

# The Story of Christ's Church

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## The Story of Christ's Church – Part 1

### The Church expands: AD 30 – 325: The Emperor and the Saint



**Emperor Nero**  
37 – 68 AD



**St. Polycarp**  
65 – 155 AD  
**Bishop of Smyrna,  
Apostolic Father & Martyr**

Introduction: a few years ago Philip Yancey wrote a book entitled '**The Jesus I never knew**'. Growing up as a young Presbyterian, the story of Christ's Church could have been for me a story of '**The Church I never knew**'. We were never told it. The 2000 year old story is often inspiring, sometimes depressing, but it is the story of our Christian Faith-Family.

If we could enter a 'Time Capsule' and travel back 2000 years, the Church scene would look so different:

- prior to 1950 there were no 'House Churches';
- prior to 1900 no Pentecostals;
- prior to 1800 no Salvation Army;
- prior to 1700 no Methodists;
- prior to 1600 no English Baptists;
- before 1500 no Lutherans, no Reformed and no Congregationalists;
- before 1000 there were
  - no western cathedrals or universities,
  - no mention of 'The Crusades' and
  - no "great schism" between the Eastern Orthodox Churches and Roman Catholic Church.

If 2000 years is 1 hour, Presbyterians arrived only 13.5 minutes ago!

What was happening in the Church over the first 300 years of its life?

These were centuries of expansion.

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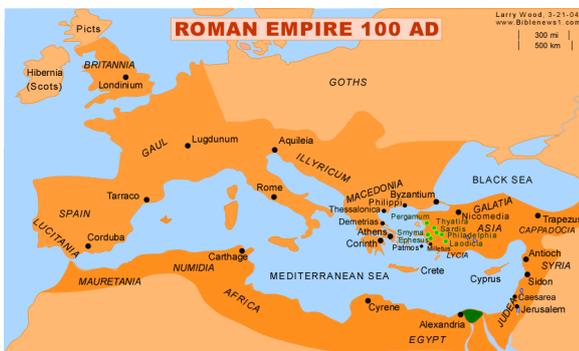
## 1. The Church expands as the seed is sown



The Sower of the Seed

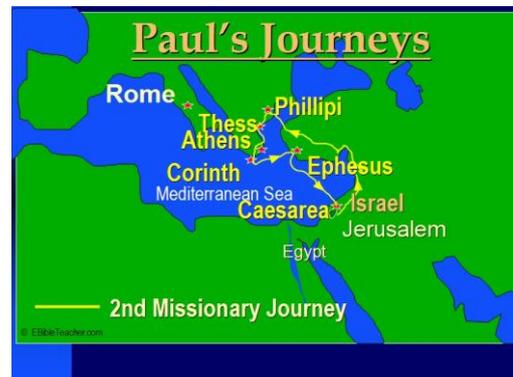


Pentecost AD 30



In the parable of sower, Jesus tells his disciples that despite difficulties, there would be a harvest of believers. From Pentecost onwards, believers became “sowers of Word” and the seeds of grace started growing in people’s hearts. The Church expands north, south, east and west, beyond the boundaries of Judea and out into the vast Roman Empire.

The growth was both planned and unplanned: Paul’s missionary journeys were planned: 1st 46-48, 2nd 49-52, 3rd 53-57 planted Churches in Central Turkey and Greece. But often growth was ‘unplanned’ and ‘mysterious’, like pollen borne on the wind of Spirit from one soul to another (Egypt, Cyrene, Carthage, Tangier in N. Africa). Wherever Christians lived, worked, did business, socialised or served in the Roman Army, they sowed the seed of the story of Jesus and the love of God.



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Growth was slower than we imagine: the Church took root first of all in the largest cities: Rome, Athens, Damascus, Antioch, Ephesus, Alexandria and Constantinople (Istanbul) and followed well-developed trade routes to regions of prosperity like Andalusia in Southern Spain and Marseilles in Southern France.

From the socially freer cities, it moved slowly into the more conservative rural areas. Growth was patchy, but after 300 years the Church had spread to most provinces of Roman Empire.

## Why did the Church expand?

**1) Personal evangelism:** Christians were not embarrassed to speak in a natural way about what Jesus meant for them and how he was changing their lives.

**2) Deep convictions:** becoming a Christian took courage; families did not like members changing their religion; communities were suspicious of those who chose to live another way. Yet such was the attraction of Christ that many made that journey into a living faith. Their faith was not skin-deep for they made a courageous choice to follow Christ despite their social upbringing, family ties, business acceptability and political correctness. Deep convictions make deep impressions.

