

Lesson 43: The Church Grows Out From Israel

Previously...

At Jesus' first coming, He offered the Jews the returning Kingdom. But because they rejected Him, He postponed it. Instead, He told His disciples about a new age: the church age.

Jesus told them that after His death and resurrection, He would ascend to heaven and He would send them the Holy Spirit.



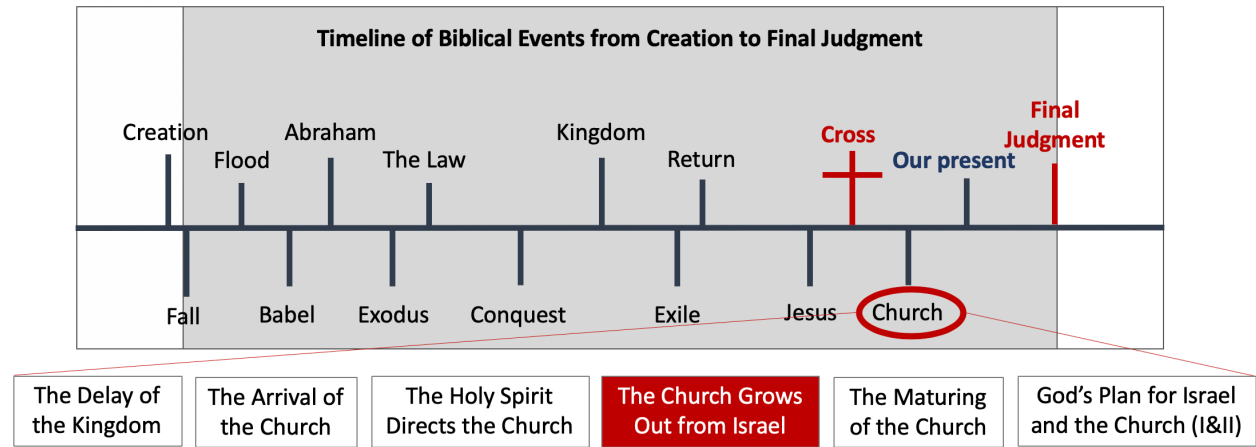
On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit filled the disciples and they began to speak about Jesus in different languages! Three thousand Jews, a mix of those from Judea and the Roman Empire believed and were saved. This was how the Holy Spirit started the church.

The Holy Spirit does many things to help believers. Here are six:



Now, from heaven, Jesus directs the work of the church. And on earth, the Holy Spirit carries out Jesus' orders, working from within each believer.

But what exactly is the church and how did it grow after that Pentecost event?



What is the Church?

The church is the made up of believers in Christ. They are the future citizens of the coming Kingdom of God!



The Bible uses a very interesting picture to describe the church. It says that Jesus is the head of the church and believers make up His body (Colossians 1:18). So every believer is considered to be part of Jesus. This is what Jesus said to Saul (later Paul).

Acts 9:3–5

³ As he was approaching Damascus on this mission, a light from heaven suddenly shone down around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?”

⁵ “Who are you, lord?” Saul asked.

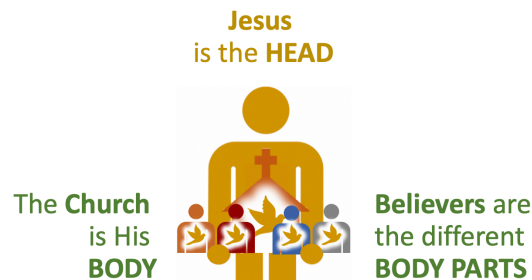
And the voice replied, “I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting!



How was Saul persecuting Jesus? He was hunting for believers, not Jesus. But Jesus said Saul was actually hunting Him! Jesus was saying that He and His followers are one and the same. Paul would later write:

1 Corinthians 12:12–13

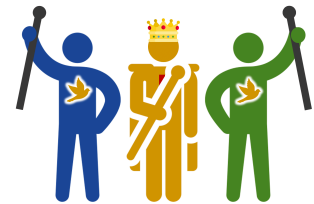
¹² The human body has many parts, but the many parts make up one whole body. So it is with the body of Christ. ¹³ Some of us are Jews, some are Gentiles, some are slaves, and some are free. But we have all been baptized into one body by one Spirit, and we all share the same Spirit.



Actually, earlier on, Yahweh had given Daniel a vision about this. Daniel saw Yahweh give all sovereignty, power and greatness not just to the eternal King Jesus, but also to His people!

Daniel 7:13–14, 27

¹³ As my vision continued that night, I saw someone like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient One and was led into his presence. ¹⁴ He was given authority, honor, and sovereignty over all the nations of the world, so that people of every race and nation and language would obey him. His rule is eternal—it will never end. His kingdom will never be destroyed. ²⁷ Then the sovereignty, power, and greatness of all the kingdoms under heaven will be given to the holy people of the Most High. His kingdom will last forever, and all rulers will serve and obey him.”










The right to rule all the world is given to King Jesus **and** His people. They will rule together because they are spiritually united together as one body.

So during this church age, Jesus is busy building His body, the citizens of the coming Kingdom of God.

But how did the church start at Pentecost? Through the work of the Holy Spirit.

God the Holy Spirit Supernaturally Started the Early Church

In the Old Testament, God always confirmed that the prophets He sent to write Scripture were genuine. And in starting the church, Yahweh did something similar. This was how He confirmed that He had given the apostles and early church leaders spiritual authority.

Old Testament	New Testament
<p>How God proved that the prophets He sent were genuine:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Their teaching always agreed with the rest of Scripture.  <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. They spoke prophecies that came true.  <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. They performed miracles. 	<p>How God proved that apostles and early church leaders He chose were genuine:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Their teaching always agreed with the rest of Scripture.  <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. They prophesied.  <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. They performed miracles.  <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. They spoke in languages they did not know. 



1. Prophecies

God gave new prophecies to these new prophets so that they could write the New Testament.

Importantly, the prophecies showed that the New Testament was a continuation of God's revelation from the Old Testament. This was what Peter said after Jesus' Transfiguration.

2 Peter 1:19–21

¹⁹ Because of that experience, we have even greater confidence in the message proclaimed by the prophets. You must pay close attention to what they wrote, for their words are like a lamp shining in a dark place—until the Day dawns, and Christ the Morning Star shines in your hearts.



²⁰ Above all, you must realize that no prophecy in Scripture ever came from the prophet's own understanding, ²¹ or from human initiative. No, those prophets were moved by the Holy Spirit, and they spoke from God.



Miracles

2. Miracles

When Jesus first came, He performed many miracles by the power of the Holy Spirit to prove that He is God.

Later on, the Holy Spirit also gave the apostles the power to perform miracles to prove that they were genuine and had the authority to speak from God.

These were some of the miracles:

- Peter and John healed the lame man (Acts 3:1–10).
- The apostles performed signs and wonders (Acts 5:12–16).
- Philip performed miracles (Acts 8:6).
- Peter healed Aeneas and raised Tabitha from the dead (Acts 9:32–43).



These miracles caused people to listen to their message and trust that God had indeed sent them. This was what Paul said:

2 Corinthians 12:12

When I was with you, I certainly gave you proof that I am an apostle. For I patiently did many signs and wonders and miracles among you.



3. Languages

God gave His disciples the ability to tell others about Him in languages that they previously didn't know (Acts 2:6–11).

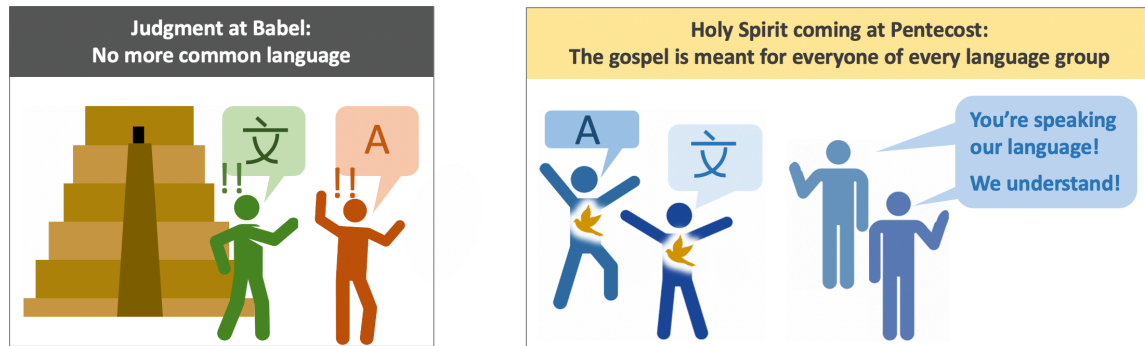
Why did God do that?

