TURNING POINTS IN THE EXPANSION OF CHRISTIANITY

From Pentecost to the Present

ALICE T. OTT

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Introduction

Before his ascension, Jesus commissioned his disciples to "make disciples of all nations," to baptize them in the name of the triune God, and to teach them to follow his commandments (Matt. 28:16–20). Then, in his final words, Jesus told his fearful disciples to tarry in Jerusalem until they had been endued with power from on high. The Holy Spirit would enable them to be his "witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). On the day of Pentecost, the 120 disciples huddled in the upper room were "filled with the promised Holy Spirit" (2:4). They proclaimed the "wonders of God" in unknown tongues, and three thousand believed and were baptized (2:11, 41). The church was born, and its unstoppable growth began. Repeatedly in the book of Acts, we read that the "Lord added to their number . . . those who were being saved" (2:47; cf. 6:7; 12:24; 19:20). The gospel traversed geographical boundaries, first from Jerusalem to Judea, then to Samaria and to the ends of the earth. Not only Jews believed the Messiah's saving message. Within two decades after Pentecost, gospel messengers began to cross cultural, ethnic, and religious barriers to reconcile to God "persons from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Rev. 5:9).

This is a book about the history of the expansion of Christianity across geographical, cultural, ethnic, and religious boundaries. From its cradle in Aramaic-speaking Palestine, the Christian faith spread by the second century as far west as Spain and as far east as Syria and perhaps India. In the next four centuries, the faith expanded throughout the Roman Empire and beyond, eastward into Persia, central Asia, and China, westward into Ireland and the British Isles, and southward into Egypt, Nubia, and Ethiopia. Celtic and Anglo-Saxon monks spearheaded a mission among the Germanic and Slavic peoples of Europe in the seventh and eighth centuries. The conversion

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of Europe was completed around 1200, and Europe became the center of Christendom. European Catholicism made hesitant steps toward global mission outreach in the thirteenth century; it was not until roughly 1500 that these efforts were dramatically expanded. The older mendicant orders (Franciscans and Dominicans) and new religious orders such as the Jesuits provided the personnel for this movement. European Protestants needed considerably longer to embrace world mission. It was not until the early eighteenth century that German Pietists first pioneered cross-cultural foreign missions. By the end of the century, however, a Protestant mission movement had been launched. In the nineteenth century, Protestant missions rivaled and soon outpaced the Roman Catholic mission enterprise. The saving message of redemption in Christ spread across the globe. Today, Christianity is the most globally dispersed of all the major world religions. It is no longer a Western phenomenon but is a diverse and multicultural religion found on every continent. Truly, the gospel has expanded to the ends of the earth.

The use of the phrase "history of the expansion of Christianity" rather than "history of Christian mission" in this book is intentional. I chose the former phrase because it better communicates that the expansion of Christianity is not just a case of the "West to the rest" of the world. In actuality, the expansion of Christianity is neither just a Western enterprise nor entirely a missionary-driven phenomenon, as the phrase "history of mission" may imply. Rather, from its inception, the church has spread by the efforts of both Western and non-Western missionaries, as well as of local lay and clerical converts. The extant documentary sources were for the most part produced by official mission personnel and organizations; hence they controlled the narrative. This means that the focus in these sources remains largely on the efforts of Western missionaries. Local evangelists and missionaries are often only superficially mentioned; at times their names are not even provided. Nevertheless, indigenous Christians were usually more effective than missionaries from the West, since they were fluent in the local language and had an insider knowledge of the culture. They were also embedded in social, occupational, and kinship networks, which provided natural and effective opportunities for sharing the gospel. The expansion of Christianity occurred through the combined efforts of Western and non-Western missionaries and through the valiant witness of local Christians. Two chapters are exclusively devoted to the role of non-Western missionaries: chapter 3 to the eastward expansion of the Christian faith by East Syrian monks and lay Christians, and chapter 12 to Majority World missionaries in the twentieth century. Elsewhere in the book, the contribution and role of indigenous converts and evangelists is also included in the narrative.

It is necessary to define what is meant by "mission" and "missions" in this book. In the last half century, the singular term "mission" has generally been used to describe *missio Dei*, God's sending activity and the church's participation in his redemptive purposes in the world. One should not maintain too sharp of a division between home and foreign mission or between mission among nominal Christians and mission among non-Christians. Nevertheless, the task of the expansion of Christianity, which is the topic of this book, concerns the advance of the Christian faith across cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and religious frontiers, into territories where there was little or no Christian presence. Therefore, in this book I draw on the definition of "mission" from James Scherer: "Mission as applied to the work of the church means the *specific intention* of bearing witness to the Gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ at the borderline between faith and unbelief. . . . The heart of mission is always making the Gospel known where it would not be known without a special and costly act of boundary-crossing witness."[1] The plural term "missions" refers to the various specific efforts that the church employed to carry out the task of world mission. In this volume, I aim to consistently maintain the distinction between "mission" and "missions" described above.

It is important to note that the meanings of words change over time. Some words that initially had neutral or nonreligious connotations developed more derogatory undertones over time. Three important terms are found repeatedly in primary-source documents dealing with the expansion of Christianity—"heathen," "pagan," and "native." The term "heathen," originally from Germanic for "heath-dweller," was for much of Christian history synonymous with Gentile and referred to all non-Christian people who did *not* adhere to the monotheistic religions of Christianity, Judaism, or Islam. Over time, it gradually developed the negative connotations of an uncivilized, irreligious, or unchristian person.[2] Due to the negative connotations that "heathen" possesses today, I will generally substitute "non-Christian" or "Gentile" for "heathen," except, of course, when that term is found in primary sources. Originally the term "pagan" referred to a rustic country-dweller, but by the nineteenth century it had developed religious connotations; in some cases, the term had become a close synonym for "Gentile" or "heathen." In other cases, however, "pagan" and "paganism" are technical terms commonly used to describe pre-Christian religious traditions, specifically "the polytheisms of the Greco-Roman world" in the classical period and late antiquity, and the amorphous "body of pagan beliefs" among the Germanic and Scandinavian peoples "beyond the old Roman *limes*" in the early Middle Ages.[3] It is in this sense that these terms are used in chapters 1 through 4. The word "native" refers to an indigenous person, someone who was not a foreigner but was born in a particular, specified location.[4] Unlike "heathen," the term "native" is not generally viewed as offensive, although it holds negative connotations for some people today. Therefore, I will generally substitute "indigenous" or "local" for "native," except in the following contexts: when the term is found in primary sources, when it refers to the place of origin of a person or group, or when it is used as a technical term to describe, for example, Native Americans (chap. 6) or the native church in Sierra Leone and elsewhere (chap. 9). Finally, there are other terms used in this book that were common during the historical period in question but that sound outdated or antiquated today because they have since been replaced with newer words. Cultural "accommodation" and "adaptation" were two terms employed by the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Jesuits to describe what, since the 1970s, Roman Catholics call "inculturation" and Protestants call "contextualization." I will generally use the historically appropriate terms, unless they lead to misunderstanding.

