

The Firstfruits of Jesus' Jewish Evangelism Program

Introduction

This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard Him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to His will.
Heb. 2:3, 4

The foregoing happened in Luke's narrative called "Acts." The Holy Spirit cooperated with the Son of God in the building of His church for God. The presence of the Holy Spirit indicates we are living in "the last days." Acts 2:17.

Jesus' final program to gather children for God's eternal kingdom from mankind is now happening (I Cor. 10:11; II Pet. 1:10, 11). The Apostle Paul put the whole scene in focus for us.

*We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the **firstfruits of the Spirit**, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.*
Rom. 8:22, 23

This scene is about God's purpose in creation for faithful church members who enjoy several benefits because of our personal fellowship with the Holy Spirit. See Romans 8:5-27. Jesus spoke of the results of "the fruit" in Christians' lives when He said, "Whoever believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him." John 7:38.

Paul named nine elements of fruit in Christian character and personality (Gal. 5:22, 23). The dynamics of what Jesus spoke happens as Christians "crucify our sinful nature with its passions and desires." Gal. 5:24. As we put off the old self and put on the new self, "streams of living" attributes of Christ will flow from sons and daughters of God (Eph. 4:22-24; II Cor. 6:18). Christians "shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life..." Phil. 2:16. Each church Jesus directed to be built in cooperation with the Holy Spirit and preachers by His evangelism campaign in Acts was a temple of God, the Father. God dwelt there by the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5; Eph. 1:13, 14; 2:19-22).

Lesson

Jesus organized a great gospel meeting on the first day of the last days (Acts 2:1-4; 11:15, 16). Three thousand Jews repented and were baptized; thus enabling them to enjoy the "firstfruits" of the personal indwelling of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:41).

Today, Jesus Christ's individual churches are temples of God because His Holy Spirit indwells the members. Who are these churches? They are the ones who have not left their first love (Rev. 2:4). They accept persecution as a part of God's discipline to develop His children (Rev. 2:10; 12:11). They repent of their sins and produce fruit (Rev. 2:16, 22; Luke 3:8). They are "awake" and actively carry forth Jesus' mission to seek and save the lost (Rev. 3:2).

These churches, whose **cornerstone** is Jesus Christ and their **foundation** is the apostles' teaching, are the temple of God in their communities (Matt. 21:42; I Pet. 2:6-8; I Cor. 3:9, 10). They have a "single eye" paradigm focused on the "open door of faith" concept. God opened this door for all mankind through Jesus (Rev. 3:8, 9; Acts 14:27; Matt. 6:22). The churches of God "in Christ" whose "lampstand" is standing before God's throne in heaven are the temple of God on earth (Rom. 16:16; Rev. 1:20; 2:5). Their lampstands will remain before God's throne unless a particular church becomes "neither cold nor hot" and Jesus spits them out of His mouth (Rev. 3:15).

The Revelation received by the Apostle John may have been given to him thirty years after Jesus built the churches in Acts. From the foregoing quotes, we hear Jesus evaluating seven of these churches in Asia. We understand the sign board in front of a church's meeting place does not mean their lampstand is still before God's throne in heaven. Jesus warned the Jewish leadership:

Therefore, I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to the people who will produce its fruit. Matt. 21:43

Jesus has given the blessing and responsibility of producing fruit for God's kingdom to the churches whose lampstands are now standing in heaven. They do not stand in Rome or a denominational headquarters on earth. Evidently, the churches established in Acts understood their calling (Eph. 4:1).

We understand the churches of Christ are autonomous temples of God in their geographical location if the Holy Spirit indwells the members. They exist to produce fruit for God's kingdom. The growth of each member is fruit for God's kingdom (Col. 1:27; Gal. 4:19; Jas. 1:21). We spiritually grow into the "divine nature" of Deity (II Pet. 1:4). This is God's predestined purpose for creating mankind (Rom. 8:28-30). The fruit of the spirit in our "self" is how Christians become salt and light for others (Matt. 5:13-16; Gal. 5:22, 23; II Pet. 1:8). It is also one way we lay up treasures in heaven for God and ourselves (Matt. 6:20). Clay in the hands of a potter gives glory to the potter (Rom. 9:19-

21). A son of God is a treasure for God. Christians are the clay Jesus is now working with to develop a son for God. "If we overcome," this will be our treasure on Judgment Day (Rev. 3:21; 21:7).

