

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES
ON A
THEOLOGY OF SUFFERING,
PERSECUTION, AND MARTYRDOM

Complete in eight chapters

by

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“If here we suffer something for Christ, there we shall be blessed. For He tests us by the cross

and suffering, as gold is tested by fire by the Creator, Who out of nothing created the whole world. Blessed then we shall be if we persevere in the good to the end.”

From a letter Jan Hus wrote to the people of Louny, after March 15, 1411, translated in Matthew Spinka, *The Letters of John Hus*.¹

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Table of Contents

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES.....	1
Roy Stults, PhD	1
TABLE OF CONTENTS	3
GENERAL INTRODUCTION	11
General Observations on Persecution and Martyrdom in the Early Church.....	15
CHAPTER 1: CHRISTIANITY IN CONFLICT WITH ROMAN RELIGION	19
The Clash between Christians and Rome	19
Aspects of Roman Religion	20
The Expectations of Roman Authorities and People	22
Points of Conflict.....	25
CHAPTER 2: THE END OF THE FIRST CENTURY AND THE BEGINNING OF THE SECOND	28
Ignatius of Antioch.....	28
Letter to the Romans	28
Letter to the Church at Smyrna	29
Letter to Polycarp	30
Letter to the Ephesians	30
Ignatius' Thoughts on Martyrdom	31

Clement of Rome	32
An Assessment of Clement’s Thoughts on Martyrdom.....	33
Aristides Presents His Case	33
An Assessment of Aristides’ <i>Apology</i>	34
CHAPTER 3: THE SECOND CENTURY.....	35
Martyrdom and Apologetics	35
Justin Martyr: Where Apologetics and Martyrdom Converge.....	36
Justin Martyr’s <i>First Apology</i>	38
Justin Martyr’s <i>Second Apology</i>	41
Assessment of Justin’s Thought.....	41
Tatian of Assyria	42
An Assessment of Tatian’s Thought.....	43
The Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus.....	43
Assessment of Mathetes’s Thought on Persecution.....	44
Minucius Felix.....	45
An Assessment of <i>Octavius of Minucius Felix</i>	46
Tertullian’s Thoughts on Persecution and Martyrdom.....	47
Tertullian’s <i>Defense of the Christians Against the Heathen</i>	49
Tertullian’s <i>Scorpiace</i>	51
Tertullian’s <i>Ad Martyrs</i>	53
Tertullian’s <i>Ad Nationes</i>	53
Assessment of Tertullian’s Thought on Persecution and Martyrdom.....	55
Athenagoras of Athens’ Thought on Persecution.....	56

Assessment of Athenagoras' Thought on Persecution.....	58
Clement of Alexandria's Perspective on Persecution and Martyrdom.....	59
An Assessment of Clement of Alexander's Thought on Persecution and Martyrdom	61
Origen's Thought on Persecution and Martyrdom.....	62
Origen's <i>An Exhortation to Martyrdom</i>	63
Origen's Response to <i>The True Doctrine</i> by Celsus.....	66
An Assessment of Origen's Thought on Persecution and Martyrdom	68
CHAPTER 4: THIRD AND FOURTH CENTURIES.....	69
Cyprian of Carthage's Thought on Persecution and Martyrdom	69
<i>Exhortation to Martyrdom</i>	70
Epistle VIII To the Martyrs and Confessors.....	71
Epistle XXIV To Moyes and Maximus and the Rest of the Confessors	72
Epistle XXV Moyes, Maximus, Nicostatus and the other Confessors answer the forgoing letter (250).....	72
Epistle LXXVI Cyprian to Nemesianus and other Martyrs in the Mines.....	73
Epistle LXXVII The Reply of Nemesianus, Dativus, Felix, and Victor to Cyprian	74
Epistle LXXX Cyprian to Sergius, Rogatianus, and Other Confessors in Prison	74
<i>On the Lapsed</i> Treatise 3.....	75
An Assessment of Cyprian's Thought on Persecution and Martyrdom.....	77
Athanasius: Persecution within the Church and State	77
<i>On the Incarnation</i>	78
Apology of our Holy Father Athanasius, Archbishop of Alexandria, in Vindication of His Flight, when He was Persecuted by Duke Syrianus	80
An Assessment of Athanasius' Thought on Persecution and Martyrdom.....	81
Methodius of Olympus	81

<i>Discourse on the Resurrection</i>	82
Assessment of Methodius for a Theology of Persecution and Martyrdom.....	82
CHAPTER 5: FIFTH SIXTH, AND SEVENTH CENTURIES.....	83
Theophilus of Antioch’s Defense of the Faith	83
An Assessment of Theophilus’ Thought on Persecution and Martyrdom.....	84
Boethius’ Thoughts on Suffering and Persecution	84
<i>The Consolation of Philosophy</i> Book I	85
<i>The Consolation</i> Book II.....	87
<i>The Consolation</i> Book III.....	88
<i>The Consolation</i> Book IV.....	88
An Assessment of Boethius’ Theology of Persecution and Martyrdom.....	89
Maximus the Confessor	91
An Assessment of Maximus’ Theology of Persecution and Martyrdom	93
CHAPTER 6: THE THIRTEENTH THROUGH THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURIES.....	94
Thomas Aquinas on Martyrdom	94
“Of Martyrdom” (Five Articles).....	94
John Bradford’s Thought About Persecution And Martyrdom.....	95
An Assessment of Bradford’s Theology of Persecution and Martyrdom	96
Martin Luther’s Theology of the Cross	96
The Relationship of Luther’s Theology to the topic of Suffering and Persecution.....	97
The Origin of the Theology of the Cross and the Theology of Glory in Luther’s Theology.....	97
The Suffering Church	98
An Assessment of Martin Luther’s Theology of the Cross in regard to the Suffering, Persecution, and	
Martyrdom.....	99

George Whitefield’s Theology of Persecution.....	99
An Assessment of George Whitefield’s Theology of Persecution.....	101
CHAPTER 7: THE TWENTIETH CENTURY.....	102
Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Theology of Persecution and Martyrdom.....	102
The Holy Life.....	102
Grace.....	103
Giving up Personal Rights.....	104
Love Defined.....	104
Suffering.....	105
Martyrdom.....	106
Reward.....	106
An Assessment of Bonhoeffer’s Theology of Suffering, Persecution, and Martyrdom.....	107
Johann Christiaan Beker’s Theology of Suffering.....	107
Some foundational Themes.....	108
Apocalypse.....	108
The Normative Pattern for Christians.....	109
The Dogma of Retribution.....	109
Suffering and Hope.....	110
The Question of Theodicy.....	111
An Assessment of Beker’s Theology of Suffering.....	112
Wang Ming Dao’s Theology of Suffering, Persecution and Martyrdom.....	113
Wang’s Theology of Suffering and Persecution.....	118
Obey God or Man?.....	118
Old Testament Prophets Suffered for Being Obedient.....	119

The Courageous Apostles.....	119
Opportunity for Martyrdom.....	120
Assessment of Wang’s Theology of Suffering, Persecution, and Martyrdom	120
Josef Ton’s Theology of Suffering, Persecution, and Martyrdom.....	121
The Topic of Suffering.....	121
God and Suffering.....	122
Suffering as the Method God uses to Reach the World.....	123
The Servant of the Lord.....	123
Why Saints Suffer.....	124
No Idea of Atonement/Merit in the Suffering of the Saints.....	124
The Teachings of Jesus on Suffering and Death.....	125
The Book of Acts on Persecution and Martyrdom.....	126
The Apostle Paul’s Teaching on Persecution and Suffering.....	127
The Apostle Peter’s Teaching on Persecution and Suffering.....	128
Rewards	129
An Assessment of Josef Ton’s Theology of Suffering and Martyrdom.....	130
Arthur McGill’s Theology of Suffering.....	130
Violence and Suffering.....	131
Demons.....	132
Love: Self-Expenditure	133
The Cross and Redemption	133
Assessment of McGill’s Theology of Suffering.....	134
Alister McGrath’s Theology of Suffering	134
Questioning God’s Goodness	134
The Suffering of Christ’s Followers	135
Theology of the Cross	136

God and our Suffering.....	136
Dying with Hope and the Age to Come.....	137
An Assessment of McGrath’s Theology of Suffering.....	137
CHAPTER 8 SUPPORTING THEOLOGIES.....	139
Terence E. Fretheim’s Suffering God: an Old Testament Perspective	139
The Relationship of Fretheim’s Study to a Theology of Suffering, Persecution, and Martyrdom.....	139
What kind of God?.....	139
Three Reasons God Suffers	140
God Suffered with and through the Old Testament Prophets.....	141
The Suffering Servant: another Picture of God.....	141
God’s Suffering	142
An Assessment of Fretheim’s Theology of Suffering.....	142
Jürgen Moltmann’s Theology of a Suffering God	143
Greek Philosophy and its view of God’s passion.....	143
The Pathos of God	144
Luther’s Theology of the Christ.....	145
The Real Nature of God.....	145
The Cross of Christ	146
An Assessment of Moltmann’s Theology of a Suffering God	147
Kazoh Kitamori’s Theology of the Pain of God	148
Theology of God in Pain	148
Theology of Love Rooted in God’s Pain.....	150
Serving the Lord.....	150
Summary	152
Assessment of Kitamori’s <i>Pain of God</i>	152

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Religious persecution, conflict, and human suffering are major threads in the news these days. Radical believers of a major world religion violently persecute persons of their own faith and other faiths. The fact that Christians are being persecuted is not a new thing but is something that needs to be examined historically to get a renewed perspective and to learn from it. How did Christians in the past deal with violence against their faith? How should they respond to the violence of today? What did the theologians of the past, some of whom died as martyrs, teach about martyrdom and persecution, and are their teachings relevant for our times?

Perhaps the first question we must answer is why do we need a historical view? The eighteenth century historian, Edward Gibbon, described the work of history in relation to persecution in this manner: “History, which undertakes to record the transactions of the past, for the instruction of future ages, would ill deserve that honorable office, if she condescended to plead the cause of tyrants, or to justify the maxims of persecution.” Merely recording past persecutions is not as valuable as using the past to teach us how to face religious violence today and any future outpouring of persecution.

The information we receive from historical documents needs to be assessed theologically. The topic of religious persecution is, after all, religious history, and the church’s experiences today and tomorrow will fall into the area of religious history as well. To reflect theologically on the events is to consider them in relation to the essential tenets of the Christian faith, especially as taught by Jesus Christ and his apostles, as well as by subsequent teachers whom the Church considers to represent its teachings. How can we not only make sense of past persecutions but learn from them those lessons that affirm and confirm our faith and provide us with the necessary strength and support to face persecution that may lie ahead? Are we as well-equipped as past Christians to deal with people and systems that may want not only to harm us but to take our lives because of our loyalty to Jesus Christ?

The initial focus of our study will be on the sufferings of the early church (the church immediately after the era of the Apostles). Then we will look at the reflections of theologians through several centuries on the meaning of persecution and suffering. As we look at the events and teachings of the New Testament in regard to persecution and suffering, we see how persecution began and what were some of the issues that precipitated violence against Christians.

We sometimes forget that the holy family began their lives together under the threat of

death to the baby Jesus by King Herod the Great (Matthew 2:13-23). Herod had instructed the visiting Wise Men to return and tell him where they found the baby Jesus. Herod pretended he wanted to worship the newborn king. In reality, he wanted to kill him. As we know, after being warned by an angel, Joseph took Mary and Jesus and fled to Egypt. Herod's persecution foreshadowed the conflict that would arise between Jesus and other religious and political authorities of the first century. Initially Christ's mature conflict was with religious authorities but it led to the involvement of the Roman government in Judea. What Christ experienced would become the norm for the church throughout the centuries: it would face persecution from both religious and political foes in each era.

Edward Gibbon began a chapter of his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (chapter XVI), with rhetorical puzzlement: as one wonders how a baby could seem threatening to a powerful king, one wonders why the world acted so violently against a benevolent religion. He wrote:

If we seriously consider the purity of the Christian religion, the sanctity of its moral precepts, and the innocent as well as austere lives of the greater number of those who during the first ages embraced the faith of the gospel, we should naturally suppose that so benevolent a doctrine would have been received with due reverence, even by the unbelieving world;...we are at a loss to discover what new offence the Christians had committed ... and what new motives could urge the Roman princes ... to inflict a severe punishment on ... their subjects, who had chosen for themselves a singular but inoffensive mode of faith and worship.²

With Jewish authorities, motives for rejecting Jesus and his teachings are perhaps more understandable. They perceived his teaching as blasphemous and took offence at Christ's words directed against their hypocrisy and power abuses, much as Jewish leaders historically had reacted to prophets sent from God with words they did not want to hear. They were miffed that he accused them of disobeying God and distorting God's revelation. An underlying motive was fear that Jesus was a threat to their position and power. No doubt he did not meet their expectations for the Messiah, whom they expected to be military/political leader who would stand with them against foreign oppression. They expressed fear that he would lead yet another failed rebellion against Rome, putting the Israelite nation in jeopardy.

Jesus anticipated persecution for himself and for the church and sought to prepare his immediate coterie of disciples for the difficult times that were ahead; but his teachings were also meant for subsequent generations of Christians who would face opposition for their faith and for belief in him. At the very beginning of his ministry Jesus articulated the parameters and expectations of his kingdom in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus told a crowd assembled by the sea: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake... You are blessed when people insult you and persecute you because of me.” His followers, he was saying, would experience harassment, prejudice, or more severe persecution for their witness and lifestyle. Jesus reiterated this teaching at the end of his ministry in his last discourses. In the fifteenth chapter of John’s Gospel, Christ told his disciples that the world would hate them as it hated him. If it persecuted him, it would also persecute them because of his name. The world always hates both Christ and the Father. Christ’s teachings on suffering, then, are to be understood in the context of persecution, not in the context of the general suffering that is the common lot of all humanity. Christ was preparing his followers for the suffering that would come as a result of following him and testifying about him.

In his own death, Jesus uniquely exemplified an individual persecuted because of righteousness. We stress his uniqueness, however: what he did as Savior was one-of-a-kind, because his sacrifice and death atoned for the sins of others and set up the conditions for our redemption and transformation. This was a one-time event that can never be repeated. It fulfilled all that was necessary for our redemption. Our role, as followers of Christ, is to suffer and sacrifice, not to atone for the sins of the world, but to apply the benefits of the atonement to the world in conjunction with the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Wherever and whenever Christ’s followers witness and suffer, they become conduits of grace to those who need grace—even those who persecute them.

The Apostle Paul in many ways fulfilled Israel’s call to carry the gospel to the nations and to be a suffering servant. He remains a prototype for the work of Christians in the world and for their sufferings. He epitomized the roles of follower of Christ and witness for Christ. Paul’s call, recorded in Acts 9:16, explicitly foretold that he would suffer for Christ. And suffer he did. In 2 Corinthians 1, Paul related his suffering in the province of Asia where he witnessed about Christ. He told the Philippian church that it, too, had been granted the privilege of suffering for Christ (1:29). In Philippians 3:10 he testified to wanting to know “the fellowship of Christ’s

sufferings, becoming like him in his death,” showing how fully he had embraced his calling. In 2 Timothy 1:8 he invited Timothy to adopt his attitude: “Don’t be ashamed to testify of our Lord or of me his prisoner” and he called on his protege to join him in suffering for the gospel.

Josef Ton, in an insightful book on suffering and martyrdom, asserted that the whole of Acts, where we get the first glimpses of the early church in action, is about witnessing for Jesus by preaching the gospel. In Greek, the word *witness* is the word we often translate *martyr* and it, or its derivatives, appear 39 times in Acts.³ Those who became actual martyrs (as we think of martyrdom today) were martyred because they were witnesses. Their preaching was perceived as a threat to the belief systems, cultures, and social or political structures of the first century, eliciting violent reactions. This would become the pattern for centuries to come.⁴ Jesus knew this would happen and sought to prepare his disciples for the eventuality. When they finally realized what they were up against, their perspective on their ministry changed. They were witnesses and would most likely die for their witness. Ton wrote that the disciples developed a view of their work that included the following elements. *First*, they strongly believed in the sovereignty of God, which meant that God had control of the situation and would only allow what fit his ultimate plan and purpose—which was the eventual triumph of Messiah and his people. *Second*, they saw persecution as a privilege and an honor, and rejoiced that such an honor had been bestowed upon them. *Third*, they perceived martyrdom as glorious, accompanied by visions of heaven. *Finally*, they considered it essential to emulate the protomartyr Stephen’s prayer of forgiveness for his murderers (Acts 7:60). The martyr was not to be a passive victim but an active fighter, witnessing to the very end of earthly life by actions and words.⁵

After the ministry, death, and Resurrection of Jesus the conflict gradually shifted from Jewish religious issues to clashes with pagan assumptions. Whereas the Jewish authorities saw Christ’s teachings as a threat to their theology and status (with some fear that his ideas might destabilize the nation, and cause the disfavor of God), the Romans viewed the teachings of Jesus and of Christianity as a threat to their world order. We will explore the Roman developments in the coming pages.

General Observations on Persecution and Martyrdom in the Early Church

In volume II of Philip's Schaff's monumental church history (Second Period: Ante-Nicene Christianity), he began a chapter with an assessment of the church's situation for the first three hundred years. He wrote:

The persecution of Christianity during the first three centuries appears like a long tragedy: first, forbidding signs; then a succession of bloody assaults of heathenism upon the religion of the cross; amidst the dark scenes of fiendish hatred and cruelty the bright exhibitions of suffering virtue; now and then a short pause; at last a fearful and desperate struggle of the old pagan empire for life and death, ending in the abiding victory of the Christian religion. Thus this bloody baptism of the church resulted in the birth of a Christian world.⁶

The *New Encyclopedia of Christian Martyrs* quoted Schaff's glowing analysis of Christian survival amid all the persecution. No other religion, he said, could have stood for so long under the opposition and persecution of Jewish bigotry, Greek philosophy, and Roman power and yet triumph purely by being a moral and spiritual force without deferring to the weapons of the world to defend against or defeat its enemies. The comprehensive and long-term persecution and martyrdom experienced by early Christians stands as a peculiar crown of glory for the early church.⁷ He considered the first three centuries as the classical period of persecution because, even though the whole church (at that time) had witnesses ready for any sacrifice, it was an era when the church had no legal status and merely to be a Christian was considered a political crime and punished accordingly.⁸

Dr. Sophie Lunn-Rockliffe, Senior Lecturer in Roman History at King's College, London, said that in the first few centuries AD Christians were persecuted and martyred at times but that they also had periods when they were more secure and free from strife. It was not until the middle of the third century that Roman emperors began intensive and deadly persecutions (Lunn-Rockliffe, "Christianity and the Roman Empire."⁹). Whenever and wherever the conflict took place, it was usually elicited because Christians were "turning the world upside down." They were upsetting traditional patterns of religious allegiance and practice. This was true both in its conflict with Judaism and in its prolonged resistance to pagan Roman religion.¹⁰

It is important to distinguish between *confessors* and *martyrs* as understood by the early church. At first *martyr* meant "witness" but as the church experienced serious opposition, *martyr*

came to mean one who not only proclaimed the Lordship of Christ but also suffered death as a result of that testimony. This meaning of martyr is the one most familiar to us, although there are those who believe a martyr is anyone who suffers in any form for their testimony, whether they die as a result or not. A *confessor* was one who testified to the Lordship of Christ in court but who did not receive the death penalty. Because of the boldness of their testimony and the risk they took, confessors were highly esteemed in the early church.¹¹

The early church was driven by a theology of martyrdom that not only shaped its thinking but also its actions. Christ's followers sought to imitate him in their deaths. According to church historian W. H. C. Frend, Christ suffered as a martyr.¹² Some have disputed this status because it makes Christ appear to be a victim rather than the Son of God in control of his own destiny. He was not a martyr but a Savior, they say. Still, there is no doubt that Christ's example inspired subsequent martyrs. The early church believed that a martyr was a true disciple of Christ, who followed the Lamb; as the Lamb had been sacrificed, so might these disciples expect to be sacrificed. Death for them, said Frend, was the beginning of true discipleship. As a historian, Frend was reporting what early church fathers had written, so the issue is not whether Frend was correct but whether the church fathers were correct. To the church fathers, martyrdom was the climax of the Christian life and should be earnestly desired. Nonetheless, it should be accepted in meekness and not provoked.¹³

Christ exemplified non-violence and declared that his followers were not to use the weapons of the world to defend their faith. Given that approach, suffering and death would be the lot of the disciples and many subsequent followers as well. While Christ did not resist his arrest and death with physical violence, he was not a passive participant. He actually engaged in a battle of epic proportions against the very powers of Satan and hell. He would defeat them, as would his disciples, through moral and spiritual power greater than the violence that evil could throw their way. Moreover, Christ identified with those who would suffer as his witnesses. The persecution of his followers was persecution of him and the death of his followers for his sake was a literal replication of his own death and burial. Christ was actually with them as they sought to imitate him.¹⁴

The martyrdom of Polycarp was the first documented instance after Scripture in what became known as *Acta Martyrum* or *The Acts of the Martyrs*. Polycarp's story, written soon after the event, was appropriately titled *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*. According to Frend, such *acta*

were written by the hundreds to commemorate the martyrs on the anniversaries of their martyrdom, and were used to celebrate their memory in churches. Many *Acta* were incorporated into the *Historia Ecclesiastica* by Eusebius.¹⁵

From the account of Polycarp, Ton derived three elements of genuine martyrdom. *First*, it originated in the will of God; it was God-ordained. *Second*, the person chosen by God to suffer and die would endure to the end. God, having ordained the event, empowered the martyr to undergo torture and execution victoriously. *Third*, the martyr was not self-absorbed but rather sought how he or she could suffer for the good of both tormenters and onlookers.

Ton went on to discuss the theology of martyrdom the early church believed and practiced. One of its elements was the church's desire to imitate Christ all the way to the end of earthly life, which Frend had also placed at the forefront of the theology of martyrdom held by the early church. As one moves through the account of Polycarp, one realizes that martyrdom is God's sovereign choice—it is God who wills that a person should become a martyr. This is a great honor. Consequently, the church warned its new members about the possibility and instructed them in the principles of martyrdom as soon as they enrolled in baptismal classes.¹⁶

A survivor of the persecution at Lyon in the summer of A.D. 177 wrote a letter detailing the event and also presenting a step-by-step theological reflection on what happened. This letter made its way into Eusebius's *Historia Ecclesiastica*. The letter related the facts and interpreted them. Its author sought to find the spiritual motivation and causes for the persecution but also reflected on the consequences the persecutions and martyrdoms produced. As a result, a theology of martyrdom emerged that would dominate the church's thinking on the subject in the coming centuries.¹⁷

The author regarded what took place in Lyon as an attack instigated by Satan against the servants of God. God's response was to fight against the devil through the Christian martyrs. Instead of crushing his enemies, God increased the patience, self-sacrifice, and faithfulness of martyrs to defeat them. The purpose of the devil was to break the faithfulness of the servants of God and therefore defeat God. That is why the devil used such violence, cruelty, and persistent torture—to obtain a victory against God. But the martyrs absorbed the attacks through their steadfast endurance and thus “rendered the instruments of torture impotent.”

A powerful weapon by which martyrs resisted Satan was their assertion “Jesus is Lord, not Caesar!” This testimony defeated the evil one.¹⁸ The battle was Christ's and not the martyrs'.

Therefore it was Christ's strength and power that defeated the persecutors. The extraordinary relationship of martyrs with Christ and the prospect of rewards in heaven were a source of great strength for them in court and arena. The author of the Lyon account saw a balance between the doctrine of rewards and of God's great grace poured out on the believers, enabling those martyrs to conquer the evil one.¹⁹

CHAPTER 1: CHRISTIANITY IN CONFLICT WITH ROMAN RELIGION

The Clash between Christians and Rome

The persecutions at Lyon in AD 177 and the eyewitness descriptions of the horrors that took place there became a launching point for W. H. C. Frend's discussion of martyrdom and persecution in the early church. "For simplicity, sincerity and for the sake of the sheer horror of events it describes it is unmatched in the annals of Christian antiquity."²⁰ He regarded the letter by one of the Lyon's survivors as of singular importance for posterity. His understanding of it sets the tone for our study of persecution in the early church. He wrote:

The account of martyrdom at Lyon thus provides a starting point for the study of the clash of cultures that divided the ancient world, between the theocracy of the Jews and Christians and the equally universal claims of the Greco-Roman state. In this clash, martyrdoms and persecution are abiding features.²¹

Frend made a strong point, but instead of a clash of cultures, it becomes evident when one studies the content of the conflict in the first three centuries, that the clash was between *religions*, and more specifically between *theologies*.

In the post-Apostolic age persecution was not empire-wide but took place at the local level, depending on regional governors and how they perceived and dealt with the issues surrounding Christians. In some cases, Christians were merely scapegoats. In others they may have faced pockets of opposition and hostility based on false rumors and charges. The essence that defined any local culture in the Roman Empire was drawn from its inhabitant's ancient beliefs and the myths passed down through the generations. The way of ancestors was ingrained into the minds and the actions of its people. Ancient tribes and nations each held a belief system that focused on a god or gods. Maintaining a relationship with those gods was believed to be essential for the well-being of the populace. Traditional rituals seemed to meet a people's religious and social needs, providing cohesion to the culture and unity of minds and hearts.

The Romans differed little from the many primitive and animistic cultures of history. Their polytheism was not distinctive in its forms of worship, but merely distinctive in the gods it served. Like other peoples, they thought the worship of their gods guaranteed security and material blessings. Roman religion was practical in that it helped secure social order and provided the basic needs of its adherents. The fact that Rome had seen generations of success in its endeavors convinced its citizens that they were the most religious of all people and that the

gods had showered particular favor upon them. Roman religion became a national cult which took service to its gods seriously lest the empire fall into disfavor and its successes cease. Imperial officers were impelled to seek continuing sanction from the gods as support for their authority. Anything seen as a challenge or a threat to this system was dealt with accordingly. This was the context of the conflict between the first Christians and both the Roman religion and the imperial cult.

According to Frend, the Roman Republic was well-known for its religiousness and the Roman governing classes were proud of their devotion to this ancestral religion. The gods, they believed, were the guardians of Rome. "Failure to give them their proper due," Frend wrote, "embodied in rites handed down from time immemorial, could bring disaster to Rome and her achievements."²² Romans felt they had a contract with their gods: if they gave the gods appropriate worship and due respect, the gods would ensure protection for the people. So, Roman public religion was not so much a matter of individual devotion as it was a national cult, connected with support and loyalty to the state.

After the Republic gave way to empire, Augustus Caesar recognized the value of the Roman religious order. Considered the first and probably the greatest of the Roman Emperors, Augustus's renewal of Roman cults would have a powerful effect upon the attitude and treatment of Christians in the future. Roman religion became intimately associated with the imperial mission of bringing peace and order and it became a rallying point for the hatred of Judaism, and later of Christianity, in the Greek-speaking provinces. Augustine brought in a period of resurgent self-assertiveness of Roman paganism, patriotic as well as religious. The expectation was that Rome, in part through its religion, would retain eternal power and bring prosperity to its people indefinitely.²³

Aspects of Roman Religion

In order to understand why there was conflict between Christianity and the Roman Empire, it is necessary to delve deeper into the mentality of Roman religion.

The traditional religion of the Greco-Roman world was essentially a social and public affair. What one believed and practiced in private did not matter as long as it did not interfere with, or cause a person to withdraw from, the public ritual which was an affair of community and family. It was centered on the primary objective of the well-being of Roman society, which

Romans believed depended on the will of the gods. Religion was the means of supporting the needs of common life, such as agriculture and business, as well as the engagements of public policy, such as war and diplomacy. Leaders utilized age-old religious rites and traditional practices that seemed to work in bringing the blessing and protection of the gods. The will of the gods was sought by divination and dreams while their allegiance was procured by prayer and sacrifices.²⁴

Traditional Roman rites were for public worship and corporate ceremony—not for meeting personal needs or longings. Attempting to meet the need of whole communities or of the entire empire, the rites were impersonal. They were contractual to the extent that the religious rites were seen as a way of winning the favor of the gods who would then reward the community with protection and practical benefits like making the crops grow or giving success in business. Individuals who sought a more personal identification with the gods turned to religious cults to meet their religious needs for security, prosperity, and for a sense of place and destiny.²⁵

Roman religion was polytheistic: the worship of many and varied gods. Jupiter, Apollo, Cupid, and Bacchus are just a few names moderns recognize as gods of Rome. Many of the Roman gods had counterparts in the Greek pantheon. The Greeks imparted to the Romans their iconography, mythology, and sometimes their religious practices. Romans imported mystery religions to satisfy their need for salvation in the afterlife. These cults were practiced in addition to public rites and ceremonies. However, many Romans distrusted these mystery religions, suspecting them of subversive activities, because they required secret oaths and were not open to public scrutiny. Some feared these mysteries undermined the national cult.

As the Empire expanded and included new peoples, the Romans absorbed their deities and cults for the sake of public stability. If ethnic groups retained the traditions usually connected to their own nation or tribe without making universal claims, they were less likely to encounter difficulty being incorporated into the Roman Empire. Sometimes temples to these new local deities were erected beside the temples of Roman deities. Monotheistic systems, like Judaism (and later Christianity), posed a problem to Roman religion because of their claims of universality and the exclusive worship of one God. By contrast paganism was never a unified system, a single religion that could be identified as distinct from other religions. Its loose but coherent network of worship to the immortal gods who, in combination, ruled all realms of earth

as well as the heavens, functioned as a protective canopy that would, Romans believed, ensure their continued success.

The Romans had a term for their religious fervor. They called it *pietas* or piety. *Pietas* was not a personal holiness as we think of it in Christianity but of faithfulness to tradition and scrupulous practice of rites to honor the gods. In the Roman imagination, practice of this ritual piety was what guaranteed the well-being of the state. And that is how religious persecution entered the picture. The dark side of paganism surfaced because Roman religion was based on the notion that if the gods were not properly treated or respected bad things would happen to the empire. Much of the motivation for Roman piety, then, was fear that neglect of *pietas* could result in disasters that would be costly to individuals and to the state. When bad things did happen (like crop failure, or defeat in battle) it would be blamed on those who were not participants in Roman piety. Christianity and Judaism were not in the category of *pietas*; thus they were considered *superstitio* or superstition.

In the second century, for example, there was hostility against Christians in certain localities because of a popular perception that Christians were atheists and seditionists, given over to detestable crimes such as incest and cannibalism. Christians were persecuted because of the popular belief that the gods were not pleased with them because they did not pay due respect to the gods, who showed their displeasure by withdrawing their blessings, allowing disasters to overtake the general populace.²⁶ Christians became scapegoats during such disasters.

The Expectations of Roman Authorities and People

The general expectation of Roman authorities was that all the people of the Roman Empire should embrace Roman religion, at least in its public aspect. Rome was generally tolerant of a variety of gods and private practices among its people. There were, however, limits to the tolerance of Rome.

Christianity was able to stay below the radar at first because it was brought to Rome by Jewish Christians and therefore was, at the start, largely associated with the Jews. This provided some political cover for them since the Jews, by fierce resistance to polytheism, had achieved a special status within the Roman Empire that allowed them to function outside the pagan religious system. Schaff noted that Christianity had taken root before the Roman authorities realized that it was not a part of Judaism.

Like the Jews, Christians believed in one God and would not participate in emperor worship. Given the Roman mentality about the public cult, it was just a matter of time before Christians would be seen as undermining the whole religious tradition of Rome, and therefore its very stability and survival. The steadfast dedication of Christians to God and their declaration that Christ is Lord soon led to problems.

Once the Romans began to see Christianity as distinct from Judaism, they viewed it as a strange and subversive religion, meeting in catacombs and other places where there was no public traffic. Although Christians did this for privacy and safety the behavior was misinterpreted by the Romans as secretive and therefore the expression of a shameful cult. Rumors of illicit moral activity and barbarian practices placed a stain and stigma on the early Christians. The Romans had a particular fear of secretive societies that could sow discord and insurrection among the populace. Social stability and unity were very high on the priority list of the Roman authorities. Edward Gibbon commented on the issue of “secret societies”:

It is well known, and has been already observed, that Roman policy viewed with utmost jealousy and distrust any association among its subjects; and that the privileges of private corporations, though formed for the most harmless or beneficial purposes, were bestowed with a very sparing hand. The religious assemblies of the Christians who had separated themselves from the public worship, appeared of a much less innocent nature; they were illegal in the principle, and in their consequences might become dangerous; nor were the emperors conscious that they violated the laws of justice, when, for the peace of society, they prohibited those secret and sometimes nocturnal meetings. The pious disobedience of the Christians made their conduct, or perhaps their designs, appear in a much more serious criminal light.²⁷

Before long, pagan attitudes toward Christianity hardened into harassment and eventual persecution. Even then some pagan statesmen and authors saw Christianity as a ‘vulgar superstition’ not worth their notice.²⁸ But when Christians were noticed, they were seen as *superstitio* and, therefore, were under suspicion because they were a foreign cult, presumably associated with social and moral deviations. Closely connected with superstition in the Roman mind were atheism and impiety. These labels were applied to anyone who opposed the Roman ancestral custom upheld strongly by Greco-Roman traditionalists²⁹. Because Christianity was

seen as a new religion, claiming universal validity, it was categorized as treasonable and unlawful, a *religio illicita*.³⁰ Heathen idolatry drove the Roman state to withdraw from Christians its professed tolerance of religions, leaving the new faith without the right to exist.

According to the Lyon survivor, there was no issue of dogma at stake in the persecution. The Roman authorities were essentially ignorant of Christian beliefs. At least in Lyon, popular hatred arising from fear the Christians might triumph over the gods was the primary reason for the anti-Christian outbreaks.³¹

The roots of Roman idolatry can be traced back to the piety of Romulus and his successor Numa, who were believed to have laid the foundation of power of Rome. The favor of the gods was credited for the success of the Roman army. Hence the cultic priests and Vestal virgins were paid from the public treasury. After the rise of emperors, each was, *ex officio*, the *pontifex maximus*, and became the object of divine worship.³² Even so the Romans tended to be tolerant of other religions, but Christianity posed a particular problem. It was not a national religion, claiming instead to be the only universal one, drawing converts from many nations, even Greeks and Romans, in larger numbers than the Jews had. Its adherents refused to compromise with any form of idolatry, would not pay divine honors to the emperor, and were thus perceived as a threat to the existence of Roman state religion. The common people, polytheists that they were, despised those who worshiped one God and called them *atheists*. They were prone to believe the most repulsive rumors about Christians.³³

Perhaps Christians' most conspicuous refusal, and the one that put them in the most jeopardy, was their refusal to acknowledge the emperor as a god. Emperor worship was completely utilitarian and not spiritual. The well-being of the emperor meant that all would be well for the empire. The benefits the imperial order conferred on the Mediterranean world convinced the Romans and many subject peoples that Roman power was the manifestation of the power and blessing of the gods. As Rome experienced numerous triumphs and the empire expanded and grew in power, the idea began to emerge that Rome had a special divine mission.³⁴ The setting for the growth of emperor worship was Roman traditional religion. As the era of the Roman republic came to an end and collapsed, the state religion supported the rise of the new regimes of the emperors. It helped Augustus to justify the novelty of one-man rule in Rome. Emperor worship gradually expanded the traditional Roman veneration of ancestors and of the *genius* (those rational powers, abilities, or supernatural spirit that are in every individual). The

cult of the imperial genius was a bridge between the concept of the authority and dignity of Augustus and the Hellenistic idea of the divine right of kings. It united two aspects of the Classical world and provided a religious basis of loyalty to the empire. It was presupposed that the emperor had a special relationship with the gods which symbolized the cult of the emperor's genius. Augustus himself believed that he was under the special protection of the god Apollo.³⁵

Pax Augustus was the final and definitive expression of the spirit of antiquity, said Charles Norris Cochrane. The development of the imperial cult was centered in the power of Caesar and led to his deification. The deification of imperial virtue involved the deification of imperial fortune. Domitian wished to be called *dominus et deus* or 'Lord and God!' The tragedy of the Caesars was that they had to play the role of gods, which caused them to condescend to becoming like beasts.³⁶ Christians were suspicious of Augustan peace. They excluded themselves from this aspect of religious loyalty to the empire by not endorsing emperor worship. The rejection of the state religion was soon to be considered treasonous.