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[1] James A. Scherer, *Gospel, Church, and Kingdom: Comparative Studies in World Mission Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1987), 37.

[2] Online Etymology Dictionary, "Heathen," accessed June 3, 2021, https://www.etymonline.com/word/heathen.

This is a book about *turning points* in the historical expansion of Christianity. I was inspired by Mark Noll's *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity* to adopt a similar turning-points approach to the history of the expansion of Christianity. Generally speaking, a turning point in history is a specific, decisive moment when something monumental changes. I am convinced that the use of critical turning points is an engaging way to present and organize historical material. All authors decide which material to include in their books and which to exclude. The turning-points approach means that the author makes this decision based on whether the material portrays those junctures where something changed and a new historical trend began. The turning-points approach thus provides a method not only to choose but also to organize the material around pivotal moments in the expansion of Christianity. Relevant historical context, key historical precedents, and the later development and impact of the trend are included. Furthermore, the turning-points approach helps the reader to not be overwhelmed by unfocused information and thereby miss the proverbial forest for the trees. Rather, it aims to assist the reader to understand (and remember) the most important historical trends in the expansion of Christianity.

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[3] Online Etymology Dictionary, "Pagan," accessed June 3, 2021, https://www.etymonline.com/word/pagan; James Palmer, "Defining Paganism in the Carolingian World," *Early Medieval Europe* 15, no. 4 (November 2007), 404; cf. Prudence Jones and Nigel Pennick, *A History of Pagan Europe* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 1–2.

[4] Online Etymology Dictionary; "Native," accessed June 3, 2021, https://www.etymonline.com/word/native.

Admittedly, my decision of which turning points are the most crucial, and therefore should be included, is somewhat subjective. Other turning points could have been chosen. For example, the Second Vatican Council and the impact of liberation theology on Roman Catholic missiology are worthy of attention. I have chosen not to include those topics in this volume for this reason: they are not directly turning points in the expansion of Christianity as I have defined it—as an expansion across cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and religious frontiers into territories where there was little or no Christian presence. Due to space limitations and the broad scope of this book from Pentecost to the present, other important issues have only been touched on briefly (Pentecostalism) or not at all (Orthodox missions). I am convinced, however, that each of the turning points contained in this volume reveals an important facet of the expansion of Christianity.

In this book, the concept of turning points has a range of meanings. In many cases, the turning point marks the beginning of a new trend in the expansion of Christianity. In other cases, however, the turning point is the climax and culmination of a trend, a key representative of a development in a new direction, or a dramatic symbol of momentous changes affecting the advance of the Christian faith. In five chapters of this book, the turning point marks the *beginning* of a new trend in history. The Jerusalem Council, described in chapter 1, was a pivotal event. It opened the door for the large-scale mission to the Gentiles in the following centuries by removing the chief hindrances to Gentile conversion (adherence to the Jewish law and circumcision). Patrick's mission to Ireland was the first example of sustained evangelization outside the boundaries of the Roman Empire (chap. 2). William Carey did more than any other single individual to turn the previously sporadic Protestant mission efforts into a growing and thriving mission movement (chap. 7). The British abolitionist crusade spawned a new geographical focus on mission in Africa. It was linked with a clear humanitarian agenda to root out all remaining vestiges of African slavery (chap. 8). Finally, the 1974 Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization was a key factor, though not the only factor, in motivating Christians in the Global South to embrace world evangelization and to launch their own mission movements (chap. 12).

But not all the turning points in this book mark the beginning of a new trend. One turning point, the East Syrian mission to China in 635, was the climax and *culmination* of widespread mission eastward into East, Central, and South Asia in the previous centuries (chap. 3). Another, the 1910 World Missionary Conference, was a turning point in a dual sense: it was a culmination of the traditional, conservative mission approach of the nineteenth century and a harbinger of newer missional trends in the twentieth (chap. 11). Three of the turning points in this book highlight a *key representative* of a developing trend, even when the representative was not the first to initiate the change. Boniface was not the first to confront Germanic pagan gods through power encounters on the European continent; Celtic missionaries had done likewise in the previous hundred years (chap. 4). But Boniface is a better example of this trend because many more reliable primary sources are available for him and because he reflected deeply on the task of converting pagans. The Moravian mission was not the first Protestant global mission; that honor is reserved for the Danish-Halle mission (chap. 6). But the Moravian mission is a better representative due to its astonishing number of missionaries, the geographic breadth of its mission outreach, and the profound impact it had on later Protestant mission efforts. Henry Venn was one of two key individuals, the other being Rufus Anderson, who virtually simultaneously developed the three-self principles for an independent, indigenous church (chap. 9). Venn, however, was the more articulate and systematic theorist, and his views were more broadly influential than Anderson's; therefore, he is chosen as the key representative of this groundbreaking mission theory.

Finally, two chapters have turning points that were *dramatic symbols* for momentous changes in the expansion of Christianity. In 1707, the emperor of China, Kangxi, mandated that only those missionaries who upheld the cultural accommodation views of the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci on ancestor veneration might remain in the country (chap. 5). This was not only a pivotal event but also a dramatic symbol of the ongoing Chinese Rites controversy, which lasted for over a century (ca. 1630–1742). Similarly, the Scramble for Africa serves as a dramatic symbol of the change from earlier forms of imperialism to a new and a more virulent form during the high imperialist era (chap. 10).

Each chapter begins with a "close-up" view of one critical turning point in the worldwide mission and expansion of the church. I believe that readers can more easily relate to significant historical persons and crucial concrete events (turning points) when the story is told with adequate detail to make it come alive and demonstrate its significance. I attempt to do just that for each turning point. This close-up, detailed survey of a pivotal event or person is followed by a discussion of why it is a turning point and what type of turning point it is. Then we pan out to gain a broader historical view. Key historical precedents to the turning point are discussed, as are their later or ongoing impact. Each chapter begins with a hymn and ends with a prayer from the time period and cultural context discussed.

