CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 57: Converting the Empire: Early Church Evangelism

Evangelism in the Early Church: Did You Know?

Little known or remarkable facts about church growth in the ancient pagan world.

editors

For more than 150 years after the Resurrection, Christians had no official church buildings. During this time, evangelism was conducted mainly in homes, in the context of worship and Christian education. Itinerant evangelists were rarely found in the early centuries.

In Roman society, it was generally expected that everyone would participate in a cult, but few people thought it necessary to believe in pagan gods, like Mars or Venus. The satiric Roman poet Juvenal wrote, "These things not even boys believe, except such as are not yet old enough to have paid their penny for a bath."

At the end of the second century, nearly every popular religion—especially Mithraism—aligned itself in some way with solar monotheism. Thus Christians often talked of the similarities and differences between the sun god and the Light of the World.

Apologists attempting to defend the truths of Christianity sometimes argued with a uniquely Roman mind. Clement of Rome (died c. 97), for example, tried to prove the Resurrection by comparing it to the story of the phoenix—a mythological bird alleged to be reborn from its ashes every 500 years. Clement wrote as if all reasonable people believed in the phoenix story.

Christianity, when it eventually prevailed, often "baptized" paganism: it established churches on old shrines, like the churches of San Clemente and Santa Prisca in Rome. The Church of Santa Pudenziana in Rome is named, not after a martyred Christian (as the legend goes) but after the Roman senator, Pudens, who originally owned the land.

Constantine's famous Edict of Milan, which officially ended persecutions and granted certain favors for Christians, was not an edict (but a letter from a governor), nor was it issued at Milan (but at Mediolanum).

In 250, after over 200 years of evangelistic effort, Christians still made up only 1.9 percent of the empire. By the middle of the next century, though, about 56 percent of the population claimed to be Christians.

More resources:

- Evangelism in the Early Church, by Michael Green, dwells on both the New Testament and later periods. As

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Ordinary Saints at First Church

It wasn't revivals or eloquent preachers that most influenced pagan society but everyday Christians doing everyday evangelism.

E. Glenn Hinson

Pagans and Jews converting by the thousands after hearing the preaching of the apostles. Apologists, using logical and passionate argument, convincing elite Romans to believe in Christianity. These are the images once elicited in histories of evangelism in the early church.

But typical converts in the early days of Christianity probably did not hear about the faith from an apologist or at a public rally. More likely, their introduction came through "everyday evangelism"—through the ongoing life in the local church, the witness of individual Christians, and specialized "parachurch" ministries.

Mission-sensitive churches

Organized communities of faith deserve chief credit for evangelizing the Roman Empire, both before and after Constantine. Imitating a model crafted by Paul, early Christians planted churches, nurtured them, and made them centers for attracting and enlisting converts.

Churches were founded in almost every way possible. Sometimes a bishop, presbyters, or deacons were sent to evangelize and organize a new church. For example, in the mid-third century, Cornelius of Rome was reputed to have sent seven bishops to Gaul (modern France) to plant churches. Other times, churches that had spontaneously formed through lay evangelism asked for a bishop to instruct them.

Most churches had the same goal: evangelism.

"Enlighten those in darkness," intones an early liturgical prayer from Egypt. "Raise up the fallen, strengthen the weak, heal the sick, guide all, good Lord into the way of salvation and into thy holy flock."

Some converts learned about the faith through friendship with church members. Others saw or heard about exorcisms or healings. Some witnessed the arrest of a Christian or even a martyrdom. Others lived in Christian households as slaves or indentured servants. By the end of the third century, Christians had built formal churches near pagan temples across the empire.

However pagans heard about Christianity, they came to the church out of curiosity and stayed because it offered security in an age of anxiety. Visitors heard Christian teachers claim the church was ***the*** people of God. They were told of promises of immortality and escape from eternal punishment, and of assurances of salvation. And they heard about, and sometimes witnessed, the power of two ceremonies, baptism and the Eucharist.

The example of Christians' high moral standards and their practice of offering charity to all, regardless of social status, also made a deep impression on unbelievers. Galen (129-199), the Greek physician, in commenting on those "people called Christians," wrote, "They include not only men but also women who refrain from cohabitating all through their lives, and they also number individuals who, in self-discipline and self-control in matters of food and drink, and in their keen pursuit of justice, have attained a pitch not inferior to that of genuine philosophy."

