

New Testament Background 3

The Development of the Early Church

Jewish Beginnings and Spreading Outward

For centuries before the birth of Jesus, the number of Jews living outside of Palestine had been increasing. Dating back to the Old Testament times there were numerous Jews in Persia and Mesopotamia. In Egypt, they had even built a temple in the seventh century BCE, and another five centuries later. By the time of Jesus, there were sizable Jewish communities in every major city in the Roman Empire. (Gonzalez, 17)

Diaspora Judaism is of crucial importance for the history of Christianity, for it was one of the main avenues through which the new faith expanded throughout the Roman Empire. (Gonzalez, 18)

The political unity wrought by the Roman Empire allowed the early Christians to travel without having to fear bandits or local wars. When reading about Paul's journeys, we see that the great threat to shipping at that time was bad weather. A few decades earlier, an encounter with pirates was much more to be feared than any storm. In the first century, well-paved and well-guarded roads ran to the most distant provinces—even though most trade and travel took place by water. Since trade flourished, travel was constant; thus Christianity often reached a new region, not through the work of missionaries or preachers, but rather through traveling traders, slaves, and others. (Gonzalez, 19)

During a number of voyages, first with Barnabas and then with others, Paul took the gospel to the island of Cyprus, to several cities of Asia Minor, to Greece, to Rome, and perhaps—according to a tradition that cannot be confirmed—to Spain. But to say that Paul took the gospel to those areas is not to imply that he was the first to do so. The Epistle to the Romans shows that there was a church in the imperial capital before Paul's arrival. Furthermore, the spread of Christianity in Italy was such that when Paul arrived at the small seaport of Puteoli there were already Christians there. Therefore, Paul's significance to the early spread of Christianity ought not to be exaggerated. Although the New Testament speaks a great deal of Paul and his journeys, there were many others preaching in various regions. (Gonzalez, 33)

Paul's greatest and most unique contribution to the shaping of early Christianity was not so much in the actual founding of churches. Rather, it was in the Epistles that he wrote in connection with that activity, since those Epistles eventually became part of Christian scripture, and thus have had a decisive and continuing impact on the life and thought of the Christian church. (Gonzalez, 33)

The same roads and sea lanes that served Christian missionary expansion were also traveled by people of all sorts of traditions and beliefs. These traditions and beliefs mingled in the plazas and markets of the cities, to the point that their original form was barely recognizable. Syncretism became the fashion of the time. In that atmosphere, Jews and Christians were seen as unbending fanatics who insisted on the sole worship of their One God. (Gonzalez, 20)

New Testament Background 3

The Development of the Early Church

The Book of Acts affirms that from the very beginning there was a strong church in Jerusalem. But then that very book moves on to other matters, and tells us very little about the later history of that Christian community. The rest of the New Testament offers a few other bits of information. But it, too, deals mostly with the life of the church in other parts of the empire. (Gonzalez, 25)

“the Hellenists murmured against the Hebrews because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution” (Acts 6:1). These last words do not refer to a conflict between Jews and Gentiles, for Acts makes clear that at that time there were still no Gentiles in the church. It was rather a conflict between two groups of Jews: those who kept the customs and language of their ancestors, and those who were more open to Hellenistic influences. In response to this crisis, the twelve called an assembly that appointed seven men “to serve tables.” Exactly what this meant is not altogether clear, although there is no doubt that the idea was that the seven would have administrative tasks, and that the twelve would continue preaching and teaching. In any case, it would seem that all seven were Hellenists, for they had Greek names. Thus, the naming of the seven appears as an attempt to give greater voice in the affairs of the church to the Hellenistic party, while the twelve, all “Hebrews,” would continue being the main teachers and preachers. (Gonzalez, 25)

The seventh chapter of Acts tells the story of Stephen, one of the seven. There is a hint (Acts 7:47-48) that his attitude toward the Temple was not entirely positive. In any case, the Jewish Council—the Sanhedrin—composed mostly of anti-Hellenistic Jews, refuses to listen to him and condemns him to death. This contrasts with the treatment given by the same council to Peter and John, who were released after being beaten and told to stop preaching (Acts 5:40). Furthermore, when persecution finally broke out and Christians had to flee Jerusalem, the apostles were able to remain. When Saul left for Damascus to seek out Christians who had taken refuge there, the apostles were still in Jerusalem, and Saul seemed to ignore them. All of this would seem to indicate that the earliest persecution was aimed mostly at what were called Hellenistic Christians, and that the Hebrews had much less difficulty. It is later, in chapter 12, that we are told of Herod (not the council) ordering the death of James, and the arrest of Peter. (Gonzalez, 26)

The earliest Christians did not consider themselves followers of a new religion. All of their lives they had been Jews and they still were. This was true of Peter and the twelve, of the seven, and of Paul. Their faith was not a denial of Judaism but was rather the conviction that the messianic age had finally arrived. According to Acts, Paul would say that he was persecuted “because of the hope of Israel” (Acts 28:20)—meaning the coming of the Messiah. The earliest Christians did not reject Judaism, but were convinced that their faith was the fulfillment of the Messiah whom Jews over the ages had been anticipating. For this reason, Christians in Jerusalem continued to keep the Sabbath and attend worship at the Temple. To this they added the observance of the first day of the week, in which they gathered to break bread in celebration of the resurrection of Jesus. (Gonzalez, 27)

New Testament Background 3

The Development of the Early Church

The church began as a particular group within Judaism, where faith was never thought of only as an individualistic personal relation to God; no Jew, then or now, thinks of God as “my personal savior” apart from the relation to the whole community of faith. It is modern Western society that conditions people to contrast a personal spirituality with “institutionalized religion.” Jews thought of belonging to the people of God, established by God’s saving acts, with a mission from God to this world. How did the earliest believers in Jesus as the Messiah think of themselves, and how were they seen by their fellow Jews? Of one thing we may be sure: they did not understand themselves to be members of a new religion, belonging to the “church” in contrast to “Judaism.” Like Jesus, the original disciples were all Palestinian, Aramaic-speaking Jews, and understood themselves as a special group within Judaism. They continued to worship in the temple, which became the focus of their own life, and observe the regular hours of prayer (Acts 2: 46– 3: 1). (Boring, 140)

The original Jewish hearers of the Christian message were not asked to “convert” in the sense of leaving their ancestral faith, but— as Jews— to believe that God was acting to fulfill their Jewish hopes (Acts 28: 20). But when Christian missionaries move into the larger world, how is the Messiah to be proclaimed where a Messiah is not expected? Such Jewish terms as “kingdom of God,” “Son of Man,” “resurrection,” and even “Christ” were hardly understandable in the Greco-Roman world outside Palestine, while much in Hellenistic culture was alien to the Palestinian Jewish tradition in which Christianity was born. In the wider Hellenistic world the early Christian missionaries were in fact calling for a conversion. The Christian movement appeared as a new religious group intruding as an alien element into the dominant religiocultural ethos of the Greco-Roman world. On pagan soil, the Christian message represented an exclusive, intolerant claim that was new to most hearers. But what did this mean? Must Gentiles first become monotheistic, Torah-observant Jews who are expecting a Messiah, so that the Messiah can be preached to them? Or can Christian faith be proclaimed to them in their terms, so that they can become full members of the redeemed people of God without becoming Jews prior to or as part of their conversion to the Christian faith? This issue, in its many dimensions, was the most theologically problematic and emotional issue faced by the first generation of Christians. (Boring, 144)

