

FIRE WITHIN



SAINT PETER LIBERATED BY THE ANGEL

MEDITATIONS ON THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

FIRE WITHIN

MEDITATIONS ON THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

JAMES P. O'BRYAN, S.T.



MISSIONARY CENACLE APOSTOLATE - ORANGE, CALIFORNIA

NIHIL OBSTAT: Rev. Raymond Skonezny, S.S.L.
IMPRIMATUR: +William R. Johnson
Bishop of Orange in California

March 19, 1984

The Nihil Obstat and Imprimatur are official declarations that a book or pamphlet is free of a doctrinal or moral error. No implication is contained therein that those who have granted the Nihil and Imprimatur agree with the contents, opinions or statements expressed.

Scripture texts used in this work are taken from the NEW AMERICAN BIBLE. Copyright 1970 by the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, D.C. and are used with permission of said copyright owners.

COPYRIGHT 1983

Holy Spirit Missionary Cenacle Apostolate
P.O. Box 4522, Orange, Ca 92863-4522

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INRODUCTION TO ACTS (Acts 1/1-11)	1
2. THE FIRST NINE DAYS (Acts 1/12-26)	10
3. BAPTISM OF THE HOLY SPIRIT (Acts 1/27-2/41)	20
4. THE CHURCH IN CHILDHOOD (Acts 2/42-6/26)	30
5. CHRISTIAN CRISIS AND CONSOLATION (Acts 3/26-5/11)	40
6. THE SPIRIT FILLED CHURCH (Acts 5/12-6/7)	50
7. THE WITNESS OF STEPHEN (Acts 6/8-7/60)	59
8. THE WINDS OF PERSECUTION (Acts 8/1-40)	68
9. SAUL OF TARSUS (Acts 9/1-31)	78
10. CATHOLICITY OF THE CHURCH (Acts 9/32-11/18)	88
11. CHURCH TO THE NATIONS (Acts 11/19-12/25)	98
12. MISSION TO THE GENTILES (Acts 12/26-13/52)	107
13. THE DOOR OF FAITH (Acts 14/1-15/2)	116
14. COUNCIL AT JERUSALEM (Acts 15/3-41)	125
15. THE APOSTOLIC SPIRIT (Acts 16/1-17/15)	134
16. THE UNKNOWN GOD (Acts 17/16-34)	143
17. GOSPEL OWER (Acts 18/1-34)	152
18. THE WAY OF TRUTH (Acts 19/1-20/6)	161
19. FAREWELL TO THE CHURCH (Acts 20/7-21/14)	171
20. THE GOSPEL AND THE JEWS (Acts 21/15-23/22)	180
21. THE GOSPEL BEFORE THE WORLD (Acts 23/23-26/32)	190
22. NUNC DIMITTIS (Acts 27/1-28/31)	200
23. BIBLIOGRAPHY	207

FOREWORD

This present work, FIRE WITHIN, is part of a larger Catholic bible study, *Invitation to Christian Discipleship*, a seven year study which consists in lectures, summary of lectures and worksheets. FIRE WITHIN is the summaries and work sheets for the Acts Of The Apostles by Saint Luke. This seven year study has been designed for the Catholic laity that the “Word of Christ” rich as it is, dwell in them.

Thus they will be able to grasp fully, with all the holy ones, the breadth and length and heights and depth of Christ’s love, and experience this love which surpasses all knowledge, so that they may attain the fullness of God himself. (Eph. 3:18-19)

The general motivating force behind this study is the preservation and growth of the Christian Faith as understood and transmitted by the Catholic Church through the centuries. It has four immediate goals:

1. To ensure a true spirit of repentance;
2. To foster a deeper commitment in faith to the Lord Jesus Christ;
3. To create a greater awareness of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer; and
4. To encourage a more vibrant participation in the life and mission of the Church.

Invitation To Christian Discipleship has been accredited by the Catechitical Institute of the Diocese of Orange, California. It is now available to all parishes and at-home study groups. It is designed for a lay person to present.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

Saint Luke, the author of the Third Gospel account, likewise wrote the Acts of the Apostles. He intended the two works to be read in conjunction with one another. Luke, as the first Christian historian, presents the Founder and the Foundation of the Christian Church in his two-fold work. He demonstrates how the Church flows from the life and work of Jesus Christ, and he reveals how the Church is the continuation of God's plan for the salvation of mankind.

By the time of St. Irenaeus (180 A.D.) tradition identified the author of Acts as Luke, a Syrian from Antioch, a gentile convert, a doctor by profession and companion of Paul. He remained unmarried and died at the age of eighty-four at Boeotia in Greece. Irenaeus, in his work "Against Heresies" attributes the Third Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles to the authorship of Luke. The Anti-Marcionite prologue to the Third Gospel, written around 160 A.D., and the Muratorian Canon, composed between 170-190 A.D., both attribute the Gospel and Acts to Luke.

The archaeological findings of the present century confirm that the author of the Acts possessed reliable information about life in the First Century. The evidence argues that the author possessed knowledge acquired through personal experience. The author was familiar with the area in which Paul traveled. Beginning in chapter sixteen of Acts, he implies he is a participator and co-worker with Paul. Here he begins to write "we." He implies, at this point, he became an eyewitness of the things recorded.

Since scholars generally agree that Acts was written shortly after the composition of the Third Gospel, the date for the writing of Acts has been determined largely by what date would be acceptable for the

composition of the Third Gospel. Some modern scholars still favor the early sixties for its composition. They even see it as a brief, drawn up by Luke, to defend the imprisoned Paul and Christianity itself before Rome. Critical consensus places the date for the composition of Acts between 70-85 A.D.

In a general sense Acts divides itself around the activities of the two most prominent members of the early Church – Peter and Paul. From the very beginning of his account Luke demonstrates Peter is the head of the Church – the acknowledged leader and chief spokesman for it. Indeed, he presents Paul as the hero but not at the expense of Peter who clearly stands out, in Luke’s writings, as the Rock on whom the whole Church was founded. The first half of Acts paints a picture prior to Paul’s electric and dramatic impact upon it. The Third Gospel closes with a picture of the disciples spending all their time in the Temple at Jerusalem “constantly, speaking the praises of God.” (Lk. 24:53) Acts ends in Rome. Paul was the bridge builder spanning the Church across ethnic, cultural and provincial differences. He brings the salvation that came from the Jews to the Gentiles. After suffering many trials and hardships the cross is planted at the heart of the Roman Empire. The Gospel is on the move and nothing can stop it.

Luke does not intend Acts to be read independently of his Gospel account. These two works impart the teachings he desired to convey to his readers. Luke writes at a transitional time in the Church. From where Luke stands he can still see those distant beginnings of the Christian Church – a time unique and gone. Luke seeks to bridge this historic primitive Christian Community with the Church of his present day, and by so doing he builds a bridge between that primitive Church and the Christian Churches of the future. In some distant tomorrow the Church can return and contemplate, in the Gospel and Acts, its roots, its foundation, its true character and thereby gauge the genuineness and faithfulness of its own Christian spirit.

PAROUSIA AND THE PRIMITIVE CHURCH

The Church of the apostolic times expected the end of the world to be imminent. Jesus would soon return in glory as the Judge of this world. The Church felt an urgent need to spread the "good news" as rapidly and as far as possible. It preached an oral gospel for as yet, nothing had been written. Christian Communities lived in a state of expectancy for the Second Coming of Jesus which would herald the end of the world. Needless to say, this spiritual awareness and psychological condition of an imminent Second Coming colored and controlled the apostolic activities and life of the primitive Christian Community. They stimulated a unique community that the Church, as a whole, would not see again. Luke does not present the early Church as an example and ideal for the later Church. He merely records the unique characteristics of this community that already differed decidedly from the Church of his day. Luke paints a picture in Acts of a progressively changing Church.

By the time Luke writes, the Church realized the Second Coming would be indefinitely postponed. The Church, faced with the possibility of a long life on this earth, would be forced to re-think its position towards the world, its methods of preaching and teaching, and its organizational set-up. Indeed, many things only developed in the Church with the realization that long life on earth was a distinct possibility. Christian attention would switch from the Second Coming of Jesus to the fact of a personal, future Judgment and a final resurrection of the Just – with no fixed date for either. Luke was to aid this with his written works.

THE DIVINE PLAN OF SALVATION

Luke recognized a divine plan of salvation being unfolded in the world. This Divine Plan served as the background and blueprint for the composition of both his works. It has been suggested Luke viewed salvation history to be in three distinct but successful stages.

The first stage was the foundation of Israel as God's People. It was the initial and preparatory stage for salvation with the Prophets and the Law occupying the central role. This first period ended with the ministry and death of John the Baptist. The preaching of John echoed

the religious theme of the first stage in salvation history: return to God through repentance – the necessary condition for salvation. This theme will run through all three stages creating a moral continuity between them.

The ministry of Jesus of Nazareth was the second stage and central period of salvation. It was the time of salvation – a timeless salvation accomplished in a historical moment of time. The effects of this salvation flowed back through the ages reaching to Adam. Likewise, it would cover men and women in all ages to come. The third stage, and last period in the history of salvation, would be the time of the church. The Church would serve as the means by which salvation, achieved through the death and resurrection of Jesus, would be carried and applied to all peoples.

Even though each of the three stages are unique, there is a continuity between them. Each served as the foundation of the other. The three together form the Divine Plan of salvation. Luke demonstrates Jesus' continuity with the previous period by having Jesus baptized by John, and initially, continuing the ministry of John. The time of Jesus was unique and distinct from the time of the Church. But the Church must know and understand the time of Jesus in order to know its own nature and purpose and find its direction. Each new age of the Church must return to its roots – its Founder – to adequately and accurately interpret its mission to its own age. Christ is for all ages and so can His Church be for all ages.

The historical life of Jesus achieves the salvation of the world. Salvation becomes a historical fact. The historical life of Jesus has also a future significance. From it flows the establishment of the Church, and His historical life serves as the pattern and way of Christian discipleship. The grace-filled words and deeds of Jesus, remaining with the Church, continue to influence the present. They have a sacramental quality to produce grace in the lives of people and they serve forever as a light directing the light of the Church.

Although the earthly life of Jesus comes to an end, Jesus does not abandon His disciples. Luke apparently seeks to tie together the return of Satan and Jesus' institution of the Holy Eucharist at the Last Supper.

In a special way the Eucharist appears to be instituted for the period of conflict now beginning for the disciples and the Church. The Sacrament of the Eucharist replaces the Presence of the historical Jesus. In this sacrament a disciple finds the strength and protection of the Risen Savior. It is forever the sacrament of Faith and instituted to insure perseverance in the Faith.

TIME OF THE CHURCH

An interval of time occurs between the Ascension of Jesus and the Coming of the Holy Spirit. This time interval separates the central period of the Divine Plan from the final stage – the age of the Church. The Coming of the Holy Spirit inaugurates this final epoch in salvation history. Luke directs the attention of the Church away from Parousia to the Presence of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit has been given in lieu of an immediate return of the Lord Jesus. The Holy Spirit's coming fulfills the promises of the Old Testament prophets and establishes the continuity of this third stage, the Church, with the first stage, Israel.

The city of Jerusalem is the geological focal point of the Divine Plan. The city symbolizes the continuity of three stages: here is the Temple of Yahweh the earthly point of God's encounter with men; here Jesus dies on the Cross and achieves salvation; here the Holy Spirit is poured out upon the disciples of Jesus and the Church is born.

The third stage is a missionary one. The Christian Community is a mission Church. It is sent into the world to bring the saving news of Jesus Christ – to announce the Good News in order that all men can be saved. The Church will be able to do this through the abiding Presence of the Holy Spirit. All the Church truly accomplishes in the Name of God and His Christ will be done in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The nature and mission of the Church gradually unfolds. The initial phase of the Church is unique. It possessed the authentic witnesses of Christian revelation – the Twelve Apostles. From their presence flowed a unity and peace that would noticeably be absent after their deaths. It does not begin with the awareness that it must break away from the Law and Temple worship and the city of Jerusalem itself. A

conscious awareness of the Church's universal commission for the salvation of the world comes gradually. Time and changing circumstances and the interpretation of these events in the light of the Holy Spirit would bring to the Church the awareness of its true nature and mission. This is the story told in Acts.

BETWEEN RESURRECTION AND ASCENSION

Luke begins the Acts of the Apostles by immediately stressing the continuity between his Gospel account and his present work. By so doing he establishes the relationship between Jesus and the Church. "In my first account, Theophilus, I dealt with all that Jesus did and taught until the day he was taken up to heaven, having first instructed the apostles he has chosen through the Holy Spirit." (Acts 1:1-2.) Luke implies the words and deeds of Jesus, retold in the Gospel, begin the story now to unfold. To the Holy Spirit, who will dominate this work, Luke attributes the selection of the first members of the Church. This Holy Spirit, who operated in the life of Jesus, from the moment of His baptism in a most unique way, will soon operate within the Church in a comparable fashion.

Luke stresses the importance of the previous formation given to those who will receive the Holy Spirit. The Gospel relates to us the effort Jesus took in the formation of His disciples. Luke now relates that the Risen Jesus continued this formation and education between the Resurrection and the Ascension. Obviously, it is not enough to merely believe in Jesus Christ. A Christian must be grounded in Christian truths. In other words, a disciple of Jesus must be carefully taught these Christian truths so that they may accurately understand them and clearly instruct others about them. Luke emphasizes the care and time Jesus spent accomplishing this task. The period between the Resurrection and the Ascension is a time when the disciples, under the divine guidance of the Risen Lord, received clarification of many things that still troubled them. The disciples needed to be instructed in a fuller way of concerning the coming of the Kingdom of God in light of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Fullness of understanding did not come immediately. Luke relates, "While they were with him they asked, 'Lord, are you going to restore the rule to Israel now?' His answer was: 'The exact time it is not yours

to know. The Father has reserved that to Himself.” (Acts 1:6-7.) Mark states the same truth even more forcibly: “As to the exact day or hour, no one knows it, neither the angels in heaven nor even the Son, but only the Father.” (Mk. 13:32.) This teaches us that the time of the end of the world, or the Second Coming that heralds it, is not part of the revelation given to the Church nor will it be! Jesus implies this when He teaches it has not been given to the Son to know this. In other words, it is not part of the Word’s revelation to the world. In the light of this, what are we to think of these prophets and prophecies proclaiming the end of the world? Any teaching that truly contradicts the Scriptures cannot be of the Holy Spirit. It is not the mission of the Christian Community to proclaim the time of the Second Coming but to proclaim the Gospel and work for the salvation of all men.

THE ASCENSION

With the instruction of the disciples complete, Luke writes: “No sooner had he said this than he was lifted up before their eyes in a cloud which took him from their sight.” The earthly life of Jesus ends with Ascension and the Church begins with the Ascension. The ending of the earthly life of Jesus is the Church. Luke’s account of the Ascension teaches that the historical, earthly life of Jesus has been completed and now He goes “to sit at the right hand of God.” This proclaims that Jesus Christ, elevated in His humanity, is over all the angels and saints and now takes up a place of honor. He now participates in the honor, in the glory, in the ruling and judging power of God. There He shall remain until the work of the Church has been completed, and then, He shall return to the earth in glory. The Ascension means the final elevation of Christ’s nature into the condition of divine glory. This was symbolized by Jesus being assumed into the “cloud” – a biblical reference to the Shekinah – the glory of God’s presence.

Christ’s Ascension is the example and pledge of the disciples’ own Ascension into Heaven. As Saint Paul writes: “Both with and in Christ Jesus he raised us up and gave us a place in the heavens, that in the ages to come he might display the great wealth of his favor, manifested by his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.” (Eph. 2:6-7.)

INTRODUCTION

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND QUESTIONS SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK (PLEASE MEMORIZE)

“HE IS ALWAYS ABLE TO SAVE THOSE WHO APPROACH GOD THROUGH HIM, SINCE HE FOREVER LIVES TO MAKE INTERCESSION FOR THEM.” (Heb. 7:25.)

FIRST DAY: Read the Introduction to the Summary.

1. What does Luke seek to present to us in the writings of the Third Gospel and the Acts?
2. How does Acts present Peter and Paul to us?
3. How does Luke’s work aid the Church of today?
4. What was the great work Paul was to do in the Church?

SECOND DAY: Read from the summary through the Divine Plan Salvation.

1. What effect do you think a belief in an imminent return of Christ would have on the Christian Community?
2. What are the three stages of the Divine Plan?
3. What do you discover to be a continuity between the three stages?
4. What is the importance of the second stage in the Divine Plan?

THIRD DAY: Read the remainder of the Summary.

1. What would you say is the importance of the historical Jesus to the Church of today?
2. How is the third stage of salvation brought into existence?

3. Why would this be called the missionary stage?
4. What do you see to be the work of the Church?

FOURTH DAY: Read Acts 1:1-5 and Luke 24:13-49.

1. Before the Ascension how does Jesus spend His time?
2. What does this teach you concerning preparation for reception of the Holy Spirit?
3. Why is merely believing not enough?
4. What is the difference between John's baptism and of the Spirit?

FIFTH DAY: Read Acts 1:6-8, Mark 13:32-37 and I Thes. 5:1-11.

1. What do you believe about the Second Coming of Jesus?
2. What do the Scriptures tell us about the time of the Second Coming?
3. What are we to think about today's prophecies of the end of the world?
4. How do the Scriptures teach us to prepare for the Second Coming?

SIXTH DAY: Read Acts 1:9-11, Lk. 24:50-53, Ephesians 4:7-16.

1. What does the Ascension teach us about Jesus?
2. What is the symbolism of "a cloud" in Acts 1:9?
3. What do you think Paul teaches us in Ephesians 4:8?
4. How can a Christian prepare for his or her own ascension?

CHAPTER 2

THE FIRST NINE DAYS

INTRODUCTION

The Risen Lord had ascended into Heaven. The Disciples of Jesus are on their own. For three years Jesus had been with them. He called them into an intimate personal relationship with Himself. This relationship must be maintained even at the cost of family and friends – even to the point of death if necessary. Jesus of Nazareth personally taught and trained His disciples. He sought to impart His own spirit to them. He emphasized the necessity of unity among themselves – a unity founded upon mutual love for one another. He left them an example of self-sacrificing love – a love that lays down its life for the brethren.

The death of Jesus had been a shattering blow to the community of disciples. The blow had been deadly. The Shepherd had been struck down and the sheep scattered. Jesus risen from the dead had resurrected the dead hopes of His disciples. His appearance to over five hundred disciples in Galilee had restored the community to life. Faith in the Risen Jesus as Lord and Savior was the power reuniting the disciples of Jesus.

As His departure from this world grew near, Jesus commissioned His followers to go and make disciples of others. They must preach forgiveness of sins and salvation in the Name of Jesus of Nazareth. Those who believed and were baptized would be saved. Jesus cautioned the disciples to wait before embarking upon their commission. His work upon them was not yet completed. He told them not to leave Jerusalem: *“Wait, rather, for the fulfillment of my Father’s promise, of which you have heard me speak. John baptized with water, but within a few days, you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 1:4-5)*

The disciples of Jesus waited in joyful expectation at Jerusalem. The Lord Jesus had painstakingly fashioned the body and now the body must patiently await the reception of its soul in order to become a living body.

SPIRIT OF GOD

“Ruah” is the Hebrew word for spirit. It is the same word for “wind” or “breath.” The Jews believed the breath of God to be the spirit of life. God breathed forth His spirit and life on earth came to be. To the mighty “ruah” of God, the Book of Genesis attributes life on earth. Genesis describes the creation of man thus: *“The Lord God formed man out of the clay of the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and so man became a living being.”* (Gen. 2-7.)

That man shared only temporarily in God’s life was not due to God’s will, but man’s sin. Sin destroyed man’s capacity for eternal life. We read in Genesis: *“The Lord said: ‘My spirit shall not remain in man forever, since he is but flesh. His days shall comprise one hundred and twenty years.’”* (Gen. 6:3.)

At times, in the history of the Jews, the “ruah” of God was poured out upon certain individuals in a unique and extraordinary way. The “ruah” of God enables men to perform extraordinary deeds. The New Testament teaches that the Holy Spirit of God descended upon Jesus at His baptism and abided with Him. The Scriptures imply a permanent indwelling of the Holy Spirit in Jesus of Nazareth. What God had decreed in Genesis had now been rescinded. The sinless humanity of Jesus became the permanent receptor of the Holy Spirit and, thereby, of eternal life.

The actions of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament and Jesus’ teachings about the Holy Spirit began to reveal the nature of the Holy Spirit and, subsequently, the Nature of God: The Holy Spirit is distinct from the Father. The Father and Holy Spirit are distinct from the Son. The Nature of the Father, the Holy Spirit and the Son is divine. God is One. The Divine Nature is One. In this One Divine Nature subsists Three Divine Persons. The One God is the Holy Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit Himself revealed the fullness of this divine mystery within the Church. This mysterious truth is so brilliant it would forever leave human intelligence in darkness. As the human eye cannot contain the light of the sun, so the human mind cannot contain an understanding of God’s Nature. Some things are meant to be accepted, not understood!

THE CHURCH

The Scriptures tell us that the disciples of Jesus, filled with joyful expectation, spent the next nine days in prayer: *"They were to be found in the temple constantly, speaking the praises of God." (Lk. 24:53.) "Together they devoted themselves to constant prayer." (Acts 1:14.)* In prayerful joy, they await the birth of the Church.

The word "Church" comes from the Greek "kyriakon" meaning the Lord's (house)." In the Acts, the Greek word translated as Church is "ekklesia." It appears twenty-three times. Originally, "ekklesia" signified the assembly of citizens meeting for legislative or deliberative purposes. Only citizens enjoying full citizenship could participate in the "ekklesia." The title "ekklesia" signified the dignity and legality of the assembly. "Ekklesia" was adopted into the religious vocabulary when the authors of the Greek Septuagint Bible translated the Hebrew word "kahal" into Greek. "Kahal" combined with the word "edah" signified the Assembly of Yahweh or the Assembly of God's People.

In the New Testament "ekklesia" or "church" was first applied to the Disciples of Jesus in Jerusalem. "Church" implies, therefore, the Assembly of those who believed Jesus of Nazareth to be the Messiah – the Christ. Of course, the Church at Jerusalem was completely Jewish. In so far as Jesus was truly the Messiah of God, this Assembly was the legitimate, the lawful, the true Assembly of Yahweh.

A JEWISH COMMUNITY

A wine must taste of its own grape. The soil, in which the Vine grows, governs the quality of the grape. The Vine of the Church took root in Jewish soil. The more we understand the Jewish background at the time of the Church's birth, the better we'll understand the primitive Church. That Assembly of believers did not see itself as anything other than Jewish.

The form this early community assumed had a striking similarity with the Jewish sect of Essenes found at Qumran. The Essenes of Qumran considered themselves to be a New Covenant people, the remnant of a faithful Israel. They lived a holy life in preparation for the coming of the Messiah. The

Essenes believed themselves to be living in the last days and they, too, expected an imminent intervention of God's power upon the earth. By 63 A.D. they began to realize that the end times were being prolonged because of the mysterious plan of God.

In order to enter into this New Covenant, members had to undergo a ritual cleansing similar to the baptismal practices by John the Baptist. Their general government was carried out through two bodies: The General Assembly, composed of all mature members, and the Supreme Council. The General Assembly was apparently the governing body of the Community. It convened once a year on the feast of Pentecost to renew the Covenant and receive new members. The Supreme Council was part of the General Assembly, but a higher and more permanent body. It consisted of twelve men who represented the Twelve Tribes of Israel and three priests. Smaller groups of community members were under the supervision of a priest learned in their "Book of Meditations" and a supervisor learned in the Law. The priest took care of the liturgy; the task of the supervisor was to instruct the congregation, act as a good shepherd toward the community and supervise new members. The documents of Qumran speak of a "supervisor of the many" who had important duties at the assemblies and supervised the communities' goods. It also mentions a person who presided at the head of the many and examined candidates.

There are some striking similarities between the community at Qumran and the early disciples of Christ. They both considered themselves to be people of the New Covenant. Members entered the community through a baptismal ritual, accompanied by repentance. The Church had a general assembly spoken of as the "multitude" of disciples (*Acts 6:2, 5; 15:12*). It was governed by a body of Twelve, called Apostles. There is a close parallel between the "supervisors" in the Qumran Community and the bishops of the early Christian Communities. The word for bishop – "episkopos" – means an "overseer" or a "supervisor." The work of the Christian bishops was similar to the supervisors of the Essenes – chiefly to be good shepherds of the flock and custodians of community property.

It would not be surprising if the early Church modeled itself upon, and adopted certain practices of the Qumran community. In the Providence of God, they may have served as a good example for the early Christian Community. The Christian Church was born within a Jewish environment

and spirituality. Here were its roots and the Christian wine – the Christian spirit – would of necessity have a strong flavor of Jewish spirituality.

THE APOSTLES

Luke begins by identifying the members of the Community of believers as “men of Galilee” – not as “Men of Jerusalem.” Immediately, he highlights the witness value of this first Community. Jesus began His ministry in Galilee. These are the people with Jesus from the very beginning of His ministry. They witnessed the whole story – all of them. Their witness was not to be of those who had heard this and seen that, but those with Jesus from the beginning to the end. They were “the original eyewitnesses and ministers of the word.”

Luke now lists the important members of this Community and probably in the order of importance in the mind of the Community: “*Peter and John and James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James, son of Alphaeus; Simon, the Zealot party member, and Judas, son of James.*” Eleven are named.

The Greek word “apostolos” means “to send.” In secular Greek, it was a term used in reference to an army, or fleet, or an expedition, or colonists being sent to settle. Understandably, many scholars have turned to the Hebrew to seek a more proper interpretation of this word. The Septuagint Bible does translate the Hebrew “saluah” as “apostolos.” The root of “saluah” does mean “send.” It is used in I Kings 14:6 in regards to Ahijah as one sent by God with a message. The origin of the concept “apostle” is believed to be connected with a Jewish institution called the “sheluhim.” “Sheluhim” means a “commissioned emissary.” The Palestinian authorities established a legal institution of the “sheluhim.” These were rabbis, often ordained by Jewish authority with a laying on of hands, who were commissioned and sent by the Jewish authorities to represent them. They had full authority to act in their name. Moses, Elijah and Ezekiel were thought of as the “sheluhim” of God, especially when they performed miraculous deeds. We know Jesus said to the Twelve: “*As the Father has sent me, so do I send you.*” (Jn. 20:21.) Jesus is the “Sheluhim” of the Father. The Twelve are the “sheluhim” or apostles of Jesus. The Twelve Apostles are His commissioned emissaries empowered to act in His Name. The custom of a religious authority sending out apostles in his name was in keeping with Jewish tradition in the time of Jesus.

THE SCRIPTURES

Jewish life based and governed itself by the Scriptures. Rabbis believed it covered each aspect of human life. The Scriptures had a most powerful influence over the lives of the early members of the Church. It had been important for Jesus to demonstrate how His life and death fulfilled the Scriptures. When the disciples preached to their fellow Jews, it was necessary for them to be able to show how Jesus fulfilled the Scriptures. This alone would impress the Jews. What appeared in Scripture was unquestionable. The fact that they could find a reference in Scripture, to explain a mysterious occurrence, was a sufficient explanation for the occurrence. God willed it.

It is natural that the original disciples sought an explanation for the scandal of Judas in the Scriptures. Peter stands up in the center of the brothers. "Brothers" is the first name given to members of the Church. The title symbolizes the love and unity to exist within the Community. The assembly consisted of about 120 members. This number is not accidental. Jewish law stated that in order for a community to have its own governing body – a sanhedrin – it must consist of no less than 120 members, and of which ten percent could be elected to the local sanhedrin. The Twelve Apostles would comprise the ten percent of this communities sanhedrin - its governing body. In the Jewish eyes, this would now give the body the legal authority to act and render legal its decisions.

Peter appears as leader of the Community and in this authoritative capacity speaks: *"Brothers, the saying in Scripture uttered long ago by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of David was destined to be fulfilled in Judas..."* This Judas incident affords a good example of how the early Church applied the Scriptures. Peter implies that in the Psalms, written by David, lies the answer. Psalm 41 implies that one of the sufferings of the Just One is to be betrayed by a friend. Peter's discourse suggested Judas personified all those who betray God. Peter calls our attention to Psalm 69 that describes the sufferings of the Messiah and the curse upon those who have caused these sufferings. Peter turns our attention to Psalm 109:7-8, *"When he is judged, let him go forth condemned, and may his plea be in vain. May his days be few; may another take his office."* The word for "office" in this context is "episkopos."

ELECTION OF MATTHIAS

The Scripture quotation, "*may another take his office,*" affords the scriptural authority for Peter to proceed with choosing a man to replace Judas as the twelfth Apostle. The fact that only two men are nominated for the office stresses the importance the early Church attached to the historical facts of their faith. These twelve men, unitedly, provided a collective witness to the historical Jesus and His Resurrection. Within their witness and testimony, lay the entire deposit of Christian Faith. Later the Church declared the close of Christian public revelation with the death of the Apostles.

The unique witness of the Twelve rested upon their being present with Jesus from the beginning – they "began" with Jesus. They knew the whole story – each and every one knew the same story. This guarded the Church against the anarchy of private revelations and against the ungovernable charismas of certain individuals. In other words, no matter how apparently holy future prophets appeared to be – no matter the works they performed – they could not contradict or set aside the revelation given to the Church through the Apostles.

The Christian Community narrowed its choice to Joseph and Matthias. After this, they resorted to the casting of lots leaving the Lord to make the final choice. Casting of lots consisted in writing the names of the contestants on a stone, placing the stones in a bowl and shaking the bowl until one stone was ejected. The man's name on that stone was elected. That man was Matthias and he was added to the Twelve. His name does not appear again, but we know he inherited a glorious ministry and his future glory is yet to be beheld. As for the man he succeeded, Scripture says: "*It were better for him had he never been born.*" (Mk. 14:21.)

WORK UNFINISHED

The believers in Jerusalem had come a long way, and yet, they have but begun. Apostles and Disciples of Jesus are not made overnight. Initial religious experience must be nurtured in prayer and in exposure to the teachings and example of Jesus Christ. The mind must be enlightened in the mysteries of religion. The mystery of sin and suffering must be faced. Self must learn to die in order to live. The spirit must be tempered with humility. The humbled soul must be uplifted by hope in God's mercy and kindness. The disciples must come to know the importance of the

Community. Outside the body of believers – beyond the Assembly – he can hope for nothing, for one is outside of Christ Jesus. These are the foundations, the bricks and mortar that build the Apostles and Disciples of Jesus.

The Jerusalem Community is now ready – their souls and wills are prepared to go the whole way for Jesus. But like stacks of dry kindling, they must await a spark of fire in order to burn. As yet, they were not caught up in a flame of Divine Love. This must be a gift from on high. The Church prayed – a novena of days it prayed – constantly it prayed. In a spirit of joyful expectation and hope it prayed. It longed for the fulfillment of the Lord's words to Isaiah: *"I will pour out water upon the thirsty ground, and streams upon the dry land; I will pour out my spirit upon your offspring and my blessings upon your descendants."* (Is. 44:3.) In the words of the psalm, the Church found expression for its hearts desire: *"As the hind longs for the running waters, so my soul longs for you, O God. Athirst is my soul for God, the living God."* (Ps. 42:2-3.) The Prayer of the Church enkindled a Pentecostal Fire!

FIRST NINE DAYS

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND QUESTIONS SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK (PLEASE MEMORIZE)

“AS THE HIND LONGS FOR THE RUNNING WATERS, SO MY SOUL LONGS FOR YOU O GOD. ATHIRST IS MY SOUL FOR GOD, THE LIVING GOD.” (Ps. 42:2-3)

FIRST DAY: Read Joel 3:1-2; Ezekiel 11:14-21 and John 1:29-34.

1. What does the Old Testament teach us about the gift of life?
2. How does the Holy Spirit appear in the Old Testament?
3. To what does the Old Testament attribute man’s death?
4. What does John 1:29-34 tell us about the Holy Spirit’s relationship with Jesus of Nazareth?

SECOND DAY: Read John 14:15-18, 25-26; 15:26-27; 16:7-15.

1. Why does Jesus promise to send the Holy Spirit upon His disciples?
2. What are some of the works to be accomplished by the Holy Spirit?
3. Can you find evidence for the doctrine of the Holy Trinity in these readings?
4. Compose a short personal prayer to the Holy Spirit to be prayed the rest of this week.

THIRD DAY: Read The Church and a Jewish Community.

1. What is the meaning for Church that comes to us from the Greek word “ekklesia” and the Hebrew word “kahal”?
2. What would be a definition for the early Christian Church?
3. What characteristics of the early Church reveal its Jewish origin?

4. What were some of the characteristics common to the early Christian Community and the Jewish Community at Qumran?

FOURTH DAY: Read Acts 1:12-14; Luke 6:12-16; Matthew 10:1-15.

1. How would you define the concept of "Apostle"?
2. What was the "sheluhim" and how is it like the apostolic institution?
3. Why can it be said that Jesus was the "sheluhim" of God the Father?
4. How did Jesus go about forming the body of His Church?

FIFTH DAY: Read Acts 1:15-20; Matthew 27:3-10.

1. How did the Jews and the early Church look upon the Scriptures?
2. How does the early Church use the Scriptures to explain the case of Judas Iscariot?
3. What do you see to be the underlying theme of these two different accounts?
4. What warning does the life of Judas have for members in the Christian Community?

SIXTH DAY: Read Acts 1:21-26.

1. How does Peter appear here as the leader of the Christian Community?
2. What do we learn here about the role of an Apostle in the Church?
3. What do you see to be the relationship between Christian Truths and the role of the Apostles?
4. What truly prepares a disciple to fruitfully and worthily receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit?

CHAPTER 3

BAPTISM OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

INTRODUCTION

Saint Luke etched a vivid portrait of the Disciples of Jesus in his Gospel account. The disciples formed a closed, introverted, prayerful Community of people who looked not outwardly towards other human beings, but heavenward, as they awaited the return of the glorified Jesus who would usher in the Kingdom of God in which the disciples would triumphantly share.

Something happened within the Community revolutionizing it, transforming its character. What had previously been as closed as an acorn within its shell now broke forth within the world as a dynamic force of great energy producing powerful effects on the human environment. A godly thing took place within the disciples and Luke reveals the Divine Cause. He explains this to us in his Pentecostal account. He paints a dramatic and visual picture of sight and sound depicting and symbolizing the internal transformation occurring in the Christian Community through the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Within the Old Testament, he finds sufficient background and images for his presentation of the Community being baptized in the Holy Spirit.

COMING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN JOHN'S GOSPEL

The Gospel of John presents the bestowal of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples in a marvelous but less dramatic manner. He presents the Risen and Ascended Jesus appearing to ten, fearful Apostles in an enclosed and locked Cenacle. To these Apostles Jesus says, *"Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, so I send you."* (Jn. 20:21) John tells us that Jesus then *"breathed on them."* This is an act of creation – of re-creation – of creating life within them. John emphasizes it is a New Genesis. It is the first day of the week – the first day of a New Creation.

The Apostles receive the Holy Spirit in a special manner. They receive power to impart the Holy Spirit to other men and thereby free them from sin and reconcile them to God. The words of Jesus imply it is not a power to be imparted to all men. Jesus taught that the world cannot receive the Holy Spirit. Jesus empowered the Apostles to impart the Holy Spirit to those who believe in Him and desire to love Him and keep His commandments. John's Gospel account appears to emphasize the sanctification of the soul through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

COMING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT AT PENTECOST

Luke's account in Acts highlights the witnessing power of the Holy Spirit in the Apostles and disciples. These two accounts really complement one another for the Holy Spirit is both the Sanctifier and the Generator of power to be a witness to the Risen Jesus. Luke sets the stage for the action of the Holy Spirit with these words of Jesus, "*You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes down on you; then you are to be my witnesses...*" (Acts 1:8) This same "power" mentioned in Acts is attributed to Jesus in the Gospel of Mark 5:30, "*power went forth from Him.*" It can be expected that the disciples will perform actions similar to those worked by Jesus Himself.

The setting for the coming of the Holy Spirit is the Jewish feast of Pentecost. The word Pentecost means "the 50th Day." It is likewise referred to as "the feast of weeks." At this feast, the cereal offering, in the form of two loaves, was made to the Lord. The date of the feast was reckoned by counting seven weeks from the beginning of the grain harvest. It was a day of Sabbath observance. When the Jewish feast of Passover received the fixed date of the 14th of Nisan – the middle of April – the feast of Pentecost received a regular date on the Jewish calendar – 50 days after Passover, falling in the beginning of June.

Among the Jews, the feast of Pentecost had also come to be a feast to celebrate the establishment of their Covenant with Yahweh – the day God gave the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai. It is highly possible that on this day the Jews renewed their Covenant with God. The picture of Moses ascending to God on Mt. Sinai and returning with the Law of the Covenant, certainly reflects the idea of Jesus ascending into heaven and returning on Pentecost with the Holy Spirit – the Spirit of the New Covenant.

Luke introduces the Pentecostal scene by using a Greek expression roughly translated as "when the days were fulfilled." It is a Lucan formula to announce a major stage in sacred history. It recalls to the readers' mind the beginning of the Gospel account. Once again, Luke calls to the mind of the Church that the Mother of Jesus symbolizes, in her own life, the life of the Church. In the Gospel account, Mary is about to give birth to Jesus, formed by the Holy Spirit, within her body. Now the Spirit of Jesus is about to be born within the Church through the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the Church.

Jesus previously spoke of the Coming of the Holy Spirit as a baptism in the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the effects of the Holy Spirit upon the Church at Pentecost will be similar to the effects of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus at His baptism in the Jordan by John.

Luke describes the Coming of the Holy Spirit thusly, *"Suddenly from up in the sky there came a noise like a strong, driving wind which was heard all through the house where they were seated. Tongues as of fire appeared which parted and came to rest on each of them. All were filled with the Holy Spirit. They began to express themselves in foreign tongues and make bold proclamation as the Spirit prompted them."* (Acts 2:2-4) As the psalmist proclaimed, *"When you send forth your spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth."* (Ps. 104:30)

The picture presented by Luke not only echoes the Old Testament, but later, Jewish tradition. Certain rabbinical traditions associated the reception of the Law on Sinai with fire, wind and tongues. A tradition maintained that angels had proclaimed from Mt. Sinai the Law to all nations in their own tongues. The divine manifestations on Pentecost do recall the divine manifestations in the Old Testament. The report of a strong, driving wind recalls the morning of creation when a "mighty wind swept over the waters." Luke, likewise, insinuates that a New Genesis has begun. The whole scene of the Apostles enclosed in the Cenacle, the wind, the shaking of the house, the fire, recalls the divine manifestation of Elijah (*I Kings 19:9-18*). We read there that the Lord sent Elijah from his hiding place back into the world, assuring him there were still 7000 faithful men in Israel.

Fire symbolized the Divine Presence in the Old Testament in the burning bush before Moses and we read, *"Mount Sinai was all wrapped up in smoke, for the Lord came down upon it in fire."* (Ex. 19:18) The Holy Spirit

descending as fire upon the disciples not only symbolized the Divine Presence, but the purifying effects of the Holy Spirit in their souls.

Luke notes the Holy Spirit "*rested upon each of them,*" thereby fulfilling the prophecy the Holy Spirit made through the prophet Joel, "*Then afterward I will pour out my spirit upon all mankind. Your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions; even upon the servants and the handmaids, in those days, I will pour out my spirit.* (3:1-2)

GIFT OF TONGUES

Acts relates that the Holy Spirit inflamed the hearts of the disciples and loosened their tongues in order to give expression to the faith and love now flooding their minds and hearts. Luke recorded, "*All were filled with the Holy Spirit. They began to express themselves in foreign tongues and make bold proclamation as the Spirit prompted them.*" (Acts 2:4) Some scholars believe that Luke based his Pentecostal presentation on an existing tradition within the early Church, that connected the first public proclamation of the Gospel, amidst extraordinary circumstances that involved overwhelming enthusiasm, and the disciples speaking in ecstatic speech – a type of speech in Jewish tradition attributed to the Presence of the Holy Spirit. In the Old Testament, prophesying in the prophetic state implied ecstatic utterances. Apparently, one of the immediate results of the baptism of the Holy Spirit was that the disciples immediately began to praise and glorify God in other tongues. These were enthusiastic and ecstatic utterances and were a direct inspiration of the Spirit. In a moment of intense emotion, simple men, forgetting self, spoke tongues beyond their common capabilities. Such a phenomena, manifested in 120 people, attracted attention and a crowd collected.

The fifteen nationalities from whence the Jews and the Gentile converts came, represented the universality of mankind – spread over the earth and divided by different languages. This list is but a literary device, listing people more or less geographically from East to West, achieving an impression of the universal world as then known. All those present in Jerusalem would either know Aramaic or Greek. Only two languages, at the most, would have been needed to communicate with the crowd. It is doubtful that the miracle of tongues implied that the disciples preached in all those languages or even that, as some have suggested, they spoke in their

native language and others heard them in the different languages. Probably the miracle consisted of the disciples praising God in an ecstatic way – in a tongue given to them by the Holy Spirit, other than Aramaic and in these ecstatic utterances, the visitors recognized their own native language being used. Such a miracle of tongues would explain why some listeners sneered at them and attributed these utterances to their being intoxicated.

Luke intends to teach that now the Voice of the Spirit speaks through the Church and the Voice of the Spirit is intelligible to every nation under the heavens. It not only makes the Church articulate in proclaiming the Gospel, but the Holy Spirit empowers the Church to address herself to all nations and be understood by them. The catholicity – universality – of the Church is here attributed to the inspiration and power of the Holy Spirit and not to the ambitions of the early disciples who were content to remain a perfected Jewish community.

Many scholars hold, and early Christian writers agree with them, that Luke desired men to behold, in the gift of tongues, the Holy Spirit healing the division caused by the confusion of tongues at Babel. Luke implies that the lost unity is restored in the Church, which speaks all languages, in a single unified society. That Luke intended this reference, is strengthened by his use of a vocabulary that appears in the Septuagint account of Babel. The Pentecostal Spirit overcomes the ancient division of men's tongues that began at Babel. All those who seek to build the city of God will understand each other through the One Holy Spirit.

THE FIRST CHRISTIAN SERMON

The first public proclamation of the Gospel by the Church occurs on Pentecost. Peter preaches the “good news” under the power of the Holy Spirit. He is anointed with the Spirit of God.

It would be prudent to pause and reflect briefly on the subject of speeches in Acts. The speeches in Acts are not intended to be taken as verbatim accounts of what was actually said at that particular historical moment. A speech was used by an author to stress the importance of an event or to highlight a particular point. Nevertheless, many good scholars believe collections of important traditions and events circulated within the early Church. Luke is proven to be a faithful transmitter of tradition. It is highly possible that the essence of important speeches given by Peter, Stephen and Paul, were

accurately conserved within the memory of the Community. The speeches narrated by Luke maintain sufficient differences to distinguish one speaker from the other, and they exhibit something of the character of the one who delivered them. It is highly probable that Peter's speech on Pentecost represents an authentic summary of what was preached that memorable day in Church history.

