

In Search of Early Christianity Part I

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*“If you get the [Jewish context of Christianity]
wrong, you will certainly get Jesus wrong.”
Amy-Jill Levine, Vanderbilt University New Testament Scholar*

Suppose you could invite one of the original twelve apostles to your church this weekend. Can you imagine what it would be like to entertain Peter in your worship services? How do you think he would react to what he saw?

Would this apostle approve of your denomination’s teachings and practices?

Or is it just possible that he would tell you that some of your most cherished beliefs were in error? How would you feel if he stood up and loudly proclaimed that your church was a promoter of false teachings? What if he said that your religious practices were totally contrary to those of the primitive church formed immediately after the death of Jesus Christ?

Is this a startling thought? Of course it is. Yet if any of the very men who served Jesus during His earthly ministry could witness the teachings of Christianity today, they would express almost total disagreement with its doctrines and beliefs!

How has this all come about? Unfortunately, for centuries the world had little access to historical information on the early church. Most Christian churches had to rely on the teachings of men who lived at least a century after Christ’s death. These men became known as the "church fathers," whose writings wielded an enormous influence on Christian belief. They undermined the influence and authority of the true founders of Christianity such as James, Peter, and John. The character of the church from the second century down to modern times was set by Justin Martyr, Origen, Tertullian, and many other uninspired men. Fortunately, the past several decades have seen a plethora of new information on what the primitive church was really like. It is amazing what scholars and historians have found!

This new information, coupled with what is in the pages of your Bible, clearly shows that there is a great difference between the church led by the original apostles and the modern “Christian” world. Read for yourself how a great apostasy took place and how it affects your life, your beliefs, and even your salvation!

In the first part of this two-part series, we will trace the development of early Christianity as recorded by history. Prepare for some shocks along the way. You are about to discover that the Christian legacy left by Jesus the Messiah is definitely not the Christianity of today!

The Apostolic Church

We should begin our search by noting that historians and theologians alike agree that primitive Christianity began as a sect within Judaism. At the time, however, Judaism itself did not consist of a single uniform set of beliefs. Rather, there were several major religious parties such as the Sadducees and the Pharisees, both mentioned in the New Testament, and the Essenes, whose teachings were later unearthed by the Qumran discoveries. These three groups existed simultaneously in Palestine. Although the Sadducees were the descendants of the priests and controlled the Temple, the Pharisees had the greatest influence among the Jewish people.

Josephus describes how the Pharisees and the Sadducees debated the concepts of fate, free will, and other issues over which they were at odds. Doctrinal differences were the order of the day in ancient Palestine.

In addition, the Jews living in other parts of the Roman Empire were influenced by Gnostic philosophies. Gnostic ideas were introduced in the Mediterranean lands in the first century B.C. Because of the Gnostic appeal to reason and secret knowledge, Hellenistic Jews felt they could accept these new ideas without being disloyal to the Law of Moses. Thus a variety of religious ideas and doctrines was freely circulating within Judaism.

When Christ began His ministry, He had to combat many of these false teachings. As pointed out by Charles Guignebert, a well-known Roman Catholic scholar, Jesus emphasized loyalty to God and His law and clarified how that loyalty was to be expressed. But He did not overthrow the law given at Mount Sinai. In Guignebert's words, "He did not come bearing a new religion, nor even a new rite...Nor did he aim at changing either its creed or its Law or its worship. The central point of His teaching was the Messianic idea, which was common property to nearly all his compatriots as much as to him, and only his conception of it was his own" (*Ancient, Medieval and Modern Christianity*, p. 44).

Jesus taught the Samaritan woman that "salvation is of the Jews." He dispatched His disciples to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. He boldly proclaimed that He came to magnify the Law. Since the religious parties could not accuse Him of breaking the higher laws of God, they focused on his rejection of the traditions of the elders and his claims of being the Son of God. They had to manufacture evidence before they could condemn Him to death.

After Christ's resurrection, His disciples continued to remain within the fold of Judaism. The small community of believers was later called a sect by the Jews (Acts 24:5, 28:22), but it was still purely Jewish. Although their teachings were highly unpopular, day after day Christians went to the Temple to worship and to preach the Gospel (Acts 2:46-47, 3:1, 5:20).

