



The Origins of the Church

Prepared by

The Voice of Renewal/Lay Education National Working Group

The Origins of the Church

Description: A summary of the political, social, and religious background from which Jesus and His teachings emerged, and how the early church organized itself and spread Christianity.

Suggested Duration: 7 sessions

Package Contents: A list of the books to use; a study guide with suggested questions; a timeline for the writing of the “New Testament”; tips on conducting programs

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What You Need to Start

The study program relies primarily on two books, one by Frederick J. Cwiekowski, a priest from the Archdiocese of Hartford and a member of the Society of St. Sulpice; and the other by Stephen M. Wylen, a rabbi in Wayne, N.J. Juxtaposing chapters and sections from both books provides an enlightening summary of what Biblical scholars in the past 50 years have learned from critical analysis and by studying source documents for the Gospels, Epistles, the Acts of the Apostles, and other writings from the first 200 years of Christianity.

Participants will need these resources:

- *The Beginnings of the Church*, Frederick J. Cwiekowski (with a foreword by Raymond E. Brown, S.S.), Paulist Press, 1988, ISBN 0-8091-2926-4
- *The Jews in the Time of Jesus: An Introduction*, Stephen M. Wylen, Paulist Press, 1996, ISBN 0-8091-3610-4
- The Bible (Some readers find that an online version allows quick searches for the passages cited in Cwiekowski’s book. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops hosts a very good one, the New American Bible, <http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/> .)

Additional Suggested Readings

- *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind*, Raymond Brown

Tips on Running a Collaborative Learning Session

A collaborative learning environment does not use the traditional format where a speaker, standing at a lectern or podium, presents material to an audience seated in rows before the lectern, and then takes questions from the audience at the end. The collaborative setting is more like a book discussion group where attendees gather around a table or sit in chairs arranged in a circle. Although each session should have a clear “leader” to guide the discussion, this leader need not be the same from session to session.

More important than “who leads” in a collaborative session is the “how” of leading. Your goal is to involve as many attendees as possible in the discussion, to encourage respectful attention to opposing views, and to prevent one or two voices from dominating a session.

This does not mean cutting off a persistent voice. In any such setting, some people will speak more than others. But you can encourage those who are not contributing by asking them to read passages from the book, or to read a pertinent Bible passage. You can ask generally that those who have not yet contributed take the next question. You can follow up on someone’s first contribution with a question that allows them to elaborate on their answer (be sure it’s a simple enough follow-up that you don’t intimidate them!).

You may find the following format useful for conducting the session:

1. Greeting and Introductions

Introduce yourself, ask each person to introduce themselves and, depending on the size of the group, perhaps say what they hope to learn or how they heard about the session. The goal is not to obtain answers to these questions but to “lubricate the voices” (get everyone talking from the start). [You may not need the introductions each time.]

2. Opening Prayer

Use a multi-stanza prayer and go around the room having each person say a few lines of the prayer. Again, your goal is to lubricate the voices and let everyone become a participant from the beginning.

3. Ground Rules (remind attendees of this at each session)

- (a) Everyone is invited to contribute.
- (b) Try not to speak twice until everyone has had a chance to speak once – but don’t force anyone to comment until they are ready.
- (c) Respect each other’s opinions and contributions.

4. Session

Perhaps begin by reading the session synopsis and Things to Consider, then discuss the questions – or other questions you developed while reading.

5. Closing Prayer (then distribute the Session notes for the next session)

Session 1: Pre-Critical Versus the Critical Approach to Scripture

The book by Fr. Cwiekowski is a synopsis of the best of Catholic Scripture scholarship conducted on the origins of the Church since the Council of Vatican II. It focuses on a **critical analysis** of the New Testament: that is, an analysis of the methods the New Testament authors used as they “selected, synthesized, and explained what they received in order to address the situation of the church to which they were writing.”¹

As a synopsis, *The Beginnings of the Church* does not cover everything available in current Biblical analysis, nor does it indicate every possible difference in interpretation among the scholars. Instead, it is – as the Foreword by Fr. Raymond Brown indicates – a centrist approach to presenting the current findings.

The Jews in the Time of Jesus also explores this difference between the pre-critical and the critical approach to the Bible. Rabbi Wylen identifies three eras in the search for the historical Jesus and places the 33 years of Jesus’ life in the context of Jewish history and the literary genres common at that time.

