

**Evaluate the growth of the church in the first 5 centuries.  
What, in your view, are 2 important things that the church  
today can learn about church growth from the early church?  
Give reasons.**

**Course:** Early Church History (27 – 500 AD)

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**Programme:** MDiv 2008

**Word Count:** 2,304

**Date of Submission:** 25<sup>th</sup> April 2008

The Early Church was the body of believers that was birthed in the days of the Apostles in the first century, when Christ, after His glorious resurrection, baptized them with the Holy Spirit and commissioned them to make disciples of all nations. The church grew steadily for the next three centuries, by which time so much martyr blood had been spilt that the fall of the pagan Roman Empire seemed almost justified. However, the unprecedented church growth was not without its foreshadowing of systemic corruption, abuse of power and worldliness. Evaluation can be done on the growth of the church and lessons gleaned that may afford insights for the Church today into how to face similar challenges.

### **Persecution**

It is impossible to talk about the growth of the Early Church without mentioning persecution. More than any other factor, persecution has defined this band of early believers. These martyrs had the unshakable belief that their sufferings and witness would see many more come into the Kingdom. Because of such a high price paid, people knew that becoming a believer meant the surety of losing one's life; and the most convincing way to say "I believe in Jesus Christ" meant being ready to die for Him.<sup>1</sup>

However, in spite of these early persecutions, the Church grew and spread. Tertullian, who was a Greek lawyer in Rome, wrote of the effect such martyrdom had on the populace: "All who see the endurance of the martyrs, are struck with some doubts, and feel they must look into this matter. Then, when they find the truth, they join up as disciples."<sup>2</sup>

### **Numerical Growth**

The sacrifices of the martyrs were clearly not in vain, as their faith finally overcame the tyranny of previous Caesars who all but tried to wipe out Christianity. The conversion of Constantine in the early fourth century was undoubtedly decisive in bringing about the

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<sup>1</sup> Foster, John. *The First Advance: Church History I: AD 29-500*. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 1-51, 69-93.

<sup>2</sup> Foster, *The First Advance*, 52.

Christianizing of the Empire and the subsequent astronomical growth of the church. Latourette records “beginning with Constantine, accessions so flooded the church that before AD 500 the vast majority of the citizens of the Empire had become Christians.”<sup>3</sup> His conversion inspired many others to become Christians also, but many converted to partake of the new found Imperial favor that translated into land titles, tax exemptions and newly elevated status.

But how many of these ‘new converts’ truly grasped the cost of discipleship paid out by faithful men and women who died that others might be inspired to live for Christ? Numbers did not equate depth, and church leaders soon found that they had to increasingly deal with bad theology (from questionable exegesis), wrong attitudes and a creeping worldliness that would eventually paralyze the church for centuries to come and blind it to its own atrocities and misguided ways.

It was not long before unscrupulous individuals began to exploit such widespread numerical growth for their own gains. New and foreign elements would eventually seep into the Church that were not in line with the teachings passed down by the Apostles. Pagan priests began aligning themselves with the church in the desire for power and prestige. Many people converted to obtain the worldly and material benefits offered. Such motives did much to dilute the faith of many and promote excesses that would be later condemned as unbiblical.

### **Physical Growth (Church Buildings)**

With new found favor and overflowing membership rolls came the need for bigger buildings. The days of meeting in catacombs was now over, and high-ranking clergy were already planning for great basilicas. Bigger churches were needed to house the expanded congregations and host more elaborate settings, since resources were now more available. But this trajectory would eventually lead to the gradual institutionalization of the religion and the marriage of Church with the State, resulting in unchecked corruption

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<sup>3</sup> Latourette, Kenneth. S. *The First Five Centuries: A History of the Expansion of Christianity*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970), 66-114.

and state interference in church governance and doctrine. Also, the church would struggle to manage such copious wealth and many clergy in positions of influence would be stumbled by these lavish assets, becoming caught up with the trappings of worldly power and status than with the proclamation of the Gospel, since the Gospel would seem to have been declared to the entire known world anyway.

