

# No Other Foundation: A History of the Church, part 1

## Christ and Caesar - The Church in the Roman Empire, 100-500 AD

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When our Lord Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea he was born into a world dominated by a power known to subsequent ages as the Roman Empire . In the century following Jesus' birth the Empire would reach its furthest limits and stretch from the moors of Scotland and forests of Germany to the sands of the Sahara and waters of the Tigris and the Euphrates . The monuments of its temporal glory are still with us, testimonies to its historical greatness. Hadrian's Wall still stands guard in Northern England . Moss-covered now and hardly a wall, it was once a mighty bulwark against the ferocious Picts. At Bath , in the West Country of England, the engineering genius of the Romans can still be seen in the tremendous complex of baths they built over natural hot springs . Where the city of Lyons now stands, over a hundred mosaic floors have been unearthed. They are all that now remains of luxurious suburban villas that once were equipped with central heating and frescoed rooms for gourmet dining, with fresh running water supplied by four stupendous aqueducts.

The Empire encompassed some 60-70 million in the Mediterranean basin--Celts, Berbers, Italians, Greeks, Syrians, Egyptians, Arabians, Thracians, and many more people groups. Numerous customs, languages, and traditions peppered the countryside, for the Empire never ceased to be an amalgam of the various peoples whom the Romans had conquered.

For all its diversity, however, the Empire boasted important marks of unity. Latin was the official language in the western part of the Empire, Greek in the east. Knowledge of those two tongues alone could carry a person all the way from Britain to Mesopotamia , a remarkable fact when one considers the map of Europe and the Middle East today. All government business and legal matters were conducted in Latin or Greek. The army, the source of Roman hegemony, needed a single common language and thus insisted on Latin throughout its ranks. Many educated Romans were bilingual, though in the final days of the Empire, as troubles began to gnaw at its foundations, fewer people could afford the luxury of learning a second language.

Ninety per cent or so of the inhabitants of the Empire lived in the countryside, and not surprisingly were deeply resistant to change. It is not without significance that the term "pagan" comes from the Latin *paganus* , "country dweller." Early Christianity was primarily an urban religion, first planted in the large cities and only slowly penetrating the countryside.

For most people in the Empire, male or female, life was not easy. Historians estimate that two per cent were wealthy, a mere eight per cent were middle-class, and the remaining ninety per cent lived a hand-to-mouth existence. These are sobering statistics. Perhaps hardest for us to fathom is the tremendous gulf that existed between rich and poor. The upper class was stupendously wealthy. Some of their estates spanned thousands of acres, each with several thousand slaves tilling the soil. One ranch alone in south-eastern Italy boasted 250,000 sheep, an impressive operation by any estimate. The first emperor, Augustus Caesar (r.27 B.C.-14 A.D.), himself owned all of Egypt--taken after his well-remembered defeat of Cleopatra and Mark Antony--not to mention his other vast estates and plantations dotted throughout the Empire. The poor, on the other hand, either crowded into the cities that hugged the Mediterranean shoreline or sought employment as tenant farmers on the estates of the rich.

One final point that needs to be noted is that the Empire was a military dictatorship. The Emperors maintained their power by the support of the army. This would have great significance for the Church as we shall see.

## **The Growth of the Church**

Now, sociologist Rodney Stark has estimated that Christianity grew in the first three centuries from roughly a few thousand believers c. 40 A.D., comprising .0017% of the population--based on an estimated population of 60 million--to over 6,000,000 by 300 A.D., roughly 10.5% of the total population, assuming the size of the population remained fairly stable. [1]

This rapid growth of the Christian faith is perhaps nowhere better illustrated than by the words of the North African, Latin-speaking Christian, Tertullian (fl.190-215), who could write, albeit with some exaggeration, in his Apology 37.4:

Christians are scattered...over the whole world... We are but of yesterday, yet we have filled every place among you--cities, islands, fortresses, towns, marketplaces,... town councils, the palace, the senate, the forum; we have left nothing to you but the temples of your gods. [2]

