

Pilgrims in a Strange Land

Overview

It's different from your parents' day. Not everyone attends church anymore. Co-workers may be Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, or atheists. Christians find themselves just one of many religious options. While Christianity may be tolerated, any claim to exclusive truth will tend to be viewed as being narrow minded or bigoted. In this atmosphere, how are Christians to live their lives and share their faith?

The early followers of Jesus faced similar—but even more staggering—challenges. Their leader was executed like a common criminal. He was no longer physically with them to lead their movement. They were pioneers blazing a trail in a hostile world without a clear map.

Like believers today, they lived in a pluralistic world of many religions in a time of rapid social change. Only several thousand in number, they had been given a great mission—to spread the good news, bring others to belief in Jesus, and live as a body of fellow believers. How were they to achieve these goals?

As we examine the lives of these early Christians, we will explore several issues:

- What causes the church to grow and vitally impact the world around it? What accounted for the early church's growth from a thousand believers shortly after Jesus' death to 7,500 by AD 100 and six million (10 percent of the Roman world) by AD 300?
- How should Christ's followers interact with a world that is deeply lost and confused?
- How should the church face persecution? What challenges and opportunities result from persecution?

Understanding the Setting

100 BC		
	14	Death of Caesar Augustus concludes <i>pax Romana</i>
	4	Birth of Christ
AD 1		
	29	Crucifixion of Christ
	50	Paul's missionary journeys begin
	64	Nero persecutes church
	70	Destruction of Jerusalem
	c.90-96	Domitian persecutes church
	98-117	Trajan persecutes church
AD 100		
	117-138	Hadrian persecutes church
	150	Justin's <i>Apology</i>
	156	Polycarp martyred
	161-180	Marcus Aurelius persecutes church
AD 200		
	200	Tertullian's <i>Apology</i>
	202-211	Septimus Severus persecutes church
	203	Perpetua martyred
	235-236	Maximinus the Thracian persecutes church
	249-251	Decius persecutes church
	257-260	Valerian persecutes church
AD 300		
	303-311	Diocletian and Galerian persecute church
	312	Constantine becomes emperor and brings tolerance for the church

Step 1: Grasp the Issue

Sound Bites

“Christianity is the only major religion to have as its central event the humiliation of its god.” – Bruce Shelley

“The blows that . . . Roman generals rained upon Jerusalem did not destroy the Christian church. Rather they liberated the church for its destiny as a universal religion offered to the whole world.” – Mark Noll, describing the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70

“They live in their own native lands but as aliens; as citizens they share all things with other; but like aliens, suffer all things. . . . They love everyone but are persecuted by all.”
– Letter to Diognetus (probably 2nd century)

“For eighty six years I have been his servant and he has never done me wrong; how can I blaspheme my king who saved me? . . . The fire you threaten burns for a time and is soon extinguished: there is a fire you know nothing about—the fire of the judgment to come and of eternal punishment.”
– Eusebius, describing the martyrdom of Polycarp at the hands of Nero

“For Ignatius, as for many early Christians, martyrdom was discipleship. . . . To rebel against martyrdom—that is, to retreat—would be a failure to imitate Jesus in his quiet submission to death.” – D. Jeffrey Bingham

Case Studies

Like many of her friends, Angela is burned out when it comes to religion—particularly Christianity. As a child, she attended a traditional church in a small town. Currently, she prays “in her own way.” She doesn’t recall much from Sunday School, feels very uncomfortable in church, and is a little baffled that anyone can really believe “that stuff.” She’s always been a generally decent person, even though some of her lifestyle choices have perturbed her conservative parents. In conversation one evening, she says, “I admire you, but I really don’t see how you believe all this. Christians really aren’t any better than my other friends. They go to church, but it seems they just ‘put on

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this religion mask' on Sunday as part of their cultural heritage. I mean, everybody has a right to their own beliefs, but there are an awful lot of religions around if you haven't noticed."

What challenges do you face in sharing your faith with Angela? What will allow you to effectively communicate with her?

