

The Apostolic Era

Introduction

- We will cover the Apostolic Witness of Christ – A.D. 30-100.
 - First begins with period of Jewish Witnessing – A.D. 30-45.
 - Then spreads out to the Roman world by Paul – A.D. 45-67.
 - We will then cover briefly from 67 to 100.
- The church was born 10 days after Christ ascended.
- History of the church is the hyphen between Christ's launching off (Acts 1:9) and his landing (Zech 14:4).
 - "The history of the church is the delay of the Parousia.
- Main Sources: NT; Josephus; Clement.



Jesus Prepares the Church

- The Lord did not appear to His enemies, but only His disciples (Acts 1:3).
 - Did this for 40 days after His resurrection.
 - Peter was restored, Thomas' doubts were satisfied, and many signs were performed.
- Disciples were bold after this because they now knew death was not the end, and Jesus is who He said He was.
- Jesus commanded them (and us) to do what He did not – proclaim the gospel to all nations (Acts 1:8).
 - He came to the lost sheep of Israel in keeping with the OT promises, and with His victory over sin and death, the way is now open for the Gentiles to join the people of God.
 - It is the task of the church to call the elect from every nation, tribe, and tongue.
- Christ reigns at the right hand of the Father as we continue His work.

The Birth of the Church

- The book of Acts records the fulfillment of Acts 1:8 – Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, & the start towards the world.
- It began in Jerusalem in A.D. 30, and spread in Judea and to Samaria from 30 to 45.
 - Note: Church began in Jerusalem, not Rome.
- Church began in upper room in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost in A.D. 30. (Acts 1:4-5 – 2:1-4).
- The disciples were baptized with the Holy Spirit, spoke in tongues, and Peter delivered a powerful sermon.
 - Jews from all over the world were at the feast of Pentecost and many converted.



A Jewish Ekklesia

- Early Christians did NOT reject Judaism.
 - They still were observant Jews, indistinguishable in life-style of non-Christian Jews.
 - They did not see Christianity as a new religion that replaces the old. Instead, they were convinced that their faith was the fulfillment of Judaism's promises.
 - The church was simply Judaism in light of the in-breaking of the Messianic age.
 - The term church, ekklesia, is not adopted from Greek political councils, but is the LXX translation of *qahal*, or the Lord's congregation. They understood themselves to be the *Yahad* of God.
- The Jewish character of the early church is evidenced by:
 - They kept the Sabbath (Acts 13:14; 16:13; 17:2; 18:4).
 - They attended worship at the Temple (Acts 2:46; 3:4; 5:42).
 - They still recited Jewish prayers (Acts 2:42; 3:4).
 - They practiced Jewish fasting patterns (Acts 13:2; 14:23;).
- They set themselves apart by adding the 1st day of the week as an observance of Christ's resurrection.



Miraculous Growth

- Luke showed early church growth as a miracle in and of itself.
- In Acts 1:15, there was only 120 disciples.
 - Also 300 to 400 in Galilee.
- After Peter's 1st sermon, we read in Acts 2:41 that God added 3,000.
- Acts 2:47 shows that God continued to add people everyday – church did not just operate on Sundays.
- In Acts 4:4 (after Peter's 2nd sermon), we see it jump to 5,000 men. Women + children would bring the number up to 20,000.
- By Acts 5:14, Luke stops counting because record keeping became impossible – he just tells us increasing numbers were added.
- In Acts 6:1 Luke begins to use the word “multiplying” as he no longer speaks in terms of addition.
- From this point on, he speaks of the church as being multitudes.
- Thus, the church had early success.

Early Problems

- Philip Schaff – “When God is building the church, the devil builds a chapel next door.”
 - The enemy usually uses both internal and external attacks.
- Jewish leadership mounted heavy opposition.
 - Acts 4 has Peter & John threatened.
 - Acts 7:58-59 has the first Christian martyr Stephen killed.
 - Acts 12:1-2 shows Herod kill James Zebedee the apostle.
- There were internal problems with discipline.
 - Ananias and Sapphira were killed by God to strike fear into the heart of the church – selfishness & pride still plagued people even in the church – much like today.
- There were problems with management (Acts 6:1-7).
 - The church got so large, the Apostles needed help – deacons.
 - Some object to these being the first deacons, but their ministry matches what Paul tells us later.



Early Problems

- More about Acts 6:1-7.
- The longstanding prejudice between Hebraic and Hellenistic Jews entered into the church.
 - Hellenistic widows were neglected.
 - To solve the problem, seven Hellenistic Jews were appointed to take care of them.
- This Hebraic/Hellenistic culture clash affected the church even from the outside.
 - In Acts 8, when Saul heavily persecutes the church, the Apostles were unaffected. It was directed at the Hellenistic believers (Stephen caused a stir in Hellenistic synagogues).
 - This actually served to spread the church. They went to cities of the diaspora, and spread Christianity to diaspora Jews, which led to Jewish churches outside of Israel.
 - This would pave the way for Gentile inclusion that came a few years later.



