

## **WHY DID THE CHURCH SPREAD SO QUICKLY IN THE FIRST-THREE CENTURIES OF ITS EXISTENCE?**

*Elizabeth Zimhunga*

The Christian church has been the most powerful, religious, social and intellectual institution in the history of western civilization. However, the Christian Church only began as a small, lower class group of followers in a remote part of the Roman Empire.<sup>1</sup> The initial centre of Christianity was in Jerusalem where Jesus had been crucified, raised from the dead and where the Pentecost experience had occurred.<sup>2</sup> These were possibly 20 to 100 people who had been followers of Jesus who continued to believe in him after his death. The expansion of the church was highly unlikely to succeed.<sup>3</sup> Shortly after the descent of the Holy Spirit, the Gospel was preached in Asia, Europe and in Africa by the apostles.<sup>4</sup> Over the course of 300 years, the religion grew, despite many obstacles, to about 5% of the population of the Roman Empire becoming a world religion commanding the respect of the highest echelons of Roman society and government.<sup>5</sup> St Irenaeus in 220 declared that “the Church is spread throughout the world, even to the ends of the earth”.<sup>6</sup> This essay therefore, presents the reasons why the Church spread so quickly in the first three centuries of its existence.

According to Chadwick “Practical application of charity was probably the most potent single cause of Christian success”.<sup>7</sup> Paul made collections for the poor in Jerusalem from the Greek Christians in Asia Minor. The pagans neglected their needy whilst the Christians helped the suffering people for example, in the middle of the third century, during the pestilence in North Africa, the pagans deserted the sick and dying while Christians tenderly nursed the sick and cleared the dead bodies.<sup>8</sup> Care for the poor, widows and orphans, social action in times of calamity like earthquakes or war and care for those condemned to labour in the mines were major preoccupations of the church. Hospitality to travellers was a special act of charity with the bishop providing such hospitality especially for travelling missionaries. The Christian community rendered to poor brethren provision for their burial. Later, the churches in Rome and Carthage began to acquire burial grounds for their members which were later called “catacombs”.<sup>9</sup> This strong social aspect led to the spread of the church.

The Church was especially successful among women. It was through the wives that it penetrated the upper classes of society in the first instance.<sup>10</sup> Women were termed slaves and had no legal rights with their mental endowment being termed inferior. Marriage was a loose bond but Christians believed in the equality of men and women before God, and found in the New Testament commands that husbands should treat their wives as Christ manifested for his church with love (Ephesians 5:6, 1 Peter 3:7).<sup>11</sup> Divorce was forbidden absolutely<sup>12</sup> hence Christian teaching about the sanctity of marriage offered a powerful safeguard to married women. This overall resulted in the church spreading quickly.

When Christianity appeared there was moral deprivation in the Roman Empire. Childhood was not viewed as important, only boys were regarded as valuable in the parents' eyes. In the pagan religion, stealing was a virtue in the boy child and children were fighting machines in battles. Christianity however, brought a moral teaching that opposed these with the teaching of Christ which elevated childhood "whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18: 4-5)

Christianity elevated the status of slaves since it preached that all men were created in God's image (Genesis 1: 26). Several emancipated slaves rose to be bishops for example Callistus of Rome in the 3rd century.<sup>13</sup> Whereas under Roman law, slaves could not contract a legal marriage, the Church regarded marriages between slaves as free and indissoluble.<sup>14</sup> At the dawn of the Church, there were a huge number of slaves in the Roman Empire and these were not regarded as persons but as things. However, Paul had taught on freedom of individuals saying "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). The Church, on the occasion of the slave's conversion to Christianity, brought the slave and his master to brotherly equality.<sup>15</sup> This led to the church growing in numbers as once relegated persons managed to attain freedom and equal status for themselves.

When Christianity started the Roman Empire was already established and was universal. The Romans had converted the Palestinian territory into a province. As a result many nations unknown to each other were brought into contact. This contact between nations facilitated the spread

of Christianity as missionaries, merchants and tradesmen moved about with great freedom and with no fear of being rejected because of their nationality.<sup>16</sup> Other agents of the spread of the faith were travellers like slaves or Christians deported for their faith.<sup>17</sup> To connect all parts of this vast territory, great highways were built for the rapid movement of armies. This vast system of roads bound together the different parts of the empire and the Mediterranean Sea formed a great water-way on which travel was fast and safe enabling contact between the different parts of the empire.<sup>18</sup> All the factors made rapid dissemination of the gospel easy. The apostles could move along these stone roads with ease and so these roads became highways for gospel messengers (Hurst 26). It is clear that Christianity found facilities for its spread in the Roman Empire namely universal peace, uniform language and ideas and rapid and safe communication (Duchsene 13). This led to the efficient movement of the gospel and the faith as a whole leading to the quick spread of the early Church.

