

“Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution.”

“The Hebrews” refers to the Jewish Christians, which were the overwhelming majority of Christians at that early stage. *“The Hellenists”* refers to the Greeks who were already converting from paganism to Christianity. It may also include Jews who had already moved abroad to Greek-speaking lands, and had embraced the Greek language and culture. This is the first time that Christianity became cross-cultural.

Jewish Christians and Hellenic Christians came to Christ from two totally different cultural directions. For Jewish Christians, Christ was the long-awaited Messiah, prophesied for centuries and fulfilled in their day. For Hellenic Christians living in the Roman Empire, Christ was divinity becoming humanity, a lover of humanity, who offered hope of eternal life for all. This was an attractive belief for people living in a world where the Roman Empire, and their Greco-Roman gods, were universally known as being capricious, cruel, and had little love for mortals. Jewish and Hellenic Christians shared Christ, but they did not understand each other. This led to interracial suspicion, which led to the charge of their widows being neglected. We do not know whether this accusation was true, but it is evidence of racial tensions in the Church.

It is also important to note that collection material goods and distributing them to the needy was an important feature of the early Church. This was the teaching of Christ:

“Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you” (Matthew 5:42).

“For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in” (Matthew 25:35).

“When Jesus heard this, He said to him, “One thing you still lack; sell all that you possess and distribute it to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me” (Matthew 18:22)

The Apostle James repeated Christ’s teachings on philanthropy:

“Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world (James 1:27).

“If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Depart in peace, be warmed and filled’” but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? (James 2:15).

The early Church practiced what they had been taught. They were all known by non-Christians for their charity to people both inside and outside their own community.

“Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, “It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables.”

Even though the Apostles were highly respected by the Christian people, this verse indicates that they were also extremely humble. The leaders of the Church were undertaking even the most menial of tasks - “serving tables.” They learned from Christ the importance of humility. *“But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant” (Matthew 23:11)*. One of Christ’s last acts before going to the cross was to wash the feet of His disciples. They learned the true meaning servant-leadership, and were putting it into practice.

However, the Apostles were so diligent in practicing servant-leadership that it was affecting their other, higher duties. Christ had given the Apostles their marching orders:

“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19).

The Apostles primary mission was to evangelize, baptize and teach. Philanthropy is immensely important to the Church, but it can be done by designated people in the Church other than Apostles. If there was favoritism being shown to one group of Christians in the distribution to the widows, the reason for it was the Apostles were being over stretched. The Apostles took decisive action to prevent even a hint of favoritism:

“Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business;”

Previously, the Apostles had assumed personal responsibility for philanthropic ministry. Now, they would delegate it. They would focus their energies on their spiritual duties.

“...but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”

Therefore, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Apostles founded a new order of the Church - the Deacon - to directly supervise charitable work.

“And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch, whom they set before the apostles;”

This new office of Deacon was elevated to the rank of the clergy.

“...and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them.”

Ordination to all the ranks of the clergy are accomplished by the laying on of hands. This was not only the creation of a new order of the clergy, it was also the first ordination to the clergy performed by an Apostle. All ordinations in the Orthodox Church are performed by a Bishop, who is a direct successor to an Apostle by Apostolic Succession.

The office of the Deacon was created to supervise the Church's charity. However, Deacons grew to perform a wide variety of functions, especially in the Liturgies.

With the restructuring of the Apostles' duties, and addition of the Deacons, the Church grew even more:

"Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem.."

The text includes an interesting detail:

"...and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith."

At this extremely early stage, the Church was led directly by Apostles. Then, in Acts 6, the new office of Deacon was established, to assist the Apostles. A third office was added soon after - the office of Presbyter - from the Greek word "presbyteros" which means "elder." The Presbyters were ordained by the Apostles to lead the Christian communities in the absence of an Apostle. The term "Presbyter" was gradually overshadowed by the term "Priest." The term "Presbyter" is still used in Orthodoxy, but less commonly than "Priest."

This phrase *"...and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith"* is referring to the Church in its earliest stages, before the office of Presbyter was established, and before term "Presbyter" became "Priest" in common usage. However, this verse uses the specific word "priest" (Greek: "iereus"). John Chrysostom says that the priests who were "obedient to the faith" were Jewish priests who were converting to Christianity.

This would not be surprising. We know of several priests who were genuine seekers of God and saw Christ as the Messiah. The Priest Simeon was, *"...a just and devout, waiting for the Consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ."*

"He took Him up in his arms and blessed God and said: "Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word; For my eyes have seen Your salvation Which You have prepared before the face of all peoples, a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel" (Luke 2:26-32).

There was also the Priest Nicodemus, who *"came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him" (John 3:1).* Nicodemus also defended Christ among his fellow priests: *"Nicodemus (he who came to Jesus by night, being one of them) said to them, "Does our law judge a man before it hears him and knows what he is doing?" (John 7:50).* After Christ's crucifixion, Nicodemus also provided a generous amount of burial spices for the Jewish preparation of Christ's body for burial: *"And Nicodemus, who at first came to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds"(John 19:39).*

Another Jewish Priest who believed in Christ was Joseph of Arimathea. *“Now behold, there was a man named Joseph, a council member, a good and just man. He had not consented to their decision and deed. He was from Arimathea, a city of the Jews, who himself was also waiting for the kingdom of God. This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then he took it down, wrapped it in linen, and laid it in a tomb that was hewn out of the rock, where no one had ever lain before.”* When Acts says here, *“...and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith,”* it means that there many other Priests of Israel, addition to Simeon, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, who became followers of Christ at this time.

The office of the Diaconate was brand new, yet one of the new Deacons soon became a Martyr:

“And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. Then there arose some from what is called the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia), disputing with Stephen. And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke.”

