

## READING 2: A RANGE OF CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

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The early followers of Jesus held that their risen Lord had commissioned them to preach the gospel and make disciples of all nations. In Acts, the risen Jesus tells them, 'you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1: 8). Note the tide change this represents. Instead of people being drawn to Jerusalem, to God's people and presence there, the early Christians are to go out from Jerusalem and make disciples in all nations.

Jesus promises to be with them. There is also the recognition that God is already present where they go. As Paul says when addressing the Athenians 'God is actually not far from any one of us'. (Acts 17: 27). In preaching of Jesus they let people know the true nature and character of God. Moreover the apostles and missionaries not only proclaimed the Christian message and sought a response from people, they formed them into congregations. Individual interest was not enough. People were gathered into communities where faith could develop and be expressed.

At first, as Luke tells the story in Acts, people joined the Jerusalem community. There they learned from the apostles, took part in the fellowship, and shared in the fellowship meals and prayers (Acts 2: 42). As the number in the congregation grew a difficulty arose.

Hellenists, Greek speaking Jews, complained against the Hebrews, native Jews, that their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of funds. So seven, all with Greek names, were chosen to be put in charge of this matter. Interestingly later Luke tells us nothing of their social welfare and administrative activities. Instead he give us accounts of them as preachers and missionaries..:

In the persecution following Stephen's death the believers were scattered, except for the apostles. Luke tells us those who were dispersed went from place to place proclaiming the Word (Acts 8). Led by the Spirit they were responsible for the establishment of new house churches. The twelve largely stayed at the original, or base church of Jerusalem. What Luke wants to emphasise is that the twelve apostles are the foundation of the church. They are the ones who knew Jesus throughout his earthly ministry and were witness to the resurrection. Robert Maddox says, "They are the bridge from the historical mission of Jesus in his human flesh to the renewed mission of risen and ascended Lord Jesus through the Holy Spirit in his church". The prime function of the twelve apostles is to be the touchstone for the Christian movement. Others moved out and started new congregations.

As the number of new congregations which were established grew, inevitably contact with the mother church would have been reduced. New congregations developed to suit the needs and interests of different groups of people. New Testament study reveals a range of Christian communities. At first the Jerusalem church was spontaneously led by the twelve apostles. Later the key figure was James the brother of Jesus. It was a Jewish Christian community which took on the synagogue pattern of government. Then there were Pauline and Pauline-influenced communities. The Pastoral epistles show a movement toward more formal structures and away from the more charismatic style of the Pauline churches..: :

Though there were appreciable differences, there were also major benefits and practices in common: faith in Jesus, initiation by baptism, sharing the Lord's Supper, preaching and teaching derived from the apostles, an emphasis on mutual love, and future expectation – though this varied.

Paul was the major cross cultural missionary. It was largely due to his influence that Gentiles were accepted into the Christian movement on an equal basis as Jews. Jewish practices did not have to be adopted first. Faith in Jesus Christ was the one criteria for acceptance into the community of faith. Before the first century was over, Gentile Christians outnumbered Jewish Christians. Churches were emerging across the Roman Empire and beyond.