

TRUTH TRIUMPHANT: CHAPTER 3

The Apostolic Origins of the Church in the Wilderness

The rise of Christianity and the spread of the Church in Syria was startling in its rapidity. 1

IN CONTRAST with the four hundred years of silence between Malachi and Matthew, the coming of the great Redeemer brought to the world a powerful, stimulating message and introduced a marvelous new era. None of the prophets before Him had been permitted to change the bases of the dispensation introduced by Moses. Jesus Christ, however, was that Prophet predicted by Moses who was to usher in a new dispensation. He gave to man a new revelation from Jehovah. The twelve apostles, going forth to promulgate the teachings of Jesus, formed the charter membership of the apostolic church which flourished for about five hundred years. Then gradually the combined heretical sects seized the power of the nations and drove the true church into the wilderness. These apostolic origins will be the theme of this chapter.

Previous to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 by the Roman army, at which time the apostles were dispersed, the gospel had gone to Samaria, Ethiopia, Syria, Asia Minor, Greece, Italy, and India. The religion of Christ was enriched in all utterance. As a bright and shining light, it evangelized Zoroastrians, Buddhists, Greek philosophers, and Confucianists, laying strong foundations for the future.

As the apostolic church advanced, the gospel was planted not only in diverse nations, but in different languages. Often the same language was used by several nations. Therefore, in this volume Syrian or Syriac Christianity will refer to all churches which are indebted to Syrian origins; that is, to Syrian missionaries and authors to whom later churches looked as pioneers of the Syriac language in their services; as, for example, in Syria, Assyria, Persia, India, and China. Similarly, the term Celtic Christianity will apply to all churches and nations which used the Celtic language in their divine worship, such as Galatia and France, as well as Ireland, Scotland, and England before England was overrun by the pagan Anglo-Saxons. Greek Christianity will refer to the churches throughout the world where the Greek language was used in their literature and worship. Latin Christianity refers particularly to the homeland of the Romans, Italy, and to certain other nations. No hard and fast rule of designation can be laid down for the overlapping of these different designations and terms. All that can be given is a general guiding description.

Christianity Among the Jews

The gospel first went to the Jews. It is easy to forget that almost every hero of the Bible was a Jew and that every book of the Sacred Scriptures was written by a Hebrew. Jesus Christ Himself was an Israelite.

It was to those having the blood of Abraham in their veins that the Redeemer first directed His message. His apostles were sent "to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Tens of thousands received the word gladly, and among them were many priests. Even to the uttermost parts of the earth, where the Jews had been scattered and their descendants were counted by the millions, did the message penetrate. For a long time, as will be shown in later chapters, the bulk of the early church members had been won from among the descendants of Israel.

The first people other than the Jews to accept the gospel were the Samaritans. Christ had predicted that His disciples should witness for Him in Judea, Samaria, and in the uttermost parts of the earth.

Philip, the newly elected deacon, was the one who determined to tell the good news to the Samaritans. (Acts 8:5.)

Samaria was the only place where men were presumptuous enough to build a temple to rival the one at Jerusalem. It was claimed that it was the successor to Solomon's temple. Here only could be found another Pentateuch. 2 The small group of Samaritans still existing look upon these first five books of Moses, written in the old Hebrew letters, as their greatest treasure. 3

Ethiopia is the second foreign country evangelized by the church at Jerusalem. The story, as told in the book of Acts, represents Philip the evangelist as being conducted southward by the Holy Spirit after his victories in Samaria. There he met the royal treasurer of the queen of Ethiopia returning to his country from Jerusalem where he had been to worship. The treasurer was reading the prophecy of Isaiah, who wrote about eight hundred years before Christ. Philip explained to this searcher for truth the fulfillment of the prophecy. This prophecy and its accurate fulfillment gave Philip a powerful message which caused the eunuch to accept Christ and be baptized. Thus began the evangelization of Ethiopia.

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The Beginnings of Syrian Christianity

Christianity was to enter a new field through the leadership of Paul, strong herald of the cross. In Antioch, the capital of the Roman province of Syria, was to be found a new center for the gospel. When Jerusalem, the original headquarters, was destroyed, the leadership passed to Antioch, where it remained for some time.