The sermon falls into three parts. Each begins with a personal address (i.e., "You who are the Jews," "Men of Israel," "Brothers"). The changing addresses indicate the growing spiritual ties between Peter and his hearers. Each section concludes with a Scripture and its application.

All Twelve Apostles stand forth on Pentecost, but only Peter addresses the congregation. The message of Peter's sermon is the testimony of all Twelve Apostles. Peter gives voice to the faith of the Apostles.

The first part of the sermon deals with the phenomenon that initiated the sermon – the explanation for the joy and ecstasy flooding the disciples of Jesus. Peter proclaims this action of the Holy Spirit to be the fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel. He announces that the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on the disciples of Jesus heralds the end of times – *"the coming of that great and glorious day of the Lord."* (Acts 2:20) Luke would have us see the final age of salvation inaugurated at this moment – the age of the Church. Peter sets the stage for the proclamation that Jesus is Lord in whose name salvation can be obtained.

In the second part of the sermon, Peter delivers the apostolic witness to Jesus of Nazareth. Peter proclaims that the miracles, wonders and signs worked by Jesus, were a divine approbation that God sent Jesus of Nazareth to Israel. Peter charges the Jews to their faces, with murdering the Christ and using pagans to kill Him. Peter proclaims that the death of Jesus was not the end of the story. God vindicated Jesus by raising Him from the dead. This is the very heart of the apostolic testimony – Jesus of Nazareth has been raised from the dead. All Twelve Apostles stand behind this truth. Peter demonstrates the resurrection of the Messiah had been foretold in Psalm 16 by David.

In the third section of the sermon, Peter calls his listeners *"Brothers."* He fully interprets the prophecy of David for them. This prophecy was fulfilled not by David, but by the resurrection of Jesus. God had exalted Him to His

right hand. There, He who had first received the Holy Spirit at His baptism, now pours this same Holy Spirit upon mankind. Peter goes back to the beginning of this sermon; what they witnessed in the disciples, is a baptism in the Holy Spirit, coming from the Risen Jesus.

Just as the Resurrection of Jesus is substantiated by the Scriptures, Peter now shows that Psalm 110 proclaims the Ascension of Jesus. The Resurrection, the Ascension of Jesus, the sending of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples of Jesus testifies to Israel, beyond a doubt, that Jesus crucified has been proclaimed Lord and Messiah by God.

THE EFFECTS OF THE SERMON

It was a weighty truth for the consciences of those men to bear that they had crucified the Messiah of God. The Holy Spirit convicted the hearts of many of the truthfulness of Peter's accusation. They were "deeply shaken." In near despair, they turned to Peter and the other Apostles, "*What are we to do, brothers?*" Peter answered, "*You must reform and be baptized, each one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, that your sins may be forgiven; then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. It was to you and your children that the promise was made, and to all those still far off whom the Lord our God calls.*" Luke informs us, "*Those who accepted this message were baptized; some three thousand were added that day.*" (See Acts 2:36-41)

Through the mouth and actions of Peter, the Holy Spirit teaches that no matter the seriousness of the sins committed, salvation is possible through Jesus Christ. Men, who rejected Jesus, were not rejected by Jesus. Jesus loves His enemies and died for their sins. Those who rejected God are not rejected by God, but are given the same opportunity to come to salvation.

Peter tells sinners how to be saved. Peter's answer to these men is the answer of the Holy Spirit. It is the only answer the Church can give to sinners. They must repent – reform their lives. They must turn their hearts away from the evil they formerly embraced, and with all their hearts, they must embrace the Will of God. True repentance is a necessary and a preliminary step to salvation. Peter teaches repentant sinners that they must be baptized in the name of Jesus. This implies that a sinner recognize Jesus as Savior and accept the atonement Jesus made for sins by His death on the Cross. But much more is implied: The sinner must be incorporated into the very body of Jesus through the sacrament of Baptism. At the moment of

Baptism, the sinner receives the gift of the Holy Spirit – bringing sanctifying grace to the soul – rendering the sinner justified and holy in the sight of God. In order to remain in the state of justification, a person must continue to “hear the Word of God and keep it.” In other words, the believer must live a life of charity – love of God above all things and love of neighbor as one’s self.

Luke closed the Pentecostal scene with words that indicate he had only given us a summary of what Peter said that historical day, *“In support of his testimony he used many other arguments, and kept urging, ‘Save yourselves from this generation which has gone astray.’” (Acts 2:40)* Peter implies the important part our own wills play in the salvation of our souls. For this reason, St. Augustine taught, *“He who created thee without thy help does not justify thee without thy help.”*

The Scriptures make it very clear that there is no operation in the Church that is not attributed to the Holy Spirit. The Church teaches, “Christ is the Head of the Church, and the Holy Spirit is her soul.” The Church is not just a congregation of men and women who share a common belief about Jesus Christ. It is not just another visible institution of people in this world, no more than Jesus of Nazareth was just an ordinary man. The Church is a unique and special organization, created by God, for the salvation of mankind. This is the message of Pentecost!

BAPTISM OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND QUESTIONS SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK (PLEASE MEMORIZE)

“YOU MUST REFORM AND BE BAPTIZED, EACH ONE OF YOU, IN THE NAME OF JESUS CHRIST, THAT YOUR SINS MAY BE FORGIVEN; THEN YOU WILL RECEIVE THE GIFT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.” (ACTS 2:38)

FIRST DAY: Read John 20:19-23.

1. How is the Coming of the Holy Spirit presented in the Gospel of John?
2. How do we know that the Apostles can impart the Holy Spirit?
3. What does the presence of the Holy Spirit produce in the soul?
4. Why is it implied here that not all can receive the Holy Spirit?

SECOND DAY: Acts 2:1-4; I Kings 19:9-18; Exodus 19:16-25.

1. What does Luke’s account of the Coming of the Holy Spirit emphasize?
2. In what way does the Old Testament serve as a background for Luke’s presentation on Pentecost?
3. How is the occurrence on Pentecost similar to the Annunciation to Mary?
4. What sign at Pentecost symbolizes the very heart of the Pentecostal experience?

THIRD DAY: Read Acts 2:5-13; Genesis 11:1-9.

1. What does Luke teach us by different nations hearing the Word of God?
2. What do you think the miracle of the gift of tongues consisted of?

3. What is the relationship between Pentecost and the Tower of Babel?
4. What does the Voice of the Spirit enable the Church to do?

FOURTH DAY: Read I Samuel 10:5-13 and I Cor. 14:1-25.

1. How does the gift of tongues appear in the Old Testament?
2. How does St. Paul describe the gift of tongues?
3. How does he appear to measure this gift?
4. What do value do you see in this gift for the Church?

FIFTH DAY: Read Acts 2:14-36.

1. In your opinion, what does the sermon at Pentecost represent to us?
2. What part does Scripture play in this sermon?
3. What would you say is the heart of this sermon?
4. What do you learn from this first Christian Sermon?

SIXTH DAY: Read Acts 2:37-41.

1. What must we to be saved according to St. Peter?
2. What do we learn about God's mercy from Pentecost?
3. What is true repentance?
4. What does Peter's answer teach you about your own salvation?

CHAPTER 4

THE CHURCH IN CHILDHOOD

INTRODUCTION

Summarizing the childhood of Jesus, Luke tells us: *“Jesus, for his part, progressed steadily in wisdom and age and grace before God and men. (Lk. 2:52) The Church, too, had its own childhood. Filled with the Holy Spirit, it also progressed steadily in wisdom and age and grace before God and men. In a cameo presentation, Luke shows a picture of the Church in childhood: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ instruction and the communal life, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. A reverent fear overtook them all, for many wonders and signs were performed by the apostles. Those who believed, shared all things in common; they would sell their property and goods, dividing everything on the basis of each one’s need. They went to the temple area together every day, while in their homes, they broke bread. With exultant and sincere hearts they took their meals in common, praising God and winning the approval of all the people. Day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.” (Acts 2:42-27)*

The Holy Spirit had come upon the Apostles and they mightily proclaimed the “Good News.” At the first preaching of the Gospel, the Holy Spirit anointed Peter and touched many hearts of his hearers – healing souls and re-creating lives. The Church at Jerusalem grew from 120 to 3000 members. The first members of the Church were probably known as “Nazareans” since they professed Jesus of Nazareth to be the Messiah.

New members were received into the Community through the Sacrament of Baptism. Repentance was a necessary condition for the baptism and probably repentance was demonstrated by a public confession of sins. That such was a custom, we see from the report given about John’s baptism, *“They were being baptized by him in the Jordan River as they confessed their sins.” (Mt. 3:6)*

IN THE NAME OF JESUS

Peter urged his believers, "...*be baptized each one of you in the name of Jesus Christ, that your sins may be forgiven.*" (Acts 2:38) To be baptized in the Name of Jesus certainly implies Jesus accepts the baptized as His own and the baptized person submits self to being incorporated into the Community of which Jesus is Head.

What significance did the members of the early Church give to the expression "in the Name of Jesus"? Among the people of the Near East, a name of a person possessed great significance. The name of a person mysteriously represented the personality of the person. In a religious cultic situation, to invoke the name of God was to summon God, or His power, into the present situation.

When the Old Testament speaks of knowing the name of God, it implies much more than merely knowing the word "Yahweh." It signifies having experienced the reality of God's presence – having experienced deliverance through Him. Since using the name of Yahweh in prayer was believed to summon Him, the highest respect must be given to His name. It could not be used carelessly, vainly, or disrespectfully without serious consequences. The Jewish high priest pronounced the sacred name of God only once a year when entering the Holy of Holies, to offer atonement for the sins of the people.

In the Old Testament, what is applied to the Name of Yahweh, applies to the Name of Jesus in the New Testament. It is a subtle one, but it is one of the strongest affirmations in the New Testament to the Divine personality of Jesus of Nazareth. Peter preached, "*There is no salvation in anyone else, for there is no other name in the whole world given to man by which we are to be saved.*" (Acts 4:12)

"In the Name of" implies to be acting in the power and authority of the person named. To act in the name of Yahweh or Jesus is a summons to God or His Only Begotten Son that He be present in and through the person. In other words, even though the hands of the minister pours the waters of baptism, or pronounces the words of absolution over a sinner, it is in truth Jesus who baptizes and forgives sins. As with the Name of Yahweh, the Name of Jesus must be held in high respect and not be used vainly, nor lightly. St. Paul confesses: "*At Jesus' name every knee must bend in the*

heavens, on the earth, and under the earth, and every tongue proclaim to the glory of God the Father, 'JESUS CHRIST IS LORD!'" (Phil. 2:10-11)

COMMUNITY LIFE

Baptism establishes a community of believers. It creates a Community between God and man. Likewise, it establishes Community among men. All baptized in the Family of God. For this reason, it calls God "Father" and other members of the Community "Brothers" and "Sisters." In the mind of the early Church, being baptized into Jesus equated with being baptized into the Church.

Community life was the essence of life in the Near East. No greater punishment could be inflicted upon a person, this side of death, than being excommunicated from the Community. The word "community" comes from the Greek "koinonia." This word derives from "koinos" meaning "common." Community implies a fellowship of human beings who share a common life. Christian Community and Christian Fellowship are synonymous.

Jesus laid the foundation for the Community when he called the Twelve Apostles into fellowship with Himself. Jesus and the Twelve lived a common life and kept a common purse of which Judas had custodial care. From the beginning, it was a religious community; it was never merely a human community – first, because of the Divine Nature of Jesus and second, because of the Gift of the Holy Spirit to the Community. The Community experienced the Holy Spirit as the cause of brotherhood. Through union with the Holy Spirit, the Community maintained union with the Ascended Jesus and the Father. The Christian Community, therefore, became a Divine Community – truly the Kingdom of God on earth.

THE COMMUNITY TEACHERS

Membership in the Community involved one's complete life. It involved a persevering adherence to persons and duties. Life centered around the Apostles. Everyone respected them, adhering closely to their teachings and example. Why? Because as the "commissioned emissaries" of Jesus, they represented Jesus in the Community. Union with the Apostles kept one in union with Jesus: *"He who hears you, hears me!" (Lk. 10:16)* These men Jesus commissioned to teach in His Name, *"Teach them to carry out*

everything I have commanded you. And know that I am with you always, until the end of the world!” (Mt. 28:20)

Today, any person who feels touched by the tip of the Spirit’s wing, feels called and qualified to preach and interpret the Scriptures. Such would have never been tolerated in the early Church with its Jewish background. The Scriptures, being the Jewish rule of life, were not to be interpreted by everyone. Rabbis explained the Scriptures to the people. Men desiring to be Rabbis were intensively trained by Masters, not only in the Scriptures, but in the leading and respected rabbinical interpretations of the Scriptures. Only after years of study and having reached the age of forty, could a man be ordained a Rabbi and become an approved teacher of the Scriptures.

The Twelve Apostles had been the disciples of the Great Master – their Rabboni – Jesus of Nazareth. When He completed His training of them, He sent them as His “commissioned emissaries” (sheluhim) to make disciples of all men – authorizing them to begin teaching only after receiving the Holy Spirit. The qualifications of the first preachers of the Word were properly instructed, Spirit-filled and divinely commissioned.

St. Paul instructs the Corinthians, “*God has set up in the Church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracle workers, healers, assistants, administrators...*” Paul asked, “*Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles or have the gift of healing...?*” (I Cor. 12:28:30) “*To each person the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good (the good of the Community).*” (I Cor. 12:7) Paul implies one cannot preach the word of God unless one is “sent.” In other words, he must be a “sheluhim” of Jesus. For this reason, the Church has insisted that the preachers in the Church must be ordained by the Church – be formally commissioned by the Community.

The Apostles taught, as did the Jewish Rabbis, by word of mouth and constant repetition. In the course of time, the instructions would automatically assume a set form. In this fashion, the deposit of faith would be passed from one generation to the next. These would become the Christian Traditions – meaning “matter handed down.” Later, some of this material appeared in the four written Gospel accounts; the speeches in Acts would echo the apostolic creed; the epistles would convey the dogmatic and moral teachings of the early Church.

THE BREAKING OF BREAD

Luke tells us the Community *“went to the temple area together every day, while in their homes, they broke bread. With exultant and sincere hearts they took their meals in common...”* (Acts 2:46) “Breaking of bread” symbolized an eating together. Jews baked their bread in cakes and these were broken, apparently, by the head of the household, in a solemn fashion, while giving thanks over it and then distributed to those at table. “Breaking of bread” came to denote the beginning of a meal with a blessing.

It seems the Christian Community participated daily in a meal symbolizing their unity and love. This meal has been called an “Agape.” We see from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, that the Agape preceded the Lord’s Supper, called the Eucharist. It is possible “the breaking of bread” usually referred to the communal celebration consisting of an Agape and the Lord’s Supper.

When it was no longer possible for the Community to meet daily, the custom developed of meeting on the first day of the week for the “breaking of bread.” Sunset heralded the new day. The celebration would be held Saturday evening with the ending of the Sabbath at sunset. The Eucharistic celebration followed the Agape. As Paul confirms, this led to certain abuses in the Corinthian Community: factions, selfishness and drunkenness. This practice of celebrating the two together continued for many years, often having the Agape being eaten in Church. Apparently, because of abuses, the Agape was separated from the Eucharistic celebration. The Agape was held on Saturday evening and the Eucharist early Sunday. This probably originated the old Eucharistic fast that obliged them to end the Agape by midnight. The practice was slow in dying out. Even in 692, at the Council of Trullan, it was necessary to forbid an Agape from being held in Church.

COMMUNITY PRAYER

The prayer life of the Community followed that of the Jews. Common hours of prayer in the Temple were at 9 a.m., 12 noon and 3 p.m. The Temple was the place of God’s presence and the place of sacrifice under the direction of the priests and Levites, but the synagogue was the heart of Jewish life. The synagogues were meeting houses for prayer and the study of the Scriptures, under the direction of the laity. Here the Jews gathered on the Sabbath. The disciples of Jesus would have gathered in the Cenacle as their synagogue. The service opened with a recitation of the Jewish profession of faith called

the Shema (Deut 6:4ff), followed by a long, formal prayer. After the prayer, a reading in Hebrew from the Law and the prophets and a translation was given in Aramaic; a member of the congregation gave a homily on the readings. The service was then concluded with other prayers and the singing of psalms. If a priest was present, the service ended with the priestly blessing (Num. 6:24-26). When the Eucharist became separated from the Agape, this "prayer service" replaced the Agape and preceded the Eucharistic celebration.

A COMMUNITY OF KALOS

There are two words in Greek for good: "agathos" which implies a thing is good in itself, and "kalos" which implies a thing is more than just good, it is attractive. It has a certain attractive beauty that catches the eye – holds the attention. The word "kalos" best describes the early Community of disciples. The two outstanding characteristics of the Community were Joy and Unity of spirit. These two virtues signified a proper relationship with God and man. Their joy expressed itself in the spirit of Divine Praise flooding their hearts. Their unity was evident from their singleness of purpose – a sincerity of heart that characterized the Community's relationship with each other. "They shared all things in common" expressed more the common life, rather than a life of poverty. As we are told, "dividing everything on the basis of each one's need." They were a Community of "kalos" and they had an effect upon the lives of their neighbors: they won the "approval of all the people."

PETER'S SECOND SERMON

Luke speaks of the Community being filled with awe and wonder, for great miraculous powers were being displayed by the Apostles. At first, such power was limited to them, but after they laid hands on Stephen and Philip, it began to be manifested through other members. Luke relates one miracle and the effect it had on people. Peter cures a lame man in the temple area. The man, being over forty years of age, probably had seen and heard Jesus in the temple; nevertheless, his cure had been delayed. The Apostles realized the man had faith to be healed. When the man responded to Peter, he demonstrated his faith in a Name that had only recently been placed above the head of an executed man. The cured man clung to Peter and John, and his behavior attracted a crowd. This provided the setting for Peter's second sermon.

These sermons are of the greatest importance, for they illustrate for us how the early Church proclaimed the Gospel – how they evangelized. In this second sermon, Peter proclaimed that through the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Apostles continue the same powerful works as performed by Jesus; this they do in the Name of Jesus. Miracles were the Apostles' credentials proving them to be the "commissioned emissaries" of Jesus. Peter and John attribute nothing to themselves, "*Why do you stare at us as if we had made this man walk by some power or holiness of our own?*" (Acts 3:12) What Israel now witnesses is further proof that Jesus is both the Lord and Messiah.

They have witnessed a display of Divine Power. This ought to affect something in their hearts. Peter moves, once again, to convict them of sin. He invokes a most sacred divine title – used by Yahweh at the burning bush, "*The God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his Servant Jesus.*" (Acts 3:13) Peter emphasizes the perverseness of their crime in rejecting a holy and just man, who no one could convict of sin, and preferring in his place a convicted murderer. "*You put to death the Author of life.*" (Acts 3:15) This was probably an earlier title given to Jesus. The word "author" could also signify "pioneer." It implied that Jesus, by His Resurrection, had become the "pioneer" of eternal life.

Peter makes the point that it is in the Name of Jesus that the man stands before them healed. It implies salvation comes in the Name of Jesus. This point becomes clearer when we understand that the Jews attributed infirmities to sin. They believed that infirmities could only be healed by the removal of sins. True healing restored the person, in the Jewish mind, into God's grace.

The Holy Spirit that fills the Apostles is indeed the Spirit of Truth and Love. How terrible truth can be without love. Divine Truth ought never to be proclaimed except when balanced with Divine Love; otherwise it could produce guilt, despair and self-hatred when it reveals the sinfulness of the soul. None of these are ever the fruits of the Holy Spirit. Peter indicts the people with the murder of Jesus. But he recalls the words of the dying Jesus, "*Father forgive them; they do not know what they are doing.*" (Lk. 23:34) In the spirit of Christ, Peter now proclaims forgiveness. Peter, reflecting the charity of Christ, embraces these men to his heart as "*Brothers.*"

Peter again makes the point that the Messiah had to suffer these things. This point would forever be contested by the Jews. Peter makes the very

sweeping statement that it was foretold by all the prophets. He considered the evidence to be beyond refutation. In the face of it, he insisted, *"Therefore, reform your lives! Turn to God, that your sins may be wiped away! Thus may a season of refreshment be granted you by the Lord when He sends you Jesus, already designated as your Messiah."* (Acts 3:19-20) Peter echoes a familiar teaching among the Jews. The Rabbis taught that if all Israel together repented for a single day, redemption through the Messiah would come. This "season of refreshment" recalled Israel's deliverance out of the slavery of Egypt and, being led by God, to a place of refreshment. These words of Peter suggest the coming of Israel's glory – the longed-for Messianic Age. Peter taught this is impeded by unrepentance, *"Jesus must remain in heaven until the time of universal restoration, which God spoke of long ago through his holy prophets."* (Acts 3:21) For the Jews, "the time of universal restoration" meant first the restoration of Israel's glory from which would flow, through Israel, the restoration of the world itself. Israel's restoration rested upon its repentance. Peter believed this restoration would occur when Jesus returned in glory. Men delayed this return by their failure to repent.

Peter demonstrates that the unique role of Jesus had clearly been foretold in the Scriptures. He quotes the most famous of all Jews - Moses. Moses had foretold the coming of another prophet like himself. The coming of this prophet would herald a new epoch in the salvation history. This period, Peter proclaims, has come and *"all the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel onward, have announced the events of these days."* (Acts 3:24)

Filled with personal enthusiasm, Peter proclaims to the Jewish people that what God offers to mankind through Jesus Christ, is their spiritual heritage. A failure to accept Jesus will be the greatest tragedy of their personal lives, with terrible consequences in time and eternity.

Motivated by a personal love for the eternal welfare of his Jewish brothers, Peter fearlessly teaches Divine truth that shatters an evil darkness shrouding the minds and hearts of men. Even as he does so, other clouds of darkness appear on the horizon, heralding the coming storms that spell the end of the Childhood of the Church.

THE CHURCH IN CHILDHOOD

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND QUESTIONS SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK (PLEASE MEMORIZE)

“THERE IS NO SALVATION IN ANYONE ELSE, FOR THERE IS NO OTHER NAME IN THE WHOLE WORLD GIVEN TO MEN BY WHICH WE ARE TO BE SAVED.” (Acts 4:12)

FIRST DAY: Read Acts 2:42-47.

1. What does Christian Community mean to you?
2. What impresses you most about the early Christian Community?
3. What virtues characterized this Community in the early Church?
4. How could Christian Communities be improved today?

SECOND DAY: Read I Corinthians 11:17-34.

1. What is being implied by the expression “the breaking of Bread”?
2. What custom of the Christian Community does Paul describe here?
3. Why did the custom of having an Agape disappear in the Church?
4. What part of the Mass today is similar to the old synagogue service?

THIRD DAY: Read Acts 3:1-10.

1. Why did the early Community hold the Apostles in such high esteem?
2. What qualities are needed to be a preacher of the Word of God?
3. What is signified by saying “in the Name of Jesus”?
4. What does this teach you about the use of the Name of Jesus?

FOURTH DAY: Read Acts 3:11-16.

1. In what way is the humility of Peter and John demonstrated?
2. What do you learn from their example?
3. To what does Peter attribute the cure of the crippled man?
4. What do you learn from verse 16?

FIFTH DAY: Read Acts 3:17-26.

1. In what way does Peter balance truth and love?
2. What does this teach us about revealing painful truths to others?
3. To what does Peter attribute the delay of the Second Coming of Christ?
4. What does Peter imply will happen to those who refuse to listen to the Prophets?

SIXTH DAY: Read Acts 2:14-36.

1. What similarities do you see between the first and second sermons given by Peter?
2. Can you detect any technique Peter has in preaching to the Jews?
3. Do these sermons teach you anything about how one should present Christian truths to unbelievers?
4. What do you think is needed in order to be a good evangelist to others?

CHAPTER 5

CHRISTIAN CRISIS AND CONSOLATION

INTRODUCTION

The ministry of the Apostles, coupled with the conduct of the first members of the Church, profoundly affected many Jewish people. The congregation at Jerusalem rapidly grew from 120 to 5000 men. When you add the women converts to this, the Community of Disciples represented a formidable minority within the city. The Community, with its close adhesiveness, was fast becoming a power to be considered. The political powers of the city began to keep a watchful eye upon the movement.

THE SADDUCEES

Jewish political power resided in the party of the Sadducees. The name probably derived from Sadoc (Zadoc) - the high priest, during the reign of David. Membership in the party came from the most prestigious and wealthy families of the city and from the powerful priestly families that controlled the office of the high priest, along with the temple. The political power of the party extended over all Judea, but the principles of the party appealed only to the rich.

The Sadducees had a vested interest in the present economy, as the stability of the economy depended upon a stable political climate. As the massing of wealth and the maintaining of it was their prime concern, these men were dedicated to public law and order. They were noted for their exactness in demanding the observance of the Law and for their harshness in punishing offenders. They had no interest in the "spirit" of the Law. The Sadducees were materialistic, practical and pragmatic men. They rejected the immortality of human souls, affirming that the soul perished with the body. Therefore, logically, they denied punishment after death, resurrection of the dead, final judgment and the existence of spirits and angels. They did not believe in spiritual forces controlling the actions of men - neither divine nor otherwise. (The Pharisees held all these truths.) The Sadducees believed

God had no personal interest in whether man did good or evil. All men's actions flowed from their own powers, and these actions of themselves brought here and now, good or evil, depending upon the nature of the act. They taught that only the written Law of Moses obliged the Jewish people. They rejected the writings of the Prophets as being falsely inspired and the traditions of the fathers as useless. Men of such spirit naturally despised men who believed otherwise. This included the Pharisees and the common people.

Apparently, the Sadducees had no belief in a Messiah. Any talk of Messiahs, any claim to be one, any so-called messianic movement, would be viewed critically by them. Considering the emotional climate among the people, the subject of the Messiah was conducive to igniting political fires and explosions. Jesus of Nazareth in Galilee caused no concern to the Sadducees. Galilee was always a hotbed of revolt. Jesus in Jerusalem was another story. His presence and activities had a deadly effect upon the Sadducees. *"...There was a plan afoot to kill him." (Jn. 11:53)*

THE GREAT SANHEDRIN

The Great Sanhedrin was the Supreme Council of the Jewish Nation. The word "sanhedrin" comes from the Greek "synedrion" meaning "council." At the time of Jesus, its juridical powers extended only over the territory of Judea, but its moral force extended to all Jews. The Sanhedrin consisted of seventy-one men, including the high priest who served "ex officio" as president of the Council. Its membership was comprised of elders from the high priests' families, elders from the leading families among the laity and scribes – mostly Pharisees. It had power in both religious and civil matters, and the Law directed all its decisions. It possessed its own police force to enforce its decrees.

The Sadducees and the Sanhedrin thought they had ended with Jesus of Nazareth on Calvary. But, the Spirit of Jesus returned to disturb their tranquility. This last stage was worse than the first. They kill One and a few months later, the temple area is crawling with "Nazarenes." This situation had been ignored long enough. Time had come to take action against the movement. These inflammatory speeches in the temple area could stir people against them – they were in danger of being accused by the people of murdering Jesus of Nazareth. *"While Peter and John were still addressing the crowd, the priests, the captain of the temple guard and the*

Sadducees came up to them, angry because they were teaching the people and proclaiming the resurrection of the dead in the person of Jesus.” (Acts 4:1-2)

CRISIS OF AUTHORITY

The Church encounters its first external obstacle to its mission. The alien force is directed primarily against its mission and commission. It is not a stumbling block in its path – it is a mountain of religious and civil authority. Jesus had forewarned this day would come.

Peter and John are brought before the Sanhedrin and interrogated in this fashion, *“By what power or in whose name have men of your stripe done this?” (Acts 4:7)* The same question had been put to Jesus after the cleansing of the temple. That a deed of power has been performed, they admit. But they call into question the source of the power. The word used for “power” (dunamis) can imply the use of power without legitimate authority. Jesus had been accused of working marvels by the power of Satan. The implication is the same here.

Previously, Jesus told His disciples, *“When they hand you over, do not worry about what you will say...You yourselves will not be speakers; the spirit of your Father will be speaking in you.” (Mt. 10:19-20)* *“If they call the head of the house Beelzebub, how much more the members of his household! Do not let them intimidate you.” (Mt. 10:25-26)*

We had a fine example in this episode of the distinction between the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, who forms the Christian character of the disciples of Jesus, and a temporary charism bestowed upon a Christian for a particular work. We ought to note that the charism is present only in action – in the work. Only when the Christian steps out in faith does it become operative. In our present account, the charism of the Holy Spirit became operative as Peter opened his mouth to speak. The thoughts expressed were not first present within his mind. They were known to his mind as his lips pronounced them.

Peter points to the man born crippled, but now completely cured. He proclaims that through the very person of Jesus the Nazarene, this man stands before them perfectly sound. The word “sound” implies more than legs being straightened and strengthened. It denotes the complete restoration of a human being. The man is a symbol of salvation. Peter

makes it quite clear to the Sadducees that it is in the Name of the same crucified Jesus, that this man stands before them perfectly sound. This was proof that Jesus had risen from the dead. The dead do not give life, but the living do! The Man they disregarded has been highly regarded by God. Peter recalls the words of Psalm 118 and implies they have been fulfilled in Jesus. Even more so in Jesus, do the words of Isaiah find their fulfillment, *"Thus says the Lord God, 'See, I am laying a stone in Zion, a stone that has been tested, a precious cornerstone as a sure foundation; he who puts his faith in it shall not be shaken.'"* (Is. 28:16)

The cornerstone is the most important stone in a building. It must be the most solid and the strongest. It is upon this stone that the two walls of the house meet and rest. It is upon this stone a battlement must be erected - in order to protect the house. Calling Jesus the cornerstone implies he is the most important Person in the House. He is the Strong One that sustains the rest. Upon Him, the defense of the house rests.

The spirit-filled words of Peter to the Sadducees were like the rain splattering on a cement walk - their spirits remained unmoved. They gave no credence to what was said, but they did have to face hard facts. It was of their nature and character to do that. They would leave the philosophizing about the facts to others. One fact they were certain of - this type of speaking would bring no good to them. These men must be silenced. Threats would be the most prudent means with which to begin. If this failed, other more appropriate means could be used.

The Church faced its first major crisis in the world. The chief priests and the Sanhedrin represented the legitimate religious and civil authority within Judea. Such authority was equated with God's authority. St. Paul wrote to the Romans, *"Let everyone obey the authorities that are over him, for there is no authority except from God and all authority that exists is established by God. As a consequence, the man who opposes authority rebels against the ordinance of God; those who resist thus shall draw condemnation down upon themselves."* (Rm. 13:1-2) St. Matthew records, *"Then Jesus told the crowds and his disciples, 'The scribes and the Pharisees have succeeded Moses as teachers; therefore, do everything and observe everything they tell you. But do not follow their example.'" (Mt. 23:1-3)*

The Jewish training and moral background of the Apostles would have led them to see in the command of the Sanhedrin - the very authority of God.

This authority now commands them not to mention the Name of Jesus or teach about Him. Yet, on the other hand, they had been commanded by Jesus to do this very thing. Wherein now lies their moral obligation? Whom must they obey? What does one do when he is faced with two moral obligations that contradict each other? The contradiction is only apparent – the lesser obligation ceases to exist in the face of the higher obligation. (One has the obligation to attend Mass on Sunday, but to give aid to an accident victim would be a greater obligation.) It now becomes a matter of conscience for Peter and John to decide which is the higher obligation.

For a command of a superior to be legitimate and morally binding upon a subject, the command must be good and not evil. Only good can be the basis of a moral obligation of obedience. An adult ought to be able to see the value, the goodness and the justice of what is commanded. To command obedience, the law must be just. One can never obey a superior when the command violates a well-informed and enlightened conscience, or when the subject judges the things commanded to be morally wrong – sinful. When a person, after serious reflection and examination, comes to the conclusion that what has been commanded is contrary to the dictates of his or her conscience, the person must follow conscience and refuse obedience, no matter how painful the consequences may be.

The command of the Sadducees could be seen as a good, in so far as it intended to preserve the civil order. They viewed such preaching to be inflammatory. But such preaching was necessary for the eternal salvation of mankind. To preach in the Name of Jesus was the greater good and therefore, the true moral obligation of the Apostles. The action of the council objectively seeks to suppress religious truth. This command is objectively immoral, even though, perhaps, subjectively considered to be proper. There is no moral obligation to obey such a command. In fact, the moral obligation is to defy it.

To the demands of their rulers, Peter and John could have given only one morally conscientious reply, *“Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight for us to obey you rather than God. Surely we cannot help speaking of what we have heard and seen.”* (Acts 4:19-20) The Apostles confirmed they believed the command of Jesus to be the command of God.

CONSOLATION IN THE SPIRIT

The first division between the Church and the established Jewish religion had occurred. It was over preaching the Name of Jesus. The Jewish leaders had rejected Jesus and in time, they would completely reject His followers. They would expel them from the synagogues. They would force the Church to go its separate way. No doubt Peter and John were emotionally shaken by the experience. They had committed themselves to active resistance against the Establishment. What was done in a moment of religious fervor, must now be sustained with Community assistance and prayer. They needed assurance and confirmation. The Community prayed with them and the Holy Spirit confirmed the righteousness of their act and to the course they had committed themselves. The Community realistically assessed its own human limitations. It prayed for needed spiritual support and for assurance that God blessed their efforts in the Name of Jesus. They prayed for the consolation of seeing miracles and wonders resulting from their ministry, *"The place where they were gathered shook as they prayed. They were filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak God's word with confidence."* (Acts 4:31)

Many see this as another Pentecost. As the Church – and the Church is always people – moves into more challenging times, a greater in-filling of the Holy Spirit is needed. This Community had the wisdom to realize this and the faith to pray for it, *"Ask and you shall receive!"* (Lk. 11:9) The grace of yesterday may not be sufficient for the cross of today. What grace has inspired, only grace can accomplish!

CHRISTIAN COMMUNISM

This crisis situation resulted in a more intensive life of faith and love among the members of the Church. For the second time, Luke mentioned the spirit of Christian communism that existed among the early Christians. Luke presented a picture of common life and not a picture of a life of poverty. In future years, the Jerusalem Community was noted for its want – its poverty. Apparently, getting rid of property was a communal expression of faith in the immediate return of Jesus in glory. If the Second Coming of Jesus was to be imminent, then material abundance was superfluous. Members demonstrated their belief by getting rid of the wealth upon which future security relied.

CRISIS OF SCANDAL

Up to this point, the Apostles have been the center of attention. Luke now spotlights a particular member of the Church who sells his property and lays the proceeds at the feet of the Apostles. Luke tells us that there was a man called Joseph, whom the Apostles named "Barnabus." The very fact that Joseph's action was singled out, implies the practice described by Luke may not have been all that widespread in the Community.

We have here a good illustration of the importance of a name – how it ought to express the personality. When Joseph became a Christian, the Apostles were so impressed with his unique personality, that they changed his name to fit his personality. Luke interprets for us what "Barnabus" implies and it certainly suggests he was indeed a "spirit-filled" young man. The word Luke uses to describe the meaning of Barnabus is "Son of Paraclesis." It is the same word Jesus used to describe the Holy Spirit – the Paraclete. Apparently, the Apostles saw this young man as one filled with the Christian spirit and they gave him a name implying he was a son of the Holy Spirit.

For a man of such idealism as Luke, it must have been particularly painful to record the next episode in Acts. But Luke is a historian and he must deal with reality. In this world, human weakness and evil influences are realities. There is even sin in the Body of Christ – the Church.

The episode of Ananias and Sapphira demonstrates the seriousness of sin within the Christian Community – the Body of Christ. The early members of the Church lived grace-filled lives expressed in great zeal and mutual love. A conscious awareness of sin in the Community would shock it. It is the ancient story recorded in Genesis, the story of the Garden of Eden. The coming of the Holy Spirit into the Community re-established the relationship between God and man that had characterized human existence in the Garden of Eden. Into that relationship quietly, slowly crawled Evil. The same Ancient Enemy found entrance into the Community of Disciples.

We must not only look at the deed done, for that is to concentrate on the symptom. We must look at the root of the sin, for only therein, can we discover its true evil and detest it – in ourselves and in the Community. Scripture tells us that Satan found an entrance into the hearts of Ananias and Sapphira, as he did with Judas. The door of entrance was love of

money. It implies one puts his or her trust in money – it is the source of security. It implies a mistrust in God – a failure to believe in God’s word. This sin of infidelity expresses itself in greed. Satan stirred the fires of greed in their hearts and when aflame, inspired its expression. They were greedy for the esteem given to Barnabus – for the image of faith and love he demonstrated to the Community. They were greedy to share in the Community’s goods, as if their lives depended upon Community support. They were greedy to be known as a couple that had faith in God and love for the Community, when in reality, they had little faith or love in either. They were two little greedy foxes – little Christian foxes whom God out-foxed. They decided to live a life of hypocrisy within the Christian Community for the benefits this life could bring them.

Ananias and Sapphira did not just lie – they were a lie. If the Christian Community is a reflection of the Holy Spirit - the Spirit of Truth – then such within the Community would be an abomination to the Holy Spirit. Their presence within the Community personally distorted the Image of the Holy Spirit – their sin personally touched the Holy Spirit. They were a lie within the Church – a cancer within the Body of Christ. They were a stain in the Image of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, through the person of Peter, purged this ugliness out of the Community.

Wheat and weed will co-exist in the Church. There was a Judas among the Twelve; Ananias and Sapphira were among the members of the early Church. We could grow accustomed to hypocrisy within the Church – we could begin to accept it. But the example stands from the very beginning of Church History that God demands holiness in His Church and He does not accept any compromise, *“You must be made perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.”* (Mt. 5:48) The deaths of these two people symbolize that one day God will purge all evil leaven of hypocrisy from the Church. *“Scandal must indeed come, but woe to him through whom it comes.”*

There will always be foxes in the Christian Community. But, the foxes must one day see themselves in the light of the Holy Spirit – in the light of the truth that goes beyond the symptoms of sin, to reveal the real evil in the human heart.

CHRISTIAN CRISIS AND CONSOLATION

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND QUESTIONS SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK (PLEASE MEMORIZE)

'THE COMMUNITY OF BELIEVERS WERE OF ONE HEART AND ONE MIND. NONE OF THEM EVER CLAIMED ANYTHING AS HIS OWN; RATHER, EVERYTHING WAS HELD IN COMMON.' (Acts 4:32)

FIRST DAY: Read Acts 4:1-4 and Matthew 10:16-39.

1. What do you think Jesus means in Matthew 10:16?
2. When it comes to proclaiming His teachings, what does Jesus demand of His disciples?
3. What do Jesus' words in Matthew 10:19-20 teach you?
4. Why do you think Jesus taught that His mission was to spread the division (Matthew 10:34)?

SECOND DAY: Read Summary through The Great Sanhedrin; Acts 4:5-12; Luke 12:18-31.

1. How would you describe the Sadducees?
2. What did Jesus say was at the root of their error?
3. Why were Jesus and His disciples a threat to the Sadducees?
4. What does Acts 4:12 teach you?

THIRD DAY: Read Summary through Crisis of Authority; Romans 13:1-10.

1. What is the Scriptural teaching about earthly authority?
2. When is human authority not to be obeyed?
3. Can you describe the spiritual crisis Peter and John found themselves facing?
4. What is the Church's teaching about the human conscience?

FOURTH DAY: Read Acts 4:13-22.

1. What did the Sanhedrin demand of the Apostles?
2. What was the response of Peter and John to their demands?
3. How would you defend the Apostles position?
4. What does this episode teach you about your own obedience?

FIFTH DAY: Read Acts 4:23-37; Summary through Christian Communism.

1. Why do you think the Church needed to be re-affirmed by the Holy Spirit at this time?
2. What did the Church ask for in order to give it assurance?
3. What do you think of the requests?
4. What do you think motivated the spirit of Christian Communism existing in the early Community?

SIXTH DAY: Read remainder of Summary; Acts 5:1-11.

1. What do you see as the real sin of Ananias and Sapphira?
2. What do you see as the real evil of this sin?
3. What is the symbolic teaching to the Community by their deaths?
4. What does this episode tell you about your own membership in the Church?

CHAPTER 6

THE SPIRIT-FILLED CHURCH

INTRODUCTION

St. Luke describes the Church still in the afterglow of Pentecost. It is a Holy Spirit-filled Community. In chapter five of Acts, Luke refers to the Community for the first time as "Church." The organization has formally been described. Soon it would become the common title to designate the gathering of the Christian Community. The name would be applied to the "Church at Jerusalem," the "Church at Antioch," and the New Testament would even speak of the "Churches," but this usage was never intended to imply separate, different Christian Communities. Though they were geographically separated, they formed one corporate Body – One Church. St. Paul taught, *"Just as each of us has one body with many members, and not all the members have the same function, so too we, though many, are one body in Christ and individually members one of another."* (Rm. 12:4-5)

THE SPIRIT-FILLED COMMUNITY

The author of Acts has demonstrated that the life of the Church flows from the operations of the Holy Spirit within the organization. Let us identify some of the main works of the Holy Spirit within the Church. The Holy Spirit first of all witnesses to men the truths about Jesus of Nazareth, *"God has made both Lord and Messiah this Jesus whom you crucified"* (Acts 2:36); *"The Author of Life"* (Acts 3:15); *"There is no salvation in anyone else, for there is no other name in the whole world given to men by which we are to be saved"* (Acts 4:12). This is the witness within the Church of the Holy Spirit to Jesus of Nazareth.

The Holy Spirit teaches that the first blessing that faith in Jesus brings to the Community is repentance, *"When God raised up his servant, he sent him to you first to bless you by turning you from your evil ways."* (Acts 3:26) In the light of their belief in Jesus, disciples see the darkness of their own sinfulness. In the revelation of personal sin, the Holy Spirit reveals to each, their need

for Jesus the Savior. With this faith in Jesus and a personal knowledge of sin, comes the voice of the Holy Spirit, *"Save yourself from this generation which has gone astray."* (Acts 2:40) *"You must reform and be baptized...in the name of Jesus Christ, that your sins may be forgiven; then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."* (Acts 2:38) Reformed sinners composed the membership of the Community – sinners regenerated into saints through baptism and the Gift of the Holy Spirit.

From these "saints" the Holy Spirit makes a Community – a perfect Community, *"The Community of believers were of one heart and one mind."* (Acts 4:32) A Community of Peace! Peace is one of the first fruits of the Holy Spirit. The perfume of the Holy Spirit's presence permeates the Community.

The early Church glistened in the fruits of the Holy Spirit: love, peace, joy, a prayerful spirit, docility. *"They devoted themselves to the apostles' instruction and the communal life..."* (Acts 2:42) *"They went to the temple area together every day, while in their homes they broke bread,"* celebrated the Eucharist. (Acts 2:46) The Holy Spirit created a loving family; *"Those who believed shared all things in common."* (Acts 2:44) *"None of them ever claimed anything as his own..."* (Acts 4:32)

At the dawn of its birth, the Church could truly be seen as a corporate reflection of Jesus. The early Fathers of the Church pictured the birth of the Church as Genesis had presented the birth of Eve - as Eve came forth from the side of the sleeping Adam, so the church came forth from the side of Jesus asleep in death on the Cross. As Israel called herself the Bride of Yahweh, so the Church sees herself as the Bride of Christ. The Church was created to be a suitable partner to the New Adam, Jesus. It is for this reason that sin within the Community is viewed as a true abomination to the Holy Spirit who creates the Bride of Christ.

