

# Persecuted Church

## Two: The Persecuted Church (AD 100—313)

From the completion of the New Testament to the Edict of Constantine.

This sets forth the period when the church was crushed beneath the iron heel of pagan Rome, yet it never gave out such sweet fragrance to God as in those two centuries of almost constant martyrdom. The Edict of Constantine was an official decree that ended the killing of Christians in the Roman Empire. Constantine will be further discussed in the Imperial Church Period.

We have record of events of the first church period from the Bible, which we believe is inspired. We do not have biblical record for any other church period. This means that not all accounts that we will read are necessarily true. Two people can witness the same event and yet give completely different accounts of it. History is complicated because the sources may or may not be true. There is a saying, "history is written by the victors." This is because those that lost the battle were gone, and they were not able to write their own account of what happened.

## Persecution

This was an intense period of persecution of the church. Those who weren't killed were forced into hiding and endured poverty and hardship.

Jesus foretold of the suffering of this period. Jesus encourages the saints not to fear. This is a prophecy of the suffering that was to come to the church.

Many were imprisoned for the sake of the Gospel during this period. It became against the Roman law to be a Christian.

In AD 303 the Emperor Diocletian began the tenth and fiercest persecution of Christians that is called "The Great Persecution." This was an attempt to remove Christianity from the face of the earth. It is said that Diocletian erected a pillar inscribed, "In honor of the extirpation of the Christian superstition." Many Christians were burned alive for their testimony. Christians were eaten by wild beasts in the arena.

## Causes of imperial persecutions

Heathen worship was hospitable to new gods while Christianity was exclusive to the worship of the one true God

New gods were accepted by the heathen culture of Rome. Christians could not condone worship of false gods and would not accept the way of the heathen.

Idol worship was interwoven with life

Images stood in many houses to receive adoration. Sacrifices were made to gods at festivals. Images were worshiped at civil ceremonies. Christians did not practice this offering, so they did not fit in with society. Because Christians did not participate in the public pagan worship ceremonies, many people did not think that they worshiped at all and that they were atheists.

## Emperor worship

Christians would not worship the emperor. Christians spoke of another "king." Christians were looked upon as being disloyal and plotters of a revolution.

## Judaism had been an allowed religion in the Roman Empire

In the first century Christians had been considered a sect of Judaism, an allowed religion. After the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, Christianity stood alone with no laws to protect them.

## Secret meetings

The Christians started to meet in secret to protect themselves from persecution. The secret meetings of Christians aroused suspicion. They were accused of meeting in secret to plan an overthrow of the Empire. Because of the Lord's Supper and talk about eating the body of Christ, some people thought that they were cannibals.

## Equality in the church

Christians looked upon all men as equal, thus destroying the social order of the nobles. This went against the order of Roman society.

## Business interests

Christianity meant an end to the profitable business of making idols. The craftsmen supported the persecution of the Christians (Acts 19:23—28).

## Prominent Martyrs and leaders of the Persecuted Church

### Ignatius

Ignatius was bishop of Antioch in Syria. He had been a pupil of the Apostle John.

Ignatius was thrown to the wild beasts in the Coliseum. Standing in the arena as the lions approached him, Ignatius prayed, "I thank Thee O Lord, that Thou hast vouchsafed thus to honor me. I am God's grain, to be Ground between the teeth of wild beasts, so that I may become a holy loaf for the Lord."

### Justin Martyr

Justin Martyr was a philosopher who became a Christian after meeting an elderly man who explained how Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecies. He was one of the first apologists, which is someone who uses reason and logic to defend his faith. He wrote several books which are still in existence that give us much information about this period. One of his prominent works is *Dialogue with Trypho*, a treatise refuting the Ebionites (Rev. 2:9).

He once wrote, "You can kill us, but cannot do us any real harm." He was beheaded in Rome in AD 165. His last words were, "I am a Christian, having been freed by Christ, and by the grace of Christ, I partake of the same hope."

