

The Missionary Strategy of the Early Church (70-135CE)

The expansion of the post-apostolic Church was unparalleled. As a proportion to population, there has never been a more rapidly growing movement. Within ten years after the death of Christ, there were churches in Alexandria and Antioch (Green, 1979, 13). By the end of the second century, churches were active throughout the Roman Empire and as far away as Mesopotamia. Past research has generally focused on the expansion of the church in the later Ante-Nicene period. Less has been written about the expansion of the church prior to the rise of the learned apologists and the missionary bishops. Many scholars overlook this gap (70CE-135CE) and assume the church went directly from the Apostles to the Apologists. This paper will attempt to fill that gap by exploring the earliest missionary endeavors of the church as described in the *Didache* and elsewhere.

In order to understand the practice of early Christianity, it is necessary to understand the background. The apostles started the process of evangelizing the known world. Eusebius provides a listing (though his knowledge of Asian Christianity is limited).

Eusebius writes in *Book 3, Chapter 1: The Parts of the World in Which the Apostles Preached Christ*:

Meanwhile the holy apostles and disciples of our Saviour were dispersed throughout the world. Parthia, according to tradition, was allotted to Thomas as his field of labor, Scythia to Andrew, and Asia to John, who, after he had lived some time there, died at Ephesus.

Peter appears to have preached in Pontus, Galatia, Bithynia, Cappadocia, and Asia to the Jews of the dispersion. And at last, having come to Rome, he was crucified head-downwards; for he had requested that he might suffer in this way. What do we need to say concerning Paul, who preached the Gospel of Christ from Jerusalem to Illyricum, and afterwards suffered martyrdom in Rome under Nero?

The apostolic age is generally considered closed at 90-95CE at the death of John the Elder. There is some question as to the identity of John the Elder and John the Apostle. This author believes them to be one in the same. Regardless of the identification of John, with the death of John the Elder, we know that the last canonical writer left the scene. Thus, many equate his death with both the close of the canonic and apostolic age.

However, the death of the last apostle is not the best demarcation for the end of the apostolic age. The deaths of Peter and Paul and the destruction of the temple are better indicators. The fall of Jerusalem left the new church without a central point of reference (Frend, 1984, 120). Therefore, most Protestant scholars date the beginning of the post-apostolic (or sub-apostolic) age at 65-70CE (Goppelt, 1970, 108). This time period is most important for this study. Much of the works of wandering ecstatic prophets take place before the death of the last writer of the New Testament.

Some material unquestionably straddles this date. The *Apocalypse* and perhaps other New Testament books are dated around or after 70CE. The *Shepherd of Hermas* and the *Didache* both have been dated before and after this time. Regardless, the apostolic age can best be marked with the destruction of Jerusalem and the resulting Jewish Diaspora. More importantly, the destruction of Jerusalem and the death of Paul mark a significant change in mission strategy. The church lost its central point (soon to shift to Antioch and Rome) and its most important missionary. Thus, this paper will begin its survey at 70CE.

There are a limited number of extant writings from this period. They include some of the later New Testament writings, the *Didache*, *First Clement*, the writings of Ignatius of Antioch, the *Epistle of Barnabas*, *Second Clement*, the *Shepherd of Hermas*,

and a few non-Christian sources (i.e. Josephus, Pliny's letter to Trajan, and Tacitus). It is interesting to note that some of the literature of the era speaks best to the next era (and vice-versa). For example, Ignatius' description of the monarchical episcopate better reflects the era after 135CE and Tertullian's openness toward Montanism might have been better received in the 70-100CE era.

There is substantial evidence of the expansion of the church in the post-Nicene era. However, this is not true before the Nicene council. The years that follow the fall of Jerusalem are the most obscure in the early church (Frend, 1966, 46). This omission may show that the participants were involved in activities other than keeping records (Conzelmann, 1973, 28). They were evangelizing and starting churches. The literature becomes more plentiful in the mid- to late- second century. However, there may be enough information to hypothesize several things.

The year 135CE marks the end of a sixty-year shift away from the synagogue base of Christianity for reasons to be discussed later. The church no longer considered Jerusalem its base. Christianity had slowly grown away from Judaism, but by 135CE the shift was complete. Christians began to engage the Greek philosophers rather than the Jews. The Jewish to Greek shift will characterize the work of the church for the remainder of the second century (Conzelmann, 1973, 162). Thus, the focus of this work will end at 135CE.

Finally, this time is also the approximate time when Harnack claims ecstatic phenomena were most common (Harnack, 1972, 254-255). Green dislikes this “ecstatic” terminology. Though he believes that the early prophets were not only exercising a preaching gift (i.e. their words *were* revelatory), he does believe that ecstatic describes a

state different than an ecstatic trance (Green, 1970, 200). However, most follow Caird that tongues and prophecy should both be regarded as ecstatic speech (Caird, 1955, 61).

Referring to visions, ecstasy, trances, healing the sick, exorcism, and other phenomena, Harnack explains, "The apologists allude to them as a familiar and admitted fact, and it is quite obvious that they were of primary importance for the mission and propaganda of the Christian religion." (Harnack, 1972, 253) The focus of this paper will be on those who practiced such phenomena and their impact on the mission practice of the early church.

Factors Impacting Growth

The rapid spread of the church can be attributed to many factors other than ecstatic gifts and wandering prophets. However, there were certain pre-existent factors during this time that helped make growth possible. Though they were not the cause of growth, they are important elements. These factors include the existing synagogue system, the Hellenized culture, the Roman infrastructure, and the mystery religions.