Points of Conflict

There have been a number of items mentioned in relation to Rome's attitude toward the Christians. There were a number of points of conflict, some more serious than others, some more important to the minds of Romans than others. Generally they thought of Christianity as a strange, subversive cult that practiced its ritual in secret. Although they were forced "underground" because of the threat against them but going underground seemed to make matters worse. Romans misunderstood, misperceived, and misrepresented Christian practices. At this point these kinds of issues occupied the minds of hostile people; it would not be until later that they would ridicule Christian teachings, especially doctrines about Christ.

Early on the main contention that ignited opposition (and, as Frend has said, "the deepening wave of hatred" toward the Christians) was that they did not believe in the gods. More specifically it would seem, pagans abhorred the fact that Christians did not believe in their cultic or community gods. Believing and serving in the Roman cultic gods was, in their minds, as we have seen, the glue that held civilization together. Because Christ's followers did not believe in the cultic gods, they were called atheists, the same word used against the Jews by the Greek provincials. Atheism, says Frend, was the most damning charge made against the Christians. Their refusal to sacrifice to the Roman gods was considered an insult to the gods, angering the

deities. Along with this was the requirement of each citizen to swear an oath to the emperor and offer incense at his images (see Lunn-Rockliffe). This, the Christians refused to do.

For Christians it was an abomination to offer incense or cupful of wine to the “genius” of the emperor, affirming that “Caesar is Lord.” They had only one Lord, Jesus Christ.

How did Christians respond to the pressure to conform to the wishes of the empire and of the people, especially when they were accused falsely, persecuted, and in some cases martyred? They did not retaliate with insurrection or armed rebellion but submitted to persecution and martyrdom as something they received from God—through which they should bring glory to God. Steadfast devotion and constancy characterized their response. Death was considered a witness, an ultimate witness to be sure, the glorious culmination of a life of witness, both through articulating the word of God verbally and by showing it through a holy lifestyle. Tertullian was so impressed by the way persecuted Christians endured their suffering with gladness that it led him to Christ. Josef Ton described it in this manner: “Intrigued by the fact that so many Christians accepted to die for their faith, marching to their death in the arena of gladiators, he set his mind to discover their secret. In the course of his inquiry, he found Christ and became a Christian.”³⁷ Later in his discussion of Tertullian and persecution, Ton noted the impact of the martyrs’ endurance and faithfulness in suffering. They would accept going to prison with great joy. They would enter the arena singing and stand fearless before gladiators and wild beasts. They showed incredible endurance under torture and accepted with eagerness the renunciation of wealth, family, and life for their faith.³⁸

It should be noted that the Christians did not see the fight as against Rome or its emperors. Rather, they believed the fight was instigated by Satan. Christian response against Satan was to fight with spiritual weapons, such as remaining faithful to Christ until death.³⁹ They were able to sort out the real cause and the real enemy, which would determine the type of battle and weapons. They fought spiritual warfare with weapons based on Christ’s spiritual victory at the cross. They fought with faith, not force. Christians were called to suffer, not to inflict suffering.

Martyrdom was death imposed upon believers who remained faithful and constant, and who did not deny their faith.³⁹ It was death imposed on those who refused to take an oath of loyalty or to sacrifice to a false god.⁴⁰ Suffering and tribulation belonged to the very nature of the Christian church. Converts expected they would have to confess their faith and suffer in the

name of Jesus.⁴¹ The early church looked at the Suffering Servant passages of Isaiah not only as foretelling what Christ had suffered but also what his followers would suffer. While Christ's redemptive work was fulfilled on the cross, his brethren would experience afflictions until he came again. Christians would suffer these afflictions in his behalf.⁴²

Unfortunately not all Christians were so valiant or faithful. Many would relapse and recant their confession of faith in Christ, would sacrifice to the gods, and obtain the necessary proof of their sacrifice in the form of certificate (although some friendly officials issued the "proof" even though the lapsed Christians did not actually make the sacrifice. It was a way, in the thinking of these weak Christians, of keeping themselves from persecution while not actually committing sin. A new group of "apostates" (as Gibbon called them) arose. They were called *traditores* (traitors) because they delivered Scriptures up to the authorities to be burned. "But," as Schaff said, "as the [Diocletian] persecution raged, the zeal and fidelity of the Christians increased, and martyrdom spread as if by contagion."⁴³

As soon as the persecution subsided, lapsed Christians realized their mistake and sought re-admission to the church. It was not an easy process and differed in various regions and times. In Tertullian's time the process for allowing lapsed Christians back into the church required that they publicly seek forgiveness, but they were restricted from taking Communion until a point close to their death. It was then that they were considered truly forgiven.⁴⁴

During the times of intense persecution in the early days of the church, it would appear to many, Christians and pagans alike, that Satan had the upper hand and that he would decimate the church. But before the Edict of Toleration of AD 313, it became apparent that paganism had failed. Schaff wrote: "The long and bloody war of heathen Rome against the church, which is built upon a rock, utterly failed."⁴⁵ Rome's aim was to exterminate the church but instead purified it.⁴⁶ Referring to the Diocletian terror, Schaff commented that "The persecution was the last desperate struggle of Roman heathenism for its life. It was the crisis of utter extinction or absolute supremacy for each of the two religions. At the close of the contest the old Roman state religion was exhausted."⁴⁷

Paganism did not entirely die out, however. Emperor Julian in the 360s tried to reinstate it as the dominant religion of the empire where it continued to pose a challenge to the Christian church (see Lunn-Rockcliffe).

CHAPTER 2: THE END OF THE FIRST CENTURY AND THE BEGINNING OF THE SECOND

Ignatius of Antioch

Ignatius was a disciple of the Apostle John, as was Polycarp. His life overlapped the first and second centuries. He was bishop of the Antioch Church while Polycarp was bishop of Smyrna. He is best known for his writings and martyrdom following his arrest by Trajan and transportation to Rome to die in the arena. The Roman idea was to raze the leadership of the church and in so doing terrify the rank and file. However, Ignatius utilized his forced travel as an opportunity to speak to Christians and church representatives along the way. When Ignatius's prison escort reached the west coast of Asia Minor, it halted before taking ships. Delegations from several Asian churches came to visit the suffering bishop and to speak with him at length. It was to these churches and to Polycarp that he wrote letters that give us a picture of his thoughts during those days.⁴⁸ He was the first Christian martyr after Paul to record his thoughts about martyrdom while on a trip to Rome.⁴⁹ His letters were so famous that they were imitated by others and forgeries abound.

“In the seven genuine letters written to the Churches in Asia Minor, through which he passed on his way to Rome, circa 107–108, and to the Roman community itself,” wrote Frend, “he exhibits the theology of martyrdom of the primitive Church at its most intense.”⁵⁰

Letter to the Romans

Writing to Rome, Ignatius emphatically stated his desire was not to please men but to please God, and he avowed his belief that martyrdom was God's will for him. He wished to use the opportunity to “attain to God,” that is, to go to God through martyrdom. He asked the Roman Christians to allow him to make this sacrifice to God while the altar was prepared. (Apparently the Roman church could pull some strings to have him freed.) Reflecting on the attitude of the world toward Christians he wrote that when the Christian is hated by the world he or she is loved by God.

Ignatius wanted to impress upon his readers that he would willingly die for God so he begged his friends not to hinder him from his quest by showing undue and unseasonable

goodwill toward him. He urged them to allow him to become food for the wild beasts (he was to face killer animals in the arena) and that was the context for the words that have become famous: “I am the wheat of God, and am ground by the teeth of the wild beasts, that I may be found the pure bread of God.” Later he would write that if the beasts were afraid to pursue him, he would compel them to come and kill him.

He made some statements that seem to contrary to his evident spiritual state. For example, although he was dying because he was a disciple of Christ, he wrote that in martyrdom he would *begin* to be a disciple, and then attain Christ or true life. To him, it appeared that being an untested disciple was inferior to being one who had faced and experienced martyrdom. That point at least was clear: martyrdom was the true test of the whether a disciple was genuine or not.

Ignatius was a man in bonds who had learned not to desire any worldly perk or those things that are valueless for eternity. He would suffer martyrdom as a freedman of Christ and would rise again emancipated in him. The hope of the resurrection was a powerful incentive for Ignatius. For his friends to try to get his release would be, he said, to help the prince of this world. While writing the letter to the Romans, Ignatius was focused on heaven and his desire was to be “heavenly food.”

Letter to the Church at Smyrna

In his letter to the Church at Smyrna, Ignatius focused on the incarnation of Christ. His Christology provided the reason why he was willing—very willing—to die for Christ. It was not hero worship nor was it loyalty to a human emperor who had the audacity to think he was somehow divine; no, it was worship of the Son of God who, born of the virgin, had obtained salvation for humanity through his death and resurrection. This letter to Smyrna lauded the church there for its immovable faith in the God-man Jesus Christ—man according to the seed of David and the Son of God according to the power and will of God.

Ignatius made a point to say that Jesus truly suffered for our sakes in his flesh. He died and was raised from the dead. He was truly dead. He was truly made alive again. Even after his Resurrection he still possessed flesh. While spiritually united to the Father, he could eat and drink with humans since he had a real body too. For this Jesus, Ignatius was willing to suffer.

And why have I also surrendered myself to death, to fire, to the sword, to the wild beasts? But [in fact], he who is near to the sword is near to God; he that is among

the wild beasts is in company with God; provided only he be so in the name of Jesus Christ. I undergo all these things that I may suffer together with him. He who became a perfect man inwardly strengthening me (chapter IV).

Later in the long letter, Ignatius warned his readers against teachers of error, specifically those who taught that Christ did not have a body. His logic was simple—if Christ did not have a body then he did not really die, and therefore could not have atoned for our sins; and if he did not have a real, physical body, there was no Resurrection. If there was no Resurrection then we have no hope of our own resurrection. Ignatius connected this error to the failure of the heretics to take the Eucharist because they did not believe it to be the flesh of Christ. No matter what one's position on the nature of the Eucharist, the core question is whether the bread is the body of Christ or at least represents the fact that Christ had a body. The church's tradition of celebrating Eucharist became a key argument for Ignatius that Christ had a body. To deny that Christ had a body meant that one did not accept the grace of God and therefore was in the state of spiritual death.

Letter to Polycarp

Ignatius's instruction to Polycarp, disciple of the Apostle John, was to stand firm and endure pounding like an anvil on which metals are beaten. He was sure of the steadfast faith of Polycarp who looked to God, the immovable rock. It was, wrote Ignatius, expected of an athlete when wounded yet to strive to be victorious. Ignatius pointed Polycarp to Christ, for whom he would suffer and die. This Christ was "above all time, eternal and invisible, yet who became visible for our sakes; impalpable and impassible, yet who became passible on our account; and who in every kind of way suffered for our sakes." This Christ, for whom Ignatius and Polycarp suffered, was the pre-existent Son of God, who as God was immaterial and unchangeable. But, he became incarnate and therefore took on flesh and suffered as humans suffer but for our sakes not his own.

Letter to the Ephesians

In his letter to the Ephesians, Ignatius commented that to be chosen for martyrdom was to be found worthy to show forth the honor of God: "Remember me, as Jesus Christ also remembered you. Pray for the Church which is in Syria, whence I am led bound to Rome, being

the last of the faithful who are there, even as I have been thought worthy to be chosen to show forth the honor of God. Farewell in God the Father, and in Jesus Christ, our common hope.” He called his bonds “spiritual jewels.”

Ignatius’ Thoughts on Martyrdom

Ignatius was fulfilling his duty as a bishop when he wrote to Polycarp and to the churches. The letters were part of his practical spiritual work. Consequently, behind his writings was a theology. We have formed a picture of his theological assumptions from these letters and have summarized them under five points that allow us to see his thought more clearly.

1. Ignatius felt called to be a martyr. This call drove him forward even though he surmised that he would face a gruesome death in the Coliseum. Because he was called, he would allow nothing to stand in his way. Martyrdom was the highest honor and would be the capstone of his life of discipleship.
2. Ignatius saw martyrdom as a way to reach his final goal and destination—being in the presence of God in eternity. He did not challenge the goodness and compassion of God because of his adverse circumstances, but wholly trusted that his calling would serve the purpose of God. Consequently, he regarded as a tool of Satan anyone who tried to hinder his martyrdom. Satan, he believed, was actively trying to circumvent God’s will by causing well-meaning Christians to protect him from martyrdom. Ignatius’s high view of martyrdom also affected his view of the world, which to him no longer held any value.
3. Ignatius considered his martyrdom a sacrifice to God on an altar prepared by God. It was not just a matter of witnessing, although it was that, but was more profoundly spiritual in that he, like Christ, would become a sacrifice to God, pleasing to him. His sacrifice was categorically different than Christ’s in that Christ’s sacrifice was once and for all time, satisfying God’s judgement upon human sin by being perfectly efficacious. Ignatius was merely following Christ in his willingness to suffer and die, benefitting his own soul but also strengthening and sustaining the faith of other Christians facing similar adversity.
4. Ignatius was not dying for another human being as one would die for a beloved leader. Because of his belief that the pre-existent Christ was truly incarnated, that he

had a real body, that he died a real death, and that he was truly raised from the dead, he found sufficient reason to lay down his life for Christ.

5. Ignatius's life and actions conformed to his understanding of God's sovereignty. For Ignatius, Christian discipleship meant explicit and profound obedience to Christ. Following God's will was the ultimate manner of expressing obedience to God.

Clement of Rome

Clement of Rome, a bishop or elder, is generally considered the first apostolic father of the church since he was traditionally listed as the first or second elder in Rome following Peter's ministry there. Legend declared that Clement was martyred during Trajan's reign by being tied to an anchor and drowned in the sea. His only undisputed writing was a letter to the church at Corinth (known as 1 Clement) in which he dealt with a schism that saw certain Corinthian presbyters forced out of office. Clement asserted that the presbyters were the legitimate leaders of the church since they were appointed by the apostles. Only brief sections of the epistle have immediate value to a theology of martyrdom, although the whole epistle affirmed the body of truth for which martyrs would die.

Clement began his exhortation for unity in the body of Christ by identifying the motive of persons who were causing problems: envy among those out of leadership who were seeking to depose those who were in. Those out of power were jealous of the leaders' spiritual authority. Schaff wrote:

Through envy and jealousy, the greatest and most righteous pillars [of the Church] have been persecuted and put to death, Let us set before our eyes the illustrious apostles, Peter, through unrighteous envy, endured not one or two, but numerous labors, and when he had finally suffered martyrdom, departed to the place of glory due to him.⁵¹

The presbyters at Corinth were persecuted but for the most part had not experienced the martyrdom of death. Clement was writing in their defense and demanding their reinstatement. He asserted further:

To these men who spent their lives in the practice of holiness, there is to be added a great multitude of the elect, who, having through envy endured many indignities and tortures, furnished us with a most excellent example.⁵²

Clement then considered repentance, presumably for those who deposed the legitimate leaders of the church. In making his points on repentance, he alluded to Christ's sufferings, relevant to any discussion of suffering and martyrdom.

Let us attend to what is good, pleasing, and acceptable in the sight of him who formed us. Let us look steadfastly to the blood of Christ, and see how precious that blood is to God, which, having been shed for our salvation, has set the grace of repentance before the whole world.⁵³

Eventually Clement discussed the manner in which the righteous suffer at the hand of the wicked. "The righteous were indeed persecuted, but only by the wicked," he said. "They were cast in prison, but only by the unholy; they were stoned, but only by transgressors..."⁵⁴ In light of this persecution of fellow-believers, Clement urged the Corinthians to brotherly love.

An Assessment of Clement's Thoughts on Martyrdom

The issue that faced the Corinthian church was intra-church conflict and disunity. According to Clement, it became severe enough that not only were appointed leaders pushed out of office, some were persecuted and killed. Clement wrote to the leaders of the sedition and to their followers, urging repentance. Along the way, he mentioned the Apostle Peter as an example of one who was martyred by persons who exhibited "unrighteous envy." It was unrighteous envy that caused the sedition that led to the mistreatment of the appointed leadership of the church. Peter was rewarded for his faithfulness by departing to a place of glory that was "due to him." Those killed by the schismatics also received the reward of glory. By observing that it is the wicked who persecute the righteous, Clement was implying that those doing the persecution in Corinth were the wicked, and therefore needed to repent and seek forgiveness.

Aristides Presents His Case

The Greek philosopher and Christian apologist, Aristides, had occasion, according to Eusebius, to present a defense before Emperor Hadrian when Hadrian visited Athens in AD 125. Apologies of this sort were presented either to combat arguments against the Christian faith or to help non-Christians, such as emperors, to form correct opinions regarding the truth of Christianity. The thrust of Aristides's argument was that the Christian God and Christians' ethics

were superior to the gods and practices of the Barbarians, Egyptians, the Greeks, and the Jews. The Greeks came the closest to an advanced understanding of knowledge, yet their gods and ethics fell far short of the pristine morality of Christianity. The Greeks became persecutors of Christians.

Aristides contrasted the practices of Christians to those of the Greeks. Christians held to a high level of morality and did not worship idols. They did good to their enemies and they did not bind themselves to anything unclean. “It is enough for us to have shortly informed your Majesty concerning the conduct and the truth of the Christians,” wrote Aristides. “For great indeed, and wonderful is their doctrine to him who will search into it and reflect upon it. And verily, this is the new people, and there is something divine...in the midst of them.”⁵⁵

While Christians recognized the immorality of the Greeks and how they turned it onto Christians, Christians were “just and good” and long-suffering; though they knew the errors of the Greeks and were persecuted by them, the Christians endured it. Further, they had compassion on them as on men who were unaware of their evil and lacked knowledge. They prayed for those who persecuted them so that they would repent and be forgiven and purified. Christians recalled when they themselves formerly did such evil deeds out of ignorance, speaking blasphemy and speaking evil of the true knowledge of Christians.

“Henceforth let the tongue of those who utter vanity and harass the Christians be silent and hereafter let them speak the truth.”⁵⁶

An Assessment of Aristides' Apology

While at first glance Aristides's apology doesn't appear noteworthy or unique, it was actually a bridge from one kind of witnessing (enduring persecution) to another kind—witnessing by defending the faith. He assumed that his defense (witness) should be public and he addressed it to the highest official in his world. And in making his defense, he inaugurated a tradition among apologists to present the Christian faith as a reasonable alternative to paganism and morally superior to the religious practices of the culture they addressed.

The bottom line for Aristides was that, because of their positive faith in a righteous God and because they lived moral lives, Christians did not deserve to be persecuted. There was no logical or civil reason for persecuting them.

CHAPTER 3: THE SECOND CENTURY

Martyrdom and Apologetics

The second century, according to Lutheran historical theologian Otto Heick, was an age of severe conflicts. Christianity was seen as a menace and hated by diverse religions and philosophical entities, including Jews, gnostics, and heathen (those who practiced pagan religions) backed by the Roman Empire.⁵⁷ According to the pagans, Christians were regarded as arrogant because they asserted a unique God who heard their prayers and on whose behalf they worked. Their claim that they had a special relationship with this God, and that they should receive special recognition as his true servants, seemed to the pagans both sacrilegious and insane. The fact that Christians appeared to be a new sect convinced the pagans of their subversive intent.

Few would connect martyrdom and apologetics to the same calling but Williston Walker asserted that, in fact, they were two facets of the work of witnessing. Charges brought against the church and its leadership, as well as treatment of the church as an illegal organization, “impelled believers not only to bear witness in suffering but also to explain and defend their faith.”⁵⁸ The defenses or apologetics written in response were highly valued in early church circles because they offered to the church the first reasoned explication of the church’s tenets. The authors were generally a special breed of defenders in that they were men who had partaken of the Mediterranean world’s literary and philosophical culture which allowed them to speak the language of the educated classes, placing the apologetic material in the hands of persons of influence within the culture.⁵⁹

Christianity had to deal with a skeptical and sometimes hostile public opinion. One writer explained:

Christianity must justify its existence to a skeptical public opinion. Thus the Apologists, while maintaining the martyrs’ struggle in the forefront of the Church’s relationship with the world, were also intent on arguing the reasonableness of the Christian faith, its intellectual truths, and its ultimate harmony with its early surroundings...Christianity was divine revelation but it was also the true philosophy acceptable to reason⁶⁰

In reading over the material coming out of that era, it becomes clear that apologists had at least two important tasks. The first was to defend Christianity from misconceptions, half-truths,

and rumors that sought to undermine it because pagans perceived Christianity as a threat to their beliefs and practices. In connection with this, their reasoned defenses were a relatively novel approach to culture. Some apologists felt that it was valuable to mine the truths found in heathen religions and Greek philosophy. That is not to say that one could be saved through heathen religion or in Greek philosophy but that through God's grace and general revelation of himself (facilitated by cultural dispersion), truth about God and the nature of the universe became imbedded into some systems of religious thought. Pointing this out and connecting with culture through the truths both systems shared was an avenue for opening the door of understanding to their contemporaries. There were some apologists, noted Heick, who turned to polemics and saw nothing but evil and demonic elements in pagan religion and philosophy, and they sought to point out the folly, immoral character, and intolerance that characterized much of the heathenism they encountered.

The second task was countering the growing intolerance and the growing negative attitude of the empire toward Christianity. So, the apologists wrote and defended the faith with the general public in mind and not exclusively to debate individual representatives of a particular religion or philosophical system as we might think of apologetic debates today.

Justin Martyr: Where Apologetics and Martyrdom Converge

Justin was a Platonist philosopher who became a Christian believer. He was born of pagan parents in Samaria and received a good education in rhetoric, poetry, and history. Studying at various schools of philosophy, he attached himself first to the Stoics, then to the Pythagoreans, and lastly to the Platonists. While at Ephesus, he was impressed by the faithfulness and steadfastness of Christian martyrs. He was also strongly impressed by an old Christian man who happened to be walking on the seashore. The old man spoke to Justin about Jesus as the fulfillment of the promises made through the Hebrew prophets. This touched Justin's soul and led him to become a Christian (AD 130). Even so, he continued to wear the philosophical cloak. He came to believe that Platonism had a partial grasp of truth and had served as "schoolmaster" to bring him to Christ.⁶¹ He taught at Ephesus and while there engaged in a dialogue with Trypho a Jew. Later he opened a school of Christian philosophy in Rome and wrote his *First Apology* in c. 155 and the *Second Apology* in c. 166.⁶² He was arrested on the

charge of practicing an unauthorized religion and when he refused to renounce Christianity was beheaded along with some of his students.

African theologian, Kwame Bediako, made an assessment of Justin that is worthy of attention. Socrates's view, Justin thought, was prompted and motivated by the Divine Word (Logos), Christ, "Justin became the first to seek to validate Graeco-Roman Christian identity in terms of Graeco-Roman tradition itself."⁶³ Christian writers, astute to the intellectual outlook and spiritual realities of their cultural world, tried to vindicate the Christian faith in ways that were faithful to Christian teaching and also consistent with their participation in the cultural dynamics of Graeco-Roman civilization.⁶⁴ Bediako believed that the motivation for this was that Christians were seeking ways to reach their culture and to find ways to relate to them. He wrote:

The missionary (or missiological) agenda which confronted the Christian movement in Graeco-Roman society could not be more fundamental or comprehensive. At the heart of the agenda was the viability of Christian identity itself in terms of the cultural inheritance in which the Christians stood.⁶⁵

In making his case for Justin, Bediako quoted Henry Chadwick who had written that Justin "is the first Christian to make a serious attempt to determine the relations between Christianity and philosophy, between faith and reason."⁶⁶ Justin was not writing an apologetic just for the sake of philosophical argument but, Bediako says, *apologia* became above all *witness*, intended to win the hearer to a commitment similar to his own.⁶⁷ Justin adopted Christianity not just because it appealed to the educated, philosophical mind but also "because it was able to give satisfaction to the fundamentally unphilosophical mind."⁶⁸ The common ground between the Christian and the philosopher was love of truth.

Justin's study of Christian truth and philosophy led him to what was an important tool that facilitated a greater understanding of truth. He believed that Christianity was the "true" philosophy, *theoretically*, and also the "right law of life *practically*." Christianity was the only safe and profitable philosophy. But it is more than that; the whole Christian schema, he came to understand as the result of his conversion, was "an interpretative framework," a "hermeneutical key" for understanding the character of the ways of God with mankind.⁶⁹ Justin saw in the content of Christianity and Christian philosophy a framework for assessing Hellenism (and all cultures for that matter). He could look at Hellenistic thought through the lens of Christianity and decide which elements were compatible and which were not.⁷⁰

It was the concept and theory of the Logos/Word that met Justin's need for a tool in the quest for integration (where possible) of his Hellenistic consciousness and his Christian commitment.⁷¹ Williston Walker put this concept into perspective:

The Logos has been active throughout human history as the revealer of God, and all human persons partake of, or participate in, God's Logos/Son insofar as they are rational.⁷²

While the Logos concept was a part of his apologetic, it was Justin's writings to Roman leadership that spelled out most clearly his reasoning in behalf of justice for Christians. It needs to be mentioned that Justin's motivation for finding a way to relate to Graeco-Roman culture was not to avoid persecution, although that could have been the byproduct of a successful connection to the culture, but his motive was to find a way of being a better and more adequate witness for Christ. Although he clarified his views and presented his faith as faithfully as he could, his appeals were not accepted with the result that he, too, suffered martyrdom. Many missionaries since Justin have found it so. Clearly no guarantee can be had that if one relates to a culture and articulates the word faithfully it will have a positive result—it may be rejected.

Justin Martyr's *First Apology*⁷³

Justin began his *Apology* to Emperor Titus (*et al.*) on behalf of all those who are unjustly hated and abused because of their faith. He went directly to the point—what he was experiencing was not just, but was the result of prejudice against Christianity.

His first appeal asked those who were truly pious and philosophical to honor and love what was true, even if it meant relinquishing traditional opinions should they prove to be untrue and worthless. Sound reason, he said, directs the lovers of truth to refuse to follow the guidance of those who teach what is wrong even if death is threatened because of this refusal. The lover of truth should do what is right. This led Justin to request a thorough investigation into the Christian faith, confident that since Christians were not evildoers or wicked, nothing would be found to convict them.

Justin demanded a just investigation, noting that if authorities learned the truth, but did not do what was just, they would have to stand before God without excuse. He was distressed that Christians should be unjustly condemned merely because they were called Christians.

By chapter V of his apology, Justin had undertaken to refute the charge that Christians were atheists. They were called atheists because they did not honor and worship the gods of the empire, which Justin identified as demons in disguise. He declared that evil demons affected people but the people did not know what was affecting them. They inadvertently called demons gods and knew them by names the demons chose for themselves. These demons, wicked and impious, did things that bore no relation or comparison with the acts of men who desired to be virtuous.

Christians were atheists only in the sense that they did not confess or respect the “gods” he had described. In reality Christians were not atheists at all, because they had respect for the “most true God, the Father of righteousness and temperance and other virtues, who is free from impurity.” Refuting the charge of atheism, Justin articulated adoration for the Trinity of God, which included respect and worship for the Son of God and the prophetic Spirit.

Justin advanced a principle on which he believed justice should be meted out: Each person should be tried for his or her own deeds, not because he or she associated with or belonged to a group called Christians. That would be more fair than judging them based on corporate bias. But Justin went on to explain that Christians were motivated by the desire for eternal and pure life, so that they could abide with God, the Father and creator of all, and they hastened to confess their faith that their works might prove they followed God and loved to abide with him where “there is no sin to cause disturbances.”

He went back to the question of gods and idol worship. Christians did not honor pagan gods with sacrifices or garlands of flowers because the gods had been shaped by humans and set in shrines. These are not gods—they may be called gods but they are “soulless and dead.” They did not have the form of God because the real God has no material form. What they were seeing were “the names and forms of those wicked demons which have appeared.” Such “gods” were insulting to the real God, attaching his name to things that were corruptible and in need of constant care. Consequently, God did not need the material offerings offered to gods since God was the provider of all things. He had all things already.

Since Christians sought a non-material, spiritual kingdom, they were not a threat to human kingdoms such as the Roman Empire. Christians looked for a kingdom that comes from God. Chapter XII of Justin’s *Apology* seems to have been an attempt to assure Caesar that Christians were not wicked people. Since they would not participate in wicked actions, they

should be of little concern to Roman authorities. He said that those known as Christians would go to everlasting punishment or salvation based on the value of their actions. It may seem he was basing salvation on works, but it seems he was saying that the actions of Christians reflected their actual spiritual state, so if they were genuinely Christian and acted it, they would receive salvation.

In light of the foregoing, no sober-minded man should accuse Christians of being atheists. They worshiped the maker of the universe who needed no “streams of blood and libations and incense” as did the false gods who were really demons. Christians worshiped Jesus Christ, who was their teacher, said Justin in Chapter XIII; and their worship was reasonable since they had learned Jesus was the Son of the True God himself.

The reference to the Son of God led him into a discussion about following Christ and adhering to what he taught. The topic of Chapter XIV was that “the demons misrepresent Christian doctrine” and this opened the door for Justin to enter into a more thorough discussion of Christ and Christian belief. Justin adamantly affirmed that since demons misrepresented Christian doctrine, his readers should be persuaded by the Word of God and stand aloof from demons, following the “only begotten God through His Son.” He reiterated the point—“we who formerly used magical arts now dedicate ourselves to the good and unbegotten God.” Justin then reflected on how following Christ had changed believers’ attitudes toward those “of different tribes” and toward their enemies.

While Christians worshiped God alone, he wrote, they acknowledged the kings and rulers of men and gladly served them, praying that their kingly power would be accompanied by sound judgment (chapter XVII). However, if rulers paid no regard to Christians’ petitions and explanations, Christians could ultimately suffer no loss. However each person will suffer punishment according to the merit of their deeds according to the power they had received from God. The last was no doubt a warning aimed at Caesar and all others who might be called upon to adjudicate arguments—a warning to be just.

After elucidating more Christian doctrines, Justin returned with another warning to Caesar about the coming judgment of God, admonishing him that if he persisted in injustice, he would be subject to that judgment.

Justin Martyr's *Second Apology*

The major thought in Justin's *Second Apology*⁷⁴ relating to persecution is found in Chapter III where Justin accused one Crescens, supposedly a philosopher and a learned man, of being prejudiced against Christians because he is ignorant of Christian teaching. Justin wrote:

I, too, therefore expect to be plotted against and fired by the state, by some of those I have named, or perhaps by Crescens, that lover of bravado and boasting; for the man is not worthy of the name of philosopher who publicly bears witness against us in matters which he does not understand, saying that Christians are atheists and impious, and doing so to win the favor of the deluded mob, and to please them. For if he assails us without having read the teachings of Christ, he is thoroughly depraved, and far worse than the illiterate, who often refrain from discussing or bearing false witness about matters they do not understand.

Assessment of Justin's Thought

Justin was comfortable in the arena of pagan philosophy and, although he was an ardent Christian thinker and philosopher, did not cast aside all pagan philosophical thinking but tried, instead, to find links between it and Christianity. He tried to be a good witness within the Graeco-Roman culture. Clearly he saw no need to cast off his cultural heritage after becoming a Christian.

While several themes in Justin's writings were common to other apologists, his emphasis on witness was his own. And he delved deep into cultural thinking to find ways of connecting his apologetic with it. Like other apologists of the era, he latched onto the philosophic term Logos (Word) as a means of relating to thinkers in his culture and to explain in a plausible way the nature of God and how things came to be. It was a pagan term that became almost exclusively used by Christians to convey knowledge of the pre-existent Christ (the second Person of the Godhead) with a culture already familiar with the term.

The charge of atheism was not new to Christians; and Justin, like others before him, had to answer the charge with a reasonable explanation. The gods, he explained, were in reality demons, and Christians did not worship demons or gods made of wood or stone. Christians honored and revered a righteous God, the source of morality and purity, who valued and promoted virtue. Pagan gods were notorious for their immoral behavior and outrageously

unrighteous acts. Such gods were creations of human craftsmen while the Christian God was the creator of all existence, even the material out of which the other so-called gods are made.

All of Justin's arguments were made in an effort to deflect criticisms that had led his contemporaries to persecute Christians. Consequently, explanations of Christian beliefs and pleas for justice were both significant aspects of Justin's apologetic.

Tatian of Assyria

When we move on to Tatian, who was a student of Justin, we find a Christian thinker far different than his teacher. Tatian was born in Syria and lived from 120 to 180 AD. After he became a Christian and while living in Rome, he became a student of the Christian philosopher, Justin Martyr. He compiled the *Diatessaron*,⁷⁵ a Syriac-language version of the Gospels as a single narrative. It served as the biblical and theological vocabulary of the Syrian churches at least into the fifth century. Tatian adamantly rejected the classical values of Hellenistic culture. Unlike Justin, who searched for links between pagan Greek culture and Christian truths in his effort to be an effective witness, Tatian rejected any link with paganism, with one exception: he utilized the Logos concept as a significantly striking explanation of the principle that created the rational and purposeful cohesion of the universe.

Like Justin, Tatian started a Christian school in Rome. He had a strong abhorrence to pagan religion and cults, and was convinced of the unreasonableness of pagan thinking. Tatian wrote his apology, *Address to the Greeks*,⁷⁶ about 155-165 AD. The question he addressed from the top was whether Christianity was rooted in history or was a new religion. Authorities held in high suspicion novel religions and were prone to treat them with social harassment and legal persecution. Many people in the Roman culture thought Christianity was a new religion. Christians, however, traced their roots to Judaism. Tatian set out to show the relationship. The religion of the Jews, out of which Christianity came, was more ancient than all Greek philosophy and writings.

Little of what Tatian wrote directly concerned persecution and martyrdom. However, his work was an attempt to allay persecution of fellow believers by presenting Christianity in a reasonable light. He taunted pagan philosophy for its ridiculous ideas and acceptance of idolatry, and he held up a great and good creator God as an alternative. Far from being a novel religion, Christianity went back as far as the eternal Being of God.

Although Tatian had little to say about persecution, in the fifteenth chapter of his Address, he posed an important question to Roman authorities: “Why do you hate those who follow the Word of God, as if they were the vilest of mankind?” And in chapter 27 he observed that Christians were hated just because of their name. He pointed out that this was neither fair nor just.

