History & Theology – Church History

Class 1 – Survival and Resistance: The Patient Ferment of the Early Church (49-312)

## Main Point:

* Despite persecutions from without, and divisions from within, Christianity emerged as an unstoppable force in the Roman world.

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## Class Goals:

* Explain the precarious legal situation in which Christians found themselves in the first three centuries as *superstitio* as opposed to *religio licita*.
* Show how Roman persecution of Christians was sporadic and geographically diffuse.
* Demonstrate that Gnosticism posed a particular temptation for early Christians to adapt their faith to accommodate Roman religious beliefs.
* Explain Apostolic succession, the Canon, and the Apostle’s creed, and how they unified the church in response to Gnosticism.
* Clarify the importance of Christian social witness in caring for the poor, preserving marriage, and protecting life, as part of the long-term causes of Christianity’s success.

# Introduction: “Turning the World Upside Down”

Do you remember what Paul and his companions were accused of in Acts 17 when they brought the Gospel to the Greek-speaking city of Thessalonica? Paul had simply visited the synagogue (“as was his custom”) and “reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, ‘This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ’” (Acts 17:2-3). And their response?

“… they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, ‘These men who have *turned the world upside down* have come here also, and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that *there is another king, Jesus’*” (Acts 17:6-7).

The Christian claim of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead as the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies truly threatened to “turn the world upside down” for three reasons. First, it was a claim of a particular historical event, and could therefore not be mythologized. It demanded a response. Second, unlike Roman pagan religion, it was an exclusive claim: Jesus was the only way to be reconciled to God, all other paths led to Hell. Third, it was an all-encompassing claim. Following Jesus demanded your utmost allegiance, displacing duties of family, tradition, and even the emperor. These implications of the gospel were seen as inherently destabilizing to society. And looking back two thousand years later, we can confirm that the complaint of the Thessalonians,as recorded by Luke, was not an overstatement. Christianity has turned the world upside down. Or rather, Christianity has turned the world right-side up.

In many ways, this is what we will be unpacking and exploring over these next thirteen weeks.

This first class traces the history of the earliest church from the Book of Acts to AD 313, from its emergence as a distinct religion outside of Judaism, through its confrontation with Rome, to its overwhelming growth on the eve of the reign of Emperor Constantine.

# 1. The Earliest Christians and their Confrontation with Rome

## Context of Early Christianity

Christianity emerged from within Judaism and developed in the first centuries through a series of encounters. First with Jews, then with Gentiles, and finally with the broader Roman world. In each of these encounters, Christianity was upsetting the “status quo” with its teaching about the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

### (Optional: Confrontation with Judaism)

The first encounter was within Judaism. As we’ve already seen from Paul’s ministry at Thessalonica, the Apostles taught that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Old Testament. And although many rejected this message, Judaism was ripe for the Messiah. The Old Testament had been translated to Greek during the previous centuries (the Septuagint), allowing the Scriptures to be circulated throughout the Greco-Roman world, even among Gentiles. In fact, many Gentile ‘God-fearers’ attended synagogue meetings where the Scriptures were read and exposited.[[1]](#footnote-0)

As Christianity spread, it may have initially appeared as just “one more sect or group within Judaism,” like the Sadducees, Pharisees, or Essenes.[[2]](#footnote-1) But especially after Acts 15, where the Apostles and the Church at Jerusalem affirmed that Gentile believers did not have to become Jews—be circumcised and keep the Mosaic dietary laws—to be saved, the differences between Christians and Jews grew. So it was at Antioch that Luke tells us Jewish followers of Jesus were first called ‘Christians’ (Acts 11:26). The Jewish term for them was “Nazarenes,” a term by which Christians began to be cursed and condemned at synagogue meetings as early as the late 80s.[[3]](#footnote-2)

To the Romans, Christianity appeared similar to Judaism in many respects, and yet different. Christians were similar to Jews in their devotion to the Scriptures, their refusal to be associated with any pagan cult or eat food sacrificed to gods, and by their insistence on a strict sexual ethic.[[4]](#footnote-3) But there were also critical differences. Unlike Judaism, Christians were not simply content to exist but were determined to expand by winning converts. This created tensions with Romans who considered them a destabilizing force.

## The Confrontation with Rome

To understand why Christians were considered a “destabilizing force” we need to understand something of Roman society and religion. The Roman religious landscape was incredibly diverse and inclusive. In fact, they prided themselves on inclusivity. As the historian Henry Chadwick writes,

“By supposing that the various deities were either the same god under different names or local administrators for a supreme deity it was possible to give all cults a loose unity. The Roman government was in practice tolerant of any cult *provided that it did not encourage sedition or weaken morality.* Indeed, one reason for Roman military success was believed to be the fact that, while other peoples worshipped only their own local deities, the Romans worshipped all deities *without exclusiveness* and therefore had been rewarded for their piety.”[[5]](#footnote-4)

But while Romans considered themselves “inclusive” and “tolerant,” there was an exclusiveness and intolerance to their system. It worked only as long as every group accepted the status quo. To quote again from Chadwick:

“To refuse to participate in the pagan Emperor-cult was a political as well as a religious act, and could easily be construed as dangerous disaffection.”[[6]](#footnote-5)

This is where Christians ran into trouble.

