

**PERSECUTION AS A UNIQUE MARK OF CHRISTIANITY: A COMPARATIVE
STUDY OF THE EARLY CHURCH AND THE MODERN CHURCH**

Adegbite, Deborah Doyinsola (PhD)

Bethel Institute of Theology and Biblical Research,

An Affiliate of

Olabisi Onabanjo University,

Jesusland, Akiriboto, Gbongan, Nigeria.

adegbitedebbie@gmail.com

08033245482

Abstract

The Christians' persecution is not necessarily just killing. It is a firm attempt of a community or government to rebuke, subdue, or silence Christianity which in most cases results in Christian massacre, burning of churches and other forms of humiliations. It is noted in history that persecution is part of Jewish heritage. If part of Jewish heritage, then it must be part of what Christianity inherited from her Jewish background since Jesus never promised worldly peace for his followers. The understanding of this will be explored in a comparison with the modern church. The implication and application to the Nigerian context is also discussed. The methodology adopted consists of the critical historical analysis as well as exegesis of some biblical passages, using the Reader Response hermeneutical principle to investigate the contextual understanding of how persecution is a unique mark of Christianity from time immemorial and how it has remained the unique mark of Christianity up till now. The result shows that while the modern church prays against persecution; it seems they forget that it is part of Christian package and nothing can be done to stop persecutions in the real sense.

Word Count: 191 words

Key Words: Jewish heritage, Pagan Persecution, Official Persecution, Kingdom of God, Mark of the Church, Early etc.

Contents

- i. Introduction
- ii. Persecution as Jewish heritage
- iii. Persecution of Christianity in the First Four Centuries AD.
- iv. Jesus Christ prepared His followers for Persecution
- v. The “Kingdom of God” Promised by Jesus to His Followers
- vi. Persecution as Mark of the Church
- vii. A Comparative Study of Persecution in the Early Church and Modern Church in Nigeria
- viii. Conclusion

Introduction

The verb ‘persecute’ is generally defined as threats especially because of religious or political devotion, J. D. Douglas and F. F. Bruce agree that it is “an encounter by Christians”,¹ this was nothing new. It was part of their Jewish heritage. After Jesus Christ has been put to death, his followers, the church, suffered serious persecution in the Roman Empire but the more they were killed, the more they increased in number and strength. The persecution of Christians is surrounded by many reasons both in the early period and the modern times. Insults, mass murder, burning of churches and other forms of humiliations are not alien to the history of Christianity. In the early period, there were a lot of persecutions in the Roman Empire, under different emperors especially from the first to fourth century. Boer suggests that “the basic reason for the persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire was the refusal of the church to permit her members in emperor worship.”² That is, the Christians refusal to worship or acknowledge the emperor as god is against the faith of the entire Roman Empire and the rule of the emperor. This reality is spelt out in one of Tertullian’s famous apology where he wrote on behalf of the Christians appealing³ for their toleration. When he wrote to the Tribunal during the reign of Emperor Septimus Severus that “The blood of the Saints is the seed (that grows the Church)”; this was based on the writing that a large number of

people were transformed and converted to the faith through witnessing the Christian martyrs and themselves becoming part of the Christian martyrs as a result.

Persecution as Jewish heritage

Christianity is an offshoot of the Judaism, that is, it is rooted in Judaism. It is asserted that persecution is part of Jewish heritage too. It is understood that before Christian era, the Bible records the Jews being persecuted in Egypt (Ex. 1-3), they were attacked by the Assyrians in 2 Kings 19, the Babylonians also sent a large numbers of them into exile in the 6th century BC (1 Chr. 9:1^{ff}) where the Jews were "persecuted" as an indigenous ethnic group with a strong and sovereign attachment to their land. The Persians and the Greeks also persecuted the Jews in their own way. The Psalmist also speaks of the of the righteous who suffers persecution as a result of their faith in God, and who prayed to God for deliverance from such suffering (Ps.7;35;37;79;119:84-87). In the intertestamental period, people almost renounced their faith because of the persecution of the period. When Antiochus Epiphanes⁴ who, after capturing Jerusalem, stopped all religious activities in and outside the Temple, including male circumcision and the observance of Sabbath. He defiled the Jewish temple by sacrificing a pig to Zeus (the chief Greek god) of whom he believed he incarnated and turned Judaism into a forbidden religion and tried forcing them to worship the Greek gods.

Persecution of Christianity in the First Four Centuries A.D.

