

Church History

ANCIENT PERIOD – AGE OF MARTYRS

150AD-325AD

INTRODUCTION TO THE AGE OF MARTYRS:

A. The Time of this Age

1. **Beginning:** 150AD was about the time that any personal memory of the apostles had disappeared. This opened the door for increasingly serious departures from the faith that was originally given to the New Testament saints (Acts 20:27-32; 1Timothy 4:1-3; 2Timothy 3:1, 5-7; 2Peter 2:1-3; 1John 2:18-19; Jude 1:3).
2. This time period is characterized by its many Roman persecutions and its many Christian martyrs. This time is often compared to the second of the seven churches of Asia Minor in Revelation 2-3, the church of Smyrna (Revelation 2:8-11).
3. **Ending:** 325AD is the date of the Council of Nicea. This Council significantly marks the marriage of church and state under the Roman Emperor Constantine. He called the council together and presided over it even though he was certainly not saved and even waited until his deathbed to get baptized.

B. Trends of this Age

1. The continued growth of Christianity. Although Christians remained a minority in the Roman Empire throughout this time, they continued to grow. To many, it seemed that the more they were persecuted, the more they grew.
2. An increasing departure from the faith. Extra-biblical beliefs and perversions of true doctrine grow tremendously during this time. However, ancient times did not have the means to mass produce ideas by means of media. Therefore, the development of doctrine was very inconsistent from one place to another. Many areas stayed very close to the doctrine passed on from the apostles while other areas began to stray to varying degrees.
3. The continued development of church hierarchy. Although Roman Catholicism is still far from being established at this time, the foundational beliefs and doctrines that would lead to Catholicism begin to develop.
4. A growing superstition in holy objects, people, places, and practices. The Christians began to drift into more pagan beliefs and practices. Also, their veneration for the martyrs and other saints prepared the way for saint worship.
5. A growing influence of philosophy and allegorical understanding in the approach to Bible interpretation. These movements decreased the direct influence of the Bible on doctrine and practice.

I. PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS

A. General Characteristics

1. According to tradition, all the apostles except John died as martyrs (1Corinthians 4:9; 1Peter 2:21); and John was boiled in oil.
2. Most of the persecutions did not encompass the entire empire, but were confined to specific localities.
3. Times of persecution were generally followed by times of relative peace (Acts 9:1-2, 30-31).
4. Roman Catholicism has killed more Christians than the Roman Empire ever did (Revelation 17:5-6).

B. Sources of Persecution

1. Judaism (John 12:47-53; Acts 8:1-3; 9:1-2); this was the first wave and is pretty much over by the time of the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD.
2. Roman Empire (Ephesians 3:1; 2Timothy 1:8, 16-18); this persecution began around 50AD and mostly ceased at the reign of Constantine (around 325AD).
3. Roman Catholicism (Revelation 17:1-9); this began about the time of Constantine and continued for many centuries. More will be said about this persecution later in the course.

C. Causes of Persecution

1. The proselytizing nature of Christianity
 - a. Roman policy was to tolerate the religions which would not proselyte and which would allow emperor worship
 - b. This made Christianity an illegal religion
 - c. The rapid growth of Christianity frightened the Roman rulers
2. The extreme enthusiasm of Christians even to the point of being willing to die for their faith
3. Christian separation from worldly activities offended the Romans
4. Christian refusal to accept the emperor as a god; they had another King (John 19:14-15)
5. Christian refusal to use idols; this brought on the accusation that they did not believe in any god
6. Christian conflicts with the money-making interests (Acts 19:23-28)

D. Charges Against the Christians

1. Atheism – because they rejected idols and their God was not visible
2. Licentiousness – because they shut themselves up in a house to worship; this created rumors about what they did when they met together
3. Cannibalism – probably arose because of the corrupted teaching concerning the Lord's Supper

4. Causing earthquakes, famines, etc. – as an unfavorable reaction of the *gods* to this new atheistic religion
5. Hatred of humanity – they did not honor the accepted sacred cows such as idols, philosophy, culture, etc.

