

# How the Church began

## Focus

This topic focuses on the different expressions of church in the closing years of the first century CE. The topic examines significant differences in the church communities and proposes a unifying principle.

## Learning outcomes

By the end of this topic, you should:

- be aware of the different models of early church that developed under the influence of James, Paul and John
- understand what differences existed in worship, governance and ministry in those early communities
- understand the importance of belief in the resurrection for the early church.

## Introduction

There are approximately 1.1 billion people in the world today who identify themselves as Catholics. These people are served by just over 405,000 priests and by approximately 4800 bishops. Among the bishops are some 185 cardinals, of whom just over 110 are currently eligible because of their age to elect the pope. The pope himself is not only the head of the Catholic Church but is also recognised internationally as the head of state of the Vatican.

The situation I have just described is vastly different from the situation in the earliest days of the Church. It is the very early days of the Church that we will be exploring in this topic.

## The Lord's Prayers

Many of us are familiar with *The Lord's Prayer*, sometimes known as *The Our Father*. At the celebration of Eucharist in the Catholic Church the priest often introduces the prayer with the words, "Let us pray with confidence to the Father in **the words our Saviour gave us.**" The congregation then prays:

Our Father, who art in heaven,  
hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come.  
Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our trespasses,  
as we forgive those who trespass against us,

and lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil.

When we go to the Gospels to find these words that Jesus “gave us”, we find something very interesting. The “Lord’s Prayer” is found only in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. It does not appear in the Gospels of Mark and John nor in any of Paul’s letters. Furthermore, the wording of the prayer in Matthew’s Gospel **differs** from the wording in the Gospel of Luke:

#### **Matthew 6:9-15**

Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name.  
Your kingdom come.  
Your will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our debts,  
as we also have forgiven our debtors.  
  
And do not bring us to the time of trial,  
but rescue us from the evil one.

#### **Luke 11:1-4**

Father,  
hallowed be your name.  
Your kingdom come.  
  
Give us each day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our sins,  
for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted  
to us.  
And do not bring us to the time of trial.

There are a number of conclusions that we could draw from the differences in these two versions of the prayer. One conclusion might be that Jesus taught **two** different versions of the prayer and Matthew chose one version while Luke chose the other. Another conclusion could be that Jesus taught **one** version of the prayer and either Matthew added words to it or Luke omitted some words. I believe it is more likely that Jesus frequently prayed to his Father and encouraged his followers to do likewise, and that the communities for whom Matthew and Luke wrote their Gospels had each **constructed** a liturgical prayer based on the themes of Jesus’ prayers as they had been handed down in oral tradition. Matthew and Luke then wrote these community prayers into their Gospel narratives.

It is possible that the early Christians in **Rome** also prayed a similar prayer. Paul seems to be alluding to such a liturgical prayer when he writes to the Roman Christians, “When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Rom 8:15).

From all this evidence we can draw the conclusion that the various early Christian communities used **different** versions of *The Lord’s Prayer* in their liturgical celebrations. We will now see how the central prayer of the Eucharistic liturgy also differed in various communities.

## **The Eucharistic Prayer**

There are **five** accounts of the Last Supper in the New Testament. They are found in Paul's first letter to the Christians in Corinth and in the gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke and John. All except John refer to Jesus stating that the bread and wine consumed at the meal are his body and blood.

<b>Paul</b> <b>1 Cor 11:23-25</b>	<b>Mark</b> <b>14:22-24</b>	<b>Matthew</b> <b>26:26-29</b>	<b>Luke</b> <b>22:19-20</b>
<p>For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, <b>"This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me."</b> In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, <b>"This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."</b></p>	<p>While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, <b>"Take; this is my body."</b> Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, <b>"This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.</b> Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God."</p>	<p>While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, <b>"Take, eat; this is my body."</b> Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, <b>"Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.</b> I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it with you in my Father's kingdom."</p>	<p>Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, "Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, <b>"This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."</b> And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, <b>"This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood."</b></p>

I have highlighted in the table above the words that, according to the four writers, Jesus said about the bread and wine. You will notice that they differ considerably in the four accounts. It would be most unlikely that Jesus celebrated four different Last Suppers. It is most likely that the highlighted words are the **liturgical formulas** used in the different communities. Mark, Matthew and Luke have written these words into their Gospels while Paul is probably referring to the words which he told the Corinthians to use in their Eucharistic liturgies.

