

Church History
Lesson 4 - Early Church Writings (1 Clement, Ignatius, Didache)

1. Introduction - Writings from the Apostolic Fathers

1.1. The Apostolic Fathers and their writings

1.1.1. After the apostles had all died created a very different situation for the young church

1.1.1.1. Few if any people who had actually walked with Jesus were still alive

1.1.1.2. In case of disputes over doctrine or in relationships, there were no apostles who could be turned to for a decision about what to do

1.1.2. Obviously, the church had leaders to guide her through this transition. The leaders of this time are often referred to as the Apostolic Fathers.

1.1.2.1. These leaders were not themselves apostles, and their writings were not considered Scripture (although a few of them were considered as candidates to be accepted as Scripture.)

1.1.2.2. However, many of these leaders knew the apostles personally, or were at most one generation removed from the apostles.

1.1.2.3. For this reason these individuals held a place of real esteem in the life of the church, and their writings give a real glimpse into Christianity as it developed during the time from the close of the NT canon (between 70-90 AD or so) to the middle of the 2nd century (circa 150 AD or so.)

1.1.3. Consequently, Christians came to expect that to follow Jesus would mean suffering in this present age. That was the normal Christian life.

1.1.3.1. 2 Timothy 3:12 - In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted...

1.1.3.2. Acts 14:21–22 - They preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, ²² strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. **“We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,” they said.**

1.1.3.3. 1 Thessalonians 3:3–4 - so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. You know quite well that we were destined for them. ⁴ In fact, **when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know.**

2. The First Wave of Persecution - From Jews Who Rejected Jesus & Christianity

- 2.1.** The earliest persecution came, not from the government, but from Jews who rejected Jesus and Christianity.
 - 2.1.1.** Acts 4:1–3 - The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. ² They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. ³ They seized Peter and John, and because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day.
 - 2.1.2.** Acts 5:17–18 - Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy. ¹⁸They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail.
 - 2.1.3.** Acts 5:40–41 - His speech persuaded them. They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. ⁴¹ The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.
- 2.2.** This persecution from Jewish people was not because they thought they were persecuting another religion, but precisely because they thought of Christianity as a heretical, impure schism within Judaism. And as we saw last time, the earliest Christians themselves viewed Christianity as being true Judaism, and within the larger stream of Judaism.
 - 2.2.1.** For those early Christians, Judaism was not a rival religion to Christianity, but the same faith, even though those who followed it did not see or believe that the prophecies had been fulfilled. (Gonzales, location 921)
 - 2.2.2.** From the point of view of those Jews who rejected Christianity, the situation was understood in a similar manner. Christianity was not a new religion, but a heretical sect within Judaism. (Gonzales, location 923)
 - 2.2.3.** The early Christians did not believe that they were following a new religion. They were Jews, and their main difference with the rest of Judaism was that they were convinced that the Messiah had come, whereas other Jews continued awaiting his advent. (Gonzales, location 915)
 - 2.2.4.** The late first and early second century saw an increased alienation of believers in Jesus from the synagogues. (Ferguson, location 942)
 - 2.2.5.** Furthermore, many Jews believed, with some biblical foundation, that the reason why they had lost their independence and been made subjects of the Empire was that the people had not been sufficiently faithful to the traditions of their ancestors. Nationalistic and patriotic sentiment was aroused by the fear that these new heretics could once more bring the wrath of God upon Israel. (Gonzales, location 928)

- 2.2.6.** In the book of Acts the government did not distinguish Christians from Jews, whose religion was legally recognized. (Ferguson, location 1276)
- 2.3.** In fact, Christians sometimes initially appealed to the Roman government for relief from Jewish persecution. However, because Rome too viewed Christians as simply another sect within Judaism, they sometimes refused to become involved.
- 2.3.1.** Acts 18:12–17 - While Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him into court. ¹³ “This man,” they charged, “is persuading the people to worship God in ways contrary to the law.” ¹⁴ Just as Paul was about to speak, Gallio said to the Jews, “If you Jews were making a complaint about some misdemeanor or serious crime, it would be reasonable for me to listen to you. ¹⁵ But since it involves questions about words and names and your own law — settle the matter yourselves. I will not be a judge of such things.” ¹⁶ So he had them ejected from the court. ¹⁷ Then they all turned on Sosthenes the synagogue ruler and beat him in front of the court. But Gallio showed no concern whatever.
- 2.3.2.** For these reasons, in most of the New Testament it is Jews who persecute Christians, who in turn seek refuge under the wing of Roman authorities. This happens, for instance, when some Jews in Corinth accuse Paul before Proconsul Gallio, saying that “this man is persuading men to worship God contrary to the law,” to which Gallio answers, “If it were a matter of wrongdoing or vicious crime, I should have reason to hear you, O Jews; but since it is a matter of questions about words and names and your own law, see to it yourselves; I refuse to be a judge of these things” (Acts 18:14 (Gonzales, location 930)
- 2.3.3.** A good illustration of this policy was the expulsion of Jews from Rome by Emperor Claudius, around A.D. 51. Acts 18:2 mentions that expulsion, but does not explain the reason for it. Suetonius, a Roman historian, says that Jews were expelled from the capital city for their disorderly conduct “because of Chrestus.” Most historians agree that “Chrestus” is none other than “Christus,” and that what actually took place in Rome was that Christian proclamation caused so many riots among Jews that the emperor decided to expel the lot. At that time, Romans still saw the conflict between Christians and Jews as an internal matter within Judaism. (Gonzales, location 939)
- 2.3.4.** For instance, the presence of Christians had been the occasion of a disturbance in Rome (c. 49) during the reign of Claudius, who expelled Jews from the city (Acts 18:2) because of agitation over “Chrestus” (Suetonius, Claudius 25.4). (Ferguson, location 1280)
- 2.4.** This initial situation of Jewish persecution of Christians, and sometimes Christians even appealing to the Roman authorities for protection, explains the majority of persecution that we see in the pages of the New Testament.