E. Results of Persecution

1. Rapid spread of Christianity (Acts 8:1-4; 11:19-21); fleeing believers took their faith to other parts of the world
2. Pagan admiration of Christians (Luke 23:46-48); this admiration often led to new converts
3. Hero-worship of martyrs; this outcome developed in stages
 - a. Those who suffered and died for the faith were looked on as spiritual heroes to be imitated (cp. Hebrews 11)
 - b. Later, these heroes were placed on a high pedestal; they were considered to be more pure and godly than other Christians
 - c. This eventually led to their adoration as saints higher than lowly believers
 - d. This, of course, led to the worship of saints; however, this entire process took several centuries
4. Hatred toward and rejection of those deemed traitors to the cause because they:
 - a. Denied Christ
 - b. Offered sacrifice to idols
 - c. Recognized the emperor as a god
5. NOTE: There was extreme disagreement in the early centuries as to whether or not those who had denied the faith under threat of persecution could repent and be received back into the church. Many separated from others over this single issue.

II. THE TEN ROMAN PERSECUTIONS

A. First Great Roman Persecution

1. Under Nero (64-68AD)
2. Paul beheaded; Peter crucified (tradition)
3. Blamed burning of Rome on Christians
4. Many turned to Christ upon seeing the faith of the Christians
5. Very little persecution outside Rome

B. Second Great Roman Persecution

1. Under Domitian (81-96AD)
2. John boiled in oil; Timothy clubbed to death
3. Started as a persecution against the Jews
4. Many rumors were being spread about Christianity

C. Third Great Roman Persecution

1. Under Trajan (98-117AD)
2. Ignatius killed
3. Persecution continued by Hadrian (117-138AD)

D. Fourth Great Roman Persecution

1. Under Marcus Aurelius (161-180AD)
2. Polycarp burned at the stake; Justin Martyr beheaded
3. Celsus, a philosopher, predicted the extermination of Christianity
4. Inquisitorial proceedings were encouraged by the emperor
5. Torture was used to compel Christians to renounce their faith
6. Informers were allowed to take the property of those they accused

E. Fifth Great Roman Persecution

1. Under Severus (193-211AD)
2. Iranaeus beheaded
3. Passed law in 202 forbidding conversions to Judaism or Christianity
4. Emperor Elagabalus (217-222) aimed at merging Judaism, Samaritanism, Christianity and the state religion into one system dominated by the worship of Baal, the sun-god.

F. Sixth Great Roman Persecution

1. Under Maximus (235-238AD)
2. Those who preached were commanded to be put to death

G. Seventh Great Roman Persecution

1. Under Decius (249-251AD)
2. Origen tortured
3. In 250, Decius issued the first imperial edict aimed at the suppression of Christianity
4. Christians were ordered to offer sacrifices to Roman gods upon threat of torture and death
5. Tried to eliminate Christianity for the purpose of unity

H. Eighth Great Roman Persecution

1. Under Valerian (253-260AD)
2. Cyprian beheaded
3. Persecuted Christians as an attempt to halt public calamities
4. Issued edict in 257
5. Commanded Christians to conform to state religion or be banished
6. Directed pastors to be separated from their churches
7. Prohibited Christian assemblies of any kind

I. Ninth Great Roman Persecution

1. Under Diocletian (284-303AD)
2. Most systematic of all persecutions
3. House to house searches
4. Bibles and books burned
5. Property confiscated
6. Edict of 303 demanded that all pastors of churches be thrown in prison

J. Tenth Great Roman Persecution

1. Under Galerius (303-312AD)
2. Ended by Constantine the Great

III. THREE CITIES

A. Introduction

1. Rome, Alexandria and Antioch
2. The three largest cities in the world at the time of Christ
3. Located on three different continents
4. Representing the three major races
5. Influential over three major sections of the Roman Empire
6. Known for three brands of Christianity
7. Known for three kinds of Bible interpretation and three ways of handling the word of God (i.e., with preservation or corruption)

