

CHURCH HISTORY

Persecution by the State (A.D. 60-313)

by Dr. Jack L. Arnold

Early Church History, part 9

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. For the first 30 years, the church suffered at the hands of Jewish religious leaders who persecuted Christians because they feared that Christianity would destroy Judaism and the leaders would lose their positions.
- B. Starting around A.D. 60, the church had to fight a war on two fronts. It opposed the foes within, namely heretics and their teachings (such as Gnosticism, Docetism, Montanism, Neoplatonism, Monarchianism), and it fought the foes without, namely the state which persecuted the church.
- C. Multiplied thousands of Christians gave their lives for the Christian faith because of persecution from Rome. When the Christian had to choose between Caesar and Christ, he chose Christ. This often meant that he would lose his life.

II. CAUSES OF PERSECUTION BY THE STATE

- A. The Roman state considered Christianity in its early stages just another sect of Judaism, and Judaism was a legal religion. But as soon as Christianity was recognized as a separate religion, it became an illegal religion and was considered a threat to the Roman Empire. Christians spoke of Christ as their ruler, and as the king of his kingdom. The Romans thought Christians guilty of treason.
- B. The Roman government acknowledged the emperor as the highest god and demanded that all religions include worship of him. As long as religions included worship of the emperor, they could practice their own particular rites. Christians refused to acknowledge any king but Christ, and would not offer any sacrifice to Caesar. Consequently, they were considered disloyal to the state. In point of fact, Christians were very loyal to the State (cf. Rom. 13), but they would only worship Christ.

- C. Christians held their meetings early in the morning or late at night, and Roman authorities felt this could only be done for reasons of conspiracy.
- D. The Roman pagan religions were mechanical and external with altars, idols, priests, processions, rites, and practices that people could see. The Christians had no idols, and their worship was spiritual and internal. Because Christians refused to recognize the pagan gods and idols, they were called atheists.
- E. The early Christians partook regularly of communion, and spoke of eating and drinking Christ's body and blood in a symbolic sense. But this was misunderstood by Roman authorities to mean that Christians were guilty of cannibalism. The close fellowship of Christians and the holy kiss were misconstrued as incest and immoral practices.
- F. Christianity had a great appeal to the slaves and lower classes, although many in the middle and upper classes also responded to Christ. The Christians upheld the equality of all men (Col. 3:11); paganism insisted upon an aristocratic structure of society in which the privileged few were served by the lower class and slaves.
- G. Because most everything in the Roman Empire was somehow connected with emperor worship, the Christians separated themselves from pagan gatherings at temples, theaters and places of recreation. This nonconformity to accepted social patterns brought upon them the dislike that the nonconformist always faces in any period of history. The purity of lives of early Christians was a silent rebuke to the immoral lives that the upper class in Rome were leading. Despite of their virtuous living, the government thought Christians were a threat to society and the state.
- H. There were also economic reasons for the dislike of Christians. Priests, idol makers, and other vested religious interests could hardly look on disinterestedly while their incomes dwindled and their very livelihoods stood in jeopardy. Pliny the Younger (A.D. 112), governor of Bithynia, wrote to Emperor Trajan that "the contagion of this superstition" had spread in the villages and rural areas as well as in the larger cities to such an extent that the temples had been almost deserted and the sellers of sacrificial animals impoverished.
- I. Christians were also made the scapegoats for great calamities, such as famine, earthquakes and pestilence, which were sometimes regarded as punishment meted out because people had forsaken the Graeco-Roman gods.

III. THE STATE PERSECUTES THE CHURCH

A. *Introduction:* Persecutions by the state were local and sporadic throughout the Empire until A.D. 250 when they became general and violent, beginning with Decius.