Foreign faiths were forbidden in Roman dominions with existing religions being tolerated in conquered provinces. However, the old ban on foreign faiths was revived with the coming of the Christian faith. Christians were accused of disobedience and would be blamed for all calamities (for example defeat in war, natural disasters) (Hurst 33). This led to growing dissension towards the Christians resulting in many accounts of persecution and martyrdom.

The course of Christianity was marked by persecutions and martyrdoms. The book Acts of the Apostles has many accounts of persecution of early Christians (Acts 7:54-60, Acts 12:1-5, Acts 14:19-20). Persecutions occurred in the first and second centuries but in the third they increased in violence. This resulted in exaltation of passive martyrdom. The Christians were happy to voluntarily share in the experience of Jesus, the founder of the faith who had been executed (Lautorette 135). The heroic fortitude with which the early Christians met punishment or torture even death rather than denying their faith inspired admiration and respect and also belief in the truth of their religion. The martyrs frequently showed signs of intense joy in their sufferings. This brought many to embrace the Christian religion (Gilmartin 61). The persecutions that the Christians were subjected to could have dealt a fatal blow to a young church but the

opposite actually happened. The persecutions awoke the whole Roman Empire to the teachings and practices of Christianity (Vidmar) and thus the church spread.

The wars that resulted in the founding of the Roman Empire resulted in the intermingling of individuals (slaves and freed men) and thus their original religions were weakened. These had been separated from their hereditary origins hence they welcomed the fellowship afforded by the Christian church and the security which the faith promised for the afterlife (Lautorette 163). The first churches were established in the large cities. Christianity spread among the pagans in the country from the cities and these converts in the country attended church in the city (Kuiper 19). The disintegration of existing cultures made it less difficult to resist the new faith (Lautorette 163).

There were frequent changes in the imperial rule with new methods and strategies for Christian repression and persecution adopted constantly. Despite the risk of persecution, the Christian Church grew in numbers. Resultantly there were many exiles but the Christians would carry their faith and way of life to their new homes thus the Church spread to many areas (Hurst 36).

The church had a powerful and coherent structure. It instilled in its members loyalty and solidarity which proved important in the struggle for existence (Lautorette 164). The earliest churches were simply private houses that were gradually converted inside as the congregations grew (Chadwick, 55). These churches in cities were initially loosely connected with each other. They however started to amalgamate as the number of members increased steadily and by the year 200 they were one compact whole (Kuiper 21). With this emerged the different terms presbyter, bishop, diocese, diocesan bishop and episcopal. Around the year 110, the Antioch church had a bishop by the name Ignatius and Smyrna had Polycarp. They both had been disciples of the apostles (Kuiper 20).

The church managed to attract people of all races and classes compared to Judaism hence Christianity glorified in its appeal to individuals of all races and classes. The ignorant could also grasp Christian teachings because they were simple. It received the respect of the learned to which it offered what the rival philosophies could not. Christianity was for both

male and female. The rival religions present at the time were primarily for men. Christianity was a place for both the rich and the poor. Because of all this inclusiveness, it took in the most groups and strata of society and thus the church managed to grow and spread (Latourette 164).

The church refused to compromise on what it deemed essential and central doctrines. The need to break from old customs and moral practices gave the adherents a conviction which became a source of strength against persecution and of zeal in acquiring converts thus the church managed to grow and spread (Lautorette 165). During this time, most of the Christians were converts from paganism who embraced the Christian religion. They embraced it with sincere conviction of its truth. They led pure and holy lives and practised these virtues little known among gentiles namely charity, meekness, humility, chastity and temperance. Hence their lives became more eloquent than words in preaching the truth of their religion and recommending it to unbelievers (Gilmartin 58).

The Jewish roots of the church helped it in its growth. Hebrew Scriptures offered the sanctity of a long historical development. In Hellenist Judaism, Christianity found communities prepared for its message (Lautorette 166). The Messianic prophecies contained in the Old Testament pointed to Christ and were fulfilled by his coming (Gilmartin 61). The incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus were emphasized remarkably and thus managed to attract many converts leading to the growth and the spread of the church (Lautorette 166).

