

LESSON TWO – 2nd Century Persecution and Defense of the Faith

Persecution in the 2nd Century

“Now I begin to be a disciple...Let fire and cross, flocks of beasts, broken bones, dismemberment, come upon me, so long as I attain to Jesus Christ.” – Ignatius of Antioch¹

Roman persecution of Christians began in the time of Roman emperor Nero but records in the 1st century of the details of the persecution are scarce. By the 2nd century records begin to give us a better view of what was involved in the persecutions and the Christian outlook on martyrdom.

- *Acts of the Martyrs*
- Seven letters of Ignatius of Antioch
- Correspondence of Pliny and Trajan

In 111 AD, Pliny the Younger was appointed governor of Bithynia, located on the northern shore of modern-day Turkey.

- Pliny had a profound respect for Roman law and tradition.
- Bithynia had a large Christian population and Pliny discovered that the pagan temples were almost deserted and the sellers of animal sacrifices had few buyers.
- When Pliny was sent a list of Christians, he began to make inquiries for he knew it was an illegal religion.
- If the Christians would renounce Christ, burn incense to the emperor, and pray to the gods, Pliny would release them. If they refused, they were executed.
- Pliny wrote to emperor Trajan for clarification on whether Christians should be punished for concrete crime or simply for naming the name of Christ.
- Trajan responded that Christians should not be sought out but if they were accused and refuse to recant, they should be punished.
- Those willing to recant would be pardoned and anonymous accusations were to be disregarded.

“What a necessarily confused sentence! It refuses to seek them out, as if they were innocent, and orders that they be punished if they are guilty. It pardons, and yet it is cruel. It ignores, and yet punishes. Why do you circumvent your own censure? If you condemn, why do you not inquire? And if you inquire, who do you also absolve?” - Tertullian²

- Trajan’s policy many have lacked logic but it did not lack political sense. Christians, by the mere fact of being a Christian, were not committing any crime against the state or society. Resources should not be used to seek them, but once accused, Christians had to face punishment or recant.
- Trajan’s policy was followed throughout the empire and long after his death. Into the early 3rd century, it was imperial policy not to seek out Christians but to punish them when they were brought before the authorities.

Clement of Rome

- Clement was a bishop of Rome at the close of the Apostolic era at the end of the 1st century.
- Best known for his letter to the church in Corinth typically dated around 96 AD.
- Origen and Eusebius both claimed that Clement of Rome was the Clement mentioned by Paul in Philippians 4:3, however, there are no records to confirm that.
- There is evidence that Clement studied under Peter and the other apostles.

The motivation for Clement's letter to the Corinthians was an internal dispute within the Corinthian church regarding church leadership. Clement encourages them to practice humility and to look to Jesus and His apostles as examples. The letter includes a call to repentance and an encouragement to pursue holiness. Clement's letter makes reference to several canonical books including Genesis, Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, 1 Corinthians, and Philippians. Gospel citations from both Matthew and Luke are present as well.³

Moreover, in 1 Clement we possibly find one of the earliest patristic references to the biblical doctrine of justification through faith alone: "And we, too, being called by His will in Christ Jesus, are not justified by ourselves, nor by our own wisdom, or understanding, or godliness, or works which we have wrought in holiness of heart; but by that faith through which, from the beginning, Almighty God has justified all men; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen" (1 Clement, 32)⁴

- Early sources indicate Clement died a natural death but later tradition holds that he was martyred by Trajan by being tied to an anchor and thrown in the sea.

Ignatius of Antioch

- Around 107 AD, Ignatius, the elderly bishop of Antioch, was condemned to death by imperial authorities.
- On his way to martyrdom, Ignatius wrote seven letters that are among the most valuable documents informing us of early Christianity.
- Born somewhere between 30 and 35 AD, Ignatius was well over seventy when he was martyred.
- Nothing is known of the arrest or trial of Ignatius.
- During his travel to Rome to be executed, Ignatius wrote seven letters to churches in Ephesus, Magnesia, Tralles, Rome, Philadelphia, and Smyrna, and one final letter to Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna.

Somehow Ignatius heard that the Christians in Rome were considering a plan to free him from death but he did not look favorably on this. He was ready to seal his witness in blood, and any move on the part of the Christians in Rome to save him would have been an obstacle to this goal. He wrote to them, "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." As Ignatius goes on to say, his purpose is to be an imitator of the passion of his God, Jesus Christ. As he faces ultimate sacrifice, Ignatius

believes that he begins to be a disciple; and therefore all that he wants from Christians in Rome is that they pray, not that he be freed, but that he may have the strength to face every trial,...”so that I may be called a Christian, but also as such....My love is crucified....I no longer savor corruptible food...but wish to taste the bread of God, which is the flesh of Jesus Christ...and his blood I wish to drink, which is an immortal drink....When I suffer, I shall be free in Jesus Christ, and with him shall rise again in freedom...I am God’s wheat, to be ground by the teeth of beasts, so that I may be offered as pure bread of Christ.” And the reason why Ignatius is willing to face death with such courage is that he will thereby become a witness: “If you remain silent about me, I shall become a word of God. But if you allow yourselves to be swayed by the love in which you hold my flesh, I shall again be no more than a human voice.”⁵

- Ignatius was the first to speak of the “catholic church,” referring to the universal church comprised of all local congregations.
- The exact date and details of Ignatius’s death are unknown. Tradition tells us he was martyred shortly after arriving in Rome by being devoured by wild beasts.