Yahweh was showing that His message of salvation must go out to all the world in the many different languages.

At the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11), God sent the judgment of languages so people no longer had a common language.

But by making the disciples now speak in the languages of the world, God was saying that:

- the gospel was meant for everyone all over the world.
- the Bible need not be passed on in its original written languages!

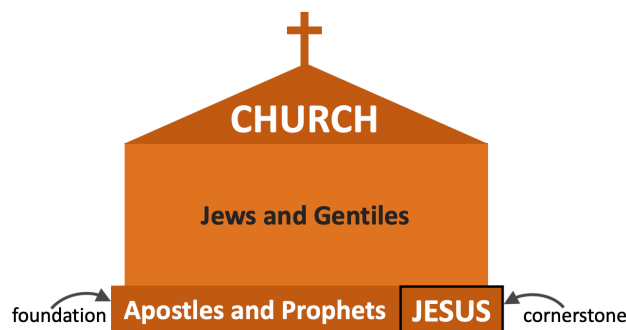


Indeed, God once again confirmed His intention that the whole world hear about Him and be saved!

This was how the Holy Spirit used the apostles and prophets and their gifts to build the foundation of the church. Paul said:

Ephesians 2:20

Together, we are his house, built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. And the cornerstone is Christ Jesus himself.



What is this foundation? It is the New Testament that the Holy Spirit directed them to write. The church must be built on Scripture and their Holy Spirit inspired teachings.

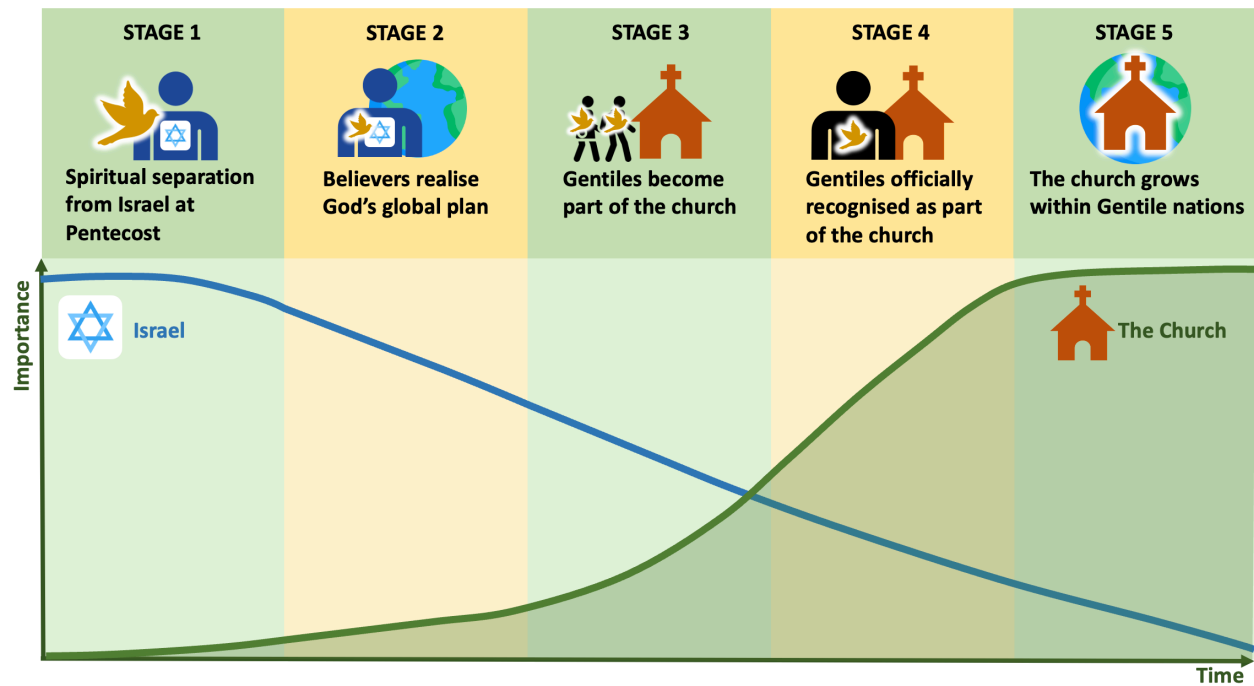
The Growth of the Church

The book of Acts records the beginning, growth and change of the church. The church began in Jerusalem with Jews but the Holy Spirit gradually separated it from Israel.

By the end of Acts, the church was made up mostly of Gentiles and is focused in Rome, the capital of the Gentile Roman Empire! In fact, the church becomes more prominent over time while Israel becomes less significant.

How did this happen?

It happened over the course of one generation (about 30 years) in five stages.



Stage 1: Spiritual Separation from Israel at Pentecost (Acts 2)

It took some time for the apostles to realise that the church began at Pentecost. In fact, immediately after Pentecost, it was hard to tell the difference between the church and Israel. They both did the same things. The only difference was spiritual, where believers were baptised by the Holy Spirit.

ISRAEL: Jews who did not believe in Jesus	THE CHURCH: Jews who believed in Jesus
Worshipped at the Temple	Worshipped at the Temple
Met in synagogues	Met in synagogues
Followed Mosaic Law	Followed Mosaic Law
Shared meals	Shared meals
Not baptised by the Holy Spirit	Baptised by the Holy Spirit

Acts 2:42–47

⁴² All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper), and to prayer. ⁴³ A deep sense of awe came over them all, and the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders.

⁴⁴ And all the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had.

⁴⁵ They sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need.

⁴⁶ They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity— ⁴⁷ all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people. And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved.

**Stage 2: Believers realise God's worldwide plan (Acts 6–7)**

God had planned all along that people all over the world would come to know His history and truth and come to believe in the Saviour, Jesus. In fact, before Jesus ascended to heaven, this was what He told His disciples.

Matthew 28:19–20

¹⁹ Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. ²⁰ Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

Acts 1:8

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

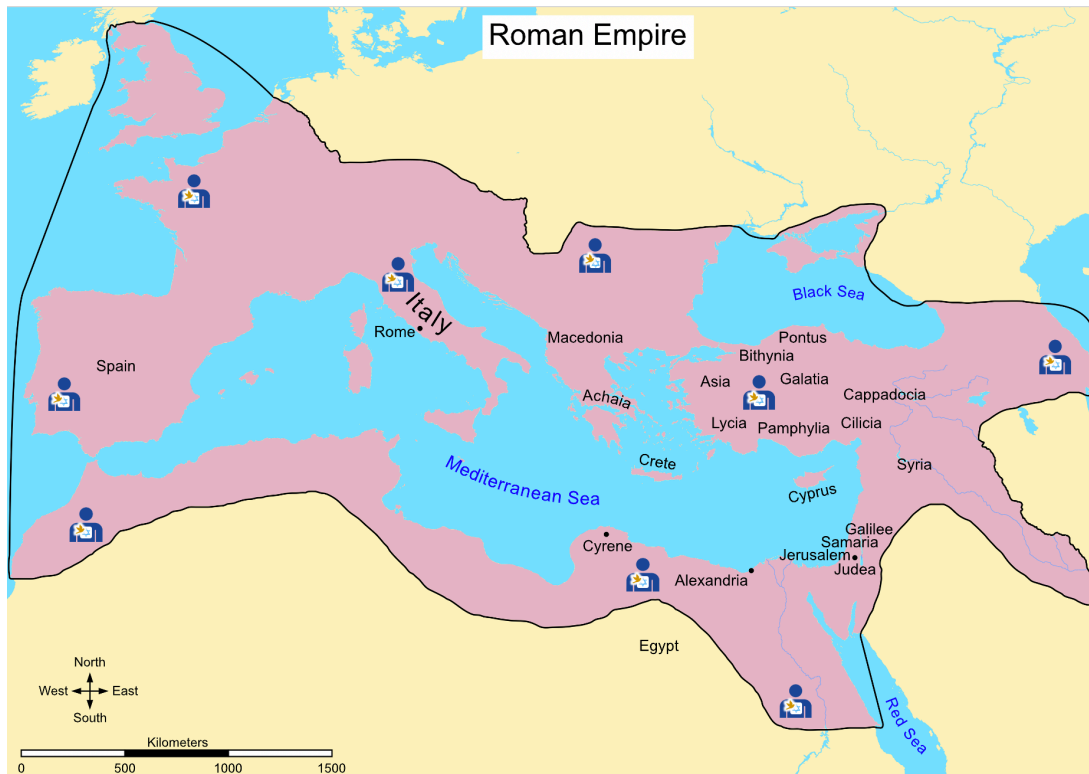
However, Jesus' disciples had never travelled outside of Judea. They knew very little of the world. And even after the Holy Spirit started the church, these men didn't leave Judea. They didn't yet obey Jesus' command to go out into the world.