Classes and the sacraments

Once inquirers displayed an interest in the Christian faith, the catechetical process (something akin to today's confirmation or new members classes) probably provided the chief means for drawing them into the fold. As depicted by Hippolytus around 217, these classes, which led to baptism, began with a preliminary inquiry by skilled teachers, engaging their students in a dialogue designed to point the way to conversion.

Churches carefully sifted out candidates not likely to make the serious commitment, which was critical during periods of persecution. Before enrolling them as "hearers," Hippolytus wrote in ***The Apostolic Tradition***, teachers were to examine candidates about their lives and their reason for embracing the faith. The Christians who brought the "hearers" were asked to "testify that they are competent to hear the word."

Hippolytus wanted to exclude people in certain professions—panderers, sculptors or painters of idols, actors or pantomimists, teachers in pagan schools, charioteers, gladiators and others connected with the shows, priests in other cults, military commanders or civil magistrates, harlots or licentious persons, enchanters, astrologers, diviners, soothsayers, and the like—unless they changed their occupations. He would not let magicians even make an inquiry about the faith.

The rest of the initiation process, which took about three years (or as many as six in some places), primarily sought to secure an authentic commitment. In the fourth century, Augustine outlined the typical procedure for instructing people to faith. After scrutinizing the candidate's motives, the catechist (teacher) would present the message of salvation history, from Creation to the Second Coming. The catechist often had to deal indulgently and patiently with slow or stubborn candidates, repeating and prodding them on.

Catechumens could participate only in the instructional (preaching) service. After instruction the catechist prayed for the candidates, laid hands on them, and dismissed them. (The ***Ite! Missa***, meaning "Go! You have been dismissed/sent," is thought by some scholars to be the source of the word ***Mass***.)

Catechumens were not allowed to participate in the Eucharist, which followed the preaching service. No doubt, the great mystery surrounding this rite, (as well as reports of its efficacy) kept many straining at the leash to receive baptism and post-baptismal instruction.

The sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper had powerful appeal in the ancient world, where mystery cults (which were full of mysterious rites) prospered.

In the Eucharist, for example, seekers were told, one could partake of heavenly manna of an "unbloody sacrifice"—not the costly offerings of bulls and goats and other plants and animals, which pagans were used to. Referring to a Dionysian ritual, Clement of Alexandria wrote, "Come, O madman, not leaning on the thyrsus, not crowned with ivy. Throw away the mitre, throw away the fawn-skin." Then, referring to Christ and the Eucharist, he said,"Come to your senses! I will show you the Word and the mysteries of the Word."

Ordinary saints and country hicks

Formal traveling evangelists played a key role only during the second century."Casual" evangelism, on the other hand, was important throughout the early period.

Responding to criticism that Christians were just a bunch of country hicks, Origen agreed that common folks accounted for Christianity's spread. The planting of Christianity in Georgia (former Soviet Union), for example, resulted from the witness of a captive woman named Nino (see "The Exile and the Slave Girl,"

page 21).

The most famous example of individual witness, though, is Justin. He was eventually martyred for his faith around 165, and he credited his conversion to two sources: first, to the fearlessness of Christians in the face of death. Second, he had a conversation with an old man.

It occurred during his years of spiritual searching, when he was reading philosopher after philosopher to understand the meaning of life. One day while strolling on a beach in Ephesus, Justin met an old man, who engaged him in a discussion about philosophy. It was but one conversation, and Justin never saw the man again. But this one conversation kindled in him, he said, a love for the prophets and for "friends of Christ." Not long after that conversation, Justin converted.

Parachurch schools

Scholars are not sure how evangelistic/philosophical schools came into existence. Most likely they began with private initiative like many of the other philosophical schools in the ancient world. Certain teachers established a reputation and gathered followers. Pantaenus launched the school in Alexandria made famous by Clement and Origen. Justin established a school in Rome where he could present Christianity as "the true philosophy."

How did such teachers discharge their tasks? One of Origen's most famous students, Gregory Thaumaturgus, described his story.

Gregory and his brother Athena-dorus crossed paths with Origen by chance on a trip to Caesarea, and Origen did his best to effect a deep and genuine friendship with them.

Once he had persuaded them to remain in Caesaria, he taught them the physical sciences, then philosophy and ethics, and finally the Scriptures (which he considered the queen of all learning).

