

Introduction: the Birth of the Church and Initial Ingathering.

The birth of the church was astonishing.

¹ And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. ² And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. ³ And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. ⁴ And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. Acts 2:1-4 (KJV)

Pentecost occurred 7 full weeks (50 days) after the feast of Passover ([Deut 16:8-10](#)). Passover was, of course, was the day that celebrated the release of the Hebrews from the rule of Pharaoh of Egypt ([Exod 12:1-28](#)). These feasts pointed first to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross for the sins of the world and then the ingathering of countless of people into the church.

The amazing ingathering. So the church was born – in fact over 3000 were brought into the church at the preaching of Peter on that day ([Acts 2:37-41](#)). But the Enemy would have none of this – Peter and the Apostles were preaching boldly the resurrection of Christ¹ and were performing miracles through the power of God. Eventually, the Jewish leaders were fearful that this new movement – the Christian movement – would get out of hand so the priests, the leader of the temple guard and the Sadducees seized Peter and John and placed them in detention for a hearing. Even so, another 5000 were brought into the church ([Acts 4:1-4](#)). They were let go because they had felt the pressure of the Apostles popularity with the people:

²¹ After further threats they let them go. They could not decide how to punish them, because all the people were praising God for what had happened. ²² For the man who was miraculously healed was over forty years old. Acts 4:21-22 (NIV).

The infant church was on a roll, so to speak.

And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all. Acts 4:33 (KJV).

Later on, Paul – then an enemy of the church gave witness to this great power in Romans 1:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: *for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.* Romans 1:16 (KJV, my emphasis).

Persecution of the Infant Church Escalates.

The infant church may have been on a roll but at the same time she was on the run.

¹ May I point out that Christianity is unique among all religions in that He, the founder, is not dead – rather Jesus Christ lives and is forever the head of the church.

The Enemy of the Church was not going to give up – in fact he never gives up to this day. It is Satan who makes every effort to suppress the preaching of the Gospel by the church. Let's take a look in Acts for another account of this persecution.

First, we had the Priests, the chief of the temple guard and the Sadducees try to suppress the early church. Again, we have the Synagogue of the Freedmen (freed Jewish slaves) and the synagogues of the Cyrenians and of the Alexandrians and of those from Cilicia opposed Stephen ([Acts 6:9](#)). Then Saul of Tarsus became inflamed with hatred – he began to persecute the church ([Acts 9:1-2](#)). Finally for this lesson we conclude that the king Herod murdered the Apostle James because he perceived that it pleased the Jews.

¹ Now about that time Herod the king stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church. ² And he killed James the brother of John with the sword. Acts 12:1-2 (KJV).

And so begins this amazing account of the birth of the Church, it's infancy and the divine selection of a Persecutor to become the Church's very defender – Saul of Tarsus A.K.A. Paul, the Apostle.

The expanding church finds Saul.² Paul was a man of zeal. He was about to meet a man in kindred spirit – Stephen.

⁸ And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people. ⁹ Then there arose certain of the synagogue, which is called the synagogue of the Libertines, and Cyrenians, and Alexandrians, and of them of Cilicia and of Asia, disputing with Stephen. ¹⁰ And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake. ¹¹ Then they suborned men, which said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses, and against God. ¹² And they stirred up the people, and the elders, and the scribes, and came upon him, and caught him, and brought him to the council, ¹³ And set up false witnesses, which said, This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law: Acts 6:8-13 (KJV).

Please note that Stephen beat the opposition (including Saul³) at their own game. Although *the opposition* debated Stephen with their best rationalization,⁴ the wisdom of

² Outline point taken from The Life and Letters of St. Paul, J. W. Shepard, pg 48. From now on "JW Shepard."

³ "...Certain of the hellenistic students of the law, among whom Saul was probably outstanding..." JW Shepard, pg 55.

⁴ Constantive aorist of *suzeteo* – to examine bit by bit. A debaters technique where arguments are one by overwhelming the other side with details, rationalization.

Stephen completely refuted these debater so that they could not resist⁵ his wisdom as empowered by the Spirit. If Saul was there, as is strongly implied, he must have been greatly stirred up in the face of this irresistible wisdom. Saul had been taught in the in the school of Gamaliel, whose founder was a doctor of the law, greatly respected by the all the people. This may be an important detail not to be overlooked. The religious leaders were held in some disrespect by the people but Gamaliel was not.⁶ This was Saul's first contact with someone in the church who could stand up against the arguments of the religious leaders, *including Saul*. Please note that his teacher Gamaliel had expressed some concern that there was a possibility that God was on the side of the church and if that be the case they, *the opposition*, would find themselves fighting against God Himself.⁷ I find Gamaliel's cautionary position interesting. I think he was, at least, a God-fearing man. Although he was *the* doctor of the Law, he could allow the possibility that God was in this growing movement of Christians.

Stephen was railroaded through the bogus court of these religious leaders and was executed via stoning. All the while Saul witnessed this – it made a powerful impression on him. Nonetheless, Saul, a man of zeal began his crusade against the church:

¹ And Saul was consenting unto his death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles. ² And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him. ³ As for Saul, he made havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison. ⁴ Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word. Acts 8:1-4 (KJV).

So the church was not suppressed – rather like throwing water on a inferno the church spread – like wildfire, if you please. Even so, Saul was determined to eliminate this group of Christians – followers of Christ. But at the same time, the very quenching effort of Saul only served to spread this fire from heaven – the Good News of Salvation through Christ.

⁵ Constantive Aorist of antistenai – to stand up against. The use of the constantive aorist meant that this was done repeated times – on every occasion.

⁶ Compare [Acts 4:21](#) with [Acts 5:34](#).

⁷ [Acts 5:34-39](#). I like KJV for this.