But God had a plan. He used other Jews to go out into the other nations. Who were they?

During the time of the exile, the Jews were scattered all over the world. These Jews set up homes in foreign lands and learnt the local cultures and languages. But they still clung to their Jewish roots. They were known as the Diaspora (or dispersed) Jews.

As the church grew, many of these Greek-speaking Diaspora Jews from across the Roman Empire became believers.

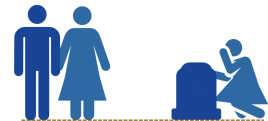
Unlike the initial disciples, these Diaspora Jews lived in foreign lands and they had a much larger view and understanding of the world.



So now, God was going to use them to grow the church. This is how it happened.

1. Some Diaspora Jews returned to Jerusalem, but that caused some unhappiness.

Some Diaspora Jews went back to live in Jerusalem because many wanted to die and be buried there. But after they died, they left behind widows.



Acts 6:1

But as the believers rapidly multiplied, there were rumblings of discontent. The Greek-speaking believers complained about the Hebrew-speaking believers, saying that their widows were being discriminated against in the daily distribution of food.

2. The apostles appointed seven believers to take charge of the food programme.

When these food problems came up, the apostles chose seven believers to help manage the distribution of the food. They said that as apostles and leaders of the church, their main priority was to teach the Word and pray. And they must not be distracted from that.

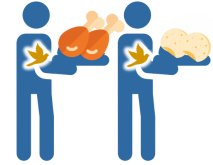


Main job of apostles in the church:
Teach the Word and Pray

So they delegated the rest of the work to capable believers.

Acts 6:5–6

⁵ Everyone liked this idea, and they chose the following: Stephen (a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit), Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas of Antioch (an earlier convert to the Jewish faith). ⁶ These seven were presented to the apostles, who prayed for them as they laid their hands on them.



All seven men were Diaspora Jews and had Greek names. The Holy Spirit chose them to be part of the leadership of the church because He was preparing the church to move out beyond Jerusalem.

3. Stephen preached in Greek-speaking synagogues.

One of the seven leaders was a man called Stephen. Besides managing the food programme, he started sharing the gospel with people from outside of Judea. Specifically, he went to speak with other Diaspora Jews at Greek-speaking synagogues.



But these Jews didn't like what he was saying, so they made false accusations to get rid of him.

Acts 6:8–14

⁸ Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed amazing miracles and signs among the people. ⁹ But one day some men from the Synagogue of Freed Slaves, as it was called, started to debate with him. They were Jews from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, and the province of Asia. ¹⁰ None of them could stand against the wisdom and the Spirit with which Stephen spoke. ¹¹ So they persuaded some men to lie about Stephen, saying, "We heard him blaspheme Moses, and even God."

¹² This roused the people, the elders, and the teachers of religious law. So they arrested Stephen and brought him before the high council. ¹³ The lying witnesses said, "This man is always speaking against the holy Temple and against the law of Moses. ¹⁴ We have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy the Temple and change the customs Moses handed down to us."

4. Stephen defends himself with a speech to the Jewish council (Acts 7:2–53)

Stephen was forced to give a defence against the two false accusations. What did he say? He knew the Jews were fanatical about the Mosaic Law, their Temple and being Jewish. So in his speech, Stephen pointed out two very important things.

He said that Yahweh's plan was always more than just about Israel.

Israel, as a chosen nation, was just a part of God's worldwide plan to save all mankind and nature.

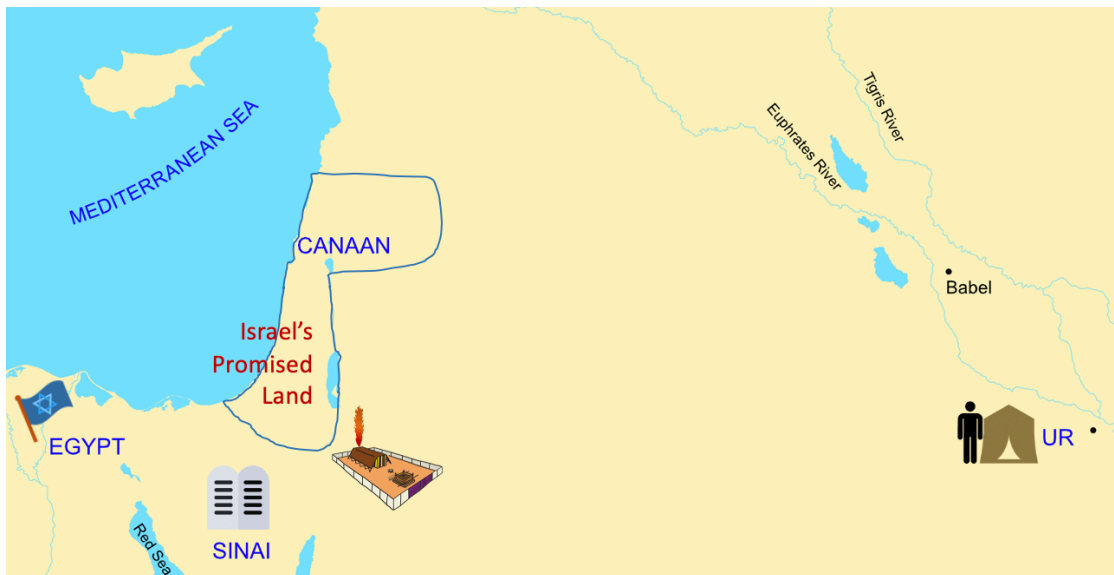
In fact, everything they valued as “Jewish” didn’t even start in Jerusalem or Israel! God started all of it outside of Israel.

The Jews were fanatical about the Mosaic Law, their Temple and being Jewish

Stephen told them that God’s work and plan was bigger than Israel

		
God called Abraham outside of Israel	God gave the Mosaic Law outside of Israel	God met with them in the Tabernacle outside of Israel

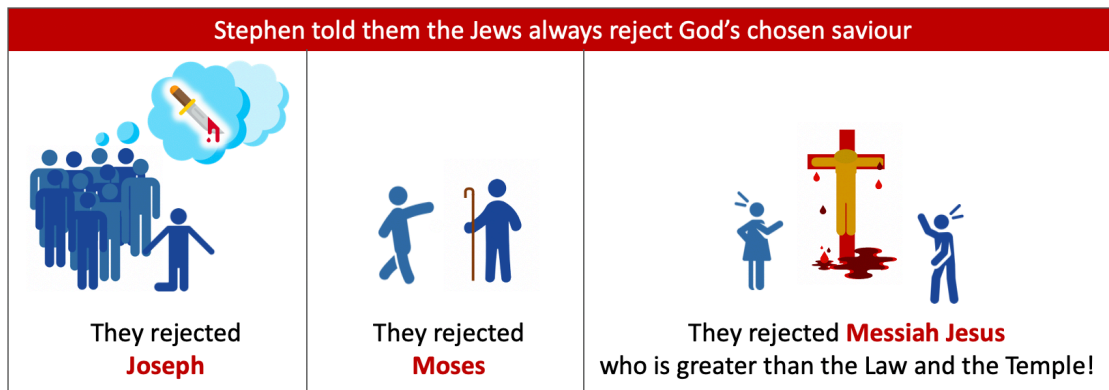
- Israel began with a Gentile man named Abraham who was living in the Gentile land of Ur, outside of Israel.
- God started the nation of Israel while they were in Egypt, a pagan land, outside of Israel.
- God gave the Israelites their law while they were in the desert of Sinai, outside of Israel.
- God first met with the Israelites in a mobile tent (the Tabernacle) in the wilderness, outside of Israel.