Up until the third century, believers had still been meeting in homes. The country of Edessa is recorded as one of the first places where Christians actually began meeting in church buildings, c.a. 201 AD.<sup>4</sup> However, because of Constantine, the church soon found much land, property and wealth at their disposal.<sup>5</sup> “In Asia Minor and Syria by the end of the fourth century it was common to bequeath a determined proportion (often a third) of one’s property to the church.”<sup>6</sup> Such properties, palaces and gold could have been used to expand the missionary efforts to unreached groups along the frontiers of Rome. Or, the money could have been used to build up the lesser developed citadels and set up more centers of learning, where knowledge and literature could be further developed and promulgated among the masses.

### **Doctrinal Growth**

Additionally, with such growth, doctrinal structures would also become sorely needed, as seen in the convening of the first Jerusalem Council during the Apostolic era, to mediate issues arising from a large body of Gentile believers coming to the faith. In the third and fourth centuries, the threat of heresy loomed large. Arianism, which claimed that Jesus was not fully divine, had infected large sees within the church by the early fourth century. The church’s response was to quickly consolidate existing beliefs and codify doctrinal creeds. This step was both timely and effective, as these creeds became the basis for doctrinal agreement. To achieve maximum efficacy, it required the assent of all major leaders of the different centers of influence. The church would call upon the role of the ecumenical councils in later years to help consolidate opinion and doctrine among

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<sup>4</sup> Foster, *The First Advance*, 89.

<sup>5</sup> Chadwick, Henry. *The Early Church*. (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1967), 54-73.

<sup>6</sup> Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 58.

various groups. Although not without its own difficulties, these councils did much to establish the standard for Orthodoxy in a time of rampant false teaching.

The first ecumenical council was convened in 325, and named the Council of Nicaea. The Council was called to address the threat of Arianism. The church eventually outlawed Arianism and formed the Nicene Creed to reaffirm the full divinity of Christ. These councils were crucial to secure stability in a time of rapid expansion across geographical and cultural boundaries.

### **Geographical Growth**

The global expansion of the Gospel was made possible for a number of reasons. Firstly, the military highways of Rome were some of the best traffic systems at the time; secondly, the *Pax Romana* brought about peaceful travel and dealings in various cities; thirdly, the effectiveness of lay preachers in bringing the Gospel wherever they went helped to establish Christian communities in the most far flung places in the Empire. By the second century, Christianity had already advanced into Gaul, Roman Africa, Britain and Spain.<sup>7</sup>

Bardaisan, a Christian nobleman of Edessa in northern Mesopotamia wrote in 200 AD, “Christ has planted the new race of us Christians in every nation.”<sup>8</sup> He noted also that there were Christians as far east as the Kushan Empire, which at that time stretched from Bactria (now Afghanistan) to Kashmir and the Punjab.<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere, evidence of Church existence is confirmed by Tertullian of churches established in South Tunisia, Numidia, and Mauretania in 200 AD.<sup>10</sup>

This rapid geographical expansion can only be described as ‘relentless’ in the effort to bring the good news to “the ends of the earth” and to heed the heavenly mandate in view of the impending Second Advent. Their methodology of evangelism was successful

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<sup>7</sup> Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 63.

<sup>8</sup> Foster, *The First Advance*, 36.

<sup>9</sup> Foster, *The First Advance*, 36.

<sup>10</sup> Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 65.

because these believers were earnest and honest in their dealings even in business; also the teachings of Christ offered a better alternative to the prevalent low moral standards and offered egalitarian rights to disenfranchised communities. Additionally, the mass conversions in Jerusalem in the first century at Pentecost saw men of Alexandria, Parthia and Arabia present and open to the Gospel. It is believed that these very men who were converted were instrumental in bringing the message of the Gospel to their own home countries after they returned from Jerusalem. Their lay preachers were also self-sustaining and had professions and skills of their own. This enabled such preachers to travel from place to place, earning their keep with their own hands. This was helpful especially when they had to contribute to the poor and welfare of the churches they visited.