But it was his embodiment of what he taught, Gregory judged, that most impressed him and his brother. "And thus, like some spark lighting upon our inmost soul," Gregory later wrote, "love was kindled and burst into flame within us—a love at once to the Holy Word, the most lovely object of all, who attracts all irresistibly to himself by his unutterable beauty, and to this man, his friend and advocate."

As a result, Gregory became the fabled evangelizer, the "Wonder Worker" of Cappadocia (see "Key Converts," page 22).

And so it went: countless converts, by their lives and witness, brought the good news to others on a very personal level, whether in church or in conversation.

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The Exile and the Slave Girl

Two of the least known but most effective early evangelists.

Gregory P. Elder

Gregory the Illuminator

(c. 240-c. 332)
Converted a nation—before Constantine

As an infant, Gregory was whisked away from his homeland—Armenia—by his nurse. His father, it seems, had murdered a member of the king of Armenia's family, and Gregory's family was slaughtered in revenge. Gregory was taken to Cappodocia, already a largely Christian province in what is now central Turkey. There he was raised in the Christian faith.

When it was safe, Gregory returned to Armenia with his wife and two sons. He used his connections to gain admission to the ruler, met King Tiridates, whom he converted out of Zoroastrianism to Christianity, but not without many difficulties.

Gregory's story is encrusted with legend. In one telling, the king imprisoned Gregory for 15 years in a pit full of rotting corpses, and the evangelist was kept alive only because a devout widow bought him food. After killing another missionary, Tiridates became a wild boar. His sister was told that only the prayers of Gregory would change him back. Once Gregory was released, his prayers turned the king back into human form. The grateful Tiridates immediately asked to be baptized along with his household.

For whatever reason, when the king converted to Christianity, much of the kingdom followed suit, and Christianity was soon established as the national religion. Gregory eventually became bishop of Armenia, and he spent much of the rest of his life "bringing the light" (thus his nickname) to his homeland: establishing congregations, building churches, and working with the king to stamp out paganism.

Nino

(early 4th century)
Missionary to Georgia

As a young girl, Nino was carried away from her Roman home by Cappadocian raiders and made a slave in Iberia (now eastern Georgia). Frightened and lonely, Nino turned to her faith for solace, spending hours in prayer and reflection. When acquaintances asked her to explain her faith, she simply replied that she worshiped Christ as God.

According to the Palestinian priest Rufinus (whose accounts are difficult to verify), Nino healed a sick child through her prayers. Word of the healing reached the Georgian royal court, and the queen, who was seriously ill, visited Nino. The queen was healed, and, impressed by the slave girl's faith and the apparent power of her God, she and the king converted to Christianity.

Much in the accounts of Nino's life must be considered legend, but it is certain that Nino did exist and that she spent considerable time preaching the gospel and building a church. One legend tells how,

when her church was being built, one large stone column could not be moved. But when Nino prayed, the pillar raised itself upright and floated through the air to its correct position.

That Nino did convert the monarchs is confirmed in a letter of 334 sent by King Mirian, asking Emperor Constantine for trained clergy to build up the church. Nino was allowed to preach openly for Christ and, like Gregory, against Zoroastrianism. The rest of Georgia eventually followed the royal family's lead.

More resources:

- The Conversion of Armenia : A Retelling of Agathangelos' History by Valerie Goekjian Zahirsky. Honestly, we haven't read this book, told from an Orthodox perspective. But if you're looking for a biography of Gregory the Illuminator, this is the one.
- My Brother, My Enemy, by George Bishop, is an out-of-print Thomas Nelson novel that tells Gregory's story through historical fiction.
- Evangelism in the Early Church, by Michael Green, is an excellent introduction to the subject as a whole.

Links

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Live Longer, Healthier, & Better

The untold benefits of becoming a Christian in the ancient world.

Rodney Stark

Constantine, the first Christian to rule Rome, governed for 31 years and died in bed of natural causes at a time when the average imperial reign was short and emperors' lives usually came to violent ends.

That he lived to old age illustrates a more general, if not widely known, early Christian achievement: Christians in the ancient world had longer life expectancies than did their pagan neighbors.

Modern demographers regard life expectancy as the best indicator of quality of life, so in all likelihood, Christians simply lived better lives than just about everyone else.

In fact, many pagans were attracted to the Christian faith because the church produced tangible (not only "spiritual") blessings for its adherents.

Why Christians lived longer

Chief among these tangibles was that, in a world entirely lacking social services, Christians were their brothers' keepers. At the end of the second century, Tertullian wrote that while pagan temples spent their donations "on feasts and drinking bouts," Christians spent theirs "to support and bury poor people, to supply the wants of boys and girls destitute of means and parents, and of old persons confined to the house."