Filled with the Holy Spirit, the Church is indeed the helpmate of the Lord. By shining examples of Christian lives, by the courageous proclamation of the Gospel, by the many signs and wonders performed, membership in the Community grows.

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND CHURCH MINISTRY

The Holy Spirit not only works within the disciples creating community, He likewise works mightily within the Apostles in order that they be evangelists. When the Holy Spirit shook the Cenacle as the Community prayed, He brought to birth a spirit of fortitude in the hearts of the believers. They are fortified to act according to their faith. The early Christian Community was no shrinking violet – hiding away in some cranny wall quietly trying to catch the attention of a passerby. No indeed! That is not a picture of a Spirit-filled Community.

The Sanhedrin had declared it illegal to evangelize (proclaim the “good news”) in the Name of Jesus. What did the Apostles do? They pitched their tent for their evangelization, meeting upon the front lawn of the high priest’s house, *“By mutual agreement, they used to meet in Solomon’s Portico. No one else dared to join them...”* (Acts 5:12-13) At this point, one needed the gift of fortitude to identify with the Community. Fortitude is the gift of the Holy Spirit that enables one to live in this world and not lose the gift of eternal life. It gives us the moral strength to live the truth we profess – to incarnate it in our lives.

Unless fortitude is balanced by Wisdom, another gift of the Holy Spirit, it can, on one hand, become foolhardiness or, on the other hand, watered down to become human prudence. Wisdom grants God’s vision of the situation to the spirit. The wise spirit sees things from God’s point of view and understands the means necessary to achieve God’s purpose. What may be the charting of a prudent course according to human prudence may be, in the eyes of God, foolishness and morally sinful.

In the minds of the Apostles, it was their duty not only to proclaim the Gospel in Jerusalem but, as you might imagine, right in the temple. Where else should the Word of God go forth other than from the House of God? Each day the Apostles marched right up to the temple. On the porch of Solomon, the disciples daily gathered to teach, to heal the sick, to free those troubled with unclean spirits. Whether they realized it or not, they were in many ways replacing the temple. They certainly were upstaging the priests of the temple, and soon they would not be tolerated.

THE APOSTLE BEFORE THE SANHEDRIN

It was in keeping with Jewish justice to warn offenders first and if they persisted, punish them. Luke relates, *"The high priest and all his supporters (that is, the party of the Sadducees), filled with jealousy, arrested the apostles and threw them into the public jail."* (Acts 5:17-18) *"During the night, however, an angel of the Lord opened the gates of the jail, led them forth and said, 'Go out now and take your place in the temple precincts and preach to the people all about this new life.'"* (Acts 5:19-20)

The word "angel" means a "messenger." In the Old Testament, "an angel of the Lord" could mean Yahweh Himself, or a celestial being acting as God's instrument, or a prophet speaking the message from God. It could also imply an impersonal agent that accomplished the Will of God – a storm, a plague. In this particular case in Acts, since no other details are given, it could be presumed to have been an inside job. It is possible one of the sympathetic Levite guards on duty released them and encouraged them to continue preaching to the people.

When the Apostles finally arrive before the Sanhedrin, the high priest accuses them of disobedience, *"We gave you strict orders not to teach about that name, yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us responsible for that man's blood."* (Acts 5:28) Peter courageously responds to the accusation as do the other Apostles, *"Better for us to obey God than men!"*

The rulers were afraid the Apostles would bring the blood of Jesus down on their heads and Peter does proclaim that His blood falls upon them but as a layer of redemption. This Jesus whom they destroyed has not risen from the dead to destroy His enemies, but to save them. This Crucified Jesus brings to Israel the grace of repentance and forgiveness of sins. (See Acts 5:31) The Apostles said, *"We testify to this. So too does the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those that obey him."* When the Sanhedrin heard this, they were stung to fury and wanted to kill them. (Acts 5:32-33)

Apparently, the reaction described to the Sanhedrin represented only the Sadducees. Their rage was about to force them to take illegal action, that of murdering the Apostles. A Pharisee named Gamaliel stood up to speak. In this incident, he serves as "an angel of the Lord", delivering the Apostles from death. Gamaliel may have been in doubt as to whether this movement

was truly from God or not. In such a case of doubt, one cannot morally act. Gamaliel's argument before the Sanhedrin took this line of argument, *"If this movement be of man, you make it worse by making martyrs of them – leave it alone and it will self-destruct. However, if it be from God, it cannot be stopped and one would be fighting God Himself."* (See Acts 5:35-39)

Gamaliel's reason prevailed. But the Sanhedrin, no doubt to appease the Sadducees, ordered the Apostles beaten for their disobedience. How did this affect the Apostles? *"The apostles for their part left the Sanhedrin full of joy that they had been judged worthy of ill-treatment for the sake of the Name. Day after day, both in the temple and at home, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news of Jesus the Messiah."* (Acts 5:41-42) These were men filled with Wisdom and Fortitude!

A VISIBLE SOCIETY

Some men have argued that the Church established by Jesus is purely a spiritual society, created by the Holy Spirit among those who believe in Jesus; a society governed by the Holy Spirit, working in the souls of individual men and interpreting, for each, the Word of God as revealed in the Scriptures. This teaching is hard to maintain in the face of Luke's presentation of the early Church. The early Christian Community was as visibly organized as any Jewish synagogue and its community. The society was visible enough to profoundly affect the lives of others by the life they lived in common. The early Church certainly appears before us with certain individuals possessing offices or functions as Teachers, Wonder Workers, and Leaders. The Holy Spirit worked mightily within the Community, but certain works He only performed through certain individuals. Every member possessed the Gift of the Holy Spirit, but not everyone possessed the same gifts from the Giver. It is only in the Community, as a whole, that one finds all the charisms of the Holy Spirit.

What is the picture Acts presents to us? The offices of teachers, miracle workers and authority all resided in Twelve Men – the Apostles. The Twelve Apostles certainly appear in this first history of the Church, as men possessing special power and authority in the Christian Community. Likewise, it has been evident from the beginning of Acts that out of these Twelve men, Peter appears in the leadership role within the Community. All the apostles appear as men with authority, but Peter appears as chief apostle

and as the visible head of the Church – a leadership that he willingly exercises in conjunction with the other Apostles and the Community.

What we find in the Four Gospel accounts relating to Peter, only confirms and clarifies the position Peter assumes in Acts. Probably the most impressive scene, considering the Old Testament concept of shepherd, occurs on the final page of the last Gospel account to be written. There Jesus asks Peter three times, “*Do you love me?*” To each of Peter’s affirmations of love, Jesus responds, “*Feed my lambs.*” “*Tend my sheep.*” “*Feed my sheep.*” (Jn 21:15-17) Among Semitic people, to pronounce an agreement three times publicly, makes a contract legal and binding. The Risen Jesus declares Peter to be the Shepherd of the Church of God. A shepherd in the Old Testament certainly symbolized authority and leadership. Peter appears in Acts as a loving and humble shepherd.

GROWTH AND CHANGE

Within a few pages, Luke masterfully presented the first years of Church History. Now, no doubt, a few years have passed since the last encounter with the Sanhedrin. The face of the Church is changing – the lifestyle of the Community has had to adapt to its growing numbers. Now present, in large numbers, are both Hebrew-speaking Jews and Greek-speaking Jews. At this time, the first note of disharmony within the Community develops: the Greek-speaking widows are being neglected in favor of the Hebrew-speaking widows. The disharmony appears rooted in that all too common prejudice – racial discrimination. A spirit of murmuring and criticism arises in the Community – certainly aimed indirectly, if not directly, at the Apostles. After all, they are the authorities and it is their responsibility.

Up to this point, all administrative authority resided in the Apostles. A major change is now to be inaugurated. Luke now stresses the importance of what follows by describing it as an action of the entire Church, “*The Twelve assembled the community of disciples and said, ‘it is not right for us to neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. Look around among your own number, brothers, for seven men acknowledged to be deeply spiritual and prudent, and we shall appoint them to this task. This will permit us to concentrate on prayer and the ministry of the word.’*” (Acts 6:2-4) This episode illustrates the unique position and authority of the Twelve. The Community will select the men, but the Apostles will ordain them, “*We shall appoint them to this task.*”

Seven men were presented. They all spoke Greek and had Greek names (one even was a Greek convert), and the Apostles accepted them. The first ordination ceremony now occurs in the Christian Community, "*They presented these men to the Apostles, who first prayed over them and then imposed hands on them.*" (Acts 6:6) It was an ancient belief that one transfers power to another by the laying on of hands.

The tension existing between the Hebrew and the Hellenistic Jews symbolizes the innate unsociability of the Jews with the Gentile world. The Church, flowing out of a Jewish culture, carries within itself the seeds of this prejudice against the Gentile world. The Church of Jerusalem has been content to be a Jewish Community concerned with the people of Israel. The Holy Spirit now begins to lead the Church to take its first step towards the Gentile world without it even knowing it. How marvelous to see the Holy Spirit working within the human situation to realize the Divine Purpose and Will. With the appointment of the Seven, the Lord prepares a team in the midst of the Church for the work He has planned.

An even more important event has occurred. Jesus imparted His full power to the Twelve. His Divine Power had been contained and conserved in these Twelve. For the first time, they open the floodgates of this power. When they laid hands upon the Seven, they became channels for this Divine Power to be released and to flow down through all ages, to become an unbroken series of ordained ministers who would be of every race, color and tongue.

The Church has been One, Holy, Apostolic and now, unconsciously, has taken its first step towards being Catholic – a universal Church!

THE SPIRIT-FILLED CHURCH

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND QUESTIONS SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK (PLEASE MEMORIZE)

"HE SENT HIM TO YOU FIRST TO BLESS YOU BY TURNING YOU FROM YOUR EVIL WAYS." (Acts 3:26)

FIRST DAY: Read Summary through The Spirit-Filled Community.

- 1. What are some of the teachings about Jesus that the Holy Spirit has revealed in Acts so far?**
- 2. Gospel means "good news." What do you see to be the "good news" preached by Peter?**
- 3. What is the first blessing God gives to those who come to faith in Jesus?**
- 4. What were some of the evident gifts of the Holy Spirit in the early Christian Community?**

**SECOND DAY: Read Summary: The Holy Spirit and Church Ministry;
Acts 5:12-16.**

- 1. How do you see the Holy Spirit working through the Apostles?**
- 2. What does Acts 5:15 tell you about Peter?**
- 3. How would you describe the Gift of Fortitude?**
- 4. Why do we need the Gift of Wisdom along with Fortitude?**

**THIRD DAY: Read Summary: The Apostles before the Sanhedrin;
Acts 5:17-32.**

- 1. What are some of the different meanings for an "Angel of the Lord" in the Scriptures?**
- 2. How is the Gift of Fortitude displayed in this episode?**

3. What are some of the ways Christians today fail to demonstrate the Gift of Fortitude?
4. In what way do you see the Holy Spirit testifying to Jesus in your life?

FOURTH DAY: Read Acts 5:33-42.

1. Why do you think the Sanhedrin desired to kill the Apostles?
2. In what way does Gamaliel act as an "Angel of the Lord"?
3. What effect did the threats and punishment of the Sanhedrin have on the Apostles?
4. How would you explain the Apostles being filled with joy over being beaten?

FIFTH DAY: Read Summary: A Visible Society; Mt.16:13-20; John 1:40-42; John 21:15-19.

1. What kind of society does the Church appear to be in Acts?
2. What role appears to belong exclusively to the Apostles?
3. Up to this point in Acts, what appears to be the role of Peter in the Community?
4. In what way do you see the readings in the Gospels confirming Peter's role in the Community?

SIXTH DAY: Read Summary: Growth and Change; Acts 6:1-7.

1. What is the cause of disharmony In the Community?
2. How does the Holy Spirit use this problem for His own purposes?
3. What is the importance of the ordination of the Seven?
4. What does it mean to you for the Church to be Catholic?

CHAPTER 7

THE WITNESS OF STEPHEN

INTRODUCTION

Jesus Christ was God's revelation to the world of God's own personality. Jesus is the perfect example of the supernatural being built upon the natural. God became man while remaining God. In Jesus we behold a realistic human reflection of the Divine. In every respect Jesus remains man. Divinity did not destroy the humanity of Jesus - but glorified it. Jesus, as the Word Incarnate, is indeed the Light of the World.

In Palestine, amidst a Jewish culture, this revelation of God was presented to men. Upon good and simple men, like the shepherds in the field, did this heavenly light shine for the first time.

Revelation is Divine Truth revealed to human beings. Jesus Christ is the supreme revelation of God to mankind. Since this revelation comes in a human package, it is capable of being understood and received by all peoples. Each can receive this revelation in a relatively full way. (Each child knows its mother, but no two children know her in exactly the same degree.) All people can receive Jesus the Light of the World, but can anyone receive Him fully? Each will understand Him in keeping with his or her own light and in keeping with the natural capabilities of one's own mind, and, most important, to the degree that one makes use of the light and natural talents possessed.

The gifts of the Holy Spirit bring supernatural powers to the human spirit, but the Holy Spirit does not re-create the human nature of the person. In the case of healings, the Holy Spirit does work in the physical dimensions of the person. After the reception of the Holy Spirit, the natural limitations of the personality remain unless a miracle in the physical order does occur. For example, if the eating of raw oysters sickens you before the reception of the Holy Spirit, chances are you will be sickened by them afterwards. What we are saying is that grace builds upon the natural foundation. The Apostles

were the first to receive the revelation of Jesus. These were simple men conditioned by their culture and education.

Even though many Jews did not accept Jesus as the Messiah, they accepted the disciples of Jesus because their beliefs concerning the Messiah did not clash with the accepted Jewish beliefs. This was soon to end. A new stream entered the Church destined to charter a new course for the Church--setting it on a rough and difficult course for many, many years to come. The Hellenistic mind became exposed to the revelations of Jesus Christ. The Hellenistic mind, in the light of Christian Faith, profoundly affected the Church's understanding of Jesus and his teachings. "Hellen" means "Greek"; it designated a people with a common culture and language. The Greeks referred to the rest of human beings as "barbarians."

At the time of the writing of Acts, Alexandria in Egypt was one of the three great cities within the Roman Empire. By New Testament times, Alexandria, with its famous libraries and scholars, had become the greatest center of Hellenistic culture in the world. The city had one of the largest, the richest, and the most influential concentration of Jews in the ancient world. They, too, were greatly affected by the intellectual environment of the city. It was here that seventy Jewish scholars translated the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek (the Greek Septuagint Bible). Here lived Philo, the great Jewish philosopher. He endeavored to prove that the Jews were not barbarians, but that in the Jewish Law, they possessed great Wisdom capable of leading to intellectual growth.

THE HELLEN SYNAGOGUE

Jews raised in an Alexandrian environment or Greek culture would have reflected quite differently upon the Scriptures than Jews raised in Palestine. The Palestinian Jews must have appeared mentally dull in comparison. It is understandable that such Jews living in Jerusalem would form their own cultural community. This would center around their own synagogue. From this Hellenic center, no doubt, came the Greek-speaking converts to the Christian Community. We know the Church selected seven of these men to deal with the problem of Greek-speaking Christians. The Apostles ordained these men to the ministry. It was the first extension of the Apostolic authority and power to other men. For the first time, the Church reached beyond its Hebrew environment.

Of the Seven ordained, one stands out as a superstar – Stephen. Some scholars believe he came from Alexandria. His behavior certainly indicates a man well trained in the science of logic and argumentation. Luke has already singled him out as a man “*filled with faith and the Holy Spirit.*” (Acts 6:5) In Stephen, we have an interesting combination; we have a young man not only with a good mind but one well trained to razor sharpness; he possesses an ardent faith in Jesus and has a soul filled with the Holy Spirit. What happens when this fine mind of Stephen gazes upon the revelation of the Word under the inspiration of the light of the Holy Spirit? New aspects of the Christian revelation are seen for the first time. When Luke identifies Stephen as a man filled with faith and the Holy Spirit, he has prepared us to see that the teachings Stephen will give on faith come from the Holy Spirit.

Stephen recognized that in Jesus the true spiritual reality of God had become real and visible. Jesus was neither shadow nor reflection of God, but truly God incarnated. If this be true, then what of the Jewish religion? What of the temple so highly esteemed by all Jews? The Old Testament is but an image, a shadow of the true sun come into the world to enlighten all men. Before the true light all shadows and images fade away. What is the consequence of this truth? The Old Testament is fulfilled in Jesus. With the coming of Jesus it is no longer needed. This is a bold deduction and a dangerous one to be made in Jerusalem. Once the Christian religion could rise above the confines of the Jewish religion, it would know its true self and see its universal mission. It was truly a religion for all men, for all times. It had always been and would always be Catholic “*for there is no other name in the whole world given to men by which we are to be saved.*” (Acts 4:12) It is Stephen's ministry that appears to have inaugurated this separation.

When Stephen went back to his old synagogue seeking to enlighten his fellow countrymen, he ran into violent opposition. There was a man present in the city at this time from the Province of Cilicia, Saul of Tarsus. It may be presumed that Saul attended this synagogue and was no stranger to Stephen. Anyone who later described himself as “a Pharisee of Pharisees” would have been especially alarmed by Stephen's deductions. Stephen made enemies and not only for himself, but for the Christian Community. There was a mood swing among the people and the Pharisees away from the disciples. This offered the enemies of Stephen the opportunity to rid themselves of him, “*All together they confronted him, seized him, and led him off to the Sanhedrin.*” They charged him with blasphemy.

THE TRIAL OF STEPHEN

Stephen is requested to defend himself against the charges. What appears to be a long drawn out defense - going a long way around the problem - is in actual fact a subtle demonstration of defending the claims of Jesus, and, on the other hand, condemning the Sanhedrin. In truth, Stephen acts as a clever lawyer vindicating Jesus and indicting the true criminals - indeed, a work of the Holy Spirit.

Let us review the charges against Stephen before the Sanhedrin. First, he had spoken against Moses by substituting a "false prophet" - Jesus of Nazareth - in place of Moses. Second, he was charged with blasphemy against the Law - holding that the Law no longer applied as it had been fulfilled in Jesus. Third, he was charged with blasphemy against the temple - teaching it was no longer needed in order to worship God.

Stephen begins his defense by reviewing the history of Israel from Abraham to David. Stephen knew the secret purposes of God's Will to be hidden in the history of Israel. These purposes are veiled. When the veil is lifted, the life of the Messiah is revealed in the history of Israel. This life coincides with the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Also, the sufferings of the Jews are revealed to be a result of their constant rebellion against the Divine Plan.

Acts 7:1-16: In this section, Stephen subtly demonstrates that the founder of the Jewish people found communion with the "God of glory" beyond the Holy Land - in Mesopotamia. The promises made to Abraham were never to be fulfilled during his earthly life. In Abraham stands a veiled image of Jesus, in whose life the promises to the Messiah had not been realized. He, too, entered a foreign land without receiving His inheritance. Jesus lived and died in Hope of the promises. In the fullness of God's time, these promises to the Messiah would be fulfilled.

Stephen demonstrates that Israel became the people of God prior to the practice of circumcision in which they put so much stock. Obviously, it could not be absolutely necessary to be circumcised in order to belong to God inasmuch as Abraham belonged to God, and in him all his descendants, before the establishment of the ritual of circumcision.

The figure of Jesus appears again in the image of Joseph. Just as Joseph was

sold into slavery because of the envy of his brothers, so was Jesus delivered up to death out of envy. As God saved Joseph from his tribulations, so He saved Jesus from the pangs of death - He raised Him up. Pharaoh becomes an image of God who now has exalted this Jesus to His right Hand after being despised by His brothers. In other words, God has made Him Ruler - the Messiah. From this exalted position, He now acts as Savior of His brethren. Just as Pharaoh had appointed Joseph as head of his house, so God has appointed Jesus as Head of His house - the Church.

The second time Joseph made himself known to his brothers may be a reference to the coming of the Holy Spirit whose coming revealed the true nature of Jesus. The brothers who first despised their Brother now come to Him as their Savior - those who are true children of the patriarchs. Their true spiritual ties are recognized in their coming to Jesus. They are the true children of Israel.

Stephen also notes that the bodies of the holy patriarchs did not lie buried in a place deemed holy by the Jews. These places are made holy by the bodies of the patriarchs. There are holy places other than those recognized by this present group of Jews.

Acts 7:17-38: Stephen sees a comparison between Jesus and Moses - the most esteemed and beloved of all Jews. He subtly makes the point that this Moses they so esteem is the same Moses of whose authority the Jews had rejected and whom they had driven away. But what the Jews rejected, God selected! God confirmed Moses in his role as savior of his people. Stephen saw a comparison between the Divine commission of Moses and the Divine commission of Jesus when the Holy Spirit descended upon Him at the moment of His baptism.

The Lord said to Moses, "Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground." Stephen saw in this incident a rejection of the Jews affirmation that the temple was the only holy place on earth. God makes that place holy wherever His Presence may be.

A close parallel between the ministry of Moses and that of Jesus is drawn. Moses, rejected by the Jews, became not only ruler and judge, but savior. Jesus, *"the stone rejected by the builders has become the cornerstone."* *"God has made both Lord and Messiah this Jesus whom you crucified."* (Acts 2:36) *"There is no salvation in anyone else."* (Acts 4:12) God proved His Divine

Jesus was a man approved by God. *“Jesus the Nazorean was a man whom God sent to you with miracles, wonders, and signs as his credentials. These God worked through him in your midst, as you well know.” (Acts 2:22)* God spoke to the Jews directly through Moses and through Moses passed to them the way of life. Moses himself confirmed that these teachings were incomplete and his way was not the final one when he revealed that God would one day send another prophet like himself, and to this prophet all Israel must listen. Moses warned future Israelites, *“And the Lord said to me, ‘This was well said. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their kinsmen, and will put my words into his mouth; he shall tell them all that I command him. If any man will not listen to my words which he speaks in my name, I myself will make him answer for it.’” (Dt. 18:17-19)*

The facts about the life of Jesus would have been known to all the Sanhedrin. The apostles had been preaching about them quite vocally and publicly for several years. It was the death of Jesus on the Cross that became the “stumbling block for the Jews.” They couldn't accept the fact that a suffering Messiah could possibly be the Promised Messiah. Stephen has been demonstrating that the Scriptures revealed all this in its own history. The lives of the great Jews - Abraham, Joseph, Moses - had been but images and shadows of this great reality (Jesus) reflected on the pages of Jewish history.

Acts 7:39-50: Stephen goes on to demonstrate that in the case of Moses, even though God had confirmed before the Jews that Moses was His prophet, they still rejected Moses. The source of their rejection was not their failure to know the truth and its source, but their own obstinate wills. They rejected God's way in favor of their own ways - their own wills; they would follow gods of their own creation. Because of this disobedience, God abandoned them to their own will, permitting them to suffer the evil consequences flowing from it. God had sent Jesus, a man approved by Him, but the Jews had rejected Him for messiahs in keeping with their own desires. Since they refused to accept and obey Jesus, God abandoned them to follow their false messiahs who would lead them down roads of destruction.

Stephen stresses the idea of idolatry, for he has seen in this Jewish worship of the temple an idolatry in itself. The Jews devotion to the temple had replaced their devotion to God. It is a work of their own hands - an

extension of themselves. In their love of the temple, they loved themselves and not God. Stephen demonstrates that God cannot be confined in anything made with human hands. David had understood this. It was Solomon who built the temple and Solomon fell into idolatry. *“The heavens are my throne, the earth is my footstool; what kind of house can you build me?” asks the Lord. ‘What is my resting-place to be like? Did not my hand make all these things?’”*

Acts 7:54-60: As Stephen speaks, he himself is overcome by the terrible reality of the sin of Israel, the rejection and murder of the Messiah, and the root cause of this sin - the pride of human will. It is the Sanhedrin that has been on trial and in them the Jewish people. Through Stephen, the Holy Spirit delivers the verdict. Stephen's trial will not come to an end. But their trial has ended and the verdict of “guilty” has been handed down. Their subsequent actions will prove the righteousness of the verdict. The end has come. Stephen's words have released diabolical rage and hatred and his physical life will not withstand its onslaught.

The trial of Jesus before the Sanhedrin had ended with the sentence of blasphemy when Jesus confessed, *“Soon you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.” (Mt.26:64)* By referring to Himself as the Son of Man, Jesus identified Himself as the one spoken of by Daniel in 7:13-14. The testimony of Stephen before this same Sanhedrin confirms the words of Jesus. This Jesus crucified by them is truly the glorious Son of Man. This witness the Jews cannot bear. For this, Stephen dies. The Greek word for “witness” is “martyr.” Stephen has witnessed unto death. His name means “crown.” He is the first in the Church to wear the martyr's crown. He professed, by his life, that Jesus is Lord. With his dying breath, his lips had confessed the Lordship of Jesus, *“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”* This is the first recorded prayer in the history of the Church addressed to Jesus.

Today if you go to the Holy Land, the guides will show you the place where tradition confirms that Stephen died. It is marked by a beautiful Church. Likewise, the guides will point to the mount that looks down upon the spot where Stephen died, and they will point to the place tradition maintains that the Mother of Jesus viewed this martyrdom and wept for her son Stephen and prayed for him at the hour of his death.

THE WITNESS OF STEPHEN

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND QUESTIONS SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK (PLEASE MEMORIZE)

"I WILL RAISE UP FOR THEM A PROPHET LIKE YOU FROM AMONG THEIR KINSMEN, AND WILL PUT MY WORDS INTO HIS MOUTH; HE SHALL TELL THEM ALL THAT I COMMAND HIM." (Dt. 18:18)

FIRST DAY: Read Summary through Hellen Synagogue; Acts 6:7-15.

1. Why should all men be able to understand God in Jesus Christ?
2. Why is the same truth understood in different degrees by different people?
3. What was Stephen's view of Jesus?
4. How can you deepen your own understanding of God's Word?

SECOND DAY: Read Summary through section Acts 7:1-16; Acts 1:1-8.

1. What effect did Stephen's vision of truth have on the Church?
2. Why does Stephen use the Old Testament to defend Jesus' claims as Messiah?
3. What do you think Stephen is trying to teach when he tells us God appeared in Mesopotamia?
4. How does Abraham serve as a veiled image of the Messiah?

THIRD DAY: Read Acts 7:9-19.

1. How does the reaction of Joseph's brothers toward him resemble that of the Jews towards Jesus?
2. How does God frustrate the plans of Joseph's brothers?

3. How does this become an image of Jesus?
4. What do you see to be the symbolic representation in Acts 7:13 to the Christian Community?

FOURTH DAY: Read Summary through section Acts 7:17-38; Acts 7:20-38.

1. Can you find things from the early life of Moses that symbolize the early life of Jesus?
2. What in the ministry of Moses is parallel to the Ministry of Jesus?
3. Why does Deuteronomy 18:18-19 prove the revelation coming through Moses was temporary and incomplete?
4. What does Deuteronomy 18:18-19 teach you personally?

FIFTH DAY: Read Summary through section Acts 7:39-50; Acts 7:39-50.

1. What was the reason the Hebrews rejected Moses?
2. What does this tell you about the Jews rejection of Jesus?
3. How does God punish people who turn from truth?
4. What does this teach us about the living of our own lives?

SIXTH DAY: Read Summary through section Acts 7:54-60; Acts 7:51-60.

1. What is the verdict the Holy Spirit delivers through Stephen?
2. Why do you think there was such a violent reaction to these truths?
3. How is Stephen revealed to be a true disciple of Jesus?
4. What does Stephen's final prayer teach you?

CHAPTER 8

THE WINDS OF PERSECUTION

INTRODUCTION

The very fact that Luke devoted one-twentieth of Acts to Stephen's short ministry, arrest, and trial indicated the importance of this episode in his mind. He viewed the episode of Stephen as a major moment in Church History.

The picture presented by history indicates a relatively small number of Jews accepted Jesus as Messiah. The majority of Jews, following their leaders, rejected the claims of Jesus of Nazareth. These two groups - the Jews who believed in Jesus and those who rejected Him - were destined to go separate ways. One was to follow the Will of God and the other was to follow a course of its own choosing. The course taken by the Jews under the guidance of their leaders shortly led to the destruction of Jerusalem, the temple and the party of the Sadducees. As a result of this, the priesthood and sacrificial worship disappeared from among the Jews. Their lives became centered around the lay-run synagogue communities under the leadership of a rabbi - a layman trained in the Law and traditions of the fathers. The groups survived through the centuries in an almost cellular existence scattered across the earth. Judaism's continuance in existence, under some extremely difficult circumstances, can only be described as miraculous. They were not totally abandoned by God. Their continued existence seems to imply that the Jews, as a whole, still have an important role to play in the Divine Plan on earth. St. Paul believed it and spoke of it in his writings.

The remnant of Jews who accepted Jesus as Messiah had an entirely different course to follow. Only time made clear the course the Church must take as the Holy Spirit pushed the Church down the Divine Path it must walk. The Holy Spirit worked in many aspects of the Body to develop the mission and the theology of the Christian Church. Religion came to center on the very Person of Jesus. An awareness developed within the Church that salvation must be achieved through personal identification with the Person of Jesus. This demanded a radical change in the person and conformity of one's

personal life to the Way of Jesus. A person expressed this by being baptized. The baptized person became empowered by the Presence of the Holy Spirit to live a life patterned on that of Jesus. Jesus was seen to be living in the baptized. The union with Jesus replaced the Law as a means of salvation. Stephen sowed the seed of this doctrine and Paul was destined to fully develop and masterfully express it in his Epistle to the Romans. By the time disciples of Jesus were faced with separating themselves from temple worship, they had been "led" to see, through the ministry of Stephen, how Jesus replaced the temple and how His death on the Cross made temple sacrifice superfluous. The Author of the Book of Hebrews, probably an Alexandrian Jew, further developed these theological concepts.

This is a broad and general picture of how one religious source (the Jewish Religion) divided to become two divergent religious streams, both enduring through the course of nearly two thousand years and neither being the same as when they parted. Apparently, somewhere along the course of history these two streams - Judaism and Christianity - are divinely destined to meet and become one again...

THE WINDS OF PERSECUTION

The world knocking at its door demanding entrance awakened the consciousness of the Church to an awareness of its universal mission. If Jesus is the Savior of the world, He must be made available to the world. He must be presented, if possible, to every creature on earth. If the whole world cannot come to Jerusalem, then Jerusalem must go out to the whole world. Religious persecution pushed the Church down the road towards world evangelization. Religious persecution, being the stimulus, causing the spread of Christianity, serves to illustrate how God brings good out of evil - how even man's rebellion works the Will of God.

Through the Holy Spirit, the Church came to realize that this glorious return of Jesus depended upon a restoration of men's lives. The Holy Spirit had been sent into this world to produce this "universal restoration" spoken of by Peter. The Church recognized its mission to prepare men to receive the Holy Spirit - to preach repentance and forgiveness of sins. Once the Church realized this, it came to the conscious awareness it must "exodus" beyond Jerusalem - it must extend beyond Palestine so that the posterity of Jesus, as that of Abraham, "will be strangers in a foreign land." The Christian Community would live in hope of the promises made to its forefathers, the

Apostles. It was a People of God "sent" into the world to bring all men to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. In other words, the disciples of Jesus Christ are essentially a Missionary Church!

Stephen has been the first disciple of Jesus to shed his blood as a witness to his faith. The blood of Stephen did not serve to quench Saul's hatred but rather to inflame it. A fanatical zeal consumed him to purge Judaism of the disciples of Jesus. The very name of Jesus had become despicable to his ears. Under the leadership of Saul, this gang from the Synagogue of Freedmen formed a band of storm troopers and descended, that very day, like a pack of mad wolves, upon the Christian Community in Jerusalem. The death of Stephen sparked a conflagration.

Saul devastated the Church in Jerusalem. Through him a reign of terror descended upon the Church. Those who could escape fled the city. Luke tells us, "*All except the Apostles scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria.*" (*Acts 8:1b*) Due to the uproar in the city against the disciples, the Community had to leave the dead body of Stephen where it lay. The Lord provided. He moved some devout Jewish men to honorably bury His Saint.

Saul's hateful activities inflicted deep wounds upon the Body of the Church. It left scars deeply embedded in the memory of the Church - too deep even for his later repentance and reputation to entirely erase. The Church of Jerusalem would never completely trust and receive him with open arms.

The winds of persecution, arising upon the death of Stephen, "scattered" the disciples of Jesus like seeds across Judea and Samaria and the seed of faith was sown wherever they went. Luke records, "*The members of the Church who had been dispersed went about preaching the word.*" (*Acts 8:4*) As an example, Luke now relates the ministry of Philip, one of the Seven ordained by the Apostles.

PHILIP IN SAMARIA

Philip, who probably was well known to Saul and likewise an object of his hatred, fled Jerusalem and headed north to Samaria. Judea was too unsafe for him. Samaria lay beyond the jurisdiction of the high priest and the Sanhedrin. The city of Samaria itself, the capitol of the province, had long been a center of refuge for those accused of breaking the Jewish Law.

The Samaritans, as the Sadducees, accepted only the Law, the first five books of the Bible called the Pentateuch, as inspired Scriptures. They practiced circumcision and strictly observed the Sabbath. However, they maintained Mt. Gerizim, rather than Zion, to be the mountain of God and the site for the temple and the rituals of the Law. They exalted Moses and looked for a messiah to come called the "taheb" meaning the "restorer" or "he who returns." The Messiah would be the prophet like Moses or even Moses reincarnated.

The Jews were deeply prejudiced against the Samaritans. Therefore Samaria was a safe place for any fugitive from Judea. Any enemy of the Jews was a friend of the Samaritans. In this environment, Philip began to preach about Jesus. The very fact that the Jews rejected Jesus and killed Him would awaken a responsive cord in the Samaritans. They could identify with Jesus in this.

The faith of the people of the city of Samaria had a less secure foundation than the people of Judea. In our Lord's day, the Samaritan woman said to Him, "*Sir, I can see you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you people claim that Jerusalem is the place where we ought to worship God.*" (Jn. 4:19-20) The statement centered on a sensitive religious issue between the Jews and Samaritans - they had been warring over it for years. When it comes to religious truth, it is not a matter so much of who is right but what is right (true)! The Light of Truth cannot but reveal the truth. Jesus responded to the woman, "*You people worship what you do not understand, while we understand what we worship; after all, salvation is from the Jews.*" (Jn. 4:22)

Through Philip, God meets the people where they are. Words would not be sufficient to initiate Faith. They were raised upon a diet of signs and wonders and for this their souls hungered. The works that accompanied the preaching of the Word far exceeded anything the city had witnessed, "*There were many who had unclean spirits, which came out shrieking loudly. Many others were paralytics or cripples, and these were cured.*" (Acts 8:7) "*Without exception, the crowds that heard Philip and saw the miracles he performed attended closely to what he had to say.*" (Acts 8:6) The people began to experience a spirit within themselves which they had never experienced before - the spirit of Joy, "*The rejoicing in that town rose to fever pitch.*" (Acts 8:8) Large numbers of the Samaritans embraced the faith and were

baptized. Among these converts, Luke centers our attention upon one particular man - Simon.

Simon was a magician. No one can better see through the magic of a magician than another magician. Simon watched Philip closely and was profoundly impressed. Philip made a believer out of Simon. From the account given, this was some conversion - Simon had been a superstar in his own field. He goes from being a master to a disciple.

CONFIRMATION BY PETER AND JOHN

Luke now shifts the scene back to Jerusalem. Reports have come to the Apostles of the conversions in Samaria. This is the first report of anyone entering the Church other than bona fide Jews. No doubt the news caused a little surprise and uneasiness that those detested Samaritans had entered the Christian Community. But, after all, they are circumcised, observe the Law, believe in Moses and are looking for the Messiah - it is not as if they were pagans! The Church in Jerusalem decided to accept them as true members of the Community.

Philip has, prophet-like, opened this new door to the Church under the personal inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Luke ties in what Philip has done with the established Christian Community. He indicates that the Church in Samaria is not an autonomous body, but has a dependence upon the Church of Jerusalem. The dependence that a body has upon the head. There is an organic unity in the Church. There is organization and authority in the Church and each Christian Community needs to accept this. Even though the Samaritans believe in Jesus and have been baptized, they still need the ministry of the Church's leaders in order to receive the fullness of the Holy Spirit. If we cut ourselves off from the leadership of the Church, we have certainly cut ourselves off from certain ministries of the Holy Spirit very vital to our spiritual life.

The Church has recognized in the Samaritan incident the administration of the Sacrament of Confirmation. The Apostles (The Church) certainly confirm and strengthen what has been wrought through the ministry of Philip. Luke describes it this way, *"The two went down to these people and prayed that they might receive the Holy Spirit. It had not as yet come down upon any of them since they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. The pair upon arriving imposed hands on them and they received the*

Holy Spirit.”(Acts 8:14-17)

THE SIN OF SIMON

Luke once again centers our attention on that famous convert Simon. *“Simon observed that it was through the laying on of hands that the apostles conferred the Spirit, and he made them an offer of money with the request, ‘Give me that power too, so that if I place my hands on anyone he will receive the Holy Spirit.’”* Peter is shocked by the request and reacts strongly, *“May you and your money rot - thinking that God's gift can be bought. You can have no portion or lot in this affair. Your heart is not steadfastly set on God. Reform your evil ways. Pray that the Lord may pardon you for thinking the way you have. I see you poisoned with gall and caught in the grip of sin.”* (Acts 8:18-23) Some still have the nerve to maintain in the light of this that Peter never acted with unique authority in the Church. No matter in what language you read it, It still comes out the same way. The Apostle Peter, the head of the Church, has just told a member of the Church to go to Hell! One ancient text of Acts relates that Simon carried on for days after this, mourning and crying in near despair.

Simon has the distinction of doing what is almost impossible - creating a new sin. He has the dubious honor of having it named after him - simony (commercial traffic in sacred things). Simon is probably an example of a person becoming a Christian without true repentance - without denouncing and turning away from his old way of life - at least not deep down in his soul. The Church may maintain that the sacraments work independently of the spiritual condition of the minister, but never independently of the spiritual condition of the recipient.

The words of Peter filled Simon with fear and he begged the prayers of the Community, but they can be of no avail if he refuses to turn from sin. Fear is an emotion; repentance - an act of the will. Simon, no doubt, experiences fear and guilt, but not repentance. Tradition confirms that Simon returned to his old ways, nourishing and abiding hatred for Peter. He is credited with the foundation of Gnosticism - the first heresy within the Church.

PHILIP THE EVANGELIST

Luke relates that Peter and John not only confirmed, but they filled their essential apostolic role of *"giving their testimony and proclaiming the word of the Lord."* Luke tells us that they evangelized all the way back to Judea, *"They went back to Jerusalem bringing the good news to many villages of Samaria on the way."* (Acts 8:25) We certainly have to credit Philip's zeal with getting the Apostles out of Jerusalem for the first time.

Luke now reports another task in which the Lord uses His servant Philip. In these brief glimpses of Philip, we catch a passing resemblance to the prophet Elijah in the way the Lord moves this docile servant here and there. The Lord sends Philip south towards the Gaza strip that leads to Egypt; Philip does not know the purpose of his mission, only the direction.

Down by Gaza, Philip falls in with a caravan heading south. In the caravan was an important black official, a eunuch who was the treasurer for the Candace - the female ruler of the kingdom of Meroe. The Scriptures refer to him as from Ethiopia but this was a wide term which covered all Africa south of Egypt. The man was returning from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. He adhered to the Jewish religion although he could not be received into Judaism as the law of Deuteronomy forbade the reception of a eunuch into the *"Community of the Lord."* (See Dt. 23:2)

The Spirit of the Lord takes Philip on a long journey to bring one man into the Church. As the Scriptures tell us, *"His eye is upon the sparrow."* This incident emphasizes the importance of one person. The eunuch was reading aloud from the prophet Isaiah and Philip came alongside and asked him if he understood what he was reading. The eunuch replied that he needed someone to interpret Scripture for him. He invited Philip to join him in his chariot. Beginning with the text being read, Philip explained how these Scriptures and others referred to Jesus of Nazareth. Through the Scriptures he brought the man to faith in Jesus. In this case, no signs and wonders were needed. The evangelist had a soul of greater spiritual maturity upon which to work and so faith quickly took root. Because of his background and spiritual disposition, he evidently possessed a docility of spirit open to be instructed. He said, *"How can I (understand the Scripture) unless someone explains it to me?"* (Acts 8:31) He had the humility of heart that readied him for the truth and conversion. Did not the Holy Spirit explain to the eunuch the mysteries of Christ in the Scriptures? Yes Indeed! But He did so

through a Christian Teacher. That is His ordinary means through which the Spirit instructs us. When Philip ended his instructions, the man asked for baptism.

For a few moments, two men met and briefly shared a religious experience. The black man continued on south towards Africa, filled with the joy of his new faith, and the Lord took Philip away to a town north of Gaza. Philip evangelized all along the coast, finally coming to Caesarea. Apparently, he settled there. Twenty years later, we hear of him again. Paul is making his last trip to Jerusalem. He is accompanied by Luke who records, "*The next day we pushed on and came to Caesarea. There we entered the home of Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven, with whom we stayed. This man had four unmarried daughters gifted with prophecy.*" (Acts 21:8-9) On this visit, Luke heard the accounts he recorded for us. Philip now has a new title, and a well deserved one - "Philip the Evangelist."

Luke presented Philip not because he was rare, but because he was an example of how the Gospel spread through the disciples of Jesus. How much good one willing servant of the Lord can do? Acts emphasizes the importance of what one person can do for God or even against God. The Apostles were needed but where would the Church of God be without its Stephens and Philips?

Philip and the black eunuch were never to meet again on earth, but their meeting had eternal consequences. They would meet again in the Kingdom of God - what had occurred so long ago on earth will be a cause of eternal joy to them both.

Once the great American missionary priest Thomas Judge asked a young lay missionary, who he had just picked up at the train station, what she had talked about to the man who had been seated next to her on the train. She replied that she had not spoken to him. Father Judge said, "*You mean you sat next to him all those hours and you never shared any of your faith with him?*" The young lady replied, "*I didn't see any reason to as I would never see him again.*" Father Judge said to her, "*Oh yes you will - on Judgment Day!*"

THE WINDS OF PERSECUTION

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND QUESTIONS SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK (PLEASE MEMORIZE)

“YOU NEED PATIENCE TO DO THE WILL OF GOD AND RECEIVE WHAT HE HAS PROMISED.” (Heb. 10:36)

FIRST DAY: Read Summary through Winds of Persecution; Acts 8:1-3; 22:4,19-20; 26:10-11; Gal.1:3; Hebrews 10:32-36.

1. How did persecution affect both the Jewish Community and the Disciples of Jesus?
2. What effect did Saul's persecution have upon the Church?
3. How would you describe the character of Saul?
4. What does Hebrews 10:32-36 teach you about being a disciple of Jesus?