**3) Real inclusiveness and visible unity:** Churches everywhere were “open-to-all” and strove to be “socially-inclusive”; they worked hard at being genuinely multicultural and multiracial. They didn’t fly one flag but honoured the flags of all nations, as Jesus said:

*“My house shall become a house of prayer of all the nations.”*

Sceptics were impressed by the moral lives and positive attitudes of Christians as well as the “miraculous social bonding” of unity across divisions of religion, race, colour, sex, age, class (slave and owners), education and politics. It wasn’t always easy to achieve or maintain this unity. People then as now preferred their comfort zones. In a divided South Africa, when believers from diverse racial groupings united in Christ it threatened apartheid and was resisted; in a religiously divided community like Northern Ireland, when Protestants and Catholics come together in Jesus Christ there has also been resistance. But Jesus identified the transforming power of visible unity when he prayed:

*“By this shall all men know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another.”*

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## 2. The Church suffers in faithfulness to Christ



Cult of the Divine Emperor:  
"Caesar is my Lord"



The Emperor Nero  
AD37 - 68

Christians knew that following Jesus meant "taking up the cross". At first they were seen as a Jewish sect and legally protected. But as the Church spread, social hostility and legal persecution from Jews and Romans intensified: Christians were despised as cannibals and atheists.

In AD 64 fire destroyed much of Rome and Nero blamed it on Christians. The Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus (55-117 AD) captures well the atmosphere in the capital of the Empire: (15.44)

***"To kill the rumours, Nero charged and tortured some people hated for their evil practices - the group known as Christians. The founder of this sect, Christ, had been put to death by the governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate.***

***Their deadly superstition had been suppressed temporarily, but was beginning to spring up again - not now just in Judea but even in Rome itself where all kinds of sordid activities catch on.***

***First, those who confessed to be Christians were arrested. Then, on information obtained from them, hundreds were convicted, more for their anti-social beliefs than for fire-raising.***

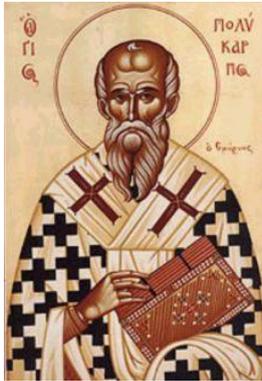
***In their deaths they were made a mockery. They were covered in the skins of wild animals, torn to death by dogs, crucified or set on fire – so that when darkness fell they burned like torches in the night. Nero opened up his own gardens for this spectacle and gave a show in the arena.***

***As a result, although they were guilty of being Christians and deserved death, people began to feel sorry for them. For they realised that they were being massacred, not for the public good, but to satisfy one man's mania."***

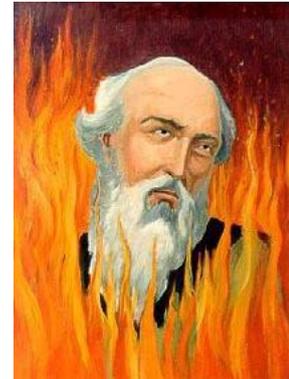
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The gravest legal threat to Christians centred on emperor-worship which was strongest in the province of Asia, where the Church also took root quickly. It was for their refusal to worship the emperor, not the pagan gods, that Christians faced execution. 'Satan's throne' was understood to be the might of Rome. Worshipping the Emperor was the sign of being patriotic and politically loyal to the Roman Empire and all the blessings it brought through its succession of 'divine emperors'; you were expected to visit the Temple of "the divine Emperor", offer a pinch of incense, and confess: "Caesar is my lord". Christians saw themselves as good citizens and prayed regularly for Emperor (1 Pet 2:17 "Love the brotherhood, fear God and honour the Emperor"). But they refused to offer worship to anyone but Christ: for them "Jesus is my Lord", higher than any political commitment. Legal persecutions started breaking out in some areas and under different emperors: in Asia Minor under Emperor Domitian (81-98); Emperor Trajan (111-113) made being a Christian a capital offence; if believers renounced Christ and offered incense to Emperor, they lived; if they refused, they were executed.



Martyrdom therefore became the fate of many Church leaders as well as ordinary members: Ignatius, bishop of Antioch travelled from Syria to Rome in 117 to face death; Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna in Asia Minor was martyred in 156AD, at the age of 86.