### Nero

In 64 AD, a fire broke out on July 19 that raged for 9 days. By the time it was under control, two-thirds of Rome had been destroyed. When rumors began to spread that Nero himself had started the fire in order to build a new imperial city, he quickly laid the blame at an already unpopular group: the Christians. As the Roman historian Tacitus wrote 50 years later:

“To kill the rumors, Nero charged and tortured some people hated for their evil practices – the group popularly called ‘Christians.’ The founder of this sect, Christus, had been put to death by the governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate, when Tiberius was emperor.”[[7]](#footnote-6)

Tacitus continues:

“First those who confessed to being Christians were arrested, and on the basis of their testimony a great number were condemned, although not so much for the fire itself as for their *hatred of humankind*. Before killing the Christians, Nero used them to amuse the people. Some were dressed in furs, to be killed by dogs. Others were crucified. Still others were set on fire early in the night, so that they might illumine it. Nero opened his own gardens for these shows.”[[8]](#footnote-7)

At that time Christians were suspected of incest and cannibalism because of the way they spoke of the Lord’s Supper as a “Love Feast,” because even husbands and wives referred to one another as “brother” and “sister,” and because the Christian observance of the Lord’s Supper gave rise to numerous accusations of cannibalism.[[9]](#footnote-8) Facing this kind of stigma and opposition, it is no wonder that some Jewish Christians—such as the ones addressed in Letter to the Hebrews—“must have felt tempted to retrace their steps.”[[10]](#footnote-9)

### Pliny’s Letter to Emperor Trajan

The next glimpse we get of how early Christians were viewed from a series of letters between the Roman Emperor and a Roman governor from 112 AD. Around 112 AD, Pliny the Younger, the Roman governor over Bithynia and Pontus (now in modern Turkey), wrote to Emperor Trajan (r. 98-117) asking for advice on how to deal with Christians. Pliny writes,

“For the moment this is the line I have taken with all persons brought before me on the charge of being Christians. I have asked them in person if they are Christians, and if they admit it, I repeat the question a second and third time, with a warning of the punishment awaiting them. If they persist, I order them to be led away for execution; for, whatever the nature of their admission, I am convinced that their stubbornness and unshakeable obstinacy ought not to go unpunished. There have been others similarly fanatical who are Roman citizens. I have entered them on the list of persons to be sent to Rome for trial.”[[11]](#footnote-10)

Emperor Trajan wrote back, essentially agreeing with Pliny’s actions, but emphasizing four points: (1) Christians were not to be sought out for trial; (2) If the accused were found guilty of being a Christian, then they must be punished; (3) If the accused denied being a Christian they were to show proof by worshiping the gods; (4) Anonymous accusations were not to be considered.

“You have followed the appropriate procedure, my Secundus, in examining the cases of those brought before you as Christians, for no general rule can be laid down which would establish a definite routine. Christians are not to be sought out. If brought before you and found guilty, they must be punished, but in such a way that a person who denies that he is a Christian and demonstrates this by his action, that is, by worshipping our gods, may obtain pardon for repentance, even if his previous record is suspect. Documents published anonymously must play no role in any accusation, for they give the worst example, and are foreign to our age.”[[12]](#footnote-11)

These letters highlight the precarious legal position Christians found themselves in in the first centuries. They were viewed as members of an illicit sect and denied legal protection. Whereas Judaism was regarded by the Romans as “*religio licita*,” Christianity came to be regarded as “*superstitio”* or superstition, the Roman category for “mystery-religions” not granted legal protections because of their destabilizing tendencies.[[13]](#footnote-12) Whereas Roman civil religion was intended to cultivate *pietas*, Christianity was seen to cultivate *superstitio* by requiring pledging allegiance to a publicly convicted criminal, and by submitting to God rather than civil authorities when it came to worship practices.[[14]](#footnote-13)

By refusing to participate in public sacrifices and worship of Roman gods, Christians were ironically accused of Atheism. Moreover, since Roman public worship was seen to be essential for protection from enemies and natural disasters, Christians were accused of being “haters of mankind” for not participating. Such obstinacy enraged the Romans who believed that their gods would bring natural disasters, drought, and disease in retribution for the large section of the population who refused to worship them. As one Christian pastor named Tertullian commented, “if the Tiber rises too high or the Nile too low, the cry is ‘The Christians to the lion’.”[[15]](#footnote-14)

Nevertheless, during the first two centuries, “persecution was far from being continuous or systematic.”[[16]](#footnote-15) Largely because Christianity was still such a minority, persecution depended more on local attitudes and enforcement than Empire-wide. And as Chadwick writes, “the fact that before the third century the government did not take Christianity seriously, gave the Church breathing space to expand and to deal with critical internal problems,” the foremost of which was Gnosticism.[[17]](#footnote-16)

# 2. The Threat of Gnosticism

Already in the New Testament Epistles we see evidence of the influence of Gnosticism on the early churches. The Corinthian church seemed to have been divided into two rival camps with shared “Gnostic” presuppositions about the insignificance of the body. On one side, some were arguing that “physical acts were a matter of indifference” and giving themselves over to sexual immorality. On the other side, another group was taking an extreme ascetic approach, discouraging sexual intimacy in marriage, and downplaying the significance of the resurrection of the body. It’s instructive for us today—in an age with so much confusion about gender, sex, and the body—that both a radical rejection of the goodness of the body *and* the idolatrous obsession with the body are rooted in the same unbiblical errors of Gnosticism.

