

The Unexpected!

A series of 5 articles by Michael Penny

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Jesus Christ: The Unexpected Messiah!

Michael Penny

According to some people we have just entered the next millennium. Others argue that it will not start until the year 2001. However, if we are considering the third millennium since Christ's birth, then it started some years ago. For calendar corrections place His birth not at 0, but somewhere between 6 and 4 BC.

BC – Before Christ! AD – *Anno Domini*; Latin for “In the year of our Lord”. Who is this person, this Lord Christ, who divided the calendar and who stands in the centre of time?

Today, many people feel that an era is ending. In the days of Caesar Augustus, the people of Israel also sensed that an era might be an ending. Many of them hoped for, even felt that, their Messianic King might be arriving any day. This Messiah (or Christ, in the Greek) would remove the Hasmonean Herods from the throne of Israel for they were not descendants of David. But more than this, this Messiah would remove the Romans from the land promised by God to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and their descendants, the people of Israel.

One of the candidates for Messianism was Jesus, a carpenter from Nazareth in the north. However, His death seemed to doom the movement that had grown up around Him. One of His closest followers betrayed Him, nine others fled, one denied knowing Him three times. Only one went all the way to the foot of the Cross, to look up at his dying leader.

The death of Jesus the Messiah should have been the end of the matter, but it was not. It was the beginning.

Messiah: Son of David

Most Jews thought about the coming Messiah in glowing and glorious terms. He would be a great king, like His ancestor David. This Messiah-ben-David would overthrow Herod and Caesar. He would ride the promised land of Rome, of injustice and of oppression. He would destroy idolatry and bigotry. He would establish justice and righteousness. He would bring peace and love, not just to Israel but also to the Gentiles, to the whole world.

If that was the case, how could such great expectations ever be met by a small-town carpenter from the north, from Galilee of the Gentiles?

Messiah: Son of Joseph

However, there was another view, one that believed in a Messiah who would ultimately be rejected even by His own nation, just as Joseph had been rejected by his brothers and sold into slavery in Egypt. This Messiah-ben-Joseph would be sold for 30 pieces of silver. He would be despised and disdained. He would be scourged and scorned. Yet just as Joseph was to be the bread of life for his family, so this Messiah was to be the bread of life, eternal life, for all His family, His nation ... and beyond.

Three days after His death, astounding news rocked Jerusalem. This Jesus of Nazareth was alive again! He had risen from the dead. Ten days after His death, eleven of His disciples had seen Him and believed.

So did His half-brothers James and Jude. Fifty days after His resurrection 120 of them gathered in an upper room in Jerusalem to celebrate the Jewish Feast of Pentecost.

Jesus: The Messiah

This group of people, those Jews who believed that Jesus was the Messiah and that He had been resurrected from the dead, eventually became known as 'Christians'. These Christians were scorned by many of their fellow Jews. They were looked upon as superstitious by the educated and cultured Greeks and the powerful Romans. Their philosophers laughed at the idea of someone being raised from the dead. And to the Jews, to even speak of the Messiah and crucifixion in the same breath seemed impossible. It was foolish and scandalous to say such things. It was a contradiction, a negation of all that they associated with the Messiah.

It is often hard for Christians today, who have been brought up with the Cross as the glorious symbol of triumph over sin and death, to understand the disgrace linked with Roman crucifixion. For those Gentile people alive at that time, it implied that the crucified person was one who had so offended the much admired and respected Roman laws as to deserve the most severe and demeaning death. Such a person could hardly be the Saviour of the world!

And, as for the Jews; anyone who suffered such a public death on a cross (on a tree), must have clearly seriously broken the Mosaic Law. So much so, that he was considered cursed by God. Such a person could hardly be the Jewish Messiah!

However, the early Christians saw that Christ was cursed not for His own wrongdoings, His own personal sins, but for the sins of others, for the sins of the world. And by the very act of raising Him from the dead, God showed that Christ personally was acceptable to Him and that Christ's death had been accepted as the sin offering for others. Those who trusted in His offering as a sacrifice for their sins were justified in God's eyes. They were forgiven and guaranteed eternal life.

Jesus: spotless and sinless

Yet this band of beleaguered believers spread their strange and distinctive message, and others started to believe it and were changed. Not only were the Jews affected, but also the God-fearing Gentiles who attended the synagogues throughout the Roman world and beyond. And then even pagan Gentiles, idolaters from the temples of Zeus and Diana, were changed. The message was powerful. Jesus was perfect, sinless, spotless. He has died to take away the sin of the world. Believe and repent, trust and change, and God will forgive you your sins and grant you eternal life. You will be saved from sin and eternal death.