This follows previous pattern. Peter and John performed a miracle of healing. This resulted in them being brought before the Jewish Council. They were warned not to preach about Jesus and then let go. Then Peter preached and performed another miracle. He was brought before the Sanhedrin again, and sent to prison. An angel of the Lord delivered him. Now Stephen performs miracles, and preached so powerfully that no one could oppose him. Like Peter and John before him, Stephen was also brought before the Council.

The particular synagogue that brought him before the Council had representatives from several Roman provinces: *“Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia...”* This is similar to the witnesses to Pentecost, which included, *“Parthians and Medes and Elamites, those dwelling in Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya adjoining Cyrene, visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs...”* The international audience to Pentecost represented the Roman world which was beginning to hear the Christian Gospel for the first time. The international audience to Stephen’s false accusation - and eventual martyrdom - represented the international opposition to the the spread of the Christian Gospel. It was an anti-Pentecost.

“Then they secretly induced men to say, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.” And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon him, seized him, and brought him to the council. They also set up false witnesses who said, “This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law;

This organized false accusation follows the example of Christ’s trial: *“Now the chief priests, the elders, and all the council sought false testimony against Jesus to put Him to death, but found none. Even though many false witnesses came forward, they found none. But at last two false witnesses came forward...”* (Matthew 26:59-61).

Even the specific charge of planning to destroy the Temple was leveled at both Jesus:

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“...and said, “This *fellow* said, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God and to build it in three days’ ”...

And Stephen:

“for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us.”

Acts chapter 6 concludes with this powerful detail:

“And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel.”

Normally, people on trial for their lives are terrified. Their terror is usually perceptible in their facial and body language. However, this was not the case with either Christ or Stephen. Christ faced His accusers not with fear, but with silence. This amazed Pilate, who was accustomed to facing people whose lives he held in his hands. No doubt he had seen such people beg and plead and proclaim their innocence, but not Christ: “*Then Pilate said to Him, ‘Are You not speaking to me? Do You not know that I have power to crucify You, and power to release You?’ (John 19:10).* Christ turned the tables and declared Who was actually in control: “*You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above.*” Christ knew His death was hours away, yet showed no fear.

Like Christ, Stephen also showed no fear. All his accusers in the Sanhedrin, “... *looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel.*” This angelic facial expression showed complete calm and peace at whatever the outcome of his trial. This life held nothing for him. He was prepared for the joy and glory of the next world that he was about to enter.

But Stephen’s angelic face was also an eternal indictment upon his accusers. His accusers are accusing him of blasphemy, but what they saw was an angel. Even the members of the Council who may not have been aware the testimony was false looked upon Stephen’s face and knew the accusations were all false. Angels are NOT blasphemers. Yet they convicted and sentenced Stephen to death anyway.

Chapter 7 begins with a powerful sermon, comprehensive in its scope, reviewing the entire history God’s dealings with the Israelite people.

Stephen begins his legal defense with a summary of God’s mercy towards His Old Testament people. He begins with the story of Abraham:

“And he said, “Brethren and fathers, listen: The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran, and said to him, Get out of your country and from your relatives, and come to a land that I will show you.’ Then he came out of the land of the Chaldeans and dwelt in Haran. And from there, when his father was dead, He moved him to this land in which you now dwell. And God gave him no inheritance in it, not even enough to set his foot on. But even when Abraham had no child, He promised to

give it to him for a possession, and to his descendants after him. But God spoke in this way: that his descendants would dwell in a foreign land, and that they would bring them into bondage and oppress them four hundred years. 'And the nation to whom they will be in bondage I will judge,' said God, 'and after that they shall come out and serve Me in this place.' Then He gave him the covenant of circumcision; and so Abraham begot Isaac and circumcised him on the eighth day; and Isaac begot Jacob, and Jacob begot the twelve patriarchs."

Stephen continues with the story of Joseph:

"And the patriarchs, becoming envious, sold Joseph into Egypt. But God was with him and delivered him out of all his troubles, and gave him favor and wisdom in the presence of Pharaoh, king of Egypt; and he made him governor over Egypt and all his house. Now a famine and great trouble came over all the land of Egypt and Canaan, and our fathers found no sustenance. But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent out our fathers first. And the second time Joseph was made known to his brothers, and Joseph's family became known to the Pharaoh. Then Joseph sent and called his father Jacob and all his relatives to him, ⁷⁰seventy-five people. So Jacob went down to Egypt; and he died, he and our fathers. And they were carried back to Shechem and laid in the tomb that Abraham bought for a sum of money from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem.

"But when the time of the promise drew near which God had sworn to Abraham, the people grew and multiplied in Egypt till another king arose who did not know Joseph. This man dealt treacherously with our people, and oppressed our forefathers, making them expose their babies, so that they might not live."

Stephen summarizes the story of Moses:

"At this time Moses was born, and was well pleasing to God; and he was brought up in his father's house for three months. But when he was set out, Pharaoh's daughter took him away and brought him up as her own son. And Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and deeds.

"Now when he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brethren, the children of Israel. And seeing one of them suffer wrong, he defended and avenged him who was oppressed, and struck down the Egyptian. For he supposed that his brethren would have understood that God would deliver them by his hand, but they did not understand. And the next day he appeared to two of them as they were fighting, and tried to reconcile them, saying, 'Men, you are brethren; why do you wrong one another?' But he who did his neighbor wrong pushed him away, saying, 'Who made you a ruler and a judge over us? Do you want to kill me as you did the Egyptian yesterday?' Then, at this saying, Moses fled and became a dweller in the land of Midian, where he had two sons.

"And when forty years had passed, an Angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire in a bush, in the wilderness of Mount Sinai. When Moses saw it, he marveled at the sight; and as

he drew near to observe, the voice of the Lord came to him, saying, ‘I am the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ And Moses trembled and dared not look. ‘Then the Lord said to him, “Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground. I have surely seen the oppression of My people who are in Egypt; I have heard their groaning and have come down to deliver them. And now come, I will send you to Egypt.” ’

“This Moses whom they rejected, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge?’ is the one God sent to be a ruler and a deliverer by the hand of the Angel who appeared to him in the bush. He brought them out, after he had shown wonders and signs in the land of Egypt, and in the Red Sea, and in the wilderness forty years.

