

Lesson 3
The Early Church To
Early Reformation

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Class Schedule

- **The Ancient Church (100 – 313 A.D.)**
- 1. Historical Backgrounds and the World of the Early Church
- 2. The Church in Jerusalem and the Mission to the Gentiles
- 3. **1st & 2nd Century Conflicts with the State**
- 4. Early Apologists
- 5. Defining the Faith
- 6. Christian Life

1st & 2nd Century Conflicts with the State

Lesson 3

“I know that you have but little power,
and yet you have kept my word and
have not denied my name”

- Revelation 3: 8

The New Jewish Sect

New Jewish Sect

- Early Christians did not believe that they were following a new religion.
- The early Christian message to the Jews was not that they should abandon their Jewishness, but rather they should become participants in the promises made to Abraham and his decedents.
- Gentiles were invited to become children of Abraham by faith, since they could not be so by flesh.
- Judaism had held that through the advent of the Messiah all nations would be brought to Zion.

New Jewish Sect

- Jews who rejected Christianity did not see the founding of a new religion, but rather a heretical sect within Judaism.
- 1st century Judaism included many divergent sects & opinions.
- It was easy to see Christians as a Jewish sect going from town to town tempting good Jews to become heretics.
- This thinking reinforced the common idea that Judea had lost its independence & was living under the heavy hand of Roman rule due to Jews not being faithful to the traditions of their ancestors.

New Jewish Sect

- In most of the NT it was Jews persecuting Christians, who in turn tried to find refuge in Roman authorities. (Acts 18: 14 – 15)
- As long as there was order Romans preferred to stay out of such matters. When disorder broke out the Romans were quick to intervene to restore calm & punish the disorderly.
- Jews, Christians & Romans were in agreement that what was taking place was just another disagreement among the Jews.

Identity Change

- As the church gained more Gentile converts the distinction between Jews & Christians became clearer.
- As Jewish nationalism increased, and eventual rebellion occurred against Rome (66 A.D.), Christians (particularly Gentiles) began to put as much distance as possible between that movement and themselves.
- This new consciousness of Christianity as a separate religion was the root of 2 ½ centuries of persecution by the Roman Empire. From the time of Nero until Constantine.

The Crux of the Matter

- Jews were normally exempt for the expectation that they worship the Emperor & other Roman gods. Romans had dealt with Jews long enough to understand that their refusal to worship was not an act of rebellion, but a ancient religious belief.
- Once it became clear that not all Christians were Jews, and that this new religion was spreading through the Empire, the authorities would demand that Christians, like any other subject of the Empire, show their loyalty by worshiping the Emperor.

Something to Consider

- When Christianity became the official religion of the majority, there were those who, on the basis of what the NT says about the opposition of Judaism to Christianity, and without any regard for the different historical circumstances, declared the Jews to be a rejected race, persecuted them and even massacred them.
- One has to wonder what Paul, who claimed he was being persecuted for “the hope of Israel” would have thought about this matter?

1st Century Persecution

Persecution Under Nero

- Nero reached the throne in Oct 54 A.D. The 1st few years went relatively well.
- By yr. 10 he was despised by the general population, and especially by the poets & artist, of whom he claimed to be one. By this time it was widely rumored he was mentally unbalanced.
- On June 18th, 64 a fire broke out in Rome that consumed 10 of the 14 sections of the city.
- Rumor arose that the mentally unhinged emperor had the fires set so he could rebuild Rome to his own desires.

Persecution Under Nero

- Nero may have been mad, but he was politically astute.
- Two of the areas that had not burned held many Jewish & Christian residents. Therefore, Nero decided to blame the Christians.

