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LEVEL

THE EARLY CHURCH

(Origins, Development and Themes)
and the Church Today

FOR CCEA A LEVEL

3rd
EDITION



**COLOURPOINT
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Raymond Banks

with additional material
by Gillian Keys

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Author Preface

This text has been written specifically to assist teachers and students to meet the requirements of CCEA's GCE Religious Studies AS and A2 courses on the Early Church. The first section of the book covers the AS course ('The Origins and Development of the Early Christian Church to AD325') and the remainder the A2 course ('Themes in the Early Church and the Church Today'). In each case the order of the chapters matches that of the topics listed in the relevant section of CCEA's Specification. This order, of course, is not prescriptive and teachers are therefore free to deal with the topics within each section in whatever order they choose.

The abbreviation *ANE* will be found frequently in the following chapters and provides regular links to relevant primary sources collected in *A New Eusebius*, edited by J Stevenson and revised by WHC Frend (SPCK: London, 1987). There is no substitute for familiarity with the early sources themselves, which students are advised to consult regularly.

No claim is made for originality as far as the book's contents are concerned. Rather, the book represents a collation of the work of many others before me, to whom I gladly acknowledge my debt, as well as my own understanding of the primary literature. Thanks are due to all at Colourpoint Books for their professional expertise and assistance in the production of this text.

I would like to thank Dr Gillian Keys for providing the material on the 'other aspects of human experience' to support the notes on CCEA's AS Level Religious Studies.

R Banks
November 2017

Other Aspects of Human Experience

As well as studying the Early Church you will be expected to have thought about some of the issues which arise from this topic and to be able to apply them to other aspects of human experience.

What does this mean? 'Other aspects of human experience' simply means anything which is not part of your taught course.

It is not enough to be able to address the issues in the context of the history of the church alone: you need to think the issues through, see their wider applications and be able to write about them in the examination.

At AS Level, you are given eight issues which relate to your course and are expected to be able to apply them outside the taught course. Each of these issues derives from one section of the course. However, in the examination they will not be confined to that section and could appear as part (b) of a question, combined with a part (a) which relates to another section of the specification.

It is recommended that you keep a separate file for your work on other aspects of human experience. You should try to read around the topic and collect up articles from the internet, newspapers, church and religious magazines, etc. which relate to these issues.

The eight issues are:

1. The role of martyrdom within religion
2. The perennial issue of persecution of religious believers
3. The relevance of initiation in the life of the religious believer
4. The understanding of Eucharist within the Christian tradition
5. The contribution of writers who defend religious faith in any age
6. The relevance of pastoral and theological issues for religious leaders
7. The importance of religious conversion in the life of the believer
8. The relationship between religion and state

At the end of each section of the AS material in this book we will deal with the appropriate issue, explaining it and giving pointers and guidelines for your own discussion and research.



The spread of Christianity

1

Expansion of Christianity

In this chapter we shall note how the Christian Church expanded in its first three centuries. We shall consider the political and religious factors that contributed to the Church's expansion and then explore martyrdom and its impact, with particular reference to Justin, Polycarp and Blandina.

EXPANSION – NUMERICAL

In the absence of firm historical evidence, various suggestions have been made about the size of the Church and its proportion of the general population during its first three hundred years.

A recent attempt at quantifying the rate and ratio of early Church growth has been made by the sociologist Rodney Stark¹. Estimating a total population of 60 million in the Roman empire he has presented the following outline (Table 1) of the Church's numerical increase and percentage of the general population, assuming a growth rate of 40% each decade. Stark observes that the Mormon church grew on average at about 43% per decade in the twentieth century and argues for a similar rate of expansion for early Christianity.

Table 1 Christian Expansion (AD40–350)

Year	Number of Christians	% of Population (60 million)
40	1000	0.00
50	1,400	0.0023
100	7,530	0.0126
150	40,496	0.0
200	217,795	0.3
250	1,171,356	1.9
300	6,299,832	10.5
350	33,882,008	56.5

Hard data on the numerical growth of Christianity in its early period is unavailable and Stark's profile provides only a very general framework for the perceived growth of the early Church. When we turn to consider the

geographical and social expansion of early Christianity, we are on somewhat firmer ground.



TASK

Outline the difficulties involved in attempting to quantify the growth of early Christianity, with particular reference to Rodney Stark's scheme.

EXPANSION – GEOGRAPHICAL

Christianity began in the city where its founder was crucified – Jerusalem. Our earliest Church history, the New Testament book of Acts, records in its opening chapters the progress of the Jerusalem church under the leadership of the apostles Peter and John. We are told that some 120 Christians (1: 15) grew to about 3,000 on the day of Pentecost seven weeks after Jesus' death (2: 41) and 5,000 some time after (4: 4). Later, James is the leader of the Jerusalem church and it is reported that many thousands of Jews have become Christians (21: 17–20). While some regard these numbers as unreliable, others accept them as plausible. Jewish persecution of the Jerusalem church resulted in the dispersal of its members throughout the province of Judaea and neighbouring Samaria, according to Acts (8: 1). Naturally the earliest Christianity in Palestine was of a Jewish character. However, after the First Jewish Revolt (AD66–74) imperial policy promoted Gentile elements in the region. And after the Second Jewish Revolt (AD132–135) Jewish Christians were removed from Palestine and Gentile Christianity developed thereafter.

