

**Title** The Birth and Basic Doctrines of the Church—Acts and Epistles  
**Speaker** Perry Beachy  
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It is a blessing to be together like this with believers who are following Christ. How many thousands of years have believers gathered together and worshipped God, and expressed their thankfulness, just as we also look to Him?

I'd like at the outset to credit a few sources besides the Scriptures. You may or may not be interested in pursuing that. *[Several sources were quickly mentioned.]*

Judaism at the time of Christ, even up to this very day, has been influenced heavily by a couple of Scriptures: Deuteronomy and Leviticus. I felt these words have so much influenced who the early church was, shaping the culture and who they were, and their relationship with God. In the New Testament, Jesus quoted these words in response to "What is the most important commandment?" I don't think any aspect of our Christian walk doesn't at least stem from a basic understanding and belief in these words. Every child in the early Jewish history, even up until today, knows these words, from the time they are old enough to comprehend anything. Listen to the words of God.

"Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one God... *read verse.*" Leviticus 19:18, also part of the Shema. *Read verse.*

There was a major emphasis in the early days of the church to practically live their faith. The way it appeared, they thought, I love God through my obedience; I love God through my devotion; I love God through my love for my neighbor. In other words, by my actions, I speak. I tell God that I love Him through the way that I walk, through my life.

There was a second century pagan ridiculing the Christians for their lack of education. One replied, "We don't speak great things, we live them." The early church was very much influenced by this idea of walking and living their love for God. "We don't speak, we live."

David Bercot says this: "Early Christians understood truth in general concepts, not in meticulous theological definition." Clement of Alexandria says, "Those particular about words and devote themselves to it, miss the whole picture." Again, Bercot says, "Although theology was important

to the early church, it took a back seat to living.”

I will not so much be doing a theological discourse of the early church, but showing you who they were, how they lived, and what they faced as a group of believers. They were people, just like we are. They faced situations in their churches that most of us would not want to face. Let’s look at that and draw some conclusions based on how they lived and walked.

I’d like to look at the birth of the church. As we look back in time and through history seeing God very involved in the events of history, we see God working in the affairs of men and also in nations, to bring about his purpose. I’d like us to see clearly how he orchestrated those events. The setting is Egypt. The people there are under very intense bondage. They are being worked to the maximum of their abilities and beyond. They cried out to God, “Help us!” How long did they cry? I don’t know. Did they feel that nobody heard their cries? Their cries were falling on deaf ears, perhaps, but the Scriptures tell us that God heard their cry. In fact, He was paying close attention to what they were saying. The time was right, and God spoke to Moses. Moses told God, “I’m not qualified, send someone else.” God tells him, “I’ve asked you, and I’m sending you.” The Lord actually tells Moses, “I have put you in the place of God.” That is an awesome responsibility. God tells His people that I will free you; I will rescue them from their oppression; I will redeem you with an outstretched arm; I will take you as my people, and I will be your God. Just before God has them come out of Egypt, He does a peculiar thing. God tells them that this month now will be your new year. From this time on, this will be the new year for you. Furthermore, on the tenth day of this month, take a lamb and, for four days, observe that lamb. In ancient Egypt there is a god that takes on the persona of a creator-god, and it was always depicted with a ram’s head. Why did God pick a lamb? Why take that lamb and slaughter it? Because the Egyptians took a very dim view of someone who slaughtered an image of their god. They didn’t view the ram as their god, but it as similar to a fish and how it symbolizes Christianity. God in essence was asking them to put their lives on the line. “I want you to slaughter that lamb. It doesn’t matter how the Egyptians feel about it. I want you to put that blood on your doorpost, and death will pass over that night.” All the firstborn of Egypt died that night. God tells them later, “I want all your firstborn. I passed over you, and I caused your firstborn to live. Now I want you to give them to me. *Read verse about first children being redeemed from Exodus. Ex. 13:15-16*

God wants them to forever remember what He did for them. “I want you to remember the power that brought you out of Egypt and relive this on your Passover service, telling your children what God has done.” He gives them more instructions: “I want you to roast that lamb,” and he gives specific directions on how to roast it. God brings them out of Egypt on the 14<sup>th</sup> day of that month. About 45 days later, they finally arrive at the mountain of God, where God says, “I want you to come out and meet with Me here at Sinai. Here God arranges a symbolic wedding for His people. Around the 50<sup>th</sup> day after Passover, the glory of God came down on the mountain. According to the account, there was fire and lightning, the chauffer sounded, and God spoke to his people. I can’t comprehend what it would be like to be at that place on that day. They were terrified. God initiated the blood covenant at Mt. Sinai. We read about that in Exodus 24. Moses went up to God to receive the covenant. God wants to come down and live with them, and be with them in their midst; tragically, while God was explaining these things to Moses, Israel was still standing figuratively at the wedding altar--they were being unfaithful. They followed after

