

EBERHARD ARNOLD

# THE EARLY

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IN THEIR OWN WORDS

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# CHRISTIANS



A SOURCE BOOK OF ORIGINAL WRITINGS INCLUDING TEXTS BY

- TERTULLIAN
- HERMAS
- JUSTIN
- IGNATIUS
- POLYCARP
- IRENAEUS
- ORIGEN
- CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA
- EXTRA-BIBLICAL SAYINGS OF JESUS



## THE EARLY CHRISTIANS



# THE EARLY CHRISTIANS

*In Their Own Words*

*Selected and Edited by*

EBERHARD ARNOLD



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Published by Plough Publishing House  
Walden, New York  
Robertsbridge, England  
Elsmore, Australia  
www.plough.com

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Originally published as *Die ersten Christen nach dem Tode der Apostel* by Eberhard Arnold Verlag, Sannerz, and Hochweg Verlag, Berlin, 1926.

In the original German edition, translations of Greek and Latin texts are by the author; the textual sources, as well as scholarly works that the author consulted, are listed in the bibliography. The English text here was translated from the German edition by Eberhard C.H. Arnold, Winifred Hiddel, and Miriam Potts.

First English Edition (hardcover) 1970  
Second Edition (hardcover) 1972  
Third Edition (softcover) 1979  
Fourth Edition (hardcover) 1997

ISBN 13: 978-0-87486-596-7  
2020 19 18 17 16 15 14 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.  
Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data from the 1997 edition of this title:

Ersten Christen nach dem Tode der Apostel. English.  
The early Christians in their own words / selected and edited by  
Eberhard Arnold. -- [Rev. ed.]  
p. cm.  
Previous eds. entered under: Arnold, Eberhard, 1883-1935.  
Translated and edited by the Society of Brothers, Rifton, N.Y.  
Includes bibliographical references (p. ) and index.  
ISBN 0-87486-095-4  
1. Christian literature, Early. I. Arnold, Eberhard, 1883-1935.  
II. Bruderhof Communities. III. Title.  
BR63.A713 1998  
270.1--dc21

97-36585  
CIP

Printed in the USA

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## *How to Use This Book*

ASIDE FROM CHAPTER 1, which is an overview of the early Christian era by Eberhard Arnold, each chapter consists of passages by the early believers themselves, and by non-Christian contemporaries.

ARNOLD'S EXTENDED NOTES on many of the passages appear at the end of each chapter; typically these include historical details, bibliographic references, and interpretation. To indicate the presence of a note for a given passage, an asterisk appears at the bottom of the text before the name of the author or source.

THE SYMBOLS USED to illustrate chapter titles throughout the book are based on paintings and engravings found in Roman catacombs, as reproduced in L. Perret, *Les Catacombes de Rome* (Paris, 1851). See also Oskar Beyer, *Frühchristliche Sinnbilder und Inschriften: Lebenszeugnisse der Katakombenzeit* (Kassel, Bärenreiter Verlag, n.d.), and Edward L. Cutts, *A History of Early Christian Art* (London, Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, 1893).



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## *Preface*

**H**OW CAN THE FIRST CHRISTIANS speak to those of us who profess Christ today? Isn't the gap between now and then too wide? And even if it could be bridged, why expend the effort; isn't it difficult enough to interpret the demands of the gospel as we seek to understand them in our own day?

Only the reader will be able to answer this question sufficiently. It is our belief, however, that the first believers have a great deal to say to us today, and that the words they have left behind – though rooted in a long-gone era – are every bit as relevant today as they were when first recorded. That is the reason for this collection.

*The Early Christians* is not merely a volume of historical sayings and recorded events; it reflects a faith and way of life aflame with uninhibited zeal and unwavering devotion. For nowhere else, and at no time since, has the world seen a more vibrant, unyielding (and even reckless, when one thinks of the thousands who paid for it with martyrdom) surge of enthusiasm than that shown by the early believers.