Initially, Rome tolerated Christianity, thinking it to be some sect of Judaism, alongside the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Essenes. But Christianity was not content to stay within the borders of Israel or restrict itself racially to Jews. And so the immense power of Rome set itself against this pacifistic party that taught that God loved the world and that He wanted people to love one another as He loved them.

Within a short period of time it became a capital offence against Rome to be a follower of Jesus. Christians, like their founder, could be crucified on a cross. There were other atrocious punishments like being dipped in tar and set on fire to light up the arena where other Christians were cast to ferocious lions, to be torn apart and eaten, much to the enjoyment of the crowd.

From slaughter and slander ... to power

But Christianity survived the slaughter and slander. It overcame hatred and opposition. But it did more than survive. It first gained acceptance and then respectability, and eventually it gained power and authority. So much so that some 300 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, Christianity won control over its one time impregnable enemy, Rome. Under the Emperor Constantine, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire and for the following 1600 years or so, its power and influence slowly and steadily grew. Christianity became the major religion of the world. Christ became the central figure in history. He, more than anyone else, has dominated the world stage for the last 2,000 years.

That is, until the last part of the 20th century and into the 21st. In these recent years there has been a serious decline in commitment to Christ, both outside in an increasingly secular society and, to some extent, within parts of the church. This can only leave one wondering what is to happen in the next century, or the next millennium – if the world lasts that long. Will the Unexpected Messiah, this Jesus of Nazareth, still be as influential in the next hundred years, let alone the next thousand? Will the message of forgiveness and eternal life through faith in His sacrifice for sins be as powerful and efficacious? Yes! But will it be believed and accepted in a materialist, secular society? The answer depends upon us, we who are Christians, for we are His Body upon this earth.

If we feel daunted by the pressures exerted by hedonistic materialism and the new aggressive atheism, let us take note and emulate those Christians in the first three years of Christianity. May they inspire us, encourage us and enthuse us. However, we will need more than inspiration, encouragement and enthusiasm. We will need God's incomparably great power, and thankfully that is available to all who believe in Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1:19-20). That power raised Jesus of Nazareth, the Unexpected Messiah, from the dead. It took Him up to heaven and seated Him at God's right hand in the heavenly places far above all. That's the power we will need in coming years if our witness to the resurrected and glorified Christ is to be effective, and if we are not to give up the battle.

Paul of Tarsus: The Unexpected Missionary!

Michael Penny

When he first put pen to papyrus in an inspired letter, Paul had been a Christian for at least fifteen years. He had just returned from his first missionary journey to Cyprus and Galatia. His reflections were mature and profound, which caused Albert Schweitzer to describe Paul as “the patron saint of thought”. Others have called Paul “the first Christian theologian”, believing his letters were the first New Testament documents to have been written.

Paul’s main desire was to communicate with the ordinary people and his manner of expression and style of writing were both idiomatic and colloquial. This may have been because he dictated his letters to an amanuensis, a secretary, friend or slave who could write. It was also because of the language he used. Paul communicated in the Greek language of the ordinary people, *Koine* Greek, not the classical Greek of the scholars.

Although the dictation and the language may have simplified Paul’s message, his content contained breadth. It was that of a cosmopolitan, one who could and did quote not only from the Hebrew Scriptures, but also from Greek literature. This resulted in Paul being a Jew to the Jews and a Gentile to the Gentiles. He, alone, in the New Testament, is called *The Apostle to the Gentiles*. This set him apart from the other Apostles and made him different from them for they, almost exclusively, confined themselves to Israelites. Paul was, as J. B. Priestly called him, “a missionary of genius”, and no better place was this evident than in Corinth.

Corinth

On the east coast of Greece, at the head of the gulf, lay the city of Corinth. From the commercial point of view it was ideally situated at a crossroads between the eastern and western halves of the Roman Empire. A constant stream of travellers and cargo flowed through this hub and made it one of the greatest business centres of the time. But like other bustling ports throughout the centuries, Corinth was notorious for the profligacy of its lifestyle. Paul called on the people there to repent of their impurity, immorality and licentiousness. The temple of Zeus in the city had a thousand priestesses, whom we would call prostitutes.

