

Perspectives on Church History: Where we've come from and how we got here
Unit 1: The Ancient Church (6 BC to AD 590) – The Ancients were people just like us
Part 2: "When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son" – The Age of the Apostles (AD 33 to 100)

1. Information sources: As we progress in our study, I will be referring you to several sources, often from the Web, and invite you to submit additional suggestions for me to review and pass along to others as appropriate. There is a wealth of information available, so with a little time and discernment, your surfing will be of great value to you. Check these out:

- The Church Timeline – www.churchtimeline.com . An online chronology of events in church history which was compiled by Clay McKinney as a part of a church history project at Covenant Seminary. This source provides not only people, places and times but also references to other materials. We will be using it several times.
- Timothy Paul Jones – www.timothypauljones.com . Jones' site often contains interesting information, and he updates and adds items.
- Credo House Ministries and Reclaiming the Mind Ministries – www.credohouse.org . Would you want some small group materials on some "heavy" subjects that are handled on a level even I can understand? You might want to look here.
- The Hall of Church History – www.spurgeon.org . Theology from a bunch of dead guys – need I say more?
- The Highway – www.the-highway.com . A site I have saved for several years. This source is especially useful when you want to look at doctrine, creeds and confessions, and so on. This site contains many articles on varied topics.

2. It's not always good to be the King after all:

"Christianity is the only major religion to have as its central event the humiliation of its God. 'Dear dying Lamb,' believers sing, 'thy precious Blood Shall never lose its power, Till all the ransomed Church of God Be saved to sin no more.'

"Crucifixion was a barbarous death, reserved for agitators, pirates and slaves. Jewish law cursed 'everyone who hangs on a tree' and the Roman statesman, Cicero, warned: 'Let the very name of the cross be far, not only from the body of a Roman citizen, but even from his thoughts, his eyes, his ears.'

"Part of the victim's punishment was to be whipped, and then to carry the heavy cross-beam to the place of his own death. When the cross was raised, a notice was pinned to it giving the culprit's name and crime. In Jesus' case I N R I:

Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum, Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.

"Pontius Pilate, Jesus' Roman judge, apparently intended it as a final thrust of malice aimed at the Jews, but like the cross itself Jesus' followers found a special meaning in the message." Shelley, p.3.

So, how in the world could a faith, based on the claims of a Man who lived so humbly and died so horribly, have possibly spread in a world that appears so fragmented and oppositional?

The primary reason, of course, is the Providence of the Father and the work of the Spirit. From a human perspective, though, there were several factors which we can identify that help us appreciate how the Almighty uses man's plans to accomplish His purposes.

3. Timeline for the Apostolic Period: 35-120. As our discussion begins to move beyond the time in which Scripture was written, here is a timeline from Clay McKinney that summarizes the first transition in the story of the young church:

35 b. Ignatius. His letters to churches and to Polycarp are widely quoted in the early church

51 The Jewish persecution of Christians in Rome becomes so disruptive that the Jews are expelled from the city

60 b. Papias, Bishop of Hierapolis in Asia Minor. "He was a man of long ago and the disciple of one 'John' and a companion of Polycarp," according to Irenaeus

64 Emperor Nero (reign 54–68) blames the fire that destroys much of Rome on the Christians. He persecutes the church ruthlessly and uses Christians as candles to light his garden. It is likely that both Peter and Paul were executed during this persecution

69 b. Polycarp, in Smyrna. He was a strong defender of the faith in Asia Minor combating the Marcionites and the Valentinians. Irenaeus reported that Polycarp had communication with John the Apostle and 'others who had seen the Lord'

81 – 96 Reign of Domitian. As Emperor, he persecuted both Jews and Christians

c. 96 – 101 d. Clement of Rome. He wrote influential epistles to Corinth

98 – 117 Reign of Trajan. Trajan eventually instituted a policy toward Christians that stayed in effect until the time of Aurelius. His policy was not to seek Christians out, but if they were brought before the authorities they were to be punished, usually executed, for being Christians

99 By the end of the first century it is possible to document congregations in almost every city that Paul visited on his three missionary journeys. There are also a few churches in Egypt and along the coast of Northern Africa

107 Ignatius led to Rome and martyred

115 b. Irenaeus, the first great Catholic theologian and author of *Against Heresies*, a treatise against the Gnostics

4. The Greeks and the Romans played a part in the religious preparation for the appearance of Christ.

"Greek and Roman contributions aided in bringing historical development to the point where Christ could make the maximum impact on history in a way not possible before or since the time of His birth." Cairns, Earle E., *Christianity Through the Centuries*, 4th ed., Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan Publishing House (1996) (hereafter "Cairns, p. _"). In the fullness of these times, then, several seemingly unrelated factors served to support the spread of the faith (*remember, God uses human factors to produce spiritual results*).

