

CHRISTIANITY AFTER CHRIST'S ASCENSION

By

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE EARLY CHURCH CHRISTIANITY AFTER CHRIST'S ASCENSION

Introduction

Today we're firstly going to be looking at the establishment of the early church in the first years after Christ's ascension up to the time of persecution and scattering, mainly using material from the Book of Acts. Secondly, we're going to look at the subsequent development of the early church – including Paul's missionary journeys – again mainly using material from the Book of Acts. Thirdly, we're going to be looking at the books of the NT themselves – who wrote them, when they were written, who they were written for and how reliable they are. Then, finally, we're going to consider what all that means to us today. These references to “the early church” might imply that it was a single entity. In reality, of course, it was a loosely connected network spread across much of the Roman Empire.

Today's subject is one that lends itself to maps, pictures and photographs better than most of my talks, so today I'm going to use the screen more for this material – which means that in some places less of my spoken points will be repeated in text on the screen, so please listen even more carefully than usual.

The Ascension of Christ and Afterwards

In the book of Acts Luke tells us that Christ had commanded the disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the coming of the Holy Spirit which would fulfil the prophecy of John the Baptist:

“On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptised with water, but in a few days you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit.”” (Acts 1:4-5 NIV)

and that this baptism with the Holy Spirit would empower them to preach and spread the gospel:

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8 NIV)

and as we shall see this is the order in which their witness progressed, in fact it's almost an overall table of contents for the Book of Acts.

Following this Jesus ascended back to the Father from the Mount of Olives:

“After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.” (Acts 1:9 NIV)

There would be no further post-resurrection appearances.

Obediently the disciples returned to Jerusalem and waited in an upper room along with women who had been close to Jesus and Jesus' brothers – about 120 people in all – all joining together in prayer. The apostles chose one of these followers – Matthias – to make up their number to twelve following the death of Judas Iscariot:

“Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles.” (Acts 1:26 NIV)

[*slide of dice cast*]. The casting of lots was believed to be putting matters into God's hands when there was no rational basis for a decision (Proverbs 16:33). The number twelve is significant, it's the number of the tribes of Israel and marks out the apostles as leaders of the

new Israel. It's interesting that Luke recorded the choosing of Matthias as he along with most of the twelve apostles disappear from history – only Peter and John figure prominently – although Matthew did leave his mark on history in the writing of his gospel. Apart from Peter and John the rest of the twelve become lost to us and James the Lord's brother, Mark and Paul assume prominence.

Then on the day of Pentecost, the fiftieth day after the first Sunday following the Passover, the waiting was fulfilled and the Holy Spirit descended in great power on all these 120 followers and they began to speak in foreign languages:

“All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language.” (Acts 2:4-6 NIV)

The spiritual baptism Jesus had promised was now an accomplished fact. Note the difference between this and the modern speaking in tongues, as bystanders – probably Jews from the Diaspora returned to Jerusalem – could understand what was being said. This was the birth of the Christian church. The Holy Spirit who had been active in the creation of the universe and the incarnation of Christ and his equipping for ministry, was now active in the birth of the church. From this time on, the early church regarded the giving of the Holy Spirit as a normal, indeed essential, part of becoming a Christian believer.

The crowd which had gathered at the unusual sound of Galileans praising God in many foreign languages were totally amazed and wondered what could be happening. This gave Peter the opportunity to preach the first Christian sermon:

“Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say.” (Acts 2:14 NIV)

Peter preached a simple gospel message that Jesus was the Christ and that he had been crucified and raised and exalted. This message may have been simple, but it included what were to become the main elements of missionary preaching in the early church – an announcement that the age of fulfilment had arrived, an account of Jesus' ministry with an emphasis on his death and resurrection, scriptural proofs that Jesus was the Messiah, and a call to repentance. More importantly, in the power of the Spirit, it touched the hearts of the crowds:

“When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"” (Acts 2:37 NIV)

note that the crowds don't seek to deny the reality of either the crucifixion or the resurrection of Christ – which would have been the natural response if these things had been an invention of the disciples – rather their positive response gives Peter a further opening to call them to faith:

“Peter replied, "Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call." With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.”” (Acts 2:38-40 NIV)

Peter promises them forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit, which are still the essentials of coming to Christian faith today. The gift of the Holy Spirit is of course quite distinct from the gifts of the Spirit which the Holy Spirit bestows on believers as he chooses.

The response was amazing:

“Those who accepted his message were baptised, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.” (Acts 2:41 NIV)

the 3,000 were added to the 120. One preaching of the gospel in the power of the Spirit produced more converts than Jesus' entire ministry – no wonder Jesus said as a result of his returning to the Father they would be enabled to do greater works than he had done (John 14:12). Today we tend to forget that all, or almost all, of these first Christians were Jews or converts to Judaism. Note also that the 3,000 weren't just casual converts, but became real followers:

“They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” (Acts 2:42 NIV).

Their behaviour and, no doubt, further preaching by the apostles produced yet more converts: “..... And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.” (Acts 2:47 NIV)

The Development of the Church in Jerusalem

Next we hear of Peter and John working together in ministry and of Peter performing a miraculous healing of a lame man – which leads to conflict with the Jewish rulers:

“Now a man crippled from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts.” (Acts 3:2 NIV)

[slide of gate]

“Then Peter said, "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk." Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong. He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God.” (Acts 3:6-8 NIV)

Note that Peter healed not through any power or skill of his own, but through the power of the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. The power by which Jesus had healed such people during his public ministry was still present and active, exercised no longer directly but through his disciples.

Peter preaches this message to the crowd in the Temple witnessing also to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. He calls the people to repentance and offers them forgiveness for their part in Jesus' death (a surprisingly lenient treatment of the Jewish leadership who were determined to put Jesus to death). Peter clearly identifies Christ as the Messiah and speaks of his second coming. He then points out that that this was foretold by OT figures such as Moses, Samuel and other prophets.

This teaching by the apostles quickly brings a reaction from the authorities who arrest them: “They seized Peter and John, and because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day.” (Acts 4:3 NIV)

The teaching of Jesus' resurrection would have particularly annoyed the Sadducees who denied the resurrection of the dead. Jewish Law forbade conducting examinations and trials after sundown, so they were locked up for the night. Luke tells us that the apostles preaching was effective as it continued to bring people to faith:

“But many who heard the message believed, and the number of men grew to about five thousand.” (Acts 4:4 NIV)

So the number of believers increased from 3,000 to 5,000.

The next day the Sanhedrin met. Having removed Jesus from the scene they were still in difficulties – they were going to have as much trouble on his account as they had before his death. The apostles were immediately on the offensive:

“Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: "Rulers and elders of the people! If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and are asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed.” (Acts 4:8-10 NIV)

[slide of Sanhedrin meeting]

This is what Jesus had taught them:

“Settle it therefore in your minds, not to meditate beforehand how to answer; for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict” (Luke 21:14-15).

Peter now proved this assurance and replied in words inspired by the Holy Spirit. Again it's striking that the Sanhedrin never sought to deny the reality of Jesus' death and resurrection – and they would surely have loved to do just that if there had been any possible doubt.

Peter and John were not educated in the formal learning taught by the rabbinical schools, but they had been taught by Jesus and spoke with authority and understanding in the power of the Holy Spirit. Isn't that a lesson for all of us today.

So the court conferred together. Peter and John hadn't really done anything wrong, but in the eyes of the Jewish authorities, they couldn't be allowed to go on teaching like this. The authorities came up with a weak solution – to let them go, but threaten them if they didn't change their ways:

“Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.” (Acts 4:18 NIV)

Peter and John were not deterred and came back with a bold and defiant answer:

“But Peter and John replied, "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.” (Acts 4:19-20 NIV)

The apostles continued to teach and preach about Jesus, although outsiders were deterred from joining in. But more and more believers came into the fold:

“The apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade. No-one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number.” (Acts 5:12-14 NIV)

[slide of Solomon's colonnade] and Peter, and apparently other apostles too, healed the sick: “As a result, people brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by. Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by evil spirits, and all of them were healed.” (Acts 5:15-16 NIV)

Peter's shadow was as effective at healing as a touch of Jesus's cloak had been.

Then the apostles were arrested again:

“Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy. They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail.” (Acts 5:17-18 NIV)

but, they were quickly released through the power of God and his special intervention so that they could continue to preach the gospel:

“But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. “Go, stand in the temple courts,” he said, “and tell the people the full message of this new life.”” (Acts 5:19-20 NIV)

and the apostles were again brought before the Sanhedrin from their teaching:

“At that, the captain went with his officers and brought the apostles. They did not use force, because they feared that the people would stone them. Having brought the apostles, they made them appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest.” (Acts 5:26-27 NIV)

[slide of Sanhedrin]

The apostles were reminded of the previous warning from the Sanhedrin not to teach in the name of Jesus. But Peter told the court that they must obey God and bear witness to the truth. May we always bear witness to God’s truth whatever the obstacles.

Some of the Sanhedrin wanted to put the apostles to death:

“When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death.” (Acts 5:33 NIV)

But the greatest Pharisaic teacher of the day, Gamaliel, who (as we shall see later) taught Paul stood up to defend them:

“But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, who was honoured by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered that the men be put outside for a little while.” (Acts 5:34 NIV)

and went on to advise the Sanhedrin:

“Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.” (Acts 5:38-39 NIV)

Gamaliel was so revered that when he died it was said:

“the glory of the Torah ceased, and purity and ‘separateness’ died.”

and so he persuaded the Sanhedrin, although the apostles were punished:

“His speech persuaded them. They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.” (Acts 5:40 NIV)

The apostles accepted both their punishment and their release with joy, but paid no more attention to the Sanhedrin than they had the first time, and continued to preach the gospel:

“The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.” (Acts 5:41-42 NIV).

The disciples appointed seven assistants to help in the work, primarily but not exclusively in the distribution of food, as the early church expanded. The efforts of the apostles were blessed and the church continued to grow, even bringing in priests from the Jewish faith:

“So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.” (Acts 6:7 NIV)

Although there is no indication that these priests gave up their duties in the Jewish faith, a tremendous tension was clearly developing between the old and the new order – as the Story of the stoning of Stephen makes clear. Stephen taught in power and the wisdom of the Holy Spirit and this aroused jealousy, particularly in the synagogue where he taught:

“Now Stephen, a man full of God’s grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people. Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia. These men began to argue with Stephen,” (Acts 6:8-9 NIV)

[*slide*]The mention of Cilicia [*follow the red arrow on the slide*] raises the possibility that this was the synagogue attended by Saul, more commonly known as Paul (of whom we shall be hearing much shortly), whose native city Tarsus was the principal city of Cilicia.

Stephen bested his opponents in debate and so, arousing their jealousy, he was falsely accused and brought before the Sanhedrin:

“Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, “We have heard Stephen speak words of blasphemy against Moses and against God.” So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. They produced false witnesses, who testified, “This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us.”” (Acts 6:11-14 NIV)

Stephen’s opponents had been unable to silence him in debate, so they made false accusations. Later on blasphemy was narrowly defined as the misuse of God’s name, but we know from the accusations of blasphemy made against Jesus that it was much more widely interpreted in the first century AD. The false witnesses testified that Stephen’s teaching threatened both the holy place – the Temple – and the customs handed down from Moses’ time. These accusations were probably not a complete fabrication as Jesus had mentioned the destruction of the Temple and Stephen probably repeated Jesus’ words.

The high priest – probably still Caiaphas who remained in office until 36 AD – asked Stephen if these charges were true, and rather than giving a direct answer Stephen gave a rather long defence of Christianity as God’s appointed way of worship. Stephen’s speech summarised the history of the Jewish nation and their refusal to acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah in a highly critical way, indeed at the end he accuses the Jewish leaders of murdering the Messiah. In many ways his statements remind me of the book of Hebrews, although Stephen is even more critical of the old order than is the book of Hebrews. But, Stephen also seeks to show that the new way of Christianity honours Hebrew scripture and it could be said that his defence was that he was even more OT scripturally correct than his accusers. Stephen’s statements made mission to the Gentiles a logical necessity and it is interesting that his death, largely caused by this speech, was to be the trigger that launched Christian mission to the Gentiles – as we shall in a moment.

Stephen was ready to be, and swiftly became, the first martyr for the Christian faith. His death was full of Christ. Luke records three further sentences which he spoke, the first of which referred to Christ, while the remaining two were addressed to Christ and are remarkably reminiscent of Christ’s own words from the cross:

“When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.” (Acts 7:54-60 NIV)

The Sanhedrin were unwilling to listen to Stephen's testimony to Jesus and covered their ears. Indeed they were determined to silence him, so they dragged him out and stoned him in what was a mob lynching rather than an official execution – although the witnesses did apparently take the lead as they would have done in an official execution. In these verses Luke introduces us to the person who was to become probably the most important figure as regards the growth of the early church – Saul – whom we find guarding the clothes of those carrying out the stoning. Saul, later known by his Roman name Paullus or Paul, never forgot this experience as we learn from his speech when he was arrested in Jerusalem recorded in Acts chapter 22.