This book seeks to make several distinct contributions. Considerable space (five out of twelve chapters) is devoted to the expansion of Christianity prior to the rise of Protestant missions. An in-depth emphasis on outreach by the early church, and by East Syrian and Roman Catholic missionaries, is often lacking in other surveys written by Protestants. Furthermore, two chapters in this book survey turning points seldom included in other volumes on the expansion of Christianity: the chapter on the role of British abolitionism on mission to Africa (chap. 8) and the detailed chapter on imperialism and mission (chap. 10). A second emphasis in the volume is the frequent use of primary sources to enliven and underpin the narrative. Primary sources are included in the body of the chapters as well as in sidebars. Finally, certain missiological, theological, and historical themes are highlighted repeatedly in the book. These include mission methods, motivation for evangelization, theology of mission, cultural accommodation, the role of indigenous converts and evangelists, and the relationship between mission and imperialism.

1

Embracing Ethnic Diversity

The Jerusalem Council (49)

> The Lord has directed my [Jesus's] mouth by His Word. . . .
>
> He has caused to dwell in me His deathless life; and gave me that I might speak the fruit of His peace: to convert the souls of them that are willing to come to Him: and to lead captive a good captivity for freedom. . . . And the Gentiles were gathered together who were scattered abroad. And I was unpolluted by my love for them, because they confessed me in high places . . . and they walked in my life and were saved and became my people for ever and ever. Hallelujah.[1]

The hymn quoted above is from the earliest Christian hymnbook, the *Odes of Solomon*, written in Syriac, a Semitic language, in AD 100–125. Jesus, the speaker in the hymn, affirms his love for the Gentiles, whom he has saved, gathered into his church, and made his people. This ode mirrors the successful resolution at the Council of Jerusalem (AD 49) of the most significant controversy of the church in the apostolic age—the terms of acceptance for Gentiles into the Christian community. The controversy revolved around whether non-Jews could be received into the church merely by faith in Christ and baptism, or whether they must be circumcised and adhere to aspects of the Jewish law—that is, whether they must first become Jewish proselytes in order to join the church. The answer to that question and its implications for mission were not immediately evident to all within the early church, hence the controversy.

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[1] J. Rendel Harris, *The Odes and Psalms of Solomon Published from the Syriac Version* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911), 104 (modernized).

The answer was not self-evident in part because Christianity had been born within the cradle of Judaism. Its earliest center was the Jewish capital, Jerusalem. The first converts to the messianic faith were Jews of one stripe or another. Some of the Jewish-background believers in the capital were converted Pharisees, who strictly followed the Torah. Others, including the majority of Jesus's disciples, interpreted the law more broadly and not always literally. Most of these, however, still kept the Jewish food laws and worshiped in the temple, at least in the first months or years after Pentecost. Finally, a sizable group of Hellenistic Jews were in the Jerusalem church—Greek-speaking diaspora Jews, who had returned to the capital to live. Hellenistic Jews had adopted some aspects of Greek culture and were in general more universalist and inclusive in their cultural and theological outlook. They were the first to engage in mission to the Gentiles.

Apostolic Christianity not only had its roots in the Jewish religion. It was also perceived by both Romans and Jews as a "sect" (Acts 24:5; 28:22) or "Way" (Acts 24:14) within the broad diversity of contemporary Judaism, and *not* as a new and separate religion. The Roman proconsul Gallio refused to listen to the charges brought against Paul by hostile Jews in Corinth, since they involved "questions about words and names and your own law" (Acts 18:12–16). Gallio clearly regarded Paul's faith as a faction or subgroup within Judaism, and therefore outside his jurisdiction. The Roman historian Suetonius likewise made no distinction between the new faith and Judaism: the *Jews* were expelled from Rome in AD 49/51 "because of *Chrestus*" or Christ.[2] Non-Christian Jews in the first decades after Pentecost also initially tolerated followers of the "Nazarene sect" in their synagogues, since they still viewed them as fellow Jews. Finally, Jewish-background Christ-followers in Jerusalem saw themselves as children of Abraham living in the prophesied eschatological age of the Spirit, which had been inaugurated by the death and resurrection of Jesus, Israel's Messiah. They were the "remnant [of Israel] chosen by grace" and the rebuilt "tabernacle of David" (Rom. 11:5; Acts 15:16 ASV)—in other words, Jews. The earliest Christian assemblies in Jerusalem were not labeled "churches" but "synagogue" meetings by James, the half brother of Jesus and a leader of the Jerusalem church (James 2:2).

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[2] Henry Bettenson and Chris Maunder, eds., *Documents of the Christian Church*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 2.

The strong Jewish character of the church in Jerusalem was retained throughout much of the first century. Therefore, it is not surprising that Jewish-born Christians struggled to comprehend the exact relationship between their messianic faith and its roots in Judaism/Israel. For example, it was not readily obvious how the Old Testament law should be interpreted and applied in light of the new covenant initiated by Jesus. They were well aware that their risen Lord had commissioned them to “make disciples” of Gentiles (“all nations”), as well as Jews (Matt. 28:16–20; Acts 1:8). But what precisely did that entail? Could Gentiles become “children of Abraham” by faith alone—in other words, *as Gentiles*—or must they first be circumcised? These issues were exposed and gradually clarified during key missional moments in the church’s development until they were finally settled at the Jerusalem Council in AD 49.

In this chapter, I will first discuss the key stages in the rise and development of the Jewish-Gentile controversy in the early church. Then, in a second section, I will sketch the historical context of, the debates during, and the decree issued by the Jerusalem Council. I argue that the Jerusalem Council was a turning point in the history of the expansion of Christianity for several notable reasons. First, the apostolic decision at the council to not require circumcision of Gentiles had broad ramifications. It removed the “dividing wall” of separation and hostility between Jewish and Gentile believers (Eph. 2:14). It declared that Gentile ethnicities had equal standing with Jewishness within the Christian community. Ethnic diversity was officially embraced by the church. Second, the Jerusalem Council formally established the nature of salvation. Both Jews and Gentiles were saved by grace through faith and not by works of the law. Third, the council gave momentum to the development whereby Christianity gradually emerged from its Jewish roots. Soon it was no longer regarded as a sect within Judaism. Finally, and most importantly for this chapter, the Jerusalem Council “represents a turning point in the history of the Church” because “it prepared the way for the spread of Christianity in the Greco-Roman world” in the first three centuries.[3] It opened wide the door to full-scale mission to Gentiles of all ethnicities. The Gentile mission of Paul, the apostle to the uncircumcised, was affirmed at the Jerusalem Council. In the third section of this chapter, I examine Paul’s ministry to Gentiles and that of his successors in the first century, with a special focus on the mission methods employed. In the final section, we will explore the church’s Gentile mission in the second and third centuries. The church in that period

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[3] Vesilin Kesich, “The Apostolic Council at Jerusalem,” *St. Vladimir’s Seminary Quarterly* 6, no. 3 (1962): 108.

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abandoned some of the first-century missional practices pioneered by Paul. Despite some significant weaknesses, the church in the pre-Constantinian era continued to expand rapidly. This chapter focuses on the westward expansion of Christianity, while chapter 3 explores its eastward expansion.

