

STUDIES IN EARLY CHURCH HISTORY

Pastor Eddie Ildefonso

STUDY 1 THE CHURCH IN JERUSALEM THE BEGINNING

The Christian Church was prepared for by the Jewish church, but it had its beginning in Jesus Christ. He is its Founder (**Matthew 16:15–20; John 14:6; Matthew 26:28; John 11:25, 26; 12:32; Matthew 28:19, 20; Acts 1:8**) and Foundation (**1 Corinthians 2:2; 3:11; Philippians 2:9–11**).

“Very early in the ministry of Jesus Christ we observe indications that He intended to found a society, based upon the principles of The Kingdom of God, in which the members should be held together by outward and visible ties of fellowship in addition to a common belief and the observance of certain sacraments.” This society is the church or assembly.

The word church in the New Testament is used in three senses to denote the difference in the form.

1. The local congregation worshipping in a house (**Philemon 2; Colossians 4:15**) or a certain place as “The church of God which is at Corinth” (**2 Corinthians 1:2**) and “The church of the Thessalonians” (**1 Thessalonians 1:1**). This is much the most frequent use of the word.
2. The entire community of Christians throughout the world or some portions of it (**1 Corinthians 15:9; Galatians 1:13; Matthew 16:18**).
3. The total company of the redeemed, the bride of Christ (**Ephesians 5:23, 25, 27, 30; Hebrews 12:23**).

Those who joined the early Christian church did so because of their belief in Christ as the Messiah (**John 1:41**) and their acceptance of Him as their Saviour (**Acts 2:36–41**).

The First Candidates for Membership in the church were attracted to Jesus, followed Him and sought to have their relatives and friends follow Him, because of the testimony of John the Baptist that “**This is the Son of God**” (**John 1:34–51**).

The First Sermon was preached by Christ upon a mountain in Galilee (**Matthew 5:1–7:29**). Here he laid down the principles which were to guide the conduct and lives of His followers. He taught the blessedness of those who accepted these principles (**Matthew 5:1–16**), their relations to the world, to their fellow men, and to God. The appeal was to the inner life (**Matthew 6:1–6; 7:1–5**), to conform it to the law of God and to seek to please Him first in all things (**Matthew 6:20–24, 33; 5:48**).

Jesus taught many things, not set forth in the Sermon on the Mount, in regard to Himself, but the “root principle of the Kingdom proclaimed by Him was the allegiance of the soul to Himself as its supreme Lord.” He said, **“I am the way, the truth and the life” (John 14:6); “I am the vine, ye are the branches” (John 15:5), and “He that believeth on Me hath everlasting life” (John 6:47; 3:17; 20:30, 31).**

Necessarily His disciples did not fully understand much of what Jesus taught about “the nature of salvation through Himself, for it had not yet been revealed by His sufferings, death and resurrection.”

The First Form of Prayer is given in connection with the “**Sermon on the Mount**,” and is known as the Lord’s Prayer (**Matthew 6:9–13**). Christ here teaches that God loves man and stands in the relation of a Father to him. Man is also taught the proper approach to God and the right objects of prayer. It is the perfect pattern for all prayer. It has expressed in it, “petition, intercession and thanksgiving; all essential objects of prayer—spiritual and temporal, divine and human—in the most suitable and beautiful order.”

The First Missionaries.—Jesus was not only incessant in His own efforts to bring men to a knowledge of the truth, but He sent forth **“The Twelve” (Luke 9:1–6)**, who were in immediate attendance upon Him, and **“appointed other seventy also, and sent them two and two before His face into every city and place, whither He Himself would come” (Luke 10:1–17)**. Careful instructions were given these first missionaries in regard to the proper way of approaching people, what and how they were to preach and how they were to act in case of their rejection. The needs and the dangers of the work were impressed upon their minds.

Baptism and the Lord’s Supper.—Baptism, the outward sign of an inward cleansing, was a badge of discipleship and commanded by Jesus in His last instructions to His disciples (**Matthew 28:19**).

