

Seeing the Early Church through Acts and the Corinthians Epistles
 ReCatechism 7
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The books of the Acts and Paul's letters to Corinthians are part of the New Testament.

While the four Gospels tell us of what Jesus taught and the miracles he performed while he was amongst people here on earth, both the Acts and the two letters of the Corinthians tell us of what took place after Jesus Christ ascended to heaven.

In both, the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel according to Marc, we see that Christ gave instructions to His disciples to go out to the world and preach everything they heard and experienced and to baptise them in the name of the Holy Trinity.

"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you (Matthew 28: 19-20).

The first half of the book of the Acts, or as it is known by its full name, "**The Acts of the Apostles**", give us a full account of what happened the first years of Christianity; It give us full details of how the first church was created and organized. It shows the difficulties they had, the persecutions by both the Jews and the Gentiles and how they managed to survive.

The second half of the book describes Paul's conversion from a persecutor of the church to a defender of the church, more than anyone else, to the point that he is called "**The first after the One**" (ο Πρώτος μετά τον Έναν), meaning he is second only to Christ.

Although, it is not stated in the book itself, it is believed to be written by Luke the Evangelist and, most likely, it is a continuation of his Gospel. It is written, around the years 63 to 64 AD. Both the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles are addressed to "Theofilos" some believed to be a Roman official converted to Christianity. The name Theofilos is Greek and it means "a friend of God". It could also mean that the individual was someone that loved God, in which case, Luke simply describes the man and it is not a name.

Christ instructions were to go out and preach the Gospel. How would that be possible? We are talking of twelve fishermen with no proper education no official training, no position in the society, poor against rich, weak against strong, with no arms against the mighty Roman soldiers. All they had was a promised from Christ Himself: **"I am with you always, even to the end of the age"** (Matthew 28: 20). And indeed He was.

Chapters 1 and 2

Christ is ascending to heaven and He is asking the disciples to stay close to Jerusalem because they will get power from above. Sure enough, only ten days later, on the day of Pentecost, as they are gathered in a house and praying, the Holy Spirit came down on each one of them anointing them and giving them the strength and the knowledge to go and preach the nations with no fear, even for their lives. The uneducated and untrained disciples speak different languages, the crowd marveled as they all know that they are nothing but simple fishermen from Galilee and yet, they are able to speak languages they did not know up until now. According to the fathers of the church, on the day of Pentecost, Christ ordained first His disciples as bishops ready to take charge of the church that was about to be born.

Right before Pentecost, they had replaced Judas, who betrayed Christ, with Matthias. Peter is talking to the crowd and asks them to repent and be baptized. The first day we have three thousand people converting to Christianity. The birth of the church is reality. The disciples, (οι μαθηται) as the first Christians were known then, live together, they pray together, they take Holy communion, they even sell their properties and give the proceeds to those in need. It is much later in Antioch that the disciples (οι μαθηται) are called Christians.

Chapters 3 to 7

Peter and the rest of the twelve disciples continue to preach and pray. Christ is really with them. Peter and John go to the Temple to pray and, in the name of Christ, they perform the first miracle. A lame man that never walked in his life is standing up walking and dancing around the disciples. The high priest and the Pharisees are not impressed. They realized that Christ's death did not accomplished what they are looking for. They crucified Christ but now His disciples are at it again. They arrest Peter and John and put them in jail. Next morning they gathered every one that had a high position and called them for interrogation. Why are you preaching about Christ? They said. Didn't we forbid you to do so? And the answer from Peter: **"We ought to obey God rather than men"**. That is Peter for you. The one that denied Christ three times in front of a servant the night He was arrested,

now is not afraid to tell the high priest, the one that condemned Christ to death, that he is responsible for Christ's crucifixion. That is the power of the Holy Spirit. As a result, another two thousand people convert to Christianity and now they are five thousand.

