

STUDY PACK 21

EARLY CHRISTIANITY

“No one else holds or has held the place in the heart of the world which Jesus holds. Other gods have been as devoutly worshipped; no other man has been so devoutly loved.” ~ John Knox ~

“Jesus of Nazareth, without money and arms, conquered more millions than Alexander the Great, Caesar, Mohammed, and Napoleon; without science and learning, he shed more light on things human and divine than all philosophers and scholars combined; without the eloquence of school, He spoke such words of life as were never spoken before or since, and produced effects which lie beyond the reach of orator or poet; without writing a single line, He set more pens in motion, and furnished themes for more sermons, orations, discussions, learned volumes, works of art, and songs of praise than the whole army of great men of ancient and modern times.” ~ Philip Schaff ~

I. THE APOSTLES AND THE EARLY SPREAD OF CHRISTIANITY

After Christ’s resurrection, He appeared to His disciples for forty days. He then ascended into Heaven after delivering the “Great Commission” to His disciples. “But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)

God delivered the New Testament Scriptures to the chosen apostles who were _____
_____. The Book of Acts records the early spread of Christianity.
The epistles described the challenges of developing churches.

The early church survived persecution from the Jewish and Palestinian leaders. Jewish leaders, including Saul of Tarsus, began a vicious persecution of Christian believers. By now there were thousands of disciples. One of the first deacons, Stephen, was killed by a mob. King Herod had James the Apostle killed. Christians began to scatter throughout the region of Palestine.

Saul of Tarsus was on his way to Damascus to persecute the Christians there. He saw a vision from the Lord Jesus during which he trusted Christ as his Saviour. Saul was transformed into one of the greatest missionaries of all time and he was counted as one of the apostles.

God allowed the apostles to _____
to demonstrate that they were really the representatives of God. “How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him; God also bearing them witness, both with signs and wonders, and with divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to his own will?” (Hebrews 2:3-4).

In the early years most of the apostles concentrated on preaching the Gospel to the Jews. Saul of Tarsus, his name changed to Paul, conducted three missionary journeys starting churches throughout the Mediterranean area. He was aided by men like Barnabas, Silas, Timothy, and Luke. After being arrested by Jewish authorities in Jerusalem, Paul was turned over to Roman authorities. He appealed to be heard by Caesar and he began the long journey to Rome (see Acts 28).

Most of the apostles ended up spreading throughout the Roman Empire and beyond. The spread of the Gospel extended throughout the known world. All of the apostles, except John, were eventually martyred for their faith.

II. THE APOSTOLIC FATHERS AND THE BATTLE WITH PAGANISM

The next generation _____ . Many of them actually knew apostles. Paganism began to try to overwhelm Christianity in some areas and to try and infiltrate Christianity in other areas. These early church leaders had to battle paganism in order to keep the church what God intended for it to be.

Paganistic heresy about the deity of Christ, the inspiration of the Scriptures, the plan of salvation, and the purpose of civil government challenged the church from the very beginning. By the end of the first century A.D., prominent church leaders like Clement and Ignatius were teaching _____ .

Soon Christian leaders began to write in “Defense of the Faith” in the spirit of Jude 3. These were called “apologies.” In that day, the word apology meant _____ . These “apologies” were designed to _____ . Important apologists were Tatian (110-172 A.D.) and Justin Martyr (114-168 A.D.).

III. THE EARLY CHURCH FATHERS

The next generation of church leaders are often referred to as the “_____.” Irenaeus (202 A.D.) was a great champion of the independent church. The early church fathers tried to maintain a pure church during times of persecution.

IV. WAVES OF PERSECUTION

The pagan Roman world recoiled at the principles of Christianity. Paganism was hostile to any concept of a Creator-God, a moral code, written revelation, and

salvation by grace. Governments and rulers felt threatened by the Christian concepts of the Lordship of Christ and limited government. This hostility often broke out in waves of violent persecution.

The first persecution (outside of Judea) took place in Rome under the wicked emperor Nero. He blamed the Christians for the burning of Rome (for which he was really responsible). He had some Christians crucified, others torn to death by wild dogs, and others covered with wax and used as human torches. During this persecution it is believed _____ , along with many other church leaders, were killed.

The second great persecution came under the Roman emperor Domitian (81-96 A.D.). Christians were accused of being atheists (_____), cannibals (_____), and communists (_____). Domitian declared that he was a god and demanded worship. The Apostle John was exiled to the isle of Patmos during this persecution.

