



TAKING *the* WORLD for
JESUS
The Remarkable Story of the Greatest Commission

Kevin Swanson

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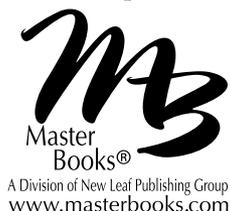
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*This book is dedicated to the Lord Jesus Christ,
who is Lord of all.
He is the Chief Shepherd of His Church.*





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Preface

It is my hope that this book will encourage Christians everywhere around the world. Our perspective of the Kingdom of God is always too small. We are too short-sighted. We have a hard time seeing beyond our immediate situation when we encounter the ebb and flow of Gospel work, not to mention our own limitations and sinfulness. As this study opens up the aperture for a worldwide perspective and a 2,000-year view of the progress of Christ in history, I trust it will leave a permanent word of encouragement with the reader.

Where man's kingdoms and man's works have been of central importance in many of our history books today, this book is shifting the focus. After all, history is *His story*. God is completely sovereign over the kingdoms of men, and the Son of God is establishing His Church in the world. Indeed, Jesus is changing the world by the power of the Word and Spirit.

Therefore, in each section of the book we establish the world context first. We ask the question, what in the world is going on in this nation or that nation? Then, Jesus and His people enter the scene and... everything changes. Every century marks progress. The empires of this world come and go, but Christ's Church presses on.

I have integrated Scripture into the book in order that the reader might see that God's will is coming to pass on this earth, in time and space. The Christian must learn to interpret history through the lens of Scripture, a biblical worldview. We must prioritize certain events only because that's what Scripture does. We must discern between good and evil events, right and wrong actions by God's law, not by man's law.

To further enrich this study, the reader is encouraged to saturate it in Word and prayer throughout. Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly as you read, and be sure to end each reading in thanksgiving and prayer. The power that has transformed nations through the centuries is still accessible to us here and now. How might the Lord Jesus Christ visit your community or your church, by the outpouring of His Spirit? The potentialities are thrilling.

When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, saying, "Whom do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?"

So they said, "Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"

Simon Peter answered and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Jesus answered and said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:13–18).



Introduction

How do you look at the world? Some will look at the world, and they do not see very much. They can see their own neighborhood, but they do not give a lot of thought to the bigger world beyond. They reflect little on what happened last year and have scant knowledge of what took place in the last century. All they focus on is what is happening in their world this week. They have a very small perspective of the world.

Some people will read the newspapers, and they think of what is going on in sports and civil government. They watch nations rise and nations fall. They see athletes win big games, and then these athletes grow old and die. They see rich people building big towers, and eventually these big towers fall down. Sometimes men will build even bigger towers, and these towers come down too. Beyond this, they think that little else of consequence is happening in the world.

But what about those of us who follow Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who was born in Bethlehem, died on the cross, and rose again on the third day? How do we view the world? How should we look at history?

We must begin by recognizing that God's Word—given to us in the Old and New Testaments—is the light we need to rightly see and understand the world



Christ's Resurrection transformed the world.
An ancient tomb in the Holy Land.

around us. His sure testimony is “a lamp to [our] feet and a light to [our] path” (Ps. 119:105), and there are a number of key truths found in Scripture that we must grasp in order to have a proper outlook on the world.

First of all, the life, death and the Resurrection of Jesus Christ was the most important event in the history of the world (Acts 13:26–39). Those who ignore or minimize this pivotal work of God will veer off course in their attempts to interpret history. All of history centers around this great event of His death and Resurrection.

Appropriately, history is divided by the years that come before and after Christ. Almost every calendar in the world today is set around the date of Jesus' birth. Our calendars use the term “A.D.” for the present designation. This is an abbreviation of the Latin phrase “anno Domini,” which means “in the year of our Lord.” We published this book in A.D. 2017, for example. A monk by the name of Dionysius the Humble, who lived somewhere in modern-day Romania or Bulgaria, introduced this designation in A.D. 525. When we speak of the years before Jesus' birth, we use the letters “B.C.” or “before Christ.”

Secondly, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is in control of all of history as we read in Colossians 1:

For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist (Col. 1:16–17).

Not only does Jesus control all things, but He holds everything together (Heb. 1:3). He holds the nations together (Ps. 22:28). He holds families together (Deut. 7:9). He also holds entire eco-systems together, so that the sun will shine, the rain will fall, and the crops will grow every year (Gen. 8:21–22).

Thirdly, Jesus has placed the Church at the center of His eternal, redemptive purpose for history (2 Tim. 1:9). He gave His life to save and sanctify her as His people (Matt. 1:21; Eph. 5:25–26), and following His Resurrection and ascension, He now presides as head of the Church. Ephesians 1 notes:

[God the Father] raised Him [Jesus] from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church (Eph. 1:20–22).

In Christ's exalted state, He always acts for the benefit of His Church. Whatever events play out in history—whether it be natural disasters or what seem like bad political decisions—all will work out for the good of the true Church of Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:28).

Fourthly, it is a historical certainty that Jesus Christ now sits on the right hand of the Father, caring for His Church and actively ruling until His enemies are subdued. Hebrews 10 affirms this truth:

But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God, from that time waiting till His enemies are made His footstool (Heb. 10:12–13, cf. 1 Cor. 15:24–25)





The great empires of men always crumble.
The Asclepion of Pergamon (Bergama) in Turkey.

As we look across the centuries, we will learn of many wars and of a great number of nations and empires rising and falling. In this study of history, the Christian student must always keep the Ephesians 1:21–22 and Hebrews 10:12–13 paradigm in mind—for God is building and preserving His Church, even as He is bringing His enemies down.

Fifthly, we must also remember the Great Commission that the Lord gave to His disciples just prior to His ascension. This remains the ongoing mission for all Christians until the end of the age. This commission, given to the 11 disciples, is found in Acts 1 and Matthew 28.

Therefore, when they had come together, they asked Him, saying, “Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” And He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:6–8).



Cerro Guanaco in Tierra del Fuego

And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Amen (Matt. 28:18–20).

Take special note of the scope and content of the commission. The scope encompasses all nations and the uttermost ends of the earth. This must include all lands, not to except Mongolia, the South Sea Islands, Madagascar, and the Tierra del Fuego Islands off the tip of Argentina.

The content of this discipleship work is to be rich and deep. It is clear from these words that Jesus did not want His disciples to take a short evangelistic message to the nations. He wanted His missionaries to teach *everything He commanded* in the Word of God. This is a quite a big project that must take many years, even centuries, to bring about.

Throughout the following survey, we will cover the exciting history of the world from A.D. 30 to the present. It is a thrill because Jesus is Lord over all things, and this is “His Story.” It is the story of the world written by Jesus for His people whom He gave His life to redeem—whom He will reconcile to Himself in history by the implementation of the Great Commission, even as He makes His enemies “His footstool” (Heb. 10:13).

In addition to these key points, there are two insightful parables that help us to better see how Jesus works practically in history. They explain two key strategies He has chosen to use in the building of His Kingdom.

Another parable He put forth to them, saying: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field, which indeed is the least of all the seeds; but when it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches.”

Another parable He spoke to them: “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened” (Matt. 13:31–33).

The Parable of the Mustard Seed tells us that Jesus’ Kingdom would grow slowly and almost imperceptibly at first, but that it would blossom, over time, into a large tree that would be a haven for many. The language of a large tree serving as a

lodging-place for birds was used in the Old Testament to describe the far-reaching scope of the Assyrian and Babylonian Empires (Ezek. 31:3–6; Dan. 4:10–12). Jesus employed this familiar language with His disciples to describe the ultimate triumph of His Kingdom over all others.

The Parable of the Leaven points to the influence of Christ's Kingdom as pervasive and far-reaching. Like the small mustard seed, it would be hard to detect this influence in its early stages. The lesson is this: When Jesus builds His Church and when His people influence the world, it is not always obvious at first. Though Christ's leaven is having an effect, it may not be announced on the front page of the newspapers. In fact, great pagan empires usually ignore the most important work that faithful men and women of God are doing. At times, Jesus' Church grows slowly and quietly in little nooks and crannies here and there around the world. Yet as we step back and carefully review two thousand years, we will see the undeniable evidences of Christ's Kingdom everywhere around the world.

A proper study of history will recognize Christ's Kingdom and appreciate what He is accomplishing over time. Such an outlook requires real and abiding faith. Such studies as this should encourage the faith of Christians around the world to know that Christ is, indeed, building His Church. While Satan is still active, Christ is robbing the strong man's house (Mark 3:22–27). This means that the most powerful forces in the universe, whether they be demonic or human governments, cannot possibly prevent Jesus from pulling off His "church project." His Kingdom is coming on earth, as it is in heaven (Matt. 6:10; Luke 11:2).

