

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Chapter 4 Martyrdom

One question that always pops into my mind when faced with things I don't understand is, "Why?" This is true in physics, and it is equally true in philosophy. I want to know *why* electricity works. I am not satisfied with the fact that when I plug in my phone, it charges. I am curious why that is so. What is the magic of a plug and cable? What is really happening?

Not everyone has this malady. Not everyone feels a compulsion to know, "Why?" But I do. It is why when studying the martyrdom experienced by so many in the early church, I am driven to ask, "Why were others killing Christians for their faith?" I might understand it if the Christians were physically aggressive, were thieves, or were driving for political power. But none of that seems to be the case, and yet, just as we see today in areas of the world, peaceful, law-abiding Christians are sometimes persecuted to the point of death.

Why? That is the question we address here. The persecution was not accidental. It was never a case of mistaken identity. Some might even say the persecutors' motives were not evil or malicious!

Yet persecution occurred in the early church to such a degree that we are able to read about it and study it today. The insights we gain should inspire us and motivate us to deeper faith and conviction as we live our lives, even though most of us will never be threatened with martyrdom in the name of faith.

WHY WERE CHRISTIANS PERSECUTED?

When examining the reasons behind the suffering and martyrdom of Christians in the early church, we must look into several different areas because the early Christians suffered death at the hands of multiple interests. Our examination will cover the Jewish persecution of the church, persecution arising from local interests, and government sponsored persecution. Each of these interests exacted a price of blood on the church.

As we look into these sources of persecution, we are reminded of Paul writing about the scandal of Christianity in 1 Corinthians. Paul explained "the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor. 1:18). How was this true? Consider the question in light of history's lessons on persecutions.

Jewish Persecution

The Jewish persecution of the early church arose not only in Jerusalem, but also in other cities around the Roman world. Acts reported Jerusalem as the site where the first Christian blood was spilled. The Jewish authorities and Temple cult adherents martyred Stephen for his faith (Acts 6, 7). Acts also notes other persecutions that came directly or indirectly out of the religious authorities in Jerusalem.

The persecutions by certain Jews, however, went beyond Jerusalem. Paul originally went to Damascus with a plan to persecute the Christians there. After embracing the Christian faith, the Jews in Thessalonica and other places persecuted Paul and made attempts on his life (Acts 14, 17). When Paul wrote Second Corinthians, he had already received 39 lashes from the Jews 5 times (2 Cor. 11:24).

Following the Corinthian passage quoted earlier, Paul went on to specify that “Christ crucified” was a “stumbling block to Jews” (1 Cor. 1:23). Why? What was it about Christianity that brought out such harsh judgments from some of the Jews? Many reasons! We isolate several of the more prominent ones for this lesson, categorizing them into three areas.

Theology

Multiple objections were based on theology. First, the simple fact that Jesus was crucified on a tree seemed to cause disbelief in any messianic attribution. As Paul noted in Galatians 3:13, the law pronounced a curse on “everyone who is hanged on a tree” (quoting Deut. 21:23). For Paul, however, this passage in particular turned into a reason to believe in Jesus as Messiah. For as Paul told the Galatians, Jesus was cursed! Jesus became “a curse for us” and thus ‘Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law’ (Gal. 3:13).

A second problem that the Jews had with the Christians was a perception that the Christians were teaching what seemed opposed to the Law of Moses, rather than its fulfillment. This is not hard to understand since the church was learning and teaching that salvation came by faith, rather than by human deeds.

Human Emotion

Another reason for Jewish persecution was simple jealousy (Acts 5:17). Christianity brought large numbers of Jews into a faith that reduced the ranks of normative Judaism, as people followed miracle-working apostles preaching a crucified Savior. This is not unlike the great jealousy and fear that had arisen from the popularity of Jesus himself. Jesus’ opponents were repeatedly described as “afraid of the people” that were followers of Jesus (Lk 22:2). There is every

reason to think this would continue, especially after days like Pentecost when 3,000 became believers in one fell swoop.

Political and Cultural Concerns

The threat of Christianity to much of the power structure of New Testament Judaism was a source of great affront to the ruling Jews. After the death and resurrection of Christ, there was no longer a perceived need for atoning sacrifices. These sacrifices were core to the Temple power structure and to the economics of the Temple cult.

