

By What Authority?: Rethinking Early Church History

Study Guide

Introduction

Who are we?

Who is in and who is out?

Can we participate in civic life?

Who is Jesus?

How do we know if our lives are in line with what Jesus taught?

How much diversity can we tolerate?

Who leads us? In worship? In community life? In teaching? (As any kindergartner will ask: “Why do you get to be the boss of me?”)

How do we fund our community?

Does it matter how we live? How do we relate to the world around us—people and creation?

What do we do with the holy writings of the Jewish community?

Do we need to have scriptures of our own?

What do we do with people who leave the church in fear or anger, and then want to come back?

Isn't it amazing how familiar these questions sound! These were the questions that needed to be answered in the first centuries of the church. Since Jesus didn't return as quickly as believers assumed, they had to figure out how to live as believers in their world. They ended up inventing the church. That the church is still alive after all these years is a testament to God's faithfulness and patience, and gives us courage to wrestle with these and similar questions today.

We invite you to enter this series to see how the drama of the early church's formation has direct connections to your life of faith today.

Study Guide Pathways

This resource has many sessions. You could use all of the sessions or some of them. We are suggesting multiple groupings below. We recommend beginning with Group 1-Core Questions. The other Groups can be viewed in a sequence that fits the interests of your study group.

It is also possible to do 2 sessions in an hour class time. That will depend on how talkative your groups are. The time for each video is listed below. The study guide for each session provides 3-6 discussion questions.

Group 1 – Core Topics

- Why Study Church History? (5:05)
- Authority (9:09)
- Christian Identity (10:36)
- Heresies and Councils (10:58)

Group 2 – Finding Their Way

- Rule of Faith (13:43)
- Church Fathers and Teachers (15:24)
- Structures and Hierarchy (11:16)
- Politically Powerless to Patronage (12:13)
- Jesus Human and Divine (11:20)

Group 3 – Practical Implications

- What Language Shall We Borrow? (9:08)
- Worship in the Early Church (7:23)
- Social Teaching and Action (8:29)
- Teaching and Preaching (5:20)
- Grace and Law (4:45)

Group 4 – Interesting Developments

- Christianity and Judaism (8:20)
- Martyrs and Confessors (9:47)
- Monasticism and Ascetics (12:47)
- Missionary Church (9:27)
- Eastern and Western Church (7:40)

Facilitator Preparation

This study guide is written to help participants make connections between the events of history and the dynamics of today's church. In order to facilitate reflection and dialogue among the participants here are some processes to use:

- The facilitator should view the session in advance to prepare for the discussion.
- Double check the equipment the day of the study to make sure that everything is working. Technical difficulties derail even the most enthusiastic group.
- During the viewing make sure that everyone can see the screen and hear the sound. After the viewing, if at all possible, rearrange the seating to a semi-circle or a circle so that participants can see each other to better facilitate conversation.
- Provide name tags and/or have participants introduce themselves before beginning the discussion. Remember that a newcomer is less likely to return if they are not made to feel welcome through some form of introduction or inclusion. Whether a church is large or small, not knowing 'how things are done here' can make a participant feel uncomfortable. The more the facilitator can be clear about the process and hospitality the more comfortable people will feel.
- Use the opening and closing prayers provided or create your own.
- Set ground rules for discussion. If you have a stable group that meets weekly you may only have to mention these the first session. If people move in and out of the group you will have to make these reminders at each session. Many people have the impression that church history is dry and dusty but participants may discover there are some lively issues that still impact us today—and there may be differences of opinion.
 - It is OK and welcome to have differences of opinion—as history shows, it is what we do with those differences that make the difference.
 - If anything personal happens to be shared that information stays in the room unless the person who spoke gives permission to share outside the group.
- Look over the discussion questions and highlight the ones that you want to make sure to cover. Depending on how lively the discussion is you may have to cut down the number of questions you cover.
- If you have more than 12 people in the class you may want to divide the class into small groups for discussion purposes, and then pull the class back together before the end of the session to glean themes from each group.
- The facilitator needs to be prepared to move the discussion on to a new question if the group is stuck and/or to keep any one person from dominating the discussion. One technique in the latter situation is to insert yourself with something like, "That is very interesting. What do some of the rest of you think about this issue?"

Background for the leader:

We are living in a time of tremendous change where honored institutions and traditions that formed the cultural foundations are being shaken. Church affiliation based on cultural, social or political affinity has become a weakened identity. Being the church in this century requires acknowledging and adapting to new realities. The church no longer has home field advantage. That's why we can feel a kinship with those early followers of Christ.

First century Christians had to invent themselves. They had no mandatory model for designing their life together. No sets of rubrics were on hand to guide decision-making about the handling of pagans, dealing with Judaism, and confronting internal bickering. The early church ended the notion that religion, ethnicity, and culture were inevitably linked.