Persecution of the Christians mainly covers the first four centuries; that is, from the New Testament period to the "Great Persecution" of Dioclecian in 284 – 305AD. Jesus, the Lord of Christianity was persecuted and finally killed by both religious and political officials (Mk.3:6; Lk.4:29; Jh.5:16; Acts 3:13-15). The persecution of this early period can be classified into two categories; the first category is concerned with the first and second century persecutions which are sporadically enforced but the second category, which comprises of the third and fourth century persecutions are the ones spoken of as "The Great Persecution". This

was because they (especially Decian and Diocletian persecutions) were empire wide and they aimed at a complete and sudden wipe out of Christianity. Persecution of the Church in all the early period includes harassment or maltreatment, killing and deprivation of rights.

The persecutions were from both Jews and gentiles and the general reasons for the persecutions were for the name (Christian), Atheism, *Religio illicit*⁵, Cannibalism, Incest, Arson, threatening the state's safety, etc. It is necessary for this paper to explore each of the notable persecutors and analyse their reasons and implication for the persecution before explaining the response of the church to it. The persecutions of the Early Church are mainly in three parts, the Jews, Pagans and the Official persecutions.

The Persecution from the Jews

The Jews had always persecuted Jesus who was the Lord of the Church during his earthly ministry; he was arrested, killed directly or indirectly by them. They vouch to stop his followers (Mt. 2:23 cf. Acts 24:5) for so many reasons which can be understood in three ways - political, religious and natural. Acts of Apostles chapter 8 attest to Saul/Paul's hatred for Jesus' followers before he became one of them too. The reasons for Paul's persecution can be explained naturally because of the fact that he was a Benjamite and Jesus was from Davidic lineage which automatically opens an old wound for the family of Saul for David's descendant (e.g. 1 Sam.19:17; 20:30). It is also religious because Yahweh is King in Israel, the monotheistic idea of Judaism necessarily will fight against any threat to that, and a normal Jew will see Jesus' claims as claiming to become an illegal King of the Jew. The political aspect of the persecution is glaring in the actions of Herod in Acts chapter 12 who was trying to appease the Jews by arresting Peter after killing James. This was political because Herod ordered the arrest of Peter when he realised that the Jews derived joy in James' death.

Eusebius attests to the Jewish persecution of Christians that "... Barcochba, the leader of the revolt of the Jews, gave orders that Christians alone should be led to cruel punishments, unless they would deny Jesus Christ ..."⁶ The reason for this is the fact that the Christians could not support the Messianic pretension of Barcochba.

The Pagan Persecution

The hatred from paganism is displayed in the Ephesians riot of Acts 19:21-24, apart from this fact, the reason for the persecution is also economical because verse 25 asserts that it was their means of livelihood.

The Official Persecution

The persecution by the government is what is known as the official persecution of the church and the persecutions from the Jews and Pagans are nothing to compare with it. Emperor Nero (54-68 AD.) was the first official Christian persecutor; from Foxe' view, he was the sixth Emperor of Rome⁷ he blamed Christians for the fire of July 19, A.D. 64 which swept across Rome. According to Tacitus⁸, Nero himself was responsible for the fire, tradition even declares that Nero wanted to erect new and modern buildings to replace old ones; when he was suspected for causing the fire; he blamed it on the Christian and used them as scape goats for his own offence. John Foxe asserts that the conflagration continued for nine days and in Foxe' own word: "In particular, he had some sewed up in skins of wild beasts, and then worried by dogs until they expired; and others dressed in shirts made stiff with wax, fixed to axletrees, and set on fire in his gardens, in order to illuminate them."⁹

The reason for Neroean persecution is more than Rome just being set ablaze because Christians did not do it, there was no evidence that they did it, yet, Nero still vowed to hunt them down and kill them. Tacitus seems to now highlight the clue for the reason for Neroean

persecution by referring to them as “a class hated for their abominations”¹⁰ when reporting the fire incident. This persecution claimed the lives of two great Apostles, Peter and Paul yet the outcome of the persecution did not diminish Christianity, rather the spirit of Christianity increased.

Emperor Domitian (c. 90 - 96) was the second official persecutor of Christians and the seventh Roman Emperor. His persecution mainly centred in Rome and Asia Minor, his family is known for the willingness to destroy both the Jew and the Christians alike, he was the son of Emperor Vespasian and the brother of Emperor Titus, who is also known as Titus Flavius Domitianus. He was the first emperor to call himself by the title *dominus et dues*, meaning, “lord and master”, and one of his reasons for persecution was atheism, because Christians refused to serve or see him as the ‘lord’ or ‘master’ of their lives by refusing to offer incense to the genius of the emperor so, he persecuted Christians for being atheist. Among other punishments during his persecution of Christians, his niece Flavia Domitila was banished, together with her husband, his cousin was killed for being a Christians and he also confiscated Christian properties. He was the one who sent Apostle John to the exile in island of Patmos. In the last three years of Domitian’s reign, he also terrorized and executed many of the nobility as well because he felt they were not loyal to him; his wickedness was so intolerable that his wife Domitia ganged up with those who plotted against and assassinated him in 96AD.

