

KNOW YOUR CHURCH HISTORY (2)

The Early Church (AD70-312) - Persecution

A. Introduction

1. The Early Church is a period of church history between two significant events.

The Fall of Jerusalem in AD70 and the Edict of Milan in AD313.

The Fall of Jerusalem separated Christianity from its Jewish roots.

The Edict of Milan, after Constantine became Emperor of the western part of Roman Empire, granted religious freedom to Christians, and was the start of a process that would lead to Christianity becoming the official religion of the Empire.

2. Two things we see happen during the time of the early church:

We see how the early church went about making disciples of all nations.

“Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.” (Acts 8:4)

We also see how the early church sought to obey everything Jesus had commanded.

“And teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” (Matthew 28:20)

3. Two dangers threatened to halt the progress of the early church and could have potentially destroyed it.

The first of these dangers was persecution.

“In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” (2 Timothy 3:12)

From the very beginning Christians have been persecuted.

4. They were first persecuted by the Jews.

“On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him.” (Acts 8:1-2)

“But the Jews incited the God-fearing women of high standing and the leading men of the city. They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region.” (Acts 13:50)

“Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one.” (2 Corinthians 11:24)

“For you, brothers, became imitators of God’s churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus: You suffered from your own countrymen the same things those churches suffered from the Jews.” (1 Thessalonians 2:14)

This persecution increased as the church gained more converts from the Gentile population, and especially when the Jewish Christians didn’t help in the revolt against Rome.

When the revolt began, the Jewish Christians left Judea and sought refuge in the Gentile town of Pella.

“When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those in the city get out, and let those in the country not enter the city. For this is the time of punishment in fulfillment of all that has been written... They will fall by the sword and will be taken as prisoners to all the nations. Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the time of the Gentiles are fulfilled.” (Luke 21:20-22, 24)

After Jerusalem was almost completely destroyed, and the temple was left in ruins, the Pharisees became the controlling group within Judaism.

They made it impossible for Christians to worship in the synagogue by including a curse on all Christians in the Jewish liturgy: *"May apostates have no hope and may the kingdom of impertinence be uprooted in our day. May the Nozrim and Minim [i.e., the Christians] disappear in the twinkling of an eye. May they be removed from the book of the living and not be inscribed among the just."*

But it wasn't just the Jews that persecuted Christians.

5. Throughout the first 300 years of church history, there were at least 10 official persecutions sanctioned by the Roman Emperor, and countless localised ones.

B. Why was the early church persecuted?

1. They were different to the rest of Roman society.

Christians could not take part in official state occasions, holidays or celebrations, because these always involved worshipping the gods.

Christians would not go to a pagan hospital because hospitals employed priests of Aesculapius, the god of healing, to pray over the patients.

Christians would not send their children to Roman schools where pagan religion was taught.

*"Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? ..."*Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord." (2 Corinthians 6:14-15, 17)

This separation made them unpopular with their pagan neighbours who accused them of being anti-social.

"For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do – living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. They think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you." (1 Peter 4:3-4)

2. They were misunderstood about what they believed.

Christians were accused of cannibalism – as they spoke of consuming the body and blood of Christ at their love feasts.

Christians were accused of incest – as they called each other brother and sister.

3. They valued every human life.

Christians rejected the widespread Roman custom of infanticide, adopting unwanted infants.

Christians opposed easy divorce.

Christians gave dignity to women, children and slaves.

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:28)

4. They didn't worship the gods.

"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one." (Deuteronomy 6:4)

"For there is one God and one mediator between God and man, the Christ Jesus." (1 Timothy 2:5)

The Romans sacrificed to many different gods and goddesses.

The refusal of Christians to do this was seen as unpatriotic, but also as a threat to the security of the Empire.

Whenever there was a disaster, the Christians were often blamed, because the gods were angry that Christians were drawing people away from worshipping them.

"If the Tiber floods the city, or the Nile refuses to rise, or the sky withholds its rain; if there is an earthquake, famine or pestilence, at once the cry is raised: 'Christians to the lions'." (Tertullian)

5. They didn't worship Caesar.

Emperor worship was a way of unifying the Empire.

People were allowed to practice any religion as long as they worshipped the emperor.

But Christians could not worship both Caesar and Christ.

C. When was the early church persecuted?

1. There were 10 Roman Emperors from Nero that made being a Christian illegal.

Dates	Emperor	Famous Martyrs
AD64	Nero	Paul, Peter
c.90-96	Domitian	Clement of Rome, John (exiled)
98-117	Trajan	Ignatius
161-180	Marcus Aurelius	Polycarp, Justin Martyr
202-211	Septimus Severus	Irenaeus
235-236	Maximus the Thracian	
249-251	Decius	
257-260	Valerian	Origen, Cyprian
303-311	Diocletian (303-305) Galerius (305-311)	

Between their reigns, the church enjoyed periods of relative peace.

2. Persecution during the First Century.

Under Nero – when a great fire broke out in Rome in AD64, he decided to the blame the Christians for this. Persecution was limited at this stage to Rome.