The Existing Synagogue System and State of Judaism

By the time of Christ, Judaism was the most vital religion in the Greco-Roman world (Frend, 1984, 42). Some estimates range that as high as twelve percent of the Roman population was Jewish with over one million Jews in Egypt (Green, 1970, 23). There were perhaps 4-4.5 million Jews spread about the Roman Empire (Harnack, 1972, 10). Though not particularly well liked, the Jews were influential (Green, 1970, 24). The synagogue was the center of life for the Jew outside of Palestine (Bull, 1967, 21). These vibrant Diaspora communities would become magnets to draw missionary believers out of Jerusalem (Frend, 1984, 43).

The Jews also prepared the Roman world for proselytization. Jewish proselytism had led to unpopularity in Rome (Frend, 1984, 41). Judaism at this time was experiencing its own renewed sense of mission (Harnack, 1972, 10). In almost every city there was a synagogue or a meeting place (Frend, 1984, 33). Converts were common as many were wearied with the corrupt pagan practices of many religions (Caird, 1955, 29).

Contrary to some perceptions, the Jews of this era were strong in the area of outreach (Green, 1970, 23). Judaism was the major rival for Christian converts in the gentile world (Frend, 1984, 121). The casual reader of the New Testament will miss this emphasis. However, Jesus told the Pharisees,

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are" (Matthew 23:15 NIV).

During this time, churches were considered synagogues, and in many respects they followed the practices of such (Frend, 1984, 120). The pure Jews, God-fearers, converts, and Gentiles populated Judaism. This spiritual caste system helped pave the way for a faith that de-emphasized social status. By concentrating efforts within the established synagogue, but specifically reaching those who were not fully initiated into Judaism (not circumcised, etc.), early Christians had great success (Green, 1979, 119).

Thus, the prevalence of Jewish proselytization and the existing synagogue system became a ready-made conduit for this new message. As Bull explains:

"Every synagogue was a ready-made base for Christian preaching. From it came the nucleus of believers, Jews and especially Gentiles, who would form the local church" (Bull, 1967, 21).

At the time of the New Testament, Judaism was a melting pot of ideas about the truth. A great variety of expression and belief was welcomed (or tolerated) within its boundaries (Kelly, 1997, 72-73). Judaism at this time was bound more by its practice

than its belief system (Caird, 1955, 23). This included conservative elements associated with the temple, social revolutionaries, apocalyptic prophets, and others (Frend, 1984, 43).

From this milieu arose a new branch of Judaism: Christianity. All Christianity at the beginning of this period was Jewish-Christianity (Frend, 1984, 123). Though all of early Christianity was Jewish, the early Christians were not all Jewish. Early in this era, there were Hebrew and Hellenized Christians (see Acts 6:1). However, the synagogue and Jerusalem heavily influenced Christianity until 135CE.

By the middle of this period, Christianity began to assert its own identity. This was particularly noticeable in the writings (ca. 107CE) of Ignatius (Frend, 1984, 124). By the end of the period, Christians had a love/hate relationship with Judaism (Frend, 1984, 124). Interestingly, both the beginning and ending dates of this era (70 and 135) relate to cataclysmic events in Jerusalem. After 135CE, Jerusalem mattered little to the growing church.

The break from Judaism truly began at the resurrection of Jesus, but Christians remained part of Jewish faith communities for decades after. The transition from Jewish Christian to Gentile church was complete by 135CE. Some put the break with Judaism as early as the 60's (Caird, 141), but this is not a complete view. Clearly there is a break, but Christians remained in the synagogue until they were forcibly expelled. Expulsion does not happen to a people uninvolved in synagogue life.

By 180CE, the church added Jewish Christians (the Ebionites) to its listing of heretics (Harnack, 1972, 72). Such a transition cannot go unnoticed. The early church utilized the Jewish religious system, in some places superceded it, and eventually outgrew it.

The transition from Jewish to Gentile church was difficult (and not all made the change). In its earliest years, Christianity did not distinguish itself as separate from Judaism (Hinson, 1981, 13), and many believers sought to be both. However, in the early second century, the writer of the *Epistle of Barnabas* (ca. 130CE) argued that the Jews, by rejecting Christ, were no longer God's chosen (Kelly, 1997, 77). The break began to accelerate.

Three decades later, Justin, responding to Trypho, begrudgingly affirmed the faith of Mosaic-law keeping (early Ebionite) Christians, as long as they did not try to persuade others to their view.

And Trypho again inquired, "But if some one, knowing that this is so, after he recognises that this man is Christ, and has believed in and obeys Him, wishes, however, to observe these [institutions], will he be saved?"

I said, "In my opinion, Trypho, such an one will be saved, if he does not strive in every way to persuade other men,-I mean those Gentiles who have been circumcised from error by Christ, to observe the same things as himself, telling them that they will not be saved unless they do so. This you did yourself at the commencement of the discourse, when you declared that I would not be saved unless I observe these institutions" (Justin Martyr, accessed 22 August 1999).

Justin, however, already considers non-Christian Jews to be powerful enemies.

For other nations have not inflicted on us and on Christ this wrong to such an extent as you have... you not only did not repent of the wickedness which you had committed, but at that time you selected and sent out from Jerusalem chosen men through all the land to tell that the godless heresy of the Christians had sprung up, and to publish those things which all they who knew us not speak against us (Justin Martyr, accessed 22 August 1999).