The spreading flame of the Jesus movement reached far and wide into many cultures, languages and customs. Differentiated from both the exclusive nature of Judaism and its purity laws, and the capricious nature of Roman and Greek gods, this movement has a word of promise for all.

It's important to know these stories of this fledgling movement and its fascinating characters. The first few centuries of growth and development of the church saw the establishment of a common belief, the formation of the New Testament, the creation of structures and disciplines that are still present today. We all want to know where we came from and this series will help you claim your roots.

Included in the Study Guide:

- Study guide pathways
- Facilitator preparation
- Session guides

Additional resources:

- Annotated list of people in the course
- Glossary of terms
- Map of Christian centers in the early church

Group 1 – Core Topics

- Why Study Church History?
- Authority
- Christian Identity
- Heresies and Councils

Group 1 – Core Topics – Why Study Church History?

Welcome:

Welcome to this course on the Early Church entitled “By What Authority”. The question of authority is central in our lives. Who and what can you trust? Who do you follow or obey? We sometimes rebel against authority we don’t like. Who hasn’t heard a child say to their parent, “You aren’t the boss of me”? In geopolitics, this question lies at the center of all interactions. Some authority is imposed by power and might. Other authority is experienced as a trusted source of truth and light. This is the dynamic that played out in the in early years of the Christian movement. It was a messy, fluid time, but also a time of exciting innovation and creativity. Establishing a common set of beliefs, a shared witness, and practice was the task of early church leaders. You will experience the creation of a totally unique religion, which was, for the first time in history, not based on ethnicity, culture or geography. This is a faith for the whole world and one that crosses all boundaries and barriers. This is a revolution of enormous consequence.

Knowing how this amazing phenomenon emerged and spread throughout the world is vital to understanding the faith in our day. You will be amazed at how so many of the challenges of those early years are still with us today, as we adapt to a changing world.

Opening prayer:

God of life and creativity, open our minds and hearts to be curious about the beginnings of the Christian church. May the stories we hear and the questions that are raised help us understand the process of being formed in faith. Amen

Opening conversation:

In groups of 2-3 share your experience of your own interest in your family history. Has your interest changed over time?

Watch video (5:05)

Synopsis:

Many of the main beliefs, structures and worship forms which we take for granted today, were established in this very creative period, so it is important to know about it.

Questions for discussion:

- Was there anything that you heard from one of these professors that resonated with the types of questions you are asking?
- Talk about an experience where you have learned about something that happened in the past that made it easier to understand the present (in your family, town, church, or country).
- Collect on newsprint or a whiteboard your answers to this question: “What are the questions you (this group) would like to have answers to about the early centuries of the church?” Then look at the back cover of the DVD case and see how your list compares. Same? Different? Surprising?

Closing prayer:

Thank you God, for the gifts of learning, discussion, and exploration. May the fruit of this time together accompany us into the coming week. Amen

Group 1 – Core Topics

- Why Study Church History?
- Authority
- Christian Identity
- Heresies and Councils

Group 1 – Core Topics – Authority

Welcome:

Authority can be obtained externally by an election, a coronation, seniority, military power, threat of punishment or organizational hierarchy. Authority can also be granted by wisdom, knowledge, trustworthiness and truth. Jesus was the embodiment of God's truth for the world, carried in flesh and blood. This incarnated truth meant that the church could not rely on imposed authority but from the authority of the tested witness of the apostles.

Opening Prayer:

God, we give thanks that we can gather together today. May the session we are about to share in, be a gift of learning and discussion, building community and trust in you.

Opening Conversation:

In groups or 2-3 share about a person who has been an authority figure whom you respect (teacher, parent, boss, elected leader, pastor...) and why you respect them.

Watch video (9:09)

Synopsis:

Martin Marty traces the source of authority before, during and after the Jesus event. This authority was not backed by military and political might, but the power of the self-giving love of God.

Questions for Discussion:

- How has the question of Jesus' authority impacted your daily life?
- How should the church exercise authority today?
- The Christians in the early church lived in a culture of fear. Though the causes may be different, people today also live in a culture of fear. How can Jesus' authority and the authority of the church help us to live as Christ followers in our culture?

Closing prayer:

Loving God, thank you for humbling yourself to become one of us to show your love for us. Help us to trust in your love and put aside our fear. Amen

Group 1 – Core Topics

- Why Study Church History?
- Authority
- Christian Identity
- Heresies and Councils

Group 1 – Core Topics– Christian Identity

Welcome:

Suppose you spun off a new business from an established business, now formed to serve a unique purpose. You'd probably consult with a marketing guru, create a memorable name for your business and then work to get the word out. When a new movement forms it takes a while to create an identity for itself. The new Jesus movement grew out of a Jewish tradition, so there was some continuity, but it was also quite new and revolutionary. It struggled to create its own sense of identity.

