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## *The Work of the Twelve Apostles*

“Ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.” Acts 1:8

**H**is Church continued the work Jesus had begun. The organization of that Church in a world that had just rejected the Master fell to the twelve apostles. This was a stupendous task, and they were unlettered men according to the standards of the day—men who had not been educated in the rabbinical schools. But they were well-trained spiritually through their long and close association with Jesus, and their teaching adhered to the basic truths of his Messiahship and Resurrection. The power of the Holy Ghost was clearly evident in their teaching and healing work, and authenticated the truths of the gospel message. The only contemporary record of the early Church during the first thirty-three years of its existence (30–63 A.D.), with the exception of a few brief allusions in Paul’s Epistles, is found in the New Testament book known to us as The Acts of the Apostles. Written by Luke, Acts is a continuation of the history of Christianity begun in the Gospel of Luke. It does record the acts of the apostles—of Peter and John, of Paul, and the work of other prominent evangelists. The account, vivid in its simplicity, gives a picture of the origin and growth of the Church in Jerusalem, its spread into Palestine, and its extension to Asia Minor and the continent of Europe.

**A**cts 1 After Resurrection Jesus had confirmed his former promise to his apostles of the gift of the Holy Spirit when he “breathed on them” and said, “Receive ye the Holy Ghost” (Jn. 20:22). He had commanded them: “Tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until ye be endued with power from on high” (Lu. 24:49). Just before his Ascension he repeated his promise: “Ye shall be

baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence." Returning to Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, the eleven withdrew to an "upper room" to pray and to await in joyous expectation the fulfillment of that pledge.

The apostles were joined by other disciples, among them Jesus' mother, his brothers, and the faithful women who had accompanied him in Galilee, until their total was about a hundred twenty. The inner circle of the Twelve having been broken by Judas Iscariot's defection, Peter proposed the appointment of another apostle to fill Judas' place. From among the disciples who had traveled with Jesus from his Baptism to his Resurrection two men were nominated, Joseph and Matthias; after prayer for guidance, the whole assembly cast lots and Matthias was chosen.

### Acts 2 Birth of the

**Church** The momentous occurrence of the descent of the Holy Ghost came on the Day of Pentecost, ten days after Jesus' Ascension. Pentecost was a Jewish harvest festival, a day of dedication of the firstfruits of the grain harvest to the Divine Giver, observed fifty days after Passover. This particular Pentecost fell on the fiftieth day from Jesus' Resurrection, marking the birthday of the Christian Church.

The inpouring of the power of the Spirit to the minds of the disciples came swiftly and suddenly. As they were gathered together "with one accord in one place," they heard "a sound from heaven." To Elijah the sound from heaven had been as "a still small voice"; to the apostles it was "as of a rushing mighty wind" filling the house in which they waited. Light accompanied the coming of this divine influence; they saw "cloven tongues like as of fire" rest on the head of each one. All were "filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance."\*

Word of this extraordinary event spread rapidly

*\*Spirit of God and Holy Spirit are Old Testament terms for the invisible divine presence and power as seen in the affairs of men. Holy Ghost is the New Testament designation, a translation from Greek.*

The Holy Ghost is first mentioned in connection with those whose lives touched the birth of the child Jesus: with John the Baptist (Lu. 1:15), the Virgin Mary (Lu. 1:35), Elisabeth (Lu. 1:41), Zacharias (Lu. 1:67), Simeon (Lu. 2:25). Jesus was "child of the Holy Ghost" (Mt. 1:18); he was imbued with a fresh influx of the Holy Ghost at baptism (Lu. 3:22); and this Spirit which "filled" his being enabled him to triumph over Satan at the Temptation and to preach and heal with irresistible power.

Jesus defined the Holy Ghost as the "Comforter," the "Spirit of truth," emanating from the Father and the Son (Jn. 14:16,17,26; 15:26), an ever-present continuing power unfolding truth to men (Jn. 16:8,13,14). To the Church the "Spirit of God" and the "Spirit of Christ" were one (Rom. 8:9), the divine force that gave Christianity its substance and impetus. The Holy Ghost so guided the early Church that the book of Acts has sometimes been called "the Gospel of the Holy Ghost."

and soon a crowd gathered, many of whom were Jews of the Dispersion who had resettled in Jerusalem or had come to the Holy City for the feast—men from Persia, Mesopotamia, Arabia, Asia Minor, Africa, Crete, and Rome. These were amazed because each man, whatever his nationality, heard the disciples speak the truth of God in his own tongue. Language differences were overcome as they shared the inspiration of the Spirit. "We may see in this event, which seemed to obliterate the barriers of nationality and language, a reversal of the separation and confusion of tongues (Gen. 11)."<sup>1</sup>

Some of the devout asked the meaning of this phenomenon; others mocked the speakers, accusing them of being filled with new wine. Peter, as spokesman for the other apostles, instantly denied this slanderous charge. He declared that what they were hearing was in reality the language of inspiration, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit long ago foretold by the prophet Joel: "It shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy" (compare Joel 2:28–32).