Stephen was pointing out that all the Israelites treasured about being Jewish actually started outside of Israel.

This is because God always had in mind a more universal plan, a plan that was meant for the whole world and not just for Israel.

Stephen also said that from the start, Israel always rejected God’s chosen saviour.



- **Joseph:** God gave Joseph two dreams about him ruling over his family (Genesis 37:5–11). Those dreams were pointing to Joseph one day saving his family from starvation in a famine. But his brothers got jealous of him, rejected him and tried to kill him. They rejected God’s appointed saviour for their family. But God was not thwarted. God used Joseph to save his family from death anyway.
- **Moses:** God chose Moses to save the Jews, but when Moses defended a Jew by killing an Egyptian, the Jews rejected him (Exodus 2:11–15). They rejected God’s chosen saviour. But again, that did not stop God from sending Moses back later to rescue Israel from Egypt.
- **Jesus:** God sent Jesus to save Israel and all mankind. But once again, the Jews missed the point and rejected the Saviour God sent. But Jesus would still accomplish His work. This was what Stephen said:

Acts 7:51–53

⁵¹ “You stubborn people! You are heathen at heart and deaf to the truth. Must you forever resist the Holy Spirit? That’s what your ancestors did, and so do you! ⁵² Name one prophet your ancestors didn’t persecute! They even killed the ones who predicted the coming of the Righteous One—the Messiah whom you betrayed and murdered. ⁵³ You deliberately disobeyed God’s law, even though you received it from the hands of angels.”

5. The Jews responded quickly and violently to Stephen’s speech!

Acts 7:54–60

⁵⁴ The Jewish leaders were infuriated by Stephen’s accusation, and they shook their fists at him in rage. ⁵⁵ But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed steadily into heaven and saw the glory of God, and he saw Jesus standing in the place of honor at God’s right hand.

⁵⁶ And he told them, “Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing in the place of honor at God’s right hand!”

⁵⁷ Then they put their hands over their ears and began shouting. They rushed at him

⁵⁸ and dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. His accusers took off their coats and laid them at the feet of a young man named Saul.

⁵⁹ As they stoned him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” ⁶⁰ He fell to his knees, shouting, “Lord, don’t charge them with this sin!” And with that, he died.



The young church had started inside Israel. But now, with the violent death of Stephen, there was a disagreement between believing and unbelieving Jews.

From this point on, believing Jews and unbelieving Jews would not agree on who Jesus is.



Stage 3: Gentiles become part of the church (Acts 8–11)

The killing of Stephen led to a wave of persecution. The believers, except the apostles, fled to the surrounding regions.

God the Holy Spirit was pushing the church to obey Jesus’ command to go out of Israel to tell others about God. The church didn’t plan this move. The Holy Spirit had to force them out using persecution.

Previously, we learnt that at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit indwelt the apostles and all believing Jews with them. We also learnt that after Pentecost, the Holy Spirit indwells a person immediately and permanently the moment they come to faith in Christ.

However, the apostles were slow to understand that Jesus’ salvation was available not just to the Jews, but to everyone in the world. So the Holy Spirit had to teach this to the apostles in a very visible and dramatic way. There must not be any doubt in their minds that salvation and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is for everyone who comes to faith. How did the Holy Spirit teach this to them? He used a series of three “mini-Pentecosts”.

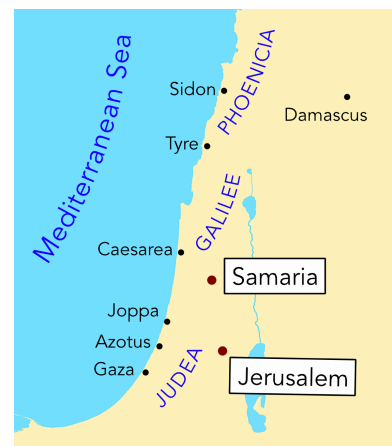
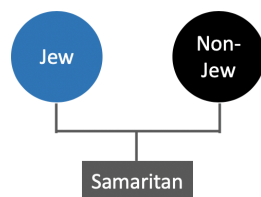


Samaritans

Mini-Pentecost #1: Samaria (Acts 8:5–25)

After Stephen’s death, another of the seven leaders, Philip, went north to Samaria.

The Samaritans were half-Jews. During the Exile, Assyria and Babylon brought foreigners into Israel and they intermarried with the remaining Jews. Their descendants were the Samaritans.



The Jews despised them because they:

- were a mixed race
- had their own culture
- had rewritten Scripture
- had developed their own understanding about God so they could claim to be part of the Abrahamic Covenant. (Jesus dealt with their wrong understanding of Scripture in John 4:5–42.)

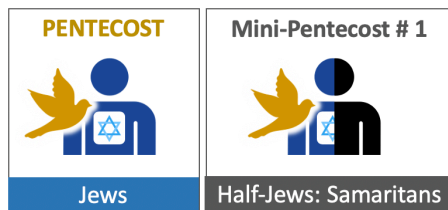
Philip shared the gospel with them. And they believed and were baptised (Acts 8:12)!

When the apostles found out there were Samaritan believers, Peter and John went to meet with them. And when they prayed for them, these Samaritans also received the Holy Spirit!

Acts 8:15–17

¹⁵ As soon as they arrived, they prayed for these new believers to receive the Holy Spirit.

¹⁶ The Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them, for they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ¹⁷ Then Peter and John laid their hands upon these believers, and they received the Holy Spirit.



It was very important that Peter and John saw and experienced this. Why?

They were at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit first came down and now, they recognised the Samaritans had also received the same Holy Spirit just like they did! In fact, this was a mini version of Pentecost among the Samaritans!

The Holy Spirit was showing the apostles that these half-Jews could also receive salvation through Jesus and be included in the body of Christ!

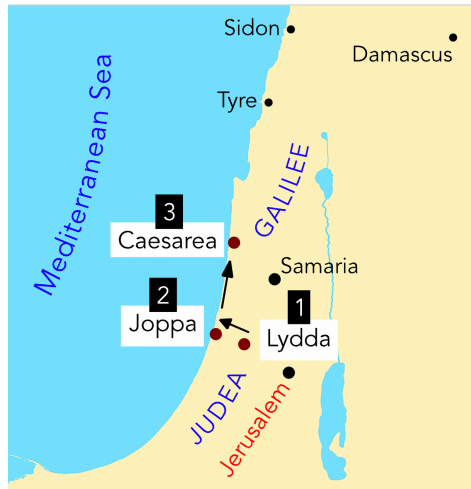
This was the first of three “mini-Pentecosts”. Each new mini-Pentecost was a signal to the church that God wanted salvation to go out even farther and wider.



Mini-Pentecost #2: The Gentiles (Acts 9:32–10:48)

Next, the Holy Spirit used Peter to tell the church that God was offering salvation to the Gentiles also! How did this happen?

1. Peter was first led to the town of Lydda where he healed a paralysed man, Aeneas. Many believed because of this (Acts 9:32–36).