From its beginnings in Palestine, Christianity spread out in three main directions: **north-west** (Syria, Asia Minor, Macedonia, Achaia [Greece], Rome, Gaul, Spain and Britain), **south-west** (Egypt, Cyrene and along north Africa) and **east** (Persia and Armenia). The Church had the most success north-west of Palestine through Syria, Asia Minor, Rome and south Gaul; south-west to Egypt and North Africa, and eastwards through the Persian empire. However, it was not an even expansion and was most successful in urban areas where there was a sizeable Jewish population.

EXPANSION – SOCIAL

From the start, in theory at least, Christianity cut across social boundaries. Its socially inclusive message disregarded economic inequalities. While Jesus was presented as the champion of the materially poor and the socially marginalised (especially in Luke's Gospel), he also attracted some wealthier

followers (eg Joseph of Arimathea – Matthew 27: 57). The classic egalitarian New Testament text is Galatians 3: 28: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”. In Christ there is a religious equality which overrides racial, social and gender distinctions.

However, it is clear from the beginning that the new faith was accepted mostly among those of a lower social status. Paul reminded the Corinthian church that such was their social background at the time of their conversion – ‘not many’ of them were wise or influential or of noble birth, rather God had chosen the foolish, the weak and the lowly (1 Corinthians 1: 26–29). James similarly referred to God’s choice of the poor when social favouritism reared its head in the Church (James 2: 9).

The fact is that until the conversion of the emperor Constantine in the early fourth century Christianity spread mostly among the lower and middle classes.

By and large early Christian writings appear to be addressed to non-elites such as merchants and craftsmen. In the late second century Celsus, a pagan opponent of Christianity, made the somewhat exaggerated observation that the Church’s converts were merely women, children, slaves and fools.

However, there is early evidence that Christianity made some impact on the upper end of the social scale. Around the same time as Celsus, the Christian Apologist Tatian provided a counter-balance to the pagan’s charge by writing, “Not only do the rich among us pursue our philosophy, but the poor enjoy instruction gratuitously” (*Address to the Greeks*, 32). At times, as in the book of Acts (17: 4, 12), the upper classes were evangelised through converted wives.

Before Constantine we know of at least ten Roman aristocrats in Christian churches⁴. During the Decian and Valerian persecutions of the mid-third century senators and equestrians were among those who suffered for their faith. And surviving early Christian literature is testimony to the fact that there was a sizeable number of Christians in the top 2% of society. Also, social levels were not unalterable castes. Some Christians were upwardly mobile slaves who gained their freedom and entered the imperial civil service.

Indeed, there are various pieces of evidence which reveal the presence of Christians in imperial and government circles. As early as the sixties of the first century there were Christians in ‘Caesar’s household’ (Philippians 4: 22). The third century Roman historian Dio Cassius reports that the emperor Domitian (reigned AD81–96) persecuted prominent Romans for atheism and Jewish sympathies, in what is probably a reference to Christians. Titus Flavius Clemens, consul in AD95, was executed and his wife Flavia Domitilla was exiled. In the fourth century they were regarded as Christian martyrs.

In the *Martyrdom of Justin* (Justin was martyred in Rome in about AD165) we read that Euelpistus, one of his followers, was an imperial slave. Also, Callistus, bishop of Rome, was once the slave of Carpophorus, a Christian in the household of the emperor Commodus (AD180–192). Around this time, too, Irenaeus and Tertullian are aware of Christians in the royal palace.

Certainly, after Constantine and the establishment of Christianity as the official religion of the empire, many social elites joined the Church. Christian sermons from the fourth and fifth centuries reflect a largely upper class audience. In the view of such preachers and writers it was the middle classes (eg landowners, merchants, craftsmen) who were the ‘poor’. Rural peasants were often passed by and only attended the urban churches on special holy days. Thus, before and after Constantine the social constitution of the Church was markedly different. What initially was a largely low to middle class Jewish community eventually became the preserve of predominantly upper class Gentiles. In earlier days the Church was a persecuted minority whom the general public was at least suspicious of and often hostile to. It seemed inconceivable then that one day Christianity would become the imperial religion, to which allegiance was advisable.



