

Great Controversy Series

04 Satan's Plan B

You may "kill us, torture us, condemn us. . . . Your injustice is the proof that we are innocent Nor does your cruelty . . . avail you." It was but a stronger invitation to bring others to their persuasion. "The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed."--Tertullian, Apology, paragraph 50.

These are the words of Tertullian, a Christian who lived from 160-220 A.D. He received his education in Carthage. He was one of the leaders of the African church.

Under persecution Jesus Christ's people, rather than shrinking in number, that actually grew. There are no recorded statistics but researchers estimate that by the end of the persecutions under Diocletian in 311 one out of every 10 people in the Roman Empire was Christian. That is an amazing percentage. Christianity was an illegal religion. If caught, a Christian risked having all of his property seized leaving nothing for his heir, and either being burned alive or crucified. Who would want to join such a group?

As a group, Christians were despised. In those early periods Christians did not recognize social classes or ethnicity. Whether slave or citizen, poor or rich, ignorant or learned, regardless of race or gender they found equality among the Christians. This logic didn't go over very well with the Romans because it was not according to their customs. How can an upper class person socialize and talk with someone of the lower classes?

In the second century, in general the Christian worships were not open to the public. Christians celebrated the Lord's Supper in secret. Only those who were baptized could join in. Because grape juice and the bread were consumed symbolically as the blood and body of Christ they were called cannibals. Because Christians called one another brother and sister and ate at an agape, that is a love feast together they were called immoral and incestuous. Because they did not worship the Roman idols they were called atheist. Because they called a crucified man, "Lord" they were called crazy. Now who would want to join a group like that?

There was no open preaching. There were very few books and writings. How could Christianity grow in an environment like that?

Although Christians were hated, they drew the attention of pagan writers. If that were not so why did they frequently criticize and write about them? What was so attractive about Christianity? Perhaps how they went to their death attracted the attention of the pagans. There was a big interest among the pagans regarding death. The pagans, who went to the theater or stadiums to watch the gladiator contests were considering their own death. They watched with intensity how the gladiators faced their death. If the gladiator faced his death with courage he was considered

honorable. Perhaps the pagans seeing Christians going to their death with courage and even singing hymns were curious how the Christians could have such courage.

There can be many reasons that the number of Christians increased. Justin who was born in Palestine was deeply schooled in Greek philosophy. One day, probably in Ephesus, while he was meditating by the sea shore, an elderly man explained Christ to Justin. Justin had already observed how the Christians came to their death with a decidedly moral behavior. Justin became a believer and wrote a number of papers and shared his faith by giving lessons in Rome. In approximately 165 he was martyred.

In approximately 246 in Carthage of Tunus, Cyprian became a believer. Cyprian had become a very wealthy man. But this wealth did not provide happiness. Later he would describe his noble life as, “a dark and gloomy night.” Perhaps through the contact with a religious leader named Caecilianus he began to learn about Christianity. But could Cyprian change?

Cyprian was used to the most delicious food and luxurious clothing. Could Cyprian change? There was a battle going on inside him. That battle was not about believing as the Christians believed. It was about living as the Christians lived. Cyprian wrote, “The errors of my previous life the inculcated mistakes were a part of my life.” It seemed that change was impossible. He wanted to be baptized and with his baptism he understood the Holy Spirit’s coming upon him. What he previously thought was impossible now happened. His diet, his dress became more simple and more humble. His house was open to the poor. In a short time he would be a church leader. He was martyred in 258.

From place to place it could have been different but in general baptismal candidates went through a long process. The first step of the process was generally an unbeliever meeting a believer in an informal way and being taken to the church leader for education. The newcomers were not accepted as catechumens right away. They passed through an interrogation. If in their occupation there was idolatry, astrology, immorality or murder they must either quit that immediately *or* be rejected. If the candidate was a slave, what would his master say? If the candidate was a soldier only by oath that he would not kill could he become a catechumen. It was investigate whether the person had the capacity to understand God’s word.

So why was a candidate required to adhere to the standards of the group before he was accepted into the group? In this first step, the religious leaders were more interested in forming a group whose values were different than society rather than dispensing concepts. In this process people did not enter into a different lifestyle though thinking but rather by having a different lifestyle they changed their thinking.

If the candidate was accepted a few times a week their sponsor would take them to the religious leaders early in the morning for education. The purpose of the education was more about behavior than knowledge. There were prayer groups, the believers prayed in one group and the

catechumens in the other. This was because the believers could give a holy kiss while the catechumens could not.

Romans 16:16 Greet one another with a holy kiss. The churches of Christ greet you.

In the end the leaders prayed for the believers and catechumens and then everyone went to their various businesses. The process could last a long time, 3, even five years. If the students were living Christian values and priorities then they could pass to the third step.

In the third step the students took lessons every day and studied heavily on the doctrines of the Bible. They also did exorcisms. In our modern age some people can laugh at this. But most of the students had come from a completely pagan background. In our day most people don't believe that a person can be possessed by demons. Skeptics put forward the idea that because the ancient writers did not know about mental illness, they attributed every strange behavior to what demons were doing. But let's think about this a minute.

Luke 4:33-35 Now in the synagogue there was a man who had a spirit of an unclean demon. And he cried out with a loud voice, ³⁴ saying, "Let *us* alone! What have we to do with You, Jesus of Nazareth? Did You come to destroy us? I know who You are -- the Holy One of God!" ³⁵ But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be quiet, and come out of him!" And when the demon had thrown him in *their* midst, it came out of him and did not hurt him.

Who is Jesus talking to? Jesus is not talking with a mental illness. He is talking with a demon or we might say an evil spirit. Jesus gave the command and the demon left. A sickness didn't leave. A demon left. A being which could think and talk left. The demon used the word "we." He didn't say, "What have I to do with You." He said, "What have we to do with You." These kind of events were not rare. They happened all the time.

Luke 6:18 as well as those who were tormented with unclean spirits. And they were healed.

In our day people voluntarily strap bombs to themselves and go somewhere and set off the bomb. They kill themselves and others. This is not normal behavior. In my opinion these people are controlled by demons. This is not just a common mental illness. They are possessed by demons. Because they demonstrate an intense hatred toward humanity. And there are a lot of people who do this. The suicide bombers seem endless as if they are waiting in line to die. They assign themselves to this evil work saying, "I will do it! I will do it! Pick me!"

There are a lot more people who are possessed by demons than we think.

In the end, the catechumens, generally on the day of Pentecost, after a final exorcism prayer was done, were baptized and they became full members. At last they could join in the Christian worship services and partake of the Lord's supper.

The church remained relatively pure under persecution. People who were not sincere did not risk their goods and their lives and pass through a three year education.

But a great change took place in the Roman Empire. After Diocletian there were a few emperors and co-emperors. Constantine the Great's father was a co-emperor, ruling in the west. When his father died, Constantine the Great went to war with Maxentius to secure the throne.

Eusebius of Caesarea recorded that in the year 312, Constantine had a dramatic experience at the battle of Milvian Bridge. According to this account and other Christian sources, before the battle Constantine looked at the sun and saw above it a cross of light. It is written there, "In this sign conquer." Constantine had the Christian symbol of the Chi-Rho put on the shields of the soldiers. Constantine won the battle and later became the emperor of both the west and the east. After the battle, Constantine did not offer sacrifice in the pagan temples as was the custom after a huge victory. Most of the leaders in the empire were still pagan. The Roman coins still carried the images of the Roman gods on them. In 313 with the Edict of Milan, Christianity became a recognized religion and persecution ceased.

Constantine became the sponsor of Christianity. He gave money to the church and made cathedrals, he held Christian clergy exempt from taxes, Christians were promoted to high places and property seized during the time of Diocletian were returned. On the surface these seemed to be blessings but there was a trap lying underneath.

First of all, suddenly there was an emperor who called himself a Christian but had never become a catechumen, never joined a Lord's Supper, nor could he, and had not been baptized. In order to get appointed to higher positions people were joining the church. But their lives had not been changed. The conditions of discipleship were abbreviated. Satan could not destroy Christianity by killing Christians. He tried a more subtle thing: Satan joined the church. Satan's Plan B was more successful.

Under persecution the church was composed of those who were honest, humble and self-sacrificing. Those faithful believers held fast to truth many times at the price of their lives. But when persecution ceased, a spirit of compromise entered the church. To win converts from paganism to Christ, enticements of worldly honor and money were placed before them. Pagans were led to accept part of the Christian doctrine while other important truths were rejected. They accepted Jesus Christ as God's Son but they were not convicted of sin, felt no need for repentance and their hearts were not changed.

Beforehand there were many miracles and believers, pointing to these were able to show that God was with them. But the miracles stopped. The church was losing her power and Satan was exulting in the triumph. Some Christians did not compromise but most Christians lowered the standards. Professed Christians were, in essence, no different from pagans. Only the names of the statues and icons changed. Icons of Jesus, Mary and the saints filled the church. Superstitions, wrong doctrines and pagan rituals multiplied. Christianity united with paganism.

If the Bible had not warned us about this ahead of time, perhaps our trust in the Scriptures would be shaken. But the Bible gives lots of information about this.

2 Thessalonians 2:1 Now, brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, we ask you,² not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as if from us, as though the day of Christ had come.³ Let no one deceive you by any means; for *that Day will not come* unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition,⁴ who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God.

Paul said that before Jesus comes there would come a great falling away. The Greek word is *apostasia* from which we get the word *apostasy* by way of the Latin. We looked at the beginning of this apostasy today. Next time we will look at it in a more detailed way, especially looking at the Bible texts about this subject.

As we will see, compromise on religious principles and teachings does no good for the church, just the opposite, it opens the way for its fall. Now are you compromising on a religious principle or teaching going against the Bible? Do you say, "It isn't important, who cares?" If that is so, what should you do?