The early church was shocked and stunned by Stephen's death and by the violent persecution which followed:

“..... On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him.” (Acts 8:1-2 NIV)

This persecution of Jesus and his witnesses stands in continuity with the persecuted prophets of the OT. But, with the benefit of hindsight, we can see how God's providence used Stephen's testimony, in word and deed, through life and death, to promote the church's mission. As always, Satan overreached himself, and the persecution he initiated had the opposite effect of what he intended. God can bring good out of even the most adverse and unpromising circumstances and we need to remember that when we face difficulties and hard times in our own lives.

After these events, we know little of the development of the Jerusalem church. The focus of the book of Acts shifts to Judea and then further afield and, of course, Paul deals with his mission to the Gentiles.

The Spread of the Church Outside Jerusalem

The persecution dispersed converted Jews (other than the Apostles) around the Roman world and initiated the bringing of the gospel both to Jews outside Israel and also to the Gentiles [*slide explanation – green area Roman Empire red dots Christian communities established during the 1st century. Many established by Paul and the Apostles but many by ordinary believers*]. We shouldn't necessarily assume from this that the apostles were spared persecution; just that persecution didn't cause them to leave Jerusalem at this time. So, ordinary believers took the opportunity to proclaim the gospel message wherever they went – let that be an example to us ordinary believers here today. Firstly, Jesus transferred the task of building the church to the disciples, now it's being transferred to the ordinary believers whom the disciples have evangelised. Luke introduces a pattern of events that will be repeated in other contexts: rejection in one place becomes the opportunity for people elsewhere to receive the gospel and become part of the messianic community. God and the gospel are not defeated by human opposition, however evil and intense. The efforts of the Sanhedrin and Saul to halt the preaching of the gospel and wipe out the early church only resulted in expansion and wider impact.

Saul was a leading figure, perhaps the leading figure, in this persecution:

“But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.” (Acts 8:3 NIV)

Unlike his teacher Gamaliel Saul clearly didn't believe in restraint. Probably he saw clearly that the new order of Christianity was not really compatible with the old order of Judaism. If

Christ was indeed the Messiah, then the old order of the Law was superseded. So, he reasoned that Christianity must be stamped out. Saul was brutal in his attacks on the church, many followed Stephen into martyrdom. Saul had blood on his hands.

The book of Acts uses Philip (who along with Stephen was one of the seven assistants appointed earlier by the apostles) as an example of the spreading of the Gospel out of Jerusalem and indeed out of Israel:

“Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there. When the crowds heard Philip and saw the miraculous signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said.” (Acts 8:5-6 NIV).

Philip ministered first in a city in Samaria, probably the capital city, fulfilling Jesus’ earlier predictions of carrying the gospel to the Samaritans. [slide showing where Samaria is – North of Judea]. It’s hard to conceive how bold a move this was on Philip’s part. Antagonism between Jews and Samaritans had been alive for centuries and was particularly intense in the first century AD. Note that people aren’t persuaded just by the miraculous signs Philip did. Philip also preached the word. Note also that these verses make it clear that the performance of miracles wasn’t restricted just to the apostles.

Learning of the success of Philip in Samaria, John and Peter came to join in the ministry:

“When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them.” (Acts 8:14 NIV)

and Philip disappears from the scene in Samaria. Peter and John prayed for the converts and laid hands on them so that they would receive the Holy Spirit. This is probably the origin of the idea of Episcopal confirmation within the church, but I think that stretches too far what we can derive from these verses and Paul never attempts to make such a point in his writings, even when he speaks of Christians being anointed by the Spirit (2 Corinthians 1:21-22). It is indeed surprising and does not seem to have been the normal early church experience, so probably it was necessary in order to incorporate the Samaritans into an integrated church body, rather than encouraging them to form a separate church perpetuating the Samaritan relationship to Judaism.

After this and after they had testified and proclaimed the word, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem preaching the Gospel in villages as they went:

“When they had testified and proclaimed the word of the Lord, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many Samaritan villages.” (Acts 8:25 NIV)

Philip was then divinely guided to go south, to the road from Jerusalem to Gaza, where a divine appointment had been arranged for him in a most unlikely place. He comes upon what the NIV translates as a ‘chariot’ (but which was most probably a covered travelling wagon). In it was seated the treasurer of the kingdom of Ethiopia (Sudan rather than modern Ethiopia [slide follow the red arrow and you can see it’s much nearer to Egypt than modern Ethiopia]), who had made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and was now returning home (the Gaza road carries on to Egypt and the African continent). He was probably a Gentile worshipper of Yahweh. The treasurer was reading the book of Isaiah – in antiquity reading was almost always done aloud – and Philip was prompted to go up to him and ask him if he understood it. The treasurer asked Philip for help in interpreting it (he was clearly a modest man) and Philip mounted the wagon and found the treasurer reading chapter 53 of Isaiah. Philip used this wonderful opportunity to preach the Christian Gospel to the treasurer who believed and was baptized, which shows the importance both of reading scripture and making the most of our opportunities to preach the gospel. So, an important and influential convert was won for

the kingdom. He was also probably the first Gentile convert to Christianity – the importance of Cornelius (who we shall be looking at later), who is often called the first Gentile convert, is that he was the first Gentile convert to receive apostolic acceptance. This is the last we hear of the treasurer in scripture, although Irenaeus records that he became a missionary to the people of Ethiopia – thus in a sense the evangelization of the Gentiles was beginning. In those days Ethiopia was beyond the limits of exploration by the Roman Empire (an expedition was sent in AD 61) – so the Gospel message was indeed being carried to and even beyond the ends of the known world. So, the commission which Jesus had given the disciples was being fulfilled – the Gospel was being preached first in Jerusalem, then in Judea, then in Samaria and now to the ends of the earth.

[*slide of area*]The divine purpose having been accomplished, Philip was sent on his way by the Holy Spirit and he travelled around preaching the Gospel of Christ between Azotus (the old Philistine city of Ashdod) and Caesarea [*which you can see marked by the red arrows*]. Philip seems to have settled down in Caesarea as we find him there when he makes his next appearance in scripture 20 years later in Acts chapter 21.

The Conversion of Saul

Now that Stephen and Philip have contributed their pioneer preparations for the world mission of the church, we then come to one of the most important events in the development and spread of the early church, the miraculous conversion of Saul or Paul. Saul was on his way to Damascus to continue his persecution of the church. Clearly he was not content merely to harass Christians in Jerusalem and the Romans had accorded the Jewish nation rights of extradition against neighbouring territories such as Syria. But, he was overcome by the power of Christ:

“As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied.” (Acts 9:3-5 NIV)

Saul had almost reached Damascus [*slide with red arrow*] when a light which outshone the sun – the light of Christ the Son of God – flashed around him and a voice spoke to him in Aramaic asking him why he is persecuting him. Saul obviously recognises the divine in the voice as he responds “who are you Lord?” But, he wasn’t prepared for the response that it was Jesus Christ speaking. At once Saul must have grasped, from the extraordinary way in which Jesus identified with his followers, that to persecute them was to persecute him; that Jesus was alive and his claims were true. What a shock that must have been to him! This was no faint or fit, epileptic or otherwise, this was a truly miraculous experience. The supernatural impacted on the natural. In fact we know from the later statements of Ananias (verse 17) and Barnabas (verse 27) that Saul actually saw the risen Christ.

Saul was then told to proceed to Damascus and receive instruction:

““Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." The men travelling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus.” (Acts 9:6-8 NIV)

He who had expected to enter Damascus in the fullness of his pride and prowess, as a self-confident opponent of Christ, was actually led into it, humbled and blinded, a captive of the very Christ he had opposed.

Saul remained in Damascus for three days blind to the outside world:
“For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.” (Acts 9:9 NIV)
but receiving wonderful spiritual visions and supernatural instruction.

There was a Christian in Damascus named Ananias who was told to go and lay hands on Paul to restore his sight and also told that Saul had been informed of this in a vision:

“In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, “Ananias!” “Yes, Lord,” he answered. The Lord told him, “Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.”” (Acts 9:10-12 NIV)

[*slide of straight street*] Straight Street is still one of the main thoroughfares in Damascus.

Ananias was reluctant because he knew of Saul’s reputation:

““Lord,” Ananias answered, “I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.”” (Acts 9:13-14 NIV)

Ananias knew about Saul’s persecution of Christians. But, God overruled Ananias’ protest, Saul was God’s chosen instrument:

“But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”” (Acts 9:15-16 NIV)

Now the mission to the Gentiles is confirmed by God himself. Saul’s calling to suffer identifies him as a Christ like figure in his future life and ministry. The great antagonist of the gospel will become its outstanding protagonist. The persecutor will become the persecuted and suffer like Jesus himself.

So, Ananias, obedient to the call of Christ, went to Saul and restored his sight:

“Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”” (Acts 9:17 NIV)

and Saul was converted to Christianity:

“Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptised, and after taking some food, he regained his strength. Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus.” (Acts 9:18-19 NIV)

In my view this commissioning of Saul directly by Christ’s power and intervention discredits any idea of the necessity of apostolic intervention – or the transmission of such intervention – in ordination for ministry. So Ananias enters and leaves what we know of history and we hear nothing more of him. But, having been greeted by Ananias as a brother, Saul is immediately welcomed into the fellowship of the church. Saul’s conversion was an amazing act of God – choosing one of his chief enemies as his champion. I think that the sudden conversion of Saul is one of the three or four strongest pieces of evidence for the truth of Christianity. As George Lord Lyttleton said “the conversion and apostleship of St. Paul alone, duly considered, was of itself a demonstration sufficient to prove Christianity to be a divine revelation”.

The first fruits of conversion are always a Godly life and Saul shows this by beginning to preach the Gospel:

“At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. All those who heard him were astonished and asked, “Isn’t he the man who caused havoc in Jerusalem

among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?" Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ." (Acts 9:20-22 NIV)

[*slide of Damascus*] Now Saul has a very different commission to that of persecuting the church, instead he is promoting it.

Saul didn't stay in Damascus for long, he left the city and then probably spent about three years in Arabia (near where Damascus is located), according to Paul's account in Galatians. He likely preached and taught there. He then briefly returned to Damascus where the Jews tried to kill him and so he was forced to flee and went to Jerusalem:

"After many days had gone by, the Jews conspired to kill him, but Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall." (Acts 9:23-25 NIV).

Saul's Early Ministry

When Saul came to Jerusalem, the disciples were initially afraid of him, but Barnabas made an introduction and spoke up for him:

"When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord." (Acts 9:26-28 NIV)

We know from Saul's account in Galatians that he met with Peter (with whom he stayed for 15 days) and James. True conversion always results in church membership. It's not only that converts must join the Christian community, but that the Christian community must welcome converts, especially those from a different religious, ethnic or social background.

Saul debated with the Hellenistic or Grecian Jews, but they tried to kill him, so the disciples took him to Caesarea and sent him to his home city of Tarsus:

"He talked and debated with the Grecian Jews, but they tried to kill him. When the brothers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus." (Acts 9:29-30 NIV).

[*slide showing Tarsus*] So, Saul's conversion story began with his leaving Jerusalem to arrest fugitive Christians and ends with his leaving Jerusalem as a fugitive Christian himself. Here we leave Saul for a time, no doubt engaged in unrecorded ministry, but we shall meet with him again shortly.

Relieved of the persecution promoted by Paul the church enjoyed a time of peace and growth: "Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord." (Acts 9:31 NIV)

Evangelism by Peter and the Beginnings of Gentile Christianity

The Christian ministry was progressively broadening its appeal towards the Gentiles and Luke proceeds to set out that progression in the ministry of Peter and makes it clear that acceptance of Gentiles on equal terms came about through the ministry of Peter. This

apostolic acceptance of Gentile converts was a key moment for the growth and development of the early church. First, in chapter 9 verses 32-42 (*on screen only verses 32-35*) Luke focuses on Peter's itinerant ministry in the coastal region of Judea, where Jewish Christians are strengthened in their walk with the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit through the ministry of the apostle. At the same time, Luke notes how many others 'turned to the Lord' (v. 35), and (*on screen only verses 36-42*) 'many people believed in the Lord' (v. 42). Peter travels to Lydda (v. 32) – about 40 kms from Jerusalem – and then to Joppa (v. 42) – 20 kms further on and a distinctly Greek city [*slide showing Lydda and Joppa*]. So Peter was moving further and further away from Jerusalem into Gentile territory. As he responds to various needs, God blesses his pastoral and evangelistic endeavours. Aeneas, a paralytic, is healed, Tabitha (Dorcas) is raised from death, and many people turn to Christ. The healing of the paralytic and the raising from the dead of the widow parallel the ministry of Jesus (Luke 5:17-26; 7:11-17) and the earlier ministries of Elijah and Elisha (1 Kings 17:17-24; 2 Kings 4:18-37). So, Peter is validated again as an authentic representative of the line of prophets who "work signs and wonders among the people." His Christ-likeness is highlighted at a moment when his authority is about to become decisive.