In the middle of the next century, Origen could write without fear of contradiction that there was a "multitude of people coming to the faith." [3]

Numerous reasons could be given for such growth. Prominent among them would be:

- The power of the Scriptures to give new life. [4]
- The proclamation and verbal sharing of God's grace and forgiveness. As a twentieth-century historian of the early Church, Henry Chadwick, puts it:

"The Christian gospel spoke of divine grace in Christ, the remission of sins and the conquest of evil powers for the sick soul, tired of living and scared of dying, seeking for an assurance of immortality and for security and freedom in a world where the individual could rarely do other than submit to his fate." [5]

- "Lived witness": What do I mean by "lived witness"? Well expressed by the Apostle Peter in 1 Peter 3:1-2. [6] The lifestyle of Christians, one of warmth and light, love and truth, was a powerful evangelistic medium.

- Prayer for the salvation of unbelievers. As Augustine once said:

"When has the Church not prayed for infidels, or for her enemies, that they might believe? When has a Christian, having a pagan friend, relative or spouse, not begged the Lord to grant him a humble acceptance of the Faith? Such a prayer implies a strong belief, and in it the Church was born, in it she has grown and continues to grow." [7]

## **Persecution**

One other way in which the Church bore witness to her faith was in the fires of persecution and martyrdom. The New Testament word for "witness" (as found, for example, in Acts 1:8) is *martys*, from which we derive directly the English word *martyr*. In fact, by the end of the New Testament era this word had come to mean what we mean by *martyr* --someone who gives their life for their faith in Christ. See Revelation 2:13.

In the New Testament period persecution comes mostly from the Jewish Temple leaders and the synagogue. By the time of the Jewish War (66-73 A.D.), the main persecutor of the Church is the Roman State. From 64-312 A.D. the Roman state engaged in frequent, though never continuous, persecution of the church. The main reason for this persecution is not hard to see. The Roman Empire, as we have noted, was a military dictatorship, and as such could not tolerate the non-conformity of Christians who refused to do what all of the other inhabitants of the Empire did, offer worship to Caesar. Other reasons for this persecution mentioned by the Romans included:

- The claim that Christians were "atheists"
- The charge of hatred of the human race
- The charge of cannibalism and incest -- resulting from a misunderstanding about the Lord's Table and Christian speech about agape.

A good example of a persecution narrative is found in the account of the martyrdom of Vibia Perpetua in 202 in Carthage , North Africa , a major centre of Christian growth. Perpetua was but twenty-two, a "member of the urban upper middle classes, whose family may have held an estate near Carthage ." [8] She can speak Greek, [9] which indicates a fair degree of education for she was living in Latin-speaking Africa , and she appears to be "an adored only daughter." [10] See The Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas 3, 6. No wonder Tertullian, an early Christian author living at the same time as Perpetua and in the same city, Carthage , as she, could say: "the blood of the martyrs is [the] seed [of the Church]."

## **Two Heresies**

Attacks also from within: heresy. Heresy is a denial of a fundamental of the Christian faith such as the deity of Christ or the doctrine of the Trinity or justification by faith alone. Two major heresies fought in the early Church.

First, there was Gnosticism--battled from the 60s AD well into the third century. It can be described thus:

Gnosticism was the belief in a radical dualism of spirit and matter. Spirit was divine and wholly good. Matter was irredeemably evil. Through a cosmic upheaval, spirit became trapped in matter--human souls trapped in human bodies. Since this entrapment was hidden, liberation required knowledge ( gnosis ), which in turn required a saviour like Jesus to reveal it. [11]

Embedded in this description are the following convictions:

- The conviction that the material realm is inherently evil and the spiritual realm inherently good.
- The belief that salvation came through knowledge not faith. This saving knowledge entailed recognition of the supposedly divine element within one's being which constituted the real self, the realization that within one's being is a divine spark. It is fascinating to note that this line of thinking is not too dissimilar from that of some modern New Age devotees.
- For most Gnostics, though not all, this work of enlightenment is the work of Jesus. But the Gnostic Jesus is quite a different person from the incarnate Son of God of the New Testament. Christ's incarnation, his death and resurrection are downplayed, even rejected, and emphasis placed on Jesus as a teacher.
- Finally, there was a great concern with freedom:
- Freedom from biblical morality, which resulted in either strict asceticism or libertine indulgence.
- Freedom from what the Gnostics regarded as the tyranny of creation, which was based upon a completely pessimistic view of the created realm as inherently evil.
- And freedom from the Old Testament and the God of creation who is proclaimed therein.