## Defining Gnosticism

For purposes of a definition,

“Gnosticism is a generic term used primarily to refer to theosophical adaptations of Christianity propagated by a dozen or more rival sects which broke with the early church between A.D. 80 and 150.”[[18]](#footnote-17)

Now, the extent to which Gnosticism predated Christianity is not known. But at its essence Gnosticism was a bifurcation of spirit and matter—a radical dualism between body and spirit. And as in the Corinthian church, this dualism could lead either to a radical asceticism or radical licentiousness.[[19]](#footnote-18)

## The Attraction of Gnosticism

Gnosticism's main apologetic and attraction lay in its explanation of ‘origin of evil.’ It did this by mythologizing the creation account in Genesis and claiming that the material world was inherently and irretrievably evil. It taught that the soul was “imprisoned” in body, denied the resurrection of the body, and mainly consisted in the memorization of secret passwords and collecting amulets that would supposedly help the soul navigate the cosmic journey to God after death.[[20]](#footnote-19)

This may seem ridiculous to us today, but Gnosticism posed a strong temptation for Christians who may have wanted to soften their beliefs in order to fit into Roman society. Because “Gnostic dualism argued that Pagan gods were not devils, but simply non-existent,” they taught that “it was a matter of complete indifference whether one ate meat that had been offered in sacrifice to idols or if one offered incense in honor of the emperor,” because—and this is what makes all the difference—“merely external acts did not affect the inner devotion of the mind.”[[21]](#footnote-20)

Another reason Gnosticism was attractive to Christians was that it downplayed the Christian claim to the *historicity* of the gospel. Much of Roman religion consisted of mythological accounts from ancient times. The Christian refusal to mythologize the Bible made it unpalatable to its detractors. As Chadwick writes,

“The Christians amazed the world by the extraordinary claim that the divine redeemer of their story had lately been born of a woman in Judaea, had been crucified under Pontius Pilate, had risen again, and at the last (which they believed to be in the near future) would judge the world. It would all have been less startling to the ancient mind *if only the story could be cut free of its historical anchorage and interpreted as a cosmic or psychological myth attached to an esoteric mystery-cult.*”[[22]](#footnote-21)

In the twentieth century, the German theologian Rudolf Bultmann made a career off of teaching a mythological approach to the Bible. But this is nothing new. One Gnostic leader Marcion, for example, rejected the Old Testament—pitting the God of the Old Testament against the God of the New—and sought to restore the original “non-Jewish” New Testament.[[23]](#footnote-22) He was excommunicated by the Church at Rome in AD 140.

## Responses to Gnosticism

Early Christian writers and pastors such as Irenaeus of Lyon (ca. 130-200) argued vehemently against Gnostic incursions into Christianity. Irenaeus was born in the Turkish city of Izmir [then Smyrna] but spent most of his ministry in southern France. Two full treatises of Irenaeus have come down to us: his *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching* and, most famously, his treatise *Against Heresies*. These works are primarily engaged in refuting Gnosticism, in such detail, and with such accuracy, that it is largely through Irenaeus that we today know much about Gnosticism at all. (Incidentally, Irenaeus’s treatises are so steeped in Scripture that he quotes from every New Testament book except for Jude, 2 Peter, and 3 John). His method was threefold: (1) Exposing the absurdity and contradictions of Gnostics drawn from their own writings. (2) Demonstrating the unity of the Old and New Testaments through the parallelism of Adam and Christ. (3) Showing the unity of the church’s teaching and rightful claim to Apostolic origin in contrast to the ever-changing tides of heretics.

# 3. The Need for Unity in the Church in Faith and Order

As Gnostic sects proliferated in the 2nd century, each claiming to embody the “true and secret teachings” of the Apostles, the best argument the church had recourse to was that its unity of faith and practice demonstrated its Apostolic origins. The first argument was the argument of Apostolic succession.

## The Unity of the Faith

### Apostolic Succession

While many Gnostic teachers claimed to possess secret traditions handed down by the Apostles and even forged letters claiming Apostolic origin, Irenaeus and other Christians responded by asserting that they were teaching the same thing that the Apostles had taught. How could they prove it? Irenaeus could produce a list of all the pastors of the church in Rome or the church in Antioch for that matter, from the days of the Apostles onward, demonstrating that each pastor had faithfully passed on the doctrine entrusted to him to the present day. He called this “Apostolic Succession.” What was the significance of this?

“The apostles Peter and Paul could not have failed to impart such doctrines to those whom they had set over the churches and that by the line of accredited teachers in those churches of apostolic foundation no such heretical notions had been transmitted. The succession argument carried the implication that the teaching given by the contemporary bishop of, say, Rome or Antioch, was in all respects identical with that of the apostles.”[[24]](#footnote-23)

In other words, apostolic succession showed that the teaching of the apostles had been faithfully transmitted. Christians did not need to rely on “secret teachings” or forged letters to know the true content of Christianity.

Later the Roman Catholic Church would distort this doctrine of Apostolic Succession to claim that supreme power in the church lay with the Pope who they claimed to be the Apostle Peter’s true successor.[[25]](#footnote-24) But that was not how Irenaeus was using the language of apostolic succession. He was simply pointing out how easy it was to demonstrate that the same gospel was being preached in the 2nd century as had been preached in the 1st century.

