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A THEOLOGY OF PERSECUTION

MATTHEW 10:16-23

JESUS WARNED HIS DISCIPLES, AND ALL CHRISTIANS WHO would follow, “Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you” (Jn. 15:20). Those words prepared them for what was, in fact, very soon to come and last some 300 years. The term “Christian,” first used in Antioch in Syria, was not a term of endearment, and that spark of annoyance was about to ignite into a raging inferno of violence. Beginning with Stephen, persecution became the norm. Peter and John were imprisoned (Acts 4:1-4), James was martyred (12:1-2), Peter was imprisoned again but miraculously delivered (12:3-19), and Paul himself (the former persecutor Saul of Tarsus) was persecuted often (9:29; 13:50; 14:5, 19; 16:22; 18:12; etc.; cf. 2 Cor. 11:23-28).

As it had been with the Lord Jesus, persecution initially came from the Jews. Soon, however, this shifted to the Romans. Let us first note the causes of persecution and then its character and finally its consequences.

The Causes of Persecution

There were five reasons Christianity came under persecution from Rome. *First*, there was the perception of political rivalry. As long as Christianity appeared to be simply another Jewish sect (e.g., Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Zealots), the Romans remained tolerant, just as they usually did with conquered peoples. As long as the conquered submitted to Roman rule, they were left alone, a practice that was actually one of many reasons for Rome’s strength—it helped keep revolt to a minimum. But when it became clear that Christianity was separate from the tolerated Judaism, this new sect became a serious threat in Roman thinking. Suspicion came, of course, because Christians elevated Christ over Caesar.

Second, there were obviously religious reasons for persecution. Since the Romans were polytheistic (believing in many gods), Christians were actually accused of atheism because they believed in only one God. This was further confirmed in their thinking because Christians closed their eyes when praying and did not look upon any object of worship. Further still, they had no idols or religious trappings. Worship was outward in Roman thinking (and all religions everywhere agree), but for Christians, worship is inward, for “God is a

Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth” (Jn. 4:24).

Third, there were also moral motivations for persecution. Because the Romans misunderstood Jesus’ command to eat His body and drink His blood, Christians were accused of cannibalism. Other immoral practices they thought likely came because of the Christian custom of greeting one another with a “holy kiss” (Rom. 16:16; cf. Acts 20:37; 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; 1 Thes. 5:26; 1 Pet. 5:14; etc.).

Fourth, social issues also contributed to persecution. More suspicion came because Christians met in secret and divorced themselves from public gatherings (e.g., temples, theaters, and the public games) because they were steeped in paganism. Also, while the Romans adhered to a strict class system, in which slaves and the lower class serve the upper class, Christians believed that all people are equal (Col. 3:11), a view that could lead to disorder and revolt.

Fifth, there were even economic reasons for persecuting Christians, which is often overlooked. A religious system where idols and statues have a prominent place is one that will make money providing them. The very livelihood of artists, artisans, and architects was threatened by a new religion that condemned idolatry. That was, in fact, exactly what occurred in Ephesus when the livelihood of the silversmiths was threatened as people were converted and no longer buying statues of Diana (Acts 19:23-41; cf. Ps. 135:15-18; etc.).

Do those above five reasons for persecution still exist today? Indeed, they do. If anyone was qualified to make the following statement, it was Paul: “Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution” (2 Tim. 3:12; cf. John 15:19-21; 16:2). The true Gospel is never popular, and those who proclaim it will suffer for it.

As a result of all this, Christianity became a hated and despised religious sect in the Roman Empire. Writing to Emperor Trajan (who we detail below), Pliny, the governor of Bithinia, scorned Christianity as a “depraved and extravagant superstition” and went on to complain that “the contagion of this superstition has spread not only in the cities, but in the villages and rural districts as well.”¹ Roman historian Tacitus, a contemporary of Pliny, described Christians as “a class hated for their abominations,” while **Suetonius**, another contemporary of Pliny, dismissed them as “a set of men adhering

to a novel and mischievous superstition.”²

Christianity, therefore, went from a *religio licita* (permitted, approved, or lawful religion) to a *religio illicita* (an impermissible or illegitimate religion; English “elicit”). Interestingly, while recent scholarship has argued that “there was no law, either existing section of criminal law or special legislation directed against the Christians, under which Christians were prosecuted in the first two centuries,”³ such denial is indefensible when one examines Nero and other Roman emperors, as we will see next.