Trajan (98-117 A.D.), the eighth emperor and the third persecutor was not even sure of why the emperors before him persecuted the Christians. He only persecuted the Christians for the mere name “Christian”. The fact is that by the time of Pliny/Trajan correspondence, the name “Christian” sounds like when someone shout something like, “help, help, thief, thief” in

Lagos in those days when people will not even bother to ask, what did he steal before they start to burn the person alive with tyres, kerosene and matches. Many of the second century Apologists, especially Justin Martyr, Tertullian advocated then that those who are accused as Christians should be investigated because names do not deserve hatred¹¹. This is simply the situation found in the correspondence between Emperor Trajan and his senatorial governor of Bithynia, Pliny the Younger, who reported his dealings with those accused as Christians before him saying: “I do not know what is the crime usually punished or investigated, ... meantime, this is the course I have taken with those who were accused before me as Christians. I asked them whether they were Christians, and if they confessed, I asked them a second and a third time with threats of punishment. If they kept to it, I ordered them for execution.”¹² He was really not sure of why they were being persecuted; all he knew was that they should be punished even without unreasonable reason. Trajan, in his reply to Pliny the Younger agreed that he (Pliny) will not find anything incriminating the Christians in the examination of the cases who were accused before him as Christians. The fact is that: “... indeed nothing can be laid down as a general ruling involving something like a set for of procedure” and added that “they are not to be sought out but if they are accused and convicted, they must be punished.”¹³ To this statement, Tertullian, in his apologetic comment on Trajan’s reply to Pliny’s letter, where he asserts that nothing can be laid down as a general ruling, in Tertullian’s word, “What a decision, how inevitably entangled! He says they must not be sought out, implying they are innocent and he orders them to be punished, implying they are guilty. He spares them and rages against them, he pretends not to see and punishes”¹⁴. The outcome of this persecution is not far-fetched in the same Pliny/Trajan correspondence where Pliny noticed and pointed out the Christians’ stubbornness which deserves punishments. It is obvious here that even if Pliny was not sure of the crime that is attached to the mere name “Christian”, he was sure and accused Christians of “obstinacy

and unbending perversity’’¹⁵. This noted attitude as an outcome of the persecution shows that Christians are used to being persecuted.

Emperor Hadrian (117-138 AD.) was the fourth official persecutor of Christians. Being a trained soldier, he adhered strictly to the old religion but despite being described as someone with a loving and peaceful mind, yet, Christians were still persecuted during his regime for the violation of law and order but he insisted that those who are innocently or wrongly accused as Christians should be protected and added that those who brought the false accusations should be punished for doing so but he did not outlaw action against Christians. It was glaring that some non-Christians had been accused as Christians. According to John Foxe, about ten thousand Christians were martyred during his reign including the whole family of Eustachius¹⁶. This is because by his time, many people were falsely accused to be Christians. Hadrian died in c.138AD but before his death he appointed Antonius Pius as his successor. Antonius Pius was another Emperor, it was said that there was no persecution of Christians, well, this is probably because he read the apology of Aristides and Justin Martyr.’¹⁷

However, he followed the policies of Trajan and Hadrian of forbidding mob violence; punishing Christians only after regular legal processes. Due to this he was referred to as ‘a friend of Christianity’¹⁸ by some writers. Also it was stated that Christians suffered during his reign. It is argued that the great Polycarp of Smyrna died during his reign in c.155AD.

Marcus Aurelius (161 -180 AD) was considered the most cruel of all the persecutors of the early period simply because he was a Stoic philosopher. Stoicism¹⁹ was a philosophical school which was founded by Zeno of Citium (335-263BC). It proposed harmony between the Logos²⁰ and the world. The philosophy influenced many educated people and great men including Emperor Marcus Aurelius but he persecuted Christians on philosophical grounds

and blamed them for every natural disaster. He ruled and hated Christians with passion. This was because he thought of Christians as undermining the structure of civilization which he was trying to maintain. During his persecution, John Foxe, asserts that his persecutions were so inhuman that many of those who watched them shuddered with horror, and were astonished at the courage of the sufferers.²¹