### The Canon of Scripture

The second argument to counter Gnostic sects was the Canon of Scripture. The rejection by Marcion and other Gnostics of certain books of the Bible required the church to formally acknowledge which books were Canonical. This was not a matter of great controversy. “Apart from accepted use in church lectionaries the prime criterion was *apostolicity*.”[[26]](#footnote-25) This principle led to “the eventual exclusion of writings like the Shepherd of Hermas and the Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians which did not claim to be apostolic.”[[27]](#footnote-26) As the Muratorian Canon (dated around AD 200) explained, “the Shepherd is good private reading, but as its author was neither apostle nor prophet but a recent writer it is disqualified for admission to the lectionary.”[[28]](#footnote-27) As Chadwick has written, “The truly astonishing thing is that so great a measure of agreement was reached so quickly” regarding the Canon in the early church.[[29]](#footnote-28)

F.F. Bruce has good comments on this process in his book, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* “One thing must be emphatically stated. The New Testament books did not become authoritative for the Church *because* they were formally included in a canonical list; on the contrary, the Church included them in her canon *because she already regarded them as divinely inspired*, recognizing their innate worth and generally apostolic authority, direct or indirect. The first ecclesiastical councils to classify the canonical books were both held in North Africa—at Hippo Regius in 393 and at Carthage in 397—but what these councils did was not to impose something new upon the Christian communities but to codify what was already the general practice of these communities.”[[30]](#footnote-29)

### The Creed

The third tool against the Gnostics was the “rule of faith” or the Apostle’s Creed, which emphasized the unity of the Covenants and the fulfillment of Scripture in Christ.

I believe in God the Father almighty;  
and in Christ Jesus His only Son, our Lord,  
Who was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary,  
Who under Pontius Pilate was crucified and buried,  
on the third day rose again from the dead,  
ascended to heaven,  
sits at the right hand of the Father,  
whence He will come to judge the living and the dead;  
and in the Holy Spirit,  
the holy Church,  
the remission of sins,  
the resurrection of the flesh  
(the life everlasting).[[31]](#footnote-30)

This confession was required of new believers for baptism.[[32]](#footnote-31) You’ll notice that the language of “descended into hell” is absent—this language did not appear until the fifth or seventh century.[[33]](#footnote-32)

## The Unity of Order

As the Churches grew in unity and uniformity doctrinally in the first three centuries in response to the attacks of Gnosticism, the polity and governance of churches likewise developed to greater uniformity and hierarchy, both as a natural process of development in response to growth and increased administrative complexities, but also to reinforce the authority of the apostolic churches over and against the errors of Gnosticism.

### Membership and Discipline

The polity of the New Testament was evidently adhered to by the earliest churches. Baptism was the rite by which they were “admitted to the church.”[[34]](#footnote-33) Each Sunday the church gathered for their “thanksgiving” (or *Eucharist*) “in which the baptized age bread and drank wine” in a service that outsiders and non-baptized persons were prohibited from participating by Deacons who guarded the doors. As Chadwick writes, “To share in this sacred meal was so deeply felt to be the essential expression of membership.”[[35]](#footnote-34) He continues, “A serious moral fault entailed exclusion from sharing in the meal, either permanently or for a time; but those so excluded continued to attend the first part of the service consisting of psalms, readings, and prayers, together with those who were not yet baptized but were ‘receiving instruction’ (*catechumenoi*).”[[36]](#footnote-35)

### Church Leadership

Moreover, the earliest churches followed the Apostle Paul’s instructions in the pastorals about church leadership. Ignatius spoke of Antioch and the Asian churches as possessing a lead-bishop with presbyters [elders] and deacons.[[37]](#footnote-36) The letter of Clement of Rome “implies the existence of two distinct orders of ministry, bishops *or* presbyters and deacons,” just as taught in Philippians 1, Acts 20:17, and Titus 1:5-7, and “the titles [or bishop and presbyter] [were] applied to the same people.”[[38]](#footnote-37) The *Didache* (dated between AD 70 and 110), provides instruction for a local ministry which is not itinerant, reflecting qualifications for elders very similar to those found in the Pastorals:

“Appoint for yourselves therefore bishops and deacons worthy of the Lord, men that are meek and not lovers of money, true and reliable; for they also perform for you the ministry of prophets and teachers. Do not despise them therefore; for they are your men of honour together with the prophets and teachers.”[[39]](#footnote-38)

### The Diaconate

The division between elders and deacons in the early church followed the division in Acts 6 between the ministry of the Word and Prayer and the ministry of the table. The bishop-presbyters celebrated the Lord’s Supper; the deacons assisted.[[40]](#footnote-39) The deacons took charge of church property and administered charitable relief; the elders oversaw the teaching and disciplinary work of the church.[[41]](#footnote-40) “The diaconate was not originally a probationary order for the presbyterate” as is common among Catholics today.[[42]](#footnote-41) Rather it was an office for life, unless one was appointed as a bishop. The charitable, though not the liturgical work of deacons “was shared with deaconesses who had special responsibilities for women.”[[43]](#footnote-42)

