

BIB204 NT2 Early Church

Unit 1b

Beginnings of Messianic Judaism-Conflict with Tradition

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As I said in the last segment, in this segment we're going to begin to explore what happens with the scattering of the church. And the way in which we're going to do that is we're going to continue with the historical narrative as we have it in the Book of Acts, with me summarizing that material and drawing connections that may not be immediately obvious in some respects, and in other respects, it will be something that you've heard before. And I think that's okay. So what we're going to do is we're going to run up to the point of persecution, and hopefully that will end this particular segment. That's the plan, and we'll see how it goes.

So these folks, these devout men from every nation under heaven, these diaspora Jews, they are about to go home but they are arrested by this outbreak of the activity of the Holy Spirit, particularly regnant in these 12 apostles. So Peter preaches the Gospel of Jesus Christ, proclaimed his resurrection. His audience is convicted, thousands of them. They say, "What shall we do?" Peter, by his response and his subsequent action, draws a direct line from where he is at that point in time and space to the ministry of John the Baptist. The baptism of repentance, although the forerunner is no longer mediating between Messiah and his people. That's the only difference. So the baptism of repentance, eyes on the Lord Jesus Christ, figuratively speaking, spiritually speaking, metaphorically speaking, salvation. There are about 3000 of them that are added.

And so, what happens after that, in verse 42 of chapter 2, they begin to submit themselves to the teaching of the apostles and the fellowship. They begin to break bread and they begin to pray. So what that means is that these folks do not go home. These new believers do not go home. They listen to what the apostles have to say about Jesus. That means that everything that is written in the Gospels, all of those sections of the Gospels in Mark and in Matthew and in Luke and in John, at this point, is oral tradition. Nothing's been written down yet. Luke's history of the early church, of the acts of the Holy Spirit, is history composed in retrospect. And it is structured and it's under the impress of the Holy Spirit. Nothing is written down as of yet, as far as we know. That will change rapidly because in the early church, there was the early initiation of written material. But you have a strong oral tradition. So the apostles are the repositories of this tradition. So they begin to teach what Jesus has taught them. And of course, that teaching will progress not just from the words and the deeds of Jesus the Christ. It will also move into the instruction that Jesus gave them in his resurrection for 40 days. So that's what they had. They have a whole body of tradition now, and it's in them and it's oral teaching. And at this point, historically, if you step outside of the context, the milieu of what's happening here, as an outside observer, this movement does not look different from the Judaism of the day. Not yet. Those differences will become more apparent as time rolls on. But for now, it looks quite similar. It looks like a slightly different take on what's happening in Judaism, the teachings of the law and what have you, but that will change rapidly and we will see how and why.

So again, verses 42 to 43, apostles teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread. They share food with one another because they're not going home. They have enough to get home, but at this point, they're staying and they're listening to this teaching. And they're not going home, which means that they're going to run out of resources that they had set aside for the journey back home. Some people are going to run out of resources more quickly than others, and so that's going to compel the church to share all things in common. And that's what, in fact, we read in the subsequent verses. But let me read on and get us to that point. "Awe came upon every soul (verse 43). Many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common." They had to share what they had because this is a new state of affairs. They're not being dispersed to go home in

order to return the following year. Their lives have been changed and they can't get enough of this new teaching. And so they stay, and as a result, some choices were made about what to share. They had to share all things in common.

They are selling possessions. Look at verse 45. They're selling their possessions and belongings. They're distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. "Day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes." So they're having communal meals together, but they're going to temple day by day to worship God because they are caught in the light of this new teaching, and all around them, temple and altar and incense is exploding with significance, because they've lived with this all their lives. It's familiar to them. They've come for several years, some of them, to festival every year, to Pesach, to Passover, to the Feast of Unleavened Bread. They've celebrated for generations. This is baked into their experience. But now with the indwelling, and of course, that's a retrospective comment, isn't it? At this point, they know that the Holy Spirit has come upon these believers. They haven't developed the language as of yet, except through the apostles. John 15 and 16, where Jesus talks about how the Holy Spirit was with you, but he would be in you. So the apostles know that. But the Holy Spirit is causing all of this, all of these symbols, the very structure of the temple, what the high priests are doing in offering sacrifice, the incense that is offered, the Day of Atonement; all of these things are exploding with significance, all in the context of oral tradition. So they have to share their resources. "They received their food with glad and generous hearts (verse 47), praising God and having favor with all the people." So this movement looks engaging. We would probably use the term winsome. It looks like Judaism. It looks like something fresh and new. And the initial reception of this new thing is positive: "having favor with all the people." And of course, people are inquiring as to this new thing, and the Gospel is being preached and being taught and being shared. And that's what we see. "And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved."

