

FACTFILE: GCE RELIGIOUS STUDIES

UNIT AS 4: THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE EARLY CHURCH



The development of the early Church

Expansion

Expansion was a hallmark of early Christianity. *Acts* refers to this growth in Judea; ‘about 120’ (1:15), ‘3,000’ (2:41), ‘about 5,000’ (4:4) ‘many thousands’ (21:20). Suetonius (*The Twelve Caesars – Claudius* 25:4), Tacitus (*Annals* 15:44) and Pliny the Younger (*Letters* 10:96) all refer to growing numbers of Christians in the first and early second centuries.

It has been estimated by sociologist Rodney Stark that half of the Roman Empire population was Christian by 350 CE. His work is based upon twin assumptions of a total population of 60 million and an annual Church growth rate of 40% (*The Rise of Christianity*, Princeton University Press. 1997). His estimated figures are:

Church Expansion (AD 40–350)

| Year | No. of Christians | % age of population |
|------|-------------------|---------------------|
| 40 | 1,000 | .0017 |
| 50 | 1,400 | .0023 |
| 100 | 7,530 | .0126 |
| 150 | 40,496 | .07 |
| 200 | 217,795 | .36 |
| 250 | 1,171,356 | 1.9 |
| 300 | 6,299,832 | 10.5 |
| 350 | 33,882,008 | 56.5 |

Church historians believe that early Christianity experienced exponential growth rather than mass conversions and that the Church grew by a combination of diverse factors.

The first Christians were Jews, experienced by **public address**, and met daily in the Temple (*Acts* 3.1; 5:12–13). **Private conversations** and meetings of small groups obviously also played a significant role in spreading the faith. These Jewish Christians were, naturally, strongest in Jerusalem and Judea. The first ‘gentile church’ was in Syrian Antioch (*Acts* 11:19–20) and partly formed due to **persecution** (*Acts* 8:1–5 & 11:19–20). **Personal commitment** of Christians helped the Church to grow.

There were some **organized missionary tours** (e.g. Paul & Barnabas) to new areas. The apostles helped organize new Christian groups (e.g. appointing elders – *Acts* 14:23). Initially, Paul preached in local synagogues; for example in Salamis (*Acts* 13:5), Pisidian Antioch (*Acts* 13:14) and Iconium (*Acts* 14:1). Perhaps surprisingly, general early Christian expansion was rather less planned and more haphazard than previously assumed.

‘**God-fearers**’ were an early target group for Christian expansion. These people were Gentiles attracted by the ‘reasonable worship’ of the synagogue, especially the high moral stance of Judaism. They were reluctant to submit to the full Mosaic Law (esp. circumcision) so, according to strict Jewish standards, they were regarded as Gentiles.

Christian ideas spread by the spoken and written word and this process was assisted by the fact that the Greek *lingua franca* was the most **common language** of the Empire. The New Testament, in Greek, was easily understood by many people. The Roman peace and security (*pax Romana*) aided communications and travel throughout the Empire. **Commerce and communication** always

helped in the spread of new ideas and Christian expansion also benefitted from excellent roads and shipping routes.

Government policy towards Christianity was ambiguous, assuming initially it was a branch of Judaism (*Acts* 18:14-15), and this allowed the Church to grow. Pliny did not know how to treat Christians (*Letters* 10:96).

Contemporary **sociological factors** also played a role in Church expansion. Patriarchal **family ties** were important in the ancient world and feature in New Testament records of conversions such as Cornelius (*Acts* 11:14), Lydia (*Acts* 16:15) the Philippian jailor (*Acts* 16:31-33), Crispus (*Acts* 18:8) and Stephanus (*I Corinthians* 1:16). There are also examples of wives only converted but not husbands, or only servants converted.

There are numerous examples of poorer converts (women and slaves) and a Christian conformity to contemporary reluctance to marry across social classes. There is also evidence of some wealthy converts. Additionally, the Church tolerated slavery as normal. Anti-slavery protests came much later.

Geographical Expansion

In geographic terms, the Church originated in Jerusalem and expanded in three main directions: North-West, South-West, and East.

North-West

Christianity spread rapidly in **Syria, Asia Minor, Greece** and **Rome**. Progress was slower into **Gaul, Spain** and **Britain**.

Syrian Antioch was a very important Gentile church; the base for organized missionary tours by Barnabas & Paul to Asia Minor & Greece. It was also a base for organized outreach eastwards into Armenia, Mesopotamia & Persia. Bishop Ignatius was an important representative of this church.

