

Sunday Circle – May 11, 2025

How the Church developed in the years between the Resurrection and the death of the last Apostle (33-100 AD)

Initially early believers were seen as a sect of Judaism. They called themselves The Way and other Jews sometimes referred to them as the Nazarenes. The name The Way may come from Isaiah 40:3 “prepare the way of the Lord.” Nazarenes was a reference to Jesus’ hometown of Nazareth.

The followers were first called Christians in Antioch according to the Book of Acts. By 100 AD the term is first used in writing by Ignatius of Antioch to distinguish the Christian faith from Judaism.

Beliefs

Their beliefs were based on oral traditions, the Hebrew scriptures, the Gospels, letters of the New Testament and likely other lost writings.

The earliest creed is expressed in 1 Corinthians 15:3-7. It is considered to have originated with the Jerusalem apostolic community no later than the 40s AD.

3For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, 4and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, 5and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. 6Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. 7Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.

First century Christians expected Jesus to return within their lifetimes. Their belief evolved when this did not happen. They came to believe that Jesus would return at an unknown time.

Early Christians of Jewish ancestry maintained the belief in angels and the devil as can be seen in the appearances of angels and references to evil and demons in the Gospels. They also believed in protecting angels (what we might call guardian angels).

Prayer and fellowship

Early believers in Jerusalem continued many Jewish practices including going to the Temple daily, gathering for home prayer, reading scripture, fasting, and observance of holy days.

Acts 2:46-47 46Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, 47praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Acts 4:29-31 After Peter is arrested and released he goes to the believers and they pray for boldness: 29And now, Lord, look at their threats, and grant to your servants to speak your word with all boldness, 30while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” 31When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness.

Baptism

In Matthew 28, following his baptism, Jesus gives the Great Commission to his followers

18And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of **the Holy Spirit**, 20and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

The baptismal sacrament developed over the first century of Christianity. Initially it appears in Acts that people were baptized in the name of Christ, but as time passed the coming of the Holy Spirit upon a person and baptism in the name of the Trinity came to be the norm along with immersion in water or sometimes sprinkling or affusion were used.

Acts 1:4-5 “This,” he said, “is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

Acts 8:14-17

14Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. 15The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit 16(for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). 17Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

Eucharist

The Eucharist was based upon the Last Supper prior to Jesus’ crucifixion which is described by Mark, Matthew, Luke, and Paul.

In the early church the Eucharist was part of an Agape feast where believers gathered together to share fellowship. Sometime between 100-250 AD the Agape feast and the Eucharist became separate rituals with the Eucharist being part of worship. Worship would take place mainly in homes until Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity in 313.

Sharing of possessions

Acts describes the life of the earliest believers

Ch 2 44All who believed were together and had all things in common; 45they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.

Ch 4:32-35 32Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common... 34There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. 35They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

Leadership in Jerusalem

The church in Jerusalem was led by Peter, John (one of the sons of Zebedee), and James the brother of Jesus also called James the Just (not to be confused with James the Apostle). Once Peter began his missionary work, James was the primary leader of the church in Jerusalem.

All of the apostles are described as being active in ministry and there was a need for more leaders. In Acts 6, we are told

“1Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. 2And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. 3Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, 4while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word.”

Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus were chosen. The apostles prayed and laid their hands on them to anoint them for ministry. While not called deacons, the seven are considered the precursors to deacons. Stephen became the first martyr for the Christian faith and Phillip is credited with bringing the faith to the Samaritans.

Mission to the Gentiles

Peter's mission to the Gentiles is described in chapters 9-11 of Acts. His missionary work was largely within Judea and Samaria.

Paul is credited with bringing the faith to the majority of the Gentiles around the eastern Mediterranean. Over three mission trips he is credited with founding at least the seven churches to whom he addressed letters in the New Testament and possibly many more. In addition his companions also established many churches. The seven churches thought to be established by Paul are Rome, Corinth, Thessalonica, Philippi, Colosse, Ephesus and Galatia.

Following the Roman destruction of the Temple around 70 AD most Jewish people as well as Christians of Jewish descent living in Judea were dispersed across the Mediterranean. The Gentile church eventually became the dominant version of Christianity,

The Twelve Apostles travelled throughout Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and India. There is debate over exactly where many travelled. This chart shows the possibilities.

<i>Apostle</i>	<i>Possible places where they spread the Good News</i>
Andrew	Scythia, northern coast of the Black Sea, Crimea, Kievan Rus, Novgorod
John	Samaria with Peter
Philip	Greece, Phrygia, Syria (later accounts)
Bartholomew	India, Mesopotamia, Parthia, Lycaonia, and Ethiopia
Matthew (not the Gospeler)	Ethiopia and maybe other countries
Thaddeus	Samaria, Idumaea, Syria, Mesopotamia, Libya, Beirut, Edessa
Simon the Zealot	Egypt, Persia, Armenia, Georgia, Africa, Middle East, Caucasian Iberia, Britain (many different legends)

Question of whether Gentile Christians First Needed to Convert to Judaism

Many formerly Jewish Christians, including the leaders of the new church such as James and Peter believed that Gentile converts should convert to Judaism and follow Jewish law by being circumcised, observing the Sabbath, and following food laws. Some advocated a strict adherence to the law while others thought some, but not all, of the law should be followed by Gentiles.

Others such as Paul, and eventually Peter, believed that following the law was no longer required because Jesus had fulfilled the law.

Peter changes his stance after having a vision from God. Subsequently, he meets Cornelius, a Roman centurion. He then preaches to the Gentiles in Caesarea many of whom come to believe and they receive the Holy Spirit. Jewish converts who observed this and Jewish Christians in Jerusalem criticized him but he answered

Acts 11 I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ 17If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?” 18When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, “Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.”

The Council of Jerusalem

Paul and Barnabas go to Jerusalem between 48-50 AD to discuss with Peter, John, and James the issue of whether or not Gentile believers needed to follow Jewish law in what would come to be called the Council of Jerusalem.

Acts 15

3So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great

joy to all the believers. 4When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. 5But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, "It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses."

6The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter. 7After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. 8And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; 9and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. 10Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? 11On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."

The elders in Jerusalem then send a letter with Paul, Barnabas, Judas, and Silas to the Gentile believers saying that they did not need to follow the law and only needed to "abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication."

Persecution

Luke writes in Acts that following the martyrdom of Stephen around 36 AD, a persecution of believers led by Saul happened that lasted until his conversion (some time between 37-39 AD)

Ch. 8 That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria... 3But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison.

Ch. 9 31Meanwhile the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was built up. Living in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.

Emperor Claudius expelled Jews and Christians from Rome between 47-52 AD

Roman Emperor Nero blamed Christians in Rome for the Great Roman Fire in 64 AD and persecuted them.