Stages in the Jewish-Gentile Controversy

The dramatic arrival of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost transformed the 120 disciples of Jesus, who had been cowering in the upper room. Filled with God-given power, Peter called the "God-fearing Jews from every nation" who had gathered at the sound of the mighty wind to respond in faith, and three thousand were baptized that day. The new converts were "one in heart and mind," and the church grew rapidly (Acts 4:32; 2:42–47). But in time the first cracks in the Jerusalem church's unity appeared when Hellenistic Jews complained against the Aramaic-speaking (Hebraic) Jews that Hellenistic widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food (6:1). Prompt and wise action by the Twelve prevented a rift from developing between these two culturally diverse branches of Judaism. Seven Hellenistic deacons were chosen to administer the food distribution. Two of them, Stephen and Philip, preached, evangelized, and performed miracles as well (Acts 6–8).

The scattering of Jewish Christians due to persecution after the martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 8:1, 4) launched the church's mission beyond Jerusalem (1:8). Hellenistic Jewish Christians formed the spearhead of these evangelizing efforts, in part because they had fewer scruples about contact with Gentiles than Hebraic Jews. Furthermore, their Greek linguistic competency equipped them well for mission work among Gentiles and diasporic Jews. Finally, Hellenistic Jewish believers "reflected more consistently about the consequences of Jesus's death and resurrection for the Torah and the temple, and thus for Israel, than did the apostles."[4] They were quicker to realize that the believers' relationship to God was mediated by Jesus Christ alone and did not require additional Torah adherence. God's presence was no longer located in the temple, but was now in the Spirit-filled community of believers. Thus, it was not surprising that Philip, one of the Seven, initiated mission among the Samaritans, converted a prominent eunuch from Nubia, and evangelized in towns on the coastal plain with a strong Gentile presence (Acts 8). Other unnamed Hellenistic Jewish Christians carried the gospel to Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Syrian Antioch (11:19–21). In Antioch, these unnamed evangelists proclaimed the good news not only to Jews but also to Gentiles, who responded in great numbers. The apostles in Jerusalem viewed the conversion of non-Jews as a serious issue that required investigation. They sent trusted members of their circle for this purpose: the apostles Peter and John were sent to Samaria, and Barnabas to Antioch. In both cases, the Jerusalem delegates "saw what the grace of God had done" (11:23) and rejoiced that the gospel had crossed ethnic and racial boundaries. The mother church in Jerusalem presumably rejoiced as well.

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[4] Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 1:662; cf. 653.

The Jewish-Gentile controversy began in earnest with Cornelius's conversion through Peter's preaching (ca. AD 37). Cornelius was a Roman centurion and an uncircumcised but God-fearing Gentile who "prayed to God regularly" and gave alms (Acts 10:2). Both Cornelius and the apostle were prepared by visions for their encounter with one another. Three times Peter had a vision of a sheet filled with unclean animals. Through this vision, Peter recognized that God had not only canceled the kosher food laws but also directed him to "not call anyone impure or unclean," not even Gentiles (10:28). Therefore, when he arrived in Caesarea, Peter did not hesitate to enter Cornelius's house and accept his hospitality, something a law-abiding Jew would have been reluctant to do. Cornelius and his household believed Peter's message. The Holy Spirit descended on them as it had on the Jews at Pentecost, and they spoke in tongues, signaling the acceptance of Gentiles by God.

But when Peter returned to Jerusalem, the "circumcised believers criticized him" (Acts 11:2). Peter and his companions were, of course, also circumcised (10:45), though not a part of the ultrastrict "circumcision group" within the Jerusalem church. The circumcision group took offense at Peter's association and table fellowship with uncircumcised Gentiles, even God-fearing ones like Cornelius. Peter argued in response that God himself had orchestrated the encounter through revelatory visions. Furthermore, since "God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?" Upon hearing that, the circumcision party had no further objections. They praised God that he "has granted repentance that leads to life" even to Gentiles (11:17–18).

Then, in about AD 44, after a year of fruitful ministry in Syrian Antioch, Paul, Barnabas, and Titus brought a collection of money to Jerusalem to provide relief for Christians threatened by famine conditions (Acts 11:27–30; Gal. 2:1–10).[5] While in Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas took the opportunity to consult privately with the "pillars" of the church—James, Peter, and John. Paul presented to them the gospel that he preached to the Gentiles in order to ensure that he was not "running and had not been running [his] race in vain" (Gal. 2:2). The church leaders "recognized the grace given" to Paul and extended to the two men the "right hand of fellowship" (Gal. 2:9). Paul was confirmed in his commission to preach the gospel to the Gentiles, just as Peter was the apostle to the Jews. At this point in the Jewish-Gentile controversy, circumcision as a prerequisite for acceptance into the church was not yet a major issue. After all, no pressure was exerted on Titus, a Greek Christian, to be circumcised (Gal. 2:3).

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[5] For a short overview of the relationship between Acts and Galatians 1–2, see J. Julius Scott, "The Church's Progress to the Council of Jerusalem according to the Book of Acts," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 7 (1997): 221–24. Cf. F. F. Bruce, *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 148–59.

That changed after Paul and Barnabas's first missionary journey to south-central Asia Minor (today Turkey) in AD 45–47. Although they first preached to the Jews, the greatest number of converts were Gentiles. "This [missionary] effort marked the first initiative by Christians to reach large numbers of Gentiles and resulted in the beginning of a radically different racial-cultural make-up in the Christian community."[6] It was one thing when just a limited number of God-fearing Gentiles were included in the church, but quite another when droves of non-Jews responded in faith to Christ. After revisiting the various stations of their itinerant mission, Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch, where they reported to the church how God "had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles" (Acts 14:27).

The immediate backdrop for the Jerusalem Council was a crisis that occurred in the Syrian Antioch church at about this time. Some "people came down from Judea" to Antioch without a mandate from Jerusalem (Acts 15:1, 24; Gal. 2:12), and instructed the Gentiles that circumcision and adherence to the law were essential for salvation. They also pressured Peter, who had been in the habit of eating with non-Jews, to cease from mixed table fellowship. Not surprisingly, the Gentile believers were "troubled" by this teaching, which in effect assigned them second-class status within the church. When Paul learned that Peter had complied with the demands of the circumcision party, he confronted him publicly for his hypocrisy. Paul perceived that "behind this demand . . . were not simply racial-cultural preferences or ceremonial issues, but . . . the doctrine of Christian salvation (justification by faith)."[7] He wrote to the Galatians prior to the council: "We know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ . . . because by the works of the law no one [neither Jew nor Gentile] will be justified" (Gal. 2:16). Paul and Barnabas were brought "into sharp dispute and debate" (Acts 15:2) with the circumcision party in Antioch. To resolve the issue, the two men and some companions were sent to

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[6] Scott, "Church's Progress," 217.
[7] Scott, "Church's Progress," 224.