The texts selected here were originally translated and compiled some ninety years ago. We are not unaware of many important discoveries made since then, or of new light shed on previously discovered documents by recent and ongoing

## PREFACE

research. Yet we know of no other collection of early Christian sources undertaken with the same purpose and perspective as this book. As Eberhard Arnold noted in the first edition:

We have not attempted to go into scholarly discussion of theological opinions or the results of earlier and recent research. That has been done elsewhere. With this book we want to help those who have earnest questions and concerns to grasp the witness to Christ in past centuries, just as it was given to his followers in those times. The conclusions and results of scholarship and research have been taken into consideration. Without taking sides, we have tried to highlight all the trends which led from living faith to a practical life of love in trust and loyalty under Christ's direction...The express purpose of this source book is to point to faith in God, to the witness of the living Christ, and to the working of the Holy Spirit among the gathered believers everywhere throughout the centuries.

Though his book is thoroughly documented and comprehensive enough to be useful to scholars and lay readers alike, what mattered most to Arnold – and matters to us today – is the challenging legacy of the men and women whose faith is recorded here: an unyielding allegiance to God's kingdom, and an undivided willingness to sacrifice everything for its sake. This challenge shaped Arnold's entire life and continues to guide the movement he started.

Eberhard Arnold studied theology, philosophy, and education at the universities of Breslau, Halle, and Erlangen in Germany, receiving his doctorate from Erlangen in 1909. In 1920, he and his wife and a few others began living in community, drawing inspiration and strength from the example of the first Christians.

*Die ersten Christen nach dem Tode der Apostel* was published in 1926 as volume 1 in the *Quellen* series of Christian witnesses through the centuries. Arnold used the sources

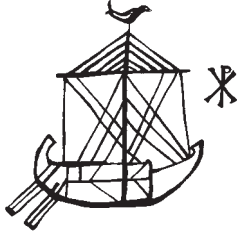
available to him in the 1920s, sometimes translating directly from Latin or Greek. This English edition is a translation of his German book. Today's reader will be able to find full English translations of most of the texts without too much difficulty.

The early Christians challenge us to see discipleship as a path away from “self” toward a wholly transformed social order. To them, this demanded a solidarity in which people of all backgrounds, creeds, and cultures would join hands in rejecting the spirit of the age and giving their lives instead to a new, diametrically opposed cause: the rulership of Christ on earth. In stark contrast to their pagan contemporaries, they saw themselves as soldiers under oath, as fighters in a deadly battle against the prince of this world.

To read the early Christians in their own words is to be confronted with a primal boldness and clarity that sweeps the horizon clean and forces us to take a new look at our own situation. What idols confront us as we strive to follow Christ today? What powers vie for our allegiance? The first believers were a threat to the social system, the power structure, the very moral basis of the society in which they lived. Are we? They sacrificed everything – even their lives – for the sake of the truth that burned in their hearts. Do we? They sold all they had and gave it to the poor, then banded together in close-knit communities where they took care of the weak and sick, and fed the poor. Can this be said of us?

It is our hope that through the witness of this book, our spiritual distance from the early Christians, those first followers of Jesus, might be narrowed; that instead of approaching their texts merely as interesting or edifying historical documents, we might be challenged, even shaken, to examine our own condition.

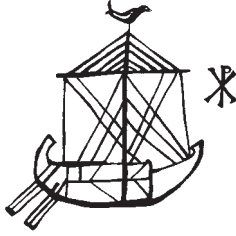
*The Editors*  
*September 2014*



## THE WITNESS OF THE EARLY CHURCH

**I**N THE FOLLOWING PAGES *Eberhard Arnold* provides religious and historical context to the writings included in this book. Beginning with the life of Jesus Christ and the birth of the church at Pentecost, he describes the development of Christianity until around AD 180. His description of the Spirit-filled life of the early church is based on the source material that comprises the rest of the book.

*The ship stands for the church. Its meaning is derived from the ark of Noah, which saved humankind from destruction, and from the fishing boats associated with stories of Jesus and his disciples in Galilee. The mast and sailyard form a cross, as does the chrismon at the bow of the ship. A bird (the Holy Spirit) guides the vessel from the top of the mast.*



**J**ESUS BROUGHT a fresh, new message to the world. It is a message that heralds both judgment and rebirth. It announces a totally different social order: the coming reign of God, which will bring to an end the present age ruled by man. Without God we sink down into hollowness and coldness of heart, into stubbornness and self-delusion. In Jesus the Father revealed his love to us, a love that wants to conquer and rule everything that once belonged to it. Jesus calls, urging a divided humankind to sit together at one table, God's table, where there is room for all. He invites all people to a meal of fellowship and fetches his guests from the roadsides and skid rows. The future age comes as God's banquet, God's wedding-feast, God's reign of unity. God will be Lord over his creation again, consummating the victory of his spirit of unity and love.