The enormous numerical growth of the church in its first centuries is undeniable. The ancient church knew nothing of “evangelistic services” or “revivals.” On the contrary, in the early church worship centered on communion, and only baptized Christians were admitted to its celebration. Therefore, evangelism did not take place in church services, but rather in kitchens, shops, and markets. A few famous teachers, such as Justin and Origen, held debates in their schools, and thus won some converts among the intelligentsia. But the fact remains that most converts were made by anonymous Christians whose witness led others to their faith. The most dramatic form taken by such witness was obviously that of suffering unto death, and it is for this reason that the word “martyr,” which originally meant “witness,” took on the meaning that it has for us today. (Gonzalez, 115)

Acts mainly depicts Paul and his companions speaking in public or quasi-public places and impressing masses of people, both positively and negatively, by miracles and rhetoric, and then

New Testament Background 3 **The Development of the Early Church**

taking advantage of the patronage of officials and well-to-do householders for extended teaching. They look, in short, like traveling sophists or philosophers – extraordinarily successful ones, with a retinue and rich patrons. From the letters, though, although they by no means contradict all aspects of the Acts picture, we receive on the whole the impression of a less grand and public mission, of communication more along the natural networks of relationship in each city and between cities. The families and houses of certain individuals seem to have been starting points, and connections of work and trade seem to have been important. (Meeks, 28)

Christians gathered in private homes. There are indications of this in the New Testament. Later, as congregations grew, some houses were exclusively devoted to divine worship. Thus, the oldest Christian church, found in the excavations of Dura-Europos and built before 256, seems to have been a private dwelling that was converted into a church. Another consequence of the growth of congregations was that it soon became impossible for all Christians in a particular city to gather together for worship. Yet the unity of the body of Christ was so important that it seemed that something was lost when in a single city there were several congregations. In order to preserve and symbolize the bond of unity, the custom arose in some places to send a piece of bread from the communion service in the bishop's church—the fragmentum—to be added to the bread to be used in other churches in the same city. Also, in order to preserve and symbolize the unity of Christians all over the world, each church had a list of bishops of other churches, both near and far, for whom prayer was to be made during communion. (Gonzalez, 111)

The contemporary reader, especially in Europe or North America, must resist the pressure to think of “house church” in terms of modern one-family houses, in which people of different socioeconomic classes are geographically segregated. In Hellenistic cities, we should rather think of society as composed of a large number of over-lapping pyramids, with each pyramid containing the whole gamut from very rich to very poor, with the patron at the peak of each pyramid, and the emperor as the chief patron at the top of them all. In large cities, rich and poor lived together in large city-block insulae (“islands”), all in the same large building complex that included the elegant apartment of the owner/ patron; his or her extended family; shops and small offices where his employees, retainers, and slaves lived; with small living quarters attached in a loft or back room. Distinctions between social classes were very rigid, and each one “stayed in his place,” but the separation was not geographical. All lived under one roof, and the distinctions were maintained by social rituals rather than geographical space. In situations where all or most of the disciples belonged to the lower social classes— as was typically the case— a “house church” would be a “tenement church,” meeting in a small room that could accommodate no more than ten or twelve people. When wealthy people were converted, their more spacious homes with dining rooms and atriums could accommodate larger groups. Thus Prisca and Aquila were apparently business people of some wealth, Phoebe apparently had employees and slaves, and Philemon had a house served by slaves, with more than one guest room. While the house churches provided the setting for redemptive Christian freedom of the “discipleship of equals,” in which there was no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female (Gal 3: 27– 28), it also was the setting for tensions and disputes that were often more sociological than doctrinal. (Boring, 171)

New Testament Background 3

The Development of the Early Church

No Roman cult groups, not even those that were primarily mutual support groups, are known to have looked after strangers and people in need. In the mid-fourth century, the emperor Julian commented (Epistles 84) that Jews and Christians provided not only for their own poor, but also for the poor of the Hellenes, his preferred term for followers of the traditional religion. Provision for the poor was not an ethical priority in Roman culture (ch. 6), whereas Christians were expected to take the gospel to the poor and to help those in need. It is difficult to show that most Christian converts were poor, either in the sense that they were not rich or in the sense that they were actually destitute; but practical help for those who needed it may have been an important factor in the growth of Christianity. For example, Eusebius (Ecclesiastical History 7.22.7-10) cites a letter of Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria in the mid-third century, on how Christians nursed plague victims and gave them burial, regardless of the danger, while pagans abandoned even family members. (Clark, 23-24)

The Socio-Economic Backgrounds of Early Christians

The apostolic church was more nearly a cross section of society than we have sometimes thought. In the series of articles published by Gerd Theissen which discuss the situation in Corinth, he too finds leading figures in the Christian groups of that city who belong to a relatively high economic and social level, but Theissen emphasizes the evidence that the church, like the larger society, is stratified. The conflicts in the congregation are in large part conflicts between people of different strata. (Meeks, 53)

The Greek names of Euodia and Syntyche (Phil. 4:2f.) may hint that they were among the merchant groups who were metics in Philippi. It is to be noted besides that they were women who had sufficient independence to be recognized in their own right as activists in the Pauline mission. Tertius is another Latin name among the Corinthian Christians (Rom 16:22); in his case we have the further hint of a profession, or at least training, as a scribe. Another professional with a Latin name is Luke (Philem. 24), a physician (Col 4:14) with Paul, probably in Ephesus. Doctors were often slaves; we might speculate that Luke has been a *medicus* in some Roman familia, receiving the name of his master (Lucius, of which Lukas is a hypocorism) on his manumission. The ability to travel bespeaks some financial means, but not necessarily the traveler's own. Many slaves and freedmen traveled as agents of their masters or mistresses, like the members of Chloe's household who told Paul in Ephesus about Corinthian troubles. (Meeks, 57)

Gaius (1 Cor 1:14; Rom 16:23) has a good Roman praenomen, thus resembling several Corinthian Christians already mentioned, but in addition he has a house ample enough not only to put up Paul, but also to accommodate all the Christian groups in Corinth meeting together (Rom 16:23). He is evidently a man of some wealth. The same is true of Crispus, whose office as *archisynagogos* shows that he not only has high prestige in the Jewish community but is also probably well to do. (Meeks, 57)

New Testament Background 3 The Development of the Early Church

It was also in Corinth that Paul met Prisca and Aquila. Two letters mention a Christian community in their house. The author of Acts has other information about them: that Aquila's family came from Pontus, that he was a Jew, and that they were tentmakers. We may summarize their known indicators of status as follows: wealth: relatively high. They have been able to move from place to place, and in three cities to establish a sizable household; they have acted as patrons for Paul and for Christian congregations. Occupation: low, but not at the bottom. They are artisans, but independent, and by ancient standards they operate on a fairly large scale. Extraction: middling to low. They are eastern provincials and Jews besides, but assimilated to Greco-Roman culture. One thing more: the fact that Prisca's name is mentioned before her husband's once by Paul and two out of three times in Acts suggests that she has higher status than her husband. (Meeks, 59)

"Chloe's people" (*hoi Chloes*, 1 Cor 1:11) are slaves or freedmen or both who have brought news from Corinth to Ephesus. (Meeks, 59)

