

30 EVENTS

THAT SHAPED THE

CHURCH

LEARNING *from* SCANDAL,
INTRIGUE, WAR, AND REVIVAL

ALTON GANSKY



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Introduction

Imagine standing on a barren shoreline staring across the smooth waters of a massive lake. Poking out of the depths are small islands that seem to float independently of all the others, but a closer look reveals causeways connecting one island not just to its nearest neighbor but also to scores of others. There is something important on each of those islands, something worth investigating. History is like that vast lake, and this book is about that lake.

We are all products of history. The cities or towns where we live exist because people in our past chose to settle there. The medicines we take were created on knowledge learned by scientists and doctors decades and even centuries ago. The places we work, the way we travel, and the entertainment we enjoy all have history.

Appreciating history is a nice sentiment, but the twenty-first century is a demanding place filled with distractions, challenges, and sometimes mentally and physically taxing effort just to get by. Still, we are the product of the past. Every new day, year, decade, and century is rooted in its past, and—at the risk of sounding like a history professor on the first day of class—that past is important.

The late Michael Crichton (1942–2008) is known for his works of fiction: not for his medical degree, not for being a Harvard graduate, but for his ability to spin captivating tales. He said, “If you don’t

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know history, then you don't know anything. You are a leaf that doesn't know it is part of a tree." This book is about that tree.

Church history is a broad topic spanning two thousand years. Unlike the timelines we all learned in junior high school, history is more of a web than a straight line, more mountains and hills than open plains. It has twists and sudden turns and unexpected happenings that resonate for centuries.

Of the seven billion people in the world, over two billion are connected to a church. Christianity is the largest religious system in existence. Christian history is *everyone's* history, not just those in the pews but those who have never crossed the threshold of a sanctuary. Even the most anti-church individual must admit that Christianity has changed and continues to change the world.

It may seem odd to quote a Hindu in a book about Christian events, but Mahatma Gandhi's (1869–1948) words could certainly apply to the events that shaped the church: "A small body of determined spirits fired by an unquenchable faith in their mission can alter the course of history." This book is about those "determined spirits."

30 Events That Shaped the Church is the companion book to *60 People Who Shaped the Church*. In the first book I focused on the people who helped or hurt the Christian cause. In this book, I focus on events that continue to shape our Christian behavior and thinking.

"Events" can be misleading. The word conjures up an occurrence that happened at some moment in time, but events can slowly rise from the depths, break the surface, and last for years. I use the term liberally here. At times I discuss events that happened over a period of hours, and at others events that are still ongoing.

"Those who don't know history are doomed to repeat it," or so said Edmund Burke. This sentence is often uttered as a warning, a way of saying, "Wake up, pay attention, or you will make the same mistakes as those who came before you." True as that is, some history deserves to be repeated. The examples of the brave, the determined, and the dedicated are worth emulating.

Selecting which events to include in this book was difficult. I started with a much longer list, then began paring it down. With every event

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I removed from the list, I felt I was leaving something important on the cutting room floor. For every bit of joy I felt over what remained, I felt guilt for those left behind. Even after the list was set it began to change. During the writing of this book I dropped some events to make room for others.

In the end, I believe this is a good sample of key events in church history, drawn from both the distant past and modern times. It is my hope that this book will help the reader get a sense of the people, times, and events that make the church what it is today.

Alton Gansky

Pentecost

(AD 30)

Fifty days after the crucifixion, the inner circle of disciples watched the resurrected Jesus ascend to heaven. Before leaving, the Messiah told them they would be witnesses to the world. Since that moment they had waited, as they had been told to do, in Jerusalem, uncertain what would happen next.

Outside their doors the people who had chanted for Christ's crucifixion carried on their daily lives as if nothing had happened two months before. The Jewish leaders who orchestrated his arrest and the Roman leader who allowed it all to happen—all were still in place. The danger remained.

The leaders of the fledgling church, people we think of today as brave, bold, unrelenting in their duties, and ready to die for the cause of Christ, started off as timid, uncertain, confused, and frightened.

But what happened at Pentecost would change them—and the world—forever. The church did not come on the scene quietly. Its birth was loud. Chaotic.

Jesus practiced an itinerant ministry, walking from town to town preaching and performing miracles. This created a variety of interested parties. Some came out to hear and behold the spectacle that often followed Christ. Others believed his message but continued their daily lives as before. There is no evidence that they gathered for fellowship or worship.

Then there was the larger group of disciples, those who were closer to Jesus, who supported and aided him in his work. When we hear the word *disciple* we often think of the twelve men who were part of Jesus' ministry. The Bible sometimes refers to them as "the Twelve." (Mark 4:10 mentions the Twelve and "His followers.") The New Testament reveals Jesus' followers numbered 120 people, which included the Twelve and a group of women. Still, there is no indication that, other than the Twelve, they considered themselves as part of an organization or community. The idea of a "church" was foreign to them. Jesus said the word *church* only twice in the Gospels (Matt. 16:18; 18:17). He visited synagogues and, when in Jerusalem, the temple. This was no oversight; it was part of the plan. Jesus came to teach, to die, to be raised from the dead, and then to ascend to heaven to take his seat at the right hand of God. The establishment of the church wouldn't come until after those accomplishments. The rest was in the hands of his followers.