### ***Chapter IX -- Polycarp Refuses To Revile Christ.<sup>1</sup>***

Now, as Polycarp was entering the stadium, there came to him a voice from heaven, saying, "Be strong, and show thyself a man, Polycarp !" No one saw who it was that spoke to him; but those of our brethren who were present heard the voice. And as he was brought forward, the tumult became great when they heard that Polycarp was taken. And when he came near, the proconsul asked him whether he was Polycarp. On his confessing that he was, [the proconsul] sought to persuade him to deny [Christ], saying, "Have respect to thy old age, Swear by the fortune of Caesar; repent, and say, Away with the Atheists." But Polycarp, gazing with a stern countenance on all the multitude of the wicked heathen then in the stadium, and waving his hand towards them, while with groans he looked up to heaven, said, "Away with the Atheists." Then, the proconsul urged him "Swear and I will set you free; reject Christ". Polycarp declared, "86 years have I served Him, and He never did me any injury: how then can I blaspheme my King and my Saviour?"

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<sup>1</sup> The Encyclical Epistle of the Church at Smyrna (c160 AD), Concerning the Martyrdom of St. Polycarp -.

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### Martyrdom at Carthage (203 AD)

**Perpetua – a 22 year old noblewoman  
with a baby son**

**Felicity – a pregnant slave**

Persecution increased under the Emperor Marcus Aurelius (161-180) in Rome, Gaul, North Africa; but under the Emperors Decius (249-251) and Diocletian (284-305) it became widespread and very severe.

Throughout the 3<sup>rd</sup> century Church, the most powerful martyrdom story was that of Perpetua and Felicity who lived in Carthage, North Africa. The lives of many early martyrs are shrouded in legend; but we have the record of the courage of Perpetua and Felicity from Perpetua's own hand. In 203AD, Perpetua made a decision to become a Christian. She knew it could mean her death because 'conversion' was banned by the Emperor Septimus.

Her father was frantic with worry and tried to talk her out of her decision: she was just 22, was well-educated and was still nursing her baby son. Perpetua's answer was simple and clear. Pointing to a water jug, she asked her father, "*See that pot lying there? Can you call it by any other name than what it is?*" Her father answered, "*Of course not.*" Perpetua responded, "*Neither can I call myself by any other name than what I am – a Christian.*" Infuriated, he physically attacked her.

Shortly afterwards she was arrested along with 4 other catechumens including two slaves, Felicity and Revocatus. She was baptised before being taken to a very dark prison which was overcrowded with people and suffocatingly hot. Perpetua "had never known such darkness." The soldiers who guarded them pushed them around without any concern. Perpetua was afraid, but her most excruciating pain came from being separated from her baby. The young slave, Felicity, was even worse off, for she suffered the same stifling heat, overcrowding, and rough handling while being eight months pregnant.

Two deacons who ministered to the prisoners paid the guards so that the martyrs would be put in a better part of the prison. There Perpetua's parents were able to visit her and bring her baby to her. When she received permission for her baby to stay with her "my prison suddenly became a palace for me." Often her father would come, throw himself at her feet and beg her to give in. She told him, "*Our lives lie not in our own power but in the power of God.*"

When she and the others were taken to be sentenced, her father pleaded with the judge who also, out of pity, tried to get her to change her mind. But when she stood fast, she was sentenced with the others to be thrown to the wild beasts. Her father was furious; he refused to send her baby back to her.

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Meanwhile Felicity was also in torment. It was against the law for pregnant women to be executed: killing an unborn child was shedding innocent blood. Felicity was afraid that she would not give birth before the day set for the martyrdom of her Christian companions and she didn't want them to go on in their journey to God without her. But two days before the execution she went into a painful labor. The guards made fun of her, *"If you think you are suffering now, how will you stand it when you face the wild beasts?"* Felicity answered calmly, *"Now I'm the one who is suffering, but in the arena Another will be in me suffering for me because I will be suffering for him."* She gave birth to a healthy girl who was adopted and raised by one of the Christian women of Carthage.

The prison officers began to recognise the amazing courage of these Christians and the strength of their faith. In some cases they helped them: their warden let them have visitors – and later became a believer.

There was a feast the day before the games so that the crowd could see the martyrs and make fun of them. The four new Christians and their teacher went to the arena with joy and calm (the fifth, Secundulus, had died in prison). Perpetua in her usual high spirits looked into the eyes of everyone along the way and, we are told, walked with "shining steps as the true wife of Christ, the darling of God." While the men were set upon by bears, leopards, and wild boars, the women were stripped naked to face a crazed young cow. When the crowd, however, saw the two young women, one of whom had obviously just given birth, they were horrified and cried for them to be taken back to their cells and given back their clothes.