The Jews in power seem to have tolerated their teachings until Christians began to attract large numbers of converts, including priests. The Temple officers, who were

Sadducees, wanted to kill the apostles, not for their abrogation of Judaism, but because they were stirring people up over the death of Christ.

According to Hans Conzelmann, "The first Christians are Jews without exception. For them this is not simply a fact, but a part of their conscious conviction. For them their faith is not a new religion which leads them away from the Jewish religion" (*History of Primitive Christianity*, p. 37). Rather, the Christians are both ethnic and spiritual Jews. Jesus is the Messiah, and the church is the true Israel.

"Since the Christians still know themselves to be Jews, they appear to have continued to participate in the Jewish worship in the temple and the synagogue. But this participation now has acquired a new sense. It documents the fact that the Christians hold to their membership in the chosen people and confess the God of Israel" (Conzelmann, p. 49). The early Christians did not reject Judaism. They continued as its faithful supporters despite persecution from other Jews.

Some of the early followers of Jesus also lived outside of Palestine. The first conversions after the resurrection included Jews who were from far-flung areas of the Roman Empire (Acts 2). Christian communities of Greek-speaking Jews were soon established.

What did these Jewish Christians believe? Did they immediately begin to worship on Sunday, the supposed day of Jesus' resurrection, in place of the seventh day Sabbath?

Our only contemporaneous account is the book of Acts, which presents church history in barest outline form. M. Max B. Turner discusses several relevant points on this question in his essay in *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation*.

According to Turner, eight accounts of events that happened on the Sabbath can be found in Acts, but there is only one mention of an event that happened on Sunday. Acts describes Christian teachings, fellowship, temple worship, and growth of the Church, but nowhere is there evidence that the apostles instituted Sunday as the Christian day of worship. This is a rather startling admission from a scholar who supports Sunday as the Christian day of rest!

Christ's message was soon taken outside the realm of Jewish believers. After it was revealed to Peter that the Gentiles were to receive the Gospel, Peter, Paul, and other apostles began to preach the message to people who were not of Israelite descent. Note, however, that Paul and Barnabas typically gained Gentile converts who were already observing the Sabbath (Acts 14:1, 17:1-4).

A new controversy then arose. Were the Gentiles to enter the new community of Israel through the ancient rite of circumcision? Were they to practice ritual observances? A council in Jerusalem decided the matter. The Gentiles were to abstain from meats sacrificed to idols, from fornication, from eating the meat of strangled animals, and from blood. These were the four proscriptions found in Leviticus 17-18 which had applied to non-Jews living in Israel. Physical circumcision was not a requirement for those who wished to enter spiritual Israel, the Church.

The judgment of the apostles is stated in Acts 15:21, then repeated in verse 29 and Acts 21:25. These decrees were intended to smooth relations between Christian Jews and Gentiles--to make it possible for a mixed community of believers to remain in harmony.

The account in Acts shows that Paul and the Jerusalem apostles were in agreement over the Gentile mission. Later, James and the elders in Jerusalem asked Paul to take charge of four men who were going through purification rites to complete vows. Their purpose in

doing so was to stop rumors that Paul disbelieved the law (Acts 21:21-26). James and the elders are presented in Acts as a mediating group between Jews who were zealous of the law and Gentile believers.

With respect to Paul's doctrines, an important point needs to be mentioned. As a result of ecumenism and efforts to free the New Testament of a perceived anti-Semitic bias, scholars have modified their view of Paul's teachings on the law over the past 30 years.

Now they speculate that Paul objected to Gentiles having to obey the law but not to Christian Jews subjecting themselves to rituals. The Paul of Acts "never polemicizes against the law and often observes the requirements of Jewish ritual, including circumcision" (Shaye J. D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*, p. 167).

The End of the Apostolic Age

By this time, the apostolic age was rapidly drawing to a close. Historical events would shatter the mother church at Jerusalem, and Christianity would begin to take on a new character. By 70 A.D., James (the brother of Jesus), Peter, and Paul would all be dead. Jerusalem would be in total ruins. As the only living apostle, John was to be found in exile far from Palestine.

Following the death of James, Simon, who was a cousin of Jesus, had been unanimously chosen to be James' successor. Then, as the destruction of Jerusalem loomed frighteningly near, the entire Church fled to the nearby town of Pella.

