

Chapter 13 The Disciples of Jesus as an Organized Movement

To visualize the richness of the thinking and activity of the emerging Christian movement, we need to update the traditional view of its development. Traditionally, we have assumed that Jesus chose twelve disciples, that these men went into the world as the leaders of the church, and that the church grew out of the ministry of the twelve alone. The New Testament indicates, however, that both in the number of people involved and in the varieties of mission offered the growth of the Christian church was more intricate than this. This complex social movement can be divided into three-time frames: first, the ministry of Jesus in the third decade of the first century; second, the period from the resurrection until about the year A.D. 70 when the city of Jerusalem was destroyed once again; and third, the time from the destruction of Jerusalem to the conclusion of the writing of the New Testament, about A.D. 100.

I.

All the gospels indicate that the ministry of Jesus began not in Galilee but in Judea. Matthew, Mark, and Luke merely mention the fact -- they locate Jesus' baptism and temptation as being in Judea; Matthew and Mark note that Jesus left Judea for Galilee only when John the Baptist was arrested -- but the Gospel of John places most of Jesus' ministry in Judea. In fact, John tells us as much about his Judean ministry as the other gospels do about his ministry in Galilee.

According to John's Gospel, the following key events took place in and around Jerusalem. There he called his first two followers, one of whom was Andrew the brother of Simon. After a short trip to Galilee, Jesus again returned to Jerusalem, where he cleansed the temple and conversed with Nicodemus. Following a dispute with the Baptist, Jesus withdrew to Galilee but shortly returned to Jerusalem. Here he healed the cripple in the Pool of Bethzatha and was challenged by the Jewish leaders for doing so. Withdrawing again, he went into the Decapolis region to the north and east of the Sea of Galilee where he presided over a meal in the wilderness. Against advice from friends, he returned to Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles, taught in the temple, healed the man born blind, raised Lazarus from the dead, and because of the opposition of the chief priests had to withdraw from the area until that final fateful Passover when he was crucified.

With such an extended ministry in Jerusalem, Jesus gathered many followers in the area of Judea. Some we know by name, some only by description. Nicodemus was one of his followers, who came by night and who later helped to bury the body of Jesus; the man born blind, who confessed that Jesus was Lord, was another. Yet another was the man who owned the colt upon whose back Jesus rode as he entered the Holy City for the last time, and yet another was

the man carrying the pitcher of water, who was perhaps also the householder in whose room Jesus and the twelve observed their last meal together. Chief among them: the Judean followers Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, all of whom lived in the little village of Bethany on the east side of the Mount of Olives. The group included the young man who followed Jesus into the garden of Gethsemane and fled as the Jerusalem police were about to arrest him; Joseph of Arimathea, who buried his body; and Cleopas and his friend from Emmaus who reported that they had walked and talked with Jesus after his resurrection. The most important figure in the group was the "beloved disciple," so-called, who was at the last supper, the trial, and by the cross, and to whom Jesus entrusted the care of his mother; it was his account of Jesus' ministry in Judea that provided the basis for the Gospel of John and offers us our insights into the community of followers that Jesus had gathered in Jerusalem and Judea.

Jesus' ministry in Galilee, equally significant, is much better known. According to Mark's Gospel, Jesus came to Galilee when John the Baptist was arrested. There he called his first Galilean disciples, preached in the synagogue at Capernaum, healed the sick and cleansed lepers. Moving about the area, he taught in the villages, rebuked a storm while crossing the sea, raised from death the daughter of Jairus a ruler of a synagogue, gathered his followers together for a wilderness meal, was seen walking on the water of the Sea of Galilee, took his little band north to Tyre and Sidon, at Caesarea Philippi was identified by Cephas as the messiah, and was transfigured before them on a mountaintop. After a final short visit to Capernaum, he led the twelve to Jerusalem where the cross awaited him.