Opening Prayer:

God, today we will learn more about the early years of your church. Help us to listen for your Spirit in the story of the early church and in the story of our own congregation. May our identities rest in your Son, Jesus. Amen

Opening Conversation:

In groups of 2-3 share a story of entering a new setting (grade in school, new job, new town, new church..) and what it was like to find an identity in that situation.

Watch video (10:36)

Synopsis:

Jesus was a Jew and early believers were Jewish but this universal good news included all others, so the early church needed to create a unique identity in a world of local and capricious gods.

Questions for Discussion

- What has been your experience as you've sought a community with an identity that is worthy to belong to?
- The early Christian church had to answer this question: "Who are we and how do we fit into the culture we find ourselves in?" How would you answer that question?
- Where in our church communities are we willing to cross cultural and ethnic boundaries? What are some of the consequences?
- Jesus introduced the formative rituals of Christianity, baptism and the Lord's Supper.
 - What rituals are important in your family?
 - In your church?
 - How do rituals provide continuity in your life? In your life of faith?
 - How do rituals provide identity?

Closing prayer:

Thank you for the gift of this faith community. May we be faithful stewards of the love Christ has shared across cultures and centuries. Amen

Group 1 – Core Topics

- Why Study Church History?
- Authority
- Christian Identity
- Heresies and Councils

Group 1 – Core Topics – Heresies and Councils

Welcome:

It's hard to start a Church. No leader, no structure, no single decider. There were lots of questions. How much diversity of belief is acceptable in a church before it threatens its unity? How does this new movement discern what is outside the bounds of their shared faith? Who decides? Early Christian thinkers were trying to make sense of Jesus and what can be said about his nature. Without any prior blueprint, they risked sharing their ideas and understandings.

Opening Prayer:

Gracious God, living in community without parameters and norms is hard. We confess that we struggle in faith communities today when we are challenged to new behaviors by the culture or by differences in perspectives within our communities. Lord help us to learn from the early church how to live with these tensions and bear the fruit of faith and love. Amen.

Opening Conversation:

In groups of 2-3 share a time when you were introduced to something you weren't sure about (an idea, a food, a person, a strategy...) and you ended up liking or respecting this new introduction.

Watch video (10:58)

Synopsis:

Sorting out a common belief and its boundaries was an organic process that eventually was aided by the shared wisdom of church councils.

Questions for Discussion:

- What are modern day heresies or disagreements that you think need to be addressed? How much diversity are we willing to accept? What surprised you about how the early church sorted out what was orthodox and what was not?
- When has a challenge helped you discover what you actually believe?
- In your family do you have the same main story? Do you have a lot of side stories? Or do you just have a lot of different stories? How does your family experience relate to what you heard about the early church family's story?
- One of the ways in which people or ideas were labeled heretical was to judge them after the fact (like in another century). Have you ever been judged out of context or know of someone who has? If you aren't sure you agree with someone else's position, what questions would be good to ask in order to not judge too quickly?

Closing Prayer:

Gracious God, help us to listen with empathy to each other and to the stories of Christians of other denominations and other times. May the diversity of our expressions of faith, and the stories of our difficulties, strengthen us to work together in love and service of all your creation. Amen

Group 2 – Finding Their Way

- Rule of Faith
- Church Fathers and Teachers
- Structures and Hierarchy
- Politically Powerless to Patronage
- Jesus: Human and Divine

Group 2 – Finding Their Way – Rule of Faith

Welcome:

Not many people have the opportunity to create a new organization, with a mission statement, constitution, bylaws, job descriptions and an organizational chart.

You start with a blank page and begin to sort things out and build a system of authority.

When nothing was nailed down, how did Christians in the first centuries find common ground? How did they discern what is trustworthy and true? This messy process was guided by the Holy Spirit and worked out by humans.

Opening Prayer:

God, we give you thanks for this opportunity to learn together. Help us learn from the stories of the early church and listen for what the Spirit may be saying to us in our time. Amen

Opening Conversation:

In groups of 2-3 share: have you ever been part of the formation of a new organization (book group, church, volunteer program, job...)? What was that like?

Watch video (13:43)

Synopsis:

The reliable witness of the apostles and their followers formed the basis for the authority of scriptural texts and beliefs. This unwritten guideline is called the rule of faith.

Questions for Discussion:

- How would you test ideas that seem outside the mainstream of Christian doctrine?
- How would you talk about the authority of scripture?
- Holy scriptures make holy people—how is that true for us today? Tell a story from your life where a portion of scripture or sermon or reading about scripture made a difference.
- How do we discern what points to Christ and the cross and what doesn't? How do we say no to some ideas/people and yes to others? Discernment is key. They used the Rule of Faith. What do we measure things against?