The Lord’s Supper was instituted by Christ to commemorate His work and His atoning death (**Matthew 26:26–29; Mark 14:22–24; Luke 22:19, 20; 1 Corinthians 11:23–26**). In giving His disciples the bread Jesus said, **“This is My body which is given for you; this do in remembrance of Me” (Luke 22:19)**. In passing the cup He said, **“This is My blood of the New Testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins” (Matthew 26:28)**.

The Policy was that of an aggressive extension of the work. Jesus knew that He was to depart in bodily presence from the earth. He predicted His death and in so doing

He also prepared His followers for the great task before them in extending the mission of the church **“in Jerusalem and in all Judea and in Samaria and unto the uttermost part of the earth” (Acts 1:8)**. His church was not to be for one age or one people, but for all ages and all peoples and in His spiritual presence He was to be in all its work **(Matthew 28:18–20)**. Here was a decidedly new and startling idea in the world of religion. Hitherto religions had been narrow and circumscribed; each nation or people had its own exclusive gods which were supposed to protect it and to which it looked for all benefits beyond its power. But this new religion, Christianity, declared boldly and openly that these national gods were naught and called upon all men everywhere to repent and believe in Jesus Christ. It is not to be wondered at that the first Christian teachers and preachers met with such strong opposition and persecution in carrying out the command of their Lord to proselyte all nations.

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THE BAPTISM BY THE HOLY SPIRIT

Time. From the Ascension of Christ to the martyrdom of Stephen, 30–35 A.D. This baptism marks not only a great epoch in the history of the church, but of the world. Many writers date the beginning of the Christian church from this baptism. The agency of the Holy Spirit is very marked in the record of the Acts. He is mentioned about seventy times.

The particular period in the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the church—treated in this study, from this point to the close—is from the day of Pentecost to the martyrdom of Stephen, the first deacon **(Acts 2:1–7:60)**. The action is all in the city of Jerusalem and is marked by the display of marvelous divine power. This is a natural division occupying in time about five years, 30–35 A.D. The command of Christ was here fulfilled that His disciples should first witness for Him in Jerusalem **(Acts 1:8)** the place of His death and resurrection.

The General Preparation for this baptism **(Acts 2:1–12)** was long and arduous. It is true that when it came to pass, it came suddenly, but the way and the men had been made ready. The Old Testament prophets had foretold it and sought to qualify the people to receive it. Jesus had not only had His disciples under careful training, but He had gone up and down and roundabout through Palestine preaching and teaching things pertaining to the Kingdom to all who would listen. Then His trial, death and resurrection had been so accomplished, in the sight of a multitude of people, when Jerusalem was crowded with Jews attending the Passover that these great events were upon every tongue.

But now when Jesus has accomplished His mission on earth, in bodily form, He bids His disciples wait until they shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost **(Acts 1:5)**. It was not sufficient that the multitude without and the disciples themselves, much more intimately, should have a knowledge of the facts about Christ, but there must be an added divine power through the Holy Spirit to make these facts glow with life and a light which

¹Sell, Henry Thorne: *Studies in Early Church History*. Willow Grove, PA : Woodlawn Electronic Publishing, 1998, c1906

should change men's hearts and cause them to turn to their Saviour. The witnesses to the facts were to testify for Christ after the descent of the Holy Spirit and not before. The Christian church was planned not as a human, but a divine creation; without the Spirit it has no power; with the Spirit it is the mightiest institution on earth.

The Immediate Preparation.—After the ascension of Jesus, the disciples returned to Jerusalem, repaired to the upper room of a certain house and held a ten days' prayer-meeting. There they **“all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication”** (Acts 1:12–14).

