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**Church History**

**Core Seminar**

**Class 1: The Early Church: Beginnings and Persecutions**

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*“…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 of the Apostles 8:1,4

**Introduction: What is Church History and why is it important?**

To be a Christian is to be a part of history. And to grow as a Christian is to be a student of history. This does not mean that every Christian enjoys researching old documents in musty archives, or reading the latest historical best-seller from Oxford University Press. Rather, it Christianity isn't a religion of abstraction or of speculative philosophies, but is a religion of historical fact. It is, among other things, a message about events that took place in time and space. Christianity also teaches some eternal truths (the existence of God, his attributes, and Trinitarian nature, etc.) but is focused on the historical events of Jesus' incarnation, death and resurrection. Therefore, the Christian is personally involved with history.

But often times, we tend to relegate the importance of history or we treasure history too much for its own sake.

This is how Carl Trueman describes the two tendencies:

"*An idolatry of the new and the novel, with [the concomitant] disrespect for anything traditional; or a nostalgia for the past which is little more than an idolatry of the old and the traditional. Both are disempowering: the first leaves the church as a free-floating anarchic entity which is doomed to reinvent Christianity anew every Sunday, and prone to being subverted and taken over by any charismatic (in the non-theological sense!) leader or group which cares to flex its muscle; the second leaves the church bound to the past as its leaders care to write that past and thus unable to engage critically with her own tradition.*"[[1]](#footnote-1)

As Dr. Trueman indicates history is important. What do you think are some effects of neglecting history for the Christian? A few that I thought of would be: Fuzzy ecclesiology; disunity over minutia; confusion over mission; adoption of cultural values; sloppy theology; weak foundations; heresy.

I have listed several reasons why I think we, as Christians should give attention to church history.

First, God commands us to be students of the past. In the Old Testament, God's people are reminded to remember his faithfulness to them in the past: his special covenant with them, his bringing them from Egypt, defeating their enemies time and again. We see the pattern as persistent: The Israelites did best when they remembered; the flailed and faltered when they forgot. This is also why God commanded them to build monuments and practice yearly ceremonies: He wanted them to remember what he did for them. We do not build monuments anymore, but some of our local church practices (baptism and the Lords Supper) remind us of God's faithfulness and grace. So we should make a habit of remembering the past.

Second, by the Gospel we have been adopted into a family that spans races, cultures, borders and even time. So it profits us to refresh our family history. Church history should provide for us plenty of examples of our brothers and sisters from all walks of life and from a variety of contexts who labored to bring their faith to bear upon the world in which they live.

Third, 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.

Finally, history should humble us and encourage us and equip us for evangelism. 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.

What do you think are some other reasons why Christians should give attention to history?

I think we should highlight a few things about this class and the next twelve weeks. First, this is not going to be a history of Christianity across the world. Time doesn’t permit us. But I would highly encourage the study of Christianity’s growth and expansion in areas not covered in this class. Second, what we will be looking at is more tailored. We are trying to locate our theology and practice in the stream of Christianity from the first century on. So we are highlighting things that are important to us as a local church.

**Context of the Early Christianity**

***Judaism***

Christianity emerged in many ways as an outgrowth of Judaism, and Christians were self-conscious about their roots in the ancient religion. They believed the same set of Scriptures and even claimed to worship the same God, Yahweh, who created and ruled the world. Jesus Christ had grown up in a Jewish family and was unmistakably Jewish in His teachings and practice. Many of the earliest Christians still worshipped in the Temple, kept the Jewish Sabbath, and thought of themselves as “good Jews” who just believed Jesus was the Messiah.

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 as historian Mark Noll says, the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD is the first major turning point in church history, because it is then that the church is forced out from the protective umbrella of Judaism.

***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 3000 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.

***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.

**Expansion of Christianity**

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.*”[[2]](#footnote-2)

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.

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. 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, 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.

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.

[Illustration: personal testimony is not just “God’s grace”...human means]

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. 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?

**Persecutions and Martyrdom**

This growth 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. 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. They were severe, however, and thousands of Christians were tortured and put to death in ways horrific and cruel.

We see this 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.

[Include in Handout--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 excoriate, 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

{Extra notes on persecutions: not universal, but local; not witch hunts, but brushes with law/reports from neighbors...peace was the "god" in Empire}

An early and well known persecution broke out under Nero. [NOTE: Handout lists persecutions] 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.*” [[3]](#footnote-3)

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.*”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Notice Tacitus’ charge of “hatred of humankind”. Nero seems to have persecuted Christians for 3 reasons: his desperate desire to distract attention from the great fire, widespread hostility towards Christians because they did not worship Roman gods, and 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.

[Application: From the very beginning Christian belief and practice chaffed the larger culture. Should it be any different when we say things like: marriage is the union of one man and one women for life?]

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. 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.”*

Some professing Christians actually did renounce Christ, and the church would suffer for centuries over questions regarding how to treat apostates (or the “lapsed” who requested readmission into the fellowship. [Note: this is one of the lasting effects of these early persecutions]

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. 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 Eccelsiastical 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 20th century] Those who refused were considered treasonous, and punished severely. Some Christians avoided the sacrifices and still acquired the certificates from greedy, corrupt officials. Many apostatized and denied their faith. Others fled into exile. Some believers resisted and were executed. But the Church had grown complacent, and 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. By 251, one historian writes that “all over the Mediterranean Christianity lay seemingly in ruins.” This should caution us against “romanticizing” persecution, or thinking that it always only strengthens and grows the church. Under Decius, persecution almost succeeded in destroying the church.

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 incompliant 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?

1. Carl R. Trueman, *Minority Report: Unpopular Thoughts on Everything from Ancient Christianity to Zen-Calvinism* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2008), 116–117. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Tertullian, *Tertullian, Apology, De Spectaculis*, The Loeb Classical Library. Latin Authors (London, New York: W. Heinemann, ltd.; G. P. Putnam’s sons, 1931), 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Cornelius Tacitus, *The Annals: The Reigns of Tiberius, Claudius, and Nero*, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 359. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., 360. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)