

# **The Uniqueness of the First-Century Church**

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This lesson draws on material from Frank Viola and George Barna's *Pagan Christianity?*

The church (*ekklesia* – the movement of “called out” people who followed the teachings of their Savior God Jesus while being empowered and led by the Holy Spirit) exploded into existence in 30 C.E. and “turned the world upside down” for the Jewish leaders in Judea. In subsequent decades, the movement spread throughout the Roman Empire and threatened the Powers wherever it appeared.

Many of us believe that this passionate, radical early life of the Christian movement ought to be the model for the church today. We strive to imitate the attitudes, beliefs, and practices of these first believers so we can have the same kind of effect on the world.

However, the way modern churches (and Christians) think and function seems quite different from what we read about in the New Testament. In this study, we will attempt to answer **WHY** the early church was so unique and powerful so we can try to restore that power among believers today.

#### **I. Early Christianity as the Anti-Religion**

It might be confusing to learn that some early pagan critics of the Jesus movement accused Christians of being atheists. This is because their worship bore little resemblance to what people experienced in Judaism or Paganism.

Whereas most religions center around holy buildings, holy men, and appeasement of the gods through sacrifices, early Christianity was unique among ancient religions in that it had:

- No temple
- No priesthood
- No sacrifices

The early Christians met in homes, they were all considered priests, and their only sacrifices were their lives of service and their worship to God in song and prayer. But what caused them to be so weird?

Religious practices are shaped by three things:

- Theological Beliefs
- Tradition
- Culture

The worship and lifestyle of the early Christians was a significant break from the religious traditions and culture of both the ancient Jews and Greco-Romans. This leaves their theological

beliefs (which they received from Christ and the apostles) as the only explanation for why they worshiped the way they did.

All three traditional markers of worship (temple, priesthood, and sacrifice) are absorbed in the New Testament's teachings on Christ and his Body. Physical temples, priesthoods, and sacrifices were merely shadows, which have now been replaced by the true substance, which is Jesus and his ekklesia (Heb. 8:5; 10:1; Col. 2:17).

### **Temple**

As Immanuel (God Among Us), Jesus was himself the temple of God on the earth. It was impossible for Christ and Herod's temple to coexist (Mark 14:58). Christ spoke at great length about the imminent demise of the Jerusalem temple and the religious system associated with it (Matt. 23:37-38 – 24:34).

The New Testament letters assert that Christ's body is still present on earth in the form of his ekklesia, the organic assembly of believers (Eph. 4:7-16). And that mystical, universal body is the true temple of God (1 Cor. 3:16-17; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:19-22; Heb. 3:6). No physical structure is needed, for God is closer to us than our own skin (1 Cor. 6:19).

### **Priesthood**

Hebrews 8:1-10:18 explains how the Jewish priesthood was a physical foreshadowing of Christ and his ekklesia. Jesus is the ultimate high priest, so no earthly high priest is needed. All believers are also priests (1 Peter 2:5, 9). There is no clergy/laity distinction within the kingdom. All Christians are the clergy, through whom God ministers to the world.

### **Sacrifice**

Hebrews also explains that Christ, the perfect sacrifice for sins, renders all physical sacrifices obsolete (7:27; 9:12, 26, 28; 10:10). We are no longer under any obligation or law to bring our physical goods to God. Rather, the law of love for neighbor should control how we use our God-given assets.

As members of Christ's body, believers themselves are also "living sacrifices" (Rom. 12:1). The only sacrifice or tithe God wants is our hearts' continual surrender to him. Our worship and acts of self-giving service are sufficient sacrifices (Heb. 13:15-16).

### **Backsliding: Christianity Becomes Religious Again (Incipient Catholicism)**

After the deaths of the apostles, the concepts of temple (church building), priest (clergy), and sacrifice (mass and tithing) began to reappear. Notice how these three concepts support each other. We can see this happening as we read the works of the Apostolic and Ante-Nicene Fathers. The church became more hierarchal, organized, and authoritarian. The distinction between clergy and laity returned. Worship became more ritualized and clergy-centered. Christian teaching absorbed large chunks of Greek (Neoplatonic) theology. When Emperor Constantine "converted" and eventually made Christianity the state religion of the Empire, the Pagan and Christian systems and worldviews became combined. There were suddenly church buildings, church councils, professional clergy, hero-saints, creeds, etc.