Corinth also attracted a host of itinerant magicians, sorcerers, and entertainers. There were also philosophers representing all the pagan beliefs, from Stoicism to the mystery cults with their secrets and inner circles. Such a city did, indeed, present an intriguing challenge to Paul. If a Christian community could be established in such a wild and wayward town, then surely the message of Jesus would become known throughout the Empire. But more than that, the Christian message would shine brightly as an example of how faith in Christ saved and changed people. Paul preached salvation through Jesus and he must have blazed through that notorious city like a rocket. He set the town alight, but how did a Hebrew of the Hebrews, a law-keeping Pharisee, become the Light bearer to the pagan world?

Christ! The centre and circumference

At the heart of Paul’s thinking was his personal vision of Jesus Christ, Whom he encountered on the Damascus Road. Christ was the centre and circumference of Paul’s new life. His vision, brighter than the noonday sun, was the fire that illuminated and motivated him. It drove him ever onwards.

No question was more central for early Christianity than understanding Who Jesus was. Paul's faith and teaching centred on the very person of Jesus, together with His Crucifixion and Resurrection. Jesus was the promised Messiah (Christ), the Son of God. However, the hanging of God's Messiah on a tree as an accursed criminal was so inconceivable to any Pharisee that it must have been a stumbling block to Paul's acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah (Christ). Under the Law of Moses not only was it a public disgrace to be hung on a tree, the person was seen to be cursed by God.

But at his conversion, Paul came to believe the unbelievable, to accept the unacceptable, to see that the unthinkable *was* true, indeed it *had to be* true. The God Whom he had always obeyed had revealed himself in Jesus Christ and had died an accursed death as a sacrifice for sin, but not for *His* Ownsin, but rather for the sin of the world, for only *He* could take away the sin of the world. Furthermore, to confirm all this and show that the sacrifice was acceptable, God raised Christ from the dead. And Paul saw clearly that this sacrifice was made for *all* the weak and ungodly, not only for Jewish sinners but also for Gentile ones.

Jesus of Nazareth

Paul says little about the historic Jesus of Nazareth, the One Who walked the hills of Judea and Who sailed the Sea of Galilee. Rather he related to the crucified, raised, risen, ascended, and glorified Messiah; the Saviour-God, the Redeemer, the One Who took away the sin of the world, and Who was seated in the heavenly realms, far above all.

Neither does Paul say much about the teachings of Jesus, teachings that had been given to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, a people who were to obey the Law of Moses. Rather what Paul preached and taught was given Him by the risen and glorified Christ, given in special revelations. This solidified his faith in Christ, and established his absolute certainty in the death and resurrection of God's one and only Son.

The Law of Moses

Initially, after Christ's ascension, it was right for Jewish Christians to continue in their observance of the Law of Moses, for how else could they effectively witness to their fellow-Jews that Jesus was, indeed, the Son of God, the promised Messiah (Christ)? However, although at first, following the Day of Pentecost, many ordinary Jews believed, opposition from the Jewish leadership grew stronger and harder, and in the end Paul was the instrument God used to herald in a new dispensation. At the end of Acts, he announced that Israel, as a nation, had been struck blind and deaf because they had hardened their hearts to God's Son and to His love, grace and forgiveness. God's salvation was now to be sent directly to the Gentiles and the Mosaic Law, with its commandments and ordinances, was abolished for those Jews who did believe in Jesus. This Christ-given message won Paul few friends amongst his fellow-Jews. Even those Jews who were Christians found it hard to accept that Israel had lost its premier place in God's plan, and that circumcision, sacrifices, and offerings were no longer required.

However, since God had to sacrifice His own Son to free people from their sin, it was clear that neither observing the Mosaic Law, nor keeping any laws of the Gentiles, could reconcile anyone to God. People were saved by grace through faith in the Christ's sacrifice for sin. People were saved by grace through faith, not by works; not by religious rituals, neither by social works, nor by good deeds. None of these could save anyone, and so no one could boast, not even the Jews. All humanity was in the same boat as all were sinners. All had to admit they had sinned and come short of the glory of God. All needed to ask for forgiveness. And all had to believe that forgiveness was possible only because Christ had died for their sins.