Polycarp

- Although very little is known of Ignatius’s martyrdom, we have much more information on the martyrdom of his younger friend, Polycarp.
- After the courageous death of another Christian in Antioch the mob began to call for Polycarp.
- Polycarp originally tried to flee on the advice of his flock but after multiple moves to evade the authorities he decided his arrest was the will of God and patiently waited to be arrested.
- Despite the prosecutors attempts to convince Polycarp to recant due to Polycarp’s advanced age, he stood his ground.
- The judge promised to free him if he would just swear by the emperor and curse Christ. Polycarp replied, “**For 86 years I have served Him, and He has done me no evil. How could I curse my King, who saved me?**”⁶

“**Lord Sovereign God...I thank you that 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.**”⁷

Persecution Under Marcus Aurelius

- Marcus Aurelius became emperor of Rome in 161 AD.
- Left behind a collection of *Meditations*, written for his own private use, and are literary masterpieces of the time.

“**Think constantly, both as a Roman and as a man, to do the task before you with perfect and simply dignity, and with kindness, freedom, and justice. Try to forget everything else. And you will be able to do so if you undertake every action in your life as if it were the last,**

leaving aside all negligence and opposition of passion to the dictates of reason, and leaving aside also all hypocrisy, egotism, and rebelliousness against your own lot.”⁸

- Marcus Aurelius was a superstitious man who frequently sought out advice from seers.
- During the early years of his reign the empire was plagued with a string of floods, invasions, epidemics and other disasters. These were soon blamed on Christians for the wrath of the gods upon the empire.
- It is unknown whether the emperor believed that but he fully supported the persecution of Christians and favored revival of the old religion.
- Justin Martyr, perhaps the best Christian scholar of that time, was martyred under Marcus Aurelius.
- Marcus Aurelius died in 180 AD and was succeeded by Commodus, who had already been ruling jointly with Marcus for eight years.
- After the death of Commodus, the empire was plunged into civil war and Christians were largely ignored.
- In 193 AD, Septimius Severus became emperor. In the early years of his reign Christians lived in relative peace but his name would soon be added to the list of emperors that persecuted Christians.

Defense of the Faith

- In the 2nd century and into the 3rd century, there was no systematic persecution of Christians.
- It was illegal to be a Christian but Christians were not sought out by the authorities. Persecution largely depended on local circumstances and on the goodwill of the neighbors.
- Christians felt the need to refute rumors about their practices. Even if their arguments did not gain converts, they believed that something could be gained from dispelling false reports.
- This was the task of Christian writers and thinkers, called apologists. Some of their arguments have been used for centuries.
- Most of the negative rumors were centered on Christian practices. Christians gathered weekly for what they called “love feasts.” This was done in private homes and only baptized members were admitted. Christians also called each other brother and sister, even their spouses. Due to these practices the pagans believed the Christians were having orgies, where they would eat and drink to excess and indulge in their fleshly lusts including incest.
- Communion gave rise to vicious rumors. Pagans believed that Christians would bake a human baby in a loaf of bread and they would all join in eating this together.
- These rumors were easy to refute since Christians followed principles of conduct incompatible with such wild notions.
- What was more difficult to dispute was that Christianity was intellectually wanting. Christians were considered ignorant whose doctrines were foolish and self-contradicting.

The common attitude among the cultured was that Christians were uneducated, despicable rabble.

- Most Christians were among the common people and the cultured were offended that Christians claimed to have a truth that was hidden from the sophisticated.
- Christians were considered barbarians whose religion was derived from the Jews, who were considered a primitive people.
- Christians preached and believed that they will rise again after death. To the pagans this made no sense. Why would one want to leave a life that is certain for an afterlife that is uncertain. The doctrine of the final resurrection of all mankind was the final nail in the coffin for the pagans who could not conceive how any god could accomplish such a task.
- Possibly the earliest apology to survive is the *Epistle to Diognetus*. This writing presents a picture of early Christian life. The writer and exact date of this writing is unknown.
- Aristides wrote an apology around 130 AD. It was originally written in Greek but the Syriac translation is better.
- Tatian was a pagan born in east Syria, who converted during a journey to Rome. Tatian composed a harmony of the four Gospels in Syriac. His *Oration Against the Greeks* is principally a blast against Greek culture.
- Athenagoras of Athens writings adapts the model of Middle Platonist philosophy. He argues for the superiority of Christian morals and the Christian view of God over pagan descriptions of their gods. Athenagoras also gave an early formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity.
- Theophilus, a bishop in Antioch, wrote *To Autolytus*, comprised of three books in about 180 AD. He spoke frequently of the Logos but avoided mentioning Jesus Christ. He produced a chronological argument for the antiquity of the Jewish Scriptures and offered an allegorical reading of Genesis creation account.

