

*The Birth of the Christian Church***Garth M. Rosell, Ph.D.**

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Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. My name is Garth Rosell, professor of church history at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in South Hamilton, Massachusetts; and it's my great privilege to serve as your instructor as we begin our study of this fascinating world of Christian history. I'm delighted you can be part of the class, and I pray that you'll find the course intellectually stimulating, historically informative, and also spiritually enriching.

At the beginning of each class, I'll be starting by inviting you to join me in prayer. We ask that God will bless our time together and that every word we speak, every thought we entertain would conform to God's glorious Word and bring special glory to His wonderful name. Let us pray: *Eternal God, as we begin our class together, we ask Your special blessing on each student who is studying. How grateful we are for their sense of calling from above and for their dedication to the spread of the glorious gospel throughout the world. How thankful we are for their bright minds and willing spirits, and how blessed we are by their friendship and encouragement. And so we ask, through the power of Your Holy Spirit, that this class will somehow help to strengthen their faith and deepen their love for You. We ask that You would give us all a fresh vision for Your work, keep us faithful to Your Word. Grant us a zest and tenacity in our studies, a new joy in our learning, and open our minds and hearts to Your truth. Draw us all daily into Your healing presence, wherein we can find wisdom, strength, and hope. Through Jesus Christ our Lord we pray, Amen.*

Church history begins at Pentecost. The place was Jerusalem, that beautiful but often-troubled city. The year was about 30 AD, in the first century. Although the dates are given variously by scholars between 29 and 33 of the Common Era, the time was late spring, 10 days after Christ's ascension into heaven, 50 days after His glorious resurrection from the dead. The occasion was a kind of thanksgiving celebration concluding the grain harvest, and those involved were the followers of Jesus—those who had

been commanded to wait in Jerusalem until they were empowered from on high. Remember that wonderful text in the book of Acts, first chapter, verse eight; and on this occasion they had probably gathered in the morning in the upper room for their usual time of prayer and fellowship. And it was there in those humble surroundings in the midst of those unlikely people that the Spirit of God descended and the church was born. By the power and grace of God, the community of faith became a living reality, a fellowship which was destined to reshape the very contours of history, touching literally millions of lives with the good news of the gospel: that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself.

It is the history of that community of faith that we'll be exploring throughout our course together. Today however, I want us to focus our attention more specifically upon the church's very beginnings, looking at that first Pentecost in Jerusalem and exploring together the remarkable story that surrounded the birth of the church. In order to do this, of course, we need to remind ourselves that the church emerged within some larger contexts: The Jewish tradition, of course, most immediately, and the larger world into which the church spread to the East into India and Asia, to the South throughout Africa, and to the North and to the West throughout what we call Europe, the great Roman Empire. So it is appropriate I think that we begin our study with the Jewish rootage of the Christian church.

To say that the roots of Christianity are planted in Jewish soil is to say what should be obvious to all of us: Jesus our Lord and Savior was Jewish. Most of the earliest converts to Christianity were Jewish. Practically all of the early leaders of the Christian church in fact were Jewish. Much of the worship of the early church was taken directly from synagogue practice. In fact, the only Scriptures the early Christians knew in those very earliest years were the writings of the Old Testament, the Law and the Prophets. As my good friend and colleague Marvin Wilson has suggested in his wonderful book *Our Father Abraham*, "The roots of Christianity, run deep in the Hebrew soil." Jesus was born of Jewish parents (Matthew 1:16). He was circumcised on the eighth day according to Jewish law (Luke 2:21). As a boy, He celebrated Passover (Luke 2:41-43). As a youth, He learned by interacting with various Jewish teachers, all of whom were amazed at His understanding (Luke 2:46-47). Frequenting the synagogue from Sabbath to Sabbath, as was His custom (Luke 4:16), He was exposed to a wide range of Jewish thought.

I would like to suggest, as we begin this course, that we ought to love and treasure this wonderful linkage between Judaism and Christianity, between our Old Testament and our New Testament; for our very lives and our churches are deeply planted in Hebrew soil, for which we thank God. It's also important to remember that God chose to plant the very first Christian church in the city of Jerusalem. . . . Jeremias, in his fascinating little book *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, describes the makeup of the city for us when the church was born. Economically, it was structured around a number of trades: pottery, baking, wools, olive oil, carpentry, stone cutting, and the like. All of these, Jeremias suggests, depended heavily upon the tremendous consumption of the temple establishment. Furthermore, Jewish Jerusalem social structure reflected the ordering of the thousands of religious functionaries that peopled the city. Among the rich, were the higher priestly classes, the bankers, the tax collectors. The middle-class was made up of ordinary priests, small shopkeepers, and traders. And finally, there were the many poor people, the day laborers, and slaves. And all of these fit together into a giant interconnected network, all of them dependent either directly or indirectly upon the temple and temple life.

