

CHRISTIANITY—THE FIRST 300 YEARS

Developments

A fundamental question that the early Christians had to address, and indeed, that all Christians must address, was the challenge of passing on important truths, values, and traditions. One must remember that the early church did not yet have a formal New Testament. The circulation of

Passing on Important Truths,
Values and Traditions

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| <p>ORAL TRADITION ... what I received I passed on to you as of first importance (1 Co. 15:3a; 2 Ti. 1:13)</p> <p>TRUSTED SUCCESSORS ... 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 (2 Ti. 2:2)</p> | <p>RITUALS ... For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread... (1 Co. 11:23)</p> <p>WRITTEN DOCUMENTS ... after this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea. (Col. 4:16)</p> |
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written texts was slow, and a given congregation might only have one gospel, maybe some of Paul's letters, and not much else. The apostles themselves were now deceased. They had left some clues, of course, embedded in their writings about the importance of moving forward faithfully, but still, the challenge remained for the next generation to find the right path.

What, then, was the relationship of the developing church to the primitive church? Was it imitating

what the earliest church did, so that the church remained more-or-less static, or was it following the trajectory that the earliest church set, depending upon the Holy Spirit to lead them into the future? Three spheres of authority are in play here: 1) the writings of the Apostles and their proper interpretation, 2) the tradition of the church, which is to say the rituals, practices, and oral transmissions that were handed down, and 3) the work of the Holy Spirit, which Jesus had said would guide them (cf. Jn. 16:13). As it turned out, the next generation of Christians appealed to all these spheres of authority in one way or another.

DEVELOPMENTS AND VARIATIONS

As the decades rolled by, Christians continued the apostolic practices, but there were also developments and variations.

- **Infant Baptism:** Four occasions in the NT describe household baptisms (Ac. 10:24, 47-48; 16:15, 32; 1 Co. 1:16). These likely included children. By the early 200s, infant baptism was widely practiced. In the Apostolic Tradition (Hippolytus), collected in ca. 215 from earlier works, it says, "Baptize first the children, and if they can speak for themselves, let them do so. Otherwise, let their parents or other relatives speak for them."

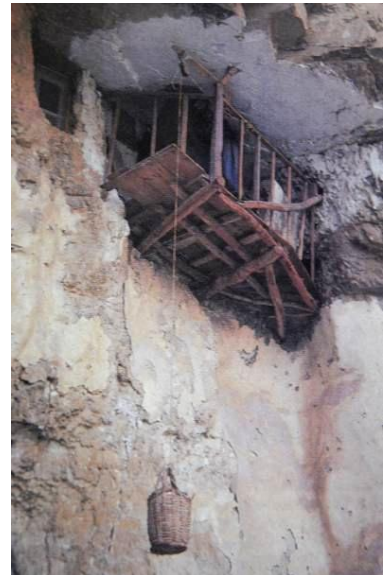
BAPTISM BY POURING

The performance of baptism by pouring was probably encouraged in lieu of the fact that since Christianity was not a legal religion, congregations could hardly build baptismal pools like the Jewish mikva'ot. In the Didache, variations of baptismal practice were allowed for practical reasons. The authenticity of baptism did not depend upon the style but the confession of faith.

