

CHRISTIANITY—THE FIRST 300 YEARS

Post-Apostolic Christianity

THE CHURCHES THE APOSTLES LEFT BEHIND

Paul's lead in missionary activity was soon emulated by the other apostles. The Greek word *αποστολος* means "one sent on a mission," and according to Eusebius (early 4th century church historian), the apostles were dispersed throughout the ancient world in missionary work. By the close of the first century, several churches had been established in the Roman world and beyond, some clearly mentioned in the New Testament itself, and others mentioned in various traditions of the church.

The transition between the period of the apostles and the period immediately following them raised several critical questions that early Christians needed to answer, questions about: 1) the relationship of Christianity to Judaism, 2) what form of worship was to be followed, 3) the extent of authoritative Scriptures, 4) the challenge of distorted or opposing religious ideas, 5) the proper transition between leaders and their successors, and 6) the relationship of Christianity to Rome.

THE APOSTOLIC DISPERSION

One of the problems in tracking the missionary work of the apostles is that there are varying traditions within early Christian documents. The oldest form of the tradition seems to describe the apostles in three groups:

GROUP 1

Peter, Andrew, Matthew, and Bartholomew in the region of the Black Sea

GROUP 2

Thomas, Thaddaeus, and Simeon the Canaanite in Parthia

GROUP 3

John and Philip in Asia Minor

THE SEPARATION FROM JUDAISM

The relationship of Christians to Judaism had already appeared before the middle of the 1st century with the beginning of Gentile outreach and the issue of circumcision (Ac. 15). The



Thousands of Judaea Capta coins, like this bronze sesterce, were struck in Rome in AD 71. This coin was the largest series minted in Roman history.

Jerusalem church had resolved this issue by composing an apostolic letter (the letters of Paul show that even this apostolic letter did not immediately end the issue, cf. Gal. 6:12-16; Phil. 3:2-3). Still, it seems clear from the New Testament that early on, at least, the temple in Jerusalem and the synagogues around the world continued to be revered as sacred space by the Christians (Ac. 2:46; 3:11; 5:12, 21, 42; 13:14; 14:1; 17:1-2, 10, 17; 18:4, 19; 19:8). To be sure, there were some tensions, as Luke's history of Paul's travels indicates (Ac. 13:50; 18:6-8; 19:8-9), but Jesus had forewarned his followers that they would be expelled from the synagogues (Jn. 16:1-4). It was the 1st Jewish Revolt that deepened the divide between Christians and Jews.

This revolt, led by Simon bar-Giora, began in AD 66, but the Christians, who remembered Jesus' words that they should flee Jerusalem when it was surrounded by armies (Lk. 21:20-24), abandoned the city, and relocated in the Transjordan at Pella. The Romans, for their part, marshalled the Legio V Macedonica, Legio X Fretensis, Legio XII

Early Christianity

Fulminata, and Legio XV Apollinaris in Syria, and after a two-year siege of Jerusalem, they breached the walls and destroyed the 2nd Temple. That the Christians in Jerusalem had refused

THE BIRKAT HA-MINIM

This prayer in the synagogue liturgy, according to the Babylonian Talmud, seems to have been added in the late 1st century. It consists of a curse upon the apostates and enemies of Israel, including the Nazarenes (a code word for Christians).

to support the revolt, having fled the city before the disaster, left them in the role of betrayers to the Jewish cause, and this bitterness was eventually reflected in the *birkat ha-minim*, adopted in the synagogue prayers. This made Christian attendance at a synagogue very difficult if not impossible. The Christians themselves, by adopting Sunday as the day of worship rather than Saturday, widened this cleavage. Sunday was the day Christ arose from the dead, and from very early, they had begun to

gather on the first day of the week for Christian worship (Ac. 20:7; 1 Co. 16:2; Rv. 1:10). The Christian writers in the early 2nd century remark how Jewish Christians had given up Sabbath observance: *They [Jewish Christians] have given up keeping the Sabbath, and now order their lives by the Lord's Day instead (the day when life first dawned for us...) ...to profess Jesus Christ while continuing to follow Jewish customs is an absurdity...*¹

THE APOSTOLIC FATHERS

The Apostolic Fathers were core Christian leaders and theologians who lived near the end of the 1st century and the beginning of the 2nd century. They are believed to have known several of the apostles personally, and indeed, some were disciples of some apostles. Their writings, while not included in Scripture, were widely read throughout early Christianity. In their works, they frequently quote from the writings of the New Testament authors. The writings that they left include: **1st Epistle of Clement**; the **seven letters of Ignatius** (written while on his way to martyrdom); **Epistle of Polycarp**; **Martyrdom of Polycarp**; **Fragments of Papias**; **Didache**; **Epistle of Barnabas** (not by the Barnabas in the NT); **Epistle to Diognetus**; **Shepherd of Hermas**. All were written in Greek and unavailable to English readers for a very long time, but English translations began in 1693 and have continued ever since.

1st Clement is one of the oldest, since the author was bishop in Rome from AD 88-99. Ignatius (ca.



Ancient copy of the Didache, dated ca. AD 95 or early

35-110) was bishop in Antioch. He seems to have known the Apostle John personally, and he supported the developing hierarchy of bishops, presbyters, and deacons. Polycarp, bishop in Smyrna, knew some of the apostles personally, and he is described by Irenaeus as having listened to “the accounts...with John and the others who had seen the Lord.” Papias was bishop in Hierapolis, and he is described in ancient texts as “an ancient man who was a hearer of John and a companion of Polycarp.” The Didache (more fully “The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles”) is a short early treatise dated anywhere as

¹ Ignatius, *Magnesians* 9-10 (ca. AD 135)

Early Christianity

early as AD 50 to the end of the first century. It especially addressed details of baptism and the Eucharist and contains the earliest description outside the New Testament of Christian baptism “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” Regularly, the Apostolic Fathers use Trinitarian language even before the Doctrine of the Trinity was formally adopted.