other gods and committed adultery while standing at the altar of God. We know that God threatened to wipe them off the face of the map, but Moses pleads and gets them a reprieve. He comes off the mountain, takes the tablets, raises them above his head and smashes them on the ground. Why did Moses take what God had made and destroy it? It was because this was God's covenant, and they broke that covenant. He broke the covenant in front of their eyes. He then takes the Golden Calf and grinds it up, throws it in the water and then tells them to drink it. There was another test of unfaithfulness. For a test of unfaithfulness, they would grind up the dust and put it in water and drink it. If they were unfaithful to their spouse, they would die. That day, approximately 3,000 died. Still, God worked through His people. God continued to work with them and a nation was born: a nation set apart from all others, His Bride.

As we move through history, 1400 years later, Paul tells us in Romans 8, "All creation was groaning in pain eagerly awaiting..." God entered time and space as a baby through a young Jewish girl. He lived a perfect and sinless life, thus filling the requirements of the Passover lamb. Jesus entered Jerusalem toward the end of his ministry: on the tenth day of the first month. This was the day they selected their lambs for the Passover. He was seen daily teaching in the temple. He was examined by the brightest minds of Israel, and no fault was found within Him. He celebrated the Passover with His disciples, and He gave His life the precise moment of the afternoon sacrifice. But He didn't stay there; He rose again on the Day of First Fruits. He appeared to many people over the next forty days. He ascended to heaven and told them to wait on the coming of the Spirit: "I will send you a comforter." About 120 disciples awaited in Jerusalem for that day. After fifty days, on Pentecost, they were waiting. On Pentecost, the first fruits of the wheat harvest are presented to the Lord in the temple. On that day, the Lord brought in the first fruits of the church. Soon thereafter, the rest of the harvest would follow, and we are the rest of that harvest: the Gentiles. John 16 tells us, "Other sheep..." *Read verse.* Romans 11: "For if the first fruits be holy..." *Read verse.* Galatians 3 "There is neither..." *Read verse.*

Turn to Acts 2:1-12. Please stand for the reading of the Word. I'd like to point out some parallels between what happened in Acts 2 and what happened at Sinai. God had a plan. That plan didn't start after Christ ascended to heaven, but at the beginning of the world. I want to show you a little of that. At both events, at Sinai and Pentecost, the Torah (or teaching) was delivered to the people. At Sinai, it was distributed on stones, but at Pentecost it was written on their hearts. Both took place on the day of Pentecost. Both were accompanied by God revealing Himself to man. Both were accompanied by many languages. (Where were the other languages at Sinai? There were people from all over who followed them out of Egypt.) Both were accompanied by sound and fire--At Pentecost, the Spirit came down as flames of fire. The Word of God was spoken. At Sinai, 3000 people died. At Pentecost, 3000 men were saved. On that day, a nation was born: on this day, a church was born. People from the four-corners of the world were there. The Gospel, as it went out, they became known as followers of the Way, as those people from Jerusalem spread out across the entire world. How did these people live? How did they flesh out God's Word in their lives? What impact did it have on them and on the people around them? I'd like to come back to the Shema again. Every observant Jew from the time God gave them these words until today (at least in recorded history), every morning and every evening, they will say these words. They commit themselves to God, every morning, every evening: I will do my utmost to serve You and do everything I can to live my life to honor You. Many die for those words. Some of them suffered persecution because they were Jews and they spoke these words: I love You with

all my heart, soul, and mind; I'm willing to die for You.

Reading in Matthew 22:36-40, the question was asked, "Master, what is the greatest commandment in the Law?..." *Read verse.* There is a controversy amongst Judaism at that time between the schools of Hillel and Shammai; both had separate views on how the Torah should be obeyed and fleshed out in their life. Both believed whole heartedly in the Torah, but they had different views on how it should be applied. There was a controversy, and they were saying, which is the Greatest Commandment? Should I love God or my neighbor? Depending on which is the greatest commandment, it will make a huge difference. Jesus said, "The second like unto it." If you love God, you will love your neighbor. On these two hang all the law and prophets. As we love our neighbor, so we love God. We understand that today as well. How did they apply these things to their lives? Speaking now of the early church: In Acts 2, we read that they met daily in the temple. I'll grant you this was a honeymoon period. God tells us not to lose our first love. I think they had something there. I'm not saying we need to gather together every day, but we can learn something here. They spent every day in Bible study, listening and hearing the doctrine, hearing what Jesus and the Torah had to say. They searched the Scriptures and lived what they heard. They believed God meant what He said, and they took it seriously. I believe that the act of studying, the act of learning God's Word and seeing what He has for us is as much as an act of worship as singing or praying here. As we study or learn, we gather God's words into our heart. We can hear what He has in mind for us as we live. We can see that these early Christians loved God intensely. My question to you as pastors is--how well do you do in setting aside special time for study? Regular time? We're pastors; we're supposed to have this down pat. I suspect if you're normal like the rest of us, we struggle sometimes. We're busy, to set aside regular times for study for God's Word... It's interesting--one of the early Rabbis said, "When you get to the kingdom to come, the first question to be asked of you will be if you set aside regular time to study: learning the Torah. We can learn from them.