Thus Peter is led to the house of Simon the Tanner:

"Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon." (Acts 9:43 NIV)
a strange place for a Jew to stay as Tanners were considered unclean, because they dealt with dead animals. Peter doesn't seem to have been troubled by this, as he stayed for some time, but he was soon to be faced with more radical adjustments.

The focus then shifts to a God fearing Gentile centurion named Cornelius living in Caesarea [*slide showing location of Caesarea*], the centre of Roman administration. God gives him a vision of an angel, to instruct him to send to Joppa for Peter, because Cornelius and his family need to hear the Gospel:

"One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, "Cornelius!" Cornelius stared at him in fear. "What is it, Lord?" he asked. The angel answered, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter." (Acts 10:3-5 NIV)

and Cornelius duly sends his servants to Joppa to bring Peter, setting the scene for Cornelius to become the first Gentile convert to receive apostolic affirmation and for the breaking down of barriers between Jews and Gentiles.

Peter also had to be prepared for the encounter – even more so than Cornelius, because of Peter's Jewish scruples – and he is having a parallel vision in which he was instructed to eat what he would have previously regarded as unclean:

"He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air. Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat." (Acts 10:11-13 NIV)

Peter resisted, but God insisted:

"Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean." The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven." (Acts 10:14-16 NIV)

Peter must acknowledge God's right to determine what is clean and to redefine boundaries for the gospel era. The message was so important that it was given *three times*, before *the sheet was taken back to heaven*. Peter must not treat any of the creatures in the vision as

profane, since God has declared them to be clean. What was implicit in the teaching of Jesus (Mark 7:14-23) is now made explicit. [*slide showing unclean animals in Jewish Law*] By the time he explains the vision to Cornelius and his household, Peter recognises that he should no longer allow the Levitical laws to keep him from associating with Gentiles (v. 28) – it was of course Jewish food laws which formed a large part of the barrier to associating with Gentiles – and the events that follow after that (vv. 30–48) make it clear that Gentiles do not have to conform to Jewish customs in order to benefit from the salvation brought by Jesus.

While Peter was still pondering over his vision the messengers from Cornelius arrived, identified themselves and explained their mission and Peter invited them into the house to stay. For Peter to invite Gentiles into the house was definitely a step in the right direction.

The next day Peter left with Cornelius' men, taking six fellow Jewish believers from Joppa with him, and arrived at Cornelius' house in Caesarea, [*slide showing relationship of Joppa and Caesarea*] where he was greeted by Cornelius and his friends and relatives. [*slide showing picture of Caesarea*] Peter made it clear that he had been prepared by the Lord to accept association with Gentiles and to enter a Gentile house, both of which were strictly against Jewish custom. Peter had obviously grasped the wider implications of his vision, which had only explicitly dealt with food.

Peter then asked why Cornelius had sent for him and Cornelius explained his vision and asked that Peter tell him everything God had commanded him to say:
“So I sent for you immediately, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us.” (Acts 10:33 NIV)

Peter then preached a simple but powerful Gospel message to Cornelius starting by stating that God had no favourites and that men from all nations were fully accepted by Him, so that non-Jewish persons could achieve salvation on the same basis as Jews. Peter testified to the resurrection, saying that he had eaten and drunk with the risen Lord. All who heard the message received the Holy Spirit – the Pentecost of the Gentile world had arrived:
“While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message.” (Acts 10:44 NIV)

The giving of the Holy Spirit to Gentiles astonished the other Jewish believers from Joppa:
“The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.,” (Acts 10:45-46 NIV)

It was very like the original Pentecost. As Paul said: “in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks” (1 Corinthians 12:13). Paul also tells us (1 Corinthians 12:10, 30) that the gift of tongues was not bestowed on all those who received the Spirit, so we mustn't see the gift of tongues as essential evidence of the bestowing of the Holy Spirit.

Then they were all baptised:

“ Then Peter said, "Can anyone keep these people from being baptised with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." So he ordered that they be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.” (Acts 10:46-48 NIV).

Apart from this incident, Peter is not recorded as evangelising or testifying to Gentiles. Indeed a few years later it was agreed that Peter should evangelise to the Jews whilst Paul and Barnabas would focus on the Gentiles (Galatians 2:1-10).

No one suggested that the new Gentile believers should be circumcised – which was soon to become an important precedent – but rather Peter then suggested that they be baptised. He baptised them in the name of Jesus and remained with them for a few days. This acceptance of Gentile believers on equal terms was an incredibly important turning point for the early church.

The news of what had happened and what Peter had done spread widely throughout Judea and it reached Jerusalem before Peter himself returned:

“The apostles and the brothers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticised him and said, “You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.”” (Acts 11:1-3 NIV)

inevitably Peter attracted criticism and hostility for what he had done. This reminds us of the criticism of Christ by the Pharisees for “eating with sinners”. The use of “circumcised” as opposed to “uncircumcised” terminology highlights the debate about Gentile Christians which was to come. Peter’s authority was not so great as to guarantee automatic acceptance of his deeds and this was probably the beginning of the end for the apostles in Jerusalem. Indeed it would not be long before James the brother of Jesus would be appointed leader of the church there.

Then Peter recounted his vision and what he had done to the Jerusalem church and finished with the climax of the Holy Spirit being given to the Gentiles whilst he was speaking to them. He explained that this meant that God did not differentiate between Jews and Gentiles. The Jerusalem church accepted this and praised God:

“When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, “So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life.”” (Acts 11:18 NIV)

an epoch making decision by the conservative leaders of the Jerusalem church which was to set the scene for the next development in the ministry of the early church.

Wider Mission to the Gentiles

Luke now moves the focus to what is to be the main theme of the remainder of the book of Acts – mission to the Gentiles – apart from a final account of persecution by Herod Agrippa in Jerusalem, which we’ll come to in a moment. It’s not that evangelism to Jews must stop, but rather that evangelism to the Gentiles must begin in earnest. As Paul was later to write (indeed it’s almost a refrain in the early chapters of Romans), the gospel was intended ‘first for the Jew, then for the Gentile’. Luke is leading up to his account of the heroic work of Saul. But first, he tells us that many Jewish believers had been scattered in the persecution which had started after Stephen’s death, and were mainly spreading the gospel message to other Jews. But, a few were spreading the message to Gentiles in Antioch:

“Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus.” (Acts 11:20 NIV)

[*slide of Antioch*] Antioch was an important city in the Roman world, probably third after Rome and Alexandria, with a population of around 500,000. We see that the early phases of the mission to the Gentiles were led by unknown and unnamed evangelists – but how important their work was! It was bearing fruit:

“The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.” (Acts 11:21 NIV)

so when the Jerusalem church heard this they sent, not an apostle, but Barnabas to Antioch:

“News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.” (Acts 11:22 NIV)

In fact Barnabas was a superb, God ordained choice and he encouraged this work of evangelism to the Gentiles.

[*slide of Tarsus and Antioch*] Soon the scale of the work in Antioch was so great that Barnabas needed help, and he went to Tarsus to find Saul and brought him to Antioch. The two ministered together in Antioch where they taught many people. Antioch was to become Paul’s home base and the starting point for all his missionary journeys. Luke tells us that believers in Christ were first called Christians in Antioch:

“and when he found [Saul], he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.” (Acts 11:26 NIV) [*slide of Antioch*]

Luke regularly shows the importance of teaching as an essential aspect of evangelism (e.g., Acts 2:14–36; 3:12–26; 13:16–41) and as a vital means of growing a church to maturity and keeping believers faithful to the Lord (e.g.: Acts 14:21–22; 18:11, 24–28; 19:8–10; 20:17–35). Here it’s worth noting that there is a tradition of the early church that Luke was a native of Antioch and that he became a believer at this time.

The missionary work was now authenticated by good works. The believers in Antioch were informed of a forthcoming famine by the Christian prophet Agabus, exercising his gift of prophecy under God’s direction:

“During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.)” (Acts 11:27-28 NIV) and so the church in Antioch decided to make provision for their brothers in Judea:

“The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea. This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.” (Acts 11:29-30 NIV)

Why the church in Antioch deduced that Judea would be particularly badly affected is not clear, although we know from Josephus that Judea did suffer from bad harvests and localised famine at this time. This was to become Saul’s second visit to Jerusalem. It’s not completely clear whether this is the same visit that Paul writes of in chapter 2 of his letter to the Galatians – although I believe that it was, because the nature of Paul’s comments in Galatians make it fairly clear that he was writing prior to the Jerusalem council and speaking of events before the decisions of that council.

More Persecution in Jerusalem

Around this time – probably 42 or 43 AD – King Herod Agrippa I, who was now king of Judea and Samaria (although not a very secure king), commenced a new persecution of the Christians in Jerusalem. This was no doubt done to please the Jewish leaders of the day. The Greek of Acts implies quite a lot of violence – and this is what we read of. The disciple James became the second Christian martyr as he was “killed with a sword” and Peter was imprisoned under heavy guard just before the Passover – this is further evidence that things were turning against the apostles. Note that the death of James does not lead to the appointment of a new apostle – the days of the twelve are over. No doubt Peter would also have been tried and executed, but he was being earnestly prayed for:

“So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.” (Acts 12:5 NIV)

here the Greek indicates fervent prayer by the believers, which has great power (James 5:16) and this led to a miraculous rescue from God:

“Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. “Quick, get up!” he said, and the chains fell off Peter’s wrists. Then the angel said to him, “Put on your clothes and sandals.” And Peter did so. “Wrap your cloak around you and follow me,” the angel told him. Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision. They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him. Then Peter came to himself and said, “Now I know without a doubt that the Lord sent his angel and rescued me from Herod’s clutches and from everything the Jewish people were anticipating.”” (Acts 12:7-11 NIV)

Luke does not say where Peter’s prison was, but it was quite probably in the Antonia fortress, where Paul was later confined. (Acts 21:31–23:32). [*slide of Antonia Fortress*] The fortress stood northwest of the temple area, and a flight of steps probably led down from it to street level, comparable to flights excavated south and southwest of the temple mount since 1968. That James should die while Peter should escape is a mystery of divine providence which has been repeated countless times in the history of the people of God. By faith, says the writer to the Hebrews, some “escaped the edge of the sword”; by faith others “were killed with the sword” (Hebrews 11:34, 37).

Peter then went to the house of the mother of John Mark (probably the cousin of Barnabas (Colossians 4:10) and the author of the gospel of Mark) and made known his miraculous release before making good his escape from Agrippa’s police. Peter asked them to tell James the oldest half-brother of Jesus (who by now seems to have become the leader of the church in Jerusalem) and the other brothers. Peter then departed and went underground so successfully that he escaped, indeed to this very day no-one knows where he went, and Herod ordered the prison guards executed as under Roman Law guards who allowed a prisoner to escape suffered the penalty he would have been due.

According to both Luke and Josephus, Herod then died shortly (a few months to a year) afterwards and Luke tells us that with Agrippa’s removal the church continued to grow and multiply in Jerusalem.

Paul’s First Missionary Journey

[*slide of map of journey*] Paul’s three, or possibly four, missionary journeys were obviously enormously important in spreading Christianity across the then known world and I’m sure the church wouldn’t have spread so far so fast without them. But, the spread of the church wasn’t totally dependent on them, they weren’t the only factor. For example, the church in Rome was established without Paul even visiting Rome as the introduction to the Epistle to the Romans makes clear. What may have been even more important were Paul’s letters, which helped to keep established churches on the right path, and ensured that correct Christian doctrine was taught. We shall be looking at this in more detail when we consider the writing of the New Testament. These letters were a major factor in combating the heresies which became so prevalent in the early church.

Saul and Barnabas, returning from Jerusalem then picked up John Mark as an additional disciple and returned to Antioch from where they were soon sent out on Paul’s first missionary journey to bring the gospel to the Gentiles:

“While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.” (Acts 13:2-3 NIV)

The idea of mission to the Gentiles was not completely new. Phillip had converted the Ethiopian and Peter had converted Cornelius, but organised ministry to the Gentile community at large was a new departure.