EARLY CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

The earliest Christians were all Jews. As such, their experience of formal worship was limited to the 2nd Temple and the synagogues. With the loss of the temple and the continuance of the synagogues, it is not surprising that the early forms of Christian worship drew directly from what these Jewish Christians had known in the past. As a religion without legal standing, especially after the destruction of Jerusalem, Christians could hardly build elaborate church buildings, which very likely would have been destroyed. Rather, they met in homes, where often there was a sizable courtyard or interior rooms that were suitable for a small group. Here they continued to meet weekly on Sundays, conduct baptisms, and celebrate the Eucharist.

There are various hints of early Christian worship in the New Testament itself. In addition to baptisms and Eucharist, the New Testament describes the **public reading of Scripture** (1 Ti. 4:13; Col. 4:16; Rv. 1:3) and **community prayer** (Ac. 4:24; 12:12). Some participated in the Jewish prayer hours (Ac. 3:1). There were concise **confessions of faith** (Ro. 10:8-9; 1 Co. 12:3; 15:1-4; 1 Ti. 6:12), **preaching and teaching** (1 Ti. 5:17, etc.), and collections of **monetary gifts** (Ro. 15:25-27; 1 Co. 16:1-4; 2 Co. 8-9; Phil. 4:15-19; 1 Ti. 5:17-18). All these elements were already familiar for those who had attended a synagogue. In addition, one finds the earliest examples of liturgical elements in “the thanksgiving” (1 Co. 14:16), “the Amen” (1 Co. 14:16; 2 Co. 1:20), and Aramaic words, like “Abba” (Ro. 8:15; Ga. 4:6) and “Maranatha” (1 Co. 16:22), even in communities that did not speak Aramaic. Finally, early Christians sang “psalms, hymns and songs” (Ep. 5:14, 19; Phil. 2:6-11; Col. 3:16; 1 Ti. 1:17; 3:16; 6:15-16; 2 Ti. 2:11-13).²

In the Didache, we find early instruction for Christian worship: *And on the Lord’s own day gather yourselves together and break bread and give thanks, first confessing your transgressions, that*

EXCERPTS FROM THE DIDACHE

The procedure for baptism is as follows: After repeating all that has been said, immerse in running water “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.” If no running water is available, immerse in ordinary water. This should be cold if possible; otherwise, warm. If neither is practicable, then pour water three times on the head “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.”

At the Eucharist, offer the eucharistic prayer in this way: Begin with the chalice: “We give thanks to thee, our Father, for the holy Vine of thy servant David, which thou has made known to us through thy servant Jesus. Glory be to thee, world without end.”

Then over the broken bread: “We give thanks to thee, our Father, for the life and knowledge thou hast made known to us through thy servant Jesus. Glory be to thee, world without end.”

² While several of these passages are not strictly described as songs, the fact that they are in the form of Hebrew poetry strongly suggests that they may have been. Such singing, like the synagogue, was performed without instrumental accompaniment.

Early Christianity

*your sacrifice may be pure. And let no man, having his dispute with his fellow, join your assembly until they have been reconciled, that your sacrifice may not be defiled; for this sacrifice it is that was spoken of by the Lord: 'In every place and at every time offer me a pure sacrifice; for I am a great king, says the Lord, and my name is wonderful among the nations.'*³

Similarly, the Didache provides an early Eucharistic prayer: *We give you thanks, O our Father, for your holy vine of your son David, which you made known unto us through your Son Jesus; Yours is the glory forever and ever. We give you thanks, O our Father, for the life and knowledge which you made known unto us through your Son Jesus; Yours is the glory forever and ever. As this broken bread was scattered upon the mountains and being gathered together became one, so may your church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into your kingdom; for yours is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ forever and ever.*

Finally, we also have an early Eucharistic Thanksgiving: *We give you thanks, Holy Father, for your holy name, which you have made to tabernacle in our hearts, and for the knowledge and faith and immortality, which you made known unto us through your Son, Jesus; yours is the glory forever and ever. You, Almighty Master, created all things for your name's sake, and gave food and drink unto men for enjoyment, that they might render thanks to you; but you bestowed upon us spiritual food and drink and eternal life through your Son. Before all things we give you thanks that you are powerful; yours is the glory forever and ever. Remember, Lord, your church to deliver it from all evil and to perfect it in your love; and gather it together from the four winds—even the church which has been sanctified—into your kingdom which you have prepared for it; for yours is the power and the glory forever and ever. May grace come and may this world pass away. Hosanna to the God of David. If any man is holy, let him come; if any man is not, let him repent. Maranatha. Amen!*⁴

All these elements seem to have been carried over into the 2nd century and beyond. When Pliny, the Governor of Bithynia, wrote to Emperor Trajan about how to treat the Christians in his province, he described their worship thus:

“They were in the habit of meeting on a fixed day before it was light, when they sang an anthem to Christ as God, and bound themselves by a solemn oath not to commit any wicked deed, but to abstain from all fraud, theft and adultery, never to break their word, or deny a trust when called upon to honor it; after which it was their custom to separate, and then meet again to partake of food, but food of an ordinary and innocent kind.”

Pliny, *Letters* x.96 (ca. AD 110)

³ Didache 14

⁴ Didache 10