



After Pentecost anti-Christ's efforts would become focused on the apostles as they ministered the Gospel to the Gentiles. Paul, especially, would be the major target. As he and his companions began to take the Gospel to the Gentiles they were strongly opposed by the Jews who were zealous of the Law of Moses and their man-made traditions. Although many Jews also believed the Gospel, most did not. Those who resisted the truth also sought to prevent the apostles from converting Gentiles to the Gospel.

Upon proclaiming that they would henceforth be taking the Gospel to the Gentiles, Paul and Barnabas were expelled from Antioch. Anti-Christ used the Jews to stir up the devout women and chief men of the city to persecute them. Leaving Antioch, Paul and Barnabas went to the synagogue at Iconium and gained a large crowd of Jews and Greeks who believed. But again, anti-Christ in the persons of unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and turned them against the believers. So Paul and Barnabas stayed there for a long time, speaking boldly and demonstrating God's power through signs and wonders.

Just as it happened at Antioch, so at Iconium the city was divided, some holding with the unbelieving Jews, and some with the apostles. The anti-Christ elements among the Jews and Gentiles sought to stone Paul and Barnabas, but they became aware of the plot and escaped to Lystra and Derbe in Lycaonia. There, and in the regions around, they proclaimed the Gospel.

At Lystra Paul and Barnabas met a different kind of attack by anti-Christ. When Paul spoke healing to a life-long cripple, there was no opposition as before. This time the Gentiles assumed that the gods of Rome had come down to them. They called Barnabas "Jupiter," and Paul they called "Mercury" because he was the chief speaker. Rather than give the God of Heaven the glory they were persuaded to give the gods of Rome the glory, and were ready to make sacrifices to them.

Alarmed, Paul and Barnabas tore their clothes and ran in among the people, explaining that they were mere men, and that

the people should give the glory to the living God who made the heavens and the earth. Even so, they barely restrained the people from offering sacrifices to them.

Anti-Christ blinded the Gentiles, causing them to lean toward their own gods rather than the God of Heaven. He also brought Jews from Antioch and Iconium who convinced the people to turn against the apostles. Whereas they were ready to offer sacrifices to Paul and Barnabas, they were convinced to stone Paul instead:

And there came there certain Jews from Antioch and Iconium, who persuaded the people, and having stoned Paul, carried him out of the city, supposing he had been dead. However, as the disciples stood around him he rose up and came into the city. And the next day he left for Derbe with Barnabas. (Acts 14:19-20)

Anti-Christ knows how to turn the fickle nature of men to his purposes.

It appears as if Paul and Barnabas were able to continue on their journey without opposition for a time. We're told only that they left Lystra for Derbe, then returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, confirming the faith of the believers there, and exhorting them to continue in the faith. They also appointed elders in each assembly.

They then went throughout Pisidia, Pamphylia, Perga, and Attalia before returning again to Antioch.

At Antioch certain believers in Jesus came down from Judea and taught the brethren that they must be circumcised or they could not be saved. This was the first attempt by anti-Christ to employ the technique of Judaizing to compromise the purity of the faith. But Paul and Barnabas disputed strongly with them, so that it was determined that the question should be taken to the apostles and elders at Jerusalem. There it was determined that the Gentile believers should not be pressed into keeping the Law:

Then it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole assembly, to send chosen men from their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas—namely, Judas surnamed Barsabas, and Silas, chief men among the brethren:

And they wrote letters by them after this manner: “The apostles and elders and brethren send greetings to the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia. Forasmuch as we have heard that certain who went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls by saying you must be circumcised and keep the Law, to whom we gave no such commandment, it seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul—men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, we have sent Judas and Silas, who shall also tell you the same things by mouth. For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: that you abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication, from which, if you keep yourselves, you shall do well. Fare you well.”

So when they were dismissed, they came to Antioch. And when they had gathered the multitude together they delivered the letter which, when they had read, they rejoiced for the consolation.

And Judas and Silas, being prophets also themselves, exhorted the brethren with many words, and confirmed them. And after they had stayed there awhile, they were let go in peace from the brethren to the apostles. Notwithstanding, it still pleased Silas to stay there.

Paul and Barnabas also continued in Antioch, teaching and preaching the Word of the Lord, with many others also. (Acts 15:22-35)

Paul and Barnabas determined to return to the cities where they had established the Body of Christ to see how they were doing. Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus, while Paul took Silas through Syria and Cilicia. When Paul and Silas came to Derbe and Lystra they met Timothy, whose mother was a Jewess and whose father was a Greek.

There are no recordings of opposition as they continued on their journey until, on their way to Macedonia because of a vision given to Paul of a man beckoning him to come to Macedonia to help them, they came to Philippi. There they met a different kind of opposition from anti-Christ.

