

The Growth of the Christian Church

“There went forth a stream” is the title of this lesson on the growth of the Christian church. That title comes from the church of the East, *The Odes of Solomon* hymnbook, which we think was produced in the church in Syria, perhaps in the second century. The prayer we will use to begin this lecture comes from one of the church leaders in the West, from the city of Rome, Clement of Rome, pastor to the church there. He died in about 100 AD. I use this prayer from Clement because it contains so many of the elements that made it possible for the early church to grow. “There went forth a stream...” and as we pray with this ancient church father, Clement of Rome, we catch a glimpse of some of the features and strengths of early Christianity that made it possible for that stream to reach both to the East and to the West. Let us pray.

Grant unto us, Lord, that we may set our hope on Thy name and open the eyes of our hearts that we may know Thee. We beseech Thee, Lord and Master, to be our help and succor. Save those among us who are in tribulation, have mercy on the lowly, lift up the fallen, show Thyself to those in need, heal the sick, turn again the wanderers of Thy people, feed the hungry, ransom our prisoners, raise up the weak, comfort the fainthearted. Let all nations know that Thou are God alone and that Jesus Christ is Thy Son and that we are Thy people and the sheep of Thy pasture. We praise Thee who are able to do these and better things than these, through Jesus Christ the High Priest and guardian of our souls through whom be glory and majesty to Thee both now and throughout all generations forever and ever. Amen.

Some years ago my son Allen was studying in graduate school at Indiana University, and he was taking a class in early Christian history from a professor who was not a professing Christian by any means. And as this professor described the triumph of Christianity he expressed a great deal of amazement that Christianity, a small sect of Judaism originating in an unimportant Roman province without great power among its early followers, and of all the possibilities for the triumph of any one religion in the Roman world, Christianity was the one that did triumph. “How could that be?” he said, “It really had nothing going for it.” Well my lecture today is an attempt to answer this professor and to understand something of why Christianity not only grew but eventually triumphed. When we look at the spread of Christianity we can see it in different ways. First of all we can look at the spread of Christianity as a cultural movement. As we go through this course and through the Reformation and Modern Church History course, we will be looking at the six cultural transitions that took place in the spread of Christianity as identified by Professor Andrew Walls. Professor Walls talks about six cultural frontiers across which Christianity moved at very critical times in its history. He says that as Christianity moved from one cultural milieu to the next, it did it just in the nick of time. Without that cultural movement, humanly speaking, it would have died. The first of those cultural movements was the transition from Judaism to the Gentile world. The earliest Christians were of course Jews. Because of the resistance on the part of Jewish Christians, including some of the apostles at first, it is one of the marvels of history that Christianity entered a second phase at all. To see Christianity move beyond the bounds of Judaism into the Gentile world is a marvel. But in Acts we have Antioch, the Jerusalem Council, and above all we have the visionary work of the Apostle Paul, and we see Christianity moving from its Jewish roots into the next phase of its history, into the Gentile world. As Professor Walls points out, this happens just in the nick of time because the Jewish state disappeared in the wars of AD 70 and 135. But by the time the Jewish state disappeared in those wars with the Romans, Christianity was firmly planted in its second cultural context, the culture of the Greco-Roman world. That is one way to look at the spread of Christianity, from a Jewish sect to a religious faith embraced by Gentiles far and wide as well as by Jews.

The second way to look at the spread of Christianity is to see it as a social movement. When Paul wrote to the church at Corinth he said, "Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were influential, not many were of noble birth." That continued to be true for the church throughout the Roman world. The early church was largely made up of common people sometimes called the people of the lower classes. The opponents of Christianity were not slow to notice this and to use it as an instrument against the Christians. Celsus was one of the early opponents of Christianity who was answered by Origen (we will study this later). Celsus said that the Christian message was this: "Let no one educated, no one wise, and no one sensible come near." He said, "By the fact that Christians admit that these people are worthy of their God they show that they want and are able to convince only the foolish, the dishonorable, and the stupid, only slaves, women, little children." That was part of Celsus' attack on the Christian faith. In a sense it was true. Christians did not deny this charge. A Christian apologist, Minucius Felix, said, "That many of us are called poor is not our disgrace but our glory." There were many poor people who were members of the early church. Women were accepted as full members of the church. It is probable that in the early church, as throughout most of church history, women made up a larger percentage of the church than men. Even more remarkable, slaves were also accepted as full members of the church and participated equally in the worship of the community. In fact, we think that a slave named Callistus became bishop of the church of Rome in the early third century, perhaps the most important post in the Christian church at that time. Many of the people who embraced Christ and joined the Christian church were poor people. But there were some, as was also true in Corinth, who were from the higher classes.

