

'Rock and Sand'

- Persecution, perversion, perseverance (30-300 CE)

BLOOD WITNESS

Path of persecution

While the Christian community spread apace it did so in the face of persistent and severe persecution, but in fact this only strengthened it. The character that persecution developed was a witness that increased growth.

The church was born out of persecution, the crucifixion of Jesus. Early it saw the Jewish community into which it was born turn hostile. The martyrdom of Stephen gave impetus to the outward spread of the gospel.

Martyrdom was to become a 'keystone' in early church consciousness, and with the possible exception of Judaism it has had more martyrs than any other religion. It was said by Jerome that by the third century any day of the year, with the exception of New Year's day, you could remember the death of 5000 Christians; some 1,820,000 martyrdoms in total! ¹ The gospel was so radical you must expect persecution - Jesus said so. This continues into the 21st century.²

As we have noted the initial persecution came from the Jewish community because every aspect of the gospel challenged its 'orthodoxy'. While it was seen as a sect of Judaism, the Christians had the protection of the 'genius of the Emperor'; they were *religia licita*. Once the Jews threw the Christians out of the synagogue saying 'they are not one of us!' The church had to face the full hostility of Rome as *religia illicita* because they would not worship the Emperor.

Case against Christians

The pagan world totally misunderstood the Christian faith, and what they thought they understood played to their deepest fears. They believed that Christians were:

¹ Quoted by Michael Bourdeaux in the forward to HB Workman '*Persecution in the Early Church*' (originally pub 1906) Oxford 1980: iv

² The statistics regarding world martyrdom in the 21st century:

- All martyrs killed from 33 - 2000CE: 69,420,000
- Martyrs in the 20th century (1900-2000): 45,400,000
- Martyrs since 1950: 13,300,000
- Average annual martyrs since 1950: 278,000 per annum
- Recent annual martyrs: 171,000 per annum
- Current annual martyrs: 160,000 per annum

See, for example, D. B. Barrett, G. T. Kurian and T. M. Johnson, World Christian Encyclopedia (Second edition; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) Vol. 1, p. 11. There is a weblink for the above, it is <<http://worldchristiandatabase.org/wcd/>> The figures are disputed as exaggerated but nevertheless the scale of Christian martyrdom in the twentieth century is widely recognised.



- **Secretive** because they held their meetings either late at night or early before dawn, the only time slaves were free to come and made it possible to avoid public notice; people thought they had something to hide;
- **Atheists** because they avoided the pagan feasts and entertainments and had no visible image of God;
- **Immoral** because not only did they hold night meetings but the 'agape' was said to be an orgy;
- **Cannibalistic** because in the 'eucharist' they said they were eating the body and blood of a person;
- **Incestuous** because they practised marriage between a 'brother' and a 'sister'; baptism of children was also thought to be 'child sacrifice';
- **Social threat** because the empire lived in fear of slave revolt while Christians treated high-born and slaves as equals and slave men and free women would marry, a political danger;
- **Treacherous** because the economic and social order of Rome was crumbling, there was a constant cry to return to the old ways and old gods; the gospel denounced this;
- **Revolutionary** because of their 'apocalyptic hope' about the end of the present world order and the future coming King, their refusal to worship the Emperor must be treason;
- **Insanity** and the fact that they honoured manual work was said to be insanity.

Christians to the lion!

The simple phrase 'Jesus Christ is Lord' struck at the heart of both Judaism and Imperial Rome, and Christians would not compromise. They were viewed as socially undesirable, threatening every aspect of the life of the times. As Tertullian said:

"If the Tiber reaches the walls, the river Nile does not rise to the fields, the sky does not move, or the earth does, if there is famine, if there is plague, the cry is always the same, 'Christians to the lion! - What all of them to one lion?'"

The extent and frequency of the persecution is something about which we cannot be certain, but on the basis of the evidence we have ten major persecutions are usually documented. They begin in 64 with Nero and conclude in 311 at the deathbed of Galerius the Emperor.

The early persecutions, though often fierce were also limited, but as time went on they were often empire wide but increasingly with the aim of destroying leaders and property rather than wholesale massacre; apostates were preferable to martyrs. It has been said for persecutions to be successful it depended upon the co-operation of three wills; the will of the people, the will of the local governor and the will of the Emperor himself.