At a certain time, as they went to prayer, a girl possessed with a spirit of divination followed them, crying out, “These men are the servants of the most high God, who show the way of salvation to us.”

After several days of this, Paul was grieved and commanded the spirit to come out of her.

Here is an example of how anti-Christ may speak truth, but with an ulterior motive. The people knew this girl had a spirit of divination; her testimony was tainted. People would associate the truth with devils, thus hindering the apostles’ testimony.

After the devil was cast out of the girl her masters who used her for monetary gain turned the city against the apostles, beating them and throwing them into prison. Thus anti-Christ again sought to silence the truth through persecution.

The Book of Acts chronicles the work of Paul and his companions in taking the Gospel to the known world. There we find many different attempts by anti-Christ to thwart the fledgling Gospel through persecution and death of the faithful disciples. History (and tradition) also records how all the apostles with the exception of John were most likely put to death for their testimonies.

James, son of Zebedee: Beheaded in A.D. 44, James was the first of the twelve to be martyred. Acts 12:1-2 records that Herod Agrippa had James executed by the sword. There are no details beyond this, although some traditions state that his remains are in Santiago de Compostela in Spain, considered the third most holy town within Roman Catholicism.

We will see, as we progress through the fates of the apostles, how Roman Catholicism largely usurped claims to the apostles through its fabricated traditions—a ploy by anti-Christ to corrupt the purity of the faith and lay the groundwork for an apostate Christianity.

John, son of Zebedee: This is the John who was exiled to the island of Patmos where he wrote the Book of Revelation. There are no traditions or history about this John being martyred. It is believed that he died of old age in Ephesus around A.D. 100.

Peter: Roman Catholic tradition stemming from the teachings of Origen of Alexandria states that Peter was crucified in Rome in A.D. 64 during the *dies imperii* (anniversary of ascension to the throne) of Emperor Nero. This was some three months after the fire that destroyed Rome, and which Nero blamed on the Christians. It is believed that Peter requested he be crucified upside down because he felt he wasn’t worthy to die in exactly the same manner as the Lord.

There is no empirical historical evidence that Peter was ever in Rome. Scripture’s last references to Peter have him in Jerusalem. So while this is a dramatic story, it rests entirely on Roman Catholic tradition, tied to the belief that Peter was the first pope, and thus, had to have been in Rome.

In either case, we see how anti-Christ may have had Peter martyred, or, lacking that, used Peter as a foil to establish the tradition of the papacy. Certainly the latter is true, whether or not Peter was ever actually martyred.

Andrew: Another apostle whose history is largely shaped by tradition, Andrew’s death has two versions. One of the so-called “New Testament Apocrypha,” *The Acts of Andrew*, (ca. third century A.D.) forms the basis for much of the tradition surrounding Andrew’s ministry and death. It has Andrew dying bound, not nailed, to a Latin cross of the type Jesus is said to have died on. But a tradition developed that Andrew was martyred by crucifixion on an X-shaped cross because, like Peter, he did not consider himself worthy to die in exactly the same manner as the Lord. This is believed to have taken place in the city of Patras in Ahaea, on the northern coast of the Peloponnese.

Philip: There are conflicting traditions concerning Philip's death. One has him being crucified upside down in the city of Hierapolis in southern Turkey. It is said that his preaching brought about the conversion of the proconsul's wife which, in turn, brought the wrath of the proconsul upon Philip and Bartholomew, as well as Philip's sister Mariamne. All three were tortured, but Philip and Bartholomew were crucified. It is said that, while crucified, Philip continued to preach, affecting the crowd so much that the people wanted to release both men. Bartholomew was released, but Philip refused to be released, thus consenting to his own martyrdom. Another legend has Philip being martyred by beheading in Hierapolis.

Again, there is no definitive historical evidence for Philip's martyrdom, but there is no reason to doubt that the early Apocryphal writings wouldn't have some basis in truth. Both traditions put his death in Hierapolis; both have him being martyred. **Bartholomew (Nathanael):** As with other apostles, the account of Bartholomew's death is largely based on tradition, some conflicting. He is said to have been beheaded in Albanopolis in Armenia. But a more popular tradition has him being flayed alive and crucified upside down. His death is said to be the result of having converted Polymius, the king of Armenia, to Christianity, prompting Polymius' brother, Astyages, to order Bartholomew's death.

Jude: Armenian tradition places Jude's death by martyrdom about A.D. 65 in Beirut, in the Roman province of Syria. He is said to have been martyred along with Simon Zelotes (the Zealot). But, again, there is no empirical historical evidence for Jude's martyrdom.

Simon Zelotes: One tradition associates Simon Zelotes with Jude who together evangelized Persia, and Armenia after Simon had evangelized Egypt. In Simon's tradition they were martyred in Armenia. Another tradition in Ethiopia is that he was crucified in Samaria. Still another is that he was sawn in half at Suanir, Persia. Other traditions have him being martyred in Iberia or Britain, while yet another has him dying peacefully at Edessa.

