

THE APOSTOLIC CHURCH

The Biblical Foundation

The Genealogy of Christian Division

A Historical and Biblical Study of Schism, Reformation, and the Making of Modern Christianity

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Abstract

This chapter reconstructs the apostolic church of approximately AD 30-100 as the historical and theological baseline for tracing later Christian division. Its primary evidence is the New Testament, read in historical sequence and in conversation with first-century Jewish and Roman sources and modern scholarship on Christian origins. Earliest Christianity arose within Second Temple Judaism and, through the resurrection proclamation, Pentecost, Gentile mission, and translocal church formation, became a rapidly expanding transethnic messianic movement centered on Jesus Christ as crucified, risen, exalted Lord. The chapter examines the apostolic gospel, Christ's headship, apostolic eyewitness authority, Israel's Scriptures, emerging apostolic writings, local and translocal ministry, baptism, the Lord's Supper, worship, discipline, spiritual gifts, economic solidarity, mission, persecution, and eschatological hope. It also distinguishes what is clearly present in the first century from later developments such as a universal monarchical episcopate, a seven-sacrament system, papal jurisdiction, and a formally closed twenty-seven-book New Testament canon. Particular attention is given to Gentile inclusion, Jewish-Christian relations, the Jerusalem Council, women and household networks, and apostolic tests for false gospels, corrupt Christology, resurrection denial, moral lawlessness, exploitative ministry, and deceptive revelation. Genealogically, apostolic Christianity is the root to which all later Christian communions, reforms, succession claims, and restoration movements appeal. Theologically, continuity must therefore be tested by fidelity to Christ, the apostolic gospel, and the apostolic Scriptures rather than inferred from antiquity, charisma, or institutional continuity alone.

Keywords: apostolic church; early Christianity; New Testament; ekklesia; apostolic gospel; church leadership; baptism; Lord's Supper

1. Introduction: Why the Genealogy Must Begin Here

Every genealogy requires a root. For the history of Christian division, that root cannot responsibly be identified with a later Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Protestant, Pentecostal, or restorationist institution, because none of those later ecclesial identities existed in the first century in their developed forms. The correct starting point is the apostolic community itself: the movement gathered by Jesus, commissioned by the risen Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, instructed by the apostles, and progressively established in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, Syria, Asia Minor, Greece, Rome, and beyond. Accordingly, the genealogy begins by establishing the apostolic church as the historical and theological benchmark against which later claims of continuity, development, reform, succession, recovery, or restoration must be assessed.

This starting point is methodologically important. Later Christians have repeatedly appealed to apostolicity, but they have meant different things by it. Some traditions emphasize an institutional succession of bishops; others emphasize continuity of doctrine; others appeal to a restoration of New Testament order after alleged corruption; still others claim renewed apostolic gifts, prophecy, or charismatic power. Those later claims cannot be evaluated fairly unless the first-century evidence is first reconstructed on its own terms. The task is therefore not to force the New Testament into a later denominational mold, but to ask what the earliest communities actually believed and practiced before later controversies generated more elaborate institutions and formulas.

The New Testament is both the principal historical corpus for apostolic Christianity and, within the Sola Scriptura method of this book, the final theological norm. Historical analysis must nevertheless distinguish genre and evidentiary function. Acts is a theological narrative of mission and expansion; Paul's undisputed letters are the earliest extant Christian writings that can be dated with confidence to the first generation; the Gospels preserve the authoritative apostolic witness to Jesus in literary forms shaped for proclamation and instruction; the Catholic Epistles and Revelation testify to diverse late first-century contexts. External sources, including Josephus and Tacitus, help anchor persons and events within the wider first-century world, but they do not replace the church's apostolic testimony (Dunn, 2009; Keener, 2012; Schnabel, 2004).

The resulting portrait is neither institutional minimalism nor retrospective ecclesiastical maximalism. The first-century church was not an unstructured spiritual association. It possessed recognized authority, doctrine, discipline, ordinances, offices, moral boundaries, common worship, translocal relationships, and mechanisms for resolving controversy. Yet neither was it already the fully articulated ecclesiastical system of later centuries. The evidence points instead to a missionary, charismatic, doctrinally bounded, locally ordered, and rapidly expanding communion whose unity rested above all on Christ, the apostolic gospel, the Spirit, and the apostolic word (Dunn, 2006).

2. Sources, Chronology, and Method

The chronological scope of this chapter is approximately AD 30-100. Exact dates must be handled with care. The crucifixion of Jesus is commonly placed in AD 30 or 33; the chronology of Paul's conversion and journeys is reconstructed from Acts and the letters; the Gallio episode in Acts 18:12-17 provides one of the firmer external anchors for Paul's Corinthian period; James the brother of Jesus was executed around AD 62, a datum independently attested by Josephus; Nero's persecution of Christians in Rome followed the fire of AD 64; the Jewish revolt began in AD 66 and culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in AD 70. Tacitus later confirms that the Roman population knew a group called Christians and connects their name with Christus, executed under Pontius Pilate, while describing Nero's punishments in Rome (Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44). Josephus' reference to James, 'the brother of Jesus who was called Christ,' is widely regarded as authentic and places James' death in the governorship transition around AD 62 (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 20.200; Schmidt, 2025).

A second Roman datum helps illuminate the social setting of the early mission in Rome. Acts 18:2 reports that Claudius had ordered Jews to leave Rome, explaining why Aquila and Priscilla were in Corinth. Suetonius likewise states that Claudius expelled Jews because of disturbances 'at the instigation of Chrestus' (Claudius 25.4). The identification of 'Chrestus' and the precise relation between Suetonius' notice and conflicts surrounding the Christ movement remain debated, so the passage should not be pressed beyond what it can establish. At minimum, it confirms serious disturbances within the Roman Jewish community under Claudius and provides useful external context for the movement of Jewish Christ-followers in the late 40s.

The dates and authorship of several New Testament books remain disputed in scholarship. This chapter therefore avoids making arguments that depend unnecessarily on a single contested dating scheme. What is historically secure is that Paul's letters arise within the first generation, that multiple Gospel and apostolic traditions were written and circulated during the first century, and that by the end of the century apostolic writings functioned with high authority in the churches. The familiar twenty-seven-book New Testament did not yet exist as a universally bounded codex, but the absence of a finalized later canon list must not be confused with an absence of authoritative apostolic writings. Recent scholarship on canon formation properly distinguishes the early authority of core apostolic texts from the later formalization of a complete canonical boundary (Watson, 2024).

The theological method is likewise explicit. Historical description comes first: what Jesus and the apostles taught, how communities were organized, and where scholarly uncertainty remains. Biblical-theological evaluation then asks whether later claims correspond to this apostolic baseline. In this chapter, because the baseline itself is being established from Scripture, historical and theological analysis necessarily overlap, but later institutional claims are not permitted to define the first-century evidence in advance.

3. The World Before the Church: Judaism Under Rome and the Messianic Setting

3.1 Roman rule, Jewish identity, and the Second Temple world

Jesus and the first apostles did not appear in a religious vacuum. They lived within the diverse world of Second Temple Judaism under Roman imperial power. Jewish life was organized around covenant identity, Torah, the Jerusalem temple, the festivals, prayer, purity practices, family and village life, and a network of synagogues across Palestine and the diaspora. Modern scholarship has rightly rejected older caricatures of Judaism as a monolithic religion of legalistic self-salvation. First-century Jewish groups differed over interpretation, purity, resurrection, politics, priesthood, and eschatological expectation, but they shared a recognizable covenantal and scriptural world (Sanders, 1992).

Roman rule intensified the political and eschatological pressures of that world. Herodian rulers, Roman governors, priestly elites, popular movements, and revolutionary expectations overlapped uneasily. The temple was simultaneously Israel's cultic center, a symbol of national identity, and a politically sensitive institution. The synagogue, whose exact origins remain debated, provided local settings for Scripture reading, prayer, teaching, and communal life. This combination of temple-centered worship and synagogue networks helps explain both the initial

Jewish shape of the Jesus movement and the routes by which its message could travel rapidly through diaspora communities.

The Roman setting also supplied much of the material infrastructure through which the Christian mission could travel: intercity roads, shipping routes, dense urban networks, a widely used Greek lingua franca, and long-established Jewish diaspora communities. Yet the language of Roman 'peace' should not be romanticized. Taxation, military coercion, slavery, patronage, civic hierarchy, and public cult shaped ordinary life, while loyalty to city and emperor could carry religious dimensions. The empire therefore both facilitated mobility and generated recurring points of tension when Christian allegiance to Jesus as Lord challenged idolatrous or absolutizing claims (Meeks, 2003; deSilva, 2018).

The New Testament itself reflects Jewish diversity. Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes, priests, zeal-like revolutionary currents, ordinary villagers, diaspora Jews, proselytes, and 'God-fearers' appear in different contexts. Jesus' conflicts with some leaders therefore must not be turned into a contrast between Christianity and an undifferentiated Judaism. Jesus, the Twelve, Paul, James, Peter, and the earliest Jerusalem believers were Jews. The decisive controversy was not initially whether Christianity would be 'Jewish' or 'non-Jewish,' but how the fulfillment announced in Jesus reconfigured Israel's hopes and how Gentiles could be incorporated into God's people.