Septimus Severus (193-211), and Maximus the Trachian (164 -238) were a bridge to the “Great Persecution”. Septimus Severus’ rule was at first favourable towards Christians but later he blamed and punished them for every natural disaster. It was during his persecution that Origen’s father, Leonidus, Irenaeus (130-202) of Lyons and Pope Victor of Rome were martyred. During Maximus’ persecution, Christians were buried in fifty and sixty inside large pits²²

Emperor Decius (249 - 260) was the first to introduce the empire-wide persecution. He aimed at uniting the empire religiously as well as in other areas and he saw Christianity as threat to such unity; he therefore demanded that everyone should participate in the worship of the Emperor god and that they must get a certificate of worship (*libilus*) to show for it. His attempt caused division and schismatic movements in the early church; the Church was divided into at least five different groups as a result of his persecution. The first group were the confessors,²³ the second were the voluntary apostate,²⁴ they are called voluntary because they apostatised voluntarily, the third were those who apostatised after series of torture, and the fourth group were those who got the certificate through bribery while the fifth group ran away into exile. The Christian version of eremitic life which began in Egypt in the 3rd century AD was said to have been as a response to Decian persecution. During this persecution, Christians fled to the desert to pray and to maintain their faith.²⁵ This was also

the origin of what led to the Novatian Schism²⁶. During this persecution, the butchered to make a Roman holiday was described in a tale of the Ancient Rome, foreworded by R. L. Roberts. It was noted that “the whole extent was covered with human beings of every class and every age ... more than one hundred thousand people were gathered ... animated by one common feeling, it was the thirst for blood which drew them hither”.²⁷ The outcome of the persecution led to the apostasy of many members but it did not wipe out Christianity.

Emperor Diocletian is considered the worst of all the persecutors of the Early Church. He aimed at destroying Christianity by reviving the traditional gods, rebuilding the old pagan temples and the introduction of the use of devices on coinage. During the most part of his reign he did not persecute Christians but because his vice, Galerius, who was a pagan, prompted him to do so for threatening the state safety; using the cases of Christians refusing to comply with military ceremonies. The document illustrating the history of the Church to AD 337 noted that it was on the 23rd February 303, that the Church in Nicomedia was destroyed with all the sacred books inside it. Needham also attests that Galerius in 303 persuaded Diocletian to take action against the Christians too.²⁸ Churches were destroyed and bibles were burned, the appointment of all Christians in the government and army were terminated. Immediately, arrests were made of all clergy and were instructed to make sacrifices to the gods in order to be free or else they are tortured and executed.²⁹ It was Diocletian persecution that tore into factions the Eastern Church because of the schismatic movement called the *Donatism*³⁰.

Jesus Christ Prepared His followers for Persecution

The assertion that Jesus is the Prince of Peace and the originator of peace in the lives of his followers is true on one hand, but on the other hand, the concept of Jesus' idea of peace as presented in the Gospel of John 14:27 is contrary to the kind of peace that is preached in churches. It is glaring that most Christians do not see persecution as a package of their Christian lives but the fact remains that Jesus never promised such easy life Christianity. The Greek text is as follows:

Ειρηνην αφημι υμιν, ειρηνην την εμην διδωμι υηιν ου καθως ο κοσμος διδωσιν εγω διδομι υμιν. μη ταρασσεσθω υμων η καρδια μηδε δειλιατω.

“...Peace I leave with you; my peace I give unto you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.”³¹ (John14:27).³²

ειρηνην is probably from a verb *ειρω* which by implication means prosperity, quietness, or rest; it is used for ordinary salutation and word of farewell in the East.

The fact that the *παρ υμιν μενων* that is used in verse 25 of the same chapter suggests that Christ will be departing from among them soon; therefore, the *ειρηνη* of verse 27 is a parting word of peace to his disciples. According to the International Critical Commentary on John, it is asserted that *ειρηνη* is used by John only here and in 16:33; refers to spiritual peace which Christ gives except other places where it is used for salutation (20:19, 21, 26; 2Jn.3 and 3 Jn14). “Here *ειρηνην την εμην διδωμι υμιν* conveys more than the usual ‘Go in peace.’”³³ Jesus intended to give a permanent Peace gift. He said: “I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world” (Jh.16:33).

The chosen bible passage presents us with the Jesus' kind of 'peace gift', a rare kind, and it is not the kind that is given by the world. The promise was primarily and specifically made to those of his followers living in the Roman Empire, in a world where physical peace is difficult for the Christian community; it must then be understood that the peace here is a spiritual one. Despite the fact that the earliest Christian community had no access to the complete New Testament, all they had is the Old Testament and fragments of the New Testament yet they clearly understood what Jesus meant and their understanding of Jesus' peace gift is the background for the later Church fathers' theology of peace.