Much of his ministry in Galilee centered around the twelve men he had chosen to be disciples. Taken together, the twelve were looked upon as Israel recreated, with each man representing one of the ancient twelve tribes of the holy nation. Such a choice was in itself an act of faith. There had not been twelve tribes in Israel for 750 years, not since the ten northern tribes had been taken into captivity and scattered among the cities of the Assyrian Empire. But Jesus chose twelve, and this act reflected his inner purpose to restore the whole nation to its faithfulness to God.

Not all of the twelve had equal shares in Jesus' developing ministry, however, for the names of some are more familiar to us than are the names of others. Peter, James and John, and Judas, turn up frequently in the Gospel stories; other disciples do not play such a prominent part. From the twelve Jesus selected an intimate group to be with him at the critical moments of his ministry, and these men, Judas excepted, were to have special places of leadership in the early years of the church.

Jesus also had another larger group of men whose support he counted upon, and at one point in his ministry he sent out seventy of these as missionaries to proclaim the coming of his kingdom; it may even have been seventy-two. A number of women were also in Jesus' Galilean movement. Some of them followed him from Galilee to Jerusalem and were witnesses to his crucifixion. To a small group of these women, outside the tomb, the message of the resurrection came; while the testimony of women would not have stood up in any Jewish court of law in that day, it was accepted by this early Christian movement as a fundamental

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Since Jesus spent part of his time in Galilee and part in Jerusalem, the two groups of people hardly knew each other. They came closest to meeting at the time of the crucifixion and resurrection. Through the Jerusalem group Jesus arranged for his entry into the city and for the last meal with the twelve; the groups were so little aware of each others' presence that the Galileans looked upon the receiving the colt and the preparing of the Passover room as miracles of Jesus, results of his divine insight. The Galileans were with him in Gethsemane, where they camped during the Passover season, but at the moment of his arrest they fled and went into hiding; it was the Judeans who stood by the cross with him. To the Galilean women came the announcement of his resurrection and to the men of Emmaus his appearance at the meal; the Galilean Peter and the beloved disciple of Jerusalem both went to his empty tomb. Take cumulatively, the evidence shows that "the followers of Jesus as an organized movement" was considerably more complex than the traditional view would have us believe. Many segments of the population of Judea and Galilee were represented among his followers, and they were beginning to organize themselves in fairly definite ways.

II.

The second timeframe lies between the resurrection of Jesus and the destruction of the city of Jerusalem; in these years, from approximately A.D. 30 to 70, the complexity increased. The Christian movement in these four decades centered around four men and the groups they led.

One of them, James, was the leader of the Christian group in Judea and Jerusalem. The Christians residing in Jerusalem combined their faith in Jesus with worship in the Jewish Temple and practice of the Jewish law, but they were having an increasingly difficult time co- existing with their Jewish neighbors; differences in religious perspective were tolerated at first, but as the tension between Pharisees and Christians increased the Judean Christians were scorned, reviled, accused of all manner of evil, cast out of the synagogues of the rabbis, and finally persecuted to the extent that James and others were killed. This group, known as the Brothers of Jesus, or alternately the Poor, and organized in the typically Jewish manner of acknowledging a council of elders as their leaders, decided to leave the Holy City as the tensions built that resulted in the Jewish- Roman war of 67-70 A.D. Those who were able emigrated to the Peraan desert, the area of Transjordan, where they and their descendants continued to practice their

faith for almost two centuries.

A second leader, Stephen, stepped forward as the spokesman for another group also headquartered in Jerusalem; they were known as the Hellenists. These Hellenists — Jews who spoke only Greek and used it in their synagogues, who resided permanently in Jerusalem and had worshiped in the synagogues of the city, but who like some of their contemporary Jewish brethren rejected Temple worship and the authority of the Temple priests — had their origin as a separate group in a conflict with the Jewish-Christian party of James. Considering themselves at first a part of the Jerusalem movement of Jesus, the Hellenists soon began to feel a part of the Jerusalem movement of Jesus, the Hellenists soon began to feel their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food to the needy, and they complained vigorously about this. The issue was brought before a council of the church, and out of the conference came a decision to recognize the Hellenists as a separate party in the Jesus-movement. Seven men were chosen to lead the group, with Stephen as their head.

