



70 GREAT CHRISTIANS

The Story of the Christian
Church

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THE EARLY CHURCH

Throughout its history the Christian Church has been subject to divisions and heresies, quarrels and wars, and no century has passed without it being troubled by enemies. Worst of all, countless numbers of believers have suffered torture and been cruelly put to death for their faith in Jesus. Warned that they would be betrayed and brought before governors and kings, they were stirred to great deeds of heroism and paid the ultimate price rather than deny their Lord. Not only did the early Church survive this terrible onslaught, but it increased in strength and by the fourth century was firmly established throughout the Mediterranean world.



Beginning in Jerusalem

Although Jesus was put to death by the Romans, it was the Jewish authorities - who rejected the claim that he was the Messiah - that mounted the first attacks upon the Church. Beginning in Jerusalem, followers of the Way were imprisoned and beaten, while others such as Stephen and James were executed. Paul also relates how he was imprisoned, stoned and exposed to death for the sake of the gospel.

At first the Romans were unaware of the differences between Christianity and Judaism, and they regarded Christianity as a Jewish sect. It was Roman policy to allow freedom of worship to the national religion of the peoples they conquered, and for a while Christians were granted the same rights and privileges as Jews. In fact, the New Testament makes reference to a number of occasions when Roman officials gave legal protection to believers and saved them from harm.

As the number of Gentile Christians in the Church greatly increased, however, points of difference between the two religions began to emerge. The Church was no longer a Jewish ethnic group, and the process of separation between synagogue and church was accelerating. Awareness of these developments may well have been brought to Nero's attention as a

EMPEROR WORSHIP

Emperor worship can be traced back to the reign of Julius, when in BC 42 the Senate gave him a place among the Roman gods. The Emperor Caesar Augustus (BC 29 - AD 14), who was in power at the time Jesus was born, prohibited worship of himself in Italy, but the practice spread in the provinces to become the official religion of Rome. Worship was offered to his genius, or guardian deity, and he was addressed as 'lord'. After his death, his name continued to be honoured, and Nero, who was his great-grandson, also accepted the title of 'divine'. Christians who refused to offer incense on an altar to the divine Emperor were considered unpatriotic and became a target for persecution.

result of Paul's trial in Rome.


The Romans eventually classed Christians as atheists, because they had no gods - they did not display any idols and they refused to worship the Romans' gods. Believers came under increasing suspicion from the populace as they tended to keep themselves separate: they refused to attend the games at the Circus (because they started with a procession of the gods), it was difficult to do trade with them, and they often withdrew from the normal round of society.

Each week they held 'secret' meetings at which they spoke of another kingdom; they partook of a communal meal at which they were said to 'drink blood and eat flesh', a practice which led to charges of cannibalism and witchcraft. When finally they refused to offer incense on an altar to the divine Emperor or to address him as 'lord', they were regarded as traitors to Rome. Christianity was declared to be a religio illicita - a religion not recognised by the state - and Christians became outlaws.

Christians in Rome

By now the believers formed a large, prominent body in Rome and public feelings against them were mounting. Things came to a head during the reign of the Emperor Nero and local attacks broke out against the Christians. For the next two and a half centuries the Roman government attempted to stamp out Christianity, though opposition merely served to stiffen resistance. By the fourth century the Church emerged intact into a period of calm, albeit increasingly swayed by worldly influences.

Nero, who reigned from AD 54-68, was the first of a line of Emperors who tried to destroy the Church. He came to power at the age of eighteen and for the first five years ruled with clemency and justice, though privately he was a licentious and depraved young man. His lust for power, however, led him along a path of senseless destruction. To further his political ends



The Early Church

he arranged for his mother to be clubbed to death, and had his brother, wife and other members of his family killed as well; in AD 65 he forced his tutor and aide, Seneca, to commit suicide.

He was a 'playboy' Emperor who enjoyed all kinds of pleasures. As an accomplished musician and poet, he wrote his own compositions; he was also keen on chariot racing and had his own private hippodrome next to the palace gardens in the Vatican valley. When in AD 62 he took sole charge of the government of the Empire, things took a turn for the worse.

In July AD 64 a great fire destroyed two thirds of Rome. Rumour had it that it was the Emperor himself who had started the blaze in order to provide a scenic background for the recitation of his poems about the burning of Troy, though there is no evidence to this effect. Surprisingly, in fact, he showed concern for the people who had lost their homes during the fire: he started a relief programme and opened up his gardens as a place of refuge for the homeless.

But the rumours persisted, so to divert this suspicion he made a scapegoat of the Christians, already a target of public dislike, and accused them of being the culprits. A large number of believers were arrested and charged, not on religious grounds, but with arson; others were quickly implicated as confessions were obtained under torture. According to the Roman historian, Tacitus, who wrote some fifty years later, the charge against the Christians was gradually changed to that of 'hatred of mankind', meaning disloyalty to the Empire. Soon, anyone who acknowledged the name of Christ was accepted as guilty and hundreds more were subjected to a most barbaric death.

In order to provide amusement for the citizens of Rome, Nero turned the occasion into a show, and details of how the Christians were made to suffer have been passed down to us by Tacitus. The Emperor dressed himself as a charioteer and, mounted in his chariot, mingled with the crowds who had gathered to witness the spectacle. Christians were covered in the skins

A MISCHIEVOUS SUPERSTITION

'Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilate; and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out, not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre and become popular.'

Tacitus, Annals

of wild animals and were then torn to pieces by dogs; some were crucified, others were nailed to crosses, their bodies covered with tar and set alight, so that when darkness fell they burned as human torches. Although Tacitus had a low opinion of Christians, he felt pity for them and described how 'there arose a feeling of compassion for them (i.e. among the Roman people), for it was not for the public good... but to glut one man's cruelty'.

PETER and PAUL (died AD 65-68): Apostles in Rome

Among the martyrs at Rome were the apostles Peter and Paul, though there is no direct evidence to prove it. Little is known of Peter's movements after his escape from prison under Herod's persecution in Jerusalem, except that he eventually reached Rome. The claim that he founded the church in Rome cannot be supported, though he was certainly active there in ministry. One suggestion is that he visited Rome at the request of Paul, to try and heal a breach among the Christians.

Paul was arrested in Jerusalem, and following his appeal to the Emperor reached Rome around AD 59-60. He was in custody for two years until his trial before Nero. During that period he lived in rented accommodation under guard, but was given freedom to receive visitors.

After his acquittal in AD 62 he probably travelled to Spain and later visited the churches of Asia Minor. He was at some point re-arrested, by which time the tide of opinion had turned against Christians and being a follower of Christ now carried the death penalty. The date of his execution is unknown, but it was sometime between the years AD 65-68.

Both apostles wrote stirring epistles while they were in Rome. Peter penned his first epistle in which he spoke of the possibility of persecution and called on his readers not to be ashamed of suffering for the name of Christ. He was joined there by Mark who, according to Papias (c140), wrote down Peter's recollections of what Jesus had said and done. Woven into the fabric of the Gospel of Mark is the theme of Christ's sufferings, possibly written to encourage Roman believers under attack.

At the height of Nero's persecution, Peter was arrested and crucified, though the circumstances of his death are shrouded in mystery. One apocryphal account tells that he was crucified head downwards because he did not believe he was worthy of suffering as his Master had done.

According to tradition - which is quite likely correct - he was buried on Vatican hill and a chapel erected over his tomb. This was later replaced by a basilica which was pulled down in the sixteenth century to make way for the new basilica of St. Peter's that we know today.