In response, Christians stressed the goodness of creation and the human body, in particular, the incarnation of the Saviour, Jesus Christ, and the canonicity of the Old Testament.

The other heresy was fought in the fourth century and was known as Arianism, named after Arius (fl. 318-336). It denied the doctrine of the Trinity, which had been the implicit bedrock of the church's

faith. Until the beginning of the fourth century an implicit Trinitarianism prevailed in the Church. Numerous examples of this fact could be cited beyond what we have already examined. Let the three following suffice.

- The first is a portion of a third-century hymn discovered in the 1920s at Oxyrhynchus in Egypt, a few miles west of the Nile.

May none of God's wonderful works  
keep silence, night or morning.  
Bright stars, high mountains, the depths of the seas,  
sources of rushing rivers:  
may all these break into song as we sing  
to Father, Son and Holy Spirit.  
May all the angels in the heavens reply.  
Amen! Amen! Amen!  
Power, praise, honour, eternal glory to God,  
the only Giver of grace.  
Amen! Amen! Amen! [12]

- The second is found in the Martyrdom of Polycarp (c. 155), in which the bishop of Smyrna concludes his prayer prior to his martyrdom thus:

"O Lord God Almighty... I bless you and glorify you through our eternal and heavenly high priest Jesus Christ, your beloved Son, through whom be glory to you, with Him and the Holy Spirit, both now and forever." [13]

- A third text comes from the writings of Gregory Thaumaturgus (c. 210/215- c. 270/275), who studied under Origen (c. 185-254) and later was an evangelist in the region of Pontus in what is now Turkey. In a small treatise written for a certain Philagrius, and which is extant only in a Syriac translation, Gregory could declare:

"[T]he divine and indivisible substance of God is undivided and single in form; ...[but] the Son is never divided from the Father, not the Holy Spirit again from the latter...For as no division or cleft is conceived of between mind and idea and soul, so neither is cleft or division conceived of between the Holy Spirit and the Saviour and the Father..." [14]

The best minds of Christianity were employed in fighting Arianism:

- Athanasius, the native Egyptian, for example, who rightly recognized that if Christ be not fully God, we cannot be saved, for a creature cannot redeem a creature.
- Basil of Caesarea, who defended the deity of the Holy Spirit.
- Ambrose of Milan (d. 397), the man whom God used to bring Augustine to Christ. Consider his hymn:

All praise to God the Father be,  
All praise, eternal Son, to thee,  
Whom with the Spirit we adore  
For ever and for evermore.

- Augustine of Hippo, the greatest theologian of the early Church after the Apostle Paul, who argued that "the Holy Spirit is in a certain sense the ineffable communion of the Father and the Son." Not only is he the Gift of both the Father and the Son. He also binds them together in love. The Spirit, he could say, is "the Spirit of both [the Father and the Son], and therefore, he suggests to us the common love by which the Father and the Son mutually love each other." And that is why the Spirit can make known to

us the love of the father for sinners in the crucified Christ: he is the love of the Father.

## **Augustine**

There are three great gifts of the Early Church to the church that comes after: 1) the canon; 2) the developed doctrine of the Trinity; and 3) the writings of Augustine.

By the time that Augustine was born, the Church was fast becoming the legal religion of the Roman Empire . Christianity had become tolerated under Constantine , and in 381 it was declared the state religion. This radically changed the situation for the Church. Augustine was born on November 13, 354, the son--perhaps the eldest, we know of a brother Navigius and a sister--of a pagan father, Patricius, and Christian mother, Monica. The fourth century was an age of mixed marriages at this level of society, in which devout Christian women like Monica were often to be found praying for the conversion of their irreligious husbands and their children. Augustine would later attribute his conversion to God's grace answering his mother's prayers.

