

CHAPTER ONE  
**"BREAKING OUT"**

(From Parochial Judaism to Universal Christianity)

*"And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and they shall become one flock, one shepherd"* John 10:16

The appearance of Christ on earth, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, was a moment in history so important and dramatic that our era has taken the approximate time of His birth in Bethlehem as its prime date. Very few historians today deny that Jesus actually lived. His person, His character, and His teaching have been corrupted through the perverse works of men, but it cannot be denied that His influence for good has survived all the attacks made on Him through the centuries.

The inspired biographers record few events of Jesus' life between His birth and the beginning of His public work at age 30. However, the three or four years that followed His appearance as a teacher were packed with events that have shaped all the subsequent centuries to the present time. From the time of His death (about 30-33 A. D.), to the death of the last of His fourteen Apostles (the original twelve plus Matthias and Paul), that short span of nearly 70 years has come to be known as the "Apostolic Age." It was a time of miracles. It was a time of divine revelation. It was a time which had a profound impact on both western and world history.

This apostolic epic divided the Roman world into two classes, believers and unbelievers, just as Jesus had predicted. He said, *"Think not that I came to send peace on the earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword"* (Matthew 10:34). Families and friends would be estranged because of the intrusion of the Gospel. The believer class would be extremely small at first, but it would grow like the mustard seed of Jesus' parable into a tree of power. The gospel preached by Jesus' little band of disciples came to a world that was

ready to receive it. Their success provided a "breaking out" from the confinement of Parochial Judaism toward the distant horizons of Universal Christianity.

The Old Testament system (Law of Moses) was limited and localized. It was applicable only to Jews, because Moses said to the people of Israel, "*Jehovah our God made a covenant with us in Horeb (Mt. Sinai). Jehovah made not this covenant with our fathers, but with us, even us, who are all of us here alive this day*" (Deuteronomy 5:1-3). The only way a Gentile could come under this covenant was to become a "proselyte," a Jew by choice, and many did.

Another parochial feature of Moses' Law was its requirement that all male adherents return to the Temple three times a year to attend feasts (Deuteronomy 16:16). We have an example of this duty being performed in the epic journey of the Ethiopian Eunuch, "*who had come to Jerusalem to worship...and was returning*" (Acts 8:26-28).

The New Testament system, in contrast, was to have a universal appeal, embracing believers in "every nation under heaven," Gentiles as well as Jews. The devotions of New Testament Christians would not be confined to a central location, but, as Jesus said to the woman of Samaria in John 4:21, "Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father."

The history of the rapid spread of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire is a source of amazement to all men, even to those who know it was the working of God. This growth was simply the fulfillment of the prophecies found in the Old Testament. The destiny of the kingdom of God was that it would be extended to the "ends of the earth." The prophet Isaiah said of Jesus, hundreds of years before his birth, "*And now says Jehovah that formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob again to him, and that Israel be gathered unto him (for I am honorable in the eyes of Jehovah, and my God is become my strength); yes, he says, It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel: I will also give you for a light to the Gentiles, that you may be my salvation unto the end of the earth*" (Isaiah 49:5-6; compare Acts 13:45-47). Again, in David's Psalm about the suffering of the Christ, it is written, "*All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn unto Jehovah; and all the kindreds of the nations shall worship before you*" (Psalms 22:27).

How did it all begin? At the end of His sojourn on earth, Jesus gave to His Apostles the "Great Commission," which revealed a universal Gospel. He said to His disciples, "*Go into all the world, and preach the gospel to the whole creation*" (Mark 16:15). Matthew's version of this has Jesus saying, "*Go and make disciples of all the nations...*" (Matthew 28:19). This was to be accomplished by the Apostles in their generation. They were told by the Lord, "*... You shall be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth*" (Acts 1:8). That goal was reached in the lifetime of Paul, who said the gospel "*was preached in all creation under heaven: whereof I Paul was made a minister*" (Colossians 1:23).

Prophecy, which (because of the factual foreknowledge of God) is history in reverse, placed the coming kingdom of God in the Roman Empire. Daniel, God's faithful prophet in exile, interpreted a dream of the famous Nebuchadnezzar in which the king saw an image made of five substances. Daniel said that Nebuchadnezzar's empire was the "*head of gold,*" to be succeeded by three other empires greedy of world-girdling power. The final "iron" empire of this vision has to be Rome, a kingdom "*...partly strong, and partly broken.*" Though the legs of the image were of iron, its feet were composed of unmixed iron and clay, indicating that "*they (the Romans) shall mingle themselves with the seed of men; but they shall not cleave one to another, even as iron does not mingle with clay.*" It would happen "*in the days of those kings*" that the "*God of heaven*" would "*set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed, nor shall the sovereignty thereof be left to another people* (that is, no other kingdom would come after it)." This was the Kingdom which had Christ as its king (Daniel 2:36-45). It was also a part of God's plan that Jesus would come in that "*fullness of time*" (Galatians 4:3-5), and that the New Covenant would be revealed in that same "*fullness of time*" (Ephesians 1:7-10). Confident in these things, Jesus would say at the beginning of His ministry, "*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel*" (Mark 1:14-15).

### **ROME WAS READY**

Secular history shows that Rome found itself congenial to the coming of Christ. The Roman Empire consisted of a multitude of kingdoms, each under the "protection" and the domination of Roman rule. It became Christianity's breeding ground in both negative and

positive ways. In the negative sense, the things that were wrong with that ancient world opened opportunities to the evangelists of Christianity.

