

Early Christians Speak

Intro: As Christians and as members of the church of Christ, we hold a number of viewpoints that are different from the rest of those who profess faith in Christ.

Among those unique doctrines, for example:

Belief in baptism for the remission of sins.

Belief in worship on Sunday rather than Saturday.

Belief in observing the Lord's Supper every Sunday.

Belief that church music should be without instrumental accompaniment.

It may be tempting at times to wonder if our understanding is true especially when so many people differ with us. And we may also wonder if we could in some way verify that others have reached similar conclusions. The answer is "yes." In fact, it is interesting to know how those who lived closest to the first century answered these same questions, since they were direct recipients of the apostles' teaching and converts of those taught by the apostles.

Many years ago Everett Ferguson, who was for many years professor of church history at Abilene University authored a book called "Early Christians Speak" and which surveys and documents the viewpoints of the earliest Christians outside the NT itself. I highly recommend the book to any who want to learn more about the viewpoints of the earliest Christians. Today I want to share with how early Christians answered some of the same questions we are seeking to answer.

First someone may ask, "How can we know what the earliest Christians believed?"

Early church resources

Today we have in our possession a collection of documents from a number of authors who lived near the end of the apostolic era and shortly thereafter.

First, there are those called "apostolic fathers". They receive this designation because their life span overlapped the first century and because some of them had firsthand experience with the apostles themselves. Also there are some ancient documents preserved that date very close to the first century whose authors are unknown. Second there are "apologists". Apologists were men whose primary role in writing was to defend Christianity against the attacks and accusations of unbelievers.

Third, there are "theologians." These were men of leadership in the church who wrote concerning doctrinal matters.

I thought you might find it interesting to see what their understanding was on some of these controversial points in the religious world today.

An important reminder: The truth is what is revealed in Scripture. However we may find some usefulness in how these men who lived in close proximity

to the establishment of Christianity (within a generation or two) understood and practiced the faith.

Let's consider what they believed:

On Baptism

Many religious groups affirm that baptism is not necessary for the remission of sins (that salvation takes place before baptism.) In contrast, we understand and teach that baptism to be “for the remission of sins” based on the words of the apostle Peter (Ac. 2:38).

And Peter said to them, “Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 2:38)

The act of baptism stands between the sinner and salvation

So then it might be helpful to ask, “How did the early church view baptism?”

Consider this quote from an early source known as “The Epistle of Barnabas.” It is generally regarded to be a first century document written as early as 74 AD and before the middle of the first century. Though authorship by Barnabas, the companion of Paul, has been debated, it was highly regarded by the early church and included in Codex Sinaiticus. It gives us some insight into the beliefs of one Christian writer who lived during the apostolic era.

This meaneth, that we indeed descend into the water full of sins and defilement, but come up, bearing fruit in our heart, having the fear [of God] and trust in Jesus in our spirit. (Barnabas 11)

Also consider the words of Justin Martyr who lived from 110-165 AD. He was converted in Palestine and became a well-known apologist among the second century Christians. He was beheaded in Rome for his testimony concerning Jesus. Certainly he would be a credible witness of the practice of the churches. Among his works is “The Constitutions of the Holy Apostles.” He wrote:

There, the one who refuses to be baptized is to be condemned as an unbeliever, partially on the basis of what Jesus told Nicodemus.... "He that, out of contempt, will not be baptized, shall be condemned as an unbeliever, and shall be reproached as ungrateful and foolish. For the Lord says: 'Except a man be baptized of water and of the Spirit, he shall by no means enter into the kingdom of heaven.' And again: 'He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved but he that believeth not shall be damned.'" (Justin Martyr "Constitutions of the Holy Apostles," Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 7, pg. 456-457.)

Justin also wrote in his “First Apology a chapter called “On Baptism”:

As many as are persuaded and believe that what we teach and say is true, and undertake to be able to live accordingly, are instructed to pray and to entreat God with fasting, for the remission of their sins that are past, we praying and fasting with them. Then they are brought by us where there is water, and are regenerated in the same manner in

which we were ourselves regenerated. For, in the name of God, the Father and Lord of the universe, and of our Savior Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, they then receive the washing with water (First Apology 61)

Justin also speaks of those who “may become the children of choice and knowledge, and may obtain in the water the remission of sins formerly committed, there is pronounced over him who chooses to be born again, and has repented of his sins, the name of God the Father and Lord of the universe; he who leads to the laver the person that is to be washed calling him by this name alone.” (First Apology 61)

Would you say Justin thought baptism preceded or followed the remission of sins? Here we can see that our understanding of the NT text corresponds very well with that of those writing in the late first and second century.

The Lord’s Day

Most of the Christian world accepts the idea that Sunday is the day of assembly for the church. That is based on a number of NT text that point to Sunday worship.