3.2 Jesus, the kingdom of God, and the community he formed

The apostolic church begins historically with Jesus. His proclamation of the kingdom of God, his call to repentance and faith, his gathering of disciples, his symbolic appointment of the Twelve, his table fellowship, his teaching on holiness and love, his authority to forgive sins, and his announcement of a renewed covenant people created the matrix from which the post-resurrection church emerged. The Twelve carried an obvious symbolic relation to restored Israel, while Jesus' mission also anticipated the inclusion of the nations. The Church therefore cannot be reduced to a merely post-Pentecost institution detached from Jesus' ministry; Pentecost empowered and publicly constituted the community that Jesus had already gathered and commissioned.

The Greek term *ekklesia* appears explicitly in [Matthew 16:18](#) and [Matthew 18:17](#), but the concept is broader than those occurrences. Jesus identified himself as the decisive center of allegiance, promised to build his assembly, instituted the covenant meal, authorized witnesses, and commanded a worldwide mission. The risen Christ then commissioned the disciples to make disciples of all nations, baptizing and teaching them to obey his commands ([Matthew 28:18-20](#)). The church's mission, therefore, was never self-generated. It rested on the authority of the crucified and risen Lord.

3.3 Cross, resurrection, ascension, and Pentecost

The death and resurrection of Jesus formed the non-negotiable center of apostolic proclamation. Paul could remind the Corinthians of a tradition he had 'received' and 'passed on': that Christ died for sins according to the Scriptures, was buried, was raised on the third day, and appeared to named witnesses ([1 Corinthians 15:1-8](#)). The formula in [1 Corinthians 15:3-5](#) is widely recognized as preserving tradition earlier than the letter itself. This matters genealogically: resurrection faith was not a late doctrinal accretion but belonged to the earliest recoverable Christian proclamation (Cook, 2017).

According to Luke-Acts, the ascension marks Christ's exaltation and the transition to Spirit-empowered witness. At Pentecost, the disciples received the Holy Spirit and publicly proclaimed God's mighty acts to Jews and proselytes from many regions ([Acts 2:1-41](#)). Peter interpreted the event through Joel and the Psalms and culminated in the confession that God had made the crucified Jesus 'both Lord and Messiah' ([Acts 2:36](#)). Earliest Christian devotion thus joined Jewish monotheistic confession with an extraordinarily high place for the risen Jesus, a pattern explored extensively in scholarship on early Christ devotion (Hurtado, 2003).

Luke's language that God 'made' Jesus Lord and Messiah in [Acts 2:36](#) is best understood within the sermon's resurrection-and-exaltation logic as enthronement and public vindication, not as a claim that Jesus first came into existence or first became divine at Pentecost. Other early texts already place Jesus within divine prerogatives, worship, preexistence, and the saving identity of Israel's Lord. The later Nicene vocabulary did not yet exist, but the material from which orthodox Trinitarian and Christological confession would be articulated is already deeply embedded in first-century worship and proclamation (Hurtado, 2003).

4. The Jerusalem Church and the First Pattern of Christian Life

4.1 Pentecost and Jerusalem as the first center

Acts presents Jerusalem as the first geographic center of the post-resurrection mission. The earliest community remained visibly Jewish: believers attended the temple, prayed at Jewish hours, used Israel's Scriptures, and confessed Jesus as Israel's Messiah. Yet they also formed a distinct messianic fellowship marked by baptism in Jesus' name, the apostles' teaching, shared meals, prayer, mutual economic care, and expectation of Christ's return. [Acts 2:42](#) summarizes the gathered life: devotion to apostolic teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayers. The formula is not an exhaustive liturgy, but it offers one of the earliest compact descriptions of church life.

The Jerusalem community also practiced striking forms of generosity. [Acts 2:44-45](#) and [Acts 4:32-37](#) describe voluntary sharing and property sales to meet need. The story of Ananias and Sapphira clarifies that property remained under the owners' control before sale ([Acts 5:4](#)); the episode is therefore better read as radical voluntary generosity enforced by truthfulness and holiness, not as compulsory abolition of private ownership. Economic care nevertheless remained a recurring apostolic concern, from the Jerusalem relief collection to instructions that churches support the poor, widows, missionaries, and those in genuine need.

The community was also disciplined. The apostles exercised teaching and corrective authority; deception was judged; moral scandal could lead to exclusion; disputes over distribution required administrative reform. The early church therefore combined fellowship with boundaries. Its unity was not the absence of conflict but a commitment to resolve conflict under apostolic truth and communal holiness.

4.2 Hebrews, Hellenists, Stephen, and the first outward pressure

The first serious internal administrative dispute recorded in Acts arose between 'Hellenistic Jews' and 'Hebraic Jews' over the daily distribution to widows ([Acts 6:1-6](#)). The terminology points to linguistic and cultural differences within Jewish Christianity, probably involving Greek-speaking diaspora-background believers and more locally rooted Aramaic-speaking believers. The apostles responded by ensuring representative service rather than dismissing the grievance. Seven men were appointed for the task, while the apostles emphasized prayer and the ministry of the word. Although later tradition often calls the Seven 'deacons,' Acts itself does not give them that formal title. The episode nevertheless demonstrates differentiated ministry and the church's capacity to adapt structures to pastoral need.

Stephen's preaching and martyrdom became a turning point. His speech in [Acts 7](#) retold Israel's history in a way that relativized confidence in sacred place and accused his hearers of resisting God's messengers. His death triggered persecution and scattered believers into Judea and Samaria ([Acts 8:1-4](#)). The result was an unintended missionary expansion. Philip preached in Samaria and encountered the Ethiopian official on the Gaza road. Persecution, therefore, functioned paradoxically as one of the mechanisms by which the Jerusalem-centered movement became geographically and ethnically broader.

Table 1. Selected chronology of the apostolic age (dates approximate where noted)

Date / period	Major development
AD 30 or 33	Crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus; ascension and Pentecost soon afterward.
Early-mid 30s	Growth of Jerusalem church; Stephen; scattering into Judea and Samaria; Saul/Paul's conversion is often placed in this period.
40s	Gentile inclusion expands; Antioch becomes a major missionary center; Paul and Barnabas undertake mission.
c. AD 49	Jerusalem consultation/council addresses whether Gentile converts must be circumcised and keep the law of Moses as covenant-entry requirements.
c. AD 49	Claudius' expulsion of Jews from Rome provides context for movements affecting Roman Jewish and Christian networks.
50s	Major Pauline missionary activity in Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Achaia; earliest extant Pauline letters written.

Date / period	Major development
c. AD 51-52	Gallio's proconsulship in Achaia provides a major external chronological anchor for Paul's Corinthian ministry (Acts 18:12-17).
c. AD 57-60	Paul's final Jerusalem visit, arrest, and transfer toward Rome according to Acts.
AD 62	Death of James the brother of Jesus under the high priest Ananus II, attested by Josephus.
AD 64	Neronian persecution of Christians in Rome after the great fire, attested by Tacitus.
AD 66-70	Jewish revolt; Jerusalem and the temple destroyed in AD 70.
c. AD 70-100	Later first-century Christian writings and apostolic traditions circulate; churches confront false teaching, persecution, and questions of order as the eyewitness generation passes.

5. From a Jerusalem Movement to a Transethnic Church

5.1 Peter, Cornelius, and the problem of Gentile inclusion

The expansion into Gentile households forced the church to answer a question with enormous genealogical consequences: must Gentiles become Jews in order to belong fully to the messianic people of God? Acts narrates the decisive Cornelius episode in [Acts 10-11](#). Peter receives a vision that challenges ritual boundaries, enters a Gentile household, preaches Christ, and witnesses the Spirit fall on uncircumcised hearers. His conclusion is not that holiness has become irrelevant, but that God has granted repentance leading to life to Gentiles without requiring prior conversion to Judaism.

This issue was not merely cultural preference. Circumcision was the covenant sign given to Abraham in Genesis 17, and Jewish believers who insisted on it could appeal to Scripture. The controversy therefore tested how the coming of Christ and the gift of the Spirit reconfigured covenant membership. That is why the dispute became one of the first major doctrinal crises within the church rather than a minor question of custom.

5.2 Antioch, Paul, and the Gentile mission

Antioch in Syria became the most important missionary center after Jerusalem. Acts reports that scattered believers preached there not only to Jews but also to Greeks, that Barnabas was sent from Jerusalem, and that he brought Saul to participate in the work ([Acts 11:19-26](#)). The disciples were first called 'Christians' at Antioch. Whether the label originated among outsiders or was adopted internally, it signals that devotion to Christ had become sufficiently visible to generate a public group designation.

Paul's own letters reveal a self-understanding as apostle to the Gentiles, called by the risen Christ and entrusted with a gospel not derived merely from human appointment ([Galatians 1:11-17](#)). Yet Paul did not present himself as an isolated prophet. He visited Jerusalem, conferred with recognized leaders, received the right hand of fellowship for his Gentile mission, and remained deeply concerned with the unity of Jewish and Gentile believers ([Galatians 2:1-10](#)). The mission was therefore both charismatically commissioned and relationally accountable.

Paul's strategy often followed major urban and commercial routes. He preached in synagogues where possible, engaged Gentiles, formed communities in households, trained coworkers, revisited churches, wrote letters, and connected congregations through messengers and material support. The Pauline assemblies were socially mixed, although not socially egalitarian in every practical respect; patrons, artisans, slaves, freed persons, women, household heads, and people of varying status appear in the sources (Meeks, 2003; Osiek et al., 2006). The movement's household base gave it both flexibility and vulnerability: it could spread rapidly through social networks, but it also had to negotiate household hierarchy, patronage, economic inequality, and the moral patterns of Greco-Roman cities.