Some Jewish Christians did not want to make the change. They desired to remain *both* Jewish and Christian. The Ebionites were such a group, but were condemned by Irenaeus:

Those who are called Ebionites agree that the world was made by God; but their opinions with respect to the Lord are similar to those of Cerinthus and Carpocrates. They use the Gospel according to Matthew only, and repudiate the Apostle Paul, maintaining that he was an apostate from the law. As to the prophetic writings, they endeavour to expound them in a somewhat singular

manner: they practise circumcision, persevere in the observance of those customs which are enjoined by the law, and are so Judaic in their style of life, that they even adore Jerusalem as if it were the house of God (Irenaeus, accessed 22 August 1999).

It is hard to imagine a faith system such as Christianity operating within Judaism (or at least within its fringes). Yet, that is exactly the picture of the early church until the early second century. The early Christians did not believe they were following a new religion, instead, they believed they would be better Jews by acknowledging the Messiah (Gonzalez, 1984, 31). Acts 6:9 may even imply that each sect had its own synagogue. This may have eventually become the case with the early Christians, though no conclusive evidence of this can be found. It is more likely that, after finding its converts in Judaism, it met separately (perhaps in addition to the normal synagogue worship). Regardless, the existing synagogue system and the state of Judaism provided a natural starting point for the growth of the Christian faith. Christians were able to begin their work within a receptive and responsive population.

The defeat of Simon Bar Kochba's independence movement (135CE), and the subsequent travel restrictions in Jerusalem, completed the break with Judaism and Jerusalem (Frend, 1984, 162). Jerusalem became a Gentile city, and no Jew could enter (Frend, 1984, 162). The church was soon to move out of the Jewish realm and engage the Greco-Roman world. As it left Judaism, it became more hostile to its parent faith. In two centuries, Christianity would become the dominant religion in the Empire and eventually would persecute the Jews who persecuted it (Frend, 1984, 164).

Hellenization

The adoption of Greek culture was widespread throughout the Roman Empire (particularly in the East). Hellenization allowed for a common language and culture and

the Greek language was spoken throughout the Empire. Through Hellenization, the known world shared, at least in a surface way, a common worldview. It certainly shared a *lingua franca*.

Perhaps even more important were the nuances the Greek language provided. For centuries, the Greek language had been used to express thoughts of the greatest thinkers. As evidence, the lack of this specialist vocabulary would lead to difficulty when Latin replaced Greek as the common tongue (Green, 1970, 17). The gospel was able to thrive in a linguistic milieu where its subtleties could be expressed.

Hellenization was not just limited to language. Rigorous thought patterns made men and women restless with powerless deities (Green, 1970, 18). The culture that arose immediately before the coming of Christianity was one where the faith could grow and eventually thrive. The very ideas that promoted Hellenization made persons of the Empire hungry for something beyond what was available. Christianity was able to offer more, and men and women responded.

The Roman Empire

The Roman Empire was, in large measure, eventually “taken over” by Christianity. Eventually its diocese system would become boundaries for churches and bishops. Its capital would become headquarters of the world church. The Roman Empire would become the Roman Church. The reasons for this are many, but the empire made evangelization and expansion possible by its roads and tranquility.

The roads of the Roman Empire were unparalleled. This network allowed, for the first time, travel throughout the known world. The Roman Empire (and its transportation system) stretched from the Atlantic to Arabia; North England to the Nile (Bull, 1967, 2). Roads, some still in use today, stretched throughout this vast expanse.

The Roman roads also were mostly free from piracy (Davies, 1965, 35) allowing for unmolested travel through the Empire. In many ways, travel was easier in that era than it is today (no passports, etc.) (Bull, 1967, 3).

Growth in the second century was primarily relegated to the cities. Pliny disagrees but may be speaking hyperbolically. He writes: "For the contagion of this superstition has permeated not only the cities, but also the villages and even the country districts" (Pliny, accessed 22 August 1999). However, it is most likely that villages were often not impacted (Terry, 1994, 31). It was not until Irenaeus (ca. 180) that we hear of a mission to the "wild and barbarous" outside the city (Frend, 1984, 132). This makes most sense when considering the options: a paved road to the next unreached town, or a trip into the wilderness. Clearly, the early church chose the former.

Furthermore, the impact of the *Pax Romana* is difficult to understate. Though there were occasional revolts, this peace lasted from 27BCE until 96CE. Even Eusebius takes note of the opportunity this peace afforded the early church (Davies, 1965, 34). Had Jesus been born 50 years earlier, much of the spread of the gospel would have been impossible (Green, 1970, 13).

Finally, though persecution certainly did occur from Nero to 313CE, it was sporadic and/or localized. Between 70 and 95CE, there is little mention of persecution (other than a brief reference in *I Peter*). Even though Pliny knows Christianity is illegal, he does not know why. The tone of the correspondence is basically to leave the Christian alone unless forced to do otherwise (Frend, 1984, 150). By and large, Christians were not harassed.

The Roman Empire provided an unparalleled infrastructure. The earliest Christians utilized this travel system and exploited the peace that was afforded them. In

doing so, they reached a substantial number of the major cities and centers of commerce within sixty years.

The Rise of Mystery Religion

The rise of religion and the decline of exact science (Harnack, 1972, 23), though seemingly contradictory to the rise of Hellenistic rationalism, provided an additional resource for the early church. Already, the state religions were discredited and dissatisfying. Instead, mystery cults provided promises of life after death, ecstatic union with the deity(ies), and freedom from guilt (Green, 1970, 20-21). The mystery cults appealed to the marginalized of society but not to them alone. These religions were practiced even by Roman emperors such as Hadrian and Marcus Aurelius (Kelly, 1997, 85).

Mystery religions had much in common with Christianity including, in some cases, baptism, a ritualized meal, life after death, etc. (Bull, 1967, 8). Green, however, cites a major difference: what the mystery religions promised, Christianity provided. The unbeliever could see the power in healings and exorcisms that the early church practiced (Green, 1979, 29).

