Berean Bible Institute
Fall Semester 2026
Church History I
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Lecture Two – The First 200 Years

Memory Verse – Matthew 23:34

"Wherefore, behold, I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes: and some of them ye shall kill and crucify; and some of them shall ye scourge in your synagogues, and persecute them from city to city:"

Introduction

The first two centuries of Christianity were marked by intense persecution. Satan's weapon against the churches in the early years was to kill the Christians. Martyrdom was the expected fate of dedicated believers. Persecution has always followed the faithful (See Hebrews 11:32 – 40), and those that lived godly:

"Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution." (2 Timothy 3:12)

Revelation chapters two and three contain the seven letters given to the churches in Asia Minor and though these letters were written to literal churches at the conclusion of the first century, many theologians believe that each of these churches prophetically typify or picture a specific period from what is now the history of New Testament Churches. The Church at Smyrna (Revelation 2:8 – 11) is known as "the persecuted or martyr church" and is believed to represent the spiritual condition of Christianity in the first three centuries. According to *Fox's Book of Martyrs,* over five million people were murdered during this period.[1] When Satan's attack of Christians didn't stop them, he added to his strategy an attack against the Word of God and attempting to destroy the Scriptures.

In this lesson, we will begin with the churches of the New Testament and study some of the people and events that were prominent in the first two centuries.

I The Origin of New Testament Churches

People have argued for centuries over the exact starting point of the beginning of the Church Age. Some of the more common explanations are listed here:

A The New Testament Church is merely a continuation of Old Testament Israel. People who promote this theory believe that Israel is the church of the Old Testament which has now been opened to the Gentiles in the New Testament.

B The Church began with Jesus and His disciples who were all believers baptized by John the Baptist. The actual starting point would be the baptism of the Lord Jesus by John which marked the beginning of His public ministry.

C The Church began at Pentecost (Acts 1:8; Acts 2).

Personally, I hold to the second view. There are references to the Church prior to Pentecost (Matthew 16:18; 18:17). The Church, however, was certainly empowered at Pentecost and in a great way opened the door to many people being saved, baptized, and added to the church. There were 120 disciples of Christ in the upper room prior to the movement of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

II The First Martyrs

A **John the Baptist** – beheaded by Herod (Matthew 14:3 – 12)

Note – John the Baptist is said to be the last of the Old Testament prophets as well as the first of the New Testament prophets. He is not part of the church. (John 3:29) He is the friend of the bridegroom, not the bride or part of the bride. The bride of Christ is the Church.

B **Jesus** – crucified

C **Stephen** – stoned to death in Jerusalem in A.D. 34 (Acts 7:59)

[1] McGee, J. V. (1997). Thru the Bible commentary (electronic ed., Vol. 5, p. 905). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

D James the son of Zebedee – beheaded by Agrippa in A.D. 45

E Philip – stoned in Phrygia in A.D. 54

F James, the brother of Jesus – beaten to death on the steps of the Temple in A.D. 63.

G Barnabus – burned in Cyprus in A.D. 64

H John Mark – dragged through the streets of Alexandria in A.D. 64

I Simon Peter – crucified (upside down) by Nero in A.D. 69

Note Peter's wife was also crucified.

J Paul – beheaded by Nero in A.D. 69

K Additional martyrs of the first century

Aristarchus, Epaphras, Priscilla and Aquilla, Andromicus, and Juna were all martyred by Nero in A.D.70. Silas was beaten to death in Macedonia; Onesiphorus and Porphyrius were dragged to death by horses; Andrew was crucified; Bartholomew was flayed alive; Thomas was burned by hot plates and eventually stabbed to death; Matthew was nailed to the ground and beheaded; Matthias was crucified and beheaded; Luke was hanged in Greece in A.D. 93; Antipas was roasted alive in A.D. 95.

Note – John the apostle is said to have been boiled in oil by Emperor Domitian but miraculously survived. He was banished to the penal isle of Patmos where he was given the Revelation by the Lord. Tradition has it that he was eventually released and returned to Ephesus where he was the pastor. He died at the age of 100 being the only apostle that was not martyred.

