

## Disasters

Throughout human history, disasters have been a fact of life, and the era of the early church was no exception. In this issue of *Ekklesia Then & Now*, we'll look at the biblical and historical record of disasters during that time, the response of the *ekklesia*, and the ramifications of that response.

### Then

Droughts and famines are mentioned frequently in the Bible. They are mentioned in the time of Abraham (Genesis 12:10), Isaac (Genesis 26:1), Jacob (Genesis 41:54), Judges (Ruth 1:1), David (2 Samuel 21:1), Ahab (1 Kings 17:1), and Elisha (2 Kings 4:38). Contemporary historians record several famines during the reign of Emperor Claudius (AD 41-54)—one in AD 45 was predicted by the prophet Agabus (Acts 11:28) and chronicled by the Jewish historian, Josephus (*The Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 20, Chapter 5). It was probably that famine that impoverished the Jerusalem church, prompting Paul to solicit contributions from the churches he founded (see Romans 15:25-26).

Most famines were the result of the vagaries of rainfall in an era before effective irrigation, but others were man-made. Josephus reports that the famine in Jerusalem during Titus' siege in AD 70 was so severe that mothers even took food from their babies' mouths, and one even ate her newborn child.

**Storms** driven by the Euroquila wind routinely swept across the Mediterranean, particularly during the winter—so much so that the seas were considered closed from October through April. Merchants who ventured out early or late seeking to deliver one more cargo often lost their ships and their lives. The most famous of these storms is records in Acts 27. It was Paul's confident assurance that no lives would be lost aboard that ship that probably saved the crew.

**Earthquakes** were relatively common to the Roman province of Asia (western Turkey). A powerful earthquake in AD 60 completely destroyed Hierapolis and severely damaged nearby Laodicea and Colosse. We know there were active Christian communities in Laodicea and Colosse from New Testament accounts, and Hierapolis had become a major Christian center by the early second century. In addition, an earthquake in the Macedonian city of Philippi freed Paul and Silas from prison, and their response led to the conversion of the jailer (Acts 16:25-34).

**Fires** routinely plagued the large cities, especially Rome itself. A major fire broke out during Claudius' reign, but the most famous fire occurred in AD 64, when all but four of Rome's 14 districts were affected. The legend that Emperor Nero fiddled while Rome burned comes from the account of the Roman historian Tacitus, who records that "a rumour had gone forth everywhere that, at the very time when the city was in flames, the emperor appeared on a private stage and sang of the destruction of Troy, comparing present misfortunes with the calamities of antiquity." ([The Annals](#), Book 15). These rumors created speculation that Nero, hoping to rebuild Rome according to his ideas of urban design, was directly responsible for the fire. There was also apparently a report that a group of Christians gathered on the edge of the

city and celebrated the fire. It seems likely that what was mistaken for celebration was in fact an impromptu assembly to pray for deliverance. If these Christians sang praises to God, it could easily have been viewed as a celebration. Whether or not this report was factual, Nero sought to divert attention from himself by making scapegoats of the Christians in Rome and instituted a brief but vicious persecution. Tacitus records that Nero's actions were so heinous that the citizenry came to pity the victims.

But of all disasters, the one which most terrified ancient people and which ultimately seems to have had the most profound affect was an **epidemic**. This unseen enemy, incubated in the squalid conditions of ancient cities, held no respect for wealth or position. In the movie, *Gladiator*, Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius, played by Richard Harris, dies in one of the early scenes—not in combat during one of the battles he led to secure the borders of the Empire, but of sickness. His death in what is now Vienna in AD 180 came near the end of the "Plague of Galen," which medical historians believe may have been the first outbreak of smallpox in the West.

Tertullian, the influential Christian writer of the late second and early third century wrote, "The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed" (*Apology*, Chapter 50), referring to the way early Christians faced persecution and martyrdom, but there is at least some evidence that epidemics were an equally important seed of the church. Along with smaller outbreaks, at least two widespread epidemics struck the Roman world during the early church era: one beginning in about 165 AD (sometimes referred to as the "Plague of Galen" after the famous second century physician who, by the way, fled during the epidemic) that eventually claimed Marcus Aurelius and an even larger one (sometimes referred to as the "Plague of Cyprian," Bishop of Carthage) in the mid-third century.