Matthew: There is no empirical historical evidence concerning Matthew's death. Some hold to the belief that he died a natural death; others say that he was martyred by being stabbed to death. But neither can be conclusively established.

Thomas: The New Testament apocryphal book, Acts of Thomas (ca. third-century), is the source generally accepted regarding Thomas' ministry and the circumstances of his death. The apocryphal books are regarded as historical, but they have never been accepted as canonical by any mainstream Christian religion. Apart from this source there is no historical account of Matthew's life after the writing of the New Testament books.

It is said that Thomas' ministry was to India. According to the Syriac version of the Acts of Thomas, Masdai, the king at Mylapore, condemned Thomas to death around the year A.D. 72 to appease the Brahmins who opposed the introduction of Christianity into India. His death was by stoning and stabbing with a lance by an angry Brahmin.

James, son of Alphaeus: Often referred to as James the Less, this James was less prominent than James the son of Zebedee. There are many uncertainties surrounding this James' ministry and history, but tradition holds that he was executed by the Jews for violating the Law of Moses. Some historians consider this unlikely since the Jews did not practice execution, and the Roman authorities would not have acquiesced to it. However, contrary to this argument, the Lord Himself was executed by the Romans to appease the Jews.

Matthias: The apostle chosen to replace Judas (Acts 1:26) is also the victim of diverse traditions surrounding his death. Some accounts say that he died peacefully of old age in Jerusalem. One tradition has him being stoned by the Jews at Jerusalem, and then beheaded.

Skeptics dismiss these traditions of martyrdom because there are no secular historical accounts of them. Nor are there any biblical accounts for any other than for James the son of Zebedee. The confusion that surrounds early history can be attributed to faulty intentions on the part of religious traditionalists who fabricate traditions. Unfortunately, even with their supposed good intentions, such fabrications play into the hands of the anti-Christ simply because they call into question the truth of history as it relates to true biblical faith.

Yet there is no reason to doubt that some of the traditions surrounding their deaths are true. Certainly they were met with much opposition by anti-Christ in every land where they took the Gospel. Scripture relates how often the anti-Christ attempted to kill Jesus (eventually succeeding according to the Father's plan), Paul, and others, and how they did manage to kill Stephen and John the Baptist. Those who wrote of the martyrdoms of the other apostles were privy to oral traditions that dated back a couple of generations, and there is no reason to suspect those writers of deliberately falsifying the accounts they received.

Thus ends the account of the apostles and how anti-Christ sought to destroy the faith at its outset. Having failed, anti-Christ was faced with the daunting task of combating the faith for the next 2,000 years in every arena into which the Body of Christ shed the light of the Gospel. That conflict is evidenced in the letters to the assemblies written by Paul, as well as those written by others who exhorted the brethren during the first-century buildup of the Body of Christ.

Although indwelt by the Holy Spirit, many believers in those first-century assemblies had to be taught why and how to submit their wills to the will of God. The flesh is strong and unwilling to die so easily, and the spirit of anti-Christ is always lurking within the flesh of believers to act contrary to righteousness.

This is why Paul had to consistently exhort the brethren to live by the law of love and to submit themselves to godliness at the expense of their own pleasure.

A most notable example is that of the brother in the Corinthian assembly who had taken his father's wife for his own spouse or mistress. The details aren't provided, nor are they

necessarily important. What is important is that Paul had to chastise the Corinthian believers for tolerating that sin. To their credit they dealt with the brother in a way that brought him to repentance.

Another problem that reared its head was the attempt to Judaize the assemblies by some insisting that the Law of Moses must be kept, and that circumcision was required. Still other ways anti-Christ sought to destroy the assemblies was by false brethren bringing in what Peter called damnable heresies (2 Peter 2:1).

Paul had to deal with those who opposed his authority, and others who sought to rule over the assemblies in ungodly ways. The assemblies were often on the verge of schisms that threatened scandal and the unity of the Body. In the world, anti-Christ was devising other ways to keep the heathen in their unsaved condition and to thwart the spreading of the Gospel. His ultimate goal, however, has remained constant—to gather all humanity into a globalist Babel through which he hopes to lift himself above the heights of the clouds. All the major world events that have seen one kingdom after another rise and fall has been to that end. Now, after the Lord had effected the means by which the world would be redeemed—the perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world—anti-Christ’s efforts toward globalization would increase exponentially.

