

Faith through the Flames

Review: Why Study the History of the Ancient Church?

- The years AD 100-500 were characterized by:
 - 1) the physical threat of persecution,
 - 2) extraordinary evangelistic expansion, *and*
 - 3) the theological threat of heresies.
- This period laid the foundation of the church and set the pattern for its future:
 - Canon: The 27 authentic books of the New Testament were gathered and recognized.
 - Controversies: the Trinity, the person of Christ, and the integrity of the church and its sacraments.
 - Creeds: The church began writing and publishing summary statements of faith.
 - Episcopacy: The church developed a leadership model based on a hierarchy of bishops.
- The story of this period unfolds in 3 phases:
 - 1) Easter to the End of the Apostles (AD 30-100)
 - 2) Persecution to Tolerance (AD 100-313)
 - 3) Toleration to “Triumph” (AD 313-476)

Background: Why Did the Romans Persecute Christians?

- In the ancient world, religion was absolutely not a private affair:

Today, “religion” for most Westerners designates a detached area of life, a kind of private hobby for those who like that sort of thing, separated by definition (and in some countries by law) from politics and public life, from science and technology. In Paul’s day, “religion” meant almost exactly the opposite. The Latin word *religio* has to do with “binding” things together. Worship, prayer, sacrifice, and other public rituals were designed to hold the unseen inhabitants of a city (the gods and perhaps the ancestors) together with the visible ones, the living humans, thus providing a vital framework for ordinary life, for business, marriage, travel, and home life. (A distinction was made between *religio*, official and authorized observance, and *superstitio*, unauthorized and perhaps subversive practice.)¹
- Although for a time regarded as a subgroup within Judaism (Acts 18.12-16), eventually Christianity earned the label of “superstition,” and with that label came trouble:

Romans regarded a group as a *superstitio* if it was deemed strange, foreign or subversive... they conceived of religion as something that would serve and stabilize the social and political structure of the Roman Empire.... The Christian insistence on worshipping Christ alone.... was deemed to be a threat. Refusal to worship the gods, and to potentially invoke their wrath, was viewed as recklessly endangering the Roman people. For Christians to do so was viewed as a blatant disregard for the welfare of their fellow citizens... Christians were charged with “hatred of mankind.”²
- Moreover, Christianity’s appeal across traditional lines was nothing short of revolutionary:

Early Christianity chartered, a rather unprecedented course - its emergence allowed religious identity to be separate from cultural-ethnic identity. Unlike our modern world, “religion” was not viewed by the Romans as a personal, private affair, separate from their national identity as Roman citizens. On the contrary, religious observance was the duty of any good citizen of the empire. Cult and culture belonged together. Jews were allowed to abstain from the public cult of Rome precisely because they were viewed as a distinct national-ethnic group. Since Christians did not enjoy this status, they were viewed as simply insubordinate and disruptive to the prosperity and stability of the state.³

In the ancient Near East the idea of a single community *across the traditional boundaries of culture, gender, and ethnic and social groupings* was unheard of. Unthinkable, in fact. But there it was.⁴

¹ N.T. Wright, *Paul: A Biography* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2018), 22.

² Michael J. Kruger. *Christianity at the Crossroads* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 42-43.

³ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁴ Wright, *Paul*, 91.

Occasional and Regional Persecutions

- 64-68 In June of AD 64, a horrific fire gutted the city of Rome. In order to deflect rumors that he himself had ordered the fire, the Emperor Nero blamed the already suspect Christians:
 Before killing the Christians, Nero used them to amuse the people. Some were dressed in furs, to be killed by gods. Others were crucified. Still others were set on fire early in the night, so that they might illumine it... All of this aroused the mercy of the people... for it was clear that they were not being destroyed for the common good, but rather to satisfy the cruelty of one person.⁵
- 81-96 Emperor Domitian initiates persecutions of those who follow “Jewish practices,” which hit Christians as well, especially in Rome and Asia Minor. Written from Rome near the end of this period, *1st Clement* speaks of “the sudden and repeated misfortunes and reverses that have happened to us.” The persecutions mentioned in *Revelation* also date to this period.
- 112 Pliny, a provincial governor, writes to Emperor Trajan for advice on what to do with Christians. Trajan’s reply established a policy that remained intact for the next century:
 1) The government should not seek out Christians; their “crimes” are not worth it.
 2) But if a person is accused of being a Christian, then:
 a) If they will worship the Roman gods, they should be pardoned and released.
 b) If they refuse to worship the gods or renounce Christ, they should be punished.
 Several “apostolic fathers” (Ignatius, Polycarp, Justin) were martyred under this policy...

Official and Imperial Persecutions

- 249-251 To restore the ancient glory of the Empire, Emperor Decius believed he must restore ancient paganism. Those who refused to worship the old gods were enemies of the state. Decius made a law requiring all citizens to offer sacrifice to the gods and burn incense before a statue of the emperor. Those who obeyed received a certificate. Those without a certificate were treated like criminals. Some Christians gave in and apostatized. Some bought false certificates and lied. Others refused to apostatize or lie and were martyred.
- 303-305 The final and “Great Persecution” came under Emperor Diocletian. At this point, roughly 10% of the Empire was Christian – including the emperor’s wife, daughter, and many officials. Problems began when some Christians refused to join the army. Diocletian forbid Christians from government jobs, and ordered all Christian buildings and books be destroyed. Christians who refused to hand over their books were tortured and executed. Things got even worse after there was a fire in the imperial palace – twice! The Christians were blamed, church leaders were arrested, and all Christians were ordered to sacrifice to the gods. Some apostatized. Some took their books and hid. Others escaped to Persia.

The End of Persecution

- 305 Diocletian grew sick and retired. Imperial leadership unclear, persecution continued in some places.
- 311 One of the worst persecutors, Galerius, grew sick. He issued an edict that ended persecution in his territory and ordered Christians to pray for him.
- 312 Future emperor Constantine claimed to see a vision where he was promised victory if he placed a Christian *labarum* (combined chi-rho) on his army’s shields. He did, and he won.
- 313 Emperor Constantine ended the persecution of Christians throughout the Roman Empire.

“Must all men be martyrs? ...I reply, it is not always in one way that Satan persecutes the servants of Christ. But yet it is absolutely unavoidable that all of them shall have the world for their enemy in some form or other...” (John Calvin)

⁵ Tacitus, *Annals*, 15.44. Cited in Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, vol. 1, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2010), 43-44.