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An artistic illustration depicting Jesus, a man with a beard and long hair wearing a white robe and a red sash, standing in the center. He is surrounded by a diverse group of people, including men and women of various ages and ethnicities, dressed in traditional Middle Eastern attire. They are gathered in front of a stone wall with arched doorways. The scene is illuminated by warm, golden light, suggesting a sunrise or sunset. The overall style is painterly and expressive, with visible brushstrokes and a rich color palette of earthy tones and vibrant reds and yellows.

2

## **A Church of Converts: Widening the Circle of Jesus' Followers**

IN THE BEGINNING of its history, the church was not even thought of as a church. Rather, while Jesus was alive, the band of disciples who gathered around him thought of themselves simply as followers of Jesus of Nazareth. It was not unusual in those times for movements and followings to develop within Judaism, which was the religion of Jesus and his disciples. Most of these movements were tolerated within the religion; Judaism was known for the diversity of groups and beliefs within it. Jesus' truthfulness and integrity, however, would eventually get him into big trouble with the authorities, both religious and civil. ●

Rather than squelch the fledgling movement of Jesus' followers, the Roman authorities' execution of Jesus seemed only to bring more followers to the Way—the way of life that Jesus had shown them. The disciples of Jesus spread the Good News that he had been raised from the dead and had appeared to them. Surely, they declared, this man was the long-awaited Messiah, sent by God to save the Jewish people from oppression.

These claims, though welcomed by many new Jewish followers of the Way in Jerusalem, presented an intolerable threat to the Jewish authorities of the Sanhedrin, the supreme council of the Jews. Within a couple of years of Jesus' death, scenes like the following one were occurring, as the Sanhedrin tried to stamp out the growing movement of Jesus' followers:

A young man stood undaunted in front of his accusers, members of the Sanhedrin, who encircled him. Their faces showed a mixture of hate, fear, and grudging admiration. The young man, Stephen, did have courage. He was sure of himself. Indeed, his confidence itself made his listeners fearful and uneasy.

**Illustration, facing page:** On Pentecost, the circle of Jesus' followers grew beyond those who had known him personally. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Peter and the Apostles converted many Jews from other lands.



- Jesus begins his public ministry.
- Peter's leadership role is foretold.
- 30 ➤ Jesus dies and is resurrected.
- Pentecost transforms the disciples.

- General persecution follows Stephen's stoning.
- Saul encounters Risen Jesus, is converted to the Way.

- Peter first baptizes Gentiles.

- Antioch believers are termed *Christians*.

- Paul and Barnabas bring famine relief to Jerusalem.
- Paul begins his first missionary journey.

- 50 ➤ Council of Jerusalem decides Jewish Law is not essential for Christians.
- Paul begins his second missionary journey.

- Paul writes his first epistle.
- Paul begins his third missionary journey.



They felt strongly that Stephen and his kind had to be crushed before their ideas about this Jesus spread far.

Stephen had been selected by the community of Jesus' followers to be a deacon. His duties included taking care of widows, orphans, sick people, and those members of the movement who were in prison. Although challenging the Jewish authorities was a dangerous move, Stephen felt compelled to speak out, convinced that Jesus was the way and the truth. The crowd of accusers claimed that Stephen spoke "blasphemous words against Moses and God," so Stephen attempted to show them that even Moses had been rejected by the people of Israel. He further unsettled the crowd by claiming that God did not need a Temple in which to be worshiped. God existed everywhere and could be worshiped everywhere.

Over the shouts of the hostile council members, Stephen ended his speech with words that only further inflamed them: "You stiff-necked people . . . you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers. You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it."

Many of the dignified men of the Sanhedrin had covered their ears to prevent hearing such blasphemy. Enraged, they grabbed Stephen and dragged him out of the city. They snatched up large stones; first one and then the rest began hurling the stones at Stephen. Soon the stones rained down upon him. Blood poured from his wounds.

"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit," Stephen prayed, and then in a loud voice he cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." A large stone, thrown with all the force of anger and fear, crushed the back of Stephen's skull.



When the young man finally lay still, those who had stoned him gazed silently at his broken and bleeding body. Slowly, they began drifting away. Many had laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul, who came from Tarsus. Saul had heartily approved of the execution. In the days that followed, he joined the vigilantes who broke into homes and dragged Jesus' followers off to prison. He was determined to put an end to the Way, this fanatical movement whose followers dared to challenge the most sacred beliefs of Judaism. (Based on Acts of the Apostles, chapters 6–7) **1**

In spite of persecution and martyrdom, and perhaps even because of it, the community of Jesus' followers persisted in their message. The movement grew. It developed in unexpected ways into a church whose identity would one day be worldwide, going far beyond the boundaries of Palestine and its original Jewish membership.

Let's step back, however, to see what was behind this movement, what gave the disciples of Jesus determination to follow him no matter what the cost.