At your small group meeting at church, a discussion develops on ways the church may need to change to reach out to young couples that don't enjoy going to church. The answers begin to fly as the discussion becomes heated:

"Get rid of religious trappings, get out of the formal church, and use metaphors that this generation can understand and appreciate."

"You can't do that! You must preach the basic gospel message of sin and redemption. Otherwise the message is lost."

"They will believe if they see our love in the community. We need to be working for the poor and disadvantaged more."

"We need to get back to the rituals of the faith. People are looking to be in touch with the transcendent. The last thing they need is for the church to look like MTV."

"No! You must find out their concerns and questions and answer them."

What characteristics do you think a church needs in order to effectively bring people to Christ and nurture their growth as Christians?

What are some questions we need to explore as we seek to gain a better understanding of this issue?

Step 2: Study the Scriptures

Acts 2:42-47; 6:1-7

First century Christians, or “people of the Way” as they were called, continued patterns begun in the book of Acts.

Note: In Acts 6, note the tension over suspected favoritism that developed between the Hebraic Jews (native Jews who spoke Aramaic and became Christians) and Grecian Jews (Jews from other lands who spoke Greek and became Christians at Pentecost).

- What were some of the key elements of the corporate life of early believers?

1 Corinthians 4:9, 11-13

Paul describes some of the persecution he faced as an apostle, as well as his response to those who persecuted him.

- Paul was setting an example for the early believers to follow when they faced persecution. How did he respond?

Matthew 5:11-16

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus describes a kingdom of true faith.

- What elements does he describe that will be a part of the life of those who follow him?

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Step 3: Consult Other Sources

How did this little band of Jewish believers survive, grow, and influence a region rich with a variety of pagan religions and under the rule of government hostile to them? Reading 1 explores how believers confronted rival religions and a non-Christian world-view. Reading 2 is an interview with Robert Wilkin about how the new church grew and influenced others. Readings 3 and 4 are voices from the past including a letter from the 2nd century describing how others viewed Christians and the story of two early martyrs.

As you read ask yourself: How did the church respond to other religions? What did they do that attracted others to this new faith? How did they understand and respond to persecution?

“The Church Wins the Empire,” by Ernest Trice Thompson.

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“Roman Redux,” by Robert Wilkin.

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“Extraordinary People,” by Tim Dowley, ed.

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“Perpetua and Polycarp—Two Heroic Martyrs.”

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The Church Wins the Empire

by Ernest Trice Thompson

In The Book of the Acts a physician named Luke tells how the gospel of the risen Jesus spread—within a single generation—into the centers of the Roman Empire. In the years that followed the church grew even more rapidly. Pliny, governor of Bithynia (see Acts 16:7), disturbed over the rapid spread of Christianity in this province, wrote about A.D. 112 to the Emperor Trajan:

. . . many of every age, every rank, and even of both sexes, are brought into danger; and will be in the future. The contagion of that superstition has penetrated not only the cities but also the villages, and country places.¹

In the middle of the second century, Justin, the first philosopher to be won to the new faith, wrote with pride:

. . . there is not a single race of men, whether among barbarians or Greeks, or by whatever name they may be called, of those who live in wagons or are called nomads or of herdsmen living in tents, among whom prayers and thanksgivings are not offered through the name of the crucified Jesus to the Father and Maker of all things.²

Tertullian, at the century's end, boasted:

We are but of yesterday, and we have

¹ As quoted by Joseph Cullent Ayer, *A Source Book for Ancient History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913), p. 21.

² *Ibid.*, p. 19.

filled every place among you—cities, islands, fortresses, towns, market-places, the very camps, tribes, companies, palace, Senate, and Forum. We have left you only the temples.³

By A.D. 323 perhaps one-tenth of the population of the Empire, ten million out of a hundred million, had been won to the new faith. The strength of the church was greater than these figures would indicate, for its adherents were more numerous in the cities, where the course of empire was determined, than in the countryside; and in the East, particularly North Syria and Asia Minor, where the earliest civilizations had arisen, than in the cruder and more imitative West. It drew especially from the influential middle class, but there were also many poor, and some of wealth, education, and social position. Only a change of attitude on the part of the government was necessary to bring the mass of the population flocking into the church.