A related concern was the Gentile inclusion in the faith. Ethnic pride of distinction as a Jew was diluted by a faith that treated Gentiles as full equals with no distinction.

From the normative Jewish perspective, Christianity was a cultic aberration of the faith handed down and followed for thousands of years. Rather than upholding the core Jewish doctrine of one God (Deut 6:4), it is easy to see Jews thinking that Christianity seduced the people into believing there were three Gods, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. From this perspective, Christianity, in essence, was tantamount to the idolatry of Israel's prior days that brought captivity and God's harsh judgment on the people as a nation. What was worse (at least in a more earthly way) was the effect that Christianity was having on the masses. As people moved to faith, the community and social fabric were changing. This was the Jesus who taught worship in spirit and truth rather than location! (Jn 4:21-24) This was the Jesus who threw moneychangers from the temple courts (Jn 2:13-16). This was the Jesus who had thousands following him rather than the conventional Jewish hierarchy (Jn 6:5,10). For these reasons, Christ himself was delivered to death. This left the establishment a dilemma: allow a cultic interpretation that bred radical social change or figure out a way to stop it. Wasn't it more expedient for one man to die, than for the masses to die from the hand of God's judgment or the hands of Rome? (Jn 11:49; 18:14)

Consider the speech Tertullus (the prosecuting lawyer presenting the case against Paul before the Roman Governor over Jerusalem) gave. Acts 24:1-9 recorded the lawyer speaking of the "long period of peace" under the Governor. He then accused Paul of being a "troublemaker, stirring up riots among the Jews all over the world." Tertullus added that Paul "even tried to desecrate the temple. So we seized him." The lawyer argued that arresting and eliminating Paul would best keep the Roman peace.

The Christian perspective offered no solution to the establishment's dilemma. In fact, Jesus did bring a kingdom that would upset the religious order of the day. Brother would be set against brother; child would be turned against parent (Mt

10:35-37; Lk 14:26). For the simple truth was that the one God Israel worshipped, the one true God, was more complicated than Israel supposed. His nature and composition was not one as an individual human is one. The one God was what we see and understand as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He is not three Gods, but three essences of one God.

Similarly, the Christian faith would not budge from teaching against the temple as an endpoint. The sacrifices that paved the way for much of the temple revenue were past their time. Christ died as the real sacrifice for sins. This was one death for all sins, a one-time event that animal sacrifices forecasted. Since that reality had occurred, there was no further need for the foreshadowing (Heb 10:1-4). The effects of Christianity did not stop there. Much of the legalistic requirements Jewish law imposed, the Christian community saw as a lifestyle choice (for example, the dietary laws) rather than a requirement of holiness (see 1 Cor 8; Acts 10, etc.). Perhaps most egregiously, Christianity taught that God was interested directly in all peoples of all nations (Gal 3:28; Acts 10). The Jews were not elite before God as they had believed themselves to be. Moreover, Christianity taught that God would relate to others directly based on their faith in him, rather than Gentiles first becoming Jews and *then* relating to God through the legalistic Jewish religious system (Rom 3:21-23).

And so it was that many Jews persecuted Christians. Eventually, the Jews even went so far as to rewrite their 18 prayers/benedictions to specifically exclude worshippers of “the Nazarene.” (See lesson 1).

Local Persecution

As the church spread throughout the Mediterranean world, various local issues and personalities brought out persecution as well. In the New Testament, we read of the problems Paul faced from economic interests in Ephesus, as the growing faith was perceived to affect the trade in idols (Acts 19).

We have a number of accounts of public hostility and hatred toward the Christian faith and church. Some hostility was no doubt based upon false assumptions about what Christians were doing. Christians certainly did not worship the gods of the local areas. Any natural disasters were often blamed for that “atheism.”

