

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 57: Converting the Empire: Early Church Evangelism

The Emperor's New Religion

The story of early Christianity's most famous—and most controversial—convert.

Bruce Shelley

The first *Life of Constantine* describes its subject as "resplendent with every virtue that godliness bestows." This panegyric came from the hand of Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea in Palestine, and perhaps Constantine's greatest admirer. It is the classic image that prevailed in Eastern Christianity for more than a thousand years.

Historians now debate whether "the first Christian emperor" was a Christian at all. Some think him an unprincipled power seeker who sought only to inflate his ego. What religion he had, many argue, was at best a blend of paganism and Christianity for purely political purposes.

Certainly, Constantine held to ideals we no longer share. He knew nothing of religion without politics or politics without religion. Yet he clearly believed he was a Christian, and he looked back to a battle at the Milvian Bridge, just outside the walls of Rome, as the decisive hour in his newly found faith.

Commander and strategist

Constantine's early years lie mostly in history's shadows. We know only that he was born in Illyria, a region in the Balkans. His father, Constantius Chlorus, was already a Roman official on the rise. Helena, the daughter of an innkeeper and Constantius's wife, gave birth to Constantine around A.D. 280 in Naissus, just south of the Danube.

In 293 his father became caesar of the West (assistant to the Western augustus [emperor], Maximian), and the young Constantine served in the court of Diocletian, the Eastern augustus.

The Most Widely Used Christian Symbol

The symbol Constantine made famous was formed by the overlapping of the Greek letters chi (**Χ**) and rho (**Ρ**), an abbreviation for *Christos* already in use. Sometimes an alpha (**α**) and omega (**ω**) were added, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, representing Christ as the first and the last.

When Diocletian retired in 305, in a realignment of power, Constantine's father became augustus of the West, and when he died a year later, Constantine succeeded him. The young ruler decided to let the East resolve its own conflicts while he turned his attention to consolidating power in his own empire, gaining valuable field experience as a commander and strategist.

But when Galerius, the Eastern augustus, died in the spring of 311, defending outlying regions became peripheral. Maximian's son, Maxentius, anxious about Constantine's power, was in the capital claiming to be the legitimate emperor of the West.

Field vision

With 40,000 soldiers behind him, Constantine rode south to confront an enemy whose numbers were

four times his own.

Under a fatal sense of security, Maxentius waited in Rome, with his Italian troops and the elite Praetorian Guards, confident no one could successfully invade the city. But Constantine's army was already overwhelming his foes in Italy as he marched toward the capital. When the formidable army at Turin fell, even the Roman crowds turned against Maxentius. At the October 26 chariot races, commemorating the anniversary of his accession two days later, the spectators openly mocked their leader.

The aggravated Maxentius turned to pagan oracles, finding a prophecy that the "enemy of the Romans" would perish on October 28, Maxentius's accession day. But Constantine was still miles away. Bolstered by the prophecy, Maxentius left the city to meet his foe. He made his stand at a place called Red Rocks, nine miles north of Rome. On one side stood massive hills. On the other flowed the Tiber River. It was a strong defensive position but made retreat difficult.

Meanwhile, Constantine and his army saw a vision in the afternoon sky: a bright cross with the words ***Hoc vince***: "By this sign conquer." As the story goes, Christ himself told Constantine in a dream to take the cross into battle as his standard.

Though accounts vary, Constantine apparently believed the omen to be a word from God. When he awoke early the next morning, the young commander obeyed the message and ordered his soldiers to mark their shields with the now famous Chi-Rho.

Maxentius and his troops fought well but were overwhelmed by Constantine's army, which was invigorated by this sign from heaven. Maxentius's troops fled in disarray toward the surging Tiber. The would-be emperor attempted to escape over the wooden bridge erected to span the stream, but his own army-turned-mob, pressing through the narrow passage, forced him into the river where he drowned by the weight of his armor.

Constantine had no desire to impose his newfound faith as a state religion. "The struggle for deathlessness," he said, "must be free.". Constantine entered Rome the undisputed ruler of the West, the first Roman emperor with a cross in his diadem.

Wavering believer

Once supreme in the West, Constantine met Licinius, the ruler of the Balkan provinces, and issued the famous Edict of Milan that gave Christians freedom of worship and directed the governors to restore all the property seized during the Diocletian persecution.

Eusebius in his ***Church History*** recorded the Christian jubilation: "The whole human race was freed from the oppression of the tyrants. We especially, who had fixed our hopes upon the Christ of God, had gladness unspeakable."

Constantine's faith was still imprecise, but few questioned its authenticity. In 314 Constantine sent a message to the assembled bishops at the Council of Arles. He wrote about how God does not allow people "to wander in the shadows" but reveals to them salvation: "I have experienced this in others and in myself, for I walked not in the way of righteousness. ... But the Almighty God, who sits in the court of heaven, granted what I did not deserve."

For a decade, though, he wavered. For example, on the Arch of Constantine, which celebrates his Milvian Bridge victory, pagan sacrifices usually depicted on Roman monuments are absent. Then again, there are still no Christian symbols, and Victory and the Sun God are honored.

He had no desire to impose his newfound faith as a state religion. "The struggle for deathlessness," he said, "must be free." He seemed to begin where his father left off: more or less a monotheist opposed to idols, and more or less friendly toward Christians. Only through the years did his Christian convictions grow.

Ten years after the Edict of Milan, Licinius had fought his way to supremacy in the East and, given the ambitions of the two emperors, conflict seemed inevitable. In 323 they took up arms to settle their differences. Constantine fought as the Christian champion against an enemy who put his trust in Jupiter.

Constantine triumphed and became the sole ruler of the Roman world.

Public relations expert

The victory over Licinius enabled Constantine to move the seat of government permanently to the East, to the ancient Greek city of Byzantium (now Istanbul). He enlarged and enriched the city at enormous expense and built magnificent churches throughout the East. The new capital was dedicated as New Rome, but everyone soon called the city Constantinople.

Christians were more populous and vocal in the East than they were in Rome, so during the last 14 years of his reign, "Bullneck" could openly proclaim himself a Christian. He proceeded to create the conditions we call "state-church" and bequeathed the ideal to Christians for over a thousand years.

In 325 the Arian controversy threatened to split the newly united empire into two camps. To settle the matter, Constantine called together a council of the bishops at Nicea, a city near the capital. He ran the meeting himself.

"You are bishops whose jurisdiction is within the church," he told them. "But I also am a bishop, ordained by God to oversee those outside the church."

Presiding at the council, Constantine was magnificent: arranging elaborate ceremony, dramatic entrances and processions, and splendid services. He was also a gifted mediator, now bringing his skill in public relations to the management of church affairs.

Unfortunately he could not follow abstract arguments or subtle issues and often found himself at a great disadvantage at these councils. This explains, in part, his explosions of temper and indecisive policy making and why he could be ardent in his convictions yet remain oblivious to moral implications.

Fat with flattery

As Constantine grew older, his private life seemed to degenerate. He grew fat and delighted in flattery and elaborate titles. His nephew Julian said he made himself ridiculous by his appearance: weird, stiff Eastern garments, jewels on his arms, a tiara on his head, perched crazily on top of a tinted wig.

He waited until death drew near to be baptized as a Christian. His decision was not unusual in a day when many Christians believed one could not be forgiven after baptism. Since the sins of worldly men, especially those with public duties, were considered incompatible with Christian virtue, some church leaders delayed baptizing such men until just before death.

He gave his sons an orthodox Christian education and his relations with his mother were generally happy, but he continued to act as a typical Roman emperor. He ordered the execution of his eldest son, his second wife, and his favorite sister's husband. No one seems to be able to explain fully his reasons.

While many of his actions cannot be defended, he did bid farewell to the old Roman gods and make the cross an emblem of Victory in the world.

Bruce Shelley is senior professor of church history at Denver Seminary and author of Church History in Plain Language (Word).

Copyright © 1998 by the author or Christianity Today International/Christian History magazine.

More resources:

- Bruce Shelley's [Church History in Plain Language](#) is a thorough but readable overview of the last two millennia.

Links

- Eusebius's writings on Constantine are available at the [Christian Classics Electronic Library](#).
- Biographies of Constantine and other Emperors are available at [De Imperatoribus Romanis: An Online Encyclopedia of Roman Emperors](#).
- [The Ecole Initiative](#) contains many images of Constantine in their images section.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 57: Converting the Empire: Early Church Evangelism

Evangelism in the Early Church: Did You Know?

Little known or remarkable facts about church growth in the ancient pagan world.

editors

For more than 150 years after the Resurrection, Christians had no official church buildings. During this time, evangelism was conducted mainly in homes, in the context of worship and Christian education. Itinerant evangelists were rarely found in the early centuries.

In Roman society, it was generally expected that everyone would participate in a cult, but few people thought it necessary to believe in pagan gods, like Mars or Venus. The satiric Roman poet Juvenal wrote, "These things not even boys believe, except such as are not yet old enough to have paid their penny for a bath."

At the end of the second century, nearly every popular religion—especially Mithraism—aligned itself in some way with solar monotheism. Thus Christians often talked of the similarities and differences between the sun god and the Light of the World.

Apologists attempting to defend the truths of Christianity sometimes argued with a uniquely Roman mind. Clement of Rome (died c. 97), for example, tried to prove the Resurrection by comparing it to the story of the phoenix—a mythological bird alleged to be reborn from its ashes every 500 years. Clement wrote as if all reasonable people believed in the phoenix story.

Christianity, when it eventually prevailed, often "baptized" paganism: it established churches on old shrines, like the churches of San Clemente and Santa Prisca in Rome. The Church of Santa Pudenziana in Rome is named, not after a martyred Christian (as the legend goes) but after the Roman senator, Pudens, who originally owned the land.

Constantine's famous Edict of Milan, which officially ended persecutions and granted certain favors for Christians, was not an edict (but a letter from a governor), nor was it issued at Milan (but at Mediolanum).

In 250, after over 200 years of evangelistic effort, Christians still made up only 1.9 percent of the empire. By the middle of the next century, though, about 56 percent of the population claimed to be Christians.

Copyright © 1998 by the author or Christianity Today International/Christian History magazine.

More resources:

- [Evangelism in the Early Church](#), by Michael Green, dwells on both the New Testament and later periods. As

the adviser on evangelism to the archbishop of Canterbury, his zeal for spreading the gospel shines through his well-researched history.

- [Encyclopedia of Early Christianity](#), edited by Everett Ferguson, is a resource we are very excited about. The newly revised work is \$187.50 for both volumes, so it's a little expensive for the average reader. But since it is one of the top reference works on the subject, either demand that your local library purchase a copy, or start saving up for it. A single volume paperback edition, which will be far less expensive) will be released in late 1999.
- [The Ecole Initiative](#) —A comprehensive hypertext encyclopedia of early church history. It offers everything from images from early Christian art to primary

source documents, to recent academic papers on the period. For early church buffs, this is a necessary bookmark.

- [Journal of Early Christian Studies](#)

—For a more academic view, visit this journal, published by the North American Patristics Society (NAPS.) It includes book reviews and many kinds of scholarship on A. D. 100-700. One of the editors, Everett Ferguson, is a contributor to ***Christian History*** magazine and editor of the ***Encyclopedia of Early Christianity***.

- [The Perseus Project](#)

—For information on the world the early Christians lived in (and eventually converted), this is one of the best. It includes ancient texts and translations, philological tools, maps, extensively illustrated art catalogs, and secondary essays on topics

like vase painting. This is truly an amazing site. More than 70 museums have shared pictures of their art objects. So far, it is mainly about the Greek world, but they are adding Roman materials constantly.

