



PRESENT DAY TRUTH

The Original Christians — What the First Church Really Looked Like

"And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch."

— Acts 11:26

"Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls."

— Jeremiah 6:16

THE FIRST-CENTURY CHURCH · FROM THE BOOK OF ACTS & THE HISTORIANS OF THE ERA · SCRIPTURE: KJV

Nearly two and a half billion people today call themselves "Christian" — across tens of thousands of denominations. But the name was coined only once, in one city, to describe one particular kind of people. This pamphlet lays out, straight from the book of Acts and from Roman-era historians, what the original Christians actually believed and practiced. One request: read honestly, then compare. **"Prove all things; hold fast that which is good"** (1 Thessalonians 5:21).

PART I — THE CHURCH THE NAME DESCRIBED

I Called "Christians" First at Antioch *the nickname the world gave the church*

For the first decade after the resurrection, the movement had no label of its own. Its members called themselves **"the disciples," "brethren," "believers,"** and most strikingly **"the way"** (Acts 9:2; 24:14). It was outsiders in Antioch — the third-largest city of the Roman Empire — who coined *Christianoi*: "the Christ-people." The believers embraced it, because it said exactly what they claimed to be: people who belong to Christ.

Acts 11:26

*"And it came to pass, that a whole year they assembled themselves with the church, and **taught much people.** And the disciples were **called Christians first in Antioch.**"*

Acts 11:22–23

*"Who, when he came, and had seen **the grace of God**, was glad, and exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart they would **cleave unto the Lord.**" — What Barnabas saw as evidence of a true church: not a building or a ceremony, but the grace of God.*

Acts 26:28–29

*King Agrippa, half-mocking: "**Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian.**" Paul: "I would to God, that not only thou, but also all that hear me this day, were both almost, and altogether such as I am, except these bonds."*

1 Peter 4:16

*"Yet if any man suffer **as a Christian**, let him not be ashamed; but let him **glorify God** on this behalf."*

Consider the facts: Antioch of Syria (modern Antakya, Turkey), on the Orontes River — third city of the empire after Rome and Alexandria; cosmopolitan, Greek-speaking, commercial. From this church the first missionaries were sent out (Acts 13:1–3). And remarkably, the word "Christian" appears **only three times** in the entire New Testament (Acts 11:26; Acts 26:28; 1 Peter 4:16) — each time on the lips of outsiders or sufferers, never as a self-chosen brand. The name was earned, not marketed.

II They Continued Steadfastly in the Apostles' Doctrine *Scripture above every other authority*

The first church had no creeds, no councils, no denominational headquarters. It had the Scriptures — read through the lens of Christ — plus the living eyewitness testimony of the apostles. Every new claim was tested the same way: **by the written Word.**

Acts 2:42

*"And they continued stedfastly in **the apostles' doctrine** and fellowship, and in **breaking of bread**, and in **prayers.**"*

Acts 17:11

*"These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and **searched the scriptures daily**, whether those things were so."*

Isaiah 8:20

"**To the law and to the testimony**: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them."

2 Timothy 3:16–17

"**All scripture is given by inspiration of God**, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works."

Their leadership was simple and local: elders (also called bishops/overseers) and deacons — Paul greets the church "with the bishops and deacons" (Philippians 1:1); Titus is told to ordain elders "in every city" (Titus 1:5). No popes, no synods, no clerical hierarchy — a Person and a Book held them together.

PART II — THE VISIBLE MARKS OF THE ORIGINAL CHURCH

III They Kept the Seventh-Day Sabbath *as their Lord had done before them*

The original Christians were **Sabbath-keepers** — not as a Jewish ritual, but as the creation gift of God, kept by Christ Himself, honored after the cross, and preached among Gentiles throughout the book of Acts. Nothing in Scripture ever changes it. (How the day was changed — centuries later, and by whom — is documented in our companion pamphlet, Part 2 of this series.)

Luke 4:16

"And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up: and, **as his custom was**, he went into the synagogue **on the sabbath day**, and stood up for to read."

Exodus 20:8, 10

"Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy... **the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God.**"

Acts 13:42, 44

"The Gentiles besought that these words might be preached to them **the next sabbath**... And the next sabbath day came **almost the whole city together** to hear the word of God."