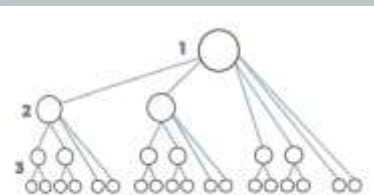
Interpretive Issues in Acts 6:1-7

- RCC and EO claim this proves Apostolic Succession.
- The text shows the opposite.
 - Overwhelmed apostles ask the congregation to select 7 men who already are filled with the Spirit (verse 3).
 - Afterward, the apostles laid hands upon them. No indication that this conferred authority. Other NT texts speak of this as imparting gifts to perform a ministry.
- This matches the evangelical view.
 - God gives a Christian an inward call for ministry and fills him with the Spirit.
 - The church recognizes the call by observing the person and then offers an outward call (official invitation) for an office of ministry.
 - The leadership lay their hands on the person, thus ordaining them.



What Acts 6:1-7 Teaches about Church Leaders

- The Apostles were spending too much time attending to Hellenized widows.
- Their primary call was to preach and teach God's Word, which was being neglected.
- Ephesians 4:11-13 makes it clear that apostles, prophets, and pastor/teachers have the job of equipping the saints for the work of ministry.
 - In other words, they don't do the work of ministry, but they are ones who train the saints to do it.
- Acts 6, has this principle. The 7 were chosen to do the work of the ministry in order to free up the Apostles (leaders) to teach, shepherd, and equip the saints.
- Stephen helped with the teaching, and the others did different tasks. American churches need to learn the biblical pattern.



Early Spread of the Church

- In Acts 8:5-6, we see the Way spread to the Samaritans by Philip the deacon.
 - Peter & John complete his work.
- Philip then is carried by the Holy Spirit to convert the first Gentile – Ethiopian eunuch.
- Not long after, Peter does the same with the Gentile soldier Cornelius. The two Gentiles were “God-fearers.”
- This brings us up to around the year A.D. 45. Everything changes after this and Luke changes his focus to Paul and the Gentiles.



Expansion of the Church

- Center was in Jerusalem, but it expands out. By Acts 11, another great center emerges in Antioch, Syria – 11:26.
 - This was the staging point for sending missionaries to the Gentiles.
- Label of “Christian” was first used in Antioch.
 - This is what the world calls us. It was to distinguish believers from Jews and Greeks.
 - Believers is a better term for us to use – the world labels many as Christians who are not saved, and the word has lost much meaning in our day (born again confusion).
 - There are only two types of people with respect to salvation – saved and lost. Believers are saved.
- Jerusalem remains center until its destruction in A.D. 70.
- Afterward, Antioch becomes the center.



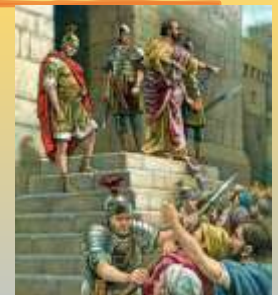
Ministry of Paul

- Paul converted around A.D. 33-35, but his first ten years as a Christian are left out.
 - The focus was on Peter and John in that time and so Luke doesn't tell us much of Paul until after 45.
- The impression that Paul immediately jumped into service is incorrect.
 - Like the other 12 Apostles Paul had preparation from Christ– Galatians 1:12-18.
- Once God had him adequately prepared, He unleashed him.
- It's also worth noting the parallel work between Peter and Paul as they both were foundational to the church (Peter to the Jews; Paul to the Gentiles).



Paul Continued

- He began his missionary work with Barnabas and John Mark.
 - When he took the gospel to new areas, he went to the synagogue first. He did not believe he was preaching a new religion. Rather, he was announcing the fulfillment of the promises.
 - Gentiles were invited into God's people in the Messiah. God-fearers were likely the first Gentile converts.
- Early in the ministry of Paul, his successful ministry among the Gentiles created an existential crisis for the church.
- In A.D. 49, the Jerusalem Council (1st Ecumenical Council) was called by the leaders of the church to decide what God desired concerning Gentile believers.
 - The controversy is displayed in Paul's letter to the Galatians.
 - James, the brother of the Lord, presided over the council.
 - Gentiles did not have to become Jewish proselytes to then become Christians.
 - Gentiles could be saved by Christ and be heirs of God's promises just like ethnic Jews.
 - It seems there was still an expectation for Jews to be Torah observant (Acts 21:18-25).