He linked this Pentecostal outpouring to Jesus of Nazareth, whose life and ministry among them had been attested by miracles and signs. He stingingly reproached them for the crucifixion of Jesus but added that God had raised him to life, not allowing His Holy One to suffer corruption, even as David had prophesied (Ps. 16:8–11). He asserted that he and the others were eyewitnesses to Jesus' resurrection. He testified to Jesus' ascension and glorification and explained that this gift of the Holy Ghost as seen by them at Pentecost had been bestowed by the ascended Christ. "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ."

Cut to the heart his listeners asked: "What shall we do?" "Repent," Peter answered, "and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost." Three thousand were baptized that day, the firstfruits of the Pentecostal gospel harvest.

Baptism had been employed by John the Baptist as a symbolic rite of purification; it had been practiced by Jesus' apostles during his ministry; now in accordance with one of his final commands, to baptize in his name (Mt. 28:19), it was adopted by the nascent Church to mark the acceptance of believers. It signified not only repentance but initiation into the new moral and spiritual way of life in Christ.

### The Church in Jerusalem

The apostles, having a clearer realization of their part in Christ's continuing mission and now equipped with the power of the Holy Ghost, the promised Comforter,

went forward with confidence to preach Jesus as the Messiah. Basic to their assurance was the Master's resurrection and ascension which verified the truths of all he had taught. They were the natural leaders and teachers of the new religion. Among them Peter was acknowledged chief and called upon to play a prominent role. Jesus' charge "Feed my sheep" still echoed in Peter's mind; it was he who first used "the keys of the kingdom" in opening the door of faith to the Jews on the Day of Pentecost (and later to the Gentiles in the house of Cornelius). Through the power of the Holy Ghost the apostles performed many miracles, and the unique characteristic of healing that had accompanied Jesus' ministry continued to be a distinguishing mark of his Church.

The growth of the new sect was enthusiastic and rapid, springing out of the conviction of Jesus' resurrection. Many now accepted him as the long-awaited Messiah and were constant in listening to the apostles' teachings. This embryo Christian society was called *ecclesia*, a Greek word meaning "an assembly of called-out ones." Although these new adherents still went to the Temple and the synagogue to worship, they were united by a new and deeper sense of love and brotherhood, and soon groups began to meet in one another's homes for prayer and "breaking of bread." Although this eating together may have included the communion of the Lord's supper, its major purpose was fellowship. A new community life evolved as believers sold their possessions and shared all in a common purpose.

**Acts 3** The healing power the apostles had practiced when they were with Jesus (Lu. 9:6) continued in the early Church and helped authenticate their mission. Typical of their work was the healing of a man more than forty years old, a beggar lame from birth. Daily he had been carried by his friends to the Temple and placed near the Beautiful Gate to beg alms of those who entered. As Peter and John passed him one day on their way to prayer, he asked for money. They paused, and Peter, seeing his need for physical healing and eager to share his spiritual wealth, said, "Look on us." As the man waited for the usual alms Peter spoke again: "Silver and gold have I none; but such as I have give I thee: In the name [by the power] of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk" (*arise*, the active command Jesus so often gave). Peter stretched out his hand to the outcast and lifted him up; immediately the man's feet and ankle bones became strong; he stood, and walked. Leaping for joy and praising God, he entered with them into the Temple.

Many, assembled for evening prayer, saw the man walking and running. Realizing that a miracle had taken place, they excitedly surrounded the three.

"Why marvel ye at this?" Peter protested, "or why look ye so earnestly on us, as though by our own power or holiness we had made this man to walk?" Seizing the opportunity, he explained that the healing came from God through His Son Jesus and was the natural result of faith in Christ. He was God's Holy One and the Prince of life whom they had denied and killed but whom God had raised from the dead. Peter urged his listeners to repent so that this sin, committed in ignorance, might be wiped out.

He reminded them of Moses' warning command concerning disbelief in their coming Messiah: "A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear in all things whatsoever he shall say unto you. And it shall come to pass, that every soul, which will not hear that prophet, shall be destroyed from among the people" (compare Deut. 18:15,18,19). He declared that they, the children of the prophets and heirs of the Abrahamic covenant, were the first to be given the blessing of the Risen Christ.

**Acts 4** While Peter and John were teaching the people, the priests, the Sadducees, and the captain of the Temple guard suddenly appeared. They were incensed to find the apostles proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus, for the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead was one they rejected. Unless such teaching was repressed it would effectually undermine the already unpopular Sadducean ideas, so the captain quickly arrested the two. But Peter's speech and the lame man's healing had already convinced the people, and five thousand converts were added to the church that day.

Peter and John were imprisoned and held overnight; the following morning they were brought before the Sanhedrin. "By what power, or by what name, have ye done this?" the council demanded. Peter fearlessly repeated what he had preached to the people—that through the name of Jesus Christ, whom they themselves were responsible for crucifying but whom God had resurrected, the man had been healed. He announced for the ears of the nation: "This is the stone which was set at nought of you builders, which is become the head of the corner. Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name (Moffatt, nor even a second Name) under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved." His judges were startled at so bold an answer from one rabbinically untrained; they realized that these men had been the close associates of Jesus and would be dangerous if allowed further to spread his teachings.

The members of the Sanhedrin hurriedly deliberated what action to take. The miracle could not be denied, since by now all the city knew of it; nor did they dare punish these men for an obviously good

deed. The only course open to them was to resort to threats. They therefore warned Peter and John not to teach again in the name of Jesus, but the apostles were not to be intimidated: "Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard." The council found no justifiable reason for punishment, so after further threats the two were released.