**Photo:** An artist's depiction of the martyrdom of Saint Stephen

**1**  
Using a question-and-answer format, write an imaginary interview with someone who stoned Stephen. Make sure you examine the person's feelings.

## Stephen's Martyrdom Is Repeated Today

Through the centuries, thousands of martyrs like Stephen have given their life for the Gospel. Some of them have been recognized and honored by the church, and others have gone relatively unnoticed by the world. We may think of martyrdom as a phenomenon of the past, but it continues today. Here are a few of the Catholic martyrs from more recent years:

- In El Salvador in 1980, lay missionary Jean Donovan, Maryknoll Sisters Ita Ford and Maura Clarke, and Ursuline Sister Dorothy Kazel were murdered by Salvadoran national guards as a warning to other foreign church workers to stop serving and struggling for justice for poor

people. Earlier that year, Archbishop Oscar Romero, an advocate for El Salvador's poor, had been assassinated while celebrating Mass. In El Salvador in 1989, six Jesuit priests who were outspoken defenders of the poor, the priests' cook, and the cook's teenage daughter were assassinated at the order of the Salvadoran army.

- Between 1981 and 1988 in the Philippines, ninety church workers and members of small Christian communities were killed by paramilitary forces for activities on behalf of peace and justice.
- James Miller, a De La Salle Christian Brother, was assassinated in 1982 at the Indian Center in Huehuetenango, Guatemala. He was likely killed because of his identification and work with the poor as a teacher and director of a vocational farm project.
- In Peru, where a revolutionary guerrilla movement known as the Shining Path has terrorized the country for years, Fathers Teodoro Santo Mejia and Victor Acuna Cardenas (the archdiocesan welfare director) were killed in the late 1980s because of their work for poor people and their opposition to the terrorist movement.
- In 1987, Jesuit Brother Vicente Canas Costa, of Brazil, was stabbed to death as a way to warn others against advocating for the rights of Brazilian Indians.
- Oblate Missionary Father Miguel Rodrigo was shot to death in 1987 while celebrating Mass in Sri Lanka. He had tried to intervene to stop ethnic violence that had claimed dozens of lives.



**Photo:** James Miller, a Christian Brother who was assassinated in 1982 because of his work with poor Guatemalan Indians



## The Original Circle: Those Who Walked with Jesus

The church began with the group who gathered around Jesus: the twelve Apostles and other disciples who knew him personally. The beliefs that united them came from Judaism, and they saw themselves as Jewish to the core. Like other Jews, the disciples longed for the coming of a **Messiah**, who would rescue them from oppression by their Roman occupiers. Gradually they would come to recognize Jesus as that Messiah, the redeemer sent by God. Thus, church history began in a powerful personal experience—the disciples' living, talking, and walking with Jesus. Even today, Jesus' followers personally experience him, though in different ways than the original band did.

## Peter: First Among the Faithful

Among the twelve Apostles—those followers associated most closely with Jesus—the most prominent one was **Simon Peter**, also known simply as **Peter**. When Jesus first called him away from his fishing nets in Galilee, Simon would certainly have laughed if anyone had told him how his life would change. As odd as it may seem, this illiterate, hot-tempered, married fisherman was to be the “rock” on which Jesus would build the church. (*Peter*, the name Jesus gave to Simon, literally means “rock.”) Jesus called Peter and Peter's brother Andrew from their fishing occupation, promising, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people” (Mark 1:17). And Peter and Andrew left behind a whole way of life to follow him. Jesus must have been a striking, magnetic person.

**Photo:** *Christ's Charge to Saint Peter*, by Raphael (16th century), depicts Jesus entrusting Peter with the church and “the keys of the kingdom.”



The Christian Testament tells us that Peter was to be central to the new group of believers, after Jesus would be physically gone. In Matthew's Gospel account, Jesus says:

"I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." (Matthew 16:18–19)

Jesus knew Peter and loved him, even with Peter's considerable weaknesses, including his ignorance, angry moods, and betrayals. After all, Jesus had come to save sinners, and Peter was clearly one of them. **2**

## The Apostles: Witnesses to Jesus' Death and Resurrection

### Together at the Last Supper

As Jesus rode triumphantly into Jerusalem toward the end of his life, the crowds who acclaimed him were huge. But crowds do not necessarily make up a church of genuine believers. So the night before he died, Jesus gathered the twelve Apostles together to celebrate the Passover. At the **Last Supper**, in a ritual meal that was to be repeated in remembrance of him, Jesus showed the Apostles how they should serve one another and share the word of God. This was the coming-to-birth church, celebrating its first Eucharist. ●

### A Disappointing Group of Friends

In the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus went to pray after the Last Supper, Peter and the other Apostles disappointed Jesus. Instead of keeping vig-

il with him, they all went to sleep—abandoning their leader to lonely agony, for he knew that the time of his betrayal by one of his own followers, Judas, was at hand. After the Roman soldiers came and took Jesus away, Peter and perhaps some of the others followed. But when pressured to identify himself with Jesus, Peter denied that he even knew him. The Apostles were probably at the Crucifixion, but we are sure only of John's presence there.