Chapter 3 brings us to sort of a seminal event. At this point, the favor among the people, it's a small, nascent, beginning movement. And of course, in chapter 3 and following, what we see is this movement now runs up against the religious authorities. It runs up against the boundary of religious authority where conflict begins to germinate, right? So chapter 3 verses 1 to 10. Peter and John, they're going to the temple at the hour of prayer. Again, it looks very much like Judaism. And of course, all of the believers in the early church pretty much are Jewish, diaspora and Palestinian Jews. They're all Jewish for the most part. There may be a couple of proselytes here and there, but they're largely Jewish. So they go up the ninth hour. The ninth hour is probably about 3:00 p.m. There's a man who is lame from birth. He's carried and laid daily at the gate of the temple that is called Beautiful to ask alms. Peter and John, they're heading into the temple. He looks to them, hoping to get something from them. And Peter says to this guy, this man, "Look at us." And he does. And Peter says, "I don't have silver or gold for you, but I'll give you what I have. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, get up and walk." And this guy suddenly gets up. We read, according to Luke, verse 7, "And he (Peter) took him by the right hand and raised him up, and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong." Immediately. So they weren't strong in the first place. "Leaping up, he stood and began to walk, and entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. And all the people saw him walking and praising God, and recognized him as the one who sat at the Beautiful Gate of the temple, asking for alms. And they were filled with wonder and amazement at what happened to him."

And of course, Peter and John take advantage of this situation. As they run together to see this strange thing, Peter says, "Why are you looking at us as though we're special? No, no, no. This is about Jesus."

And he preaches Jesus to them. And while he is doing this, of course, he's going to talk about resurrection because that's central to the Gospel. If you would look at verse 22, I'll start reading from there. "Moses said, 'The Lord God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers. You shall listen to him in whatever he tells you. And it shall be that every soul who does not listen to that prophet shall be destroyed from the people.' And all the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and those who came after him, also proclaimed these days. You are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant that God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham, 'And in your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed.' God, having raised up his servant, sent him to you first, to bless you by turning every one of you from your wickedness."

Which leads us into chapter 4. In chapter 4, they're speaking to the people, and so the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them because they were annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming him Jesus, the resurrection from the dead. That's verses 1 and 2. So the thing to understand here is that the priests are Sadducees. They did not believe in the resurrection. The Pharisees did. They believed in angels and demons. They believed in the resurrection of the dead. The Sadducees did not believe that. They only held to the first five books, the Law of Moses. They are greatly annoyed as a result. So this is a Sadducean response that you see here in chapter 4 in the opening verses. They lay hands on Peter and John. They put them in custody until the next day because it was evening already. But the message has gone out, and so we're told by way of implication that many of those who had heard the word believed. The number of the men came to about 5000. So now you've got 5000 of these new people, believers.

On the very next day, there's a gathering of the council, the Sanhedrin. Annas is the high priest. Caiaphas and John and Alexander, all of those who were of the high-priestly family, these individuals have extra biblical references to them. You find them in Josephus primarily. In the writings of Josephus, these individuals are referenced. And of course, you see them in the Gospels too, particularly the Gospel of John. And so they questioned Peter and John. They say, "By what power or by what name did you do this?" They also took hold of this formerly lame individual. And so Peter is filled with the Holy Spirit and he basically preaches the Gospel to the council again. He finishes with verse 11 of chapter 4, "This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." They see the boldness of Peter and John. They perceive that they are uneducated, Galileans, common men. And they are astonished, but they can't say anything about this bona fide miracle that's taken place. So they tried to intimidate Peter and John into not preaching in the name of Jesus any longer, and Peter leaves them with a choice. He challenges them in return. "You judge whether it's right to speak God's words or to listen to you." And we see that in verse 19. "But Peter and John answered them, 'Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.'"

And so they receive more threats and then they let them go. Peter and John go back. They report what happened to the congregation. And they all lift their voices, probably in the vicinity of the temple, and they pray for boldness to speak the word of God. And you see that focused in verse 28 and following of chapter 4. "To do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus." So they are asking for boldness. They are asking that the Lord would

stretch forth his hand to heal through the ministry of the apostles, and God answers. The place where they are is shaken. They are all filled with the Holy Spirit. And so they indeed, as a result of that filling, speak the word of God with boldness.