Christians (and Jews before them) were called atheists because of their refusal to acknowledge the gods of the nations. Yet, it is an error to think that the early Christians did not believe in the gods of the nations. They did. They just did not believe these deities were part of an available pantheon. Instead, they considered them demons (Bulloch, 1981, 64). As such, they were to be battled, not accepted.

Furthermore, the mystery religions of the day were not intended for the sick, but for the well (Harnack, 1972, 125). Christianity ministered to the sick and demonized. The Mediterranean was ready for an ecstatic supernatural phenomenon. In a culture with

strong belief in healing, demons, and exorcism (Harnack, 1972, 156-157), a religion with power to overcome was well received. Furthermore, it is easy to understand how the hearer would be attracted to a preacher "moved by the spirit" in prophetic utterance (Green, 1970, 202).

The early Christian apologists and polemicists spent little time refuting the mystery religions (Bulloch, 1981, 63). Instead, the earliest focused on the Jews and the later on the Greeks. However, these religions were indicative of the state of the Empire. Men and women were receptive to a faith embracing the emotive and ecstatic. The mystery religions offered such a faith. Christianity did as well, and impacted the Empire already accustomed to the expression of the supernatural.

Conclusion

These factors provided unsurpassed opportunity for the gospel to spread. "Gifts" from the Jews, Romans, Greeks, and pagans would help the gospel to grow from a small sect in Palestine to the state religion in 300 years. The unique combination of these factors prepared the Empire for a new faith. Though the Empire was replete with conflicting truth claims, the faith of the Christians rapidly gained ground. The background factors listed were, perhaps, not adequate to cause the rapid growth. (If so, why do we no longer hear of Mithraism, a religion with significant parallels to Christianity, which grew in the same milieu?) In addition to the power of the Holy Spirit, a delivery system and agent were necessary. The ecstatic wandering prophet may have been the primary missionary of the early church.

The Mission Strategy of the Early Church: Ecstatic Wandering Prophets

The above listed factors are well attested in the existing literature. The remaining factor is not, though it may have been key to the growth of the early church. Clearly the early church had a goal—evangelization. It lacked a strategy (Terry, 1994, 27) but had zeal. Unfortunately, the story of the church's mission actions during this period is obscure (Frend, 1984, 125). Perhaps because of that obscurity, few take into account the impact of the ecstatic gifts and zealous prophets on its early growth.

Conzelmann mentions prophets (1973, 117) only once as an "old pneumatic position." The error of forgetting the period between the destruction of Jerusalem and engagement of Hellenistic philosophy seems common. Conzelmann also has other issues as he attempts to see the Pastoral Epistles and others as later documents intended to solidify a monarchical system already in place. They are better understood as two strands of tradition that remain unreconciled until the end of the second century.

Though there are numerous materials addressing the nature of the prophecy (Forbes, 1995, 4) and even its role in the New Testament, there is little regarding the role of the wandering ecstatic prophet in the immediate post-apostolic era. Boring defines a prophet as follows: "A Prophet is an immediately-inspired spokesman for the (or a) deity of a particular community, who receives revelations which he is impelled to deliver to the community (Boring, 1973, 142-154).

Though not universally held, most recent consensus parallels early Christian prophecy to equivalents in contemporaneous Hellenistic phenomena (Crone; 1973; Aune, 1973; Callahan, 1985; Boring, 1973, etc.). Regardless of its parallels, or lack thereof, our focus will be its role in the church and its missionary expansion, not whether

these parallels existed. Instead, we will focus on who the prophet was and what the prophet did.

The most thorough work on the subject would be Wayne Grudem's *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* (Grudem, 1988). Grudem's focus has evolved over two editions. Originally titled *The Gift of Prophecy in 1 Corinthians* and published in 1982, his focus was exclusively New Testament prophecy, particularly in 1 Corinthians. The 1973 edition was a reprint of his doctoral dissertation. However, the later (1988) edition focused on the application of his earlier work in the local church setting (and added the phrase "and today." As such, he felt it necessary to add a section to counter the idea of the prophet's role in church government: "Chapter 9: Prophets and Church Government, Were Prophets 'Charismatic Leaders' in the Early Church?" His argument is centered in the New Testament text and is essentially correct. However, soon after the death of the apostles, the wandering prophet's influence would markedly increase, a fact that Grudem does not address. Though helpful to understand the basis of prophetic revelation, the text is not as relevant when seeking to understand the missiological role of the wandering prophet in the post-apostolic era.

In response to Paul's efforts, two types of ministry seem to have emerged. Apostles and teachers taught the tradition of the church as interpreted through the Scriptures. Prophets spoke forth revelations received directly from God (Crowe, 1997, 59). At this point, the division was not between those who practiced ecstatic gifts and those who did not. Instead, it was between the itinerant missionary prophet and the residential presbyter/bishop. The residential ministry was clearly held in lower status in this era (Frend, 1984, 140).

The traditional view has been that prophecy had played a foundational role in the establishment of the church but then passed away as the church grew (Farnell, 1993, 171). In contradistinction, the mission strategy of the early church was integrally tied to the exercise of this, and other, supernatural phenomena. Von Campenhausen speaks of prophesyings, revelations, healings, and other phenomena being common in the early church (1997, 57). Men and women, empowered with supernatural charisms (particularly prophetic utterance), were sent from church to church. These methods, described most thoroughly in the *Didache*, were one of the primary methods of spreading the gospel in the early church (Green, 1979, 128). (Green does not include elements of supernaturalism when he proposes this as a primary strategy. He is only referring to the "sending out." The emphasis on supernaturalism comes from the *Didache* and other sources.)

