

The Primitive Church

Acts 4: 23 — Acts 5:6; Acts 5: 11-14

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Here is a picture of the church in Jerusalem as it was at the outset. There are some very interesting and striking features to be noted as having marked these early saints. The picture shows us what was God's mind when, for the moment, the power of the indwelling Spirit of God was very powerfully felt.

The first point I would like you to notice is this, that being let go Peter and John went to their own company. They had been hauled up before the authorities, but they were let go. We are told in the earlier verses of the chapter that they found “nothing how they might punish them” (Acts 4: 21). They found that what had happened was really beyond their criticism and reluctantly, having given them a beating, they had to let them go, and being let go they went to their own company. There was to be found in Jerusalem at that time a number of people who formed a company, so that the apostles, released by the antagonistic authorities, knew where to go. The church of God is a company distinct from the world. That has been forgotten. Through the years the object of the adversary has been to mingle the church with the world. If possible, to swamp what is of God in worldly circumstances, and all too often he has succeeded in that kind of thing. But before there was any very widespread failure we see there was a distinct line drawn between the church and the world. That line still exists today and you and I have to recognise it. The church is not a part of the world's religious system. The church is a called out company. That is what the word translated church, or assembly by Mr. Darby, really means. The Greek word has been brought in to our language, albeit as an adjective. You might go to London and find the offices of the ecclesiastical commission: people who have to do with church affairs. The Greek word *ekklesia* comes from “ek”, meaning “out of”, and “klesis”, from “kaleo”, meaning “to call”. It simply means the called out people. That has always been God's way. He calls out His own, and we notice it right in the beginning of the Bible. If you read those early chapters in Genesis you find that after the flood, when perhaps a century had passed and they were beginning to multiply once more, they said, “Go to, let us build us a city, and a tower whose top may reach unto heaven” (Gen.11: 4). They said in effect, “we can't achieve what we want as individuals, we must achieve it together. We must have something collective and not merely individual”. In the Darby translation, rather more homely and striking, it is rendered, “Come on”. The world is saying, “Come on, let's all come together. You can accomplish a lot more if you come and join us, and give a kind of Christian push to what we're doing”. That's what they were saying when they started to build the tower of Babel. One man couldn't do it but all of them together could, and they started to do it. Against that background God said to Abraham, “Get thee out...” (Gen. 12: 1). The thought of calling out has marked God's work all through. He called Israel out to make them a distinct nation. That is why the word “*ekklesia*” is used in connection with that nation in Acts 7: 38: “This is that Moses which said unto the children of Israel, A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear. This is he, that was in the church in the wilderness, with the angel which spake to him in the Mount Sina, and with our fathers...” It was a people called out of Egypt. We belong to the *ekklesia*, the church, the called out family. Immediately after Pentecost this became manifest in Jerusalem, and Peter and John “went to their own company”.

What marked this company? The first thing I notice is that they were familiar with the Word of God, and their thoughts were governed by the Word of God. In this emergency, brought face to face

with the opposition of the powerful religious leaders, they found light and direction in the Word of God. They didn't have the New Testament Scriptures, but they had the Old Testament and they went back to what David had written in the second Psalm. Here's a remarkable case of how Scripture often has a double fulfilment. There is a preliminary fulfilment, before the complete fulfilment comes. When Peter preached on the day of Pentecost he said, "This is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel" (Acts 2: 16). If you read the prophet Joel you will see he is predicting what will happen on a greater scale at the opening of the millennial age. Peter was saying that the outpouring of the Spirit and the speaking in tongues on the day of Pentecost was a kind of sample of what is yet to be. So it is here in connection with the quotation from Psalm 2. When the climax of the age is reached, and the heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing, and the anti-Christian powers are all apparently at the top of their form, God will intervene, and He will set His anointed on His holy hill of Zion. They only quote this part, "Why did the heathen rage, and the people imagine vain things? The kings of the earth stood up, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against His Christ". Exactly what was predicted then had happened. Jew and Gentile had crucified the Messiah, but they had only done what "Thy hand and Thy counsel determined before to be done". Although they didn't know it, they had only succeeded in accomplishing what had been predicted concerning the suffering of the Christ. But what fortified the early church was the knowledge and the counsel and direction of the Word of God. That is equally true for us who belong to the church of God today. The Word of God should be the governing factor.