Mark 2:27–28

"The sabbath was **made for man**, and not man for the sabbath: Therefore the Son of man is **Lord also of the sabbath.**"

Also: Gen 2:3 — God "blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it" at creation, two thousand years before the first Jew · Acts 16:13 — with no synagogue in Philippi, believers gathered "on the sabbath" by the riverside · Acts 18:4, 11 — Paul reasoned "every sabbath" in Corinth for 18 months — over seventy Sabbaths — persuading "the Jews **and the Greeks**" · Luke 23:56 — even after the crucifixion, the women "rested the sabbath day **according to the commandment**" · Matt 24:20 — Jesus, prophesying the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, still expected His church to be honoring the Sabbath decades after the cross.

IV They Baptized Believers by Immersion *buried with him — and raised*

Baptism in the original church was no infant ceremony. It followed **repentance and personal faith**, and it was by immersion — the Greek *baptizō* means to plunge under. Every New Testament example shows people going down into, and coming up out of, the water.

Acts 2:38

"Then Peter said unto them, **Repent, and be baptized** every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost."

Acts 8:38–39

"They went down **both into the water**, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him. And when they were **come up out of the water**..."

Romans 6:4

"Therefore we are **buried with him by baptism** into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in **newness of life.**"

Matthew 3:16

"And Jesus, when he was baptized, **went up straightway out of the water**: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him..."

From the earliest church manual outside the New Testament: "Concerning baptism, baptize this way: having first said all these things, baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, in living water... And before the baptism let the baptizer fast, and the one to be baptized" — *The Didache* ("Teaching of the Twelve Apostles"), ch. 7, late 1st / early 2nd century. Teaching first. Repentance. Fasting. Immersion. That was the original pattern.

V They Met in Homes and Broke Bread Together *gladness and singleness of heart*

For its first two and a half centuries the church owned **no buildings at all**. It lived in living rooms — participatory, joyful, simple — weaving the fellowship meal and the Lord's Supper together.

Acts 2:46

"And they, continuing daily with one accord... and **breaking bread from house to house**, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart."

Romans 16:5 · Colossians 4:15 · Philemon 1:2

"Likewise greet **the church that is in their house.**" — house churches are also named for Priscilla & Aquila, Nymphas, and Philemon (also 1 Cor 16:19).

1 Corinthians 14:26

"When ye come together, **every one of you** hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a revelation... Let all things be done unto edifying." — participatory worship, not a spectator event.

Pliny, Letters 10.96 (c. AD 112)

A Roman governor's report to Emperor Trajan: Christians "were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and **sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god**, and to bind themselves by oath... not to commit fraud, theft, or adultery... and to assemble again to partake of food — but **ordinary and innocent food.**"

Why the Roman report matters: it is *hostile* testimony. Pliny was prosecuting these people — yet the worst he could record was early-morning singing to Christ, pledges of honesty and purity, and a shared meal. Even their enemies could find no fault in them — exactly as it was with their Lord (Luke 23:4). The "church" was never the building. It was the people.

VI They Loved Sacrificially and Looked for His Return *the blessed hope*

The mark Jesus Himself chose for His disciples was not a day, a diet, or a denomination — it was **love**. The first Christians became famous for it across the pagan world. And they lived facing forward, expecting the visible return of the same Jesus who had ascended.

Acts 2:44–45

*"And all that believed were together, and had all things common; and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, **as every man had need.**"*

John 13:35

*"**By this shall all men know** that ye are my disciples, if ye have **love one to another.**"*

Acts 1:11

*"**This same Jesus**, which is taken up from you into heaven, **shall so come in like manner** as ye have seen him go into heaven."*

Titus 2:13

*"Looking for **that blessed hope**, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ."*

Also: a century and a half later the pagan world was still remarking, "See how they love one another" (reported by Tertullian, *Apology* 39, c. AD 197). These believers refused the emperor cult, the arena, and the moral license of their age — and when required, they sealed their testimony with their lives. The Greek word for "witness" (*martyrs*) became our word *martyr*.