Peter and John reported to the brethren the Sanhedrin's order, but this injunction, far from breaking their ranks, served only to unite the church. With one voice they prayed that courage be given them to speak in Jesus' name and that divine power accompany their preaching with healing. A sign was immediately given: the place in which they were assembled was shaken and all felt a fresh inpouring of the Holy Ghost. Spiritually strengthened, they went forth to speak God's message with boldness.

The spirit of brotherhood and unity continued in the new society to a remarkable degree. Many willingly sold their lands and houses and brought the money to the apostles for distribution, so there was not a needy man among them. One of those who gave up his possessions was Joses, a Cyprian Levite whom the Twelve renamed Barnabas. He became a preacher, an apostle of the Church, and Paul's co-worker on his first missionary journey.

**A**cts 5 Not all the members were equal to this spirit of self-sacrifice, however. One couple, Ananias and Sapphira, sold some property, and with his wife's full knowledge Ananias withheld a portion of the money for themselves. Peter detected this duplicity and he rebuked him: "Ananias, why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Ghost, and to keep back part of the price of the land? . . . thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God." At these words Ananias fell dead at the apostle's feet. Three hours later Sapphira came in, unaware of her husband's death; and when Peter questioned her, she too lied. "How is it that ye have agreed together to tempt the Spirit of the Lord?" he asked; "behold, the feet of them which have buried thy husband are at the door, and shall carry thee out." She too fell dead. This swift judgment on religious hypocrisy struck awe in the hearts of the whole Christian community.

The new cause prospered as miracles and signs continued to accompany the apostles' preaching. Their healing work, particularly Peter's, was so successful that great numbers of men and women believed; and the people of Jerusalem and the neighboring villages brought their sick and laid them in the streets in the hope that Peter's shadow at least might fall on them. And they all were healed.

This success aroused the anger and jealousy of

the high priest and the Sadducean party; they seized the Twelve and put them in the common prison. But hate and malice could not stop the Word. That night an angel opened the prison doors and freed them, saying, "Go, stand and speak in the temple to the people all the words of this life." The following morning when the high priest Caiaphas sent for the prisoners, the Temple officers reported that they could not be found, although the prison doors were still shut and the guards on duty.

Then came the astonishing news that the apostles were in the Temple again teaching the people. At this, the captain himself went with his officers and brought them to the council room, being careful to rearrest them without violence for fear of being stoned by the people. Caiaphas charged: "Did not we straitly [strictly] command you that ye should not teach in this name? and, behold, ye have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this man's blood upon us." (So quickly had they forgotten their eager willingness at Jesus' trial to take upon themselves the curse of his innocent blood [Mt. 27:25].) Peter answered fearlessly: "We ought to obey God rather than men." As at his previous arraignment, he testified that the Jesus they had slain God had exalted as Prince and Savior of Israel. "We are his witnesses of these things; and so is also the Holy Ghost, whom God hath given to them that obey him."

Infuriated, the Sanhedrin determined to kill the apostles, but at this point a note of caution was sounded. One of the Pharisees of the council, the eminent and respected rabbi Gamaliel, advised against so rash an act. He cautioned the council to move slowly against these followers of Jesus, recalling two earlier revolutionary movements—one led by Theudas and the other by Judas of Galilee—the impact of which had dissipated after these leaders had been killed, without any action instigated by the Sanhedrin against their adherents. "Refrain from these men, and let them alone: for if this counsel or this work be of men, it will come to nought: But if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it; lest haply ye be found even to fight against God."

Reluctantly his fellow members agreed. But before the prisoners were released the Sanhedrin had them beaten; again they warned them not to speak in the name of Jesus. This was the apostles' first taste of persecution. They left the council rejoicing that they had been found worthy to suffer shame and humiliation for Jesus' name (compare Mt. 5:11,12; Lu. 21:12). Flouting the Sanhedrin's prohibition, they preached every day—openly in the Temple and privately in homes.

**A**cts 6, 7 Within two or three years many converts—both men and women—

were added to the Church. From the first, women had eagerly accepted the gospel, responded to the call to spread its truths, and by their ennobling influence steadily advanced the cause of Christianity. Jesus had given woman a higher standing than she had heretofore enjoyed; this was evident at once in her new status in the early Church.

The Jerusalem church had a rapidly multiplying membership of both Hebrew- and Greek-speaking Jews, the former outnumbering the latter. A difficulty arose when the Hellenists complained that their widows were being discriminated against by Hebrew Christians in the daily distribution of provisions. To rectify this situation the apostles called a meeting and suggested the appointment of seven men—men honest, wise, “full of the Holy Ghost”—to oversee the fair and charitable distribution of food and other necessities. The apostles themselves desired to be free to devote their full time and efforts to prayer and preaching. This proposal found enthusiastic approval. Seven spiritually minded men were chosen to supervise the dispensing of church charity—Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas—and these the Twelve formally inducted by the laying on of hands.