When one looks back from the 1st century until now, the evidence of this fact is astonishing. The first church assembly, recorded in Acts 1 and 2, started with 120 people in the upper room (Acts 1:13–15, 2:1). Now, one of the most respected research organizations in the United States has documented that Christianity has the most adherents of any religion in the world today. The Pew Research Center notes: "As of 2010, Christianity was by far the world's largest religion, with an estimated 2.2 billion adherents, nearly a third (31 percent) of all 6.9 billion people on Earth."¹ This means that Jesus' Church has grown by a factor of more than 18,000,000 times over the last two thousand years.

May this survey encourage much joy and raise each Christian to give God the glory for His great work accomplished throughout the centuries. Whereas the kingdoms of this earth come and go, the Church of Jesus Christ continues to grow, and "the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18).



The Spreading Influence of Christianity

— A.D. 70 —

■ Roman Empire ■ Spread of Christianity



The Roman Empire and the Men Who “Turned the World Upside Down”

World history begins with God’s creation (Gen. 1) and man’s Fall in the Garden (Gen. 3). Without this framework, the study of history, the study of man’s behavior and social systems, would be completely misguided. That is why *secular* social studies and history classes which reject this framework become nothing more than the futile exercise of the blind leading the blind.

Man’s Fall in the Garden resulted in murder, violence, and chaos on a grand scale (Gen. 6:11), as well as murder, violence, and chaos between smaller tribal groups (Gen. 14:1–12). After the Flood and the dispersion at the Tower of Babel, a thick darkness settled over the world, especially on those tribes that were completely cut off from trade routes and access to God’s revelation that came through such men as Abraham and Moses. This is why the most degraded practices were found among the Aztecs in the 16th century and the isolated Pacific islanders in the 19th century. Mass-scale murders and gross moral degradations have been perpetrated by the great humanist empires in history (Babylon, Greece, Rome, China, Germany, Russia, and modern-day America), while the decentralized tribes have degraded themselves on smaller scales.

Under the sovereignty of Christ, Satan was allowed free rein to govern a fallen world from 4000 B.C. to A.D. 30, as “the god of this world” and the “prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience” (Eph. 2:2–3).

Before pronouncing the Curse upon Adam and Eve after their Fall into sin, God graciously promised salvation from their dreadful condition. He proclaimed that the seed of the woman would crush the head of the serpent (Gen. 3:15).

At first, the Lord God made a covenant with one man, who traveled from Ur of the Chaldees into the land of Canaan around 1900 B.C. Only one family on earth would maintain a relationship with the true and living God during these early centuries, while the rest of the world lay in darkness. When God communicated His promise to this man, Abraham, however, He was careful to mention that in this family “all nations” would be blessed. Later, the Apostle Paul, commenting on this promise, said:

And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, “In you all the nations shall be blessed.” So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham” (Gal. 3:8–9).

The Gospel preached from A.D. 30 through the present day was first preached to Abraham. Clearly, this was God’s plan from the beginning. Thus, we find previews of God’s saving grace throughout the Old Testament era, with the inclusion of many Gentiles in the number of those who heard this Gospel and believed. Examples would include Job, Rahab the Harlot, Ruth the Moabitess, Naaman the Syrian, and so forth. The Old Testament prophets also looked forward to a great future missionary outreach to the Gentile world:

It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also give You as a light to the Gentiles, that You should be My salvation to the ends of the earth” (Isa. 49:6).

This was fulfilled in the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Eternal Son of God who is wholly God became man (Matt. 1:18; John 1:14; Heb. 4:15), in order to save us from sin and the devil (Matt. 1:21; 2 Cor. 4:4–6; 1 John 3:8). He came to save both Jew and Gentile, as the promised Seed who would be a blessing to every

nation on earth (1 Cor. 1:24–31; Eph. 2:12–14; 2 Tim. 2:9–11; 1 John 4:14–15). When He died on the Cross, Jesus Christ became a sacrifice for sin. He was called the “Lamb of God who came to take away the sins of the world.” He rose from the dead, and was given complete authority over heaven and earth (Matt. 28:18) and “appointed heir of all things” (Heb. 1:1–3).

At the time of Jesus’ ministry on earth (between A.D. 30 and 33), “the ruler of this world will be cast out” (John 12:31). He reported seeing Satan fall like lightning (Luke 10:18) and gave His disciples authority to tread on snakes and scorpions (the demonic world). This is the point at which world history radically changed directions.

During Jesus Christ’s three-year ministry to the Jews, some insight into a worldwide outreach is given. We find Jesus commending “great faith” among Gentile converts like the Syrophenician woman (Matt. 15:21) and the Roman Centurion (Luke 7:1–10). With the Resurrection and ascension of our Lord to the right hand of the Father came the implementation of the plan shared with Abraham 4,000 years earlier. Now, all nations were to be blessed in this Seed of the Woman, this Seed of Abraham—the Lord Jesus Christ. Finally, the middle wall of partition between Jew and Gentile came crashing down, and “now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (Eph. 2:12–13).

This Gospel was meant for the world, and this is the story of how the Gospel took the world by storm between A.D. 33 and the present.

The Roman World

At the time that Jesus Christ was born, sometime between 6 B.C. and A.D. 1, the Roman Empire was approaching its zenith in world influence and glory. After multiple attempts to build world empires with Babel, Assyria, Persia, and Greece, finally the world had achieved the greatest empire of all.

Three centuries earlier, Rome was just a dot on the map—a city-state in the ancient world. By the time Augustus established his rule shortly before Jesus the Messiah was born in Bethlehem, the Roman Empire included North Africa, modern Spain, France, Germany, Italy, Greece, Turkey, Israel, Egypt, and the Netherlands. The Roman armies invaded Britain between A.D. 43 and 84, gradually obtaining a foothold over the southern part of the British Isles. At its peak, the Roman Empire

was never much larger than what you see in the map at the beginning of this chapter.

ISSUES IN FOCUS

Christ's Kingdom Trumps All Others

The kingdoms of men going back as far as Nimrod's Babel (Gen. 11) have attempted to give glory to man. They work to solve man's problems by powerful governments, and they always fail. The rise and fall of the greatest empires of the ancient world were prophesied by the prophet Daniel. These include Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon, Cyrus' Persia, Alexander the Great's Greece, and finally Rome under the Caesars—all would be set aside and they would render fealty to the greatest kingdom of all: "And in the days of these kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed: and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever" (Dan. 2:44).

Octavian—who was given the title "Augustus Caesar" by the Roman Senate—reigned between 27 B.C. and A.D. 14 and inaugurated an era known as the "Pax Romana," or the Peace of Rome. Apart from a few wars in Judea and Parthia and conflicts on the far perimeter of Rome's reach, the empire enjoyed a season of relative peace for two hundred years. At the introduction of Jesus Christ to the world, human institutions had achieved the highest levels of power, peace, prosperity, and pride. It seemed that man had finally achieved something for himself. It was common at that time for the Caesar to be referred to as "the savior of the world." The Priene Calendar Inscription of 9 B.C. introduced the emperor as "Augustus . . . filled with virtue that he might benefit humankind, sending him *as a savior* [emphasis added] . . . that he might end war and arrange all things."¹

It was at these great heights of human endeavor that another Savior was born in a stable in Bethlehem—a direct rival to Augustus and the great empires of men. His primary reason for coming, however, was not to free Israel from Roman power, but to "save His people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). He was born of a virgin named Mary. This young woman had never been with a man, so it was by

the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit of God that the Lord Jesus was conceived in her womb. He came as the Messiah, the Savior of the World. He is the eternal Son of the living God, and He is also called the Son of Man. This great event occurred during the reign of Caesar Augustus, according to the clear testimony of the Gospel of Luke.

And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city.

Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child. So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn (Luke 2:1–7).

Roman Government

Five hundred years before Christ, Rome formed as a Republic, with elected leaders serving the people. But powerful nations and empires usually degrade into dictatorships where one man takes control of all (or nearly all) the levers of power. This is what happened to Rome in 27 B.C. when Octavian was declared “Emperor.” Augustus postured himself as a god-like being, assuming the title of “Pontifex Maximus.” This title may be translated as “the highest priest” or the highest religious person on earth. Because Augustus Caesar controlled the military, his power was virtually unlimited. The central government in Rome would also send out governors to rule in the various provinces around the Empire, including Judea where Jesus was born.

Roman Culture: A Low View of Human Life

The Roman culture maintained a very low view of human life. They would routinely abandon infants out in the elements to die. It was not uncommon for fishermen to retrieve babies out of their nets when fishing the rivers around Rome. Roman law also gave fathers a great deal of power, under the Roman tradition of *pater familias*. Under this legal doctrine, the father could choose to abort a child or kill the child as soon as he or she was born. Table Four of Rome's "Law of the Twelve Tables" states that a "dreadfully deformed child shall be quickly killed."² Sadly, these pagans did not submit to biblical law which offers protection for the lives of children as well as adults.

Pontius Pilate was the Roman prefect in charge of Judea between A.D. 26 and 36, and he was responsible for sentencing Jesus to the death of the Cross. According to some accounts, Pilate committed suicide just a few years after Jesus' death and



Ecce Homo by Antonio Ciseri depicts Pilate during the trial of Jesus.

