

## Twelve Things I've Learned about Early Christianity

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I was recently speaking to some friends about ancient Christian history, and one of them suggested I post some details. I've never been a blogger, so I figured I'd just post something here.

These are twelve things that I learned during undergrad courses, my graduate degree in early Ecclesiastical History, and a lifetime of my own reading/conversations. But honestly it's pretty easy to find this material: e.g. just break open a reputable secular source, like the Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church (Oxford, 2005). None of this is ground-breaking, and I think many an honest historian would agree with the following remarks.

That said, I don't have the space/time to give all of my sources (much less the original Latin/Greek). Books have been written on less material, and I taught two semesters on it while in Spain. I usually like to give at least 150-200 footnotes whenever I write a history paper, but I thought that would be overkill here. Instead, I'd be very happy to take this as an opportunity to begin a dialogue, to point to additional sources, if anyone is interested. I'd be happy to lend out any of my books, or to point directly to original sources. Fortunately, most of the early texts have been translated into English, and they're available on the Internet.

Let me also say that none of this is meant to be insulting or incriminating. As in my old teaching days, I'd like to probe and provoke thought and discussion. As my oldest friends know, my nickname throughout high school was "doubting Thomas." Since I was twelve years old, I've had doubts/questions that have led me to study and discuss a variety of religious systems. But here my focus will be early Christianity.

With that preamble, here's the twelve things (my table of contents).

Intro: We have a wealth of historical evidence.

1. Early Christians believed in Christ as divine.
2. Early Christians were persecuted/executed (albeit sporadically) for their beliefs.
3. Early Christians emphasized practical charity and accepted medicine (among other branches of secular learning).
4. The earliest Christians accepted the Septuagint, the four Gospels, Acts, and Paul's Epistles. Other books of the Bible required a bit more time to gain unanimous approval.
5. Early Christians believed in the Real Presence of Christ's Body and Blood in the Eucharist, which was their central act of communal worship.
6. Early Christians made the sign of the cross often.
7. The apostolic succession of bishops was very important for early Christians.
8. Early Christians had no issues with drinking wine in moderation.
9. Early Christians condemned gladiator games, human sacrifice, infanticide, abortion, and contraception as grave sins.
10. Early Christians treasured the relics (physical remains) of the martyrs.
11. Early Christians asked for the intercession of holy men and women.
12. Early Christians did not profess the doctrines of "sola fide" or "sola Scriptura."

Conclusion: Why any of this matters to me. Why I am Catholic, rather than something else.

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**Intro: the historical material.**

We have a pretty decent amount of written material about early Christians (1<sup>st</sup>-3rd centuries) from which historians can reconstruct the past. For example, we have documents from pagan Romans that talk about

early Christians, e.g. Governor Pliny's Letter to Trajan, circa 110 CE. The Christians themselves wrote letters back and forth, and they wrote open letters to the Romans who were persecuting them (e.g. Bishop Ignatius' letters, circa 110 CE or Justin's Apology, c. 150 CE). And of course we have the writings of the New Testament; e.g. most historians agree that Paul's earliest letters come from 55 CE. We physically possess all these documents in the form of subsequently copied manuscripts, as well as some very early papyri. The large number of manuscripts (in Greek, but also translated into Syriac, Latin, Coptic, Ethiopian, etc.) allows historians/classicists to determine with a high degree of accuracy what was originally written. E.g., even among all of the different manuscripts for Tertullian's Apology (197 CE), they differ only in a few letters or words here or there. The vast number of manuscripts for New Testament books, and the great consistency between these manuscripts, is perhaps even more impressive. Few historians would doubt, for example, that Paul actually wrote the Letter to the Galatians around 55 CE, that Pliny actually wrote to Emperor Trajan c. 110 CE, etc. The evidence is pretty darn good. Indeed, compared to other areas of ancient history (e.g. Tacitus' Annals, which exist only in one or two manuscripts), the wealth of evidence on 1<sup>st</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> century Christianity is even more impressive. And, by the fourth century, evidence grows exponentially, since Christianity had grown considerably and was no longer persecuted.