B. Rome

1. Largest city in the time of Christ
 - a. Country – Italy
 - b. Continent – Europe
 - c. Race – Japheth
2. Historical significance
 - a. Capital of the Roman Empire
 - b. Political and military center of the ancient world
3. Realm of influence
 - a. Italy
 - b. North Africa (excluding Egypt)
4. Biblical significance
 - a. Nine biblical references
 - b. A place of persecution (2Timothy 1:16-17)
 - c. A place of religious perversion (Revelation 17:18)
5. Religious significance
 - a. Became center of Roman Catholicism

- b. Known for tradition and legalism
 - c. Interpreted scripture according to tradition
 - d. Known for adding to the word of God – like the Apocrypha
6. Important people
- a. Cyprian
 - (1) Lived from 200-258AD
 - (2) Native of Carthage, Africa
 - (3) Taught that there was no salvation outside the Church
 - (4) Taught that Rome was the head of the universal (catholic) church
 - b. Jerome
 - (1) Lived from 340-420AD
 - (2) Studied at Rome
 - (3) Prepared his Latin Vulgate in 382 by appointment of Pope Damasus
 - c. Augustine
 - (1) Lived from 354-430AD
 - (2) Spent most of life in Hippo, North Africa
 - (3) Taught that the Bible should be interpreted according to the tradition of the Roman church

C. Alexandria

- 1. Second largest city at the time of Christ
 - a. Country – Egypt
 - b. Continent – Africa
 - c. Race – Ham
- 2. Historical significance
 - a. Founded by Alexander the Great in 332BC
 - b. Literary, philosophical and scientific center of the ancient world
 - c. Had the largest library in the world
 - d. Combined the teachings of Judaism and Christianity with Greek and Oriental philosophy
- 3. Realm of influence
 - a. Egypt
 - b. Palestine (especially Caesarea)
- 4. Biblical significance
 - a. Four mentions in scripture
 - b. A place of doctrinal perversion (Ac.6:9; 18:24-26)
 - c. Ships that took Paul from Caesarea to Rome (Ac.27:6; 28:11)
- 5. Religious significance
 - a. Known for scholarship
 - b. Known for allegorical interpretation of scripture
 - c. Known for subtracting from the word of God
- 6. Important people
 - a. Philo
 - (1) Lived from 20BC-53AD

- (2) Jewish theologian and philosopher
 - (3) Combined Judaism with Platonism
 - (4) Allegorically interpreted the Old Testament
 - b. Clement of Alexandria
 - (1) Lived from 150-215AD
 - (2) Became head of the Christian school in Alexandria
 - (3) Brought together Greek, Gnostic and Christian ideas
 - c. Origen
 - (1) Lived from 185-254AD
 - (2) Succeeded Clement as head of the school in Alexandria
 - (3) Systematized a scientific approach to the allegorical interpretation of scripture
- D. Antioch
- 1. Third largest city at the time of Christ
 - a. Country – Syria
 - b. Continent – Asia
 - c. Race – Shem (Gen.9:26)
 - 2. Historical significance
 - a. A melting pot between East and West
 - b. Combined Roman wealth, Greek culture and Oriental luxury
 - c. Called the “Gate of the East”
 - 3. Realm of influence
 - a. Syria
 - b. Asia Minor
 - c. NOTE: This is the area in which the early Christians were most active. Much of Paul’s missionary work, the exemplary church of Antioch and the seven churches of Revelation were all in this area.
 - 4. Biblical significance
 - a. Nineteen (19) mentions in scripture
 - b. Founding of the church in Antioch (Ac.8:1; 11:19-21)
 - c. A place of strong Biblical Christianity (Ac.11:20-30; 13:1-4)
 - d. Where the disciples were first called Christians (Ac.11:26)
 - e. The first missionary-sending church (Ac.13:1-4; 14:26-28)
 - 5. Religious significance
 - a. Known for its Bible believers
 - b. Known for literal interpretation of the scriptures
 - c. Known for the preservation of the scriptures
 - 6. Important people – Although this area had many great preachers and men of God (as Chrysostom who was exiled in 403 because of his strong preaching against sin in high places), most of the names that are so well known in history came from the other two areas in this study. Perhaps those who exalt the Bible are not as likely to overly exalt men. Or, perhaps, they are less likely to count the doctrines of men as the commandments of God (Mt.15:9; Col.2:22)