Much has been written on the parallels of early Christian ecstatic phenomenon and parallels in the non-Christian religions of the day (Callahan, 1985, 125-140). Other religions espoused some of these phenomena, but nowhere is the wealth of activity paralleled to Christianity (Harnack, 1972, 254).

This has been an overlooked area of study. Kelly explains, "This survey of early Christian history concentrates on external events. It makes no attempt to understand the Christian's spiritual motives or inner attitudes" (Kelly, 1997, 173). This author would go a step further: this, and most other works on the early church, fail to understand the nature of the supernatural in the spread of the early church. The presence of the supernatural fills the New Testament, and the first extant Christian apologetic (ca. 126CE, preserved in part by Eusebius) begins with attestations of the supernatural:

Quadratus, Bishop of Athens. From the Apology for the Christian Religion. "Our Saviour's works, moreover, were always present: for they were

real, *consisting of* those who had been healed of their diseases, those who had been raised from the dead; who were not only seen whilst they were being healed and raised up, but were *afterwards* constantly present. Nor did they remain only during the sojourn of the Saviour *on earth*, but also a considerable time after His departure; and, indeed, some of them have survived even down to our own times” Quadratus in Eusebius, accessed 22 August 1999).

Yet, historians often overlook this topic. If Green is correct and these wanderers were the missionaries of the early church (Green, 1970, 172), more work needs to be done.

It is important to note that this phenomenon is experienced after the death of all twelve apostles (some contemporary dispensationalists posit that charisms ceased to function at the death of the last apostle). Ecstatic phenomena played an integral role in the mission after the death of the apostles and until the rise of the monarchical episcopate when institutional forces brought about the demise of prophecy and ecstatic phenomena in the mainstream church (Aune, 1983, 189).

This author believes that the transition from prophetic ecstatic leadership to institutional ecclesiastical leadership (as indicated by the *Didache* and related documents) demonstrates a major change in the missiological strategy of the church. This transition moved quickly in the early second century. The *Didache* emphasizes the prophetic nature of the early church while Ignatius is already emphasizing the rigid episcopate (Grant, 1957, 11). The church moves quickly from ecstatic to intellectual and, during much of this time, embraces both.

The transition from emotive ecstasy to rigid structure and Hellenistic philosophy changed how the church did mission. This transition became complete at the end of the Montanist controversy in the second century when the church rebuffed the Montanists' attempt to return to the practices of the first century (Kelly, 1997, 184). Prophecy and ecstatic phenomena ceased to be a major issue in the life of the church or in its mission outreach (Reiling, 1977, 60).

According to Farnell, the nexus of the Montanist controversy was prophecy. Since the end of Montanism in the third century, ecstatic gifts have been generally (though not completely) silent until the rise of twentieth century Pentecostalism (Farnell, "Debate," 277).

New Testament ecstatic phenomena has never been a topic of great research but, according to David Hill (1979, xi), the rise of Pentecostalism, and the commensurate desire to explain or justify the practice of modern practices, may have caused a new interest. Previously cited authors Wayne Grudem and Cecil Robeck have both been involved in the charismatic churches. Grudem is a professor at Phoenix Seminary, but is best known for his twenty-year tenure at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and Robeck teaches at Fuller Theological Seminary. Thus, they bring personal interest and academic insight to the issue.

With the discovery and publication of the *Didache* an unprecedented interest has also risen in the academic community (Farnell, 1992, 297). Thus, the new interest in justifying present experience with early church practice, and the coinciding scholarly writings on the *Didache* have given birth to a new grouping of literature on the subject.

The gap of widespread practice from Montanism until the rise of modern Pentecostalism may be explained, in part, by the "expulsion" of prophecy from the church. The writings of Eusebius describe the expulsion:

For the faithful in Asia met often in many places throughout Asia to consider this matter, and examined novel utterances and pronounced them profane, and rejected the heresy, and thus these persons were expelled from the Church and debarred from communion" (Eusebius, 5.16.10, accessed 25 August 1999).

Expulsion must assume presence—and the New Testament and early non-canonical literature attests to the presence and prominence of ecstatic prophets.

Some background is required to understand this claim. There is little mention of prophecy and ecstatic phenomena in early New Testament literature. First Thessalonians has the earliest reference to New Testament prophecy and ecstatic phenomena. *First Thessalonians* tells little about the subject (Aune, 1983, 191) and rather shows a church dependent upon the apostles. The Thessalonians are told not to despise prophecy (5:19), indicating that it did not yet hold a great position of authority. However, by the end of the New Testament references to prophets are numerous.

By the time of 1 John, prophets seem to be common and in need of testing (Sullivan, 1982, 105). Many of the latter books of the New Testament speak of prophets and false prophets. These include warnings against deceivers (II John 7-11), support of prophets (III John 5-8), testing of prophets (Revelation 2:2), Jezebel the prophetess (Revelation 2:20), the two witnesses (Revelation 11:3), the anti-christ (Revelation 13:1-8), and the beast (Revelation 13:11-17). In many circumstances, the absence of personal covetousness and indulgence is seen as the safest criterion for recognizing the true prophet (von Campenhausen, 1997, 72). Such a remarkable paradigm shift in the canonical texts is indicative of leadership and mission shifts in the post-apostolic church.

