The Founding and Growth of the Church
In Jerusalem, A.D. 30-35
Acts 1—7

1. FOUNDING OF THE CHURCH.
(ACTS 1, 2.)

1. Nucleus of the Church; The Ten Days of Waiting.—The number of disciples residing or remaining in Jerusalem after the ascension was one hundred and twenty. Including those in Galilee there were over five hundred, at least (1 Cor. 15:6). The one hundred and twenty continued in prayer while waiting in daily expectation of the promised Spirit. During the days of waiting, upon the suggestion of Peter, the vacancy in the apostolate, caused by the suicide of Judas, was filled by the election of Matthias; an essential qualification of an apostle being the personal knowledge which should enable him to testify to the resurrection of Christ (Acts 1:21, 22; 1 Cor. 9:1).

2. The Baptism of the Holy Spirit.—a. Time and Accompaniments.—Christ had suffered at the Passover: the Spirit came fifty days later at Pentecost, the second of the great feasts. It came with accompaniments appealing to eye and ear—a sound like a mighty wind, though not wind; flame-like tongues, though not flame.

b. Its Effects on the Disciples.—Its effects on the Twelve were instant, powerful, transforming: “They were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak with other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.” But supernatural insight and power were not the only effects. They were morally transformed. Henceforth there are no carnal conceptions of the kingdom, no unseemly strifes over the chief places in it.

c. Its Evidential Value.—Jesus had connected the coming of the Comforter with his return to the Father (John 15:26, 27; 16:7; cf. 7:39; Acts 2:33). Pentecost was heaven’s answer to earth’s rejection of her Lord; a public notification that the crown of thorns had been exchanged for a crown of glory; the crowning proof of the nation’s sin and Jesus’ Messiahship.

d. Effects on the Multitude.—To the wondering thousands who instantly gathered around the apostles, the baptism of the Spirit came with convicting, converting power; indirectly, indeed, yet effectively, through the gospel as it fell from Peter’s lips.

3. Peter’s Sermon; Results.—Peter is the spokesman; his hearers, Jews, born in a score of different lands. After an introduction fitted to allay prejudice, he goes on to prove that Jesus is the Christ (1) by his well-known works; (2) by his death, which was a plan of God unconsciously executed by wicked men; (3) by his resurrection, foretold by prophets and attested by the apostles; (4) by his exaltation at the right hand of the Father, predicted by prophets and confirmed by the Pentecostal miracle.

The results were (1) a pungent conviction; “they were pricked in their heart”; (2) a pointed question: “What shall we do?” (3) a plain answer: “Repent—and be baptized—every one of you—in the name of Jesus Christ—for the remission of sins—and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit”; (4) an instant obedience; “Then they that gladly received the word were baptized, and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls”; (5) steadfast continuance “in the apostles’ teaching, and fellowship, in breaking of bread and in the prayers.”

Well may Pentecost be called “the birthday

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1An alternate date for the founding of the church is A.D. 33.
II. THE GROWTH OF THE CHURCH IN JERUSALEM. (Acts 3—7.)

1. The First Jewish Persecution.—Soon after Pentecost, Peter and John healed a lame man at the gate of the temple. The vast crowd that gathered gave Peter an opportunity to follow up the work of Pentecost. His discourse was interrupted by the Sadducees, to whom the preaching of the resurrection was especially obnoxious; the two apostles were imprisoned. The effect of Peter’s discourse, however, was to increase the number of the disciples to five thousand. The next day Peter and John were brought before the Sanhedrin, which was largely composed of Sadducees, and questioned as to the power by which they had done the miracle. They boldly owned that it was by the power of Jesus, and as boldly declared to their judges that there was salvation in no other name. The authorities could not deny the miracle, and, contenting themselves with threats, let the apostles go.

2. Dangers From Within; Ananias and Sapphira.—The Jerusalem church furnishes an example of Christian compassion (Acts 2:44, 45; 4:34-37). It was not compulsory (Acts 5:3, 4), but wholly spontaneous. It was neither universal nor permanent; in form it belonged to the Jerusalem church alone, though in spirit it characterized the entire apostolic church. Ananias and Sapphira turned over part of their possessions to the apostles but were motivated to do so by a sinister motivation. Their prompt exposure by Peter, and their instantaneous death at his feet, filled the whole church with awe. It stands at the very threshold of the new community as a monument against unreality in religion. It is a noteworthy fact that the first death among the Twelve was that of a traitor and suicide, and the first deaths in the apostolic church were those of hypocrites and liars.

3. The Second Jewish Persecution.—The effect of the judgment on Ananias and Sapphira, as of all righteous discipline, was to increase the power of the gospel. The Sanhedrin, alarmed and indignant, threw all the apostles into prison. God had further work for them; and his angel opened the prison door and sent them back to the temple to preach the gospel. Perplexed by their mysterious escape, the rulers brought them before the council. The apostles declared their purpose to obey God rather than men; and the Sanhedrin were restrained from violent measures only by the counsel of Gamaliel: “If this counsel be of men it will come to naught; if it be of God ye cannot overthrow it.” Gamaliel was a Pharisee, the teacher of Paul (Acts 22:3). The Pharisees seem to have taken no active part in these earlier persecutions.

4. First Division of Labor.—The church quickly became cosmopolitan. Peter’s varied audience on Pentecost (Acts 2:8-11) soon came to have its counterpart in the church. Those people of Jewish blood, born in lands outside Palestine, were called Hellenists, or “Grecian Jews.” They often appear in Acts in contrast with “Hebrews,” or Palestinian Jews. A jealousy between the two classes became the occasion of the first division of labor. The organization of the church was an evolution. The apostles, at first, filled all offices. To allay the jealousy growing out of the daily distribution of food, upon the recommendation of the apostles, the congregation chose seven men, all with Grecian names, to attend to the business. In this way the office of deacon arose. The apostles were thus able to give themselves wholly to prayer and the ministry of the Word. The good effect was seen in still larger victories for the gospel, many priests becoming obedient to the faith.

5. The First Christian Martyr (6:8—7:60).—The church had chosen better than it knew. Stephen, one of the seven deacons, began by feeding Hellenistic widows; it was not long before he was breaking in Hellenistic synagogues the bread of life.

Up to this point the disciples would be regarded, even by Jews themselves, as a peculiar sect of Jews. No clear thought of widening the work to include the Gentiles had been entertained. But Stephen evidently began to look toward the abrogation of Judaism. This touched all Jews at a tender point. The Hellenists, beaten in argument, resorted to persecution. And now

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*Acts. 5:38, 39.*
the Pharisees became active. In the second persecution, Gamaliel, the Pharisee, appears as the protector of Peter; in the third, his pupil, Paul, as the persecutor of Stephen. And so it came to pass that Stephen, the most progressive spirit in the Jerusalem church, fell the first Christian martyr. In the spirit of his Master he dies with the prayer, “Lord, lay not this sin to their charge.” The church lost Stephen, but soon gained Paul; and we may say with St. Augustine,—

         Si Stephanus non orasset,  
         Ecclesia Paulum non haberet.

If Stephen had not prayed,  
The church would not have had Paul.

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9Acts 7:60.