

Why Study Church History? by David Feddes

Benefits of knowing church history (Mark Noll)

- His-story: See God at work.
- Perspective on interpretations of Scripture.
- Laboratory that gives insight and sense of proportion
- Gratitude
- Encouragement

Knowing God and Scripture

- **Shows God at work.**

The Christian faith involves not only dogmas, moral codes, or world picture, but events and actions of God in time and space.

- **Perspective on interpretation of Scripture.**

Many others before us have sought to understand and apply Scripture. We can learn much. We can also be humbled by noticing cases where godly people came up with bizarre interpretations that seemed obvious to them in their setting.

Laboratory and sense of proportion

- Christian history provides a kind of **laboratory** to study how Christians in various eras and societies have interacted with their culture. (Christians have had different views on church music; systems of government; family structure; education approaches; war or pacifism; King James Bible only).
- Christian history gives a sense of **proportion** and shows what's been held in common over the centuries, focusing our strongest commitments on what matters most. It helps to study different eras and different cultures.

Gratitude and Encouragement

- A history of heroism and insight shows how much we owe to those who came before us. It can also inspire us to strive all the more, surrounded by "so great a cloud of witnesses" (Heb. 11).
- A history that is honest about Christians' wrongdoing and error shows how much we owe to God for mercifully protecting and increasing his church despite human wickedness and demonic opposition.

Preaching and teaching

- Church history provides exciting stories and inspiring heroes for sermon examples.
- Church history helps us see when some things entered the church that weren't in the Bible.
- Church history helps us recognize "new" teachings and practices as old, discredited errors. For instance, Brian McLaren's *A New Kind of Christianity* is just a recycling of unbiblical, social gospel liberalism that was popular in the late 1800s before it collapsed.

See alternate possibilities

- History can offer alternatives to present paradigms in our own cultural setting.
- Church buildings are not the only place.
- Fulltime pastors are not the only leaders.
- Seminary-educated scholars are not the only preachers. Circuit riding preachers in the early 1800s had huge impact. Indigenous evangelists in missionary settings have been mighty for the Lord.

Great Commission framework for studying church history (Mark Noll)

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. (Matthew 28:18-20)

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

The Lord Jesus is sovereign over all. Nothing is irrelevant to Christ, the living Word. He reigns over all experiences and events that affect his church.

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations.

- The church keeps moving outward to reach more peoples.
- The church keeps moving inward to learn and teach more of Christ.
- Christianity takes root in various cultures and influences them, but is not identical to any culture.

Surely I am with you always to the very end of the age.

- Whatever the church's wanderings and sins, Christ's presence sustains and builds his church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.
- A number of times it seemed the church had gone entirely to the dogs. **Each time it was the dog that died.**

The Trial and Testimony of the Early Church

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STEVE: There are more than 5 billion people alive on the earth today. Nearly one third of these, or about 1.6 billion, would identify themselves as Christians.

Today the Christian faith is alive on every continent and in every major geographic area of the world in over 22,000 different denominational expressions.

But it was a faith that most people simply did not want in the world into which it was first born, here in Jerusalem almost 2000 years ago. Its founder was killed and his followers, who became known as "Christians," were from time to time victimized and put to death. The most powerful political empire the world had ever known used its vast legal and administrative machinery in a strenuous effort to suppress this feisty, fledgling faith. But it failed.

NIGEL: In this series of programs, we will look at the Christian church in its early period when it was under attack, a period covering almost 300 years— up to the Edict of Milan in 313 when the church was finally given legal status. This is one of the most incredible stories in all of recorded human history.

STEVE: We will look at the foundations of the church and how it spread, also the accusations hurled against it, the persecution that threatened to destroy it and the stories of martyrs who gave their lives rather than surrender their faith, and the transition whereby Christianity in the early 300's became not only a legal religion but eventually the official faith of the Roman Empire.

SERIES LOGO

2:35

RUSSELL: As we proceed through this series, you will see us slip into the roles and play the parts of some of the key characters in this story which covers almost 300 years.

JANE: I think you will find it an amazing drama, for it's a story filled with danger and suspense. It copes with the questions and problems of life that we find in every age.

NIGEL: We will be your guides as we find out what Christianity was like long before it had so much of what we identify with the church today.

JANE: Perhaps a good place to begin might be by asking the question, "What is a church anyway?" Is the church really a building? Is it still a church if we would take away the hymn books or the Bible? What if the organ were removed? What if we take away the pulpit and the vestments of the clergy?

RUSSELL: The answer to all of the questions Jane asked would be an immediate "yes," if you were a Christian living in the period of early Christianity that we are looking at in these programs.

NIGEL: The early Christians had none of the things that we think about when we think of the church today.

RUSSELL: They did not have church buildings. They didn't have different denominations or publishing houses or big bureaucratic organizations or a complex hierarchy.

NIGEL: But they were still a church. The church was not buildings but people. They did have two things that they considered of utmost importance—indeed irreplaceable—they had a faith and a fellowship.

JANE: And both of these were centered on the one they looked to as the foundation.

4:23

STEVE BELL: Christianity begins with Jesus of Nazareth and the Jewish people in first-century Palestine. Although no one in history has been depicted by great artists more than Jesus Christ, we actually have no specific knowledge of what he looked like. In the entire New Testament there is no clue at all to his size, build, or any other physical characteristics. Yet the question that was asked when he walked this earth is the same question that has been asked ever since—Who is Jesus?

NIGEL: We do not have any complete biography of Jesus' life in terms of the modern expectations of biography. But there are some things that we know about him beyond any reasonable doubt. Even those who do not follow him or even those who despise him would admit that at least this much can be said about him.

STEVE:

5:19

*Jesus was born into a humble family.

*Yet he came from a distinguished family tree even by careful Jewish standards.

*His teachings were perceived as extraordinary, and he gained a reputation as one who could perform wonders and miracles.

*His message announced the beginning of an entirely new order, summed up in the phrase "The Kingdom of God" which, although not immediately recognized or realized, was nevertheless inevitable.

*Jesus gathered around him a group of followers who were mostly common working people, yet He trained them to become His messengers.

*He caused great controversy and aroused vehement opposition.

*He was condemned by Jewish leaders and crucified by Roman authorities.
*His followers believed and testified that He rose from the dead on the third day and met with them, talked and ate with them.
*Jesus' followers were convinced it was God who had raised Jesus from the dead, thereby validating His claims and teachings; further they believed that Jesus was the divinely appointed Savior of humankind, the Lord to whom all owed faith, loyalty, and total obedience.
*And there can be no doubt that these followers soon believed they were to take this message to everyone at any cost. They were to call all peoples to repent and believe in Jesus. And we know that they took this word with remarkable energy and fortitude far beyond the confines of their homeland.

6:46

STEVE: Jesus was a Jew and much of his ministry was based at the synagogue here at Capernaum in Galilee where he worshipped and ministered. In fact, it's believed the ruins of that synagogue lie right beneath this very sight. Jesus' first disciples or apostles also were Jews. They did not see themselves as forming any new religion nor a breakaway group from Judaism. On the contrary, they saw themselves as loyal to their Jewish heritage and a part of the people of Israel; they also believed in the promises given to Israel by God through the writings that we now commonly refer to as the Old Testament. So in the first years after Jesus left them, his followers continued within the Jewish community. They were active in synagogue, testifying to and disputing with their fellow Jews about just who Jesus was and what He was calling Israel to become.

Communities of Jews were scattered throughout the Roman Empire. It took ten Jewish men to establish a synagogue, so synagogues were formed wherever they went. The synagogue offered an ideal setting to spread the word about Jesus as the disciples moved out into wider circles. At that time conversions to Judaism were more common than we find today. Non-Jews could come and worship in the synagogues, and those who did not become full-fledged Jews could still find a place to share in community life. Those worshipers were known as "God fearers" and many proved to be receptive to the message about Jesus.

NIGEL: But the Word was for everyone. Jesus' parting instructions were to go into all the world—and the world to them meant the mighty Roman Empire.

8:27

STEVE: The Roman Empire was the largest empire ever known to Western antiquity with some 50 to 60 million inhabitants. That's about as many people as Germany or Britain today-- or approximately one-fifth the population of the United States. It included all of the nations directly touching on the Mediterranean Sea and also portions of the Netherlands, all of Belgium, part of West Germany, all of Austria and Switzerland, and most of Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, England, Wales and Southern Scotland.

Rome, with 1 1/2 million residents, was the capital and center of this vast geopolitical domain. Rome was THE city, but wherever the Romans ruled they built new cities if they were not there already. Thus, the world into which early Christianity spread was primarily an urban world.

After Jesus, the apostles formed the backbone of the church. Nearly every Christian tradition today still looks to the apostles as the ones to whom the original treasury

of the faith was entrusted and of course some of the apostles' names have become the most common men's names throughout the Western world. How many men do you know named John, James, Peter, Thomas, Philip, or Andrew? And these common names came from very common men. Five of them were humble fishermen. They worked here on the Sea of Galilee, and it was by this very shore that Jesus came and invited them to give up their trade and follow Him.

NIGEL: What happened to this rather ordinary group who were given the most extraordinary of assignments after Jesus left earth?

10:05

STEVE: The New Testament gives us an account of the deaths of two of the apostles — Judas and James.

Judas, who betrayed Christ for thirty pieces of silver, committed suicide by hanging himself.

James, the son of Zebedee, was put to death by the sword, probably beheaded in Jerusalem around 44 AD. According to tradition, he died after preaching the Gospel in Spain.

Andrew is reported to have journeyed to Scythia, the region north of the Black Sea, now part of the Soviet Union. More certain is his preaching in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey) and in Greece where he was said to have been crucified.

Thomas, "doubting Thomas," was most probably active in the area east of Syria. Tradition has him preaching as far east as India where the ancient Marthoma Christians revere him as their founder.

Philip, so tradition records, preached the Gospel in Heirapolis in Asia Minor where he converted the wife of the Roman proconsul. In retaliation, her husband had Philip arrested and cruelly put to death.

Matthew, also known as Levi, is credited with writing the Gospel that bears his name. Different traditions place him preaching the Gospel in areas as far apart as Persia and Ethiopia.

Bartholomew, too, had widespread missionary travels attributed to him by tradition: to India with Thomas, back to Armenia, and also to Ethiopia and southern Arabia. There are various accounts of how he met his death as a martyr.

James, the son of Alpheus, is one of at least three Jameses referred to in the New Testament, and there is some confusion as to which is which. But this James was reckoned to have ministered in Syria, and the Jewish historian Josephus says he was stoned and then clubbed to death.

Simon the Zealot, so the story goes, went to Persia and was killed after refusing to sacrifice to the sun god.

Matthias was the Apostle chosen to replace Judas. Tradition sends him with Andrew to Syria and to death by burning.

The Apostle **John** is perhaps the only one of the company thought to have died a

natural death from old age. He was the leader of the church in the Ephesus area and is said to have taken care of Mary, the mother of Jesus, in his home. During the persecution in Domitian's reign in the middle 90's, he was sent into exile on the island of Patmos in the Aegean. There he is credited with writing the last book of the New Testament, the Revelation of John.

NIGEL: If they did go to all the places that claim them, then we can see that the apostles covered a very wide expanse, bringing their message about Jesus.

STEVE: But we emphasize again that it is not possible to sort out where historical fact ends and fanciful legend begins. It is generally regarded that in most cases there was some truth that gave rise to the legends, which would then become embellished over a period of time.

12:54

But for two of the apostles, **Peter** and **Paul**, we have more information that is considered reliable.