### **Leadership Growth**

The rise of leaders in the church was absolutely critical to maintain continuity and stability to the growing church. Leaders were chosen among men and given tasks to oversee churches and sees. Other leaders rose to speak in defense of the faith, and some were even elected as bishops against their will. Some leaders were forced to take up responsibilities left behind by their predecessors. However, such leaders were undoubtedly godly men of deep spirituality. On an individual basis, lawyers, writers and philosophers each contributed towards Christian apologetics, and these leaders became known and respected throughout the entire Christian world, if not for their association with apostolic teaching/teachers, then for their comprehensive and consistent treatises against pagan attacks.

Justin Martyr, an apologist of the Early Church, was an archetype of some of these early Church Fathers. Fearless in proclaiming the truth, he wrote extensively and spoke tirelessly against all those who sought to discredit the faith from the standpoint of philosophy.<sup>11</sup> It is said that nearly all the Greek Fathers of the Church were, consciously or unconsciously, his imitators.<sup>12</sup> From his life, we see the role of the Church Father

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<sup>11</sup> Von Campenhausen, Hans. *The Fathers of the Greek Church*. (R&R Clark Ltd: Edinburgh, 1963), 5-16.

<sup>12</sup> Von Campenhausen, *The Fathers of the Greek Church*, 15.

providing adequate responses to the secular and pagan environment that the Church found herself in. These leaders would write letters to their congregations and provide advice and leadership into church and administrative matters. These were crucial for a growing church that was in desperate need for literature on how to conduct itself in an evolving culture with new challenges and flashpoints.

### **Lessons from the Early Church**

Firstly, during the first three centuries, many Christians had to pay a high price for their faith. The church in attempting to resist the state-sanctioned idol or emperor worship lost many of its greatest leaders. But with such courage and dedication there was great wonder and awe at the faith of these devout men and women who, even after being brutally mutilated and exposed to horrible tortures, would not give up their allegiance to Christ their master. These martyrs adhered to the words of Jesus: “I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.”<sup>13</sup>

Today, some people become Christians in the hopes of getting a ‘passport to heaven’ but balk at the hardships that may come from living out the Gospel. They might even think that poverty is a curse from God, or that suffering is no longer relevant or needed in today’s day and age. Obviously, Christianity is more than its material blessings. The call of Christ upon one’s life may sometimes require suffering for doing what is right. Such was the call of the Early Church and they willingly paid it, that they may be in fellowship with Christ and His sufferings and to demonstrate the power of God in using the weakest (and unarmed) vessels to conquer the mightiest empire and its cohorts. Their sacrifice enabled the church to grow in faith and serves as an example to Christians today who are facing the possibility of death or torture for their faith.

Secondly, during the early period of growth of the church, the believers met together regularly and shared everything. They sold their land and belongings to help one another. Because of the close-knit nature of the community, they could pool their resources

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<sup>13</sup> John 12:24.

together to help all those in need, supporting not just themselves but the poor, the widows and the clergy.<sup>14</sup> Their love for one another was well-known.

In today's context, Christians are far from living in close community and in mutual cooperation. In the name of correct doctrine, the Church has been known to go overboard in exerting its watchfulness. Even in the last century, Christians have attacked and killed other Christians over non-doctrinal matters as forms of worship and baptism procedures. Not to mention the ethnic cleansing programs against other ethnic groups, the shedding of innocent blood and cruel tortures done on people of other faiths. All this while the people claimed faith to Christ. Such violence and armed resistance is clearly unbiblical, and these acts have done much to tarnish the name of Christ in His Church in the eyes of the unbelievers. The church today would do well to consider again how the Christians in the Early Church loved and cared for each other. The church should also consider how the church reached out to those in need and to offer them assistance without fear or favor, and with no strings attached.

### **Conclusion**

The Early Church has left us important signposts that point us towards Christ's Calvary. The price they had to pay, especially in the second and third centuries, bought an entire Empire over to Christianity. But with it came the challenge of handling the 'weeds' that came with the true wheat. And history shows that the Church has not been successful in 'serving two masters'. Also, considering therefore the incredible abuses done by the church over the last 2 millennia, one must carefully consider how we can continue to remain faithful to what has been entrusted to our care. If better persons have not been able to appropriate such resources in the past, how much more we, who live in such freedoms?

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<sup>14</sup> Foster, *The First Advance*, 29.

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