

# Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed

*Dr. Bohlin explores the key points from this documentary from a Christian perspective. He looks at three of the scientists featured on the film who were persecuted for their willingness to consider intelligent design as an option. The film may become dated but the issue of an intelligent creator versus an impersonal, random cause of creation will continue on for many years.*

A film was released in April 2008 starring Ben Stein. Titled *EXPELLED: No Intelligence Allowed*,<sup>[1]</sup> this film documents the dark underside of academia in America and around the world, exposing what happens when someone questions a ruling orthodoxy. In this case, that orthodoxy is Darwinian evolution.

Evolution is routinely trumpeted as the cornerstone of modern biology, indispensable even to modern medical research. Therefore, if someone questions Darwinian evolution and its reliance on unpredictable mutation and natural selection, you are questioning science itself. At least that's how the gatekeepers of science explain it.

Never mind that over seven hundred PhD trained scientists from around the world have openly signed a statement questioning the ability of Darwinism to account for the complexity of life. You'll find my name among them ([www.dissentfromdarwin.org](http://www.dissentfromdarwin.org)). We are usually dismissed as being misguided, uninformed or religiously motivated. We couldn't possibly have legitimate scientific objections to Darwinian evolution.

Many have refrained from signing that list because of the possible repercussions to their career. But isn't there

academic freedom in this country? Doesn't science progress by always questioning and leaving even cherished theories open to reinterpretation? Isn't science all about following the evidence wherever it leads? Well, in theory, yes. Practically, scientists are human, too, and often don't like it when favorite ideas are reexamined.

The film *EXPELLED* explores the reality of what happens when evolutionary orthodoxy is questioned by vulnerable scientists who have yet to secure tenure.

In what follows, I will take a detailed look at just three of the scientists featured in the film. In each case I will reveal greater detail than the film is able to explore and provide resources for you to inquire further. Hopefully this will inspire you to learn more about this important issue and attend the film when it opens.

Let me briefly introduce the three scientists.

Richard Sternberg has a double PhD in evolutionary biology. As editor of a scientific journal, he oversaw the publication of an article promoting Intelligent Design and critical of evolution. As a result, he was harassed and falsely accused of improper peer review. He has been blacklisted.

Caroline Crocker taught introductory biology and made the mistake of including questions about evolution contained in science journals. She was accused of teaching creationism and eventually lost her job, and has been unable to find work ever since.

Finally, Guillermo Gonzalez, a well published astronomer, has been denied tenure because he supports Intelligent Design. Trust me, you'll find it hard to believe what you read.

# Richard von Sternberg

Richard von Sternberg was the managing editor of the biological journal, *The Proceedings of the Biological Society of Washington*, or *PBSW*. Sternberg was employed by the National Institutes of Health in their National Center for Biotechnology Information. He was also a research associate at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History when he served as the journal's managing editor.

Sternberg was considered a rising scientist and theorist. His multiple appointments demonstrated great confidence in his research ability. By 2004 he had accumulated thirty scientific publications in peer-reviewed science journals and books.

His fall from grace was not for something he said or did, but for what he didn't do. As managing editor for *PBSW*, he did not reject outright an article submitted for publication that supported Intelligent Design as "perhaps the most causally adequate explanation" for the explosion of new, complex life forms during the Cambrian period. He "*mistakenly*" sent the paper out for peer review, and went along with reviewers recommendations for publication after extensive revisions were made.

When the article appeared in the journal's August 2004 edition, the journal and Sternberg were assailed for allowing the publication of this heresy. He was accused of not following proper peer-review procedure. If he had, certainly the paper would have been rejected. He was accused of acting as the editor himself when normal procedure was for the paper to be referred to an associate editor. If he had, surely the article would have been rejected. He was accused of choosing reviewers predisposed to support the ID perspective of the article. If he had chosen true scientists, surely they would have rejected the article.

I think you get the point. Any scientist worth their salt

would have rejected the article out of hand; Sternberg didn't and therefore was guilty of academic sin. Eventually, Sternberg claimed he was harassed by the Smithsonian where he currently worked. He claimed his office was changed, that he was denied access to museum specimens and collections, that his key was confiscated, and that he was subjected to a hostile work environment, all intended to get him to leave.{2}

The White House Office of Special Counsel was eventually called in to investigate, and although they eventually did not take the case because Sternberg was not actually a Smithsonian employee, they did issue a preliminary report documenting the inaccuracy of the charges against him and the accuracy of Sternberg's accusations.{3} He followed very standard and proper peer-review procedures and even got approval for the article from a member of the society's ruling council. You can bet that the editors of other journals were paying attention.

## **Caroline Crocker**

Caroline Crocker, a PhD with degrees in pharmacology and microbiology, is a research scientist and former lecturer at George Mason University.{4}

As Crocker tells her story, she was an instructor at George Mason University, teaching introductory biology. One lecture was devoted to evolution, and she decided it was important for students to hear not just the evidence favoring evolution but published research that questioned certain elements of evolutionary theory. Crocker had come to this conviction not from any religious motivation but from her own research and convictions as a scientist.

The lecture was received very well with spirited discussion and she considered it a success. Days later she was called to her supervisor's office who accused her of teaching creationism. She denied this and claimed she never even used

the word and encouraged her supervisor to look up the lecture herself which was online, as were all her lecture notes. Later she was demoted to only teaching laboratories and eventually dismissed altogether.

Upon getting another teaching job at a local community college, she eventually learned she was targeted for dismissal again and left on her own. Eventually, she applied for other teaching positions and, though initially offered the job at one interview, she was later called and told there was no money for the position. Someone at the National Institutes of Health eventually told her to stop looking because she was blacklisted.[\[5\]](#)

A young lawyer at a local law firm eventually volunteered to take her case *pro bono* [without charge]. His firm agreed with his decision and filed an initial complaint with George Mason University. The complaint was later dropped and the lawyer mysteriously asked to clean out his office. He too has struggled since, trying to find employment.

George Mason denies any wrongdoing, of course, and maintains that academic freedom is honored at their university, but they offer few specifics on just why Crocker was terminated.