Readings for This Session

- *The Beginnings of the Church*: Foreword, Introduction, Chapter 1
- *The Jews in the Time of Jesus*: Chapter 1 and pages 122-123 (“The Literary Genres of the New Testament”)

Things to Consider While Reading

As you read the sections recommended for Session 1, keep in mind the distinction between the pre-critical and the critical approach to Biblical analysis. The pre-critical or historical view of the Church’s foundation, and the one upon which most of us were raised, was based on the belief that the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles were historical documents and that all of these writings (and writers) agreed on the essentials of the Faith.

A critical analysis of the Gospels demonstrates that this “historical” approach does not match the methods actually used by the Gospel authors, nor does it correctly capture their intent. As with the Old Testament, “history” in the New Testament was not equivalent to fact-based verification as sought by modern historians. Instead, the authors sought to address issues of faith specific to a particular time and place. A critical analysis also demonstrates that the four gospels differ from one another on many essential facts and even more so on theological interpretations.

¹ Cwiekowski, *The Beginnings of the Church*, page 18.

Contemporary Scripture scholars use several forms of critical analysis. Some of these forms (briefly described) are:

- Textual criticism, which tries to recover the best possible Greek text from the hundreds of manuscripts available
- Historical criticism, which tries to recover what the author literally meant to say by understanding the historical situation, audience, social era, and so on
- Source criticism, which considers the antecedents (such as oral traditions) the authors used in writing the New Testament
- Form criticism, which attempts to understand the literary genre of the document (history, parable, prophecy, apocalyptic sayings, miracle stories, and so on)
- Redaction criticism, which examines how the authors creatively shaped the material they received
- Canonical criticism, which examines each passage in light of the entire Bible
- Social criticism, which looks at text in light of the prevailing society and culture

Finally, as we explore what modern scholarship tells us about our Church's origins, we should be careful that we do not assign more value to the "facts" than to the truths that may emerge as we study. We seek more than "the facts and only the facts" about the lives of Jesus and the early Christians. We also seek the spiritual truths such a study can yield. In the words of Joan Chittister, "Religion and science do two different things. One looks at life and attempts to understand it. The other looks at life and attempts to explain it. ... Science seeks verifiability of material processes. Religion seeks understanding of spiritual realities. ... Belief is not contrary to fact. It simply transcends it."²

Questions for the Study Session

1. How do the pre-critical and the critical approaches to the origin of the Church differ?
2. Pre-critical belief was that the New Testament was a history written by eyewitnesses. What are some of the obstacles to such beliefs?
3. What is your reaction to the Church's reversal of position from the beginning of the 20th century to mid-century on interpreting Scripture?
4. The Bible was not intended as history, although some books do describe historical events. What are some of the literary genres used, particularly in the New Testament?

² *In Search of Belief*, pages 8 and 14.

Session 2: Political Background and the Emergence of Sects

Do not be discouraged by the lengthy historical summaries in this session's readings. We are not so much concerned with specific dates and rulers as we are with the political realities that shaped Jewish life in these eras, how their perception of themselves as a separate "people" emerges, and how the destruction of both the ruling dynasty (the House of David) and priestly dynasty (Zadok) led to the emergence of Jewish sects.

The sects best known to us today are the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Essenes, and the Zealots. Of these, the Pharisees were the most well-known. Many of their beliefs – the coming of a messiah, the resurrection of the body, the existence of angels, and a final coming – ultimately became hallmarks of the new Christian faith, which itself began as simply another sect among the Jews.

There is no clear evidence that Jesus himself belonged to a particular sect. Although his teachings have much in common with Pharisaic thoughts of the time, there are significant differences, as there are similarities and differences between Jesus' teachings and the practices and beliefs of other sects. However, while perhaps not a member of a particular sect, Jesus as a devout Jew would have been familiar with many of the sect teachings.

Readings for This Session

- *The Beginnings of the Church*: Chapter 2 and referenced Bible passages
- *The Jews in the Time of Jesus*: Chapters 2, 3 and 4; Chapter 5 pages 63-75; Chapter 10 pages 133-147

Things to Consider While Reading

Note how the political practices of the conquering Greeks and Romans permitted the Jewish religion to continue but also influenced its separation from a specific geography or locale. In fact, according to Rabbi Wylen, this separation of a religion from its locale (unlike other ancient peoples, the Jews said you could worship God anywhere, not just in the place where his Temple lay) was a first for humankind and, he implies, at least as noteworthy as monotheism.

Also note the Temple's importance to Jews and to Jewish worship at that time, the transition from oral to written traditions, the end of prophecy, and the rise of Messianism. Consider the impact of Hellenism on diaspora Jews and note the development of a group of Gentiles whom Wylen calls "god-fearers": Gentiles who adopted Jewish belief in one supreme God but rejected actual conversion to Judaism. (They kept their own laws and culture, kept their social status as Greek citizens, but rejected circumcision and the requirement to follow Jewish dietary laws.)