At Pentecost the church and its leaders received a spiritual power that allowed them to do what they never could have done before. Prior to that, Jesus' followers had been a *congregation* but not a *church*.

Timeline

A timeline helps us link separate occurrences into a unified series of events. Jesus begins a public ministry that lasts three years. During Passover, he is arrested in Jerusalem, endures three trials, and is crucified and buried in a borrowed tomb. His followers are scattered and directionless. Three days later, Jesus rises from the dead, and over the next forty days he appears to his followers—and only his followers—as many as five hundred at one time (1 Cor. 15:6).

At the end of the forty-day period following the resurrection, he calls the Twelve (technically the Eleven after Judas' suicide) and gives them their final marching orders. Then Jesus, in full view of his disciples, ascends into heaven. It is interesting that their first question reveals their lack of understanding of Jesus' overall goal. They ask about an earthly kingdom, with Jesus on the throne. This misunderstanding would continue until Pentecost.

It is in Jesus' last words that we get a hint at what was changing. There are two accounts of this event recorded in the Bible:

Now He said to them, "These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and He said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending forth the promise of My Father upon you; but you are to stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high."

And He led them out as far as Bethany, and He lifted up His hands and blessed them. While He was blessing them, He parted from them and was carried up into heaven. And they, after worshiping Him, returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple praising God. (Luke 24:44–53)

The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when He was taken up to heaven, after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen. To these He also presented Himself alive after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God. Gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, "Which," He said, "you heard of from Me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

So when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, “Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?” He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.”

And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was going, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them. They also said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven.” (Acts 1:1–11)

Waiting

The disciples were to stay in place for ten days. It is doubtful they fully understood what would happen, but they were obedient nonetheless. Waiting can be hard work, but it often has a reason. Why wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit? Why would Jesus order his disciples to bide their time in a hostile city—the same city where he was tortured and crucified? The answer is timing.

They were to wait for the arrival of the Holy Spirit, who would grant them supernatural power. This part was not new to them. Most scholars link the start of Jesus’ public ministry with his baptism at the hands of John the Baptist. John fit the mold of the Old Testament prophet. He lived an ascetic life, like a desert monk, but preached to the masses the need for repentance and baptism. He said, “As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Matt. 3:11). There it is, the mention of fire and the Holy Spirit. John was speaking of an event that wouldn’t happen for three years. But the disciples would recognize it when it came.

Pentecost (AD 30)

This commission must have sounded overwhelming to them. They were, Jesus said, to become witnesses in four geographical arenas: Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the world. The last one must have made them pause. It was one thing to follow Jesus around the Holy Land for three years, but the “ends of the world” would have been too much to imagine. After all, Jesus never left his home country.

Of course, there was a reason for this. His mission centered on presenting God’s plan to the Jews first (Matt. 15:24). The global mission would spread out from there. At the right time, they were to evangelize in Jerusalem, the city they were in, then move to regional but still local areas, then to the outliers in Samaria—a place religious Jews of the day avoided—then out to the world. The New Testament book of Acts is outlined on this structure.

While Jesus had many friends, the real core of his followers numbered 120, the size of a small church, and the real outreach would be done by the remaining members of the Twelve, with the later addition of the apostle Paul.

This mission would be done with first-century technology: walking, riding, traveling by ship, and small-group communicating. No armies would march ahead of them to subdue the people in advance. That was Rome’s way. Jesus’ way was much simpler but had a much longer life, and it continues today.

The 120 waited in the upper room, probably the same upper room where Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper. They stayed busy with prayer and filled Judas’ spot with Matthias (Acts 1:23–26). In some ways they were acting like a small church and, against the custom of the day, included the female followers of Jesus. In that number were his mother Mary and most likely Mary Magdalene. Jesus’ ministry crossed gender lines. The first people to see the resurrected Jesus were women (Luke 24:1–12).

Pentecost

Pentecost is a Greek term for one of the Jewish feast periods. The ancient Jews referred to it as the Feast of Weeks and later as Shavuot.

The first name refers to a “week of weeks,” that is, forty-nine days. Adding Passover to that raises the number to fifty, hence, “Pentecost.” The word *pentecost* comes from the ancient Greek meaning “fiftieth” day.

For the Jews it was a time to celebrate the first harvest and offer the “firstfruits” to God as a sacrifice. Later the feast became associated with the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai.

The church was born on this particular Pentecost, and it came about in a remarkable way. The disciples were all in one place. There is some debate as to where that place was. It is generally assumed they were in the upper room because the phrase “whole house” is used. Some scholars think the phrase refers to the temple as the house of God, but there is no mention in the text of the disciples leaving the upper room to go to the temple after supernatural events began. Acts 2 relates the whole story.

Whether in the upper room or somewhere on the temple grounds, the disciples were together, probably a huddle of 120 or more people. There came an audible event: the sound of rushing wind filled the whole house. Then a visual event followed: tongues of fire appeared and rested on them. Both fire and wind are emblems of the Holy Spirit, that is, symbols of the third person of the Trinity. As promised by Jesus, the Holy Spirit descended upon them, at a time and in a place where thousands of people would see.

