

# *Persecution of the Christian Faith—The Church*

## *By Gerald E. Cumby*

Rapid growth of the early church was evident as noted in the Scriptures (Acts 2:11 and Acts 4:4). Multitudes became part of the early church including Hellenistic Jews (Acts 6:1) and “a great number of priests” (Acts 6:7). This rapid growth had its opposition, however; the ecclesiastic authorities quickly realized in the early stages of Christianity (Christianity called “the Way”) that this new enthusiastic, charismatic group threatened their principles and beliefs as interpreters and priests of the law. With this in mind, the ecclesiastical authorities rallied their forces to combat this new and “unacceptable” sect that challenged their authority and status. The first persecution of the Church came from the Sanhedrin, a political ecclesiastical body. This body, with the permission of Roman Rulers, supervised the civil and religious life of the state. With this authority and power, they came down hard on the new Church that believed in a Risen Savior and who charged that the Ecclesiastical authorities were the ones that led the charge against Jesus and eventually approved and condoned His death.

The first martyr of the early church that we read about was Stephen. He was chosen as one of seven men to administer the charitable funds (support and care for widows, orphans, etc.) of the Jerusalem Church. Stephen was an outstanding young man who spoke the Word of God and was full of the Holy Spirit. He was brought before the Sanhedrin to defend some accusations by false witnesses. While answering and defending the charges against him, Stephen denounced the Jewish leaders for their rejection of Christ. In turn, the Jewish authorities took him outside and stoned him to death, claiming blasphemy. The death of Stephen was the turning point for the spread of the gospel to the entire world.

Fear of the authorities quickly caused panic among many of the new believers. The severe persecution that followed was the reason for the scattering and purifying the early church. The early followers that were not “sold out” to Christianity and their belief in the Lord Jesus as the Risen Savior regrouped and recanted their loyalty to “the Way.” After all, the continued support of this new belief (of Jesus and His teachings) would mean that their businesses would suffer and their families would be chastised. Even worse, they might be stoned as was Stephen.

However, there were many early followers of Christianity that were ready to “go to their death” in order to protect their belief that the Lord Jesus was truly the Messiah and that “death on earth” would mean “life with Christ.” These believers were willing to leave their homes to escape persecution. With their scattering came a new message sent out to all parts of the country (Acts 8:4). This message was one of hope that Jesus is alive and well, has ascended to the Father, and desires to take all believers with Him to an eternal home. This new and enlightening message was being shared with the neighboring countries and in homes of both Jews and Gentiles. Persecution of the Church was a frightening and disheartening thing to those that were having to go through it; but their hope was fastened on an eternal hope of a Risen Lord that gave them every reason to be thankful for each new day and every breath of life.

*Besides facing internal problems in the Church between 100 and 313, the Church had to deal with the external problem of persecution from the Roman state.<sup>1</sup>* It is a historical fact that the Christians in the Roman Empire, the Chinese Nestorians (belief that divinity and humanity existed as two distinct natures in Jesus) in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the Roman Catholics in Japan in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, as well as Christians in the states where Nazism and Communism ruled, have all experienced state hostility...some to the point of martyrdom.

Before 250 AD. persecution was mainly local, quite sporadic, and often the result of mob action rather than civil policy. However, after that date, persecution became a policy of the Roman Imperial government. The persecution became widespread and violent. Many Christians met their death quickly and violently with no trial or even remorse by the executioners. The Christians’ deaths were approved by the state and condoned by the religious rulers. It was the order of the day to hunt down and quickly exterminate the “ones that believe in a resurrected Christ.”

The church, somehow, continued to develop in spite of persecution and finally won freedom of worship under the leadership of Constantine (first Christian emperor of Rome, 306 to 337 AD.).

The causes for persecution of the Church were political, religious, social and economical.

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<sup>1</sup> Earle Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries*, Zondervan, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 1996, page 86.