### Amazed by the Risen Lord

In the Gospels, we have an image of the Apostles, scared and worried, huddled together, when Mary Magdalene and two other women came rushing back from the empty tomb to announce that Jesus had risen. Peter "got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened" (Luke 24:12). Later, the Risen Jesus appeared to his followers on the road to Emmaus, and then again in a room where they were staying—the place where "doubting Thomas" insisted he would have to touch Jesus' wounds to believe that Jesus was risen. In one amusing story of Jesus' appearing to the disciples after the Resurrection, Peter spots him on shore from a fishing boat and, in eagerness, jumps in the water to go meet him.

The **Resurrection**, Jesus' being raised from the dead, was the crucial event for the church. Without it, the Apostles would have certainly disbanded, and Jesus would be a forgotten religious fanatic who was executed for threatening the established order of things. However, for the church to really take off, one more event—Pentecost—had to happen after the Resurrection.

## 2

If Peter walked into your classroom and you were allowed to submit two questions to him, what two questions would you ask? Write these down.





## Transformation at Pentecost

After the joy of experiencing Jesus with them again, the Apostles were disheartened and frightened when Jesus ascended to God and no longer walked with them. For days the Apostles drifted like boats that had lost their rudders. Nonetheless, these disciples and Jesus' mother, Mary, gathered to celebrate the traditional Jewish feast of Pentecost,



■  
Photo: *Pentecost*, by El Greco  
(16th century)

in thanksgiving for the year's harvests. What happened in that anxious gathering was completely unexpected, but it transformed those present, who had known Jesus personally, as no other experience could:

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. (Acts of the Apostles 2:1–4)

The coming of Jesus' Spirit, or the Holy Spirit, upon them suddenly turned the timid, discouraged, scared followers into bold, confident, zealous heralds of the Good News. This was the conversion that the Apostles needed if they were to have the strength and vision to carry on in Jesus' footsteps. Therefore, the Christian feast of **Pentecost**, which recalls the wonderful event that transformed the Apostles, is frequently called "the birthday of the church." 3

### For Review

- Who was Stephen, what group executed him, and for what offense?
- Who was part of the original circle of Jesus' followers, and what was their religious heritage?
- Describe Peter and his role in the formation of the church.
- What change did the Pentecost event bring about in the Apostles?

3  
Have you ever been timid or scared but then gained the courage you needed to face what confronted you? Describe in writing what brought on the change in you.

## The Circle Expands: Jews Who Did Not Know Jesus

On the day of Pentecost, the Apostles were not the only ones who were converted in a new way to Jesus. Their hearts were set with such a fire that for the first time, they had the courage to go out into the world and proclaim Jesus to all who would listen. The Apostles could no longer keep the Good News to themselves.

### The First Christian Baptisms

Leaving the building where they had been moved by the Holy Spirit and going into the streets of Jerusalem, the Apostles encountered their fellow Jews, many of whom were originally from countries besides Palestine. Amazingly, the foreign Jews heard the Apostles speaking about God's great deeds, each in the hearer's own native language. Peter addressed the crowd powerfully, speaking to the people in the context of their own Jewish tradition—about how Jesus had been sent as the Messiah, and God had raised him from the dead and placed him at God's right hand. With these words, Peter invited the assembled Jews to follow Jesus, a man they had never met:

“Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.” (Acts of the Apostles 2:38–39)

The Acts of the Apostles, which gives an account of the early years of the Christian community, records that about three thousand persons were

baptized that day. Through his actions on Pentecost, Peter became a central figure for Jesus' followers, and the circle of Jesus' followers expanded.

### Jewish and Christian

It is important to recognize that the first-to-be-baptized followers of Jesus did not think of themselves as converting from Judaism to Christianity or as starting a new religion. They saw themselves as still within Judaism but following Jesus' way of life and teachings. In fact, as noted earlier in this chapter, their movement was known as the Way. (The term *Christian* did not come into use until about ten years later, when it was applied to the believers at Antioch. For our purposes, however, we will refer to Jesus' followers as Christians at this point.)

Before long, Christianity would spread far beyond Jerusalem's gates and beyond Palestine to many other places in the Roman Empire where Jewish communities existed. Those spreading the word would usually preach to their fellow Jews in local Jewish synagogues, because the Jews could understand the prophecies about the Messiah and see Jesus as a fulfillment of their religious hopes. ●

As a minority movement within Judaism, the earliest followers of Jesus met regularly in **Jerusalem at the Temple**, the center of Jewish worship, to pray, and they kept the Jewish religious laws. In other towns, they went to the local **synagogue** to pray. The followers also met in private homes to share meals and special prayers. 4

### Trouble with the Authorities

In Jerusalem, the Jewish authorities began harassing the growing community of Jesus' followers. What upset the authorities was that the leaders of



4 Find out about a group within Christianity or Catholicism that sees itself as a movement within the religion, not as a new religion. In writing, compare that group with the first Christians.