[*slide of journey*] Saul, Barnabas and John Mark set sail from Seleucia Pieria a port on the coast near Antioch for [*new slide of journey*] Salamis in Cyprus, about 60 miles away. Barnabas was a Cypriot by birth, which might have played a part in this choice of destination. We also know that Jewish believers had already brought the word to Jews in Cyprus (Acts 11:19). [*new slide of journey*] From Salamis they crossed the island of Cyprus to Paphos, some 90 miles West, [*new slide of journey and second slide of Paphos*] from where they sailed to Perga. They then travelled [*new slide of journey*] around the Southern Galatian area of Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe. They then reversed their steps through these towns, [*new slide of journey*] returning to the coastal port of Attalia before sailing back to Seleucia Pieria for Antioch.

At Salamis in Cyprus, the administrative centre of Eastern Cyprus, the missionaries proclaimed God’s word in synagogues, following Saul’s principle that the gospel was first for the Jew (Romans 1:16). This was a pattern of action which became characteristic of Barnabas and Saul’s missions, although we are not told if they had any success in Salamis. They then crossed Cyprus to Paphos, the seat of the provincial government, on the Southwest coast of the island. Here they met with the proconsul Sergius Paullus, who was interested in Christianity, but they were opposed by the Jewish sorcerer Bar-Jesus (who obviously felt his position with the proconsul was endangered), whom they challenged and defeated. From this time on Luke calls Saul by his Roman name of Paul. They then sailed for Perga where Luke tells us that John Mark left them and returned to Jerusalem, an action which was to remain in Saul’s memory and have consequences for the ministry later.

The next point of interest in the journey is Pisidian Antioch, about 100 miles from Perga [*slide of Pisidian Antioch plus another slide of Pisidian Antioch*], where Paul again preached in the synagogue. Josephus tells us that there was a substantial Jewish population there, which might explain why Paul concentrated on it. Here, the synagogue ministry is given great prominence and a Christ-centred sermon is recorded with an emphasis for the Jews on not missing the salvation offered by Jesus. Paul was asked to preach again, but, opposition from unbelieving Jews, awakened by Gentile interest in Paul's message and Gentile attendance at the synagogue, the second time Paul preached, necessitated a turning away from synagogue ministry and a more direct engagement with Gentiles. This scenario of general rejection of the gospel by the Jews - although there were always some who believed - was to become the general pattern of Paul's ministry. However, evangelism to the Gentiles was apparently a great success and the gospel spread widely in the region:

“When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honoured the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed. The word of the Lord spread through the whole region.” (Acts 13:48-49 NIV)

but Jewish opposition drove them from this area to Iconium, a city about 90 miles south-east of Pisidian Antioch.

The same pattern of Jewish opposition is repeated in Iconium (Acts 14:1–7) and the opposition is so fierce that the apostles are unable to finish their ministry, so they flee to the nearby city of Lystra (18 miles from Iconium). In Lystra, however, there appears to have

been no synagogue and there was an immediate encounter with paganism, as Paul challenged the inhabitants to turn from idolatry to the living God (Acts 14:8–18). Paul backed up his preaching with at least one miraculous healing of a crippled man who had never walked and had such great success that he had difficulty preventing the local population from worshipping them as gods. Here, Luke refers to Paul and Barnabas as apostles for the first time. Jewish opposition to this ministry came from Pisidian Antioch and Iconium, forcing the missionaries to move on to Derbe, another 55 miles further on (Acts 14:19–20). The strength of this opposition in Lystra can be measured by the fact that some Jews were travelling from Pisidian Antioch more than 100 miles away in order to deliver it, and it was so successful that Paul was stoned and left for dead (although he was in fact still alive). Paul's missionary journeys were not full of triumphant success but were rather the way of the cross.

Although there was a priority of ministry to Jews wherever possible through the synagogues, there is a lot of focus on ministry to the Gentiles. Despite the opposition which has been encountered, the return by way of Lystra and Iconium, enables them to strengthen and encourage both new disciples and the churches (Acts 14:21–28) appointing elders for the churches (Acts 14:23). Paul taught them about enduring hardships, a subject which must have been on his heart after his recent stoning. Paul and Barnabas then preached in Perga and returned to Attalia from where they sailed back to Syrian Antioch. Whatever the success of ministry amongst the Jews, the whole campaign is evaluated in terms of “opening a door of faith to the Gentiles” (Acts 14:27). The first missionary journey of Paul had occupied at least a year and probably more, but soon the apostles will have to leave for Jerusalem, to represent the interests of Gentile believers at the Jerusalem Council.

Back in Syrian Antioch they reported what God had done, especially in terms of opening the door of faith to the Gentiles and stayed some time there. It's likely that in this period (around AD 48) Paul wrote his first pastoral letter – Galatians – to the churches he had just helped to found. Dating Galatians prior to the Jerusalem Council – which we are about to consider – explains Peter's strange behaviour about associating with Gentiles at Antioch (Galatians 2:11-14), the statements about the circumcision of Titus (Galatians 2:3), and the fact that Paul doesn't mention the Jerusalem Council or its decree in Galatians (which should surely have been relevant to his arguments about circumcision and Judaisers).

The Council of Jerusalem

Now Jewish teachers arrive in Antioch from Judea and start teaching that Gentiles cannot be saved unless they are circumcised (Acts 15:1). Naturally Paul and Barnabas hotly disputed this and eventually they were appointed, along with some other believers, to go to Jerusalem to meet with the apostles and elders there to decide on this issue (Acts 15:2). They travelled through Phoenicia and Samaria encouraging them about the success of the mission to the Gentiles. On arrival in Jerusalem they reported what had been happening in their ministry, but believers who were Pharisees asserted that Gentiles must indeed be circumcised (Acts 15:4-5). It's likely that Jewish Christians were concerned that they were becoming outnumbered by Gentile Christians and they also felt that Gentile Christians had to make some kind of submission to Jewish Law. Peter, no doubt prepared by his experiences with Cornelius, stood up and defended the doctrine of salvation by faith without any need for works such as circumcision (Acts 15:7-11). This is virtually the last we hear of Peter, his legitimization of the mission to the Gentiles is his last great work of which we know. Yet, other voices remained to be heard, especially that of James, the half brother of Jesus.

Barnabas and Paul validated their ministry by describing the miracles God had enabled them to perform (Acts 15:12) and James (who was now leader of the church in Jerusalem) proposed a compromise position whereby Gentiles should not be required to be circumcised but should instead:

“..... abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood.” (Acts 15:20 NIV)

This was an important, indeed vital, turning point for the development of the early church. If all Gentile converts had been required to be circumcised (and so become Jewish proselytes observing Jewish Law) in order that they could be saved, then it would have been much more difficult to bring Gentiles into the Christian church. Instead they are required to conform to rules rather like those set out for “resident aliens” under Jewish Law (Leviticus 17 and 18). This decree was incredibly important, it was a centrepiece in the development of the early church which justifies and validates what had happened so far and makes possible what was to come. From now on the Jerusalem church fades into the background and the real focus is on the spread of the church, to both Jewish and Gentile converts, throughout the Roman Empire. Against the majority of scholars, I believe that this meeting is completely different from the meeting described by Paul in Galatians chapter 2, since it would surely have been important for Paul to inform the Galatians of the decision of the council – which is not mentioned in Galatians.

So now the apostles and elders of the Jerusalem church sent two church leaders, Judas (also called Barsabbas) and Silas, back to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas bearing an official letter from the Jerusalem church:

“With them they sent the following letter: The apostles and elders, your brothers, To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia: Greetings. We have heard that some went out from us without our authorisation and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul— men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell.” (Acts 15:23-29 NIV)

The church in Antioch was encouraged by this word from Jerusalem and Judas and Silas also encouraged and strengthened them (Acts 15:30-32). Eventually Judas and Silas returned to Jerusalem, but Paul and Barnabas remained at Antioch (Acts 15:33-35).

Paul’s Second Missionary Journey

[*slide of journey*] Some time later Paul suggested to Barnabas that they should together make a further visit to the churches they had founded in Galatia (Acts 15:36). Barnabas agreed, but wanted to take John Mark with them (Acts 15:37). Paul was vehemently opposed to this because of what he saw as John Mark’s desertion of their previous mission and this led to an acrimonious dispute between Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:38-39). This dispute culminated in Barnabas leaving for Cyprus with John Mark and Paul leaving for Syria with Silas (who had apparently returned to Antioch from Jerusalem by this time) (Acts 15:39-41). This is the last we hear of Barnabas in Acts, but he apparently became a colleague of Paul once again as he

appears in 1 Corinthians 9:6. Barnabas's confidence in Mark was justified as he later became a colleague of Paul (Colossians 4:10; 2 Timothy 4:11) and he eventually became the author of what is almost certainly the first gospel. This marks the beginning of Paul's second missionary journey, probably late in AD 50 [*slide of journey*] again commencing from Paul's base at Antioch.

Travelling overland this time, Paul first of all visited the churches previously founded in Derbe and Lystra, where we are introduced to Timothy who lived in Lystra (Acts 16:1). As we know Timothy would come to play an enormously important part in Paul's later ministry. Paul addressed two letters to him, listed him as a co-sender of numerous letters and named him as a co-worker in still others. Paul obviously liked him from the beginning, because he decided to take him along on his mission after having him circumcised, probably because he was the son of a Jewish mother (2 Timothy 1:5) and a Greek father (who had presumably refused to have him circumcised) and thus he was effectively an apostate Jew. This would have made it very difficult for him to minister to Jews (and would even have made things difficult for Paul with him as a companion) – so Paul had him circumcised to assist in their ministry to the Jews (Acts 16:2-3). Paul resisted circumcision of Gentile believers, but Paul was treating Timothy as a Jew (albeit an apostate Jew) not a Gentile. Paul himself became like a Jew to win the Jews (1 Corinthians 9:20). As they moved around they made known the decree of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 16:5) as this could only be helpful in their mission, especially given the trouble being fomented by the Judaisers (Galatians 5:10-12; 6:12-16)

[*new slide of journey*] Paul then visited the churches already founded in Iconium and Pisidian Antioch [*new slide of journey*] and then broke new ground in Dorylaeum, Nicea and Prusa. They then wanted to go into the province of Asia – but the Holy Spirit would not allow that (Acts 16:6), so they went down to Troas. It's interesting that on the way to Troas they were again prevented from entering Asia “by the Spirit of Jesus” (Acts 16:7). Luke is making it quite clear that Christ is still in charge of his church and its ministry. In due time the gospel was brought to Asia as we know from Acts 19 and 1 Peter 1:1. [*new slide of journey*] Paul's missionary journeys show an amazing combination of careful planning and sensitivity to the leading of the Holy Spirit. In Troas Paul had a vision of a man from Macedonia asking for help [*new slide of journey*] and so Paul sailed to Samothrace and on to Neapolis (Acts 16:11), a total distance of about 160 miles. It's interesting that here Luke says “we” sailed to Macedonia, so I think we can take it that Luke met up with Paul, Silas and Timothy in Troas and accompanied them to Macedonia. We have no record of any evangelistic work in Neapolis. Presumably they had concluded that the help required was their preaching of the gospel in the main cities of Macedonia. [*new slide of journey*] From Neapolis they travelled to Philippi, the leading city of Macedonia [*slide of Philippi*] and stayed there for a few days (Acts 16:12). This is actually the longest account in Acts of ministry in any one town and we have no way of knowing exactly how long Paul stayed there. Apparently there was no synagogue there as Paul does not follow his usual practice of commencing preaching in the synagogue. This can only mean there were very few resident Jews – 10 men were required to start a synagogue. Luke records three different episodes presenting different kinds of people encountered by Paul in his ministry. These are interesting and instructive, and we know that Paul founded a thriving Christian fellowship in Philippi, but because of limitations of time we're going to move on. The two things I'm going to mention are that, firstly Paul made his first convert in Europe, Lydia, and secondly, Paul and Silas were supernaturally released from prison in a miracle very reminiscent of the miraculous release of Peter from jail that we looked at earlier, except that instead of escaping, Paul converts the jailer and his family to Christianity.

When Paul and Silas were released from prison the following day, they went to Lydia's house and were encouraged by the believers there. They then left Philippi westwards along the Egnatian way, arriving in Thessalonica, about 90 miles west of Philippi and the principal city of Macedonia, by way of Amphipolis and Apollonia [*new slide of journey*]. Luke perhaps stayed behind in Philippi, at any rate he reappears in Philippi in Acts chapter 20 at the beginning of the second "we" section of Acts. The subsequent history of the Philippian church makes pleasant reading. They made repeated gifts to Paul during his subsequent travels and during his Roman imprisonment.

