



Chapter 25

# Reaching Out To All Nations

*"And he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him,  
'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' And he said,  
'Who are you, Lord?' And he said, 'I am Jesus, whom you  
are persecuting; but rise...and you will be told what to do.'"*

*Acts 3: 4-6*

Chapter 25

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Read

Acts

8:26 - 9:31

15:1 - 21

Galatians

2:11 - 14

## Philip Baptizes The Ethiopian

So far the apostles had put all their effort into preaching the Gospel to the Jews and the Samaritans. But Jesus had sent them out to all nations.

But an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is a desert road. And he rose and went. And behold, an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a minister of Candace, the queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of all her treasure, had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. (Acts 8: 26-28)

Ethiopia was a civilized and wealthy country in Africa. At the time it was governed by a line of queens (Candace seems to have been their title rather than their name), and those queens were capable enough leaders that even the Romans could never conquer Ethiopia. An ancient (but probably not reliable) Ethiopian tradition said that Ethiopian rulers were descended from the union of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba.

| 35 A.D.  | 40 A.D.   | 45 A.D.   | 50 A.D.  |
|--|---|---|--|
| 35 Saul has a vision of Jesus on the road to Damascus and is converted   | 38-46 Paul, the converted Saul, preaches in Cilicia and Syria                                 |   | 52 The Apostolic Council of Jerusalem is convened to discuss the acceptance of Gentiles      |
| 35 Philip, one of the Seven, converts an Ethiopian who carries the faith to Africa; Peter baptizes Cornelius a Roman Centurion in Caesarea | 41-44 Herod Agrippa rules over Palestine supporting Jewish unrest with the Christian movement |   | Rome: 37-41 Caligula is Emperor<br>41-54 Claudius is Emperor<br>43-84 Romans conquer Britain |
|  | 37 The name "Christian" is first used in Antioch to describe believers                        | 43-44 Herod Agrippa arrests and beheads Apostle James the Greater, son of Zebedee. He was the brother of John the Evangelist and was present at the Transfiguration with John and Peter and in the Garden of Gethsemane while Jesus prayed. |  |

There were many Jews among the Ethiopians (as we know from Is 11:11), and the queen's treasurer must have heard about their religion from them. This eunuch was a man of very high position. He was important enough to ride in a chariot on the long trip from Ethiopia to Jerusalem and back. (The "chariot" was actually a large carriage, big enough to hold at least two passengers and a driver.) Even so, because he was a eunuch he could never be either a Jew or a proselyte (see Deuteronomy 23:1). But he may have been reading Isaiah because Isaiah promised a place in the Kingdom even to eunuchs:

**For thus says the LORD:**

**"To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,  
who choose the things that please me  
and hold fast my covenant,**

**I will give in my house and within my walls  
a monument and a name  
better than sons and daughters.**

**I will give them an everlasting name  
which shall not be cut off."**

**(Is 56: 4-5)**

In those days, people often read aloud even when they were alone, so Philip could hear what the Ethiopian was reading.

**And the Spirit said to Philip, "Go up and join this chariot." So Philip ran to him, and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. Now the passage of the scripture which he was reading was this:**

**As a sheep led to the slaughter  
or a lamb before its shearer is dumb,  
so he opens not his mouth.**

**In his humiliation justice was denied him.**

**Who can describe his generation?**

**For his life is taken up from the earth.**

**And the eunuch said to Philip, "About whom, pray, does the prophet say this, about himself or about some one else?" Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this scripture he told him the good news of Jesus.**

**(Acts 8: 29-35)**

Showing how Jesus fulfilled the Scriptures was always the early Christians' most effective argument.

