

1 How Did Christianity Start?

Let's think about history. How did the Christian movement manage to survive and thrive in the first hundred years? How did it inspire the believers long term and how did their children not abandon it? Other than the gospels (first 4 books on the New Testament) and epistles (letters of the New Testament), there is almost nothing written by these earliest followers of Jesus who were perhaps 10,000 people by 100AD. Besides God's Old Covenant Word, what did those early churches have?

There were no sermons, a later invention. It is thought the early church spread by quiet networking. Music was not a big thing in ancient Rome. The early Christians met in their homes built around a central courtyard. Worship services would remind one more of home devotions than a modern church. Nobody said, "Come hear our great preacher and our wonderful music this Sunday!"

Jesus died about 33 AD and the first gospel, *Mark*, wasn't written until at least 56AD. For a generation, there was no written New Testament scripture. Yet we know apostles were travelling. Thomas went to India in 52 AD according to royal records. Even 100 years later, a church might own only a partial hand-copied gospel and a couple of epistles. How did these people not wander away from their first beliefs? Secular historians presume their beliefs evolved or there was a secret text somewhere. That's unlikely. We know they had firm beliefs from the earliest days. Moreover, a confused person who doesn't know what to believe will hardly bring about persecution by the authorities. Moreover, a religion won't last if it doesn't remind people constantly of what they are to do. The kids will walk away if it doesn't solve or put in perspective life's problems.

An answer is buried in Acts 2:23ff, Peter's Pentecost address. "*Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified...But God raised Him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for Him to be held by it. (vs. 24)...And they devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching and the fellowship to the breaking of bread, and to prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. (vs. 42-43), praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number... (vs. 47)*"

From the earliest days, Roman pagans claimed Christians believed the **Resurrection**. This was attested to by Julio, the Prefect that succeeded Pontius Pilate. He wrote home to Rome about a new group of Jews, harmless but weird. They believed that their leader had risen 3 days after he died. Romans snickered. In 3 days a dead body will start to stink. Roman soldiers knew death! But if Jesus was raised, why? Did Christians simply say he was sinless? That alone would only save a man from God's eternal wrath and find him a place in heaven. The grave, Peter and the Christians insisted, "could not hold Him." Hence Jesus must be God. This answers the first of the two fundamental questions of Christianity—"Who was Jesus of Nazareth?" The second question is "What does that mean for me?" Jesus Died For My Sins. As soon as you claim this you have also said that Jesus is God. A 3rd party person can't forgive 2 people who are at odds. That person isn't part of what happened. Only the offended can forgive. Hence Jews say, "God alone could forgive all sins because all sins offend God."

Early Christians had some apostles right there teaching them (if one lived in Jerusalem). They had the 5 functions of the church (worship, fellowship, discipleship, service, witness) just as today (Acts 2:42ff and the visible signs of the Spirit). Yet they actually did have the New Testament. This was not written scriptures, but "This is the **New Testament in My blood.**" The Old Testament (covenant) was the Law. But what if you messed up? Then a sacrifice was required to make things right. Sacrifices were the atonement--a sacred act, ordained and commanded by God, with physical elements, which required the believer's faith, worked forgiveness and sometimes

brought about other inexplicable benefits from God. What if you forgot some of your sins? There was a “clean-up sacrifice” at Yom Kippur to forgive all the sins of the prior year. Jesus claimed in this New Testament, that He was the “forever sacrifice”—forgiveness from a God who loves you so much to come for you in your utter unworthiness. This new covenant brings you extraordinarily close to God.