When reading information about the Jewish sects, consider the distinctions among them, and how Gospel characterizations of the Pharisees as “rigid” are both true and false. As an example, while Pharisees were more lenient than the Sadducees in their interpretation of the Torah and their belief in an oral tradition, it was the Sadducees who tolerated Gentiles and Greek influence and the Pharisees who shunned such associations.

Also be aware that, for all their prominence, the members of these sects were a minority among the Jews. Most of the common people were farmers, shepherds, fishermen, craftsmen, merchants, traders, public officials. It was from these people that Jesus and most of his followers came. (Jesus was not of the priestly tribe of Levi and therefore was a layman.)

Questions for the Study Session

1. How did Greek and Roman rule “protect” Jewish religion?
2. What was the significance of the Babylonian Exile on Judaism?
3. What is Christianity’s possible “legacy” from the beliefs of the Pharisees about conversion?
4. After reading the description of the Pharisees, why do you think they come off so badly in the gospels?
5. What are some of the reasons Pharisees would oppose the new “Christian sect”?
6. What is the significance of the synagogue for Jewish worship in the time of Jesus?

Session 3: The Public Ministry of Jesus

This session takes its title from Chapter 3 in the Cwiekowski book. But it is better to start your review of Jesus' ministry by studying the pages in Wylen that focus on what Jews believed and how they worshipped during the 1st century. Wylen traces the evolution of Judaism from a way of life (the political and social development described in the previous session) into a religion.

Elements of Jewish religious development that became important to Christianity also emerged in this period: belief in an after-life, personal repentance, spiritualization of the seasonal festivals that Christianity ultimately adopted, and so on. Don't be overly concerned with the details of this Jewish history. Seek instead to develop a general feel for how a "devout Jew" lived, to appreciate the setting into which Jesus was born and in which he carried out his ministry.

The source texts for this re-creation of Jewish life in the 1st century are primarily faith documents. That is, they were written to examine faith, to explore the meaning of life. They were not written as factual history. Similarly, the writings of the early Christians were not intended to be history, but to illustrate the truth about The Way that Jesus taught. The Gospels especially are subject to such purpose; they combine Jewish and Greek literary genres to portray Jesus' life in a way that illustrates the tenets of the newly emerging Christian religion – not necessarily in a way that provides a detailed journal or a diary of His life on earth.

For example, although the gospels and some of Paul's epistles teach that the Eucharist was founded by Jesus at the Last Supper, there is some ambiguity about what actually happened, especially when comparing the Synoptic gospel accounts with the Gospel of John. Still, the Eucharist clearly has a central focus in the New Testament.

In contrast, scholars say that the teachings about baptism were placed into the mouth of Jesus later, backwards in time, after baptism had become the sacrament of initiation into the church (this was still early in the Christian communities).

Further, aside from these mentions of Baptism and the Eucharist, there is no evidence in the Scriptures that Jesus instituted any of the other sacraments.

Despite this lack of textual reference, Christians can claim correctly that the "Christ" established all the sacraments. The key word here is "Christ," as in the catechism definition of a sacrament: "an outward sign, instituted by Christ, to give grace."

The title "Christ" was not ascribed to Jesus until after the resurrection. It was the risen Christ who sent the Holy Spirit upon the church and it is under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that the church and the sacraments were established. Many of these sacraments drew upon Jewish practices and traditions, but they were adapted to meet the needs of this newly emerging church and the theological interpretations of the Scripture writers.

Thus, although the church and the sacraments were established mostly by those who came after the deaths of the Apostles, Christians can claim justifiably that they were established by Christ (not by the historical Jesus) under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Readings for This Session

- *The Jews in the Time of Jesus*: Chapters 6, 7, 8, 9, and 12; referenced Bible passages
- The Beginnings of the Church: Chapter 3; referenced Bible passages

Things to Consider While Reading

The picture of Jesus' trial and crucifixion presented in the Gospels apparently does not reflect accurately the social and political structures in place at that time. Note how their literary interpretations allowed the Gospel writers to link Jesus to the Old Testament prophecies. Note also how the Christian story of the Messiah differs from the messiah the Jews had come to expect.

The followers of Jesus seemed to include sets of disciples, some of whom – the Apostles – were given special status. But that status has more to do with the Judaic notion of 12 tribes of Israel. The Apostles were, in fact, missionaries rather than priests anointed for Eucharistic celebration. It is not even clear, given that lists of names differ, exactly who the “12 Apostles” were.

