

The Church - Introduction

Its purpose



By Chris Crabb

The emergence of the Christian church is inextricably linked to the purpose, promise, and person of Jesus of Nazareth who emerged in the early decades of the 1st century CE. Marked by His apocalyptic preaching of the arrival of the Kingdom of Heaven, the movement that followed this enigmatic figure grew in fervor and intensity leading to his eventual crucifixion and the later appearances to His followers. Easily overlooked though is that Jesus of Nazareth whose resurrection would spur the extraordinary Christian movement, predicted the coming of his own church of which the gates of Hades would not prevail against (Matt 16:18). It was a prediction that would prove prescient as the Christian church would grow from a small, unified group of believers to an entity that would triumph over distance, persecution, and time itself.

The authority that would unite the coming body of believers is suggested ever so subtly, yet powerfully, elsewhere in the witness of the gospel writers. The need for church discipline for a coming church is on prominent display as Christ offers preemptory admonitions to his earliest followers (Matt 18:15-20). While a blueprint has been provided for dealing with difficulties within the group of His followers, what lies behind the surface is that such discipline is carried out with Christ's assurance that the doctrine behind the correction has already been assured in Heaven with Christ's full solidarity with his church (Matt 18:18-20). Moreover, a call for unity among His followers, the early church, sounds out from Christ's desire that His charges be one (John 17:11, 22). Thus, behind the unity of the church to come is a grounding for this solitary, indestructible church marked by the ownership by and the authority of, Christ.

It is then of little surprise that the last instructions of Jesus of Nazareth to His disciples contained both an anchoring to His authority and a continuation of His directive. A call to teaching and preaching His message to the world was prominent in one of Christ's final gatherings with His stunned followers (Matt 28:19-20; c.f. 1 Thess 4:1-2). All power was found in the hands of Christ, who then directed that His followers carry the authoritative words of His gospel into the world. A sense of urgency is readily apparent in the words of the angelic message to Christ's gathered followers immediately following His ascension as the apostles' gazing upon Christ's exit was interrupted by a reminder of Christ's eventual return (Acts 1:10-11). The angelic interlude was a subtle reminder of Christ's last words to the gathered apostles that they were to proclaim His message in Jerusalem, throughout all Judea and Samaria, and to the very ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

The unified body of believers following Christ exploded like a wildfire in Jerusalem, the city of his crucifixion, as over a hundred believers would eventually swell to thou-

sands of followers united in fellowship, prayer, the doctrine, and the breaking of the bread commemorating Christ's death (Acts 1:12-15; 2:42-47; cf. 20:7). But the Christian church would not remain anchored to its early Jerusalem moorings. The arrival of persecution from the religious authorities only watered the seed of the Gospel as obedience to the Gospel brought the Lord's adding of new believers to the church throughout Judea, Samaria, and a symbolic conversion of an Ethiopian eunuch from the "very ends of the earth" (Acts 8; cf. Acts 1:8; Acts 2:41, 47, 5:14). Ethno-religious barriers would soon be crossed with the conversion of the Roman Cornelius and his household, giving an intriguing indication of the turn to come, the church's expansion to include Gentiles (Acts 10).

The joining forces of the already acclaimed Barnabas (Acts 4:36; 9:27) with Saul of Tarsus gives an initial indication of church expansion beyond Jewish Palestine. The site of this foothold into Gentile environs was the metropolitan city of Antioch located in modern day Turkey. That the Christian movement would gain traction in this city, one that's prominence in the Roman Empire took a back seat only to Rome and Alexandria, was not difficult to predict. The efforts in the city would lead to an explosion of the Gospel in the city, so much so that the preaching and the teaching would foster an environment where the believers would first be called a title derivative of their master, that of Christians (Acts 11:21; 24-26).

The full work of the Antiochian ministry would be felt in the subsequent unfolding chapters of the Acts of the Apostles. From Antioch, the successful tandem of Paul and Barnabas were dispatched at the behest of the Holy Spirit to undertake what would become designated as the First Missionary Journey (Acts 13:1-3). The first stop on this great expansion of the Gospel was the Mediterranean island of Cyprus (Acts 13:4-12). It was in Cyprus in which a formula would first appear that would reoccur in subsequent journeys to carry forth the Gospel of the emerging church. Preaching in the synagogues to a Jewish and God-fearing Gentile audience, the missionaries would receive both rejection and acceptance. Though a local false prophet named Bar-Jesus attempted to subvert their efforts, Paul's Spirit-led rebuking of the magician led to the belief of the local proconsul Sergius Paulus.

