

THE CHURCH SPREADS ACROSS THE EMPIRE

The resurrection of Jesus was the starting point of Christian faith. The idea of resurrection had already appeared in Judaism during the second century B.C., but Christians found their faith in resurrection given new clarity and certitude through faith in the resurrection of Jesus. They first gave voice to this faith in the various brief formulas such as we find in the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians: "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures • • • he was buried and, in accordance with the Scriptures, rose on the third day."

The Acts of the Apostles pictures the Church itself as only beginning with the Pentecostal explosion of the Spirit—that is, the event that occurred on the Jewish feast of Pentecost shortly after the resurrection, when the first believers were filled with the Holy Spirit, who confirmed them in their faith and ignited in them a zeal to witness publicly and urge others to believe, repent, and be baptized. They shared an intimate fellowship of love and prayer centered on the Eucharistic breaking of the bread in their homes—in obedience to the Lord's command at the Last Supper to repeat his words and actions.

This small community of believers at Jerusalem was led by twelve men who were supposedly chosen by Jesus himself during his lifetime and were later named apostles. Their leader and spokesman, according to the Acts

of the Apostles, was Peter (or, in Greek, Cephas). According to Paul, Peter was the first to see the risen Jesus, while Acts pictures him as the apostle who preaches the first sermon and works the first miracle. Two others who stand out at this period were John, who is closely associated with Peter in Acts; and James, who apparently succeeded Peter as leader of the Jerusalem community after Peter departed to do missionary work.

The story of how this tiny community of believers spread to countless cities of the Roman Empire within less than a century is indeed a remarkable chapter in the history of humanity. In attempting to trace it here we must realize that our sources are limited and that we must tolerate many gaps in our information. Still it is possible to put together the basic story.

We must keep in mind that the first apostles were all Jews, and so were their first converts. For a time the Church remained completely Jewish, a sect within Israel of those who believed in the resurrection of Jesus and regarded him as the promised Messiah who was about to come again to definitively establish the reign of God.

Their new faith did not require them to break with the Temple or the Law. In fact, the Acts of the Apostles emphasizes how faithful they were to daily prayer in the Temple. Some Jewish leaders, notably the Sadducees, regarded the Christians as an alien group of nonconformists and wanted to suppress them. But the Jewish leaders were

unable to because public opinion favored the Christians and admired their fervent piety and fidelity to Jewish custom.

The spread of the Church beyond Jerusalem occurred very gradually as the disciples carried their message to the numerous Jewish communities scattered along the Mediterranean coast. At first they confined their evangelizing efforts to their fellow Jews, no doubt in conformity with the practice of Jesus himself, who said he had come to preach only to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel." The first group to break with this custom were probably some Jewish dissidents with strong Hellenistic ties and unorthodox views on the Jewish Temple worship. Their leader Stephen, the deacon, was arrested and denounced to the Sanhedrin for speaking against the Temple. When questioned by the high priest, he launched into a polemic against his fellow Jews whom he blasted as "stubborn people, with • • • pagan hearts and pagan ears,"! Stephen was stoned to death, and his martyrdom triggered a general persecution; his followers sought refuge elsewhere and began to preach the Gospel wherever they traveled.

It was at Antioch, it seems, that they took the revolutionary step that would have momentous consequences for the spread of the Church and the history of the world. Here they first preached the Gospel to the

Gentiles and dared to baptize them. And they made this city the center of missionary work among the Gentiles.

Such an innovation no doubt sorely troubled many of the pious who found no room in their faith for the idea of a mission to the pagan Gentiles. But at first they went along. A liberal attitude toward Gentile converts seemed to prevail in the Church: They were not required to be circumcised or otherwise to observe the Jewish Law. But as greater numbers of them began to stream into the Church, misgivings were felt by the more traditional-minded, who demanded they be circumcised and made to obey the Jewish Law. There was undoubtedly a fear that the Church would be swamped by these Gentiles and lose its Jewish character. And so the Church was plunged into its first great controversy, which shook it to its roots; at bottom it was the question of whether it was 'going to remain an exclusively Jewish affair or stretch out to encompass all of humanity.

The man who contributed most to the solution of the matter was Saul of Tarsus, known by his Roman name, Paul. It was Paul who stripped the Gospel of much of its Jewish character and adapted it to appeal to all humanity.

For him, in fact, the very essence of the Gospel was at stake in the controversy over circumcision; to require Gentiles to practice the Jewish Law would be tantamount to saying that faith in the risen Lord Jesus was not enough for salvation; observance of the Law was also necessary.

