

The Church of Jerusalem

(F.F. Bruce)

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There was a period - it did not last very long - during which the holy church throughout all the world was confined within the limits of one local church. That one local church was the church of Jerusalem, the first Christian church. It may be asked whether there were not many disciples of Jesus left in Galilee during the period covered by the first five chapters of Acts, and whether they could not be regarded as constituting a Galilaean church in some sense. That is a separate question, the answer to which is beset by so many gaps in our knowledge that for our present purpose we must leave it on one side.

The first Jerusalem church lasted for some forty years. It left the city and went into dispersion not long before A.D.70, and although even in dispersion it continued for long to call itself the church of Jerusalem, it had no more any direct association with the city. When Jerusalem was refounded as a Gentile city in A.D. 135 a new church of Jerusalem came into being, but this was a completely Gentile Christian church and had no continuity with the church of Jerusalem of apostolic days.

The picture which we have of the early halcyon days of the first Jerusalem church, practising community of goods with glad and spontaneous abandon, upraising God and having favour with all the people, is different from the picture which we have of it twenty-five to thirty years later, when its own leaders could describe the bulk of its members as 'zealots for the law' who viewed with grave suspicion the progress of the Gentile mission conducted by Paul and his colleagues. Although it was the mother-church of the Christian world, its contribution to the gospel throughout the world in its later years was much smaller than its status and origins might have led one to expect. It may be that a survey of its history will suggest one or two practical lessons which churches of the twentieth century could profitably take to heart.

I. HISTORY OF THE JERUSALEM CHURCH

1. Its foundation

The birthday of the Jerusalem church was the birthday of the Christian Church as a whole. The one account of the occasion which we have is the one preserved in Acts 2. When the Holy Spirit came down in power on the apostles on the first Christian Pentecost in accordance with the promise of Christ in Acts 1:8, they - or rather Peter, as their spokesman, - proclaimed the gospel so effectively to the crowds of Jews and proselytes from many lands who were present in Jerusalem for the festival that three thousand hearers were convicted of sin and responded to the call to repent and be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ. Those who thus responded received the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit, and were incorporated into the same Spirit-baptised fellowship as the apostles themselves. There was an organic continuity between the people of God in New Testament times and the people of God in Old Testament times, but the day of Pentecost marked a new beginning, for then the outpouring of the Spirit, predicted long before as a sign of the end-time, came true in experience. The church in the New Testament phrase is 'the fellowship of the Spirit'.

2. Its early character

The main features which characterised the early church of Jerusalem have provided an example for Christian churches ever since. 'All who believed were together' and devoted themselves to (a) the apostolic teaching, (b) the apostolic fellowship, (c) the breaking of bread, (d) the services of prayer, (e) mutual care and (f) gospel witness.

The apostolic teaching was the teaching which the apostles had received from Jesus in order that they might impart it to others - 'teaching them', as He said, 'to observe all that I have commanded you' (Matt. 28:20). To this ... (continues)

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... day the surest criterion of an apostolic church is its adherence to the apostolic teaching. An unimpeachable pedigree not that any church can produce one which would satisfy the strictest historical scrutiny is no substitute for adherence to the apostles' teaching - and fellowship. Much later in the first century John emphasizes that those who abandon the apostolic teaching, or advance beyond it in a direction which the apostles would not have countenanced, cannot claim to belong to the apostles' fellowship. The apostles' fellowship carries with it fellowship 'with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ' (I John 1:3), and is marked by faithfulness to that teaching which was given and received 'from the beginning' 1 John 1:1; 2:7, 24; 3:11).

The other features which have been enumerated were all aspects of the apostles' fellowship. 'The breaking of bread' might refer generally to their fellowship meals, but especially to the taking of bread and wine in remembrance of their Lord. This memorial act appears to have been a daily practice, taking place in the course of a fellowship meal, in the houses of various members of the church. So at least we may gather from Acts 2:46, every part of which describes something that took place 'day by day'. The 'prayers' would be those occasions on which they came together in manageable groups for united prayer. Many of them, like the apostles (Acts 3:1), would continue to attend the services of prayer in the temple, which accompanied the morning and evening sacrifice day by day; but the temple services could not take the place of prayer within their own community.

