

Pentecost's people

John Houghton ©

A. Introduction

1. The epic themes of prophet, priest and king come together, as they were destined to, in Jesus, the Anointed One. His life, death and subsequent resurrection forms the crux of salvation history. But it is not the culmination – that remains in the future. The full government of our ascended Saviour has yet to be realised (1 Corinthians 15:25; Hebrews 2:8-9).
2. The process of Christ's ascension as King to its actualisation on earth is outworked through the Church. Slowly but surely, the world will be populated with a new kind of person – converts drawn from every nation, kindred and tribe, grafted into the faith stream of Abraham's descendants (Romans 11:17-18; Galatians 3:26-29), setting out to do nothing less than change the world (Acts 17:6-7) in anticipation of the coming King. Filled with the Holy Spirit, proclaiming a message of salvation to all, and demonstrating that message in a community lifestyle noted for its love, joy, peace, faith and hope—these are Pentecost's people.

B. The people

1. The New Testament church originated as a prayer meeting consisting of eleven apostles, Jesus' four brothers, his mother, Mary, Joseph Justus, Matthias, and a number of other men and women, making the total number up to 120. All were ethnic Jews who had known Jesus personally and had witnessed the resurrection. Peter was the acknowledged leader.
2. In spite of three years with Jesus, it is evident that their mind-set was still very nationalistic. They expected the restoration of the Jewish kingdom under their Messiah when he shortly returned (Acts 1:6). A process of education would be necessary to enable them to see the full scope of God's intentions.
3. The Day of Pentecost saw the birth of the church as a Jewish sect consisting entirely of Hebrew and Greek-speaking Jews who had come to Jerusalem for the feast. The infant church grew rapidly, in spite of inevitable opposition from the establishment, who stood accused of having crucified their own long-awaited Messiah. Drawing on the best of Jewish social culture, the new converts adopted a lifestyle characterised by joyful meals, generous fellowship, diligent obedience, and devoted prayer. Miracles abounded, people feared God, and the message spread like wildfire.
4. Left to themselves the apostles may well have remained in Jerusalem indefinitely, enjoying a revival of faith and awaiting the return of Christ to the Mount of Olives. However, the promise was for the whole world. Soon, the Gospel reached Samaria. Then a Centurion was converted at Caesarea – the first Gentile convert (Acts 10).
5. The conversion of Gentiles radically altered the dynamics of the early church. It led to the shifting of the centre to Antioch, and ultimately to Rome. The term Christian was coined;

this was a new religion, not just a Jewish sect. Churches began to meet in places other than synagogues. In spite of massive problems of compatibility the ancient divide between Jew and Gentile began to be crossed.

6. The understanding of the kingdom became spiritual and world-wide, as Jesus had always intimated. By the time Jerusalem fell in AD 70, the church was free of its dependence on a geographic headquarters. Christianity had become a world religion.

C. The progression

1. Jesus had instructed the disciples to bear testimony to him throughout the whole world (Acts 1:8). Peter initially headed the Jerusalem ministry, though James later presided over the council (see Acts 15). Persecution shifted many believers out of Jerusalem. This resulted in the Gospel spreading to Judea and then, through Philip, to Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:1-5). A certain reluctance characterised the apostles. Maybe they stayed in Jerusalem simply for the Second Coming. It wasn't until the conversion of Saul, and Peter's ministry to Cornelius, that the Gentile world opened up and the apostles began to get on with the job.
2. Paul's three missionary journeys and his trip to Rome were crucial to the expansion of Christianity. It is difficult to overemphasise the importance of the missionary vision of the Antioch church, nor the significance of those journeys into modern day Turkey and Greece. Later history demonstrates the wisdom of the Holy Spirit in planting churches in key population centres and on trade routes to ensure the rapid spread of the message.
3. Paul's arrival at Rome, along with the influence of other apostles, was to change the course of world history. Christianity was lifted from provincial Jerusalem to become a world religion.

Paul's First journey (46-47)

SYRIA: Antioch → Seleucia → CYPRUS: Salamis → Paphos → TURKEY: Attalia -%o Perga → Pisidian Antioch → Iconium → Lystra → Derbe → SYRIA: Antioch

Paul's Second journey (48-51)

SYRIA: Antioch → TURKEY: Tarsus → Derbe → Lystra → Iconium → Pisidian Antioch → Troas → GREECE: Neapolis → Philippi → Amphipolis → Apollonia → Thessalonica → Berea → Athens → Corinth → Cenchrea → TURKEY: Ephesus → ISRAEL: Caesarea → Jerusalem → SYRIA: Antioch

Paul's Third journey (53-59)

SYRIA: Antioch → TURKEY: Tarsus → Iconium – %o Pisidian Antioch → Ephesus → Mitylene → Troas → GREECE: Neapolis → Philippi → Amphipolis → Apollonia → Thessalonica → Berea -%o Corinth → retraces steps to Troas, then to Assos → Miletus %o Patara → SYRIA: Tyre → Ptolemais → ISRAEL: Caesarea → Jerusalem

