

Early Christian Response to Roman Persecution

Introduction

The church of Jesus Christ has had an interesting and turbulent history over 20 centuries. As the world globalizes, shrinks, and becomes more unstable many Christians might believe that the church is entering into uncharted territory. However, such a belief is unfounded, as the church has endured multiple trials and challenges over the years.

In this paper I argue three main points about the early Christian response to persecution. The first is that the church did not have a singular organized response to Roman oppression. The second is that organization of the church created ad hoc information systems but focused upon living a particular way of life or *politia*. Thirdly, the Church had a robust theology of Risk and Suffering.

Today, as we sit here talking about the likelihood of Christian persecution, we are separated by 2,000 years of social, cultural, theological, and philosophical change. In order to understand the decisions believers had to make 2,000 years ago requires a brief trip to the ancient Roman empire. After we have sufficiently described the ancient world we will describe the three basic Christian responses to Roman oppression. There were those Christians who capitulated to Roman pressure, those who resisted Roman persecution and those that actively sought out Martyrdom. We will describe each response providing examples and analysis of each position. We will then close out the presentation focusing upon the church's robust theology of Risk and Suffering and encouraging a shift to a deeper theological grasp of these issue. To begin we will have to describe the geopolitical and social world of the first three centuries. (2:30)

Setting the stage

Roman conquest of the Mediterranean world was swift and impressive. While Greece was influential culturally, Rome was politically and militarily powerful. With the destruction of the Republic Rome became an Empire. As an Empire most Roman people still clung to the ideal of her law and order roots. So while Rome operated practically as a dictatorship most people perceived themselves living as free people in a republic. Roman power sat on top of hundreds of tribes and people groups extending from the British Isles to the Persian desert from the Black Sea to North Sudan.

Individual identity centered upon these tribes or ethnic people groups. An individual's goal in life was not to express anything or find anything about themselves in isolation. For most people the goal in life was to demonstrate to their tribe or group that they were good upstanding members. In this way, life was not about individuality but conformity. The word we will use for this today is dyadic. Absolutely every person in the ancient world was dyadic.

Each people group had their own particular set of values, actions, beliefs, and religious practices. These values and practices can center upon the idea of citizenship. Belonging to a group or city meant demonstrating that you were a good citizen of that city, that you belonged, and deserved the privileges of belonging. The word they used, can be found in Philippians 3:20 "But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ,"¹ The greek word Paul uses there is *πολίτευμα* it means citizenship. Citizenship meant you were expected to demonstrate the values, practices, and beliefs that a good citizen practiced.

In the modern Western world citizenship refers more to a legal status that mainly bestows privileges and rights rather than a more collective reciprocity of rights with obligations. One of the obligations a good citizen was expected to participate in was honor and respect of the group's deities. Once again, in contrast to the modern world where religious beliefs and practices center upon an expression of a person's individuality, ancient religious practices were inherently social and demonstrative. A person demonstrated their group loyalty by practicing group sacrifices and ritu-

1. [*The Holy Bible: New International Version*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), Php 3:20.

als.(5:48)

Theresa Morton in *Roman Faith and Christian Faith* (2017) described the relationship between faith and these social practices. Oaths, in particular were very troubling for Christians in this context. In a world where fidelity to one's word or contract was unverifiable once away from civilization, the gods became validators of oaths. Once a person swore by the gods that they were telling the truth, the expectation on both parties parts was that the gods exacted vengeance upon oath breakers. Thus, belief in the gods was not merely a practice that involved individual beliefs but played a foundational role in social cohesion.

It was in this context that the Roman empire used military might to occupy and dominate the hundreds of people groups. It was a daunting task to control hundreds of different people groups as a coherent whole. One of the ways Roman Emperors tried to maintain this control was through public demonstrations of loyalty. The raising of Julius Caesar to divine status meant that Augustus was a son of a god. This divine status was not merely a cynical power ploy to dupe the ignorant masses, on the contrary, it was the emperor situating himself into the already existing order of the cosmos so as to take the role of divine benefactor. The worship of Caesar's genius was designed to bring diverse people groups together, and sometimes these groups had very little in common.

Ironically, Christ came almost simultaneously, with the introduction of the Emperor cult of worship. Christian practice challenged the age old notion of worshiping the gods and on the local level, brought about increasing social chaos. Empire wide their recognition of Christ's Lordship rather than Caesar's was politically and socially destabilizing.

Thus, the Emperor used various tools at his disposal to enforce capitulation. Emperor Augustus started using roman legionaries who were specialists as informers. *Frumentarii* were legionaries assigned to maintain each legion logistically. One of their tasks was to travel throughout the empire obtaining grain. Each legion stationed multiple *Frumentarii* with their regional governor taking their part on a staff of over 100 persons. The Castra Peregrina in Rome was their base of operations and in many ways the *Frumentarii* were weaponized by Emperors to act as his eyes and ears all over the empire.

It is likely that it was these *Frumentarii* which Emperors and governors employed to seek out dissidents and social disruptors like Christians. As *duplicarii* they received twice the pay of a legionnaire and as much authority which they used to accomplish their missions. With their ability to move freely throughout the empire and their training and authority as high ranking Imperial soldiers they were formidable agents for the Empire.

One of the key elements of Roman organization was the *cursus publicus*, a modern equivalent would be a governmental post office. Using this system of communication emperors and their regional governors could exchange letters in as little as 40 days, making communication swift by ancient standards. This made orders of persecution swift and rapid depending upon the governmental goals.

In Trajan's letter to Pliny the Younger we catch a glimpse into this early Roman persecution. (Pliny Letters 10.96, 10.97) Trajan says that Christians are not to be sought out, implying that their crime is one that is discovered rather than actively sought out. This situation seems to be the case with Polycarp in Smyrna fifty years later and Perpetua and Falicitas in North Africa a little over a hundred years after Polycarp. One is accused of being a Christian and then brought before magistrates and Tribunes for trial and punishment. Moreover, the mere accusation of being a Christian did not automatically entail persecution and death. In Perpetua, Pliny's, and Polycarp's accounts Christians were given an opportunity to recant their stubbornness. (11:23)

By simply renouncing their association with Christianity people could escape retribution and death. How did one demonstrate they were not Christians? According to Pliny they repeated a pledge to the gods renouncing Christ and offered incense to the emperor's image. This simple act, in their minds, was sufficient to weed out Christians from non-Christians. Imagine a situation today where a person demonstrated they were not a traitor to the United States by simply standing up and

reciting the pledge of allegiance. Yet, this was, indeed, the litmus test for Christianity.

What this means, practically, is that Christians were accused of being Christians by delatores. Delator simply means accuser. The Roman legal system did not operate according to modern modes of legality. If you were a law breaker you had to be accused of being a law breaker. The upshot of this is that, per legal precedence, if an accuser proved his case before the magistrates or Governor a delator could receive a portion of the forfeited estate. This meant that a delator stood to gain financially if their accusations proved correct. This, in turn, created a society under constant threat of accusation by neighbors, relatives, and friends. Tacitus argued that the paranoia created by Diocletian reached a fevered pitch just two decades prior to Pliny's letters to Trajan.

Most disturbing to both the population and the Roman authorities was the way in which these Christians embraced death. Martyrdom was unheard of among most common ordinary people. Of course, famous people took their lives over public humiliation and shame but willingly going into an arena to be mutilated and butchered by gladiators and wild beasts was incomprehensible. To a 21st century, Western Christian the obvious question is: why not sacrifice in public and just do what you want in private?

One must remember Worship for everyone at this time was not simply a question of private belief but, as previously mentioned, demonstrated a public loyalty to a particular way of life, a *politia*. As Celsus argued in the third century, non-Christians were more than willing to embrace Christian celebrations of Christ as Lord, as long as Christians were willing to participate in public affirmation of the gods. In short the polytheistic world was more than willing to embrace Jesus as one god among many gods, but it was the Christian affirmation of Jesus' sole Lordship that made that situation untenable. With the cultural and political contexts described sufficiently we will move on to the Christian response to Roman persecution. (15:35)

Christian Response

There were three general Christian responses to Roman persecution, capitulation, resistance, and martyrdom. The first is quite easy and obvious. Some Christians capitulated. Some, as Pliny relates, had left the church 25 years previously. Others failed under the pressure of intense trials. Standing in front of the Prefect, or Governor who demanded obedience before friends, relatives, opponents, and strangers certainly was difficult for a dyadic person who keenly felt the social pressure to conform.

It is difficult to relay to individualistic people 2,000 years later the emotional difficulty such a display caused people. In contrast to our modern world, oppression by rulers and authorities was generally considered proper. People believed one would not have been whipped, beaten, in prison, or crucified without good cause. So standing before a governor was virtually a public admission of guilt. When Christians capitulated to their demands for public oaths, such an admission was not considered cowardly, or treacherous by the vast majority of people. Many considered capitulation to be a sign of good common sense. Pinch incense to Caesar, and go and worship Jesus in private. That was how most people felt, if you wanted to follow a superstition on your own, fine, just make sure you demonstrate that you're a good citizen, that you belong.

The reason the early church resisted capitulation was precisely because of its *politia*. As a dyadic people they lived their lives in public, belonging to a community and demonstrating their loyalty to a community. Christians demonstrated their loyalty to the Kingdom of God by submitting only to Jesus. The emperor's call for capitulation demanded a *politia* which centered upon a worldly way of living.

Christians who capitulated, would have thought something akin to this type of reasoning. Capitulate in public, return to Jesus, in private. This implied incomplete loyalty to Christ's way of life. Some of the Gnostics embraced this type of response. Elaine Pagels (*The Gnostic Gospels* 1979) argued that a Christian community's view of martyrdom was directly linked to its view of Jesus' death. If they believed Jesus escaped suffering and death, they were more likely to escape it themselves. However, sometimes bishops capitulated to this type of public pressure; this caused, of course, the entire Donatist controversy. How should the church deal with bishops who capitulated

to Roman pressure and lived with divided loyalty? (*Apocalypse of Peter* 78.31-80.7; *Testimony of Truth*; *Test. Truth* 33.25; *Test. Truth* 34.4-6.) (1929)

The second group are much more relevant to the people who are sitting here today. There were Christians who resisted Roman persecution. This resistance mainly took the form of avoidance of capture or release from capture. We know there were Christians who avoided capture. Origen is just an example. Polycarp of Smyrna avoided capture as did many other bishops (*Mart. Poly.*) Clement of Alexandria (Clement of Alexandria - *Stromatias* 4.16.3-17.3) fled persecution yet praised martyrdom. Fleeing persecution is no easy task when the persecutor is Rome. To successfully accomplish this, at minimum, requires a rudimentary information network as well as an action team of some kind.

Creating an information network is not as easy as one might imagine. People have to be motivated to get difficult to obtain information. That motivation can come from money, relationships, or ideology. Likely, the early church's information network was informal and centered around relationships but held together through their *politia* commitment to Christ's Lordship. Take a moment and open your Bibles, in the pages one can find the structure of this early information network. In Luke 8:3 we find Joanna the wife of Cuza who managed Herod's household along with Susanna, and other women who were supporting Jesus. Thus, from the very beginning Jesus' message attracted powerful people from different social stations. Are we to believe that Cuza or Joanna never sent crucial information to Jesus about Herod's actions? In Luke 13:32 we find Pharisees giving Jesus just such information about Herod's intentions to kill him. How did religious leaders like Pharisees gain this information? Did Joanna send a message to Christ via these pharisees?

In Acts 10 a Roman centurion and his whole family converts to Christ. In Philippians 4:22 Paul sends greetings from those who belong to Caesar's household.

We will examine three separate incidents that provide us a window into Early Christian resistance to Roman persecution. We will examine Paul's escape from Damascus, Polycarp's martyrdom, and Ignatius' of Antioch Martyrdom.

In Acts 9:23 after Paul's conversion a group of Jews in Damascus plot to kill Saul. Not only does he learn of the plot but his followers conduct a covert operation and let him out a hole in the wall. We will pause here at Paul's escape to describe the necessary but unspoken activities that had to take place for Paul to escape from this assassination plot.

How did Paul learn of the Jewish plot in Acts 9? Clearly the Jews did not make a public announcement concerning Paul's death, it would have proven counter productive. So it was secretly put together. If it was secret people had to be invited to participate in the plot. So a follower of Paul, who was not publicly known to be a follower of Paul either inadvertently was invited into the conspiracy, overheard it, or intentionally got himself invited into the plot. Then he had to bring that information to Paul and his friends for evaluation.

Evaluating a life threat is no easy task. One has to discern motive, means, and opportunity. Do the assassins really intend Paul harm or are they just blowing off steam and frustration? It is one thing to want a person dead it is another to hire an assassin or to become one. Once one decides that the motive is sufficient the question becomes one of means. Can this cabal of Jews actually get it done? Do they know an assassin, or killer for hire can they afford it? Is one of their member so angry that they are ready to become a killer themselves? Finally, can the killers actually get to Paul, do they have opportunity? Paul's friends had to investigate to ascertain the Jewish capabilities to kill him. Perhaps the information critical for the evaluation came with the knowledge of the plot, perhaps they sought out more information. Regardless once they evaluated the information as credible they had to form their own counter assassination team designed to thwart the plot. (25:37)

They had to be able to identify assassins at the city gate. Likely, these assassins anticipated using techniques similar to Sicarii, Jewish assassins who would sneak up behind their victims and slit their throat or stab them multiple times. These kinds of assassins counted upon blending in and

disappearing into the crowd. It wouldn't be sufficient to know assassins were waiting, they had to be recognized by face.

According to the text they were waiting night and day for Paul to make his appearance. Unless Paul showed up at the city gates, knowing exactly what the assassins looked like, Paul's disciples had to send followers ahead of him to make sure the way was clear before he could leave the city. Hidden in these lines are subtle signs of an information campaign.

The assassins were watching the city gates they had to know that Paul's friends were trying to get him out. How did they know that? Did they have their own source of information telling them about Paul and his friends? So they knew enough to know he was leaving and when, because they guessed properly as to the time, but their own information leak provided the other side the opportunity to know the "who" they were looking for. Both sides were waging an information and disinformation campaign.

Clearly this situation was occurring over several days, maybe even a week, as day and night implies. Which means they tried to extract Paul multiple times and aborted the attempts due to the assassins being present and recognized. This implies a counter intelligence plan and operation.

Paul's look out had to be covert enough that the assassins didn't know their plan had been discovered. If the Jewish assassins had known their plan had been discovered and countered they would have altered their own plans which would have made Paul's intelligence worthless. The longer the situation stayed the same the more Paul's own intelligence source was put in danger. If Paul's enemies had found out their operational security had been compromised they would have altered their plans. They might have directly assaulted his residence or altered their tactics in an unanticipated way. In this way, a known enemy plan is easier to counter than an unknown enemy plan.

So someone had to decide that the status quo was too dangerous to maintain and that they had to get Paul out of Damascus through any means necessary. Now as easy as it sounds to let him down through a basket, that operation took planning and a team of people to execute. They had to develop an extraction plan then they had to recon the right location. Perhaps the plan and the location developed simultaneously perhaps they developed separately, there are usually not many holes in city walls. They had to procure both the basket and the rope and then insure that the hole, wherever it was, was free from prying eyes. All of this requires operational forethought and planning. Perhaps one of Paul's Jewish converts was a former Zealot, or criminal who knew how to put an operation like this together. In this scenario Paul was the asset and the others were tasked with preserving his life. Regardless, this operation demonstrates not only the capability but the forethought necessary to plan complex missions.

About a hundred years later we see hints of the same kind of operational forethought in the text of Polycarp's Martyrdom. Apparently a crowd called for Polycarp's death upon the death of Germanicus. Polycarp initially refused to leave the city of Smyrna but was persuaded by friends. He moved to a country house and then to another country house hiding from the authorities. Finally, the authorities captured a young slave boy and after torture he gave up Polycarp's location. Polycarp, pre warned, refused to leave to a third safe house and choose Martyrdom instead, being burned alive in front of thousands of witnesses. In this are four distinct operations. Information collection and dissemination, setting up of three safe houses, extraction from Smyrna, and shadowing Roman troop movements. (31:38)

Polycarp is warned three separate times about impending arrest. The first warning he refuses. This warning could be easily ascribed to its public nature of the threat. If the crowd actually called out for Polycarp's arrest anyone concerned for his safety could have left the amphitheater and went to his house to inform him. Polycarp could have felt the threat wasn't credible, as it came from a crowd and not the governor or prefect. He could have felt that it was just displaced passion rather than real intent. For Polycarp to get this information requires very little organization, analysis, distribution, or operational sophistication.

Because Polycarp's friends try to persuade him to leave it is more probable that these friends

sent a runner to inform Polycarp of the danger with orders to return with his answer. When he refused to leave they certainly must have gathered a friend or two and went to compel him to leave Smyrna. This had to have happened quickly unless the Proconsul waited hours or even days later to pursue Polycarp with vigor.

Considering his fame it seems unlikely that after heeding his friends advice Polycarp simply strode out through the city gates without disguise. Francis Grimm translates that Polycarp left the city secretly to a farm just outside of the city. Hidden beneath this line is a fairly complex set of circumstances. Once they convinced him it was necessary to leave they had to have a location in mind where to send him. So, either the location was already preset or they had to send out feelers to different property owners who would be willing to put him up.

Once they had decided on where he was going to go they had to dress him appropriately so as to not attract attention as he left. It is unlikely that the people who convinced him to leave were the same people capable of secreting him out of the city. With the pressure from the crowd it is unlikely that they felt free enough to stay at Polycarp's home to debate these issues. So they likely moved him out of his home in the city of Smyrna to another home in the city and debated these issues there. So from his second location they would have debated him leaving and decided upon their course of action. Polycarp's age is somewhat under dispute, but taking the conservative age of 86 means he would have needed a companion or two to escort him out of town. This takes planning.

When Polycarp moved out of Smyrna to the farm house their access to public information like the screaming crowd was gone. The decision remained with the Proconsul who would have sent the magistrates, lictors, frumentarii, or speculators to find the elderly bishop. As previously mentioned there were Christians in all stations of life and in all kinds of locations. It is possible that someone in the Proconsul's household was secretly funneling information to the believers. Moreover, there is cause to think the one running the operation was not Polycarp but one of his loyal friends or deacons. Given Polycarp's demeanor it is unlikely he was concerned with his own safety enough to conspire and organize it.

Although he stayed at the farm house for several days, according to the text he prayed for all the churches in the world and all mankind. This sounds less like Polycarp was organizing his own security as much as he was the object being secured. Someone, or a group of someones, was looking out for his safety. We catch a hint of this in the statement that "when those who were seeking him were at hand, he departed for another dwelling." It is highly unlikely that an 86 year old man outran frumentarii or legionaries to his next hiding place. It is more likely that the forces looking for Polycarp were under observation themselves and they were an hour or two away from finding the 86 year old Polycarp.

As easy as that is to write, shadowing a military force in reconnaissance is no easy task. Unless you want to be discovered you have to have multiple observers on a rotating duty shift. They have to coordinate hand offs and report to someone who handles the whole operation. Such an endeavor is difficult under the best of circumstances.

Lest someone believe that there are other options like an LPOP, Listening Post Observation Post operation, a brief excursus is necessary. Establishing an LPOP would be insufficient to the problem for two reasons, there would need to be multiple LPOPs as the direction of the soldiers could not possibly be guessed. Secondly, one cannot stand guard day and night, night and day without relief requiring a situation with a change of guard. Finally, given Polycarp's age and limitation it seems most likely that they would have needed LPOPs more than a mile in every direction, making them virtually useless. With the gaps in their view, the distances involved, the fact that they were mounted troops mean the early warning would have beaten the soldiers by mere minutes, with Polycarp's age they would have needed more time than any LPOP could provide.

Their best bet was a shadowing operation by either paying someone to do it or finding someone within their group with the skill set to do so. The most likely option for success was that they paid someone with experience to follow the soldiers and report on their status. Considering that Polycarp was at the farm house, praying day and night, it seems likely he was there four or five

days. If they were paying for shadow reconnaissance they couldn't well have told them where Polycarp was staying. That means a central authority had to be coordinating the operation, keeping Polycarp safe and simultaneously tracking the soldier's daily progress. (39:31)

When the group was close to his location they moved Polycarp to another cottage. Chapters six and seven give slightly different accounts of this. But the over all sense is that Polycarp moved to a third house prior to capture; moreover, they received sufficient warning to move the bishop again but he refused, saying it was "God's will." They finally found him by capturing one of the slave boys at the house and torturing him into giving up Polycarp's location. Polycarp was then seized and burned at the stake after a vigorous interrogation. Their operation failed mainly because Polycarp was ready to face the Proconsul and martyrdom. Either way the Christian underground successfully extracted a well known Christian bishop from a major metropolitan area and evaded skilled reconnaissance for at least a week, with the potential of longer success.

These two events, approximately a hundred years, apart demonstrate a knack for resistance activities. One more evaluation should demonstrate that the church had sufficient resources to effectively withstand Roman persecution. Approximately 40 years prior to Polycarp's death. Ignatius of Antioch was captured in Syria and escorted to Rome by 10 soldiers who mistreated him along the way. While in route to Rome Ignatius wrote several letters encouraging churches along the way. When he finally wrote to Rome, Ignatius's pleas changed their tone. While in his letters to the other churches he discussed his willingness to suffer and die, with Rome he virtually begged them to let him be throw to the wild beats. His arguments are telling.

"I would have you think of pleasing God—as indeed you do—rather than men. For at no later time shall I have an opportunity like this of reaching God; nor can you ever have any better deed ascribed to you—if only you remain silent. If only you will say nothing in my behalf, I shall be a word of God. But, if your love is for my body, I shall be once more a mere voice. You can do me no greater kindness than to suffer me to be sacrificed to God while the place of sacrifice is still prepared."

He asked the Church in Rome to stay silent. Just a few verses later he asserts a similar sentiment.

I am writing to all the Churches to tell them all that I am, with all my heart, to die for God—if only you do not prevent it. I beseech you not to indulge your benevolence at the wrong time. Please let me be thrown to the wild beasts; through them I can reach God. I am God's wheat; I am ground by the teeth of the wild beasts that I may end as the pure bread of Christ.

In his first quote he asked them to stay silent, and in his second quote he asked the church to not prevent his death. His execution would have been under the Emperor Trajan, who, we already established was willing to kill Christians. In what way could someone have "spoken up" to spare Ignatius? He clearly believes that the Roman church has someone or someones capable of saying something to get him out of the situation. He pleads with them to say nothing and if they love him to let him die. Likewise, in our second quote, Ignatius asks them not to prevent his death and to not practice benevolence at the wrong time. This begs the question: to whom could the church have possibly spoken to get him out of trouble?

In Suetonius, *Life of Domitian*, we discover that around the year 95 A.D. Titus Flavius Clemens just finished being the Consul of the Roman Senate. Domitian, the oddly bloody and ego-centric Emperor executed his cousin on the claim that he was an atheist while his wife, Flavia Domitilla, Clemens' wife and blood relative to Domitian, was exiled to an island. Interestingly, one of the earliest Christian catacombs just outside Rome is the Domitilla catacombs dating to around 120A.D. donated by the woman herself for Christian burials. Christians were often executed under the accusation of atheism so Titus Clemens, her husband, may have been a secret believer in the

Roman Senate.

It seems probable that the early Roman church may have had Senators who were secretly followers of Christ. With such a high ranking Roman official executed as a Christian it is possible that the church had several other people in similar high ranking positions and that they could have spoken up for Ignatius. When Ignatius pleaded with the Roman church to not interfere in his death he may well have meant that in a very literal sense.

Moreover, there is good evidence that the early church had a robust information network stretching from one end of the empire to the other. In the apocryphal text the Shepherd of Hermas, the young prophet asserts that Clement is in charge of communicating with other churches (Hermas II.4.3). We actually have such a correspondence in the text of 1 Clement. In the letter, we have the Church in Rome writing to the church in Corinth. At the very end of Clement's letter he asks the church to send back their delegates: Claudius Ephebus, Valerius Vito and Fortunatus. Of course, reading the New Testament one observes that churches sent delegates back and forth all the time. The early Church was in constant communication from one end of the empire to the other.

With such a group of traveling delegates moving around the empire on their own missions and tasks impromptu networks form. By the simple fact that people were communicating with one another the sharing of important information was a by product of that relationship. Any such communication would have been deemed contextually relevant but increasingly irrelevant as time moved on. This explains why almost no historical record exists of such an informal network.

As a brief modern example, emails are often cited in criminal economic cases. While any email might be crucial even damning in any particular case, as the case fades into history, becoming less and less historically relevant, so too will the email. Eventually, only the out come of the trial becomes historically relevant not the individual evidence. One need only image the Cataline conspiracy under Cato, or more modern the BTK killer Dennis Rader's trial. In the same way, evidence of an ancient Christian ad hoc information network simply would not survive the test of time. All we have are results preserved in throw away lines of text, like in Polycarp's Martyrdom.

As demonstrated, there is good evidence that early Christians developed ad hoc information and operational networks based upon their relationships. They used this information network to encourage one another, inform one another, and warn one another. It was this communication that facilitated a growing, unified Christian identity allowing them to develop their own Christian *politia*.(49:30)

Thus far, we have discussed the first two Christian responses to Roman persecution, capitulation and resistance. The two quotes from Ignatius illustrate the last response. Some Christians embraced martyrdom. Some recent scholars have cast questions upon ancient martyrology. Was it really as prevalent as Eusebius described? Was it really as brutal and barbaric as it seems 200 centuries later? One need only look at the recent news to put such notions to rest. Christians all over the world are murdered and killed precisely because they are loyal to Christ. However, the early church both resisted persecution and embraced it. The resistance built around the notion that some were not yet ready to embrace martyrdom or the church could not afford to loose leaders to martyrdom. Others were so anxious to embrace martyrdom they they sought it out, seeing within it a method of fighting the spiritual war that waged about them.

Ignatius of Antioch provides an excellent illustration of this type of mentality. He considered himself the wheat of God ground by the teeth of the wild beasts.(Rom IV.1) This view is actually telling. Ignatius was not suicidal, nor was Polycarp merely tired of being chased. On the contrary, the early church had a very developed sense of what this type of death meant. Jesus' way laid the ground work for their own *politia* in the world.

Christ suffered in the flesh in obedience to the will of God. It was God's will that Christ pick up his cross and die on our behalf. This suffering was something that was ever before their minds eye. (1 Cl 2:1) In contrast to our own post-Protestant time, the suffering of Christ was not something that was merely objectively done on humanity's behalf but demonstrative of what it means to follow God. (Clement of Alexandria, *Stomaties* 4:4) Jesus life was their *politia*, their unique way of

living in the world. Christ's mission was to suffer on behalf of those separated from God, Christians are Christlike people so the expectation of suffering was built into the name for them. In short, Jesus' death was to be emulated, it was normative, they followed the pattern established by Christ as their way of life, their *politia*. In this way, the garden of Gethsemane is more normative of the Christian's life experience than any healing, feeding of the 5,000, or raising of the dead. The early church took Christ's admonition to pick up your cross and follow him, seriously.

Early Christians likened life to an arena in which believers fought with Satan and their wicked desires (I Cl 6:2, I Cl 7:1-2, I Cl 35:4, II Cl 7:1-3, II Cl 18:2, II Cl 20:2-4, Ign to Eph 10:1, Ign to Poly 1,2, Mart Poly 18:3, Eus Hist. V.1). This had the effect of turning normal, life experiences into training events designed to strengthen the believer for this final battle against the evil one at death. If they overcome the trial and temptations of the flesh and of Satan their reward was eternity (I Cl 5:7, I Cl 6:2, I Cl 56:15, II Cl 22:2-4, Ign Trail. 4. Ign Rom 7-8, Eus Hist. V.1).

The issue is not that martyrdom guaranteed eternal life, like it is a work in itself, as much as martyrdom demonstrated victory over the passions and the evil one. This is why Ignatius, in route to Rome, could state he was "beginning to be a disciple." (Ign Eph. 3, Ign Trail. 5.) Only a person who had put to death fully the passions of the flesh could suffer such cruel treatment. In this way, martyrdom wasn't a work to be accomplished on demand, as much as it was a sign-act indicating the work that the Holy Spirit had wrought within them. (53:30)

Thus, believers were not encouraged to seek out martyrdom, as a work, as one never knew just how much the Holy Spirit had worked out and how much worldly passions had been removed. "For this reason, therefore, brethren, we do not approve those who give themselves up, because the Gospel does not teach us this." (Mar Poly 4). It was dangerous to seek martyrdom because, as in any contest, the opponent could be underestimated. Successful martyrdom then was demonstrable victory over evil desires and Satan not over the temporal powers who were mere tools in a higher game. Martyrs thought they were fighting a tougher enemy in a more important battlefield. Paul Middleton (Radical Martyrdom and Cosmic Conflict in Early Christianity, 2006) describes six aspects of this martyr theology: martyrdom was a contest, a public witness, a cosmic struggle, participation in Christ, confession of Christ, and finally participation in Christ's victory over death.

This understanding of martyrdom shifts theological categories and arguments around. It deposits things like Sanctification and suffering, Salvation and works, into different categories. The notion that martyrdom is a work the Christian accomplishes rather than a sign of what God has already accomplished, misrepresents the situation. God enables the believer to shed off what is, normally, the existential cares of this world. This is done much like a father might do for his son or daughter, or, more apt, what a coach would do for his athletes. (55:48)

Hundreds of thousands of coaches each year force their athletes to lay on the grass, roll around, exercise until their arm and legs fail. They push them until they vomit, challenge them until they cannot move. They do not do this because they are sadistic, on the contrary. Coaches all over the world put their athletes into increasingly difficult circumstances so that when the test comes they can overcome it. (56:30)

Suffering

The modern American Christian notion of suffering and success does not prepare the believer for difficult times. A proper theology of suffering is more important than any structure of resistance, more foundational than any operational security. One cannot construct a theology of suffering like this without a more robust eschatology and an understanding of what God is doing with the church in the world. Protestant American ecclesiology reduces the church to something between a social club and a concert for fans. For the early Christians, the Church was filled with those God had called out of the nations to pick up his name, to be his followers, to live his way, and to proclaim his message (*Letter of Diognetus* V.).

Suffering was not to be avoided at all costs. Suffering had a place in God's economy, it was something like discipline (I Cl 56:16, *Stromaties* IV.16-17). God was not trying to damage people, rather to correct them and prepare them for a life in eternity. This moves suffering from something

pointless and just harmful and instead points to Sanctification, He is doing something within us as we endure suffering. This makes the loss of our daughters, the death of our spouse, the loss of job or income, as a test rather than merely a random event that just happened to occur.

As the West moves towards a more grotesque form of self worship and self gratification suffering will only become less desirable, and seem increasingly pointless. The irony is that the world has never enjoyed such a time of wealth and abundance, world wide. Any suffering will become intolerable and must be extinguished no matter who gets hurt, killed, maimed, or impoverished. As an example transgendered persons must be publicly acknowledge because of the pain of societal rejection. This must be done regardless of cultures, values, beliefs, traditions, even evidence. Their suffering trumps anything else that one might say. Compassion becomes the weapon to overthrow anyone who disagrees. (59:29)

Thus, a robust theology of suffering will be met with hostility by professing Christians and the wider culture all in the name of compassion. Grounding our theology of suffering in our willingness to endure criticism, social media gulags, bad press, loss of friends and income will build a robust understanding of the church and her identity in the world. A church that has a unique *politia* in the world rather than just religious labels will be better prepared to persevere in the face of opposition and more likely to form effective structures of resistance. (1:00:00)

As I have demonstrated, the early church indeed responded to persecution in different ways. Some believers capitulated to Roman demands, they knew what public renouncement of Christ brought. Some returned to Christ afterwards seeking repentance and renewal, others abandoned Christ totally. It was common for believers to flee in the face of persecution and if one was unsure at all if they could endure it they fled. For those fleeing, the Church indeed had a robust system. For believers they could leave their homes and families on the other side of the empire and find solace and help with other believers far away. They used sophisticated planning and organization to thwart oppression. There were also Christian who embraced persecution and martyrdom, some ever sought it out. They had a robust sense of suffering and endured it heroically. (1:01:30)

Drawing it together.

For believers who perceive that suffering is on the horizon there is much to be gained from this study. First, we find that the early church indeed did not just sit idly by and encourage everyone to become a martyr. On the contrary, while the church regarded martyrs very highly, their frequent admonition was to passively resist, to hide. The church created systems of information exchange, and even actively hid people being sought by the empire. Organized resistance was local, ad hoc, and quite skilled. Bishops focused upon spreading the message of Christ while laypersons and deacons, seemingly, were the ones who found their message important enough to preserve.

Secondly, the religious leader should build into his people a robust theology of suffering as well as a profound sense of community giving them a *politia* of their own. While this study did not focus upon *politia*, the importance of building a community of faith with its own understanding of living in the world cannot be over emphasized. Having an information network or a network of operators is simply insufficient. Pastors, superintendents, and bishops must concern themselves with the theological and philosophical superstructure that allows the intelligent and skilled layperson the moral, and intellectual foundation to act with Christian conviction, *politia*. At some point the spiritual leader must be willing to demonstrate their theological conviction and embrace a difficult outcome, perhaps death.

As we move into the 21st century this notion of citizenship centered upon Christ's lordship and the resurrection of the dead can provide the theological underpinning for strong resistance. As pastors and leaders we can encourage the natural development of resistance structures by simply articulating a strong theology of Christ's lordship and a robust theology of suffering. Thank you. (1:04:04)