

This assignment writing sample is an excerpt from the paper "An Ecclesiology" by Randy Edwards, 2008

The Earliest Church (AD 30 – 90)

The existence of the early church is first identified in Acts 2:47 by the use of the term *ekklesia* (ἐκκλησία). Although the term is found in Matthew 16:18 and 18:17 there is insufficient information about the use of it by Jesus to make any clear deductions from these texts. *Ekklesia* basically meant "assembly" in the first century, but in this case it is not any assembly but a distinctive group who understood themselves as belonging to God.¹ It is impossible to determine who first used this term to refer to the gathering of Christians, but the evidence suggests that very early after Pentecost these gatherings began to see themselves as a community, but did not necessarily see themselves as distinctive from Judaism. In fact, they appeared first to be a Jewish sect, similar to a separate synagogue, who continued to worship in the temple and participated in most of the normal activities of Judaism within Jerusalem.² They make no effort to live apart from the world of which they are apart, and in fact use their location within the "pilgrimage center" to share the good news about Jesus with other Jews both local and pilgrims.³ As such it was characterized primarily by "enthusiasm" and was an evolving community that began with little or no structure⁴ and consisted of people who fully participated in Jewish sacrifices and rituals while reserving some of their everyday meals attracting a

¹ K. L. Schmidt, "ἐκκλησί", *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (10 Vols), Gerhard Kittel (ed.), tr. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 3:505.

² Étienne Trocmé, *The Childhood of Christianity* (London: SCM, 1997), p. 17.

³ Ibid, p. 20. See also James D. G. Dunn *The Christ & the Spirit Vol. 2 Pneumatology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 253.

⁴ Dunn, *Pneumatology*, p. 247.

liturgical component for their private gatherings.⁵ Leadership is provided initially by the Apostles, but as problems associated with diversity arise, *ad hoc* leaders are appointed to deal with such problems (Acts 6:5)⁶

As the good news of the kingdom spread, other communities formed, primarily within Jewish contexts outside Jerusalem. Such communities again continued to reflect their Jewish context; in fact, the early *Christian* communities were largely sects similar to the variety of Jewish sects that existed throughout Palestine in the first century. If there was a separation, it was at best “emerging” throughout this period and was neither clear nor final until the end of the first century or into the 2nd at least.⁷ The growing diversity within Judaism basically meant that the earliest church could easily reside within the broad boundaries of Judaism⁸ without attracting too much attention, although we know that in and around Jerusalem there were Jews who objected to the messianic claims of the first Christians. What distinguished these groups was their focus on the coming of and preparation for the Kingdom of God, their commitment to following Jesus of Nazareth as their only focus, and their unwillingness “to set boundaries as to those inside and those outside.”⁹ This final point was most likely the ultimate source of tension between those Jews who remained as Jewish Christians and those Jews who separated from Judaism.¹⁰ Dunn comments that the original “mother” church is “less of a model and more an example of a church will tend to conform to its dominant environment.”¹¹

As Christianity was taken outside Palestine, new communities again were formed, primarily from the instigation of the mission of Paul. These communities apparently understood themselves as a continuation of the people

⁵Trocmé, p. 17.

⁶Raymond E. Brown, “*Episkop and Episkopos: The New Testament Evidence*”, *Theological Studies* 41/2, 1980:326.

⁷ Dunn, *Partings*, p. xiv.

⁸ Robert Banks, *Paul’s Idea of Community* (Rev. ed.), (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), p. 154.

⁹ Dunn, *Pneumatology*, pp. 245 – 246.

¹⁰ Dunn, *Partings*, p. 153.

¹¹ Dunn, *Pneumatology*, 248.

of God whose origins were found in Judaism, but they no longer carry with them the cultic features which were a part of Palestinian Judaism.¹² Now these communities took on a Greco-Roman flavor which required new codes of behavior and different structures.¹³ As such they would have been viewed "as part of a wider movement towards the spontaneous association of individuals in society. . ." ¹⁴ There is little doubt that they met in houses and that households became the primary focus of their attention and involvement.¹⁵ As such they consisted of the "broad constituency" of a normal household, owners through to children and slaves, and this was in part their distinguishing feature from other associations of this period that formed primarily around economic and homogeneous similarities.¹⁶ Contrary to some who suggest that the early Greco-Roman church consisted primarily of the economically and socially depressed, the communities formed out of Paul's preaching spanned the breadth of Roman society, although its movement throughout the culture seems to have begun regularly within the social contexts of Christians, and this was strongest within the household.¹⁷ It would appear that such household meetings were retained as Christianity began to be persecuted by Roman authorities and by meeting in households, to some degree they maintained a low profile.¹⁸ The gatherings were informal¹⁹ and consisted primarily of conversations²⁰ focused primarily on their ". . . responsibilities to outsiders and to society in general."²¹

¹² Dunn, *Theology*, p. 547.

¹³ Hans Dieter Betz, "Antiquity and Christianity", *Journal of Biblical Studies*, 117/1 1998:10.

¹⁴ Banks, *Community*, p. 108.

¹⁵ E. A. Judge, *The Social Pattern of Christian Groups in the First Century* (London: Tyndale Press, 1960), p. 36.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 60.

¹⁷ Ivor, J. Davidson, *The Birth of the Church From Jesus to Constantine AD 30 – 312 Volume One (The Baker History of the Church)* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), pp. 108 – 109.

¹⁸ Andrew Lawler, "First Christians of the Jesus Cult" *Archaeology*, 60/5, 2007: n.p.

¹⁹ See Robert Banks, *Going to Church in the First Century* (Chipping North, NSW: Hexagon Press, 1980), p. 108

²⁰ Frank Rees "A Conversational Theology for a Conversational Church" *Asian Journal of Theology* 21/1 2007:33.

²¹ Banks, *Community*, p. 65.

As these communities approached the latter half of the 1st century and it became apparent that the kingdom of God did not arrive in the 1st generation, the church again responded to its environment in several ways. Initially “charismatic” in its essence the various communities began to develop more formal structures in the 2nd generation which may have arisen from the organizational structures of Jewish churches merging with the Hellenistic communities.²² These structures may have arisen out of the struggle to survive in the midst of the various pressures being placed on these communities.²³ Eventually the churches were shaped more and more by the political structures of the Roman Empire, particularly following Constantine when buildings modeled on the Roman basilica became the normal gathering places of Christians.²⁴

Thus the form or shape of the *ekklesia* changed as its environment changed or adapted to its new surroundings appropriately. The church of the New Testament expresses great diversity while at the same time demonstrates a remarkable unity. Much of this unity is centered on the person of Jesus, his resurrection and his death. These are the key definers of the earliest *ekklesia*, and it is to these that we now turn our attention.

²² Dunn, *Pneumatology*, p. 253.

²³ Brown, 338.

²⁴ Lawler, n.p.