The Character of Persecution

As Jesus encouraged the believers in the Church at Smyrna, “Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life” (Rev. 2:10; cf. Lk. 21:16–19; 1 Pet. 1:5). In effect, He said, “Even though the persecution will continue, do not fear your sufferings.” Though a few commentators disagree, there can be little doubt that the phrase “ye will have persecution ten days” refers to the ten great historical periods of persecution that occurred as a result of the edicts proclaimed by ten specific Roman emperors. As one historian writes, “Usually ten persecutions are enumerated, beginning with Nero in the first century and culminating in the one which was inaugurated by Diocletian early in the fourth century.”⁴

1. Nero (64–68). While there were persecutions before Nero, mainly because Christians were still associated with Jews, it was the monster Nero who began the focused persecution of Christians. Tertullian, for example, stated, “Nero was the first who assailed, with the imperial sword, the Christian sect.” Nero’s dream of rebuilding Rome to even greater splendor was well known, so when a fire broke out in 64 that killed thousands and reduced ten of the 14 sections of the city to ashes, Nero was suspected of deliberately setting the fire. While he was probably in his palace in Antium several miles away, the rumor was still so widely accepted that Nero sought a way to shift the blame, and Christians were an easy target. After all, they taught that Jesus was going to return and destroy the earth by fire (2 Pet. 3:10; cf. Rev 21:1), so this seemed to be a reasonable, if not likely, explanation.

Some were wrapped in animal hides and thrown before dogs to be torn to pieces. Others were fastened to crosses and set on fire to illuminate a circus that Nero staged for the crowds in his garden. Though he is not mentioned by name in Acts 25:10–12, Nero was the “Caesar” to whom Paul appealed for justice during his trial in Caesarea, and it was under his reign that Paul was beheaded and Peter crucified.

2. Domitian (81–96). Equal to Nero in cruelty was Domitian, who called himself, and demanded that others call him, “Lord and God.” He decreed that embracing Christianity was a crime against the state. He condemned many Christians to death, including his own nephew (some say his cousin), Flavius Clemens (who actually might have become emperor) and accused them of atheism because, of course, they denied that he was God. He sent others, such as Domitilia, the wife of his cousin, into exile. According to the histories of Irenaeus, Eusebius, and Jerome, it was Domitian who exiled the Apostle John on Patmos where he penned the book of Revelation (one

of several proofs for the late date of that book).

3. Trajan (98–117) and Antonius Pius (138–161). While basically a good emperor—he was just and good-tempered—it seems that Trajan should have been against persecuting Christians, but such was not the case. He listened to Pliny the Younger, who wrote to the emperor that the land was “swarming with Christians” and that as a result of this “contagion of superstition” the temples of the gods were deserted and few people were buying sacrificial animals. To stop this progress, he condemned many Christians to death, sent others (who were actually Roman citizens) to the imperial tribunal, and then asked the emperor for further instructions. Trajan, who wanted to uphold the ideals of the old empire and to protect it from disintegrating forces, responded by saying that Pliny was doing the right thing and that while Christians should not be searched for, decreed that when accused and convicted they should be put to death if they did not repent. It was during this era that the famous Symeon, bishop of Jerusalem, was tortured and crucified in 107 at the age of 120.