In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus calls on God, our Father, that his primal will should alone prevail on earth, that the future age in which he alone rules should draw near. His being, his name, shall at last be honored because he alone is worthy. Then God will liberate us from all the evil of the present world, from its wickedness and death, from Satan, the evil one now ruling. God grants forgiveness of sin by revealing his power and his love. This saves and protects us in the hour of temptation, the hour of crisis for the whole world. In this way God conquers

the earth, with the burden of its historical development and the necessity of daily nourishment.<sup>1\*</sup>

However, the dark powers of godlessness pervade the world as it is today so strongly that they can be conquered only in the last stronghold of the enemy's might, in death itself. So Jesus calls us to his heroic way of an utterly ignominious death. The catastrophe of the final battle must be provoked, for Satan with all his demonic powers can be driven out in no other way. Jesus' death on the cross is the decisive act. This death makes Jesus the sole leader on the new way that reflects the coming time of God. It makes him the sole captain in the great battle which shall consummate God's victory.

There is a gulf between these two deadly hostile camps, between the present and the future, between the age we live in and the coming epoch. Therefore the heroism of Jesus is untimely, hostile in every way to the spirit of the age. For his way subjects every aspect and every condition of today's life to the coming goal of the future. God's time is in the future, yet it has been made known now. Its essence and nature and power became a person in Jesus, became history in him, clearly stated in his words and victoriously fought out in his life and deeds. In this Messiah alone God's future is present.

The new future puts an end to all powers, legal systems, and property laws now in force. The coming kingdom reveals itself even now wherever God's all-powerful love unites people in a life of surrendered brotherhood. Jesus proclaimed and brought nothing but God, nothing but his coming rule and order. He founded neither churches nor sects. His life belonged to greater things. Pointing toward the ultimate goal, he gave the direction. He brought us God's compass, which determines the way by taking its bearings from the pole of the future.

*\* Endnotes for this chapter begin on page 50.*

Jesus called people to a practical way of loving brotherhood. This is the only way in keeping with our expectation of that which is coming. It alone leads us to others, it alone breaks down the barriers erected by the covetous will to possess, because it is determined to give itself to all. The Sermon on the Mount<sup>2</sup> depicts the liberating power of God's love wherever it rules supreme. When Jesus sent out his disciples and ambassadors, he gave them their work assignment, without which no one can live as he did:<sup>3</sup> in word and deed we are to proclaim the imminence of the kingdom. He gives authority to overcome diseases and demonic powers. To oppose the order of the present world epoch and focus on the task at hand we must abandon all possessions and take to the road. The hallmark of his mission is readiness to become a target for people's hatred in the fierce battle of spirits, and finally, to be killed in action.

**A**FTER JESUS WAS KILLED the small band of his disciples in Jerusalem proclaimed that though their leader had been shamefully executed, he was indeed still alive and remained their hope and faith as the bringer of the kingdom.<sup>4</sup> The present age, they said, was nearing its end. Humankind was now faced with the greatest turning point ever in its history, and Jesus would appear a second time in glory and authority. God's rule over the whole earth would be ensured.

The powers of this future kingdom could already be seen at work in the early church. People were transformed and made new. The strength to die inherent in Jesus' sacrifice led them to heroically accept the way of martyrdom, and more, it assured them of victory over demonic powers of wickedness and disease. He who rose to life through the Spirit had a strength



that exploded in an utterly new attitude to life: love to one's brother and love to one's enemy, the divine justice of the coming kingdom. Through this new spirit, property was abolished in the early church. Material possessions were handed over to the ambassadors for the poor of the church. Through the presence and power of the Spirit and through faith in the Messiah, this band of followers became a brotherhood.