It is significant that this goodly number of disciples, about an hundred and twenty, spent their waiting time not in discussion or speculation over the wonderful events which they had recently witnessed and what would come to pass in the immediate future, but they placed themselves in an attitude of earnest and prayerful expectancy. Their supreme desire was to be used in the most effective way to promote the salvation of men. It is not too much to say that any church—if all the members would come together, or any considerable number of them, in a like spirit for a ten days' prayer-meeting—might likewise have a wonderful outpouring of the Spirit. The way to divine blessing is still through prayer.

The Fulfillment of the Promise made by Christ, before His death (John 14:16, 17; 16:7–15) and after His resurrection (Acts 1:5, 8) came to pass on the day of Pentecost on the morning of Saturday or Sunday May 27 or 28, 30 A.D. It was a fitting time for the display of divine power. This feast of Pentecost was the second of the great feasts of the Jews. It was so named because it was kept on the fiftieth day after the Passover. It was the feast of harvest and of first fruits. Because of its being in the summer greater numbers were present in Jerusalem than at any other season from all parts of the world. “From a census taken in the time of Nero more than 2,700,000 people were gathered at the Passover and still greater numbers came to Pentecost.” It was on this day that the Jew was to remember that he had been a bondman in the land of Egypt and had been led forth to freedom. It was also the traditional memorial day of the giving of the law on Sinai. It was therefore especially suitable for a new manifestation of the Spirit and the giving of a new spiritual law in Christ and the leading of the people out into a new religious freedom. It was a great feast of the gathering of the first fruits of Christ on earth.

The Descent of the Holy Spirit is the record of a historical fact and the simplest fact is sometimes not easy to explain. The narrative, however, is a plain one and is told in a comparatively few sentences. The disciples are of one accord in one place. Suddenly there is the sound as of a rushing mighty wind. Cloven tongues like as of fire sit upon the disciples' heads. It is not said that it is a rushing mighty wind, but like the sound of it. It is not said that the tongues are of fire but like it (Acts 2:2, 3).

The writer is attempting to describe a supernatural event in comparative terms. The disciples are, however, filled with a power beyond their comprehension. They are enthused with the Holy Spirit. They become new men speaking with extraordinary

facility and ease. All their timidity and hesitation have departed. They speak with other tongues ([Acts 2:4](#)) as the Spirit gives them utterance.

The symbol of the flaming tongues has large meaning in it. Fire is a representative characteristic of the Holy Spirit; it is bright and glorious and not only represents His revealing power, but also His purifying and cleansing power. “The human tongue, illuminated and sanctified by fire from the inner sanctuary, was about to be the instrument of the gospel’s advancement.” The best preaching has been called, “logic set on fire.” A new spirit always means a new tongue.”

The speaking with “other tongues” has been described as “a sudden and powerful inspiration of the Holy Spirit, by which the disciples uttered not of their minds, but as mouthpieces of the Spirit, the praises of God in various languages, hitherto, and possibly at the time unknown to them. This miracle was meant to foreshadow the universal progress of the new faith and its message for all mankind, without distinction of nation, position or age. Pentecost is the reversal of Babel.”

Some Effects of the Presence of this Power.—The first effect was upon the disciples themselves. From timid men they became exceedingly bold in the presentation of their cause. They had to speak to a multitude of people who had a short time before cried out for the death of their Master and Lord.

The second effect was upon the multitude. They were “confounded” and “amazed,” they “marveled” ([Acts 2:6, 7](#)). Their interest was aroused to the highest point when every man heard the disciples speaking “in his own language.” There is no better time to present the truth to men than when they themselves are roused to the highest point of interest in regard to it. Peter spoke to a highly interested audience.

The third effect. Three thousand souls ([Acts 2:41](#)) were converted.

The picture of the state of the early church given in [Acts 2:42–47](#) is certainly a beautiful one. Here is peace, joy and harmony in the faith in Christ.

