

Christian Culture Lesson 2 The Apostolic Age (c 33 - 300 AD)

1. From Jewish to Christian

We ended the last lesson by investigating the first big disagreement in the Church: did non-Jewish converts to Christianity need to follow all the rules of the Jewish faith as well? This was a very pressing question because it was not long after the start of the Church that non-Jews began wanting to join. The first recorded pagan convert was an Ethiopian man; the first Roman convert was a centurion called Cornelius - we know about them from the Acts of the Apostles. **Saint Peter** was so reluctant to set foot in Cornelius' home (as this was against the Jewish faith) that he needed a direct commandment - even a vision - from heaven to make him go.

Remember that although the Roman persecutions are more well known, the first persecutions in the Church took place at the hands of the Jews. **St. Stephen**, a deacon, was the first ever martyr (proto-martyr); his death was soon followed by that of **St James. St. Paul** (who, as Saul, had been one of the greatest persecutors of Christians) discovered that when he travelled around preaching, it was often the Jews who opposed him while the pagans accepted his teachings (though on one occasion, it was the pagans who wanted rid of him - the silversmiths of Ephesus were worried that if his preaching was effective, no-one would want them to create pagan statues anymore and they would be out of business!). Paul was so successful in his preaching to non- Jews that he is known to history as '**The Apostle of the Gentiles**'.

The issue as to whether or not Christians must also be Jews was settled at the Council of Jerusalem (the first great council of the Church) in about 50AD. Within a hundred years or so, the Church was made up primarily of Gentile converts and was no longer viewed by Rome as a group within Judaism.

2. Roman persecutions

Persecutions of the Church by the Roman authorities began in earnest when the **Emperor Nero** blamed Christians for the fire which devastated Rome in **64AD**. Nero used this as an excuse to arrest and brutally execute anyone who was discovered to belong to the Church. His cruelty became legendary, and it was during this persecution that both Peter and Paul were martyred. The Roman historian **Tacitus** relates that no-one really believed the Christians were guilty, but that they still felt the punishments were justified. Why? Christians were regarded by pagan Romans as enemies of the state, guilty of treason: for a Roman, loyalty to Empire and Emperor were at the heart of Roman culture, but Christians preached loyalty to something higher. They offended the pagan gods by insisting on belief in only one God and trying to convince others to do the same, and their secret rites and miraculous ('magical') power to heal the sick also brought them under suspicion. As Tacitus wrote, '*they were convicted not so much for the burning of Rome, as of hating the human race*'. Loyalty to Rome was equated with being a good citizen and a humane person and from the time of Nero the cry became '*Christiani non suit*' ('let the Christians be exterminated!'). These

persecutions continued for 250 years under various emperors - notably Domitian, Trajan, Marcus Aurelius, Decius, Valerian and Diocletian - and with various levels of severity.

3. The Church continues to grow

Despite the severe persecutions and horrific martyrdoms, more and more people chose to become Christian (In 112 AD, a writer called **Pliny** who was Roman governor of Bithynia, wrote a letter to the Emperor Trajan asking for advice about how to deal with the Christians as so many were being presented to him for trial: Trajan replied to Pliny that he should continue to execute anyone who admitted being a Christian, whether they were accused of any other crime or not.) It has been estimated that by the year 250, about a third of the population of the Empire was Christian. Why did the faith spread so rapidly despite the persecutions ? Here are some reasons which have been suggested:

- The genuine love/charity which existed between Christians impressed people
- The courage and faithfulness of the martyrs impressed people
- The fact that the faith was open to rich and poor, slave and free alike
- The promise of eternal happiness
- The lack of morality in pagan religion led people to believe there must be a better way to live

The Christian writer **Tertullian** who lived around 200AD famously gave another reason for the spread of the Catholic faith when he addressed the Roman authorities, saying: "Afflict us, torment us, crucify us - in proportion as we are mown down, we increase: *the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.*" Tertullian is saying that it is actually the martyrdoms themselves which cause the Church to grow, so persecution will never stop it - the more martyrs, the more Christians.

4. Expressions of Christian culture in the Apostolic Age

Painting

There is not a great deal of Christian art from this early period, partly because many of the converts were poor, uneducated people and partly because of the persecutions which meant people tended not to be too open about displaying their faith. Virtually all surviving Christian painting from this era comes from the **catacombs**, where the paintings show a simple, symbolic style very similar to contemporary pagan art (a fish representing Christ; bread and wine invoking the Eucharist). The **Catacomb of Domitilla** covers 11 miles and includes an early portrayal of Christ as the Good Shepherd (the shepherd was a very popular subject in pagan art and easy to adapt). Very early depictions of Christ dating back to c235 AD and were found in a house-church at **Dura-Europos** (an abandoned ancient city in Syria); these include the Healing of the paralytic, and Christ and Peter walking on the water (early Christians preferred to depict miracles from the life of Christ, and to portray his resurrection: the Crucifixion only became a popular subject in art much later). A large fresco at Dura-Europos depicting three women approaching a large sarcophagus is thought to

represent the three Marys visiting Christ's tomb. Another famous portrayal of Christ as the Good Shepherd, and possibly the earliest ever painting of Our Lady, were found in the **Catacomb of Priscilla** in Rome (dating from around 250AD). Also found in the Catacomb of Priscilla are references to the Eucharist, including a standing cup and loaves, loaves and fishes, and even possibly the earliest ever picture of the last supper.

Sculpture

Early Christian sculpture took the form of relief carvings on sarcophagi/ tombs and usually consisted of illustrations of Old Testament stories such as Moses striking the Rock, Daniel in the Lions' Den, Jonah and the Whale, Noah receiving the Dove with the Olive Branch - all of these would have signified the Resurrection or Salvation. Carved figures of a shepherd holding a sheep were common in pagan art and were easily adopted by Christian artists to represent Christ. Virtually no full Christian statue or sculpture has survived from this early period and it is possible that none were even made due to a strong reluctance to create anything that resembled a pagan idol.

Architecture

Early Church ('ecclesiastical') architecture reflected the basic difference between a Christian church and a pagan temple: a temple was designed to be the dwelling of the god/goddess in question, and the place where priests of the cult might offer suitable sacrifices and hold ceremonial rites. In other words, it was a sacred place, to which ordinary devotees of the cult were not allowed entry, no matter how large it was. In contrast, a Christian church was designed as a place of worship for the local congregation. To begin with, the small groups of persecuted Christians sought to worship inconspicuously: they worshipped in secret house-churches or similar meeting-places, which were entirely devoid of any external architectural design or decorative art. The 3rd century house-church excavated at Dura-Europos is one of the earliest surviving examples: the building consists of a house joined to a separate hall-like room, which functioned as the meeting room for the church. It was only after Christianity became the official religion of the Empire that a need developed for much bigger churches; this led in turn to the adapting of the Roman basilica (a large roofed public building containing markets, courthouses, covered promenades, and meeting halls) as a place of worship

Once the state persecutions ended, Christian culture took over from pagan culture as the dominant culture of the Roman Empire. That is when the story of Christian culture really begins.

Review

- Which group of people first persecuted Christians?
- Why, according to Tacitus, were Christians so hated by pagan Romans?
- Can you name four Roman emperors who persecuted Christians?
- Why, according to Tertullian, did the persecutions not stop the growth of the Church?
- Why are there so few paintings from before 300AD?
- Why are there no statues of Christ from before 300AD?
- Why are there no large church buildings from this time?