Dying we conquer

With nearly two million Christian martyrdoms it is difficult to know how to give a sense of the story and the experience. The following few memorials stand as a tribute to the many:

The barbarity of Nero's actions in 64 burnt itself upon early Christian consciousness:

"Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths ... covered with the skins of beasts they were torn by dogs and perished or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to flames ... they served to illuminate the night when daylight failed.." (Tacitus).



There were:

- The aged bishop Polycarp disciple of apostle John, burnt in Smyrna in 165. "Eighty and six years I have served him (Jesus), how then can I blaspheme my King and Saviour? Bring forth what you will"
- The slave girl Balandina in Lyon in August 177 saying, "I am a Christian and there is no wickedness among us!"
- The highborn woman Perpetua and her slave Felicitas in Carthage in 202. 'They were first scourged, then wounded by the wild animals they gave each other the kiss of peace, and were put to the sword'

It has been well said:

"Christianity challenged the world to choose between two masters; Imperial Caesar in his purple robe, and the carpenter's son who died in the purple of his own blood"³

And history makes it clear who won:

"The blood of the martyrs is indeed the seed of the Church. Dying we conquer. The moment we are crushed, that moment we go forth victorious" (Tertullian).

Winds of change

Towards the end of the third century CE there was external and internal pressure on the Empire. However, it was a time of relative peace for the church. In 285, in an attempt to cope with external threats to the Empire, especially from the east, the Emperor Diocletian divided the Empire into two, West and East, with a ruler and deputy for each:

	WEST	EAST
Augustus Caesar	Maximum Constantius	Diocletian Galerius

As the fourth century dawned the last persecution, the 'great persecution', broke out (303-11) under Diocletian. He was strongly influenced by his Caesar Galerius. The aim of the persecution was to create apostates rather than make martyrs; leadership was challenged, property was confiscated, and torture was used. There was some slaughter. Many showed courage, however, a large number apostatized.

The final terror subsided when on his deathbed, in 311, the eastern ruler Galerius rescinded the persecution. The Christians had won! The pagan Roman Empire had been unable to crush them and the future was theirs. The future will be dramatically shaped by an Emperor showing favour to the Christians, but in so doing imperilling the essential nature of their faith.

Pen of the apologists

In the face of the gross misunderstandings the pagan and Jewish world had about the Christian community, some of the more able spokesmen made every effort to put the

³ Attributed to WHC Frend



record straight and show how the gospel really was the message for the world. These writers were called 'Apologists', and we shall let the anonymous author of the 'letter to Diognetus' speak for them all:

"Christians are not marked out from other people by country, language or customs, you see they do not live in cities of their own, or speak some strange dialect, or have some peculiar lifestyle ... They live ... wherever chance has put them. They follow local customs in clothing, food and other aspects of life. But at the same time, they demonstrate the wonder and certainly unusual form of their own citizenship. They live in their native lands, but as aliens; as citizens they share all things with others, but like aliens suffer all things. Every foreign country is to them their native country, and every native land is a foreign country. They marry and have children like everyone else but they do not kill unwanted babies. They share a common table but not a common bed. They are at present 'in the flesh' but they do not live 'according to the flesh'. They are passing their days upon earth but are citizens of heaven ... They love everyone but are persecuted by all. ... They are poor yet make many rich. They are dishonoured and yet gain glory through dishonour ... When they do good they are punished as evildoers, when punished persecuted by all. ... They are poor yet make many rich. Yet those who attack them can give no reason for their hostility ... To put it simply the soul is to the body as the Christians are to the world..."

SECRETS AND LIES

Gnostics and heretics

By no means were the greatest dangers to the Christian community found outside in the form of persecution; in fact a far greater peril was found within in the form of false teaching.

Even before the close of the New Testament the shadow of heresy is falling [John's gospel, Colossians, letters of John, 2 Peter, and Jude are all attacking error]. It is widely believed that this was the beginning of the complex error of Gnosticism. An accurate description of this heresy is nearly impossible because it appeared in so many forms both within and outside the Church. The early fathers referred to it as 'that many-headed hydra!'