5.3 The Jerusalem Council and the first major doctrinal settlement

The dispute over Gentile circumcision came to a head in the consultation described in [Acts 15](#), which should be read alongside Paul's autobiographical account in [Galatians 2](#). The exact relationship and chronology between these accounts remains debated, but the theological issue is clear: some believers argued that Gentile converts must be circumcised and keep the law of Moses to be saved or fully incorporated. Peter appealed to God's gift of the Spirit and insisted that Jews and Gentiles are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus. James cited the prophets and

proposed practical requirements aimed at turning Gentiles from idolatrous and sexually immoral patterns while protecting table fellowship across Jewish-Gentile lines.

The outcome established a foundational principle: Gentile inclusion did not require circumcision as a condition of salvation or covenant membership in Christ. Paul would defend this point with exceptional force in Galatians, where adding circumcision as a necessary condition of justification was treated as a corruption of the gospel itself ([Galatians 1:6-9](#); [Galatians 5:2-6](#)). Yet Paul's rejection of circumcision as a saving boundary marker did not mean moral antinomianism. Faith works through love, believers walk by the Spirit, and the ethical demands of the new life remain serious.

The precise rationale for the four requirements in the Jerusalem letter - abstention from idolatrous pollution, sexual immorality, meat from strangled animals, and blood - remains debated. Proposals relate them to the so-called Noachide laws, to the resident-alien regulations of [Leviticus 17-18](#), to the practical conditions of Jewish-Gentile table fellowship, or to some combination of these. The debate should not obscure what the narrative makes plain: circumcision and comprehensive Torah observance were not imposed as covenant-entry conditions for Gentiles, while conversion to Christ still required a decisive break with idolatry and sexual immorality. The settlement therefore joined gospel freedom to concrete holiness and communal peace.

5.4 The Jerusalem collection: translocal unity expressed economically

Paul's collection for impoverished believers in Jerusalem is one of the clearest windows into the material and translocal unity of apostolic Christianity. He instructed churches in Galatia and Corinth to set aside gifts, devoted substantial space to the theology and ethics of generosity, and traveled toward Jerusalem with the contribution despite personal risk ([1 Corinthians 16:1-4](#); [2 Corinthians 8-9](#); [Romans 15:25-32](#)). The collection was not merely philanthropy. It embodied fellowship between Gentile congregations and the Jewish mother church and made economic solidarity a visible expression of one gospel and one people.

This economic pattern also guards against opposite distortions. The Jerusalem sharing narratives do not describe compulsory abolition of private property, while Paul's collection teaching does not promise wealth as a reward for giving. Apostolic generosity is voluntary, proportionate, transparent, and directed toward genuine need. Leaders are accountable in the handling of funds, and Christian giving is interpreted through the self-giving grace of Christ rather than through religious pressure or transactional promises of material return.

6. The Apostolic Gospel: The Doctrinal Center

6.1 The kerygma: event, interpretation, and confession

The apostolic church was not held together merely by shared memory or community practice. It was created and sustained by a message called the gospel. That gospel can be summarized without reducing it to a slogan. Humanity stands under sin and judgment; God has acted in fulfillment of the Scriptures through Jesus the Messiah; Christ died for sins, was buried, rose bodily, appeared to witnesses, ascended and reigns; forgiveness and the gift of the Spirit are proclaimed in his name; sinners are summoned to repentance and faith; those who belong to Christ are justified, reconciled, adopted, regenerated, sanctified, incorporated into his body, and called to persevering holiness; and they await resurrection, judgment, and the consummation of God's kingdom.

The New Testament also preserves compact confessional and traditional formulas that show how early the gospel was being summarized for transmission. Paul's language of receiving and handing on the resurrection tradition in [1 Corinthians 15:3-5](#), the Christological pattern in [Romans 1:3-4](#), and the exalted hymn-like confession of [Philippians 2:6-11](#) demonstrate that earliest Christianity possessed both narrative content and memorable doctrinal formulations. Later creeds would become more technical, but confession, catechesis, and doctrinal summary were not post-apostolic inventions.

The gospel is therefore both event and interpretation. The cross is not merely the tragic death of a teacher but the saving death of the Messiah 'for our sins' ([1 Corinthians 15:3](#)); the resurrection is not merely inspiration but God's victory over death and the pledge of believers' resurrection ([1 Corinthians 15:12-28](#)); Jesus is not merely one teacher among many but Lord ([Romans 10:9-13](#)). The earliest Christian confession therefore possessed a strong Christological and eschatological structure long before fourth-century conciliar terminology.

6.2 Repentance, faith, grace, and justification

Repentance and faith belong together. Peter calls hearers to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ ([Acts 2:38](#)); Paul summarizes his public ministry as testifying to both Jews and Greeks about 'repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus' ([Acts 20:21](#)). Faith is not bare intellectual assent. It is trust in Christ that produces a new allegiance and a transformed life. The apostles can therefore oppose both legalistic attempts to make boundary markers conditions of justification and lawless professions that deny Christ by conduct.

Justification is grounded in grace and received through faith, not earned by works of law or human merit ([Romans 3:21-28](#); [Galatians 2:15-21](#)). Yet the same apostles insist that saving faith produces obedience, love, and holiness. Paul can speak of 'the obedience of faith' ([Romans 1:5](#)); James rejects a dead faith without works ([James 2:14-26](#)); John treats habitual rebellion and hatred as incompatible with knowing God ([1 John 2:3-11](#)). The apostolic pattern is therefore grace opposed to merit, not grace opposed to transformation.

This Pauline emphasis must be set within, not against, the Jewish world from which Paul came. Modern scholarship has decisively challenged the caricature of Second Temple Judaism as a religion in which Jews simply tried to earn salvation by accumulating merit (Sanders, 1992). Paul's controversy concerns the saving action of God in Christ, the place of Torah and ethnic boundary markers in the messianic age, and the character of grace itself. Barclay's analysis of grace as divine gift is especially useful here: Christ is God's incongruous gift to the undeserving, so boasting is excluded, yet the gift creates new obligations of allegiance and transformed life (Barclay, 2015). Paul and James therefore address different distortions when Paul denies justification by works of law and James rejects a merely verbal faith that produces no obedient fruit.

6.3 Regeneration, adoption, sanctification, and life in the Spirit

The new birth and the gift of the Spirit are likewise central. Jesus speaks of birth from above/by the Spirit ([John 3:3-8](#)); Paul describes believers as saved through regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit ([Titus 3:4-7](#)); Peter speaks of new birth through the living and enduring word of God ([1 Peter 1:22-25](#)). The Christian life is therefore neither ritual membership alone nor mental agreement alone. It is the life of those joined to Christ and indwelt by the Spirit.

The apostolic vocabulary of salvation is deliberately rich. Believers are not described by one metaphor only: they are justified before God, reconciled from enmity, adopted as sons and daughters, transferred into a new realm, united with Christ, indwelt by the Spirit, sanctified for holy living, and incorporated into one body. These images should not be collapsed into a single mechanism. Together they show that apostolic salvation is judicial, relational, participatory, covenantal, ethical, and eschatological at once.

6.4 Perseverance, resurrection, and the consummation of hope

The apostolic gospel also includes perseverance and hope. The churches are warned against apostasy, unbelief, moral hardening, and deception, yet they are also assured of God's preserving grace. The New Testament refuses both presumption and despair. Believers are called to continue in faith, pursue holiness, encourage one another, and await the appearing of Christ. The final horizon is bodily resurrection, judgment, the defeat of death, and the renewed creation.

Apostolic eschatology is therefore not an appendix to the gospel. The church lives between Christ's resurrection and his return, tasting the powers of the age to come while still awaiting bodily resurrection, final judgment, the defeat of death, and the renewal of creation ([1 Corinthians 15:20-28](#); [1 Thessalonians 4:13-18](#); [Revelation 21:1-5](#)). The first-century texts do not resolve every later debate over millennial chronology, the sequencing of end-time events, or the relation of particular prophetic schemes. They do, however, fix the controlling hope: the personal triumph of Christ, resurrection of the dead, judgment, vindication of God's people, and the final restoration of God's creation.

7. Apostolic Authority, Revelation, and the Emergence of Scripture

7.1 Christ as the source of apostolic authority

The apostles did not claim independent religious sovereignty. Their authority was derivative from Christ. Jesus chose and commissioned the Twelve, promised the Spirit's guidance, and sent them as witnesses. In Acts,

qualification to replace Judas emphasized companionship with Jesus' ministry and witness to the resurrection ([Acts 1:21-26](#)). Paul, whose apostleship was exceptional because he was not among the Twelve, grounded his commission in the risen Christ's appearance and call ([1 Corinthians 9:1](#); [1 Corinthians 15:8-10](#)). Apostolicity in this foundational sense was therefore tied to Christ's commission and authoritative witness to his resurrection.

The apostles expected their teaching to bind the churches. The Jerusalem believers devoted themselves to 'the apostles' teaching' ([Acts 2:42](#)). 2 Thessalonians instructs its recipients to hold to what they had received and places written apostolic instruction alongside oral instruction ([2 Thessalonians 2:15](#)). This text is important in later debates over Scripture and tradition. In its first-century setting, however, the 'traditions' are apostolic instructions delivered to identifiable churches by an apostle and his coworkers, not an undefined authorization for any later extra-biblical doctrine. Their authority derives from apostolic origin, not from mere antiquity.