Phoebe is recommended to the Roman Christians as *diakonos* of the church in Cenchreae and "prostatis of many [others] and myself as well." The sensible solution to Phoebe's standing is to follow E.A. Judge in taking prostatis in the sense that it often has where Roman influence is strong, as an equivalent of *euergetes* and the Latin *patrona*. Paul says that Phoebe has been the protector or patroness of many Christians, including himself, and "for that reason" (*gar*) he asks that the Roman Christians provide her with whatever she needs during her stay in Rome. We may then infer that Phoebe is an independent women (she is probably traveling to Rome on business of her own, not solely to carry Paul's letter) who has some wealth and is also one of the leaders of the Christian group in the harbor town of Cenchreae. (Meeks, 60)

We have already seen that there were both slaves and slaveowners among the Pauline Christians. Philemon and Apphia represent the latter category, as does probably Chloe; "Chloe's people" are slaves or former slaves, and Onesimus a slave who, though not a Christian in his master's house, became one as a runaway. (Meeks, 64)

In what is usually taken to be the oldest of the extant letters, to the Christians in Thessalonica, Paul appeals to them "to strive to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business, and to work with your own hands, according to the instructions we gave you, that your behavior may be decent in the view of the outsiders and that you may not be in need." This instruction probably implies that the great majority of the Thessalonian Christians were workers, whether skilled or unskilled. (Meeks, 64)

Regarding the divisions which appeared when the Corinthian Christians gathered for the Lord's supper, vs 22 notes that their actions imply that they "despise the congregation of God" because they "humiliate those who do not have." The phrase makes it clear that the basic division is between the (relatively) rich and the (relatively) poor. Pliny's letter of advice to a young friend sounds eerily similar:

...I happened to be dining with a man – though no particular friend of his – whose elegant economy, as he called it, seemed to me a sort of stingy extravagance. The best dishes

New Testament Background 3 The Development of the Early Church

were set in front of himself and a select few, and cheap scraps of food before the rest of the company. He had even put the wine into tiny little flasks, divided into three categories, not with the idea of giving his guests the opportunity of choosing, but to make it impossible for them to refuse what they were given. One lot was intended for himself and for us, another for his lesser friends (all his friends are graded) and the third for his and our freedmen. My neighbor at the table noticed this and asked me if I approved. I said I did not. "So what do you do?" he asked. "I serve the same to everyone, for when I invite guests it is for a meal, not to make class distinctions; I have brought them as equals to the same table, so I give them the same treatment in everything." "Even the freedmen?" "Of course, for then they are my fellow-diners, not freedmen." "That must cost you a lot." "On the contrary." "How is that?" "Because my freedmen do not drink the sort of wine I do, but I drink theirs." (Meeks, 68)

Theissen believes that differing perspectives of people of different social levels were involved also in another of the conflicts that perturbed Christians at Corinth, the issue of "meat offered to idols." Those who, after conversion to Christianity, may still have had reason to accept invitations to dinner where meat would be served (10:27), perhaps in the shrine of a pagan deity (8:10), are likely to have been the more affluent members of the group, who would still have had some social or business obligations that were more important to their roles in the larger society than were comparable connections among people of a lower status. The difference is not absolute, however, for Christian clients of non-Christian patrons would surely also sometimes have found themselves in this position. But the poor in fact rarely ate meat. (Meeks, 69)

Also in Corinth the status of women became a matter of controversy. There were women who headed households, who ran businesses and had independent wealth, who traveled with their own slaves and helpers. Some who are married have become converts to this exclusive religious cult without the consent of their husbands (1 Cor 7:13), and they may, though Paul advises against it, initiate divorce. Moreover, women have taken on some of the same roles as men's within the sect itself. Some exercise charismatic functions like prayer and prophecy within the congregation; others are Paul's fellow workers as evangelists and teachers. Both in terms of their participation in the Christian communities, then, a number of women broke through the normal expectations of female roles. It is not surprising that this produced tensions within the groups, and that the tortuous theological compromise stated by Paul in 1 Cor 11:2-16 would not settle the issue. Later in the received form of the same letter, a discussion of ecstatic speech and prophecy in the assemblies is interrupted by an absolute prohibition of women from speaking in the meetings, requiring them to be "subordinate" and to "ask their own husbands at home if they want to learn something" (14:33-36) (Meeks, 71)

Paul declared that 'there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3.28). But Paul was talking about spiritual equality, and he was not alone in affirming the spiritual equality of women and simultaneously maintaining their traditional social roles: these were standard assumptions of Platonist and Stoic philosophy. Slaves, likewise, were told that they were spiritually no different from free people, but they

New Testament Background 3

The Development of the Early Church

could not expect their church to buy them out or their Christian owner to free them; rather, they were to serve the better for love of Christ. (Clark, 29)

The “typical” Christian, the one who most often signals his presence in the letters by one or another small clue, is a free artisan or small trader. Some even in those occupational categories had houses, slaves, the ability to travel, and other signs of wealth. Some of the wealthy provided housing, meeting places, and other services for individual Christians and for whole groups. In effect, they filled the roles of patrons. (Meeks, 73)

It was mostly out of this rank and file that legends and writings arose with a very different tone from that of Justin and the other Christian scholars. The miraculous plays a central role in these writings, even to the point of the ridiculous. Thus, for instance, in one of the Apocryphal Gospels, young Jesus amuses himself by breaking the water jars of his playmates and throwing the pieces into a well. When the other boys burst into tears, saying that their parents will punish them for having broken the jars, Jesus orders the water to return the broken jars and these come up unscathed. Or, when Jesus wishes to be atop a tree, he does not climb like other boys. He simply orders the tree to bend down to him, sits on it, and tells the tree to return to its original position. (Gonzalez, 107)

A Pauline congregation generally reflected a fair cross-section of urban society. We may venture the generalization that the most active and prominent members of Paul’s circle (including Paul himself) are people of high status inconsistency. They are upwardly mobile; their achieved status is higher than their attributed status. Is that more than accidental? Are there some specific characteristics of early Christianity that would be attractive to status-inconsistents? Or is it only that people with the sorts of drive, abilities, and opportunities that produced such mixed status would tend to stand out in any group they joined, and thus to be noticed for the record? (Meeks, 73)

Leadership

Of the apostles, Peter and John seem to have been foremost, for Acts gives several indications of this, and they are two of the “pillars” to whom Paul refers in Galatians 2:9. The third such pillar, however, was not one of the twelve. He was James, the brother of the Lord. According to Paul (1 Cor. 15:7), the risen Jesus had appeared to James. Whether because of his blood ties with Jesus, or for some other reason, James soon became the leader of the church in Jerusalem. (Gonzalez, 28)

It is now commonly recognized that the term “apostle” represented no office in Paul’s own time, but it did point to functions that carried authority in the missionary activities of the Christians. We need not enter into the long discussion by modern scholars about the origins of the notion and its historical development. The Greek word we transliterate apostle meant at its simplest level “agent” or “envoy,” and Paul could use the word ambassador or its verb as a synonym: “For Christ, then, we are acting as ambassadors, as God is making his appeal through us” (2 Cor 5:20). There were in fact a good many apostles in the early Christian movement, and

New Testament Background 3 The Development of the Early Church

some of them crossed paths with Paul and had some effect on the way that patterns of authority were taking shape in his mission area. First of all, there were the ones in Jerusalem, “the apostles before me” (Gal 1:17). These earlier apostles, in Paul’s terms, were in fact a large and , so far as we can see, not well-defined group. His list of witnesses of the resurrection names, in order, Cephas, the Twelve, “more than five hundred brothers,” James, “all the apostles,” and then himself, “last of all...least of the apostles” (1 Cor 15:5-9). There are also Andronicus and (his wife?) Junia, who were probably fellow Tarsians or fellow Cilicians, became Christians before Paul did, and were “notable among the apostles.” The rivals who appeared in Corinth in Paul’s absence and won some considerable following there with their claims to superior authority were also “apostles”, as Paul’s attack on them makes clear (2 Cor 11:5, 13) (Meeks, 131-132)

