

Church History I

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Session Three

“Persecution in the Early Church”

Introduction

Following Jesus’ ascension to heaven, it was widely believed by the apostles that Christ would make his return in their lifetimes. Once the church took root in Jerusalem and expanded out to Judea, Samaria, and the known world, they probably thought that it was only a matter of time before Jesus would come in the clouds and initiate the new heavens and new earth. However, although Jesus promised that he would return (Matt. 24; Mark 13; Luke 21), he never told them a time or a generation (Matt. 24:36; Acts 1:6-7). But what he did promise was the reality of persecution until the end. Jesus warned the disciples in the Upper Room, *“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you”* (John 15:18-20). Likewise, Jesus described Paul’s mission by saying, *“For [Paul] is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”* Years later, as John received the Revelation of Christ, he personally confessed, *“I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus...”* (Rev. 1:9). Then, Jesus revealed to him a message for the church in Smyrna, *“Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.”* These verses and descriptions testify to the reality of intense persecution in the early church. Stephen became the first martyr (Acts 7). James was killed at Herod Agrippa’s order. Peter and Paul were both executed, among other apostles and believers. Even to this day, Jesus’ words concerning persecution have remained true throughout two millennia of church history. Faithful believers throughout the world die each year for the name of Christ.

A. Conflict with the Jews

1. **Background:** Early Christians never thought of themselves as establishing a new religion, but only advancing the Jewish faith following the arrival of Messiah. In other words, early followers of Christ felt as if they were still Jewish, but had merely embraced the next stage in God’s plan of redemption for the world – including Gentiles. Therefore, early Christians viewed unbelieving Jews as nothing more than “unbelievers” who had not arrived at the truth. However, in contrast, unbelieving Jews were still waiting for the Messiah’s advent, and viewed Christianity as a heretical sect, a false teaching, a distortion of the truth – a movement that must be rooted out. As González notes, first century Jews viewed Christianity *“as a new heresy going from town to town*

tempting good Jews to become heretics” (32). Some Jews even believed that God allowed Christianity to be formed as a means of judgment against Israel for disobedience.

2. **Conflict:** This theological conflict is the reason we find the earliest opposition and persecution against Christians coming from the Jews. The book of Acts records many instances of Jewish hostility against the church. And ironically, Christians would take advantage of protection from the Romans against their Jewish persecutors.
 - a. **Acts 18:12-16** – *“But when Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him before the tribunal, saying, “This man is persuading people to worship God contrary to the law.” But when Paul was about to open his mouth, Gallio said to the Jews, “If it were a matter of wrongdoing or vicious crime, O Jews, I would have reason to accept your complaint. But since it is a matter of questions about words and names and your own law, see to it yourselves. I refuse to be a judge of these things.” And he drove them from the tribunal.”*
 - b. **Expulsion from Rome:** Around A.D. 51, Emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome (cf. Acts 18:2). According to Suetonius, a Roman historian, Jews were expelled from Rome for disorderly conduct *“because of Chrestus,”* which is another way of spelling “Christus,” or “Christ.” Therefore, in the earliest days, the Romans punished the Jews for their persecution of Christians – not because Romans loved Christ, but because they opposed disorderly conduct.
3. **Aftermath:** As Christianity grew, gaining more converts from Gentiles, it eventually outgrew the Jewish population, leading to less issues from the Jews. Also, as the Jews rebelled against Rome (*Jewish Revolt*, AD 66-73), leading to serious conflict between them – including the destruction of Jerusalem/Temple (AD 70) and 1.1M Jewish deaths – Christians were able to enjoy more peace from their Jewish adversaries. In fact, Jewish Christians that lived in Jerusalem during this time remembered the prophetic words of Jesus about this event (Luke 21:20-24) and took refuge east of the Jordan River, in Pella. Christ always had a plan to protect and preserve his people. However, following the aftermath of the Jewish Revolt, Christianity never really returned to Israel – it became a majority Gentile movement.