## Polycarp

Polycarp was bishop of Smyrna at Asia Minor. He was taught as a youth by the Apostle John. When the police came to arrest him, he treated them as guests. He fed them and asked for an hour to pray, but he took two hours.

They brought Polycarp to the proconsul, who threatened to burn him alive with fire if he would not deny Christ. Polycarp answered, "Eighty and six years have I served Christ, and He has done me no wrong; how then can I blaspheme my King who has saved me? You threaten the fire that burns for an hour and then is quenched; but you know not of the fire of the judgment to come, and not of the fire of the eternal punishment. Bring what you will."

The proconsul pleaded with him to say, "Away with the atheists!" (meaning the Christians), so that they could let him go free. Polycarp turned to the crowd that was watching and motioned to them while saying, "Away with the atheists!" Because he would not recant his Christian beliefs, he was burned alive in Smyrna in AD 155. Polycarp was the last link to the Apostolic Church.

## Ireneus

Ireneus was a student of Polycarp. He became bishop of Lyons (in Gaul) in AD 177. He stressed the fundamental Christian doctrines which were facing opposition from the Gnostics. The Gnostics believed in "secret knowledge" that only some believers would receive, but Ireneus reminded them that the Apostles taught in the open and not in secret. Some of his writings still survive today.

## Origen (AD 185—254)

Origen was a humanist, which means that he read from secular sources, such as the Greek philosophers, and applied their ideas to religious thinking.

He believed that there were three levels of biblical meaning: literal, moral, and allegorical.

## Tertullian (AD 150—229)

Tertullian said "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" He was saying that the ideas of the philosophers (Athens) could not add anything to the doctrine of Christianity (Jerusalem). This was an attack against the humanists.

He believed that persecution came from God. He thought it was a tool used to separate the true believers from the false ones.

## Simeon

Simeon was James' successor as head of the Jerusalem church. He was crucified by order of the Roman governor of Palestine in AD 107 during Trajan's reign.

## Blandina

Blandina was a Christian slave girl who was tortured from morning until night declared, "I am a Christian, and no evil is committed among us."

## Perpetua and Felicitas

A noble lady in Carthage, Perpetua, and her slave, Felicitas, were killed by wild beasts in AD 203.

# Formation of the New Testament Canon

The word *canon* means "a rod, rule or measuring device."

Refers to the Biblical books that were judged to be of divine origin (*inspired* means "God breathed") and included as part of the Bible.

No precise date can be given for the full recognition of the New Testament Canon, but it cannot be placed earlier than AD 300.

## False teaching arose during this period

### Gnostics

Gnostics taught that people could be saved by secret knowledge. They get their name from *Gnosis*, which is a Greek word for "knowledge." They believed that salvation was not freedom from sin, but it was freedom from ignorance.

They believed that Jehovah was an evil god who created this world to trap the souls of humans. To them, the natural world was evil, and so the souls of humans must escape it by this secret knowledge. This knowledge could not come from this world, but their way to receive it was through asceticism (denying the self). They would not share this knowledge with people outside their group.

### Ebionites

Ebionites continued in the ceremonial Law of Moses, and were trying to influence others to do the same. They were Jews who thought that Gentiles should convert to Judaism. They rejected Paul as an apostle. They did not believe that Jesus was divine. The only writings that they used from the New Testament was chapters 3—28 of the Gospel of Matthew. They did not use the first two chapters of the Gospel, because they show Jesus as the Son of God.

### Marcionism

They were followers of Marcion. This group was like the opposite of the Ebionites. They wanted Christians to completely separate from anything pertaining to the Jews. Marcion created a canon of the Bible that had only the Gospel of Luke (who was a Gentile) and ten of Paul's letters (which were edited to remove references to Judaism). He did not like the God of the Old Testament.

### Montanism

They were followers of Montanus (AD 150—170s). This was a prophetic group that believed that the Holy Spirit spoke new things to the church. They believed that the members of the Trinity operated in different times:

- The Father worked in Old Testament times
- The Son worked in New Testament times
- The Holy Spirit works today

### Sabellianism (also known as Modalism)

This group believed that there was one God who had three positions (or forms): Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.