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***The Age of Persecutions***

**Overview** - This is a study of the transitional period of the church, from Christianity as an outlaw religion to Christianity as a legitimized religion of the Roman Empire. Much of the structure and doctrine of the church became crystallized during this period of trial by fire. And much of the church's expansion was completed at this time as well, so much so that Paul could declare, "This is the Gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven." We will be spending three sessions on this period. This is more than we will spend on any other period except perhaps the present day, because almost all of what the church became, and thought, and taught till the present time, has its seeds in the first three hundred years of its existence as a body.

**Part I: Planting the Garden of God**

Seed of the Apostles

The Bible covers the history of the church up to about 62 AD, which marks the basic end of the Apostolic Age. This is followed by the Anti-Nicene period, which includes all the developments which preceded the Council of Nicea in 325. It is a time of trial by fire for the church. A cruel Jewish persecution following the death of Stephen c. 35 almost exterminated the seedling church. Nearly two thousand Christians were killed at Jerusalem. Most of the Hellenist Christians fled the city, providentially taking the Gospel to wherever they went. Some who had witnessed the events of Pentecost, returned to Rome and began a church there even before Paul had arrived. Those who stayed behind in Jerusalem were identified first as Jews and only secondly as followers of Christ. To the Jews, these new converts to Christ must have seemed like one of our own false cults would seem to us today. They use the same language but there is something basically different about them. The Jews were quick to deny any association with them, and almost as quick to have them killed. Martyrdom was the crown for every one of the Apostles except John who, by tradition and Biblical testimony, died a natural death (Jn.21:22-23).

*Fate of the Apostles and Early Church Leaders*

We find the death of James the son of Zebedee in the book of Acts, 12:2. James was beheaded in 44 AD by Herod Agrippa. Two of the seven deacons, Timon and Parmenas were martyred at about the same time at Corinth and Phillipi in Macedonia respectively. The other Apostles' fates come to us from extra-Biblical sources and in brief this is how they and the early church fathers were returned to the Lord:

**Philip** was sent on important missions into the Asiatic countries. In Phrygia he converted many snake worshippers raising the ire of the local priests. They martyred him 8 years after James by being scourged and then crucified. Bartholomew removed and buried the body and was almost killed himself for doing it.

**Matthew** preached for 9 years in Judea writing his gospel in Hebrew for use by the Jews to whom he had preached. James the Less then translated it into Greek. He was slain by the sword in Parthia (60 AD). Mark, a convert of Peter, had recorded Peter's discourses at the request of the Roman converts. He established a bishopric at Alexandria and then went to Libya as a missionary. When he returned to Alexandria, he was martyred by being dragged through the streets and then burned by some Egyptians jealous of his power. His bones were gathered and taken to Venice where he is the patron saint.

**James the Less** was killed by the Jews of Jerusalem who incited a mob to attack and stone him to death.

**Matthias** was also killed at Jerusalem being first stoned and then beheaded. Some have said that the reason we hear nothing more of him after his selection is that the choice was improper, Paul having been God's anointed replacement for the outsider Judas. Choosing by lot thereby loses its only acceptable example. When Simeon is chosen to replace James as the bishop of Jerusalem, it is by vote and not by lot.

**Andrew** preached to many Asiatic nations and was condemned to death by the governor of Patrae in Greece for denouncing his idolatry. He was crucified on an 'X' shaped cross to which he was tied and not nailed to slow his death. He hung there for three days preaching continually to those around him. The listeners begged the governor to let him down but when the last cord was cut Andrew fell to the ground dead.

**Peter and Paul** had prayed that the Lord would confound the magic tricks of Simon Magus who was a favorite of the emperor Nero. When Simon fell to the ground and broke both legs after a feat of flying, Nero had Peter and Paul locked in prison for nine months, during which time they converted two captains of the guards and forty-seven others. Peter was brought out for execution. He was scourged and then crucified head-down by his own request because he felt unworthy to suffer the same fate as Christ. Paul was then beheaded with the sword c. 64 AD

**Jude** made many converts in Persia which enraged those in power. He was crucified in 72 AD

**Bartholomew** translated the book of Matthew into the heathen languages and was either killed by the sword or beaten to death by idolaters.

**Thomas**, also known as Didymus in Greek, preached in Parthia and India and arousing the anger of the pagan priests, he was thrust through by a spear. He left behind many churches in India that exist to this day. Members are called "Thomas Christians."

**Luke** may have died a natural death.

**Simon the Zealot** preached in Mauritania and other parts of Africa and even in Britain where he was crucified by the pagans in 74 AD

**Barnabas** died of unknown causes in 73 AD He is listed among the post-Apostolic teachers of the church (sometimes called the Apostolic Fathers). His epistle is authoritative but was excluded from the Canon of the Church in later centuries. If you would like to read it, you can find it in a book called "The Lost Books of the Bible and the Forgotten Books of Eden" (Alpha House, 1926, reprint World Bible Publishers).