The mission next moved to Perga in Pamphylia and Antioch in Pisidia (modern Turkey) with the preaching leading to Jews, Jewish converts, and even Gentiles being converted to the faith despite persecution that would eventually force Paul and Barnabas' departure to Iconium (Acts 13:13-52). The preaching (and persecution) continued as the mission moved from Iconium to Lystra and Derbe in Lycaonia, with converts being made along the way. But the missionaries bolstered the burgeoning church by returning to strengthen the disciples in these areas during the return trip to their home base at Antioch in Syria (Acts 14:21-28). Relying not just upon their own encouragement, the Gospel carrying entourage went on to install elders in the nascent Christian communities to further bolster the new disciples in their faith (Acts 14:23).

An early threat to the unity of the believers was resolved harmoniously at the Jerusalem Council before once again the missionary efforts to expand the church went on

their way (Acts 15). The strengthening of the church continued to be a priority as from town to town the church grew in encouragement and numbers (Acts 16:5). After a vision of an inhabitant of Macedonia, Paul and his new coworkers, Silas, and Timothy, travelled to Macedonia, leading to the conversions and a seed of the Gospel planted in Philippi (Acts 16:6-10; 11-40). Future missionary work would see the spread of the Gospel to Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-4), Berea (Acts 17:10-12), Corinth (Acts 18:1-11) and Ephesus (Acts 18:24-19:10). Though doubtless other environs saw the spread of the Gospel, the missionary efforts found in the Acts of the Apostles offer up the clear pattern. Through preaching, the response of obedient hearts touched by the word, and much encouragement, the church of Jesus Christ continued to grow throughout these early years. It is then of no surprise that the Acts of the Apostles ends, as it began, in triumph as the former persecutor turned apostle Paul now stood proclaiming the gospel in Rome itself (Acts 28:17-31). The movement following Jesus of Nazareth had carried forth from its humble beginnings in Galilee, throughout all of Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, to the very ends of the earth.

But the church exists as more than a historical entity, unconnected to its present members beyond mere legacy. The encouragement and instruction have come down to the church today through the apostolic writings of the New Testament. Though the four gospel accounts document the ministry and teachings of Christ while on the earth, it is through the New Testament epistles that instruction and edification for life in the 1st century church is instructive for life in the 21st century church today. Whether it be the reassurance of the young Christians at Thessalonica, the exhortation to the troubled brethren of Corinth, the joyous encouragement to the Philippians, the exhaustive proclamation of the Gospel to the Romans, the powerful theological exposition afforded the Ephesians and Colossians, the eloquent call for steadfastness of Hebrews, or the guidance for a Christian walk amidst persecution found in the first epistle of Peter, these authoritative writings remain to guide the church in doctrine. Resolution of the inter-necine struggles within the church, both then and now, receives illumination from the Peter's second letter against lascivious heretics who denied Christ's return, Jude's terse epistle against immoral libertines, John's spirited defense of the faith in his epistles, and Paul's response to the Judaizers in Galatians. The Pastoral Epistles of 1-2 Timothy and Titus remain as a historical, yet divinely inspired, collection navigating the always thorny subjects of church leadership and structure. Wisdom for life at the personal and collective level can be found in the Epistle of James and that to Philemon. Finally, the pattern of the church, and its history, unfolds in the Acts of the Apostles while the eventual victory over Satan is promised in the symbol laden Book of Revelation. Thus, the church exists not just as a historical construct to be studied, but as a living entity guided by the historical, inspired writings of the New Testament.

Overall, the history of the church finds its greatest asset in its example. It is in the growth of the early, apostolic church that one sees a pattern of evangelism, opposition, and triumph that continued the movement began by Jesus of Nazareth. Through the writings of the New Testament, the doctrine, encouragement, and structure of that

church of the 1st century has been safeguarded and transmitted to that same church today. In doing so, the revolutionary teachings, and even more revolutionary gospel of salvation, transformed a movement of the crucified Jesus of Nazareth to one which has transcended distance, ethnicities, and time itself. It is the mission of all its members, of yesteryear, the present, and the days to come, to continue to work to expand these borders until the day that Christ returns from heaven the same way in which he left this earth two millennia ago.