By Nero's time, the 60s AD, Christianity was beginning to infiltrate the noble families of Rome. Paul, writing from prison in Rome to the Philippians, said, "All the saints send you greetings, especially those who belong to Caesar's household." So even at that early date there were some Christians who had a high place in government. There is evidence that in Emperor Domitian's time, the 90s AD, the emperor's cousin and wife were Christians. We are not absolutely sure about all the details of this, but apparently these two people were banished or put to death and their two young sons have vanished from history. They had been designated as Domitian's heirs, and it could well be that the presumptive heirs of the throne of the Roman Empire before the first century were Christians. What a change! Thirty years after the fearful persecutions of Nero, the heirs to the throne were brought up in a Christian house. Clement of Alexandria in the late second century wrote a sermon titled, "What kind of rich person can be saved?" The very fact that this church father would preach a sermon on this topic shows that people with wealth were beginning to become part of the Christian church and this was now a question to be answered. Clement's writings show that he did not yet have a very clear idea of salvation by faith alone in Jesus Christ. But Clement's answer to the question posed in his sermon, "What kind of rich person can be saved?" is a moderate one: "the person who does not set his heart on wealth and put it first, like the rich young ruler did." The person who does not do that certainly can be saved and be part of the Christian church.

Christianity moves culturally out of Judaism to the Greco-Roman world. It moves throughout the social levels of the Roman Empire, although the large majority of Christians remain people of the lower classes, common people. Next we will look at the geographical movement of the church. As we discuss this it would be helpful to have a map of the Roman world to reference. We will look at the movement first to the West and then to the East. In Acts we see the beginning of the movement of Christianity to the West up into Asia Minor, from there to Greece, and from there to Italy, and perhaps even into Spain. By the end of the first century Asia Minor had become the most Christianized area of the Roman Empire. Though there are very few Christians in that area now, at the end of the first century Asia Minor was the center of Christianity. There were other places that had also become Christian in part. By 185

AD Christianity had spread more widely in Asia Minor, Greece, and Italy, and had also spread all the way to Gaul. There was persecution in the city of Lyons in Gaul in the year 177 AD, during which a Christian bishop was put to death. There was a Christian center up in Germania. There were Christian churches in different parts of Spain. There were also Christians in different locations in North Africa. North Africa at this time was part of the Roman Empire. North Africa from Egypt to Numidia and Mauretania were included in the Roman Empire. There is a tradition that Mark first established the Christian church in Alexandria. It is hard to know how to treat some of these church traditions about the establishment of the church in different places because almost every church everywhere wanted to claim a big name. Even Scotland claims Andrew the Apostle, who is also claimed by Russia. If that is the case then Andrew would have had to travel widely and evangelize in many different places and in many different languages. Thus I think we have to treat those traditions with some caution. Mark Shaw in his *History of the Kingdom of God in Africa*, says, “Until more evidence is produced we should neither rule out St. Mark’s role in Egyptian history nor endorse the tradition as it stands.” Later, Christianity moved further south into Africa outside the bounds of the Roman Empire into Nubia and Ethiopia. We will look at that movement as we get to the later history of the church.

Thus Christianity begins to make its way into the West, and it begins to spread widely by the end of the second century. It is sometimes forgotten that Christianity moved also to the East. I have a book in my library by J. C. Wan, *History of the Early Christian Church to the Year A.D. 500*. This is a very fine book. But Professor Wan says this: “The birthplace of the church stood on the boundary between the East and the West. It is significant that this infant religion, as soon as it was strong enough to leave the cradle, marched straight to the West.” It did not go straight to the West. Acts tells us of the beginning of that story of the spread of Christianity to the West. But it also went to the East. With Sam Moffat’s *History of Christianity in Asia*, we really do not have any excuse now for not knowing something of the remarkable spread of Christianity to the East. The first New Testament translation was in Syriac in the East. The first Christian hymnbook, *The Odes of Solomon*, which I referred to earlier, was produced in Syria. The first known church building was in the East, in Edessa or Eura Europis—both have claims on that. An archeology team from North Carolina State University thinks they have discovered an even earlier church building in Acaba which is also in the East, in Jordan. The first Christian king and state may have been in Armenia or Eastern Turkey, 100 years before Constantine. I say all that to stress the importance of not leaving out the history of the spread of Christianity to the East.