This was their immense task: to challenge the people of Israel in the face of imminent catastrophe, and more, to shake the whole of humankind from its sleep in the face of certain destruction, so that all might prepare for the coming of the kingdom. The poorest people suddenly knew that their new faith was the determining factor, the decisive moment in the history of humankind. For this tremendous certainty, the early church gained strength in daily reading of the Jewish Law and Prophets; in baptism, the symbol of faith given by the prophet John and Jesus himself to represent submitting to death in a watery grave in order to be reborn; in communal meals celebrated to proclaim the death of Jesus; and in collective prayer to God and Christ. The words and stories of Jesus and all that they demanded were told over and over again. Thus the original sources for the Gospels and New Testament are to be found in the early church.

"Lord, come!" was their age-old cry of faith and infinite longing, preserved in the original Aramaic from this early time of first love. He who was executed and buried was not dead. He drew near as the sovereign living one. The Messiah Jesus rose from the dead and his kingdom will break in at his second coming! That was the message of his first followers, such as Peter, who led the church at Jerusalem at its founding.

Friends of Stephen, the first martyr, took this message from Jerusalem to Antioch. As a consequence, this nearby metropolis

of Greek culture led the way in the work of the apostles, even before Ephesus in Asia Minor, or Corinth, or Rome. It was in Antioch that their enemies coined the name “Christians” for the “people of the Christ.” The striking aptness of this name, used to distinguish those who belonged to Christ’s messianic future, surely did not remain unnoticed. As apostles of the Spirit, Paul and Barnabas were sent from Antioch to the Gentiles. Were they the first new apostles after the original circle of twelve?

Paul’s witness – his proclamation of the cross, the resurrection, and the freedom and unity of the Spirit – powerfully influenced the church. His work extended over a large part of the known world. It was Paul who, under the leadership of the church in Jerusalem, instituted a standard of behavior that united both Jewish and Gentile Christians.<sup>5</sup> The barring of sexual license, the rejection of idols as demonic, and the repudiation of the use of blood in food constituted the practical unity between Jews and Gentiles. This unity was significant because it meant a powerful victory over the rule of demons, now struck to the core and exposed as impurity, idolatry, and blood-lust. The Acts of the Apostles contains the charter of this agreement.

No definite year marks the boundary between the earliest period of the church, led by the apostles, and the following time of transition dealt with in this book. The extinction of the first Jewish-Christian church at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem and Judea in AD 70 gives us an approximate date. James, the trusted leader of congregations in Jerusalem for over thirty years, and its two most fruitful apostles, Paul and Peter, had suffered martyrdom and death a few years before. The sources in this book speak of the time following the death of James, the end of Jerusalem, and the martyrdom of Paul and Peter.

The witness of the first church at Jerusalem and its apostles permeated the following period. Continuity with the original movement that sprang from Jesus showed itself in the retention of certain fundamental elements: the message proclaimed by the apostles, the accounts they wrote about their work, the ancient Jewish writings, the new book of the New Testament, and above all, the apostles' determined stand against the pagan spirit of the existing order. The strong influence of the first church is all the more striking because it (and with it early Jewish Christianity) perished in the two merciless wars waged by Rome against the Jews, in AD 70 and 135, and in persecutions initiated by a Jewry turned fanatical as a result of these wars.<sup>6</sup> This complete annihilation, humanly seen, mirrors the annihilating death by execution that ended the life of Jesus.

**G**OD'S NEW ORDER can break in with all its splendor only after cataclysmic judgment. Death must come before the resurrection of the flesh. The promise of a future millennium is linked to the prophecy of judgment, which will attack the root of the prevailing order. All this springs from the original message passed on by the very first church. There is tension between future and present, God and demons; between selfish, possessive will and the loving, giving will of God; between the present order of the state, which through economic pressures assumes absolute power, and God's coming rule of love and justice. These two antagonistic forces are sharply provoking each other. The present world-age is doomed; in fact, the promised Messiah has already overpowered its champion and leader! This is an accomplished fact. The early church handed down this suprahistorical revolution

to the next generation. Jesus rose from the dead; too late did the prince of death realize his power was broken.<sup>7</sup>

From the time of the early church and the apostle Paul, the cross remains the one and only proclamation:<sup>8</sup> Christians shall know only one way, that of being nailed to the cross with Christ. Only dying his death with him leads to resurrection and to the kingdom.<sup>9</sup> No wonder that Celsus, an enemy of the church, was amazed at the centrality of the cross and the resurrection among the Christians.<sup>10</sup> The pagan satirist Lucian was surprised that one who was hung on the cross in Palestine could have introduced this death as a new mystery: dying with him on the cross was the essence of his bequest.<sup>11</sup> The early Christians used to stretch out their hands as a symbol of triumph, imitating the arms extended on the cross.

