

Early Christians and the Synagogue

Katharine Bell
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Photo date and location unknown

The early church grew out of the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The sources for our knowledge of the early church are the gospels, especially Mark, the letters of Paul and the Acts. The basic apostolic message contained in the gospels is that with the advent of Jesus the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies is now at hand. These prophecies were fulfilled through the resurrection by God of Jesus of Nazareth, who has left with us a sign of his present power and glory, the Holy Spirit.

Jesus of Nazareth, a Jew, was born approximately 3 A.D. and died approximately in 33 A. D. Our knowledge of the details of his life is scanty, but that he is an actual historical figure there can be no doubt. Jesus, who is referred to as the Son of Man, the Messiah, the Son of God, to mention a few of his titles was believed by his disciples to have been the long-awaited Messiah of Jewish hope. The writers of the gospels and the Acts present a picture of Jesus in this light as the One through whom the long-awaited Kingdom of God was to begin: "The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." (Mk 1: 15) From the evidence available, it appears to me that the disciples' understanding of the nature of the Kingdom was incomplete; however, all of the gospel writers agree that Jesus of Nazareth was the long-awaited Messiah through whom this kingdom was to begin.

Outgrowth of Judaism

Through the evidence in the gospels and Acts, the early church began with Jesus of Nazareth who gathered around himself a small band of disciples with whom he wished to begin the establishment of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Among these disciples twelve were chosen to become apostles and were to have played a major role in the establishment of this Kingdom. At this time the early church was not a church as such, but a small group of devout Jews centered around the person of Jesus of Nazareth whom they believed was the one through whom the Kingdom of God was to begin. The establishment of this small group of Jews into a church did not begin until the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ and his appearance to the twelve and a number of the other early Christians.

The first Christians then, were a small group of men within Judaism who followed the practices of Judaism-circumcision, the keeping of the Law, worship in the synagogue and Temple-but differed from their fellow Jews in their belief in Jesus Christ as the long-awaited Jewish Messiah, who had been resurrected from the dead and with whom the establishment of the Kingdom of God was now to begin.

The first Christians, then, believing Jesus to be the fulfillment of Judaism, felt that this new teaching was

continuous with the teachings and traditions of Judaism. Thus the old Jewish tradition of the action of God, the Creator, who has revealed Himself in the history of His chosen people is now continued with the Advent of Jesus, the Son of God and long awaited Messiah. The action of God is seen in His covenant with Abraham, symbolized by circumcision, whose descendants multiplied from a family, to a clan, to a tribe and then to a nation. To the tribe of Abraham, God revealed Himself further in the Law or Torah given to Moses on Mount Sinai and in the writings of the prophets. God's action in sending Jesus, then, was a continuation of His action in the past and the first Christians were circumcised Jews, followers of the Law and the Temple, and had no identity separate from the tradition of Judaism.

Rejection by the Sanhedrin

The central question which arose in this apostolic age (33-70A.D.) was the question of the continuity or discontinuity of the early church with Israel. Israel at this time was represented by the Jewish Council, the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was the establishment of hierarchy of the Jewish people and through the Sanhedrin the Jewish people were made aware of any doctrinal changes or new happenings within Judaism. With the rejection of Jesus Christ by the Sanhedrin it was inevitable that as the followers of Jesus grew they would be rejected also. In other words, the seeds for the eventual separation of the early church from Israel were planted with the crucifixion of Jesus by the Jewish people as represented through the Sanhedrin.

Initially, however, Christianity was a sect within Judaism. After Jesus' appearance to his disciples at Pentecost, Peter and John as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles (chapters 3,4) "were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead."

From the preaching of these early apostles the early church began. As a number of people began to respond to their teaching, the Sanhedrin had the apostles brought before it and charged them saying: "We strictly charge you not to preach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us." (Acts 5:28) It is interesting to note at this time, Gamaliel, a teacher of the Law, held in honor by all the people, gave the following advice. "So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone; for if this plan or this undertaking is of men it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them." (Acts 5:38-39) There is further reference in Acts that the Sanhedrin took Gamaliel's advice.