- **ROMAN POLITICAL FACTORS – Political contributions to the events preceding the Coming of Christ, and the spreading of the faith thereafter, was primarily the work of the Romans. "This people – who followed the way of idolatry, mystery religions, and emperor worship – were used by God, of whom they were ignorant, to bring about the fulfillment of His will." Cairns, p.39. The Romans provided:**

a. A united Mediterranean world – Unlike any previous period in history, the Mediterranean basin was comparatively united. The armies of Rome forced a peace, the *Pax Romana* (30 BC – AD 180), but it brought stability, forced or not. As a result, trade flourished over both land and sea. A more prosperous economy would enhance the reach of the Christian message. Unlike any other people up to their time, the Romans developed a sense of the unity of mankind under a universal law. This sense of solidarity created an environment favorable to a gospel that would proclaim the unity of humanity – all men are under the penalty of sin and all are offered a salvation that makes them a part of a universal organism – the Church, the body of Christ.

b. Roads and communication – very much like our own country at this very moment, the infrastructure provided by Roman roads tied together the empire. Meanwhile, communications moved with a speed never known before – yet another comparison to the day in which we live. The system of roads literally led to the farthest points of the empire. In time, strategic cities would locate on these roads. In the providence of God, the resulting communications network, just like the infrastructure of roads, would be used by the early church to spread the gospel.

c. Free movement throughout the Mediterranean world – Before the reign of Caesar Augustus (27 b.c. – a.d. 14), the ancient world was divided into small, often jealous, units (think of the city states), which hampered not only travel but the spread of ideas that would depend on such travel. As the Roman imperial power spread into empire building, such obstacles would begin to clear. This factor led to an exposure of many ideas, and the Christian movement was among them.

d. An army, which travelled on its stomach but carried a message – The Roman army would play a critical role of a universal organization (and in fact would be a prime example of such). The Romans began using provincials from within their empire as a ready supply of troops. These provincials encountered Roman culture and helped spread its ideas throughout the ancient world. In time, the gospel penetrated the army, which, of course, was in service everywhere throughout the empire. Paul spoke of believers within the Praetorian guard, which included those elite soldiers serving close to the emperor (Phil. 1.13). Christianity would be spread by the Roman army as far away as Britain. In fact, the impact of Christianity on the Roman army became so significant that the army would come to be called the “mouthpiece of the gospel.”

e. A legal legacy – Roman law placed emphasis on the dignity of the individual and his right to justice. Roman citizenship, to an extent greater than other cultures, joined men of different races into one political organization – this would anticipate a message that similarly proclaimed the unity of the races both in setting forth the penalty for sin and the Relief from that sin.

f. Conquests of men and their ways – One consequence of Rome’s military success was a loss of belief by many conquered peoples in their gods since those gods had not kept them from defeat. These people would experience a spiritual vacuum that the religions of the day could not fill. Rome’s substitutes, in turn, could do little more than make people realize a need for a more spiritual, and even personal, religion. Just as the Norman conquest (ad 1066) wrought political, cultural, and social change in England, Roman successes brought about the same kind of changes in the places occupied by the empire.

- By the time of Jesus, a variety of mystery religions had sprung up throughout the empire. These cults, not Rome’s recognized pagan gods, would prove to be the chief rivals of Christianity.

Examples would be the worship of Isis, from Egypt, emphasizing death and resurrection. The worship of Cybele, the great earth mother, came from Phrygia. Religious rites included the dramatization of the death and resurrection of Attis, the consort of Cybele. From Persia came Mithraism, which featured a miraculously born savior – Mithras, who was worshipped in chapels.

In sum, it is an inevitable conclusion that the Roman Empire provided a political environment favorable to the spread of Christianity in its infancy. As we shall see, even the church as late as the Middle Ages was never able to break its link to the glory of imperial Rome and even sought to perpetuate its ideals in the ecclesiastical system that evolved.

- **GREEK INTELLECTUAL CONTRIBUTIONS – As much as Rome’s political power fostered the growth of the faith, it was eclipsed by the intellectual culture that the Greeks provided. The Romans won the military battle, but the Greeks won the cultural war – the empire may have been Roman, but the intellectual influence was Greek. For instance, the common language was *koine* Greek, which was spread by Alexander the Great. In God’s sovereignty, this would become the language of His revelation, the New Testament. Meanwhile, Greek philosophy came to be predominant in the Roman world. Most Greek thinkers (even as they held varying views) maintained that there was a transcendent realm beyond the physical world. Into this marketplace of truth-seeking stepped Christianity, which spoke of hope for this physical world and expressed confidence in a world to come. Consider John’s gospel and his first epistle, along with Paul’s presentation of Jesus in Colossians 1 and his argument with the philosophers described in Acts 17. If the empire’s roads and communication advancements provided a means for delivering the gospel message, the Greco-Roman intellectual world provided “ears to hear” that message. Here’s a little more detail on what the Greeks added to this soup:**

a. The universal gospel needed a universal language if it would have maximum impact on the world. As noted above, *Koine* Greek allowed Christians to make contact with the peoples of the ancient world. Like the printing press in its day, this common language provided the means to convey, on a scale previously unattainable, the thoughts of the New Testament (compare today’s computer languages). “Not until recently was it known that the Greek of the New Testament was the Greek of the common man of Christ’s day because of the marked difference between it and the Greek of the classics.” Cairns, p.42.

