

1.

HOW EARLY CHRISTIANS SHARED THEIR FAITH

LESSON 1 TEXT HANDOUT

JESUS GIVES THE GREAT COMMISSION

Jesus was in the 40 days between His resurrection and His ascension and was giving His final instructions to the apostles. Mark 16:16 records His words this way: "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned." In this great commission, Jesus challenges his apostles to make the good news that He has brought salvation known to every person on earth. As people hear this good news, they are to believe in Jesus and to be baptized so they can be saved.

Matthew 28:19-20 tells of the same occasion and Matthew gives even more of what Jesus said to the apostles: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." This passage adds that we are to make disciples (learners) of everyone, to baptize them, and then we are to help them learn more of what Jesus has commanded.

Luke 24:47 gives another account of the great commission: "and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem."

Since all of these passages describe the same occasion, we get the best picture of what Jesus said by combining all three accounts. Essentially He said: You apostles and those whom you reach, should go everywhere in the world teaching the good news that I came to die as the punishment for sins so through me all might be saved. But you must be the messengers of this word by taking the gospel to every person. Then they will know about me and will believe on me, repent of their sins, and be baptized to be saved.

THE APOSTLES BEGIN CARRYING OUT THE GREAT COMMISSION

In Acts 1:8, a passage which is also from the same 40 days, Jesus says the apostles are to be His "witnesses" to carry the message to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and all over the world. Witnesses are those who testify and declare. So these apostles, and all of us who follow them, are to tell people the story of Jesus in every way we can and where ever we can.

On the day of Pentecost, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to guide the apostles in what to say so their message would be exactly right. And on that day, Peter preached the first sermon in carrying out what Jesus challenged His followers to do. He taught about Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. At the end of his sermon, he said, "God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified."

Peter's sermon convinced thousands that Jesus was the Christ and that many Jews, even some that were there, had a hand in killing Him. When they realized this, they were "cut to the heart" and asked,

"What shall we do?" These obviously now believe that Jesus is the Son of God. So have they done all they have to do to have their sins forgiven? Peter answers their question of what to do with these words, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins." Even though they already believed, they had to demonstrate that faith in obedience.

How did the people respond? Three thousand of them, believers who accepted Jesus as the Son of God, repented of their sins and were immersed so they could be forgiven of sins. Thus the apostles and early Christians began carrying out the charge Jesus had given them to "preach the gospel to all creation." Christ's church, those saved by His blood, has now begun and is at work. Those who have been saved tell others the good news and people are being baptized every day.

THE APOSTLES BEGIN CARRYING OUT THE GREAT COMMISSION

Opposition to the work of the apostles, however, was not long in arising. Soon the Jewish leaders, the very ones who had opposed Jesus when He was alive and who had contributed to His death, were stirring opposition against those who teaching that He was the Son of God. Acts 4:1-4, 18- 21, and 29 tell us of this rising opposition. Apostles are being put into jail, peoples' houses are being invaded to find Christians to be put into prison, and finally, Stephen, a Christian preacher, is stoned to death by an angry mob. But the Christians were not scared away from doing what Jesus said--sharing their faith and the number of Christians grew and grew until there were more than 10,000 Christians.

Acts 8:4 tells us that as the opposition, led by a Jew named Saul, became so intense, that many of the disciples left Jerusalem to go to other places. While it was a very difficult for Christians to leave their homes and strike out for some other place, this persecution served as a way to spread the gospel message. It is very important to notice that as these Christians were driven from Jerusalem because they had been telling the story of Jesus, as they left they did not say "Let's quit telling the story of Jesus because that is getting us into trouble." Rather, they said, "Let's keep sharing the faith and if that creates persecution, so be it."

Acts 11:19-21 tells how those scattered by this persecution continued to carry out the word Christ had given them. Now they are past Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and are going to the ends of the earth--to Cyprus and Antioch. And these places, in turn, become the launching pads for still further spread of the gospel.

APPLICATION

As we look at these early Christians, we must be struck by the fact that they were very dedicated to taking the message about Jesus and salvation through Him to others. They shared their faith with friends because they were excited about the benefits Jesus can give. And when opposition arose, even putting some of them in prison and others to death, they did not stop.

We need to have a similar commitment. Thankfully, few of us would have to face prison or death to share our faith. We might have to give up a little time or stick our necks out a little to take a stand in front of a friend. Let's be like the early Christians and show great determination in sharing our faith with others.