

After Acts: Early Christianity

Introduction: This lesson will cover what happened right after the time of the Apostles. It begins where the book of Acts left off.

Acts 28:30–31 - He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, ³¹ proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.

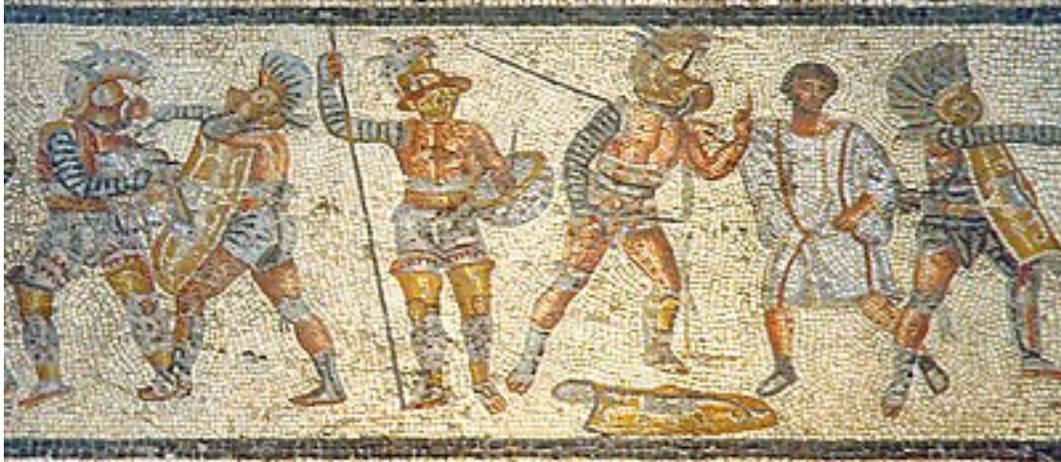
The Roman Empire: The social context of the early church



- The Roman empire reached its apex under the emperor Trajan (who ruled from 98-117 A.D.). It was almost 2,000,000 square miles (from Kuwait to Portugal).
- The romans had 53,000 miles of constructed roads by the 4th century.
- They had the most powerful army in the world.
- Rome was the center of the pagan world and had a vast array of temples and idols to the Roman gods.
- The primary language in the Roman empire was actually Greek, not Latin.
- What did Roman women look like?
- You were required to offer worship to the Roman emperor.
- In many of the temples the way you would worship is by having sex with male and female temple prostitutes.

Revelation 17:1–6 - Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, “Come, I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute who is seated on many waters, ² with whom the kings of the earth have committed sexual immorality, and with the wine of whose sexual immorality the dwellers on earth have become drunk.” ³ And he carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness, and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and ten horns. ⁴ The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her sexual immorality. ⁵ And on her forehead was written a name of mystery: “Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and of earth’s abominations.” ⁶ And I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of the martyrs of Jesus. When I saw her, I marveled greatly.

-Rome had the gladiatorial games where people would fight to death for sport and where people would be killed by wild animals just for the amusement of the audience. It is estimated that 3.5 million people were killed in the arena. In one battle the emperor Titus had the Coliseum flooded with water to have a naval battle where 3,000 men fought each other in one giant battle.



-Gladiator's sweat was sold at the colosseum and their blood was drunk as an aphrodisiac.
-This is the context in which the early church would grow up!

What early church services looked like

1. Services were done in the vernacular.
2. They met in small house-churches.

1 Corinthians 16:19–20 - The churches of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, send you hearty greetings in the Lord. All the brothers send you greetings. Greet one another with a holy kiss.

Colossians 4:15 - Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house.

Romans 16:5 - Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in Asia.

-This contrasted with pagan worship which was usually done outside.

-Purpose-built church buildings didn't actually exist until the beginning of the 3rd century.

3. The services focused on a few things: singing, scripture reading, teaching/preaching, praying, and partaking of communion.

Acts 2:42 - And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

4. According to the *First Apology* of Justin Martyr and the *Didache*, services included:
 - a. Meeting on the “day of the sun” (Sunday).
 - b. First there was a reading of the memoirs of the Apostles and the writings of the Prophets “as long as time permits.”
 - c. Then an exhortation or homily was given by the “president” (pastor/preacher).
 - d. The congregation then stood for prayer.
 - e. They then celebrated communion.
 - f. They ended with a “kiss of peace.”
 - g. Deacons would take communion to the homes of those who could not attend or were sick.
 - h. They lastly took up a collection for the poor, the sick, orphans, strangers, etc.
5. Those who were non-believers or who had not been baptized were dismissed before communion.
6. They had a communal meal called an “agape” before partaking of communion.
7. Baptism was done naked, in running water, by full immersion. Sprinkling or pouring was only done if immersion wasn’t available.

