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History of New Testament Churches

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BIBLE STUDY



by Harold L. Willmington

History of New Testament Churches

In 1 Corinthians 10:11 Paul writes: "Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples; and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come."

Here, he refers to those Old Testament events. But we may with scriptural justification apply these same words to the events recorded for us in the New Testament. Present-day church leaders will profit greatly by examining the joys, sorrows, sins, and strong points of these early local churches. The following is a brief summary of some of these New Testament churches.

The church in Jerusalem began at Pentecost (Acts 2:47) with at least 3,120 (Acts 2:41). Pastored by James, the half-brother of Christ (Acts 15:13), it performed many wonders and signs (Acts 2:43; 5:12-16). The people had all things in common (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-35), were in one accord (Acts 2:46), spent a good deal of time in prayer (Acts 2:42; 3:1; 4:24; 12:5-17), witnessed at every opportunity (Acts 3:12; 4:5; 5:42; 4:33), and radiated Jesus (Acts 4:13; 6:15). The church was kept pure by God (had standards) (Acts 5:1-11; 8:18-24), grew constantly (Acts 2:47; 5:14; 4:4; 12:24), endured persecution (Acts 4:1-3; 4:21; 5:17-41; 7:54-60; 8:1-3; 12:1-4), appointed deacons (Acts 6:1-7), practiced baptism and the Lord's Supper (Acts 2:41,46), sent forth missionaries (Acts 8:5,14; 11:22; 13:1-3; 15:22), held the important meeting on circumcision (Acts 15), was Spirit-led (Acts 2:1-18; 4:31; 13:2-4; 15:28), preached the Word (Acts 2:16-36; 3:13-26; 5:42; 6:4; 7:1-53), and contended for the faith (Acts 15:1-21). Its problems came when it apparently later compromised with the Judaizers (Acts 21:18-25).

The church in Antioch of Syria was founded during the persecution period that followed the martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 11:19). It experienced a great ingathering of souls (Acts 11:21), and the Jerusalem church sent Barnabas to "check

it out" (Acts 11:22). He became the first pastor (Acts 11:23) and added many to the church at this time (Acts 11:24). Barnabas then called Saul as associate pastor (Acts 11:25) and both worked there for a year (Acts 11:26). At Antioch believers were first called Christians (Acts 11:26). They took up a large love offering for the needy believers in Jerusalem (Acts 11:30). This was the home church of the first two Christian missionaries (Paul and Barnabas) (Acts 13:1-3; 14:26) and later became their headquarters, both after their first missionary trip (Acts 14:26) and following the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:35). Silas was from this church (Acts 15:34). It was where Paul set Peter straight on matters of legalism (Gal. 2:11).

Paul organized the church in Philippi in the home of a woman convert named Lydia (Acts 16:15,40). A demon-possessed girl was his next convert (Acts 16:18), followed by the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:33). Paul later wrote a letter to this church (Phil. 1:1). Timothy ministered to this church (Phil. 2:19) and sent Epaphroditus to minister to Paul while the apostle was in prison (Phil. 2:25). It was in danger of legalism (Phil. 3:1-3). Paul writes and asks "true yoke-fellow" to help two quarreling churchwomen named Euodias and Syntyche (Phil. 4:1-3). The church helped to supply the material needs of Paul (Phil. 4:15,18).

The church in Thessalonica was founded during Paul's second missionary trip (Acts 17:1) and witnessed a great harvest of souls (Acts 17:4). Paul is accused of turning the world upside down (Acts 17:6). In spite of their zeal, the church members were not good Bible students (Acts 17:11). Later Paul wrote two letters to this church (1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1). The believers had a reputation for witnessing (1 Thess. 1:8) and were persecuted by the unbelieving Jews because of their faith (1 Thess. 2:14). Timothy ministered to this church (1 Thess. 3:1,2). And it had the problems

of some lazy members (2 Thess. 3:10), some busybodies (2 Thess. 3:11), and some disobedient members (2 Thess. 3:14,15).

The church in Berea was commended for its knowledge of and love for the Word of God (Acts 17:11).

The church in Corinth was founded during Paul's second trip (Acts 18:1). The chief ruler of the Jewish synagogue, a man named Crispus, was one of Paul's first converts (Acts 18:8). Paul wrote several letters to this church (1 Cor. 5:9; 2 Cor. 10:9,10), two of which are included in the New Testament Canon (1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1). It experienced almost total confusion in matters relating to baptism (1 Cor. 1:12), earthly wisdom (1 Cor. 1:26), carnality and strife (1 Cor. 3:1-3), judging others unfairly (1 Cor. 4:7), immorality (1 Cor. 5:1), taking other believers to court (1 Cor. 6:1-4), marriage (1 Cor. 7:1), Christian liberty (1 Cor. 8,9), the Lord's Table (1 Cor. 11:17-34), spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 12-14), the doctrine of the Resurrection (1 Cor. 15), and tithing (1 Cor. 16).

The church in Ephesus, founded during Paul's second trip (Acts 18:19), may have been pastored by Apollos, Timothy, and the apostle John. Paul wrought many miracles there and saw much fruit (Acts 19:11-41). Paul went soulwinning door-to-door (Acts 20:17-21). This was the only Christian church ever to receive letters from two New Testament writers. Paul wrote Ephesians to them (Eph. 1:1), and John the apostle would later direct a portion of Revelation to them (Rev. 2:1-7).

The church in Pergamos (Rev. 2:12-17) was located in the very center of satanic worship. It had nevertheless remained loyal to Christ in spite of martyrdom. Members were, however, tolerating some in the church who were guilty of sexual sins. They were also tolerating those who held the doctrine of the Nicolaitans. □

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