At Thessalonica there was a Jewish synagogue and Paul followed his usual custom of preaching there. Some Jews received the gospel and became believers, we can assume that Jason who is named as their host (Acts 17:5) was one of these, but the usual pattern of Jewish opposition and persecution quickly arose. The opposition must have been particularly intense, because Paul and the others fled from Jason's house and, following the arrest of Jason and some other believers (Acts 17:6) who were forced to post a good behaviour bond (Acts 17:9), left Thessalonica under cover of night (Acts 17:10). They did not leave on the Egnatian way (which Paul had perhaps originally intended to follow to Rome, although Jews were banished from Rome around AD 49), but instead went south-west to Berea, about 40 miles from Thessalonica. In any event, Paul's ministry in Thessalonica was clearly very successful. We know that by the time he left, his pagan converts outnumbered Jewish believers (1 Thessalonians 1:9).

[*new slide of journey*] In Berea Paul again preached in the synagogue and was better received there (Acts 17:10-11). But, as had been the pattern in Galatia, Jews from Thessalonica followed Paul and his companions to Berea and made trouble for them, and once again Paul had to leave quickly and quietly although Silas and Timothy were able to stay on in Berea.

Paul journeyed on to Athens, possibly by sea or perhaps along the coastal road, sending back instructions for Timothy and Silas to join him in Athens. Whilst waiting for them he commenced evangelistic preaching (Acts 17:17), both to the Jews in the synagogue and to the pagans in the agora or marketplace. Waiting in Athens he was greatly perturbed by the terrible pagan idolatry he found there, although Athens also represented the height of intellectual and philosophical learning in that period. The statues and architecture we admire today as art represented pagan temples and images of pagan gods in Paul's time. Paul was every inch an intellectual and disputed successfully against the religious and philosophical leaders of the Court of the Aeropagus, which exercised jurisdiction in matters of religion and morals, converting a number of their leading figures (Acts 17:34). His speech to the Aeropagus is masterfully adapted to Hellenistic reasoning (so much so that many commentators have disputed that Paul could have delivered it) and a complete contrast to his addresses in synagogues – as we would expect given the very different nature of the audiences. Paul doesn't quote from Hebrew scriptures (which would have been unknown to his audience), but instead quotes Greek poets. The fact that Paul could successfully defend and indeed promote Christianity before the foremost pagan intellectual authorities of his day shows that we need not be afraid of defending Christianity before the pagan intellectuals of our own day.

Paul then left Athens and went to Corinth [*slide of journey*] a very important city, the largest and most cosmopolitan in Greece some 45 miles west (Acts 18:1) [*slide of Corinth*]. It had two ports one on the Adriatic Sea and one on the Aegean Sea and cargoes and even whole

ships were transported overland between the two to avoid a long and treacherous journey by sea. The Corinthians were probably the most licentious people in the Roman Empire, their chief goddess was Aphrodite, the goddess of love. Paul's later letters to the church in Corinth make it clear that the Christian community there had difficulty in maintaining the required standards of sexual conduct. Here Paul teamed up with Jewish Christians named Aquila and his wife Priscilla, who had left Italy because of the banishment of Jews from Rome by the Emperor Claudius (Acts 18:2), a couple with whom he formed a firm and lifelong friendship. Like Paul Aquila was a tentmaker (Acts 18:3). As a large commercial city, Corinth had a substantial Jewish community and Paul followed his usual practice of commencing by preaching in the synagogues. When Silas and Timothy arrived with a gift of money from the community in Philippi (2 Corinthians 11:9), Paul devoted himself to full time ministry (Acts 18:4-5). The Jews opposed his preaching, but clearly not as violently as in Thessalonica, since Paul stayed on teaching for a year and a half (Acts 18:11). However, the opposition was such that Paul ceased teaching the Jews and concentrated on ministry to the Gentiles (Acts 18:6-7). We know from Paul's letters to the Corinthians that the church became quite large, certainly large enough to develop a number of factions. Paul probably wrote both of his letters to the church in Thessalonica from Corinth, 1 Thessalonians in around 51 AD and 2 Thessalonians in either late 51 or early 52 AD.

We're not quite sure why Paul left Corinth, although the mention of the fulfilment of a vow (Acts 18:18) perhaps connects it with the vision he had in Corinth about his ministry there (Acts 18:9-10) or with his probable coming visit to Jerusalem. [*slide of return journey*] In any event, Paul did leave and sailed to Ephesus (a usual port of call on the way to Syria) accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila from where he returned to Syrian Antioch by way of Rhodes and Caesarea (Acts 18:18-22), most likely with a very brief side trip to Jerusalem, possibly to keep the Passover (Acts 18:22) – which could also have had some connection with the fulfilment of a vow we just mentioned. Priscilla and Aquila remained in Ephesus presumably continuing the Christian witness there. Paul's brief visit here to Ephesus would set the scene for his much longer visit there during his third missionary journey.

Paul's Third Missionary Journey

Paul's brief return to Antioch in what is now probably AD 52, was no more than a brief interlude between his second missionary journey and the third journey which was to commence in AD 53. Paul set out from Antioch, visiting the Galatian and Phrygian churches (Acts 18:23). [*slide of new journey*] Strictly speaking this was pastoral work rather than mission, as the churches in Galatia had been founded some years before – but this follow up and teaching and nurturing was a vital part of Paul's work. Don't forget the great commission was to make disciples of all nations not converts of all nations. Meanwhile, a disciple named Apollos, was being taught and mentored in Ephesus by Aquila and Priscilla (Acts 18:24-26) who commended him to believers in Achaia. He left for Corinth (where he clearly did much good work and figures in Paul's letters to the Corinthians) and Paul arrived in Ephesus (Acts 19:1) – a journey of 1,000 to 1,500 miles from Antioch. Ephesus was to prove to be the last known major place of Paul's work of ground breaking mission. However, given that Ephesus was the largest and most important city in Asia Minor, it was a fruitful and important ground and all the seven churches of Revelation may well owe their existence to Paul's period of ministry in Ephesus.

On arrival in Ephesus Paul found believers there who had not been baptised with the Holy Spirit (Acts 19:2-4), possibly followers of John the Baptist or disciples taught by Apollos

(who, in spite of his generally good knowledge of our faith, had only known the baptism of John before meeting Priscilla and Aquila). Paul baptised these disciples and laid hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit (Acts 19:6). I don't think we should see this incident as an argument for re-baptism of those who have received a Christian baptism, whether they were filled by the Spirit at this time or not. I believe the significance here is that their previous baptism was not truly a Christian baptism because it was not in the name of Jesus Christ.

Paul then commenced his work in Ephesus in earnest commencing by preaching in the synagogue for three months (Acts 19:8). Again he ran into opposition and then began preaching daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus for a period of two years (Acts 19:9), which gave him the opportunity to reach both Gentiles and Jews. God empowered Paul to perform many miracles to validate his ministry (Acts 19:11). The power of God found in Paul at Ephesus is comparable to the power found in Peter in Jerusalem. But, Jewish impostors who tried to copy him were disgraced because they did not have a true faith in the name of Jesus they were trying to employ (Acts 19:13-16). People were so impressed that many sorcerers were moved to repent and burn their expensive scrolls (Acts 19:18-19). Paul's ministry in Ephesus flourished and he sent two helpers, Timothy and Erastus to Macedonia while he himself resolved to go to Jerusalem and later Rome by way of Macedonia (Acts 19:21-22). Paul will indeed arrive in Rome in due course, but not in the way he imagined. We can't be sure why he wanted to go to Jerusalem, but probably it was to deliver a collection to the church there (Romans 15:25-31), this was probably part of his reason for going via Macedonia and Achaia.

At this time there was a great uproar, indeed a riot, caused by local silversmiths who made replicas of the Temple of Artemis and who feared that Christianity would damage their trade and so Paul left quietly for Macedonia (Acts 19:23 – 20:1). [*slide of Artemis*] However, as we've already said Paul's ministry in Ephesus was very fruitful, although apparently fraught with personal dangers to him not referred to by Luke but mentioned by Paul in his letters to the Corinthians, and Paul stayed in Ephesus, longer than any other place he visited on his missionary journeys. Paul wrote 1 Corinthians to the church in Corinth perhaps a little less than a year before he left Ephesus – around 55 AD – and there were probably other letters to the Corinthian church which are now lost.

[*slide of journey*] So, Paul now set off from Ephesus to revisit the churches in Macedonia and Achaia he had established on his second missionary journey and with the further plans of revisiting Jerusalem and then going on to Rome. Paul almost certainly wanted to visit Jerusalem to deliver a major collection from various churches in Asia, Macedonia and Greece for the relief of poor Christians in Jerusalem – Paul refers to this in several places (e.g. Romans 15:25-29) – and we know that Paul wanted to arrive in Jerusalem in time for Pentecost (Acts 20:16). Paul travelled through Macedonia, probably writing 2 Corinthians at this time, [*new slide of journey*] and finally arrived in Greece, where he stayed for three months, probably the winter months of AD 56/57, encouraging the people (Acts 20:2-3). He probably spent quite a lot of this time in Corinth and probably wrote his letter to the Romans there during this time in order to prepare them for his visit. It's interesting that he suffered quite a lot of opposition from the Jews in Macedonia during his first journey there, but we hear of no opposition on this occasion.

Paul decided to return via Macedonia rather than by sea, because he discovered a plot to kill him (presumably at the port or on the ship), and he went accompanied by a number of

disciples from various churches he had founded (Acts 20:4) – possibly as representatives of churches which had contributed to the collection for Christians in Jerusalem. Apparently they went ahead of him and met up with him again in Troas (Acts 20:5) where Paul stayed with them for seven days (Acts 20:6). *[slide showing Troas]* Luke himself also probably joined them at this point as he reverts to the “we” style in Acts 20:6 and probably stayed with them until they eventually arrived in Jerusalem as the “we” style continues until then.

Paul preached to the people in Troas at length and was enabled to resurrect a young man, Eutychus, who suffered accidental death through a fall whilst listening to Paul’s preaching (Acts 20:7-11). Paul then went overland to Assos where the ship carrying the others picked him up and they sailed to Miletus via Mitylene (Acts 20:13-15). At Miletus, about 30 miles from Ephesus, Paul had a long and emotional last meeting with the elders from the church in Ephesus (Acts 20:17). Paul told them he was going to Jerusalem to face hardships and prison (Acts 20:23) and that he would never see them again (Acts 20:25). *[slide showing Miletus]* He warned them against false teachers and troublemakers both from inside and outside their church (Acts 20:29-30), charged them to take care of their flocks and committed them into God’s hands (Acts 20:32). Naturally they were grieved and they prayed and wept, Paul and the others tore themselves away and the Ephesians saw them onto their ship (Acts 20:36-38). This speech was effectively Paul’s last will and testament to the churches he had founded on both the East and West side of the Aegean. It’s an interesting speech, the only recorded speech by Paul to a Christian audience – in fact it has very much the flavour of Paul’s epistles – but unfortunately we don’t have time to look at it in detail this morning.

[slide of sea voyage] Paul sailed for Cos, Rhodes and Patara and finally on to Tyre, this last a sea voyage of some 400 miles, where Paul stayed for seven days. The direct voyage meant that Paul had enough time to arrive in Jerusalem in time for Pentecost. He met with elders of the Christian church in Tyre who apparently had the gift of prophecy and they urged him not to go to Jerusalem (Acts 21:4). Paul sailed on to Caesarea where he met with Philip (Acts 21:8), who we already heard of as one of the seven deacons and he apparently remained in Caesarea. Here Paul also met the prophet Agabus (who had previously foretold the famine which arose in Claudius’s day) who now prophesied that Paul would be bound in Jerusalem (Acts 21:10-11) – although it’s interesting that Agabus doesn’t say that Paul shouldn’t go. In any event, Paul’s mind was made up and he insisted that he must go to Jerusalem (Acts 21:13-15). In some ways Paul’s setting his face grimly towards Jerusalem parallels the similar actions of Jesus before the crucifixion.

Paul now journeyed the final 65 miles or so from Caesarea up to Jerusalem, accompanied by some Christian friends from Caesarea, and so Paul’s third missionary journey was complete. His mission in Greece and the Aegean was also complete, he would not return. In Jerusalem Paul met with James and the brothers and the elders of the church, reported on his activities, and they all received him warmly (Acts 21:17-20). But then matters took a turn for the worse and Paul was told that he was accused of encouraging Jews to turn away from the Law of Moses (Acts 17:21). They told Paul that these many Jews would hear that he was in Jerusalem and so he should join in Jewish rites to show that the rumours were untrue (Acts 21:22-24) and reiterated the Jerusalem decree which applied to Gentile converts (Acts 21:25).