- **Calm exorcist.**

Jews and pagans had their own exorcism prayers and rituals to "place spirits under oath" long before Christianity arrived. But Christian exorcism was impressive in that it used no elaborate invocations or rituals—just prayer, Scripture, and the name of Jesus.

- **Recreational death.**

Prisoners of war, criminals, slaves, and even an emperor had fought in the highly popular gladiatorial games since 254 b.c. This was one aspect of Roman culture Christians particularly despised—for

the callous disregard of life and because the games were dedicated to pagan gods. Though Constantine tried to outlaw the games in 325, they continued for at least another century.

- **Live nude girls!!!** Another aspect of Roman culture abhorrent to Christians was the theater. Unlike early Greek drama, female roles in Roman dramas were played by women, and the dramas had explicit sexual themes. Elagabalus, the oversexed, gay, transvestite emperor (204-222), ordered that all sex acts in dramas be real.
- **Sibling rivalry —with a difference.** Christianity was most often associated with Judaism, since it too had come from Jerusalem (pictured here in a mosaic). But pagans found its rite of circumcision abhorrent, so more women

converted than men. When King Izates, from the Tigris valley, converted to Judaism, he refused to participate in, what he called, "rites that were strange and foreign."

- **Execution party.** Nero (37-68) saw Christians as easy scapegoats and executed many in cruel and ingenious ways, including burning crucifixions like these. Fortunately, his persecution was limited to Rome itself. Unfortunately, it took two centuries before Romans felt pity for the Christians they executed.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 57: Converting the Empire: Early Church Evangelism

Evangelism in the Early Church: From the Editor - Hodgepodge Evangelism

Hodgepodge Evangelism

Mark Galli

American Christianity has depended on great evangelists with great methods to both get and keep the evangelistic enterprise going.

Billy Graham's crusades are less remarkable for the number of people he converts than for the number of local Christians he involves in the evangelistic task—they pray for conversions, invite friends to the stadium, counsel people down on the field, and so on.

We see a similar phenomenon in his predecessors: George Whitefield, Charles Finney, Dwight Moody, and Billy Sunday. In doing great evangelism for great crowds, these great men motivated the ordinary to spread the faith. This phenomenon is central to the story of American Christianity.

The early church knew no such phenomenon. It didn't have a Graham, a Finney, or a Moody. It didn't have Promise Keepers. It didn't have a Great Awakening or user-friendly churches. Furthermore, it had no concise spiritual laws to share, no explosive method for talking to the unconverted.

What it had seems paltry: unspectacular people, with a hodgepodge of methods (so hodgepodge they can hardly be called "methods"), and rarely a gathering of more than a handful of people.

The paltry seems to have been enough, however, to make an emperor or two stop and take notice.

One of those emperors was Constantine, who, when he converted, changed entirely the dynamics of early church growth. So though we bring up his story, and that of his successors (to reveal the larger context), we focus on evangelism before Constantine.

The issue, then, has no central character or unifying narrative. It is a jumble of articles about a hodgepodge of things that normal and (to us) nameless Christians did to bring the name of Jesus Christ to the attention of pagans.

Not a phenomenon that filled stadiums, just enough to begin converting the known world.

P.S. Our online pages (<http://www.christianhistory.net> or AOL Keyword: CH) are getting a new look with new features. Check them out.

Copyright © 1998 by the author or Christianity Today International/Christian History magazine.

Future issues to anticipate

- **Spring 1998:** Pentecostalism (1880 to 1950): The American beginnings of the most

extraordinary
movement
in modern
Christianity.

- **Summer 1998:** The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth: The social, political, and religious life in first-century Palestine.
- **Fall 1998:** The Conversion of Europe (a.d. 500 to 1000): How Christians converted the "barbarians."
- **Winter 1999:** The Second Coming: How Christians have thought about and prepared for the return of their Lord.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 57: Converting the Empire: Early Church Evangelism

The Empire Within the Empire

Setting the context.

Around the year 300, Christians numbered anywhere from 5 to 10 percent of the population of the Roman Empire. In some provinces (e.g., Britain), Christians could hardly be found. But they were so numerous in other provinces, their internal disputes endangered the peace of the civic community.

In many Mediterranean lands, Christians had penetrated all levels of society. It had once been said that few Christians were wise by human standards or influential or of noble birth (1 Cor. 1:26), but this characterization was no longer valid. Christianity had become a minority that simply could no longer be ignored. Persecution, far from eradicating the Christian faith, served to highlight its remarkable powers of survival.

Without publicized campaigns or even an explicit evangelistic strategy, Christianity had made its way quietly and effectively in an environment not wholly unlike that in the post-Christian West today. It was, in some respects, an empire within the Empire.

So, how did it grow so large that one emperor felt threatened enough to persecute it mercilessly, and another was intrigued enough to adopt its faith.

Copyright © 1998 by the author or Christianity Today International/Christian History magazine.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 57: Converting the Empire: Early Church Evangelism

Defending the Cannibals

How Christians responded to the sometimes strange accusations of their critics.

J. David Cassel

Christians are cannibalistic, incestuous, ass-worshiping magicians who practice dangerous superstitions. Or at least that is what early critics thought.

Christianity faced opposition from its inception. Its founder was killed, and its first major missionaries were martyred. But as Christianity spread beyond Judea, the nature of the criticisms changed. Rather than opposing Jesus' teachings, most attacks against Christianity arose from ignorance and fear. Frequently critics had little, if any, firsthand experience with Christians, their worship, or their beliefs. So for the first two centuries, at least, attacks tended to restate stereotypes, stock objections, and misconceptions circulating throughout the pagan world.

If we examine the main charges and how Christians responded, we'll discover why Christianity could not easily be dismissed in the ancient world.

"Deadly superstition"

In his *Lives of the Caesars*, Suetonius (a Roman writer and secretary to Emperor Hadrian) was one of the first pagan writers to mention Christianity. But the context was hardly positive: believers are mentioned only as "a class of men given to a new and mischievous superstition." This charge of superstition was perhaps the most serious, and most common, pagan accusation.

The comment was repeated by Tacitus, a Roman historian, in his account of the burning of Rome. He acknowledged that Nero fabricated the accusations that Christians started the fire, but he held little sympathy for the "notoriously depraved" believers.

"Their originator, Christ, had been executed in Tiberius's reign by the governor of Judea, Pontius Pilatus," he wrote. "But in spite of this temporary setback, this deadly superstition had broken out not only in Judea (where the mischief had started) but even in Rome. All degraded and shameful practices collect and flourish in the capital."

Pliny the Younger, a Roman official sent to the province of Bithynia (in what is now northern Turkey) about the year 110, shared some of the same sentiments. Although Pliny had extensive governmental experience, he had never been involved in a trial involving Christians. So when it came time to question some of them, he wrote to Emperor Trajan for advice.

"I do not know what crime is usually punished or investigated or to what extent," he wrote. He was uncertain whether those admitting to be Christians should be punished or if they had to be charged with a crime as well.

Meanwhile, he asked the accused if they were Christians. To those who confessed, he asked a second time, then a third. When, even after "threatening punishment," they still confessed to be Christians, Pliny ordered that they be punished. "For I did not doubt that, whatever it was they admitted, obstinacy and unbending perversity certainly deserve to be punished."

The seeming lack of respect toward Roman authority seems to have angered Pliny more than anything. He likened this Christian attitude to a kind of contagious insanity or mental disorder that would inevitably result in crimes against the Roman state. As he closed his letter, he warned, "This contagious superstition is not confined to the cities alone but has spread its infection among the country villages." Trajan, incidentally, commended Pliny for his actions.

But what did the Romans mean by *superstition*? According to several prominent Roman authors, including Cicero and Plutarch, it was any offensive religious belief or practice that deviated from Roman norms. Certain groups were given to such "irrational" religions, in which they acted unpredictably—without regard for the rites, rituals, and traditions of Rome.

Plutarch, the famous biographer, suggested that superstition was even worse than atheism: "The atheist is unmoved regarding the Divinity, whereas the superstitious people are moved as they ought not to be, and their minds are perverted."

To Pliny the Younger, Christians were akin to *heraeria*, subversive political societies that lobbied for the interests of their group over the interests of the state:

"If the people assemble for the common purpose," he wrote, "whatever name we give them and for whatever reasons, they soon turn into a political club."

Indeed, it was political suspicions, not necessarily religious ones, that concerned Roman elites. Romans incorporated many religions into their empire. As long as devotees continued to observe Roman religious rites, they were free to worship any god they wished.

Christians, however, refused to acknowledge any god but their own. For the Romans, that was bad enough, but Christians also refused to participate in any non-Christian religious rites, to serve in the army, or to accept public office. Their refusal to eat meat during Roman religious rites, for example, prompted the trial before Pliny in Bithynia.

"Incestuous cannibals"

A stranger complaint of critics was this: Christians were cannibals and practiced incest. They were thought to be involved in bizarre and abhorrent religious rituals such as Thyestian feasts and Oedipean sex—the most heinous acts in Greco-Roman myth and literature. In these two myths, Thyestes eats his own children, and Oedipus kills his father and marries his mother.

How could pagans associate these myths with Christianity? Most likely the critics misread the Christian Scriptures. New Testament writers referred to their fellow Christians as brothers and sisters (James 2:15) and encouraged them to greet one another with a "holy kiss" (Rom. 16:16). This could have been misunderstood as incestuous, especially if a married couple were referred to as a brother and sister in Christ. This perspective may have been intensified by the secrecy of early eucharistic services, which were open only to baptized Christians.

The charge of cannibalism could also have arisen from a false understanding of the Christian Scripture and liturgy. The very words of the Eucharist, "Take and eat, this is my body broken for you," could be misread in a literal, cannibalistic sense by a reader ignorant of the metaphor.

Epiphanius of Salamis (315-403), a self-proclaimed expert on Christian heresies, offered another explanation. He suggested there were certain heretical Gnostic sects that proclaimed themselves Christians while performing rituals with no Christian origin or meaning. Christians were lumped together with Gnostics, who were said to gorge themselves with food and then engage in sexual orgies as wild

dogs were turned loose on the leftovers.

Christians were also accused of worshiping the head of an ass. The source of this accusation is unclear, though according to Tertullian, it arose from an account found in Tacitus's *Histories*. Tacitus wrote that when the Jews were released from slavery in Egypt and wandered in the desert, they often followed wild asses because these beasts would lead them to water at hidden oases. In gratitude, Tacitus suggested, Jews deified the head of this animal. Since Christianity and Judaism were closely identified, critics likely tarred both groups with the libel.

"Hocus pocus"

Celsus was a Roman philosopher who penned a critique of Christianity, *On True Doctrine*, during the reign of Emperor Marcus Aurelius (161-180). In it he derided Christians as "wool-workers, cobblers, laundry-workers, and the most illiterate and bucolic yokels, who could not dare to say anything at all in front of their elders and more intelligent masters."

Critics thought of Christianity as merely another version of Greek sorcery. In fact, the phrase *Hoc est corpus meum* (This is my body) was later adapted to "hocus pocus.". Celsus also dismissed Christianity as nothing more than magic and sorcery. For critics like Celsus, Christianity had more to do with the external manipulation of events through rites and incantations (magic) than with a belief system (religion).

Critics thought of Christianity as merely another version of Greek sorcery, with rites, spells, and magical formulas, amulets, and artifacts.

This accusation may have had several sources. One of the early accusations against Jesus himself was that he was a magician, and in fact, all Middle-Eastern religions at the time were accused of practicing magic in one form or another.

Christianity, however, may have left itself open to such charges by its emphasis on the mysterious and spiritual elements of baptism and the Eucharist. Before a baptismal service in the early church, priests often performed exorcisms over the candidates, and the ritualized liturgy could easily be mistaken for purification rites that often accompanied magic spells of the period.