CARSTEN THIEDE: After the resurrection, Peter, the man who had denied Jesus, was reinstated by the risen Lord at the Sea of Galilee. From then on, Peter is indeed the rock, the pillar of the early church. He is their first public speaker, their first evangelist. He defends them before the Sanhedrin. He, as it were, institutes missionary journeys. He is the first to begin a mission to the Gentiles, long before Paul. When Paul finally comes to Jerusalem, he, Peter, is his teacher. He informs him about the history of Jesus, about the beginnings of the church. Finally, he proves himself to be an able administrator when he himself leaves Jerusalem for Rome.

DAVID WRIGHT: Peter is one of the best-known of the early Christians. He was a man just as we are. He was a disciple, apostle, martyr. A disciple of Jesus, an apostle who preached and declared the Gospel and laid the foundations of the early church back in Jerusalem, a martyr in Rome probably along with Paul under Nero. Yet, in all three of these roles the important thing was what he confessed: when he first recognized in Jesus the Messiah, who was promised; when he declared to the assembled Jews at Pentecost and the days that followed the same message that Jesus was indeed the Christ who was to come; and as he died in Rome, faithful to that confession to the last.

14:31

NIGEL: The apostle Paul was not one of the original twelve apostles of Jesus, but he was almost certainly the greatest missionary for Christ who ever lived.

STEVE: As a devout Jew, Paul had been a fierce persecutor of the early church but then came an experience on the road of Damascus where Paul claimed Jesus himself had appeared to him. Paul became a man obsessed with one task in life: to bring the Gospel of Christ to as many people as possible with no regard for what he would suffer personally. During one of his many imprisonments, Paul shared his zeal in a letter to his young disciple, Timothy.

PAUL (dramatization): "Be not thou therefore ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me his prisoner: but be thou partaker of the afflictions of the Gospel according to the power of God; who hath saved us, and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began. But is now made manifest by the

appearing of our Savior Jesus Christ, who hath abolished death, and hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel: unto which I am appointed a preacher, and an apostle, and a teacher of the Gentiles.

STEVE: Paul's pattern was to go into the synagogues. But he also taught and preached in the streets, and marketplaces, the Areopagus, Mars Hill, and anywhere he could gain a hearing. Here are the routes of his three recorded missionary journeys. Just about everywhere Paul went, some would respond positively, becoming new disciples of Christ. But inevitably he found resistance from others. He would often be arrested, beaten or stoned before he was chased out of town.

Paul helped the church understand the universality of the faith better than any other. And it involved him in some intense controversy with other apostles, including a showdown with Peter, but ultimately, he opened up the doors to the Gentiles to become full participants in the fellowship of Christ, and he distinguished those parts of the Jewish heritage that were to be maintained from those that were optional or superseded with the coming of Christ.

Eventually Paul ended up in Rome, where he traditionally is said to have been beheaded outside the city limits.

DAVID WRIGHT: It's easy to miss the enormous contribution that Paul made to the early Christian church. One could ask, in fact, what the church would have become had it not been for Paul, because there were pressures around that would have kept the new movement within the fold of Judaism. And it was above all Paul who saw more clearly than anyone else that the new faith could not be confined within the bounds of Judaism alone. He spoke of the mystery that had been given to him to declare. That mystery was an open secret that the Gospel of Jesus was for all peoples. He was himself a man of remarkable gifts. Evangelist, teacher, miracle worker, prophet, writer (many of the New Testament writings come from Paul), theological thinker, but the thing I would like to stress is that he was a strategist, a visionary, someone who saw that the Gospel had to be free from Jewish requirements like circumcision and keeping of the law, if it really was going to appeal to the peoples of the Roman world.

18:59 STEVE: It wasn't long after the death of Paul that Christians began to understand more clearly that they were a community distinct from Judaism. Yet at the same time the church still thought of itself as the true Israel and inheritor of God's covenant promises to Israel.

A major step in this transition can be seen in the events associated with the Jewish revolt against the Romans in 66 AD. Eusebius, the first major historian of the church, writing in the early fourth century, reports that Christians in Jerusalem were continually harassed by Jews, and many left Jerusalem. When the Jewish revolt broke out, the remaining Christians did not side with the Jews but fled to Pella, a town in Trans-Jordan. In 70 AD, the Roman forces led by Titus, the emperor's son, attacked and captured Jerusalem and destroyed the temple. Today there are only remains like these, the Western wall, or wailing wall, still visited by the devout as the most sacred site in Judaism.

A band of the Jewish Zealots had escaped and taken refuge in the natural fortress

offered at Masada. On May 2, in the year 73, the Jews barricaded here, numbering almost 1,000, committed suicide rather than be captured or resubmit to the Romans. The failure of the revolt and the destruction of the temple were major disasters for the Jewish people; nevertheless, they found the resiliency to reorganize their religious life around the Jewish Law.

The rift between Christians and Jews only deepened as the centers of the Christian movement shifted to other cities beyond Jerusalem. By the end of the century the Jews had even excluded Christians from the synagogues by changing their liturgical prayers to add a curse upon heretics.

20:46

RUSSELL: After the apostles died, the faith was carried on by those who had been taught by them and their associates. But we no longer find missionaries of the stature and effectiveness of Paul leading the way.

JANE: In fact we do not have much by way of records to tell us how the faith spread or who spread it.

RUSSELL: Remember that until about the year 312 the church had been unlicensed, or unregistered, and as early as the Emperor Nero in the AD early sixties it was considered a "religio prava:" that is, a depraved or evil religion, therefore having no legal status and often considered as an enemy both to the state and to the people.

NIGEL: These were not the kind of people that you would erect monuments to, or celebrate in the public arts for posterity to remember. Or, if you do, it was more in ridicule as in this piece of graffiti on the wall of a house on the Palatine Hill in Rome, which, by the way, is the earliest known representation of Christ's crucifixion. Here you see hanging from the cross the body of a man with the head of an ass. The words of ridicule written beneath: "Alexamenos worships his god."

JANE: Nevertheless, we do know that the faith spread like wildfire, making its way throughout the whole Roman Empire.

RUSSELL: Now stop and think of the absurdity of the task: A small group in a remote corner of a mighty empire, a group considered to be a small sect within Judaism (and the Jews were not well liked across the empire), this group sets out to convince the world of their faith.

NIGEL: They preach commitment to one who has died a despised criminal-that's strange enough-but they also affirm that this same one rose from the dead and is alive today through His Holy Spirit. The world that they are so bold to speak into is steeped in fierce loyalty to inherited traditions and local religions.

JANE: And it wasn't as though the Christians were asking the world to make room for just one more god--one more faith that they could practice privately. The Romans were very tolerant, really. They could have accommodated that.

RUSSELL: No, the Christians came saying that their God was the only true God, that all were obliged to repent, change from their sinful ways, and follow the Christ they proclaimed as the Lord of heaven and earth.

JANE: They were compelled by an unshakable conviction that Jesus was Lord and

that they were duty bound to bring His gospel into the whole world.

23:34

STEVE: The aqueduct here at Caesarea still stands as a visible symbol of Roman power. Yet conditions in the empire at the start of the Christian movement were better suited for the spread of a faith that claimed to be for all people than at any other time in human history. In fact, the Christian historian Eusebius, writing in the fourth century from here in Caesarea, claimed that God had providentially prepared the Roman Empire and the cultural setting that it provided for the spread of the Gospel. And even earlier, the pivotal theologian Tertullian saw the empire and the emperor as God's agents to preserve society. He made this surprising claim around the year 200.

NIGEL as TERTULLIAN: "We must respect the emperor as the chosen of our Lord. Therefore, I have a right to say that Caesar is more ours than yours, appointed as he is by our God."

STEVE: Not surprisingly, the empire did not share that view. To put it simply, Christians were not wanted. Yet, they managed to take advantage of the times and the conditions offered by the Roman Empire to spread rapidly. Over their first 300 years a presence was established in most parts of the empire and across all classes and social boundaries. In our next program we will take a close look at the spread of the faith

CLOSING CREDITS

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 28: 100 Most Important Events in Church History

A.D. 70 Titus Destroys Jerusalem

When the Roman general sacked the temple, the Jews were forced into a new era—and so were the Christians.

Gessius Florus loved money and hated Jews. As Roman procurator, he ruled Judea, caring little for their religious sensibilities. When tax revenues were low, he seized silver from the temple. As the uproar against him grew, in A.D. 66, he sent troops into Jerusalem who massacred 3,600 citizens. Florus's action touched off an explosive rebellion—the First Jewish Revolt—that had been sizzling for some time.

Launching the Revolt

The Jewish Revolt began—and met its bitter end—at Masada, a hunk of rock overlooking the Dead Sea. The Romans had built a virtually impregnable fortress there. Yet the atrocities of Florus inspired some crazy Zealots to attack Masada. Amazingly, they won, slaughtering the Roman army there.

In Jerusalem, the temple captain signified solidarity with the revolt by stopping the daily sacrifices to Caesar. Soon all Jerusalem was in an uproar, expelling or killing the Roman troops. Then all Judea was in revolt; then Galilee.

Cestius Callus, the Roman governor of the region, marched from Syria with twenty thousand soldiers. He besieged Jerusalem for six months, yet failed. He left six thousand dead Roman soldiers, not to mention weaponry that the Jewish defenders picked up and used.

Emperor Nero then sent Vespasian, a decorated general, to quell the Judean rebellion. Vespasian put down the opposition in Galilee, then in Transjordan, then in Idumea. He circled in on Jerusalem. But before the *coup de grace*, Nero died. Vespasian became embroiled in a leadership struggle that concluded with the eastern armies calling for him to be emperor. One of his first imperial acts was to appoint his son Titus to conduct the Jewish War.

Crushing the Revolt

By now, Jerusalem was isolated from the rest of the nation, and factions within the city fought over strategies of defense. As the siege wore on, people began dying from starvation and plague. The high priest's wife, who once basked in luxury, scavenged for crumbs in the streets.

Meanwhile the Romans employed new war machines to hurl boulders against the city walls. Battering rams assaulted the fortifications. Jewish defenders fought all day and struggled to rebuild the walls at night. Eventually the Romans broke through the outer wall, then the second wall, and finally the third wall. Still the Jews fought, scurrying to the temple as their last line of defense.

That was the end for the valiant Jewish defenders and for the temple. Historian Josephus claimed that Titus wanted to preserve the temple, but his soldiers were so angry at their resilient opponents that they burned it. The remaining Jews were slaughtered or sold as slaves.

The Zealot band that took Masada held it for at least three more years. When the Romans finally built their siege ramp and invaded the mountain fortress, they found the defenders dead—they had committed suicide to avoid being captured by foreigners.

Results of the Revolt

The Jewish Revolt marked the end of the Jewish state until modern times. The destruction of the temple also signified a change in the Jews' worship (although that change had begun as Jews had been scattering throughout the world for at least six hundred years). The first destruction of the temple, by the Babylonians in 586 B.C., had forced the Jews to become people of the Book. The temple's sad end slammed the door on the Jew's sacrificial system. They adjusted, of course, creating new rituals for home and synagogue. But the Sanhedrin was dissolved, and the center of Jewish religion moved to the educational institutions of Jamnia.

Where were the Christians? Out of town, basically. Many had been driven out of Jerusalem by persecution decades earlier. Eusebius wrote that when the revolt began, in A.D. 66, some of the remaining Jewish Christians fled to Pella, a city across the Jordan River.