One has sometimes met people who professed to stand foursquare on Acts 2 in the matter of church practice, but were a little less sure of their footing when it was pointed out that the community of goods was a prominent feature of the fellowship described in this chapter. There were other religious groups in Israel at this time which practised community of goods - the Essenes are the best known example - and to many of these new believers this no doubt seemed to be a natural and proper way of expressing their sense of fellowship one with another. Towards the end of the second century Tertullian can still say of Christians: 'We hold everything in common, except our wives' this last remark being a refutation of the slanders about Christian behaviour that circulated among the pagans). The practice led to abuses, as is shown by the account of Ananias' and Sapphira's deceits in contrast to Barnabas's generosity; but that simply reminds us that no community of human beings, not even such an apostolic church as this, can be perfect. The attempt to get credit for being a little more generous than one really is can be found in settings where no community of goods is practised; the story of Ananias and Sapphira is not told in order to suggest that the community of goods was itself a mistaken idea. Luke that it was a nowhere suggests mistake; probably he saw much to commend in it. It had certain practical drawbacks, indeed, and perhaps the chronic poverty which seems to have afflicted the Jerusalem church in later decades may not be unconnected with the exhaustion of the common pool into which the members placed their property; but the spirit that inspired the practice was wholly admirable.

Their fellowship was manifested in their gospel witness as well as in these other ways. If for certain purposes they enjoyed fellowship in their own homes, they carried on their gospel witness in as public a place as they could find, and a favourite spot for this appears to have been Solomon's colonnade, at the eastern end of the outer court of the temple (Acts 3:11; 5:12). So their activity advanced and their numbers increased by leaps and bounds. In a few weeks' time the three thousand had increased to five thousand, not counting women and children. (That only 'the number of the 'men' is given in Acts 4:4 is natural in a Jewish setting; it was not until later that the truth began to dawn that in a Christian community a woman counts for as much as a man.)

3. Its administration

In the earliest days of its existence the church of Jerusalem appears to have been administered by the apostles, who had charge not only of the teaching and preaching ministry but also of the receipt and distribution of the property placed by members in the common pool. Before long, however, this last responsibility threatened to encroach unwarrantably on the primary apostolic duties, and it was accordingly delegated to seven almoners selected for this ... (continues)

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... purpose by the general membership of the church. Their appointment was evidently of short duration, for one of them, Stephen, was martyred, and in the campaign of repression which immediately followed his martyrdom the others, with the Hellenistic group in the church to which they all seem to have belonged, were dispersed.

From the middle forties onwards we can discern a radical change in the pattern of church administration at Jerusalem. The leadership of the apostles is not set aside, but that leadership is exercised now over the expanding area of Christianity, and the local affairs of the Jerusalem church are handled by a body of elders. How many elders there were is nowhere stated, but if their institution was modelled on that of the Jewish Sanhedrin, there may well have been seventy of them. Seventy would not be too large a number for the effective administration of a community numbering tens of thousands according to Acts 21:20. The body of elders carried out its responsibilities under the general superintendence of James, the Lord's brother. His position as *primus inter pares* is suggested in Acts 12:17; 15:13 ff.; 21:18 ff.; and it is noteworthy that when Paul in Gal. 2:9 lists him along with Peter and John among the 'pillars' of the Jerusalem church, it is James who is named first.

No matter in whose hands the administration was, however, and no matter by what name the governing body might be called, regular government was recognised from the first to be requisite for the well-being of the church. The alternative to government in church as in state, is anarchy.

4. Its development

At the beginning of Acts 6 we are introduced to a twofold grouping in the Jerusalem church for which the preceding chapters have not prepared us. The reason is, perhaps, that from Chapter 6 to Chapter 8, Luke is drawing upon a source of information which was not available to him for the earlier part of his narrative. That his informant for this section of his history was Philip is a suggestion that has commended itself to many. At any rate, here we are told that the Jerusalem church comprised both Hebrews and Hellenists. The precise significance of these, two terms has been much disputed. It is probable, however, that the 'Hebrews' were those who belonged to Palestinian families and spoke Hebrew or Aramaic, while the 'Hellenists' 'Grecians' in A.V. were related to the Jewish communities in the lands of the Greek-speaking dispersion and spoke Greek. (It was exceptional for Jews in the Greek-speaking lands to continue to live as 'Hebrews', as Paul and his parents evidently did, according to 2 Cor. 11:22 and Phil. 3:5; Paul's parents, Roman citizens though they here as well as residents in Tarsus, maintained their Palestinian associations and sent their son to be educated in Jerusalem.)

