



EARLY PLAGUES AND THE MOVEMENT OF GOD





“Not to know what has been transacted in former times is to be always a child. If no use is made of the labors of past ages, the world must remain always in the infancy of knowledge.”

Marcus Cicero





BIG IDEA

By looking specifically at the first century persecutions, the first century “global” famine, and two later plagues – Antonine and Cyprian – we will draw the conclusion that the church was prepared to stay on mission during these difficulties and emerged on the other side without changing her mission trajectory from when she entered these crises.





*“Marcus Aurelius is said to have invested heavily in restoring the temples and shrines of Roman deities, and **one wonders** whether it was in part due to the plague that Christianity coalesced and spread so rapidly throughout the empire at the end of the second century.”*

Sarah K. Yeomans
Director of Educational Programs
Biblical Archaeology Society





- Early Persecutions
 - Stephen's persecution
 - Local persecutions
 - Empire-wide persecutions
- Plagues
 - Famine during the reign of Claudius
 - Antonine Plague aka Plague of Galen
 - Cyprian Plague





PERSECUTIONS

- Stephen's persecution (Acts 8:1)
- Local persecutions
 - Philippi (48AD)
 - Thessalonica (49AD)
 - Corinth (51AD)
 - Ephesus (54AD)
- Empire-wide persecutions
 - Nero (64-68AD)
 - Trajan (117AD)
 - Decius (250AD)
 - Diocletian (303-305AD)





- From Corinth, in AD 50 or 51, he [Paul] wrote to the church in Thessalonica,
 - “For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything” (1 Thess 1:8).
- Again from Corinth, in AD 58, he told the growing movement in Rome that
 - “your faith is proclaimed in all the world” (Rom 1:8).
- Perhaps from a Roman imprisonment in AD 61, Paul and Timothy wrote to encourage the Philippians in their partnership in the gospel (Phil 1:5).
- Similarly, to the Colossians, the two wrote,
 - “Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person” (Col 4:6).
- The proclamation of the gospel and the making of disciples were paramount in the movement (Cooper, *Ephesiology*, 2020: 144)





*“The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow;
the blood of Christians is seed.”*

Tertullian, Apologeticus 50





PLAGUES

- Famine during the reign of Claudius
 - Prophecy of Agabus (Acts 11:27-28)
 - Response of the church (Acts 11:29)
- Antonine Plague a.k.a. Plague of Galen (163-175AD)
 - Estimated 25 million people died of the decade long plague
- Cyprian Plague (250-273AD)
 - Estimated 5,000 people per day were dying
 - 62% of Alexandria's population died or fled the city





*“Christian values of love and charity had, **from the beginning**, been translated into norms of social service and community solidarity.”*

Rodney Stark

The Rise of Christianity



GROWTH OF THE EARLY CHURCH





OBSERVATIONS

- First, Christianity was already on a growth trajectory.
- Second, the religious and philosophical worlds of Jews, Greeks and Romans were primed for the message of the gospel.
- Third, the impact of Christianity had already been felt on social, economic, religious, intellectual, and political levels in many of the major cities of the Roman Empire.
- Fourth, during plagues, Christianity lost fewer people and gained as many as they would have even if there were no plague





In other words, Christian behavior during plagues did not cause the growth as early Christianity grew even when there were no plagues.





STAYING ON MISSION

- God is on mission (Acts 17:27). That will not change and in his sovereignty, good will result in the world for those who love him (Rom 8:28).
- The early church stayed on mission. This did not change during times of suffering or hardship. The church is still adopted into his family for the explicit purpose to join with him in uniting all things in Christ (Eph 1:10).
- All Christ-followers were empowered to use their gifts, inspired to endure hardships, entrusted to teach others, and reminded to preach the word. Simply put, early church leaders equipped the saints for works of ministry (Eph 4:11-12).





STAYING ON MISSION

- The church did not have to adapt methods and strategies while staying on mission as it is not a complicated mission (1 Pet 2:9). In fact, it could very well be that our methods and strategies are a distraction from the simple task of declaring God's glory.
- The early Christians were not interested in attracting people to worship services or church buildings. Their focus was on attracting people to Jesus Christ (1 Cor 1:23).
- There was never a flattening of the curve in the growth trajectory of the early church (Acts 19:10, 20). We need to get back to a growth posture.



GROWTH OF THE EARLY CHURCH





God causes the growth of the church, not
plagues or persecutions





THE LENS OF HISTORY

- We might want to prepare to step into an uncertain future:
 - Food shortage and general distribution breakdowns
 - Mass resource limitations
 - Political instability and increased tribalism
 - Civil unrest and war
 - Global war





“Then afterwards he added, that there was nothing wonderful in our cherishing our own people only with the needed attentions of love, but that he might become perfect who would do something more than the publican or the heathen, who, overcoming evil with good, and practicing a clemency which was like the divine clemency, loved even his enemies, who would pray for the salvation of those that persecute him, as the Lord admonishes and exhorts.”

Pontius, Life and Passion of Cyprian





PATH FORWARD

- Recover the growth posture of the New Testament church:
 - Gospel-centric not sermon-centric
 - Ecclesio-centric not building-centric
 - APEST-centric not pastor-centric
 - Mission-centric not program-centric
 - Theocentric (Holy Spirit empowered) not anthropocentric (human strategies, methods, ingenuity)





EARLY PLAGUES AND THE MOVEMENT OF GOD



“*Ephesiology* gives a solid biblical understanding to the original church planting movement, and provides a healthy DNA understanding for local congregations, denominations and ministries to grow effectively. Dr. Cooper has made a significant contribution to the Kingdom here.”

Nate Vander Stelt

Executive Vice President

Global Alliance for Church Multiplication

*Discover God's passion
for movements*