7.2 Israel's Scriptures and the apostolic writings

The church inherited the Scriptures of Israel as sacred Scripture. Jesus and the apostles cited the Law, Prophets, and Writings as divine authority and interpreted them christologically. The Bereans were commended for examining the Scriptures to test apostolic preaching ([Acts 17:11](#)). 2 Timothy states that the sacred Scriptures make one wise for salvation through faith in Christ and that 'all Scripture is inspired by God' ([2 Timothy 3:15-17](#)). The immediate referent includes the Scriptures Timothy had known from childhood, but the apostolic period also witnessed the production of new authoritative writings.

Paul's letters were intended for public reading and circulation ([Colossians 4:16](#); [1 Thessalonians 5:27](#)). [2 Peter 3:15-16](#) refers to Paul's letters and places them in relation to 'the rest of the Scriptures,' though the dating and authorship of 2 Peter are debated in scholarship. The Gospels likewise preserve authoritative testimony to Jesus, and Luke explicitly situates his work among earlier accounts and eyewitness-derived tradition ([Luke 1:1-4](#)). Bauckham's influential work has renewed attention to the role of named eyewitness testimony in Gospel tradition, though aspects of his reconstruction remain debated (Bauckham, 2017).

It is therefore historically inaccurate to say that the church in AD 50 possessed the completed twenty-seven-book New Testament. It is equally inaccurate to infer that first-century Christians therefore lacked a normative apostolic word. The period is best described as one in which the Scriptures of Israel already functioned as canonical Scripture while apostolic teaching was being proclaimed, written, copied, exchanged, and increasingly recognized as enduring authority. The formal boundaries of the later New Testament collection belong principally to the post-apostolic story addressed in the next chapter.

8. Ekklesia: The Identity of the Apostolic Church

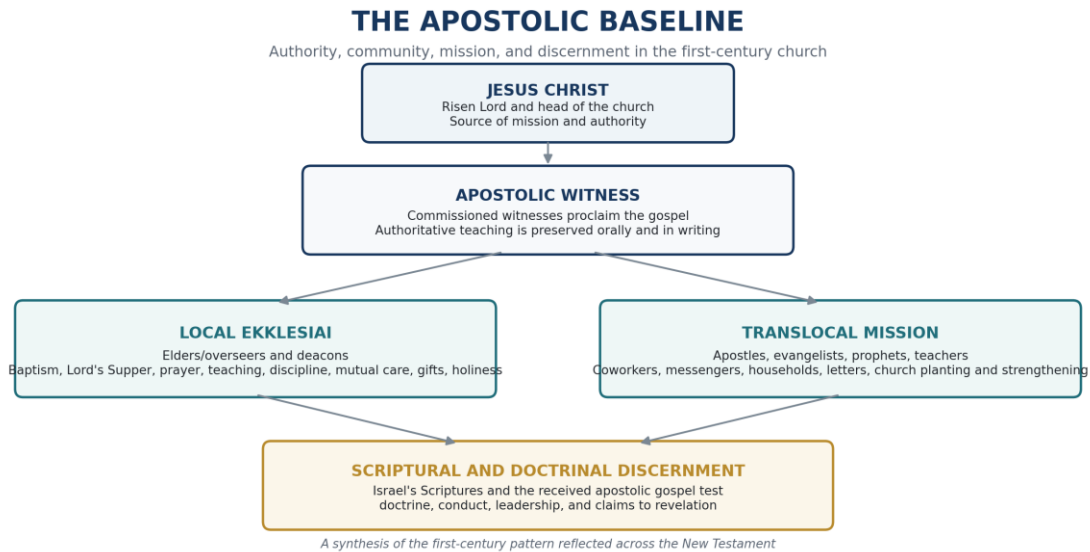
The Greek word *ekklesia* could denote an assembly or gathered civic body, and its Christian use also resonates with the Greek Scriptures' language for the assembled people of God. Scholarly debate continues over whether the Septuagintal or Greco-Roman civic background should be considered primary in particular contexts; van Kooten (2012), for example, stresses the civic-assembly resonance in Paul's usage. Theologically, the New Testament uses *ekklesia* flexibly for a local congregation, multiple congregations, and the church in its broader corporate sense.

The church's identity is described through several complementary metaphors. Christ is head and believers are his body ([1 Corinthians 12:12-27](#); [Ephesians 1:22-23](#)). The church is God's temple indwelt by the Spirit ([1 Corinthians 3:16-17](#); [Ephesians 2:19-22](#)). Believers are God's household, a holy people, a royal priesthood, and a community of brothers and sisters. These metaphors distribute dignity across the entire people of God while still allowing differentiated leadership and gifts.

The universal and local dimensions cannot be separated. Paul can address 'the church of God that is in Corinth' while also speaking of all who call on the name of Jesus everywhere ([1 Corinthians 1:2](#)). Local congregations are not franchises of a later denominational corporation, but neither are they autonomous in the sense of having no obligations beyond themselves. They receive apostolic letters, share workers, collect relief for distant believers, recognize teachers and messengers, and participate in a common confession. Apostolic Christianity is therefore both local and translocal.

The church also understands itself through Israel's covenant vocabulary, but the New Testament does not support Gentile boasting over Israel. Paul can describe Gentile believers as grafted into the nourishing olive root and immediately warns them not to become arrogant toward the natural branches ([Romans 11:17-24](#)). The apostolic church is therefore a transethnic people created in Christ, yet its self-understanding remains inseparable from God's promises in Israel's Scriptures. This tension is historically important because later Christian claims about replacement, succession, and the status of the Jewish people must be tested against the full apostolic witness rather than against post-biblical polemic.

Figure 1. The apostolic baseline: authority, community, mission, and discernment



Note. Author's synthesis of the first-century pattern reflected across the New Testament.

9. Leadership and Ministry in the New Testament Churches

9.1 Apostles and translocal workers

The term *apostolos* can function broadly as 'messenger' or 'sent one,' but the New Testament also uses 'apostle' for foundational witnesses commissioned by Christ. The Twelve occupy a unique role in relation to Israel and the resurrection witness, while Paul insists that he too is an apostle by divine call. Other figures, such as Barnabas, may be called apostles in a broader missionary sense. This semantic range matters because later claims to restored apostleship should not simply assume that every New Testament use refers to the same office or authority level.

The foundational apostles exercised translocal teaching and disciplinary authority, planted churches, recognized leaders, and preserved doctrinal unity. Yet they did not work alone. Barnabas, Silas, Timothy, Titus, Luke, Priscilla and Aquila, Epaphroditus, Phoebe, Mark, and many others appear as coworkers, envoys, teachers, patrons, hosts, or missionaries. The apostolic mission was therefore collaborative, even when certain figures possessed distinctive authority.

9.2 Elders, overseers, shepherds, and plurality

Local churches developed recognized leadership. Acts reports the appointment of elders in churches ([Acts 14:23](#)), and Paul's farewell to the Ephesian leaders uses 'elders' for the men summoned and then describes the same group as 'overseers' charged to shepherd the church ([Acts 20:17,28](#)). Titus likewise moves from 'elder' in [Titus 1:5](#) to 'overseer' in [Titus 1:7](#). These passages are a principal reason many scholars conclude that *presbyteros* and *episkopos* overlap substantially, perhaps functionally, in the first-century evidence (Robinson, 2002).

This does not prove that every congregation everywhere used identical terminology or structure at every moment. Philippians addresses 'overseers and deacons' ([Philippians 1:1](#)); 1 Thessalonians speaks more generally of those who labor, lead, and admonish ([1 Thessalonians 5:12-13](#)); Corinthians reflects strong charismatic participation. The

evidence suggests real order but also developmental and local flexibility. What is difficult to demonstrate from the New Testament alone is the later universal pattern of one monarchical bishop standing over a college of presbyters in every city. That structure becomes much clearer in some second-century sources and belongs to the post-apostolic development examined in the next chapter.

Leadership qualifications emphasize character and teaching rather than sacerdotal status. Overseers must be above reproach, self-controlled, hospitable, able to teach, not violent or greedy, and able to manage their households faithfully ([1 Timothy 3:1-7](#); [Titus 1:5-9](#)). Elders shepherd rather than domineer ([1 Peter 5:1-4](#)). The New Testament reserves priestly sacrificial language in a distinctive way for Christ's high-priestly work and for the priestly identity/sacrifices of the whole people of God; it does not ordinarily call local elders hieries, cultic sacrificing priests. This does not eliminate ministerial authority, but it does caution against importing a later sacerdotal system into the first-century vocabulary.

9.3 Deacons, prophets, teachers, evangelists, and spiritual gifts

Deacons are explicitly named in [Philippians 1:1](#) and given qualifications in [1 Timothy 3:8-13](#). The precise scope of the office is not described comprehensively, but service, trustworthiness, and tested character are central. Phoebe is called a diakonos of the church at Cenchreae and a benefactor/patron of many ([Romans 16:1-2](#)), evidence that women exercised important recognized ministries. The exact implications for later debates over ordination require more argument than the term alone can settle.