As Stephen was reviewing the most honored heroes of Hebrew history, the Sanhedrin certainly nodded in approval. They considered themselves to be the righteous successors of righteous Abraham, Joseph, and Moses.

Now Stephen introduces the pre-incarnate Christ into the history of Israel:

“This is that Moses who said to the children of Israel, ‘The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your brethren. Him you shall hear.’

Stephen begins to clarify Who is this predicted Prophet Who will be “like Moses” and Whom the Israelites “will hear:”

“This is he who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the Angel who spoke to him [Moses] on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers...

The book of Exodus says that God spoke to Moses on Mt. Sinai:

“And Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain” (Exodus 19:3).

Now, the book of Acts tells us that the God who spoke to Moses at Mt. Sinai is synonymous with the Prophet who will be like Moses and Whom the people will hear. Prophets are human. Christ is human. As John Chrysostom concludes, “Behold, he [Stephen] affirms that it was Christ who gave the Law since Moses was with him in the assembly in the wilderness.”

... the one who received the living oracles to give to us, whom our fathers would not obey, but rejected.”

The Israelites rejected the Ten Commandments. They rejected Moses, who brought them the Ten Commandments. And they rejected the God Who inscribed the Ten Commandments. They did not “hear” anyone from God. They were in a state of total rebellion, as the following verses state.

“And in their hearts they turned back to Egypt, saying to Aaron, ‘Make us gods to go before us; as for this Moses who brought us out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has

become of him.’ And they made a calf in those days, offered sacrifices to the idol, and rejoiced in the works of their own hands.

Israel’s rebellion against God continued long after Sinai.

You also took up the tabernacle of Moloch, And the star of your god Remphan, Images which you made to worship;

The pagan god Moloch was particularly abominable. One of the features of the worship of Molech is parents who sacrifice their own children.

“And if the people of the land should in any way hide their eyes from the man, when he gives some of his children to Moloch, and they do not kill him, then I will set My face against that man and against his family; and I will cut him off from his people, and all who prostitute themselves with him to commit harlotry with Moloch” (Leviticus 20: 4-5).

For such monstrous sins, God allowed the Israelites to be conquered and enslaved by the Babylonians:

“And I will carry you away beyond Babylon.’

Stephen says that many Israelites remained faithful to God and His law:

“Our fathers had the tabernacle of witness in the wilderness, as He appointed, instructing Moses to make it according to the pattern that he had seen, which our fathers, having received it in turn, also brought with Joshua into the land possessed by the Gentiles, whom God drove out before the face of our fathers until the days of David, who found favor before God and asked to find a dwelling for the God of Jacob. But Solomon built Him a house.”

Thus far, the Sanhedrin listening to Stephen’s address would have agreed with nearly every word. They considered themselves on the side of righteous Abraham, Joseph and Moses. They also considered themselves enemies of the Jews who had rejected the Ten Commandments at Sinai, and instead worshiped a golden calf of their own making. They Pharisees also considered themselves the opposite of the worshipers of Moloch.

Now, Stephen overturns their false opinion of themselves. Stephen thunders:

“You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers, who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it.”

Stephen is correctly accusing them of being the spiritual descendants of the worshipers of the golden calf and of Moloch, and the spiritual opponents of the honored patriarchs. Stephen’s condemnation of the Pharisees is strikingly similar to Christ’s. Our Lord said to this same group,

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, and say, ‘If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets.’ ...that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar... O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her!” (Matthew 23:29-30, 35).

The Pharisees reacted to Stephen’s condemnation the same way they did to Christ’s:

“When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth. Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; and they cast him out of the city and stoned him.”

Stoning is the only form of the death penalty approved by the Old Testament:

“Whoever blasphemes the name of the Lord shall surely be put to death. All the congregation shall stone him. The sojourner as well as the native, when he blasphemes the Name, shall be put to death” (Leviticus 24:16).

The question arises: How did the Jews stone Stephen without Rome’s permission? The text doesn’t offer the answer. Here is a possible answer:

“Stephen was not known to Rome since he was not a public figure like Jesus. And he didn’t have a background of opposing the Jewish religious leaders. Therefore, Rome would not respond to his stoning since the matter didn’t bear political connotation. The stoning of Stephen was a strictly a Jewish matter that could be settled by the Sanhedrin without any Roman interference. It was not an issue of national security. So, the Jews took the liberty to stone Stephen to death in Jerusalem (Acts 7:58). They wanted the Romans to administer the punishment themselves to relieve them from that responsibility. The Jewish religious leaders wished to appear loyal to Rome for they said to Pilate “We have no king but Caesar” (John 19:15).”

At the beginning of his trial, the text says the Sanhedrin was, ***“... looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel.”*** Now that his trial was over and his execution had begun, Stephen’s angelic demeanor did not waiver:

“But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God...”

It is common phenomenon that people who are about to die say they can see into the afterlife. They sometimes say they see loved ones and angels. But Stephen saw His Lord.

The ascended Christ is usually described in the Bible as being seated in heaven:

“... according to the working of His mighty power which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places...” (Ephesians 1:19-20)

“Now this is the main point of the things we are saying: We have such a High Priest, who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens...” (Hebrews 8:1).

This would be expected; sitting on a throne would be expected exalted royalty. But Stephen saw him otherwise:

“... and said, “Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!”

It appears that Christ stood specifically to welcome His newest martyr into glory.

“And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not charge them with this sin.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep.”

Christ spoke nearly the same words from the Cross:

“Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do” (Luke 23:34).

It is a sign of extraordinary spiritual maturity to forgive one’s own murderers while being murdered.

