

Introduction

Every era is by definition *pivotal*. It marks a turning point in the conditions of life for many people. The movement from one age to the next is usually gradual and hardly noticeable.

Some ages, however, are more pivotal than others. Some begin or end with upheaval, and people feel their effects immediately as revolutionary. This book covers such an age. It tells of events in the fourth and fifth centuries, a time when Christians moved from persecuted minority to the dominant religion in much of the Roman Empire—an empire that stretched from Britain to Syria.

For a moment that now seems brief, the Church and the Empire stood as systems of mutual support, each gradually defining its sphere of authority, influence, and power in relation to the other.

From the first through third centuries, Christians had suffered intermittent bloody persecution. Their constant prayer was for “the peace of the Church.” Now, for the first time, Christians found themselves presented with what looked like the conditions for peace: the free exercise of their religion. As the Church emerged from the shadows, its scriptures took their canonical form, as did its discipline, forms of worship, and structures of governance.

Near the beginning of this era came a council, the Council of Nicaea in 325, that would ever afterward represent Christianity’s mainstream belief. Catholics, Orthodox, and many Protestant bodies profess the Nicene Creed and claim the mantle of “Nicene Christianity.” So important is this council that it defines not only its own time (the “Nicene Era”), but also the times immediately before and afterward. Historians call these “Ante-Nicene” and “Post-Nicene.”

These centuries were a time of outsized heroes—personalities such as St. Athanasius of Alexandria, St. Jerome, and St. Augustine. Constantine

the Great, the first openly Christian emperor, stands out not only in any history of the period, but any history of the world. In his own time, his uniqueness and importance were signified by a colossal statue in marble and bronze—forty feet high—in the Roman Forum. He still looms large today.

These centuries were also a time of catastrophe. Barbarians penetrated the city of Rome, sacked it, and eventually claimed it as their own.

Today, we measure ourselves as Christian by standards set by the Church in the centuries described in this book. We read the Bible that was published then. We keep the liturgy as it was set to paper then. We recite the Creed that first defined what Christians believe.

Chapter 1

The Underground

The heavy pounding at the door threw a cold silence over the little group. They had all known it was coming, but it sounded so much more like doom than they had imagined.¹

The men looked at one another.

The pounding came again.

Without a word, one of the subdeacons stood, walked to the door, and opened it.

Soldiers poured through—maybe a dozen of them. And behind them came the governor himself. The men in the church automatically rose in the presence of such a high dignitary.

A clerk filtered through the soldiers, found himself a seat, pulled out his wax tablets and stylus, and immediately began taking notes.

“Which one of you is Dionysius?” the governor demanded.

“I am,” said a gray-haired man, moving to the front of the others and deliberately meeting the governor’s gaze.

“You are the so-called ‘bishop’?”

“I am,” the man repeated.

“Well, you know what this is about. Bring out your scriptures and anything else you have.”

“We’ll give you what we have here,” the bishop told him. “The lectors have most of the scriptures.”

“Who are these ‘lectors’? Where are they?”

“They’re at home. You know who they are,” the bishop said a bit defiantly.

“We don’t know anything of the sort,” the governor insisted.

“Your office does,” the bishop said. “Ask your clerk.” He looked over at the clerk, who was industriously transcribing the conversation on his tablets and very carefully not smiling.

The governor also gave his clerk a glance. Then he turned back to the bishop. “Well, then, we’ll leave the lectors for later, and my *clerk* will point them out. Now bring out the property.”

The bishop turned to the men behind him. They had all been watching him. He gave them a nod, and they got to work.

One disappeared for a while into the back rooms and came out with a bin of flour. Another produced an armful of silver plate. Two brought out piles of robes and laid them on the floor. All the while the clerk was making a careful inventory.

After a good stack had accumulated, the men stopped, and the governor looked through it all. Then he turned to the bishop again.

“Now,” he said with more of an undertone of menace in his voice than before, “bring me your scriptures.”