Prophets and teachers appear prominently, especially in Acts and 1 Corinthians. Antioch had prophets and teachers who fasted, prayed, and discerned the Spirit's missionary direction ([Acts 13:1-3](#)). Corinthian worship included prophecy, tongues, interpretation, teaching, and other gifts, but Paul subjected charismatic expression to intelligibility, order, love, and communal discernment ([1 Corinthians 12-14](#)). The presence of charismatic gifts therefore did not create doctrinal anarchy. Prophecy was to be weighed, spirits tested, and all things done for edification.

Evangelists also appear. Philip is called an evangelist ([Acts 21:8](#)); Timothy is told to do the work of an evangelist ([2 Timothy 4:5](#)). Ephesians 4 names apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers as gifts for equipping the saints ([Ephesians 4:11-16](#)). The passage emphasizes the goal of ministry: the maturity of the whole body, not the exaltation of officeholders.

9.4 Women, households, and ministerial agency

Women are visible throughout the apostolic mission not merely as passive recipients but as patrons, hosts, coworkers, teachers, prophets, and servants of churches. Priscilla, together with Aquila, explains the way of God more accurately to Apollos ([Acts 18:26](#)); Phoebe is commended as a diakonos of the church at Cenchreae and a benefactor or patron of many ([Romans 16:1-2](#)); Lydia opens her household to the Philippian mission; women including Nympha host churches; and Paul repeatedly names women among those who labored with him. Junia in [Romans 16:7](#) is almost certainly a woman, although interpreters continue to debate whether Paul's wording means that she was prominent among the apostles or well known to them. House-church research has rightly emphasized how patronage, hospitality, household leadership, and missionary mobility created substantial space for female agency in earliest Christianity (Osiek et al., 2006).

At the same time, the evidence cannot be reduced to a modern slogan. Paul assumes that women pray and prophesy in the assembly ([1 Corinthians 11:5](#)), while other passages place restrictions on speech or teaching whose scope and application remain among the most disputed questions in New Testament interpretation ([1 Corinthians 14:34-35](#); [1 Timothy 2:11-15](#)). The historically secure conclusion is therefore narrower but important: women exercised significant recognized ministry within apostolic networks, and later debates about ordination must engage the complete textual evidence rather than either erasing those ministries or assuming that the first century maps neatly onto later office structures.

9.5 Peter, James, Paul, and the question of primacy

Peter is unquestionably prominent. He is named first among the Twelve, frequently speaks for them, preaches at Pentecost, plays a leading role in early Acts, opens the Gentile mission through the Cornelius episode, and speaks decisively in the Jerusalem controversy. Any reconstruction that minimizes Peter's importance does violence to the

sources. Yet prominence is not identical to a fully developed doctrine of universal monarchical jurisdiction. Acts also presents James, the brother of Jesus, as a central leader in Jerusalem, especially in [Acts 15:13-21](#) and [Acts 21:18](#). Paul can publicly oppose Peter at Antioch when he believes Peter's conduct compromises the truth of the gospel ([Galatians 2:11-14](#)).

The apostolic pattern therefore exhibits both recognized prominence and mutual accountability. Peter's leadership is real; Paul's independent apostolic commission is real; James' Jerusalem leadership is real; councils and congregations participate in decisions; and the apostles themselves are accountable to the gospel they proclaim. These facts are essential when later claims about Roman primacy, episcopal succession, and conciliar authority are examined historically.

Table 2. New Testament ministries and what can be established with reasonable confidence

Ministry	What the New Testament shows	Important caution
Apostles	Foundational witnesses and commissioned missionaries; the Twelve and Paul possess distinctive authority, while the term can also be used more broadly for sent messengers.	The New Testament does not define a perpetual succession of foundational resurrection-witness apostles.
Elders / presbyters	Local leaders who teach, shepherd, guard doctrine, and model character. Often plural in a church.	Whether every use is institutionally identical across all communities is debated.
Overseers / bishops	Leaders charged with oversight; Acts 20 and Titus 1 strongly associate the term with elders.	A later universal monarchical episcopate is not clearly present as an already uniform structure.
Deacons	Recognized servants/ministers with character qualifications; practical and ecclesial service.	Exact duties and later ordination implications are not exhaustively defined.
Prophets / teachers	Charismatic and instructional ministries subject to testing, order, and apostolic truth.	Charismatic claims are never exempt from doctrinal discernment.
Evangelists / missionaries	Proclaim the gospel, extend mission, and strengthen churches.	Not a single standardized office description across all texts.
Whole body	All believers receive gifts and are called to mutual edification, holiness, witness, and service.	Gifted participation does not erase qualified leadership or doctrinal order.

10. Baptism: Initiation, Allegiance, and Union with Christ

Baptism is a universal feature of apostolic mission. Jesus commanded the making of disciples by baptizing and teaching ([Matthew 28:19-20](#)); Acts repeatedly presents baptism as the public response of those who receive the gospel; Paul assumes that believers have been baptized into Christ and into one body ([Romans 6:1-4](#); [1 Corinthians 12:13](#)). Baptism marks identification with Jesus, incorporation into the visible community, participation in the death-and-resurrection pattern of Christ, and a break with the old life.

The normal narrative order in Acts is proclamation, hearing, repentance/faith, and baptism, though the sequence of baptism and the manifest gift of the Spirit varies in exceptional transitional episodes. At Pentecost, repentant hearers are commanded to be baptized ([Acts 2:38-41](#)); the Samaritans receive baptism before Peter and John lay hands on them ([Acts 8:12-17](#)); Cornelius' household receives the Spirit before water baptism ([Acts 10:44-48](#)). These variations caution against converting salvation history into a mechanical sacramental sequence.

The New Testament contains household baptisms, including Lydia's household and the Philippian jailer's household. These texts are important in later debates over infant baptism, but none explicitly states whether infants were present. Defenders of infant baptism argue from household solidarity and covenant continuity; defenders of believer's baptism emphasize the recurring link between hearing, believing, repentance, discipleship, and baptism. Historically, the apostolic evidence clearly commands baptism and tightly associates it with conversion, but it does not provide an explicit first-century example that unambiguously settles the later infant-baptism controversy.

Likewise, the mode of baptism is not exhaustively legislated in narrative detail. The verb baptizo and several narrative settings are compatible with immersion, but the New Testament does not explicitly legislate one mode in a way that by itself settles every later debate; Christian practice would subsequently display greater variety.

Theologically, the more decisive point in the apostolic texts is baptism's Christ-centered meaning. It is not an autonomous magical act. Salvation rests on Christ's saving work and is received through repentant faith, while baptism functions as the commanded initiatory sign through which the believer publicly identifies with Christ and his people.

11. The Lord's Supper: Remembrance, Participation, Proclamation, and Community

The Lord's Supper derives from Jesus' final meal with his disciples. Paul preserves an early tradition that he says he 'received from the Lord' and delivered to the Corinthians: Jesus took bread and cup, interpreted them in relation to his body and the new covenant in his blood, and commanded remembrance ([1 Corinthians 11:23-26](#)). The meal therefore looks backward to Christ's sacrificial death, presentward to communion in the body, and forward to his coming.

Paul's language is stronger than bare recollection. The cup is a 'sharing' or participation in the blood of Christ and the bread a participation in the body of Christ ([1 Corinthians 10:16-17](#)). Yet the New Testament does not supply the later metaphysical vocabulary by which medieval and Reformation traditions would debate the mode of Christ's presence. It is therefore anachronistic either to read transubstantiation as an already defined apostolic dogma or to assume that the meal meant nothing more than mental recollection. The apostolic evidence supports remembrance, covenantal participation, proclamation, communion, self-examination, and corporate unity.

The Corinthian abuses also show that the Supper was embedded in real social relations. Wealthier members apparently ate in ways that humiliated those with less, and Paul treated this social fracture as a profanation of the Lord's Supper itself ([1 Corinthians 11:17-34](#)). Recent scholarship has explored the bodily and economic dimensions of this abuse, reinforcing the point that Eucharistic theology cannot be separated from ecclesial ethics (Downs, 2019). The meal proclaimed one Christ and one body; therefore class contempt contradicted its meaning.

12. Worship and the Gathered Life of the Churches

Apostolic worship was Scripture-saturated, Christ-centered, Spirit-enabled, and participatory. Churches read Scripture and apostolic letters, taught doctrine, prayed, sang psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, confessed Christ, gave thanks, exercised spiritual gifts, collected offerings, baptized converts, shared the Lord's Supper, and practiced mutual exhortation. The exact order varied, and the New Testament does not preserve a single universal liturgical script. What it does preserve are governing principles: intelligibility, edification, truth, holiness, love, order, and the centrality of Christ.

Prayer was constant. The Jerusalem believers prayed in crisis and mission ([Acts 4:23-31](#)); Antioch's leaders worshiped and fasted before missionary sending ([Acts 13:1-3](#)); Paul's letters overflow with intercession and thanksgiving. Singing also belonged to gathered life ([Colossians 3:16](#); [Ephesians 5:18-20](#)). Early confessional and hymnic material, such as [Philippians 2:6-11](#), shows how worship and doctrine reinforced one another.

Gatherings commonly occurred in homes. Romans 16 names several house-based congregational networks, and archaeological and social-historical scholarship has emphasized the importance of households, patrons, dining spaces, and domestic relationships for earliest Christianity (Meeks, 2003; Osiek et al., 2006). House churches should not be romanticized as structureless. A household setting could intensify patronage and status dynamics as readily as it could foster intimacy. The apostolic letters repeatedly work to reshape those relationships under the lordship of Christ.