**1. Early Christians believed in the divinity of Jesus Christ, as Son of God.** The exact Greek term "homoousios" (=of the same essence) was not officially accepted until the Council of Nicea in 325, and even then this term was debated for a while. But from the very beginning, it is clear that Christians believed that Jesus was the Son of God, in some sense divine himself ("consubstantialis" with the Father). For Christians, Jesus was not only the Messiah promised to the Jews, but actually the "image of the invisible God," "being in the form of God," whom Jesus called his Father (Col 1.15, Phil 2.6). Ignatius of Antioch (110 CE) refers to "Jesus Christ our God." (Here's the English, for fun: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.v.ii.xviii.html>). Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tatian, Tertullian, Clement, etc. all speak similarly (while also condemning polytheism and professing belief in only one God). "Kyrios" (Lord), the word for "God" used throughout the Old Testament, was repeated by numerous Christian authors to describe Jesus. And this mass of evidence is corroborated with non-Christian sources: for example, Pliny (110 CE) writes that the Christians "address prayers to Christ, as to a divinity." (<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/pliny.html>). Evidently, the word was out that Christians believed that Jesus was (a) God.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, some German writers popularized the idea that there were other Christians (heterodox or Gnostic Christians) who held different views which were eventually suppressed (at Nicea in 325). Certainly Dan Brown's Da Vinci Code plays into the public conception that a "different view" about the "real Jesus" was present from the beginning, e.g. by the Gnostics. In fact, even after recent archaeology and scholarship has uncovered the writings of these Gnostics, it is clear that the Gnostics too believed in Christ's divinity. Their "error" (for which they were criticized by the "orthodox" Christians) was that they denied Jesus' humanity. For Gnostics (the group was heterogenous, so I am simplifying here), Christ was a sort of supernatural, divine being with no physical body. Some claimed that Christ the divinity joined himself to Jesus the man. In short, there were a few groups of heterodox Christians who believed in a non-human divine Christ, but apparently no large group who believed in a simply human Christ.

To put it another way, there is simply no good historical evidence that any substantial group of early Christians believed that Jesus was simply a good man or a prophet. Instead, there is overwhelming evidence from writings of orthodox and heterodox Christians (as well as non-Christians), that 1<sup>st</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> century Christians believed in Christ as Son of God and Lord, in some sense truly divine (even if they didn't all agree on the precise term "homoousios"). And early Christians went to their deaths pronouncing these beliefs.

To return for a moment to Dan Brown, the popular opinion seems to be that the debate at the Council of Nicea (325) was whether Jesus was divine or not. Supposedly, Arius and his followers said that Jesus was just a holy man, whereas the majority of bishops (who triumphed) said he was divine. Incorrect. Even Arius acknowledged Jesus as Son of God and Lord, superior to and before all of creation. Arius' problem was this: he was wary of calling Jesus equally eternal and divine with God the Father, and he didn't like the term "homoousios." In the East, it took some time to agree upon this precise terminology (in the West, the Latin "consubstantialis" was less problematic). But a belief in Jesus' Sonship and Divinity was apparently the widespread norm from the beginning.

For more info, see the Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church's entries on "Christology", "Jesus Christ", and "Arianism." See also Mt 28.19, which shows early belief in the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit... I'll have to save a discussion of the Trinity = "three persons, but one God" for another day ...

**2. Early Christians were tortured and put to the death for their beliefs.** Beginning with Emperor Nero in 64 CE, and extending to the Edict of Milan in 313, various persecutions were carried out against the early Christians. These persecutions were not always universal, and the leniency or severity depended on the time and place (e.g. each Roman province had governors who were more or less severe). But simply being a Christian (refusing to curse the name of Christ, refusing to sacrifice to the Roman gods) was a capital offense. Nero had Christians tied to stakes and lit on fire (as "lanterns in his gardens") as well as crucified or eaten by dogs. Persecutions under Marcus Aurelius (177 CE) included awful torments: women and men being put in a red-hot iron chair, or being ripped apart by wild animals. While horrific, the persecutions were apparently quite sporadic (at least until 249, when Decius began a universal persecution).

The persecutions had serious consequences for Christians, including the growth of the importance of martyrs and "confessors", relics, and reason-based apologetics (see below).

