

## First Century Christian Diversity: Historical Evidence of a Social Phenomenon

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***Abstract:** In light of Ken Howard’s recent “religion singularity” phenomenon, this article attempts to ascertain the nature of Christian diversity during the last seventy years of the first century (roughly 30 to 100 CE). It offers an examination of the two largest Christian movements that existed before the second century, as well as when those movements may have begun and the locations they most likely flourished. The article argues that the earliest Christian tradition was the one persecuted by the Apostle Paul and that later, two breakaway movements splintered off from this tradition: the Pauline and Ebionite movements. The paper concludes that during the first century, of these two splinter movements, the Pauline movement likely preceded that of the Ebionite movement, though they both flourished in many of the same locations. Of interest is the finding that all three Christian movements (the pre-Pauline tradition, Pauline, and Ebionite) flourished in Asia Minor, a cosmopolitan sub-continent which appears to have served as a geographic information nucleus through which diverse ideas easily proliferated.*

***Keywords:** Christianity, Church Demographics, Christian Diversity, First Century Church, Religion Singularity*

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### Introduction

ACCORDING TO KENNETH HOWARD, present-day institutional Christianity is experiencing a sociological phenomenon which he terms the “religion singularity.”<sup>1</sup> The phenomenon consists of a global expansion in the number of “new and breakaway” denominations or movements.<sup>2</sup> This explosion of movements outpaces the overall growth rate of the Christian population in a way that, according to Howard, has apparently never happened before in the history of the religion and may result in a change significant enough to be considered a paradigm shift.<sup>3</sup> In addition, Howard concludes that because these various new movements will presumably be different in nature from one another, a new age of Christian diversity may be on the horizon, harkening back to the diversity of the first century, a time during which Howard contends there were “many Christianities.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth W. Howard, “The Religion Singularity: A Demographic Crisis Destabilizing and Transforming Institutional Christianity,” *International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society* 7, no. 2 (2017): 77–93, <http://dx.doi.org/10.18848/2154-8633/cgp/v07i02/77-93>.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 77, 78, 88, 90.

<sup>4</sup> Howard, “The Religion Singularity,” 87, 90. Elsewhere, Howard notes two genera of Christianity in the first century, which he designates “The Nazarene Jewish Christian Movement” and “The Pauline Gentile Christianity Movement” (Ken Howard, *Paradox: Creating Christian Community Beyond Us and Them* [Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2010], 67–76).

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Howard is not the only scholar who has studied the varieties of Christianity in the early church. In his landmark work, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, theologian and scholar, Walter Bauer, described a number of Christian movements that prevailed in the second century.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, Bauer chose not to consider New Testament literature as a source for his investigation, and he altogether omitted inquiry into the mid-first century.<sup>6</sup> Similarly New Testament scholar and church historian, Bart Ehrman, catalogued “the wide diversity of early Christianity.”<sup>7</sup> Here, Ehrman focused on second and third century variations in Christian theology.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, Everett Ferguson, in his edited volume *Doctrinal Diversity: Varieties of Early Christianity*, concedes that this diversity was “present from [Christianity’s] beginning and continuing even after orthodoxy was firmly institutionalized.”<sup>9</sup> Ferguson’s volume consists of essays from a number of scholars which deal with diverse Christian teachings from the second century and later.

Much like the aforementioned studies, this article also examines diversity in early Christianity; but, in consideration of Howard’s comparison between the twenty-first and first century church, it takes on the task of investigating how Christian diversity manifested itself during that *earliest* period (i.e. from about 30 to 100 CE). This research is important because understanding the similarities and differences between the “Christianities” of the very earliest era furnishes students of religion with an historical foundation upon which to construct subsequent understandings of the social and theological history of the church. Conducting such research should lead to a more accurate knowledge of which Christian elements (if any) were primary, which of these teachings persevered, and which were abandoned. This may also prompt further investigation into *why* certain elements were retained or jettisoned.<sup>10</sup> In short, the research should lend to a greater comprehension of how Christianity evolved from its earliest traditions and the degree to which scholars can reasonably consider those elements paradigmatic to pre-Pauline Christianity. Moreover, this research is necessary because it will help temper assertions that may exaggerate the degree to which first century Christianity was either diverse or unified in its beliefs. An investigation of this type is relevant due to the current cultural emphasis on religious pluralism and diversity.

This article, therefore, offers an examination of the two main movements that broke away from the earliest detectable traditions of the Jesus movement, as well as when those movements may have begun and the locations they most likely flourished. It argues that the

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<sup>5</sup> Walter Bauer, *Rechtgläubigkeit Und Ketzerei Im Ältesten Christentum* [Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity], 2nd ed., ed. Georg Strecker, Beiträge zur Historischen Theologie 10 (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr [Siebeck], 1963), 5.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 3, 5, 81–98. Bauer dealt with those doctrines that emerged in Asia Minor toward the end of the first century, such as those mentioned in John’s Apocalypse and those in the Pastorals, but these doctrines likely did not precede the pre-Pauline or Pauline traditions which manifested in the late 30s and 40s CE. Bauer also treats the topics of Marcionism, Gnosticism, and other diverse doctrines in Edessa, but it is more likely that these emerged and flourish in the second century rather than in the first.

<sup>7</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battle for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), ix.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 2–3. Specifically, Ehrman focused on Ebionism, Marcionism, Gnosticism, and Montanism. The last three of these are deemed by scholars to have flourished in the second century. Ebionism is treated in this present paper as one of the first century Christianities, though it is likely not the earliest.

<sup>9</sup> Everett Ferguson, ed., “Volume Introduction,” in *Doctrinal Diversity: Varieties of Early Christianity*, Recent Studies in Early Christianity 4 (New York: Garland Publishing, 1999), ix.

<sup>10</sup> See also, Arland J. Hultgren, *The Rise of Normative Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994), 7-18.

significant movements. What this article has argued is that the initial movement of Christianity was the movement persecuted by Paul, and that by the end of the first century, two main schisms occurred, namely the Pauline and Ebionite movements. Of these two, Pauline Christianity arose before the Ebionism. Significantly, though, both movements found reception in several of the same regions, particularly Asia Minor.

In relation to Howard's "religion singularity," the implication of first century Christian diversity is that divergent belief systems tend to thrive among geographical melting pots. Hence, something like a present-day Asia Minor may help explain why the explosion of Christian denominations has reached a point of no return. Just as Asia Minor appears to have been a geographic conduit for diverse religious ideas in the first and second centuries, so too does the internet act as a similar conduit for diversity today. Coinciding with the proliferation of the internet, there has been a tendency toward religious pluralism and divergent theologies across the globe as people have access to more information with less external control.<sup>49</sup> If Asia Minor was a melting pot of diverse ideas, then it makes sense that competing forms of Christianities would exist in the same region. Likewise, if the internet is a melting pot of ideas today, then it makes sense that competing denominations would continue increasing. Of course, the internet was not responsible for the "religion singularity" since the phenomenon had already manifested decades before its invention. Rather than slow down, however, the internet may have aggravated the situation by allowing multiple divergent Christianities to exist unhindered in the same (cyber)space, just like Asia Minor did in the first and second centuries.

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<sup>49</sup> See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (1979; repr., Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

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