



PERSECUTION IN THE EARLY CHURCH • Rick Wade

Background

Things are a bit tougher for Christians in our society today than a few decades ago, aren't they? At times like this, it's probably good to get some perspective. I think any of us, once we knew what the early church experienced—and, indeed, what Christians in other parts of the world are experiencing now—would find ourselves looking a bit sheepish if caught complaining about our lot.

In this article, we'll look at the persecution our brothers and sisters faced in the fledgling church in the first few centuries after Christ. We'll talk about some of the reasons for persecution, and identify some of the emperors under whom Christians suffered.

Reasons for Persecution

There are several important and interrelated reasons for the persecution of the early church.

First was the problem of identity. Christianity was identified at first with Judaism, but people quickly came to see it as a different religion. Jews were left alone for the most part; it seemed best to Rome to just confine them and leave them alone. Christianity, however, was a strange, new cult, and it began to spread across people groups and geographical boundaries. People felt threatened by this oddball new religion.

The next problem was with the religious activities of the Christians, with what they did do and didn't do.

In the days of the Roman empire, the worship of pagan gods and the emperor, was a part of everyone's life. Two problems arose because of this. First, because they didn't participate in pagan rituals, but tended to keep to themselves, Christians were considered anti-social. When the imperial police took an interest in them, they became more secretive which added fuel to the fire. They became associated with the *collegia*—clubs or secret societies—and leaders were suspicious of these groups because of the threat of sedition. Second, since Christians wouldn't join in with the religious activities which were believed to placate the gods, they became a threat to the very well-being of the community. Writing in about A.D. 196, Tertullian said, "The Christians are to blame for every public disaster and every misfortune that befalls the people. If the Tiber rises to the walls, if the Nile fails to rise and flood the fields, if the sky withholds its rain, if there is earthquake or famine or plague, straightway the cry arises: 'The Christians to the lions!'"

With respect to what they did do in their own religious practices, talk of eating the body and blood of Jesus, and the customary greeting with a kiss, brought charges of cannibalism and incest.

The third problem was the nature or content of Christians' beliefs. The historian Tacitus spoke of Christians as a "class hated for their abominations" who held to a "deadly superstition." A drawing found in Rome of a man with a donkey's head hanging on a cross gives an idea of what pagans thought of Christian beliefs.



Finally, Christians' reluctance to offer worship to the emperor and the gods was considered madness, considering what would happen to them if they didn't. Why not just offer a pinch of incense to the image of the emperor? In a pluralistic society, the narrowness of Christian beliefs seemed absurd, especially considering what would happen to Christians who wouldn't go along. In the opinion of the general populace, says F. F. Bruce, "Such a crowd of wretches were plainly worthy of extermination, and any repressive measures that were taken against them by authority could be sure of popular approval."

Emperors

Let's turn now to a brief survey of some of the emperors under whom the church suffered persecution.

Nero

Claudius Nero was named emperor at age 16 and reigned from A.D. 54-68. He had about five good years under the guidance of such men as Seneca, the Roman poet and philosopher. But that all changed when he had his mother killed in A.D. 59. She was too powerful. Her "insanity and her fury at seeing her son slip out of her control" led Nero to believe she was a threat to his power. In A.D. 62, he had his wife killed so he could marry another woman. He later killed a brother and his teacher, Seneca.

Christians became the object of his ire following the Great Fire of Rome in A.D. 64. Some people suspected that Nero started the fire himself, so he pointed the accusing finger at Christians. The fact that he felt confident in doing this indicates the low regard in which people held Christians already. Historian Philip Schaff says that, "Their Jewish origin, their indifference to politics and public affairs, and their abhorrence of heathen customs, were construed into an 'odium generis humani' (hatred of the human race), and this made an attempt on their part to destroy the city sufficiently plausible to justify a verdict of guilty." Schaff says that "There began a carnival of blood such as even heathen Rome never saw before or since....A 'vast multitude' of Christians was put to death in the most shocking manner." Some were crucified, some sewn up in animal skins and thrown to the dogs, some were covered in pitch, nailed to wooden posts, and burned as torches. It was in the fallout of this that Peter and Paul gave their lives for their Savior, probably within a year of each other. Nero apparently took his own life in A.D. 68, when the Senate and the patricians turned against him.

Trajan

Emperor Trajan ruled from A.D. 98-117. One of his governors, a man called Pliny the Younger, wrote to Trajan seeking advice on what to do with the Christians. They were becoming very numerous, and Pliny thought the pagan religions were being neglected. He began sentencing Christians who refused to honor the gods and the emperor to death. Pliny believed that, even if the Christians' practices weren't too bad, just their obstinacy was enough to be rid of them. Should he sentence them for carrying the name Christian only, or did they have to commit specific criminal acts?

Trajan responded with a kind of "don't ask, don't tell" policy. "They must not be ferreted out," he said. But if someone made a credible charge against a Christian, the Christian should be sentenced unless he or she recanted and gave proof by invoking pagan gods.

