

*God at Work  
Through History*

**Lars Dunberg**

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Published by  
*Global Action*  
7660 Goddard Street, Suite 200  
Colorado Springs, Colorado 80920, U.S.A.  
[www.globalaction.nu](http://www.globalaction.nu)  
Tel: 719-528-8728 Fax: 719-528-8718  
E-Mail: [GLOMOS@global-act.org](mailto:GLOMOS@global-act.org)

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## *INTRODUCTION*

About a year after my conversion, the church that my parents belonged to decided that it was time to renovate some of their facilities. One of the church's decisions was to close a little library that they had maintained for many years. Seeing a pile of hundreds of books lying outside of what had been the library, I went to the pastor and asked if I could buy these books. We set a price and for \$15 the 300 titles changed hands. Many of the books were very old, but among them were several that, in time, would shape my entire life.

As I carried the books home over a couple of days, I began to realize what I had purchased. There were biographies of evangelists Dwight L. Moody, Ira Sankey and Billy Sunday and missionary giants William Carey, Charles Spurgeon, and Hudson Taylor. There were books describing revivals that swept across Europe in the 19th century, Swedish revival history and stories of people like Charles Finney and Jonathan Edwards.

I was especially fascinated by Dwight L. Moody, Charles Spurgeon and Billy Sunday. Moody had filled the largest auditoriums across the U.S. and Britain, yet he was an unlearned man. I could identify with him. Among the collection was a book of Sankey's hymns and I sang them to myself in my room. I also studied the pictures in the books and now and then practiced "the preacher gestures" in front of the mirror. Who would become a Dwight Moody or a Billy Sunday in my generation?

Charles Spurgeon was special too, because he never went to seminary but he loved to read, just like me. His loud voice could carry right across the entire Crystal Palace, the massive glass structure in London, which, in his days, seated over 30,000 people. He had a sermon for every situation.

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And then there was Billy Sunday! I carefully copied many of his sayings into a book and memorized them. Here was a man that called sin “sin”, who could communicate with his whole body, catch the crowds and hold them. I read, prayed and cried, “Lord, raise up new people like Moody, Spurgeon and Sunday!”

While I loved reading about the church fathers and the early church, it was the stories from the missionary movements, impacting people in far away, exotic lands, and the spiritual awakenings across Europe and the U.S., that touched my heart.

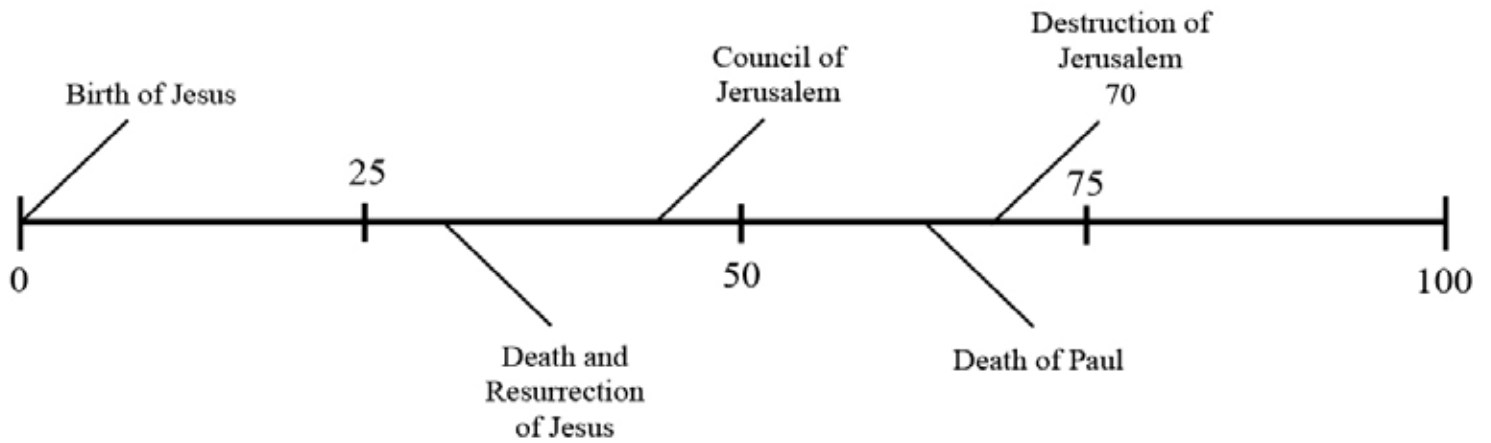
Who could not be affected by the story of the founder of Herrnhut and the Moravian Brethren movement, Count Nicolaus Ludvig von Zinzendorf, who one day as a young man stood in front of a painting of the suffering Christ and heard a voice saying, “This I have done for you. What have you done for me?” No wonder Count Zinzendorf used to exclaim, “I have only one passion! It’s Him, only Him!”