After the Roman army razed Jerusalem in 70 A.D., Christians returned to help rebuild the city. Two church historians, Eusebius and Epiphanius, tell us that the church there remained under the control of converted Jews. The Church continued to exist peacefully in Jerusalem until the time of Emperor Hadrian, with the kinsmen of Jesus playing an important role in it.

During the second Jewish War in 135 A.D., however, Jewish Christians were persecuted by the leader of the Jewish revolt. All racial Jews were subsequently expelled from Jerusalem by the Roman government. Thereafter, the church in Jerusalem was ruled by Gentiles, and other cities began to gain prominence as centers of Christian teachings.

It was about this time that Jewish Christianity became "stamped as heretical" (Conzelman, p. 134). Although these Christians held fast to the teachings of the apostles, they were seen as retaining a narrow and false legalism.

The weakening of the mother church in Jerusalem meant that there was no longer anyone to decide on questions of doctrine. There was no apostle or prophet. The issue of which church could lay claim to having a true "apostolic succession" became a very important one.

At the beginning of the second century, most of the larger churches in major cities were autonomously ruled by local bishops, who had replaced the council of elders mentioned in Acts. Some of the more important bishops were from the churches mentioned in Revelation 2-3, as well as from Rome, which also had a long history of Christian fellowship. No single bishop had preeminence during the first two centuries of Christianity.

Nonetheless, the church at Rome was beginning to be held in high regard by the second century because of its supposed association with two apostles, Peter and Paul, its many converts, and its wealth.

The Epistle to the Romans, written around 56 A.D., indicates a thriving primitive Christian community. Like many others, this congregation was first composed of Jews, such as Priscilla and Aquila, who had been forced by civil authorities to leave Rome (Acts 18).

The Roman historian Suetonius tells us that in 50 A.D. emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome. The expulsion was due to their rioting over "the instigation of Chrestus." Historians consider this reference as an erroneous transcription of the name of Christ. The early Church in Rome was further decimated by Nero in 64 A. D. The influence of Jewish Christians had come to an end in the chief city of the empire.

Without the spiritual leadership of Jerusalem, the change in Christian beliefs was a fairly rapid one, arising predominantly in areas outside of Palestine.

"The ritual development of Christianity advances step by step...It began with very simple practices, all taken from Judaism: baptism, the breaking of bread, the imposition of hands, prayer and fasting. Then a meaning more and more profound and mysterious was assigned to them. They were amplified, and gestures familiar to the pagans added...it is sometimes very difficult to tell exactly from which pagan rite a particular Christian rite is derived, but it remains certain that the spirit of pagan ritualism became by degrees impressed upon Christianity, to such an extent that at last the whole of it might be found distributed through its ceremonies" (Guignebert, p. 121).

For example, around 110 A. D. Gnostic followers of Basileides began to celebrate a festival commemorating Christ's baptism on January 6 or 10. This festival was later worked into the Christian festal calendar as Epiphany, despite the fact that it was also the date of a pagan feast celebrating the birth and growth of light.

In the early second century vague references to observing the "Lord's Day--Sunday--" began to appear. Then the voices for Sunday worship grew more strident. Ignatius of Asia Minor and Barnabas of Alexandria both condemned Sabbath-keeping. Although considered Gnostic heresy, Marcion's anti-Sabbath views were widely promulgated throughout the churches. By 150, Justin Martyr clearly indicated that the day of the sun was the day of rest for Christians. Sunday worship had become a widely-accepted practice among these people who professed to follow Christ.

Paganism began to be grafted into every aspect of Christian life. In Roman cemeteries, for instance, the figure of a young man carrying a sheep on his shoulder was a common theme of funerary art. A much later Christian tradition identified this figure as Christ the Good Shepherd (Robert Wilken, *The Christians As The Romans Saw Them*, p. 81). Another typical portrayal of Christ as the Shepherd was obviously modeled on a statue of Mercury carrying a Goat. The earliest known mosaic of our Lord (240 A.D.) shows him with a disk or nimbus at the back of his head. Yet this was also a common pictorial representation of the sun!