In simple terms it was an attempt to solve the problem of evil. It taught that matter was evil, the product of an evil god. However, within many, rarely all, there was a spark of light from the good god that by receiving secret 'knowledge' [Gk 'gnosis'] could bring the initiate to salvation. Though it could be dressed up in biblical language it is clear that these were ideas that cut right across revealed truth and the person and work of Jesus. Although it was attacked in every turn it in fact won an enormous following in the Christian world.

Neither was this the only popular error with which the leaders of the second and third centuries had to contend. Others were over the person of Christ:

- Was he really a human that God 'adopted' as his son at his baptism;
- Did he have in fact any humanity at all?
- Was he only an appearance [Docetism]?
- Was his nature human or divine;
- Did he actually have one or two natures?

... and so the possibilities were developed.



Then of course there was the nature of God:

- Was God one or three?
 - Were the persons of the Godhead different 'modes' of one God or three persons?
 - Did the 'Father' die on the cross?
- ... and so the permutations were unfolded.

Remember that although these were dangerous times for truth they were also a vital process through which the church began to express, as clearly as language would allow, what it believed. Sadly, while important steps were taken there was also a failure to realise that 'truth' is a living thing that cannot ever be 'made safe' or 'contained', nor was God at the end of what he was doing or unfolding.

FIRMNESS AND TRUTH

Keeping the faith

Obviously something had to be done; error had to be expelled and truth had to be made plain. This was attempted by a fourfold campaign:

- ❑ **Authority was sought in establishing a 'canon'.** A collection of New Testament literature that was trustworthy and a standard of truth. The Gnostics appealed to writings that had appeared early, but contained ideas that were deviant from what was known to be the Christian gospel. So a 'canon' was steadily brought together which contained writings known to spring from the fountain of the Spirit's inspiration. Appeal to any others had no authority.
- ❑ **Authority was sought in a 'credal statement', a 'rule of faith'.** This was a clear statement of beliefs, based upon scripture, free from spurious interpretation, which all Christians at baptism were expected to believe. The 'Apostles Creed' grew from these. The shaping of these creeds was a long and painful process as 'truth' reduced to precise words is almost an impossible task. The work on the creeds passed well into the fourth and fifth centuries.
- ❑ **Authority was sought in structuring the Christian ministry.** A line of 'bishops' was clearly drawn up in the more important Christian circles that reached back, unbroken, to the first apostles. On the basis of this claims were made that the truth now taught was the same as that originally given. While this broke the Gnostic claims it set a pattern that had tragic results. A caste apart grew up within the community with an authority that could be manipulated for their own ends. While many bishops were sincere and devout, there were those who engaged in political struggles and would bend their authority for personal ends.
- ❑ **Authority was sought in the Church's worship.** The way the Christians worshiped was used to combat heretical ideas. For example, Jesus was prayed to as 'God' and 'Lord' – therefore Christ is one with the Father. Baptisms are performed in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit therefore there are three persons of the Godhead. Water, wine and bread are used in the sacraments therefore the material world is good. The bread and wine of the Lord's Supper manifests the body and blood of Christ therefore Christ was a real human. Sunday was called the Lord's Day and celebrated the Lord's resurrection therefore Christ must have truly died and rose again.



Irenaeus of Lyons wrote, "The Eucharist agrees with our teaching, and our teaching agrees with the Eucharist."

These were difficult times and needed real wisdom in handling. Ignatius says, "Let nothing be done without the bishop", the words express anxiety about the times but Ignatius had a pastor's heart that wanted vulnerable Christian communities to be made secure against those who would divide and destroy them. Paul had a similar concern for the Galatians, "I fear for you..." (Gal 4:11). Sadly in later centuries others would use these statements to restrict the organic life of the priesthood of all believers and the spontaneous voice of the prophet, but that was not the intention here.

'GOD, WHAT WOMEN THESE CHRISTIANS HAVE!' ⁴

Brief survey of women in New Testament Church

It is clear that women were important in the leadership of the early church.

The Book of Acts focuses mainly on Peter and Paul, in the same way that we only glimpse John and the other apostles so too do we get just brief glimpses of women and their role in the church.

Acts 1:14: This is the first mention of women, which reveals the importance of women in the church from the outset. Although Jesus' mother Mary is mentioned by name, we are not told in detail who the other women were.