Peter and John are going back to jail only to be let out by an Angel of God and started preaching again at the temple of Solomon. They are arrested again and they are ready to punish them when Gamaliel, a teacher of the law and highly respected man by the people, stopped them from doing so. More and more people join the church. They are so many, that the twelve disciples don't have enough time to preach and take care of their everyday needs. They choose seven men of good reputation whose job will be to take care of everyday needs while the disciples will spend their time in prayers and preaching the word of God. Amongst the seven men, Steven, full of faith and Holy Spirit, not only serves the needs of the individuals but also preaches the word of God and even performs miracles.

That did not go very well with the high priest. Instead of stopping the twelve disciples to preach, now they have other people joining in. They call Steven to the Synagogue hoping to persuade at least him to stop preaching. Instead, he, like Peter and John, is blaming them for Christ's death. As a result, they take him out and stone him to death. Someone by the name Saul is keeping an eye of their clothing while they stoned Steven to death.

Chapters 8 to 20

The church is devastated. Most of the Christians, with the exception of the twelve disciples, leave Jerusalem in order to avoid persecution. At the same time, Saul a Pharisee himself, is going from door to door arresting Christians and put them in jail. He is convinced that these followers of Christ have to be stopped, even killed if need be.

His zeal to stop this new heresy, as he thought, takes him to Damascus to persecute the Christians there. God on the other hand has a different idea. As he approaches the city, suddenly a light shone around him from heaven and a voice is heard saying:

Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? Saul is terrified, **who are you, Lord?** He asked. And the voice replied: **I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.** The light is so strong that he loses his sight. His friends take him in the city and he stays there for three days fasting and praying.

A man named Ananias, sent by Christ, comes to the house and baptised him. Now Saul is a different man. Instead of persecuting the church, he becomes a supporter of the church. He goes to the Synagogues and preaches that Christ is the long waited Messiah. The Jews are confused. At the beginning they thought he was trying to fish out the Christians, but when they realized that he himself is a Christian, they try to kill him. From now on Saul, or, as he is also known as Paul, will be preaching and converting both Jews and Gentiles to Christianity and he will be persecuted by both groups.

At the same time back in Jerusalem Peter and the rest of the disciples continue to preach the good news of salvation. That did not go very well with the Jews or the Romans who are occupying the Jewish nation. Herod, the Roman governor, kills James the disciple, the brother of John and he sends Peter to jail. An angel of God however, appears in the middle of the night and releases Peter from jail. The Jews are confused. They want to kill Peter as well but he became too popular and they are now afraid of the people. **People brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed and be healed.(Acts 5:15)**

God seems to be supporting the new movement and people are converting on a daily basis.

A gentile by the name Cornelius called Peter in Caesarea and becomes the first gentile to convert to Christianity. Some Christians, being Jews before, are objecting. They believe that only Jews can become Christians but Peter claims that the Holy Spirit himself anointed Cornelius and his family. They accept the new comers but a new problem arises. Should the gentiles become first Jews and then Christians? Should they be circumcised first?

They sent to Jerusalem to ask the disciples who get together to discuss the issue. After a long discussion and prayer they write a letter to the Christians in Caesarea and say:

It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and us to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: That you abstain from things offered to idols from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. By the way, that is why Christians do not circumcise their boys.

Paul and Barnabas start their mission outside Jerusalem. Some believe and others persecute them. One day they believe that they are gods and prepare to offer sacrifices, and the next day they stoned Paul and they left him to die. They continue

their journey north and they cross over to Europe. First stop is Philippi in Macedonia Greece. Luke, Timothy and others join the group and Paul continues to preach and convert people to Christianity. Next stop Thessaloniki, Berea, and Athens. In Athens they want to hear about the new God and Paul in preaching in Acropolis. Everything goes well until he mentions resurrection from death. They think it is a jock and they stop him. Some even laugh at him. The group continues to Corinth and Paul stays for a few months. Paul decides to return to Jerusalem to be there for the day of Pentecost.