Now let us take note of the characteristics of the members of churches in different locations in Acts. This information will help us read the letters:

1. Jerusalem. More than five thousand people were converted in Jesus' Jerusalem campaign; however, probably, most of these church members left the city on or before "a great persecution broke out against the church." Acts 8:1. They had come from many countries to celebrate the first Pentecost after Jesus ascended back to heaven. Among these new converts were Grecian (Gr. Hellenistes) Jews and Hebraic Jews. A Hellenist was a Jew who had adopted the Greek language and perhaps the Greek culture.

When these Jews who were "born again" went home, the Lord's church may have been planted in all the places named in Acts 2:9-11. We know a disciple named Ananias was a member of the Lord's church in Damascus when the blinded man named Saul arrived (Acts 9:10-12). Of course, some of the other apostles or Spirit gifted evangelists could have preached the kingdom of God in Damascus. Churches surely existed in Phoenicia, Cyprus, Antioch and Cyrene very early because some Jewish converts returned home (Acts 11:19, 20). The members in these churches would have been Jews along with some Gentile "converts to Judaism." Acts 2:11. Paul addressed his audience in Pisidian Antioch as "Brothers, children of Abraham, and you God-fearing Gentiles." Acts 13:26.

2. Jesus expanded His successful evangelism campaign to the **Jews in Judea, Galilee and Samaria** (Acts 9:31). The Apostle Paul left Damascus for Arabia and preached the kingdom for three years. He then returned to Jerusalem for fifteen days before leaving for Syria and Cilicia to preach. Tarsus in Cilicia was his own native place. It appears Paul did not start his "priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God" to the Gentiles until the Cornelius affair was accepted by "the apostles and brothers" in Jerusalem (Acts 11:1; Rom. 15:16).

3. One aim of this lesson is to identify the membership that made up the churches at certain strategic intervals in Jesus evangelism campaign. This will help us in our historical and literary analysis for reading the letters. For instance, we might conclude the Hebrew epistle was addressed to a church, or group of churches, that consisted of mostly Jews and Jewish proselytes in a certain location. At one time the author of the Hebrew letter had visited where

the document was received. He planned to return to them as soon as Timothy was released (Heb. 13:19, 23). There was a significant time lapse between the time these Jews were converted and the time they received the letter (Heb. 3:12-14; 5:11, 12; 10:32-36). This letter could have been post-marked to Arabia where Paul preached for three years or a number of other locations such as Tarsus or Damascus. Jews had been converted in many locations outside the Israelite territory. This will be important to keep in mind as we attempt to understand Paul's intent for writing the Roman epistle. Jesus had no desire to build a Jewish church and a Gentile church in separate bodies (Eph 3:6). Since the Hebrew letter was written in the Greek language, we might conclude it was not addressed to the churches in Jerusalem.

The reason this letter was written was not because they were falling back to Judaism, as so many proclaim. It was written because they had lost their confidence in God's discipline by tribulations program for them to develop as sons of God (Heb. 10:35; 12:4-11). They had not developed as teachers. They required the service of someone teach them first principles (Heb. 6:1-4). They were no longer producing fruit for God (Heb. 6:7, 8). They had a good fellowship with one another, but God expects more than a Sunday morning worship service and a church picnic from the church of Christ. Jesus expects preachers to preach to the lost in the world. Evangelists should not need to teach first principles to the church.

4. "So then, God granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life." Acts 11:18. After the word went out about the acceptance of Cornelius, "men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to **Antioch** and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus." Acts 11:20. The church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to Antioch to encourage this work "and a great number of people were brought to the Lord." Acts 11:24. Barnabas brought Paul from Tarsus to Antioch in Syria and they spent a year building a strong Jew/Gentile church of Christ. They called the disciple Christians (Acts 11:25, 26).