One Citizen's View of the Persecution Under Nero

- Tacitus – a contemporary citizen of Rome
- “In spite of every human effort, of the emperor’s largesse, and of the sacrifices made to the gods, nothing sufficed to allay suspicion nor to destroy the opinion that the fire had been ordered.
- Therefore, in order to destroy this rumor, Nero blamed the Christians, who are hated for their abominations, and punished them with refined cruelty.
- Christ, from who they take their name, was executed by Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius. Stopped for a moment, this evil superstition reappeared, not only in Judea, where was the root of the evil, but also in Rome, where all things sordid & abominable from every corner of the world come together.
- Thus, first those who confessed (that they were 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 mankind.”

One Citizen's View of the Persecution Under Nero

- Tacitus' remarks are one of the most ancient indications of how pagans viewed Christians.
- 1. the fire was not set by Christians
- 2. he did not approve of Nero's cruelty
- 3. he did believe a great deal about what was being said about the "abominations" of Christians and their "hatred of humankind". He did not detail what the abominations were.
- The last charge makes sense when you consider all social activities – theater, army, classic literature, sports – were entwined with pagan worship that Christians often felt the need to abstain from.

One Citizen's View of the Persecution Under Nero

- Tacitus continues:
- “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, and in the circus he himself became a spectacle, for he mingled with the people dressed as a charioteer, or he rode around in his chariot.
- All of this aroused the mercy of the people, even against these culprits who deserved an exemplary punishment, for it was clear that they were not being destroyed for the common good, but rather to satisfy the cruelty of one person.”

One Citizen's View of the Persecution Under Nero

- It is obvious that Tacitus showed no love for Christians, while admitting the punishment was unjust, and was only to satisfy the sick whims of Nero.
- These lines are one of few surviving pagan testimonies of the tortures to which early martyrs were subjected.
- Peter & Paul were likely both among Nero's purge.

Persecution Under Nero

- The historical records show no mention of persecution outside the city of Rome at this time.
- Although charged with arson, Christians were soon being persecuted for merely being Christian, and for all the supposed abominations connected with that name.
- In 68 Nero was killed by a rebellion supported by the Senate. Nero was the last of the Augustus dynasty.
- Year 69 was called the Year of Four Emperors. This was during the height of the 1st Jewish Revolt.
- During the reign of Vespasian & his son Titus (69 – 81) Christians were generally ignored by the authorities.

Persecution Under Domitian

- Domitian (81 to 96 A.D.) decided all Jews should remit to the imperial coffers the annual offering they once had sent to Jerusalem for the support of the Temple.
- Domitian enacted strict laws against Judaism. Since there was still an unclear distinction, in the pagan mind, between Jews & Christians both were persecuted.
- Since Christians worshipped an invisible God, pagans often declared them to be atheist.
- It does not appear Christian persecution occurred outside of Rome & Asia Minor. Asia Minor had been the center of the imperial cult since the time of Augustus. The religious-political conflict between the ruling class & the church came to the forefront there.
- The persecution in Asia Minor coincides with the time it is thought that John wrote the book of Revelation.
- Just as persecution broke out Domitian's reign was coming to an end. He was murdered in his own palace.
- After Domitian's fall no authority seems to have take much notice of Christians. Therefore, they lived in a few years of relative peace.

2nd Century Persecution

2nd Century Persecution

- Throughout the 1st century details of persecutions are scarce. During the 2nd century records begin to afford a clearer view of the issues involved in the persecutions, and of the attitudes of Christians toward martyrdom.
- Also 2nd century records offer an additional glimpse into the attitude of Roman authorities.

Plinty & Trajan

- In 111 Plinty the Younger was appointed governor of Bithynia, on the northern shore of modern day Turkey. Records indicate Plinty was a just man with a profound respect for Roman law & traditions.
- There were many Christians in the area of Bithynia. When he arrived, Plinty found pagan temples were almost deserted, and that sellers of animals for sacrifice had few buyers.
- Soon after his arrival someone sent the governor a list of Christians. Plinty made inquiries because he knew this religion was illegal.



