

## **1. The Early Church: Persecution and Perseverance**

### **1. What is Church History and why is it important?**

#### **(a) Core convictions**

We believe that:

- God is sovereign over history. He is in charge of everything. He is in charge of the events of history. There are no accidents. When the driver of the Archduke Ferdinand takes a wrong turning in Sarajevo in 1914... and just happens to drive past Gavrilo Princip who earlier that day had failed to kill... and thereby allowed him another successful attempt... and thereby began WW1... there are mysteries, but there are no accidents.
- History has a centre: the person and work of Jesus Christ – his incarnation, life, death and resurrection are the central events of all human history.
- History has a goal: all things are working to this end – that Jesus may hand the kingdom over to his Father.
- History will bring conflict – between Satan and the spiritual enemies of Christ... and the people of God.
- History will bring uncertainties and pain for the people of God, even as we know the glorious end.<sup>1</sup>

Church history is the MOST IMPORTANT type of history. It is a story that we are part of. It is story that we need to know.

Often we neglect the old – what C.S. Lewis called “chronological snobbery” – and worship the new and the shiny. Some of us, though, are guilty of a different kind of idolatry – a nostalgia for the past.

#### **(b) Think for a moment:**

What will go wrong if a Christian or a church neglects church history?

[Discuss if time permits]

Let me list a few serious problems:

- We imagine that the church is a free-floating entity which reinvents Christianity every Sunday.
- It's prone to being taken over by any powerful personality.
- It'll be ignorant, specifically, in matters of church government and ecclesiology.
- There'll be disunity over little and unimportant matters.
- The culture's values will be absorbed
- There'll be sloppy theology, weak foundations and heresy.

#### **(c) Here are some specific reasons why we should be students of the past:**

By the Gospel we have been adopted into a family that spans races, cultures, borders and even time. So it profits us to know our family history. For the sake of our encouragement. And also that we might know where we fit in: as a local church... as a denomination... where do we come from?

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Garry Williams, CH1.1 (Oak Hill, unpublished lecture)

Ecclesiastes reminds us “*there is nothing new under the sun*”. (Ecc 1:9) As we will undoubtedly see in this course many of the same disagreements and heresy will be repeated. They may be at different times and in different ways, but a student of history is better equipped to address these problems and provide clear responses.

History should humble us and embolden us. I pray this course serve as a source of humility for us as we remind ourselves that we do not exist in a bubble of our current circumstance, but can learn great things from the remembering the past. And I pray that we are encouraged by the boldness and sacrifice of our brothers and sisters now passed. May their examples serve as reminders of the Gospel.

**(d) Some important things for you to know...**

We are going to be VERY selective in what we cover!

And what I’m going to give you in this course is largely ripped off from other people! Let me make two acknowledgements: firstly, the church history seminar course from the wonderful Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington DC is giving me the guts of our course. Secondly, I’m also going to be relying heavily on Garry Williams church history survey which he taught me back at Oak Hill College a number of years ago.

As we begin, I’m going to PRAY for us, and then give us two short READINGS: one from the Bible, and one from the pen of a church leader named Polycarp:

“...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**

What was the world in which early Christianity lived and grew? What was the context into which it came?

**(a) Judaism**

Theologically, the first Christians saw themselves as followers of Jesus the Messiah. They were Jews. They weren’t doing something new. They believed the same Scriptures, and worshipped the same God – though they now knew who the Messiah was.

But, historically most Jews came to reject Jesus. The Christians left the synagogue. The church quite quickly became overwhelmingly Gentile in character.

For a time, Christianity existed in relative peace under Rome because of the official protection that was afforded to Judaism, since the new religion looked like a small sect within the older faith.

However, as we see in the book of Acts, "Followers of Jesus", as they were called ran into significant opposition with the Jewish establishment. And then the first major turning point in church history occurred in AD70 – with the destruction of Jerusalem (an event prophesied within the New Testament), which marked God's final judgement on the system of temple worship, and also drove Christians out from Judaism and began a new phase in the spread of the Gospel.

### **(b) The Roman Empire**

Jesus was born into a land governed by the Roman Empire. Through the first (0-99) and second (100-199) centuries AD, Roman emperors extended their rule over a vast realm that stretched from Britain to the Sahara, and from Spain to Iraq. The Empire ranged some 3,000 miles from east to west, about the length of the United States, and historians estimate that it contained about 50 million people. By the beginning of the second century, Rome was the lone world superpower, and was in the middle of a two hundred year stretch known as the *pax Romana*, the "Roman Peace" where there was little or no international warfare.