- 2.4.1.** For example, all of the persecution in the early chapters of Acts, including the martyrdom of Stephen the persecution that spilled out from that, was from Jews (including Paul himself!)
- 2.4.2.** Furthermore, most of the persecution Paul suffered was at the hands of fellow Jews, and the reason he was eventually taken to Rome was because he himself appealed to Caesar for protection. It is this story that dominates the later chapters in Acts.
- 2.4.2.1.** Acts 22:21–25 - “Then the Lord said to me, ‘Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’” ²² The crowd listened to Paul until he said this. Then they raised their voices and shouted, “Rid the earth of him! He’s not fit to live!” ²³ As they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air, ²⁴ the commander ordered Paul to be taken into the barracks. He directed that he be flogged and questioned in order to find out why the people were shouting at him like this. ²⁵ **As they stretched him out to flog him, Paul said to the centurion standing there, “Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who hasn’t even been found guilty?”**
- 2.4.2.2.** Acts 22:30 - The next day, since **the commander wanted to find out exactly why Paul was being accused by the Jews,** he released him and ordered the chief priests and all the Sanhedrin to assemble. Then he brought Paul and had him stand before them.
- 2.4.2.3.** Acts 23:10 - The dispute became so violent that the commander was afraid Paul would be torn to pieces by them. He ordered the troops to go down and take him away from them by force and bring him into the barracks.

2.4.2.4. Acts 23:16–24 - But when the son of Paul's sister heard of this plot, he went into the barracks and told Paul. ¹⁷ Then Paul called one of the centurions and said, "Take this young man to the commander; he has something to tell him." ¹⁸ So he took him to the commander. The centurion said, "Paul, the prisoner, sent for me and asked me to bring this young man to you because he has something to tell you." ¹⁹ The commander took the young man by the hand, drew him aside and asked, "What is it you want to tell me?" ²⁰ He said: "The Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul before the Sanhedrin tomorrow on the pretext of wanting more accurate information about him. ²¹ Don't give in to them, because more than forty of them are waiting in ambush for him. They have taken an oath not to eat or drink until they have killed him. They are ready now, waiting for your consent to their request." ²² The commander dismissed the young man and cautioned him, "Don't tell anyone that you have reported this to me." ²³ Then he called two of his centurions and ordered them, "Get ready a detachment of two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen to go to Caesarea at nine tonight. ²⁴ Provide mounts for Paul so that he may be taken safely to Governor Felix."

2.4.2.5. Acts 25:8–12 - Then Paul made his defense: "I have done nothing wrong against the law of the Jews or against the temple or against Caesar." ⁹ Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favor, said to Paul, "Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and stand trial before me there on these charges?" ¹⁰ Paul answered: "I am now standing before Caesar's court, where I ought to be tried. I have not done any wrong to the Jews, as you yourself know very well. ¹¹ If, however, I am guilty of doing anything deserving death, I do not refuse to die. But if the charges brought against me by these Jews are not true, no one has the right to hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar!" ¹² After Festus had conferred with his council, he declared: "You have appealed to Caesar. To Caesar you will go!"

3. The Second Wave of Persecution - From Local Gentiles Acting Apart From the Government

- 3.1.** From the times of the New Testament, there was also another type of persecution Christians faced. This came not from Jews nor from the government, but rather from Gentile neighbors. Sometimes this persecution was stirred up by Jewish leaders, but sometimes it was not.
 - 3.1.1.** Yet in Acts we do get the background for later unfavorable treatment: the Jews sometimes stirred up trouble, Christian preaching often created wider disturbances (something those in authority always disliked), and Christian teaching threatened pagan society. (Ferguson, location 1279)
- 3.2.** We read of this type of persecution at various places in the book of Acts:
 - 3.2.1.** Acts 14:18–20 - Even with these words, they had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them. ¹⁹ Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. ²⁰ But after the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city. The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe.
 - 3.2.1.1.** Note that these are clearly Gentiles. They had proclaimed Paul and Barnabas to be Greek gods (see Acts 14:11-12), and they wanted to offer sacrifices to them.
 - 3.2.1.2.** However, note in this case, the idea of persecution came from the Jewish leaders, while the act of persecution was carried out by the Gentile mob.
 - 3.2.2.** Acts 16:19–24 - When the owners of the slave girl realized that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities. ²⁰ **They brought them before the magistrates and said, “These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar ²¹ by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice.” ²² The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten.** ²³ After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. ²⁴ Upon receiving such orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.
 - 3.2.2.1.** Note that the people charging Paul and Silas called them Jews, in distinction from the people themselves being Roman.
 - 3.2.2.2.** Furthermore, we can read in Acts 16:35-40 that when the magistrates learned that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, they were afraid and tried to appease them.
 - 3.2.2.3.** Thus, treatment of Christians might vary according to whether they were Roman citizens or not, because Christianity was not outlawed, and if one was a Roman citizen might not be punished at all at this point.

3.2.3. Acts 17:5–9 - But **the Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city.** They rushed to Jason’s house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd. ⁶ But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other brothers before the city officials, shouting: “These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, ⁷ and Jason has welcomed them into his house. **They are all defying Caesar’s decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus.”** ⁸ **When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil.** ⁹ Then they made Jason and the others post bond and let them go.

3.2.3.1. Note once again that the ring leaders are Jews, but the crowd of rioters seems to be mainly Gentile, and the charges have nothing to do with Judaism, but defying Caesars decrees and saying there is another king - Jesus. This was a charge aimed to stir up loyal Gentile Romans citizens - and it did.

3.2.3.2. But also notice that the government does not kill them - they follow orderly legal procedures, taking a bond and then letting them go.

3.3. We can also see that predominately Gentile churches experienced local persecutions from their neighbors (sometimes apparently instigated by Jewish leaders) as well:

3.3.1. 1 Thessalonians 2:14–16 - For you, brothers, became imitators of God’s churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus: You suffered from your own countrymen the same things those churches suffered from the Jews, ¹⁵ who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. They displease God and are hostile to all men ¹⁶ in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last.

3.3.1.1. This passage is describing the same persecution discussed in Acts 17:5-9 above.

3.3.1.2. We know from Acts 17:4 that while some Thessalonian Jews believed, an large number of Gentiles did so.

3.3.1.3. Furthermore, Paul notes that they suffered these things “from their own countrymen” and that the Jews were trying to stop Paul from speaking to Gentiles.

3.3.1.4. From all of this it appears that this passage is just like the one in Acts - persecution may have been instigated by the Jews, but it was carried out by Gentiles.