It could be said that these events threw the young church's balance of power toward the Gentiles. Missionaries like Paul had originally dealt with a strong (and conservative) Jewish church, based in Jerusalem. But the Christian Jews' non-involvement in the revolt drove an obvious wedge between them and their traditional counterparts. After A.D. 70, Christians were not permitted in the synagogues.

The fall of Jerusalem, then, made the Christians even more distinct from the Jews and impelled the church to develop among the Gentiles.

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The Trial and Testimony of the Early Church

PROGRAM 2 SPREAD

DAVID WRIGHT: Dead as a dodo. That's the fate of most of the cults and religions of the ancient world. Have you ever met Mithra-ist or a Manichean or a devotee of Isis and Osiris? And yet the movement started by Jesus did survive. And more than survive, it grew to conquer and win the allegiance of the whole Roman world and beyond it.

NIGEL as TERTULLIAN: We are but of yesterday and have filled everything you have—cities, tenements, forts, towns, yes, and camps, tribes, palace, senate, and forum. All you have left to you is your temples!

CARSTEN THIEDE: After the resurrection, Jesus told his followers that they were to take the Gospel to the farthest ends of the world. It had to have sounded preposterous, ridiculous even; how should they do it? A mere twelve apostles, no mass media, no financial means, a minority group, threatened by persecution. It was impossible.

STEVE: In our first program we showed how Christianity emerged from its Jewish roots, It was a new faith in a world that revered tradition, a universal faith in a world loyal to local deities, an exclusive faith in a world that celebrated its tolerance.

From their roots in Palestine as followers of a humble working-class carpenter-turned-preacher—Jesus of Nazareth—the Christians set out to bring their faith to the whole world. By any normal calculation this was an impossible job because Christian teachings simply could not be accommodated or reconciled with the most sacred assumptions of the Roman world.

NIGEL: Yet, in spite of incredible difficulty the faith managed to spread and in some places even to thrive. What happened?

SERIES LOGO

2:45 STEVE: It all began at a place like this, a first century tomb in Jerusalem. After his crucifixion, Jesus was buried in just such a tomb. But two days later the massive stone that covered the entrance was found pushed aside and there was no body in the tomb. His followers reported that Jesus was alive again. They had seen Him, talked with Him, even eaten bread and fish with Him. His followers proclaimed, "Christ is risen," and they called it the Good News! To pick up the story, let's go to my three colleagues in our series, Jane, Russell and Nigel.

RUSSELL: The disciples of Christ had shown themselves to be rather fickle, even cowardly, under pressure before the resurrection, but after the resurrection and the day of Pentecost, they went forward as passionate messengers that Jesus was their Lord.

JANE: But they didn't just proclaim Him as their Lord. They came to see Him and announce Him as their Lord and Savior of the whole world!

NIGEL: "When the fullness of time had come," as the apostle Paul put it.

RUSSELL: The disciples of Christ clearly understood themselves to be under a divine mandate to bring this news about Christ to the whole world. But how do you do it, particularly when you are so few in number, very limited in resources, and have no game plan?

JANE: That's right. Jesus really didn't even give his rather unimpressive group of followers any clear-cut strategy.

NIGEL: Well, maybe there was a reason for this, Jane. If they had known what it would take to get the thing started, then would any of them have had enough faith to move out and begin?

RUSSELL: To understand how the faith spread, we first have to understand a little about the world into which it was born.

4:24 STEVE: Prior to the emergence of Roman power, a few centuries before Christ, the Greek conqueror, Alexander the Great, laid the groundwork as he expanded his domain. The Greeks loved cities. Of course they had their farmers, but the city was the place to be—and the Greeks had some great ones like Athens and Corinth. Everywhere Alexander went he would build new cities like Alexandria, or rebuild old ones. His successors followed the pattern, founding Antioch among others. Thus, the Mediterranean societies became more and more Greek, with the Greek language becoming a common language used almost everywhere in the empire.

When the Romans took over, they maintained this pattern and continued to build cities across the expanse of the empire. And wherever they went, they took with them their advanced administrative skills and amazing engineering abilities. Imagine the engineering skills needed for the systems of aqueducts they built to supply water for their citizens.

This is the aqueduct built at Caesarea on the Mediterranean coast, a key departure point in the advance of the early church.

So when Christianity began to spread under Roman rule, it spread through a world of cities, most of them, of course, very much smaller than Rome. These cities were linked together by an incredible network of well constructed roads. There were more than 50,000 miles of roads, or a distance twice the circumference of the earth, and many of these roads have outlasted the empire itself by more than 1500 years. And they can still be seen and used today.

Where the roads touched the sea there were good harbors for sea travel. And the *Pax Romana* (or "Peace of Rome") meant that the roads and seas were relatively safe for travel without fear of robbers or pirates. There was also an efficient postal system. With the Greek language spoken and understood in the main centers of the empire, communication and travel for government, commerce, and trade were greatly facilitated. And for the spread of ideas, conditions had never been better.

6:23 STEVE: By the year 100, just 70 years after the death of Christ, the faith had burst forth from its Judean womb to many of the major cities of the empire. Jesus, from the accounts in the Gospels, never traveled more than 100 miles from home during his entire adult life, but now there were communities of followers thousands of miles from where it all began. And the places highlighted on this map are not just places where the Gospel was preached but locations where there were actual communities of believers.

JANE: A band of followers, a growing band whose names have now been lost to us, shared their new-found life all around the apartment buildings of the cities in the Mediterranean world.

STEVE: A fascinating report on the Christians was written by an unknown author around the year 180. It is called the Epistle to Diognetus.

JANE: Here we catch a glimpse of how the believers' lives were ordinary and yet, at the same time, so very extraordinary: "Christians are not distinguished from the rest of mankind by country, by speech, nor by customs. But although they live in both Greek and foreign cities, and follow the local customs, both in clothing and food and the rest of life, they exhibit the wonderful and admittedly strange nature of their own citizenship. They live in their own homelands but as sojourners; they share all things as citizens, and suffer all things as aliens. Every foreign country is their homeland and every homeland a foreign country. They marry as all do; they bear children, but they do not discard their children as some do. They offer a common table but not a common bed. They find themselves 'in the flesh,' but do not live 'according to the flesh.' They pass their time upon earth, but are citizens of heaven. They obey the established laws, and surpass the laws in their own lives.

"They love all and are persecuted by all. They are put to death and are made alive. They are poor but make many rich. They lack all things yet abound in all things. They are abused and give blessing; they are insulted and give honor. When they do good they are punished as evildoers; when they are punished, they rejoice as those receiving life. By the Jews they are attacked as foreigners, and by the Greeks they are persecuted; and those who hate them are not able to state the cause of their hostility."

9:13 DAVID WRIGHT: Christianity traveled along the ordinary highways and byways

of the Roman world through travelers of various kinds, merchantmen, businessmen, soldiers, prisoners, slaves and hostages, Christian lay people of all kinds moving around and being moved around the great roads of the empire. Students, teachers, philosophers, refugees, pilgrims, professionals, doctors, lawyers, people of many kinds taking their Christian faith with them: bearers of the Christian message as they traveled around. So largely, expansion was not, it seems, the work of clergy, of ministers, of pastors but of Christian men and women in their ordinary paths and routines of life.

JANE: Here is another very helpful document written by a Christian to the emperor Antoninus Pius. It gives us a valuable insight into the lives and attitudes of Christians who lived during this vital period of church history and who tried to manage the affairs of the church without the first-century apostles left to guide them. The writer here is Justin, who himself was to become a notable martyr, a victim of persecution. Listen as he tells us:

10:31 RUSSELL as JUSTIN: "Before, we rejoiced in uncleanness, but now we love only chastity; we used to practice magic arts, but have now dedicated ourselves to the true and unbegotten God; we used to love money and possessions more than anything, but now we share what we have and give to all of those in need; we used to hate one another, kill one another. We would not eat with those of different races. But now, since the manifestation of Christ, we love our enemies and pray for those who hate us without just cause."

11:15 STEVE: The faith continued to spread rapidly despite mounting opposition. Here we see where Christian communities were established by the year 200, but how are we to account for the continuing advance? Keep in mind that the churches had no impressive public ceremonies to attract the masses. For generations they also had no church buildings. And if you went to a service in a home, you would find no bizarre spectacle or compelling entertainment and none of the depraved orgies they were falsely accused of in the earliest years. Instead, you would find scriptures read, some prayers, exhortation, and finally the Eucharist, but if you were not baptized, you would not even be invited to stay for that.

NIGEL: There is every evidence that the church was never without its internal tensions. They did not break off into denominations as we know them today, but serious conflicts were part of their ongoing life—for they considered that they were dealing with matters of truth and error—perhaps the clue to the secret of the spread of the early church. As we have pointed out, early Christianity was an urban movement. The people lived in cities, and in these cities you lived very close to your neighbors. You did not have many secrets in such a setting. Your neighbors had a very good idea of who you were, how you lived your life, and what was important to you.

12:49 DRAMA SEGMENT (NIGEL AND RUSSELL).

RUSSELL: May I talk to you; I need to talk to you. Look, I know I have no right to ask you anything, especially after the way that I insulted you last week. My wife is dying. The doctors have done all they can. There is nothing else they can do. She doesn't have much time. Look, it is said about town that you Christians pray for healing, that the god you pray to sometimes answers your prayers and grants a healing.

NIGEL: Yes, that's right, He does grant us healings sometimes.

RUSSELL: Please, would you come pray for my wife? I'll give you anything you ask. I don't know what else I can do!

NIGEL: Let's go quickly. . . . I am going to pray to the Lord to heal you. Then, I'll go get the sisters and they will come to you. They will look after you. They will pray for you. I am going to pray for you.

14:31

STEVE: It was through such countless everyday acts of compassion, concern, and love for the neighbors that the Gospel spread. It was a grassroots people movement that found its opportunities in serving human needs, caring for the unlovely, even rescuing and taking in children who had been abandoned on the garbage dumps. In Rome, by the year 250, in what was perhaps the first "meals on wheels" program, the church was providing for more than 1500 widows.

NIGEL: But there was also the element of the miraculous in reports of early Christian life. Christians became known as those who would care for the sick and had healing powers and also powers to drive out demons.

DAVID WRIGHT: If we are to understand early Christianity, we've got to take proper account of the miraculous. Miracles are attested right from the beginning of the movement. We find Peter, for example, healing a cripple at the Beautiful Gate of the temple. Miracle stories are found right through the second and third centuries. Writers like Justin and Irenaeus and Tertullian make a great deal of the Christians' ability to perform miracles. They offer even to work miracles under laboratory conditions in court in order to demonstrate the power of the Christian God.

CARSTEN THIEDE: Miracles were an integral part of life in Palestine and, of course, in the early church. Exorcisms, healing, it had to be done. Many people did it, not only Jesus, incidentally, his contemporaries, so he had to prove himself as it were to his contemporaries as one who could do what others did and then go on and explain why he did it and what the purpose of it all was. And that's what Peter and Paul did when they performed miracle healings and so on. Or look at certain instances in the history of the early church. Peter's escape from the prison of Herod Agrippa was a miraculous escape. It couldn't be explained by human or natural means. Or look at the survival of the important manuscripts of the New Testament writings. It was the avowed aim of persecution after persecution to destroy all these manuscripts, but yet they have survived. The New Testament, the whole Bible, has survived. We could go on and give many more examples of the necessity of the importance of the miraculous in the history of the early church.

16:56

STEVE: By the early 300s the faith had continued to spread, new centers were established, and existing centers strengthened. In some regions there was actually a Christian majority, and in other places, while still a minority, Christians maintained a strong presence.