But the Hellenists soon raised an issue that brought grief to the whole church. Stephen and his co-workers challenged Jews from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, and Asia to a debate and stated clearly their conviction that as Christians they need not worship in the temple nor practice the Jewish law. The matter was argued before the Jewish Sanhedrin, and despite Stephen's passionate yet well-reasoned defense of his position, that highest court of Judaism condemned Stephen to death by stoning. In the general confusion that followed his death, the Sanhedrin made no distinction between Christians of Hebrew or Hellenist persuasion, and Christians from both parties were persecuted. The church in Judea and Samaria was, as they said, "scattered." That is, the movement disintegrated into confusion and flight and this persecution brought an end to the Hellenists as a significant group within the organized Christian movement. Its influence continued, however. In the person of the leader Stephen the group had provided the Jesus-movement with its first martyr; through the preaching of Philip it had influenced a governmental official of Ethiopia to become a Christian, and this had led to the Christian movement turning south toward Alexandria and Egypt; and it had conclusively proved that the Christian faith was attractive to persons who were not Jews by birth, that is, to Greek proselytes and their God-fearing friends, and Peter and Paul, in related yet differing ways, were soon to act upon this newly-attested fact.

The leader of the third segment of the Jesus-movement was Simon, the man known to the Greek-speaking Christians as Peter and to the Aramaic-speaking Christians as Cephas; both names meant "the Rock," the name Jesus had given him before his crucifixion. Simon was the leader of the Twelve, the group from Galilee that Jesus had gathered and which, after the death of Judas, had reconstituted itself into Twelve with the selection of Matthias. The mission of the Twelve centered in Galilee.

Galilee was familiar territory to Peter; he was born and raised there, and his speech was the dialect of a Galilean. He was with Jesus during his ministry in Galilee, and he returned there after Jesus' resurrection. Galilee was the northernmost of the three Roman provinces that were soon to become Palestine. It was not solely a Jewish area, like Judea, but differed from its

southern neighbor in both culture and religion. Frequently called "Galilee of the Gentiles," it centered around ten Greek cities known as the Decapolis. ("Polis" is the Greek word for city, and "deca," the word we use in "decade," is the Greek word for ten.) Its people were racially mixed: the Israelites remaining in Galilean cities after their leaders were exiled in 722 had intermarried with the heathen populations. Assyria had resettled there, and Galilean religious practices had been tarnished by this. Only in the third century B.C. had Judaism even re-entered the Galilean precincts. People of Judea looked down upon the Galileans. Nathaniel, a resident of Judea and a prospective follower of Jesus, was expressing a commonplace prejudice when in John 1:46 he is reported as asking. "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" Peter of Galilee, therefore, had a mission that reflected his origins: a circumcised Jew at home in Gentile environments, his ministry and that of the Twelve centered in Galilee but it did not remain there. Quickly yet deliberately it began to reach north along the Mediterranean shores where the Twelve preached the message of Jesus Christ to Jews and their proselytes in the synagogues of, among others, Tyre and Sidon, Lydda and Joppa, Damascus and Caesarea, Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch. It was an extensive ministry, destined to go from Jerusalem into Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth, and Peter and the Twelve were at the heart of it.