The gospel had even spread beyond the empire—into the Tigris-Euphrates Valley, along the shores of the Black Sea, into Armenia, Arabia, and India; and some converts had been won among the Goths.

“Never in the history of the race has this record ever quite been equalled,” declares Kenneth Scott Latourette:

Never in so short a time has any other religious faith, or, for that matter, any other set of ideas, religious, political, or economic, without the aid of physical

³ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

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force, or of social or cultural prestige, achieved so commanding a position in such an important culture.⁴

This rapid growth is more impressive when we recall that it took place in spite of opposition by the state, rivalry on the part of other religions, and attacks by contemporary scholars seeking to exploit every weakness....

The Struggle with Rival Religions

The growth of the church in the early centuries is more striking when we recall that it faced the rivalry of other religions competing for the affections of the people.

The old pagan religions, the gods of Greece and Rome, had lost their hold on the minds of men, and offered no serious competition to the new religion. However, it has been said:

Religions do not die. They only pass, leaving immeasurable traces of their doctrines and ceremonies in the religious systems that succeed them. The old religion of the Latins yielded in large degree to Greek and Oriental beliefs, but none the less it persisted in many ways and was a powerful element in religious thought till the end of the Empire. And in its turn that complex of Latin, Greek and Oriental concepts that we call Roman religion did not entirely perish when Christianity won its victory. In some of its phases it survived in the religious

practices, customs and beliefs of the early Christians, and traces of it are extant to the present day.⁵

Such remnants of these older religions are embedded in our marriage customs, for example, the engagement ring, worn on the third finger of the left hand, the bridal veil, the wedding feast (including the wedding cake), and in some countries the wearing of garlands by both bride and groom, the procession to the bridegroom's house and the carrying of the bride over the threshold. Many of our Christmas festivities stem from the same source, as do some of the present accompaniments of the Easter season—the bunny rabbit and the eggs. The ancient religions gave an impetus also to the veneration of the saints. The Latins attached some divine personality to every important process of nature. When Christianity finally vanquished the ancient gods, their functions were ascribed to the “saints.” To this topic we shall return.

The most serious religious competition offered to Christianity came from the mystery religions (so called because of the secrecy attached to their rites of initiation). These mystery religions came from the East, and were spreading rapidly in the West along with Christianity, with which they had some striking resemblances. They believed, for example, in savior-gods, who died and rose again, and in sacramental acts, which brought cleansing from sin, a new birth, and the promise of immortality. The gods of the

⁴ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, Vol. I, *The First Five Centuries* (New York and London: Harper & Row, Publishers, Incorporated, 1937), p. 112.

⁵ See Gordon J. Laing, *Survivals of Roman Religion* (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1931). Courtesy of David McKay Company, Inc.

mystery religions, however, were nebulous figures from an imaginary past, men, slain against their will, who had become gods. They too succumbed finally to the power of the crucified and risen Jesus, but not without leaving their mark on the superior religion which supplanted them in the affections of the people.

Not only did they in part Orientalize the West and thereby make it hospitable to a Palestinian Gospel, but they also awakened profound religious aspirations which only Christianity could satisfy, and provided the new faith with a redemptive terminology which enabled it readily to make contact with the existing religious ideas of its converts.⁶

From the mystery religions, probably, came the growing belief that the value of a sacramental act lies not so much in the religious experience symbolized as in the proper performance of the act itself, and that the bestowal of divine grace is conditioned not by the spiritual receptivity of the worshiper, but by the magical power of the ceremony itself.