The first day of the week appears as a significant gathering time in [Acts 20:7](#), while [1 Corinthians 16:2](#) associates the first day with setting aside a collection. Jewish believers also continued temple and synagogue engagement during the earliest period. The evidence therefore establishes meaningful first-day practices in some apostolic communities, but it does not by itself supply the later legal or liturgical framework by which subsequent traditions would debate Sabbath and Sunday observance.

Giving was purposeful, generous, and morally accountable. Paul organized relief for Jerusalem, appealed to Christ's self-giving, taught proportionality and willingness, and insisted that giving should not be coerced ([2](#)

[Corinthians 8-9](#)). The apostolic writings nowhere present wealth as a guaranteed sign of divine favor. On the contrary, greed is condemned, the rich are warned against arrogance, and generosity toward the poor is treated as an important evidence of Christian love.

13. Holiness, Discipline, and the Moral Shape of the Church

The apostolic church proclaimed grace but did not treat holiness as optional. Jesus taught reconciliation, sexual fidelity, truthfulness, mercy, enemy-love, and discipline. Paul could exclude a man involved in egregious sexual immorality from fellowship ([1 Corinthians 5](#)) and instruct churches not to tolerate idolatry, exploitation, drunkenness, greed, or persistent disorder. Hebrews calls believers to pursue holiness; Peter commands them to be holy in all conduct; John makes love and obedience tests of authentic knowledge of God.

Discipline is therefore part of apostolic ecclesiology. [Matthew 18:15-20](#) provides a graduated process for confronting sin; Paul commands restoration of the repentant and protection of the community; Titus warns against a divisive person after repeated admonition ([Titus 3:10-11](#)). Discipline aims at truth, repentance, protection, and restoration, not institutional self-protection or coercive domination.

The moral vision also crosses social boundaries. In Christ, ethnic, social, and gender status do not determine standing before God ([Galatians 3:28](#)), yet the New Testament communities still lived within societies structured by patriarchy, slavery, citizenship, patronage, and economic hierarchy. The apostolic writings address believers inside those structures while also planting principles of shared lordship, brotherhood, mutual obligation, and final accountability to Christ. Historical honesty requires recognizing both the radical equalizing theological claims and the incomplete social transformation visible within first-century conditions.

14. Mission and Geographical Expansion

Acts frames the mission programmatically: the witnesses will move from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth ([Acts 1:8](#)). The narrative then traces precisely that widening movement. Jerusalem remains the symbolic origin, but Antioch becomes a missionary base; Cyprus and southern Galatia receive organized mission; Macedonia and Achaia become major fields; Ephesus becomes a strategic center for Asia; and Rome appears as the symbolic western horizon of Acts. Paul also expresses an intention to proceed toward Spain ([Romans 15:23-28](#)), though the New Testament does not narrate whether he achieved that plan.

The mission spread through several overlapping mechanisms: itinerant apostolic teams; diaspora synagogues; merchant, household, and patronage networks; migration caused by persecution; ordinary believers speaking the word; correspondence; delegated coworkers; and the credibility or scandal of transformed communal life. Schnabel's extensive study of early Christian mission rightly emphasizes that the missionary movement cannot be reduced to Paul's journeys alone; it involved Jesus' commissioning, the Twelve, Hellenistic Jewish believers, Peter, Philip, Barnabas, Paul, and a much wider network of named and unnamed participants (Schnabel, 2004).

Evidence for regions beyond the New Testament narrative must be handled cautiously. Later traditions place apostles in many lands, some plausibly and others without early corroboration. The historical baseline should therefore distinguish the New Testament's secure geography from later memory. It is safe to say that by the late first century Christian communities existed across significant parts of the eastern Mediterranean and in Rome, with evidence of wider diffusion growing thereafter.

Table 3. Major first-century centers in the New Testament mission

Center	Historical significance	Principal evidence
Jerusalem / Judea	Origin of Pentecost mission; apostles and James; temple engagement; early persecution; later relief needs.	Acts 1-8; 15; 21
Samaria	Bridge region in Acts; Philip's preaching and apostolic confirmation.	Acts 8
Caesarea	Cornelius episode; important Judean port and administrative setting.	Acts 10; 21; 23-26

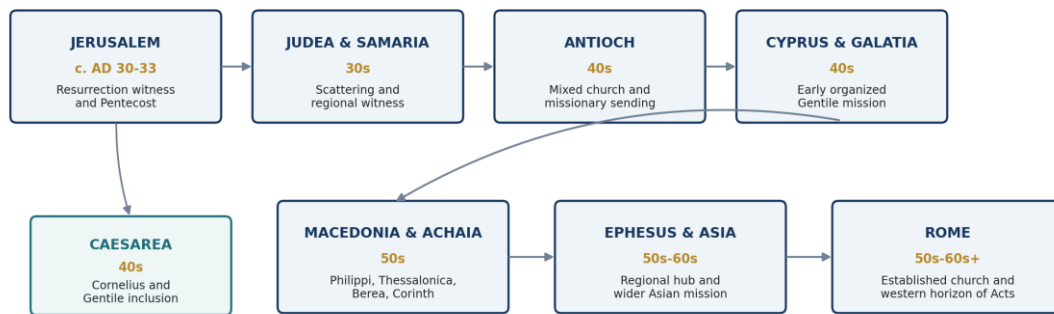
Table 3 (continued)

Center	Historical significance	Principal evidence
Antioch (Syria)	Mixed Jewish-Gentile church; first major missionary-sending center; disciples called Christians.	Acts 11; 13; 15
Cyprus / southern Galatia	Early Barnabas-Paul mission; synagogue and Gentile outreach.	Acts 13-14
Philippi / Thessalonica / Berea	Macedonian churches; persecution, household networks, and Pauline correspondence.	Acts 16-17; Philippians; 1-2 Thessalonians
Corinth	Strategic Achaian church marked by social diversity, gifts, moral disputes, and doctrinal correction.	Acts 18; 1-2 Corinthians
Ephesus / Asia	Long Pauline ministry; broad regional influence; later Johannine and Revelation associations within Asia.	Acts 19-20; Ephesians; Revelation 2-3
Rome	Christian presence before Paul's arrival; recipients of Romans; Neronian persecution attested by Tacitus.	Romans; Acts 28; Tacitus, Ann. 15.44

Figure 2. Schematic expansion of the apostolic mission, c. AD 30-100

SCHEMATIC EXPANSION OF THE APOSTOLIC MISSION, c. AD 30-100

A chronological-geographical synthesis of the widening mission documented in Acts and the Pauline letters



Schematic rather than exhaustive: securely attested communities extended beyond these representative centers.

15. Persecution, Political Status, and the Late First-Century Transition

15.1 Local conflict and Neronian violence

Apostolic Christianity grew under pressure. Some opposition arose within intra-Jewish disputes over Jesus' messianic claims, temple preaching, Gentile inclusion, and the interpretation of Torah. Acts records arrests, beatings, the death of Stephen, Herod Agrippa I's execution of James the son of Zebedee, and repeated local conflicts. Paul's letters confirm suffering from multiple directions: synagogue punishments, civic disturbances, imprisonment, violence, and the ordinary vulnerabilities of itinerant mission.

Roman policy in the first decades should not be described as a single empire-wide program of systematic persecution. Local authorities often treated disputes as problems of public order or Jewish intra-communal controversy. By the mid-60s, however, Christians in Rome could be singled out as a recognizable group. Tacitus reports that after the fire of Rome, Nero inflicted brutal punishments on Christians, whom he associated with Christus executed under Pontius Pilate (Tacitus, Annals 15.44). The passage is hostile, which makes its basic external testimony to the group's existence and Neronian persecution especially important historically.

15.2 AD 70 and the changing Jewish-Christian landscape

The destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in AD 70 transformed the world in which both Jews and followers of Jesus understood communal identity, memory, and sacred space. Yet it should not be treated as a single date on

which 'Judaism' and 'Christianity' suddenly became two fully separated religions. Jewish followers of Jesus continued to exist, Gentile participation had already become extensive before AD 70, and patterns of differentiation varied by region and community. Scholarship increasingly describes the so-called parting of the ways as a prolonged, uneven process rather than one universal rupture (Dunn, 2009; Fredriksen, 2018).

The New Testament itself resists an anti-Jewish reading of that transition. Paul grieves over Israel, affirms the patriarchal gifts and calling, and warns Gentile believers not to boast over Jewish branches ([Romans 9-11](#)). The apostolic genealogy therefore begins inside Israel's scriptural and messianic story even as the mission becomes increasingly Gentile. Later Christian estrangement from Jewish communities is a historical development that must not be projected backward as though the apostles had founded a religion defined by contempt for Israel.

15.3 Christ's lordship, civic obedience, and the limits of political authority

The New Testament theological response to suffering is neither political triumphalism nor passive fatalism. Believers are instructed to honor authorities where obedience does not conflict with God, to pray for rulers, to endure unjust suffering, and to refuse retaliation. Yet Acts also insists that 'we must obey God rather than people' when authorities command silence about Christ ([Acts 5:29](#)). The church's ultimate allegiance belongs to the risen Lord, not to the empire.