Barnabas and Paul founded churches in **Asia Minor** (*Acts* 13 & 14) and several New Testament letters are addressed to such churches. Both Paul and John had strong links with the church in Ephesus. Ignatius' letters are to churches in Asia Minor and Pliny's persecution in Bithynia is also relevant. Asia Minor became the most Christian part of the Empire in the third century.

Paul was very active in Achaia and Macedonia in **Greece** (*Acts* 16:9-18; 18; 20:1-6). He also had links with Philippi and Corinth and several New Testament letters are addressed to such churches. Bishop Clement (Rome) wrote to Corinth about 96 CE (*I Clement*) and Bishop Polycarp (Smyrna) wrote a letter to Philippi in the early second century.

Jews from **Rome** were present at Pentecost in Jerusalem (*Acts* 2) and in 49 CE Claudius expelled Jews from Rome for rioting at the name of *Chrestus*. Paul wrote to this church about 57 CE. Paul and Peter were both victims of the Neronian persecution here (64-67 CE). Bishop Soter, c. 166 CE, claimed that Christians outnumbered Jews in Rome in AD166. Bishop Cornelius, c. 250 CE, listed 46 presbyters, 7 deacons, 7 sub-deacons, 42 acolytes, 52 exorcists, readers and door keepers and 1,500 widows & needy persons in connection with this church. There were 100 bishops in Italy in the mid-third century.

Paul's companion, Crescens (*II Tim.* 4:10), possibly brought the gospel to **Gaul**. Congregations existed at Lyon and Vienne in the mid-second century and the persecution in Lyon in 177 CE is well documented. Several bishoprics were established in Gaul by the early fourth century.

Paul certainly intended to take the gospel to **Spain** (*Romans* 15:19, 24) and may actually have preached there (cf. *I Clement* and *Muratorian Fragment*). By 200 CE there is mention of bishops in the important larger Spanish cities and by late third century there were about 60 Spanish bishops.

Christian origins in **Britain** are uncertain. Alban may have been martyred here in the Great Persecution (303-4). Three British bishops attended Council of Arles in 314 and by 400 CE Roman Britain was a broadly Christian province. Patrick began work in Ireland about 432 CE but Christianity was already present on the island.

South-West

Jews from Alexandria in **Egypt** were present at Pentecost in Jerusalem (*Acts* 2:10). Precise details of the early history of this church are missing but it was certainly of early origin. Mark is traditionally credited with the origins of the Egyptian church. In the second century. Alexandria became a leading Christian centre with a famous catechetical school. There were about 100 Egyptian dioceses by end of the third century.

Jews from **Cyrene** were present at Pentecost in Jerusalem (*Acts* 2:10, 41) and Cyrenians were among the first Christians to preach to Gentiles (*Acts* 11:19-20). By the early sixth century there were 6 dioceses in Cyrene.

The gospel also expanded further south via a main trade route into **Ethiopia**. Note the conversion of the Ethiopian treasury official in *Acts* 8:26f.

No record survives of origin of the church in **North Africa** but Carthage became a leading centre for Christianity in the third century.

East

Parthians, Medes, Elamites & residents of Mesopotamia were present at Pentecost in Jerusalem (*Acts* 2:9). By the late second century a church was established in **Persia** (in Syriac speaking cities of Nisibis & Edessa. The Kingdom of Osroene (capital Edessa) had a church by mid-second century. Tertullian knew of Christians in **Armenia** in the early third century and there were Christian converts in neighbouring **Georgia**. There is some evidence of Christians in **India** by the third century.

Impact of Martyrdom

The impact of Christian martyrdom on the growth of the Church is disputed. Justin Martyr stated that Christian bravery at death encouraged him to want to know more about Christian beliefs whereas Pliny reported that people flocked to traditional temples to avoid suspicion of being sympathetic to Christianity (*Letters* 10:96).

Polycarp was bishop of Smyrna, in Asia Minor and the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* is the earliest Christian account of martyrdom outside the New Testament. It was written by an eyewitness, Marcion, in response to a request for details from the Church of Philomelium in Phrygia and includes a record of Christians having a meal for the dead and the formation of a martyr's calendar (17.1–18.3). His death is also recorded by Eusebius (*HE* 4.15)

Polycarp was martyred at the age of 86 though the date is uncertain. Eusebius gives 167–8 CE yet in the proconsulship of Statius Quadratus which was 155–6 CE.