The intonation of these rites had a semi-mystical quality and sounded similar to the chants used by Roman magicians. In fact, the phrase *Hoc est corpus meum* ("This is my body") from the Latin Rite of the Eucharist, was later adapted by magicians as "hocus pocus."

The empire's "best allies"

Christians among the elite, usually philosophers and writers, vigorously refuted the charges against their religion. They are known as apologists, from the Greek *apologeō* meaning "to defend." Once they established their defensive position, however, apologists took the offensive, arguing that Christianity was the only true philosophy.

Christian apologists often drew from the apologetic tradition of Hellenistic Judaism. This was helpful since many of the charges leveled against the Christians, such as atheism and political subversion, had once been cast against the Jews. Many apologists also drew from Roman philosophy, especially Platonism (Plato's *Apology of Socrates* remains now, as then, the most famous of all apologetic works).

The apologist Athenagoras, whose primary concern was to deny the charges of atheism, Thyestian

banquets, and Oedipean incest, challenged his pagan opponents to examine the lives of Christians in detail before judging them. Christians, he maintained, came from all walks of life, and though sometimes "unable to prove in words the benefits of our doctrine, by their deeds, they exhibit the benefit arising from the possession of its truth."

Justin Martyr, a convert from paganism who became the best known of the early apologists, went a step further, arguing that Christians should not be condemned unless factual evidence proved they were criminals. A close examination of the facts, he said, will prove that Christians are moral, upright, and law-abiding citizens who are the empire's "best allies in securing good order."

The apologists admitted that Christians did not worship the emperor or other gods and that most did not take part in the social events associated with pagan religion. But this did not make Christians bad citizens, the apologists stressed.

Christians obeyed Christ's command to pay taxes (Matt. 22:15-22), as well as Paul's teaching to submit to governing authorities (Rom. 13:1-5). How could that be considered subversion? Even more, Christians regularly offered prayers for the emperor and the empire as a part of their worship!

As even further evidence, Justin recounted a dubious tale of how the "thundering legion" (i.e., Christians) had saved Emperor Marcus Aurelius and the rest of the Roman army at Carnuntum by prayer.

The apologist Tatian, who tended not to employ classical philosophy in his defense, avowed his allegiance to Rome: "Why am I abhorred as a vile miscreant? If the emperor levies a tax, I am willing and ready to pay it. If I am a bondsman and my master commands me to serve, I acknowledge my status and obey. ... Only when I am commanded to deny my God will I not obey, since I would rather die than show myself false and ungrateful."

Sunshine policy

To counter the charge that Christian worship was a vile and secret assembly full of cannibalism, magic, and incest, apologists carefully and openly laid out the order and content of worship.

In his *First Apology*, Justin Martyr explained the innocent nature of the "holy kiss" and then described the Eucharist and baptism:

"When the president has given thanks and the whole congregation has assented, those whom we call deacons give to each of those present a portion of the consecrated bread and wine and water. ... We do not, however, receive these things as common bread or common drink; but ... we have been taught that the food consecrated by the word of prayer ... is the flesh and blood of the incarnate Jesus and that washing of baptism was not a magical cleansing but an action symbolizing the cleansing action of God within the believer."

Justin also went through the order of worship for a typical Sunday worship service in detail, demonstrating that though sometimes mystical, it was never indecent.

Taking the offensive

Most apologists reproached their critics with tact and traditional Greco-Roman diplomacy. Avoiding *ad hominem* attacks on their critics, apologists regularly attributed the rumors to demonic activity, accentuated by Roman zeal for truth and disgust for evil. Marcus Minucius Felix, for example, wrote, "For we were once the same as you; blind and ignorant, our opinions were once the same as yours. We believed that the Christians worshiped monsters, ate the flesh of infants, and practiced incest at their

feasts. We did not understand that these tales were always being spread abroad by the demons, without examination or proof."

Yet apologists were not content simply to defend the faith: they also mocked, criticized, and condemned Roman philosophy and religion. They often turned the tables on their accusers, suggesting they were guilty of that which they accused Christians. "Who would be so foolish as to worship [an ass's head]," wrote Felix, "or even still more foolish, to believe it—except yourselves, who keep whole asses as sacred in your stables together with your or their Epona [horse goddess]?"

Tertullian wrote, "How absurd it is for you to believe that [Christians] are panting for the blood of man when to your own knowledge they abhor the blood of man—unless indeed you have found by experience that human blood is the more palatable of the two! Again, who are more incestuous than those whom Jupiter himself has taught?"

The Romans worshiped gods who assumed human shape to impregnate mortals, and who petulantly harassed, punished, or killed mortals whom they disliked. Furthermore, argued the apologists, pagans emulated the behavior of these gods by exposing unwanted babies (i.e., infanticide), raising abandoned girls to be prostitutes, participating in or tacitly accepting pedophilia, sodomy, incest, and other immorality. The Christian God, they argued, is pure, holy and chaste, and expects the same moral excellence from Christians.

The seed of reason

Still, many early Christians did not argue that pagan religion and philosophy were completely wrong, only that they were inadequate or perverted reflections of the truth.

Justin Martyr was especially fond of this approach, and suggested that prior to Christ, God had scattered the seed of reason among all peoples. This seed enlightened not only the Hebrew prophets but also the pagan philosophers, so that even their best insights could be attributed to God.

Justin argued that everything done according to this seed of reason was "Christian," even if these people had no idea of the ultimate origin of the truth:

"We have been taught that Christ is the first-begotten of God, and he is ... the **Logos** ["word" or "reason"] of which every race partakes. Those who lived in accordance with the **Logos** are Christians, even though they were called godless." As examples, Justin listed Greeks like Socrates and Heraclitus with Abraham, Hananiah, Azariah, Mishael, and Elijah,"and many others whose deeds and names I forebear to list."

This seed present in all people, however, was insufficient and incomplete until it appeared in all its fullness as the divine **Logos**, manifest in Christ (John 1:1-18). The errors and inadequacies of the pagan philosophers and Hebrew prophets came about because they did not know or see the fullness of God revealed in Christ. It is only Christians, he argued, who worship and trust the revealed and embodied **Logos**, who have full access to eternal truth. In short, "Whatever things were rightly said among all teachers are the property of us Christians."

Christian apologetics, then or now, have never won masses of people to the faith. Few ancients were convinced solely by intellectual argument that Christianity was the truth. But apologetic writings demonstrated that Christianity was not a religion only for the simple minded or the irrational. It was a faith, a world view, with intellectual breadth and depth, one that no pagan could dismiss lightly.

J. David Cassel is assistant professor of theology at Hanover College.

More resources:

- [Early Christian Fathers](#) by Cyril C. Richardson is an excellent introduction to the apologists of the early church, with good translations of their works. If you are somewhat new to this subject, Richardson's book is a great place to start digging.
- [Evangelism in the Early Church](#), by Michael Green, dwells on both the New Testament and later periods. As the adviser on evangelism to the archbishop of Canterbury, his zeal for spreading the gospel shines through his well-researched history.
- [The Rise of Christianity](#), by W.H.C. Frend, is one of the best books in the field by one of the best historians in the field. He is professor emeritus of ecclesiastical history at

Glasgow
University.

Links

- [Christian Classics Electronic Library](#) —The Internet's best resource for Christian primary source documents, especially early church apologists.
- [The Ecole Initiative](#) —A comprehensive hypertext encyclopedia of early church history. It offers everything from images from early Christian art to primary source documents, to recent academic papers on the period. For early church buffs, this is a necessary bookmark."

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 57: Converting the Empire: Early Church Evangelism

Ordinary Saints at First Church

It wasn't revivals or eloquent preachers that most influenced pagan society but everyday Christians doing everyday evangelism.

E. Glenn Hinson

Pagans and Jews converting by the thousands after hearing the preaching of the apostles. Apologists, using logical and passionate argument, convincing elite Romans to believe in Christianity. These are the images once elicited in histories of evangelism in the early church.

But typical converts in the early days of Christianity probably did not hear about the faith from an apologist or at a public rally. More likely, their introduction came through "everyday evangelism"—through the ongoing life in the local church, the witness of individual Christians, and specialized "parachurch" ministries.

Mission-sensitive churches

Organized communities of faith deserve chief credit for evangelizing the Roman Empire, both before and after Constantine. Imitating a model crafted by Paul, early Christians planted churches, nurtured them, and made them centers for attracting and enlisting converts.

Churches were founded in almost every way possible. Sometimes a bishop, presbyters, or deacons were sent to evangelize and organize a new church. For example, in the mid-third century, Cornelius of Rome was reputed to have sent seven bishops to Gaul (modern France) to plant churches. Other times, churches that had spontaneously formed through lay evangelism asked for a bishop to instruct them.

Most churches had the same goal: evangelism.

"Enlighten those in darkness," intones an early liturgical prayer from Egypt. "Raise up the fallen, strengthen the weak, heal the sick, guide all, good Lord into the way of salvation and into thy holy flock."

Some converts learned about the faith through friendship with church members. Others saw or heard about exorcisms or healings. Some witnessed the arrest of a Christian or even a martyrdom. Others lived in Christian households as slaves or indentured servants. By the end of the third century, Christians had built formal churches near pagan temples across the empire.

However pagans heard about Christianity, they came to the church out of curiosity and stayed because it offered security in an age of anxiety. Visitors heard Christian teachers claim the church was **the** people of God. They were told of promises of immortality and escape from eternal punishment, and of assurances of salvation. And they heard about, and sometimes witnessed, the power of two ceremonies, baptism and the Eucharist.

The example of Christians' high moral standards and their practice of offering charity to all, regardless of social status, also made a deep impression on unbelievers. Galen (129-199), the Greek physician, in commenting on those "people called Christians," wrote, "They include not only men but also women who refrain from cohabitating all through their lives, and they also number individuals who, in self-discipline and self-control in matters of food and drink, and in their keen pursuit of justice, have attained a pitch not inferior to that of genuine philosophy."

Classes and the sacraments

Once inquirers displayed an interest in the Christian faith, the catechetical process (something akin to today's confirmation or new members classes) probably provided the chief means for drawing them into the fold. As depicted by Hippolytus around 217, these classes, which led to baptism, began with a preliminary inquiry by skilled teachers, engaging their students in a dialogue designed to point the way to conversion.

Churches carefully sifted out candidates not likely to make the serious commitment, which was critical during periods of persecution. Before enrolling them as "hearers," Hippolytus wrote in *The Apostolic Tradition*, teachers were to examine candidates about their lives and their reason for embracing the faith. The Christians who brought the "hearers" were asked to "testify that they are competent to hear the word."

Hippolytus wanted to exclude people in certain professions—panderers, sculptors or painters of idols, actors or pantomimists, teachers in pagan schools, charioteers, gladiators and others connected with the shows, priests in other cults, military commanders or civil magistrates, harlots or licentious persons, enchanters, astrologers, diviners, soothsayers, and the like—unless they changed their occupations. He would not let magicians even make an inquiry about the faith.

The rest of the initiation process, which took about three years (or as many as six in some places), primarily sought to secure an authentic commitment. In the fourth century, Augustine outlined the typical procedure for instructing people to faith. After scrutinizing the candidate's motives, the catechist (teacher) would present the message of salvation history, from Creation to the Second Coming. The catechist often had to deal indulgently and patiently with slow or stubborn candidates, repeating and prodding them on.

Catechumens could participate only in the instructional (preaching) service. After instruction the catechist prayed for the candidates, laid hands on them, and dismissed them. (The *Ite! Missa*, meaning "Go! You have been dismissed/sent," is thought by some scholars to be the source of the word *Mass*.)

Catechumens were not allowed to participate in the Eucharist, which followed the preaching service. No doubt, the great mystery surrounding this rite, (as well as reports of its efficacy) kept many straining at the leash to receive baptism and post-baptismal instruction.

The sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper had powerful appeal in the ancient world, where mystery cults (which were full of mysterious rites) prospered.

In the Eucharist, for example, seekers were told, one could partake of heavenly manna of an "unbloody sacrifice"—not the costly offerings of bulls and goats and other plants and animals, which pagans were used to. Referring to a Dionysian ritual, Clement of Alexandria wrote, "Come, O madman, not leaning on the thyrsus, not crowned with ivy. Throw away the mitre, throw away the fawn-skin." Then, referring to Christ and the Eucharist, he said, "Come to your senses! I will show you the Word and the mysteries of the Word."

Ordinary saints and country hicks

Formal traveling evangelists played a key role only during the second century. "Casual" evangelism, on the other hand, was important throughout the early period.

Responding to criticism that Christians were just a bunch of country hicks, Origen agreed that common folks accounted for Christianity's spread. The planting of Christianity in Georgia (former Soviet Union), for example, resulted from the witness of a captive woman named Nino (see ["The Exile and the Slave Girl,"](#)

[page 21](#)).

The most famous example of individual witness, though, is Justin. He was eventually martyred for his faith around 165, and he credited his conversion to two sources: first, to the fearlessness of Christians in the face of death. Second, he had a conversation with an old man.

It occurred during his years of spiritual searching, when he was reading philosopher after philosopher to understand the meaning of life. One day while strolling on a beach in Ephesus, Justin met an old man, who engaged him in a discussion about philosophy. It was but one conversation, and Justin never saw the man again. But this one conversation kindled in him, he said, a love for the prophets and for "friends of Christ." Not long after that conversation, Justin converted.

Parachurch schools

Scholars are not sure how evangelistic/philosophical schools came into existence. Most likely they began with private initiative like many of the other philosophical schools in the ancient world. Certain teachers established a reputation and gathered followers. Pantaenus launched the school in Alexandria made famous by Clement and Origen. Justin established a school in Rome where he could present Christianity as "the true philosophy."

How did such teachers discharge their tasks? One of Origen's most famous students, Gregory Thaumaturgus, described his story.

Gregory and his brother Athena-dorus crossed paths with Origen by chance on a trip to Caesarea, and Origen did his best to effect a deep and genuine friendship with them.

Once he had persuaded them to remain in Caesaria, he taught them the physical sciences, then philosophy and ethics, and finally the Scriptures (which he considered the queen of all learning).

But it was his embodiment of what he taught, Gregory judged, that most impressed him and his brother. "And thus, like some spark lighting upon our inmost soul," Gregory later wrote, "love was kindled and burst into flame within us—a love at once to the Holy Word, the most lovely object of all, who attracts all irresistibly to himself by his unutterable beauty, and to this man, his friend and advocate."

As a result, Gregory became the fabled evangelizer, the "Wonder Worker" of Cappadocia (see "[Key Converts](#)," [page 22](#)).

And so it went: countless converts, by their lives and witness, brought the good news to others on a very personal level, whether in church or in conversation.

E. Glenn Hinson is a professor at Baptist Theological Seminary, Richmond, Virginia. He is author of The Evangelization of the Roman Empire (Mercer University, 1981).

Copyright © 1998 by the author or Christianity Today International/Christian History magazine.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 57: Converting the Empire: Early Church Evangelism

The Exile and the Slave Girl

Two of the least known but most effective early evangelists.

Gregory P. Elder

Gregory the Illuminator

(c. 240-c. 332)

Converted a nation—before Constantine

As an infant, Gregory was whisked away from his homeland—Armenia—by his nurse. His father, it seems, had murdered a member of the king of Armenia's family, and Gregory's family was slaughtered in revenge. Gregory was taken to Cappodocia, already a largely Christian province in what is now central Turkey. There he was raised in the Christian faith.

When it was safe, Gregory returned to Armenia with his wife and two sons. He used his connections to gain admission to the ruler, met King Tiridates, whom he converted out of Zoroastrianism to Christianity, but not without many difficulties.

Gregory's story is encrusted with legend. In one telling, the king imprisoned Gregory for 15 years in a pit full of rotting corpses, and the evangelist was kept alive only because a devout widow bought him food. After killing another missionary, Tiridates became a wild boar. His sister was told that only the prayers of Gregory would change him back. Once Gregory was released, his prayers turned the king back into human form. The grateful Tiridates immediately asked to be baptized along with his household.

For whatever reason, when the king converted to Christianity, much of the kingdom followed suit, and Christianity was soon established as the national religion. Gregory eventually became bishop of Armenia, and he spent much of the rest of his life "bringing the light" (thus his nickname) to his homeland: establishing congregations, building churches, and working with the king to stamp out paganism.

Nino

(early 4th century)

Missionary to Georgia

As a young girl, Nino was carried away from her Roman home by Cappadocian raiders and made a slave in Iberia (now eastern Georgia). Frightened and lonely, Nino turned to her faith for solace, spending hours in prayer and reflection. When acquaintances asked her to explain her faith, she simply replied that she worshiped Christ as God.

According to the Palestinian priest Rufinus (whose accounts are difficult to verify), Nino healed a sick child through her prayers. Word of the healing reached the Georgian royal court, and the queen, who was seriously ill, visited Nino. The queen was healed, and, impressed by the slave girl's faith and the apparent power of her God, she and the king converted to Christianity.

Much in the accounts of Nino's life must be considered legend, but it is certain that Nino did exist and that she spent considerable time preaching the gospel and building a church. One legend tells how,

when her church was being built, one large stone column could not be moved. But when Nino prayed, the pillar raised itself upright and floated through the air to its correct position.

That Nino did convert the monarchs is confirmed in a letter of 334 sent by King Mirian, asking Emperor Constantine for trained clergy to build up the church. Nino was allowed to preach openly for Christ and, like Gregory, against Zoroastrianism. The rest of Georgia eventually followed the royal family's lead.

Copyright © 1998 by the author or Christianity Today International/Christian History magazine.

More resources:

- [The Conversion of Armenia : A Retelling of Agathangelos' History](#) by Valerie Goekjian Zahirsky. Honestly, we haven't read this book, told from an Orthodox perspective. But if you're looking for a biography of Gregory the Illuminator, this is the one.
- [My Brother, My Enemy](#), by George Bishop, is an out-of-print Thomas Nelson novel that tells Gregory's story through historical fiction.
- [Evangelism in the Early Church](#), by Michael Green, is an excellent introduction to the subject as a whole.

Links

- More detail on Nino's life is available at Robert Bedrosian's translation of [The Georgian Chronicle](#), written in the twelfth or thirteenth century. You must scroll down to "Chapter Eight."

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 57: Converting the Empire: Early Church Evangelism

Evangelism in the Early Church: A Gallery of Key Converts

Rejecting paganism, these five Christians helped evangelize an empire.

Gregory P. Elder

Gregory Thaumaturgus

(c. 210-260)

"The Wonder Worker"

Parents today sometimes worry that their children will go off to college and return as converts to some strange new religion. That's exactly what happened 1,700 years ago to Gregory of Pontus, only the strange new religion was Christianity.

Born into an affluent pagan family in Neocaesarea (modern Turkey), Gregory studied law and the traditional Greek and Roman classics. Then he and his brother were sent for further study to Caesarea in Palestine, where they enrolled in the school of the great Christian thinker Origen. His teacher converted him (and his brother, Athenodorus) to Christianity.

When Gregory returned home, he found a Christian community of 17 people waiting for him. Soon afterward, Gregory was elected bishop. Although his training was in speculative theology, Gregory's pastoral work was concerned with practical applications of the faith. His pastoral skills were such that some of his flock soon attributed miracles to him—hence his nickname, "The Wonder Worker."

One legend (from a generation later) described the Virgin Mary directing the apostle John to instruct Gregory about the Trinity so the bishop could teach his catechumens. Another legend tells how two brothers quarreled over possession of a lake and asked Gregory to arbitrate between them: Gregory is said to have divided the lake into two bodies of water, giving one to each brother.

Legends or no, Gregory's leadership must have been great, because during his ministry most of the city of Pontus converted to Christianity.

Doctrinal conflicts required him to participate in several church councils that condemned false teaching. In 253 and 254, he watched Goths sack his beloved home city. Roman rule survived for only another century, but the church Gregory built continues today.

Cyprian

(c. 200-258)

Despairing pagan, sensible bishop

The conversion of Thascius Cyprianus was one of the best things to happen to the North African church—and to the Christian church as a whole.

He was born into the Roman upper class in North Africa. As an accomplished rhetorician, he was deeply versed in the pagan literature of the late Roman age. But Cyprian became friends with an elderly priest

named Caecilius, who welcomed the young aristocrat and introduced him to his family—and to Christianity.

While Cyprian accepted the Christian God as true, he found Christian morality difficult. In light of the stubbornness of human nature and bad habits, he wondered, "How is such a conversion possible?" In particular, he questioned if he could do without public honors and wine.

Cyprian finally converted, and he discovered during his baptism that the power of God, and not his own efforts, made the Christian life possible:

"In a wondrous manner, doubtful things at once began to assure themselves in me, hidden things to be revealed, dark things to be enlightened, and what before seemed difficult began to suggest a means of accomplishment, and what had been thought impossible, to be capable of being achieved."

With the zeal of a convert, Cyprian quickly mastered the Christian Scriptures and the writings of Christian theologians. Two years after his conversion, he was ordained a priest, and in spite of his own resistance, was then chosen to be bishop of Carthage.

Within a few months of his election, Emperor Decius began persecuting Christians in North Africa, and the new bishop was forced to flee. When he returned, he found his congregation in tatters. Some had lapsed from the faith making sacrifices to the pagan gods. Others still had kept their faith in Christ but had handed over precious copies of the Scriptures and sacred vessels to the Roman authorities. Still others had left the fellowship of the church to join the schismatic church of Novatian, a rigorist sect that disdained Christians who were too tolerant in forgiving those who had lapsed under the pressure of persecution.

Cyprian's policies were moderate and sensible, earning him a permanent place in the history of the church. Against the Novatianists, he ruled the lapsed could indeed be restored to the church. But lest the church become lax, he also ruled that the lapsed must observe an appropriate time of penance for their lack of fortitude. As for those who handed over ecclesiastical property, he ruled each case was to be decided on its own merits. In all these disputes, Cyprian argued for the importance of the church, for, as he was famous for saying, "There is no salvation outside the church."

His ministry was cut short by the persecution initiated by Emperor Valerian in 258, during which Cyprian was arrested and beheaded.

Arnobius

(died c. 327)

The Christian Voltaire

The fourth-century bishop of Sicca in Numidia, Africa, was used to being ridiculed for his Christian faith. But his surprise could not have been greater when one of his greatest critics, Arnobius, appeared before him to humbly ask permission to receive instruction in the faith.

Arnobius had been devoted to the old gods to the point of gross superstition. But after witnessing the courageous martyrdoms of some Christians, and having a dream in which he was told to convert, he sought to become a catechumen.

In surprise—and perhaps because he did not yet trust Arnobius—the bishop asked the young philosopher if he would make a public renunciation of paganism. Arnobius replied that he would like nothing better and began work on his multivolumed ***Against the Nations***, which refuted the charge that Christianity

was responsible for the many plagues that raged through the empire. After finishing the first two books of his work, Arnobius was baptized. Then he wrote five more.

Arnobius's favorite literary flourish was the rhetorical question, which he put to every pagan claim he could imagine. To the argument that paganism was superior because it was older, Arnobius replied curtly, "Is there anything older than him [God]?"

When pagan philosophers said it would have been carnal for a transcendent God to be born as a man, Arnobius listed page after page of the carnal exploits pagan sources ascribed to Jupiter, Saturn, and the other gods.

