

History is His Story

Nero succeeded Claudius in AD 54. He craved a palace, but wanted to build it over a well-developed area of Rome. He was implicated in starting a fire to burn that area of the city. He conveniently blamed Christians, hauling them in for cruel and unusual executions. Meanwhile mismanagement of Palestine by Roman governors had led to widespread Jewish rebellion that culminated with half the 2 million Jews being genocided by Vespasian from 66-73 AD. When Vespasian thereupon became emperor (Roman Senate voted Nero out of power in 68 AD) his goal was death sentences for Christians.

Yet through the years, **Roman persecution** was sporadic. Their attitude was that Christ's followers were irrationals with no regard for Roman gods (therefore atheists) and likely disloyal because they wouldn't toast the emperor as immortal. Rumors were spread about Christians being cannibals (ate body and blood of the Lord's Supper).

But what were Christian practices? We know this primarily by two books. *Didache*, "teaching", was written about AD 100. It describes meeting on Sunday, baptizing—preferably in running "living" water, Lord's Prayer, and fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays. The second book is Justin Martyr's *Apologia I*. He wrote this to the emperor in 155 AD to argue that Christians were in fact most patriotic and loyal. Services began with a kiss of peace, then singing of *Gloria*. Both of these continue in handshaking and the opening hymn of praise in Lutheran/Anglican and other traditional worships today. There followed readings from the Old Testament prophets and the Apostles. The 'president' of the congregation then gave an exhortation to live nobly based on the readings (sermon). Finally the Eucharist was celebrated. It was so important that deacons would take this to people who were absent. Martyr's reasonableness won him only a death sentence.

Christians were banished from the markets because sellers had to swear blessings of the local deity or one could not participate. Often they worked outside the city walls, such as Simon the Tanner whom Peter stayed with. They stayed in extended family-like groups reading what writings of the apostles they owned. Most noticed by the pagans was that they loved one another deeply. "Faith is the beginning and love is the end."—Ignatius of Antioch, c. 107 AD. The belief in the real presence of Jesus in the Lord's Supper made them part of the actual body of Christ on earth—Jesus with skin on.

A very illuminating set of letters has been preserved from Emperor Trajan to Pliny, governor of Bithynia, when trouble arose in there. When Christians are found out, Trajan said, just execute them. If they renounce their superstition (faith), they are to be released. But don't seek them out if they make nothing of their beliefs. This was typical of Roman rule. Nonetheless, churches lived underground, defensively. Phil. 3:10 was often quoted, "know Him and the power of His resurrection, and may share His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death." And so many Christians died rather than renounce faith and it grew in the eyes of other believers, many of whom lived at peace with their neighbors.

Polycarp of Smyrna was one of the first of early church fathers to have writings survive. He was Apostle John's understudy and was ordained by him. Indeed some think Polycarp was the person who assembled the New Testament scriptures. At age 86, Feb. 23, 155 AD he was executed by burning at the stake, but the fire wouldn't burn so he was stabbed until dead. When his house was opened, Romans were stunned to find the old man harboring 80 children. He had organized the first orphanage. Christians would famously follow Romans who wanted to dispose of undesired children by abandoning the infants in the forests. They would rescue the babies and raise them. When plagues ravaged a city, the pagans would flee to the countryside. Christians would stay behind to care for the sick and dying. Some died themselves, but gave testimonies to their eternal faith. And the Christians educated women, an unheard-of practice. As a result, thousands flocked to Christianity despite the dangers of association. Often we find church rolls or baptismal records from second and third century ruins. Women comprised 2/3 the membership. Until 150 AD, Roman soldiers were turned away from churches (Roman army swore allegiance to Roman gods and were blessed by priests before battle.) Nonetheless, the faith spread among the troops, hungering to make peace with God before their ultimate test in battle. Recently a baker's kitchen in Pompeii's ruins (79 AD) was found to have a secret room for gatherings of Christians. The baker was a highly decorated and proud war veteran who had settled down in Pompeii.

The church grew from 60,000 around 60 AD, to 300,000 in 120 AD, to 2.5 million by 200AD and 36 million (1/3 the empire) by 325 AD. "Caesar and Christ had met in the arena, and Christ has won." – historian Will Durant.