

# AFTER ACTS: A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

## Episode 1: The Early Church

### THE GROWTH OF THE CHURCH

#### *Church growth in the New Testament period*

Christ commanded his disciples to take the gospel to the whole world (Matthew 28v19-20; Acts 1v8). The message of the gospel, proclaimed in a pluralistic context, was uncompromising: 'Jesus is Lord.' Paul and other missionaries spread the gospel through the Eastern Mediterranean. There was probably a church in Rome by AD 50, before Paul visited. Paul possibly reached Spain (Romans 15v28). The gospel spread quickly because there were Jewish communities living in most of the major cities. The early missionaries preached first to Jews and Greek God-fearers (e.g. Cornelius - Acts 10v2) and then to pagans (e.g. Paul in Athens Acts 17v16-34). After the siege of Jerusalem and destruction of the Temple in AD 70 the dominance of the Jerusalem church came to an end and the church became a predominantly gentile movement.

#### *Church growth after the New Testament period*

After churches were established in the major cities Christianity tended to spread by personal evangelism. There was little effort to preach the gospel beyond the boundaries of the Empire. The first Christians were, with some exceptions, largely from the lower classes. Women in the higher classes were the main means by which Christianity penetrated higher social groups.

#### *Why did Christianity grow?*

- corruption and depravity of paganism
- radical egalitarianism made it attractive to the oppressed (e.g. slaves, poor, women)
- obvious love of Christians for each other - 'See how these Christians love one another' (*Tertullian*)
- willingness of Christians to die rather than deny Jesus

## THE PERSECUTION OF THE CHURCH

### *Persecution by the Jews*

The majority of the persecution of the church recorded in the New Testament was inflicted by the Jews, who either persecuted the Christians directly or stirred up the Roman authorities to persecute them (e.g. Acts 17v5, 13; 18v12-17; 2 Corinthians 11v24). It seems that trouble in Rome between the Jews and Jewish converts to Christianity caused Claudius to expel the Jews from Rome:

'Because the Jews at Rome caused continuous disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from the City.' (Suetonius, *Life of Claudius*)

### *Persecution by the Roman Empire*

Christians were persecuted because they refused to worship Caesar or participate in the worship of the pagan gods (cf. 1 Corinthians 10v14-30). Christianity was initially treated as a sect of Judaism, which enjoyed protected status in the Empire. Christians sought to ensure that they were not perceived as seditious rebels (e.g. Romans 13v1-7; cf. Mark 12v13-17). As persecution increased Christians endured economic hardship because the local trade guilds operated 'closed shops' centred around the pagan Temples and membership required worship of the local gods.

In 64 AD Nero (55-68) blamed Christians for the fire of Rome.

'To suppress this rumour, Nero fabricated scapegoats - and punished with every refinement the notoriously depraved Christians (as they were popularly called)...First, Nero had self-acknowledged Christians arrested. Then, on their information, large numbers of others were condemned - not so much for their incendiarism as for their anti-social tendencies.' (Tacitus)

The Church enjoyed peace under Vespasian & Titus but there was renewed persecution under Domitian (81-96). *Revelation* may date from this period. The policy of Trajan (98-117), which he communicated to Pliny in Bithynia, was 'don't ask, don't tell.' Christians were not to be sought out, but when accused they should be punished if they refused to recant. Major Christian leaders executed included Ignatius (107 AD) and Polycarp (155 AD). Christians were noted for their obstinacy and refusal to recant:

'But when the Pro-Consul pressed him and said "Take the oath and I let you go, revile Christ," Polycarp said: "For eight and six years I have been his servant, and he has done me no wrong, and how can I blaspheme my King who saved me?"'

Persecution revived under Marcus Aurelius (161-180) and there was a final severe period of persecution under Diocletian (284-305). On April 30th 311 Galerius issued an edict granting Christians tolerance:

‘After the promulgation of our edict ordering all to return to the ancient customs, many obeyed for fear of danger, and we were forced to punish others. But there are still many who persist on their opinions, and we are aware that they neither worship nor serve the gods, nor even their own god. Therefore, moved by our mercy to be benevolent towards all, it has seemed just to us to extend to them our pardon, and allow them to be Christians once again, and once again gather in their assemblies, as long as they do not interfere with public order.’

He required them to ‘pray to their god for us, for the public good, and for themselves, so that the state may enjoy prosperity and they may live in peace.’ Under Constantine (306-337) Christianity became the state religion.

