

The Early Christian Church

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Learning Objectives

- Know the religious climate in the 1st century when Christianity developed
- Know the basic tenants of Christianity
- Know about the Early Church and how it was structured
- Know the steps to becoming a Christian
- Know the Christian Literature as of 150 CE
- Know the major theological controversies

Religion in First Century

- Greeks and Romans had their pantheons – but belief in them had largely ceased at least among the elite
- Sacrifices to the Roman gods carried on officially, but there was little popular support for them
- Nations within the Empire had their own religions
- Rise of Mystery Religions

Mystery Religions

- Mithraism – a development from Persian thought – popular cult among Roman soldiers
- Osiris cult spread from Egyptian religions
- In Greece, the worship of Dionysus was popular
- Many offered the believer life after death
- Many had sacred communion meals and baptisms that aided the participant in the search for eternal life
- Most of the mystery religions accepted people into their groups without regard to race or social status

Christianity

- Christians share a common belief in the uniqueness of Jesus of Nazareth
- That he provided for the redemption of humankind by his death
- That he was resurrected from the dead
- Belief in baptism as an initiation into the religion
- Idea that believers have one life in which to determine their destiny for life after death – eternity in either heaven or torment in hell

Spread - Early Christian Communities

- Before Paul began his ministry – other leaders had successfully carried Christianity to Antioch, Alexandria, and Rome
- Barnabas, Symeon Niger, Lucius the Cyrenian, Manaen Apollos and other, all actively engaged in organizing new Christian churches
- Chief successes of early Christianity were in the commercial centers of the Roman Empire – Jewish communities
- Independent Christian communities sprang up among the trades people
- New religion spread to the Tigris-Euphrates Valley and into Ethiopia

Roman Suspicion, Perplexity, and Persecution

- By middle of the second century- major problem for the governors of the Roman provinces, esp. Syria and Asia Minor
 - Refused to take part in the official patriotic cult signified disloyalty and rebellion
 - Christian met secretly, almost always at daybreak or at night – employed during the day
 - Christians were accused of sexual perversions (“love feasts”) and cannibalism (“Take, eat; this is my body..this is my blood”)
 - Christians stayed away from theaters, gladiatorial combats and festivals

Pliny the Younger - Asia Minor (112 CE)

- Christians who persisted three times saying they were Christians he executed them:

“for I did not doubt that, whatever it was they admitted, obstinacy and unbending perversity certainly deserve to be punished.”

Developments in Worship

- At the time of Apostle Paul two kinds of services
 - Meeting on the model of the synagogue services
 - Open to inquirers as well as believers
 - Reading from the Jewish Scriptures
 - Prayer, preaching and the singing of psalms
 - The agapé or “love feast”
 - Believers only
 - Brief ceremony, recalling the last supper
 - Couched in terms of thanksgiving (Greek name Eucharist)

Fractio Panis

Developments in Worship

- As the Christian communities grew larger, the common meal discontinued
 - “Lords Supper” observed at the conclusion of public portion of Sunday services
- 150 CE typical Sunday observance
 - The Gospels or writings of prophets read aloud
 - Stand up and offer prayers
 - Unbaptized dismissed
 - “Lords Supper”
 - Contribution plate passed

New Members

- Entrance into the Christian community formalized into definite steps
 1. Systematic course of instruction and testing (catechization) - testing commonly during Lent
 2. Baptism – commonly at Easter
 3. Confirmation or laying on of hands (so the Holy Spirit might descend upon each new member)



Pentecost Celebrations And Apostles

- Holy Spirit Descends upon the Apostles
- Ecstasy – Speak in Tongues

Early Church Organization

- Loosely organized
 - Directed by a board of elders
 - One or more Bishops (superintendents)
 - Deacons assisted the Bishops
- Prophets and teachers – preached and gave instruction
 - Members of the congregation
 - Traveling evangelists

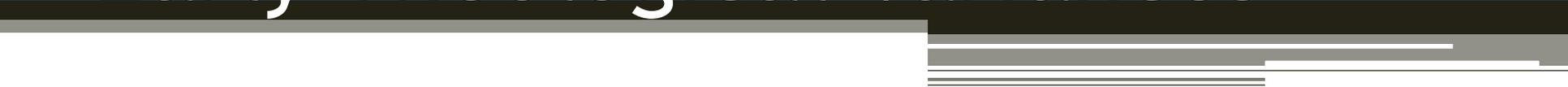
Church Organization 2nd Century

- Congregations headed by a single Bishop
- Assisted by elders and Deacons
- Bishop now did the preaching and instruction
- Prophets and traveling evangelists gradually disappear

Christian Literature to 150 BCE

- 13 Epistles (Letters) attributed to Paul
- Gospels
 - Mark – 65-70 C. E.
 - Matthew – 90 C. E.
 - Luke – 90 C. E.
 - John – 1st Century C. E.
- Acts (written by Luke)

Early Theological Variances



Gnostic Christianity

- The term Gnostic has come to encompass many beliefs and practices among early Christians
 - A belief in a divine spark within all humans
 - This spark is immortal and came from an unknown god
 - The universe as we know it is controlled by evil forces
 - Necessary for a redeemer to come to earth from the unknown god and provide knowledge
 - Whereby the divine spark in humanity might be able to rejoin its maker

Gnostic Christianity

- Some Gnostics believed that the spirit was good and the flesh was evil
 - The Supreme God, who was pure spirit could not have created this fleshy world – created by some secondary deity
 - Denied that the godly Christ could have been fully identified with the human Jesus
 - Many Gnostics said Jesus only appeared to be human but was actually pure spirit
 - His life, teachings, and death and resurrection were of little consequence

Gnostic Christianity

- Syncretistic took its doctrines from late Judaism; Christianity; Greek, Persian, and Egyptian religions; Greek philosophy; and mystery religions
- A collection of early Christian Gnostic literature was discovered at Nag Hammadi in Egypt in 1945

Marcionism

- Marcion, son of the Bishop of Pontus, came to Rome in 140 CE seeking an office in the church.
- Dualism
 - World god of justice, who created the world – God of the Old Testament
 - A god of goodness who was the father of Jesus Christ – god of the New Testament
- All of humankind are the children of the god of justice
- Jesus came into the world to save us from that god
- Attracted many followers but was excommunicated in 144 CE and died in 160 CE

Montanism

- Montanus founded this sect - middle of 2nd century
- The Holy Spirit, was not to be stifled by dogma but was to be free to move among Christians, causing them to speak in tongues and prophesy
- The end of the world was coming soon, along with the return of Christ

Apostles Creed - 340 CE

To Prevent Heresy

“I believe in God almighty and in Christ Jesus, his only son, our Lord. Who was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary. Who was crucified under Pontius Pilate and was buried. And the third day rose from the dead. Who ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of the Father. Whence he cometh to Judge the living and the dead. And in the Holy Ghost. The holy church. The remission of sins. The resurrection of the flesh. The life everlasting.”

Summary

- Religious atmosphere – Emperor cult, rise in Mystery Cults
- Basic tenants of Christianity
- Early Church and how it was structured
- Know the steps to becoming a Christian
- Christian Literature as of 150 CE – Epistles of Paul, Gospels and Acts
- Major theological controversies Gnostic Christianity, Marcionism and Montanism
- Apostles Creed – 340 to prevent heresy