

WATERSHED MOMENTS

Pivotal Points in Church History

by Mark Adams



Table of Contents

1. Living Sacrifices	5
2. God and Man?	11
3. Saved By God's Grace	16
4. A Model for Missions	22
5. A Different Kind of Kingdom	28
6. Back to the Bible	34
7. Soldiers for Christ	40
8. Foreknowledge and Free Will	45
9. New Directions.....	51
10. Exploring New Freedoms	57
11. Only One Church.....	63
12. Restoring the Church.....	69
13. A Unity Movement Divides	75
Helpful Works For Learning About Church History	82

Introduction

There are two mistakes one can make in approaching church history. One mistake is to give too much authority to our predecessors of faith, blindly adopting their views, simply because they precede our own. The other mistake is to pay so little regard to history that, in ignorance, we doom ourselves to repeat past mistakes. But if we approach the past with respect, and with discernment through Scripture, we find a healthy platform to consider how best to face our own challenges. There truly is “nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:9).

This study is not a survey, but a collection of snapshots. We will explore together many challenging decisions with which believers before us have been confronted. We can gain helpful perspectives by stepping out of our own context of Restoration Christianity to look at challenging issues of historical “Christianity.” May God bless us as we strive to live out Christ’s vision for what His church should be.

About the Author

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Lesson 1

Living Sacrifices

Key Verse:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God— this is your spiritual act of worship. (Romans 12:1).

WARM UP



It could be said that the entirety of the Christian’s journey in this world all centers around each person’s efforts to answer a single question: “What must I do in my life to pick up my cross and follow Jesus?” And after all, as Paul says, our calling is to offer our bodies as a “living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God” (Romans 12:1-2). The answer to this question has taken many different forms over the centuries since Christ walked the earth. In seeing the faith, wisdom, and courage of Christians who have fought the good fight before us, we can find strength to live out this calling in our own situation.



Christian Martyrdom

Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). For those of us living in the United States, worshiping without fear of persecution, those words sound like metaphor or hyperbole. To the Christians in the early centuries of the church, as well as to some in oppressive situations today, these words are ominously realistic for what the Christian life might involve.

The persecution of Christians in the early church was not persistent everywhere, all the time. Most often, it occurred in pockets with varying degrees of severity. Even so, many Christians were put to death because they would not deny the Lordship of Jesus Christ. In 64 AD, when the city of Rome burned, Nero decided to place the blame on Christians, and many were butchered under his reign. When Domitian became emperor in 81 AD, he persecuted both Christians and Jews.

Under such intense pressure, some Christians defected, but others did not. Those who stood strong to the end were a source of great encouragement to the church. Called *martyrs* (witnesses), they were revered as champions in the cause of Christ. One such martyr was Ignatius of Antioch. A man in his 70s, he was arrested during the reign of Trajan (98-117 AD) and was executed in the wild animal games that were put on to entertain the populace. We still have seven letters that Ignatius wrote to various churches. In the fifth chapter of his letter to the Romans, his words contain great courage: "Now I begin to be a disciple. And let no one, of things visible or invisible, envy me that I should attain to Jesus Christ. Let fire and the cross; let the crowds of

wild beasts; let tearings, breakings, and dislocations of bones; let cutting off of members; let shatterings of the whole body; and let all the dreadful torments of the devil come upon me: only let me attain to Jesus Christ."

Monasticism as the New Martyrdom

Monasticism, the practice of being a monk, was something that arose somewhat in conjunction with the end of the persecution against Christians. In fact, persecution hit its crescendo around the end of the third century when Diocletian was the emperor. Paul speaks of people who "invent ways of doing evil" (Romans 1:30). This would be a good description of Diocletian's relentless actions against Christians who would not renounce their faith. But by around 304 AD, Diocletian was getting older and tired, and of the four men fighting for control of his empire, Constantine soon rose to the top of the heap.

One of the other competitors was Maxentius. On the eve of battle between the armies of Constantine and Maxentius, Constantine had a vivid dream. He saw the first two letters of the word "Christ" in Greek, which are *chi* (KEY) and *rho* (ROW). He was told, "In this you shall conquer." The next day, he had a chi-rho symbol (☩) placed on the shield of each of his soldiers before they went to battle. When they achieved victory, Constantine gained control of the western half of the empire, and credited the victory, in some degree, to Christ. This event marked a notable shift in the way that Christians were treated by the Roman Empire. Persecution ceased immediately, and by the reign of Theodosius (379-395), there was even a chi-rho symbol placed on their currency representing Christianity as the official religion of the empire, similar to our money which says, "In God we trust."

This new cultural acceptance was bittersweet for the church. Of course, it was wonderful to be able to worship without fear of

persecution. But when Christians had been under the threat of death, they came to view martyrdom as a privilege. What better way to pick up your cross and follow Jesus than to actually be put to death on His account? But now, with such widespread approval of Christianity, it was also much easier to be lukewarm toward God.

Though monasticism began while persecution was still underway, it grew much in popularity after persecution ended. The monks' reasoning was that if no one would kill them for Christ, they would voluntarily give up their whole life for him anyway. It was the next best option to being a martyr. They wanted to do willingly what the rich young ruler was hesitant to do (Matthew 19:21). They tried to dedicate their lives to the obedience of Christ, desiring only those possessions that will never rust or decay (Matthew 6:20).

There were many varieties of monks. Some monks lived in communities, while others preferred to remain in solitude. Many of them were dedicated to teaching. Some of them were rather eccentric, such as Simeon the Stylite, who lived atop a 45 foot pillar on a 4 foot platform for 39 years. Ironically, the more he sought solitude, the more people sought him out for spiritual advice.

COOL DOWN



I regularly hear prayers offered up in my congregation's assemblies where we thank God for the freedom and safety we experience in our nation as Christians. Even if our culture mocks us, at least they are not murdering us for their nightly entertainment. But we must guard ourselves carefully against the ease that comes with acceptance. Christians under persecution are not afforded the opportunity to be lukewarm, but for us, it is an ever-present temptation.

We would do well to read in the Scriptures about the lives of those who were martyred for Christ, such as Stephen (Acts 7) and Paul (2 Timothy). We have many more stories from then until the present time of thousands of believers who would die before they would deny Jesus Christ as Lord. Their testimonies help us to hold ourselves accountable to the same high calling. Similarly, the early monks pose a great challenge to us in our materialistic worldview. We may look at some of the requirements and orders of monks, and find aspects that are scripturally objectionable. However, we must respect that many were making a real effort in their lives to forsake their worldly possessions and to answer that one question: "What must I do in my life to pick up my cross and follow Jesus?"

Points to Ponder

1. Though most Americans work from a mindset that anything uncomfortable is inherently bad for us, can you see how some persecution might actually be a blessing in disguise? Have you experienced this?
2. What do you think Christians should learn from those who have been martyred for their faith?
3. What about monasticism do you find admirable? What do you find objectionable?
4. Some people read about the rich young ruler in Matthew 19:16-30 and try to make the application be that we don't have to give our possessions away; we should just be willing to give our possessions away. How can we know whether we are willing unless we ever actually do it? Have your charitable contributions ever been great enough that they have prevented you from being able to afford something else you were wanting for your own benefit or entertainment?
5. If you are offering your body as a "living sacrifice" as Paul describes in Romans 12:1-2, how will this be reflected in your life? In your bank account? In your daily planner? In your phone calls and text messages?
6. Have someone in class do some research ahead of time on Polycarp's death and report to the class.
7. Check out *Voice of the Martyrs* at www.persecution.com to see how people around the world are being persecuted for their faith.