When the gospel moved into Syria, the whole church was astir. Cornelius, a Roman centurion at Caesarea, had experienced a remarkable conversion. Church members were fired with new zeal, and they entered Antioch "preaching the word to none but unto the Jews only." Syria at that time included Palestine, parts of Arabia, and extended to the Euphrates River. Then began what may be justly described as "the golden age of Syria." 5 In Antioch, its capital, an opulent center, was located the administration building of the Roman officials of the East. Many Jews were there, and so numerous and influential were they that their rights and privileges were recorded on tables of brass. 6

As a result of the ministry of Barnabas and Paul at Antioch, the name of "Christian" was there first given to the followers of Jesus. The providence of God was looking to the future of the gospel. Soon Jerusalem would be destroyed, and tens of thousands of Christian Jews would be driven northward, rejected by the rabbinical Jews. It would now be greatly to their advantage as followers of Jesus to be called Christians. They would no longer be classed with the Jews, and the new name would help them to escape the wrath of the Gentile world against the Hebrew race. As will be shown later, these exiles were to populate with beautiful cities, and with institutions of unsurpassed scholarship, a section of country northward beyond the bounds of Canaan. 7 They would furnish an evangelical grasp of Christianity's greatest doctrines which their background of Jewish history enabled them to appreciate more profoundly than could Gentile converts.

It was from Antioch that Paul and Barnabas, set apart by the Holy Ghost, went forth as the first foreign missionaries. The results were a revelation. Little did the apostles foresee the manner in which the Gentiles would desert the heathen temples for the churches, as they had seen the Jews come into the church from the synagogues. Leaving the island of Cyprus, where the Gentiles had heard with astonishment the doctrines of the Lord, Paul and Barnabas went into Asia Minor. Here, as in Syria, the

cities were full of Jews. Paul was proud that he was a son of Israel, because he knew that fifteen hundred years of sacred teaching on each recurring Sabbath had enriched the Hebrews with a mentality in things divine which enabled them to grasp readily such truths as God, sin, morality, and the need of a Redeemer. He entered therefore into the synagogues on the Sabbath day. The synagogues had long been established in the regions which were new to Paul and his helpers, and through the Jews they were able to secure an introduction to the Gentiles. A new vision came to the churches in Syria and Judea when the two men who launched Christianity's foreign mission program returned with the reports of their successes. Even before Paul had finished his labors, or before Jerusalem was in ruins, the apostle Thomas had left for Persia and India.

Eastward into those fertile lands between and around the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers were laid the beginnings of Christianity at the second Syrian center, Edessa. Edessa, now Urfu, in Asia Minor, was at that time the capital of the small kingdom of Osroene. This city was about two hundred miles northeast of Antioch. From it Christianity emanated to Persia, India, Parthia, and China, and from it and other near-by cities, came the continued support of the work in those distant Eastern countries. Concerning Edessa, a well-known Orientalist writes as follows: "Edessa had also a celebrated School of Medical Research which was removed to Nisibis. Many famous physicians were numbered in the Nestorian ranks who graduated there."⁸ At Edessa, the purest Syriac (Aramaean) was spoken.

Tertullian, who wrote about seventy-five years after the death of the apostle John, speaks of the spread of Christianity in the following language:

For upon whom else have the universal nations believed, but upon the Christ who has already come? For whom have the nations believed, - Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and they who inhabit Mesopotamia, Armenia, Phrygia, Cappadocia, and they who dwell in Pontus, and Asia, and Pamphylia, tamers in Egypt, and inhabitants of the region of Africa which is beyond Cyrene, Romans and sojourners, yes, and in Jerusalem Jews, and all other nations; as, for instance,...varied races of the Gaetulians, and manifold confines of the Moors, all the limits of the Spains, and the diverse nations of the Gauls, and the haunts of the Britains (inaccessible to the Romans, but subjugated to Christ) In all which places the name of the Christ who is already come reigns. ⁹

By whom was the knowledge of Christ brought to all these places? By those Christians who had the spirit of the genuine Syrian theology. However, there were others who taught false doctrines. Gnosticism, a product of Alexandria, Egypt, Antioch's rival, was a union of pagan philosophy and gospel truths. While it was founding churches and building colleges, it rejected the Old Testament, denied creation, and held in contempt all Jews, even Christian Jews. In these words, the historian Newman aptly describes the difference between the theology of Antioch and that of Alexandria: "In the great christological controversies of the fourth and following centuries Alexandria and Antioch were always antagonists, Alexandria representing a mystical transcendentalism and promoting the allegorical interpretation of the Scriptures; Antioch insisting on the grammatico-historical interpretation of the Scriptures, and having no sympathy with mystical modes of thought." ¹⁰