NIGEL AND RUSSELL (in adaptation of comments from the writings of Justin Martyr).

RUSSELL: From all over the world there are those of us who have put our faith in

Christ Jesus. When we truly do, there is no one that can make us afraid. True, there are those among our number, some who have been beheaded and crucified, others tortured in other ways, thrown to wild beasts and burned, but it is now plain that even these horrible things cannot make us forsake our precious faith. I look at it like this . . . it's like when you cut back the part of the vine that has borne fruit already. Cut it back, other flourishing fruit bearing branches grow to take its place. . . . Now please understand us that we are not contentious. Christ has taught us how, by patience and gentleness, to lead those from shame and the love of evil.

NIGEL: Do you have many that have joined you?

RUSSELL: I can show you many who have turned from a violent and tyrannical disposition. People who have been convinced by the quality in the life of their Christian neighbors: the extraordinary forbearance they show after they are cheated, how they conduct their own business affairs with the utmost honesty.

18:27

STEVE: At this time the empire had a population of 50 to 60 million people. Estimates are that five to ten percent were Christian believers or somewhere between three to six million people from all walks of life and every social rank. As more and more people became Christians, their presence permeated society. And in the early 200s the colorful theologian Tertullian could boldly challenge the empire, no doubt with a bit of rhetorical exaggeration.

NIGEL as TERTULLIAN: What if so vast a people as we had broken away from you and moved to some other part of the world? The loss of so many citizens would have brought shame upon your rulers. You would have to find other people to rule. You would have more enemies than citizens. But, as it is, you have fewer enemies because of the multitude of the Christians. Indeed, it would seem that in nearly all the cities nearly all the citizens are Christians.

19:47

STEVE: The catacombs, underground tunnels and rooms with art work and inscriptions celebrating central themes of the faith. They had been dug out by the early Christians to bury and honor their dead. Today they are a vivid symbolic reminder that Christianity in its first few hundred years was a kind of underground movement. But in 312 the emperor Constantine was converted to Christianity after a reported vision. His victory, at the Milvian Bridge north of Rome, consolidated his political power. It is a convenient point in time to mark the great divide between the era when Christianity was a despised, harassed minority and later in the fourth century when it became the dominant and official faith of the empire.

Success would bring its own problems and challenges, but that subject is for another time. For the moment consider that the early years of Christianity represent one of the most astonishing peaceful revolutions and transformations of established cultural norms ever seen at any time.

20:47

How can we account for the remarkable spread of the Christian faith? No simple answer is possible, but at least part of an answer may be found in considering what happened at this place. This is where Jesus gave what we now call the Sermon on the Mount, and part of that sermon is known as the Lord's Prayer. What a jolt that brief prayer now so familiar must have given to first-century hearers. After all, it told people how to think of God and themselves in a new way. Look at this.

ROTAS
OPERA
TENET
AREPO
SATOR

This Latin word square has been found in widely divergent places including England, Dura Europos in Mesopotamia, and the two found at Pompeii, which have to date back earlier than 79 AD when the city was destroyed. No one knows for sure what it means.

Notice the palindrome: how the same words are spelled forwards and backwards. See how the letters can easily be rearranged to spell "Paternoster" twice in the form of a cross. The N of Noster forms the intersection with an A and an O left over. Paternoster are the first two Latin words of the Lord's Prayer, "our Father," and the A and the O could represent the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, Alpha and Omega. That's the term applied to Christ in the book of Revelation in the New Testament meaning "the beginning" and "the end."

NIGEL: Paternoster, "our Father." Maybe in those two words we get a clue as to how the Gospel was spread throughout the world.

RUSSELL: For the world into which the Gospel was born was a world in which people felt themselves to be at the mercy of fate, victims of chance, their lives controlled by impersonal astrological forces.

JANE: Yes, because it was a world where, for the most part, religion was tradition rather than a personal belief.

STEVE: So into this world came Christianity proclaiming that your life has meaning, you are known, you are loved, and that a God greater than any you could ever have imagined is creator of all. He has visited our planet in the person of his son Jesus Christ to show His love, and His love is so intimate he can be approached and addressed as "our Father." Such a concept was totally new and yet it seemed to be exactly what many were waiting for. It was a concept that found a home across the diverse cultural, religious, and social backgrounds that made up the Roman Empire.

NIGEL: Of course this is not a full explanation of why and how the faith spread, but it would seem to be a necessary part of any explanation that would adequately account for what happened.

23:28

STEVE: Over the following centuries, Christianity continued to grow and spread at an even faster rate than in the first three centuries. And we should note that, ironically, this faith born in the Middle East would find its strongest reception the more it moved west through the Greco—Roman world. It would become a foundational institution for western civilization itself.

NIGEL: But it is in this present century that there has perhaps been the most exceptional spread of Christianity in all of its history--and in the most unexpected

places.

STEVE: For example, dramatic spiritual awakenings have been quietly advancing in some communist countries. In fact, it's possible that one of the most rapid expansions of the Christian faith in its entire history has taken place in our generation in communist China. Spreading through an informal network of house churches, some observers estimate that Christianity in China has grown from some 800,000 adherents to many millions in the past forty years.

The message the Christian church has brought to every generation is called the "Gospel," which means literally "good news." But the good news has often meant persecution for those who proclaim it. In our next episode we will look at the resistance to the early church and the range of charges and accusations that were hurled against it.

The Trial and Testimony of the Early Church

PROGRAM 3 ACCUSATION

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Begin counter with the Gateway
Films/Vision Video logo

NIGEL as CAECILIUS: You people are happy to benefit from all that is ours, living in this greatest time of all history. But where is your gratitude? You are all anti-social snobs. You will not show proper respect for our anniversary festivals. You will not sacrifice to the genius of the emperor. You will not fight and join the empire.

STEVE: In previous programs we have seen how the early Christian church spread here in Jerusalem to the farthest reaches of the Roman Empire. But the price was repeated outbursts of horrible persecution that produced many noteworthy martyrs.

In future programs we will take a look at these persecutions in detail, but today our focus is on what was behind the persecutions. It's important to remember that the Roman Empire tolerated many religions, almost any religion. Yet there were aspects to Christianity that the Roman world simply could not abide.

NIGEL: In today's program we look at what made Christianity so intolerable and such a threat. What were the accusations?

SERIES LOGO

1:55

STEVE: This is the only above-ground section that remains of the praetorium of Pontius Pilate in Jerusalem. Here Jesus was brought before Pilate, accused, and tried. Later his followers found that they too would continually be brought before the authorities and accused.

The actual charges typically brought against the Christians are fascinating and varied. Some were frivolous, others maliciously false, but still others were valid and right on target and they show just how Christianity did indeed represent a genuine threat to some of the most deeply held convictions and cherished values of the

Roman world.

Some of the charges will no doubt surprise you. Among them: cannibalism, disruption of business, gross immorality, anti-family, poverty, atheism, novelty, lack of patriotism, anti-social behavior, cause of disasters.

Among the writings of the church fathers, there is a document written about the year 230 called the OCTAVIUS OF MINICIUS FELIX. It describes a debate between a Christian and a pagan at the Roman port of Ostia. Only one copy of this work has survived.

Minicius Felix was walking about Ostia with two friends, Octavius a Christian, and Caecilius a pagan. When Caecilius pauses to pay his respects to a pagan idol, Octavius feels obligated to object. An extended debate develops with the pagan Caecilius presenting the main arguments of the Romans against Christianity. And the Christian Octavius replies.

We now adapt and recreate the debate with arguments drawn not only from the writing of Minicius Felix but also from other sources, so we can include other accusations leveled against the Christians in the early centuries. The setting where the filming takes place is at the remains of the villa of the emperor Hadrian at Tivoli, not far from Rome. Caecilius is played by Nigel, and Octavius by Russell. Jane comes in from time to time to offer comments.

3:25

CAECILIUS: You Christians are the worst breed ever to affect the world. You deserve every punishment you can get. Nobody likes you. It would be better if you and your Jesus had never been born.

OCTAVIUS: Come, come, let's not waste time with insults. Get to your specific complaints and I'll show you that, in many cases, you've simply misunderstood us. Give us a fair trial. Who knows? You may become one of us.

CAECILIUS: You are the one who needs to change your mind. We hear that you are all cannibals—you eat the flesh of your children in your sacred meetings.

OCTAVIUS: Well, that story has certainly gone the rounds— whether through malice or misunderstanding, I don't know. It's probably based on reports that we share together a meal of the body and blood of Christ. Now, that we do. But it is not human flesh we eat. It is bread and wine we consecrate to commemorate our Lord's death.

It amazes me you give credibility to these rumors of cannibalism. You know what we're like. Keep in mind that if you have a child and it is a girl but you wanted a boy or if the child is deformed or if you simply don't want it, what is done? You leave the child outside, exposed to die.

CAECILIUS: You know that it is far more merciful to let the baby die than to bring it up in a home where it is not wanted.

OCTAVIUS: We do not expose our children, and I'd love to know how many of the little ones that others have left out to die have been rescued by Christians and

given a home. So it's just the opposite of what you accuse us of, Caecilius. We don't consume human life; we rather protect and defend it.

CAECILIUS: All right. Granted, it was just a rumor, but we also hear that you meet in secret, even before sunrise, and the gross immorality that we hear goes on in those places is so disgusting I could not even describe it, except to say that it's the incest that I find most repulsive.

OCTAVIUS: You have never been to one of our meetings.

CAECILIUS: No, and I wouldn't be seen there.

OCTAVIUS: Well, if you did, you would find that the lovemaking and intimacy that you are so quick to imagine is of a totally different kind. We meet before sunrise because we are working people. We have jobs to go to. We do not always meet in secret, but we have no temples or synagogues, so we use somebody's home which has enough room. We call one another brother and sister and pledge to love one another because that is what our Lord commanded us to do. And we greet one another and bless one another with a holy kiss, not out of lust but out of genuine love and concern for one another. Come and you will see that we demand the highest standards of morality among all who join us.

6:25 JANE: The charge of cannibalism and immorality did make the rounds for some time. The Christians did not have their own public festivals nor did they have any church buildings. They did often meet in secret, which caused the imaginations of their opponents to run wild. But, as the number of Christians grew, these charges began to fade away as more and more people knew about them, their faith, and their life.

CAECILIUS: Let me move on to one you will not be able to squirm out of. Whenever your sect begins to grow in number, bad things happen. Jobs are lost. Temples are deserted. The sale of animals for ceremonies is way off. The sale of sacrificial meat is down.

OCTAVIUS: Guilty.

CAECILIUS: You could hardly deny it, so you must admit that you are bad for business and disrupt the local economy.

OCTAVIUS: Yes, you are right.

CAECILIUS: I will be generous here and admit that it is not unsolvable. There can be a reallocation of investment over time. But what cannot be fixed is the irreparable damage your kind is doing to the family. The family is the backbone of our society, and you are a clear danger when it comes to the family.

OCTAVIUS: Let me surprise you. I admit in one sense you are right. But overall you are wrong. Now hear me out on this one, friend.

CAECILIUS: I am not your friend. People who break up families are no friend of mine.

OCTAVIUS: Let's get back to your point. It is true that when we become Christians, we become members of another family. Other believers are our brothers and sisters. And, yes, in some ways that does become most important. But we do not neglect our own family. If anything, we treat them far better. Let me digress for a moment and show you what I mean. Caecilius, do you ever sleep with a woman other than your wife?

CAECILIUS: What if I do? It's none of your business.

OCTAVIUS: Do you ever compel your slave women to have sex with you?