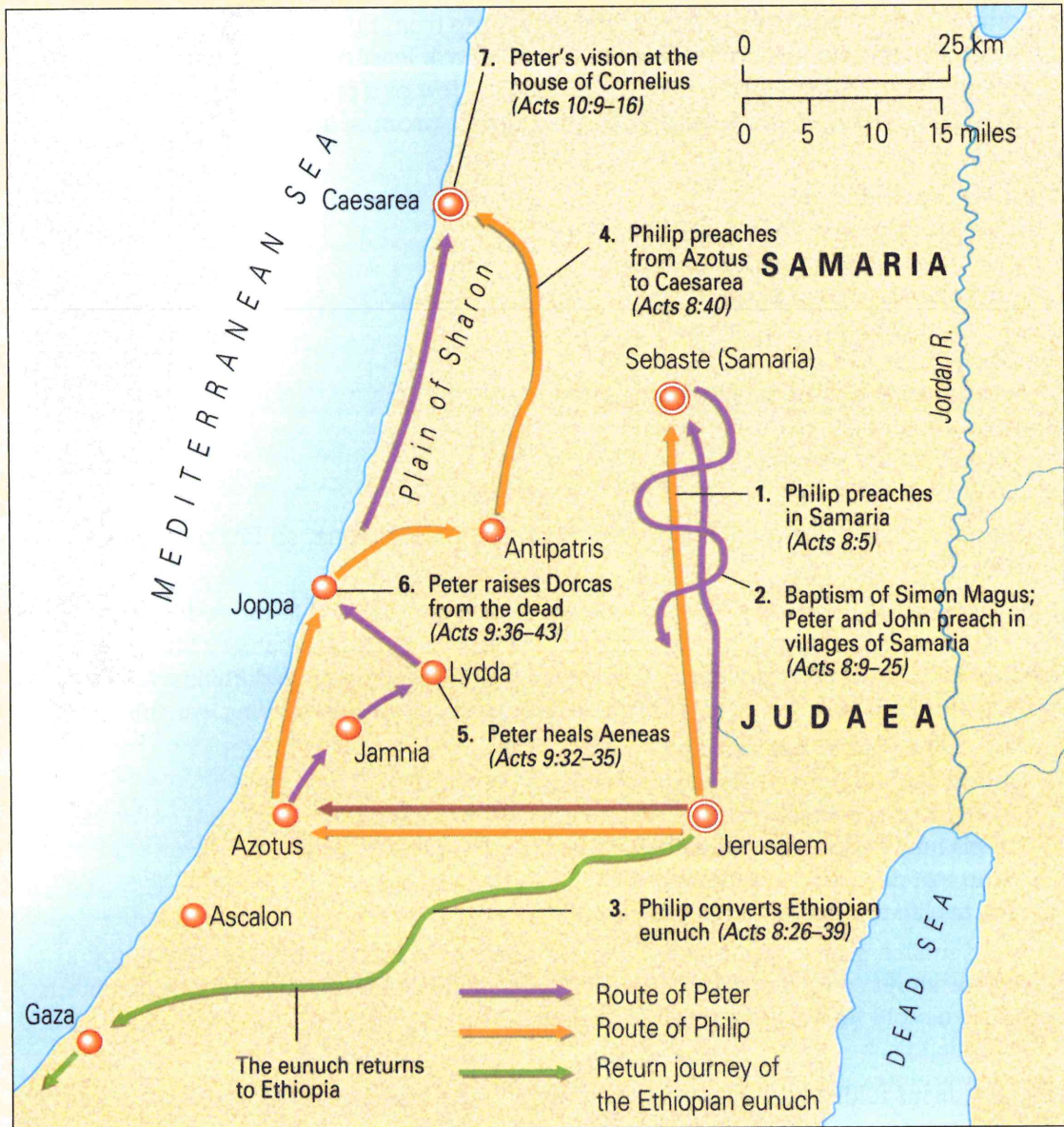
**And as they went along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "See, here is water! What is to prevent my being baptized?" (Acts 8: 36)**

Now Philip had a decision to make. Was there anything to prevent the Ethiopian from becoming a Christian? If being a Christian meant first being a Jew, then there was something to prevent it: a eunuch could not become a Jew. But Philip had been led by an angel and guided by the Spirit. Surely this must be the will of God.

