

### 3. Life in the Early Church (3Q 2018—The Book of Acts)

**Biblical material:** Acts 2:42–46; Acts 4:34, 35; Acts 3:1–26; Acts 4:1–18; Acts 5:1–11; Acts 5:34–39.

#### Quotes

- The early Church was birthed and sustained in almost constant persecution and pressures. *Greg Gordon*
- The church the Bible described is exciting and adventurous and wrought with sacrifice. It cost believers everything, and they still came. *Jen Hatmaker*
- We who formerly hated and murdered one another now live together and share the same table. We pray for our enemies and try to win those who hate us. *Justin Martyr*
- We are a body knit together as such by a common religious profession, by unity of discipline, and by the bond of a common hope. *Tertullian*
- Christianity served as a revitalization movement that arose in response to the misery, chaos, fear, and brutality of life in the urban Greco-Roman world. . . . Christianity revitalized life in Greco-Roman cities by providing new norms and new kinds of social relationships able to cope with many urgent problems. To cities filled with the homeless and impoverished, Christianity offered charity as well as hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered an immediate basis for attachment. *Rodney Stark*
- They [early Christians] made the grace of God credible by a society of love and mutual care which astonished the pagans and was recognized as something entirely new. It lent persuasiveness to their claim that the New Age had dawned in Christ. *Michael Green*

#### Questions

What lessons should we take away from our study of the early church? What would you say were the strengths, and what were the weaknesses of the early church? How did they decide what aspects of the Old Testament were still applicable? What was their primary focus, and what does this mean to us today?

#### Bible summary

Acts 2:42–46 summarizes the early church experience: they shared together, they learned together, they were one together. Acts 4:34, 35 recounts how they sold property to help those in need. Acts 3 tells the story of Peter’s healing of the beggar at the temple gate, along with his subsequent speech. Acts 4 details the arrest of Peter and John, and their “trial” before the Sanhedrin, as well as the way in which the believers shared together. Acts 5 is the sad tale of Ananias and Sapphira and their corruption of this community of sharing.

#### Comment

The key aspect of the early church is their happiness. The “joy of the Lord” is at the heart of their experience, recognizing that Jesus has changed everything. The contrast

between the formalism of Judaism or the depraved worship of paganism and the wonderful good news of God's true salvation could not be more obvious.

This scene of "perfection" needs to be set against the opposition of both Romans and Jews. Persecution and harassment were regular occurrences. When Herod saw how persecution of the Christians gained him favor with the Jews, he doubled his efforts. James was executed, and then Peter imprisoned.

Added to the outward attacks were the more insidious internal problems, as demonstrated by the case of Ananias and Sapphira. Their crime was not in holding back money for themselves, but in representing this as the total sum to be donated to help the poor. Such deception within the church at such an early time needed to be dealt with firmly and quickly. Lies and deceit strike at the very heart of the Christian message, and while in later times became commonplace, the strongest condemnation needed to be given in trying to keep the early witness pure.

What is not so obvious are the many discussions the early believers had regarding their beliefs. Those coming from Judaism had to work out what parts of their former belief system were still relevant, and what were not. The most obvious example is that of circumcision, and this debate continued over several decades. Added to this were the observance of feast days, clean and unclean foods, and other religious observances. Those from a Gentile background had also much that challenged them, and it's clear that pagan beliefs did affect the thinking of the church, especially in later years when the influence of contemporary society was more significant in the church.

### **Ellen White Comments**

Of the disciples after the transfiguration of Christ it is written that at the close of that wonderful scene "they saw no man, save Jesus only." Matthew 17:8. "Jesus only"--in these words is contained the secret of the life and power that marked the history of the early church. When the disciples first heard the words of Christ, they felt their need of Him. They sought, they found, they followed Him. They were with Him in the temple, at the table, on the mountainside, in the field. They were as pupils with a teacher, daily receiving from Him lessons of eternal truth. {AA 64}

To the early church had been entrusted a constantly enlarging work--that of establishing centers of light and blessing wherever there were honest souls willing to give themselves to the service of Christ. The proclamation of the gospel was to be world-wide in its extent, and the messengers of the cross could not hope to fulfill their important mission unless they should remain united in the bonds of Christian unity, and thus reveal to the world that they were one with Christ in God... Their spiritual life and power was dependent on a close connection with the One by whom they had been commissioned to preach the gospel. {AA 90}

To the members of the early Christian church was given a sacred trust. They were to be executors of the will in which Christ had bequeathed to the world the treasure of life eternal. . . . In the trust given to the first disciples believers in every age have shared. God desires that every believer shall be an executor of the Saviour's will. . . . The unselfish labor of God's people in ages past is to His servants today an object lesson and an inspiration. Today God's chosen people are to be zealous of good works, separating from all worldly ambition and walking humbly in the footsteps of the lowly Nazarene. . . .

{HP 339}

Prepared February 19, 2018 © Jonathan Gallagher 2018