

Dating The Early Church

Luke provides us with excellent historical information in the book of Acts regarding the history of the early church. Nevertheless, correlating the information in Acts with historical chronology in general is a difficult task. Only a few dates can be correlated with certainty; many events are described without reference to duration of time. Therefore the honest Biblical historian recognizes that many events cannot be dated with great specificity. We recognize that Luke and others could easily have provided the dates if so desired; his silence ought to be noted. And yet we can gain some profit and understanding by exploring the dating of the events of the early church, especially in relation to one another. We shall attempt to date the events of the early church through Paul's departure from Corinth in Acts 18:18.

For this period we have only two historically fixed points (Acts 12:19-23, 18:12-16). Luke described the death of Herod Agrippa I after the arrest and deliverance of Peter in Acts 12:19b-23; Josephus records this event as well, and based on his chronology we can date it to 44 (cp. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 15.9.6, *Wars of the Jews* 1.21.5-8). Thus the famine spoken of Acts 11:18 must have occurred between 41, the accession of Claudius as Emperor, and 44. Luke also records how Paul was brought before the proconsul Gallio after preaching for eighteen months in Corinth according to Acts 18:12-16. Gallio (Lucius Junius Gallio) was the brother of the famous Roman philosopher Seneca (Dio Cassius, *History* 60.24), and an inscription found at Delphi in Greece establishes that he was proconsul of Achaia after the twenty-sixth acclamation of the Emperor Claudius as *imperator* (Merrill Tenney, *Exploring New Testament Culture* 276). The inscription is dated to 52, suggesting Gallio began his time as proconsul in 51. Poor health, however, cut his time in office short, according to his brother Seneca (Seneca, *Epistulae Morales* 104.1). Thus Paul stood before Gallio either in 51 or 52.

Paul provides some chronological insights into his early years in Christianity in Galatians 1:15-18, 2:1-2. While it is somewhat difficult to precisely correlate Paul in Galatians and Luke in Acts, we get the impression that there is a three year span between the events in Acts 9:1-22 and Acts 9:23-30, and then a further fourteen years between these events and the events in Acts 15:1-35. We do well to note how some suggest that Paul speaks in Galatians 2:1-2 of his trip to Jerusalem mentioned in Acts 11:29-30, and that the "fourteen years" begins at his conversion in Acts 9:1-25. Yet even if we date the famine of Acts 11:29-30 to 44, the latest possible date, fourteen years goes back to 30, demanding that everything from Acts 2:1-9:22 took place in a mere six month period, straining credulity. Furthermore, Paul simply says "after fourteen years" in Galatians 2:1, and the natural antecedent of the fourteen years is his first trip to Jerusalem, not his conversion (cp. Galatians 1:18-24). Thus Paul most likely overlooks his visit to Jerusalem in Acts 11:29-30 in his narrative in Galatians 1:11-2:10 since it had no value in Paul's defense before the Galatians.

Paul was brought before Gallio around the year 52 (Acts 18:12-16). Paul spent eighteen months in Corinth (Acts 18:11); Paul thus arrived in Corinth at some point between the

middle of 50 through the middle of 51. We do not know the exact amount of time that Paul spent going through parts of Asia Minor and parts of Greece (Acts 16:1-17:34): it could be anywhere from a few months to a couple of years. Paul's second missionary journey took place sometime between 49 and 52; the Jerusalem conference of Acts 15:2-29 thus took place between 48 and 50.

We can make sense of that timeframe in light of earlier information. Jesus most likely died, was raised, and ascended in 30 (perhaps in 33); the church would have begun on Pentecost 30 (Acts 2:1-48). The events of Acts 2:1-7:60 could have taken anywhere from a few months to a few years: if Stephen were murdered and Saul of Tarsus were converted between 31 and 33, then Paul's visit to Cephas in Jerusalem would have taken place between 33 and 36 (Galatians 1:15-18), and his second trip to Jerusalem would have taken place between 48 and 50 (Galatians 2:1-2). In this way there are left anything from a few months to a couple of years for Paul to arrive in Corinth by 50-51.

In this way we can make up the following timeline; for many dates we can only have some confidence in terms of a range of years.

- 30: day of Pentecost, establishment of church.
- 30-31/33: earliest church in Jerusalem, events of Acts 2:1-7:60.
- 31-33: Stephen murdered; persecution arises; Gospel promoted throughout Samaria and Galilee; Saul of Tarsus converted, travels to Arabia and back to Damascus (Acts 8-9:22, Galatians 1:11-17).
- 32-5: Founding of church in Antioch (Acts 11:19).
- 34-36: Paul travels from Damascus to Jerusalem (Acts 9:23-30, Galatians 1:18-19).
- 34/36-38/41: Paul in Cilicia (Galatians 1:21).
- 37-42: Cornelius converted, Antiochenes preach Christ to Gentiles (Acts 10:1-11:21); Barnabas sent to Antioch, goes and gets Paul from Tarsus (Acts 11:25-26); after one year, Agabus comes and predicts famine (Acts 11:27).
- 41-44: Famine predicted by Agabus comes to pass (Acts 11:28); Antiochenes send aid to Judea to elders by hand of Paul and Barnabas (Acts 11:29-30).
- 41-44: Herod Agrippa I executes James the brother of John, imprisons Peter; Peter freed miraculously (Acts 12:1-19).
- 44: Death of Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12:19-23).
- 44-46: Paul and Barnabas in Antioch (Acts 13:1-2).
- 46-48: First Missionary Journey; Paul and Barnabas promote Gospel in Cyprus and southern Asia Minor (Acts 13:1-14:28).
- 48-50: Jerusalem conference (Acts 15:1-29).
- 49-50/51: Paul begins Second Missionary Journey with Silas, returns to southern Asia Minor, preaches in Macedonia and Athens (Acts 15:36-17:34).
- 50/51-52: Paul preaches in Corinth for eighteen months (Acts 18:1-11).
- 52: Paul brought before Gallio, departs from Corinth (Acts 18:12-16).

All the events of Acts 1:1-18:16 most likely occurred within a twenty-two year period. We can marvel at how so much was accomplished in such a relatively short amount of

time. Let us take this information and use it to the profit of our understanding of the history of the early church!

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