

The Persecutions

The Enemies of Christianity

1. The Jews—first century
 - a. Acts 4:5-31; 5:17-42; chp. 7; 13:45; 17:5, etc.
2. The Romans—regarded Christianity as “religio illicita” (an illegal sect)

Reasons for the Roman Persecutions

1. Political
 - a. There was little persecution as long as the Romans viewed Christianity as a branch of Judaism
 - b. Loyalty to state came first
 - c. Secret meetings of Christians
2. Religious
 - a. Roman religion was very external—was afraid of the more heart-centered religion of Christianity
 - b. The secret meetings brought charges of illegal and unnatural actions—Lord’s Supper/cannibalism, etc.
3. Social
 - a. Christians separated themselves from a lot of activities. Their restraint from certain activities were silent rebukes to their fellow citizens (1 Pet. 4:4)
 - b. Christians regard all men as important and at least equal in the sight of God
 - c. Also, the common man hated Christianity because of its claim of one God
4. Economic
 - a. The spread of Christianity severely impacted the sell of idols (Acts 19:27)
 - b. With the 1000-year anniversary of Rome in 250 AD, plague, famine and civil unrest hit Rome. Being superstitious, they blamed Christianity.

Roman Persecutors

1. Rome practiced a policy of measured tolerance for a long time toward Christianity. Because of this, when they finally began to fear Christianity, it was too late. Christianity was already firmly established in the empire.
2. In the lives of the apostles, they came in two phases:
 - a. Those under Nero, 65-68
 - i. “...Vast multitudes (of Christians) were convicted...and in their deaths were made the subject of sport, for they were covered with hides of wild beast and worried to death by dogs or nailed to

crosses, or set fire to...and when day declined were burned to serve as nocturnal lights.”—Tacitus

- b. The next serious round of persecutions took place under the edict signed by **Domitian** (89-96 AD)
 - i. He called himself “Lord and God”
 - ii. First to make Christianity a crime against the state
 1. Had his own cousin killed (Flavius Clemens)
 - iii. His successor, Nerva, refused to make Christianity a political crime, though he still persecuted them when they showed themselves.
3. In the second century, **Trajan** (98-117 AD) approved of the killing of Christians who refused after three opportunities to reject the name of Christ. While he did not authorize the hunting down of Christian, if they were turned in, he approved of their persecutions.
 - a. His policies guided the empire view of Christianity for more than a century
4. **Marcus Aurelius** (161-180 AD) picked up Christian persecution again, blaming Christianity for calamities befalling Rome. He also viewed the teachings of Christianity regarding the after-life a threat to the empire
5. **Septimus Severus** (193-211 AD) outlawed conversion to Christianity
6. Persecutions intensified after 250. For the first time became “empire-wide.”
7. **Decius** was persuaded Christianity was a threat because of its growing numbers.
 - a. Edict of 250 demanded offerings of sacrifice to be made to the genius of the emperor. A certificate was given to those who sacrificed. If one did not have the certificate, there was trouble.
 - b. The jailed Christians in Rome wrote to their brethren in Africa, “What more glorious and blessed lot can fall to man by the grace of God, than to confers God the Lord amidst tortures and in the fact of death itself; to confess Christ the Son of God with lacerated body and with a spirit departing, yet free; and to become fellow sufferers with Christ in the name of Christ?”
8. **Gallienus** (260-268 AD) once again made Christianity “religio licita”. Peace ruled for the church for 40 years.
 - a. But, as the church grew comfortable and wealthy, it also became worldly and factious
9. **Diocletian**—again, blamed Christians for the social and natural calamities hitting Rome.
 - a. Once again took on a title earlier rulers held, the Vicar of Jupiter
 - b. Wife and daughter were either Christians or sympathetic to Christianity.
 - c. Edict of 303—Outlawed meetings of Christians and destroyed meeting places; arrested church leaders and burned confiscated scriptures.
 - d. Eusebius wrote that the bloody swords became dull and shattered. The executioners grew weary, and had to relieve one another; but the Christians sang hymns of praise and thanksgiving in honor of Almighty God, even to their last breath.
10. **Galerius** issued an edict in 311 giving religious tolerance to Christians.

- a. At the close of his edict, he wrote, “*after this manifestation of grace, (Christians) should pray to their God for the welfare of the emperors, of the state, and of themselves, that the state might prosper in every respect, and that they might live quietly in their homes.*”
11. Edict of Milan, 313 AD, when **Constantine** came into power. Allowed freedom of worship for all.

Questions

1. From who did the early Christians find themselves persecuted?
2. From what Roman emperor did the early persecutions begin?
3. Which emperor was the first to make Christianity a crime against the state?
4. How many times did the emperor Trajan give Christians to reject Christ?
5. Under whose rule did the persecutions become “empire-wide?”
6. After a peaceful 8 years under Gallienus, which emperor again intensified the persecutions against Christians?
7. What were some of the reasons for the Roman Persecutions?