Acts chapter 7 closes with a seemingly small detail that sets the stage for the second part of the book - the life and ministry of St. Paul.

“And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.” Now Saul was consenting to his death.”

Watching Stephen being martyred must have moved Saul (soon to be Paul) greatly, but in a bad way. He did not participate in the stoning, but this appears to have been a turning point. From now on, he not only “consented” to the persecution of Christians, but actively participated in the persecution of Christians. He did not waste time:

“At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him.

“As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison.

Many years later, Paul recalled with deep regret this misguided period of his life:

“For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it. And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers” (Galatians 1:13-14).

“Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time. For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God” (1 Corinthians 15:8-9).

This reminds us that zeal is no substitute for truth. For centuries, people of all faiths have committed terrible atrocities firmly believing that they were doing God’s will. Christ warned of this phenomenon: *“They will put you out of the synagogues; yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service” (John 16:2).*

This is still the case:

Now the text leaves aside Paul for the time being and turns to the Apostle Philip. He is mentioned several times in the Gospels. Through the call of the Savior (John 1:43), Philip followed Him. ... he brought to Christ the Apostle Nathaniel (i.e. Bartholomew). The Lord asks him where to buy bread for five thousand men (John. 6: 5-7). He brought certain of the Hellenized Jews wanting to see Jesus (John. 12:21-22); and finally, at the Last Supper he asked Christ to show them the Father (John. 14:8). He preached the Gospel in Galilee, Greece, Parthia (modern day Iran) Phrygia (part of modern day Turkey), and was martyred in the city of Hieropolis.

“Now an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, saying, “Arise and go toward the south along the road which goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” This is desert. So he arose and went. And behold, a man of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under Candace the queen of the Ethiopians, who had charge of all her treasury...”

In the 1st century, Ethiopia was where Ethiopia and Eritrea still are today. This encounter between Phillip and the Ethiopian eunuch was not the first such encounter in the Bible. 1 Kings 10 records a visit from the Ethiopian Queen of Sheba who visited Solomon in 9 centuries before. History records that in the 1st century, Ethiopia was fast developing into a great empire. Today, Ethiopia is a predominantly Oriental Orthodox country:

“...and had come to Jerusalem to worship, was returning.”

The Ethiopian was a sincere seeker and worshiper of God. God was now honoring his search, much like the 3 Wise Men in Bethlehem.

“And sitting in his chariot, he was reading Isaiah the prophet.”

The Ethiopian was looking for God in all the right places - by worshiping in Jerusalem where the Temple was, and in the Scriptures, where God can be reliably found.

“Then the Spirit said to Philip, ‘Go near and overtake this chariot.’ So Philip ran to him, and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said, “Do you understand what you are reading?”

Philip had a history of using the Bible to direct others to believe in Christ, the Messiah: *“Philip found Nathanael and said to him, ‘We have found Him of whom Moses in the law, and also the prophets, wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph’” (John 1:45).*

“And he said, “How can I, unless someone guides me?”

This is one of the vital functions of the Church - to guide all people into a correct understanding of the Bible. The Church is the living repository of all the trustworthy interpretations of Scripture. The Orthodox faithful go there to find truthful biblical interpretations. We live in a time when most Christians believe each individual can find correct Biblical interpretations on their own. Peter warns against this: *“... knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation...” (2 Peter 1:20).* The Ethiopian seeker in Acts didn’t create his own interpretation of this passage, but relied on Philip the Apostle to provide it for him. The Bishops of the Church are responsible for accurate interpretations based on Holy Tradition. As we pray in the Liturgy, *“Among the first remember, Lord, our Archbishop Alexios. Grant him to Your holy churches in peace, safety, honor and health unto length of days, rightly teaching the word of Your truth.”*

“And he asked Philip to come up and sit with him. The place in the Scripture which he read was this:

“He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; And as a lamb before its shearer is silent, So He opened not His mouth. In His humiliation His justice was taken away, And who will declare His generation? For His life is taken from the earth.”

So the eunuch answered Philip and said, “I ask you, of whom does the prophet say this, of himself or of some other man?”

Philip used the Scripture to draw Nathaniel to faith, now he is doing the same with the Ethiopian.

“Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him.”

In Matthew 28:18, Christ gave the Great Commission of the Church: *“All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you...”* By teaching Christ from the Scriptures, Philip had fulfilled the first part of that mission; he made the Ethiopian into a disciple of Jesus. Now, Philip would fulfill the second part of the commission:

“Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, ‘See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?’ Then Philip said, ‘If you believe with all your heart, you may.’”

This profession of faith is continued in every Orthodox baptism. The candidate and/or the sponsor renounce the devil six times, then unite themselves to Christ six times. They then recite the Creed. This part of the Baptismal service concludes with the candidate saying: *“I believe in [Christ] as King and God.”* This last profession of faith is nearly identical to that of the Ethiopian:

“And he answered and said, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.””

The Baptism of the Ethiopian was completed: *“So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him.”* The words, *“went down into the water”* indicate the Ethiopian was baptized by immersion.

Now the text turns back to Saul, last seen in chapter 8, present at the martyrdom of Stephen:

“Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.”

Of all people, Saul was the least likely person to become a Christian. He wrote of this phase in his life, *“For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it. And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers” (Galatians 1:13-14).*”

What happens next - the conversion of Saul the persecutor of Christians to Paul the zealous missionary Christian - would forever affect the early Church and Christian New Testament.

“As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?”

And he said, “Who are You, Lord?” Then the Lord said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”

Saul was persecuting Christ’s Church, not Christ per se. But here Christ is reaffirming that He and His Church are one. He told His disciples at the Last Supper, *“At that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you” (John 14:20).* Later, Paul would also describe this unity: *“I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church...” (Colossians 1:24).* Christ and the Church can be distinguished, but not separated.

“It is hard for you to kick against the goads?”