The bishop didn’t move. For a tense moment, governor and bishop stared into each other’s eyes. Then one of the men turned and walked silently out of the room. A moment later he came back with a large codex, that newfangled kind of book made up of sheets in a stack bound on one edge, rather than laid side by side and rolled up in a scroll. Christians liked codices for some reason, the governor knew.

“Who are you?” the governor demanded.

“Marcus the deacon,” the man replied, and the clerk noted the name on his tablet.

“This is the only scripture you have in this place?”

“Yes. The lectors have the rest.”

“Your answer has been recorded,” the governor said, gesturing toward the clerk. Then he directed a threatening stare at the bishop.

The bishop met it with a stare equally determined.

At last, the governor turned to his soldiers. “Gather up the confiscated property. And bring that book. We’re going to pay a visit to these lectors.”

There was a lot of rustling and clattering as the soldiers gathered up everything from the floor. The governor led his entourage out of the church, and the men inside could hear the procession clanking down the street into the distance.

The bishop turned to the deacon who had brought out the book, and for just a moment the two men shared a secret smile.

The Jesus Movement

We all have an image of the persecuted Christians in pagan Rome, cowering in catacombs or facing the lions in the arena. Those things did happen—sometimes. But there were long periods of peace and quiet as well. And the last period of peace was the longest one, which was what made the last persecution all the more shocking and horrible. The Church was unprepared for the persecution that ended the third century and opened the fourth. It began with the confiscation of scriptures and quickly moved to an epic scale of executions.

What made the Christians so frightening to the Roman government? After all, ancient Rome was a religious shopping mall. You had your favorite religion and I had mine, and we all got along fine together. There was even room for the Jews and their strange one-God religion. It might be strange, but it was ancient, and the Roman government respected ancient traditions. There were Jews in every city of the Empire, and as long as they stuck to their own business like decent people everywhere, they could have their private beliefs.

But Christians were different. They seemed to have come out of nowhere, and suddenly they were everywhere.

Just before Jesus left his disciples, he told them, “you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The Acts of the Apostles is the history of how the apostles carried out that assignment in less than one generation. By the end of the book, the Good News has reached Rome, the heart of the great world empire whose arteries extended to the ends of the earth.

The movement started with a bang. On the first Pentecost, when the apostles took up their assignment of preaching the Good News, “about three thousand souls” came into the Way, as the Jesus movement was called in its early days (Acts 2:41). And the pace didn’t slow down. The infant Church grew by thousands and tens of thousands. The growth was scary enough to attract the first persecution from the Jewish religious authorities—a persecution that scattered the believers through Judea and Samaria, spreading the Christian contagion wherever they went (Acts 8:1–4).

This rapid expansion needed organization. Jesus had left eleven men (the twelve disciples minus Judas Iscariot), with Peter at their head, to carry his message to the ends of the earth. They had replaced Judas with Matthias (Acts 1:15–26), and they ordained “deacons”—from the Greek word for “helpers”—to take care of the business of distributing charity to the poor and helpless (Acts 6:1–6). As the Church grew, it needed more “overseers”—*episkopoi*, the word from which we get our word “bishops.” These were men who had the authority of the apostles in their own local churches.

As the Church spread across the Empire, the apostles wrote letters to distant congregations to give them encouragement, answer their questions, sort out their problems, and sometimes scold them if that was what they needed. It was a big deal for the congregation when one of these apostolic letters arrived. The letter was read to the whole church when they met for worship. Then it was carefully kept, and often read again. It was copied and sent to other churches in other cities. After all, that letter contained the actual words of one of the witnesses of the Resurrection, a man who had met the risen Christ face-to-face.

As the original apostles died one by one—most killed by zealous authorities of one sort or another—the men they had chosen to be bishops took their places. St. Clement of Rome, a man who had known the apostles, was one of Peter’s successors as bishop of Rome. He says that the apostles knew that people would fight over the position of bishop and they therefore came up with a sure way to keep the succession legitimate:

“They appointed these bishops and then made them permanent, so that, if they should pass on, other approved men would take up their office.”² Thus a legitimate bishop is one appointed directly by the apostles or one appointed by the ones appointed by the apostles, and so on down the chain.

