

Roots of Christianity

III. Apostolic and Sub-apostolic period

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Pentecost

Post-Resurrection period

- Only John and the women close to Jesus remained faithful at the Cross.
- Jesus appeared a number of times to His disciples, instructing them and readmitting them into communion with Him. (Peter's repentance is presented at Jo 21:15).
- Following His Ascension, the disciples gathered in prayer at the Temple and shared the common meal.
- At Pentecost the Spirit descends upon those gathered in the upper room (120 persons). The good news is preached.

The Epistles of Paul

- The Epistles and Gospels are theological reflections on the significance of the Resurrection.
- Paul's Epistles date from 45-65 AD.
- Paul argues for the unique mediation of Jesus and the absolute sufficiency of the faith for salvation. One is called to share in the suffering and death of the Lord (not simply in Baptism) and to find in service of the neighbor and in the building up of the community the action of the Spirit.

The Gospels

- The Gospel of Mark dates from the Jewish revolt (65-70 AD) and predates the destruction of the Temple.
- The Gospel of Matthew (80 AD) is a dialogue with the rabbinic community. Its origin is probably Antiochene.
- The Gospel of Luke/Acts (80 AD) is directed to a Gentile audience. Its origin is probably Antiochene.
- Both follow Mark and borrow heavily from the Epistles of Paul.
- Used for catechesis by the Church.

The Gospels

- Mark is quite critical of Peter: Peter's denial is presented in some detail. Mark is quite pointed in telling how Peter failed to comprehend Jesus or His message.
- Jesus is Lord, but He is Lord precisely as a weak human being.
- The Cross is the presence of God in the place and at the moment at which the world fails. This is confirmed by the Resurrection.
- The Cross and its message is the permanent rule of Christian discipleship. The Law is relativized.

The Gospels

- Matthew is from a conservative Jewish-Christian community well schooled in the Scriptures.
- Jesus is the fulfillment of prophecies. He is more than the new Moses. He replaces Moses and the Mosaic Law (Mt 5:21).
- Yet Jesus' criticism of the Law is tempered (Mt 5:17).
- Seriously considers Peter as the leader of the early community.

The Gospels

- Luke is an irenic document that demonstrates the inexorable movement of the message of Jesus from Galilee to the center of religious power (Jerusalem) and to the center of secular power (Rome).
- Jesus humanity is downplayed.
- Jesus is a past event. The Parousia is in the indefinite future.
- Paul's message is tempered. He is the hero of the first generation, however.
- Rome is absolved of Jesus' death.

The Gospels

- The Gospel of John (90 AD) is a fully reflected theology of Jesus.
- Jesus is divine.
- It was only revealed to the elect (which is why it is read only after Pasch/Easter).
- The second coming is within the faith experience of every individual now while the Parousia is a future event.

Other writings

- The Pastoral Epistles, Hebrews, and 2nd Peter date from 100 AD.
- The Apocalypse of John (Revelation) was accepted in the 5th Century AD but not for liturgical use. (Vatican II introduced its use in the Roman liturgy 1963-65 AD.)

Who is Jesus?

- “In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God.” (Jo 1:1)
- “I came forth from the mouth of the Most High.” (Sir 24:3)
- The word is the Torah.

Who is Jesus?

- “He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being that has come into being. In him was life.” (Jo 1:2-4, imperfect tense, a continuous activity).
- “I was anointed at the first ...He begets me when he had not yet made earth or fields.” (Prov 8:23-25 LXX)
- “Wisdom has built her house.” (Prov 9:1)

Who is Jesus?

- The word is God in action: creating (Ps 33:6), revealing (Am 3:7-8), redeeming (Ps 107:19-20).
- The word is eternal, pre-existent, yet operates in space-time.
- Creation was made for the righteous (Jer 2:3) and the righteous uphold creation (Gen 18:32).
- “the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” (Jo 1:5)

Who is Jesus?

- John 1:1-5 recapitulates Genesis 1:1-3. The presentation is perfectly rabbinical. It is not pagan philosophy.
- The striking insight occurs at Jo 1:14: the Torah became man.

“The Word became flesh and tabernacled among us, and we have seen His glory, the glory of the Father’s only begotten son, full of grace and truth.”

“What was from the beginning...concerns the Word of life – for the life was made visible; we have seen it and testify to it ...” (1 Jo 1:1-2)

Who is Jesus?

- Grace, the Law, was given through Moses (Jo 1:17).
- Grace and Truth came through Jesus, the anointed one (Jo 1:17).
- “No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son who is close to the Father’s bosom, who has made Him known.” (Jo 1:18)
- Jesus, then, is the Creator. No creature can see (grasp the essence of) God. Only God may disclose God. Jesus, then, is God.