Finally, note how the historic actions of Jesus, and the actions attributed to Him, are refined in the “faith documents” to illustrate the truth about beliefs rather than to clarify history.

Questions for the Study Session

1. How did Jesus' teachings about the kingdom of God differ from the general Jewish hope for the establishment of God's reign on earth?
2. How does a critical reading of the Gospels change your views (or does it?) about “The 12 Apostles”? What was the significance to the Gospel writers of naming 12 Apostles?
3. Did Jesus intend to establish a church separate from Judaism?
4. Did Jesus institute a system of seven sacraments? Were Baptism and the Eucharist intended to be sacraments?

Session 4: Resurrection and the First Christian Communities

The disciples expected Jesus to be triumphant, to usher in the reign of God during which Jews would emerge victorious over their oppressors. But Jesus died. The disciples had to make sense of that event and to reinterpret their beliefs in the light of the crucifixion. It was the resurrection, and its effect on the disciples, that led to new understanding and, ultimately, to establishment of new communities which sought to follow Jesus' teachings. This session explores the earliest development of those communities and the profound effect both the resurrection and the Pentecost had on the disciples.

These earliest communities saw themselves, still, as Jews. But they began to develop prayer services and practices that slowly distinguished their communities from other Jewish sects. Some of them also began to embrace the Hellenists and Gentiles. As Paul and other early missionaries spread Jesus' message to other communities, the tensions between Hebrews, Hellenists and Gentiles grew, as did tensions between Christians and other Jews.

Readings for This Session

- *The Beginnings of the Church*: Chapter 4 and referenced Bible passages
- *The Jews in the Time of Jesus*: Chapter 13

Things to Consider While Reading

Critical scholars hold that Jesus was a devout Jew of his times, and that his only intention was to reform his Jewish religion. He did not intend to establish a church. Although Peter played a central role in the subsequent development of Christianity, he and the rest of the Apostles were certainly not ordained priests or bishops, not by Jesus and not by anyone else. The Apostles actually had a more important role in the establishment of the church than that of bishops: they were missionaries who traveled around preaching the gospel.

The bishops were a later development needed to stabilize the communities the Apostles had founded. It was only in the late 1st and early 2nd century that distinct roles were established for bishops, priests and deacons. And it is likely that this order was drawn from the Second Temple era structure of high priest, priest, Levite, lay people.

The gospels (including chapter 21 of the Fourth Gospel, a late addition) also indicate the centrality of Peter in the early Church, but there is no evidence that Peter was a bishop and certainly no evidence that he was the Bishop of Rome. By the time Peter arrived in Rome, around the year 60, there were already several bishop/presbyters there. (In this early church, bishops were the equivalent of pastors in our churches today, but their house churches were much smaller than a typical city parish is today.)

It was well into the 2nd century before a “monarchical bishop” began to appear in the larger cities. Note also that Rome began to play a pastoral role for churches outside Rome in the early 2nd century, and yet for the first four centuries the Bishop of Rome played a relatively insignificant role in the Church. Indeed, the bishops of Rome were not even invited to the first four Great Councils of the Church, which were convened by emperors.

Questions for the Study Session

1. How did the development of a “Gentile church” affect the relationships among Jews and the followers of Jesus? Does Rabbi Wylen’s description (pages 188-190) of Paul and the Gospel authors alter your perception of those authors?
2. Biblical scholars today agree that “something significant happened” at the Resurrection and at Pentecost. The Resurrection should not be seen as a resuscitation, they say, but as a transformation, and the Pentecost probably did not happen until months – perhaps an entire year or longer – after the crucifixion. What is your reaction to those conclusions?
3. How did their understanding of the “end times” affect the earliest Christian communities in Jerusalem?
4. What was the impact of the martyrdom of Stephen on the mission of the Church?
5. Who was more important among the early Christians: Peter, Paul, Barnabas, Stephen, or James? When was the church in Rome first mentioned?
6. Scholars have identified at least four distinct groups among the early Christians. How did these groups differ?
7. What was the role of women in the early church?
8. What evidence is there of communal meals, the Eucharist, and baptisms? Were these communal meals led by “ordained” priests?