### **3. The early Christians both emphasized practical charity and accepted medicine (among other branches of secular learning).**

Regarding charity, the Christians took very seriously Jesus' command to treat the "least of these brethren" (the sick, hungry, unclothed) as they would treat Christ himself (Mt 25). Even pagan Roman authors attested to Christian selfless philanthropy. Emperor Julian lamented that the Christians showed greater charity than the pagans: "These impious Galileans not only feed their own poor, but ours also... Whilst the pagan priests neglect the poor, the hated Galileans devote themselves to works of charity." The Christians established a system of social welfare (for widows, orphans, sick, etc.), the likes of which had never been seen in the ancient Greco-Roman world. Pagans were particularly impressed when Christians took care of the sick (and buried the dead) during catastrophic plagues. Indeed, when the Roman persecutions were ended, Christians—beginning with Bishop Basil of Caesarea--founded the first public hospitals (free for the poor, staffed with medical professionals).

I now move to medicine and other branches of secular learning (remember that science in the ancient world was seen as a branch of philosophy, and even today scientists receive a PhD, a Doctor of Philosophy)...

The stereotype is that early Christians were "pro-faith" and "anti-science", and that they attempted healing miracles or prayer-healings rather than resort to physicians. In fact, we can find very little evidence for Christian practice of supernatural healing (or attempts thereof) after the New Testament writings. Instead, we find in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century several Christian apologetics that make repeated appeals to philosophy and secular learning (the Apologists, who wrote during persecution, were trying to defend Christianity as reasonable and admirable). For example, Justin Martyr (150 CE) used philosophy (particularly Platonism) in trying to explain Christian theology. The apologists tried to explain

Christianity in terms that learned pagans would understand. Tertullian (210 CE) is often quoted as saying, “What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?” or “I believe, because it is impossible.” But Tertullian was in fact one of the most learned scholars of his day, and he actually respected medicine more than many of his pagan contemporaries. (I wrote a very long paper on this, and I’d be happy to share it with you if you’re interested.)

One even finds in authors like Augustine of Hippo or Gregory of Nyssa suggestions that the world was evolving/progressing (Augustine, for example, speaks of “seeds” which grow and develop at the right time). Furthermore, the “six days” of creation (Gen 1.3-31) were clearly interpreted allegorically/metaphorically by some early Christian authors (i.e., not as six literal 24-hour periods). Obviously, early Christian theologians were more concerned about theology than science, but it is naïve to think that they rejected secular learning that was not explicitly in the Bible. One can find plenty of early Christians who refute the “faith vs. reason” or “religion vs. science” antipathy hypothesis.

On the subject of early Christians and medicine, see Gary Ferngren, *Medicine and Healthcare in Early Christianity* (Johns Hopkins, 2009) and my article in *Studia Patristica* (Leuven, 2010). On the subject of early Christian philanthropy, see Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton, 1996).

**4. Early Christians placed central importance on the Scriptures, which included the Septuagint (Greek version of the Old Testament) and most/all of the writings we know as the New Testament.** According to Justin Martyr (150 CE), the Eucharistic service on Sunday morning included readings from the “memoirs of the apostles” (New Testament) and the “writings of the prophets” (Old Testament). Early Christians quoted the Scriptures freely and frequently, showing its central importance in their lives.

The Scriptures accepted by the very earliest Christians, including the writers of the four Gospels, were the Septuagint (LXX), the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC Greek version of the Old Testament. This Septuagint included what is today referred to as the “Old Testament Apocrypha.” The Evangelists quoted this Greek version (not the shorter Hebrew version) when showing Jesus’ fulfillment of prophecies. According to the Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, the early Christians “received all the Books of the Septuagint equally as Scripture.” This Septuagint included Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Baruch, 1 and 2 Maccabees, and the other “Apocrypha” (a term which was not used until St. Jerome, circa 400). It was not until Martin Luther (16<sup>th</sup> century) that some Christians took these books out of the Old Testament. (Interestingly, among the Apocrypha that Luther discarded is 2 Macc, which was central to the Catholic doctrine of Purgatory). In sum, the early Christians accepted the entire Septuagint as inspired.

Regarding the New Testament, the exact definition of the “canon” (list of books considered to be inspired Scripture) was a somewhat complex process. Paul’s epistles were written circa 51-58 CE, while the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke and Acts were written circa 55-80 CE (with John likely coming later, circa 90-110). All of these were accepted unanimously as inspired/canonical by early Christians (except the Gnostics and Marcionites, who disliked those passages that referred to Jesus’ humanity; or the Ebionites, who clung to Jewish customs). The 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> generation Christians apparently saw in these writings the authentic teaching of Christ which they themselves had heard first or second or third-hand from eyewitnesses (e.g. Irenaeus in 180 CE said he knew Polycarp, who knew John the Apostle). Furthermore, the four Gospels, Acts, and Paul’s letters form what most Christians see as the core of the New Testament (i.e. even without the other letters, the core of the Christian message would hardly change). These were accepted nearly unanimously by Christians from the beginning, suggesting that they reflected the earliest traditions that had been preached by the apostles themselves.