There was also prayer. They were in touch with God. They didn't appeal to the ruling powers or try to cultivate things with the men of the world. No, they cast themselves wholly on God, and there is no doubt that when saints do that there is sure to be a gracious answer. They lifted up their voice to God with one accord, and what did they ask? They didn't complain about the antagonism of the rulers or the difficult time they were having. They certainly didn't ask God to judge or to stop them. They viewed things from what we might call the divine standpoint. They said, "And now, Lord, behold their threatenings", but also, "and grant unto Thy servants, that with all boldness they may speak Thy Word" (Acts 4: 29). They asked God to stretch forth His hand and make His power felt, so that they might be able to do what they knew they were commissioned to do. They were to go and preach repentance and remission of sins among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem (Luke 24: 47). It was as if the Lord said: "You are going to begin at the most difficult place of all, the place where sin has reached its climax", because there never was a sin before, and never could be again, like the rejection and death of the gracious Messiah. It was the supreme sin of humanity and it was perpetrated at Jerusalem, the city that had slain the prophets. When our Lord wept at the graveside of Lazarus with the sisters, the word translated "wept"¹ means to shed tears silently. When He wept over Jerusalem the word used for "wept" means loud lamentation. He knew what lay before the city (Luke 19: 41-44). Yet the gospel was first to be preached in this very city, and there its mighty power and efficacy were first to be shown. Knowing what their commission was, and not thinking for the moment of the nations, they prayed for boldness in speaking the Word of the Lord, and that is exactly what they did. We're told that "they spake the Word of God with boldness" and "with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 4: 31, 33).

Consequent upon prayer there was the working of the Holy Spirit in their midst. That is one of the great marks of the primitive church. The Holy Spirit is come and the power is His. Let us not forget that. It is the power of the Holy Spirit that accomplishes the work of God. We are living in an age when man is thought to be very great and his thoughts and doings are around us on all sides. We may forget that power doesn't lie in human abilities but in the Holy Spirit of God. That is made very clear in a doctrinal way in Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians. It is the Holy Spirit of God who, by His power,

operates in the assembly of God. People may sometimes be inclined to say of so-called “brethren” meetings that they appear to be a kind of democratic institution where any brother can get up and speak. We should say that no one can get up and speak, except under the gracious power and direction of the Spirit of God. I do not deny that it is difficult to practise. I feel it often when I sit in a meeting. Should I be right in perhaps rising to my feet to give thanks or to speak or to pray. We have to be exercised. I may make mistakes and others may make mistakes, but it is better to do the right thing even imperfectly than the wrong thing in a first class style.

1 This is the only time that the word is used in the New Testament.

Alas, Christendom has largely drifted away from the simplicity of the primitive church, which was marked by the power of the Spirit and consequently by great oneness of heart. Do we see that today? All too often we do not. In the beginning they were “of one heart and of one soul” (Acts 4:32). The divergence that we see today tells us how little we have known of the controlling power of the Spirit of God. There was great oneness of heart amongst the saints and there was powerful testimony to the world. These two things, the oneness inside and the testimony flowing to the outside, are more intimately connected than sometimes we imagine. The oneness of heart meant care for the saints. People have often spoken about this remarkable outburst of generosity. We must remember that the saints were an outcast people. Nevertheless, there was a great outflow of divine care and compassion. This generosity wasn't something laid on them as a divine demand. Peter said to Ananias: “Whiles it remained, was it not thine own? and after it was sold, was it not in thine own power?” (Acts 5:4). He was under no compunction. He might have sold it and kept the money, not pretending anything, but he came acting a lie. Poor Sapphira told one. When “as many as were possessors of lands or houses, sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, And laid them down at the apostles' feet”, Ananias brought money pretending it was the full price, but keeping back a part of it. It is often the way, when that kind of sin comes into the circle of the saints, at the outset you see a very drastic exhibition of holy discipline.