The main biblical words for "peace" are *shalom* in the Old Testament and *εἰρήνη* in the New Testament both words mean completeness, soundness or wholeness (Gen. 29:6 and Luke 24:36). Apart from the fact that "peace" is a favourite biblical greeting, it is used for expressing cessation from war (Josh. 9:15); for companions between friendship (Gen. 26:29 and Num 25:12). Peace has a lot to do with health, prosperity, well-being, security, as well as quiet from war (Eccl. 3:8; Isa. 45:22). The prophet Isaiah pointed out repeatedly that there will be no peace for the wicked (Isa. 48:7; 57:21), even though many of the wicked continually seek to encourage themselves with a false peace as found in Jer. 6:14.

Again, peace is a condition of freedom from strife whether internal or external. Security from outward enemies (Isa. 26:12), as well as calm of heart for those trusting God (Job 22:21; Isa. 26:3), is included. Peace is so pleasing to the Lord to the extent that the godly are commanded to seek for it diligently (Ps.34:14; Zach. 8:16, 19). In the New Testament it is a characteristic of a believer as well as a comprehensive and valued gift from God, and the promised and climaxing blessing messianic times (Isa. 2:4; 9:6-7).

The theology of Jesus' peace is peace with God, the inner peace which automatically radiates in interpersonal relationships. This peace is to be experienced by the followers of Jesus as a taste of the reign of God here on earth, Peace is to be in the Presence of God and it is the parting gift of Jesus to his disciples. "Peace I leave with you or my peace I give to you" (John 14:27). While there is no doubt that peace is considered as a central value of the Christian life, it should be noted that this peace promise has a political background in that context. It is the message of 'The Gospel' (i.e. Jesus) versus 'a gospel' (Caesar), the Kingdom of Jesus within Caesar's kingdom. He told his followers that they will have problems with Caesar because they are not of the world; Caesar owns what they had in their pocket but God owns lives. Therefore, Christians should not return violence with violence "turn the other cheek" when slapped on one (Matthew 6:39); they should love their enemies (Matthew 5:44), love their neighbour as themselves (Matthew 22:39), are required to treat others as they would want to be treated (Luke 6:31). By being peacemakers they will be called children of God (Matthew 5:9).

The Peace of Jesus	The Peace of the World	Comment
Peace with God which included being at peace with man.	Looking for Peace from man and surrounding which may or may not include giving it back. And it does not necessarily include having peace with God	Finding Peace with man is like finding a refuge in the desert. It is time we understand that there are people we cannot influence positively or negatively, no matter how hard we try, they will be what they will be and do (good or bad) what they will do. There are also things we cannot change because we have no power over them.
Jesus' peace is from within, no matter what happens outside the body; be it poverty, sickness, or the worst kind of persecution, etc.	The world's peace is without – it includes not being persecuted in any way, having money especially when it is needed, Living well, happy marriage, good health, good job, etc.	As far as Jesus is concern, it does not profit a man to gain all these and lose his soul. He was aware that his disciples may not achieve peace within Roman Empire so he warned

<p>Jesus did not seem to care much about what we consider as peace and this is seen in the story he told of the rich man and Lazarus who has nothing but when he died, his funeral rites was done by angels (Lk. 16:19-31). This story reveals the fact that even if Lazarus lack physical peace yet he had the kind of peace that even the rich man in all his riches did not have.</p>		<p>them of the impending possible problems.</p>
--	--	---

The “Kingdom of God” Promised by Jesus to His Followers

The Kingdom of God in Jesus’ teaching is the awkward kind that encouraged His followers to endure suffering and persecution instead of avoiding it. Jesus came to preach and teach Peace in relation to the Kingdom of God, which was the Reformed Old Testament Idea of the same. It is noted that Yahweh attempted the establishment of His Kingdom of peace in the Old Testament when he gave the law that is, the Ten Commandments (Ex.20):

1. You shall have no other gods before me.
2. You shall not make to yourselves any graven image ...
3. You shall not take the name of Jehovah your God in vain.
4. Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.
5. Honour your father and your mother
6. You shall not kill.
7. You shall not commit adultery.
8. You shall not steal.
9. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.
10. You shall not covet your neighbour’s house.