By the end of the second century the Mass had taken shape. "Based partly on the Judaic Temple service, partly on Greek mystery rituals of purification, vicarious sacrifice, and participation through communion in the death-overcoming powers of the deity, the Mass grew slowly into a rich congeries of prayers, psalms, readings sermon, antiphonal recitations, and, above all, that symbolic atoning sacrifice of the Lamb of God..." (Will Durant, *Caesar and Christ*, p. 599).

Overcome by the society around it, the religion that was now known as Christianity threatened to fragment into scores of uninspired and misguided creeds. One writer counted

80 heresies circulating among these so-called Christians. Wave upon wave of new doctrine and heresy inundated the churches.

Montanists rushed to Roman authorities begging for persecution. The Roman proconsul Antoninus is famous for his scorn of these would-be martyrs: "Miserable creatures! If you wish to die, are there not ropes and precipices?" The Theodotians considered Christ only a man while the Docetists believed He was a phantom. Other groups taught that the Christian was free to do anything he desired since grace covered all sins. It was a period of great religious confusion.

The Consolidation of Church Authority

But some of the churches launched a counteroffensive. The second and third centuries marked a time when the church became "catholic" (in the sense of what was universally accepted) in doctrine and solidified its power and authority. Beset by groups which claimed to represent Christ, the bishops in leading cities sought to protect their flocks by hammering out a uniform dogma.

The "catholic" church became the standard-bearer of orthodox doctrines as opposed to heretical ones. In reality, few of these doctrines were actually based New Testament teachings. Rather, they represented a synthesis of Pagan, Gnostic, and popular church beliefs of the time.

The first meeting of bishops took place in the middle of the second century. A hierarchy of churches soon developed with Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch acquiring the most power and the councils emerging as major decision-making bodies.

The controversy over when Passover was to be celebrated is a compelling example of how doctrines became catholic. Although the book of Acts describes Christians observing annual High Days such as Pentecost and the Day of Atonement (see Acts 2:1, 27:9), the bulk of the churches which professed to be Christian had by this time rejected nearly every Old Testament high day. Passover was the last to be retained according to the Jewish Practice.

Irenaeus wrote that the celebration of this day among Western churches was changed during the bishopric of Sixtus of Rome (between 120-135 A.D., roughly the same period when the influence of the Jerusalem church waned). Thereafter, Christianity was divided as to whether Passover should be celebrated on a Sunday in honor of Christ's supposed resurrection, or on the 14th of Nisan in honor of His death.

At this time, all referred to the day as the Pascha. It was not until centuries later that the day became known as Easter. (Note: The King James Version of Acts 12:4 incorrectly uses the word "Easter" for the Greek word "Pascha." Other translations render it "Passover.")

The churches of Asia Minor, particularly those mentioned in Revelation 2-3, continued to follow the New Testament observance of the 14th of Nisan. Melito, a bishop of Sardis, traveled to Rome to discuss the Passover and other topics with Anicetus, bishop of Rome. Although they did not agree, neither was willing to let a quarrel arise between them. Melito continued to follow the practice left by the apostle John, while Anicetus felt obligated to follow the practice established by the four presbyters before him.

Several more rounds of sharp dissension took place in what has become known historically as the Quartodeciman controversy. A new element in negotiating the dispute was

interjected when the emperor Constantine made peace with Christians. He called the council of Nicea, which finally settled the questions regarding the Passover by decreeing that it was to be celebrated only on Sunday.

This edict was not well received by the Christians who kept the Passover. A group known as the Audiani made a separation in the church and was consequently banished by Constantine. In 341 Quartodecimans in general were condemned as heretics. Later laws by Theodosius I and Theodosius II subjected them to severe penalties and even capital punishment for their religious beliefs.

The final consolidation of catholic Christianity as a force in the Roman Empire can actually be attributed to Constantine. Up to that time, believers had been sporadically persecuted by Roman emperors. In fact, during the second century, practicing Christianity in any form could be a capital offense. Intense persecution was especially common in Asia Minor during the late third and early fourth centuries.

After allegedly seeing a cross in battle, Constantine abruptly ended religious persecution. For the first time, a Roman emperor recognized catholic Christianity as an official state religion. In 321, Constantine passed a law making Sunday the official day of rest in the Roman Empire. He also established the celebration of Christ's birthday on December 25, traditionally the feast of the sun god.