It was also during this period that Ignatius (67–107), a student of the Apostle John and pastor of the church at Antioch, was transported to Rome and thrown to the lions in the Coliseum. While on that journey to Rome, he wrote seven letters,⁵ which serve as an example of early Christian theology and address important topics such as: ecclesiology, the sacraments, and the role of bishops. As one might expect, those letters greatly influenced later theological thought. When the hour of his death arrived, he faced it without fear: “May the wild beasts be eager to rush upon me. If they be unwilling, I will compel them. Come, crowds of wild beasts; come, tearing and mangling, wracking of bone and hacking of limbs; come, cruel tortures of the devil; only let me attain unto Christ.”

While not a separate period, we should also mention Antonius Pius, who to some degree seems to have tried to protect Christians simply to avoid public calamity. It was still during his reign, however, that the specific persecutions in Smyrna in Asia Minor (modern Turkey) took place. Some historians submit that it was more the populace in Smyrna that persecuted Christians than it was the government, but Antonius Pius (like many politicians) seems to have bowed to public sentiment. It was there that Polycarp (c. 70–155), the personal friend and student of the Apostle John and pastor of the church at Smyrna, was burned at the stake.⁶ A stone monument still marks his grave.

Polycarp’s martyrdom, in fact, is one of the most striking testimonies in church history, which appears in the second century document, *The Encyclical Epistle of the Church at Smyrna Concerning the Martyrdom of the Holy Polycarp*. When finally brought before the Proconsul, who said to him, “Swear the oath, and I will release thee; revile the Christ,” Polycarp answered, “Fourscore and six years have I been His servant, and He hath done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who saved me?” When the Proconsul threatened, “I have wild beasts here and I will throw thee to them, except thou repent,” Polycarp answered, “Call for them: for the repentance from better to worse is a change not permitted to us; but it is a noble thing to change from [evil] to righteousness.” Again the proconsul threatened, “I will cause thee to be consumed by fire, if thou despisest the wild beasts, unless thou repent,” but Polycarp answered, “Thou threatenest that

fire which burneth for a season and after a little while is quenched for thou art ignorant of the fire of the future judgment and eternal punishment, which is reserved for the ungodly. But why delayest thou? Come, do what thou wilt."

4. Marcus Aurelius (161–180). The reign of Marcus Aurelius was a trying time for Christians. While actually mild, philosophic, and even amiable, he was nonetheless a devout Stoic so was strongly biased against Christianity. Because Stoicism believed in an immediate absorption after death into the Divine essence, he considered the Christian doctrine of the immortality of the soul, with its moral consequences, as vicious and dangerous to the welfare of the state and therefore ordered the persecution of Christians.

Especially violent and fanatical were the persecutions in the churches of Lyons and Vienne in Gaul in 177. Slaves were tortured on the rack to give false testimony against Christians. Christians who were Roman citizens were simply beheaded. Others were thrown to the lions in the amphitheater. The severity of the tortures, even among young girls, are beyond comprehension. One such victim, the 15-year-old slave girl Blandina (c. 162–177), demonstrated almost superhuman strength in her being half-roasted on "the iron chair" (and other tortures for several days) before being wrapped in a net and then thrown to wild bulls.

It was also during this era that Justin Martyr (100–165), the great apologetic writer, was seized during a trip to Rome, scourged, and then beheaded, along with six other Christians. While most of his works did not survive the millennia, two of his "apologies" did, his *First Apology* being the most well known. Addressed to Emperor Antoninus Pius, it was a defense of the philosophy of Christianity and a detailed explanation of its practices and rituals, as well as an argument against the persecution of individuals solely for being Christian. Justin's last words were: "We desire nothing more than to suffer for our Lord Jesus Christ."

5. Septimus Severus (193–211). Severus was actually favorable to Christians early in his reign and even had some in his household, one of which was a nurse for his children. But in 202 he turned hostile and issued an edict against anyone converting either to Christianity or Judaism, and persecution followed quickly. Especially severe were the persecutions in Egypt and North Africa. Clement of Alexandria wrote, "We see daily many martyrs before our eyes burned, crucified, and beheaded." One woman, Perpetua, said of her suffering, "The dungeon became like a palace of rejoicing to me," even as her aged father begged her to recant. In response to her pagan father's pleading, "Father, do you see this vessel lying here as a little pitcher or as something else?" He answered, "I see it as a little pitcher." She then asked, "Can it be called by any other name than what it is?" "No," he replied, to which she concluded, "Nor can I call myself anything else than what I am, a Christian."

