

PART I

BEGINNINGS

AD I–325

SUMMARY

Christianity rapidly spread beyond its original geographical region of Roman-occupied Palestine into the entire Mediterranean area. Something of this process of expansion is described in the Acts of the Apostles in the New Testament. It is clear that a Christian presence was already established in Rome itself within fifteen years of the resurrection of Christ. The imperial trade routes made possible the rapid traffic of ideas, as much as merchandise.

Three centers of the Christian church rapidly emerged in the eastern Mediterranean region. The church became a significant presence in its own original heartlands, with Jerusalem emerging as a leading center of thought and activity. Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) was already an important area of Christian expansion, as can be seen from the destinations of some of the apostle Paul's letters, and the references to the 'seven churches of Asia' in the book of Revelation. The process of expansion in this region continued, with the great imperial city of Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul) becoming a particularly influential center of mission and political consolidation.

Yet further growth took place to the south, with the important Egyptian city of Alexandria emerging as a stronghold of Christian faith. With this expansion, new debates opened up. While the New Testament deals with the issue of the relationship of Christianity and Judaism, the expansion of Christianity into Greek-speaking regions led to the exploration of the way in which Christianity related to Greek philosophy. Many Christian writers sought to demonstrate, for example, that Christianity brought to fulfilment the great themes of the philosophy of Plato.

Yet this early Christian expansion was far from unproblematic. The 'imperial cult', which regarded worship of the Roman emperor as a test of loyalty to the empire, was prominent in the eastern Mediterranean region. Many Christians found themselves penalized as a result of their insistence on worshipping only Christ. The expansion of Christianity regularly triggered persecutions. These were often local – for example, the Decian persecution of 249–51, which was particularly vicious in North Africa.

CHAPTER I

The Church Begins

FROM JERUSALEM TO ROME

Jesus was executed by the Roman authorities in the city of Jerusalem around AD 30 on a trumped-up charge of sedition. Not a promising start for a new religion! But within three days the rumour was spreading around the city that he was alive, that he had been raised from the dead. Some of his closest followers claimed that they had actually seen him, and seven weeks later his resurrection was being boldly proclaimed in public in the city where he had been executed. The effects were startling; thousands of Jews and Jewish converts, who had returned from other parts of the Roman Empire to live in or visit Jerusalem, came to believe that Jesus was alive, and that his death on a cross was, in fact, part of God's plan to save humanity. During the following weeks and months many others joined them.

This marked the birth of the Christian church, as recorded in the book of Acts.

THE BIRTH OF THE CHURCH

During the days immediately following the resurrection, Jesus' followers claimed to have met him. After these encounters with the risen Jesus, no one could convince them that they were following mere pious hopes. They were not deluded: they had really *seen* their master and he was alive for ever!

They said Jesus explained to them things they had never understood before; for example, that it had been necessary for him to suffer and die before entering into his rightful glory. Now – in the light of his resurrection and the explanations he gave – the cross of Jesus took on an eternal dimension of significance for them, despite the wickedness of the people responsible for his death.

But belief in Jesus' resurrection did more than simply rebuild the faith of his disciples and cast new light on the meaning of his death. The apostles also said that he commissioned them to take into all parts of the world the good news of what God had done by sending him to rescue the human race. But they would not be alone in this task: Jesus promised them God's Holy Spirit to empower them (Matthew 28, Luke 24, and Acts I).

Some writers have suggested that a better name for the 'Acts of the Apostles' would be 'Acts of the Holy Spirit'. The book tells of the coming of the promised Holy Spirit, and how the earliest Christians witnessed to their Lord in various parts of the Roman Empire.

The account in Acts gives just part of the picture. It tells of only a few important churches and individuals – particularly Peter (the key figure in chapters I–12) and Paul (who comes to the fore in chapters 13–28). But Acts gives a clear insight into the patterns of growth of early Christianity and – together with the New Testament letters – provides most of what is known about the spread of the gospel in the first century.

Above all, Acts stresses that the Holy Spirit's power enabled the disciples to witness effectively in their world. A tiny band of discouraged and disillusioned men and women was suddenly transformed into a bold company of enthusiastic evangelists. Their work began in Jerusalem, but quickly spread to other centers. Thirty years later, the new faith had reached most parts of the eastern section of the Roman Empire, and probably even beyond, as well as westwards to Rome itself.