Under Constantine's protective wing, catholic Christianity experienced a period of mass conversion of pagans. This flood of pagans had a great impact on the catholic system of worship. New customs brought over from paganism included "devotion to relics, the use of the kiss as a sign of reverence for holy objects, the practice of kneeling, the use of candles and incense, and an increased use of ceremonies patterned on those used in the imperial court" (Barrie Ruth Straus, *The Catholic Church*, p. 36).

Worship of angels, martyrs, and Mary also began to arise during the fourth century as new converts transferred to them some of the reverence they had felt for pagan deities. The converts believed that they could offer prayer to any of these personages, who would then make intercession for them. By the end of the fourth century, the catholic believers were not the bride of Christ as they claimed to be, but a fallen woman!

The New Sun Worshipers

The changes in the church over the first four centuries were bound by a subtle but common thread: the incorporation of the symbols and imagery of sun worship. Though Christ was never referred to as a "sun" in the New Testament, the early church writers adapted the comparison in order to appeal to pagans. Tertullian, for example, urged pagans to worship the true Light and Sun, while strongly refuting the charge that Christians were sun worshippers.

By 150 A.D. professing Christians were praying toward the east. Clement of Alexandria claimed this was done because the birth of light came from the East and because some ancient temples existed there. The Apostolic Constitutions, an early document on church customs, stated that the church building and the congregation were to face the East (2, 57, 2, and 14).

A long-time sun worshipper, Constantine saw numerous similarities between catholic Christianity and sun worship. He made every effort to accommodate the two.

Why was sun worship so intriguing and influential a concept? To understand, we need to look at a cult that enjoyed an immense popularity in the Roman Empire. Mithraism, the worship of Mithra the god of light, was brought to the empire by Roman soldiers. The first day of the week was held sacred to Mithra, and his followers celebrated his birth on December 25,

Around 150 A.D. Justin Martyr recognized the similarity between Christianity and Mithraism, but maintained that these sun worshippers had imitated Christianity. Yet Mithraism was introduced in the Roman Empire in the early part of the first century A.D., and converts to this cult spread throughout the civilized world just as quickly as did converts to Christianity. A number of the Roman emperors were followers of Mithra, with the cult of the Sol Invictus (the invincible sun) dominant in Rome and other parts of the empire from the second century A.D. Mithraism was a rival of Christianity, with the competition most intense during the third century.

In his condemnation of pagan sun worshippers, Tertullian described a Mithraic priesthood ruled by a "high pontiff" and made up of celibates and virgins, the partaking of consecrated bread and wine, and the climax of a ceremony ending with the ringing of a bell. He recognized the parallels between the sun cult and the Christianity of his day, but refused to admit their common source.

What is historically interesting about Mithraism is that nearly every physical remnant of this religion was destroyed by Christians. After Constantine made Christianity a state religion, Mithraism was doomed. Christian mobs soon sacked and burned Mithraic temples and slew the priests. Intent on obliterating an ancient rival, church authorities turned a blind eye to the very same type of persecution that they had once endured. Believers went to great lengths to show their hatred of this cult. For example, in Rome the prefect Gracchus promised to destroy a Mithraic crypt to show his readiness for baptism.

"Nevertheless, the conceptions which Mithraism had diffused throughout the empire during a period of three centuries were not destined to perish with it...Certain of its sacred practices continued to exist, also in the ritual of Christian festivals and in popular usage" (Franz Cumont, *Mysteries of Mithra*, p. 206).

As historian Will Durant points out, "Christianity was the last great creation of the pagan world" (*Caesar and Christ*, p. 595). The alluring sights and sounds of ancient rituals were blended with Jewish monotheism and Greek philosophical thought. With its emphasis on brotherhood, probably no more appealing religion than Christianity has ever been presented to mankind. **Yet it was never established by Christ!**

As this massive apostasy from His teachings was taking place, what happened to the group labeled Jewish Christians? Part II will tell the fascinating story of how this small band of true believers survived the first four centuries. It will show how they remained faithful despite mounting persecution from Jews, professing Christians, and Roman authorities.

Be sure to read *In Search of Early Christianity, Part II*.

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