In a very early church document, the *Didache*, sometimes called *The Teaching of the Apostles*, we find a description of **another way** of celebrating Eucharist (Bettenson, 1967, pp. 231-232):

At the Eucharist, offer the Eucharistic prayer in this way. Begin with the chalice: 'We give thanks to thee, our Father, for the holy Vine of the servant David, which thou hast made known to us through thy servant Jesus.'

*'Glory be to thee, world without end.'*

Then over the particles of bread: 'We give thanks to thee, our Father, for the life and knowledge thou hast made known to us through thy servant Jesus.'

*'Glory be to thee, world without end.'*

'As this broken bread, once dispersed over the hills, was brought together and became one loaf, so may thy Church be brought together from the ends of the earth into thy kingdom.'

*'Thine is the glory and the power, through Jesus Christ, for ever and ever.'*

No one is to eat or drink of your Eucharist but those who have been baptized in the Name of the Lord; for the Lord's own saying applies here, 'Give not that which holy unto dogs.'

When all have partaken sufficiently, give thanks in these words:

'Thanks be to thee, holy father, for thy sacred Name which thou hast caused to dwell in our hearts, and for the knowledge and faith and everlasting life which thou hast revealed to us through thy servant Jesus.'

*'Glory be to thee for ever and ever.'*

'Thou, O Almighty Lord, hast created all things for thine own Name's sake; to all men thou hast given meat and drink to enjoy, that they may give thanks to thee, but to us thou hast graciously given spiritual meat and drink, together with life eternal, through thy Servant. Especially, and above all, do we give thanks to thee for the mightiness of thy power.'

*'Glory be to thee for ever and ever.'*

'Be mindful of thy Church, O Lord; deliver it from all evil, perfect it in thy love, sanctify it, and gather it from the four winds into the kingdom which thou hast prepared for it.'

*'Thine is power and the glory for ever and ever.'*

'Let His Grace draw near, and let this present world pass away.'

*'Hosanna to the God of David.'*

'Whosoever is holy, let him approach. Whoso is not, let him repent.'

*'O Lord, come quickly. Amen.'*

(Charismatists, however, should be free to give thanks as they please.)

The actual date and author of the *Didache* are unknown, but most commentators say that it was most probably written some time between 90 CE and 150 CE. 1 Corinthians was probably written around 55 CE. Mark's Gospel seems to have been written shortly after 70 CE and the Gospels of Matthew and Luke some ten to fifteen years later.

What is noticeable in these five accounts of very early Eucharistic celebrations is that there appears to have been **no fixed universal formula** that was used in all the Christian communities at the time. Furthermore within the community for whom the *Didache* was written it appears that there was no hard and fast rule. For example, charismatists, those members of the community who felt inspired to speak the Spirit's words, were free to respond in any way they chose, not necessarily with the formulaic words such as "O Lord, come quickly. Amen."

It would seem that what bound the various early Christian communities together was not a **universal** way of celebrating Eucharist or of praying The Lord's Prayer. We will now examine how governance and ministry

were exercised in some of the early communities and whether it was a centralised authority which fostered a sense of unity.

## **Authority in the early Christian communities**

Just as there was neither one way of praying, nor one way of celebrating Eucharist in the early Christian Communities, so there was not one form of **governance** and **ministry** in those communities. The following lengthy extract from *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* examines two points of view on authority in the early Palestinian and Jerusalem church (Dunn, 1990, pp. 106-109).

Two pictures of ministry within the earliest Palestinian church are possible. Both can be derived from a reading of Acts: the one appears more straightforward but is probably more contrived; the other is less obvious but is probably more historical.

