep of Israel (see [Matthew 15:24](#)) and he instructed his disciples to go nowhere except to the “lost sheep of the house of Israel” (see [Matthew 10:5-6](#)). (Note the exceptional faith of the Canaanite woman and of the Roman Centurion broke the time barrier! – see [Matthew 15:21-28](#); [8:5-13](#)). With the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples, however, a new era came into being. This was the significance of the Great Commission ([Matthew 28:19-20](#)), but it took much prompting and pushing by the Holy Spirit for the revelation to hit home that the Gospel was not just for the Jews but for the Gentiles also.

Two Greek words translated “preach” in the KJV are used in this passage. One is *euaggelizo* (**verse 20**) meaning to “announce, declare good news.” The other is *laleo* (**verse 19**), which means to “talk,” “tell,” or “utter words.” This word is less formal than *euaggelizo*, and has more of a spontaneous feel to it. In other words, these believers *prattled* the Gospel wherever they went – even to the Gentiles – and the result was that multitudes believed! It was the “ordinary” believer sharing the reality of Christ that brought a flood of people into the kingdom of God.

The thing that characterizes the spread of the Gospel in the book of **Acts** is the *spontaneous* explosion of life. The new life of those early believers could not be contained. It overflowed wherever they went. As Michael Green describes it:

“It was no official policy of the Jerusalem Church to evangelize this great city. On the contrary it was a spontaneous movement arising from Christian men who could not keep quiet about Jesus their Lord.”⁷

The life of God cannot be confined within man-made structures or restrictions. Like mighty flood waters, it breaks all boundaries and flows out to all around.

The second wave

The second wave followed with the arrival of an envoy from Jerusalem. In response to news that Gentiles had started believing in Jesus as Messiah, the apostles in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to the newly established church at Antioch (**Acts 11:22-24**).

It must have been hard for the “circumcised believers” to comprehend this massive influx of Gentiles into the messianic community of the Church. But Barnabas had the ideal qualifications to act as envoy from Jerusalem to Antioch. He was a trusted leader within the Jerusalem Church and a Levite, but he was also a Hellenistic Jew from Cyprus (**Acts 4:36**).

To a great degree, everything hinged on how Barnabas handled this sudden influx of Gentiles into the Church. But Barnabas was “a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith” (**Acts 11:24**). And with the incident of Cornelius’ conversion now behind the Jerusalem Church, Barnabas recognized “the evidence of the grace of God” and, true to his name (which means “Son of Encouragement”), he “was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts” (**Acts 11:23**).

How grateful we today (and through the generations) are to Barnabas. At his word history could have been different. The Gospel could have been denied to the Gentiles. But, through his sensitivity to the Holy Spirit, he threw open the door of salvation to the whole world! He joined with the believers in Antioch, preaching the Gospel, and “a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord” (**Acts 11:24**).

The Great Shift

But this was not the end of either Barnabas’ or Antioch’s role in the shaping of Church history. Two other things happened at Antioch which sent repercussions right down to today.

The return of Saul

With such a massive influx of people coming to the Lord – of whom a great number were Gentiles who, unlike their Jewish counterparts, had no foundation in the Old Testament – the great need now was for teaching in the Word of God. So Barnabas went to Tarsus to find Saul.

Remember, Barnabas already knew Saul. As a Levite, Barnabas had probably been familiar with the brilliant young protegy of Gamaliel who was officially recognized by the Sanhedrin themselves (as his involvement with the stoning of Steven implies). As we have seen, it had been Barnabas who had accepted and gathered in Saul, the converted persecutor, when everyone else was afraid of him. And now, once again, Barnabas sought Saul out and brought him to Antioch. He knew no one more fitted to minister to the new Gentile converts.

Read Philippians 3:4-6

Read Acts 21:37-22:29

Paul indeed was perfectly suited for Antioch. He had the best of both worlds. He was born a Jew, of the tribe of Benjamin (**Philippians 3:5**) in a family of Pharisees (**Acts 23:6**). His parents named him Saul after the first king of Israel, who was also a Benjamite (**1 Samuel 11:15; Acts 13:21**), but he was also called by his Roman name Paul (**Acts 13:9**), and he uses this name in all his letters to the Gentile churches.

