

Church History 101

Lesson 3

The Jesus Community

Key Concepts: Following Pentecost, the followers of the Way of Jesus began to organize themselves into a counter-cultural community with Jewish roots.

The Story: The interesting thing about the initial Jesus' community was that it lived at first as a sect of Judaism which slowly became a distinct community. The early church lived in continuity with its Jewish roots by continuing to observe Jewish customs (eating kosher) and worshipping at the Temple in Jerusalem. This was the natural thing to do because they did not believe themselves to be a new "religion." Instead they saw themselves as Jews who had found and were now following the Jewish messiah, Jesus. It made sense then to maintain their presence in Jerusalem, which was the center of world-wide Judaism. At the same time as they lived in continuity with their Jewish identity there were ways in which they were different.

First, they were a Jesus community. Everything that they did and believed was either centered on Jesus as Lord and messiah, or was seen in a new way through their identity as followers of Jesus.

Second, their life was not centered on public activity so much as it was centered on small groups meeting in homes. The book of Acts is filled with references to people meeting in homes, upper rooms and behind lock doors. By meeting in such places the followers of Jesus began to craft their own unique identity.

Third, they were a community of charity. While Judaism had a process for taking care of the widows and those in need in Jerusalem, the early church acted more like a commune in which all people shared what they had so no one was in need. This led to the creation of those who would later be called deacons, who insured that all widows had enough to eat.

Fourth, they were a community of radical inclusiveness. Jesus had demonstrated a radical inclusiveness during his life and work. The poor, women and others were included in Jesus' circle of friends. This continued in the early church where women held prominent roles (deacon and apostle) along with slaves and the poor. Some of the church's early critics dismissed it as nothing more than a gathering of easily misled women and slaves.

Fifth, the church instituted new rituals. The first was the ritual of baptism. In some ways this was an extension of the Jewish ritual of washing converts prior to their entry into the Jewish faith. Baptism for the early church was done in the name of Jesus, setting people apart as members of this new Jesus' community. The second ritual was that of the "agape" meal, (love/fellowship meal) which morphed into what we call communion. It was at this common meal that the story of Jesus' death would be retold. While the early church probably still celebrated Passover, this new meal slowly became more important.

Sixth, they were a community of worship. While Jews around and beyond the Roman Empire came together in synagogues for scripture study, there was no real sense of worship as we know it today. The church on the other hand included scripture reading, extemporaneous prayers, prophecies, teaching and singing. The focus was on Jesus as messiah rather than on any set of Jewish rituals. As a reminder, at this point in the life of the church, the only scriptures they had were those of the Old Testament. The writings of Paul and the Gospels would come later.

Questions

1. In what ways do you see the activities of the early church still alive in the church today?
2. In what ways do you see the church different today from the early church?
3. What if any of the practices of the early church ought we too emphasize?