I would like to focus on two aspects of the eastern spread of the church. The first aspect I would like to focus on is the spread of Christianity to India. The tradition is that the apostle Thomas went to India. Most of these traditions about where the apostles went and what happened to them are probably legendary, but there is more reason to believe that the tradition of Thomas going to India is a true tradition. There are Christians in India who still look back to Thomas as the founder of their church. Samuel Moffat in his book evaluates this opinion by saying, “Most opinions [concerning the tradition of Thomas founding the church in India] range from possible to probable, with a discernable trend towards the latter.” Dr. Moffat is a very cautious scholar so if he says it is probable then we can take his word for it, that Thomas probably reached India. And there is another tradition that in the late second century, about 120 years after the martyrdom of Thomas in India, another missionary left the Roman world, this time from Alexandria in Egypt. The head of the catechetical school there (roughly the equivalent to a president of a seminary now), Vantenis, left his important center in the Roman world “in order to preach Christ to the Bramans and philosophers in India,” as St. Jerome said in the fifth century. Dr. Moffat says, “The story of the visit of Vantenis to India is not to be dismissed lightly. There are indirect, presumptive indications from the period of his mission that tend to support the later references to his journey.” Not only does Christianity spread very early to India, but it also spreads into Syria, to Edessa, and the little kingdom of Armenia in Turkey, just across the Euphrates. Armenia we think became the

first Christian state with a Christian king—100 years before Constantine, the first Christian emperor in the Roman world. From Edessa Christianity spread to Arbela, across the Tigris near ancient Nineveh. This area produced a very famous Eastern theologian whose name was Tatian. He was chiefly known for the *Diatessaron*, that is, *The Life of Christ*, that he compiled from the four gospels. Then Christianity spread, amazingly, from Arbela into Persia and all the way into Afghanistan. By the end of the second century there were churches as far east as Persia and modern-day northern Afghanistan. So the church spread from Syria to Mesopotamia to Persia to Afghanistan, and down into India before the second century AD. The Christian faith was unquestionably spreading across the continent of Asia as vigorously as it spread into Europe.

Now I want to come to another question. Why did Christianity spread? My son's professor said it had nothing going for it. He did not understand how this feeble religion with its nondescript followers could have such an impact on the world. Well, the first answer to the question of why Christianity did spread certainly has to be the power of the Gospel. It is not an answer that every historian would see at first, but certainly a Christian historian sees that there is something supernatural about the spread of the Christian faith. The world into which Christianity came, both in the East and West, was a world full of religions. Sometimes people have said that Christianity came into a vacuum—people were looking for something to believe and so they latched on to Christianity because there was not anything else. That is very far from the truth. The Roman world particularly was filled with warring sects and rival faiths. There were the traditional pagan religions. This was not the prime of paganism, the Greco-Roman gods, but those religions were not gone from the Empire. In fact, on the popular level they were still very strong. You can read Acts and find Paul encountering the pagan religions at Lystra, the worship of Zeus. And in Athens Paul encounters the worship of many gods and goddesses including an unknown god. Also in Ephesus Paul finds the worship of Artemis, or Diana as she was called by the Romans. So the traditional pagan religions were still alive.

There were also the mystery religions. These were a great variety of Eastern religions promising a sense of belonging and personal salvation, which did not come from the traditional gods of Greece and Rome. Their worshipers really had no personal relationship with these gods; they just tried not to offend them. But the mystery religions promised a great deal more: salvation and fellowship with the god or goddess. There were many of these. From Persia came the worship of Mythrias. From Egypt came the worship of Isis. From Asia Minor came the worship of Cybele. There were numerous mystery religions. When the ruins of Pompey were discovered two centuries ago one of the first structures uncovered in that Roman city was an opulent temple to the Egyptian goddess Isis. In addition to the mystery religions there were also the philosophies, which provided a kind of religious allegiance for some people. These included Stoicism, Epicureanism, and others. These philosophies had moved away from theory to practical religious commitment by the end of the second century. They promised, through rational processes, the discovery of a good life and even hope beyond death. As part of the religious mix of the Roman Empire there was the imperial cult. This was the worship of the emperor. Beginning with the death of Julius Caesar in 44 BC there was a tendency to deify the Roman emperor after he died. But by the time we come to Augustus the living emperor was beginning to be viewed as a god to be worshiped. Romans practiced the worship of the emperor. It was really a small thing that was required, simply bowing before the image of the emperor or taking a little pinch of incense and burning it in a flame before some symbol of the emperor. This was viewed as a unifying and patriotic act to hold the empire together.