Who better to analyze and explain this accusation than a well-trained accomplished lawyer? Enter Tertullian (c.160-c.225). Son of a centurion, Tertullian was born in Carthage, but became an accomplished lawyer, distinguishing himself as such in Rome.¹ Tertullian followed the ways of his

¹ Eusebius, Church History 2.2.4.

pagan family until he became a Christian in Rome well into adulthood. Scholars believe that Tertullian was moved to faith by witnessing the way that Christians suffered martyrdom rather than recant their faith.² After his conversion, Tertullian noted the role of martyrdom on the ranks of the church:

But, carry on, good officials; you will become much better in the eyes of the people if you sacrifice the Christians for them. Crucify us—torture us—condemn us—destroy us! Your iniquity is proof of our innocence... Yet, your tortures accomplish nothing, though each is more refined than the last; rather they are an enticement to our religion. We become more numerous every time we are hewn down by you: the blood of Christians is seed.³

In his *Apology*⁴, Tertullian discussed the way society blamed the Christians for natural disasters:

They consider that the Christians are the cause of every public calamity and every misfortune of the people. If the Tiber rises as high as the city walls, if the Nile does not rise to the fields, if the weather will not change, if there is an earthquake, a famine, a plague—straightway the cry is heard: “Toss a Christian to the lion!”⁵

Persecutions also arose against Christians because of ignorance. As noted in the lesson on the *Didache*, Christians had closed communion, a time of consuming the Eucharistic elements of the body and blood of Christ. Pagans didn’t know “for sure” what was going on, but the rumors were rife. “Eating flesh and drinking blood” was a common rumor.

Justin Martyr (c.100-165) is the first reference to Christian cannibalism. Justin was born into a pagan family, and studied to be a philosopher. After working through various philosophical schools, he subscribed to the teachings of Plato, when he was converted to the Christian faith. Subsequently Justin (who was

² Arbesmann, Rudolph, *The Fathers of the Church: Tertullian, Apologetical Works and Minucius Felix, Octavius*, (Catholic University Press 1950), at viii.

³ Tertullian, *Apology*, at 50.12 (Arbesmann translation).

⁴ In this sense, “apology” is *not* used in the sense of apologizing or expressing remorse. Rather it is the English translation of the Greek *apologia* (ἀπολογία), meaning a “defense.”

⁵ Tertullian, *Apology*, at 40.1-2 (Arbesmann translation).

martyred for his faith), wrote defenses of the faith where he referred to those who indicted Christians for eating the flesh of people.

The ignorant also accused Christians of practicing incest. It is not hard to see how this rumor might start. Christians routinely attended the Eucharist as a part of an *agape* feast (a “love feast”) where they were with “brothers and sisters,” even bestowing on each other the “holy kiss” (Rom 16:16).

In 177, in ancient Lugdunum (modern Lyon, France), the church sustained dozens of martyrdoms over these accusations. Eusebius wrote that the church was accused of incest, cannibalism, “as well as things we should not even speak or think about.”⁶

Outside the faith, we can also read pagan comments saved in historical writings. Tacitus (c.56-c.120), a Roman historian writing around 117AD, claimed that Christians were “hated for their abominations.” Tacitus wrote about the horrendous fires that happened under Nero’s reign. He explained that, try as he might, Nero could not stop the rumors that he had ordered the fires. So after trying to get the gods to intervene, after throwing lavish parties to dispel the rumors, Nero turned to blaming the Christians.

Therefore, to scotch the rumor, Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost cruelty, a class of men, loathed for their vices, whom the crowd styled Christians. Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate, and the pernicious superstition was checked for a moment, only to break out once more, not merely in Judea, the home of the disease, but in the capital.⁷

According to the Roman historian Suetonius (c.69-122) who authored a biography of the first twelve Caesars, Nero was executing Christians even in his earlier and more virtuous days.

Christians, who were followers of a new and wicked cult, were put to death.⁸

While Suetonius does not detail his thoughts on Christianity being a “wicked” (Lat. *malefica*) cult, we can readily glean that from other sources. Toward the end

⁶ Eusebius, *Church History*, 5.1.

⁷ Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44.

⁸ Suetonius, *Life of Nero*, at 16.2.

of the second century, another Christian defender (“apologist”) named Minucius Felix wrote a defense of the faith entitled, “Octavius.” The book is a discussion between a pagan (Caecilius Natalis) and a Christian (Octavius Januarius) with Minucius arbitrating and recording the discussion. The pagan gives a long list of atrocities he believes Christians commit. The list is appalling, but insightful for the rumors about Christians and their secret activities.

