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Andrew M. Davis

Teaching Notes

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A.C.T.S. Church History Seminar

Week 1: The Spiritual Conquest of the Roman Empire (30-325)

I. Biblical Context

- A. The “fullness of time”: Galatians 4:4
- B. Christ’s warning to His apostles: John 15:18-19; John 16:33
- C. Christ’s trial before Pilate: John 18:33-40
- D. Christ’s three inscriptions: John 19:20
- E. Paul’s “finish line”: a witness to Caesar: Acts 9:15-16; Acts 25:12; 2 Timothy 4:16-18

II. Roman Empire: Aid and Opposition to the Gospel Advance

A. Unintentional Aid

- 1. Roman roads
- 2. Roman commerce
- 3. Roman culture
- 4. Roman laws

All these helped the advance of the gospel greatly!!

B. Intentional Persecution

“The blood of martyrs is seed for the church.” Tertullian

- 1. Sometimes greater, sometimes less... always possible until A.D. 312
- 2. Notorious persecutors:
 - Nero (54-68)

Nero burned Christians alive as a reprisal for (as he claimed) burning Rome

“As a result, although they were guilty of being Christians and deserved death, people began to feel sorry for them. For they realized that they were being massacred not for the public good, but to satisfy one man’s mania.” Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44

- Domitian (81-96)

Domitian took the title, "Master and God," and ordered that people took the official oath

- Trajan (98-117)

Developed official policy of empire toward Christians: 1) Acquit the repentant; 2) Accept no anonymous accusations; 3) punish the obstinate with death. This was policy for 100 years.

Key martyr: Ignatius of Antioch (A.D. 107)

"For I am afraid of your love, lest it should do me an injury. For it is easy for you to accomplish what you please; but it is difficult for me to attain to God, if you do not spare me, under the pretense of carnal affection. For it is not my desire to act towards you as a man-pleaser, but as pleasing God, even as also you please Him." Ignatius, *Epistle to the Romans*, 1.2-2.1

- Antoninus Pius (138-161)

Key martyr: Polycarp in Smyrna (A.D. 155)

- Marcus Aurelius (161-180)

Stoic philosopher, promoted traditional religion of Rome; hated Christians because they undermined pure Roman culture

Key martyrs: Felicitas, seven sons; Justin Martyr (A.D. 165); Martyrs of Lyons and Vienne (A.D. 177)

Felicitas:

"While I live, I shall defeat you; and if you kill me, in my death, I shall defeat you all the more!!".

Martyrs of Lyons and Vienne: [read in Gonzalez, p. 46-47]

A certain man named Sanctus, when tortured, simply answered, "**I am a Christian.**" The more he was tortured, the more he persisted in saying nothing but these words, "**I am a Christian.**" Others who had previously lost their courage were now strengthened and they were all executed.

- Septimus Severus (193-211)

Required all to worship *sol invictus* (Sun god); in 202, made conversion a capital crime

Key martyrs: Origen's father (but not Origen!!); Perpetua & Felicitas

Origen:

His mother hid his clothes so he wouldn't be martyred with father

Perpetua & Felicitas: (A.D. 203, Carthage)

Three men, Saturninus, Revocatus, and Secundulus were martyred first. The first two died quickly and bravely, but no beast would attack Secundulus. Finally, he declared that a leopard would kill him, and that's exactly what happened! Then Perpetua and her servant Felicitas were put in the arena to be attacked by a ferocious cow. Having been hit and thrown by the enraged animal, Perpetua, stopped to retie her hair, for loose hair was a sign of mourning and this was a joyful day for her. Finally the two bleeding women stood in the middle of the arena, bid each other farewell with a holy kiss, and were killed with the sword.

- Decius (249-251)

Issued edict requiring all to sacrifice to gods & burn incense to emperor; those who complied received a certificate (*libellus*); those who refused were jailed, tortured, or killed

C. Christian Response

1. Martyrdom (as we've seen)
2. Apostasy (called the *lapsi*... the lapsed)
 - *libellatici*: obtained forged certificates
 - *thurificati*: sacrificed to the gods (but perhaps didn't mean it!)
3. Treason
 - *traditores*: handed over Scriptures or betrayed fellow Christians
4. Apologetics:

Answering critics who ridiculed Christianity or misunderstood it:

False ideas about Christian doctrines & practices:

- ◆ Christian “love feasts” were actually orgies
- ◆ Using the title “brother” or “sister” in these love feasts showed they were incestuous orgies
- ◆ Eating the Lord’s Supper (representing the Body and Blood of Christ) showed they were cannibals
- ◆ Bottom line: Christians were anti-social, ignorant, rebellious, and immoral
 - Justin Martyr (d. 165)

Taught that Christianity is true philosophy; the Logos that inspires reason became incarnate in Christ; in *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, argued that Christianity is superior to Judaism; pressed home fulfilled prophesies to prove his case

- Tertullian (155-222; probably a lawyer; lived in Carthage, North Africa)

First apologist who wrote in Latin; "Father of Latin Christianity"; wrote his *Apology* around A.D. 197; refuted false understandings of Christian beliefs and practices; ridiculed the moral and legal absurdities by which pagans justified persecuting Christians

"What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem? What does the Academy have to do with the Church?" Tertullian, Prescription Against Heretics, Chapter 1.7.

That is, Christian faith should have nothing to do with pagan philosophy!

D. Christianity a Tolerated Religion: Galerius's Edict of 311

- ◆ Emperor Galerius contracted a painful disease
- ◆ Became convinced that the Christian God was punishing him
- ◆ Grudgingly decided to change his policy, in 311

"... Therefore, moved by our mercy to be benevolent towards all, it had seemed just to extend to them our pardon, and allow them to be Christians once again, and once again to gather in their assemblies, as long as they do not interfere with public order..."

In return for our tolerance, Christians will be required to pray to their god for us, for the public good, and for themselves, so that the state may enjoy prosperity and they may live in peace."

E. Christianity the State Religion: Constantine, Milvian Bridge, the Edict of Milan (A.D. 312)

- ◆ Had followed sun god *sol invictus*
- ◆ Stated he had a vision in which he was instructed to put Christian symbol on the shields of his soldiers
- ◆ Won the Battle of Milvian Bridge over Maxentius
- ◆ Drew up agreement with Maxentius, called "Edict of Milan" (A.D. 313)

All persecution of Christians would stop, their churches, cemetaries, other properties returned

Constantine then embraced Christianity as the official state religion

- ◆ Founded new city in the east as the capitol of his empire: Constantinople
- ◆ Made incredible impact on future history of the Western Church
- ◆ Developed "official theology"
- ◆ Emperor's declared faith caused thousands to flock into the church who were not really Christians
- ◆ Some responded by withdrawing and fleeing to the desert as MONKS (following a pattern of fasting, meditation, and renunciation of the world), since martyrdom was no longer possible

- ◆ Others began working in earnest on theological writings
- ◆ Christian worship was affected by the immense churches the new wealth enabled them to build