

6.2 Christian Life in the First Three Centuries: the First Communities

After the death and resurrection of Jesus, Christianity grew, slowly at first and later very quickly. Use the following information and questions to revise your knowledge of the first few centuries of Christianity.

The Jewishness of Jesus Christ

Many people imagine that Jesus was “the first Christian” but he was born into a Jewish family and raised in the Jewish religion.

The teachings of Jesus Christ

Jesus showed and taught about a loving God, whose desire was for all people to live in peace and harmony. Jesus taught about the Fatherhood of God and about a Kingdom of God that was open to all.

The earliest followers of Jesus Christ

At first, Christianity was a movement within Judaism, and the disciples would certainly have seen themselves as good Jews, going to the **Temple** and to the **synagogue**, keeping the food and other laws outlined in the **Tōrah**, and continuing to pray as Jews. The spread of the movement which was to become Christianity, occurred gradually, as the disciples carried the teachings of Jesus to the many Jewish communities along the Mediterranean coast. At first they taught only fellow Jews, until a particular group of disciples led by a **deacon**, Stephen, broke with this practice and began to preach to the **Gentiles**. Stephen's criticism of the Jewish leaders led to his death by stoning. He was the first of many Christian disciples to die as a **martyr**. Stephen's followers began to preach the gospel wherever they travelled and to whoever would listen, no longer seeing the message of Jesus as belonging only to the Jews.

The first great controversy in Christianity was the question of whether the teachings of Jesus were just for the Jews, or whether Gentiles too could become a part of the infant Church. The debate was finally settled at the first Council of the Church, the **Council of Jerusalem** in AD 49. Paul's view that **Gentiles and Jews alike** were saved by Christ was finally accepted. Paul began a series of journeys to many places in the Roman Empire where he preached the gospel and set up Christian communities. Some of Paul's letters to these communities are gathered in the New Testament, and for Christians today they are still a source of information, inspiration and meditation.

From then on there was growing separation between Christians and Jews. After the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in AD 70, a new centre of Judaism was established in Jamnia. Jewish leaders began to tighten up the differences in thought and practice that had been a part of Judaism before the destruction of the Temple. Now there was officially only one Judaism. The early Christians soon found that they presented a problem to their fellow Jews. Synagogue prayer looked forward to the coming of the Messiah, but Christians firmly believed and proclaimed that the Messiah had already come in Jesus whom they called the Christ (a title which means Messiah or the 'Anointed One').

The Apostles appointed leaders in the first Christian communities as their personal successors. Two leadership roles are recorded in the New Testament, the **president** or **bishop** and the **elders** or **presbyters**, later known as priests. They preached and taught, they led worship and gave the sacraments as well as looking after day-to-day pastoral care and management. Decision-making in the community was entrusted to the bishop and presbyters, appointed by the Apostles through prayer and the laying on of hands.

Within each community the presbyters formed a group or council (presbyterate) around the bishop, who was regarded as the successor of the Apostles in leading each community. By the end of the first century, a single bishop led or had replaced the presbyterate committee in each Church community. Thus began the role of bishop, as we know it in the Church. Up until the ninth century the community generally elected the bishops.

There were **deacons** in the earliest community in Jerusalem. Their role was to look after the daily administration of the community, so that the Apostles would be free for the task of teaching. Deacons had a ministry of assisting at the "breaking of the bread", since it was their task to distribute the Body and Blood of the Lord to the assembled Christians. They assisted at baptisms and took care of the sick. They were in charge of distributing the community funds, and so had to be honest and just in their dealings with others.

Women also took leading roles in the management of particular communities. Unlike deacons, however, they did not receive the "laying on of hands" which marked them as ordained ministers.

In the early Church it also appears that there were men and women who were **prophets** and **teachers**. Believing themselves to be called by the Holy Spirit, these men and women moved freely from community to community, teaching and preaching, while the bishops, presbyters and deacons lived in one community.

From this very earliest time Christians would confess their sins before taking part in worship. "The breaking of the bread" was the most important sacrament and it was only for those who had been baptised.

Baptisms were celebrated after a long period of instruction, study, reflection and prayer, and were usually carried out by full immersion in a pool of water.

At some time in the middle of the first century, Christianity began to attract the dislike of the Jewish leaders and also of the pagans. (This is a term which the Christians used to refer to those who followed the religions of Rome.) The main reason for this dislike was that, because of their beliefs, Christians kept themselves apart from many public activities.

The Breaking of the Bread in the Early House Churches

Historians tell us these things about the early celebration of the Eucharist.

- Early Christians celebrated *the breaking of the bread* in response to the command of Jesus at the Last Supper "*Do this in memory of me*".
- The memory of Jesus was kept alive through reading and telling stories, praying and celebrating the Eucharist. These actions encouraged the hope of the early Christians that Jesus would come again.
- The early Christians believed that in *the breaking of the bread* they were eating and drinking the Body and Blood of the Lord.
- The early Christians gathered on the first day of the week (Sunday) to read the Scriptures, to re-tell the story of Jesus' death and resurrection, to remember him in the blessing of the bread and wine. Christians believed and taught that the bread and wine became the Body and Blood of Christ. Early in the second century, St Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, described the Eucharist as the *flesh of our Saviour, Jesus Christ*.
- The early communities met in house-churches, gathering in a room in a family's home. The unity and love experienced in *the breaking of the bread* reflected the support and care that these early Christians gave to each other.
- In the first twenty or so years after Jesus' death, the breaking of the bread probably took place within a meal, just as it had at the Last Supper of Jesus. However, from the middle of the first century the blessing of the bread and wine was separated from the meal. The bread and wine were first consecrated in a prayer, which came to be called the eucharistic prayer. After the celebration, some Christians were allowed to take portions of the Eucharist home, to receive during the week or to bring to those who could not be present, especially persecuted Christians in prison.
- The meal was held later and it came to be called the "agape" or "love feast".



Early Christian Mass.