There was nothing wrong with the Law of Moses, it was good and holy, said Paul. However, its weakness was due to the inability of people to live by it. No law, not even the God-given Law of Moses, had the power to set people free from the enslaving power of sin. Paul himself, at one time, thought that he had managed to live a perfect and righteous life as measured by that Law. However, when he saw the righteousness of Christ, he realised that his own Law-keeping righteousness was no better than filthy rags. Even a zealous Jew, like himself, was spotted, but he did not despair. Christ showed him that God's perfect righteousness could be freely his as a God-given gift.

Works follow salvation

Although this righteousness was a free gift and was not by works, Paul saw that works should follow salvation, that Christians were created for the good works that God had ordained. Life for Christians was to embrace the love and forgiveness Christ had for them and then to exhibit that love and forgiveness to others. All self-promotion was to be rejected in favour of service to the community, and first and foremost to the Christian community.

Christ and the Christian community: these formed the core of Paul's Christianity, and were central to Paul's life and central to his writings, writings that have had vast implications for Christianity throughout the ages and will continue to do so for years to come.

(For more on Paul see *Paul's Three Ministries* (£1.50) and *Approaching the Bible* (£7.50) by Michael Penny. Also available on cassette is *Understanding Paul and Understanding the Bible* (£3.00) by Michael Penny and *Paul - A Missionary of Genius* (£3.00) by Peter Felter and Charles Ozanne. All available from the Open Bible Trust, Fordland Mount, Upper Basildon, Reading RG8 8LU, UK or from www.obt.org.uk)

Jews of the Dispersion: The Unexpected Converts!

Michael Penny

By the time of Christ there were about two million Jews living in Palestine. However, a far greater number, possibly as many as four million, which constituted about two thirds of the world's Jewish population, lived outside the Holy Land. Many lived within the boundaries of the Roman Empire and there had been a large Jewish colony in the capital of the Empire for 200 years or more. However, the largest contingent lived in Egypt, which had a Jewish population of perhaps a million, centred in Alexandria, the most important city in the Roman world after Rome

Elsewhere Jews were settled in Spain (which was why Paul wished to visit that country), Gaul (modern France), Northwest Africa, and Greece, as well as in the Greek-speaking Middle East and in Macedonia and the Crimea. Beyond the Roman Empire's eastern frontiers, in Parthia (modern Iran) there was a large Jewish population with roots dating back to Daniel's day and the Babylonian Captivity (from about 587 to 537 B.C.). These Jews produced the impressive Babylonian Talmud and Paul may have visited the Jews in that region after he left Damascus and spent time in Arabia (Galatians 1:17).

The *Diaspora*

Over the years these exiled Jews, Jews of the Dispersion, became known as the *Diaspora*. Their life was often far from easy. They were subject to relocations, sometimes forced and sometime voluntary, which scattered them not only geographically but also socially (Daniel 1:3-4). When at times they found themselves on the losing side in a war, they would be displaced and enslaved. Eventually, the Jewish slaves would buy their freedom and swell the ranks of the working poor. However, throughout the *Diaspora* there were also able or influential Jews who belonged to the local ruling classes. Then, between these two extremes of slaves and rulers, there were civil servants, merchants, bankers, tradesmen, artisans, farmers, shepherds, physicians, lawyers, painters, poets, actors and singers. There were even a few fortune-tellers, astrologers, sorcerers and itinerant quacks!

Rich or poor, every Jewish male contributed the annual half shekel to support the Temple in Jerusalem, but for the *Diaspora* most religious life in their far-off communities was focused on the local synagogues. Many did their best to follow the exacting regulations of the Mosaic Law in traditional form, although this must have been impossible for these strangers in strange lands. These faithful Jews won for themselves certain concessions. They could be exempted from certain civic duties and observances that would violate their religion; some were able to acquire citizenship of the country in which they lived. The granting of such special privileges, combined with their refusal to mingle socially with non-Jews and to worship state and local gods, often led to tensions between these Jews and their neighbours, and anti-Semitism was widespread.

Others, however, focused on the similarities between Greek philosophy and Hebrew doctrines, attempting to incorporate into their lives what they considered the best of both worlds. This avoided hostility and antagonism from their neighbours, but these adaptations set them apart from their brethren in Jerusalem, especially if they had concluded that circumcision was not necessary.

Evangelists for Judaism

Yet *Diaspora* Jews at the time of Christ were energetic and successful proselytisers, great evangelists for their Jehovah. There is some evidence to suggest that Saul of Tarsus, in his pre-Christian days, was just such a Jew, encouraging Gentiles to accept Jehovah as their God, to be circumcised and to embrace the Law of Moses. Judaism had not sought converts so actively before or since.

