



The Kingdom Perspective

Why Were Christians Persecuted?

Hello, this is Pastor Don Willeman of Christ Redeemer Church. Welcome to The Kingdom Perspective.

Rome was the most pluralistic civilization the world had ever seen.¹ The Empire was comprised of people from all sorts of backgrounds, cultures and religions. So, this raises the question: Why then were Christians so singled out as a threat? Well, the answer is simple: they refused to declare the state and its leader ultimate. Under the authority of Rome, you could worship any god you please. Rome didn't care which of the gods you preferred, so long as you also worshipped Rome and its Emperor.

Now, these early Christians had nothing against human government. They believed and taught that it was established by God (Romans 13:1) and was necessary for good order (Romans 13:2-5; 1 Timothy 2:1-5). They had nothing against obeying human laws and kings. They simply refused to worship them, as their ultimate authority. Just like faithful Jews before them, they refused to bow down and swear absolute allegiance to any earthly king or man-made god.

This meant that they could not obey any human dictate that forced them to disobey the dictates of heaven. However, this was a huge problem to Rome. In the mind of Rome, the universal and absolute worship of the Emperor guaranteed the continuation of Pax Romana—the Peace (stability) of Rome.

Historian and scholar Justo Gonzalez summarizes why Christians and their Jewish counterparts were seen as such a threat:

“In that atmosphere, Jews and Christians were seen as unbending fanatics who insisted on the sole worship of their One God—an alien cyst that must be removed for the good of society.”²

To the early Christians, Jesus was the Lord of all, or He was not Lord at all.

Something to think about from The Kingdom Perspective.

“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.”

~ Romans 13:1-7 (ESV)

References:

1. *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* by Edward Gibbon (1776). “Roman Religion” by Donald L. Wasson in *World History Encyclopedia* (2013). Accessed online at https://www.worldhistory.org/Roman_Religion/.
2. *The Story of Christianity, Vol. 1* by Justo Gonzalez (Harper One: 2010).

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