They know one another by secret marks and insignia, and they love one another almost before they know one another. Everywhere also there is mingled among them a certain religion of lust, and they call one another promiscuously brothers and sisters.... I am told that, because of I know not what foolish belief, they consecrate and worship the head of a donkey, the meanest of all animals. I know not whether these things are false; certainly suspicion is applicable to secret and nocturnal rites; and he who explains their ceremonies by reference to a man punished by extreme suffering for his wickedness, and to the deadly wood of the cross, appropriates fitting altars for reprobate and wicked men, that they may worship what they deserve... And of their banqueting it is well known all men speak of it everywhere... On a solemn day they assemble at the feast, with all their children, sisters, mothers, people of every sex and of every age. There, after much feasting, when the fellowship has grown warm, and the fervor of incestuous lust has grown hot with drunkenness, a dog that has been tied to the chandelier is provoked, by throwing a small piece of offal beyond the length of a line by which he is bound, to rush and spring; and thus the conscious light being overturned and extinguished in the shameless darkness, the connections of abominable lust involve them.⁹

Of course almost every accusation is false, or taken totally out of its Christian construct (for example, Christians loving each other “almost before they know one another”). Yet this was not a singular understanding. Even the idea of worshipping a donkey is cited elsewhere. Early Roman graffiti (now in Rome’s Kircher Museum) was discovered in the 19th century showing a crucified donkey with the inscription, “Alexamenos worships his God.”

⁹ Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, at 9.2-6.



This is a tracing from the Alexamenos graffiti (itself hard to see in a picture). The graffiti is misspelled and poorly written, consistent with the slave training facility where it was found. It shows the level of dislike and contempt for Christians even among ordinary people.

Government Sponsored Persecution

Of course, one of the most significant government persecutions of the early church was a “local issue” referenced in the previous section – the burning of Rome and Nero’s blaming of the church. We go into more detail, however, because this was a local issue with worldwide repercussions.

The events started on the night of July 18 in the year 64 A.D. The fire alarm was sounded in Rome, a city of some one million people. The fire broke out among the spice-booths and stalls around the Great Circus. No doubt fed by the oils and other combustible items for sale, the fire quickly spread to many of the timbered homes and buildings that were closely crowded together. The fire spread to the poorest corners of the city and burned for almost a full week. Rome had 15 districts; all but 4 were severely burned. The death and destruction produced a great stench. People were desolate (and uninsured!). Beyond homes, temples of great import to the people were burned to the ground.

These tragic events occurred at a critical point in the reign of Nero. Nero was never a popular Caesar among the citizenry or the Senate. Nero had recently seen to his mother’s murder as well as his wife’s, and the people’s faith in his integrity was not too great! Then, the rumors flamed hot on the tale of the fire. Didn’t people see Nero’s servants running through the slums with torches carrying flames further? Nero had often said, “A ruler can do anything he wishes!” The Roman historians Suetonius and Tacitus record many more “reasons” offered that Nero was behind the conflagration. Nero did not help the public concern when he immediately announced a rebuilding plan, adding to the rumors of his guilt.

Nero needed a diversion, and he needed it fast. Christians provided the perfect scapegoat. With their secret meetings, the rumors of their atrocious activities, their teaching of another king, and the coming destruction of this world with fire (2 Thes 1:7-9), they made a convincing scapegoat. Clement, Tacitus, and others

recount the terrors inflicted on the Christians. In Nero's Circus (which was roughly where St. Peter's Basilica stands today), Christians were tortured, beheaded, and crucified. One evening, Nero took out his chariot and road down an avenue lit with torches that were actually Christians coated with tar and pitch and set on fire while hanging from posts. Others were sown into animal skins and released to run before starving mastiffs that hunted and devoured them.

This persecution ultimately cost the lives of Peter and Paul, among many others. Before his martyrdom, Peter wrote his epistle explaining the Christian "suffers grief in all kinds of trial" so that faith "may be proved genuine" and "result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed" (1 Pet 1:6-7). He added, "Do not repay evil with evil...but with blessing" (3:9). Finally, "do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering...but rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ" (4:12-13).