Early Christianity

- **The Holy Kiss:** *Based on NT references, the exchange of peace with a kiss appears to be a Christian innovation with no examples from the Roman culture at large or Jewish tradition (Ro. 16:16; 1 Co. 16:20; 2 Co. 13:12; 1 Th. 5:26; 1 Pe. 5:14). Tertullian wrote that before leaving a house, Christians were to give the Holy Kiss and say “peace to this house.” It was also viewed as an essential part of preparing to participate in the Eucharist.*
- **Foot-washing:** *Tertullian (ca. AD 200) wrote that foot-washing was a regular part of early Christian worship, using a basin of water and a linen towel (based on Jn. 13:14; 1 Ti. 5:10).*
- **Real Presence:** *Early Christian writers referred to the Eucharistic bread and wine as Jesus’ “body and blood,” following the language of Jesus at the last supper. The Eucharist was reserved for baptized Christians (Didache). Various leaders speak of what today we call the “real presence” of Christ in the Eucharist, including Ignatius (ca. AD 106), Justin Martyr (ca. AD 150), Tertullian (ca. AD 200), and Ambrose (ca. AD 397), among others.*
- **Morning and Evening Prayer:** *Hippolytus instructed Christians to pray privately seven times a day, upon rising, at bed-time, at midnight, and at the 3rd, 6th, and 9th hours of the day (these various times are associated with Christ’s Passion). Throughout the week, Christians began to assemble each day for morning prayer (known as lauds) and evening prayer (known as vespers).*
- **Eschatology:** *The dominant view about future things prior to the return of Christ was what today we call historic premillennialism, i.e., the belief that the church would face great affliction from the antichrist before Christ returned (Papias, Lactantius, Theophilus, Tertullian, and Hippolytus).*
- **Monasticism:** *Monastics began to appear in the deserts of Egypt by the 3rd century as a way of ridding themselves of earthly wealth and dedicating themselves to prayer. In doing so, they sought to emulate Jesus’ time in the desert as well as the ancient prophets of Israel, who often were loners. Anthony (AD 251-356) gradually gained followers who lived as hermits. Monasticism spread to Palestine, Syria, Asia Minor and beyond, and the sayings and writings of the monastics came to be circulated as the Desert Fathers.*

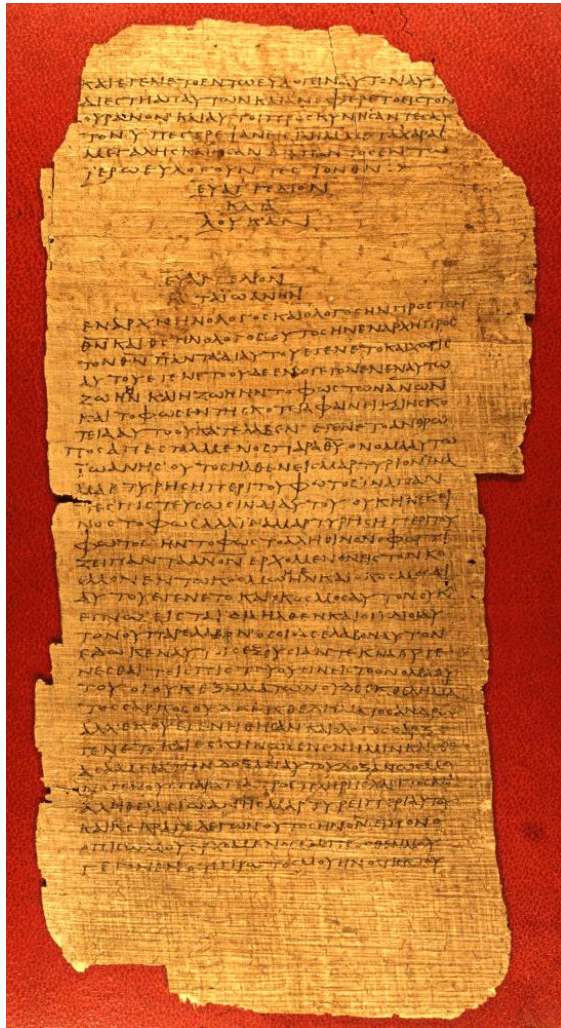
Especially important was the **elevation of the bishop** within the clergy. Leadership in the Apostolic Period had resided primarily in the twelve apostles whom Jesus’ chose (Mk. 3:13-19), those who had seen and known Jesus personally from the baptism of John until his ascension (Ac. 1:21-22, 26). Qualifications for this role were time-bound in the 1st century and non-repeatable. With the deaths of the apostles, the bishops became more prominent, with a single bishop (ἐπισκοπος) overseeing a city or region, supported by elders (πρεσβυτεροι) and deacons (διακονοι).



Isolated monks would pull up food and necessary items in a basket

Early Christianity

Beginning in the letters of Ignatius (ca. AD 110), who asserted that the bishop represents Christ on earth, the bishops became the protectors of the church by establishing theological consistency and holding the churches in unity. By the end of the 2nd century, the term “priest” was being used of the bishops, and by the mid-3rd century, this term was also extended to elders.



p75 from ca. 175-225, the end of Luke and the beginning of John

Vatican Library, Rome

as, *kyrie christe* (= Lord Christ), *kyrie eleison* (= Lord, have mercy), *agape* (= love), *logos* (= Word), etc. Eventually, early Christians began to translate their texts into other languages of the times.