## Who Were the Deacons?

When we think of those who function officially for the church, we most often think of priests, bishops, and the pope. In the earliest years of the church, however, two roles were most often referred to: that of the Apostles, who were roughly equivalent to the first bishops, and that of the deacons, who were appointed by the Apostles to assist them. Only later, when communities of Christians became too large for the bishops to conduct all the liturgical functions, priests were appointed to help preach the Gospel and celebrate the sacraments. During the early years of the church, deacons had an essential role in church life.

What did the deacons do? First it is necessary to understand that the early church lived in much closer community than most parishes do now. The Acts of the Apostles describes the early church like this:

The whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. (Acts 4:32-35)

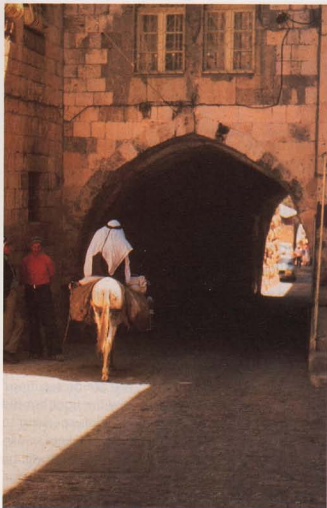
Evidently, despite the close bonds in the community, some disputes did arise over the distribution of goods. The Apostles settled the problem by appointing seven deacons, "men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom" (Acts 6:3). Their role was to care for the welfare of the Christian community, especially persons whose needs might be overlooked by the others.

Until approximately the fourth century, women deacons served in parishes alongside their male counterparts. The Christian Testament and early church documents attest to women's ministry in the Christian community. Even as late as the year 451, a document by a church council described how women deacons were anointed to their role by a "laying on of hands."

After some centuries, the practice of appointing deacons in each parish died out. Instead, the diaconate (the role of deacon) was looked upon as just one step on the way to becoming a priest. In recent years, however, the permanent diaconate has been restored in many dioceses. Men of good character and faith are trained in preaching, theology, and the practice of ministry. They are then given assignments in parishes to do work similar to that of the early deacons. Most deacons hold full-time jobs outside the church, and many are married. The same Spirit of God that moved the Apostles to appoint deacons almost two thousand years ago has moved the church to reinstitute the role of the permanent deacon today.



the group, especially the fisherman Peter and a fellow named John, kept telling people that Jesus of Nazareth was alive, that they had seen and talked with him, even eaten with him—all this after everyone knew that he had been executed and buried. Peter and the others also claimed that Jesus was the Messiah, sent by God to give freedom to



**Photo:** A gate in the Old City of Jerusalem today

the Chosen People. In addition, Jesus' followers were able to cure the sick. The cures could not be denied, because there were too many eyewitnesses.

Due to all of this trouble, some of the Jewish leaders had the Apostles jailed, but the Apostles managed to escape and continued to teach in the Temple. Finally, a powerful member of the Sanhedrin, the Pharisee Gamaliel, urged the Jewish leaders to leave the movement alone. If Jesus was the Messiah, he reasoned, the Sanhedrin could not do anything about it, as it would be fighting against God. On the other hand, if Jesus was not the Messiah, his followers would disband and eventually die out. In spite of Gamaliel's wise advice, incidents such as the stoning of **Stephen**, the first Christian martyr (from the story at the beginning of this chapter), took place and set off a round of persecution. **5**

When the harassment, imprisonments, and executions began in Jerusalem, the Apostles stayed on there, but most of the other Christians fled into the countryside and waited for the persecution to die down. The Christians, remember, thought of themselves as faithful Jews, so they must have been grief-stricken and horrified that they were being persecuted by members of their own religion. **6**

### For Review

- Explain how the first-to-be-baptized followers of Jesus viewed their relationship to Judaism.
- Why were Jesus' followers in trouble with the Jewish authorities? How were the followers persecuted?

**5** List some groups in today's society that seem threatening but toward whom it might be wise to follow Gamaliel's advice on how to react to the early Christians.

**6** Has anyone you know been persecuted, even in little ways, for being Catholic or Christian or for trying to act in a Christlike way? In a paragraph, describe what has happened.



## Paul: The Link Between Jewish Christians and the Wider World

The Acts of the Apostles notes that after the stoning of Stephen, Saul (whom we know as Paul) ravaged the Christian community by going house to house and dragging Christian men and women off to prison. He even obtained warrants from the Sanhedrin to go north into Syria and arrest any Christian refugees he could find in the city of Damascus.