6. Maximinius Thrax (235–238). After Septimus Severus, the persecution of Christians lapsed for a few years but was sharply revived under soldier turned emperor Maximinius. In his short three year rule, "the fury of the heathen populace, which was stimulated by governors hostile to Christianity, was allowed to vent itself without check."⁷

7. Decius Trajan (249–251). Motivated by the singular desire to build up the ancient institutions of the Roman Em-

pire, Decius thought the best way to do that was to revive the policies of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius, bringing with it the most severe persecution Christianity had yet endured. By imperial command, Christianity was an obvious threat to that goal, so he set out to exterminate it. He decreed that all Christians must stand before a magistrate, renounce their religion, and make a sacrifice to the gods. While some Christians did so, many did not and were imprisoned, tortured, or killed outright. Church father Origen (185–254) suffered imprisonment and torture under Decius. One married couple was crucified on neighboring crosses and encouraged each other as they endured their agony.

8. Valerian (253–260). While at first mild towards the Christians, Valerian changed his course in 257, possibly by the advice of one of his counselors. Trying to prevent bloodshed, he tried to deprive the Church of its leaders by banishing them, confiscating their property, and prohibiting religious assemblies. That failed, however, so he decreed that they would be killed. One prominent deacon named Lawrence was slowly roasted to death, and one of the most prominent of the early pastors, Cyprian (c. 200–258), was beheaded. Upon receiving his sentence of death, Cyprian calmly answered: "*Deo gratias!*" (Gracious God).

9. Aurelien (270–275). After another deliverance from persecution under Valerian's son Gallienus, who reversed his father's policy and issued a decree of toleration, warlike Aurelian came to power. While he issued an edict of persecution, it was rendered void upon his assassination. So, since 260, the Church knew a wonderful rest from persecution, but that was to change with renewed vengeance.

10. Diocletian (284–313). Perhaps the simplest summary of Diocletian's reign is "a bloodbath." His goal was nothing less than the wholesale annihilation of Christianity. Like others, he was motivated by the welfare of the Empire, but even his methods of government were unorthodox. Feeling that "a single head can be severed by a single blow," he appointed "co-emperors," one who was a co-regent with him and two others who ruled large parts of the Empire. While tolerant for the first 20 years of his reign, in 303, spurred on by his co-regent and son-in-law Galerius, he became determined to eradicate Christianity and issued a series of edicts to accomplish that goal. The first required the destruction of all Christian churches and Bibles and reduced all Christians, no matter what their status, to the rank of slave. The second edict required the immediate imprisonment of all Church officers. The third offered amnesty to any minister who would make sacrifice to the gods and decreed that any torture could be used to get such a profession. The fourth edict decreed that death and confiscation of property was to occur for any Christian who refused to make sacrifice to the gods. As one historian describes this period:

All former persecutions of the faith were forgotten in the horror with which men looked back upon the last and greatest: the tenth wave (as men delighted to count it) of that great storm obliterated all the traces that had been left by others. The fiendish cruelty of Nero, the jealous fears of Domitian, the unimpassioned dislike of Marcus, the sweeping purpose of Decius, the clever devices of Valerian, fell into obscurity when compared with the concentrated terrors of that final grapple, which resulted in the destruction of the old Roman Empire and the es-

tablishment of the Cross as the symbol of the world's hope.⁸

The Consequences of Persecution

The relatively soft rock beneath the city of Rome was conducive to digging tunnels 30 or more feet below the surface. These catacombs crisscross in all directions and cover some 500 miles. It was here that Christians found a level of security not only for worship but also for living and even dying. Rooms, galleries, and even burial niches were dug into the walls.