CAECILIUS: Of course I do. That's the right of every man. What's your point?

OCTAVIUS: You're the one who wanted to talk about the family. We keep to our own wives. We love them and honor them as our scriptures teach. I think it really bothers you that we don't relieve ourselves in fornication with our slaves. We welcome them into our churches. Maybe it really bothers you that we accept the outsider, any race, any class, even slaves. And maybe that, dear Caecilius, maybe that is your problem.

CAECILIUS: I've been waiting for this one. Take a look at your churches. What are they made up of? Mostly women, gullible children, the majority are from the working classes, not well-educated, as you said yourself, even slaves. It makes me laugh when I think how poor you are, barely enough to live on. If this God of yours is so great and so loving, why are so many of you so poor? Either he's not that good and doesn't care that you are poor or he is not that loving and is unable do anything about it. Some God! No wonder you're all regarded as fools.

9:43

OCTAVIUS: Nicely done. But so wide of the mark! First of all, if you had bothered to take the time to find out, you would know that there are many from the upper classes among our number, even some of Caesar's staff. And notable scholars, who were once pagans, have written in defense of our faith for the more educated to consider. But let's not quibble. Many of our number-- most of our number are poor.

CAECILIUS: So you are ready to admit that you are poor wretches?

OCTAVIUS: Put it as you wish, but what is more important is how we regard ourselves. We consider ourselves to be rich. We have that which is most valuable, the most precious gift, which cannot be lost. And for your information, there are those of us who are wealthy. We do not despise wealth; we welcome it when it comes lawfully. But we do not lust after it. And when we get more wealth, we simply give more away. Wealth can be a great burden. It weighs you down with many cares and concerns. Traveling light has its advantages.

CAECILCUS: Sorry, I haven't noticed any. I'll take the wealth instead any day.

OCTAVIUS: You know, Caecilius talking to you makes me realize for the first time why it is God doesn't automatically bless us with wealth. Because if he did, people like you would rush to become Christians and miss the whole point. So don't pity us. We have plenty, not only for ourselves but also for those in need, the ones that

you walk right by.

CAECILIUS: You're all so pure and good. That's another thing that bothers me: you all think you are so righteous.

OCTAVIUS First you accuse us of cannibalism and orgies, now you're offended because we seek to lead a holy life. Let me assure you, we do not consider ourselves to be holy. Every Lord's day we have a service of communion and it is a service of thanksgiving--thanksgiving because we are forgiven, not because we are holy, and if we are forgiven, then we shall seek to lead lives that are like Christ.

CAECILIUS: What concerns me is what you really are. This is the reason that you are hated across all the lands of this vast empire. Let's get to the real problem. You are atheists.

OCTAVIUS: Yes, we are atheists—if you mean that we do not pray to or believe in all of the gods that are worshiped. But these are not gods. We worship the one true God, the Lord over all.

12:17

JANE: Now indeed they have come to a sore point. This was the most difficult thing for the Romans to understand about the Christians. You see, the Roman world had gods aplenty. Household gods kept by each family, the local region's gods worshiped for their past victories. An empire that looked to its patron gods that had protected it and given it victories, and even the emperor himself was seen as a god—the embodiment of the favors and glory that the gods had bestowed upon Rome. Not to worship the gods, or at least show some respect, was considered atheism. To affirm the one God over all the others was looked upon as presumptuous and stupid.

CAECILIUS: You act as if you people knew more than the rest of us. This is just what I am talking about, my learned and "wealthy" Octavius. You think you know more than all of our fathers, that you alone are right. What it comes down to is that you people are captive to novelty. How blind of you not to see that you lack the indispensable quality that has always been revered by the wise. I speak of respect, honor for our traditions, loyalty to the heritage that has been entrusted to us. Novelty! Novelty! That's what titillates you.

OCTAVIUS: That is simply just not the case. Why is it you do not require the Jews to sacrifice to your gods. They alone are given exemption. Why? Because of the antiquity of their religion. The one thing they can not be accused of is novelty. You give them room, even though they are largely disliked, because theirs is a most ancient religion. Well, be assured that the God that the Jews worship is the very same God that we worship. Their sacred writings, the Law and the Prophets—we revere and read aloud in our meetings. And because we worship this God of the Jews, the one thing we cannot be accused of is novelty. It is just the opposite. Our faith looks back beyond the beginning of time to the God who created all that is. What you won't listen to and what the Jews refuse to accept is that this God has come into our world to show us what he is like in the person of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, whom we love and serve. Why? Because he died for us to bring us back into relationship with this one true God, to offer God's forgiveness, new life to all who will accept him and believe him—even you, my friend.

15:07

CAECILIUS: How you tire me with this reckless babble! I shall not take the time now to answer you, except to say, how absurd to think that even if the "one true God," as you assert, were to come to earth, he would surely do better than to come as an unschooled, working-class carpenter in a place like Galilee in Judea. And, if forgiveness were to be found through some man, I assure you that that it would never come through the death of some convicted and crucified criminal. But let's put aside such simplicity and naivete for now, for we are a tolerant people and you are free to believe as you wish. In many ways you do not sound all that different from some of the mystery religions and they are left alone. But what makes you people so offensive is your stubbornness. Believe what you will, but that is no excuse for the lack of patriotism.

JANE: Lack of patriotism? Yes. Remember, the whole idea of separation of religion and the state is a relatively recent one. It was the great cause of the Anabaptists in Europe in the 16th century. And it was more effectively advanced only a couple of hundred years ago with America. In all societies and countries before that time, the political and the religious were intertwined and inseparable. The connection between the two was unquestioned. It was just one of those things taken for granted. To walk through Rome was to be constantly reminded of the place of religion and gods in Roman life. The state paid due homage to the gods on behalf of the people. Not to do so was to risk incurring the gods' displeasure and wrath. So religion was not just a personal thing. No, to deny the gods was considered atheism, but it was even more than that. It was anti-social and unpatriotic. It was considered politically subversive.

17:30

CAECILIUS: You people are happy to benefit from all that is ours living in this greatest time of all history, but where is your gratitude? You are anti-social snobs. You will not show proper respect for our anniversary festivals. You will not sacrifice to the genius of the emperor. You will not fight and join the empire. Simply put, you are disloyal, unpatriotic, and not to be trusted. As far as I am concerned, you are a danger to society.

OCTAVIUS: If you would make just one point and stick to it, I could perhaps answer you. But you are all over the place with your misrepresentations and exaggerations. We do not join the army and we do not fight because we do not believe in killing. We love our enemies and do good to them. Even though we are often hunted down and killed because of accusers like you, we do not even take up arms to defend ourselves. So, I fail to see how we are any danger to anyone. But, yes, you are right, we do not pray to the emperor or join with our neighbors in the sacrifices to the gods. But while we do not pray to the emperor, we do pray for the emperor. We recognize those in authority as appointed by God to preserve order. We seek, we pray for the peace and tranquility of the empire. God knows, if any group seeks a quiet and undisturbed life, it is us. We never know when we will be blamed for anything that is going wrong, be hunted down and arrested.

CAECILIUS: Not without cause, I assure you. Why can you not see what is so clear to everyone? Your lack of patriotism has caused us all grief and suffering. The gods have been good to Rome. They have given us great victories, good food, fertile land. That is why we must propitiate them and rid ourselves of you atheists. You are no more than criminals and must be dealt with as such.

19:40 OCTAVIUS: Oh yes, we have heard that before, too many times. As one of our fathers wrote:

If the Tiber reaches the walls, if the Nile does not rise to the fields, if the sky doesn't move or the earth does, if there is famine, if there is plague, the cry is at once: 'The Christian to the lion'! Let's get to what really unsettles you. One of the accusations leveled against us which you have not yet said in so many words is that we are a superstition. Well, it is superstition that is at the heart of this matter. This is difficult, and if you give me consideration here, then I will be able to show you that much that divides us will be cleared up. You live in such fear of offending your gods. You are so careful to make your sacrifices and make your bargains with your gods to keep them happy, so they won't send troubles upon us. What kind of gods are these anyway that you think built Rome and made her great?

CAECILIUS: What is this? What are you saying? Be careful with your mouth, for I fear that you do not know what you are saying.

OCTAVIUS: I know exactly, my dear Caecilius, for it is you and the masses that think like you that are the superstitious ones. Your gods did not build Rome. Rome was built on war, murder, violence, and greed. Go back to the very beginning, to the founders you exalt. Why, Romulus murdered his own brother Remus! Our history is not a gift from the gods. Ours is a history of conquest and destruction by violence and force. And that not of the gods but of our own greed and hate. They may be demons that have stood by Rome, but they are no gods.

CAECILIUS: Enough, enough of this, I say. I will hear no more of this. This is utter blasphemy. You and your kind are perverse and wicked. Away with you.

21:34 JANE: In the actual account of Minicius Felix, Caecilius ends up getting converted. But we leave them here in our adaptation because here they have come to the crux of it all. Two diametrically opposed views were up against each other, and there did not appear to be a way of reconciling them. Christianity was far more than a distasteful outlook to the pagan world. It was correctly perceived as a threat. The Roman world did not easily tolerate threats.

Look at this ancient wall, the Aurelian wall that stretches for miles through Rome. Even mighty Rome needed its defenses. The Gospel with its quiet message of forgiveness, peace, and love began to undermine the walls—and it's the familiar walls that give security. When the walls are penetrated, insecurity increases, and the the tendency is to react. Strangely, even when it is a wall of confinement, there is a resistance to letting it go. For breaking down these walls, there was a price to be paid.

NIGEL: But there was more than broken walls behind the Roman accusations against the Christians. Christianity, from the very beginning, understood itself to be intrinsically offensive to most religious sentiments.

23:04 STEVE: Here are some more broken walls. They are the remains of the small Galilean city of Chorazin. Although mentioned only twice in the New Testament, we're told that Chorazin is the very place where Jesus did some of his greatest wonders. Interestingly, we're not told what those wonders were. But Jesus

pronounced woe upon the city because its residents didn't repent and turn their hearts to God in response to such wonders. Thus, these haunting remains are stark reminders that Jesus came and delivered His judgments and accusations before he or his believers became the accused. But it goes even deeper. It was not just that Jesus' words were sometimes offensive, especially to the religious establishment. No, more than that, Jesus Christ himself became an offense. The major offense of Christianity has always had to do with the very person of Jesus Christ.

The heart of the issue may have been stated best in a now classic BBC radio talk given more than 50 years ago by the British scholar C. S. Lewis.

24:05

C.S. LEWIS: There was a time when I believed that the universe was just an accident, that God was just a fantasy, and that Christ was just a good moral teacher. Not so now. You see, I discovered that Christ denied that there was any truth my arguments. What's more, He said He was the Son of God. Here I was troubled. The man who was merely a man and said the sort of thing that Jesus said wouldn't be a great moral teacher at all. He would either be a lunatic on the level with the man that says he's a poached egg, or else he would be the devil of hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was and is the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon, or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But don't let's come up with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He hasn't left that open to us. He didn't intend to.

NARRATOR: It is this claim of Christ that has across the ages been both Christianity's biggest offense and its greatest attraction.

The Roman world could see what was at stake, thus the opposition and the accusations. In our next episode, we will look at how the accusations led to wave after wave of violent persecution.

Glimpses

of people, events,
life and faith from

the Church Across the Ages

FOUNDATIONS OF OUR FAITH: A LOOK AT THE EARLY CHURCH

Glimpses is published in six-month cycles with a theme for each cycle. Our first cycle was on outstanding laity in church history. This current set will deal with the early church, the first few hundred years up to the time of the Emperor Constantine. At that point, the church received legal status and went on to become the official faith of the Roman Empire. This first issue in the cycle takes a broad look at life, worship, and ministry in the early church. We hope this will whet your appetite to feast more on this critical period.