Nero was not the only Roman authority to persecute the church. With Nero, Christianity became a *prava religio* (an "evil religion") and was no longer considered a *religio licita* (a "legal religion"). The term Seutonius and others used for Christianity was a *superstitio*, the Latin term from which we get "superstition" that was used for "practices the Romans did not count as acceptable religion."¹⁰

Another emperor arose toward the end of the first century, Domitian. Still in his 20's Domitian took the throne after the death of his brother Titus in 81 A.D. History shows that Domitian was disliked by many and was suspicious of most. He reigned until 96 amidst great discord and political intrigue. By the time of his reign (a mere 27 years since Nero had passed) Christianity had grown rampantly into the highest ranks of the Roman Empire. Most scholars are convinced that a number of members of the aristocracy and even the house of Domitian had converted to the faith. Domitian set about to punish and execute Christians as he willed.¹¹

Domitian went after Christian and Jew for "ritual taxes" to be paid in homage to the pagan god Jupiter. Of course, Christians found this an outrageous form of idolatry to be avoided. Domitian used the charge of atheism to punish the faithful.

¹⁰ See Clark, Gillian, *Christianity and Roman Society*, Cambridge 2004), at 18 and cites therein.

¹¹ While some scholars question whether Domitian persecuted the church, the evidence of such persecution is strong. The letter of Clement was likely written in the midst of persecution during Domitian. Similarly, the book of Revelation was composed at this time and refers to the persecution of the churches in Asia Minor (Rev 1:9; 2:3-13). Eusebius and other church historians record the persecutions as well (*Church History* 3.18.4).

Atheism, in the criminal sense of Rome, meant a refusal to acknowledge the official gods.

By 112, we have a clear indication of the Empire's quandary regarding persecution of Christians. Trajan was emperor at the time. Pliny the Younger was the official in what is now Turkey (although he was born on Lake Como where George Clooney keeps a home!) on the southern coast of the Black Sea. His letters indicate that Pliny was a good ruler who was concerned about justice and fairness. Similarly, the Emperor Trajan was clearly a solid leader who cared about right and wrong. We maintain in our 21st century legal system an idea Trajan first espoused, "it is better to let a guilty man go unpunished than to sentence someone who is innocent."¹²

Yet, for all this goodness and fairness in these men, we have an interesting exchange of correspondence that tells us much about the persecution of the church. Pliny spent a year trying to get things organized for the government in Pontus and Bithynia. In the process, Pliny wrote the Emperor with questions on handling certain matters¹³. One of those matters was Christians. Pliny had already been sentencing those who embraced Christianity, but he had a difficult time seeing what they did as wrong. Certainly, the Christians taught a faith that changed the social order. People were leaving the temples with the corresponding loss in trade associated with the temples and their sacrifices. But, upon capturing and torturing two Christian women who Pliny says the Christians called "deaconesses." Pliny learned simply that the Christians met before dawn to sing a song to Christ as God, and took oaths to live orderly. They would then meet again at the end of the day to eat a common meal. The Christians were not engaged in any offensive behavior that Pliny could identify. Pliny asked if the situation was more fully understood in Rome.

Pliny followed what some scholars believe to have been a Neronian law and made decisions that "No one is allowed to be a Christian."¹⁴ When Christians were

¹² This passage from Trajan's letter to Frontonus was quoted by the U.S. Supreme Court in the 1895 decision, *Coffin v. United States*, 156 U.S. 432; 15 S. Ct. 394.

¹³ Pliny was quite a letter writer. We have his letters today that allow us to follow his own career in almost biographical form. He was born in 62 and appointed to his task in Turkey in 109 or 110. He was coming off a good job as head of the Roman sewer system! (Technically, "President of the Curators of the Tiber" – his job included maintaining the riverbanks of the Tiber as well as the sewer system.)

¹⁴ There is a good indication that the actual crime that incited Trajan and Pliny against the Christians was the mere gathering together into a club or secret society. Trajan had banned clubs and societies as a source of disloyalties in the empire. Had Christians not been incessant about meeting together, they might have avoided some of the persecution. But, the faithful took their fellowship seriously and would "not give up meeting together" (Heb 10:25).

identified, Pliny had a three-prong procedure. First, he would question the individuals if they were Christians, having first warned them that if they answered “yes” they would be executed. Pliny was in the practice of asking this question a second and third time. If they continued to admit to Pliny that they were in fact Christians, then Pliny had them executed (except for the Roman citizens that would be sent for appeal to Caesar). Those who would not admit to being Christians were then given a test. Pliny would have them brought before statues of the emperor¹⁵ and certain other gods. Pliny would have them offer incense, make an offertory prayer and then curse the name of Jesus.