As to political persecution, we find the Church endured little persecution so long as it was considered part of Judaism. However, when Christianity was distinguished from Judaism and a separate sect, the authorities looked on Christianity as a “Secret Society. This, then, came under the ban of the Roman state and became an illegal religion that was considered a threat to the safety of the Roman government. Separation of religion and state was not good according to the Roman Empire. No private religion was considered legal. Religion was only tolerated if it contributed to the state. The loyalty to Caesar was expected by the Roman government. To the Christian, Christ was given first priority and top honors and Caesar was respected only due to position, but was not in control of one’s life as a Christian.

This allegiance to the King Jesus, of course, was conceived by the Roman leaders as disloyalty to the state. They saw Christians as ones who were rebelling and trying to set up a state within a state. To the Roman government, the Christians must decide whether Caesar was sovereign or Christ was sovereign in their lives. The disloyalty to the Roman Empire was seen when the Christians refused to burn incense devoted to the Roman emperor. Due to the fact that the Christians were holding meetings at night and were considered secretly worshipping their God, this could only mean conspiracy against the safety of the state. Another cause for the Roman government to be apprehensive in trusting the Christians is that the believers (Christians) would not serve as soldiers until after 313 AD.

As to the many reasons for persecution of the Christians, religious persecution stands out as the most misunderstood and mind-boggling for the Church today. Roman state religion was external and mechanical. The state religion had its rites and practices that people could readily see. So long as a new deity or idol were subservient and subordinate to the Roman state religion, the ones bringing these pagan gods into the Pantheon were approved and accepted along with their false gods. The Christians, on the other hand, had no idols and minimal external (visible) items of worship. The Christian God was different and the ones that worshipped were different. These worshippers of the Living God had as their worship something that was internal and spiritual. With no external symbols or material manifestations (objects of worship), the Romans thought the Christians to be atheistic. Standing and praying with their eyes shut and no

visible object (gods) or paraphernalia to worship, the Roman government looked on this type of worship as having no god and having no sensibility to their worship.

Moral charges were filed against the Christians because of their secrecy with their worship. False charges were claimed against them concerning incest, cannibalism, and unnatural practices. The misunderstanding of the meaning of “eating and drinking” of the elements representing Christ’s body and His blood caused great concern for the Roman government and other religious entities. The government and religious leaders heard and believed what they presupposed. They believed this new religion was into cannibalism. Even the brotherly ‘kiss of peace’ was misconstrued to mean that there was some kind of incest and immoral conduct going on in the worship services. Again, the secrecy of the meetings caused the religious leaders of the false gods and the Roman authorities to believe even stronger that this “strange religion” was cultic, atheistic, and repugnant to the cultured Roman mind. Rumors and stories were rampant and caused all who were on the outside of the Church looking in to desire immediate punishment and expulsion of this blasphemous religion. If the Christian would not recant, it was the duty of the state to exterminate this threatening force. Many Christians were tortured and put to death because of their faith and belief.

One of the examples of the persecution of Christians in the early Church came at the hand of *Pliny the Younger* while he was governor of Pontus/Bithynia from 111-113 A.D. In his letters to Emperor Trajan regarding the early Christian Church, He mentioned the Christians devotion to Christ and how he persecuted, tortured, and murdered them.<sup>2</sup> It was during this persecution that Ignatius lost his life. His last statement to the Roman Church was that he requested the members to not prevent his martyrdom; that he was ready to meet his God.

The Christians were hated by the influential aristocratic leaders of society because of their great appeal for the “little” (lower class) people and slaves. This was a social problem that did not go away with mere explanation or communication. The Christians simply upheld the equality of all people (Colossians 3:11). This was a slap in the face to the aristocrats who depended on the lower classes and slaves to serve them, the privileged few. Christians did not

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.godandscience.org/apologetics/persecution.html> ; The Persecuted Church, page 1 of 2.

socialize with the aristocrats at the places of entertainment such as the theaters, the temples, and other places of recreation. The unwillingness of the Christians to conform to the societal creeds and practices led the pagans to charge that these “unsocialized” heathens were “haters of mankind” and were ready to incite the masses to go against the social structures of modern society and the Roman government and eventually revolt. This led the upper class society and religious leaders of the Roman Empire to request from the government a punishment, or banishment of these “doers of ill will.”