The whole of this ten commandment is divided into two, the first four (1-4) is related to God and the remaining six (5-10) is related to our neighbour. Rabbi Simlai, a talmudic sage from Palestine in the 3rd century A.D. asserts that there are six hundred and thirteen (613) laws in the Torah.³⁴ These laws, whether ten (10) or six hundred and thirteen

(613), David summarised them into eleven (Ps 15), Isaiah opts for six (33:15) while Micah says three (6:8), Deutro-Isaiah, prefers two (56:1) but for Habakkuk, it is just one law (2:4). Jesus' summary of the O.T. laws is two like that of Deutro-Isaiah but while Deutro Isaiah interpreted the whole in terms of "keeping judgment and doing peace," Jesus' division of the laws are: "Loving God and Loving fellow human." The whole six hundred and thirteen laws of Rabbi Simlai, eleven of David, six of Isaiah, the two of the Deutro-Isaiah and the only one of Habakkuk are what are summarized into two by Jesus. It is natural that the basis of showing love to anyone that is loved, either God or man is simply making or living in peace with them; thus Jesus' method summarises every type of law that has to do with the Kingdom of God.

Persecution as Mark of the Church

Jesus said Christians do not belong to this world (Jh. 15:18-19). Apostle Peter mentioned it that the world will naturally expect us to be like them and since in reality we are not like the world, the world will hate us (1 Pt.4:3-4). Paul in 2 Timothy 3:12 warns that living a Christian life attracts persecution; even the Montanists³⁵ in the Early Church taught that Christians should not run away from persecution, they should go out of their ways to look for it. Christians should learn to recognise the value of persecution and even to rejoice in it.

A Comparative Study of the Early Church and Modern Church in Nigeria

<p>Many things have changed since the early period of the church and these changes include even reasons for persecution. For example, in the early church, the Holy Spirit was very active. The Apostles' sermons were Spirit filled sermons that are backed with signs and wonders</p>	<p>In the 21st century, the Gospel preachers are jesters, comedians, entertainers and Spirit quenchers.</p>
<p>Ananias and Sapphira, with their lies, were not</p>	<p>Many Ananias and Sapphira-like Christians are</p>

<p>able to hide in the Early Church (Acts 5)</p>	<p>not only members but Church Workers, even Pastors in the 21st century Church and no one is able to challenge them of their evil deeds. The Apostles prayed, reasoned, disagreed to agree and concluded with one heart and voice in many discussions, while the 21st century Apostles are busy fighting, gossiping, discriminating and never agree on anything because their hearts and voices are never together.</p>
<p>Clement of Rome (c.30-c.100)³⁶, an Apostolic Father, was possibly the one mentioned in Phil.4:3. Like Apostle Paul, he took it upon himself to sort out the schismatic problems in the Church at Corinth on behalf of the Church at Rome. Some of their ministers are voted out of office and Clement became worried because of the wellbeing of the body of Christ Empire-wide.³⁷</p>	<p>In the 21 century Nigerian Church, many of the pastors will add directly or indirectly to the problem of another denomination only for egoistic and superiority reasons.</p>
<p>Ignatius of Antioch (d. c.115?): he knew was going to die in Rome but on the way, he wrote letters to five churches in Asia, one to Polycarp of Smyrna from Troas and one to the church in Rome, seven letters in all are credited to his name. The letter that he wrote to Rome was a very touchy one. There, he informed the church in Rome of his coming and also warned them against any effort to save him from the impending death.</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">May I have joy of the beasts that are prepared for me. I pray too that they may prove prompt with me. I will even entice them to devour me promptly, and not to refrain, as they have refrained from</p>	<p>Many of today's Nigerian ministers are the persecutors of the saints and many so called Christians too see nothing good in being persecuted forgetting that Jesus already promised tribulations as part of the package of the peace he gave to his followers. "I have spoken these things to you so that you might have peace in me. In the world you shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer. I have overcome the world" (Jh.16:33).</p>

<p>some, through fear. ... Now I am beginning to be a disciple.³⁸</p> <p>The importance of this letter shows the attitude of the Early Fathers to martyrdom, he as a person sees it as a great price to pay for following Christ regardless what others think about it, he, like most Christians of his time looked at bright side of the evil situation. He declared, similar to Apostle Paul, let there come fire and cross and conflicts with wild beasts, wrenching of bones, mangling of limbs, crushing of the whole body ... may I but attain to Jesus Christ.³⁹ (cf. Rom. 8:35). The Christians then read and understood that Christ did not promise bed of roses to those were his followers.</p>	
<p>Hermas, a contemporary of Clement of Rome, but an ordinary church member, was so concerned for the sinful lives and the moral decadence of the members of the Roman Church, this must have forced him to see the vision on the post baptismal sin that one can only be forgiven of sin once after baptism.</p>	<p>Many of the 21st century preachers never see anything wrong with the immorality that is going on in the church. Instead of addressing it, they call it many fanciful names, such as, “new wine”, “new revelation”, “new anointing”, etc.</p>