### Bishops

While referred to synonymously in Scripture, the role of a lead bishop or simply “bishop” in contrast to presbyter gradually developed without controversy until it was commonplace in the second and third centuries. “Among the presbyter-bishops one rose to a position of superiority, and acquired the title ‘bishop’ while his colleagues are called ‘presbyters.’[[44]](#footnote-43) Chadwick gives four reasons or consequences of this development: (1) Ordination—both of other presbyters and of deacons—required one member of the presbytery to take the lead. (2) Correspondence between churches was carried out by the presiding bishop-presbyter. (3) For churches to participate in one another’s ordination services, one presbyter would be chosen and sent as a representative—this honor necessarily fell to the presiding presbyter or bishop. (4) The crisis of the Gnostic movement necessitated a focus on a single leader in the church in order for the argument of apostolic succession to hold.[[45]](#footnote-44)

The existence of a single figure at the head of a body of presbyters can be seen at the church at Jerusalem and in the correspondence of Ignatius. Nevertheless, “the bishop among his presbyters remained first among equals and for centuries continued to address them as ‘fellow-presbyters.’[[46]](#footnote-45) Presbyters would assist with celebrating the Eucharist and “were entrusted with [executing] the disciplinary ‘power of the keys’ (Matt. 16:19, 18:18; Jn. 20:23) by which the purity of the society was maintained and sinning brethren excluded.”[[47]](#footnote-46) Though the presbyters shared in the laying on of hands, ordination was viewed as the special responsibility of the bishop.[[48]](#footnote-47) Nevertheless, “the actual choice of the candidate [of Bishop] rested with the whole congregation, clergy and people together.”[[49]](#footnote-48) “Election by the people likewise played a large part in the ordination of presbyters and deacons.”[[50]](#footnote-49) This did not change until the fourth century when Christian emperors began to assert the right of appointing bishops, a practice that Chadwick says was “not free of abuses.”[[51]](#footnote-50)

In all this, we see that the testing of the church, so far from harming it, actually strengthened it through the need to further articulate and clarify doctrinal beliefs and practices otherwise handed down through tradition. The threat of Gnosticism in the first and second centuries necessitated the development of greater uniformity in church practice and doctrinal belief. This occurred through the formal recognition of the New Testament canon and the criterion for determining canonicity, as well as through an increasing emphasis on bishops through the argument of apostolic succession.

# 4. Expansion and Growth

One of the most remarkable aspects of the beginnings of Christianity is the rapid growth of the church during the first few centuries. The Book of Acts records the spread of the Christian Gospel from Jerusalem outward throughout the Eastern Mediterranean, to Turkey, Greece, and finally in 60 AD to the very heart of the Empire: Rome.[[52]](#footnote-51) But it doesn’t end there. By 150 AD we have reports of Christians scattered throughout every realm of the Empire, from the Eastern part of the Mediterranean, all across North Africa, even reaching up into modern day France. Christianity had also spread beyond the Empire into India, and even as far south as Ethiopia. As one Christian wrote,

“We have filled all that belongs to you – the cities, the fortresses, the free towns, the very camps, the palace, the senate, the forum. We leave [empty] only the [pagan] temples.”[[53]](#footnote-52)

Another Christian wrote in the 2nd century that “Christians day by day increase more and more.”[[54]](#footnote-53)By the start of the 3rd century, Tertullian, an African pastor, could refer to Christians as “a great multitude of men—almost the majority in every city.”[[55]](#footnote-54) Just fifty years later, Origen, a Christian leader from Alexandria, Egypt, could write that from Britain to Mauretania, “The Savior’s greatness… extends to all the world.”[[56]](#footnote-55) In his book, *The Rise of Christainity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History,* Rodney Stark estimates that by 312 AD, 8-12% of the Roman Empire were Christians.[[57]](#footnote-56)

## Causes of Success

Examining the growth of the early church in the first three centuries, Chadwick states, “Nothing could have been less likely to succeed by any ordinary standard of expectation.”[[58]](#footnote-57) Another scholar writes that “According to the evidence at our disposal, the expansion of the churches was not organized, the product of a mission program; it simply happened.”[[59]](#footnote-58) “Persecution, so far from driving the church underground, had the opposite effect.”[[60]](#footnote-59) How did this happen? What accounts for Christianity’s meteoric rise?

### The Witness of Charity

The main factor in the expansion of Christianity that Chadwick identifies was charity—or the love with which Christians cared for one another and the most vulnerable.[[61]](#footnote-60) This, along with the faithful preaching of the Gospel, was critical for clarifying who Christians really were: by modeling a radical otherworldliness in its commitment, especially, to the sanctity of marriage and the sanctity of life.

### The Sanctity of Marriage

Chadwick writes that part of the reason Christianity may have grown so rapidly among women was its insistence on the equal value of men and women before God and requirements for how Christian husbands treat their wives. Unlike Roman society at large, “the Christian sex[ual] ethic differed from the conventional standards of pagan society in that it regarded unchastity in a husband as no less serious a breach of loyalty and trust than unfaithfulness in a wife.”[[62]](#footnote-61)

Sharon James picks up on this in her book *How Christianity Transformed the World:*

