

SECTION I :

**CHRISTIANITY'S HUMBLE BIRTH IN THE
APOSTOLIC ERA**

33 –70 AD

CHAPTER 1 : HUMBLE BEGINNINGS YET GREAT PROMISE

The beginning of the Christian church is reckoned from the great day on which the Holy Spirit came down, according as our Lord had promised to His Apostles. In its infancy the church was a humble institution indeed, consisting of a relatively small number of disciples. One hundred and twenty believers in their risen Lord awaited together the coming of the promised Comforter, who should abide with them for ever, to guide them into all truth, and to enable them to proclaim the accomplishment of all the promises. The eleven Apostles, who, as their name implied, had been sent forth by their Lord, added to their number Matthias, in the place of the traitor Judas, laying hands on him in order to carry on the gift that the Savior had breathed upon them. Besides these, there were the seventy whom our Lord had sent out in pairs, and whose order was afterwards called the elders, presbyters, or priests. They were all gathered in the upper room to keep the newly instituted Lord's Day, on the first day of the week, to commemorate the Lord's resurrection. And it was not just any first day of the week; it was the day of Pentecost kept by Jews as the Feast of Weeks, in memory of the giving the Law. While the disciples of Christ were gathered in the upper room, the Holy Spirit came upon them. He was the one who could enable that Law to be kept, bringing the Divine Presence, which is the pervading Life of the whole Body.

The Holy Spirit's coming was marked by such open signs, as to draw the attention of all the pilgrim Jews, who had come from their distant homes to keep the feast. Peter expounded to them that the time of fulfillment was come, and that Jesus, crucified and risen, was their Salvation. 3,000 at once accepted the New Covenant, and were baptized; and thus, on the day of Pentecost, A.D. 33, the Church of Christ sprang into full life.

Many of these devout men there converted by what they then saw and heard, to believe the Gospel; and, when they returned to their own countries, they carried back with them the news of the wonderful things which had taken place at Jerusalem. So although of humble birth in Jerusalem, the church of Jesus Christ rapidly spread throughout the Roman empire and beyond in the Apostolic era. As Jesus had told His Apostles: "Thus it is written, and thus it behooved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day: And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And ye are witnesses of these things." (Luke 24:46-48)

Many of the converts in Jerusalem sold their goods, and brought the price to the Apostles, all living on one common stock, and giving bounteous alms; but the new converts of Greek education, found their poor less well provided than the native Jews, and to supply them, seven deacons were set apart as the serving order of the ministry. Foremost of the deacons was Stephen, who, about two years after the Ascension, bore the first witness through death to the doctrine which he taught, being stoned by the people in a sudden fit of fury, at his showing how the whole course of their history was but a preparation for Him whom they had crucified.

In the year 37, Pontius Pilate was recalled to Rome to answer the many charges against him. He was sentenced to banishment in Gaul, and there suffered so much from remorse,

that he killed himself. At the time of his deposition, the Caesar, Tiberius, was dying, hated by all, and leaving his empire to his nephew, Caligula, who had been a youth of great promise. Shortly before Tiberius' illness, Herod Agrippa, the son of Herod the Great's murdered son, Aristobulus, had said how glad everyone would be to see Caligula reigning. The charioteer reported the speech, and Tiberius punished it by keeping Herod in prison, chained to a soldier; but to make up for his sufferings, Caligula no sooner became emperor than he set him free, gave him a crown, made him King of Trachonitis and Abilene, and presented Herod with a gold chain of the same weight as the fetters which he had worn in prison. This chain Herod hung up in the Temple, for he was a zealous Jew, although such a friend of heathen princes, and he seems to have been greatly puffed up with admiration of his own good management. His sister Herodias, envious of his crown, persuaded her husband, Herod Antipas, to go and sue for another one; but all he gained by his journey was an inquiry into his conduct, which ended in his being exiled to Gaul, and his domain being given to Herod Agrippa. In A.D. 41, the miserable madman Caligula was killed, but Herod Agrippa continued in high favor with the next emperor, the moody Claudius, and under him the Jews had again the power of giving sentence of death. They used it to persecute the disciples; and this led to many leaving Jerusalem, and carrying the knowledge of the faith to more distant parts.