On the former view the twelve apostles constituted the leadership of the Jerusalem community from the first and oversaw its mission — Matthias having been divinely elected (by lot) to restore the apostolic twelve after Judas's defection (e.g. 1:15-26; 2:42f; 4:33-37; 6:2,6; 8:1,14; 15:22). At an early stage their office was supplemented by the appointment of seven others to a secondary office to take over some of the administrative chores from the apostles (6:1-6) — just as Moses had appointed seventy to share his administrative burden (Num 11:16-25) and Jesus had appointed seventy to assist him with his mission (Lk 10:1 ff). 'Elders' are first mentioned in 11:30, but thereafter appear on several occasions, exercising authority with the apostles (particularly 15:2,4,6,22f). On this reading, then, at an early date the classic three-fold order of ministry was quickly established: bishop (successor to apostle), priest (= elder) and deacon (the seven). Moreover, so it is sometimes implied or argued, this was the pattern of ministry which became the norm for other churches and congregations as they sprang up in different places round the eastern Mediterranean.

But there are several difficulties with this view. Here are the most important. (a) According to the primitive tradition(s) of 1 Cor 15:3-7 *'the apostles' are not to be identified with 'the twelve'*. Paul himself (1 Cor 9:1; 15:8f), James (Gal 1:19), Barnabas (Gal 2:9), Andronicus and Junia(s) (Rom 16:7), and probably Apollos and Silvanus (1 Cor 4:9; 1 Thess 2:6f) were also reckoned apostles. Consequently, *'the apostles' must have been a much wider group than 'the twelve'*. Moreover, for Paul apostleship consisted primarily in mission (1 Cor 9:1f; 15:10f; Gal 1:15f; 2:9). This accords well with the primitive sense of apostle as 'missionary' preserved in Matt 10:2, Mark 6:30 (only in the context of mission are the disciples called 'apostles') and Acts 14:4,14. It does not accord so well with the picture of 'the apostles' as resident leaders of the Jerusalem church implied particularly in Acts 8:1 — 'the apostles' are the only ones *not* to go out from Jerusalem!

(b) The suggestion that the seven appointed in Acts 6 were subordinates of the twelve and that they are the forerunners of the deacon is based only narrowly in the text. *Their election was much more a recognition of a charismatic authority already in evidence than an institution to an office*: their fullness of Spirit was neither lacking before the laying on of hands nor bestowed by it (6:3,5,8,10). Besides, according to the more natural sense of the Greek, it was the crowd of disciples and not 'the apostles' who laid their

hands on the seven (6:6). And their authority was certainly not confined, if directed at all, to 'serving tables'. As the sequel indicates, their charismatic authority was much more important and found its expression most fully in evangelism and mission (6:8ff; 8:4ff).

(c) Elders certainly played an important role in the Jerusalem church (cf James 5:14), and Luke suggests that the Jerusalem pattern was reproduced elsewhere by Paul (14:23; 20:17). But this is not borne out by Paul himself: 'elders' are nowhere mentioned in the Pauline writings prior to the Pastorals<sup>1</sup>, which are most probably post-Pauline. perhaps most striking of all, even according to Luke's own account, the leadership of the church at Antioch lay in the hand of prophets and teachers (Acts 13:1-3) — a hint of a very different kind of community structure and ministry in the churches of the Hellenistic mission ... . The probability is therefore that Luke has attempted to portray earliest Christianity as much more unified and uniform in organization than was in fact the case.

*On the other view of Acts, ministry and authority within the earliest Jerusalem community were much more spontaneous and charismatic in nature, and leadership took several diverse forms before a form of administration following the pattern of Jewish synagogue government became established.*

Ministry was evidently undertaken at the immediate behest of the Spirit or of a vision — and that was regarded as authority enough. This was certainly the case with the church at Antioch and with Paul (13:2,4; 16:6f, 9f; 18:9; 22:17f). So too with the Hellenists<sup>2</sup> and with Ananias of Damascus (6:8,10; 7:55; 8:26,29,29; 9:10). So too with Peter and John and 'the brothers' in Judea (4:8; 10:10-16, 19; 11:18; cf 15:28). Thus Philip ministered to the Ethiopian eunuch, Ananias to Paul and Peter to Cornelius, without prior consultation with fellow missionaries or local church or the church at Jerusalem; and those who were, according to Luke, to 'wait at table' at the appointment of the community, exercised rather a ministry of evangelism at the urging of the Spirit. Ministry was certainly not confined to a few, and even priests who were converted (6:7) seem to have held no special position or performed any particular ministry within the church.