“The early Christians lived in a culture where a small privileged elite of males had sexual access to the rest of the population. This ubiquitous culture of abuse created an ocean of exploitation and suffering… Roman sexual culture rested on a bedrock of coercion. The poorest men who didn’t have free access to their own slaves could hire prostitutes for pathetically low sums. Vile abuse surrounded the ‘sex trade’: ‘The commodification of sex was carried out with all the ruthless efficiency of an industrial operation, the unfree body bearing the pressures of insatiable market demand. In the brothel the prostitute’s body became, little by little, like a corpse.’ [Kyle Harper, *From Shame to Sin*, p. 49]. The Christian sexual ethic forbade the buying and selling of sex. It held men and women to an equal standard. It gave equal dignity to husband and wife. This was revolutionary. By contrast to Christian behavior, the second-century poet and satirist Juvenal portrayed a society in which large numbers of people were dangerously addicted to ever more extreme sexual behavior. Nothing was shameful or out of bounds. Stage plays celebrated incest, physical torture for gratification, paedophilia and bestiality. The early Christians were counter-cultural in opposing such decadence.”[[63]](#footnote-62)

Christians may have been mocked and maligned for the repressive views on sex, but in the long run their practice and example won the day.

### The Sanctity of Life

The second area in which Christians challenged the public morality of the Roman world by their teaching and example was the sanctity of life—in all its forms. This love showed itself in care for the poor (inside of the church mainly, but also outside), for widows, and orphans, not just in times of plenty but also in times of famine, pestilence, or war. Christians showed this through providing burials for poorer members, by showing hospitality to visiting brothers, and giving generously to the church which in turn supported others. By the year 251, Chadwick writes that in addition to its own ministers, the church at Rome was supporting 1,500 widows and needy persons.[[64]](#footnote-63) But it also showed itself in caring for the unborn.

In his book *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World*, Tom Holland describes how studying Christianity in the context of the Roman world challenged his atheistic presuppositions:

“I was more than ready to accept [the modern] interpretation of history: that the triumph of Christianity had ushered in an ‘age of superstition and credulity’, and that modernity was founded on the dusting down of long-forgotten classical values… [But] the longer I spent immersed in the study of classical antiquity, the more alien and unsettling I came to find it. The values of Leonidas, whose people had practiced a peculiarly murderous form of eugenics… were nothing that I recognized as my own; nor were those of Caesar, who was reported to have killed a million Gauls and enslaved a million more. It was not just the extremes of callousness that I came to find shocking, *but the lack of a sense that the poor or the weak might have any intrinsic value*… **[**The] most defenceless of God’s children [were infants]. Across the Roman world, wailing at the sides of roads or on rubbish tips, babies abandoned by their parents were a common sight. Others might be dropped down drains, there to perish in the hundreds. The odd eccentric philosopher aside, few queried this practice. Indeed, there were cities who by ancient law had made a positive virtue of it: condemning to death deformed infants for the good of the state. Sparta, one of the most celebrated cities in Greece, had been the epitome of this policy, and Aristotle himself had lent it the full weight of his prestige. Girls in particular were liable to be winnowed ruthlessly. Those who were rescued from the wayside would invariably be raised as slaves. Brothels were full of women who, as infants, had been abandoned by their parents—so much so that it had long provided novelists with a staple of their fiction. Only a few peoples—the odd German tribe and, inevitably the Jews—had stood aloof from the exposure of unwanted children. Pretty much everyone else had always taken it for granted. Until, that was, the emergence of a Christian people… What the implications might be for infants tossed out with the trash was best demonstrated [by a Christian woman named Macrina]. Macrina, the eldest of nine siblings, [including her two more famous brothers Basil and Gregory]… would make a tour of the refuse tips. Those infant girls she rescued she would take home and raise as her own… She believed that within even the most defenceless newborn child there might be glimpsed a touch of the divine… Mary had given birth to Christ in a stable, and laid him down on straw. Macrine, taking up the slight form of a starving baby in her arms, could know for sure that she was doing God’s work.”[[65]](#footnote-64)

“The pagan comment, ‘See how these Christians love one another’ (as reported by Tertillian) was not irony.”[[66]](#footnote-65)

Even as they were derided, persecuted, misrepresented, and mocked, Christians continued to love one another and their enemies. The word on the streets was that “Christianity was widely suspected of secret vice.”[[67]](#footnote-66) But then why did they care so well for widows? Roman Philosophers argued that Christianity was a threat to the Roman way of life.”[[68]](#footnote-67) But then why did they rescue babies from dumpsters? “The paradox of the church,” Chadwick writes, “was that it was a religious revolutionary movement, yet without a conscious political ideology: it aimed at the capture of society throughout all its strata, but [it never aimed at the] possession of power in this world.”[[69]](#footnote-68) What is it that Peter writes? “Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation” (1 Peter 2:11).

# 5. The Pagan Revival and Rise of Persecution (249-251)

But their love and compassion did not make them immune from persecution and suffering. As Christians we do not love others in order to *avoid persecution*, but to be faithful to God, even in suffering.

The expansion of Christianity throughout the empire, both numerically and in social influence, and the rumblings of the military and political decline of the Roman Empire provoked a revival of paganism around the turn of the third century. Many Romans believed that a return to traditional forms of Roman piety was their best hope of restoring Roman grandeur. As the imperial cult grew, Christians found themselves increasingly perceived as “hateful” for their unwillingness to participate in the pagan forms of civil religion. In 248, Origen remarked that popular hostility to the church was rising sharply.”[[70]](#footnote-69) In AD 249, when Christians in Alexandria abstained from participating in celebrations they were attacked by an anti-Christian pogrom.