When tension developed between the two groups because of the impression that the Hebrew widows were receiving a larger slice of the communal cake than those of the Hellenists, it is noteworthy that the seven almoners appointed to take charge of the allocation of the daily dole were all Hellenists, to judge by their names. Their gifts were not purely organisational, for one of them, Stephen, displayed exceptional ability as an Old Testament expositor, while another, Philip, was an effective evangelist. Stephen was put on trial before the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem for blasphemy (on charges remarkably similar to those on which the same court, some three years previously, had attempted to procure a conviction against our Lord); his defence was judged to confirm the accusation rather than refute it, and he suffered the capital penalty. In the following persecution and dispersion of Jerusalem Christians it was naturally the Hellenists, the group to which Stephen belonged, that suffered most.

Two things happened as a result of this persecution and dispersion. One was the vigorous propagation of the gospel in the provinces adjoining Judaea, and eventually the launching of a programme of active Gentile evangelisation. It was as a direct sequel to the persecution that some Hellenistic believers of Cypriot and Cyrenaean extraction came to Syrian Antioch and began to preach the gospel to Gentiles there. The church of Antioch was, almost from the outset, a predominantly Gentile church, and soon became the metropolis of the Gentile mission. For the cause of Christianity in general, the persecution which followed Stephen's death was an excellent thing. For the church of Jerusalem, it was not so good.

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With the dispersion of its Hellenist members, the Jerusalem church was predominantly 'Hebrew' in its composition. Among those Hebrews were converts from the Pharisees, who unlike Paul took most of their Pharisaic outlook into the church. 'A great many of the priests were obedient to the faith' (Acts 6:7) and they may have brought another kind of traditionalism with them into the new community. If the Gentile mission was a congenial task for the Hellenists, many of the Hebrews at home in Jerusalem viewed it with deep misgivings.

Even if we think the Hebrews were wrong, we should try to understand their point of view. They knew the depravity of the pagan world; the description which Paul gives of it in Rom. 10:18-31 was a commonplace in Jewish polemic against paganism; if people from this corrupt environment were to be welcomed into the Christian brotherhood, they believed, the most stringent conditions must be imposed on them. Otherwise the time would speedily come when there would be more Gentile Christians than Jewish Christians, and there would be a steep decline in the ethical standards of Christianity. To welcome Gentiles who confessed Jesus as Lord and received baptism in His Name was not enough; they must be required to keep the Jewish law, and as a token of their sincere undertaking to keep it they must accept circumcision.

We who have learned the principles of Christian liberty from Paul understand at once that this attitude really undermined the foundation of the gospel. But the people who adopted this attitude did not see it that way; they thought they were safeguarding the purity of the gospel. It says much for the wisdom of the leaders of a church in which this viewpoint had many supporters that, when the Council of Jerusalem was convened to consider the terms of Gentile admission to the Christian fellowship, it was the 'evangelical' view that prevailed. The conditions stipulated in the apostolic decree (Acts 15:28 f.) had to do, not with the basis of the gospel or the terms of church membership, but with the facilitating of social fellowship between Jewish and Gentile Christians.

It is very probable that James's moderating influence carried the verdict of many who tended to take a more legalist position. Indeed, with James's hand on the helm during the next fifteen years or thereby the Jerusalem church was guided very wisely. But even with James in that position of leadership, there were thorough-going legalists in the Jerusalem church who tried to undo the spirit of the apostolic decree by going to the Gentile mission-field themselves and imposing their viewpoint on the Gentile converts. Now much trouble these self-commissioned messengers gave Paul may be gauged from his epistles - 'sham apostles', he calls them, 'crooked in all their practices, masquerading as apostles of Christ' (2 Cor 11:13 NEB).

James and Paul, however, maintained relations of mutual respect. James was one of the Jerusalem leaders who recognised Paul's call to evangelise the Gentiles, and when in AD.57 Paul and the delegates from the Gentile churches came to Jerusalem with gifts for the mother church, they received a cordial welcome from James and his fellow-elders. But in order to conciliate the 'zealots for the law' in the Jerusalem church who were ready to believe the worst of Paul and all his activities, James and his colleagues made the well-intentioned but probably ill-conceived suggestion that Paul should take part publicly in a temple ceremony—a suggestion which led directly to his arrest and imprisonment, and ultimate dispatch to Rome.

5. Its disappearance

It is not recorded that the Jerusalem church or its leaders exerted themselves in Paul's behalf when he was arrested. They probably thought that his removal from Jerusalem under armed guard was all to the good; there was usually trouble when Paul came to Jerusalem. In his absence they got along tolerably well with the authorities; James enjoyed such respect among the people because of his piety that the authorities dared not take action against him or his followers.