Leadership probably focussed initially in the twelve, in their roles as representatives of eschatological Israel (Matt 19:28; Luke 22:29f; Acts 1:6, 20-26; 6:2). But for some reason or other their place at the centre of things diminished, and apart from two or three obvious exceptions, they began to disappear wholly from view — presumably at least because their role was thought of more in relation to the resurrection and return of the Christ (1 Cor 15:5; Matt 19:28; Luke 22:29f) and was less suited to the continuing community of the interval. Be that as it may, so far as we can tell, Peter (and probably the brothers James and John) quickly emerged as the most prominent, and so we may assume, leading figures (Acts 1:13; 3 - 4; 12:1f; and note their prominence in the Gospel tradition). The episode of the Hebrews and the Hellenists in 6:1-6 reveals another side of things: the seven chosen were probably all Hellenists, and so quite likely they were the leading lights among the Hellenists — already marked out by their spiritual maturity and authority (6:3). The relation of the leadership of the group round Peter to that of the seven is not at all clear — Peter does not figure at all in the central episode, 6:7 - 8:4.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus

<sup>2</sup> Greek speaking Jewish Christians

It was only after about ten years of the Jerusalem church's life, that is after Herod Agrippa's death in AD 44 [sic], that a firm and final pattern of leadership took shape and authority became rather more institutionalized. The key figure here was James the brother of Jesus. When did he first emerge among the Jerusalem leadership? We have no clear answer. But certainly by the time Paul went to Jerusalem for his second visit (AD 46 at the earliest) he was already the most prominent of the three 'pillar apostles' (Gal 2:9). The other James had been killed some time earlier by Agrippa (Acts 12:2), and Peter and John were steadily fading from the Jerusalem leadership scene — Peter because presumably he was under threat from Agrippa and anyway was more concerned with 'the mission to the circumcision' (Acts 12:3-17; Gal 2:8), John we do not know why (he appears for the last time in Acts 8:14). At all events James soon attained a position of complete dominance which lasted till his death in AD 62 (Acts 15:13ff; 21:18; Gal 2:12), and it was probably he who adopted the pattern of synagogue government for the Jerusalem church by gathering round him a body of elders (11:30; 15:2,4,6,22f; 16:4; 21:18). Within this more rigid community structure we may suppose that there was (progressively) less room for the earlier charismatic authority that depended solely on Spirit and vision, though on important issues the whole congregation was apparently still consulted (Gal 2:2-5; Acts 15:22) and prophets were still associated with Jerusalem (Acts 15:32; 21:10).

Dunn is suggesting here that in the early Jerusalem church, authority was exercised by James and his advisors. Dunn also suggests that prior to James exercising leadership there were two discernible groups in the Jerusalem church, the Hellenists and the Aramaic speaking Christians. Initially these two groups were quite distinct, but eventually both came under the **leadership** of James who governed the community in a similar way to that in which Jewish **synagogues** were organised.

The churches established by Paul, sometimes referred to as Pauline churches, were very different from the Jerusalem church under James. Dunn (1990, pp. 109-114) proposes that the Pauline churches were more **charismatic** than the Jerusalem church under James, that is, the members of the Pauline churches were guided by the dictates of the Spirit rather than by a hierarchical authority structure.

In the Pauline churches every member of the community had some function or ministry because each person had been **gifted** by the Spirit. Paul made it clear that no function was more important than another, even though some functions carried more responsibilities than others. Thus someone who had the gift of compassion should not regard compassion as a gift inferior to, for example, prophecy, and the prophet should not think that she/he was superior to a teacher (Rom 12:3-7). In fact as far as Paul was concerned Christian **community** exists only when there is interplay between the various ministries: "For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another" (Rom 12:4-5).

The ministry with most **responsibility** was that of the apostle. The apostle was one who had been directly commissioned by the risen Christ in a vision, and she / he had the responsibility of establishing a community and then guiding its members on how to live the Christian life. Paul maintained that the authority of the apostle was confined to the church(es) that she / he had established, and that no other apostle had authority within that community. Thus Paul writes (2 Cor 10:13-16):

We, however, will not boast beyond limits, but will keep within the field that God has assigned to us, to reach out even as far as you. For we were not overstepping our limits when we reached you; we were the first to come all the way to you with the good news of Christ. We do not boast beyond limits, that is, in the labors of others; but our hope is that, as your faith increases, our sphere of action among you may be greatly enlarged, so that we may proclaim the good news in lands beyond you, without boasting of work already done in someone else's sphere of action.