THE JERUSALEM CHRISTIANS

In spite of Jesus' commission to preach the good news in all the world, most of his followers in Jerusalem at first restricted themselves to evangelizing fellow Jews. This was not quite so limited as might appear, since thousands of Jews regularly flocked to Jerusalem for their most important religious festivals, and many actually settled permanently in Jerusalem – though doubtless maintaining links with their home countries. Paul's travelling companion, Barnabas, provides one example (see Acts 11).



Overview of the 1:50 scale model of Jerusalem, based on research by the Jewish archaeologist Michael Avi-Yonah, now housed at the Israel Museum, Jerusalem. Top left, dominating the city, is Herod's Temple, with the four defensive towers of the Roman Antonia Fortress adjoining.



The Roman Empire in AD 14



It was probably largely through the witness of these unknown Jewish converts from the earliest days that the Christian faith spread throughout the Empire and beyond in the first few decades, though Acts reveals little about this.

But among the Jerusalem Christians there were a few who were more forward-looking. They grasped the full meaning of Jesus' final command to his disciples and tried to reach beyond the orthodox Jews. One disciple, named Stephen, saw more clearly than others that the faith was for all people, and that a break with Judaism was inevitable. He belonged to a group of Jews called 'Hellenists', who spoke Greek and adopted a freer life-style than the more conservative Jews. Stephen came into conflict with some of the Jewish leaders as a result of his bold preaching. This led to his quick trial and summary execution, and a general outburst of persecution against the Jerusalem Christians, and particularly the Hellenists (Acts 6, 7).

PERSECUTION AND EXPANSION

Many Christians were forced to flee from Jerusalem because of this persecution, but they spread the good news about Jesus wherever they went – throughout the province of Judea and into Samaria. Philip, another Hellenist, led the way by evangelizing extensively among the despised Samaritans, who were half-caste and unorthodox Jews (Acts 8). This resulted in mass conversions.

Other Christians travelled to the coast of Palestine, to the island of Cyprus, and to Antioch in Syria, the third city of the Empire, preaching the message of Jesus with great success. It was in the metropolis of Antioch that the revolutionary step of evangelizing non-Jews was first taken by some of these nameless refugees from Jerusalem. This move was only reluctantly accepted by the Christians back in Jerusalem. It was in Antioch, too, that the followers of Jesus were first called 'Christians' (Acts 11:19–30).

During these early years, Peter evangelized among his fellow-Jews, but only within his own country. On one occasion he was rather reluctantly forced to preach the good news directly to Gentiles (Acts 10); but it took him at least ten years to decide that the gospel was for all people. It was left to a one-time opponent of Christianity to become the champion of Gentile evangelism and to pave the way for the integration of Jews and Gentiles into a common community.

PETER

Peter came from Bethsaida, on Lake Galilee, and his fisherman father John originally named him Simon. He was living in Capernaum, with his wife, brother, and mother-in-law, when first introduced to Jesus by his brother Andrew. He quickly became the leader of Jesus' twelve close followers, was often their spokesman, and was the first to declare publicly that Jesus was the Messiah, at Caesarea Philippi.

Jesus gave him the nickname 'Peter' (*Cephas* in Aramaic) meaning 'rock'. Rash and hot-blooded, Peter said that he was ready to die with Jesus, then three times denied knowing him on the night of Jesus' arrest. But Peter was one of the first to meet the risen Jesus, who specifically restored him to his position as leader.

After Jesus ascended, Peter took the initiative in the appointment of a successor to Judas among the Twelve, and was the chief preacher when the Holy Spirit came, on the Day of Pentecost. Peter and John took the lead in the early days of the church, disciplining Ananias and Sapphira after they deceived the believers, healing and preaching, and taking a special interest in the mission to Samaria.

Peter's mission

Later, Peter had a vision which launched the mission to take the gospel to the Gentiles. Although he was wary of this new venture, and later wavered under the criticism of strict Jewish Christians at Antioch, Peter welcomed Paul's work among the Gentiles, and gave it his full support at the Council of Jerusalem, which welcomed Gentile converts without imposing on them all the rigours of the Jewish law. Peter was imprisoned by King Herod Agrippa I (r. AD 41–44), but miraculously escaped the night before he was due to be executed.

Peter's later career is obscure. He may have worked in Asia Minor, perhaps visited Corinth, but ultimately settled in Rome, where he described himself as a 'fellow elder', which may mean that he was one of the church leaders, but not the sole leader. Two New Testament letters bear his name, and he was probably the main source for Mark's Gospel. Peter is believed to have been martyred at Rome during Nero's persecution of Christians, around AD 64.

