

1. THE EARLY CHURCH: PERSECUTION AND PERSEVERANCE

1. WHAT IS CHURCH HISTORY AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

(a) Core convictions

- God is sovereign over history
- History has a centre
- History has a goal
- History will bring conflict
- History will bring uncertainties and pain for the people of God

(b) Think: what will go wrong if a Christian or a church neglects church history?

(c) Reasons to study the past:

- by the Gospel we have been adopted into a family that spans races, cultures, borders and even time
- there is nothing new under the sun (Ecc 1:9)
- history should humble us and embolden us

(d) Some important caveats

- We are going to be VERY selective!
- BIG acknowledgements
 - Capitol Hill Baptist Church: "Core Seminars"
 - Garry Williams: "Church History Survey" (Oak Hill College; unpublished)

"...and on that day a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem; and they were scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria...Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word." (Acts 8:1,4)

"Let us, therefore, hold steadfastly and unceasingly to our hope and the guarantee of our righteousness, who is Christ Jesus, who bore our sins in his own body upon the tree, who committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth; instead, for our sakes he endured all things, in order that we might live in him. Let us, therefore, become imitators of his patient endurance, and if we should suffer for the sake of his name, let us glorify him. For this is the example he set for us in his own person, and this is what we have believed." (Polycarp, Letter to the Philippians)

2. THE WORLD OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY

- (a) Judaism
- (b) The Roman Empire
- (c) Greek Philosophy and religions

3. THE EXPANSION OF CHRISTIANITY

- (a) What happened?

Tertullian, writing c.150AD: “we have filled all that belongs to you – the cities, the fortresses, the free towns, the very camps, the palace, the senate, the forum. We leave [empty] only the [pagan] temples.”

- (b) Why did Christianity grow? In God’s providence conditions were ripe

- (c) Why did Christianity grow? Because the Gospel was attractive

- Christian charity held great appeal
- Christians valued all persons equally
- Christians valued all persons individually
- Christianity promised the power of good over evil
- Christianity promised deliverance from death, and eternal life
- The bold and faithful witness of the martyrs

- **Application for us:**
Would the watching world say this of us... and of the Gospel WE hold out?

4. PERSECUTIONS AND MARTYRDOM

(a) Apostolic persecution

Paul was imprisoned under Nero, then beheaded in Rome

James the brother of John was beheaded by Herod (Acts 12:2)

Thomas went as far as India where he was “slain with a dart” (arrow?)

Simon Peter was crucified (according to Jerome) upside down in Rome under Nero

Simon the Zealot preached throughout Africa, was also crucified

Mark founded the church in Egypt and was burned alive

Bartholomew preached in Armenia and “after divers persecutions, he was beaten down with staves, then crucified; and after being excoriated, was beheaded.”

Andrew evangelized in Ethiopia, was crucified

Matthew preached in Egypt and Ethiopia, until the king had him “run through with a spear”

Philip ministered in Greece, was “crucified and stoned to death”

James the brother of Jesus was beaten to death by Pharisees and Sadducees

John the apostle was exiled on the isle of Patmos, and later died of natural causes

(b) Nero’s persecution: what? why?

Tacitus: “To kill the rumors, Nero charged and tortured some people hated for their evil practices – the group popularly called “Christians.” The founder of this sect, Christus, had been put to death by the governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate, when Tiberius was emperor. “First those who confessed to being 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 humankind. 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.”

- Homestudy: read online why early Christians were despised. See <http://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1-300/why-early-christians-were-despised-11629610.html>
- **Application for us:**
From the very beginning Christian belief and practice rubbed up against the culture – and its emperors and its commentators. It will be the same for us.
- **Application for us:**
Don’t expect to be loved by your non-believing friends and neighbours. Early Christians were often hated by the ordinary folk around them.

(c) **Successive waves of persecution**

- 60s Nero
- 70 Destruction of Jerusalem and temple
- 90s Emperor Domitian demands worship as a god
- 98 Trajan begins lengthy campaign vs. the church
- 161-180 Marcus Aurelius' campaign of persecution
- 155 or 165 Martyrdom of Polycarp
- 197-212 Further persecutions, from Alexandria to Carthage to Rome

249-251 Climax of several years of persecution, in reign of Decius: all must sacrifice to Roman gods to receive *libelli* or certificate of safety

257-260 Valerian persecution

303 Diocletian persecution

313 Constantine

➤ **Application for us:**

The martyrs knew Christ, the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings (Philippians 3:10). The sufferings of Christ overflow.

➤ **Application for us:**

Don't romanticise martyrdom or forget your doctrine of sin.

➤ **Application for us:**

What does our culture require from us in order to get a "libelli" and stay safe? What will get us into trouble? Why might we cave in? How will we stand?

Pliny the Younger, to Trajan:

"This is the course that I have adopted. I ask them if they are Christians. If they admit it I repeat the question a second and a third time, threatening capital punishment. If they persist I sentence them to death, for their inflexible obstinacy should certainly be punished. Christians who are Roman citizens I reserved to be sent to Rome. I discharged those who were willing to curse Christ, a thing which, it is said, genuine Christians cannot be persuaded to do."

The martyrdom of Polycarp:

"For eighty-six years," replied Polycarp, "I have been his servant, and he has never done me wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?"

"I have wild beasts," said the proconsul. "I shall throw you to them, if you don't change your attitude."

"Call them," replied the old man.

"If you make light of the beasts," retorted the governor, "I'll have you destroyed by fire, unless you change your attitude."

Polycarp answered: "The fire you threaten burns for a time and is soon extinguished. There is a fire you know nothing about – the fire of the judgment to come and of eternal punishment, the fire reserved for the ungodly. But why do you hesitate? Do what you want..."

The proconsul was amazed, and sent the crier to stand in the middle of the arena and announce three times: "Polycarp has confessed that he is a Christian..." Then a shout went up from every throat that Polycarp must be burnt alive...

The rest followed in less time than it takes to describe. The crowds rushed to collect logs...When the pyre was ready...Polycarp prayed: "O Father of thy beloved and blessed Son, Jesus Christ, I bless thee for counting me worthy of this day and hour, that in the number of the martyrs I may partake of Christ's cup, to the resurrection of eternal life of both soul and body..."

When he had offered up the Amen and completed his prayer, the men in charge lit the fire, and a great flame shot up."