

CHAPTER 19

THE PARADIGM OF THE CROSS IN THE EARLY CHURCH I

PART I: MARTYRDOM

Paul, Stephen, along with others mentioned in the New Testament, faced persecution and reflected the same attitudes, forgiveness, and sacrificial love Jesus demonstrated in His death. From their examples and from many scriptures mentioned in previous chapters, we can conclude that the fundamental requirement of those of us who are truly Christian disciples is the willingness to lay down our lives—physically or otherwise—for the Lord and to suffer if necessary in doing so. Along with that, we must diligently search out and determine to apply such a total commitment to every aspect of our life—to seek to love every one with the same quality of sacrificial love that Jesus did in His passion, even to love our enemies so deeply that we would die for them. In this chapter, we will look at examples of Christians who lived shortly after New Testament times and who demonstrated the paradigm of the Cross in physical and spiritual aspects.

Ignatius of Antioch (A.D. 35-107) was an example of a martyr who followed the paradigm of the Cross in a literal, physical manner, and also in his Christ-like attitude:

. . . his purpose is to be an imitator of the passion of . . . Jesus Christ. As he faces the ultimate sacrifice, Ignatius believes that he begins to be a disciple . . . the reason why Ignatius is willing to face death with such courage is that he will thereby become a witness:¹

The same dedication to express the paradigm of the Cross was expressed by Polycarp in his statement “Grant me nothing more than to be poured out as an offering to God”² and also by these words that he prayed out loud just before he was burned alive:

Lord Sovereign God . . . I thank you that you have deemed me worthy of this moment, so that, jointly with your martyrs, I may have a share in the cup of Christ. . . . For this . . . I bless you. Amen.³

Noteworthy are the words of Felicitas, who declared before her execution she would not abandon her faith: “while I live, I shall defeat you; and if you kill me, in my death I shall defeat you all the more.”⁴

For those who “lapsed” during persecution, the attitude of the church in discussing their restoration was that denying Christ was a serious sin and that the norm for a committed Christian was to be a “confessor” by accepting torture and death rather than worship idols or deny Christ.

Along with Jesus’ willingness to suffer and die, a further aspect of the paradigm of the Cross was the trust that Jesus had in God for the results of His obedient suffering, which included the work that the Cross would accomplish in the salvation of all true followers of His. Likewise, early Christian martyrs trusted God for their reward in heaven and for the dramatic results their martyrdom had as a witness to non-Christians. Tertullian had declared that “the blood of the martyr was a seed, for the more it was spilled the greater the number of Christians.”⁵

The ancient church knew nothing of “evangelistic services” or “revivals” . . . most converts were made by anonymous Christians whose witness led others to their faith. The

¹Justo L. Gonzales, *The Story of Christianity Volume I* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1984), 43.

²M. Collins and M.A. Price, *The Story of Christianity* (London: DK Publishing, 1999), 44

³Gonzales, *The Story of Christianity*, 44, quoted from *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 14.

⁴Gonzales, 46.

⁵Gonzales, 86.

most dramatic form taken by such witness was obviously that of suffering unto death, . . .

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For though we are beheaded, and crucified, and exposed to beasts and chains and fire and all other forms of torture, it is plain . . . the more things of this kind which happen to us the more are there others who become believers . . . through the name of Jesus.⁷

There is another cause why God permits persecutions to be carried out against us, that the people of God may be increased.⁸

From these last quotes, we see in the lives of the martyrs reflections of Jesus' total unselfishness in suffering and dying for our salvation. Further, some of the stories of the martyrs show their loving and obedient attitude towards God and their forgiveness and love of their persecutors.

Before the time of Constantine, the most common reason many Christians left society and lived in solitude in the desert was to flee persecution. In some cases, leaders were perfectly ready to lay down their lives, but they believed that the church needed them for their leadership. In many cases, however, there were those who were not ready to face torture and execution, but chose a life of solitude rather than deny their faith in Christ. There were aspects of monasticism that required sacrifice, discipline, and self-denial, and thus expressed in some ways the paradigm of the Cross. However, in prolonged solitude and self-inflicted suffering, love for others—a central aspect of Jesus' sufferings—was totally missing.

It has already been noted that motives are an important aspect of Jesus' example of love in His suffering. Note Paul's words: "If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing." (1 Cor. 13:3) Our actions often reveal our real motives, but we need the Holy Spirit to reveal our hidden motives—often hidden to ourselves. If we truly want to follow the paradigm of the Cross, we must be willing to have these motives exposed and dealt with.

The challenge for us is to become willing to sacrifice our whole lives for Christ and to learn how to apply this total commitment to every aspect of our lives.

Faith of our fathers, living still

In spite of dungeon, fire and sword—

O how our hearts beat high with joy

Whene'er we hear that glorious word!

Chorus Faith of our fathers, holy faith,

We will be true to thee till death!

Our fathers, chained in prisons dark,

Were still in heart and conscience free;

How sweet would be their children's fate

If they, like them, could die for thee! (Chorus)

Faith of our fathers, we will love

Both friend and foe in all our strife;

And preach thee too, as love knows how.

By kindly words and virtuous life (Chorus)

Frederick W. Faber

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⁶Gonzales, 99.

⁷Owen Collins, *The Oral History of Christianity* (London: HarperCollins, 1998), 28-29.

⁸Collins and Price, *The Story of Christianity*, 54.