Justin Martyr (Martyr is not Justin's last name, more of title given to him)

- The most influential apologist of the 2nd century was Justin. There survives from Justin two apologies, the *Dialogue with Trypho*, and an account of his trial in the *Acts of Justin*.
- Justin was born in Samaria but he was neither a Samaritan or a Jew. Justin studied under a Stoic, an Aristotelian, a Pythagorean, and a Platonist, until he met an old man, who in Socratic method raised questions that only a Christian philosophy could answer. Justin came to regard Christianity as the true philosophy.
- Justin traveled to Rome where he taught Christian doctrine in a private school. Another philosopher named Crescens brought charges against Justin and he was executed in 167 AD.
- Justin fought his apologetic battles on four fronts, against pagans intellectuals, the state, Jews and Christian heretics. He responded to charges of incest, cannibalism, atheism and being an uneducated group.
- Justin gives a lot of attention to demons which he identifies as pagan gods.
- In order to banish the secrecy around Christian gatherings, Justin explained what was involved in baptism and Sunday worship.

- In explaining the relationship between Christ and God, Justin gives expression to the doctrine of the Logos.
- *The Dialogue of Trypho* is useful for showing the questions that were at issue between the Jews and the Christians. The dialogue was a common literary form, so we should not assume it was an actual transcript of a discussion. Justin's knowledge of Judaism however, does show that he must have had many conversations with Jews.
- In dealing with pagan philosophy, Justin claimed several points of contact between it and Christianity.
- The best philosophers spoke of a supreme being from which every other being derives existence. Plato and Socrates affirmed life beyond physical death.
- In contrast to the philosophers, Christian hope is not based on immortality of the soul, but rather the final resurrection.
- For Justin, explaining the similarities between the philosophers and Christianity, was found in the doctrine of the Logos.

The Logos Doctrine

- Logos is a Greek word that means both, "word," and "reason." The Gospel of John affirms that in Jesus, the Logos or Word was made flesh. According to Justin, what happened in the incarnation is that the underlying reason behind the universe, the Logos, has come in the flesh.
- According to the book of John, this Logos is "the true light that enlightens" everyone. This means that before the incarnation, He is the source of all true knowledge. Paul had already said in I Corinthians 10:1-4, that the ancient Hebrew's faith rested on none other than Christ, who had been revealed to them before the incarnation.
- Justin's use of the Logos provided a basic framework where Christians could claim whatever they wished from the rich well of classical culture.
- Justin's theological mistakes were that he took a Greek philosophical idea of God who is so transcendent from created reality that He needs an intermediary, His Word, to mediate between Himself and creation.

Conclusion

- When accused of being atheists, because they had no visible gods, Christians replied that many of the philosophers and poets would have also been atheists. They would quote ancient writers who affirmed the gods were human inventions and that their vices were worse than those of their worshippers.
- Another common argument against idols was that they had to be protected from thieves since they were made of gold, silver and precious jewels. How can a god that must be protected by men have any power?
- When it came to the final resurrection, the apologists pointed to the omnipotence of God. If God created everything out of nothing, why would it be impossible for this same God to create bodies anew.
- Justin wrote at length about Christian teaching and practice to show that the accusations of Christian immorality was simply not true.

- Christians maintained that although they would not worship the emperor, they were still loyal subjects willing to serve him.
- The writings of the apologists show the tension the early Christians lived in. These tensions are admirably expressed in the *Address to Diognetus*:

“Christians are no different from the rest in their nationality, language or customs...They live in their own countries, but as sojourners. They fulfill all their duties as citizens but they suffer as foreigners. They find their homeland wherever they are, but their homeland is not in any one place....They are in the flesh but do not live according to the flesh. They live on earth, but are citizens of heaven. They obey all laws, but they live at a level higher than that required by law. They love all, but all persecute them.”⁹

- Jesus, Himself promised that in this earthly life we would face persecution for His name’s sake.
- The apostles faced persecution and most of them died for their faith. Persecution in this life is to be expected in a world that is hostile to Christianity.

“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 this world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.” – John 15:18-19

“I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart I have overcome the world.” – John 16:33

“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.” – James 1:2-3

¹ The Story of Christianity, Volume One, Gonzalez, Justo, L., page 49

² The Story of Christianity, Volume One, Gonzalez, Justo, L., page 51

³ <https://www.gotquestions.org/Clement-of-Rome.html>

⁴ <https://www.gotquestions.org/Clement-of-Rome.html>

⁵ The Story of Christianity, Volume One, Gonzalez, Justo, L., page 53

⁶ The Story of Christianity, Volume One, Gonzalez, Justo, L., page 54

⁷ The Story of Christianity, Volume One, Gonzalez, Justo, L., page 54

⁸ The Story of Christianity, Volume One, Gonzalez, Justo, L., page 55

⁹ The Story of Christianity, Volume One, Gonzalez, Justo, L., page 68