The church is a place of discipline. It was shown in the primitive company when the first outbreak of selfishness came. There was pretension and unreality. It was lying to the Holy Spirit, as if the Spirit of God didn't know the truth of the case. He was powerfully active in the church and manifested His power in holy discipline. He illumined the mind of Peter so that he was able to speak as he did and Ananias died. He had been behaving as though you can deceive the Spirit of God, and you can't. Often, at the beginning of an epoch, God gives a very drastic exhibition of power and of disciplinary judgment. Some will remember the case of Achan, when the children of Israel were entering the land. It is important to learn this lesson. The church of God in its primitive state was not only marked by the features we have already considered, but also by holy discipline. The church is the house of God and God dwells there by His Spirit. Here was something that no ordinary person could have detected, but the Holy Spirit knew about it, and He proved the reality of His dwelling in the church, the house of God, by acting in this way. Peter simply spoke the words that the Holy Spirit gave him to speak and both Ananias and Sapphira died. The fact that God dealt with them shows that they were His saints. God doesn't deal with the world in that way. That is the great thing in Psalm 73. The poor psalmist says, “But as for me, my feet were almost gone; my steps had well nigh slipped. For I was envious at the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked” (Ps. 73: 2-3). He was troubled and plagued and chastened every morning while the people of the world were doing things and seemed to be unchecked. But when the psalmist went into the sanctuary, then he understood their end. He saw things from God's standpoint. The people of the world may appear to get away with many things in this life, but then they plunge into a lost eternity. The child of God doesn't get away with it. One has often

seen that. A child of God has done something that isn't right, and God has allowed it to be found out. You may say that that thing has been done again and again by other people in that place and they've got away with it. A Christian does it and is caught. Why? Because God deals with the Christian. If a saint dishonours the Lord he's pulled up. That is what happened here in Acts 5. Such discipline having come in, it had a restricting effect. In the first place, "great fear came upon all the church" (Acts 5: 11). They were reminded that God doesn't want the believer to do the kind of things that the world does. They were committed to a life of holiness. As saints of God we are committed to a life of another order that isn't marked by the ways of the world. The eye of our Lord is upon us.

Then there was something else. This fear came upon "as many as heard these things". God's power was manifested through the apostles and "of the rest durst no man join himself to them" (Acts 5: 12-13). There may have been those who were impressed with the generosity of the saints, who would have joined themselves to them, while being no true members of Christ and only sources of trouble and weakness. This disciplinary action hindered the inrush of mere outward professors, but it didn't stop the true work of God. "Believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women" (Ch. 5:14). That is what we ought to see. Believers brought under the Lordship of Christ. Such become a source of real help and joy.

Acts 11: 19-26; Acts 15: 1-11, 28-29

We have previously considered the picture of the primitive church at Jerusalem which is given in Acts 4: 23-5: 6; Acts 5: 11-14. But one very prominent detail connected with God's present work in calling out the church is lacking in those verses. In writing to the Ephesians, in chapter two of his epistle, Paul reminded the believers there that God has abolished in the flesh of our Lord Jesus, through death, the breach that there was between Jew and Gentile. At the present time He is making of the twain one new man. The word for make, "for to make in Himself of twain one new man", is actually the word to create. The same word is used earlier in the chapter, in verse 10, where we read, "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works...". Both Jew and Gentile are brought on equal terms, and in the same way, into a new position which God creates, and this is as valid today, near the end of the church's history, as it was when Paul wrote those words, very near the beginning of the church's history. An election from the Gentiles is brought into this new position equally, and exactly on the same footing, as an election which God is making from the Jews. That, of course, was absent in the fourth chapter of Acts. God began the work in the midst of Israel. The masses who were gathered on the day of Pentecost were Jews, with perhaps a sprinkling of proselytes as they would have been called; people who were Gentiles originally in origin, but who had attached themselves to the Jewish synagogue. The gospel was preached and three thousand souls were converted. No doubt these too had got busy for the Lord, and then the apostles had been apprehended and other troubles had come to pass. Then we read that lovely account of the assembly in Jerusalem. I suppose that if we had been there at that time, and had examined the thousands who were found in "their own company", we would have found them practically to a man and a woman to be of Jewish extraction. The book of Acts gives us what we sometimes call the transition period. God doesn't do things in a hurry. No, quietly, the Divine thought was worked out. That is why I have read these verses about the work at Antioch. It was at Antioch that God began this remarkable work, in a very obvious way, of gathering out from the Gentiles a people for His Name.

I began reading at the point where many went forth, scattered abroad because of the persecution that arose after Stephen was martyred. The majority of them still had the Jews only in their thoughts. They preached the Messiah, crucified and risen from the dead, and they preached Him to Jews only.

