

Perspectives on Church History: Where we've come from and how we got here
Unit 1: The Ancient Church (6 BC to AD 590) – The Ancients were people just like us
Part 3: Now the story's been told, so what are you going to do with it? (AD 64 – 177)

1. **Overview:** “Who were the Christians? For you, that may not be a tough question. For thirty years people in the Roman Empire couldn’t agree on an answer. According to many Jews, Christians were renegades who had abandoned the ancient Law. Christians, however, claimed that they followed the Jewish Messiah. They even called themselves ‘the Israel of God’ (Galatians 6.16). According to the Romans, the church was simply another Jewish sect (Acts 16.20). Because the Jewish faith was legal throughout the empire, the church’s association with the Jews protected the earliest Christian missionaries.

“During the last half of the first century AD, the situation shifted completely. By AD 100 the church had endured thirty years of veiled contempt and open violence. Jewish synagogues had excluded Christians. The followers of Christ were a distinct group within the empire. Why? The answer can’t be confined to any certain event. Yet two fires – one in Jerusalem, one in Rome – were critically important.” Jones, p.7.

**WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT CHRISTIAN HISTORY
AD 64—AD 177**

Five Events You Should Know
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Jerusalem Council (AD 49-50): Church recognized that the gospel is for Gentiles too (Acts 15). 2. Fire in Rome (AD 64): Flames destroyed 70% of the capital city. Emperor Nero blamed and persecuted the Christians. 3. Destruction of Jerusalem Temple (AD 70): After a Jewish revolt, Emperor Vespasian ordered his son, Titus, to regain Jerusalem. Titus torched the city and leveled the temple. 4. Pliny’s Letter to Emperor Trajan (around AD 112): Pliny, governor of Pontus, asked Trajan how to handle Christians. Trajan ordered Pliny not to pursue Christians. Only when people were accused of being Christians were they to be hunted down. 5. Martyrdom of Polycarp (AD 155): Polycarp of Smyrna (now Izmir, Turkey) was burned alive because he would not offer incense to the emperor.
Ten Names You Should Know
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Peter (died between AD 65 and 68): Leading apostle of the early church. 2. Paul (died between AD 65 and 68): Early Christian missionary and apostle. 3. Nero (AD 37-68): Roman emperor, persecuted Christians after fire in Rome. 4. Clement of Rome (died, AD 96): Leading pastor of Rome in the late first century. The fourth pope, according to Roman Catholics. Probably mentioned in Philippians 4:3. 5. Josephus (AD 37-100): Jewish writer. His historical works tell about early Christianity and the destruction of the Jewish temple. 6. Ignatius (AD 35-117): Apostolic church father and leading pastor in Syrian Antioch. Wrote seven important letters while traveling to Rome to face martyrdom. 7. Papias (AD 60-130): Apostolic church father. Wrote about the origins of the Gospels. 8. Polycarp (AD 69-155): Apostolic church father. Preserved Ignatius’ writings. 9. Justin Martyr (AD 100-165): Christian philosopher and apologist. Martyred in Rome. 10. Blandina (died, AD 177): Slave-girl. Martyred in Lyons with the city’s leading pastor.
Five Terms You Should Know
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Anno Domini: Latin for “the Lord’s Year,” usually abbreviated AD. Refers to the number of years since Christ’s birth. Dionysius Exiguus, a sixth-century monk, was the first to date history by the life of Christ. His calculations were four years off. So, Jesus was around four years old in AD 1! 2. Century: One hundred years. The first century extended from AD 1 to AD 100; the second century, from AD 101 to AD 200; the third, from AD 201 to 300, and so on. 3. Yahweh: Hebrew name for God. The name means “I AM” (see Exodus 3:13-14). 4. Apostolic Fathers: Influential first-century Christians, such as Ignatius, Polycarp, and Papias. A few later theologians (such as Augustine) are also called church fathers. 5. Apologists: Second-century Christian writers who argued that Christianity should be legal.

2. A fire in Rome – AD 64. This fire was a big deal – the city burned for six days, leaving 10 of Rome’s 14 districts ruined. It did not help matters that the emperor was more than a little bit off. As the city began to rebuild, the populace looked for someone to blame, and Nero was the leading candidate (isn’t it amazing how there really is nothing new under the sun – just ask George W. Bush, who was not “off” but who did cause Katrina :)