But a few writings, e.g. Hebrews, Jude, 2 Peter, and Revelation, were debated among 1<sup>st</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> century Christian authors. Not all Christians accepted them on the same level of authority as the previously

mentioned books. At the same time, a few very early writings, e.g. Barnabas, the Didache, the Shepherd of Hermas, and Clement's Epistle (none of which are included in our current Bible), were accepted as inspired by certain Christian communities, and actually read at the Eucharistic services. They do not differ substantially from the Bible in any crucial doctrine (read them online if you like), but neither do they seem to have the same early eyewitness/apostolic source as the earliest books. Accordingly, and eventually, the bishops decided that they were not to be held as the same degree of authority as the rest of the "canon" of Scripture/Bible.

Finally, there were the Apocryphal/Gnostic gospels/writings. All of these were clearly written later (e.g. 200 CE), and most of them are quite fanciful. Indeed, some historians have aptly described them as the "science fiction" of the ancient Christian world. E.g. the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, in which a young Jesus carries water in his cloak, or forms clay sparrows and then makes them fly; or the Acts of Peter, which include a miracle-contest between St. Peter (who makes sardines come alive) and Simon (who flies around in the air) (<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/infancythomas-c-mrjames.html>). They're fun to read (and that website gives many of them in full). But they simply do not have the historical weight of any of the four Gospels or Acts (which clearly pre-dated them), and they never gained widespread acceptance as canonical among Christians. They're fanciful, not historical.

For an interesting list of the unanimously accepted books (Gospels, Paul's Epistles, 1 John, 1 Peter), the disputed books (see above), and the rejected books (the Gnostic gospels/writings), see Eusebius' History of the Church 3.25 (written circa 320 CE). Here <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf201.iii.viii.xxv.html>. It was not until 382 under Pope Damasus that a definite list/canon of New Testament books was defined (the same list that we use today).

In sum, I make three conclusions. First, the core of the Bible as we know it (four Gospels, Acts, Paul's and a few other Epistles) was accepted both very early and pretty unanimously among Christians as authentic. Second, that the earliest Christians accepted the entire Septuagint. Third, that the precise definition of the canon of Scripture was a long process begun and completed by Church leaders. Thus, any Christian today who accepts all the books of the "Bible" is actually accepting a decision made by the early bishops. One could argue that anyone who accepts the Bible implicitly agrees that the 2<sup>nd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> century bishops (including Pope Damasus) made good decisions and were guided by valid traditions (or perhaps even divine inspiration). In other words, accepting the full New Testament presupposes an agreement with the authority and legitimacy of the 4<sup>th</sup> century bishops who finally decided what would go "in" or not. In any case, history shows that the church preceded (and decided upon) the precise definition of the canon of Scripture as it now stands.

**5. The Eucharist (Greek for "thanksgiving") was central to Christian prayer/worship.** With the bishop (episkopos=overseer) or one of his appointed priests (presbyteros=elder) presiding, early Christians came together to read from Scripture, join in prayer and song, and follow Jesus' mandate at the Last Supper ("do this in memory of me").

From the 16<sup>th</sup> century until today, one finds a variety of opinions among Christians about what the Eucharist really represents. But early Christians were much more unified. With apparent unanimity, early Christians professed that the Eucharistic bread and wine were truly and actually the Body and Blood of Christ. Apparently, Jesus' words, "This is my body... this is my blood" were taken quite literally by the 2<sup>nd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> century Christians. (Cf. also John 6.51-58—Jesus insists we must "trogon" (chew) his "sarx" (flesh), and then insists again, even at the cost of offending the audience.) Ignatius of Antioch (110 CE) writes to the Smyrneans that true Christians believe the "Eucharist to be the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, which suffered for our sins, and which the Father, of His goodness, raised up again." From the various corners of the Roman world, different authors--Justin Martyr (150), Irenaeus (180), Tertullian (200), and the Apostolic Tradition (220)—all speak similarly (e.g., see one example