Jerusalem to confer with the apostles and elders. This was the first instance of a church council being called to settle a theological debate.

The Jerusalem Council (AD 49)

The church in Jerusalem had faced hard times in the 40s. King Herod Agrippa I (41–44) commenced persecution of the twelve apostles. The apostle James was executed, and Peter escaped with his life only by supernatural intervention (Acts 12:1–19). Forced to leave Jerusalem, Peter fled first to Caesarea and later to Antioch, where he was at the time of the crisis described above. After the death of Agrippa in 44, a new wave of Jewish nationalist zealotry broke out against the Roman imperial power, but also against those Jews viewed as collaborators. Furthermore, by the mid-40s, there was almost certainly an increase in the number and influence of ultraconservative Jewish believers in Jerusalem. Acts 21:20–21 reports that “many thousands of Jews” who were “zealous for the law” had accepted the messianic faith in recent times. In this highly charged atmosphere, the “influx of uncircumcised Gentile believers . . . presented the Jerusalem church with an ethical and strategic-political problem.”[8] To accept Gentiles without circumcision into the Christian community went against the conviction of many local believers; it also exposed the church to hostility from Jewish Zealots.

On their arrival in Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas were welcomed warmly by the apostles and elders of the church. The council was convened with three groups in attendance: (1) conservative Jewish Christians, including converted Pharisees, who insisted that Gentiles be circumcised; (2) Peter and James, who held a mediating position between the circumcision party and the Antioch contingent; and (3) Paul and Barnabas, representatives of the Gentile mission. The circumcision party opened the discussion with a statement of their position: “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses” (Acts 15:5). A vigorous and lengthy debate ensued. Then Peter, the apostle to the Jews, arose and reminded the assembly how God had demonstrated in the Cornelius event that “he did not discriminate between us and them,” since the Holy Spirit had been poured out upon the Gentiles (15:8–9). Despite his withdrawal from mixed table fellowship in Antioch, Peter at the council agreed with and defended Paul’s theology of salvation: “We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we [Jews] are saved, just as they are” (15:11). Paul and Barnabas then recounted the miraculous signs and wonders that God had performed among the Gentiles in Antioch and south-central Asia Minor. God had supernaturally called the Gentiles to faith—this was not merely Paul's pet mission project. Finally, James, as head of the Jerusalem church, quoted Amos 9:11–12 and other passages to establish that just such an eventuality had been prophesied in the Old Testament Scriptures. Gentiles, who were "not [God's] people," would become the people of God (Hosea 2:23).

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[8] Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 2:1010.

The council unanimously agreed (Acts 15:25a) to James's suggestion that no unnecessary burdens hinder Gentiles from turning to faith in Christ. Circumcision and adherence to all aspects of the law were not required. Four stipulations, however, were required to facilitate fellowship between Jewish and Gentile Christians: abstinence from food offered to idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals, and from blood as an ingredient in food. These stipulations were not arbitrary; they were regulations found in Leviticus 17–18 for Gentiles who lived as "foreigners" among Jews. This apostolic decree was accepted by Paul, by most Jewish Christians, and by Gentile believers in Antioch and Galatia, who were glad for the "encouraging message" of the letter from the council leadership, sent with a delegation from Jerusalem (Acts 15:24–29). Despite some minor subsequent flare-ups of the controversy (Titus 1:10), evidence from Christian writers in the second and third centuries suggests that the apostolic decree's stance regarding Gentile circumcision was consistently upheld.

After the Jerusalem Council, "conservative Judaizing Christianity became increasingly marginalized" within the church. This trend accelerated as ever more Gentiles entered the church through missionary efforts. After the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in AD 70, only vestiges of Jewish Christianity survived, largely in heretical sects, such as the Ebionites. By the end of the first century, the church had become predominately Gentile. "The most significant development of early Christianity was its ethnic expansion of including the Gentiles *as Gentiles*."[9] After the council, Christianity was no longer linked with Jewish ethnicity. The church became increasingly a transethnic entity, with a clearly articulated Pauline doctrine of salvation—by grace through faith and not by works of the law. Hindrances were removed, and the foundation was laid for a rapid expansion of Christianity among Gentiles to the very ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

Mission among Gentiles in the First Century

The apostle Paul's mission to the Gentiles was affirmed by God and the church several times. The first affirmation took place shortly after Paul's conversion on the Damascus Road. In a vision, the Lord told Ananias, a disciple in Damascus, that Paul was his "chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel" (Acts 9:15). Then, during his visit to the capital to deliver the famine relief collection circa AD 44, Paul and his companions met privately with the "pillars" of the Jerusalem church. In that meeting, they recognized that Paul "had been entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the uncircumcised" Gentiles (Gal. 2:7). But for Paul's mission to the Gentiles to advance unhindered, the Jerusalem Council was needed. At that event, not only did the apostles, the elders, and the whole church rejoice at "everything God had done" through Paul and Barnabas for the salvation of the Gentiles. Key hindrances to Gentile conversion (circumcision and adherence to the law) were swept away by the decree promulgated at the council (Acts 15:4, 19, 22). Built on the strong foundation of the Jerusalem decree and divine and church calling, Paul's mission to the Gentiles thrived.

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[9] Cornelis Bennema, "The Ethnic Conflict in Early Christianity," *JETS* 56, no. 4 (2013): 762–63.

The apostle Paul was the missionary par excellence in the apostolic era. With the help of coworkers, he planted flourishing churches among Gentiles in the major cities of the Roman provinces of Cilicia (Tarsus), Syria (Antioch), Galatia (Lystra, Derbe, Iconium), Asia (Ephesus), Macedonia (Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea), and Achaia (Corinth, Athens). Paul's focus on district or provincial capitals was a central tenet of his mission method. Each of these urban centers were hubs of communication, commerce, and culture, and in Paul's mind, representative for the whole region. In these urban centers, Paul first preached the messianic message in synagogues to Jews and God-fearers. He only turned directly to the Gentile population after his expulsion from the synagogue or the rejection of his message by local Jews. In most instances, Jewish opposition arose rapidly, while Gentiles readily responded. Unlike some early itinerant missionaries, who hurried from one location to another, Paul stayed long enough to establish viable churches—one and a half years in Corinth and two to three in Ephesus. His role was to plant the church (1 Cor. 3:6); others would further develop and nurture it. Paul's pioneering work was accomplished when healthy urban churches were established. Therefore, he could assert that he had "fully proclaimed the gospel" in the Eastern Mediterranean "from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum." Since his "ambition [was] to preach the gospel where Christ was not known," he sought to move on to unreached areas, such as Spain (Rom. 15:19–20, 28). Paul's mission strategy assumed that others, normally his coworkers in the newly planted churches, would evangelize the surrounding region.[10] The conversion of rural areas, however, proved to be a slow process that was only completely accomplished in the early Middle Ages. Nevertheless, some successful regional expansion of the gospel is reflected in the New Testament. Paul rejoiced that "the Lord's message rang out" from the Thessalonians in "Macedonia [their region] and Achaia," the neighboring province (1 Thess. 1:8).