### Who Was Paul?

Who was this zealous defender of Jewish orthodoxy? Saul was a well-educated Jew from Tarsus, a

major trading city in Asia Minor (now Turkey). He was steeped in the Jewish tradition, having studied under Gamaliel at the Temple as a boy. In addition, he was knowledgeable of and comfortable with Greek and Roman ways, because of having grown up in a major trading city. His everyday language was Greek, and he enjoyed the privileges of Roman citizenship, including having the Roman name *Paul*. He had been around many **Gentiles** (non-Jews) in his life, but Saul's first allegiance was to his Jewish faith. As a teacher and leader in the synagogue at Tarsus, he loved the **Jewish Law** and greatly revered the covenant between God and the Chosen People.

### On the Road to Damascus: Forever Changed

Something happened to Saul as he approached Damascus to persecute the Christians, and the event would change him and the community of Jesus' disciples forever. In the Acts of the Apostles, Saul tells about his experience:

"While I was on my way and approaching Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone about me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?' I answered, 'Who are you, Lord?' Then he said to me, 'I am Jesus of Nazareth whom you are persecuting.' Now those who were with me saw the light but did not hear the voice of the one who was speaking to me. I asked, 'What am I to do, Lord?' The Lord said to me, 'Get up and go to Damascus; there you will be told everything that has been assigned to you to do.' Since I could not see because of the brightness of that light, those who were with me took my hand and led me to Damascus." (Acts 22:6-11)



Photo: Orthodox Jewish boys learn their lessons from a rabbi at a synagogue in Israel today. As a young boy, Paul was educated in the Jewish tradition.



In a state of shock, blind, and too stunned to eat or drink, Saul realized that his old world was coming to an end. He had been doing what he thought was right—protecting his religious heritage. With the startling experience on the road to Damascus, his thoughts must have gone around in circles always ending with Jesus. Jesus really was alive. Now what?

After Saul had suffered three days of shock and blindness, a man named Ananias came to visit him. Ananias claimed to have been sent by Jesus. Saul felt the man's hands on his face, and suddenly he could see again. Not only could he see the physical world, but a spiritual insight was given to him. Acknowledging Jesus as the Messiah, he received baptism from Ananias.

When Saul was well again, cared for by the people whom he had come to harm, he needed time to rebuild his life. In a letter to the Galatians, written years after his conversion, he says that he left Damascus and went to Arabia, the desert area east and south of the city. He does not say what he did there, but he likely went back to making tents,

which was the trade of his family in Tarsus. He probably read, again and again, what the prophets said about the Messiah in the Bible. Above all, he must have prayed and reflected deeply on his experience at Damascus.

Saul, who eventually went by his Roman name, **Paul**, was vigorous, determined, and dynamic. When he came out of the desert after studying and praying, all the energy he had put into persecuting the followers of Jesus was directed toward spreading Jesus' message. Paul's whole life and destiny were changed. He would travel thousands of dangerous miles, mostly on foot, to spread the Good News that had knocked him off his feet on the road to Damascus. **7**

## For Review

- What were Paul's connections to the Gentile world?
- Briefly describe Paul's conversion.

**Photo:** *The Conversion of Saint Paul*, by Michelangelo (16th century)

**7**

If God knocked you off your feet and told you to reform your ways, what aspects of yourself would you need to change? Describe these in one page.



## Gentile Converts: Beyond the Limits of Judaism

While Paul was living in the quiet desert country, unexpected things were going on elsewhere among the people of the Way.

### First the Samaritans, Then the Gentiles

As Jesus' followers fled from persecution in Jerusalem, all along the way they spoke of Jesus to whoever would listen. For example, a deacon named Philip stopped in Samaria. For centuries the Samaritans (who were despised "distant cousins" of the Jews) and the Jews had been enemies. But the Samaritans listened to Philip's Good News about Jesus. Many asked to be baptized. Peter and John were sent by the Jerusalem community to find out what was going on at Samaria, and they saw the great belief the Samaritans had in Jesus. Spurred by the acceptance of the Good News, Philip went west to the towns on the Mediterranean coast, speaking to both Jews and Gentiles. ●

Following in Philip's footsteps through the coastal towns, Peter taught and healed the sick, and even brought a dead woman back to life. At Caesarea, the Roman capital of Judea, Peter baptized some Gentiles, including the Roman commander Cornelius and his whole family. Much to the amazement of the Jewish members of the Way, these newly baptized Gentiles then received the Holy Spirit and began speaking in foreign tongues.

Today we think of Paul as the person who brought the Gospel to the Gentiles. His role in that process was certainly most significant, but he was not the first to preach to them.

## Controversy Brews over the Gentile Question

When Peter returned to Jerusalem, turmoil in the community greeted him. How could Peter baptize Gentiles—people who were not Jewish? Even if the Gentiles accepted belief in the One God, they were not the Chosen People. Jesus had come to the Jews. Besides, didn't Peter break the Jewish Law by visiting Gentiles and eating with them? (The Gentiles were considered unclean because they did not follow the strict dietary laws of the Jews. In addition, the Gentiles did not follow the Jewish practice of circumcision, which was a sign of the covenant with God and was essential for Jewish males.)