Paul duly took part in the rites of purification after the long time he had spent in Gentile lands (Acts 21:26), but hostile Jews from the province of Asia (where Paul had incurred particular enmity during his ministry in Ephesus) stirred up a mob against Paul nonetheless (Acts 21:27-29) and he was seized (Acts 21:30). The Roman garrison alerted by the uproar came

and arrested Paul and took him into the Antonia fortress to question him (Acts 21:31-33). If the Roman troops had not intervened Paul would surely have been beaten to death by the mob.

So, mainly for reasons of time, we're going to leave Paul at this point. The remainder of what Luke has to tell us about him in the book of Acts is interesting. The pace of the narrative slows considerably in these final chapters 21-28, drawing attention to the significance of the events, and Paul's speeches include many biographical details: 'his background, his calling as an emissary of the gospel, his fidelity to Jewish traditions, and what he might represent to the interests of the Roman state'.

This does not mean that this section was somehow designed to legitimate Paul in the eyes of Roman or Jewish readers. Luke didn't write the book of Acts primarily to persuade outsiders of the truth of Christianity or to defend its main protagonists. Luke wanted his patron Theophilus and all his other readers to know the certainty of the things they had been taught (Luke: 1:1). Strengthened in that way, his readers would be better able to give a reasoned and persuasive account of the hope that motivated them. As a work of edification for Christian believers, Acts has a number of special interests, one of which is in Paul as 'the greatest of the early Christian leaders and missionaries'. The Twelve Apostles are presented as foundational witnesses of the life, death, resurrection and ascension of the Lord Jesus. After them, great preachers and missionaries, like Philip, Paul, and others, took their testimony to the nations.

But, this closing section of Acts doesn't really deal with the development of the early church, rather it deals with Paul's questionings and trials and his imprisonment in Rome. These didn't contribute greatly to the development of the early church, except in that Paul taught and strengthened the church in Rome and wrote a number of Epistles during his first imprisonment in Rome, Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians and Philemon, all around 61 AD, and then Titus after his probable release from his first imprisonment, probably in 63 AD. I believe he was released as we know from Josephus that a number of Jewish priests and other Jewish prisoners were released at this time and also from the writer to the Hebrews (Hebrews 13:23) that Timothy was released in Italy (probably Rome) about this time. All these letters were important for the early church and still form an important part of the NT for us today. Luke leaves us during Paul's first imprisonment, and the fact that he does so leads me to believe that he wrote Acts no later than 63 AD. This has important implications for the dating of the gospels as we shall see later. Around this time James the brother of the Lord and head of the church in Jerusalem was executed in Jerusalem, probably by stoning (although tradition has it that he was thrown from the pinnacle of the Temple).

I believe that after the book of Acts ends, Paul was released from house arrest in Rome, possibly undertook a fourth missionary journey (although we can know little of this and cannot even be certain that it took place) and was again imprisoned in Rome, possibly around 66 AD after the violent persecution under Nero had commenced in around 64 AD. The reasons why I believe in a fourth missionary journey by Paul and a second imprisonment are firstly that Eusebius implies that Paul was indeed released in Rome in his Ecclesiastical History (and if Paul was released he would almost certainly have wanted to undertake a further mission to new ground), secondly that other early Christian literature (e.g. Clement of Rome, *Epistle to the Corinthians*, *Actus Petri Vercellenses* and the Muratorian Canon) implies that Paul took the gospel to Spain and thirdly there is a gap in Paul's writing of letters between Ephesians etc. and 1 and 2 Timothy which is well explained by a journey.

I think it was during Paul's second imprisonment that he wrote 1 and 2 Timothy in around 66 AD and that he was executed by the sword (Roman citizens were exempt from crucifixion) in 67 AD. In many ways Paul serves as a bridge between the initial apostles like Peter and Luke's readers and indeed us as Christian believers today. Paul stands out in lonely grandeur as undoubtedly one of the most remarkable and influential figures in history.

Church tradition has it that Peter was also executed in Rome by being crucified upside down (because he didn't want to imitate Christ in this) under the Neronian persecution around this time. Although it's much more likely that he was crucified in the normal way. It is very unlikely that Peter was ever in Rome before 63 AD (since neither Paul nor Luke mention this) and so it is extremely improbable that he founded the church in Rome as some traditions have it. It is much more likely that it was founded by Jewish Christians fleeing persecution in Jerusalem who had heard Peter preach. Certainly the idea that Peter was bishop of Rome for 25 years (popular in the Catholic church) is a complete error.

I think that Paul's mission to the Gentiles has quite a lot to teach us about mission and the church today. Firstly, Paul preached a message that was uncompromisingly theologically correct and accurate and gently corrected his churches when they deviated from it. He might have been all things to all men in terms of coming alongside them to gain their trust and friendship, but he didn't accommodate theologically. Secondly, Paul came alongside his churches as much as he could, spent time with the people and became part of their lives, or where he couldn't do that he tried to get members of his missionary team to do it. Thirdly he didn't just make converts with an altar call, he made disciples. He created fellowship and worship structures – churches – and drew converts into these churches where they could be taught, fed and nurtured. Today we too often ignore the elements of teaching and feeding and leading converts into a church structure.

A few years after Paul's execution, Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed in 70 AD – as Christ had predicted – by Roman forces putting down the great Jewish rebellion (which had started in 66 AD), and this did much to break the strong ties which had existed between Judaism and Christianity.

The final 30 years of the first century AD are enshrouded in a mysterious darkness illuminated only slightly by the writings of John son of Zebedee (John the apostle) and probably end with the peaceful death of John in Ephesus around 100 AD. I believe it's likely that John was exiled to Patmos around the end of Nero's reign, where he wrote Revelation, and that after his release he returned to Ephesus where he wrote his letters and his gospel. This is a period of church history about which we know least and would like to know most. Christian converts in this period probably belonged mostly to the middle and lower classes of society, such as fishermen, peasants, mechanics, traders, freedmen, slaves – although of course there were notable exceptions. By 100 AD there may have been up to 500,000 Christians in the Roman Empire out of a total population of 100 million or so.

Before we move on from this section of our talk, it's worth noting once again how the gospel spread first culturally from Jew, to related people (Samaritans), to God fearing Gentiles and finally pagan Gentiles and second geographically from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria and finally to the ends of the earth. The commission which Jesus had given to the apostles in his last words before his ascension (Acts 1:8) was well on its way to fulfilment. Also, thanks not only to Paul, but to countless unnamed Christian believers whose names are known only to

our Father, churches and communities of Christian believers had been planted and established throughout the known world.

THE WRITING OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

We've already looked at the writing of some of Paul's letters, but now let's look at the writing of the NT more systematically. First of all let's look at what the NT is and why it is what it is. In theological terms that's called the issue of canonicity.

The New Testament Canon

[slide] The 27 books in the NT section of your Bible are what is called the NT Canon – the list of books that have been recognised as having the necessary inspired quality to be part of the Bible and which are generally accepted as such. The first canon comprising all the 27 books currently included in the NT wasn't officially established until 393 AD by the Synod of Hippo – but it was largely established much earlier. Also this official recognition didn't give the canon any authority it didn't already possess – it just confirmed that authority.

The basic criterion for what was included in the canon was divine inspiration and the main test for this was 'apostolicity'. For the church was built upon the foundation of the apostles. This does not necessarily mean apostolic authorship, but extended to apostolic association or approval.

The early church had a great need to establish a 'canon' of approved books because of the prevalence of heresy. Some heretics such as Marcion even tried to establish their own competing canon. The status of most of our current NT as authoritative was established around AD 130 and almost all NT books – including the four gospels and all Paul's letters – (and only three others not in our current canon) were recognised as canonical by around 170 AD in the Muratorian Canon.

It's very important to realise that all the 27 books of the NT canon were being circulated amongst the early churches and were being read and digested by them before the end of the first century AD. Also the vast majority of the 27 books of the NT canon were quoted by early church Fathers such as Irenaeus who quoted from 23 of the 27 books around AD 170. It's just that the precise contents of the NT canon were not authoritatively determined until later.

There were various Pseudepigraphal books (literally books of false authorship, although the word has come to mean books outside the canonical boundaries) such as:

Epistle of Pseudo-Barnabas
Epistle to the Corinthians
Apocalypse of Peter
The Gospel of Truth
The Gospel According to the Hebrews
The Gospel of the Egyptians
The Gospel of St Thomas
The Gospel of Peter
The Gospel of Philip
Second Epistle of Clement

The Acts of Paul and Thecla
Epistle to the Laodiceans
Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians
The Seven Epistles of Ignatius

Some of these have been brought to prominence by modern authors like Dan Brown in the Da Vinci Code, but these books never enjoyed more than temporary or local recognition and no major church council voted to include *any* of them in the NT.

We can usefully divide the NT canon into five sections as per the table:

The Gospels	History	The Pauline Epistles	The General Epistles	Prophecy
Mathew Mark Luke John	Acts	Romans 1 Corinthians 2 Corinthians Galatians Ephesians Philippians Colossians 1 Thessalonians 2 Thessalonians 1 Timothy 2 Timothy ? Hebrews Titus Philemon	James 1 Peter 2 Peter 1 John 2 John 3 John Jude	Revelation

I think those categories are largely self explanatory, except perhaps for Hebrews which I included with the Pauline epistles with a question mark. In fact Paul almost certainly didn't write it, and we don't really know who did, but I do believe Paul contributed to it; much of the theology is very Pauline.

The Writing of the New Testament

The above sections and the ordering of the books of the NT in our Bibles don't in any way correspond to the order in which they were written, so let's now look at the NT from that perspective. We can't absolutely certain of the authors of all the books, although I believe the table is correct, and we can't be absolutely certain of the dates of many of the books, although we know the dates of quite a few of Paul's letters quite accurately, but the following table is a good estimate:

BOOK	DATE	AUTHOR
James	45	James the Lord's brother
Galatians	48	Paul
1 and 2 Thessalonians	51	Paul
1 Corinthians	55	Paul
Mark's Gospel	55	John Mark
2 Corinthians	56	Paul
Romans	58	Paul

Ephesians	61	Paul
Colossians	61	Paul
Philemon	61	Paul
Philippians	61	Paul
Luke's Gospel	61	Luke, the doctor
Mathew's Gospel	62	Matthew the disciple
1 Peter	62	Peter
Acts	63	Luke
Titus	63	Paul
2 Peter	65	Peter
Jude	65	Judas the Lord's brother
1 and 2 Timothy	66	Paul
Hebrews	67	Unknown
Revelation	68	John the apostle, son of Zebedee
John's Gospel	88	John the apostle, son of Zebedee
1, 2 and 3 John	90	John the apostle, son of Zebedee

The first important thing we can note and learn from that table is that almost all of the NT – indeed everything apart from some of John's writing – was written within 35 years after Christ's ascension. That's well within the lifetime of those who were eyewitnesses to the events of the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, and no one, neither individual witnesses nor the Jewish establishment, ever came forward to contradict the message of the NT which was being widely preached and taught. The Jewish establishment especially had a huge vested interest in contradicting the gospel message, but they never did so – that tells me that they well knew that what was being said was true.

The second important thing we can learn is that every important book was written either by an eyewitness to the events they were writing about (John, Matthew, Peter, James, Judas), had extended direct contact with those who were eyewitnesses and recorded what they had heard (Mark and Luke) or had a special revelation direct from God (Paul – who also had contact with other eyewitnesses such as Peter).

Let's now look at these writings partly from an historical perspective, but mainly grouping them according to their authors and also looking at the four gospels together.

As we saw the first NT document was the epistle of James written around 45 AD, just 12 years after Christ's ascension, which makes it the earliest of the NT writings. James was probably the oldest brother of Jesus, not the apostle James. It is distinctively Jewish and refers to synagogues rather than churches. It is written to "the twelve tribes," perhaps to early Christian Jews scattered from Jerusalem after Stephen's death.

The next documents were certainly Paul's pastoral letters to various churches which he either founded or in which he ministered. Most of these were written between 48 and 61 AD and in many cases we can be certain of those dates to within a year or so. We've looked at Paul's life and work in a fair amount of detail in the first part of our talk. Paul's letters weren't written as evangelical documents or to tell the gospel story, rather they were written to those who had already received the gospel message and believed it. They were written to address specific doctrinal or pastoral issues which were important (and usually troublesome) in the churches to which he was writing. Yet in these letters we can find sufficient material to reconstruct an outline of early apostolic preaching about Jesus. Paul marshals much

eyewitness testimony. He says that the risen Christ was seen by many eyewitnesses on numerous occasions and that on one occasion he was seen by over 500 people most of whom were still alive 25 years later. Paul was not himself an eyewitness but he both had a special divine revelation and knew many of the apostles such as Peter, James and John. Although he says he derived nothing of his message from the other apostles, his teaching is in complete agreement with them.