Paul's understanding of the Gospel as a liberation from the Law was not some academic theory he had worked out in a study; it was at the very heart of the conversion experience that had changed him from a dedicated devotee of the Law to an ardent disciple of Jesus. As a zealous rabbi, student of the great Gamaliel at Jerusalem and subsequently a figure of importance in the synagogues there, Paul could say, "I stood out among other Jews of my generation [in my enthusiasm] for the traditions of my ancestors." (bracketed portion is my paraphrase) 2 He had even become a chief persecutor of the disciples and was present at the stoning of Stephen.

But then spiritual lightning struck! He had an immediate experience of the risen Jesus. His spiritual universe turned up. side down; he realized that with the coming of Jesus the era of the Law had passed. "I look on everything as so much rubbish if only I can have Christ and be given a place in him. I am no longer trying for perfection by my own efforts, the perfection that comes from the Law, but I want only the perfection that comes through faith in Christ, and is from God and based on faith."B This central intuition into the meaning of the coming of Christ was henceforth to govern all of his preaching and writing.

So when Paul heard the traditionalists saying the Gentiles must be circumcised, he insisted, "what makes a man righteous is not obedience to the Law, but faith in Jesus Christ. • . • if the Law can justify us, there is no point in the death of Christ. • • • When Christ freed us,

he meant unto remain free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery."

There is no doubt that the conflict became shrill and bitter and that the unity of the Church was severely strained, particularly at Antioch, where the Christian community was already in large part Gentile. Their Jewish Christian brethren who had previously felt no scruples about joining in the common meals taken with the Eucharist now withdrew due to pressure from those who wanted to maintain the link with Judaism. Even Peter, who shared Paul's views, momentarily wavered and deserted the common table. Paul was indignant and dressed him down publicly.

A resolution of the issue could not be postponed indefinitely, and so a council was held at Jerusalem, probably in the Year 49. It was undoubtedly a long and stormy session. At the close Peter argued in favor of freedom for the Gentiles, appealing to experience, which showed that the uncircumcised Gentiles also possessed the Spirit. Peter concluded: "We believe that we are saved in the same way as they are: through the grace of the Lord Jesus."

It was James, however, who summed up the debate and pronounced the verdict: Circumcision would not be required of the Gentiles. But to soothe the sensibilities of the traditionalists and preserve the unity of table fellowship, a compromise was arranged: All would be obliged to follow certain Jewish laws; abstinence was required from any food

offered in sacrifice to idols; illicit sexual intercourse was forbidden, and certain Jewish dietary regulations were imposed, specifically those that forbade the taking of meat with blood still in it (blood was regarded as the seat of life and hence belonging to the Lord). The meat of strangled animals—that is, animals not killed according to Jewish ritual—was also forbidden.

This did not immediately clear up all dissension; some recalcitrant refused to go along and were later to trouble Paul no end by visiting his churches in order to lead them back to strict Jewish observance. But these traditionalists were fighting a losing battle; the pillars of the Church had decided against them in an open debate in full assembly. Paul's understanding of the Gospel was accepted by the Church as her own. The Church officially shed her exclusively Jewish character and became potentially the Church of all humanity. It was a great turning point in the history of the Church and of the world.

It was with the Gentiles that the future of the Church lay and now that the door was wide open, Paul lost no time in going out to gather them in. His ambition was to take the Gospel to the whole world; extended missionary journeys took him across Asia Minor and into Greece, where he left behind congregations in Iconium, Lystra, Colossae, Philippi, Thessalonica, Beroea, Athens, Corinth, Ephesus, and many other places.

He went only to those towns where the Gospel had not yet been preached, and his usual method was to start in the synagogue, where he endeavored to show to the Jews and proselytes gathered for the service that Christ was the fulfillment of the promises of the Old Testament. Often, as at Corinth, the outcome was trouble. When they turned against him in the Corinthian synagogue and began to insult him, he said, "Your blood be on your own heads . . . from now on I will turn to the Gentiles." And as usual he had more success with the pagan Corinthians, many of whom heard him and became believers and were baptized. In this way he left behind churches where the distinction between Jew and Gentile was of no importance.

His letters to his fledgling communities show Paul as the first and greatest in the ranks of shapers of Church history: men who combined a profound depth of religious experience with an uncanny ability to organize—men like Augustine, Bernard, Loyola, Luther, and Wesley. Paul's letters contain deep theological insights that laid the groundwork for the future developments of theology and yet at the same time reveal his remarkable concern for every little detail in the life of his congregations.