The Age of Persecution Begins

Persecution was part of the Jesus movement from the beginning. The Church was founded by Christ, and Christ “suffered the extreme penalty at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilate,” as the Roman historian Tacitus explained to his pagan readers.³ Almost all the apostles died as martyrs. (John lived a long life and probably died of natural causes, and there are conflicting stories about Matthew.) St. Paul himself was, before his conversion, a ferocious persecutor of Jesus’ followers who had Christian blood on his hands: “I persecuted the Church of God violently and tried to destroy it” (Gal 1:13).

But these were all local persecutions, often stirred up by mob violence (see Acts 17:5–8, 19:23–41). As yet, the Roman Empire had no official policy about Christianity, probably because the Empire had no clear idea of what Christianity was.

The first time we know of Christianity coming to the notice of the imperial government was in the year 49, when the emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome because “they constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus,” as the Roman historian Suetonius says in his biography of Claudius.⁴ It’s possible that there was a man named Chrestus causing riots, but the more likely interpretation is that the acrimonious debate over the Messiah had been causing riots among the Jews in Rome (*Chrestus* and *Christus* would have been pronounced almost the same), and Claudius, not caring what the fight was about, simply got rid of all the Jews.

That was less than two decades after the first Pentecost. By the middle 60s, people in Rome had definitely learned to distinguish Christians from

other kinds of Jews. When a great fire broke out and destroyed much of the city, people blamed the crazy emperor Nero for starting it. (They may well have been right: Nero used land cleared by the fire to build his indescribably opulent palace, the Golden House.) Nero, looking for a scapegoat, seized on the Christians—“a class hated for their abominations,” as Tacitus says.⁵ The stunt backfired; Nero was so cruel that people started to sympathize with the detested Christians.

Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames. These served to illuminate the night when daylight failed. Nero had thrown open his gardens for the spectacle, and was exhibiting a show in the circus, while he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer or drove about in a chariot. Hence, even for criminals who deserved extreme and exemplary punishment, there arose a feeling of compassion; for it was not, as it seemed, for the public good, but to glut one man’s cruelty, that they were being destroyed.⁶

Among the Christians who died in this orgy of cruelty were Peter and Paul. Tradition says they died on the same day. Peter was crucified upside down; Paul, a Roman citizen, had the privilege of being beheaded.

This was the first time the government in Rome had officially decided on an anti-Christian policy. Clearly the Romans had learned that Christians were a distinct group, and clearly there were enough of them now that the mob knew what a Christian was. Otherwise, Nero wouldn’t have tried to foist the blame for the fire on the Christians.

So, already about thirty years after the first Pentecost, Christians were visible enough to be targets. In the decades to come, they would grow in numbers and visibility at a surprising rate—a growth of 40 percent per decade, according to sociologist Rodney Stark.⁷

But why was Christianity spreading so fast? What did it have that people in the Mediterranean world needed?

Mr. and Mrs. Average Roman

Let's meet a typical well-off Roman couple—we'll call them Julia and Antonius. They have some money and property; they aren't exactly rich, but Antonius certainly doesn't need to work for a living. In fact, like most Roman citizens, he has an instinctive horror of useful labor. That was what slaves were for.

So Antonius and Julia really have nothing important to do. In the afternoon, Antonius might go to the arena to watch gladiators murder each other or enjoy the fun of seeing condemned criminals eaten by lions. Julia finds her own amusements while he is away: she has a couple of handsome favorites among the household slaves, and if she ever becomes bored with them, she might entice a workman off the street. Antonius knows all about his wife's recreations, and he has plenty of girlfriends and boyfriends of his own—his neighbors' wives, slaves who aren't allowed to say no, and harlots from the well-known establishment down the street.