The library also contained some books of more recent Church movements across the world, such as the explosion of denominations like Baptist, Methodist and Pentecostal.

As I read through the old, dusty books with these stories of conversions, church growth and setbacks, led by somewhat peculiar personalities who dared to stand up, take risks and be counted for God whatever the cost, it was like the Lord was speaking to me through the pages and the characters. “Lars, I will do it again, I will do it again.”

I can clearly say that, apart from the Word of God, nothing impacted me more in my youth and early ministry than God’s work through people’s lives in the rich history of the Church. As you read and study this new book on church history, I pray that you will be touched in your innermost being and begin to voice this prayer in your own life, “God, do it again! Do it again!”

## Notes



## CHAPTER 1

### *The Embryo Church: Jesus and The Disciples, 6 B.C. - 60 A.D.*

#### **The world of Christ**

The history of the church begins with an understanding of the fact that "...when the time had fully come, God sent His Son." (Gal 4:4) There could not have been a more critical time for the Lord to come to earth, establish faith in Him, die for humankind and rise, and then, with power from on high, equip His church to take the message of redemption to the world.

The then-known world was oppressed by conquering armies. The society was amoral. To understand the beginning of church history, we must first understand the culture and world into which the early church entered. Politically, there was a world empire stretching from Persia (present Iran) in the East to the Atlantic in

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the West, from Britain and Germany in the north to North Africa and Sudan in the south. It encompassed many languages, many people groups and many religions and cultures.

The military powers controlled the area and provided easy travel through well-built roads, sea routes and open trade. Pax Romana, the Roman Peace that lasted for several hundred years, made it possible for the Gospel to spread across the entire empire without much political problem.

While the Roman law kept the empire together, the real glue was the Hellenistic culture and the Greek language. The Koine Greek (Koine means common) of the marketplace was an excellent tool for the message of the church and it became the language of the very first New Testament. In the Hellenistic culture, people tended to wander from monotheistic worship to syncretistic worship of whatever god fit their own personal needs. Gnosticism was spreading rapidly, separating the functions of the flesh (body) from the spirit, and giving people the freedom to any sexual perversions while their mind could continue to be spiritual and separated from the rest of the world around them.

However, the most important platform for the early church was the Jewish Diaspora comprised of Jewish settlers who were worshipping in synagogues all over the then-known world. When Paul or any of the other apostolic evangelists traveled to a new location, they always visited the synagogue first. Jews in the Diaspora had more contact with non-Jews outside their own circles than Jews in Jerusalem, and, to some degree, they practiced missions among the non-Jews. The Diaspora Jews helped the early church find a larger group of people interested in the Gospel through local pagans who feared God. These people knew the Old Testament well and accepted its moral values. The Diaspora also provided the beginning for the church using the Bible, as the Jewish synagogue used only the Old Testament as its own holy scriptures when it met for worship.