Peter defended his actions, telling the community that in a vision God had instructed him not to call anyone profane or unclean. Peter was growing in the conviction that although Jesus had come among the Jews first, his gift of salvation was meant for all people, not just the Jews. Peter reminded the Jerusalem community that Jesus had eaten with sinners, tax collectors, and Samaritans and had commissioned the Apostles to go out to the whole world. Those reminders probably stung the Jerusalem community. Although the members were followers of Jesus, they still thought of themselves as religious Jews, not as members of a new religion. Peter's explanation calmed the group for a while, but the problem did not end there. **8**

### Paul's Mission: Initially to a Jewish Audience

When Paul emerged from his time of reflection in the desert (after about three years), he was on fire with faith in Jesus. He started preaching to the Jews

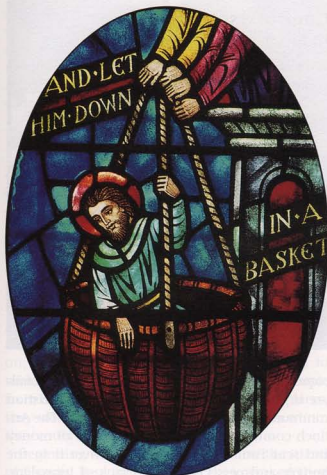


**8**

List at least five clubs or other groups that have rules restricting who can join them. Next, write down two probable reasons that each group restricts membership and your feelings about these reasons. Last, react in writing to

this statement: *The Christian community should welcome all people.*





in Damascus, the city of his conversion. So powerful were his words that some people complained to the governor. Paul's friends warned him that a special guard at the city gates had orders to arrest him on sight. So in the deep of night, Paul's allies managed to lower him over the high city walls in a large basket ordinarily used to carry vegetables.

Having escaped Damascus, Paul headed south to Jerusalem, where he met Peter and James and spent two weeks with them. Undoubtedly they told Paul many things about Jesus as they remem-

bered him, but Paul also had his own unique experience of the Risen Jesus on the road to Damascus to carry with him the rest of his life.

Soon Paul was on the run again, to escape a plot by some Jews to kill him. Paul, who previously had persecuted other people for preaching about Jesus, became a marked man himself. After these initial experiences with preaching the Gospel, Paul spent several years back in his hometown of Tarsus.

## Antioch: The First Jewish-Gentile Christian Community

Some of the Jewish Christian refugees from Jerusalem had gone to **Antioch**, the third largest city in the Roman Empire, to escape persecution. Situated on a river not far from the Mediterranean Sea, Antioch was beautiful and impressive. The city had a mixed population of Gentiles and Jews. Some of the Gentiles even attended the synagogue with the Jews, but they usually did not convert to Judaism, because they felt that the Jewish Law was too difficult to observe and that too many of the laws did not make sense.

### The Controversy Reopens

When the Christians from Jerusalem arrived at Antioch, they spoke of Jesus to the mixed Jewish-Gentile audience in the synagogue. Consequently, those asking for baptism included people from both groups. The Christian community in Jerusalem was upset when it heard about this, reopening the controversy that the community had earlier with Peter over whether to welcome Gentiles into the Way. An influential and committed Christian, **Barnabas**, was sent by the Jerusalem community to make inquiries into the questionable goings-on at Antioch.

**Photo:** Paul escaped arrest in Damascus when he was lowered over the city walls in a vegetable basket.





### A Remarkable Community

Barnabas saw clearly that the Jews and Gentiles at Antioch were united in their faith in Jesus. He was glad. In fact, he decided to stay in Antioch to teach and encourage the people in their new way of life. As the Antioch community grew, Romans and other outsiders remarked about how different this group was compared with the rest of the Jewish community. So, to distinguish this community from the other Jews, the general population began to call the members **Christians**, that is, “followers of Christ.” It was the first time the term was used.

### Charity and Solidarity Grow

Barnabas soon enlisted the help of Paul, living then in Tarsus, to minister with him to the flourishing church of Antioch. Before long, the Antioch

community was responding to news of a crop failure in Jerusalem that was putting the Christian community there in danger of starvation. The Antioch community took up a collection of money and sent Paul and Barnabas to deliver it to the hungry and persecuted Christians of Jerusalem. This visit of charity must have been greatly appreciated by the community at Jerusalem, who not long before had questioned the legitimacy of the mixed Jewish-Gentile church of Antioch. **9**

The Christians in Jerusalem were hurting. The Apostle James was beheaded by the Jewish king, and Peter was imprisoned. Although Peter escaped miraculously, he knew that he had to flee Jerusalem. So he appointed another man, named James, a relative of Jesus, as head of the Jerusalem community. In such a time of crisis, it must have been

**Photo:** An artist’s depiction of Antioch from a Bible of the 18th or 19th century. In Antioch, the followers of Jesus were first called **Christians**.