This earlier date ties in with Polycarp's correspondence with Ignatius of Antioch and with Irenaeus' statement that Polycarp knew John the Apostle at Ephesus.

Both the police chief and the Proconsul tried to dissuade Polycarp from martyrdom. He was asked to revile Christ and say 'Lord Caesar' and his life would be spared.

Polycarp replied, 'For 86 years I have been his servant, and he has done me no wrong, and how can I blaspheme my King who saved me?'

Jews and pagans combined in a mob and demanded his death.

'This is the teacher of Asia, the destroyer of our gods, who teaches many neither to offer sacrifice nor to worship'. He was killed by sword and his body burned at a stake.

Samaritan **Justin Martyr** is the most important of the second century apologists. During the reign of Antoninus Pius (138–161) and founded a philosophy school in Rome. He was beheaded in Rome with 6 colleagues between 163–167 CE at the instigation of Roman prefect Junius Rusticus for refusing to honour the local gods. Justin argued that Christians were loyal people even though they opted out of traditional communal worship – sometimes a difficult argument to make.

Blandina, a slave girl, was the most famous martyr of the Lyon persecution in 177 CE. In an attempt to demonstrate local rejection of Christianity, local leaders tried to make an example of her in the amphitheatre, but she maintained her faith despite extensive physical and psychological torture – much to the annoyance of the authorities. The bodies of victims were burned and the ashes dispersed in an attempt to prevent resurrection.

Persecution

Early Christian persecution still holds a fascination for many people with the high cost of early discipleship often contrasted with contemporary widespread Western Church weakness.

Causes and effects of persecution varied. Religion was popular and communal in the ancient world and communities believed that the gods must be placated in order to guarantee safety and prosperity. The Christians opted out of communal pagan worship, in obedience to the first commandment, and so risked local retribution in adverse local conditions. A local plague, bad harvest or fire would be interpreted as the anger of the gods and the non-participant Christians would identify them as key suspects as the cause of such anger (cf. *Acts* 19).

Christianity was never illegal but it was not a

licensed religion and as such Christians never enjoyed legal protection in times of communal stress. It was a *religio illicita*. There were many gods in the Roman Empire and the Christians were noted for their refusal to acknowledge these gods or honour them. Paul was asked advice on how to live in such an environment (*I Corinthians* 8:1f). Judaism was regarded by the Romans as an extreme and misguided religion, but, unlike Christianity, it did have a long history and was therefore a special case.

The Romans adopted a tolerant policy towards religion, assimilating new gods into an ever expanding pantheon. They opposed any religion advocating rebellion or deviant behavior (e.g. Druids who practiced child sacrifice). There was a general suspicion of religious conversion; an individual's religion was thought to be unalterable, like their place of birth. The early Christian practice of worship in the very early hours of Sunday morning seemed suspicious, leading to common rumours of sexual orgies and cannibalism as snippets of gossip circulated (the 'holy kiss', 'brother and sister' and 'body and blood'). The essential Christian dilemma was to convince Roman authorities that they were good and loyal citizens yet refuse to participate in the official State cult of the Emperor. Refusal to participate in the state cult was regarded as a political as well as a religious act and therefore always left the early Christian's open to suspicion.

Persecution in the first two centuries was local and sporadic in nature. It tended to originate from one of four sources; the Jews, Roman officials, Emperors or mob violence.

During the reign of **Nero** (54–68 CE), in the summer of 64 CE, a fire destroyed much of Rome. Nero blamed the Christians and many were arrested, tortured and killed. Later martyrologies give the total number of victims in this persecution at 977, including both Peter and Paul. The persecution lasted for three years. Tacitus, writing fifty years later, did not blame the Christians but he saw no harm in the executions of a contemptible, anti-social mob 'hated for their vices'.

The Neronian persecution was local, confined to Rome, and not an ideological persecution. However, a precedent set: Christians could be condemned simply because they are Christians. As Christianity was un-licensed, Christians had no legal protection and were vulnerable to persecution at any time, even if they were law abiding individuals. During the reign of **Domitian** (81–96 CE) there

is evidence of further persecution. Domitian encouraged divine offerings to himself and this created a crisis for Christians and Jews. According to Dio Cassius prominent senator Titus Flavius Clemens was executed on a charge of 'atheism and Jewish sympathies' (*Roman History* 67.14). The Christians were called 'atheists' because they didn't believe in the traditional gods.