“Concerning baptism, baptize thus: Having first rehearsed all these things, baptize, ‘in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,’ in running water; But if thou hast no running water, baptize in other water, and if thou are not able to baptize in cold water, then do so in warm. But if thou hast neither, pour water three times on the head ‘in the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost.’ And before the baptism let the baptizer and him who is to be baptized fast, and any others who are able. And thou shalt bid him who is to be baptized to fast one or two days before.” -Didache (c. first century)

8. There was an emphasis on holy living. In addition to many of the things we think are sinful today, they also thought that being an actor, attending chariot races, using any form of contraception, or holding public office (because you had to worship the emperor) were all sinful.
9. In addition to Sundays, they met on Wednesdays and Fridays for fasting and prayer
10. They often gathered in the tombs and in catacombs to partake of communion near the bodies of those who had been martyred. Their faith joined them to, not only Christ, but to great Christians who had died.
11. In addition to the cross the fish became a symbol for Christianity because the Greek word for fish (ichthus) forms an acrostic:

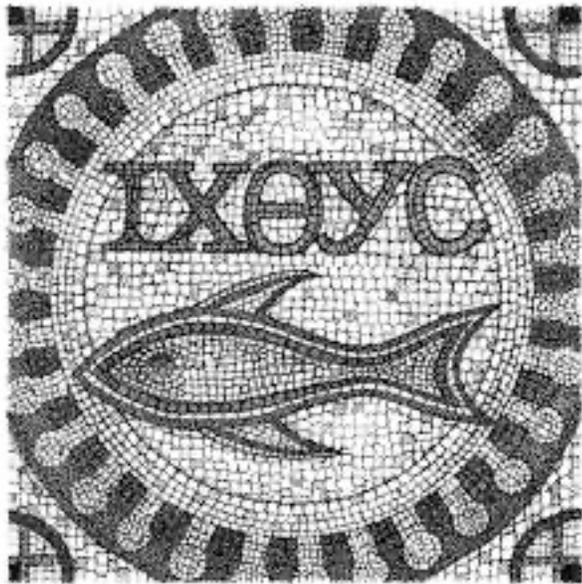
I – Ιησους (Jesus)

X -Χριστος (Christ)

Θ – Θεος (God[‘s])

Υ – Υιός (Son)

Σ – Σωτηρ (Savior)



Becoming a Christian

According to *The Apostolic Tradition* by Hippolytus it was a three-year process before you could fully become a Christian.

1. First, you were called a “weeper” and could receive private instruction.
2. Next, you were called a “hearer” and could attend sermons.
3. Then you were called a “kneeler” and allowed to stay after the sermon for prayer.
4. But it wasn’t until you were examined by a bishop and actually baptized that you could partake of communion and be a full member of the church.

Roman persecution

Roman persecution was primarily local before 250, but after 250 the Roman government had a sustained program of persecution. Under an edict by Diocletian (in 304) Christians were to be killed on sight.

Pliny’s Letter

“Meanwhile, in the case of those who were denounced to me as Christians, I have observed the following procedure: I interrogated these as to whether they were Christians; those who confessed I interrogated a second and a third time, threatening them with punishment; those who persisted I ordered executed. For I had no doubt that, whatever the nature of their creed, stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy surely deserve to be punished... Those who denied that they were or had been Christians, when they invoked the gods in words dictated by me, offered

prayer with incense and wine to your image, which I had ordered to be brought for this purpose together with statues of the gods, and moreover cursed Christ--none of which those who are really Christians, it is said, can be forced to do--these I thought should be discharged. Others named by the informer declared that they were Christians, but then denied it, asserting that they had been but had ceased to be, some three years before, others many years, some as much as twenty-five years. They all worshipped your image and the statues of the gods, and cursed Christ. They asserted, however, that the sum and substance of their fault or error had been that they were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god, and to bind themselves by oath, not to some crime, but not to commit fraud, theft, or adultery, not falsify their trust, nor to refuse to return a trust when called upon to do so. When this was over, it was their custom to depart and to assemble again to partake of food--but ordinary and innocent food. Even this, they affirmed, they had ceased to do after my edict by which, in accordance with your instructions, I had forbidden political associations. Accordingly, I judged it all the more necessary to find out what the truth was by torturing two female slaves who were called deaconesses. But I discovered nothing else but depraved, excessive superstition.” -Governor Pliny the Younger to the Emperor Trajan

Nero



- He was crazy!
- Nero became emperor in 54 A.D.
- When he was 16 he married his step-sister.
- His name in Hebrew numerology is 666.
- He murdered his mother, his brother, and he kicked his pregnant wife to death.
- Nero also partook in two gay marriages one in which he played the role of the groom and one in which he played the role of the bride (even consummating the “marriage” in front of his dinner guests).
- It is likely that Paul and Peter were martyred under the Neronian persecutions.