Paul's Journey to Rome (61 -62)

ISRAEL: Caesarea → SYRIA: Sidon → TURKEY: Myra → CRETE → MALTA → SICILY: Syracuse → ITALY: Puteoli → Appius Forum → Three Taverns → Rome

D. The power

1. Jesus did not end his ministry at his ascension but continued through the Holy Spirit in the lives of the disciples. Miracles multiplied as the message spread, but they were never 'a magic wand' to make Christians' lives easy. Rather, they were acts of the Holy Spirit to authenticate and illustrate the message preached.
2. Although a lot of miracles did occur, the message did not depend upon miracles. The word of the Gospel proved to have its own convicting power. People, touched by the Holy Spirit, received it as life-changing and revolutionary good news, joining the new chosen people by baptism to express their conversion from an old life to a new.
3. Baptism represented the way into the church. In this act, new converts identified with Christ's death and resurrection (Romans 6:1-11); they saw it as the expression of a cleansed conscience (1 Peter 3:21) based upon God's forgiveness of their sins (Acts 2:38). All the positive evidence suggests that at that time baptism was offered on the basis of personally expressed repentance and faith.
4. This identification with Christ in the body of his church was also expressed in the breaking of bread. This was a regular feature of a communal meal, forming a distinct activity within it (1 Corinthians 11:23-34). There is no evidence that the remembrance of Christ had been moved into the context of a religious service.
5. With the decentralising of the message arose the need for authorised records of Jesus' life and teaching. Thus, came about the writing of the four Gospels. The Holy Spirit enabled the recording of four authentic accounts of Christ's life and ministry, together with Acts and a number of letters on church belief and conduct. These writings were quickly recognised as holy writ on a par with the Old Testament (2 Peter 3:15-16), and in due course were collected to form the New Testament.

E. The problems

1. The early church wasn't without its problems. Racism reared its head the moment Gentiles started becoming believers. One of the hardest issues for Jewish Christians to face was the fact that divine election was not by race and faith, but by faith alone. This raised issues concerning whether or not Gentiles needed to keep the Jewish festivals, and especially, whether they should take the to themselves the old covenant mark of circumcision.
2. At a different, but nonetheless real, level the issue of clean and unclean foods impinged upon the key fellowship expression of eating together. Most Gentile foods were either ritually unclean to Jews, or had been offered to idols. One man's meat was another man's compromise. These issues are addressed particularly in the epistles of Galatians, Ephesians and Hebrews, where Paul demonstrates that faith has priority over the Law by precedence, power and promise.
3. Graeco-Roman secular philosophy offered a world-view that did not need a crucified Saviour and which scoffed at the notion of literal resurrection (1 Corinthians 1:18-24; Acts 17:32). In an attempt to make the message intellectually respectable some Christians tried to combine the two world-views. One result was Docetism, a forerunner of Gnosticism.

Colossians and 1 John address these issues by maintaining the uniqueness of Christ and the reality of his incarnation.

4. Christianity took on all comers; religious legalism on the one hand, and pagan laxity on the other. Where Jewish society was morally reticent, the Gentiles were permissive and idolatrous. Sexual license was common, as was corrupt business practice. Class discrimination abounded – a major issue when so many slaves were becoming Christians. I Corinthians, Philippians, Philemon, James and 1 Peter especially lay down the implications of love being the fulfilment of the Law for those justified by faith.
5. Self-seeking apostles arose teaching deviant doctrines with worldly eloquence. Religious salesmanship became commonplace. Teachers must be judged by their sufferings, not by their sensational claims. True leadership is servanthood. The presence of false teaching is an evidence of the reality and challenge of truth. Sound doctrine produces holy living. Romans, 2 Corinthians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, 2 Peter, 2 & 3 John and Jude deal in particular with the issues of true apostleship and doctrine.
6. The promise of Jesus' return had been deliberately couched in ambiguous terms. No date was given, no catastrophic signs portended the end. Believers must watch and pray in every generation. Yet, some early believers became convinced that Christ had already returned, or that he was about to. With the difficulties of communication it would be hard to prove that he hadn't come back to Jerusalem if you lived in Greece. So, they stopped work and awaited his arrival! Others simply got depressed by the delay. To answer these concerns Paul wrote 1 & 2 Thessalonians, and John wrote Revelation.