at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.viii.ii.lxvi.html>). All take for granted that the bread and wine are truly the Flesh and Blood of Christ. Origen even says that Christians were very careful to avoid dropping even a crumb of the Body or a drop of the Blood (Tertullian speaks similarly). As far as modern historians can tell, this belief in the “Real Presence” was unanimous (except, again, among Gnostics, who despised physical things). I encourage curious (or skeptical) readers to see the entry on “Eucharist” in the Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, p570. With the passing of time, the precise prayers at the Eucharistic service became more formalized, but this belief in the Real Presence continued. And the Eucharist (presided over by a bishop or one of his priests) remained the center of Sunday worship, which itself was the highlight of the Christian week. With the coming of the Protestant Reformation, however, a number of different groups claimed that Jesus words should be interpreted more metaphorically (that the bread and wine only symbolized the Body and Blood).

Unfortunately, John Calvin and others simply did not study the early Christian authors closely, and Calvin often assumed that the early Christians agreed with his opinions (to Calvin’s credit, not all of the early Fathers’ writings were readily available in the libraries of France in the 16<sup>th</sup> century). If you’d like to hear more, I wrote a long paper on the topic of Calvin and the Fathers, and I’d be happy to send it along (my Lutheran professor at Oxford wanted me to publish it, but I never got around to it).

**6. Early Christians made the sign of the cross often.** The sign of the cross was a form of prayer, sanctifying the actions of daily life. “At every forward step and movement, at every going in and out, when we put on our clothes and shoes, when we bathe, when we sit at table, when we light the lamps, on couch, on seat, in all the ordinary actions of daily life, we trace upon the forehead the sign” (Tertullian, circa 200 CE) <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf03.iv.vi.iii.html> (which also talks of prayers/offerings for the dead). By marking themselves with the sign of the cross, Christians reminded themselves of the central tenet of their faith: that God himself would show such love so as to die a horrible death for sinners. It was also a sort of self-blessing in times of trial (e.g. temptations from the devil), and was also preformed by the bishop during the rites of Baptism and Confirmation (see the Apostolic Tradition 20.7, circa 220 CE). Interestingly, one of the Roman persecutions began precisely because the Emperor heard that Christians were performing the sign of the cross publicly (and thereby ruining the pagan religious ceremonies). The sign of the cross seems to have been fairly universal until the Protestant Reformation. For more info, see Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, p1510.

**7. Early Christian writers placed great emphasis on the succession of bishops from the apostles.** Clement of Rome (96 CE) explicitly states that the apostles appointed men to succeed them in authority and then told these bishops (episkopoi) to appoint others before they died (<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.ii.ii.xliv.html>). Ignatius of Antioch (110 CE) instructs Christians at several different churches to follow their bishop, as holding the place of Christ/God (<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.v.iii.vi.html>). His letters demonstrate that the hierarchy of bishop (episkopos) > priest (presbyteros) > deacon (diakonos) was present very early (at least in Asia Minor). Some scholars debate whether other parts of the Roman empire (e.g. Egypt or Italy) possessed the same exact hierarchy as early as 110, but certainly every church had its presiding bishop by 160 or so. Irenaeus (circa 180) provides lists of succession in the major churches (e.g., in Rome: Peter+Paul->Linus->Anacletus->Clement->Evaristus->etc. to his present day). For Irenaeus and others, the office and succession of bishops were key to preserve unchanged the authentic doctrines taught by Christ (not all of which were written down, e.g. 2 Thes 2:16). As an example: Irenaeus knew Polycarp, who knew John, who knew Jesus; thus, Irenaeus could trace his teaching to Christ. Armed with this knowledge, Irenaeus argued that the Gnostics and other heretics sprang from nowhere, making arbitrary interpretations about Scripture or Jesus (e.g. that Christ was not human). The institution of bishop as successor to the apostles was a key feature of post-Biblical Christianity, and facilitated a remarkable unity of doctrine and practice across great distances.

As we have seen, it was these same bishops who, discussing with one another and drawing from traditions they had received, defined which books would be included in the Bible or not.

Particularly important was the bishop/church of Rome. To sum up a lengthy research paper I completed long ago: the early church of Rome (the resting-place of Peter and Paul) claimed--and was granted--a unique place of respect/authority among other churches. E.g. see Irenaeus (150 CE): "it is a matter of necessity that every Church should agree with this Church [of Rome], on account of its pre-eminent authority" <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.ix.iv.iv.html>. Irenaeus was from Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), but he traveled extensively and became bishop of Lyons (Gaul); hence, it is reasonable to think that his words here are reflecting more than just a local opinion. I can send you my paper with other authors too.