The “laying on of hands” usually symbolizes the bestowal of the Holy Spirit, which at the very beginning seems to have been connected with this rite rather than with baptism (see Acts 19:5–6 and . . . 8:17). The rite is taken over from the O.T., where it symbolizes the establishment of some vital connection between two persons, and the transference of some power or responsibility from the one to the other. Thus Moses, when appointing Joshua his successor, laid his hands on him, by which act he “put some of his honor upon him” (Num. 27:23,20). So the apostles in Acts frequently do in healing, confirming, and ordaining.<sup>2</sup>

Their Greek names suggest that these seven men were probably Hellenic (Greek-speaking) Jews, with the exception of Nicolas, a convert from Antioch in Syria. (These seven are traditionally regarded as the first “deacons” of the Church. However, their office differed from that of the deacons appointed in the latter half of the first century A.D. [I Tim. 3:8–12].) This was the first organizational step taken by the Apostolic Church and it promoted harmony and unity in the Christian community.

The first attack on the Church had come from the Sadducees; the second, which resulted in the death of Stephen (*ca.* 32 A.D.), was brought about by conservative Hellenistic Jews who feared the new teachings. Stephen, a mature and ardent Christian, possessed in rich measure both the spirit and the power of the Holy Ghost. He not only carried out the stewardship to which he had been appointed but also soon achieved an almost apostolic prominence as he

healed and preached with great effectiveness. Being a Greek-speaker, he appears to have taught the gospel mainly in the Jerusalem synagogues of foreign colonists—the Libertines (Jews freed from Roman slavery), Cyrenians and Alexandrians of northern Africa, and men from Cilicia and the province of Asia. (It is entirely probable that Saul of Tarsus, the zealous young pupil of Gamaliel, was among Stephen’s antagonists in the Cilician synagogue.)

Stephen’s teachings drew him into bitter controversy with some of his listeners. He was so eloquent in defense of the new faith that they were unable to resist his reasoning or the Christlike spirit he manifested. They became alarmed by the threat his teaching posed to the Law of Moses (to accept Christ as Savior virtually nullified ceremonial law and implied its eventual abandonment), and determined to silence him. Resorting to the world’s weapons, they bribed men to spread a rumor that his teachings which exalted Jesus as pre-eminent were blasphemous, taking glory away from Moses and from God. Stephen was seized, arraigned before the Sanhedrin, and accused by the suborned witnesses: “This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law: For we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us” (the crime charged against Jesus [Mk. 14:58] and later against Paul [Acts 21:28]). But Stephen stood serene, even while this accusation was being made against him, his face alight with an inner radiance “as it had been the face of an angel.”

When questioned by the high priest, Stephen began an impassioned plea to make his judges understand that Jesus of Nazareth was the God-sent Messiah. He opened his defense with an account of Israel’s history from the time of Father Abraham to the Wilderness Wandering to show how God’s love and grace had continually sustained His people. He gave full honor to the great prophet Moses, but went on “to remind his Moses-worshipping audience of the grand testimony of their faithful lawgiver, that *himself was not the last and proper object of the Church’s faith, but only a humble precursor and small model of Him to whom their absolute submission was due.*”<sup>3</sup> Stephen declared: “This is that Moses, which said unto the children of Israel, A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear. This is he, that was in the church in the wilderness with the angel which spake to him in the mount Sina, and with our fathers: who received the lively oracles [the Law] to give unto us: To whom our fathers would not obey, but thrust him from them, and in their hearts turned back again into Egypt.”

As for the Temple his opponents claimed he was

defaming, Stephen told his judges (now its privileged overseers) that it was an error to consider it the final dwelling place of God. This he did first by reciting the progressive history of the sanctuary from a movable Tabernacle in the wilderness to the structure erected by Solomon in Jerusalem, then by quoting from Isaiah: "Howbeit the most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands; as saith the prophet, Heaven is my throne, and earth is my footstool: what house will ye build me? saith the Lord: or what is the place of my rest? Hath not my hand made all these things?" (compare Is. 66:1,2).

Abruptly Stephen's tone changed to one of scathing rebuke of his judges, now as obstinate in resisting God as their forebears had been: "Ye stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, Ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye. Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? and they have slain them which shewed before of the coming of the Just One; of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers: Who have received the law by the disposition of angels, and have not kept it."

An instant uproar spread through the assembly hall and Stephen's judges gnashed their teeth at him (grating the teeth was a Jewish form of expressing rage). But he, "full of the Holy Ghost," looked up and cried: "I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God." This was too much for his enemies. With a loud outcry they stopped their ears against this assertion of Jesus' glorification, which seemed to them a final blasphemy (compare Mt. 26:65). Not waiting to condemn him formally or to obtain the necessary Roman permission for execution, they rushed upon him in a body and dragged him outside the city walls to stone him; and the witnesses, whose hands were to be the first to stone him (Deut. 17:7), "laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul. . . . And Saul was consenting unto his death." (This is our first introduction to Saul—Paul, as we later know him.)

While the stones rained upon him, Stephen entreated "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Kneeling down, he prayed: "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge" (both prayers much like those of Jesus on the cross), and with these words he died.

