

Challenges Facing the Early Church

A. Post-Apostolic Martyrdom

1. Polycarp [c. 155/156 AD] – Personal friend of the Apostle John

Now as Polycarp was entering into the stadium, he heard a voice, saying, “Be strong, and show thyself a man, O Polycarp?” The proconsul sought to persuade him to deny Christ: “Have respect to thy old age; Swear by the fortune of Caesar, Repent. ... Swear, and I will set thee at liberty, reproach Christ. “

Polycarp declared, “Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me any injury; how then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?”

Proconsul insisted: “I have wild beast at hand; to these will I cast thee, except thou repent.”

Polycarp: “Call them then, for we are not accustomed to repent of what is good in order to adopt that which is evil.”

Proconsul: “I will cause thee to be consumed by fire, seeing thou despises the wild beasts.”

Polycarp: “Thou threatenest me with fire which burneth for an hour, and after a little is extinguished, but art ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and of eternal punishment, reserved for the ungodly. But why tarriest thou? Bring forth what thou wilt.”

The crowd gathered logs and faggots from the workshops and baths – as usual, the Jews in particular. When the pyre was ready, the crowd attempted to nail him to the grid for the fire. Polycarp said: “Let me be, for He who enables me to endure the flames will also enable me to remain in them unmoved, even without nails.”

Polycarp prayed: “O Father of your beloved Son, Jesus Christ, through whom we know you, I bless you for this day and hour, that I may, with the martyrs, share in the cup of Christ for the resurrection to eternal life ... May I be received among them today as a rich and acceptable sacrifice, according to your divine fulfillment. For this reason, I praise you for everything, I bless and glorify you through the eternal high priest, Jesus Christ, your beloved Son, through whom be glory to you and the Holy Spirit, both now and in the ages to come. Amen.”

When he had finished the fire was lit and a great flame blazed up, but it billowed like a ship’s sail full of wind, leaving space between its flames and his body. The crowd immediately ordered an executioner to slash him with a sword. When the executioner did so, blood gushed out, quenching much of the failing fire. In this way Polycarp entered into the presence of His precious Lord and Savior.

2. Justin Martyr [165 AD]

Rusticus, prefect of Rome: “Do you suppose, then, that you will ascend into heaven to receive some recompense?”

Justin responded: “I do not suppose it, but I know and am fully persuaded of it.”

Rusticus the prefect: “Let us then, now come to the matter in hand, and which presses. Having come together, offer sacrifice with one accord to the gods.”

Justin said: “No right-thinking person falls away from piety to impiety.”

Rusticus: “Unless ye obey, ye shall be mercilessly punished.”

Justin: “Through prayer we are saved from this life to the next. Do what you will, for we are Christians, and do not sacrifice to idols.”

Rusticus: “Let those who have refused to sacrifice to the gods and to yield to the command of the emperor be scourged, and let away to suffer the punishment of decapitation, according to the laws.”

Justin was one of a group of believers who were then beheaded for their faith, while some of the faithful secretly removed many of their bodies to suitable burial places.

B. Reliability of Early Church Fathers and Historians

NAME	DATES	KEY WRITINGS	RELIABILITY
Clement of Rome	35-99 AD	<i>1st and 2nd Epistles of Clement</i>	Generally Reliable for early church orders and disputes
Ignatius of Antioch	35-110 AD	<i>7 Letters of Ignatius of Antioch</i>	Highly Valued, Church Unity, Bishops' role, suffering of Christ
Polycarp of Smyrna	69-155 AD	<i>Letters to the Philippians</i>	Trusted by later writers as key source, Martyred in Smyrna, Bridge between Apostolic and Patristic periods
Papias of Hierapolis	60-130 AD	<i>Expositions of Lord's Sayings</i>	Valuable, but occasionally questioned Early views on the Gospels, Knew both John and Polycarp
Justin Martyr	100-165 AD	<i>The Dialogue with Trypho</i> <i>1st Apology, 2nd Apology</i>	Very well-regarded Apologist of Christianity, well-informed
Irenaeus of Lyons	130-202 AD	<i>Against Heresies</i> <i>Demonstration of Apostolic Preaching</i>	Often quoted and very reliable source of early orthodoxy High for early doctrinal disputes
Clement of Alexandria	150-215 AD	<i>Stromata (Miscellanies)</i> <i>Exhortation to the Greeks</i> <i>The Instructor</i>	Reliable but often Allegorical Christian philosopher Synthesis of Faith and Reason
Origen of Alexandria	185-254 AD	<i>Hexapla, On First Principles</i>	Prolific, occasionally speculative Brilliant interpreter
Tertullian of Carthage	155-240	<i>Apology, Treatises (in Latin)</i>	Very precise, 1 st Major Theologian Coined terms like "Trinity" became sectarian
Eusebius of Caesarea	260-340	<i>Ecclesiastical History</i> <i>Life of Constantine</i>	First true church historian, Documented early church, persecutions, and canon history