SYNAGOGUE READINGS

In the synagogue tradition, two Scripture readings were appointed for each service, one from the Torah and one from the Prophets, and these were arranged in a three-year cycle. (Jesus gave the “Prophets” reading in his hometown of Nazareth, cf. Lk. 4:16ff.). These readings in turn became the “text” for the sermons of the rabbis or whomever the rabbis might appoint.

Christians followed the same pattern (1 Ti. 4:13).

THE SACRED LITERATURE OF THE CHRISTIANS

Christianity, like Judaism, was a religion of texts, which is remarkable in a world where the general literacy rate was only about 10%. This meant that the ability to read, critique, and interpret texts belonged to a relatively small number of Christians in any given congregation. It also meant that public reading became an essential part of Christian worship (cf. 1 Ti. 4:13a). To a large degree, early Christians followed the pattern of public reading that was employed in the synagogues. As Christianity moved into the Greco-Roman world, the Christians also followed the practice of the Diaspora synagogues of reading from the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible), since Greek was the international language. These readings naturally included texts from the Apocrypha, since they were included in the Septuagint.

In addition, of course, Christians also publicly read the writings of what would eventually be called the New Testament, which is to say, the four gospels and the various epistles of Paul, Peter, James, and others. These texts, also, were in Greek so that Greek became the common language of early Christian worship. A variety of Greek terms continues to survive into the modern period, such

Early Christianity

Because Christians used the codex form for their texts, their books gradually assumed a fixed order.

EARLY CHRISTIAN TRANSLATIONS

Coptic – 3rd Century

Syriac – 3rd and 4th Centuries

Old Latin (predating Jerome's Latin Vulgate) – 4th Century

Armenian – 5th Century

Georgian – 5th Century

Ethiopic – 5th Century

It is to the point that *koine* Greek, which is to say “common Greek,” was employed universally. This means that the language of the early Christians was not some special language or exalted ecclesiastical language, but the common vernacular that everyone used in everyday life.

Tatian's Diatessaron

About AD 150, Tatian, an Assyrian Christian theologian, rearranged the four gospels into a single narrative. Called the Diatessaron (Greek for “through four”), he aimed at producing a chronological and cohesive narrative of the life of Christ in order to eliminate the

repetition that arises from reading four separate accounts. While this version of the gospel continued in the Syrian church until around AD 400, in the end the larger church retained the four gospels by the four evangelists in their original form

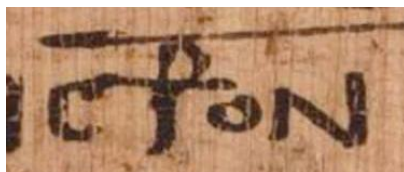
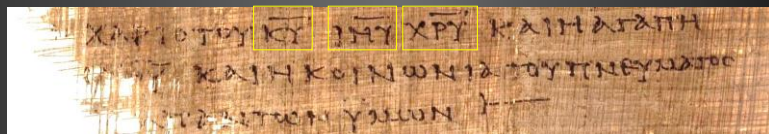
Christians began to accentuate their sacred texts with *nomina sacra* abbreviations (accented abbreviations of sacred names). They also used staurograms (stylized depictions of the cross within New Testament texts). Also, Christians used alphabetic symbols and at least one quite famous acronym, the fish. These small accents were the first glimmerings of Christian art.

2 Corinthians 13:13 (p46)

"[The] grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of [God] and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit [be] with you all."

Here, the sacred names "Lord," "Jesus," and "Christ" have all been abbreviated with a line drawn over them.

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|---------|---|-----|---|--------|
| ΚΥΡΙΟΥ | = | ΚΥ | = | Lord |
| ΙΗΣΟΥ | = | ΙΗΥ | = | Jesus |
| ΧΡΙΣΤΟΥ | = | ΧΡΥ | = | Christ |



This staurogram, from an early text of Luke's Gospel (ca. AD 200), stylized the "t" so that it looks like a figure on a cross. The line over it accents this word as sacred.



The fish symbol was based on an acronym using the initial letters of Jesus Christ God's Son Savior in Greek (ΙΗΣΟΥΣ ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ ΘΕΟΣ ΥΙΟΣ ΣΩΤΗΡ), which as an acronym spelled ΙΧΘΥΣ, the Greek word "fish."