**Acts 8     The Extension of the Church into Palestine** Stephen's martyrdom precipitated a period of cruel persecution. Very shortly after Stephen's murder the young Pharisee Saul appears to have been given almost unrestricted authority by the chief priests to destroy the Christian Church. With blind rage and fanatic zeal he forced his way into every house in which he suspected there were Christians, committed men and women to prison, and

caused many to be put to death. Their lives in danger, their homes no longer safe even for secret meetings, many believers fled into Judaea and Samaria, but the apostles remained in Jerusalem. Far from crushing the Church, this persecution identified its faith; wherever these fugitives scattered they preached the gospel, thus extending the new movement throughout Palestine.

The dispersion brought Philip the Evangelist, colleague of Stephen, to the city of Samaria. Philip was one of the seven appointed by the apostles to administer charity. Being Hellenistic, he had few of the national prejudices of Hebrew-speaking Jews toward the Samaritans and so felt no antipathy toward them. These people of mixed descent, who followed the Pentateuch as their sole code, warmly received his preaching of Christ, and his ministry was marked by many healings and conversions, "and there was great joy in that city."

Many of Samaria's citizens were followers of Simon (Magus), a sorcerer who delighted them with magical arts and to whom they attributed divine power; but after seeing Philip's miracles they transferred their allegiance to Jesus Christ and were baptized. Simon also was attracted to this new religion, and was baptized. When the apostles in Jerusalem heard of these conversions, they sent Peter and John to visit the Samaritans; through their prayers and the laying on of the apostles' hands the new believers received the gift of the Holy Ghost. The ministry of Paul to the Gentile world was foreshadowed by the admittance of this racially mixed group into the Church.

Simon remained in the company of Philip, amazed at his miracles of healing, so different from the tricks by which he had duped the people; when he saw the power of the Spirit after the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered Peter money for this power. Peter's reprimand was instant: "Thy money perish with thee, because thou hast thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money. Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter: for thy heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee. For I perceive that thou art in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity." In great fear Simon begged the apostle to pray that God's judgment for this sin be averted.

Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, preaching in many Samaritan villages along the way. Philip, however, was directed by an angel to travel southward to the road that ran down from Jerusalem to Gaza. In faith he obeyed, not knowing the object of his journey; in the desert he met an Ethiopian eunuch of high office, a convert to Judaism, returning home in his chariot from a religious pilgrimage to Jerusalem. This man had charge of the treasures of Candace,

queen of the Ethiopians. The inner voice of the Spirit commanded Philip to join him, and as Philip drew near, he heard him reading aloud the prophecy of the suffering Servant from the book of Isaiah (53:7,8). "Understandest thou what thou readest?" Philip asked. The Ethiopian invited him into his chariot to explain this puzzling passage; as they rode, Philip, using the passage as his text, told him of Jesus, the fulfillment of this prophecy.

Eagerly the Ethiopian accepted the gospel; when they reached an oasis, he said: "See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized?" Confessing his faith in Jesus as the Son of God, he went down with Philip into the water and Philip baptized him. As they came up out of the water Philip was "caught away" by the Spirit (compare I Ki. 18:12; II Ki. 2:16); the Ethiopian, now sealed in discipleship, went his way rejoicing, to carry the gospel into northern Africa. Philip found himself at Azotus, the old Philistine city of Ashdod; from there he journeyed on to preach in the coastal cities as far north as Caesarea.

**Acts 9** The next important recorded event is the *conversion of Saul (Paul)*, ca. 33/34 A.D., on his way to Damascus to persecute Christians of that distant city. This is followed by his ministry in Damascus, his brief visit to Jerusalem, and his return to his native Tarsus in Cilicia (vv. 1–30). Saul's conversion, so important in its issues for the Church, and his subsequent ministry to the Gentile nations are discussed in the *Life and Ministry of Paul*, p. 389.

Luke's record of the expansion of the Apostolic Church in Palestine from this point on follows only the activities of Peter. With Saul's conversion persecution of the Church slackened, and by 40 A.D. many churches had sprung up in Judaea, Samaria, and Galilee, the regions of Jesus' ministry. Early in the second decade of the Church's history Peter was sent out by the parent church in Jerusalem to visit these clusters of believers. He came to see the Christians at Lydda, a town in the Maritime Plain, and was taken to the bedside of a man who had been a paralytic for eight years. "Aeneas," he said, "Jesus Christ maketh thee whole: arise, and make thy bed." Aeneas immediately arose from his bed, healed. Many of the townspeople of Lydda and nearby Sharon, hearing of this remarkable healing, were converted.

At the coastal city of Joppa (modern Jaffa), Tabitha (Dorcas), a woman of the church much loved for her charitable works, fell ill and died. Her friends laid her out in an upper room; knowing that Peter was at Lydda, some ten miles distant, they sent two men to implore him to come at once. When he arrived, he was taken to the upper room—now filled with grieving

friends who tearfully showed him various garments her hands had made. But Peter "put them all forth," as Jesus himself had done at the raising of Jairus' daughter. Kneeling, he prayed. Then, turning to her, he said: "Tabitha, arise." She opened her eyes; seeing Peter, she sat up. Calling in her friends, he returned her to them alive. Word of this miracle was soon on everyone's lips, and many more embraced the new faith.