The English word “goads” is not widely understood by English speakers. Greek word translated into “goads” here is “kentra” (κέντρα). It means “sharpened sticks.”

Can you imagine how painful it would be to kick against sharpened sticks while wearing sandals? Christ was telling Saul that persecuting the Church was just as painful to his Paul’s soul. Paul was driven to destroy Christianity, but the more he did so, the more pain he felt inwardly, even though he probably did not make that connection. Christ made that connection. This teaches us that when we see people trying their best to destroy Christianity (like the ISIS members beheading Coptic Christians on a beach in Libya) we only see their rage and hate. But we do not see the painful destruction they are bringing upon their own souls and minds.

“So he, trembling and astonished, said, “Lord, what do You want me to do?”

Then the Lord said to him, “Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”

And the men who journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice but seeing no one. Then Saul arose from the ground, and when his eyes were opened he saw no one. But they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

This event could be described as Saul’s repentance. That wording Greek means a “change of mind.” It is a change in one’s fundamental beliefs, attitudes and priorities. As Paul laid blind in his bed in Damascus, coming to grips with what he had experienced, he changed his mind about who Jesus was, who the Christians are, how much of his Judaism still applied to his life.

“Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and to him the Lord said in a vision, “Ananias.”

And he said, “Here I am, Lord.”

So the Lord said to him, “Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying. And in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and putting his hand on him, so that he might receive his sight.”

And Ananias went his way and entered the house; and laying his hands on him he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” Immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he received his sight at once; and he arose and was baptized.

Ananias said Paul would receive his sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit. Then, Paul received his sight and was baptized. Clearly his baptism was his filling by the Holy Spirit. There is no mention here of speaking in tongues. All of us who have been baptized have been filled with the Holy Spirit, whether or not we ever spoke in tongues.

“So when he had received food, he was strengthened.”

Paul’s profound repentance including a three day fast. In Orthodoxy, our days and seasons of repentance are also accompanied with fasting.

Then Saul spent some days with the disciples at Damascus. Immediately he preached the Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God. Then all who heard were amazed, and said, “Is this not he who destroyed those who called on this name in Jerusalem, and has come here for that purpose, so that he might bring them bound to the chief priests?”

But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who dwelt in Damascus, proving that this Jesus is the Christ.

God created Paul with a zealous temperament. Before his conversion to Christianity, he was zealous in his support of Judaism and hostility towards Christianity. After his conversion, he was zealous in the spread of Christianity. Before and after, he was a zealot.

“Now after many days were past, the Jews plotted to kill him. But their plot became known to Saul. And they watched the gates day and night, to kill him. Then the disciples took him by night and let him down through the wall in a large basket.”

Decades later, Paul recalled and wrote about this event:

“In Damascus the governor, under Aretas the king, was guarding the city of the Damascenes with a garrison, desiring to arrest me; but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and escaped from his hands” (2 Corinthians 11:32-33).

This type of escape shows the mutual trust that the Christian disciples and Paul had quickly developed. By being lowered from a high wall, Paul was literally placing his life in their hands. And the Christians were convinced enough of Paul’s sincerity to help him.

Chapter 10 of Acts records why the Christian Church does not keep Old Testament dietary laws.

“The next day, as they went on their journey and drew near the city, Peter went up on the housetop to pray, about the sixth hour. Then he became very hungry and wanted to eat; but while they made ready, he fell into a trance and saw heaven opened and an object like a great sheet bound at the four corners, descending to him and let down to the earth. In it were all kinds of four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air. And a voice came to him, “Rise, Peter; kill and eat.”

The keeping of religious dietary laws was always an important part of Judaism. The entire chapter 11 of the book of Leviticus is devoted to what Jews were allowed or forbidden to eat. These are known as “kosher laws.” Land animals must have cloven (split) hooves and must chew the cud, meaning that they must eat grass. Seafood must have fins and scales. Eating shellfish is not allowed. It is forbidden to eat birds of prey. Keeping the kosher laws was essential to Judaism, and the earliest Christians - who were mostly Jewish - assumed it

was essential to Christianity as well. Peter was one of them. When he saw a variety of non-kosher animals presented to him to eat, he responded exactly as one would expect.

“But Peter said, “Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean.”

God persisted:

“And a voice spoke to him again the second time, “What God has cleansed you must not call common.” This was done three times. And the object was taken up into heaven again.”

Peter understood God’s revelation. Christians were no longer bound by Jewish kosher laws. This has been true of Christianity ever since. The Church does fast from certain foods on certain days and seasons, but this is completely unrelated to kosher laws. Leviticus divided food into foods that “unclean and clean.” Unclean foods were always forbidden and clean foods were always permitted. The Orthodox Church abstains from certain foods during fasts, but not because we consider them unclean. We abstain from meat on Wednesdays and Fridays enjoy them the very next day on Thursdays and Saturdays. The reason we do not eat meat on fast days is those foods tend to inflame our passions, which left unrestrained, lead to the sin of gluttony.

In Acts chapter 10, God revealed to Peter that the ancient Jewish dietary laws were nullified. However, in chapter 15, the apostolic Church had to wrestle with the broader question: in addition to kosher laws, what other Jewish laws were nullified, and which ones remain in place for Christians? This was the first theological controversy to face the Church. The answer was not clear, and sides were quickly drawn:

“And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.’ Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question.

The reason this controversy was so difficult was because it was entirely new territory. It could not easily be solved by referring to the Scripture or the oral Tradition of Christ. The Apostles revered the Scripture, and always appealed to it for Truth. For example, at Pentecost, Peter quoted the Old Testament prophet Joel to explain what had just happened:

“For these are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day. But this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

‘And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, That I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh; Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, Your young men shall see visions, Your old men shall dream dreams...’ (Acts 2:15-17)

The Hebrew Bible was God’s revelation in written form, but its revelation applied to the Old Covenant. It was inherently a “BC” or “Before Christ” book. It foretold of the coming

Christ, His crucifixion, His resurrection, and the coming of the Holy Spirit, but it had little to say about the “AD” world of the apostolic Church. It did not provide much guidance on what aspects of Judaism made the jump from BC to AD, and which did not.