**Timothy** was outraged by a feast in 97 AD which bears a resemblance to Halloween. After he reproved them for their idolatry, the crowd beat him to death with the sticks which they carried as magic wands.

**James**, also called **James the Righteous**, the Lord's earthly kin who was Bishop of Jerusalem and probable author of the Book of James, was seized following the arrest of Peter and Paul in about 62 AD. He was admired and revered even by the Jews as a righteous man who took no one at face value. The Scribes and Pharisees had come to him and asked him to explain to the people who would be arriving from around the world to attend the Passover feast that this man named Jesus was not the Christ [perhaps expecting that he would continue to reject Jesus as the Christ even though he was his brother]. They stood him on the Sanctuary parapet and shouted their questions to him, "Tell us, righteous one, what is meant by 'the door of Jesus.'" James replied, "Why do you question me about the Son of Man? He is sitting in heaven at the right hand of the Great Power, and he will come on the clouds of heaven." Many were convinced by James' testimony. Angered by this, the Pharisees and Sadducees rushed up the parapet steps, throwing James headlong from its summit. Then, finding him still alive, they stoned and then clubbed him to death even as he prayed for them. The siege of Jerusalem was not long afterwards and many noted the coincidence.<sup>1</sup>

**John** was at Ephesus but was ordered by the Emperor Domitian to be sent to Rome where he was sentenced to be boiled in oil. He was saved from this fate and banished to the island of Patmos instead where he wrote his revelation. When Domitian died, the new emperor Nerva was kind to the Christians and sent John back to Ephesus where he lived to be one hundred years old.<sup>2</sup>

## Part II: The End of an Age

### Seeds of a Nation

Now that we've seen a bit of the passing of the Apostolic Age, I would like to explore the passing away of the Jewish world before continuing on to the formation of the Anti-Nicene church. I want to begin with the proposition that the physical nation of Israel does not stand side by side with the Spiritual nation in the Kingdom of God (Rom.9:6-8). Rather Israel's time was allotted to it for repentance and, as with the Ark, God sealed his remnant when the time was ripe.

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<sup>1</sup> Eusebius, *The History of the Church* (Penguin, N.Y., 1981), pp. 100-102. Note: This text includes quotations from other original sources such as Tertullian and Josephus.

<sup>2</sup> Foxe, John, *Foxe's Christian Martyrs of the World* (Moody Press, Chicago, pre-copyright), pp. 24-38

Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, 'Sir, open the door for us.' But he will answer, 'I don't know you or where you come from.'... People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God. Luke 13:25,29

Most scholars put the date of the new testament at approximately 95 AD. Others place it closer to 65 AD. I would like to suggest that the earlier date is more probably the correct one because of one singular event of such awesome proportion that it seems inconceivable the writers of the New Testament would have ignored it. It is the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD which also resulted in the destruction by fire of Herod's Temple at Jerusalem. It had taken 18,000 men 9 years to build it. When it comes to discussing the endtimes of Matthew 24, or of the Revelation of John, most modern speakers on the subject ignore the history of God's Judgment on the physical nation of Israel and go straight to the sensational events of today to explain the fulfillment of those prophecies. It has a disturbing tendency to distract believers from the labor at hand. The coming of the kingdom of God and the fulfillment of God's precious word have manifestations both in the present and in the future. The historical context of God's word is central to Christianity. Unless we understand what God has finished and what he has left to be revealed at the Last Day, we will be hopelessly confused by the parade of historical events we will study in this course. Anthony Hoekema writes in his book "The Bible and the Future,"

So keen is the recognition that there will be a future age in distinction from the present age that there are a number of passages where the two ages are spoken of together. [There is] the juxtaposition of the two ages in the New Testament use of the expressions "the last days" and "the last day." ...We are in the last days now. When the expression is found in the singular, however ("the last day"), it never refers to the present age but always to the age to come, usually to the Day of Judgment or the day of resurrection.

Oscar Cullmann uses a well-known figure: the Christian believer lives between D-day and V-day. D-day was the first coming of Christ, when the enemy was decisively defeated; V-day is the Second Coming of Christ, when the enemy shall totally and finally surrender... The battle that decides the victory has already taken place.

The New Testament believer, therefore, is aware that history is moving toward the goal of this final consummation. This consummation of history, as he sees it, includes such events as the Second Coming of Christ, the general resurrection, the Day of Judgment, and the new heavens and new earth. Since the new heavens and new earth will be the culmination of history, we may say that all history is moving toward this goal.

The church is caught up in the tension between the present age and the age to come. As George Ladd puts it: "The church has experienced the victory of the Kingdom of God; and yet the church is, like other men, at the mercy of the powers of this world.... This very situation creates a severe tension --- indeed, acute conflict; for the church is the focal point of the conflict between good and evil, God and Satan, until the end of the age. The church can never be at rest or take her ease but must always be the church in struggle and conflict, often persecuted, but sure of the ultimate victory."