**8. The early Christians drank wine.** Although Paul condemns drunkenness (Rom. 13.13), early Christians certainly drank wine (e.g. the Didache 13.3, circa 90 CE). Wine was undoubtedly used at the Eucharistic services (described above). A few austere Christian sects (e.g. Tatian and the Encratites) did practice asceticism from wine, sex, and meat, but such extremism was rejected by bishops and mainstream Christians. (These sects generally didn't last very long, since they also rejected sex and so failed to procreate. Sects without sex. Ha ha.). The Biblical claim that Jesus multiplied wine at Cana (creating perhaps 150 gallons worth of wine, see John 2.6), and that Peter and Paul considered all foods lawful, supports the idea that Christians assumed wine was a good.

**9. The early Christians condemned abortion, infanticide, contraception, human sacrifice, and gladiatorial games, which were all commonplace in the Roman world.** According to the Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, "Early Christian thinkers...were united in their condemnation of infanticide and abortion, in contrast to their pagan contemporaries. ...The general patristic teaching against contraception was related to this set of attitudes and was shaped by an insistence against Gnostics and Manichees...that procreation within marriage was good.... These early established prohibitions predominated in Christian teaching until recent times [i.e. 1930]...." Athenagoras, Tertullian, Hippolytus, the Didache, and the Letter of Barnabas are a few of the witnesses to this early, apparently unanimous opinion. The reasons for Christian rejection of contraception and abortion are very interesting, but I'll wait to discuss them another day.

**10. The early Christians treasured the relics (physical remains) of the martyrs.** Against the Gnostics, orthodox Christians respected the human body (which would experience resurrection, according to Christian belief), and they saw relics of holy people as reminders of God's ongoing work through human beings. For example, the 150 CE account of the martyrdom of Polycarp writes that: "[After his martyrdom], we afterwards took up his bones, as being more precious than the most exquisite jewels, and more purified than gold, and deposited them in a fitting place, whither, being gathered together, as opportunity is allowed us, with joy and rejoicing, the Lord shall grant us to celebrate the anniversary of his martyrdom. [Notice this early example of celebrating the 'anniversary'/'feastday' of the martyrs.]" (<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.iv.iv.xviii.html>) Even in the Bible one can find respect for physical articles associated with holy Christians (Acts 19:12). Holy men and women, body and soul, were instruments and reminders of God's action in the world. During and after the persecutions, Christians celebrated the Eucharist at the tombs of martyrs (e.g. St. Peter's tomb on the Vatican hill, or down in the Roman catacombs). Jerome describes the Christian teaching: relics are "honored for the sake of Him whose martyrs they are." Of course, Christians condemned idol or nature-worship, and they condemned too the worship of human beings or their relics. But they respected those who imitated Christ so intimately, and they believed that the martyrs' remains would be raised by Christ himself on the Last Day. Accordingly, relics were held in high regard.

**11. Early Christians saw the intercession of holy men and women as important and efficacious.** The Roman persecutions had a number of important consequences, including the survival of certain courageous Christians called "confessores" (not all captured Christians were killed; some were

simply maimed/tortured or imprisoned). Another group also survived: namely, those Christians who denied their faith and sacrificed to the idols--rather than suffer torture, imprisonment, or death. When these weaker Christians (called "lapsi") repented of their cowardice/apostasy, they came to the bishops for forgiveness, to be readmitted into the communion of the Church and receive again the Eucharist. (A similar process of Reconciliation occurred with other major sins like adultery). Oftentimes, the penance for the lapsi was quite severe (e.g. several years of penance and exclusion from the Eucharist) before they would be readmitted to communion.

Moving to the actual martyrs, popular belief saw these saintly/heroic Christians as being particularly close to God, and thus their prayers and sacrifices as being particularly pleasing to God and beneficial to the rest of the Church (the unified body of Christ). Thus, within the Sunday Eucharistic celebration, the bishop or priest would include petitions to the saintly men/women who had died, asking these saints to offer their prayers to God. A list (canon) of saints grew. Since Christians believed that these saints lived with God/Christ in Heaven, their intercessory prayers were most welcome for those living on earth. Christians appealed to the saints who had died, just as they might appeal to the saintly men and women still living for prayers/intercession to God. "Friend, please pray for me."