Similarly, in a letter to the bishop of Antioch in 251, the bishop of Rome mentioned that "more than 1,500 widows and distressed persons" were in the care of his congregation. These claims concerning Christian charity were confirmed by pagan observers.

"The impious Galileans support not only their poor," complained pagan emperor Julian, "but ours as well."

The willingness of Christians to care for others was put on dramatic public display when two great plagues swept the empire, one beginning in 165 and the second in 251. Mortality rates climbed higher than 30 percent. Pagans tried to avoid all contact with the afflicted, often casting the still living into the gutters. Christians, on the other hand, nursed the sick even though some believers died doing so.

The results of these efforts were dramatic. We now know that elementary nursing—simply giving victims food and water without any drugs—will reduce mortality in epidemics by as much as two-thirds. Consequently Christians were more likely than pagans to recover—a visible benefit. Christian social services also were visible and valuable during the frequent natural and social disasters afflicting the Greco-Roman world: earthquakes, famines, floods, riots, civil wars, and invasions.

Girl power

Women greatly outnumbered men among early converts. However, in the empire as a whole, men vastly outnumbered women. There were an estimated 131 men for every 100 women in Rome. The disparity was

even greater elsewhere and greater still among the elite.

Widespread female infanticide had reduced the number of women in society. "If you are delivered of a child," wrote a man named Hilarion to his pregnant wife, "if it is a boy, keep it, if it is a girl discard it." Frequent abortions "entailing great risk" (in the words of Celsus) killed many women and left even more barren.

The Christian community, however, practiced neither abortion nor infanticide and thus drew to itself women.

More importantly, within the Christian community women enjoyed higher status and security than they did among their pagan neighbors. Pagan women typically were married at a young age (often before puberty) to much older men. But Christian women were older when they married and had more choice in whom, and even if, they would marry.

In addition, Christian men could not easily divorce their wives, and both genders were subject to strongly enforced rules against extramarital sex.

To cities filled with the homeless and impoverished, Christianity offered charity and hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered immediate fellowship. To cities filled with orphans and widows, Christianity provided a new and expanded sense of family.. Christian women benefitted further from their considerable status ***within*** the church. We have it from the apostle Paul that women held positions of leadership, as was confirmed by Pliny the Younger, who reported to Emperor Trajan that he had tortured two young Christian women "who were called deaconesses."

Urban sanctuary

Yet the early church attracted and held members of both sexes, and not just because it offered longer life and raised social standing. Christianity also offered a strong community in a disorganized, chaotic world.

Greco-Roman cities were terribly overpopulated. Antioch, for example, had a population density of about 117 inhabitants per acre—more than three times that of New York City today.

Tenement cubicles were smoky, dark, often damp, and always dirty. The smell of sweat, urine, feces, and decay permeated everything. Outside on the street, mud, open sewers, and manure lay everywhere, and even human corpses were found in the gutters. Newcomers and strangers, divided into many ethnic groups, harbored bitter antagonism that often erupted into violent riots.

For these ills, Christianity offered a unifying subculture, bridging these divisions and providing a strong sense of common identity.

To cities filled with the homeless and impoverished, Christianity offered charity and hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered an immediate fellowship. To cities filled with orphans and widows, Christianity provided a new and expanded sense of family.

In short, Christianity offered a longer, more secure, and happier life.

The emotional benefits of martyrdom

More resources:

- If you liked this article, you'll love the author's The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History. Even though it is sociology, not history, his insights into urban religious development, the ramifications of Christian compassion,

It seems obvious that in periods of persecution, church membership would decrease dramatically. In fact, persecutions rarely occurred, and only a tiny number of Christians were ever martyred—only "hundreds, not thousands" according to historian William H. C. Frend. Usually only bishops and other prominent figures were singled out for martyrdom. The actual threat to rank-and-file Christians was quite small.

However, the martyrdoms played a crucial role in cementing the faith of early believers. Persecution eliminated the "free-rider" problem common to many new religions. Those who stayed in the church believed strongly in the tenets of the faith because it was "expensive" to do so.

Anyone who has participated in a cause that demands great sacrifice will understand that services conducted in those early house churches must have yielded an intense, shared emotional satisfaction. Shared risk usually brings people together in powerful ways.