**Prophets and teachers** were other ministers who had considerable responsibilities second only to those of the apostle, but when Paul identifies these ministries it is always in the context of the community as a whole. Apostles, prophets and teachers exercise their ministries alongside all the other ministries within the community:

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? (1 Cor 12:27-30)

Paul believed that it was incumbent upon **all members** of the community to teach, admonish, judge and comfort each other. To the community in Rome he wrote, "I myself feel confident about you, brothers and sisters, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able to instruct one another" (Rom 15:14). In a similar vein he told the Christians at Colossae, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom" (Col 3:16).

Dunn summarises the situation in the Pauline churches: (1990, pp. 112-113):

... any form of service etc which any individual member of the charismatic community found himself [sic] regularly prompted to by the Spirit and which benefited the church was (or at least should have been) recognized as a regular ministry by the church. ...

... if leadership was required in any situation Paul assumed that the charismatic Spirit would provide it with a word of wisdom or guidance through some individual.



Because the “word of wisdom or guidance” was the word of the Spirit of God, Paul believed that it was the **duty** of the community to recognize the Spirit at work in the community and to respond accordingly.

Whereas the Jerusalem church under James practised a hierarchical mode of governance and ministry and the Pauline churches emphasised the role of the charismatic community, Dunn (1990, pp. 118-119) suggests that the Johannine<sup>3</sup> communities practiced a **third way** of being church. Dunn claims that in the Gospel of John and the three letters there is no mention of any form of ministry or official position in the community. Dunn says that in the Johannine church there was a sense of community, but that relationship with God was regarded as an **individual**, not communal, relationship (1990, pp. 118-119):

... there is a sense of community both in the Gospel and in the first epistle ... but not of a community charismatically interdependent. And of course the ‘horizontal’ responsibility is laid on each to love the brethren; in both writings, as in Paul, this is the real mark of the Christian believer. But for John the ‘vertical’ relationship with God the Spirit is essentially an *individual* affair. Thus, in particular, there is mutual belonging to Christ, but not a mutual interdependence in that belonging: each sheep hears the shepherd’s voice for himself [sic] (John 10:3f, 16); each branch is rooted directly in the vine (15:4-7). ... Jesus does pray for the *unity* of believers, which again speaks of community, but even here the unity John has in mind is comparable to the unity of the Father and the Son and is both rooted in and dependent on the individual believer’s union with Jesus.

The exercising of **authority** in the Johannine communities was very different from the way authority was exercised in the Jerusalem and Pauline churches where members had specific roles. In John’s communities, according to Dunn (1990, p. 119),

The anointing of the Spirit obviates the necessity of teachers: the Spirit indwelling each believer is teacher enough. In short, *throughout these writings there is no real concept of ministry, let alone of office*. Everything is seen in terms of the individual’s immediate relationship to God through the Spirit and the word.

We have explored how some of the earliest Christian communities functioned. There were of course many **other** communities that we have not examined. These include the communities to whom the Pastoral Letters, the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke and the Book of Revelations were addressed. Such an examination would reveal further examples of differences in worship, governance and ministry among the earliest churches, and so we can say that it was not a universal form of governance, ministry and worship which provided unity in the early Church.

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<sup>3</sup> The Johannine communities were the early church communities for whom the Gospel of John and the three letters of John were written.

## **The unifying factor**

The earliest Christians were not united by obeying the directives of a central authority or by all praying in the same way or by exercising the same ministries in all the different communities. What united them was the **faith** that Jesus had been **raised** from the dead. Every book in the New Testament proclaims this belief, and Paul provides a succinct summary of this universal belief in Romans 10:9: "... if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

The model of church with which we are familiar and which I described in the Introduction is very different from the churches of the earliest Christians. The process of the change was very long and involved, and I hope that one day you will take the opportunity to explore the story.

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