HAVE YOU EVER noticed that the Bible gives us no clue as to what Jesus looked like? All our paintings of Jesus are merely the artist's idea of how he might have looked. The first representation of Christ on record is actually a derisive graffiti on the wall of a house on the Palatine Hill in Rome. It pictured the body of a man being crucified but with the head of an ass. The inscription reads: "Alexamenos worships his god."

From the time of Nero (64 A.D.) until the conversion of Emperor Constantine and the Edict of Milan (313 A.D.), whereby Christianity was made legal, the Christian faith was officially regarded as a *religio prava*, an evil or depraved religion.

Jewish Roots

Christianity began as a movement within Judaism. Much of the earliest proclamation of the Gospel took place in the synagogues. The Christians did not side with the Jews in their revolt

against Rome beginning in 66 A.D., and by the end of the first century the church had largely separated from the synagogue.

When a "church" wasn't a building

These early believers did not have church buildings to meet in. They met mostly in homes. The first church buildings did not start to appear until the early 200s.

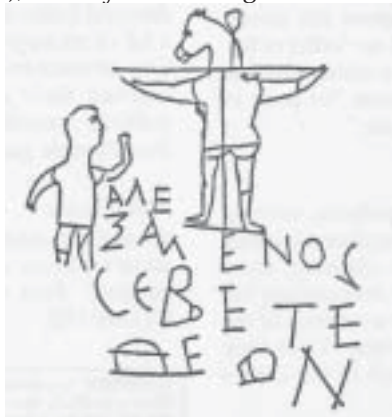
Debate but not denominations

The early church did not have denominations as we think of them today. But that does not mean they had no serious disagreements within the ranks. They did.

And they did not find this surprising. They felt they were dealing with matters of ultimate truth and error—matters to be taken with the utmost seriousness even when it meant dissension.

Persecution

The early Christians were the targets of repeated persecutions—some of unspeakable cruelty. For example, the emperor Nero



The Alexamenos graffiti from Palatine Hill, Rome. The first artistic representation of the crucifixion?

blamed the Christians for the great fire that destroyed 10 of the 14 city wards at Rome in 64 A.D., a fire that Nero apparently had ordered himself. The historian Tacitus, not a Christian, said that Nero had the believers "torn by dogs, nailed to crosses, . . . even used as human torches to illumine his gardens at night."

But Christians were not under persecution everywhere and all the time. The persecutions were sporadic, with peaceful intervals in between. They varied in their intensity and were mostly localized.

Just Get the Certificate!

There were two all-out empire-wide persecutions intended to utterly destroy the church. The first, under the emperor Decius, began in December, 249. Everyone in the empire had to get a certificate from a government officer verifying that he or she had offered a sacrifice to the gods—an act that most Christians in good conscience could not do.

The second, called "The Great Persecution," began on February 23, 303, under Emperor Diocletian. Galerius, the empire's second-in-command, was behind this persecution policy and continued it after Diocletian's death. For eight long years, official decrees ordered Christians out of public office, scriptures confiscated, church buildings destroyed, leaders arrested, and pagan sacrifices required. All the reliable methods of torture were mercilessly employed—wild beasts, burning, stabbing, crucifixion, the rack. But they were all to no avail. The penetration of the faith across the empire was so pervasive that the church could not be intimidated nor destroyed. In 311, the same Galerius, shortly before his death, weak and diseased, issued an "edict of toleration." This included the statement that it was the duty of Christians "to pray to their god for our good estate."

Baptism

The Christian writer Hippolytus, writing about 200 A.D., describes baptism at Rome. Candidates took off their clothing, were baptized three times after renouncing Satan and affirming the basic teachings of the faith, and put on new clothes. Then they joined the rest of the church in the Lord's Supper.

Baptism was not entered into lightly. First one went through an extensive period of preparation as a "catechumen." This lasted as long as three years, involving close scrutiny of the catechumen's behavior. The church would only admit those who proved to be sincere in seeking a totally new life within the Christian community.

Stats

Researcher David Barrett reports that by the year 300, or nine generations after Christ, the world was 10.4% Christian with 66.4% of believers Non-whites. The scriptures had been translated into ten languages. More than 410,000, representing one in every 200 believers from the time of Christ, had given their lives as martyrs for the faith.

Slave Makes Good!

Christians drew members into their fellowship from every rank and race, an affront to proper, class-conscious Romans. A former slave who had worked the mines actually became the bishop of Rome—Callistus in 217.

"Send me your letters and gifts"

Misusing the Gospel for financial gain is by no means the invention of 20th-century religious hucksters. One of the earliest Christian documents after the New Testament, "The Didache," a kind of manual on church practice, warns about traveling preachers who come and ask for money. The satirist Lucian in the second century ridiculed Christians for being so easily taken in by charlatans, often giving them money. Lucian recorded the notorious case of the philosopher Peregrinus, who attracted a devoted following among Christians (and a lot of money) before he was found out. The showman instincts of Peregrinus reached their climax when he died by publicly cremating himself at the close of the Olympic games in 165.

Next Time

What happened to the 12 apostles beyond what we know of them from the New Testament? Find out in the next edition of **GLIMPSES**.

Glimpses

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WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE TWELVE APOSTLES??

THEY WERE NOT the kind of group you might have expected Jesus to send forth on his mission to reach the world. There was nothing special or spectacular about them. They were just ordinary working men. But Jesus formed them into the backbone of the church and gave them the most extraordinary task imaginable: calling the entire world, including the mightiest empire ever known, to repentance and faith

in the risen Christ. You can be sure that any educated, first-century Roman citizen would have laughed at any prediction that within three centuries the Christian faith would be the official faith of the empire.

The New Testament tells of the fate of only two of the apostles: **Judas**, who betrayed Jesus and then went out and hanged himself, and **James** the son of Zebedee, who was executed by Herod about 44 A.D. (Acts 12:2).

Into All The World

Reports and legends abound and they are not always reliable, but it is safe to say that the apostles went far and wide as heralds of the message of the risen Christ. An early



The Calling of The Apostles Peter and Andrew. It wasn't from among the respected religious leaders in Jerusalem that Jesus called his Apostles but from ordinary workers in remote Galilee.

Painting by **DUCCIO di BUONINSEGNA** National Gallery of Art, Washington; Samuel H. Kress Collection Date 1308/ 1311

legend says they cast lots and divided up the world to determine who would go where, so all could hear about Jesus. They suffered greatly for their faith and in most cases met violent deaths on account of their bold witness.

PETER and **PAUL** were both martyred in Rome about 66 A.D., during the persecution under Emperor Nero. Paul was beheaded. Peter was crucified, upside down at his request, since he did not feel he was worthy to die

in the same manner as his Lord.

ANDREW went to the "land of the man-eaters," in what is now the Soviet Union. Christians there claim him as the first to bring the gospel to their land. He also preached in Asia Minor, modern-day Turkey, and in Greece, where he is said to have been crucified.

"Doubting" **THOMAS** was probably most active in the area east of Syria. Tradition has him preaching as far east as India, where the ancient Marthoma Christians revere him as their founder. They claim that he died there when pierced through with the spears of four soldiers.

THEY WENT IN EVERY DIRECTION AS HUMBLE MESSENGERS



The Apostles took The Gospel throughout the Roman Empire and even beyond its borders. Most met violent deaths because of their message of "Good News."

PHILIP possibly had a powerful ministry in Carthage in North Africa and then in Asia Minor, where he converted the wife of a Roman proconsul. In retaliation the proconsul had Philip arrested and cruelly put to death.

MATTHEW, the tax collector and writer of a Gospel, ministered in Persia and Ethiopia. Some of the oldest reports say he was not martyred, while others say he was stabbed to death in Ethiopia.

BARTHOLOMEW had widespread missionary travels attributed to him by tradition: to India with Thomas, back to Armenia, and also to Ethiopia and Southern Arabia. There are various accounts of how he met his death as a martyr for the gospel.

JAMES, the son of Alphaeus, is one of at least three Jameses referred to in the New Testament. There is some confusion as to which is which, but this James is reckoned to have ministered in Syria. The Jewish historian Josephus reported that he was stoned and then clubbed to death.

SIMON THE ZEALOT, so the story goes, ministered in Persia and was killed after refusing to sacrifice to the sun god.

MATTHIAS was the apostle chosen to replace Judas. Tradition sends him to Syria with Andrew and to death by burning.

JOHN is the only one of the company generally thought to have died a natural death from old age. He was the leader of the church in the Ephesus area and is said to

have taken care of Mary the mother of Jesus in his home. During Domitian's persecution in the middle 90's, he was exiled to the island of Patmos. There he is credited with writing the last book of the New Testament—the Revelation. An early Latin tradition has him escaping unhurt after being cast into boiling oil at Rome.

For Pete's sake

The names of Jesus' apostles have become the most common names for males in the Western world. How many do you know named John, Pete, Tom, Andy, Jim, Bart or Phil?

None of the apostles were called from the priesthood or the "professional clergy" of Jesus day.

At least four of the apostles were fishermen. Can this be part of the reason that one of the earliest and most prominent Christian symbols was the fish? The Greek word for fish, *ichthus*, formed an acrostic: **I**esous **C**hristos **T**heou **U**ios **S**oter, which means "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior."

After the death of the apostles, we do not find great missionary figures of the stature of Paul. Yet the faith continued to spread like wildfire—even though Christianity was declared an illegal religion. Learn more of "How the Young Church Spread" next time in **GLIMPSES**.

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Glimpses

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Against All Odds The Spread of the Early Church

HOW did the early Christian church survive? Humanly speaking, the odds were all stacked against it.

It was unthinkable that a small, despised movement from a corner of Palestine could move out to become the dominant faith of the mighty Roman Empire, an empire steeped in fiercely defended traditional pagan religions.

The spread of the Christian church in its earliest centuries is one of the most amazing phenomena in all of human history. The church was considered a *religio prava*—an illegal and depraved religion. Wave after wave of persecution was unleashed to squash it. At least two of the persecutions were empire-wide and intended to destroy the church. So how did this young fledgling movement make it?

More than a building

The earliest Christians did not have church buildings. They typically met in homes. (The first actual church building to be found is at Dura Europos on the Euphrates, dating about 231.) They did not have public ceremonies that would introduce them to the public. They had no access to the mass media of their day. So how can we account for their steady and diverse expansion over the first three centuries?



JUSTIN MARTYR, a leading second century Apologist for the faith, was a pagan philosopher who was converted to Christ through the witness of an old man by the seashore. Justin wrote vigorously to clear up misunderstandings of the faith by Christianity's opponents. He was martyred at Rome about 165.

After the Apostle Paul, we do not run across many “big names” as missionaries in the first few hundred years of Christian history. Instead the faith spread through a multitude of humble, ordinary believers whose names have been long forgotten.

To the cities!

Early Christianity was primarily an urban faith, establishing itself in the city centers of the Roman Empire. Most of the people lived close together in crowded tenements. There were few secrets in such a setting. The faith spread as neighbors saw the lives of the believers close-up, on a daily basis.