Compassion equation

It was not simply the promise of salvation that motivated Christians, but the fact that they were greatly rewarded in the here and now for belonging. Thus while membership was "expensive," it was, in fact, "a bargain." Because the church asked much of its members, it followed that it gave much.

For example, because Christians were expected to aid the less fortunate, they could expect to receive such aid, and all could feel greater security against bad times. Because they were asked to nurse the sick and dying, they too would receive such nursing. Because they were asked to love others, they in turn would be loved.

In similar fashion, Christianity mitigated relations among social classes, and at the very time when the gap between rich and poor was growing. It did not preach that everyone could or should be socially or politically equal, but it did preach that all were equal in the eyes of God and that the more fortunate had a responsibility to help those in need.

Good theological news

Converts not only had to learn to act like Christians but to understand why Christians acted as they did. They had to learn that God commanded them to love one another, to be merciful, to be their brother's keeper. Indeed, they had to understand the ***idea*** of "divinity" in an entirely new way.

The simple phrase "For God so loved the world ... " puzzled educated pagans, who believed, as Aristotle taught, that the gods could feel no love for mere humans. Moreover, a god of mercy was unthinkable, since classical philosophers taught that mercy was a pathological emotion, a defect of character to be outgrown and overcome.

The notion that the gods care how we treat one another would also have been dismissed as patently absurd by all sophisticated pagans.

and other such topics make the book a quick and fascinating read.

- A newer, paperback version of his work is The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries.
- Stark (with co-author Roger Finke) has given much the same free-market treatment to American religious history in The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy.

Links

- For more information on the world the Christians converted, check out the Perseus Project Home Page. This is

When we examine the gods accepted by these same sophisticates, they seem trivial in contrast with "God the Father," and wicked incompetents compared to "His Son." Yet to many pagans, this new teaching was more than absurd. It was also good news.

Behind all these tangible, sociological, and intellectual motives, of course, Christians believe the Holy Spirit prodded and persuaded pagans to believe. Christian conversion, after all, is ultimately a spiritual affair. But is it too much to imagine that God perhaps used the tangible to influence the spiritual?

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truly an amazing site. More than 70 museums have shared pictures of their art objects. So far, it is mainly about the Greek world, but they are adding Roman materials constantly.

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Evangelists to the Death

It took centuries for Christian martyrs to impact pagan society.

William H.C. Frend

The blood of Christians is seed," wrote Tertullian, a North African Christian, in about 197. "[It is] the bait that wins men to our school. We multiply whenever we are mown down by you."

Tertullian, of course, wrote with rhetorical exaggeration. Pagans hardly flocked to the church after witnessing the death of Christians. Martyrdom eventually made a large-scale impact on pagans but not before two centuries of sacrifice.

The pleasure of persecution

Ordinary citizens in Tertullian's day were not impressed with Christian deaths. In fact, they seemed to take pleasure in the persecution of Christians.

"Faggot-fellows" and "half-axle men" were nicknames of contempt for people who allowed themselves to be tied to a half-axle post or have faggots (wood chips) heaped around them in preparation for being burnt. Christians were viewed as only a sect or school that opposed the established order, dabbled in black magic, and practiced incest and ritual child-murder. They were seen as a dangerous cult, disliked and despised.

"Through trusting [in resurrection], they have brought in this strange and new worship and despised terrors, going readily and with joy to death," mocked one ancient. "Now let us see if they will rise again, and if their god be able to help them and take them out of our hands."

Officials were even more contemptuous, telling one group of Christians in the province of Asia (now Asian Turkey) that if they wanted to kill themselves, there were precipices and halters enough for the job.

We find similar feelings aroused by Christians in the account of the martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas at Carthage in March 203. Inside the prison, many visitors were impressed by the constancy of Christians, but once in the amphitheater, attitudes changed.

When Perpetua and Felicitas came into the arena, the crowd was alternately enraged at their defiance and shocked at their being displayed naked. But no mercy was demanded. Furthermore nothing in the account suggests that any were influenced to become Christians and share their fate.

People throughout the empire were used to watching brutal scenes in the amphitheater, sometimes involving the execution of criminals by wild beasts. Besides, Christians deserved scant sympathy. They were subversive fanatics, motivated, as the emperor Marcus Aurelius believed (c. 170), with "sheer opposition." If they wanted death, they could have it.

