

Faithful Even Unto Death

By JAMES D. BALES

With the destruction of Jerusalem the Jews ceased to be the great persecuting power. As the pagans began to see more and more the challenge of Christianity to their religion and institutions they began to bring pressure to bear upon the church. Their persecutions were the more merciless because they had greater power to bring against the church.

I—Causes of the Persecutions of the Christians by Pagans

The Romans tried to be tolerant of the religion of the people whom they conquered. The Jews, in particular, had been granted special privileges. Why did they try to crush Christians?

Idolatry and pagan religion were closely tied to the social life of the people. The withdrawal of Christians from various aspects of the social and political life, aspects of life which were sanctioned by religion, custom and antiquity, was bound to arouse animosity.

Pagan religion was bound up with the state. The Christians assailed the pagan religions. The pagans looked upon their refusal to sacrifice to idols as an invitation to the gods to visit all the people with natural and political calamities. Christians would not offer up incense to the image of the Emperor or call him god. Their meeting for worship could be construed as treasonable meetings of illegal societies. Christianity was not only exclusive and novel but it had not been approved by the state. For this reason Paul was accused of teaching "customs which are not lawful for us to receive, neither to observe, being Romans" (Acts 16:21).

Christianity undermined certain vested interests. These tended to savagely smite those who cut in on their profits. Pliny, in a letter to the Emperor Trajan around A.D. 112, said that the temples had been almost deserted, sacred rites had lapsed, and that the food for sacrificial victims was not being bought due to the number of Christians. If Christianity prevailed men such as Demetrius, the silversmith (Acts 19:25), priests and others, would be jobless.

The proselyting spirit of Christianity. Although the Jews had been permitted to proselyte the Romans did not like proselyting religions. Religion was supposed to be subservient to the interests of the State and they did not like an aggressive religion which placed allegiance to the Christ above everything else.

Witchcraft was forbidden and the cessation of veneration on the part of the Christians for the pagan gods, as well as the mere fact of their holding to a "new superstition," was sufficient for them to be accused of witchcraft.

They were regarded as enemies of both men and the gods. Since they denounced

wickedness and all pagan religions, since they refused to worship idols, since they refused to participate in idolatrous ceremonies which the pagans regarded as essential to the welfare of the state, the Christians were regarded as enemies of men and the gods.

At first the contempt which the Romans felt for the Jews fell upon the Christians as it was regarded as a sect of the Jews in the beginning.

The appeal of the church to the lower classes led the upper classes to look down upon it.

The enthusiasm of its converts shocked the philosophers and led them to regard it as fanaticism. The claim of the Christians to the truth insulted the philosophers also.

II—Legal Enactments Against Christianity

First made illegal in A.D. 64. A decree of Nero "made the profession of Christianity a crime." Trajan tells us of the Neronian persecution.

The law required the offering of sacrifices to the Emperor's image. Christians prayed for the Emperor but they would not do divine honors unto a mere man. Thus their religion was illegal for it led them to violate the laws. Trajan in his letter to Pliny held that Christianity was a crime but he told Pliny not to hunt the Christians out.

Marcus sanctioned the employment of torture to make Christians recant and if they did not they were to die.

Severus (A.D. 202) forbade "conversions to Christianity."

It was not until the beginning of the fourth century, in the time of Constantine, that the laws prohibiting Christianity were repealed.

III—Persecutions and How Christians Faced Them

Nero in order to divert public suspicion, for the burning of Rome, from himself blamed it upon the Christians and a multitude of them were tortured and put to death. Nero was so cruel that Tacitus said even for such criminals as the Christians there "arose a feeling of compassion."

Continual persecution. Persecutions went on, in one part or another of the country, continually though at times they were particularly intense. Christians never knew when the animosity of their neighbors would break out into violent persecution. At the games the mobs cried for the blood of Christians. Magistrates often granted their request in order to placate them. Christians in Lyons underwent terrible torture. Just as a mob cried for the blood of Christ just so they often cried for the blood of Christians. Polycarp when called upon to revile Christ said: "Eighty and six years have I served

Him, and He hath done me no wrong; how then can I blaspheme my King Who saved me?" He was burned at stake. Ptolemaeus and Lucius confessed that they were Christians so they were put to death. Justin, with others, suffered martyrdom. The "Scillitan Martyrs" (180 A.D.) in Carthage sealed their faith with their blood. Countless others paid the last full measure of their devotion to the Saviour who died for them.

IV—Means of Torture Which Were Used

They were banished to mines or unhealthy islands, they were tortured with iron talons, flogged, crucified, thrown to wild beast, bound in chairs of hot iron, roasted over slow-burning fires, torn "to the very bone by shells or hooks of iron," limbs were cut off, "holy virgins given over to the lust of gradators or the mercies of the pander," in fact all the means that the perverted mind of man could devise were used to torture Christians. But, as Lecky has said, "For the love of their Divine Master, for the cause which they believed to be true, men, and even weak girls, endured these things, when one word would have freed them from their sufferings."

V—Attitude of the Christians Towards Persecutors and Apostates

Christians are called upon by Christ to turn the other cheek, to suffer if needs be for righteousness sake, and not to return persecution for persecution. Multitudes heeded both the letter and the spirit of his word. Thus Christians often tried to convert the very people who were persecuting them. They stood by without raising a hand while they were despoiled of property. They gladly gave their lives as a testimony to their faith and to Christ.

Of course, some apostatized before, as well as after, torture. Christians mourned for such as the lost ones instead of for those martyrs who had died for Christ. After denying Christ some repented. After persecutions had ceased others returned to the fold. There was much discussions as to what should be done when those who had forsaken Christ during time of persecution later came back. When we remember the denials of Peter, the fact that many are babes in Christ, the fact that faith has its "hour of weakness," we are not prone to be too harsh with such. If they really repent God forgives them. We are not their judge.

VI—Conclusion

Let us draw courage from the courage of the martyrs of old. Let us recognize that all must die sooner or later and that if we are called upon to die or to denounce Christ that to die for Christ will be the most glorious manner in which we can quit this life. We do not seek martyrdom. But let us pray that if such an hour of testing comes to us that we may be able to offer testimony to Christ which will influence our generation and encourage generations to come. Let us not boast of what we shall do but let us so live that we shall be able to withstand anything that may come to us as a result of our being Christian.