### **Bible History**

*The first New Testament was written in Koine Greek. It was not the Greek used by scholars, but the Greek of the marketplace. Koine was the Greek that women spoke at the market, men used when talking in the streets, and it was understood by everyone. This language level was often looked down upon by scholars, but it was this language that first communicated the New Testament.*

### **Notes**

## The Old Testament Canon

*No one has a full background on the history of the biblical Old Testament texts or exactly how old they are. There are not many Old Testament manuscripts available. Until 1947, when the Dead Sea scrolls were found, the oldest copies of the Old Testament manuscripts were from the 9th century. The Dead Sea scrolls date part of the manuscripts back a further 1,000 years in history and confirm the careful way the texts were transmitted through the centuries.*

*There is a Jewish tradition which says that Ezra, the scribe, helped form the Canon. It is interesting to note that the Dead Sea scrolls contain fragments of all Old Testament books except Esther.*

*Most of the books of the Old Testament are quoted in the New Testament, which tells us that the Old Testament, as we know it, was basically "Scripture" to Jesus and His disciples.*

The synagogue also created a platform for a Scriptural Old Testament canon for the church. The Greek Old Testament, called the Septuagint, was already formed before the days of Jesus and the 39 books of the Old Testament were already established. The Old Testament canon became a great foundation for establishing the New Testament canon hundreds of years later.

The synagogue functioned under an administrative system, with a council of elders and a synagogue superintendent. This was a system the early church accepted and further developed, as described in Paul's letters, especially to Timothy.

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At the start of Christianity, there was little tension between Jews and Christians. Around the world, Christians were viewed as a Jewish sect and because of their closeness to the Diaspora synagogues, they were not viewed as a threat by the Romans.

### **The church of Jesus**

The early church grew directly out of the ministry of Jesus. For three years, He gathered the multitudes, healed the sick, fed the hungry, was a close friend to the friendless and put forth a philosophy that enhanced thousands of years of Jewish worship of the Almighty. As God personified, Jesus taught people about a relationship with the Father that went far beyond anything that the tabernacle, temple or sacrifices ever could offer. Through His ultimate sacrifice on the cross and triumphal conquest over death, Jesus set the stage for the foundation of the church.

The Day of Pentecost was the major breakthrough for the church. Building on the cornerstone laid by the death and the resurrection of Jesus, the Holy Spirit equipped the disciples beyond imagination. From having been in hiding, fearing the Jewish leaders and the Roman soldiers, the disciples now stood up with great boldness, verbally challenging the Jewish leaders as the people who killed Jesus!

Beyond any doubt, they convinced the people gathered at Pentecost that Christ was indeed the expected Messiah. Right now was the best time to confess sins, repent and accept Christ's work on the cross as the biggest gift ever handed to someone.

The church was established by those who accepted their message and were baptized. There were no buildings, no orators nor choirs. Quickly, they met in homes where,

### **The Septuagint**

*By 250 B.C., the Old Testament was translated from Hebrew to Greek. The version was called the Septuagint (meaning Seventy), after the 70 scholars who worked on the manuscript. The translation was widely used before the days of Jesus and is frequently quoted in the New Testament.*

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*“They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people.”*  
(Acts 2:46-47)

*Ekklesia: A gathering of people, the Greek term we use for church.*

“they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:42-47).

They called their new fellowship *ekklesia* (meaning church in English) which simply meant a gathering of people – in this case, God’s people.

It did not take long for the Jewish leaders to oppose the new “religion”. Many of the apostles were arrested, multiple times. Through persecution, many of the believers fled Jerusalem, fulfilling the words of Jesus in Acts 1:8, “*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*”

These believers viewed the death, burial, resurrection and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost as God-given events. The old was gone; a new era had begun. They proclaimed the new life through baptism, not like the baptism of John the Baptist, which had been a “professing of faith baptism” in a kingdom yet to come. Instead, this was a baptism into a new spiritual kingdom already proclaimed, though not completely revealed in its fullness.