**Acts 10:1–11:18** Peter remained in Joppa for some days in the house of Simon the tanner, and while he was there a new and important chapter began for the Church with the baptism of Cornelius. Cornelius was a Roman centurion stationed at Caesarea, forty miles north of Joppa. This Gentile was a convert to Judaism, a man who feared God, gave generously to the poor, and devoted much time to religious worship. Praying one day, he saw in a vision an angel, who said: "Cornelius . . . Thy prayers and thine alms are come up for a memorial before God. And now send men to Joppa, and call for one Simon, whose surname is Peter: He lodgeth with one Simon a tanner . . . he shall tell thee what thou oughtest to do." At once Cornelius dispatched two of his servants and a soldier with the message.

The following day as they were approaching the city, Peter went to the housetop to pray. It was noon and he suddenly became very hungry; while food was being prepared he, too, had a vision. He saw heaven open and a great sheet lowered to the earth by its four corners. In it were all kinds of beasts, reptiles, and birds. A voice commanded: "Rise, Peter; kill, and eat." Peter answered: "Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten any thing that is common or unclean [undedicated, unholy]." The voice came again: "What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common." After the voice had spoken to him a third time the sheet was gathered up into heaven.

The meaning of this vision was obscure to Peter, and while he puzzled about it, Cornelius' messengers came to the gate. The Spirit directed the apostle: "Behold, three men seek thee. Arise . . . and go with them, doubting nothing: for I have sent them." The next morning, accompanied by some of the Christians from Joppa, he set out for Caesarea. The following day he found the centurion waiting with his close friends and relatives. As he went into the house Cornelius threw himself down at Peter's feet, but the apostle would not permit this personal homage; lifting him up, he said: "Stand up; I myself also am a man."

For Peter and his companions to enter the house of a Roman was a radical departure from the Jewish practice of segregation. This putting aside of an age-old custom is apparent in his greeting: "Ye know how that it is an unlawful thing for a man that is a Jew

to keep company, or come unto one of another nation; but God hath shewed me that I should not call any man common or unclean. Therefore came I unto you without gainsaying, as soon as I was sent for: I ask therefore for what intent ye have sent for me?"

Cornelius related how he had been divinely directed to send for Peter; now he and his friends were waiting to hear what God had commanded Peter to tell them. The meaning of the apostle's vision now became clear to him. The two visions were one in purpose: to make plain to the Church by this special revelation that God's salvation was for all men. No longer was the non-Jew to be regarded unworthy of God's grace. No longer were the Mosaic ceremonial distinctions of "clean" and "unclean" meats (Lev. 11) to debar the Jew from social intercourse and table-fellowship with the non-Jew. Peter declared: "Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him." The gospel message of salvation, which he had shared only with "the circumcision," he now imparted to Cornelius and his friends. While he was still speaking of the forgiveness of sins to whoever believes in Jesus, the Holy Ghost fell on them all; they spoke with tongues, as had the disciples at Pentecost, and praised God. Peter's Jewish companions were astonished to see this gift of the Spirit bestowed equally on the Gentiles.

By this sign of divine approbation it was evident that these men had been accepted in God's sight and should not be shut out from the Church. Remembering Jesus' words relating to spiritual baptism ("ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost" [Acts 1:5; 11:16]), Peter said: "Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we?" and at his command they were baptized.

The Jerusalem church was critical of Peter for his transgression of Jewish law in associating with non-Jews and eating at their table, but when he had given them a full explanation of all that had occurred they approved his conduct and acknowledged that God had granted the same grace to the Gentiles He had granted the Jews. The conversion of Cornelius established for the Church the principle of equality for all segments of its membership—a mark of the universality of Christ's gospel—but it remained for Paul rather than Peter and the other apostles to carry the gospel to the non-Jewish nations.

**Acts 11:19–30 Extension**  
of the Church beyond Palestine Luke digresses: he turns from Peter's work to record the carrying of the gospel beyond Palestine, the establishing of the Gentile church at Antioch in Syria, and the early ministries of Barnabas and Saul (see p. 392).

**Acts 12 The Church Persecuted by Herod** In 44 A.D. the church in Jerusalem was again subjected to persecution, this time political. After the recall of Pontius Pilate to Rome (36 A.D.) Judaea had been governed briefly by new procurators, first by Marcellus and then by Marullus. In 41 Herod Agrippa I, grandson of Herod the Great, was made king of all Palestine by the Roman Emperor Claudius. Although educated in Rome and Hellenistic in his sympathies, Herod Agrippa was half-Jewish and upon occasion found it politically expedient to support the Judaic interests of his subjects. In the third year of his rule, to curry favor with the Jews he harassed the growing Christian sect by striking at some of its leaders. At his order the Apostle James, brother of John, was beheaded.

When Herod saw that this act gratified the Jews, he had Peter arrested and imprisoned about the time of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, intending to execute him at its close. Sixteen soldiers were assigned to guard the prisoner, four for each watch of the night; he was securely chained by the wrists to two and the other two were stationed at the door. Church members prayed fervently for his release but their faith was tested to the utmost through the remaining days of the feast, for their prayers were not answered quickly. When they were, however, events transpired so rapidly that Peter thought it was a vision.