Next we probably have the gospel of Mark, written perhaps as early as 55 AD. The author was probably John Mark, a close associate of Peter (he probably acted as Peter's interpreter) and who accompanied Paul and Barnabas in Antioch and on part of a missionary journey. Tradition has it that this gospel was written in Italy, possibly in Rome. It was certainly written with gentile readers in mind as Mark explains Jewish customs and practices. He emphasises persecution, martyrdom and suffering, the cross, discipleship, and Jesus' teachings. Thus if this gospel was written in Rome a part of the purpose may have been to prepare Roman Christians for persecution. However, I consider that, whilst the material in the gospels and their focus was almost certainly influenced by the Christian community in which they were composed, they were written for circulation amongst the wider Christian community. This view has recently been strongly and persuasively argued by theologian Richard Bauckham in two books "*Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*" and "*The Gospels for all Christians*".

I believe Mark was the first of the three synoptic (or at one look) gospels because I believe that it is quite clear that a part of Mark's material was used by both Luke and Matthew – look at the gospel relationships diagram [slide]. Matthew and Luke both used 235 verses from another source, usually called Q and they each included material from their own unique sources. There are only 31 verses in Mark which have no close parallel in either Matthew or Luke. Also where Matthew's material duplicates that in Mark it is usually Matthew who abridges it- if Matthew had written first you'd expect it to be the other way around.

Luke was probably the next of the synoptic gospels to be written, I believe quite early, around 61 AD, as it seems to me quite clear that Luke wrote his gospel before he wrote Acts (we can infer both from Colossians and the dedication and other material in the book itself that Luke also wrote Acts). Acts was almost certainly written before 64 AD as Luke doesn't mention the great persecution under Nero which started in AD 64, Paul's likely second imprisonment commencing around 66 AD or Paul's execution. All these are of such importance that it seems most unlikely that he would have failed to mention them if he had been writing later.

Luke was a well-educated gentile physician who was with Paul and other apostles, perhaps originating from Antioch of Syria or Philippi. Luke travelled with Paul and his companions on some missionary journeys (as we've already seen) and he accompanied Paul to Rome after Paul's detention in Caesarea (Philemon 24). It may have been his arrival in Rome with Paul that stimulated Luke to start setting down his gospel in manuscript and that certainly fits in with my suggested dating. Luke also says that he carefully investigated everything, and we know he was an accurate and careful historian, so I'm sure he talked to many eyewitnesses. The gospel was written to strengthen the faith of believers and answer the attacks of unbelievers, which were prevalent at this time. It was clearly addressed to a wide range of recipients as it assumes its readers are unfamiliar with Palestine. It emphasises salvation, the place of Gentiles as well as Jews in God's kingdom, prayer, the joy of announcing the gospel, the poor, sinners, family, "Son of Man", and the Holy Spirit.

Matthew was probably the last of the synoptic gospels to be written, probably around 62 AD (although many scholars want to date it after the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 I think the balance of the evidence favours an earlier date). The author was probably Matthew (who was called Levi by Luke and Mark), one of the twelve apostles. It was probably written in Palestine or Antioch (where it first seems to have appeared) for Greek speaking Jews familiar with Jewish tradition and customs, to prove to them that Jesus is their Messiah by showing them how Jesus fulfilled the prophecies of the OT. In format it seems to be rather like a teaching manual rather than being arranged in chronological order and it forms a very good link between the OT and the NT.

John's gospel was almost certainly written by the apostle John, son of Zebedee rather than a mysterious John the Elder figure. The detailed evidence is too long for us to look at it in detail today, but if any one is interested I'm happy to email them the material – please let me know. John wrote, possibly as early as the mid to late 60's AD and certainly no later than AD 85 - 90, probably from Ephesus. I used to favour an early date for this gospel, because there is some evidence that this gospel was written before the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. However, I have now come to favour a later date of around AD 85 in line with the early church fathers. The Rylands manuscript, a fragment of John's gospel from the early second century AD, makes it clear that this gospel must have been written before the end of the first century AD at the latest. John's primary intention was evangelistic but he may also have intended to correct or supplement the synoptic gospels, combat heresies and oppose the followers of John the Baptist. This gospel is much more chronological than the synoptic gospels, and it's from this gospel that we learn that Jesus probably ministered through four Passovers (which is why I favour the AD 33 date for the crucifixion rather than AD 30).

Just as an aside here, some scholars have tried to reconstruct the original Aramaic of Jesus' words and sayings from the Greek of the gospels we have today. It's really interesting that when you do this the language becomes poetic with lots of rhymes and parallelism. Jesus was almost certainly a poet.

Next in time come the letters of Peter. 1 Peter is written in polished and idiomatic Greek, probably around 62 AD. I believe it was written by Peter, although the quality of the writing makes that open to argument. I personally believe that either Peter himself was the author and that he had mastered the Greek language during his 30 years of ministry, or that the basis of the letters come from Peter with Silas serving as an intermediary writer. Peter writes from "Babylon" (more probably Rome, being likened to Babylon) and 1 Peter deals mainly with the persecution of Christians. 2 Peter is like 1 Peter, probably written towards the end of Peter's life around AD 65. It has clear parallels with Jude. The purpose of the letter is to deal with false teachers and evildoers who have come into the church.

Then we come to Jude. This letter was written between 65 and 80 AD, but I favour an earlier date as it would seem that 2 Peter makes use of Jude. The author is Jude (Judas in Greek) very probably Jesus' brother. Jude refers to Apocryphal literature and has similarities to 2 Peter. Its unstated recipients are warned against the false teachings of early Gnosticism.

Next we come to Hebrews. Although I have included this book amongst the Pauline epistles in the table, it is probable that it was not written by Paul, but either by one of Paul's helpers, perhaps under Paul's guidance, or by an intellectual Jewish Christian, perhaps Barnabas or Apollos, almost certainly before 70 AD (as the destruction of the Temple marking the end of the Jewish sacrificial system would have been important). The most likely dating is 67 AD.

It was written for Jewish converts to Christianity. Its theme is the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ, who is said not only to be superior to the OT prophets, but to fulfil a "new covenant." This book emphasises that there can be no turning back to the old Jewish system.

Finally we come to the letters of John and Revelation. As with the gospel of John, I believe that these letters were written by the apostle John probably around 88-90 AD, after the writing of the gospel, but before the persecutions of Domitian which began in AD 95. The first letter is addressed to unspecified believers, probably from Ephesus. It describes heretics as antichrists and attacks early Gnostic teaching. He also gives believers assurance of salvation. The second letter discourages Christians from offering hospitality to Gnostic teachers. In the third letter John encourages support for the itinerant teachers he sends out. Again I believe Revelation was written by the apostle John. The author identifies himself as John, possibly John the Presbyter, but I believe it was almost certainly John the apostle. Revelation was written as Christians were in a time of persecution, but probably before the fall of Jerusalem. He warns the believers at Smyrna and Philadelphia about coming persecutions and emperor worship, and states that the final showdown between God and Satan is imminent. If I'm right about the dating, the early chapters of Revelation tells us about problems in seven of the early churches soon after Paul's death. The remainder of Revelation is apocalyptic literature, highly symbolic, and full of visions. It has been interpreted to apply to the first century, to all of history, to the end times, or to an idealised time – although I believe it was clearly intended to apply to the end times.

Concluding then our section on the writing of the NT, you will have seen how soon after the crucifixion of Jesus almost all of the books were written. At that time many eyewitnesses to the events in Jesus' life and death would have still been alive, so I think it is very unlikely that these books would have gained a wide circulation and credibility unless they contained a true and accurate description of the historical events they describe. It's simply not credible to dismiss them as myth and legend.

The New Testament Manuscripts

To conclude this section, people often say to me how can we know that what we have in our Bible today is the same as the original NT manuscripts. Well let me say at the outset that if you're not going to accept the NT as correct you absolutely must throw away all other ancient literature because the NT is by far the best attested ancient literature we have [slide].

The NT manuscripts were the most frequently copied and widely circulated books of antiquity. Thus, there is lots of manuscript evidence. All in all, there are 5,366 partial or complete copies in Greek dating from between the second to the fifteenth centuries AD, more than 10,000 Latin vulgate manuscripts and more than 9,300 other early manuscript versions. That makes a total of approximately 25,000 manuscripts of all or part of the NT in existence today.

No other document from antiquity even begins to approach these standards. Homer's Iliad is second with 643 surviving manuscripts and the first complete manuscript here dates from the thirteenth century. If you doubt the textual reliability of the NT then you must throw away all ancient literature as unreliable because no other ancient documents are remotely as well attested as the NT. Sir Frederick Kenyon who was the director and principal librarian to the British Museum stated:

Besides number, the manuscripts of the New Testament differ from those of the classical authors In no other case is the interval of time between the composition of the book and the date of the earliest existent manuscripts so short as that in the New Testament. The books of the New Testament were written in the latter part of the first century; the earliest extant manuscripts (trifling scraps excepted) are of the fourth century – say from 250 to 300 years later. This may sound a considerable interval, but it is nothing to that which parts most of the classical authors from their earliest manuscripts. We believe that we have in all essentials an accurate text of the seven extant plays of Sophocles; yet the earliest substantial manuscript upon which it is based was written more than 1,400 years after the poet's death.

And he also further stated:

The interval between the dates of original composition and the earliest existent evidence becomes so small as to be in fact negligible, and the last foundation for any doubt that the Scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written has now been removed. Both the authenticity and the general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established.

Furthermore, there is very good agreement between the texts of the various manuscripts, so that there is little doubt that we have the correct wordings in almost all cases. Dockery, Mathews and Sloane write:

For most of the biblical text, a single reading has been transmitted. Elimination of scribal errors and intentional changes leaves only a small percentage of the text about which any questions occur.

They conclude:

Although there are certain differences in many of the New Testament manuscripts, not one fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith rests on a disputed reading.

Some of the important early NT manuscripts are:

John Rylands MS (AD 117 - 138) – a portion of the gospel of John found in Egypt

Bodmer Papyrus II (AD 180 –250) – most of John's gospel

Chester Beatty Papyri (AD 200 - 250) – major portions of the NT

Codex Vaticanus (AD 325 –350) – nearly all of the Bible, written in small delicate uncials on fine vellum. This document was not known until 1475 and for the next four hundred years scholars were prohibited from studying it.

Codex Sinaiticus (AD 340) – which contains over half of the Old Testament and almost all of the New Testament. This was discovered in a monastery at Mount Sinai by a German scholar Count VonTischendorf in 1859. Again this is written in uncials on vellum.

All in all there are some 88 known papyri manuscripts of portions of the New Testament, of which the foregoing are merely the most important representatives. The papyri witness to the text is invaluable, ranging chronologically from the very threshold of the second century within a generation of the original autographs and including the content of most of the New Testament. All are extant from within the first two hundred years after the New Testament itself was written. During that intervening 250 year period the original manuscripts were

copied and recopied, but we have many quotations from the early church fathers which testify to the wide circulation of a number of manuscripts of all the important NT books during that intervening period.

Conclusion

So what does all this mean for us today? Well firstly I wanted you to appreciate how neatly the spread of the gospel after the ascension corresponded to Christ's last commission to the disciples before the ascension. As the gospel spread from Jews in Jerusalem to Greek speaking Jews, to God fearing Gentiles and finally to pagan Gentiles so it spread from Jerusalem into Judea and then Samaria and finally to the ends of the earth as the Lord had commanded.

Secondly, I wanted you to see that, whilst Paul was a towering figure who was hugely important and influential – in fact one of the greatest figures in history, the word of the gospel was also spread to an enormous extent both by ordinary believers after the dispersion of Christians from Jerusalem following the stoning of Stephen and also by the band of disciples who travelled around preaching the word like Barnabas, Timothy and many others we've mentioned. That should be a wonderful encouragement to us all here today to preach the word wherever we go. We don't need to be trained theologians or gifted speakers and who knows how great the effect of our poor words may be.

Thirdly I wanted you all to understand how short the gap between Christ's death and the writing of almost all the NT was. It was well within the lifetime of many witnesses to Christ's death and resurrection.

Fourthly I wanted you to see that the NT was written by eyewitnesses or those who had close contact with eyewitnesses. This was not the stuff of myth and legend.

Fifthly, I wanted you to see that there was overwhelming evidence for the truth of the gospel story. There is the change of attitude of the disciples from craven cowards who ran away at Jesus' arrest to lions who braved arrest torture and even death for the sake of the gospel. Indeed apart from John who appears to have lived to a ripe old age all the other apostles met violent deaths for their faith. There is the fact of Paul's miraculous conversion and subsequent ministry. There is the evidence of the miracles performed by the apostles which are confirmed not only by NT writings but also by the evidence of Jewish literature – the Mishnah.

Finally I wanted you to appreciate the fulfilment of God's wonderful plan for the spread of the gospel message and the building of the church and the bringing of the gospel to us today both through that church and the writings made for us nearly 2,000 years ago – the New Testament.

