

# ***“Church History: Heroes, Heretics & Holy Wars”***

## ***Sunday School Notes***

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### **CLASS 1- Early Church Apologists & Martyrs**

In a book that Charles Spurgeon wrote urging other pastors to use commentaries in preparing their sermons, he comments that “I find it odd that he who thinks so highly of what the Holy Spirit teaches him, thinks so little of what the Holy Spirit teaches others also.” Church History is like that! We think very highly of what God is doing today and what the Holy Spirit teaches us now (as well as what He did during Bible times), but why do we discard what the Holy Spirit did in the intervening 2,000 years?

Our age has its way of thinking. Every age has its way of thinking, the spirit of the age. We are in a very enlightened, very open-minded age. Or are we? Not every age looks like ours, but from those that do we can learn how believers succeeded and failed; and from eras that look completely different we can realize how God works when the church and society function completely differently. We’ll see how a lot of the problems and debates through the ages were based on different understandings of Scripture passages, we’ll see how ancient heresies are still around today. And of course, those who don’t learn the lessons of history are “doomed to repeat them.”

Matthew 16:13-20 contains Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Christ, and Jesus saying “on this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.” Jesus didn’t say much beyond that about what the church would look like, but He promised that it would persevere.

J.C. Ryle quote about the church:

“Nothing can altogether overthrow and destroy the church. Its members may be persecuted, oppressed, imprisoned, beaten, beheaded, burned. But the true Church is never altogether extinguished: it rises from its afflictions; it lives on through fire and water. When crushed in one land, it springs up in another. The Pharaohs, the Herods, the Neros... have labored in vain to put down this Church. They slay their thousands, and then pass away and go to their own place. The true Church outlives them all, and sees them buried each in his turn. The Church is an anvil that has broken many a hammer in this world, and will break many a hammer still. The Church is a bush which is often burning, and yet is not consumed.” (Ryle, *Principles for Churchmen*, 118)

When did the church start? Arguments for: Adam & Eve/Creation? Abraham/Judaism? The Incarnation? Pentecost? The church always was, & traces its roots to the very beginning, but for the purposes of this class, we’ll take “Post-Scripture formal church history.”

In AD 64 the Jewish temple was finished, thousands of laborers were out of work; AD 66 the Jews revolted, refusing to perform daily sacrifice for the emperor. Rome sent an army.

70 AD- Emperor Vespasian’s forces led by Titus broke through the walls of Jerusalem, looted and burned the temple; its treasures carted off to Rome. The Holy City was destroyed. Every synagogue in Palestine was burned to the ground.

At the beginning of the Jewish revolt, the Christian community fled the city and took refuge on the other side of the Jordan (as Jesus had told them to do in Matthew 24:15-21). This helped make the decisive break between Christianity and Judaism. Judaism relocated to Jamnia; in AD 90 had a council that essentially condemned all Christians.

The 6 accusations against Christians early on in the Roman Empire were:<sup>1</sup>

- they were *atheists* because they did not participate in Emperor worship or traditional religions.
- they practiced *incest* and put so much emphasis on loving your brothers and sisters
- they were *cannibals* who ate the flesh and drank the blood of some victim in their ritual
- They were also seen to trick the poor into joining them
- they were bad citizens who would not defend the realm,
- their doctrine was confused and contradictory (God died? God was war in OT, peace in NT?)

BAD REPUTATION QUOTES:

-Tertullian in his *Apology* wrote, "If the Tiber floods the city, or if the Nile refuses to rise, or if the sky withholds its rain, if there is an earthquake, a famine, a pestilence, at once the cry is raised: 'Christians to the lion.'"<sup>2</sup>

-Celsus, a critic of Christianity wrote: "Far from us, say the Christians, be any man possessed of any culture or wisdom or judgment; their aim is to convince only worthless and contemptible people, idiots, slaves, poor women, and children... These are the only ones whom they manage to turn into believers."<sup>3</sup>

GOOD REPUTATION QUOTE:

Emperor Julian said this (4<sup>th</sup> century, but true early on too): "Atheism (i.e. Christian faith) has been specially advanced through the loving service rendered to strangers, and through their care for the burial of the dead. It is a scandal that there is not a single Jew who is a beggar, and that the godless Galileans care not for their own poor but for ours as well; while those who belong to us look in vain for the help that we should render them."<sup>4</sup>

**Christian apologists** (*someone who presents a defense, not someone who's sorry*) turned the accusations of immorality back on the Romans, who practiced infanticide, sexual freedom, and prayed to made up gods.

-Athenagoras of Athens, Greece defended Christianity against all those accusations.