The other source of Truth was the oral tradition of Christ, which formed the foundation of the Holy Tradition of the Church. All the Apostles were eye-witnesses of the resurrected Christ. All except Paul spent years sitting at Christ’s feet when He taught. Even the late-coming Apostle Paul quoted the words of Christ: “...and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’ ” (Acts 20:35). These words are not quoted anywhere in the Gospels, but Christ said them, the Apostles remembered them, Paul heard them, and quoted them.

This was the precious oral Gospel which formed the basis of the entire New Testament age, the age of the Church. This oral tradition of the teachings of Christ were later compiled, written down, and published by the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. These Gospels eventually formed the basis the Christian New Testament. But that process would take place decades later.

Unfortunately for the Apostles, Christ had not given them instructions how to address this controversy. In His many teachings, He did not tell his disciples how much of Judaism would carry over into Christianity.

“So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, describing the conversion of the Gentiles; and they caused great joy to all the brethren. And when they had come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders; and they reported all things that God had done with them. But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, ‘It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses.’”

This issue was a serious theological issue. It threatened the unity of the Church and needed to be addressed immediately. Although neither Scripture or Holy Tradition definitively resolved the issue, Christ did leave a mechanism with which theological disputes would be settled - the Ecumenical Council. This chapter of Acts recounts the Council of Jerusalem, which was the prototype of all future ecumenical councils in the Orthodox Church.

“Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter.”

The first component of the Council of Jerusalem is that it was a coming together of all the Apostles. The Greek root word for “came together” is “synaxis” which is significant in Orthodoxy. To us, “coming together” as the people of God is vitally important at all levels. We see the principle of families when they “come together” in love at meals, weddings and funerals. We see it most clearly in group worship, where the clergy “comes together” with the laity to give praise, receive instruction, and ultimately “come together” with God Himself in the Body and Blood of Christ.

The book of Hebrews addresses the importance of synaxis in the local church: “*And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of*

ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching” (Hebrews 10:24). Here we see that even in the first century there were many who chose to forsake gathering themselves together. This remains a problem today. Such people “self-quarantine” themselves from gathering together to their own spiritual detriment.

While many “self-quarantine” themselves from coming to together, the years of Covid restrictions from synaxis have been keenly felt by millions faithful. They experience the spiritual joy of synaxis, and mourn deeply when it is taken away from them. Such people experience the full mystical significance of synaxis, even at its lowest level, as Christ said, *“For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:20).*

“And when there had been much dispute...”

The Council of Jerusalem, and all future Ecumenical Councils, are called in response to dangerous theological disputes, not according to a calendar.

“Peter rose up and said to them...”

Here we see Peter, as preeminent of the Apostles, rightly exercising his office. This was also done at Pentecost, when he preached the Pentecost sermon.

“Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us, and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they.”

Peter clearly supported the view that Gentiles did not have to practice Judaism in order to practice Christianity. He had not always held this view. The Apostle Paul recounts how Peter had once resisted embracing Gentile converts to Christianity:

“Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision” (Galatians 2:11-12).

Obviously, Peter had changed his view before the Council of Jerusalem. Peter gave the opening address, then Paul and Barnabas addressed the gathering:

“Then all the multitude kept silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul declaring how many miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles.”

Next, James spoke:

“And after they had become silent, James answered, saying, “Men and brethren, listen to me: Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name. And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written:

After this I will return And will rebuild the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down; I will rebuild its ruins, And I will set it up; So that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, Even all the Gentiles who are called by My name, Says the Lord who does all these things.’

“Known to God from eternity are all His works. Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God, but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood. For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath.”

With the testimony of Peter, Paul, Barnabas and James, the Council reached a consensus. That consensus was put in writing, and announced to all the known churches:

“They wrote this letter by them:

The apostles, the elders, and the brethren,

To the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia:

Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, “You must be circumcised and keep the law”—to whom we gave no such commandment— it seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who will also report the same things by word of mouth. For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to 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. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well.

Farewell.”

Several important points from this Council of Jerusalem.

- 1. We have seen that the Scriptures and the oral Tradition Christ’s teaching were not adequate to settle disputes in the the New Testament Church. However, Christ gave to His Church a sufficient mechanism to settle all future disputes - the Ecumenical Council.**
- 2. The Council of Jerusalem was authoritative because all the Apostles attended it. This precedent has continued at all subsequent Ecumenical Councils. All Bishops are successors to the Apostles. When an Ecumenical Council is convened, all are called to attend, or at least be represented. Without all (or**

nearly all) of the Bishops attending, the meeting cannot be a true Ecumenical Council. This happened in 2016, when the Ecumenical Patriarch called a Pan-Orthodox Council to meet in Crete. All the Orthodox Bishops were invited. It was hoped that this Council might become a true Ecumenical Council. However, the Bishops of the Churches of Antioch, Georgia, Russia, and Bulgaria did not attend. Therefore it could never be an Ecumenical Council.