**And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. (Acts 8: 38)**

This was the first time a Gentile had been baptized as a Christian. And it was symbolically appropriate that it was an Ethiopian. To the Romans, Ethiopia represented the farthest point of the known world—"the end of the earth," in fact. And Philip had been led to the Ethiopian by the Holy Spirit. It was a sign the Apostles could hardly ignore. The Good News was not just for the Jews; it really was for all nations. The preaching of the Gospel to the whole world had begun.

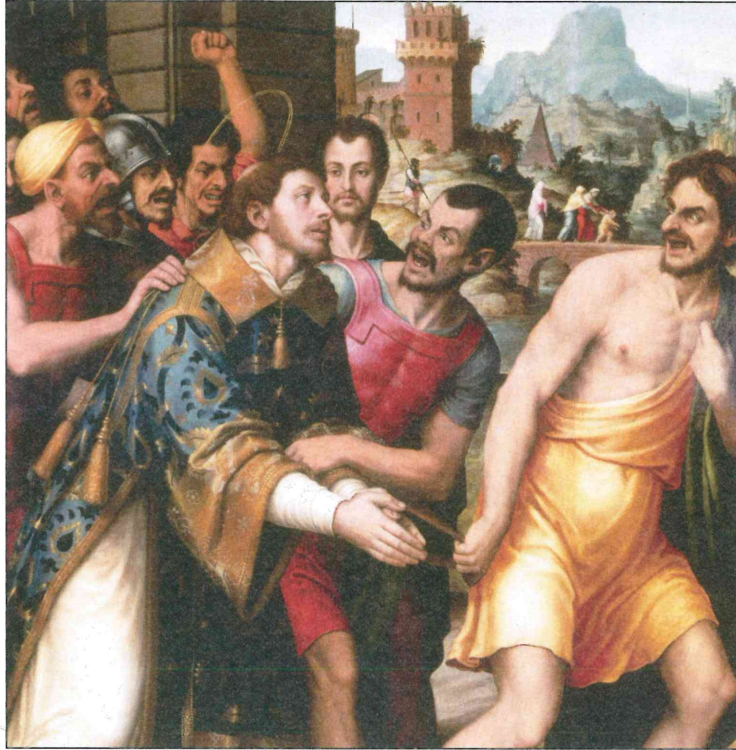
## Early Spread Of "The Good News"



The ruins of Herod's palace in Caesarea which in New Testament times was the capital of the Roman province of Judea and named in honor of Caesar Augustus.



The city of Joppa, now called Jaffa, was the only harbor between Mt. Carmel and Egypt in Old Testament times and today is contiguous with Tel Aviv, the largest city in Israel.



## Saul The Persecutor

Meanwhile, it was becoming less and less safe to be a Christian in Jerusalem. After the death of Stephen, the authorities decided to try to stamp out the Jesus cult once and for all. Leading the charge against the Christians was a fanatical Pharisee named Saul—the man who had approved Stephen’s execution.

Saul was born in Tarsus, a seaport at the northeastern corner of the Mediterranean in Cilicia. It was “no mean city,” as he would remember later—one of the most important centers of learning in the Roman Empire. Although he was raised as a Jew, his father was a Roman citizen, a much-envied privilege that made life a lot easier for the people who possessed it. Saul inherited the Roman citizenship.

After his early years of education in Tarsus, Saul went to Jerusalem to study under Gamaliel, one of the most famous of the Pharisees. Saul ended up with the best of both educations: an amazingly thorough knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures along with a complete training in Greek literature and philosophy.

He might have intended to become a rabbi, but usually a young man learned some sort of business as well. Saul learned to make tents. There was always a market for tent cloth in the eastern part of the Roman Empire, and it was a trade that would support Saul even at the height of his fame as a traveling missionary.

