

The Survival of Christianity - a Miracle!

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Over the centuries Christianity lost the essence of Jesus' message -- the imminence of the Kingdom of God. This is understandable, considering it never materialized. In anticipation of the Kingdom, Christ had taught his disciples to pray, "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven" as an entree to a real, physical kingdom. Yet that kingdom never materialized, causing an embarrassment to the early Church.

I cannot help but be astonished by the external tribulations and internal dissensions experienced by the early Christian Church. *That Christianity survived its birth is truly a miracle.* Such a striking contrast exists between the Empire of Rome and the tiny, motley group of true believers who dared to challenge the "Dear Rome" that without having been in accord with Divine Providence, their faith never could have lived. Nonetheless, it became the imperial religion of the Empire. Even more astounding is that the Church survived the dissidence within itself, considering the diversity of doctrines, gospels, and traditions propagated in those formative years.

Jesus referred to the Kingdom of Heaven as a mustard seed which, though small, grows to become the largest of all trees. That is precisely what happened to Christianity. In the fullness of time, but not without extraordinary heroism and human sacrifice, it demonstrated greater potency than the decrees and chariots of the Emperors. No more than an innocuous mystery cult in comparison with the eternal grandeur of Rome, Christianity appeared inferior to its adversary. Few people recognized either the internal strength of the martyrs or the thinness of the Roman veneer.

By modern standards, the rage of the mobs and cruelty of the authorities verged on insanity, yet the confessors acknowledged only "Christ as Lord." Employed as torches to light Nero's gardens, thrown to the beasts, accused of incest and cannibalism, having their property confiscated, persecuted for merely being called Christians, and having their religions declared "superstitio illicita," they refused to recant. Barefaced and bare fisted, they met the threats, accusations, and persecutions of Rome. I am awed by the absoluteness and directness of their stand. Theirs was not a feeble, lackadaisical response. Unconditionally and straightforwardly, they challenged the very essence of Roman government and society its immorality, corruption, and idolatry. Having experienced a "change of consciousness," no force could arrest them. Rome exercised all its muscle, but in the end succumbed to the sacrifice of

Golgotha.

With regard to its internal structure, the early Church had no hierarchy of bishops, canon, or creed. The apostles taught primarily by word of mouth. This "viva vox" was subsequently handed down to successive generations, along with a few written documents. By the fourth century a definitive "regula fidei" (i.e. rule of faith) emerged that consisted of written, as well as oral, Scriptures, liturgies, creeds, and standards for apostolic succession. This contrast between early and mature Christianity depicts the remarkable evolutionary ecclesiastical, doctrinal development experienced by the embryonic Church. From perplexity to orthodoxy in a few hundred years is a noteworthy accomplishment.

Bewildered, the early Church lacked five essentialities: leadership, a definitive tradition, authoritative scriptures, acceptable creeds, and unity. Firstly, having had its founder executed, this insignificant though revolutionary sect abruptly found itself leaderless and in need of clearly defined standards of organization. Not until the time of Irenaeus and Tertullian at the end of the second century were such concepts as apostolic succession and supremacy of the Church of Rome formally expressed. Secondly, confronted with a diversity of life styles, the early Church appears to have lacked an identifiable tradition. In light of the crucifixion of Christ and misunderstandings as to his original intent, the message and tradition of the apostles and apostolic fathers seem to have been quite individualistic. As a result, dissent emerged over such issues as remarriage and adultery, orthodoxy and heresy, and forgiveness and rigidity. Thirdly, canonization of Scripture' evolved over an epoch. Initially there were no officially authorized texts. Many stories and "gospels" were in circulation and read either publicly or privately. What today are designated "apocrypha" were widely distributed among early converts. Though in the beginning it was not easy to know who or what to believe, subsequently many writings were declared inspired "gospel" -- whereas others were thought spurious or forged. Nor was it easy in those days to determine who was truly a Christian. No creeds were accepted.

Finally, the history of Christianity is a history of schism and heresy. But most specifically the birth of the Church is inundated with controversy and dissent. Bishops excommunicated bishops. Christians fought Christians. Adoptionism, Gnosticism, Montanism, modalism, rigidity, and Arianism nearly overran the very foundations of what came to be catholic orthodoxy. At Nicaea Constantine called the First General Council of the church and a creed was accepted, but not without opposition. Distinctions between orthodoxy and heresy often lacked clarity. Everything appeared to have been in a state of flux. Some would call it anarchy.

Thus, Christianity had two basic factors working to its detriment -- external persecutions and internal dissent. In addition to these factors, there are such other disadvantages as: illiteracy of the apostles, the fall of Jerusalem, failure of the Parousia to materialize, the abundance of other mystery religions, and "failure of nerve" among the populace.

This is not to deny such favorable conditions as: the relatively advanced system of transportation, the "Pax Romana" (i.e. Roman Peace), and the transitional nature of the times. Built to allow the legions to better govern the Empire, the celebrated Roman roads enabled St. Paul and others to travel freely, speedily, and safely throughout the Empire proclaiming Christ's resurrection. Also important was the abnormal unity and peace of the age. The "Pax Romana" contributed to the growth of Christianity by allowing a freedom of movement that in other ages would not have been possible. Though persecuted by Rome, the Church benefited from the security and protection of the Roman peace. Moreover, the reigns of Augustus and subsequent Emperors were times of immense change. Subject to challenge from all sides, man's conceptions of themselves and the universe were rapidly changing. Consequently, people were open to the newness of Gospel message.

Only a handful of people living two thousand years ago sensed the divine destiny of the Christian faith. A contemporary of the early Church might have realistically observed, "This Aramaic-speaking group of harlots and fishermen will never advance beyond Galilee." Yet in time, having converted the Emperor Constantine, it became the most influential force in the entire Greco-Roman world. That Christianity survived its birth is truly miraculous. But in God all things are possible.