This balance becomes especially important in an imperial environment where civic loyalty could be expressed through religious honors. The New Testament can command prayer for rulers and respect for governing authorities while simultaneously presenting worship as belonging to God and the Lamb alone. Revelation makes the collision explicit when imperial power becomes idolatrous, coercive, and blasphemous. Apostolic political theology is therefore neither anarchic rejection of civil order nor sacralization of the state; political obedience remains real but bounded by the prior lordship of Christ.

16. Heresy and Doctrinal Boundaries in the New Testament

16.1 The Judaizing controversy: when a biblical practice becomes a false gospel

The circumcision controversy provides the clearest example of an apostolic boundary around the gospel. Circumcision itself was not immoral; it was a biblical covenant sign within Israel's history. Paul even had Timothy circumcised for missional reasons in a particular Jewish context ([Acts 16:1-3](#)). The error arose when circumcision was imposed on Gentiles as necessary for justification or full saving status. In that setting, Paul treated the demand as a denial of the sufficiency of Christ and therefore 'a different gospel' ([Galatians 1:6-9](#)).

This episode establishes a lasting interpretive principle. Not every religious practice is equally serious, but a practice becomes gospel-threatening when it functions as a necessary supplement to Christ's saving work or as a condition of justification not required by the apostolic gospel.

16.2 Denial of resurrection

At Corinth, some believers denied the resurrection of the dead. Paul did not classify this as a harmless eschatological preference. If the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised; preaching is empty; faith is futile; believers remain in sins; and Christian hope collapses ([1 Corinthians 15:12-19](#)). The bodily resurrection belongs to the gospel's structural core because it concerns both the identity of Christ and the believer's final hope.

16.3 False Christology and early anti-docetic boundaries

The Johannine letters confront teachers who deny essential claims about Jesus Christ. [1 John 4:1-3](#) commands believers to test the spirits and identifies confession of Jesus Christ come in the flesh as a criterion; [2 John 7-11](#) warns against deceivers who do not confess Jesus Christ coming in the flesh. Scholars debate the precise opponents and whether terms such as 'docetic' or 'proto-gnostic' should be applied. The texts themselves are sufficient to establish the boundary: claims about spiritual revelation cannot be accepted when they alter the apostolic identity of Jesus.

Similarly, Colossians and the Pastoral Epistles oppose speculative teaching, ascetic rules, myths, genealogies, and a falsely named 'knowledge' that displaces the sound word. It is methodologically safer to describe these

phenomena from the texts than to assume a fully developed second-century Gnostic system already existed in every case.

16.4 Moral antinomianism, exploitation, and divisiveness

The apostles reject the idea that grace legitimizes immorality. Jude warns of people who turn grace into sensuality ([Jude 3-4](#)); Peter warns against teachers who exploit believers and promise freedom while enslaved to corruption ([2 Peter 2](#)); Paul repeatedly condemns sexual immorality, idolatry, greed, drunkenness, hatred, and factionalism. False teaching is therefore tested not only by verbal confession but by its moral fruit.

Divisiveness is also treated seriously, although not every disagreement constitutes heresy. Romans 16 warns against those who create divisions contrary to apostolic teaching; Titus 3 instructs the church to reject a persistently divisive person after warning. At the same time, Romans 14 allows diversity of conscience on disputable matters. Apostolic unity is therefore neither doctrinal indifference nor compulsory uniformity in every secondary practice.

The New Testament also treats greed, self-promotion, and abusive authority as doctrinally relevant indicators of false ministry. Teachers may exploit believers with fabricated words ([2 Peter 2:1-3](#)), imagine godliness as a means of financial gain ([1 Timothy 6:3-10](#)), or love preeminence in ways that exclude faithful believers ([3 John 9-10](#)). Apostolic discernment therefore asks not only what a leader says but what kind of power, money, status, and moral fruit accompany the ministry.

Table 4. New Testament tests for doctrine, teachers, and spiritual claims

Test	Apostolic question	Representative texts
Gospel fidelity	Does the teaching preserve Christ's sufficient saving work and the apostolic gospel?	Galatians 1:6-9 ; 1 Corinthians 15:1-8
Christological confession	Does it confess the true Jesus Christ, including his coming in the flesh and lordship?	1 John 4:1-3 ; 2 John 7-11
Scriptural/apostolic conformity	Does the teaching agree with the received apostolic word and the Scriptures?	Acts 17:11 ; 2 Thessalonians 2:15
Resurrection hope	Does it preserve Christ's resurrection and the future resurrection of believers?	1 Corinthians 15:12-28
Moral fruit	Does it produce holiness, love, truth, and freedom from greed and exploitation?	Matthew 7:15-23 ; 2 Peter 2
Prophetic testing	Are spiritual claims tested rather than accepted because they are impressive?	1 Thessalonians 5:19-22 ; 1 John 4:1
Character of leaders	Are leaders qualified by integrity, self-control, hospitality, sound teaching, and freedom from greed?	1 Timothy 3:1-13 ; Titus 1:5-9
Ecclesial fruit	Does the teaching build the body in truth and love rather than produce destructive faction?	Ephesians 4:11-16 ; Titus 3:10-11

17. Apostolic Foundations and Questions Developed More Fully Later

A useful genealogy must distinguish apostolic substance from later elaboration. Several elements are already unmistakable in the first century: monotheistic worship centered on the God of Israel; confession of Jesus as Messiah, Son, Lord, crucified and risen; the saving significance of Christ's death; the Holy Spirit; repentance and faith; baptism; the Lord's Supper; prayer; Scripture; apostolic teaching; local church leadership; moral discipline; mission; resurrection hope; and doctrinal boundaries against false gospels and false Christology. These are not inventions of later councils.

Other matters were present in seed or practice but not yet defined in the technical forms familiar from later centuries. The New Testament contains strongly Trinitarian patterns, but not the Nicene term *homoousios*. It contains Christological confession, but not the Chalcedonian formula of one person in two natures. It contains baptism and the Lord's Supper, but not a seven-sacrament system. It contains elders/overseers, deacons, apostles, prophets, and teachers, but not an indisputably universal three-tier hierarchy of bishop-presbyter-deacon in its later monarchical

form. It contains Peter's prominence and apostolic leadership, but not an explicit first-century juridical doctrine of a Roman pope with universal ordinary jurisdiction. It contains authoritative apostolic writings, but not a universally published fourth-century-style list of twenty-seven New Testament books.

This distinction is not an argument that every later doctrinal formulation is therefore false. A later term may clarify a biblical truth in response to controversy. The decisive question is whether the later formulation faithfully expresses the apostolic witness or introduces an authority, doctrine, or practice that cannot be sustained from Scripture. That distinction supplies the criterion for evaluating later doctrinal and institutional developments throughout the genealogy.

Table 5. Apostolic baseline versus later questions

Area	Clearly present in the apostolic age	Questions developed more fully later
Authority	Christ; Israel's Scriptures; commissioned apostolic witness; apostolic writings emerging and circulating.	Formal canon boundary; post-apostolic succession theories; papal, conciliar, magisterial, confessional, or prophetic authority claims.
God and Christ	One God; Father, Son, Spirit; Jesus as Lord, Messiah, Son, crucified and risen; high Christ devotion.	Technical Nicene and post-Nicene vocabulary developed to settle later controversies.
Church order	Apostles and coworkers; local elders/overseers; deacons; prophets/teachers; charismatic participation; discipline.	Monarchical episcopacy, patriarchates, papal monarchy, later denominational polities.
Ordinances	Baptism and the Lord's Supper are commanded and central.	Infant-baptism controversy, baptismal regeneration systems, Eucharistic metaphysics, seven-sacrament system.
Worship	Teaching, prayer, Scripture, song, gifts, giving, fellowship, meals, first-day gatherings in some contexts.	Later liturgical families, calendars, vestments, sacramental rites, formal Sunday legislation.
Mission	Transethnic disciple-making through proclamation, households, cities, coworkers, letters, and church planting.	Missionary societies, colonial structures, denominational mission boards, media networks.
Discernment	Gospel, Christology, resurrection, holiness, apostolic teaching, tested prophecy, leader character.	Later creeds and confessions may serve as summaries, but remain subordinate to apostolic Scripture under <i>Sola Scriptura</i> .
Salvation	Grace in Christ; repentance and faith; justification, reconciliation, regeneration, adoption, sanctification, perseverance, and a transformed life.	Later disputes over merit, sacramental causality, assurance, perseverance, faith and works, and the order of salvation.
Eschatology	Return of Christ; resurrection of the dead; judgment; defeat of death; final vindication; renewed creation.	Later millennial systems, rapture sequences, prophetic chronologies, and date-setting claims.

18. The Apostolic Church as the Benchmark: What Continuity Can and Cannot Mean

All later Christian traditions face the same foundational question: in what sense do they continue the apostolic church? Institutional survival alone cannot answer it, because the apostles themselves judged teachers and communities by doctrinal and moral fidelity. Nor can doctrinal profession alone be separated from embodied church life, because the apostolic faith produced baptism, fellowship, leadership, discipline, mission, and holiness. Apostolic continuity is therefore multidimensional, but its controlling norm is fidelity to Christ and the apostolic gospel.