Resurrection.³ This was very common among the Roman leaders. These kingdoms of men were cruel.

Herod the Great ruled over Judea from 37 B.C. until shortly after Jesus was born. He thought nothing of killing all of the babies in Bethlehem — not unusual in the Roman world nor for the king. History records that Herod had one of his ten wives, and three of his own sons murdered. Having built the temple for the Jews, he was immensely popular among the religious leaders. When news came to



Herod the Great (73-4 B.C.).

Jerusalem that the King of the Jews was born in Bethlehem, the Scriptures say, “When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him” (Matt. 2:3). These wicked leaders in Jerusalem would allow no competition with their rulership. Therefore, Herod’s goal was to kill the newborn Messiah of the Jews, and that is why he ordered the murder of the children in Bethlehem.

Then Herod, when he saw that he was deceived by the wise men, was exceedingly angry; and he sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the wise men (Matt. 2:16).

What Was Going On in the Rest of the World at This Time?

China was the other great empire that got its start around the same time as the Roman Empire (221 B.C.). The first dynasty lasted 15 years, and then the second dynasty continued until roughly A.D. 30. After several thousands of years of smaller confederacies vying for control of China, the warlord Qin Shi Huang launched China’s imperial age. He collected an army of 600,000 men and gained control over about one-third of modern-day China. Again, this great empire was controlled by an emperor who was very powerful and cruel. War and revolution was a way of life for this empire. They governed by a philosophy called “legalism,” which gave the government the right to be despotic, cruel, and tyrannical. This philosophy that was taught in the schools created a strong centralized political system. This made way for powerful, tyrannical governments, a precedent that continues today with its current Communist regime.

Most of the rest of the world was broken up into many small tribes and villages that would come and go within a few hundred years of time. Ireland offers a good example of the primitive world, located far from the influence of the God of Scripture. The Roman Empire avoided Ireland entirely and treated the Irish as “barbarians.” From a Christian perspective, the problem with these far-off tribes is that they were completely ignorant of the true and living God. The more isolated the nation from the influence of Jews and Christians, the more likely the natives would give way to human sacrifice, cannibalism, witch doctors and spiritism, abject fear, mass starvation, slavery, and ignorance found there.

Jesus Christ and His Men Turn the World Upside Down

But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth (Acts 1:8; KJV).

To this dark world entered the Lord Jesus Christ, the very Son of God born in a stable in Bethlehem (about six miles south of Jerusalem). After He died on the Cross for our sins and rose from the dead, He gave His disciples the Great Commission. “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15). The Lord charged them to take the message first to Jerusalem, then to Judea, to Samaria, and after that to the uttermost parts of the earth. And that is exactly what happened from A.D. 30 onward.

Thankfully, we have an entire book of the Bible dedicated to recording the high points of initial missionary work during the first century. As Jesus instructed them in the commission, it was vitally important that the Apostles receive power first, which came by the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2). Here, we find a tremendous transformation that came over the Apostle Peter. Forty-nine days earlier, he had denied Jesus in the face of a servant girl. Now, he stood in the most public location in the Temple and preached the Resurrection and Lordship of Jesus Christ in the presence of the people who put Him to death. Thousands were converted, and the Church in Jerusalem was formed (Acts 2:41ff).

It is very important that all Christians carefully follow the Gospel message preached by the Apostles from the beginning. Acts 2, 3, and 4 contain this seminal message, and we would do well not to stray from it. Here is a sample of the first sermon Peter preached:

And it shall come to pass that whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved. “Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know—Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death; whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it....

This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses. Therefore being exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He poured out this which you now see and hear.

For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he says himself: “The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool.’ Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:21–24, 34–36).

Not long after these first sermons were preached, Peter and John were imprisoned, but they walked out of the prison twice by supernatural intervention. The ministry continued against tremendous opposition, even as more were converted and baptized. In Acts 10, the first Gentile household was baptized into the Christian Church by the Apostle Peter. This marked the beginning of the outreach to the Gentiles which has continued for the last 2,000 years. Virtually the same pattern can be seen throughout history, witnessed more recently in Korea, Fiji, and elsewhere. The breakout of Holy Spirit revival produces thousands of conversions within days and weeks, followed by mass evangelism and, at times, severe persecution.

The Jewish leaders in Jerusalem began to persecute the first Christians in Judea, which forced the believers to scatter north into Samaria. This “diaspora” is described in Acts 8:1–8. After that, the disciples proceeded to take the Gospel up into the city of Antioch in Syria. Over time, this city became a new center for the Christian faith, as well as a mission-sending “agency” for the Apostle Paul, Barnabas, Silas, and others. Within the first century, the Gospel had covered the Roman world. By the time Paul wrote his epistle to the Church at Colossae, the Gospel had been preached “in all the world” (Col. 1:6).

This pioneering work is not without risk and danger, and it always calls for great faith on the part of all the missionaries involved with it. Truly, these courageous men are robbing the strong man’s house of his goods (Mark 3:27). They are robbing Satan of his people (whom he has controlled for thousands of years). Satan is never happy to see his house robbed, and there are usually persecuting repercussions that result.

We have the most information on the missionary endeavors of the Apostle Paul in Asia Minor (Turkey), Greece, and Rome, who faced many challenges in his work. He took the Gospel throughout the Roman Empire, and planted many

churches. In 2 Corinthians 11, Paul speaks of the various persecutions and troubles that befell him in his journeys:

Are they ministers of Christ?—I speak as a fool—I am more: in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often. From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness (2 Cor. 11:23–27).

Few missionaries have ever taken that much abuse, yet Paul was dedicated and persevering. His first missionary journey covered 1,400 miles (taking in Cypress and Turkey). His second missionary journey was twice as long, spanning about 2,800 miles as he traveled through Syria, Turkey, Greece, and Jerusalem. On his third missionary journey, Paul visited Turkey, Greece, Lebanon, and Israel, logging roughly 2,700 miles. The Apostle Paul wrote a large portion of the New Testament, following up with churches to which he had ministered over the years of his service. Finally, he sailed for Rome on his fourth missionary journey while under arrest by the Roman guard. Paul was put to death in Rome by Nero sometime around A.D. 67, probably by beheading. His final recorded words are found in his second epistle to Timothy, which includes this poignant statement:

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the LORD, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing (2 Tim. 4:7–8).

After His Resurrection, the Lord gave Peter forewarning that he would face martyrdom in John 21:18. Peter's ministry included Asia Minor or Turkey (1 Pet. 1:1) and Rome. He is believed to have been killed in Rome under orders of Nero sometime around A.D. 67 or 68. According to a later Christian writer named Origen, Peter was crucified upside down on his own request. He did not think he was worthy of dying in the manner of his Lord and Savior.

The Apostle John’s ministry spanned somewhere between 60 and 80 years. John was active in Asia Minor and is believed to have spent much of his time in Ephesus. He wrote five New Testament books in all, including three epistles and the Gospel of John. He penned his fifth work, the Book of Revelation, while exiled on the Island of Patmos. John died sometime between A.D. 80 and 100 and was buried at Ephesus.⁴ John’s brother James was executed by Herod around A.D. 44 in Jerusalem (Acts 12:1–2).

Peter’s brother Andrew took the Gospel into Scythia (Ukraine and Southern Russia), according to the earliest recorded accounts of his ministry. Later writers assert that he preached the Gospel in Greece, Asia Minor, and the strategic city of Byzantium (later Constantinople and Istanbul). He is believed to have been crucified in Achaia (Southern Greece).

The Apostle Philip is believed to have preached in Syria, Greece, and Phrygia (Central Turkey). An episode passed down concerning his death is memorable. In response to Philip’s preaching in the city of Hierapolis (located in southwestern Turkey), the Roman proconsul’s wife was converted. Her husband responded in anger, tortured Phillip and his sister (who was ministering with him), and killed them both by crucifixion. In 2011, archaeologists discovered what appears to be Phillip’s tomb in ancient Hierapolis.

According to the church historian Eusebius, the Apostle Bartholomew brought Matthew’s Gospel to India. Bartholomew, along with Jude (Thaddeus), is also regarded as the first to introduce the Gospel into Armenia in the first century. He preached the Gospel, healed the sick, and cast out demons in what was an explosive environment in Armenia. When the daughter of King Sanadroug was converted, the believers were subjected to beatings. Bartholomew was fatally injured in the beatings, but before he died, he was said to have prayed these words: “Lord God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, do not overlook the entreaties of the apostles who labored for this country. Grant to these people the grace of your mercy and enable them to renounce the worship of their vain idols.”⁵

Thomas doubted the Lord’s Resurrection at first, but he became a great missionary who took the Gospel far and wide. While he is believed to have shared the good news in ancient Parthia (Northern Iran and Turkmenistan), his most enduring legacy was in India. He reportedly landed at a seaport called Muziris on the southern tip of India in A.D. 52—less than 20 years after the Resurrection of Jesus. According to the Nasrani Christians, Thomas planted seven churches in

India, and died circa A.D. 72, killed by an arrow or a spear.