Pity for the fools

By the end of the second century, examples of courageous and virtuous Christian living were beginning

to earn a grudging respect among some influential contemporaries. In about 200, the physician Galen, while criticizing the ignorance and gullibility of Christians, acknowledged their "contempt of death and restraint in cohabitation" and their "self-control in matters of eating and drinking and their keen pursuit of justice [which is] not inferior to that of genuine philosophers."

There is, however, little evidence that victims of the widespread local persecutions in the years 202-206 were regarded more favorably. In Rome, Alexandria, and Corinth, where these outbreaks took place, popular attitudes seem to have resembled those of the Carthaginians.

Between 210 and 235, and again from 238 to 250, Christianity received a measure of toleration. But in January 250, Emperor Decius, beset with a devastating invasion by the Goths on the frontier, ordered an empire-wide sacrifice to the Roman gods, following the example of the yearly sacrifice on the Capitol in Rome. Those who failed to sacrifice would be severely punished.

The response was immediate and overwhelming. Faced with the alternative of obeying the emperor or suffering for their faith, the great majority of Christians went with the emperor. Temples bulged with sacrificers. Masses apostatized. Pagans felt themselves morally and intellectually on top. Christian confessors—those who kept the faith—were derided and treated as fools.

The ***Acts of the Martyr Pionius and His Companions*** (martyred at Smyrna in 250) provides a vivid firsthand account of events there: Every effort was made to persuade Pionius and a small band of fellow Christians to sacrifice in the temple of Nemesis and avoid punishment. Even Euctemon, the bishop, had sacrificed; why should he not?

Loud guffaws erupted when Pionius confessed he worshipped the crucified Christ, though the public executioner pleaded for him to change his mind and allow the nails fastening him to the gibbet to be taken out.

But in the end Pionius's sacrifice aroused nothing but sorrow and pity.

Show of strength

During the next half century martyrdom slowly made an impact on public opinion. During that time, Emperor Valerian ordered another round of persecution, lasting three years. The Christian hierarchy and wealthy supporters were harassed and church buildings and cemeteries confiscated. The persecution ended only when, in June 260, the Persians defeated and captured the emperor near Edessa.

In Carthage the most notable victim was Bishop Cyprian, and at his execution on September 14, 258, Christians demonstrated their support by keeping a public vigil for him the night before his beheading. It was a show of strength, a sign they had become a sizable and self-confident minority in some of the major provinces of the empire.

Whether due to the demonstration or not, during the next 43 years, the church enjoyed peace from all but minor, isolated persecutions. The decline in civic values and an economic downturn helped Christianity, and the church's size and influence increased enormously.

In Rome, catacombs such as that of Peter and Marcellinus expanded into great necropolises containing 11,000 or more burial sites. Church organization progressed throughout the empire. Even Roman Britain had its bishops. Once a purely urban institution, Christianity was finding increasing support in the countryside.

Thus, when the emperor Diocletian (reigned 284-305), after long hesitation, tried to destroy the church—

the one non-conformist element in the empire—his task was infinitely harder than in his predecessors' day.

The failed persecution

The Great Persecution of 303-312 affected town and countryside alike. It was carried out to the letter by imperial officials, but many pagans had growing doubts about its justification and success.

First, there were too many Christians to suppress. By this time, many Christians served in the army and administration. In addition, Christians didn't defect en masse this time, and the fortitude of persecuted Christians influenced public opinion.

L. Caelius Firmicanus Lactantius (c.270-320) was a North African teacher of rhetoric who immigrated to Asia Minor and found employment at Diocletian's court. He became a Christian and wrote of events at Nicomedia and in the surrounding province of Bithynia. Christianity was growing rapidly, Lactantius said, and God permitted the persecution of some believers to draw in others.

"Great numbers are driven from the worship of the false gods by their hatred of cruelty," he wrote. Still more onlookers marveled at Christians who would rather die than worship Roman gods and wondered if their own gods were worth dying for:

"The people who stand around hear them saying in the midst of these very torments that they do not sacrifice to stones wrought by the hand of man but to the living God, who is in heaven: many understand that this is true and admit it into their breast."

Lactantius credited "numerous causes being collected together" (including miracles and exorcisms) for winning "a great multitude to God." But chief among them was the fortitude of the Christians when confronted with persecution.

Several hundred miles away from Lactantius's Nicomedia, a struggle of often horrific proportions engulfed Coptic Egypt. Eusebius of Caesarea (269-339) was in Upper Egypt during the final spasm of persecution ordered by emperor Maximian in 311.