**9**

Most parishes take up special collections for relief agencies, food pantries, shelters, and so on. Write an answer to this question: *Is giving to these collections an essential part of being a Christian? Why or why not?*

consoling for the Christians in Jerusalem to know that they could rely on other Christian churches, even those far away like the one in Antioch, for material and spiritual support. The Christian community learned about compassion and solidarity early on. ●

## Paul's First Journey: A Growing Gentile Audience

With the community at Antioch solidly established, the missionary team of Paul and Barnabas could turn their attention to spreading the Gospel to other cities in more unfamiliar territory. The trip they undertook is known as Paul's **first missionary journey**. They had the advantage of traveling within the bounds of the Roman Empire, which had good roads, seas that were relatively free of pirates, and a common language—Greek. From this point on, Paul and Barnabas would be preaching to mixed populations: Greeks, Romans, and people from distant lands. Nevertheless, in many places, they would find Jewish congregations with whom they could stay.

Beginning with a successful effort on the island of Cyprus, Paul and Barnabas then worked their way through the seaside towns of Asia Minor (modern Turkey), staying in each place for several months, and then went on to the plateau prairie lands. **10**

### Rejection by Jews

Paul and Barnabas's plan was first to preach in the synagogues on the Sabbath. Some Jews accepted Jesus as the Messiah; many did not. Those who rejected Paul and Barnabas's teaching ignored them or forbade them to speak in the synagogue

again. Others who rejected the message, usually a small minority, became violent. Paul wrote later of being driven out of towns, beaten, and even stoned and left for dead. Somehow he and Barnabas survived all of the violence.

### Acceptance by Gentiles

The Gentiles who accepted Jesus were relieved that they did not also have to accept the many laws that their Jewish neighbors followed. Paul and Barnabas did not encounter the violent rejection of their teaching from Gentiles. Mixed communities of Jewish and Gentile Christians began to form their own worship groups, distinct from the synagogues. Paul and Barnabas stayed in each town for a while, teaching, praying, and counseling the new Christians. Paul often paid his way by working as a tent maker.

At the end of the first preaching tour, Paul and Barnabas ended up back in Antioch. While they had been gone, more controversy had been brewing over what was expected of Gentiles entering the church.

### For Review

- Why did Peter's community in Jerusalem object to his baptizing Gentiles?
- How did the Antioch Christian community differ in makeup from the other Christian communities?
- How did the Antioch Christians express solidarity with the church in Jerusalem?
- On Paul's first missionary journey, what kind of reception did Paul and Barnabas receive from Jews and from Gentiles?



### 10

Paul understood Gentiles even though he was a Jew, so he was effective as a missionary in Gentile communities. Write about someone you know who understands a certain group and is effective with them as a leader

even though he or she is not one of them.

## Crisis over the Jewish Law

By the time Paul and Barnabas finished the first missionary journey, the Christian community at Jerusalem had supposedly accepted the fact that the Way would be open to Gentiles as well as Jews. But the issue never seemed to really go away; it flared up particularly around the issue of exactly what would be expected of the Gentiles entering the church, such as those in Antioch. Although the Gentile Christians were not Jews, would they be obligated to keep the Jewish Law, in effect becoming Jews?

### Dietary Laws and the Requirement of Circumcision

On a visit to Antioch, Peter discovered that the Gentile converts there ate food forbidden by the Jewish Law—for example, pork and shellfish. In the first century, meals were considered very important in human relations. People who ate together shared their lives just as they shared food at the table. Thus, meals were signs of unity.

The members of the small Christian community in Antioch enjoyed having meals together. Peter joined them. As had happened earlier, a group of Jewish Christians from Jerusalem reprimanded Peter for eating with Gentiles. He was breaking the law that forbade Jews to eat with non-Jews. This was a serious charge against the man designated as leader of the Apostles.

Dietary laws were not the only controversial issue. The Jerusalem delegation of Christians insisted that the male Gentile Christians be circumcised. All Christians, according to the Jerusalem group, had to observe the entire Jewish Law. Shock ran

through the Antioch community. In fifteen years of its existence as a Christian community, no one had made this demand. In effect, the Jerusalem group was saying that biblical laws were even more important than faith in Jesus.

Peter must have immediately grasped the gravity of the situation: The Gentiles would never accept obedience to the Jewish Law as a prerequisite to being believers in Jesus and active members of the Way. The work of Peter, Paul, Barnabas, Philip, and all the other missionaries would be destroyed. Most importantly, didn't Jesus come to save all who would believe, even if they did not follow the Jewish Law? The issue had to be settled finally.

twisty history



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tians sent Paul and Barnabas to talk to the leaders in Jerusalem about the problem.