In addition, Polycarp of Smyrna, a disciple of Apostle John who was the last link of the Apostolic Age, he did three important things that honour Christ and his position as a Church Father:

1. He has the opportunity of using a veto power on the Quatodeciman controversy but he preferred to consult Pope Anicetus of Rome who disagreed with him on the issue of the date of Easter; yet he holds no grudge against Anicetus it was an amicable disagreement. Most Nigerian pastor will hold more than grudge, they will curse such a junior or younger minister who dare disagree with them.
2. Secondly, Polycarp was a cautious man. When Marcion⁴⁰ began to teach heresy, at a time he met with Polycarp in Rome. As described by Irenaeus, when in excitement

asked Polycarp: “Do you recognize me?” possibly thinking that Polycarp will embrace him, and commend him; instead, Polycarp answered and said: “I do recognize you, the first-born of Satan.”⁴¹ Polycarp did not condone evil practice or heretical teaching and he was not intimidated by Marcion’s wealth. On the other hand, the 21st century senior pastors would not mind serving the popular rich young minister and they cannot correct him for any wrong doing.

3. When Polycarp was to be martyred, the soldiers who were sent to arrest him, after so much persistent, saw him, “they wondered at his age and his constancy, and at there being so much haste about the arrest of such an old man.”⁴² He was encouraged and persuaded to curse Christ by saying ‘Caesar is Lord,’ but he answered and said: ‘Eighty-six years have I serve him, and he has done me no wrong: how then can I blaspheme my King who saved me?’⁴³ It should be noted that Polycarp at this age should be considered an old man, and for the fact that he claimed to have served Christ for eighty-six years may also mean either that he was a born Christian, which is unlikely or he started to serve Christ at a tender age (which should not be lesser than twelve years of age). Whichever the case may be, this man lived his long life in the service of Christ without a record of soiled image or accused of any dirt of immorality and Eusebius attests to the fact that Polycarp had been “treated with every honour even before his head was white.”⁴⁴ Unlike most of our modern ministers of the Gospel who would dent the image of Christ in their lives and ministry before long. Someone asked whether there will be different compartment in heaven for people like the early fathers whose faith never shiver in the presence of death, sickness and ugly situations of life.

When they suffered, it was for Christ’ sake and not because they offended the law

Conclusion

In conclusion, since it was Jesus, the Lord of Christianity, who confirms that his followers are blessed when they are insulted, persecuted, and falsely accused of all kinds of evil because of Him and that they should rejoice and be glad, because their rewards are great in heaven. He reminded them that they will be persecuted in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (Mt. 5:11); they are like sheep among wolves (Mt. 10:16).

He also warned them that they will be killed and whoever kills them will think that he is offering God service (Jh16:1-4), they will be hated by all nations for His name's sake (Mt.24:8-14), they will even be betrayed by members of their families (Mk. 13:11-13) and they are cursed when they are spoken well of (Lk. 6:26).

It is glaring that the world is more dangerous this days than it was in the past and there is no single evidence that it will be better, it can only get worse but as Apostle Paul says, I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy *to be compared* with the glory which shall be revealed in us." (Rm.8:16-18) and warned Timothy and the Thessalonians that everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution" (2 Ti. 3:12; 1 Thes.3:4). For these reasons, the modern church should stop teaching fallacies and begin to teach the reality of what Christ taught, that persecution is not alien to Christian life and that it should be expected.