The first-century evidence does not justify the claim that the apostolic church was simply an early version of any one modern denomination. A Baptist can recognize believer-oriented baptismal narratives but must still reckon with household texts and the historical development of later Baptist polity. A Presbyterian can recognize plural elders but must not assume that every first-century office corresponds neatly to a modern presbytery. An Anglican or Orthodox

reader can recognize episcopal vocabulary but must distinguish first-century overseers from later monarchical bishops. A Roman Catholic reader can rightly emphasize Peter's prominence and translocal authority while still needing to demonstrate the later claims of Roman universal jurisdiction historically and scripturally. A Pentecostal can rightly note prophecy, tongues, healing, and spiritual gifts while still being bound by apostolic tests of revelation and doctrine. A restorationist can rightly call Christians back to Scripture while still needing to prove that the proposed restoration itself reflects the whole apostolic witness rather than a selective reconstruction.

This benchmark also prevents two opposite errors. The first is antiquarianism: assuming that the oldest surviving institution must therefore be doctrinally identical to the apostles. The second is primitivist fantasy: imagining that the apostolic churches were conflict-free, administratively uniform, or untouched by human weakness. Corinth had factions, sexual scandal, class divisions, litigation, gift-related disorder, and resurrection error. Galatia faced a gospel crisis. The churches of Revelation faced compromise, false teaching, loveless orthodoxy, persecution, and complacency. Apostolicity therefore means submission to apostolic correction, not the absence of problems.

19. Biblical-Theological Assessment

Because this chapter establishes the biblical baseline, its theological assessment is a synthesis of the evidence rather than a critique of a later movement. The New Testament presents Christ, not an institution, as the head of the Church ([Colossians 1:18](#)). Apostles possess genuine authority because they are commissioned witnesses of Christ; local leaders possess genuine authority because they shepherd and teach under Christ; congregations possess real responsibilities of discernment and obedience. No office is authorized to create another gospel or overturn what God has revealed.

The apostolic gospel is both objective and transformative. It rests on Christ's historical death and resurrection and announces justification and reconciliation by grace through faith. The same grace creates a holy people. Any later theology that makes human merit, ritual performance, secret knowledge, a new prophet, an additional scripture, or institutional allegiance a necessary supplement to Christ's saving sufficiency must therefore face the warning of Galatians. Conversely, any theology that invokes grace while normalizing unrepentant rebellion contradicts the apostolic call to holiness.

The apostolic church is also charismatic without being credulous. The Spirit gives gifts, guides mission, empowers witness, and may speak prophetically, yet spiritual claims are tested. Miraculous experience never functions as an independent theological court of appeal. [1 John 4:1](#) commands believers not to believe every spirit; [1 Corinthians 14:29](#) requires prophetic speech to be evaluated; [Galatians 1:8](#) goes so far as to reject even an angelic message that contradicts the apostolic gospel. This principle is decisive for evaluating later prophetic and restorationist movements.

Finally, the apostolic church joins truth and unity. Jesus prayed for the unity of his people, Paul condemns factionalism, and the apostles labor to preserve Jewish-Gentile communion. Yet unity is never purchased by surrendering the gospel. The New Testament pattern is unity in truth, charity in secondary matters, correction where error threatens the church, and separation when a teaching becomes another gospel or persistently corrupts the confession of Christ. This is the standard by which later schisms must be judged without assuming that every separation is equally justified or equally sinful.

The apostolic benchmark also requires proportionality. The New Testament does not treat every disagreement as another gospel. [Romans 14:1-12](#) allows conscientious diversity on disputable matters, while [1 Corinthians 15:1-19](#) treats denial of resurrection as destructive of the faith itself. A responsible Sola Scriptura method must therefore distinguish doctrines that define the gospel and the identity of Christ from serious but secondary disputes over polity, liturgical form, chronology, or other matters on which faithful Christians may disagree. This distinction does not make secondary questions unimportant; it prevents the genealogy of division from confusing every difference with apostasy.

20. Contemporary Significance

The apostolic age remains contested ground because virtually every major Christian family appeals to it. Ancient communions emphasize continuity of ministry, worship, and succession. Protestant traditions emphasize the

authority of apostolic Scripture and reform according to the Word. Restorationist movements claim that post-apostolic Christianity departed so seriously that New Testament Christianity had to be recovered. Pentecostal and charismatic movements often appeal to Acts and 1 Corinthians as evidence that spiritual gifts remain integral to church life. Independent churches frequently appeal to the simplicity or flexibility of first-century structures. These appeals cannot all be assumed correct simply because they invoke the apostles.

The contemporary value of the apostolic benchmark is therefore diagnostic. It asks churches whether Christ remains functionally head; whether the gospel is preserved; whether Scripture governs doctrine; whether leaders are qualified by character and truth rather than charisma, wealth, lineage, or title; whether baptism and the Lord's Supper are treated as Christ-centered rather than as instruments of institutional control; whether spiritual claims are tested; whether mission serves the gospel rather than organizational expansion; whether the poor and vulnerable are cared for; and whether unity is rooted in truth and love.

The first century also warns against nostalgia. Apostolic churches needed correction because human sin operated inside Christian communities from the beginning. The proper response to later corruption is therefore not a simplistic slogan that reproduces only selected first-century features, but a comprehensive return to the apostolic Word: gospel, doctrine, worship, holiness, discipline, mission, love, suffering, and hope together.

21. Genealogical Summary

Field	Apostolic baseline
Parent tradition	No prior Christian denomination. Historical religious matrix: Second Temple Judaism; immediate community: the messianic movement gathered by Jesus and constituted publicly through the resurrection witness and Pentecost.
Approximate emergence	c. AD 30-33 for the post-resurrection, Pentecost-empowered church; first-century development through c. AD 100.
Geographical origin	Jerusalem and Judea, expanding to Samaria, Syria, Asia Minor, Greece, Rome, and other regions.
Principal actors	Jesus Christ; the Twelve, especially Peter and John; James the brother of Jesus; Stephen and Philip; Barnabas; Paul; numerous male and female coworkers, household leaders, elders, deacons, prophets, teachers, and evangelists.
Immediate trigger	The ministry, death, resurrection, ascension, and commissioning of Jesus, followed by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.
Deeper causes / theological claims	Fulfillment of Israel's Scriptures and messianic hope; resurrection of Jesus; gift of the Spirit; command to make disciples of all nations; conviction that forgiveness and salvation are proclaimed in Christ.
Authority structure	Christ as head; commissioned apostles as foundational witnesses; Israel's Scriptures; apostolic teaching and emerging apostolic writings; local elders/overseers and deacons; tested charismatic ministries.
Principal doctrinal distinctives	Jesus as crucified and risen Lord and Messiah; salvation by God's grace received through repentant faith; gift of the Spirit; baptism; Lord's Supper; resurrection hope; holiness; transethnic people of God; mission.
Immediate branches	No later denominational branches yet in the proper sense. The first century contains diverse local churches and significant Jewish-Gentile tensions, but not the later Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant families.
Later descendants	All later Christian communions, denominations, reform movements, restorationist groups, and Christian-derived religions claim some relation to this apostolic root, whether by succession, doctrinal continuity, reform, recovery, restoration, or new revelation.
Present-day presence	The apostolic texts remain the foundational canonical sources for global Christianity and the primary historical record to which later churches appeal when defining apostolicity.
Major biblical questions raised	What constitutes the true gospel? What authority belongs uniquely to Christ and the apostles? How should local churches be governed? What is baptism? What is the Lord's Supper? How should prophecy and spiritual gifts be tested? What distinguishes legitimate diversity from false teaching?

22. Conclusion and Transition: From Apostolic Witness to Post-Apostolic Development

By the close of the first century, Christianity had traveled an extraordinary distance from the upper room in Jerusalem. What began as a Jewish messianic movement centered on the crucified and risen Jesus had become a network of transethnic assemblies spread across the Roman world. Those churches confessed one Lord, received one apostolic gospel, practiced baptism and the Lord's Supper, prayed and worshiped, appointed local leaders, shared resources, exercised spiritual gifts, disciplined sin, endured persecution, and sent missionaries. Their unity was real but not institutional uniformity; their structures were ordered but still developing; their doctrine possessed firm boundaries even before later conciliar terminology; and their writings were becoming the enduring textual form of apostolic authority.

Several conclusions must therefore govern the genealogy that follows. First, later institutional antiquity cannot by itself prove apostolic fidelity. The apostles themselves judged teachers by gospel, Christology, holiness, and conformity to received truth. Second, later doctrinal terminology cannot simply be projected backward, even where it may ultimately articulate biblical truth. Third, restoration claims must recover the whole apostolic pattern rather than selected practices. Fourth, charisma, miracle, prophecy, or claimed revelation never exempts a teacher from apostolic testing. Fifth, legitimate Christian unity is unity under Christ and his truth, not institutional unity at any cost.

The next historical problem arose precisely because the first generation could not remain forever. The eyewitness apostles died. Churches multiplied across vast distances. Heresies became more organized. Persecution forced questions of identity and discipline. Christians needed to preserve apostolic teaching when living apostles were no longer available to settle disputes directly. In the second and third centuries, bishops, succession lists, rules of faith, creedal summaries, sacramental language, and increasingly defined canonical collections would become crucial instruments in the struggle to preserve continuity. Those developments contained both genuine efforts to defend apostolic truth and important institutional and doctrinal changes. The next chapter therefore turns from the apostolic foundation to the post-apostolic transition: how the churches moved from living apostolic authority toward the structures increasingly described as the early catholic church.

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