2. In the town of Joppa, a believer named Tabitha became very ill. Since Peter was nearby, the believers asked for him. By the time he arrived, she had died but Peter performed a miracle and revived her, causing more people to believe (Acts 9:36–43).
3. Meanwhile, in the town of Caesarea, the Holy Spirit gave a Roman army officer, a centurion named Cornelius, a vision of an angel. The angel told Cornelius to send men to get Peter (Acts 10:1–8). Cornelius was a Gentile, in charge of the Italian Regiment, which had come directly from Rome. He was European and he believed in Yahweh. However, he was probably not clear about Jesus.

The next day, back in Joppa, the Holy Spirit gave Peter a vision three times. Peter saw a large sheet come down from the sky and in it were all kinds of animals that the Jews could not eat under Mosaic Law. But God's voice said to kill and eat the animals (Acts 10:9–13)!



What did this mean? The Holy Spirit was preparing Peter to meet Cornelius and not just meet him, but to eat a meal with the Gentile, something that Jews simply did not do!

But because of the vision, Peter went with Cornelius's men to meet him and his family in Caesarea.

Peter ate his first Gentile meal with them. When Peter heard how God had spoken to Cornelius, he realised what the Holy Spirit had been doing.

Acts 10:34–35

³⁴ Then Peter replied, “I see very clearly that God shows no favoritism. ³⁵ In every nation he accepts those who fear him and do what is right.

Then Peter told them about Jesus.

Acts 10:44–48

⁴⁴ Even as Peter was saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who were listening to the message. ⁴⁵ The Jewish believers who came with Peter were amazed that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles, too. ⁴⁶ For they heard them speaking in other tongues and praising God.



Then Peter asked, ⁴⁷ “Can anyone object to their being baptized, now that they have received the Holy Spirit just as we did?” ⁴⁸ So he gave orders for them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Afterward Cornelius asked him to stay with them for several days.

Peter and the other Jewish believers were amazed to see the Holy Spirit come upon Cornelius and his household just as He did at Pentecost! The Gentiles even spoke in foreign languages!

Cornelius and his family weren’t Jews; they weren’t even half-Jews. They were Gentiles from Europe!



What was the Holy Spirit doing?

He was opening Peter’s eyes to what Yahweh was doing: God was telling them His gospel had to go out to all the world just as Jesus had commanded.

By coming in such a dramatic way on the Gentiles, God was giving visible proof to Peter of the invisible indwelling of the Holy Spirit. He was showing they were now Christians!



Mini-Pentecost #3: “Old Testament” Believers

The Holy Spirit was not done. While the first two “mini-Pentecosts” happened with Peter, the third and final one happened with Paul.

Paul was in Ephesus when he met a group of John the Baptist’s disciples. Although they had been baptised by John, they were still living under Mosaic Law.



But as Paul spoke to them, the Holy Spirit came upon the men!

Acts 19:1–7

¹ While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul traveled through the interior regions until he reached Ephesus, on the coast, where he found several believers. ² “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” he asked them.

“No,” they replied, “we haven’t even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.”

³ “Then what baptism did you experience?” he asked.

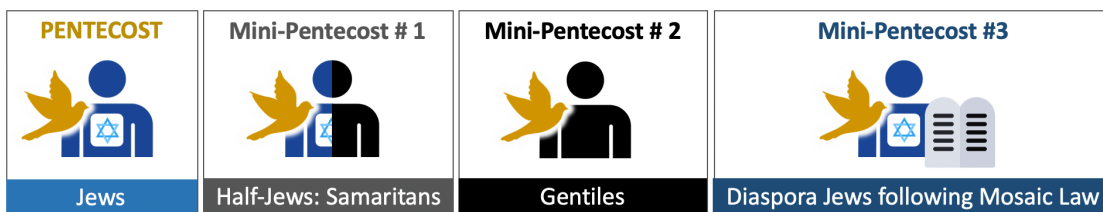
And they replied, “The baptism of John.”

⁴ Paul said, “John’s baptism called for repentance from sin. But John himself told the people to believe in the one who would come later, meaning Jesus.” ⁵ As soon as they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ⁶ Then when Paul laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in other tongues and prophesied. ⁷ There were about twelve men in all.

These Jewish disciples who still followed Mosaic Law now received the baptism of the Holy Spirit! For Paul, it was visible proof of the Holy Spirit’s invisible indwelling.

Yahweh was saying that everyone who trusts in Him must stop trying to make themselves right through Mosaic Law. Rather, they need to trust in Jesus and Yahweh will make them right with Him.

God showed clearly that both half-Jews (Samaritans) and complete Gentiles who trusted Jesus for salvation were also baptised by the Holy Spirit. He was making the apostles understand that the gospel was meant not just for the Jews, but for everyone in the world.



These “mini-Pentecosts” were a visible and dramatic teaching. Once the apostles understood this, there were no further incidents of such dramatic indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Instead, believers simply trust in God’s Word, that indeed, all who believe immediately receive the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 6:16).

Through these unique events, the Holy Spirit was making it very clear that God wants the message of Jesus to go out to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth.



Stage 4: The Gentiles are officially recognised as part of the church (Acts 15:1–32)

Beginning with Cornelius, more and more Gentiles became believers and joined the church as the gospel went out among them.

In fact, there was a growing church in the Gentile city of Antioch in Syria where Paul and Barnabas were teaching.

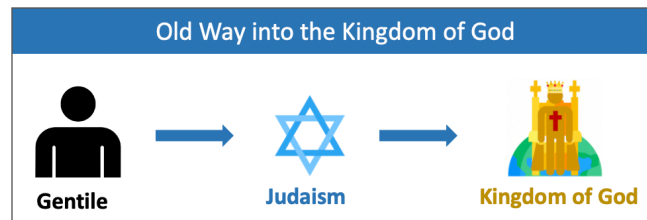


But problems started when some Jewish believers from Jerusalem went to Antioch to teach.

These believers still followed Mosaic Law and thought that to be right with God, people still had to follow the ways of the Jews.

Acts 15:1

While Paul and Barnabas were at Antioch of Syria, some men from Judea arrived and began to teach the believers: “Unless you are circumcised as required by the law of Moses, you cannot be saved.”



Jesus had already said at His first coming that it was only by believing in Him that people will be saved (John 11:25). They will not be saved through following Mosaic Law. In fact, no human can fulfil the requirements of the Law except Jesus Himself, the God-man (Matthew 5:17–20).

But when these Jews came to believe in Jesus, they continued following Mosaic Law. And now they were insisting that Gentile believers do the same!

Because of this disagreement, the early church held a very formal meeting, or a council, to discuss this. The meeting was in Jerusalem and it was a normal meeting, not something filled with signs and wonders.

Acts 15:6–11

⁶ So the apostles and elders met together to resolve this issue. ⁷ At the meeting, after a long discussion, Peter stood and addressed them as follows: “Brothers, you all know that God chose me from among you some time ago to preach to the Gentiles so that they could hear the Good News and believe.



⁸ God knows people’s hearts, and he confirmed that he accepts Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us. ⁹ He made no distinction between us and them, for he cleansed their hearts through faith.

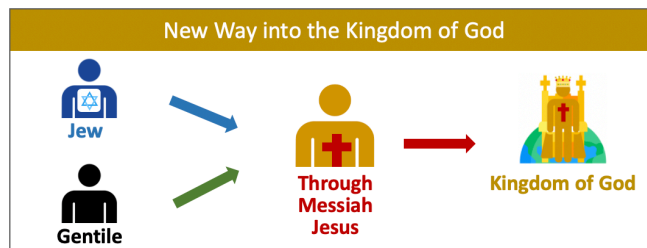
¹⁰ So why are you now challenging God by burdening the Gentile believers with a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors were able to bear? ¹¹ We believe that we are all saved the same way, by the undeserved grace of the Lord Jesus.”

It was interesting that it was Peter who spoke to the crowd. Why?