Many Gentiles were attracted to the Jews' belief in one God, their emphasis on the family, their commitment to taking care of their fellow-Jews, and their high moral and ethical standing. Those Gentiles who underwent circumcision and fully converted to Judaism were called Proselytes. Others, who attended the synagogues but who had not undergone circumcision, were known as God-fearers, and there were many of these in New Testament times.

The “other sheep”

The Jews of the *Diaspora* were the “other sheep” which Christ referred to in John 10:16. They were not in the sheep pen of Palestine but He wanted to gather them and bring them in so that Israel would be one flock. When Jesus told the Jews that they would not be able to find Him, their reaction was to query whether He would go to the Dispersion scattered amongst the Greeks (John 7:35). But there was no need for Jesus to go to the Dispersion for as well as sending their half-shekel annual temple tax, many of the Dispersion made pilgrimages to Jerusalem, to worship at the temple.

We read in Acts 2:11 of both Jews and Proselytes (converts to Judaism) being in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. That passage lists their nationalities: Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome, Cretans and Arabs (Acts 2:9-11).

Unexpected Missionaries

We also read that three thousand were converted that day and a little while later the number of male converts grew to five thousand. These returned to their own cities and countries, and some even established churches. We know from the Bible that there was a church in Rome, yet no apostle had visited them, not until Paul reached them at the end of Acts. We know from history that there was a thriving Christian community in Alexandria in Egypt but, again, they had been paid no visit by anyone of significance. Thus the *Diaspora* were not only the unexpected converts to Christianity, they were also the unexpected missionaries.

For example, again from history, we know that many Jews lived in Syrian and Parthian way stations on the silk-road from China, and they worked in the silk business. Some of the earliest Christian missionaries to the East were originally Jewish silk merchants. These Jews of the Dispersion may have had a far greater impact upon the spread of Christianity than has been thought.

Peter and the Twelve

By contrast the Twelve were reluctant to leave Jerusalem and Judea and Galilee, and even more reluctant to minister to anyone who was not a Jew. In this they were not wrong. Their Christ-given mission was first to convert Jerusalem and Judea, and then Samaria, before going to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8; Luke 11:47). Their task in Jerusalem and Judea was proving to be a hard one.

Peter was given a special vision and special instructions to visit the God-fearing Gentile Cornelius, but there is no record of him visiting any other Gentiles. And similarly, the Jewish Christians from

Jerusalem and Judea who had been scattered as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, shared the message of Christ only with Jews of the Dispersion, not with Gentiles. It was some Christian Jews of the Dispersion, some from Cyprus and Cyrene, who went to Antioch and who were the first to start telling the good news about the Lord Jesus to the Greeks, a great number of whom believed and turned to the Lord (Acts 11:11-19-21).

Unexpected Leaders

At this time Paul came back onto the scene after many years of silence in Tarsus. His God-given ministry was to take Christ's name to the Gentiles as well as to the people of Israel. However, God directed him not to those Jews who lived in the Holy Land, but rather to the Jews of the Dispersion. And so starts one of the most exciting of human adventures as Paul, accompanied by Barnabas, set sail for Cyprus, and, having crossed the island, sailed to Pamphylia and went inland to Galatia. This was the beginning of the first of his three missionary journeys recorded in Acts.

His converts came from the Jews of the Dispersion, from God-fearing Gentiles who sat in the synagogues, and from pagans to whom he ministered in the market place. However, neither the God-fearers nor the pagans had the knowledge of God and the Scriptures to lead and teach these new converts in these young churches. The leadership came from the Dispersion. The unexpected converts, who had become the unexpected missionaries, now also became the unexpected leaders.

Pax Romana

The Unexpected Peace

Michael Penny

We have a tendency to think that during New Testament times Rome was the strongest Empire in the world. This is because (a) we know that Rome conquered Britain; (b) we tend to study European history and we know that Rome dominated Europe; and (c) we read our Bibles and we see Rome as the dominant power over Israel. Yet, are we correct in thinking this?

