

Church History 101
Lesson 9
Persecution by Rome

Key Concepts: For many of us the image we have been offered of Rome's relationship with the church is that of constant persecution. The reality is that until the late 200s persecution of Christians tended to be a local affair and not a national effort on the part of Rome.

The Story: In order to understand Rome's persecution of the church we need to understand one key factor about Roman society, and that is, to be a good Roman meant to participate in the rites and rituals of Roman religion. Even though there was little if any sense of "belief" involved in Roman religion (meaning Romans did not believe in their gods, like Jews believed in YHWH) what mattered was that the health of Roman society was understood to be dependent upon its traditional religious practices. This meant that other religions such as Christianity were seen as a danger to society and the Empire. That being said the persecution of the church can be divided into two eras.

The first era began with the persecutions of Nero. During Nero's reign there was a great fire which destroyed much of Rome. Nero, understanding that much of Rome blamed him for the fire, needed a scapegoat, and so he chose the Christians. Many Christians were rounded up, tortured and horribly executed. Even though this was a local matter, it marked the moment when Christianity began to be seen as an illegal religion. What this meant was that as an illegal religion its adherents could be executed. In Bithynia around 111 there is correspondence in which the governor, having executed Christians, wants to know how to handle the situation of those who had been accused of being Christians, but there was little proof. The Emperor Trajan instructs him not to hunt down believers and if someone is accused of being a Christian, their accusers must appear in court. By the time of Marcus Aurelius (161-180) the localized persecutions had become more intense. In places like Lyons and Vienne Christians were rounded up and slaughtered in the amphitheaters. In addition Aurelius attacked the theological foundations of the faith, saying it was all superstition.

The second era of persecution began with the reign of Emperor Decius (249-251). Decius wanted to renew the life of the Empire through the renewal of the Roman religion. To this end he ordered that all citizens, on a certain day, should offer a sacrifice to the gods and to the throne. For those who did so a certificate was issued. His desire was not a wholesale killing of Christians but that they should return to being good Romans. Fortunately this edict was not uniformly enforced and many Christians escaped. Emperor Valerian (253-260) continued the persecutions by attacking church leadership and confiscating church property. Following his death there was a short period of peace, which would be lost when Diocletian (284-305) began to reign. Though he was initially friendly to the church, in 303 he issued an edict which called for all churches to be destroyed, scriptures burned, and church leaders imprisoned. This was followed in 304 by another edict which stated that anyone not offering sacrifices to the gods was to be executed. Active persecution continued until 311 when another emperor, Galerius issued an edict of toleration. The formal acceptance of the church occurred in 313 with the signing of the Edict of Milan which stated the Christians could worship freely and that all confiscated church property was to be returned.

The persecutions were difficult for the church. Many Christians denied their faith and lived. Others remained faithful and died. Yet through it all the church continued to grow and by the time of the Edict of Milan, estimates are that 10% or more of all Romans were Christians.

Questions

1. Why do you think that the church survived the persecutions?
2. Where do you see the church persecuted today?
3. What do you think you would be willing to suffer for your faith?