And what kind of lives did they lead? Justin Martyr, a noted early Christian theologian, wrote to Emperor Antoninus Pius and described the believers: “We formerly rejoiced in uncleanness of life, but now love only chastity; before we used the magic arts, but now dedicate ourselves to the true and unbegotten God; before we loved money and possessions more than anything, but now we share what we have and to everyone who is in need; before we hated one another and killed one another and would not eat with those of another race, but now since the manifestation of Christ, we have come to a common life and pray for our enemies and try to win over those who hate us without just cause.”

“Our Father”

Perhaps we can better understand the remarkable spread of the faith by remembering what a jolt it must have been to the Roman world for the early Christians to come teaching about God as "Our Father." In that world, people felt, like so many do today, they were at the mercy of fate, victims of chance, dependent on luck, their destiny determined by blind astrological forces. By contrast, Christian believers witnessed to a personal God who could be approached as "our Father." This radical idea liberated those who were captive to fatalistic resignation.

An indirect testimony to the importance of this is perhaps found in this mysterious Latin word square that has been found in many places from England to Mesopotamia. Two were found at Pompeii which would have to date back to before 79 AD when the city was destroyed. See how the words can be spelled forwards and backwards in any column or line.

R O T A S

O P E R A

T E N E T

A R E P O

S A T O R

The letters can be rearranged in a cross to Paternoster ("Our Father" in Latin) twice with "A" and "O" left over. These are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet - Alpha and Omega, a New Testament designation of Christ

A

P

A

T

E

R

A PATERNOSTER O

O

S

T

E

R

O

In another place Justin points out how those opposed to Christianity were sometimes won over as they saw the consistency in the lives of believers, noting their extraordinary forbearance when cheated, and their honesty in business dealings.

Care and Prayer

Christians became known as those who cared for the sick. Many were known for the healings that resulted from their prayers. Christians perhaps also started the first "Meals on Wheels." By the year 250, they were feeding more than 1500 of the hungry and destitute in Rome every day.

When Emperor Julian ("the Apostate") wanted to revive pagan religion in the mid-300s, he gave a most helpful insight into how the church spread. This opponent of the faith said that Christianity "has been specially advanced through the loving service rendered to strangers and through their care of the burial of the dead. It is a scandal that there is not a single Jew who is a beggar and that the [Christians] care not only for their own poor but for ours as well; while those who belong to us look in vain for the help we should render them."

On the surface, the early Christians appeared powerless and weak, they were an easy target for scorn and ridicule. They had no great financial resources, no buildings, no social status, no government approval, no respect from the educators. And after

they became separated from their first-century association with the Jewish synagogues, they lacked that institutional setting and ancient tradition to appeal to.

But what finally mattered is what they did have. They had a faith. They had a fellowship. They had a new way of life. They had a confidence that their Lord was alive in heaven and guiding their daily lives. These were the important things. And it made all the difference in laying a Christian foundation for all of Western civilization.

In many ways the spread of Christianity in our present generation is as amazing as in the first three centuries. For example, over the past 40 years the church under the communist regime in China has multiplied many times over. Despite official opposition, they have developed a rapidly spreading network of house churches that is reminiscent of the early church. This success is mirrored in many other places around the globe.

Next time in GLIMPSES

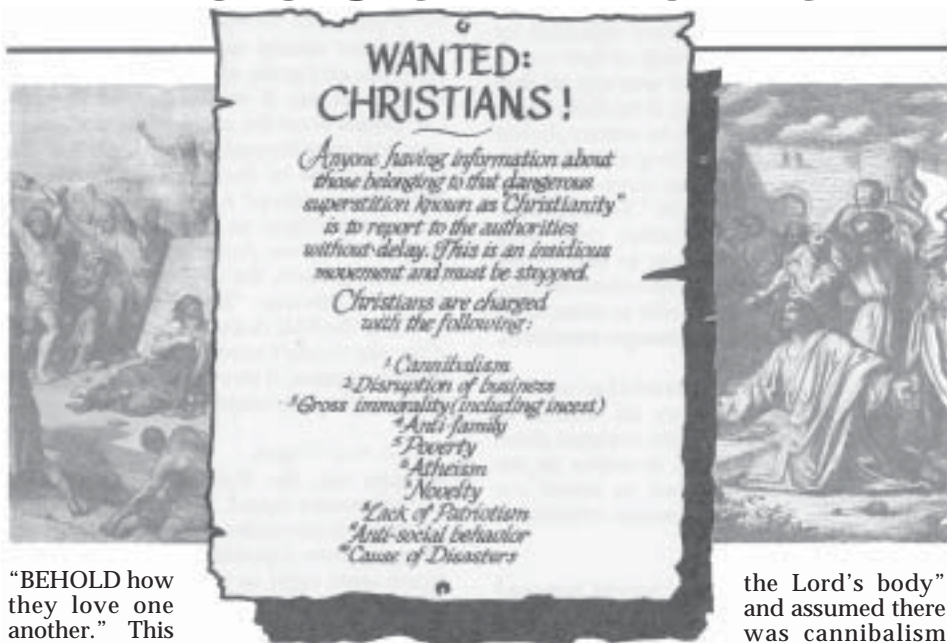
Why were the Christians, whose distinctive was love, so hated and opposed by the Roman Empire? What were the accusations hurled against them? Some will surprise you.

Glimpses

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A C C U S A T I O N S



"BEHOLD how they love one another." This was a hallmark of the early Christians. Yet these same believers were the object of repeated persecutions and oppression for almost the first 300 years. Why were the believers so hated in the Roman Empire? What were they guilty of? What were the charges against them?

Before you read any further, look at the "Wanted" poster that we made up. Put a check in front of those that you think the Christians were actually *accused of*. Put an X in front of those you do *not* think they were accused of. Circle the ones that you think they were *actually guilty of*.

1. Cannibalism. The Roman world could not understand the communion or Eucharist. They heard references to "partaking of

the Lord's body" and assumed there was cannibalism going on behind

closed doors. This accusation didn't last long, as the Christians were able to show that it was bread and wine—not human flesh—they were using.

2. Disruption of business. Guilty as charged. In some places the growth of the church hurt the income of the pagan religions by curtailing their sale of animals and sacrificial meat. (See also the disruption caused in Acts 19:21ff.)

3. Gross immorality including incest. The believers called each other "brother" and "sister" and professed love for one another. The pagans assumed this had to involve lust and immorality. The exemplary lives of Christians eventually put this accusation to rest.

Here are the answers for the quiz on the front side. Every item should have a check, and none an X. Numbers 2,5, and 9 could be said to be true in a sense, and therefore could have a circle.

4. Anti-Family. There was an element of truth in this charge. When one became a believer, he or she was welcomed into the family of Christ. This new family became the Christian's deepest commitment. The new faith also typically made believers better family members than they had been before. But when a conflict came up between their natural family and the family of Christ, first loyalty was to Christ.

5. Poverty. Christians were ridiculed by the pagans because so many of their number were poor. Their god was not all that good, the pagans figured, if he didn't care that they were poor. And he wasn't all that great if he didn't do anything about it. The Christians countered that there were advantages to "traveling light." Wealth could become a snare, and, besides, they were rich in what counted most in life. They somehow not only managed to find enough to get by, but were even able to share with others in need out of their meager resources.

6. Atheism. The Roman world had a multitude of gods, and statues all around to represent them. Christians insisted there was only one true God, invisible in the heavens, and they refused to honor the Roman gods. Thus the Romans considered them atheists.

7. Novelty. The Roman world honored tradition and the ancient religions were revered because they were old. Christianity was accused of being a new upstart. Traditional Romans feared that converts were merely seduced by the novelty of this new faith. Christians countered that they were heirs of Judaism, an ancient faith the Romans recognized. Besides that, the Christians claimed they were the most ancient faith of all—they worshiped the God who existed before creation.

8. Lack of Patriotism. There was no distinction between church and state in the Roman Empire. All civic festivals were religious. It was expected that all would participate and thank the gods for their blessings to the empire. Christians would not participate because it would imply they were worshiping gods they denied. This would be idolatry. Further, Christians would not join the army because they did

not believe in killing. So there was some validity to this charge, yet Christians affirmed their loyalty to the state, prayed for the emperor, and lived lives as exemplary citizens.

9. Anti-social behavior. This was related to the charge above, since the Christians would not participate in the civic festivals nor involve themselves in what they considered immoral behavior. Many Romans resented their independence and their conviction that they were "in the world but not of the world." So Christians were often scorned and charged with anti-social behavior.

10. Cause of Disasters. Because the Christians would not honor the Roman religions and gods, when flood, famine, or disaster came, it was assumed that the Christians were the cause. The gods were sending punishment, many Romans figured, because of the Christians' atheism. This charge played a large role in the notable persecution at Lyons in 177 under Emperor Marcus Aurelius. Satirizing the prevailing view, the church father Tertullian put it this way: "If the Tiber reaches the walls, if the Nile does not rise to the fields, if the sky doesn't move or the earth does, if there is famine, if there is plague, the cry is at once: The Christians to the lion."

Yes, A real Threat

As you see, the Romans perceived the Christians as a threat. That is why they had so many accusations. While many of the charges were frivolous and false, the Romans were right in perceiving the threat. Christianity did pose a mortal danger to many of the most deeply held assumptions of the Roman world. In what ways does our present society see the church as a threat? What are their charges against us? Which are valid and which are not?

Next Time

How would you feel if you were forcibly arrested, dragged before a raging crowd, and ordered to blaspheme your God? If you refused, you would burn at the stake. This is what happened to a second-century bishop named Polycarp. He remained a peaceful and powerful witness to the Lord. Read about it next time in *GLIMPSES*.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 43: How We Got Our Bible, Canon to King James

A Testament Is Born

Could Matthew take shorthand?—and other intriguing reasons the New Testament may have emerged surprisingly early.

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“But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger” (John 8:6).

Here, in the story of the adulteress, we learn that Jesus knew how to write. But Jesus was a teacher, not a writer—it was left to others to write down what he said. Yet literacy was something Jesus could take for granted. The ability to write fluently and intelligibly was widespread in ancient Israel, almost as widespread as the ability to memorize long and complicated texts.

In other words, Jesus could count on this: among his followers there would be a number of people capable not only of memorizing what he said, but also of writing it down.

Furthermore, Jesus and the people around him could use more than one language. Aramaic was commonly used in daily life, Hebrew in religious life, particularly in worship and the reading of Scripture (e.g., Luke 4:16–30).

But people were aware of a third language, that of the eastern Roman Empire: Greek. Recent investigations have shown that even orthodox Jews used Greek in everyday dealings with each other—we see it, for instance, in tombstone inscriptions and in handwritten notes passed between defenders of the Masada fortress.

Jesus himself used Greek: in the dialogue with the Greek-speaking Syrian Phoenician woman (Mark 7:24–30), and in the dispute about paying taxes to Caesar (Mark 12:13–17), which relies on a wordplay that works only in Greek.

But (and this is a fairly recent insight of scholarship) the first stages of a literary tradition may have been instantaneous with Jesus’ ministry—and they could have been surprisingly precise. Shorthand writing (“tachygraphy”) was known in Israel and in the Greco-Roman world. We find a first trace of it in the Greek translation of Psalm 45:1 (third century B.C.): “My tongue is the pen of a skillful writer”—literally, “a stenographer.”

Such a skill was highly necessary. Writing material was scarce: leather or parchment was highly priced; papyrus was dependent on import. Writers often were forced to use pot shards or wax tablets, which had limited room for detailed texts. Shorthand writing was the most practical remedy.

There was even a man among Jesus’ entourage who was professionally qualified to write shorthand: Levi-Matthew, the customs official. Indeed, if Levi-Matthew had heard the Sermon on the Mount before he was called by Jesus (and could react so swiftly to this call because he had already been convinced by that sermon), one may have in Matthew 5 through 7 a direct result of a shorthand protocol.

