

The Character of the Church 1
The Church is Persecuted (by 300 AD)

Diagram

The history of the Church generates the character of the Church. That is, the Church is what it has been. What the Church has been is an expression of what it is.

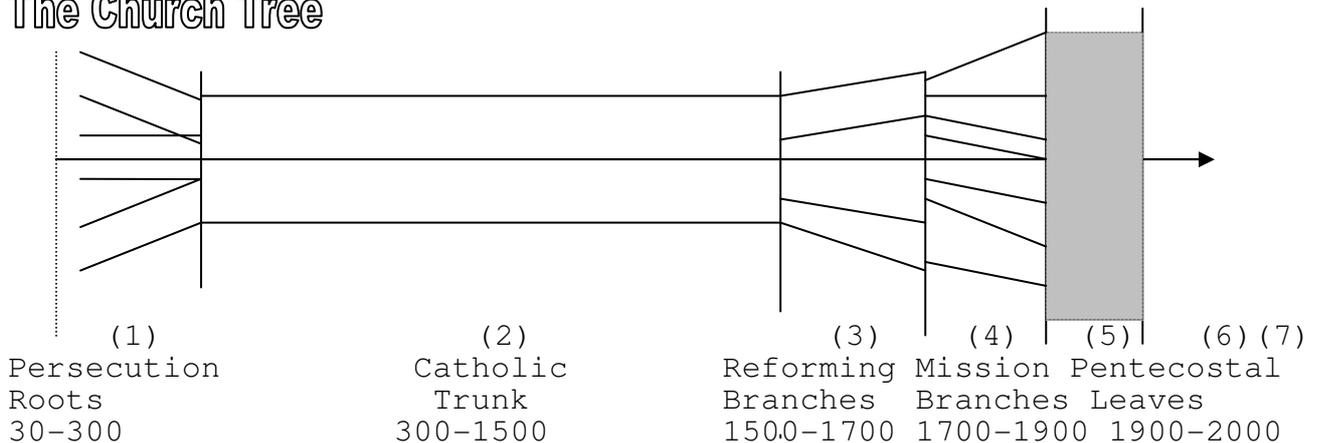
Past

1. Persecuted (300 AD)
2. Catholic (1500AD)
3. Reforming (1700AD)

Future

4. Missionary (1900AD)
5. Pentecostal (2000AD)
6. Harvested
7. New Jerusalem

The Church Tree



This diagram is an attempt to describe the history and character of the Church. The Church reveals its character and nature in its history. I also claim that the history of the Church is cumulative and that it gathers and reveals its character in its history. Ultimately, the Church is all of these periods at the same time.

1. The Church is Persecuted (30-300AD) (Ex 1:12).

The roots of the Church are always in persecution. The message of Jesus Christ confronts the world, rebuking worldliness and calling us to a deeper spiritual life that is hidden in God (Col 3:3). In fact, Christianity thrives on persecution. 'The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church' (Tertullian). The Church can always revert to a persecuted state. Persecution officially finished for the Western Church in 313 AD in the Edict of Milan.

2. The Church is Catholic (300-1500AD).

Over the next 1200 years the Church was established and consolidated as the prevailing ideology in Western society. However, over this period the Church split (in 1054) into its Latin (western) and Greek (eastern) cultures. The western Church was based in Europe and centred in Rome under the Pope becoming the Roman Catholic Church. The eastern Church was based in Constantinople (modern Turkey) and became the Orthodox Church which has taken various forms such as Greek, Russian, Serbian. The Ecumenical Councils of the early catholic church established the basis for orthodoxy, or right teaching against heresy.

3. The Church is Reforming (1500-1700AD).

Luther nailed his 95 theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenburg in 1517. Luther's disagreement was initially over indulgences. However, there had been discontent for decades over the authority of Rome and abuses in ecclesiastical structures and processes. The Reformation changed the map of Europe. Given the Church's structures it always is in need of reformation.