In other words, what this means at this juncture at verse 31 is that they continued to proclaim Christ in the face of administrative opposition, the opposition of the religious authorities. They pray for boldness to stand against that opposition, the fact that they have been forbidden to teach, to talk about Jesus, to talk about the resurrection. They pray for that boldness and they continue right in the face of that. It's basically a form of civil disobedience. At least that's what we would call it in our day. And then we see in verses 32 to 37 a return to this idea of all believers having everything in common. It tells us that they were of one heart and one soul. That's verse 32. Verse 33, the apostles were testifying to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus with great power. There was great grace. They had everything in common. Verse 34, no one had a need. "As many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet. It was distributed to each as any had need." So people who had a need, that need was met. Joseph is introduced here. He will eventually be called Barnabas. That name Joseph will only be used here in 4:36. He was also called by the apostles Barnabas, which means son of encouragement. So he was probably called Barnabas. That's probably what it would have sounded like. Bar being the Aramaic term for son. He's a Levite. He's a native of Cyprus, so he's on the island in the Mediterranean, way up north. He sold a field that belonged to him. He brought the money. He laid it at the apostles' feet.

Of course, to be fair, thinking about this historically, it is entirely possible that some of these folks are actually going home, selling possessions, and coming back. But the narrative doesn't read that way. It's rather early. That would have been quite a bit of peripatetic activity. As we read these chapters, we are only looking at a time span of about a year, maybe two years. Jesus ascends, arguably, in AD 33. Some would say AD 32, give or take. And so the outbreak of persecution is somewhere in AD 34, 35, no later than AD 36. And Saul gets converted somewhere in that timeframe. So the events are very telescoped. They're occurring very closely together, even though we have a number of chapters. And by the time Saul gets converted, that's Acts 9. And that's only about a year or two after the ascension of the Lord Jesus.

Chapter 5, there's a man named Ananias and his wife Sapphira. They sell a piece of property and he keeps back part of the proceeds and lies about how much the land or the property cost. In other words, he was trying to present himself as someone who sold his possessions in total and came and laid it at the apostles' feet, and he declares, he lies about the cost of the property sold. And so Peter, under the impress of the Holy Spirit, challenges Ananias, rebukes him for lying to the Holy Spirit (that's verse 3), keeping back part of the proceeds of the land. And why did Ananias do this? He didn't have to. Verse 4, "While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal?" In other words, selling it and keeping back part of the proceeds was okay. What was not okay was that Ananias lied about it. And so he is judged. He falls down dead in front of Peter. He's buried. That's verses 5 to 6. After about three hours, verses 7 to 11, his wife comes in and Peter asks her how much they sold the land for, and she colludes with her husband. She does not know that her husband is dead. And Peter rebukes her too. "You agree together to test the Spirit of the Lord," because all of this, all of this activity is as a result of the activity of the Holy Spirit. And what Ananias and Sapphira have just done is they had introduced human avarice, human pride, the human quest for position. And it is a significant enough event that Luke includes it here in this historical narrative. It's almost as though

something pristine gets lost with what they do here. And so Peter rebukes her. She falls down. She dies and she is buried.

We're told in verses 12 to 16 that wonders are being done regularly. This is in answer to the previous prayer by the entire congregation. I mean, even Peter's shadow is an impetus for healing, as we see in verse 15. Towns around Jerusalem are hearing about this. This movement is growing. That is why we have verse 17. "The high priest rose up, and all who were with him (the party of the Sadducees), filled with jealousy." They arrest the apostles. They imprison them. But an angel of the Lord releases them and they keep right on preaching in the temple at daybreak. So the high priest comes with the council or the senate of the people of Israel. That is verse 21. And they send to the prison to have them brought, but they're not in the prison and they find that out. And they also find out that they're teaching in the temple. And so they have to go in and treat these men with kid gloves, as it were, because they are afraid (verse 26) of being stoned by the people. So now all of the apostles are brought before the council and they are questioned. "You intend to bring this man's blood upon us." "Your teaching is not helping us at all. Your teaching is subversive" is basically what they are saying. And Peter and the other apostles speak about their need to obey God rather than men. So it's sort of a continuation of a prior conversation with the council.

And of course, at this point, the council wants to kill these men. Gamaliel, who is a grandson of Hillel, who was sort of a scribe, a rabbi who taught a lenient version of the law as opposed to his contemporary Shami, this Gamaliel counsels patience. "Let's see if this thing is of God," he says. "If it's of God, you can't stand against it. If it's of men, it's going to fall apart." So what they do in lieu of killing them is they beat them. You see that in verse 40 of chapter 5. They beat them and charged them not to speak of Jesus. Well, that's not going to change anything. The apostles rejoice because they're counted worthy to suffer for the name of Jesus. In the next segment, we will pick up because we haven't quite gotten to the precipitation of the spread of the Gospel beyond the bounds of Jerusalem.