We may now note that this tension is illustrated and exemplified by New Testament teaching on the kingdom of God...Only God can place us into the kingdom. ...Yet this fact does not relieve us of responsibility with regard to the kingdom. ...The kingdom of God demands from us repentance and faith. On a number of occasions Jesus said that we must enter the kingdom of God. One can only enter the kingdom by humbling himself like a child, by doing the will of the Father in heaven, or by having a righteousness which exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees. ...The kingdom of God, as a matter of fact,

demands nothing less than total commitment. ...No one should seek to enter the kingdom unless he has thoroughly counted the cost.<sup>3</sup>

Here we see the connection between membership and obedience in the True church. The kingdom of God is marked by the committed discipleship of Christ's followers. The birth of the Kingdom in the person of Jesus Christ brought with it an end to the Age of Temple, Priest and Sacrifice.

Keeping the tension between the "already" and the "not yet" in mind, let's begin to lay the historical foundations of the church in the first century AD. Whether the events which follow provide the fulfillment of the New Testament prophecies below or provide simply the first installment in the tension Hoekema describes above, understand that the writings of Eusebius dating from the 3rd century AD indicate it was his own understanding that the events indeed fulfilled Matthew 24 and the Revelation of John.<sup>4</sup> And so to set the Biblical stage for what is about to come, here are those pertinent Scripture passages that from time to time have caused disagreement among Biblical scholars as to their historical (not prophetic) application:

As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, 'If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace --- but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you.' Luke 19:41-44.

So when you see standing in the holy place 'the abomination that causes desolation, spoken of through the prophet Daniel --- let the reader understand --- then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains ... How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers!... There will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now --- and never to be equaled again. If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call. I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Mat.24:15-16, 19, 21-22, 30-31, 34.

In as much as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I make much of my ministry in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them... And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again... Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved. Romans 11:13-14, 23, 25-26.

### *The Fall of Jerusalem*

Politically, for the Jews, hard times had come in the years after the crucifixion. The emperor of Rome changed every other week and demands were ever being made to put the latest statue of the emperor in the Temple for its worship. Factions within Jerusalem's Jewish community opposed the emperor-worship and Roman Rule in general. Talk of the Messiah by local Christians stimulated a new wave of Messianic expectation among the Jews who had not believed Jesus was the Anointed One. This talk of a physical savior-king disturbed the Romans who became suspicious of an imminent rebellion.

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<sup>3</sup> Hoekema, Anthony, *The Bible and the Future* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1979), pp.18-19, 21, 32, 52-53.

<sup>4</sup> Eusebius, pp. 117, 125.

Then in 66 AD., Florus, who was procurator of Judea, forcefully took 17 talents (approx. \$61,200) from the Temple Treasury at Jerusalem. A riot broke out, started by those who were outraged at the Roman's effrontery and who had incidentally been looking for just such an occasion to pick a fight. In an effort to quickly suppress the riot, Roman legions scourged and crucified over 3600 Jews. Two Jewish factions rose up: the rebels, or Zealots, who wanted autonomy, and the pacifists, who wanted peaceful co-existence for business' sake. These two factions were viciously opposed to each other, throwing rocks whenever two groups of them met in the street. The rebels were comprised of cut-throats (literally) who loved to slip into a crowd of their opposition with hidden daggers and dispatch them in broad daylight. The first victim was the high priest, Jonathan. The Pharisees sided with the Zealots who had been fighting Rome relentlessly since the days of Herod. There was a legitimate fear that Caligula, the latest maniac of Rome, would desecrate the Temple as Antiochus Epiphanes IV had done 200 years earlier when his statue was placed in the temple and a fatted pig was sacrificed on the altar. Talk of war with Rome was rampant.

In 68 AD the animosity between these two factions erupted into a pitched battle with the Romans trying to play referee. The radicals won the bloody confrontation after killing 12,000 opposition members, including nearly all the rich in Jerusalem, and incidentally the source of local Roman influence and support. Another revolt began against the foreign occupation. Masada's Roman garrison was surrounded, falsely coaxed into disarmament and surrender by Menahem and his Zealots, and then brutally slaughtered. Eleazar, son of Ananias, the Temple Captain, ordered the sacrifice for the emperor to cease, which was the signal for open revolt. By August, the entire city and several citadels were in the hands of the rebels. Greek cities in Judea, symbols of Rome's dominance, were also attacked by the rebel forces.<sup>5</sup> In retaliation, the gentiles of Caesarea slew 20,000 Jews. Thousands more were sold into slavery. The gentiles of Damascus cut the throats of some 10,000 Jews in a single day.<sup>6</sup>

Hearing of disastrous earthquakes and volcanic eruptions during the preceding 4 years, and then being warned in a vision, the Christians in Jerusalem fled the city and headed for the mountains of Pella as Christ had cautioned them to do. Not one of them died in the holocaust which soon followed. The Jews were so angry at this "desertion" by the Christian Jews that they forever barred them from their synagogues.<sup>7</sup> The 12th Roman Legion was dispatched to Jerusalem to quell the rebellion, but it was disastrously defeated by the rebels. The Jews declared themselves an independent country, struck their own coins, and divided the country into 7 military districts. Command of Galilee was given to the future historian, Josephus.<sup>8</sup> More troops were dispatched from Rome under the command of a Roman legate named Vespasian. He began a sweeping campaign which forced the rebels further and further inland until he had driven them into their last two strongholds at Jerusalem and Masada.