- One rumor had Nero ordering his servants to start the blaze so he could rebuild Rome to suit himself. Other rumors had him playing a harp while the city burned (he was beloved by his own, wasn’t he?).
- As these and other rumors persisted, a besieged Nero looked for a scapegoat. He settled on a minority group that had become misunderstood and mistrusted – the Christians. One pagan writer wrote the following about this strange group and its observance of the Lord’s Supper: “An infant is covered with dough, to deceive the innocent. The infant is placed before the person who is to be stained with their rites. The young pupil slays the infant. Thirstily, they lick up its blood! Eagerly, they tear apart its limbs. After much feasting, they extinguish [the lights]. Then, the connections of depraved lust involve them in an uncertain fate.”
- Ironically, Nero became the first ruler to recognize Christianity as a separate new religion.
- The persecution that followed was not pretty. As one Roman wrote, “Some were dressed in furs and killed by dogs. Others were crucified, or burned alive, to light the night.”
- Even before the fire, Christians were described as “hated for their abominations.” Why were the Christians so disdained?
 1. Christians believed in only one God, which seemed arrogant to Romans. For them, it was far more expedient (and quite easy) to sacrifice to every known god. The Christians, then, were unpatriotic and perhaps even hazardous to the status quo.
 2. Christian customs were greatly misunderstood. In describing their worship, these strange individuals spoke of consuming the body and blood of Jesus during a feast. Also, at least in some ancient cultures, calling each other “brothers” and “sisters” was a reference to sexual partners. When believers shared communion, they did so in secret, with nonbelievers not present. Many contemporaries came to see them as a dangerous cult in which cannibalism and incest were practiced.
 3. The early church took on the social order of the day. Christianity asserted that all persons mattered – Jew, Greek, slave, free, male, female. As early Christians lived out the words of Paul, Romans who encountered them were challenged and offended. While Roman law prohibited a slave from owning property and treated a woman as a lesser person, Christians saw that same slave and woman as an equal. After Christians began adopting abandoned infants left to die, the culture around them considered this act to be open defiance of a father’s wishes.
 4. Christianity was a new product in a society that distrusted newness. While Rome forced change on conquered cultures, it valued compliance and status quo. The Jewish faith was ancient and thus tolerated. Although Christians claimed that their faith preceded even Abraham, many Romans saw only a new set of beliefs. The church built no city, recognized no sacred city, and made no sacrifices to their Divinity. For contemporaries, they were too radical, too unpleasant, too unusual. Even so, the distinction between Judaism and Christianity was not apparent to most observers. This would change in AD 70, though, and Jerusalem would again be the setting.

3. A fire in Jerusalem – AD 70. By the middle of the first century, the friction between Rome and the Jews was a boiling point. A riot resulted during Passover of AD 50 after Roman soldiers supposedly

demeaned the worship. 30,000 people were said to have died. Another insult to Jews occurred in AD 64 when a new Roman ruler raided the temple. Rioting and discord resulted, and Jews overthrew local Roman rule in Jerusalem and Galilee. In response, Nero sent Vespasian and a substantial army to regain the territory. Even before Vespasian could arrive, Nero committed suicide, and the general would return to Rome and claim the empire.

The army continued its campaign, however, and Jerusalem was attacked in AD 70. By late summer, the city fell. Rebels were killed, and the city was plundered. The temple was burned to the ground, with only one wall left standing. The last fortress holdout – Masada – would be overcome about four years later. The only Jewish “authorities” left intact were compliant leaders who wanted to disarm any threat to the forced peace that had resulted. “Fringe” groups were banned from the synagogues as a result. “By AD 90 the weekly synagogue prayers included a curse against ‘the Nazarenes,’ a reference to Christians who followed Jesus of Nazareth. The division between church and synagogue was complete.” Jones, p.11. The total break with Judaism was complete – God uses human factors to produce spiritual results.

4. Roman persecution and Christian response. The earliest persecution of Christians by Rome was confined to Rome itself. After Nero, and as the break between Judaism and Christianity became permanent, the early Christians enjoyed a few years’ respite from Roman opposition. Having resolved the Jewish problem with the fall of Masada, the Roman emperors saw no threat from the new faith. This break would not last long, however. Domitian (the son of Vespasian) succeeded as emperor and determined that would assume an even greater title, that of “Lord and God.” Demanding tithes from all Jews, Domitian would react against Jewish stubbornness by prohibiting all Jewish practices, to include Christianity. These events resulted in a form of persecution which moved beyond Rome itself and exceeded any opposition that the young church had faced before.

- The next emperor, Trajan, approved the efforts of subordinates like Pliny of Asia Minor (now Turkey), a governor who offered Christians a chance to recant – those who cursed Christ were released; those Roman citizens who refused were sent to Rome to await trial; non-Roman citizens who refused to recant were immediately executed.
- Thousands of women and men “atheists” would die during the following years. Because the Christians rejected the gods accepted by Rome, they were considered atheists.
- Polycarp of Smyrna was among those who professed this faith of “superstitions.” Known throughout Smyrna (modern Turkey), he was eventually rounded up and taken into captivity. Brought before the governor, the aged Polycarp was instructed to respect his age and recant. “Away with the atheists,” he was told to say – instead, he pointed to crowd and stated, “Away with the atheists! Eighty-six years I have served Christ, and he has done me no wrong. How, then, can I blaspheme my king, who has saved me?” For this, he was burned alive.
- As the second century of the faith unfolded in the mid-100s, Christian scholars began to answer the criticisms of the faith. These “apologists,” more than attempting to convert the Romans, were seeking to defend the faith as legitimate and not illegal. One such apologist was Justin, who believed that Greek philosophy was a point of contact with the faith in that it contained hints of God’s cosmic Word. In Jesus, this cosmic Word, “became flesh.” (John 1.14). His viewpoints would be repeated in the centuries to come as believers sought “points of contact” between their faith and the culture around them. In time, though, Justin would have to choose between the gods of Rome and the real God. He chose Christ and was beheaded in AD 165. He is known to us as “Justin Martyr.”

Next time: More on those who lead the early church.