## The Council of Jerusalem: A Turning Point for Christianity

The Christians in Jerusalem called a meeting about the question of the Gentiles' not observing the Jewish Law. The **Council of Jerusalem**, held in 50 C.E., would later be considered the first official church council, that is, a gathering of the leaders of the church to decide on major issues of doctrine or religious practice. ●

### Debate and Decision

At the Council of Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas described their work among the Gentiles, stressing the enthusiasm and faith of the people who had turned away from their idols and converted to belief in Jesus and the one true God. One group at the meeting insisted that everybody, including Gentile converts, had to keep the Law that was given to Moses. After lengthy debate, Peter stood up and addressed the council:

"You know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as the [Gentiles] will." (Acts 15:7–11)

A man of action, Paul lost no time in bringing the issue before the whole Christian community in Antioch. As might have been expected, the Jerusalem group turned against Paul as well. Arguments followed. After more wrangling, the Antioch Chris-

Photo: Saint Peter led the Council of Jerusalem in coming to a decision on whether the Gentile Christians would have to keep the Jewish Law.





**James**, the head of the Jerusalem community, supported Peter and proposed a solution that was accepted by the assembly and then stated in a letter to the Gentile Christians.

The letter assured the Christians of Antioch, Syria, and Asia Minor that they had to do only what was essential for the followers of Jesus. They did not have to observe the complete Jewish Law, and circumcision was not required of them. The communities were asked to live together in peace. Thus:

*"It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well."* (Acts 15:28–29)

The Gentiles gladly accepted these conditions and rejoiced at the encouragement the decision gave them.

### Conflict Resolved, Essentials Defined

A major rift in the community had been healed, and as a result Paul was completely free to speak about Jesus to Gentiles everywhere. Perhaps most important, the essential criterion for being a Christian had been defined: the criterion was belief in Jesus Christ, which did not include adherence to the Jewish Law. **11**

The decision made at the Council of Jerusalem represented a major turning point in the history of the church's development. It was a turning point that eventually would enable the church to spread throughout the world. Soon Gentiles outnumbered Jews in the Christian communities. The Christian congregations began to develop their own non-Jewish identity. As Paul would say in one of his



letters, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

### For Review

- What two aspects of the Jewish Law did the Gentile Christians object to following?
- What was Paul's perspective on the question of whether the Gentile Christians should follow the complete Jewish Law?
- What did the Council of Jerusalem decide? Why was the decision significant for the Christian community?

### 11

Using initials, make a list of people you have rejected in some way. Next to each person's initials, write down what caused you problems with her or him. Reflect in writing on whether your rejection of the person seems right.

Last, write a prayer for those you have rejected.

**Photo:** After the Council of Jerusalem, Saint Paul could feel free to spread the Good News of Jesus to Gentiles everywhere.

## Conclusion and Implications

Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit received on Pentecost, the disciples in Jerusalem began actively telling people about Jesus. They formed a community that was nourished by their mutual care and the sharing of the Body of Christ. The Way proved to be so dynamic that the religious authorities of the time wanted to wipe it out.

The young church was also expanding its understanding of itself. Beginning with the small band of Jewish followers who had walked with Jesus in his lifetime, the community welcomed other Jews who professed belief in Jesus. But the identity of the Way as a strictly Jewish movement soon gave way to a broader, more inclusive identity. The missionary Apostles Peter and, especially, Paul found that Gentiles were even more receptive to the Gospel than Jews were.

The major issue surrounding the acceptance of Gentiles into the church focused on whether they would have to follow the complete Jewish Law. In a pivotal moment for the church, the Council of Jerusalem settled the matter, truly opening the church to all believers. Thus the church became “catholic” in the root sense of that word—“universal or all-inclusive.” From then on, belief in Jesus Christ became the defining characteristic of a Christian.

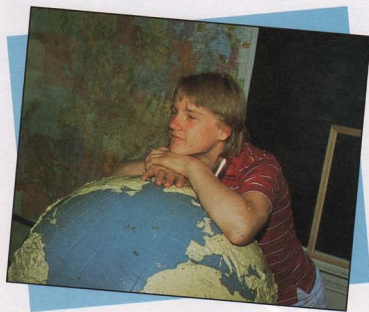
The historical developments of this period, from the time of Jesus through the Council of Jerusalem, had implications for later developments in the church, even into our own era. Here are a few of them:

1. From the beginnings of Christianity up until the present, Christians have been willing to die for their beliefs. Martyrs like Stephen are not a thing of the past.

2. The decision to open the doors of the Christian community to all believers made possible the growth of the church to every corner of the earth. Today, rather than being predominantly a European-oriented religion (as it once was), Catholicism is on every continent, with its greatest growth now happening in Africa. In fact, there are more Catholics in Africa today than there are in North America.

3. The Council of Jerusalem and the dilemma that prompted it show us that genuine conflict existed in the early church. The church has never been free of conflict, nor should we expect it to be without heartfelt disagreement or argument.

The Council of Jerusalem, however, also showed that conflict in the church can be resolved by allowing differences to be aired, hearing them out, and relying on the guidance of the Spirit to move people’s hearts and minds toward God’s ways.



**Photo:** Because of the decision to open the Christian community to all believers in Christ, the church has grown and spread to every continent of the earth.

*Photo by depicting St. Paul*