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[10] Volker Rabens, "Paul's Mission Strategy in the Urban Landscape of the First-Century Roman Empire," in *The Urban World and the First Christians*, ed. Steve Walton, Paul Trebilco, and David Gill (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 111.

This brings us to a second key mission method of the first-century mission—the utilization of both official missionaries (Paul, other apostles, and coworkers) and the unofficial evangelistic ministry of individual believers and congregations. Both Paul and Peter were official missionaries who fulfilled their commission to preach the gospel, Paul in the Eastern Mediterranean as the apostle to the Gentiles, Peter as apostle to the Jews (Gal. 2:7–8). Peter was accompanied in his missionary travels by his wife (1 Cor. 9:5). The references to the Peter party in 1 Corinthians 1:12 and 3:22 suggest that he may have ministered in Corinth for a time. Similarly, he may have engaged in mission work in northern Asia Minor, since 1 Peter is addressed to churches in that region. Early Christian tradition claims that Peter either founded the church in Rome, had a sustained ministry there, or arrived there shortly before his martyrdom. This tradition, though early, has not been historically verified.[11] Neither has the appealing third-century tradition that the twelve apostles, while gathered together in Jerusalem, cast lots to determine which Gentile nation the Lord had assigned each of them as their mission territory. "Thomas . . . obtained by lot Parthia, Andrew Scythia, [and] John Asia."[12] That the twelve apostles engaged in mission is likely. Where the Twelve evangelized, however, is unclear. It is significant that the term "apostle" was used in this period not only for the Twelve but also for other missionaries (or emissaries), such as Barnabas (Acts 14:14). In Ephesians 4:11, "apostles" are included alongside evangelists, pastors, and teachers as gifts to the church.

Paul employed a team of coworkers as "official" missionaries to advance or further his mission initiatives. The majority of Paul's thirty-eight coworkers listed in the New Testament were fairly recent converts from the churches he planted. Some, such as Epaphroditus (Phil. 2:25), were sent to assist Paul as delegates from their home churches. Nine or ten of Paul's circle of coworkers were women—a sizable number. Two of them, Euodia and Syntyche, "contended at my [Paul's] side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my coworkers" (4:2–3). Their ministry in Philippi was viewed as similar to that of male coworkers. Some coworkers, such as Timothy, Titus, and Silas, accompanied Paul on his itinerant missionary journeys. Others had a more localized ministry. Stephanas, Paul's first convert in Achaia, and his household witnessed to Christ on their home turf—in Corinth and its environs (1 Cor. 16:15–6). Epaphras, a native of Colossae, was present with Paul in Ephesus. He was most likely sent by Paul back to his home territory in the Lycus valley, where he planted three churches—in Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis (Col. 1:3–8; 4:13).[13]

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[11] Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 1:528, 721.

[12] Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, trans. C. F. Cruse (London: Bagster and Sons, 1842), 106.

Not all evangelists or missionaries were officially appointed apostles or coworkers. Unnamed Hellenistic and Hebraic Jews witnessed to their faith when they were scattered due to persecution—with remarkable results (Acts 8:1; 11:19–21). The Pax Romana (peace of Rome) allowed great freedom of movement for the hundreds of unnamed believers who shared their faith as they traveled about the empire. These unofficial missionaries most likely contributed to the establishment of those first-century churches that were not founded by an apostle or coworker: in Syria (Tyre, Sidon, Damascus), in Asia (Miletus, Smyrna, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia), in Italy (Puteoli, Pompeii, probably Rome), in Egypt (Alexandria), and in North Africa (Cyrene). Not just individual believers but local churches likewise had "an evangelistic function that appears to have developed spontaneously. . . . The strong evidence of Acts is that local congregations expanded and grew through the efforts of their members."[14] Local church worship services had evangelistic potential for unbelieving visitors (1 Cor. 14:23–25). Households and house churches "served as missional bases of operation" that provided "natural evangelistic contacts and conversation opportunities" for gospel "proclamation" and "Christian brotherly love."[15]

Expansion of Christianity in the Second and Third Centuries

The Jerusalem Council of AD 49 smoothed away key hindrances to Gentile conversion and thereby paved the way for a robust mission among diverse ethnicities in the following centuries. The church in the second and third centuries continued to grow, at times rapidly. Nevertheless, the church in the postapostolic era exhibited a number of glaring weaknesses with regard to mission that were not found in the first century. For example, in contrast to

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[13] Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 2:1425–32, 1434, 1439–41.

[14] I. Howard Marshall, "Who Were the Evangelists?," in *The Mission of the Early Church to Jews and Gentiles*, ed. Jostein Ådna and Hans Kvalbein (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 262–63; Jehu J. Hanciles, *Migration and the Making of Global Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021), 141–69.

[15] Roger W. Gehring, *House Church and Mission: The Importance of Household Structures in Early Christianity* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 227.

Paul's Gentile mission, missional efforts in this period lacked organization and clearly articulated methods. Mission did occur, but it came about for the most part incidentally through individual initiative. There was no longer an official church office of missionary or evangelist. By 200, the broader meaning of "apostle" as an itinerant missionary, seen occasionally in the New Testament, had all but disappeared, and the word instead referred exclusively to the Twelve. Furthermore, with only a few notable exceptions (Pantaneus, Gregory the Wonderworker), by 150 missionaries vanished from the written record, as did evidence of evangelistic preaching. Extant sermons from these

SIDEBAR 1.1

Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.10 (AD 175–185)

The Church, though dispersed throughout the whole world, even to the ends of the earth, has received from the apostles and their disciples this [apostolic] faith. . . . She [the Church] believes these points [of doctrine] . . . and she proclaims them, and teaches them, and hands them down, with perfect harmony. . . . For the Churches which have been planted in Germany do not believe or hand down anything different, nor do those in Spain, nor those in Gaul, nor those in the East, nor those in Egypt, nor those in Libya, nor those which have been established in the central regions of the world.

Tertullian, *Apology* 37 (AD 197)

We [Christians] are but of yesterday, and we have filled every place among you—cities, islands, fortresses, towns, market-places, the very camp, tribes, companies, palace, senate, forum,—we have left nothing to you but the temples of your gods. . . . For now it is the immense number of Christians which makes your enemies so few—almost all the inhabitants of your various cities being followers of Christ.

Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 6.28 (AD 182–202)

But the word of our Teacher remained not in Judea alone, as philosophy did in Greece; but was diffused over the whole world, over every nation, and village, and town, bringing already over to the truth whole houses, and each individual of those who heard it by him himself, and not a few of the philosophers themselves.

Source: Francis M. DuBose, ed., *Classics of Christian Missions* (Nashville: Broadman, 1979), 278–79, 284, 282.

two centuries were almost exclusively addressed to Christians or baptismal candidates; they focused on Christian ethics, not on a call to repent and believe. One final form of mission outreach common in the first century, missional worship services, likewise became rare in this period. Due to persecution, non-Christians were seldom given access to Christian worship services.[16]

Despite these missional shortcomings in the second and third centuries, Christianity continued to spread throughout the Roman Empire and beyond. By the time of Emperor Constantine's edict of toleration (312), approximately 10 percent of the population in the empire were Christ-followers, an amazing development considering the severe but periodic state-sponsored persecutions from the 60s onward.[17] Christians were found in all social classes during the first three centuries. Pliny the Younger, governor of Bithynia, in his letter to Emperor Trajan in 112, reported that "many persons of all ages and classes and of both sexes" had become Christians.[18] Some converts were slaves (e.g., Onesimus; "those who belong to Caesar's household," Phil. 4:22; second-century martyr Blandina); others belonged to the highest echelons of society (e.g., Erastus, the city treasurer of Corinth, Rom. 16:23; noblewoman Pomponia Graecina). Furthermore, Christians were actively engaged in society and found in all occupations. Tertullian emphasized that "we [Christians] sojourn with you in the world, abjuring neither forum . . . nor workshop, nor inn, nor weekly market, nor any other places of commerce. We sail with you, and fight with you, and till the ground with you."[19] Although Christians would not participate in pagan religious festivals, they served in the military, in commercial ventures, and in the halls of government. Pliny in his letter to Trajan testified to the geographic expansion of the faith: the Christian "superstition has spread not only in the cities, but in the villages and rural districts as well."[20] Other ancient writers confirmed this rapid spread of Christianity (see sidebar 1.1). Irenaeus asserted that the apostolic faith had spread "even to the ends of the earth," specifically to Germany, Spain, Gaul, Egypt, Libya, and the East. Tertullian stressed the spread of the gospel to "every place." Clement of Alexandria noted that unlike Greek philosophy, which remained in Greece, Christianity did not linger in Judea but was diffused throughout the whole world—to every nation, town, village, and household.

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[16] Ramsey MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire AD 100–400* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 34; Reidar Hvalvik, "In Word and Deed: The Expansion of the Church in the Pre-Constantinian Era," in Ådna and Kvalbein, *Mission of the Early Church*, 267, 272, 276; Alan Kreider, "They Alone Know the Right Way to Live: The Early Church and Evangelism," in *Ancient Faith for the Church's Future*, ed. Mark Husbands and Jeffrey Greenman (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008), 170.

[17] Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997), 6–7.

[18] Bettenson and Maunder, *Documents of the Christian Church*, 4.

[19] Tertullian, *Apology* 42, quoted in Hanciles, *Migration*, 143–44.

[20] Bettenson and Maunder, *Documents of the Christian Church*, 4.

In the postapostolic period, Christianity continued to expand westward within the Roman Empire. Greek-speaking Christian merchants brought the gospel to Gaul (Lyons and Vienne in southern France), to Italy (Aquileia, Nola), to Croatia (Salona), and to Germany (Trier). By the end of the second century, churches had been established among the Celtic/Gallic population in southern Gaul as well. Whether the apostle Paul evangelized in Spain is unknown. The progress of the gospel there was rather slow, though by 305–306, when the council of Elvira (today Granada) convened, there were thirty-six bishoprics in Spain. The canons of the council, however, suggest that pagan influence in the church was still an ongoing problem. Tertullian reported that by 200, Christianity had "reached the haunts of the Britons."[21] Christian soldiers and merchants probably first brought the faith to the British Isles. During the empire-wide persecutions under Emperors Decius and Valerian, three named Britons (Alban and soldiers Aaron and Julius) were martyred for refusing to sacrifice to the gods. The growth of the church in Britain was further evidenced by the participation of three British bishops at the international Council of Arles in 314.

Carthage was probably the gateway in the late first century for Christianity in Roman North Africa. The first agents of evangelization were Italian immigrants who came as settlers, merchants, and soldiers. By AD 150, the church was established, and Christians were being buried in the catacombs at Hadrumetum (today Sousse, Tunisia), one hundred miles south of Carthage. Twelve Christians from the region of Scilla (west-central Tunisia) were martyred in 180. Five of the twelve had typical African (Berber) names, an indication that the gospel had crossed to the indigenous population living far inland from coastal Carthage.[22] "By the end of the third century, there was no area in the Roman Empire which had not been penetrated to some extent by the Gospel. But distribution was very uneven . . . and the village people were as yet to a large extent untouched."[23]

The most effective means of mission in the second and third centuries was the witness of ordinary lay Christians. As described above, Christian immigrants, merchants, and soldiers were the primary agents of evangelization in

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[21] Tertullian, *Against the Jews* 7, trans. S. Thelwall, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3, *Latin Christianity: Its Founder*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo: Christian Literature, 1885), rev. and ed. Kevin Knight, http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0308.htm.

[22] Francois Decret, *Early Christianity in North Africa* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009), 9–13, 30–31.

[23] Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, 2nd ed. (New York: Penguin, 1991), 35.

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much of the Roman world. Some of these Christians were relocated elsewhere involuntarily: slaves when their masters moved; soldiers when assigned to other military installations; harassed believers when persecution struck. Lay merchants and tradesmen, however, voluntarily moved for their business pursuits. These lay believers "went everywhere gossiping the gospel . . . naturally, enthusiastically, and with . . . conviction," not by "formal preaching, but the informal chattering to friends and chance acquaintances, in homes and wine shops, on walks, and around market stalls."[24] Jehu Hanciles notes that "Christian *witness* was a matter of *with-ness*," which combined "intimate proximity" to non-Christians with a convincing lifestyle and gospel message.[25] Christianity spread through natural relational networks of friends, neighbors, family, and business acquaintances, but also when Christians shared the gospel with strangers. Justin Martyr was converted in 135 when an elderly Christian explained how the Old Testament prophets pointed to Christ. "Straightway a flame was kindled in my soul; and a love of the prophets, and of those men who are friends of Christ, possessed me."[26]

By 150, the office of missionary or evangelist no longer existed in the church. Nevertheless, other church officials evangelized at times. It was part of the job description of bishops to "warn and reprove the uninstructed with boldness"[27]—that is, to evangelize. We only know of a few who actually did. Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna (d. 156), did "exhort men to gain salvation" by departing from idolatrous practices.[28] Irenaeus, while bishop of Lyons (178–200), became fluent in the Celtic/Gallic language in order to evangelize the indigenous population. Cyprian, bishop of Carthage (248–258), wrote an apologetic tract to the Roman proconsul of Africa, Demetrianus, in which he defended Christians against charges that they caused wars, famines, and epidemics by abandoning the pagan gods. At the end of the tract, the bishop makes a missionary appeal, something quite unusual for apologetic writing in this era:

> Forsake the idols which human error has invented. Be turned to God. . . . Believe in Christ. . . . Pardon is granted to the man who confesses, and saving mercy is given from the divine goodness to the believer, and a passage is opened to

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[24] Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 173.