But there were some who went beyond that. These men of Cyprus and Cyrene spoke to the Greeks, preaching the Lord Jesus (Acts 11: 20), and the hand of the Lord was with them (Acts 11: 21), and a great number turned to the Lord, and much people was added unto the Lord (Acts 11: 24). There was then a very powerful work among the Gentiles at Antioch, and the Lordship of Christ was evidently very much pressed and made plain. When Peter was talking to Cornelius he said: "The word which God sent unto the children of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ: (He is Lord of all:)" He is Lord, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles. Certainly His Messiahship more particularly applied to the Jew, who had got the holy writings, the prophetic announcements of the coming of the Messiah. But when we consider Him from the point of view of His Lordship, then all other distinctions vanish. He is Lord of the Jew, but He is equally Lord of the Gentile. They preached the Lord Jesus, and people turned to the Lord. If I turn to the Lord I shall at once admit myself to be under His authority. My place is subjection beneath His mighty Word. There was therefore a very remarkable work among the Gentiles in Antioch, almost parallel to that work which had taken place among the Jews on the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem.

When Barnabas came down he saw the grace of God and was glad. He was a good man. He saw how greatly God had blessed the labours of someone else, and though it didn't cast any credit on Barnabas, he was glad because he saw that the Lord was being exalted. He "exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord". We couldn't have much better advice than that. Let there be a living link between my soul and the Lord, and your soul and the Lord, and don't let anything come in to divert you from the Lord. "Cleave", says this good man Barnabas, "cleave unto the Lord". He came amongst them and it gave further impetus to the conversion work because the next verse, verse 24, says: "and much people was added unto the Lord". Then Barnabas went away and found Paul, and brought him to Antioch, and for a whole year they were there, ministering and teaching.

The disciples were called Christians first in Antioch. What do you think they were called in Jewish circles? We find the answer to that in Acts 24. There comes this Tertullus, and he accuses Paul in the presence of the Roman power. He says of Paul, "...we have found this man a pestilent fellow, and a mover of sedition among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes". There were the Pharisees, who were terrific sticklers for the law and rather full of themselves. There were the Sadducees, who were very analytical and critical and didn't believe this and didn't believe that. And there were the Herodians, who didn't bother their heads so much about these things, but who went along with the ruling power because they knew it would be profitable for them in worldly things if they did so. The Jews had these sects among them and they were saying: "Now we've got the Nazarenes, the followers of this remarkable Person, Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified". But another thing now arrives. Here where there was this work among the Gentiles, those who were converted owned the authority of the Lord over their hearts and lives and it put the stamp of Christ upon them. Others looking at these believers said, "We can't talk about them with a long rigmarole of explanation, we shall have to have something short and to the point. Well, they are Christ's ones, they are Christians". It has often been pointed out that that word only occurs three times in the New Testament. Agrippa knew it (Acts 26: 28). The name Christian had clearly travelled into high circles. Agrippa didn't say, "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Nazarene", but, "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian". And it is endorsed by the Holy Spirit of God because in the first epistle of Peter you have the Spirit of God saying, "Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf" (1 Peter 4: 16). The Spirit of God, so to speak, accepts this name as a very good definition of those who are swept into this new and mighty work of His.