3.3.2. 1 Peter 1:6–7 - In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to **suffer grief in all kinds of trials.** ⁷ These have come so that your faith — of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire — may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

3.3.3. 1 Peter 4:12–16 - Dear friends, do not be surprised at **the painful trial you are suffering**, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³ But rejoice that you **participate in the sufferings of Christ**, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴ **If you are insulted because of the name of Christ**, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. ¹⁵ If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. ¹⁶ **However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.**

3.3.3.1. Most scholars believe that Peter is writing to Gentile rather than Jewish believers, and that these believers were being persecuted (ranging from insults to physical persecution apparently) by their neighbors, rather than by the government.

3.3.3.2. We do not have records of government sponsored persecution at the time of this writing (prior to the persecution under Nero), and especially not in these provinces.

4. The Third Wave of Persecution - From the Roman Empire

4.1. As we have seen, persecution was initially a local thing, often at the hands of Jews. However, as the church spread to Gentiles, Christians began to suffer at the hands of Gentile neighbors as well.

4.2. Initially, the Roman empire was at worst neutral, and was sometimes even appealed to for protection from persecution. This was because the Roman Empire was in general very tolerant of religions. Rome did not care what religion people followed as long as they did not disturb the peace and were loyal to Rome and her culture.

4.2.1. As long as things were relatively orderly, Romans preferred to stay out of such matters. (Gonzales, location 937)

4.2.2. Let's start with Rome's basic policy. Imperial authorities were remarkably tolerant of religions from those lands overrun by the Roman legions. If the national religions of the conquered countries would add homage to the emperor to their other ceremonies, Rome almost never interfered. (Shelley, location 832)

4.3. However this situation drastically changed under Nero. This is the persecution that most are familiar with, though many misunderstand the details.

4.3.1. Nero was initially a fairly popular emperor. However, this faded and he became unpopular with the general populace and many leaders within the empire.

4.3.2. During this period of increasing unpopularity, on June 18, 64 AD, a huge fire broke out devastating much of the city. Although it appears Nero may have been away from the city when the fire broke out, rumors began to spread that he was responsible for the fire.

- 4.3.2.1.** Ten years after his accession to the throne, he was despised by the people as well as by the poets and artists, who were offended by the emperor's claim that he was one of them. Soon the rumor began circulating that he was mad. Such was the state of things when, on the night of June 18, A.D. 64, a great fire broke out in Rome. It appears that Nero was several miles away, in his palace at Antium, and that as soon as he heard the news he hurried to Rome, where he tried to organize the fight against the fire. (Gonzales, location 959)
- 4.3.2.2.** Ten of the fourteen sections of the city were destroyed. In the midst of their sufferings, the people clamored for justice. Soon the rumor arose—and persists to this day in many history books—that Nero had ordered the city destroyed so he could rebuild it according to his fancy. The Roman historian Tacitus, who may well have been present at the time, records several of the rumors that circulated, but seems inclined to believe that the fire began accidentally in an oil warehouse. (Gonzales, location 966)
- 4.3.3.** In order to shift attention, Nero looked for a scapegoat. As it happened, two of the sections of the cities that were spared had large populations of Jews and Christians, so Nero decided to fix the blame on the Christians.
- 4.3.3.1.** Nero tried to allay such suspicions, but it soon became clear that he would not succeed in this as long as there was no one else to blame. Two of the areas that had not burned had a very high proportion of Jewish and Christian population. Therefore, the Emperor decided to blame the Christians. (Gonzales, location 975)
- 4.3.3.2.** To turn this hatred away from himself Nero accused the Christians of having set the fire. The accusation certainly was not true, but large numbers of Christians were arrested and a terrible persecution followed. (Shelley, location 891)
- 4.3.3.3.** The situation changed under Nero. In response to rumors that he was responsible for the great fire that destroyed much of Rome (AD 64), Nero (or his magistrate) charged and punished Christians for the fire. (Ferguson, location 1284)
- 4.3.4.** This persecution appears to have been limited to Rome and nearby areas, but it was brutal. Many Christians were tortured in the most cruel manner and put to death. Although the charge was initially due to the fire, soon all that mattered was being a Christian. It was probably this persecution that saw the martyrdom of Paul and Peter.
- 4.3.4.1.** Christians were now recognized by the authorities in Rome as distinct from Jews. The persecution under Nero was confined to Rome, but this action set a precedent that could be followed elsewhere. (Ferguson, location 1288)

- 4.3.4.2.** To turn this hatred away from himself Nero accused the Christians of having set the fire. The accusation certainly was not true, but large numbers of Christians were arrested and a terrible persecution followed. Many Christians were even crucified. Some were sewn up in the skins of wild beasts; then big dogs were let loose upon them, and they were torn to pieces. Women were tied to mad bulls and dragged to death. After nightfall Christians were burned at the stake in Nero's garden. The Roman people who hated the Christians were free to come into the garden, and Nero drove around in his chariot enjoying the horrible spectacle to the full. (Shelley, location 891)
- 4.3.4.3.** It was probably during this persecution that the apostles Peter and Paul suffered martyrdom in Rome. (Shelley, 896)
- 4.3.4.4.** Tacitus, the Roman historian who reports the incident (Annals 15.44), did not give much credence to the charge of arson, but he did consider Christianity a "deadly superstition" deserving punishment for "hatred of the human race." (Ferguson, location 1285)
- 4.3.4.5.** Tacitus tells the story: 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. Christ, from whom they take their name, was executed by Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius. Stopped for a moment, this evil superstition reappeared, not only in Judea, where was the root of the evil, but also in Rome, where all things sordid and abominable from every corner of the world come together. 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. (Gonzales, location 977)
- 4.3.4.6.** It is also very likely that both Peter and Paul were among the Neronian martyrs. On the other hand, there is no mention of any persecution outside the city of Rome, and therefore it is quite likely that this persecution, although exceedingly cruel, was limited to the capital of the Empire. (Gonzales, 1004)
- 4.3.4.7.** Although at first Christians were charged with arson, soon they were persecuted for the mere fact of being Christians—and for all the supposed abominations connected with that name. Ancient writers tell us that Nero issued an edict against Christians. But such an edict, if it ever existed, is no longer extant. (Gonzales, location 1006)

4.3.4.8. But Tacitus goes on: 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, and in the circus he himself became a spectacle, for he mingled with the people dressed as a charioteer, or he rode around in his chariot. All of this aroused the mercy of the people, even against these culprits who deserved an exemplary punishment, for it was clear that they were not being destroyed for the common good, but rather to satisfy the cruelty of one person. (Gonzales, location 993)

4.4. The persecution under Domitian

4.4.1. Following the death of Nero, there was a year of political turmoil during which four separate emperors reigned. Eventually Vespasian (who had overseen the conquering of Palestine and Jerusalem) gained control and reigned. During the reign of Vespasian and Titus Christians were generally left alone by the authorities. (See Gonzales, location 1010).