b. Greek philosophy paved the road for Christianity by destroying the older religions. In short, Greek philosophy made the polytheism of the ancients indefensible. This same philosophy, however, failed to satisfy the spiritual needs of these same ancients. Philosophy could posit God intellectually, but it could never reveal a personal God of love. In time, Christianity alone would prove capable of filling the vacuum in the spiritual life of the day. Also, Greek thought called attention to a reality that transcended the temporal and relative world in which the Greeks lived – this intellectual development would be a “precursor” to the answers that Christianity provided (and still provides). “Christianity offered to those who accepted Socrates’ and Plato’s philosophy the historical revelation of the good, the beautiful, and the true in the person of the God-man, Christ.” Greeks also believed in the immortality of the soul (but, they had no belief in a physical resurrection of the body – a void that Christianity would dive into).

c. The Greeks also contributed in a religious way to making the ancient world receptive to Christianity when it appeared. As noted above, Greek philosophy began destroying polytheism, which destruction began occurring some six centuries before Christ. In turn, philosophy may have revealed truth on some levels, but it led to individualism and even fatalism. Philosophy, then, did not fill the hearts of men and made the people of the day hungry for more. Religion was that “more,” and like the building of a retail mall awaiting competing tenants, Greek thought eventually proved to be the means to an end, the acceptance and spread of the faith.

5. And the religious contributions of the Jews were even more significant. Jewish influence, it should be remembered, was even more significant to the development and growth of Christianity than were Roman and Greek contributions. While those factors set the stage in terms of environment, Judaism was the heredity of Christianity. Judaism has been described as the stalk on which the rose of Christianity was to bloom. Although a small nation, Israel had already played a significant role in the history of the world prior to Christ. The Jews were in Palestine, which is a land bridge linking Asia, Africa, and Europe. This location had led Israel to subjugation and captivity by bigger bullies (you ever played “Risk”?), but these events had spread this religion throughout the Mediterranean world. Unlike the Greeks, the Jews did not reason God into existence, they assumed His existence and granted to Him the worship they felt He was due. As they saw it, God had sought them and had revealed Himself to them in history. Therefore, salvation was really, as Jesus said (Jn. 4.22) “of the Jews.” From this small and captive nation, the Savior came to the world. Not only was Judaism the spiritual root and heritage of Christianity, but also, like a newborn child has certain immunities after delivery, Judaism would give shelter to the infant religion for a short, but significant time. Judaism provided for Christianity:

- a. A firm monotheism – totally unlike the pagan religions, Judaism practiced a lofty monotheism, having never again lapsed into idolatry after the return from the Babylonian captivity.
- b. A Messianic hope – Jews offered the world the hope of a coming Messiah, which was in sharp contrast to the rest of the Roman world. Before the birth of Jesus, this hope had filtered to the non-Jewish world. Consider how Rome would pick up on this hope even as it rejected Judaism, or how the wise men most assuredly had some knowledge of that hope as they traveled to Jerusalem.
- c. An ethical system – Judaism offered the world through its moral law the purest ethical system known to the ancients. The Ten Commandments contrasted greatly with the ethical systems of other cultures. Unlike the Greeks and Romans, who attributed sin to external and even contractual failures, the Jews saw sin as a violation that expressed itself in an impure heart which resulted in overt external acts. “This moral and spiritual approach of the Old Testament made for a doctrine of sin and redemption that really met the problem of sin. Salvation came from God and was not to be found in rationalistic systems of ethics or subjective mystery religions.” Cairn, p. 45.
- d. A message, as revealed through Scripture, the Old Testament – Christ and His disciples would revere the Scriptures, and it provided the “DNA” of the New Covenant. By the time of Christ, many Gentiles had read the Scriptures and were familiar with the tenets of the Jewish faith.
- e. A philosophy of history – In short, the Jews were perhaps the only ancient culture to insist that history has meaning. Judaism opposed any view that the past was a meaningless series of cycles or simply a

process of linear evolution. They insisted that the Sovereign who created history would triumph over man's spotty record to bring about a better world.

f. An institution for worship – The Synagogue, interestingly, developed from Israel's forced absence during the Babylonian captivity from the temple at Jerusalem. By the time of Jesus' life, it had become an integral part of everyday Jewish life. It would also become the first forum for the faith in Christianity's early days – Paul went there first to preach in all the cities he reached on his missionary journeys. The Synagogue (and I am referring to more than just a literal building) became the preaching house of the first Christians.

“EVERYTHING OLD IS NEW AGAIN” (or, “There is nothing new under the sun.” Ecc. 1.9). Please make this lesson better by comparing the factors and events we just discussed with the world as you see it now – what paved the way for the spread of the faith then, and what parallels (or differences) can you see in our day?