Augustine studied first at Thagaste, and afterwards at Carthage , where he went to university in 371 at the age of 17. He was to remain there until 383. His father, who became a believer late in life, seems to have had little influence on his son. On the other hand, his mother Monica was a devout Christian, one whose prayers were used of God to bring her son to Christ. [15]

Before he left for Carthage , Monica warned him earnestly not to engage in fornication and above all never to contemplate committing the sin of adultery. But, Augustine said, "I went to Carthage , where I found myself in the midst of a hissing cauldron of lust... My real need was for you, my God, who are the food of the soul. I was not aware of this hunger."

In his first year at Carthage Augustine led what many might regard as a typical life of a student: enjoying the bawdy theatre of the day, using sex in search of love, consorting with a group called the Eversores --"the Smashers." Within two years all had changed though. He had taken a concubine to live with--this arrangement was not regarded as scandalous by pagan Roman society, since many pagans of the upper and middle classes would have such an arrangement with a social inferior until the complicated arrangements for a financially advantageous match with some girl of their own class could be made. [16] He had a son by her--Adeodatus ("Gift from God"). And he had been smitten by a desire to find the truth. Thus began a long search in which he never considered Christianity until many years had passed.

In 383, at the age of 28, Augustine moved to Rome to reach the apex of his career ambitions. But in Rome everything went wrong: his health began to suffer, the students would not pay their fees, and soon he became quite discouraged. Finally, hearing of a professorship in Milan he moved to northern Italy in 384 and rented a home belonging to a man named Verecundus . [17] There his mother Monica joined him with his common-law wife (whom he never names), Adeodatus, his brother Navigius, and two life-long African friends, Alypius and Evodius.

At the same time he started to go back to church. The pastor of the congregation with whom he was worshipping was Ambrose ( c. 340-397), the bishop of Milan and a famous preacher. Augustine found in Ambrose a man whose piety was fused with an intellect matching his own. And slowly God began to bring conviction regarding his sinful ways into his heart. Describing Ambrose's preaching, Augustine says this: "I was all ears to seize upon his eloquence, I also began to sense the truth of what he said, though only gradually. ...I thrilled with love and dread alike. I realized that I was far away from you...and, far off, I heard your voice saying I am the God who IS."

This experience, though, was not yet what we would call conversion. In Augustine's own words: "I was astonished that although I now loved you...I did not persist in enjoyment of my God. Your beauty drew me to you, but soon I was dragged away from you by my own weight and in dismay I plunged again

into the things of this world."

The central thing in what Augustine calls "the things of this world: was his relationship with his concubine/common-law wife. Now, Monica, his mother, had come to Milan with the express purpose of persuading her son to give this woman up and prepare for a proper marriage with a well-to-do Christian woman. [18] Augustine gave in to his mother's sinful suggestion and sent his concubine of fifteen years back to Africa . "The woman with whom I had been living," Augustine later wrote in his Confessions , "was torn from my side as an obstacle to my marriage and this was a blow which crushed my heart to bleeding, because I loved her dearly. She went back to Africa , vowing never to give herself to any other man. ...But I was too unhappy and too weak to imitate this example set me... I took another mistress, without the sanction of wedlock."

This is the immediate background to Augustine's conversion in 386. One day in August of that year, while Augustine was labouring under deep conviction of sin, a fellow North African, Ponticianus, came to see him. Heart of his Confessions, 8.6-12, tells the story of what transpired that day as God converted him to himself.

Ponticianus told Augustine and his best friend Alypius about the remarkable sacrifice and holiness of Antony , the founder of Egyptian monasticism. Augustine was deeply shamed by the fact that others were quite prepared to give their all for God, while he, a supposed searcher after truth for thirteen years now, was still held in bondage by his lust for sexual pleasure. Listen to his own account of what took place that August day.