## **THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH**

The early Christians were a despised minority with no political power. Pliny described the practices of the early Christians:

‘They had met regularly before dawn on a fixed day to chant verses alternately amongst themselves in honour of Christ as if to a god, and also to bind themselves by oath, not for criminal purposes, but to abstain from theft, robbery and adultery, to commit no breach of trust and not to deny a deposit when called upon to restore it. After this ceremony it had been their custom to disperse and reassemble later to take food of an ordinary, harmless kind.’ (Pliny, *Letters* 106-114 AD)

Christians were suspected of cannibalism because they ate the body and blood of Jesus, and of holding orgies because of their ‘love [agape] feasts.’

### *Features of the early Church*

- no buildings - they met in houses
- no national structure/denominations - churches were organised locally
- democratic - elders and bishops elected by the people
- practical care - e.g. by 251 AD the church in Rome was supporting 1500 Christian widows and other needy people

## DOCTRINAL DISPUTES AND HERESIES

### *Gnosticism (1st Century)*

Gnosticism was a movement in the 1<sup>st</sup> century which had strong roots in Platonism. Gnostics believed that matter was evil and that the spirit was imprisoned in the body. Salvation was conceived in terms of the liberation of the spirit from the body by secret spiritual knowledge (*gnosis*). Gnosticism led to the idea that Jesus did not have a physical human body but only appeared to be a man (Docetism). Gnostics tended to become either extreme ascetics (denying bodily pleasures) or extreme libertines (anything is permissible).

### *Marcionism (144 AD)*

Marcion taught that the God of the Old Testament (Jehovah) was not the God and Father of Jesus Christ. Whilst Jehovah made the material world, the Father intended a spiritual world. Marcion compiled a Canon of Scripture excluding the OT. The Church countered Marcionism by the Apostle's Creed (approx. 150 AD) and formulating the Canon of Scripture:

'I believe in God, the father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.

He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary'

### *Montanism (circa. 155 AD)*

Montanus claimed that he was a prophet who had received a fresh outpouring of the Spirit marking the beginning of a new age, and indicating that Jesus would shortly return to establish the millennial kingdom. Montanism was accompanied by increased moral rigour, which made it attractive to some Christians. Montanism was opposed by the majority of the church because it suggested that the new age/last days had not begun with Jesus.

'The orthodox reply, as formulated by Hippolytus of Rome, was unerringly directed against Montanism's weakest point, namely its divisiveness.; the quest for miraculous gifts is well (he thought), but the supreme miracle is conversion and therefore every believer alike has the gifts of the Spirit; the supernatural is discerned in the normal ministry of the word and sacrament, not in irrational ecstasies which lead to pride and censoriousness.' [Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*]

### *Donatism (circa. 313 AD)*

Donatists rejected the legitimacy of the ministry of those consecrated by Bishops who had yielded to persecution, e.g. by handing copies of the

Scriptures to the authorities. Donatus was a rival Bishop of Carthage who rejected the legitimacy of Caecilian because he had been consecrated by a compromised bishop. The dispute was influenced by social factors. Donatists tended to be of a lower social class. Their opponents came from the 'establishment' of the newly Christian Empire. The schism continued until Islam conquered North Africa, when it became irrelevant.

### *Arianism (circa. 325 AD)*

Arius taught that Jesus was a created being. His slogan was 'there was when he was not.' He was opposed by Alexander Bishop of Alexandria. A church council at Nicea in 325 AD rejected Arianism. The Nicene Creed employed the language of Greek philosophy to declare Jesus fully divine:

'...true God of true God, begotten, not made, of one substance [homoousios] with the Father...But those who say that there was when he was not, and that before being begotten he was not, or that He came from that which is not, or that the Son of God is of a different substance [hypostasis] or essence [ousia], or that He is created, or mutable, these the catholic church anathematizes.'

### *Nestorianism (circa. 428 AD)*

Nestorius, Patriarch of Constantinople in 428 AD, taught that Jesus had two natures and two persons, one divine and one human. The Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD declared that Jesus had two natures in one person:

'This is one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, manifested in two natures without any confusion, change division or separation. The union does not destroy the difference of the two natures, but on the contrary the properties of each are kept, and both are joined in one person and *hypostatis*. They are not divided into two persons, but belong to the one Only-begotten Son, the Word of God, the Lord Jesus Christ.'



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