

The Development and Spread of Christianity

See "Lesson Content" (below)

Memory Verse

*"The believers studied what the apostles taught. They shared life together.
They broke bread and ate together. And they prayed."*

--Acts 2:42

Message

Each congregation must work toward Health, Growth, and Completion.

Lesson Content

The Development of the Congregation in Jerusalem

(Taken from *God's Ways* Vol 2)

Apostle Peter's Pentecost sermon was so powerful that 3000 people decided to have themselves baptized (cf Acts 2:41). These were added to the approximately 120 faithful upon whom the Holy Spirit had previously been poured out (cf. Acts 1:15; 2:1-4) In connection with this a few exceptional features of congregational life at that time are emphasized. This account ends with the phrase, "And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved" (Acts 2:47). A little later, already about 5000 believing men belong to the congregation (cf. Act 4:4).

In Acts 6:7, it says further, "And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly..."

The congregation in Jerusalem consisted of Semitic-speaking Jews from Palestine, and Hellenists (i.e. one who used the Greek language but was not Greek and who had lived in Diaspora¹.)

The differences between the two groups were not only confined to language. Due to varied cultural backgrounds, their religious thinking and practice had also been formed differently. At times, this resulted in tension among the faithful. That is why the Hellenistic Jews, for example, complained that their widows had not been adequately considered at the distribution of food, clothing, and money.

Tackling these kinds of problems would have taken time away from the Apostles' main task of proclaiming the gospel. That is why they appointed seven Deacons to assist them. They were to lend a helping hand with commonplace matters in the congregation.

Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables."³ Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business;⁴ but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word." Acts 6:2-4.

One of these seven men was Stephen, a man "full of faith and power," who performed great wonders and miracles (cf Acts 6:8).

Stephen's critical words about the temple and the law evidently aroused the hatred of the Hellenistic Jews in Jerusalem. At first, they tried to refute him. Then they falsely accused him. Stephen was arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin (cf Acts 6:9-15).

Lesson Content - continued

There he made a speech in his own defense, which turned more and more into a harsh reprimand. This enraged his listeners. And when he still had the cheek to exclaim, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God,” they were so incensed that they drove him out of the city and stoned him. His last words were, “Lord, do not charge them with this sin.” (Acts 7: 56, 60)

Stephen’s murder was the signal to persecute the faithful in Jerusalem, and many fled the city. Since the refugees talked about their faith when they resettled, their flight led to the spreading of the gospel, also outside of Jerusalem. With it, what Jesus Christ had said to the Apostles began to fulfill itself, “...you shall be witnesses to Me^[a] in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” (cf Acts 1:8)

A Brief History of Rome and the Roman Empire

According to legend, Rome was founded in the year 753 BC, and ruled by kings. In 510 BC – a date, which also has not been verified historically – the kingdom was transformed into a republic which now was governed by two annually elected consuls, a Senate and popular assemblies.

The Romans waged numerous wars on their neighbors, until all of the central and southern Italy was under their control in 270 BC. During the centuries that followed, the Romans took possession of the entire Mediterranean coast, and all European countries west of the Rhine River and south of the Danube River. At the beginning of the second century BC, the Roman Empire reached its greatest expansion.

The continuing expansion of the empire made it necessary to construct a road system branching out in all directions. Already in 312 BC, construction of the first of the great Roman roads, the Via Appia (Appian Way), commenced. It ran southeast from Rome in a perfectly straight line.

In the year 44 BC, General Gaius Julius Caesar had himself proclaimed dictator. Following his assassination one month later and battles that lasted for years, Octavian, who had been honored with the title Augustus (i.e. the exalted, the venerable) since 27 BC, established the Roman Empire. During his reign from 30 BC to 14 AD the Roman Empire experienced a period of peace and prosperity called Pax Augusta and the Golden Age of Rome. At the borders of this great empire, though, there were constant clashes with neighboring peoples, also during this time.

Caesar Augustus had many public buildings, magnificent temples and numerous statues of gods erected (“I found a city made of brick, and turned it into a city made of marble”). The Romans expected the population of the conquered areas to worship their emperor as a deity, but otherwise brought no influence to bear on the various religions in the Provinces.

The Romans settled retired soldiers (i.e. veterans) in the conquered areas. These settlements were called colonies, and later received the right to self-government, whose seat became the quasi district capital of the area.

A Roman citizen enjoyed special privileges throughout the empire – above all, civil rights in the city of Rome. Without having been sentenced he could be neither bound nor scourged, could not be crucified, and, during legal proceedings, could appeal to the emperor, who then made the final decision. Apostle Paul, for example, had special legal protection because he had inherited the right to Roman citizenship from his father.

After Caesar Augustus, many other emperors followed. Under Diocletian (284-304 AD), stabilization of the political and military structures was achieved. The decline of the Roman Empire began during the 4th century, in the course of peoples’ migrations. In the year 395, the Roman Empire split into the Western and Eastern Roman Empires.



Talk About It

Read today's lesson together and help your child to understand the history behind the development and spread of Christianity. Share with your child how it is that you have your faith? Were you born into a family that was already actively following the Lord? If this is so, share what you know about your family history. Maybe your parents or grandparents started your family coming to church and following the teachings of the Lord Jesus. Maybe you found your faith as an adult. Share your life experiences with your child. Let him know what your faith means to you. How has your belief in God and His teachings helped you in your life?

Pray together and thank our Heavenly Father for helping you to find faith in your life. Pray that your child would also be able to find the value of faith and believing in Him as they grow. Talk about it.