Acts 2:42: There was fellowship--a deepening friendship, developing common goals and priorities as they met together every day. They were developing that deep connection. That is what church is all about: to develop those friendships. Fellowship is more than a casual relationship, but learning to know the inner-core of who you are, developing goals for the future.

Then came a deep and abiding love. Out of that fellowship, they went so far as to take the belongings they had and share with one another. Can you imagine? I would love my brother so much that I would be willing to sell my car because he has a need. They got really practical. They put feet on their love. They shared with each other. I'm not suggesting we need to develop a commune, live together and have all things common, but there are things we can learn by this example and also learn how we can apply this to our churches today? How can we love our neighbor and how can we love our brother? How can we share our blessings to your need? I think we do OK in that; I think our brotherhood sharing plans are part of that. Lest we stand here and pat ourselves on the back, there are things we could do better. I'm not going to give you the answers, but you need to wrestle with that as communities. How can I better love my brother, my neighbor? We have a concept of helping each other in hardship and tragedy, which is good, but do we speak love and then live it? As Jesus takes those words of the Shema and amplifies it, let's listen to these words, "Give to him that asketh...even as your father in heaven is perfect." *Read verse.*

He would like to call us to a higher calling: a calling of love. Love your enemy as you do your brother. I believe the Anabaptists did a good job of living that principle. Maybe we could do even better in our lives. Maybe we don't have so much trouble loving the enemy we can't see out there, but we do if the enemy is there rubbing our shoulders. We get a glimpse of how the early church lived.

A converted Greek philosopher of Athens wrote this: [*read about the brotherhood and sharing of the Christians.*] Ouch! How many of us would be willing to fast for two or three days to give someone enough food to live on for two or three days. Even more practical--dig into our wallets where it hurts. It's a difficult thing. We don't speak great things, we live them: putting feet to our words, to what we say. The early church is speaking to us today. It is challenging us to live a radical life, live a life totally sold-out to God, to live, to love, like Jesus did. We see this kind of love demonstrated. It's easy for us to excuse ourselves by saying, "Well, maybe they were different than we are. They were brought up differently, so it's not so difficult for them." We say this to excuse ourselves of our own hard work. The love lived out in that church, as they gathered together and shared, was no less miraculous than when Jesus fed the 5,000 or when the Spirit came down on Pentecost.

The "Separated" or "Separatists," as they were called, did not associate with the common people, the unlearned people, and disassociated themselves from them. They didn't tithe. They were known as the Perushim. By contrast, the Perushim called themselves the holy community of Jerusalem. The origin of the Pharisees is around second century BC. There was a clash between the Sadducees who embraced Greek ideas and those who felt it was an abomination. So, there was conflict between the priests and this group of learned people. These learned men studied Torah and learned God's Word, and had no part with the world, especially as it related to the Greeks. About 130 BC, the Pharisees were expelled from the Sanhedrin, and they were branded with the term "heretic." Historians know of about 20 different sects that lived around Judea. Josephus mentions only three. I'd like to look at those three in a little more detail. The Pharisees, the Sadducees and Essenes. The Sadducees were the priests; they were worldly, skeptical of the afterlife and existence of spirit. You could think "mafia," extortionists, they used bribery. They even assassinated people. They stole tithes that belonged to the priests. They even went to the extreme of stealing so much that some priests died of starvation. They grew powerful and wealthy, building enormous mansions. This is the group Jesus was in conflict with the majority of the Passion Week. The third group was the Essenes, the ascetics. Their idea was to make straight the path so that the Messiah could come. For the most part, they did a good job of that.