IV. SCHOOL OF ALEXANDRIA

A. Philo

1. Lived from c.20BC to 53AD
2. An Alexandrian Jew
3. In practice, a Greek philosopher who sought to harmonize the Old Testament with Greek philosophy
4. His system combined Pythagoreanism, Platonism, Aristotelianism and Stoicism
5. The key to Philo's harmonizing was his system of the allegorical interpretation of scripture
6. Some of Philo's rules of interpretation:
 - a. The literal sense must be set aside when it implies anything unworthy of God, anything incomprehensible, impossible or contrary to reason
 - b. Any repetition points to something new
 - c. A word can be interpreted according to every shade of meaning it has and other meanings can be given to the word by slightly altering the letters
 - d. One allegorical interpretation can be used as the basis for another
7. Philo's greatest influence was on the theology of the Gnostics and the theology of the "Christian" school of Alexandria

B. Pantaenus

1. Founder of the Christian school of Alexandria
2. Taught at the school until 190AD
3. Clement called him "the deepest Gnostic"

C. Clement of Alexandria

1. Lived from 150 to 215AD
2. Very well versed in Greek philosophy and literature
3. Studied under Pantaenus in Alexandria
4. Followed Pantaenus as head of the school about 190AD and continued until 202 when he left because of persecution
5. He brought the allegorical interpretation of scripture to Christianity
6. He thought that the gospel was the result of Hellenism (Greek thought) and Judaism converging
7. He regarded star worship as a God-given stepping stone to a purer religion

D. Origen

1. Life
 - a. Lived from 185 to 254AD
 - b. Born of Christian parents
 - c. His father died as a martyr
 - d. Studied Neo-Platonism and Gnosticism

- e. Lived as an extreme ascetic
- f. Had only one coat and no shoes
- g. Slept on the floor
- h. Castrated himself in supposed obedience to Matthew 19:12
- i. Followed Clement of Alexandria as head of the school in 202
- j. Wrote extensively. He had several copyists who wrote down the words for his books.
- k. He spent the last part of his life in Caesarea, Palestine
- l. He died as the result of persecution
- m. One of the two most influential theologians of ancient Christianity along with Augustine of Hippo

2. Beliefs

- a. Studied the Bible scientifically
- b. Put the allegorical interpretation of scriptures into a system
- c. Taught three senses of scripture
 - (1) Literal – having little importance
 - (2) Moral – concerning religious life
 - (3) Spiritual – concerning the heavenly life
- d. Called the first textual critic
- e. Composed the Hexapla – a parallel Old Testament containing six versions
- f. Believed that Jesus Christ was created by the Father and yet had not beginning being eternally begotten
- g. Taught that the Holy Spirit was the first being created by the Son
- h. Believed that Christ died for all men and even for fallen angels. He believed further that eventually all including the devil would be saved. This doctrine is called universalism.
- i. He supported both baptismal regeneration and infant baptism
- j. He denied the resurrection of the material body

E. Dionysius of Alexandria

- 1. Lived from 200 to 265AD
- 2. A pupil of Origen
- 3. Succeeded Origen as head of the school in about 232
- 4. Became bishop of Alexandria about 246
- 5. Taught that “the Son has existence not from himself, but from the Father.”
Believed in both the absolute eternity of the Son and the subordination of the Son to the Father