The earliest accounts of the Apostle Matthew's labors indicate that he focused his Gospel ministry in and around Jerusalem for about 20 years following Christ's ascension. After this, there is a great deal of debate about his exploits, yet his missionary work is believed by some to have reached the Persians and Medes (in modern-day Iran) as well as the Ethiopians in Africa.

Jude and Simon the Zealot are believed to have partnered together on a mission throughout the Middle East, including Persia (Iran), Samaria (Israel), Idumaea (near Jordan), Syria, and Libya. According to one tradition, both of them were sawn in pieces, either in Persia or Syria.

These Apostles of Jesus Christ were filled with the Holy Spirit, and with great boldness and faith. They met fierce opposition, but it did not deter them. They steadfastly built the Church everywhere they went. By the time Paul made it to Thessalonica on his second missionary journey, his reputation had preceded him. The people in the city said, "These [are the men] who have turned the world upside down . . ." (Acts 17:6).

Christ's Apostles had gained the attention of the whole Roman Empire, and the Empire would retaliate hard against them.



The oldest church in the world
planted by Thomas in Muziris, India.

The Roman Empire and the Men Who “Turned the World Upside Down”



Martyrdom of the Apostles by Stefan Lochner



The Spreading Influence of Christianity

— A.D. 450 —

■ Spread of Christianity



The Roman Empire Opposes Christ and Falls (A.D. 70–476)

And in the days of these kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever (Daniel 2:44).

On June 26, A.D. 363, the Roman Caesar, Julian the Apostate, breathed what are said to be his last words on the Samarra battlefield (in modern-day Iraq): “Thou hast won, O Galilean.”¹

These words summarized the previous 300 years of Western history. For a short two years, the Emperor Julian had attempted to restore pagan culture into the Roman world. The Emperor Constantine had ended public animal and human sacrifice in the empire some 30 years earlier after receiving the Christian faith. He banned the practice of married men consorting with concubines. He legislated against the killing of infants by exposure and parricide (the killing of one’s own family, including the elderly). By the fourth century, it was obvious that the world would never be the same after the coming of the Son of God.

The clash between Christ and Caesar was palpable in these early centuries. Prior to the rise of Constantine, the Roman Emperors would brook no rivals to their claim of absolute rule. They allowed for the worship of many gods across their dominions, so long as Caesar was acknowledged as the final and ultimate sovereign. Augustus Caesar and his successors viewed themselves as the “savior” of the world. However, the Apostles and Christian believers rejected this prideful, empty notion, as Peter preached it, “Nor is there salvation in any other [than Jesus Christ], for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

The Empire proceeded to fight against Jesus Christ by persecuting His people, and Rome lost. Throughout the Empire’s far-flung provinces, this Church kept growing and Jesus’ people continued to disciple the world in line with His Great Commission. During the terrible persecutions that attended, the Church became more firmly established, and the Christians grew more committed to the true faith. Also, Spirit-filled, bold missionaries took the Gospel to the far reaches of the Empire. It was a marvelous time for the Church.

❖ ISSUES IN FOCUS ❖

Christ’s Exclusivity vs. Religious Cult or Emperor Worship

Polycarp, a personal disciple of the Apostle John and the pastor of the church of Smyrna, was a mighty man of God who accepted martyrdom rather than acknowledge Caesar’s deity and lordship. The police captain who escorted him to the stake, wishing to spare the aging man, appealed to Polycarp, “Why, what harm is there in saying, ‘Caesar is Lord’ and offering incense and saving yourself?”² Polycarp refused to comply. In the arena, the proconsul of Asia urged him also, “Have respect for your age . . . swear by the divinity of Caesar; repent. . . . Take the oath, and I will let you go.”³ To which Polycarp bravely replied, “For eighty-six years I have been his servant, and he has never done me wrong: how can I blaspheme my king who saved me?”⁴

The Debauched and Dimming “Grandeur” of Rome

Rome struggled for many years to maintain its former glory. Corrupt emperors like Nero (A.D. 54–68), Hadrian (A.D. 117–138), Elagabalus (A.D. 218–222), and Carus (A.D. 282–283) were known for their immoral lifestyles. They were not content to marry a woman and be faithful to her in the marriage. Instead, these powerful emperors broke God’s Seventh Commandment, “You shall not commit adultery” (Exod. 20:12), in the most egregious ways. As with most pagan rulers, it was common for the Caesars to murder their own family members. Tiberius killed his stepson, Agrippa Postumus; and Nero murdered his own mother and his wife.

The Games

The gladiatorial “games” were a big part of Roman life—another example of what the world looks like without the influence of Jesus. Words cannot express the horrible degradation of human life that went on in these terrible games. The blood of thousands of poor victims soaked the sands of the arena. And, it wasn’t just the Colosseum in Rome that conducted the games. At least 230 amphitheaters have been discovered in ancient cities around the old Roman world.

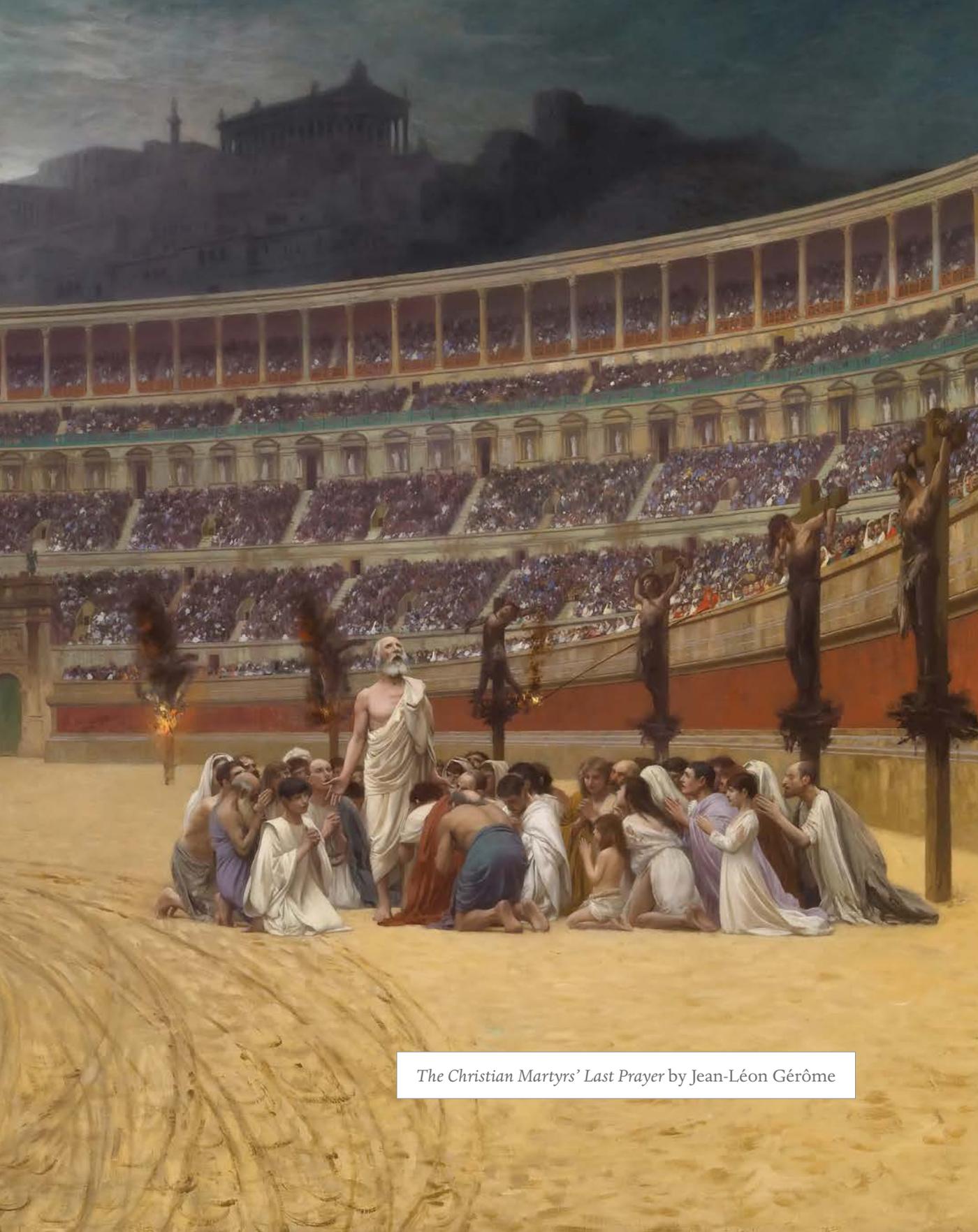


Gladiator frieze, 2nd–3rd century A.D.

Up to 3,000 men would fight mock battles, floating in boats in an arena filled with water, to the blood-lust excitement of the spectators. One staged battle in a nearby lake in Rome involved 19,000 combatants.