Whence came that marvelous missionary activity of the church of the East for a thousand years? It originated in the regions of Antioch and Edessa. How great was the difference between apostolic Christianity and its perversion at Alexandria in the early history of the church is shown in the following quotation from Bigg: "The Church of the second century rang with alarm, and the consequence was that all the Christian writers of that period except Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria, shrank with

horror from the name of philosophy." 11

Shortly after the death of the apostles, the New Testament was translated into Syriac. This noble version, called the Peshitta, meaning "simple," had for centuries a wide circulation in the East. 12 It is still the authoritative Bible in large Eastern communities.

The Beginnings of Celtic Christianity

The apostle to the Gentiles, after founding Syrian Christianity, was called to plant the gospel among the Galatians, in the heart of the large Celtic branch of the human family. The Celts of Galatia were of the same family, and spoke the same language as the Irish, Scotch, British, Welsh, and French. 13

Thus the Holy Spirit set another stream flowing rapidly which was to water the lands of the West. As India and China were to be bound to the West by Syrian Christianity, so Ireland and the western rim of Europe were to touch the East through Celtic Christianity. By one of those strange phenomena of history - may it not well be called providential? - the Galatians, a numerous branch of the Gauls from France, had pushed their way into Asia Minor. With all the fiery nature of the Celtic race, they had invaded and subdued Italy and sacked Rome in the fourth century before Christ. 14 Not satisfied with this success, they broke into Asia Minor, and, settling there, became the founders of the province of Galatia.

Paul prepared to pass them by as he journeyed west, but the Holy Spirit disposed otherwise. A severe affliction compelled him to tarry in their midst. He won the love and devotion of these people, and soon there was raised up what he pleased to call "the churches of Galatia." (Galatians 1:2.) Patrick entered Ireland in the latter half of the fourth century. He found a well-organized and healthy Celtic Christianity there. 15 Evidence goes to show that Celtic Ireland learned the gospel from the believers in Galatia. One writer, who has made special research in Oriental history, says, "The Christianity which first reached France and England (i.e., Gaul and Britain) was of the school of the apostle John, who ruled the churches in Asia Minor, and therefore of a Greek, not Latin, type. 16

There is abundant evidence of intercommunication between Ireland, France, and Galatia in the three hundred years between Paul and Patrick. 17 That the Celts in France were evangelized by the Celts in Asia Minor is shown by a well-known event in the history of the French church. 18 About seventy years after the death of the apostle John, the churches in southern France suffered a terrible persecution at the hands of the pagans. The distressed believers in 177 sent a pathetic account of their afflictions, not to Italy or to Africa, but to their brethren in Asia Minor.

"In order to understand the situation, political and ecclesiastical, in southern France, we must bear in mind that the Gauls of the West and the Galatae of the East were of the same stock, and that each branch, though several nations intervened, retained unimpaired its racial characteristics. 19

Thus Ireland received the gospel from Asia Minor, by way of the sea and by way of the Celtic believers in southern France; and they, in turn, obtained the light from the Galatians to whom Paul had ministered.

The facts given by Douglas Hyde show how powerful and how widely spread over Europe was the Celtic race centuries before Christ. Alexander the Great would not embark upon his campaigns into Asia without having first assured himself of the friendship of the Celts. 20 Within the generation following the apostles, if not even before the death of John, the New Testament had been translated

into that most beautiful of all Latin texts, the Italic version, often called Itala. For centuries scholars of the Celtic church quoted from the Itala. 21

The Beginnings of Greek Christianity

After Paul had labored in Galatia he was instructed by the Lord in a vision by night to go into Greece. He might have spent the rest of his days profitably in Asia Minor, but the Holy Spirit purposed otherwise. By his celebrated labors in the Greek centers of Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, Corinth, and later in Ephesus, the apostle founded Greek Christianity. At Athens, he entered the world's intellectual center of paganism. Greece was still palpitating with the glorious memories of her victories over Persia's millions, and the nation was reveling in the rich stores of her golden literature. Paul planted the gospel in the midst of the people who spoke the Greek language, that medium through which God was pleased to transmit to the world the most exalted of all literature, the Greek New Testament. The first revelations given to the gospel church were written in Greek. 22