Chapter 21 to 28

Paul is preaching that there is no salvation by keeping the Mosaic Law. The only way to be saved is to believe in Christ and be saved by His grace. That does not go very well with the Jews. The disciples asking Paul to at least show that he continues to obey the law. He goes to the temple and when they see him there they arrest him. They want to kill him but the Roman governor sent the solders and saved him. From now on there is an open war.

The governor finds out that they are plotting to kill him and he sends Paul to Caesarea. The high priest heirs a lawyer and they go down to Caesarea to appear in court and persuade the governor there to send him to Jerusalem while they are plotting again to kill him on the way. They accuse Paul for plotting a revolution, but they cannot prove it. Paul tells the governor about the vision he had on the way to Damascus. The vision that was the reason for his conversion. He claims that he did nothing wrong and when he realizes that the governor is ready to send him back to Jerusalem he appeals to Caesar.

That stops the persecution but Paul remains in jail. Agrippa the king and friend to the Roman governor in Caesarea, is informed about Paul and wants to hear him. Another court is scheduled and Paul is called again to say his side of the story. Agrippa believes that Paul is innocent and he could have been release but, since Paul had appealed to the emperor, they decide to send him. The Roman governor finds a ship and Paul starts the journey to Rome.

There is a storm and they stop at Crete hopping to continue the trip as soon as the weather gets better. In a few days they believe that they can continue. Paul is asking them to wait for a few more days but they don't listen to him. They start the trip towards Rome. The weather get worse. The winds are strong. The waves are high and they throw away some of the merchandise hoping to lighten the ship. Fourteen days are gone by, one worse than the other. The ship is dragged down by the waves and they lose control. No sun or stars appear for a few days and everyone is convinced that it is only a matter of time that they will go down. Paul however stands up and assures everyone that he had a vision from God. He was told

that no one will die.

Sure enough the next day they see a small island and they try to get there. The waves continue to be high. They ran the ship aground. Some swim and others get to the land some on boards and some on parts of the ship which is destroyed but everyone, two hundred and seventy six people, get to the land without any loss of life.

They realized that they landed in Malta. The people are very friendly and they offer food and shelter for a few days. The father of the local governor is sick and Paul prays to God and he is healed. Three months later, they find another ship going to Rome and they get there alive and well. Paul is allowed to stay for two years in a house chained to a Roman soldier, preaching and writing letters to the people that he brought to Christ. The Bible is not saying whether he ever got to meet Caesar or how he died. I am sure that Fotini will give us more details on the next session in a couple of weeks.

Letters to the Corinthians

The city of Corinth is located in south part of Greece name Peloponnesus, about eighty kilometres from Athens. During Paul's time, it was a major Roman city with two harbours and about 400,000 people (compare to Athens who had 10,000 people at the time). People in Corinth were known for their wild night life. In the city they had the infamous temple of Venus with two thousand female prostitutes. Paul visited the city right after his visit to Athens and stayed there for about a year and a half. During this period he converted a lot of gentiles and a few Jews. He left Corinth and went to Ephesus where he wrote the first letter to the Corinthians around 57 AD.

Preaching to the Corinthians was a lot different than preaching to Jews. Jews believed in one God and they were expecting the Messiah. Gentiles, like the Corinthians, had many gods and, even worse off, their gods had problems and faults like any human. Pagan gods were getting revenge, they were punishing the people and they were even fighting among themselves. Christian's God however died for the people, something that was inconceivable for the gentiles. Paul had to be very careful how to approach the subject. He had to be firm on his beliefs and, at the same time, not to offend the gentiles. That made his job very difficult.

Believing in one God was not an easy thing for the gentiles either. At least Jews knew what God was expecting from them. Gentiles had no idea. To make things worse off, some gentiles were baptized in the new faith but continued to live pagan lives.

There were a lot more problems in the newly created Christians church than those from Jewish descent. That is why most of Paul's epistles are addressed to previous gentiles and one to Hebrews.

A' Corinthians chapter 1 to 7

Have you ever had a situation that someone read a couple of chapters of the Bible and they believe they know it all? How about splitting into groups and claiming that one group was better than the other. Or, claiming that one preacher was better than the other?

