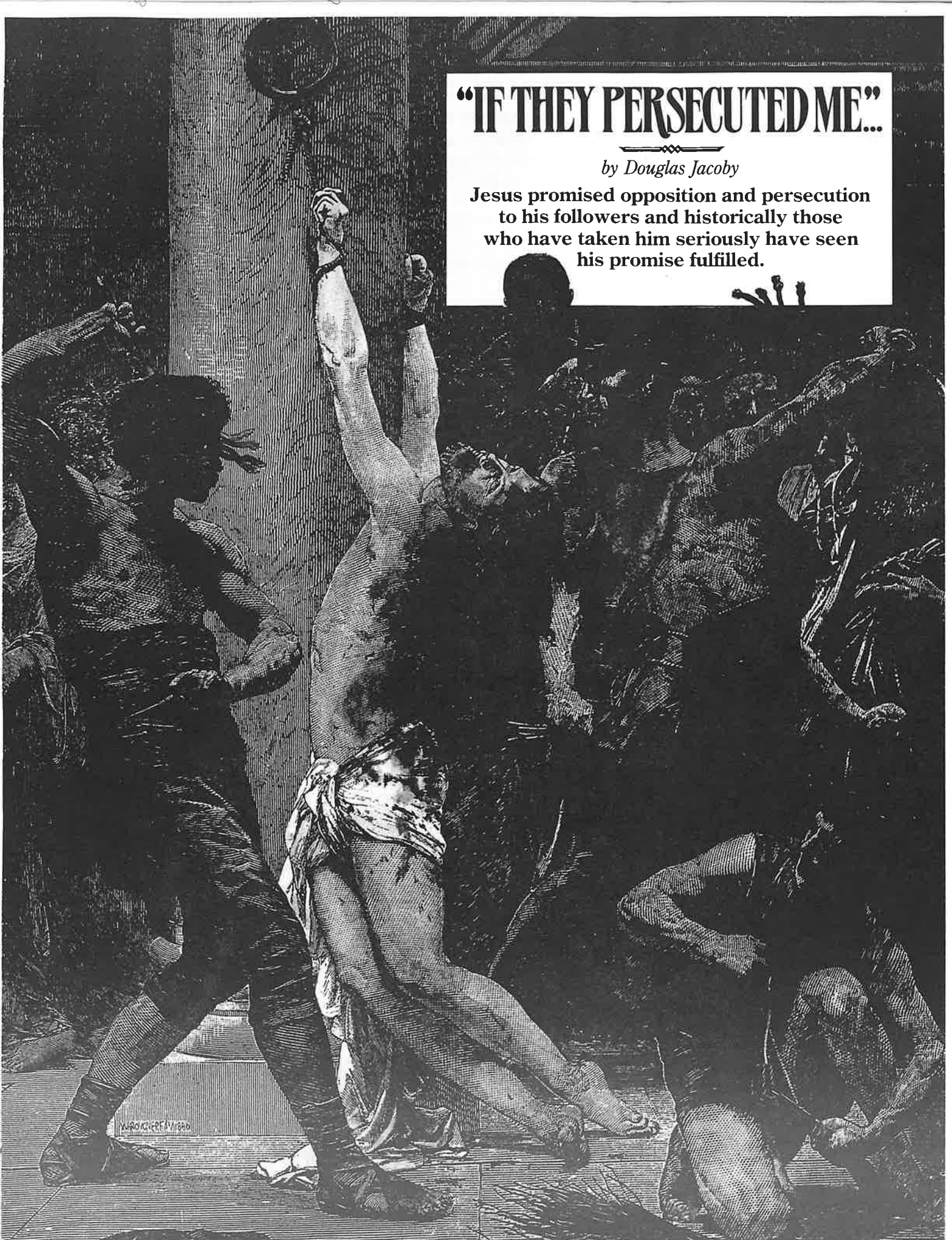


“IF THEY PERSECUTED ME...”

by Douglas Jacoby

Jesus promised opposition and persecution to his followers and historically those who have taken him seriously have seen his promise fulfilled.



Y. BOIGRETT 1890



"I have told you this, so that when the time comes you will remember that I warned you."

THE MODERN PERIOD
16th—20th Centuries
"We will Baptize You"

The Reformation spread like wild-fire. At first it was an attempt to "reform" the Catholic Church, but just as new wine cannot be put into old wineskins, a separate movement was founded. Lutheranism spread from its home in Germany, and became the official religion of Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland and Iceland. Calvinism spread from Switzerland to France, Germany, Poland, Holland, England and Scotland. In 1534 Henry VIII broke with the Catholic Church and founded the Anglican Church (Church of England), but it was not long before these victims of persecution became persecutors themselves. The Anabaptists, a group who rejected the validity of infant baptism and sought to be neither Protestant or Catholic, were severely repressed even by Protestants, some of

group was met with persecution. Many religious groups, some persecuted by Catholics, others by Protestants, fled to the New World.

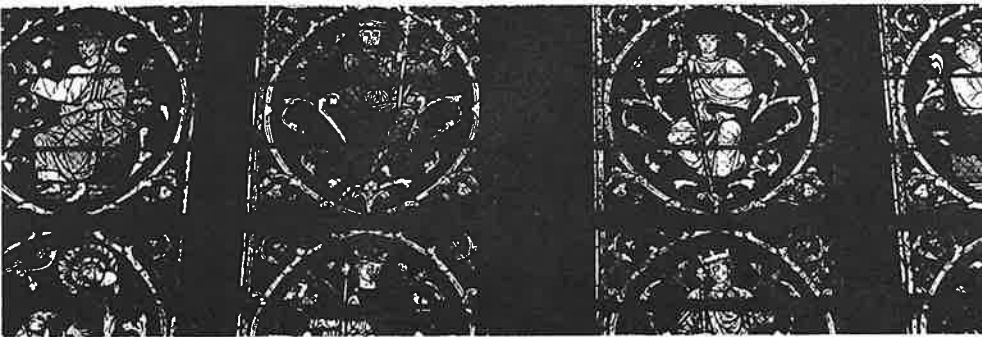
In our own century, religious persecution has continued. In many places in the world, including Uganda, the Philippines and the U.S.S.R., denominational leaders and missionaries have been brutally treated or killed. However, in the 19th and 20th centuries, participants in the Restoration Movement (the movement to restore New Testament practices of which the discipling movement is an outgrowth) have had very little persecution in the historical sense of the word. However, as the discipling churches have uncompromisingly preached the radical message of Jesus, more and more controversy has developed and disciples around the world are now experiencing various forms of opposition.

As we move into the next decade and confront the world's darkness in



can be expected in communist nations. Localized aggression is a possible form of persecution among tribal peoples, where the response of the "chief" to the gospel will determine the response of the tribe nearly 100% of the time. This also applies in the rural village settings in Third World countries. Denominational Christianity, with its church, para-church and missionary groups, will always present opposition because of the lukewarm commitment fostered, combined with the centralized political structure of the denomination. Finally, just as the Jews of the first century tried to hinder the Christians in every city they evangelized, mainline churches have and probably will give negative responses if they, like other denominations, feel threatened, jealous and unsure of their position.

Yes, the modern period, like all previous periods, will experience persecution as a reality in everyday Christian life. Persecution has never really stopped, and we see a fundamental principle always in effect: whenever anyone tries to do something great for God, he will be opposed. We must therefore be prepared to offer our "blood, toil, tears and sweat." For that is the only way we will evangelize our world. *"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven"* (Matthew 5:11-12). **D**



whom gave approval to their deaths. Most notable is the fact that some of them were executed by drowning by fellow reformers who said in so many words, "So you want to be baptized, do you? Well, then, we will baptize you."

History continued to repeat itself. England, became Protestant and began to persecute Catholics. *Foxes Book of Martyrs* is full of blood-curdling stories of the brutal repression. Other Protestant groups, who had campaigned for religious freedom only years before, refused to tolerate dissension, and so denominationalism was born. In 1611 John Smyth, building on the earlier foundation of the Anabaptists, started the Baptist church in England and his

deeper ways, the major types of persecution to expect are in the following fields:

- (a) Muslim cultures
- (b) The remaining hard-line Communist countries
- (c) Tribal peoples
- (d) Territory "controlled" by denominational Christianity
- (e) Areas where "mainline" churches of Christ are entrenched

The most severe persecution is likely to occur in Muslim cultures (which account for 1/7 of the world's population). Possibly less severe but probably more systematic opposition

If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also... said Jesus (John 15:20). Indeed our Lord was persecuted, and the pattern of church history is one of persecution. Our Lord was radical, and in any age when the church has been radical, persecution has been commonplace.



This article traces the history of persecution in Christendom, and though the thread of true Christianity is hard to follow—it's difficult to discover when the "church" stopped being the church—we will trace the thread from the first century to the present. There are five phases in the history of persecution:

- I. Jewish, 30-64 A.D.
- II. Limited Roman, 64-249 A.D.
- III. Imperial Roman, 249-313 A.D.
- IV. Catholic, 4th-16th centuries
- V. Modern, 16th-20th centuries

The Jewish period was a time of persecution mainly due to conflicts with Judaism. Persecution in the Limited Roman period, though intense at times, was not well organized. Christians were persecuted by popular request in limited or local conflicts. In the Imperial Roman persecution, there was a concerted effort to stamp out organized Christianity. After Christianity triumphed over the Roman Empire, the church became highly political, and increasingly there was little tolerance of dissent: the Catholic Church became the persecutor in the Catholic period. The final phase, the Modern Period, sees the rebellion of Protestantism and an eventual return to New Testament Christianity in our own day.

These are the broad periods; let's consider each one of some depth, noticing the hand of God in each period as he works in history for his purpose.

THE JEWISH PERIOD

30-64 A.D.

In Danger from Jews and Gentiles Alike

"... You suffered from your own countrymen the same things those churches suffered from the Jews, who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. They displease God and are hostile to all men in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved..." (I Thessalonians 2:14-16, 50 A.D.).

From the beginning the Jews were at the forefront of opposition to the Christian message. Even the execution of Jesus, though carried out by the Romans, were arranged by the Jews. Yet the persecutors' primary goal was not to disprove the message, but to prevent Christians from evangelizing (Acts 4:16-17, 5:40). It's the same for us: it doesn't matter what we believe, as long as we are silent. Satan has won the day when he succeeds in keeping the Christians quiet!

We are familiar with the book of Acts and the many riots stirred up by the Jews as they hounded the disciples from city to city. Even in the capital city of Rome the secular historian Suetonius speaks of "disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus" (Claudius, XXV.4, 49 A.D.). Apparently the gospel was having an impact in the Jewish community in Rome! So it is today: those who consider themselves God's "chosen people," whether in denomination, Islam, or even the Restoration Movement, usually take the lead in organizing opposition to Christ's church. We are also familiar with the deaths of a number of apostles at the hand of the Jews: James, brother of John, was beheaded (Acts 12:2); Paul was forced to Rome, where eventually he too was beheaded; while Peter was crucified upside down, at his own request (Eusebius, H.E. II.25.5). We may not be so familiar with the execution of James, brother of Jesus and

leader of the Jerusalem church (Galatians 1:19, 2:9, Acts 15:13), in 62 A.D.:

So Ananus (the high priest) assembled the sanhedrin of judges and brought before them the brother of Jesus who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others. And when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned (Josephus, *Antiquities* XX.9).

So it was that James, the brother of Jesus Christ, met his death. Thus we see that although Rome controlled the Mediterranean world, the Jews were the Christians' chief persecutors. Rome might have taken a more active role in the persecution in this period if they hadn't viewed the Christians as simply one denomination of Judaism. The Jews enjoyed imperial protection and exemption from paying honor to the pagan gods. Two things changed the secure position of the Christians: Nero's insane aggression against the Christians (64 A.D.) and the destruction of Jerusalem (70 A.D.), after which the influence (and security) of the Jews was severely limited.

Peter being crucified upside down.





“Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me.”

Even though the Jews were a continual thorn in the side of the church, God worked through them and their history to spread Christianity throughout the Mediterranean area and beyond. Centuries before Christ, the Jews had been scattered (as punishment for their sins) all around Asia, Europe and Africa. Synagogues were formed, and it was to these that our early missionary brothers and sisters first preached the Word—a sort of evangelistic beach-head. This is the pattern in Acts, and even Paul, apostle to the Gentiles (Romans 1:16). Furthermore, as the Jews chased the disciples from one city to another, they were actually propelling the early missionaries on an evangelistic course previously determined by the Holy Spirit!

THE LIMITED ROMAN PERIOD 64-249 A.D.

“If Only I May Attain to Jesus”

The Roman Emperor Nero (54-68 A.D.) was a detested man, and certainly had a perverse sense of humor. In July, 64 A.D., he set the city of Rome on fire, seriously damaging ten of Rome’s 14 districts. Needing a scapegoat, he blamed the Christians. *Anyone* who was a Christian was likely to be executed. The Roman historian Tacitus (112 A.D.) records how Nero crucified many brothers and sisters, wrapped others in animal skins only to be ripped into pieces by wild dogs, while turning others into human torches to light the imperial gardens (*Annals*, XV. 44). This is possibly the “fiery ordeal” referred to by Peter in his letter to persecuted Christians (1 Peter 4:12, RSV).

It should be noted that the apostle Paul was probably *not* thrown into any arena with wild beasts, although certainly many Christians perished in this way after the time of Nero. The “wild beasts in Ephesus” (1 Corinthians 15:32) and the “lion’s mouth” (2 Timothy 4:17) refer rather to vicious human opponents, following the Old Testament figure of speech (see Psalm 7:2, 10:9, 17:12, 22:13, 57:4, 58:6, 74:19,).

The significant thing about the persecution of Nero is that it set a precedent for executing Christians simply for being Christians. Until 64 A.D. Roman officials cared little whether a person was a Christian or not, as is clear from a reading of Acts. From 64 on, even being a Christian was a dangerous thing and many were imprisoned (Hebrews 13:2) or killed (Revelation 12:11).



Emperor Nero

Our movement today has not even come to the persecution level of Acts 8:4, much less that of the time of Nero. (We are somewhere between Acts 2:47 and 4:3.)

The cruel emperor Domitian (81-96 A.D.) went much further than any previous emperor in insisting on divine honors in his own lifetime. (Most waited until they were dead, though Vespasian, 79 A.D. is rumored to have joked on his deathbed, “Alas, I think I’m becoming a god!”). Domitian made a law that he had to be addressed and referred to as “master and God.” Obviously true disciples could never go along with this nonsense, and many were exiled, executed, thrown to the beasts or deprived of their property. Still, Domitian’s order seems not to have been consistently enforced, and consequently many Christians escaped the sword.

In the second century things heated up considerably. Increasing numbers of church leaders were executed. One of the most famous is Ignatius of Antioch (110-115), who left us seven letters

to seven Christian communities. He certainly didn’t seem afraid to die, as we read his letter *To the Romans*, v:

From Syria to Rome I am fighting with wild beasts by land and sea, by night and day, bound to ten leopards, that is, a bunch of soldiers, whose abuse grows still harsher when they are liberally treated. . . May I have the joy of the (actual) beasts that are prepared for me. I pray that they too may prove prompt with me. I will even entice them to devour me promptly. . . Let there come on me fire and cross and conflicts with wild beasts, wrenching of bones, mangling of limbs, crushing of the whole body, grievous torments of the devil, if only I may attain to Jesus Christ.

Do we detect a bit of a morbid attitude here? Regardless, Ignatius’ courage and faith are inspiring, and capture the confidence of the Christian church in a time of persecution.

Many Christians are acquainted with the moving accounts of the martyrdoms of Polycarp (156) and Justin (165). Let’s focus on the second of these two great men of faith, Justin, as he is interrogated by a Roman official about his beliefs and pressed to sacrifice to the gods.

Official: “Do you then think that you will ascend to heaven, to receive certain rewards?”

Justin: “I do not think—I know, and am fully persuaded.”

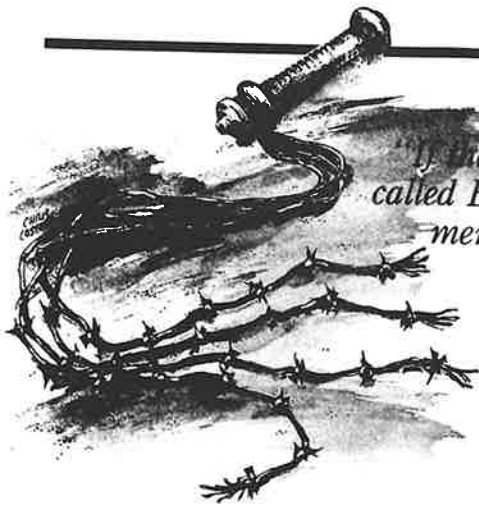
Official: “Let us now come to the pressing matter in hand. Agree. . . and sacrifice. . . to the gods.”

Justin: “No one who is rightly minded turns from true belief to false.”

Official: “If you do not obey, you will be punished without mercy.”

Justin: “. . . Do what you will. For we are Christians and offer sacrifice to no idols.”

Official: “Let those who will not sacrifice to the gods and yield to the



...the head of the house has been called Beelzebub, how much more the members of his household!"

command of the Emperor be scourged and led away to be beheaded, in accordance with the laws."

Not just Christian leaders, but "average" Christians were executed in the second century. In Bithynia, the governor, Pliny, in a letter to the Emperor Trajan (112) admits:

I asked them whether they were Christians, and if they confessed, I asked them a second and third time with threats of punishment. If they kept to it, I ordered them for execution; for I had no questions that whatever it was they admitted to, in any case stubbornness and inflexible perversity deserve to be punished. There were others of equal insanity, but since these people were Roman citizens, I noted them down to be sent to Rome (Pliny, *Epp.* X.96).

Several other accounts have survived from the second century, relating to persecutions in Greece, Africa and France. Around 170, Greek Christians underwent much worse persecution than any endured in the first century. Many were condemned to the mines, worked to death as slaves. In Scilly (Africa) Septimus Severus ordered 12 disciples to be executed; hatred for the believers was mounting. But the worst persecution in the late second century was probably in France.

The emperor Marcus Aurelius ordered that the Christians be not just executed, but tortured to death. One of the brothers there related the beginning of the persecution: "Not only were we excluded from houses and baths and marketplace, but they even forbade any of us to be seen at all in any place whatsoever!" The story continues (Eusebius, *H.E.* V.1.7ff) as the mob attacks the Christians. They are robbed, beaten, stoned, mocked, imprisoned—



"all that an infuriated mob is likely to employ against enemies..." One sister, named Blandina, frustrated her torturers:

Those who by turns kept torturing her in every way from dawn to evening were worn out and exhausted, and they themselves confessed defeat from lack of anything else to do to her. They were amazed that the breath still remained in a body all mangled and covered with gaping wounds... But the blessed woman, like a noble champion, regained her strength when she made her confession: "I am a Christian" (1:18-19).

An exceptionally brave brother, Sanctus, had been tortured to make him renounce his faith, but his reply to every question was "I am a Christian."

Finally, when nothing else was left to inflict on him, they applied red-hot brass plates to the most tender parts of his body. And though they were burning, Sanctus himself remained unbending and unyielding, and firm, in his confession... His poor body was a witness to what he had undergone—one whole wound and bruise... (1:22-23).

Those who by turns kept torturing her in every way from dawn to evening were worn out and exhausted, and they themselves confessed defeat from lack of anything else to do to her.

Both Blandina and Sanctus survived their tortures, and were later taken to the arena and thrown to the beasts. After Sanctus was mauled by the animals, he was put into the iron chair, "which fried his body and choked him with smoke" (1:38). Meanwhile Blandina was suspended on a stake and exposed as food to the wild beasts,

later put into a frying pan, and finally thrown into a basket and given to a bull and gored to death. Marcus Aurelius' wish came true.

Undoubtedly thousands were persecuted to their deaths, but the attacks were concentrated on the main leaders—the "high profile" men and women. In the years 235-238, under Maximinus, there was a serious attack on the higher clergy (by the third century the clergy/laity distinction, unfortunately, had developed), more Christians were sent to the mines, and persecution was renewed in Cappadocia and Palestine.

Terrible suffering was inflicted on the disciples in the second century, but unlike the first-century situation, it was now a capital offense to be a Christian. Yet we must emphasize that persecutions were local, sporadic and limited. There was still no serious attempt by the Empire to annihilate Christianity.

In summary, during the Limited Roman Period, the Roman Empire did not take Christianity as seriously as it would immediately after. Opposition was usually churned up in local situations, and the pagans found the disciples made humble scapegoats for their own problems. Rumors were still circulating that the church practiced cannibalism ("Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you") and incest ("brothers" and "sisters" marrying one another, enjoying "love feasts" behind closed doors, non-members not invited). But because opposition was geographical and temporary, the church as a whole had plenty of time to deal with its internal problems, and the negative propaganda was actually free publicity which helped the cause. (Not so in the next period.) And on those occasions when disciples were martyred, especially "lead evangelists," "elders" and "sector leaders" (the rough equivalent), the famous words of Tertullian (c. 200) were in force: "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." Yes, the hand of God was still working powerfully in church history.



"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me."

IMPERIAL ROMAN PERIOD

249-313 A.D.

Was Christianity Coming Apart?

Up until this third period of persecution history the church had, for the most part, enjoyed considerable growth and only limited persecution. But as the number of disciples became so great that the pagan temples were "losing members," popular hatred for the Christians increased. Despite the church's extensive involvement in society (it had become the main source of care for the poor), and despite the presence of committed Christians at all levels of society, the tide was now to turn.

In 247 the Roman Empire celebrated its 1000th year, but there were deep and ominous rumblings throughout the imperial domain. Politically, the empire was unstable. Corruption and loose living were weakening the moral fabric of Rome, and the degeneration affected the family, the military and the imperial house. Inflation was running high. Overpopulation of the cities and grinding poverty were the lot of those who were exploited by the rich and powerful. The plague struck and the biggest Gothic invasion ever came the next year (248 A.D.). Who could be blamed? Obviously, the Christians were at fault.

Decius (249-51) ordered that all citizens had to sacrifice to the gods in the presence of special commissioners. Only then would they receive a certificate saying that they had sacrificed. Refusal to do so was interpreted as rebellion against the Roman state, and treason was a capital crime. Many Christians were killed.

But not all Christians confessed Jesus as Lord. A spirit of worldliness had crept into the church, and many fell away—especially among those who had land. Africa was especially hard hit. Men and women gave up their faith. Was Christianity coming apart at the seams?

The persecution was renewed under Valerius (253-260). The Decian and Valerian persecutions were the

worst yet, and many more prominent church leaders were executed. Then there was a slight lull.

Early in the 4th century, Diocletian renewed the systematic persecution of Christians, and this plan was calculated to inflict even more harm than the Decian and Valerian persecutions. In 303 and 304, four edicts were issued. Here are the results:

Edict i: Church buildings were destroyed. Bibles and other Christian literature were confiscated and burned. Christians were denied access to the courts. They also lost their voting rights.

Edict ii: All church leaders sent to prison (the prisons were filled!).

Edict iii: Torture and death for church leaders. (Pardon only if they would sacrifice to the gods).

Edict iv: General persecution of all Christians. All Christians must sacrifice to the gods. Torture, imprisonment, death.

The sheer numbers of Christians made the enforcement of the edicts difficult. Furthermore, while in some regions the decrees were more or less carried out, in many areas they were nearly ignored. (After all, who wants to turn his local grocer in to the authorities?)

The incredible irony of this last attempt to bring down the church, called "The Great Persecution," is that only nine years later Christianity was legalized! For all intents and purposes the persecution was over! In 313 the Edict of Milan granted freedom of reli-

gion to all—pagan and Christian alike. (The emperor Constantine was highly favorable to Christianity, which had made such a huge impact on the world of its day.) In 381, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire! After the storm, the calm.

The Roman persecution was over. But not persecution. Remember Jesus' words: "If they persecuted me..."

CATHOLIC PERIOD

4th-16th Centuries

The Persecuted Becomes the Persecutor

The Catholic Church at the beginning of the 4th century was certainly radically different from the Catholic Church today. The commitment, though weakening, was still substantial.

Baptism was still administered to adults, who were immersed for forgiveness of sins, although many decided to wait until their old age before being baptized, in case they sinned after baptism. (Struggles in understanding grace have dogged every generation.) Church services were simple—nothing of the pomp and circumstance of the medieval and modern church. But the more the government (particularly the Roman Emperor) got involved in the church, the more political and worldly—even pagan—the church became. The cult of martyrs spread rapidly (one bad side-effect of the persecutions). Ceremonial candles, kissing the bishop's hand, Sunday as a sabbath of rest, a 40-day Lent, Christmas and other inno-



View of a prison during the Inquisition

"... a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God."



vations made their debut; and all with imperial endorsement! Because Christianity was the "official religion" (from 381) and social, economic and political prosperity depended, to some extent, on being a "Christian," millions of pagans poured into the church. There was just one problem: they weren't converted to Christ.



Protestant Clergyman being roasted alive

Popular superstition blended with a revived Judaism and polluted the relative purity of the Christian faith. New doctrines were formed and promoted: original sin, predestination, the worship of Mary, and infant baptism all entered the stage around the year 400. After 400, the Latin Bible was so firmly entrenched that it became the "authorized version." For centuries, churchgoers worshipped in the language of the Roman Empire—even after it fell in 476. Most attempts to revise or leave behind the Latin Vulgate Bible were met with repression. In the 5th century, the "clergy" began to wear special vestments, and in 606 Boniface III was the first Bishop of Rome to claim universal authority: the first "pope" in the modern sense of the word.

The Dark Ages were dark indeed. It is not true that the Catholic control of the church was unchallenged—attempts to reform it never gained ground. Authoritarianism got stronger and stronger, while faith and commitment grew weaker and weaker. In fact, when the Muslim invasion swept southern Europe, northern Africa and southern Asia in the 7th century, nearly all "Christians" became Muslims. The Catholic Church inherited the moral decay of the old Roman Empire.

As Latin became a dead language except in intellectual circles, the Bible was effectively removed from the hands of the common man. But it did not matter (so it was taught) because only the church's interpretation of the Bible was correct, and only the theologians and clergy had the ability to understand it.

The Inquisition was established in 1233 to deal with heresies and heretics, and within 20 years torture had been approved as a means of enforcing unity of opinion. What a pendulum swing: *the persecuted had now become the persecutor!*

In the 14th-century popular demand for an understandable Bible was dealt with harshly by the Catholic authorities. In Switzerland John Hus was burned to death for his insistence that "anyone can read the Bible." In England, Wyclif translated the Bible into English. His translation (1380) was later condemned. In 1413, at the beginning of the reign of Henry V, there was a death penalty for reading the Bible in any language except Latin, and in 1428 Wyclif's corpse was dug up and burned in disapproval!

In Germany, in 1517 Martin Luther posted his 95 objections to the Catholic practice of indulgences. Indulgences were reductions in the length of time spent in "purgatory," the place after death where sins were purified so that man could go to heaven. Indulgences were for sale by the church, and many a clergyman grew fat on his income from their sale. Indulgences were even sold in advance of sins

committed: you could find out the cost of penalty, pay it, then commit the sin. Luther was condemned for heresy, but protected through political good fortune. Other Reformation leaders included Zwingli, a Swiss reformer more radical than Luther, killed in clashes between Protestants and Catholics. His body was publicly quartered and burned with dung by the Catholics. Calvin, the third Reformation leader, also caused quite a stir. One of his followers, Michael Servetus, disagreed

The Inquisition was established in 1233 to deal with heresies and heretics, and within 20 years torture had been approved as a means of enforcing unity of opinion. What a pendulum swing: the persecuted had now become the persecutor!

with the Catholic doctrine of the trinity and was burned at the stake. By 1546 more than 50 Calvinists had been executed. Fortunately, the Catholic Church was unable to contain the powerful waves of reform launched by these men. The long night of Catholic control (12 centuries) was finally over. The day was dawning, the Bible was falling into the hands of the common man, and even the Catholic Church urgently tried to reform itself.

But the Catholic Period was a sad era. We are reminded of 2 Chronicles 15:3-4.

For a long time Israel was without the true God, without a priest to teach and without the law. But in their distress they turned to the Lord...

Just as God used the dispersion of the Jews to establish a beach-head for future Christian missions, so he used the Catholic Church (which, after all, did establish a quasi-Christian base the world over) to lay a basic foundation for the spread of the gospel in the succeeding centuries.