



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

Church History – Part One (100-1500 AD)

Lesson 8 – The Life of the Early Christians

It is very probable that most of the Christians in the first three centuries came from the lower levels of society. It is also very possible that their grasp of the true Gospel of Jesus was on firmer ground than the philosophical views of men like Justin, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen.

Already in the book of Acts we learn that Christians began to gather for joyful worship on Sunday, the day of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. It seems that at first the Lord's Supper was celebrated as a part of what was called a love feast – a regular meal that was much appreciated by the poor and needy. This connection did not continue, however, perhaps because it was misunderstood by outsiders or because it got out of hand among the believers. As time went on, the customary worship was divided into two parts:

1. The first part included extensive reading of Scripture, the singing of psalms or hymns, and prayer. Since actual copies of Bible portions were scarce, the public reading of Scriptures was a very important part of the worship, as well as the explanations and words of encouragement based on what was read.
2. The second part of the worship was the Lord's Supper, to which only those who were already baptized were invited. Those who were being catechized but not yet baptized could attend the first part of the service, but not the second.

At first, the gatherings took place in private homes. Some gatherings also took place where Christians had been buried, no doubt in order to emphasize that the Holy Christian Church was made up of two kinds of Christians: those still alive on earth and those who were already part of the Church triumphant. The oldest known building used exclusively for Christian worship was built sometime before 256 AD. It was probably a private home that had been converted to a place for worship. Since the number of Christians was growing, it probably became impossible for all the Christians in any large city to gather together as one for worship in someone's home.

Gradually it became the custom for the various Christian leaders to choose one of their number as a bishop or overseer of many congregations. Each bishop would try to remain in contact with the bishops of other congregations throughout the world.

It developed very naturally that every Sunday was a remembrance of Easter and a day of joy, and every Friday became a day of repentance and fasting. Easter was the one great feast of the year, and it became the day when those who had been converted to the Christian faith were baptized as a group. The season of Lent developed as a time of preparation for baptism

and for the Easter celebration. A bitter dispute arose, however, over when the resurrection of Jesus should be celebrated, whether it should be celebrated on the Jewish Passover or on a Sunday.

The early church did not celebrate the birth of Jesus until a later time, but early on January 6 was celebrated as a day of Jesus' manifestation (epiphany) to the world as Lord and Savior.

Although this was not the case at the beginning, by the third century the common practice was to instruct the converts over a three-year period before baptism. During these three years, they were "catechumens", and it became customary to baptize all the catechumens on Easter Sunday morning. Gonzalez tells us that "the candidates [for baptism] were completely naked, the men separated from the women. On emerging from the waters, the neophytes were given white robes, as a sign of their new life in Christ" (Gonzalez: *The Story of Christianity*, Part 1, p. 96). An early Christian manual from this time called *the Didache* (Teaching) of the Twelve Apostles mentions that baptism was done by immersion in a lake or stream, or by pouring water three times over the head, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. There is also evidence both in the Bible and in early church writings that infant baptism was practiced as a normal occurrence.

In the days of the apostles there was no distinction made between bishops (overseers or supervisors) and pastors and elders. The terms were interchangeable. But by the second century a three-fold organizational system had developed:


1. the bishop, who was supervisor over several pastors and congregations
2. the various pastors or elders in the smaller groups or congregations
3. the deacons (both men and women) who assisted in the work in different ways

It was not considered essential, however, for all the congregations to have the same kind of organization. The Lord Himself had mandated that women should not be teachers of men or have authority over them (1 Timothy 2:12). Therefore, those who were chosen as pastors or bishops were always men. They could be married like Peter or unmarried like Paul. It seems that in many cases older widows and unmarried women were given suitable work in the church and were supported by the churches.

The one consuming occupation of all the early Christians was the spread of the saving Gospel of Christ to those who did not know it. In the days of the apostles, the preaching of God's Word was often accompanied by miraculous signs, as we read about in the book of Acts. But as time went on and the writings of the New Testament became available, these confirming miracles dwindled and eventually came to an end.

It seems that most converts heard the Gospel through the witness of anonymous Christians who talked about Christ in their work, in their shops, in their kitchens, in their markets, or wherever they happened to be. We do not hear much about traveling missionaries like Paul or Barnabas, but rather traveling Christians who moved from place to place for their work or

for other reasons. For example, Aquila and Priscilla were tentmakers, and the books of Acts tell us they moved to Ephesus, Corinth, and Rome at various times in their lives.

One of the earliest Christian symbols was the sign of the fish . Early Christians could recognize other Christians by the fish symbol. The Greek word for fish is *ichthus* (ἰχθύς). The letters of this word spell out the first letters of the sentence: "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior" in Greek.

Questions:

1. What kind of persons were brought into Christ's Church in the early years?
2. What is meant by the so-called "love feast"?
3. What was included in the early church services?
4. Where did the early Christians meet for worship?
5. What was special about their Easter services?
6. What was their common practice for instructing adults in the Christian faith?
7. How was the water of baptism applied to the candidates for baptism?
8. What three-fold organization developed in many of the congregations?
9. How was the Christian Gospel spread in the Roman world of that time?
10. What can we learn from the methods and customs of these early Christians?