Crocker always received high marks from her students and was qualified and effective wherever she went. Suddenly after questioning Darwinism, her scientific career is over. There is another viewpoint, of course. P. Z. Meyer's, for example, defends the decision to let Crocker go at the end of her contract because questioning evolution shows she was incompetent.[\[6\]](#)

## Guillermo Gonzalez

Guillermo Gonzalez is a planetary astronomer and associate professor at Iowa State University. Gonzalez has done research and taught at Iowa State for five years and has accumulated an

impressive record. He has accumulated over sixty peer-reviewed publications in various science and astronomy journals. In addition, he has presented over twenty papers at scientific conferences, and his work has been featured in such respected publications as *Science*, *Nature*, and *Scientific American*.[\[7\]](#)

Ordinarily, to become a tenured professor at a research institution there are specific requirements that must be met. The Astronomy Department at Iowa State requires a minimum of fifteen research papers. Gonzalez should have felt quite secure since he published nearly five times that many papers. He also co-authored an astronomy textbook through Cambridge University Press that he and others used at Iowa State. But his initial application for tenure was denied. The faculty senate indicated his application was denied because he didn't meet certain necessary requirements.

However, many suspected he was denied tenure for his support for Intelligent Design through his popular book and film *The Privileged Planet*. While having nothing to do with biological evolution, Gonzalez and his co-author Jay Richards maintain that our earth is not only uniquely suited for complex life but is also amazingly well-suited for intelligent life to observe the cosmos. This dual purpose seems to suggest design.

In denying Gonzalez's initial appeal, the university president specifically stated the denial had nothing to do with Intelligent Design. Gonzalez further appealed to the University Board of Regents. In the meantime, the Discovery Institute obtained internal university emails clearly indicating that the sole reason Gonzalez was denied tenure was due to his support of ID, despite the university's public denials. These emails also indicated that some of these university professors knew what they were doing was wrong and conspired to keep their deliberations secret.

Amazingly, the ISU Board of Regents refused to see this information or provide Gonzalez an opportunity to defend

himself before they voted. Not surprisingly, Gonzalez's final appeal was denied in early February 2008.

## Be Prepared for *EXPELLED*

Probe Ministries highly recommends the film *EXPELLED: No Intelligence Allowed* as it highlights the harassment and persecution of PhD scientists at the highest levels of academia and exposes signs of ugly things to come in the culture at large.[\[8\]](#) Usually the scientific establishment tries to cover up these activities, but when exposed, they usually resort to saying that this level of harassment is deserved since a fundamental tenet of science is being challenged, and therefore these scientists don't deserve their positions. Academic freedom apparently only applies to disagreeing with details about evolution but not evolution itself.

These three stories are just the tip of the iceberg. These scenes are being played out around the world, and publicity is an important step in seeing justice done.

Now, let's be clear about something. Just because a few scientists and scientific institutions have behaved badly on behalf of evolutionary orthodoxy doesn't mean that evolution itself is suspect. But as I stated earlier, over seven hundred scientists have now signed a statement declaring their skepticism about Darwinian evolution as a comprehensive explanation of the complexity of life and the list is growing. The scientific underpinnings of Darwinian evolution have been unraveling for over fifty years. I've been personally involved in this revolution for over thirty years, long before Intelligent Design was even a recognized movement.

The *EXPELLED* documentary will certainly raise the visibility of this debate even further in the general public and hopefully within the church. But I have been quite surprised how many in the church are really unfamiliar with the

Intelligent Design movement and are even suspicious of the motives and beliefs of those involved.

In that light, Probe Ministries and EvanTell unveiled last summer, before *EXPELLED* was announced, a small group DVD based curriculum about the Intelligent Design movement, called *Redeeming Darwin*. Check out this material at [Redeeming Darwin](#).<sup>{9}</sup> There are small group leader kits, self-study kits, and very inexpensive outreach kits meant to be handed out to people wanting to see for themselves. We are thrilled to have Josh McDowell's endorsement, and our curriculum is being recommended to church youth leaders by those promoting *EXPELLED*.

This spring and through the summer the rhetoric will be escalating, and many just won't understand what all the fuss is about. First, make plans to attend *EXPELLED* in a few weeks and take some skeptical friends with you. Then give your friends a copy of our *Discovering the Designer* DVD and invite them to join your small group in studying *Redeeming Darwin* to help answer the inevitable questions about ID and evolution. In addition, *Redeeming Darwin* will show you how to take a conversation about ID and evolution and use it to share the gospel. That's how you can "redeem Darwin."

## Notes

1. [streamingmoviesright.com/us/movie/expelled-no-intelligence-allowed/](http://streamingmoviesright.com/us/movie/expelled-no-intelligence-allowed/).
2. [www.rsternberg.net/](http://www.rsternberg.net/) (last accessed 2/12/08).
3. [www.rsternberg.net/OSC\\_ltr.htm](http://www.rsternberg.net/OSC_ltr.htm) (last accessed 2/12/08). Sternberg used well-qualified reviewers for this paper and has steadfastly refused to identify them, which is normal protocol despite repeated attempts by evolutionists to find out who they were. None of them were "creationists" as has been suggested.
4. [www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/02/03/AR200](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/02/03/AR200)



[6020300822.html](#) (last accessed 5/18/20).

5.

[www.christianpost.com/news/expelled-exposes-plight-of-darwin-doubters-30277](#) (last accessed 5/18/20).

6. [scienceblogs.com/pharyngula/2006/02/05/heck-yeahcaroline-crocker-shou](#) (last accessed 5/18/20). Also be advised that PZ Meyers is not shy about using vulgar language.

7. To view a full list of online and print articles and to view Gonzalez's academic record, visit the Discovery Institute's section on Gonzalez at [www.discovery.org/a/2939](#) (last accessed 5/18/20). See also [post-darwinist.blogspot.com](#)

8. [streamingmoviesright.com/us/movie/expelled-no-intelligence-allowed/](#).