An Assessment of Tatian’s Thought

Tatian was not a major apologist, nor was he primarily concerned with persecution or martyrdom. Highly critical of pagan thinking and practice, he rejected any positive link between paganism and Christianity except for the concept of the Logos, which he was willing to connect with Christian theology.

He had a strong aversion to pagan religion, and considered its thinking unreasonable. Perhaps he thought that conversion to Christianity should be of such a radical nature that its converts would be completely cut off from the old religions. He had no spirit of compromise in his bones or in his argument. Such an attitude in Christian converts would, of course, lead many to their death at the hands of irrational pagan persecutors.

The Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus⁷⁷

Mathetes wrote a lengthy letter to a pagan named Diognetus who apparently was not a critic of Christianity but rather an eager learner. Nonetheless Mathetes discussed persecution of the church in the fifth chapter of his letter. Much of the letter was an effort to explain Christian teaching and to have Diognetus reconsider the assumptions of his worldview. Mathetes showed the folly of heathen gods. Having explained Christian doctrines and attacked idolatry, he moved into discussion of the Christian lifestyle. It was in this context that he spoke about Christians being dishonored, reviled, insulted, and persecuted. Before discussing Christians’ high level of ethics and morality (not derived from manmade doctrines), he noted the uniqueness of those who constitute Christianity. Instead of a religion confined to one ethnic group (like the Jews) or to a single tribe or culture (like most pagan religions), Christianity was multi-national, multi-cultural, multi-lingual, and lived at home in a variety of cultures. Christians were uniquely diverse as well as universal in outlook. As citizens of particular countries, they shared their regional cultural amenities yet they realized that they were ultimately foreigners even in their homelands, since

their allegiance was to an eternal King and heavenly kingdom. Christians lived by high moral standards and sometimes surpassed the requirements of the law by the conduct of their lives. He pointedly wrote:

They love all men, and are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death, and restored to life. (2 Corinthians 6:9) They are poor, yet make many rich; (2 Corinthians 6:10) they are in lack of all things, and yet abound in all; they are dishonoured, and yet in their very dishonour are glorified. They are evil spoken of, and yet are justified; they are reviled, and bless; (2 Corinthians 4:12) 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.⁷⁸

Moving on, Mathetes discussed the being of Christ. In his Christology he remarked on the nonviolence of the Christians' creator/king. With his power Christ could have ruled in a tyrannical manner, creating fear and terror. Instead he came (and comes) in meekness, a Son sent by the King, to be our Savior. He did this not by compelling us to obey or believe but by persuading us, "for violence has no place in the character of God." He did not send his Son to judge us but to save us. However, he will in due time send his Son to judge us and then "who shall endure His appearing?"

Mathetes closed his letter with an affirmation of knowledge, realizing that knowledge had been maligned since it became an object of a bad moral choice by Adam and Eve. It was not the tree of knowledge (really only the knowledge of good and evil, not all knowledge) that caused man's problems but disobedience. Thus knowledge is not important but is necessary for life. Knowledge, properly understood and used, brings forth much fruit.

Assessment of Mathetes's Thought on Persecution

Mathetes followed the general pattern of apologists in showing what Christians believed and the folly of idolatry. Pagans hated and persecuted Christians because Christ's followers did not revere the gods, but why should they? His strong new argument against idols was that since such gods were malleable, they were changeable, and by implication not trustworthy. If

Diognetus persisted in such worship, Mathetes warned, he would become like the gods he worshiped.

In his one definitive pronouncement on persecution, Mathetes spoke against the injustice of Greeks persecuting Christians without being able to give any reason for their hatred—a theme that ran through apologetic writings of that era.

Minucius Felix

Minucius Felix wrote *The Octavius of Minucius Felix*⁷⁹ recounting a debate between two friends. Caecilius Natalis supported the cause of paganism while Octavius advocated for Christianity. Minucius Felix was to judge the debate.

Caecilius Natalis's opening premise was that all human affairs are uncertain and therefore it seemed unreasonable that Christians should speak with certainty concerning God and the universe, especially since Christians were illiterate and untrained. Furthermore, all nations honored and worshiped their gods for the well-being of their nations. The Romans had received the dominion of the known world as a result of their devout worship of their gods. When, on occasion, they had neglected to honor their gods, they had experienced ill consequences. He described those who had rejected the worship of the gods (Theodorus of Cyrene, Diagoras, Protagoras, etc.) as impious atheists.

He then cataloged the offenses of which Christians were allegedly guilty, the kinds of charges levelled against them in persecution. Christians, he said, were foolish because they worshiped a crucified man. He went on to accuse them of immorality and crimes, painting them as total reprobates, who practiced incest, cannibalism, and drunkenness. He also accused them of practicing secret rites and having no temple, altars, or images of their god. That the Christian God was unnecessary was apparent because the Romans, without any help from the Christian God, governed, reigned, and had the enjoyment of the whole world, and also had dominion over Christians. Christians meanwhile were in suspense and anxiety, and abstained from respectable enjoyments, standing in dread of the very gods they denied.

Octavius replied to Caecilius's arguments and defended Christians against numerous false charges. He asserted that righteous and pious Christians will be rewarded while unrighteous persons will receive eternal punishment. He observed that Christians were unjustly afflicted with

torture merely because of being Christians and suggested how that appeared from God's perspective and from the perspective of the believer undergoing the torment.

How beautiful is the spectacle to God when a Christian does battle with pain; when he is drawn up against threats, and punishments, and tortures; when, mocking the noise of death, he treads underfoot the horror of the executioner; when he raises up his liberty against kings and princes, and yields to God alone, whose he is; when, triumphant and victorious, he tramples upon the very man who has pronounced sentence against him! For he has conquered who has obtained that for which he contends. What soldier would not provoke peril with greater boldness under the eyes of his general? For no one receives a reward before his trial, and yet the general does not give what he has not: he cannot preserve life, but he can make the warfare glorious. But God's soldier is neither forsaken in suffering, nor is brought to an end by death. Thus the Christian may seem to be miserable; he cannot be really found to be so.⁸⁰

In the end Caecilius conceded and professed the Christian faith.

An Assessment of Octavius of Minucius Felix

The *Octavius* fortified and carried on themes advanced by other apologists, giving insight into what early Christians felt was important both in defending and explaining the faith as a part of the faithful witness of the early church. The issue that was most deplored by apologists during that age was the unreasonable and uninformed bias against Christians that caused not only social disdain but became the basis of persecution. The *Octavius* also picked up on this.

Because the Romans did not know what Christians believed, Christians were easily misrepresented. It was easy for Romans to believe malicious rumors about them. What little they understood they ridiculed as had Caecilius Natalis, saying the old gods had served them well and they did not need the Christian God.

In his retort, Octavius argued that truth stands on its own merit. Knowledge of the creator God was necessary for genuine understanding of the organization, coherence, and rational structure of the universe. The Roman gods were inherently inferior to the real God and were, in fact, no-gods. Hiding behind the label of "gods" were demons, who were responsible for entering into the minds of people and causing them to hate Christians, leading to persecution and

execution of Christians. Octavius exalted the actions of persecuted Christians and said that their faithfulness under torture was a beautiful spectacle to God, who did not actually forsake suffering Christians.

Tertullian's Thoughts on Persecution and Martyrdom

Tertullian was born in Carthage in a Roman province of Africa in c. 160. Carthage was second only to Rome in the empire. Tradition said Tertullian was the son of a Roman centurion and became a lawyer. He was a prolific Christian writer, a notable apologist, and a polemicist against heresy. He has been called the father of Latin or Western theology and was the first to use the term "Trinity" to summarize what Christians thought about God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

Tertullian became a Christian when he observed how Christians marched to their deaths as martyrs with gladness. He wanted to find out why that was so and his inquiries led to his conversion to Christ around 197.⁸¹ Tertullian believed a Christian could be described as a person who had undergone a radical conversion to faith in Christ and made a conscious breach with his old life.

Before we discuss his writings, it seems wise to begin a discussion of Tertullian with comments and observations from others who can give us perspective and allow us to develop a rubric for both understanding and criticizing Tertullian's writings.

W. H. C. Frend discussed Tertullian in reference to the Roman Empire. Tertullian rejected the idea that the achievements of Rome were due to the religious observations of the empire's people.⁸² This rejection, common to Christians, was at the heart of the negative view Romans took of Christians, because Romans believed the Christians' neglect of the Roman gods was detrimental to the welfare of the state. Tertullian's opposition to Roman paganism went deeper than this civil concern. He opposed the values of pagan Rome.⁸³ His rejection also of civil obligations included Roman literary and philosophical heritage. Philosophy, in his view, was not a means whereby the educated could approach Christianity. On the contrary, Plato, Aristotle, and Zeno were harmful as patriarchs of heresy.⁸⁴

Kwame Bediako, a modern African theologian from Ghana, made an extensive treatment of Tertullian's perspective in his book, *Theology and Identity*. Tertullian, he said, came close to being the most eloquent and most provocative advocate of the distinctive Christian self-

understanding in early Graeco-Roman culture.⁸⁵ He waged an unrelenting battle to establish the rights of Christian identity. It became the single most important reality of his life.⁸⁶ Society, Tertullian observed, insisted on misguided worship that had arisen from error.⁸⁷ The gods were actually fallen angels (evil demons in Christian thinking). The whole city of Rome was impregnated with the demonic essence of idolatry.⁸⁸ “Tertullian’s viewpoint is understandable,” wrote Bediako, “in his historical context, which was characterized by the twin dangers of religion and intellectual syncretism and heretical Christianity.”⁸⁹ Like earlier Christian apologists, Tertullian believed that God’s revelation of truth was most fully given in the Christian gospel. He was, however, not interested in trying to discover any “anticipations” of God’s revelation in the philosophical traditions of the pre-Christian Graeco-Roman culture. He believed that “the most convincing grounds for the validity of the Christian Gospel outside the Scriptural tradition” were “basic human apprehensions in human experience” and not in the thinking or writings of philosophers.⁹⁰ He was not interested in coming to terms with the world.⁹¹

The topic of persecution was addressed in most of Tertullian’s writings.⁹² He often described the Christian life as a preparation for martyrdom.⁹³ A Christian was under obligation to begin training for the day of trials and testing, and renouncing worldly things as a necessary part of that training.⁹⁴ Persecution would be the ultimate test of faithfulness and obedience.⁹⁵ Obviously then, persecution was willed by God as a means to test his children.⁹⁶

Tertullian called persecution a battle, and the testing was a part of the training for the battle. For the battle to take place, Satan must take the initiative and ignite hostile attitudes against Christians that led to violence against them.⁹⁷ Even so, God superintended the conflict. It was the Holy Spirit who trained Christians for battle and the outcome was decided by God.⁹⁸ Tertullian’s theology of persecution was practical. It involved extensive training for the believer so that when the battle came, the believer would have developed enough personal power to remain strong and faithful. Submission and obedience were key elements in this preparatory training.

Tertullian believed that the actions of Christians during persecution and in martyrdom had an emphatic impact upon the pagans watching. Ton explained:

Tertullian spoke vividly and emphatically about the impact of the martyrs’ endurance and faithfulness in suffering upon the pagan world. Primarily, the curiosity of the pagans is at first stirred by the joy with which the Christians accept

to go to prison; then by the fact that they enter the arena singing, fearless before the gladiators or the wild beasts. The Christians' incredible endurance under tortures, as well as their eager renunciation of wealth, family, even life for their faith, also surprise the unbelievers who are watching. Their interest having been aroused, the pagans are motivated to seek out the content of faith that produces such people and behavior.⁹⁹

*Tertullian's Defense of the Christians Against the Heathen*¹⁰⁰

Tertullian wrote a straightforward defense of Christians to the governors of the Roman Empire, those endowed with the authority and power to adjudicate cases where a legal decision needed to be made. In chapter I he took them to task for not allowing a reasonable defense to be made. Tertullian speculated that they were either "afraid or ashamed" to make a public inquiry so that justice could be observed. In fact, it appeared that they had purposefully blocked the way for Christians to be able to make an adequate defense before them. He asked the governors to allow the truth to be presented before them even if only in written form. The church, he said, asked for no special favor or mercy but only that her case be heard and a fair judgment given. One thing the church asked was that in the meantime she not be condemned without really being known.

Tertullian made a case for a fair hearing by saying that if the governors condemned the church before hearing her case, they would be under suspicion of complicity, especially if the church could not be condemned. Hatred toward the name "Christian" was unjust. It was made worse by the fact that it was out of ignorance, which was the same excuse for not hearing the case. Tertullian asked: "For what could be more unfair than that men should hate that of which they know nothing, even if the fact deserves this hatred?"

There was a genuine difference, Tertullian observed, between evildoers and Christians during interrogation. Evildoers sought to hide their deeds and deny their guilt. Christians, on the other hand, felt no shame because they were not guilty of evil-doing but were anxious to confess their faith.

In chapter II Tertullian continued making his case against the unfairness of Christians' treatment by Roman authorities. Criminals, he said, have "paid pleaders" to present their case but "Christians alone are not permitted to say anything to clear themselves of the charge, to uphold the truth, to prevent injustice in the judge." There was no investigation and no procedure was

followed. Trajan's reply to Pliny on how to treat Christians was self-contradictory. He said Christians should not be sought out because they are innocent and yet if they were found they should be punished as criminals. Christians deserved punishment, not because they should be *sought* for crimes, but because they were *found* even when they had committed no crimes.

Tertullian boldly accused the Roman legal system. "To others," he said, "you apply torture when they deny [their guilt], to make them confess, to Christians alone you apply it to make them deny." "Why do you torture me to make me give the wrong answer? You reward my confession with torture?" Interesting, Tertullian observed, Christians were guilty if they confessed their faith but were acquitted if they denied it. It was because the Romans wrongly believed that Christians [because of their faith] were guilty of all crimes and were the "enemy of the gods, emperors, laws, morals, and the whole teaching of nature." With that assumption, Tertullian explained, Christians were always found guilty. Essentially, however, they were punished because the battle was about their name—*Christian*.

In chapter III of this defense, Tertullian exposed the extent of the prejudice that blinded people toward Christians. Even when they witnessed to the person's excellence they mixed it with taunts of the name Christian. If a person underwent radical personal reform, if it was done in the name of Christian, it was the ground of offence. The hatred of Christians trumped the obvious goodness of a person's life.

In the middle of his defense Tertullian threw in a little sarcasm about Roman justice. It seemed absurd to him that a god cannot be "official," even if consecrated by a general, without the approval of the Roman senate! Humans decided who would be gods and who would not.

Chapter VII held to the light a significant failure of the Roman system: it did not attempt to validate the charges against Christians, nor did it have any desire to prove its charges. "It is quite a different duty that you lay upon the executioner against Christians," wrote Tertullian, "namely, not that they should say of what they are guilty, but that they should deny what they are."

In refutation of the false assumptions of the Roman system, Tertullian described Christian belief about God, traced the roots of Christianity back to the most ancient times, outlined the life of Christ, and explained why Christians considered heathen gods to be demons.

With all that in mind, Tertullian found irony in the fact that it was lawful to worship anything except the true God. His explanation met the charge that Christians injured the gods by ignoring them since it was not possible to injure something that didn't exist! (chapter XXVII).

He also rejected charges of disloyalty to the emperor. Christians did not offend the majesty of the emperors when they did not pray for their safety to the heathen gods since they did not think that images soldered with lead could protect the emperor (chapter XXIX). Instead, “we invoke on behalf of the safety of the emperors a God who is everlasting, a God who is living, when even the emperors themselves prefer should be propitious to them beyond all others” (chapter XXX).

Christians were loyal to the emperor because they believed he had been chosen by God. The emperor actually belonged more to Christians than to pagans because he had been appointed by the Christian God! However, the emperor was not equal to God but must be subject to him. Christians worked for his safety since he was a servant of the real God (XXXIII). Anyone who truly desired God to be propitious toward the emperor should be loyal to God and cease to believe in other gods, or even describe them as gods (chapter XXXIV).

Despite their true understanding, Christians were considered public enemies because they did not offer ill-advised or useless honor. Christians were blamed for every public disaster and yet were not to blame. They were, in fact, a gift from God to the world to moderate the injustices of the world and to encourage people to become intercessors with God (chapter XXXV).

In chapter L, Tertullian clarified the Christian desire for suffering. He posed the rhetorical question: If Christians desire to suffer for God, why do they complain when they are persecuted for Christ’s sake? Tertullian’s answer was that Christians suffer as a soldier suffers in war. “Nobody indeed willingly suffers.” While a soldier might complain about fighting a battle, yet he would fight with all his strength because that is how he attained both glory and booty. The battle for Christians was to be summoned to court or to appear before tribunals, “to fight thee for the Truth at the risk of our lives.”

Tertullian’s *Scorpiace*¹⁰¹

In *Scorpiace* Tertullian likened the pestilence of persecution on the church to the torment of a scorpion’s sting. Some Christians were persecuted and died by fire, or by the sword, or by beasts. Others were subjected to clubs and claws in prison. Some (Tertullian included) were being pursued while heretics roamed where they wanted.

It was this situation which prompted him to pick up a pen “in opposition to the little beasts which trouble our sect, our antidote against poison, that I may thereby effect cures” (chapter 1).

Tertullian proceeded to examine the nature and necessity of martyrdom and concluded God allowed martyrdom in his great contest with the enemy in order to keep bruising Satan by Christians' faithfulness and trampling him by martyrs' courage. Further, martyrdom might cause faith to grow to new heights. This normally would cost great effort, experiencing "poignant suffering, torture, death. It is God who makes man a martyr" (chapter 7).

God commended martyrdom, wrote Tertullian (chapter 8). From the beginning of human history the righteous had suffered. And the New Testament, nearer his own time, had significant teaching about suffering for righteousness (chapter 9).

The disciple is not above the master, nor the servant above his own Lord; because, seeing the Master and Lord Himself was steadfast in suffering persecution, betrayal and death, much more will be the duty of His servants and disciples to bear the same, that they may not seem superior to Him, or have got an immunity from the assaults of unrighteousness since this itself should be glory enough for them, to be conformed to the sufferings of their Lord and Master, and, preparing them for the endurance of these. He reminds them that they must not fear such persons as kill the body only, but are not able to destroy the soul, but that they must dedicated fear to Him rather who has such power that He can kill both body and soul, and destroy them as well.

Tertullian examined the implications of denying Christ—given that one aim of the persecutors was to force such a denial. He concluded that if a person denied he was in Christ, then he was not a Christian, because if he was a Christian he would be in Christ. Was it then the will of God that Christians undergo persecution? He concluded it was, observing, "We are both regarded as persons to be hated by all men for the sake of the Name, as it is written; and are delivered up by our nearest kin also, as it is written; and are brought before magistrates, and are examined, and tortured, and make confession, and are ruthlessly killed, as it is written. So the Lord ordained" (chapter 11).

In chapter 13 Tertullian contemplated the lessons that could be derived from the life of Paul—both as persecutor and as persecuted. He concluded that in writing Philippians 2:17, Paul was writing about the bliss of martyrdom (and persecution) as "a festival of mutual joy." Tertullian highlighted the notion that if we suffer with Christ, we shall also reign with him.

Tertullian's *Ad Martyrs*¹⁰²

Ad Martyrs was written to encourage and instruct those designated for martyrdom, who were in prison awaiting execution. Tertullian began with an encouraging declaration that the Holy Spirit was with the martyrs in prison, that God led them there and will lead them to the Lord. The prison was also a residence for Satan and the purpose for Christians' imprisonment was "trampling the wicked one under foot in his chosen abode." Tertullian urged the martyrs not to let Satan have any success by causing disunity among them but to let him find them well-fortified and armed to do battle with him. In short, he counseled they live at peace with fellow martyrs (chapter 1).

Tertullian asserted that when Christians went to prison they were severed from the world. He observed that the world was actually a prison as well, so the martyrs had gone from one prison to another. Since the world was a place of greater darkness, more grievous fetters, a place breathing out the worst impurities, having a larger number of criminals, the martyrs could say they had been transferred to a place of safety. It was dark, but they were light; it had bonds, but they were free. Tertullian went on to talk about the evil things of the world that Christian prisoners do not have to deal with. He argued that though their flesh was confined, they were open to the spirit, and could roam beyond their confines (chapter 2).

In chapter 3 Tertullian likened a Christian in prison to a soldier at war. Both prison and war were unpleasant, involving "hardness, roughness, and unpleasantness." He exhorted Christian prisoners to count whatever was hard as a form of discipline for the mind and the body. They were going through a noble struggle, in which God acted the part of superintendent and the Holy Spirit was their trainer. Then Tertullian switched to the analogy of an athlete in training with prison as the training ground. Whereas some prisoners committed suicide to avoid torture—"the fear of death is not so great as the fear of torture"—others bore torture for the glory of men. Tertullian declared that the worst possibilities were but trifling sufferings to obtain celestial glory and divine reward.

Tertullian's *Ad Nationes*

In *Ad Nationes*, Tertullian again dealt with the theology of persecution. He began by accusing those who hate Christians of doing so out of ignorance. Worse yet, persecutors deliberately remained ignorant because if they knew the truth they might want to become

Christians themselves. In the opening chapter, he contrasted criminals with Christians and asked in light of the comparison how a Christian could be considered evil.

CRIMINAL	CHRISTIAN
Turns from pursuing good to perverse ways, defends evil as good	Seeks virtue
Seeks concealment, shrinks from publicity	Unashamed and glories in the faith
Trembles when caught	
Denies guilt when accused, even under torture	Confesses Christ when accused
Grieves when condemned	Rejoices when condemned
Reproaches past life	Sorrows only for former sins, not for belonging to Christ
Blames fate for his/her wickedness	Makes no defense [i.e. excuses]

In chapter II Tertullian summarized what he had already pointed out: “When culprits are brought up for trial, should they deny the charge, you press them for a confession by torture. When Christians, however, confess without compulsion, you apply torture to induce them to deny.” His reasonable question was “What great perverseness is this?” It was perverse because it tried to compel Christians to deny charges of which the persecutors already had clear evidence.

In chapter III of *Ad Nationes*, Tertullian argued that the charge against Christians had nothing to do with any sinful conduct, but was based wholly and solely on the name “Christian.” He challenged the authorities to explain why they sought to extirpate the name. What crime, what offense, what fault was there in a name? “Surely, surly, names are not things which deserve punishment by the sword, or the cross, or beasts.”

Moving forward with his argument, he accused Roman prosecutors of deliberate ignorance about Christianity and enumerated virtuous character traits that would identify Christians to their persecutors, such as temperance, chastity, compassion, and monotheism. He asked that Christians be tried for actual crimes, not for accepting a mere name.

In subsequent chapters he took to task the persecutors’ demands that Christians swear by the genius of the emperor, a practice that seemed designed to make them appear disloyal when they were not. Christians could not call the emperor God because of their beliefs and indeed would be

mocking the emperor to do so. Nor could they propitiate imperial images given their high opinion of the real God and refusal to worship images.

By chapter XIX Tertullian was responding to the accusation that Christians were obstinate. How could they be anything else considering their strong convictions? For example, they believed in the resurrection. Hope of resurrection was in reality contempt of death which gave them strength to face death threats. Finally Tertullian declared that Christians were unjustly judged in the courts of man. “This is injustice,” he said, “that, knowing truth, we are condemned by those who know it not.”

Assessment of Tertullian’s Thought on Persecution and Martyrdom

Tertullian was a prolific writer. Persecution and martyrdom were often his topics. His apologetic in behalf of Christians was greatly expanded compared to earlier apologists and introduced new themes that he developed as a part of his unique arguments.

Prominent among his themes was a radical view of the Christian faith and life. Christians were those who had experienced a profound conversion, which Tertullian saw as a distinct break from their previous life, a rejection of the old culture and philosophy that embodied paganism.

Tertullian’s theology gave his readers a clear perspective on the phenomenon of persecution. Persecution was the will of God and God superintended the persecution and martyrdom of his followers. The Christian life was preparation for martyrdom, not only rejecting the world and the enticements of the world, but submitting to and obeying God as a part of that training.

He described persecution as a pestilence that the church must endure. He used the analogy of a scorpion sting to press home his point. Persecution was initiated by Satan and took many forms. However, Tertullian reiterated that it was the Lord who ordained persecution. One outcome of Christian martyrdom was the trampling of Satan. For all intents and purposes, Satan was defeated over and over again when Christians remained faithful unto death.

While Satan was the source of persecution, the Roman legal system became the agency by which persecution was allocated to Christians. Tertullian accused the Roman authorities of injustice, negligence, and deliberate ignorance. They did not allow Christians to mount a defense, there was no public inquiry into charges against Christians, and the authorities did not seem inclined to investigate whether the charges were true or false. Hatred of Christians,

Tertullian said, was unjust when based on ignorance. There was no reason, legal or practical, for hating Christians except for their name. The battle Christians were fighting was about the Name, of which the Romans knew nothing.

Christians did not worship the emperors or swear by their genius because those practices actually dishonored the emperors, who neither were gods, nor wished to be. Christians honored Caesar far more than pagans by praying for him to the one real God who, in fact, gave Caesar his position and power and who alone was capable of protecting him.

That Christians really were not criminals was evident by the way they behaved when charged with the “crime” of faith. Christians readily confessed their “crime” while actual criminals sought to deny theirs. He called Roman justice perverse because it tortured Christians to get them to deny their “guilt” but tortured criminals to get them to acknowledge theirs.

In a writing specifically directed toward martyrs (*Ad Martyrs*), Tertullian sought to encourage imprisoned Christians awaiting execution by favorably contrasting prison to the world at large. The Holy Spirit had led believers to prison, was with them in prison, and would finally lead them to God. The world also was a prison that might actually be worse than the prison in which they were incarcerated. Tertullian identified prison as a training ground, with discipline and hardship, much like the training of soldiers for battle or athletes for competition. Christians were put into prison to fight their battles where Satan had made his home.

With Tertullian, then, we see the theology of persecution and martyrdom articulated more fully and clearly than with previous apologists. It was a positive step forward.

[Athenagoras of Athens' Thought on Persecution¹⁰³](#)

Apart from the detail that Athenagoras flourished in the second half of the second century, little is known about him. He designated himself as “Athenagoras, the Athenian, philosopher and Christian.” His work was seldom mentioned in the writings of other apologists although his writings appear to have been well-known and influential. His ability as an apologist, rhetorician, and philosopher becomes apparent as one reads his writings. Athenagoras addressed a plea for justice to Marcus Aurelius and his son, Commodus; a plea that made a clear and compelling case for monotheism.

His apologetic opened with a strong polemic against the injustice occasioned by the Roman bias against the name “Christian” (chapter I). He asked the rhetorical question, why was

the mere name so odious to Romans? Names were not deserving of hatred, he argued: there was nothing inherently evil about them that demanded punishment. He pointed out that while others enjoyed justice under the authority of Marcus Aurelius and his son, Christians were harassed, plundered, and persecuted—only because they were called Christian. Athenagoras entreated the emperor to bestow some consideration on them.

He noted that Christians had learned not to retaliate—to return evil for evil—but rather to follow the biblical principle of turning the other cheek.

As he continued his appeal for justice, he asked that the authorities remove despicable treatment by passing a law that would keep Christians from becoming the victims of false accusations. His plea was that they receive what was the common right of all. He wanted justice and asked that Christians be tried on charges of actual crimes when appropriate, but not be punished merely for bearing the name “Christian” (chapter II).

In the third chapter of his plea, Athenagoras discussed allegations against Christians, the foremost being their atheism. This led him to a compelling argument in support of monotheism (chapter IV), showing that the Christians’ so-called atheism was actually the highest theism.

Demonstrating that God must be spirit, not matter, he cited numerous Greco-Roman philosophers and poets who had anticipated this Christian position. If Plato was not considered an atheist for conceiving the existence of one uncreated God, then neither should be Christians, considering they firmly believed that God “has framed all things by his Logos, and holds them in being by His Spirit” (chapter VI).

Athenagoras pushed back against persecution, asking again why others could think and write with impunity about God while discussing first principles of the universe while, when Christians articulated similar ideas, Roman law came down on them? In his effort to refute the common charges of the persecutors that Christians rejected the local gods and were therefore atheists, Athenagoras advanced prophecies of the Old Testament as proof of a God greater than the local deities and said “it would be irrational for us to cease to believe in the Spirit from God, who moved the mouths of the prophets...to give heed to mere human opinions” (chapter VII).

After describing the nature and character of the Christian God (chapter VIII), Athenagoras asked, “Who, then, would not be astonished to hear men who speak of God the Father, and of God the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and who declare both their power in union and their distinction in order, called atheists?”

Another charge against Christians was immorality but Athenagoras showed the high Christian ethic that forgave even its enemies and adopted a benevolent and temperate lifestyle (chapter XII). Romans charged Christians with failure to sacrifice to gods, but considering the Christian doctrine of the one eternal God, it was not surprising believers would not sacrifice to the futile Roman gods (chapter XIII).

Another common accusation of persecutors was that Christians didn't pray to or believe in the same gods as the city-dwellers. Athenagoras said this was a silly complaint because those who charged Christians with atheism couldn't even agree which gods to worship. So how could Christians find agreement with them?

After more refutation of the charge of atheism, showing the high nature of the true God and the demonic nature of false gods, Athenagoras again refuted charges of immorality brought against Christians. Christians, he said, were moral because they did not live only for the present life but would ultimately have a heavenly abode with God, or if they did evil, would fall into the fire. He contrasted Christian morality to that of their accusers. Christians did not divorce their wives or commit murder by aborting their children. The fetus in the womb was a created being under God's care.

So, he concluded by seeking the approval of Marcus Aurelius and his son Commodus.

Assessment of Athenagoras' Thought on Persecution

Athenagoras shared the concern of other Christian thinkers that bias against the name "Christian" resulted in injustice. His treatise was largely an attempt to add content to the name, since the main reason for anti-Christian bias was ignorance of who Christians were.

His doctrine of God (his 'theology') took a tack more philosophical than experiential, because he was writing to two men steeped in the Graeco-Roman philosophical tradition. Athenagoras attempted to construct his monotheistic apologetic utilizing sources from within the culture with which Marcus Aurelius would have been familiar (specifically those poets and philosophers who had espoused the view of one God) as well as from the Old Testament biblical tradition of Moses and the prophets. If atheists were persons who did not believe in a god then by definition Christians could not be atheists. Athenagoras argued that God and matter were not two terms for the same thing. The God Christians worshiped was the artful creator of the universe

and was responsible for its functionality and beauty. Obviously, God preceded matter, since matter, as something created, needed a creator.

Athenagoras was less concerned about finding a rationale for suffering than about pushing back on the glib reasons given for persecuting Christians.

Clement of Alexandria's Perspective on Persecution and Martyrdom

Clement of Alexandria was born about AD 150, probably in the eastern Mediterranean region. After he converted to Christianity he traveled from teacher to teacher to receive higher instruction in the faith but just who he studied with is not known for certain. He found “rest” when he met and studied under Pantaenus of Alexandria. Clement then became part of the Catechetical School of Alexandria. His writings show he was well-versed in Greek philosophy and literature; he appears to have been more influenced by Hellenistic philosophy than most other Christian thinkers of his day. Clement did not exert a significant influence on theology through his writings but among his notable students were Origen and Alexander of Jerusalem.

Although Clement wrote of persecution and martyrdom, he did not systemize his thoughts regarding either. One place his writings mentioned martyrdom was in his *Stromata* or *Miscellanies*, in book IV.¹⁰⁴ He sought to distinguish the traits of the Christian gnostic (wise person) and define what a perfect Christian gnostic was. A Christian gnostic differed from the heretical gnostics of that time, who were syncretistic and esoteric. In the midst of his discussion of Christian gnostics, Clement mentioned martyrdom. To him martyrdom had two meanings: *first*, one who died for his or her faith, and *second*, one who denied the world, rejecting it for Christ. He wrote: “We call martyrdom perfection, not because the man comes to the end of his life as others, but because he has exhibited the perfect work of love” (chapter IV).

He said that gnostic martyrdom was, at least in part, a rejection of the world. It was life conducted by the rule of the gospel, “in love to the Lord...so as to leave his worldly kindred, and wealth, and every possession, in order to lead a life free from passion.”

In a discussion of the Beatitudes (chapter VI), Clement said that being persecuted for righteousness teaches us that we should seek the martyr who, if he is poor because of righteousness' sake, witnessed to us that the righteousness he loves is a good thing. In reference to those who are blessed because of persecution, he wrote, “Blessed are ye when men hate you, when they shall separate you when they shall cast out your name as evil, for the Son of man's

sake . . . if we do not detest our persecutors, and undergo punishment at their hands, not hating them under the idea that we have been put to trial more tardily than we looked for, but knowing this also, that every instance of trial is an occasion for testifying.” In chapter VII he began a paragraph with the words: “You see that martyrdom for love’s sake is taught.” He dedicated chapter IX to “Christ’s Sayings Respecting Martyrdom.” The gist of his teaching was that gnostics who walked in the footsteps of the apostles should be sinless and, out of love to the Lord, to love their brother also so that, if occasion should come they would “drink the cup” without stumbling. One who “ascends to love,” is really a true martyr and is blessed.

Chapter X addressed the problem of persons eager to offer themselves for martyrdom. He warned that if a person could avoid persecution “but out of daring presents himself for capture” he became an “accomplice in the crime of the persecutor.” In chapter XI he considered the question whether God even cared for Christians since they were persecuted and put to death and he did not prevent it. His response was that God foretold what would happen to the martyrs but he did not wish them to be persecuted. However, he used the situation to prepare martyrs beforehand for their promised inheritance.

Clement made the same complaint against the judicial system we have seen in other apologists. Christians were judged for doing wrong when they had done no wrong and the judges did not care to know anything about them. Judges were influenced by “unwarranted prejudice.” They persecuted Christians on the supposition that by merely being Christian they sinned against life in their conduct.

But what about the love and forgiveness Christ had taught? Loving one’s enemies did not mean loving the wickedness they did. It meant loving them because they were persons, “the work of God” (chapter XIII). In chapter XIV of the *Miscellanies*, under the title “The Love of All, even our Enemies,” Clement said that it was inevitable that those who confess Christ would find themselves in the middle of the devil’s work and as a result would suffer hostile treatment. The death of the martyrs seemed foolish to some. Yes, in the sight of men they were being punished, but in fact they were “full of immortality.” They were chastened a little but they had been proven by God to be worthy of himself, worthy to be called sons, like gold purified in the furnace and accepted as a “whole burned-offering of sacrifice” (chapter XVI).

In chapter XXI Clement described the perfect man or gnostic [i.e. a wise or knowledgeable one]. He wrote:

And now we perceive where, and how, and when the divine apostle mentions the perfect man, and how he shows the differences of the perfect...Such being the case, the prophets are perfect in prophecy, the righteous in righteousness, and martyrs in confession, and others in preaching, not because they are not sharers in the common virtues, but are proficient in those to which they are appointed.

So, the martyr is perfect in his witnessing.

Ghanaian theologian Kwame Bediako pinpointed Clement's interest in the gospel and what that meant in his culture. He wrote:

For [Clement], the immense attractiveness of the Christian Gospel lies in the belief that it fulfills the aspirations that lay behind the intellectual and moral critique of philosophers of the popular religion and its mythology. The Gospel not only confirmed that rejection of the conception of divinity offered by the myth makers, but also provided converts with the spiritual dynamic and the intellectual integrity to pursue the life of godly piety which was the goal of the quest for the truth.¹⁰⁵

An Assessment of Clement of Alexander's Thought on Persecution and Martyrdom

Clement's perspective and underlying theology is found in short statements spread throughout Book IV of his *Stromata*. His premise was that it was inevitable those who confess Christ would suffer hostile treatment because they would find they were in the middle of the devil's work.