4.4.2. Domitian became the emperor following Titus. He began his rule in 81 and initially ignored Christians. However, he loved Roman traditions and attempted to restore them, including the worship and sacrifices to traditional Roman gods. Whether for this reason or another, he eventually began to persecute believers. (See Gonzales, location 1014; Ferguson, 1290).

4.4.3. One likely cause was the problem between Domitian and the Jews. He expected Jews to give the annual offering that had formerly gone for the Temple to now be sent to Rome. Some Jews refused to do this, which started a series of strict laws against Judaism and Jewish practices. Since the relationship between Christianity and Judaism was still evolving and little understood, Christians may have been swept into this. (See Gonzales, location 1019).

4.4.4. As in the case of Nero, it does not appear that this persecution was uniformly severe throughout the Empire. In fact, it is only from Rome and Asia Minor that there are trustworthy reports of persecution at this time. (Gonzales, location 1024).

4.4.4.1. It is possible that the reason persecution broke out in Asia Minor is that it was a center of the imperial cult from the time of Augustus (during Jesus lifetime), and Domitian appears to have insisted on receiving divine honors. Thus, this would most likely be enforced in Asia Minor, and if Christian refused, persecution would ensue.

4.4.4.2. This is yet another thread that will continue to cause problems for Christians in the years to come.

- 4.4.5.** In Rome, Flavius Clemens and his wife Flavia Domitilla, who may have been related to the emperor, were executed. They were accused of “atheism” and of “Jewish practices.” Since Christians worshiped an invisible God, pagans often declared them to be atheists. Therefore, it is likely that Flavius Clemens and Domitilla died because they were Christians. (Gonzales, location 1025)
- 4.4.6.** Depending on how one dates the writings of John, especially Revelation, it may be that the persecution which caused them was the one under Domitian.
- 4.4.6.1.** In Asia Minor, this persecution resulted in the writing of the book of Revelation, whose author was exiled on the island of Patmos. (Gonzales, location 1034)
- 4.4.6.2.** In the midst of persecution, Revelation displays a much more negative attitude towards Rome than the rest of the New Testament. (Gonzales, location 1036)
- 4.4.7.** Fortunately, when persecution broke out Domitian’s reign was coming to an end. Like Nero, Domitian was increasingly seen as a tyrant. His enemies conspired against him, and he was murdered in his own palace. The Roman senate then decreed that his name should be erased from every inscription, so that there would be no memory of him. (Gonzales, location 1039)
- 4.4.8.** Domitian was assassinated in 96 AD and succeeded by Trajan.
- 4.5.** The persecution under Trajan (98-117)
- 4.5.1.** The policy towards Christians under the rule of Trajan becomes much clearer, thanks in large part to correspondence between Pliny the Younger, who was an imperial magistrate serving in Asia Minor, and Trajan, regarding how to handle Christians.
- 4.5.2.** In A.D. 111, Pliny the Younger was appointed governor of Bithynia, on the northern shore of what today is Turkey. From various sources, it would appear that Pliny was a just man with a profound respect for Roman law and traditions. But in Bithynia he had to deal with an unexpected problem. There were many Christians in the region—so many, in fact, that Pliny declared that the pagan temples were almost deserted, and that the sellers of sacrificial victims found few buyers. (Gonzales, location 1059).
- 4.5.3.** Pliny asked Trajan what he should do with these Christians. In doing so, he described his current policy:
- 4.5.3.1.** When people were accused of being Christians, he asked them if they were. If they said they were not, or that they had been but were not any longer, he would require them to pray to the gods, burn incense before the image of the emperor, and curse Christ, something that he had heard true Christians would never do. Once they performed these rites, he simply let them go. (See Gonzales, location 1065).

4.5.3.2. If they said they were Christians and refused to do these things, Pliny's practice was to offer them three opportunities to recant, while threatening them with death. If they refused, he had them executed, not so much for being Christians, as for their obstinacy. If they were Roman citizens, he had them sent to Rome, as the law required. (See Gonzales, location 1067).

4.5.3.2.1. The correspondence in 112 between Pliny the Younger (Epistles 10.96), governor of Bithynia, and the emperor, Trajan, provides a window into the legal situation. From this correspondence it is clear that the standard charge was already "the name": "I asked whether they were Christians. (Ferguson, location 1375)

4.5.3.2.2. Faithful Christians wanted the examination to be on the basis of supposed crimes, for they were guilty of none; apostates wanted it to be on the basis of the name, for they were no longer members. Pliny himself wanted to encourage apostates, for he felt that many could be reclaimed from the Christian superstition. (Ferguson, location 1393).

4.5.4. Pliny also described what he could learn of the beliefs and practices of Christians, which may be summarized as follows: All he could learn was that Christians gathered before dawn to sing to Christ "as to a god," and to join in an oath not to commit theft, adultery, or any such sins. They also used to gather for a common meal, but had discontinued this practice when the authorities had outlawed secret meetings. Not quite convinced that this was the whole truth, Pliny put two female Christian ministers to torture. But they simply confirmed what he already knew. (Gonzales, location 1071).

4.5.4.1. "They were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god, and bound themselves to a solemn oath, not to any wicked deeds, but never to commit any fraud, theft, adultery, never to falsify their word, not to deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up. When this was over, it was their custom to depart and to assemble again to partake of a meal—but ordinary and innocent food." (Pliny the Younger to Trajan)

4.5.4.2. To secure this information Pliny states that he had two female slaves who were deaconesses tortured (which was standard Roman practice for slaves). He said that he uncovered nothing from them but "depraved, excessive superstition."