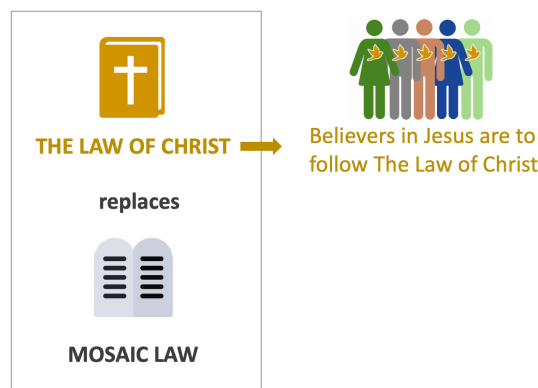
Earlier, the Holy Spirit had taught him very personally, through the Pentecost and mini-Pentecost #1 (Samaritans) and #2 (Gentiles), that it was God’s plan to have both Jews and Gentiles saved by faith in Jesus alone. So he was the best person to tell the others about this.

Peter said that their Jewish ancestors were not able to obey the Mosaic Law, so why were they now forcing the Gentiles to follow it?

Instead, he said that both Jews and Gentiles would be saved and made citizens of the coming Kingdom by trusting in Jesus.



The Gentiles were not to follow Mosaic Law but rather obey the Law of Christ.



On a separate issue, the council also realised that the church was now made up of both Jews and Gentiles. Both groups had very different cultures and practices.

How would they be able to get along, eat together and have fellowship?

In order to help Jews and Gentiles fellowship together, the council wrote a letter to the Gentile believers with the following advice:



Acts 15:28–29

²⁸ “For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay no greater burden on you than these few requirements:

²⁹ You must abstain from eating food offered to idols, from consuming blood or the meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality. If you do this, you will do well. Farewell.”

What was the meaning of these instructions? They were not meant to be legalistic.

- **Food:** The Jewish believers should be coming out of living under the Mosaic Law. But at this point, many were still following it. If the Gentiles were sensitive to their food restrictions and habits, then both Jews and Gentile believers could comfortably eat a meal together and have fellowship.
- **Sexual immorality:** With regards to relationships and sexual practices, many Gentiles had followed pagan habits all their lives. If the Gentiles better understood and lived by God’s standards regarding sexual relationships, again, their fellowship with the Jews would be free from tension and awkwardness.

With Gentiles now officially part of the growing church, the church was quickly moving away from its Jewish roots.



Stage 5: The church grows within the Gentile nations (Acts 16, 21, 28)

A. The Church in Asia Minor

God chose Paul to be the main apostle to share the gospel with the Gentiles and Diaspora Jews. Along with companions like Luke, Barnabas, Timothy, Silas and many others, Paul spent years going through areas of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey).

When entering a new city, Paul’s habit was to speak at the synagogue first. He used the Old Testament to explain how Jesus was the Messiah.

Many Jews and Gentiles came to believe (Acts 14:1). But some Jews were angry that Paul said there was no need to follow Mosaic Law anymore.

So while the number of Gentile believers increased, there was a growing split between Israel and the church:

- The church started out in Israel with a focus on Mosaic Law.
- But more and more, the church grew and concentrated itself in Asia with a focus on the grace of God.



B. The Holy Spirit directs the church into Europe (Acts 16)

Now the Holy Spirit was going to direct Paul to physically take the gospel into Europe.

Acts 16:9–10

⁹ That night Paul had a vision: A man from Macedonia in northern Greece was standing there, pleading with him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us!” ¹⁰ So we decided to leave for Macedonia at once, having concluded that God was calling us to preach the Good News there.

The gospel was going into Europe! This was very important. It was no accident.



Right from the beginning in Genesis, Yahweh had already planned that His history and truth would go into Europe!

How do we know this?

God shared this through Noah's prophecy about the nations!

After Noah realised that his son Ham had dishonoured him while he was drunk and naked, Noah spoke a prophecy over his three sons.

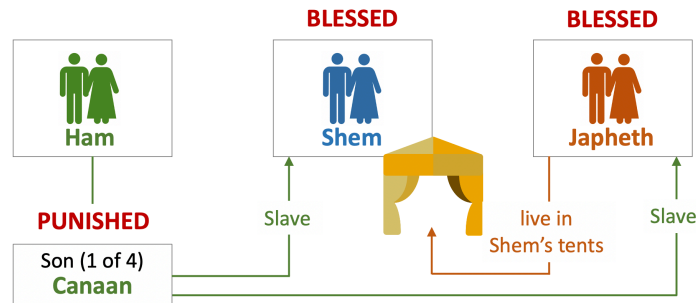
Genesis 9:24–27 (NIV)

²⁴ When Noah awoke from his wine and found out what his youngest son had done to him,
²⁵ he said,

“Cursed be Canaan!
 The lowest of slaves
 will he be to his brothers.”

²⁶ He also said,

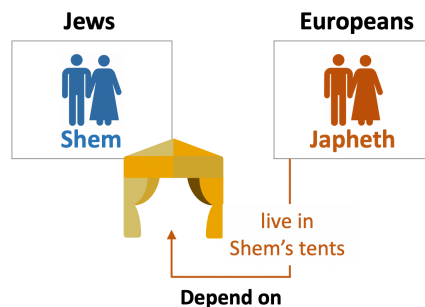
“Praise be to the LORD, the God of Shem!
 May Canaan be the slave of Shem.
²⁷ May God extend Japheth's territory;
may Japheth live in the tents of Shem,
 and may Canaan be the slave of Japheth.”



- Genesis 10 said that from Shem came the peoples of the Middle East, including the Jews.
- From Japheth came the Europeans. They would become world conquerors (verse 27a).

But what Noah said after that was very interesting. Noah said that Japheth would “live in the tents of Shem” (verse 27b). What does this mean?

- It means Japheth’s descendants (the Europeans) would depend on the descendants of Shem (the Jews).



How and why would Japheth depend on Shem?

- The Saviour and the gospel would come from the Jews and go to the Europeans! The Europeans would be blessed in the “tents” of the Jews.

Even way back in Genesis, God had already planned for how His gospel would go out into the world!

C. The Holy Spirit directs the church into Rome (Acts 21–28)

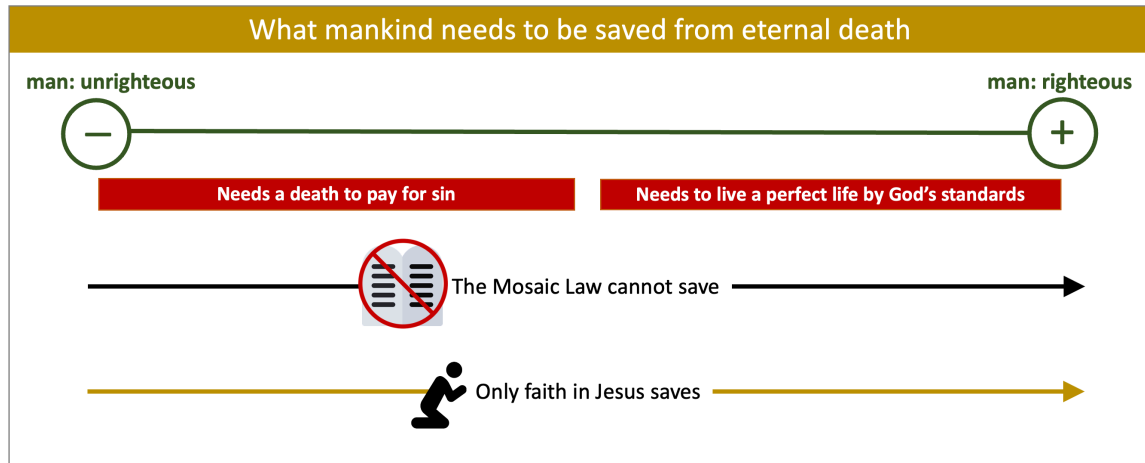
After Paul’s travels in Europe, the Holy Spirit led him back to Jerusalem. Paul told the church leaders that many Gentiles were coming to faith in Christ and they all praised God for it (Acts 21:18–20).

But the church leaders also told Paul there was a problem. Thousands of Jewish believers in Jerusalem were still following Mosaic Law very seriously. And they were upset to hear the Diaspora Jews reporting that Paul had been asking Jewish believers to forget about Mosaic Law.