Here then we see God working among the Gentiles, and gathering out of them a people for His Name. Then the adversary gets busy. There were those, we sometimes speak of them as Judaizing teachers, who wished to make all things, especially the Gentiles, conform to a certain Jewish pattern. That is why I turned on to chapter fifteen. Some of these teachers came down to Antioch and said, "Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved" (Acts 15: 1). Circumcision was something that, "after the manner of Moses", or according to the law, attached the circumcised person to Judaism. In proposing this these teachers were seeking to bring in the middle wall of partition which God had broken down. There is no such partition in the church, and we who form part of it are on a new basis altogether, because whether Jew or Gentile we're made one new man. We are brought together, and the adversary, of course, is out to mar the work of God. So these men came down and they said in effect, "You will have to make these people kind of second rate Jews. You'll have to incorporate them into our legal system, or they'll never be saved." If you read chapter fifteen carefully you will notice that there was a good deal of disputation. It doesn't mean that they were all flying at each other's throats and arguing in a very noisy way, but the whole matter was being thrashed out in discussion. Peter rose up and said: "Ye know how that a good while ago God made choice among us, that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel, and believe". When was that? When he went to the house of Cornelius. Three times God gave him a special vision, to deliver him from preconceived notions that would only hinder him, and at last Peter went. It is a remarkable thing that not only do we have the divinely inspired account of it by Luke the historian, in Acts chapter ten, but in the next chapter it is repeated again, though from a somewhat different angle. When Peter returned to Jerusalem he was challenged about what had happened, and we have an account of it in chapter eleven from the lips of Peter, though recorded of course by Luke, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit of God. Now for the third time, here in chapter fifteen, Cornelius is referred to. It was an epoch making event. The Pharisees were very particular about the washing of this and the washing of that, but they didn't bother much about their hearts. Peter said as it were: "My dear brethren, look what happened when God made choice among us that by my mouth the gospel should be preached to the Gentiles. Why, the Holy Spirit decided the question. You say they are unclean Gentiles, but their hearts were purified by faith. God has purified their hearts, and He who knows the heart gave them the Holy Spirit, even as He did unto us." If you read the tenth chapter of Acts you may be struck by the fact that no word was said as to their being baptised until they had received the Holy Spirit. In Acts chapter two, in answer to the question "Men and brethren, what shall we do?", Peter said: "Repent, and be baptised 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". Baptism has a very special place in connection with the Jew. If I was asked to give in one word its great significance I should give the word disconnection, though it has a new association in view. In the context of Acts chapter two it is cutting the link with the Nation that had rejected the Messiah. Peter says as it were: "Cut your links with the Nation that has killed the Messiah; stand out from it. Save yourselves from this untoward generation." And they were baptised; they cut their links with, there was disconnection from, the apostate nation of that time. But when you read Acts chapter ten you find that while Peter was preaching the word that pointed them to the risen Christ, the Holy Spirit fell on all them which heard. Has there ever been again an occasion like that? Many of them were doubtless God-fearing, pious persons, but not really converted. You start with all that were there unconverted, apart from Peter and those who went with him, and one hundred per cent they're converted. The Holy Spirit fell on all them that heard the Word. Cornelius, soldiers, friends and family. And Peter had to say: "How can we refuse to baptise these people? Let them cut the links with the old life, and come amongst us as Christians." God had settled it. That's what they say later in chapter fifteen: "For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us...". The Holy Spirit decided the question of the reception of the Gentiles by falling on them just as they were, as the light of the gospel dawned in

their hearts. On the day of Pentecost there were three thousand, but here there was only a room full, but they were “by one Spirit... all baptized into one body”. Here we see things taking shape according to what was later unfolded doctrinally in the epistle to the Ephesians, God’s present work in calling out of the Nations a people for His Name. It started in a very remarkable way in the case of Cornelius and his household, and continued in Antioch by the labours of these humble people. They were not great preachers; just men of Cyprus and Cyrene. What their names were we are not told, though I hope we shall be permitted to know in the coming day when the Lord assesses all His servants and rewards them for what they have done for Him. These humble and unknown individuals who were driven abroad by the persecution that arose about Stephen and had, perhaps, to flee for their lives, they began talking to these Gentiles. And, as it was the purpose of God to go out to the Gentiles (He had made that perfectly plain at the outset to the apostles), of course the hand of the Lord was with them. A great number believed and turned to the Lord, and were brought into the church of God.

When you come right to the end of the book of Acts you find the apostle in Rome, a prisoner. He gathers the Jews together and it seems that a few believed, but alas the great mass were rejecting the gospel testimony. To them Paul had to say a very solemn thing, after quoting some verses from Isaiah chapter six, “Be it known therefore unto you, that the salvation of God is sent unto the Gentiles, and that they will hear it”. There is no doubt that through this long age in which our lot is cast, while still God works and gathers out of the Jewish circle, the main work has been the out-gathering from the Gentiles. Hence we get the Scripture that “in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace, in His kindness toward us through Christ Jesus”. The word “exceeding” might be translated “surpassing”. Something that surpasses everything else. The grace of God that is working today, and gathering out of the nations a people for His Name, and bringing them into this wonderful position of nearness and favour and ultimately of glory in association with Christ, it is a surpassing display of the grace of God.

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