"Civil liberty and independence had been destroyed by internal discord and corruption. Philosophy had run down into skepticism and refined materialism. Art had been degraded to the service of levity and sensuality. Infidelity or superstition had supplanted sound religious sentiment. dishonesty and licentiousness reigned among high and low. This hopeless state of things could not but impress the more earnest and noble souls with the emptiness of all science and art, and the utter insufficiency of this natural culture to meet the deeper wants of the heart. It must fill them with longings for a new religion....The dark picture which St. Paul, in addressing the Romans, draws of the heathenism of his day, is fully sustained by Seneca, Tacitus, Juvenal, Persius, and other heathen writers of that age, and shows the absolute need of redemption. 'The world,' says Seneca, in a famous passage, 'is full of crimes and vices. More are committed than can be cured by force. There is an immense struggle for iniquity. Crimes are no longer hidden, but open before the eyes. Innocence is not only rare, but nowhere.'" (Schaff, History of the Christian Church, Vol. 1, pp. 79, 83-84)

The New Testament confirms much of this. The Apostles of Jesus moved in a society rife with skepticism. When Paul proclaimed the resurrection of the dead to inquisitive Athenians, "*some mocked, but others said, We will hear you concerning this yet again*" (Acts 17:30-32). It was a materialistic world, as evidenced by the story of the silversmiths who seemed to be more concerned about their monetary losses than about the decline of Pagan religion. They complained that Paul, by his preaching, was destroying their trade of making "*silver shrines of Diana*" (Acts 19:23-28). Romans and other pagans of that time groped through the dark world of religious superstition. Paul and Barnabas barely avoided the attempt of some men to worship them as the gods Jupiter and Mercury (Acts 14:8-18), and Paul witnessed a dramatic about-face in those Melitan pagans who interpreted his chance snake bite first as a retribution of the gods, but who later called him a god for having survived it (Acts 28:1-6, and compare Mark 16:17-18). Roman society was a

cesspool of vice and sensuality. Paul described the Gentiles as ones who *"being past feeling gave themselves up to lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness"* (Ephesians 4:19).

But the Apostles saw a favorable opportunity in these negative conditions, and attempted to turn men from this sort of life. Peter would plead, *"Wherefore, girding up the loins of your mind, be sober and set your hope perfectly on the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; as children of obedience, not fashioning yourselves according to your former lusts in the time of your ignorance: but like as he who called you is holy, be yourselves also holy in all manner of living"* (1 Peter 1:13-15). And Paul would say, *"Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that you should obey the lusts thereof: neither present your members unto sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves unto God, as alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God"* (Romans 6:12-13).

Apart from the negative challenges which Rome offered, there were many positive advantages in that corrupt world. These were derived from its culture and its commerce. Not the least of these was the universal use of the Greek language.

"Greece gave the Apostles the most copious and beautiful language to express the divine truth of the Gospel, and Providence had long before so ordered political movements as to spread that language over the world and to make it the organ of civilization and international intercourse... 'Greek,' says Cicero, 'is read in almost all nations.'" (Ibid., p. 77)

Commercial traffic had also been greatly facilitated during the time of the Roman Empire.

"The ends of the empire were brought into military, commercial, and literary communication by carefully constructed roads... The facilities and security of travel were greater in the reign of the Caesars than in any subsequent period before the nineteenth century. The Roman legions razed the partition-walls among the ancient nations, brought the extremes of the civilized world together in free intercourse, and united north and south and east and west in the bonds of a common language and culture, of common

laws and customs." (Ibid., pp. 81, 84)

Yet, with all this providential atmosphere for success, negative and positive, the potential for apostasy was also recognized. Jesus predicted both successes and failures. When He said to his Apostles, "*You shall be my witnesses.....unto the uttermost part of the earth* (Acts 1:8)," He knew that divine power would assist them in this venture. However, he could predict possible failure just as confidently. He described what lurked in the future for his servants. "*Then shall they deliver you up to tribulation, and shall kill you: and you shall be hated of all the nations for my name's sake. And then shall many stumble, and deliver up one another, and hate one another. Many false prophets shall arise, and lead many astray. And, because iniquity shall be multiplied, the love of the many shall wax cold.*" Even with such adversity, the Lord gave them a view of hope. He said, "*But he that endures to the end, the same shall be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a testimony to all the nations...*" (Matthew 24:9-14).

The Apostles were not blind to this potential for success and failure. Paul told the Christians at Colossae that he could see the Gospel "*in all the world bearing fruit and increasing,*" as it did in them (Colossians 1:3-6). Yet, he was also guided by the Spirit to look forward to the time when the "*man of sin*" would be revealed, "*whose coming is according to the working of Satan with all powers and signs and lying wonders, and with all deceit of unrighteousness for them that perish; because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved*" (2 Thessalonians 2:1-12).

If we can consider that Rome was ripe for the preaching of the Gospel, we can certainly see a parallel in our world today. This present age of vice and corruption should excite our desire to spread the Word of God, and, just as Rome offered convenient means for that spreading, we should use today's even more powerful media to reach the "uttermost parts of the earth." However, there is the same potential for success and failure that existed then. To have the predicted success, we must duplicate all the spiritual conditions leading to it. To avoid the failures, we must eliminate all the human conditions that contribute to them. This is our "history lesson" from the beginning of the Christian Era. Do Christians today have enough courage to apply it? If they do, they may be able to "break out" of *modern "parochialism,"* and begin to think in universal terms again!