From the opposition of Paul by the idol makers (silversmiths and iron workers) of Ephesus and those with vested interests where their livelihood was threatened because of this invisible God that the Christians worshipped, one can see that the Christians were a thorn in the side to all who loved their many gods which brought in much money to the local vendors and manufacturers. Paul and the Christians threatened the local economy in every town or city where there were many gods accepted and worshipped. The economy was suffering greatly in each city where there was Christian influence. After all, having only one God to worship and this God having very few outward symbols and statues meant that there would be no need for wood, metal and stone images. This was a threat to the culture, to the society in which they lived, and their livelihood.

Persecution became violent and quite common in lieu of the spasmodic persecution prior to 250 AD. Rome and the leaders of the day blamed the Christians for the troubles they were having. Plagues and famines, along with civil unrest, were common in the Roman Empire at this time and this unrest and tension was ascribed to the presence of Christianity causing some to forsake the other gods worshipped in the community. Persecution of the Christians was the norm. It just seemed like that the Christians were always causing unrest amongst the general population. In the minds of the authorities of the day, the Christians were stirring up trouble and were the most logical trouble-makers to be persecuted and condemned. Persecution was a natural reaction as a part of imperial policy for all that did not yield allegiance to Caesar and His authority. To the Romans and religious activists and leaders of the day, Christianity did not have a legal right to exist. Death sentences for the Christians and public torture of these disloyal tyrants seemed to satisfy the mobs and the state.

There is no way to know the number of Christian martyrs in the early church. Although there are some early writers that spoke of “great multitudes,” there are still some that believe that there were not as many Christians martyred for the cause of Christ as sometimes imagined. *Out of the 54 emperors who ruled between 30 and 311 AD, only about 12 were diligent and adamant about violent persecution of Christians.*<sup>3</sup> In the reign of Nero (54-68 AD), organized persecution began to come from the Roman state. The Christians were blamed by Nero for the disastrous fire in Rome (64 AD). The rumor was that Nero had ordered the burning of Rome that destroyed part of the city (writings of Tacitus). To place the blame on someone else and get people to thinking that it was not his doing, Nero quickly and methodically diverted feeling against him by the citizens to the Christians. He accused them with arson and planning secretly as to how to destroy Rome. He then gave orders to round up these unruly scoundrels (Christians) and incited the citizenry to seek out and bring to justice all thought to be worshipping this invisible, secret god. Brutal persecution, even violent death sentences were given. Torture of the Christians was a game with the Roman soldiers and the leaders that had received approval by Nero to make the Christians pay for their disloyalty and rebellious ways. Even with this horrendous persecution by the Roman Emperor Nero, these persecutions seemed to be local and sporadic during his reign.

Persecution was seen in the city of Smyrna in the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. Polycarp was martyred (tortured and burned alive) as an enraged mob rounded up the known Christians and brought before the authorities.

Persecution of Christians was now the order of the day (181-203). Justin Martyr, the great apologetic writer, suffered martyrdom in Rome and well as Perpetua, daughter of a noble and wealthy family. She refused the pleadings of her father and the official in charge to recant her Christian belief and was flogged, ripped apart by beasts, and then beheaded. The Christians were being picked out as a threat to the state because of their rapid growth in numbers. The Roman government was adamant about squelching any order or group that might seem to be moving toward setting up a state within a state. Emperor Decius issued an edict in 250 that

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<sup>3</sup> Article on internet, Persecution in the Early Church-Religious Facts, <http://www.religionfacts.com>, page 1 of 6.

demanding an annual offering of sacrifice to the gods and the Roman Emperor. Although some Christians did offer sacrifices to the gods in order to escape any persecution, most Christians were so committed to the Christian faith that they not only refused to offer the sacrifices, but were willing to be tortured and go to their death in lieu of breaking their covenant with their God.