Actually, Paul didn't say that. The Diaspora Jews misunderstood Paul's teaching. He taught that even though the Law was good, it could not save anyone. Only faith in Jesus saves. This was what he explained to the church in Galatia.

Galatians 5:5–6

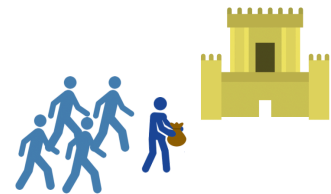
⁵ But we who live by the Spirit eagerly wait to receive by faith the righteousness God has promised to us. ⁶ For when we place our faith in Christ Jesus, there is no benefit in being circumcised or being uncircumcised. What is important is faith expressing itself in love.



This issue about the Law was the same problem that happened in Acts 15 that led to the first church council! It was supposed to have been resolved then, but clearly, it had not.

The church leaders, especially James the half-brother of Jesus, were concerned. But they did something strange.

Instead of clarifying Paul's (and therefore Jesus') teaching with the Jewish believers, they convinced Paul to show that he still respected Mosaic Law. How? They told him to accompany four Jews who had taken a vow and pay for their sacrificial offerings at the Temple. This was probably the Nazarite vow in Numbers 6 (Acts 21:20–24).



However, the plan didn't work. In fact, it was a disaster! Jews from Asia Minor who had heard Paul teach were not convinced that Paul was supportive of Mosaic Law. They stirred up the crowds and started a mob of probably thousands of people (Acts 21:27–30)! They dragged Paul out of the Temple (because the Jews didn't want to spoil their temple).

When the Roman army saw the riot, they immediately sent centurions and troops to stop it. Ironically, it was the Gentile Roman army that saved Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, from his own people, the Jews (Acts 21:31–32)!



After the Romans investigated the incident Paul was sent by ship to Rome (Acts 25:12). Actually, Rome was exactly where God the Holy Spirit wanted Paul to go (Acts 19:21, 23:11).



When Paul arrived in Rome, he was placed under house arrest to await trial (Acts 28:16).

While under house arrest, he arranged a special all-day meeting with the Roman Jews. He explained to them from the Old Testament how Jesus was the Messiah.



Some believed but others did not (Acts 28:17–24). Paul then said these last words to the unbelieving Jews before they left. He quoted from the prophet Isaiah:

Acts 28:25–28

²⁵ And after they had argued back and forth among themselves, they left with this final word from Paul: “The Holy Spirit was right when he said to your ancestors through Isaiah the prophet,

²⁶ ‘Go and say to this people:

When you hear what I say,
you will not understand.

When you see what I do,
you will not comprehend.

²⁷ For the hearts of these people are hardened,
and their ears cannot hear,
and they have closed their eyes—
so their eyes cannot see,
and their ears cannot hear,

and their hearts cannot understand,
and they cannot turn to me
and let me heal them.'

²⁸ So I want you to know that this salvation from God has also been offered to the Gentiles, and they will accept it."



This rejection by the Roman Jews was the final record in Acts of the Jews' overall response to Jesus.

Paul said that from then on, the Holy Spirit would focus on taking the gospel to the Gentiles and the Gentiles would accept it.

God used Paul mightily to bring the gospel to many in Asia and Europe. But Paul also wrote letters to encourage and rebuke the Gentile churches. These places were where his letters went.



This was how God the Holy Spirit grew, directed and expanded the church into all the world. Starting from the Jews in Jerusalem, God used the Diaspora Jews and finally even the Gentiles.

The Church Today

Till this day, Jesus, the head of the church, is directing the Holy Spirit to build up the body of believers. These believers are the citizens of the soon-to-return Kingdom of God.

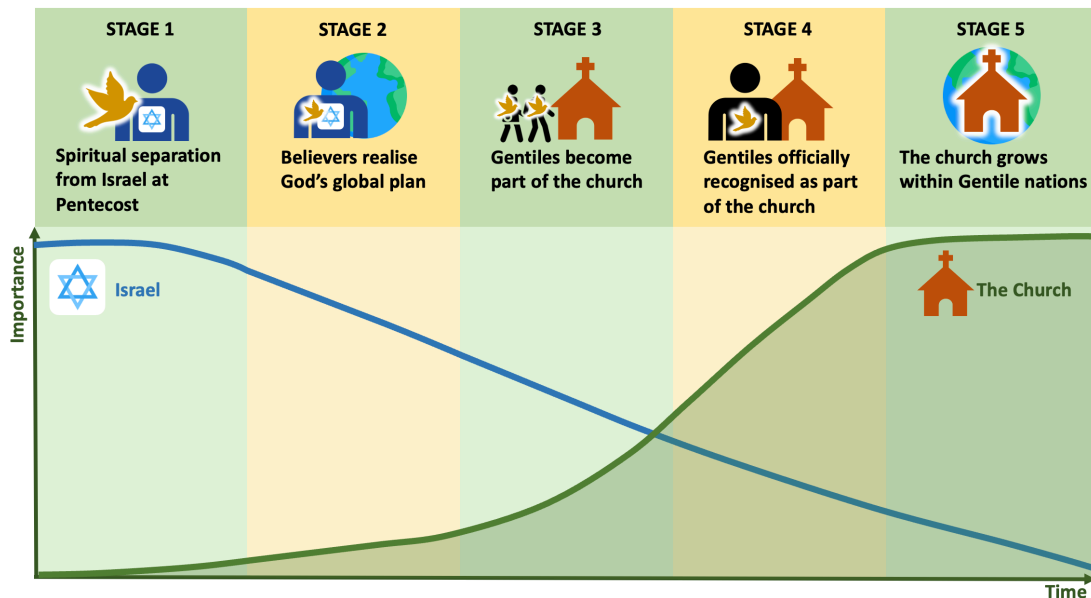
This period of filling the church with Gentiles is still going on today, but it will end at some point in the future. After that, God will once again focus on His chosen people, the Jews (Romans 11:25–27).

Should we expect the experience of the early church to be our experience as well?

It is important for us to understand that the book of Acts is a book of transition.

Transition 1

The church started off focused in Jerusalem with the Jews and ends with its focus in Rome with Gentiles.



Transition 2

The church started with many signs and miracles because God wanted to confirm that the apostles were representing Him and writing Scripture. It ended with the fading away of these signs and miracles when the New Testament Scriptures were completed.



For example, at the start of the church, God confirmed His message with special gifts to prove that the apostles were doing His work. But later believers, like the author of Hebrews, looked back at what God did during that period as something that had happened in the past. (In writing the book of Hebrews, he particularly used the past tense in verse 4.)

Hebrews 2:3–4

³ So what makes us think we can escape if we ignore this great salvation that was first announced by the Lord Jesus himself and then delivered to us by those who heard him speak? ⁴ And God confirmed the message by giving signs and wonders and various miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit whenever he chose.

Like his readers, the author of Hebrews was looking back to the time of miraculous confirmation of the gospel message. It seems by the time he wrote, that period had already come and gone.

Similarly, the Bible describes the different stages of Paul's ministry. Note how it was like at the early stages of his ministry.

Acts 19:11–12

¹¹ God gave Paul the power to perform unusual miracles. ¹² When handkerchiefs or aprons that had merely touched his skin were placed on sick people, they were healed of their diseases, and evil spirits were expelled.



Such a gift really made the people sit up and listen to what Paul was teaching!

But once his authority as an apostle was established, this supernatural ability faded. In fact, later in his ministry, Paul couldn't even heal his close friends. This is what Paul said about:

Epaphroditus

He almost died and Paul could do nothing about it.

Philippians 2:25–27

²⁵ Meanwhile, I thought I should send Epaphroditus back to you. He is a true brother, co-worker, and fellow soldier. And he was your messenger to help me in my need. ²⁶ I am sending him because he has been longing to see you, and he was very distressed that you heard he was ill. ²⁷ And he certainly was ill; in fact, he almost died. But God had mercy on him—and also on me, so that I would not have one sorrow after another.

Timothy

He had a long-term condition that Paul could not heal.