Most of the bankers' transactions, for example, were related to temple finance; and most of the small shopkeepers would probably have gone out of business but for the income from the thousands of pilgrims who flooded into Jerusalem and who purchased the goods they produced. The poor, moreover, were dependent upon a huge welfare system administered directly by the temple. People from every class knew exactly on which side their bread was buttered and who was putting that butter there. Politically, Jerusalem was dominated by the Sanhedrin, the highest political body of the community, made up of 71 members, headed by the high priest. These wealthy landowners, priests, and Levites were all dependent, directly or indirectly, on the temple. In addition to all of this, we need to remember that Jerusalem was literally flooded with religious functionaries, what we might call the clergy of the day. At the very top was the high priest, who was a Levite who alone could enter the Holy of Holies to make atonement for the people. Next came the chief priests, usually Sadducees. These are the ones that taught the 24 weekly educational courses offered at the temple. They also managed temple finances and made decisions relating to civil law. And then there were the ordinary priests. Jeremias suggests some 7,200 of them including Sadducees, Pharisees, and scribes. There were also some 9,600 singers, guards, doorkeepers, and the like.

In short, these religious functionaries made up perhaps as much as a third of the population of the city of Jerusalem.

The point I want to make is simply this, Jerusalem was a very unique city, a kind of Vatican City, if we were reported in Roman Catholic terms. A company town, a religious community par excellence, a place in which every citizen was dependent, and knew they were dependent, upon the bounties of the temple. Consequently, can't we understand more clearly how threatening would have been Jesus' words when He said, "*Destroy this temple, and in three days I will restore it.*" Our Lord, of course, was speaking about His own death and resurrection, but they would've heard it perhaps very differently. They could not have imagined the destruction of the temple, for it was tantamount for many of them to destroying their very livelihood. In short, Jerusalem was a very unique kind of city, a religious enclave whose temple system benefited the citizenry directly; and it was there in the heartland of this institutionalized Jewish religiosity at the center of a powerful and pervasive kind of Judaism that God chose for His Holy Spirit to descend upon the church and to give it birth. It's also important to add that at this time, when the church was born, Jerusalem was literally filled with pilgrims. Faithful Jews from all over the Mediterranean basin and beyond gathered each year for the three great pilgrim festivals that were held in Jerusalem.

Paul Maier and his wonderful little book that I would recommend to all of you, titled *First Christians: Pentecost and the Spread of Christianity*, identifies these three festivals for us as Passover, the Festival of Weeks, and the Feast of Booths. The Weeks festival was called the Feast of Harvest, for the day of Pentecost, which comes from the Greek term for "fiftieth," fell exactly 50 days after the wave offering of the sheaf of barley during Passover (required, as you remember, in Leviticus 23:9). This is very much akin in many ways to America's Thanksgiving Day. It was an agricultural festival celebrated seven weeks after the harvest season began; a festival of weeks, when the first fruits of the wheat harvest were presented to God in accordance with scriptural directives in Leviticus. Josephus in fact estimates that some three million pilgrims may have gathered in Jerusalem during that high feast day. For the Festival of Weeks, this period of Pentecost was probably the time of the year in which more people, more pilgrims, would have gathered in Jerusalem than any other time during the year. Even though Josephus the Jewish historian's estimate may be a bit high, there's no question that the town would have been literally filled with faithful Jews from all over the Mediterranean

basin, having gathered there for this festive joyous celebration of Pentecost.

Joseph Caiaphas, the high priest, would have taken two loaves of bread, baked with milled flour from the new wheat crop, waving them back and forth in front of the altar as an offering to God on behalf of the people. Then, as you'll remember, two lambs without blemish were brought as an offering, sacrificed to the Lord who had made this bounty possible. Following this, all Jewish males were invited to do the altar dance in the courts of the temple, during which they sang the Hallel—the joyous praises which are found in Psalms 113-118. And later in the day, of course, individual presentations were made by families; then everyone gathered for the great feast: the poor, the visitors, everyone was invited to share in the bounty—very much like our own Thanksgiving celebrations here in America.