III Periods of Intense Persecution

It is important to note that there were several organized persecutions of the Christian churches in the first two centuries.

According to J. Vernon McGee there was intense persecution of Christianity in the first three centuries, up until Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire in 313 A.D.: [2]

There were ten intense periods of persecution by ten Roman emperors (these dates are approximate):

1 Nero (64–68 - Paul was beheaded under his reign; Peter was crucified)

John Phillips provides a very colorful description of Nero:

> He was just three years old when his father died. It was little loss to the boy. for his father had been a killer, a bully, and a cheat. His mother took over the family trade and continued the boy's education. She murdered his stepfather with a dish of poisoned mushrooms. He was reared in squalor and proved a notable son to his parents. While still young, he committed his first murder, killing a teenage boy who stood in his way and watching him die with callous indifference. He married at fifteen but soon had his wife killed. He married again and slew his second wife too. To marry a third time, he murdered the husband of the woman he wanted. His mother annoyed him; so, he arranged her murder, first by guile, but when that was unsuccessful, without pretense. He was an ugly man with a bull neck, beetle brows, a flat nose, and a tough mouth. He had a pot belly, spindly legs, bad skin, and offensive odor. At the age of thirty-one he was sentenced to death by flogging. He fled to a dingy basement and, in the house of a slave, cut his own throat. He gave the infant church its first taste of things to come. His name was Nero. He was the first of the persecuting Caesars of Rome.[3]

Nero was the emperor responsible for the martyrdom of Paul and Peter in 69 A.D. along with many others. Nero was a psychopathic murderer who had a bloodlust for killing Christians. Some of his infamous cruelties include the following:

a He dressed them in skins of beasts so that they would be torn by dogs or wild animals.

b He crucified them in a variety of fashions.

c He burned and smoked them after having cut them and scourged them.

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[2] McGee, J. V. (1997). *Thru the Bible commentary* (electronic ed., Vol. 5, p. 906). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

[3] Phillips, J. (2009). *Exploring Revelation: An Expository Commentary* (Re 2:8–11). Kregel; WORDsearch Corp.

d He nailed them to a stake and wrapped them in mantles and burned them, using them to light the streets of the city and even his private gardens.

It is believed that Nero burnt down much of the city of Rome and blamed it on the Christians.

2 Domitian—95–96 attempted to martyr the Apostle John but could not. It is said that Domitian wanted the people to worship himself as a god. Robert Thomas states:

> Under Domitian (A.D. 81–96) emperor worship was made compulsory for every Roman citizen. Failure to comply meant death. Each year every citizen had to burn incense on Caesar's altar, after which he was issued a certificate. To be without a certificate, as must have been the case for Christians obedient to Christ, was to risk discovery and the death penalty.[4]

3 Trajan—104–117 (Ignatius was burned at the stake)

4 Marcus Aurelius—161–180 (Polycarp was martyred)

5 Severus—200–211

6 Maximinius—235–237

7 Decius—250–253

8 Valerian—257–260

9 Aurelian—270–275

10 Diocletian—303–313 (the worst emperor of all).

There were some Caesars during this period that were more sympathetic to Christianity, but persecution was the norm throughout the Roman Empire during this period. There were also persecutions directed primarily against Jews that affected Christians, particularly early in the first century when the churches were made up of mostly Jewish believers. Titus destroyed the city of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.

IV Important Leaders of the Second Century

It is believed that by the end of the second century Christianity had spread southward to Africa, eastward to India, and north to Europe including Germany and Britain through the missionary efforts of the churches of Asia Minor and other churches established by the apostles and other church leaders. These are some of the people who were notable in the second century:

A Clement – He was the fourth bishop of Rome. He wrote a letter to the Corinthians condemning the practice of prostitution there. He is a significant figure because it appears that he acted as a general head of the Christian church. He was martyred by Domitian.

B Ignatius – He is listed as the second successor to Peter at Antioch. Tradition states that he may have been one of the "little children" who came to Jesus in the gospel account. He wrote many letters which have remained. He was given the name God-bearer.