Session 5: The Church in the 50s, 60s, and 70s

What we know about the churches in the 50s and 60s comes primarily from the letters Paul wrote to these churches. There was no “Church” in those early days. Rather, there were various house churches in Jerusalem, Antioch, and Rome and in communities where Paul and other missionaries traveled and spread word of Jesus the Christ. Each church had its own character –as well as characters – and as these churches grew in size, the questions and problems they faced were in many ways distinct. Today we tend to think of Paul’s letters as ongoing “tutorials” about Jesus. They were, but they also sought to settle disputes, address complaints, and speak to the particular needs and issues within each community.

The 60s and 70s represent a turning point in the early church. It was a time when the principal leaders of the early church began to die, along with others who had actually walked and talked with Jesus. At the same time, the Jewish Temple and Jerusalem itself were destroyed, relations between Jews and the followers of Jesus worsened, and it was becoming obvious that the Second Coming would not be soon.

In response to these developments, the beginnings of structure and of codified beliefs began to emerge.

Readings for This Session

- *The Beginnings of the Church*: Chapters 5 and 6; referenced Bible passages

Things to Consider While Reading

Although the letters from Paul to the various community churches are primary sources for understanding the development of the early church in this period, Biblical scholars are certain about only seven of those letters having been written by Paul. Paul may have written some of the other letters, or perhaps a follower wrote them; scholars do not agree. Despite the uncertainty of who wrote each letter, each addressed particular issues in the churches, and it is by analyzing the letters that scholars obtain glimpses of what the earliest churches were like. Pay special attention to how these early churches began to organize ministries and leaders and to the indications of how women were regarded.

Also consider how Paul’s missions fed the separation of Christianity from Judaism, and how Paul and others began to deal with the evidence that the Second Coming was not as imminent as expected.

This is also a good time to begin using the “Timeline for New Testament Writings,” to see which writings are closest in time to Jesus and the Apostles and which actually were written much later.

Questions for the Study Session

1. What are some of the elements in Paul's epistles that describe the gradual movement of Christianity away from Judaism? What was the typical pattern of his preaching in new communities?
2. Before critical analysis was applied to the Bible, we tended to assume that the Gospels were written first, because they begin with "the life of Christ." But critical analysis identifies the letters of Paul as the earliest writings. Which letter is considered to be the first book of the church's scriptural library now called the New Testament? And what does it tell us?
3. By the time Paul writes a letter to the church at Rome, it is clear from his letter that the Roman church already was established. But was Peter a part of that church?
4. What social classes of people do we find in the early churches? What were some of the early roles or ministries identified within those churches?
5. What was the role of women in Paul's epistles?
6. Paul mentions the Lord's Supper twice only, but scholars say that those mentions give an important look at how it was celebrated. What were the characteristics of the celebration?
7. Why is the period from the early 60s to the late 70s considered a turning point in the development of the church?
8. What factors increased the estrangement of Jews and Christians?
9. Paul did probably not write the letter to the Ephesians, but it provides important insight into the organization of the church during this period. How does this letter slightly change the focus of "church"?
10. What were the characteristics of the community described as the Marcan church?

Session 6: Becoming a New Religion

The **historical view** held that Jesus established a church, a view fostered especially by a passage from Matthew (Mt. 16:18): “Thou art Peter and upon this Rock I will build my church.” In the historical view, this same quotation indicated that Jesus appointed Peter as the first pope, and that at the Last Supper Jesus ordained the Apostles as the first priests and bishops. This historical view also held that Jesus instituted the seven sacraments during his lifetime.

In Chapter 7 in *The Beginnings of the Church*, we see that a **critical analysis** of the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles, calls into question the above-stated view (as does the entire book). The chapter discusses the transition and consolidation that took place after the death of the Apostles. This transition is described in the writings of the New Testament, all of which were written long after the death of Jesus. In addition, each gospel was written at a different time, in a different place, for a different audience, with different theological presuppositions:

- Mark’s gospel was written perhaps in Rome around the year 70 and was addressed primarily to Gentile Christians.
- Matthew’s gospel was written probably in Antioch between 80 and 90 and was addressed to a mixed group of Jewish and Gentile Christians.
- The gospel of Luke, as well as Acts of the Apostles, was written perhaps in Greece or Syria around 85 and had a goal of presenting a common front among all the Apostles.
- The gospel attributed to John was written perhaps in Ephesus between 90 and 100 and was addressed to a select group of disciples of the Beloved Disciple.

Although all of the gospels were based on oral traditions about Jesus, they all addressed problems experienced in their own communities some 50 to 80 years after Jesus’ death. Critical scholars hold that these authors read some of these later problems back into the teachings of Jesus. Perhaps there was a kernel of truth in the actual teachings of Jesus, they conclude, but the authors enhanced those teachings to address their current issues.