From his parents, Saul had received a knowledge of the Law and Prophets, and was fluent in the Hebrew and Aramaic languages (**Acts 21:40; 22:2-3; 23:6; Galatians 1:14; Philippians 3:5-6**) – he calmed the crowd in **Acts 22:2** by speaking to them in Aramaic. But he was also a Hellenist, born in Tarsus, the capital city of the Roman province of Cilicia, which was a center of commerce that embraced Hellenistic learning and Roman politics. Tarsus had a distinctly Greek character, where the Greek language was spoken and Greek literature was cultivated, and so Paul also spoke Greek. Paul's ancestors were probably among the Jews who were brought to Tarsus in 171 BC to promote business in the region. At that time they would have been given Roman citizenship and so Paul inherited this citizenship (**Acts 22:22-29**). His Roman citizenship gave him privileged access to all the regions of the Empire. Yet he had been brought up in Jerusalem and from early childhood had studied under Gamaliel (**Acts 5:30-41; 22:3**). As D Partner explains:

“Gamaliel, was the grandson of Hillel, who began the Pharisaic school whose teachings run through the Talmudical writings to this day. This is the same Gamaliel whose wisdom persuaded the Sanhedrin to spare the lives of Peter and the apostles (**Acts 5:33-40**). No doubt it was while studying under Gamaliel in Hillel's school that Paul began to advance in Judaism beyond many Jews of his own age and became extremely zealous for the traditions of his fathers (**Galatians 1:14**). Perhaps then also Paul began to experience the struggles with the law he would later describe in **Romans chapter 7**.”⁸

Paul was thus a rare combination of a Hellenistic Jew and a “Hebrew of Hebrews” (**Philippians 3:5**). And so Barnabas sought him out and brought him to Antioch (**Acts 11:25**). This time in Antioch would also prove to be a valuable preparation time for Paul for the call that was already on his life as the “apostle to the Gentiles” (**Romans 11:13; Galatians 2:8-9**).

The sending of Barnabas and Saul

The ground had been laid. The way had been opened. The ministries had been prepared. And now the Lord directs!

Read Acts 13:1-3

This sending forth of Barnabas and Saul marks a new chapter in the mission of the Church – not just because they are sent to the Gentiles, but because they are sent anywhere at all! As D Partner writes:

“Beginning from the day of Pentecost the work in the gospel had been casual and incidental. Contacts were made in the homes, the marketplace, the streets, synagogues, highways, etc (**Acts 3:1; 5:12, 42; 8:26-29; 10:22**). But in Antioch, the Holy Spirit initiated a determined effort to evangelize a section of the Roman Empire (**Acts 13:1-3**). By the Holy Spirit’s instructions, the church separated Barnabas and Paul for this work. With the prayers and encouragement of this church and with John Mark as their assistant, Barnabas and Paul, sent out by the Holy Spirit, sailed for Cyprus (**Acts 13:4**).”⁹

This was not an “out of the blue” direction to Saul and Barnabas. At the very moment of his conversion, the Lord had told Saul: “Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles” (**Acts 22:21; 9:15**).

Read Acts 26:14-18

Saul had seen a partial fulfillment there in Antioch but now his eyes were on the world! He and Barnabas (**Acts 13:4-14:28**), later with Silas (**Acts 15:36-18:18**) and, as time progressed, with a team of up to fourteen others, set out to spread the Gospel across the known world. After almost 30 years of ministry Paul could declare in **Romans 15:19-24**:

“...from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ. It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else’s foundation...But now that there is no more place for me to work in these regions, and since I have been longing for many years to see you, I plan to do so when I go to Spain...”

Stephen Neil explains Paul’s driving ambition:

“It was his aim to work rapidly through all the Gentile countries to the utmost ends of the world. Rome was not his goal; he planned to spend only a brief time with the Roman Christians, and then to move on to Spain – Spain, the pillars of Herakles, which to an age that knew nothing of new worlds in the farther west was literally the end of the inhabited earth.”¹⁰

The Council in Jerusalem

Read Acts 15:1-35

The issue of the Gentile believers came to a head in AD 49 when some men came from Jerusalem, purporting to be sent from the Mother Church, and told the Gentile believers in Antioch that unless they were circumcised according to the Law of Moses they could not be saved. After much debate with them, Paul and Barnabas, with some others, headed for Jerusalem to meet with the apostles and elders to get this issue resolved. Thus the most important discussion affecting world evangelism took place in Jerusalem.