C Justin Martyr – He was a converted Greek philosopher who boldly preached Christ and wrote a defense of the Christian faith. He was martyred in A.D. 166

D Polycarp – a second-century bishop of Smyrna who tradition states was a friend of Ignatius and was ordained by the Apostle John, was burned at the stake at the age of 86 (in 155 AD) for his refusal to worship the emperor.[5] Here is the account of the martyrdom of Polycarp by John Fox:

> Polycarp, the venerable bishop of Smyrna, hearing that persons were seeking for him, escaped, but was discovered by a child. After feasting the guards who apprehended him, he desired an hour in prayer, which being allowed, he prayed with such fervency, that his guards repented that they had been instrumental in taking him. He was, however, carried before the proconsul, condemned, and burnt in the marketplace. The proconsul then urged him, saying, Swear, and I will release thee; —reproach Christ. Polycarp answered, "Eighty and six years have I served him, and he never once wronged me; how then shall I blaspheme my King, who hath saved me?" At the stake to

[4] Thomas, R. L. (1992). Revelation 1-7: an exegetical commentary (p. 158). Chicago: Moody Publishers.

[5] MacArthur, J., Jr. (Ed.). (1997). The MacArthur Study Bible (electronic ed., p. 1994). Nashville, TN: Word Pub.

which he was only tied, but not nailed as usual, as he assured them, he should stand immovable, the flames, on their kindling the fagots, encircled his body, like an arch, without touching him; and the executioner, on seeing this, was ordered to pierce him with a sword, when so great a quantity of blood flowed out as extinguished the fire. But his body, at the instigation of the enemies of the Gospel, especially Jews, was ordered to be consumed in the pile, and the request of his friends, who wished to give it Christian burial, rejected. They nevertheless collected his bones and as much of his remains as possible and caused them to be decently interred.[6]

E **Montanus** – He was a convert to Christianity in the second half of the century. He was known for his preaching on the imminent, pre-millennial return of the Lord. He also believed in the priesthood of all believers, strict discipline in the church, and scriptural baptism. The teaching of Montanus was later condemned by the emerging Catholic church. Followers of Montanus include a scholar from the school in Alexandria, Egypt named Tertullian who eventually started his own congregation established on Biblical (Montanist, Baptist) principles.

Note – An important leader in the second century who became a heretic is Marcion who was a Christian ship owner who was responsible for the belief that the God of the Hebrews was not the same as the God of the Christians. He was officially excommunicated from the Church at Rome in 169 A.D. and went on to establish his own church. At first his movement flourished but later died out in Rome but moved into Syria where it survived until the tenth century.

V Important Corruptions Starting in the Second Century

It did not take very long for Satan to begin corrupting the purity that was the rule in the early church. These heresies began to creep in and became prominent in the second century. However, keep in mind that there was always the faithful remnant who stayed true to the New Testament pattern.

A **The Corruption of Independent Churches** – Provincial synods (gatherings of bishops from a particular region) were started, which ultimately would become the framework for the Roman Catholic Church. Also, some larger churches would usurp authority over some of the smaller churches.

John Christian points out in his, *A History of the Baptists*:

> Such a church was a voluntary association and was independent of all other churches. It might be, and probably was, affiliated with other churches in brotherly relations; but it remained independent of all outward control, and was responsible to Christ alone, who was the supreme lawgiver and the source of all authority. Originally the teachers and the people conjointly administered the affairs of the church. In the New Testament sense of the church there can be no such an organization as a National or General Church, covering a large district of country, composed of a number of local organizations. The church, in the Scriptural sense, is always an independent, local organization. Sister churches were "united only by the ties of faith and charity. Independence and equality formed the basis of their internal constitution" (Edward Gibbon, The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, 1.554. Boston, 1854). Gibbon, always artistic in the use of material, continues: "Such was the mild and equal constitution by which the Christians were governed for more than a hundred years after the death of the apostles. Every society formed within itself a separate and independent republic; and although the most distant of these little states maintained a mutual, as well as friendly, intercourse of letters and deputations, the Christian world was not yet connected by any supreme or legislative assembly" (Thid, 558).[7]

Early on in church history, some of the larger churches would usurp authority over the smaller ones. The pastors of these larger churches. These powerful Bishops were called Metropolitans.