Foremost among the techniques of contact and influence over the congregations were return visits by the missionaries to the groups they had planted, and when a visit was not possible, letters. These contacts were important for the development of perceptions and attitudes, a sense of solidarity transcending local groups. There were instructions to be given, often in response to reports of specific local problems; there were general reminders of the mode of life deemed appropriate for the new faith; there were arguments against viewpoints that Paul regarded as unacceptable; there were even directives for quite specific actions such as the discipline of deviants and procedures for the Jerusalem collection. (Meeks, 114)

We hear a number of times in the letters about messengers from one church to another or between the churches and Paul. (Meeks, 133)

Acts and the Pauline letters make no mention of formal offices in the early Pauline congregations. The first letter admonishes the Thessalonian Christians to acknowledge “those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you.” Yet this seems to name functions more than offices. The same is true in the longer lists of leaders and functions in 1 Cor 12:8-10, 28-30; Rom 12:6-8; Eph 4:11. These list for example apostles, prophets, teachers, miracle workers, people with gifts of healing, people who speak in tongues, evangelists, patrons and donors, shepherds, etc. Although some leaders were financial benefactors of the congregations, other types of leaders were supported by the congregations from a very early time. Roles do not become fully institutionalized, though, until the turn of the century and afterward, as we see in the letter of Clement from Rome, the letters of Ignatius, and the Pastorals. (Meeks, 134-135)

They referred to themselves as a/ the “church,” the same term used of the people of Israel in their Bible: (qahal, congregation), often translated as ἐκκλησία (ekklēsia, assembly, church) in the LXX. (Boring, 141)

Not all first-century Christian communities had the same structures at the same time. Yet by the middle of the second century, a substantially uniform pattern of local ministry was coming to prevail throughout the Christian world. In each city, the Christians tended to have a principal leader and pastor, called *episkopos* – “bishop” or, more literally, “overseer” or

New Testament Background 3 The Development of the Early Church

“superintendent.” The *episkopos* worked on the one hand with a body of colleagues called *presbuteroi* (“elders”) and on the other with a set of assistants who “served” him in his administrative and pastoral functions – the *diakonoi*, or “deacons.” (Walker, 45)

In spite of the statement in Acts that Paul and Barnabas “appointed elders for them in every church,” the letters of Paul make no mention of established church officers and certainly none of elders. It is true that 1 Thessalonians 5:12 refers to persons who “are over you in the Lord,” and that Philippians 1:1 includes the “bishops and deacons” among the “saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi.” On the other hand, Paul’s Corinthian correspondence contains no such references, nor indeed do any of the others among his undoubted letters. (Walker, 46)

1 Clement (c. 96 CE) mentions elders as officers in the church, but everything in the letter goes to suggest that it uses “elder” and “bishop” as interchangeable words for the same office. (Walker, 47)

The Didache almost certainly reflects a transitional situation, in which the authority of local officers has to be commended in the face of charismatic appeal of traveling “apostles” and “prophets,” who occasionally showed a tendency to charlatanism. Didache accordingly gives rules for distinguishing false prophets from true (the false prophet asks for money and does not practice what he preaches) and exhorts its readers to “elect” for themselves “bishops and deacons who are a credit to the Lord.” The Pastoral Epistles unlike *Didache*, mention elders as well as deacons and bishops, but one passage in Titus seems to suggest that here, as in 1 Clement, “elder” and “bishop” denote the same individuals. In describing the work of the elder-bishop, the Pastorals place emphasis on three matters. The bishop is, first, to be a model of Christian life: “no drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and no lover of money.” Second, he is to be an apt manager of affairs – an administrator. Above all, though, he is to be a “teacher,” to “follow the patten of sound words.” (Walker, 48)

What stands out in the Ignatian letters is the fact that in all the churches he addresses (except that of Rome), he presupposes not a twofold ministry of elder-bishops and deacons, but a threefold structure in which the office of bishop is clearly distinguished from that of elder. In each of these churches there is one bishop, who governs with a body of elders and has him “ministers” in the deacons. It is thus in the Ignatian letters that the historian first encounters the ministerial structure which, in the course of the second century, came to prevail in all the churches. [see for example, Ignatius’ letter to the Ephsians, c. 107-110 CE] (Walker, 48)

Special status and responsibility in each church came to be assigned to an elder who regularly chaired meetings of what Ignatius calls “the presbytery.” This hypothesis finds some confirmation in the fact that, even after the development of the monarchical episcopate, bishops seem often to have been referred to as “elders.” The third-century church order known as the *Didascalia Apostolorum* identifies the chief pastor of a local church as “bishop and head among the presbytery,” and it is clear that for a long time elders were regarded not as the bishop’s representatives or delegates but as his colleagues. (Walker, 49)

New Testament Background 3 The Development of the Early Church

Assemblies and Worship

A central aspect of their new self-understanding was that the eschatological gift of the Spirit was powerfully present in their midst. The Holy Spirit, the spirit of prophecy, understood by some streams of Jewish tradition to have ceased in the time of Ezra, was expected to reappear in the final period of history. This Spirit, already active in the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus, had now called the eschatological community into being. The church was not the project of perceptive disciples who saw in Jesus what the Jewish leaders had missed, not a “worthy cause” created by interested human beings concerned to continue Jesus’ program. The initiative was from God’s side. God had raised up Jesus and sent the Spirit. This awareness was accompanied and reinforced by signs, including especially the rebirth of prophecy, charismatic gifts of healing, and glossolalia— the latter a distinctively Gentile expression of the Spirit. (Boring, 141)

By the time the Pauline letters were written, churches were worshiping on the Lord’s Day, the first day of the week (Sunday; see 1 Cor 16: 2; Acts 20: 7; Rev 1: 10). While we have no documentation on the details of how the transition was made, we may readily imagine that when the Sabbath ended at dusk on Saturday, the community of believers in Jesus would make their way to their own gatherings in people’s houses (see Acts 2: 46– 47), where they would worship with Christian songs and prayers (such as the Lord’s Prayer and the sort of hymns and prayers found in the canticles of Luke 1– 2). In Jewish reckoning in which the new day began at sunset, this late Saturday evening worship was on Sunday, the first day of the week. (Boring, 142)

At the beginning, the Christian calendar was rather simple and was basically a weekly calendar. Every Sunday was a sort of Easter, and a day of joy; and every Friday was a day of penance, fasting, and sorrow. Part of what took place at Easter was the baptism of new converts and their being added to the congregation. Justin tells us that “once those who have believed have been washed and joined us, we take them to where those who are called brothers and sisters are gathered, in order to offer fervent prayers for ourselves, for the recently illumined, and for all others all over the world. [. . .] Then there is the kiss of peace, the president is given bread and a cup of wine and water . . . ,” and the Eucharist is celebrated. In preparation for these events, that usually took place at Easter, there was a time of fasting and penance. This is the origin of our present-day Lent. Pentecost, a feast of Jewish origin, was also celebrated by Christians from a very early date. The earliest feast day in connection with the birth of Jesus was January 6, Epiphany, the day of his manifestation. This was originally the celebration of the birth itself. Later, particularly in some areas of the Latin-speaking West, December 25 began to take its place. This latter date was actually a pagan festival which, after the time of Constantine (the fourth century), was preempted by the celebration of Christmas. (Gonzalez, 111-112)