3. When the Council of Jerusalem declared its decisions, they said, *“For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things...”* Their decision, made as a group, was directed by the Holy Spirit. As such, its decisions carried divine authority. No one person (even a pope) or lower council could overturn it. That is how all Ecumenical Councils are understood by the Orthodox Church.
4. The Jerusalem Council was called to decide which elements of the Jewish law were binding on Christians. They looked at all the Old Testament requirements - including those regarding circumcision, the Sabbath, circumcision, the Jewish priesthood, the Temple sacrifices, the Passover and all other Jewish holy days, etc. They decided that Christianity would only keep four requirements from the Jewish law: 1.) Eating foods sacrificed to idols. The pagan world was filled with old that had been offered to pagan gods and goddesses. They were difficult to avoid. Jews had long struggled to avoid such foods, and Christians were required to do the same. This was a challenge until Rome became predominantly Christian. 2.) From drinking blood. This was not referring to blood coming from uncooked meats, but drinking blood from a cup as part of a pagan sacrificial ritual. Like the Jews, Christians were barred from doing this. 3.) Eating animals that had been strangled. The law required Jews to slaughter their animals by cutting the jugular artery. It was a quick death for the animal and therefore much more humane than by strangling them, which pagans often did. 4.) Sexual Immorality. The Ten Commandments forbade adultery. Other lesser laws forbade fornication. Christians were required to obey these laws, which were in stark contrast to the promiscuous pagan cultures surrounding them.
5. These decisions by the Jerusalem Council were binding on all Christians. Violations of these decrees could result in expulsion from the Church. It was not left up to any particular person or local congregation to decide for themselves. This authority of the Jerusalem Council, and all Ecumenical Councils, are obeyed by faithful Orthodox Christians. We understand that God expresses His will through them, as well as the Bible and the other elements of Holy Tradition. This is extreme contrast to Christians who believe they have the authority to determine theological Truth on their own.

“Then after some days Paul said to Barnabas, “Let us now go back and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they are doing.” Now Barnabas was determined to take with them John called Mark. But Paul insisted that they should not take with them the one who had departed from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work. Then the contention became so sharp that they parted from one

another. And so Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus; but Paul chose Silas and departed, being commended by the brethren to the grace of God.”

Who was John-Mark? Early Church Fathers are divided on whether John-Mark is the same person as Mark the writer of the Gospel of that name. He is mentioned by name several places in the New Testament:

When Peter miraculously escaped from prison, he fled to the home of John-Mark’s mother: “So, when he had considered this, he came to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose surname was Mark, where many were gathered together praying” (Acts 12:12).

Paul and Barnabas took John-Mark with them on their missionary journeys: “And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had fulfilled their ministry, and they also took with them John whose surname was Mark” (Acts 12:25).

John-Mark assisted Paul in Cyprus: “And when they arrived in Salamis, they preached the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. They also had John as their assistant” (Acts 13:5)

John-Mark left Paul and Barnabas in Cyprus “Now when Paul and his party set sail from Paphos, they came to Perga in Pamphylia; and John, departing from them, returned to Jerusalem” (Acts 13:13).

We do not know why John-Mark left Paul and Barnabas. We do know that Paul remembered it and refused to take John-Mark with him on his trip to Pamphylia. But we do know that Paul and John-Mark reconciled and rejoined. Paul wrote to the Colossians:

“Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, with Mark the cousin of Barnabas (about whom you received instructions: if he comes to you, welcome him),...”

This story of Paul and John-Mark teaches us two things. First, we Orthodox tend to romanticize our past. We witness the disagreements and hostilities in our Church today, and think these did not exist in the early Church. Acts is honest and tells us that such things did happen, even in our glorious past. We already saw that Paul and Peter had a significant disagreement, yet both were holy men. Now we see that Paul and Barnabas - both tireless missionaries - had sharp disagreement over the character of John-Mark.

From this we can learn that disagreements within the Church do exist, but that does not mean that one of the parties is evil. Moreover, Paul and Peter overcame their disagreement over the circumcision of Gentile converts to Christianity. Likewise, Paul rejected John-Mark’s as an assistant, but later accepted him back. This is what forgiveness and repentance look like.

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Chapter 17

The early Church writer Tertullian was famous for saying *“What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?”* To him, Jerusalem represented all that was worthwhile. It was the holy city - the city of divine revelation of God to His Old Testament people. It was the city of Christ’s preaching, miracles, crucifixion, and resurrection. It was the city where the Holy Spirit was poured out. In Tertullian’s view, Athens was the place of paganism, a city of philosophers, from which nothing of spiritual worth could ever come. In this chapter, Jerusalem and Athens collide. We can learn much from the Apostle Paul how the world of divine revelation and the world of human wisdom are not always at odds with each other. At times they can even enhance each other.

“Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols.”

God had forbidden idolatry in the Ten Commandments. We have seen in the book of Acts that many aspects of the old Jewish Law had been abolished in the New Testament age, such as kosher and sabbath laws. But this verse makes clear that God’s prohibition against idols and idolatry remained in force. God still was repulsed by idolatry and so was Paul.

“Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshipers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there.”

Even though Paul was called to evangelize the Gentile world, he always began proclaiming Christ to the Jews of every city he visited.

“Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. Then Paul, as his custom was, went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures...” (Acts 17:1-2).

“Then certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered him. And some said, ‘What does this babbler want to say?’ Others said, “He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods,” because he preached to them Jesus and the resurrection.”

Athens Greece was the center of all Greek philosophy and all higher learning. It was the home of Plato, Aristotle, and countless other intellectual giants. This verse mentions two particular schools of philosophy. The Epicurians rejected the supernatural, and believed the best course of life was the pursuit of physical pleasure and avoidance of pain. The Stoics believed in virtue above all things, and pursuing it was the purpose of life. They understood that pursuing virtue would result in pain, which they accepted and endured. The Epicurians and the Stoics were opposites. Their mention in this passage indicates that Greek philosophy had many options to choose from, and they were often contradictory.

How does this compare to our own culture?

“And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus...”

“The Areopagus is a prominent rock outcropping located northwest of the Acropolis in Athens, Greece. Its English name is the Late Latin composite form of the Greek name Areios

Pagos, translated "Hill of Ares" (Ancient Greek: Ἀρειος Πάγος). The name Areopagus also referred, in classical times, to the Athenian governing council, later restricted to the Athenian judicial council or court that tried cases of deliberate homicide, wounding and religious matters... Since the Areopagus was a restricted area, it may be that when the text says, *"And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus..."* it may mean that Paul needed the member Epicureans and Stoics to gain access.

