

## *The Early Church in the Roman Empire*

**F.F. Bruce**

Scholar of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge

[p.32]

The rapid rise and expansion of the Christian Church during the decades immediately following the closing events of our Lord's earthly ministry and the coming of the Comforter on the day of Pentecost present the student of history and the student of revelation alike with a phenomenon unparalleled in the annals of the human race. Most, probably all, who read this paper firmly believe that the hand of God may be traced throughout the whole of the world's history, but surely at no period is this truth more manifest than in the period of transition from pre-Christian to post-Christian times, from B.C. to A.D. No Spirit-taught student of secular history can fail to observe the marvellous way in which God prepared the world for the Gospel; and it is equally instructive to mark how this state of preparation was used when in the fulness of time the followers of Christ began to carry out His commission and preach the Gospel to every creature.

To throw some light on this wonderful story is the object of the present paper, which attempts no more than to consider a few of the points of contact between the Church and the Roman Empire in the New Testament period, roughly between 30 and 100 A.D. The period is divided into two parts by the first persecution

[p.31]

of Christians under the Imperial power—the Neronian persecution of A.D. 64. In the earlier part of the period one man stands head and shoulders above all others—the Apostle Paul, who, more than anyone else, was used in promoting the rapid growth of the Church and its expansion to include all classes and Conditions of men—Jew and Roman, Greek and Barbarian, male and female, bond and free.

The attitude of the infant Church to the Empire may be summed up by saying that they put into practice a memorable precept of their Founder uttered on an equally memorable occasion: "Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesars, and unto God the things which are God's." To begin with, however, there was very little contact between the Church and the Empire. Christianity was regarded as nothing more than a new sect of Judaism. The Jewish religion was a *religio licita*, religion permitted and tolerated by Roman law, and so long as Christianity was regarded as merely one more of the many Jewish sects, it attracted no particular attention. That this state of affairs could not last indefinitely was quite clear for a number of reasons. One of these was the universal character of the Church's mission. The Apostles were commanded by their Master to make disciples of all nations, and as soon as they began to go outside the Jewish pale with their message their distinctive character became evident.

It was Paul who made it his life's work to evangelize the non-Jewish races of the Empire, and all ages have consented to call him the Apostle of the Gentiles *par excellence*. His first prominent association with Christian work took place when Barnabas brought him down to the recently-formed Church at Antioch in Syria—the first Gentile Church, and one which attained a high degree of eminence, becoming in course of time one of the five Patriarchates

of the Christian world. With the establishment of a Christian community in this centre of Greek Civilization began the Church's connection as such with the Empire, about the year 44. While the Church had been composed of Jews and Jewish proselytes it was outside the jurisdiction of Roman law, but in Antioch its existence as a separate community within the Empire had to be recognized. Hence it was there that the disciples first received the distinctive appellation "Christians."

The Church's decision regarding the relation of the Gentile believers to the ceremonial Jewish law also served to widen the breach between Jews and Christians in the eyes of the outside world. In particular, when judgment was given at the council of Jerusalem in 49 against those who maintained that circumcision was binding upon all Christians, Gentiles as well as Jews, the absence of the distinctive external mark of the sons of Abraham according to the flesh left no doubt that the old Jews and the new Christians were two very different sets of people.

A third obvious reason why the Church could not continue to be regarded as part of the Jewish commonwealth was the way in which the Jews themselves regarded the new movement. From the first they had persecuted the Church, just as they had persecuted Christ Himself; and if they thought that through Gentile failure to apprehend the distinction between them the Christians were sharing their privileges of civil protection and toleration, they would make it their business to make the true state of affairs clear. The Jews had reached their favoured position mainly through the influence of friends at court, and indeed there is evidence which goes to prove the existence of a considerable element of Jewish proselytes there. It has been thought probable that Nero's wife Poppæa was herself one of these proselytes, and one might therefore be inclined to suspect that to a certain extent the Jews were implicated in bringing about the Neronian persecution. We learn from Paul that the preaching of Christ crucified was a stumbling-block to the Jews, who thought it blasphemous to suggest that such a person could at all fill the role of their long-expected Messiah, who should set them free from Gentile dominion and establish an earthly Kingdom on Mount Zion.