The growth of the Gentile church brought about a number of changes, particularly in the life of worship. When Christians were expelled from the synagogues as false Jews, they began gathering in private houses, at least on Sunday for the breaking of the bread, but often more frequently for instruction and for joint support in the increasingly difficult task of living as

New Testament Background 3 The Development of the Early Church

Christians in a hostile world. When most converts were either Jews or God-fearers, the church could take for granted that they already knew most of the fundamentals of Christian faith and ethics—the worship of only one God, creation of all things by this God, chastity, honesty, etc. But as increasing numbers of Gentiles sought to join the church it was found necessary to provide for them more extensive periods of teaching and training before they were admitted into the church by baptism. Thus, the catechumenate arose. As part of this process, the service came to be divided in two main parts: the “service of the Word,” and the “service of the table.” In the former, extensive portions of scripture were read and interpreted both to guide those who were already baptized and for the instruction of catechumens. Then those who were not yet baptized were dismissed, and the congregation proceeded to the service of the table—communion. (Gonzalez, 35)

“When you come together” is a clause that Paul uses several times in his correspondence with the Corinthian saints. The verb *synerchesthai*, quite simply “to come together,” occurs in five verses of 1 Cor – all referring to meetings “to eat the Lord’s supper.” (Meeks, 142)

Throughout most of its history, the Christian church has seen in communion its normal and highest act of worship. Only after the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century—and in many cases much later—did it become common practice in many Protestant churches to focus their worship on preaching rather than on communion. (Gonzalez, 108)

The most remarkable characteristic of those early communion services was that they were celebrations. The tone was one of joy and gratitude, rather than sorrow and repentance. In the beginning, communion was part of an entire meal. Believers brought what they could, and after the common meal there were special prayers over the bread and the wine. However, by the beginning of the second century the common meal was being set aside, perhaps for fear of persecution, or in order to quell the rumors about orgiastic “love feasts,” or perhaps simply because the growing number of believers made it necessary. But even then, the original tone of joy remained. (Gonzalez, 108)

Justin Martyr wrote, “The day that is commonly called Sunday all those [believers] who live in the cities or the fields gather, and in their meetings as much as time allows is read from the memoirs of the apostles or from the writings of the prophets. Then, once the reader is through, the one presiding offers a verbal exhortation, urging us to follow these beautiful examples. Immediately after this, we all stand as one and raise our prayers, after which—as I have already said—bread, wine, and water are offered, and the president, as he is able, also sends to God his prayers and thanksgiving, and all the people respond, “Amen.” Now follows the distribution and partaking of the nourishment that has been consecrated by thanksgiving, and they are sent by means of the deacons to those who are not present. Those who can and will, freely give what seems best to them, and the offering is given to the president. With this he helps orphans and widows, those who are in need because of illness or any other reason, those who are in prison, sojourners, and, in short, the president provides for any who are in need. We hold this general gathering on Sunday, because it is the first day, in which God, transforming darkness and

New Testament Background 3 The Development of the Early Church

matter, created the world, and also the day in which Jesus Christ, our Savior, rose from the dead.” (Gonzalez, 109)

From these and other sources we know that at least since the second century there were two main parts in a communion service. First there were readings of scripture and commentaries on them, with prayers and hymn singing. Since at that time it was almost impossible for an individual Christian to possess a copy of scripture, this first part of the service was often the only way in which believers came to know the Bible, and therefore this part of the service was rather extensive—sometimes lasting for hours. Then, after dismissing those who were not baptized with a prayer and blessing, came the second part of the service, communion proper, which opened with the kiss of peace. After the kiss, the bread and wine were brought forth and presented to the one presiding, who then offered a prayer over the elements. In this prayer, often lengthy, the saving acts of God were usually recounted, and the power of the Holy Spirit was invoked over the bread and the wine. Then the bread was broken and shared, the common cup was passed, and the meeting ended with a benediction. This service was also the occasion for the sharing with those in need, for whom an offering was collected. Elsewhere, Justin also says that “whatever we have we make common, and this we share with those who are in need.” (Gonzalez, 109)

Another early custom was to gather for communion at the tombs of the faithful. Many heroes of the faith were buried there, and Christians believed that communion joined them not only among themselves and with Jesus Christ, but also with their ancestors in the faith. This was particularly true in the case of martyrs. As early as the middle of the second century, it was customary to gather at their tombs on the anniversary of their deaths, and there to celebrate communion. (Gonzalez, 110)

The earliest extant letter specifies that the letter is to be read “to all the brothers” (1 Thess 5:27). In the letter to Colossae, Paul’s surrogate takes for granted the reading of this letter in the assembly, and gives instructions that it also be read in Laodicea, and the Laodicean letter in Colossae (Col 4:16). The form of all the Pauline letters assumes that they will be read at a regular gathering of the *ekklesia*. (Meeks, 143)

What happened in the assemblies? The closest thing we have in the letters to outright description is the series of admonitions in 1 Cor 11 and 14. Some of the actions mentioned there are confirmed for other places by mention in other letters. “When you assemble,” writes Paul, “each has a psalm, a teaching, a revelation, a tongue, and interpretation” (14:26). As Barrett remarks, “Church meetings in Corinth can scarcely have suffered from dullness.” Let us begin with the psalm. There are a number of clues that chanting and singing were normal parts of the Christian meetings. Both Col 3:16f. and the parallel text, Eph 5:18-20 - both probably adapting traditional language – speak of “psalms, hymns, and spiritual odes.” The psalms may have included some from the biblical psalter (OT book of Psalms), which was very important in early Christian interpretation and apologetic. Most though were probably original Christian compositions or adaptations. Perhaps we even have some examples of those psalms, hymns, and spiritual odes. It is widely agreed that Paul quoted one in Phil 2:6-11. (Meeks, 145)

New Testament Background 3

The Development of the Early Church

Of course the assemblies included prayer. How formal was it? The fact that one could pray either “by tongue” or “rationally” (“with the mind,” 1 Cor 14:13-15) suggests some mixture of the spontaneous and the customary. (Meeks, 147)

One of the most vivid (and noisiest) activities in the Pauline assemblies was glossolalia (speaking in tongues) – at least that was the case in Corinth, and the source used by the author of Acts for his Pentecost story probably presupposes a widespread phenomenon in the early churches. We would form a seriously distorted picture of these meetings, however, if we were to assume that glossolalia and other manifestations of spirit possession were formless, while ritual behavior was pure form. Neither is true. Not only does glossolalia in modern groups occur at predictable times in the service, framed by rather clearly defined ritual procedures; there are also quite specific verbal formulas and physical actions that to some extent channel and limit the ecstatic behavior. Paul, at least, thought the same was true at Corinth, for he gives explicit directions about the number of glossolalists who are to be permitted to speak and clearly expects that the charisma can be controlled within the framework of the other ritual procedures we have been describing. Thus we are led to a conclusion that at first might have seemed paradoxical: that such exotic and presumably spontaneous behavior as speaking in tongues is also ritual. It occurred within the framework of the assembly, performed by persons who were expected to do it. It happened at predictable times, accompanied by distinctive bodily movements, perhaps introduced and followed by characteristic phrases in natural language. (Meeks, 148-149)