Readings for This Session

- *The Beginnings of the Church*: Chapter 7 and referenced Bible passages

Things to Consider While Reading

The last two decades of the first century experienced the emergence of several different Church structures in different locations and responding to different challenges. The fourth

gospel emphasized the presence of the Holy Spirit within the Church and within each Christian. As a result there was a basic egalitarianism in the Johannine community and a rejection of any type of authority figures. In fact, there is no mention of apostles in the fourth gospel, and the Beloved Disciple always upstages Peter. It is likely that the absence of leadership in the Johannine community led to its decline and disappearance by the end of the second century.

On the other hand, Matthew's gospel, which is the only gospel to use the term "church," sees the need of a visible structure with authoritative officials and authoritative functions. Peter is seen as the principal leader in the Matthean church. And, whereas the early Pauline epistles saw the need for prophets and teachers and other forms of leaders, the Pastoral epistles speak of deacons and presbyters and bishops. Thus, a structured church is already beginning to emerge before the end of the first century.

Questions for the Study Session

1. What is your understanding of whether Jesus intended to establish a hierarchical church with Peter as its head?
2. Describe the conditions in Antioch that Matthew's gospel sought to address.
3. The "pastoral letters" (which probably were not written by Paul) speak for an increased structure and organization within the church. Describe the situation the letters sought to correct. What is the importance of these passages: 1 Timothy 6:20, 2 Timothy 1: 12, 14?
4. Describe the attitude of "the Pastor" towards women and the conditions that apparently gave rise to that attitude.
5. What characteristics marked the Johannine community as different from other Christian communities? How did the Johannine community's understanding of Christ and of the Church distinguish it from other Christians, and why is their understanding important today?
6. What was the role of women in the Johannine community?
7. Despite its disagreements with the "Apostolic tradition" communities, what did the Johannine community say about Peter?

Session 7: From the 1st Century to Today

By the end of the 1st century, Rome was clearly exercising pastoral care over churches in other cities. Just as clearly, the authority, organization, and orderliness of the Roman Empire was itself influencing Christian writers to call for greater organization and structure within the Church. It is during this same period that writers such as Clement began to identify the church as divinely ordered, with an Apostolic succession, using rituals that sanctified the faithful.

Despite Clement's insistence, there is no evidence that churches of this period followed uniform practices. There is no evidence in the New Testament that the appointments and naming of successors as described by Clement ever took place.

However, there is evidence from this period itself – in the letters Ignatius wrote – that the churches faced many pressures: from a Judaizing movement, from erroneous teachings, from conflicts among community leaders, from persecutions by the civil authorities.

Chapter 8 describes how the Christians of this era responded to those pressures.

Chapter 9 looks back on the development within the early Church and highlights seven themes that might inform our efforts today in reflecting on the church of Christ.

Readings for This Session

- *The Beginnings of the Church*: Chapters 8 and 9 and referenced Bible passages
- Chapter 8 also references some non-Biblical letters, by Clement and by Ignatius. If you do not have textual resources for those writings, they are available online at <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/> or <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/churchfathers.html>.

Things to Consider While Reading

The Book of Revelation is more militant and confrontational than other New Testament writings, giving us yet another perspective on how the church communities at this time were still highly variable in their circumstances and in their views. Note also how the letters of Ignatius identify an organizational shift at least in the church at Antioch.

In reflecting on what a study of church origins can teach us, we should also be aware of how the needs of both people and the church evolve over time.

Questions for the Study Session

1. Although Clement was the first to speak of “laity” in the church, that vocabulary emerged in relation to Clement’s identifying divinely ordained clerical offices. Did all the communities at this time begin developing such a structure?
2. What problems did the letters of Ignatius address?
3. How does the “phenomenon of development” affect your perspective of the emergence of the Catholic Church?
4. What do you think of the diversity of the early churches? Can you also discern a unity among these churches despite their diversity?
5. Does a glimpse of the early churches affect the way you think of ministry within the Church? How about your thoughts on the roles and ministries of lay people and of women?

Summarizing the Sessions

This summary, published in January 2000 by the Franciscans and St. Anthony Messenger Press, reinforces the general themes covered in the previous study sessions. Use it as a final handout for the sessions, after participants have completed their own studies. (Distributing it earlier might inhibit the discovery and analysis participants will experience as they begin studying the Origins of the Church.)