C. Emphasis of Early Church Fathers in their Writings

1. Balance of Doctrine and Morality

Justin Martyr [*2nd Apology*] witnessed the Christian martyrs' visible testimony of their commitment to Christianity, and having "heard the Christians slandered, and saw them fearless of death, and of all other things which are counted fearful, perceived that **it was impossible that they could be living in wickedness and pleasure.**" Christian fortitude both softened his heart and convinced his mind that Christians could not be crazy if they were willing to give their lives for the sake of their god.

An old man by the sea introduced Justin to the Scripture: "There existed, long before this time, certain men more ancient than all those who are esteemed philosophers, both righteous and beloved by God, who spoke by the Divine Spirit, and foretold events which would take place, and which are now taking place. They are called prophets. These alone both saw and announced the truth to men, neither reverencing nor fearing any man, not influenced by a desire for glory, but speaking those things alone which they saw and which they heard, being filled with the Holy Spirit."

When Justin heard these things, he declared: "Straightway a flame was kindled in my soul and a love of the prophets, and of those men who are friends of Christ possessed me; and while revolving his words in my mind, I found this philosophy alone to be safe and profitable." Justin himself proclaims the testimony of the Scripture brought about his conversion to Christianity.

“We who formerly delighted in fornication, but now embrace chastity alone; we who formerly used magical arts, dedicate ourselves to the good and unbegotten God; we who valued above all things the acquisition of wealth and possessions, now bring what we have into a common stock and communicate to every one in need; we who hated and destroyed one another, and on account of their different manners would not live with men of a different tribe, now, since the coming of Christ, live familiarly with them, and pray for our enemies, and endeavor to persuade those who hate us unjustly to live conformably to the good precepts of Christ, to the end that they may become partakers with us of the same joyful hope of a reward from God the ruler of all.”

Aristides [*Apology 16*, c. 140 AD] describes **the important role the Scriptures played in his conversion**. He studied the Scriptures and concluded that these writings alone have the knowledge of “things which are to come.”

[Speaking of the Christians] “For great indeed, and **wonderful is their doctrine** to him who will **search into it and reflect upon it**. And verily, this is a new people, and there is something divine in the midst of them.”

Catechesis = Discipleship

An array of catechetical manuals written in the first few centuries included a rich diet of theological and moral instruction.

Irenaeus, On the Apostolic Preaching

The Christian disciple must attend to both soul and body, both doctrine and morality. The true disciple should seek purity in both. “What use is it to know the truth in words, only to defile the body and perform evil deeds? Or what profit indeed can come from holiness of body, if truth is not in the soul? **Hypocrisy and Heresy destroy true religion**, but when doctrine and morality are held together in due measure and proportion, it is a beautiful thing to behold.”

Pliny, governor of Bithynia to Emperor Trajan [98-117 AD] (Summary)

Pliny was frustrated by the morality of the Christians. They stopped patronizing the temples and refused to attend social activities such as gladiatorial games. The *conundrum* for Pliny, however, was that **Christians committed crimes of omission; they simply refused to perform acts contrary to their religious convictions**.

“The sum and substance of their fault or error had been that they were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god, and to bind themselves by an oath, **not to some crime, but not to commit fraud, theft, or adultery, nor falsify their trust, nor to refuse to return a trust when called upon to do so**. When this was over, it was their custom to depart and to assemble again to partake of food – but ordinary and innocent food.”