In Acts we are told that people were baptized as soon as they were converted. This was feasible in the early Christian community, where most converts came from Judaism or had been influenced by it, and thus had a basic understanding of the meaning of Christian life and proclamation. But, as the church became increasingly Gentile, it was necessary to require a period of preparation, trial, and instruction prior to baptism. This was the “catechumenate,” which by the beginning of the third century lasted up to three years. During that time, catechumens received instruction on Christian doctrine, and were to give signs in their daily lives of the depth of their conviction. As the date approached for their baptism, they were taught the meaning of the creed or baptismal formula that they would be asked to affirm at their baptism. Finally, shortly before being baptized, they were examined and added to the list of those to be baptized. Baptism was usually administered once a year, on Easter Sunday. Early in the third century it was customary for those about to be baptized to fast on Friday and Saturday, and to be baptized very early Sunday morning, which was the time of the resurrection of Jesus. The candidates were completely naked, the men separate from the women. On emerging from the waters, the neophytes were given white robes, as a sign of their new life in Christ (see Col. 3:9-12 and Rev. 3:4). Then they were anointed, thus making them part of the royal priesthood. After all the candidates were baptized, they went in procession to the meeting place, where the neophytes joined the rest of the congregation and partook of communion for the first time. The newly baptized were then given water to drink, as a sign that they were thoroughly cleansed, both outside and inside. And they were also given milk and honey, as a sign of the Promised Land into which they were now entering. Baptism was

New Testament Background 3

The Development of the Early Church

normally performed by immersion or with the neophyte kneeling in the water, and then having water poured over the head. The Didache or Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, a document of uncertain date, prefers that it be done in “living”—that is, running—water. But where water was scarce it could be administered by pouring water three times over the head, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. To this day, scholars are not in agreement as to whether the early church baptized infants. By the late second or early third century, there are texts indicating that at least sometimes the children of Christian parents were baptized as infants. (Gonzalez, 112-113)

The fact that baptism could be construed as a symbolic burial with Christ (Rom 6:4; Col 2:12) suggests a complete immersion in water. That was the case with the normal Jewish rite of purification. However, the little manual of church order called the Didache provides for pouring water three times over the head. Most of the artistic depictions of baptism, in Roman catacombs and sarcophagi show the candidate standing in water, with the officiant pouring water over his head. The earliest (early 3rd century) identifiable Christian meetinghouse discovered by archaeologists, at Dura-Europos on the Euphrates, contained a basin that would hardly suffice for immersion. The Christian converts were baptized naked. Analogy with the Jewish rites might suggest that; it is explicit in the Roman practice described by Hippolytus and indicated in all the early portrayals of baptism in Christian art. What confirms the fact for the Pauline groups is the variety of metaphorical allusions to taking off and putting on clothing. Those allusions are of two sorts: the mythical notion of taking off the body, the “old human,” and putting on instead Christ, the “new human”; and the rather common ethical figure of taking off bad habits (sin) and putting on virtuous ones. (Meeks, 151)

At an early date at least some Christians began fasting, not on Mondays and Thursdays, like the Jews, but rather on Wednesdays and Fridays. It may be that this shift took place in commemoration of the betrayal and the crucifixion. (Gonzalez, 27)

Persecution

Herod Agrippa, the grandson of Herod the Great, ordered the death of James the brother of John—not to be confused with James the brother of Jesus and head of the community. When this move was well received by his subjects, Herod had Peter arrested, but he escaped. In 62 CE the other James, the brother of Jesus, was killed by order of the high priest, even against the desire and advice of some of the Pharisees. Soon thereafter, the leaders of the Christian community in Jerusalem decided to move to Pella, a city beyond the Jordan River, the population of which was mostly Gentile. This move seems to have been prompted, not only by persecution at the hands of the Jews, but also by Roman suspicion regarding the exact nature of the new religious sect. At that time, Jewish nationalism had reached the boiling point, and in 66 CE, a rebellion broke out four years later that would lead to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman armies. (Gonzalez 28)

The result of all this was that the ancient Jewish church, rejected by both Jews and Gentiles, found itself in increasing isolation. Although by 135 CE a number of Jewish Christians had

New Testament Background 3 **The Development of the Early Church**

returned to Jerusalem, their relationship with the rest of Christianity had been almost entirely severed, and leadership had passed to Gentile Christians. (Gonzalez, 29)

Many Jews believed, with some biblical foundation, that the reason why they had lost their independence and been made subjects of the Roman Empire was that the people had not been sufficiently faithful to the traditions of their ancestors. Nationalistic and patriotic sentiment was aroused by the fear that these new heretics could once more bring the wrath of God upon Israel. For these reasons, in most of the New Testament it is the Jews who persecute Christians, who in turn seek refuge under the wing of Roman authorities. This happens, for instance, when some Jews in Corinth accuse Paul before Proconsul Gallio, saying that “this man is persuading men to worship God contrary to the Law,” to which Gallio answers, “If it were a matter of wrongdoing or vicious crime, I should have reason to hear you, O Jews; but since it is a matter of questions about words and names and your own law, see to it yourselves; I refuse to be a judge of these things” (Acts 18:14-15). Later, when there is a riot because some claim that Paul has brought a Gentile to the Temple, and some Jews try to kill the apostle, it is the Romans who save his life. Thus, Romans, Jews, and Christians agreed that what was taking place was a conflict among Jews. As long as things were relatively orderly, Romans preferred to stay out of such matters. But when there was a riot or any disorderly conduct, they intervened to restore order, and sometimes to punish the disorderly. A good illustration of this policy was the expulsion of Jews from Rome by Emperor Claudius, around the year 51 CE Acts 18:2 mentions this expulsion, but does not explain the reason for it. Suetonius, a Roman historian, says that Jews were expelled from the capital city for their disorderly conduct “because of Chrestus.” Most historians agree that “Chrestus” is none other than Christus, and that what actually took place in Rome was that Christian proclamation caused so many riots among Jews that the emperor decided to expel the lot. At that time, Romans still saw the conflict between Christians and Jews as an internal matter within Judaism. But the distinction between Christians and Jews became clearer as the church gained more converts from the Gentile population, and the ratio of Jews in its ranks diminished. There are also indications that, as Jewish nationalism increased and eventually led to rebellion against Rome, Christians—particularly the Gentiles among them—sought to put as much distance as possible between themselves and that movement. The result was that Roman authorities began to become cognizant of Christianity as a religion quite different from Judaism. This new consciousness of Christianity as a separate religion was at the root of two and a half centuries of persecution by the Roman Empire, from the time of Nero to the conversion of Constantine. Jews were normally exempt from the expectation that they worship the emperor. Thus, as long as Christianity was considered a variant of Judaism, its adherents would not normally be required to worship the emperor, and their refusal to do so would not be considered an act of rebellion or disobedience, but a matter of religious conviction. But once it became clear that not all Christians were Jews, and that this new religion was spreading throughout the empire, authorities would demand that Christians, like any other subjects of the empire, show their loyalty by worshiping the emperor. (Gonzalez, 43)

On the night of June 18, 64 CE, a great fire broke out in Rome. It appears that Nero was several miles away, in his palace at Antium, and that as soon as he heard the news he hurried to Rome, where he tried to organize the fight against the fire. He opened to the homeless the gardens of