The power of working miracles possessed by the early Christian preachers was a very powerful means of propagating the Christian religion. Christ had promised this power to his apostles before he ascended into heaven (Acts 1:8). The early preachers used the power given to them in healing the sick, raising the dead to life amongst other acts (Acts 2:43, Acts 3:7-11). Such miracles sealed their heavenly mission and were a very strong argument for Christianity. This showed that the Christian God was more powerful than all the others. Those who came to believe that abandoned their old gods and converted to Christianity adding to the numbers in the Church (Lautorette 167). The occurrence of demons in the Graeco-Roman world was huge. Christianity had scored many instances of success in expelling evil spirits. The manifestation of the gifts of the

Holy Spirit appeared under various forms namely miraculous cures, visions amongst others. Prophecy and the gift of tongues were the most remarkable manifestations (Duchsene 33). This way the church attracted lots of people (Latourete 167).

To pagans, the current polytheism had many weaknesses and thus the grandeur and antiquity of Christian monotheism attracted them (Lautorette 170). Christianity proclaimed monotheism and following the Christian God meant abandoning all the others. This way, all the other religions were destroyed, resulting in the promotion of Christianity and the subsequent growth of the church (Erhman 29).

The internal organization of the Church was very simple. Baptism administered in Jesus's name was how the converts were admitted. They celebrated a common daily meal, the Eucharist, which was the sign and bond of their corporate life (Duchsene 17). This simplicity made it easier for people to convert to the Christian faith and resulted in the spread of the Church.

Three great Christian schools emerged in the Roman Empire by the middle of the second century. The most important was the one at Alexandria. There were other minor schools as well. It is at these schools that the doctrinal and literary development of Christianity occurred. These became important in that they were rallying points for the defense of the Christian faith and for the planning for Christian work. These proved to be instrumental in strengthening and spreading of the Church (Hurst 58).

### **Conclusion**

As shown by the above discourse, the Church managed to grow and spread throughout the Roman Empire in the first three centuries of its existence. Interestingly, I have concluded that the spread of the Church was not as a result of large evangelical drives and gatherings but was because the lives that the Christians themselves lived witnessed to the message of the faith and thus created interest and intrigue in the non-believers leading to their conversion. I am also convinced that a very significant factor in the spread of the Church in this crucial period in the history of the Church, was the initial energy imparted at Pentecost to the disciples and those present which enabled all the factors mentioned above and others to

launch and sustain the life and remarkable spread of The Church. Finally, the Holy Spirit did guide the Church in these formative years against the many odds that it faced as a young and new organization and I believe it is the reason it is still alive in the present day.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ehrman B. D. *From Jesus to Constantine – A history of early Christianity*. North Carolina: The Teaching Company, 2004. P. 8.

<sup>2</sup> Lautorette K.S. *A History of the Expansion of Christianity 1: The first Five Centuries: to 500 AD*. New York: Harper and Row, 1971

<sup>3</sup> Chadwick H. *The Early Church*. London: Penguin Books, 1993. P. 54.

<sup>4</sup> Gilmartin T. *Manual of Church History*. Maynooth St Patrick's College, 1926. P. 51.

<sup>5</sup> Ehrman B. D. p. 28.

<sup>6</sup> Gilmartin T. p. 52.

<sup>7</sup> Chadwick H. p. 56.

<sup>8</sup> Hurst J. F. *Short history of the early church*. New York, Chautauqua Press, 1886. <https://ia800702.us.archive.org/31/items/shorthistory00hurs/shorthistory00hurs.pdf> Accessed online 29 July 2019

<sup>9</sup> Chadwick H. p. 56.

<sup>10</sup> Chadwick H. p. 58.

<sup>11</sup> Van Voorst R. E. *Readings in Christianity*. Stamford: Cengage Learning. 2015. P. 66.

<sup>12</sup> Duschene L. *Early History of The Christian Church: From its foundation to the end of the fifth century*. New York: Longmans, Green and Co, 1924. P. 33.

<sup>13</sup> Handl A. Bishop Callistus I. of Rome (217?–222?): A Martyr or a Confessor? *Journal of ancient Christianity* (2014) 18(3): 390

<sup>14</sup> Chadwick H. p. 60.

<sup>15</sup> Hurst J. F. p. 40. Van Voorst R. E. p. 60.

<sup>16</sup> Gilmartin T. p. 58.

<sup>17</sup> Lautorette K.S. p. 117.

<sup>18</sup> Duschene L. *Early History of The Christian Church: From its foundation to the end of the fifth century*. New York: Longmans, Green and Co, 1924. P. 11.