The third great persecution came under the leadership of Trajan (98-117 A.D.). Trajan declared that Christianity was an illegal religion and that Christians were rebels against the nation. During the persecution, Polycarp (student of John the Apostle) was martyred. Polycarp was told that he must declare that Caesar was Lord or be burnt at the stake. He was asked, "What harm is there in saying Caesar is Lord, and offering incense to save thyself?" Polycarp responded "Fourscore and six years I have been his servant, and he hath done me no wrong. _____?" Polycarp was then burnt at the stake.

The fourth great persecution came under Marcus Aurelius (121-180 A.D.). It became customary to blame Christians for every natural disaster. Christians were normally killed by being in great Roman Coliseums before jeering crowds. Then lions were released to devour the Christians for the enjoyment of the pagan crowds.

The fifth great persecution came under Emperor Severus (193-211 A.D.). Again Christians were routinely delivered to the lions. It was now common for men, women, and children to be stripped and humiliated in front of the jeering crowds before the lions were released.

The sixth great persecution came under Maximus the Thracian (249-251 A.D.). He ordered all preachers to be hunted down and killed.

During these persecutions the faithfulness of the Christians amazed the pagan world. Some Christians compromised, but pagan writings are full of statements about how many stood faithful to the end. Their greatest critics recorded, with awe, their willingness to suffer for Christ.

Christians _____ to escape persecution. Others lived in the famed catacombs under the streets of Rome. In spite of all the opposition, the churches continued to grow in number and influence.

The seventh great persecution came under Trajan Decius (249-251 A.D.). He was determined to destroy all traces of Christianity. Christians were given the choice between converting to paganism and torture. Christian women who refused to engage in the moral impurity of paganism were laid on beds of hot coals. Some Christians gave in to paganism, but more stood fast for the Lord.

The eighth major persecution came under Emperor Valerian (253-260 A.D.). He ordered the property of Christians seized and forbade Christian assemblies to meet. When this did not end Christianity, he ordered all the preachers killed. Christianity was referred to as a "_____." Soon Christians of all ages and both sexes were being cruelly tortured and killed. Valerian was then captured by the Persians and cruelly tortured and killed himself. Then the church had about forty years of peace.

The ninth great persecution came under Emperor Diocletian (303-312 A.D.). All copies of the Bible were ordered burned, church buildings plundered, and preachers killed. Soon Christians of all ages were being fed to the lions in the coliseums. This was the most savage persecution of all and the one in which the greatest number of Christians were killed. So many Christians died that _____.

V. CIVIL GOVERNMENT AND CHRISTIANITY

The response of the people _____ will determine what philosophies they hold. It will determine what form of government they choose. It will determine what economic systems they practice. It will determine what kind of leaders they choose.

God is the author of all power and authority. He has created civil government and has given it a distinct but limited function. He has given civil government the authority it needs to carry out its limited function.

“Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? Do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake. For this cause pay ye tribute also: for they are God’s ministers, attending continually upon this very thing. Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour.” (Romans 13:1-7).

The divine but limited nature of civil government is also seen in John 19:9-11, Psalms 75:6-7, and Proverbs 8:15-16.

Much of the history of the world is the history of nations and peoples trying to exceed _____. Biblically the legitimate role of government is to be a terror to evil works and the praise of good works. When civil government tries to take the place of the family or become the saviour of mankind it rebels against God. This rebellion provides much of the material of the story of the world’s history.

A 1906 U.S. History book expressed the concern over the corruption of civil government this way:

“Government authority has no inherent force in itself; it is not the creator, but the creature; it is not the master, nor even the partner of the people, but their agent or servant; it acts in the name of and in behalf of someone else and not for itself.”

“Not only is government the servant of the people, but it is an untrustworthy and unreliable servant. It cannot be given a free hand in caring for the affairs of its master; on the contrary, it must be limited in many ways; it must be checked at every possible point; it must be at all times under suspicion. Otherwise, it will cease to be servant and take the place of master. Too much emphasis cannot well be laid upon the fear which the Fathers had of government. To them the great lesson of history was, that government always tends to become oppressive, and that it is the greatest foe of individual liberty.”

~~Dr. C. Edwards Merriam, *American Political Theories*, (1906). ~~