The Struggle with Critical Intellectuals

Christianity won its victory in the Roman Empire in spite of opposition from the state, in spite of the rivalry of other religions, in spite also of attacks launched in the second and third centuries by contemporary intellectuals. The attacks then were much like attacks on Christianity today by unsympathetic scholars: essentially, that its beliefs are no more than

superstitions, and that Jesus was no more than a very imperfect man. The belittlement of Jesus Christ proved ineffective and was soon dropped. But attacks against Christianity itself—the absurdity of some of its doctrines and facts (such as the resurrection of Christ)—were keenly pressed. None of its claims was left unexamined (for which we can truly be grateful). The church in turn possessed able defenders. They returned sensible answers to all serious charges; they argued from the reasonableness of Christian beliefs and from the practical effects Christian faith has in men. Every martyr was one more bit of evidence for the power of Christ. They advanced positive arguments for their claims, pointing not only to fulfilled prophecy, and to the miracles performed by Christ, but also to the moral effects of the gospel, to the rapid spread of Christianity, to its reasonableness and its adaptation to the deepest needs of human nature. As Origen declared in his reply to Celsus:

And so we shall go on believing in God according to the teaching of Jesus Christ, seeking to convert those blind on the subject of religion. Blind, they say, are we; but they themselves are blind. Seducers we, they say; but they lead men astray. Oh, what a noble seduction ours, that men should change from dissolute to sober living—or towards it; to justice from injustice—or tending that way; to wisdom from being foolish—or becoming such; and from cowardice, meanness and timidity, show courage and fortitude,

⁶ G. H. C. MacGregor and A. C. Purdy, *Jew and Greek: Tutors Unto Christ* (London: I. Nicholson and Watson, Ltd., 1936), p. 288.

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not least in this struggle for the sake of our religion—for God the Creator of all things, and Jesus Christ even as all the prophets have spoken.⁷

Explanation of the Church's Growth

How do we explain the growth of Christianity—in spite of persecution, in spite of the attraction of rival religions, in spite of attacks by leading literary figures?

In part, no doubt, by what Paul describes as “the fulness of the time” (Gal. 4:4, K.J.V.). As we look at the ancient world the stage seems to have been set for the birth of Christ—Christianity could not have grown so readily a few generations earlier, or a few generations later. The Roman Empire had gathered under its banner ancient lands, the founts of western civilization, around the Mediterranean; for a short period there was comparative peace, good roads bound the empire together; life was secure, men were free to travel. Greek language and culture had spread through the bounds of the Roman Empire; the missionaries could be understood wherever they went; a common culture had prepared the way for a common religion; philosophic thought tended toward belief in one God; the oriental mystery religions awakened in men's hearts a desire for redemption.

Basic of course was the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, the Christian message. Describing the church's victory over its rivals, Kenneth Scott Latourette concludes:

Out of them all Christianity won partly because of its organization, with the fellowship and protection which the

uprooted individuals of the Graeco-Roman world craved, partly because of its inclusiveness, partly because of its happy combination of adaptability and intransigence, partly because it supplied better than any other what the ancient world was asking of religion and philosophy, partly because of its Jewish heritage, its moral earnestness and power, and its miracles, but chiefly because of the quality of the life and the death of Jesus and the experiences which followed among his disciples. In the last analysis it was from Jesus that those qualities stemmed which gave to Christianity its victory over its rivals.⁸

But the success of the gospel cannot be accounted for by the fullness of the times, or even by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ—the Christian message—alone. We must also take into account the witness of believers, the Christian messengers.

One might gather from the book of The Acts that mass conversions accounted for the rapid growth of the church (Acts 2:41; 4:4). But there were no mass conversions, so far as we know, in the early church after the early sermons of Peter. One might then conclude that the growth of the church came from the missionary labors of men like Paul. But this does not seem to have been the case. There were no missionary societies, no missionary institutions, no organized efforts, so far as is known, in the period before Constantine, and yet in this period, less than three hundred years from the death of Christ, the mass of the Roman Empire, representing civilization in the West, was nominally Christianized.

Christianity grew naturally, it has been

⁷ As paraphrased by John Foster, *After the Apostles* (London: Student Christian Movement Press Limited, 1961), p. 12.