Although Josephus is far from reliable, as a Jewish priest and eyewitness to the events his use of the imagery of Scripture to describe what he saw is revealing: angelic armies were seen surrounding Jewish cities. "Chariots and troops of soldiers... running about among the clouds."

<sup>5</sup> Aharoni and Avi-Yonah, *McMillan Bible Atlas*, (N.Y., 1977), p.251

<sup>6</sup> Durant, *Will Caesar and Christ* (Simon and Schuster, N.Y., 1944), pp. 542-549.

<sup>7</sup> Shelley, *Bruce Church History in Plain Language* (Word, Inc., Waco, 1982), p. 36

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid. McMillan*, pp.251-257

This description, curiously enough, was repeated by the Roman historian Tacitus and can even be found in the Talmud.<sup>9</sup>

In 70 AD, Vespasian laid siege to Jerusalem. There were some 600,000 rebels walled up within, plus many others who had come for the Passover feast, some three million in all. Meanwhile, the mad fiddler of Rome, emperor Nero, had committed suicide to avoid his own murder by the mob for his many crimes. Vespasian was chosen as the new emperor. He left his son Titus to continue the siege against the rebel leader, John of Giscala. This Zealot leader had outfoxed Titus 2 years earlier and escaped to Jerusalem where he removed his rival Simon. In preparation for the last stand at Masada, the rebels began gathering all the food available in the city by force. Any who tried to leave the city were murdered and their money confiscated on the grounds that they were deserters. As the famine grew worse, the houses were ransacked for food and the inhabitants tortured or killed by the rebels. Little children were dashed against walls and floors. Brutal mutilations were carried out by the Rebels in their search for more and more food stores. People began to steal the food from each other's mouths, mothers stole even from their children. Mary, the daughter of Eleazar, of a good family and rich, took her suckling baby and killed it, cooking it for food. When the aroma wafted into the surrounding area the rebels broke down the door and demanded the food. She held out the uncooked half to them. Even these callous murderers turned away in horror.<sup>10</sup>

After 5 months some 116,000 bodies had been thrown over the walls of Jerusalem. There were too many to even bury anymore. Soon they were piled up in the valleys surrounding the city, including the Valley of Hinnom also known as gehenna or hell. A river of putrefaction flowed from under the decaying corpses, permeating the entire city with the stench of death. Titus himself cried out for the mercy of God denying that any of it was his doing.<sup>11</sup> As the battle for the city raged on, the Temple was set aflame using Roman brands (by the Jews, says the historian Josephus ... see Daniel 9:26). Of those Jews who survived, 97,000 were sold as slaves. Between 600,000 and 1,197,000 Jews were killed during the siege. The high priesthood and the Sanhedrin were abolished. The temple was razed leaving not one stone on another. It has never been rebuilt nor have sacrifices ever been made there again. The Sadducees disappeared while the Pharisees and rabbis became the leaders of a homeless people. The forced exodus from Jerusalem was so massive that Jewish scholars began to date the DIASPORA (or Dispersion) from the destruction of Herod's temple rather than the Babylonian Captivity.<sup>12</sup>

The remnants of the rebel forces fled the city under the command of Eleazar Ben Jair and took up a final defensive stand in Herod's summer fortress at Masada until 73 AD. The Romans waited them out and then, after completing an assault ramp to breach the rebel defenses, the Romans decided to delay the final attack until daylight. To preclude capture, the defenders of Masada, all 960 men, women and children, committed mass suicide during the night.<sup>13</sup> As if the earth itself were responding to this awful judgment, massive earthquakes and minor volcanic eruptions began throughout the Mediterranean. Unexpectedly in 79 AD., following many minor and not so minor eruptions, Mt. Vesuvius had a catastrophic final eruption that buried Pompeii in

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<sup>9</sup> Yoma, folio 39B

<sup>10</sup> Eusebius, pp. 112-116

<sup>11</sup> Eusebius, pp. 114-115

<sup>12</sup> Durant, p. 545

<sup>13</sup> loc.cit., McMillan

50-60 feet of mud, lava, and ash wreaking judgment on those who had been the instruments of God's judgment on Israel (Rev.16:18-21). Babylon had indeed been relived.<sup>14</sup>

In the second century, other events related to the nation of Israel arise. In AD 115-16 the Jews of Cyrene, Egypt, Cyprus and Mesopotamia again rose up against Rome. During the bloody suppression which ensued, some 220,000 people died in Cyrene; 240,000 in Cyprus – for centuries after no Jew was even allowed to enter Cyprus. In AD 130, Hadrian tried the same tactics as Antiochus IV Epiphanes and the resulting rebellion was every bit as fierce as before. One-half million Jews died in battle, as many starved to death, and many more succumbed to numerous pogroms which ensued world-wide.

Even so, in AD 132 **Simeon Bar Cocheba** (a self-proclaimed Messiah who was acknowledged as such by the famous Jewish expositor of the law, Akkiba) led the Jews in their last quest to recover their homeland and their freedom. They fought Rome for three years during which the Romans destroyed 985 towns in Palestine and slew 580,000 men. Nearly all Judea was laid waste. The pagan city of Aelia Capitolina rose on the site of Jerusalem with shrines to Venus and Jupiter. Circumcision was forbidden, as was the observance of the Sabbath or any other holiday. The successor to the Sanhedrin (or Council of 70) had been known as the Council at Jamnia. Even this was dissolved and outlawed. Public instruction of the Law was forbidden. Akkiba, now 95, refused to be quieted and died with the basic tenet of the Law on his lips, "Hear O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one."

The reason this is important is because the seat of Christianity was moved from Jerusalem very early in church history and there is a reason for it. "A time is coming, and has now come, when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem, a time when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth" (Jn.4:21-24). Jesus wept when he saw Jerusalem for the last time because he knew, as it was true of his own role as a sacrificial offering it would also be true of Israel as a nation, that "unless a seed falls to the ground and dies it remains a single seed. But if it dies it produces many seeds." Christ's death as a man would mean the planting of God's spiritual Garden. And Israel's death as a nation would mean the harvesting of all nations in Christ.

The false Christ who was prophesied came and was proclaimed, and then was summarily dismissed by God's hand. Perhaps we saw only a type of all false messiahs in Simon Bar Kocheba, and he returns again and again in history in other guises. Israel ceased as a political entity for nearly two thousand years, and even when it rose from the ashes of WWII it never resurrected the priesthood, never rebuilt the Temple, never appeased the wrath of God with sacrifices. God's special relationship with his people has continued unbroken through the ages with another Israel, the remnant of ancient Israel, known as Spiritual Israel, God's faithful Bride as we defined the church at the beginning of the course. That's why Jesus told his disciples to go first to the Jews. They were to draw out his chosen people as a remnant so his Abrahamic promises would be kept. Paul too always went first to the Jews and only then to the Gentiles, drawing out God's wandering sheep. In time this distinction vanished and the Jews were approached without special favor by the church. If anything, they were mistakenly perceived as "Christ killers." It was Christ's purpose to pay for all our sins on the cross of atonement and his

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<sup>14</sup> Feder, Theo., *Great Treasures of Pompeii and Herculaneum* (Abbeville Press, Inc., N.Y., 1978) pp.7-9

persecutors were the proxies of all mankind, mimicking our own rebellion and unbelief. This misperception of Jews during the middle ages will be seen as a natural consequence of the twisted theology of the times when we get to that portion of church history in a few weeks.

It must be said that this view of physical Israel's role in the Kingdom of God is not the only one possible, nor is it necessarily the correct one. It is a personal view, one widely held in reformed circles, but not one that must be accepted by the student of church history. With that disclaimer let's return to the church, Spiritual Israel, and explore its function as a discipling ground for the followers of Christ.

### **Part III: Forged in the Crucible**

#### Seeds of Discipleship Using Scripture as "The Rule of Life and Faith"

Following the Fall of Jerusalem and after his return from exile, the Apostle John traveled widely encouraging and teaching the churches even at his advanced age. One account of the Apostle John's adventures following the fall of Jerusalem involved a young lad of ardent spirit that he noticed while visiting the church at Smyrna. He left the boy in the keeping of the Bishop "with all earnestness, in the presence of the church and Christ as my witness." The cleric took the boy home, brought him up, kept him in his presence, looked after him and finally gave him the grace of Baptism. After this he relaxed his constant care and watchfulness, having put the seal of the Lord on him for protection. The youngster snatched at liberty too soon and was led astray by a bad crowd of friends. Little by little he was led into their ways until he had renounced God's salvation and in his rebellion, feeling that his life was already in ruins, sought after more and more heinous crimes with which to impress his friends. He became their leader and formed them into a gang of bandits.

John had occasion to return to Smyrna one day and went to the Bishop saying, "Come now, bishop, repay me the deposit which Christ and I left in your keeping in the presence of the church over which you reside as my witness." The bishop replied, "He is dead to God," and then he told John the sad tale. John tore his clothes in grief saying, "A fine guardian I left of our brother's soul. However, fetch me a horse immediately." He rode off to the bandits' hide-out in the mountains. As he approached, the young man turned to flee out of shame, but John called out to him, "You still have hopes of life. I will account to Christ for you. If need be I will gladly die in your place, as Christ died for us; to save you I will give my own life. Stop! Believe! Christ sent me."