".... saying, "May we know what this new doctrine is of which you speak? For you are bringing some strange things to our ears. Therefore we want to know what these things mean." For all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing."

The Philosophers of Athens had not yet heard the Gospel. Paul's address to this group has much to teach us about how to bring Jerusalem to Athens (or to modern America). He could have addressed this gathering of "influencers" like Tertullian would have, and simply said, "Believe in Jesus or you're all going to hell." Rather, Paul strived to find common ground with them:

"Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, 'Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription:

TO THE UNKNOWN GOD.

Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you:

This opening certainly would have piqued their interest. The ancient pagans believed in hundreds of gods and goddesses. Their entire religion was based on appeasing them through sacrifices. This idol demonstrates that they were afraid that there might a god they did not know, and therefore they were not offering him or her the proper sacrifices, and that god or goddess might take offense and punish them somehow. Paul proclaimed to them that there was indeed a God they did not know, but He was known to the Hebrews, and He was the only God.

The Greeks had their myths about how the Universe began. This was the story of creation that the philosophers facing Paul believed.

This is how Paul replied. Instead many gods and goddesses, God that created the Universe is One:

"God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth."

Unlike the gods and goddesses of the Greek creation myth, the One God is Spirit and has no human body parts. He does not create or mate with other gods. He knows everything and cannot be tricked. He is omnipotent and cannot be overpowered. The One God Who created the Universe is omnipresent, as we say in our prayers, "Everywhere present and filling all things":

“He does not dwell in temples made with hands. nor is He worshiped with men’s hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things.”

Human beings are trivial to the Greek gods and goddesses, but we are the crown jewel of the one God’s Creation:

“And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their pre-appointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings...”

The Greek gods and goddesses had little or no interest in creating any relationship with the humans they created, but the One God of creation truly seeks a deep relationship with us:

“...so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him...”

Paul is saying that the Greek philosopher’s seated before him - are those “seekers” and “gropers” of the one true God. And it is by means of their philosophy that they might grow from “seekers” and “gropers” to “finders” of Him. And the distance from “seeker” and “groper” to “finder” is stunningly short.

“...though He is not far from each one of us...”

God has often revealed Himself to pagans who are honestly seeking Him. He revealed the birth of Christ in the form of a star, right where pagan astrologers in Babylon would see it. They followed that revelation all the way to Bethlehem and worshiped the Christ Child. Many of the early Church Fathers (especially of the well-educated) saw pre-Christian Greek Philosophy as a God revealing Himself to the Greek civilization. Justin Martyr wrote, *“Do not the philosophers turn every discourse to God? Is not this truly the duty of philosophy, to investigate the deity?”* Clement of Alexandria wrote, *“Philosophy has been given to the Greeks as their own kind of Covenant, their foundation for the philosophy of Christ ... the philosophy of the Greeks ... contains the basic elements of that genuine and perfect knowledge which is higher than human ... even upon those spiritual objects.”*

To the philosophers listening, Paul quotes two ancient Greek writers. The first is Epimenides: *“...for in Him we live and move and have our being...”* He also quotes the Stoic Aratus: *“as also some of your own poets have said, ‘For we are also His offspring.’”*

By quoting their own authorities, Paul is clearly trying to find common ground with the philosophers in order to draw them to faith in Christ. Paul writes that this was his practice:

“For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law; to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law; to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. Now this I do for the gospel’s sake, that I may be partaker of it with you” (1 Corinthians 9:19-23).

This method is rooted in the Incarnation of Christ, who became man in order to save man.

“Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked...”

God’s love for humanity is so great that He is merciful towards past, unwitting human errors. In our Orthodox prayers we often ask for forgiveness of sins “voluntary and involuntary.” Christ said, *“But all these things they will do to you for My name’s sake, because they do not know Him who sent Me. If I had not come and spoken to them, they would have no sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin” (John 15:21-23).* God’s “grace period” for unintentional sins ran out when Christ came. Paul put the Areopagite philosophers on similar notice:

“...but now [God] commands all men everywhere to repent...”

Paul begins with the necessity of repentance, just as Peter did in his Pentecost sermon. Repentance is the central them of Great Lent, where we hear the prayer, *“Open unto us the gates of repentance.”* The need to repent, i.e. undergo a “change of mind” is a Judaeo-Christian imperative. The philosophers would have been familiar with the concept as well: *“Metanoia is depicted as a shadowy goddess, cloaked and sorrowful, who accompanied Kairos, the god of Opportunity, sowing regret and inspiring repentance for the ‘missed moment.’”* Paul continues:

“...because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.”

The ancient Greeks believed in an afterlife. When one died, the soul went to Hades, a place of mist and gloom. Within Hades there were varying levels. Those who led more virtuous lives went to Elysium, which was pleasant. Those who had led evil lives went to Tartarus, which was painful. The fate of the dead was largely influenced by the degree to which their loved ones remembered them. There was no expectation of a final Judgement Day at the End of Time, as believed by the Christians.

The concept of resurrection - the receiving back of one’s body - was not generally embraced by Greek philosophers. They tended to see death as a liberation from the limitations of the body, and had no interest in receiving the old body back again. There were myths of some gods and goddesses dying and coming back to life, but there was little similar hope for mere mortals.

With this as their prior beliefs, it is not surprising that the philosophers listening to Paul’s sermon would have mixed response to Paul’s presentation of Resurrection and Final Judgement.

“And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, while others said, ‘We will hear you again on this matter.’ So Paul departed from among them. However, some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.”

Saint Dionysius the Areopagite later became the Bishop of Athens. He followed in Paul's footsteps as a missionary. He wrote several books that survive, and was finally martyred. Little is known about St. Damaris after her her conversion. Some believe that she was the wife of St. Dionysius. Both are commemorated on October 3.