⁸ Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, Vol. I, *The First Five Centuries*, pp. 364-365.

said, from within. Ordinary Christians witnessed to those with whom they came in contact. Celsus, one of Christianity's leading critics, scoffingly remarked that fullers and workers in wool and leather, rustic and ignorant persons were the most zealous propagators of Christianity and brought it first to women and children. Women and slaves introduced it into the home circle. Careful investigation reveals that Christianity in its growth followed the trade routes of the empire, and we recognize that merchants carried it with their goods. We find it in the army barracks and know that soldiers carried it from one post to another. Justin, the first philosopher to believe, had sought truth in many areas and in a number of philosophic schools. He was converted, he tells us, by a venerable old man whom he met walking on the shores of the sea. He taught now the new philosophy of Christ. Every Christian laborer, said Tertullian, both finds out God and manifests him. As another has said, it was a case "of one loving heart setting another on fire."

It was not only the words that they spoke, but also the witness of their lives. "Behold how these Christians love one another," the pagans are reported to have said. "The Jews do not allow any of their own people to become beggars, and the Christians support not only their own but also our poor . . ." Julian, the heathen emperor, wrote after the death of Constantine, seeking in vain to turn the clock backward and breathe new vitality into a dying paganism. "It is matters like this," he added, "which have contributed most to the spread of Christianity: mercy to strangers, care for burying the dead, and the obvious honourableness of their conduct."⁹ It is "no

⁹ As quoted by Hans Lietzmann, *From Constantine to Julian* ("A History of the Early Church" [London:

wonder," says Gwatkin, the Cambridge historian,

if the Christians made an impression out of all proportion to their numbers. Conviction in the midst of waverers, fiery energy in a world of disillusion, purity in an age of easy morals, firm brotherhood in a loose society, heroic courage in time of persecution, formed a problem that could not be set aside, however polite society might affect to ignore it: and the religion of the future turned on the answer to it. Would the world be able to explain it better than the Christians, who said it was the living power of the risen Saviour?¹⁰

It was not only the *life* of the Christian community which invited faith, but the *death* which so many of them were willing to die for the sake of Christ. Not all Christians, as we have seen, were ready to give their lives, but many were, and out of every persecution the church came purified and strengthened. Their constancy and their courage had won new converts for their cause. "The blood of the martyrs," Tertullian cried, "has become the seed of the church!"

In a word, Christians won the Roman Empire because, as T. R. Glover once wrote, they "out-thought," "out-lived," and "out-died" the pagan world.¹¹ And so it must be again.



Lutterworth Press, 1950)), III, 278.

¹⁰ Henry Melville Gwatkin, *Early Church History to A.D. 313* (New York: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1912), I, 234-235. Used by permission.

¹¹ T. R. Glover, *The Jesus of History* (New York: Association Press, 1917), pp. 200-201.

Roman Redux

by Robert Wilkin

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

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

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

But what about the persecutions?

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

In this issue, we've examined the role of apologetics, martyrdoms, and everyday

evangelism. Are there other, often overlooked, reasons the early church grew in this environment?

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

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

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

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

Yes, but in Christian teaching, you have a person who is human and more than human, who died and rose again—and all this is grounded in history, not myth. The ancient world had stories of gods coming back to life

and miraculous happenings. But to talk about such things as if they happened in history, to have a good historical record of such things, that was unparalleled.

What Christian beliefs most impressed pagans?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

How did the early church build their community?

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

Did the church strive to be “user-friendly?”

Not at all—in fact, just the opposite. One thing that made the early Christian community especially strong was its stress on ritual. That there was something unique about Christian

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liturgy, especially the Eucharist. It was different from anything pagans had experienced.

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

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

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

Do you think we ought to adopt this strategy today?

Yes. I think seeker-sensitive churches use a completely wrong strategy. A person who comes into a Christian church for the first time should feel out of place. He should feel this community engages in practices so important

they take time to learn. The best thing we can do for “seekers” is to create an environment where newcomers feel they are missing something vital, that one has to be inculcated into this, and that it’s a discipline. Few people grasp that today. But the early church grasped it very well.

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

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

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



Extraordinary People

by Tim Dowley, Ed.

“For Christians are not differentiated 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 same peculiar lifestyle.