During the early morning hours, shortly before Herod planned to send for him, Peter lay asleep between the two soldiers. An angel appeared at his side, awakened him, and a light shone in the cell. "Arise up quickly," commanded the angel. As Peter did so, the chains fell from his hands. Again the angel spoke: "Gird thyself, and bind on thy sandals." Peter obeyed. "Cast thy garment about thee, and follow me." Peter followed him, and unseen they passed the first and second guards of the prison. As they approached the great iron gate leading to the city, it swung open of itself and they went out. When they were safely beyond pursuit, the angel suddenly left Peter. Only then did he realize he was free and that it was not a dream: "Now I know of a surety, that the Lord hath sent his angel, and hath delivered me out of the hand of Herod, and from all the expectation of the people of the Jews." (See Example of Deliverance through Prayer, p. 550.)

He went to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, where he knew many of the faithful would be gathered. Mary was a well-to-do Christian woman whose home was a chief meeting place for the early disciples. So dim had grown the hope for Peter's life that when he knocked on the door they could not believe at first that it was he. Peter stayed only long enough to describe to them his marvelous deliverance



and to ask them to inform James (Jesus' brother), apparently the acting head of the Church. Then, to insure the disciples' safety and his own, he left the city.

With the death of Herod Agrippa in 44 A.D. political persecution against the Church in Palestine ceased for a time. The vicious attacks it had endured since inception—the persecution of the apostles by the Sanhedrin, the attempted suppression of the gospel,

the death of Stephen, the sufferings of Christians under Saul's cruelties, the martyrdom of James, the imprisonment of Peter—only served to bind its members together more closely and make its cause prosper.

Here the Biblical record of the activities of the Twelve in Palestine under Peter's leadership ceases and Luke turns from their work to chronicle the ministry of Paul among the non-Jewish nations—a ministry that carried Christ's gospel to the far reaches of the Graeco-Roman world.

## *APOSTOLIC CHURCH, 30–63 A.D.*

When Jesus commissioned his apostles and sent them out to spread his teachings, he stated clearly that their mission was to be a universal one (Acts 1:8). The unique history of their work in the early Apostolic Church is preserved in the Acts of the Apostles—“so mightily grew the word of God and prevailed.” This important record covers a period of a little more than thirty years of missionary work. It was natural that Christ’s Church should first take root in the regions in which he had preached. It was also natural that it should be established by the apostles he had chosen and trained.

Under the leadership of Peter the apostles carried the gospel to the Jewish nation but, bound by the traditions of centuries, they hesitated to approach the Gentiles. Therefore Paul was specially called as an apostle to the Gentiles. By his efforts and his extensive missionary journeys he succeeded in promulgating the teachings of Jesus Christ throughout the Roman Empire north of the Mediterranean and in firmly establishing numerous Christian churches from Asia Minor to Rome.

### **THE GROWTH OF THE CHURCH IN JERUSALEM**

Acts 2:1–8:4

The outpouring of the Holy Ghost, the Holy Spirit, on the apostles at Pentecost—founding of the church

Acts of Peter and John

Acts of the Twelve—they preach boldly in the name of Jesus—convert and baptize thousands—they carry on the healing work of the Master

Repeated imprisonment of the apostles by the Sanhedrin

The Christian community evidences a strong spirit of fellowship and unity—seven deacons appointed

Acts of Stephen, one of the seven deacons—his martyrdom

Great persecution of infant church by Saul—many flee from Jerusalem for safety

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The outpouring of the Holy Ghost on the church in Jerusalem (fulfillment of Joel 2:28, 29)

### **SPREAD TO PALESTINE, SYRIA, AND CILICIA**

Acts 8:5–12:25

Fleeing Christians preach in Judaea and Samaria

Acts of Philip the Evangelist, of Peter, of John

Conversion of Saul (Paul)—his acts in Damascus, Jerusalem, Syria, and Cilicia (Gal. 1:21)

Conversion of Cornelius, a Gentile, by Peter

Growth of the church in Syrian Antioch with a Jewish and Gentile membership—acts of Barnabas and Saul

Herod Agrippa I persecutes Christians in Jerusalem, killing Apostle James and imprisoning Peter—Peter’s deliverance—the Jerusalem church grows and prospers

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The outpouring of the Holy Ghost on the Gentiles (forwarding world-wide Christianity)

### **EXTENSION TO ASIA MINOR, MACEDONIA, GREECE, ROME**

Acts 13–28

The acts of Paul and Barnabas on first journey into Asia Minor—“opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles” Acts 14:27

The acts of Paul and Silas on second journey: into Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Greece—“churches established in the faith, and increased in number daily” (Acts 16:5)—Paul begins to write his Epistles

Continued acts of Paul on his third journey: into Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Greece

Paul’s two-year imprisonment at Caesarea, 58–60 A.D.

Paul’s first imprisonment at Rome—continued preaching and teaching, 61–63 A.D.

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Christ’s gospel is widely disseminated in the Roman Empire

## APOSTOLIC HEALING

Just before his ascension Jesus had said to his disciples, “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. . . . And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover” (Mk. 16:15–18).

Though the Master was no longer with them in person, the Holy Spirit which had filled him now animated them and empowered them to carry out his command, for Mark records they preached everywhere, “the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following” (Mk. 16:20). Acts makes clear these were not isolated incidents but that multitudes were healed (5:12,16). Acts also makes clear that the divine power to heal was not confined to the Twelve but was given to other consecrated Christians, according to Jesus’ promise. Stephen, Philip the Evangelist, and the apostles Barnabas and Paul exercised it in great measure in their ministries (6:8; 8:6,7; 14:3;28:9).