Yet his worst incriminations he leveled against himself for ever having believed in pagan gods: "O blindness that I worshiped images just brought from the furnaces, gods made on anvils and forged with hammers, the bones of elephants, paintings, wreathes on aged trees; whenever I espied an anointed stone ... I addressed myself to it and begged blessings from a senseless stock."

Because of Arnobius's satire and invective against paganism, one historian called him "Voltaire on the side of the angels."

Lactantius

(c. 250-c. 325)

Defender of hope and life

One of Arnobius's greatest gifts to the Christian church was his pupil Lucius Caecilius Firmianus, known to us as Lactantius. Like his master, Lactantius was an accomplished philosopher—so much so he was made a public rhetorician at the imperial city of Nicomedia.

It is not clear exactly what led Lactantius to convert (c. 300), but after he embraced Christianity, he was both an apologist and historian for the faith. He continued in his post until the great persecution of Diocletian in 303. He escaped arrest and torture, but not poverty and hunger.

Unlike his master, Arnobius, who used his skills to ridicule paganism, Lactantius attempted to promote Christianity among the learned classes by meticulously explaining what Christians believed. His ***The Divine Institutes*** is the first large scale attempt in common Latin to set forth Christian doctrine in a detailed and systematic manner. He assured his readers he would "speak of hope, of life, of salvation, of immortality, and of God, that we may put an end to deadly superstitions and most disgraceful errors."

In his ***The Workmanship of God***, Lactantius attempted to prove the existence of God from the wonders of the human body. In his tract ***The Wrath of God***, he argued against philosophers who had criticized the Scriptures on the grounds that a sublime God cannot possibly be moved to anger. Lactantius replied that God is more than sublime or impassible—he is the master of the universe who is capable of direct action in time.

For less sophisticated readers, he wrote ***The Deaths of the Persecutors***, a popular history that recounted in gruesome detail the horrible deaths that came to the emperors and other malefactors who had persecuted Christians.

Lactantius, like his mentor Arnobius, was later likened to a great secular writer. Some Renaissance humanists called him "the Christian Cicero."

Tertullian

(160-225)

Pugnacious apologist

While some apologists tried to reconcile Christianity and philosophy, Tertullian tried to draw a sharp distinction between the Christian faith and the world.

Quintus Septimus Florens Tertullian was raised in Carthage in North Africa, educated in classical literature, and is said to have trained to be a lawyer. But some time around a.d. 197, he converted to Christianity and may have become a priest. Tertullian did not leave a record of his conversion, but many scholars believe that the heroism of Christian martyrs made a deep impression on him.

Tertullian declared that the church need not even argue with such people: "You will lose nothing but your breath and gain nothing but vexation from their blasphemy." His earliest known work is a letter of solace and encouragement to imprisoned Christians awaiting execution. Shortly after that, he sent a long letter to the Roman authorities mocking their attempts to suppress Christianity.

"We are but of yesterday," he wrote, "but we have filled every place among you—cities, islands, fortresses, towns, market places, the very camp, tribes, companies, palace, senate, forum—we have left nothing to you but the temples of your gods."

Tertullian is more commonly remembered for his apologetic writings—and for his razor sharp wit—in defense of the Christian faith. To the pagan world, Tertullian's tracts asserted that Christians posed no threat to the empire and were loyal citizens; so Christians should be tolerated.

In his writings to Christians, Tertullian warned that separation from pagan culture was necessary to avoid moral and doctrinal corruption. The theater, pagan banquets, public assemblies, and above all, the gladiatorial games were incompatible with Christian faith. "With such dainties" he wrote, "let the devil's guests be feasted."

Tertullian leveled his deepest criticism at those who attempted to change or modify the Christian faith. God, he insisted, was the same loving and merciful God in both the Old Testament and New; Christ was God incarnate and the fulfillment of all messianic prophesy, and the church alone carried on the legitimate faith received from the apostles.

Gnostics, heretics, schismatics, and pagans, he said, were just plain wrong. They had no right to quote the Scriptures, which did not belong to them anyway.

Tertullian declared that the church need not even argue with such people: "You will lose nothing but your breath and gain nothing but vexation from their blasphemy."

But with Christians he did argue, in book after book. He disliked infant baptism, believed the return of Christ was at hand, and had little time for clergy, who were (in his opinion) lenient about sexual immorality. He believed the Holy Spirit still spoke through believers of his day, and he held this belief so strongly, he ended his days among the Montanists, a movement eventually condemned by the church.

Nonetheless, his learning and writing have earned him a lasting legacy as one of the great African Fathers of the church.

Gregory Elder is assistant professor of history at Riverside Community College in Riverside, California.



More resources:

- A new version of [The Works of St. Gregory Thaumaturgus](#) won't be released in October, but you can order it now.
- Gregory Elder is also the author of [Chronic Vigour : Darwin, Anglicans, Catholics, and the Development of a Doctrine of Providential Evolution](#).
- [Evangelism in the Early Church](#), by Michael Green, is an excellent introduction to the subject as a whole.

Links

- [The Christian Classics Electronic Library](#) offers the works of [Gregory Thaumaturgus](#), [Cyprian](#), [Arnobius](#), [Lactantius](#), and [Tertullian](#).
- [The Ecole Initiative](#) —A comprehensive hypertext encyclopedia of early church

history. It offers everything from images from early Christian art to primary source documents, to recent academic papers on the period. For early church buffs, this is a necessary bookmark.

- Speaking of images, here are some of [Gregory Thaumaturgus](#) and [Cyprian](#).

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 57: Converting the Empire: Early Church Evangelism

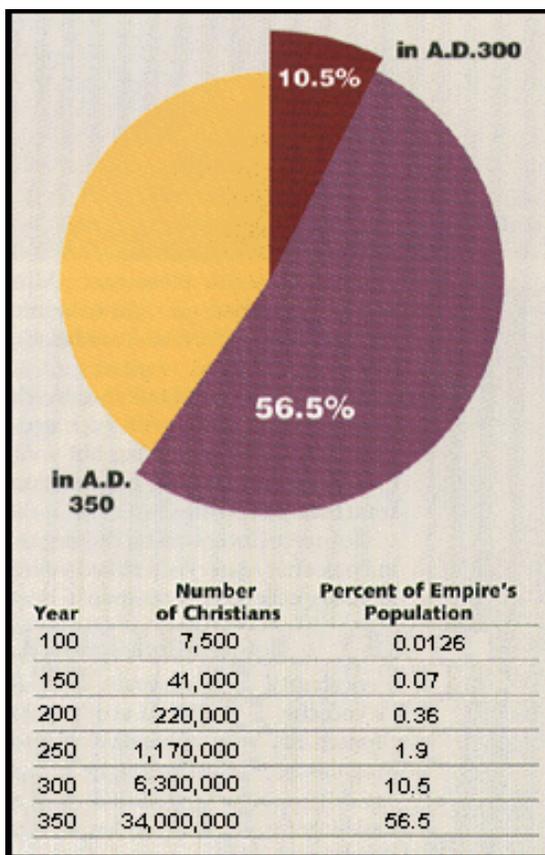
Evangelism in the Early Church: Christian History Timeline - The Growth of Early Christianity

Christian History Timeline

David F. Wright

The Explosive Decades

Percentage of Christians in the Roman Empire



*These estimates are based on 40 percent growth per decade, and roughly correspond with figures found in early church documents. For more details, see Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton, 1996).*

- c. 30 Death and resurrection of Jesus; coming of the Holy Spirit
- c. 40-65 Missions of Paul and associates, especially to Gentiles
- c. 40 The word **Christians** first used to describe believers in Antioch
- c. 50-95 Books of New Testament written

70 Separation of Christianity from Judaism widens after capture of Jerusalem

c. 100-150 Writings of apostolic fathers show a concern with unity and good order of churches

c. 112 Pliny, governor of Bithynia, consults Emperor Trajan on how to deal with those accused as Christians

140 Justin founds school of Christian philosophy at Rome

165 Justin's martyrdom

c. 170 Celsus writes *True Word*, the first book opposing Christianity

180-200 Irenaeus of Lyons preaches to Celts in Gaul, refuting gnosticism

180 Clement heads school of "true gnosticism" in Alexandria

197 Tertullian begins writing apologetics in Carthage, Africa

c. 200 First mention of Christians in Britain

203 Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas in Carthage

212 Origen begins traveling, commending Christianity to high ranking officials throughout the empire

c. 215 Hippolytus of Rome compiles the *Apostolic Tradition*, describing how converts are to be disciplined

231 Origen founds school at Caesarea (Palestine)

c. 240 Gregory "the Wonder Worker" appointed bishop of Pontus (in north Asia Minor)

248 Cyprian appointed bishop of Carthage, the largest church in Africa, only two years after his conversion Origen defends Christianity in *Against Celsus*

250 Emperor Decius begins the first, though short-lived, general persecution of Christians

c. 260-305 Porphyry, a Neoplatonist philosopher, writes multivolume *Against the Christians*

270 Monasticism begins to spread in Egypt and Syria, promoting Christianity in rural areas

303 Diocletian implements Great Persecution

312 Conversion of Constantine

313 Edict of Milan provides official toleration for Christians

c. 314 Gregory the Illuminator founds Armenian church

c. 315 Eusebius, the first church historian and later eulogist of Constantine, appointed bishop of Caesarea

325 Council of Nicaea

c. **330** Nino converts Georgian royal family

c. **340** Roman legislation begins to favor Christianity and penalize paganism

c. **350** Frumentius converts the royalty of Axum, Ethiopia

362 Marius Victorinus, one of Rome's most famous rhetors, converts, causing much public excitement

c. **371** Martin, evangelist to the pagans of central Gaul, is elected bishop of Tours

c. **380** Ulphilas, Arian missionary bishop among Goths and translator of Gothic Bible, dies

380 Emperor Theodosius makes orthodox Christianity the official religion of the empire

David Wright is senior lecturer in ecclesiastical history at the University of Edinburgh.

Copyright © 1998 by the author or Christianity Today International/Christian History magazine.

More resources:

- David F. Wright is also the author of [The Bible in Scottish Life and Literature](#), and one of the editors of [The Atlas of the Bible and Christianity](#).
- Rodney Stark's [The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History](#), makes a compelling argument for the statistics used above. It's sociology, not history, but the work sparkles with insights.
- [Evangelism in the Early](#)

[Church](#), by Michael Green, dwells on both the New Testament and later periods. As the adviser on evangelism to the archbishop of Canterbury, his zeal for spreading the gospel shines through his well-researched history.

Links

- [The Ecole Initiative](#) —A comprehensive hypertext encyclopedia of early church history. It offers everything from images from early Christian art to primary source documents, to recent academic papers on the period. For early church buffs, this is a necessary bookmark.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 57: Converting the Empire: Early Church Evangelism

Live Longer, Healthier, & Better

The untold benefits of becoming a Christian in the ancient world.

Rodney Stark

Constantine, the first Christian to rule Rome, governed for 31 years and died in bed of natural causes at a time when the average imperial reign was short and emperors' lives usually came to violent ends.

That he lived to old age illustrates a more general, if not widely known, early Christian achievement: Christians in the ancient world had longer life expectancies than did their pagan neighbors.

Modern demographers regard life expectancy as the best indicator of quality of life, so in all likelihood, Christians simply lived better lives than just about everyone else.

In fact, many pagans were attracted to the Christian faith because the church produced tangible (not only "spiritual") blessings for its adherents.

Why Christians lived longer

Chief among these tangibles was that, in a world entirely lacking social services, Christians were their brothers' keepers. At the end of the second century, Tertullian wrote that while pagan temples spent their donations "on feasts and drinking bouts," Christians spent theirs "to support and bury poor people, to supply the wants of boys and girls destitute of means and parents, and of old persons confined to the house."