Though Rome had no external rivals, it did have internal issues. Christ was born into a Roman Empire experiencing considerable turmoil. Local rebellions almost continually broke out against Roman rule, particularly among the Jews. Always vigilant to maintain their authority, Roman leaders kept a constant watch for threats to their control.

The Empire's official state religion worshipped an evolving pantheon of capricious deities who supposedly governed the forces of nature. When it would conquer a new land, Rome habitually incorporated the local gods into its imperial religion. As the empire grew in authority and prominence, the official cult became worship of the emperor himself. The goal of all religious devotion, in the eyes of Roman authorities, was to maintain civic unity and to attain divine favor. More on that in a couple of minutes.

### **(c) Greek Philosophy and religions**

Additionally, new philosophies and schools of thought contributed to a popular religious atmosphere that had not been seen in the Empire for some time. Many religions besides Christianity started, and usually ended, during this period. Hellenistic philosophies and "Mystery religions," as they were called, were widespread in the 3rd century among those who were searching for answers that were more intellectually and spiritually satisfying than the official cults could offer.

## **3. Expansion of Christianity**

### **(a) What happened?**

The Roman Empire was the setting for most of the expansion of Christianity. We see in the Book of Acts the Christian Gospel spreading from Jerusalem outward throughout the Eastern Mediterranean and ending up at the end of the book in Rome in the early 60s AD.

One hundred years later, in roughly 150 AD, we have reports of Christians scattered throughout the Empire, including in every Roman Province in the Eastern part of the Mediterranean, all across North Africa, and even reaching up into modern day France. Christianity had also spread beyond the Empire into India, and perhaps even as far south as Ethiopia. **[See maps]**

One intrepid writer could even write to the Emperor in 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."*<sup>2</sup>

People from all walks of life embraced the new faith. Most early Christians lived in urban areas, and most were middle-class, though people from lower and upper classes believed as well. Many were of a Hellenized Jewish background, though converts came from all manner of ethnic and religious origins.

### **(b) Why did Christianity grow? In God's providence conditions were ripe**

The message of Jesus Christ death and resurrection came at a time when conditions were ripe for its rapid spread and assimilation into Roman culture. Here we see the sovereign hand of God, working history to His own ends:

- With the conquests of Alexander the Great, Greek had become the unifying language of the Mediterranean. Barriers of language, then, did not exist, and the message of Christ moved rapidly by word of mouth and written literature.
- Not only that, but the Jews had been dispersed throughout the empire. We find Paul going straight to the Jewish synagogues in every city he visited, to proclaim the message of the risen Christ.
- The infrastructure of the empire was unprecedented. A system of roads crisscrossed the land [250k miles of Roman Roads; Josephus records a ship that could carry 600 passengers], and the government protected travelers from bandits and other perils. The Empire had carved out extensive trade routes inside its borders and with other civilizations; these proved a useful inlet into Europe and Asia.
- Quite apart from its intentions, even Rome's periodic persecutions of the Christians often aided the spread of the Gospel. As we read in Acts 8:1-4, when the Jewish persecution broke out the Christians in Jerusalem were scattered abroad throughout the region, taking the news of Christ with them.

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

Why did people become Christians? In a theological sense, we know that salvation is a sovereign act of divine grace. From a human perspective, however, we can stretch our historical imaginations to consider how this strange new faith first appeared and attracted new believers. Please take all of these with a grain of salt, they're all based on traditions and stories from the First and Second Centuries.

First, Christian charity held great appeal. Christians became known and admired for their kindness, hospitality, and generosity to those in need.

Second, in contrast to the rigid social hierarchy of the Roman Empire, Christians valued all persons equally, and modeled a community that broke down social barriers.

Third, Christians valued all persons individually. Whereas Rome placed a premium on civic unity, making the individual person subordinate to the imperial cult, Christianity affirmed the dignity and worth of each human being.

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<sup>2</sup> Tertullian, *Tertullian, Apology, De Spectaculis*, The Loeb Classical Library. Latin Authors (London, New York: W. Heinemann, Ltd.; G. P. Putnam's sons, 1931), 82.

Fourth, Christianity promised the power of good over evil. Many Romans believed in evil spirits, and this new faith seemed to offer protection against the demonic.

Related to this, a fifth reason for Christianity's appeal was its promise of deliverance from death, and eternal life.

Finally, as persecution of Christians intensified, the bold and faithful witness of many believers facing torture and death could not be ignored. Something about this faith must be real, people reasoned; why else would these Christians die for it?

➤ **Application for us:**

Would the watching world say the same of us... and of the Gospel WE hold out?  
There's something to think about.

And to these persecutions we need to turn.