A number of specific healings are recorded of Peter and Paul. Note the commands (so similar to those of Jesus) and their natural sequence.

### HEALING OF THE LAME MAN—BY PETER

“lame” from birth

Acts 3:1–10 (See 4:7–22)

In Jerusalem

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Peter’s commands: “Look on us.”

“In the name of Jesus Christ . . . rise up and walk.”

“A certain man [above forty years of age] lame from his mother’s womb was carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple which is called Beautiful, to ask alms. . . . Who seeing Peter and John about to go into the temple asked an alms.”

Peter with John said, “Look on us.”

“He gave heed . . . expecting to receive something of them.”

Peter said, “Silver and gold have I none; but such as I have give I thee: In the name of Jesus Christ . . . rise up and walk.”

“And he took him by the right hand, and lifted him up. . . .”

“*and* immediately his feet and ankle bones received strength. *And* he leaping up stood, and walked, and entered with them into the temple, walking, and leaping, and praising God.”

### HEALING OF AENEAS—BY PETER

“palsy”

Acts 9:32–35

At Lydda

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Peter’s command: “Arise, and make thy bed.”

At Lydda, Peter “found a certain man named Aeneas, which had kept his bed eight years, and was sick of the palsy.”

Peter said, “Aeneas, Jesus Christ maketh thee whole: arise, and make thy bed.”

“*And* he arose immediately.”

### HEALING OF THE CRIPPLED MAN—BY PAUL

“impotent in his feet”

Acts 14:8–10

At Lystra

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Paul’s command: “Stand upright on thy feet.”

“There sat a certain man at Lystra, impotent in his feet, being a cripple from his mother’s womb, who never had walked.”

“The same heard Paul speak. . . .”

“Paul . . . stedfastly beholding him, and perceiving that he had faith to be healed, Said with a loud voice, Stand upright on thy feet.”

“*And* he leaped and walked.”

### HEALING OF DAMSEL WITH SPIRIT OF DIVINATION—BY PAUL

“spirit of divination”

Acts 16:16–18

At Philippi

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Paul’s command: “I command thee [the spirit] in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.”

“As we [Paul, Silas, Luke] went to prayer, a certain damsel possessed with a spirit of divination met us, which brought her masters much gain by soothsaying.”

She “followed Paul and us, and cried. . . . These men are the servants of the most high God, which shew unto us the way of salvation. And this did she many days.”

“But Paul, being grieved, turned and said to the spirit, I command thee in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.”

“*And* he came out the same hour.”

### HEALING FROM VIPER’S BITE—BY PAUL

serpent bite

Acts 28:1–6

At Melita

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“When Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks, and laid them on the fire, there came a viper out of the heat, and fastened on his hand.”

“When the barbarians saw the venomous beast hang on his hand, they said among themselves, No doubt this man is a murderer, whom, though he hath escaped the sea, yet vengeance suffereth not to live.”

“And he shook off the beast into the fire. . . .”

“*and* felt no harm.”

“Howbeit they looked when he should have swollen, or fallen down dead suddenly: but after they had looked a great while, and saw no harm come to him, they changed their minds, and said that he was a god.”

## HEALING OF THE FATHER OF PUBLIUS—BY PAUL

fever and dysentery

Acts 28:7,8

At Melita

“The father of Publius [in whose home Paul lodged] lay sick of a fever and of a bloody flux. . . .”  
“Paul entered in, and prayed, and laid his hands on him. . . .”

“*and* healed him.”

## RAISINGS FROM THE DEAD BY THE APOSTLES

### THE RAISING OF DORCAS BY PETER

Acts 9:36–42

“There was at Joppa a certain disciple named . . . Dorcas . . . full of good works and almsdeeds. . . .

“And it came to pass . . . that she was sick, and died: whom when they had washed, they laid her in an upper chamber.”

They sent for Peter “desiring him that he would not delay to come to them.

“Then Peter arose and went with them . . . they brought him into the upper chamber: and all the widows stood by him weeping. . . .

“But Peter put them all forth, and kneeled down, and prayed; and turning him to the body said, Tabitha, arise.

“And she opened her eyes: and when she saw Peter, she sat up. And he gave her his hand, and lifted her up, and . . . presented her alive.”

### THE RAISING OF PAUL FROM STONING

Acts 14:19,20

“There came thither certain Jews from Antioch and Iconium, who persuaded the people, and, having stoned Paul, drew him out of the city, supposing he had been dead.

“Howbeit, as the disciples stood round about him, he rose up,

“and came into the city: and the next day he departed with Barnabas to Derbe.”

### THE RAISING OF EUTYCHUS BY PAUL

Acts 20:7–12

“Upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them . . . and continued his speech until midnight.

“And there were many lights in the upper chamber. . . .

“And there sat in a window a certain young man named Eutychus, being fallen into a deep sleep: and as Paul was long preaching, he sunk down with sleep, and fell down from the third loft, and was taken up dead.

“And Paul went down, and fell on him, and embracing him said, Trouble not yourselves; for his life is in him. . . .

“And they brought the young man alive, and were not a little comforted.”