

The Epistle Of First Peter

Background of the Epistle:

In the New Testament little is said about the relation between Christianity and the Roman government. The few political references in the Gospels deal with the local rule of the Herods rather than with the imperial system, with the exception of Jesus' famous utterance: "...Render therefore unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's." (Matt. 22:21). Acts invariably represents the contacts between Christianity and the Roman officials in a favorable light, but it gives the impression that those contacts were few. The epistles of Paul do not discuss political theory and merely enjoin the Christians to be subject to the powers that be, because they are ordained of God. (Rom. 13:1-6).

This comparative silence concerning political relations which under a totalitarian government could hardly have been unimportant may be explained in several ways. First, Christianity was primarily spiritual, not political. "My kingdom is not of this world," said Jesus to Pilate: "if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight...." (John 18:36)

The application of the principles which Jesus taught had political consequences, but neither He nor the apostles were revolutionists or agitators. Again, as has been observed, Christianity grew up within Judaism, which was a religio licita, a cult permitted and protected by the state. Rome's policy was tolerance wherever religious observances did not conflict with the state's claims. As long as the Christians created no disturbance, they were simply ignored.

The Christians who did come into contact with Rome in the earlier part of the first century left a favorable impression upon the Roman authorities. Paul stood on his rights as a citizen on at least two occasions and demanded recognition for them (Acts 16-36-39, 22:24-29) but he could also say that he had never been guilty of subversive activities or of raising insurrection (24:12). The church had followed a policy of peaceful penetration of society with the message of Christ.

Toward the close of the sixth decade the situation began to change. The Christians had separated from Judaism and were recognized as a different group. Their firm adherence to belief in an invisible God and in a risen Christ excited the suspicion and the contempt of the public, while their talk of a coming judgment and overthrow of the existing world created misunderstanding and hatred. The reaction against them in Rome under Nero was the product of this popular dislike, activated by Nero's spiteful accusations. The close of the Pastoral Epistles shows that Paul's death marked a turn in the policy of the government from casual tolerance to hostile criticism.

"When the churches began to realize this change in attitude, they became apprehensive of what might befall them. They could not organize resistance, for by so doing they would violate their own principle of peaceful obedience to the government, and would only give occasion for further charges against them. Were they faced with extinction? What would be the outcome? Would the brutalities of Nero be duplicated in the provinces? They looked to their leaders to answer their questions for them.

I Peter was written in reply to this situation as it affected the churches of northern Asia Minor in the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. Two of these provinces, Pontus, and Cappadocia are not mentioned in Acts among those evangelized by Paul; Bithynia he attempted to reach, but was forbidden to do so (Acts 16:7). Galatia and Asia he did evangelize, but the way in which these provinces are listed gives the impression that Peter was addressing only those Christians living in the northern sections

The origin and constituency of these churches are not well known. Men from Cappadocia and Pontus were present on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:9) and may have returned to their homes with the news of the coming of the Messiah and of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. It is possible that Peter had preached in these regions, for he had worked with the church at Antioch (Gal. 2:11), and had traveled in the Mediterranean world while Paul was preaching during the European campaign (I Cor. 5). While there is no statement on record that Peter founded or even visited these churches there is nothing to preclude his doing so.

AUTHOR

"Simon Peter, the author of the epistle, is the best known of the apostles of Christ (with, perhaps, the exception of the Apostle Paul). Like most of his comrades, he was a Galilean, a fisherman by trade, who was brought to Christ early in His ministry (John 1:41,42). Simon was his given name; Peter (Rock) was a nickname conferred on him by Jesus who predicted that his impulsive and vacillating nature would become as stable and as reliable as a rock. Simon left the fishing boats at Jesus' summons (Mark 1:16-20) and joined His company as he toured Galilee. He was a natural leader (10:28) and often was spokesman for the Twelve (8:29); John 6:67-68; Matthew 19:27), Jesus placed him in the inner circle of the disciples (Mark 5:37, 9:2, 14:33) and gave him special attention on several occasions (LUKE 5:10; Matt. 16:17; Luke 22:31-32; John 13:6-10). He was impulsive, vacillating, and selfish, hasty in action and quick in recoil. His denial of Jesus was not the result of premeditated malice but of sudden panic, of which later he repented bitterly (Matt. 26:69-75). Nevertheless there was in his soul a deep undercurrent of loyalty (John 13:36-38; 18:10,15). He was deeply concerned over the disappearance of Jesus' body from the tomb (20:2-6) and rejoiced to see the risen Lord (21:7,15-21).

Merrill C. Tenney, New Testament Survey, pp.343f.