The New Testament shows the position of a prophet to be under the apostles' authority and not of great weight. Thus, Prophecy could be disobeyed without blame (Acts 21:4). There are many prophets, all of whom did not hold leadership positions in the church. Prophecy is exercised by Agabus (Acts 11:28; 21:10-11) and at Corinth, Tyre (Acts 21:4), Ephesus (Acts 19:6). In the New Testament there are fourteen references to unnamed prophets. The congregational nature of prophecy was strong in Paul's writing. Furthermore, all Christians could be prophets in the theology of Paul (Greeven in

Warden, 1989, 7). Paul considered prophecy an event to be exercised as part of the worship service by any individual upon whom the Holy Spirit moves.

By the latter third of the first century, the church was distinctly conscious of prophecy and ecstatic phenomena. Following the death of the apostles, and the subsequent search for authority and leadership, prophecy and ecstatic phenomena became normative. The Johannine Epistles (written around the end of the first century?) speak of much prophetic activity in Asia Minor. John's Apocalypse has an odd ending unless it is understood as a response to a growing number of false prophets in the cultural milieu. It specifically refers to Jezebel who called herself a prophetess (Farnell, 1992, 277).

Therefore, the apostles were dying at the very time that prophecy and ecstatic phenomena were on the rise in the church. In other literature from the end of the first and beginning of the second century, Polycarp of Smyrna (70-155CE), Melito of Sardis (died 190CE), Ammia of Philadelphia (100-150CE), Quadratus (during the reign of Hadrian 117-138CE), and Cerinthis (late first, early second century) are all identified as prophets (Farnell, 1992, 277).

There is little question that the prophetic gift was a powerful force immediately after the death of the apostles. Though it seems to have trailed off by the end of the second century (Harnack, 1972, 253), this emphasis became a major force in the church and its mission strategy. These ecstatic missionaries wandered about presenting the gospel, relying on existing Christian communities to provide for their needs, yet only staying a short time so that their mission could continue (Green, 1970, 169-170).

Justin Martyr considers the presence of prophecy and other ecstatic phenomena indicative of the validity of the faith. He claims, "the gifts of prophecy exist among us...

which had resided among your (Jewish) people" (Justin Martyr, accessed 22 August 1999). Irenaeus clearly lays down a view of spontaneous prophecy:

Only those to whom God sends His grace from above possess the divinely bestowed power of prophesying, and then they speak where and when God pleases (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, accessed 26 August 1999).

To Irenaeus, the same Spirit which had provided prophetic gifts to Paul (3.11.9) provided those gifts to believers in his day (3.17.2). He believed that those who rejected the use of gifts (including prophecy) were of "no use to God" (Irenaeus, *Epideixis*, 99).

Prophecy was originally a function and not an office or position (Aune, 1983, 9). However, it seems that an office of prophet soon began to develop. There is no consensus on this point. Several authors seem to believe that there never was an office of prophet but that prophecy was always congregation-based (as part of worship). However, others hold that an office developed after prophecy grew in stature in the early church. This office was the closest the early church came to a "missionary order." This paper agrees with the latter and proceeds with that assumption.

The regular appearance of "apostles, prophets, and teachers," suggests that these may have been permanent offices in the earliest church (Crowe, 1997, 141). Frend posits that the primitive offices of the church were teacher and prophet (Frend, 1966, 50). Perhaps one was localized, and the other traveled. At the very least, a more formalized distinction began to emerge as a charismatic order of prophets grew.

The evidence seems to show that early prophets were not a part of the leadership structure of the *local* church (Aune, 1983, 204). Instead, they would appear to have acted as wandering missionaries, strengthening churches and evangelizing new localities. From the time of Acts, for one hundred years, it was common for churches to send out bands of three to four missionaries to spread the gospel (Green, 1979, 128).

The growth of these prophets caused controversy in the church. Though Justin and Irenaeus proclaim that prophets and ecstatic gifts still exist, they do this with little enthusiasm (Aune, 1983, 204).

Now if you look around, you can see among us Christians both men and women endowed with gifts from the Spirit of God (Justin Martyr, accessed 22 August 1999).

In likely manner we also hear many brethren in the Church, who profess prophetic gifts (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, V.6.1.).

Regardless of their lack of enthusiasm (perhaps an early sign of the demise of ecstatic gifts), the prophets were central to the spread of the gospel.

The *Didache* is perhaps the best-written guide on the actions of the prophets. The *Didache* is fully titled *The Teaching of the Lord by the Twelve Apostles to the Gentiles*, based on a dubious tradition that it was written by the apostles. The *Didache* probably came from Syria (Streeter, 1929, 281), and it is written as advice to a series of scattered churches. Bishops and deacons are mentioned once in the document, but the main theme of the second half of the letter is prophecy (Aune, 1983, 208). The most important teaching of the *Didache* is the tension between prophets and teachers. While Paul's prophets seem to prophesy in the local church worship service, the *Didache's* prophets do not. Instead they reveal a developing order of prophets, some wandering and some settled into a local faith community.

The dating of the *Didache* has varied widely. When first discovered, it was assumed to have been written before the end of the first century. Later, due to possible references to *Clement* and the *Apocalypse*, it was dated in the late second century. Today, the majority conclusion is it was written between 70 and 110CE (Farnell, 1992, 284). The dating is important because it describes an oft-overlooked time between the

death of the apostles and the rise of the monarchical episcopate. During this time, the prophet seemed the chief evangelist and missionary of the church.

The importance of the *Didache* on the early church should not be understated. Clement of Alexandria understood the *Didache* to be scripture (Miscellanies 1.20). Eusebius placed it among the $\nu\theta\theta\alpha$, or spurious books, that were valuable but not canonical—thought some books on the list were later made canonical ("Anonymous" in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.25.4). The *Didache* was on the verge of inclusion in the canon until the fourth century (Streeter, 1929, 284). In the late (by canon standards) Stichometry of Nicephorus (850CE) the *Didache* was finally listed as a rejected book. (Farnell, 1992, 25, 28).