Our family has had the privilege of living in England from time to time during my sabbatical leaves, and on one such occasion we lived in Oxford. And I discovered that once a year at harvest time the churches of Oxford have a special service in which adults and children bring the bounty of the earth, things that they have grown or made, things representing their vocation, their work, their interest; and parents and children all bring these items to the church. I remember the excitement on the faces of the children as they brought their own particular gift into the church; and then altogether they were invited to come down the aisles and put those gifts at the front to symbolize the thanksgiving to God, who had made that bounty possible—a tremendous joy and delight in celebration! And it would've been very much like that on this first church Pentecost when the Christians had gathered as they typically did in the upper room at the other side of town, on that very special day, in that very special city, in that special *kairos*, the Greek term for a meaning-laden time, a very special moment. And it was on that Pentecost morning, in the midst of all that celebration, that the town woke up to a day that would literally change the face of history.

While the throngs of locals and the pilgrims began to gather on the temple mount, across town in the upper room (probably the same place where Jesus initiated the Last Supper), the 120 followers of Christ or so, we surmise, had gathered there according to the instructions of their Lord, to wait until they could be empowered from on high for their service in the world. Among them, Maier suggests, were the 12 disciples, the 11 plus Matthias, who of course had been elected in the place of Judas; and it would've

included the Galilean followers of Jesus (perhaps the 70 of Luke 10:1), and Mary, Jesus' mother, Jesus' own brothers and sisters, and Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, those that came up from Bethany, along with Judean followers of Christ, such as the Emmaus disciples, John Mark, his mother, and the like. And they are in that wonderful setting about 9 a.m. in the morning. A noise, like the sound of a mighty wind, filled the chamber in which they were all meeting, and the promised Spirit descended, and the church was born. That account of course is taken from Acts 2, in that stunning passage. Let me read it for you.

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. Utterly amazed, they said: "Aren't all these men who are speaking Galileans? How is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What can this mean?"

What an incredible occasion! John R.W. Stott, in his study of the message of Acts, identifies the three phenomena, as he calls them, of the passage:

First, there came from heaven the sound of a blowing of violent wind, and this noise filled the whole house where they were sitting. Secondly, there appeared to them visibly what seemed to be tongues of fire, which separated and came to rest on each of them becoming for each an individual possession. Third, all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, languages of some kind, as the Spirit enabled them. These experiences—wind, fire, and speech—seemed like natural phenomenon, yet they were supernatural both in origin and in character. But these external evidences pointed to a much more important concurrent internal change that was taking place within those who were touched by the power of the Spirit.

Ministry requires us to depend upon the power of the Holy Spirit. Any genuine work of God is going to come through His hand, and we become merely the wonderful recipients of the opportunity to serve God in that way.

Howard Marshall, puts it this way: “For God’s special purposes, and according to His divinely appointed *kairos*, not only are these people going to hear the message—hear it in their own language and hear it gladly—but they are to become the first great missionary task force in the spreading of the gospel around the world, carrying the message to their very homes.” Just think of it, God had in His glorious providence brought thousands of people into the city from all over the world to hear the message. And His plan apparently was that they would hear and respond to that message and then carry it back to their homes, planting new churches in many parts of the world. They became, in God’s providence, the first great missionary task force, the promise of Matthew 16, the commission of our Lord. The Great Commission, as we call it in Matthew 28, became now the reality of Pentecost in Acts 2. Quite amazing!

Not everyone of course was convinced that the message was authentic. We read in Acts that detractors ridiculed them, as they always will. “These folk are filled with new wine!” Peter takes that occasion to stand up and say, “These men aren’t drunk, as you suppose. After all, it’s only 9 a.m.” And then Peter takes the opportunity, as we read in Acts 2, to preach from the Old Testament—the only effective way that he could have been able to reach this pilgrim audience, these faithful Jews who had come to Jerusalem as an act of worship, had risked their lives, some of them spending a great amounts of money to be able to be there, As F. F. Bruce, the great biblical scholar from Manchester, England, has suggested in his commentary on Acts in the New International Commentary series: “Peter used Joel to begin the process and then focused on the four major elements of all apostolic preaching. The announcement that the age of fulfillment had arrived, the rehearsal of the ministry, death, and triumph of Jesus, the citation of Old Testament Scriptures to prove Jesus as the Messiah, and finally a call to repentance.”

We’re always in need of good preaching, aren’t we? And Peter’s preaching led to a remarkable response. We’re told in the book of Acts that some 3,000 souls were touched by the gospel and baptized as new believers; and later that day Peter and John went to the temple for midafternoon prayers, healed the beggar at the gate called Beautiful, and a crowd gathered and Peter seizes the

opportunity again to preach. And this time we're told 5,000 souls were converted, including, as the text says, "a great many of the priests," which shouldn't be a surprise since, as we've discovered already, the town was filled with priests and other religious leaders. Persecution of course came immediately. The followers of Christ are not greater than their master; there's going to be great persecution. One of our later lectures will look specifically at the nature of persecution and the great martyr tradition of the early church. But here in Jerusalem we see an emerging almost immediately: a crackdown by the authorities that we read about in Acts 4 and 5. After all, the apostles weren't proclaiming this new faith in far-off Galilee or some obscure area. They were proclaiming it in the heart of Jerusalem, right in Solomon's Portico, which seems to have become a kind of gathering place for the preaching of the gospel.