B. *Persecution Under Nero (54-68 A.D.):*

1. Nero had the distinction of being the first emperor to persecute the Christian church. This took place in and around Rome. Nero, a madman, had much of Rome burned to the ground and then blamed it on the Christians. This was a lie, but the people believed it and hated the Christians for this wicked act.
2. It was during this time that the apostle Peter, according to tradition, was crucified upside down because he felt himself not worthy to die exactly like his Master. Also Paul, as a Roman citizen, was beheaded under Nero's reign.
3. For the burning of Rome, Christians were arrested and terribly persecuted. Many Christians were crucified. Some were sewn up in the skins of wild beasts; then big dogs were let loose on them, and they were torn to pieces. Women were tied to mad bulls and dragged to death. After nightfall Christians were burned at the stake in Nero's garden. The Roman people who hated the Christians were free to come into the garden, and Nero drove around in his chariot wickedly enjoying the horrible scene.
4. From A.D. 68 (after the death of Nero) to 90, there was very little physical persecution of Christians. These breaks in persecution gave the Church time to recuperate and build.

C. *Persecution Under Domitian (68-96 A.D.):*

1. This persecution lasted from about A.D. 90 to 95 and was really caused because Jews refused to pay a poll tax to the state. Rome still considered Christianity at that time to be part of Judaism, so they punished Jews and Christians alike.
2. Some Christians were martyred, some dispossessed of property, and others were banished. It was at this time that the apostle John was

exiled to the Isle of Patmos, where he received the vision of the Revelation.

D. Persecution Under Trajan (A.D. 98-117)

1. Until this time no official policy was set by the state on the handling of Christians. Pliny the Younger, governor of Bithynia, wrote the Emperor Trajan his policy on state discipline for Christians. Pliny said that when someone informed upon a Christian, he brought the Christian before his tribunal and asked him if he were a Christian. If he still admitted the charge after three such questions, he was sentenced to death. In his answer Trajan assured Pliny that he was following the correct procedure. No Christians were to be sought out, but if someone reported that a certain individual was a Christian, the Christian was to be punished unless he recanted and worshiped the gods of the Romans. This became official procedure, and governors throughout the empire followed the principles Trajan had approved.
2. It was during this time (about A.D. 115) that Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, was thrown to the wild beasts in the Colosseum. Ignatius longed for the honor of giving his life for his Saviour, saying, "May the wild beasts be eager to rush upon me. If they be unwilling, I will compel them. Come, crowds of wild beasts; come, tearings and manglings, wracking of bones and hacking of limbs; come, cruel tortures of the devil; only let me attain unto Christ."

E. *Persecution Under Hadrian (A.D. 117-138):*

1. Hadrian followed the general policy of Trajan, but in actuality Christians were persecuted in moderation. When it became common for mobs at heathen festivals to demand the blood of Christians, Hadrian published an edict against such riots.
2. Christianity made marked progress in numbers, wealth, learning and social influence during his reign.

F. *Persecution Under Antoninus Pius (A.D. 139-161):*

1. Antoninus was rather sympathetic to the Christian cause, but felt obligated to uphold established imperial policy. Thus many

persecutions took place. Most were done by mobs and not by consent of the Emperor.

2. It was during this time that Polycarp, who was personally taught by the apostle John, was martyred. He was arrested and brought into the amphitheater in Smyrna, which was filled with an immense multitude. Since there were no images of gods in the houses of worship of the Christians, the heathen rightly concluded that the Christians did not believe in the existence of the Roman gods, and they accused him of being an atheist. The proconsul reminded Polycarp of his great age, and urged him to show his penitence by joining in the cry, "Away with the atheists!" Polycarp looked straight at the excited crowd, pointed his finger at them, and cried, "Away with the atheists!" Then the proconsul said, "Revile Christ, and I will release you." But Polycarp answered, "Eighty and six years have I served him, and he has never done me wrong; how can I blaspheme him, my King, who has served me? I am a Christian." To the crowd the proconsul then proclaimed, "Polycarp has confessed himself to be a Christian." The crowd yelled, "Let him be burned!" Wood was collected and made into a pile. Polycarp asked not to be fastened to the stake. "Leave me thus," he said. "He who strengthens me to endure the flames will also enable me to stand firm at the stake without being fastened with nails." The woodpile was lighted. While Polycarp prayed with a loud voice, "Lord God Almighty, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, I praise thee that thou has judged me worthy of this day and of this hour, to participate in the number of thy witnesses, and in the cup of thy Christ," the flames consumed him.