Indeed, the intercession of the still-living victims of persecution (the maimed and imprisoned "confessores") was also seen as efficacious. Thus, if the repentant "lapsi" were to receive letters of commendation from these heroic "confessores", their sentence of penance could be shortened by the bishop. The different parts of the Church/Christ's body could work together to help each other (see Col 1.24). This was the seed of the doctrine of indulgences, which later became corrupted and exploited for money (e.g. by Johann Tetzel, who actually sold indulgences) and rightly condemned by Luther.

**12. Finally, one cannot find in early Christian writings any substantial belief in the doctrines of "sola Scriptura" or "sola fide."** As we have seen, the precise canon of Scripture wasn't even defined until 382 CE. "Sola Scriptura" is hardly possible without a defined, agreed-upon "Scriptura." Also, we have seen that the apostolic authority inherent in the office of bishop (as successor of the apostles) was extremely important. Finally, these bishops were the ones who agreed upon the Bible as we know it. For early Christians, Scripture was crucial, but not the only source of moral or spiritual authority.

Furthermore, there is no indication that early Christians believed in "sola fide", or any concept that a single act of faith was enough to make one "saved." Nor would they have accepted the belief of certain 16<sup>th</sup> century Protestant Reformers that humans possess no free will, and are either damned or saved by God, irrespective of their actions. Not until the 5<sup>th</sup> century, in the later (anti-Pelagian) writings of Augustine, do we find anything close to the doctrine of "predestination to damnation" (and Augustine himself insisted on human free will). Even past the 5<sup>th</sup> century, "The Eastern Church... continued to emphasize both the necessity of grace and the reality of human free will, and resisted the notion of predestination" (Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, p701). Early Christians placed great emphasis on good choices, including performing good deeds and living a life of charity (even if all of this was only possible through God's grace). Although Calvin thought that this position on free-will and good deeds was rare in the early Church, in fact, it "represents the entire Greek patristic tradition" (see Ian Hazlett, "Calvin's Latin Preface," Oxford: 1991)

I considered adding more comments about early Christian beliefs about Mary, infant baptism, and sacred art (paintings and statues), but I've written too much already.

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Whew. That was a lot.

You may ask, "Why have you written all of this? Why do you care?"

First, because I love history, and there was a time (not long ago) when all my waking hours were spent in historical research. This was a fun break from memorizing drugs.

Second, because I dislike false stereotypes and untrue rumors. And recently I've seen all sorts of rubbish published on the Internet or printed in handouts. The best way to go about any discussion is lay out the facts (here, starting with history).

Third, because the conclusions of historical research change how I live my life.

For example, many of the arguments against Christianity are historical ones (e.g., that Jesus made no claims to divinity, and his apostles only thought that he was a good guy, and he was divinized gradually by later, ex-pagan followers. Or that the Bible is not historically authentic, and the Gnostic gospels give a more accurate portrayal of the "real" Jesus).

But the historical evidence does not support these and other claims. In various times of my life, I have considered abandoning Christianity in favor of some other faith (or non-faith); but every time I look at the arguments offered against Christianity, I am not impressed. Furthermore, I find in Christian history (e.g. the lives and deaths of the martyrs) extremely impressive examples of virtue that inspire and inform the way I live.

Also, it may be clear from the above historical discussion why I am Catholic. All of these early opinions of Christians (Real Presence of the Eucharist, apostolic succession of bishops, faith and reason together, the entire Old Testament, the importance of the Sign of the Cross, relics, and martyrs, etc.) have been preserved by the Catholic Church (and the Orthodox Church), but rejected by many other churches. I can think of several prominent writers who became Catholic precisely after they studied early Christian history. Certainly, early Christian history has taught me a good deal.

This much seems logical to me: as a Christian, I want to follow the authentic teaching of Christ. The Bible possesses this teaching, but is subject to wide interpretation. E.g. What does "this is my body, this is my blood" really mean? There are as many interpretations as there are different churches. What about "call no one father", or "if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out"? There are many difficult passages. Even those churches that agree to "sola Scriptura" fail to agree on a multitude of particular interpretations and issues. Protestant historian Alister McGrath put it well: "[In the Reformation,] it became a question of whether you looked to the pope, to Luther or to Calvin as an interpreter of Scripture." It is naïve to believe that Scripture can interpret itself. So the question is who you turn to for help with interpretation.