That is exactly what had happened in Corinth. Right after Paul left to Ephesus, he found out that they were divided in four groups. One group was having as a leader Paul, another had Apollos , a third one had Peter and finally the fourth one had Christ. He was furious.

Is Christ divided? He asked, Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul? Thank God I did not baptize too many of you lest anyone should say that I had baptized in my own name. Christ is the one we all preach. Christ is the one that paid with His life for our salvation. Not Paul, not Peter, not anyone else for that matter. And Paul adds: **I planted, Apollos watered but God gave the increase.** The truth is that there were not differences in the teaching of Paul, Peter or Apollos. Each one of them was building the same church with the same foundation, Jesus Christ.

Earlier I mentioned that some Corinthians were baptized but they continued to live a sinful life. Paul found out that someone was having an affair with his stepmother.

If that was not bad enough, nobody stepped in to put him in his place. The church is young. An example like this one could be devastating. Paul wants them to get together and deal with this situation right away. If the individual refuses to change and live a Christian life, he has to be separated from the rest of the group in order not to influence the rest of the people. If need be, he said, **deliver such one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the**

Lord.

You might think Paul is too harsh. Remember what I said at the beginning. He had to be firm on his beliefs. Immorality had no place in the new church. As for the rest of the people, they should separate themselves from this kind of people. Did that work? Yes it did. It looks like the individual repented and came back to church. Paul writes on the second letter to Corinthians: **This punishment which was inflicted by the majority is sufficient for such a man, so that, you ought rather to forgive and comfort him.**

Christ did not come to condemn the people but to save them. Neither does the church. The idea is not to punish people but to show them the proper way to live and be saved.

Paul had to deal with another question. Do you need to be single to go to heaven, or, is it OK to get married. Paul's opinion is that both of them have the same chance. It is better to be single but if you must get married is also OK.

There was also another unique problem. Some of the new Christians were already married when they converted to Christianity. Some of the spouses however, remain pagans. Should they divorce them? No says Paul. **If the pagan spouse wants to stay, do not get a divorce. Because, how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know O husband, whether you will save your wife? If, on the other hand, the pagan spouse wants to leave, let him/her leave; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases.**

Chapter 8 to 16

Life continues in Corinth. The majority of the people are still pagans. They offer animal sacrifices to the pagan gods and then they sell the meat at the market. Was it OK for the new Christians to eat of that kind of meat? We all know, says Paul, that there is only one God; therefore, sacrifices to other gods don't mean anything. There is a problem however. Some new Christians with weak conscience might have questions in their mind. If they see you, a devoted Christian, consuming meat from the pagan meat market, they might confuse the real God with the pagan god. For that reason alone, says Paul, **if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.**

It was customary in the early churches to get together and take part in what was originally called "**the braking of the bread**", Holy Communion. Paul noticed that some Christians would bring their food, eat and drink, while others did not even

have the necessities. Shame on you, says Paul. If you want to eat and drink, you can do that at home but not when you all gather for Holy Communion. What you have it is not just bread and wine but the true body and blood of Jesus Christ. **Let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup.** Taking Holy Communion is serious business. Don't take it for granted. **For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgement to himself not discerning the Lord's body.**

Like today, most people look at the position someone has in the church. Everyone wants to be the president and no one the caretaker. Paul writes to the Corinthians. Everyone is a unique person with a unique job to do. In order to have the job done we need the input from everyone. Take a look at the human body for example. The body is not one member but many. **If the foot should say, "because I am not a hand, I am not of the body," is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I am not of the body," is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole were hearing where would be the smelling?**

It is the same idea in the church. Everyone had a unique job to do but in order to finish the job, we need everybody's input. It is the same in the secular world. Can you imagine a society that had only doctors and lawyers and accountants? They will starve to death because they will not have anything to eat and clothes or shoes to wear. The lawyers need the baker and the shoemaker as much as they need him. It is the same in the spiritual world. God has appointed apostles, prophets, teachers, administrators and so on. All of those are gifts from God and they should be used as such.