Closing Prayer:

Forgiving God, in your wisdom you chose to work through flawed humans to share with others your deep love of your creation. Like those early Christians who verbally passed on what your life, death and resurrection meant for them and their world, give us the courage and patience to search the written record, our Bible, as we discern your will for our lives of faith. Amen

Group 2 – Finding Their Way

- Rule of Faith
- Church Fathers and Teachers
- Structures and Hierarchy
- Politically Powerless to Patronage
- Jesus: Human and Divine

Group 2 – Finding Their Way – Church Fathers and Teachers

Welcome:

We all have people in our lives who formed us and mentored us in the faith and we hold them in high regard. The Early Church is also called the Patristic Period because Church Fathers and learned teachers shaped the theological landscape as they tried to make sense of the Jesus event. They set the stage for believers in every generation to wrestle with the essentials of the faith.

Opening Prayer:

Thank you for the communion of saints that have walked in faith before us. Help us to learn from their lives. We give thanks for the foundation they laid for the church that we have today. Amen

Opening Conversation:

Turn to 2-3 people for conversation. Are there people in your family that you have interesting stories about? Share one short story.

Watch video (15:24)

Synopsis:

Faithful theologians with strong beliefs and personalities worked diligently to write and teach about the meaning of Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

Questions for Discussion:

- We learned in this session about the important influence of leaders. How have leaders impacted the ministry of your congregation?
- Are there people of faith that you know about (past or present) who you would like to have coffee with and why?
- Who are our modern day interesting church leaders? What ideas/faith practices are they championing?
- One of the stories shared was about Augustine and Jerome. Jerome had a new scripture translation. Augustine was concerned about the impact of the new translation on people. Share some stories of your experience with changes in: biblical translations, hymnals, or the wording of the Lord's prayer.
- Did you hear about a person that you would like to learn more about? Name them. In the next week go look on the web and bring back some information to the next class.

Closing Prayer:

God, we give you thanks for our mentors and leaders in faith both past and present. May we be blessed with courage, honesty, and graciousness when we wrestle with the important areas of growth in our church today. Amen

Group 2 – Finding Their Way

- Rule of Faith
- Church Fathers and Teachers
- Structures and Hierarchy
- Politically Powerless to Patronage
- Jesus: Human and Divine

Group 2 – Finding Their Way – Structures and Hierarchy

Welcome:

Some people say that they don't believe in organized religion. They would have loved the early church. It was a bit chaotic and disorganized. But eventually this Jesus movement does become a church. Someone has to begin to create order, structure and leadership in order to lay a foundation for building a church and advancing its mission.

Opening Prayer:

Forgiving God, structures and hierarchy are realities that people both love and hate. May the story of the early church give us insight into both the necessity and limitations of structure and hierarchy, then and now. Amen

Opening Conversation 1:

If anyone has brought back information from a person they were interested in from the last session, allow a brief amount of time to share what they learned.

Or...

Opening Conversation 2:

In a group of 2-3 people share a story of a time you wish there had been either a little more structure to a group you were part of or where you wished there was less structure. (family, study group, work team, athletic organization, club,)

Watch video (11:16)

Synopsis:

Initially most believed in the imminent return of Christ so they were not actively organizing this new movement. As time passed leadership emerges, common forms of worship develop and an authoritative hierarchy is established to advance the mission of the church.

Questions for Discussion:

- What is the role of institutional authority?
- How is authority achieved and maintained?
- How does a family or a community pass on its values and beliefs from one generation to the next?

Closing Prayer:

God, thank you that the church, in its many forms, has stayed the course to introduce us and nurture us in faith today. Help us to be faithful followers of Jesus, by implementing structures that pass along the faith, and by listening to the Spirit where we may be called to new and different ways of being church. Amen

Group 2 – Finding Their Way

- Rule of Faith
- Church Fathers and Teachers
- Structures and Hierarchy
- Politically Powerless to Patronage
- Jesus: Human and Divine

Group 2 – Finding Their Way – Politically Powerless to Patronage

Welcome:

Many people want the church to have the support of both the culture and the government, like prayer in school and nativity scenes in the public square. In some countries the church is an institution of the state and receives its funding that way.

The Early Church was a counter-cultural movement and at first persecuted and then supported by the government. We will learn both the benefits and the dangers of either arrangement.

Opening Prayer:

Today we learn about a time when the Christian church moved from cultural powerlessness to having power. Help us to listen with curiosity and honesty. May the questions of the past help us with the questions of today. Amen

Opening Conversation:

In groups of 2-3 share your impressions of what it feels like to be an 'insider' and an 'outsider' in a social circumstance.