Saul was an awkward young man—not very tall, and not very good-looking. He was not a very good speaker, either. But he was fanatically devoted to the Law of Moses, and his zeal earned him a high position among the Jewish authorities. Though he was still a young man, we hear that it was Saul who led the squads of Temple guards during the first big persecution of Christians in Jerusalem. “But Saul laid waste the church,” Luke tells us, “and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.”<sup>1</sup>



## Saul's Conversion

**H**earing that there were followers of Jesus even in Damascus, Saul decided to go there and root them out. But Jesus Christ had a different plan for him.

Now as he journeyed he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed about him. And he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting; but rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. Saul arose from the ground; and when his eyes were opened, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him to Damascus. (Acts 9: 3-8)

When he reached Damascus, Saul was blind, disoriented, and Christian.

The Christians in Damascus wanted nothing to do with him. Jesus sent a man named Ananias to Saul, but Ananias, Luke tells us (Acts 9:13-14), argued with Jesus himself, pointing out what a dangerous man this Saul was. But Ananias did go, and Saul was cured of his blindness and baptized. He stayed in Damascus for a while, and the astounded Jews and Christians there heard Saul, the head of the Jerusalem temple guards who had come to haul all the Christians back in chains, preaching in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.

Some time after that he went off to Arabia for a while,<sup>2</sup> but soon he was back in Damascus. He spoke so boldly that he started getting death threats. Finally his life was in so much danger that he had to escape over the city wall in a basket.

Unwelcome in Damascus, Saul decided it was time to go back to Jerusalem and meet the Twelve for the first time.

Remember that Saul had been the leader of the first big persecution in Jerusalem. It was hard for the Christian community in Jerusalem to believe that Saul was on their side now. Most of the Christians had run away after Stephen was killed; the Apostles who remained remembered Stephen's death vividly. Now they were supposed to believe that Saul had changed his ways completely.

Of all the Christians in Jerusalem, only Barnabas was willing to take a chance on Saul at first. Satisfied that Saul was telling the truth, Barnabas brought him back to the Apostles and made them listen to Saul's story.

Once they were persuaded that Saul really was a Christian, the Apostles thanked God for sending them such a powerful ally and joyfully welcomed him into the Way, as they called the religion Christ had taught them.

## Are Christians Jews?

**W**ould the people of the whole world have to become Jews before they could become Christians? Would they have to be circumcised and follow the whole Law of Moses? Peter learned the answer just before he met Cornelius, a Roman commander who was one of the "Proselytes of the Gate"—a Gentile who worshiped the True God but had not been circumcised. Cornelius had been told in a vision from God to send for Peter. He immediately sent two servants to Joppa, where Peter was staying at the time.

*The next day, as they were on their journey and coming near the city, Peter went up on the housetop to pray, about the sixth hour. And he became hungry and desired something to eat; but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance and saw the heaven opened, and something descending like a great sheet, let down by four corners upon the earth. In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. And there came a voice to him, "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." But Peter said, "No, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean." And the voice came to him again a second time, "What God has cleansed, you must not call unclean." This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven. (Acts 10: 9-16)*

Shortly after that, at the home of Cornelius, the Holy Spirit came to a crowd listening to Peter's preaching—Jews and Gentiles alike. "Can anyone forbid these people to be baptized," Peter asked, "since they have received the Holy Spirit, too?"<sup>3</sup>

The answer was obvious. All the believers who had gathered at the house of Cornelius were baptized—Jews and Gentiles alike.

## The Council Of Jerusalem

**S**aul took on the job of preaching the Gospel to the Gentiles, and he made thousands of converts. But that old question came up again: Did Christians have to be Jews first?

Antioch, a city in Syria, was the first great center of the Church outside Jerusalem. Some of the followers of Jesus had fled there after the death of Stephen. It was the third-largest city in the Empire. Only Rome itself and Alexandria were larger.

