

Is there Evidence of Bible Colleges in the New Testament?

Over the past 25 years many people have asked if there is a New Testament justification for conducting the kind of instruction found in a typical Bible College setting. Of course there are many concerns in our modern world which not fully addressed in the New Testament testimony of the Genesis Church, but the idea of systematic, organized study of the Scriptures and the doctrines and practices of the New Covenant in Christ Jesus seem to be readily available.

The descriptions may not be the same as we might use today in various cultures, but the principles are just as applicable now as they were in the beginning of the Church. In this short article we will look briefly at several examples and their possible application

Systematic Study of the Scriptures in a ‘Bible School’ Setting in the Book of Acts

Acts 8:1 “At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.” (NIV)

Acts 8:4 “Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word.” (NIV)

The disciples preached what they had heard and seen for several years from the apostles and mature disciples of Jesus of Nazareth and the kingdom of God.

The Antioch Model of Systematic Study

Acts 11:19-24 “Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. ⁽²⁰⁾ Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling the good news about the Lord Jesus. ⁽²¹⁾ The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. ⁽²²⁾ News of this reached the ears of the Church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. ⁽²³⁾ When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. ⁽²⁴⁾ He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.” (NIV)

This passage provides us with a clear representation of one of the most **powerful and positive effects of persecution**... the disciples being scattered and spreading the gospel message of Christ into areas where they might not have gone otherwise. In this case, the message went across language/ethnic barriers, reaching Antioch, and the good news was also shared with the Greek people. More than a few were prepared for the good news of the Savior and Lord, and a “**great number**” believed. Confronted with a “great number” of new believers who would need to be disciplined, it appears that Barnabus decided by the Spirit to recruit a colleague, Saul of Tarsus, to help him appropriately

Acts 11:25-26 “Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, ⁽²⁶⁾ and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So, for **a whole year** Barnabas and Saul met with the Church and **taught great numbers** of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.” (NIV)

Here we see the origin of what might be considered the **first recorded systematic instruction outside of Jerusalem**. It appears to have been started there in Antioch by Barnabas and Saul, of **a one-year duration**. There must have been a keen desire to learn about their new faith paradigm, as they “taught great numbers of people.” This *great number* took on a new identity of their own, and there in Antioch disciples were first given the label of “Christians.” The character of Christ may have been the

primary focus. It is also interesting that Barnabas travelled to Tarsus to recruit Saul to return with him to Antioch to join him in teaching.

Acts 11:27-30 “During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. ⁽²⁸⁾ One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. ^(This happened during the reign of Claudius.) ⁽²⁹⁾ The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea. ⁽³⁰⁾ This they did, sending their gifts to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.” (NIV)

This passage shows the acknowledgment of the manifestation of the **prophetic function** into their Christ centered, kingdom community paradigm, as Agabus predicts the famine that will come. The disciples respond in deciding to give into the coming need according to their individual abilities. They sent their gifts to the Jerusalem elders through the ‘**team**’ of Barnabas and Saul. So in this short segment of scripture, we see the ‘**seedbed for the prophetic gifting**’ in operation, while at the same time a precedence was modelled of **benevolent giving** from one group of believers to another, according to the need of the one and the resources of the other. All was being done in ‘**team.**’

In these brief passages we see the disciples manifesting various attributes of the disciple, teacher, apostolic, prophetic, and benevolent gifting anointings upon and within these groups of people in the early days of the Church.

Some time later Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem and apparently continued in their fellowship and teaching roles among the disciples.

THE ANTIOCH PROPHETIC COMMISSIONING

Acts 13:1-3 “In the Church of Antioch there were **prophets and teachers**: Barnabas, Simeon... and Saul. ⁽²⁾ While they were **worshipping the Lord and fasting**, the **Holy Spirit said**, ‘**Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul** for the work to which I have called them.’ ⁽³⁾ So, after they had **fasted and prayed**, they **placed their hands on them** and sent them off.”

Here we see the manifestation of several aspects of the early church’s spiritual life. First, this passage confirms the presence of functioning **prophets and teachers** resident in Antioch. And we see the manifestation of what appears to have been a standard practice within the Church for **listening for a prophetic “word” from the Lord** in the process of making congregational decisions, such as the sending out of missionaries. We see **worship, fasting, waiting upon the Lord, Holy Spirit inspired prophecy, laying on of hands, appointing of elders, and corporate prayer** at work in the Antioch Church, in which all persons were integral players in the important decisions being made. These ‘**team**’ characteristic traits would manifest themselves in an ever-expanding mission-field, influencing many within their region and beyond.

THE HUB & SPOKE PATTERN EMERGES

Acts 13:13-52 ⁽¹⁴⁾ “...they came to Antioch in Pisidia... ⁽⁴⁸⁾ Now when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the word of the Lord. And as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed. ⁽⁴⁹⁾ And **the word of the Lord was being spread throughout ALL the region...** ⁽⁵²⁾ And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.”

The same ‘**spreading**’ of the word of the Lord, which had begun in Jerusalem (**Acts 6:7**), continued to be the pattern utilized by the disciples as they scattered out from Jerusalem (**Acts 8:1**). They would find a city in a centralized location on an established trade route with good roads, and then begin training and sending disciples out to other communities in the region.

Acts 14:26-28 “From Attalia they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed. On arriving there, they gathered the Church together and reported all that God had done through them, and how He had **opened the door of faith to the Gentiles**. And they stayed there a long time with the disciples.”

Here at the end of **Acts Chapter 14**, we see the conclusion of their assignment and the reporting of what took place within the experience of their mission trip. They shared the impartation of the knowledge of a **new reformational paradigm** within the body of Christ which was **the inclusion of Gentiles into their number**. They also confirmed the **expectation for difficulties and persecutions** to accompany the effective sharing of the gospel of the kingdom of God and those things pertaining to Jesus Christ. They had preached encouragement to the disciples in Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, stating that “**We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God**” **Acts 14:22(b)**.