SECOND DAY: Read Summary through Philip In Samaria; Lk. 9:51-56; 17:11-19; John 4:4-26.S

1. What was the attitude of the Jews towards the Samaritans?
2. What type of spirit do James and John show in Luke 9:51-56?
3. What do you see being symbolized in Luke 17:11-19?
4. What does the episode between Jesus and the Samaritan Woman teach you about evangelizing others?

THIRD DAY: Read Acts 8:4-13.

1. Why would Philip be safe in Samaria?
2. What means does Philip use to evangelize the Samaritans?

3. Why do you think these means were needed?
4. What is it that especially appears to appeal to Simon?

FOURTH DAY: Read Summary The Sin of Simon; Acts 8:14-25.

1. What is Luke teaching us by the Church sending Peter and John to Samaria?
2. What does this teach you about the Sacrament of Confirmation?
3. In your opinion what appears to be at the root of Simon's sin?
4. How did Philip's ministry affect the Apostles?

FIFTH DAY: Read Summary Philip the Evangelist; Acts 8:26-40.

1. What does this incident reveal to you about God?
2. What method does Philip use to evangelize the eunuch?
3. Why do you think in this case signs and wonders were not needed?
4. What does this incident teach you about evangelizing?

SIXTH DAY: Read Isaiah 56:1-8; Acts 21:8-9.

1. How would you say that Philip's ministry is fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah?
2. Why do you think Luke has recorded the ministry of Philip?
3. What kind of Christian do you find Philip to be?
4. What does Acts 21:8-9 tell you?

CHAPTER 9

SAUL OF TARSUS

INTRODUCTION

Saul of Tarsus was a religious zealot. Religion dominated his life to a fanatical degree. It consumed his thoughts; it motivated his actions. What the Lord said of Jeremiah, He may well have spoken of Saul, *"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I dedicated you, a prophet to the nations I appointed you."* (Jer. 1:5) Saul sensed that God had set him apart even before his birth. (See Gal. 1:15) The Divine call to righteousness – *"Come follow me!"* – resounded early in the soul of Saul.

Saul was born no later than 10 A.D. in Tarsus – a city now part of modern Turkey. His own testimony confirms he was born a "Hebrew of Hebrews" – a way of saying that his total background and culture was Jewish. He was born of the tribe of Benjamin, circumcised on the eighth day, and was called Saul. Saul was not an only child. Acts speaks of a sister who lived in Jerusalem. His early life was divided between Tarsus and Jerusalem, *"The way I have lived since my youth, and the life I have led among my own people from the beginning and later at Jerusalem, is well known to all Jews."* (Acts 26:4) *"Here I sat at the feet of Gamaliel and was educated strictly in the law of our fathers."* (Acts 22:3b) *"I am a Pharisee and was born a Pharisee...They have been acquainted with me for a long time and can testify, if they wish, to my life lived as a Pharisee, the strictest sect of our religion."* (Acts 23:6b; 26:5) The Philosophy of the Pharisees shaped his moral and religious outlook. Revelation and Grace would later alter and temper his personality but never completely change it. Saul too, as all men, is a product, in some degree, of environment.

SAUL THE TALMID

At the time of Jesus, Jerusalem was the center of Jewish theological and juridical knowledge and training. From all corners of the known world young Jews streamed to Jerusalem to sit at the feet of the masters whose teachings were respected and repeated throughout the Jewish Communities.

When a young Jew desired to be a Scribe (Rabbi) he had to enroll in a school as a "Talmid." He pursued a regular course of studies for several years. When he had mastered all the material and the halakic method to where he could make capable decisions in religious and penal matters, he reached the status of "Talmid Hakam" – a non-ordained scholar. Only when he attained the canonical age of forty could he be ordained and be received into the company of the Scribes as a "hakam" – an ordained scholar. They received the title of "Rabbi." In our Lord's day, this title was somewhat loosely applied. It later became restricted to a Hakam.

Saul came from Tarsus to sit at the feet of Gamaliel I. Probably when Saul went to Jerusalem to sit at the feet of the most famous Scribe of the time, the mysterious longing within his soul began to assume shape and take direction. His soul thirsted for righteousness before God. He discovered in the Law the road to quench his thirst. Fully obeying the Law as decreed by Moses expressed an Israelites' true love of God. Saul desired to love God as the Scriptures demanded. He embraced the Law and channeled his energies of soul – not only to obey but to excel! *"I made progress in Jewish observance far beyond most of my contemporaries, in my excess of zeal to live out all the traditions of my ancestors."* (Gal. 1:14)

Many a true religious spirit has been stifled, corrupted, or retarded by faulty religious training. The teachers who mold the religious spirits of others unfortunately can only give what they have. Many of these are mediocre and retarded spirits themselves. The spirit of Saul was subjected to intense religious training under Gamaliel. His Rabbi may have been the best but he still was a product of the religious culture of the day. The very fact he was so well accepted testifies he kept well within the traditional bounds of accepted teachings.

By this time the traditions of the ancients had assumed an importance equal to the Law itself. The traditions of the ancients were so many "hedges"

erected to protect the Law. The Pharisaic section of Judaism defined 248 commandments and 365 prohibitions to be observed in order to be righteous before God. The Scribes elaborated all kinds of methods of getting around the traditions and Law. The Scribes satisfied the consciences of men, but in the end no one kept the Law. No one truly had its spirit. There was a lack of the true religious spirit. This, Jesus severely criticized.

What had been genuine in Saul, his education perverted into legalism. Such a spirit neither fosters a love of God nor a love of neighbor. Such a religious spirit often finds expression and release in hating others in the name of God – of espousing causes that truly express contempt and hatred of others. The religious life of such a person reflects a very negative attitude about God.

THE CONVERSION OF SAUL

Saul first appears on the Scripture scene as an enemy of Stephen. Saul silently watches as Stephen is stoned to death – he guards the cloaks of those who stone him. He, more than others, had understood the danger to Judaism in the teachings of Stephen. It had enkindled his fanatical zeal against the Christian Community inaugurating a bloody persecution – a reign of terror lasting for several years. Saul probably was in his early thirties at the time.

“Saul, still breathing murderous threats against the Lord's disciples, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus which would empower him to arrest and bring to Jerusalem anyone he might find, man or woman, living according to the new way.” (Acts 9:1-2) Damascus lay about 136 miles north of Jerusalem. As Saul and his associates headed for Damascus, Saul was “ambushed” along the road by the Lord. Luke had heard this story many times. He relates it here as a Church Historian, seeing it from the point of view of history rather than to Saul personally. *“As he traveled along and was approaching Damascus, a light from the sky suddenly flashed about him. He fell to the ground and at the same time heard a voice saying, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ ‘Who are you, sir?’ he asked. The voice answered, ‘I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting. Get up and go into the city, where you will be told what to do.’ The men who were traveling with him stood there speechless. They had heard the voice but could see no one. Saul got up from the ground unable to see, even though his eyes were open. They had to take him by the hand and lead him into Damascus.” (Acts 9:3-8)*

Three days he remained entombed in interminable darkness haunted by despairing and deadly visions. *"For three days," writes Luke, "he continued blind, during which time he neither ate nor drank."* (Acts 9:9) He did the only thing he could do – he prayed. A stranger's voice broke the silence – the soft sounds of his voice falling like the words of an absolution over his tormented soul, "Saul, my brother..." Ananias, a disciple of Jesus, had come to bring Saul out of his darkness into the light.

Ananias hadn't come without first expressing his own misgivings and fears to the Lord about this man. The Lord appeared to Ananias in a vision, *"Ananias!" he said. 'Here I am Lord,' came the answer. The Lord said to him, 'Go at once to Straight Street and at the house of Judas ask for a certain Saul of Tarsus...' But Ananias protested, 'Lord, I have heard from many sources about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people.' The Lord said to him, 'You must go! This man is the instrument I have chosen to bring my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I myself shall indicate to him how much he will have to suffer for my name.'*" (Acts 9:10-16)

Ananias, no doubt, instructed Saul in the fundamentals of faith and revealed the revelation God had given to him about the destiny of Saul – he was the chosen instrument of the Lord to make Him known to the Gentiles. Ananias baptized Saul and, we are told, his strength came back. He began to live again – a new life. Saul experienced baptism as a death and a resurrection, *"In baptism you were not only buried with him, but also raised to life with him because you believed in the power of God who raised him from the dead. Even when you were dead in sin...God gave you new life in company with Christ. He pardoned all our sins."* (Col. 2:12-13) Saul later preached this out of his personal experience.

The Lord revealed that Saul would suffer much. All the days of his apostolic life he would be persecuted by two groups of people: the Jews who considered him the arch-traitor, the renegade, and from certain members of the Christian Community who never trusted him, his vision, or his message. Later, he was to preach, again out of experience, *"We must undergo many trials if we are to enter into the reign of God."* (Acts 14:22b)

Luke believed Saul was an instrument of God; Saul was called by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself to the apostolate of the Gentiles; Saul had duly been received into the Church by a Christian minister appointed by Jesus, and

one well respected in the community at Damascus. Again, we must note how the Lord insists upon using members of the Christian Community for His work, "You must go!"

Luke has presented the conversion of Saul from the historical point of view and to its importance to the Church. The conversion of Saul is a turning point in Church History.

SAUL IN THE DESERT

Since it is not Luke's intention to give us the life of Saul, he omits details not important to the narrative. Details we find in Saul's letters. He writes to the Galatians, *"Immediately, without seeking human advisers or even going to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before me, I went off to Arabia..."* (Gal. 1:16b-17)

As the Spirit once led Moses and Jesus into the desert, Saul too is led to spend time in prayer and meditation – to contemplate the vision he had received and to grasp its meaning. Saul wrote the Galatians, *"I assure you, brothers, the gospel I proclaimed to you is no mere human invention. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I schooled in it. It came by revelation from Jesus Christ."* (Gal. 1:11-12)

The theology of Saul primarily developed from the revelation experienced on the road to Damascus. Saul speaks of the experience as a revelation in which God revealed His Son. Saul saw the Crucified Jesus to be the Lord of Glory. Nothing could have been more astounding to him nor more destructive of his previous religious foundation. When the skilled mind of Saul, touched by the grace of the Holy Spirit, considered what he saw in a vision, it led him to behold the "mystery of Christ" in which all men can be brought to righteousness in Jesus Christ. Saul finally understood the Crucifixion of Jesus – the curse that now rested upon Jesus. By His death on the Cross, Jesus accepted the curse that fell upon all breakers of the Law – all sinners. Jesus became, in a sense, sin in order that sinners could become sinless. The innocent Jesus, bearing the curse of the Law, redeemed all men under the Law by atoning for their transgressions of the Law. Saul had written, *"The Law was powerless because of its weakening by the flesh. Then God sent his Son in the likeness of sinful flesh as a sin offering, thereby condemning sin in the flesh, so that the just demands of the law might be fulfilled in us who live, not according to the flesh, but according to the spirit."*

(Rom. 8:3-4)

THE CHURCH IS JESUS

The revelation of Jesus sowed another seed in the heart of Saul, which was destined to bear abundant theological truth. A truth so unbelievable that many who profess it with their lips deny it in their actions. Jesus said to Saul, *"Why are you persecuting me?"* Saul personally persecuted the disciples of Jesus – men and women. Jesus identified Himself with each of them to such a degree that Saul had done to Jesus what he had done to the disciples. This reveals the intimate union existing between Jesus and His disciples. A union created by baptism. The disciples are an extension of Jesus' own life – the lives of the disciples continue the life of Jesus on earth. Jesus continues to live on earth in them – He still teaches, preaches, heals, forgives, feeds the multitudes, raises the dead, suffers and dies. Many Christians truly fail to equate their lives with Jesus. When we are in Christ it means we love, pray, serve and suffer as Jesus does. When we die, Jesus dies – and yet, when we die in Jesus we can never die, for Jesus has died once for all. Christians who understand the mystery of Christ realize that their sufferings fill up the suffering lacking in the body of Christ. They understand that the redemption continues – Jesus continues to redeem the world through them. Saul perhaps was the first to understand and teach this great revelation, *"Even now I find my joy in the suffering I endure for you. In my own flesh I fill up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ for the sake of his body, the Church."* (Col. 1:24)

By this doctrine, we can escape that immature concept of faith that equates Jesus only with the historical and physical Christ. It is this narrowness of faith that rebels against the roles of Mary, the saints, the teachers, the ministers, the popes in the Church. Can't we see that it is all Jesus? Jesus is in all and all is Jesus. Is Mary outside of Jesus? Are the saints? Are the ministers of the Church? Are the sacraments? Are any of these outside of Jesus that we should consider the honor and respect paid to them as robbing what is due to Jesus? When you love Mary, you love Jesus. When you love the Saints, you love Jesus. When you love the ministers of the Church, you love Jesus. When you love your fellow Christians, you love Jesus. *"...So too we, though many, are one body in Christ and individually members one of another."* (Rom. 12:5) *"...Christ cares for the Church – for we are members of his body."* (Eph. 5:30) *"You, then, are the body of Christ. Every one of you is a member of it."* (I Cor. 12:27) Yes, Saul understood this "mystery of Christ"

and expressed it clearly. Jesus has broadened his personality – He equates Himself with the Church. We must indeed broaden our spirits to embrace Jesus in the Church. There truly lies the greatness of Saul – he made the effort to embrace in faith and love the whole Christ!

SAUL'S FIRST FERVOR

After his stay in Arabia, Saul returned to Damascus where he remained for about three years. Luke tells us, *“Saul stayed some time with the disciples in Damascus, and soon began to proclaim in the synagogues that Jesus was the Son of God... Saul for his part grew steadily more powerful, and reduced the Jewish community of Damascus to silence with his proofs that this Jesus was the Messiah. After quite some time had passed, certain Jews conspired to kill Saul, but their plot came to his attention.”* (Acts 9:20, 22-24) Saul escaped over the wall in a basket. Probably, there was some fear involved but whatever the motive for it, Saul later spoke of it as one of his worst humiliations for the sake of the gospel. It just went against the man that he was to hide in a basket.

Saul's first apostolic ministry stemming out of his first fervor had not been too successful. It succeeded in almost getting him killed. Saul now headed south to the city of Jerusalem. Luke relates that the return of the prodigal son was not received with open arms, *“When he arrived back in Jerusalem he tried to join the disciples there; but it turned out they were all afraid of him. They even refused to believe that he was a disciple.”* The most obvious suspicion was that Saul was a spy – a wolf in sheep's clothing. One of the disciples read his spirit correctly – Barnabas. He stepped out of the shadows to take his hand. Barnabas believed in Saul and took him to the Community, *“He explained to them how on his journey Saul had seen the Lord, who had conversed with him, and how Saul had been speaking out fearlessly in the name of Jesus at Damascus. Saul stayed on with them, moving freely about Jerusalem and expressing himself quite openly In the name of the Lord.”* (Acts 9:26-29)

Saul couldn't resist returning to see his old friends – the Greek-speaking Jews and as Luke tells us, he *“debated with them.”* With his own unique diplomacy, he probably pointed out they had become murderers in the death of Stephen and himself an accessory to the fact. He did have a way about bringing out the worst in some people. *“They for their part responded by trying to kill him.”* At this point the Church took things in its own hands.

Saul had started one persecution for the Church at Jerusalem. It had since died down after he had left town – now he was back poking a stick in the embers trying to get things going again. *“When the brothers learned of this, some of them took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.”* With the departure of Saul to his home, Luke writes, *“Meanwhile throughout all Judea, Galilee and Samaria the church was at peace.”* (Acts 9:30-31a)

For Saul the period that followed was a strange interlude. It appears to be the limbo of his apostolic career. For the next ten years nothing is heard of Saul. For these ten years he was outside the mainstream of Church activity. Perhaps he was being ignored. It was a long time of inactivity for a man who had seen Jesus face to face and burnt with zeal to spread His kingdom. Yet that is what God planned for Saul – a period of preparation that followed the pattern of the Lord. Saul was to be the greatest of all missionaries and he must prepare for his public life by long periods of prayer, silence, and obedience as Jesus Himself had done. And also – The Church had to be prepared for Saul and his ministry and that was what the Holy Spirit would be about in the next ten years....

SAUL OF TARSUS

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND QUESTIONS SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK (PLEASE MEMORIZE)

“EVEN NOW I FIND MY JOY IN THE SUFFERINGS I ENDURE FOR YOU. IN MY OWN FLESH I FILL UP WHAT IS LACKING IN THE SUFFERINGS OF CHRIST FOR THE SAKE OF HIS BODY, THE CHURCH.” (Col. 1:24)

FIRST DAY: Read Summary through Saul the Talmid; Acts 9:1-9.

1. What type of person does Saul appear to be to you?
2. What do you see to be his best and worst quality?
3. What was he chosen by God to do?
4. Why do you think God chose him?

SECOND DAY: Read Summary The Conversion of Saul; Acts 9:10-19.

1. How would you describe the spiritual state of Saul before his conversion?
2. What can you see symbolized in his three days of darkness?
3. What do you see to be the importance of Ananias in this incident?
4. What were two of the great sufferings Saul would undergo in his apostolate?

THIRD DAY: Read Acts 22:1-16 and 26:1-18.

1. How do these two accounts differ from the one given in Acts 9:1-19?
2. What does Saul appear to stress in his account to the Jewish people?
3. What does he appear to stress in his account to King Agrippa?

4. In his account to King Agrippa, how does Saul view his vocation?

FOURTH DAY: Read Gal.1:11-21; Rom.7:1-6; 8:1-17.

1. From Saul's letter to the Galatians, what immediately occurs following his baptism?
2. To what does Saul attribute his understanding of the Gospel?
3. What did Saul come to understand about the Crucifixion of Jesus when he saw Jesus glorified?
4. What did Saul teach to be the true source of spiritual righteousness?

FIFTH DAY: Read Summary The Church of Jesus; I Cor. 12:1-31.

1. What teaching was implied by Jesus' words, "Saul, Saul why do you persecute me?"
2. What truth did Saul learn and teach concerning the relationship of the Community to Jesus?
3. Why can we truly say that Mary, the saints, the members of the Church are Jesus?
4. What does the Scripture of the Week (Col. 1:24) teach you about your own sufferings?

SIXTH DAY: Read Summary Saul's First Fervor; Acts 9:20-31; 22:17-21.

1. What effect did Saul's first missionary activities have on the people of Damascus and Jerusalem?
2. Why do you think he had such an effect?
3. What does Jesus' revelation in the temple to Saul tell you?
4. Why do you think God permitted Saul to be outside of the mainstream of Church activity for ten years?

CHAPTER 10

CATHOLICITY OF THE CHURCH

INTRODUCTION

It is around the year 38 A.D. The Church has taken root in Palestine. Luke mentions an environment of peace for the Church in Judea, Samaria and Galilee. The Apostles had first understood their mission to be directed towards Israel, which was best expressed in that command Matthew attributes to Jesus, "*Do not visit pagan territory and do not enter a Samaritan town. Go instead after the lost sheep of the house of Israel.*" (Mt. 10:5-6) For this reason, all early Church activity centered around Jerusalem and restricted itself to the house of Israel. It was not the Apostles but the evangelist Philip who brought Christ to Samaria.

The early Church did not have the recorded Gospels to guide it. They had not as yet been written. The Apostles only had their memories of Jesus to guide them. Many of these memories lay buried deep in their subconscious. In quiet moments of reflection some would rise into conscious awareness. Certain incidents, little crises, would stimulate the memory and recall something Jesus had done and said. These sacred memoirs would give direction to expressing their Christian discipleship. With the passing of time, others would collect these memoirs of the Apostles and they would become the living Christian traditions within the Community. Only when the Church came to be about thirty years of age would the written Gospels, as we know them, appear.

The role of Scripture has an exalted role in the Catholic Church. The inspired Scriptures are an authentic source for the authoritative teachings of the Church. The Scriptures, along with the Apostolic Traditions, are the sources of Divine Revelation. These are the Divine reservoirs from which the living authority within the Church draws its Christian teachings and guidelines for moral conduct. We need to remember that Jesus commanded His Apostles to teach, not write. He left a living, teaching authority in the

Church and He promised to support it until the end of time, "...go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations...Teach them to carry out everything that I have commanded you. And know that I am with you always until the end of the world!" (Mt. 28:29-20) The highest authority in the Christian Community is not that the Scriptures reveal a truth, but that the Church teaches the truth! Men can be deceived in their interpretation of the Scriptures, but the Church cannot be.

THE LAW OF CIRCUMCISION

The Acts now record an incident that demonstrates one of the greatest exercises of Church authority recorded in the New Testament. Simon Peter abrogates the Divine commandment of circumcision in favor of Gentile converts entering the Church. Peter makes two momentous decisions: (1) to admit Gentiles into the Church, and (2) to do so without first demanding circumcision. To better appreciate Peter's action we need to understand two things: the importance of circumcision to the Jews, and the Jewish attitude toward Gentiles.

The Law to circumcise was a Divine command given to Abraham when Yahweh established a covenant with Abraham. We read in Genesis, "*God also said to Abraham...every male among you shall be circumcised...that shall be the mark of the covenant between you and me...If a male is uncircumcised...such a one shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.*" (Gn. 17:9-14) Leviticus 12:3 confirmed the necessity of circumcision. Exodus 12:48 made it mandatory in order to celebrate the Passover. The obligation was serious, and failure to fulfill it meant separation from the Covenant.

JEWS AND GENTILES

To the Jews, a Gentile was the "stranger," the heathen. It was the mission of Israel to mediate the blessing of the Covenant to all nations. From the very first, it had been promised that through the seed of Abraham "all nations of the earth should be blessed." Deuteronomy confirms Yahweh's love for the Gentiles and urges the Israelites to love them. "*For the Lord, your God, is the God of gods...who has no favorites...who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and befriends the alien, feeding and clothing him. So you too must befriend the alien, for you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt.*" (Dt. 10:17-19) Leviticus commands, "*You shall treat the alien*

who resides with you no differently than the natives born among you; have the same love for him as for yourself..." (Lv. 19:34)

In actual practice, in apostolic times, it was not the Scriptures that directed the Jews' attitude towards the Gentiles, but the interpretations and decisions of the rabbis. These teachings of the rabbis serve as a good example of how the spirit of sectarianism and legalism perverted the true spirit of the Law. Under the guidance of the rabbis, the Jews concentrated upon Israel as being the elect nation of God – alone worthy to receive the Law. All other nations were condemned to worship false gods. The rabbis destroyed any missionary zeal. The Talmud prohibited teaching the Torah to a Gentile. Rabbi Johanna taught, "*Such a person deserves death.*" Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus taught that the mind of every non-Jew was bent on idolatry and even their cattle were unfit for sacrifice. Gentiles had no share in the life to come. He held that whatever charity the Gentiles practiced was really sinful – the motive being self-glorification, seeking to make a name for self. Gamaliel held the same opinion and added that the Gentiles, by their impure motives, incurred the penalty of Gehenna. Rabbi Simon ben Yohai had these three sayings, "*The best of snakes ought to have its head crushed. The best among Gentiles deserves to be killed. The most pious Gentile women are addicted to sorcery.*" Even when a Gentile became a convert, he was held to have no part in the various merits and virtues of Abraham, for these were reserved for the blood-descendants of the patriarch. The proselyte (convert) had to rely absolutely on his own merits for justification.

The Apostles themselves concentrated on the Jews, first in Palestine and then in the dispersion; only when the Jews refused the Gospel did they make an effort to convert the Gentiles. Even for this, God must especially prepare them. He would have to raise up a special instrument to accomplish the conversion of the Gentiles – Saul of Tarsus. But, first, God must inspire Peter, the holder of the Keys, to open the door through which Saul would lead the multitudes.

PETER AS CHRIST

Luke tells us that during this time Peter was making numerous journeys. Luke seems to imply Peter was visiting the different Christian Communities. He appears to be exercising his office of Chief Shepherd of the flock, touring areas already evangelized. "*...one place after another and eventually came to the saints living down in Lydda.*" (Acts 9:32) Calling Christians "saints"

appears to signify on the negative side that they have been purified of sin and on the positive side that they have an intimacy with the very Person of God.

Peter's activities definitely appear to be an extension of Jesus' own life. Luke relates two incidents involving Simon Peter reminiscent of Jesus' own ministry. In Lydda, Peter found a man named Aeneas, a paralytic who had been bedridden for eight years. *"Peter said to him, 'Aeneas, Jesus Christ cures you! Get up and make your bed.' The man got up at once."* (Acts 9:34) From the words used – "Jesus Christ cures you" – Peter certainly did not divorce his activities from those of Jesus. Peter is aware that Jesus lives and operates through him. The narrative seems to indicate that Aeneas was non-Christian. This miracle and the one to follow may both be symbolic and prophetic of what is soon to occur among the Gentiles. The eight years the man remained paralyzed could symbolize the years of the Church's own existence in which it had ignored the condition of the Gentiles. The cure does symbolize the forgiveness of sins that paralyzed the spirit of man. Remember the words of Jesus, *"Which is less trouble to say, 'Your sins are forgiven' or 'Stand up and walk'? To help you realize that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins – he then said to the paralyzed man, 'Stand up! Roll up your mat, and go home.'"* (Mt. 9:5-6)

Just twelve miles northwest of Lydda lay the coastal town of Joppa, the present city of Haifa. At this time in Joppa, a beloved member of the Christian Community named Tabitha ("Dorcas" in Greek) fell ill and died. *"Her life was marked by constant good deeds and acts of charity."* (Acts 9:36) The Community was sorely distressed over the loss of Tabitha. It was a Jewish belief that the spirit of the dead person remained close to the body for three days. The Community called Peter because they had faith in his being able to raise Tabitha from the dead. Peter set out and came to Joppa. He entered the room where Tabitha lay dead. He put all out of the room – *"then he knelt down and prayed. Turning to the dead body, he said, 'Tabitha, stand up.' She opened her eyes, then looked at Peter and sat up. He gave her his hand and helped her to her feet."* (Acts 9:40-41a) It is not without significance that Peter does not touch the dead body of the woman. To touch a corpse would render him ritually impure. Only when life returned to the body did he offer his hand to her. The miracle no doubt symbolizes the power of the Church to give life to the spiritually dead – the Gentiles. Again, the presence of Jesus' power appears operative through Peter. Yes, it is the power of Jesus that restores the life of Tabitha to the Community, but

the life is restored only through the prayers of the Community. Apparently, Tabitha was still needed and she still consented to serve.

Luke relates *“that Peter stayed on in Joppa for a considerable time at the house of Simon, a tanner of leather.”* (Acts 9:43) That sounds innocent enough, but in the context of Jewish culture it is quite significant. Tanners of leather and collectors of dung were forbidden occupations to Jews. Such work left a man continually unclean – ritually impure. It is interesting to note that Peter dwelt in this man’s house. Was it perhaps his Christ-like character that inclined him to identify with the lost sheep of Israel – the social outcasts? It indicates some growth in Peter in understanding Jesus’ teachings on purity and contamination. If the Lord had not been contaminated by His association with the sinners, then a servant of the Lord, in whom the Spirit dwelt, could not be contaminated by his association with the sinners the Lord had sent him to save. The Lord had been preparing Peter for the great leap in faith he must now make.

PENTECOST OF THE GENTILES

Luke momentarily transports us from the town of Joppa to the beautiful seaside city of Caesarea – thirty miles north of Joppa. We know this city to be the home of Philip the Evangelist – one of the Seven. Luke introduces us to a centurion in Caesarea who is destined to make Church history. His name is Cornelius. Luke tells us, *“...he was religious and God-fearing. The same was true of his whole household. He was in the habit of giving generously to the people and he constantly prayed to God.”* (Acts 10:1-2) “A God-fearing Gentile” was a religious title given to Gentiles who accepted Judaism to the degree of identifying with its belief in God and the practice of many Jewish customs, but stopping short of becoming a convert.

While Cornelius was at evening prayer, *“...he had a vision in which he clearly saw a messenger of God coming toward him and calling, ‘Cornelius!’ He stared at the sight and said in fear, ‘What is it, sir?’ The answer came, ‘Your prayers and your generosity have risen in God’s sight, and because of them he has remembered you. Send some men to Joppa and summon a certain Simon, known as Peter. He is a guest of Simon the leather-tanner whose house stands by the sea.’”* (Acts 10:3-6)

The evangelist Philip lived in Caesarea – but he is not sent for. This is a mission only the Chief Shepherd himself can undertake. A monumental

decision in religious matters must be made. Only the representative of Jesus Christ on earth is qualified to make this decision. Others will later approve and ratify it but they do not establish the principle – God does through Peter!

Cornelius has no idea why Peter must be sent for – he acts in obedience to the vision. As with Saul, Cornelius must wait to be instructed in God's Will through the Church – through its chief representative, Simon Peter.

Meanwhile back in Joppa, the Lord is preparing Peter. He goes upon the roof terrace for his noontime prayer. These roof terraces were often covered with a white awning for shade purposes. Peter was hungry and while waiting for his food to be prepared, he probably was lulled into the "twilight zone" by the soft sea breezes. In his spirit he suddenly "*saw the sky open and an object come down that looked like a big canvas. It was lowered to the ground by its four corners. Inside it were all the earth's four-legged creatures and reptiles and birds of the sky.*" (It was filled with creatures the Scriptures condemned as unclean and unfit to eat.) "*A voice said to him, 'Get up, Peter! Slaughter, then eat!'*" (No one would ever accuse Peter of blind obedience.) "*He answered, 'Sir, It is unthinkable! I have never eaten anything unclean or impure in my life.'* The voice was heard a second time, '*What God has purified you are not to call unclean.*' This happened three times; then the object was snatched up into the sky." (Acts 10:9-16) The scene being repeated three times emphasized to Peter the solemnity of the vision and the message it carried. It seemed to proclaim a new creation, an echo of Genesis – before sin on earth – when God proclaimed all His creatures "good." The vision stimulated the memory of Peter and he recalled when Jesus had said, "*Hear me, all of you, and try to understand. Nothing that enters a man from outside can make him impure; that which comes out of him, and only that, constitutes impurity.*" (Mk. 7:14-15)

As Peter wrestled with the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius arrived. "*Peter was still pondering the vision when the Spirit said to him, 'There are two men in search of you. Go downstairs and set out with them unhesitatingly, for it is I who sent them.'*" (Acts 10:19-20) The men explained to Peter the purpose of their visit. In Peter's mind the pieces of the puzzling vision began to fall into place: the animals were a symbolic representation of mankind - all those people beyond the Jewish religion. "*What God has purified you are not to call unclean.*" Peter took his first step towards attacking his inherited prejudices against the Gentiles, "*Peter invited them in*

and treated them as guests.” (Acts 10:23)

The next day, Peter left for Caesarea with the men sent by Cornelius. Wisely, he took six Christian Jews with him to be his witnesses concerning the happenings in Cornelius' household. Cornelius on his part also anticipated the importance of his meeting with Peter and had called his relatives and close friends to his house. Peter entered the house of Cornelius consciously aware of the fact that he was breaking Jewish tradition. Cornelius received Peter as an angel of God, falling at his feet in an act of worship. Peter helped Cornelius to his feet as he said, *“Get up! I am only a man myself.”* Apparently, Peter himself was quite excited by the whole affair. Luke says, *“Peter then went in, talking with him all the while. He found many people assembled there...” (Acts 10:26-27)*

Peter first explained his presence among them. Cornelius repeated the story of his own vision, which made them realize that such a meeting had been a Divine command. They both acted under Divine Inspiration. This is a moment of great grace for all involved. Cornelius indicated the grace-filled hearts of all present, *“All of us stand before God at this moment to hear whatever directives the Lord has given you.” (Acts 10:33)* Such openness of spirit can anticipate an outpouring of God's Spirit!

Peter delivered the good news for the first time to the Gentiles. According to the mind of Luke, this sermon contains the approved method and outline for evangelizing Gentiles. Peter began by proclaiming the universal goodwill of God towards all men. He preached the universality of the Lordship of Jesus – *“Lord of All”* – and therefore the catholicity of the good news. Peter summarized the ministry, the death, and resurrection of Jesus. He presented Jesus as the holy, spirit-filled agent of God's saving activity. Peter emphasized that men who fear God and act uprightly make themselves acceptable to God but their righteousness is not complete. Grace has but prepared them to receive the fullness of salvation coming only through Jesus. *“Everyone who believes in him has forgiveness of sins through his name.”* As Peter spoke those words, an undreamed of phenomenon occurred. The Holy Spirit was poured out upon all who listened to Peter's words – they all began to speak in tongues and glorify God. The Holy Spirit was poured out upon the Jews and Gentiles uniting them all into one Community praising and glorifying God. It was the Pentecost of the Gentiles!

These Gentiles had not yet been baptized and they had received a baptism of

the Holy Spirit. Indeed this was rare, and Peter must interpret the significance of this unique occurrence. Up to this moment, it had generally been presumed that all members of the Church must first be Jews in order to enter the Community of believers. These Gentiles had been united, through the Gift of the Holy Spirit, to the Community. The step of first becoming Jewish proselytes had been by-passed. Peter clearly read what this implied – there was no necessity for Gentiles to become Jews in order to belong to the Church of Jesus Christ. He knew he must follow his conclusion to its logical application – he must receive these people formally into the Church. Peter turned to his Jewish companions and asked them, *“What can stop these people who have received the Holy Spirit, even as we have, from being baptized with water?” (Acts 10:41)* They agreed there was none.

It was a momentous moment in religious history. Peter was about to abrogate the law of circumcision as a necessary condition for entrance into a covenant relationship with God. Jesus had told him, “Whatsoever you loose upon earth will be loosed in heaven.” Peter displayed tremendous faith and moral courage: *“He gave orders that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.” (Acts 10:48)* He ordered uncircumcised people to be received into the Church – affirming their total equality with Christian Jews. Peter opened the door of salvation to the Gentile world.

It would be left to another great man of the spirit – Saul of Tarsus – to fully understand and develop the religious truths proclaimed by Peter’s action. Peter had now opened the door to the great apostolate to which Saul had been called and for which he was now being prepared.

CATHOLICITY OF THE CHURCH

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND QUESTIONS SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK (PLEASE MEMORIZE)

“...HOW TRUE IT IS THAT GOD SHOWS NO PARTIALITY. RATHER, THE MAN OF ANY NATION WHO FEARS GOD AND ACTS UPRIGHTLY IS ACCEPTABLE TO HIM.” (Acts 10:34-35)

FIRST DAY: Read Genesis 17:9-14; Leviticus 12:3; Exodus 12:48.

1. In the beginning why do you think the Apostles only sought to convert Jews?
2. What is the role of the Scriptures in the Church?
3. What do the Scriptures teach about the necessity of circumcision?
4. Why do you think this Law is no longer enforced in the Church?

SECOND DAY: Read Summary Jews and Gentiles; Deuteronomy 10:17-19; Leviticus 19:34; Matthew 15:21-28.

1. What do the Scriptures teach about the Gentiles?
2. What did the Jewish Rabbis teach about the Gentiles?
3. What does this tell you about the spirit of religion at this time?
4. How did the teachings of the time affect the early members of the Church?

THIRD DAY: Read Summary Peter as Christ; Acts 9:32-43.

1. How does Peter's ministry reflect the life of Jesus?
2. What does Peter reveal when he says to Aeneas, “Jesus Christ cures you!”?

3. In what way do these two miracles symbolize the spiritual condition of the Gentile world?
4. What does the episode of Tabitha teach you about prayer?

FOURTH DAY: Read Summary Pentecost of the Gentiles; Acts 10:1-23.

1. How does Cornelius show forth a true religious spirit?
2. What effect does such a life have upon God?
3. What does the vision of Peter teach you about how God deals with us?
4. What message did the vision bring to Peter?

FIFTH DAY: Read Mark 7-15-23; Acts 10:24-48.

1. What did Jesus teach to be the source of human contamination?
2. What did Peter's sermon declare Jesus to be?
3. What did the Holy Spirit's coming upon the Gentiles demonstrate to Peter?
4. Why do you think Peter ordered the Gentiles to still be baptized after receiving the Holy Spirit?

SIXTH DAY: Read Acts 11:1-18.

1. What gives Peter the right to exempt the Gentiles from the obligation of being circumcised?
2. How is Peter's faith and courage demonstrated in this episode with Cornelius?
3. What was the attitude of the Jewish Christians to what Peter had done?
4. What did you learn from this episode about the life of the Church?

CHAPTER 11

CHURCH TO THE NATIONS

INTRODUCTION

The first ten years of Church life centered around Jerusalem. Jewish culture colored and controlled its formation. It could not conceive itself other than Jewish. What truly differentiated the early members of the Church from the rest of the Jews was their acceptance of Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah. The Jews referred to them, not without contempt, as the sect of the Nazoreans. As the Spirit of Jesus of Nazareth increased within the disciples, the differences between the followers of Jesus and the rest of the Jews became more magnified. The narrowness of their faith began to give ground to a more expansive vision with the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. This Pentecostal experience became the Divine leaven determining the life and growth of the Church founded by Jesus of Nazareth.

A GROWING CHURCH

Luke tells us that Philip, one of the Seven, evangelized in Samaria. Philip's missionary work extended the Community to embrace people considered to be half-Jews. The authorities in Jerusalem approved the reception of these circumcised Samaritans into the Church. This episode was the first outreach of the Church to evangelize people other than pure orthodox Jews. Later, Philip baptized a Jewish proselyte. This action represented a further extension of Church membership to include those of Jewish faith but not origin.

At Caesarea, Simon Peter received the Roman centurion Cornelius and his household into the Church. His entrance into the Church symbolized the acceptance of the uncircumcised into the Community. In Cornelius' case, he came to the Church – the Church did not seek him. At this time, membership in the Church was restricted to Jews and to those who, in some degree, adhered to Judaism. The entrance into the Church was through the door of the synagogue. The Church had yet to take the ultimate step of actively seeking converts among the Gentiles.

The Lord Jesus spoke of the Kingdom of God as being like leaven. It is interesting to see how almost secretly and unconsciously the Church began to grow. She was amazed herself at the steps being forced upon her. The growth of the Church can be primarily attributed to the Holy Spirit and not to the vision, ambition, and zeal of the Apostles. It is certainly to the credit of the Apostles that even though they did not directly lead Church expansion, they never used their authority to impede it, but rather, when it occurred, they recognized it to be an operation of the Holy Spirit.

The general expansion of the Church resulted from the zeal of many unknown men and women. Philip appears as a representative of the many great men and women of the early Church. Acts teaches the importance of the individual members of the Church for the spreading of the Gospel. The leaders have their roles, but primarily through the body of the faithful, the Holy Spirit extends His kingdom on earth. When the faithful are content to leave the spreading of the Gospel to Church officials, and the officials are content for the laity to sit in the pews, the Spirit's voice grows weak in the world and the Church grows feeble.

CHURCH AT ANTIOCH

In chapter eight Luke has written, "*The members of the Church who had been dispersed went about preaching the word.*" (Acts 8:4) Picking up that thread, he wrote, "*Those in the community who had been dispersed by the persecution that arose because of Stephen went as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, making the message known to none but Jews.*" (Acts 11:19) In the city of Antioch a great page of Church History would be written. Here the Church came face to face with the Mediterranean world dominated by its Greco-Roman culture. It found itself in an environment completely alien to its conception and birth. Could the Church survive in such an environment? It not only survived – it flourished! Here arose the Mother Church to the Nations. From here, the Mediterranean world would come to know Christ. The Church rooted itself in an alien environment such as Antioch and confirmed the universality of the Gospel message. It testified to the truth that nothing could stop the spread of the Gospel. The Word would win the World for the Father!

Luke tells us that some of these disciples preached the Word only to Jews, but certain individuals who came from Cyprus and Cyrene began to preach

to Greeks. These Jews had a wider outlook upon the world. They were not burdened with a lot of the inherited prejudices of the Palestinian Jews. Their own spirits gave them greater freedom in dealing and associating with Gentiles. When some of these disciples came to Antioch, being free from the cultural and moral restrictions of the native Jews, they began, without hesitation, to preach the Gospel to the Greeks – no doubt the God-fearing Greeks who came to the synagogues. Luke immediately indicates this new missionary thrust was under Divine grace and with Divine approval. He indicates this by saying, *“The hand of the Lord was with them.”* This implies their ministry was accompanied by signs and wonders. As a result *“a great number of them believed and were converted to the Lord.”* (Acts 11:21)

JERUSALEM SENDS ENCOURAGEMENT

About the year 40 A.D., the Church was in its 10th year. At Antioch, the congregation was composed of Jews and non-Jews – the circumcised and the non-circumcised. For the first time in its history, the Church became concretely Catholic. Interestingly, it was a member of this Antiochian Community, Ignatius the Martyr who died in 96 A.D., that first referred to the Church, in writing, as the Catholic Church.

Luke writes, *“News of this eventually reached the ears of the Church in Jerusalem, resulting in Barnabas’ being sent to Antioch.”* (Acts 11:22) The Church’s attitude is best demonstrated by the man chosen as its official representative to the community in Antioch. It sends Barnabas - its “son of encouragement” – a Greek speaking Levite from the Isle of Cyprus.

Barnabas came to Antioch. He saw and he rejoiced. The very same evidence that convinced Peter to accept Cornelius convinced Barnabas to bless the Church in Antioch. The Community manifested the Presence of the Holy Spirit. Living up to his name, Barnabas became a source of great encouragement to the disciples there. *“He encouraged them all to remain firm in their commitment to the Lord, since he himself was a good man filled with the Holy Spirit and faith.”* (Acts 11:23-24a) As a result of Barnabas’ ministry, the evangelistic spirit within the Community increased and “large numbers were added to the Lord.”

THE RETURN OF SAUL

Barnabas has analyzed this growing ministry in Antioch. He notes the progress being made but he likewise sees the potential not being achieved. This work demands certain qualifications, certain characteristics. This missionary field demands men who speak and write Greek, who have a good working knowledge of the Septuagint Bible; men who understand foreign customs and can easily adapt to them. And if God should call them beyond Antioch – there were men who had the spirit for the wider world of highways by land and sea that led to other great cities. As Barnabas thought over these things, the Spirit of the Lord kept bringing into his conscious awareness the face and name of a man he knew some ten years ago – Saul of Tarsus. He heard he may still be in Tarsus.