9. Also see [www.probe.org](#) and [streamingmoviesright.com/us/movie/expelled-no-intelligence-allowed/](#).

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# Justin Martyr: Defender for the Church

## Justin's Conversion and Writings

In a [previous article](#) I talked about the persecutions Christians experienced in the early church.<sup>{1}</sup> One of the striking characteristics of persecuted Christians was the courage they exhibited on their way to execution. In fact,

we're told by an adult convert of the early second century that this courage was a factor in making him open to the gospel. This convert was a philosopher named Justin, whom you might be familiar with as Justin Martyr. Justin was one of the church's earliest apologists or defenders. Church historian Robert Grant says Justin was "the most important second century apologist."[\[2\]](#) As we consider the work of Justin, along the way we'll see some similarities in the charges made against Christians in his day and ours. Maybe we can learn something from this second century Christian.

### *Justin's Life*

It is believed that Justin was born shortly after 100 A.D. His birthplace was Flavia Neapolis, in Syria-Palestine, or Samaria.[\[3\]](#) Justin's childhood education included rhetoric, poetry, and history. As a young adult he took a special interest in philosophy, and studied primarily Stoicism and Platonism.[\[4\]](#) Justin was searching for God, which "is the goal of Plato's philosophy," he said.[\[5\]](#)

Justin was introduced to the faith directly by an old man who engaged him in discussion about philosophical issues and then told him about Jesus. He took Justin to the Hebrew prophets who were before the philosophers, he said, and who spoke "as reliable witnesses of the truth."[\[6\]](#) They prophesied of the coming of Christ, and their prophecies were fulfilled in Jesus. Justin said that afterward "my spirit was immediately set on fire, and an affection for the prophets, and for those who are friends of Christ, took hold of me; while pondering on his words, I discovered that his was the only sure and useful philosophy. . . . it is my wish that everyone would be of the same sentiments as I, and never spurn the Savior's words."[\[7\]](#) Justin sought out Christians who taught him history and Christian doctrine, and then "devoted himself wholly to the spread and vindication of the Christian religion."[\[8\]](#)

Justin continued to wear the cloak which identified him as a

philosopher, and he taught students in Ephesus and later in Rome. James Kiefer notes that “he engaged in debates and disputations with non-Christians of all varieties, pagans, Jews, and heretics.”[\[9\]](#)

Justin’s conviction of the truth of Christ was so complete, that he died a martyr’s death somewhere around 165 A.D. Eusebius, the early church historian, said he was denounced by the Cynic Crescens with whom he engaged in debate shortly before his death.[\[10\]](#) Justin was beheaded along with six of his students.

Historian Philip Schaff sums up Justin’s character and ministry this way:

*He had acquired considerable classical and philosophical culture before his conversion, and then made it subservient to the defense of the faith. He was not a man of genius and accurate scholarship, but of respectable talent, extensive reading, and enormous memory. . . . He had the courage of a confessor in life and of a martyr in death. It is impossible not to admire his fearless devotion to the cause of truth and the defense of his persecuted brethren.*[\[11\]](#)

### *Justin’s Writings*

Several books have been attributed to Justin, but only three are universally accepted as genuine. They are what are now called the *First Apology* and the *Second Apology*, and the *Dialogue With Trypho the Jew*. His *First Apology* was addressed to Emperor Antoninus Pius, who reigned from 138-161 A.D., his sons, Lucius and Marcus Aurelius, and to the Roman Senate and “the whole Roman people.”[\[12\]](#) The *Second Apology* was apparently addressed to the Roman Senate, although it originally might have been attached to the *First*. Both were written in response to persecution.

### *Justin and Greek Philosophy*

Justin's understanding of Christianity was filtered through the philosophy he had learned. The Platonism of Justin's day had a strong theistic bent, and its high moral tone seemed to accord with Christianity. Justin (and others) connected the Logos of philosophy with the Logos of John chapter 1. Historian Philip Schaff describes the thinking this way:

*The Logos is the pre-existent, absolute, personal Reason, and Christ is the embodiment of it, the Logos incarnate. Whatever is rational is Christian, and whatever is Christian is rational. The Logos endowed all men with reason and freedom, which are not lost by the fall. He scattered seeds of truth before his incarnation, not only among the Jews, but also among the Greeks and barbarians, especially among philosophers and poets, who are the prophets of the heathen. Those who lived reasonably and virtuously in obedience to this preparatory light were Christians in fact, though not in name; while those who lived unreasonably were Christless and enemies of Christ. Socrates was a Christian as well as Abraham, though he did not know it.*[{13}](#)

In addition to this source of truth, Justin (and others) believed that the teachings of Moses were handed down through the Egyptians to the Greeks.[{14}](#) God was not simply known through abstract reasoning; He made Himself known personally as well as He spoke to the prophets who in turn made Him known to us.[{15}](#)

If Justin's idea about Christ and the Logos seems odd, we should keep in mind that we, too, typically understand Christianity through the categories of the philosophies of our day. We aren't completely neutral readers of Scripture.

For example, in modern times science has been considered to be the supreme source of truth. This fed the development of evidential apologetics. This is a method which emphasizes historical and natural facts as evidences for the faith. But

scholars have come to see that facts aren't the completely value-free "truths" modernism taught. Other Christians who object to what they consider such an overly rationalistic approach have drawn from existentialist philosophers who are more concerned with the human condition. In other areas, too, we reveal the ideals of modernism in our Christian lives. How many "how-to" books are on the shelves of Christian bookstores? There is a tendency to take a "do this and such-and-such will result" attitude about our personal and spiritual development. Proper technique is a very modernistic notion.

Thus, we shouldn't be too harsh with Justin Martyr. He was a man of his times who did his best to explicate and defend Christian beliefs using the framework of thought with which he was familiar. In doing so, he was a significant force in the development of Christian theology and apologetics in the early church.

## **Justin's Apologetics**

### *Christians Treated Unfairly*

In his two Apologies, Justin's primary goal was to defend *Christians* rather than *Christianity per se*.[\[16\]](#) Christians were being treated unfairly; Justin's ambition was to get fair treatment for them. Persecution had advanced to the point where Christians were worthy of judgment just for bearing the name *Christian*. Their odd worship habits, their refusal to participate in the civic cults and in emperor worship, and their strange beliefs were enough to create a general bias against them. Thus it was that under some emperors and local governors Christians could be brought to trial just for bearing the name.

