

Sunday, November 7, 2010—Grace Life School of Theology—*Church History: A Tale of Two Churches*—Lesson 8 Early Church History: From the Death of Paul to the Apostolic Fathers

The Death of Paul

- Theories abound regarding Paul’s movements after his release from house arrest in Acts 28.
- Romans 15:24, 28—while some believe Paul went immediately into Spain after having been released it is not possible to know this for sure. This theory is based on the writings of Clement (Philippians 4:3) who speaks of Paul as having preached in the east and west instructing the whole world, even those in the extremity of the West (Spain). While the testimony of Clement is valuable there is no way to prove from Scripture that Paul went to Spain. (Miller, 132)
- From the testimony of Philemon 22 and Philippians 2:19, 23-24 (Prison Epistles) it appears that Paul altered his plans for going to Spain.
- “At some point after leaving Rome, Paul and his companions must have visited Asia Minor and Greece.” “Feeling, it may be, somewhat anxious about his son Timothy, and weight of the responsibility of his position at Ephesus, he sends him a letter of encouragement, comfort, and authority from Macedonia (I Timothy 1:3).” (Miller, 133-134)
- Titus 1:5—it is also clear that Paul and Titus had visited the Island of Crete after his first imprisonment.
- Titus 3:12—it is clear that Paul intended to winter in a place called Nicopolis
- II Timothy 4:13, 20—Paul clearly visited Troas, Corinth, and Miletum before being arrested a second time.
- It is impossible to know for sure the time or place where Paul was arrested a second time. In addition, we have no means of ascertaining the exact charge from which Paul was apprehended. What does seem certain is that Paul was arrested and executed during the persecution of Christians unleashed by the roman emperor Nero.
- II Timothy 4:6-8—we have extra Biblical historical evidence to suggest that Paul was executed during the Neronian persecutions in 67 AD. “As a Roman citizen, he was beheaded in place of being scourged and crucified or exposed to the frightful tortures he then invented for the Christians.” (Miller, 137)

Early Persecution Christians

- In the summer of 64 AD a fire burned 10 of the city of Rome’s 14 districts to ground. While Nero organized the fire-fighting efforts and allowed thousands of refugees to stay in his garden many Romans blamed Nero for the tragedy. Rumors spread that Nero started the fire so that he could rebuild the city according to his own whims and desires. (Jones, 10-11)

- When lavishing his citizenry with gifts failed to win back the favor of his people, Nero blamed the fire on the Christians. As a result, Nero was the first Roman emperor to recognize publically that Christianity was a different religion, and he began immediately to persecute Christians. (Jones, 11)
- According to Timothy Paul Jones, author of *Christian History Made Easy*, there were essentially four reasons why many citizens of the Roman Empire viewed early Christians with contempt.
 - *Christians rejected all other gods*—“Christians believed in only one God—the god of Israel, revealed in Jesus Christ (I Timothy 2:5).” This belief seemed arrogant to the Romans who sacrificed to many gods so as to cover their religious bases. Believing their religious sacrifices secured divine assistance for the empire, the Romans would offer scarified to Emperors both dead and alive. (Jones, 11-12)
 - *Christian customs were widely misunderstood*—since believers talked about consuming the body and blood of Christ at their love feasts many Romans accused Christians of being cannibals. Moreover, since believers called each other “brothers and sisters” terms used in Egypt to refer to sexual partners, many Romans accused Christians of incest. (Jones, 12)
 - *Christians challenged the social order*—Christians believed that every person matters regardless of their social status (Galatians 3:28). The early church defied Roman customs by welcoming lower classes and valuing every human life. Believers were adopting unwanted infants and welcoming women and slaves as equal inheritor of God’s grace. (Jones, 12)
 - *Christianity was a new religion*—unlike in modern American society the Romans valued old and proven ideas as opposed to new and untested ones. While the Romans never trusted the Jews they allowed them to practice their religion in large measure because it was old and established. In contrast, Christians offered no scarifies and had no temples or sacred cities. (Jones, 12)
- Bruce L. Shelley, author of *Church History in Plain Language*, observes that the supreme cause of the Roman persecution of Christians arose from the tradition of emperor worship. (Shelley, 43) To the Romans the Christians appeared utterly intolerant, stubborn and even worse self-confessed disloyal citizens. This is why Rome regarded Christians as a band of political revolutionaries that threatened the very existence of the empire. (Shelley, 43)
- The persecution of Christians the erupted in Rome under Nero in 64 AD highlighted the habits of life and faith that caused Christianity to be unpopular among the Romans. (Jones, 14)
- After years of hostile relations in 70 AD the Romans took the city of Jerusalem, massacred its inhabitants, plundered the temple, and with the exception of the “wailing wall” burned it to the ground.