## **II. How to Restore the New Testament *Ekklesia*?**

First, it is necessary to get a view of what the original apostolic church was like. Through Acts and the Epistles, we can see that New Testament churches had problems. But we can also see clearly God's vision for how the *ekklesia* is supposed to function.

To do this best, we should study Acts in conjunction with the Epistles in chronological order as much as possible. The directives in the Epistles help us to reconstruct how apostolic churches operated. We will look specifically at leadership, worship, and giving.

### **A. Leadership**

#### **Extra-Local**

In the New Testament, we see those who are called apostles ("sent ones") who travel and plant new churches. They characteristically leave these young churches for extended periods of time, and then return to deal with problems, to deliver deeper teachings and spiritual gifts, and to give their recognition and blessing to local leaders. See Acts 14:21-23; 15:36, 41; 18:23, etc.

#### **Local**

The New Testament recognizes that different members of the body have different gifts and skills (Eph. 4:11). Those who had the wisdom and character to shepherd (pastor) people in their spiritual growth became recognized as elders (presbyteros – aged ones), who "looked over" (epicopos – later "bishop") the Christians in their city (see esp. Acts 20:17-35). Notice that although different "churches" met in homes within a city, the elders were recognized city-wide (Titus 1:5), which likely facilitated unity and communication among a region's house-churches.

#### **Absolute**

The early Christians believed that Jesus Christ was actually among them and that he was the leader ("head") of their assemblies (Eph. 1:22-23; Col. 2:6-7, 10, 18-19). When the church gathered, Christ in the Spirit spoke through people (1 Cor. 12:4-11). He set the agenda. Any hierarchical form of leadership among the new priesthood would be a violation of Christ's teachings (Matt. 20:25-28; 23:8-12; 2 Cor. 1:24; 1 Peter 5:2-3).

### **B. Worship**

New Testament worship centered around communal meals (the agape and Lord's Supper), prayer, and mutual admonishment through the sharing of prophecies, songs, scriptures, confession of sins, and other types of testimony (1 Cor. 11-14).

Notice that ordinary New Testament worship and teaching are reciprocal: they involve the whole body and aim at healing and encouraging each other (Eph 5:18-19; Col. 3:15-16; Heb. 10:24-25). This form of "every-member functioning" or "mutual edification" meeting activated every member of the body and utilized their unique spiritual gifts in teaching, admonishing, and equipping.

### **C. Location**

Though early Christians were capable of renting or purchasing property for the church to meet, it appears they had a preference for meeting in homes. This would be in harmony with the New Testament's concept of the *ekklesia* as a spiritual family, and Christianity as central to one's day-to-day living. And only in small groups would it be possible for all members to participate in mutual edification, and for the believers to develop the kind of intimacy necessary for serious spiritual encouragement.

House churches and worship in homes: Acts 2:46; 12:12; Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15; Philemon 2.

There were no church buildings before Constantine, though there is evidence of Christians modifying their homes to accommodate larger groups (Ferguson 171).

#### **D. Giving**

Giving was spontaneous and related to immediate needs, though special projects were also done.

Giving to help the needy: Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-37; 6:1; 11:27-30; 1 Tim. 5:3, 9

The Collection for the poor in Jerusalem: Rom. 15:25-26; 1 Cor. 16:1-3; 2 Cor. 8 & 9.

Support for travelling apostles: 1 Cor. 9:9-14; 1 Cor. 16:6, 10-11; 2 Cor. 1:16; Phil. 4:14-18; Titus 3:13; 3 John 5-8.

Also, perhaps the hard-working elders "worthy of double-honor:" 1 Tim. 5:17-18

- I hope that this presentation has given you some vision of how apostolic churches typically operated.
- The early Christians went against the grain of what religion was supposed to be. Looking only to Christ as their head, they rejected both Jewish and Pagan ways of approaching God.
- In subsequent history, we see the church adopting cultic practices from Greco-Roman culture, then citing Old Testament law as justification.
- Departures from apostolic practice are harmful if they interfere with the church's function and theological basis.
- My prayer is that you will help transform the church so it can more closely reflect its God-given function and theological basis.