At this same time, perhaps during this one year period, Agabus announced a severe famine during Claudius, the Roman Emperor's reign. Claudius reigned from A. D. 41-54. We know he was still reigning when Paul arrived in Corinth on his secondary missionary journey. Please review the "Travels in Acts," Part II, Lesson Three. If this time chart has some validity we may assume Jesus evangelized those who claimed to be Jews for a period of ten years, and perhaps less, before He opened His Gentile campaign. This helps us understand the importance of God's covenants with Abraham and the Israelites. God had tu-

tored these people with the old covenant for fifteen hundred years. Jesus spent over three years teaching and performing miracles for their personal benefit. They had Him nailed to the cross; however, He gave them the first benefit of intense evangelism by the Holy Spirit baptized apostles and other spirit directed people. Even though most did not repent Jesus is expecting the new Israel of God, the church, to carry on His evangelism of the Jews (Rom. 11:11-15, 26; Gal. 6:16).

Satan's opposition was active during the period of Jewish evangelism. See Part III Lesson Five. Satan used both the Jews and Roman rulers. Paul gave us some insight about the treatment of the Jewish members of the church by their own countrymen. He compared the ill treatment the Thessalonians were receiving from the Jews after the Gentiles "came in" with the abuse the Jews heaped on the church, perhaps in Israel and Asia (I Thess. 2:14-16). The Pharisees, who were self-righteous Jews, did not accept Jesus (Acts 15:5). Self-righteous religious people have proven to be some of the most evil abusive people on earth (Luke 11:37-54; Gal. 4:17).

Tiberius (A. D. 12-37) was followed by Caligula as Emperor of Rome (37-41). He deified himself and this finally became the basis for Christian persecution; however, James was killed by a second generation Herod, who was a Roman puppet king (Acts 12:1-4). He did this and planned to do the same to Peter just to please the Jews.

In our next lesson we will note how the character of the churches changed as the idol worshipping Gentiles were brought into Christ.

Questions for Discussion

A. Lesson Introduction.

1. How did the Hebrew writer describe what had happened in Luke's two narratives?
2. What is one role of the Holy Spirit that is related to "Why God created you?"
3. Why could the Holy Spirit not fulfill this role until Jesus finished His ministry?
4. Is there no room for "lukewarm" people in the church Jesus is building? Why not?

5. God's predestined plan is to develop sons of God for His eternal kingdom. God's children are defined as the fruit of the Spirit. What is the continual struggle of a child of God "in Adam in Christ?"

B. Lesson.

1. When was it possible for the "firstfruits" of Jesus' kingdom to become a reality? In what sense could Paul speak of this as "we who have the firstfruits of the Spirit?"
2. Describe a church whose members have the firstfruits of the Spirit as Jesus defined healthy churches for the Apostle John's "Revelation" on the Isle of Patmos.
3. What is significant about a church's lampstand?

C. The first churches of Christ.

1. How did the church Jesus started to build on Pentecost with three thousand "saved people" serve to let Him start building churches for God in other parts of the world?
2. Describe the people who were "the firstfruits of Jesus' evangelism" for most of the first decade after Jesus became Prince and Savior.
3. Why might the Hebrew epistle have been addressed to a church that Jesus had built in the first decade after Pentecost?
4. Did the church who received the Hebrew letter have a doctrinal or spiritual growth problem?
5. Name the church that became a center of activity after the "door of faith" was opened for the Gentiles.
6. Although Paul was appointed by Jesus personally as the "apostle to the Gentiles," who was sent first? There is little doubt Jesus made a good decision. What are some possible reasons why Jesus passed over Paul at this time and place?
7. What might have been some reasons Jesus gave the Jews an opportunity to be born again for several years before He started to build His church with both Jews and Gentiles?
8. How was God faithful to His covenant with Abraham, that "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you?" Gen. 12:3.