Also remember that in the first century there was only one “office of a bishop” (1 Timothy 3:1), which was the same position as the “pastor” or “elder”. These three words describe different duties within the same office or position. The word “bishop” (ἐπίσκοπος - *episkopos*) means overseer or ruler; the word “elder” (πρεσβύτερος - *presbyteros*) literally meant someone who was advanced in years but was also used in reference to people who were placed by God and a congregation into a position of spiritual authority. Interestingly, the word “pastor”, which means “shepherd”, is used only once in the entire New Testament and only in the plural form. (Ephesians 4:11) These three words are used

[6] Foxe, John. Foxe's Book of Martyrs (Optimized for Kindle) (pp. 19-20). Kindle Edition.

[7] Christian, John T. A History of The Baptists: Together with Some Account of Their Principles and Practices (Kindle Locations 268-278). www.DelmarvaPublications.com. Kindle Edition.

interchangeably in the New Testament in reference to the leader of a local church.[8] There were no bishops, pastors, or elders in the New Testament who had authority over bishops or elders from other churches.

B The Corruption of Believer's Baptism – Both the subjects of baptism and the mode of baptism changed. Baptism became no longer a symbol of washing or regeneration, but the method of regeneration. Eventually, since baptism was now thought to be efficacious (have saving power) people were baptized as infants. Immersion became impractical, so many churches began to sprinkle (called effusion). Clinic baptism became a method to baptize the sick and invalids.

These practices were clearly unscriptural. In the New Testament only believers were baptized (Acts 8:37) and the mode of baptism was always immersion. John Christian states:

> The practice of infant-baptism in the apostolic and post-apostolic age cannot be proved. We hear indeed frequently of the baptism of entire households, as in Acts 15:32; Acts 18:8; 1Corinthians 1:16. But the last passage taken, 1Corinthians 7:14, is not favorable to the supposition that infant baptism was customary at that time. For then Paul would not have written "else were your children unclean."[9]

C The Corruption of the Lord's Supper – The elements of the Lord's Supper are representative of the body and blood of the Lord Jesus, which serve to remind us of the atonement that Jesus made for us on the cross of Calvary. In the second century, some of the language that was later used for the Catholic Mass emerged. They began to call the symbol a sacrifice and the table an altar. The supper had not yet developed into transubstantiation, but it was on its way. Transubstantiation is the false doctrine that the elements of the Lord's Supper literally become the actual body and blood of Christ.

It is important also to remember that the Lord's Supper was only to be taken by those who were baptized and added to the church. John Christian states: "In the Scriptures, the Lord's Supper is always preceded by the act of baptism, and there is no account of any person participating in the Supper who had not previously been baptized. That baptism should precede the Lord's Supper is avowed by scholars of all communions."[10]

Addendum to Lecture Two

The Epistle to Diognetius, a letter, written perhaps in the second century, was one of the earliest Christian apologies (a reasoned argument or justification in defense of Christianity). Some have attributed the letter to Justin Martyr, but this cannot be proven

Phillip Schaff, in his History of the Christian Church says this about the mysterious author of this letter:

> "Yet this most obscure writer of the second century is at the same time the most brilliant; and while his name remains unknown to this day, he shed lustre on the Christian name in times when it was assailed and blasphemed from Jew and Gentile and could only be professed at the risk of life. He must be ranked with the "great unknown" authors of Job and the Epistle to the Hebrews, who are known only to God."[11]

Regarding the recipient of the letter, Schaff states:

> Diognetius was an inquiring heathen of high social position and culture, who desired information concerning the origin and nature of the religion of the Christians, and the secret of their contempt of the world, their courage in death, their brotherly love, and the reason of the late origin of this new fashion, so different from the gods of the Greeks and the superstition of the Jews. A Stoic philosopher of this name instructed Marcus Aurelius in his youth (about 133) in painting and composition, and trained him in Attic simplicity of life, and "whatever else of the kind belongs to Grecian discipline." Perhaps he taught him also to despise the Christian martyrs, and to trace their heroic courage to sheer obstinacy. It is quite probable that our Diognetus was identical with the imperial tutor; for he wished specially to know what enabled these Christians "to despise the world and to make light of death."[12]

This letter gives us an interesting window into the lives and practices of early Christians.