References

-
- ¹ J.D. Douglas, et al, *The New Bible Dictionary*, London: Inter Varsity Fellowship,1962, p,968
- ² H.R. Boer, *A Short History of the Early Church*, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976, p. 45.
- ³ Appealing here should not be misunderstood to mean pleading because Tertullian is considered and an Apologist without apology.
- ⁴ Known as Antiochus IV
- ⁵ *Religio Illicit* used for describing Unregistered or Unlawful Religion
- ⁶ J. Stevenson, *A New Eusebius: Document Illustrating the History of the Church to A.D.337*, London: SPCK, 1998, p. 22.
- ⁷ J. Foxe, Rewritten and Updated by H. J. Chadwick, *The New Foxes Book of Martyrs 2001*, Benin City: Bridge-Logos Pub. 2001, p.11.
- ⁸ It should be noted that Tacitus supported the killing of Christians but he affirms that they are not to be blamed for the fire. This is because he referred to them as a class, hated for their abomination. Eusebius p. 2.
- ⁹ J. Foxes, *Foxes, The New Foxes Book of Martyrs 2001*, p. 12
- ¹⁰ J. Stevenson, *A New Eusebius*, p. 2.
- ¹¹ J. Stevenson, *A New Eusebius*, p.66
- ¹² J. Stevenson, *A New Eusebius*, p.18
- ¹³ J. Stevenson, *A New Eusebius*, London, SPCK, 1957, p. 16.
- ¹⁴ J. Stevenson, *A New Eusebius*: p.p. 20-21
- ¹⁵ J. Stevenson, *A New Eusebius*: p.18
- ¹⁶ Eustachius was a successful and brave Roman commander, who refused to join in the Emperor worship as a celebration for his noble service to Rome. His wife, children and he were killed.
- ¹⁷ E.S. Moyer, *Who was Who In the Church History*, Chicago, Moody Press, 1962, p.16.
- ¹⁸ E.S. Moyer, *Who was Who In the Church*, p.16
- ¹⁹ Stoicism is a religious philosophy which is expected to be the kindest of all philosophical groups to the Christians. Unfortunately, Marcus Aurelius, who was an adherent, who is expected to lay good example was one of the cruellest persecutor against Christians.
- ²⁰ Logos is believed to be the soul of the world and the one governs it.

²¹ J. Foxe, Rewritten and Updated by H. J. Chadwick, *The New Foxes Book of Martyrs 2001*, Benin City: Bridge-Logos Pub. 2001, p.61.

²² J. Foxe, *The New Foxes Book of Martyrs 2001*, p.21.

²³ Confessor here does not referred to as the acknowledgement of one's sin, or how it is used in the sixteenth century to refer to the Lutheran Augsburg Confession (1530), and it is not confessor that is used in Christianity for a priest who hears confessions and sometimes acts as a spiritual adviser. During persecution in the Early Church, the word Confessor is used for describing the Christians who possibly must have been tortured for their faith but not executed. They are so called because they did not recant their faith during such persecutions, e.g. Origen.

²⁴ Apostate is a term which refers to one who denies, or abandons his or her religious faith. This could be under pressure, or out of personal volition. Many Christians became apostates during the persecutions that occurred in the early Church centuries.

²⁵ D. D. Adegbite, *A Concise Theological & Philosophical Dictionary*, Edited by C. O. Oshun, Gbongan: BIP, 2015.

²⁶ Novatianism is named after Novatian, a presbyter at Rome. During Decian persecution. After the persecution most of the backsliders are willing to be admitted back into the Church, Novatians insisted that they should be permanently rejected no matter how deep their repentance may be.

²⁷ Martyr of the Catacombs, Grand Rapids MI: Kregel Publication, n.d. p.9.

²⁸ N. R. Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power: Part One: The Age of the Early Church Father*, London: Grace Publication, 2002, p. 150.

²⁹ J. Stevenson, *A New Eusebius*, pp. 271-273.

³⁰ Donatism is a schism that is named after Donatus. It is a movement in Roman North Africa in the fourth and fifth centuries, the movement developed a rigorous view of both the church and her sacraments. The problem of the Donatists somehow came to an end theoretically in the time of Augustine of Hippo.

³¹ RSV Bible

³² NKJV

³³ J. H. Bernard, *A Critical And Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John*, edited by A.H McNeile, Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1928, p.554.

³⁴ Torah, http://www.oceansidejc.org/rebmark/TORAH_TABLE_TALK/5769/TTYitro69.pdf (accessed 27th June, 2015)

³⁵ Montanism was named after the Asia Minor teacher known as Montanus who was condemned by the Church as heretic in the 2nd century AD

³⁶ Clement of Rome wrote 1Clement to the Church of Corinth on behalf of the Church of Rome in c.96.

³⁷ J. Stevenson, *A New Eusebius*, pp. 7-9.

³⁸ J. Stevenson, *A New Eusebius*, pp. 12-13

³⁹ J. Stevenson, *A New Eusebius*, p.13. cf. Rom 8:35

⁴⁰ Marcion (c. 100-160), was probably a rich ship merchant and the son of the bishop of the city of Sinope who rejected the O.T. some parts of the N.T., including the accounts of the incarnation and the resurrection.

⁴¹ J. Stevenson, *A New Eusebius*, p. 116.

⁴² J. Stevenson, *A New Eusebius*, p. 24.

⁴³ J. Stevenson, *A New Eusebius*, p. 25.

⁴⁴ J. Stevenson, *A New Eusebius*, p. 26.