The Roman Emperor Decius thought that Christianity was weakening the Empire and believed that “a return to old religion would make Rome great again.”[[71]](#footnote-70) He offered a sacrifice to institute a renewed “Roman golden era” and mandated that similar sacrifices be made throughout the Empire. To enforce this measure, he required that everyone in the Empire obtain a certificate (a *libellus*) from an official certifying that they had offered the proper sacrifice to the emperor.

Archaeologists have recovered examples of these certificates in Egypt.[[72]](#footnote-71) One of them reads:

“Presented to the commission for the sacrifices in the village of Alexander Island, by Aurelius Diogenes, the son of Satabus, of the village of Alexander Island, about 72 years of age, with a scar on the right eyebrow. I have at other times always offered to the gods, as well as also now in your presence, and according to the rules have offered, sacrificed, and eaten of the sacrificial meal; and I pray you to attest this. Farewell. I, Aurelius Diogens, have presented this.”[[73]](#footnote-72)

Death was the penalty for failing to obtain such a certificate. How should Christians respond?

The church had been largely caught unawares. The previous fifty years had been relatively easy, and Christians were not accustomed to persecution. Some Christians immediately rushed to the altars to offer the sacrifices. Some pastors urged their congregations to do so! Other Christians initially refused, but after prison and torture caved in. Still others lived in regions where the officials were friendly and did not want to kill the Christians. “I know you’re a Christian,” they said. “You don’t have to sacrifice. Just give me some money and I’ll give you a certificate.”[[74]](#footnote-73)

**[Discussion Question] - Now here’s my question for you: what should Christians do in such a situation? Is it lawful for a Christian to offer such a sacrifice? Is it lawful to buy a certificate that says you’ve sacrificed without sacrificing?**

The number of church members who apostatized from Christ by obeying the edict was large, and it was a special shock that many clergy, including a number of bishops, were among the lapsed.[[75]](#footnote-74) Once the persecution was over, those who had left the church wanted to return to the church.

This presented challenging questions for churches and pastors: should they be forgiven and readmitted to the churches? How should they demonstrate their repentance? What about the ministers who had offered the sacrifices? Could they resume their ministry? As we’re going to see next week, the way churches responded to these questions led to great controversy.

# Conclusion

Despite persecutions from without, and divisions from within, Christianity emerged as an unstoppable force in the Roman world.

One of the most striking examples of endurance amidst persecution comes from the life of Polycarp.[[76]](#footnote-75) Polycarp was the pastor of the church in Smyrna, now known as the city of Izmir in modern day Turkey. Around 150 AD, a mob erupted in that city calling, “Away with the atheists!” “Get Polycarp!” the mob began to cry. The soldiers found Polycarp praying in his house. “Save yourself,” they told him. “Consider your old age! What is the harm in saying ‘Caesar is Lord’ just once?” But Polycarp refused and was led to the arena to be thrown to the lions.

The governor gave Polycarp three chances to save his life. First, he told him to say, “Away with the atheists” (meaning the Christians). Polycarp pointed to the heathens in the galleries and said, “Away with the atheists!” The governor gave him a second chance, “Curse Christ.” Polycarp answered, “Eighty and six years have I served him and he has done me no wrong, and can I revile my King that saved me?” A third time the governor said, “Swear by Caesar.” Polycarp answered, “I am a Christian. If you want to know what that means, set a day and I will explain it to you.”

“I’ll throw you to the beasts!” the governor threatened.

“Bring on your beasts,” Polycarp replied.

“If you scorn the beasts, I’ll have you burned,” the governor warned.

“You try to frighten me with the fire that burns for an hour and you forget the fire of hell that never goes out.”

So Polycarp was burned at the stake. His dying prayer was, “Lord God almighty, Father of Jesus Christ, I bless you that you have deemed me worthy of this hour that I shall take my place among the martyrs in the cup of Christ to rise again with the Holy Spirit. May I be an acceptable sacrifice.”

As we consider the early church, the sufferings they endured, the faithfulness they exhibited—We should praise God for the lives of these brothers and sisters. We should thank God for the “great cloud of witnesses” that surrounds us and spurs us on (Heb. 12:1). Yet we should ultimately fix our eyes on the same one that they fixed their eyes on: “Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb. 12:2).

So when you face hostility for your faith at work. When you feel the pain of being misunderstood by your friends or rejected by your family. When you are accused of harboring hatred in your heart when you know that to be false. Brothers and sisters, remember Polycarp. Remember the saints who have gone before. There is a great cloud of witnesses that has gone before you! But most of all, remember Jesus! “Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted” (Heb. 12:3).