THE GREAT PIVOT OF GOD – THE GENTILE PARADIGM SHIFT

In **Acts Chapter 15**, we see that Paul and Barnabas were appointed as a ‘**team**,’ along with several other disciples, to go to Jerusalem in order to meet with the **apostles and elders** to handle the controversy over the practice of circumcision.

After settling this question, along with other concerns regarding appropriate foods, sexual immorality and other issues, the **apostles and elders**, “with the whole Church” chose **some of their own men**, Judas (Barsabbus) and Silas, to **travel to Antioch** as a ‘**team**’ with the message of their decisions. In **Acts 15:32**, we see Judas and Silas manifesting their own functional ministry: “Judas and Silas, who themselves were **prophets**, said much to encourage and strengthen the brothers.” And in verse 35 we read, “Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, where they and **many others taught** and preached the word of the Lord.”

In these chapters the ***multiplicity of elders effectively functioning together in ‘team’*** within the early Church fellowships illustrates the principle in **2 Timothy 2:2** where Paul encourages Timothy to train up faithful disciples of Jesus of Nazareth.

The multiplication of disciples of the kingdom was a ‘core value’ of the early Church.

2 Timothy 2:2 “And the things you have heard **me** say in the presence of **many witnesses** entrust to **reliable men** who will also be **qualified to teach others**.”

THE MOVE INTO THE EUROPEAN MISSION FIELD

In **Acts 16:9** Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia begging him to “Come over to Macedonia and help us.”⁽¹⁰⁾ “After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.” The “we” in this sentence is taken to imply that the decision had been made in ‘**team**’ and that Luke ^(the author of Acts) had joined the mission team at that time. Skipping over to Acts 18, we see Paul coming into Corinth, where he began to work in ‘**team**’ with Aquila and his wife Priscilla, who had been forced to leave Rome upon an order made by Claudius for all Jews to leave Rome. He worked with them as a tentmaker, and reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, persuading both Jews and Greeks. Working with them was an innovative opportunity to witness about Jesus Christ to the Jews in that area.

When the Jews opposed Paul and became abusive, he left the synagogue and went into the house of Titius Justus who lived next door and was a “worshiper of God.” The synagogue ruler, Crispus,

and his household believed in the Lord after Paul's testimony, and "many of the Corinthians who heard him believed and were baptized."

Paul was **spoken to by God in a dream**, (**Acts 18:9-10**) in which He encouraged Paul not to be afraid, "For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city." **Acts 18:11** speaks of what might be considered a **second Bible college**: "So Paul stayed for **a year and a half**, teaching them the word of God."

Skipping over to **Acts 19:8-10**, we read: "Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for **three months** (90 days), arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God."

This may have been **the first 90 day 'discipleship training school'** (DTS).

When there was some conflict in that environment, Paul "took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. This went on for **two years**, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord." This is a possible pattern of a **third Bible College** being described in the book of Acts. Paul would have trained disciples of the kingdom of God and then commissioned them to the various cities of the region, developing a 'mission military mindset' among the disciples.

Moving on to **Acts 20**, we see Paul heading on toward Jerusalem, and in verse 17 he sent to Ephesus for elders of the Church. In **Acts 20:25** Paul testifies, "Therefore I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the **whole will of God**." (NIV) "And indeed now I know that you all, among whom I have gone preaching the **kingdom of God** will see my face no more...I have not shunned to declare to you the **whole counsel of God**." **Acts 20:25-27** NKJV.

Here we have Paul's own statement that he preached **the gospel of the kingdom of God**, the gospel he said he had received from Jesus in **Galatians 1:11-12**.

The judgment which Paul may have been referring to might be the judgment spoken of by Jesus in **John 12:48-49**. "There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept My words; that very word which I spoke will condemn him at the last day..."

Luke summarizes the end of his narrative with the statement in **Acts 28:31**, "Boldly and without hindrance he preached the **kingdom of God**, and taught about the **Lord Jesus Christ**." (NIV) In this same chapter Luke further characterizes Paul's ministry in **Acts 28:23(b)**, "From morning till evening he explained and declared to them the **kingdom of God** and tried to **convince them about Jesus** from the Law of Moses and from the prophets." (NIV)

APPLICABLE CONCLUSIONS

In summary, we are drawing several observations from the scriptures. In the **first Bible school** in Antioch (**one year**), much of the teaching may have had to do with **Christian character**, and the **qualities of Christ**. There the disciples were first called "*Christians*."

The **second Bible school**, (**1.5 years**), in Corinth called people out from the synagogue, and added the 6-month module regarding **proofs that Jesus is the Christ** ^(Jewish Messiah) and the Savior and Lord of all mankind.

The **third Bible school** in Ephesus added yet another 6-month curriculum module (**two-year Bible school**), and it **dealt heavily with the kingdom of God**.

While in prison in Rome, Paul wrote to the Church in Ephesus, where they had received teaching regarding the kingdom of God. Here he included teaching about **the revelation of the Bride of**

Christ, which he had not preached to the Church in Ephesus earlier. His teaching was intended to provide a greater understanding of the kingdom of God.

The letters sent by Paul from prison, and the other apostles of the Genesis Church might be considered '**continuing education**' and '**distance/correspondence learning.**'

These are wonderful progressions in the variations and development of systematic studies of the Scriptures. It may be considered that the **Resurrected Christ** may have taught the very first New Testament '**40 day Intensive**' instruction and training sessions.

Acts 1:3 "After His suffering, He showed Himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that He was alive. **He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.**"

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