Pliny had no legal basis for killing these Christians except on the grounds of stubbornness. They were not conspiring to commit some crime; they simply gathered to worship, committed themselves to the highest standards of virtue, and refused to sacrifice to the Roman gods.

To His Excellency, Diognetus [130-180 A.D.]

Christians in the World but Not of It

For the Christians marry, like everyone else, they beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh ... They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men and are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death and restored to life. They are poor yet make many rich; they lack all things and yet abound in all; they are dishonored, and yet in their very dishonor they are glorified. They are evil spoken of and yet are justified; they are reviled and bless; they are insulted and repay the insult with honor; they do good yet are punished as evil doers. When punished, they rejoice as if quickened into life; they are assailed by the Jews as foreigners and are persecuted by the Greeks; yet those who hate them are unable to assign any reason for their hatred.” (*Epistle to Diognetus*, c. 130-180 AD)

2. Dual Citizenship – Balance between Church and Politics

Three Core Assumptions of the Political Theology of the Early Church

(a) Divine transcendence and providence [Joseph and Daniel – Dan. 4:34-37]

“Every apologist in early Christianity, surrounded as they were by pagan gods and temples lining the streets, consistently appealed to the first principle of divine transcendence, that of God as Creator over all. [Rom. 13:1-7; Titus 3:1; 1 Peter 2:13-17] – (Presley, Cultural Sanctification, p. 60)

(b) Imperial authority is bestowed by God alone [Dan. 2:20-22; 4:17]

Polycarp to the Proconsul: “You I might have considered worthy of a reply, for we have been taught to pay proper respect to rulers and authorities appointed by God as long as it does us no harm.”

Tertullian: “Since he has been chosen by God, he is more our emperor than yours, for our God has appointed him.”

Acts 23:4-5 - “And they that stood by said [to Paul], Revilest thou God’s high priest? Then said Paul, I wist not, brethren, that he was the high priest; for it is written, **thou shalt not speak evil of the ruler of thy people.**”

(c) Christians are dual citizens, first of earth, yet ultimately of Heaven

Phil. 3:20 – “For our [citizenship] is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Eph. 2:19 – “Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints.”

Heb. 11:13-16 – “[Martyrs] confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly; wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for he hath prepared for them a city.”

Augustine [4th-5th century]: *The City of God* (contrast the “City of Man”)

Origen and Tertullian emphasized that Christians belonged to a higher commonwealth and therefore could endure persecution without fear.

To His Excellency, Diognetus [130-180 A.D.]

Christians Social Obligations on Earth, Citizenship in Heaven

For the Christians cannot be distinguished from other men by country, or language, or the customs which they observe. For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity. But, inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities, according as the lot of each of them has determined, and following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life. They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is their fatherland, and yet for them every fatherland is a foreign land. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven” (*Epistle to Diognetus, c. 130-180 AD*)

3. Intellectual Debate [Acts chapters 17, 22-26]

The Early Christians often began each debate from a position of weakness since God had often hidden His truths from the wise and simple and given them to children (Matt. 11:25) as well use the foolishness of the world to shame the wise. (1 Cor. 1:25-27)

Origen: “The writings of the philosophers possess truths that could be harvested and applied to a good theological method. Subjects such as rhetoric and grammar become the handmaidens to Christian Theology.”

Origen: “Be conversant with all the rest, neither biased in favor of one nation or philosophical doctrine, or yet prejudiced against it, whether Hellenic or barbarians, **but listening to all.**”

Origen, a highly educated Christian and Debater used a technique in his writings he called, ***Plundering the Egyptian*** [using your opponents' resources (arguments) against them. (Exodus 12:33-36)]

Acts 17:28 – “For in him we live, and move, and have our being; **as certain also of your own poets have said**, for we are also his offspring.”