### *Christians and Atheism*

Part of the problem was a misrepresentation of Christian

beliefs. Because Christians wouldn't worship the Greek and Roman gods, they were called atheists. Justin asked how they could be atheists since they worshipped "the Most True God." Christians worship the Father, Son, and Prophetic Spirit, he said, and "pay homage to them in reason and truth." Justin also pointed out the inconsistency of Roman rulers. Some of their own philosophers taught that there were no gods, but they weren't persecuted just for bearing the name *philosopher*. Even worse, some poets denounced Jupiter but were honored by governmental leaders. {17}

### *Christians and Citizenship*

Another accusation against Christians was that they were enemies of the state. Their lack of participation in pagan religious rituals, which were a part of everyday public life during those days, and their talk about belonging to another kingdom led to charges that they weren't good citizens. Justin responded they weren't looking for an earthly kingdom, one that would threaten Rome. If they were, they wouldn't go to their deaths so calmly, but would run away and hide until the kingdom came on earth. Furthermore, he insisted that "we, more than all other men, are truly your helpers and allies in fostering peace," because Christians knew they would face God one day and give an account of their lives. {18} "Only God do we worship," he said, "but in other things we joyfully obey you, acknowledging you as the kings and rulers of men." {19} As a specific example of being good citizens, Justin cited that Christians are faithful in paying taxes because Jesus said they should (Matt. 22:20-21). Justin's general argument was that by living virtuous lives, something highly regarded in Greek philosophy, Christians were by conviction good citizens.

### *The Situation Today*

Does this kind of situation sound familiar to you? Today, bearing the name *fundamentalist* or being associated with a well-known Christian like Jerry Falwell or Pat Robertson is

enough to be convicted of being mean-spirited, bigoted, close-minded, and certainly harmful to society.[\[20\]](#) If we Christians would just keep our religion private while in public, agreeing with the sentiments of secular society, we would be acceptable. To this we must respond as Justin did, not by getting red in the face and sinking to the level of name-calling in response, but by setting forth what we really believe and by showing that we—and Christianity itself—really aren't harmful to a well-ordered society, but in fact are good for it. We might want to go further and show how the morality of our day is harmful to society. This might be persuasive to some, but certainly not on everyone, maybe not on most. But in clarifying what we believe and why we believe it, we will strengthen the church, and this is important if, as I think, believers are weakened more through name-calling and ostracism than through attacks on doctrine.

### *Christianity as Moral*

In addition to being called enemies of the state and atheists, Christians in the early church were charged with engaging in gross immorality. For example, they were said to engage in orgies and in cannibalism in their worship services. In his apologies, Justin defended Christians as being instead people of high moral character.

For one thing, Justin said, Christians demonstrated their honesty by not lying when brought to trial. Because they were people of truth, they would confess their faith even unto death. They loved truth more than life itself. Christians were patient in times of persecution, and showed love even to their enemies.

This attitude of living according to truth was one example of the change brought about in people's lives following their conversion. One writer notes that this change came to be known as "the triumphal song of the Apologists."[\[21\]](#) Justin said:

*We who once reveled in impurities now cling to purity; we who devoted ourselves to the arts of magic now consecrate ourselves to the good and unbegotten God; we who loved above all else the ways of acquiring riches and possessions now hand over to a community fund what we possess, and share it with every needy person; we who hated and killed one another and would not share our hearth with those of another tribe because of their [different] customs, now, after the coming of Christ, live together with them, and pray for our enemies, and try to convince those who hate us unjustly. . . .*[\[22\]](#)

Justin also emphasized the chaste behavior of Christians, in response to accusations of immoral behavior during worship. To show how far that was from the truth, he told the story of a young man who asked that a surgeon make him a eunuch to prove that Christians do not practice promiscuity. The request was denied, so the young man chose to remain unmarried and accountable to fellow believers.[\[23\]](#)

One of Justin's apologetical tactics was to contrast what the Christians were falsely charged with doing, and punished for it, with what the Romans did with impunity. For example, Christians were charged with killing babies in worship services and then consuming them. Justin countered that it was the worshipers of Saturn who engaged in homicide and in drinking blood, and other pagans who sprinkled the blood of men and animals on their idols. Christians were accused of sexual immorality, but it was their critics, Justin said, who imitated "Jupiter and the other gods in sodomy and sinful relations with women."[\[24\]](#)

Today, Christians who oppose abortion are said to hate women. Those who believe that homosexuality is wrong are called hate-mongers. When we try to present our case as Justin did it can be hard to get a hearing. This isn't to say we shouldn't attempt to clarify our beliefs or even to show how critics can be as immoral as they accuse Christians of being.[\[25\]](#) What we



need to remember is that a clarification of Christian teachings isn't enough. It wasn't in Justin's day. Consider the means he listed by which people were brought to Christ. He said that many were "turned from a life of violence and tyranny, because they were conquered either by the constancy of their neighbors' lives, or by the strange patience they noticed in their injured associates, or by experiencing their honesty in business matters."[\[26\]](#) Christians' high moral character, even though often maligned, is a powerful witness and apologetic for the faith.

## Justin's Case for Christ

As part of his defense of Christians before the Emperor and Roman Senate, Justin also argued that Christianity was true. This was important because reason and the pursuit of truth were highly valued by the Roman intelligentsia. Since one of the charges against Christians was that they held superstitious beliefs, it had to be shown that their beliefs were reasonable. Let's consider Justin's central case for the truth of Christianity, namely, that the coming of Christ—the Logos of God—was foretold through the Prophetic Spirit thousands of years in advance.