It serves as an instruction book in the mission strategy and practice of early wandering prophets. The *Didache* does not just give mention to the prophets. It describes a prophet in high esteem—his or her authority is not to be questioned. This was even considered an unforgivable sin (*Didache* 11:7).

And you shall not tempt any prophet who speaks in the spirit, or judge him; for every sin shall be forgiven, but this sin shall not be forgiven (*Didache* 11:7).

Once tested and found genuine, the prophet is to be immune from further criticism (von Campenhausen, 1997, 72).

This authority structure is best understood as a change in the role and authority of the prophet. His or her authority has increased from that in the oldest books of the New Testament. Perhaps this new authority level might be understood as a continuation of the pattern already at work in the New Testament. The prophet goes from obscurity in 1 Thessalonians, to prominence in the later writings of John, to leadership in the *Didache*.

Two times in the *Didache*, apostles and prophets are equated (Streeter, 1929, 147). At the time of the apostles, the apostles were clearly in charge. By the time of the

Didache (at least in Syria/Palestine) the prophet was the chief figure of church leadership and mission. The prophets were those who had "founded" churches (Eph. 3:20). It is not unreasonable to assume that they continued to do so (von Campenhausen, 1997, 55).

At the time of the *Didache* there is a structure of bishops and deacons:

"Elect for yourselves bishops and deacons... Do not despise them for they are honored men among you, along with the prophets and teachers" (Didache 15:1-2).

However, the admonition to not despise bishops/deacons indicates that their position is not that of full congregational power. (Notice the striking contrast from 1 Thessalonians where the Thessalonians are told not to despise prophetic utterance. Here the opposite may be the problem.) Regardless, the author seeks to make it clear that the resident leadership is not to be held as less important than the prophets (Streeter, 1929, 150).

The *Didache* also portrays the prophets as wanderers who come to churches on an itinerant basis (Reiling, 1977, 66). Streeter sees the time of the *Didache* as a time of change and transition in relation to this itinerant/permanent tension. This would fit with Frend's assertion that by 100CE, Christianity was beginning to emerge as a more distinct religion within the milieu of Hellenistic Judaism (Frend, 1984, 137). As Christianity became established, it needed an *establishment*.

The *Didache* is a document of the East and all its teachings would not be followed in Rome. *The Shepherd of Hermas* is a Roman counterpart of the *Didache*, dated between 95-115CE. *Hermas* presents itself as prophetic in nature and consists of a series of revelations (Farnell, 1992, 287). While the *Didache* seems to indicate an office of prophecy, *Hermas* does not. *Hermas* indicates prophecy that is more congregational in nature and just one part of a worship experience. Thus prayer of the congregation is a vital part to the prophecy (Sullivan, 1982, 110).

In Rome the prophet is subordinated to the elders. *Hermas* is only gradually admitted to the Elders. On the other hand, the *Didache* assumes that the prophet is over the bishop and when present he will celebrate the Eucharist (Streeter, 1929, 210).

Streeter holds that the issues that Clement addresses in Corinth deal with the questions of the prophet's authority. Thus, under the surface of Clement's letter is the age-old conflict between prophet and priest (Street, 1929, 220).

There are clear differences between the office in the East and the practice in the West as illustrated by Mandate 11, par. 9: "When a man who has the divine Spirit enters a gathering of just men who have faith in God's spirit, and an entreaty is addressed to God by such a gathering, at that moment the angel of the prophetic gift, who is attached to this man, fills him and in the fullness of the Holy Spirit he speaks to the gathering in accordance with the Lord's wishes" (*Shepherd of Hermas*, Mandate 11:9).

The prophet here is a part of the worship service and could be any member of the congregation. This is similar to the Pauline pattern mentioned earlier. With the ascendance of Rome, the order of Rome is to become dominant. The epistles of James and Hebrews call the presbyters "rulers" at an early age indicating that Rome had its prophets under control at an early date—in comparison to 1 Corinthians and the *Didache* (Streeter, 1929, 199-200). Clement rebukes Corinth for "making sedition against its presbyters" and speaking of their removal from office (1 Clement 47.6). This clearly was not a problem with Rome with its leadership in place. The Roman prophets and the Roman church understood prophecy to be a congregational exercise, not a leadership office.

During this era in the East, the wandering prophet was spreading the gospel, strengthening churches, and acting in a position of authority. It is particularly telling that

the prophets had special permission to give thanks at the Eucharist and the offerings of the church are to be given to them as the "chief priests" (Streeter, 1929, 150). This is the clearest definition and provides the *Sitz im Leben* for the *Didache* and second century prophecy. The tradition of Jewish offerings being given to the Chief Priest is reflected here. The parallel between the leader of the Jewish Temple/Synagogue and the leader of the Jewish Christian congregation is clear.

Yet, the wandering prophet and ecstatic gifts are rapidly becoming obsolete, and the "soon-to-come" monarchial episcopate has not yet developed. Perhaps recognizing this, the *Didache* demands the highest respect for the prophet who has settled into a certain community (Streeter, 1929, 149), ending his or her wandering mission activities.

The situation changes drastically and quickly: the wandering prophet/evangelist who exercises ecstatic gifts in the church and in evangelistic endeavor is being replaced with the established monarchial episcopate. The *Didache* sees bishops as "meek men," while Ignatius sees the hierarchical church government as normative and the bishop as far from meek (Frend, 1984, 145). By the end of the first century this prophetic/ecstatic system is in decline (Frend, 1984, 139), but the issue will continue to surface until the Montanist controversy.