The Church of Jerusalem had exiled Saul to Tarsus ten years earlier. It is a representative of this same Jerusalem Church that now goes to Saul asking him to assume a ministry with the Community in Antioch. The ancient Bezan text of Luke indicates that Barnabas encountered a reluctant Saul. Perhaps the reluctance of Saul stemmed from a sense of rejection by the Church officials or his own personal sense of failure. No mention is made of a Community of believers in Tarsus where Saul dwelt, off and on, for the last ten years. Due to the persuasive power of Barnabas and Saul's cooperation with Divine grace, Saul enters into the mainstream of Church life. Saul's arrival in Antioch was a historical moment in Church History, destined to change the course of that history. He entered his ministry gradually. He assumed a role of teacher along with Barnabas.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Shakespeare once wrote, "What's in a name? A rose by any other name would smell as sweet." He implies names are but arbitrary symbols expressing no intrinsic relationship to the things named. This is not the case in Semitic culture. In Antioch, members of the Church received a new name. It came from the unbelieving Antiochians. These people had a reputation for wit and bestowing nicknames. The Community of believers had become visible enough in the eyes of the general public to be recognized as distinct from the general Jewish Community. They heard the disciples so often speaking and arguing about "the Christ" that the word Christ came to be associated with the group. The word, being Hebrew in origin, had little significance to the Greeks. In the Hebrew it meant "the Anointed One." It

signified the divinely anointed king of Israel who would exalt Israel over all enemies. Such a meaning would be lost upon the Greeks. The Greeks had a similar word, "Chrestos," meaning "a good worthy person." So making a play on the word "Christos" with "Chrestos", the Antiochians nicknamed the members of the Church "Chrestianoï." Today, we might roughly translate that to mean "those goodie goodies." What was given in a joke stuck, and members of the Church came to be called "Christians." The original form was probably "Chrestians." The members of the Church found in the correct version of their nickname that which essentially expressed their religious beliefs: Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ – the Messiah, their anointed King. The word not only expressed their faith in Jesus but their obedience to Him. It is ironic that the name began as a joke. Today many who call themselves "Christian" have made the name a joke again. Many so-called Christians neither believe in nor obey Jesus Christ. Obedience to Jesus is the first fruit of true faith in Him. When we call ourselves Christians we can well ask, "What's in a name?"

PROPHETS AND PRESBYTERS

Luke tells us, "*At about that time (it was around the year 43 A.D.), certain prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch.*" (Acts 11:27) This is Luke's first mention of prophets in the Church. In fact, in the next few verses, he casually mentions another group that had developed within the Church. Prophets held a recognized position in the early Church. They ranked next to Apostles. Prophets had a charismatic office. Paul describes the work of a prophet in this way: "*The prophet...speaks to men for their upbuilding, their encouragement, their consolation.*" (I Cor. 14:3) They appear to have exercised a distinctive role within the Church until about the end of the second century. The role of prophets may have decreased and all but disappeared in the Church because of the great number of false prophets appearing on the scene and successfully seducing the people. St. John writes, "*Beloved do not trust every spirit, but put the spirits to a test to see if they belong to God, because many false prophets have appeared in the world.*" (I John 4:1)

The Church of Antioch received the prophets from Jerusalem with open arms. "*One of them named Agabas was inspired to stand up and proclaim that there was going to be a severe famine all over the world.*" (Acts 11:28) The poverty of the Church at Jerusalem was well known. As an expression of their concern and responsibility "*the disciples determined to set something aside, each according to his means, and send it to the relief of the brothers who*

lived in Judea. They did this, dispatching it to the presbyters in the care of Barnabas and Saul." (Acts 11:29-30)

Elders or presbyters are mentioned for the first time within the Church. Luke implies the money was being sent to officials in the Church other than the Apostles. We know that elders played a prominent role in the Old Testament. We can best understand their position in the Church by understanding the concept and role of elders within the Jewish religion. These would have served as a prototype for the Christian elders.

The elders appear in the Old Testament as a distinct social and ruling body with political and religious duties. In these duties, they represented the entire people. They appeared as associates and companions of a political or religious leader particularly when he exercised authority. At times they appear as a governing or judicial body. The elders appear as heads of clans or families who formed the King's council. As representatives of the people, they served as a check upon the ruling powers.

The appearance of elders in the Christian Community indicates the organizational development of the Church. Apparently, their roles developed within the Community. By the time the Epistle to Titus was written, the role of elders had apparently evolved into the roles of bishop and priest as we find it in the Church today.

DARK CLOUDS OVER JERUSALEM

Luke has already directed the mind of his readers towards the second part of his historical presentation with the founding of the Church at Antioch and the return of Saul into the mainstream of Church life. He now directs our minds back to the Jerusalem Church in order to cap and complete this section before entering fully into his second phase called, by some, "The Acts of Paul." Luke does this by relating the episode in which the Apostle James is beheaded by Herod in order to please the Jews, and Herod's intention to destroy the head of the Church – Simon Peter. Luke paints a vivid account of Peter's escaping from the hands of Herod. Peter himself leaves Jerusalem and apparently James governs the Church there. With Peter's leaving Jerusalem, Luke closes this first part of the narrative. This episode in Church History has ended. Before proceeding with his story, he records the dramatic end of a man who plotted the end of the Church – *"he died eaten by worms."* (See Acts 12:1-23)

As always, Luke implies much more than he says. In a special way, the Apostles represent the Church. The Church must go the way of the Lord. Members of the Church must not only live and work for the Lord, but, if it be the Will of God, they must die for the Lord. The Church is in God's hands and no matter what evil hands grasp the Church for a time, out of those evil hands God delivers His Church.

Those who seek to destroy the Church may indeed appear to be fortunate by the standards of this world. In Herod Agrippa they may behold their prototype. One moment they dazzle the world with their power – a peacock of splendor – but in the next moment comes the judgment of God. Herod's death represents this judgment of God. It symbolizes what will be the final end of all those who make themselves an antichrist. An angel of the Lord struck him down. He became food for worms where the worm dies not and fire is not quenched.

When Herod had had his day and all had been said and done by him, Luke subtly concludes with: *"Meanwhile the word of the Lord continued to spread and increase."* (Acts 12:24) No one can stop the Gospel!

As the curtain falls upon the first great episode in the life of the Church, dark clouds shroud the future. Religious leaders and rulers oppose its existence on earth. Persecution has fallen heavily upon the Community. Stephen and James are dead. Many of its finest members have been driven away. Poverty grips the Community. With Peter fleeing for his life, the last Apostle has been driven away from Jerusalem. The Church faces an uncertain and doubtful future. In all this gloom and darkness, Luke sees a glimmer of light. There, on the way back to Antioch, is Saul and Barnabas, and a third young man has joined them – John Mark. Their hearts are filled with the Spirit of Jesus of Nazareth. The fire He came to cast upon the earth is far from being extinguished. A new and brighter dawn is about to break. A torch has been lit and it has been passed on...Tomorrow will be a brand new day for the Church. The Gospel goes on!

CHURCH TO THE NATIONS

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND QUESTIONS SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK (PLEASE MEMORIZE)

**“THE SOULS OF THE JUST ARE IN THE HAND OF GOD, AND NO
TORMENT SHALL TOUCH THEM.” (Wisdom 3:1)**

FIRST DAY: Read Summary - A Growing Church.

1. In what way do you see the Church growing in its first ten years?
2. In what way did the qualifications for membership change?
3. To whom is the growth of the Church attributed?
4. What does this teach you about your responsibility for spreading the Gospel?

SECOND DAY: Read Summary through The Return of Saul;
Acts 11:19-25.

1. What unique thing began to take place in Antioch?
2. What does Barnabas' being sent to Antioch tell you?
3. What does Barnabas do for the Church in Antioch?
4. What do Barnabas' activities teach you about Community growth?

THIRD DAY: Read Summary What's In A Name?; Prophets and
Presbyters; Acts 11:26-30.

1. Why do you think the nickname given to the disciples stuck?
2. What does calling yourself a Christian mean to you?
3. What role did prophets fulfill in the Church?

4. What does the changing role of elders or presbyters reveal about the early Church?

FOURTH DAY: Read Acts 12:1-19.

1. For what reason did Herod Persecute the Church?
2. What does the death of James and the arrest and escape of Peter teach you?
3. What does this lesson teach about prayer?
4. What do you think it was like being a Christian in Jerusalem at that time?

FIFTH DAY: Read Summary Dark Clouds Over Jerusalem; Acts 12:20-25.

1. To what does Luke attribute the death of Herod?
2. What does this teach you about divine justice?
3. In Luke's mind, what does the death of Herod symbolize?
4. How does his death serve as a lesson in Church History?

SIXTH DAY: Read Wisdom 2:1-24 and 3:1-12.

1. What does this reading tell us about the wicked in this world?
2. What happens to the just and innocent that suffer at their hands?
3. What does this reading reveal about the final reward of the just?
4. In what way are the stories of James and Herod prefigured in this reading?

CHAPTER 12

MISSION TO THE GENTILES

INTRODUCTION

The Church is now on the road to Rome from where it will reach out to embrace the world for Jesus Christ. The Church of Antioch will send out the first missionary expedition into the pagan world. Luke's opening scene pictures an established Christian Community with its prophets and teachers: "*There were in the Church at Antioch certain prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Symeon known as Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch), and Saul.*" (Acts 13:1)

The Epistle to the Ephesians tells us that Christ Jesus "*gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers in roles of service for the faithful to build up the body of Christ.*" (Eph. 4:11-12) The Church was never without organization and authority. It never appeared as a flock in which all the sheep were internally directed by some kind of divinely synchronized radar equipment. The Church never appeared in Scripture without its visible shepherds and guardians.

THE LITURGY

These five men presided over the worship of the Church. *Luke tells us "they were engaged in the liturgy of the Lord."* The Greek word translated as liturgy signified public worship or service. Originally, it meant a service rendered to the state by an individual. In Egypt, it came to imply the service rendered to God in the temple. It carried this meaning in the Septuagint Bible.

In the Church at Antioch, the liturgical service would have been the Eucharistic celebration, called "the breaking of the bread," and traditional prayers and readings. For centuries, the Greek Christians have referred to the Eucharistic celebration as the liturgy. Luke mentions fasting along with the Eucharist. Based upon the words of Jesus (Mt. 9:15) that His disciples would fast "*when the bridegroom shall be taken away,*" the early Church

fasted on Good Friday and Holy Saturday. Luke's words could possibly imply that the Church was engaged in the Pascal celebration of Holy Week.

From the very beginning, Church worship was considered a liturgy – a public work in which the entire community actively participated. It would have been offered in a working language. The Jerusalem Church celebrated in Aramaic, the Church at Antioch in Greek. When the Church arrived in Rome, the official language became Latin, as it was the common language of the Roman people. When the official language of the Church became spoken only by Church officials, the true spirit of the liturgy suffered. Under the Holy Spirit's inspiration, the Church reformed the liturgy. Part of that reform began by putting the liturgy back into a working language – the language of the workers, and putting the people in the pews back into the work of public worship. The reform of the liturgy still goes on – whatever form it finally takes, it must afford all the people a more perfect participation in the public act of worshipping God.

APOSTLES OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Luke tells us that during the celebration of the liturgy the Holy Spirit spoke, *"Set apart Barnabas and Saul for me to do the work for which I have called them."* (Acts 13:2) Luke sees and presents the Holy Spirit as a distinct Person. This Holy Divine Person now moves into the life of the Antiochian Community in a direct and dramatic way; by so doing, the Holy Spirit charts and directs the destiny of the whole Church. The Holy Spirit reaches into the Community and takes Barnabas, the leader of the Church, and Saul, one of its most promising and gifted members, for a predestined Divine work. The Church obediently conducts a farewell service, *"Then, after they had fasted and prayed, they imposed hands on them and sent them off."* (Acts 13:3)

The laying on of hands signified some blessing, some gift or office was bestowed on them. The solemnity of the occasion signified something of importance occurred. Since both men were already prophets and teachers, they were probably ordained to be apostles. Both Barnabas and Saul are called apostles after this ceremony but never before it. This apostolic commission empowered them to proclaim the Word, to work signs and wonders, to lay on hands, to establish and govern churches. Barnabas and Saul were apparently ordained to these works. Their ordination was exceptional and resulted from a special intervention and empowering of the

Holy Spirit. The two could rightly be called the “sheluhim” – the apostles of the Holy Spirit. Saul later appears with the Gentile churches with a prominence close to that of Peter. The leaders of the Jerusalem Church apparently never denied Saul's claim to the apostolate, but rather acknowledged it.

MISSION TO CYPRUS

The sailing season did not begin until March 5th. It probably was in the early or mid-spring of 46 A.D. that Barnabas and Saul left Antioch to evangelize the world. Luke emphasizes they went forth as apostles of the Holy Spirit, “These two, sent forth by the Holy Spirit, went down to the port of Seleucia (about seventeen miles from Antioch) and set sail from there for Cyprus.” As they were not impeded by the westerly winds that blew during the summer months, they were able to sail into the harbor of Salamis on the south - a journey of about 130 miles.

Barnabas and Saul followed the standard missionary technique of going to the synagogue to evangelize. We know that in the synagogue, after the invocation and prayers and readings from the Scriptures, the head of the synagogue would request someone to give a homily on the readings. Saul's dress, no doubt, indicated his rabbinical training and the congregation would have welcomed hearing from a learned visitor. Apparently, they received no opposition and were received well by the Jews.

At this point, Luke mentions the presence of John Mark. John Mark accompanied them as an assistant. Luke deliberately omitted mentioning him earlier. By so doing, he signifies that he had not been selected by the Holy Spirit for this mission, nor delegated by the Church of Antioch. His presence was due to a personal decision on the part of Barnabas and Saul. They brought John Mark along to be of personal assistance to them and possibly to train him in the apostolate.

To the mind of the historian Luke, only one incident of historical note occurred on this island of Cyprus. This took place in Paphos, the capital of the province located ninety miles west of Salamis. At Paphos, *“they came across a Jewish magician named Bar-Jesus who posed as a prophet. He was attached to the court of the proconsular governor Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence who had summoned Barnabas and Saul and was anxious to hear*

the word of God.” (Acts 13:6-7) Such a summons would have been a command. In Sergius Paulus, the Church addresses itself to Rome for the first time. Sergius Paulus is touched by the words he hears. Bar-Jesus perceives a threat to his own power over the governor. He gives a rebuttal to the apostles. He perverts the word by giving a different account of Jesus and His doctrine. Sergius Paulus would be in no position to distinguish the false from the true. It is a critical moment and Saul acts under the influence of the Holy Spirit – he puts a curse upon the man. Luke records, “Saul (also known as Paul) was filled with the Holy Spirit; he stared at him and exclaimed, ‘You are an impostor and a thoroughgoing fraud, you son of Satan (his name “Bar-Jesus” meant son of salvation. Saul implies this was a hypocrisy and he strips away the mask to reveal his true sonship - a son of Satan) and enemy of all that is right! Will you never stop trying to make crooked the straight paths of the Lord? The Lord’s hand is upon you even now! For a time you shall be blind, unable so much as to see the sun.’ At once a misty darkness came over him, and he groped about for someone to lead him by the hand. When the governor saw what had happened, he believed, so impressed was he by the teaching about the Lord.” (Acts 13:9-12)

In this incident, the Gospel has been effectively preached to a man symbolizing Rome. He has been impressed by the teachings of Jesus and believes. The opposition to the Gospel – symbolized by Elymas (the magician) – has been overcome. In this incident, Luke foresees the future success of the Gospel. Our missionaries leave Cyprus confident and reassured by their success.

SAUL TO PAUL

For the first time, Luke has referred to Saul as Paul. The Jews who lived in two worlds had two names – one name for the Jewish world and another for the Gentile world of business and politics. When Saul projected himself as born of the tribe of Benjamin, a Pharisee – son of Pharisees, educated at the feet of Gamaliel, he was the Jew Shaul. When he boasted he was a citizen of Tarsus – no mean town – and to the Roman commander that he was a Roman citizen by birth, he was Paulus.

Up to now, Saul has dealt with Jews – lived and worked within the shadows and the influence of the synagogue. When he reached Paphos, he preached the Gospel in a completely Roman environment. Paul psychologically takes a momentous step at this time. In the incident that occurred, he assumed

leadership and directly confronted and silenced the enemy of the Gospel. He identified himself with that wider world of Rome – projecting himself as its citizen and assuming responsibility to preach the Gospel to this world. As we follow the footsteps of Paul, we will note he never steps outside the Roman world – his missionary activities are restricted to Roman provinces. In the mind of Luke, the Holy Spirit has approved Paul's new course.

Up to this point, Paul stood in the shadow of Barnabas. Paul's star would be of such magnitude that no man would overshadow him. He was destined to be one of God's superstars – *"for me to live is Christ!"* Luke places Paul's name first from this time on.

MISSION IN PISIDIAN ANTIOCH

After this incident in Paphos, Luke reports that *"Paul and his companions put out to sea and sailed to Perga in Pamphylia."* (Acts 13:13) Paul now leads the missionary expedition. Something occurs in Perga that Luke covers with silence. No effort is made to evangelize in the province of Pamphylia. John Mark suddenly leaves the group, returning not to Antioch but Jerusalem. We know from Paul's later reaction that this situation must have been some unpleasant experience involving human frailty.

The missionary party set out towards the Galatian country with the Roman colony of Antioch Pisidia as the immediate destination. They arrived in Pisidian Antioch and *"on the sabbath day they entered the synagogue and sat down. After the reading of the law and of the prophets, the leading men of the synagogue sent this message to them, 'Brothers, if you have any exhortation to address to the people, please speak up.'"* (Acts 13:14-15)

When Paul rises to speak we note, by his introduction, his awareness of the audience he desires to reach. He speaks not only to the Jews as *"fellow Israelites,"* but also to *"you others who reverence our God."* (13:16) The sermon is addressed to Jews and Greeks, for salvation is offered to all. He calls them *"my brothers,"* acknowledging the love of God and his own for Jew and Greek. Luke summarizes the text of Paul's sermon. It is presented as an example of his synagogue preaching to the people. It demonstrates the orthodoxy of Paul's preaching – similar to sermons given by Peter and Stephen.

Paul sees in religious history a continuous unfolding of the Divine Plan in

which the Old Testament becomes a preparatory stage for the Messiah. Divine power works slowly as leaven within the history of mankind, bringing all creation into the Divine Plan of salvation and perfection. For Paul, David the King most perfectly reflects Jesus the Lord. He pictures David as a man who *"spent a lifetime in carrying out God's will."* With Peter, he preaches the remission of sins through Jesus, and that sanctification through Jesus is beyond any sanctification bestowed by Law, *"You must realize, my brothers, that it is through him that the forgiveness of sins is being proclaimed to you, including the remission of all those charges you could never be acquitted of under the law of Moses."* (Acts 13:38)

Paul preaches salvation through faith, *"In him, every believer is acquitted."* (Acts 13:39) For Paul, as for the Church, the faith that saves is a living faith, a faith inflamed with charity – a charity that expresses itself in perfect obedience to the Will of the Holy Spirit. Faith is not a mere intellectual consent to truth, but a wholehearted commitment and response to a Person in whom you completely entrust your life and eternal destiny. The fullness of Paul's faith expresses itself when he proclaims, *"I no longer live but Christ!"*

How did the sermon affect the people? *"The people invited them to speak on this subject again on the following sabbath."* (Acts 13:42) Certain people from the congregation were touched by grace and deeply moved. They received the gift of faith. Paul and Barnabas urged them to hold fast to the grace of God. The Scriptures confirm that the gift of faith must be nourished and developed. Faith can be lost.

One of the major differences in Paul's sermon from that of Peter and Stephen is the emphasis Paul places upon salvation through Jesus Christ for Jews and Greeks alike. Paul subtly lowers all barriers. Salvation had been a possession of the Jews. They believed it to be their inheritance from Abraham. They prided themselves upon being God's chosen people with a special and unique relationship with God. They had a door open to God, which was closed to all others. Many Jews were not about to accept Paul's teaching, *"There does not exist among you Jew or Greek, slave or freeman, male or female. All are one in Jesus Christ. Furthermore, if you belong to Christ you are the descendant of Abraham, which means you inherit all that was promised."* (Gal. 3:28-29)

At Pisidian Antioch, the Jews did not refuse to believe that Jesus was the

Messiah. They rejected the doctrine of the universal salvific Will of God. They would not accept that the Messiah brought salvation equally to Jew and Greek. *"When the Jews saw the crowds, they became very jealous and countered whatever Paul said with violent abuse."* (Acts 13:45) Their jealousy was stimulated not because the crowds came to Paul and Barnabas, but because they came to salvation. Salvation that belonged to the Jews was being offered in the market place to Gentile "dogs."

Luke implies that this refusal of the Jews to share salvation led them to reject a Messiah who offered such. This awareness on Paul's part created a moment of crisis – an historical moment in evangelization.

Luke relates, *"Paul and Barnabas spoke out fearlessly, nonetheless, 'The word of God has to be declared to you first of all; but since you reject it and thus convict yourselves as unworthy of everlasting life, we now turn to the Gentiles. For thus were we instructed by the Lord, 'I have made you a light to the nations, a means of salvation to the ends of the earth.'"* The Gentiles were delighted when they heard this... (Acts 13:46-48)

This does not imply that Paul and Barnabas would abandon their method of preaching first in the synagogue ("the word of God has to be declared to you first of all"), but that from now on, the synagogue would not be the only door through which one could enter the faith. They would take the Gospel message into the market place and present it to Gentiles who had no relationship with the synagogue or the Jewish religion. Because the Father of Jesus Christ is the God of the street and market place as well as of the temple and synagogue, *"No one who believes in him will be put to shame...Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."* (Rom. 10:11-13)

The Spirit of the Gospel has been freed from its narrow cage – free now to fly where the Spirit blows.

MISSION TO THE GENTILES

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND QUESTIONS SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK (PLEASE MEMORIZE)

“I HAVE MADE YOU A LIGHT TO THE NATIONS, A MEANS OF SALVATION TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH.” (Acts 13:48)

FIRST DAY: Read Summary through Apostles of the Holy Spirit; Acts 13:1-3.

1. What does the presence of prophets and teachers in the Church tell us about the Church at Antioch?
2. What does the word “liturgy” mean and what does it teach us about our Church worship?
3. In what way is the Holy Spirit a Person to you?
4. How did Barnabas and Saul become Apostles?

SECOND DAY: Read Summary Mission to Cyprus and Saul to Paul; Acts 13:4-12.

1. What does verse 4 tell you about evangelism?
2. What is the significance of Saul’s encounter with Sergius Paulus and Bar-Jesus?
3. Why was Saul’s name now changed to Paul?
4. How much of your true personality enters into your Christian Witness?

THIRD DAY: Read Summary Mission to Pisidian Antioch; Acts 13:13-31.

1. What necessary virtue for evangelism does John Mark appear to lack?

2. What do we learn from Paul's and Barnabas' technique of first going to the synagogue to evangelize?
3. What does Paul's introduction tell us about his intention and his theology?
4. How does Paul see the Old Testament?

FOURTH DAY: Read Acts 13:32-41.

1. What does Paul's sermon teach you about the presentation of the Word of God?
2. What statements in this sermon about King David serve as a reflection of Jesus own life?
3. What does this tell you about the life of discipleship?
4. What do you see as the highlight of this sermon?

FIFTH DAY: Read Acts 13:42-52.

1. What were the reactions in the congregation to Paul's sermon?
2. What do we learn about the gifts of God by the apostles "urging them to hold fast to the grace of God"?
3. What was the source of the jealousy of the Jews?
4. What does this Scripture teach us about the influence of women in evangelism?

SIXTH DAY: Read Galatians 3:15-18, 23-29; I Corinthians 9:19-23.

1. What do you understand as Paul's teaching about salvation?
2. Why would this be so unacceptable to so many Jews?
3. What does I Cor. 9:19-23 tell you about the evangelist Paul?
4. What does this teach you personally about evangelizing others?

CHAPTER 13

THE DOOR OF FAITH

INTRODUCTION

The Scriptures teach that “unless the Lord build the house, they labor in vain who build it.” (Ps. 127:1) Luke demonstrates in Acts that the Holy Spirit builds the Church. From the feast of Pentecost this has been evident, and also evident has been the dependence of the Holy Spirit upon human beings. The Kingdom of God comes through human beings docile to the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God calls people into the Divine work of salvation making them partners of the Spirit. As the history of the Church unfolds, this essential partnership of the Divine and the human becomes more evident. The Acts of the Apostles reveal to us how the Holy Spirit does act in this world and in the Church. As Acts unfolds, we understand more and more why the work has been called “The Acts of the Holy Spirit.”

We saw how God entered the life of Saul in thunderbolt fashion and how his vocation unfolded through many human circumstances and external situations. We noted how the Holy Spirit used the Church to call Barnabas and Saul to evangelize the Gentiles. Their mission was a guaranteed success because they were “*sent forth by the Holy Spirit.*” Luke made it clear that John Mark went forth without being “sent forth by the Holy Spirit.” He could not persevere. Under the influence of the Holy Spirit, the Apostles had the prudence to use the right missionary techniques. They possessed the courage to undertake a hazardous mountain journey and to firmly stand their ground in the face of “violent abuse” from powerful people. As one door closed to the Apostles, they were sensitively attuned to the direction of the Spirit to go elsewhere, and heroic enough to do so, “*We now turn to the Gentiles!*” (Acts 13:46c)

MISSION TO ICONIUM

The Apostles had been called to preach the Gospel by the Holy Spirit – not by men. Men could not stop them. “When they persecute you in one town – go to the next!” (Mt. 10:23) After being driven out of Pisidian Antioch, Paul and Barnabas went about 100 miles southeast along the Imperial

highway to Iconium. As was their custom, they went into the synagogue. As Paul preached earlier to the Jews, *"The word of God has to be declared to you first of all..."* (Acts 13:46) Again, persecution came from the Jews. *"But the Jews, who remained unconvinced (the word implies disobedient), stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers."* Despite their opposition, Paul and Barnabas operated for some time in the city. They *"spoke out fearlessly, in complete reliance on the Lord. He, for his part, confirmed the message with his grace and caused signs and wonders to be done at their hands."* (See Acts 14:2-3) Luke notes their complete reliance upon the Holy Spirit and, as a result, His evident support of them.

An ancient legend called the "Acts of Paul and Thecla" tells of Thecla, a famous convert of Paul's in Iconium. The work was written by a Christian priest in Iconium around 160 A.D. Many scholars believe the work has some merit and probably has a foundation in fact. The study relates that Thecla belonged to one of the leading families, and one day, by chance, she heard Paul preach. She was greatly inspired and dedicated her life to God by a vow of virginity and became a devoted follower of Paul. As she was formally engaged to one of the leading men of the city, her conversion caused serious repercussion within her family. Paul was accused before the magistrates of disturbing the social order and family life. He was scourged and expelled from the city.

Luke does relate that Paul and Barnabas succeeded in dividing the city into two camps, *"Most of the townspeople were divided over them, some siding with the Jews and others with the apostles. [This is the first reference in Acts to anyone other than the Twelve as being apostles.] A move was made by Gentiles and Jews, together with their leaders, to abuse and stone them."* (Acts 14:4-5) As the legend of Thecla indicated: accepting the Christian faith would cause strife and problems within the family and thereby, the social-order. Jesus had preached, *"I have not come to bring peace but the sword – to set one member of the family against another."* (See Mt. 10:34.) *"When Paul and Barnabas learned of this they fled to the Lycaonian towns of Lystra and Derbe and to the surrounding country, where they continued to proclaim the good news."* (Acts 14:6-7.)

MISSION TO LYSTRA AND DERBE

Luke has been cited for his accuracy and exactness; an excellent example of

this is in referring to Lystra and Derbe as Lycaonian towns. This statement was historically and geographically accurate only during the period of 37 A.D. to 72 A.D. while King Antiochus reigned. It distinguished the Roman part of Lycaonia from the part ruled by Antiochus.

Lystra lay about 25 miles southwest of Iconium and Derbe about 30 miles southeast of Lystra. By coming into this area, the Apostles entered a more primitive and pagan area. Such an environment offered new challenges and difficulties. What had been safe and acceptable to do in a more culturally and religiously developed area could be misunderstood and wrongly interpreted in this area. Our Apostles quickly learned this lesson.

One day while preaching, Paul suddenly cured a crippled man. The deed electrified the audience and, lapsing into the native language, which neither Paul nor Barnabas knew, they excitedly announced, "*Gods have come to us in the form of men!*" In truth, the Holy Spirit had come to them in men. The whole town gathered to offer sacrifice to Paul and Barnabas. They believed Barnabas to be Zeus and Paul, Hermes. The two Apostles nearly panicked when they realized what was taking place. Tearing their clothes, they ran into the crowd shouting frantically, "*Friends, why do you do this? We are only men, human like you.*" It was at this point Paul addressed his first sermon on paganism. He very diplomatically indicated the foolishness of their religious practices, but without accusing them of the sin of idolatry. He implied God permitted them to go in this religious direction for a time but now called them into true worship. (See Acts 14:11-15)

The people, in light of Paul's explanation, felt somewhat disappointed and foolish. Their good intentions had been frustrated. Frustration easily turns to depression and anger. At this precise moment, certain Jews, probably corn merchants, arrived from Pisidian Antioch and Iconium. They took advantage of the situation and turned the crowd against the Apostles. They probably convinced the people Paul caused the cure through black magic. As he had been the speaker, the people stoned Paul. He fell down stunned and, thinking him dead, they dragged him outside the walls of the city. Luke relates, "*His disciples quickly formed a circle about him, and before long he got up and went back into the town.*" (Acts 14:20a) Among these disciples would have been Lois, her daughter Eunice and Eunice's young son Timothy.

Luke avoids any statement that would indicate Paul had been killed and

raised from the dead. He does suggest an extraordinary occurrence when he tells us that a man thought dead one day made a 30 mile journey on foot the next day to Derbe.

The mission to Derbe was very successful. Derbe was the only city in which no trouble was reported. Perhaps Paul's enemies believed him dead or perhaps Paul presented the Gospel more prudently. In a sense, Derbe was the end of the line for this missionary expedition. To the south lay the territory of King Antiochus. The Apostles decided to retrace their steps and check upon the Christian communities founded.

MISSIONS REVISITED

With new churches being established independently of the synagogue's organization and influence, an organizational structure had to be established to regulate and promote the Christian life. Paul does this on the return trip. Luke records, "In each Church they installed presbyters and, with prayer and fasting commended them to the Lord in whom they had put their faith." (Acts 14:23) The Greek word translated as presbyters is "episkopol" – the word for bishop. The word means an overseer or a supervisor. The Christian Churches, even from their mustard seed days, have not been without religious authority residing in particular designated members of the Church. Each Community possessed a shepherd or shepherds ordained to their roll within the Church.

In one sentence, Paul masterfully sums up the Christian life: "*We must undergo many trials if we are to enter into the reign of God.*" (Acts 14:22b) To enter the reign of God implies the human soul is permanently at peace with the Will of God. The prayer "Thy will be done on earth as in heaven" has been realized in a person's life. Against this reign of God, the soul constantly faces three enemies: the world, the flesh, and the devil. The Apostles have met these three enemies face to face and will continue to do so.

BACK HOME

It has been estimated that the missionary journey took about eighteen to twenty-four months. On their arrival back in Antioch, "*they called the congregation together and related all that God had helped them accomplish, and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles.*" (Acts 14:27) Luke

again emphasizes the successful missionary partnership – God and man: *“They related all that God had helped them accomplish.”* From the standpoint of Church History, the highlight of this missionary expedition was how “God had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles.” The Evil One quickly sought to close this door.

PRELUDE TO THE COUNCIL

The coming of the Gentiles into the Church created a major crisis in the Christian Faith. The Church came to understand that faith in Jesus had become the key to salvation. Righteousness, sanctification, and salvation all came through Jesus. The Christian leaders understood that the Law had been unable to save – to produce – righteousness, but in reality, only produced a sense of sin and a conscious need for a savior. To insist that Christians must become Jews was an unnecessary burden to place upon them. To demand such, implied that the sacrifice of Jesus Christ had been inadequate of itself, or in other words, to hold that the works of the Law and faith in Jesus saved.

Many of the early members of the Church had previously been Jewish priests and members of the party of the Pharisees. Some of these firmly believed that salvation came through the works of the Law and through faith in Jesus Christ. The practical application of this belief would be to insist that all Gentiles be circumcised and baptized. Many members of the early Church became very zealous for this doctrine; they took it upon themselves to promulgate it and they became preachers and missionaries of this doctrine. They could have split the Church in two. Standing directly in their path stood Paul of Tarsus.

Luke tells us that Paul and Barnabas remained some time with the Church at Antioch. During this time *“some men came down to Antioch from Judea and began to teach the brothers, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to Mosaic practice, you cannot be saved.’ This created dissension and much controversy between them and Paul and Barnabas.”* (Acts 15:1-2)

Paul laid before the Church leaders in Jerusalem the Gospel he preached to the Gentiles, *“...a man is not justified by legal observance but by faith in Jesus Christ...by the works of the law no one will be justified.... It was through the law that I died to the law, to live for God. I have been crucified with Christ, and the life I live now is not my own; Christ is living in me. I still live my*

human life, but it is a life of faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I will not treat God's gracious gift as pointless. If justice is available through the law, then Christ died to no purpose!" (Gal. 2:16,19-21)
The Church leaders agreed with Paul's doctrine.

Apparently, some Christian Jews believed it was not necessary for Gentiles to be Jews, but it was still necessary for Christian Jews to remain Jews – to keep Jewish customs. They lacked the spiritual freedom to act otherwise. It seems that James, the bishop of Jerusalem, was one such Christian – at least at one point in his life. Peter was not such a scrupulous person as James, but he admired James who greatly influenced Peter's behavior. When Peter acted to please James, Paul confronted him. He saw in Peter's behavior a sheer betrayal of the gospel. It struck at the very roots of what it meant to be a Christian. For the chief Apostles to yield to the supporters of Jewish traditionalism would lead to their demand that all Gentile Christians totally accept the Mosaic Law, including circumcision. This could have resulted in two parallel churches or in abandoning the mission to the Gentiles. Christianity would have become a Jewish sect with a doubtful future. Apparently, Peter repented and acknowledged Paul to be right. This incident probably prepared Peter to handle the subject when the Church demanded an official statement on the doctrine of salvation. It was a subject so vital to the life of the Church that it was to be the subject of the first ecumenical council of the Church.

SOURCE OF CHRISTIAN UNITY

Here in Acts, we learn the source of Church unity. All involved in this controversy could quote the Scriptures. Those in error had the strongest Scriptures on their side of the fence. We have only to recall the words of God to Abraham in Genesis 17:10-14. If the written Scriptures had been the source of Christian authority, we would have had a divided Church before 50 A.D. The Scriptures are a source of authoritative teachings, but when you make Scriptures the authority in the Church, you destroy true authority in the Church and the foundation for Christian unity. History proves this is so!

The Church at Antioch recognized that the authority in the Church is alive, as Jesus Christ is alive. The Church of Antioch knew the source of religious authority within the Christian Community: *"This created dissension and much controversy between them...Finally it was decided that Paul, Barnabas,*

and some others should go to see the apostles and presbyters in Jerusalem about this question." (Acts 15:2)

Before the death of Father Thomas Judge, C.M., he wrote to the Cenacle Family founded by him, "I know not what evils the future will launch upon us, but remember, never be found in any faction or schism opposing Rome. If an Angel of heaven were to come down on earth and war against the Papacy, refuse to surrender your allegiance to the Pope. Rally around the Pope for he is the standard bearer of the Cross."

THE DOOR OF FAITH

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND QUESTIONS SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK (PLEASE MEMORIZE)

“WE MUST UNDERGO MANY TRIALS IF WE ARE TO ENTER INTO THE REIGN OF GOD.” (Acts 14:22)

FIRST DAY: Read Summary through Mission of Iconium; Acts 14:1-7.

1. What does Acts tell us about how the Kingdom of God spreads on this earth?
2. What does that tell you about your own Christian life?
3. Why do people refuse to believe in the Gospel?
4. Why does the Gospel divide people?

SECOND DAY: Read Summary Mission to Lystra and Derbe; Acts 14:8-18.

1. What was different about the mission to Lystra and Derbe?
2. What did Paul and Barnabas have to learn here?
3. How did Paul treat the subject of paganism?
4. What does this teach you about evangelizing others?

THIRD DAY: Read Summary Missions Revisited; Acts 14:19-23.

1. What did the Apostles do when they returned to the missions?
2. What do you learn from this?
3. What does Acts 14:22 mean to you?

4. What do you see as a personal enemy for your entering the reign of God?

FOURTH DAY: Read Summary Back Home; Acts 15:1-2; Gal. 1:6-2:10.

1. What does Luke see as the highlight of the missionary expedition?
2. What does this mean to you?
3. What is this “new gospel” being preached to the Galatians?
4. What is Paul trying to do in this reading from Galatians?

FIFTH DAY: Read Summary Prelude to the Council; Gal. 2:15-21.

1. What was the first major crisis in the Christian Faith?
2. What do you understand to be the two sides of the argument?
3. What do you understand to be Paul's doctrine?
4. What danger did the Church face at this time?

SIXTH DAY: Read conclusion of Summary; Gal. 2:11-14.

1. Why did Paul attack the behavior of Peter in Antioch?
2. What do you learn from this incident?
3. What did the Church at Antioch see as the solution to their controversy?
4. What is the role of the Scriptures in the Church?

CHAPTER 14

COUNCIL AT JERUSALEM

INTRODUCTION

In about the twentieth year of its existence, the Christian Church faced its first major internal crisis in Church doctrine. The question was, "What must a person do in order to be saved?" Only when Gentiles began to enter the Church, with no affiliation with the synagogue or Jewish customs, did the problem fully surface within the Church. A traditional school began to form within the Christian-Judean Community. They viewed the Church to have been founded upon the Jewish religion and the Messiah of Israel, Jesus of Nazareth. They believed salvation could be achieved by fulfilling the Mosaic Law and by accepting Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God. It would be a natural deduction of this belief to demand that all Gentiles be circumcised.

Others in the Church held a decidedly different opinion. They saw the Church as a New Creation – the New Israel flowing from the sacrificial death of Jesus on the Cross, and this New Israel inaugurated by Jesus sending down the Holy Spirit upon all believers. When understood in this light, salvation came to be seen as having no relationship whatever with the Mosaic Law. Therefore, salvation had nothing to do with whether one kept the Mosaic Law or not – whether one was circumcised or not. This truth found capsule expression in *"We hold that a man is justified by faith apart from the observance of the law."* (Rom. 3:28)

CHURCH COUNCIL AT JERUSALEM

Around 49 A.D., the controversy between these two opposing groups fully flowered. Seeking peace for the Christian Community, the Church at Antioch decided to send a delegation, composed of Paul, Barnabas and some others (no doubt from the opposing side), to the Apostles and presbyters in Jerusalem about this question. (See Acts 15:2.) When the delegation from Antioch arrived in Jerusalem, the entire Christian Community convened to

listen to the report of the brothers from Antioch. It was a general assembly with the Apostles and presbyters presiding over the meeting. The delegation from Antioch reported *"all that God had helped them accomplish."* After they finished their report, *"some of the converted Pharisees then got up and demanded that such Gentiles be circumcised and told to keep the Mosaic Law."* (Acts 15:5)

A free and hotly debated argument followed this statement. After the anger of the argument had expended itself, the public meeting was adjourned. The Apostles and presbyters convened to discuss the matter. After much discussion, the entire assembly met together for a formal decision on the matter. The Church used no extraordinary means by which to reach its decision. The Lord worked no sign or wonder indicating who was in the right. They didn't cast lots this time. They dialogued and discussed the problem. "After much discussion," Peter finally rose and gave the decision that ended the controversy and brought peace to the Church.

PETER SPEAKS

Peter carried his hearers' minds back some ten years earlier when, inspired by a revelation, he preached the gospel to the household of Cornelius and how they had believed in the word spoken. As a result, *"God, who reads the hearts of men, showed his approval by granting the Holy Spirit to them just as he did to us. He made no distinction between them and us, but purified their hearts by means of faith also."* (Acts 15:8-9) Peter addressed this question to the opposition, *"Why, then do you put God to the test by trying to place on the shoulders of these converts a yoke which neither we nor our fathers were able to bear?"* Are these men now to bring God to trial making him prove to them the righteousness of His action? Must God answer for sanctifying uncircumcised men? *"Are you jealous because I am good?"*

Peter clearly and firmly then declared the Christian Dogma, *"Our belief is rather that we are saved by the favor of the Lord Jesus and so are they."* (Acts 15:11) Peter's statement affirmed that no one earns nor merits salvation. It is a free gift from God to all who believe in Jesus Christ. Peter declared the belief of the Christian Community – *"our belief."* This belief must be accepted in order to be part of this Christian Community. An infallible decision had been given. Peter's words ended the discussion. Luke pointedly writes, *"At that the whole assembly fell silent."* (Acts 15:12)

At this moment, the words of Jesus to Simon Peter come to mind, "*Simon, Simon! Remember that Satan has asked for you to sift you all like wheat. But I have prayed for you that your faith will never fail. You in turn must strengthen your brothers.*" (Lk. 22:31-32) This is Peter's last recorded act by Luke. He indeed staged a grand act for Peter's exodus from the written pages of the first Church History. As the Chief Shepherd he leaves the stage!

JAMES THE PRESBYTER

James the Just agreed with Peter's doctrine. Nevertheless, he saw certain practical difficulties in its application in a Jew-Gentile Community. Certain Gentile practices were so abhorrent to anyone raised a Jew that they would cause a serious impediment to Church unity. As noted earlier, one of the big problems of having Jews and Gentiles in the same Church was the need to eat together. Eating a common meal was closely tied to the celebration of the Eucharist. Jews were governed by strict dietary laws.

According to the Old Testament there were certain prohibitions that foreigners must observe if they wished to dwell with Jewish people. These prohibitions were, no doubt, in the back of James' mind when he spoke to the assembly. James agreed with Peter and held that the Old Testament prophets did also. James moved on to the practical matter of implementing this decree. Since the Jewish Christians had conceded to waiver circumcision for the Gentiles then the Gentile Christians should be asked to abide by certain Jewish convictions without which Christian fellowship would be nearly impossible. James went on to say, "*It is my judgment, therefore, that we ought not to cause God's Gentile converts any difficulties. We should merely write to them to abstain from anything contaminated by idols, from illicit sexual union, from the meat of strangled animals, and from eating blood.*" (Acts 15:29-20) James insisted that Jewish tradition, which meant so much to Jewish Christians, should therefore be respected by their Gentile Christian brethren.

It is in this spirit the first council of the Catholic Church ended. It had proclaimed the gospel truth. It taught that this truth must be lived in a way that works for peace and strengthens Christian fellowship.

AFTER THE COUNCIL

Luke relates that complete harmony and unity had been achieved, *“It was resolved by the apostles and presbyters, in agreement with the whole Jerusalem church, that representatives be chosen from among their number and sent to Antioch along with Paul and Barnabas. Those chosen were leading men of the community, Judas, known as Barsabbas, and Silas.”* (Acts 15:22) The Church prudently sent both the written and the living word. Human prudence is quite evident by not sending the reply merely with the delegation from Antioch, but including members outstanding in the Jerusalem Community.

Luke gives this description of Antioch’s acceptance of the decree from Jerusalem: *“When it was read there was great delight at the encouragement it gave. Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, strengthened the community and gave them reassurance in a long discourse.”* (Acts 15:31-32)

REFLECTION ON THE COUNCIL

These episodes in Acts clearly illustrate that there has always been authority in the Christian Church. The Twelve Apostles possessed a teaching and governing authority and these powers remain in the Church, for they are essential for the structure and permanence of the Church. Each time Luke mentions the Apostles at the Council, he places presbyters side-by-side with them. The Apostles and the presbyters now appear together as the authority in the Jerusalem Church. By so doing, Luke subtly indicates a transfer and a continuation of apostolic power within the Church. This would be in direct contrast to the Church as it had been twenty years earlier when all authority resided in the Twelve.