V. ANTE-NICEAN WRITERS

A. Divisions of Early Christian Literature

- 1. Edification Period

- a. Simple writings concerning salvation and service
 - b. No knowledge of pagan philosophy
 - c. Distinctively inferior to the New Testament books
 - d. Major writers of this period
 - (1) Clement of Rome
 - (2) Ignatius
 - (3) Polycarp
2. Apologetical Period
- a. Apologetics deals with defending the faith
 - b. Written to support the right of Christians to exist
 - c. Often addressed to Roman emperors
 - d. Major writers
 - (1) Justin Martyr
 - (2) Tatian
3. Polemical Period
- a. Polemics deals with argument or dispute
 - b. Writings against heresies
 - c. A systematic theology was beginning to develop
 - d. Major writers
 - (1) Irenaeus
 - (2) Hippolytus
 - (3) Tertullian
 - (4) Cyprian
4. Scientific Period
- a. Writings aimed at making a systematic exposition of Christianity as a whole
 - (1) Centered around Alexandria
 - b. Laid the germs for many later doctrinal developments
 - c. Major writers
 - (1) Clement of Alexandria
 - (2) Origen

B. Justin Martyr

1. Lived from 111 to 165AD
2. A well-educated Stoic philosopher
3. Called Christianity a philosophy
4. Continued to wear the philosopher's robe
5. Wrote *Apologies* to Roman emperors and a *Dialogue* to Trypho the Jew
6. Considered baptism as the culmination of the regenerative process
7. Beheaded

C. Tatian

1. Lived during the second century
2. Born in Assyria, east of the Tigris River
3. Lived most of his life in Syria
4. Disciple of Justin Martyr
5. Sharply ridiculed paganism in his *Apology*
6. Called a heretic by the Catholics
7. Wrote *Tatian's Diatessaron*
 - a. Between 150-175AD
 - b. A harmony of the gospels
 - c. Matches the Textus Receptus

D. Irenaeus

1. Lived from 130-202AD
2. Born in Asia Minor
3. Taught by Polycarp
4. Pastor in Lyons, France
5. Wrote *Five Books Against Heresies*
6. Said that ambiguous passages (as parables) should not be made the source of doctrine
7. Believed in the complete humanity and divinity of Christ
8. Taught the freedom of the will

E. Tertullian

1. Lived from 160-220AD
2. Born in Carthage, North Africa to an officer in the Roman army
3. Trained in the law
4. Studied Stoic philosophy
5. First major Christian writer to use Latin
6. Joined the Montanists
7. Denied the co-eternity and the co-equality of the Son and the Spirit with the Father
8. Teaching concerning baptism
 - a. Believed in baptismal regeneration
 - b. Opposed infant baptism
 - c. Believed that post-baptismal sins were unpardonable
9. His writings laid the foundations for later Latin theology (Cyprian, Jerome, Augustine)

F. Hippolytus

1. Lived from 170-236AD
2. An active participant in Roman church matters
3. Wrote much but only fragments have been preserved
4. Almost a Montanist in his severity

G. Cyprian

1. Lived from 200-258AD
2. Trained as a lawyer
3. An admirer of Tertullian
4. Became bishop of the church in Carthage, North Africa
5. Did more for the development of ecclesiastical hierarchy than anyone else of this time
6. Taught the primacy of the church of Rome
7. Believed that there was no salvation outside the church
8. First to establish clear distinction between presbyters and bishops
9. Said, "He cannot have God for his Father who has not the church for his mother."
10. Suffered martyrdom under Valerian

VI. CORRUPTION OF CHRISTIANITY

A. Grace Through External Works

1. Several changes of doctrine during this time moved toward salvation by works. Each movement was slow and did not effect all believers. Each movement bore even more corrupt fruit in later generations.
2. Asceticism – grace through self-imposed hardship and suffering
3. Almsgiving – grace by easy-payment-plan. They felt that giving helped earn their way to heaven
4. Sacramentalism – grace through ceremony. The ordinances were thought to provide a bit of saving grace. There was also an increase in the number of ordinances or sacraments until the Catholics recognized seven in the Middle Ages.

B. Super-reverence for Holy Objects

1. Holy water
 - a. Special water that has been blessed and is in turn used to bless objects and people
 - b. Blessed by the prayer of the priest and the sign of the cross
 - c. Used to ward off unclean spirits and as a safeguard against sickness
 - d. Used to sprinkle the congregation before the Sunday mass
2. Holy places
3. Bones and relics of saints and martyrs
4. The cross