In their certainty of victory, Christians who were gathered for the Lord's Supper heard the alarmed question of Satan and death, "Who is he that robs us of our power?" They answered with the exultant shout of victory, "Here is Christ, the crucified!"<sup>12</sup> Proclaiming Christ's death at this meal meant giving substance to his resurrection, allowing it to transform their lives. This transformation proved the decisive fact of Christ's victory, born of power and giving power, consummated in his suffering and dying, in his rising from death and ascent to the throne, and in his second coming. For what Christ has done he does again and again in his church. His victory is perfected. Terrified, the devil must give up his own. The dragon with seven heads is slain. The evil venom is destroyed.<sup>13</sup>

Thus the church sings the praise of him who became man, who suffered, died and rose again, and overpowered the realm of the underworld when he descended into Hades. He is "the strong," "the mighty," "the immortal."<sup>14</sup> He comes in person to his church, escorted by the hosts of his angel princes. Now the

heavens are opened to the believers. They see and hear the choir of singing angels. Christ's coming to the church in the power of the Spirit, here and now, makes his first historical coming and his second, future appearance a certainty. In trembling awe the church experiences her Lord and sovereign as a guest: "Now he has appeared among us!"<sup>15</sup> Some see him sitting in person at the table to share their meal. Celebrating the Lord's Supper is for them a foretaste of the future wedding feast.

The Holy Spirit has descended upon them, and grace has entered their hearts. Their fellowship is complete and perfect. The powers of God penetrate the gathered church. Gripped by the Spirit, filled with the Spirit, they become one with Christ. Ulysses, tied to the mast of the ship, sailed past the Sirens unscathed. In the same way, only those who become one with the Crucified by being tied, as it were, to his cross, can withstand the lures of this storm-tossed world and the violent passions of this age.<sup>16</sup>

**T**HE TRIALS OF ALL the Greek heroes, however, cannot match the intensity of this spiritual battle. By becoming one with the triumphant Christ, early Christian life becomes a soldier's life, sure of victory over the greatest enemy of all time in the bitter struggle with the dark powers of this world. Murderous weapons, amulets, and magic spells are of no use in this war. Nor will people look to water, oil, incense, burning lamps, music, or even the symbol of the cross to gain victory over demonic powers, as long as they truly believe in the name of Jesus, the power of his spirit, his life in history, and his suprahistorical victory. Whenever the believers found unity in their meetings, especially when they celebrated baptism

or the Lord's Supper and "lovemeal," the power of Christ's presence was indisputable: sick bodies were healed, demons were driven out, and sins were forgiven. As people turned away from their past wrongs and were freed from all their weaknesses, they could be certain of resurrection and eternal life.

At that time the holy nature of baptism and the Lord's Supper required no ecclesiastical forms. Outwardly, baptism was much more like a simple bath than a church rite, and the Lord's Supper more like an ordinary mealtime.<sup>17</sup> At these times the gathered church heard the apostolic confession of faith and readings from Jewish prophetic writings, the Lord's Sayings, and the Gospels. Spirit-filled witnesses gave testimonies, and the believers called upon Christ in prayer, offered gifts, and sang hymns in praise of God and Christ. God responded with the coming of the Spirit, the coming of the Christ.