Watch video (12:13)

Synopsis:

After on and off persecution of Christians, Emperor Constantine comes to power and converts to Christianity. This sudden change gives the church both spiritual and temporal authority for good and ill.

Questions for Discussion:

- The early church went from subjugation to having the power of patronage under the Emperor Constantine. What have we lost when privilege allows us not to live with diversity? How does that change us?
- Can the church challenge the dominant culture if it is part of the power structure of that culture?
- How do Christians as individuals, and churches as groups, relate to the political order today?

Closing Prayer:

Thank you for the gift of our faith community. Bless us with the courage to wrestle with how our faith impacts our own political and social choices. Amen

Group 2 – Finding Their Way

- Rule of Faith
- Church Fathers and Teachers
- Structures and Hierarchy
- Politically Powerless to Patronage
- Jesus: Human and Divine

Group 2 – Finding Their Way – Jesus, Human and Divine

Welcome:

Scientists and engineers don't like to live with mysteries, they prefer to solve them. But how do you describe the mystery of the incarnation? It defies easy explanation and yet it is at the heart of the Gospel message. Some early theologians emphasized Jesus' divinity, and others his humanity. We'll listen in on that discussion.

Opening Prayer:

God, as we learn about the struggle the Early Church had, to live with the mystery of your incarnation, may your Spirit open us to the implications of what it means for our lives. Amen

Opening Conversation:

In groups of 2-3 share a favorite Jesus story.

Watch video (11:20)

Synopsis:

The divinity of Christ, and how to talk about it, created quite a stir in the early days of the church. The paradox of the incarnation spun off a few heresies and eventually a creed.

Questions for Discussion:

- In your family history do you have stories where pleasant activities are considered a threat to your faith? (drinking, dancing, card playing) Does the presentation of the humanity and divinity of Jesus help free you from this type of thinking?
- How does this session inform how you might think about faith and science? Faith and feelings? Faith and reason? How is it different if it doesn't have to be a 0 sum game? Is it OK to live with mystery?
- Much of Christian theology is based on paradox, where two contradictory ideas are held together at once. Since we live in a culture that wants clarity and simplicity, how do we rise to the challenge of living with paradox?

Closing Prayer:

Surprising God, your incarnation reveals your love for all creation. Since the church began, there has been a variety of interpretations of what that means for our daily lives. Help us to live with the complexity of our faith tradition, while at the same working together to be your hands and feet in the world. Amen

Group 3 – Practical Implications

- What Language Shall We Borrow?
- Worship in the Early Church
- Social Teaching and Action
- Teaching and Preaching
- Grace and Law, Pelagius and Augustine

Group 3 – Practical Implications – What Language Shall We Borrow?

Welcome:

Church language can seem foreign to outsiders, and sometimes even to regular church goers, if they are honest. Have you ever wondered about the language of the Nicene Creed? “We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father. Through him all things were made.” Not the language we usually use to talk about Jesus. When we say the words of the Nicene Creed in worship we are using the ancient language of Greek philosophy. It isn’t biblical language. The question is why?

Opening Prayer:

Bless our time of learning and dialogue today. Help us to find the words, the language, that brings our faith and our stories alive to one another. Amen.

Opening Conversation:

In groups of 2-3 share a story of a time you had to find a new way to explain something to someone (teaching a child to read, teaching a skill, introducing a topic...)

Watch video (9:08)

Synopsis:

To talk about the incarnation, early church leaders had to borrow the philosophical language of the day. These Greek terms were in common use and were borrowed by church leaders to work out some difficult doctrinal issues, like the nature of Christ.

Questions for Discussion:

- If Greek philosophical language was useful in the early church to form our creeds, what language would we use to communicate our faith today?
- Creeds were written to stop a huge fight. Their fight was about the divinity of Christ. If we were writing a creed today what issues about God would have to be addressed?
- How can we, in the 21st century Christian church, define fundamental truths that make sense in our culture today?
- What role might writers, artists, poets and musicians play in employing fresh language for our time and place?

Closing Prayer:

Gracious God, help us to find the language to express our faith in you, so that we may pass along our faith by word and deed to our children and our neighbors. Amen

Group 3 – Practical Implications

- What Language Shall We Borrow?
- Worship in the Early Church
- Social Teaching and Action
- Teaching and Preaching
- Grace and Law, Pelagius and Augustine

Group 3 – Practical Implications – Worship in the Early Church

Welcome:

Many of our current forms of worship find their genesis in the early days of the church.

Our worship may seem old and outdated to some, but it connects us to a Christian practice that is at the foundation of the faith. We will discover our connection to those who worshipped in catacombs and cathedrals.