Let's just close with a few words of prayer. Father I pray that today will have given us a new understanding of the development of the early church and the writing of the New Testament and that this will encourage us all and deepen our faith both in you and your word to us in the NT. Amen.

APPENDICES

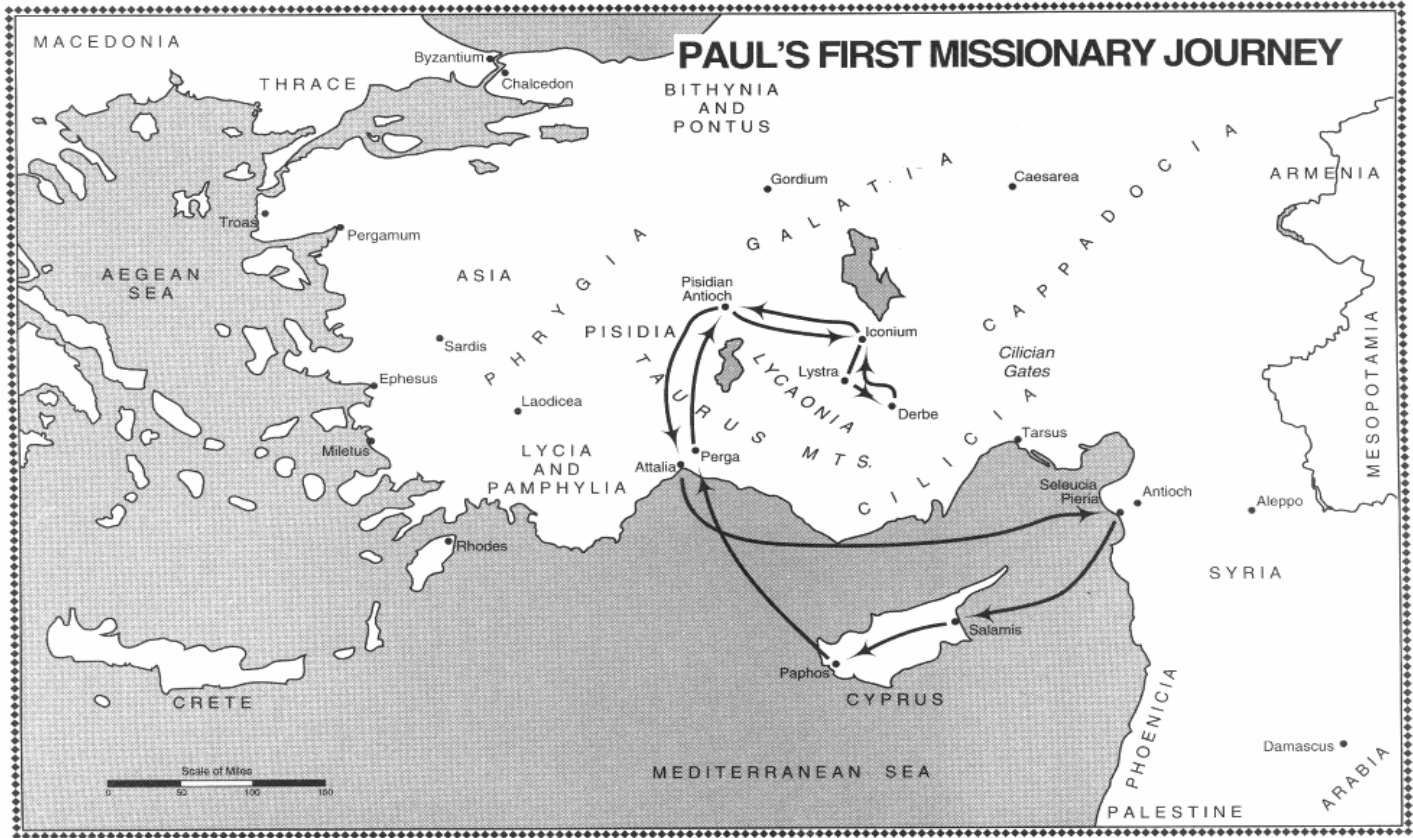
TIMELINE OF THE APOSTOLIC AGE

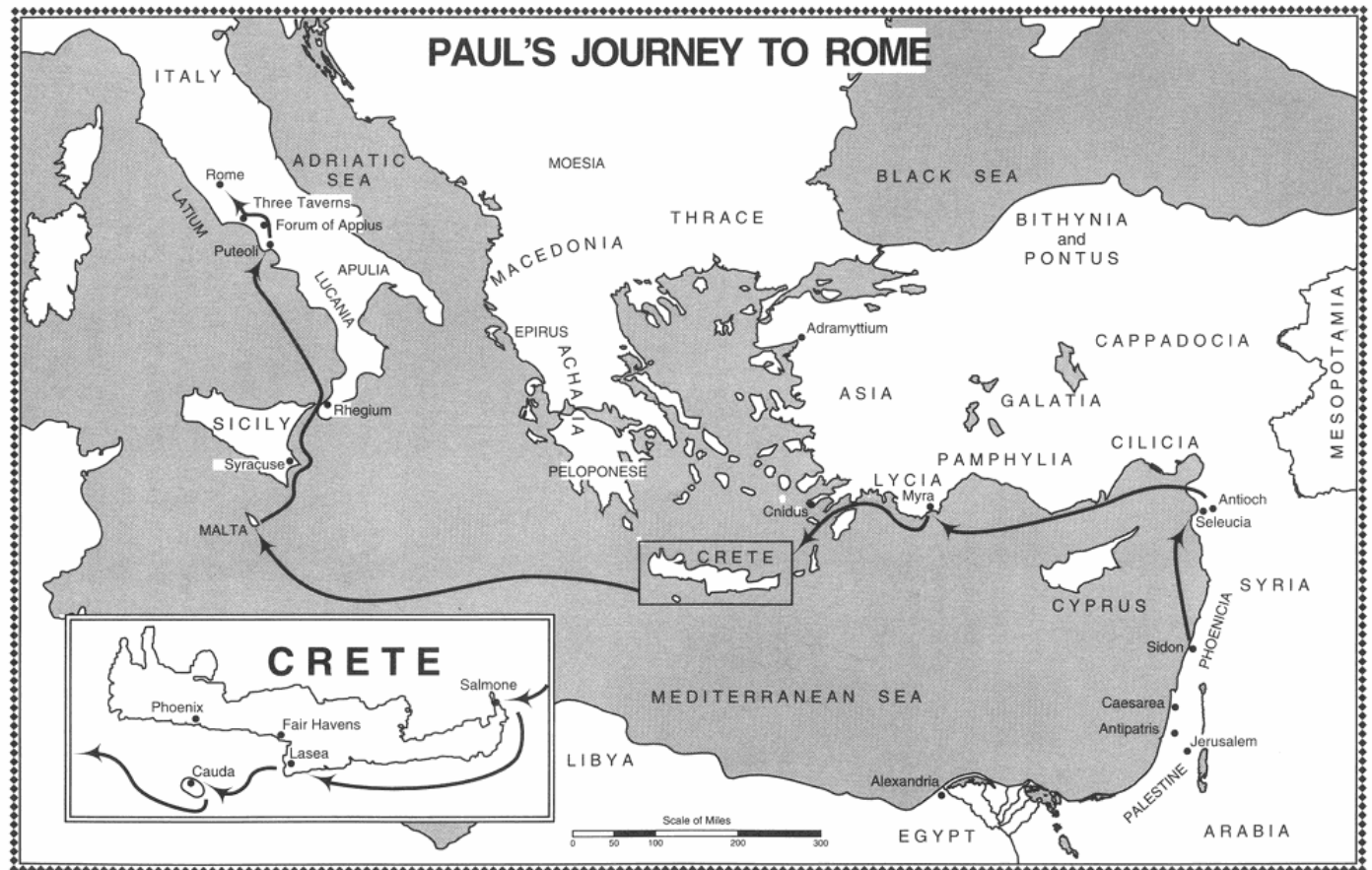
YEAR	EVENTS IN THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH	NT BOOKS WRITTEN	EVENTS IN ROMAN EMPIRE
33	Christ Crucified and Resurrected		Tiberius Emperor
34	Stephen stoned to death		
	Peter and John in Samaria		
36	Conversion of Paul		Caligula becomes Emperor
40	Paul meets apostles in Jerusalem and flees to Tarsus		
	Cornelius becomes first Gentile convert		
41			Claudius becomes Emperor, Herod Agrippa I becomes Procurator
43	Antioch ministry of Paul and Barnabas		
45	Paul's second visit to Jerusalem with offerings from Antioch		Herod Agrippa I dies
	Peter imprisoned and delivered		
	Persecution of Jerusalem church, James the Elder (James the apostle) beheaded.		
	James the Lord's brother writes epistle	James	Cuspius Fadus appointed Procurator of Judea
46	Paul's first missionary journey begins		Tiberius Alexander appointed Procurator of Judea
47			Ventidius Cumanus appointed Procurator of Judea
48	Paul's 1 st missionary journey ends	Galatians	
50	Paul's third visit to Jerusalem. Council of Jerusalem between Paul and Jerusalem church		
	Paul's 2 nd missionary journey commences		
51		1 and 2 Thessalonians	
52	Paul's 2 nd missionary journey ends		
53	Paul's fourth visit to Jerusalem. Paul's 3 rd missionary journey begins		
54			Nero becomes Emperor
55		Mark, 1 Corinthians	Revolt of the Sicarii
56		2 Corinthians	
57	Paul's 3 rd missionary journey ends	Romans	
58	Paul visits Jerusalem for the fifth and last time and is arrested		

58	Paul awaits trial in Caesarea		
60	Paul goes to Rome for his trial and is shipwrecked at Malta		Porcius Festus appointed Procurator of Judea
61	Paul under house arrest in Rome	Luke, Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon, Philippians	War with Boadicea in Britain
62	James the Lord's brother martyred at Jerusalem on the orders of the high priest Arianus II	Matthew, 1 Peter	
63	Paul released from house arrest in Rome	Acts, Titus	
	Paul's 4 th missionary journey begins		
64	Severe persecution under Nero commences		Great fire of Rome. Persecution under Nero commences.
65	Paul's 4 th missionary journey ends	2 Peter, Jude	
66	Paul begins 2 nd imprisonment in Rome	1 and 2 Timothy	
67	Paul executed	Hebrews	
68		Revelation	Galba becomes Emperor
69			Otho and Vitellius Emperor then Vespasian Emperor
70	Temple and Jerusalem destroyed		
79			Titus Emperor
81	Christian persecution under Emperor Domitian begins		Domitian Emperor
88		John	
90		1, 2 and 3 John	
96			Nerva Emperor
98			Trajan Emperor
100	John son of Zebedee dies		

Notes

1. New Testament Books emboldened are those where we can be most sure of the dating. Others may have a considerable range of possibilities – see separate Table and Notes on the Books of the New Testament.
2. Apart from matters noted in 1. above, we can be reasonable certain of most dates up to AD 70 within a couple of years either way. Christ could have been crucified in either AD 33 or AD 30 – although I prefer the evidence for the AD 33 dating.
3. There is dispute about whether or not Paul actually took a fourth missionary journey (and where he went if he did) as this is not in the Book of Acts. This is probably because Acts was written prior to this journey, which I believe happened, as it fits better with what we know of events in the Roman Empire, with Paul's own Epistles and most importantly with early church literature.





COMPARISON OF NEW TESTAMENT DOCUMENTS WITH OTHER ANCIENT LITERATURE

AUTHOR	BOOK	DATE WRITTEN	EARLIEST COPIES	TIME GAP	NO. OF COPIES
Homer	Iliad	800 BC	c 400 BC	c 400 yrs	643
Herodotus	History	480-425 BC	c 900 AD	c 1,350 yrs	8
Thucydides	History	460-400 BC	c 900 AD	c 1,300 yrs	8
Plato		400 BC	c 900 AD	c 1,300 yrs	7
Demosthenes		300 BC	c 1,100 AD	c 1,400 yrs	200
Caesar	Gallic Wars	100-44 BC	c 900 AD	c 1,000 yrs	10
Livy	History of Rome	59 BC – 17 AD	4 th cent. (partial) mostly 11th cent.	c 400 yrs c 1,000 yrs	1 partial 19
Tacitus	Annals	100 AD	c 1,100 AD	c 1,000 yrs	20
Pliny Secundus	Natural History	61-113 AD	c 850 AD	c 750 yrs	7
New Testament		50-100 AD	c 114 (fragment) c 200 (books) c 250 (most of NT) c 325 (complete)	c 50 yrs c 100 yrs c 150 yrs c 225 yrs	5,366

THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