Although he did not found the church at Rome, Peter's martyrdom in Rome gave it great prestige. Paul's association with the church added to this, and the Church of Rome later claimed to be the chief church in the West of the Empire, and the only one with assured apostolic roots. A considerable cult began to surround Peter and Paul from about AD 200. By the time of the Emperor Constantine, the site of Peter's martyrdom was held to be that now occupied by the Vatican basilica of St Peter's. In the time of Pope Leo I (c. 391/400–461), Peter was given greater prominence. The popes of Rome now claimed direct spiritual descent from Peter, the leader of the Twelve.

Several apocryphal works are attributed to Peter. A Gospel of Peter was banned from use at Rhossos (near Antioch) in AD 190 because of its heretical tendencies. The Apocalypse of Peter, which includes a graphic description of hell, and the Acts of Peter, which tells the famous '*Quo vadis?*' story of Peter returning to Rome to be crucified, also date from the later part of the second century.

Michael A. Smith



Statue of Peter, holding the traditional keys of heaven and hell, outside the Cathedral of Syracuse, Sicily, Italy.



The Church in Asia Minor, c. AD 50

PAUL: THE MODEL MISSIONARY

Saul of Tarsus is better known to us as Paul. Saul was his Jewish name; Paul his Roman name – or *cognomen*. He is mentioned in Acts as leading the persecution of Christians which followed the death of Stephen (Acts 7:54–8:3). For a time he violently opposed the Christian movement; but suddenly the chief persecutor became a leading witness to the risen Christ, as a result of his personal encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus. After a period in Arabia (Nabatea), Paul returned home to Tarsus (near the south-east coast of modern Turkey), where he may have spent the next ten years or so, spreading the gospel (Acts 9:1–30).

When the Jerusalem believers sent a man called Barnabas to visit the Christians in Antioch, he fetched Paul from Tarsus to assist him. This marked the beginning of the well-documented part of Paul's life, which was to be so important for the expansion of Christianity. Paul quickly emerged as leader of the dynamic group of Christians in Antioch who now became

Paul

A man small in size, with meeting eyebrows and a rather large nose, bald-headed, bow-legged, strongly built, full of grace; for at times he looked like a man, and at times he had the face of an angel.

Second-century description of Paul

the leaders in a concerted campaign to evangelize the Gentiles. Jerusalem was to remain important in the worldwide Christian community until the Roman army destroyed the city in AD 70 – and Paul reported back to the believers there after each of his missionary journeys abroad. But it was the church at Antioch which actually set the pattern for the future.

Paul was ideally equipped to be the greatest of all missionaries. He belonged to three worlds: Jewish, Greek, and Roman. His parents were strictly orthodox Jews who used the Hebrew language and observed Jewish customs at home. They were sufficiently concerned about a correct religious upbringing to send Paul to Jerusalem at an early age – possibly to live with an older, married sister (Acts 23:16-22). In Jerusalem Paul learned the traditions of his people and was ultimately taught by Gamaliel the Elder, one of the most famous rabbis of the day (Acts 22:2-5).

But Paul also inherited Greek culture, which had permeated the eastern Mediterranean following the conquests of Alexander the Great (335–323 BC). Paul later showed his mastery of Greek in his pastoral letters, which can be counted among the classics of Greek literature. In addition, Paul was a Roman citizen, which gave him special freedom of movement, protection in his travels, and access to the higher strata of society. Ultimately it meant that he probably died by the sword, a Roman prerogative, rather than on a cross.

PAUL'S ACHIEVEMENT

Paul's missionary achievements were immense. The years AD 35–45 remain obscure, but during the next ten or twelve years his activity was astounding. Between AD 47/48 (when he set sail with Barnabas on his first missionary journey) and AD 57 (when he returned to Jerusalem for the last time) he established flourishing churches in major cities in the Roman provinces of Galatia, Asia, Macedonia, and Achaia (Acts 13–23). When he wrote to the church in Rome, towards the end of this period, he spoke of his work in the eastern provinces as being essentially finished, and indicated that he was now thinking about visiting Spain (Romans 15:23-24).

How was it that Paul played such a decisive role in the early Christian mission? First, it was he who championed the mission to the Gentiles and won its acceptance by the rest of the church. Second, it was Paul who developed the theological defense of the Gentile mission that is clearly set out in Romans I–II. He worked very hard to keep Jewish and Gentile Christians united. With this purpose in view, he kept in constant touch with the mother church in Jerusalem, collected a considerable sum of money among Gentile converts for the needs of the Christians in Judea, and regularly underlined the importance of Christian unity in his letters.