Rome, the last of the great kingdoms prophesied through Daniel’s interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, would have to be subordinated for a season in order for those efforts to come to final fruition. But Rome would not go quietly; anti-Christ would continue to use it in his attempts to stamp out the new faith in Jesus Christ. Yet at the same time, the Roman Empire provided the means by which the Gospel could be taken throughout the world. Historian J.M. Roberts attests how Rome was perceived by the early Christians as God’s creation for the benefit of the faith:

...It can be argued that Paul was the real maker of Christianity. Certainly most of the theology of the Christian Church has its roots in his interpretation of Jesus’ teaching. Here there is room only to note that he seized the opportunity presented by a world at peace, protected by a framework of government and law in which men could travel easily and securely, a world in which the widespread Greek language made communication of ideas easy, to launch Christianity on its huge career of expansion. It is not surprising that Christians soon began to think that the Roman empire itself was somehow created by God to make the spreading of the Truth possible. It was divinely intended, some of them thought, to further Christianity. A more sinister reflexion also occurred to some of them as time passed: it was not the Romans, after all, but the Jews who had actually killed Jesus.¹

It wasn’t long before Christian assemblies sprang up in all Roman provinces. And it was tasked to Paul, Peter, Jude, John,

¹ J.M. Roberts, *A Concise History of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 147-148.

Luke, and the writers of the Gospels to bring testimony of Jesus’ finished work on the cross and clarification of the faith, as well as exhortation to live godly and defend the purity of the faith. But two things happened that threatened that purity: 1) as the Gentiles began to outnumber the Jews within the assemblies, the approach to Scripture took a turn away from Hebraic understanding toward Hellenization; 2) a strong desire for organization led to a hierarchical and eventually centralized authority over the originally autonomous assemblies. Both of these developments, we will see, were attempts by anti-Christ to turn faith in Jesus Christ into a religious system largely controlled by men of ambition who would use it for personal gain and/or propagation of their peculiar philosophies. There was also a desire to have preeminence over the people (3 John 9).

Because Christianity was perceived as a sect of Judaism rather than the continuation of the faith once delivered to the saints of old, men following their fleshly instincts soon began to follow the pattern of the synagogue. Thus, assemblies became less and less autonomous communities of believers guided lovingly by a plurality of elders meeting in homes and other non-descript environs, instead evolving into hierarchical institutional gatherings in buildings designed for the institution’s benefit.

As well, heretical sects began to break off from the mainstream of biblical faith, establishing beliefs that challenged the nature of Jesus as the Word of God incarnate. Soon false gospels were being written and attributed to the apostles. These purported to offer insights into the mysteries of God while redefining Jesus as a mystic—a mere man who had attained higher consciousness through adherence to tenets and practices within eastern mysticism.

Gnosticism, which predates Christianity, found among some of its sects an affinity to Jesus, as well as some of His apostles, whom they considered Gnostics. In some Gnostic texts Mary Magdalene was seen as a Gnostic leader superior even to the twelve apostles. Simon Magus (Simon the Sorcerer in Acts 8:9-24) is said to have been a Samaritan proto-Gnostic. This Simon is mentioned in several Gnostic texts as one of the leaders of early Gnosticism.

Gnosticism is a form of mysticism that purports to impart esoteric knowledge leading to realization of one’s alleged divine origins. Gnosis is knowledge—spiritual knowledge attained by mystically enlightened human beings. The influence of Gnosticism came into Christianity early on, and has remained in various forms over the centuries. It is the basis for belief in divine principles which, if learned and applied, will elevate the believer to a state of spiritual maturity that will give him power over the physical and spiritual worlds.

It would be some 100 years before the Gnostic “gospels” would be written, but we will see as we progress how Gnosticism is at the heart of many of today’s false teachings.

At the same time anti-Christ was employing Gnosticism, Hellenization, and Judaizing to wreak havoc upon the assemblies internally, externally the assemblies were suffering persecution from the world.

Although the Roman world afforded the Gospel easy inroads into the nations, the empire began to perceive Christianity as a threat to its stability which rested largely on the belief in the divinity of the emperor. The pantheon of Roman gods was under attack by the proclaiming of the Gospel which insisted that there is only one God, and that the way to Him is only through His Son, Jesus Christ.

It wasn't long before persecution of the most horrific kind was instituted by the Romans against Christians. The first imperially supervised persecution of Christians within the Roman Empire began with Nero (37-68). When in A.D. 64 a great fire broke out in Rome, destroying much of the city, Nero came under suspicion by Roman historian Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus. Suetonius accused Nero of playing the lyre and singing the "Sack of Illium" during the fires. Tacitus stated that "to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace."

Nero's persecution of Christians was merely one of anti-Christ's attempts to stamp out the faith. Nor was it the worst under the Roman Empire. As time passed succeeding emperors would devise ever more cruel ways to dispose of the hated Christians.

As Christianity is spreading throughout the Roman Empire, Buddhism also expands, reaching China from central Asia and India around A.D. 60. The spiritual darkness that enveloped the world was just beginning to be pushed aside by the light of God's Word. Anti-Christ still held sway over the minds of the vast majority of men and women.