The first gladiatorial competition where men fought each other to the death before a live crowd took place in 264 B.C. To commemorate the death of his father, Julius Caesar held a competition involving 640 gladiators. Animals were killed by the thousands, and animals killed their thousands. The Roman orator Cicero reports that one lion killed at least 200 men in the arena. Life was cheap in Rome.





The Christian Martyrs' Last Prayer by Jean-Léon Gérôme

❖ ISSUES IN FOCUS ❖

Christians Made Scapegoats for All Ills

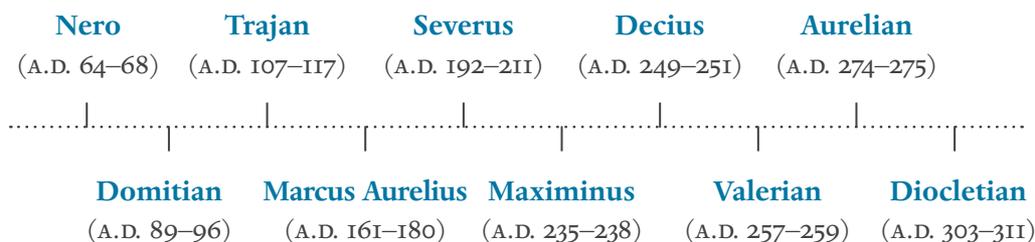
The early church father Tertullian (c. A.D. 155–244) complained of the persecutions that fell upon the Christians. He wrote, “For the name of ‘faction’ ought to be applied quite otherwise to those who unite in hatred of the good and honest, who join in outcries against the life of innocent men, alleging as an excuse, forsooth, in defence of their hatred this additional falsehood, that they believe the Christians are the cause of every public disaster and ever popular calumny. If the Tiber rises up to the walls, if the Nile does not overflow the fields, if the heaven stands still, if the earth moves, if famine and pestilence arises, the first cry is, ‘The Christians to the lion!’ ”⁵

Thousands of Christians died in these public arenas, killed by men and beasts. In the end, however, the life of Jesus prevailed. As the story goes, a Christian monk named Telemachus was sickened by the killings and leaped into action. He climbed into the amphitheater in the middle of the games and began to preach against the idolatry and the pagan games. He was stoned to death. But Emperor Honorius was so impressed with the man’s faith that he put a final end to the games on January 1, A.D. 404.

The Persecutions that Followed Expansion

One of the patterns seen throughout history as the kingdom of God expands around the world, is the rise of Christian persecution. Wherever the Church is growing, and wherever the seeds are planted and germinating, persecution becomes the fertilizer to nurture added growth. This is the experience of the Church in Korea and China in the 20th and 21st centuries. The same thing is happening in the Middle East today. And such was the case during the early years of Christianity. As the early Church exploded on the scene in the first-century Roman world, intense persecution followed for several hundred years. By the sheer percentages of those believers who were martyred, the most severe persecutions in the history of the Christian church came in the Roman Empire between A.D. 64

and 313. Over 100,000 Christians are estimated to have been killed during these ten major persecutions:



The first great persecution occurred in the wake of the Great Fire of Rome in A.D. 64. Roman historians report that the Emperor Nero ordered the blaze and then blamed the Christians for it. The historian Tacitus records:

. . . to get rid of this rumor, Nero set up as the culprits and punished with the utmost refinement of cruelty a class hated for their abominations, who are commonly called Christians. . . . Besides being put to death they were made to serve as objects of amusement; they were clad in the hides of beasts and torn to death by dogs; others were crucified, others set on fire to serve to illuminate the night when daylight failed. Nero had thrown open his grounds for the display, and was putting on a show in the circus, where he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer or drove about in his chariot. All this gave rise to a feeling of pity, even toward men whose guilt merited the most exemplary punishment; for it was felt that they were being destroyed not for the public good but to gratify the cruelty of an individual.⁶

The last great attempt by Rome to purge the Church—known to history as the “Great Persecution” (A.D. 303–311)—occurred during Emperor Diocletian’s reign, just prior to Constantine’s ascent to power. Not only were many believers brutally murdered, but Christian books (including the Scriptures) and church buildings were burned on a large scale.

✦ ISSUES IN FOCUS ✦

An Early Official Approval of Persecution

In A.D. 112, Pliny the Younger, the Roman governor over Bithynia, wrote to Emperor Trajan, complaining about the Christians: “I have taken this course about those who have been brought before me as Christians. I asked them whether they were Christians or not? If they confessed that they were Christians, I asked them again, and a third time, intermixing threatenings with the questions: If they preserved in their confession, I ordered them to be executed: for I did not doubt but, let their confessions be of any sort whatsoever, this positiveness and inflexible obstinacy deserved to be punished. . . . [O]n a stated day, [they would] meet together before it was light, and . . . sing an hymn to Christ, as to a god, alternately.”⁷ Pliny was seeking official approval for his executions of these Christians. Emperor Trajan’s response is telling: “You have taken the method which you ought in examining the causes of those that had been accused as Christians. . . . but if they be accused, and convicted, they are to be punished, but with this caution, that he who denies himself to be a Christian, and makes it plain that he is not so by supplicating to our gods, although he had been so formerly, may be allowed pardon upon his repentance.”⁸

Try as they might, the Roman authorities could not stamp out Christianity. Each persecution added to the faith, the missionary zeal, and the numbers of disciples among the Christian churches throughout the Empire.

The Apostles and their successors had appointed “elders in every city” (Tit. 1:5; Acts 14:23), and these churches continued to gain strength and numbers as the wrath of Rome came down. Many of the Church leaders of these early centuries gave their life as martyrs, including Ignatius of Antioch (c. A.D. 108), Polycarp of Smyrna (A.D. 156), and Cyprian of Carthage (A.D. 258).

With these leaders came the Christian apologists who courageously appealed to the Roman authorities in an attempt to vindicate the virtues of the Christian faith. Justin Martyr (A.D. 100–165) addressed his First Apology (the Greek word for “defense”) directly to Roman Emperor Antoninus and his Second Apology to the

Roman Senate. He and six of his students were later tried by the Roman prefect, Junius Rusticus, and executed.

Another great apologist of the 2nd century was Tertullian of Carthage (c. A.D. 155–240), who penned a detailed defense of Christianity to the Roman magistrates in A.D. 197. After defending Christians against a host of unjust charges, he wrote these memorable words to Rome’s civil powers regarding the Church’s massive growth in the face of persecution:

...by the cruelty of Nero they sowed the seed of their Christian blood in Rome. ...We are of yesterday, and yet we have filled all your places; your cities, islands, villages, townships, assemblies, your very camp, tribes, companies, palace, senate, forum; we leave you only your temples. We can count your armies; the Christians of one province are more numerous.⁹

ISSUES IN FOCUS

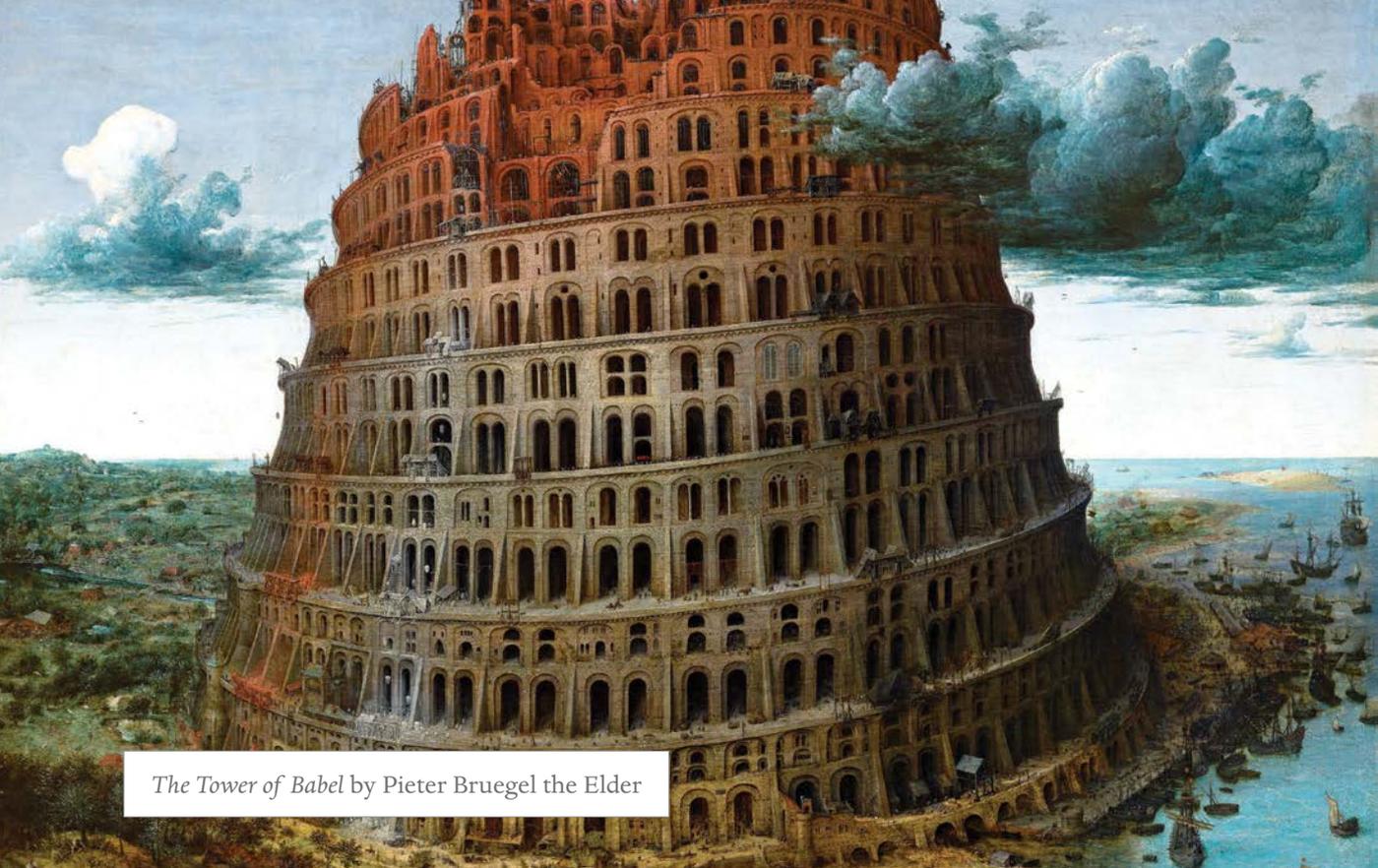
Christ’s Wisdom vs. the Philosophy of the Greeks