Martyrdom had two meanings for Clement. The first type of martyr was a person who died because of witness for Christ. The second was a person who had rejected the world. The latter was poor because of righteousness and loved righteousness above all else in the world. A martyr was perfect in witnessing just as prophets were perfect in prophesying. Each was proficient in what he or she was called to do.

Christians were blessed when they were hated for Christ's sake and the Christian gnostic martyrs did not hate their persecutors. Each instance of trial was an occasion for witnessing. It was inappropriate for Christians to seek martyrdom, especially when they had the opportunity to escape it. To seek persecution was to enter into the crime of the persecutor. God did not desire that Christians be persecuted, but foretold what would happen to his followers.

So, Clement emphasized two things, neither entirely new to the history of the apologetics of persecution and martyrdom but perhaps more clearly stated. He identified a ‘living’ martyr as one who has rejected the world and lived as though dead to the world, and he admonished against seeking the martyrdom of death.

Origen’s Thought on Persecution and Martyrdom

Origen was raised in the context of persecution. His father was martyred when Origen was seventeen years old and he would have rushed out to join his father as a martyr had his mother not hidden his clothes. He was born c. AD 185 in the city of Alexandria and as a young man became the student of Clement of Alexandria and was appointed the head of the Catechetical School of Alexandria. He was forced from Alexandria and went to Caesarea. Eventually he was imprisoned during a time of persecution and died from his injuries a couple of years after his arrest, torture, and release.

Although prone to heresy (some of his writings were condemned by an early church council) Origen is considered a great theologian because he was the first to develop a truly systematic Christian theology. His goal was to make theology understandable and intelligible to the pagan. By observing the success of systems developed by heretical gnostics, he learned the value of systemized theology and he set out to create one, which was the reason for he wrote his treatise *On First Principles*. Before Origen’s day, there was little doctrinal consensus. He sought to change that. The only section of his *First Principles* that relates to martyrdom is found in book IV, where Origen wrote:

And yet there are throughout the whole world— throughout all Greece, and all foreign countries— countless individuals who have abandoned the laws of their country, and those whom they had believed to be gods, and have yielded themselves up to the obedience of the law of Moses, and to the discipleship and worship of Christ; and have done this, not without exciting against themselves the intense hatred of the worshipers of images, so as frequently to be exposed to cruel tortures from the latter, and sometimes even to be put to death. And yet they embrace, and with all affection preserve, the words and teaching of Christ.

And we may see, moreover, how that religion itself grew up in a short time, making progress by the punishment and death of its worshipers, by the plundering

of their goods, and by the tortures of every kind which they endured; and this result is the more surprising, that even the teachers of it themselves neither were men of skill, nor very numerous; and yet these words are preached throughout the whole world, so that Greeks and Barbarians, wise and foolish, adopt the doctrines of the Christian religion.¹⁰⁶

As mentioned earlier, there were two approaches to the defense of the faith in the early church. The first was through witness by way of martyrdom. Origen believed that martyrdom had persuasive power in bringing pagans to the light and truth. The second defense was through apologetics which presented truth to counter the rumors and heresies rampant in the Roman world. Origen participated in both approaches, although the majority of his work was in writing apologetics and doctrinal treatises. His ability to articulate the faith shone when he faced the challenge to create a system of doctrine and again when he set out to refute Celsus, the first serious critic of Christianity. Origen's *Contra Celsus* is lengthy and well-reasoned.

*Origen's An Exhortation to Martyrdom*¹⁰⁷

Origen's *Exhortation to Martyrdom* was addressed to Ambrose and Protoctetus. No longer babes in Christ, he told them they could now expect that which was prophesied for athletes: "affliction upon affliction." But "affliction upon affliction" opened the door to "hope upon hope." The sufferings Christians encountered were considered "light momentary affliction" (2 Cor. 4:17) when compared to the glory to come. While persecutors sought to focus the attention of persecuted Christians on their own sufferings, martyrs instead turned their minds toward the prizes and rewards they expected to receive if they endured. His counsel to the persecuted, should their soul begin to pull back, was to let the mind of Christ be in them so they could hear the words "hope in God" (Is. 42:11).

Eventually Origen moved to the topic of denial. If "every evil word is an abomination to the Lord," how great an evil would be the "evil word of denial"—proclaiming loyalty to another god which had no existence. Christians would be confronted by an enemy who sought to trick them into bowing down to a false god like the sun or moon; or, they might be approached by an impious prophet who would try to convince them that some teaching was the Word of God when it was not. At that point they should become like deaf men.

In chapter XI of his text on martyrdom, Origen offered ways for his readers to fill up his or her confession, especially in response to the devil placing in their hands “any plausible argument urging us to conduct [that would be] hostile to our martyrdom.”

Christians had the covenants of God. Each was therefore to deny himself, to take up their cross, and follow him. So, long ago they should have denied themselves and said, “I no longer live” (Galatians 2:20). “If we wish to save our soul in order to get back better than a soul, let us lose it by our martyrdom.” This statement needs some explanation. Origen regarded souls as fallen minds.¹⁰⁸ “For if we lose it for Christ’s sake, casting it at His feet in a death for Him, we shall gain possession of true salvation for it.” Perhaps “better than a soul” refers to a redeemed mind.

Origen spent much time talking about the rewards of those who gave up kindred, houses, and possessions for Christ—they would receive a “manifold” or “hundred-fold” reward. He hoped to leave much behind if he was a martyr so that he could receive much. Martyrs were to be given “manifold” spiritual blessings a well. Priority of blessing, he thought, went to those who had rejected the normal attachments that people have in this life. He wrote:

Therefore just as it is right for those who have not been tested with torture and sufferings to yield first to those who have demonstrated their endurance in instruments of torture, in different sorts of racks, and in fire, so also the argument suggests that we poor, even if we become martyrs, should get out of the front seats for you who because of your love for God in Christ trample upon the deceitful fame most people seek, upon such great possession, and upon affliction for your children. (Rowan, *Origen*, ‘Exhortation,’ 52).

In chapter XXVIII Origen wrote that there would be a great theater filled with spectators who would watch the martyrs undergoing their contests and witness their summons to martyrdom. He recounted the story of the many sons martyred in the Book of Maccabees. The mother of the sons bore the news of their sufferings and deaths with good courage. Origen commented: “We can also learn from this what martyrdom is like and how much confidence toward God it produces” (Rowan, *Origen*, ‘Exhortation,’ 59).

After a discussion of “the cup,” referring to Christ’s sufferings at death, Origen quoted Mark 10:38 in which Jesus asked two of his disciples whether they were able to drink the cup he was about to drink or to be baptized with the baptism he would receive. Origen was calling this

baptism a baptism of martyrdom (chapter XXXI, or 61 in Rowan). From this he drew an unwarranted conclusion. “Just as the Savior’s [baptism of martyrdom] brought cleansing to the world, may not also [our baptism of martyrdom] serve to cleanse many.” Just as the priests of the Old Testament “thought they were ministering forgiveness of sins to the people by the blood of goats and bulls (Hebrews 9:13, 10:4; Psalm 50:13), so also the souls who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus (Revelation 20:4, 6:9) did not serve the heavenly altar in vain and minister forgiveness to people praying for forgiveness” (62). He was teaching that it was martyrs who dispensed forgiveness to people who prayed for forgiveness. This was not even *implied* in Scripture. Jesus alone dispenses forgiveness for sins through the Holy Spirit. [See John 20:22,23]

In chapter XXXIV of *An Exhortation to Martyrdom*, Origen quoted various verses in which Christ spoke about future persecution of his disciples and how even family members would rise up against others because of rejected witness to Christ, leading to the martyrdoms of some. No one, he said, would enter into martyrdom except by the providence of God (Matthew 10:29-33).

Chapter XL examined the obverse side of persecution—the potential for denying one’s faith. Origen drew an analogy from 1 Corinthians 10:21 in which Paul said that Christians cannot eat or drink at the table of the Lord and the table of demons at the same time. You had to be on one side or the other. Origen thought that to deny Christ was to sit at the table of demons.

If you had passed from death to life (unbelief to faith), he taught, you shouldn’t be surprised if the world responded with hatred. He quoted 1 John 3:16 which reminded early Christians that Christ had laid down his life for them. Origen urged his readers to lay down their lives for others in the same way, especially for those who would be built up by seeing Christians martyred. Martyrs should take encouragement through the sufferings of Christ, whose encouragement abounded toward them. “Those who share in suffering will also share in the comfort in proportion to the suffering they share with Christ” (Rowan, 72).

Origen alluded to a martyr or group of martyrs being led under guard in a procession before the world. He said it was “celebrating a triumph rather than being led in triumph” (Rowan, 73). “For,” he wrote, “the martyrs in Christ disarm the principalities and powers with Him, and they share His triumph as fellows of His sufferings, becoming in this way also a fellow of the courageous deeds wrought in His suffering” (cf. Colossians 2:15). These deeds include

triumphing over the principalities and powers, “which in a short time you will see conquered and put to shame” (Rowan, 73).

Unfortunately, Origen resorted to a teaching unsubstantiated in Scriptures. He said that just as some people were redeemed through the precious blood of Jesus, some would be redeemed by the precious blood of martyrs, since martyrs were exalted above the righteous who did not become martyrs. John 12:52, which he quoted as his authority, had nothing to say about martyrs. It referred to Jesus only (Rowan, 79). However, Origen did make an acceptable comment regarding this: “Let us, then, glorify God, exalting Him by our death, since the martyr will glorify God by his own death” (Rowan, 79).

Origen’s Response to *The True Doctrine* by Celsus

The True Doctrine by Celsus was devoted to countering every aspect of Christian thought, teaching, and life. Most of it was accusatory, without solid substance or documentary evidence to support its argument. Origen seemed to think that, whether Celsus was serious opponent or just a crank, he needed a response. At the very least Celsus’s writings gave Origen an opportunity for articulating Christian faith and belief, which he did in great detail.

Here and there, Origen’s reply to Celsus touched upon Christian martyrdom or answered accusations that frequently got Christians martyred. For example, Celsus accused Christians of being a secret society (with the insinuation they were up to no good) when in reality, according to Origen, Christians were discreet in meeting together because of the tremendous prejudice and bias against them. They were merely avoiding unnecessary trouble. Origen later took a different approach, defending secret societies as necessary under certain circumstances.

For this paper’s development of a theology of martyrdom, it is not necessary to present Origen’s reasoning against Celsus in great detail. He did, however, intersperse some relevant statements among his other arguments.

In chapter LII, for example, he gave an insightful explanation for the difficulty people had of changing their cultural opinions, an explanation that shed light on why the Roman population occasionally turned against Christians, gripped by the standing idea that, because Christians did not honor the gods, they were bringing harm to Rome. In this case, Origen was commenting on Jewish reluctance to hear and understand the prophecies and miracles of Jesus. Although not speaking of the Roman situation, his reasoning can be applied to it. He explained:

Strife and prejudice are powerful instruments in leading men to disregard even those things which are abundantly clear; so that they who have somehow become familiar with certain opinions, which have deeply imbued their minds, and stamped them with a certain character, will not give them up. For a man will abandon his habits in respect to other things, although it may be difficult for him to tear himself from them, more easily than he will surrender his opinions. Nay, even the former are not easily put aside by those who have become accustomed to them; and so neither houses, nor cities, nor villages, nor intimate acquaintances, are willingly forsaken when we are prejudiced in their favor. This, therefore, was a reason why many of the Jews at that time disregarded the clear testimony of the prophecies, and miracles which Jesus wrought, and of the sufferings which He is related to have endured.

In book II of *Contra Celsus*, Origen took up the claims of certain heretics (Docetists and gnostics) that Jesus had only appeared to undergo his sufferings. Origen promptly affirmed that Jesus did indeed suffer and die in the flesh. A physical death was essential to the teaching of a real and genuine resurrection from the dead, a cornerstone of Christian belief (Chapter 16). Death had no more dominion over Christ and he could not suffer death in the future. Origen referred to the sufferings of Christ again in chapters 23 and 25. In Origen's reasoning, having assumed a human body at birth, Jesus had voluntarily assumed the ability to suffer. The implication, of course, was that having endured true suffering he therefore could sympathize with the suffering of his followers and was a true example to them.

The portion of book III of *Contra Celsus* that most directly relates to a theology of persecution and martyrdom is found in Chapters 7 and 8. Celsus had begun with the premise that the Hebrews were originally Egyptians who rebelled against Egypt, and he made the ridiculous statement that Jesus led a group of Jews to rebel against the Jewish state. Origen immediately refuted this by saying that Jesus did not teach that it was appropriate to use violence against anyone, no matter how wicked the person might be. Jesus taught that his disciples would be slain as sheep and that on no occasion were they to resist their persecutors. Since they were not to defend themselves for their faith, many endured death; but God, in his providence, never allowed

Christians to be totally eliminated. God restricted the violence and rage against Christians to preserve them.

Aside from the few statements given above, the rest of Origen's eight books in response to Celsus do not provide material for a theology of persecution and martyrdom, except a statement at the end, in book VIII, where Origen wrote:

When God gives to the tempter permission to persecute us, then we suffer persecution; and when God wishes us to be free from suffering, even in the midst of a world that hates us, we enjoy a wonderful peace, trusting in the protection of Him who said, 'Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.' And truly He has overcome the world. Wherefore the world prevails only so long as it is the pleasure of Him who received from the Father power to overcome the world; and from His victory we take courage (Chapter 70).

An Assessment of Origen's Thought on Persecution and Martyrdom

Origen's theology of persecution and martyrdom was a small part of his large body of work, although he did devote a whole treatise to the subject of martyrdom. He personally experienced martyrdom and also wrote in defense of the faith, both of which were aspects of witness frequently exhibited in the early church.

The cornerstone of Origen's thought was that one could expect persecution and sufferings, as explained in his discussion of "affliction upon affliction." But he also emphasized "hope upon hope" that comes as a result of "affliction upon affliction" and the rewards for those who suffered great losses for their witness.

He believed martyrdom produced confidence in God and that persecution and martyrdom only happened if God allowed them. These came not by the will of man but by the providence of God.

As would other theologians of persecution and martyrdom, he reiterated that Christians were not to take vengeance upon their persecutors, but were, as Jesus said, to be slain as defenseless sheep. Christians were not to defend themselves but to submit to martyrdom.

He drew an unfortunate conclusion regarding the redemptive aspects of martyrdom. He believed that martyrs could cleanse and forgive sins because they were dying for Christ and so he assumed their deaths were as efficacious as Christ's.

CHAPTER 4: THIRD AND FOURTH CENTURIES

Cyprian of Carthage's Thought on Persecution and Martyrdom

Cyprian's thoughts can be classified most readily as pastoral encouragement and instruction or as pastoral theology. He not only dealt with the practical issues arising from persecution of his flock, which suffered through much of his life, but he also dealt with factions opposing his leadership when he disciplined those who had denied Christ during persecution. He also had to answer those who faulted his own response to persecution. Cyprian eventually died a martyr's death.

Cyprian was born to wealthy pagan parents and was educated in law, which he practiced before his conversion to Christianity in 246. In early 250 he was elected bishop of Carthage. He was immediately confronted with a wave of persecution under Emperor Decius. Cyprian went into hiding. During his absence, thousands of Christians compromised their faith by obtaining a *libellus*, which declared that they had sacrificed to pagan gods (whether they actually had or not). As the persecution cooled down, the confessors (those who remained faithful but were not martyred), began to allow lapsed Christians back into the church with a full pardon. Cyprian and other clergy in Carthage demanded that these lapsed Christians show repentance and penance before they were readmitted to fellowship. Subsequently two rival bishops were elected by factions unhappy with Cyprian's solution. (One group considered him too lenient, the other too harsh.) Eventually Cyprian called a council to deal with the issue and the council sided with him saying baptisms by the splinter groups were invalid, but the bishop of Rome (pope) overruled the council's decision on baptism. Ultimately Cyprian's policy of restoring the lapsed following discipline prevailed because of its moderation.

Cyprian wrote *Exhortation to Martyrdom* to prepare his people for impending persecution and needed the instruction himself. Brought before Roman proconsul Aspasius Paternus, he refused to sacrifice to the gods, firmly testifying to his faith in Christ. At that point he was banished but was later imprisoned and sentenced to die. He was beheaded near the city of Carthage, becoming the first bishop-martyr of Africa. Pontius the Deacon wrote the *Life and Passion of St. Cyprian* as a tribute to the bishop who had been a sterling example to his flock,

capping his teaching with martyrdom. In Pontius's work one can read about Cyprian's arrest, persecution, and execution.

Cyprian was a prolific writer and much of what he wrote dealt with martyrdom and contained instruction and encouragement for his suffering flock. Along with his *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, Cyprian wrote letters to various confessors and to those designated to be martyrs.

Exhortation to Martyrdom

Cyprian's *Exhortation* was exactly what he said it would be, a compendium of Scriptures to help strengthen the minds of brethren who were experiencing persecution. He wrote to Fortunatus that "persecutions and afflictions" were heavy upon them. He wanted to provide support for those engaged in the ongoing spiritual conflict. To illustrate his case, he developed the analogy of a soldier preparing for battle who must first be trained in the field. He was confident that when a Christian "soldier" engaged in spiritual warfare and was confronted by the enemy he would conquer because of Christ, the unconquered.

Cyprian wished to set down only those things God had spoken—those exhortations of Christ to his servants and martyrs. Divine precepts must be supplied to arm combatants in the spiritual war, he thought. He spoke about two baptisms—one of water (for the forgiveness of sins) and the other a baptism of the blood of martyrs, who would receive a "crown of virtue."

The thirteen major points of the *Exhortation* were each supported by Scripture quotes. The first eight sections prohibited idol worship, a theme common to other theologies of persecution and martyrdom because Christian refusal to worship false gods was at stake. Parts nine through thirteen were more focused on the topic of martyrdom, although few words were actually Cyprian's, because he filled the sections with quote after quote of Scripture. The purpose of persecution, he said, was to "prove us" (section 9). Therefore persecution was not to be feared (section 10). Christ had predicted that his followers would undergo persecution (section 11). The final two sections of the *Exhortation* were about home and rewards. Cyprian wrote:

If to soldiers of this world it is glorious to return in triumph to their country when the foe is vanquished, how much more excellent and greater is the glory, when the devil is overcome, to return in triumph to paradise, and to bring back victorious trophies to that place whence Adam was ejected as a sinner, after casting down him

who formerly had cast him down; to offer to God the most acceptable gift—an uncorrupted faith, and an unyielding virtue of mind, an illustrious praise of devotion; to accompany Him when He shall come to receive vengeance from His enemies, to stand at His side when He shall sit to judge, to become co-heir of Christ, to be made equal to the angels; with the patriarchs, with the apostles, with the prophets, to rejoice in the possession of the heavenly kingdom! Such thoughts as these, what persecution can conquer, what tortures can overcome? (section 13).

Epistle VIII To the Martyrs and Confessors

Cyprian's eighth epistle was a letter of commendation to those who had stood firm amid persecution but it also included instructions to those who might subsequently face persecution and martyrdom. Spiritual combat had increased by the time Cyprian wrote this but, as he saw it, the glory of the combatants in this spiritual war had increased also. Cyprian declared the martyrs had proved stalwart against the worst tortures. The fear of tortures did not deter them but rather tortures had acted as a stimulant to brave and firm contention in the most extreme conflict. "The tortured," wrote Cyprian, "stood more brave than the torturers." Those spiritual warriors had undergone "the sharpest examination by torture" yet had not yielded to their sufferings. Their sufferings, in fact, had yielded to them. As the "examination of torture" grew more intense, it did not overthrow the steadfast martyrs but facilitated in sending "the men of God more quickly to the Lord."

Cyprian graphically described the tortures undergone by those brave men and he assured them that the death of martyrs is precious in the sight of God. Martyrs would receive a crown as a reward, he promised. Cyprian offered his pastoral advice:

I not only beseech but exhort the rest of you, that you all should follow that martyr now most blessed, and the other partners of that engagement, soldiers and comrades, steadfast in faith, patient in suffering, victors in tortures, that those who are united at once by the bond of confession, and the entertainment of a dungeon, may also be united in the consummation of their virtue and a celestial crown.

And he laid out his recommendations for those who might soon face similar persecution:

If the battle shall call you out, if the day of your contest shall come engage bravely, fight with constancy, as knowing that you are fighting under the eyes of a

present Lord, that you are attaining by the confession of His name to His own glory; who is not such a one as that He only looks on His servants, but He Himself also wrestles in us, Himself is engaged, Himself also in the struggles of our conflict not only crowns, but is crowned. But if before the day of your contest, of the mercy of God, peace shall supervene, let there still remain to you the sound will and the glorious conscience. Nor let any one of you be saddened as if he were inferior to those who before you have suffered tortures, have overcome the world and trodden it under foot, and so have come to the Lord by a glorious road.

If the battle came to them and they died, they would receive crowns, promised Cyprian. Wrapping up his advice, he assured his readers that if in God's providence peace should come and they did not die as martyrs, they shouldn't be sad, but allow God's will to be done and accept it.

Epistle XXIV To Moyes and Maximus and the Rest of the Confessors

Cyprian had high praise for Moyes, Maximus, and other confessors, "the most brave and blessed brethren." He declared they had become "chiefs and leaders" in the spiritual battle that was presently being waged, and had set the standard for "celestial warfare." They had exhibited valor, "unshaken strength and unyielding firmness." They had broken through the first onset of the rising war.

Epistle XXIV was a letter of congratulation for their strength and discipline in the face of opposition and persecution. The prospect of spiritual victory was clear.

Epistle XXV Moyes, Maximus, Nicostatus and the other Confessors answer the forgoing letter (250)

The confessors were in a difficult situation when they received Cyprian's letter, but they were able to describe its words as their "chief consolation." By God's providence they had been shut up for a long time in prison bound by chains and were sad. But Cyprian's letter "vigorously animated" them so that they might with more earnestness seek to attain the destined crown. Cyprian's letter showed them the bright and growing light which they described in a variety of ways—like a calm in the midst of the tempest, tranquility in the midst of a trouble sea, a repose in labors, etc.

They were especially comforted and refreshed with Cyprian's description of the deaths of the martyrs. They saw from his letters the "glorious triumphs of the martyrs." It raised their spirits and inflamed them to follow "the track of such dignity." For what, they asked, was more glorious and blessed than to be able to confess the Lord God in death before one's executioners?

Epistle LXXVI Cyprian to Nemesianus and other Martyrs in the Mines

In Epistle LXXVI Cyprian regretted that circumstances did not allow him to visit Nemesianus and other martyrs in the mines. He noted that some had already experienced martyrdom and had received their crowns. Others were experiencing delays so that their tortures had become tedious but they had responded by being strengthened and by arming other brethren for what was about to befall them. The delay of death merely added to the number of heavenly rewards the sufferers would receive.

He applauded them for their good deeds—both the confession of their mouths and the suffering of their bodies. It had the effect of encouraging other brethren to divine martyrdom. Their example to the flock was as leaders of virtue so that their example complemented the example of their pastors, so that they will be "crowned with the like merits of obedience by the Lord."

Cyprian described their incarceration, bound in fetters with "disgraceful" chains. For men dedicated to God, those fetters were ornaments not chains, he declared. The feet of Christians were not in bonds because of infamy, but were there for glory and a crown. He reminded those being persecuted that "temporal and brief suffering" would be exchanged for "a bright and eternal honor."

Cyprian believed they must be experiencing a "victorious consciousness," an exultation of feeling with triumph in their breasts because they stood near the promised reward of God. They walked in the mines with bodies captive to chains but with hearts reigning because they knew Christ was present and rejoicing in the endurance of his servants. They expected with joy that each day would be the day of their departure, "hastening to the rewards of martyrdom and to their divine homes which are in the purest light to receive glory greater than all the conflicts and sufferings of this world."

Epistle LXXVII The Reply of Nemesianus, Dativus, Felix, and Victor to Cyprian

The confessors who received Cyprian's encouraging letter had a high estimation of Cyprian's character and appreciated his words of encouragement. They thought perhaps they would also see their beloved teacher, Cyprian, attain a crown of martyrdom. In the meantime he was having a tremendous input into the confession of the confessors as they stood before Roman authorities. He had counseled them what to say before the proconsul. The confessors used the analogy of spiritual warfare to describe their current spiritual situation. At the sound of the trumpet, they said, Cyprian had stirred up God's soldiers, furnishing them with heavenly arms; and in close fighting, they had "slain the devil with the spiritual sword." He had ordered the troops of the brethren who sowed snares on all sides for the enemy. The confessors believed that Cyprian's innocent spirit was not far from its hundred-fold reward. His example of confession, which first spoke of "martyr-witness" "provoked others to acts of martyrdom by its example."

Epistle LXXX Cyprian to Sergius, Rogatianus, and Other Confessors in Prison

In another letter, Cyprian congratulated Sergius, Rogatianus, and other men for their ability to "persevere strongly and steadily" in their testimony of heavenly glory. He described them as having entered "the way of the Lord's condescension," or the way of humble servanthood which blesses mankind, and now they walked in the strength of the Spirit to receive their crowns, with the Lord as their guide and protector.

He exhorted them to let nothing occupy their minds except the "divine precepts and heavenly commands" by which the Holy Spirit was able to enliven them to endure suffering. He counseled them to think not of death but immortality, not of their temporary punishment but the eternal glory that awaited them. The Scripture, he said, speaks of torture as consecrating God's martyrs, sanctifying them in their trial of suffering.

So what does the future glory hold? They shall judge and reign with Christ. Consequently he urged them to tread underfoot their present sufferings in the joy of what will be coming. Cyprian noted that from the very beginning of the world it had been appointed that the righteous should suffer, with Abel as the first example of this, followed by numerous prophets, righteous persons, and apostles. Romans 8:18 says that present suffering is in no way comparable to the glory which is to come.

So, he exhorted them to set their whole heart only on the future and have contempt for the present, so that they “may be able to come to the fruit of the eternal kingdom.”

On the Lapsed Treatise 3

Cyprian began *On the Lapsed* with praise to God for those who had withstood persecution and had been victorious. These stalwart confessors were an example to the brethren who would follow them, he said. They rested on heavenly precepts and suffered tortures, banishment, confiscation of property, and were not terrified by any of these. Cyprian was concerned that no one depreciate their glory.

However, now that persecution had ceased and there had been a long peace, discipline in the church had become corrupted. During peace Christians had sought to increase their wealth and property and there seemed to be little interest in holding a line regarding those who had denied Christ during persecution. So, the lapses he was addressing were both a failure to affirm Christ by those who denied Christ under persecution and a lapse of discipline in the church that allowed an easy return to the fold to those who had denied Christ.

In section 7 Cyprian exhorted the church with God’s precepts and commandments; and, in reference to deniers, said. “Did He not before ordain both for those who deny Him eternal punishments, and for those that confess Him saving rewards?” in section 8, he said those who had denied Christ have “immolated your salvation.” Strong words! He was trying to make the lapsed aware that although they had not publicly acknowledged their sin, they nevertheless had already paid a spiritual price for their denial.

In section 13, he sympathized with those who failed and denied Christ because they were broken by torture and by “long-term sufferings.” When these persons pled for forgiveness, their plea was understandable. Such an apology could inspire other believers. But in section 14 he spoke against those who had not faced such tortures but had denied Christ of their own free-will. These persons needed to pray the prayer of repentance for the atonement of their sins. It was not the place of priests to easily give such persons concessions but rather to provide them with real remedies that would lead to their salvation. What had happened instead was that those deniers had been easily readmitted to Communion without showing real repentance. Their spirits had been soothed and as a result they didn’t face their sin which consequently receded into their

memory and was forgotten. Subsequently they had taken Communion unworthily, which was to their spiritual and physical detriment (section 15).

Cyprian considered what was happening to the lapsed as another form of persecution. In this case, Satan had quietly corrupted them by hushing their laments, silencing their grief, causing the memory of their sin to pass away and the groaning of their heart to be repressed. They no longer wept over their betrayal. This was deadlier than physical persecution because it was their spirits rather than their bodies that died. There was no victory over this spiritual persecution.

Cyprian reminded his readers that humans cannot pardon sin. Only the Lord can have mercy on sins committed against him. The Lord would be appeased by the prayer of atonement offered by those who repented of their sins. But those church officials who in haste had given remission of sin to all, had done no favor for the lapsed but had actually done them harm. Cyprian asked: How dare a human rescind the Lord's precepts?

In section 20, Cyprian enunciated a clear description of the principle from which he worked:

If they who deny shall not be guilty of a crime, neither shall they who confess receive the reward of a virtue. Again, if faith which has conquered be crowned, it is of necessity that faithlessness which is conquered should be punished.

Cyprian's deepest concern was that the behavior of the lapsed and those who easily reinstated the lapsed took away the dignity of the martyrs, degrading their glories and crowns.

One group Cyprian mentioned with particular concern: those who had not actually sacrificed to idols but had obtained certificates saying they had, thus avoiding persecution and martyrdom. They believed they were not guilty of idol worship but Cyprian held a different view. To him it seemed those persons really had denied the Lord, disavowing what they had been (section 27). Worse, those persons thought that God was like people who believed they could avoid the penalty of a crime by not openly admitting it. Cyprian entreated them to confess their sin while they were still in this world. He exhorted them to turn to the Lord with their whole heart, expressing repentance for their sin, and seeking the Lord's mercy.

An Assessment of Cyprian's Thought on Persecution and Martyrdom

Cyprian immersed himself completely in the role of bishop and pastor of his flock. During the years he held office, his church suffered persecution.

His writings were meant to prepare and steady his flock during that time of trouble, for some of his flock were imprisoned and became martyrs. He attempted to provide spiritual support for the “soldiers” engaged in spiritual conflict. He tried to succor them through the presentation of divine precepts that would guide them through the fray, not least by reminding them of the prohibition against idol worship, which was the focal point of Rome’s conflict with Christians.

Some of his letters (e.g.: Epistle VIII) were commendations to confessors who had remained faithful during persecution. He had high praise for them because he believed they were examples to the rest of the flock. The evidence indicates his letters provided consolation and inspiration to those imprisoned in the mines and dungeons. His letters were an effective means of mentoring and encouraging those who were designated to be martyrs.

After persecution died down, Cyprian faced a different challenge. Many Christians lapsed in their discipline. He was most concerned with Church leaders who were inappropriately admitting back into the church those who had denied Christ during intense persecution and doing so without proof of genuine repentance. He did not feel such action was appropriate. Cyprian felt that easy readmission to the church diminished the glory of those who had remained faithful and had been martyred.

Athanasius: Persecution within the Church and State

Athanasius did not want to be a bishop, especially with the challenges he knew he would have to face. But he was made bishop by popular demand in Alexandria, Egypt, where he had been born in 297 into a Christian family. Although an Egyptian, Athanasius spoke and wrote Greek fluently.

Even before he was raised to the office of bishop, Athanasius anticipated the great doctrinal controversies of his day, authoring *Against the Heathen* and *On the Incarnation*. In those books, he articulated teachings that councils would adopt as orthodox theology regarding the nature of Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the Trinity.

As a young man Athanasius had come under the tutelage of Alexander, Bishop of Alexandria. He was possibly a student at the famous catechetical school of Alexandria where Clement and Origen had taught. Bishop Alexander invited Athanasius to become his secretary and ordained him as a deacon in 319. Athanasius accompanied the bishop to the First Council of Nicea in 325. It was Athanasius who suggested the word “consubstantial” or *homoousia*, which meant that Christ was the same substance as the Father. It was adopted and a faith statement was drawn up by Hosius of Cordoba. That word formed the test for orthodoxy in the Western church from that point on. His theological battle then and afterward was with Arius, a Libyan, who taught that Christ was subordinate to the Father and was *made* not *begotten*. This theology, known as Arianism, was prominent in Alexandria and was supported by several bishops and influential Christian leaders across the church and throughout the empire.

When Athanasius was consecrated as bishop in 326 at the age of thirty, he was stepping into one of the leading sees of the early church, becoming one of the five patriarchs. He was also stepping into decades of theological controversy during which he would be exiled five times for a total of over seventeen years. Several times he had to flee Alexandria to escape threats on his life. All of this gave rise to the saying *Athanasius contra mundum* or “Athanasius against the world.”

Despite his many sufferings, he did not die a martyr, but passed away peacefully in Alexandria, surrounded by faithful supporters and fellow clergymen. He experienced persecution, but ultimately survived it, as did his theology—which helped define orthodox Christianity for the ages.

On the Incarnation

Athanasius shone as an important theologian and apologist in his theological treatise *On the Incarnation*. It is relevant to this study on persecution because of passages dealing with Christ’s death. Athanasius’s preferred term for the second Person of the Trinity was the “Word”—“the Word of the Father is Himself divine,” he asserted at the very beginning of the treatise.

The idea that the Word became incarnated was much maligned by Jews, Greeks, and unbelievers, who “pour scorn on Him,” so Athanasius built a case to show the need for the incarnation. Humanity had turned toward evil and that choice was having serious and obvious

consequences. The human race was devolving into destruction. Athanasius asked, “What then was God, being Good, to do?” There were critics who said that since the path to destruction was not being curbed it indicated that God was limited. Athanasius explained: “It was impossible [under the circumstances], therefore, that God should leave mankind to be carried off by corruption, because it would be unfitting and unworthy of Himself” (section 6).

The purpose of the incarnation was the salvation of humanity. More specifically, it was to recreate in humanity the image of God bestowed on mankind at creation but lost [or at least severely damaged] at the Fall. It would require suffering on the part of the incarnated Word to accomplish this. Therefore Christ assumed a human body capable of death, death being the only remedy for ridding humanity of the corruption of sin and evil.

Athanasius further explained:

Much more, then, the Word of the All-good Father was not unmindful of the human race He had called to be; but rather, by the offering of His own body He abolished the death which they had incurred, and corrected their neglect by His own teaching. Thus by His own power He restored the whole nature of man” (section 10).

The first cause for Christ becoming a man, therefore, was because of humanity’s need for salvation (section 10). In chapter 4, Athanasius dealt with the death of Christ. Significantly for the one who had created the world, when Christ was on the cross, the sky grew dark and there was an earthquake. It was the response of the universe to the death of its Master. It was a vivid testimony by creation to the deity of the Incarnated Word dying on the cross.

The second reason why the Word was incarnated was so that he could be a sacrifice on behalf of all mankind, to settle humanity’s account with death and to free them from their transgression. He proved mightier than death, showing that he was incorruptible and becoming the “first-fruits of the resurrection.” The indwelling of the Word in a human body released it from its natural liability to corruption so corruption did not touch the body of the Word. “The death of all was consummated in the Lord’s body; yet, because the Word was in it, death and corruption were in the same act utterly abolished” (section 20).

In chapter 5 then, Athanasius examined the significance of the Resurrection. The death of the Word on the cross was the only way to accomplish the salvation of the world. Christ died in sight of all creation so that the world would know that he truly died. So that no one could deny

that he was completely dead, he remained in the grave two days and when he rose from the dead on the third, he showed no signs of corruption. His body was incorruptible and impassable.