"There was a small garden attached to the house where we lodged. ...I now found myself driven by the tumult in my breast to take refuge in this garden, where no one could interrupt that fierce struggle in which I was my own contestant. ...I was beside myself with madness that would bring me sanity. I was dying a death that would bring me life. ...I was frantic, overcome by violent anger with myself for not accepting your will and entering into your covenant. ...I tore my hair and hammered my forehead with my fists; I locked my fingers and hugged my knees... I was held back by mere trifles. ...They plucked at my garment of flesh and whispered, "Are you going to dismiss us? From this moment we shall never be with you again, for ever and ever." ...I flung myself down beneath a fig tree and gave way to the tears which now streamed from my eyes... In my misery I kept crying, "How long shall I go on saying 'tomorrow, tomorrow'? Why not now? Why not make an end of my ugly sins at this moment?" ...All at once I heard the singsong voice of a child in a nearby house. Whether it was the voice of a boy or a girl I cannot say, but again and again it repeated the refrain 'Take it and read, take it and read.' At this I looked up, thinking hard whether there was any kind of game in which children used to chant words like these, but I could not remember ever hearing them before. I stemmed my flood of tears and stood up, telling myself that this could only be a divine command to open my book of Scripture and read the first passage on which my eyes should fall. So I hurried back to the place where Alypius was sitting. ...seized [the book of Paul's epistles] and opened it, and in silence I read the first passage on which my eyes fell: "Not in reveling in drunkenness, not in lust and wantonness, not in quarrels and rivalries. Rather, arm yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ; spend no more thought on nature and nature's appetites" (Romans 13:13 -14). I had no wish to read more and no need to do so. For in an instant, as I came to the end of the sentence, it was as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled."

Then came the account of his conversion:

"You converted me to yourself."

"During all those years [of rebellion], where was my free will? What was the hidden, secret place from which it was summoned in a moment, so that I might bend my neck to your easy yoke...? How sweet all at once it was for me to be rid of those fruitless joys which I had once feared to lose...! You drove

them from me, you who are the true, the sovereign joy. You drove them from me and took their place, you who are sweeter than all pleasure, though not to flesh and blood, you who outshine all light, yet are hidden deeper than any secret in our hearts, you who surpass all honor, though not in the eyes of men who see all honor in themselves. ...O Lord my God, my Light, my Wealth, and my Salvation." [19]

[1] *The Rise of Christianity. A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996), 7. For different figures, see Alan Kreider, "Worship and Evangelism in Pre-Christendom", ..., 24 (June 1994), 7-8.

[2] Tertullian, *To Scapula* 5. "The voluminous works of Tertullian sometimes assert, and frequently presuppose, that the Christians of Carthage in the very early third century formed a numerous community drawn from every social category, including the provincial aristocracy " [ T. D. Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study* (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1971) , 53].

[3] *Against Celsus* 3.9.

[4] See, for example, Tatian, *Address to the Greeks* 28-29; Theophilus of Antioch, *To Autolycus* 1.14; Hilary, *On the Trinity* 1.5, 10, 12.

[5] *Early Church* , 55. Ian Rennie, "The Church Conquers Rome", also noted this.

[6] Chadwick, *Early Church* , 58-59.

[7] *On the Gift of Perseverance* 23.

[8] W.H.C. Frend, "Blandina and Perpetua: Two Early Christian Heroines" in his *Town and Country in the Early Christian Centuries* , 167-170.

[9] *The Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas* 13.

[10] Frend, "Blandina and Perpetua", 175.

[11] Based on Robert A. Segal, "Religion: Karen L. King, What Is Gnosticism? ", *Times Literary Supplement* (November 21, 2003), 31.

[12] Cited Mark A. Noll, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), 47.

[13] *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* 14.

[14] *To Philagrius, on Consubstantiality* [trans. Michael Slusser, *St. Gregory Thaumaturgus: Life and Works* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1998), 176-177].

[15] See *The Happy Life* 6.

[16] A.J. Krailsheimer, *Conversion* , 16-17 .

[17] *Confessions* 9.4.

[18] *Confessions* 6.13.

[19] 8:12