Plinty & Trajan

- The governor had the accused brought before him. Some declared their innocence, & some declared they were once followers but had changed their minds. Some confessed their faith.
- Plinty only asked that they:
 - 1. Pray to the gods
 - 2. Burn incense before the image of the Emperor
 - 3. Cruse Christ
- Any of these three he was told a true Christian would never do.
- After being threatened with death those who would not recant was offered 3 opportunities to do so. There after they were executed or if a Roman citizen sent to Roman for trial; not so much for being a Christian but for being obstinate before the authority of Rome.

Plinty & Trajan

- Plinty being a just man, felt obliged to find out what crimes, beside sheer obstinacy, Christians had committed. All he could find out was:
- Christians gathered before dawn to sing to Christ “as to the gods;” and joined in an oath not to commit theft, adultery, or any such sins. They also used to gather for a common meal, but had stopped this practice when the authorities had outlawed secret meetings.
- Unsure of what course to follow Plinty wrote Emperor Trajan (98 – 117) for instruction.

Trajan's Response

- The nature of the crime is such that the state should not waste time seeking them out.
- If they are accused & refuse to recant, they should be punished.
- Those willing to worship the gods should be pardoned without further inquiries.
- Anonymous accusations should be disregarded, for this is a bad legal precedent.
- One hundred years later Trajan's edit was still being enforced.

Trajan's Response

- Trajan's response might not appear logical from a legal precedent, but it made complete political sense:
- Christians, by the mere fact of being so, were not committing any crime against society or against the state. Therefore, the resources of the state should not be wasted seeking them out.
- But, once before the authorities Christians had to be forced to worship the gods, or face punishment.
- Christians were not punished for crimes committed before being brought to trial, but for what seemed to be their contempt for Roman courts.
- They must be punished because the dignity of the court required it, and secondly, because in refusing to worship the Emperor they seemed to be denying his right to rule. Throughout the 2nd century & into the 3rd this ruling stood as imperial policy.

Some Famous Martyrs

- **Ignatius Bishop of Antioch** (107 A.D.) –
- well over 70 years of age
- a celebration of a military victory was being planned in Rome & Ignatius was sent to the capital so that his death might provide entertainment for the people.
- During his trip he wrote seven letters that became among the most valuable documents informing us of early Christianity. (*Seven Letters of Ignatius*)
- One of these letters was sent to a young man **Polycarp** who was martyred in 155 A.D. (*Martyrdom of Polycarp*)
- **Felicitas & her seven sons**
- **Justin** – perhaps the best Christian scholar of the time – founded a school of Christian teaching in Rome – martyred in Rome

Emperor Marcus Aurelius

- Marcus Aurelius (161 – 180 A.D.) was a refined & enlightened man. He left behind a collection of *Meditations*, written for his private use, which were literary masterpieces of the time.
- He was an avid persecutor of Christians because he saw them as flaunting Roman law & influencing citizens to move away from the old ways.
- His only reference to Christianity in his *Meditations*; the emperor praises those souls who are ready to abandon their bodies when the time comes, rather than cling to life.
- He then goes on to say that this attitude is praiseworthy only when it is the outcome of reason, “and not of obstinacy, as is the case with Christians.”
- Stoic philosophy permitted suicide in certain cases, but Romans saw Christians as being motivated by blind fanaticism.

Emperor Commodus

- Commodus (180- 192 A.D.), son of Aurelius, co-shared the throne with his father the last 8 years of his father's reign.
- Commodus did not issue any edicts against persecution, but he did not seek to enforce his father's strong commitments. The number of martyrs during his reign was relatively low.

Final Thoughts

- During the entire 2nd century Christians were in a precarious position.
- They were not constantly persecuted. Sometimes they were persecuted in some areas of the Empire, and not in others.
- In contrast with much of what we have often been told, it was not usually the worst emperors, it was sometimes some of the best, who persecuted Christians.
- A Christian's chances of being persecuted had more to do with his/her relationship with their neighbor than who was in authority at this time.