Paul and Barnabas had great success in bringing the Good News to the Gentiles there. For a year they preached, and they gained such a reputation that, in about the year 41, the Greek-speaking inhabitants of the city came up with a new name for their followers. They called them Christians. Until then, the converts had simply said that they followed "the Way."

Everything was going well until some inspectors came from Jerusalem. Paul says they were sent by James (Gal 2:12), but we know that James had not given them authority for what they started to

teach (Acts 15: 24). They told the new Gentile converts that they could not be saved unless they were circumcised and followed the Law of Moses. They said it with such conviction and authority that even Peter was shaken.

“Before certain men came from James,” Paul remembered later, “he [Peter] ate with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party.” (See Gal 2:12.) It was the same old Peter we remember from the Gospels—the Peter who said he would never deny Christ and then denied Christ three times.

Paul confronted Peter directly. “I said to Cephas before them all, ‘If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?’”<sup>4</sup>

Finally, in the year 49 or 50, the Apostles decided to call a general convention in Jerusalem to decide the matter. Paul came to argue his side; numerous converts from among the Pharisees were there to argue for circumcision. At the head of the table sat James the Just, a close relative of Jesus and the head of the Church in Jerusalem. He was known to everyone as the most devoted follower of the Law in the city. He never cut his beard; he was a strict vegetarian, going far beyond the dietary requirements of the Law; he was also authorized to wear the linen robes of a Jewish priest. For a devout Jew, James represented the ideal. One reason so many of the Pharisees had converted was that they saw James the Just following the law so completely.

Now here was James the Just sitting at the meeting that would determine how the Gentiles would be treated. Things looked bad for Paul’s side.

The debate went on and on without a decision. Finally Peter stood up to speak. We can imagine how the room went suddenly quiet. What would Peter say? Possibly the Pharisees had heard how Paul had embarrassed him in front of half of Antioch; they might have expected Peter to take his revenge.

“My brothers,” Peter said,

**you remember how quite a while ago God chose me to bring the Good News to the Gentiles. And you remember how God, who knows our hearts, sent the Holy Spirit to them the same way he did to us, making no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. So why should we tempt God by putting a yoke on their necks that neither our ancestors nor we were able to bear? No, we believe that it is through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ that we shall be saved, as they will. (Acts 15: 7-11)**

The whole crowd was silent. Peter had come out decisively for Paul’s side. James himself directed that a letter should be sent to the Church in Antioch, informing them that his representatives had spoken without his authorization, and that Gentiles would not have to be circumcised. For the time being, he asked them to abstain from food offered to idols and to follow a few dietary restrictions, but otherwise they were free from the burden of the Law.

This famous meeting, described by Luke in Acts 15, was the first council of the whole Church. We know it today as the Council of Jerusalem.

**“At all times and in every race, anyone who fears God and does what is right has been acceptable to him. He has, however, willed to make men holy and save them, not as individuals without any bond or link between them, but rather to make them into a people who might acknowledge him and serve him in holiness. He therefore chose the Israelite race to be his own people and established a covenant with it. He gradually instructed this people.... All these things, however, happened as a preparation for and figure of that new and perfect covenant which was to be ratified in Christ...the New Covenant in his blood; he called together a race made up of Jews and Gentiles which would be one, not according to the flesh, but in the Spirit.”<sup>5</sup> (CCC 781)**



SUPPLEMENTARY READING

**John Chrysostom, *Homily on Acts no. 7***

Observe the wisdom of Philip: he did not accuse him, not say, “I know these things exactly,” did not pay court to him, and say, “Blessed art thou that readest.” But mark his speech, how far it is from harshness alike and from adulation; the speech rather of a kind and friendly man. “Understandest thou what thou readest?” (Acts 5:30.) For it was needful that he should himself ask, himself have a longing desire. He plainly intimates, that he knows that the other knew nothing: and says, “Understandest thou what thou readest?” at the same time he shows him that great was the treasure that lay therein.

It tells well also, that the eunuch looked not to the outward appearance (of the man), said not, “Who art thou?” did not chide, not give himself airs, not say that he did know.