B. Conflict with the Romans

1. Nero

- a. **Background:** In A.D. 54, Nero became emperor of the Roman Empire. He began as a popular, reasonable ruler, but quickly became infatuated with himself and his glory. In just ten years after his ascension to the throne, Roman citizens had turned against him and declared him to be mad, or mentally unstable. On June 18, A.D. 64, a great fire broke out in Rome. Nero rushed back to town from his palace in Antium to “help” fight against the fire. The blaze destroyed ten of the fourteen districts. Widespread rumors went out that Nero himself had started the fire in order to rebuild the city according to his own desires. It was also rumored that as the city burned, Nero dressed as an actor, played his lyre and sang about the destruction of Troy – as if he were writing his own poem or song about the

destruction of his own city. However, people demanded justice, so Nero had to come up with a scapegoat, or somewhere to cast blame.

- b. **Conflict:** According to the first century Roman historian Tacitus, *“In order to destroy this rumor [of personal involvement] Nero blamed the Christians, who are hated for their abominations, and punished them with refined cruelty. Christ, from whom they take their name, was executed by Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius. Stopped for a moment, this evil superstition reappeared, not only in Judea, where was the root of the evil, but also in Rome, where all things sordid and abominable from every corner of the world come together. Thus, first those who confessed (that they were Christians) were arrested, and on the basis of their testimony a great number were condemned, although not so much for the fire itself as for their hatred of humankind.”*
- **Apologetics:** Tacitus’ historical account that Jesus *“was executed by Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius”* is the earliest extrabiblical evidence of Jesus’ crucifixion by a Pagan writer. Tacitus wrote in the first decade of the second century (AD 100-110). Also, Flavius Josephus (born in A.D. 37) recorded the same event in *Antiquity of the Jews* (A.D. 93-94). He records, *“At this time Jesus appeared, a highly gifted man, if we can call him a mere man; for he was a miracle-worker, a teacher of those who loved to hear the truth, and he gained many followers from among the Jews and even the Gentiles too. He was the Messiah. The most important men in Israel prompted Pontius Pilate to condemn him to death on a cross; but those who loved him from the beginning did not stop loving him, for on the third day he appeared to them alive again. The inspired prophets foretold this and many other wonderful things about him. Even today the group of people named after him, the “Christians,” have still not died out.”* It’s so valuable that unbiased historians affirm the biblical witness.
 - **Testimony:** Tacitus records that Christians were *“hated for their abominations”* and *“for their hatred of humankind.”* Normally, these descriptions sound very unbiblical. But from a Roman perspective, *“abominations”* meant a reluctance to worship any other god or obey any other religious rule. The *“hatred of humankind”* didn’t mean a hatred of people, but a hatred of all social activities that were intertwined with paganism – the theatre, army, sports, cultural norms and practices, etc. Christians were known for being distinct from the pagan practices of the culture. Would Christians be described this way today?
- c. **Aftermath:** What did Nero do after charging Christians with burning the city? Tacitus reflects, *“First, the authorities arrested those who confessed to being Christians. Then, on information obtained from them, the courts convicted hundreds more, not so much for starting the fire as for their anti-social beliefs. Mockery was heaped on them in their deaths. They were covered with the skins of wild beasts, torn to death by dogs, crucified, or set ablaze – so that when night-time fell, they lit up everything like torches. Nero had opened up his own gardens for this spectacle and gave a show in the arena, where he mingled with the crowd, or stood in the garb of a charioteer, and rode around in a chariot. Consequently, although his victims were guilty and deserved to die, people began to feel compassion for them. For they realized that they were being killed, not for the public good, but to gratify*

one man's madness." Peter and Paul were most martyred through the persecution of Nero. However, in A.D. 68, Nero was overthrown, and he killed himself.

