

In Life and in Death: How the Testimony of the Early Church Transformed Their World

It is an amazing fact that the small group of Jesus-Followers in Judaea and Galilee who had "been with Jesus" initiated a movement that, in the course of the next 200-300 years, reached and transformed not only the Roman empire, but also other regions and countries like Armenia, Persia, and reached all the way to Ethiopia and India. How did the early Christians achieve this - in the face of opposition and persecution and without the backing of financial and political support? In this session, we will look at the key factors in the life and witness of these early Christians which made this possible.

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I. The Spread of the Gospel in Apostolic Times

- A. The early Christians were part of a **movement** that had its **origin** in the life, teachings, ministry, death and resurrection of **Jesus** of Nazareth.
- B. The teaching of the original **apostles** and the life and example of the **first church**, which was birthed in Jerusalem on the day of **Pentecost**, became the basis for this Jesus-movement, commonly known as the church.
- C. The **foundational teaching** of the **apostles**, as retained in their **epistles**, along with the **canonical records** of the life of Jesus, as recorded in the **four gospels**, and the concomitant "**Acts of the Apostles**" formed the **basis and norm** for the faith and the life of the Early Church. These writings were concluded within the life-span of the **apostolic** (i.e. first) **generation** of believers and were very quickly considered as "**Holy Scripture**" on equal footing with the "Old Testament".
- D. The Jesus-movement started to spread throughout the **Roman Empire and beyond**, and consisted of a **network** of church-congregations in many cities and increasingly also in rural areas,

II. The Spread of the Gospel in Sub-Apostolic Times

- A. In sub-apostolic times, **other writings** were produced by leaders of the second, third, fourth and following generations, expounding the truth, meaning, and relevance of the new faith.
- B. However, the **continuous growth** and spread of the Christian church was due not only to the **intellectual** "defense" and explanation of the faith, but in equal manner to the

practical life, the **witness of word and deed** of simple believers, and the **new reality** and cohesion of the local church families.

- C. The spread and growth of the Christian church can be explained on a human level – apart from the work of God through his **Holy Spirit**, which, of course, is the primary reality in this context – by a number of secondary **factors**.
1. The effects of the **Jewish presence and mission** throughout the ancient world, which had attracted many spiritual seekers, and established belief in One God (**monotheism**) as a better alternative to traditional religions. As seen in the book of Acts, the early Christian missionaries followed the maxim of Paul: “**to the Jew first**”. So, the early churches were often made up of Jews, proselytes and “God-fearers”, who formed a new community together with Gentiles converted directly to the Christian faith.
 2. This **new social reality**, sometimes called the “**tertium gens**” (third nation – after Jews and Greeks) was able to **overcome traditional boundaries**, especially between “free” and “slaves”, and thus demonstrated a new, reconciled reality to the outside world. “There is neither **Jew** nor **Gentile**, neither **slave** nor **free**, nor is there **male** and **female**, for you are all **one** in Christ Jesus.” (Gal 3,28)
 3. It was especially the new freedom and **dignity** that **women** were able to enjoy in the church that proved to be attractive. The **new ethical code** enforced in the churches provided protection to women, children and dependents (“slaves”) in a way that was in stark contrast to the surrounding Greek-Roman society.
 4. The “**Pax Romana**” (“Roman peace”) offered a stable political context, which allowed for safe and easy **travel** across the empire – as seen e.g. in the travels of the apostle Paul and others. This facilitated the **communication** and **growth** of the church congregations across the empire. Koine Greek was understood in all urban centers, a unifying reality which helped the spread of the gospel message.
 5. The **new life** that the Christian church communities developed, with their emphasis on community (**koinonia**), witness (**martyria**), service (**diakonia**), the reality of the Holy Spirit (**charisma**) and clear repudiation of their former way of life (**metanoia**), and thus living a distinct ethic and following the commands of Holy Scripture, striving to live a **consecrated life**, was very much **counter-culture**. (also see **outline 3** for these central points!)
 6. The resulting **fascination** with the Christian way which expressed itself both in **admiration**, but often also misunderstanding, aversion and hatred, sometimes leading to outright **persecution**, put the Christian cause into the central focus of Roman society. The church, small as it was, could no longer be ignored and grew steadily in spite of opposition.

7. Thus, the early Christians bore **witness in life and death** to the truth of the gospel. Their clarion call “**Iesous Kyrios**” - “Jesus is Lord” **challenged** ancient society at the core – with emperor worship (“Kaisar Kyrios” - “Caesar is Lord”) being a central point of social and political cohesion – and at the same time **transformed** the empire to the point, where finally, in the 4th century, even the emperors had to bend their knees and confess the **Lordship** of Jesus Christ.

Suggested Readings:

Eusebius of Caesarea: Church History (also: Ecclesiastical History).

- An online version: https://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0265-0339,_Eusebius_Caesariensis,_Historia_ecclesiastica_%5BSchaff%5D,_EN.pdf
- An audio version in English: <https://librivox.org/eusebius-history-of-the-christian-church-tr-by-mcgiffert/>

Apostolic Fathers / Early Christian writers.

- See the online "Library of Church Fathers" by the University of Fribourg / Switzerland, which provides almost all church fathers in English, French and German: <https://bkv.unifr.ch/en>