- While no emperor regarded the Christians as enough of a threat to institute a systematic, empire wide campaign against them until 249 AD, there were multiple local, temporary persecutions that resulted in many martyrs. The most famous of which was Polycarp of Smyrna a student of the Apostle John who was executed in 155 for refusing to offer incense to the emperor. (Price and Collins, 44)

Christianity Spreads Despite Persecution

- Despite persecution and other widely held negative views, Christianity continued to spread throughout the Roman Empire in the later part of the 1st century.
- Timothy Paul Jones offers the following three reasons for this phenomena:
 - *Christianity provided moral guidelines*—by the middle of the 1st century the moral depravity of the Roman world repulsed not just Jews and Christians but many gentiles as well. For those seeking a moral compass Christianity offered a less painful option than submitting to the Jewish right of circumcision. (Jones, 18)
 - *Christianity offered equality and respect*—the Christian view of women differed deeply from the view of many Romans. One Roman author is reported to have said, “We have courtesans for pleasurable sex, young females slaves for day-by-day physical usage, and wives to produce legitimate children and to serve us faithfully by managing our houses.” Christians not only encourage women to accept the gospel but embraced and respected women as equal heirs of God’s salvation. The believers acceptance of women and slaves was appealing to many who others wise had no hope. (Jones, 18)
 - *Christianity offered a personal relationship with God*—“Christians claimed that they worshiped a deity who became flesh and whose life had intersected with human history. This deity not only embraced human flesh but also experience human suffering.” (Jones, 19) The willingness of martyrs to die for the name of Jesus on strength the notion that Christianity offered its follows a personal relationship with God.
- At this point we must be mindful that the version of Christianity that was spreading across the Roman Empire in the last 35 years of the 1st century was a perverted version because of the widespread departure from Paul’s distinction message and ministry.

The Apostolic Fathers

- It is important to remember that as we move forward from 70 AD the steam of historical evidence dries up until about 110 where it begins to trickle once again. (Noll, 31)
- Church historians give much attention to the writings of the so-called Apostolic Fathers because they represent the writings of those who were still alive during the lifetime of the New Testament apostles.
- The writings of the Apostolic Fathers are as follows:

- Clement—*The First Epistle of Clement of Rome to the Corinthians*--written about 97 AD
 - Unknown author—*The Second Epistle of Clement*—written about 150 AD
 - Ignatius Bishop of Antioch—*The Epistles of Ignatius*—written about 110 AD to the churches of the Ephesians, Magnesians, Trallians, Romans, Philadelphians, Smyrnans, and to Polycarp, the Bishop of Smyra.
 - *The Didache or Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*—written about 100 AD
 - *The Epistle of Barnabas*—written between 70 and 132 AD
 - *The Sheppard of Hermas*—written about 140-145
 - *The Fragments of Papias*—written about 125 (Enns, 409)
- “In studying the works of the apostolic fathers it quickly become apparent that there is a considerable difference in quality from the New Testament writings, and that there is little new material offered.” (Enns, 409)
 - Instead what we see articulated is a version of Christianity that bears virtually no resemblance to the one Paul taught in the church Epistles.
 - R. Dawson Barlow laments this fact in *The Apostasy of the Christian Church* when he states, “With the close of the apostolic age, the great distinctive truths of the Pauline Revelation had vanished from the thinking and dialogue of those in Christian leadership.” (Barlow, 113)
 - When the church fathers began their writings, most of them described a religion that was vastly different from the Christian faith so clearly revealed and described in the Church epistles. In all the writings of the church fathers there is not mention of the distinctive doctrines of grace. (Barlow, 114)
 - After an extensive investigation into the church father’s comments on II Timothy 2:15, R Dawson Barlow concluded that the verse was completely passed over by the church fathers for over five hundred years. Five hundred years of church history passed before any written comments were made by any of the church fathers on II Timothy 2:15. (Barlow, 115)

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