But in those areas a new concern arose, a concern that speedily became a problem. It centered around the synagogues of the Diaspora. The word Diaspora was a Greek word whose latter syllables meant "seed" and whose first ones meant "through," and the word itself indicates the kind of a mission that these synagogues had taken upon themselves: they considered themselves the seed that God had scattered through the world that God's message might be sown in every part of God's creation. In these synagogues of the Diaspora there were three groups of people. One group was composed of the Jews of Jewish parentage; these men had been circumcised, they kept the sabbath, they observed the Jewish dietary laws, and when the occasion permitted they worshiped in the Temple of Jerusalem. The second group were proselytes, Gentiles by birth who were attracted to Judaism and who after a long period of probation when they had proved conclusively that they would live like Jews, that is, would do the four things listed above that were required of one born into Judaism, they were admitted to the synagogue roles and could share fully in the worshiping community. There was also a third group attached to the synagogue. These were Gentiles who were attracted to Judaism, perhaps through friends who had become proselytes, and who shared in some of the life of the synagogue. Whether they were given an official name and an official position - some scholars indicate that the word "God-fearer" indicated both the name and the regular status that they had within the synagogue - they were still very much a part of synagogue life, and when the message of Christ was preached to the Jews and proselytes of the synagogue, some of these God-fearers responded positively, as well.

It was the growing willingness of proselytes and God-fearers to recognize Jesus Christ that created the fourth segment of the Christian movement. This was the movement of the apostles, the "sent-ones." The names of all the apostles we know, save one, indicate that they were men of the Diaspora, with Greek names, who were probably drawn from the proselytes of the synagogues; the persons called apostles in the New Testament include Paul and Barnabas, Zenas and Apollos, Aristarchus and Secundas, Gaius and Timothy, Tychicus and Trophimus,

Mark and Silvanus (Silas). This group, building upon the Christian faith that they had received from the party of James and the Brethren, the influence of Stephen and the Deacons, and especially the preaching of Peter and the Twelve, soon targeted the proselytes and the God-fearers of the Diaspora synagogues as the focus of their mission.

Their first leader may well have been Barnabas, but Paul soon came to be preeminent among them. Born a Jew in the Diaspora city of Tarsus at the northeastern corner of the Mediterranean Sea, he had been educated as a Pharisee, had persecuted the church in his early years, had been converted to the Christian cause and had taken a position of leadership in the apostles' mission. He had established churches in Galatia, just over the Taurus mountains from his home city; later had pushed on to Ephesus, Philippi and Thessalonica, Athens and Corinth; had even wanted to visit Rome and go to Spain to take his Gospel there. The churches of the apostles soon developed a distinctive style. Accepting much of the Christian faith they had received from the others, their Christian communities were based on the premise that "in Jesus Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female; we are all one in Christ." They quickly tended to accept God-fearers as full members of their fellowship and did not require them to receive circumcision or to abide by the food-laws of Judaism as a prerequisite of their participation in the Lord's Supper and full inclusion in the community of Christ; baptism upon profession of faith in Christ was sufficient as a means of entrance into their churches.

The history of the church in the four decades under examination is the story of the four groups and their various positions on receiving these God-fearing Gentiles into the Christian fellowship. Paul and the apostles initiated the practice. James and the brethren opposed it at first, especially the Pharisees in the James-party who looked upon circumcision and the food-laws as the primary points of Judaism. Peter and the Twelve vacillated on the issue, first refusing admission to the uncircumcized Gentiles, then accepting them, then backing away from that position, and finally granting it again. More than one attempt was made to deal with the issue: at first it was thought that Peter could go to the Jews and proselytes in the Diaspora and Paul to the God-fearers, but when that failed in practice, another decision was made, to wit, that circumcision was not necessary for the God-fearers but that keeping the food-laws was. Even that decision was challenged by Gentile-based churches like the one in Corinth; what would have been the outcome of the argument had it been settled in a church council, no one knows, for the death of James and the subsequent destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans removed the Jewish-Christian party of James from the scene, and the churches of Peter and Paul in the Gentile world were those that flourished and whose story has come down to later generations of Christians.

III.

During the last timeframe, from A.D. 70 to about 100, the Christianity that was moving out into the Gentile world was becoming a very complicated movement indeed. By the time this period closed, Christianity was fully established in the major cities of the Roman Empire, and individual Gospels had been written in different parts of the empire for the use of the Christian communities of those areas.