A strong proof of the power of Christ's death on the cross was that Christ's disciples afterward trampled on death rather than feared it. Believers trod it underfoot and preferred to die rather than to deny their faith. They knew they would not perish but would become incorruptible through their resurrection. One indication of the impotence of death was the effect it had on former unbelievers. Athanasius reported: "Indeed, there have been many former unbelievers and deriders who, after they became believers, so scorned death as even themselves to become martyrs for Christ's sake" (Section 28).

Apology of our Holy Father Athanasius, Archbishop of Alexandria, in Vindication of His Flight, when He was Persecuted by Duke Syrianus

This particular treatise is like no other of Athanasius' writings. He was not dealing with theological questions but with the practical question of whether fleeing from persecution was justifiable if one had the opportunity. In writing this he was defending his own flight from persecution. Those who were accusing him of cowardice were the very ones (the Arians and others) who sought to capture him and, presumably—from what was written about their behavior with other opponents—to do him harm. Athanasius pointed out the sins of the Arians in persecuting those who did not agree with them and he made a further point of saying that they were not ashamed of their evil deeds.

Athanasius, much like a boxer, took a number of jabs at the Arians. He said, for example, "For if it be a bad thing to flee, it is much worse to persecute" (Section 8, paragraph 11). In paragraph 12 he wrote: "For no man flees from the gentle and the humane, but from the cruel and the evil-minded." Although Athanasius did not explicitly say it, he insinuated that the Arians had no moral authority to require him to submit to them.

Athanasius supported his actions with numerous illustrations from the Bible of persons fleeing their persecutors, including the Lord Himself. One rationale for fleeing persecution is that there is a designated time for each person to die and if it is not that time, fleeing is perfectly legitimate.

An Assessment of Athanasius' Thought on Persecution and Martyrdom

Athanasius had to work while being harassed and persecuted by heretics in the church or occasionally by Roman officials, including the emperor. His major contribution was to articulate the central doctrines of the Christian faith with clarity and accuracy in spite of and in face of the heretical teachings prevalent in his day. His defense of the faith was also his witness; consequently his legacy continues to the present day. In passing he illuminated a Christian view of persecution.

In Athanasius's day, pagans did not have the upper hand in government and could not overtly persecute, so their opposition to Christians was limited primarily to scoffing at their teachings. Athanasius's writings to the pagans explained Christian teachings to clarify exactly what Christians believed. Athanasius provided context for the pagan practice of idol worship (and insistence that others join them in that worship) by showing that the Fall of humanity led to humankind's spiritual devolution into a depravity which had brought them so low they had even designated creatures as gods. They revered gods made with human hands.

Another error of pagans was to doubt Christ had been both human and divine. The Arian heresy in the church adhered to a similar doubt. To answer both, Athanasius discussed the purpose of the Incarnation and the nature of the Word, the second Person of the Trinity, along with the suffering role he played in the salvation of humanity. Christ assumed a human body that could die so he could be a sacrifice for our sins and conquer death and corruption.

His theological treatise *On the Incarnation* established the orthodox teaching about Christ, the Word of God, second Person of the Trinity and his role in suffering. On a more personal note, Athanasius also defended his flight from persecution, utilizing numerous scriptural precedents and making a solid biblical argument for flight if it was not one's designated time to die.

Methodius of Olympus

Methodius was a Christian bishop who opposed the thinking of the great theologian, Origen, at certain points (for good reason), while still maintaining a high appreciation for Origen as a churchman. Jerome reported that Methodius met his death was under the persecution of Emperor Maximus Daia (311).

Methodius's opposition to Origen centered on the doctrine of the resurrection. Origen taught that the resurrection body would be different than the body a person had in life. Methodius countered by saying that it would be the same body that would be raised incorruptible at the resurrection.

Discourse on the Resurrection

From the *Discourse on the Resurrection* it is clear that Methodius was reacting against the platonic view of the body as evil and as a fetter to the soul. According to Origen, the real person is the soul alone (part 3, IV). Methodius asserted to the contrary that the human is a union of body and soul, and both will be together throughout eternity. "It is evidently absurd to think that the body will not co-exist with the soul in the eternal state" (part 1, III).

Methodius made the point that the universe (all creation) will not be utterly destroyed but will be purified and renewed by fire. Creation, he said, after being restored awaits our redemption from the corruption of the body so that when we have been raised, we will shake off the mortality of the flesh (Part 1, VIII).

Assessment of Methodius for a Theology of Persecution and Martyrdom

The significance of Methodius' thinking for a theology of persecution and martyrdom is that persecuted Christians could find hope in the fact of the resurrection in which their bodies would be raised incorruptible. This teaching would have been encouraging for those undergoing persecution.

CHAPTER 5: FIFTH SIXTH, AND SEVENTH CENTURIES

Theophilus of Antioch's Defense of the Faith

The one writing of Theophilus we have was written to his friend, Autolycus, a pagan, who was skeptical of Christian teachings and laughed at the name "Christian." Even though Autolycus was a friend, Theophilus held nothing back in his counter-arguments against Autolycus's positions, and dealt frankly with his friend's criticism and scoffing.

Theophilus put forth a theology of persecution and martyrdom that was primarily an extensive discussion of the Christian doctrine of God. But at the end of his third book, he took note of the persecution and martyrdom of Christians. He chided Greek historians for not mentioning God in their writings, focusing instead on trivial matters. Not only did Greeks fail to mention the "incorruptible and only God" but they persecuted and killed those who worshiped this God (book III, chapter XXX).

In book I, chapter I Theophilus wrote that his friend had assailed him with empty words about gods who were, in fact, made by human hands. Autolycus had spoken harshly, in a damning manner, about the name "Christian," a name Theophilus called "beloved" and was proud to bear as he served God.

In chapter II Theophilus opened his defense by declaring that Autolycus needed to have his "spiritual eyes" opened. He needed God's help to perceive what cannot be seen by human, fleshly eyes. In a culture of concrete idols, the visual component had a heavy influence on the mind of worshipers. Somehow, Autolycus needed to be able to go beyond the obvious (that which can be seen) to become aware of what could not be seen and therefore was not obvious to the human eye. Theophilus asserted that Autolycus couldn't "see" because there was a dark film of sin and evil spread over his eyes keeping him in darkness. Theophilus explained that "the experience of God was ineffable and indescribable, and could not be seen by eyes of flesh." He continued: "for in glory He is incomprehensible, in greatness unfathomable, in goodness inimitable, in kindness unutterable." He described God by several titles: Light, Wind, Mind, Spirit, Wisdom, Strength, Power, Providence, Kingdom, Lord, Judge, Father, and Fire (chapter III).

Theophilus was attempting to defend and explain the Christian faith to Romans because, subsequent to Christianity's conflict with Judaism, much of the persecution came from Roman misunderstanding of the Christian faith: misunderstanding that could lead to bias and social

prejudice and create the context for persecution. Theophilus therefore sought to refute a number of criticisms commonly leveled against Christianity. One of Theophilus's first endeavors was to make clear that the Christian God was categorically different from the Roman gods (the "no-gods") and that Christians have a truly moral life in spite of the persistently negative rumors about their behaviors and practices. Hence he emphasized God as uncreated and as sole creator, described his own conversion, pointed out absurdities in the writings of the Greek philosophers (especially Plato's), and provided a synopsis of biblical history.

When his friend Autolyclus remained unconvinced, Theophilus felt compelled to write another book—book III. He noted that to Autolyclus, "the word of truth is an idle tale" (chapter I).

In the third book, Theophilus offered more refutation of the Greek and Roman philosophers and discussed the doctrine of God and his law (chapter IX). He showed that God teaches people to act righteously, to be pious, and to do good. He affirmed the antiquity of the biblical view and reproached the Greeks who even gave prizes to those who insulted God. Theophilus wrapped up his arguments with this observation: "Of those who are zealous in the pursuit of virtue and practice a holy life, some they stoned, some they put to death, and up to the present time they subject them to savage tortures." People capable of doing such things had lost the wisdom of God.

An Assessment of Theophilus' Thought on Persecution and Martyrdom

Theophilus added an idea new to the apologetic writings of his day when he declared that Autolyclus needed spiritual insight to be able to comprehend Christian doctrines. The eyes of flesh could not see God because there was a dark film of sin and evil veiling spiritual eyes so that the unsaved could not see or comprehend the truth. People with darkened understanding became persecutors. Perhaps Theophilus intended his readers to see that it was willful darkness that led to persecution.

Boethius' Thoughts on Suffering and Persecution

Boethius was a Roman philosopher of the early sixth century who was serving as a senator by age twenty five and then as a consul. His father and his two sons also served as consuls. Boethius entered the service of Theodoric the Great, king of the Ostogoths, but later lost

favor with the king, who accused him of treason. He was imprisoned and eventually executed. Boethius maintained his innocence and insisted he was the subject of injustice.

A prolific scholar, Boethius had completed translations of Aristotle's works on logic into Latin. He not only translated key philosophical works and important Greek texts on arithmetic, but also wrote a commentary on Porphyry's *Isagoge*, and a textbook on music, works that would be widely used during the Middle Ages. He wrote a number of theological treatises as well.

Boethius is included here not only because he suffered unjustly for advocating in behalf of the rights and freedoms of the Roman Senate against an autocratic ruler, but because of his lengthy exploration of the theme of unjust suffering. He was not a martyr in the usual sense. Although there was a tradition that he died defending the Catholic faith against Arians, there is no historical evidence of this, and even by his own account, he was unjustly accused of treason and unfairly imprisoned.

The Consolation of Philosophy Book I

Boethius wrote *The Consolation of Philosophy* while in prison where he was incarcerated because the king had perceived him as a political threat. A champion of justice and fairness, he had stood up on behalf of the Roman Senate whose freedoms and functions had been greatly restricted by Theodoric, king of the Ostrogoths. Boethius wrote the *Consolation* as an antidote to discouragement. It expressed his feelings about unfair imprisonment and his belief in the value of philosophy in situations such as his. He imagined that he was visited by Lady Philosophy, who discussed his plight with him and probed issues raised by his situation. Boethius' creative genius shone in his portrayal of Lady Philosophy, and his literary scheme allowed him to express his deepest feelings and convey good theological points to his readers. Certain critics have claimed that *The Consolation* is merely philosophy and have denied that theology enters into its discussion. That is not true—the discussion is deeply theological, deeply philosophical, and very personal. In fact, some of Boethius's theological treatises collected in his *Theological Tractates*, are more purely philosophical than *The Consolation*.

Boethius declared himself the victim of false charges. At minimum, his intentions had been misunderstood. Significantly, he would have Lady Philosophy remind him of a number of philosophers who had been unjustly imprisoned, tortured, and killed because of their beliefs. The

intent was that Boethius should encourage himself by recalling men of learning and truth who had suffered at the hands of unscrupulous men. Lady Philosophy explained:

Naught else brought them to ruin but that, being built up in my ways, they appeared at variance with desires of unscrupulous men. So it is no matter for your wonder if, in the sea of life, we are tossed about by storms from all sides; for to oppose evil men is the chief aim we set before ourselves (5).

The words of Lady Philosophy, although penned by Boethius himself, did encourage him. He recounted to Philosophy his desire for public service and noted that (Lady Philosophy and God being his witness), his desire had been to work for “the common welfare of all good men.”

Boethius had sought to serve justice, which he admitted to loving at his own personal risk. He had not considered his own safety or laid aside provision for it. His focus had been on those who suffered unfairly at the hands of others. He suffered alongside them (6). Because, as Boethius said, “I had desired the safety of the Senate” he was accused of treason by persons who were, in fact, out of favor with the King Theodoric but whose testimony against Boethius was accepted anyway. He realized that sometimes in stating one’s beliefs, even if they were true and reliable, one must be discreet, but that had seemed contrary to the needs presented by the situation he had faced. Boethius wrote: “I cannot think it right to hide the truth or assent to falsehood.”

Instead of receiving rewards for honest virtue, he suffered for a deed that he had not committed. For kindness, he had received persecutions, which included being defamed, deprived of his possessions, and the loss of reputation and honor. He cried out to God—“The hurtful penalty is due to crime but falls upon the sinless head” (10). He had not committed the imputed crime and did not think he deserved the punishment.

Lady Philosophy tried to change his state of mind (11). She probed Boethius with questions. Do you think the universe is guided by the “rule of reason” or does it function at random? Boethius responded with a positive statement of faith: “I know that God, the founder of the universe, does [oversee] His works” (11). Lady Philosophy scolded Boethius for thinking that it was mankind alone who was not guided by God. Something was lacking in his thinking. She suggested he was ill and foggy headed.

Lady Philosophy believed she knew the chief cause of his sickness—Boethius had forgotten who he was. He had forgotten by what methods the universe is guided and fallen to thinking that good and bad fortune are merely random. Such a mind-set can lead to disease and even to death. But, said Lady Philosophy, Boethius still had enough understanding to avoid the worst. Boethius still had the “true knowledge of the hand that guides the universe.”

The Consolation Book II

Boethius’ complaint in book two was against Fortune. Lady Philosophy retorted by describing the nature of Fortune—she is deceitful, alluring her victims only to desert them when least expected. Fortune had not changed her mind against Boethius—she was faithful to her character by alluring him to a false good fortune. She tempted people only to bring about their ruin.

Lady Philosophy reminded Boethius of his good fortune. When he had lost his father, he had been taken in by persons of high caliber and rank, and blessed by marriage to a woman of character. He had two sons who were successful consuls. Boethius admitted that he had experienced success and prosperity. “The unhappiest misfortune,” he wrote, “is to have known a happy fortune.”

Lady Philosophy noted some progress in Boethius—he was not entirely weary of his present lot. Lady Philosophy remarked that most of those who suffered in prison alongside Boethius would have been happy for even a portion of the good fortune that he had seen. Then she articulated this axiom: “Thus there is nothing wretched unless you think it to be so: and in like manner he who bears all with a calm mind finds his lot wholly blessed.”

Both Boethius’s assertion and Lady Philosophy’s are debatable.

Meanwhile, Lady Philosophy told the story of a tyrant who tortured a free man thinking he would get information on an alleged conspiracy to take the tyrant’s life. But the philosopher bit through his tongue and spat on the tyrant’s face. The tyrant intended for the tortures to have a cruel effect on the philosopher but instead the philosopher became a person of high courage.

Lady Philosophy exhorted Boethius to consider what had happened. He had lost his wealth and such friends as had been attached to that wealth. She counseled him: “Cease then to seek the wealth you have lost. You have found your friends, and they are the most precious of all riches.”

The Consolation Book III

Much of the early part of book III does not relate to our theme of persecution but Boethius, with the help of Lady Philosophy, dealt with questions that are important to a theology of persecution and martyrdom. We must not forget the context in which the *Consolation* was written. Boethius was a philosopher and theologian who had been unjustly accused and imprisoned. He was trying to deal with the experience, new to him, of being disgraced. His discussions revealed a person agonizing over his lot and trying to work out its meaning.

Most relevant to the discussion of martyrdom in this chapter was the recognition of the goodness of God. This goodness of an omnipotent God could be doubted by a person suffering unfairly. So, Lady Philosophy brought Boethius to recognize that the goodness of God is absolute happiness. God, the fountain-head of all things, is good. Nothing can be thought of as better than God and without doubt he is good. Reason tells us that in him lies perfect goodness. In fact, goodness and happiness are in the very nature of God and cannot be distinguished from him. After some back and forth, the book ended with Boethius and Lady Philosophy affirming that God, the absolute good, was in control of the universe and that to resist the highest good was foolishness. A caveat to the discussion doubled back to remind the reader that although God is all-powerful, he is not the author of evil nor can he do evil. Lady Philosophy noted: “We have worked out the greatest of all matters by the grace of God, to whom we prayed.”

Boethius found real comfort, I believe, in these conclusions, which were not mere speculation. If God was in control of the universe, then what was happening to him (and by extension to all martyrs) was not the random act of an evil person’s will, but was an event seen and managed by God for his own purposes. Boethius could therefore rely in his adverse circumstances on the God of absolute good and happiness.

The Consolation Book IV

With book IV of the *Consolation* Boethius began to rise to a new level of understanding. Because of the grief he was suffering and the injustices he was experiencing, he had forgotten (to some degree) that there was a good governor of the universe. When he recalled the existence of the good governor, he had grief, because, despite the good governor, evil still existed, some of it

going unpunished. His was the age-old philosophical question, “If there is an omnipotent good God how can there be evil?” For Boethius it was more than a philosophical question—it was a personal, existential conundrum.

Lady Philosophy’s response was that God would teach Boethius that good men are always powerful and evil are weak, “vice never goes unpunished, virtue never goes without its own reward; happiness comes to the good misfortune to the wicked. And when your complaints are at rest, many such things would most firmly strengthen you in this opinion.” It seems that Boethius’s imaginary Lady Philosophy had a rather simplistic view of life. Her understanding was like that of Job’s friends who could not conceive that a person could suffer for being good.

Much of the discussion at this point in the book had Lady Philosophy defending and explaining her comments. Periodically she made statements that are axiomatic. For example, “all which is just is good...and all that is unjust is evil.” Later both Boethius and his imaginary lady affirmed that “the doer of injustice is more miserable than the sufferer.” Interesting thought.

Boethius acknowledged his perplexity in a passage of his book that has become a classic statement of the quandary of injustice. He wrote:

I am struck with great wonder why these dues are interchanged; why punishments for crimes fall upon the good, while the bad citizens seize the rewards of virtue; and I long to learn from you what reason can be put forward for such unjust confusion. I should wonder less if I could believe that everything was the confusion of accident and chance. But now the thought of God’s guidance increases my amazement; He often grants happiness to good men and bitterness to the bad, and then, on the other hand, sends hardships to the good and grants the desires of the wicked. Can we lay our hands on any cause? If not, what can make this state different in any way from accidental chance?

Lady Philosophy answered: “All is rightly done, because a good Governor rules the universe.”

[An Assessment of Boethius’ Theology of Persecution and Martyrdom](#)

Boethius was not persecuted or martyred as a Christian *per se*, but he suffered unjustly. The value of his musings to the theology of persecution lies the fact that he was a Christian who stated his faith in the midst of heretical teachings and later dealt philosophically and theologically with his personal experience of injustice. It is not unlikely that his work on behalf of justice was motivated and informed by his Christian faith.

For instance, in his tract *Whether Father, Son, and Holy Spirit may be Substantially Predicated of the Divinity*, he lists other predicates such as justice and truth. Therefore it can safely be assumed that Boethius's concept of justice was formulated within the context of the justice of God. And in the theological treatise *Against Eutyches and Nestorius*, Boethius assumed that since Christ was both human and God (having two natures but one Person), when Christ suffered as a human God suffered as well. The idea that God suffered would be a comforting thought to persecuted Christians. It meant that God intimately understood their plight.

The *Consolation* touched on themes pertinent to a theology of persecution and martyrdom. At the heart of the discussion was Boethius's passion for justice and the fact that he was suffering injustice. Philosophers, like Christians, had been unjustly accused, persecuted, and executed for their belief in the truth. The chief aim of philosophy, according to Lady Philosophy, was to oppose evil men. That, of course, had very real consequences.

Boethius declared that he desired to work on behalf of the welfare of all persons, seeking justice and suppressing injustice. In doing so, he could not hide the truth or affirm or assent to falsehood. Instead of seeing rewards for his diligent pursuit of truth and justice, he suffered punishment and humiliation. He believed that the punishment fit the crime, but that he had not committed the crime.

The discussion took an even more sobering tone when Boethius confessed to Lady Philosophy that he did not believe that God's providential care of the universe included humans—or at least that he had doubts about it. The goodness of God was easily doubted by a person who was suffering from unfairness and injustice. However, Boethius in his dialog, moved from skepticism about the goodness of God to fully embracing the idea that God is good and that he rules the universe.

When Boethius brought up the subject of chance, it led into a discussion of God's foreknowledge and human free-will. Boethius equated foreknowledge with determinism. He took the position that foreknowledge would have a causal effect on events, but eventually had Lady Philosophy convince him that God's perspective is the "eternal now," where all the things that appear to humans as past, present, and future are to God always present. Because God's perspective is different than ours, human free-will stays intact. God does not cause persecution, for example, but he can see it coming. Evil men misuse free-will and choose to persecute.

Maximus the Confessor

Sad to say, the church learned the wrong lessons from the persecution it experienced and began to apply imprisonment and torture to its own. Maximus suffered and died at the hands of a heretical Christian faction that was in power and had the authority to inflict suffering on those who did not conform to its beliefs. So, although Maximus was persecuted and martyred, it was not done at the hands of pagans but at the hands of churchmen who acted like pagans.

Nor did Maximus have a theology of persecution and martyrdom. He suffered for his faith at the end of his life but was, during his heyday, pre-occupied with defeating the heresy of Monothelism and with practicing asceticism. The latter preoccupation took up most of his writings. He was a good example of an Eastern Orthodox theologian who combined theological thought with spirituality. So is there anything we can glean from Maximus? Yes. In the process of expressing his deep devotion to living a Christ-like life, he touched briefly on themes related to our topic.

Maximus had the benefit of an excellent education, one that could only be afforded by the son of a prosperous, noble family, described by some as pious and Christian. He mastered the subjects of philosophy and theology. He entered government service and so impressed Emperor Heraclitus (611–641) with his knowledge and his behavior that he was made the emperor's first secretary and chief counselor.

Unfortunately, the emperor and many church leaders throughout the East became convinced of Monothelism, a heretical doctrine that denied the human will of Christ. Maximus never reneged on his orthodox belief that Christ had two natures and two wills, human and divine. If Christ had been devoid of a human will he would not have been fully human.

Maximus was able to demonstrate the relationship between theology and the spiritual life in a compelling manner, although the latter could be misunderstood. It appears from a superficial reading that Maximus was against all natural passions and pleasure, when actually he was talking about sinful passions and pleasures. To be devoid of all passion and pleasure would make a person less than human, which was not, it appears, what he meant.

In Maximus there was a strong emphasis on asceticism and the use of terms like “deification,” referring to what God wishes to accomplish in human nature. Study of the term deification leads into a discussion of the Greek term *theosis* used by Eastern Orthodox theologians to describe the process of becoming God-like. *Theosis* is a transformative process

with the goal of union or oneness with God. It also has the ethical component of seeking to be like God. *Theosis* has two elements leading up to its realization: *Katharsis* (purification of mind and body) and *theoria*, which is the contemplation of the Trinity. Divinization is the belief that sinful men can become holy as God is holy. This is possible because of and through the Incarnation of the Son of God. It is a process requiring the grace of God and the cooperation of humans who participate in the process with sacramental life, ascetic discipline, and other means to facilitate progress toward *theosis*.

In Maximus there was little that related to a theology of persecution and suffering. One thought we find in his writing was that suffering frees the soul from its preoccupation with the body. He also brought up the idea that God (in Christ) suffers along with us, writing:

24. If God suffers in the **flesh** when He is made man, should we not rejoice when we suffer, for we have God to **share** our sufferings? This shared suffering confers the kingdom on us. For he spoke truly who said, “If we **suffer** with Him, then we shall also be glorified with Him” (Rom. 8:17).

25. If we have to suffer because our ancestor involved our nature with sensual pleasure, let us endure our temporary **sufferings** bravely; for they blunt the sharp point of such pleasure for us, and free us from the eternal torment which it brings upon us.

This was not suffering for Christ’s sake but was suffering because of the need to rid ourselves of any encumbrance that would keep us from purifying our lives to reach *theosis*. When Maximus wrote this he was not suffering from persecution so he did not explicitly connect his theology of suffering with persecution. Instead he wrote that: Suffering cleanses the soul infected with the filth of sensual pleasure and detaches it completely from material things by showing it the penalty incurred as a result of its affection for them. This is why God in His justice allows the devil to afflict men with torments.

Commenting on Isaiah 40:4, Maximus used the phrase “rough places” as an analogy for the trials and difficulties that come in life—unsought tribulations. He wrote:

54. The “rough places”—that is to say, the attacks of trials and temptations suffered against our will—shall be made “smooth,” above all when the intellect, rejoicing and delighting in weakness, affliction and calamity, through its unsought sufferings deprives of all their lordship the passions in which we deliberately indulge. For by

“rough places” Scripture means those experiences of unsought trials and temptations which change to smooth ways when endured with patience and thankfulness (cf. Isa. 40:4, Septuagint).

55. He who longs for the true life knows that all suffering, whether sought or unsought, brings death to sensual pleasure, the mother of death; and so he gladly accepts the harsh attacks of trials and temptations suffered against his will. By patiently enduring them he turns afflictions into smooth untroubled paths, unerringly leading whoever devoutly runs the divine race along them towards “the prize of the high calling” (Phil. 3:14). For sensual pleasure is the mother of death and the death of such pleasure is suffering, whether freely chosen or not.

From this passage, even though the suffering of persecution was not on Maximus’s mind, those going through persecution could derive a maxim: To endure with patience and thankfulness is the essence of the Christian response to persecution.

Maximus also declared that the wrath of God is the source of painful trials and is given to us to train us. It is one of the factors in the growth and development of the Christian toward *theosis*. Elsewhere Maximus explained that suffering for the sake of virtue meant severing one’s will from the flesh, so that one dies daily. At the same time the soul is renewed through spiritual regeneration.

An Assessment of Maximus’ Theology of Persecution and Martyrdom

Maximus stated no theology of persecution but he did state insights into the reasons for suffering that remain relevant to those who are suffering for their faith.

CHAPTER 6: THE THIRTEENTH THROUGH THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURIES

Thomas Aquinas on Martyrdom

Thomas Aquinas was a leading theologian of the medieval church. He did not suffer persecution or martyrdom as commonly understood, although his family incarcerated him in a locked room in their castle to prevent him following his chosen vocation as a Dominican brother. His interest was in analyzing and categorizing martyrdom theologically and religiously. He dealt with the topic under “A treatise on fortitude and temperance,” question 124, in his massive *Summa Theologica*.

“Of Martyrdom” (Five Articles)

Aquinas’ theological method in the *Summa Theologica* was dialectical. He would pose a question, raise objections to it (antithesis), and then seek to resolve the question and formulate a final answer. Aquinas asked questions regarding martyrdom as a virtue or as a perfection. In examining his answers to these questions, we learn his position on martyrdom.

Under the question “Whether martyrdom is an act of virtue?” he gives a functional definition of martyrdom. “And martyrdom consists essentially of standing firm to truth and justice against the essentials of persecution. Hence it is evident that martyrdom is an act of virtue.”

Under the question “Whether martyrdom is an act of fortitude?” he replies: “Thus martyrdom is related to faith as an end to which one is strengthened, but to fortitude as the eliciting habit.” In reply to a posed objection, he wrote: “Hence martyrdom is an act of charity as commanding, and as fortitude as eliciting. For this reason also it manifests both virtues.” In reply to another objection, he said that “since patience serves fortitude on the part of its chief act, viz., endurance, hence it is that martyrs are also praised for their patience.”

Under the heading “Whether martyrdom is an act of the greatest perfection?” he asserted that martyrdom is a perfection in the highest degree. It is the greatest proof of a perfection of charity, which is union with God and attainable in this life.

Finally, the question arose “Whether death is essential to martyrdom?” and was answered that the perfect notion of martyrdom requires that a person suffer death for the sake of Christ.

The merit of martyrdom lies in the voluntary endurance of death, or the voluntary willingness to die for Christ. The person may linger on but the merit is in the willing submission.

John Bradford's Thought About Persecution And Martyrdom

John Bradford (1510–1555), a martyr in Mary's English persecution, left a skeleton of thought regarding suffering and martyrdom for the sake of Christ. He intermixed his thoughts about suffering generally with thoughts of suffering that proceeded from serving Christ.

Bradford was writing to all those in England who professed Christ. His purpose was to encourage them to stand firm, move forward, and not be caught in the snares of the world, whether by prosperity or affliction. He told his readers that trouble, adversity, afflictions, and persecution were not strange to the believer. How could it be otherwise, he asked, seeing that the world and Satan do not love them?

Bradford thought that God would not treat those who rejected the faith any differently than he does the world. God had treated believers of his day as dearest friends, just as he did with other believers in the past who had suffered even more misery than Bradford's generation was experiencing. Many martyrs and confessors had suffered the shedding of blood rather than lodge in any of "Satan's inns."

Bradford urged his contemporaries to go forward, the wind at their back, hoist up their sails, and lift up their hearts and hands to God in prayer. They should consider affliction, persecution, and trouble as not strange and so they should not be dismayed or discouraged. It was not strange to be persecuted for the sake of the gospel, he argued. It had happened in every age.

In two places in his exhortation Bradford mentioned the idea that persecution was part of the providence of God. He wrote that no cross could come to a Christian without the counsel and consent of God. In the first instance, Bradford mentioned persecution as providence and then moved to a related topic. Later he returned to the idea briefly, saying when trouble or persecution came the godly behold "the presence, the providence, and power of God," because Scripture "teaches that all things come from God," the good and the bad. God uses Satan as an instrument of justice and mercy. The wicked experience God's justice while the godly experience His mercy.

Finally, he exhorted his readers to prepare to suffer whatever God would lay upon them. Remember, he said, the fight is short but the joy is exceedingly great. They need not fear what

Satan or man can do to them because, as the Apostle John says, nothing can take his sheep out of his hands.

An Assessment of Bradford's Theology of Persecution and Martyrdom

Bradford recognized the reality of persecution. Those who believed in and proclaimed the gospel should expect it. This was the fundamental idea upon which all his theology of persecution was built. The progress of his thought is clear and useful in understanding the subject. There are three levels, each built on top of the other.

Starting from the the ground-floor idea that Christians must expect to be persecuted, Bradford's disseminated encouragement to believers in England. But he did so by mentioning the negative aspect of persecution—people can lose their faith. God will treat them, said Bradford, like those who persistently reject him and they will cease being his 'dearest friends.' On the other hand, Bradford tried to encourage his suffering contemporaries by reminding them many martyrs and confessors had remained faithful. With this in mind, they should move forward expecting persecution.

Bradford's second level discussed persecution as part of the providence of God. God is always in control but allows trouble and persecution to strengthen the faith of his people.

The third and final level from Bradford was an exhortation to prepare for the inevitable.

It was a short exhortation but concise, to the point, and profound.

Martin Luther's Theology of the Cross

Martin Luther was born in Eisleben, Saxony, Germany in 1483. He came from a working class family. On his way to becoming a lawyer he had a life-changing experience when his life was threatened by a storm. He vowed that if he was spared he would become a monk, a promise he kept. His life in the monastery, however, was difficult spiritually because he did not find answers to his deepest spiritual questions. After a few years he discovered the life-changing biblical prescription "the just shall live by faith." This was the illumination that brought him to genuine salvation. He realized he merely had to believe in Christ to receive salvation and the burden of having to earn God's favor was lifted from him.

He had earned a doctorate in theology and was a professor of theology at the University of Wittenberg. He remained a theologian the rest of his life, with or without an official

professorship. When he began teaching the new/old doctrine of salvation by faith, he was excommunicated and his writings were banned. He was declared a “convicted heretic.” From 1533 until 1546 (the year he died), he served as the dean of theology at the University of Wittenberg.

The Relationship of Luther’s Theology to the topic of Suffering and Persecution

Luther did not write about suffering, persecution, or martyrdom as stand-alone topics but as outcomes of a faithful, witnessing church. The “theology of the cross” best describes Luther’s approach to theology. The cross and the death of Christ are integral to a theology of suffering and they are also cornerstones of Luther’s theology. His theology has many implications regarding the nature of discipleship based on the character of God revealed at the cross.

The question we will ask is how did Luther see the nature and character of God in the fact of the cross? Should this be reflected in the life of the disciple?

The Origin of the Theology of the Cross and the Theology of Glory in Luther’s Theology

Theologia Crucis is important to understanding Luther’s theology of suffering. Luther advanced the idea in disputes to distinguish the Reformation ideal of the “liberating gospel of the crucified Christ” from *Theologia Gloriam*—the theology of the institutional church.

God revealed himself to us on the cross where he suffered for us, yet our natural inclination is to look for God in his glory, seen in creation and the marvel of his works. It is through the crucified Christ that we have the true knowledge of God, “a furnace of love.” The theologians of glory were vain sophists, Luther thought, who set their minds on the high things (God’s infinite power, wisdom, and justice for example) while despising God in his “suffering, weakness, and foolishness.” The theologian of the cross knows God from his sufferings, revealed on the cross of Christ. For theologians of the cross, God’s power is not manifested directly but paradoxically under helplessness and lowliness.

Luther opposed theological systems that glorified human reason and that sought to capture God’s favor by human effort, glorifying human performance. In his view, the theology of glory was a push for self-deification through knowledge and works, whereas in reality it was God on the cross who revealed the fullness of God’s love and who revealed the inadequacy of all

human effort to fix ourselves. The cross is the material principle of reality, the greatest action God has ever performed.

Most Lutheran theologians see the importance of the theology of the cross as an integral part of Christian theology. Among those who have pointed out its importance are Jürgen Moltmann, Gerhard Ebeling, Otto Heick, Paul Althaus, xxx Eckardt, Robert Kolb, Robert A. Kelly, and Walther von Loewenich. Let Robert Kolb speak for them all:

Luther's "theology of the cross"... employs the cross of Christ as the focal point and fulcrum for understanding and presenting a wide range of specific topics within the biblical message.

The Suffering Church

With suffering so close to the heart of theology it follows that the material ease and prosperity of the church are among the greatest dangers it can face, and where found probably indicate that the pure gospel is not being preached or taught. The true church is identified by its possession of the true cross. By possessing the cross, Luther meant that Christians suffer every kind of misfortune and persecution, mental and spiritual. Christ, who himself suffered, shares his suffering with the church so it can share his burden and wear his yoke. Our ancestors in the faith suffered and we should expect nothing less. Luther believed that the connection between the church and suffering is so strong that if one sought to avoid persecution, that person had surrendered Christ. Persecutors thought they were doing service to God by ridding the earth of such "vile" people as Christians. However, suffering and weakness were the source of the church's glory.

The church was persecuted, not because of questionable moral behavior, said Luther, but because it preached the Word of God and ardently insisted on preaching and teaching the gospel alone and Christ alone. Luther saw a strong connection between persecution and the preaching of the pure gospel. If there were no persecution, most likely the gospel was absent. The true church expects suffering as the result of its witness but it refuses to abandon the gospel, no matter the cost. The church that suffers for preaching the gospel gains assurance that it is part of the true church because it experiences the same kind of suffering as the ancient saints. Suffering has this advantage: that under it the church flourishes, grows, and becomes healthy.

In his commentary on Galatians, Luther reminded his readers that they were not alone in suffering but rather were sharing in the cross of Christ.

When the church identifies with Christ, its members are despised and the world is offended. Unlike the world, which glories in power and wealth, the church glories in afflictions for the sake of Christ.

Persecution is the work of the devil, who fears for his kingdom, not without reason, for the triumph of the gospel results in the destruction of his kingdom. Satan's opposition is a sign of the presence of the gospel. For that reason Christians should not fear suffering and persecution but should fear peace and success.

An Assessment of Martin Luther's Theology of the Cross in regard to the Suffering, Persecution, and Martyrdom

The theology of the cross began as Luther's way of distinguishing his thought from the *theologia gloriae* of the Catholic Church but it soon became the defining factor of his theology. It was a substantial groundwork for a full theology of suffering, persecution, and martyrdom.