There is not space to deal with the issue here, but the heretical Montanists and the reaction to them accelerated the decline of prophecy and ecstatic phenomena until its virtual disappearance by the beginning of the third century (Farnell, 1992, 294). Ecstatic phenomena were already in decline (Hultgren & Hagmark, 1996, 127) but the rejection of Montanism led to the widespread end of prophecy and ecstatic phenomena (Hill, 1979, 84). Furthermore, the Montanists "upgraded" their status, claiming greater authority as

prophets in a manner unacceptable to the church, which was barely tolerating the presence of “traditional” ecstatic prophets (Trevett, 1996, 40). What began as the primary strategy for evangelism and missions ended within two centuries.

There were sporadic groups who continued prophetic operation. As late as Origen, Celsus seems to be aware of prophets who are going from town to town (Reiling, 1977, 66). However, by the time of Chrysostom the gifts of prophecy and ecstatic phenomena were considered past. As a well-traveled individual, Chrysostom would know the status of the church (Farnell, 1992, 287), and it was his belief that prophecy and ecstatic phenomena (and other charismatic gifts) were no longer operating:

"The whole place is very obscure: but the obscurity is produced by our ignorance of the facts referred to and by their cessation, being such as then used to occur" (Chrysostom, 1983, 168).

The third century produced a missionary ethic far different than that found in the late first and early second centuries. No longer are missionaries mentioned. The growth was no longer dramatic (until perhaps 260CE). Instead, Christianity quietly advanced from where this initial burst had brought it (Harnack, 1972, 258). It solidified and institutionalized, soon becoming the state religion. Missions continued, but in a new form. Bishops of large cities considered it their responsibility to evangelize the countryside (Terry, 1994, 35). This movement from urban to rural would mark the next advance of the early church.

Regardless, even the missionary bishop Irenaeus displays concern (before the calamity of Montanism) that the presence of false prophets in the church should not lead to the rejection of prophecy and ecstatic phenomena (Irenaeus, 2.32.4, accessed 22 August 1999). During the Montanist controversy, even the opponents of Montanus did not question that prophecy and ecstatic phenomena would continue until Christ's return

("Anonymous" in Eusebius, 5.16.10). (Why the need to mention such a possibility unless it was just that: a possible outcome being advanced by some within the church?)

Regardless, the church's intentions to reject the false prophets but keep the true did not work. The itinerant prophet, and perhaps first missionary class, was ejected along with the Montanist false prophets.

However, the presence of the ecstatic gifts was the growth force needed for the early church. For many, it appears that after Paul, the next great mission venture is the apologetics to the Greeks. Hinson dismisses the idea (advanced by Schweizer and von Campenhausen among others) of wandering prophets and missionaries but fails to provide any conclusive evidence of how the church spread before the monarchical episcopate was in place (Hinson, 40). Like others, he moves from the apostolic missions to the time of bishops, ignoring the period of the ecstatic prophet.

Kelly believes that by the time of the Pastoral Epistles (which he does not consider Pauline) the "prophets, apostles, and speakers in tongues" are gone and replaced by the bishop (Kelly, 179). However, those who hold to Pauline authorship can also understand that one paradigm does not immediately replace another. This confusion seems to be a common thread among many authors. For them, there is a leap from the ecstatic to the episcopate. This, however, does not work when the available literature is studied. The church entered the second half of the second century in rapid growth, already transitioning to a more formalized order.

Conclusion:

All did not receive the transition from an ecstatic prophetic to a rational intellectual missiology in a positive manner. Even in the late second century, some

rejected the more rational approach (i.e. Tertullian's comment, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?"). However, reliance on the ecstatic was soon a minority position, and the church became more acceptable to the upper classes. The decline of prophecy can be attributed to social factors as opposed to theological (Aune, 1983, 189). Such a transition from "charisma to institution" may have been necessary to engage this element of the Roman world (Kelly, 1997, 180).

Justin (ca. 155CE) makes clear the transition in Dialogue 1, Chapter 20:

If, therefore, on some points we teach the same things as the poets and philosophers whom you honour, and on other points are fuller and more divine in our teaching, and if we alone afford proof of what we assert, why are we unjustly hated more than all others?" (Justin Martyr, accessed 22 August 1999).

Clearly, this change was significant. As the new paradigm engaged the Greek world, it had a new power structure to support it—the monarchical episcopate.

"After the close of the second century, bishops were the teachers, high priests, and judges of the church; on their demeanor the churches depended almost entirely for weal or woe" (Harnack, 1972, 57).

Unfortunately, for the sake of mission, there was more woe than weal. The decline of prophecy and ecstatic phenomena cost the church. By marginalizing prophecy and ecstatic phenomena and emphasizing the monarchical episcopate, the church lost much of its zeal (and half its missionaries, since both men and women were prophets).

There is substantial evidence to indicate that the wandering ecstatic prophet was the primary means of church planting and strengthening in the early church, but the evidence is not adequate to conclusively prove such. However, it is clear that many, if not most, histories overlook this fact. Perhaps the practice is so far from that of the historian, it is difficult to understand.

Many questions remain. Why was this order not followed in Rome? How did the ecstatic and intellectual coincide and how did they clash? Was the church later

embarrassed by its emotive beginnings? Though the issue of prophecy has received recent attention, the earliest mission practice has received much less notice. It will be difficult to fully understand the growth of the earliest church until the subject is addressed.

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