As we have seen, accepting the "Bible" already means accepting, to some degree, the authority of the early bishops who defined the canon. Protestants and Catholics don't include the Epistle of Barnabas or Shepherd of Hermas in their Bible... precisely because the early bishops agreed on this. Clearly, Jesus founded a Church—he did not write a book (or ask his apostles to do so). Scripture is not self-interpreting, nor does it claim to say everything about Jesus (see Jn 21.25).

Instead, it is clear that Jesus appointed specific followers and told them that his Spirit would be with this Church forever (Mt 28.19-20, Jn 14.16), and that the gates of hell would not prevail against it (Mt 16.18). There is no indication that Jesus (who, according to Christians, knew and foreknew everything) ever predicted that the Church would simply fall apart, ceasing to exist until the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Quite the contrary: Jesus said he would be with his followers always, to the end of the world.

Thus, it seems reasonable that Jesus' authentic teaching (e.g., what he really meant by "this is my body") would be preserved by his followers, and the followers of these followers. Certainly, the early Christians, who often went to death for their beliefs, made these claims themselves. They believed that the Church, led by the bishops, remained in the teaching of Christ.

What is the alternative? That, within a couple of generations, all across the Christian world, a bunch of Christians were claiming things as true that they simply invented (e.g., that the Eucharist really is the

Body and Blood of Christ). But, in a culture that valued very highly the oral transmission of traditions, and in a tight community with a hyper-sensitive radar for innovation (e.g. from all of those Gnostics), this seems unlikely. Furthermore, what did the Christians have to gain from corrupting Jesus' teaching? If they had professed Jesus merely as a prophet or the Eucharist as ordinary food, they might have avoided stigmatism by Romans and subsequent persecution. Let's not imagine anachronistically that these bishops were reaping massive monetary rewards or wearing jeweled crowns. The only reward that Ignatius got for all his letters (about the Eucharist, the bishop's authority, and Christ's divinity) was imprisonment and death to the lions.

No, if I am to accept the authority and divinity of Christ (and I have many reasons for doing so, which is the subject of another essay), it seems reasonable to assume that his Church (which he has promised to stay with always) wouldn't corrupt everything he taught within one or two hundred years. What kind of leader (much less God) makes an organization that immediately falls apart, then has to wait 1500 years until a German monk can start it all afresh? Even the Founders of America (with all of their slaves and concubines) did a better job than that.

No, it seems much more likely that Christ founded a Church on firm ground (Mt 7.25), to withstand the gates of death and lies. And it seems very likely that the teachings given by Christians all across the ancient Roman world within just a few generations of Jesus' death probably reflect his true teachings. The consistency on these issues continues to amaze me.

As a historian, I'm most interested in the earliest, most accurate accounts of those who were closest to the original events. The early Fathers were the people who spoke the languages, lived the culture, and heard the eyewitnesses of those Biblical events. The 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century Christians seem to me the most reliable source we have to help interpret Scripture, to know what Jesus really meant. Certainly, they seem more reliable than anyone in 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe, thousands of miles away from Palestine.

And, as I look at the lives of people like Ignatius, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Cyprian, etc. etc., I see in their lives exactly what is exhorted and exemplified by Christ himself. Indeed, whenever I encounter someone who believes that the early Christians (or perhaps medieval Christians) corrupted Jesus' message, I want to ask him/her about these saintly people. What about Ignatius of Antioch, Cyprian of Carthage, Basil of Caesarea, Benedict of Nursia, Pope Leo the Great, Pope Gregory the Great, Bernard of Clairvaux, Catherine of Siena, Thomas Aquinas, Francis of Assisi, Thomas More, and hundreds of other Christian saints one could easily name from the 1<sup>st</sup> century-16<sup>th</sup> century? These are all people who agree to all of the basic tenets of early Christianity I have outlined above. Reading their writings/biographies, one sees beautiful, loving, Christ-like lives. Are they in hell because they were pre-Reformation? I highly doubt it. Rather, I think they did a lot of things right, and I'd like to join their company. When I die, I'll be happy to meet them in Heaven, and share in the Eucharistic banquet that never ends.

Thanks for reading all of this.

I apologize again that I didn't have time/space here to throw in all of the footnotes/references, but this is an immense amount of material to cover. I'd be happy to share additional references or discuss further, if you're interested. Shoot me an email. I look forward to your thoughts.

—Tommy