Similarly, in a letter to the bishop of Antioch in 251, the bishop of Rome mentioned that "more than 1,500 widows and distressed persons" were in the care of his congregation. These claims concerning Christian charity were confirmed by pagan observers.

"The impious Galileans support not only their poor," complained pagan emperor Julian, "but ours as well."

The willingness of Christians to care for others was put on dramatic public display when two great plagues swept the empire, one beginning in 165 and the second in 251. Mortality rates climbed higher than 30 percent. Pagans tried to avoid all contact with the afflicted, often casting the still living into the gutters. Christians, on the other hand, nursed the sick even though some believers died doing so.

The results of these efforts were dramatic. We now know that elementary nursing—simply giving victims food and water without any drugs—will reduce mortality in epidemics by as much as two-thirds. Consequently Christians were more likely than pagans to recover—a visible benefit. Christian social services also were visible and valuable during the frequent natural and social disasters afflicting the Greco-Roman world: earthquakes, famines, floods, riots, civil wars, and invasions.

Girl power

Women greatly outnumbered men among early converts. However, in the empire as a whole, men vastly outnumbered women. There were an estimated 131 men for every 100 women in Rome. The disparity was

even greater elsewhere and greater still among the elite.

Widespread female infanticide had reduced the number of women in society. "If you are delivered of a child," wrote a man named Hilarion to his pregnant wife, "if it is a boy, keep it, if it is a girl discard it." Frequent abortions "entailing great risk" (in the words of Celsus) killed many women and left even more barren.

The Christian community, however, practiced neither abortion nor infanticide and thus drew to itself women.

More importantly, within the Christian community women enjoyed higher status and security than they did among their pagan neighbors. Pagan women typically were married at a young age (often before puberty) to much older men. But Christian women were older when they married and had more choice in whom, and even if, they would marry.

In addition, Christian men could not easily divorce their wives, and both genders were subject to strongly enforced rules against extramarital sex.

To cities filled with the homeless and impoverished, Christianity offered charity and hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered immediate fellowship. To cities filled with orphans and widows, Christianity provided a new and expanded sense of family.. Christian women benefitted further from their considerable status *within* the church. We have it from the apostle Paul that women held positions of leadership, as was confirmed by Pliny the Younger, who reported to Emperor Trajan that he had tortured two young Christian women "who were called deaconesses."

Urban sanctuary

Yet the early church attracted and held members of both sexes, and not just because it offered longer life and raised social standing. Christianity also offered a strong community in a disorganized, chaotic world.

Greco-Roman cities were terribly overpopulated. Antioch, for example, had a population density of about 117 inhabitants per acre—more than three times that of New York City today.

Tenement cubicles were smoky, dark, often damp, and always dirty. The smell of sweat, urine, feces, and decay permeated everything. Outside on the street, mud, open sewers, and manure lay everywhere, and even human corpses were found in the gutters. Newcomers and strangers, divided into many ethnic groups, harbored bitter antagonism that often erupted into violent riots.

For these ills, Christianity offered a unifying subculture, bridging these divisions and providing a strong sense of common identity.

To cities filled with the homeless and impoverished, Christianity offered charity and hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered an immediate fellowship. To cities filled with orphans and widows, Christianity provided a new and expanded sense of family.

In short, Christianity offered a longer, more secure, and happier life.

The emotional benefits of martyrdom

More resources:

- If you liked this article, you'll love the author's [The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History](#). Even though it is sociology, not history, his insights into urban religious development, the ramifications of Christian compassion,

It seems obvious that in periods of persecution, church membership would decrease dramatically. In fact, persecutions rarely occurred, and only a tiny number of Christians were ever martyred—only "hundreds, not thousands" according to historian William H. C. Frend. Usually only bishops and other prominent figures were singled out for martyrdom. The actual threat to rank-and-file Christians was quite small.

However, the martyrdoms played a crucial role in cementing the faith of early believers. Persecution eliminated the "free-rider" problem common to many new religions. Those who stayed in the church believed strongly in the tenets of the faith because it was "expensive" to do so.

Anyone who has participated in a cause that demands great sacrifice will understand that services conducted in those early house churches must have yielded an intense, shared emotional satisfaction. Shared risk usually brings people together in powerful ways.

Compassion equation

It was not simply the promise of salvation that motivated Christians, but the fact that they were greatly rewarded in the here and now for belonging. Thus while membership was "expensive," it was, in fact, "a bargain." Because the church asked much of its members, it followed that it gave much.

For example, because Christians were expected to aid the less fortunate, they could expect to receive such aid, and all could feel greater security against bad times. Because they were asked to nurse the sick and dying, they too would receive such nursing. Because they were asked to love others, they in turn would be loved.

In similar fashion, Christianity mitigated relations among social classes, and at the very time when the gap between rich and poor was growing. It did not preach that everyone could or should be socially or politically equal, but it did preach that all were equal in the eyes of God and that the more fortunate had a responsibility to help those in need.

Good theological news

Converts not only had to learn to act like Christians but to understand why Christians acted as they did. They had to learn that God commanded them to love one another, to be merciful, to be their brother's keeper. Indeed, they had to understand the *idea* of "divinity" in an entirely new way.

The simple phrase "For God so loved the world ..." puzzled educated pagans, who believed, as Aristotle taught, that the gods could feel no love for mere humans. Moreover, a god of mercy was unthinkable, since classical philosophers taught that mercy was a pathological emotion, a defect of character to be outgrown and overcome.

The notion that the gods care how we treat one another would also have been dismissed as patently absurd by all sophisticated pagans.

and other such topics make the book a quick and fascinating read.

- A newer, paperback version of his work is [The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries](#).
- Stark (with co-author Roger Finke) has given much the same free-market treatment to American religious history in [The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy](#).

Links

- For more information on the world the Christians converted, check out the [Perseus Project Home Page](#). This is

When we examine the gods accepted by these same sophisticates, they seem trivial in contrast with "God the Father," and wicked incompetents compared to "His Son." Yet to many pagans, this new teaching was more than absurd. It was also good news.

Behind all these tangible, sociological, and intellectual motives, of course, Christians believe the Holy Spirit prodded and persuaded pagans to believe. Christian conversion, after all, is ultimately a spiritual affair. But is it too much to imagine that God perhaps used the tangible to influence the spiritual?

Rodney Stark is professor of sociology and comparative religion at the University of Washington, and author of *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton University Press, 1996).

Copyright © 1998 by the author or Christianity Today International/Christian History magazine.

truly an amazing site. More than 70 museums have shared pictures of their art objects. So far, it is mainly about the Greek world, but they are adding Roman materials constantly.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 57: Converting the Empire: Early Church Evangelism

Evangelists to the Death

It took centuries for Christian martyrs to impact pagan society.

William H.C. Frend

The blood of Christians is seed," wrote Tertullian, a North African Christian, in about 197. "[It is] the bait that wins men to our school. We multiply whenever we are mown down by you."

Tertullian, of course, wrote with rhetorical exaggeration. Pagans hardly flocked to the church after witnessing the death of Christians. Martyrdom eventually made a large-scale impact on pagans but not before two centuries of sacrifice.

The pleasure of persecution

Ordinary citizens in Tertullian's day were not impressed with Christian deaths. In fact, they seemed to take pleasure in the persecution of Christians.

"Faggot-fellows" and "half-axle men" were nicknames of contempt for people who allowed themselves to be tied to a half-axle post or have faggots (wood chips) heaped around them in preparation for being burnt. Christians were viewed as only a sect or school that opposed the established order, dabbled in black magic, and practiced incest and ritual child-murder. They were seen as a dangerous cult, disliked and despised.

"Through trusting [in resurrection], they have brought in this strange and new worship and despised terrors, going readily and with joy to death," mocked one ancient. "Now let us see if they will rise again, and if their god be able to help them and take them out of our hands."

Officials were even more contemptuous, telling one group of Christians in the province of Asia (now Asian Turkey) that if they wanted to kill themselves, there were precipices and halts enough for the job.

We find similar feelings aroused by Christians in the account of the martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas at Carthage in March 203. Inside the prison, many visitors were impressed by the constancy of Christians, but once in the amphitheater, attitudes changed.

When Perpetua and Felicitas came into the arena, the crowd was alternately enraged at their defiance and shocked at their being displayed naked. But no mercy was demanded. Furthermore nothing in the account suggests that any were influenced to become Christians and share their fate.

People throughout the empire were used to watching brutal scenes in the amphitheater, sometimes involving the execution of criminals by wild beasts. Besides, Christians deserved scant sympathy. They were subversive fanatics, motivated, as the emperor Marcus Aurelius believed (c. 170), with "sheer opposition." If they wanted death, they could have it.

Pity for the fools

By the end of the second century, examples of courageous and virtuous Christian living were beginning

to earn a grudging respect among some influential contemporaries. In about 200, the physician Galen, while criticizing the ignorance and gullibility of Christians, acknowledged their "contempt of death and restraint in cohabitation" and their "self-control in matters of eating and drinking and their keen pursuit of justice [which is] not inferior to that of genuine philosophers."

There is, however, little evidence that victims of the widespread local persecutions in the years 202-206 were regarded more favorably. In Rome, Alexandria, and Corinth, where these outbreaks took place, popular attitudes seem to have resembled those of the Carthaginians.

Between 210 and 235, and again from 238 to 250, Christianity received a measure of toleration. But in January 250, Emperor Decius, beset with a devastating invasion by the Goths on the frontier, ordered an empire-wide sacrifice to the Roman gods, following the example of the yearly sacrifice on the Capitol in Rome. Those who failed to sacrifice would be severely punished.

The response was immediate and overwhelming. Faced with the alternative of obeying the emperor or suffering for their faith, the great majority of Christians went with the emperor. Temples bulged with sacrificers. Masses apostatized. Pagans felt themselves morally and intellectually on top. Christian confessors—those who kept the faith—were derided and treated as fools.

The *Acts of the Martyr Pionius and His Companions* (martyred at Smyrna in 250) provides a vivid firsthand account of events there: Every effort was made to persuade Pionius and a small band of fellow Christians to sacrifice in the temple of Nemesis and avoid punishment. Even Euctemon, the bishop, had sacrificed; why should he not?

Loud guffaws erupted when Pionius confessed he worshipped the crucified Christ, though the public executioner pleaded for him to change his mind and allow the nails fastening him to the gibbet to be taken out.

But in the end Pionius's sacrifice aroused nothing but sorrow and pity.

Show of strength

During the next half century martyrdom slowly made an impact on public opinion. During that time, Emperor Valerian ordered another round of persecution, lasting three years. The Christian hierarchy and wealthy supporters were harassed and church buildings and cemeteries confiscated. The persecution ended only when, in June 260, the Persians defeated and captured the emperor near Edessa.

In Carthage the most notable victim was Bishop Cyprian, and at his execution on September 14, 258, Christians demonstrated their support by keeping a public vigil for him the night before his beheading. It was a show of strength, a sign they had become a sizable and self-confident minority in some of the major provinces of the empire.

Whether due to the demonstration or not, during the next 43 years, the church enjoyed peace from all but minor, isolated persecutions. The decline in civic values and an economic downturn helped Christianity, and the church's size and influence increased enormously.

In Rome, catacombs such as that of Peter and Marcellinus expanded into great necropolises containing 11,000 or more burial sites. Church organization progressed throughout the empire. Even Roman Britain had its bishops. Once a purely urban institution, Christianity was finding increasing support in the countryside.

Thus, when the emperor Diocletian (reigned 284-305), after long hesitation, tried to destroy the church—

the one non-conformist element in the empire—his task was infinitely harder than in his predecessors' day.