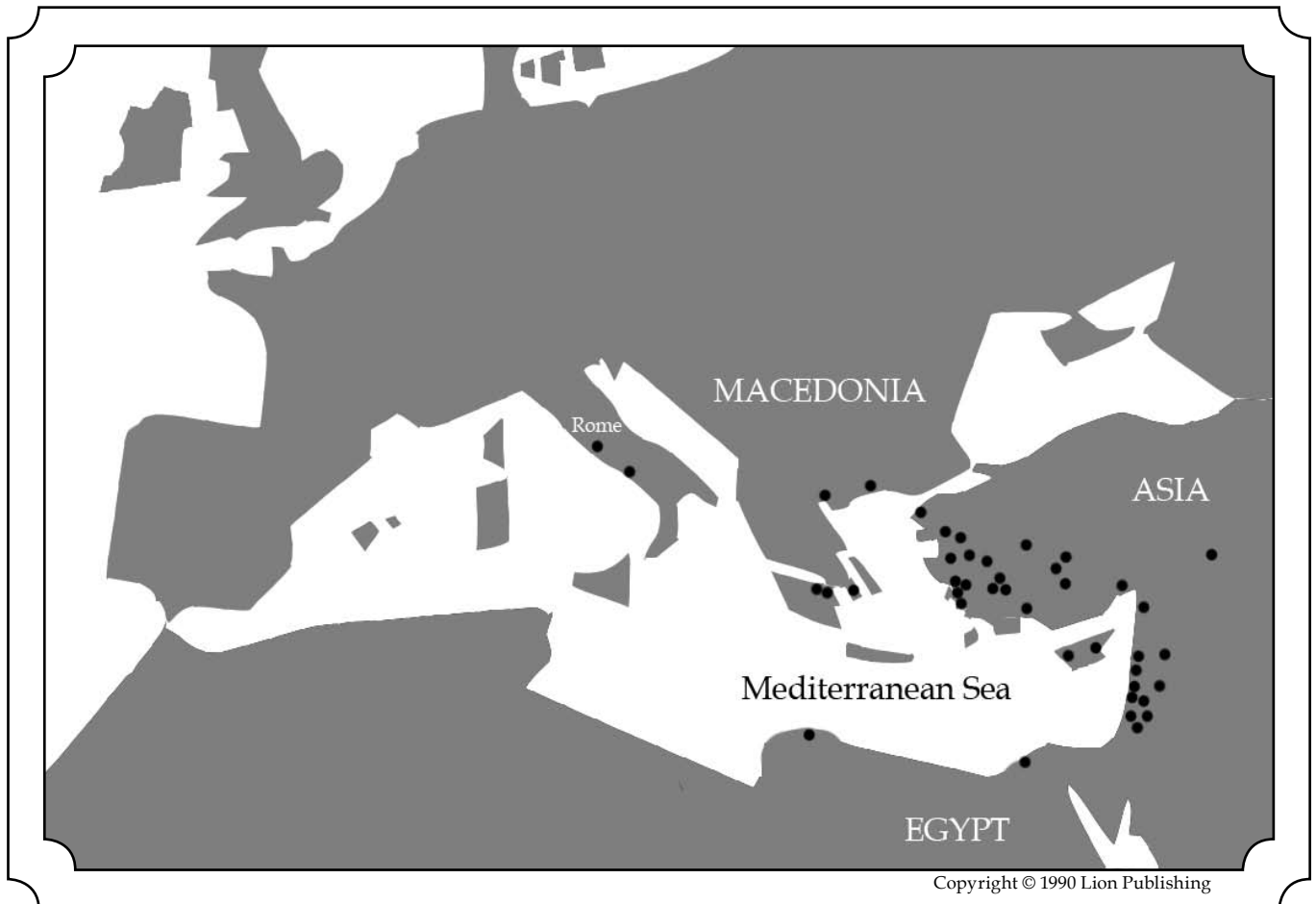
The believers met together for the Lord’s Supper, to remind themselves afresh of what happened at the cross and celebrate the

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fact that the tomb was empty. These followers believed this was the fulfillment of the new covenant, as outlined by the prophet Jeremiah,

*“The time is coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,’ declares the LORD. ‘This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,’ declares the LORD. ‘I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people’” (Jer 31:31-33).*

One of the disciples, Stephen, was martyred early in the life of the church. However, this did not hinder the missionary fervor of the church. Some evangelists went to Samaria, others to Antioch and Damascus. After Paul’s conversion, Paul, Silas, Peter, Mark, Luke, Barnabas and many others began their international travels to plant churches in every possible city. The church was moving forward and as it grew, its center shifted rapidly from Jerusalem to Rome.



The spread of the church, c.a. 300