G. *Persecutions Under Marcus Aurelius (A.D. 161-180):*

1. Marcus Aurelius was an intolerant Stoic who had no love in his heart for Christians. He thought all this martyrdom by Christians was silly nonsense, and bordered on the theatrical. He was the first to introduce a spy system against Christians, and promised that the property of Christians would be given to their accusers. With such rewards for the informers, many Christians were turned over to authorities and persecution became almost universal. This persecution was cruel and barbarous.
2. What happened to the Church in Lyons and Vienna in southern Gaul (modern France) can give us some idea of the severity of the persecution. By the most horrible tortures, they sought to make the

Christians deny their faith. When at last the persecutors became convinced that no amount of torture would make the Christians deny their faith, they beheaded those Christians who were Roman citizens, and the others they threw to the wild beasts in the arena of the amphitheater. The mobs, possessed of a Satanic spirit, committed shocking atrocities such as the murder of Bishop Pothinus, aged 90.

The heroic witness of Blandina, a slave girl, who was fragile of body and timid of spirit, can never be forgotten. Day after day she was subjected to every kind of torture, but her tormentors could not compel her to deny her faith. She continued to encourage and exhort her comrades in Christ to remain steadfast to the end. She seemed clearly sustained by God, and even that diabolical crowd said, "Never woman in our time suffered so much." Finally she was put into the arena, a net thrown over her, and she was exposed to the fury of a wild bull. Several times the bull took her upon his horns and tossed her into the air. In the end she was butchered by an official. The bodies of the martyrs were burned, and the ashes were thrown into the river Rhone. The heathen said mockingly, "Now we shall see whether there will be a resurrection of their bodies."

3. It was during this time that Justin Martyr (A.D. 166) was scourged and beheaded in Rome with six other Christians. In the face of death he bore with joy the witness to the truth. His last words were, "We desire nothing more than to suffer for our Lord Jesus Christ; for this gives us salvation and joyfulness before his dreadful judgment seat." Justin was also asked, "Do you suppose that you will rise again and live for ever?" Justin's noble reply was, "I do not suppose it. I know it."
4. After Marcus Aurelius, there was a twenty year lull in the persecution of the church.

H. *Persecution Under Septimus Severus (A.D. 193-211):*

1. Septimus Severus directed his persecutions mainly in Egypt and North Africa in order to stop what he called proselyting. Thousands were leaving the pagan religions of Rome and becoming Christians.
2. It was during this time that Irenaeus suffered a martyr's death by decapitation.

I. *Persecution Under Maximus (A.D. 235-238):*

1. There were a few local persecutions, but not empire-wide.
2. From Septimus Severus to Diocletian there were about seventy years of relative calm in relation to persecution by the State. There had to be breaks in the persecution of Christians, or the church might have passed out of existence.

J. *Persecution Under Decius (A.D. 249-251):*

1. Decius took the imperial throne about the time Rome was reaching the end of the first millennium of her history, and at a time when the Empire was reeling under natural calamities, and internal and external attacks upon its stability. Christianity, because of its rapid growth, was picked out as the major cause of all the Empire's troubles. Decius issued an edict in A.D. 250 that demanded an annual offering of sacrifice on the Roman altars to the gods and the genius of the emperor. Those who offered the sacrifice were given a certificate (libellus). Christians were demanded to give up their faith or suffer loss of property, torture and death. The persecution was very cruel and empire-wide. Multitudes perished.
2. During this time, many also denied the Christian Faith, but many true Christians persevered to the end. Fortunately for the church, the persecution lasted only several years.

K. *Persecution Under Valerian (A.D. 253-260):*

1. Valerian was more sympathetic to Christians at first but later he continued the persecution.
2. Many saints and important men lost their lives for Christ during this time. Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, was beheaded as a Christian martyr (A.D. 258). Origen also was decapitated for Christ.
3. From Valerian to Diocletian (A.D. 260-303), the Church enjoyed a respite from persecution that lasted about forty years. But then in A.D. 303 all fury broke loose.