4. The Church is Missionary (1700-1900AD).

Following the European explorations of the 1500 and 1600's the European church evangelised and colonised the newly conquered

territories. The earliest of these started in South America (1546), Central America (1511) and Northern America (1603), Africa (1467), India (1557), China (1601), Japan (1549), Philippines (1595), Australia (1788). This has often meant that Christianity has been associated with the indigenous critiques of 'colonialism'. Christianity has spread around the world.

5. The Church is Pentecostal (charismatic) (1900-2000AD).

The modern worldwide expression of Christianity is Pentecostalism. The Catholic Church still exists and is the largest form of Christianity today. The European denominations still exist in various forms, although these tend to be disappearing in their traditional form. The modern powerhouse of the Church is the Pentecostal or charismatic expression of Christian worship, commitment and evangelism.

Although these have been historic stages in the history of the Church, they are in fact a continuing expression of the ongoing character of the Church. The Church is variously persecuted, catholic, reforming, missionary and charismatic.

6. The Church will be Harvested (future).

The Church has a future. Jesus Christ will call it (the believers) to account. The whole earth will be involved in God's harvest.

Mtt 13:24-30 Parable of the Tares and the Wheat

Mtt 13:37-43 Interpretation of this parable

Mtt 25:31-46 Jesus Christ judges the Nations

Mk 4:26-29 Parable of the Growing Seed

Lk 13:6-9 Parable of the Barren Fig Tree

John 15:1-8 Judgement on the fruit of the vine

1Pet 4:17 Judgement begins at the house of God

Rev 14:15 The Harvest of the earth

7. The New Jerusalem (future).

The future for those whose name is written in the Book of Life, is in the New Jerusalem (Rev 21). The nations shall bring their glory and honour into it. 'There shall by no means enter it anything that defiles or causes an abomination or a lie, but only those whose name is written in the Lamb's Book of Life' (Rev 21:27). This, presumably, includes those who are not Christians but are acceptable to God, according to the judgement of Christ (Mtt 25:34).

Persecution and the Early Church.

The Acts of the Apostles is an excellent description of the early church. Christians in the power of the Holy Spirit are confronting the secular and religious powers of Judaism and paganism. 'Having disarmed principalities and powers, Christ made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in the Cross' (Col 2:15). There was victory over sorcery (Acts 13:6-12; 16:16-24) and there was imprisonment (Acts 12:5-19; 16:25-34) and martyrdom (Acts 7).

Summary of Acts by Themes in Chapters

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|----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1. Ascension (Eph 1:20-23) | 15. Jerusalem Council |
| 2. Pentecost (Birth of Church) | 16. Paul's Mission II: Europe |
| 3. Healing at Beautiful Gate | 17. Paul in Athens: Areopagus |
| 4. Peter and John arrested | 18. Paul in Corinth: Tentmaking |
| 5. Ananias & Sapphira: Revival | 19. Paul's Mission III: Ephesus riot |
| 6. Deacons selected | 20. Address to Ephesian Elders |
| 7. Stephen's martyrdom | 21. Paul arrested in Jerusalem |
| 8. Philip & Ethiopian Eunuch | 22. Paul's testimony (account 2) |
| 9. Paul's conversion (account 1) | 23. Plot against Paul |
| 10. Peter & Cornelius (gentiles) | 24. Paul before Felix |
| 11. Peter defends gentiles | 25. Paul appeals to Caesar |
| 12. Peter escapes from prison | 26. Paul's testimony (account 3) |
| 13. Paul's Mission I (Turkey) | 27. Tempest & shipwreck |