### *Eternal Logos*

Earlier I spoke of how Christ was identified with the Logos—the locus of reason in the universe—of which the philosophers spoke. Speaking of Him in these terms would help gain a hearing from the cultured classes of his day. As one historian noted, "Whenever [the Logos] was mentioned the interest of all was at once secured."[\[27\]](#) It was important to show the reasonableness of the faith, and the Logos was the locus of reason in major schools of Greek philosophy. To quote Philip Schaff again, "Christianity is the highest reason," for Justin. "The Logos is the pre-existent, absolute, personal Reason, and Christ is the embodiment of it, the Logos incarnate. Whatever is rational is Christian, and whatever is

Christian is rational.”{28} In addition to guaranteeing the rationality of Christianity, identifying Jesus as the Logos indicated His antiquity, which was important to the Greek mind in establishing the truth of a belief. I should note here that this emphasis on reason should not leave us thinking that faith meant nothing for Justin. He repeatedly refers to faith in his apologies. He speaks of us being made whole “by faith through the blood and the death of Christ.”{29} He even refers back to Abraham who “was justified and blessed by God because of his faith in Him.”{30} However, even here the matter of knowledge is central because Justin put more weight on believing in the teachings of Christ than on believing in Christ himself. *Fulfilled Prophecies* But why should this claim about Jesus be believed? The reason was that He was the fulfillment of prophecies made thousands of years earlier which proved that He wasn’t just a man who could do magic, but the promised Son of God. “We are actual eye-witnesses of events that have happened and are happening in the very manner in which they were foretold [sic],” he said.{31} Justin summarized the Old Testament prophecies about Christ this way:

*In the books of the Prophets, indeed, we found Jesus our Christ foretold as coming to us born of a virgin, reaching manhood, curing every disease and ailment, raising the dead to life, being hated, unrecognized, and crucified, dying, rising from the dead, ascending into Heaven, and being called and actually being the Son of God. And that He would send certain persons to every nation to make known these things, and that the former Gentiles rather [than Jews] would believe in Him. He was foretold, in truth, before He actually appeared, first five thousand years before, then four thousand, then three thousand, then two thousand, then one thousand, and finally eight hundred. For, in succeeding generations new Prophets rose time and again.{32}*

Not only was the fulfillment of prophecy remarkable in itself, but it was also significant that such prophecies were made

long before the Greek philosophers, for, unlike today, antiquity was important to the Greek mind in establishing the truth of a belief.

## *Conclusion*

For all the weaknesses in his theology and apologetics, Justin Martyr provides an example of those who took their faith very seriously in the early church, and who sought to be a mouthpiece for the Lord and a defender of His people. Schaff says that “[Justin’s writings] attest his honesty and earnestness, his enthusiastic love for Christianity, and his fearlessness in its defense against all assaults from without and perversions from within.”<sup>{33}</sup> While it might seem to us that Christianity was really just philosophy to Justin, historian Jaroslav Pelikan notes that Justin’s faith was fed more by what the church confessed about Christ than by his own philosophical speculation. “He was, after all, ready to lay down his life for Christ; and his martyrdom speaks louder, even doctrinally, than does his apologetics.”<sup>{34}</sup>

## **Notes**

1. Rick Wade, [Persecution in the Early Church](#), Probe Ministries, Sept. 1999.
2. Robert M. Grant, *Greek Apologists of the Second Century* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988), 50.
3. *Justin Martyr, First Apology*, in *Writings of Saint Justin Martyr*, trans. Thomas B. Falls, The Fathers of the Church (New York: Christian Heritage, Inc.: 1948), 33.
4. James E. Kiefer, “Justin Martyr, Philosopher, Apologist, and Martyr,” [justus.anglican.org/resources/bio/175.html](http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bio/175.html).
5. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue With Trypho*, in *Writings of Saint Justin Martyr*, trans. Thomas B. Falls, The Fathers of the Church (New York: Christian Heritage, Inc.: 1948), 151.

6. Ibid., 159.
7. Ibid., 160.
8. Philip Schaff, Ante-Nicene Christianity: A.D. 100-325, vol. II in *History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1910), 714.
9. Kiefer, "Justin Martyr."
10. *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. "St. Justin Martyr." [www.newadvent.org/cathen/08580c.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08580c.htm). See also Justin's own prediction of his betrayal in *The Second Apology*, in *Writings of Saint Justin Martyr*, trans. Thomas B. Falls, The Fathers of the Church (New York: Christian Heritage, Inc.: 1948), 122-23.
11. Schaff, 715.
12. Justin, *First Apology*, 33.
13. Schaff, 723.
14. *The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th ed., Macropaedia, s.v. "Platonism and Neoplatonism," by A. Hilary Armstrong. See also Justin, *First Apology*, 81.
15. *Catholic Encyclopedia*.
16. Robert Grant believes it was the martyrdom of Polycarp in Rome which prompted Justin to write to the emperor. Grant, *Greek Apologists of the Second Century*, 53.
17. Justin, *First Apology*, 37-39.
18. Ibid., 43-44.
19. Ibid., 52.
20. The reader might want to see my article [Not a Threat: The Contributions of Christianity to Western Society](#).
21. Thomas B. Falls, in Justin, *First Apology*, 47, note 2.

22. Justin, *First Apology*, 47.

23. Ibid., 65.

24. Ibid., 133.

25. This kind of discussion can be difficult in general because of the moral relativism of our day. A good book to read which shows that Americans aren't as relativistic as they seem to think is William D. Watkins, *The New Absolutes* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1996). For a summary presentation of Watkins' ideas, see my article [The New Absolutes](#).

26. Justin, *First Apology*, 50.

27. Reinhold Seeberg, quoted in J.L. Neve, *A History of Christian Thought*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: The Muhlenberg Press, 1946), 46.

28. Schaff, 723.

29. Justin, *Dialogue*, 166.

30. Ibid., 183.

31. Justin, *First Apology*, 66.

32. Ibid., 68.

33. Schaff, 719.

34. Pelikan, 143.

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# Persecution in the Early Church – How Persecution Strengthens the Church

*Rick Wade provides a succinct summary of the persecution suffered by the early church in the first three centuries and how the church grew stronger as a result of this attention. He suggests that we should be prepared to face similar trials as our culture becomes less tolerant of true Christian faith.*

*This article is also available in [Spanish](#).*



## Background

Things are a bit tougher for Christians in our society today than a few decades ago, aren't they? At times like this, it's probably good to get some perspective. I think any of us, once we knew what the early church experienced—and, indeed, what Christians in other parts of the world are experiencing now—would find ourselves looking a bit sheepish if caught complaining about our lot.