- 4.5.5. To Pliny's questions, Trajan gave three responses (Ferguson, 1397):
 - 4.5.5.1. Christians were not to be sought out, but if accused and convicted they were to be punished. (Ferguson, location 1397)
 - 4.5.5.2. No anonymous accusations were to be received.
 - 4.5.5.3. The deniers were to be pardoned; punishment was, therefore, on the basis of the "name."
- 4.5.6. In other words, Christians were not punished for crimes committed before being brought to trial, but for their seeming contempt of Roman courts. Those who openly refused to worship the gods and the emperor had to be punished, first, because the dignity of the courts required it; and, secondly, because in refusing to worship the emperor they seemed to be denying his right to rule. (Gonzales, location 1090).
- 4.5.7. Because this policy was laid out by the very successful and popular emperor Trajan, it laid the basic stance of Rome to Christians for the next two hundred years.
 - 4.5.7.1. For these reasons, the policies which Trajan outlined in his response to Pliny were followed far beyond the borders of Bithynia, and long after Trajan's death. Throughout the second century, and part of the third, it was imperial policy not to seek out Christians, but still to punish them when they were brought before the authorities. That this was true even before the correspondence between Pliny and Trajan may be seen in the circumstances surrounding Ignatius' seven letters. (Gonzales, location 1093)
- 4.6. It was during the persecution under Trajan and Pliny the Younger that Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, was martyred.
 - 4.6.1. About A.D. 107, the elderly bishop of Antioch, Ignatius, was condemned to death by the imperial authorities. Since great festivities were being planned in Rome in celebration of a military victory, Ignatius was sent to the capital so that his death would help amuse the people. On his way to martyrdom, he wrote seven letters that are among the most valuable documents for our knowledge of early Christianity. (Gonzales, location 1098)
 - 4.6.2. It is clear from this that there was no general persecution of Christians throughout the Empire at this time, but that only those brought before the courts were condemned. This was why Ignatius could receive visitors who were obviously guilty of the same "crime" of which he stood convicted. (Gonzales, location 1113)
 - 4.6.3. Somehow, Ignatius had heard that Christians in Rome were considering the possibility of freeing him from death. He did not look upon this with favor. He was ready to seal his witness with his blood, and any move on the part of the Christians in Rome to save him would be an obstacle to his goal. (Gonzales, location 1123)

- 4.6.4.** If you remain silent about me, I shall become a word of God. But if you allow yourselves to be swayed by the love in which you hold my flesh, I shall again be no more than a human voice. - Ignatius, To the Romans. (Gonzales, location 1135)
- 4.7.** The Martyrdom of Polycarp
- 4.7.1.** Although very little is known of Ignatius' martyrdom, there is much more information regarding that of his younger friend, Polycarp, when his time came almost half a century later. It was the year 155, and the policy that Trajan had outlined for Pliny was still in effect. Christians were not sought out; but if they were accused and they refused to worship the gods, they had to be punished. (Gonzales, location 1141)
- 4.7.2.** When the old bishop learned that he was being sought, he followed the advice of the flock, and hid for several days. But after having changed to another hiding place, and still having been discovered, he decided that his arrest was the will of God, refused to flee any further, and calmly awaited those who came after him. (Gonzales, location 1151)
- 4.7.3.** The proconsul who presided at his trial tried to persuade him, urging him to think about his advanced age and worship the emperor. When Polycarp refused, the judge ordered him to cry: "Out with the atheists!" To this Polycarp responded by pointing at the crowd around him and saying: "Yes. Out with the atheists!" Again the judge insisted, promising that if he would swear by the emperor and curse Christ he would be free to go. But Polycarp replied: "For eighty-six years I have served him, and he has done me no evil. How could I curse my king, who saved me? (Gonzales, location 1154)
- 4.7.4.** When the judge threatened him with burning him alive, Polycarp simply answered that the fire that the judge could light would last only a moment, whereas the eternal fire would never go out. (Gonzales, location 1158)
- 4.8.** The persecution under Marcus Aurelius (161-180)
- 4.8.1.** Marcus Aurelius, who became emperor in A.D. 161, was one of the most enlightened minds of his age. He was not, like Nero and Domitian, enamored with power and vainglory. On the contrary, he was a refined man (Gonzales, location 1176)
- 4.8.2.** And yet, the same emperor who expressed such lofty ideals of government also ordered that Christians be persecuted. In the only reference to Christianity in his Meditations, the emperor praises those souls that are ready to abandon their bodies when the time comes, rather than cling to life, and then goes on to say that this attitude is praiseworthy only when it is the outcome of reason, "and not of obstinacy, as is the case with Christians. (Gonzales, location 1185)

- 4.8.3.** During the early years of his reign, there seemed to be an endless string of invasions, floods, epidemics and other disasters. Soon the explanation arose that Christians were to be blamed, for they had brought the wrath of the gods upon the Empire. It is impossible to know for certain that the emperor believed this explanation; but, in any case, he gave his full support to the persecution, and favored the revival of the old religion. (Gonzales, location 1190)
- 4.8.4.** The reign of Marcus Aurelius (161–80) was a bad time for Christians, due to disasters and misfortunes at different places in the Roman world. Although Christian Apologists joined the general praise for Marcus Aurelius as a person, his rule saw a worsening of persecution against Christians. There was a wave of persecution in 166–68, a time when the Parthian war, pressure from Germans on the Danube frontier, and an outbreak of the plague came close together. Presumably a general edict called for sacrifice to the gods, which was not specifically anti-Christian in intent, but made Christians conspicuous by their absence. (Ferguson, location 1306)
- 4.8.5.** Before the mid-third century the persecutions were local and occasional. Although they became somewhat more frequent under Marcus Aurelius, the legal situation did not change. (Ferguson, location 1408)
- 4.8.6.** It was during this persecution that the famous Christian scholar and writer Justin the Martyr was put to death.
- 4.8.6.1.** Another martyr during this persecution was Justin, perhaps the best Christian scholar of the time, who had founded in Rome a school where he taught what he called “the true philosophy,” that is, Christianity. He had recently bested a famous pagan philosopher in a public debate, and there are indications that it was this philosopher who accused him. In any case, Justin died as a martyr in Rome, although the “acts” of his martyrdom are much later, and therefore the details are questionable. (Gonzales, location 1201)
- 4.8.7.** Further insight into this persecution come to us through a letter that the churches of Lyons and Vienne, in Gaul, sent to their fellow Christians in Phrygia and Asia Minor. It seems that at first all that was done in those cities was to forbid Christians to visit public places. But then the mob began following them on the streets, shouting at them and pelting them. Finally, several Christians were arrested and taken before the governor to be tried. (Gonzales, location 1205)