Of course, as we'll discover later, Christians didn't have actual church buildings for several centuries. They normally would meet in their own homes and, of course, the biblical record indicates that the church is after all not a building. It's the people of God, the body of Christ. This is the biblical concept of the church, and it happens to meet in various places. In the third and fourth century, of course, we'll see church architecture begin. But after that time characteristically they meet in their own living rooms or wherever it happens to be convenient; but when they do so in public they were often brought under scrutiny. And you'll remember the apostles themselves were put in prison and brought before the high priest Caiaphas, who asked "By what empowerment, by what name are you doing this?" and Peter gave that amazing answer, "By the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth!" and then the Sanhedrin charged them not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus. Remember, Acts 4:18. But the apostles couldn't comply because their gospel was like a fire in their very bones! They couldn't hold it in. They couldn't contain it; and neither can we.

Listening to a higher voice, marching to the drum of a different drummer, these followers of Christ began to preach the gospel openly and were summoned again and again. Caiaphas called a meeting of the Sanhedrin (Acts 5:21). "Summon these prisoners!" But the prisoners couldn't be brought because they'd vanished from the jail without a trace. Of course they were found easily in the temple again teaching the people. Arrested once more, they were brought before Caiaphas: "We strictly charged you not to teach in Christ's name, but you fill Jerusalem with your teaching.

You're going to bring His blood upon us?" And then Peter gives a great reply: "We must obey God rather than men"—great principle. The Sanhedrin, angered by their response, considered violence, but you remember Gamaliel, the ranking theologian of the day, gave his response: "Let them alone! If they're not of God, it will surely fail. But if it is of God, we'll find ourselves in the unhappy position of opposing the very God whom we serve." So the apostles were beaten and released—the first physical suffering since Good Friday, but it certainly was not going to be the last. The first great string of martyrs that adorned the church across its history was Stephen, one of the seven selected to distribute the daily distributions. Stephen was lynched, and his death became the first of a whole line of martyrs. "The blood of the martyrs," as the great North African lawyer Tertullian phrased it, became the very "seed of the church." And yet the church continues to grow and spread, despite the persecution, through this great Pentecost missionary taskforce into the world.

And in our next lecture we're going to be picking up the story of that growth out into the world. But first I want us to think for a few minutes about the church that remained in Jerusalem, that very first church, that first Christian community. What can we learn from them that might be of help to us today? We do know that in this church there were at least four groupings of people. First, were the Hebrews, these local Jews who spoke Hebrew and Aramaic, and then there were the Hellenists. These were the thousands of dispersion Jews, spread out throughout the Roman world and beyond, many of whom spoke Greek. We see those popping up in Acts 6:1. In the third group would have been the proselytes. These were converts to Judaism that we hear about in Acts 6. We often forget when looking back that during this period there was an enormous amount of missionary activity by Jews going out throughout the Roman Empire to spread the Jewish faith. The whole procedure had been developed whereby Gentiles could come into Judaism through ritual acts of circumcision and stringent eating codes and behavior codes that were required of all good Jews. So there were the Hebrews and Hellenists and the proselytes; and a fourth group called God-fearers. These were Gentiles who believed in Judaism but had not gone through any of the ceremonial procedures. They had not been circumcised; they hadn't gone through those ritual practices.

Knowing those groups in the first church there in Jerusalem, one can imagine that, very shortly, tensions and difficulties would arise. After all, these were not perfect souls, in very similar ways

to the church today: Made up of fallen human beings like the rest of us, saved by the grace of God, and being transformed day by day into the likeness of Christ. But the book of Acts makes very clear that there were difficulties. And I think it's a good model for us because, in fact, in most of our churches and communities we find many of the same problems, the problems of sin. We see in Acts 5 the sin of Ananias and Sapphira, in that frightening account of which all of you are familiar, I'm sure. Or, if you look at the debates that emerged from a group of protesters, the Hellenists, who in Acts 6 are complaining about the uneven distribution. We don't know exactly what that distribution was, it may've been food or clothing or other goods, but these Hellenists felt aggrieved. They felt they were being wrongfully treated. It's interesting how the leaders of the Jerusalem church chose to solve the problem. They selected a small committee because they needed to give their own attention to preaching and to the work of evangelism. So they selected a small committee to take care of the problem, and the committee, to our utter surprise, was made up of the aggrieved group—seven Hellenists—the very ones that had raised the problem. I would've imagined that we would've balanced the group with perhaps two from each of the four major groups or some other like configuration but they were far wiser than we are, and more godly in that sense. The apostles, in fact, with the wisdom that God had given them, actually selected the very ones who felt aggrieved to solve the problem; and we don't hear of it any further, so they were likely successful in their efforts.