Finally Paul's principle of being 'all things to all people' helped him move with relative ease between the synagogues, his base of operations, and Greco-Roman society, where ultimately the gospel received its greatest response. Paul's personal example as a self-supporting travelling missionary, and his concentration on important cities rather than rural areas, provided a pattern for others to follow.



The Conversion of Paul

PAUL

Paul was born into a Jewish family in Tarsus, where his parents were Roman citizens. He was a strict Pharisee, and even as a young man was outstanding in his orthodox beliefs and in his hatred of followers of Christ. He was present at the stoning of Stephen, and was commissioned by the High Priest to arrest Christians in Damascus.

Paul was converted through a vision of the risen Christ on his way to Damascus. Temporarily blinded, he was befriended by a Christian called Ananias, and when cured began to preach Christ in Damascus. However, attempts were made against his life, and he escaped by being lowered down the city wall in a basket.

After a spell in Arabia, Paul may have returned to Damascus, but later went to Jerusalem, where he was befriended by Barnabas and introduced to Peter. Further Jewish threats against his life forced him to flee again, and he returned to Tarsus. There followed a period of roughly ten years about which little is known; but Paul must have been active in Christian work, for when the Gentile mission began to flourish at Antioch, Barnabas summoned him from Tarsus to join in the work.

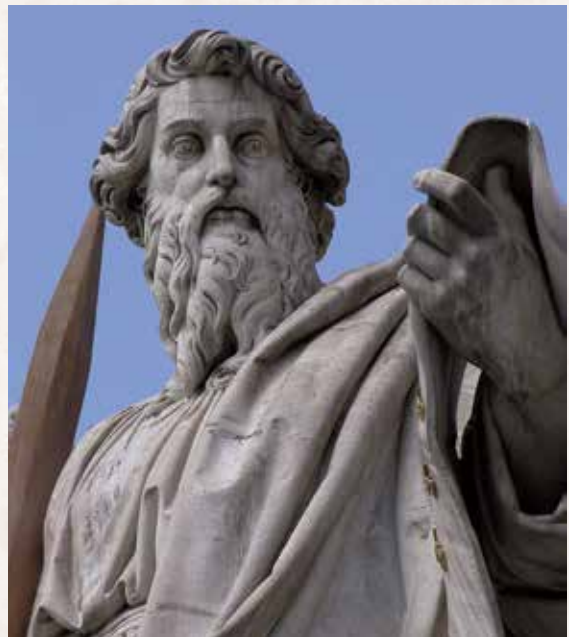
Paul's mission

Paul visited Jerusalem again, taking famine-relief funds, and discussed the Gentile mission with Peter. Then Paul began the evangelistic work which made him the outstanding Christian missionary of the first century. He journeyed with Barnabas and John Mark to Cyprus and central Asia Minor (modern Turkey), founding a number of churches. On his return, he had a violent disagreement with Peter at Antioch about how far Gentiles had to accept Jewish customs when they became Christians. This question was settled soon after at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15).

Paul now set out again, this time with Silas

(Silvanus), travelling through Asia Minor and crossing into Macedonia. Further successful missionary work followed, especially in Macedonia, Corinth, and Ephesus. After another visit to Jerusalem, Paul left with the youthful Timothy for further evangelism, finally returning to Jerusalem with money collected for the poor Christians there. On his arrival, Paul was seized by a Jewish mob and would have been lynched, but for the prompt intervention of the Roman garrison. He was kept in protective custody at Caesarea Maritima for two years by the Roman governor Felix, whose successor, Festus, suggested that Paul be tried at Jerusalem. But Paul refused to face such a biased court and appealed to the Roman Emperor for justice.

Paul was taken to Rome, surviving a shipwreck at Malta on the way. After two years in Rome (at which point the account in Acts ends), Paul was probably released and spent further time in missionary work, before being martyred on a second visit to Rome during Nero's persecution of AD 64.



Nineteenth-century statue of the apostle Paul by Adamo Tadolini, outside St Peter's Basilica, Rome. The great missionary is shown brandishing a sword, possibly the 'sword of the spirit' (Ephesians 6:21).

Paul's letters

Paul's surviving letters are found in the New Testament. Of the letters that bear Paul's name scholars debate which come directly from Paul's hand. For example, some suggest that the pastoral letters of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus may have been written by a disciple of Paul after his death. Tradition states that Galatians was probably written before the Council of Jerusalem; 1 and 2 Thessalonians date from Paul's first journey into Greece; and Romans and 1 and 2 Corinthians come from his last spell in Greece, before his arrest in Jerusalem. Philippians, Colossians, Ephesians, and Philemon were probably written from Rome during Paul's first imprisonment (though some scholars date them from an earlier imprisonment in Ephesus).