The failed persecution

The Great Persecution of 303-312 affected town and countryside alike. It was carried out to the letter by imperial officials, but many pagans had growing doubts about its justification and success.

First, there were too many Christians to suppress. By this time, many Christians served in the army and administration. In addition, Christians didn't defect en masse this time, and the fortitude of persecuted Christians influenced public opinion.

L. Caelius Firmicanus Lactantius (c.270-320) was a North African teacher of rhetoric who immigrated to Asia Minor and found employment at Diocletian's court. He became a Christian and wrote of events at Nicomedia and in the surrounding province of Bithynia. Christianity was growing rapidly, Lactantius said, and God permitted the persecution of some believers to draw in others.

"Great numbers are driven from the worship of the false gods by their hatred of cruelty," he wrote. Still more onlookers marveled at Christians who would rather die than worship Roman gods and wondered if their own gods were worth dying for:

"The people who stand around hear them saying in the midst of these very torments that they do not sacrifice to stones wrought by the hand of man but to the living God, who is in heaven: many understand that this is true and admit it into their breast."

Lactantius credited "numerous causes being collected together" (including miracles and exorcisms) for winning "a great multitude to God." But chief among them was the fortitude of the Christians when confronted with persecution.

Several hundred miles away from Lactantius's Nicomedia, a struggle of often horrific proportions engulfed Coptic Egypt. Eusebius of Caesarea (269-339) was in Upper Egypt during the final spasm of persecution ordered by emperor Maximian in 311.

Describing the carnage, Eusebius wrote, "Some suffered beheading, others punishment by fire; so that the murderous axe was dulled and worn out and was broken in pieces while the executioners themselves grew utterly weary." But every time this happened, Eusebius claimed volunteers for death rushed forward: "As soon as sentence was passed on one, another from one quarter and others from another would leap up to the tribunal and confess themselves Christians." They often went to their deaths singing psalms and hymns.

Coptic Christians in Egypt have never forgotten those days. They date their era from the accession of Diocletian in 284 as a permanent reminder of their triumph over imperial persecution.

From Tertullian's time many Christians became "evangelists to the death," but only in the fourth century did martyrdom become a serious factor in the church's growth. So long as the empire flourished and the values of Roman civilization prevailed, Christians were seen as an illegal and disloyal minority. Martyrs merely displayed their zeal to a largely hostile or indifferent populace.

About face

The Great Persecution seems to have flipped the scales. After the conversion of Constantine, martyrs became part of a "Golden Legend." In Rome, for example, the Spanish poet, Prudentius (d. 402)

embellished the story of the martyrs with miraculous details of their legendary heroism against pagan governors.

So Tertullian was right after all, though his statements took time to become fulfilled. For him the martyrdom of Christians was the supreme influence that drew people (him among them) to Christianity: "For who that beholds [martyrdom] is not stirred to inquire what lies indeed within it?"

William H. C. Frend is professor emeritus of ecclesiastical history at Glasgow University. His most recent of many works is The Archaeology of Early Christianity (Fortress, 1996).

Copyright © 1998 by the author or Christianity Today International/Christian History magazine.

More resources:

- William H.C. Frend's latest book is [An Archaeology of Early Christianity : A History](#) (which will be published in paperback later this year).
- If you can find it, Frend's 1981 book [Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church: A Study of a Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus](#) will give you far more of the story than we had room to print here.

Links

- The [Christian Catacombs of Rome](#) is a well-designed and informative site, with great images and a special section

on persecution. It's also available in other languages.

- Interested in the men who instigated the persecutions? There's no better place than [De Imperatoribus Romanis: An Online Encyclopedia of Roman Emperors](#). It contains short biographical essays of all the Roman emperors from the accession of the Emperor Augustus to the death of the Emperor Constantine XI Palaeologus. Each essay on this site, which is peer reviewed, is written by a scholar and is accompanied by a bibliography, illustrations, and footnotes.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 57: Converting the Empire: Early Church Evangelism

The Competition

When Christianity came to town, the religious marketplace was already crowded.

Everett Ferguson

It is A.D. 240 in Dura Europos, a Roman garrison on the Euphrates River. If you walk the streets at the western edge of town, you pass:

- A temple of Mithras,
- A temple of Palmyrene gods,
- A Jewish synagogue,
- A temple of Adonis,
- A sanctuary of Tyche,
- A Christian house church,
- A shrine to Zeus Kyrios.

Elsewhere in the city you would find temples to Gadde (a local Palmyrene deity), Zeus Theos, Zeus Megistos, Atargatis (a Syrian goddess), Artemis, and Jupiter Dolichenus (a Syrian Baal), as well as the military temple next to the garrison's headquarters.

To put it another way, Christianity did not enter a religious vacuum. Such religious pluralism typified all ancient cities. People were not sitting around waiting for a new religion to burst on the scene. Dozens, if not hundreds, of religions were available.

Judaism was the competitor with the greatest similarity to Christianity. The Jews' Yahweh and literally hundreds of deities vied for attention, but people tended to channel their religious and moral aspirations in one of three directions.

Mithraism: From raven to father

Although its deity had a Persian name, Mithraism was a creation of Greeks and Romans. Mithraism's god wielded power over the movements of the heavenly bodies. It combined elements of astrology and the Greek mystery religions, which highlighted special rites of initiation. There were seven grades of this initiation—Raven, Bride, Soldier, Lion, Persian, Heliodromus, and Father (the usual title of the head of a community). Neophytes passed through tests of endurance and took an oath before admission to each level.

Like Christianity and many pagan cults, a communal meal was a central feature of Mithraic meetings. It also shared with Christianity (as distinct from most mystery cults) moral demands (especially loyalty to oaths), a lack of national ties, no professional priestly caste, no public drama, and a deity who had a "life story" of significant events. However, unlike Christianity, Mithraism's divine story was related to astronomical phenomena, not historical events.

Furthermore, it was nonexclusive, permitting its members to worship other deities. Also unlike Christianity, and indeed other cults, Mithraism barred all women from membership. Consequently, it remained a religion of the few, in spite of receiving patronage from high officials and some emperors.

The remains at Dura help us glimpse the growth of Mithraism at this military outpost. The first sanctuary was merely one room in a private house (c. 168-171). In the early third century, the house was extensively remodeled to give the appearance of typical Mithraea: an elongated hall (in imitation of a cave), an altar and shrine depicting Mithras slaying a bull (the cult emblem) at one end, raised benches against both side walls flanking a central aisle, and a vestibule. The third stage (after 240) increased the seating capacity and showed more artistic elaboration: in one niche, a canopy of stars framed the bull slaying.

Emperor cult: Eagle ascending

The emperor held so much power that the only beings with whom comparison could be made were gods, and the only adequate homage seemed to be the honors given to deities. The power of emperors, although it seemed almost supernatural, did not mean people expected them to act supernaturally; nor were prayers and votive offerings given to them.

Nevertheless, in gratitude for favors bestowed or in anticipation of future blessings, honors equal to those given to the gods seemed appropriate: so people dedicated temples to them, set up their statues with the attributes of deities, offered sacrifices in their honor, and ascribed divine titles to them. For such practices, the imperial cult was born.

Typically, the new ruler directed the Senate to deify (*apotheosis*) his predecessor, although some emperors (Caligula, Nero, Domitian, and Commodus) demanded divine honors in their lifetime. In art an eagle ascending to the sky (carrying the soul of the deceased emperor) often symbolized deification. A relief from Ephesus depicts Trajan rising to heaven in the chariot of the sun.

Often cities anticipated official policy and instituted divine honors for the living emperor. Cities in Asia Minor promoted the imperial cult aggressively because the empire brought them great prosperity.

Ephesus provides a good illustration: it declared Julius Caesar a manifest god and set up a shrine to Augustus within the great temple area dedicated to Artemis. Worship was also given to Nero in connection with Artemis, and a temple to the Flavian emperors was dedicated under Domitian. A new temple to Hadrian as Zeus Olympius was also built, and a festival (Hadrianeia Olympia) was instituted.

A plethora of paganism

In the end, the strongest rival of Christianity proved to be traditional paganism, with its multiplicity of divine powers, rituals of sacrifice, temples, statues of deities, votive offerings, and periodic festivals. There is no neat way to sum up the variety, yet perhaps a few quotations from ancient sources can give a flavor of the devotion and superstition that held hope for so many (see "[From Black Magic to Mystical Awe](#)," p. [36](#)).

Philosophy served for many people in the ancient world the functions we expect of a religion—providing a moral code and giving spiritual guidance. In the late third and fourth centuries, under such thinkers as Porphyry, Iamblichus, and Sallustius, Neoplatonism allied itself with traditional paganism. The last creative form of Greek philosophy, it defended sacrifices, magic, and astrology as part of its own spiritual vision of reality.

Traditional religions, then, were deeply entrenched in the ancient world, and in a variety of forms. It is no

wonder that historians continue to probe this era to discover how exactly Christianity eventually uprooted them.

Everett Ferguson is professor of history at Abilene State University and editor of the Encyclopedia of Early Christianity (2nd edition: Garland, 1997).

Copyright © 1998 by the author or Christianity Today International/Christian History magazine.

More resources:

- Everett Ferguson is one of early church history's most prolific (and well-respected) writers. You can't go wrong with any of his books, but the one that we found most indispensable is the [Encyclopedia of Early Christianity](#), which he edited. At \$187.50 for both volumes, it's pretty expensive for the average reader. But since it's one of the top reference works on the subject, convince your local library to purchase a copy. Or wait until late 1999, when it comes out in a single-volume paperback.
- For a cheaper overview of Ferguson's early church

history,
[Backgrounds
of Early
Christianity](#).

It's more of a textbook, but it's still quite readable as an introduction to the Roman, Greek, and Jewish political, social, literary, and religious surroundings of the early church.

Links

- There's a whole site just devoted to [Mithraism](#).
- For a general overview of the competition, as well as the surrounding culture, see the [Perseus Project](#). It includes ancient texts and translations, maps, extensively illustrated art catalogs, and secondary essays on topics like vase painting. This is truly an amazing site. More than 70 museums have shared pictures of their art

objects. So far, it is mainly about the Greek world, but they are adding Roman materials constantly.

- Another constantly updated site, [Mining Company's Ancient/Classical History](#), is written for popular audiences.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 57: Converting the Empire: Early Church Evangelism

From Black Magic to Mystical Awe

Glimpses of many-sided Roman paganism—from engravings, parchments, and tablets of the ancient world.

Casting Spells

From a book of spells, early fourth century:

Spell of Attraction: it attracts those who are uncontrollable and require no magical material and who come in one day. It inflicts sickness excellently and destroys powerfully, sends dreams beautifully, accomplishes dream revelations marvelously. ...

Take a field mouse and deify it in spring water. And take two moon beetles and deify them in river water, and take a river crab and fat of a dappled goat that is virgin and dung of a dog-faced baboon, two eggs of an ibis, two drams of storax, two drams of myrrh, two drams of crocus, four drams of Italian galingale, four drams of uncut frankincense, a single onion. Put all these things into a mortar with the mouse and the remaining items and, after pounding thoroughly, place in a lead box and keep for use. And whenever you want to perform a rite, take a little, make a charcoal fire, go up on a lofty roof, and make this offering as you say this spell at moonrise and at once she comes.

Spell: "Let all the darkness of clouds be dispersed for me, and let the goddess AKTIOPHIS shine for me, and let her hear my holy voice. For I come, announcing the slander of NN, a defiled and unholy woman, for she has slanderously brought your holy mysteries to the knowledge of men. Go to her, NN, and take away her sleep and put a burning heat in her soul, punishment and frenzied passion in her thoughts, and banish her from every place and every house, and attract her here to me, NN."

