

## The Church under Roman Rule

When you teach history, you are always making choices about what to include and what to leave out. There are so many events that took place - which ones are important? Which ones most influenced the future? What were the factors that went into making the decisions that were made at the time?

In the history of the Christian mission, there is a ton that we do know and I'm going to try to focus mostly on that, but the motives of the key players are not always so clear. What moved the Roman Emperor Constantine to embrace the Christian faith? What moved the early church to become an organization based on a model of top-down hierarchy? We don't always know, but we can at least understand the influence that those decisions continue to have on the church and its mission today.

Let's begin with Jesus' parting instructions to those who had followed Him during His earthly ministry. Besides His example and His teaching, what guidance did He give them for their own future, for how to carry on His ministry? And we have five texts to look at:

*Go into all the world and preach the Good News to everyone, everywhere.*

*Anyone who believes and is baptized will be saved. (Mark 16:15,16)*

*Go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. (Matthew 28:19,20)*

*With My authority, take this message of repentance to all the nations, beginning in Jerusalem. There is forgiveness of sins for all who turn to Me. (Lu. 24:47)*

*As the Father has sent Me, so I send you (John 20:21)*

*When the Holy Spirit has come upon you, you will receive power and will tell people about Me everywhere -- in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)*

What kind of mission did Jesus give His followers that would define what Christ-followers were supposed to be about for the next few thousand years? Go and tell. Teach and baptize. Where you are and to the ends of the earth. To those who are like you and to those who have a different world view and values.

In the early years of the Christian church, the mission that Jesus had given them was at the forefront. Let's look at the outreach that took place in the first century on a timeline and then on a map.

30 A.D. - Jesus crucified, resurrected, ascended, Pentecost, the church begins

31 A.D. - Saul of Tarsus is converted (later Paul)

36 - Philip won Samaritans to faith in Christ, also baptized an Ethiopian eunuch, first Christians in Nubian Meroe (Ethiopia)

38 - Peter preached to Cornelius' household; the first of the Romans to come to faith

39 - Church of Antioch was founded, multicultural congregation became base of the Gentile mission movement

42 - First Christians in Britain. The King of Silures, in present-day Wales converted,

possibly the first ruler in the world to become a Christian

44 - Peter and many other apostles left Jerusalem

45 - Paul's missionary journeys began; Christianity soon became more Gentile than Jewish

48 - The Gospel reached Persia - the Assyrian church developed on its own as one of the most missions-minded branches of the church.

49 - Jerusalem Council:

50 - Paul's second missionary journey

52 - Thomas travels to India (martyred there in 72)

53 - Paul's third missionary journey

58 - Paul arrested in Jerusalem

60 - Kingdom of Osrhoene, an Aramaic-speaking buffer state between Rome & Persia was evangelized. By 100 it was the first independent state to become Christian

64 - beginning of first Imperial persecution of Christians by Nero. Paul and Peter martyred in Rome

65-75 - the four gospels were written

70 - Matthew martyred in Ethiopia

91 - Second imperial persecution of Christians, Diocletian

Now, let's look at a map of where the apostles, and some other missionaries, travelled in fulfilling Jesus' instructions to them:

1. Peter took the Good News to Persia, to northern Asia (what is now called Turkey), and to Rome

2. Andrew took the gospel to northern Greece

3. Thomas travelled to India preaching the resurrection

4. Philip took the gospel to Phrygia, in what would now be central Turkey

5. Matthias, who took Judas Iscariot's place among the 12, went to Ethiopia ... so did Matthew

6. Simon the Zealot took the message to the heart of today's nation of Iran

7. Bartholomew obeyed Jesus' command by preaching all the way to the Caspian Sea

8. Thaddeus and Jude went to different parts of Eastern Turkey

9. James Alphaeus travelled to Spain

10. The Apostle John to the region around Ephesus

11. Mark helped to establish the church in North Africa

12. Joseph of Arimathea, who owned the tomb that Jesus was buried in, travelled all the way to Britain with the gospel

13. Dr. Luke ministered in Greece and in Rome.

But there was an incredible cost to all this ministry. In country after country, in culture after culture, those who brought the gospel were killed for doing so, in ways that were more gruesome, if that's even possible, than what you hear today about the ISIS butchers of Syria and Iraq. And so began a pattern that we will see century after century; that those who boldly proclaimed forgiveness of sins and salvation for the repentant were martyred for the cause of Christ.