#### **4. Persecutions and Martyrdom**

##### **(a) Apostolic persecution**

We see this beginning in the New Testament, of course, from Stephen's martyrdom, to Peter and Paul's imprisonments, even to Peter's exhortations in his first epistle, addressed to believers suffering under Nero's persecution (60's).

Indeed, for virtually all of the apostles, persecution was more the rule than the exception, as tradition tells us they shared a common fate of martyrdom.

Many of these accounts may well be true. However, they should be treated with some skepticism, as by the second century the churches in different cities began claiming apostolic origins, and wanted to point to a martyred apostle as their founder. This also indicates the focus that many early Christians placed on persecution, and the reverence they had for those who suffered.

With that in mind, consider the fate of the Apostles. And if you or people you know wonder if Jesus was just a hoax, consider that those who knew Him best were willing to die for who they believed He was. [Cited Foxe's Book of Martyrs and Ecclesiastical History by Eusebius]

- 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?**

An early and well known persecution broke out under Nero. In 64 A.D. a tremendous fire engulfed the city of Rome. Many people in the city, probably with good cause, blamed Nero for the tragedy.

The Roman historian Tacitus writes of the emperor's response:

*"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."*<sup>3</sup>

Tacitus continues:

*"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."*<sup>4</sup>

Notice Tacitus' charge of "hatred of humankind". Nero seems to have persecuted Christians for 3 reasons:

- (i) his desperate desire to distract attention from the great fire, (ii) widespread hostility towards Christians because they did not worship Roman gods, and (iii) the hostility of Jews towards Christians.
- On the second factor, which relates to Tacitus' accusation, many Romans perceived Christians as atheists and anarchists for their refusal to worship the pagan deities or the emperor. Such obstinacy enraged the Romans; the deities, they thought, would bring natural disasters, drought, and disease in retribution for the large section of the population who refused to worship them. Tertullian wrote that any time a natural disaster occurred, whether flood or drought, the cry would immediately go up, "The Christians to the lions!"

Other misunderstandings of Christian practice led to even wilder accusations against them. Because of the Christians' talk of "love" and because even husbands and wives referred to one another as "brother" and "sister," they were sometimes accused of incest. Finally, the Christian observance of the Lord's Supper gave rise to numerous accusations of cannibalism.

[Why early Christians were despised. See <http://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1-300/why-early-christians-were-despised-11629610.html>]

### **An application for us here:**

From the very beginning Christian belief and practice rubbed up against the culture. Should it be any different now when we say things like: "marriage is the union of one man and one women for life?" They were thought to be atheists. WE will be thought to be atheists – because the new dogma is a religion, where the god is "self", and to which we will not bow the knee. And downright lies will be told about us – by politicians, commentators, the media.

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<sup>3</sup> Cornelius Tacitus, *The Annals: The Reigns of Tiberius, Claudius, and Nero*, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 359.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 360.

The early growth of the church often occurred in the midst of tremendous suffering. Throughout the first 300 years of Christian history, numerous persecutions broke out against Christians and these often led to death. They were severe. Thousands of Christians were tortured and put to death in ways horrific and cruel.

We shouldn't exaggerate the extent of persecution. It probably didn't run into tens of thousands. The majority of believers, probably, were sustained and preserved by God's sovereign hand.

These persecutions were not necessarily empire-wide [from the top down], though a few later ones were. Most of them were local, pressed by provincial officials. Often they were encouraged by local communities and mobs, Christians were informed on and defamed by their neighbours.

**An application for us:**

Don't expect to be loved by non-believing folk around you. Early Christians were often hated by people around them.

**(c) Successive waves of persecution followed**

As to Nero, political rivals deposed him four years later, and the disgraced tyrant took his own life. Just two years after that, in AD 70, the Romans forces quelling yet another Jewish rebellion also destroyed the Temple and Jerusalem. Tragic though it was, as one Christian historian points out, this also marked a decisive "turning point" in church history. Christianity made its final break from Judaism, as it lost its last ties with the Temple and with Jerusalem, and emerged as its own distinctive faith.

But persecution would return. The Emperor Domitian demanded worship as a god. In AD 98, the Emperor Trajan launched a campaign against the church that would last for almost two decades. In a revealing correspondence between Pliny the Younger, governor of the province of Bithynia, and Trajan, Pliny asked if the mere mention of the name "Christian" merited punishment, or only the activities associated with it. Trajan replied that Christians should be punished only if they refuse to recant their faith and "worship our gods." If they do recant, they are to be set free.

One of Pliny's letters describes his practice:

*"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."*

Another period of relative tranquility and growth came from about AD 125 until the reign of Marcus Aurelius (161-180), who triggered a new campaign of persecution. Many Christians were martyred during these years, including eminent church leaders such as Polycarp. We read from his letter to the Philippians at the start of this session.