Describing the carnage, Eusebius wrote, "Some suffered beheading, others punishment by fire; so that the murderous axe was dulled and worn out and was broken in pieces while the executioners themselves grew utterly weary." But every time this happened, Eusebius claimed volunteers for death rushed forward: "As soon as sentence was passed on one, another from one quarter and others from another would leap up to the tribunal and confess themselves Christians." They often went to their deaths singing psalms and hymns.

Coptic Christians in Egypt have never forgotten those days. They date their era from the accession of Diocletian in 284 as a permanent reminder of their triumph over imperial persecution.

From Tertullian's time many Christians became "evangelists to the death," but only in the fourth century did martyrdom become a serious factor in the church's growth. So long as the empire flourished and the values of Roman civilization prevailed, Christians were seen as an illegal and disloyal minority. Martyrs merely displayed their zeal to a largely hostile or indifferent populace.

About face

The Great Persecution seems to have flipped the scales. After the conversion of Constantine, martyrs became part of a "Golden Legend." In Rome, for example, the Spanish poet, Prudentius (d. 402)

embellished the story of the martyrs with miraculous details of their legendary heroism against pagan governors.

So Tertullian was right after all, though his statements took time to become fulfilled. For him the martyrdom of Christians was the supreme influence that drew people (him among them) to Christianity: "For who that beholds [martyrdom] is not stirred to inquire what lies indeed within it?"

William H. C. Frend is professor emeritus of ecclesiastical history at Glasgow University. His most recent of many works is* The Archaeology of Early Christianity *(Fortress, 1996).

More resources:

- William H.C. Frend's latest book is An Archaeology of Early Christianity : A History (which will be published in paperback later this year).
- If you can find it, Frend's 1981 book Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church: A Study of a Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus will give you far more of the story than we had room to print here.

Links

- The Christian Catacombs of Rome is a well-designed and informative site, with great images and a special section

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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Evangelism in the Early Church: Christian History Interview - Roman Redux

Today's evangelistic challenge is not all that different than it was for the early church.

Robert Louis Wilken

The situation of the ancient and modern church seems strikingly similar: both are minorities in predominantly pagan cultures. The early church, of course, was eventually successful at converting its culture. So the natural question is, Are there any lessons we can learn to help us convert our culture?

We posed this and other questions to Robert Wilken, professor of history at the University of Virginia. He is the author of many books on the early church, including Remembering the Christian Past ***(1995), and he is an editorial adviser to*** First Things***, a journal that examines religion and modern culture.***

Are the worlds of ancient Rome and the modern West parallel?

In some ways, yes: this culture is no longer our culture. It still has many Christian elements in it: the calendar (with major holidays like Christmas and Easter—though even they have been denuded), church architecture, choral music (much of which is Christian), art, and the like. But with the passing of each generation, the sensibility of the culture is less Christian. The feeling of being a distinct minority was very much the experience of early Christians.

But our situations are different in one key respect: today we in the West live in a post-Christian world, in an aggressive secular culture. This culture has known Christianity, and it is bitter toward Christianity; the culture is in revolt against what existed before. Ancient paganism did not have that kind of bitterness. It was curious about Christianity, even incredulous.

But what about the persecutions?

By the time you get to Decius in the middle of the third century, some Romans believed Christianity was a formidable foe. But Porphyry, the most thoughtful critic of Christianity in that period, recognized that Jesus was an extraordinary man. He just didn't want to admit he was the Son of God. He tried to fit Jesus into the divine pantheon of the Roman Empire.

In this issue, we've examined the role of apologetics, martyrdoms, and everyday evangelism. Are there other, often overlooked, reasons the early church grew in this environment?

Two lesser-known factors come to mind. First, Christians created a tightly knit community. There was strong leadership in the role of the bishop as the priest, the teacher, and the overseer (the person who presided over the life of the community). This is a wholly unprecedented kind of office.

Jews had the rabbi, who was a teacher and a scholar, but he didn't have priestly or administrative roles. Priests, Jewish and pagan, were generally not teachers or community administrators. Furthermore, no religion had tried to organize itself across the empire. But Christian bishops of different regions worked with one another. There are no real parallels to this in the ancient world.

Second, Christians had the Bible, a rich book of historical scope and literary diversity. In the Old Testament alone you have creation stories, history, poems and prayers, proverbs, and prophecy. In the New Testament, you have stories about Christ and books of theological interpretation. In the ancient world, there was nothing like it.