L. *Persecution Under Diocletian (A.D. 303-305):*

1. Diocletian was a strong military leader who came to the imperial throne at the end of a century that was marked by political disorder in the Roman Empire. He decided that only a strong monarchy could save the Empire and its classical culture. In A.D. 285 he ended the dyarchy of the principate, created by Caesar Augustus in 27 B.C., by which the emperor and senate had shared authority. A strong monarchy offered the only alternative to chaos. In such a despotic empire there was no place for the toleration of faiths hostile to the state religion.
2. The first edict in A.D. 303 ordered the cessation of meetings of Christians, the destruction of church buildings, the imprisonment of bishops, elders and deacons, the torture of all who persisted in their testimony to Christ, and the destruction of all Scriptures by fire. The second edict ordered Christians to sacrifice to pagan gods — upon pain of death if they refused to do so. The historian Eusebius points out that prisons became so crowded with Christian leaders and their congregations that there was not even enough room for criminals.
3. Christians were punished by loss of property, exile, imprisonment, or execution by the sword or wild beasts. Some were sent to the Roman labor camp where they were worked to death in the mines or starved to death.
4. These persecutions were a determined and systematic attempt to uproot Christianity completely and to wipe the Church off the face of the earth. Vos, in *Highlights of Church History*, makes an interesting observation:

“Accounts of the deaths of martyrs during the period of the Roman persecutions have been greatly dramatized. Their faith and courage were magnificent, but theirs was the easy way. Much greater suffering was endured by those who lay in their own filth in heavy irons in hot Eastern prisons — with little water or food until they died of disease or starvation. Equally hard was the lot of those sentenced to work the field and mines. Half naked, underfed, beaten for low production, the damp ground their bed — theirs was a living death. Are American

Christians, living behind a plush curtain and enjoying a cushioned prosperity, made of the same stuff as they?"

5. The pace of persecution slackened when Diocletian abdicated and retired in A.D. 305.

M. *Persecution Under Galerius (A.D. 305-311):*

1. Galerius at first persecuted the Christians, but realized that the Christians could not be put out of existence. He later sought a new approach to handling the Christian problem.
2. Galerius became ill and suffered unspeakable torments. His disease was dreaded and incurable. From his sick bed, which became his death bed, he issued an edict in AD. 311 which granted to the Christians permission to hold their assemblies again. He asked for their prayers on behalf of himself and the empire. This resulted in only a halfhearted toleration.

N. *Persecution Under Constantine (A.D. 313-337):*

1. When Constantine became master of the western part of the empire, he issued the Edict of Milan (A.D. 313), and the great persecutions ended. Constantine made Christianity a legal religion of the state and favored its development in many ways.
2. It was not until near the end of the fourth century (A.D. 395) that Theodosius made Christianity the official religion of the empire.

III. RESULTS OF PERSECUTION

A. Positive

1. *Purity:* It cost something to follow Christ in the first three centuries of the church. Therefore, people would not become Christians for political, social or economic reasons.
2. *Numerical Growth:* The more the Church was persecuted, the more was its evangelical zeal and the greater its growth in numbers. The Church began with around 500 followers of Christ in Jerusalem, and from the

Day of Pentecost until A.D. 300 it is estimated that between five and twelve per cent of the population of the empire, which was about 75 million, were Christians. At the minimum, there were five million professing Christians.

3. *New Testament*: Persecution, especially under Diocletian, brought about serious thought on what was the true New Testament canon. If Christians were going to die for possession of Holy Scripture, they wanted to be sure that they were dying for inspired books.
4. *Relationship of Church to the State*: The Christian was to be obedient to the State as long as it did not ask him to violate his moral and spiritual allegiance to God. Christians did not bear arms against the state.

B. Negative:

1. *Controversy Over Deserters*: During the severe persecutions under Decius and later Diocletian, many professing Christians, especially in North Africa, fled persecution or turned over Scriptures to the state. There arose a controversy as to how to accept these lapsed ones back after they had buckled under persecution. Some favored easy restoration, but the Novatians (persecutions under Decius) and the Donatists (persecution under Diocletian) wanted a pure church and would not let the deserters back in without being rebaptized.
2. *Poor Literature*: Christians were so busy protecting themselves that there was little opportunity to leave a literary legacy.
3. *Fanaticism and False Doctrine*: The very matter of martyrdom became warped as to its purpose or benefits. Many came to believe that dying for the Faith had some sin-atonement merit.