[25] Hanciles, *Migration*, 149–50.

[26] Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* 8.1, trans. Marcus Dods and George Reith, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo: Christian Literature, 1885), rev. and ed. Kevin Knight, http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/01281.htm.

[27] *Apostolic Constitutions* 2.2.6.

[28] Hvalvik, "In Word and Deed," 272.

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> immortality even in death itself. This grace Christ bestows; this gift of His mercy He confers upon us by overcoming death in the trophy of the cross.[29]

Another church office, that of exorcist, was much more closely linked with evangelism than that of bishop. Originally exorcists were charismatic healers who prayed for the sick or demon-possessed in the power of Jesus. Later they became a part of the church hierarchy and performed ritual exorcisms on baptismal candidates. It was not unusual for a suffering Gentile to seek healing wherever it could be found—both from the pagan Asclepius cult and from the Christian exorcist. Successful exorcisms or healings by the Christian exorcist often led to conversions. Irenaeus reported, “Others banish demons surely and truly, and frequently those who are delivered from such, become believers and are in the Church.”[30] Novation of Rome (d. 258) was baptized after Christian exorcists cast out his demons; he was ultimately healed of a grave illness. Healings and exorcisms testified to the power of the Christian God and resulted in conversions.[31]

Ironically, the persecution of Christians resulted in the growth of the church. Tertullian’s famous statement, “The oftener we are mown down by you [Roman officials], the more in number we grow; *the blood of Christians is seed*,” proved true. The willingness of some early Christians to be martyred to maintain their witness to Christ (“martyr” means “witness”) was powerful. Executions took place in the public arena, which was thronged by all levels of society. Martyrdoms thus served to publicize the Christian faith. Trials of Christians often were attended by outsiders. Some martyrs used this opportunity to clarify aspects of their faith. The army veteran Julius declared at his trial, “It was he [Jesus] who died for our sins . . . in order to give us eternal life. This same man Christ is God and . . . whoever believes in him will have eternal life.”[32] The heroism of martyrs resulted at times in sympathy for Christians, convincing some non-Christians to inquire into the faith. “At the sight of it [a martyr’s suffering and death] who is not profoundly troubled, to the point of inquiring what may lie behind it all?”[33] It is impossible to estimate how many might have converted after observing the martyrdom of Christians; we have only a few accounts of prison guards accepting the faith.

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[29] Cyprian, *An Address to Demetrianus* 16, 25, trans. Robert Ernest Wallis, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5, *Fathers of the Third Century: Hippolytus, Cyprian, Caius, Novatian, Appendix*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo: Christian Literature, 1886), rev. and ed. Kevin Knight, http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/050705.htm.

[30] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 2.32.4, in *The Treatise of Saint Irenaeus of Lugdunum Against the Heresies*, trans. F. R. Montgomery Hitchcock (London: SPCK, 1916), 1:77.

[31] MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire*, 27–28; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 295.

[32] Tertullian, *Apology* 50, trans. S. Thelwall, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3, *Latin Christianity*, http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0301.htm; Edward L. Smither, *Mission in the Early Church: Themes and Reflections* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014), 55.

[33] Tertullian, *Apology* 50.15.

Finally, the lifestyle of many Christians was radically different from that of their non-Christian neighbors, and it convinced some of the truthfulness of Christianity. Minucius Felix, in his apology *Octavius* (ca. 200), claimed, "Beauty of life causes strangers to join the [Christian] ranks. . . . We do not preach great things, we live them."[34] Christians avoided the theater, the arena, and the sexual promiscuity common at the baths and taverns. They did not participate in the emperor cult or eat meat offered to idols. They upheld the sanctity of life and condemned female infanticide, incest, polygamy, and marital infidelity. Furthermore, believers practiced sacrificial love—not only toward fellow Christians but also toward those outside the faith. During the horrific epidemic that struck Alexandria around 250, most non-Christians fled the city, leaving their sick and dying relatives to fend for themselves. Christians, however, remained there and provided care for both their own and for the sick among the pagans, even though the latter had so recently persecuted them. This behavior astonished outsiders, since it often resulted in the Christians themselves becoming infected and dying. Emperor Julian the Apostate remarked that the Christian faith had been "specially advanced through the loving service rendered to strangers. . . . The godless Galileans [Christians] care not only for their own poor but for ours as well; while those who belong to us [pagans] look in vain for the help that we should render them."[35]

In conclusion, the Jerusalem Council was a turning point in the history of the expansion of Christianity. It resolved the Jewish-Gentile controversy and clarified the doctrine of salvation and the terms of acceptance for Gentiles into the church. It eliminated the key hindrances to their conversion (circumcision and adherence to the law). The council opened wide the door for Gentile conversion, ethnic diversity in the church, and mission to the ends of the earth. The outreach efforts of official and unofficial missionaries in the apostolic era brought a massive influx of Gentiles into the church. Despite some missional weaknesses in the second and third centuries, the gospel continued to spread throughout the Roman world, largely through the witness of ordinary lay Christians.

We end this chapter with the earliest Christian prayer not found in the New Testament, written by Clement, bishop of Rome, to the church in Corinth in 96. It includes the theme of mission to the Gentiles.

> May he who created everything
> keep the number of his chosen people, throughout the world,

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[34] Kreider, "They Alone Know," 278.

[35] Neill, *History of Christian Missions*, 37–38.

up to the strength he fixed for them
through his dear Child, Jesus Christ.
Through him he called us from darkness to light,
From ignorance to knowledge
Of the glory of his name. . . .
May every nation come to know
that you alone are God,
that Jesus Christ is your Child,
that we are your people, the sheep that you pasture.[36]

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[36] A. Hamman, ed., *Early Christian Prayers*, trans. Walter Mitchell (London: Longmans, 1961), 25–27.