In spite of Pliny’s aggressive actions, the numbers of Christians were not subsiding. Pliny was getting mass numbers, including men, women, and children of all ages and social classes. Pliny was not about to kill them all without thoroughly examining the facts that made these folks criminals. As Pliny attempted to discern the truth of the various rumors about the “vile practices” of the faithful, he could find no real crime. The best he could come up with was that the Christians were meeting together before daybreak, singing songs to the glory of Christ, swearing never to steal, murder or commit adultery, eating a common meal together, and assembling together regularly. For this they were criminals? It made no sense to Pliny.

In the Fall of 112, Pliny wrote:

To the Emperor Trajan: It is my custom to refer all my difficulties to you, Sir, for no one is better able to resolve my doubts and to inform my ignorance.

I have never been present at an examination of Christians. Consequently, I do not know the nature or extent of the punishments usually meted out to them, nor the grounds for starting an investigation and how far it should be pressed. Nor am I at all sure whether any distinction should be made between them on the grounds of age, or if young people and adults should be treated alike; whether a pardon ought to be granted to anyone retracting his beliefs...

¹⁵ Emperor worship was in full bloom by the late first century. The Emperor was to be worshipped and proclaimed Lord, something Christians would not do. Pliny inserted a requirement of calling the Emperor “Lord” in his verification test to prove a person was not a Christian.

Having never been present at any trials concerning those who profess Christianity, I am unacquainted not only with the nature of their crimes, or the measure of their punishment, but how far it is proper to enter into an examination concerning them. Whether, it is possible to restrain its progress. The temples, at least, which were once almost deserted, begin now to be frequented; and the sacred rites, after a long intermission, are again revived; while there is a general demand for the victims, which till lately found very few purchasers. From all this it is easy to conjecture what numbers might be reclaimed if a general pardon were granted to those who shall repent of their error.¹⁶

So Pliny asked, is the mere name “Christian” a punishable crime? Trajan responds briefly with three simple lines. Trajan says it is not necessary to seek Christians out. But, when they are found out, if they admit to being Christians, then they are to be punished. If the Christian will recant and pay homage to the Roman gods, then the crime is pardoned.¹⁷

You have adopted the right course, my dearest Secundus, in investigating the charges against the Christians who were brought before you. It is not possible to lay down any general rule for all such cases. Do not go out of your way to look for them. If indeed they should be brought before you, and the crime is proved, they must be punished; with the restriction, however, that where the party denies he is a Christian, and shall make it evident that he is not, by invoking our gods, let him (notwithstanding any former suspicion) be pardoned upon his repentance. Anonymous information ought not to be received in any sort of prosecution. It is introducing a very dangerous precedent, and is quite foreign to the spirit of our age.

We look at this today and do not understand it, for it seems obvious to us after 2,000 years of history that Christians were not seeking to overthrow Rome, but simply to worship God in faith. Yet we can perhaps better consider the Roman misunderstanding if we think about the legitimate 21st century concern of extremist terrorist cells.

Christians were a religious group unlike any other. They claimed an exclusive right to truth in one God, rather than serving a pantheon. This one God caused

¹⁶ Pliny, *Epistles*, at 10.96.

¹⁷ Pliny, *Epistles*, at 10.97.

them to meet in homes, maintaining an international underground network. Their close relationships included financial support for each other and a “family” relationship that eclipsed normal familial ties, calling each other “brother” and “sister.” They would gather regularly sharing a meal that, unlike normal Roman society, did not involve a sacrifice to the gods. Further, they taught they were of another kingdom that would one day overthrow the world order and rule exclusively. There was a coming “apocalypse” that would bring believers into power, and those who died martyrs’ deaths in the interim were assured of treats in the afterlife. Viewed without further knowledge, it begins to make sense why Christians were feared, even though they weren’t truly threatening.

