

**Church History 101**  
**Lesson 4**  
**The Church Expands**

**Key Concepts:** One of the most interesting aspects of the early Jesus community was that it was dynamic, quickly expanding beyond its initial base of Jewish followers in Jerusalem.

**The Story:** According to the Book of Acts, following Jesus' resurrection and prior to his ascension he gave the following command to his followers. *"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth,"* Acts 1:8. This statement became the marching orders if you will for the life and work of the early church. Unlike Judaism which did not usually seek out converts (though there were instances where they did so), the Jesus community understood that its role was to tell people about Jesus; who he was, what he had done and what he could do for them. And it was to do so on an ever widening geographic and cultural scale.

Initially this telling of the Jesus' story was limited to the Jewish community. This made sense, since Jesus was the Jewish messiah who had come to save the remnant of God's people and usher them into the coming Kingdom of God. However these geographical and religious boundaries of witnessing (meaning telling people about Jesus) soon began to break down. The Book of Acts offers us two examples of the expansion of this proclamation.

The first story is about the Jesus' story moving outside of the Jewish faith. It concerns the Apostle Peter and a Roman Centurion named Cornelius which is told in Acts Chapter 10. Cornelius was part of the occupying force in Judea. He was a Roman Centurion (meaning he was a leader of a group of about 80 men). Centurions won their ranks through bravery in battle. . Cornelius was also a God-fearer, meaning he was a Gentile who believed in the God of Israel. An angel appears to Cornelius in a dream and tells him to send for a man named Simon (the Apostle Peter). At the same time Peter has a vision that leads him to believe that the kosher rules that had once set the boundaries of Judaism were no longer necessary. As Peter is trying to comprehend his vision, he is told to go down stairs because there are some people waiting for him. He goes down and accompanies them to meet Cornelius. Once he arrives, Peter tells Cornelius about Jesus, the Holy Spirit descends on the Gentiles and Peter Baptizes them. With this event, the Jesus community expands beyond the bounds of Judaism.

The second story is about the Jesus' story moving outside of both the geographic and cultic bounds of Judea and Judaism. This story concerns the Apostle Philip who is led by God to speak with an Ethiopian eunuch. This Ethiopian was again a God-believing foreigner. What sets him apart though is that by being a eunuch he is considered to be unclean within the Jewish culture. He would not have been allowed to enter the Temple in Jerusalem. Yet Phillip is sent by God to tell the eunuch about Jesus. Upon hearing the Good News of who Jesus was and what Jesus had done, the Ethiopian was baptized. Tradition in Ethiopia is that this man then came back to his home nation and founded the first Jesus' community in his home nation, thus making the Ethiopian church one of the oldest in the world.

These two stories remind us that the earliest growth of the church was driven not by human planning but by the Spirit of God. People were led to tell others about Jesus who then tell others about Jesus...and thus the church expanded.

**Questions**

1. When did you first hear the Jesus' story? Church? Sunday school? A friend?
2. What is the most important part of the Jesus story for you?
3. Have you ever shared the Jesus story with anyone else? Why or why not?