The gifts presented reflected the gratitude and devotion of the community.<sup>18</sup> The first fruits of all crops and earnings—"much or little"—were contributed even by those who had nothing, who had to suffer privation in order to make these offerings of gratitude and love. The leader of the meeting received the gifts of fruit, fowl, flowers, grapes, wine, and bread that each one brought to the table. Then they washed their hands. The festive elements for the Lord's Supper were separated from the rest: the loaves were placed in three or five rows on the table and wine was poured into the cup. At times it was mixed with water.<sup>19</sup> The food enjoyed at the common meal, to which the bread and wine belonged as a solemn crowning, was a visible thanks-offering that joined the prayers offered from surrendered hearts. During the meal the believers partook of all foods, thanking and praising God for all they ate.<sup>20</sup>

In this manner the lovemeal was originally linked with the Lord's Supper of bread and wine. This "Meal of Thanksgiving"

or “Meal of Offerings,” where the gifts were immediately used to feed the poor, the prophets, and the apostles, has no parallel in any other religion. Irenaeus taught that these offerings of thanks and praise to God are the only true and just sacrifices.<sup>21</sup> But the anti-Christian Celsus criticized the Christians for offering and eating firstlings and tree-fruits, bread and wine at their meals while rejecting blood sacrifices as demonic.<sup>22</sup> Pagans and Jews burned their sacrifices to honor God; Christians used them to feed the poor. The food offered at the meal was even delivered to those who were absent because of sickness or imprisonment.<sup>23</sup>

The spirit of Christ translates love of God into divine service of love to others. Whoever serves the poor, the destitute, the downtrodden, serves Christ himself, for God is near to them. To be loved by God means to love God and one’s neighbor: community with God becomes community with one another. So out of the expectation of the coming kingdom, life and service in the church take shape. Faith in that which is coming unites the believers in one common will and brings about brotherhood. This bond of unity in common dedication is the positive result of opposition to the present age.

Such uniting in the Spirit needs no set forms. In the first period, the elders and deacons needed for each community retained the tasks allotted to them, but also accepted the gifts of grace given by the Spirit. Although the tireless travels of the apostles and prophets helped to strengthen the unity between the communities, the consciousness of being one was created solely by the one God, one Lord, one Spirit, one faith, one baptism, one body and soul given to all.

Through the Spirit, this oneness resulted in an equality that had its roots in God alone. Just as alienation from God is common to all, so the Spirit bestows his divine gift equally and totally on all. Those gripped by God see all inequality as a

powerful incentive to become brothers and sisters in perfect love. The early Christians, united in purpose through the one Spirit, were “brothers” and “sisters” because they were all “consecrated ones,” “saints,” “the elect,” and “believers.” The same neediness, guilt, and smallness made them all “poor,” a name frequently used for them in the earliest times because their belief in God and their attitude to temporal goods was regarded as poverty.<sup>24</sup>

Because the early Christians recognized their equality in poverty and in grace, their message was simple. It reached the most depraved criminal as well as the most uneducated laborer or slave, calling each one to complete healing. To the deepest thinker it gave ultimate revelation. The unveiling of God’s mysteries is a gift bestowed in simple clarity. Jesus Christ is the revelation of God. By disclosing his nature, the physician Jesus heals the sick as well as the sinners.

Whoever receives his spirit and becomes a new man or woman by virtue of the second birth is free and confident, radiant and serene, invested with a power which makes feasible what is most difficult and even impossible.<sup>25</sup> In his longing for those old times, Origen cries out:

Oh, that the Lord Jesus would lay his hands upon our eyes, too, so that we too begin to look not at the visible but at the invisible! Oh, that he would open our eyes, too, to see not the things of the present but the things of the future! Oh, that he would unveil to us too that vision of the heart which perceives God in the Spirit through him, the Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>26</sup>

The Christians of that time were “worshippers of God and the Word.” Spirit-gripped in their innermost beings, they took their bearings from the future. Their faith saw the depths of God, and therefore was the source of their strength to do the impossible. Even the pagans (as quoted here by Macarius Magnes) saw that



this was what the church demanded: “Only those with faith like a mustard seed, the faith to do the impossible, can be counted among this brotherhood of believers.”<sup>27</sup>

**T**HE EQUALITY ACHIEVED by faith meant that every believer who stepped out of the baptismal bath was considered pure and holy. The anti-Christian Porphyry was appalled that one single washing should purify those covered with guilt and evil, that a glutton, fornicator, adulterer, drunkard, thief, pederast, poisoner, or anyone vile, wicked, or filthy in other ways should simply be baptized, call upon the name of Christ, and with this be freed so easily, casting off such enormous guilt as lightly as a snake sheds its skin. “All they have to do is to believe and be baptized.”<sup>28</sup> About this forgiveness and complete removal of guilt, Justin says: Only those who have truly ceased to sin shall receive baptism.<sup>29</sup> Whoever is baptized must keep the seal pure and inviolate.<sup>30</sup> Such an incredible practical demand, expecting total change, was possible only by faith in the power of the living Spirit, who descends on the water of baptism and makes it a bath of rebirth, a symbol of new life and purity.