TASK

- a) **Compare and contrast the social constitution of the Church before and after Constantine.**
- b) **What evidence is there of Christian influence on the upper classes?**
- c) **Research the martyrdom of the noble-woman Perpetua and the slave-girl Felicitas (early third century Carthage) as a powerful symbol of the social equality of early Christianity.**

RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL FACTORS

From the perspective of Christian faith, the spread of Christianity will be seen as the fulfilment of the promise attributed to Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel, “... I will build my church ...” (16: 18). But Christian faith accepts that divine providence often works through very human and historical means. In this section we shall consider the various factors that contributed to the rapid growth of Christianity from some one hundred and twenty Jewish believers in Jerusalem in about AD30 (Acts 1: 15) to its status as the official imperial religion with an estimated 30 million Gentile adherents in the fourth century.

We may note firstly that there were factors which facilitated the expansion of the Church which were not directly related to Christianity itself. For instance, there appears to have been a growing dissatisfaction with traditional religions and philosophies. Roman religion was creedless and therefore lacked definition. It had endless deities, variously favoured by different emperors. Many turned to Eastern mystery religions but they too were diverse, sometimes perverse and often fatalistic. Greek philosophy generally stressed the transitory and insubstantial character of the material world and yearned for immortality, but provided no certain answers.

The Church grew also because there was no consistent Roman policy for suppressing or exterminating Christianity. Before the Decian persecution (AD250–251), hostility was generally local, sporadic, populist and unplanned. The Roman governor Pliny's uncertainty about how to deal with Christianity in early second century Bithynia and the emperor Trajan's ambiguous reply to his request for advice (see Chapter 2, Persecution) is one example of an official vagueness concerning the new faith which allowed it space to grow.

The *Pax Romana* (Roman peace) also provided conditions which were favourable to the spread of early Christianity. In the third century Origen reflected that God had prepared the nations for the Gospel by bringing them under a sole ruler – the Roman emperor. A measure of political stability coupled with empire-wide security facilitated relatively safe travel on land and sea. Rome had also provided a network of easily passable roads along which the Christian message could be taken throughout the Empire.

The existence of a common tongue, the Greek language, greatly reduced linguistic difficulties in the communication of the Gospel. Alexander the Great's conquests ensured that a 'common' Greek was spoken over a wide area before Rome's rise to power. However, since rural areas were largely resistant to the new language early Christianity became a mostly urban faith.

In addition to these factors external to Christianity there were, of course, Christian reasons for the growth of the Church. The Gospels record the Church's mandate for making disciples of 'all nations' in what has been called the Great Commission of Jesus (eg Matthew 28: 18–20). However, the motivational force of this was somewhat weakened by an early belief that the twelve apostles had already evangelised the world. The New Testament writings also present an exclusive Gospel in the sense that only through Jesus Christ could the world be saved (John 14: 6; Acts 4: 12; 1 Timothy 2: 5). In the early days a belief in the imminent return of Jesus and the end of the world, found for example in the New Testament and the *Shepherd of Hermas*, created a sense of evangelistic urgency.

So, in an informal and spontaneous way Christians spread their faith through a network of daily personal relationships, business trips and casual encounters. In the second century Justin was converted through a conversation with an old man in Ephesus. In the next century it was a conversation with a church leader that led to Cyprian's conversion. Celsus observed how ordinary Christians took every opportunity to spread their faith.

There were, of course, many full-time missionaries who, like Paul and his companions in the book of Acts, took the Gospel throughout the Empire, planting churches in the cities which would serve as missionary centres to the surrounding countryside. Public preaching in the open air, while common enough in Paul's day, is rarely mentioned in the second and third centuries, probably due to the growing threat of popular persecution. We know, too, that Christians entered into debate with unbelievers to win them over – Justin's *Dialogue* with the rabbi Trypho is but one example. Justin even held classes for inquirers, and in the third century there was a famous 'Catechetical School' in Alexandria headed by Clement and then Origen. And the presence of 'God-fearers' (Gentile converts to Judaism) in many of the Empire's cities provided, as in the book of Acts, a bridge for Christian mission into the Gentile world. Here were people who shared a common understanding of God and morality with the early Christians. We have evidence too of some missionary-minded bishops such as Irenaeus of Lyons who in the late second century evangelised the rural Celts in their native tongue.

It is also clear that early Christian preachers and writers made an effort to relate the Gospel to diverse cultures by adapting the presentation of the message to the various thought forms of their audiences. Paul demonstrated this flexibility (eg 1 Corinthians 9: 19–23), as can be seen from a comparison of his different approaches to Jews and Gentiles as reported in Acts (eg compare 13: 16–41 with 17: 22–31). A similar process is discernible in the writings of second century Christian Apologists, such as Justin, and in the Alexandrian Fathers (Clement and Origen) who sought to communicate the Gospel in the language of Greek philosophy. Indeed, early Christian literature in general was an important means of spreading the Christian message. The translation of the Greek New Testament into other languages made the faith accessible to an even wider audience. By the start of the third century Latin, Syriac and Coptic versions were available.

As for the message itself, in contrast to the traditional religions and philosophies mentioned above, the Christian message proved attractive to many. Instead of a confusing array of deities it presented one universal God. In place of ill defined mythologies it made clear statements about a