Original Site:

Exploring the Synoptic Gospels: Mark and His Careful Readers

by Steve Mueller

Most of us carry in our heads a curiously mixed-up version of the Gospels. Because we have been variously exposed to four different Gospels, we run them together. But as careful Scripture readers always discover, the Gospels are often difficult or even impossible to harmonize. Each Gospel shapes a unique portrait of who Jesus is and what his life, death and resurrection meant for his followers. Scholars have long recognized that three of the four Gospels—Matthew, Mark and Luke—have a remarkable similarity in both wording and structure. They can easily be put into parallel columns and viewed together at one glance. This has led scholars to call them *synoptic* (from the Greek word for “seeing together or at the same time”).

Solving the Synoptic Problem

Putting the Synoptic Gospels in parallel columns readily illustrates their interdependence. The Synoptic problem is explaining their interrelationships, in particular which came first and so was the inspiration and source for the others. In the history of biblical scholarship, many ingenious solutions have been proposed, but only a few hypotheses have been widely accepted.

From the time of St. Augustine (d. 430) to the 18th century, the accepted view was that the four Gospels were written in the order in which they appear in our Bibles—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—and that each depended on its predecessors. In the 18th century, scholars eliminated John from Synoptic consideration, retained the priority of Matthew and identified the order of composition as Matthew-Luke-Mark.

In the middle of the 19th century, a two-source solution gained prominence. It argued for the priority of Mark as the original Gospel and identified as the second source a collection of about 230 verses of Jesus’ sayings not found in Mark but used by both Matthew and Luke. Scholars dubbed this source “Q,” from the German word for source, *Quelle*. This two-source solution has been expanded in the 20th century to recognize that both Matthew and Luke had other sources unique to their communities. These materials

show up in their distinct infancy narratives, their sayings of Jesus and their resurrection materials. Almost all biblical scholars today accept this expanded two-source theory as the basis for their analysis of the Synoptic Gospels.

Mark—Why Write a Gospel?

How would you respond if someone asked you to tell them the Christian message? Most of us would probably tick off a list of doctrinal formulas. How many of us would tell the life story of Jesus? Mark's great invention was to take the life of Jesus and shape it into a presentation of the Good News of our salvation. Mark's narrative Gospel fixed the general pattern of Jesus' life in the Gospels: baptism, ministry in Galilee, journey to Jerusalem to suffer, die and rise to new life. It also anchored the numerous free-floating sayings of Jesus more closely to specific situations in Jesus' life.

Why would Mark shape a Gospel in the form of a life of Jesus? Most people would answer that this would preserve the memory of Jesus. While there is certainly some truth to this, preserving memories can be done in many other ways. One could string together sayings, as "Q" and the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas do, or present a theological form of the Gospel, as Paul tends to do.

The masterstroke of Mark's Gospel life is its structure. To make Jesus' life into a "Gospel life," nothing is more important than the ending. Mark's Gospel ends with the resurrection of Jesus, not with his death. Had the Gospel ended with his death, there would have been no good news to proclaim, but only a rehash of the well-known bad news that everybody dies. Mark's Gospel proclaims that death ends only the earthly life of Jesus, but not his relationship with God. The good news is that what happens to Jesus will also happen to us—if we dare to follow his way of relationship and service that leads through death to new life.

Matthew and Luke—Why Revise a Gospel?

Once the Gospel was proclaimed as a narrative life of Jesus, others recognized its essential power and appeal. Jesus' life became the pattern for his followers, his story became their story and his destiny became their hope. The Gospel story could not be reinvented, but its riches could be brought to light in new ways. Like a tool that could be adapted to new tasks, Mark's Gospel story was used by other evangelists for their own purposes.

The need for a revised version of Mark's Gospel occurs for the same reasons most books are revised. The word *revise* means "to see anew." Revisions occur when the original book is read in a new situation that demands new solutions to problems, or when a later author has new material that needs to be added. Both Matthew and Luke are guided by these fundamental motives as they edit Mark's Gospel to reshape it for the problems challenging their communities.

Mark's Gospel was written in a time of trial when following Jesus' way meant taking up the cross and maybe even death. It was "the beginning of the good news" (Mark 1:1) for a mixed community of Jewish and Gentile Christians who thought it was the end. Mark shaped his life of Jesus like an extended parable that probes the issue of Jesus' identity. Over and over his readers are forced to readjust their comfortable expectations in the light of surprising and challenging information about who Jesus really was.

Neither Matthew's nor Luke's communities confronted such trials. Matthew's main problem was encouraging his mostly Jewish audience to embrace both their Jewish tradition and the mission to the Gentiles that was transforming Christianity into a new kind of community. To do this, he portrayed Jesus as an authoritative teacher who built upon Moses' law but transformed it into the new Christian community of right relationships (righteousness).