Eusebius records that the apostle John was banished to Patmos, where he wrote *Revelation* at this time (*HE* 3.23; *Revelation* 1:9). This may explain the coded language in *Revelation* which encourages a refusal to worship 'the beast' (cult of the Emperor).

During the reign of **Trajan** (112–96 CE) Bithynian governor, Pliny the Younger, wrote to Trajan concerning trials of Christians in his court. Both Pliny's and Trajan's letters survive (*Letters* 10:96 and 97). They are dated c. 111–113 CE and are extremely important in illustrating Roman attitudes to Christianity.

Throughout **Letter 10:96** Pliny's legal approach is clear and a number of points emerge. He is ignorant of what procedures he should use in dealing with Christians. Is it a crime simply to be a Christian, or are Christian activities punishable? Pliny executed Christians for their 'obstinacy' (i.e. in denying the pagan gods which everyone knew had made Rome great). 'Secret crimes' could mean atheism, cannibalism or incest. Roman citizens were sent for trial to Rome (c.f. *Acts* 16:37, 22:25f). Pliny set a practical test (worship the Emperor and curse Christ) which was continued in fourth century persecution. Christian worship was early on Sunday morning, an ordinary working day. Pliny tortured two deaconesses in order to verify his information. Unsurprisingly, there was an upsurge in local pagan religion as locals distanced themselves from the Christians.

Trajan's reply (**Letter 10:97**) contains two concessions to the Christians; they are not to be proactively sought out for persecution and anonymous accusations are to be ignored.

During the reign of **Marcus Aurelius** (161–180 CE) persecution broke out in summer of 177 CE in Lyon (cf. Eusebius *HE* Book 5, Cpts. 1–3). The trouble began with a series of measures against the Christians; banned from the local baths and the market place and mob attacks. The authorities attempted to ensure that no Christian survived beating, torture, and prison conditions. Many Christians died, including bishop Pothinus. Christians who persisted in refusing to recant were

to be executed. Roman citizens were to be beheaded and all others were to be sent to the amphitheatre. Those who recanted were to be freed. In June 177 the first batch of Christians were sent to the amphitheatre and the persecution ended in August.

Horrible details survive. **Blandina**, a female slave, became famous due to her ordeal. She was tortured for a whole day yet maintained her faith, was later bound to a stake with three others before wild animals (they refused to touch her), then brought out every day to witness the torture of her fellow Christians, including eventually her 15yr old brother. She endured the roasting chair before eventually dying when gored in a net by bull. Christian remains were fed to dogs to prevent Christian burial, and final remains guarded by soldiers for six days then burned and cast into Rhone.

Later persecutions

Decius became Emperor in autumn of 249. The precise contents of his persecution edict are not known but all citizens were required to obtain a certificate (*libellus*) proving they had made sacrifices to the traditional gods. This persecution was not a direct attack upon the Church, but rather a result of a desire to bind the people of the Empire together.

The first victims were Christian leaders. Bishop Fabian of Rome was arrested, tried and killed by 20 or 21 January 250. Bishops Babylas (Antioch) and Alexander (Jerusalem) were also martyrs. (Origen died later of wounds received at this time. Cyprian (Carthage) and Dionysius (Alexandria) both withdrew into hiding for a time. The persecution halted in 251 with the death of Decius while fighting barbarians and was the most severe test yet of the Church.

The Church faced post-persecution chaos; some

Christians had lapsed, some had purchased a *libellus* by bribery without making a sacrifice, some had died rather than make a sacrifice, some had refused to sacrifice and had survived tortures. (*confessors*) and some had fled rather than sacrifice (*stantes*) and lost property as a result. The question of how to regard the lapsed proved a major problem after the persecution with opposing 'rigorist' and 'laxist' positions emerging.

In 303 Emperor **Diocletian** (284–305) initiated the 'great persecution' which consisted of four edicts; the destruction of churches, surrender of Bibles & Christian writings, the arrest of all clergy (more rigorously enforced in the East), an offer of freedom to Christian prisoners who would sacrifice to traditional gods and, in 304, all citizens in the Empire required to sacrifice to traditional gods.

It is believed that the Eastern Caesar, Galerius, was really behind the persecution. He had previously banned Christians from his army. Diocletian represents the final effort of the 'thinking pagan' to revive his religion. Diocletian resigned on 1 May 305 but Galerius continued persecution in the East until 311.