When he heard this the young man stopped and threw down his weapons, breaking into tears. When the old man came to him he flung his arms around John, pleading for himself with groans as best he could, and baptized a second time with tears, he hid his sin-laden right hand from sight. But John solemnly pledged his word that he had found pardon for him from the Savior. He prayed, knelt down, and kissed the hidden hand, cleansed by repentance. Then he brought him back to the church, interceded for him with many prayers, shared with him the ordeal of continuous fasting, brought his mind under control by all the enchanting power of words, and did not leave him, we are told, till he had restored him to the Church, giving a perfect

example of true repentance and a perfect proof of regeneration, the trophy of a visible resurrection.<sup>15</sup>

I took the time to give you this story which dates back to the third century or earlier, so that you would have a feel for the function and role of the individual Christian in the life of the church. This is the description of the commitment which will testify to the visible resurrection. This is the reason for the success of the early church. This is the kind of discipleship that marked the lives of the Apostles and that was taught to the seedling church. We will see more of this type of discipling when we look at the practices of the Anti-Nicene church.

The closest discipling program that we have in our own day is the result of the efforts of the Navigators who have resurrected this one-on-one method of teaching. Let's look at what they have discovered during the past forty years. Its essence is revealed in a book by one of their officers who serves as International Ministry Representative, Leroy Eims. In *The Marks of Discipleship*, Mr. Eims tells us that as a general rule it can take 2 years to turn a convert into a disciple (we'll examine these distinctions shortly), 2 more years to turn the disciple into a worker, and 3 more years to turn the worker into a leader. He says this is not unreasonable when we look at how much time Jesus spent with his disciples: if he spent 12 hours a day with them for 3 years, that's 13,140 hours. If we could spend 7 hours a week with a person (4 in church and 3 elsewhere), and that might be high, it totals only 365 hours a year. At that rate it would take us 36 years to match the time spent by Jesus! The profiles of a convert, disciple, worker and leader in outline look like this:

### *Growing a Convert into a Leader*

#### CONVERT -

1. He gives evidences of possessing new life (2Cor.5:17).
2. His attitude toward Jesus Christ is now favorable.
3. His attitude toward sin is now unfavorable.

#### GROWING DISCIPLE -

1. He puts Christ first in the major areas of his life and is taking steps to separate from sin (Lk.9:23; Rom.12:1-2).
2. He continues in the Word through such means of intake as Bible story and Scripture memory; he is regular in applying the Word to his life with the help of the Holy Spirit (Jn.8:31; Jm.1:22-25, Ps.119:59)
3. He maintains a consistent devotional life and is growing in faith and intercessory prayer (Mk.1:35; Heb.11:6; Col.4:2-4).
4. He attends church regularly and demonstrates Christ's love identifying with and serving other believers (Ps.122:1; Heb.10:25; Jn.13:34-35; 1Jn.4:20-21; Gal.5:13).

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<sup>15</sup> Eusebius, pp. 129-131

5. He is openly identified with Jesus Christ where he lives and works, manifests a heart for witnessing, gives his testimony clearly, and presents the gospel regularly with increasing effectiveness (Mat.5:16; Col.4:6; 1Pet.3:15).
6. He is a learner who is open and teachable (Ac.17:11).
7. He is a visible follower and learner of Jesus Christ, and demonstrates consistency and faithfulness in all of the above areas (Lk.16:10).

WORKER -

1. He evidences growth in the virtues and skills outlined listed under 'growing disciple' (1Pet.3:18).
2. He shows a growing compassion for the lost and demonstrates his ability to lead men to Christ personally (Mt.9:36-38; Rom.1:6).
3. He is being used of God to establish believers who have become disciples, either personally or in a discipling group context (Col.1:28-29).
4. He is currently engaged in the task of making disciples (Mt.28:19).
5. Regular intake of the Word by all means and the quiet time are now habits in his life (Phil.4:9).

LEADER -

1. He is an equipped worker who evidences growth in the virtues and skills listed under 'worker.'
2. He has been used of God to help disciples become workers (2Tim.2:2).
3. He is banding and leading workers in evangelizing the lost and establishing believers (Mk.1:38)
4. He displays faithfulness and integrity in his life and ministry (2Tim.2:19-21).<sup>16</sup>

Knowing what goes into the making of an effective disciple using these guidelines, it may become easier to understand the distinctions made by the church in first centuries between clergy and laity, members and catechumens. While we may all be priests, some of us are less effective, less gifted, less motivated than others and submissiveness to those who exercise responsibility therefore becomes essential to our growth within the Body. Divisiveness is the consequence of arrogant and unfounded self-elevation. Even in the first two hundred years of church history we find schisms emerging from such competition for Christ's favor. It is no less a challenge today to remove our selves from comparisons between each other (Gal. 6:4).

Now let's see how this was put into practice by the first century church. Then we can appreciate how discipling and worship changed with time, first moving away from the norms of the early church, and then turning back to them.

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<sup>16</sup> Eims, Leroy, *The Lost Art of Disciple Making* (Navpress, Colorado Springs, 1978), pp. 184-188

## Part IV: The Crown of Martyrdom

Seeds of the Martyrs  
Battle Cry of the Faith: "To the Lions!"

For the Apostolic church, early gatherings were very simple, very basic affairs. The contents of this early worship included the reading and singing of psalms, personal testimonies about the latest persecutions, and the communion. The people who came were characterized by their humility, submission and equality, with slaves and slave masters sitting side by side in service to the Lord. Every Christian present was a missionary in his own right. The designation of missionary as we know it really didn't begin until the middle ages. Paul's missionary journeys were no different in substance than what every other Christian was doing, but by the grace of God Paul's work was more extensive in its outreach and in its impact on the church.<sup>17</sup>

Within 300 years the whole of the Roman Empire was nominally Christianized. Later we will see the efforts of the great individual missionaries effecting the establishment of strong churches that would have an impact on entire countries: e.g. Patrick in Ireland, Columba in Scotland, Augustine in England (different than the theologian), Boniface in Germany, Ansgar in Scandinavia, and Cyril in the Slavic nations.<sup>18</sup> But in the first century the heroes were the unknown Christians who shared their faith with family and friends, employers and acquaintances. Christianity was growing very naturally from within. It was so successful that rumors were spreading abroad of a secret society in Rome that was worshipping an unknown God. This disturbed the Romans who feared the instability of any group that was not directly under their control. The meetings of the Christians were forbidden and were moved into the catacombs at night. Every conceivable calamity was blamed on the Christians including famine and flood.

Then came the cruel laws, riots, and the call, "To the lions with the Christians!"<sup>19</sup> This began the persecutions of the church that John had foretold in his Revelation. The accusations leveled against the Christians included disorderly nightly meetings, rebellion, murdering their children, and even cannibalism (from a misunderstanding of the communion)! The persecutions produced many informers and false witnesses. The church devised signs to recognize each other, e.g. drawing half of the fish for the other person to complete. The Romans devised their own means to identify the Christians in the form of a test oath that would compromise their beliefs. In Christlike fashion, the martyrs of the Faith demonstrated that "unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds." (John 12:24)

### *Outline of the Persecutions*

**First General Persecution** Under Nero, AD 64. Nero was the royal arsonist of Rome who blamed the catastrophe on the Christians. Notables executed during this persecution included: Aristarchus of Thessalonica, Trophimus (a convert of Paul's who was appointed Bishop of Gaul

<sup>17</sup> Schaff, Philip *History of the Christian Church*, 8 vol.(Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1949), II 40-41.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p. 20

<sup>19</sup> Foxe, 40-41.

by Paul's direction), Erastus (another Pauline convert, Bishop of Macedonia and chamberlain of Corinth), Joseph (a.k.a. Barsabas, a disciple of Christ who was a candidate with Matthias to replace Judas), Ananias Bishop of Damascus (who was used to cure Paul's blindness).

**ASSAULT ON JERUSALEM** under Nero and Vespasian in AD 70. Although the Christians escaped the slaughter of the Siege, Vespasian ordered the execution of all those in the line of David to put an end to Jewish hopes for an heir to the ancient throne. The purge was continued by his son Titus and then later by his other son Domitian. The grandsons of Jude, the Lord's brother, were brought before the emperor one day. After questioning them, hearing that the kingdom was not of this world, and then seeing the calluses on their hands from working their small field to pay their taxes, Domitian ended the purge of David's heirs.

**Second Persecution** Under Domitian AD 85. This was the most brutal of the persecutions. Notables executed: Dionysius the Areopagite (the appointed Bishop of Athens); Timothy the disciple of Paul and Bishop of Ephesus; Simeon, Bishop of Jerusalem; and Nicomedes, a Christian of distinction at Rome.

**Third Persecution** Under Trajan AD 108. Notables executed: Phocas, Bishop of Pontus; Alexander, Bishop of Rome; and Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch (traditionally one of the children Christ held in his arms; a disciple of the Apostle John). He was scourged, and splinters of wood dipped in oil were lit and put to his side. He was then mangled by pincers and torn apart by wild beasts. Hadrian, who succeeded Trajan as emperor, ended the persecution on request of Quadratus, Bishop of Athens.