1 Timothy 5:23

Don't drink only water. You ought to drink a little wine for the sake of your stomach because you are sick so often.

Paul also left Trophimus ill at Miletus (2 Timothy 4:20). Actually, Paul said some of these special abilities like prophecies and speaking in tongues (foreign languages) would stop.

1 Corinthians 13:8 (ESV)

Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away.

Why would these gifts stop?

1. While the apostles and prophets were teaching and writing the New Testament, knowledge (information from God), prophecy and tongues were important to establish that they were speaking and writing from God.

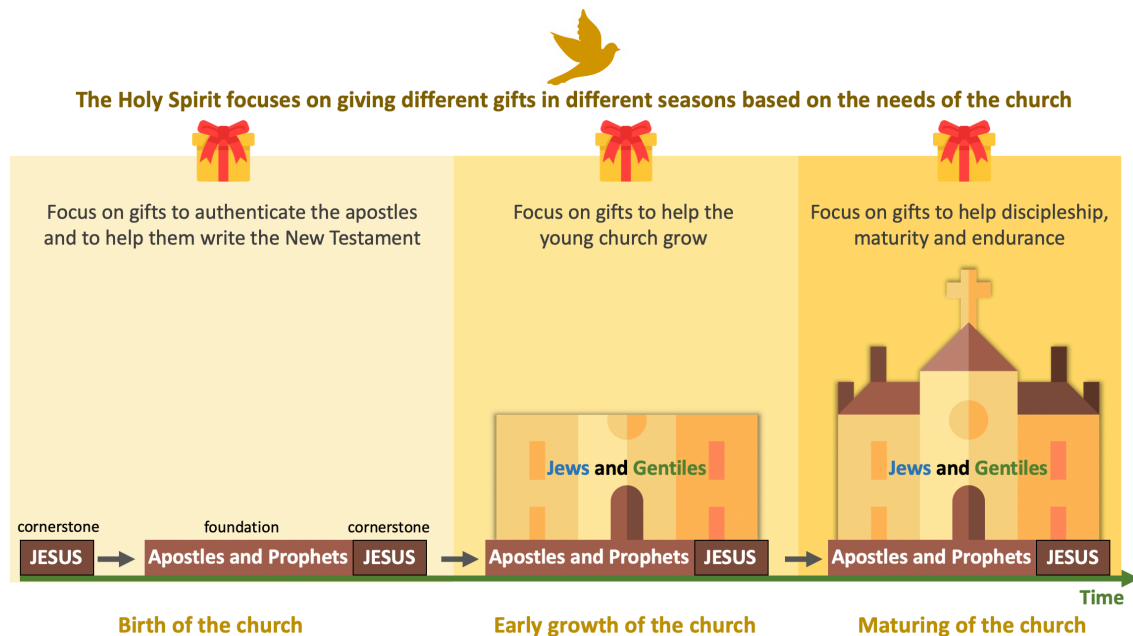
But once the Bible was completed, these gifts would have done their job. Hence these gifts were limited and temporary. That was why Paul told the Corinthian church to desire love instead.

2. So we understand that every gift is given for the building and maturing of the church (1 Corinthians 14:12). Some are for the early years of the church and others are meant to continue till the end of the church age, according to the needs of the church as a whole.

Ephesians 4:11–13, 16

¹¹ Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. ¹² Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ. ¹³ This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ.

¹⁶ He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love.



The church was built on Christ and then His appointed apostles and prophets. But once the apostles finished their job of writing the New Testament (about AD 95), the full Bible, the Old and New Testaments, became the authority. There were no longer apostles and prophets. It was then that the early gifts of the Holy Spirit faded.

We now live almost 2,000 years after the start of the church. If we understand that the book of Acts is a book of transition, we should not be surprised that our experience in the body of Christ is not the same as that of the early chapters of Acts. Specifically:

- the church is international and no longer focused on Israel and
- the signs and miracles we saw in Acts are not the “normal” Christian experience we should expect.

Does God do miracles like heal today?

God still supernaturally heals people today. Sometimes, as Christians pray for loved ones, God heals them from medical problems and even terminal illnesses. Many of us have heard testimonies like that or have even experienced it in our lives.

However, God also leaves others unhealed despite the faithful and persistent prayers of many. A lot of Christians struggle with why we or our loved ones are “left out” of this healing especially when we hear of how good God has been to others. It is painful.

When does God heal and when does He not?

We don’t know. God is sovereign and He alone decides if and when He will heal.

We must not make the mistake of claiming or thinking we can harness, control or manipulate God into healing someone. We cannot predict or guarantee when and why God decides to heal a person.

Some Christians wrongly say that the actual reason God doesn’t heal is lack of faith. They claim that if we persistently beg God and then believe without doubting, God will definitely heal.

Paul did not lack faith. But after he prayed for God to remove his “thorn in the flesh” and God said no, Paul stopped asking. He accepted God’s answer and submitted to His will.

2 Corinthians 12:8–9

⁸ Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away. ⁹ Each time he said, “My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.” So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me.

Faith is submitting ourselves to God’s sovereign will. Faith is not nagging God until He gives us what we want.



Yes, God can and does heal today. But while we live in this fallen world with our fallen bodies, we know that God will not heal everyone now. But He will definitely restore all of us later. We will all get our promised glorified bodies.

Can we submit to His will even if we can't understand or don't agree with His decision? Can we trust that He is indeed the sovereign God who has reasons for why He does things even if He doesn't tell them to us? Can we trust in His faithfulness and goodness? And ultimately, can we trust that this pain, suffering and disease is temporary?

How do I discover my spiritual gifts and what should I do with them?

1. We need to know that the Holy Spirit distributes the gifts as He decides and no gift is given to all.

1 Corinthians 12:4–11

⁴ There are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but the same Spirit is the source of them all. ⁵ There are different kinds of service, but we serve the same Lord. ⁶ God works in different ways, but it is the same God who does the work in all of us.

⁷ A spiritual gift is given to each of us so we can help each other. ⁸ To one person the Spirit gives the ability to give wise advice; to another the same Spirit gives a message of special knowledge. ⁹ The same Spirit gives great faith to another, and to someone else the one Spirit gives the gift of healing. ¹⁰ He gives one person the power to perform miracles, and another the ability to prophesy. He gives someone else the ability to discern whether a message is from the Spirit of God or from another spirit. Still another person is given the ability to speak in unknown languages, while another is given the ability to interpret what is being said. ¹¹ It is the one and only Spirit who distributes all these gifts. He alone decides which gift each person should have.

Each believer **gets at least one gift**. Often we don't get the same gift as others. In fact, in any group of believers, their gifts complement (or help) each other so that believers will need to depend on one another.

2. Spiritual gifts are given for us to help the church. So, to **discover** the gifts that God has given us, we should help the church in different areas and ways.
 - If people start telling us that we are being blessings to them in these areas, pay attention. That might be our area of gifting.
 - If people stop asking for our help in a particular area, perhaps that is not our area of gifting. Try something else! The Holy Spirit will help us discover our gifts as we serve God.
3. **Be content** with the gifts God has given us and not obsess over gifts that He didn't give us. Paul scolded the Corinthian church because they all wanted the more showy gifts (1 Corinthians 12–14). But he said that the true attitude we should have is to pursue love. The gifts are supposed to help us love each other and not for our own benefit.
4. We should continually **focus on building the church** by humbly using our gifts with the help of the Holy Spirit. In this way, we will please the Lord.

Discussion Questions

Discuss the following questions as a group or use them for personal reflection.

1. Stephen, an ordinary, Greek-speaking Jewish believer, made a masterful explanation of God's purposes and plans in front of the Jewish council, which was made up of experts in Scripture and the Law. How do you think he was able to do that? How can we similarly train ourselves to be well-versed in God's Word?
2. As we observe how the early church developed, we see that the church changed and matured. It didn't stay the same over time. In light of this, do we need to rethink any of our ideas of what church should be like?
3. Can you observe the purposeful progression of the Holy Spirit as He directs the church? Based on Scripture, what do you think God is doing with the church today?



Pre-reading for next lesson: 1 Corinthians; 2 Corinthians