New Testament Background 3

The Development of the Early Church

his palace, as well as other public buildings. In spite of this, there were those who suspected the emperor, whom many believed was mad, of having ordered that certain sections of the city be put to the torch. The fire lasted six days and seven nights, and then flared up sporadically for three more days. Ten of the fourteen sections of the city were destroyed. In the midst of their sufferings, the people clamored for justice. Soon the rumor arose—and persists to this day in many history books—that Nero had ordered the city destroyed so he could rebuild it according to his fancy. The Roman historian Tacitus, who may well have been present at the time, records several of the rumors that circulated, but seems inclined to believe that the fire began accidentally in an oil warehouse. More and more, the people began to suspect the emperor. Nero tried to allay such suspicions, but it soon became clear that he would not succeed in this as long as there was no one else to blame. Two of the areas that had not burned had many Jewish and Christian residents. Therefore, the emperor decided to blame the Christians. It is very likely that both Peter and Paul were among the Neronian martyrs. On the other hand, there is no mention of any persecution outside the city of Rome, and therefore it is quite likely that this persecution, although exceedingly cruel, was limited to the capital of the empire. (Gonzalez, 44-46)

Since the Temple had been destroyed in 70, Domitian decided that all Jews should remit to the imperial coffers the annual offering they would otherwise have sent to Jerusalem. Some Jews refused to obey, while others sent the money but made clear that Rome had not taken the place of Jerusalem. In response, Domitian enacted strict laws against Judaism, and insisted on the offering in even harsher terms. Since at that time the distinction between Jews and Christians was not clear in the minds of Roman authorities, imperial functionaries began persecuting any who followed “Jewish practices.” Thus began a new persecution, which seems to have been directed against both Jews and Christians. In Asia Minor, this persecution resulted in the writing of the book of Revelation, whose author was exiled on the island of Patmos. There are indications that many were killed, and for generations the church in Asia Minor remembered the reign of Domitian as a time of trial. (Gonzalez, 46-48)

Defining the Boundaries of Belief

The many converts who joined the early church came from a wide variety of backgrounds. This variety enriched the church and gave witness to the universality of its message. But it also resulted in widely differing interpretations of that message. Such different interpretations should not surprise us, for at the time Christianity was still ill-defined—to the point that it would probably be better to speak of “Christianities,” in the plural. There certainly were in it varying views and emphases, as any reader of the New Testament can still see when comparing, for instance, the Gospel of Mark with John, Romans, and Revelation. But, were all the existing views and interpretations equally valid or acceptable? Was there not the danger that, within the still undefined limits of Christianity, there would be interpretations that would threaten its integrity? The danger was increased by the syncretism of the time, which sought truth, not by adhering to a single system of doctrine, but by taking bits and pieces from various systems. The result was that, while many claimed the name of Christ, some interpreted that name in a manner that others felt obscured or even denied the very core of his message. In

New Testament Background 3 **The Development of the Early Church**

response to such threats, what would become known as orthodox Christianity began to define itself by reaffirming such elements of its Jewish heritage as the doctrines of creation, of the positive value of the created world, of the rule of God over all of history, of the resurrection of the body—a doctrine learned from the Pharisees—and a coming final reign of God. In order to reaffirm such doctrines, it developed a series of instruments—creeds, the canon of scripture, apostolic succession—that would set limits on orthodoxy and would long remain central themes in Christian life and teaching. (Gonzalez, 69)

Of all the differing interpretations of Christianity, none seemed as dangerous, nor as close to victory, as was Gnosticism. This was not a well-defined organization in competition with the church; rather, it was a vast and amorphous movement that existed both within and outside of Christianity. Within Judaism, partly as a response to the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple in 70, some embraced Gnostic ideas, thus giving birth to a Gnostic Judaism that contradicted much of traditional Jewish teachings—particularly regarding divine creation and the goodness of the created world. Likewise, when Gnosticism incorporated the name of Christ and other items from the Judeo-Christian tradition into its diverse systems, it did so in such terms that other Christians felt that some crucial elements of their faith were being denied. (Gonzalez, 70)

The name Gnosticism is derived from the Greek word *gnosis*, which means “knowledge.” According to the Gnostics, they possessed a special, mystical knowledge, reserved for those with true understanding. That knowledge was the secret key to salvation. Salvation was the main concern of the Gnostics. Drawing from several sources, the Gnostics came to the conclusion that all matter is evil, or at best unreal. A human being is in reality an eternal spirit (or part of the eternal spirit) that somehow has been imprisoned in a body. Since the body is a prison to the spirit, and since it misleads us as to our true nature, it is evil. The world is not our true home, but rather an obstacle to the salvation of the spirit—a view which, although officially rejected by orthodox Christianity, has frequently been part of it. Gnosticism affirmed that originally all reality was spiritual. The Supreme Being had no intention of creating a material world, but only a spiritual one. Thus, a number of spiritual beings were generated. It is at this point that the “endless genealogies” that the heresiologists describe find their place in the various Gnostic systems. Gnostic teachers did not agree as to the exact number of spiritual beings standing before the original spiritual “abyss” and the present world, with some systems positing up to 365 such spiritual beings or “eons.” In any case, one of these eons, far removed from the Supreme Being, fell into error, and thus created the material world. That is what the world is in Gnosticism: an abortion of the spirit, and not a divine creation. But, since this world was made by a spiritual being, there are still “sparks” or “bits” of spirit in it. It is these that have been imprisoned in human bodies and must be liberated through *gnosis*. (Gonzalez, 70-71)

In Christian Gnosticism—one should always remember that there were also non-Christian Gnostics—that messenger is Christ. What Christ has then done is to come to earth in order to remind us of our heavenly origin, and to give us the secret knowledge without which we cannot return to the spiritual mansions. Since Christ is a heavenly messenger, and since body and

New Testament Background 3

The Development of the Early Church

matter are evil, most Christian Gnostics rejected the notion that Christ had a body like ours. Some said that his body was an appearance, a sort of ghost that miraculously seemed to be a real body. Many distinguished between the heavenly “Christ” and the earthly “Jesus,” apparently believing that the latter was merely the shell in which Christ appeared. In some cases, this was coupled with the notion that Jesus did have a body, but that this was of a “spiritual matter,” different from ours. Most denied the birth of Jesus, which would have put him under the power of the material world. All these notions are various degrees of what the church at large called Docetism—a name derived from a Greek word meaning “to seem”—for all of them implied, in one way or another, that the body of Jesus appeared to be fully human, but was not. (Gonzalez, 72)

Marcion, whose father was bishop of Sinope, profoundly disliked both Judaism and the material world. He thus developed an understanding of Christianity that was both anti-Jewish and anti-material. He went to Rome, around the year 144, and there he gathered a following. But eventually the church at large came to the conclusion that his doctrines contradicted several fundamental points in Christian doctrine. He then founded his own church, which lasted for several centuries as a rival to the orthodox church. This means that the Hebrew scriptures are indeed inspired by a god, although this is Yahweh, and not the Supreme Father. Yahweh is an arbitrary god, who chooses a particular people above all the rest. And he is also vindictive, constantly keeping an account on those who disobey him, and punishing them. In short, Yahweh is a god of justice—and of an arbitrary justice at that. Over against Yahweh, and far above him, is the Father of Christians. This God is not vindictive, but loving. This God requires nothing of us, but rather gives everything freely, including salvation. This God does not seek to be obeyed, but to be loved. It is out of compassion for us—Yahweh’s creatures—that the Supreme God has sent his Son to save us. But Jesus was not really born of Mary, since such a thing would have made him subject to Yahweh. Rather, he simply appeared as a grown man during the reign of Tiberius, and his body was not made of material flesh. Naturally, at the end there will be no judgment, since the Supreme God is absolutely loving, and will simply forgive us. All of this led Marcion to set the Hebrew scriptures aside. If the Old Testament was the Word of an inferior god, it should not be read in the churches, nor used as the basis of Christian instruction. In order to fill this gap, Marcion compiled a list of books that he considered true Christian scriptures. These were the Epistles of Paul—according to Marcion, one of the few who had really understood Jesus’ message—and the Gospel of Luke, who had been Paul’s companion. All other ancient Christian books were plagued by Jewish views. As to the many quotations from the Old Testament in Luke and Paul, Marcion explained them away as interpolations—the handiwork of Judaizers seeking to subvert the original message. Marcion posed an even greater threat to the church than did the Gnostics. Like them, he rejected or radically reinterpreted the doctrines of creation, incarnation, and resurrection. But he went beyond them in that he organized a church with its own bishops and its own scripture. For a number of years, this rival church achieved a measure of success, and even after it was clearly defeated it lingered on for centuries. (Gonzalez, 74)