Jesus came forward with this New Covenant in the Lord’s Supper, a sacrament (consecrated act) like the OT sacrifices to remind that every day, every second, God was saving them. Was it really His blood and body they believed they ate and drank? They must have. The Romans were horrified by what they heard. Perhaps a Roman asked, what are you doing in there?” Christian: “We are eating and drinking the body and blood of Christ!” *Cannibals!*, the Romans thought—the worst form of barbarianism! But what if the Christian had said, “Well, we kind of figuratively think this.” The Romans would have just rolled their eyes and laughed had that been the case. In the **Lord’s Supper**, Christians became forgiven and then amazingly, bonded with God’s family of saved believers. That’s why Passover is celebrated. Jesus picked up the Passover bread and announced flatly that it was His body, given for them. (How could that be? God made it mysteriously happen.) When someone was invited to share bread in that society, it meant, “you will be part of my family for the night.” When we come to eat His body, we are pledging to be part of His family. And then Jesus took the Passover cup of blessing and pronounced, “This is the New Covenant in my blood.” He must have shocked his disciples. Asking someone to share the cup with you was what grooms did to ask a bride if she agreed to marriage! Week after week, the Christians did this, cementing themselves to each other and their Savior.

So Christians were reminded and partook of forgiveness, but how does one progress in faith and draw near to God? It came by **Baptism and the Spirit**. Like Lord’s Supper, baptism is a Sacred Act with elements requiring faith, forgiving sins—a sacrament. To be baptized one has to confess and turn away from sins. Years later, Paul would tell the Roman Christians (Rom. 6:3-4) “*we are buried with him in Baptism, and just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in the newness of life.*” Dead to sin, alive to God, our sins forgiven, we are again bonded to Jesus and to God’s family as in Communion. The Holy Spirit, given as God’s sealing gift in repentance at Baptism, will raise the believer and internally walk with Him. Early church fathers wrote that people were *sealed* by baptism. ‘Sealed’ *i.e.*, you aren’t getting away; you’re now a child of God. God often comes during troubles, whether they are your own fault or not. The saving is all His doing. Nothing on earth beats such certainty. Talk directly like a child to Dad, hang onto His words, pledge your life!

This established what became known as Orthodox (correct, ‘square’) Christianity. If all they’d had was the memory of their leader rising from the dead, within a generation that would have become a distant legend. If sacraments had no power, they would become dull rituals over time. Christianity would have died out. Later, books were written by the apostles but then other fraudulent books came along too. Which were right? Christians measured everything against the fundamentals of Orthodoxy.

But how did Christianity spread? Knowing God loved you and saw you from the very beginning, saved you, gave you faith to respond, and now puts His Spirit inside you, changes everything. All the world was then and is now searching for God. Christians weren’t. God found me! Sealed me forever! Yet they faced huge troubles—we know by what’s been unearthed. 30 house churches have been discovered and plaques and stones with names on them-- church members. 2/3 of the names were of women who in those days were treated like sub-humans. Half the names were just a single name, likely slaves. The Hebrew word for struggle means also to *wrestle*. When life is a struggle, one wrestles with God in prayers. “Why, God, did you do this? Why did you make me this way? Help me, please.” Jesus wrestled with God as well, in Gethsemane. Did God

take away his death? No but Jesus became closer to God in his struggle. God often does not heal a situation but brings one closer. A new door is opened as a new way of knowing God to be close arises. Through our struggles we learn empathy for others, we become experienced in their difficulties too, we become a witness with love and joy, seeing God's love for us and behind us all. That is how the early church grew and how modern churches can grow. Share your life with others. Listen to their situations. Share the Good News with Love and Joy. This is a kind of compassion that supersedes the worldly politics of doling-out favors.

More than tradition makes Lutherans love Word and Sacraments. God comes in many ways, but there's 2 places He promises--Word (Jn 1:1, Is 66:1-2) and Sacraments (I Cor. 11:23, Rom. 6:3-4).

Christians have much in common. 97% of church denominations agree on 9 *doctrines*-- Triune God, Salvation by Grace through the death of the Jesus Christ who is both God and man, Virgin birth, Resurrection, real Heaven and Hell and 2nd coming of Christ, Bible is God's Word, use of Creeds, practices of Lord's Supper and Baptism, holiness of the Church. (Baptists omit creeds yet believe in their content.) Doctrine means a belief considered absolutely true and key to faith. *Dogmas* are teachings that are considered to be true. *Adiaphora* (Greek) are issues "free to choose". Who decides this? Mostly seminaries. LCMS has a Commission on Theology and Church Relations that considers things like racism and pro-life. ELCA has a similar group overseen by bishops.