- 4.8.8.** The writers of the letter explain that persecution had appeared unexpectedly, “like a bolt of lightning,” and that this was the reason why many were not prepared. Some of them weakened and “left the womb of the church like abortive ones.” The rest, however, stood firm, and this in turn increased the wrath of the governor and the mob. Torture was ordered. A certain Sanctus, when tortured, simply answered, “I am a Christian.” The more he was tortured, the more he persisted in saying nothing but these words. Moved by this and many other signs of courage, some who had earlier denied the faith returned to confess it and die as martyrs. (Gonzales, location 1210)
- 4.9.** Summary of persecution in the second and third centuries
- 4.9.1.** Such outbursts of bloodshed were not common during the first and second centuries. For long periods Christians were left in peace. But like the sword of Damocles, persecution was always poised above them. (Shelley, location 898).
- 4.9.2.** The fact of persecution is not in doubt. Although it was not as constant or as extensive as is often assumed, it was always present as a possibility. (Ferguson, location 1364)
- 4.9.3.** In summary, during the entire second century, Christians were in a precarious position. They were not constantly persecuted. Sometimes they were persecuted in some areas of the Empire, and not in others. (Gonzales, location 1230)
- 4.9.4.** In spite of some defections, the persecutions—instead of crushing the church—strengthened the resolve of devoted believers. Their steadfastness under pressure, even to martyrdom, called attention to Christian faith and attracted inquirers. (Ferguson, location 1684)

5. The reasons for persecution of Christians by the Roman empire

- 5.1.** The root cause - suspicion that Christians were not good, loyal Roman citizens, and were therefore even haters of the human race.
- 5.1.1.** They worshipped a man who had been convicted and put to death by a Roman magistrate!
- 5.1.1.1.** Various factors must be kept in mind in understanding the causes of persecution. Christians, of course, got off on the wrong foot as far as the Roman authorities were concerned. They worshipped a man who had been crucified by the judicial decision of a Roman governor on a charge of being a messianic (kingly) pretender. That circumstance would always be prejudicial against Christians. (Ferguson, location 1370)
- 5.1.2.** Christians refused to worship any God other than Jesus.
- 5.1.2.1.** While Rome had granted freedom to Jews to not worship the Roman gods, Christianity was increasingly seen as distinct from Judaism, so this protection was removed.

- 5.1.2.2. Furthermore, while Jews did not worship the Roman gods, they were a closed sect. Christians, however, were a rapidly growing group within the empire, and the Church was spreading like wildfire due to missionary zeal.
 - 5.1.2.2.1. Once the Romans discovered what the Christians were up to they were confronted by the problem of toleration in a more exasperating form than even the Jews had presented. The Jews, after all, were “a sort of closed corporation, a people set apart from others by the mark of circumcision, who lived and worshiped largely by themselves, and did no active proselyting.” The Christians, on the other hand, were always talking about their Jesus. They were out to make Christians of the entire population of the empire, and the rapidity of their spread showed that this was no idle dream. (Shelley, location 839)
 - 5.1.2.2.2. Not only did they, like the Jews, refuse to worship the emperor as a living god, but they were doing their utmost to convince every subject of the emperor to join them in their refusal. From time to time, then, Christians felt the wrath of the empire and its people. (Shelley, location 843)
 - 5.1.2.3. Christians were held responsible for various calamities since they did not worship the traditional gods. (Ferguson, location 1316)
- 5.1.3. Christians remained aloof from the population, refusing to participate in many festivals and activities.
 - 5.1.3.1. Christians, for religious reasons, could not engage in the accepted expressions of political loyalty, so they appeared as a threat to the Roman state. (Ferguson, location 1372)
 - 5.1.3.2. Christians aroused considerable popular animosity. People tend to believe the worst about a group that seems aloof, secretive, even foreign. (Ferguson, location 1314)
 - 5.1.3.3. The main cause of the hatred of early Christians in Roman society lies in their distinctive life-style. “We have the reputation,” said Tertullian in his Apology, “of living aloof from crowds. (Shelley, location 846)
 - 5.1.3.4. The word used to describe the Christian in the New Testament is highly significant. It is the term *hagios*, often translated “saints.” It means holy ones, but its root suggests ‘different.’ (Shelley, location 848)

- 5.1.3.5.** Men always view with suspicion people who are different. Conformity, not distinctiveness, is the way to a trouble-free life. So the more early Christians took their faith seriously the more they were in danger of crowd reaction. Thus, simply by living according to the teachings of Jesus, the Christian was a constant unspoken condemnation of the pagan way of life. It was not that the Christian went about criticizing and condemning and disapproving, nor was he consciously self-righteous and superior. It was simply that the Christian ethic in itself was a criticism of pagan life. (Shelley, location 852)
- 5.1.3.6.** The Greeks and Romans had deities for every aspect of living—for sowing and reaping, for rain and wind, for volcanoes and rivers, for birth and death. But to the Christians these gods were nothing, and their denial of them marked the followers of Jesus as “enemies of the human race. (Shelley, location 857)
- 5.1.3.7.** These and other charges were more readily believed about Christians because they kept themselves removed from the normal activities of society. They remained aloof, however, because almost all aspects—athletics, entertainment, political affairs, and many commercial transactions—were permeated with idolatry. (Ferguson, location 1337)
- 5.1.3.8.** Inevitably, when he refused the invitation to some social occasion, the Christian seemed rude, boorish, and discourteous. (Shelley, location 863)
- 5.1.3.9.** Other social events Christians rejected because they found them wrong in themselves. Gladiatorial combats, for example, were to the Christian inhuman. (Shelley, location 864)
- 5.1.3.10.** The Christian fear of idolatry also led to difficulties in making a living. A mason might be involved in building the walls of a heathen temple, a tailor in making robes for a heathen priest, an incense-maker in making incense for the heathen sacrifices. Tertullian even forbade a Christian to be a schoolteacher, because such teaching involved using textbooks that told the ancient stories of the gods and called for observing the religious festivals of the pagan year. (Shelley, location 868)
- 5.1.3.11.** In short, the early Christian was almost bound to divorce himself from the social and economic life of his time—if he wanted to be true to his Lord. (Shelley, location 874)

5.1.4. Christians were the cause of unrest, often because of their refusal to worship and participate in civic activities that they found objectionable. Furthermore, as the number of Christians grew, this refusal could have adverse economic impacts for those who made their livelihood from these religious and civic practices. We can see an example of this in Acts 19:23-29:

5.1.4.1. Acts 19:23–29 - About that time there arose a great disturbance about the Way. ²⁴ A silversmith named Demetrius, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought in no little business for the craftsmen. ²⁵ He called them together, along with the workmen in related trades, and said: “Men, you know we receive a good income from this business. ²⁶ And you see and hear how this fellow Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia. He says that man-made gods are no gods at all. ²⁷ There is danger not only that our trade will lose its good name, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited, and the goddess herself, who is worshiped throughout the province of Asia and the world, will be robbed of her divine majesty.” ²⁸ When they heard this, they were furious and began shouting: “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” ²⁹ Soon the whole city was in an uproar. The people seized Gaius and Aristarchus, Paul’s traveling companions from Macedonia, and rushed as one man into the theater.