1. Acts 10:2, 22. Cf. Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, Revised edition (London: Penguin, 1993), 9-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Chadwick, 13. On the Essenes, Chadwick notes that “the New Testament writings and the Qumran Scrolls mutually illuminate one another, but neither group of documents can be said to ‘explain’ the other” (15). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Chadwick, 20. Jewish Christians who continued to insist on keeping the Mosaic law became known as “Ebionites.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Chadwick, 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Chadwick, 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. Chadwick, 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. Cornelius Tacitus, *The Annals: The Reigns of Tiberius, Claudius, and Nero*, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 359. (15:44) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. Cornelius Tacitus, *The Annals: The Reigns of Tiberius, Claudius, and Nero*, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 360. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea, ca. 260-ca. 340, and G. A. Williamson. *The History of the Church From Christ to Constantine* (New York: Dorset Press, 1984), 195: “They were ensnared by Satan, so that fearing the torches with this are inflicted on God’s people, at the soldiers instigation they falsely accused us of Thyesyian banquets and Oedipean incest, and things we are never to speak or you think about, or even believe that such things ever happened among human beings.” [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. Chadwick, 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. Pliny and Betty Radice, *Letters and Panegyricus [of] Pliny*, The Loeb Classical Library, no. 55, 59 (London, Cambridge, Mass: Heinemann; Harvard University Press, 1969), 287. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. Pliny the Younger, *Complete Letters* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 279. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
13. Frederick Hok-Ming Cheung, Ming Chiu Lai, *Politics and Religion in Ancient and Medieval Europe and China* (Brill, 1999), 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
14. Frederick Hok-Ming Cheung, Ming Chiu Lai, *Politics and Religion in Ancient and Medieval Europe and China* (Brill, 1999), 29. Cf. Robert Louis Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (Yale University Press, 2003), 54-67.  [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
15. Chadwick, 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
16. Chadwick, 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
17. Chadwick, 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
18. Chadwick, 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
19. Chadwick, 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
20. Chadwick, 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
21. Chadwick, 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
22. Chadwick, 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
23. Chadwick, 39-40. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
24. Chadwick, 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
25. Cf. Greg Allison, *40 Questions About Roman Catholicism* (Kregel Academic: 2021), 103-104. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
26. Chadwick, 43: “Mark and Luke were set beside Matthew and John as being sanctioned by Peter and Paul respectively.” [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
27. Chadwick, 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
28. Chadwick, 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
29. Chadwick, 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
30. F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (2003), 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
31. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (A&C Black, 2006), 100-131. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
32. Chadwick, 45: “The argument is of course circular: the tradition of the Church teaching must be proved orthodox by the biblical revelation; yet doubtful books are admitted to the New Testament canon because they are orthodox by the standards of the Christian tradition, and only the tradition can ensure that the interpretation of the Scripture is sound.” [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
33. Wayne Grudem,*Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), *586*. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
34. Chadwick, 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
35. Chadwick, 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
36. Chadwick, 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
37. Chadwick, 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
38. Chadwick, 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
39. Chadwick, 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
40. Chadwick, 47-48. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
41. Chadwick, 48: While some churches in the second and third centuries may have occasionally celebrated the Eucharist, “this practice was frowned upon and at the Councils of Arles (314) and Nicaea (325) explicitly forbidden” (48). “By then it was usual for rural congregations to be served by a resident presbyter” (48). [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
42. Chadwick, 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
43. Chadwick, 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
44. Chadwick, 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
45. Chadwick, 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
46. Chadwick, 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
47. Chadwick, 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
48. Chadwick, 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
49. Chadwick, 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
50. Chadwick, 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
51. Chadwick, 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
52. For an excellent history of the New Testament events see Paul Barnett, *Jesus & the Rise of Early Christianity: A History of New Testament Times* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
53. Tertullian, *Tertullian, Apology, De Spectaculis*, The Loeb Classical Library. Latin Authors (London, New York: W. Heinemann, ltd.; G. P. Putnam’s sons, 1931), 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
54. *Diognetus* 6:9, trans. E.R. Fairweather, *Early Christian Fathers*, ed. C.R. Richardson, LCC 1 (1953), 218. Cited in Kreider, 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
55. Tertullian, *Scap*. 2, trans. R. Arbesmann, FC 10 (1590), 154. Cited in Kreider, 7.  [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
56. Origen, *Hom. Luc.* 6.9, trans. J.T. Lienhard, FC 94 (1996), 27. Cited in Kreider, 7.  [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
57. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christainity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton University Press, 1996), 6. Cited in Kreider, 8. Kreider notes that “This growth varied tremendously from place to place. In certain areas (parts of Asia Minor and North Africa) there were considerable numbers of Christians. But other areas there were few believers. And some cities, such as Harran in Mesopotamia, were known to be virtual ‘Christian-free’ zones.”  [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
58. Chadwick, 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
59. Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 9-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
60. Chadwick, 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
61. Chadwick, 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
62. Chadwick, 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
63. *How Christianity Transformed the World,* 89-90. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
64. Chadwick, 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
65. Tom Holland, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World*, Illustrated edition (New York: Basic Books, 2019), 16, 143-144. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
66. Chadwick, 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
67. Chadwick, 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
68. Chadwick, 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
69. Chadwick, 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
70. Chadwick, 117. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
71. Roland Herbert Bainton, *The Church of Our Fathers* (Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1969), 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
72. See an example here <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/11/Libellus_scroll.jpg> [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
73. Bainton, 34-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
74. Bainton, 34-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
75. G. E. M. De Ste. Croix, Michael Whitby, and Joseph Streeter, *Christian Persecution, Martyrdom, and Orthodoxy* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 44.“Christians who belonged to the upper classes, and consequently had more to lose if they remained Christians, would think it prudent to forestall attack by ‘voluntarily’ making a public demonstration of their abandonment of Christianity.”  Henry Chadwick, *The Church in Ancient Society: From Galilee to Gregory the Great*. Oxford History of the Christian Church. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
76. Summarized from Bainton, *The Church of Our Fathers*. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)