Appeal to Gentiles

The conviction of the early Christians that Jesus was the long-awaited Jewish Messiah did not appeal to the Establishment of the Jewish religion, and thus the main number of converts came from Jews who were not a part of the Establishment. This led to a growing division within Judaism of those who believed Jesus was the Messiah and those who denied this fact. However, as the early Christians were a proselytizing group their message spread to many Gentiles who had converted to Judaism and even to Gentiles who were not officially a part of Judaism.

The first Christians, then, were orthodox Jews who continued to observe the Law and to attend the synagogue and Temple. With the preaching of the message of Jesus as the Messiah in the Temple, however, the early church began to draw its membership from those within the Temple itself and also those who were closely associated with the Temple.

Many Jews in the Temple at this time were Jews who had been affected by the Dispersion. After the overthrow of the Jews by the Assyrians and the Babylonians in 597 B.C. the Jews were scattered throughout the Babylonian Empire. The effect of this Dispersion created a situation which aided the split between Judaism and Christianity.

The crux of the matter was the rite of circumcision, as Henry Chadwick writes in *The Early Church*:

"A gentile might undergo circumcision and, more commonly, the baptism required of would-be proselytes, but this was rare and the Hellenized Jews of the Dispersion, to the regret of the stricter Palestinian authorities, were normally content to welcome Gentile adherents without insisting on circumcision as generally necessary to salvation. Among these Gentile groups the Christian missionaries found their first converts outside the number of the circumcised."

Cause of division

This forced the question of whether or not Christians needed to be circumcised and to follow the Law of Moses. This issue grew and began to be the cause of a division within the early church itself, the beginnings of which can be seen in the story of the martyrdom of Stephen. Stephen indicates that the importance of circumcision is of the heart: "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit." (Acts 7:51) With this statement Stephen brought the issue of circumcision out into the open, which resulted in the orthodox Jews persecuting the church in Jerusalem and the

Christians fleeing Jerusalem and scattering throughout the region of Judea and Samaria. (See Acts 7:51) With the scattering of the Hellenistic Christians from Jerusalem the Gentile mission began. The converts which the scattered Christians made caused a controversy within the church in Jerusalem which was investigated by Peter in his visit to Cornelius in Caesarea. From the account in Acts of Peter's visit to Cornelius the mission to the Gentiles is recognized by the leading figure of the original twelve apostles. "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit any one of another nation; but God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean." (Acts 10:28) And further on, Peter opened his mouth and said: "Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him." (Acts 10)

J.G. Davies wrote of this period in *The Early Christian Church*:

"Yet an internal crisis was steadily building up. The Jewish Christians were determined to preserve their orthodoxy; they were not opposed to the admission of Gentiles to the church, but they were emphatic that they must be circumcised and must obey the Law. They had before them the example of Jesus himself who had restricted his mission to Israel.

What they failed to appreciate, however, was that while Jesus considered that the call to Israel must come first, he believed that this would be succeeded by the incorporation of the Gentiles into the Kingdom of God. The one was preliminary to the other; there were to be two successive events, the first ushering in the eschatological action of God, in which was to be included the further gathering in of the Gentiles.

The scattered Hellenists, reaching as far afield as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, adopted this sequence, preaching first to the Jews and then to the pagans. The Hebrew Paul, at first violently anti-Christian and then converted on a persecuting mission to Damascus, was authorized by the growing Antiochen church to go with Barnabas on a preaching tour, and he similarly spoke first in the synagogues and only then to the Gentiles. It was upon the completion of Paul's first missionary journey that the crisis came to a head."

The crisis came to a head with the episode of Cornelius. With the support of Peter and the concurrence of James, Paul continued his missionary work with the Gentiles.

The first apostles in Jerusalem attempted to convert the Jews in Jerusalem; however they failed to be converted. In 70 A.D. Jerusalem was sacked by Titus who burned the Temple and Jerusalem passed into the hands of the Roman government. Davies also records that, "Seeking to establish a new uniformity in religion as a necessary basis for the unity, the rabbis introduced into the synagogue service a formula which the Jewish Christians could not pronounce, to the effect that 'for the Nazarenes may there be no hope.' They followed this by sending letters to all Jewish congregations in the Diaspora denouncing the practice and faith of Christianity."

With this new formula in Judaism the break between the Church and the Synagogue became complete.