We also hear of the tensions within the early Christian community, between the Galileans and the Judeans. Much of Christ's ministry, as you know, had been carried out in Galilee, in that amazing, beautiful area around that stunning lake that we know as the Lake of Galilee. Farming and fishing were the normal activities of that area. They grew grapes; the fish that they took from the sea were salted and sent to other parts of the Roman Empire. About 400,000 in population in Galilee at that time with the capital of Tiberius, known for its medicinal baths; a variety of languages spoken in that region: Aramaic, Greek, Latin, and Hebrew; and the inhabitants of course were a mix of Jews and Gentiles, many of them Proselyte Jews. Strong nationalism, a kind of an independent spirit, a mild climate, a kind of outdoor type of folk. This contrasted sharply with the Judeans who centered themselves in the city of Jerusalem that we've looked at already; a very dependent and engaged-with-temple life, strong traditions of establishment. They considered themselves far more cultured than their northern neighbors, the Galileans. In fact, in the book

of Acts they even called the Galileans “fools,” as kind of “country bumpkins.”

It’s interesting that our Lord chose His own disciples from among that Galilean group, and they are the ones, for a period of years in the church in Jerusalem, that would have provided leadership. It wouldn’t be surprising to imagine that some tensions would emerge over their leadership, and indeed it did. And yet despite the fact that that church was far from perfect, just as we as followers of Christ today are far from perfect, it provides us with an element of hope. For God has chosen to plant His church among people just like us, who have our struggles and our tensions, our disagreements, and yet, in the midst of all of that, the Holy Spirit guides us to draw us together into a greater and greater conformity to His Son. Just think of the description of that early Christian community in Jerusalem. It’s one of my favorite passages right at the end of Acts 2, and you can read it for yourselves. I would encourage you to do that. But let me read just that little paragraph for you. It’s the kind of church I would love to be part of. It’s one that would draw me, and probably you, just as it did the people of Jerusalem in that first century. Here’s its description: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and their goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Everyone broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”

It’s not surprising that many would have been added to their number. Wouldn’t you’ve wanted to be part of that kind of a company, with that sort of description? So take heart those of you who worry about the struggles that you find within your own churches, within your own ministries, because God can work through those, in humility and faith, as God’s people are led by the Holy Spirit into greater and greater fellowship and Christlikeness.

Those of you who now are at the beginning of the course may want to try something that many of my students have done as they have gone through the early stages of the course, and let me commend it to you. And that is to read through Luke and Acts together, not slowly, or passage by passage; but to take an evening or a couple of evenings, or a morning, or a couple of mornings, and read quickly through the whole of the gospel of Luke, and then immediately

through the book of Acts. They're written by the same author, and in fact they show the life, the ministry, the death and resurrection of our Lord, and then the birth and growth and development of the church. And it is a stunning, majestic story that we often don't see because we normally will read one chapter, or one section of the Scripture. Let me encourage you to try this. It has been life-changing for many. I've tried to do it at least a few times each year to be swept along with the magnificent story of God's redemptive work through Jesus Christ in the building of His church. And, of course, our task is the same as that of the early church. We need to be reaching out, commending the faith to our neighbors, to everyone in need of the gospel.

Michael Green, in his wonderful little book *Evangelism in the Early Church*, concludes his study with this paragraph, and with this I want to conclude this first lecture. Green writes, "In the first two centuries or so, the church's existence showed many faults, much that dishonors the name they professed. But we also find an evangelistic zeal and effort exerted by the whole broad spectrum of the Christian community to bring other people to the feet of their ascended Lord, into the fellowship of His willing servants. This is a permanent reminder [Green writes] of the church's first priority. Evangelism was the very lifeblood of the early Christians; and so we find that day by day the Lord added to their number those whom He was saving. It could happen again [Green suggests] if the church were willing to pay the price." Well, in our next lecture, we're going to see some of those who did pay that price and, in fact, who spread the glorious gospel outward from Jerusalem, where God had planted His very first church, to the east into India, into Asia; to the south into Africa; and of course to the north and the west into the Great Roman Empire. And it's that story that we'll pick up with our next lecture.