This teaching of theirs has not been contrived by the invention and speculation of inquisitive men; nor are they propagating mere human teaching as some people do. They live in both Greek and foreign cities, wherever chance has put them. They follow local customs in clothing, food and the other aspects of life. But at the same time, they demonstrate to us the wonderful and certainly unusual form of their own citizenship.

They live in their own 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 as their native country, and every native land as a foreign country.

They marry and have children just like every one else; but they do not kill unwanted babies. They offer a shared table, but not a shared bed. They are at present “in the flesh” but they do not live “according to the flesh.” They are passing their days on earth, but are citizens of heaven. They obey the appointed

laws, and go beyond the laws in their own lives.

They love every one, but are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death and gain life. They are poor and yet make many rich. They are short of everything and yet have plenty of all things. They are dishonoured and yet gain glory through dishonour.

Their names are blackened and yet they are cleared. They are mocked and bless in return. They are treated outrageously and behave respectfully to others. When they do good, they are punished as evildoers; when punished, they rejoice as if being given new life. They are attacked by Jews as aliens, and are persecuted by Greeks; yet those who hate them cannot give any reason for their hostility.

To put it simply—the soul is to the body as Christians are to the world. The soul is spread through all parts of the body and Christians through all the cities of the world. The soul is in the body but is not of the body; Christians are in the world but not of the world.”

– From an anonymous *Letter to Diognetus*, possibly dating from the second century



Perpetua and Polycarp—Two Heroic Martyrs

Perpetua

In A.D. 202, Emperor Septimius Severus disallowed conversions to Christianity. In the wake of that act, severe persecution broke out against Christians, particularly in North Africa. Living in Carthage at the time was Perpetua, a young noblewoman and new Christian who was preparing for baptism. Though Perpetua was only about 22 years old, and was still nursing her infant son, she (with four other catechumens) was arrested and thrown into prison.

The day of their victory dawned, and they marched from the prison to the amphitheater joyfully, as though they were going to heaven, with calm faces, trembling, if at all, with joy rather than fear. Perpetua went along with shining countenance and calm step, as the beloved of God, as a wife of Christ, putting down everyone's stare by her own intense gaze. . . .

They were then led up to the gates, and the men were forced to put on the robes of priests of Saturn, the women the dress of the priestesses of Ceres. But the noble Perpetua strenuously resisted this to the end.

"We came to this of our own free will, that our freedom should not be violated. We agreed to pledge our lives provided that we would do no such thing. You agreed with us to do this."

Even injustice recognized justice. The military tribune agreed. They were to be brought into the arena just as they were. Perpetua then began to sing a psalm; she was already treading on the head of the Egyptian

[dragon?]. Revocatus, Saturninus, and Satorus began to warn the onlooking mob. Then, when they came within sight of Hilarianus, they suggested by their motions and gestures: "You have condemned us, but God will condemn you" was what they were saying.

At this time the crowds became enraged and demanded that they be scourged before a line of gladiators. And they rejoiced at this, that they had obtained a share of the Lord's sufferings. . . .

For the young women, however, the Devil had prepared a mad heifer. This was an unusual animal, but it was chosen that their sex might be matched with that of the beast. So they were stripped naked, placed in nets and thus brought out into the arena. Even the crowd was horrified when they saw that one was a delicate young girl and the other was a woman fresh from childbirth with the milk still dripping from her breasts. And so they were brought back again and dressed in unbelted tunics.

First the heifer tossed Perpetua, and she fell on her back. Then sitting up, she pulled down the tunic that was ripped along the side so that it covered her thighs, thinking more of her modesty than of her pain. Next she asked for a pin to fasten her untidy hair; for it was not right that a martyr should die with her hair in disorder, lest she might seem to be in mourning in her hour of triumph.

Then she got up. And seeing that Felicitas [Perpetua's Christian slave] had been crushed to the ground, she went over to her, gave her her hand, and lifted her up. Then the two stood side by side. But the cruelty of the mob was

now appeased, and so they were called back through the Gate of Life. . . .

Perpetua then called for her brother and spoke to him together with the catechumens and said: “You must all stand fast in the faith and love one another, and do not be weakened by what we have gone through.”