James declares the final decision of the council: This flood of Gentiles into the kingdom of God was the fulfilment of the prophecy of **Amos 9:11-12**.

With this historic decision, based upon the understanding that the great influx of Gentiles was a direct result of the restoration of David's Tabernacle (which represented both the throne of David and the tent of worship he had set up, providing instant access, without the trappings of Old Covenant ceremony, into the presence of God),* the message of the Gospel was finally released from the fetters of the Old Covenant Law, ensuring a wide-open door for the multitudes of Gentiles to come into the covenant community of the Church.

Jerusalem is Destroyed

Read Matthew 24:1-2

Read Matthew 23:36-39

Read Mark 13:1-2

Read Luke 19:41-44

The fulfilment of the Lord's prophetic word in relation to Jerusalem is the seventh dramatic event that affects the spread of the Gospel worldwide. In May of AD 66, a group of Zealots (Jewish nationalists who were resolved to free their land from the Romans) massacred the Roman garrison in Jerusalem. So began a war that lasted four years. In AD 70, Titus surrounded the city, just as the Lord had prophesied.

Read Luke 21:20-24

Read Matthew 24:15-16

The Christians remembered the Lord's warning and fled to Pella beyond Jordan. Thus no Christian was in the city at the time of its destruction. The terrible siege began when the city was crowded with people who had come to observe the Feast of Passover. Hundreds of thousands were slain and many others died from famine and disease. In their victory, the Romans ransacked the Temple. The Holy of Holies was set on fire and "not one stone" of the Temple was "left on another," exactly as Jesus had foretold.

* For a fuller discussion of what the Tabernacle of David represented, see **ES107-03**.

With the destruction of the Temple and the removal of its priests, ritual and ceremonies, the old order came to an end (note **Hebrews 8:13**). Not only so, but the role of Jerusalem as the center of the Christian faith was also terminated.

“...great change came about when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70. Until that date Jerusalem had been without question the mother Church of the whole Christian world. James the brother of Jesus had presided over its fortunes; and there seems to have been a feeling in the minds of some Christians that a kind of caliphate ought to be developed in the family of the Lord. The disastrous result of the war changed all that. Since AD 70 the Christian Church has never had one local center; it has learned to look only to the living presence of the Lord within itself...The devout Muslim turns to Mecca to say his prayers; he dreams that one day he may be able to make the pilgrimage, and see it with his own eyes. The Christian does not share these ideas; he is aware that he belongs to the wandering people of God, who here have no continuing city.”¹¹

The Forward Movement

Following the outbreak of persecution in Jerusalem the Christians continued to experience waves of persecution in various places (as we will see in the next lesson). However, despite this opposition, the Gospel continued to explode across the known world. No amount of persecution could stop it.

The book of **Acts** only records the expansion of the Gospel into the Gentile nations as far as the Western Roman Empire. It is a chronicle of how the Gospel went from Jerusalem to Rome, the capital of the Roman Empire. It does not record its spread by AD 100 to Mesopotamia and Parthis in the East, or Gaul and Spain in the West. The Church was growing rapidly in the great cities of Rome, Alexandria, Carthage, Antioch, Ephesus and Corinth, and Christian groups were scattered through Syria, Arabia and Illyria. In a period of just seventy years, and in the face of constant opposition, such was the incredible spread of the Gospel.

¹ Bruce L Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1995), p.16.

² Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Crowborough, UK: Highland Books, 1990), p.14.

³ Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Crowborough, UK: Highland Books, 1990), p.15.

⁴ Tacitus, quoted by Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Crowborough, UK: Highland Books, 1990), p.15.

⁵ Gordon Moyes, *Discovering Paul* (Sutherland, Australia: Albatross Books, 1986), p.30.

⁶ Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Crowborough, UK: Highland Books, 1990), pp.135-136.

⁷ Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Crowborough, UK: Highland Books, 1990), p.137.

⁸ D Partner, *Who's Who in Church History*, excerpted from QuickVerse 6.0, Deluxe Edition.

⁹ D Partner, *Who's Who in Church History*, excerpted from QuickVerse 6.0, Deluxe Edition.

¹⁰ Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1980), p.29.

¹¹ Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1980), p.23.

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