After centuries of persecution, one might think that "consequences" refers to the annihilation of Christianity. But quite the opposite was true. Despite the savage storm of persecution that raged Empire-wide, Christianity flourished. Perhaps seeing the futility of such violence, or maybe just reflecting on his life as he neared his agonizing death, in 311 Galerius changed his course and declared toleration for Christianity.

What does this history teach us? Persecution has always made the Church stronger. "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church," Tertullian wrote in the second century. Through the ages to come, in fact, more persecution raged and each time the Church was made stronger. True Christians have been persecuted in Communist countries, Muslim countries, and Roman Catholic dominated lands. In today's atmosphere of toleration for false teaching, however, many professed Christians do not stand for the absolute Truth of God's Word. A growing number of Christians today compromise the Truth and tolerate virtually any teaching. Most of us have no idea what it means to stand for Truth as did those in the Early Church. We cannot help but ask, How many professed Christians today, if threatened with torture or death, would deny the Savior and even make "sacrifices to the gods?"

So with the words, "Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer" (Rev. 2:10), our Lord Jesus repeats the principle He uttered in Matthew 10:28 as he predicted future persecution, "Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (cf. Lk. 12:4-7).

That brings us to our text, Matthew 10:16-23:

16 Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves. 17 But beware of men: for they will deliver you up to the councils, and they will scourge you in their synagogues; 18 And ye shall be brought before governors and kings for my sake, for a testimony against them and the Gentiles. 19 But when they deliver you up, take no thought how or what ye shall speak: for it shall be given you in that same hour what ye shall speak. 20 For it is not ye that speak, but the Spirit of your Father which speaketh in you. 21 And the brother shall deliver up the brother to death, and the father the child: and the children shall rise up against their parents, and cause them to be put to death. 22 And ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake: but he that endureth to the end shall be saved. 23 But when they persecute you in this city, flee ye into another: for verily I say unto you, Ye shall not have gone over the cities of Israel, till the Son of man be come.

As part of their training for ministry, Jesus' followers then (as do we now) needed to know what to expect when they went out to proclaim the Gospel. This passage reveals at least three basic principles concerning persecution.

The Assurance of Persecution (v. 16a)

Jesus' use of the word "behold" reflects the absolute certainty that persecution will come. The Greek here (*idou*) calls for paying close attention to what is about to be declared. Just as certain "as sheep in the midst of wolves" will be stalked, surrounded, and slaughtered, by analogy so will true believers as they go out into a world of spiritual wolves. It is not as though the wolves sneak into the fold (although Paul warns that this, too, will occur, Acts 20:29), but that the sheep will go right into the wolves' own territory and into their very jaws. This assertion of coming persecution is repeatedly reiterated throughout the passage. Just as Winston Churchill was honest with his English countrymen with the words, "I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat," after the disaster at Dunkirk in May of 1940, so Jesus is honest with us.

The Attitudes Toward Persecution (vv. 16b, 18-20, 23)

Jesus gave his followers then, and He gives us now, instruction concerning the four attitudes we must have toward persecution.

First, we are to *reason* like "serpents." While this might seem odd to us in view of the serpent in the Garden of Eden, it is actually quite appropriate. In ancient times, serpents were symbols of wisdom. They were viewed as "wise," shrewd, and cautious. So, in that vein Christians are to imitate serpents. So, how does this apply to the Christian? We are to be wise and cautious in what we say and how we say it. In speaking the truth in love (Eph. 4:15; cf. 1 Jn. 3:18), there is no need to be inflammatory or overly accusatory. We weigh our words and look for the best way to reach the highest goal. This never implies *compromise* of the *Truth*, rather just *caution* in our *tactics*. So, when persecution comes, we want it to be because of the Truth, not because of us.

