

Eye Witness - Speed of Early Growth

The Bible as a source of accurate historical information should not be ignored.

"It is because Paul was an eyewitness of the risen Lord that his writings stand in a quite different category from, for example, those of Augustine, however important Augustine may be as a theologian." *page 17 Lion handbook The History of Christianity 1996 edition .*

There is in existence many documents backing the evidence of the Bible writers.

The new testament covers almost the entire first century. *This of course depends on which date you accept that John wrote the Revelation and what Roman Caesar his message to the churches was intended to warn about.*

There is some dispute as to who the author of Revelation is: However it is the commonly held belief the disciple John is the author, if this is the case, he is the oldest eyewitness mentioned in the Bible.

Date written

“Revelation was written when Christians were entering a time of persecution. The two periods most often mentioned are the latter part of Nero's reign (A.D. 54-68) and the latter part of Domitian's reign (81-96). Most scholars date the book c. 95. (A few suggest a date during the reign of Vespasian: 69-79.)” *NIV study Bible notes published by Zondervan Publishing House*

If we take John to be warning of persecution under Nero, then it takes little reflection for us to realise Paul must have appeared before Nero as well. It is clear the intended readers would have been familiar with the symbols and would have had no trouble knowing what John was meaning in his letter.

The writing of Paul, Luke, John, Matthew, Mark, and Peter give us a very comprehensive account of the first steps of the fledging movement.

Acts 11: 26 ...So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch. *NIV*

“What honour was now upon the Church *at Antioch: There the disciples were first called Christians...* Hitherto those who gave up their names to Christ were called *disciples, learners, scholars; but henceforward they were called Christians.* (Matthew Henry Commentary.)

The Roman authorities began to use the name ‘Christian’ to describe the ‘Early Church’ and it was the persecution suffered by early followers of Christ that in part caused the early spread of the gospel.

“As late as 112, a well informed Roman citizen Tacitus could write of primitive Christianity: ‘The Christians got their name from one Christus, who was executed by the sentence of procurator Pontius Pilate when Tiberius was emperor, and the pernicious superstition was checked for a short time, only to break out afresh - not only in Judea, the home of the plague, but in Rome itself, where all horrible and shameful things in the world collect and find a home’ (Ann. XV.44). [from course notes].

If we take Paul and his missionary journeys as an example, we find he travelled extensively. The power attending his need to present the gospel to the gentiles of the then Roman Empire came from his being an eye witness.

His endeavours had about them the smell of authenticity, he knew he was telling the truth. He had met the living Lord on the road to Damascus. No amount of remorse could salve his conscience for the persecution he had poured upon the early followers of Christ.

Paul was present when the Church's first martyr meet his death.

The book of Acts is the story of the very earliest years and the work of those first disciples (followers) and apostles.

When we consider just how short a period of time transpired between Christ's death on the cross and the early spread of the gospel we begin to realise just how powerful an eyewitness account can be to hearers of the gospel. The time span is but a blink in the history of man.

Man has a need and the gospel message provides the cure. All men if they are honest have a fear; the fear of death. The message the early disciples and apostles had was a radical one for the then known world (it still is).

“Rome was at this time the metropolis of the world. The haughty Caesars were giving laws to nearly every nation upon the earth. King and courtier were either ignorant of the humble Nazarene or regarded Him with hatred and derision. And yet in less than two years the gospel found its way from the prisoner's lowly home into the imperial halls. Paul is in bonds as an evildoer; but "the word of God is not bound." 2 Timothy 2:9.

In former years the apostle had publicly proclaimed the faith of Christ with winning power, and by signs and miracles he had given unmistakable evidence of its divine character. With noble firmness he had risen up before the sages of Greece and by his knowledge and eloquence had put to silence the arguments of proud philosophy. With undaunted courage he had stood before kings and governors, and reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come, until the haughty rulers trembled as if already beholding the terrors of the day of God.”

(Acts of the Apostles, E. White, page 462,. Published by Remnant Publications)

One of the influences that enabled the gospel to spread so far so fast was in fact the Roman Empire and it's efficient transport system. The number of journeys Paul undertook is evidence of this.

“Several factors encouraged the rapid spread of Christianity in this short period. One was the existence of a unifying language and culture, at least in the cities, from Italy to India. In the East Alexander the Great and his successors established Greek as the common language - often referred to as *koinē*, the Greek word for ‘common’. Paul and the other early Christians were able to use this language to spread their message. Jews were scattered throughout the Empire and beyond and provided Christian missionaries with an entry into the pagan world.”
p.66 Lion handbook The History of Christianity 1996 edition.

Yet good roads, the control of Rome and a common language cannot explain fully the widespread acceptance of the gospel wherever it went. Something else must have had a great influence.

When the disciples saw their master put to death on the cross they were despondent. They had attached themselves to Christ and in purely human terms had backed a lemon, a dead duck. Imagine the power then that must have enlivened them when he reappeared to them after the resurrection.

The fear that all men have (and woman) was defeated. They no longer feared death. This enabled them to go forth and preach the gospel with power after they received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

Evidence of this power and fearlessness is found through out the events portrayed in the Bible after Pentecost. Those who witnessed the day of Pentecost spread the gospel all over the Roman empire when they went home after the festival.

Paul Before Nero

“When Paul was summoned to appear before the emperor Nero for trial, it was with the near prospect of certain death. The serious nature of the crime charged against him, and the prevailing animosity toward Christians, left little ground for hope of a favourable issue.

Among the Greeks and Romans it was customary to allow an accused person the privilege of employing an advocate to plead in his behalf before courts of justice. By force of argument, by impassioned eloquence, or by entreaties, prayers, and tears, such an advocate often secured a decision in favour of the prisoner or, failing in this, succeeded in mitigating the severity of the sentence.

When Paul was summoned before Nero, no man ventured to act as his counsel or advocate; no friend was at hand even to preserve a record of the charges brought against him, or of the arguments that he urged in his own defence. Among the Christians at Rome there was not one who came forward to stand by him in that trying hour.

The only reliable record of the occasion is given by Paul himself, in his second letter to Timothy. ‘At my first answer,’ the apostle wrote, ‘no man stood with me, but all men forsook me: I pray God that it may not be laid to their charge. ‘Notwithstanding the Lord stood with

me, and strengthened me; that by me the preaching might be fully known, and that all the Gentiles might hear: and I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion.' 2 Timothy 4:16, 17." p. 492. *Acts of the Apostles*, E. White, page 462,. Published by Remnant Publications

2 Timothy 4:22 The Lord Jesus Christ [be] with thy spirit. Grace [be] with you. Amen. [*The second (epistle) unto Timotheus, ordained the first bishop of the church of the Ephesians, was written from Rome, when Paul was brought before Nero the second time.*]

The above note in Brackets appears at the end of 2 Timothy chapter 4 in the King James version of the Bible. It does not appear in all versions. However it is the commonly held belief that the Caesar Paul appeared before was Nero.

The courage of Paul and the rest of the disciples and Apostles is clear. Most of the disciples meet untimely ends (*although they did try to boil him in oil, I am not aware of how John meet his end*). Even when Paul was imprisoned or before Nero there were those amongst Nero's own house hold who become Christian. The onward spread of the Gospel would not be stopped, no matter the persecution.

The power of the gospel, the power of eyewitness reports, and the dauntless courage of early Christians were the keys to the speed with which the early Church grew.