At the Council in Jerusalem, Peter proclaimed the doctrine of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. Paul preached it, explained it, fought for it, suffered greatly for it, would have died for it – but the Church accepted it because Peter confirmed it to be true.

When Peter gave the final decision on the doctrinal matter, he symbolically passes from the scene. Luke now highlights the role of a presbyter – James the Just – who presently appears to rule the Church at Jerusalem. It is he that sends directives to the troubled churches. Luke illustrates how James implements the decree within the Church. He accepts the decree of Peter and makes reference to it. He substantiates it from the Scriptures. He

prudently implements the truth with charity. He demands that certain concessions be made by the winners in favor of the opposition – concessions that do not violate the principle involved. For the good of communal life and worship – a most high good – he asks for the renunciation of certain individual rights and goods.

Luke makes clear that it is not merely a human decision that has been given, *“It is the decision of the Holy Spirit, and ours too.”* We see again an acknowledgment of that Divine-human partnership. It is a decision of the Holy Spirit but it is also a decision of the Church officials. They worked hard to arrive at it, and within their hard work the Holy Spirit manifested His Will. To refuse to accept it would be to refuse to accept the Will of God. It is the decision of the Holy Spirit, otherwise it could not have produced heavenly fruit – peace and joy.

As a result of the Council, the Church in Antioch continued to grow and flourish in this environment of Christian unity and peace. Luke writes, *“Paul and Barnabas continued in Antioch, along with many others, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord.” (Acts 15:35)*

ADIEU TO A GREAT TEAM

Barnabas and Paul! Paul and Barnabas! Two great spirits – forged by God’s grace into one of the Church’s greatest missionary teams. Indeed, it was their personal union with the Holy Spirit of God that became the foundation for the mutual union of their own two spirits – forging them into a missionary team with one mind, one heart. Their unique talents and abilities harmoniously blended and made a power for good seldom realized in the history of the Church. What they were as a team, they could never be as individuals. Through their union with the Holy Spirit and with each other, they created an environment – truly a Divine Milieu – in which the miracle of grace created the team of Paul and Barnabas. One in mind, one in heart, they were in spirit the Missionaries of the Holy Spirit. Such union of spirits create the deepest, the highest degree of human friendship. Therese of Lisieux spoke of it as two blossoms on the same stem.

Luke spotlights the true human frailty of the Church when he records, in Acts, the breakdown of the friendship between Paul and Barnabas and the breakup of one of the finest missionary teams. We saw frailty in the Church before in Ananias and Sapphira – but they were the weakest links in the

chain; this time it is the finest and the strongest appearing in the sackcloth of human frailty. Into this Eden of Friendship – into this Divine Milieu – the Ancient Serpent found entrance.

Luke writes, *“After a certain time Paul said to Barnabas, ‘Let us go back now and see how the brothers are getting on in each of the towns where we proclaimed the word of the Lord.’ Barnabas wanted to take along John, called Mark. But Paul insisted that, as he had deserted them at Pamphylia, refusing to join them on that mission, he was not fit to be taken along now.” (Acts 15:36-38)* Paul put Barnabas in a position of having to choose between John Mark and himself. Barnabas could not turn his back on John Mark and reject him. *“The disagreement which ensued was so sharp that the two separated.” (Acts 15:39a)* Paul rejected Barnabas and turned his back upon him. *“Barnabas took Mark along with him and sailed for Cyprus. Paul, for his part, chose Silas to accompany him on his journey, and in this he was commended by the brothers to the favor of the Lord. He traveled throughout Syria and Cilicia, giving the churches there renewed assurance.” (Acts 15:39b-41)*

It would be three years before Paul would return from this journey. Tradition holds that Barnabas remained in Cyprus, dying there before Paul did. Perhaps they never were to meet again on this earth. Human frailty revealed the imperfection of their human hearts. Yet human hearts still strive to perfectly love God – the One perfect Object of Love. That God of Love promised to bring good out of evil for those who loved Him – even love out of the evil of not loving. Evil won a battle but Love won the war: two teams instead of one came into being. Two other men were brought deeply into the apostolate catching that fire of zeal burning in Paul and Barnabas. Barnabas’ confidence in John Mark was not misplaced. The second time around he would not fail. It was he that later stood within sound of the lions and urged the Roman Christians to embrace martyrdom for the faith. Paul’s missionary star would rise as he relentlessly proclaimed the gospel across Asia, into Europe and on to Rome.

Time and reflection mellowed him. He spoke defensively of Barnabas to the Corinthians. He even came to appreciate John Mark. He wrote the Colossians, *“Aristarchus, who is a prisoner along with me, sends you greetings. So does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. You have received instructions about him: if he comes to you, make him welcome.” (Col. 4:10)* He wrote Timothy, *“I have no one with me but Luke. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he*

can be a great service to me.” (2 Tim. 4:11)

But most of all, Paul grew in love. It was in the sad, personal failures of the heart that he came to realize – *“love is patient; love is kind. Love is not jealous, it does not put on airs, it is not snobbish. Love is never rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not prone to anger; neither does it brood over injuries.... There is no limit to love’s forbearance, to its trust, its hope, its power to endure. Love never fails.... There are, in the end, three things that last: faith, hope, and love, and the greatest of these is love.” (I Cor. 13:4-13)*

COUNCIL AT JERUSALEM

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND QUESTIONS SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK (PLEASE MEMORIZE)

“IN CHRIST JESUS NEITHER CIRCUMCISION NOR THE LACK OF IT COUNTS FOR ANYTHING; ONLY FAITH, WHICH EXPRESSES ITSELF THROUGH LOVE.” (Gal. 5:6)

FIRST DAY: Read Summary through Church Council at Jerusalem; Acts 15:1-5; Galatians 5:1-12.

1. What was the subject for the first Church Council at Jerusalem?
2. What does Paul imply will be the effects of a Christian being circumcised?
3. What does Galatians 5:6 teach you about salvation?
4. What do you learn by Antioch sending a delegation to Jerusalem?

SECOND DAY: Read Summary: Peter Speaks; Acts 15:6-12.

1. What would you say was the democratic spirit in the Council meeting?
2. How does Peter appear at this Council?
3. What infallible statement does he make?
4. What does that statement mean to you?

THIRD DAY: Read Summary James the Presbyter; Leviticus 17:8-15,18:6; Acts 15:13-21.

1. What did the Old Testament prohibit to foreigners living in Israel?
2. Why was it forbidden to drink or eat blood?
3. What practical problem did James foresee in implementing the decree of the Council?

4. What do you learn from the example given by James?

FOURTH DAY: Read I Corinthians 10:14-33; Romans 14:12-23.

1. What was the problem of conscience facing the early Church about eating meat?
2. How did Paul see this problem for himself?
3. What was his solution to the problem?
4. What do you learn from these readings about your own attitude towards the Church problems of today?

FIFTH DAY: Read Summary through Reflection on the Council;
Acts 15:22-35

1. What does Luke subtly imply by placing the Apostles and presbyters together?
2. What means does the Holy Spirit use to manifest His Will to the council?
3. In what way is the Council humanly prudent in implementing the decisions of the Council?
4. What does verse 28 teach you?

SIXTH DAY: Read Summary: Adieu to a Great Team; Acts 15:36-41.

1. What was the great loss to the Church here?
2. How does God bring good out of this human failure?
3. How would you explain what happened between Paul and Barnabas?
4. What does this teach you about Christians?

CHAPTER 15

THE APOSTOLIC SPIRIT

INTRODUCTION

The Council of Jerusalem ended the internal crisis within the Church. The decision of the Council made possible, in a concrete way, the words of Jesus, *"My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples."* (Mk. 11:17) The Church could now concentrate its energy on its external expansion. Through the missionary activities of Paul, Luke will illustrate the rapid expansion of the Church through Asia Minor, into Europe and on to Rome, highlighting only certain incidents and illustrating how this new faith stirred the hatred and persecution of the old faith of Judaism; how it was subjected to the criticism and snobbery of the accepted philosophical systems in the world; how the cultural circles of the Greco-Roman world treated it with indifference; how it confronted the superstition of common people and inflicted a decisive defeat on a perverted and false spiritualism. Luke always had an eye to record the attitudes and reactions of secular authority to the Church. He records the history of the first pages of world evangelization with its methods, its obstacles, its triumphs. He leaves this record for future evangelists to contemplate and in which to find inspiration.

THE SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY

Probably in the Spring of 50 A.D., Paul began his second missionary journey. Luke tells us that *"Paul arrived first at Derbe; next he came to Lystra, where there was a disciple named Timothy, whose mother was Jewish and a believer, and whose father was a Greek. Since the brothers in Lystra and Iconium spoke highly of him, Paul was anxious to have him come along on the journey. Paul had him circumcised because of the Jews of that region, for they all knew that it was only his father who was Greek."* (Acts 16:1-3)

Paul did not have Timothy circumcised for religious reasons, but because of the practical problem of working with Jews. In the eyes of the Jews, Timothy would be considered a Jew having been born of a Jewish mother.

The decree that Paul fought so hard for in Jerusalem concerned Gentile converts and not Jews. By having Timothy circumcised, Paul was not violating the principle laid down by the Council. Timothy was circumcised, not in order to make him more pleasing to God but to make him more acceptable to Jews. We know from Paul's later letters that the coming of Timothy into his life and becoming a part of his missionary team was a great blessing to Paul. A deep father-son relationship developed between the two.

The missionary team made its way from town to town, transmitting to the people for observance the decisions which the Apostles and presbyters had made in Jerusalem. Luke implies the acceptance of this decree and the obedience to it had certain good effects, "...the congregations grew stronger in faith and daily increased in numbers." (*Acts 16:5*) When faith is strengthened – when it is strong – the Church increases. In our own day, we have seen Catholic areas where the voice of apostolic authority has been silent or shunned. Consequently, faith has grown weak and countless numbers have fallen away from the Church.

The Churches of Galatia, in accepting the decisions of the Apostles and presbyters, bring to a conclusion the section of Acts dealing with the internal crisis within the Church. Luke now directs our attention and his narrative towards the external expansion of the Church.

OPPOSITION FROM THE HOLY SPIRIT

After completing their work in Pisidian Antioch, Paul and his companions decided to extend their missionary efforts further west. Only twenty miles away lay the Province of Asia. After crossing into the Province of Asia, they received a prohibition from the Holy Spirit against preaching the gospel in Asia. Since they were forbidden to do this, they decided to head north to the Province of Bithynia. Here again they ran into a wall of opposition. The Spirit of Jesus forbade them even to enter the Province of Bithynia. In the dark of faith and in the hope of enlightenment, they moved on. God's positive Will for them lay shrouded in the Divine silence. Only what they must not do was clear – they must not preach in Asia; they must not enter Bithynia. The Will of God restricted them in the Province of Asia and to silence.

Paul and his companions had probably traveled some 300 miles on foot by

the time they wearily arrived in Troas. Because of Divine intervention, they arrived in a place they had not intended. Here we see the importance in all missionary and apostolic activity to submit our plans to the Lord, always, in prayer. We need to keep ourselves open to external manifestations of God's spirit that may come from co-workers, superiors, spiritual directors, circumstances in which the Will of God may indicate a termination of a work, a different direction to be taken, another method to be used. Good ideas and inspired plans are not enough. What we envision as the goal and purpose may be entirely different to the Mind of God.

As they waited and rested by the shores of the Aegean Sea – and wondered about the Will of God – the positive Will of God manifested itself. *“There one night Paul had a vision. A man of Macedonia stood before him and invited him, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’ After this vision, we immediately made efforts to get across to Macedonia, concluding that God had summoned us to proclaim the good news there.” (Acts 16:9-10)* This is the first of the “we” passages in Acts. It is generally presumed that the author of Acts joined the missionary team at this point.

MISSION TO MACEDONIA

The missionary party set sail for northern Greece to the port of Neapolis. Neapolis was the port city for Philippi, which lay about ten miles farther west along the Via Egnatia. Philippi was the immediate destination of Paul and his party. There was no synagogue there. The number of Jews must have been less than ten males – the technical number needed to establish a synagogue. They maintained only a temporary place of prayer outside the city gate along the edge of the River Gangites.

Luke records, *“We spent some time in that city. Once, on the sabbath we went outside the city gate to the bank of the river, where we thought there would be a place of prayer. We sat down and spoke to the women who were gathered there. One who listened was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple goods from the town of Thyatira. She already revered God, and the Lord opened her heart to accept what Paul was saying. After she and her household had been baptized, she extended us an invitation, ‘If you are convinced that I believe in the Lord, come and stay at my house.’ She managed to prevail on us.” (Acts 16:13-15)* Although it was a vision of a man that called Paul to Macedonia, the Church at Philippi came into being through the conversion of a wealthy lady named Lydia. Her home was the first church and it forever remained

one dear to the heart of Paul – apparently the only one from which he accepted financial aid. This wealthy businesswoman became Paul's first convert and benefactress in Europe.

OPPOSITION OF MEN

Up to this time, Paul's opposition had been from the Jews, but now, Christianity has its first conflict with the pagan world. The cause of the hostility was not faith, but the interference with material gains.

One day, as they proceeded to their place of prayer, a young girl possessed of the Python spirit met them. Such people were believed to be inspired by the god Apollo – who was thought to be embodied in a snake (python) at Delphi. Anyone so possessed was believed to be able to foretell the future. Plutarch tells us that the word "pythons" was used to mean "ventriloquists." *"She used to bring substantial profit to her masters by fortune-telling."* This she probably did by ventriloquistic utterances in a trance-like fashion. We are told the girl began to follow Paul and the rest of the disciples shouting, *"These men are servants of the Most High God; they will make known to you a way of salvation."* (Acts 16:17)

With this incident, Luke illustrates the problem faced by Christianity in a world filled with paganism and spiritualism. He draws a contrast for us between Lydia and the slave girl. Lydia possessed a good spirit – she revered God in her heart. Lydia recognized the grace of true religion in Judaism and she conformed her life to its teachings. A spirit so open to God was a fertile field for the gospel truth to take root. In the conversion of Lydia, we see a soul prepared, apparently, by a lifetime of openness to truth and the acceptance of it. To such a person, Paul presents the gospel truth, and actual grace moves her to believe. True conversion is a matter of the spirit.

In the slave girl, we see a picture symbolizing the spirit of the pagan people that the Christian gospel must now encounter. In this girl, we see the human spirit at its worst – alive, active but perverted – a spirit that does not lead to God, despite the vocabulary it may use, but a spirit that uses its power to corrupt the true spiritual relationship with God.

The evil spirit in this slave girl had its own evil intentions in seeking to identify with Christianity. Just as Jesus rejected such testimony and witness,

so must the Church – so must every true Christian. Paul's patience finally came to an end as *"she did this for several days."* Luke tells us, *"...finally Paul became annoyed, turned around, and said to the spirit, 'In the name of Jesus Christ I command you, come out of her!' Then and there the spirit left her."* (Acts 16:18) This is Paul's first exorcism on European soil. It symbolizes the power of the Gospel to be greater than the power of evil that holds Europe in its grasp. The power of Jesus is demonstrated.

One of the greatest enemies the Church would face, in seeking to bring the true faith to pagan people, would be the hatred and hostility engendered in men and women who profit financially from false beliefs and practices. These people seek to destroy the true faith and they use whatever means available – especially political power. Of this, Paul later writes, *"...Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. It comes as no surprise that his ministers disguise themselves as ministers of the justice of God. But their end will correspond to their deeds."* (II Cor. 11:14-15)

"When her masters saw that their source of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the main square before the local authorities. They turned them over to the magistrates with this complaint, 'These men are agitators disturbing the peace of our city! Furthermore, they are Jews, which means they advocate customs which are not lawful for us Romans to adopt or practice.'" (Acts 16:19-21) The magistrates stripped them and ordered them to be flogged. Paul and Silas were stripped naked in the public square – this would be an intense suffering keenly felt due to their Jewish modesty. After receiving many lashes they were thrown into prison. Men who have proclaimed, out of love for God and man, truth that brings salvation, have now been falsely accused and condemned by civil authority to be beaten and imprisoned where they are chained like animals. Evil revenges itself on God's servants!

GOOD FROM EVIL

Paul and Silas suffered such punishment because of their partnership with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is likewise in prison with them. He brings consolation to their spirits and fills their hearts with praise that escapes their lips in prayer and song. They filled the prison with their prayerful songs. They turned the dungeon into a chapel. The jailer may have dozed listening to the songs of his prisoners when suddenly a severe earthquake jolted him awake. Seeing the open prison doors, he completely despaired, thinking the

prisoners had escaped. Paul's calling to him out of the dark dungeon stopped his intended act of suicide, "*Do not harm yourself! We are all still here.*" (Acts 16:28)

In the eye of the jailer, this earthquake confirmed the power of these men. Filled with superstitious fear, he came to Paul and Silas. They had saved his physical life and now he asked them, "*What must I do to be saved?*" That question had been settled at the Council of Jerusalem. He had asked the right ones. He had been frightened in the right direction. They proceeded to announce the word of God to him and everyone in his house. He believed; the jailer and his entire household were baptized that very night. This incident has often been quoted to support the baptism of children and baptism without submerging under water. The presumption was that children would have been in the household and such a baptism would have been impossible in such a prison environment.

A day that had started out so badly ended in a joyful agape with Paul and Silas celebrating Christian fellowship with new Christians – albeit, of somewhat different quality than Lydia. Perhaps Paul and Silas discovered from this incident what, in the end, would be the fruit of all they would have to suffer for the gospel. Their suffering would increase the numbers at the banquet of the Lord. For evangelists, such as Paul and Silas, this would be enough to cause rejoicing in their suffering for Jesus' name.

MISSION TO THESSALONICA

After being released from prison, the missionary party continued along the Via Egnatia until they reached Thessalonica. It was the capital of the province, a free city of the Empire with a large population. An old pattern was resumed in Thessalonica. When they arrived in the city, they found a synagogue where Paul and Silas preached on three successive Sabbaths. This resulted in the conversion of some of the Jews, a great number of God-fearing Gentiles and a number of leading women. It also resulted in the indignation of the rest of the Jews. This ended in an accusation that alarmed both the city council and the citizens. "*The people who have been turning the whole world upside down have come here now; they have been staying at Jason's. They have broken every one of Caesar's edicts by claiming that there is another emperor, Jesus.*" (Acts 17:6b-7*) Our Apostles had to leave Thessalonica in a hurry for Beroea.

In Beroea, they found they had a good reception and many Jews and God-fearing Gentiles, men and women, came to believe. The arrival of his enemies from Thessalonica forced Paul to leave. Silas and Timothy remained in Beroea awaiting word from Paul who was uncertain of his future movements. He would come back and collect them as soon as he could. As it turned out, he was prevented by obstacles put in his way by Satan. This was most probably the opposition of his Jewish enemies from Thessalonica. He continued his work of preaching the gospel along the Egnatian Way to Dyrrachium on the Adriatic coast. From there, he went north to Illyricum (Albania today). Finding the Jews still keeping an eye on him, he doubled back south to Nicopolis and with his Macedonian guides, Aristarchus and Secundus of Thessalonica and Sopater of Beroea, he came to Athens. These men he sent back to Beroea and Thessalonica. The Acts tell us that Paul was alone in Athens.

NOT AGAINST FLESH AND BLOOD

It had been Paul's intention to return to Thessalonica, but he had been unable to do so. He later wrote to them, *"We were seized with the greatest longing to see you. So we tried to come to you – I, Paul, tried more than once – but Satan blocked the way."* (I Thes. 2:17b-18a) The Jews of Thessalonica were no doubt the instruments used by Satan. *"Displeasing to God and hostile to all mankind, they try to keep us from preaching salvation to the Gentiles. All this time they have been filling up their quota of sins..."* (I Thes. 2:15b-16) "Pray," he urged the Thessalonians, *"that we may be delivered from confused and evil men. For not every man has faith, but the Lord keeps faith; he it is who will strengthen you and guard you against the evil one."* (II Thes. 3:2-3) Spreading the Gospel is more than preaching the good news and introducing the Christian Faith. It is an assault – an attack upon the kingdom of darkness. It is a battle with Satan and his hoards. God help the unsuspecting Christian that confronts the kingdom of darkness without being clothed in the armor of God. (See Eph. 6:13-18). Fools rush in where angels fear to tread! *"Our battle is not against human forces but against the principalities and powers, the rulers of this world of darkness, the evil spirits in the regions above."* (Eph. 6:12)

*Quotation taken from the Jerusalem Bible.

THE APOSTOLIC SPIRIT

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND QUESTIONS SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK (PLEASE MEMORIZE)

“BE TACTFUL WITH THOSE WHO ARE NOT CHRISTIANS AND BE SURE TO MAKE THE BEST USE OF YOUR TIME WITH THEM. TALK TO THEM AGREEABLY AND WITH A FLAVOR OF WIT, AND TRY TO FIT YOUR ANSWERS TO THE NEED OF EACH ONE.” (Col. 4:5-6)

FIRST DAY: Read Summary through Opposition from the Holy Spirit; Acts 16:1-10.

1. What does the acceptance of the decree from Jerusalem by the Galatian Churches teach us?
2. What does Scripture teach us about the Christian Community that is strong in faith?
3. What do we learn from the opposition of the Holy Spirit to Paul's plans?
4. How should you apply this teaching to your own life?

SECOND DAY: Read Summary through Opposition of men; Acts 16:11-18.

1. What spiritual qualities did Lydia possess that aided her acceptance of the gospel?
2. How did the spirit of the slave girl differ from Lydia's spirit?
3. What do we learn from Paul's exorcism of the slave girl?
4. Why do you think it is wrong for a Christian to be involved in spiritualism?

THIRD DAY: Read Summary Good from Evil; Acts 16:19-40; Philippians 2:19-29.

1. What are some of the evils Christians must face in a pagan world?

2. What means do the enemies of the Church often use to destroy its works?
3. How do we see God bringing good out of the sufferings of his evangelists?
4. What do you learn from the reading in Philippians about Paul's relationship with his converts?

FOURTH DAY: Read Summary: Mission to Thessalonica; Acts 17:1-9; I Thes. 2:1-20.

1. What old enemy did Paul meet again in Thessalonica?
2. What doctrine did they accuse him of teaching?
3. From his letter, what do you learn about Paul's life style as an apostle?
4. What means did Satan use to block the spread of the Gospel?

FIFTH DAY: Read Acts 17:10-15; II Thes. 1:3-10 and 3:1-5.

1. What means did the people in Beroea use to aid their search for religious truth?
2. What good effect do we see flowing from all this persecution of the evangelists?
3. From the letter to the Thessalonians, what do we learn about the lives of these early Christian converts?
4. What does II Thessalonians 3:2-3 teach you?

SIXTH DAY: Read Summary: Not Against Flesh and Blood; I Corinthians 4:9-13; II Corinthians 4:8-18; Ephesians 6:13-18.

1. How does Paul see the life of an apostle of Jesus Christ?
2. How would you describe the Apostolic Spirit?
3. What enemy does a Christian face when seeking to be an apostle or an evangelist?
4. How does a Christian protect self from such evil?

CHAPTER 16

THE UNKNOWN GOD

INTRODUCTION

Paul had been driven out of Macedonia, but not before he had succeeded in establishing the Church in the Province of Macedonia. By force of circumstance, he now finds himself alone in the city of Athens. It appears to have been a discouraging and depressing moment in his ministry. He sent word for Silas and Timothy to rejoin him in Athens as soon as possible.

Athens was not only the intellectual and artistic capital of the Roman Empire, but the religious capital as well. The pagan world looked to Athens for its authentic accounts of its pagan gods. Her artistic expression of religious works made her the religious center of the Empire – A city full of idols and altars. Xenophan described Athens as: *“the whole of it one altar, one sacrifice and votive offering to the gods.”* Visitors came to see the intellectual shrines of the city – The Lyceum of Aristotle, the Academy of Plato, the Porch of Zeno, the Gardens of Epicurus. The whole world was under the spell of Athens. Yet in truth, the fame of Athens in Paul’s time rested upon the past rather than the present. Her beautiful exterior hid her growing spirit of internal poverty.

Philosophy had come to occupy the place of religion in the lives of the more enlightened people. Under the spirit of Socrates, the virtue of knowledge became the highest good and ignorance the essential vice. The spirits of Socrates, Aristotle and Plato fostered a speculative search for truth. The human spirit sought truth and knowledge for the sake of truth and knowledge. Academic and speculative philosophies, in which the love of beauty and the pursuit of knowledge expressed the highest good, dominated the spirits of men. This pure, arid, Athenian spirit did not withstand the needs of the times.

Two opposing forces – like great waves – came crushing down upon the Grecian spirit producing essential changes. From the Romans came a pragmatic spirit demanding a practical philosophy by which one could live

in the world and not merely exist – a way of life enabling man to possess a measure of happiness and fulfillment. From the east came the call of the spirit – a need for a philosophy to feed the souls of men and again develop a sense of mystery in life. These forces channeled philosophical thought away from the speculative to concentrate its energies on developing philosophies men could live by. From these needs, the philosophies of Epicureanism and Stoicism were born. These would be the two philosophical systems confronting Paul and Christianity in Athens and the Roman Empire.

Having been born in a university city, Paul was no stranger to these philosophies. Some scholars go so far as to say that Paul was a Christian Stoic. Apparently, he had studied its doctrines, and it would not be surprising if he had been affected by its teachings.

PAUL IN ATHENS

As Paul walked through the rich and beautiful city of Athens, his Semitic heart could not but be appalled by its idolatrous spirit. Over and over he must have heard the words of Exodus 20:3 echoing in his heart, *“You shall have no other gods before me.”* How pure and perfected the religion of Judaism appeared in comparison. In this forest of gods and altars, Paul found one altar to which he could relate – an altar dedicated to the Unknown God.

Acts relates that while Paul was waiting for Silas and Timothy to join him, *“he grew exasperated at the sight of idols everywhere in the city. In the synagogue, he used to hold discussions with the Jews and those sympathetic to Judaism, as well as daily debates in the public square with ordinary passers-by.”* (Acts 17:16-17) Paul began to take to street preaching in the agora and this drew him to the attention of the philosophers who began to dispute with him. Luke writes, *“Epicurean and Stoic philosophers disputed with him, some of them asking, ‘What is this magpie trying to say to us?’ Others commented, ‘He sounds like a promoter of foreign gods,’ because he was heard to speak of ‘Jesus’ and ‘the resurrection.’”* (Acts 17:18)

It was probably the Epicureans who referred contemptuously to Paul as some kind of bird. It would have been the Stoics that saw Paul as a herald of a new god and goddess – Jesus and Anastasis (the Greek word for resurrection). To have the gospel so misunderstood and perhaps deliberately misinterpreted only added to the exasperation already experienced by Paul.

At this point, Paul would have welcomed the opportunity to make a formal presentation of the gospel before the leading men of Athens. This opportunity was given him, *"They then led him off to the Areopagus, saying, 'We are curious to know what this new teaching is that you propose. You are introducing subjects unfamiliar to us and we should like to know what it is all about.'"* (Acts 17:19-20)

SPIRIT OF ATHENS

The most difficult barrier to the acceptance of the gospel is the pride of the human mind. A proud mind feeds upon itself. It finds within itself the measure of truth to which all else must conform in order to be accepted and appreciated. There is no openness to a truth that goes beyond the mind's grasp or understanding. Even God stands before the tribunal of this mind for judgment. The only gods to be acknowledged and loved will be those "imaged" – created by the human spirit. Men create gods in order to exalt themselves above God.

The Athenians believed they possessed religious truth. Their conceit closed their minds to any truth not already enshrined in the temple of their own minds. They did not come to learn, but to be entertained – to exercise their intellectual faculties in debates, arguments, criticism and ridicule. In other words, they came to reinforce within themselves, their own cherished beliefs and to demonstrate before others the beauty of their own minds. Over the city of Athens, the spirit of Lucifer had settled. Satanic pride blossomed in the hearts of men. Their hearts could no longer serve a God greater than their own minds.

PAUL BEFORE THE AREOPAGUS

Paul stands in the middle of the Areopagus – amidst unsurpassed classical splendors of architectural masterpieces. He addresses a council of men symbolizing and representing the glorious development and expansion of the human mind that presently dazzles the world with its productions of religion, art, and literature.

Luke now presents a summary of Paul's address before the Athenian Council. The summary well reflects the heart and essence of his message. Paul speaks with an awareness of the place from which he speaks and of the audience he addresses. His opening remarks compliment them, and Paul

seeks a common ground upon which to build his message. Here we see him as the Christian philosopher addressing pagan philosophers. Once again, he seeks to be all things to all men. He knows the prevalent ideas his message will confront. Wherever possible, he seeks to blend these opposing ideas into his message. Whenever possible, he uses their own arguments to make a point. He avoids introducing ideas essentially Jewish, such as Messiah and the crucifixion. He feels these would be an unnecessary stumbling block, at this point, to his hearers. He seeks to build his message upon a natural theology – the God that reason could discover – God the Creator with providential care for the world and presence within it. To support these teachings, he used the teachings of the Epicureans and Stoics. Once the premise of a personal God involved in the affairs of men had been established, he moved from this foundation to religious behavior and judgment. These were teachings similar to those found in a natural moral theology. From this point, he seeks to stir the consciences and awaken a fearful concern in their hearts. So far he has not mentioned any teaching completely foreign to them. The Stoics would have had little disagreement with Paul up to this point. In essence, the message now follows the gospel presentation to the Gentiles as preached by Peter to Cornelius and by Paul to the pagans in Lystra. Once the love and concern of God for men has been established, Paul declares Divine Judgment. Paul preaches at this point the essential gospel message – repentance and salvation through faith. He declares Jesus to be judge of the world through His resurrection from the dead. It would logically follow that if Jesus is the Judge – His Way and His teachings would bring to man a way of life that would become the means to escape condemnation at judgment.

REACTION TO PAUL'S MESSAGE

Though the Epicureans denied life after death, Greek logic deduced the necessity of spiritual survival after death – but physical resurrection of the dead was an absurdity to their minds. Up to this point, Paul received a courteous hearing, but with mention of the resurrection of the dead, certain hearers began to openly ridicule him and sneer at the teaching. His opportunity to speak had ended. The decision of the Council probably was, “We must hear you on this topic some other time.” Apparently, hearing the gospel had not produced faith in Athens. *“At that point, Paul left them.”* (Acts 17:33.) So ended Paul’s sermon to the philosophers of Athens. It was not a total loss – the seed of faith took root in a few hearts, even in one member of the Council. Luke records, *“A few did join him, however, to*

become believers. Among these were Dionysius, a member of the Court of the Areopagus, a woman named Damaris, and a few others.” (Acts 17:34)

Generally speaking, Paul experienced a serious defeat and rejection in Athens that apparently left him shaken. Luke wrote, *“After that, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth.” (Acts 18:1)* The Greek words used seem to imply expulsion from the city. A later session of the Council may have expelled him from Athens for being “a fool for Christ's sake.” We do know he departed without waiting for Silas and Timothy. Something unusual must have caused this departure.

ATHENS' EFFECT UPON PAUL

Paul's defeat in Athens came at the end of a long series of trials and difficulties suffered over a six-month period. All of it took its toll on him. In a letter he later wrote to the Corinthians, he gave the impression that when he arrived in Corinth he was nearly an emotional wreck, *“I came among you in great fear and trembling.”* The Athens experience taught some bitter lessons which Paul learned well. The experience affected his future methods of evangelizing people. He shared these new insights into evangelism in his letter to the Corinthians.

When Paul arrived in Corinth, he did not address his teaching to the intellectuals and the wealthy of the city. He said of his converts, *“Consider your situation. Not many of you are wise, as men account wisdom; not many are influential; and surely not many are well-born.” (I Cor. 1:26)* From Paul's words, he must have addressed his message to those reckoned among the lower classes of society, *“He chose the world's lowborn and despised, those who count for nothing, to reduce to nothing those who were something.” (I Cor. 1:28)* It was said that more than half the population of Corinth was composed of stevedores and slaves.

Paul gives us a description of the content of the gospel message presented in Corinth, *“During my stay with you, the only knowledge I claimed to have was about Jesus, and only about him as the crucified Christ. Far from relying on any power of my own...In my speeches and the sermons that I gave, there were none of the arguments that belong to philosophy; only a demonstration of the power of the Spirit. And I did this so that your faith should not depend on human philosophy but on the power of God.” (I Cor. 2:1-5*)*

Paul came to see the personal problem faced by many intellectuals in accepting the gospel. He asked the question, *"Where are any of our thinkers today?"* Apparently, to the mind of Paul, they were not on the side of faith. They rejected the faith. He gave this reason, *"The natural man does not accept what is taught by the Spirit of God. For him, that is absurdity. He cannot come to know such teaching because it must be appraised in a spiritual way.... The Spirit we have received is not the world's spirit but God's Spirit, helping us to recognize the gifts he has given us."* (I Cor. 2:14,12)

In his letter to the Romans, Paul expresses his true opinion about the "wise" who reject the Gospel presented to them. He attributes the rejection to a perverse spirit within men, hindering the truth through which their "senseless hearts were darkened." *"These men are inexcusable...In consequence, God delivered them up in their lusts to unclean practices...They did not see fit to acknowledge God, so God delivered them up to their own depraved senses to do what is unseemly...without pity."* (See Rm. 1:18-31)

PRIDE BEFORE THE FALL

Our lesson clearly indicates there are certain internal conditions in man that block an acceptance and understanding of the Wisdom of God – in other words, the Gospel. This blockage impedes the union of the human spirit with that of the Divine. From this flows terrible consequences: God withdraws His grace from the soul; the flesh of man dominates the life and leads to a deterioration of the soul; it leads to the destruction of internal and external peace. True human relationships deteriorate into selfish exploits. But the worst of all – a person opposes God. Even in this life he leans upon the gates of Hell.

Paul teaches that these same Scriptures open and reveal the Wisdom of God only through an internal gift of grace. Only the Holy Spirit can discern the things of God. Only if the Holy Spirit moves in our hearts can we see, hear and respond to God. Only when we put on the mind and heart of Christ do we discover the internal and external peace that comes from learning the meekness and humility of Jesus.

We must be concerned always that the Holy Spirit grows within our own spirits. We must constantly be on our guard for the signs of intellectual and spiritual pride. An intellectual pride insists that all God's plans and purposes within our lives have the "Why?" and "Why not?" clearly

manifested and understood by our human spirit – a spirit that unconsciously demands the light of reason rather than the light of faith by which to live. A spiritual pride is one that grows spiritually complacent and self-justified and begins to disdain others. It is a quick spirit and first to throw the stone of criticism at another brother or sister. It is the last spirit to demonstrate the compassion of Christ for sinners. If one of us should perhaps stand morally or spiritually higher than another, it is only because of the grace of God. If that grace is withdrawn, we do not know at what depths of sin our own spirit will level off. The Scriptures confirm that God does abandon the proud! The Book of Wisdom teaches, *“No, Wisdom will never make its way into a crafty soul nor stay in a body that is in debt to sin; the holy spirit of instruction shuns deceit, it stands aloof from reckless purposes, is taken aback when iniquity appears.”* (Wis. 1:4-5*)

Prayer and meditation are the roads that lead to true humility if persevered upon. Humility brings to the soul the Wisdom of the Unknown God. As the author of the Book of Wisdom writes, *“And so I prayed, and understanding was given me; I entreated, and the spirit of Wisdom came to me.”* (Wis. 7:7*)

*Quotation taken from the Jerusalem Bible.

THE UNKNOWN GOD

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND QUESTIONS SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK (PLEASE MEMORIZE)

“FOR ALL MEN WERE BY NATURE FOOLISH WHO WERE IN IGNORANCE OF GOD, AND WHO FROM THE GOOD THINGS SEEN DID NOT SUCCEED IN KNOWING HIM WHO IS, AND FROM STUDYING THE WORKS DID NOT DISCERN THE ARTISAN.”
(Wis. 3:1)

FIRST DAY: Read Summary through Spirit of Athens; Acts 17:16-21.

1. How would you describe the city of Athens at the time of Paul’s visit?
2. How did this city affect the spirit of Paul?
3. What do you see to be some of the problems to evangelizing people like the Athenians?
4. Why do you think human pride is such an obstacle to the spirit of the Gospel?

SECOND DAY: Read Summary of Paul Before the Areopagus;
(Acts 17:22-27)

1. What is being symbolized: Paul’s speaking before the Areopagus?
2. What technique does Paul use to present the Gospel to them?
3. What argument does Paul use against idol worship?
4. What normal gospel teachings does Paul omit speaking of to the Athenians?

THIRD DAY: Read Summary: Reaction to Paul’s message; Acts 17:28-34.

1. How does Paul seek to show that God and man have personally separated existences, one from the other?
2. What spirit does Paul seek to produce before preaching the gospel message?

3. What was the reaction to Paul's message?
4. Why do you think they could not accept the teaching on the resurrection?

FOURTH DAY: Read Summary: Athens' Effect Upon Paul;
I Cor. 1:26-31; 2:1-5.

1. How did Paul's failure in Athens affect him?
2. In what way do you see God bringing good out of this?
3. Who did Paul now address the Gospel message to?
4. What did Paul now emphasize in his preaching?

FIFTH DAY: Read I Corinthians 2:6-16.

1. What do you learn about evangelizing from this lesson?
2. What does Paul imply in I Corinthians 2:6?
3. What reason does Paul give for men failing to understand the Gospel message?
4. What does this teach you personally?

SIXTH DAY: Read Summary: Pride Before the Fall; Wisdom 13:1-9;
Romans 1:18-32.

1. How do the Scriptures teach us that pagans can come to know God?
2. In the mind of Paul, what blocks them from doing so?
3. What is the punishment for human pride that rejects the Wisdom of God?
4. What does this teach you about your own spiritual life?

CHAPTER 17
GOSPEL POWER
INTRODUCTION

Leaving Athens, Paul arrived in Corinth, the capital of Achaia. Only fifty geographical miles separated the cities, but when Paul arrived in Corinth, he entered a world apart from Athens. Corinth was the veritable crossroad of the east and west – a teeming metropolitan city serving as port and hostess to the Mediterranean world of trade. The city teemed with Roman officials, soldiers, merchants, sailors, stevedores and slaves. The sound of Greek in the market place had long since drowned out Latin as the official language. The commercial importance of Corinth gave birth to a flourishing industry and, consequently, great wealth.

Paul would not have been long in Corinth before he realized why it had become proverbial in the empire for immorality. The south side of the marketplace was lined with taverns. To call a man “Corinthian” was an insult outside of Corinth. The name had become synonymous for a lustful person - a person whose lust for wealth and sensual pleasures dominated his life to such a degree as to characterize the personality. In this same immoral environment, Paul studied first-hand the full results of paganism upon the human character. According to Paul, Corinth housed its share of fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, homosexuals, thieves, misers, drunkards, slanderers and robbers. This was not a very likely environment in which to preach the Gospel. After giving the above list Paul said, *“And such were some of you; but you have been washed, consecrated, justified in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.” (I Cor. 6:11)*

Perhaps no place on earth witnessed more to Paul the power of the Gospel to save. Looking at the Corinthian Community and realizing their former lives, leaves no doubt in the mind that Jesus Christ came to call sinners and that the Church must remain always the refuge of sinners and not merely the citadel of the saved.

Men and women of Corinth experienced the inner emptiness left by their

lives of sinful, sensual gratifications. They had all the meanness and frustration of animals who realize they have been caged and find an escape to freedom impossible. They found themselves captives in a vicious circle, a circle impossible to break. Their lives produced evil fruit. They could no longer alter the destructive cause-effect process in their lives. They were forced to continue their destructive patterns of living in order to deaden the conscious awareness of the inner spiritual pain – the by-product of their hedonistic lives. For many, only death offered any peace.

Into such lives came Paul of Tarsus, preaching a death that would lead to newness of life. He came as an evangelist of Jesus Christ. Paul preached an escape from the cage – an opening to freedom – a freedom from a slavery worse than man could inflict upon man. Paul brought the Savior to Corinth who would free them from the vicious circle in which they were hopelessly entrapped. He determined, within himself, that he would only preach the gospel of the Crucified Christ, *“No, I determined that while I was with you I would speak of nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified.”* In that way, if men came to believe – the foundation of their faith would be in their hearts. What the Spirit worked within their souls as a consequence of their belief in Jesus, would forever be the foundation of their faith.

Paul’s preaching produced conversions in the lives of the Corinthians. These lives, so dramatically changed, became startling witnesses to others of the power of the Gospel. The good news spread in Corinth. Paul later wrote to the Romans, *“I am not ashamed of the gospel. It is the power of God leading everyone who believes in it to salvation, the Jew first, then the Greek.”* (Rm. 1:16)

AQUILA AND PRISCILLA

Paul’s first great blessing in Corinth was meeting a great couple, Aquila and Priscilla (Paul later affectionately referred to her as “Prisca”). Since Luke makes no mention of the two being converted by Paul, the presumption has been that they were Christians at the time of their meeting. We know they had shortly come from Rome, having been expelled by the edict of Claudius in 49 A.D. The Roman historian Suetonius wrote that the reason for the banishment was due to constant fighting among the Jews “at the instigation of Chrestus.” Suetonius probably confused “Christ” with “Chrestus.” Most likely, the trouble resulted from the Christians trying to prove to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ. Aquila and Priscilla were probably in the thick of

the fight.

Luke introduces the couple as Aquila and Priscilla. Further in the narrative he reverses the names. It then becomes Priscilla and Aquila. Knowing Luke, we know this change implies something. In his mind, Priscilla has assumed a more important position than her husband in the Christian Community. It suggests Priscilla may have been the motivating power within the Christian team. Paul certainly gives credit to both of them. If Priscilla excelled in service in the apostolate, Aquila may have well excelled in humility. It may have been the humility of Aquila that cemented the team.

When engaging in the apostolate, a person enters into Jesus' war upon the kingdom of darkness. A soul must be shielded by Christ in order to withstand the onslaughts of the enemy that now singles out the apostle for direct attack. To step outside the shield, or to lay aside the armor of God, invites immediate defeat. But, behind the shield and within the armor, the greatest defense a soul can muster is growth in humility. The victory of the enemy rests upon this point. The temptations of the enemy will be exerted upon the soul to become proud – this will eventually result in the person ceasing to rely upon God's armor or the shield of Christ.

It is only logical that the Enemy seeks to attack the marriage of the individuals involved. He knows even better than the couple involved how much the emotional and psychological strength of the individual rests upon the support of the other. Many couples engaged in the apostolate fail to grow in humility, which means a failure to grow more and more dependent upon the Lord and less and less dependent upon themselves and each other. Without realizing it, the arm of the flesh becomes their support.

Couples engaged in the apostolate would do well to grow mutually in humility and be aware that their marriage will be subjected to attacks, in the degree that they are working to extend the Kingdom of God and, probably, in the degree that their Christian lives depend upon the security of their marriage.