Whatever the exact reconstruction of the earliest stages may be, we do know from the prologue to Luke’s Gospel that there were more literary sources he could use than just the completed Gospels of Matthew and

Mark: "**Many have undertaken to draw up an account** of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word" (Luke 1:1–2).

In sum, though there exist theological theories about the long and slow development of the Gospels in certain ancient communities, some historical evidence suggests the first followers of Jesus may have handed down his teaching in written form.

Christian Libraries

Early Christians soon gathered such writings. They were profoundly interested in the literary world. Occasionally, they talk about it with humor: "Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written" (John 21:25). Or they ask for writing material: "When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, and my scrolls, especially the parchments" (2 Tim. 4:13). Or they are seen in the process of writing: "Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches" (Rev. 1:11).

So well acquainted were they with a literary tradition, literature was used in symbolic ways: "The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up ... " (Rev. 6:14).

This advanced interest in writing had an obvious consequence: texts had to be collected in archives and libraries, and even in stores from which copies could be ordered and supplied. Christians from a Jewish background would have known the collected scrolls of the Torah, the Prophets, the Psalms, and so forth. Those of Greco-Roman background would have known the collections of philosophers and poets like Aratus, Cleanthes, Menander, Euripides, and others, to which Paul alludes in his letters and speeches.

The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls helps us to understand how Jews and Jewish Christians organized their libraries.

There were three types of books: copies of Holy Scripture (what we now call the Old Testament), commentaries on Scripture, and theological writings.

For Christians, the first Scriptures they thrived on were the Law and the Prophets. These were copied and distributed since they provided the sources for one vital ingredient of the Christian message: the suffering and redemption of Jesus the Messiah had been predicted many centuries earlier.

Collected Letters

But how should Christians interpret these sources? How should they put them into practice? How should they integrate them into the life and teachings of Jesus?

Interpretation, first of all, was given in major speeches—like those of Peter at Pentecost, and those of Stephen and Paul—collected and edited by Luke in the Acts of the Apostles, the sequel to his Gospel.

More important, there were the letters, all of which in one way or another interpret Old Testament stories, people, and prophecies. Some of them—like Paul's letter to the Romans, the anonymous letter to the Hebrews, or the two letters of Peter and the letter of Jude—depend on a good knowledge of the Old Testament and other Jewish texts.

Early Christian letters, in fact, were the first documents distributed as collections. We find a trace of this in the New Testament itself. At the end of Peter's second letter, we read, "Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave

him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters." The statement presupposes a collection of Paul's letters, though not necessarily a complete collection.

Some recent scholarship has begun to "redate" 2 Peter to the lifetime of Peter (rather than regard it as a second-century work of one of Peter's disciples); following that dating, an initial collection of letters would have existed in the mid-sixties of the first century. That makes sense: Paul's surviving letters had all been written by then.

A few years ago, Young-Kyu Kim, a papyrologist at Göttingen University, demonstrated, I think conclusively, that p46 (an early collection of Paul's letters) should no longer be dated about a.d. 200, as it has commonly been. Instead, Kim showed, with a variety of evidence, that it should be dated to the late first century—in other words, to the lifetime of people like John and other "survivors" of the first Christian generation.

The Final Four

And the Gospels? Again, more can be said today than a few years ago. Martin Hengel of Tübingen University, one of the world's leading New Testament scholars, provided some new insights into the process of collecting the Gospels.

Look at a modern book on a library shelf—you glean the author's name from the spine. In New Testament times, there were no spines, since books existed in scrolls. No matter how these scrolls were stored, you would merely see the "top end," with a handle. In order to identify the contents, little parchment or leather strips (called *sittiboi*) were attached to the handle.

Since space was scarce, if there existed just one book on a given subject, only the title would be given. For the Gospels, as long as there was only one, the *sittibos* would have said, *Euangelion*, that is "Good News," or "Good News of Jesus Christ." But the very moment a second Gospel came into existence, differentiation became necessary; the first and the second Gospel would have carried the name of the authors—"according to Mark," "according to Matthew," and so on.

Thus, long before the end of the first century, there was—of necessity—a systematic approach to identifying the authors *and* cataloguing their works.

By the beginning of the second century, the number of the Gospels and the names of their authors were therefore well established. Our first literary source is Papias, writing at about A.D. 110. None of the later so-called gospels existed yet—neither the Gospel of Thomas, nor that of Nicodemus, of James, nor whomever. Papias knows and accepts the earliest Gospels, and he gives us some anecdotal information about their authors.

For instance, he calls Mark "stubble-fingered"—what on earth does that mean? What does he mean when he tells us that Mark was the *hermeneutes* of Peter? Interpreter? Translator? Editor? The word could mean all three.

Or what does it mean when Papias writes that Matthew compiled the *logia* (sayings) of Jesus *en hebraidi dialecto* (in Hebrew/Aramaic dialect)? In Hebrew/Aramaic style but in the Greek language? Could he have known about Levi-Matthew's shorthand notes of Jesus' public addresses (i.e., *logia*)?

The brief quotes from Papias's works leave many a question unanswered. The gist of it, however, remains: Papias of Hierapolis knew about a collection of Gospels as early as the beginning of the second century—and this implies the existence of such a collection at an even earlier stage. In other words, he appears to corroborate what we now know about Paul's letters from the redating of that papyrus codex p46.

Some seventy years later, about 180, Irenaeus offers one other item that has stimulated scholarly debate. He gives for the first time the order of the four Gospels as we have it today: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. In addition, he tells us that Mark's Gospel was written after the "exodus" of Peter and Paul.

This word has been used as a tool for dating the Gospel; for if *exodus* means "death," as the majority of critics have assumed, then a.d. 67, the probable date of Paul's and Peter's martyrdoms, would be the earliest possible date for Mark.

Exodus, however, can also mean "departure"—as in the title of the second book of the Old Testament. Does Irenaeus imply a departure of Peter and Paul from Rome some time before their eventual return and martyrdom?

Only a couple of years ago, an American scholar, E. Earle Ellis, provided an important part of the answer. He analyzed every single work of Irenaeus, and he discovered that Irenaeus never uses *exodus* when he means "death." For "death," he always employs the unequivocal Greek word *thanatos*. Thus, Mark's Gospel was probably written not after the *deaths* of Peter and Paul but after their *departure* from Rome—some time before.

Other New Testaments

Much like today, early Christians had their favorite texts, and occasionally, letters or even whole Gospels remained unused in certain regions. Second Peter, for example, was read almost exclusively in its "target area," northern Asia Minor. Clement of Rome, writing in about a.d. 96 (perhaps several decades earlier) is the first known author to have quoted from this letter. Communities elsewhere in the Roman Empire had not even heard of it, let alone read it initially. When it finally reached them, some uttered doubts about its apostolic authorship. (However, Origen, the third-century theologian and philologist, stated that Peter had proclaimed the gospel of Christ on "the twin trumpets of his two letters.")

Or take Mark's Gospel—it may, in all likelihood, have been the first full Gospel ever completed. But Matthew's longer, story-and-speech Gospel soon became more popular, and thus we know of more manuscript fragments of Matthew than of Mark.

It isn't surprising, then, that some people began collecting and arranging Christian writings in peculiar ways. A man called Marcion arrived in Rome in about A.D. 140 and developed a pseudo-Christian idea of God and Christ. That led him to exclude those early apostolic writings that highlighted the physical resurrection of Christ and the Jewish roots of Christianity. In the end, all he accepted was a severely condensed version of Luke (without the Nativity scenes and the detailed Resurrection appearances), and ten of Paul's letters. Soon enough, he and his followers were condemned as heretics, and their movement eventually petered out.

Narrowing the List

Marcion, however misguided, did force the church to consider more formally which books should make up the New Testament.

In this process, the church never gave in to the temptation to "harmonize" the documents. The four Gospels—with their different emphases, narratives, speeches—were seen not as an embarrassing multitude but as complementary, as the God-given fullness of reports by human beings with their individualities. They were never seen, as Marcion saw them, as contradictory, and therefore in need of editing.

To give another example: early Christians were perceptive enough to notice that the letter of Jude had taken over large chunks from 2 Peter (or vice-versa). But they were also intelligent enough to realize that

this provided an insight into the way letters were used and applied during the first generations.

Nor was Martin Luther the first to notice that Paul, with his emphasis on faith, appeared to see things in a different light from James, who stresses the importance of works. The early Christians preferred to see these themes as complementary. "Unity in diversity"—this may be a description of the yardstick applied to the collection that grew into our New Testament.

But where to end? How extensive should that diverse collection finally be? Which books and letters should be used in services? In particular, what about such writings as the second-century Didache, or the Letter of Barnabas, the Shepherd of Hermas, or the two letters to the Corinthians once attributed to Clement of Rome?

Eusebius of Caesarea, writing at the beginning of the fourth century, surveyed the state of things. He pretty much confirmed the contents of a fragmentary list from about a.d. 200, a list called "Canon Muratori." Eusebius says that some texts are still under debate in some churches—the letters of James and Jude, the second letter of Peter, the second and third letters of John, and Revelation. Though he does not share such doubts himself, he is adamant that the Shepherd of Hermas, the Apocalypse of Peter, the Acts of Paul, the Letter of Barnabas and the Didache are "not genuine," that is, not of truly apostolic origin.

A few decades after Eusebius, the *Codex Vaticanus*, a Greek volume of both Old and New Testaments, contained the complete New Testament as we have it today; but only slightly later, *Codex Sinaiticus* still included the Letter of Barnabas and the Shepherd of Hermas. Later still, toward the end of the fourth century, the *Codex Alexandrinus* excluded the Shepherd and Barnabas, but had the two letters of Clement instead.

In other words, even major, official codices, expensive to make and therefore produced with at least regional authority, continued to show a certain degree of freedom of choice beyond the agreed core of the 27 writings. It was an individual who finally helped clarify things.

Unshakable Consensus

In 367, Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, used the opportunity of his annual Easter Festal Letter (a letter to all the churches and monasteries under his jurisdiction) to explain what the Old Testament and New Testament should consist of. In terms of the New Testament, he listed the same 27 texts we have today, and he wrote, "These are the 'springs of salvation,' so that anyone who is thirsty may be satisfied with the messages contained in them. Only in them is the teaching of true religion proclaimed as the 'Good News.' Let no one add to these or take anything away from them."

Athanasius then says that the Shepherd of Hermas and the Teaching of the Apostles (the Didache) are "indeed not included in the canon." He does say, however, that they are helpful reading for new converts.

Athanasius's list did not settle the matter everywhere. In the West, variations remained possible, and as we have seen, a codex like Alexandrinus could, decades after the Festal Letter, happily include two letters the bishop did not even mention. But by the early 400s, the consensus of tradition was more or less established.

In a letter in 414, Jerome appears to accept the New Testament books listed by Athanasius—a list that corresponds to today's New Testament. But Jerome thinks the Letter of Barnabas should also be included, since the author was the companion of Paul and an apostle. But, and this is important, while agreeing to differ, Jerome accepted what had come to be the consensus. In other words, Jerome confirms that by the beginning of the fifth century, the canon of the New Testament had achieved a kind of solemn, unshakable status; it could not be altered, even if one had different opinions.

Since Jerome's time, the canon of our New Testament has been approved by history, tradition, and worship. In spite of some scholarly attempts to exclude or add some books, these 27 books have remained a non-negotiable nucleus of Christianity worldwide.

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