And Paul finishes the first letter to the Corinthians with two special chapters, chapter thirteen and fifteen. Chapter thirteen deals with the highest gift of all; Love. **Even if I speak all the languages of the world, he says, and that of the angels, if there was such a thing, but I don't have love, I am nothing but a sounding brass or a clanging cymbal.** Anything we do in our lives must be done under the focus of love. Love for God and our fellow men. After all, the Christian life comes down to these three. Faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these, is love.

Chapter fifteen is the chapter of resurrection. The Christian faith will be just a myth if we don't believe in the resurrection.

If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable, says Paul. **If Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty.** And he concludes: **But now Christ is risen from the dead,** therefore we will also be resurrected from the dead.

B' Corinthians chapters 1 to 10

The second letter to the Corinthians was written most likely from Philippi only a few months after he wrote the first letter. Paul sent Titus from Ephesus to see how the Corinthians received his first epistle. The two men met in Macedonia and Titus told him that they had accepted his teachings and advises. Unfortunately, he also told him that there were some false prophets who were teaching that Paul was not a genuine disciple of Christ; therefore, the Corinthians should not believe everything that Paul taught them. Paul writes to the Corinthians:

Do I really need to present letters of commendation to you? In other words, do I need to prove to you who I am in order to believe on the things I taught you?

It is true that Paul was not one of the twelve disciples. For that matter, he had not seen Christ in person while he was here on earth. He had however a vision in the road to Damascus and had a conversation with Christ. In the letter to the Galatians he writes that the gospel he was preaching was not given to him by any man but by revelation of Jesus Christ. If the Corinthians needed proof of who he was, all they had to do is look into their own hearts. The proof was there. Everywhere Paul was teaching, God was there as well, confirming his teaching with miracles and signs. **For not he who commends himself is approved, but whom the Lord comments,** he writes.

Paul does not really care whether they accept him as a genuine disciple or not. His concern is that, if they doubt his discipleship they also doubt his teaching. The church in Corinth is young. Any doubts on the truth of the Gospel, could end up on them giving up the real faith and return to idolatry. That is what he is afraid off.

Chapters 11 to 13

Unfortunately, the damaged is done. Some of the new Christians have already doubts. Although he had never boasted before of his background and his knowledge, he is now forced to do just that. Do you really want to compare me with the others? He asks. **Whatever anyone is bold, I speak foolishly, I am bold also. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they the seed of Abraham? So am I.**

Are they ministers of Christ? I speak as a fool, I am more: In labour more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often. From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils of the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren.

Note that he is boasting not of his knowledge of the gospel, although he probably knew it better than most of his accusers, not of the miracles he performed with the grace of God, and they were many, not of his ability as a preacher, although the church later on named him second only to Christ, but of what he had suffered for Christ. That is how Paul measured his services to the gospel and his genuine discipleship.

You still want more? Paul continues: **I know of a man in Christ who fourteen years ago, whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows, such a one was caught up to the third heaven. And I know such a man, whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows, how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.** I know of a man. Do you know who that man was? It was Paul himself. The reason he is not mentioning his name is that he **does not want the people to think of him above what they see him to be or hear from him**, as he explains further down in the epistle.

That is humility in its highest form. Yes, Paul is practicing what he is preaching. What he is afraid of, is exalting himself in the eyes of the people and, most importantly, in the eyes of God. God is taking good care of him. That is why in order for him not to boast for the abundance of the revelations he had, God gave him a **thorn in his flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet him, so he would not exalt himself above measure.** He writes: **I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me and He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness".**

Did Paul complain? Not at all. He accepted the challenge and continued to preach in every chance he had, even when he was in prison.

Paul believed that once a man believes in Christ, he is a new man, a new creation and that is what he was preaching to the Corinthians and even today to all of us.

Let us all follow him and be imitators of Paul as he was of Christ.

Amen

Church of St Demetrios Toronto October 16 2012