Persecution was especially bad in Syria and Palestine during Trajan's reign. In 107, he went to Antioch and demanded that everyone sacrifice to the gods. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch and pupil of the apostle John, refused and was martyred by being thrown to wild animals. Ignatius wrote this to Polycarp, another disciple of John, on his way to Rome: "Let the fire, the gallows, the wild beasts, the breaking of bones, the pulling asunder of members, the bruising of my whole body, and the torments of the devil and hell itself come upon me, so that I may win Christ Jesus."

Hadrian

Trajan's ruling was carried on by the next few emperors. Emperor Hadrian, "the most brilliant of the Roman emperors," says Will Durant, required specific charges against Christians as well. He didn't allow governors "to



use mere clamorous demands and outcries” as a basis for judgment. Furthermore, if anyone brings a charge against Christians “merely for the sake of libelling [sic] them,” the governor was to “proceed against that man with heavier penalties, in accordance with his heinous guilt.” There were to be no frivolous lawsuits.

However, Christians still needed to prove loyalty to the state and the pagan religions. Hadrian hated Jews, and was somewhat “indifferent to Christianity from ignorance of it.” Philip Schaff tells us that “He insulted the Jews and the Christians alike by erecting temples of Jupiter and Venus over the site of the temple and the supposed spot of the crucifixion.” Not all officials required Christians to denounce Christ. All they wanted was homage to the divine character of the emperor (“the personal embodiment of the sovereign state”). “It was beside the point for Christians to argue that the malicious tales circulated about them were false...deeds, not words, were required by the state; and if they were in fact loyal citizens, as they protested, there was a simple way of demonstrating their loyalty; let them offer a pinch of incense in honour of the Emperor, let them swear by his divinity, let them invoke him as ‘Lord.’”

Antonius Pius

The policy of not actively pursuing Christians was continued under Antonius Pius who ruled from A.D. 138-161. During the reigns of emperors such as Hadrian and Antonius, however, Christians sometimes suffered persecution at the hands of the local townspeople without any direct encouragement from government officials. During Antonius’ reign, Polycarp, a pupil of the apostle John, was martyred in Asia during one such outburst of violence. After this, persecution settled down somewhat. The execution of this 86 year old man seemed to turn the tide against persecution for a time.

Marcus Aurelius

In A.D. 161 Marcus Aurelius took power and reigned until 180. It was during his reign that Justin Martyr met his death.

Although he didn’t directly lead persecutions against Christians, he had no sympathy for them because he saw them as being disgustingly superstitious. We’re told that “a law was passed under his reign, punishing every one with exile who should endeavor to influence people’s mind by fear of the Divinity, and this law was, no doubt, aimed at the Christians.” F. F. Bruce says that the Christians’ “very resoluteness in the face of suffering and death, which might in itself have won respect from a Stoic, was explained not as commendable fortitude but as perverse obstinacy.... Marcus despised what seemed to him the crass superstition of the Christian beliefs, which disqualified them from the respect due to others who maintained their principles at the cost of life itself.” For Aurelius, it was good to die for something significant, but not for something as silly as what the Christians believed. Furthermore, Christians went to their executions with a show of willingness that he considered theatrical display, which was anathema to the calm spirit appreciated by the Stoics.

During Aurelius’ reign, Christians were blamed for a number of natural disasters because they wouldn’t sacrifice to the gods. In A.D. 177, in Gaul, horrible persecution broke out in a wave of mob violence. Slaves were tortured to give testimony against their masters. “The corpses of the martyrs, which covered the streets,” says Philip Schaff, “were shamefully mutilated, then burned, and the ashes cast into the Rhone, lest any remnants of the enemies of the gods might desecrate the soil.” It is said that the courage of a slave girl named Blandina “strengthened all the others; her tormentors exhausted themselves in their attempts to make her renounce Christ. At last,” Schaff tells us, “the people grew weary of slaughter,” and the persecutions died down.

Septimius Severus

Another emperor under whom Christians suffered terribly was Septimius Severus who ruled from 193-211. Writing during his reign, Clement of Alexandria said, “Many martyrs are daily burned, confined, or beheaded, before our eyes.”

In 202 Septimius enacted a law prohibiting the spread of Christianity and Judaism. This was the first universal decree forbidding conversion to Christianity. Violent persecutions broke out in Egypt and North Africa. Leonides,



the father of Origen, a Christian apologist, was beheaded. Origen himself was spared because his mother hid his clothes. A young girl was cruelly tortured, then burned in a kettle of burning pitch with her mother. A poignant story of the breaking down of class distinctions in the suffering church comes out of the persecution in Carthage. It is reported that Perpetua, a young noblewoman, and Felicitas, a slave girl, held hands and exchanged a kiss before being thrown to wild animals at a public festival. Persecutions abated somewhat soon after Septimius died, but resumed with a vengeance under Decius Trajan.

Decius Trajan

In his few short years on the throne, Emperor Decius Trajan undertook to restore the old Roman spirit. In A.D. 250, he published an edict calling for a return to the pagan state religion. Local commissioners were appointed to enforce the ruling. According to Philip Schaff, "This was the signal for a persecution which, in extent, consistency, and cruelty, exceeded all before it." It was the first to extend over the whole empire, so it produced more martyrs than any other persecution.

