

THE EARLY CHURCH



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# The Early Church

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A Walk Through history

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## **BACKGROUND AND TIME-LINE**

In the formative times of the New Testament church around the time of Nero (64 A.D.) and until the conversion of Emperor Constantine's around 313 A.D) and subsequently Christianity became legal, the Christian faith was regarded as a an evil or depraved religion.

It is during this season that a more formalized approach was adapted. Christianity began as a "movement within a movement", more specifically, within the synagogues and among the Jews.

By the end of the first century, the Christian movement had largely separated from the Jews as the gospel reached the gentiles and uttermost parts of the present day world.

Today, the Christian church has grown and emerged in many ways, and a considered comparison of both eras makes some important and helpful observations.

As the present day church faces unprecedented changes in the world view towards morality, legislation, family, racism and personal liberties (not unlike the early church); we must be mindful of the present day cause.

In this series I want to pose two questions:

- 1. Why would anyone want to become a Christian?**
- 2. What (if anything), can we learn from them**

This leads us to make four further considerations:

- 1. WHAT WERE THE STRENGTHS OF THE EARLY CHURCH?**
- 2. WHAT EMPOWERED THEM TO NAVIGATE THE PRESENT DAY CULTURE?**
- 3. WHAT DO WE HAVE IN COMMON WITH THEM TODAY?**
- 4. WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM HISTORY?**

Notes will be available as this discussion group considers the mandate of today's church within the world, and our personal approach to the world around us.

## WEEK ONE – TAKE A LOOK AROUND!

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

### Christianity's Jewish Roots

Christianity began as a movement within Judaism. Much of the earliest proclamation of the Gospel took place in the synagogues. The Christians did not side with the Jews in their revolt against Rome beginning in **66 A.D.**, and by the end of the first century the church had largely separated from the synagogue.

### Informal Structures

When a "church" wasn't a building-

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

### Debate but not Denominations

The early church did not have *denominations* as we think of them today. The early church began amongst the Jews, who had "sects" within it. But that does not mean they had no serious disagreements within the ranks, on the contrary, They did. And they did not find this surprising. They felt they were dealing with matters of ultimate truth and error - matters to be taken with the utmost seriousness even when it meant dissension.

### Persecution was expressed in many ways

The early Christians were the targets of repeated persecutions - some of unspeakable cruelty. For example, the emperor Nero blamed the Christians for the great fire that destroyed 10 of the 14 city wards at Rome in 64 A.D., a fire that Nero apparently had ordered himself.

*The historian Tacitus, not a Christian, said that Nero had the believers "torn by dogs, and nailed to crosses. They were even used as human torches to illuminate his gardens at night."*

### All out war on the Christians came in two regimes

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

**The second, called "The Great Persecution,"** began on **February 23, 303**, under Emperor Diocletian. **Galerius**, the empire's second-in-command, was behind this persecution policy and continued it after Diocletian's death.

For eight long years, official decrees ordered Christians out of:

- **Public office,**
- **Scriptures confiscated,**
- **Church buildings destroyed,**
- **Leaders arrested,**
- **Pagan sacrifices required.**

All the reliable methods of torture were mercilessly employed –

- **Wild beasts,**
- **Burning,**
- **Stabbing,**
- **Crucifixion,**
- **The rack.**

But they were all to no avail. The penetration of the faith across the empire was so *pervasive* that the church could *not be intimidated nor destroyed*. In **A.D. 311**, the same **Galerius**, shortly before his death, weak and diseased, issued an "edict of toleration."

This included the statement that it was the duty of Christians "to pray to their god for our good estate."

### **Baptism**

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

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

### **Slaves were welcomed, contrary to Roman culture**

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

### **"Hypocrisy and deception enters the church"**

Misusing the Gospel for financial gain is by no means the invention of 20th-century religious hucksters.

One of the earliest Christian documents after the New Testament, The Didache, (*The Didache also known as The Lord's Teaching Through the Twelve Apostles to the Nations is a brief anonymous early Christian treatise written in Koine Greek*).

was a type of manual on **church practice**, warns about *traveling preachers who come and ask for money*. The **satirist Lucian** in the second century ridiculed Christians for being so easily taken in by charlatans, often giving them money.

**Lucian** recorded the notorious case of the philosopher Peregrinus, who attracted a devoted following among Christians (and a lot of money) before he was found out. The showman instincts of Peregrinus reached their climax when he died by publicly cremating himself at the close of the **Olympic games in 165**

### 1. SO WHAT WERE THE STRENGTHS OF THE EARLY CHURCH?

Explaining the strengths and weakness of the early church, compared to the church today is a very informative topic as it allows Christians to *reflect* on **their purpose in the world**. After considering different sources, I have come to the following realisation:

- A) The early church was more **focused** on making sure that the **good news** about Jesus was spread *without compromise*.
- B) The **teaching** of the word about who **Jesus is** was so rich that, more and more people joined the church every-day.
- C) The **fellowship** of church members brought light to the community as it influenced their way of living.
- D) The church in the New Testament played their role to **call out** those who were in darkness to bring them to light which Jesus promised them if they love one another.
- E) Comparing the early and the church today, teaches us that the early church **was so excited** to be followers of Jesus and they **were spiritually motivated**.
- F) Christians today need that excitement to occupy their daily life to glorify Jesus because he is the **source of life and the world needs him** at this age.

1. Focused
2. Teaching
3. Fellowship
4. Called Out
5. Excited
6. Spiritually Motivated
7. Source and Need of the world

#### THE EARLY CHURCH STARTED WITH AN ENCOUNTER

'All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them' (Acts 2:4). On the day of Pentecost the New Testament church was established.