-There was a great fire that burned much of the city of Rome and there was a rumor that Nero started it. Some said he dressed as an actor and played the lyre while it burned. Others said he wanted the fire to spark creativity and inspiration in him for his acting, songs, or poems. So Nero blamed the great fire of Rome on the Christians which led to their further persecution.

“Thus, first of those who confessed [that they were Christians] were arrested, and on the basis of their testimony a great number were condemned, although not so much for the fire itself as for their hatred of humankind.” -Tacitus

-Thousands of Christians were killed by Rome as martyrs. Nero used to dip Christians in tar, impale them on spikes, and light them on fire to light his garden parties.

“Nero punished a race of men who were hated for their evil practices. These men were called Christians. He got a number of people to confess. On their evidence a number of Christians were convicted and put to death with dreadful cruelty. Some were covered with the skins of wild beasts and left to be eaten by dogs. Others were nailed to the cross. Many were burned alive and set on fire to serve as torches at night.” -Tacitus

Why Christians were persecuted

1. Their righteous behavior made them stand out as different.

John 3:19–20 - And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. ²⁰ For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.

2. They only worshipped one God.
3. They didn't offer sacrifices to the emperor.

-Emperor worship and the emperor being deified was a common practice at this time.

4. The agape and communion were misunderstood.

-The “love feast” was thought to be an orgy.

-The fact that they ate flesh and drank blood led to the idea that they practiced cannibalism. There was even one rumor that they would put infants into loaves of bread and eat them (this rumor was heightened by the fact that if Christians found an abandoned baby they would adopt it and take it home).

-The fact that they called each other “brother” and “sister” led to rumors of incest.

5. Christianity became a distinct religion and not a branch of Judaism (Judaism was protected under Roman law).

6. Christianity disrupted the Roman social pattern by exalting the weak (slaves, women, the poor, etc.).

“Far from us, say the Christians, be any man possessed of any culture or wisdom or judgment; their aim is to convince only worthless and contemptible people, idiots, slaves, poor women, and children... These are the only ones whom they manage to turn into believers.” –Celsus, 2nd century philosopher

7. Their love and morality was convicting to the pagans around them.

“[The Christian faith] has been specially advanced through the loving service rendered to strangers, and through their care for the burial of the dead. It is a scandal that there is not a single Jew who is a beggar, and that the godless Galileans care not only for their own poor but for ours as well; while those who belong to us look in vain for the help that we should render them.” - Emperor Julian

8. Unlike the Jews, the Christians promoted evangelism.

9. The person Christians worshipped as God had been crucified.



Why did Christianity spread so easily?

By 250 there were about 50,000 Christians in Rome. By 312 about 5-10% of the city were Christians. By 313 it became a legal religion.

1. Roman Roads.
2. The Greek language.

-Alexander the Great lived from 336-323 and conquered most of the known world.
-The language progressed as follows: The oldest form of Greek which was forged through the use of the Phoenician alphabet is called Linear-B and it goes all the way back to the 13th century. Classical Greek is the Greek of guys like Homer and Plato, and it goes back to the 8th century B.C. From classical Greek branched three dialects of Greek: Doric, Aeolic, and Ionic. From Ionic branched Attic and from Attic Greek we get Koine.
-Greek was the *lingua franca* of the known Roman world at the time of Jesus.

John 19:20 “Many of the Jews read this inscription, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and it was written in Aramaic, in Latin, and in Greek.”

3. The *Pax Romana* (“Peace of Rome”).
4. It was open to everyone.
5. It only required faith, not circumcision or dietary laws.

Theological Showdown: Cyprian Vs. Novatian

The early church had to deal with a theological question that would arise again during the Donatist controversy: If someone had denied or blasphemed Christ to avoid persecution during the Decian persecution, should they be let back into the church? If so, what did that look like?

This was preceded by the issue of whether the church should offer forgiveness for those who committed fornication or adultery. Hippolytus, a theologian, said “no,” and Calixtus, a bishop, said “yes.”

Cyprian (Bishop of Carthage) – Those who did not sacrifice to the emperor (but purchased certificates saying they had) could be let back into the church immediately. Those who actually sacrificed but were repentant could be forgiven on their deathbed. Those who had sacrificed but had not repented could not be let back in. But, on the whole, Cyprian was more lenient toward those who had lapsed.

Novatian (Priest in North Africa) – Thought Cyprian was being too lenient and did not think that the lapsed should be admitted to the church.

This issue related to two important theological questions:

1. How pure should the church be knowing that it is made up of sinners?
2. Does someone have to prove they are repentant (“penance”)?