**Fourth Persecution** Under Marcus Aurelius AD 163. The persecutions had spread to Gaul and Lyons by this time. Notables executed: Justin Martyr, the Philosopher; Appolonius a Roman Senator; Fructuosus, Bishop of Tarragon on the east coast of Spain; and Polycarpus, a convert of the Apostle John who served the Lord for 60 years as a prominent teacher and evangelist. He died a martyr at age 86. A crowd at the Coliseum became enraged that the executions of Christians resulted in the conversion of some spectators. They called for the arrest of Polycarpus as the most visible Christian in the city. He heard the commotion and hid himself in a closet, but was discovered by a little girl who told the authorities. He had a dream the night before that his bed was on fire and now decided that it was God's will that he receive the crown of martyrdom. When his captors arrived he greeted them cheerfully and served them a feast, requesting only that he be allowed an hour to pray. His captors were shamed. They took him before the judge who sentenced him to be burned. The flames were intense enough to force back the guards but Polycarpus sang hymns unconsumed! This startled the attendants who speared him until his blood doused the flames. Still alive he was speared again and again until dead and then recommitted to the flames. The people began to worship him as if a god.<sup>20</sup>

**Fifth General Persecution** Under Commodus, Pertinax, and Julianus AD 200. Notables executed: Leonidas, father of Origen, and two of Origen's friends (Plutarchus and Serenus).

**Sixth Persecution** Under Maximus and Gordian A.D.235. Notables executed: Pontianus, Bishop of Rome was first banished to Sardinia and then murdered there. His successor, Anteros,

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<sup>20</sup> Foxxe, 55-56.

collected the histories of the martyrs which so enraged the Romans that he suffered martyrdom only 40 days after taking office. The Roman Senator Pammachius, his entire family, and 42 others were all beheaded in a single day and their heads spiked on the city gates. Also executed were Senator Simplicius; Quiritus, a Roman nobleman. and his entire family; Martina a noblewoman; and Hippolitus, a Christian prelate.

**Seventh Persecution** Under Decius and Gallus AD 249. Notables executed: Fabian, Bishop of Rome, Cyril, Bishop of Gortyna on Crete; Babylas, Bishop of Antioch; and Alexander, Bishop of Jerusalem. Origen was tortured but not executed.

**Eighth Persecution** Under Valerian (by influence of an Egyptian magician named Macrianus) AD 257. The church had grown so phenomenally by this time that the heathen temples were all but deserted. Notables executed: Stephen, Sextus, and Laurentius, Bishops of Rome, and Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage. Laurentius (St. Lawrence) was archdeacon under Sextus. He accompanied Sextus when the latter was executed and was told that his death would be soon also. He took over as the Bishop and was approached by Macrianus, governor of Rome, to hand over the "treasures" of the Church to be used for the defense of the Empire. The Roman church was very wealthy even at this early stage. Lawrence promised to gather the riches if he could be given three days. He smuggled the treasures out of the church building to keep them for the needs of the poor and the orphans. He then gathered a chosen number of the congregation: a row each of the lame, blind, orphans, widows, the weak and the helpless. "These are the real treasures of the church," he said, "In the widows and orphans you behold her gold and her silver, her pearls and precious stones. Make use of them by asking for their prayers; they will prove your best weapons against your foes." Enraged, the governor had Lawrence roasted on a searing gridiron. Lawrence endured without crying out but prayed instead for the church and for the conversion of the Empire. A Roman soldier standing there was converted on the spot and then suffered martyrdom himself.<sup>21</sup>

**Ninth Persecution** Under Aurelian and Diocletian (through his co-ruler Maximian) AD 270. Maximian executed an entire legion of 6000 soldiers (The Theban Legion) when they refused to join a sacrifice because they had accepted Christ; also executed was St. Alban of England at Verulam, now St. Albans in Herts., Eng.

**Tenth Persecution** Under Diocletian and Galerius AD 303-305. St. Sebastian and St. George of England executed (hence St. George fighting the dragon of Rome, Satan's proxy); Constantine then became the first Christian emperor of Rome in AD 306.<sup>22</sup> He ended the persecutions because of his own conversion, real or not, and then, by his Edict of 313, he legalized Christianity .

By the end of the 2nd century martyrdom was seen not only as a higher grade of Christian virtue but also as a baptism of fire and blood. It was considered an ample substitution for the baptism of water, and for purifying the martyr from sin thus securing an entrance into heaven.<sup>23</sup> The entire epic of the persecutions was made into a folklore and then idolized by the

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<sup>21</sup> Foxe, 84-86

<sup>22</sup> Forbush, Wm. Byron *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* (John C. Winston Co. Phila., 1926), pp. 1-32

<sup>23</sup> Schaff, II p. 83.

early Christians. Not only were the martyrs worshipped, but anything they owned or touched was worshipped as well. Pilgrimages became a profitable trade, promenading the tourists past the homes and relics of the local martyrs.<sup>24</sup> It is not very different today with our guided tours of the Holy Land. The church expanded worldwide during the next thousand years as if Satan were bound. No persecution against the Christians would be repeated until the time of John Wycliffe in the late 1300's.<sup>25</sup> Even then it wouldn't be a persecution of the Church as a whole by the state, but of the Church in part by itself: a purge of dissent.

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<sup>24</sup> Schaff, II p. 82

<sup>25</sup> Forbush, p. 32