F. The persecutions

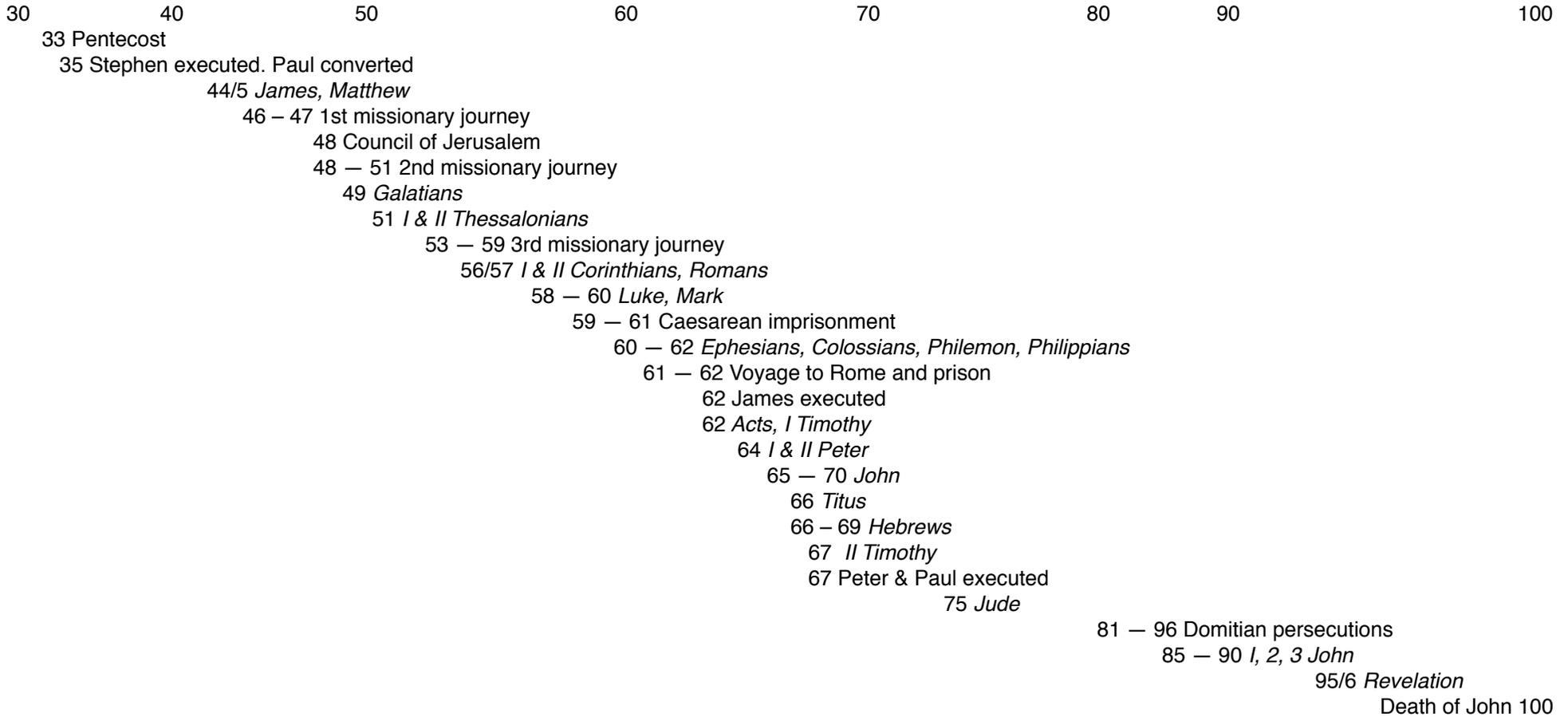
1. The first persecution of the church came, not surprisingly, from the Jews. The hierarchy, challenged by the popularity of 'The Way' and its claim that Jesus was the Messiah, tried to ban the movement. However, violence only scattered the believers and thus spread abroad the Word of God. Then the leading persecutor, Saul of Tarsus, got converted and joined the ranks of the persecuted because of his message that salvation was by grace alone. A Jewish plot had him eventually arrested and sent to Rome for trial.
2. At first Christianity enjoyed the civil liberty granted to the Jews to practice their religion. As the divide became apparent, the Romans began to view Christians as dangerous, atheistic and immoral, particularly as many came from the slave classes. Nero persecuted believers in Rome to switch the blame for having set fire to the city. Domitian, fearing conspiracy by those who put another King before him, persecuted Christians.

G. Conclusion

1. Jesus promised to return as all-conquering King. The early church expected this at any time. As years passed they began to understand better the breadth of God's will – nothing less than salvation to the world by means of the Gospel, though that would be opposed at every turn and require perseverance on the part of the saints until he comes. On that note the New Testament ends: 'Surely, I am coming quickly.' Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus!
2. The Bible begins with two people who fall from grace. It ends with a new Man, Christ and his Body consisting of a vast number of restored people who love God and their

neighbours and who look for a new heavens and a new earth at the return of Christ. Yet the great story of redemption has hardly begun...! ...!

THE TIMES OF THE EARLY CHURCH



ROME



PALESTINE