PAUL BEFORE GALLIO

When the springtime arrived and the ships began to sail again, Silas and

Timothy arrived in Corinth. Their arrival greatly encouraged Paul. They brought good news concerning the churches in Macedonia. This encouraged Paul to write his first letter to the Thessalonians. That the churches established by him still flourished encouraged Paul to step up his evangelizing in Corinth. But, just as before, the Jews turned against him. *"When they opposed him and insulted him, he would shake out his garments in protest and say to them, 'Your blood be on your own hands. I am not to blame! From now on, I will turn to the Gentiles.'"* (Acts 18:6)

At about this time, the Lord confirms and encourages Paul's work in Corinth. One night, Paul had a vision of Jesus, and the Lord said to him, *"Do not be afraid. Go on speaking and do not be silenced, for I am with you. No one will attack you or harm you. There are many of my people in this city." Paul ended by settling there for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God.* (Acts 18:9-11)

After about eighteen months, the Jews gathered forces against Paul. They brought him before the court and accused him of persuading people to worship God against the Law. Luke writes, *"During Gallio's proconsulship in Achaia, the Jews rose in a body against Paul and brought him before the bench. 'This fellow,' they charged, 'is influencing people to worship God in ways that are against the law.' Paul was about to speak in self-defense when Gallio said to the Jews, 'If it were a crime or a serious fraud, I would give you Jews a patient and reasonable hearing. But since this is a dispute about terminology and titles and your own law, you must see to it yourselves. I refuse to judge such matters.' With that, he dismissed them from the court."* (Acts 18:12-16) Roman law gave the Jews the power to deal with internal matters pertaining to their religion. From an inscription found at Delphi, it is known that Gallio was proconsul of Achaia in 52 A.D. – he had probably taken office in the summer of 51 A.D. The office would be held for a year and no more than two years.

The scene that day at court ended with this vivid little incident, *"Then they all pounced on Sosthenes, a leading man of the synagogue, and beat him in full view of the bench; but Gallio paid no attention to it."* (Acts 18:17) Was it the dissatisfied Jews who gave vent to their resentment against Paul by beating up their leader who had presented such a poor case before Gallio? Or did some over-zealous converts and friends of Paul take it out on the Jewish representative?

The attitude of Gallio has been frequently interpreted as indicating his religious indifference. More probably it should be regarded as an example of religious tolerance and as a practical declaration that Paul's conduct in no way violated the law of the Roman Empire.

THE RETURN TO ANTIOCH

Paul now leaves Corinth taking Aquila and Priscilla with him. At the port of Cenchreae "Paul cut his hair, for he had a vow." Cutting the hair was a religious custom of the time. This custom found a place in the Jewish law, which speaks of the Nazirite vow in chapter six of Numbers. During the time of the vow, the hair could not be cut. At the completion of the vow, the hair was shaved off and, along with the prescribed sacrifices, the hair was burnt at the Temple. It appears it was Paul's intention to complete this vow in Jerusalem as prescribed by the Law. By this incident, and others, Luke hints at Paul's compliance with Jewish customs and laws. Paul always maintained that he was a "*Hebrew of Hebrews.*"

Paul and his companions sailed for Asia. Arriving en route at Ephesus, he prepared for his future stay in this city by leaving Aquila and Priscilla in Ephesus and by visiting the synagogue. Faced with the Jews request to stay in the city for awhile, he remained firm in his resolve to continue his voyage to Syria, but he promised them that "*if God wills*" he would return to them. The goal of the journey was Caesarea in Palestine, though in all likelihood, it actually was the Jerusalem church. Nothing is said at this point about the purpose of this visit. From the way Luke now briefly deals with the activities of Paul, we know his attention is not centered only on the establishment of the Church at Ephesus. Paul goes to Antioch in Syria and after a stay there of some duration, he goes westward into the Galatian territory and Phrygia. The stay in Caesarea and Antioch marks the end of Paul's second missionary journey and the beginning of the third.

APOLLOS IN EPHEBUS

Luke now introduces a most interesting character. A man named Apollos arrived in Ephesus. He was a Jew from Alexandria. Alexandria had one of the most famous schools of philosophy in the world. There, at this very time, the famous Philo had introduced the doctrines of Plato to the Jews. It is highly probable that Apollos was of the school of Philo. He is presented to

us as a learned and eloquent man and that implies one learned in the “wisdom” of his world. No doubt he was powerful in the Scriptures. But more than all this, he was a man filled with enthusiastic fire – the original Greek description shows him as *“boiling over in the spirit.”* That carries a connotation of being a bit more hot than one who merely bubbles over in the spirit. This would be a man who enkindled others.

We can imagine the joy of Aquila and Priscilla when this eloquent man rose to speak in the synagogue and begin to proclaim Jesus Christ. They immediately detected that his knowledge on the Christian doctrines had only been partially formed. Who could have recognized that better than Aquila and Priscilla who had listened to Paul for nearly two years? They probably noted his lack of knowledge concerning the doctrine of the Holy Spirit and His gifts. Also, his deficiency in the doctrine of the Kingdom of God – the Church. They lost no time in rendering these defects. Thanks to their zeal, Apollos became a fully enlightened Christian and a more powerful evangelist. *“He was vigorous in his public refutation of the Jewish party as he went about establishing from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Messiah.”* (Acts 18:28) In the Providence of God, Apollos’ work in Ephesus prepared the way for Paul’s ministry.

Apollos represents many in the early Church who were brought suddenly to knowledge of Jesus Christ without adequate preparation or subsequent follow-up. In Apollos’ case, he received the baptism of John – repentance of life; he had been instructed in the Way of the Lord and possessed limited knowledge about Jesus. And in Apollos’ case, he was accurate. Apollos likewise had a good scriptural foundation. He had previously been well grounded in the doctrinal and moral teachings of genuine revelation. He had a solid foundation upon which to build a strong religious edifice.

Paul soon learned of the problems faced by the Christian Community in Corinth, which was not well grounded in moral and dogmatic theology. Here, these things were not well integrated within the members of the Church. Within a few years, the Corinthian Church would begin to disintegrate. Charisms of the Holy Spirit led to spiritual pride. These gifts were used to build up the individual egos rather than the Christian Community. Cliques and divisions formed in the Church. Charity grew cold in the Community. The agape celebration became hypocritical and a scandal. The Eucharist was being unworthily received. Sexual immorality was condoned as being in the body, not in the spirit. Since the Corinthians

were “spiritual,” what occurred in the body failed to touch them.

Paul soon realized that he had left behind infants in the spirit. The spiritual immaturity of this community plagued the Church for many years to come. Even in 95 A.D. Pope Clement of Rome writes an epistle to them seeking to restore order in the Christian Community.

Christians must not only “rejoice in the Spirit” – they must “walk in the Spirit.” They must grow in the Spirit to spiritual maturity. If they fail to walk and grow in the Spirit and only rejoice in it, it is only a matter of time before such “Spirit-filled Christians” begin to tear up the Christian Community in the name of the Spirit. Corinth leaves this sad but well documented lesson to the Church. The answer to the problem is not to suppress the Spirit but to put on the Lord Jesus Christ!

GOSPEL POWER

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND QUESTIONS SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK (PLEASE MEMORIZE)

“I AM NOT ASHAMED OF THE GOSPEL. IT IS THE POWER OF GOD LEADING EVERYONE WHO BELIEVES IN IT TO SALVATION, THE JEW FIRST, THEN THE GENTILE.” (Rm. 1:16)

FIRST DAY: Read Summary through Aquila and Priscilla; Acts 18:1-11.

1. How is the power of the Gospel displayed in the city of Corinth?
2. How does Paul preach to the Corinthians?
3. How does a person display faith in the power of the Gospel to others?
4. What are the dangers facing married couples working in the apostolate?

SECOND DAY: Read Summary: Paul Before Gallio; Acts 18:12-23.

1. What effect does the Lord's vision have upon Paul?
2. Why do you think Gallio refused to hear the Jews' case?
3. What does Luke wish to show by this case of Paul before Gallio?
4. What does Aquila's and Priscilla's going with Paul to Ephesus tell you about the couple?

THIRD DAY: Read Summary Apollos in Ephesus; Acts 18:24-28.

1. Where does Luke now center the interest of Acts?
2. What kind of a character does Apollos appear to be?
3. What danger do you see in people like Apollos preaching who are not adequately prepared?

4. What would you say was lacking in the Corinthian converts?

FOURTH DAY: Read I Corinthians 3:1-23 and 6:1-11.

1. How would you describe a spiritual infant in the Church?
2. What effect did Apollos' visit to Corinth have on some Christians?
3. What picture of the Christian Community do you get from these readings?
4. What do you learn from I Corinthians 6:9-11?

FIFTH DAY: Read I Corinthians 5:1-13 and 6:12-19.

1. What is the reason a Christian can and should live a chaste life?
2. In the mind of Paul, why is the sin of fornication so wrong for a Christian?
3. Why do you think Paul gives the advice he does in I Cor. 5:11?
4. What do you learn from these readings?

SIXTH DAY: Read I Corinthians 11:17-34.

1. What caused the deterioration of the agape celebration in Corinth?
2. Why were some receiving the Eucharist unworthily?
3. What was the effect of this upon the Corinthians?
4. What is the most important lesson you have learned from the story of the Church in Corinth?

CHAPTER 18

THE WAY OF TRUTH

INTRODUCTION

Paul promised the Jews in Ephesus, "*God willing, I will come back to you again.*" True to his promise, Paul returned to Ephesus – probably in the summer of 53 A.D. Ephesus presented a particular problem to the evangelist Paul. In coming to Ephesus, he entered the citadel of pagan spiritualism and black magic. It became a stepping stone to Rome, for the city embodied those "powers of darkness" which possessed Rome as its capital.

The city prided itself as the custodian of the Temple of Artemis. This temple, built in the Ionic style, was one of the Seven Wonders of the World. Artemis was the goddess of fertility – patroness of childbirth. She was the mother goddess of Asia who symbolized procreative and nutritive powers of nature. A whole month was dedicated to the goddess in the late spring and called the month of Artemisus. She had become an object of devotion throughout the whole Greco-Roman world. Her festival was ecumenical. In Ephesus, Christianity encountered an established religion – flourishing and possessing real power and vitality.

The worship of Artemis involved the worship of the powers of nature. It is understandable that along with this worship developed the arts of black and "white" magic. There was a famous collection of charms and spells in Ephesus known as the "Ephesian Letters." They guaranteed everything from children to the childless, to success in love and business.

GLADIATORS of TRUTH

It has been said that Paul appeared in Ephesus as a gladiator in the arena, contending against the great goddess herself. In the arena of truth, the Church confronted Ephesus through Paul. The Church proclaimed the Way and the Way possessed the power of Truth. In this section of Acts, the relationship between truth and the Church becomes clearly manifested. Jesus identified Himself as the Way, the Truth and the Life. A Church

founded by Him must also be identified with the Truth. It must become the champion of Truth – must be willing to be martyred for the Truth. As Truth cannot be separated from Jesus Himself, all that is false and untrue is unchristian. Jesus tells us, *“If you live according to my teaching, you are truly my disciples; then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”* (Jn. 8:31-32) To teach or adhere to what is false is no small matter. Jesus Christ confirms Satan to be the father of lies and his children live in falsity and resist the truth. He *“has never based himself on truth; the truth is not in him. Lying speech is his native tongue; he is a liar and the father of lies.”* (Jn. 8:44)

Ephesus, with its false religion, science, and spiritualism, would become a source of great danger to the Church – a danger that would become an internal problem for the Church. Enemies of Christian truth would appear within the Christian Community – the “wolves,” as Paul called them, would seek to destroy the faith – with half-truths and subtle lies. Every true Christian must be a gladiator of truth!

WHAT IS TRUTH?

Because of its intrinsic importance to this lesson, let us briefly analyze the concept of truth – making sure we all understand the same thing by the word used. Through Pilate, the world asked Jesus, “What is truth?” It did not wait to hear His answer. John wrote the Fourth Gospel to confirm that Jesus alone can answer the question.

The western mind today represents the Greek concept of truth. A thing is true when it possesses the essential elements that make it what it is and not something else. Liquid is true water when the liquid is actually H₂O. Our idea of a thing is true when the idea accurately corresponds with the thing as it is in reality. If I think there is water in the glass, and there is water in the glass, then my thought is true.

What is meant by “truth” in the Scriptures carries a different meaning than what the western mind is accustomed to. To understand the teaching about “truth” in the Scriptures, we must understand what truth would mean to the Hebrew mind. We may be surprised to discover that there is no distinct word in the Hebrew language for the word truth or truthful as we understand it in the west. Such concepts are expressed by the word “emet.” This word expresses more our idea of faith. This concept of faith is an essential element in understanding the biblical concept of truth. Truth is not

some idea or concept in the mind, but a person or thing outside the mind in which a person can put one's trust – rely on, have confidence in. One can trust this thing or person because experience has proven it to be steadfast and unchanging. Under test and stress, it does not collapse and betray the confidence one has in it. One comes to know that this thing or person can be relied upon. The person or thing one can rely on is true. The person or thing becomes an object of faith.

Reaction to biblical truth is different. One does not assent to the truth. One makes a personal commitment to the thing or person. A refusal to do so implies lack of trust – non-belief – at least doubt, as to its trustworthiness, its truthfulness. On the other hand, the false or the lie would be someone or something you could not depend upon – someone unreliable, something that will let you down.

In the Gospel of John, the “true” is the real and the genuine. It has permanence and eternal endurance for it is rooted in the heavenly – in the incorruptible. He teaches Jesus to be the true Light (Jn. 1:9), the true vine (Jn. 15:1), His body is true food and His blood true drink (Jn. 6:55); all other food and drink are but copies and shades of this true food and drink, because one can depend upon this food and drink to nourish life unto eternal life. Truth is synonymous with the Word of God (Jn. 8:45), and the Word, the divinely revealed reality of God, has been manifested in the words and Person of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the ultimate and supreme truth on earth. Therefore, John proclaims Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

When Paul wrote to Timothy, *“The Church is the pillar and ground of the truth”* (I Tim. 3:15), we can understand much more fully the importance of the Church in our lives and the role she must play. We can have confidence in the Church – we can put our trust in the Church. The Church is no sagging fence.

TWELVE DISCIPLES OF EPHESUS

In Ephesus, the Church battles for the truth. The first battle is waged within the Christian Community against those Christians imperfectly formed in the faith. When Paul arrived in Ephesus, *“he found some disciples to whom he put the question, ‘Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?’ They answered, ‘We have not so much as heard that there is a Holy Spirit.’ ‘Well, how were you baptized?’ he persisted. They replied, ‘With the*

baptism of John.’ Paul then explained, ‘John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance. He used to tell the people about the one who would come after him in whom they were to believe – that is, Jesus.’ When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. As Paul laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came down upon them and they began to speak in tongues and to utter prophecies. There were in the company about twelve men in all.” (Acts 19:1-7)

These twelve men appear to be the foundation of the Church in Asia Minor. Their number twelve could legally constitute a Christian synagogue. Luke describes a little Pentecost in Ephesus and therefore probably intends to indicate the birth of the Church at Ephesus. It is interesting that this is the only incident in the New Testament of re-baptism. As far as they had gone, they were right, but they had not gone far enough to be fully Christian. He teaches here that repentance, water baptism and the reception of the Holy Spirit are necessary in order to be a full Christian. He likewise distinguishes between the baptism of John and Christian baptism.

This incident demonstrates the distinction between the reception of the Holy Spirit at baptism and the reception of the Holy Spirit with the laying on of hands. Water baptism imparts the grace of sanctification through the Presence of the Holy Spirit. Through the laying on of hands, the baptized do not receive the Holy Spirit again, but receive the charisms of the Holy Spirit. Paul’s words, *“Did you receive...”* describe (in the Greek), neither a gradual process nor a reception at some later interval, but a definite gift at a precise moment in time.

PROCESS OF CHURCH GROWTH

The growth of the Church in Ephesus, as presented in Acts, probably reflects the process of Church growth in other great cities of the empire. As we have already seen, the first step has been to properly instruct believers. Paul labors to have an enlightened Christian Community. The following episode indicates the next logical step in Church growth, “Paul entered the synagogue, and over a period of three months debated fearlessly, with persuasive arguments, about the kingdom of God. When some in their obstinacy would not believe, but chose to speak ill of the new way in the presence of the assembly, Paul simply left them. He took his disciples with him.” (Acts 19:9a) Paul separates the Christian Community from the Jewish synagogue. *“You do not put a new cloth on an old garment – you do*

not put new wine in old wine skins.” (See Mk. 2:21-22) Paul felt justified in breaking from the synagogue because the Jews there spoke “ill of the new way.” In conscience, he could not expose his disciples to false teachers who were contaminating the Way of the Lord.

The next step in Church growth was to bring Christian teachings to the general public. *“...after that (he) held his discussions from day to day in the lecture hall of Tyrannus.” (Acts 19:9b)* Teaching in the School of Tyrannus, Paul would seek to reach the Greek mind. Before he could bring the gospel to them, he must bring them to repentance. First, he would have to teach on their level. He would have to bring them to see that God is One – God is truly Spirit transcending all creation, *“...we ought not to think of divinity as something like a statue of gold or silver or stone, a product of man’s genius and his art.” (Acts 17:29)* He would have to be extremely prudent because of the sensitivity of the people to their worship of Artemis. Here many came to hear Paul. “A great door was opened” to him. As Demetrius soon testifies, *“...throughout most of the province of Asia, this Paul has persuaded great numbers of people to change their religion. (Acts 19:26)*

Another means for the building up of the Church was the great power being manifested through the Christian body. These powers appeared extraordinary to a pagan world raised upon magical and occult deeds. Acts relates that *“meanwhile God worked extraordinary miracles at the hands of Paul.”* We are also informed that *“when handkerchiefs or cloths which had touched his skin were applied to the sick, their diseases were cured and evil spirits departed from them.” (Acts 19:12)* From this text, we have a little defense for the custom of applying the relics of saints to the sick.

In Ephesus, non-believers began to use the name of Jesus in their exorcisms. In one case, seven Jewish brothers were violently overcome and severely beaten by the possessed person precisely because they had invoked the names of Paul and Jesus. When this episode spread through the city, it stirred many hearts to a fear of God. They saw that no spiritual powers existed that were greater than those possessed by the Christian Church. Acts seems to indicate that many of the converted Christians still clung to their superstitious practices. They were now convicted in their hearts and we read, *“Many who had become believers came forward and openly confessed their former practices. A number who had been dealing in magic even collected their books and burned them in public. When the value of these was assessed, it came to fifty thousand silver pieces. Thus did the word of the Lord continue to*

spread with influence and power.” (Acts 19:18-20) These Christians now came to trust in the Name of Jesus.

RIOT IN EPHEBUS

From what we can ascertain, this brings us up to the spring of 57 A.D. Paul had written to the Corinthians that he planned to stay in Ephesus until Pentecost. In that year, Pentecost fell on May 28th. Circumstances, however, would hasten his departure from Ephesus.

The month of Artemisus arrived with its entire month of celebration. Such a festival afforded the opportunity for a great deal of riotous celebration. Drunkenness was common. Likewise, it was a meeting time for local parliaments, provincial councils, and guilds. A certain silversmith named Demetrius saw in Christianity, a real threat to his livelihood. He used this opportunity to call a meeting of guild members. These he inflamed by briefly mentioning their losses and then quickly moving on to the more noble cause for rage – the threatened honor and devotion due to the goddess. He turned his hearers into a mob that ran into the streets to the theater screaming, *“Long live Artemis of Ephesus.”* Unable to find Paul, Demetrius and his gang dragged Gaius and Aristarchus into the arena of the theater.

Pandemonium reigned. “Various people were shouting all sorts of things, with the whole assembly in chaos and the majority not even knowing why they had come together” and certainly caring less. When Paul heard this, he wanted to go immediately to address the crowd. Wiser heads prevailed. He would have only made matters worse and endangered his own life. Jesus did not run after martyrdom and neither must the Church. When the Church was forced to face the Enemy, she bravely did so, as Jesus Himself had done. Otherwise, she learned to survive in times of persecution by keeping a low profile.

The prudent town counselor finally saved the day. He wisely demonstrated to them that the city was in danger of being accused of rioting. They all knew what that could mean. Rome would not tolerate such behavior. They could lose their status as a free city. He said to the people, *“These men whom you have brought here are not temple-robbers. They have not insulted our goddess...As it is, we run the risk of being accused of rioting because of today’s conduct. We have no valid excuse for this wild demonstration.”* These words of his broke up the meeting.” (Acts 19:37-40)

GREECE REVISITED

The combined animosity, of the Jews centered in Alexander, and that of the Gentiles led by Demetrius, made it impossible for Paul to safely continue to live and work in Ephesus. Following the riot, he took leave of the brethren and went north to Troas. Here, he expected Titus to meet him with news about Corinth. He found a fertile field in Troas in which to work, but he was so personally disturbed by all the troubles in Corinth that he was unable to truly enter wholeheartedly into the work. He writes, "*When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, the door of opportunity was opened wide for me by the Lord. Yet I was inwardly troubled because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said goodbye to them and went off to Macedonia.*" (2 Cor. 2:12-13) The human frailty and limitations of Paul are manifested at this time. He, too, is a human being. The opportunity to do the work is there – he has the time –but it is not enough. He does not have the strength. To spread the Kingdom of God, one must also have energy. Constant inner turmoil is a human fuel hog. It consumes large amounts of human energy needed in the daily demands of life. Paul was wise. He knew he had to free himself of this destructive internal condition if he was to be his old self again. He went to Macedonia hoping to find Titus. Paul accurately states his personal condition at this time in his own words, "*When I arrived in Macedonia I was restless and exhausted. I was under all kinds of stress – quarrels with others and fears within myself.*" (2 Cor. 7:5)

Paul does not deny he had reached a low down period in his life. Even saintly human natures have their crumbling point. Paul goes on to write, "*But God, who gives heart to those who are low in spirit, gave me strength with the arrival of Titus.*" (2 Cor. 7:6) The Lord turned Paul's sadness into joy, "We are comforted" – we are consoled. With renewed strength, Paul wrote his final letter to the Corinthians. He resumed his work in Macedonia – taking up his important collection for the poor in Jerusalem. He finally went back to Corinth to spend the winter. There, he wrote the Epistle to the Romans – perhaps the greatest Christian treatise ever written. From what a depth of experience it flowed!

When the sailing season reopened, Paul planned to sail from Cenchreae to Syria, but a plot of the Jews to kill him was discovered. Many Jews would be sailing to Jerusalem for the Passover. They intended to dispose of Paul at sea. Paul went back north to Philippi and celebrated the Passover there.

The time has come for Paul to bid farewell to his beloved Christian Communities of Greece. He will not see them again. His final farewell probably would not differ too much from what was recorded earlier in Acts: he gave the disciples reassurances and encouraged them to persevere in the faith with this instruction (in an even firmer ring than before), "*We must undergo many trials if we are to enter into the reign of God!*" (Acts 14:22)

THE WAY OF TRUTH

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND QUESTIONS SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK (PLEASE MEMORIZE)

“IF YOU LIVE ACCORDING TO MY TEACHINGS, YOU ARE TRULY MY DISCIPLES; THEN YOU WILL KNOW THE TRUTH, AND THE TRUTH WILL SET YOU FREE.” (John 8:31-32)

FIRST DAY: Read John 15:26-27; 16:12-15; and 8:31-32,43-47.

1. How would you describe the difference between the western (Greek) idea of truth and the Biblical meaning of truth?
2. What does it mean to you when Jesus says the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Truth?
3. What do you understand by the words, “the truth will set you free”?
4. How do you express your belief in religious truths?

SECOND DAY: Read Summary: Twelve Disciples in Ephesus; Acts 19:1-7.

1. What do you think led Paul to inquire about their baptism?
2. What is the difference between John’s baptism and Christian baptism?
3. Why do you think Paul insisted they be re-baptized?
4. What does this episode teach you about the Holy Spirit?

THIRD DAY: Read Summary: Process of Church Growth; Acts 19:8-20.

1. What do we see to be the first step in Church development?
2. What do we learn by Paul separating his disciples from the synagogue?
3. In what way do you think Paul’s teachings would have to differ in the School of Tyrannus from those given in the synagogue?

4. What do you learn about exorcisms from the incident recorded in Acts?

FOURTH DAY: Read Summary: Riot in Ephesus; Acts 19:21-40.

1. What is truly behind the riot in Ephesus?
2. What do we learn about Paul's work through the words of Demetrius?
3. Why do you think so many men hate the Church?
4. How do you feel a Christian should behave under persecution?

FIFTH DAY: Read Acts 20:1-6; 2 Corinthians 8:1-15 and 9:1-15.

1. Why was Paul so anxious to take up a collection among the Gentile Churches for Jerusalem?
2. In Paul's mind what should motivate Christian giving?
3. What do you learn from 2 Corinthians 8:12-14?
4. What do you learn from 2 Corinthians 9:7-9?

SIXTH DAY: Read Summary: Greece Revisited; 2 Cor. 2:12-13; 7:5-16.

1. Why was Paul unable to work in Troas?
2. What do you learn from this Incident?
3. What do these readings teach you about Paul?
4. In your opinion, what does it mean to be a Christian saint?

CHAPTER 19

FAREWELL TO THE CHURCH

INTRODUCTION

The Christian Religion, rooted in Old Testament spirituality, could never be merely a religion of abstract ideas. Christian belief could never be a collection of concepts about the nature of God, eternal life, and man's relationship with both of them. Religious faith has to be more than a creed of religious truths held firmly in one's mind. If religious truths fail to be incarnated in the life of a person, that person lacks faith as understood in the Scriptures. Jesus could well say to His disciples, "What you do and what you say must include me as the wine must taste of its own grape."

St. James well expressed the spirituality of the Old Testament when he wrote to the Christian Community, *"My brothers, what good is it to profess faith without practicing it? Such faith has no power to save one, has it? Faith without works is as dead as a body without breath."* (Jas. 2:14,26) *"Looking after orphans and widows in their distress and keeping oneself unspotted by the world make for pure worship without stain before our God and Father."* (Jas. 1:27)

The Jews closely associated a truly incarnated faith with charity expressed in almsgiving. The angel Raphael gave this advice to Tobit and his son Tobiah, *"Prayer and fasting are good, but better than either is almsgiving accompanied by righteousness. It is better to give alms than to store up gold; for almsgiving saves one from death and expiates every sin. Those who regularly give alms shall enjoy a full life..."* (Tb. 12:8-9)

PAUL'S LAST WORK

The final work accomplished by Paul among his newly converted Christians emphasized the importance of almsgiving in the Christian life. He dedicated several months of his time and much energy to taking up a collection for the poor in the Church of Jerusalem. He initiated a campaign to raise funds by sending his fellow workers to the Churches for this set purpose. From what can be ascertained, Paul's campaign raised a considerable amount of money.

He was extremely cautious not to leave himself open to any suspicion about his handling of the money. He wrote, *"There is one thing I wish to avoid, namely any blame over my handling of this generous collection. We are concerned not only for God's approval but also for the good esteem of men."* (2 Cor. 8:20-21) Representatives from the Churches, approximately a party of nine, accompanied Paul with the collection to Jerusalem.

LIFE GIVING SPIRIT

After Paul and Luke joined the others in Troas, they remained a week and had the opportunity of celebrating Christian worship with the Community. The evening was late – perhaps the Agape had been celebrated earlier – the liturgy of the Word had begun. The upper room grew warm with all the burning lamps and people. Eutychus, a young lad, trying to stay awake, sat in the open window. The Greek texts implied he struggled to remain awake but he lost the battle – he fell asleep and fell to his death. Luke, the physician, clearly states the boy was dead. After the example of Elijah and Eliseus and Peter, Paul restored the dead boy to life.

Following this incident, the Community celebrated the Eucharist. The raising of Eutychus to life would have made the Thanksgiving Celebration even more meaningful. Paul would not let this lesson be lost upon the congregation. Just as the Spirit of Jesus in Paul raised Eutychus, so one day this same Spirit would raise all the Christian dead to life eternal. Paul himself was fast approaching the end of his own life. In retrospect, Luke knew this. He may well have symbolically represented in this incident the triumph of Paul's own spirit over death. Men would destroy his physical life, but not his spirit. The spirit of Paul would continue to speak, instruct the Christian Community and bring men to life in Christ long after Paul's physical death.

PAULS'S FAREWELL ADDRESS

It was customary for ships to sail at dawn and sail from one island to another. Luke tells us, *"We ourselves went on ahead to the ship and set sail for Assos, where we were to pick Paul up. This was the arrangement he had made, since his plan was to travel overland. When he met us at Assos we took him aboard and sailed to Mitylene...after that we put in at Miletus. Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus so as not to lose time in Asia, for he was eager to get to Jerusalem by the feast of Pentecost if at all possible."* (Acts 20:13-16)

Miletus was about thirty miles south of Ephesus. Upon arriving in Miletus, Paul sent word to the presbyters in Ephesus to come and meet him. He probably arrived there on Wednesday. By the time the leaders of the Church assembled together, it must have been the weekend. This remains the only recorded address of Paul to the Churches in Acts. From the context of the talk, we know Paul anticipated this as his farewell address to the Churches. In actual fact, for Luke, it becomes Paul's farewell to the Christian Church itself.

Luke sees Paul as another Christ. In other words, a true disciple who was able to say, "for me to live is Christ." Therefore, his life closely patterns that of Jesus – not in a historical sense, but in a spiritual one. At the end of His life, Jesus Himself said that the Enemy would strike the shepherd and the sheep would be scattered. Paul already experienced the reality of this. The faith of Paul's converts lay upon the solid foundation of Christian truths. The Enemy of the Faith sought to destroy that foundation in order to scatter the flock. He must separate them from the protection of their true shepherds in order for his "wolves" to destroy them. The "wolves" of Satan are false teachers inspired by the father of lies – they have been deceived and they go forth zealously to deceive others. Paul knew the power of truth in the battle of eternal salvation. To destroy the believers, the Evil One must first strike the shepherd. He must destroy, in the eyes of the faithful, the credibility of their teacher. This is the first step. The second step is to enlist his own apostles – false teachers – men and women who, in truth, become the "Sheluhims" of Satan! If these can be found within the Christian Community, so much the better for him – as they already come clothed in sheep's clothing. All that remains to be done is to indoctrinate them with false teachings about Jesus, about His salvation, His Church; Satan subtly inspires them. These inspirations appear in the minds of Satan's disciples to be inspirations of the Holy Spirit. He easily deceives them by appearing as an angel of light. Humility would have saved them from this deception. But since pride dominated, their spirits are led to convict the Church of sin. Since the Holy Spirit is the very soul of the Church, they have at least materially sinned against the Holy Spirit. Whether it be a formal sin, only God can judge. The Evil One now inspires them to spread their errors among the faithful in order to destroy the true pillar and foundation of salvation – the Church.

We can deduce from all this how important it is to pray for the teachers and pastors of the Church that they persevere in grace. They will be special

targets of the Evil One and his agents. He knows full well if they fall from grace, many will be scandalized and fall from faith because of it. Unconsciously, many Christians put their faith in men of the Church who are but shadows and reflections of Jesus, rather than putting their faith in Him who is the Enduring Rock. Our membership in the Church of God should be because of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and for what they have promised and do accomplish in the Church of the Triune God!

Satan, through his false teachers, strenuously sought to destroy Paul's reputation in the Christian Church. Paul begins and ends his address with a defense of himself. We should certainly understand why. The reason is that others will not be able to shake the foundation of truth that he has laid with solid teachings. We need also to note that Paul is presenting himself as a model to these leaders. Just as Jesus said to His disciples, "*Learn of me for I am meek and humble of heart,*" Paul himself gave the example of meekness and humility to be followed by his disciples and, primarily, by those in the role of leadership. Paul displayed humility by patiently bearing with all the suffering that came his way. He did not put God to the test by demanding special graces, protection and deliverances. He patiently bore those sufferings as the cost that must be paid by any soldier in the war against the kingdom of darkness. Just as the Master Himself had done.

LOVER OF TRUTH

"Never," he said, "*did I shrink from telling you what was for your own good, or from teaching you in public or in private.*" (Acts 20:20) Paul demonstrated his love for the people when he sought their good – not their approval of what was agreeable and pleasing to them. This would have been disguised self-seeking. Good is not synonymous with "nice." What is good is not always agreeable or pleasant to the heart of the beloved hearer.

Again, Paul demonstrated his love by spending himself in teaching others both in private and publicly (at home and in Church). He told them what had always been a fundamental teaching with him, "*With Jews and Greeks alike I insisted solemnly on repentance before God and on faith in our Lord Jesus.*" (Acts 20:21) This teaching implies Jesus to be the Savior of the world, and that the Church is the true means of salvation in this world. We know that, religiously speaking, there was no comparison between the Jews and the pagans, but, nevertheless, Paul also taught that Jews have not achieved salvation by being Jews. They too must recognize the inadequacy

of the Jewish religion to make them righteous before God. This involved turning away from the Old Israel and embracing the New Israel. This doctrine, when heard by the Jews unwilling to repent, inspired tremendous hatred and animosity in their hearts. They vented this hatred against the herald of this truth. Paul became the personal object of their hatred. He never shrank from telling the Jews what was for their own good. He loved them even when they violently hated him. That doesn't mean that Paul always liked them! Paul could say in all humility, *"Therefore, I solemnly declare this day that I take the blame for no man's conscience, for I have never shrunk from announcing to you God's design in its entirety."* (Acts 20:26-27)

Paul teaches that we who stand in the role of teachers, in relationship to others, have a responsibility before God for the formation of the consciences that will guide these through life – either to heaven or hell. This responsibility falls most heavily on parents, to teach their children solid truths. Parents need to guard against trying to win the love of their children by failing to tell them unpleasant truths fundamental to their eternal salvation. Would that all Christian parents could say at the end of their lives to their children, "I take no blame for your conscience, for I have never shrunk from announcing to you God's design in its entirety."

SHEPHERDS IN THE CHURCH

Paul believed this to be his last opportunity to speak to the presbyters. With them he shared his own prophetic vision – warned them of the dangers to come. First, he warned them to keep an eye upon themselves. They must guard their own souls by constant growth in truth, in faith, and in love. No Christian is so secure in grace in this world that he or she cannot fall from grace.

Secondly, Paul told the presbyters that as good shepherds, it was their duty to watch over the spiritual lives of the faithful. They must guard them from the enemies of truth who will enter the community with the set purpose to deceive, to divide, and to destroy. This duty, this office of shepherd, Paul confirmed, was given by the Holy Spirit. The Community may have selected the men for the office and the Apostles and presbyters laid hands upon them, but these are but human means used by the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who calls them, through this means, and gives the charism of their office. This office demands that they be good shepherds.

When Paul told them *"Shepherd the Church of God, which he has acquired at*

the price of His own blood," he made a most powerful statement with profound theological consequences. He spoke of the Church established by Jesus Christ as the Church of God. But he said even more: the Church is acquired at the price of His own blood. "His own blood" refers to God. Paul clearly proclaimed the Divinity of Jesus Christ. With the previous reference to the Holy Spirit, we find in this address the doctrine of the Holy Trinity clearly implied.

JOURNEY TO JERUSALEM

Luke now describes the farewell between Paul and his disciples. He reveals how deeply human the relationship was that existed between them. Paul's disciples did not love and esteem him only as a teacher, but they dearly – emotionally – loved him as a human being, *"After this discourse, Paul knelt down with them all and prayed. They began to weep without restraint, throwing their arms around him and kissing him, for they were deeply distressed to hear that they would never see his face again. Then they escorted him to the ship."* (Acts 20:36-38) Paul sailed away on a sea of tears!

Paul possessed a premonition of danger awaiting him in Jerusalem and that he was approaching the end of his life. Yet Paul could not deter from his path because, in conscience, he believed that God had called him to a work and he must see this work through to the end regardless of the personal danger involved or the sufferings entailed. He valued his earthly life only insofar as it was an instrument to accomplish God's Will. He would carry his concept of being the slave of the Lord to its ultimate conclusion – whether he lived or died, it was for the Lord.

When the party arrived in Caesarea they were welcomed into the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven. While there, the prophet Agabus arrived from Jerusalem. He gave the most formal prediction about Paul's future, *"He came up to us and taking Paul's belt, tied his own hands and feet with it. Then he said, 'Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'This is how the Jews in Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and hand him over to the Gentiles.'"* (Acts 21:11) The comparison between Jesus and Paul becomes strikingly clear with this prophecy. Paul will be handed over to death just as Jesus once was. This prophecy, so startlingly clear, deeply moved all who loved Paul. They begged him with tears not to go to Jerusalem. Paul asked them, *"Why are you crying and breaking my heart in this way?"* (Acts 21:13a) The words translated "breaking my heart" literally mean "crushed it to pieces."

On the eve of his entrance into Jerusalem, Paul experienced his own agony and temptation. His response to it all was, *“For the name of the Lord Jesus I am prepared, not only for imprisonment, but for death, in Jerusalem.”* (Acts 21:13b)

By remaining firm in the Will of God, Paul brings his companions around to accepting the Will of God. For his friends, Paul could wish no greater good. All his missionary activities had been undertaken in order to do the Will of God. This Will, he reveals and proclaims to men; he urges all men to embrace it. As Luke prepares to present the passion of Paul, he closes the active ministry of Paul with these most appropriate words, *“Since he would not be dissuaded, we said nothing further except, ‘The Lord’s will be done.’”* (Acts 21:14)

FAREWELL TO THE CHURCH

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND QUESTIONS SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK (PLEASE MEMORIZE)

“THERE IS MORE HAPPINESS IN GIVING THAN IN RECEIVING.”
(Acts 20:35)

FIRST DAY: Read Summary through Paul’s Last Work; Tobit 12:6-10;
James 2:14-26; Romans 15:23-33.

1. What does it mean to be spiritually mature? Give an example of a spiritually mature and immature person.
2. What does it mean to incarnate your faith in your life?
3. What spiritual values does giving alms have?
4. What is your personal feeling about giving to the Church?

SECOND DAY: Read Summary: Life-Giving Spirit; Acts 9:36-43; 20:4-12.

1. What symbolism can you see in Eutychus falling asleep and what later transpires?
2. How would this have related to the Easter celebration then being celebrated by the Community?
3. What does this incident reveal about Paul?
4. In what way does this symbolize Paul’s own triumph over physical death?

THIRD DAY: Read Summary: Paul’s Farewell Address through Lover of Truth; Acts 20:13-27.

1. Why does Paul so often defend himself?
2. What techniques does Satan use to destroy the faith?

3. How does humility protect one from false teachings and teachers?
4. What does Acts 20:26-27 tell us about our responsibility towards another's conscience?

FOURTH DAY: Read Summary: Shepherds in the Church; Isaiah 56:9-57; Acts 20:28-35.

1. What is the obligation of Shepherds in the Church?
2. What do you think it means to say, "the Shepherds have lost their bark"?
3. What does Acts 20:28 teach you?
4. How is the doctrine of the Trinity being implied in this address?

FIFTH DAY: Read Summary: Journey to Jerusalem; Acts 20:36-21:6.

1. What kind of relationship existed between Paul and his disciples?
2. What does this reveal to you about his true personality?
3. What do you feel is the general opinion about Paul? Is he still being misrepresented?
4. How has this study changed your feeling about Paul?

SIXTH DAY: Read Acts 21:7-14.

1. Why do you think Paul neglects the warning about danger in Jerusalem?
2. How does Luke truly see Paul?
3. In what way does Paul's life appear as an imitation of the life of Jesus?
4. Why can we say that Paul's life is a true example of repentance?

CHAPTER 20

THE GOSPEL AND THE JEWS

INTRODUCTION

Paul's final visit to Jerusalem occurred around the feast of Pentecost - probably in 57 A.D. Dark clouds have already gathered over the land of Judea. Only a few years remain before Jesus' prophecy would be fulfilled, "*When you see Jerusalem encircled by soldiers, know that its devastation is near.*" (Lk. 21:20) Before another ten years pass, things would reach the point of no return. When Paul arrived in Jerusalem, it was still the beginning of the end.

The city of Caesarea was about sixty-five miles northeast of Jerusalem. When the party arrived in Jerusalem, Luke relates that, "*the brothers there gave us a warm welcome.*" James still presided over the Church at Jerusalem. He and the presbyters invited the party to meet with them the next day in private. At this meeting, the collection was safely turned over to the Church. Paul gave a report of all God had accomplished through his ministry among the Gentiles. Once again, the Church acknowledges and confirms Paul's work among the Gentiles to be of God, "*When they heard it they praised God...*" (Acts 21:20)

PROBLEM OF PAUL'S PRESENCE

Paul's presence in Jerusalem proposed a serious problem for the Christian Community of the city. Many lies and half-truths circulated throughout the Christian Community about this Paul of Tarsus. Few men of the times were capable of grasping "the spirit of wisdom" that was Paul's. Few people would have been prepared to interpret Paul correctly. Paul's writings would certainly have given his enemies much material to intentionally misquote, not to mention the sheer ignorant who would also misquote him.

Many Christians had been led to believe that Paul himself had become an apostate from the Jewish religion. In their minds, Jesus came to fulfill the

law, not to destroy the law. What Paul taught to be true of Gentiles, he was being accused of teaching to be true of Jews also. This of itself was not true. Paul personally never ceased being a Jew. He did not see any contradiction between being a good Jew and a good Christian. Being a Jew was one thing – being a Christian another thing. A person could be a Christian without being a Jew; a Jew could become a Christian without ceasing to be a Jew.

Paul did teach that the observance of the Law of Moses could not bring one to salvation. That the law had no power to save was Pauline doctrine. This did not imply that the law was useless and without moral value. There still remained the problem for every baptized Christian to grow in grace and sanctification. Salvation and sanctification – though co-related – are not the same thing. Keeping the Law of Moses could greatly benefit the soul's sanctification. Paul's critics did not have the intelligence to distinguish between something being essential for salvation and something being useful for sanctification. Paul's real answer to this charge can be found in his words to Timothy (and remember, Paul speaks here of the Old Testament), "*All Scripture is inspired of God and is useful for teaching – for reproof, correction, and training in holiness so that the man of God may be fully competent and equipped for every good work.*" (2 Tim. 3:16-17)

JAMES' SOLUTION

From the epistle of James, we know he believed in an incarnational spirituality. The truths of one's life ought to be expressed in one's acts. James and the presbyters had decided on a prudent plan of action to prove the accusations against Paul to be false and thereby preserve Christian unity while Paul was in town. James said to Paul, "*Please do as we tell you. There are four men among us who have made a vow. Take them along with you and join with them in their rite of purification; pay the fee for the shaving of their heads. In that way, everyone will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you follow the law yourself with due observance.*" (Acts 21:23-24) What James asked was for Paul to personally pay for himself and four others under a vow. This would involve Paul paying out a considerable amount of money and it should impress the Christian Jews of Paul's piety. For five people to fulfill the vow, Paul would have to pay about a thousand dollars. We can see why this would be quite an impressive gesture. In the next few years, Paul would spend a great deal of money. He must have had considerable family wealth at his disposal.