Eventually Perpetua and Felicity were thrown back into the arena so roughly that they were badly bruised. Perpetua, though confused herself, was thinking of Felicity and went over to help her to her feet. The two of them stood side by side as all five martyrs had their throats cut. Perpetua's last words to her brother were, ***"Stand fast in the faith and love one another."***

What can we learn from Perpetua and Felicity? Perpetua said that she couldn't call herself by any other name than Christian. Is the name 'Christian' high on the list of what people call me? Live today as if 'Christian' was the only name you would want people to call you by.

After 250 years of social hostility and legal persecution, everything changed: the Emperor Constantine was converted in 312 and the persecution stopped; Christianity was legalised and a new era of freedom began. These were years when **"the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the Church"**, reminding us again of Jesus' word about the Sower.

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I close this blood-stained chapter of the story of Christ's Church with the testimony of 86 year old Bishop Polycarp of Smyrna as he faced death by fire: *"The Governor [of the province] still went on pressing Polycarp. "Take the oath of loyalty to the Emperor, and I will let you go. Curse your Christ."* But Polycarp replied, *"86 years have I served him and he has never done me any wrong. How then can I curse my King and my Saviour?"* With these words he went to his death.

If we ignore the faith of these early martyrs we will settle for an easy faith, a faith without spiritual muscle, a faith that influences nobody, a faith that cuts no ice with others and that we ourselves come to despise and abandon. If, on the other hand, we cherish their faith we will live differently; as one writer puts it: *"Jesus continues to suffer today - in his holy positively different people; the cross is still his way."*

Such is the inspiring story of the Emperor and the Saint.

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## Early Church Martyrs

In his *Ecclesiastical History*<sup>2</sup>, Eusebius tells of many martyrs in the Christian church prior to 324 C. E.. On this page are descriptions of the martyrdom of twenty-two of them. These Christians were put to death by heathen emperors, governors, and judges. What was their crime? It was admitting to being Christian. They did not have proper trials. They were tortured before being put to death. The one way to avoid the ordeal was to denounce one's faith. A few took this way out; but most, including those listed in this paper, did not. They frustrated their tormentors by cheerfully submitting to the torture.

This list briefly describes the horrors that these Christians faced. The details are not pleasant to read. However, every present-day Christian should read about such atrocities as these which were inflicted on believers. Then he should evaluate his own faith. Would he be willing to die for his faith if he were faced with the same decision? Or would he find it easier to turn his back on his faith and save his life temporarily?

The names are in alphabetical order. The number in parentheses at the end of each account indicates where the information can be found in *Ecclesiastical History*.

**Agapius:** He was brought to the arena with a murderer to be cast to wild animals. The emperor gave clemency to the murderer. When the Christian refused to accept liberty by renouncing his faith, he rushed against a bear let loose upon him. After being mauled by the bear, he was taken to prison. Surviving for one day, stones were bound to his feet, and he was thrown into the sea. (357)

**Alpheus:** He was scourged and scraped with iron hooks and severe bonds. He received different tortures on the rack, having his feet stretched a night and a day to the fourth hole in the stocks. At length, he was beheaded. (350)

**Apollonia:** They seized this elderly woman, beat her jaws, and broke out all her teeth. They built a fire and threatened to burn her alive unless she would repeat their impious expressions. She appeared to shrink a little, but when allowed to go, she suddenly sprang into the fire and was consumed. (258)

**Apollonius:** He was renowned for his learning and wisdom. After he gave an eloquent defence of the faith before the judge, he was decapitated according to the decree of the senate. (205)

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<sup>2</sup> **Eusebius.** *The Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius Pamphilus*. Reprint. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1994. [This book is in public domain.]

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**Apphianus:** When this youth tried to prevent Urbanus from sacrificing to a god, he was seized and torn by the soldiers. He received innumerable stripes on his whole body and was cast into prison. There he was stretched with both feet a night and a day on the rack. When he was brought before the judge and refused to make a sacrifice, his sides were furrowed and scraped to the bone while he was being beaten on the face and neck. When he still did not yield, they covered his feet with linen steeped in oil and set fire to the cloth. The fire penetrated to the bones, but the youth did not die or yield. Defeated, the tormentors returned him to prison. After three days, he was taken again to the judge. This time, as he remained faithful to his belief, he was thrown into the sea and drowned. (355)

**Blandina:** She was tortured by tormentors who took turns from morning till night until they were overcome. She continued to live despite her whole body being torn asunder and pierced. Later, she was bound and suspended on a stake, being exposed as food for wild animals. When none of the animals would touch her, she was taken down from the stake and returned to prison for another time. Then, after scourging, exposure to animals, and roasting, she was thrown into a net and cast before a bull. After much tossing from the animal, she died. (172-179)