In A.D. 62, however, one high priest, more daring than most, seized the opportunity of an interregnum in the Roman procuratorship of Judaea following on the sudden death of Festus to prosecute a number of people of whom he disapproved. Among these was James, who was stoned to death. This action shocked many of the Jews... (continues)

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... of the city, who feared that disaster would befall it after the removal of one who had so constantly interceded for its welfare. But if it shocked the populace at large, it demoralised the church which James had guided so judiciously. They could find no successor of comparable calibre.

When the Jewish revolt against Rome broke out four years later, the Jerusalem church left the city and went into dispersion. According to the fourth century historian Eusebius, they received an oracle some time before the fighting began charging them to leave the doomed city of Jerusalem and migrate to Pella. Pella beyond the Jordan was one of the cities of the Decapolis it was probably not to the city of Pella itself that the Jerusalem church migrated, but to the surrounding countryside which belonged to that city, as well as to other parts of Transjordan especially less frequented parts. The flight of the mother church to the wilderness and her preservation there may be reflected in the language of Rev. 12:14.

In dispersion these believers continued to call themselves the church of Jerusalem, and their successive leaders were drawn for several decades from relatives of James, members of the holy family. They were disowned as apostates by orthodox Jews, and increasingly disowned as heretics by orthodox Christians, although they thought of themselves as forming a bridge between these two bodies, conserving all that was best in both. They lingered on in Transjordan and Egypt until the seventh century, when those who had not already been absorbed by Jewish or Christian orthodoxy lost their identity in the overflowing tide of Islam.

II. LESSONS FROM THE JERUSALEM CHURCH

Why did a church which started with such unprecedented promise come to such an inglorious and ineffective end? And what lessons does its record contain for churches today? It is 'always a precarious undertaking to discern and apply the lessons of history, especially when we have to make a mental transference from the conditions of the Near East in the first century to those of the western world in the twentieth. We shall certainly learn nothing from the Jerusalem Christians if we sit in judgment on them from our detached vantage-point, enjoying as we do all the benefits of hindsight. If we try to sympathise with them in their situation we may more easily see how they went wrong and be preserved from the same mistakes ourselves.

(1) The danger of cultural uniformity

When the Jerusalem church embraced both Hebrews and Hellenists, as it did in its earliest days, its membership was diversified and it made an impact on the surrounding community. It is plain that Stephen's viewpoint did not coincide exactly with that of those members of the church who continued to attend the temple services. But there was room in one local fellowship for Stephen and those who thought like him, on the one hand, and for the stricter and more traditional Jewish Christians, on the other. After the dispersion of the Hellenists the membership of the Jerusalem church tended to become increasingly uniform in character and outlook. Uniformity is not a healthy thing for any church, whether it be social or theological uniformity. Within the biblical limits of Christian faith and life there is room for a wide and vigorous diversity, which is good for the fellowship itself and good for its witness.

(2) The danger of 'safety first'

It was an odd occasion in the history of an adventurous people like the English when a prime minister went to the country on a slogan of 'safety first'. It is even odder when the spirit of this slogan manifests itself among the followers of One who announced that anyone who wished to be His disciple must be prepared to shoulder a cross. Yet it is a spirit that manifested itself in one way in the Jerusalem church, and has manifested itself in other ways in other churches. These Jerusalem Christians had a great heritage, and they were resolved to keep it pure. In order to do this, they thought it necessary to set up very strict conditions for admission to their fellowship. They deplored the laxity of a... (continues)

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... man like Paul—a man who, with his Pharisaic upbringing, ought to have known better - in making it so easy for Gentile sinners to become church members simply by confessing Jesus as Lord and accepting baptism in His name. And Paul's own correspondence makes it clear - that they could point to the behaviour of some of those Gentile converts of his as awful warnings of the sort of thing they lead in mind. The heritage and the fellowship must at all costs be kept pure - no risks could be allowed in this regard; and so their attitude to the Gentile mission became more and more aloof and suspicious, not to say positively hostile.

Yet Paul himself was a Jew, with a passionate concern for righteousness and purity. All the same he saw that righteousness and purity could not be best conserved by setting a hedge around them, but rather by spreading them abroad in the preaching of the gospel and the inculcating of the law of Christ.

Is there in some places a present day counterpart to the attitude of the first-century Jerusalem church in the insistence on the necessity of 'preserving our distinctive testimony'? If the testimony is a good one, the best thing to do with it is not to 'preserve' it by hedging it around, but to bear witness to it far and wide.

