

# Worthless people

--Catholic Christianity

*Romans 7:21-8:2 So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God--through Jesus Christ our Lord!*

*So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in the sinful nature a slave to the law of sin. Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.*

Early Christians, in their efforts to carry the gospel to all men, did not stop at the borders of the Roman Empire. There is a creed that confesses faith in “the holy, catholic church.” – universal, all encompassing ...was more than an organization. It was a spiritual vision that all Christians should be in one body. The years between A.D. 70 and A.D. 312 are the Age of Catholic Christianity because **this thought dominates Christian history between the death of the apostles and the rise of the Christian emperors.**

Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch 2<sup>nd</sup> Cent was the first to use the word “Catholic” church... “*Wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic church.*” By the end of the second century the term catholic was widely used of the church in the sense that it was both **universal**, in contrast to local congregations, and **orthodox**, in contrast to heretical groups.

**By the reign of Constantine (312—337), the first Christian emperor, there were churches in every large town in the empire and in places as distant from each other as Britain, Carthage, and Persia.**

Paul (Rom. 1:16) “*For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation. . . to the Jew first and also to the Greek*” The best place to launch a tour of early Christian expansion is with the Jew. Jews were present in large numbers in every part of the Roman Empire – they may have numbered as high as 7 percent of the total population.

The majority of interested Gentiles remained in the category of “*God-fearers,*” interested but spectators –WHY? **circumcision**. When Christian preachers made it plain to these folk that, without submitting to the rite of Circumcision (law)... they could receive all that Judaism offered and it was not difficult for them to take one further step and accept Jesus as the Christ.

The “God-fearers” knew the Old Testament; they understood its theological ideas; they accepted its moral values.

After the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, the center of the Christian movement moved eventually west to Antioch of Syria. By the end of the fourth century Antioch was a city of half a million people and half of these were Christians.

The **mainstream** of early Christian missionary work moved West of Antioch not East – from Antioch the next city of note would be Ephesus.

*Farther* west, Rome, the heart of the vast empire, drew to itself peoples from all regions. The Roman church also grew rapidly...*German scholar Adolf Harnack calculated that by A.D. 250 no less than 30,000 Christians lived in Rome!* **Most of these came from the poorer classes.**

Farther west of Rome and north, progress of the gospel seems to have been slow. In the southern area of what is now France (then Gaul) we know a church existed in Lyons in the middle of the second century – the bishop there was Irenaeus (one of the first Church Scholars)

---By the end of the third century we also hear of churches and bishops in Spain. *We have no firm idea how Christianity first entered Britain. It may have been through some Roman soldier or merchant.*

Moving south across the Mediterranean we come to North Africa. Again a stands out, Carthage, **which dominated the area we know as Algeria.**

Move east across North Africa we come to Cyrene, **just west of Egypt**. This territory is mentioned a few times in the New Testament.

- Simon of Cyrene carried the cross of Jesus (Mark 15:21).
- It is almost certain that Simon became a believer since you see his son Rufus in the circle of Christians (Rom. 16:13).
- Cyrenians were also present on the Day of Pentecost when Peter delivered his rousing message (Acts 2:10).
- Some of them later disputed with Stephen (Acts 6:9).
- Cyrenians took part in that decisive step that carried the gospel beyond Israel to the gentile world (Acts 11:20).

We know that by the fifth century a half dozen bishops labored in the area of Cyrene.

Finally this circle around the Mediterranean brings us Alexandria. ***Named for Alexander the Great who founded the city in 332 B.C.*** it was a cultural capital and a center for trade with East and West. As the second largest city in the empire it had a sizeable Jewish population. Led by the well-known philosopher Philo, a contemporary of the apostle Paul, Jews in Alexandria tried to interpret Judaism in terms of Greek philosophy.

By the end of the third century, no area of the empire was without some testimony to the gospel.

The catholic (universal) vision of early Christians was as evident in the social impact of the gospel. Celsus an outspoken critic of Christianity: *“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.”* **It is to the church’s credit that it did not neglect the poor and despised.**

To answer critics like Celsus, a number of Christian writers arose to defend the Christian faith against the rumors and railings of the pagans - *these men “the apologists.”*

**----They believed that if they could answer the accusations of the enemies of Christianity and point out the weaknesses of paganism – it would change public opinion about Christianity and lead to conversions.**

Aristides, Justin Martyr, his disciple Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus of Antioch, *Professor Ward Gasque* *“Toward the end of the second century, Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons in Gaul, wrote five monumental books against the gnostic heresies of his area, together with a book entitled Proof of the Apostolic Preaching.... His theology was grounded in the Bible and the church’s doctrines and helped provide a steady, positive influence in the church. He wrote of the cosmic implications of the work of Christ and God’s plan in history and paved the way for the later Christian interpretations of history by writers such as Augustine.”*

Other intellectual giants were still to come. – Tertullian, *the “father of Latin theology”* was born in Carthage A.D. 150. After his conversion he began writing books to promote the Christian faith.

Tertullian worked in Carthage – In Alexandria (east) A.D. 185 a converted Stoic philosopher named Pantaenus was teaching Christians in Alexandria. He had a pupil Clement – carried his work to even greater heights in the closing days of the second century

By the 3<sup>rd</sup> century the Christian church was beginning to assume the proportions of an empire within the empire.

## REASONS FOR THE GOSPELS SPREAD

**Believers have always insisted that God was at work in this movement.** There was a divine side to the expansion – But God usually works through human hearts and hands, and there is some value in asking what human factors contributed to the spread of the gospel.

Several prominent factors appear to have contributed to the growth of Christianity (besides martyrdom and ordinary friendships).

- First, early Christians were moved by a burning conviction. **The Event had happened.** God had invaded time.
- Second, the Christian gospel met a widely felt need in the hearts of people.

- Third, the practical expression of Christian love was probably among the most powerful causes of Christian success. *Lactantius, the North African scholar (c. 240—320) wrote, “We will not allow the image and creation of God to be thrown out to the wild beasts and the birds as their prey; it must be given back to the earth from which it was taken.”*
- Fourth, persecution helped to publicize the Christian faith. Martyrdoms were often witnessed by thousands in the amphitheater. **The term martyr originally meant “witness,” and that is precisely what many Christians were at the moment of death.**

There are a number of cases of conversion of pagans in the very moment of witnessing the condemnation and death of Christians.

For these and other reasons the Christian churches multiplied until Rome could neither ignore nor suppress the faith. It finally had to come to terms with it.

This period, however, the age of extraordinary expansion before Christianity moved from the catacombs to the imperial courts, serves to remind us that the church is truly catholic only when it is impelled by the gospel to bring all men to living faith in Jesus Christ.

If today the church would only care for ‘worthless people’ in our society as it used...because we are all worthless people.