Jesus is Man

- Genealogies of Matthew and Luke trace Jesus' manhood to Abraham and to Adam, respectively.
- Genealogies presume the virgin birth.
- Genealogies serve to adopt Jewish history; Jesus corrects and fulfills the Law.
- The Gospels clearly state Jesus was born, lived, and was crucified.
- Jesus is Man.

Jesus is God

- At the Baptism in the Jordan, the voice of the Father is heard from Heaven; Jesus is acknowledged as Son; the Spirit descends in the form of a dove, confirming this.
- At the Transfiguration on Mt. Carmel, the voice of the Father is heard from Heaven. Jesus is acknowledged as Son. He is transformed in Light (the Shekinah, the uncreated light that is God in operation; as Moses, Ex 34:29)
- Jesus is God.

The Church

- What God ordains cannot be changed. Man's response to God's demands are historical and are not necessarily binding for all time.
- There is no textual support that Jesus came to establish a church on Earth. He came to reform Israel (Mt 5:17).
- Israel already had the Law, liturgical worship, priests and sacrifice (given at Sinai to Moses by God).

The Church

- The function of the Twelve is to judge Israel (Mt 19:28; Lk 22:30).
- The followers of Jesus are in communion, a sacred assembly (the meaning of ekklesia), a gathering as if a second Exodus (Is 40:3).
- The 120 gathered in prayer, continued with Temple worship, and shared the Eucharistic meal (Acts 1:13-15; 2:46).
- The Law and Prophets are normative through the teachings of Jesus. The Apostles are more authoritative as to the matters discussed by Jesus.

The Church as Eucharistic assembly

- Baptism is the means of entry into the community and defines the community (Acts 2:38; 1 Cor 10:1-4; 12:13; Eph 4:5; Col 2:12).
- All share the Eucharistic meal (1 Cor 11:23). The Lord's day observance follows the Sabbath celebration.
- The community is local and wholly contained (1 Cor 1:2) yet is universal (1 Cor 12:28; Eph 2:19) as it is the Body of Christ (Eph 1:22, 4:15, 5:25).

Church organization

- All things held in common (Acts 2:44).
- Peter is the early leader of the Jerusalem community (Acts 1:15).
- By 35 AD Peter, James and John are the three Apostles of most importance (Gal 2:9).
- Peter leaves Jerusalem by 50 AD. The writings are not clear as to whether he was forced out or left by his own initiative. The community around Matthew regards Peter as the one leader (Mt 16:18) though it is obvious that Paul does not nor does James (Gal 2) nor John (Jo 21:22).

Church organization

- James the Just, the brother of Jesus, is the head of the community (appointed by Jesus in a post-Resurrection appearance, 1 Cor 15:5). He assumes more importance as the century passes (Acts 12:17; 15; 21:18).
- Pauline communities less structured. The Jerusalem hierarchical model becomes the standard for the developing community.

Church organization

- Great tension within the community regarding Temple worship.
- Hellenists complained they were being slighted in the distribution of goods (Acts 6:1)
- Stephen stoned as a result of his attack on the Temple (Acts 6:8 – 7:60)
- Apostles rejected direct administration of the community. A separate administration was provided for the Hellenists (Acts 6:2-4). This becomes impetus for missionary activity.

Is it first necessary to become a Jew?

- To what extent is Jewish observance binding on non-Jews? Is circumcision necessary to enter the community? Was it necessary to first become a Jew to follow Jesus?
- If one submits to circumcision, he must follow the Law (Rom 9:11). Paul, who was circumcised, followed the Law (Acts 21:4). Timothy was circumcised because he had a Jewish mother (Acts 16:3). Peter and James followed the Law (Gal 2:11-14) though in varying degrees.
- James, son of Zebedee, martyred under Herod Agrippa (+42AD), not a true observer of the Law.

Is it first necessary to become a Jew?

- The Apostles, who had care for all Israel, convened in Jerusalem to address the matter.
- Non-Jews did not first have to become Jews. They were required to follow the commandments given to Noah (Acts 15:20). This permitted table fellowship between Jews and non-Jews. That table fellowship is the Eucharistic celebration.
- Despite sharp divisions in their actual practices (1 Cor 9:1), the Apostles remained in communion with one another (1 Cor 1:10; 1 Thess 2:14).

Destruction of the Temple

- Caligula blocked from desecrating Temple (40 AD).
- Peter escapes execution by Herod Agrippa (Acts 12:6, 42 AD).
- Paul arrested (Acts 21:33, 58 AD). Released in Rome; preached in Spain; executed by Nero in Rome (+67 AD).
- Peter also executed in Rome (+67 AD).