Paul Continued

- In the course of his career, he had three great missionary journeys.
 - He gets arrested in Jerusalem, which brings his ministry all of the way to Rome.
- Paul probably was declared innocent by Nero in 64, but was arrested again in 67 and beheaded. He anticipates it in 2 Tim 4:6-7.
- Peter probably died in 64 by Nero.
- It is also worth noting that the missionary task was not only undertaken by big-named NT figures.
 - Countless nameless Christians moved from place to place, bringing their faith with them.
 - They were merchants, slaves, soldiers, and others that traveled for various reasons.



The Other Apostles

- From Acts, you can get the impression that Peter and Paul were the only missionary apostles.
 - They were merely the focus because they were the pillars – Peter to Jews and Paul to Gentiles.
- We have to rely on church tradition to know what happened to the other apostles.
 - Thomas went to Parthia (or India), Mark to Egypt, Matthew to Ethiopia, Bartholomew to upper India, Andrew to Scythia, and John to Asia Minor.
 - Different traditions mix it up a bit.
- The two main events that got these others out of the Holy Land was the deaths of Peter and Paul (by 64-67) and the Jewish Revolt (66-73).
 - The death of James, the brother of the Lord, is important as well.



From 67-100

- We do not know much on this period. This is after Luke wrote Acts, but before Christians began writing histories.
- We do know a few things for certain.
- In A.D. 66, Jewish Zealots revolted against Rome.
 - Emperor Nero sent general Vespasian to crush the rebellion. In the middle of the conflict, Nero committed suicide. Vespasian left to secure himself as emperor in Rome.
 - Jews thought this was deliverance from God, but it was not.
 - Vespasian sent his son Titus to finish the conquest. Every city was conquered, and Jerusalem was burned to the ground.
 - In the Temple, not one stone was left upon another (Luke 21:5-6).
 - The Jews were then scattered into captivity and all that remains is the Wailing Wall.



Consequences of the Jewish Revolt on Church History

- The Jewish Revolt had a far greater effect on the future of Christianity than even Nero's persecution that killed Peter and Paul.
 - Both Judaism and Christianity lost their spiritual home, Jerusalem. The city ceased to have any importance in the life of the early church for the next 300 years. This will facilitate the divorce from most things Jewish.
 - Jewish Christians were viewed as traitors in Jewish eyes. They fled to Pella. This widened the gap between Jews and Christians in general.
 - The Pharisees emerged as the controlling force in Judaism. The Romans eradicated the Zealots and the Essenes. The Sadducees lost their power-base with the loss of the Temple.
- The heirs of the Pharisees (rabbinical Judaism) were the most determined Jewish enemies of Jesus and His followers.
 - They gathered in Yavneh (Jamnia) on the southern coast of Israel, and reestablished their own Sanhedrin. They rebranded Judaism under their strict interpretation.
 - They placed a curse on all Jewish Christians and added it to the prayer book. They made it impossible for Jewish Christians to attend synagogue.
 - Being cut off from Jerusalem and synagogues, the Jewish church that once thrived slowly died in isolation. The Romans killed its leader (Simeon) for being a relative of Jesus and a descendent of David.
 - The Gentile churches were becoming increasingly anti-Judaic. The future of Christianity rested in the Gentile world.

From 67-100

- The Bible does speak to us of John's ministry after Jerusalem's destruction.
 - He went to Ephesus and set up his ministry there.
 - He had strong influence over churches in that region. Think of the seven churches in Revelation 2-3.
 - During the reign of Domitian, he was exiled to the island of Patmos (probably in A.D. 95).
 - Jesus delivers to him the final piece of special revelation – the book of Revelation. Chapter 22 ends in similar terms to how Gen 1 began.
- For the rest of the apostles, we rely on tradition.
- We also have the letters of Clement of Rome written to the Corinthian Church.



John's Grave in Ephesus

How Far Did the Church Expand by AD 100?

- It probably went as far west as it could go – England (Britannia).
 - Best theory is that Christian prisoners converted soldiers they were chained to. When soldiers were assigned a new duty station, they brought their faith with them.
 - Philippians 1:12-13 makes this a real possibility.
- We also know from Acts 2, that it reached the Parthian Empire since some of the converts at Pentecost came from Parthia.
- If we accept what tradition says about the Apostles, the faith would have made it as far south as Ethiopia through Matthew, as far east as India through Thomas and Bartholomew, and as far north as Russia (Scythia) through Andrew.
- This would place borders around the church by the end of the first century that would be larger than the land of both the Roman Empire and Alexander's Empire combined.
- The problem is we cannot verify the tradition historically, and it might not be reliable.

Conclusion

- The early church had phenomenal growth as the apostles were led by the Holy Spirit.
- The church began within Judaism and spread to the Gentiles.
- In the 1st century, the God of Israel was being worshipped and praised not just by Jews, but by Romans, Greeks, Persians, Arabs, Celts, and numerous other groups.
- Jesus Christ truly did begin a new era that led to people of many nations, tribes, and tongues glorifying God.
- It is due to the work of the early church that any of us in this class are Christians at all. Thanks be to God!