The early church made such severe demands that anyone asking for baptism was (if possible) initiated individually into the new way with its Spirit-given character and ethical and social commitments. They learned how to witness to God and Christ. *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, the only unabridged text in this book, contains early second-century baptismal instruction of this kind.<sup>31</sup> Such thoroughness made it possible for the teacher, equipped with the Spirit, to answer with personal authority for those candidates.

Under these conditions any question of infant baptism could only have been possible after the middle of the second century. It is a fact that at the beginning there was no infant baptism.<sup>32</sup> The conviction of the first Christians rested on their deep belief in baptism. Through their faith in the Holy Spirit they were the church of believers that could forgive every sin, because in it every sin was overcome. Many came to the Christians, impressed by the possibility of a totally new way of living and looking for a power that would save them from their unworthy lives.<sup>33</sup>

More and more soldiers of the Spirit were sworn to this “military oath” through baptism and the simultaneous confession of faith. This “mystery” bound them to sober service of Christ and the simplicity of his divine works. In the water, believers buried their entire former lives, with all their ties and involvements. Plunged so deeply into the crucified Christ that the water could be likened to his blood, they accepted as their own the victory of the cross and its power to sever all demonic powers. Now they could live in the strength of the risen one. Each believer broke with the entire status quo and was thereby committed to live and to die for the cause embraced through such a consecration unto death. The new time invaded the old with a company of fighters pledged to die, a triumphal march of truth and power.

The sharp break made through baptism brought the Christian fighters of that time into such grave conflicts with their relatives that households were dissolved, families split, engagements annulled, and marriages destroyed. Celsus launched bitter attacks against the weavers, cobblers, and tanners who confronted young people and women when they were alone. He accused them of persuading their “victims” with wonderful words to leave parents and teachers in order to learn what was good from artisans in their workshops. Celsus admitted that they often achieved their purpose.<sup>34</sup>

During this first period, these fighters, hated by all the world, were recruited from the lower middle class, the working class of freed slaves, and domestic and industrial slaves. It was unusual for people from the upper classes to join the Christian communities, until the end of the first century, when their number gradually increased. They came in considerable numbers only after the second century. In the time period covered by this book, the movement spread almost exclusively among working class people. The make-up of the membership was reflected in the value the church put on work. Everyone was expected to earn his living and to produce enough to help others in want. All had to work, for all had to make offerings so that all might live. Therefore the church had to provide jobs. This obligation to provide work shows how fully the Christian communities shared their work and goods.<sup>35</sup> Whoever was not willing to do the work he was capable of – whoever “made his Christianity a business proposition” – was not tolerated in the communities. “An idler can never be a believer.”<sup>36</sup>

The freedom to work voluntarily and the possibility of putting one’s capabilities to use were the basis for all acts of love and charity. Self-determination in their work gave an entirely voluntary character to all social work done by the early Christians. Hermas gives another indication of the spirit ruling in the church. He writes that the wealthy could be fitted into the building of the church only after they had stripped themselves of their wealth for the sake of their poorer brothers and sisters.<sup>37</sup> Wealth was regarded as deadly to the owner and had to be made serviceable to the public by being given away. The early Christians taught that just as in nature – the origin and destiny of creation – the light, air, and soil belong to all, so too material goods should be the common property of all.