The earliest Jewish persecution of the Church culminated about the year 35 in the martyrdom of Stephen. Soon after this, however, the Jews had to turn their attention to their own interests, which were being threatened by the Emperor Gains Caligula (37-41), the successor of Tiberius, who attempted to desecrate the Temple. The persecution broke out again after Caligula's death under Herod Agrippa I, the vassal-king of Judaea (41-44), in whose reign took place the martyrdom of James the brother of John and the imprisonment of Peter. After Herod's death, Judaea was once more governed by Roman procurators, and systematic persecution in Jerusalem ceased for eighteen years.

There seems to have been trouble between Jews and Christians in the Imperial City itself. Light is thrown upon the statement in Acts 18:2, that Claudius had commanded all Jews to depart from Rome, by a strange remark made

[p.32]

by the historian Suetonius, connecting the edict of Claudius with disturbances "instigated by Christ." Here we have probably a garbled version of the true state of affairs, which was apparently due to disputes between the Jews in Rome and the followers of the new faith concerning the truth about Christ.

The leader of the Jewish persecution at Jerusalem in its earlier stages was Saul of Tarsus, whose conversion, occurring shortly after the martyrdom of Stephen, was the greatest event in early Church history. He devoted his life to spreading the Christian message in all the lands on the northern coast of the Mediterranean Sea. This is neither the time nor the place to describe or estimate the importance of his work: I should not disagree with those who maintain that, apart from his Master, he was the greatest man who ever lived. Certainly he was the greatest man the Christian Church has ever known. He was eminently fitted for his life's work. Born in Tarsus, the centre of Greek culture in Asia Minor, he was brought up in an atmosphere which tended to broaden his outlook on the world and to counteract his hereditary Pharisaism. But although he possessed a liberal education and an acquaintance with Greek Culture, his training in the faith of his fathers was not neglected. A Pharisee of the Pharisees, he was brought up at the feet of Gamaliel, one of the greatest and wisest Rabbis of the day. Amid all his zeal in later days for making known the Gospel to all the Gentiles, he never forgot his brethren according to the flesh, and was willing, if it were possible, to be himself accursed from Christ on their behalf. And besides being a Hellenist and a Pharisee, he enjoyed the privilege of Roman citizenship, which gave him a great advantage as the Apostle of the Gentiles, and inspired him with his great plan of utilizing the civilization of the Empire to spread the Gospel along its lines of communication.

To enlarge upon the details of Paul's Missionary journey forms no part of the present paper. But it should be remembered that the account given in the Acts of the Apostles gives us but a specimen of the kind of work that was going on during those years wherever the apostles turned to carry out the Lord's commission. The Word of the Cross travelled east as well as west. Christian witnesses penetrated far into Asia in the early days. A considerable work of God must have been carried on also in Africa. We may be sure that the Ethiopian eunuch did not hide his light under a bushel; and the sons of Simon of Cyrene were well-known figures in the early Church. There was a Christian community at an early date in Alexandria. And, to come back to Europe, the Gospel must have had free course in Rome itself from the day when the strangers of Rome returned from Pentecost to the day when the brethren tramped the forty miles of the Appian Way between Rome and Appii Forum to greet the great Apostle and escort him to the Eternal City. We have already mentioned the circumstances of Claudius' edict of 48. By 57 Christianity had penetrated to the higher social circles, finding its way into the family of Aulus Plautius, the conqueror of Britain. Writing the Epistle to the Romans in 58, Paul mentions two Roman Christians, Andronicus and Junias, his kinsmen, who were of note among the Apostles, and had been in Christ before him.

---

© 1933 F.F. Bruce. Reproduced by permission.

Prepared for the Web in March 2008 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.earlychurch.org.uk/>

---