Opening Prayer:

Faithful God, thank you for the gift of worship. May this gift be a thread that draws Christians together across the centuries. Amen

Opening Conversation:

In groups of 2-3 share a memory of a worship service that stands out for you (a particular Christmas, baptism, confirmation, funeral, wedding, Easter service, or one the youth led, . . .)

Watch video (7:23)

Synopsis:

Prayer, hymns, reading and interpretation of scripture, and a shared meal has always been a part of Christian worship.

Questions for Discussion:

- Were you surprised to hear that women were worship hosts and leaders in the early church because the church gathered in homes? How do you think our worship would change if we met in homes instead of churches? How do you think that would impact leadership?
- What do you experience as fundamental to worship? Did you hear those elements mentioned by our speakers when talking about the worship of the early church? Do you value the continuity of some of those shared experiences?
- Just as the early church had to adapt its worship practices to different cultures and different languages in different parts of the Roman Empire how can, or do, we make these ancient forms of worship come alive in a Christ centered, counter-cultural way?

Closing Prayer:

Loving God, may we worship you in spirit and truth whether we are praying privately or as a community. May you bless our leadership to create worship that honors you and calls and supports us in service and love in the world. Amen

Group 3 – Practical Implications

- What Language Shall We Borrow?
- Worship in the Early Church
- Social Teaching and Action
- Teaching and Preaching
- Grace and Law, Pelagius and Augustine

Group 3 – Practical Implications – Social Teaching and Action

Welcome:

The church has a long history of service to those in need. Before government services were available in this country, Christians built schools, hospitals, orphanages and homes for the aged. Lutheran Services in America is the largest non-profit social service agency in the country. Nothing new here. Christ's call to love and care for the neighbor was taken very seriously by early Christians and it became a mark of distinction. Serving people in need was a vital part of the new church's identity.

Opening Prayer:

God, our heart's home, may you enlarge our hearts that we may serve our neighbor. May the saints that have gone before us in love and service give us courage and hope. Amen

Opening Conversation:

In groups of 2-3 share an experience of participating in a service sponsored by a faith community, either as a recipient or volunteer or both.

Watch video (8:29)

Synopsis:

The early Christians, following the command of Jesus to love and care for the neighbor, shared their goods, tended the sick and buried the dead.

Questions for Discussion:

- How do you or your congregation live out Jesus' teachings about care of the neighbor?
- What is the role of the church/you in society today to take care of the widow, the orphan, and the stranger in our midst? (The stranger in the Hebrew scripture would be today's immigrant.)
- What is the role of the Christian in society today toward those who do not share our faith, but have a claim on our humanity?

Closing Prayer:

God, we thank you for the witness of the early church caring for those of all social statuses, particularly the poor. Help each of us and our congregations to continue to bear witness to God's love by our actions in our local communities and in our global community. Amen

Group 3 – Practical Implications

- What Language Shall We Borrow?
- Worship in the Early Church
- Social Teaching and Action
- Teaching and Preaching
- Grace and Law, Pelagius and Augustine

Group 3 – Practical Implications – Teaching and Preaching

Welcome:

We are practicing an ancient tradition. We are learners in the faith. We practice a thinking, active faith that builds a foundation and leads to maturity. Most Christians in the first centuries were illiterate, so teaching and preaching the faith were essential activities. These Christians were being equipped to know, live, and share the faith, enabling the spread of Christianity.

Opening Prayer:

God, thank you for the gift of teachers and preachers in our lives. Thank you for the teachers and preachers who have from the beginning of Christianity helped pass the faith from one generation to the next. Amen

Opening Conversation:

Turn to 2-3 other people and talk about 1 or 2 of your favorite teachers in school or church.

Watch video (5:20)

Synopsis:

New converts were taught the faith before their baptism. Preaching and teaching to mostly illiterate people was essential for the new church's growth.

Questions for Discussion:

- The Early Church took very seriously the process of preparing people to become a member of the community. How does your community prepare people to become part of it? What are the essentials that you think should be shared?
- Recent research indicates that many mainline Christians have an immature faith, one that was formed in childhood and not developed by further study and thought. What motivates you to re-engage the faith traditions as an adult?
- If you were to formulate a creed to describe the essentials of the faith, what would you put in it?
- Early communities expressed the fundamentals of the Jesus story in a particular way to meet the needs of their community. This encourages us to make the fundamentals of the Jesus story fresh again for our community. How are you and your community doing that?