The waves of official state persecution of Christians were only one of the causes of martyrdom, but they were significant. We've seen the first two waves, coming in the first century, instigated by Nero and then by Diocletian. In the second century there were Imperial persecutions led by the Emperor Trajan in 110 and a further, relatively minor one, in 165. Other persecutions were conducted by the Jews, especially before the year 135 when they were driven from Jerusalem after Bar Kochba's rebellion, by the Persians and by other local groups. In the second century alone, there were 81,000 Christian martyrs, while the number of Christian believers grew from 1.4 million to 4.7 million. By the year 200, 2.5% of the world's people were Christians. By the year 300, while world population remained the same, 7.5%, or 14.3 million people were now followers of Christ, despite a great increase in the number of martyrs, nearly 400,000 in that century, many of whom were persecuted in Persia, as Zoroastrianism was revived as the state religion. The church in Armenia was virtually wiped out ... and yet, the king of Armenia was converted to Christ in 295 and Christianity became the state religion in 301. There were 4 more Imperial Roman persecutions of the church during the third century, each lasting from between 2 and 10 years. The worst of the Imperial persecutions still lay ahead in the first decade of the fourth century.

I'm telling you this so that you will see the background for the major developments in the life of the early church. Although the "official" decisions might have come later, it was in these years of persecution and of passionate mission that the church decided which books would be part of its Scripture and how it would govern itself. It was in this period that the key beliefs of the church were disputed and consensus was formed. Yes, later Councils made the creeds, but they were, for the most part, affirming what the church had long believed.

Let's look at two of those key issues and how they were resolved in the first 300 years of church history. One is, "Who was Jesus, really? Was He human? Was He divine? What was His relationship with God and how did that determine what He did?" The second big question that the early church had to look at was, "Which writings have been inspired by God to tell the story of Jesus' life, of the early church, and of the ministry of the church? Which ones can we count on to steer us in the right direction on the important issues we face?" Because the second question was less controversial then, let's start with that one.

There were two fundamental conditions for accepting or rejecting a written work for inclusion as "Scripture", as having authority for teaching the truth of the Christian message. One, was that the writing had to be very early, being the testimony of an eye-witness to the events. Second, the writing had to have connection to someone known as an apostle, a recognized authority in the early church. Here is the list of writings that were recognized as early as AD 200 and used in the church at Rome. This is known as the Muratorian Canon:

Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John

Acts

Paul's letters: Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians

Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thess.,  
1 & 2 Timothy, Titus and Philemon  
The epistle of James  
1 & 2 John  
Jude  
Revelation of John  
Revelation of Peter and Wisdom of Solomon

The New Testament used by Origen, one of the key thinkers and writers of the early church, 50 years later, included the same four gospels, the book of Acts and all the same letters of Paul. It also included 1 Peter, 1 John and the Revelation of John. Other works were disputed, including Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 & 3 John, Jude, The Shepherd of Hermas, Letter of Barnabas, Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, Gospel of the Hebrews. Notice that the Revelation of Peter and Wisdom of Solomon had been completely dropped by this time.

AD 300 and the Gospel used by Eusebius: exactly the same as that used by the earlier church father Origen, but now listing James, 2 Peter, 2 & 3 John and Jude as well known but disputed works. The letter to the Hebrews did not appear on Eusebius' list and he excluded The Shepherd of Hermas, Letter of Barnabas, Gospel of the Hebrews, Revelation of Peter, Acts of Peter and Didache.

Another hundred years and the Council of Carthage has fixed the New Testament that we have today. It included the six disputed works listed by Origen. The second shelf of books added to the Muratorian Canon is just 4 volumes: Hebrews, 1 & 2 Peter, 3 John. What strikes you as significant from these historical progressions towards a canon, an authorized New Testament that can teach us about Jesus?

1. The huge majority of it was accepted and established from the beginning. All four Gospels, the book of Acts, the writings of Paul, 1 John and Revelation were never in doubt. During these years when Christianity was illegal and believers paid for their confession of faith with their lives, there was nothing very controversial about which books were in and which were out. The books that were being debated, with the exception of Hebrews, are five chapters or shorter in our Bibles today.

2. There is no mention of the Gospels of Thomas or of Mary or of Judas, the so-called "Gnostic gospels". None of those works were early, dating back to the first century, and none were actually written by apostles. They were written in the second century or later and presented a different view of Christ than did the writings of the early witnesses that comprise our New Testament. I'll try to answer questions on this in a few minutes.

3. The third thing I'd point out is that the gospels and letters that were accepted presented a unified view of who Jesus is and the significance of the cross. It is clear that those early sources, the eye-witnesses who walked with Jesus, and Paul who was given his own revelation of who Jesus is, saw Him the same way. They understood who He was and they present a consistent picture.

Which brings us right into the second big question, and that is, how did this picture of

Jesus emerge among the competing visions of who He was. Let's start by looking at some of the options that arose during the early centuries:

1. Gnosticism was the rising philosophy of the second half of the first century and a serious competitor in the second century. Gnostics believed that salvation was gained through secret knowledge - in Greek the word is *gnosis*. Their view of the world was *dualistic*. Dual means two and dualism teaches two equal and competing forces. The evil force was the creator, often caricatured as the God of the Old Testament, and the good was a transcendent God. The physical world was evil and the spiritual world was good. The Gnostics would teach that Jesus was a spiritual being sent from the transcendent God who would give people a secret knowledge about themselves and thus allow them to be united with the transcendent God and so be "saved". We could do an in-depth study of Gnosticism and its views on the body and on salvation and its revival in the 20th and 21st centuries, but it clearly represents a departure from the views of Paul, the views of Jesus as given to us in the Gospels and the beliefs and practices of the early church. It was a reasonably popular world view that some thinkers of the day tried to impose on the new Christian faith, but it was never a good fit.