A number of the early Church fathers expressed strong opposition to the ideas of heathen philosophers (that governed the thinking and the politics of the Romans and the Greeks). Tertullian, for example, asked the question, “What then hath Athens in common with Jerusalem? What hath the Academy in common with the Church?”¹⁰

What Was Going on in the Rest of the World?

Between A.D. 220 and 589, the Chinese Empire largely disintegrated into warring factions. Most empires do not last very long, because God brings them down for their arrogance and wickedness (Isa. 40:17–24; Jer. 13:9–11, 48:42). Just as the Lord brought the Tower of Babel to an end and scattered the tribes, He does the same thing to these giant empires throughout history that vaunt their power and refuse to serve the true and living God.

During this time, one of the most devastating wars in all of human history occurred. It was called the “Three Kingdoms War” in which as many as 40 million people lost their lives.



The Tower of Babel by Pieter Bruegel the Elder

Let us remember that God is in total control over nations that enter into these devastating wars. Consider the words of Psalm 46:

Come, behold the works of the LORD, who has made desolations in the earth. He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; He breaks the bow and cuts the spear in two; He burns the chariot in the fire (Ps. 46:8–9).

India and the Rise of Buddhism

A Nepalese man named Siddhartha Gautama was born in the 5th century B.C. and became a teacher of a new religion called “Buddhism.” The religion did not take hold right away in India. However, a king named Asoka gained control over most of India around 260 B.C. and turned to Buddhism to salve his conscience for all the killing he had done. He became an enthusiastic advocate of the new religion, spreading it as far as Greece and Sri Lanka. During the Shunga Dynasty (between c. 185 and 73 B.C.), political leaders rejected the Buddhist religion and hundreds

of monasteries were destroyed or fell into disrepair. Between A.D. 320 and 550, Buddhism once again developed a stronghold in India under the Gupta Dynasty. It was during these years that India developed engineering, science, art, literature, and mathematics. Tremendous works of architecture and sculpture were created during this period.

The Mahayana Buddhist writings were translated into Chinese between A.D. 178 and 189. Buddhist monks took the religion into Korea around A.D. 372, and then off to Japan in the 6th century.

The Buddhist religion is centered around the idea of suffering. Regrettably, Buddhism does not admit the cause of suffering to be sin against God. Instead, this religion teaches that desiring things is the cause of suffering. They try to fix man's problems by just meditating or thinking and by good moral conduct.

Buddhism is a sad example of how the world thinks. Satan creates diversions by getting us to focus on the wrong things. Buddhists ignore sin and guilt by pointing at suffering as the problem. After all their meditation and good moral living, they never solve the problem of suffering and death. Only Jesus Christ, the Son of God,

Statue of Buddha



can treat these woes. Jesus fixes the ultimate problem with us, and that is our sin and our broken relationship with God.

What Christ Was Doing to Build His Church

While empires were rising and falling and false religions were failing to solve man's problems, the Lord Jesus Christ set out to build His Church. His missionaries went far and wide, taking the Gospel to the outermost bounds of the Roman Empire, beginning in pagan Gaul.

Julius Caesar fought the Gallic Wars between 58 and 50 B.C., winning a decisive battle at Alesia in which the Romans gained control of Gaul. This territory included all of modern-day France, Belgium, and parts of Switzerland. An estimated one million people were killed in the conflict, another million were enslaved, leaving an estimated three million of the Gallic population. In common with most pagan tribes, the Gauls were animists, worshiping animals (especially the boar); and they were headhunters, nailing the heads of their conquered enemies to their walls. Their Druid priests were known for making animal and human sacrifices to the gods.

To this tribe came the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the 2nd century. Church tradition sources point to Polycarp (pastor of Smyrna), as the first to gain a vision for mission work in Gaul. Sometime around A.D. 130–140, he commissioned a man named Benigno to the mission work. Teaming up with two elders and a deacon, they boarded a ship near Smyrna, and sailed around the southern tip of Italy, shipwrecking off the island of Corsica. By God's good providence, they survived, and caught another ship to Marseilles in Southern Gaul (France). Benigno traveled about Gaul, performing miracles and preaching the Gospel. Symphorianus, the son of a Roman senator, was converted under his preaching. In A.D. 178, Symphorianus was martyred for his faith in the city of Autun (in central Gaul). Benigno himself was taken by the Roman authorities in the city of Epagny (about 20 miles south of Geneva, Switzerland). Upon his utter refusal to make sacrifice to the caesar (or worship the state), he was beat to death with iron bars—another martyr to seed the Church of Jesus Christ.

Pothinus was the first recognized pastor to the churches up the Rhone River in Gaul. Sometime during the mid-2nd century, Pothinus planted the first churches

in Lyon and Vienne. As the church grew, the resistance intensified, because the devil does not like to see his house robbed. Christians were shut out of businesses and homes, and they endured every sort of indignity and personal injury. Finally, the authorities arrested 48 members of the Church, including Pastor Pothinus in A.D. 177. The 90-year-old missionary was asked by the tribunal in the most contemptuous way, “Who was the God of the Christians?”¹¹ To which the old man said, “If thou art worthy, thou shalt know.”¹² This angered the court, and the pagans in the courtroom started throwing heavy objects at the aged pastor. He died in prison within two days after this severe beating.

The First Churches in Paris

A missionary named Denis planted churches in Paris around A.D. 250, with great success. So much so that the Roman authorities became very concerned and arrested Denis and his two close friends, Rusticus and Eleutherius. They were sentenced to death and executed by beheading on the highest hill in Paris. This Montmartre where he was killed was known as a holy place for the pagan Druid priests. According to the legends, Denis continued to preach to his executioners until he died.

The First Missionary to Switzerland

Narcissus is considered the first missionary to Switzerland. He traveled with a deacon named Felix. According to one account, while traveling up into Germany near Augsburg, Narcissus met a prostitute named Afra. The woman had a reputation of being very immoral, but she was converted and baptized. Shortly thereafter, she was arrested by the Roman authorities. They wanted her to swear allegiance to the Emperor. Powerful kings and governments consider themselves to be a god, and they require that everybody agree to this. That is what King Nebuchadnezzar required of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in Daniel 3. True to her faith, Afra would not confess the Emperor to be a god. As a result, she was taken out to an island in the River Lech and burned at the stake. Later, the Romans also executed Afra’s mother and several of her maids on the deserted island.

Both Felix and Narcissus were later martyred in Girona, Spain around A.D. 307.



An ancient Armenian church

The Church in Armenia

Jesus commissioned His disciples to turn entire nations into His followers. “Disciple the nations!” He told them in Matthew 28. This doesn’t happen automatically, of course. Nations are going to be resistant to new ideas, and they will not quickly leave the dominion of the devil to follow Christ.