When people were suspected of being Christians, they were given the opportunity of offering sacrifice to the gods before the commissioners. Certificates were issued to prove a person's loyalty to the pagan religions. Many Christians gave in to the pressure. Those who didn't were put in prison and repeatedly questioned. Rulers weren't looking for martyrs; they wanted to see the Christians conform. Christians who stood their ground were subject to confiscation, exile, torture, imprisonment, and death. Some rushed forward "to obtain the confessor's or martyr's crown." Some, however, obtained certificates through bribery or forgery. Those who offered sacrifices were excommunicated. In 251 Decius died, but persecution continued as Christians were blamed for invasions by the Goths and for natural disasters.

Diocletian

During the years 303-311, the church endured persecutions so terrible, that all before were forgotten. Historian Philip Schaff saw this as the final struggle between the pagan Roman Empire and the rule of Christ in the West. The primary sources of persecution were Diocletian and Galerius.

Diocletian came to power in 284, and for twenty years upheld edicts of toleration made by a previous emperor. His wife and daughter were Christians, as were most of his court officers and eunuchs.

But Diocletian allowed himself to be persuaded by two of his co-regents to turn on the Christians. Four edicts were issued in A.D. 303 and 304. "Christian churches were to be burned," Schaff tells us, "all copies of the Bible were to be burned; all Christians were to be deprived of public office and civil rights; and last, all, without exception, were to sacrifice to the gods upon pain of death." A fifth edict was issued by co-regent Galerius in 308 ordering that all men, with wives, children, and servants, were to offer sacrifice to the gods, "and that all provisions in the markets should be sprinkled with sacrificial wine." As a result, Christians either had to commit apostasy or starve. Says Schaff: "All the pains, which iron and steel, fire and sword, rack and cross, wild beasts and beastly men could inflict, were employed" against the church. Executioners grew tired with all the work they had to do.

The tide finally turned in the terrible struggle between paganism and Christianity in 311 when Galerius admitted defeat in trying to bring Christians back to the pagan religions. He gave Christians permission to meet as long as they didn't disturb the order of the state. He even requested that they pray to their God for the welfare of the state.

Some persecution followed under a few other emperors, but the fire was almost out on the old Roman Empire. In 313, Constantine, the emperor in the west, issued the Edict of Milan which moved from hostile neutrality to friendly neutrality toward Christians. He declared himself a follower of the God of Christianity. In 324, he became emperor of the whole Roman world, and published a new edict of toleration which was to cover the entire empire.



Reflections

In his work called *Apology*, the Latin apologist Tertullian made this now-famous comment: “The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed.” Somehow, the suffering of some Christians spurred others to more faithful living. The apostle Paul noted that “most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear” (Phil. 1:14). Through all the terrible persecutions of the early centuries, the church continued to grow.

This hasn’t been as significant a principle for Christians in America, because Christianity was, for most of our history, the religion of the land. Of course, that doesn’t mean that even most Americans have been Christians at any given time. Nonetheless, our world view was grounded in Christian beliefs, and Christianity had a prominent place in our cultural life.

But that’s changed now. Far from holding a privileged place in our cultural life, Christianity now is often portrayed as an oppressive bully out to make people’s lives miserable. No matter what issue is raised, any view which has its roots in Christian theology arouses suspicion.

In the first century A.D., it was easy for the general populace to believe Nero when he accused Christians of causing the Great Fire in Rome, because Christians were thought of as haters of the human race (*odium generis humani*). Theologian Harold O. J. Brown sees similarities between that attitude, and the attitude of people toward Christians today in America. So, for example, objections to homosexuality draw charges of hate mongering. When a homosexual is murdered, the finger of blame is pointed at Christians for creating a “climate of hate.” Attempts at saving the lives of the unborn are portrayed as attempts to make life difficult for women in crisis. Of course, over-zealous Christians don’t help any when they blow up an abortion clinic, or shoot an abortionist.

The general secular attitude today seems to be that it’s okay for Christians to have their beliefs, as long as they at least give lip service to certain trendy ideals: gay rights, abortion rights, and religious pluralism, to name a few. Not much different than the attitude in the early church, is it? “Believe in your God if you want, but be sure to worship ours, too.” By God’s grace we don’t endure serious suffering, at least not yet. But Christians in other nations are experiencing it. In Sudan, people are forced to become Muslims or pay for their resistance with low paying jobs, slavery, rape, and even death. This is not the only country where Christians suffer severely for their faith.

In my opinion, the negative attitude in our country is likely to get worse, before it gets better. But history has shown that persecution ultimately strengthens the church. It removes the nominal Christians, and it emboldens others to both stand firm when persecuted, and become more aggressive in proclamation. If persecution comes to us, the church will remain, although church membership rolls will probably become shorter.

Are we prepared to truly suffer for our faith? Do we really believe what we say we believe? If persecution ever comes, God grant us the faithfulness to stand firm. And let’s not forget to pray and work to help our brothers and sisters who are suffering for the name of Jesus Christ.

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