-Justin Martyr – was born in Judea, what is modern-day called the West Bank; ministered and beheaded in Rome. Greatest of the Christian apologists of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century; philosopher who tried to harmonize Christian beliefs with Greek philosophy; "Logos" or divine Reason/wisdom that Socrates & Plato taught. Anyone who came before Christ was guided by the Logos, we just know it now as Jesus. We can take whatever value we can find in pagan culture and philosophy. Killed mid-100s.

- Irenaeus- born in Turkey, bishop in Lyons in SE France wrote "Against Heresies" particularly against Gnostics.

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Comby, *How To Read Church History, Vol. 1*, New York: Crossroad, 1999, p. 30

<sup>2</sup> Bruce Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, Dallas: Word, 1995, p. 42.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 33.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 36.

-Tertullian (Carthage in Africa) produced probably the best defense of Christianity in his *Apology* in 197. Tertullian was around @200 AD. Was the first one to coin the names Old and New Testaments. Also gave us the word "Trinity", said that "God is one substance (or essence) and God is three persons."

-Origen (Alexandria, Egypt) was 3<sup>rd</sup> century; set up important rules of interpretation. Wrote *On First Principles*, an introductory summary of the Christian faith. Started a school in Caesarea, but was eventually tortured under the persecution of Decius in 250s. He was so brilliant that unbelievers lamented that he was a Christian, a waste of a good mind.

### **Persecutions:**

It's a little misleading to think that Christians were constantly killed in amphitheatres for the first few hundred years. Prior to AD 200, Roman attempts to silence Christians were half-hearted at best. Few Roman emperors were bloodthirsty villains, though persecution was intense at times. Christians were worse than Jews, though- they both refused to bow to the Emperor, but Christians were intent on making everyone else Christians, the Jews weren't.

-54-68 – Nero persecutions- needed someone to blame the fire of Rome on; killed Peter and Paul at the least

-98-117 – Trajan punished Christians if brought before authorities and wouldn't recant, but relatively small scale, very sporadic.

-AD 201 – Rome makes conversion to Judaism and Christianity a capital crime,

-AD 202 – Severus said you had to acknowledge the "Unconquered Son" as your supreme.

-AD 250 – Decius declares that every Roman citizen must sacrifice to Roman gods on pain of death

-2<sup>nd</sup> half of 3<sup>rd</sup> century peaceful

-303 – The "Great Persecution" The last widespread persecution of Christians; Diocletian decreed all churches destroyed, Scriptures burned, high-ranking Christians lose citizenship & all others made slaves. Christians tortured and killed widespread.

**Greek word "martyos" = witness.** Tertullian: "The blood of martyrs is the seed of the church."

The apostles:

Peter –crucified upside down in Rome by Nero, 64 AD

Paul – Killed by Nero in Rome, perhaps 63 or 67 AD

Other crucified apostles: James son of Alphaeus, Philip, Simon & Bartholomew

Killed by the sword: Matthew & James, son of Zebedee

Killed by arrows- Thaddaeus

Spear Thrust- Thomas

Two accounts from *Foxe's Christian Martyrs*:

1) James, the brother of Jesus and the author of the NT book of James, was killed @30 years after Jesus by the Jewish leaders. The scribes and Pharisees told James he should stand on top of the temple so that when he taught about Jesus he could be heard by everyone. People were starting to get converted, so they changed their minds and went up and threw him off the temple. But he didn't die, but he started praying that God would forgive them (just like Jesus did). They were about to stone him when someone pointed out that he was praying for them. But one of them took an instrument used to beat cloth and hit him over the head and killed him.

2) Perpetua was a 26 year old woman @ 200AD, during the reign of Severus. She refused to sacrifice to the idols, so she was put in a dungeon. When she was brought before the judge to deny her faith in Christ, she refused despite the fact that her father brought her infant to the trial and begged her to save her life for the sake of her child. She was taken to the arena with another woman and a bull was sent in to attack them, but it refused. So they forced a gladiator to kill her, but he wouldn't do it. So Perpetua guided his sword into her and died.

Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna in Turkey, protégé of Apostle John – “80 and 6 years have I served him and he hath done me no wrong; how then can I blaspheme my king who saved me?” Burned to death, mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century.

Ignatius was the bishop of Antioch, emphasized 3 things:

- 1) The unity of the church,
- 2) The dangers of heresy. The biggest heresy he reacted to was Docetism- the idea that Jesus only appeared to be human; God could not really become human or that would destroy his divine nature; God could not actually suffer and die.
- 3) The glory of martyrdom; felt that it was the completion of the Christian life, the ultimate modeling after Christ. These weren't just words- as he was headed to death in Rome in 107, friends devised an escape plan that he turned down; wanted to die for Jesus.

Justin Martyr and Origen (under Apologists)

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