PART III — THE QUESTION THE NAME POSES TODAY

VII Not Perfect People — a Pure Message *and a warning about what was coming*

The original church was no golden age of flawless saints — Scripture is disarmingly honest about its factions and failures. What made it "original" was a **pure message and a pure Book**. And Paul warned, on the record, that the distortion would come **from within**.

Acts 20:29–30

*"For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also **of your own selves shall men arise**, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them."*

2 Thessalonians 2:3, 7

*"Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come **a falling away first**... For the mystery of iniquity **doth already work.**"*

2 Timothy 4:3–4

*"For the time will come when they will **not endure sound doctrine**... and they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be **turned unto fables.**"*

Colossians 2:8

*"Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after **the tradition of men**, after the rudiments of the world, and **not after Christ.**"*

The honest record: Corinth had factions (1 Cor 1:11–12); Galatia was troubled by legalism (Gal 1:6); Diotrophes loved preeminence (3 John 9); Demas forsook Paul, "having loved this present world" (2 Tim 4:10). The original Christians were *forgiven* people holding fast to a pure message — and that is exactly what we are called to recover. God's description of His end-time people matches the original profile: "they that **keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus**" (Revelation 14:12).

VIII Then and Now — Which Looks Like Antioch?

Lay the two columns side by side and ask the only honest question: if a disciple from first-century Antioch walked into a modern church, **would he recognize it? Would it recognize him?**

The Original Christians	Much of Modern Christianity
Scripture alone as supreme authority — the Word of God plus the apostles' eyewitness testimony (Acts 17:11; Isaiah 8:20)	Scripture plus tradition, councils, and creeds — often with tradition holding the final vote
Seventh-day Sabbath kept (Luke 4:16; Acts 13:42–44; 16:13; 18:4)	First-day observance, largely inherited without examination
Believers baptized by immersion (Acts 2:38; 8:38–39; Romans 6:4)	Infant sprinkling, formalized centuries later
Homes — simple, participatory worship (Acts 2:46; 1 Cor 14:26)	Buildings, liturgy, and a clergy/laity divide
Elders and deacons (Philippians 1:1; Titus 1:5)	Hierarchies unknown to the New Testament
Christ's soon return shaping daily life (Acts 1:11; Titus 2:13)	The second coming sidelined or allegorized

The point is not condemnation — countless sincere believers today love the Lord deeply. The point is a fair, factual comparison. If the right column describes your experience, the question is not "which church is most comfortable?" but "**which pattern is apostolic?**"

IX The Invitation — Ask for the Old Paths

*"Thus saith the LORD, Stand ye in the ways, and see, and **ask for the old paths**, where is the good way, and walk therein, and **ye shall find rest for your souls.**"*

— **Jeremiah 6:16**

The first Christians never asked anyone to trust a tradition — they asked people to **test everything by the Word**. That invitation still stands. Do with this pamphlet what the Bereans did with Paul's sermon: search the Scriptures daily, whether these things are so.

Acts 17:11

"These were more noble... in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so."

1 Thessalonians 5:21

"Prove all things; hold fast that which is good."

Your next step: (1) Read the book of Acts straight through, pen in hand — mark everything the first church actually did. (2) Test every practice you have inherited against what you find. (3) Ask us for the companion pamphlet: **"How Did the Original Church Change?"** — the documented, fully sourced history of Constantine, the Council of Laodicea, and the Sabbath-to-Sunday story. (4) Talk to God honestly about what you're discovering — He still builds His church in living rooms and in hearts.

*"And they that shall be of thee shall build the old waste places... and thou shalt be called, **The repairer of the breach, The restorer of paths to dwell in.**"*

— **Isaiah 58:12**

Historical sources cited in this pamphlet: Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 10.96 (c. AD 112) · *The Didache*, ch. 7 (late 1st / early 2nd century) · Tertullian, *Apology* 39 (c. AD 197) · All Scripture quotations: King James Version · Full documentation and the complete article series: **originalchristians.info**

Questions? Want the documented history of how the original church was changed — emperors, councils, and all? This is Part 1 of a series. Part 2 covers Constantine, the Council of Laodicea, and the Sabbath-to-Sunday story. Write us — no pressure, no cost, no obligation.



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