A.D. 70 is the crucial date for the writing of the Gospels. In that year Jerusalem was destroyed and could no longer function as the focal point around which Christians could unite. By A.D. 70 also, the original leadership of the church was dying off. Peter and Paul had most likely died in Rome in the persecutions under the Emperor Nero. These climaxed in 63, when Christians were accused of setting fire to Rome; they had become the scapegoats for everything wrong in a decadent empire. James was gone, having died in Jerusalem in an earlier persecution. The "beloved disciple" so important to the Gospel of John was now an old man living in Ephesus. Even people who had known and worked with the original Christian leaders were dying. Some step had to be taken to protect the purity and accuracy of the Christian faith. The answer was: write it down. So, in individual Christian communities across the Roman world, Gospels were written to transmit the truth about Jesus Christ. These Gospels took into account the agreed-upon message concerning Christ, but they also showed evidence of emphasizing the particular understanding of the Christian faith that had become significant to the Christians who wrote them.

The Gospel of Mark was the first to be produced. It was written in Rome while memories of Nero's persecution were still fresh in their minds and fears over a renewed persecution were uppermost in their concerns. Mark seemed especially to be recalling things from the Christian faith that would support people who were facing death for their faith, and so his Gospel centered around the martyrdom of Jesus himself and the way this martyrdom would strengthen the Roman Christians for the trials they were facing.

Matthew, the second gospel, was probably written by and for a Christian community which had its roots in Jerusalem. This gospel, more than the others, stressed the Jewishness of Jesus, and as the basis for the Christian life it called for a righteousness that exceeded that of the scribes and Pharisees. It also pictured Jesus as having roots in Egypt, as having been a lawgiver and teacher of the faith like Moses, and as coming to a high mountain like Sinai to give his final command to go into all the world to make disciples of all nations. These and many other features point to its having been written in the Egyptian city of Alexandria and reflecting the stresses on the Jewish community in that important city; and it portrays an emerging Christian movement which was consciously seeking to replace the Jewish rabbis as the true successors of the people of God of the Old Testament.

John's Gospel was most likely written in Ephesus. Located in a picturesque bay reaching out to the Aegean Sea in the western part of Asia Minor, Ephesus was one of the important intellectual centers of the day, a city to which had gathered Jewish people of the Diaspora, Stoic preachers from Greece, and devotees of the ancient religions of Persia and the east. John's Gospel reflected the presence of these diverse interests and was able to bring them into relationship to the Gospel of Jesus Christ in a manner that has served through the centuries as a model for the way the Christian faith can relate to non-Christian religions the world over.

The Gospel of Luke differs from the others in that it is addressed to all God-loving people of the world (the name of the person to whom it is written, Theophilus, denoted this, for Theophilus

means "friend of God," and the book was addressed to all such) and was meant to be well-documented account of the Christian faith that would appeal to the intelligensia of the empire of Rome. It fulfilled its purpose, and more. Based on the Gospel of Mark and drawing some of its insights from the Gospel of Matthew, Luke used sources for his story that are otherwise lost to us: documents of Jesus' teaching, lists of parables that he taught, an account of the passion of Jesus that differs in detail from the others, and resurrection accounts that add to our understanding of that event. He also used records of the Brethren and the Deacons of Jerusalem, a travel diary to which he gave his own name, and accounts from the church of Rome that told of the last days of Paul. Perhaps composed in Ceasarea, drawing upon documents from Jerusalem and Antioch as well as Macedonia and Rome, this gospel has a great deal to say about Christianity as a missionary movement, and its companion book, The Book of the Acts of the Apostles, is our chief source of knowledge about Peter and Paul and the mission of the early church.