Marcion’s list was the first attempt to put together a “New Testament.” When early Christians spoke of “Scripture,” what they meant was the Hebrew scriptures, usually in the Greek version

New Testament Background 3 **The Development of the Early Church**

known as the Septuagint (Syriac-speaking Christians used a similar translation into their language). It was also customary to read in church passages from one or several of our present four Gospels, as well as from the Epistles—particularly Paul's. Since there was no approved list, different Gospels were read in different churches, and the same was true of other books. But Marcion's challenge required a response; and thus the church at large began to compile a list of sacred Christian writings. This was not done in a formal manner, through a council or special meeting. What actually happened was that a consensus developed gradually. While very soon there was general agreement as to the basic books to be included in the canon of the New Testament, it took a long time to come to an absolute consensus on every minor detail. There was also no question, except among Gnostics and Marcionites, that the Hebrew scriptures were part of the Christian canon. (Gonzalez, 75)

Another element in the church's response to heresies was the use of various creeds, particularly in baptism. Quite often the church in a particular city had its own creedal formula, although similar to others in neighboring cities. Apparently what happened was that a "daughter" church used the formula it had learned from the "mother church," although with some variations. On this basis, scholars have classified ancient creeds into "families," and such families can then be used to trace the relationship among various churches. One of these creeds was an earlier and shorter formulation of what we now call the Apostles' Creed. The notion that the apostles gathered before beginning their mission and composed this creed, each suggesting a clause, is pure fiction. The truth is that its basic text was put together, probably in Rome, around the year 150. Due to its use in Rome, the ancient form of the Apostles' Creed is called "R" by scholars. At the time, however, it was called "the symbol of the faith." The word symbol in this context did not mean what it does to us today; rather, it meant "a means of recognition," such as a token that a general gave to a messenger, so that the recipient could recognize a true messenger. Likewise, the "symbol" put together in Rome was a means whereby Christians could distinguish true believers from those who followed the various heresies circulating at the time, particularly Gnosticism and Marcionism. Any who could affirm this creed were neither Gnostics nor Marcionites. One of the main uses of this "symbol" was in baptism, where it was presented to the candidate in the form of a series of three questions: Do you believe in God, the Father almighty? Do you believe in Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who was born of the Holy Ghost and of Mary the Virgin, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and died, and rose again at the third day, living from among the dead, and ascended unto heaven and sat at the right of the Father, and will come to judge the quick and the dead? Do you believe in the Holy Ghost, the Holy Church, and the resurrection of the flesh? This is the core of what historians call "the old Roman symbol," or simply R. It is obvious that this creed—like most ancient creeds—has been built around the trinitarian formula that was used in baptism. Since one was baptized "in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost," these questions were posed as a test of true belief in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Closer scrutiny reveals that this early creed is directed against Marcion and the Gnostics. First of all, the Greek word *pantokrator*, usually translated as "almighty," literally means "all ruling." What is meant here is that there is nothing—and certainly not the material world—which falls outside of God's rule. (Other ancient creeds say "Creator of all things visible and invisible.") The distinction between a spiritual reality that serves God and a material reality that does not is

New Testament Background 3

The Development of the Early Church

rejected. This world, its matter and its physical bodies, are part of the “all” over which God reigns. This emphasis on divine creation and rule over it and over all of history was one of the many points derived from Jewish tradition that Christians continue to hold and consider central to their faith. The creed’s most extensive paragraph is the one dealing with the Son. This is because it was precisely in their christology that Marcion and the Gnostics differed most widely from the church. First of all, we are told that Jesus Christ is the “Son of God.” Other ancient versions say “Son of the same” or “His Son,” as does our present creed. The important point here is that Jesus is the Son of the God who rules over this world and over all reality, and who is the creator of all things. The birth “of Mary the Virgin” is not there primarily in order to stress the virgin birth—although, quite clearly, that is affirmed—but rather to affirm the very fact that Jesus was born, and did not simply appear on earth, as Marcion and others claimed. The reference to Pontius Pilate is not there to put the blame on the Roman governor, but rather to date the event, thus insisting that it was a historical, datable event. And docetism is further denied by declaring that Jesus “was crucified . . . died, and rose again.” Finally, it is affirmed that this same Jesus will return “to judge”—a notion that Marcion would never accept. The third clause, although less explicit because the needs of the time did not require it to be extensive, also shows the same concern. The holy church is affirmed because, over against the Gnostics with their many schools and Marcion with his own church, Christians were beginning to underscore the authority of the church. And the “resurrection of the flesh” is a final rejection of any notion that the flesh is evil or of no consequence. While an analysis of R helps us understand the original purpose of the Apostles’ Creed, it is important to realize that this incipient form of the Apostles’ Creed was only one of several creedal statements employed at the time in connection with baptism. Churches that had strong connections with Rome, such as those in North Africa and Gaul, used variant forms of R. But the churches in the Eastern portion of the empire—in areas such as Syria, Egypt, and Asia Minor—had their own creedal formulas. Thus, while R was the basis for the Apostles’ Creed, the Baptismal Creed of Caesarea, or some other creed of the same family, was the basis for the Nicene Creed—which was formulated in the fourth century and is the most widely accepted of the ancient creeds. (Gonzalez, 77-79)

Although the canon of the New Testament and the various creeds were valuable instruments in the struggle against heresy, the debate finally came to the issue of the authority of the church. This was important, not simply because someone had to decide who was right and who was wrong, but because of the very nature of the issues at stake. All agreed that the true message was the one taught by Jesus. The Gnostics claimed that they had some secret access to that original message, through a succession of secret teachers. Marcion claimed that he had access to that message through the writings of Paul and Luke—which, however, had to be purged of what did not agree with Marcion’s views regarding the Old Testament. Over against Marcion and the Gnostics, the church at large claimed to be in possession of the original gospel and the true teachings of Jesus. Thus, what was debated was in a way the authority of the church against the claims of the heretics. At this point, the notion of apostolic succession became very important. What was argued was simply that, if Jesus had some secret knowledge to communicate to his disciples—which in fact he did not—he would have entrusted that teaching to the same apostles to whom he entrusted the churches. If those apostles had received any such teaching, they in turn would have passed it on to those who were to follow them in the

New Testament Background 3 **The Development of the Early Church**

leadership of the various churches. Therefore, had there been any such secret teaching, it should be found among the direct disciples of the apostles, and the successors of those disciples, the bishops. But the truth was that those who could now—that is, in the second century—claim direct apostolic succession unanimously denied the existence of any such secret teaching. In conclusion, the Gnostic claim that there is a secret tradition with which they have been entrusted is false. Be it through actual bishops or through other leaders, the fact remains that the orthodox church of the second century could show its connection with the apostles in a way Marcion and the Gnostics could not. (Gonzalez, 80)

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