There were more attention-getting happenings. The disciples began to speak in other languages. And not just speaking, but preaching as the Spirit gave them utterance. The hook here is that the disciples, all from Galilee, were speaking the home languages of all the pilgrims at the temple. Centuries of invasions had scattered Jews around the known world, many of whom would return to Jerusalem during the holy feast days, especially Passover and Pentecost. The population of Jerusalem would swell by tens of thousands. Many pilgrims camped outside the city walls. Jerusalem and its environs were packed with travelers who lived most of the year in distant lands. As observant Jews they would have learned Hebrew, but their daily language would be that of the land they lived in.

It was not uncommon for people in the first century to speak multiple languages. In the case of the disciples, they would have been familiar with Hebrew, the language of religious worship and rites; Latin, the language of the Roman oppressors; and Aramaic, the common language for Jews of the day. Some were also familiar with Greek, which would become the language of the New Testament. There were a great many other languages in the world that were beyond their experience.

Hearing people from Galilee speaking languages common to what is now Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Egypt, and other parts of North Africa must have been surprising. It wasn't that the languages were strange, it was who was speaking them. Add to that, they were speaking a Christian message. This was so startling that some people assumed the cacophony was fueled by early morning drinking (Acts 2:13). These were not ecstatic utterances but the voicing of known languages. Luke, the author of Acts, records the languages by listing the countries they were associated with. Most of these countries border the Mediterranean Sea.

First Sermon

The disciples were changed by the arrival of the Holy Spirit. That morning they had awakened as cautious, fearful people who harbored grave concerns about their safety and future. They knew that the religious leaders who conspired against Christ, the Romans who crucified him, and the crowd who had chanted, "Crucify Him!" were still walking the streets of Jerusalem. Even at several hundred strong, they were a tiny minority compared to those around them.

But things changed dramatically with the arrival of the Holy Spirit. Those same disciples who had abandoned Christ after his arrest became very different people: boldness replaced fear. The greatest change came in Peter, who had, a few weeks before, publicly denied knowing Jesus.

Peter had been the center of the disciples, at times showing great courage and insight and at other times making blunders. He was

always deeply committed. As if unwinding his weakest and darkest moment, publicly denying Christ, Peter steps up and delivers the first sermon of the church age. What makes it a “church age” sermon?

First, it is Bible-based. Peter quotes from the Old Testament book of Joel and several psalms (Joel 2:28–32; Ps. 16:8–11; 110:1; and others).

Second, the message is Christ-centered, not Law-centered. The Mosaic Law was the heart of Jewish life. Its codes and commandments were clearly established (although embellished through the centuries): “This is what God expects; this is what you must do.” Peter’s message focused on Jesus, hitting on all the key issues: Christ came for a purpose, worked miracles, was delivered up by the plan of God to death, was raised from the dead, ascended to heaven, and sits at the right hand of God.

He closed with, “Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:36). “Lord and Christ”; Master and Messiah.

Peter pulled no punches. He laid blame for the crucifixion on the people and called for public repentance. It is interesting that the church was planted and grew in the place most hostile to it.

The sermon was direct, harsh, accusatory, and struck at the heart of the hearer. It was longer than what is recorded in Acts (2:40), but the material we have shows a change in preaching that has lasted for two thousand years. In seminaries around the world, professors of preaching teach this account to their students.

The people responded to it—at least three thousand of them committed to repentance and baptism. The church would continue to grow daily (v. 47). We have no way of knowing how many of those same people were in the crowd shouting for Jesus’ crucifixion two months earlier.

A Church Pattern Is Established

What was it like to be a part of the first church? There were no church manuals. No seminaries to train pastors. No denominations.

Everything was new. Acts 2:46–47 lists the key habits of the first church, customs that remain to this day:

“One mind.” They cultivated and maintained unity, something that would be tested in the years ahead.

“In the temple.” In the early days of the church, believers in Jerusalem would gather at the temple. Over time, Christians would meet in homes and later in rented buildings.

“Breaking bread from house to house.” They celebrated the Lord’s Supper in private homes. Church buildings were a thing of the future. The Lord’s Supper (the Eucharist) is distinctly Christian and portrays the broken body and shed blood of Christ, not something that would fit with temple rituals.

“Taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart.” Fellowship was a priority, and sharing meals was an important social ritual. It built friendship and kinship.

“Praising God.” Praise has always been a part of worship. Public singing is common today (although there were periods of history where singing was prohibited). In the first church, praise was a daily habit, not something reserved for a special day of the week.

“Having favor with all the people.” Their behavior was Christ-like, portraying Jesus in their words and in the way they treated others.

The contemporary church has changed in many ways, and some of the ways it expresses itself in worship have changed. A few things, like breaking bread from house to house, may have disappeared, but the principles behind them have remained.

The church did not slowly rise in history, it exploded on the scene, accompanied by a miracle. What had been a ragtag band of Jesus’ followers became an organized force in the world that has continued to alter human history for two millennia. The meek became the brave, the uncertain became the confident, and the world became a mission field.

That hasn’t changed.