Saul, or Paul, a Benjamite, born at Tarsus, in Asia Minor, a place where the inhabitants were reckoned as Roman citizens, was learned in Greek philosophy, and deeply versed in the Jewish doctrines: he was a zealous Pharisee, and a vehement persecutor, till he was called by the Lord Himself from Heaven, and told that his special mission should be to the Gentiles; and about the same time, it was revealed to Peter in a vision, that the hedge of the ceremonial Law was taken down, and no distinction should henceforth be made between the nations, who had been all alike cleansed by the Blood of Redemption. The Roman soldier, Cornelius, was the first-fruits of a mighty harvest; and the Greeks and Romans in general, gave far more ready audience to the Apostles, than did the Jews.

The hatred of the Jews moved Herod Agrippa to put to death James the son of Zebedee, the first Apostle to drink of his Master's Cup; and he would likewise have slain Peter, had not the Angel delivered that saint out of prison, in answer to the prayers of the church. The pride of Herod had come to a height. He celebrated games at Caesarea in honor of the emperor, and in the midst came forth in a robe of cloth of silver, to give audience to an embassy from Tyre and Sidon. At his speech, the people shouted, " It is the voice of a god, not the voice of a man!" But while Herod listened and took the glory to himself, he felt a deadly stroke, which made him cry, "Your god is dying!" and in five days he was dead. His son, Agrippa, was too young to take the government, and a Roman procurator was appointed.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

CHAPTER 1 : HUMBLE BEGINNINGS YET GREAT PROMISE

This second volume in a two-part series on church history is primarily an edited version of the following works on church history and Biblical interpretation:

James A. Wylie, *The History of Protestantism* (Cassell & Company, Limited: London, Paris & New York. 1878). (see electronic version at <http://www.whatsaiththescripture.com/Fellowship/James.A.Wylie.html>)

Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Logos Research Systems, Inc.: Oak Harbor, WA, 1997). (see electronic version at <http://www.ccel.org/s/schaff/history/About.htm>)

J. Parnell McCarter, *Sabbath Bible Survey Tests and Assignments* (PHSC: Grand Rapids, MI, 2003). (see electronic version at <http://www.puritans.net/curriculum/>)

J. Parnell McCarter, *Let My People Go* (PHSC: Grand Rapids, MI, 2003). (see electronic version at <http://www.puritans.net/curriculum/>)

The on-line resources of Historicism Research Foundation at <http://www.historicism.net/> also proved invaluable for my understanding of Biblical prophecy. Biblical prophecy concerning Christian church history, especially as revealed in the book of Revelation, serves as the foundation upon which all church histories should be based.

Other references especially consulted for this chapter include:

Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1990.

Richard Bacon, *Selected Thoughts on the Synagogue*. (see electronic version at http://www.fpcr.org/blue_banner_articles/synagogue.htm)

Certain erroneous assertions in Schaff have been corrected. For instance, Schaff argues that synagogues did not originate until post-exilic times. But Dr. Richard Bacon makes a compelling scriptural argument that they date from the time of Moses, and this was as well the general view of the Jewish rabbis. Also, Schaff asserts that synagogues were built on the highest elevation of a town, but Edersheim and archaeology correct this error.

Matthew Henry notes concerning Psalm 74: “He complains of the desolations of the synagogues, or schools of the prophets, which, before the captivity, were in use, though much more afterwards. There God’s word was read and expounded, and his name praised and called upon, without altars or sacrifices. These also they had a spite to (v. 8): *Let us destroy them together*; not only the temple, but all the places of religious worship and the worshippers with them. *Let us destroy them together*; let them be consumed in the same flame. Pursuant to this impious resolve they *burnt up all the synagogues of God in the land* and laid them all waste. So great was their rage against religion that the religious houses, because religious, were all leveled with the ground, that God’s worshippers might not glorify God, and edify one another, by meeting in solemn assemblies.”