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THE TEACHING

We can judge very fairly of the teaching in this period of the church by the recorded speeches of Peter ([Acts 2:14–40](#)) on the day of Pentecost; at the time of the healing of the lame man at the Beautiful gate of the Temple ([Acts 3:6–26](#)); before Annas, the high priest and the rulers, elders and scribes ([Acts 4:5–12](#)); of Peter and John ([Acts 4:15, 19, 20](#)); of Peter and the other Apostles ([Acts 5:18, 25, 29–32](#)); and of Stephen, the deacon ([Acts 6:8, 13–15; 7:1–56](#)).

The Substance.—The essential things taught by the apostles lie upon the surface. What they said was not hard to understand. They came with no obscure or abstruse doctrine. They were to be **“witnesses”** of those things which they had seen and heard. They were moved upon by the Holy Spirit to tell their story of Jesus Christ in the most effective way to reach men’s hearts.

It is hardly to be supposed that we have the speeches of the apostles recorded in full, in fact in Peter’s speech at the day of Pentecost we are distinctly told that **“with many other words did he testify and exhort”** ([Acts 2:40](#)).

There is also a certain progress in the teaching.

1. The joining of the old dispensation with the new. “Peter presented the gospel as the fulfillment of prophecy and the completion of the covenant made by the fathers. He called upon his hearers to repent of their sins, to believe in Jesus as the Messiah who could forgive their sins and set them free from sin, and to be baptized into this faith thus outwardly joining together as a communion of the Messiah; and he promised as the result, the gift of the Holy Spirit, whose wonder-working presence had been shown to them ([Acts 2:14–40](#)).

2. The supremacy of Christ and the necessity for repentance, on the part of men, and forgiveness of sin through Him alone, are more and more earnestly set forth. **“Repent ye therefore and be converted that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord”** ([Acts 3:19](#)). **“Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved ”** ([Acts 4:12](#)). This teaching is very manifest in the speech of Peter after he healed the lame man, at the Beautiful gate ([Acts 3:12–26](#)). Because of the strengthening testimony of the apostles, along this line ([Acts 4:9–12; 5:29–31](#)), great opposition arose on the part of the Jews ([Acts 4:1–4](#)). The Sadducees were especially set against them because they **“preached through Jesus the resurrection from the dead”** and caused them to be put in prison. The climax of the antagonism came, however, when Stephen, the deacon, declared **“that the new church**

was not a modification of Judaism but a new order” (Acts 6:8–15; 7:1–56). The scribes taught that the Mosaic Law provided the means of justification for men and a title

to eternal life. The disciples of Jesus taught that the law could not do this, but that the death of Jesus procured eternal life for men, that His resurrection originated it, and that confidence in Him secured it. The result was not only that a multitude believed but that there arose a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem (Acts 8:1).

The Manner.—First, of teaching and witnessing on the part of the apostles was with a profound conviction of the truth of what they declared (Acts 4:19, 20; 5:28–31), with great enthusiasm and boldness (Acts 4:13, 31). Second, of receiving the truth by those who heard it. By some it was received, as it is always, when the truth is preached, with grateful hearts, and by others it was rejected.

THE ORGANIZATION

The form of the organization of the church, shown in the first seven chapters of The Acts, is of a very simple kind, but we are left in no doubt in regard to the firm basis of belief on which it rests.

The Head of the Church is Jesus Christ. It is in His name that the apostles preach; it is in His name that they offer remission of sins—upon repentance; it is in His name that believers are received into the church; it is for bearing His name that they are persecuted (Acts 2:38; 3:16; 4:10, 12).

The Voluntary Character.—No one allied himself with this church who did not desire to do so and because of his conviction of—and acceptance of—the truth in Jesus Christ. Hence the organization consisted of those who were profoundly impressed with the preaching of the new way—and walked in it (Acts 2:41).

The Ordinances.—In the picture of the early church given in The Acts, immediately after the close of Peter’s sermon on the day of Pentecost, it is shown that **“they who gladly received his (Peter’s) word were baptized ... and they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers”** (Acts 2:41, 42).