The Epistle to Diagnetus (Epistola ad Diognetum)

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[8] Compare Acts 20:17 with Acts 20:28 – the word "elders" in v. 17 refers to the same "overseers" (or bishops) in v. 28

[9] Christian, John T. (Kindle Location 342 – 347)

[10] ibid.

[11] Schaff, P., & Schaff, D. S. (1910). History of the Christian church (Vol. 2, p. 700). New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

[12] ibid, p. 700.

For Christians are not distinguished from the rest of mankind either in locality or in speech or in customs. [2]For they dwell not somewhere in cities of their own, neither do they use some different language, nor practice an extraordinary kind of life. [3]Nor again do they possess any invention discovered by any intelligence or study of ingenious men, nor are they masters of any human dogma as some are. [4]But while they dwell in cities of Greeks and barbarians as the lot of each is cast and follow the native customs in dress and food and the other arrangements of life, yet the constitution of their own citizenship, which they set forth, is marvelous, and confessedly contradicts expectation. [5]They dwell in their own countries, but only as sojourners; they bear their share in all things as citizens, and they endure all hardships as strangers. Every foreign country is a fatherland to them, and every fatherland is foreign. [6]They marry like all other men and they beget children; but they do not cast away their offspring. [7]They have their meals in common, but not their wives. [8]They find themselves in the flesh, and yet they live not after the flesh. [9]Their existence is on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven. [10]They obey the established laws, and they surpass the laws in their own lives. [11]They love all men, and they are persecuted by all. [12]They are ignored, and yet they are condemned. They are put to death, and yet they are endued with life. [13]They are in beggary, and yet they make many rich. They are in want of all things, and yet they abound in all things. [14]They are dishonored, and yet they are glorified in their dishonor. They are evil spoken of, and yet they are vindicated. [15]They are reviled, and they bless; they are insulted, and they respect. [16]Doing good they are punished as evil doers; being punished they rejoice, as if they were thereby quickened by life. [17]War is waged against them as aliens by the Jews, and persecution is carried on against them by the Greeks, and yet those that hate them cannot tell the reason of their hostility.

6. In a word, what the soul is in a body, this the Christians are in the world. [2]The soul is spread through all the members of the body, and Christians through the divers cities of the world. [3]The soul hath its abode in the body, and yet it is not of the body. So, Christians have their abode in the world, and yet they are not of the world. [4]The soul which is invisible is guarded in the body which is visible: so, Christians are recognized as being in the world, and yet their religion remaineth invisible. [5]The flesh hateth the soul and wageth war with it, though it receiveth no wrong, because it is forbidden to indulge in pleasures; so, the world hateth Christians, though it receiveth no wrong from them, because they set themselves against its pleasures. [6]The soul loveth the flesh which hateth it, and the members: so, Christians love those that hate them. [7]The soul is enclosed in the body, and yet itself holdeth the body together; so, Christians are kept in the world as in a prison-house, and yet they themselves hold the world together. [8]The soul though itself immortal dwelleth in a mortal tabernacle; so, Christians sojourn amidst perishable things, while they look for the imperishability which is in the heavens. [9]The soul when hardly treated in the matter of meats and drinks is improved; and so, Christians when punished increase more and more daily. [10]So great is the office for which God hath appointed them, and which it is not lawful for them to decline.[13]

[13] Lightfoot, J. B., & Harmer, J. R. (1891). *The Apostolic Fathers* (pp. 505–507). London: Macmillan and Co.