Roman origins

The city of Rome became a republic in 509 BC, and was governed by two consuls who each served for just one year. For the next 200 years, under a great variety of consuls, Rome went to war with the area surrounding it, with the result that almost the whole of Italy was governed by Rome. In 264 BC Rome started expanding outside of mainland Italy and conquered Sicily, Corsica and Sardinia. Then Greece was invaded. Asia Minor was added, and so too was northern Africa (including Israel). Spain and Gaul (France) came under Roman influence. Many of these later triumphs were the work of Julius Caesar who, in 46 BC, made himself dictator. However, in 44 BC he was murdered and replaced by his nephew Octavian who, as Augustus, became the first of the Roman Emperors and ruled until AD 14. And what an Empire it was!

Augustus had Mark Antony as his right hand man and together they crushed the army of Brutus and Cassius at Philippi. Antony went to Egypt and, together with Cleopatra, formed a powerful joint alliance. It was decided to extend the Empire further east, to battle against the Persians and their capital Babylon. Antony led an army of 100,000 Roman foot soldiers supported by thousands more from Egypt. The results were disastrous! The Persian cavalry overran the Roman army and administered an humiliating defeat. Antony barely escaped with his life and Rome was shown not to be the strongest empire in the world.

A little while later, Antony regrouped his and Cleopatra's forces, and challenged Augustus for the leadership of Rome. However, at the battle of Actium (31 BC) he and Cleopatra were defeated, their ships destroyed, and they escaped back to Egypt where they both committed suicide in 30 BC.

But where did this leave the once all-powerful Roman Empire? It had lost in the east to the Persians, and was weakened by internal war. There was nowhere for the Romans to go in the east, so they went west into Britain. But what did they do in the Mediterranean?

Pax Romana

The two defeats suffered by Mark Antony ushered in three hundred years of unusual and unexpected peace and general prosperity throughout the eastern half of the Roman Empire. This *pax Romana*, (Roman Peace), was undisturbed, apart from a few notable exceptions, such as the razing of Jerusalem and the Temple and the scattering of the Jews in AD 70.

There was nowhere for the Empire to extend, other than into Britain, and so it became a job of consolidation and policing. Such a situation allowed great freedom for safe travel throughout the

Mediterranean world. For example, the Apostle Paul could travel from country to country with greater freedom, and possibly greater safety, than we can today. He needed no passport and no visas. He could just “go”, traveling along superbly engineered roads, sailing seas policed by Roman galleons in safety without fear of pirates. Everywhere he went he could expect the protection of the Roman government, that is until the final years of his life when Caesar Nero turned against the Christians.

The Church and Rome: a common destiny?

Some early Christian writers suggested that the Christian Church and the Roman Empire might have a common God-given destiny. They suggested that both began together, for our Lord Jesus was born during the reign of the first Emperor Augustus, who reigned until AD 14, and both the Empire and Christianity prospered together. And, of course, eventually Christianity became the *official religion* of the Roman Empire, following the Emperor Constantine’s conversion in 312 AD.

Some of these early writers claimed that the peace won by the Emperor Augustus was God-given and God-maintained to facilitate the spread of Christianity. Whether or not we share their views, the fact is, from the human point of view, without this *pax Romana*, this unexpected period of peace and prosperity with safety, it would have been impossible for Paul and Barnabas and Silas and Timothy and John Mark and Luke, and so many other people, to have travelled the Empire preaching the gospel of salvation by grace through faith in Christ Jesus. We, too, in the last fifty years, have lived through one of the longest periods of peace in Europe yet have we taken the opportunity to emulate those early Christians? Certainly many missionary societies have, and for that we praise them and thank the Lord for them.

The *Agora* Marketplace: The Unexpected Mission Field!

Michael Penny

Today, as Christians, we feel marginalized. We find that whenever any Christian view is expressed in public, on the radio or TV, in the press or in a book, there is always an opposing and competing position put almost immediately, and put very effectively. We long for a free run, one without opposition. We feel that if only this could be the situation then we would be able to get the gospel over, people would be converted, and our world would rapidly become a better place. Yet when Christian preachers, such as Paul, proclaimed their message in the first century A.D., competing voices could always be heard.

The opposition

In the synagogues the challenges were limited to debates about the interpretation of the passage, or an alternative view about a particular part of Scriptures, or the place and authority of Jewish tradition. The arguments were heated and usually Paul could not convince all of them, especially not the leaders, and he would be removed from the synagogue. We see this in Antioch (Acts 13:13-47), in Thessalonica (17:1-9), in Corinth (18:4-6), to name but three.