Second, we are to *respond* like "doves" (cf. Phil. 2:15). Among the most harmless and gentlest of birds, the dove is a symbol of innocence and purity. So, we must never compromise the Truth, but we also must never be harsh, unkind, or argumentative. What an amazing combination this is! Wise and pure, shrewd and gentle. One commentator well says:

Wonderful combination this! Alone, the wisdom of the serpent is mere cunning, and the harmlessness of the dove little better than weakness: but in combination, the wisdom of the serpent would save them from unnecessary exposure to danger; the harmlessness of the dove, from sinful expedients to escape it. In the apostolic age of Christianity, how harmoniously were these qualities displayed! Instead of the fanatical thirst for martyrdom, to which a later age gave birth, there was a manly combination of unflinching zeal and calm discretion, before which nothing was able to stand.⁹

Third, we are to *retreat* if possible: "when they persecute you in this city, flee ye into another," Jesus says. The Apostle Paul bears out this principle as he was sometimes able to escape persecution (e.g., Acts 9:23-31; 14:1-6), though most of the time he could not. We, too, should practice that pattern.

Fourth, if we cannot escape, we must *recognize* the opportunity for witness. To repeat Tertullian, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." That is because of the enormously powerful Gospel witness persecution is. The Greek word behind "testimony" in verse 18, in fact, is *martu-*

rion, from which is derived the English “martyr.” It originally did not speak of one who dies but rather one who lives. It was a legal term for one who gave solemn testimony and evidence in court. Likewise, we each *proclaim* Christ with our *lips* and *prove* our transformation with our *life*, and nothing provides more convincing evidence than suffering persecution.

The Avenues of Persecution (vv. 17–18)

Persecution will come from every direction and every quarter. While this article has demonstrated persecution from the *secular* world, in the final analysis it comes chiefly from the *religious* world, “for they will deliver you up to the courts, and scourge you in their synagogues.” This was true of the Lord Jesus and His apostles, and it has been true throughout history. As noted in a recent TOTT, in fact, group after group and person after person has been horrifically persecuted by Roman Catholicism simply because they did not conform to its so-called “orthodoxy”: the Donatists; the Jovinians; Vigilantius; the Paulicians; the Albigenses; the Petrobrusians; the Henricans; the Waldenses; and the list goes on.¹⁰ As one commentator puts it: “It has often been true that the man with a message from God has had to undergo the hatred and the enmity of a fossilized orthodoxy.”¹¹ But while the religious world will be the primary persecutor, the secular world (“governors and kings,” v. 18) will not be far behind, as will even family (v. 21). We will “be hated of all men for [Jesus’] name’s sake” (v. 22) because they all hate the Gospel.

Dr. J. D. Watson
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NOTES

- ¹ Cited in Henry Bettenson, ed., *Documents of the Christian Church*, 4.
- ² Cited in Bettenson, 4.
- ³ J. E. A. Crake, “Early Christians and Roman Law” in *Phoenix*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Spring, 1965), 70.
- ⁴ Latourette, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. 1, 85.
- ⁵ *To the Ephesians, To the Magnesians, To the Thallians, To the Romans, To the Philadelphians, To the Smyrnaeans, To Polycarp*. See Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers*, 79–118.
- ⁶ Schaff writes, “The persecution of the church at Smyrna and the martyrdom of its venerable bishop, which was formerly assigned to the year 167, under the reign of Marcus Aurelius, took place, according to more recent research, under Antoninus in 155, when Statius Quadratus was proconsul in Asia Minor,” and goes on to list several sources (*History of the Christian Church*, Vol. II, 51).
- ⁷ Fisher, *History of the Christian Church*, 49.
- ⁸ Arthur James Mason, *Persecution of Diocletian*; cited by Schaff, Vol. II, 64–65.
- ⁹ Jamieson, Fausset, David Brown, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory*.
- ¹⁰ Issue 128 (Jan./Feb. 2021), “A Biblical View of Church History.”
- ¹¹ William Barclay, *Barclay’s Daily Study Bible, Matthew*, Vol. 1, 386.

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