Thanks then to the Jerusalem decision allowing freedom to the Gentiles and thanks to the incredible labors of Paul and other missionaries, the Church spread with remarkable rapidity. We know that by the year 59, for instance, Paul felt that he had exhausted his possibilities in the eastern

Mediterranean. "All the way along, from Jerusalem to Illyricum, I have preached Christ's Good News to the utmost of my capacity."⁶ And we may reasonably infer that those regions mentioned that he himself had not evangelized were evangelized by others.

Paul now set his sights on Spain, the oldest Roman province, and the main center of Roman civilization in the western Mediterranean. But before he could set sail for the West, there was a matter of critical importance to attend to. He must visit Jerusalem again to deliver the collection for the Poor that he had taken up among his churches. It would also provide the occasion, he hoped, for reaching full agreement with the Church there as he entered on a new phase of his missionary effort. It is with this in mind that he penned his great epistle to the Romans, which he intended for Jerusalem as much as for Rome and which contained his mature reflection on the central issue of the Law vs. the Gospel. Hopefully it would clear up any remaining doubts the Jewish Christians still entertained on this matter. The whole epistle reflects Paul's tremendous concern for the unity of Church, which was as much an obsession with him as the worldwide spread of the Gospel. "One Lord, one faith, one baptism," was the way he put it. Hence he strove to stay in touch with Jerusalem-the acknowledged mother of all the churches-and with its leaders there.

When Paul arrived in Jerusalem, he was induced by James and the fellow elders to show his reverence for the

Law by undertaking a ceremonial purification in the Temple. While there he was recognized by some Asian Jews, who raised a hue and cry against him as a notorious traitor. The fracas that followed almost cost him his life; he was rescued by the Roman tribune but imprisoned to await trial.

Finally, after two years in the garrison at Caesarea-an eternity for one so hungry to spread the Gospel-he appealed to Emperor Nero and was sent to Rome and detained for two years under house arrest while awaiting trial.

What was the charge against him? Apparently Rome saw in him the ringleader of a sect preaching a revolutionary international form of Judaism that might undermine the social order. Was he tried then and executed immediately, or did this occur a few years later, in 64? Most scholars prefer the latter alternative. In any case he probably never achieved his ambition of evangelizing Spain. But when he died, his dream of a Church as wide as humanity itself was well on the way to realization-thanks in great part to his own clear-sighted vision and tremendous organizing skill.

There were, of course, many other missionaries at the time whose experience must have closely paralleled Paul's. Unfortunately, we know little about them. Even Peter's career after he left Jerusalem is for the most part a lost chapter, although we can readily believe the unanimous Christian tradition that testifies to his death at Rome under Nero. Nor do we know much about the other apostles,

although second. Century legend is quite willing to fill up the lacunae in our knowledge: It tells us that St. Thomas evangelized the Parthians, St. Andrew the Scythians, St. Bartholomew went as far as India and perhaps to southern Arabia, while Philip died at Hierapolis in Phrygia. We only know for certain that many traveling missionaries crisscrossed the Roman world preaching the Gospel with much success, so that by the end of the first century Christianity was well established there.

The great success of the Gospel among the Gentiles was in stark contrast to its fate among the Jews. Those Jewish Christians who tried to convert their fellow Jews met with continual hostility and rejection; around A.D. 85 a formal anathema of them was incorporated in the synagogue liturgy. Nor were matters helped by the attitude of Gentile Christians who denounced the Jews as stiff-necked apostates deservedly punished by God when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and burned down their temple in A.D. 70. A critical stage was reached in the Epistle to the Hebrews, which made rejection of Judaism essential for Christians and characterized return to Judaism as apostasy. Left alone and unsupported, the Jewish Christians gradually slipped into oblivion.

The rapid spread of the Gospel among the pagans, on the other hand, constituted the greatest religious revival in the history of man. How do we explain such a phenomenon? No doubt our explanation will vary according to our particular

philosophical or religious bias, but certainly all would agree that the expansion of Christianity owed much to general political, social, and cultural trends.