The most severe persecution of Christians came under the reign of Diocletian (245-313). To reduce the political unrest in Rome at the time, Diocletian, a strong military leader, took aim in 285 AD at any entity that ascribed democracy or any faiths that were hostile to the state religion. An edict calling for persecution of the Christians came in 303. Diocletian ordered an immediate cessation of any Christian meetings, the destruction of all the churches, the removal of all officers of the church, the imprisonment of those who failed to recant their love of Christ, and the destruction of the sacred Scriptures by fire. The Christians were later ordered to sacrifice to the pagan gods or suffer the consequences of death. The prisons were so crowded with Christians that there was not enough room for hardened criminals. Punishment for the Christians included loss of property, exile, imprisonment, or execution. The execution was by sword or wild beasts. Many were sent to work in the Roman labor camps until they were worked to death. Diocletian retired in 305 and the persecution slackened somewhat.

In 311, Galerius issued an edict from his deathbed that showed some tolerance for Christianity....so long as the Christian followers did not violate the peace of the empire. Persecution continued until Licinius and Constantine issued the Edict of Milan in 313. This edict ushered in freedom of worship, not only for Christians, but all religions until 381. Constantine was a breath of fresh air for the cause of Christianity. He believed that the worship of God should be top priority in one's life and, therefore, he felt that there could be no state religion as a policy. From that time on, freedom to worship and to testify to the saving knowledge of Christ have been permitted. Today, the same issue of church and state has become an issue. In many countries Christians are tolerated only under law. In other countries, Christians face persecution every waking moment. The importance of the separation of church and state is readily seen through the early struggles of the early church. It is imperative that the Christian faith recognize that only where people are permitted their private interests apart from public interests will there be and remain the privilege of religious freedom.

Christian persecution began with Jesus Himself. Although the Church did not exist at the time, its founder and foundation for the living body of Christ did exist. *Jesus was asked directly at His trial, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?" Leaving no room for ambiguity, Jesus words were, "I AM." The religious elite in Jerusalem knew what Jesus was saying. It was very clear to them that He was claiming to be God. As such, Jesus was put to death on a Roman cross for the crime of blasphemy, thus becoming the first martyr for what would become the Christian Church.*<sup>4</sup>

Christian persecution was a dramatic part of the early Church history. For anyone that might conclude that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ was a man-made hoax which was conspired by a group of disciples and followers of Jesus, they should check out the legacy of martyrdom. Historical documents and testimonies of early Christians and, even enemies of Christianity, conclude that eleven of the 12 apostles, as well as many of the other early disciples, died for their adherence to their story. This is dramatic and thought provoking for the Christian as well as the scoffers, since the Disciples of Christ all witnessed the alleged events of Jesus and still went to their deaths defending their faith. Why is this dramatic, when many throughout history have died martyred deaths for a religious belief or something they strongly believed in? The answer is that people don't die for a known lie. When we look at human nature throughout history, no conspiracy can be maintained when life or liberty is at stake. Dying for a belief is one thing, but numerous eye-witnesses dying for a known lie is quite another. When the Christian stands up and declares that "Jesus is Lord" and the consequences of those words mean excruciating punishment or a horrible death, something more than human is the foundational basis for such a testimony. The Spirit of God flowing through the soul of mortal man brings out that which goes beyond human reasoning and grabs hold of the inner-most being causing one to know that his belief in Jesus Christ is more than a surface faith. It is a faith that can only be understood by an experience of grace with the one that holds the key to eternal life. It is a faith that moves mountains and moves us to a new level that this world cannot take away or extinguish by death.

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<sup>4</sup> Website, <http://www.allaboutfollowingjesus.org/Christian-Persecution.htm>, Christian Persecution-Dramatic Evidence!, page 1 of 2.



## Bibliography

- Article on internet, Persecution in the Early Church-Religious Facts, <http://www.religionfacts.com>, page 1 of 6.
- Cairns, Earl; *Christianity Through the Centuries*, Zondervan, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 1996, page 86.
- <http://www.godandscience.org/apologetics/persecution.htm1> ; The Persecuted Church, page 1 of 2.
- Website, <http://www.allaboutfollowingjesus.org/Christian-Persecution.htm>, Christian Persecution-Dramatic Evidence!, page 1 of 2.

**Note:** Much of the material in this term paper came from Earl Cairns book, *Christianity Through the Centuries*. However, in lieu of quoting from the book, the information, while not changing the validity of the information, was translated in the student's style of writing.