I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like the sound of a trumpet, (Revelation 1:10)

And on the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul began talking to them, intending to depart the next day, and he prolonged his message until midnight. (Acts 20:7)

Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I directed the churches of Galatia, so do you also. On the first day of every week let each one of you put aside and save, as he may prosper, that no collections be made when I come. (1 Corinthians 16:1-2)

However some groups advocate a Sabbath observance reinterpreting even some of these texts to be references to the Sabbath.

The testimony of the early church corroborates our conclusions:

Consider this statement from the aforementioned Epistle of Barnabas:
"We keep the eighth day [Sunday] with joyfulness, the day also on which Jesus rose again from the dead" (Epistle of Barnabas 15)

Consider this quote from Ignatius, a convert of the apostle John who lived in the second half of the first century into the early part of the second century. He served as bishop of the church at Antioch and suffered martyrdom for his faith. On the way to Rome he wrote several letters to various churches. In a “letter to the Magnesians he wrote: chapter 9”

If, therefore, those who were brought up in the ancient order of things have come to the possession of a new hope, no longer observing the Sabbath, but living in the observance of the Lord’s Day, on which also our life has sprung up again by Him and by His death — whom some deny, by which mystery we have obtained faith, and therefore endure, that we may be

found the disciples of Jesus Christ, our only Master — how shall we be able to live apart from Him, whose disciples the prophets themselves in the Spirit did wait for Him as their Teacher? And therefore He whom they rightly waited for, being come, raised them from the dead. (Letter to the Magnesians 9)

The Lord's Supper

Many religious groups observe the Lord's Supper monthly or even quarterly. Our understanding is that it is to be observed each Sunday based on a careful study of the Biblical examples.

On the first day of every week let each one of you put aside and save, as he may prosper, that no collections be made when I come. (1 Corinthians 16:1-2)

Therefore when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper, (1 Corinthians 11:20)

Consider this quotation again from Justin Martyr as he describes a mid-second century worship service:

And we afterwards continually remind each other of these things. And the wealthy among us help the needy; and we always keep together; and for all things wherewith we are supplied, we bless the Maker of all through His Son Jesus Christ, and through the Holy Ghost. And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen; and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given, and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons.

Justin goes on to describe a collection for the needy and then once more gives the significance of Sunday to the Christians.

But Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Savior on the same day rose from the dead. For He was crucified on the day before that of Saturn (Saturday); and on the day after that of Saturn, which is the day of the Sun, having appeared to His apostles and disciples, He taught them these things, which we have submitted to you also for your consideration.

Church music.

Again we hold a view that is in modern times the minority point of view. Our understanding is that the early church did not use instruments of music in

their assemblies; and we likewise following their example should not use them. This is based on the specific nature of the commands God has given about worship.

God seeks worshippers who worship in spirit and in truth.

“God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.” (John 4:24)

He has revealed by the Holy Spirit “traditions” of worship.

Now I praise you because you remember me in everything, and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you. (1 Corinthians 11:2)

We can see these orders from the apostles illustrated in the worship of the Corinthian church.

What is the outcome then? I shall pray with the spirit and I shall pray with the mind also; I shall sing with the spirit and I shall sing with the mind also. (1 Corinthians 14:15)

The early church fathers made clear that instrumental music was not used in their worship assemblies. They even resorted to figurative explanations of the Psalms in order to explain them to their contemporaries.

Consider this quote by early church historian Eusebius of Caesarea:

"Of old at the time those of the circumcision were worshipping with symbols and types it was not inappropriate to send up hymns to God with the psalterion and cithara and to do this on Sabbath days... We render our hymn with a living psalterion and a living cithara with spiritual songs. The unison voices of Christians would be more acceptable to God than any musical instrument. Accordingly in all the churches of God, united in soul and attitude, with one mind and in agreement of faith and piety we send up a unison melody in the words of the Psalms."
(Commentary on Psalms 91:2-3)

Later the well-known evangelist Chrysostom also commented on the practice of the church:

"David formerly sang songs, also today we sing hymns. He had a lyre with lifeless strings, the church has a lyre with living strings. Our tongues are the strings of the lyre with a different tone indeed but much more in accordance with piety. Here there is no need for the cithara, or for stretched strings, or for the plectrum, or for art, or for any instrument; but, if you like, you may yourself become a cithara, mortifying the members of the flesh and making a full harmony of mind and body. For when the flesh no longer lusts against the Spirit, but has submitted to its orders and has been led at length into the best and most admirable path, then will you create a spiritual melody." (Chrysostom, 347-407 AD, Exposition of Psalms 41, (381-398 A.D.) Source Readings in Music History, ed. O. Strunk, W. W. Norton and Co.: New York, 1950, pg. 70.)

Interestingly this view so prevailed among the churches that worship without instruments was called “a cappella” (that is according to the style of the chapel).

Conclusion: It is clear that though the modern world may hold different these positions, it is they and not we who are out of step with the evidence of the early church. How can we explain these points in view of their close proximity to the apostles and those taught by them. Did they completely change the gospel within a generation? Or does this not indicate that these teachings were given by the apostles and passed along to the next generation without alteration?