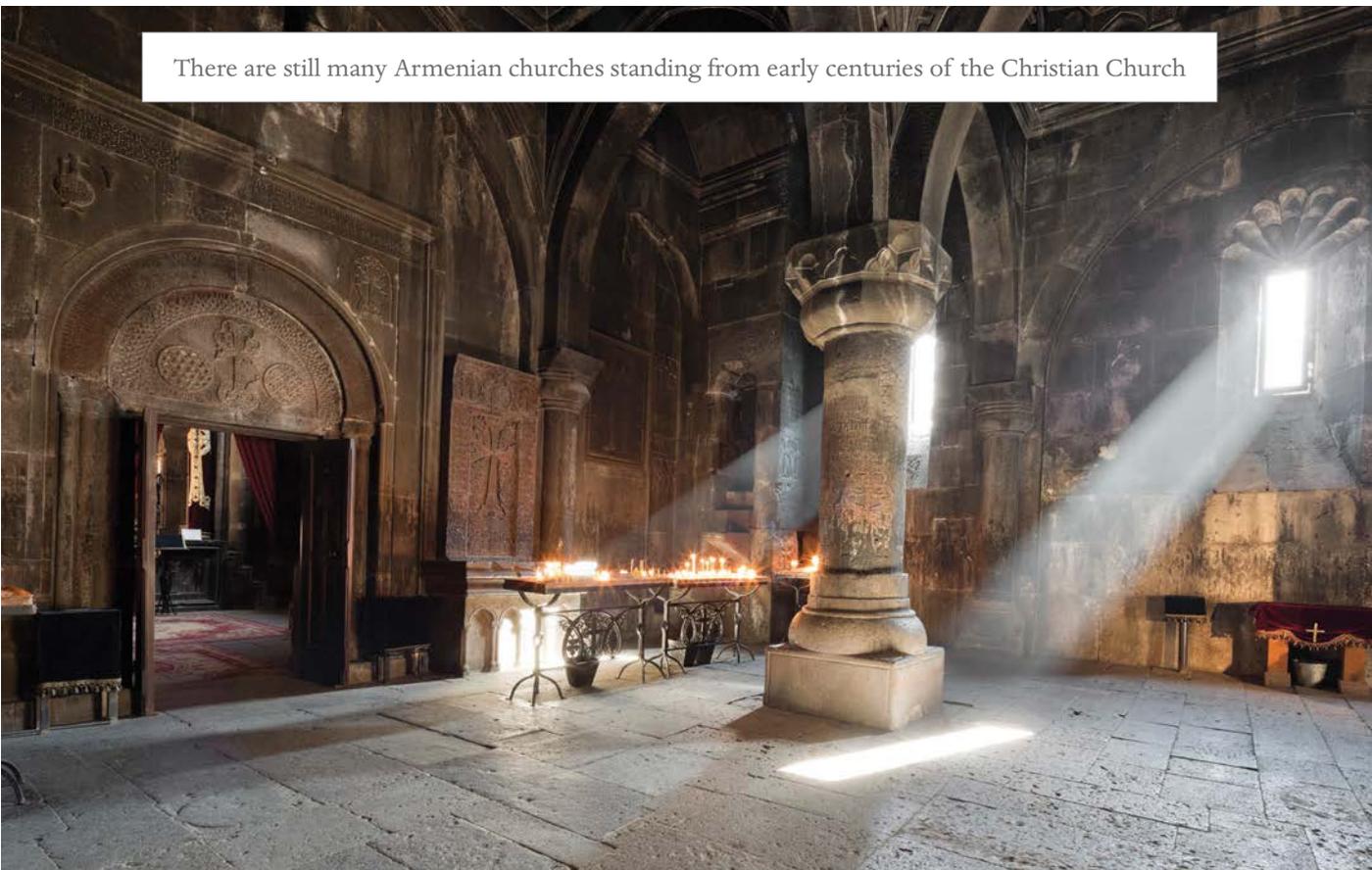
The power of the risen Christ was remarkably evident in the nation of Armenia. For at least 500 years, this kingdom was controlled by pagan idolatry under the goddess Anahit. Each year, the kings of Armenia would travel to the pagan temple at Erez to offer sacrifices to this pagan deity. Young men and women from the prominent families in Armenia were required to serve as priests and priestesses at this temple.

Due to a scandal that cost his father’s life, an Armenian noble named Gregory was whisked to Cappadocia as an infant where eventually he became a disciple of Jesus Christ. On his return to Armenia around A.D. 270, he was pressed to offer wreaths at the temple of the goddess Anahit by King Tiridates III, and he refused.

Consequently, the king ordered that Gregory be tortured and put to death, but the young man survived the ordeal and languished in prison for more than ten years. In time, however, God worked on the heart of King Tiridates. The king recalled Gregory from jail and the king was baptized into the Christian church in A.D. 302, along with other members of the royal family. This development illustrates a broader pattern that has been true throughout history: When a father is converted in a family, most of the family often comes into the faith as well. This pattern is repeated among many of the pagan kingdoms with the coming of the Gospel. When the king was converted, many of the people followed suit.

King Tiridates destroyed the temple of Anahit in the capital city of Artaxata, against the protests of the pagan priests, and declared Armenia to be a Christian nation, distinguishing this land as the first country of any size to become an officially Christian realm. The king also began to actively work with Gregory to spread the Gospel throughout Armenia. Gregory preached from one end of the nation to the other in the Armenian language, and it was not long before nearly the whole nation was converted to Jesus Christ.

There are still many Armenian churches standing from early centuries of the Christian Church



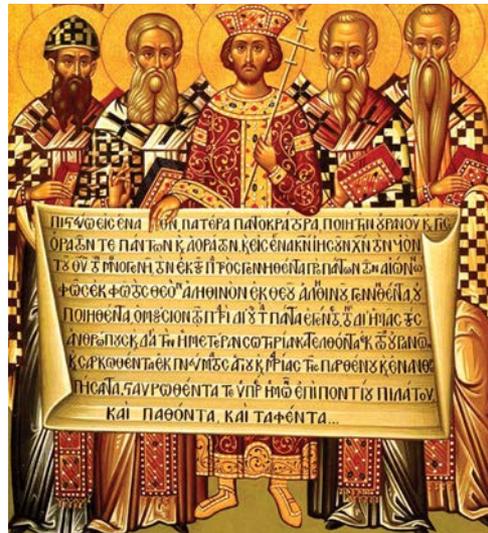
Another vital and defining event in the country's history occurred a century later when the Bible was translated into Armenian. A scholar named Mesrob developed a new alphabet for the Armenian language around A.D. 405 and he produced the first translation of the New Testament in A.D. 410. By 436, Mesrob and his associates finished the translation of the Old Testament into Armenian.

It is important to note that having access to the Bible is critical for the long-term discipleship of nations. Significantly, of all the nations in the world, Armenia has held on to the Christian faith with more tenacity through thick and thin. Even when faced with severe persecution at the hands of the Muslims after A.D. 650, these people would not vacillate in their commitment to the One True God.

As we continue to study the history of Christ's Church, we will learn that almost every church was formed out of much trial, persecution, and faith on the part of the missionaries who came with the hope of the Gospel. It requires a great deal of faith to stand against earthly kings, and insist on the crown rights of the King of kings and Lord of lords—as Gregory did before King Tiridates—but many more bold witnesses braved similar odds as the truth went forth throughout the world.

The Church in Spain

We do not know if the Apostle Paul ever made it to Spain. But we do know that one of the first men to lead the Christian church in Spain was named Hosius. He became the pastor in Cordova in A.D. 295, and very narrowly escaped martyrdom at the hands of the Emperor Maximian. He may have been the key person to organize the Council of Nicaea from which we have received the doctrine of the Trinity. Hosius actually was the moderator of this church council. Later, he was persecuted by Emperor Constantius II because he stood by the doctrine of the Trinity. Throughout



The Emperor Constantine
at the Council of Nicaea

the latter half of the 4th century, the Roman Emperors would take the wrong side on this doctrinal issue (and persecute those of the true faith).

Two Young Boys: Missionaries to Ethiopia

The story of the early Church in Ethiopia is quite interesting. Two young men, Frumentius and his brother, were sailing with their uncle on a merchant trip across the Red Sea around A.D. 316 when they were attacked by Ethiopians. Everyone was killed except for the two young boys, who were captured and taken back to Ethiopia. There they were made slaves in the royal court of King Ezana, whose favor they gained. With the king's approval, the young men founded several churches in Ethiopia, and Frumentius himself became the first Pastor/Bishop of the Ethiopian church.

The kingdoms of men are often formed when an Alexander the Great or Julius Caesar rides into the cities on a white horse. They conquer with bloodshed and military might. Jesus, however, routinely takes a different approach. His kingdom is sometimes formed by slave boys brought into the nation through a back door. It is often through weakness and suffering that His kingdom comes.

The ruins of an obelisk from the time of King Ezana



Constantine and an Empire Transformed

Finally, the persecutions came to an end as He raised up the Emperor Constantine, a ruler sympathetic to the Christian cause. In A.D. 313, Constantine issued an executive order called “The Edict of Milan.” The sum of the order was that Christians were to pray for the empire, and the empire would return properties to Christians that had been wrongly taken from them. Constantine also promised to rebuild churches that had been destroyed during the Diocletian persecutions.

Constantine is a complex and controversial character in history. When pagan kings come to faith, the transformation will not always be complete and without flaws. Nonetheless, Constantine publicly confessed Jesus Christ as “our Savior” and acknowledged the divine inspiration of Scripture,¹³ a huge shift in the mind of the Caesars who had considered themselves to be the Savior from the days of Augustus.