The Apostle Peter originally carried the Hebrew name Symeon or Simon. His Greek name was Peter and in Aramaic was Cephas. His early home was in Bethsaida which means "Home of the Fish". Its exact location is not known but it lay on the west side of the Sea of Galilee not far from Chorazin and Capernaum. John 1:44 "Now Philip was of Bethsaida the city of Andrew and Peter."

The name Symeon was abbreviated to Simon. Acts 15:14 "Symeon hath declared how God at the first did visit the Gentiles....." II Peter 1:1, "Simon Peter, a servant, and an apostle of Jesus Christ....." This name was a very common one and appears quite often in the Scriptures.

I Cor. 1:12 "Now this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ." I Cor. 9:5 "Have we not power to lead about a sister, a wife as well as other apostles, and the brethren of the Lord, and Cephas?" I Cor. 15:5 "And that he was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve..."

DESTINATION:

"To the strangers scattered abroad throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia."

PURPOSE OF THE LETTER:

"That this letter was written in a time when persecution threatened, and when Christians were in danger, is abundantly clear. They are in the midst of manifold trials (1:6) They are likely to be falsely accused as evil-doers (3:16) A fiery trial is going to try them (4:12). When they suffer, they are to commit themselves to God (4:19). They may well have to suffer for righteousness' sake (3:14). They are sharing in the afflictions which the Christian brotherhood throughout the world is called upon to endure (5:9). At the back of this letter there are fiery trial, a campaign of slander, and suffering for the sake of Christ. Can we then identify this situation?

Ist Peter was not written to meet some theological error or heresy; it was written to strengthen men and women who were in jeopardy of their lives.

Barclay, Epistle of Ist Peter, p174

THE DATE: A.D. 64

"There was a time when Christian had little to fear from the Roman government. In Acts it is repeatedly the Roman magistrates and Roman soldiers and officials who saved Paul from the fury of the Jews and of the pagans alike. As Gibbon had it, the tribunal of the pagan magistrate proved the most assured refuge against the fury of the synagogue. The reason for this was that in the early days the Roman government was not able to distinguish between Jews and Christians. And within the empire Judaism, was what was called a religio licita, a permitted religion, and the Jews had full liberty to worship in their own way. It was not that the Jews did not try to enlighten the Romans to the true facts of the situation; they did so in Corinth, for example (Acts 17:12-17). But for some time the Romans simply regarded the Christians a Jewish sect, and, therefore did not molest them.

"But then the change came in the days of Nero, and we can trace almost every detail of the story. On 19th July, A.D. 64, the great fire of Rome broke out. Rome was a city of narrow streets, and of high wooden tenements, and it was in real danger of being wiped out. The fire burned for three days and three nights; it was checked; and it broke out again with redoubled violence. The Roman populace had no doubt who was responsible for it. They put the blame fairly and squarely on Nero, the Emperor. Nero had a passion for building; and they believed that he had deliberately taken steps to obliterate Rome that he might build it again. Nero's responsibility must remain for ever

in doubt; but is certain that he watched the raging inferno from the tower of Maecenas, and expressed himself as charmed with the flower and loveliness of the flames. It was freely said that those who tried to extinguish the fire were deliberately hindered, and that men were seen to rekindle it again, when it was likely to subside. The people were overwhelmed. The ancient landmarks and the ancestral shrine were gone. The temple of Luna, the Ara Maxima, the great altar, the temple of Jupiter Stator, the shrine of Vesta, the very household gods of the Roman people were gone. The people were homeless, and in, Farrar's phrase, there was 'a hopeless brotherhood of wretchedness.'

The resentment of the people was bitter; Nero had to divert suspicion from himself; a scapegoat had to be found. The Christians were made the scapegoat. Tacitus, the Roman historian, tells the story:

Neither human assistance in the shape of imperial gifts, nor attempts to appease the gods, could remove the sinister report that the fire was due to Nero's own orders. And, so, in the hope of dissipating the rumour, he falsely diverted the charge on to a set of people to whom the vulgar gave the name of Christians, and who were detested for the abominations they perpetrated. The founder of the sect, one Christus by name, had been executed by Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius; and the dangerous superstition, though put down for the moment, broke out again, not only in Judaea, the original home of the pest, but even in Rome, where everything shameful and horrible collects and is practised (Tacitus, Annals 15:44)

Clearly Tacitus had no doubt that the Christians were not to blame for the fire, and that Nero was simply choosing them to be scapegoats for his own crime. But the question arises, why did Nero pick on the Christians, and how was it possible even to suggest that they were responsible for the fire of Rome? There are two possible answers to that question:

1. The Christians were already the victims of certain associations and of certain slanders.
 - A. The Christians were in the popular mind connected with the Jews. Antisemitism is no new thing. The Jews have always been hated; and it was easy for the Roman mob to attach any crime to the Jews, and therefore, to the Christians.
 - B. The Lord's Supper was secret, at least in a sense. It was open only to members of the Church. And there were certain phrases connected with it which were fruitful sources of pagan slanders. There were phrases about eating someone's body and drinking someone's blood. That was enough for a rumour to arise that the Christians were cannibals. In time the rumour grew until it became a story that the Christians killed and ate a Gentile or a newly born child. At the Lord's Table the Christians gave each other the kiss of peace (I Peter 5:14). Their meeting was called the Agape, the Love Feast. That was enough for stories to spread that the Christian meetings were orgies of vice and of unbridled lust. It was not difficult for slanders to arise.
 - C. It was always a charge against the Christians that they "tampered with family relationships." There was this much truth in such a charge that Christianity did indeed become a sword to split families, when some members of the family became Christian, and some did not. A religion which split homes was bound to be an unpopular religion.
 - D. It was indeed the truth that the Christians did speak of a coming day when the world would dissolve in flames. Many a Christian preacher must have been heard preaching of the second coming and the fiery dissolution of all things. It would not be difficult to put the blame for the fire on to people who spoke like that.

There was abundant material which could be twisted and perverted into false charges against the Christians by anyone maliciously disposed to injure them and to victimize them.

2. The Jewish faith had always appealed, especially to women, because of its moral standards in a world where chastity did not exist. There were, therefore, many well-born women who had embraced the Jewish faith. Now the Jews did not hesitate to work upon them women to influence their husbands against the Christians. We get a definite example of that in what he penned to Paul and his company in Antioch of Pisidia. There it was through such women that the Jews stirred up action against Paul (Acts 13:50) Two of Nero's court favourites were Jewish proselytes. There was Aliturus, his favourite actor; and there was Poppaea, his mistress. It is very likely that the Jews through them influenced Nero to take action against the Christians.

In any event, the blame for the fire was attached to the Christians, and a savage outbreak of persecution blazed up. Nor was it simply persecution by legal means. What Tacitus called an ancens multitudo, a huge multitude of Christians, perished, and perished in the most sadistic ways. Nero rolled the Christians in pitch, and then set light to them, while they were still alive, and used them as living torches of flame to light his gardens. He sewed them up in the skins of wild animals, and then set his hunting-dogs upon them, to tear them limb from limb, while they still lived.

Tacitus writes:

Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burned, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight expired. Nero offered his gardens for the spectacle, and was exhibiting a show in the circus, while he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer, or stood aloft on a car. Hence, even for criminals who deserve extreme and exemplary punishment, there arose a feeling of compassion; for, it was not, as it seemed, for the public good, but to glut one man's cruelty that they were being destroyed. Annals 15:44

3. This Wave Of Persecution of Christians Spread From Rome To The Provinces

Moffatt writes:

After the Neronian wave had passed over the capital, the wash of it was felt on the far shores of the provinces; the dramatic publicity of the punishment must have spread the name Christian urbi et orbi, far and wide, over the entire empire; the provincials would soon hear of it, and when they desired a similar outbreak at the expense of the loyal Christians, all that they needed was a proconsul to gratify their wishes, and some outstanding disciple to serve as a victim.

- A. Forever after the Christians were to live under threat. The mobs of the Roman cities knew what had happened in Rome. There were always these slanderous stories against the Christians. There were times when the mob loved blood, and revelled in a lynching. There were governors who were ready to pander to the mob by gratifying their outbreaks of blood-lust. It was not Roman law but lynch law which threatened the Christians.

- B. From now on the Christian was in peril of his life. For years nothing might happen; then some spark might set off the explosion; the terror would break out. That is the situation at the back of First Peter.

Barclay, Ibid, pp. 174ff

PLACE OF WRITING Babylon

1. There are three possible interpretations of this location:

- A. The historic Babylon in Mesopotamia, where there was a Jewish settlement until much later in the Christian era, and where Peter could well have founded a church;
- B. A town in Egypt; and
- C. A mystic name for Rome, by which Christians applied to it all the evil connotations that had been historically associated with the Babylon on the Euphrates, and by which they could vent their feelings without being detected.

(1) Several facts lend support to the idea that "Babylon" meant Rome. John Mark, who was with Peter at the writing of the epistle, was in Rome at the time of Paul's imprisonment (Col. 4:10)

(Will adduce various arguments in Chapter 5: