

Learning from the Church Fathers (3) Christians in a Decadent Empire

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Most North Americans under the age of forty are more intensely aware of the plurality of beliefs in their society than their previous generation. Christians are now confronted with the question whether Christianity is indeed essentially different from other religions. They have always been aware of other religious options – sometimes intensely so – as in the first four centuries in the Roman empire. What makes modern pluralism different is the postmodern influence of relativism with its denial of objective truth. The latter creates the sense that religious differences concern not truth, but taste. But with no absolute norms, there are no moral grounds by which to critique religions and lifestyles. As Leslie Newbigin says, "During recent years, new perceptions of this milieu have emerged, and pluralism is fast assuming the character of an ideology. Hence the need to understand afresh the nature and role of the church's mission in today's pluralistic world."

A Decadent Empire

The early Christians were face to face with a society that appeared involved in a race toward suicide through its own excesses. The evidence for this is overwhelming. Life had gone out of the classic pagan traditions. To most of the Roman emperors and for much of the Roman populace, human life was cheap and expendable. Infants born deformed or physically frail were especially prone to being willfully killed, often by drowning. Others were abandoned along roadsides, leaving them either to die of exposure or to be taken by someone, usually to be raised as a slave or prostitute. While a few poets and philosophers opposed abortion, the Roman populace received adequate support for this evil practice from its morally decadent culture and from its morally depraved emperors, who had no qualms about taking human life – young or old, prenatal or postnatal. Sexual excesses may have reduced fertility; the avoidance or postponing of marriage had a similar effect. Small families became the norm. Family limitation, first practised by the educated classes, seeped down to the proletariat once known for having large families. The fall in population had disastrous consequences for the Empire. It affected politics, army recruitment, and the decline in the workforce.

The Religious Scene

Into the moral vacuum of decadent paganism, a society sick of brutality, cruelty, oppression and sexual chaos, the early church fathers developed their theology and taught Biblical moral standards. Since they were near to the time of the apostles, their theology was characterized by a sustained commitment to remain faithful to the apostolic tradition. They ministered in the context of mystery religions, polytheism, Gnosticism, cults, as well as the philosophies of Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics and others.

Confronting Pluralism

The Roman empire tolerated a great variety of religions. In this vast Empire, Christianity was only one of the many small religious communities, with no role in public life. It was often not even distinguished, in the public mind, from Judaism. In the beginning, the early church

fathers restricted themselves in their writings to the conduct of everyday life, to missionary activity, and to coping spiritually with the local persecutions that continually flared up and were interpreted as tests. By the middle of the second century, the missionary outreach of the Church had so increased the number of Christians in the cities that their presence was noticeable. Church members now comprised all levels of population, not only the uneducated or the easily seduced – as pagan scholarly criticism was fond of describing Christians. The church fathers, therefore, were compelled to combat attacks on the church. For example, Fronto of Circa, the teacher of Emperor Marcus Aurelius (161-180), delivered a public speech against Christians. In response, the church fathers aimed to prove the reasonableness and innocence of Christianity, and to substantiate its exclusive claim to truth. They stressed the Church's unique worth for the state because of the model behaviour of its members. They also made a strong case for religious tolerance. They contended that even though one might insist that Christian teaching is absurd, the new religion contains nothing criminal or detrimental to the State.

Persecution of the Saints

The most threatening oppression of Christianity came by means of frequent persecution of believers. The charges against Christians were many, primarily godlessness, incest, cannibalism, and murder of children, which could never be proven. The church fathers clarified the misconceptions and wrong ideas regarding Christians among the people who fanned the flames of persecution. The real issue was always the claim of the uniqueness of Christ, which kept Christians away from state-related sacrifices and from participating in public festivals dedicated to the gods. The church father, Justin Martyr, explained that Christians do not pay homage to the gods, since they acknowledged that gods in reality are evil demons who by terror and torment entice humans to revere them as gods. He said that Jesus is the Son of God and not a magician.

By Roman standards the Christians were the enemies of the human race. From their point of view, the assertion of Jesus as Lord, a higher rule, higher than that of the emperor, could only end in the disintegration of civil order and the destruction of the empire. Consequently, the Gospel, with its claim to total obedience to Jesus Christ, made its first encounter with totalitarianism – an experience to be often repeated through the centuries to this present day. What Justin Martyr wrote in the middle of the second century is still true in the twenty-first. "To God alone we render worship. However, in other things we gladly serve you, acknowledging you as kings and rulers of men, and praying that with your kingly power you will be found also to possess sound judgment." When the Church began to suffer from persecution because of its unwillingness to acknowledge the Emperor as lord, it received wide publicity without which its existence would have been less widely known than it was.

How did Christians cope with persecutions? Some lost their livelihood. Others faced the death sentence. How could they look cheerfully at death in the arena from wild beasts and gladiators, or being roasted on a grid? Simply because they were convinced that evil and pain had suffered utter defeat through what God had done on that cross of Calvary and the resulting resurrection. Even death was a defeated foe (1 Cor.15:56).

The Impact of the Gospel

The early Christians lived as they preached. They did this at great cost. Their high moral standards were documented even by non-Christian writers. Christians didn't retaliate when persecuted. They turned the other cheek. In spite of numerous persecutions, as someone noted, for virtually three centuries Christians were "not known to have attacked their pagan enemies; they shed no innocent blood, except their own." In the words of Pliny's report to Emperor Trajan, the Christians "bound themselves by a solemn oath not to do any wicked deeds, never to commit any fraud, theft or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor deny a trust they should be called upon to deliver it up."

Christians were persecuted not only for their unwillingness to honour the pagan gods and for refusing to call the emperor "Lord", but also because they lived morally upright lives. Their godly lifestyle was as offensive to the morally licentious Romans as was their religious exclusivity. But their Biblical preaching and their changed attitude to life drew many to the Gospel. The Gospel offered itself without restriction to all individuals, classes, and nations; it was not limited to one race, like Judaism, nor to the freemen of one state, like the official cults of Greece and Rome. The intrinsic worth of each individual man and woman as God's image bearers was introduced by Christians. Each person is unique and precious in the sight of God. The church father, Clement of Alexandria (c.195 AD), declared that the Gospel "teaches us not to wrong anyone belonging to another race and to bring him under the yoke. For there is no other reason to justify such a thing than difference of race. But that is no reason at all."

Christians condemned the common Roman practices of abortion, infanticide, abandoning infants, suicide, homosexual sex, and the degradation of women. The uncompromising condemnation of every form of unchastity, the Pauline doctrine that the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, had their effects in a new attitude towards women in the recovery of the sanctity of family life. The church father, Cyprian, noted, "But self-control and modesty do not consist only in purity of the flesh, but also in seemliness and in modesty of dress and adornment." And Novatian pointed to the Apostle Paul's exhortation as a standard for marriage. He wrote, "Wives are to be loved by their husbands even as Christ loved the church. And wives should love their husbands also as the church loves Christ."

The early Christians were also fiercely opposed to abortion. Tertullian, the Latin church father in northern Africa, stated the Christian position to abortion by saying, "We may not destroy even the foetus in the womb." And the early Christians called infanticide murder. The church father, Athenagoras, said that "we.. teach that it is wrong to expose an infant. For those who expose them are guilty of child murder." But the early Christians did more than oppose abortion and other evils. They looked after children in need. "When a Christian becomes an orphan, it is good for one of the brethren who is without a child to take the young man and value him in the place of a son." (*Apostolic Constitutions*, compiled c. 390) Pagan Roman society took note of the lifestyle of Christians and was influenced by it.

(To be continued)