(3) The danger of legalism

By legalism is not necessarily meant the admixture of legal works with the gospel of grace which makes the gospel no gospel at all. There was indeed an element of this sort of thing in the Jerusalem church, but it was disowned by the responsible leaders. What is meant rather is the tendency to make rules and regulations for people's lives, instead of enjoying the new freedom of the Spirit which is the birthright of all those who have come of age in Christ. Such rules and regulations may be explicit, and that is burdensome enough; but when they are explicit they are available for consideration and criticism. More often they are unwritten, and all the more oppressive for that it is easy to understand how many of the Jerusalem Christians, especially those who had associations with the Pharisees, would be inclined to develop a new 'tradition of the elders' to replace the old one. They did not have the New Testament alongside the Old in those days, but some of their successors in later generations have tended to treat the New Testament in a wooden and unimaginative way, much as the Pharisees treated the Old Testament - that is to say, they have treated it as a book of rules rather than as the living word of God. I am a little disturbed at times when I am invited to supply a straight forward exegesis of say Paul's observations on women's head gear because I suspect that my questioners will try to impose that exegesis as law on a situation vastly different from the cultural setting of the eastern Mediterranean in the first century A.D. It is more difficult to stop and ask a what is the fundamental principle involved in the passage in question, and how that fundamental principle can best be applied to the changed situation of our day, more difficult, but absolutely necessary. Nor is it a revolutionary thing to say so. The Editors of Echoes of Service thirty-five years ago were men of impeccable orthodoxy (I do not mean that their successors today are any less so!) but they recorded their observation that in the twentieth century 'the missionary finds himself in circumstances very different from those disclosed in the New Testament' and drew certain practical conclusions from that undeniable fact. The principles of the New Testament are of abiding validity, but their application to changing situations may vary, and it is the duty of those who, being led by the Spirit of God are the sons of God to discover how best they may be applied in this or that part of the world today.

(4) The danger of exclusivism

Many years ago I heard E.H.Broadbent speak on the fold and the flock in John 10. He pointed out that the sheep in the fold are kept together by the surrounding walls while the sheep of a flock are kept together by the shepherd. Moreover, the number of sheep that any fold can contain is limited, while there was nothing to hinder the sheep which the good Shepherd led out of the fold having their number increased by the adherence of those 'other sheep' that had never belonged to the original fold. But, he went on, developing the parable, some of the sheep argued that in spite of the care and devotion of their Shepherd, they would feel safer if they had walls around them, and so they started to build some. But, said Mr. Broadbent, 'sheep are not good builders.' Some of the walls they built were built were effective enough in a way, but so restricted that they shut most of the flock out; there were other walls, on the contrary, which... (continues)

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... were comprehensive enough, but so badly constructed that they let several wolves in too, with predictable consequences. The moral is that the people of Christ need no walls to keep them together. We may learn valuable lessons from the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, but Nehemiah's wall is not a model for churches to follow.

Many members of the Jerusalem church, however, imbued with the principles laid down by Ezra and Nehemiah, seem as time went on to have become increasingly concerned with ways and means of keeping wrong type out. It was not so in the beginning, then the presence of God's holiness among the believers was so manifest that 'none of the rest dared join them' Acts 5:13. There is a certain plausibility about the affirm that 'separation from evil is God's principle of unity', but it is not really so; God's principle of unity is positive, not negative; it is the principle of unity in Christ; and separation from evil is a corollary of the principle, not the principle itself. If, instead of harbouring suspicion of the Gentile mission those Jerusalem Christians had recognised that this was Israel's distinctive contribution to the world, and they themselves into it wholeheartedly, their latter end might have been different from what it was.

Whether the Epistle to the Hebrews was sent to the Jerusalem church or to some other company of Jewish believers, one of its closing admonitions is very relevant here. 'Therefore let us go forth to Hire outside the camp, bearing abuse for Him' (Heb. 13:13). To remain psychologically insulated within the 'camp', reluctant to sever the last links with the old order, was a natural reaction, but a fatal one. Outside lay the teeming Gentile world with its need; outside was Christ Himself, leading His servants forth into all the world. The future lay with those who left an old order which had outlived its usefulness and went out, not knowing whither they went, except that they knew themselves to be following Christ in His conquering advance.

New occasions teach new duties;
Time makes ancient good uncouth:
They mast upward still and onward
Who would keep abreast of truth.