However, when Christian preachers stepped out into the *agora*, the marketplace of a Greco-Roman city, things were very different. There they were confronted by a dissonant chorus of philosophers and religious preachers and teachers, as well as by an assortment of astrologers, exorcists, fortune-tellers, and healers. All these, and more, were showing their intellectual and religious wares, and were competing for the allegiance of the general populace. Thus what we experience today from atheistic humanism and hedonistic materialism, from Islam and Hinduism, from horoscopes and psychics, and from the occult and healers, is no different from what was experienced by the Christians of the first century.

Some of the opponents

In the Acts of the Apostles we read about some of the opponents Paul confronted. For example, a sorcerer and false-prophet named Bar-Jesus who was counsellor to the Roman governor of Cyprus (13:6-11); the people in Lystra who thought that Paul and Baranabas were Greek gods in human form (Acts 14:8-18); the slave girl in Philippi who was possessed by a familiar spirit and who was a fortune-teller (16:16-24); a team of Jewish exorcists in Ephesus who presented themselves as seven sons of the high priest Sceva (19:13-16). Thankfully we do not have such extreme people to deal with today, or do we?

However, in Athens Paul preached in the market place and was challenged by the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers (17:16-18). Later he went to the meeting of the Areopagus on Mars Hill and debated with the Council (17:19-34). We also read of about Paul speaking in hall in Ephesus, possibly used for public lectures by a man named Tyrannus, which Paul rented for part of each day, although we do not know what Tyrannus taught (19:8-12).

Modify the Method but not the Message

Exposure to such a wide and varied religious and philosophical teaching, as well as familiarity with the occult, soothsayers and fortune-tellers, was bound to affect the way people *heard* Paul's message about Jesus. And it meant that preachers like Paul needed to know something about the current beliefs and superstitions of the people to whom they were speaking. People such as Paul did not shy away from the market place, the public hall or the philosophical society. Clearly he knew and understood where the people were at and used this to modify the presentation of his message, but not the message itself. We see him in action in public places in Ephesus, Philippi, Athens, and Corinth, and there are probably others. The presentation of his message to the Greek philosophers in Athens is very different to the way he approached the Jews at the synagogue in Antioch; compare Acts 17:22-31 with Acts 13:16-41.

Christian missionaries in other Greek cities found, perhaps, their most serious competition came from the legions of travelling philosophers. "The Greeks look for wisdom", says 1 Corinthians 1:22, and the popular ones of that day were the Cynics, the Stoics and the Epicureans, and we still have them today, especially the cynics! Almost any major public square of that time could boast of one or more philosophers. Some were charlatans who would make converts, get money out of them, and then disappear to the next city. Some were serious and effective teachers, who believed they were called to guide people towards purpose and contentment in life, and to help them escape a sense of helplessness in a world that they saw as dominated by blind chance. Many today feel helpless in their situation, trapped in their circumstances, unable to break free and do anything to change themselves and their lives. Such philosophies as the New Age teaching is aimed at making sense out of a life which seemingly has no sense, and will make no sense without a place for God.

Something different

For many of the ordinary people of that day a belief in astrology, or a belief in demonic forces controlling the cosmos, or the ecstatic, emotional worship of Cybele, the great mother goddess of Asia Minor, provided a sense of meaning in the world. However, some of the more thoughtful and reflective listeners took solace in the teaching of the philosophical guides, and there were a few who turned to the ancient monotheism and high ethics found in Judaism. These, in the Acts, are termed "God-fearers", and they could see that there was something *different* about the Jews and the God of Israel.

As Christianity made its way into this marketplace of beliefs, it had to join the already heated debate over what were true manifestation of God, what could bring salvation, and what was mere deception and foolishness. It had to battle the sensual and erotic, the joy-seekers and the fun-loving; the pleasure-hungry hedonism of the day. That all sounds very much like the position Christianity finds itself in today. Maybe Ecclesiastes 1:9 is right, "There is nothing new under the sun."

And maybe Christians in this 21st century, instead of complaining about the situation we find ourselves in, should learn from the first century saints. Perhaps we should find out what others believe, roll up our shirt-sleeves and get out into the marketplace. After all, people at home need missionaries just as much as people in Africa and Asia. However, people at home will need to see something *different* about us, and the way we live, and the Christ Whom we worship. Just as the pagans of old saw something *different* about the Jews and the God of Israel, so pagans today should see something *different* about us Christians and the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.