But the ancient world had stories of their gods, many of which are so interesting we preserve them to this day.

Yes, but in Christian teaching, you have a person who is human and more than human, who died and rose again—and all this is grounded in history, not myth. The ancient world had stories of gods coming back to life and miraculous happenings. But to talk about such things as if they happened in history, to have a good historical record of such things, that was unparalleled.

What Christian beliefs most impressed pagans?

The resurrection of Jesus was the central Christian confession. This is what set Christ and the church apart. It was a belief Christians were willing to die for. It was a belief Christians didn't soft peddle: the New Testament makes it clear that Jesus died and was buried and rose from the grave. We're not talking about a myth; we're not talking about some new kind of understanding. We're talking about a person who actually died and rose again and showed himself to witnesses. First Corinthians 15 was a key text for early Christians.

What beliefs most troubled pagans?

The strong predestinarian language of the New Testament. Around the year 200, Origen of Alexandria listed all the biblical passages that suggest our actions are determined by God, along with those that suggest we have responsibility for our actions. He did this because critics of Christianity had read in Romans 9 about loving Jacob and hating Esau, for example, and the part about God showing mercy to whom he will show mercy. Many pagans thought that undercut moral responsibility and freedom of the will, and that was a real stumbling block.

What are some of the lessons we can learn from the early church about evangelizing our culture today? For example, should we do apologetics today as the early church did?

A lot of early apologetics was not defense but simple explanation. In his ***First Apology***, Justin Martyr gave an account of Christian worship. He also talked about baptism. He didn't try only to establish a link to the larger culture or prove Christianity true. He also tried to tell people what Christians actually did in worship and what they believed.

Today I believe the most significant apologetic task is simply to tell people what we believe and do. We need to familiarize people with the stories in the Bible and to talk about the things that make Christianity distinctive. Many people are simply unaware of the basics of Christianity. They're rejecting something they don't know that much about.

But apologetics then and now has a limited role. We must speak what is true, but finally the appeal must be made to the heart, not the mind. We're really leading people to change their love. To love something different. Love is what draws and holds people.

What about the tightly knit early Christian community—what can we learn from that?

I think that should be a main strategy of Christians today—build strong communities. The early church didn't try to transform its culture by getting into arguments about whether the government should do this or that. As a small minority, it knew it would lose that battle; there were too many other forces at work. Instead it focused on building its own sense of community, and it let these communities be the

leaven that would gradually transform culture.

How did the early church build their community?

It built a way of life. The church was not something that spoke to its culture; it was itself a culture and created a new Christian culture. There were appointed times when the community came together. There was a distinctive calendar, and each year the community rehearsed key Christian beliefs at certain times. There was church-wide charity to the surrounding community. There was clarity, and church discipline, regarding moral issues. All these things made up a wholesome community.

Did the church strive to be "user-friendly"?

Not at all—in fact, just the opposite.

One thing that made early Christian community especially strong was its stress on ritual. That there was something unique about Christian liturgy, especially the Eucharist. It was different from anything pagans had experienced.

The worship was architecturally different. The altar at a Greek temple was in front of the temple and represented that worship was a public event open to all. In Christian churches, the altar was inside. Worship was something the church gave one the right to enter into.

Furthermore, in Christian worship there was no bloody sacrifice. Prayers and hymns were taken out of the Bible, a book foreign to pagans. And then there was a sermon, an unusual feature in itself, with historically grounded talk of a dying and rising God.

Pagans entered a wholly different world than they were used to. Furthermore, it was difficult to join the early church, besides the social and cultural hurdles: the process for becoming a member took two years.

Do you think we ought to adopt this strategy today?

Yes. I think seeker-sensitive churches use a completely wrong strategy. A person who comes into a Christian church for the first time ***should*** feel out of place. He should feel this community engages in practices so important they take time to learn. The best thing we can do for "seekers" is to create an environment where newcomers feel they are missing something vital, that one has to be inculcated into this, and that it's a discipline.

Few people grasp that today. But the early church grasped it very well.

What practice of the early church do you think would most impress our secular culture today?

The early Christian devotion to a celibate life of prayer. This did not begin until the middle of the third century, but there was something about this that deeply impressed pagans. It was radical. They saw that Christians were willing to spend themselves for their beliefs.

That to me has always been the most powerful argument for the truth of Christianity. For people to give themselves wholly to a life of prayer and chaste living—well, they must have seen something or felt something real, the reality of Christ.