The development of early Christian communities

The beginnings of Christianity were more complicated than they might seem at first. The gospels and the Acts of the Apostles recount that during his lifetime, Jesus chose twelve from among all his disciples. All acknowledge that Simon from Galilee was the leader of the group. Jesus gave him the nickname of ‘Rock’, which translated into Greek as Πέτρος, hence, ‘Peter’. At some point, Peter was forced to leave Jerusalem and moved his centre to Antioch, and is said to have gone to Rome and became the first bishop of the Roman Church. When Peter was forced to leave, James became the undisputed Christian leader in Jerusalem. James was put to death in 62 CE by a Jewish group attached to the Temple.

We know, therefore, that there were two early Christian leaders—Peter who was the leader of the twelve and James whose group had its base in Jerusalem. Another significant figure in this formative period was Saul. A Roman citizen from the city of Tarsus in modern-day Turkey, he was well trained in Jewish learning and awaited the coming of the Messiah. He is said to have come to Jerusalem and been commissioned by the high priest to seek out and persecute Christians in Damascus. He was converted to Christianity and took on a new name—Paul.

The early development of Christianity can be identified through four major stages:

- **Stage One**: Jesus’ death and resurrection is announced to the Jews and others at Pentecost (see Acts 2–4).
- **Stage Two**: The Church learns its first lesson about expansion. The first break—the gospel message is not tied to Jerusalem (see Acts 6–9).
- **Stage Three**: The Church learns a second valuable lesson. Expansion and disagreement—you need not be a Jew to be Jesus’ disciple (see Acts 10:11, 13:4, 15).
- **Stage Four**: The Church expands through Paul’s missionary journeys.

Earliest church communities and followers

Did Jesus found a ‘church’? The Greek word ἐκκλησία means ‘assembly, congregation, council’ and has become the term used to express the concept of a united Christian Church.

The gospels were written in Greek so it is problematic whether we should translate the word ἐκκλησία in Matthew 16:18, 18:17 as ‘church’ in the way it is understood today. In the letter to the Ephesians, half a century after the last gospel was written, there is the claim that ‘Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her’ (Eph 5:25). Later writers, such as Ignatius of Antioch and Origen, also begin to refer to these early groups of Christians as ‘the church’.

It appears that Jesus’ intention was to preach the gospel to all, at the same time knowing that only some of those ‘assembled’ would accept it. It is extremely doubtful that Jesus planned or had our understanding of ‘church’.

It became common to confess ‘the name of Jesus’ (Acts 4:18) or to accept baptism as a sign of belonging to the Way (Eph 4:5). Christian communities formed very quickly in major cities such as Ephesus and Antioch.

The word ‘church’ seems to have been used to refer both to the local community and the whole communion.
Women were frequently referred to as disciples or followers of Jesus, including Mary Magdalene and Tabitha (Acts 9:36). Paul commends Phoebe as a sister, patron and deacon of the church of Cenchreae (Rom 16:1–2) and also mentions many other women by name who served the church as ‘fellow workers’ (Rom 16:1; 1 Cor 16:19; Phil 4:2–3).

If early Christianity is understood to extend until 400 or 500 CE, then other important figures during this period were Ignatius of Antioch (d. c. 107 CE), Irenaeus (d. c. 200 CE), Origen (d. c. 254 CE), Anthony of Egypt (d. 356 CE), desert fathers and mothers, Cyril of Jerusalem (d. 386 CE), Augustine of Hippo (d. 430 CE) and Leo I (440–461 CE). Under Emperor Constantine (d. 337 CE), Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire.

**Major variants of Christianity**

The history of Christianity is a history of division, often for political and social reasons as much as theological. Two key historical developments in Christianity were the division between Eastern and Western, and the Reformation in Europe and Britain that saw the development of Anglicanism and the major Protestant denominations.

The division between the East and the West had its roots in the fourth century split in the Roman Empire and the establishment of two capitals—Rome and Constantinople. Tensions always existed between the Greek-speaking Christians of the East who became the Orthodox Church and the Latin-speaking Christians of the West who became the Roman Catholic Church. These tensions came to a head when the Church was trying to formulate a creed. The Western church looked to the Bishop of Rome for guidance, the Eastern church to the Patriarch of Constantinople. In what is referred to as the Great Schism of 1054, the separation became official.

A further split occurred within the Western (Roman Catholic) church in the sixteenth century with the movement known as the Reformation. This movement began as an effort to purify the life and teachings of the Catholic Church, and eventually led to the establishment of separate Christian Churches. All these variants adhere to specific beliefs related to Jesus Christ, creation, salvation and the afterlife, and believe that the scriptures are the inspired word of God. The question of leadership, the expression of the beliefs, and the role of scripture and tradition is what separates them.

More recent times have seen the birth of various religious movements, mostly from within the Protestant churches, such as Pentecostalism.

**Review**

1. When was the term ‘Christian’ first used for the followers of Jesus? Name two other terms used.
2. In one page, describe the development of the early Christian communities after the death of Jesus.
3. Outline the four major stages in the expansion of early Christianity.
4. Recall the names of three women prominent in the earliest church communities.
5. Outline the role of Christian women in the development of the early Christian Church.

**Extension**

1. Go to the web destinations for page 50 and investigate the lives, contributions and ongoing impact of two early Christian women. Write a short report on each.
2. Investigate the life and contributions of one other important figure of early Christianity. Present a report in point form.
3. Organise a class debate on the topic: ‘The important role women had in the early Church is not reflected in the later history of the Christian Churches.’

**Did you know?**

The word ‘catholic’ comes from the Greek word for ‘universal’. In this chapter it refers to a variant of Christianity—the Catholic Church. It is also used to describe someone who has wide tastes in, for example, music. Orthodox is from the Greek word for ‘correct belief’; Protestant is from one who ‘protests’; and Anglicanism derives from the word for the people from Anglo—England. As used within Christianity, each one tells us something about the history of the variants of Christianity that have arisen since the time of the first Christian communities.