



**CONSISTENTLY IMPACTING OUR COMMUNITY**

## **SCHOOL OF THE BIBLE**

P.O. Box 635, Bromhof, 2154 Cnr Kelly & Sylvan Rds, Boskruin  
tel: (011) 792-1340 fax: (011) 792-8624

# **Atheists, cannibals, incestuous rebels!**

Dr. Kevin Roy

The purpose of these notes are to assist in developing a proper understanding of the course presented. They are not a comprehensive evaluation of the material and are intended to supplement instruction given.

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The earliest persecution Christians experienced was at the hands of the Jews. We read in the Acts of the Apostles how the unbelieving Jews continually opposed the apostle Paul, and on a number of occasions tried to kill him. The Roman authorities regarded the church, while it was still small, as just another Jewish sect and did not pay too much attention to it. As the church grew in size among the Gentiles, it became obvious that they were a different group from the Jews. Christians then began experiencing persecution at the hands of the Gentiles. Why? There were a number of reasons. Firstly, they were illegal, not being a recognised religion by the Roman authorities. Secondly, their separatistic ways offended Roman society. But worst of all, they were regarded as guilty of serious crimes, such as atheism, cannibalism, incest and rebellion.

They were atheists because they had no visible gods, either in their places of worship or in their homes. Furthermore, they rejected the gods of the state cult and refused to worship them. Charges of cannibalism arose from reports that they met early in the morning on the first day of the week to engage in religious rites including the eating of human flesh and the drinking of blood. Continual talk about the brothers and sisters loving one another gave rise to accusations of incest, and the refusal of Christians to offer sacrifices to Caesar or even to swear by the genius of Caesar meant that they were rebels.

In the year 64 there was a fire in Rome, and it was widely suspected that Nero had started it because of his ambitions to build a better and more beautiful city. To deflect suspicion from himself, Nero accused the Christians and instigated a cruel persecution against them. The Roman historian, Tacitus, described this persecution against "a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. .. an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination when daylight had expired" (Tacitus, *Annales*).

About the year 112, Pliny, a governor in Asia Minor, wrote to emperor Trajan, asking advice as to how he should handle the problem of Christians. By this time simply being a Christian was a criminal offence. Pliny wrote, "First I have asked them if they were Christians. If they confessed that they were, I repeated my question a second and a third time, accompanying it with threats of punishment. If they still persisted in their statements, I ordered them to be taken out. ... Those who denied that they were or ever had been Christians I thought should be released, provided that they called on the gods in my presence, and offered incense and wine to your statue (which I had expressly brought in with the images of the gods for that very purpose), and, above all, if they renounced Christ, which no true Christian, I am told, can be made to do." Pliny did admit in his letter, that he could find no evidence of any criminal activity done by the Christians. Nevertheless, he considered their beliefs a "depraved and groundless superstition" and thought their unwillingness to abandon them a "stubborn and unbending obstinacy" worthy of punishment.

About the year 155, Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, present day Izmir, was arrested and brought before the Roman proconsul in the public stadium. (Polycarp, by the

way, had known the apostle John and others who had seen Jesus.) When urged to swear by the genius of Caesar and say 'Away with the Atheists', Polycarp looked at the crowd in the stadium and said 'Away with the Atheists.' When further urged to revile the Christ, Polycarp replied, "Eighty and six years have I served him, and he hath done me no wrong; how then can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" After further unsuccessful attempts to persuade Polycarp to renounce his faith, he was condemned to be burnt at the stake. Before the fire was kindled, Polycarp prayed, "O Lord God Almighty, Father of thy beloved and blessed Son Jesus Christ, by whose means we have received our knowledge of thee, God of Angels and Powers and of all creation and of the whole race of the just who live before thy face, I bless thee in that thou hast deemed me worthy of this day and hour; that I might take a portion in the number of the martyrs in the cup of Christ, to the resurrection of eternal life both of soul and body in the incorruption of the Holy Ghost ..."

Many of the accounts of the early martyrs are based on the official court transcripts of their trials. Justin was martyred in 165, during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, one of the finest of the Roman emperors, known as the philosopher king and whose *Meditations* are still published and read. Marcus Aurelius considered the laws just under which Justin was condemned. His crime was that of being a Christian and confessing it. Many others died for the same reason. The word martyr comes from the Greek word meaning 'witness'. So many of the Christians who bore witness to their faith were killed that the word 'witness' came to mean one who died as a result of confessing Christ.

In the first and second centuries, persecution was sporadic and local. In the first half of the third century there was a longish period in which the Christians enjoyed peace. Many church buildings were constructed. In 250 Decius became emperor. He was concerned about the declining fortunes of the Roman Empire, and was convinced that the Christians were to blame in turning the people away from the worship of the gods that had made Rome great. The only remedy was to eradicate the Christian church and restore the ancient ways. In this way the gods would be propitiated and Rome saved. Christians experienced severe persecution in the period 250-260 under Decius and Valerian. The death of Valerian led to a cessation of the persecution and Christians enjoyed peace again for a time. But in 303 persecution was renewed in even greater intensity under the emperors Diocletian and Galerius. Church buildings were destroyed, Bibles burnt, worship forbidden and the clergy arrested and imprisoned. Further decrees demanded that all citizens offer sacrifices to the gods or face execution. Persecution was especially fierce in the East, though not so severe in the West, where Constantine's father was co-emperor. It continued until the year 311 when Galerius died and Diocletian resigned. In the year 312 Constantine adopted Christianity and in 313 passed the Edict of Milan granting legal status to Christianity.