Acts 2:4, 17-18: On the day of Pentecost women were counted with men as having received the Holy Spirit and Peter points to the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy: "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people, your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams, even on my servants, both men and women, will I pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy" (vv. 17-18).

Although God was causing women to speak in tongues and prophesy women are not portrayed as public speakers in the remainder of Acts.

It is important to remember that in the Jewish and Roman society there were few precedents or opportunities for women to speak in public Jewish women were not permitted to testify in court and thus men would not view women as credible sources of evidence about Jesus. Nonetheless Acts 5:14; 6:1-6 Luke describes the growth of the church in terms of both "men and women" and in Samaria, "both men and women" believed and were baptized (8:12).

Women did have an important role in prayer and hospitality; for example in Jerusalem, the disciples gathered for prayer at the home of Mary the mother of John Mark (12:2), a woman who was wealthy enough to have a servant girl (v. 13).

⁴ These are the words of Libanius the pagan teacher of John Chrysostom in praise of Chrysostom's mother Anthusa. The exact quote appears to be: "O gods of Greece, what wonderful women these Christians have!" but it is frequently quoted as "God, what women these Christians have!"



Similarly, in Philippi, a woman named Lydia became a believer and “invited us to her home” (16:15); Paul and his companions stayed there for some time, accepting her hospitality. In Thessalonica, Paul preached in the synagogue, persuading some of the Jews and “a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women” (17:4, 12) and in Athens, a woman named Damaris became a believer (v. 34).

Priscilla and Aquila: In Corinth, Paul met Priscilla and Aquila (18:26). It is interesting to note here that Priscilla is named first, very unusual in Greek writings and it may indicate that Priscilla was the more prominent of the two in the church.

In the book of Romans chapter 16 Paul mentions 10 women, which is a high percentage for literature of that era. They are:

Pheobe: “A *diakonos* of the church in Cenchrea” (16:1) translated as either a deacon or servant and calls on the church to “give her any help she may need from you, for she has been a *prostatis* to many people, including me” (v. 2). A *prostatis* could mean a benefactor or a patron, a wealthy person who supported other people - a common arrangement in the first-century Roman Empire.

Andronicus and Junias: “My relatives who have been in prison with me” (v. 7). Paul’s next statement is hotly debated: “They are outstanding among the apostles.” Some take it to mean that they are outstanding in the eyes of the apostles; others say that they are outstanding apostles. There is also debate over whether Junias is actually male.

Women are also mentioned in the other Epistles and this would indicate that women had various important functions in the early church (Tryphena, Tryphosa, and Persis; Julia, the sister of Nereus). Some taught, some prophesied, some provided financial support, and many worked in the gospel.

Women could enter women’s quarters or go to anywhere women would gather. Clement of Alexandria explains that in this way the women assistants were the apostles’ “fellow ministers in dealing with housewives. It was through them that the Lord’s teaching penetrated also the women’s quarters without any scandal being aroused.”

Three centuries later, John Chrysostom, envied the dedication these women had. He described them:

“For the women of those days were more spirited than lions, sharing with the Apostles their labours for the Gospel’s sake. In this way they went travelling with them, and also performed all other ministries. And even in Christ’s day there followed him women, ‘which ministered unto Him of their substance, and waited upon the Teacher.’”

It did not take long for the church to embrace the principle that women should be devoted solely to the ministry of other women. Many believed these restrictions were in keeping with nature, which had placed women in a lesser role to men.



Montanism

Charismata were important in the 2nd century church and there was regular use of the gifts of the Spirit

Iraeneus said:

'Wherefore also those who are in truth his disciples, receiving grace from him, do in his name perform miracles, so as to promote the welfare of other men, according to the gift which each one has received from him. For some do certainly and truly drive out devils, so that those who have thus been cleansed from evil spirits frequently both believe in Christ and join themselves to the church.'

Montanism is one of the early schisms in the church and relates particularly to the use of prophecy in the church. Montanus and his two companions, Prisca and Maximilla prophesied and spoke in tongues, claiming that the promise of Jesus regarding the Holy Spirit was fulfilled in a special way in him.