Let's go back to the Pharisees. They were the most accurate interpreters of the law. Functional holiness was of greatest importance. We give the Pharisees a hard knock because of what Jesus said, but they also saw God as utmost important. The Torah was very important. Theology of the Pharisees differed from the Sadducees in many ways. The Pharisees believed in resurrection, the free will of man, angels, use of oral law, among other things. At every turn, it seems Jesus clashed with the religious leaders, especially the Sadducees and the Pharisees. Within the Pharisees, there were two main teachers: the school of Hillel, and the school of Shammai [*spelling?*]. The second was more conservative with the application of Torah, while the school of Hillel was a little more liberal in its application. These two groups were in bitter disagreement

with each other. We have nothing today compared to what they had. They called each other the synagogues of Satan. They wrote off the other group as completely hopeless and lost. Yet they came together at times and fellowshiped. The Shammai had a favorite saying: "Make the study of Torah..." The teacher was known for his severity. He held the line. Jesus identified more closely with the school of Shammai. Hillel was more concerned with the heart than with the external. In Matthew 15:4-5, they had a discussion on Corban, that tax given to the temple. Shammai taught that if you made a vow, that vow can never be broken. Hillel would say, "Yes, I believe that vow is important, but there is a commandment that is even greater, and that is the commandment to take care of your parents. If it comes down to whether you take care of your parents or complete your vow, you give to your parents. Jesus vehemently condemned the policy of claiming Corban. Let me read that: Matthew 15, *read verse*. How does this relate to the early church? In the early church, we have the influence of the Pharisees, two different sides on how the Torah should be applied. What happens when you get an Amish person and a Pentecostal person and try to make something work? I don't know if that's a good example, but think about that. You have two people with radical views as to how the Torah should be applied. In Acts 6, you have the Greek-speaking Jews. In seven, a great number of priests came to Christ. So, now you have some Sadducees in the church. Well, with that mindset, that way of thinking... Later, Samaritans were added to the mix. Peter, then Paul, added Gentiles to the church. If this isn't a mix of different sects within Judaism, consider this. In Acts 2, we see at least ten different cultural groups. People who grew up in different country, in a different culture, and they were together at Jerusalem as a church. How does this work? How can a group that is so radically different with so many diverging views come together in harmony and love? The church growth experts tell us it's impossible; you can't do it. You can't have a vibrant fellowship coming together in different groups. But God did it; we see it in Acts 2. I want to show you how amazing the work was that God did--When you have a group that absolutely (humanly-speaking) could not agree; and God brought them together and put them in a church.

While as you probably already know, there was controversy in the church. There were differing views. How do you bring those things together? You have to work through those things. Acts 15:4-5, the Gentiles are coming into the church and not following the Laws of Moses. Something must be done! Personally, I believe, those who came to the church were probably from the school of Shammai, but I have no way to prove that. So the apostles gathered together. In Jewish culture, there is a lot of noise, a lot of speaking. Everyone had a chance to speak and share their views on this issue. Peter arises to address the congregation; God sent a spirit to these Gentiles even if they did not follow all the laws of Moses! God has made a statement; He accepts them as they are. Through the grace of Jesus Christ we are saved.

What are some things we can learn from this account? (1) Everyone was given a time to speak. We need to allow time for people to share their views, and to hear them. In that church gathering, they were heard, but it didn't end there. There was time for the leadership to share how they felt God had directed them. Then James, as a leader, stood up and he said, "I'm hearing what was said, and this is what I think because it has lined up with Scripture." The Spirit was given credit for doing the leading. Two times in Acts 15: "it seemed good, first to us, then to the Holy Spirit." It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and us, and there was rejoicing. When we allow the Spirit to fall freely, there is joy.

A couple of closing remarks: If God can work, and he did in the church at Jerusalem, has his power diminished in any way from that day until now? I believe that God can work within everyone of our congregations with as much power as He did at Jerusalem. Our responsibility is to examine our conclusions and make sure they line up with Scripture. As we look at the early church (perhaps we're searching for specific answers for problems we're facing in our church), it would be really nice if God would lay out a formula: this is how it is. He tells us, He shows us, He wants us to wrestle with these questions, search the Scriptures, come before Him in prayer saying, "How do you want us to work in this situation?" Maybe even the most important way is to trust Him for leadership. One thing that really struck me is that the church, the early church, in Acts and later churches, weren't perfect. There's hope for us. All of us would admit, we're not perfect either. Our churches are not perfect, but God can work. He can do his work even in an imperfect church. Let's allow him to do that. I believe the mark of a godly church is not the absence of conflict, but the maturity to work through those issues in a godly way. Jesus Christ, my risen Lord and Savior. That statement was not just a theological question or just something to say to sound good, but a reality to them. They went to the cross for that. They went to the coliseums for that. They bled and died because Jesus is the risen Savior.

Acts 2:25-28, *read verse*. Acts 2:46-47, *read verse*.