Preaching the gospel and aligning with the crucified Christ will draw the world's violence on the church. Hence, the church suffers to show it is preaching the true gospel and that it is truly aligned with the crucified Christ. Luther believed the true church expects this violence and remains faithful to the end. In sum, the church should not fear persecution because it is an indication that the true gospel is being preached.

George Whitefield's Theology of Persecution

George Whitefield was a well-known evangelist who was part of the Evangelical Revival in England in the eighteenth century with John and Charles Wesley. Whitefield's theology of persecution was explained in his famous sermon, "Persecution Every Christian's Lot."

Whitefield was not persecuted or martyred although many of his contemporaries ardently opposed his message. He preached actively preaching in England and in America.

His theology of suffering was straightforward and biblical. It began with the Lord's warning to his disciples that they would suffer persecution in His name and followed through with the teaching of the Apostle Paul. Following Christ's lead, Paul not only taught about persecution but also experienced it. He was able to point to his own experience with suffering

and persecution to validate his teaching. The most prominent point Paul made was that those who seek to live a godly life in Christ will be persecuted. Paul explained why this was so and his explanation became a major part of Whitefield's sermon.

So, the foundational truth upon which Whitefield built his sermon and theology was that persecution is a common experience for every godly person. Based on this truth, he asked three questions: what does it mean to live a godly life in Jesus Christ? What do the various kinds of persecution look like? And finally, "why it is that godly men must expect to suffer persecution?"

What does it mean to live a godly life in Christ Jesus? Whitefield's answer was quite simple yet true and profound. To live a godly life is to "make the divine will ... the sole principle of all our thoughts, works, and actions." With the affections on things above, a Christian's citizenship is in heaven. The world reacts negatively against this theology, perhaps because of the misinformed belief that Christians are not concerned with this world and so are a liability rather than an asset to the advancement of the world's agenda.

Regarding the types of persecution, Whitefield did not list various tortures or injustices as one might expect, but began much deeper than that. The first kind of persecution, he said, was from the heart. The root of all persecutions is "heart-enmity," so it would be found in people who harbor a secret evil-will against God and His kingdom.

The second type or degree of persecution is that of the tongue, which spews out all kinds of evil against God's people. Whitefield regarded evil-speaking as a high form of persecution. To speak evil of or slander God's people was "highly provoking in the sight of God." Jesus Christ would call such slanderers to account for their speaking.

The third kind of persecution is cruel treatment of Christians by religious authorities who specifically target them "under the cloak of religion."

Whitefield's third question asked why godly men must expect persecution. His answer was two-fold: First, because Christ said to expect it and second, because it has been the experience of genuine Christians of every age, including his own. In this context, Whitefield returned to the theme of heart enmity. Wicked men, he said, hated God and hated those who were like God. Pride and envy caused them to turn to persecution.

Persecution to the same degree does not happen to all godly people. There are times when the religious situation is more peaceful and the persecution is less intense than at other times. Nonetheless, all Christians must experience some degree of persecution.

Finally, Whitefield asked, if all Christians were told they would suffer for their faith, were they presently suffering from persecution? If they were not, why not? Had cowardice caused them to remain silent when they should have spoken? Were they ashamed of Christ?

To those who are contemplating becoming a Christian, he asked were they ready to give up everything to God? Were they ready for the opposition that might come from their own household? Were they willing to endure hardness? When they put their hands to the plough, did they intend not to look back? These were not easy questions, nor were they superficial.

The last section of Whitefield's sermon was directed toward persecutors. Christ was allowing them to persecute but they would be held accountable at the judgment. An ominous question will be asked by Christ, "Why are you persecuting me?" Whitefield vividly described the punishment for being a persecutor.

An Assessment of George Whitefield's Theology of Persecution

We have but one well-structured sermon from Whitefield concerning persecution,. Obviously his was not a full-fledged, thoroughly definitive theology of persecution. But it has value nonetheless.

The focal point of Whitefield's theology was that godly people will suffer—a position that he backed up from the words of the Apostle Paul. Stated succinctly, the godly life is centered on doing God's will. That puts godly people in conflict with the world.

Another positive addition of Whitefield to theological thinking about persecution was his assertion that "heart-enmity" is the root of all persecution. Worldly people harbor hatred against God and His kingdom. Often this persecution comes from their tongues, which speak negatively and hatefully against believers.

In light of the inevitability of persecution, Whitefield urged those who contemplated becoming Christians to answer in advance serious questions about their commitment.

CHAPTER 7: THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Theology of Persecution and Martyrdom

The story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer is well known. We know a lot about his family, his personality, his resistance to Hitler's Nazi religion, his thinking on discipleship and grace, and his death by hanging just a few weeks before Allied forces liberated Flossenbürg concentration camp in WWII. His thinking on the topics of persecution, suffering, and martyrdom began in his concept of God.

Bonhoeffer rested on God's sovereign, providential care. God was to him "the source and spring of all goodness, justice, and truth," wrote a biographer. He is eternally righteous and will judge the hearts of those who substitute their own law for his. Bonhoeffer articulated his belief in the ability of God to radically transform persons. In his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, he wrote: "I believe that God can and will bring good out of evil, even out of the greatest evil."

Love toward God is expressed in obedience. If there is no obedience, there is no faith and one's claimed relationship with God is a myth. Bonhoeffer's faith and obedience led him to ardently oppose idolatry, the most obvious example of which was Hitler's attempt to establish a Nazi religion, the worship of the ideal Aryan man. In the short memoir by G. Leibhold, that introduced Bonhoeffer at the beginning of Bonhoeffer's book *The Cost of Discipleship*, Leibhold observed that Bonhoeffer "was one of the few who quickly understood, even before Hitler came to power, that National Socialism was a brutal attempt to make history without God and to found it on the strength of man alone" (Bonhoeffer, *Cost*, 14)—religion without God: idolatry in a new form yet still idolatry.

There are a number of themes in Bonhoeffer's theology that serve as precepts which guide his thinking and help him articulate his strongest convictions about the importance of discipleship. Some of the major themes are the holy life (what it means), love (defined essentially as love for one's enemies), true discipleship, the essence of grace, and suffering.

The Holy Life

What does the holy life look like? What is it about it that antagonizes the world and leads to violence against Christians? While commenting on the commandment to love our enemies and not seek revenge to wrongs done to us, Bonhoeffer said that this commandment would grow

more urgent in the “holy struggle” which lay ahead. It was the obedient Christian’s duty to prepare for this eventuality. “The time is coming,” predicted Bonhoeffer in *The Cost of Discipleship*, “when the confession of the living God will incur not only hatred and the fury of the world...but complete ostracism from human society.” Part of the holy life is the confession of who it is that is the source of holiness; and that confession will inspire hostility.

What is it that antagonizes the world against Christians? Bonhoeffer believed that it was the fact that the world cannot live side-by-side with true Christians because everything they say and do is a condemnation of the world’s words and deeds. The difference between Christ-followers and the world is that Christians are described as “peculiar” (or “extraordinary” or “unusual”). They exhibit the better righteousness that exceeds that of the Pharisees and scribes. The precise nature of “peculiar” (περισσὸν) is found in the Beatitudes—“the life of following Jesus, the light which lightens the world, the city set on a hill, the way of self-renunciation, of utter love, of absolute purity, truthfulness and meekness. It is unreserved love for our enemies, for the loving and the unloved, love for our religious, political and personal adversaries” (*The Cost of Discipleship*, 170). The Christian’s response to the rejection of the world is not to retaliate. To love one’s enemies means forgoing revenge and reciprocity.

Thus Bonhoeffer offered a significant contribution to our understanding of why the world reacts so violently against Christians.

Grace

Grace is God’s blessing given to humanity. Grace is God turning toward us in kindness and mercy and providing strength for each situation as well as provision for life. The grace upon which Bonhoeffer focused in *The Cost of Discipleship* was the grace of salvation. There was a cost to God in obtaining that grace (the cross, the sacrifice of the Son of God) and there is cost for the believer in receiving it (true discipleship).

Costly grace is costly because the call to follow Christ demands a person’s whole life. It is costly because it cost God the life of His Son. Costly grace is most recognizable in the Incarnation of God. It is not something a disciple can bestow upon himself but it is Christ “prevailing upon the disciple” to leave everything and follow Him. It is the grace by which Christ invited Peter “to the supreme fellowship” of martyrdom for the Lord he had denied, thus forgiving him of his sins.

Giving up Personal Rights

In calling believers to give up personal rights, Bonhoeffer applied the teaching of Jesus on revenge found in Matthew 5:38-42. Jesus completely rebuked the practice of revenge in the life of a Christian. Bonhoeffer said that followers of Jesus renounce every personal right; to do so is a part of giving up everything for Christ's sake. Bonhoeffer said Christians must reach a state in which they experience injustice but no longer cling to their rights or defend them, instead letting God deal with their aggressors.

The Christian attitude toward his or her persecutors is that they sit beneath the cross as do those who are persecuted: they need to experience the same grace as the Christian. Thus Christians must intentionally choose to love their enemies.

When disciples are reproached for Christ's sake, they need to remember that the reproach really falls upon Jesus, not upon his follower. "The curse, the deadly persecution, and evil slander confirm the blessed state of the disciple in their fellowship with Jesus," he wrote.

The willing endurance of suffering and pain causes the suffering to pass. By refusing to pay back the enemy for the evil done to us, we expose the enemy's sin. "Violence stands condemned by its failure to evoke counter-violence." When the follower is unjustly required to give up his coat, he offers his cloak also, which counters the enemy's demand.

Love Defined

Bonhoeffer gave a radical definition of love, not one that most, if any, Christians would have thought of as the primary definition of love. "Love is defined," Bonhoeffer wrote, "in uncompromising terms as the love of our enemies" (Bonhoeffer, *Cost*, 162). If Jesus had said that we should love our brethren as the definitive statement on what love is, few would have difficulty with that and might misunderstand the true radical nature of love. The Old Testament, it is true, never explicitly tells us to hate our enemies. But more than once it tells us to love them (Ex. 23.4ff; Prov. 25.21ff; Gen. 45.1ff; 1 Sam. 24.7; 2 Kings 6.22, etc.).

The natural man would find the precept of loving one's enemy an intolerable idea and beyond his capacity. But God wills that Christians should defeat their enemies by loving them. This is an extraordinary idea for all humanity but something realistically expected of Christian who by God's grace, can actually live it out. The Christian, Bonhoeffer says, must treat his

enemy as his brother, returning his hostility with love, treat the enemy not as he treats the Christian but as the Christian is treated by God. Christians are to bear patiently with both the evil person and the evil done, not treating evil-doers as they treat us but to actually exhibit heart-felt love towards them. The disciple must see that the enemy is the object of God's love and that just as the Christian stands beneath the cross of Christ so does the enemy.

Prayer is an important expression of love toward one's enemies. Prayer allows the disciple to go to the enemy, stand beside him, and plead to God for him. When we pray for our enemies, we are "taking their distress and poverty, their guilt and perdition upon ourselves, and pleading to God for them." We are doing vicariously what they cannot and need to do for themselves. It is a wonderful hidden ministry that God has granted us. And it is effective. Bonhoeffer does not mention that from time to time those who persecute become Christians. For historical figures like the Apostle Paul, coming to Christ and becoming a believer meant in their turn experiencing suffering, persecution, and martyrdom. It was costly but it led to eternal life.

Suffering

In his chapter on revenge, Bonhoeffer discussed suffering for Christ's sake and the appropriate Christian response to it. He taught that when evil comes unjustly, the Christian should not to resist but to "pay it out" and overcome the evil by patiently enduring the evil person. In a memorable and profound statement he wrote: "Suffering willingly endured is stronger than evil, it spells death to evil." (159). According to G. Leibholz, Bonhoeffer believed strongly that God shared his suffering. His close relationship with God implied that God took Bonhoeffer's suffering seriously and this greatly enhanced his courage and allowed him to be uncompromising in his stand (Bonhoeffer, *Cost*, 24-25).

Bonhoeffer made a distinction between rejection and suffering. Rejection was a part of Christ's experience and, by implication, would also be the experience of his disciples (Mark 8:31-38). Christ died despised and rejected and taught that such might be his followers' experience as well. Even now, he gives his disciples the freedom to choose or reject him. If they are going to be his disciples they must not feel coerced but be able to choose freely to follow.

The cross which we are to pick up means rejection and shame as well as a kind of suffering which is not martyrdom. This suffering comes when we bear the sins of our brother. The only way to bear that sin is by forgiving it. Bonhoeffer wrote: "Thus the call to follow Christ

always means a call to share the work of forgiving men their sins. Forgiveness is the Christlike suffering which is the Christian's duty to bear." Only the person totally committed to Christ can experience the meaning of the cross. "Suffering, then is the badge of true discipleship."

Discipleship, according to Bonhoeffer, "means allegiance to the suffering Christ."

Christ's disciples do not inflict suffering on others. They refuse to pay back the enemy for evil done to them. They prefer suffering without resistance.

Martyrdom

There is a tendency in the church to glorify martyrdom. Perhaps rightly so. But disciples need to recognize that often martyrdom will not be glorious. Christ died "alone, apart and in ignominy" and many Christians since then have had the same experience noted Bonhoeffer in his *Letters and Papers from Prison*. The loneliness compounds and intensifies rejection that he talked about earlier.

This is not to imply that God is not with us—the rejection and ostracism come from the world. Those whom God considers worthy of the highest form of suffering are given the grace of martyrdom. This grace is the ability to face death with courage, with strength to keep the faith, and not reject it at the moment of extreme and intense pain.

Reward

The last Beatitude, addressed by Christ to his disciples, declared they were blessed if the world reproached them, persecuted them, and said all manner of evil against them. The disciples were to rejoice and be exceedingly glad because great would be their reward in heaven. We do not often think about our reward in heaven. Those who are being severely persecuted most likely lean upon this verse for encouragement and strength. When the reward is attained, weeping ceases, the wounds of persecution and death are healed, the sufferers are fed at a large banquet, but most of all they will be in the presence of God Himself, safe and sound. There are rewards on earth (fellowship with fellow believers, etc.) as well, but nothing in comparison to what will be given to believers who are faithful until the end.

An Assessment of Bonhoeffer's Theology of Suffering, Persecution, and Martyrdom

Bonhoeffer's profound theological thinking allowed him to understand what true discipleship meant and how to assess what was going on in his culture (the rise of Nazi religion), and to appropriately respond to it. His was theology at its finest. His theological thinking began with what he felt was the most important spiritual principle—one that guided his life: Love to God is expressed in obedience. Obedience meant being loyal to God and rebuking idolatry, which meant, for him, rebuking Nazi religion.

Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 3:12 that anyone who wants to live a godly life will be persecuted. A second premise in Bonhoeffer's theology of martyrdom derived from this teaching of Paul. Living a holy life was both a life principle and a foundational theological premise of Bonhoeffer's theology of suffering, persecution, and martyrdom. There would come a time, he said, when the confession of the living God would not only cause hatred against Christians but would result in ostracism from society. The world, he observed, cannot live side-by-side with Christians because what they say and do, whether they intend it to or not, is perceived by the world as condemnation of them.

Bonhoeffer's third theological premise was that of costly grace. The grace that we receive at salvation will cost us our lives. Obedience to Christ is the definitive sign of true discipleship.

The fourth theological premise was that the followers of Christ give up all personal rights, especially in the face of injustice that comes about because of our faith in Christ. Christians intentionally choose to love their enemies and do not seek revenge for evil done to them but are ready even to die for Christ.

The fifth theological premise was that love is defined as loving one's enemies. This is how evil is defeated. True Christians endure the evil person, do not inflict suffering on others, and refuse to retaliate.

The life of obedience is not without rewards, the greatest of which we will receive in heaven, if we remain true and steadfast to the end.

Johann Christiaan Beker's Theology of Suffering

J. Christiaan Beker's suffered at the hands of German occupation forces in World War II in the Netherlands. While not specifically suffering for Christ's sake, he suffered at the hands of those who were idolatrous, adhering to the false religion of Nazism. This experience led him to

investigate the meaning of suffering, not only because of the emotional and psychological damage done to him but also out of theological interest. The “mystery of suffering” must somehow be reconciled with the Christian belief in “the goodness of the good creation.” How can we reconcile “invisible hope” with the visible reality of suffering? In *Suffering and Hope* he wrote: “The biblical vision of hope is the longing for that benign and just sovereignty of God which will right all wrongs and which will finally make our tears cease and give our restless heart its final rest in the merciful arms of God.” (p. 11).

Beker later immigrated to the United States to become a professor of New Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary. He died in 1999.

Some foundational Themes

Apocalypse

In Beker’s discussion of human suffering and the Holocaust, he introduced an important theme regarding the increase of evil at the end of history. Many believe this is playing out in our day and surely those who suffered from Nazi atrocities thought that they were experiencing the Apocalypse. Beker asserted that the contemporary use of the term was radically different from its predominant use in Scripture. The scriptural use of the term also carries the idea that evil will dramatically increase at the end of history, but unlike the use of contemporary culture includes the understanding that God is the agent and initiator of the wrath to come. But that is not the whole story. The teaching that human powers are behind Armageddon and the apocalyptic of doom, in which all created life becomes extinct, destroyed by human evil, is a man-made myth. The true apocalypse is when God by his overriding power reverses and transforms evil forces, and finally and fully reveals himself. At the time he “will structure all things in creation according to His glorious purpose.”

So, the Apocalypse is not something a Christian ought to fear—it will be a glorious reshaping of a world presently spiraling downward, a new form of creation, with a new heaven and earth, and the promised redemption of the church. So, suffering that we may be experiencing for Christ should be absorbed into hope for a glorious future.

The Normative Pattern for Christians

The normative pattern of Christian suffering must be “located in and derived from the gospel of God’s saving purpose for this world” (Beker, *Suffering and Hope*, 29). This is manifest in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ which establishes Christian hope, which is “the expectation of the coming triumph of God which will make an end to evil and suffering and bring about the joy of a world at peace” (Beker, *Suffering and Hope*, 29).

Beker noted later in *Suffering and Hope* that Romans 8:1-17a presents a sharp contrast between the old and new ages. In the coming age the church seems to be lifted out of the world: it is pictured as against the world and separated from the world; separated, also, from the sufferings of the world. But with verse 18, Paul speaks of the suffering of the present age. So the picture of the church separated and against the world is placed in contrast to the present church in solidarity with the suffering world. However, in Paul’s theology, the suffering of the present time which engulfs both the church and the world is set in the context of hope—“the hope in the triumph of God” (vv. 18, 19, 21, 25, 30), when creation is freed from its bondage to decay (p. 74).

So, hope in God’s glorious future consummation of history was one of Beker’s foundational ideas.

The Dogma of Retribution

The dogma or law of retribution is central to Deuteronomy’s theology. Essentially it refers to the principle that good is rewarded with blessings and evil is rewarded with punishment. What you sow, you will reap. It was meant to stop the practice of excessive retaliation in the ancient world by offended parties against their offenders. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth sounds barbaric to us but in order to keep the offended person from killing the person who may have knocked out an eye or tooth, the law of retribution was propagated.

Beker interpreted retributive justice as supportive of a moral order, necessary for a “sensible and tolerable life.” He explained: “The retributive scheme is undergirded by a worldview which believes in a moral order... The notion of a retributive justice is an integrated component of a rational and harmonious view of the world, in which all parts work together to contribute to an orderly cosmos” (Beker, *Suffering and Hope*, 34).

Israel's prophets hoped that God's retributive justice would not be his last word, but that his mercy would override his judgment (Beker, *Suffering and Hope*, 35). To a certain degree the dogma of retributive justice and mercy are both prominent in the coming of the Lord on the Last Day. God will then judge the unrighteous but will have mercy on those who repented and lived a righteous life.

The notion of retributive justice did not take into account that the righteous could and would suffer. The law of retributive justice was meant to be a principle that had universal positive effects (if you did good, you would be blessed) while the fact that the righteous would suffer had a specific purpose of being a part of God's methodology for reaching the world. The primary biblical example of a righteous person who suffered was, of course, Job (Beker, 38)—although Joseph, David, Jeremiah, Jesus, and Paul certainly should be mentioned.

Suffering and Hope

Beker's central theme was the relationship between suffering and hope. There is, Beker asserted, "wide agreement in Scripture about the mutual relation and interdependence of suffering and hope" (Beker, 30). He warned that if we divorce suffering from hope, we will fall into despair and worse, cynicism, and perhaps surrender hope altogether (Beker, 30). The antidote to despair is found in 1 Peter 4:12-16, where Peter described the kind and intensity of suffering the Christian churches were experiencing in Asia Minor toward the end of the first century AD. He shared with his readers a number of key truths that would encourage and brace them for what was coming, which he described as "the fiery ordeal." Rejoice, he said, in the privilege of being able to share Christ's sufferings because "the spirit of glory and God rests upon you" (Beker, 48).

Those Christians were called "aliens and exiles" since they were outcasts in their society and displaced persons. They were the victims of gossip and ostracism but also lacked legal status and security, having been locked out of the mainstream of socioeconomic activity. It was not an official, state condemned ostracism but a hostile social system that condemned Christians as "haters of the human race" (Beker, 48).

Persecution of Christians in the time of 1 Peter, was not acute or traumatic but was the constant, lingering form of suffering that wears people down (Beker, 48). A theology of martyrdom emerged with the solidarity of the faithful who because of their commitment to God

endured the onslaught of evil and surrendered their lives to death on behalf of God's cause and its ultimate victory and triumph (Beker, *Suffering and Hope*, 42).

First Peter 4:12-16, Beker said, does not glorify or romanticize suffering "for its own sake" (Beker, 49). The cause of joy and blessing is that the Christian shares the sufferings of Christ and suffers in the name of Christ (Beker, 49). Those Christians understood their suffering and tribulations within the apocalyptic perspective which allowed them to see suffering not as their final destiny but rather as a penultimate reality.

The Apostle Paul, felt Beker, drew important distinctions between the various types of human suffering. For example, he made a clear distinction between "redemptive or creative" suffering and "tragic or meaningless" suffering, the latter being the suffering of innocents, seeming to have no particular purpose.

What is the source of human suffering? According to Beker, it is idolatry. He wrote: "What is the relation of human suffering to God's wrath? Paul suggests that suffering in the world at the hands of human injustice can be reduced to an ultimate source, that of idolatry. Suffering is the result of supernatural evil or irrational fate, not ignorance or human frailty. Rather, idolatry is the source of absolute ideologies, human illusions, and pretensions" (Beker, 61).

Paul "demasks idolatry as a pseudoreligious ideology with absolute pretensions" (Beker, 61). In Romans 1:18-32, Paul argued that idolatry brings about the suffering of injustice, which affects the total domain of human relationships (Beker, 61). The church as the new creation of God in the midst of the old creation must not only endure suffering but must seek to relieve the suffering caused by the injustice and idolatry of the world (Beker, 65). There are, Beker believed, some "missionary" opportunities in the midst of oppression and injustice, as the world looks on and sees the attractiveness of the church's behavior (Beker, *Suffering and Hope*, 50). "There is no authentic hope in the church," Beker asserted, "unless it is willing to suffer for its hope in its daily life" (Beker, 67).

The Question of Theodicy

The question of suffering (meaningless or tragic suffering) raises the question whether God is just. A theodicy is an attempt to defend God's goodness in spite of evil in the world.

Whether God is just or not also falls under this topic. It is, according to Beker, an especially acute problem for the Christian faith since evil and affliction seem to be triumphing (Beker, 70).

Connected to this discussion are some ideas that help put the Christian view of God into perspective. Beker said that God “hates suffering in his good creation and that suffering is fundamentally alien to his coming kingdom” (Beker, 72).

Finally, Beker exhorted Christians to insist that the cross of Christ does not mean the affirmation of all suffering. It had a unique role in obtaining our salvation and continues to have a role in reaching the world but, he said, “God’s final purpose with his creation is not exhausted by Christ’s suffering on the cross” (Beker, 72). God’s suffering love for us is important but the New Testament asserts that “the present power of God’s love in Christ is an anticipation of the triumph of a love which will defeat the power of death and its attendant suffering in Gods’ world” (Beker, 73).

An Assessment of Beker’s Theology of Suffering

While Beker’s book was not a full-fledged theology of suffering, he touched on some themes that remain relevant to this discussion. A summary statement of his theology might be “facing the reality of suffering but always with apocalyptic hope.” Beker’s passion was to reconcile seemingly contradictory or paradoxical ideas in the Bible related to suffering and God. How do you reconcile “the mystery of suffering” with the goodness of creation? Or, how do you reconcile invisible hope with concrete reality?

He began with some foundational themes that helped guide his thinking and set the parameters for his thought. The first was the meaning of apocalypse. It does not mean, as it the popular usage of the term, the doom of total destruction and the annihilation of mankind and total destruction of the universe, but instead refers to a time at which there will be a reversal of evil and the transformation of humanity and creation in which God is finally and fully revealed.

Beker’s second theme had to do with the ‘normative pattern’ for Christians, which should be derived from the gospel. The present suffering of the church and the world is to be seen in the context of hope in the triumph of God.

His third theme was the dogma of retribution which constitutes the basic moral order of the universe. If you do good, you will be blessed; if you do evil you will be punished. It is the substance of justice. But, it is not the last word. God has introduced mercy for those who do evil.

What is not taken into account in a strictly retributive system, said Beker, is the fact that the righteous have suffered and will suffer. In fact, suffering became the way in which God sought to redeem the world. Sufferings and tribulations are really penultimate realities. They will not be permanent, not the ultimate, defining reality. Suffering, Beker believed, comes at the hands of human injustice which has its ultimate source in idolatry. "Idolatry," he says, "is the source of absolutist ideologies, human illusions, and pretensions" (Beker, 61).

Beker took up the question of theodicy, or the defense of a good God in the face of the reality of evil. For Beker, the most difficult issue was the tragic suffering that afflicts the innocent for no apparent reason. He determined that God hates suffering and it is alien to his coming kingdom. The implication is that he allows it now for his own providential reasons.

Wang Ming Dao's Theology of Suffering, Persecution and Martyrdom

Wang Ming Dao was a Chinese pastor whose theology was developed amid strong resistance, persecution, and suffering. He wrote a series of sermons from which an elementary theology of persecution can be gathered. Before we delve into his theology, we need to know more about him.

Wang was born in 1900 during the Boxer Rebellion, a violent uprising against foreigners and the Chinese Christians who had associated with them. Wang's father, a doctor at a Methodist hospital, was exactly the sort of "collaborator" the Boxers targeted. He was so afraid that he took his own life before Wang was born. Consequently, Wang grew up in extreme poverty and suffered from frequent illnesses. Like his father, Wang would buckle from fear although he rallied before taking the suicidal path of his parent.

Wang was originally named *Wang Tiezi*, which means "Iron Wang," but he later changed his name to *Wang Mingdao*, which means "to testify to the truth." Although he had early aspirations to enter politics, he repudiated those desires after becoming a Christian.

Wang experienced Christian conversion while attending the London Missionary Society's primary school, where an older student mentored him in the faith. He became a Christian teacher and then minister. A contemporary of John Sung and Watchman Nee, he developed a ministry as a pastor and evangelist on a par with theirs.

His belief system followed the lines of the Fundamentalism expressed in the Modernist/Fundamentalist debate prominent in the West in his day. He was fiercely loyal to

orthodox faith as defined by Fundamentalism, and never wavered from it. It was the basis of his perception, thought, rhetoric, and the rubric for measuring truth and genuine faith. The Modernist/Fundamentalist controversy began in the United States after the introduction of popular writings by German theologians advocating “Higher Criticism” of the Bible. While many proponents of higher criticism, who took a supposedly scientific approach to Scripture actually used the science to ravage belief, developing a skeptical, non-miraculous teaching known as Modernism, Fundamentalists advocated holding to the fundamentals of the faith taught by the Bible and the historic church. Modernism was, to them, a form of skepticism that put a dark cloud over faith and the Bible. For their part, Modernists regarded Fundamentalists as superstitious, legalistic, and anti-rational.

Modernists were liberals who claimed to adhere more to “science” and “reason” than to faith and revelation; and they regarded social issues as more important than spiritual/doctrinal issues in the church. Many openly denied essential biblical teachings such as Christ’s bodily resurrection and most derided biblical miracles such as the Virgin Birth. For Wang, as for other Fundamentalists, Modernists were simply non-believers with whom he could not affiliate spiritually. Because Wang knew China’s Three-Self Church leadership included many Modernists, he would not associate with the organization.

Early in his Christian ministry Wang had some association with foreign missionaries, but he came to see them as a liability to the development of the Chinese church and argued that Chinese should hold leadership in their own ecclesial bodies. One of his early disagreements was with missionaries at the Presbyterian school where he was teaching. It was over whether the school should have a militia. He did not think it appropriate and felt the missionaries should return to their home countries. When he stepped out on his own and founded a church, the Christian Tabernacle, it was a Chinese church—grown, built, and supported by Chinese without foreign intervention or assistance.

The Japanese attacked China and imposed martial law in the north when they conquered it. Among their efforts at control was to organize a Christian Federation that every church was required to join. At meetings of the Federation, members were required to bow to a representation of the Japanese emperor and submit to the orders of Japanese military. Wang refused to join, putting his life on the line. The Federation tried to persuade Wang through threats and allurements, but he would not join an organization with non-believers. He stood nose-to-

nose with the Japanese imperialists, refusing to compromise his principles, and they finally gave up trying to persuade him. He became known as a fearless defender of the truth. This fostered his reputation as a prophet of God.

Wang was not so successful with the Chinese Communist Party, led by Mao Zedong. His failures under communism were in large part the result of relentless attempts by the Communists to break him.

When the Chinese Communists came to power in 1949, Wang felt he could reason with them because they too were Chinese and spoke the same language. He saw Christianity and ministry as purely spiritual with no social or political involvement. Personally, he sought only to be a good citizen. He had an inherent belief in religious rights and freedom, and felt strongly that government had no authority to interfere with faith or the church. He did not perceive at first that dictatorships demand total control with complete conformity and that the Chinese Communist dictators would be no different. In short, he miscalculated.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) wanted total control of the church. Using the rationale of indigenizing the Chinese church, it tried to unite it “to free it from Western imperialistic control and funding” by bringing it under their own control. Wang then saw what the Communists were doing, and recognized that the CCP was hypocritical regarding its plea for indigenization, employing deception in its attempt to manipulate and coerce the Christian church. The CCP’s hypocrisy lay in the fact that Chinese Communism is Marxist-Leninist, an imported ideology from the West. It received support and funds from foreign entities (primarily the Soviet Union) in the process of coming to power. Its deception came in using the well-known missionary methodology (conceived and promoted by Western missionaries) called the “three-self principles,” spawned by Henry Venn, Rufus Anderson, and John Nevius. Nevius used it in China and Korea, and it became known as the “Nevius method.” It was an approach to mission work that sought to make the local church self-sufficient so it could propagate more quickly. The Chinese Communists took the idea and politicized it so that it became a means of controlling the church. In its political form it is called the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM), which became the state-sponsored and state-controlled church in China.

Wang resisted the Communists’ ideas because he believed in the priority of faith over political ideology. At first the CCP used restraint in dealing with him because of his strong personality and personal integrity. Their tactic was to persuade him through constant pressure to

join the Three-Self Church. They did this by calling accusation meetings at which various Three-Self leaders denounced and vilified him. The meetings were complemented by numerous articles and speeches in which Wang was condemned for being a reactionary and for harboring reactionaries.

In face of such opposition, Wang showed considerable strength. When he was pressured to attend the National Christian Conference in July 1954 (an attempt by the Communists to unite all Chinese churches), Wang replied, "I won't attend. My thoughts and faith are very different from theirs. I won't associate with them" (Stephen Wang, 47). On another occasion he said, "Let me solemnly declare: not only must we keep away from unbelievers and their organizations, even when it comes to believers in Jesus, we can only unite in spirit and not in organization" (S. Wang, 78).

Typical of the Communists' tactics was to send a group of elders to visit him. Called "the Old Men of Shanghai" (they were all over the age of 75, and he was still in his 50s) they were attending the National Christian Conference. However, Wang's wife turned them away, saying, "You know what his temper is like. When he speaks, he never worries about saving face. If you see him and things become heated, you will be embarrassed" (S. Wang, 48). The rumor spread that "even Wang's wife knows his temperament. You can see how hard it is to deal with him."

Wang was arrested and imprisoned on August 7, 1955. In prison, guards and inmates alike conspired to break him down with threats and stories of horrible executions. In the face of these tactics, Wang was at least temporarily subdued. As the pressure of Communist harassment, imprisonment, and relentless interrogation increased, he found himself weak, vacillating, extremely fearful, full of self-doubt, easily intimidated, emotionally unstable, overcome by hopelessness, and potentially suicidal.

He agreed to cooperate with authorities, confessed to crimes he had not committed, and promised to join the TSPM. Consequently, he was released on September 29, 1956. He was discouraged with God and ashamed of his failure. Confused and distraught, he fell apart emotionally. When he recovered his emotional health, he realized he had sinned. He would not join the TSPM. He told authorities that what he had confessed was a lie; he had not committed any crimes. So he was rearrested and imprisoned in 1958. In 1963 he had an experience in which God, by his great grace, restored and revived his spiritual life. He remained faithful for the next 16 years in prison.

Realizing that Wang was not going to change, the government offered to release him from prison a few months after his re-arrest, but Wang refused to leave unless the government apologized for imprisoning him as a criminal even though he had broken no laws. The old Wang was back, defying unjust authority and stubbornly refusing to cooperate, even when it would have benefitted him personally.

Thus we see that Wang Ming-dao's story is full of powerful victories and devastating defeats. His behavior swung between courageous strength and pitiful weakness; between impeccable morality and prevarication. His deep struggles and catastrophic failures existed side by side with heroic stands against evil and against powerful political coercion. Although Wang cracked for a while, he realized his wrongdoing, repented, recanted the confession he had made, and experienced God's gracious restoration.

His strong personality, determination, single-mindedness, self-assurance, commitment, and stubbornness greatly affected the events of his life and sometimes invited confrontation, but his moral behavior was so exemplary that it could never be used against him by Communist interrogators. His life is a realistic picture of how a fierce spiritual battle can almost engulf and swallow a prophet of God. Except for the grace of God, his life would have ended in disaster and serious defeat. But it didn't, and instead he became an encouragement to anyone facing opposition for Christ's sake.

Wang made tactical mistakes. At the start he realized neither the enormity of the challenge he faced nor his own weaknesses. He became, as he said, confident that he was strong and could stand up to any foe in his own strength. He had not been spiritually prepared for the threats, intimidation, and imprisonment he faced.

Some of Wang's personality traits became even stronger in old age. Commenting on the last chapter of Wang's life, Stephen Wang writes, "Like many elderly people Wang Mingdao became extremely stubborn in his old age" (S. Wang, 227)! For Wang Mingdao, it began a long time before old age. He was stubbornly persistent in following his convictions. He died of natural causes on July 28, 1991, at age 91, in Shanghai.

In his defiance against joining the TSPM, Wang set the stage for today's Chinese house church movement. Ironically, the house church movement is truly indigenous and fulfills the vision of those missionaries who conceived the three-self principles that the CCP distorted for

their own purposes. The CCP opposes the house church movement because they cannot control it. It seeks to serve God, not the government.