In the evenings, husband and wife go together to parties. They start drinking when they arrive, and sometime the next morning, they wake up next to someone else's husband or wife. Then they go home to sleep off the hangover; and when it is afternoon again, they start the whole round once more.

This life of idle pleasure doesn't leave room for children—not at the moment. Julia knows several ways to make sure children don't encumber them. There are some fairly effective methods of birth control, and when these don't work there is always abortion. Or she can just carry the baby to term, if it comes to that, and then expose it—leave it out on the garbage heap, in the hands of the gods. Someday, when she can be pretty sure who the father is, Julia and Antonius hope to have a son. It would have to be a son, however, to carry on the family name and take care of them when they grow old. If it turns out to be a daughter, they'll abandon it and try again.

That is their life: an endless search for amusement. They are always looking for anything that will make the time *go away*. And somewhere in the back of Julia's mind a question begins to form: *Is this all there is?*

Oh, they are certainly among the lucky ones. They could have been slaves. As far as the law was concerned, slaves were property, not people, and the property owner could use them as he liked. He could beat them, rape them, or kill them, and there wasn't much anybody could do about it. A slave was worth something as long as he was useful to his owner; once he could no longer work, he might be thrown away like any other worn-out tool. An island in the Tiber River in Rome was a well-known dumping ground for slaves who had outlived their usefulness.⁸

And the free poor might be even worse off. At least slaves had a roof over their heads. But on every corner, in every doorway, you could find the poor—human rubbish who had no families to take care of them. And if you had no family, you were out of luck, because there was no one else willing to take care of you.

Jesus mentions one of these urban poor in a parable: a man named Lazarus who lay at the rich man's gate, "full of sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table; moreover the dogs came and licked his sores" (Lk 16:20–21). The picture was a familiar one in any city of the Roman Empire, and probably anywhere else in the world. Antonius sometimes had to kick one of these revolting beggars out of the way before he could get out his own front door.

So Julia knew she was lucky. But she still couldn't get rid of that nagging question: *Is this all there is?*

And then, one particularly wretched morning after, someone answered her question.

Twilight of the Gods

The first time Julia heard it, she hadn't recognized it as the answer. She asked a Christian, who didn't really answer her question, but rather told her about Jesus Christ. Christians were a bunch of slaves, workmen, and

crazy people, weren't they? It wasn't even worth paying attention to what they said.

The traditional religion of Greece and Rome had a god or goddess for every occasion, but it wasn't enough. All over the Empire, rich and poor alike were looking for answers the pagan gods couldn't give them. The old gods were selfish and simple. You gave them the sacrifices they wanted, and in return they just might refrain from blighting your crops or sinking your ship. But they weren't in the business of answering questions like "Why is my life so meaningless?"

Julia actually listened to the message this time—maybe because her head hurt too much to interrupt, but it was a start. And then, later on, she was introduced to some more of these so-called Christians. They weren't at all what she expected. She didn't really know what to make of them. Some were poor and ignorant, yes, but some were rich and educated. And yet they made no distinctions; the rich and poor ate at the same tables and said the same prayers. She saw how they all banded together to take care of any one of them who needed help. She saw how they loved one another. And it seemed to Julia that she had never seen love before.

These people had found a life that had meaning, where the endless search for amusement was *not* all there was. And Julia knew she had found what she was looking for.

Her husband didn't approve.

What had happened to the woman? She used to be so much fun. Now she dressed modestly. She gave up getting drunk and sat around sober all day. And worst of all, she was trying to persuade him to join her in this weird cult. Or at least stop having fun with his friends' wives. But that was the whole point of having friends, wasn't it?

Julia felt trapped. She knew she had found the answer, but her husband wouldn't see it. She thought of divorcing him, but her well-meaning friends talked her out of it. She might yet be the instrument of his salvation, they told her.

But she finally gave up when he went on a trip without her to Alexandria. News came back through mutual friends that he was indulging