In later days a deep hatred sprang up between Greek and Latin churches, and Greek and Latin ecclesiastics hurled bitter words at one another. These theological controversies arose because both churches had grown ambitious and had allied themselves with kings and emperors. At length, in 1054, the Greek and Latin churches separated. Long before this the Latin state church feared the effect of the accumulated stores of Greek literature. Latin was made the ecclesiastical language of Western Europe.²³ The Greek language, with its literature, was condemned by Roman ecclesiasticism, its study forbidden, and its writings anathematized. Ireland's Celtic church in the medieval ages remained a center for instruction in Greek long after it had virtually disappeared elsewhere in Western Christendom.²⁴ The knowledge of Greek was declared in the universities of the Latin hierarchy to be full of daggers and poison.²⁵ For more than one thousand years it ceased to exist in the Teutonic kingdoms of Europe, except in the bosom of Greek and Celtic Christianity, and with those evangelical bodies which looked to the Scriptures as their only authority. 26

The repulse of the Greek church by the Latin hierarchy left the former as a buffer between the astounding activities of Christianity in the East and the victorious sword of the papal kingdoms of Western Europe.

The Beginnings of Latin Christianity

Sometimes the Lord calls, sometimes He impels men to great tasks, not because they are disobedient, but because their interest in near-by labors makes them oblivious to distant opportunities. Paul was directed by a vision to go to Greece, but he went as a prisoner to Rome. Intent on anchoring his great work among the Gentiles to Jewish Christianity, he complied with a dangerous request of the leaders at Jerusalem. The other apostles wished to disarm the prejudices of Jewish authorities against Paul by having him unwisely appear in the temple of Jerusalem in fulfillment of a vow. Paul was willing to risk his life by performing the required ceremonies in the central sanctuary of Israel if only he might avert a rupture between Gentile and Jewish Christianity. He knew that the Gentile believers had received only a meager training in the profound truths of the gospel. Is it for this reason that practically all his epistles are written to the young, inexperienced Gentile churches? Moreover, in vision he foresaw the crushing opposition which would grow into an apostate church and which would pursue the true church for 1260 years, and therefore, he yearned to link the new Gentile churches to an experienced Judaism which had turned to Christ.

In His ministry to the Jews, Jesus was sacrificed at Jerusalem; in his ministry to the Gentiles, Paul was sacrificed at Jerusalem. Only a sacrifice can open the eyes of tardy believers to the greatest spiritual advances. Nothing short of the sacrifice of Jesus could break hard hearts and inspire consecration. Although Paul knew full well the burning hatred of the rabbis against him, he followed the plan of the other apostles, and entered the temple. The temple throngs rushed on him with rage. If the tumult had not reached the ears of the Roman guard, who barely succeeded in snatching him from the hands of his enemies, he would have been torn limb from limb. When he appeared before the Roman tribunal, Paul felt he could not locally obtain justice, therefore he said, "I appeal unto Caesar." The Roman magistrate replied, "Hast thou appealed unto Caesar? unto Caesar shalt thou go."

As a prisoner, Paul was carried to Rome, the capital of the Latin-speaking nations, the mistress of the world. Christianity did not come to Rome first through Paul; he found it there already when he arrived. Whether it preceded Paul by means of merchants, converted soldiers, or humble missionaries, is not known. 27 Nevertheless, the slender beginnings soon grew in strength through the ministry of the great apostle. He at once challenged the higher circles of Judaism and paganism. Having been recognized as a prisoner of no ordinary class, he was allowed the freedom of his own house, and permitted to come and go and to labor in no small public way during the two years before his case came to trial. 28 The epistle known as Second Timothy was written between the acquittal of the apostle at his first hearing and the death sentence at his second hearing.