The practice of surrendering everything in love was the hallmark of the Christians. When this declined, it was seen as a loss of the spirit of Christ.<sup>38</sup> Urged by this love, many even sold themselves into slavery or went to debtors' prison for the sake of others. Nothing was too costly for the Christians when the common interest of their brotherhood was at stake; they developed an incredible activity in the works of love.<sup>39</sup>

In fact, everything the church owned at that time belonged to the poor. The affairs of the poor were the affairs of the church; every gathering served to support bereft women and children, the sick, and the destitute.<sup>40</sup> The basic feature of the movement, a spirit of boundless voluntary giving, was more essential than the resulting communal life and the rejection of private property. In the early church the spontaneity of genuine love merged private property into a communism of love. This same urge of love later made Christian women of rank give away their property and become beggars. The pagans deplored the fact that instead of commanding respect by means of their wealth, these women became truly pitiful creatures, knocking at doors of houses much less respected than their own had been.<sup>41</sup> To help others, the Christians took the hardest privations upon themselves. Nor did they limit their works of love to fellow believers.<sup>42</sup> Even Emperor Julian had to admit that "the godless Galileans feed our poor in addition to their own."<sup>43</sup>

According to Christians, the private ownership of property sprang from the primordial sin of man: it was the result of covetous sin. However necessary property might be for life in the present demonic epoch, the Christian could not cling to it. The private larder or storeroom had to be put at the disposal of guests and wanderers just as much as the common treasury.<sup>44</sup> Nor could anybody evade the obligation to extend hospitality. In this way each congregation reached out far beyond its own community.

But in other ways too the communities helped their brothers and sisters in different places. In very early times the church at Rome enjoyed high esteem in all Christian circles because it “presided in works of love.”<sup>45</sup> The rich capital city was able to send help in all directions, whereas the poorer Jerusalem had to accept support from other churches in order to meet the needs of the crowds of pilgrims that thronged its streets. Within its own city, the relatively small church at Rome gave regular support to fifteen hundred distressed persons in the year AD 250.<sup>46</sup>

Even in the smallest church community, the overseer had to be a friend of the poor,<sup>47</sup> and there was at least one widow responsible to see to it, day and night, that no sick or needy person was neglected.<sup>48</sup> The deacon was responsible to find and help the poor and to impress on the rich the need to do their utmost. Deacons also served at table.<sup>49</sup> There was no excuse for anyone because he had not learned or was unable to do this service.<sup>50</sup> Everybody was expected to go street by street, looking for the poorest dwellings of strangers. As a result, Christians spent more money in the streets than the followers of other religions spent in their temples.<sup>51</sup> Working for the destitute was a distinguishing mark of the first Christians.

Everyone was equally respected, equally judged, and equally called. The result was equality and fellowship in everything: the same rights, the same obligation to work, and the same opportunities. All this led to a preference for a simple standard of living. Even the spirit-bearers and leaders who were cared for by the church could not expect any more than the simplest fare of the poor. The mutual respect among these early Christians bore fruit in a “socialistic” solidarity rooted in a love that sprang from the belief that all people are born equal.

The rank afforded by property and profession is incompatible

with such fellowship and simplicity, and repugnant to it. For that reason alone, the early Christians had an aversion to any high judicial position or commission in the army.<sup>52</sup> They found it impossible to take responsibility for any penalty or imprisonment, any disfranchisement, any judgment over life or death, or the execution of any death sentence pronounced by martial or criminal courts. Other trades and professions were out of the question because they were connected with idolatry or immorality. Christians therefore had to be prepared to give up their occupations. The resulting unemployment and threat of hunger would be no more frightening than violent death by martyrdom.<sup>53</sup>

Underpinning these practical consequences was unity of word and deed. A pattern of daily life emerged that was consistent with the message that the Christians proclaimed. Most astounding to the outside observer was the extent to which poverty was overcome in the vicinity of the communities, through voluntary works of love. It had nothing to do with the more or less compulsory social welfare of the state.

Chastity before marriage, absolute faithfulness in marriage, and strict monogamy were equally tangible changes. In the beginning this was expressed most clearly in the demand that brothers in responsible positions should have only one wife. The foundation for Christian marriage was purely religious: marriage was seen as a symbol of the relationship of the one God with his one people, the one Christ with his one church.

From then on, a completely different humanity was in the making. This shows itself most clearly in the religious foundation of the family, which is the starting point of every society and fellowship, and in the movement toward a communism of love, which is the predominant tendency of all creation. The new people, called out and set apart by God, are deeply linked