Paul's letters were highly valued during his lifetime, and were probably collected together soon after his

death. In *1 Clement* (written about AD 95) they are already accepted on an equal basis with other Scripture. The letters were certainly in their present, collected form by the time of Marcion (about AD 140).

Paul's theology was not well understood in the period immediately after his death. This was partly because the heretic Marcion rejected the Old Testament and much that was Jewish in the New Testament, and made great use of Paul's writings to support his ideas. As long as Marcion's heresy was a threat, mainstream Christian teachers did not stress many of Paul's distinctive doctrines, such as law and grace. Augustine was the first to give full weight to Paul's theology.

Michael A. Smith

THE CHURCH EXTENDS

Paul was not the only pioneer missionary among the early generation of Christians. In spite of the earlier hesitancy of Peter and the other apostles, they too probably travelled far and wide in the cause of Christ. Almost certainly Peter preached the gospel in Rome and the apostle John evangelized long and successfully in the province of Asia.

According to more disputed traditions, Mark helped found the church in the city of Alexandria, and Thaddeus (possibly also known as Lebbaeus or Jude, Acts 1:13) the church in Edessa (about 180 miles north-west of Syrian Antioch). Thomas is traditionally believed to have taken Christianity to India. Hundreds of unknown believers simply talked about their new-found faith as they travelled to and fro throughout the Empire and beyond in the course of business or other responsibilities.

By the middle of the second century, little more than a hundred years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, flourishing churches existed in nearly all the provinces between Syria and Rome. Though their origins are shrouded in obscurity, there were probably also churches in the great cities of Alexandria and Carthage, as well as beyond the eastern fringes of the Empire and in Gaul (modern France).

A century later, a significant Christian minority existed in almost every province of the Empire and also in several countries to the east. After another fifty years, around AD 300, Christians formed a majority in parts of the provinces of Africa and Asia Minor. In addition, Osroene, with its capital of Edessa, adopted Christianity nationally, as did Armenia later. Finally, the Emperor himself began to support Christianity in AD 312.

WHY CHRISTIANITY EXPANDED

Several factors encouraged the rapid spread of Christianity in this short period. One was the existence of a unifying language and culture – at least in the cities – from Italy to India. In the East, Alexander the Great and his successors established Greek as the common language – often referred to as *koine*, the Greek word for ‘common’. Paul and the other early Christians were able to use this language to spread their message.

Jews were scattered throughout the Empire and beyond, and provided Christian missionaries with an entry into the pagan world. Since the first Christians were Jews, they used the synagogues – both inside and outside Judea – as centers for evangelism. Although



The Extent of Christianity by AD 100



most of their fellow-Jews remained unconverted, many God-fearing Gentiles, who were attracted to Judaism but had not gone through the ritual of total integration into the Jewish community, became Christian converts. In fact, in spite of the growing divergence between the church and the synagogue, the Christian communities worshipped and operated essentially as Jewish synagogues for more than a generation.

With a few notable exceptions, three hundred years of peace and general prosperity prevailed throughout the Roman Empire from the time of Augustus. This period has become known as the *pax Romana* (Roman peace), and allowed great freedom of travel throughout the Mediterranean world. For example, Paul could travel along superbly engineered roads, and until the final years of his life also expect the protection of the Roman government.

The pagan world was experiencing a certain insecurity. Local political independence had disappeared, old loyalties and traditions were losing their hold, and sensitive people felt that their age was morally and religiously bankrupt. Many sought security in the intimate fellowship provided by the newly-popular Eastern religious cults, while others found escape in the excitement of the ever more brutal public games and entertainments. Such an atmosphere of dissatisfaction and unease prepared people to listen to the Christian gospel.

Early Christianity in no way depended solely upon professional leaders for its practice and growth. Each Christian was both 'priest' and 'missionary'. The churches have been described as the most inclusive and the strongest of all the various associations in the Roman world. The distinctions between Jew and Gentile, slave and freeman, male and female were in theory, and usually also in practice, abolished in the Christian community. All were active in sharing the message of Christ with others.

The reconstructed Stoa of Attalos, Athens, built by King Attalos II of Pergamon between 159 and 138 BC. The Stoic school of philosophers derive their name from the word 'stoa', where they met. The apostle Paul may have debated in the nearby Stoa Basilicos.

W. WARD GASQUE

BEGINNINGS: AD 1–325