On the contrary, he confesses his ignorance: wherefore also he learns. He shows his hurt to the physician: sees at a glance, that he both knows the matter, and is willing to teach. Look how free he is from haughtiness; the outward appearance announced nothing splendid. So desirous was he of learning, and gave heed to his words; and that saying, “He that seeketh, findeth,” (Mt 7:8) was fulfilled in him.

“And,” it says, “he besought Philip, that he would come up and sit with him.” (Acts 5:31.)

Do you mark the eagerness, the longing desire? But should any say he ought to have waited for Philip (to speak), (the answer is), he does not know what is the matter: he could not in the least tell what the other was going to say to him, but supposed merely that he was about to receive some (lesson of) prophecy. And moreover, this was more respectful, that he did not draw him into his chariot, but besought him. “And Philip,” we have read, “ran to him, and heard him reading;” even the fact of his running, showed that he wished to say (something).

“And the place,” it says, “of the Scripture which he read was this: As a sheep He was led to the slaughter.” (Acts 5:32) And this circumstance, also, is a token of his elevated mind, that he had in hand this prophet, who is more sublime than all others. Philip does not relate matters to him just as it might happen, but quietly: nay, does not say anything until he is questioned. Both in the former instance he prayed him, and so he does now, saying, “I pray thee of whom speaketh the prophet this?” That he should at all know either that the Prophets speak in different ways about different persons, or that they speak of themselves in another person—the question betokens a very thoughtful mind.



Herod's harbor in Caesarea was possibly the first port built in the open sea without the protection of bays and peninsulas. Two enormous, parallel breakwaters were built out from the coast into the sea.

VOCABULARY

**ANTIOCH**

A great metropolis in Syria. The second center of Christianity after Jerusalem. The name “Christian” was first used in Antioch.

**CANDACE**

The name of a line of queens who ruled Ethiopia.

**CEPHAS**

Aramaic for “Peter” or “rock.”

**COUNCIL OF JERUSALEM**

A meeting of Church leaders. There it was decided Gentile converts to Christianity did not have to keep the whole Law of Moses.

**DAMASCUS**

An ancient city in Syria. Paul was on his way to arrest Christians there when he encountered Christ.

**ETHIOPIA**

An ancient civilization in eastern Africa. The first Gentile baptized as a Christian was an Ethiopian.

**EUNUCH**

A man who has been castrated. In some ancient kingdoms, the highest positions in the government went to eunuchs.

**GAMALIEL**

A famous Pharisee who was Paul’s teacher. Gamaliel argued before the Sanhedrin that the Christians should be left alone.

**JAMES**

A brother (that is, close relative) of Jesus who became the leader of the Church in Jerusalem. James was famous for keeping the whole Law of Moses faithfully.

**PAUL**

The leader of persecutions against Christians. He was chosen by Christ to be an apostle.

**PHILIP**

The first Christian to baptize a Gentile. The Holy Spirit led him to an Ethiopian court official who had been reading the prophet Isaiah.

**PROSELYTES OF THE GATE**

Gentiles who worshiped the True God and knew the Jewish Scriptures, but who were not circumcised and did not keep the Law of Moses.

**SAUL OF TARSUS**

The Jewish name of St. Paul.



*The Altarpiece of St. Philip and St. James from the Cathedral of Huesca, Spain*

## STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Where did the eunuch baptized by St. Philip originate?
2. Why could that Gentile have never been accepted as a Jewish convert?
3. What Jewish prophet promised a place for eunuchs in the Kingdom?
4. Who is the first baptized gentile Christian reported in the Bible?
5. What was the significance of this Baptism?
6. Who was the fanatical Pharisee who wished to stamp out Christianity?
7. What did St. Luke mean when he said “but Saul laid waste the church”?
8. Where was Saul going when Jesus Christ appeared to him?
9. Who was Ananias?
10. Where did St. Paul go when he left Damascus?
11. How did St. Peter know that the crowd at Cornelius’ home should be baptized, Jews and Gentiles alike?
12. What was the first great center of Christianity outside Jerusalem?
13. Where were the followers of Jesus Christ first called Christians?
14. What important question did the Council of Jerusalem decide?
15. When was the Council called?
16. What was this Council called?
17. Who was James the Just?
18. What was the Council’s decision?