In *The Rise of Christianity: a Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton University Press, 1996), author Rodney Stark suggests that "had classical society not been disrupted and demoralized by (epidemics), Christianity might never have become so dominant a faith" (p. 74). He bases this statement on three major theses:

1. Christianity presented a "much more satisfactory account of why these terrible times had fallen upon humanity."

When catastrophe strikes, the inevitable human response is to ask "why?" In an era when the cause of disease was unknown, pagan religions and classical Greco-Roman philosophy offered neither explanation nor solace. Christianity, on the other hand, presented disasters as "schooling and testing," and offered the hope that friends and relatives could live on through the Grace of God.

2. Christians, because of their greater compassion for the afflicted, experienced "substantially higher rates of survival." Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria, writing shortly after devastating epidemic of the mid-third century, gave a first-hand account of the disparity between Christian and pagan responses:

"Certainly very many of our brethren, while, in their exceeding love and brotherly-kindness, they did not spare themselves, but kept by each other, and visited the sick without thought of their own peril, and ministered to them assiduously, and treated them for their healing in Christ, died from time to time most joyfully along with them, lading themselves with pains derived from others, and drawing upon themselves their neighbours' diseases, and willingly taking over to their own persons the burden of the sufferings of those around them...

But among the heathen all was the very reverse. For they thrust aside any who began to be sick, and kept aloof even from their dearest friends, and cast the

sufferers out upon the public roads half dead, and left them unburied, and treated them with utter contempt when they died, steadily avoiding any kind of communication and intercourse with death; which, however, it was not easy for them altogether to escape, in spite of the many precautions they employed."

It appears that the church took very seriously Jesus' prescription of charity: *"'For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.'* Then the righteous will answer Him, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You something to drink? And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' The King will answer and say to them, *'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.'*" (Matthew 25:35-40)

3. The new bonds of pagans to Christians, created by both the care Christians showed to strangers and the higher survival rate of Christians, substantially increased the probability that pagans would have relationships with Christians, hence increasing the conversion rate.

Using some relatively simple mathematics, Stark demonstrated that in a Christian population of just 0.4% in a theoretical city at the outbreak of the Plague of Galen in AD 160 could easily have increased to 20% by the end of the Plague of Cyprian 100 years later even without assuming an increased conversion rate resulting from his third thesis. If he is correct, Christianity grew from a virtually inconsequential population to a substantial minority simply as a result of epidemics. Of course, it would be more accurate to say that this increase was not directly the result of disease, but rather of the hope and loving-kindness Christianity offered to a literally-dying world!

I personally have difficulty suggesting that God caused these epidemics and the consequent human suffering in order to expand His church, but certainly His Grace and His commands gave the church the tools it needed to win new converts.

## Now

In its September 27, 2003 cover story, [World Magazine](#) reported on the efforts of the Southern Baptist Convention's North American Mission Board (NAMB) to prepare for the aftermath of Hurricane Isabel along the east coast of the United States. The resources available to national disaster relief director Terry Henderson were truly impressive—200 recovery units, nearly 30,000 trained volunteers, and 91 mobile kitchens capable of putting out 25,000 meals a day. Without questions, the NAMB and other church-based relief organizations such as the Salvation Army and Samaritan's Purse gave much-needed comfort to thousands of Isabel's victims.

Can such efforts be expected to have an affect similar to that of the early church after the plagues of the second and third centuries? Sadly, I suspect not. In the first place, charity and disaster relief are no longer the exclusive province of the church, as they were in the Roman world. Even though humanistic charity and government relief efforts owe their existence to the example set by the church, few non-believers are likely to recognize that fact. More importantly, however, I doubt that the efforts of the early church during plagues were based on organized relief workers, whether professionals or volunteers—there simply weren't enough Christians then for a subset to have any noticeable affect.

The kindness and hope offered by the early church was the work of individual Christians, not an “organized church” that barely even existed. Today, too many of us practice checkbook charity. See a need, write a check. While money can get a lot of things done, and certainly is important, any meaningful impact on non-believers can only come when we add our time and talents to our money. Christian conversion is generally relationally-based. Unlike the Day of Pentecost, today few come to Christ because of a great sermon. Peter’s words were to a spiritually-prepared group of Jews, many of whom fully expected the coming of the Messiah.

Our world is far more like first century Athens. When Paul first visited there and preached on Mars Hill (Acts 17:22-34), the Bible records only a few converts. There is no historical evidence, in fact, that a first-century church at Athens survived. In most of the Roman world, the message of a God living as a man and dying to forgive human sin must have seemed foolish. Pagan conversion was not, for the most part, a matter of learned argument despite the many apologetics authored. It was a matter of changed, self-sacrificed lives that offered testimony through simple acts of individual kindness.

There are still epidemics today—AIDS and SARS come to mind immediately. How has today’s church responded to these?

## **NEXT ISSUE: Bondage (October 28)**

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