JUDAISM AND THE CHURCH

Even after thirty years and many persecutions by the Jews, we see the Christian Community of Jerusalem still maintaining the closest association with formal Judaism. James confirmed this with, "You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have come to believe, all of them staunch defenders of the law." (Acts 21:20) This close identification would remain until the cultic worship of the temple ceased with the destruction of the temple and the Jewish nation. Not until the Jewish religion was reduced to a religion of the synagogue did the split become formal. Even then, it would not be the Christian Jews in Palestine who fostered the separation but the non-Christian Jews. After the fall of Jerusalem, the Pharisees sought, as far as possible, to preserve the purity of the Jewish religion. They were determined to drive all Christians from the synagogues. Into the synagogue worship, they incorporated a curse upon anyone in the synagogue professing Jesus to be the Messiah. It was an excommunication from Israel.

At the time of Paul's last visit to Jerusalem, the Christian Community there lived in relative peace with the larger Jewish Community. Their acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah by the sect of Nazarenes was tolerated as a harmless peculiarity in light of their intense devotion to the Law of Moses. To proclaim Jesus to be the Messiah was no longer the volatile issue it had once been in Jerusalem. St. Paul himself brought to the surface the real animosity of the Jews towards the Jewish Christian Community and its beliefs.

PAUL ARRESTED

James' request of Paul had an effect not anticipated. Some Jews from Asia recognized Paul in the temple precincts. These same Jews had earlier seen Paul with Trophimus, a Gentile from Ephesus. These Asiatic Jews bore a special hatred towards Paul. When they saw him in the temple they presumed, as a logical deduction of his teachings, that he had brought his Gentile friend within the temple area with the set purpose of defying the laws of defilement. They ran up and grabbed Paul and simultaneously shouted, "*Fellow Israelites, help us! This is the man who is spreading his teaching everywhere against our people, our law, and this sanctuary. He has even brought Greeks into the temple area and thus profaned this sacred place.*" (Acts 21:28) A smoldering, burning hatred was growing daily – more intense in the hearts of the Palestinian Jews towards the Gentiles. A cry like that

was sufficient to cause mob violence. *"Before long the whole city was in turmoil."* (Acts 21:30) The Jews physically assaulted Paul with the intention of killing him.

The Roman garrison in Jerusalem was quartered in the fortress of Antonia. The fortress joined the northwest corner of the temple area with steps leading from the fortress into the Court of the Gentiles. A report reached Claudius Lysias the commander, that the entire city was rioting. *"Immediately the commander took his soldiers and centurions and charged down on the rioters."* From what Lysias could determine, Paul appeared to be a revolutionary. The commander ordered Paul to be led into the headquarters. *"A crowd of people was following along shouting, 'Kill him! Kill him!' Just as Paul was about to be led into the headquarters, he said to the commander, 'I beg you, let me address these people.'"* (See Acts 21:32-39)

SERMON IN THE TEMPLE

Paul grasped at the opportunity to preach to the Jewish people in the temple. The simplicity of purpose in Paul is heroic. He has no concern for himself – at that moment he is wounded, bloodied and disheveled. He stood on the steps of the Fortress Antonia – himself a fortress of courage – and he looked that howling mob straight in the eye. This was Paul's only opportunity to speak to the "people of Israel" and he must seize it. Paul stood there as an incarnation of the words preached at Miletus, *"I put no value on my life if only I can finish my race and complete the service to which I have been assigned by the Lord Jesus, bearing witness to the gospel of God's grace."* (Acts 20:24) No doubt moved by Divine Grace itself, Claudius Lysias granted Paul permission to address the Jews.

The charge against Paul is not that he proclaims Jesus to be the Messiah, but that he has betrayed the Jewish people and speaks against the Law of Moses. The Jews were able to listen to Paul's talk, up to the point where he claimed that God, through Jesus Christ, had sent him from this very temple itself to proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles. This, in their eyes, was his real crime – preaching his great heresy to the Gentiles: Gentiles, through faith in Jesus of Nazareth, could have equality with the Jews themselves before the Father in heaven. So intense was their religious and national pride – so violent their hatred for the Gentiles – their hearts totally rejected such a teaching and they could will nothing but death for the prophets of such teachings. *"They began to shout, 'Kill him! Rid the earth of the likes of him! He isn't worthy to*

live! ...*At that display, the commander directed Paul to be brought inside the headquarters.*" (Acts 22:22b, 24a)

PAUL BEFORE THE SANHEDRIN

It was Roman policy for Jews to decide matters pertaining to Jewish religion and practices. Claudius Lysias surmised that any crime Paul could have been guilty of must pertain to Jewish law. Since Paul was a citizen of Rome and a well-educated man, his case ought to be presented to the Sanhedrin, the supreme Jewish religious and legal body. *"He summoned the chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin to a meeting; then he brought Paul down and made him stand before them."* (Acts 22:30) Lysias affords Paul the opportunity to speak before the leaders of Israel. Once again, we see the unusual means God can use to bring His Will to be – Paul will be His witness before all Israel.

Paul would be formally charged before the Sanhedrin. He probably was charged with the crimes he had been accused of in the temple. Paul was expected to defend himself against these charges. Although he did not deny the charges against him, he did refuse to recognize them as crimes against his religious faith, but rather as the fulfillment of God's Will.

Paul's whole defense before the Jews for what he believed and preached rested upon the command received by him from the Risen Jesus. The Sadducees refused to believe in life after death; they would refuse to accept Paul's major statement upon which his entire defense rested. The Sadducees would find Paul guilty of the crimes charged against him. Paul cleverly forestalls this by turning the Pharisees and Sadducees against each other. The Sanhedrin did not condemn Paul and therefore it did not condemn Christianity itself. At most, it could be said that the trial ended in a hung jury. Paul cried out in the trial, *"I find myself on trial now because of my hope in the resurrection of the dead."* At these words, a dispute arose between Pharisees and Sadducees which divided the whole assembly...*some scribes of the Pharisee party arose and declared emphatically, 'We do not find this man guilty of any crime. If a spirit or an angel has spoken to him....'* At this, the dispute grew worse and the commander feared they would tear Paul to pieces. *He therefore ordered his troops to go down and rescue Paul from their midst and take him back to headquarters.*" (Acts 23:6b-a0) Claudius Lysias, no doubt, was deeply impressed with Paul's ability to stir people. Here was a man to whom people could not remain indifferent. Our Lord Himself confirmed

that He was pleased with Paul. *“That night the Lord appeared at Paul’s side and said, ‘Keep up your courage! Just as you have given testimony to me here in Jerusalem, so must you do in Rome.’” (Acts 23:11)*

A NATION DOOMED

Jesus foretold, *“If only you had known the path to peace this day; but you have completely lost it from view! Days will come upon you when your enemies encircle you with a rampart, hem you in, and press you hard from every side. They will wipe you out, you and your children within your walls, and leave not a stone on a stone within you, because you failed to recognize the time of your visitation.” (Lk. 19:42-44)* Paul had spoken the truth, and next we hear they secretly seek to murder him. We cannot but again recall other words of Jesus, *“The fact is, you are trying to kill me, a man who has told you the truth which I have heard from God.” “Can any one of you convict me of sin? If I am telling the truth, why do you not believe me?” “Whoever is of God hears every word God speaks. The reason you do not hear is that you are not of God.” “The father you spring from is the devil, and willingly you carry out his wishes. He brought death to man from the beginning, and has never based himself on truth; the truth is not in him.” (Jn. 8:40,46,41,44)*

Jesus’ words imply a state of possession has occurred. The Jews had received the true revelation of God – they were the true religion. They became the house free of the evil spirit of idolatry, but failed to bring to birth the true spirit of religion within that house. They created a spiritual vacuum in Israel. Evil spirits entered into this vacuum. Israel exalted in the truth and righteousness of her faith expressed in the Law of Moses. In her pride, she loved her law more than she loved God. It enabled her to exalt herself above others. This exaltation led to despising and disdainning others. Finally, her last state became worse than her first. At the end, her state of possession had been completed.

How rightfully we see that religious truth and membership in the true religious Community of itself cannot save us unless we possess, along with that truth, the true spirit of religion. Truth can become, through pride, a means of damnation. When we behold the banner of religious truth held high in the hand of hatred, let us take warning. It is not God that stands before us – or within us – but Satan.

Clearly we can see what the end will be for a person when the Holy Spirit of

religion is absent. Jesus came "full of grace and truth." Jesus was the incarnation of the Spirit of true religion. Those who possessed the facts of truth could not recognize living truth when it stood before them, because they lacked the Spirit of Truth. They called Him Beelzebub and sought to destroy Him. As they did to the Master, they sought to do to His disciples, His Church.

As Israel stands at the door of doom, the harsh but true words spoken by Stephen ring truer still, *"You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are always opposing the Holy Spirit just as your fathers did before you. Was there ever any prophet whom your fathers did not persecute? In their day, they put to death those who foretold the coming of the Just One; now you in your turn have become his betrayers and murderers. You who received the law through the ministry of angels have not observed it."* (Acts 7:51-53) Stephen foretold what would flow from such a spiritual condition, *"But God turned away from them and abandoned them..."* (Acts 7:42)

God left them to themselves and the end result became a horror. Josephus, who witnessed much of it himself, records a vivid picture of Israel's last days. It was a house not only divided against itself, but it was torn apart. The Jews turned upon each other like mad dogs – no! Rather like men possessed – for evil appeared limitless in Israel in those days. Titus the conqueror of Jerusalem desired to preserve the temple, but the Jews even foiled this design by forcing the destruction of their beloved temple. This was symbolic of that horrible nightmare which comes when the Spirit of God withdraws...

THE END OF THE STORY?

Is this the end of the story? The voice of Paul answers this question, *"I ask, then, has God rejected his people? Of course not!"* (Rom. 11:1) *"I further ask, does their stumbling mean that they are forever fallen? Not at all! Rather, by their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to stir Israel to envy."* (Rom. 11:11) *"To this very day, when the old covenant is read, the veil remains unlifted; it is only in Christ that it is taken away. Even now, when Moses is read a veil covers their understanding. But whenever he turns to the Lord, the veil will be removed."* (2 Cor. 3:14-16) *"For if their rejection has meant reconciliation for the world, what will their acceptance mean? Nothing less than life from the dead! ...If some of the branches were cut off and you, a branch of the wild olive tree, have been grafted in among the others and have*

come to share in the rich root of the olive, do not boast against the branches.... They were cut off because of unbelief and you are there because of faith. Do not be haughty on that account, but fearful. If God did not spare the natural branches, he will certainly not spare you. ...And if the Jews do not remain in their unbelief they will be grafted back on, for God is able to do this.” (Rom. 11:15, 17, 20-21,23)

“Brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery lest you be conceited. Blindness has come upon part of Israel until the full number of Gentiles enter in, and then all Israel will be saved...in respect to the election, they are beloved by him because of the patriarchs. God’s gifts and his call are irrevocable.

“Just as you were once disobedient to God and now have received mercy through their disobedience, so they have become disobedient – since God wished to show you mercy – that they too may receive mercy. God has imprisoned all in disobedience that he might have mercy on all.

“How deep are the riches and the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How inscrutable his judgments, how unsearchable his ways! For ‘who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? Who has given him anything so as to deserve return?’ For from him and through him and for him all things are. To him be glory forever. Amen.” (Rom. 11:25-26, 28b-36)

THE GOSPEL AND THE JEWS

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND QUESTIONS SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK (PLEASE MEMORIZE)

“TO THIS VERY DAY, WHEN THE OLD COVENANT IS READ THE VEIL REMAINS UNLIFTED; IT IS ONLY IN CHRIST THAT IT IS TAKEN AWAY. EVEN NOW, WHEN MOSES IS READ A VEIL COVERS THEIR UNDERSTANDING. BUT WHENEVER HE TURNS TO THE LORD, THE VEIL WILL BE REMOVED.” (2 Cor. 3:14-16)

FIRST DAY: Read Summary through James’ Solution; Acts 21:15-26.

1. Why were many Christians in Jerusalem opposed to Paul?
2. What do you see as the root of this problem?
3. How does 2 Tim. 3:16 defend Paul’s true position?
4. How would you explain the difference between salvation and sanctification?

SECOND DAY: Read Summary through Paul Arrested; Acts 21:27-40.

1. How did the Christian Community of Jerusalem see itself in relationship to the Jewish Community?
2. What finally separated the Church from Judaism?
3. What doctrine of Christian faith truly stirred the animosity of the Jews?
4. What teaching of Paul could have led the Jews to believe he would bring Gentiles into the temple?

THIRD DAY: Read Summary: Sermon in the Temple; Acts 22:1-23.

1. What does Paul seek to show in the first part of his sermon?
2. What part does Ananias play in Paul’s defense?
3. To what does Paul attribute his change of life?

4. Why do you think the end of Paul's sermon so enraged the people?

FOURTH DAY: Read Summary: Paul Before the Sanhedrin;
Acts 22:24-23:10.

1. By what means did Paul win the cooperation of Claudius Lysias?
2. How does Paul answer the charges before the Sanhedrin?
3. On what truth did the defense of Paul rest?
4. What is the final outcome of Paul's trial before the Sanhedrin?

FIFTH DAY: Read Summary: A Nation Doomed; Acts 23:11-22;

1. According to the words of Jesus, why is Jerusalem doomed?
2. How does this reading in Acts reflect John 8:40-47?
3. What do you see to be the cause of Israel's rejection of the truth?
4. What can we as Catholics learn from their example?

SIXTH DAY: Read Summary: The End of the Story?

1. How was the prophecy of Jesus concerning Jerusalem fulfilled?
2. What is the lesson you see in the history of the Jews?
3. According to Paul, what is to be the final end of the story?
4. What does this teach you?

CHAPTER 21

THE GOSPEL BEFORE THE WORLD

INTRODUCTION

Luke pictures in Acts the case of Christianity before the world. Christianity is not a bastardly religion that sprang up as an illegitimate shoot of Judaism. It came into being as the full flowering of the seeds of religious truth sown in Israel. It came forth as the fulfillment of the law and the prophets and not as a force alien and rebellious of them.

It had become the firm hope of Israel that she would offer the way of life to men – a way to eternal life. She assured her believers that the dead in Yahweh would rise from the dead. This was the hope of Israel. The less spiritual among the Israelites restricted their hopes to a national resurrection to freedom and ascension, to political power and glory. Those with a finer faith believed as Martha of Bethany. She expressed this true hope of Israel when she spoke about her dead brother to Jesus, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” (Jn. 11:24) This same quality of faith the author of Second Maccabees expressed – when he praised Judas Maccabee for sending an offering to the temple to expiate the sins of the dead, “*In doing this he acted in a very excellent and noble way, Inasmuch as he had the resurrection of the dead in view; for if he were not expecting the fallen to rise again, it would have been useless and foolish to pray for them in death.*” (2 Mc. 12:43:44) Therefore, the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead to life was the finest flower of Jewish Faith.

This was the great hope of Paul’s faith long before he came to believe in Jesus of Nazareth. When Paul beheld with his own eyes the Risen Jesus, this vision totally confirmed his Jewish faith. Paul came to see the Resurrected Jesus to be the hope of Israel. Jesus’ rising from the dead was the first fruits of the great harvest to come. The words of Jesus to Martha expressed, succinctly, the Christian faith, “*I am the resurrection and the life: whoever believes in me, though he should die, will come to life; and whoever is alive and believes in me will never die.*” (Jn. 11:25-26) Faith In Jesus became Paul’s

pearl of great price, *"I wish to know Christ and the power flowing from his resurrection; likewise to know how to share in his sufferings by being formed into the pattern of his death. Thus do I hope that I may arrive at resurrection from the dead."* (Phil. 3:10-11)

Paul could see no reason to be a Christian if it was not in order to have this hope realized, *"If our hopes in Christ are limited to this life only, we are the most pitiable of men... If the dead are not raised, 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die!'"* (I Cor. 15:19,32) Paul reiterates his belief in the resurrection, *"But as it is, Christ is now raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. Death came through a man; hence the resurrection of the dead comes through a man also."* (I Cor. 15:20-21) Paul preached to the Thessalonians, *"If we believe that Jesus died and rose, God will bring forth with him from the dead those also who have fallen asleep believing in him."* (I Thes. 4:14)

When we understand the central part, the belief of the resurrection from the dead, played in both the Jewish Faith and that of the early Christian Communities, it is easier to understand why the Christians did not behold themselves to be other than Jewish and to see in their faith in Jesus – not something opposed to Jewish Faith – but the fulfillment of Jewish Faith. This is why the Church ardently preached to the Jews that Jesus was the Hope of Israel. In the light of this, we can see how accurate Paul's statement was before the Sanhedrin, *"I find myself on trial now because of my hope in the resurrection of the dead."* (Acts 23:6c)

That Israel rejected Jesus as the Messiah before His death and resurrection, the Church could attribute to ignorance. But to reject Jesus in the face of the resurrection from the dead – before the testimonies of so many witnesses – indicated hardness of heart. Peter preached before the Sanhedrin, *"The God of our fathers has raised up Jesus whom you put to death, hanging him on a tree. He whom God has exalted at his right hand as ruler and savior is to bring repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. We testify to this. So too does the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him."* (Acts 5:30-2) The reaction of the Sanhedrin to this truth, *"they were stung to fury and wanted to kill them."* (Acts 5:33)

It was understandable that the Christian Community felt completely justified in maintaining that it truly represented the Jewish Religion. It was not a heretical sect called the "Nazoreans." It had legal rights under Roman

law not only to exist, but to be protected.

One of the major themes running through Acts is the legitimate claim of the Church to exist under Roman law and to be entitled to the protection of the Roman government. Christianity does not appear as a substitute for the Jewish faith, but a super addition to it (its fulfillment). The Christian Community is pictured intrinsically peaceful – rendering unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's. Luke deliberately throws light upon the fact that whenever the Christian Community, or its leaders, were the center of disturbance, the Jews directly or indirectly instigated the disturbances for unjust and base reasons.

Throughout the narrative Luke, with his artistic skill, demonstrated the warm relationship existing between the Christian Community and the Romans. The officials of the Roman Empire appear as Paul's only safeguard against the Jews. The narrative seemingly reached its climax when Paul recalled a vision he had of Jesus within the temple, in which Jesus told him, *"I mean to send you far from here, among the Gentiles."* (Acts 22:21) The very next night, after Paul revealed this revelation, the Risen Lord appeared to Paul and specified where he must go, *"Just as you have given testimony to me here in Jerusalem, so must you do in Rome."* (Acts 23:11) Luke reveals that Paul's presence in Rome will be the result of a Divine command. It is the Lord that has sent His gospel into the world.

PAUL BEFORE FELIX

When Claudius Lysias sent Paul under heavy guard to the Roman procurator Antonius Felix, he sent along a message to Felix. He informed the governor that Paul had been taken into protective custody because Paul was a Roman citizen – guilty of no crime deserving imprisonment, much less death. He accused the Jews of attempting to murder Paul on one occasion – from which he rescued him – and on another occasion of plotting to assassinate Paul, a plot which Lysias had now foiled by sending Paul under heavy armed escort to the governor Felix. Claudius Lysias' letter exonerates Paul of any serious crime and accuses the Jews of two attempts at murdering a Roman citizen. In the eyes of Lysias, Paul is not guilty of any crime against the Roman Empire and that Paul's freedom should not be impeded.

The soldiers hand Paul into the custody of Felix. Felix immediately ascertains whether he has jurisdiction over Paul's case. Judea and Cilicia, at

that time, were within the Province of Syria. Paul, being from Cilicia, gave Felix legal jurisdiction. Felix tells Paul, "*I shall hear your case when your accusers arrive.*" (Acts 23:35)

Five days later, a delegation arrives from Jerusalem to press charges against Paul. We ought to bear in mind that it is not just Paul on trial, but the Christian Church; it is not only Paul's death they seek, but the death of the Church. Tertullus, the prosecuting attorney for the Sanhedrin, begins his presentation before Felix with flattering lies about the governor and ends with damaging lies about Paul. None of this Felix believes. Tertullus accuses Paul of being a ringleader of the sect of Nazoreans. Tying Paul and the Church together would be to condemn both at the same time. Tertullus' charge implies that Paul is a leader in an illegal organization bent upon destroying Roman peace in the world. With two charges, he brands Paul as an enemy of Rome. In his third charge, Tertullus accuses Paul of attempting to desecrate the temple – for which crime he had been arrested by the Jews. All three crimes carry the penalty of death. These Jews want Paul dead. They are not particular over the reason for his conviction as long as it results in his death.

Felix motioned for Paul to reply. In his defense Paul claims that his conduct since arriving in Jerusalem refutes the charges that he is a disturber of the peace. He acknowledges he belongs to the group the Jews refer to as the "sect of the Nazoreans." But he denies their charge of it being a sect by affirming its complete fidelity to the Jewish Faith. In his defense Paul points out that the only charge they can hope to sustain against him would be the third one. But, where are the witnesses to this crime? The law demands witnesses. Why are not those Asians here to accuse him? He subtly concludes that the real crime of which he is accused is that of his belief in the resurrection of the dead. For indeed, the witnesses to that proclamation stand present here in court. Paul already had confirmed that true Jewish Faith embraces belief in the resurrection of the dead. Paul includes, for the first time, the teaching that the wicked also will rise from the dead.

Felix was shrewd enough to discern that the real problem existing between Paul and the Jews – between the so called "Nazoreans" and the Jews – was strictly one of faith. It was not faith in a tenet that was essentially alien to the Jewish religion, but a denial that in the person of Jesus of Nazareth this faith was being fulfilled. Paul had made it clear that the "Nazoreans" had not stepped outside the bounds of orthodox Jewish beliefs, "...*I worship the*

God of our fathers...I believe all that is written in the law and the prophets...." (Acts 24:14) He publicly confessed to being an orthodox Jew. That profession had not been discredited. It stood as evidence before the court. Felix adjourned the trial, saying merely, *"I will decide the case when Lysias the commander arrives."* (Acts 24:22) Felix was not a just man. He had no legal grounds upon which to keep Paul in prison. He should have permitted him, when safe, to leave. Felix had, in writing, Lysias own judgment, *"(Paul) was in no way guilty of anything deserving death or imprisonment."* (Acts 23:29) Felix kept Paul in prison for a very base motive. Paul was like an innocent bird caught in a cage – Felix would not open the door to freedom unless Paul bribed him. In conscience, Paul could not take this road to freedom and so remained imprisoned.

FELIX AND DRUSILLA

A few days after the trial, Felix came with his Jewish wife Drusilla to hear Paul speak on faith in Christ Jesus. *"As Paul talked on about uprightness, self control, and the coming judgment, Felix became frightened. Before long, he exclaimed, 'That's enough for now! You can go. I'll send for you again when I find the time.'"* (Acts 24:25)

The ground upon which the seed was sown was indeed, in the case of Drusilla and Felix, entirely too thorny. As we read in the Scriptures, *"Those sown among thorns are another class. They have listened to the word, but anxieties over life's demands, and the desire for wealth, and cravings of other sorts come to choke it off; it bears no yield."* (Mk. 4:18-19) Apparently, Drusilla and Felix were two earth-bound souls. They could not rise above the demands of their baser needs. They were indeed prisoners of a different sort and their souls wore heavier chains. That Felix never came to repentance was obvious from the fact he denied Paul his freedom and expected Paul to pay for that, which was his by right. Luke informs us, *"Two years passed, following which Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus. The former wanted to ingratiate himself with the Jews, so he left Paul in prison."* (Acts 24:21) The ancient Bezan text of Acts relates he did this at the insistence of his wife Drusilla.

PAUL BEFORE FESTUS

Porcius Festus arrived in Judea as procurator about 60 A.D. He appears in history to be a fair man, who sought to settle the differences between the

Jews and Rome in a just manner, but unfortunately he died after only two years in office. One of his first duties as new governor would be to settle all matters left undecided by the former governor. The Jews in Jerusalem had not forgotten about Paul. They endeavored to take advantage of Festus' ignorance of the situation and sought to prevail upon him to send Paul back to Jerusalem for trial. Again, it was their plan to kill him on the way to Jerusalem. Festus, desiring to please the leaders of the people he must now govern, asked Paul, *"Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and stand trial before me there on these charges?"*(Acts 25:9) Paul made his decision. Nothing but death awaited him in Jerusalem. If he was to live, it would not be as a Jew, but as a citizen of Rome. He acknowledged his civil ruler on earth to be Caesar, not the Sanhedrin. Luke may well symbolize, in these next words of Paul, the cutting of the umbilical cord that has bound the New Israel to the Old Israel. Paul proclaimed before the court, *"If I am guilty, if I have committed a crime deserving death, I do not seek to escape that penalty. But if there is nothing to the charges these men bring against me, no one has a right to hand me over to them. I appeal to the emperor!"* (Acts 25:11) With that, Paul moved the case of Christianity from Palestine to Rome. The moment the accused uttered an appeal to Caesar, all trial proceedings came to an end and the case was remitted to Rome. Until the case could be heard in Rome, the accused was not to be treated as a condemned man, and he had to be protected from harmful treatment under the severest penalties. The caesars were very jealous of this right and rigidly protected the right of appeal. With those two little words, *"Caesarem Appello,"* Paul delivered his life out of the murderous hands of the Jews.

FESTUS AND AGRIPPA

Festus now faced the problem of sending Paul to Rome and writing the charges against him. Luke artfully expresses the mind of Festus through a dialogue Festus had with his royal guest – King Agrippa and his sister Bernice. The trial before Festus had only succeeded in completely confusing him. It involved issues he was in no position to understand. These were issues over which it would be impossible to make a legal judgment. They did not pertain to Roman legal matters as Festus explained to Agrippa, *"...they did not charge him with any of the crimes I expected. Instead they differed with him over issues in their own religion, and about a certain Jesus who had died but who Paul claimed is alive...I did not find that he had done anything deserving of death.... The trouble is, I have nothing definite to write about him to our sovereign.... It seems to me a senseless procedure to send on a prisoner*

without indicating the charges against him.” “Agrippa said to Festus, ‘I too should like to hear this man.’ ‘Tomorrow you shall hear him,’ replied Festus.” (Acts 25:18-27) Once again, Roman authority has declared Paul innocent of any crime against the government, and again we see that the religious problem centers around the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

THE FINAL JUDGMENT

Again, we see that the essential theme of the Gospel is the resurrection of Jesus. To deny this destroys the foundation of Christianity. The Holy Spirit has been sent to confirm this truth in the hearts of believers. The Christian vision confirms that life exists beyond the grave, and even from the grave, life will once again come forth to life eternal. It is this life eternal one guards in this transitory physical existence on earth. Paul’s thought does not stop at the Resurrection from the dead. That leads to the next logical step. Following eternal life comes the judgment – the eternal judgment. Paul knew a day of eternal wrath had been decreed, in which the just judgment of God would be delivered upon all who have lived on the face of the earth. Only through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, could one hope to escape the Day of Wrath. Paul began to see that some people, by their perversity, had sealed themselves – signed themselves – for the wrath of God. *“The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against the irreligious and perverse spirit of men who, in this perversity of theirs hinder the truth.” (Rm. 1:18) Paul implies God finally abandons such people and leaves them to their perversity that appears limitless. (See Rm. 1:28-32) Paul sees eternal death as their final end. To all men Paul writes, “Do you suppose, then, that you will escape his judgment...? Or do you presume on his kindness and forbearance? Do you not know that God’s kindness is an invitation to you to repent? ...Your hard and impenitent heart is storing up retribution for that day of wrath when the just judgment of God will be revealed, when he will repay every man for what he has done; eternal life to those who strive for glory, honor and immortality by patiently doing right; wrath and fury to those who selfishly disobey the truth and obey wickedness. Yes, affliction and anguish will come upon every man who has done evil.... But there will be glory, honor, and peace for everyone who has done good... With God there is no favoritism.” (Rm. 2:3-11)*

Luke paints a final dramatic scene filled with pomp and circumstance, *“So the next day Agrippa and Bernice came with great pomp and entered the audience chamber in the company of military officers and prominent men of*

the city.” (Acts 25:23) These people represent the power and the glory of this world. They possess what the kingdom of the world has to offer. What price are they paying for it? In contrast to them, stands Paul – a prisoner in chains – stripped of all that the world deems as richness – a loss Paul deems as nothing. Paul stands there with the eye of the seer – with the vision of the prophet. He sees for certain – as certain as he stands before these judges – that he and they and all mankind will one day stand before the judgment seat of God. On that day, the pomp and circumstance of this world along with its drabness and drudgery will have ceased. Only the eternal real will endure...

The Gospel must be preached because *“it is the power of God leading everyone who believes in it to salvation, the Jew first, then the Greek.” (Rm. 1:16)* The gospel is the love of God reaching out to save all mankind. True brotherly love demands that the gospel be preached. How truly Paul stands before this world, as Jesus – one of its greatest lovers, *“I put no value on my life if only I can finish my race and complete the service to which I have been assigned by the Lord Jesus, bearing witness to the gospel of God’s grace... I take the blame for no man’s conscience, for I have never shrunk from announcing to you God’s design in its entirety.” (Acts 20:24, 26-27)*

THE GOSPEL BEFORE THE WORLD

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND QUESTIONS SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK (PLEASE MEMORIZE)

"I PUT NO VALUE ON MY LIFE IF ONLY I CAN FINISH MY RACE AND COMPLETE THE SERVICE TO WHICH I HAVE BEEN ASSIGNED BY THE LORD JESUS, BEARING WITNESS TO THE GOSPEL OF GOD'S GRACE." (Acts 20:24)

FIRST DAY: Read Summary Introduction; Acts 23:26-35.

1. What would you describe as the hope of Israel?
2. Why can Jesus Christ be called the hope of Israel?
3. Why did the Christian Church feel justified in denying it was an illegal sect of the Jewish religion?
4. What was the verdict Claudius Lysias handed down about Paul?

SECOND DAY: Read Summary: Paul Before Felix through Felix and Drusilla; Acts 24:1-27.

1. What did Tertullus accuse Paul of?
2. Why can we say the Church stands on trial with Paul?
3. How does Paul show the Church is not an illegal sect?
4. How do we know that Paul never brought Felix to repentance?

THIRD DAY: Read Summary: Paul Before Festus; Acts 25:1-12.

1. Why do you think Festus failed to release Paul from prison?
2. Why did Paul refuse to go down to Jerusalem to be tried before Festus?
3. What did it mean to appeal to Caesar?

4. What do you think is symbolized by Paul taking the step to appeal his case to Rome?

FOURTH DAY: Read Summary Festus and Agrippa; Acts 25:13-27.

1. What was the dilemma Festus found himself in after the trial?
2. What was Festus' verdict about Paul?
3. What was the real issue between Paul (the Church) and the Jews?
4. How did Festus hope Agrippa could aid him?

FIFTH DAY: Read Acts 26:1-32.

1. Why did Paul feel he could get a fair hearing before Agrippa?
2. What do you see as Paul's main argument of defense for his behavior?
3. What is the great work of the Christian evangelist?
4. Why do you think there was such a difference between Festus' reaction and Agrippa's to Paul's speech?

SIXTH DAY: Read Summary: The Final Judgment; Romans 2:1-29.

1. What must follow the resurrection from the dead?
2. What does Paul teach about the day of wrath?
3. By what standard will men be judged on that day?
4. Why is it so important that the Gospel be preached?

CHAPTER 22

NUNC DIMITTIS

INTRODUCTION

Luke relates the history of the life of the Church through the lives of its members – particularly through the lives of Simon Peter and Paul of Tarsus. In the life of Simon Peter, Luke carries us through the Church's foundation and early beginnings at Jerusalem and its growth beyond. Within the activities of Peter, the first ten years of Church History are recorded. In a unique way, we see how the life of Paul embodies and symbolizes the Divine work of salvation, the Divine work that both redeems and makes man an instrument of redemption. By presenting the life and activities of Paul, Luke in a very incarnational way, depicts the next succeeding of twenty years of Church History. Therefore, depicted within the lives of Peter and Paul, we see the growth and the development of the Church. We behold the persecution of this Church by the Jewish leaders and their attempts to destroy the Church. When the Jews fail to do so through their own power, we see how they branded the Church as a heretical and illegal religion. We see how, through devious means, the Jews sought to manipulate the Romans to destroy the Church. Through it all, the Church survives through Divine Power and succeeds in fulfilling its Divine Mission.

PAUL BEFORE KING AGRIPPA

Paul addresses himself to the last Jewish king when he appears before King Agrippa. Luke intends the speech to be the final defense of the Church before the Jews. The speech itself represents one of the best-written passages within Acts. Paul intends to demonstrate the natural-spiritual process of growth from being an ardent Jew to becoming a zealous Christian. He demonstrates how Judaism is the natural foundation for his present faith – a faith that does not contradict Judaism but compliments and perfects it. Paul strongly identifies himself with Judaism by his references to “*our fathers*” and “*our people.*”

Paul proceeds to demonstrate his loyalty to Judaism. He describes how he went from being an apostle of the Jewish high priests, to becoming an apostle of Jesus of Nazareth. He received a direct vision of the Risen Jesus whom he recognized as "Lord." Paul received a direct command and commission from the Risen Lord. Paul indicates to King Agrippa and to his listeners that it was precisely at this point he passed from being under the authority of the Jewish high-priests to being under the authority of Jesus the Christ. Till this moment, he had given strict obedience to Jewish authorities.

Herein lay Paul's authority for being an apostle of Jesus Christ. He had witnessed the Risen Jesus with his own eyes and this Jesus had personally "*sent him*" to be an apostle of the gospel. Paul is what he is by the command of God and not by the desire of man. Paul has been specified by God for his work among the Gentiles. This work is the conversion of the Gentiles. This is signified by the words, "*to open the eyes of those to whom I am sending you.*"

Again, the picture of true conversion is presented to us. It possesses both a human and Divine side. From the side of man it means a turning of the whole life to God and rejecting one's former life.

The external actions of one's life become but the manifestation of the inner change of mind and will. By true conversion one is designated, like Paul, as a servant of the Lord – a servant who obeys the commands of his Lord. We know from other texts that this conversion must have a visible expression in time and in an outward act. The penitent must receive the sacrament of baptism through which one enters into the Divine side of conversion and through which one "*obtains the forgiveness of sins and a portion among God's people.*" Paul emphasizes that true conversion of heart results in a true change in one's external acts. The life one lives now should testify to the grace and power received from the Holy Spirit. The baptized should "*walk in the Spirit*" – demonstrate a newness of life that produces fruits of the Spirit. In Paul's words, the new life of a Christian expresses self in "*doing works worthy of repentance.*" These works are not the cause of new life, but the fruits of it. "*By their fruits you will know them!*"

We see from the words of Jesus and Paul's example that faith becomes the instrumental cause of conversion. Jesus' own words imply that forgiveness of sin and a portion among God's people flow from faith in Him. The faith of conversion has been described as a secret surrender of the will that

transports the life of a person from the dominion of Satan into the kingdom of light and grace.

Paul emphasizes to King Agrippa that his missionary activities have all been out of obedience to the Divine command received. Paul recalls what has been the result of his obedience to God. Because he obeyed God, as he must, the Jews sought to murder him. *"That is why the Jews seized me in the temple court and tried to murder me."* (Acts 26:21)

From this point, Paul turns to the Scriptures to illustrate that all these things had been foretold in them. This would be the witness of the Spirit within Israel itself to the truth of the gospel. King Agrippa, no doubt, could follow the arguments, but Paul had long since lost and exasperated Festus. At this point, Agrippa interrupted Paul with, *"A little more, Paul, and you will make a Christian out of me!"* (Acts 26:28) With this, Agrippa intends to end the hearing.

Luke tells us the decision of the court. *"After they had left the chamber, they talked matters over among themselves and admitted, 'This man is doing nothing that deserves death or imprisonment.' Agrippa further remarked to Festus, 'he could have been set at liberty if he had not appealed to the emperor!'"* (Acts 26:31-32) What Agrippa said would have carried little weight with the Jews, however, Luke did not write to convince the Jews, but to convince the Romans. Agrippa was influential with Nero, and the Imperial Court would consider the opinion of Agrippa as that of a highly respected authority on Jewish matters.

PAUL IN ROME

When the trial ended, Festus sent Paul to Rome. Paul was placed in the custody of the centurion Julius. Once again, another Roman centurion appears in a very favorable light in the New Testament. Julius not only befriends Paul, but becomes his admirer. Paul's party departed Palestine perhaps in the latter part of August. It was destined not to reach Rome before March of the following year – after enduring a terrible storm of fourteen days and ending in shipwreck.

In the person of Paul, the living Church finds its representative and a pattern of its own existence. Luke must have intended that long detailed journey of Paul, to Rome, to symbolize in many ways, the Church's own

journey through his life.

The Church of Rome greets Paul as a Christian hero. Luke writes, *“Upon our entry into Rome, Paul was allowed to take a lodging of his own although a soldier was assigned to guard over him. Three days later, Paul invited the prominent men of the Jewish community to visit him.”* He explained to them why he had been forced to make an appeal to the emperor. He *“had no cause to make accusations against my own people.”* He had appealed to save his own life. *“This is the reason, then,”* he said, *“why I have asked to see you and speak with you. I wear these chains solely because I share the hope of Israel.”* (See Acts 28:17-20)

The Jews replied, *“We have had no letters from Judea about you, nor have any of the brothers arrived with a report or rumor to your discredit. For our part, we are anxious to hear you present your views. We know very well that this sect is denounced everywhere.”* (Acts 28:21-22) They arranged a day for a meeting and they arrived in great numbers. From morning to evening, Paul laid the case before them. He sought to convince them about Jesus. Some believed but apparently, as always, most did not. When they prepared to leave, Paul added one final word, *“The Holy Spirit stated it well when he said to your fathers through the prophet Isaiah, ‘Go to this people and say: You may listen carefully yet you will never understand; you may look intently yet you will never see. The heart of this people has grown sluggish. They have scarcely used their ears to listen; their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their minds, and repent; and I should have to heal them.’ Now you must realize that this salvation of God has been transmitted to the Gentiles – who will heed it!”* (Acts 28:25-28) With these words, Paul dismissed the Jews.

It had been a constant concern of Paul as to how the Jews could reject the gospel in the light of the resurrection of Jesus and the testimony of the Scriptures. In Isaiah 6:9-10, Paul found the answer. God has willed it so in order for a greater good to come to pass. From this moment, Paul separated himself from the unbelieving Jews. For the first time, he has said, *“your fathers”* not *“our fathers.”* Faith has finalized the split between the Christians and the Jews. Faith is the deciding factor. Faith in Jesus alone determines the true Israelite.

In the beginning of Acts, the Apostles asked, *“Lord, are you going to restore the rule to Israel now?”* (Acts 1:6) The end of Acts gives the answer to the

Apostles' question. Israel has rejected the kingdom and it has been given to the Gentiles. *"This salvation of God has been transmitted to the Gentiles – who will heed it!" (Acts 28:28)*

In the beginning of Acts, the Church received the commission, *"...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes down upon you; then you are to be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, yes, even to the ends of the earth."* (Acts 1:8)

Rome was the center of the world. The streams of humanity poured into Rome from the four corners of the world and from Rome, humanity flowed back out to the ends of the known earth. For Luke, the arrival of the Church in Rome – symbolized in Paul's journey – fulfilled the words of Jesus. The power of nature, of men and of Hell had withstood the spread of the Church and her gospel message of Jesus Christ – all in vain! Acts ends in the triumph of the Gospel. Paul proclaimed the Gospel in Rome in all its catholicity and power – *"...welcoming all who came to him. With full assurance, and without any hindrance whatever, he preached the reign of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ."* (Acts 28:30-31) Whatever the future holds for the Church, one thing remains certain: Nothing will stop the Gospel!

And as for Paul? What more fitting prayer than that of Simeon, in which to say it all, *"Now, Master, you can dismiss your servant in peace; you have fulfilled your word. For my eyes have witnessed your saving deed displayed for all the peoples to see: A revealing light to the Gentiles, the glory of your people Israel."* (Lk. 2:29-32)

NUNC DIMITTIS

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND QUESTIONS SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK (PLEASE - MEMORIZE)

‘TO OPEN THE EYES OF THOSE TO WHOM I AM SENDING YOU, TO TURN THEM FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT, FROM THE DOMINION OF SATAN TO GOD; THAT THROUGH THEIR FAITH IN ME, THEY MAY OBTAIN THE FORGIVENESS OF THEIR SINS AND A PORTION AMONG GOD’S PEOPLE.’ (ACTS 27:18)

FIRST DAY: Read Jeremiah 1:59; Galatians 1:15; Acts 26:1-32.

1. What does Luke teach about the Church through the ministry of Peter?
2. What does he teach about the Church through the ministry of Paul?
3. In what way does Luke see Paul as another Jeremiah?
4. How are the Jews represented in this early history of the Church?

SECOND DAY: Read Acts 27:1-11.

1. How do you see Paul’s life as one of true conversion?
2. What prophecy is now being fulfilled with Paul’s journey to Rome?
3. What do you see as the difference between reason and inspiration?
4. Which of the of the two are you inclined to follow? Why?

THIRD DAY: Read Acts 27:12-44.

1. How do we know the author of Acts is on this trip to Rome?
2. What do you see as the difference between inspiration and revelation?
3. How would you describe the journey to Malta?
4. Where do you see God at work in these natural disasters?

FOURTH DAY: Read Acts 28:1-10.

1. In what way is the Roman Centurion an 'angel of the Lord' to Paul?
2. What special powers are revealed in Paul on Malta?
3. What effects do they have on those around him?
4. In what way do you see God revealing His presence in your life?

FIFTH DAY: Acts 28:11-24.

1. What does this reading tell you about the spread of Christianity?
2. What significance is there in the Christians going out to meet Paul on the Appian Way?
3. How does Paul explain his presence in Rome to the Jews?
4. Why do you think that Paul is celebrated as one of the Founders of the Church in Rome?

SIXTH DAY: Read Acts 28:25-31; reread Acts 23:11 and 26:18.

1. How does Paul picture his vocation in the Church?
2. What means did the Lord use to fulfill the prophecy in Acts 23:11?
3. What does it mean to you: "God writes straight with crooked lines."?
4. How do those words of the Lord in Acts 26:18 express the Church's mission in the world and that of every true Christian Evangelist?



PETER AND JOHN HEAL THE LAME MAN. MASOLINO. BRANCACCI CHAPEL.
CHIESA DEL CARMINE. FLORENCE

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barclay, W. THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976.)
- Blacklock, E.M. THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES (Grand Rapids; Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1959.)
- Dessian, C.S. THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES - Catholic Commentary On The Holy Scriptures (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1953.)
- Dillion, R.J. and Fitzmeyer, J. ACTS OF THE APOSTLES - The Jerome Biblical Commentary (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1968.)
- Foakes-Jackson, E.J. THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1931.)
- Josephus, F. THE LIFE AND WORKS OF JOSEPHUS FLAVIUS trans. W. Whiston (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977.)
- McKenzie, J.L. DICTIONARY OF THE BIBLE (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1965.)
- Munck, J. THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1967.)
- Rackham, R.B. THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES (London: Methuen and Company, 1901.)
- Ramsay, W.M. ST. PAUL THE TRAVELLER AND THE ROMAN CITIZEN (New York: G.P. Putman's Sons, 1896.)
- Stokes, G.T. THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES (New York: A.C. Armstrong and Sons, 1903.)
- Von den Born, A. ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE BIBLE trans. L.F. Hartman (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963.)