Rome promoted a kind of amalgamation of all these religions. You could believe in all of them if you wanted to. The only thing that was absolutely required was the worship of the emperor. Edward Gibbon, in his famous *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, offered a cynical view of Rome's attitude toward all these religions. This is what he said: "The various modes of worship which prevailed in the Roman

world were all considered by the people as equally true, by the philosophers as equally false, by the magistrates as equally useful, and thus toleration produced not only mutual indulgence but even religious concord.” But then Christianity comes into this and stirs up all kinds of trouble. We see this beginning in the New Testament and we see it continuing in the history of this time in the Roman Empire. This is because Christianity and Judaism were the only two exclusive religions of the time. You could not add anything else to Christianity or to Judaism. This became a source of persecution, not because Christians were Christians but because Christians were Christians only. The magistrates often charged Christians this way, “You do not worship the gods. You do not sacrifice to the emperor.” All they had to do was sacrifice to the emperor and worship the gods and all would be well. Not only was the exclusiveness of Christianity a source of persecution, but it was also a source of great strength. I think this was one of the reasons Christianity did spread. One historian has put it this way, “There were too many cults, too many mysteries, too many philosophies of life to choose from. You could pile one religious insurance on another and yet not feel safe. Christianity made a clean sweep.” You can see the appeal of that. Arnold Tionby and many others have said that in the modern world for Christianity to survive it must give up its claims to exclusiveness and make common cause with other religions. But the reason it survived and grew, and even flourished, in the early church is that it did not do that. If it had done that it would have long since disappeared from history.

Not only do we have the power of the Gospel, but we also have the witness of Christians. Christianity was victorious because the early Christians outlived, out-thought, and out-died the world around them. The role of the apostles, as I have already said, is somewhat uncertain. It is highly probable that Thomas made it to India, and we know that Peter died in Rome; we know that John went to Ephesus and was in prison for a time on the island of Patmos. But the legends about the other apostles are probably just legends. The Lord gave the Great Commission to the apostles, but He also gave it to everyone. We know that the ordinary Christians were missionaries. In the early period, the second calling of every Christian was to be a missionary. The Gospel was carried by merchants along the trade routes and by soldiers from post to post as these Christians went throughout the empire and also into the East, one loving heart setting another on fire. These Christians were able to witness by word, but they also witnessed by deed. Tertullian put it this way, in memorable words: “It is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a brand on us.” Tertullian is saying, “This is what the pagans are saying about us. This is not what Christians are saying about each other, but the watching world says this about the Christian church. They say, ‘See how they love one another? How they are ready even to die for one another?’” That love Christians had for one another overflowed. The community of faith reached out to people in the world so that the church father Ignatius could talk about a love for the widows and orphans, for the oppressed and imprisoned, for the hungry, the thirsty, for the abandoned babies who were left to die. Christians had a reputation as people who loved each other and even loved those who persecuted them. The Scottish historian James Orr said, “The new spirit of self-denying love which Christianity breathed into the world awoke wonder from its very strangeness.” This was strange and people began to wonder about it and were brought into the faith because they were so impressed by the conduct of these Christians. And Christians witnessed also by their deaths, as we will see in the next lecture when we begin to study persecution. Again, Tertullian put it in famous words: “Blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” Of course not everyone was converted who saw the martyrs put to death, but we have many true stories of jailers, magistrates, and people in the stands watching the courageous deaths of Christians who abandoned their faith and joined the Christian church, sometimes to be martyred themselves right on the spot. Someone has said that martyrdom was the opportunity of the early church for mass evangelism. They did not hold great rallies and public preaching services, but as thousands watched Christians die, that was their opportunity for mass evangelism.

It has been asked, what was the role of children in the early church? Women and slaves were fully accepted, but what was the role of children? The question of infant baptism and whether that was a practice in the early church is a question that we will look at later. But the question of the role of children is not one that we can answer as fully as I would like. We do know that baptism marked a significant change in a believer's participation in the church. Unbaptized children and adults would take part in much of the worship of the church, but the Lord's Supper was reserved for the baptized members of the church. It has also been asked, what happened to Paul? I suppose that debate will go on until we are all in heaven and can ask Paul. I am no expert on this, but I tend to think that Paul went to Rome, was imprisoned, was released, traveled back to eastern Mesopotamia, and then was rearrested and taken back to Rome and put to death during the persecution in Rome by Nero in the 60s AD, about 64 AD. According to my interpretation Paul did not make it to Spain. I wish he had made it to Spain. It is nice to think of Paul evangelizing in the East, going to Rome and saying, "You are already evangelized," and then going on to Spain." There are different ways to interpret the evidence. I am not sure if he made it to Spain. In my opinion he probably did not, though he certainly wanted to. On the other hand, there are Christian communities in Spain very early on, by 185 AD. If Paul did not make it to Spain, then someone else did. But after Paul, as I pointed out, we really do not know the names of the missionaries. They were traders, soldiers, and ordinary people like Priscilla and Aquilla—an important duo who were in Rome, went to Ephesus, and then went back to Rome. As merchants they traveled about spreading the Gospel. I think that is the normal way that Christianity spread as well as through the soldiers in the army.

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us." (Hebrews 12:1)