Closing Prayer:

We give you thanks God for the learning opportunity that we have had today. Support our faith community in finding ways for children, youth, and adults to grow and develop in knowledge and faith. Amen

Group 3 – Practical Implications

- What Language Shall We Borrow?
- Worship in the Early Church
- Social Teaching and Action
- Teaching and Preaching
- Grace and Law, Pelagius and Augustine

Group 3 – Practical Implications – Grace and Law, Pelagius and Augustine

Welcome:

We still wrestle with the question, “What do I have to do to earn God’s favor?” It’s almost like a default position. We have to be reminded that grace is a gift and not to be earned. That question arose in the Early Church too, and was revisited by Martin Luther. We will hear how that played out between two major thinkers in the first centuries.

Opening Prayer:

Bless our reflection and dialogue this hour as we consider, once again, how grace and law function in our lives of faith. Amen

Opening Conversation:

In groups of 2-3 share what the roles of rules and love are in your family.

Watch video (4:45)

Synopsis:

Pelagius was concerned about the moral laxity of Christians and the human potential for a pure, sinless life. Augustine promoted the notion of original sin and the need for grace. The tension between grace and ethics has been part of the life of faith from early on and remains so today.

Questions for Discussion:

- What is your experience with making people follow rules? Does it really make them better people?
- What is attractive about people who don’t always follow all the rules? (Think of the movies.) At what point do they quit being attractive?
- For people who emphasize grace in their life, what is the importance of law?
- What is the problem of living by just the law (rules), no grace?
- Grace is a difficult thing to grasp. Our default setting is often that works are necessary for salvation. How does this play out for you?

Closing Prayer:

Thank you for the gift of conversation and exploration this hour. Send us forth with trust that your grace is at work in us. Amen

Group 4 – Interesting Developments

- Christianity and Judaism
- Martyrs and Confessors
- Monasticism and Ascetics
- Missionary Church
- Eastern and Western Church

Group 4 – Interesting Developments – Christianity and Judaism

Welcome:

It's hard to remember that the first Christians were Jews. We sometimes assume that there was little connection of the Early Church to Judaism but that isn't true, as we'll discover in this session.

Opening Prayer:

Loving God, be with us as we learn about the Early Church and its' lineage in Judaism. Expand our hearts and minds as we learn about living beside our siblings in faith. Amen

Opening Conversation:

In groups of 2-3 share some of the things that shaped your faith as you grew up?

Watch video (8:20)

Synopsis:

The Christian church and Rabbinic Judaism grew up as siblings in those first centuries.

Questions for Discussion:

- What is the moral authority of passages found in the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) for people who follow Jesus?
- Carolyn Schneider told us that a core question of the Early Church was "Are we Jewish? or How Jewish are we?" and that communities answered this question differently. How do you stay in conversation with someone who answers core questions differently?
- Judaism and Christianity were referred to as siblings who have had a long and difficult dialogue. How does the tenacity of this dialogue give you hope for dialogue with our Christian siblings from different congregations or denominations?

Closing Prayer: Compassionate God, may your willingness to go from the cradle to the cross, in order to claim all of us as your children, embolden us to work with people of all faith traditions to meet the needs of our neighbors near and far. Amen

Group 4 – Interesting Developments

- Christianity and Judaism
- Martyrs and Confessors
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- Missionary Church
- Eastern and Western Church

Group 4 – Interesting Developments – Martyrs and Confessors

Welcome:

Most of us do not suffer for our faith. That is not true in many countries around the world. In the early days of the church, some Christians paid the ultimate price with their lives, while others suffered torture and imprisonment. These martyrs and confessors are among the great cloud of witnesses to the faith. How are we to honor and remember them?

Opening Prayer:

We give thanks today for the cloud of witnesses who have gone before us. Those who have walked in faith in the first centuries of Christianity and the many centuries to follow. May we be curious about their story and how our own walk of faith will unfold. Amen

Opening Conversation:

In groups of 2-3 share your reaction when you hear the word 'martyr'?

Watch video (9:47)

Synopsis:

Martyrs gave their lives for the faith. Confessors suffered for the faith short of death. They hold a special place in the witness of the church.

Questions for Discussion:

- The Romans used fear as a tool by martyring a few people. Most Christians were not persecuted but all were afraid. How does fear impact us today?
- Stewart Columba talks about ordinary people who make decisions of faith one small step at a time. Have you ever found yourself making a decision that you wouldn't have expected to make 2 days, 2 weeks or 2 years before? How did that make a difference in your life?
- Following Christ meant not fitting into the economic and religious way of life in the Roman empire. How might this inform your own faith journey?
- What does counter-cultural look like in your life of faith? What price tag might be attached?