5.1.4.2. Moreover, the popular animosity aroused by the aloofness and secretiveness of Christians, and the civil disturbances their presence often caused, were part of the background to persecution. (Ferguson, location 1373)

5.1.4.3. Yet in Acts we do get the background for later unfavorable treatment: the Jews sometimes stirred up trouble, Christian preaching often created wider disturbances (something those in authority always dis-liked), and Christian teaching threatened pagan society. (Ferguson, location 1279)

5.1.4.4. For instance, the presence of Christians had been the occasion of a disturbance in Rome (c. 49) during the reign of Claudius, who expelled Jews from the city (Acts 18:2) because of agitation over “Chrestus” (Suetonius, Claudius 25.4). (Ferguson, location 1280).

5.1.5. On account of the items above, strange rumors began to circulate about Christians, accusing them of atheism, cannibalism, and gross immorality - maybe even incest.

5.1.5.1. The Christian Apologists repeatedly responded to three other charges: atheism, cannibalism, and incest. (Ferguson, location 1325)

- 5.1.5.2.** The mobs thought that people who did such terrible things, if allowed to live, would bring all sorts of trouble on the land. Such wickedness would stir up the gods, who would punish not only the Christians but those who had allowed them to exist. (Shelley, location 914)
- 5.1.5.3.** A cause of persecution of early Christians were the slanders disseminated about them. Once these were started, they could not be halted. The suspicion that the Christian gatherings were sexual orgies and cover for every kind of crime took hold of the popular imagination with a terrible vehemence. (Shelley, location 904).
- 5.1.5.4.** The charge of atheism seems strange to us, but to the Romans it made sense. The Christians refused to worship the civic gods, and they had no visible statue of their God, so they seemed to be atheists.
 - 5.1.5.4.1.** Atheism in the ancient world was practical, not theoretical. An atheist was someone who did not observe the traditional religious practices, regardless of what faith he professed. (Ferguson, location 1326)
 - 5.1.5.4.2.** The Christian Apologists insisted that Christians believed in God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit (Justin Martyr seems to throw in the holy angels as well for good measure), but this did not satisfy the basis of the objection, for Christians still did not perform the customary ceremonies. (Ferguson, location 1330)
 - 5.1.5.4.3.** Christians were accused of atheism. The charge arose from the fact that many within the empire could not understand an imageless worship. (Shelley, location 923)
 - 5.1.5.4.4.** There was little remaining of the worship of the ancient gods by the time Christianity came to Rome. The citizens were still expected, however, to observe the conventions of that worship as a matter of duty. (Shelley, location 926)
- 5.1.5.5.** The charge of cannibalism apparently arose because of a too literal misunderstanding of the Lord's Supper.
 - 5.1.5.5.1.** The charge of cannibalism probably started because the Lord's Supper was practiced in secret. The heathen did not know what happened at these closed meetings, but they heard that somebody was being eaten. (Shelley, location 911)

- 5.1.5.5.2.** The charge of cannibalism may derive from Christian language about the eucharist of eating the body and drinking the blood. Incest may have been suggested by Christians’ referring to one another as “brother” and “sister” with men and women sharing the common table at the “love feast. (Ferguson, location 1332)
- 5.1.5.6.** The charge of immorality arose because Christians had secret meetings, called each other “brother and sister” and greeted one another with a holy kiss.
- 5.1.5.6.1.** These wild charges probably arose from a characteristic of human nature—secrecy breeds distrust. (Shelley, location 906)
- 5.1.5.6.2.** The charge of gross immorality came from the fact that one Christian meeting was called the Agape—the Love Feast—and from the custom of the “holy kiss” of peace the Christians gave to one another. (Shelley, location 908)
- 5.1.5.6.3.** The charge of cannibalism may derive from Christian language about the eucharist of eating the body and drinking the blood. Incest may have been suggested by Christians’ referring to one another as “brother” and “sister” with men and women sharing the common table at the “love feast. (Ferguson, location 1332)
- 5.1.5.6.4.** Other charges of immorality apparently stemmed from a failure of the Romans to distinguish between libertine Gnostics (who claimed to be Christians) and Christians. (Ferguson, location 1335)

5.1.5.7. We can read about these views of Christians in early historians.

5.1.5.7.1. Tacitus tells the story: 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. Christ, from whom they take their name, was executed by Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius. Stopped for a moment, this evil superstition reappeared, not only in Judea, where was the root of the evil, but also in Rome, where all things sordid and abominable from every corner of the world come together. 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.* (Gonzales, location 977)

5.1.5.7.2. Tacitus and other contemporary authors do not tell us what these supposed "abominations" were. Second-century authors will be more explicit. But, in any case, Tacitus believes the rumors, and thinks that Christians hate humankind. This last charge makes sense if one remembers that all social activities—the theatre, the army, letters, sports—were so entwined with pagan worship that Christians often felt the need to abstain from them. Therefore, to the eyes of a Roman such as Tacitus, who loved his culture and society, Christians appeared as haters of humankind. (Gonzales, location 989)

5.1.5.7.3. Tacitus, the Roman historian who reports the incident (Annals 15.44), did not give much credence to the charge of arson, but he did consider Christianity a "deadly superstition" deserving punishment for "hatred of the human race. (Ferguson, location 1285)