And after these things, sacrifice. Then raise loud groans and go backward as you descend. And she will come at once. But pay attention to the one being attracted so that you may open the door for her; otherwise the spell will fail.

Hexed

From a small lead tablet from Britain, second century:

A memorandum to the god Mercury [erased: "Mars Silvanus"] from Saturnina, a woman, concerning the linen cloth she has lost. Let him who stole it not have rest before/unless/until he brings the aforesaid things to the temple, whether he is man or woman, slave or free. She gives a third part to the aforesaid god on condition that he exact those things which have been aforesaid. A third part from what has been lost is given to the god Silvanus on condition that he exact this, whether the thief is man or woman, slave or free.

Saved by divine love

A poem of thanksgiving to a local Gallic deity, Mars Lenus, first or second century:

While I am unable to bear the dire pangs of body

And spirit, wandering forever near the edges of death,
I, Tychicus, by Mars' divine love, am saved.
This little thanks-offering I dedicate in return for his great caring.

The stay of star-spangled heaven

A hymn to Zeus from the first century:

Zeus of the flashing bolt was the last to be born and the latest.
Zeus is the head and the middle, of Zeus were all things created.
Zeus is the stay of the earth and the stay of the star-spangled heaven.
Zeus is male and female of sex, the bride everlasting, Zeus is the breath of all and the rush of
the unwearying fire,
Zeus is the root of the sea, and the sun and moon in the heavens,
Zeus of the flashing bolt is the king and the ruler of all men,
Hiding them all away, and again to the glad light of heaven
Bringing them back at his will, performing terrible marvels.

Between sleeping and waking

Aelius Aristides, a well-known speaker of his day, describes a religious experience he had in Pergamum, at a shrine of the god Asclepius, in 146:

For there was a feeling as if taking hold of him [the god] and of clearly perceiving that he himself had come, of being midway between sleeping and waking, of wanting to look, of struggling against his departure too soon, of having applied one's ears and of hearing some things as in a dream, some waking; hair stood straight, tears flowed in joy; the burden of understanding seemed light. What man is able to put these things into words?

To health!

A third-century copy of a hymn to the god of health, Hygieia, by Aripbron of Sicyon (originally written in the fourth century B.C.):

Hygieia, most reverend of the gods among mankind,
Would that I may dwell with you for the rest of my life!
Be present and well-disposed to me, for if there is any delight in money or in offspring
Or in royal rule, equal to that of the gods among men, or in desires,
That we hunt with hidden traps of Aphrodite,
Or if any other delight has been revealed to man from the gods, or any relief from pains,
It is through you, blessed Hygieia, that they are all flourishing and are brilliant in the Graces' speech.
Apart from you no man counts as blessed.

Religious Resort

A description of a rural shrine, about 30 miles from Rome, by Pliny the Younger, early 100s:

The banks are thickly clothed with ash trees and poplars, whose green reflections can be counted in the clear stream as if they were planted there. The water is as cold and as sparkling as snow. Close by is a holy temple of great antiquity in which is standing an image of the [river] god Clitumnus, himself clad

in a magistrate's bordered robe; the written oracles lying there prove the presence and prophetic powers of his divinity.

All round are a number of small shrines, each containing its god and having its own name and cult, and some of them also their own springs. ... The people of Hispellum, to whom the deified Emperor Augustus presented the site, maintain a bathing place at the town expense and also provide an inn, and there are several houses picturesquely situated along the river bank.

Everything in fact will delight you, and you can also find something to read: you can study the numerous inscriptions in honor of the spring and the god, which many hands have written on every pillar and wall.

Reprinted by permission from Paganism and Christianity, 100-425 C.E.: A Sourcebook ***edited by Ramsay Macmullen and Eugene Lane, copyright 1992 Augsburg Fortress.***

Copyright © 1998 by the author or Christianity Today International/Christian History magazine.

More resources:

- All of the above was reprinted with permission from [Paganism and Christianity, 100-425 C.E.: A Sourcebook](#), edited by Ramsay Macmullen and Eugene Lane, copyright 1992 Augsburg Fortress.
- If you like primary source materials, check out the 10-year-old [A New Eusebius](#). Though it's hard to find the book, edited by W. H.C. Frend and revised by J.

Stevenson, it may be available at [The Advanced Book Exchange](#).

Links

- Good primary source material is always available at [The Christian Classics Electronic Library](#).
- For more primary source documents from the early church, see the [CH Pages of History](#).

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 57: Converting the Empire: Early Church Evangelism

The Emperor Strikes Back

How the once illegal religion became the law of the empire.

John O. Gooch

Let superstition cease; let the folly of sacrifices be abolished. Whoever, after the publication of this law, continues to sacrifice, shall be punished according to his deserts."

That decree of Emperor Constantius in 341 marked the end of paganism and the beginning of the Christian era. Christianity was no longer a persecuted minority; it began its journey to becoming the official religion of the empire.

New persecutors

The story really begins in 313, when Emperor Constantine gave Christians complete freedom of worship and equality with other religions. Confiscated Christian property was returned, and Christians were again recognized as full citizens of the empire. A series of laws favorable to the church made it plain that Constantine was pro-Christian and anti-pagan.

With this, paganism collapsed. It apparently had been practiced only as a civic duty.

By Constantius's reign (337-61), Christians had become a majority in some areas, and they sometimes persecuted the pagans who had once persecuted them. The government rarely encouraged the behavior, but neither did it try to stop it.

In Alexandria, Egypt, philosopher Demetrius Chytas was convicted of sacrificing to the gods. He argued he was only carrying on a lifelong practice, one begun when such sacrifices were legal, even commanded. Nonetheless, Demetrius was tortured and put under house arrest. In some areas, wearing amulets against diseases and having astrologers cast horoscopes were considered crimes and could result in torture and death.

In his book *On the Error of Profane Religions*, a famous convert from astrology, Firmicus Maternus, urged rulers to wholly eradicate paganism. "Away with those temple treasures," he wrote. "Let the fire of your mints or the flames of your smelting works roast the gods. Transfer all the gifts to your service and control."

Not all Christians agreed. Some told the emperor he was hurting, not helping, the faith when he used the power of the state to advance the church's cause. Athanasius of Alexandria (who was sent into exile by the government four times) pointed to the example of Jesus, who only asked people to follow him: "How can there be anything like persuasion when the fear of the emperor rules?"

Mandating faith

Although emperors continued to add laws benefiting Christians and penalizing pagans, paganism continued. For example, Constantius did not destroy the pagan temples of Rome. It was not until 380, during Theodosius' reign, that Christianity became mandatory.

"It is our will," he decreed, "that all the peoples we rule shall practice that religion that Peter the Apostle transmitted to the Romans."

By 380 Christians constituted a majority of the empire's population. In fact for the first decade of his 16-year reign, Theodosius did not demand the closing of temples, preferring, like Constantius, to retain them as historical curiosities.

But in 391, public outcry against the temples, especially from the East, was too great. Temples were closed, and every pagan practice Theodosius could imagine was banned.

The "conversion" of the empire was complete.

Copyright © 1998 by the author or Christianity Today International/Christian History magazine.

More resources:

- John Gooch is also the editor of [The Pocket Guide to the Bible](#).

Links

- Biographies of all of these Emperors are available at the thorough and accurate [De Imperatoribus Romanis: An Online Encyclopedia of Roman Emperors](#).

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 57: Converting the Empire: Early Church Evangelism

Evangelism in the Early Church: Christian History Interview - Roman Redux

Today's evangelistic challenge is not all that different than it was for the early church.

Robert Louis Wilken

The situation of the ancient and modern church seems strikingly similar: both are minorities in predominantly pagan cultures. The early church, of course, was eventually successful at converting its culture. So the natural question is, Are there any lessons we can learn to help us convert our culture?

We posed this and other questions to Robert Wilken, professor of history at the University of Virginia. He is the author of many books on the early church, including Remembering the Christian Past (1995), and he is an editorial adviser to First Things, a journal that examines religion and modern culture.

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 peddle: 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 beliefs most troubled pagans?

The strong predestinarian language of the New Testament. Around the year 200, Origen of Alexandria listed all the biblical passages that suggest our actions are determined by God, along with those that suggest we have responsibility for our actions. He did this because critics of Christianity had read in Romans 9 about loving Jacob and hating Esau, for example, and the part about God showing mercy to whom he will show mercy. Many pagans thought that undercut moral responsibility and freedom of the will, and that was a real stumbling block.

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 early 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 task is simply to tell people what we believe and do. We need to familiarize people with the stories in the Bible and to talk about the things that make Christianity distinctive. Many people are simply unaware of the basics of Christianity. They're rejecting something they don't know that much 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 love 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 Christians today—build strong communities. The early church didn't try to transform its culture by getting into arguments about whether the government should do this or that. As a small minority, 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 a 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 early Christian community especially strong was its stress on ritual. That there was something unique about Christian 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.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 57: Converting the Empire: Early Church Evangelism

Evangelism in the Early Church: Recommended Resources

Evangelism in the Early Church

editors

Most historians agree on the basic methods and reasons for the evangelization of the Roman Empire, but each brings a different emphasis. (All the in-print books can be ordered from **Books Now** at 1-800-962-6651 ext. 1248 or <http://www.booksnow.com/christianhistory.htm>.)

On the evangelists

Michael Green's *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Eagle, 1995; distributed in North America by Harold Shaw) dwells on both the New Testament and later periods. As the advisor on evangelism to the archbishop of Canterbury, his zeal for spreading the gospel shines through his well-researched history.

Another fascinating read by a nonhistorian is Rodney Stark's *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton, 1996), which applies the discoveries of modern sociology to the study of ancient history. Historians don't agree with all his conclusions, but the work sparkles with insights.

Michael Walsh also highlights the legacy of the first century church in his accessible *The Triumph of the Meek: Why Early Christianity Succeeded* (1986, out of print), which contains over 100 photos.

The resource we are probably most excited about is the newly revised *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* (Garland, 1997), edited by Everett Ferguson. At \$187.50 for both volumes, it's pretty expensive for the average reader. But since it is one of the top reference works on the subject, demand that your local library purchase a copy.

On the evangelized

The most comprehensive book on this topic, *Pagans and Christians* by Robin Lane Fox (Knopf, 1986), is out of print but well worth hunting down. It is a challenging read, and sometimes a tad too reductionistic, but each of its 800 pages is crammed with facts you never knew about early Christianity and Roman paganism.

Taking a creative approach to the subject, Robert L. Wilken's *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (Yale, 1984) is an informative character study of specific Romans and how they interacted with their Christian neighbors.

In their own words

Two resources we used most in researching this topic were on the computer. Logos's *Early Church Fathers* CD-ROM is easily searched (<http://www.logos.com> or 1-800-875-6467 for more information). The *Christian Classics Electronic Library* Web site (<http://www.ccel.org>) has dozens of early church writings, all of which can be downloaded for free—though it can take some time. For primary source material, no book beats these.

Other issues of Christian History

We've covered the early church on many occasions, and the issues relating most closely to the current issue are *Persecution in the Early Church* (Issue 27) and *Worship in the Early Church* (Issue 37). *Paul and His Times* (Issue 47) covers the earliest period. Phone 1-800-806-7798 to order.

Tired of heavy reading?

The Trial and Testimony of the Early Church is a six-part video series by Vision Video (1-800-523-0226) that covers one major thread of early church growth.

Many novels—*Ben Hur*, for example—also get you into the period. You may also want to look at something completely different: the popular online game *S.P.Q.R: An Ancient Adventure in Rome* (<http://www.cybersites.com:8080/twep/rome/>). It is essentially a mystery set in the period covered in this issue. There's a CD-ROM version of it too, but the Web version is free.

Copyright © 1998 by the author or Christianity Today International/Christian History magazine.