## PRACTICAL EXERCISES

1. The conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch and his baptism by St. Philip offer us an opportunity to reflect on how we live our faith. The Ethiopian had faith in God but could not become a Jew because he was a eunuch. He asked to be baptized without hesitating once he had learned about how God’s plan had been fulfilled through Jesus. In the same way, we should not hesitate to make changes in our lives so that we might be closer to God and his will. How can we constantly try to change our lives with regard to prayer, to the sacraments, or to learning more about our faith?
2. Saul, a devout Pharisee, led many persecutions against the earliest Christians. Though he was persecuting the Church, he believed that he was doing what God wanted

him to and protecting the Jewish faith. Like any good person, Saul had an open mind to God’s will and was trying to learn what God wanted of him. For these reasons, Saul was prepared for God to convert him to the Christian faith. Why is it so important to live your faith and keep your mind open to God’s will? How might this come into play in deciding your vocation?

3. Why was the question of circumcision so important? What do you think would have been the result if the Church had decided to require circumcision? Explain why the decision to require circumcision would not have been made under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

FROM THE CATECHISM

**3** Those who with God's help have welcomed Christ's call and freely responded to it are urged on by love of Christ to proclaim the Good News everywhere in the world. This treasure, received from the apostles, has been faithfully guarded by their successors. All Christ's faithful are called to hand it on from generation to generation, by professing the faith, by living it in fraternal sharing, and by celebrating it in liturgy and prayer (cf. Acts 2: 42).

**856** The missionary task implies a *respectful dialogue* with those who do not yet accept the Gospel (cf. *RMiss* 55). Believers can profit from this dialogue by learning to appreciate better "those elements of truth and grace which are found among peoples, and which are, as it were, a secret presence of God" (*Ad gentes* 9). They proclaim the Good News to those who do not know it, in order to consolidate, complete, and raise up the truth and the goodness that God has distributed among men and nations, and to purify them from error and evil "for the glory of God, the confusion of the demon, and the happiness of man" (*Ad gentes* 9).

**1086** "Accordingly, just as Christ was sent by the Father so also he sent the apostles, filled with the Holy Spirit. This he did so that they might preach the Gospel to every creature and proclaim that the Son of God by his death and resurrection had freed us from the power of Satan and from death and brought us into the Kingdom of his Father. But he also willed that

the work of salvation which they preached should be set in train through the sacrifice and sacraments, around which the entire liturgical life revolves" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 6).

**1122** Christ sent his apostles so that "repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations" (Lk 24: 47). "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Mt 28: 19). The mission to baptize, and so the sacramental mission, is implied in the mission to evangelize, because the sacrament is prepared for by *the word of God and by the faith* which is assent to this word:

The People of God is formed into one in the first place by the Word of the living God.... The preaching of the Word is required for the sacramental ministry itself, since the sacraments are sacraments of faith, drawing their origin and nourishment from the Word (*Presbyterorum ordinis* 4 § 1, 2).

**2527** "The Good News of Christ continually renews the life and culture of fallen man; it combats and removes the error and evil which flow from the ever-present attraction of sin. It never ceases to purify and elevate the morality of peoples. It takes the spiritual qualities and endowments of every age and nation, and with supernatural riches it causes them to blossom, as it were, from within; it fortifies, completes, and restores them in Christ" (GS 58 § 4).

Endnotes

1. Acts 8: 3.
2. Gal 1: 17-18.
3. Acts 10: 47.
4. Gal 2: 14.
5. LG 9; cf. Acts 10: 35; 1 Cor 11: 25.