**Cronion:** See the account of Julian. These two received their like torture together. (259)

**Ennathas:** She was dragged by force and brought before the judge. After being scourged and enduring dreadful abuses, she was stripped of her clothes above the loins. As she was led about the city, she was beaten with thongs of hide. She remained cheerful through this; and, when she was taken back before the judge, she was condemned to the flames. (365, 366)

**Julian:** He was an old man who was afflicted with gout. Having confessed the Lord in front of his accusers, he was carried on a camel throughout the city. In this elevation, he was scourged and finally consumed in an immense fire, surrounded by the thronging crowds of spectators. (259)

**Metra:** An aged man, he was called upon to utter impious statements. When he did not obey, his tormentors beat his body with clubs, and pricked his face and eyes. After that, they led him to the suburbs, where they stoned him. (257)

**Origen:** He endured many torments to the body because of his faith. He was under an iron collar, spent time in the deepest recesses of the prison, for many days was extended and stretched to four holes on the rack, was threatened by fire, and had other tortures. The judge tried hard to protract his life in order to prolong his sufferings. (255)

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**Polycarp:** He was a teacher from Asia who taught multitudes not to sacrifice to the gods nor worship them. Through a vision he had, he said that he must be burned alive. After he was bound to the stake, he prayed and awaited the fire. The flames gave the appearance of an oven around him. He was in the midst, not like burning flesh, but like gold and silver purified in the flames. A fragrant odour, like the fumes of incense, or other precious aromatic drugs, was perceived. When the persecutors saw that his body could not be consumed by fire, they commanded the executor to plunge his sword into him. When this was done, such a quantity of blood gushed forth that the fire was extinguished. His body was later burned according to the custom of the Gentiles, and his bones were buried. (143)

**Pothinus:** He had performed the ministrations of the episcopate of Lyons. Although past ninety years of age, very infirm of body, he was taken to the tribunal where he stood firm in his faith. He was unmercifully dragged away and endured many stripes, while those nearby abused him with their hands and feet. Then, after two days in prison, he died. (174)

**Procopius:** Before he was tried by imprisonment, he was taken before the tribunal of the governor. When commanded to sacrifice to the gods, he declared that he knew only one to whom it was proper to sacrifice. When ordered to make libations [the ritual of pouring out wine or oil in honour of a god] to the four emperors, he stated a sentence which did not please his accusers. Immediately, he was beheaded. (349)

**Quinta:** They took her to the temple of an idol and tried to force her to worship. When she turned away in disgust, they tied her by the feet and dragged her through the city, dashing her against the millstones and scourging her at the same time. When they completed the dragging where they started, they stoned her. (257)

**Sanctus:** He suffered many torments devised by men. When these men could do no more, they fastened hot plates of brass to the most tender parts of his body. He withstood all the suffering, but his body was one continued wound, mangled and shrivelled, that had entirely lost the form of man to the external eye. Again, he passed through the tortures. These included the strokes of the scourge, the draggings and lacerations from the beasts, other tortures demanded by the audience, and the iron chair upon which his body was roasted. Other tortures followed until he died. (172-176)

**Serapion:** He was seized in his own house. After torturing him with the severest cruelties and breaking all his limbs, they threw him headlong from an upper storey of the house. (258)

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**Simeon:** He was the son of Cleophas, a descendant of David, and the second bishop of Jerusalem. When he was one hundred and twenty years old, a search was made for any descendants of David. Simeon was one who was taken into custody. After he had been tormented for several days, he was crucified. (118)

**Theodosia:** She was not yet eighteen years old, yet was distinguished for her faith and virtue. As she approached some prisoners before the judgment seat to salute them, she was seized by the soldiers and led away to the commander. She was tortured cruelly, having her sides and breasts furrowed with instruments even to the bones. She kept a cheerful and joyful countenance throughout. Then she was ordered to be cast into the sea. (359)

**Timotheus:** He endured a multitude of tortures. Then he was condemned to be consumed by a slow and gentle fire. Throughout it all, he exhibited an undeniable proof of his sincere devotedness to God. (352)

**Ulpian:** He was a young man who suffered dreadful torments and the most severe scourgings. After all of these, he was sewn in a raw bull's hide, together with a dog and a poisonous asp, and thrown into the sea. (357)

**Zaccheus:** See the account of Alpheus. These two received their like torture together. (350)