

Church History, Lesson 2

(This lesson is based primarily on The Story of Christianity by Justo L. Gonzalez.)

How did the Gospel spread in the New Testament era?

- Pentecost included people from all over the civilized world.
- The Apostles eventually left Jerusalem and preached the Gospel.
- Christians traveled, moved, etc. and preached the Gospel and started churches.
- Paul's missionary journeys.



- Acts 8.1-3 - Christians scattered because of persecution.
- Acts 9.1-2 – Christians are as far away as Damascus.
- Acts 11.19 – Phoenicia (Tyre), Cyprus, and Antioch.

What happened to the Apostles?

- We know that Paul, Peter, and John all traveled extensively and supervised churches that they themselves or others had planted.
- Peter and Paul were both martyred in Rome during the persecution under Nero (beginning in 64 A.D.).
 - Peter was crucified, some say upside down.
 - Paul's execution was by beheading because he was a Roman citizen.
- John was exiled to the Island of Patmos during the persecution under Domitian, but probably died later in Ephesus.
- There are numerous traditions about Peter and James going too Spain, Thomas going to India, etc. but these are hard to confirm.

EARLY PERSECUTION AND CONFLICT WITH THE STATE

- The persecution that we see recorded in the book of Acts is primarily Jews persecuting Christians.
 - Peter and John arrested...
 - Stephen stoned...
 - Saul persecuting the church...
- It would have been hard for the Roman civil authorities to distinguish between Jews and Christians. They would have primarily viewed Christians as a subset of the Jewish religion. – Acts 18.14-15
- However, two things happened to change this:
 - Christian churches grew to have exponentially more Gentiles than Jews.
 - And as Jewish nationalism grew in Palestine and ultimately resulted in an extended uprising in 66 A.D. Christians did what they could to distinguish themselves from the Jews.
- This led to the Romans becoming cognizant of Christianity as a distinct religion, which ultimately led to Roman persecution of the church from the time of Nero to the conversion of Constantine.

Persecution under Nero:

- Nero comes to power in 54 A.D.
- He was originally popular as a reasonable ruler, however his increasing lust for power and dreams of grandeur made him unpopular. He surrounded himself with a court that vied to satisfy his every whim. After about 10 years on the throne, he was despised by the people.
- On June 18, 64 A.D. a great fire broke out in Rome. The fire lasted 6 days and 7 nights and then sporadically flared up for 3 more days. By the time it was all over, 10 of the 14 sections of the city of Rome were destroyed.
- Almost immediately rumors sprang up that Nero had set the fire or ordered it to be set so that he could rebuild the city after his own design.
 - Although these rumors were very likely false, they were serious enough for Nero to have to respond to them at the time, and they have been presented as historical fact in many history texts up until today.
 - According to the Roman historian Tacitus, the fire most likely started in an oil warehouse.
- Tacitus explains how Nero turned the people's hatred against himself toward Christians in this way:
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... 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 humankind.
- This persecution included Christians being dressed in furs and then torn apart by dogs, crucifixion, and burning. As cruel and brutal as this persecution was, it seems to have been limited to Rome.
- Tacitus, who had no love for Christians, seems to see these cruelties not as justice but as the whim of the emperor.
- In 68 A.D. Nero was deposed by a rebellion and then killed. This led to a period of political turmoil in which Christians were basically left alone.

Persecution under Domitian:

- After Nero, the Roman Empire was ruled by Vespasian, then his son Titus (the same Titus who as a Roman general destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple). During this time, the Christians continued to be ignored.

- After the temple was destroyed in A.D. 70, the Emperor Domitian decided that the “Temple tax” should be given to the Roman government. Since some Jews rebelled, the Roman authorities persecuted them. And Christians were often lumped in with those who followed “Jewish practices”.
- Again, Christians were accused of “atheism” because they did not worship the Greek / Roman gods or the Emperor.
- We know of two names of martyrs during this period, Flavius Clemens and his wife Flavia Domitilla, who were probably related to the Emperor.
- A letter from the church in Rome to the church in Corinth speaks of “the continuous and unexpected evils which have come upon us.”
- This is the time of persecution that put John on the Isle of Patmos where he received the Revelation.
- Although this persecution resulted in many martyrs it was limited to Rome and Asia Minor.

The Policy of Trajan:

- In 111 A.D. Pliny became the governor of Bithynia. The Christians presented a unique problem. According to Pliny, there were so many Christians that the pagan temples in some cities were deserted.
- He would have those accused of being Christian brought before him. Some denied Christianity, and he let them go. Pliny only wanted these accused Christians to pray to the gods and burn incense to the Emperor. If they wouldn’t, he had them executed.
- However, he was unsure of his policy so he suspended any more trials and wrote to ask the Emperor Trajan how to proceed.
- Trajan’s response was that there should be no official pursuit of Christians. However, those who were accused of Christian belief should be tried. Those who recanted should be released, those who did not should be executed. This made Christians very vulnerable and dependent on the good will of their neighbors.
- Trajan’s policy is what made persecution of Christianity widespread in the Empire, and it dominated Roman policy for at least a century. During this time, Christians were “outed” by their enemies and taken to trial.
- **The martyrdom of Polycarp** – 155 A.D. – “For eighty-six years I have served Him, and He has done me no evil. How could I curse my King, who saved me?” He was burned at the stake.

Persecution under Marcus Aurelius:

- became Emperor in 161 A.D.
- Early in his reign there had been a seemingly endless string of tragedies: invasions, floods, epidemics and other disasters.
- The Christians were blamed for making the gods angry by refusing to worship them.
- **Felicitas and her 7 sons:** “While I live, I shall defeat you; and if you kill me, in my death I shall defeat you all the more.”
- It was during this time of persecution that 40 martyrs were sent out onto the ice of a lake to freeze to death.
- It was also during this time that the church first faced the problem of what to do with those who denied to faith to escape persecution and then “rejoined” the faith. These were called “the lapsed”.
- Marcus Aurelius died in 180 A.D. and was succeeded by Commodus. Christians experienced less persecution under his reign, but it was resumed under Septimius Severus in 193 A.D.