Worth mentioning in this context is a man named Marcion who developed the first, and heretical, canon of the New Testament in 144. He had become influenced by a Gnostic teacher named Cerdo who taught that the God of the Old Testament was different from the God and Father of our Lord Jesus. So Marcion developed a canon that excluded all the Gospels except Luke and all the epistles outside of Paul. Then he removed from Luke and from Paul's letters all references to the Old Testament. The church rejected his views and his canon and Tertullian wrote a five-volume work called *Against Marcion* in 207 to counteract the theology Marcion had presented.

2. The earliest challenge to Christian faith came from the Jewish believers who argued that a person who wanted to follow Christ had to be circumcised into the Jewish faith as part of their conversion. They caused all kinds of trouble for Paul and others who planted churches, but their influence grew less after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 and was insignificant after the banishment of Jews from Jerusalem in 135.

3. The great challenges that came after Gnosticism were about the person of Jesus. Was He really God? Was He really human? How could He be both?

a. *Docetism* taught that Jesus was not really fully human, but only *appeared* to be. The Greek word "doketai" means "illusionists". This occurred very early on and was rejected by John, in 1 John 4:2 and later by Ignatius of Antioch who wrote, "They abstain from the Eucharist and from prayer, because they confess not the Eucharist to be the flesh our Savior Jesus Christ, who suffered for our sins and who the Father, of His goodness, raised up again." Docetism had mostly faded by the end of that first century.

b. *Arianism* was proposed by a Christian presbyter in Alexandria, Egypt named Arius. He believed that Jesus was a created being and therefore inferior to God the Father.

He didn't accept the verses in which John taught that Jesus had existed with God in the beginning. His views lasted several decades, but were rejected by the church. Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria is known as the "chief defender of Trinitarianism against Arianism" and he wrote and argued tirelessly for the Trinitarian view which was, ultimately, accepted. This took place at the Council of Nicaea, a council convened by the emperor Constantine and held from May until August of 325 to address this issue. Several emperors actually sided with Arius, including Constantine, Constantius II, Julian the Apostate and Valens, which resulted in Athanasius being called "Athanasius Contra Mundum" -- Athanasius against the world.

This issue brings us into a new and very different age for the church. Once Constantine had converted and made Christianity first legal, and then the state religion, the faith of the first three centuries was changed from being a persecuted minority to being allied with the state. Although that made things easier for the Christians, it wasn't a good thing for the growth and health and mission of the church.

Already, before this time, there was a significant movement towards monasticism. But when the Roman Empire adopted Christianity as their state religion, people who genuinely wanted to pursue Jesus, to know Him, to live a devout Christian life, many of them decided to live like hermits. This was common in north Africa, where the Desert Fathers lived a simple life, practised spiritual disciplines and wrote and taught others about their faith. Gradually, people who admired their faith and who wanted to learn from them began to join them, or at least to develop their own hermit style of life in a location nearby. And the next step was that monastic orders formed, which were basically rules of communal life that people committed to.

A great deal of the mission of the church was carried on through the collapse of the Roman Empire and the "Dark Ages" that followed, by these monastic orders. Monasteries were places of light and scholarship in an increasingly "dark" world. Monks were the ones who faithfully made copies of the Scriptures, who carried out charitable missions in their communities, and who spread the Gospel through word and work, establishing new communities of faith wherever they were led to go. While the church gained political power and lost its focus on mission, these orders kept something alive, a spark, a passion for Jesus' mission on the earth.

By the way, throughout history, whenever the church has gained political power, it's been bad for the church. Christianity grew up in persecution and weakness, following a servant King, taking up their cross daily in order to be true followers ... and when are put in a position of power, the church has never handled it well.

Where is the church growing today? Where it is being persecuted, where there are martyrs, where people have to decide to follow Jesus, no matter the cost, no matter the risk. There were 81,000 Christian martyrs in the second century, nearly 400,000 in the third, 962,000 died for their faith in the fourth century and over half a million in the fifth. Can you guess how many martyrs there were in the twentieth century as

civilization advanced and people were in awe of “human progress”? Just under 45 million lost their lives for proclaiming the name that is higher than any other name, the name at which the enemy of our souls trembles.

Looking back at the first 300 years of church history, one is tempted to say, “It couldn’t have happened any other way.” There is no way that an empire could simply accept an outsider as their king, no way that the church could escape persecution, no way that it could find its true identity and grow in love and faithfulness as it did, without following the path of suffering that was laid before it.