First of all, there were the favorable material conditions afforded by Rome's dominance of the Mediterranean world. After four centuries of expansion, the Roman Empire by this time completely encircled the Mediterranean Sea and stretched from the Euphrates River in Syria to the Thames in Britain, from the Rhine and the Danube to the sands of the Sahara. And it bound together this vast medley of peoples of many races and languages with its marvelous system of roads and shipping. This greatly facilitated the work of the Christian missionaries, who were able to travel the length and breadth of the Empire with relative ease. Moreover, the Romans promoted the spread of a common culture derived from Hellenism. This meant that the missionaries could preach the Gospel in Greek in almost all the large cities and be understood.

Second, the world was largely at peace, thanks to the work of Emperor Octavian Augustus, who reigned at the time of Christ's birth and early youth. The designated heir of the assassinated Julius Caesar, he had been able to outmaneuver the other contenders for power, and finally in 31 a.d., by his defeat of Antony and Cleopatra, win supreme command of the Roman Empire. With astute political realism, he fashioned a new system-the precipitated-

which concentrated most of the power into his own hands while outwardly preserving traditional Republican forms. This new constitution that he devised enabled him to rule unchallenged for more than forty years and outlasted him for several centuries, providing the Empire with a stable form of government that enabled it to keep the barbarian menace at bay and give a large measure of peace to the world for nearly two hundred years. The conditions of security afforded to travelers by this Roman peace were very beneficial to the Christian missionaries.

Third, it was spiritually a time of extraordinary unrest. In spite of increasing prosperity and the possibilities of enhanced enjoyment in the cities where theaters, stadia, amphitheaters, and baths provided a constant source of amusement for the inhabitants, there was a growing spiritual hunger. The rapid social change accompanying progress unsettled many minds, while the political climate was most depressing. The loss of political freedom was bad enough, but the successors of Augustus were themselves a strange lot. Tiberius (d. 37), Caius Caligula (d. 41), Claudius (d. 54), and Nero (d. 68) were Emperors whose personal lives were darkened by bizarre, macabre incidents and crimes; the atmosphere of their courts was heavy with intrigue and foul suspicion. Tiberius, under whom Christ was crucified, was a competent soldier but an unhappy Emperor-crushed by the discovery that his son, Drusus, had been murdered by his own most trusted adviser, Sejanus. His nerves

shattered, Tiberius retired to Capri, where he spent the last years of his reign. Caligula was a mentally deranged megalomaniac who was assassinated. Claudius, weak in body and will, was dominated by his wife, Agrippina, who finally poisoned him to make room for her son, Nero. Then Nero in turn murdered her and began a reign of terror that took the lives of many of Rome's outstanding leaders before he himself was forced to commit suicide.

The reaction of sensitive spirits to all of this and their mood of gloom and pessimism is reflected in much of the literature and art of the time-in the writings of Petronius, Martial, Juvenal, Seneca, Pliny, and perhaps most memorably in the writings of the grim and somber Tacitus, chief historian of the age.

This state of affairs provided a great opportunity for a religion that could help fill the spiritual vacuum experienced by so many. And it was Christianity that made the most of this opportunity.

Not that a seeker after salvation would necessarily turn to religion. Some found consolation in philosophy. The Stoic philosophers, for instance, won many followers by their doctrine that one could put oneself in harmony with the universe by attending to the underlying rationality of its laws; they also emphasized the need for self-discipline in order to attain inner peace and equilibrium of soul amid the vexing contingencies of life. Philosophy, however, as always, was only a refuge for an elite. The ordinary man

searched for spiritual peace in some form of religion, astrology, or magic.

The old Roman religion provided little competition for Christianity. Faith in the ancient gods could not be revived, as Augustus and other Emperors found to their dismay. Nor could the average person take much comfort in the rites and ceremonies dedicated to the deified Emperors themselves.

Much more powerful as a rival to Christianity were the mystery religions that were quite numerous and rapidly spreading during this period. They were syncretistic kinds of faith that fused Hellenic and Oriental thought. The most important ones were the Dionysian and Orphic mysteries of Thrace; the Eleusinian from Eleusis, near Athens; the religion of the Great Mother, Cybele, from Anatolia in Asia Minor; the Persian religion of Mithra and the Egyptian cult of Isis and Osiris. They were called mysteries because their central rites were kept secret from all but initiates. In spite of various differences, they all had certain characteristics in common: a sublime view of the godhead, a profound sense of cleavage between spirit and flesh, and a great yearning for a redeemer who would deliver devotees from all guilt and confer on them eternal life.