It was under Trajan that we have the arrest and execution of Ignatius of Antioch. While going to Rome for his execution, Ignatius wrote seven letters that we have today. Those letters are not just profound in what they say, but in how they say it. The letters give us insight into the mind and heart of a Christian on his way to his martyrdom. One of the holy ones that saw Ignatius while headed to Rome for execution was a man named Polycarp. Polycarp would himself suffer martyrdom 50 years later. The martyrdom of Polycarp was reported to the faithful communities in a letter we still have today. Both of these martyrdoms deserve a closer examination. We will examine those next week.¹⁸

We stop short if our discussion of governmental persecution ends with Nero, Domitian and Trajan. There were numerous other Roman rulers who persisted in persecuting the church throughout the 100’s, 200’s, and early 300’s. During this time period, a number of Christians began writing defenses of the faith, often sending them to the actual Roman Emperors. These defenses were designed to help stop the state persecution. We plan to discuss them in future classes, so we will not go into more detail at this point.

Similarly, the official persecution was supported by thought leaders outside the structure of the government itself. So, we will read in 170-80 where Celsus took on the Christian faith, attacking it intellectually. Likewise, Lucian of Samosata wrote of Christians as the cult de jour, taking them to task for their practices. These writers were similarly addressed by Christians in written defenses of the faith that we will study later.

POINTS FOR HOME

¹⁸ For any who want to “read ahead,” check out *The Letters of Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch and The Martyrdom of Polycarp*. Both are accessible in book form as part of the writings of the Apostolic Fathers. Both are also available for reading online at: www.ccel.org/fathers2/.

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

Paul wrote 2 Timothy 3:12 shortly before his martyrdom under Caesar Nero. Paul saw persecution as a fact, not a possibility. The persecution might be literal martyrdom, even today in parts of the world. In America, it will be less costly in mortal terms. It might be mockery; it might be shunning; it might be economic.

The truth of the gospel is not convenient. And when folks are confronted with Jesus as the truth, and the way (not merely an option!) to God, it demands a response. For some, the response might be faith; for others, something more visceral. Believers should not be shocked over persecution, nor should they withdraw from interacting with the world because of fear. We live before God in faith, and trust him to bring us through all fiery trials.

2. *“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God”* (Mt. 5:9).

People will watch how Christians behave. It is the clearest barometer of the truth of faith. Do people believe something enough to make them different? Do they visit hatred with hatred? Do they seek revenge when wronged? Do they embrace a faith, yet live as the world?

In a recent discussion with a prominent and published atheist who had spent 20 years in the church, he told me that the reason he left the faith was recognizing that Christians did not live any different than people of the world. Christ made no difference in life, so how could he be real?

Now we can certainly affirm that no one is perfect, and if perfection of Christians is what the world requires to validate the Christian faith, then it will never be valid to such. But Christians should respond to sin differently than the world. A true believer admits sin, somehow confesses it, repents, and tries to get help to stop the sin. He may even fall again and again, but that in no way invalidates the Christian faith, the power of the cross, or the marvelous grace we have in Christ. Then over time, we see God at work in the believer to *make a difference*. The believer has different priorities, different values, and the power and conviction of the Holy Spirit that *does* make a difference, even though Christians still sin.

God help us be different and bring glory to your name!

3. *“By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”* (Jn. 13:35).

Our churches are not a social club. They do not exist as a opportunity to get business or make economic connections. We gather together as a community of God's family united by the blood of Christ. It is a community formed by the love of Christ and should be, at its root, ruled by that love being expressed from each of us to the other. We care when people hurt, rejoice when people succeed, care as people are wounded, grieve with those grieving, provide as people need, and more. We are not known by our buildings, but by our love for each other. The church is the people, not the building. This is the root of our life on earth until he comes!

HOME WORK

To recap, we are memorizing 1 John this year in the English Standard Version. That amounts to two verses a week. To be current, we need to have memorized 1 John 1:1-6. This week we add 1 John 1:7-8. We provide all six verses below for your help!

1John 1:1 That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— **2** the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— **3** that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. **4** And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

1:5 This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. **6** If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. **7** But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. **8** If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.