KEY: Origen was able to persuade some to follow Christ. If others rejected Him, ***he used their own sources against them to defend Christian revelation.***

4. Christlike Testimony

a. Paid Taxes [Matt. 22:17-21; Rom. 13:6-7]

Justin Martyr: “Everywhere we try to pay to those appointed by you, more readily than all people, the taxes and assessments, as we have been taught by Christ.”

b. Prayed for Civil Authorities [1 Tim. 2:1-4]

Matthew 5:44 – “But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and **pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.**”

Justin Martyr: “We adore only God, but in other things we gladly serve you, acknowledging you as emperors and sovereigns, praying that along with your royal power you may be endowed too with sound judgment.” [*1st Apology* 17]

c. Loved their Enemies [Matt. 5:24; Luke 6:35]

d. Defended Religious Liberty

Allegiance to our government is required until it requires us to break conscience with our God. [Rom. 13]

e. Promoted Virtue [*Contrast: Lives of ungodly philosophers did not match their words*]

Minucius Felix [c. 210 AD]: “We who bear Christ’s wisdom in our mind do not just speak great things, but we live them; we boast that we have attained what the philosophers have not been able to find.”

5. Counselors to the King

Stephen Presley: “*Given their situation, it is most striking that early Christians were not anti-imperial.*”

Joseph answered Pharaoh: “It is not in me; God shall give Pharaoh an answer of peace.” [Gen. 41:16]

Pharaoh: “Can we find such a one as this is, a man in whom the Spirit of God is?” [Gen. 41:38]

Esther: “If I have found favor in thy sight, O king, and if it please the king, let my life be given me at my petition, and my people at my request.” [Esther 7:3]

Mordecai: “For Mordecai was great in the king’s house, and his fame went out throughout all the provinces; for this man Mordecai waxed greater and greater.” [Esther 9:4]

Nehemiah: “And I said unto the king, If it please the king, and if thy servant have found favor in thy sight, that thou wouldest send me unto Judah, that I may build it... And the king granted me, according to the good hand of my God upon me.” [Neh. 2:5-8]

Jeremiah: “Sy unto the king and to the queen, Humble yourselves, sit down; for your principalities shall come down, even the crown of your glory.” [Jer. 13:18]

Daniel (answered in the presence of the King): “There is a God in heaven that revealeth secrets, and maketh known to the king Nebuchadnezzar what shall be in the latter days.” [Dan. 2:28]

(Later) – “Thou, O king, art a king of kings; for the God of heaven hath given thee a kingdom, power, and strength, and glory.” [Dan. 2:37]

Paul: “But the Lord said unto him (Ananias), Go thy way; for **he (Paul) is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings**, and the children of Israel.” [Acts 9:15; cf. Rom. 11:13]

“And as he reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come, Felix trembled and answered, Go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season, I will call for thee.” [Acts 24:25]

“Then Agrippa said unto Paul, Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian.” [Acts 26:28]

Aristides (*Apology* c. 140 AD) – “But the Christians, O King, while they went about and made search have found the truth; and as we learned from their writings, they have come nearer to truth and genuine knowledge than the rest of the nations.”

To His Excellency, Diognetus: “I understand, sir, that you are really interested in learning about the religion of the Christians, and that you are making an accurate and careful investigation of the subject.”

6. Confrontation vs. Isolation

There were no dramatic mass conversions, only a work of church planting that attracted locals through casual contacts and everyday interactions with the common man.

Rowan Greer: “A first-century Christian could be neither fully involved in his society nor fully withdrawn from it. Instead, he must keep his sights on the pilgrim’s path.”

Robert Lane Fox: “The church was not distinguished from the culture by anything in their outward appearance, especially since they were not typically found among the upper crust of society and thus blended in even more with those around them. **What did distinguish them was their distinctive doctrine and practice.**”

One on one – Relatives, friends, neighbors – not in the marketplace but in the homeplace, in the daily routine of life

D. Church Membership of Recanters

John 9:20-23 – “His parents answered them and said, We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; But what means he now seeth, we know not; or who hath opened his eyes, we know not; he is of age; ask him; he shall speak for himself. **These words spake his parents, because they feared the Jews; for the Jews had agreed already, that if any man did confess that he was Christ, he should be put out of the synagogue.** Therefore, said his parents, He is of age; ask him.”

John 12:42-43 – “Nevertheless among the chief rulers also many believed on him; but because of the Pharisees they did not confess him, **lest they should be put out of the synagogue;** For they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God.”