Eusebius records that when the proconsul ordered Polycarp to curse Christ, the response came back:

*“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.” [Eusebius Ecclesiastical History]*

Following this season of trial, Christians enjoyed another two decades of relative peace, as the faith continued to grow throughout the empire. From 197-212, more persecution broke out. From lynching in Alexandria, to mob attacks in Rome, to judicial executions in Carthage, believers found their faith tested severely.

The persecution abated until 235, and then it began to grow again. Conditions became very severe in 250, as the new emperor Decius (r.249-251) assumed the throne desiring to restore Rome to its earlier glory. To promote civic unity, he mandated that all citizens engage in public sacrifices to Roman gods. Those who complied were granted *libelli*, or certificates, proving that they had performed the required rites. [found certificates in Egypt in 20<sup>th</sup> century] Those who refused were considered treasonous, and punished severely.

Before he could carry his extermination against the church any further, Decius died in battle, and the persecution abated for a few short years. But in 257, the emperor Valerian initiated a new attempt to stamp out the church. He gave detailed instructions that bishops, presbyters, and deacons were to be punished immediately by death, while Roman senators and military officers who were Christians were to lose their dignity and property. And civil servants who were Christians were to be made slaves and sent in chains to labor on imperial estates. Some believe this persecution was longer lasting and resulted in more deaths than any previous persecution.

Valerian was taken prisoner by the Persians in 260, and his successor son permitted relative religious freedom, which the church enjoyed for the next 40 years. During this time the church grew and grew, pervading all levels of Roman society and spreading throughout North Africa, Egypt, Syria, and Armenia. Christianity had attained such prominence by the year 300 that Frend writes *“the question had become on what terms Church and Empire could cooperate, and whether a settlement would come peacefully, or after one final, bloody encounter.”* [Martyrdom and Persecution in the early church, p 325]

On February 23, 303, the emperor Diocletian gave his awful answer. Hoping to impose a uniform order on the empire of customs, military, currency, and religion, on that day he issued an edict designed to end the Christian menace to imperial unity. Initially Christians were not put to death, but rather just imprisoned or enslaved, and churches were destroyed, and Scriptures burned. But the next year Diocletian fell ill and Galerius took over, and ordered all incomplicant Christians to be executed. Blood flowed freely as many Christians suffered martyrdom during this time, known as the "Great Persecution."

The Lord preserved His church, however, and in 311 Galerius recanted. He admitted failure to extinguish Christianity because too many Christians refused to obey him and remained faithful. He issued an edict saying "let the Christians once more exist and rebuild their churches" and "pray to their God for our well-being, for that of the state and for themselves".

More importantly, Christians, by their persistence, their good works and love, and their sheer numbers, had increasingly grown to be tolerated by the masses throughout the Roman Empire.

The next two years brought sporadic outbreaks of persecution, until Constantine took power in 313, and declared an empire-wide policy of tolerance for Christianity. For its first three centuries, the Church had survived some of the most severe opposition imaginable. Could it now survive acceptance?

**An application for us:**

Polycarp was not unusual. We could tell the story of Blandina, a slave woman martyred in France in 177AD. Polycarp... Blandina... others whose names we won't know until we meet them in that great crowd of witnesses – they knew what Paul's words meant in Philippians 3:10 – "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death." The sufferings of Christ will overflow into the lives of Christian people.

Bad there was another kind of sad story that abounded during this period of church history... abound...

Some Christians avoided the sacrifices and still acquired the certificates from greedy, corrupt officials. Others apostatized and denied their faith. Others fled into exile. Some believers did resist and were executed. But the Church was ill-prepared to handle such persecution.

Many of those who still professed faith divided and turned against each other in disputes over whose faith was genuine and whose was compromised. The church would suffer for centuries over questions regarding how to treat apostates who sought to come back to the church.

Some Christians even survived attempts to put them to death. They became celebs in the church. Tragically, some believed that they had purchased their own forgiveness... and could grant forgiveness to others... and some of these "survivors" lapsed into extraordinary and wicked sexual immorality. (See Cyprian of Carthage, writing under Decius, c250)

By 251, one historian writes that "all over the Mediterranean Christianity lay seemingly in ruins."

**An application for us:**

Don't romanticise martyrdom. Or think that it only strengthens and grows the church. During this period Tertullian gave us this marvellous phrase: "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." But only sometimes. Under Decius it was almost destroyed it.

And don't forget your doctrine of sin. We are so weak. Is it surprising that professing believers should apostatize? Or that heroes should afterwards decline into gross sin? We only ever persevere faithfully because Christ holds us fast.

**One last application**

And here is something for us to think about. 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?

**Let's pray, and then close.**