Wang's Theology of Suffering and Persecution

Theodore Choy, translator of Wang's sermons (*A Call to the Church*), noted that God allowed his faithful servant, Wang Ming Dao, to be tested on the very truths he proclaimed (9). Wang's words were almost prophecies of his later experiences. Like Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship*, Wang had a clear understanding of what true discipleship entailed and in both cases the authors were tested by the very ideas they wrote about. While Bonhoeffer did not suffer much physical abuse, he ended up paying the ultimate price of discipleship. Wang, on the other hand, went through physical and mental abuse so severe it caused him to break down but he was later released and ended up dying of old age.

Obey God or Man?

The major question that occupied Wang's mind and set the tone for a series of sermons was "Should Christians obey God or man?" His answer was that under normal circumstances Christians should obey both. A Christian's primary obedience is to God while obedience to man's laws and regulations is perfectly proper as long as they do not conflict with God's commands and precepts. If, however, the human laws *do* conflict with God's, then we have no alternative but to disobey human laws. Christians should obey all legitimate human laws, not from fear of man but from fear of God who has commanded us to obey those in authority (Wang, *A Call*, 24). Yet, Wang writes, "anyone who works for God should make an irrevocable decision whether to please God or to please man" (Wang, *A Call*, 68).

Obviously it is not always "either/or." Wang says that Christians should be exemplary in obedience to human laws and regulations (Wang, *A Call*, 25), respecting all authority "conscientiously" (Wang, *A Call*, 25). But sometimes disobedience is required. Christians should not submit to man if human systems or laws conflict with God's commandments and principles (Wang, *A Call*, 26-27).

In the case of authorities, none should interfere with the Christian who is witnessing or preaching the gospel. Preaching the gospel is commanded by the Lord and it is a mandate

Christians cannot ignore so no authority should interfere. Christians need not be afraid of authorities because God is with them (Wang, *A Call*, 27, 105).

Old Testament Prophets Suffered for Being Obedient

Wang used the prophet Micaiah as an example of one who was called by God to speak on God's behalf and who suffered for it. Micaiah was determined to be faithful to God and to not please men if it meant being unfaithful to God (Wang, *A Call*, 56). He writes: "Because he was so faithful, courageous and fearless that he would not bow under the authority of King Ahab, nor seek to please men, he spoke what the Lord wanted him to speak" (Wang, *A Call*, 35). He knowingly took the risk of displeasing King Ahab in order to please God (Wang, *A Call*, 34).

The same spirit was true of the prophet Jeremiah as well. As a result of his faithfulness, he met with intense suffering and persecution (Wang, *A Call*, 67). This was not an uncommon experience for all the prophets of Israel, as can be seen in the documented experiences of several prophets who left writings.

Wang defined determination, the hallmark of all who suffer for doing God's will, as follows: "to obey God's will at any cost, asking nothing about the future" (Wang, *A Call*, 80). Courageous and determined servants of God fill the pages of both the Old and the New Testaments.

The Courageous Apostles

In the Book of Acts, the story is told of apostles who were imprisoned but were led out of prison by an angel. Even though they were now free and able to run to secret hiding places, they were told by the angel to go to the temple and preach the gospel. They had been explicitly forbidden to preach the gospel by the High Priest, who had scolded them in a public forum; but they had responded that they ought to obey God rather than man. They had no fear of the High Priest and did not hesitate to do what God told them to do (Wang, *A Call*, 98).

Wang said that the path the church today should take is the same path the apostles took. They were courageous, did not hold life dear, were not afraid of authorities, and were faithful unto death (Wang, *A Call*, 27).

The Apostle Peter, who denied Christ, was not, according to Wang, "armed with the spirit of suffering." But after he received the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost he was then "armed

with the spirit of suffering” which made him a bold spokesman for God (Wang, *A Call*, 30). He was ready to suffer and did not try to avoid danger (Wang, *A Call*, 30). Peter wrote that those who had suffered had ceased from sin. Wang interpreted this as showing that God allows suffering for our own good (Wang, *A Call*, 30).

The same was true of Paul and Barnabas who risked their lives for the Lord Jesus Christ. Neither Paul nor his co-workers seemed to count their lives as having any value (Wang, *A Call*, 131).

Opportunity for Martyrdom

Not many believers actually enter the circumstances that allow them to experience martyrdom. Yet, remarks Wang, “every Christian can be like these valiant, victorious men” so that even if they don’t have the opportunity for martyrdom, they can receive the same glory and rewards of the saints who did have the opportunity (Wang, *A Call*, 139).

In reality, it depends upon the will of God. If he wishes for us to suffer for his name’s sake or to die a martyr, he will engineer the circumstances. It is not a matter of our seeking martyrdom (3 Wang, *A Call*, 2). Generally speaking, as the Day of our Lord’s return draws closer and closer, Christians will suffer for their faith more intensely, said Wang (Wang, *A Call*, 73). While some Christians, when facing persecution, will do all they can to escape and will become afraid to confess Jesus’ name, they have no comprehension how noble and great is his name. They do not understand that to suffer for his name is a truly glorious thing (Wang, *A Call*, 103). Wang said: “. . .nothing can compare with being put to death for the sake of the Lord’s name and word—which is much more beautiful, glorious and admirable” (Wang, *A Call*, 137).

Assessment of Wang’s Theology of Suffering, Persecution, and Martyrdom

As I mentioned earlier, Wang’s theology of suffering, persecution, and martyrdom is elementary but also very practical and instructive. He was preaching to a church that was increasingly facing pressure from the government. It would affect him personally in the years to come.

He appropriately connected witness with suffering, from the Old Testament prophets through the New Testament apostles to Christians of his day who were witnessing to the

Lordship and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. The precepts and principles he exhorted revealed an awareness that Christians who witnessed would incur resistance and even hatred and hostility.

The controlling theme of many of his sermons was the question whether Christians should obey God or men. In reality, this is one of the most important and profound questions that a theology of suffering, persecution, and martyrdom can ask. It is central to all the issues that such a theology needs to deal with. Wang's answer, as we have seen, was if the commands, demands, or laws of humans contradict or conflict with God's commands, Christians are to obey God no matter the cost.

Josef Ton's Theology of Suffering, Persecution, and Martyrdom

If a standardized textbook for a contemporary theology of suffering, persecution, and martyrdom could be designated, Josef Ton's book *Suffering, Martyrdom, and Rewards in Heaven* would have to be that book. It is a comprehensive study of suffering for righteousness' sake (or Christ's sake in the New Testament) from Old Testament times throughout history, with a historical overview of persecution as well.

Ton explained in a preface the occasion for doing his research and writing his book. He wrote:

In the spring of 1972, I was completing my undergraduate studies in theology at the University of Oxford, England. As I was making plans to return to Romania, I received different warnings that after I returned there I might be arrested, imprisoned or even killed. I knew that God wanted me back in my own country, and I was determined to obey Him, whatever the cost. Yet I wanted to understand exactly what my Heavenly Father's purpose could be in sending me to a place where I would most likely be killed. Precisely this question launched me into two decades of in-depth study on the issue of martyrdom (Ton, *Suffering*, xi).

The major points of his book became a broad outline to his theology. We begin with the topic of suffering.

The Topic of Suffering

In Ton's "Conclusions to the Survey of the Scriptures" (Chapter 12), he said the main purpose of his research was to construct a theology of martyrdom but that early in the process he

realized that he needed to take in the larger topic of suffering as well (Ton, *Suffering*, 319). Suffering and self-sacrifice, he observed, are “intimately and organically related” (Ton, 319).

In his introduction to the survey, he noted that suffering, pain, and death are an “ever-present, undesired, and hated side of human existence” which came about as a result of Adam and Eve’s moral failure and disobedience. The most disconcerting aspect of human suffering is when innocent, just, and upright persons suffer (Ton, 3).

Ton became aware that suffering and self-sacrifice were related to God’s purposes while reading a commentary of the Book of Revelation by G. B. Caird at Oxford. He learned that “God always conquers by a love that is self-giving and self-sacrificing” (Ton, xi). This was the reason he sent his Son into the world (the Lamb of God) and as a result he sends many lambs into the world to proclaim God’s love and to die for the sake of the proclamation (Ton, xi). So God always succeeds in doing his will through people who will preach and then die (Ton, xi). God uses suffering on his behalf and for his purposes (Ton, 5). It is a strange paradox, that God solves the problem of suffering by suffering, by self-sacrifice to the point of death (Ton, 8).

This method of God has become “the most essential idea of the Judea-Christian religion,” asserted Ton (Ton, 13). Sin’s catastrophic consequences, including human suffering, are dealt with through the suffering, death, and resurrection of God’s Son, Jesus Christ (Ton, 13). Christ’s followers continue to suffer as they fulfill God’s mission to the nations, proclaiming the gospel and suffering for it (Ton, 14).

God and Suffering

It is obvious from the discussion above that there is a strong relationship between human suffering and God. It is through the “life of suffering” on the part of the follower of Christ that God reveals himself to humanity. It best illustrates who God is, the essence of his nature, how much he loves humanity (Ton, 144). The Son of God, who sacrificed himself on our behalf, reflected the true nature of God. “Self-sacrifice belongs to the very nature of God,” wrote Ton (Ton, 197). God is willing to sacrifice on our behalf and those who become his disciples adopt this same mentality in order to show the world that God loves them and that the disciples love each other as well. Sacrificial love drives God’s people to share the gospel even when it means facing hostility or death.

Suffering as the Method God uses to Reach the World

With what we have said thus far, it is not difficult to draw the conclusion that God uses suffering to fulfill his purposes and to reach the world. The Book of Daniel introduced this idea. While suffering for righteousness' sake was understood early in the Bible, Isaiah introduced suffering as a methodology of God and also the idea of suffering on behalf of others (vicarious suffering). It would involve rejection and humiliation. It became personified with the introduction of the Servant of the Lord, whose actions and character changed the understanding of God's approach to dealing with sin and rebellion.

Alongside these new perspectives, Isaiah introduced the idea of "witness." This term designated God's central purpose for Israel, which was to be a witness to the nations of the world. James Muilenburg said that Israel does not exist for herself but was elected to be God's witness and his representative to the nations (Ton, 10). Ton noted that Israel is referred to both as a witness and as a servant (41:8; 43:1; 44:21) (Ton, 11). The word "witness" took the connotative meaning of one who suffers because of self-sacrifice as early as the Book of Isaiah.

The Servant of the Lord

The Servant of the Lord appeared as a distinct person in chapter forty-two of Isaiah. "Isaiah," Ton said, "makes it clear that the Servant is God's main agent in human history" (Ton, 11). He is to be God's witness. The reaction of the world is extremely violent against the Servant. This was where the concept of the Suffering Servant emerged. Surprisingly, the Servant accepted suffering in humility (Ton, 12). He was humiliated and mistreated. He became a vicarious sacrifice for those who needed to be saved. There was no precedence in Scripture for such a person, although the sacrificial practices of the Law of Moses laid a foundation for understanding vicarious substitution. The Servant voluntarily accepted suffering and death (Ton, 13).

Isaiah's prophecy revealed that suffering has both "a redemptive dimension and a missionary purpose" (Ton, 19). The suffering Servant of the Lord died on behalf of those needing redemption, those whose transgressions made them liable to God's judgment and wrath. The missionary dimension of Christ's self-sacrifice and humiliation can be repeated and accomplished by other servants who have been chosen by God "to suffer in order that they

proclaim and manifest the redemption of God” to a lost world. Missiology, then, is grounded in the redemptive sacrifice of the Servant and the continuing sacrifice of subsequent servants called by God to spread redemptive grace to the nations.

Why Saints Suffer

In his discussion of the Book of Daniel, Ton took exception to scholars who see Daniel as either a prophecy of future events or a calendar of historical events. Ton does think that the Book of Daniel presents a history of mankind up to the establishment of the kingdom of God. This is, however, just a frame in which Daniel puts his main purpose, “which is to show why” the saints of the Most High “undergo sufferings and martyrdoms and to show what purposes of God are accomplished through these sufferings and martyrdoms” (Ton, 24).

The suffering of innocent or upright people has always been a problem to those who believe in a good and just God. How can God allow suffering when he has the power to stop it? There is some suffering that is inexplicable, except that God allows the effects of human sin resulting from Adam and Eve’s rebellion to manifest themselves. But, apart from the general notion of human suffering, there is, as we discover in God’s Word, purposeful suffering or suffering that has redemptive purposes. Ton observed in his discussion of the suffering of Job that the purpose of human suffering may be (and often is) beyond their perception. Unknown to them their suffering may serve to glorify God and defeat Satan (Ton, 43).

Suffering for righteousness’ sake or for Christ is usually more straightforward and explicit. One knows they are suffering for doing the right thing or for witness about Christ. Paul warned the Thessalonian Church that they would suffer. There would be resistance to the gospel and they would be recipients of violence. In 2 Thessalonians he promised that God would strengthen those who were suffering for him and would protect them “from the evil one” (Ton, 135). The whole First Epistle of Peter, Ton noted, was devoted to the question of suffering for one’s faith in Christ (Ton, 257).

No Idea of Atonement/Merit in the Suffering of the Saints

Later in his book, Ton made a strong appeal to the church to begin teaching about the rewards Christians will receive for their faithfulness through tribulations, trials, and persecutions.

He was careful not to let anyone think that these rewards came as a result of any merit we earn. Rewards, he said, come to us by grace, a gift for our faithful service.

So, with this in mind, Ton also wants to be sure that it is understood that suffering by the saints in no way atones for sins—neither for the saint nor for anyone else. Daniel’s prayer in Daniel chapter 9 reveals that the catastrophes done to God’s people came as a result of their sin. It is the prerogative of God alone to forgive and Daniel does not intimate that the suffering of the people could or would make atonement for their sins (Ton, 33). Ton commented on Paul’s statements that Christ’s sufferings were ongoing so that he could participate in them, supplementing or complementing them (Ton, 142). But, warned Ton, these afflictions of Christ that we are called to participate in “must be completely disassociated from what happened at Calvary” (143). This suffering has a differing purpose and meaning (Ton, 143). “The cross of Christ is for propitiation, whereas our crosses are for propagation” (quote from Leith Samuel, Ton’s friend) (Ton, 90).

When Peter wrote about suffering, he saw it as a work of God’s grace. “Consequently,” Ton said, “there is no merit for the one who endures hardship and suffering” (262). His most explicit statement in this regard came just a few pages later. He wrote: “Once more we must stress the fact that although Christians are called to work hard, to fight valiantly, to endure suffering, to give up all self-interest, and to spend themselves in living totally for others, there is no hint or suggestion that through these things they could earn something or merit something” (268).

The Teachings of Jesus on Suffering and Death

There are several important features in Christ’s teaching on suffering and martyrdom according to Ton. The first and most basic is that suffering will be on Christ’s account and for his sake. It is for his cause that men and women will suffer to fulfill his purposes in the world (Ton, 75). Even more radical than having to suffer to bring about good is the teaching of Jesus that Christians are to endure evil done to them but they are to love the evil-doers. The ultimate hope or goal is to bring them to God and to salvation.

Jesus trained the disciples to war against evil and to rescue people from its power and clutches (Ton, 109-110). Yet, their method of waging war was not to imitate the world’s methods; and the battle would be fought in the supernatural realm although there would be real

consequences in the natural realm. Christians will be sheep among wolves (Matt. 10:16a) (Ton, 76). “Wisdom and innocence are absolutely necessary in the midst of persecution,” exhorted Ton (Ton, 77). Jesus was a role model to his followers, being a Lamb in order to witness to those who would beat and interrogate him (Ton, 77).

A third reason for the suffering and death of Christ’s disciples was that in God’s economy and methodology, a person finds life by losing it. It seems a strange method of God (81). The meaning of the cross for the disciple is that one is willing to sacrifice and die for Christ. This usually comes about when the disciple confesses Christ and/or preaches the gospel in a hostile situation, which will cause a reaction of hate and persecution and may lead to martyrdom (Ton, 89).

The teachings of Jesus, for the most part, were radical—completely opposite to what humans generally think. For example, Jesus taught that fruitfulness is made possible by dying (John 12:24). It will bring people into the kingdom and also qualify the martyr to rule with Christ in the kingdom of heaven.

The Book of Acts on Persecution and Martyrdom

The theme of “witness” is developed further in the Acts of the Apostles. It was introduced in Isaiah and it was exemplified in the gospels. Witnessing became more intense and the reaction to it more violent. The Apostles, it was said (Acts 4:20), could not help but witness. Their witness was often met with “anger, opposition, and violence” (Ton, 12). This would be the pattern for subsequent centuries. The gospel was often perceived as a challenge to cultural norms and values. The violent reaction was expected and perceived as normal to the witness (Ton, 113).

The martyrdom of Stephen became a prime example of one who witnessed and who received a violent response. He also became the prime example (aside from Jesus) of one who forgave his enemies and killers. Ton also noted the Holy Spirit had a prominent role in empowering Stephen and that the work of the Holy Spirit was emphasized throughout the whole of Acts.

The second New Testament martyr was James, the brother of John. He was the first Apostle to die and his martyrdom was soon followed by the rescue of Peter from a similar fate. It appears, Ton said, that Luke was teaching the sovereignty of God in the life of the disciples by

putting these two events in proximity with each other (Acts 12). Some Apostles were martyred and some escaped.

The question is why the disciples were so ready to suffer and possibly die for Christ and the gospel. Ton believed that, first, they had a good understanding of the sovereignty of God. God was in control so they could respond to persecution by remaining faithful (Ton, 114). Second, the disciples saw their suffering for Christ as an honor and a privilege. They rejoiced (Acts 5:41) because they had been found worthy to suffer for him (Ton, 116). Third, they saw the glory attached to martyrdom (Ton, 117). It was the ultimate spiritual blessing.

Jesus predicted that the disciples would meet resistance and even violence as they witnessed. Paul's experience bore this out for he suffered because of violent reactions against the gospel in almost every city where he preached (Ton, 127).

The Apostle Paul's Teaching on Persecution and Suffering

The Apostle Paul is distinguished from all other New Testament writers by the fact that he had the longest record of suffering for Christ among his contemporaries. He also wrote extensively about the meaning and purpose of suffering and dying for Christ. So, Ton said, "Paul's epistles are indeed of the greatest importance in the development of a theology of suffering, martyrdom, and rewards in heaven" (Ton, 125).

Although Paul was specifically called to spread the gospel and even though it was explained to him how much he would suffer to fulfill this calling, his involvement was "completely voluntary." Ton said that it was unthinkable Paul would have begun his mission without first thoroughly understanding the reasons why he and subsequent recipients of his message should risk being persecuted and facing possible suffering and death (Ton, 127). Paul's motivation for his life of discipline, suffering, and self-sacrifice is found in 1 Corinthians 6:27, where he was concerned that after he had preached to others, he should be disqualified. To make sure this didn't happen, he "buffeted his body and made it a slave." Such thinking and such an approach to ministry is far-removed from our present thoughts about doing God's work.

Paul never purposefully sought persecution or suffering. It was a by-product of preaching the gospel (Ton, 153). Paul's driving motivation was to deliver to the world what was achieved at Calvary. What Christ achieved was unique and complete (Ton, 147). The gospel is delivered

by those “who accept suffering and self-sacrifice for Christ and His gospel as their way of life” (Ton, 147)

One aspect of Paul’s teaching that has raised a lot of questions was his assertion to the Colossians (Col. 1:24) that he was filling up in his flesh what was lacking in Christ’s affliction. Evidently Christ continues to suffer affliction on behalf of the church. He has completed the work of atonement by his suffering on the cross but the suffering he continues to have is on behalf of the church—part of his intercessory ministry for the church. Paul’s suffering, then, would be supplemental or complementary to Christ’s (Ton, 142). Christians become partners with Christ in his ongoing ministry which requires ongoing suffering.

The Apostle Peter’s Teaching on Persecution and Suffering

The whole book of 1 Peter was devoted to the question of suffering for Christ and for one’s faith. It gives insight into important elements in our understanding of the teaching on suffering for Christ in the Bible, Ton wrote (Ton, 257). Chapter 2 verses 19 and 20 talk about God’s favor being upon those who suffer unjustly for Christ’s sake. Ton preferred the word “grace” rather than “favor” and asserted that “Peter defines grace, in essence, as suffering due to one’s faithfulness to God” (Ton, 259).

Peter wrote that we have been called to follow in Christ’s footsteps in suffering (1 Peter 2:21) and, if we are partakers in Christ’s sufferings, we will also be partakes of his glory that is to be revealed (1 Peter 5:1) (Ton, 261). Ton reasserted that every good thing we receive (such as glory) is received by grace, not merit. We cannot earn it. He wrote:

Whenever we find Peter writing about suffering, about its purpose and achievements, we have to keep in mind that it is all a work of grace, and that God is at work through it. Consequently, there is no merit for the one who endures hardship or suffering, and there can be no boasting of its achievements (Ton, 262).

One of the sources of encouragement and comfort for those who are suffering for Christ is understanding that Christ suffers with them. Ton said that Peter’s teachings are so close to those of Jesus and Paul that we can assume that Peter shared the belief that when Christians suffer “Christ is present in them through the Holy Spirit, and that Christ suffers in them in such a way that *their* sufferings are a sharing with *His* sufferings” (Ton, 266).

Rewards

To leave rewards out of Ton's theology of suffering, persecution, and martyrdom would be to miss Ton's ardent belief that rewards are a part of a solid theology of martyrdom.

The vision of the "glory of Christ" was to Ton an essential aspect of the Christian life, allowing believers to be faithful to the end. In Acts 7:55-56, Stephen saw a vision of Jesus standing at the right hand of God. It was a compelling vision that gave Stephen strength and courage to face his martyrdom almost with exuberance.

Such a vision, Ton explained, had been extremely important to Christians who were going through suffering, torture, and death. Christians across the centuries "were given this vision of the glory of Christ" (Ton, 106). Ton asserted that the martyr's spirit becomes aglow with that glory and his body is able to withstand the pain. Ton believed there were two purposes for this vision. First, it was a testimony to the bystanders observing the execution. Second, a vision of the glory of Christ and the beauty of heaven had a "transforming impact upon that person" (Ton, 121).

So, the first reward of the martyrs prior to entering heaven was the vision of Christ for those who will soon meet him. There are other rewards and Ton mentioned one in particular. But first he wanted to make the point that the topic of rewards (and perhaps even interest in the topic) has almost disappeared from contemporary Christian thought (Ton, 92). The primary reason is the theological debate about grace and merit begun at the time of the Reformation. Many Protestant theologians think that rewards are the result of our good works, when in fact, we are rewarded for our faithful service to God by receiving rewards from God's grace, and not on any merit of our own (see Ton pp. 409–19 for further discussion). Ton remarked that theologians fail to understand the true nature of rewards. He wrote:

Contrary to what theologians...may think, heavenly rewards are not just some decorative medallions in which we can take pride. The deepest reward is in the very fact that we will become what our Creator intends us to become. It is the reward of being made into the likeness of Christ. When we will be like him, we will be qualified to share with Him in the inheritance, and to work with Him in important positions of high responsibility over the whole universe. If we understand rewards according to their true nature and essence, then we will no longer be ashamed to work for them,

because in working for the rewards, we will actually be working toward the final goal for which our Father made us and for which He is busy training us (Ton, 239)

One aspect of the Christian's rewards Ton gives special mention. In context of the kingdom of God as an eschatological reality in which God is established as the ruler over the entire cosmos, Ton asserted that God's children, when they inherit the kingdom of God, will be put in charge of all of God's possessions, which is essentially to be put in charge of the whole universe (Matthew 24:47). They will exercise authority on behalf of God over the affairs of the universe. The reward of suffering with Christ is ruling with Christ (see Romans 8:17, 2 Timothy 3:12) (Ton, 159-60).

Ton reiterated that rewards come by grace, not by merit. "Whatever we receive is by grace, by God's good pleasure to give all that He has to His beloved children" (Ton, 160).

An Assessment of Josef Ton's Theology of Suffering and Martyrdom

Josef Ton's book is the most comprehensive available treatment of persecution and suffering. He pinpointed the most important biblical truths that go into making a theology of suffering, persecution, and martyrdom. The premise upon which all his other ideas stood is that God is a suffering and self-sacrificing God, who succeeds in accomplishing his will through those who will preach the truth and die for their witness. The most explicit example of this suffering is Christ who, representing the nature and will of God, sacrificed himself for humanity. The only precedence for this idea was found in Isaiah's description of the Suffering Servant of the Lord, a prophetic preview of the work of Christ in the New Testament.

So, saints suffer because that is God's method to reach the world; in suffering, they are following the pattern and precedence of their Lord who suffered on behalf of others. Ton was careful not to suggest that the suffering of the saints can atone for sins—neither their own nor those of others. Christians will be rewarded for their obedience and faithfulness but those rewards will be given by God's grace—a gift to his people.

Arthur McGill's Theology of Suffering

Arthur C. McGill was the Bussey Professor of Theology at Harvard Divinity School. In his little book *Suffering: A Test of Theological Method*, McGill addressed the question why an omnipotent God allows suffering and violence to pervade the world. He approached the topic by

examining the concept of power. He contrasted the two opposing powers in the world—the demonic power and the power of God. What he gives to the reader is an interesting analysis of the power of domination that causes the suffering of people (demonic) but also the self-giving, self-expenditure of God as the expression of his power.

It is an insightful book. Although published in 1968, his description of the effects of demonic power seems eerily contemporary in light of Islamic extremism, and his description of God’s power coincides with the thinking of other theologians who see discipleship as a life of self-giving based on the nature and character of God.

Theology, he said, is not a “detached intellectual experience” but a participation in Christ’s redemptive work.

Violence and Suffering

McGill began his discussion with a description of violence. He wrote: “When suffering is caused by an excessive application of power and there gives a person the experience of being twisted or crushed by that power, we have an instance of violence” (Arthur C. McGill, *Suffering*, 20). Suffering is the result of an abuse of power. This correlates with our topic of suffering for righteousness’ sake or for Christ but I think McGill had a wider view of human rights abuses and oppression and was not specifically thinking of the oppression of the church. Still, what he said gives insight into the dynamic of persecution and suffering, and has value for our study.

The seriousness of violent suffering, said McGill, is not just one of the inevitabilities of life that people expect and learn to live with, but it is the “scandal” that “threatens to undermine all confidence in decent values that make life possible” (McGill, *Suffering*, 21). In many ways he captured the psychological effect that terrorists seek to cause, and in some cases it is the intent of persecutors to demoralize the church.

If one were to poll random people today, most would probably have a negative view of power. McGill believed that most people think that the “most decisive manifestation of power exhibited today is destructive power (McGill, *Suffering*, 47). These destructive powers, he says, have a very peculiar character. They intrude the human scene and then withdraw with such arbitrary suddenness that it is difficult to rationally define them. They seem to have no faces or names. They just erupt and disappear (McGill, *Suffering*, 47-48).

McGill explained that Jesus is opposed to those destructive powers that victimize people and to the virulent violence that rages in the world (McGill, *Suffering*, 61). He “sets himself against” those realities and entities and powers that cause suffering. God is not for pain and suffering. He utilizes them for his own purposes but God is not the origin or source of pain, suffering, or persecution (McGill, *Suffering*, 61).

McGill also explained why Christians experience violence from the world. He said that when a person renounces the power of domination as his lord, he provokes the world to rise up in violence against him (McGill, *Suffering*, 114). The world reacts against Christians to inflict pain and suffering on them (McGill, *Suffering*, 114).

Demons

McGill described demons as “that peculiar energy of destruction.” He was not denying, I think, that demons are spiritual entities but he was focusing on the function of demons. The energy of destruction accelerates and radicalizes human emotion, for example. He described it as follows: “the dynamic of hate that magnifies the hostility into inhuman proportions, until it becomes an insatiable rage” (McGill, *Suffering*, 48). This energy enters into the inner life of a person and carries them into “inconceivable excesses of brutality” (McGill, *Suffering*, 50). This sounds all too familiar as our world seems bent on further escalating violence, brutality, and inconceivable inhuman actions of terror and rage.

Although he does not address the issue clearly, McGill appeared to disregard the idea of original sin or of personal evil embedded in the human soul. His emphasis was more on human evil being the result of enslavement to the diabolical kingdom (McGill, *Suffering*, 51). He did say that the evil of human sin is “not primarily his perverse will or corrupt nature, but rather...” That statement implies that he believed sin had corrupted human nature but that it is not enough to explain the extreme acts of evil we are seeing these days. No doubt the fact that humans are able to be enslaved by the diabolical kingdom factors heavily in extreme acts of brutality and even persecution. According to McGill, the New Testament teaches that demons are the source of oppressive power (McGill, *Suffering*, 87). Interestingly, McGill wrote this in an era when secularism was becoming popular—the standard by which everything was measured. Yet, McGill did not refer to the diabolical kingdom or demons as mythological. They are stark realities who manifest themselves in horrid acts against humanity. Later in the book McGill

repeated his claim that evil, *per se*, does not come out of self, but from submitting to the evil one (McGill, *Suffering*, 90).

The question that often arises in the minds of people is, in view of the terribly destructive forces we are seeing and experiencing, how can Christians say that God is the Lord of the world?

Love: Self-Expenditure

McGill answered the question by contrasting the powers of domination with God's demonstration of a different power. He began with the statement that Jesus, through both his teachings and actions, "stands forth as the advocate of love." This love is defined as *self-expenditure* for another's needs" (McGill, *Suffering*, 53). On the part of Jesus, it is his "deliberate and uninhibited willingness" to expend himself for others. Jesus is not telling humanity how to change or reshape their lives. He is telling them what their individual lives would become if they participated in God's own life, which means that their lives become "a momentum of self-expending service" (McGill, *Suffering*, 59). Jesus revealed to the world that God's Lordship and sovereignty does not consist in the domination of humanity but by giving his own life to and for them (McGill, *Suffering*, 93).

The Cross and Redemption

In one of the more descriptive passages of the book, McGill described what was going on at the cross:

In that event the entire energy of the world moves in unison to destroy Jesus and to prove that the power to deprive holds sway. The disciples desert, deny, and betray him. Jesus is whipped, mocked, and tortured. In the end he dies (McGill, *Suffering*, 21).

But Jesus was not a passive victim; he continued to be active in at least two ways. *First*, he offered all that he did and was to the glory of God and, *second*, he expended himself to serve the needs of his brothers, which shows the emptiness of satanic power (94). Redemption in Christ now means, said McGill, that men are liberated from satanic power and they are, in turn, possessed by the power and presence of God (McGill, *Suffering*, 93).

Assessment of McGill's Theology of Suffering

Arthur McGill's explanation for the cause of human (and Christian) suffering is a unique perspective that is especially relevant and applicable to the present scene in which terrorism in many cases targets Christians. McGill gives us clear insight into what motivates and drives terrorists to acts of violence against Christians.

Suffering comes from the abuse of power and the power of domination, the source of which is the diabolical kingdom of Satan and his demons. By saying this, McGill puts suffering into a theological category rather than seeing it as the result of a clash of ideologies or even of religions. It is the result of the actions of supernatural beings (demons) prompting, motivating, and compelling the hearts of humans to oppose God and to perpetuate extreme evil against God's people.

The answer to this extreme diabolical evil is liberation from the clutches of the diabolical kingdom and submission to God, who does not use his power to dominate humanity but shows his love toward them through self-giving and self-sacrifice. To submit to the kingdom of God is to be possessed by the power and presence of God.

So the issue is theological and the answer to the issue is theological as well. McGill makes a good case for reinstating a supernatural perspective to our view of the major issues confronting humanity today in terrorism, persecution of the church, and increased suffering of Christians in various parts of the world.

Alister McGrath's Theology of Suffering

McGrath's book, *A Journey Through Suffering*, intended to address the general problem of suffering in light of our belief in a good God, but in so doing, he made statements that relate to suffering with and for Christ, which fall within the parameters of our study of the theology of suffering, persecution, and martyrdom.

Questioning God's Goodness

In his introduction to the second edition to *A Journey through Suffering*, McGrath began by discussing the fact that the goodness of God is called into question because suffering exists in the world. He observed that Christianity, far from evading the question of pain and sorrow faces it head-on by "declaring that God himself knows what it is like to suffer and shares in our

suffering.” (1) The Christian faith, he asserted, focuses on “the image of pain and suffering,”—that being the cross of Christ.

At first, suffering may seem to question God’s goodness (McGrath, *Journey*, 1), but a deeper understanding of the cross and Christ’s suffering makes us aware of God’s deep compassion for and love toward us. The essence of the gospel is that God loved us so much that he sent his Son into the world to suffer and die for us. This changes our initial perspective to one of appreciation and of reciprocal love for God.

Since God did not remain aloof but came to live among us and to identify with us, theologians must not remain aloof from the suffering of the church. Martin Luther said that a true theologian likewise suffers with God’s people, and seeks to clarify and make sense of suffering with reference to the purposes and providence of God (McGrath, *Journey*, 7). Theology is not able to abolish suffering but it can allow the church to see it from a new perspective and in a new light (McGrath, *Journey*, 7).

The Christian’s viewpoint and outlook on suffering must be grounded on the self-revelation of God and “is not the product of despairing human imagination” (8). “The real issue,” wrote McGrath, “is not about defending God’s honor or integrity, but about making sense of our experience” (McGrath, *Journey*, 9). God suffers with us just as “we suffer when those whom we love suffer” (McGrath, *Journey*, 13).

The Suffering of Christ’s Followers

McGrath affirmed that becoming a Christian in the New Testament implied experiencing the suffering of God’s people, who were able to witness God through the experience of suffering and then to draw nearer to him (McGrath, *Journey*, 95).

Very early in the New Testament it says that we will suffer just as Jesus suffered (John 15:20). Jesus learned obedience through suffering (Hebrews 5:8) and so shall we. It is a part of the process of spiritual growth toward maturity. It is a necessary component and should be welcomed as such (McGrath, *Journey*, 83).

To be a Christian, then, means to suffer with and for Christ. In the process of being made more Christ-like, God must at times break us and then remold us into the shape of Christ. We must not seek out suffering on our own, but must allow God’s wisdom to guide our lives and bring on the suffering when it is right for us (McGrath, *Journey*, 92). Suffering is seen as a

“potential mark of God’s favor and presence” (McGrath, *Journey*, 92). If we share in his sufferings, we will also share in his glory.

Theology of the Cross

McGrath discussed the theology of the cross in the context of what appears to be an irony—when love acts in a way that seems to deny love. McGrath thinks that the finest discussion of this topic is by Martin Luther and his theology of the cross. Luther made the suffering of Christ and of his people the central focus of his theology of the cross. Any thought about the nature and purpose of God must be “grounded in the cross of Christ” (McGrath, *Journey*, 31). Martin Luther believed that the love of God was shown through the sufferings of Christ and not despite those sufferings. The Christian church came into being through those sufferings is presently sharing in Christ’s sufferings, and will finally share in his glory.

Luther made a distinction between that which is obviously consistent with the nature of God (*opus proprium Dei*)—the proper work of God and that which seems to be a contradiction of his nature (*opus alienum Dei*)—or the strange work of God, like a compassionate, merciful God who condemns sinners (McGrath, *Journey*, 31-32). The latter way may serve a greater end where suffering, for example, is “transfigured and eventually defeated” (p. 32). Just as Luther recognized the reality of suffering, and saw the cross as the symbol of suffering, so we need to realize that God can be present (although often hidden) in human suffering and is able to transfigure and transform it (pp. 32–33).