. . . Immediately as the contest was coming to a close, a leopard was let loose, and [as Satorus predicted,] after one bite Satorus was . . . drenched in blood. . . . Shortly afterward, he was thrown unconscious with the rest in the usual spot to have his throat cut. But the mob asked that their bodies be brought out into the open. And so the martyrs got up and went to the spot of their own accord, and kissing one another they sealed their martyrdom with the ritual kiss of peace. The others took the sword in silence and without moving, especially Satorus, who being the first to climb the stairway was the first to die. For once again he was waiting for Perpetua.

Perpetua, however, had yet to taste more pain. She screamed as she was struck on the bone; then she took the trembling hand of the young gladiator and guided it to her throat. It was as though so great a woman could not be dispatched unless she herself were willing.

Ah, most valiant and blessed martyrs!
Truly you are called and chosen for the glory of Christ Jesus our Lord!

[It is not known what happened to Perpetua’s husband and son.]

Polycarp

Polycarp was born about A.D. 70, and he

knew eyewitnesses of Jesus, possibly including the apostle John. Before 110 Polycarp was named bishop of Smyrna, and throughout his life he stood for orthodoxy. At a pagan festival c. 156 (though possibly later), Polycarp was arrested at the demands of an angry mob. This account was written by Christians in Smyrna shortly there after and is the earliest extant account of a Christian martyr outside of the New Testament.

But the proconsul urged him and said, “Swear, and I will release thee; curse the Christ.” And Polycarp said, “Eighty and six years have I served him, and he hath done me no wrong; how then can I blaspheme my king who saved me?”

Then said the proconsul, “I have wild beasts; if thou repent not, I will throw thee to them.” But he said, “Send for them. For repentance from better to worse is not a change permitted to us; but to change from cruelty to righteousness is a noble thing.” Then said the proconsul again, “If thou dost despise the wild beasts, I will make thee to be consumed by fire, if thou repent not.” And Polycarp answered, “Thou threatenest the fire that burns for an hour and in a little while is quenched; for thou knowest not of the fire of the judgement to come, and the fire of the eternal punishment, reserved for the ungodly. But why delayest thou? Bring what thou wilt.”

[Following this series of exchanges, Polycarp was burned to death.]



Step 5: Discuss the Issue

1. What surprised you as you read about the early church?
2. Based on your experience, what similarities do you see between the challenges faced by the early church and those facing the church today? What differences do you see?
3. What impact do you think persecution may have had on early believers?
4. What impact does persecution have on the church in places such as Pakistan or China?
5. Wilkin discusses the characteristics of the early church. What lessons do you feel contemporary Christians can learn from the early church?
6. To what extent should we look to the early church for contemporary forms of worship and ministry? Is there any reason we should pay more attention to the church of that period than any other period?
7. Do you agree with Wilkin's thoughts on church practice then and now?
8. As you reflect on the early church, what changes do you feel you need to make or ask God to bring about in your life?

Pilgrims in a Strange Land

Step 6: Take Steps to Obey

1. What elements of early church life do you find lacking in your own spiritual life?
2. Write down some steps you can take to more effectively share the faith and be an active part of the church body.

Issue Evaluation Form

Name: _____

Please make brief comments on any of the following aspects of this issue:

Sound Bites and Case Studies (Were any of these particularly helpful or unhelpful? Are there any quotes or scenarios you think we should add?):

Study the Scriptures (Were the passages selected appropriate? Are there other passages you might have added?):

Consult Other Sources (What were your overall impressions of the articles? Did they hold your interest? Were they instructive? Are there any you would drop or add?):

Form a Response & Take Steps to Obey (Were the exercises helpful and meaningful? Are there any you would drop or add?):

Discuss the Issue (Were any of the questions particularly unhelpful or especially helpful? Were they clear? Did your group discuss any issues that could be added to our list of questions?):

Overall Impression of this Issue (Please rate the issue 5= Outstanding, 1= Poor. Also include any general impressions or comments regarding this issue.):

1 2 3 4 5

Corrections (typos, grammatical errors, wrong passages, etc.):