One of the best-known mystery religions is that of Cybele, the Great Mother. Like the others it gives evidence of having originated in fertility rites associated with the vegetative rhythms of nature-death in winter and

resurrection in the spring. Cybele, the mother of all gods and men, had as her companion the semi divine Attis, who betrayed her and then in remorse castrated himself and died. The Great Mother, however, restored him to life and deified him, making him immortal. This myth was celebrated in two main rituals: In the taurobolium, the faithful reenacted the death of Attis by slaying a bull, then baptizing themselves in his blood-smearing it over themselves and even drinking it; in the spring festival of Attis' resurrection, they engaged in frenzied dancing while lacerating themselves and sprinkling the blood on a pine tree symbolizing Attis, until in a final ecstasy some of the men would castrate themselves in imitation of their god. By participating in such rituals the devotee believed himself regenerated, liberated from guilt, and reborn as a new person, sharing in the divinity and immortality of his gods. The mystery religion that proved to be the most serious rival of Christianity, however, was Mithraism, which was restricted to men and very popular with soldiers. Originating in Persia, it was apparently spread around the Mediterranean by the soldiers of Alexander the Great. Mithra was a Persian sun god who had slain the cosmic bull whose blood was the source of all life. His images always show him fighting for right against wrong-an appealing idea for soldiers. The cult promised immortality to its initiates. Its shrines have been uncovered in many places, a large one recently in London.

Certain similarities of doctrines and rites have led some scholars to claim that Christianity belongs in the same category as the mystery religions and, in fact, is derived to some extent from them. The evidence, however, does not support such theories. The fact that both the mysteries and the Christian Church used certain rites such as washings, anointing, and sacred meals does not necessarily indicate a dependency. Such primitive symbols are so basic to humanity that any religious person might use them to express an experience transcending this world.

Moreover, the Christian conception of salvation is worlds apart from that of the mysteries. The devotees of Cybele or Mithra saw their salvation as a magical liberation from the flesh. Christians, on the other hand, assumed the existence of sin and free will and conceived redemption as the forgiveness of sin. They preached sin and repentance with a frightening earnestness that had nothing in common with the orgiastic, sex-laden ceremonies of the mysteries. As Paul put it, "You broke with idolatry when you were converted to God and became servants of the real, living God and ... are now waiting for Jesus, his Son, whom he raised from the dead, to come from heaven to save us from the retribution."⁷

Again, unlike the mystery religions with their timeless myths linked with the rhythms of nature, Christianity was

founded on a historical person and connected with datable events.

As to the ethical demands made of the initiate, there is no comparison between Christianity and the mysteries. At their best, the mysteries manifested vague yearnings for a better life. The Church, on the other hand, laid down clear and precise norms of conduct for a Christian. Its emphasis on sexual control was a distinctive Church ideal that differentiated it from the pagan world; it insisted on monogamy and the indissoluble character of marriage and strictly forbade abortion and infanticide. It condemned all forms of greed and dishonesty in business life, all materialistic hedonism, double dealing, and falsehood. In short, a Christian was to be a pure person who did not cling to his possessions, was not self-seeking, and was truthful and brave. And most important, it taught the individual to rely not on his own strength in the moral struggle but on the power of God's grace.

Finally, a most important difference and a potent cause of the superiority of Christianity was the effective demonstration by Christians in their own lives of the power of love; it proved an irresistible magnet for many souls and caused the pagans to exclaim, "Look how they love one another!" This love found expression in a multitude of activities.

Christians saw to the support of teachers and officials, of widows and orphans, of the sick and infirm and the

disabled. Christians dedicated themselves to prisoners and people languishing in the mines, to those hit by great calamities and to the care of poor people needing burial; they furnished work to the unemployed, took care of brethren on journeys, and saw to the need of churches in poverty or in any peril. There is indeed no doubt that the Christian Gospel led the world to a higher stage of morality. Its social and ethical dynamism exerted a powerful influence on potential converts. Two of its greatest thinkers in the second century, Tatian and Justin, for instance, were converted, as they acknowledged, by the moral attractiveness of the Christians they knew.

„

To sum up then, the remarkable expansion of Christianity in the first century owed much to general political, social, and cultural trends. But the main reason for Christianity's success was the fact that it provided the best answers to the basic religious questions of the tortured soul: inculcating worship of the one God, creator of all, in opposition to the crass idolatry of the times. By its preaching of Jesus the divine savior, risen and about to return for judgment, it brought assurance of liberation from sin, eternal resurrection, and a motive to lead a life of faith, holiness, self-control, love, and brotherliness.