In this statement there are five things asserted, two of which are that, at this beginning stage, the church at once took up the observance of baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

The Doctrine and Prayers.—Referring again to Acts 2:41,42 it is here stated that **“they—the disciples—continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine ... and in prayers.”**

The apostles' doctrine was the supremacy and all-sufficiency of Christ. Prayer to God was much resorted to by the early believers. They found it an absolute necessity for them in the difficulties, which hedged them in. An example of the prayers of the church is given in [Acts 4:24–30](#) where when the members had prayed earnestly for the manifestation of God's presence, **“the place was shaken where they were assembled together and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost and they spake the word of God with boldness”** ([Acts 4:31, 33](#)).

The Social Aspect.—“**And all that believed were together and had all things common**” ([Acts 2:44](#)). “**And they continued daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart**” ([Acts 2:46](#)). It is doubtful if the world has ever witnessed such a perfect social estate. It was brought about by no passionate appeal against the inequalities in the lives of men or a forced communism, but believers in one Lord and Saviour had had their hearts so touched by His love that the evil and selfishness in them were purged away.

If the social conditions of the present day are ever to be improved, the improvement must come through a church as devoted to its Lord as this early church. That the Christian community of goods here spoken of was purely voluntary and not required or demanded is shown by the case of Ananias and Sapphira ([Acts 5:3, 4](#))—whom Peter tells it was in their own power to give or not to give—and in the case of Barnabas, who is specially commended, and yet there is no intimation that he sold everything. The point is that where there was any lack it was made up and to any in need ample help was given. Here was one great loving family in Christ. The principle underlying this Christian community of goods is **“that all possessing goods and industries are to be consecrated to God in the service of humanity”** ([Matthew 25:14–30](#); [Luke 13:6–9](#)). Christian love and Christian principles are to abolish poverty and want and to spread the gospel over the earth, and we are to live daily according to the brotherly principle exemplified in this early church, where the poor man knew no shame and the rich no haughtiness.”

The First Case of Discipline was forced upon the church by a flagrant instance of deliberate lying ([Acts 5:1–11](#)), showing how evil began very early to attempt to enter into the church.

The Election of the First Deacons.—We are told in the gospels how the apostles were chosen. We are told in the [sixth chapter of Acts \(vs. 1–6\)](#) how the deacons were chosen and ordained to their work. In regard to the other officers of the church which we find elsewhere mentioned we have no account—with the exception of the missionaries ([Acts 13:1–4](#))—of how they were chosen. The writers of the New Testament seem to be concerned chiefly in showing the great foundation upon which the church was to rest rather than the particular form or forms it took or should take on this foundation. The occasion of the election of the seven deacons was **“the murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews because their widows were neglected in the daily ministrations.”** There may have been some truth in this charge. At any rate the apostles did not attempt, themselves, to settle the right or wrong of the matter, but called the multitude of disciples

together and left the matter with them to choose men to remedy the wrong, if any. We have here the direct appeal to the church as a whole to settle a matter in dispute and it is very significant of the way things were carried on. After the seven deacons were chosen they were consecrated to their work by the laying on of the hands of the apostles (**Acts 6:6**).

The Grecians mentioned here, were “true Jews from foreign lands, who spoke Greek, used the Greek instead of the Hebrew Bible, and whose mode of life and thinking was Grecised. The Hebrews were the pure Jews who not necessarily residing in Palestine, still used the Hebrew Scriptures and spoke the dialect of the sacred tongue then current; there was a natural jealousy between these two parties.”

Three qualifications were required in the deacons to be chosen:

1. **“Of honest report,”** men with goodness that makes itself manifest.
2. **“Full of the Holy Ghost,”** men who are thoroughly religious.
3. **Wisdom, men of prudence and good sense (Acts 6:3).**

How well these first deacons filled their office, not only in serving tables but in preaching the gospel, is shown by their record, especially in the cases of Stephen and Philip.