- **Peter and Paul:** According to the ancient Christian historian, Eusebius of Caesarea [A.D. 260-340], "*Nero...was led on to murder the apostles. Paul was beheaded in Rome itself, and Peter too was crucified. This record is confirmed by the fact that the cemeteries in Rome are even today named after Peter and Paul. [According to Gaius, a churchman in ancient Rome] "the two apostle have been reverently laid: 'I can point out the monuments of the triumphant apostles. If you go as far as the Vatican or the Ostian Way, you will find the monuments of the men who founded this church [in Rome].'" (History of the Church, Book 2, Chapter 25).*

2. Domitian

- Background:** Following Nero and Titus, Domitian became Roman emperor from A.D. 81-96. He was a lover of Roman gods and traditions, so when Christians opposed these cultural beliefs, he began persecuting the people of Christ.
- Conflict:** Eusebius also records, "*Domitian's horrible cruelty struck down many victims. In Rome, he put to death large numbers of distinguished, high-born men of great achievements, without a fair trial. He banished countless other eminent men for no reason at all and seized their property. And then at last Domitian showed himself to be an emperor who walked in the steps of Nero for his hatred and hostility towards God. Indeed, he was the second emperor to organize a persecution of us Christians.*"
- Aftermath:** During this persecution, late in the first century, the apostle John was exiled to the prison island of Patmos, where he would receive the "*Revelation*" from Christ. Many have noted that the descriptions of persecution and evil in the book of Revelation match the issues Christians were dealing with under Domitian. Revelation was primarily written to give believers encouragement and assurance that Christ would ultimately be victorious, so they would continue to endure and remain firm until the end.

3. Trajan and Pliny

- Background:** In A.D. 111, Pliny the Younger was appointed governor of Bithynia, on the northern shore of modern Turkey. With a growing number of Christians filling the region, Pliny new that he needed to act.
- Conflict:** So, he had those who confessed Christ brought before him to be tried regarding their Christian practices. Some denied the faith or recanted their allegiance to Christ, so he let them go. Others, who were on the fence, he asked them to (1) pray to the gods, (2) burn incense before the image of the emperor, and (3) curse Christ – something that he had heard true Christians would never do. If a person performed these rites, they were let go. However, for those who persisted in professing the name of Christ, he gave them three opportunities to recant before having them executed.

- c. **Aftermath:** After seeking advice from the Roman emperor Trajan on how to handle subsequent cases, Trajan responded by letter, cautioning against wasting government resources hunting down Christians. Rather, if they were accused of a crime and brought before authorities, Christians had to be forced to worship the other gods or face death. This decision would become a standard practice for years ahead. Following the practice of examining Christians, several notable believers were put to death.
- **Ignatius:** Around A.D. 107, Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch, was condemned to death by Roman authorities. As he was being transported to Rome, he wrote seven letters that are among the most valuable documents for our knowledge of early Christianity. In his letters, he repeatedly calls himself “*Ignátios ho Theophóros,*” literally “the God-bearing,” which may have been a well-known title. How did he get this name? Since he was born around A.D. 30, legend has it that he was the small child that Jesus picked up and placed in the middle of the disciples. Tradition also identifies Ignatius and Polycarp as disciples of John the Apostle. At the turn of the second century, he was bishop (second after the apostles) of one of the most famous ancient churches, the church at Antioch, where earlier Paul was commissioned and sent out. However, as his execution was approaching, rumors circulated that Christians in Rome were going to free him from death. Ignatius responded, “*I fear your kindness, which may harm me. You may be able to achieve what you plan. But if you pay no heed to my request it will be very difficult for me to attain unto God.*”
 - **Polycarp:** In A.D. 155, Ignatius’ younger friend and bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp, was arrested and refused to worship the gods. Even under the cruelest of torture he remained firm, stating that “*resting in Christ they scored the pains of the world.*” As a judge insisted that he deny Jesus and save his life, Polycarp said, “*For eighty-six years I have served him, and he has done me no evil. How could I curse my king, who saved me?*” The judge continued to threaten him with fire, but Polycarp responded that such fire would only last for a moment, but the fires of hell would last for eternity. As he was tied to the pyre to be burned, his final words were, “*Lord Sovereign God...I thank you that you have deemed me worthy of this moment, so that, jointly with your martyrs, I may have a share in the cup of Christ...For this...I bless and glorify you. Amen.*”