Luke's problem was to demonstrate how the new Christian community of his Gentile converts was rooted in the unfamiliar Old Testament traditions and to direct their energy into a worldwide mission following the example of Jesus. To do this, he portrayed Jesus as a compassionate prophet whose witness both in word and in suffering gathered everyone, especially the poor and those on the margins, into a new community of universal table fellowship and service.

Both Matthew and Luke also had new material that they wanted to add to Mark's Gospel. They shared a common collection of Jesus' sayings with which they supplemented Mark in different ways. Matthew uses most of this "Q" material to create five extended discourses that form the backbone of Jesus' teaching in this Gospel. Luke lumps most of this material into a great insertion, chapters 9-19, in which Jesus the teaching prophet sets his face toward Jerusalem, the "killer of prophets" (Luke 13:34). On the way, he reveals the meaning of God's dream for a community of persons related as God wants them to be.

Studying the Synoptics

To study the Synoptic Gospels, scholars have devised a method for the "critical study of the process of editing" called redaction criticism. Redaction is an older word for editing. This method aims to "shed light upon the personal contribution of each evangelist and to uncover the theological tendencies which shaped his editorial work." (See the Pontifical Biblical Commission's *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 1993, I.A.1.) Using this method, scholars have been more able to recognize and appreciate the unique literary and theological characteristics of each Gospel.

We can summarize the basic presuppositions that guide redaction criticism in this way. Both Matthew and Luke had and used Mark's structure for their Gospels. They also included material from other sources at their disposal—the shared "Q" and their own sources.

Since Luke and Matthew had Mark's text, we presume that their changes to Mark are conscious and freely made. By reflecting on why these changes were made, we can begin to discern their intentions and discover their particular emphases.

Of course there is no guarantee that we can get back into the mind of Matthew or Luke, but still we can recognize the themes and ideas that each of them stresses when they want to change Mark. As we reflect upon the reasons for their changes, we discover that they are often linked to each evangelist's understanding of who Jesus is and the special needs facing their communities. Mark's Gospel was great for Mark's community, but new times and new challenges demanded new versions of Jesus' story. As you begin to study the Synoptic Gospels more carefully, you should work with a synopsis of the Gospels, which places the text in columns to detect more easily the changes among the individual Gospels. In this format, you can quickly compare the texts of each evangelist. Once you have found the passage you wish to examine, here is what to do.

First, since we assume that Mark is the original source, notice the changes that Matthew and Luke make to Mark. These changes can be grammatical, such as the use of different vocabulary or sentence construction; or thematic, such as the introduction or omission of material that the evangelist thinks is necessary to get his point across. Notice that changes can be by addition, omission, change in location or substitution (sometimes Matthew and Luke think that a version of an incident from their own sources is better than that of Mark).

Second, decide which changes are more significant and which might be just stylistic. Luke is always touching up the rather rough Greek that Mark writes. As careful readers of Mark's text, Luke and Matthew often make changes because what Mark wrote either was not clear to them or was not what they wanted to emphasize about Jesus or discipleship.

Third, in light of the significant changes, ask why Matthew and Luke would want to make these changes to Mark's text. Obviously they could have repeated Mark's text word for word, but since they chose to make changes, they must have had a reason.

Most commonly, the reasons can be traced to each evangelist's portrait of Jesus. Mark stresses that Jesus is a suffering Messiah opening a new way of relating to God. Matthew emphasizes Jesus as an authoritative teacher who presents the new guidelines for life in relation to God. Luke highlights the healing and prophetic activity of Jesus as a witness to the new action of God for salvation. Such changes reinforce their own portraits of Jesus.

Another major reason for making changes was the particular challenge that each community faced. All the evangelists believed that Jesus was the solution to their problems. So the words and deeds of Jesus hold the key that unlocks the solution to the crises facing their communities. Matthew and Luke change Mark because Mark's proclamation of the gospel is no longer the way that their communities need to hear the Good News.

Shaping Our Own Gospel

What Matthew and Luke did to Mark's Gospel is what we are still doing to the Gospels. We take their message to discover the solutions for our problems today. Each of us shapes a Gospel by selecting from all four Gospels the words and deeds of Jesus that we find most important because of our situation, our emphases—what we need Jesus to be an example of—and for following his path to God. The Good News in four versions becomes the Good News in many more. How providential it is that we have four versions rather than merely one! And how interesting it is to trace the uniqueness of each version and recognize the different theologies and community responses to Jesus that are available to us today.

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