What a remarkable achievement is represented by the accomplishments of this early Christian movement. Begun in the ministry of Jesus Christ, with its two centers in Galilee and Jerusalem, the church solved its problems of leadership and growth to such an extent that it was touching the lives of former Jewish rabbis in Alexandria, Stoics in Ephesus, a family of Roman citizens in Tarsus, slaves in Corinth, and the household of Ceasar himself in Rome. At the end of its first seventy years the church was fully established in the four major cities of the Roman Empire -- Alexandria, Antioch, Ephesus, and Rome, -- as well as in numerous regional centers of influence like Philippi and Thessalonica, Colossae, Lystra and Derbe. This was an organizational feat of impressive proportions: to have captured, or to have been captured by, the spirit of Jesus Christ in such a manner as to incorporate that spirit in the various congregations of the Christian faith and at the same time to be open to new movements of that spirit which would permit the church to grow and change.

IV.

Is there a discernible pattern of convictions which worked itself into the organizational structure of the early church? We can isolate four factors that became the basis upon which these Christian leaders made their crucial decisions.

Common to these early Christian bodies was their loyalty to Jesus Christ: having discovered God at work in him, they organized their lives to be loyal to the God who had come to them in the spirit of Jesus Christ. Did James confine his ministry to the Jewish people of Judea? He did so because he firmly believed that they alone were the focus of Jesus' ministry. Peter, on the other hand, extended his mission to Jewish people and their proselytes beyond Judea because he was convinced that Jesus had intended it. Paul likewise went to the ends of the earth to win people for Christ because he was certain that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free. Whatever these first Christians did, they did it in the conviction that their primary loyalty was to Jesus Christ and that in being loyal to him they were being loyal to God.

There was also great freedom and flexibility in setting out the faith and organization of this

early Christian church. In part this was due to their heritage from Judaism: Judaism had decreed that whenever ten Jewish men wanted to establish a synagogue to incorporate a particular expression of the Jewish faith, they were permitted to do so; and this resulted in a surprising plurality of Jewish faith and practice. Even more, however, this freedom was the Christians' heritage from Jesus Christ. He did not require rigid patterns of belief or action; his own relationship to God was much too lively for that.

The overriding concern of these Christian churches was to use this freedom to bring the spirit of Jesus Christ to bear upon the fundamental issues of life. The church of Jesus Christ in the first century A.D. was emphatically a church on the frontiers of human life. It was pioneering in social relationships: exploring new ways to govern the relationships between men and women in the name of the love of Christ; challenging the old economics in the name of the service of Christ; undercutting the practice of slavery in the name of the brotherhood of Jesus Christ; crossing the racial barriers built up between Jew and Gentile. It was also pioneering in philosophy and theology, opening up a new way into the life of God. The church used its freedom not to protect itself against the incursions of life but to bring each area of life under the authority of the spirit of Jesus Christ.

There was finally a desire on the part of these Christian communities to be what they called "one in Christ." They were not trying to be party-spirited. These communities struggled hard with each other to make certain that each Christian church was acting in a way consonant with the spirit of Christ. But once satisfied that that was happening in their respective communities, they willingly extended the right hand of fellowship to each other. They were convinced that the church was not the body of Christ unless each part of it was respected as a functioning part of that body; and they acted on the conviction.

It is for these reasons that the various social movements we can identify in Scripture come to their climax in the church of Jesus Christ. The people of God emerged into history in the persons and clans of the patriarchs. In the time of the judges, Israel tried to express in its social structures its conviction that God alone rules. As this conviction faded with the usurpation of authority by the kings, the prophets tried to call Israel to uphold its accountability to God. With Jesus, a new community was created in response to Christ's announcement that the Kingdom of God was at hand. Under the leadership first of men like James, Peter, and Paul, and later of persons in Alexandria, Antioch, Ephesus, and Rome, the church worked out its loyalty to Christ in terms of a worldwide community, one in faith but varied in practice and belief, whose freedom was to be used in such a manner as to permit the spirit of Christ to enter a world that badly needed the saving and challenging message that Jesus embodied.