Some believe that Constantine took on the faith for political purposes, but it is hard to believe that to be the case, given that an estimated 90 percent of the population was still aligned with paganism. Nonetheless, Constantine’s active support of Christianity was a strong indication that the faith was no longer some obscure cult



Bust of the Emperor Constantine

led by an obscure “Nazarene.” When Tacitus wrote his annals of Roman history in A.D. 116, references to Christians and to Christ amounted to one small paragraph. Hardly anybody had heard of what Tacitus called “a most mischievous superstition.”¹⁴

Two hundred years later, all that had dramatically changed.

Constantine the Great

By the latter part of the 300s, the powerful rule of Jesus Christ was felt in the Roman world. The killing of Christians, the slaughter of women and children at the hands of the caesars, and the widespread killing of babies through abortion and infanticide came to an end. Basil of Caesarea (d. 379) encouraged Christian women to care for those who might be tempted to abort their children; he also arranged protests against abortion, and inspired Emperor Valentinian to ban abortion in the empire, which happened in A.D. 374.¹⁵

While the pagans were characterized by their cheap view of human life, Christians became well known for their care for orphans. At first, families would adopt the orphans and care for them in their homes. By the middle of the fourth century, the first orphanages were constructed under the leadership of Basil of Caesarea and Chrysostom of Constantinople.

Christians also brought hospitals into the world in the 4th century. In A.D. 325, presbyters and bishops from churches all over the Roman Empire gathered in Nicaea (located in Northwestern Turkey) to address the question of the deity of Christ and other matters. Here, also, the leaders of the Church decided they should build a “hospice” in every city. These hospices were meant to provide lodging for the poor and for wayfaring travelers. The first hospital was introduced to the city of Cappadocia by the same Basil in A.D. 369.

Slavery was also common among the pagan nations, including Rome. Once again, it was Christians who did their best to set the slaves free. A well-known document from the early Syrian church (dated around A.D. 375), known as the *Apostolic Constitutions*, instructed the Christians to collect money for the “redemption of the saints, the deliverance of slaves, and of captives, and of prisoners, and of those that have been abused, and of those that have been condemned by tyrants to single combat and death on account of the name of Christ.”¹⁶ In one of his letters, a well-known pastor named Augustine from Hippo in North Africa tells of buying freedom for a shipload of slaves bound for Galatia.¹⁷

Emperor Trajan (A.D. 53–117)



The Further Impact of Jesus Christ on the Roman World

The bloodthirsty screams of the crowds in the great Roman Colosseum cannot be heard any more. No more do people congregate into large arenas to watch real people kill other real people in broad daylight.

Instead, people watch actors pretend to kill people in modern films. Boxers and other fighters will turn somebody's face bloody, and that might get the crowd a little excited. Yet there is more compassion today, even with unbelievers, than there was in the pre-Christian Roman days. This is because of the impact that the Lord Jesus Christ has made on world history. Christians stopped the bloody games. Christians created hospitals and adopted the orphans—instead of killing them. Christians encouraged laws that would protect life, instead of destroying it. Even abortion was discouraged throughout the entire Christian world for almost 2,000 years (although, this has changed for the worse over the last 40 years).¹⁸ By the year A.D. 750, there were thousands of hospitals throughout Europe, and by the mid-1500s, there were 37,000 monasteries that took it upon themselves to care for sick people.

Thus played out the work of the Great Commission in the Roman Empire, as faithful missionaries and pastors taught millions of men, women, and children the things that Jesus had commanded.

The Kingdom of Jesus comes when men and women give up their own lives to bring the Gospel to other nations. This is what we have seen in the first three centuries of the Christian Church.

Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it" (Matt. 16:24–25).



Tertullian of Carthage

Fourth Century Discipleship of the Nations in Gaul

Sometime around A.D. 330, a baby boy was born to a Roman officer occupying a fort in Pannonia, Hungary. His parents named him Martin, and he was himself inducted into the Roman army as a lad of 15 years of age. Not long afterward, he came to be a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ. Several years later, Martin quit the military service and testified to his desire to be a “soldier of Christ.”¹⁹

He was discipled by a pastor in Poitiers, France, by the name of Hilary (ca. 300–368), but his training was cut short due to the persecutions leveled against true Christians on account of the Arian heresy that controlled the Empire at that time. Martin wandered about Europe, and returned to Hungary where he shared the Gospel with his mother who received the faith. During these early ministry years, he also established a discipleship center for young men on an island off Italy called Gallinara, and another near Poitiers. Around A.D. 372, he was installed as a pastor of the church in Tours, replacing the previous pastor, Lidorius, who had passed away of late.

Throughout the remainder of his life (A.D. 372–397), Martin canvassed the pagan villages about north-central France preaching the Gospel and destroying heathen temples. His biographer, Severus (who had made personal acquaintance with Martin), describes one such exploit of this courageous missionary:

But in a village which was named Leprosum, when he too wished to overthrow a temple which had acquired great wealth through the superstitious ideas entertained of its sanctity, a multitude of the heathen resisted him to such a degree that he was driven back not without bodily injury. He, therefore, withdrew to a place in the vicinity, and there for three days, clothed in sackcloth and ashes fasting and praying the whole time, he besought the Lord, that, as he had not been able to overthrow that temple by human effort, Divine power might be exerted to destroy it. Then two angels, with spears and shields after the manner of heavenly warriors, suddenly presented themselves to him, saying that they were sent by the Lord to put to flight the rustic multitude, and to furnish protection to Martin, lest, while the temple was being destroyed, any one should offer resistance. They told him therefore to return, and complete the blessed work which he had begun. Accordingly Martin returned to the village; and while the crowds of heathen

*looked on in perfect quiet as he razed the pagan temple even to the foundations, he also reduced all the altars and images to dust. At this sight the rustics, when they perceived that they had been so astounded and terrified by an intervention of the Divine will, that they might not be found fighting against the bishop, almost all believed in the Lord Jesus. They then began to cry out openly and to confess that the God of Martin ought to be worshiped, and that the idols should be despised, which were not able to help them.*²⁰

Martin's work during these years was attended by supernatural interventions, not unlike what we find later in the life of John G. Paton on the heathen island of Tanna (in the 1870s). In one village, he was surrounded by an angry mob of natives, and his biographer describes the attack:

*[W]hen one of them, bolder than the rest, made an attack upon him with a drawn sword, Martin, throwing back his cloak, offered his bare neck to the assassin. Nor did the heathen delay to strike, but in the very act of lifting up his right arm, he fell to the ground on his back, and being overwhelmed by the fear of God, he entreated for pardon. Not unlike this was that other event, which happened to Martin, that when a certain man had resolved to wound him with a knife as he was destroying some idols, at the very moment of fetching the blow, the weapon was struck out of his hands and disappeared.*²¹

Martin's preaching also had a powerful effect upon the villagers as Christ's Gospel found roots in modern-day France. Severus records that with "his holy discourse that, the light of truth having been revealed to them, they themselves overthrew their own temples."²²

When accosted by a highwayman intent on beating his brains out with a hammer, Martin simply preached the Word to him. We read from Severus, "entering on a discourse concerning Evangelical truth, he preached the word of God to the robber. Why should I delay stating the result? The robber believed; and, after expressing his respect for Martin, he restored him to the way, entreating him to pray the Lord for him. That same robber was afterwards seen leading a religious life; so that, in fact, the narrative I have given above is based upon an account furnished by himself."²³

Evidently, these were times when God in His all-wise providence determined to bless with miracles, and several are recorded by Severus, writing on the life of Martin. While preaching in a certain village, a woman entered the crowd, brought her dead son to the evangelist, and asked him to restore her “only son” to her. We read, “when, in the sight of all, he had fallen on his knees, and then arose, after his prayer was finished, he restored to its mother the child brought back to life. Then, truly, the whole multitude, raising a shout to heaven, acknowledged Christ as God, and fairly began to rush in crowds to the knees of this blessed man, sincerely imploring that he would make them Christians.”²⁴

Martin lacked the formal education received by most of the pastors of the day. He dressed in rough clothing, refused wine and fancy foods, and treated missionary work as a military man might accept hardship in the field. Yet, this was the sort of man it took to take the Gospel into the hinterlands of Gaul in the 4th century. Martin ministered to the districts of Vienne, Bordeaux, Trier, and Chartres over his 27-year tour of duty.

Only 300 years after the Resurrection of Christ, His Gospel was impacting the outer reaches of civilization, and the prophecies of the Old Testament were coming to pass.

Sing to the LORD, bless His name; proclaim the good news of His salvation from day to day. Declare His glory among the nations, His wonders among all peoples. For the LORD is great and greatly to be praised; He is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the peoples are idols, but the LORD made the heavens (Ps. 96:2–5)



The Spreading Influence of Christianity

— A.D. 700 —

■ Spread of Christianity