"To kill the rumours, Nero charged and tortured some people hated for their evil practices – the group popularly called "Christians". The founder of this sect, Christus, had been put to death by the governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate, when Tiberius was emperor... First those who confessed to being 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. Before killing the Christians, Nero used them to amuse the people. Some were dressed in furs, to be killed by dogs. Others were crucified. Still others were set on fire early in the night, so that they might illumine it. Nero opened his own gardens for these shows." (Tacitus)

Under Domitian – at some point during his reign, he turned against the Christians, most likely because of their refusal to call him both "Lord and God". Persecution during Domitian's reign was known to have taken place in Rome and Asia Minor.

3. Persecution during the Second Century.

Under Trajan – he said that Christians should not be hunted down, but if they were brought before the authorities, they should be punished if they refused to worship the gods.

"This is the course that I have adopted. I ask them if they are Christians. If they admit it I repeat the question a second and a third time, threatening capital punishment. If they persist I sentence them to death, for their inflexible obstinacy should certainly be punished. Christians who are Roman citizens I reserved to be sent to Rome. I discharged those who were willing to curse Christ, a thing which, it is said, genuine Christians cannot be persuaded to do." (Pliny's letter to Emperor Trajan)

Following the reign of Trajan, Christians continued to be in a precarious position. Christians were not constantly persecuted, but it was still illegal for them to be Christians.

Persecution continued to be local and sporadic rather than Empire wide.

4. Persecution during the Third Century.

Under Septimus Severus – he outlawed conversion to Christianity under the penalty of death. This increased local persecutions plus intensive persecutions aimed directly at new converts and their teachers.

Under Decius – he organised the first universal persecution of Christians throughout the Empire in 250. He ordered that all the inhabitants of the Empire must offer sacrifices to the gods and obtain an official certificate stating they had done so.

After the persecution during the reign of Decius the church was left badly shaken because so many Christians had committed apostasy to save their lives.

Under Valerian – he prohibited all meetings for Christian worship, and systematically tried to kill all the church's bishops and presbyters.

5. The Great Persecution.

After a long period of peace, the fourth century began with the worst persecution the early church faced.

Under Diocletian – he issued four edicts against the church.

AD303: All church buildings were to be destroyed, all Bible's were to be burnt, all Christian worship was forbidden.

AD303: All clergy to be arrested and imprisoned.

AD303: All clergy to offer sacrifices to the gods or be burned.

AD304: All citizens throughout the Empire are to offer sacrifices to the gods or be executed if they refused.

The persecution was most fierce in Eastern half of the Empire.

Under Galerius – when Galerius took over from Diocletian, the persecution became more violent until 311 when he admitted his failure to destroy Christianity and gave up persecuting the church.

The next two years brought sporadic outbreaks of persecution in places such as Egypt, Palestine and Asia Minor, until Constantine took power and signed the Edict of Milan giving religious freedom to Christians.

D. How did the early church respond to being persecuted?

1. There was the need to define and defend the faith and this led to the rise of the apologist.

The apologist did two things:

a) He defined the faith – explaining what Christians believed and did against the various rumours and accusations.

“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.” (1 Peter 3:15)

b) He defended the faith – trying to prove that Christians were law-abiding citizens who paid their taxes and prayed for the Empire, and because of this should not be persecuted.

“Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right.” (1 Peter 2:13-14)

“I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone – for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.” (1 Timothy 2:1-2)

Sadly, there is no evidence that any of the apologists succeeded in convincing any of the Roman Emperors to stop persecuting Christians.

However, the confidence of the believers in the truth they professed was strengthened as the apologists showed that the Christian faith was reasonable and helped to develop the church’s theology.

2. There was the need to decide what to do with those who denied the faith.

Following the persecution under Decius the church was badly shaken because so many Christians had committed apostasy to save their lives.

When the persecution ended, church members who had denied the faith wanted to be readmitted into the church.

What should be done? Who decides?

Some thought that the confessors should decide. The confessors were Christians who had been imprisoned during the time of persecution, but not executed.

In North Africa, the confessors began to grant forgiveness and restore the lapsed Christians who repented back into the church.

The bishops, who now occupied the position of power in the church, argued that only they had the authority.

Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, gathered the bishops together, and they agreed the following:

a) Those who purchased certificates by bribing magistrates, but didn’t offer sacrifices, would be immediately restored if they repented.

b) Those who sacrificed to the gods would only be readmitted on their deathbed or when a new persecution gave them the opportunity to prove the sincerity of their repentance.

In both cases, before being readmitted, they had to show outward signs of repentance which was decided by the bishop.

c) Those who sacrificed to the gods but showed no repentance would never be readmitted.

Whilst the majority of the church accepted this course of action, there were some who thought that those who denied Christ when persecuted should be damned and that there was no way for them to make sufficient penance to be readmitted. This led to a split in the church.

E. What lessons can we learn for today?

1. Pray that God would continue to give us governments that give us the freedom to live as Christians and preach the gospel.

"I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone – for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness." (1 Timothy 2:1-2)

2. Don't be surprised if persecution comes our way.

"In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." (2 Timothy 3:12)

3. Be realistic about what apologetics can achieve.

It is useful for showing that the Christian faith is reasonable – showing believers that they are not out of their mind to believe what the Bible says is true and unbelievers that the Christian faith has an intellectual credibility to it.

"Apologetics gets you from A to Y, but only the gospel gets you from Y to Z."

4. Church discipline is difficult and messy, but it is possible to be restored after denying Christ.

"When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs." Again Jesus said, "Simon, son of John, do you truly love me?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep." The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt because Jesus asked of him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things, you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep." (John 21:15-17)