Closing Prayer:

God, we thank you for the freedom we have to choose our faith in this country without government persecution. Help us to act within this freedom to choose your way of love day by day, even when we don't fit into the culture around us. Amen

Group 4 – Interesting Developments

- Christianity and Judaism
- Martyrs and Confessors
- Monasticism and Ascetics
- Missionary Church
- Eastern and Western Church

Group 4 – Interesting Developments – Monasticism and Ascetics

Welcome:

We all wrestle with the question of how to live the Christian life. The call to holiness in the first centuries led some people to set themselves apart from the culture to pursue a life of prayer and contemplation. Some retreated to the desert and lived a spartan life. In this session we will learn about the role of monastic life in the Early Church.

Opening Prayer:

Jesus, we ask you to continue to teach us how to pray and to live a life that gives witness to your love. As we hear about practices in the early church help us learn from those who have gone before us and to be encouraged in our life of faith today. Amen

Opening Conversation:

Share in the group as a whole or in small groups a few stories from those who have had a retreat experience at a monastery or religious community or who have friends who are Roman Catholic sisters, brothers or priests. What was being on retreat like? What was the atmosphere of the community? What do you know about the community life of your friend(s) that are Roman Catholic sisters, brothers, or priests?

Watch video (12:47)

Synopsis:

Living out the Gospel for some meant a retreat from the world, living simply in community.

Questions for Discussion:

- What can we learn from those who have chosen the path of monastic life?
- Is there still a role for retreat and quiet contemplation for Christians today?
- Are some ways of following Jesus more holy than others?
- If 'desert' was an evil place of demons and the church choose to expand there, where is our desert place that we might be called to expand into and how?

Closing Prayer:

Jesus, bless us on our way as we continue to seek to follow you in the way that we live. Give us the courage and confidence to trust in you as we make choices about lifestyle and nurturing our relationship with you. Amen

Group 4 – Interesting Developments

- Christianity and Judaism
- Martyrs and Confessors
- Monasticism and Ascetics
- Missionary Church
- Eastern and Western Church

Group 4 – Interesting Developments – Missionary Church

Welcome:

How did the church grow from those few frightened disciples to the worldwide religion it is today? They didn't have paid missionaries, only committed converts who were carrying the faith with them. What was it about the message that was so compelling?

Opening Prayer:

May your Spirit inspire our hearts and minds as we consider how the Early Church spread the Good News and how we share the Good News today. Amen

Opening Conversation:

In groups of 2-3 share a story of a time you were excited to share some news.

Watch video (9:27)

Synopsis:

The Gospel message of hope and promise resonated with converts, a message that crossed boundaries of race and social status.

Questions for Discussion:

- Does what we have heard about the spread of the Early Church give you hope for the mission work in our country and the world?
- If you are connected to a church in another part of the world, how has it impacted your life of faith?
- What are the implications for your congregation that the early church grew mainly through the movement of regular people from place to place, taking their faith with them? (Not by charismatic missionaries like Paul)
- After a period of sending missionaries abroad, we relate as peers and partners with these younger churches. Has the missionary urge been diminished by this change of style?

Closing Prayer:

God bless us as we enter a new week. May our lives bear witness to the Good News of your love in and for the world. Amen

Group 4 – Interesting Developments

- Christianity and Judaism
- Martyrs and Confessors
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- Missionary Church
- Eastern and Western Church

Group 4 – Interesting Developments – Eastern and Western Church

Welcome:

We are aware that there is an Eastern and a Western Church with quite different worship practices. The Orthodox churches use icons, ancient chants, bells, incense, and colorful vestments in their worship. We know that the split happened in 1054 but the roots of this tragic division came many years before. That's what we'll learn about in this session.

Opening Prayer:

God, we your children have often divided and quarreled. Help us learn from our past and find delight and hope in your love for us in the midst of our diversity. Amen

Opening Conversation:

In groups of 2-3 share an experience, if you have one, of worshiping in a service that included incense, colorful vestments, and many symbolic actions. (This would likely be in a Roman Catholic, Anglican, or Orthodox church.)

Watch video (7:40)

Synopsis:

The roots of the East-West split, known as the Great Schism, arose early due to geographical, language and cultural differences.

Questions for Discussion:

- Is it possible to view the large variety of Christian churches and movements as a sign of health and hope, that the church takes its shape from the culture, traditions and languages of its location?
- How might we celebrate our unity while acknowledging the diversity of expressions?
- How does hearing that Christianity was diverse from its beginning speak to the diversity of Christianity now? In our own family? In our own church? Across denominations?
- What does it take to work your way back to relationship that ultimately leads to forgiveness, when arguments in your congregation happen?
- Fighting over church doctrine and biblical interpretation is a time-honored tradition. How do the dialogues, since the 1960s, between the East and the West, help us resolve the differences we have to deal with?

Closing Prayer:

God, we give you thanks that we live in a time when Christian denominations are in dialogue and often cooperating. May we continue to learn from each other and move towards being a communion of denominations. Amen