In this article we'll look at the persecution our brothers and sisters faced in the fledgling church in the first few centuries after Christ. We'll talk about some of the reasons for persecution, and identify some of the emperors under whom Christians suffered.

## Reasons for Persecution

There are several important and interrelated reasons for the persecution of the early church.

First was the problem of identity. Christianity was identified at first with Judaism, but people quickly came to see it as a different religion. Jews were left alone for the most part; it

seemed best to Rome to just confine them and leave them alone. Christianity, however, was a strange, new cult, and it began to spread across people groups and geographical boundaries.{1} People felt threatened by this oddball new religion.

The next problem was with the religious activities of the Christians, with what they *did* do and *didn't* do.

In the days of the Roman empire, the worship of pagan gods and the emperor was a part of everyone's life. Two problems arose because of this. First, because they didn't participate in pagan rituals but tended to keep to themselves, Christians were considered anti-social. When the imperial police took an interest in them, they became more secretive which added fuel to the fire. They became associated with the *collegia*—clubs or secret societies—and leaders were suspicious of these groups because of the threat of sedition.{2} Second, since Christians wouldn't join in with the religious activities which were believed to placate the gods, they became a threat to the very well-being of the community. Writing in about A.D. 196, Tertullian said, "The Christians are to blame for every public disaster and every misfortune that befalls the people. If the Tiber rises to the walls, if the Nile fails to rise and flood the fields, if the sky withholds its rain, if there is earthquake or famine or plague, straightway the cry arises: 'The Christians to the lions!'"{3}

With respect to what they *did* do in their own religious practices, talk of eating the body and blood of Jesus, and the customary greeting with a kiss, brought charges of cannibalism and incest.{4}

The third problem was the nature or content of Christians' beliefs. The historian Tacitus spoke of Christians as a "class hated for their abominations" who held to a "deadly superstition."{5} A drawing found in Rome of a man with a donkey's head hanging on a cross gives an idea of what pagans thought of Christian beliefs.{6}

Finally, Christians' reluctance to offer worship to the emperor and the gods was considered madness, considering what would happen to them if they didn't. Why not just offer a pinch of incense to the image of the emperor? In a pluralistic society, the narrowness of Christian beliefs seemed absurd, especially considering what would happen to Christians who *wouldn't* go along. In the opinion of the general populace, says F. F. Bruce, "such a crowd of wretches were plainly worthy of extermination, and any repressive measures that were taken against them by authority could be sure of popular approval."[{7}](#)

## Emperors

Let's turn now to a brief survey of some of the emperors under whom the church suffered persecution. *Nero*

Claudius Nero was named emperor at age 16 and reigned from A.D. 54-68. He had about five good years under the guidance of such men as Seneca, the Roman poet and philosopher.[{8}](#) But that all changed when he had his mother killed in A.D. 59. She was too powerful. Her "insanity and her fury at seeing her son slip out of her control" led Nero to believe she was a threat to his power.[{9}](#) In A.D. 62 he had his wife killed so he could marry another woman. He later killed a brother and his teacher, Seneca.

Christians became the object of his ire following the Great Fire of Rome in A.D. 64. Some people suspected that Nero started the fire himself, so he pointed the accusing finger at Christians. The fact that he felt confident in doing this indicates the low regard in which people held Christians already.[{10}](#) Historian Philip Schaff says that "Their Jewish origin, their indifference to politics and public affairs, their abhorrence of heathen customs, were construed into an '*odium generis humani*' (hatred of the human race), and this made an attempt on their part to destroy the city sufficiently plausible to justify a verdict of guilty."[{11}](#) Schaff says



that “there began a carnival of blood such as even heathen Rome never saw before or since...A ‘vast multitude’ of Christians was put to death in the most shocking manner.”{12} Some were crucified, some sewn up in animal skins and thrown to the dogs, some were covered in pitch, nailed to wooden posts, and burned as torches.{13} It was in the fallout of this that Peter and Paul gave their lives for their Savior, probably within a year of each other.{14}

Nero apparently took his own life in A.D. 68 when the Senate and the patricians turned against him.{15}

### *Trajan*

Emperor Trajan ruled from A.D. 98-117. One of his governors, a man called Pliny the Younger, wrote to Trajan seeking advice on what to do with the Christians. They were becoming very numerous, and Pliny thought the pagan religions were being neglected. He began sentencing Christians who refused to honor the gods and the emperor to death. Pliny believed that, even if the Christians’ practices weren’t too bad, just their obstinacy was enough to be rid of them.{16} Should he sentence them for carrying the name *Christian* only, or did they have to commit specific criminal acts?{17}

Trajan responded with a kind of “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy. “They must not be ferreted out,” he said. But if someone made a credible charge against a Christian, the Christian should be sentenced unless he or she recanted and gave proof by invoking pagan gods.{18}

Persecution was especially bad in Syria and Palestine during Trajan’s reign. In 107 he went to Antioch and demanded that everyone sacrifice to the gods. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch and pupil of the apostle John, refused and was martyred by being thrown to wild animals.{19} Ignatius wrote this to Polycarp, another disciple of John, on his way to Rome: “Let the fire, the gallows, the wild beasts, the breaking of bones,

the pulling asunder of members, the bruising of my whole body, and the torments of the devil and hell itself come upon me, so that I may win Christ Jesus.”{20}

### *Hadrian*

Trajan’s ruling was carried on by the next few emperors. Emperor Hadrian, “the most brilliant of the Roman emperors,” says Will Durant,{21} required specific charges against Christians as well. He didn’t allow governors “to use mere clamorous demands and outcries” as a basis for judgment. Furthermore, if anyone brings a charge against Christians “merely for the sake of libelling [sic] them,” the governor was to “proceed against that man with heavier penalties, in accordance with his heinous guilt.”{22} There were to be no frivolous lawsuits.

However, Christians still needed to prove loyalty to the state and the pagan religions. Hadrian hated Jews, and was somewhat “indifferent to Christianity from ignorance of it.”{23} Philip Schaff tells us that “he insulted the Jews and the Christians alike by erecting temples of Jupiter and Venus over the site of the temple and the supposed spot of the crucifixion.”{24} Not all officials required Christians to denounce Christ. All they wanted was homage to the divine character of the emperor (“the personal embodiment of the sovereign state”{25}). “It was beside the point for Christians to argue that the malicious tales circulated about them were false,...Deeds, not words, were required by the state; and if they were in fact loyal citizens, as they protested, there was a simple way of demonstrating their loyalty; let them offer a pinch of incense in honour of the Emperor, let them swear by his divinity, let them invoke him as ‘Lord.’”{26}

### *Antonius Pius*

The policy of not actively pursuing Christians was continued under Antonius Pius who ruled from A.D. 138-161. During the

reigns of emperors such as Hadrian and Antonius, however, Christians sometimes suffered persecution at the hands of the local townspeople without any direct encouragement from government officials. During Antonius' reign, Polycarp, a pupil of the apostle John, was martyred in Asia during one such outburst of violence.[\[27\]](#) After this persecution settled down somewhat. The execution of this 86 year old man seemed to turn the tide against persecution for a time.[\[28\]](#)

### *Marcus Aurelius*

In A.D. 161 Marcus Aurelius took power and reigned until 180. It was during his reign that Justin Martyr met his death.[\[29\]](#)

Although he didn't directly lead persecutions against Christians, he had no sympathy for them because he saw them as being disgustingly superstitious. We're told that "a law was passed under his reign, punishing every one with exile who should endeavor to influence people's mind by fear of the Divinity, and this law was, no doubt, aimed at the Christians."[\[30\]](#) F. F. Bruce says that the Christians' "very resoluteness in the face of suffering and death, which might in itself have won respect from a Stoic, was explained not as commendable fortitude but as perverse obstinacy... Marcus despised what seemed to him the crass superstition of the Christian beliefs, which disqualified them from the respect due to others who maintained their principles at the cost of life itself."[\[31\]](#) For Aurelius, it was good to die for something significant, but not for something as silly as what the Christians believed. Furthermore, Christians went to their executions with a show of willingness that he considered theatrical display which was anathema to the calm spirit appreciated by the Stoics.

During Aurelius' reign Christians were blamed for a number of natural disasters because they wouldn't sacrifice to the gods.[\[32\]](#) In A.D. 177, in Gaul, horrible persecution broke out in a wave of mob violence. Slaves were tortured to give

testimony against their masters.{33} “The corpses of the martyrs, which covered the streets,” says Philip Schaff, “were shamefully mutilated, then burned, and the ashes cast into the Rhone, lest any remnants of the enemies of the gods might desecrate the soil.”{34} It is said that the courage of a slave girl named Blandina “strengthened all the others; her tormentors exhausted themselves in their attempts to make her renounce Christ.”{35} “At last,” Schaff tells us, “the people grew weary of slaughter,” and the persecutions died down.{36}

### *Septimius Severus*

Another emperor under whom Christians suffered terribly was Septimius Severus who ruled from 193-211. Writing during his reign, Clement of Alexandria said, “Many martyrs are daily burned, confined, or beheaded, before our eyes.”{37}

In 202 Septimius enacted a law prohibiting the spread of Christianity and Judaism. This was the first universal decree forbidding conversion to Christianity.{38} Violent persecutions broke out in Egypt and North Africa.{39} Leonides, the father of Origen, a Christian apologist, was beheaded. Origen himself was spared because his mother hid his clothes.{40} A young girl was cruelly tortured, then burned in a kettle of burning pitch with her mother.{41} A poignant story of the breaking down of class distinctions in the suffering church comes out of the persecution in Carthage. It is reported that Perpetua, a young noblewoman, and Felicitas, a slave girl, held hands and exchanged a kiss before being thrown to wild animals at a public festival.{42}

Persecutions abated somewhat soon after Septimius died, but resumed with a vengeance under Decius Trajan.

### *Decius Trajan*

In his few short years on the throne, Emperor Decius Trajan undertook to restore the old Roman spirit. In A.D. 250 he published an edict calling for a return to the pagan state

religion. Local commissioners were appointed to enforce the ruling. According to Philip Schaff, "This was the signal for a persecution which, in extent, consistency, and cruelty, exceeded all before it." It was the first to extend over the whole empire, so it produced more martyrs than any other persecution.[{43}](#)

When people were suspected of being Christians, they were given the opportunity of offering sacrifice to the gods before the commissioners. Certificates were issued to prove a person's loyalty to the pagan religions.[{44}](#) Many Christians gave in to the pressure. Those who didn't were put in prison and repeatedly questioned. Rulers weren't looking for martyrs; they wanted to see the Christians conform.[{45}](#) Christians who stood their ground were subject to confiscation, exile, torture, imprisonment, and death.[{46}](#) Some rushed forward "to obtain the confessor's or martyr's crown."[{47}](#) Some, however, obtained certificates through bribery or forgery. Those who offered sacrifices were excommunicated.

In 251 Decius died, but persecution continued as Christians were blamed for invasions by the Goths and for natural disasters.

### *Diocletian*

During the years 303-311, the church endured persecutions so terrible that all before were forgotten.[{48}](#) Historian Philip Schaff saw this as the final struggle between the pagan Roman Empire and the rule of Christ in the West. The primary sources of persecution were Diocletian and Galerius.

Diocletian came to power in 284, and for twenty years upheld edicts of toleration made by a previous emperor. His wife and daughter were Christians, as were most of his court officers and eunuchs.[{49}](#)

But Diocletian allowed himself to be persuaded by two of his co-regents to turn on the Christians. Four edicts were issued

in A.D. 303 and 304. "Christian churches were to be burned," Schaff tells us, "all copies of the Bible were to be burned; all Christians were to be deprived of public office and civil rights; and last, all, without exception, were to sacrifice to the gods upon pain of death."[\[50\]](#) A fifth edict was issued by co-regent Galerius in 308 ordering that all men, with wives, children, and servants, were to offer sacrifice to the gods, "and that all provisions in the markets should be sprinkled with sacrificial wine."[\[51\]](#) As a result, Christians either had to commit apostasy or starve. Says Schaff: "All the pains, which iron and steel, fire and sword, rack and cross, wild beasts and beastly men could inflict, were employed"[\[52\]](#) against the church. Executioners grew tired with all the work they had to do.

The tide finally turned in the terrible struggle between paganism and Christianity in 311 when Galerius admitted defeat in trying to bring Christians back to the pagan religions. He gave Christians permission to meet as long as they didn't disturb the order of the state. He even requested that they pray to their God for the welfare of the state.

Some persecution followed under a few other emperors, but the fire was almost out on the old Roman Empire. In 313 Constantine, the emperor in the west, issued the Edict of Milan which moved from hostile neutrality to friendly neutrality toward Christians.[\[53\]](#) He declared himself a follower of the God of Christianity. In 324 he became emperor of the whole Roman world, and published a new edict of toleration which was to cover the entire empire.

## Reflections

In his work called *Apology*, the Latin apologist Tertullian made this now-famous comment: "The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed."[\[54\]](#) Somehow, the suffering of some Christians spurred others to more faithful living. The apostle Paul noted that

“most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear” (Phil. 1:14). Through all the terrible persecutions of the early centuries the church continued to grow.

This hasn't been as significant a principle for Christians in America because Christianity was for most of our history the religion of the land. Of course, that doesn't mean that even most Americans have been Christians at any given time. Nonetheless, our worldview was grounded in Christian beliefs, and Christianity had a prominent place in our cultural life.

But that's changed now. Far from holding a privileged place in our cultural life, Christianity now is often portrayed as an oppressive bully out to make people's lives miserable. No matter what issue is raised, any view which has its roots in Christian theology arouses suspicion.

In the first century A.D. it was easy for the general populace to believe Nero when he accused Christians of causing the Great Fire in Rome because Christians were thought of as haters of the human race (*odium generis humani*). Theologian Harold O. J. Brown sees similarities between that attitude and the attitude of people toward Christians today in America.[\[55\]](#) So, for example, objections to homosexuality draw charges of hate mongering. When a homosexual is murdered, the finger of blame is pointed at Christians for creating a “climate of hate.” Attempts at saving the lives of the unborn are portrayed as attempts to make life difficult for women in crisis. Of course, over-zealous Christians don't help any when they blow up an abortion clinic or shoot an abortionist.

The general secular attitude today seems to be that it's okay for Christians to have their beliefs, as long as they at least give lip service to certain trendy ideals: gay rights, abortion rights, and religious pluralism, to name a few. Not much different than the attitude in the early church, is it?



“Believe in your God if you want, but be sure to worship ours, too.” By God’s grace we don’t endure serious suffering, at least not yet. But Christians in other nations are experiencing it. In Sudan, people are forced to become Muslims or pay for their resistance with low paying jobs, slavery, rape, and even death. This is not the only country where Christians suffer severely for their faith.[\[56\]](#)

In my opinion, the negative attitude in our country is likely to get worse before it gets better. But history has shown that persecution ultimately strengthens the church. It removes the nominal Christians, and it emboldens others to both stand firm when persecuted and become more aggressive in proclamation. If persecution comes to us, the church will remain, although church membership rolls will probably become shorter.

Are we prepared to truly suffer for our faith? Do we *really* believe what we say we believe? If persecution ever comes, God grant us the faithfulness to stand firm. And let’s not forget to pray and work to help our brothers and sisters who are suffering for the name of Jesus Christ.

## Notes

1. F. F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame: The Rise and Progress of Christianity from its First Beginnings to the Conversion of the English* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 165.
2. Ibid., 169.
3. Ibid., 180.
4. Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 559
5. Ibid., 556. See also Bruce, 165.
6. Ibid., 559-61.
7. Bruce, 165.
8. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church, Vol. 1, Apostolic Christianity: A.D. 1-100* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1910), 378.
9. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, “Nero,” by Jean-Charles Pichon.
10. Bruce, 165.



11. Schaff, 381. Harold O. J. Brown sees a similar attitude developing today. See his "Odium Humani Generis," *The Religion and Society Report*, 16, no. 3 (March, 1999):1-4.
12. Ibid., 381.
13. Ibid., 381-82.
14. Ibid., 252, 329-330.
15. *EB*, "Nero."
16. Bruce, 171.
17. Oxford Dictionary, "Pliny."
18. Bruce, 171.
19. John Foxe, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, trans. Marie Gentert King (Old Tappan, NJ: Spire Books, 1968), 16.
20. Foxe, 17.
21. Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization: Pt. III, Caesar and Christ: A history of Roman Civilization and of Christianity from their beginnings to A.D. 325* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1944), 413.
22. Ferguson, 569.
23. Schaff, Vol. II, 49-50.
24. Ibid., II:50.
25. Bruce, 173.
26. Ibid., 173.
27. Ibid., 174.
28. Ibid., 174.
29. Schaff, 56.
30. Ibid., II:54.
31. Bruce, 178.
32. Schaff, 55.
33. Ibid., 55.
34. Ibid., 56.
35. Bruce, 178-79.
36. Schaff, 56.
37. Ibid., 57.
38. Bruce, 179.
39. Schaff, 57.
40. Bruce, 179.
41. Schaff, 58.

42. Ibid., 58; Bruce, 180.
43. Ibid., 60.
44. Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity, Vol.1, Beginnings to 1500*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 87-88.
45. Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), 455-56. 46. Schaff, II:60; Fox, 457; Latourette, 88.
47. Ibid., II:60-61.
48. Ibid., II:64-65.
49. Ibid., II:65.
50. Ibid., II:66.
51. Ibid., II:68.
52. Ibid., II:68.
53. Ibid., II:72.
54. Tertullian, *Apology*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 3, Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., (Albany, Ore.: AGES Software, 1997), 102.
55. Harold O. J. Brown, "Odium Humani Generis," *The Religion and Society Report*, 16, no. 3 (March, 1999): 1-4.
56. If you'd like to know more you can contact Voice of the Martyrs at 1-800-747-0085, or find their web site at [www.persecution.com](http://www.persecution.com).