Greece was the intellectual, but Rome was the military, stronghold of paganism. No one can read scholarly authors such as Auguste Arthur Beugnot, who wrote the history of the destruction of paganism in the West, without realizing how nearly invincible was the resistance of Italian heathenism. Latin Christianity did not so early show the gains which soon adorned the labors of Celtic and Syrian Christianity. Out of the three hundred eighteen bishops who signed the decrees of the great Council of Nicaea in 325 - the first general church council - only seven were from the Latin West. 29

To understand the apostolic origins of the true church, it is necessary to study the triumphs of the other apostles. In the first seven or eight years of gospel history the apostle Peter was a dominant figure. Paul held the center of the stage for the next thirty years. Peter's closing years were scenes of wide and significant labors. They ranged from Babylon 30 in the East to Rome in the West. For years he cherished the work at Jerusalem. There is reason to believe that at Rome he followed Paul in martyrdom. 31 What determinative effects came from his labors over widespread areas may be seen by noting carefully the first epistle of Peter.

Peter's Epistle to the Churches

This epistle opens with greetings from the apostle to the believers "scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia," and closes with a salutation from Babylon. All these first five provinces are found in Asia Minor. The significant results of Peter's labors in Bithynia lead the student to glean awhile in that field. Paul was to evangelize Galatia but was forbidden by the Holy Spirit to go into Bithynia. In Galatia, Paul planted but Peter watered. (1 Peter 1:1; Galatians 1:2, 21.) In Bithynia, Peter both planted and watered. Many learned writers have given valuable time to analyzing the work in Bithynia. In 109, about nine years after the death of the apostle John, the Roman emperor requested the scholarly Pliny, governor of Bithynia, to make investigations concerning Christianity there because of the stories which had come to his ears.

The governor of Bithynia, in rendering his report to the emperor, revealed the irresistible advances of

the gospel. Pliny complains that the people are leaving the old gods and their heathen worship to go in throngs to the worship of Christ. He laments because the sale of heathen sacrifices has fallen off. Paying splendid tribute to the virtues of the Christians, he describes how they meet regularly once a week on "a stated day" for worship, which was undoubtedly the seventh-day Sabbath.

While Peter lived, churches sprang up in Chaldea, Assyria, Syria, and Asia Minor. As the next two chapters will show, there grew up in this territory noble, heroic, sacrificing leaders of Christianity who for many centuries formed the most learned and stabilizing force in the world to strengthen and to help the true church in the Far East and the West.

According to the writings of Origen (A.D. 185-254), the apostle Andrew was given Scythia as his field of labor, while Thomas was assigned to Persia. 32 According to evidence fully discussed in a later chapter, Thomas went farther than Persia. Reliable Syrian history indicates that the gospel was planted at Mosul, in Mesopotamia, in 170. 33 About 150, or fifty years after the death of the apostle John, the gospel had been preached and churches raised up in Persia, Media, Parthia, and Bactria. 34 Rawlinson speaks of Christianity's spreading in the empire of Parthia by 150. 35 Evidently before he was killed in India in 72, the apostle Thomas had raised up many churches. 36

The Gospel to India

Pantaenus, one of the founders of the theological school at Alexandria, seventy years after the death of the apostle John, went to a country he called India, it is related, and reported evidences that the apostle Bartholomew had labored there. 37 The gospel must have made a great headway among the Syriac and Latin-speaking peoples within a half century after the death of the apostle John, because by that time the famous Syriac New Testament, called the Peshitta, had appeared. 38 Christianity is indicated as spreading among all ranks throughout Persia, Parthia, Media, and Bactria during the reign of the emperor Marcus Aurelius (A.D. 161-180). 39

What power drove these early believers to enter the intellectual strongholds of European paganism, to venture within the fanatical pantheons of Asia Minor, to brave the burning heat of Arabia, to spend their lives wandering in Tartary, and, as strangers, to struggle under the blistering sun of India? This power was the word of God, which burned as a fire in their hearts. They cried out with the apostle Paul, "Woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel!"

These early missionaries clung to the Bible as the guidebook which would keep them from being deceived by apostasies, counterfeits, and by wolves in sheep's clothing. Obedience to this Book singled them out for the rage of pagan emperors. They defended the truth against the wiles of Western false christs and of the counterfeit doctrines of the great Eastern religions. Nevertheless, as Paul wrote, "The word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword,"(Hebrews 4:12.) and by that word, they conquered.

This chapter has traced the origins of Christianity in its various branches (Syrian, Celtic, Greek, Latin) and has revealed how the apostles and their immediate successors delivered its truths to these different peoples. Succeeding chapters will follow up the further history of these origins in different lands and show how and where the primitive New Testament faith with its apostolic origins survived. Then the reader will be better able to see how present-day Christianity compares with primitive Christianity.