God and our Suffering

As Luther noted, God is present in our suffering to transform it. He is not insensitive to it or aloof from it. As McGrath so aptly said: “God decided to be hurt by our pain. God allowed himself to suffer” (p. 21). God is moved by our sadness and pain much like Jesus who wept over the tomb of his friend Lazarus. The cross, of course, shows his extreme solidarity with the suffering of the world. God chose to experience and share our pain (p. 21).

God expects us to have the same commitment toward suffering as he had (p. 9). He is in our sufferings today and we should offer them up to him and “ask him to reassure us of his presence, power, and purpose in our own little scenes of crucifixion” (p. 91).

Dying with Hope and the Age to Come

The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ enables us who are believers and the followers of Jesus to die with hope—hope in our future resurrection and with the knowledge that suffering has no place in the coming kingdom (McGrath, *Journey*, 2). Christian suffering provides a window through which the world can look to see why we react to hardship, suffering, and dying as we do (McGrath, *Journey*, 88). It is important that we affirm to the world that things are not the way they are meant to be, nor are they the way they will remain (McGrath, *Journey*, 96). God will completely transform believing humanity, as well as the heavens and the earth.

The sufferings of the present age will be ended at the coming of the kingdom of God in its fullness (Romans 8:18–25). The present sufferings are like birth-pangs and will usher in a new age, when the kingdom will come and every believer will experience bodily resurrection unto eternal life. This is the hope that keeps believers going in this life (McGrath, *Journey*, 36, 37).

Suffering, then, is not pointless. If we share the sufferings of Christ, we will see it leads to glory, a new blessed existence where suffering, evil, sin, and pain disappear. It is difficult to comprehend all that God has in store for his people (McGrath, *Journey*, 98-100).

An Assessment of McGrath's Theology of Suffering

While McGrath wished to discuss the general problem of suffering, he also addressed suffering with and for Christ. The first issue that he tackled was the age-old question of why there is suffering (or, more generally, evil) if God is a good God. McGrath said that if we look deeper, the cross and Christ's sufferings reveal the depth of God's compassion for humanity. This understanding sets the tone for his theology of suffering.

If God did not remain aloof from the suffering of the world, then theologian must not remain aloof from the sufferings of God's people, ministering to them by seeking to clarify and make sense of suffering in reference to the providence of God. God suffers with us just as we suffer with those we love.

Becoming a Christian in New Testament times meant to experience the sufferings of God's people. To be a Christian is to suffer with and for Christ. Suffering for Christ is a potential

mark of God's favor and it will help shape us and mature us. If we suffer with him, we will share in his glory.

McGrath utilized the thinking of Martin Luther's theology of the cross to further develop his theology of suffering. He referenced Luther's view of the proper and the strange work of God, both, in their own way, showing love, mercy to the believer and condemnation to the sinner.

The cross was the primary example of God's solidarity with the suffering of the world. In the incarnation, Christ came to be hurt by our pain.

Finally, the direction of McGrath's theology of suffering leads to hope: hope in the future resurrection and the assurance that pain and suffering will not be a part of the future kingdom. Present sufferings are the birth-pangs of the age to come. So, suffering is not pointless nor is it in vain.

CHAPTER 8 SUPPORTING THEOLOGIES

Terence E. Fretheim's Suffering God: an Old Testament Perspective

Terence Fretheim is Professor of Old Testament and Dean of Academic Affairs at Luther-Northwestern Theological Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. Fretheim did an in-depth study of the theme of divine suffering, taking into consideration metaphors that are often ignored in scholarly circles and churches. The result is a substantive study that is pertinent to a theology of suffering, persecution, and martyrdom, so fits into our topic of discussion.

The Relationship of Fretheim's Study to a Theology of Suffering, Persecution, and Martyrdom

A theology of any kind is constructed on the basis of foundational ideas or precepts. These precepts provide direction and set the parameters of the theology. Fretheim's study, which produced important truths (precepts), is biblically-based and derived. God has revealed himself by articulating his thoughts, feelings, and emotions, sometimes directly, sometime through metaphors (e.g., God mourning), and sometimes through Old Testament persons such as the prophets and the Suffering Servant of Isaiah.

What kind of God?

Fretheim made an important point when he wrote that it is not enough to say that one believes in God. The real question is: What kind of God does one believe in? Great atrocities and also great good have been done in the name of God. It is not only important to know what kind of God one serves but it is crucial, because it will influence a person's behavior.

To take this thought and apply it to a theology of suffering, persecution, and martyrdom, it is beneficial to know that the God whom suffering Christians serve is truly a God who suffers with them. God fully enters into the experience of the persecuted Christian and knows and feels the pain that the persecuted one is enduring. God is able to respond to this in a positive manner and provide grace for (and sometimes release from) the persecution. Stephen saw a vision of heaven before he died while the prison cell miraculously shook for Paul and Silas, and an angel appeared to Peter and led him from prison.

The traditional images of God, commented Fretheim, portray God as unmoved by the suffering of the world. It is difficult, he says, to portray God as “good, omnipotent, or credible” in the face of such evil as we see in the world today—atrocities and horrors on an unprecedented scale in modern times (Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 15). Another image of God that is promoted is that God is only a God of judgment and wrath. Fretheim says that this is done in part by the neglect of scholars to engage the images of God “in non-monarchical terms,” specifically as a God who is intimately involved in the human situation, embracing it as he does and making it his own. This means that God suffers as well because of his involvement in the human predicament.

Walter Brueggemann, in the editor’s foreword to Fretheim’s book, said that “the outcome of Fretheim’s research is to make clear that suffering belongs to the person and purpose of God” (Fretheim, *Suffering*, xii). This statement is a primary precept that supports a theology of suffering, persecution, and martyrdom. It permits our participation in God’s suffering and his participation in ours.

Three Reasons God Suffers

Fretheim wrote that there are three reasons God suffers (Fretheim, *Suffering*, 108). The first is *because* of people’s rejection of God as Lord. There are many terms used in the Bible to describe God’s reaction to his rejection. God mourns the loss of the relationship and grieves that his people would reject him. God feels sorrow, a sadness that his people will not obey his commands but rather rebel against his love and compassion.

The second reason is that God suffers *with* people who are suffering. This is an aspect of God’s behavior that is truly extraordinary. After judging people for their sins and administering justice with punishment, God often joins them in their pain. He was with them in captivity even though it was their wickedness and disobedience that caused them to be carried off to a foreign land.

Finally, God suffers *for* people. We have the example of the Suffering Servant who foreshadowed Christ’s vicarious death and atonement on the cross. The Father experiences suffering and death through the Son.

Fretheim asserted that from the time of creation, God was revealed as a God who is “open to and affected by the world” (Fretheim, *Suffering*, 112). God was deeply moved by

humanity's sinful behavior. As Fretheim observed: "God is not apathetic" (Fretheim, *Suffering*, 112). God was intimately and continually involved in the life of his people Israel. In Exodus 3:7-8, God is depicted as one who is wholly involved in the sufferings of his people, entering into their sufferings in such a manner as to experience what they had to endure (Fretheim, *Suffering*, 128). God experiences suffering from the inside. He is "internally related" to his suffering people. He enters fully into the hurtful situation, embracing it, and making it his own.

God Suffered with and through the Old Testament Prophets

The Old Testament prophet was a unique individual and he had a unique relationship with God, a relationship like no other person in Israel had. The relationship was unique in that the prophet's life became increasingly reflective of the divine life. Consequently, there was no separation between the suffering of the prophet and the suffering of God, for example. The prophet mirrored God's suffering before the people (Fretheim, *Suffering*, 109).

So, the prophets were more than spokesmen. They were to embody the character, purpose, and will of God. As Fretheim said, "the suffering of the prophet and God are so interwoven that they cannot be meaningfully separated" (Fretheim, *Suffering*, 109).

The Suffering Servant: another Picture of God

The Suffering Servant or the Servant of the Lord is a prominent figure that emerges in Isaiah, especially in chapters 52 and 53. The suffering of the Servant is intimately linked to the suffering of God. Fretheim asserted: "There is no suffering of the servant without the suffering of God" (148). The suffering of God is the "heavenly counterpart" to the suffering of the Servant. The Servant, said Fretheim, assumes the suffering of God and then "does what is finally necessary for the forces of evil in this world to be overcome: suffering unto death" (Fretheim, *Suffering*, 148).

Commenting on Isaiah 43:24, Fretheim concluded that at the very least, the Servant's suffering was reflective of God's suffering. God's purpose is fulfilled in the world through personal sacrifice, so he allowed the Servant to be a sacrifice. Since the Servant was the "vehicle for divine immanence," God experienced the suffering of the Servant. So, God chose at times to bring suffering upon the Servant and also upon himself. God cannot and does not experience

death but God experienced what death is like through the death of the Servant (Fretheim, *Suffering*, 164-65).

In the context of the New Testament, the Suffering Servant was Jesus Christ. Considering all the passages regarding the relationship of Jesus to the Father, it is reasonable to conclude that in Jesus Christ one sees “in the fullest possible sense...the heart of the Father, the God of the Old Testament” (Fretheim, *Suffering*, 4).

God's Suffering

Obviously when we talk about God, especially about his emotions, and suffering, we must use metaphors. Fretheim spent considerable time and space making us aware that we use metaphors in relation to God and how metaphors teach us about who God is. Metaphors are useful to point to important aspects of God's nature. Yet metaphors have their limitations. For example, as Fretheim explained:

To speak of God as one who suffers is to take with utmost seriousness the continuity inherent in certain metaphors (e.g. God as mourner). At the same time, God does not suffer exactly the same way humans do... (Fretheim, *Suffering*, 8).

Fretheim clarified one more aspect of the nature and actions of God. Even though God is deeply affected by what humans do (Fretheim says that God is “indeed a vulnerable God”) he does not get so caught up in emotion as to be overwhelmed but his “faithfulness and gracious purposes remain constant and undiminished” (Fretheim, *Suffering*, 1).

So, God suffers, but differently that we do. He suffers profoundly by what is happening in his relationship with his people.

An Assessment of Fretheim's Theology of Suffering

Fretheim did not intend to construct a complete theology of suffering, persecution, and martyrdom. His focus was on the suffering of God as a foundational precept for a larger theology of suffering and persecution. That God suffers with his people (and we are thinking especially of those who are being persecuted), is a substantial truth that encourages and sustains all believers but more specifically those who are going through tribulation for the sake of Christ. Suffering is not an accidental characteristic of God but belongs to his very person and purpose.

God suffers because of his relationship with his people. He redeemed them through suffering and he suffers with them as well because of their defiant behavior which greatly grieves him. God suffered through the prophets of the Old Testament and especially through the Servant of the Lord, or the Suffering Servant. We become aware that God will fulfill his purpose in the world through sacrifice and suffering, so he allows his people to suffer as a means of witness and to participate in Christ's sufferings.

It is not difficult to understand that God suffers differently than we do. Because of who he is and what he is (a pure Spirit, an incorporeal being) that is not like us, so he experiences suffering and all emotion differently than we do. We cannot define nor explain the differences sufficiently but we are still strengthened by the fact that he does suffer with us.

Jürgen Moltmann's Theology of a Suffering God

Moltmann's theology is not a theology of suffering, persecution, and martyrdom *per se* but is another supporting theology in that it is foundational to a theology of suffering and persecution. Its themes and precepts can be built upon and included in a theology of suffering and persecution. It is also supportive in that it provides encouragement for those who are suffering persecution and distress to know that God suffers as well. Further, God suffers with them—he is alongside them, feeling their pain.

Greek Philosophy and its view of God's passion.

Greek philosophy taught that the divine substance is incapable of suffering. In that view, the divine substance is the creator and sustainer of the transient world. It abides eternally so it is not in any way transient—"impassible, unmovable, united, and self-sufficient" is the way Moltmann described the Greek understanding of God (Moltmann, *Trinity*, 21). This, of course, is not the biblical picture of God in Christ. "God himself is involved in the history of Christ's passion" (Moltmann, *Trinity*, 21). The Bible shows God very involved in human lives and expressing love, anger, mercy, and even changing his heart toward his people. The Greek term for God's lack of passion is *apathetic* while the biblical view could be labeled *pathetic* for one who has *pathos*—God is a God of pathos or passion.

In the Patristic period God was often seen as incapable of suffering. For example, the early church father, Origen, taught that God the Father was not capable of suffering. Moltmann said: “But there is a third form of suffering: active suffering—the voluntary laying oneself open to another and allowing oneself to be intimately affected by him; that is to say, the suffering of passionate love” (Moltmann, *Trinity*, 23). The key idea for Moltmann was that God “suffers” from passionate love, the basis of his interaction with humanity and also the source of redemption for humanity. Moltmann further explained:

God does not suffer out of deficiency of being, like created beings. To this extent he is ‘apathetic.’ But he suffers from the love which is the superabundance and overflowing of his being. Insofar he is ‘pathetic.’ (Moltmann, *Trinity*, 23)

“He suffers a suffering of love” (Moltmann, *Trinity*, 24). When we call to him, he is merciful and even feels our pain.” (Moltmann, *Trinity*, 24)

Moltmann commented on Origen’s thinking by saying that when Origen talked about the suffering of God, he was talking about a suffering of love (Moltmann, *Trinity*, 24). This suffering is divine suffering, the suffering of the Father who gave up his Son and suffered the pain of redemption. It was the suffering of the Son who took our sin and sickness upon himself and bore the pain. This “suffering of love not only affects the redeeming acts of God outwards; it also affects the Trinitarian fellowship in God himself” (Moltmann, *Trinity*, 24). The suffering of love *without* is grounded in the pain of love *within* (Moltmann, *Trinity*, 25). Moltmann affirmed that we can only understand God’s love in Trinitarian terms (Moltmann, *Trinity*, 25).

The Pathos of God

Moltmann referred to Abraham Heschel in support of a theology of the suffering of God. Heschel was a Polish-born American rabbi who became one of the leading Jewish theologians and philosophers of the twentieth century. He was a professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. The primary source for his discussion of the pathos of God is in his book *The Prophets* (1962).

Heschel called his theology a theology of divine pathos. God Almighty goes out of himself (using Moltmann’s language) and he embeds himself into his chosen people where he becomes a partner in a covenant with his chosen people. In his pathos, he identifies with the people who bear his name and he is affected by their experiences, their acts, sins, and sufferings.

It is in this context of fellowship of the covenant with his people that God becomes capable of suffering. His existence and the history of the chosen people are linked together through the divine pathos from which springs forth creation, liberation, covenant, history and redemption. The divine passion “is the free relationship of passionate participation” (Moltmann, *Trinity*, 25) and not the moody passions belonging to the mythical world of the sagas.

Luther’s Theology of the Christ

A discussion of Moltmann’s and Luther’s theologies of the cross can be found in the section of Moltmann’s *Handbook on Luther*. Moltmann discussed his theology in his book *The Crucified God*. There is a theological tradition called “the theology of the cross” which has a special sense. Moltmann claims that this theology of the cross was founded by the Apostle Paul (Moltmann, *Crucified*, 69). In 1 Corinthians 1.18ff, Paul developed the word of the cross which is foolishness to those who are perishing but the power of God to those who are being saved. It destroys the wisdom of the worldly wise. According to Moltmann, the word of the cross liberates humanity from the powers of the cosmos (Moltmann, *Crucified*, 70).

Luther’s theology of the cross came from the Heidelberg Disputation. Seeking to formulate a theology which incorporated the insights of “the liberating gospel of the crucified Christ,” Luther articulated a theology of the cross to contrast the *theologia gloriae* which characterized the medieval institutional church (Moltmann, *Crucified*, 71). The *theologia gloriae* tended to reinforce humanity’s desire for self-deification and salvation through knowledge and works (Moltmann, *Crucified*, 71).

The Real Nature of God

Moltmann asserted that the epistemological principle of the theology of the cross is a dialectical principle that the deity of God is revealed in the paradox of the cross (Moltmann, *Crucified*, 27). Elaborating on the paradoxical aspect of the cross where God abandoned Christ yet remained within his humiliation. He wrote:

Humiliation to the point of death on the cross corresponds to God’s nature is the contradiction of abandonment. When the crucified Jesus is called the ‘image of the

invisible God,' the meaning is that *this* is God, and God is like *this*. God is not greater than he is in this humiliation (Moltmann, *Crucified*, 205).

So, the 'Christ event' is really a God-event and "the God-event takes place on the cross of the risen Christ" (Moltmann, *Crucified*, 205). Moltmann emphasized the unity of the Trinity, the inter-penetration of the Father with the Son so that what the Son experienced, the Father experienced as well.

The Cross of Christ

The Apostle Paul, defending his rights as a legitimate apostle, put forth visible signs of the cross in his life and in his body (2 Cor. 4; 2 Cor. 6; 2 Cor. 11.22ff.). They were signs of very tangible experiences of suffering, persecution, and rejection to which Moltmann said the apostolate let him. As the apostle followed the mission of Christ, he was led into following the cross. "He bears," wrote Moltmann, "the dying Jesus in his body, so that the life of Jesus may be revealed" (Moltmann, *Crucified*, 56). Those were not sufferings he chose himself. Nor did he hope to achieve deeper fellowship with Christ through them. They were not the imitation of the sufferings of Jesus but are the apostolic sufferings and "the cross of one who bears witness" (Moltmann, *Crucified*, 56).

In church history, the closest way to follow the crucified Christ was to become a martyr. The martyr did not just suffer *for* Christ but also *with* Christ (in him and with him). The martyr not only bore witness to the sufferings of Christ but took part in fulfilling the continuing sufferings of Christ (Moltmann, *Crucified*, 57). Moltmann writes: "The cross of Christ is the basis on which the apostle, the martyrs, and those who show selfless love are crucified with him" (Moltmann, *Crucified*, 64).

Moltmann believed that "the death of Jesus on the cross is the center of Christian theology" (204, *Crucified*). All theological statements about God—creation, sin, and death have their focal point in the crucified Christ" (Moltmann, *Crucified*, 204). In the cross of Christ, God not only experienced death so that humanity might be comforted with the knowledge that even death cannot separate them from God, but even more to make the crucified Christ the basis of God's new creation, where death is swallowed up in the victory of life and there will be no more tears or sorrow (Moltmann, *Crucified*, 217).

Moltmann toward the end of *The Crucified God*, clarified his view of the suffering and death of God and Christ. He wrote:

The suffering and dying of the Son, forsaken by the Father, is a different kind of suffering from the suffering from the Father in the death of the Son. Nor can the death of Jesus be understood in theopaschite terms as the ‘death of God.’ To understand what happened between Jesus and his God and Father on the cross, it is necessary to talk in trinitarian terms. The Son suffers dying, the Father suffers the death of the Son (243, *Crucified*).

Moltmann was careful to make the distinctions necessary to not be heretical, realizing that it is possible for people to misunderstand that while Jesus is God, he is not the Father and therefore there are limits to what can be said regarding death and God. There is unity in the Trinity but there is also diversity and keeping these two aspects in their proper balance keeps one aligned to an orthodox understanding of the Trinity.

The point that must be remembered is that Christ’s acts, especially on the cross, revealed not only his nature but also the nature of God. Moltmann explains: “If we follow through the idea that the historical passion of Christ reveals the eternal passion of God, then the self-sacrifice of love is God’s eternal nature” (Moltmann, *Crucified*, 32). He followed this with an even more compelling statement about God’s nature: “God is love; love makes a person capable of suffering; and love’s capacity for suffering is fulfilled in the self-giving and the self-sacrifice of the lover. Self-sacrifice is God’s very nature and essence” (Moltmann, *Crucified*, 32).

An Assessment of Moltmann’s Theology of a Suffering God

Moltmann’s primary contribution to a theology of suffering, persecution, and martyrdom was his belief that God suffers with us. He does clarify this by saying that God’s way of suffering is different than that of humans. He used the suffering of God’s Son and the Father’s suffering as an illustration of the difference in their suffering. It is, of course, very encouraging to those suffering persecution to know that God suffers with them, even if they do not necessarily feel his presence. The assurance of his presence, concern, and suffering is guaranteed.

The Greek philosophical understanding of God as eternal did not allow for any transient aspects like suffering. God being eternal could not suffer. The biblical view, which is God’s own

self-revelation, pictures God as a God of passion who loves, hates, and has compassion. Origen, of the Church Fathers, broke ranks and taught that God suffers a suffering love.

Moltmann's discussion of Luther's theology of the cross further reinforced the argument that God is engaged in this world and with his people, now primarily through Christ, and that Christ's experiences affect the Father.

The visible signs of Paul's Apostleship, the result of persecution and suffering, expressed clearly what it meant to follow Christ and carry one's cross. There was no abstract theory here as Paul bore the dying Jesus in his body. The cross of Christ is the way God's people show selfless love.

Kazoh Kitamori's Theology of the Pain of God

Kazoh Kitamori was a Lutheran pastor, author, and professor of systematic theology at Tokyo Union Theological Seminary, who also served as pastor of a congregation for forty-six years.

Kitamori's book, *Theology of the Pain of God*, is a supportive theology and not a theology of suffering, persecution, and martyrdom. It is a unique book, written by a Japanese theologian, that focused on the particular pain God experiences embracing the unembracable, and also the pain that God felt at the death of his Son (God the Son). It is related to our topic in that God experiences pain on our behalf and we know that he is not oblivious to the human situation, especially to those being persecuted or martyred, although these are not specifically mentioned. He talked about serving the Lord by bearing our cross and serving the Lord of the cross. He wrote about loving the unlovable and about loving our enemies.

Theology of God in Pain

How is pain related to God? According to Kitamori, the pain of God is part of God's eternal being or essence. He further explained what this meant in his theology:

Because God is essentially one in essence, it is possible that the Father still lives in the death of the Son. Thus, the pain of God arises. The death of the Son was real death, and his darkness was real pain. God the Father who hid himself in the death of God the Son is God in pain. Therefore the pain of God is neither the pain of God the

Son, not merely the pain of God the Father; but the pain of the two persons who are essentially one (Kitamori, *Pain*, 115).

The theology of the pain of God is concerned with his pain since this is the issue and the theological question Kitamori addressed (Kitamori, *Pain*, 11). Human pain, he said, is considered service to God's pain (Kitamori, *Pain*, 11). The pain of God is the heart of the gospel. Kitamori believed the prophet Jeremiah is the hermeneutical key in understanding the gospel. He is "a most precise interpreter of the gospel" because he saw the heart of God most deeply. Kitamori was led to the idea of the pain of God by reading Jeremiah 37.20 where God said (in the Japanese Literary Version of the Bible) that "my heart is pained, there my heart is broken." To Kitamori it became the definition of the gospel. He said that God on the cross in Paul is God in pain in Jeremiah (Kitamori, *Pain*, 20).

Kitamori defined God's pain as embracing that which should not be embraced. For example, a holy God embracing a sinner or embracing Christ on the cross, whom he had forsaken because he bore all the sins of the world. He also described God's pain when God experienced the loss of his Son through death on the cross.

God desires to reveal to us his pain and he does so through human pain. To us the bitterest pain imaginable, wrote Kitamori, is the pain of a father allowing his son to suffer and die. God communicated his pain through this analogy and, by doing so, Kitamori said "God suffers pain" (Kitamori, *Pain*, 47).

God resolves our pain through his own pain (Kitamori, *Pain*, 20). He is the Lord who heals. He does so through the death of God the Son, who, in so doing, heals our wounds and resolves our pain (Kitamori, *Pain*, 20). God is a wounded Lord, having pain in himself (Kitamori, *Pain*, 20). Kitamori wrote:

The Lord was unable to resolve our death without putting himself to death. God himself was broken, was wounded, and suffered, and because he embraced those who should not be embraced (Kitamori, *Pain*, 22).

In other words, God the Son expressed the pain of God by dying for humanity's sin. The holy God, who knows no evil and who is pure holiness, sent his Son to die for those whom God could not embrace, who are unholy and know evil and are the recipients of God's wrath.

Salvation is when God embraces us completely, so that God is our Savior. He already enfolds our broken reality and therefore knows the context of our lives. Kitamori says: “If one is obedient, he cannot be separated from the love of God, and one can no longer be separated from the pain of God which captures sinners” (Kitamori, *Pain*, 37).

Theology of Love Rooted in God’s Pain

The pain of God which resolves our pain is ‘love’ rooted in his pain. So when Kitamori used the phrase “theology of the pain of God” it was the same as “theology of love rooted in God’s pain” (Kitamori, *Pain*, 21). Kitamori called the pain of God ‘pain against pain’ just as the Bible talks about ‘death against death or the death of death which is the resurrection. As death against death is the resurrection so pain against pain is how God’s love resolves our pain (Kitamori, *Pain*, 21). “The pain of God,” asserted Kitamori, “reflects his will to love the object of his wrath” (Kitamori, *Pain*, 21). “The Lord wants to heal our wounds, which are caused by God’s wrath; this Lord suffers wounds, himself receiving his wrath” (Kitamori, *Pain*, 22). This idea comes from Isaiah 53:5 where it says that by his stripes we are healed. It is the death of Christ that is the death of death.

The theme “love rooted in pain” was further affirmed when Kitamori asserted that in the thought of both Jesus and Paul, the love of God and the pain of God are indissolubly united to form a unity in “love rooted in pain” (Kitamori, *Pain*, 39).

Serving the Lord

Kitamori believed that Abraham, the father of faith, was also the father of service to God. He was an example of what both faith is and what service is (Kitamori, *Pain*, 50). God tested Abraham and Abraham obeyed God’s voice and served him (Gen. 22:1, 12). “Abraham served God by sacrificing his only beloved son; he served God by his own pain, for the bitterest pain man can suffer is to cause the death of his beloved son” (Kitamori, *Pain*, 52). In the end God forbade Abraham to sacrifice Isaac but Abraham’s spirit and attitude were to obey God and that meant to act out of his pain.

We must bear our cross in order to serve the Lord of the cross (Kitamori, *Pain*, 50). This is the way we show compliance to Christ's statement about his followers taking up their crosses to follow him, by serving the Lord of the cross, in turn, we serve the pain of God (Kitamori, *Pain*, 50). We can also serve the pain of God through our own pain. We are to take up 'our' cross and follow him (Kitamori, *Pain*, 52). According to Kitamori, witnessing to and serving the pain of God has a transforming effect upon our lives. In fact, our pain is transformed into light. God's pain which overcomes wrath, which constitutes our pain, ends in salvation from this wrath. If we serve the pain of God, which is the "glad news of salvation," our pain ends in the sharing of salvation (Kitamori, *Pain*, 52-52).

Kitamori took this thought one step further. He asserted that when the believer, who has felt the pain of God in his heart, loves his unbelieving neighbor with as much intensity as he loves himself, the unbeliever stands in the immediate love of God (the reality of the wrath of God) and through the love of the believer the unbelieving neighbor is transferred from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light (Kitamori, *Pain*, 90). Kitamori's explanation implied that believers can love their unbelieving neighbors into heaven. It is difficult to accept this description of evangelism since it leaves out any action (such as faith) on the part of the unbeliever. It appears that the neighbor is the passive recipient of salvation.

Those who follow the Lord of the cross and the pain of God will determine their ethics by the love of the cross and the pain of God. It means that we must love the unlovable and not limit ourselves to loving only those who are lovable (Luke 6:32-34). It means also loving our enemies (Luke 6:27-28, 35) (Kitamori, *Pain*, 93). It means becoming Christ-like. Kitamori observed:

Man becomes conformed to Christ when his concern is absorbed in the pain of God—when he serves the pain of God through his own pain (Kitamori, *Pain*, 54).

Throughout our study of Kitamori a question has been lingering perhaps in the back of our minds: Does human suffering matter since the focus of this study has been on the pain of God? Kitamori answered the question in this manner: "The surpassing grace of God's pain makes human suffering valuable and precious" (Kitamori, *Pain*, 147).

Summary

Kitamori set down a short summary that explained his view of a theology of the pain of God. He wrote:

The concept “love rooted in the pain of God” experiences the whole of God’s love. God’s love can be divided into *three orders of love*. The first is the immediate “love of God”; the second is the “pain of God”; and the third is love rooted in the pain of God, which for convenience, we shall call the “love...of God.” When these three orders by love, by being united, comprise “love rooted in the pain of God,” the truth really exists (Kitamori, *Pain*, 117).

Assessment of Kitamori’s *Pain of God*

As mentioned earlier, Kitamori’s theology is not a theology of suffering, persecution, and martyrdom. It is a supportive theology related to the topic. It still has value but it is limited for our present study of suffering and persecution. The value of Kitamori’s theology is that it recognizes God’s pain and human pain.

Kitamori’s insights are helpful to the theologian of persecution because he viewed pain as a part of the nature or essence of God. God is not oblivious to pain. The only drawback is that Kitamori limits his discussion to God’s pain. He does not expand his thought to show how God’s pain allows him to be sympathetic to humans in pain, especially those who suffer because of their testimony about his Son. That would have been beneficial to our discussion about suffering and persecution.

Only briefly did he talk about human pain, recognizing it as valuable and precious. Human pain is considered service to God’s pain. Kitamori seemed to have no awareness of suffering for righteousness’ sake or else that aspect of pain was outside the limits of his study.

The major benefit of God’s pain for humanity is that he heals our wounds, which in the Bible is really a reference to our sins and infirmities and perhaps to the effect these have on us.

There seems is no consideration of a third party in Kitamori’s theology—someone who injures or persecutes the followers of God.

¹ <http://concordiahistoricalinstitute.org/jan-hus-reformer-confessor-martyr-introduction/>

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

² Gibbon, *The History and Decline of the Roman Empire*, 1222.

³ Ton, *Suffering*, 112.

⁴ Ton, 113.

⁵ Ton, 114-124

⁶ http://www.ccel.org/s/schaff/history/2_ch02.htm

⁷ Water, *New Encyclopedia*, 394.

⁸ Water, 395–96.

⁹ https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/romans/christianityromanempire_article_01.shtml

¹⁰ http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/romans/christianityromanempire_article_01.shtml

¹¹ Bixler, ‘How the Early Church,’ 1.

¹² W.H.C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*.

¹³ Frend, *Martyrdom*, 14.

¹⁴ Bixler, 2.

¹⁵ (http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0265-0339_Eusebius_Caesariensis_Church_History_EN.pdf).

¹⁶ Ton, 330–333.

¹⁷ Ton, 334.

¹⁸ Ton, 334–36.

¹⁹ Ton, 341–43.

CHAPTER 1: CHRISTIANITY IN CONFLICT WITH ROMAN RELIGION

²⁰ Frend, *Martyrdom*, 1

²¹ Frend, , 1.

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- ²² Frend, 78.
²³ Frend, 77-88.
²⁴ Walker, *A History of the Christian Church*, 7.
²⁵ Walker, 8.
²⁶ Walker, 52.
²⁷ Gibbon, *The Decline*, Part I.
²⁸ Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 7.
²⁹ Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, 17–27.
³⁰ Schaff, 7.
³¹ Frend, 9, 11.
³² Schaff, 8.
³³ Schaff, 8-9.
³⁴ Walker, 8-9.
³⁵ Frend, 90-91.
³⁶ Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture*, 17, 113, 129–30.
³⁷ Ton, 349.
³⁸ Ton, 354.
³⁹ Walker 52.
⁴⁰ Weinrich, “Death and Martyrdom: An Important Aspect of Early Christian Eschatology,” 327–28.
⁴¹ Frend, 58.
⁴² Frend, 59-64.
⁴³ Schaff, 26.
⁴⁴ Ton, 355.
⁴⁵ Schaff, 4.
⁴⁶ Schaff, 4.
⁴⁷ Schaff, 27.

CHAPTER 2: THE END OF THE FIRST CENTURY AND THE BEGINNING OF THE SECOND

- ⁴⁸ Water, *New Encyclopedia*, 89.
⁴⁹ Frend, 151.
⁵⁰ Frend, 151.
⁵¹ Clement of Rome, Letter to the Corinthians, Chapter V.
⁵² Clement, Corinthians, Chapter VI.
⁵³ Clement, Corinthians, Chapter VII.
⁵⁴ Clement, Corinthians, Chapter, XLV.
⁵⁵ Aristides, *The Apology of Aristides*, section 16.
⁵⁶ Aristides, *The Apology of Aristides*, section 17.

CHAPTER 3: THE SECOND CENTURY

- ⁵⁷ Walker, 57.
⁵⁸ Walker, 53.
⁵⁹ Walker, 54.
⁶⁰ Frend, 183.
⁶¹ Walker, 143.
⁶² Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, 395.
⁶³ Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, 46.
⁶⁴ Bediako, 48.
⁶⁵ Bediako, 45.
⁶⁶ Chadwick, “Justin Martyr’s Defence of Christianity,” 138 in Bediako.
⁶⁷ Bediako, 140.
⁶⁸ Bediako, 140.
⁶⁹ Bediako, 145.
⁷⁰ Bediako, 154–55.
⁷¹ Bediako, 146.
⁷² Walker, 55.

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- ⁷³ ‘First Apology’ <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0126.htm>
- ⁷⁴ ‘Second Apology’ <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0127.htm>
- ⁷⁵ Diatessaron <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/diatessaron.html>
- ⁷⁶ Address To The Greeks <http://www.aina.org/books/tatian.htm>
- ⁷⁷ Mathetes ‘The Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus’ <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0101.htm>
- ⁷⁸ Mathetes ‘The Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus’ <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0101.htm>
- ⁷⁹ The Octavius of Minucius Felix <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/octavius.html>
- ⁸⁰ The Octavius of Minucius Felix <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/octavius.html>, XXXVIII.
- ⁸¹ Ton, 349.
- ⁸² Frend, 272.
- ⁸³ Frend, 273.
- ⁸⁴ Frend, 273.
- ⁸⁵ Bediako, 106.
- ⁸⁶ Bediako, 107.
- ⁸⁷ Bediako, 109.
- ⁸⁸ Bediako, 109.
- ⁸⁹ Bediako, 116.
- ⁹⁰ Bediako, 116.
- ⁹¹ Bediako, 125.
- ⁹² Ton, 350.
- ⁹³ Ton, 350.
- ⁹⁴ Ton, 350.
- ⁹⁵ Ton, 350-51.
- ⁹⁶ Ton, 351.
- ⁹⁷ Ton, 351.
- ⁹⁸ Ton, 352.
- ⁹⁹ Ton, 351.
- ¹⁰⁰ Tertullian, “Defence Of The Christians Against The Heathen,” http://www.tertullian.org/articles/mayor_apologeticum/mayor_apologeticum_07translation.htm
- ¹⁰¹ “Scorpiace,” <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0318.htm>
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- ¹⁰³ “A PLEA FOR THE CHRISTIANS,” <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/athenagoras-plea.html>
- ¹⁰⁴ Clement of Alexandria ‘The Stromata, or Miscellanies’ Book IV <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/clement-stromata-book4.html>
- ¹⁰⁵ *Theology and Identity*, 197.
- ¹⁰⁶ First Principles, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0412.htm>
- ¹⁰⁷ Origen’s ‘An Exhortation to Martyrdom’ [Classics of Western Spirituality] Origen, Translation and Introduction by Rowan A. Greer, New York: Paulist Press, pages 41–79.
- ¹⁰⁸ See note at the bottom of page 49 in Rowan, *Origen*, ‘Exhortation.’