Indeed Maximilla is purported to have claimed that: 'After me shall be no prophetess'. and 'I am driven as a wolf from the sheep. I am not a wolf. I am the word, the spirit and power'.

It is important to remember that there was yet to be a clear doctrine of the Holy Spirit and it cannot be said that Montanus, or the women with him, were heretical, perhaps just a little 'extreme'. Nonetheless questions over the role of women were raised as well as the frenzy with which they prophesied. Increasingly the leadership of women became an issue with the wider church. Hippolytus objects to the fact that the Montanists 'glorify these wenches above Apostles and every charisma'.

Montanists believed that a Christian should suffer and therefore self denial was essential. This included fasting and teaching that marriage was an encumbrance and there should be no re-marriage.

The impact of Montanism on women in the church was significant. Not only did it give women the status of deaconess, it also allowed them to study the word and join in its ministry; this was particularly attractive to gentile women who were used to more prominent positions in religious activities.

This was not widely accepted. Hippolytus wrote against the Montanist view regarding the imminent return of Christ in the following terms:

'This is what happens to uninstructed and thoughtless people who did not keep carefully to the Scriptures but pay more heed to human traditions, to their own fancies, dreams, inventions and old wives tales...'

By the fourth century there was explicit rejection of women exercising a prophet ministry in church, such as happened with the Montanists.



'We do not reject women prophets...but we do not permit them to speak in the Church, nor to have authority over men...'

WITNESS AND FULFILMENT

Reasons for growth

In 311 the Christians were the strongest force in the empire. How, in less than three centuries, had they come from being a small messianic Jewish sect to their present state:

- **Christians were strong in a crumbling world.** They had a network of relationships that stretched from York to Armenia, from Carlisle to the Nile and far beyond. Something that no other group paralleled, not even Judaism. They were strong in a crumbling world. And they were as strong in the countryside as they were in the cities and towns.
- **Christians had a lifestyle that was a shining light in the pagan world.** They cared for the poor, the weak and the aged and those in prison. In times of distress they helped one another with gifts of food and money. Wherever Christians went in the empire and beyond they had immediate relationship and fellowship with other Christians wherever they met them. Christians also showed love to pagans. Julian the 'Apostate' said, 'They feed our poor, and bury our dead as well as their own while our people look to us in vain for help'. When plague struck the empire the pagans ran from the towns while Christians remained to tend the sick and bury the dead. Christian love was one of the most powerful forces in winning others for Christ.
- **Christians were faithful under torture and martyrdom.** This was something that pagans could not comprehend. To see young children, old men, weak women as well as strong youths suffer terrible torture and deaths without the slightest bitterness towards their enemies was more eloquent than a hundred sermons! 'When reviled, Christians bless'. It has been said 'Christians not only out-live the pagan world but it out died them as well'.
- **Christian community was totally inclusive.** Open to men and women of all races and classes in a way in which no other group was. It had a simple message that could reach the poor and ignorant as well as the educated.
- **The Christian gospel was both flexible and yet uncompromising.** It was built from the raw material of Judaism, used the skills of Greek philosophy to think through its theology, its organisation fitted in with the Roman empire. Yet unlike any other religion (except Judaism) it was not syncretistic. It was adamant about its basic principles which if broken were sin demanding repentance, (when splits occurred it was for greater strictness!)
- **The Christian message transformed lives.** Men and women who were morally defeated and corrupt were transformed by the victory of the gospel. The Christian community was open to the worst dregs of society but on entering they were 'born again', morally, physically and spiritually. One of the dramatic marks of the community throughout the five centuries was the healing power of God and the clear deliverance from demonic powers in the name of Jesus.



The Christian gospel met the 'spiritual hunger' of the first three centuries:

- Those wanting 'immortality' found it in the resurrection of Jesus;
- Those wanting 'morality' in life and spirit found it in the gospel;
- Those wanting 'fellowship' found a worshipping community that gave mutual aid and care for all needs;
- Those wanting 'truth', sceptical of the 'philosophy' and 'reason' of the age found Jesus the 'logos', eternal, and as so many proved, able to provide 'intellectual satisfaction' to those needing it;
- Those wanting 'certainty' joined a community that knew it was chosen by God and lived in anticipation of the 'close of the age' and God's final victory.

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