14. Iconium, Lystra, Derbe 28. Malta and Rome.
 The flavour of the early church is confrontation, power ministry and miraculous deliverance. This happens when the church moves in revival and the anointing of the Holy Ghost. Each of us needs to discern our way for power ministry and Holy Spirit reliance. In the Roman Empire Christians were persecuted for various reasons:
1. They were accused of being atheists because they had no idols or images and refused to worship pagan idols.
 2. They claimed that Jesus was the only Lord so they could not worship the Emperor as a god.
 3. They were regarded as a Jewish sect with a crucified malefactor as leader.
 4. When things went wrong (disease, earthquakes, barbarians) the Christians were blamed because they did not worship the State gods (note the experience of Jeremiah (Jer 44:17-19)).
 5. They made no sacrifices and rejected pagan superstitions.
 6. The Cross is a scandal to the Jews and an offence to the Greeks.
 7. Pagan temples were deserted and the sacrificial industry in animals was lapsing.

Christians who sacrificed to the pagan gods under duress were called 'lapsed'. Over a period of time, lapsed Christians (who showed signs of repentance) were re-admitted to the fellowship without being re-baptised.

Persecutions have been classified under the emperor of the time:

1. Nero beginning in 64 AD
2. Domitian 95-96 AD
3. Trajan 106-117 AD
4. Marcus Aurelius 166-177 AD
5. Severus 202 AD and onwards
6. Maximin 235 AD
7. Decius 250-251 AD continued under Gallus 251-253 AD
8. Valerian 258-260 AD
9. Aurelian 275 AD
10. Diocletian and Maximian 303-305 AD continued by Galerius and Maximin to 311 AD.

Toleration came in 313 AD under Constantine (the so-called Edict of Milan).

Persecution has always been a breeding ground for the Church.

Let us consider modern persecution in China.

House Church Persecution in China

China is rapidly becoming a Christian country. There has been a Christian presence in China for centuries. One major example is Hudson Taylor's China Inland Mission (1865). Communism took over in 1949 and Christianity was vigorously suppressed. Two types of church emerged: the underground house church movement (Protestant) and the 3Self Movement (self-governing, self-supporting, self-propagating) which was the church under Communist control and sanction without overseas 'imperialist' support. The two types are compared below (which is very relevant to our current situation):

Underground Church

1. Biblical
2. Orthodox
3. Charismatic
4. Prophetic
5. Conservative
6. Creationist (completed)
7. Personal repentance required
8. Pietism (faith based)
9. Primitive (original)
10. Separated by holiness

Cultural Church

- Modernist
- heterodox (diversity)
- political
- priestly (ruling)
- progressive (inventive)
- evolutionary (made as we go)
- social change required
- scientism (knowledge based)
- enlightened (current)
- sophisticated by culture

11. Simple (narrow) (Mtt 7:13-14)	broad (inclusive)
12. Old doctrine (Jude 3)	novel doctrine (innovative)
13. Supernatural (miraculous)	natural (non-miraculous)
14. Confessional	Ecumenical (adjusting)
15. Unity in Christ	organic Church union
16. Confession of truth	dialogue (for truth?)
17. Authority (of Word)	control (by words)
18. Confront culture	merge with culture
19. Repentance	revolution (or therapy)
20. Scriptural exhortation	political correctness
21. Fellowship of the Spirit	fellowship of the Institution
22. Word of God	word of Man (journey language)
23. Revelation	opinion
24. Absolute	relative
25. Love of God leads to people	love of people leads to God
26. Exclusive	inclusive
27. No rights (as penitents)	assert rights (litigious)
28. Conform to Christ	conform to culture
29. Heaven oriented	earth oriented
30. God is love	love is God
31. Sin language	maladjustment language(wounded)
32. Law of God	law of Man
33. CROSS (1Cor 1:17)	pride of knowledge (1 Cor 2:4)
34. Crucified	demands power signs (proof)
35. Enclosed (free to)	liberated (free from)
36. Equality before God	equality before Man
37. Man at fault	society at fault
38. Preaching (submitting)	dialogue (sharing)
39. Judgement	toleration
40. Brotherhood in Christ(2Pet1:7)	brotherhood of Man

I maintain that the Uniting Church in Australia is precisely in this predicament. (See the new Assembly of Confessing Churches.)