Destruction of the Temple

- James the Just, brother of Jesus, killed in the Temple for refusing to deny Jesus (+62 AD). This is one of the precipitating factors in the revolt against Rome (65-70 AD).
- Forewarned in the Spirit, Jerusalem community flees to Pella (in Jordan).
- Temple destroyed. Animal sacrifice ends (70 AD).
- Rabbinic community moves to Jamnia (in Syria).

The New Israel

- Gentile converts increase after 65 AD.
- Followers of Jesus excluded from Jewish community between 85-130 AD. Opposition to Jewish leadership and observances expressed in Hebrews (8:13) and John (15:25).
- Epistle of Barnabas (4:6, 130 AD) interprets Tanach as prefiguring Christ in the flesh.
- Justin Martyr (+165 AD) stratifies Tanach, beginning de-Judaization of the community.
- At 1 Pt 2:9, the Church supersedes Israel; the irrevocable call of Israel is largely forgotten (Rom 11).

Liturgical worship

- The community continued to follow Jewish liturgical practice. The earliest liturgy is that of James the Just, 52 AD. (Didache, ca 100 AD).
- The Sabbath and the Lord's Day were the traditional times for Eucharistic celebrations.
- Pasch/Easter is the central feast of the community (and never celebrated before the Passover).
- Palm Sunday, Holy Thursday, Ascension (also on a Thursday), and Pentecost are all part of the Paschal cycle.

Liturgical worship

- The Baptism of the Lord was the next major feast of the community.
- The Nativity of the Lord began to be celebrated in Syria; its liturgical texts are drawn from the Baptism celebration. A separate feast in 4th Century.
- More frequent celebration of the Eucharist develops over the centuries and is largely a commemoration of the local saints.
- Greek is the language of the cities; Aramaic, of the countryside. Latin gains wider use in the West by the 4th Century. The liturgy was always celebrated in the vernacular (Latin ceased to be the vernacular in the West by the 15th Century).

Charisms and roles

- There are a variety of charisms (1 Cor 12:22) but a differentiation of roles in the community (1 Thess 5:12). Priesthood exercised by the Church as a whole (1 Pt 2:9)
- Overseers (episkopoi/presbyters) are from the Eucharistic community and function for the community. They continue the role of the Aaronic priesthood (1 Clem 42). Formal ordination dates from at least the 3rd Century (Hippolytus).
- Women have no priestly role as it is a command of the Lord (1 Cor 14:34-6; 1 Tim 2:11-12).

Equality of all bishops

- Sees founded by the Apostles as guarantors of orthodoxy. Apostolic succession is continuation of the teaching of the Apostles. (Irenaeus, +200).
- Peter is first among equals based on his confession of Faith (Mt 16:16); Apostolic equality reiterated at Mt 18:18.
- Paul an Apostle (1 Cor 9:1). Does not hesitate to correct Peter in a matter of faith (Gal 2:11).
- John is the beloved disciple (Jo 21:20).

Equality of all bishops

- James appointed head of the community by Jesus (1 Cor 15:5). The head of the community in Jerusalem through the 4th Century came from the family of Jesus.
- Cyprian (+285 AD) writes that communion with the Bishop of Rome is a sign of orthodoxy but that orthodoxy is not dependent upon that communion.
- That there is no bishop of bishops is affirmed throughout the seven Ecumenical Councils that in the Holy Spirit defined Christian belief.

The Holiness of the Church is not dependent upon a holy clergy

- The imitation of Christ requires personal holiness and the willingness to experience martyrdom (Ignatius of Antioch,+107 AD; Irenaeus,+207 AD; Hippolytus,+235 AD; Cyprian,+285 AD, all bishops and martyrs).
- Rigorist views (Donatist, ca 400 AD; Jansenist, ca 1638 AD) that question holiness of church if clergy are not holy were rejected.
- The priest is not a magician. The Holy Spirit acts to transform the eucharistic gifts, the baptismal water, the chrism.

Christ is present in the Church

- The Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist is foundational to the authors of the Epistles and the Gospels (Jn 6:53). The earliest Tradition is reported by Paul (1 Cor 11:23).
- The Eucharist is an antidote against death (1 Cor 11:30).
- As all sacramental function occurred within the context of the Liturgy, and the Eucharist is the central point of the Liturgy, and that transformation occurs through the Holy Spirit, Christ is present with the community. The Church is a means of grace.

Relations with the Jews

- Following a failed second revolt against Rome (115 AD), Jews were expelled from Jerusalem and their re-entry was barred.
- Split between the communities permanent.
- Origen (254 AD) and Jerome (+420 AD) are the last of the great Biblical scholars to be familiar with Hebrew and to seek dialogue with the Jews.

Suggested reading

- Jaroslav Pelikan, **The Christian Tradition.**
University of Chicago. Chicago. 1971

This is a widely acclaimed 5 volume set of Christian history presenting in a straight forward manner the controversies and political currents that defined the Church.