Bishops, Elders and Other Officers.—In two instances Paul gives a list of the chief persons in the church (**1 Corinthians 12:28; Ephesians 4:11**) but the exact nature of the offices held by some of them has not been quite made plain. In the case of elders and bishops “the difference of name may point to some difference of origin or function; but in the New Testament—and Clement—the terms are more or less equivalent. Thus the Elders of Ephesus are reminded (**Acts 20:28**) that they are bishops. So, too, we find sundry bishops in the single church of Philippi. In the pastoral Epistles Timothy appoints bishops and deacons, Titus elders and deacons, though (**1 Timothy 5:17**) Timothy also has elders under him. The qualifications also of a bishop as laid down for Timothy are practically those of the elder as described to Titus and equally point to ministerial duties in contrast to what we call episcopal” (Church Government, Hastings’ Bible Dictionary). In regard to the offices held by Timothy and Titus they were evidently of a temporary nature as both 2 Timothy and Titus are letters of recall from their mission (**2 Timothy 4:9; Titus 3:12**). It is quite evident that the primitive church was quite simply organized and officered.

Persecution began as soon as it was fairly understood that the apostles were preaching the supremacy of Jesus Christ (**Acts 4:2, 3; 5:17, 18, 28; 7:56–58**).

The Growth of the church was quick and strong. The numbers of believers increased very rapidly. The day of Pentecost saw 3,000 conversions (**Acts 2:41**). In the fourth chapter and fourth verse of Acts the number has increased to 5,000. Again “**multitudes**” of converts are spoken of (**Acts 5:14**) and that “**a great company of priests were obedient to the faith**” (**Acts 6:7**).

ACTIVITIES

The Field—while it is the world—up to the martyrdom of Stephen ([Acts 7:59, 60](#)) was Jerusalem. While the area of preaching of the apostles and disciples was thus seemingly limited—for about five years—in reality it was not limited, for the Jews, who were constantly coming to Jerusalem ([Acts 2:8–12](#)) from every quarter of the Roman empire, must have carried back the glad news to their distant homes of the wonderful things in regard to the Christ, which were being preached in the Holy City. Thus the way was being prepared for a further rapid spread of the gospel.

The Equipment—The church at this time had no buildings, none of the New Testament writings were in existence, but it did have men who had walked and talked with Jesus Christ, who had been baptized with the Holy Ghost and who were thoroughly alive to the great mission before them.

The Help of the Holy Spirit—Nothing was done in presenting Christ to the multitude until the descent of the Holy Spirit. The miraculous ([Acts 3:1–16; 4:31; 5:12, 15, 16](#)) or supernatural element in these first chapters of the Acts cannot be ignored or eliminated without doing violence to the narrative. This element is part of the historical record and is to be treated as such; it need not be considered as contrary to law, but may be by a law of God which we do not as yet understand, but of which we have the marvelous record.

The apostles and disciples are inspired and encouraged to do their great work through the Holy Spirit.

The Joy—There was great rejoicing, on the part of the apostles, in preaching and in persecution ([Acts 5:41](#)), and gladness on the part of the multitude who received their message ([Acts 2:46](#)).

QUESTIONS

- What can be said of the beginning of the Christian church?
What of the first candidates for membership?
 The first sermon?
 The first form of prayer?
 The first missionaries?
 The two sacraments?
 The policy?
What is the significance of the Baptism of the Holy Spirit?
What was the general preparation for this baptism?
 The immediate preparation?
What can be said of the fulfillment of the promise of the Holy Spirit?
What is the descent of the Holy Spirit? Give some effects of the presence of this power.
What can be said of the teaching of the church?
 The substance?
 The manner?
What can be said of the organization of the church?
 The Head of the church?
 The voluntary character?
 The ordinances?
 The doctrine and prayers?
 The social aspect?
 The first case of discipline?
 The election of the first deacons?
 The persecution?
 The growth?
What can be said of the work of the church?
 The field?
 The equipment?
 The help of the Holy Spirit?
 The joy?

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