- 5.2.** All of this came in to focus in the refusal of Christians to engage in emperor worship.
- 5.2.1.** While the issue of emperor worship has fueled the popular conception of early Christian martyrs, it was actually a fairly late occurrence which only developed gradually over time.
- 5.2.1.1.** The supreme cause of Roman persecution of Christians arose from the tradition of emperor worship. This conflict between Christ and Caesar did not break out overnight. Only gradually did the worship of the emperor assume a central place in the life of the empire. (Shelley, location 931)
- 5.2.2.** The reasons for emperor worship - political and cultural unity
- 5.2.2.1.** This was pax Romana, the Roman peace. The result of this was a deep and heartfelt gratitude to the spirit of Rome. It was an easy step for the spirit of Rome to become the goddess Roma, and by the second century B.C. there were many temples in Asia Minor to the goddess Roma. But the human mind and heart need a symbol; it was a further easy step to see the goddess Roma and the spirit of Rome incarnated in the emperor. (Shelley, location 935)
- 5.2.2.2.** There is no unifying force like the force of a common religion; and Caesar worship lay ready at hand. (Shelley, location 946)
- 5.2.2.3.** As a result Caesar worship became “the keystone” of imperial policy. It was deliberately organized in every province in the empire. Everywhere temples to the godhead of the emperor appeared. (Shelley, location 947)
- 5.2.2.4.** Little by little people within the empire came to believe that any allegiance in conflict with loyalty to the emperor, and therefore to the empire, could only lead to the disintegration of order. Worship of another Lord could only open the floodgates of chaos. (Shelley, location 949)
- 5.2.3.** The final institution of Caesar worship under Decius (249-251)
- 5.2.3.1.** One final step remained. It came rather late, but under Emperor Decius (249–251) Caesar worship was made universal—and compulsory for every race and nation within the empire with the single exception of the Jews. On a certain day in the year every Roman citizen had to come to the Temple of Caesar and had to burn a pinch of incense there, and say: “Caesar is Lord.” When he had done that, he was given a certificate to guarantee that he had done so. After a man had burned his pinch of incense and had acknowledged Caesar as Lord, he could go away and worship any god he liked, so long as the worship did not affect public decency and order. (Shelley, location 951)

5.2.4. The effect - severe persecution of Christians

5.2.4.1. Thus, we see that Caesar worship was primarily a test of political loyalty; it was a test of whether or not a man was a good citizen. If a man refused to carry out the ceremony of acknowledging Caesar, he was automatically branded as a traitor and a revolutionary. (Shelley, location 956)

5.2.4.2. Thus, Christian worship and Caesar worship met head-on. The one thing that no Christian would ever say was: "Caesar is Lord." For the Christian, Jesus Christ and he alone was Lord. To the Roman the Christian seemed utterly intolerant and insanely stubborn; worse, he was a self-confessed disloyal citizen. (Shelley, location 966)

6. The Christian Response: Apologetics and A Philosophy of Martyrdom

6.1. Apologetics - a defense of Christianity

6.1.1. In responding to these brutal waves of persecution, Christian leaders wrote "apologies" - defenses of Christianity. The word "apologetics" is derived from the Greek word used in 1 Peter 3:15 - to answer questions or give a defense of the faith to those who ask.

6.1.2. The purpose of these apologetic writings was to assert the truth of Christianity, to show that Christians were innocent of the charges of atheism, cannibalism and immorality, and to therefore plea for tolerance rather than persecution.

6.1.3. Some of the most famous of these writings are:

6.1.3.1. "Against Celsus" by Origen (written to answer objection to Christianity by the philosopher Celsus).

6.1.3.2. "The Apologies" by Justin Martyr (written to the emperors to defend the Christian faith and argue against persecution).

6.1.3.3. "Dialogue with Trypho" by Justin martyr (written to argue that Christianity was the true adherents of the ancient faith of Israel - Trypho was an educated Jew).

6.1.3.4. "Apology" by Tertullian (written by the Latin Father to argue for the truth of Christianity and the falsehood of pagan beliefs).

6.1.4. These writings give a fascinating glimpse into the thought and practice of Christians in the early centuries, and show how they attempted to live out and defend their faith in the face of an often hostile culture.

6.2. Philosophy of Martyrdom

6.2.1. During this time Christians also wrote accounts of some of the martyrs. These works did not try to lay out a philosophy of martyrdom per se, but they did describe the Christians response to persecution and they served to inform Christian thought about martyrdom.

- 6.2.2.** The word “martyr” comes from the Greek word for “witness” that is used throughout the New Testament. However, in the book of Revelation it was used 5 times, usually with the idea of being a faithful witness - even to the point of death. This is culminated in Revelation 17:6 where it is used to refer to the “blood of the martyrs/witnesses.” This use came to have the special idea of being a witness faithful to death - a martyr.
- 6.2.3.** One of the most famous and influential accounts of martyrdom was that of Polycarp.
- 6.2.3.1.** One of the most influential documents of martyrdom, and perhaps the earliest to record one in some detail, was the Martyrdom of Polycarp. This letter was written by his church at Smyrna to the church at Philomelium in Phrygia. The date of Polycarp’s death is disputed between 156, 167–68, and 177, but preference is given to the early date. (Ferguson, location 1588)
- 6.2.3.2.** The theme of the Martyrdom of Polycarp is “martyrdom according to the Gospel.” The author writes against the practice of volunteering for martyrdom and refers to an instance when someone did this and then denied the faith under pressure. He commends instead the example of Polycarp, who retired from the city to avoid death, but when captured confessed his faith firmly and endured his trial and execution with dignity and courage. (Ferguson, location 1590)
- 6.2.4.** The effect of these memoirs of the martyrs was to encourage Christians to remain faithful in the face of persecution. They also did serve to try to remind Christians that they were not to seek martyrdom, but to gladly embrace it if it sought them out. Furthermore, they also answered practical questions such as the eternal state of those who were martyred for their faith but had not yet been baptized (since preparation for baptism by this point was a year long or more process.)

7. The Effect of Persecution - The Growth and Strengthening of the Church

- 7.1.** It is one of the great ironies of history that the effect of persecution by the roman empire had the exact opposite of its intended effect. Rather than stamping out Christianity, it caused it to grow.
- 7.2.** A primary cause for this effect was the manner in which Christians were willing to suffer. Rather than renounce their faith, they humbly accepted it, which had the effect of impressing others and even drawing them into the faith.
- 7.3.** Consequently, by the end of the third century, the Church had spread throughout the Roman empire, and had grown in numbers, influence, and power.