

## **Born Again Separatists**

**Warren Vanhetloo, ThD, DD**  
**Professor, Calvary Baptist Theological Seminary**

Jesus taught, "Ye must be born again" (John 3:17). He died, rose again, and sent the Holy Spirit to give His followers a new spiritual nature. In the centuries since, believers have manifested a radical conversion change. Their new life in Christ includes solid convictions and consistent conduct usually referred to as separation.

Christians of the first two or three centuries (before Christianity was considered an approved religious system by the Roman Empire) lived and died for their faith. Five areas of life clearly demonstrate this. The contrast of their testimony to the patterns of the Roman world is exemplary in relation to the estimated value of human life, to moral purity, to worldly wealth and pleasure, to social life, and to forms of worship.

### **Value of Life**

Nothing is more striking in human society under Augustus Caesar than the absolute disregard of man's life as man. The value placed on human life was often less than that of animals. The extinction of a belief in a future state of retribution was the main cause of this disregard; the gladiatorial games and the treatment of slaves of both sexes exhibited it.

Greek and Roman philosophers declared the idea of judgment and punishment after death to be an absurd fable which no thinking man could accept. Death might bring cessation of existence, Cicero taught, or at most a state of happiness for all, but not an accounting

---

*"Born Again Separatists" is a reprint from Calvary Up-Date (October 1982) at which time Dr. Vanhetloo served as Dean of Calvary Baptist Theological Seminary.*

before a deity. Fear of punishment in hell following death was to them but a baseless myth of Greek superstition.

In the amphitheater, death of humans exceeded in number the death of animals. The public demanded greater and greater spectacles of blood. In the Servile War, Crassus crucified ten thousand slaves in cold blood. Their bodies lined the road from Rome to Capua.

A slave was a piece of property. Slaves constituted 35% of the populace of the Roman Empire, by recent estimate. In Rome itself there were three times as many slaves as free men. A slave was a thing, not a person. He was totally subject to his master for life or death. The owner was absolute sovereign; a slave had no greater right legally than a piece of furniture.

Yet, in a society with little regard for human life, Christian martyrs among the many who died left testimony of personal submission to a living Savior and certainty of a greater life beyond death.

T W Allies noted:

In the two hundred and eighty years which elapsed from the crucifixion of our Lord to Constantine's decree of toleration, there was probably no considerable city of the Roman empire which had not witnessed the spectacle of men, women, maidens, and even children giving up their lives because they would not -- by burning a few grains of incense on the altar of an idol -- renounce their belief in one God the maker of all things, and cease to confess that the Son of God had become incarnate and suffered death to redeem man. One and all assigned the same reason for this conduct, that here they were in a state of banishment, and looked for their home elsewhere; that they who suffered in the present place of banishment would be crowned in the future place of reward. There was a disdain of the earth and of their human life, of all the comforts of civilization, of all the enjoyments of wealth, in the profound yearning which they testified for that other unseen life. To prince and people, the ruler and the ruled alike, to the philosopher and the illiterate, this disdain seemed an inconceivable folly.

### **Moral Purity**

Political leaders set the moral tone of the Roman Empire, both privately and openly engaging in free love. Divorce was easy and frequent. Immorality was boasted by Emperor Nero, particularly homosexual orgies. Of the sixteen Roman emperors of this period, fifteen engaged in homosexual acts.

Immorality was assumed to accompany slavery. The slave's body was as much his master's property as his labor. Both male and female

slaves were desired. The value of a male after a year of servitude was but a fraction of his price as newly captured.

The heathen household was a skin of impurity. Drunkenness and debauchery were abundant throughout society. Public baths promoted incest. Prostitutes were part of heathen temple worship.

Those who were saved by faith in Jesus of Nazareth immediately and irreversibly insisted on moral purity. Total abstinence was immediate. Slaves threatened with torture or death refused to surrender their virtue. Former prostitutes refused to sin. As new creatures in Christ, loyalty to their Lord demanded complete separation from iniquity.

### Wealth and Pleasure

Romans sought worldly recognition, honor and power. They sought bodily comforts, food, clothing, shelter. They sought entertainment, satisfaction, art, beauty, ideas. For all this there was a worship of wealth, an accumulation of goods, admiration of overabundance.

The conduct of a born again believer seemed folly to the heathen. The Christian did not strive to accumulate worldly goods; instead he was quite willing to sacrifice all goods and pleasures of this life and await a full award in a future life.

Those who declared they were spiritually saved detested worldliness. Instead of eagerly seeking honor, pleasure, and wealth, they deliberately avoided positions of preeminence. They sought to live in privacy with simplicity of food, clothing and dwelling. They eagerly shared with the less fortunate rather than accumulate for self. All this was utter folly in the estimation of the unsaved.

The *First Apology* of Justin (second century) witnesses:

Those who once rejoiced in fornication now delight in continence alone; those who made use of magic arts have dedicated themselves to the good and unbegotten God; we who once took most pleasure in the means of increasing our wealth and property now bring what we have into a common fund and share with everyone in need . . . by our patience and meekness to draw all men from shame and evil desires . . . not swearing at all, but always speaking the truth.

### Social Life

The ancient Greeks and Romans, living for this world, lived an outward life; their tastes and enjoyments were external; their time was

spent in public. Family life was rudimental and scarcely developed; political and social life absorbed almost the whole man. They had magnificent theaters, temples and circuses. They lived for the outward public events of state and community. Constant activity was their way of life. Home was often only an occasional place of rest and change of clothing.

The born-again believer shunned political and outward public activities. His citizenship he considered to be in heaven. He stressed inner rightness before God rather than social acceptance. Inwardness of character meant much more than non-edifying busy work. What a man thinks means more than what he does. Inwardly he can be making melody unto God with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs (Eph 5:19). Work was not something to be avoided by the rich; a man working at his task could commune with his Creator. Family life became important for fellowship and worship.

Kirsopp Lake translates the second century *Epistle to Diognetus*, V:

For the distinction between Christians and other men, is neither in country nor language nor customs. For they do not dwell in cities in some place of their own, nor do they use any strange variety of dialect, nor practise an extraordinary kind of life. . . . Yet while living in Greek and barbarian cities, according as each obtained his lot, and following the local customs, both in clothing and food and in the rest of life, they show forth the wonderful and confessedly strange character of the constitution of their own citizenship. They dwell in their own fatherlands, but as if sojourners in them; they share all things as citizens, and suffer all things as strangers. Every foreign country is their fatherland, and every fatherland is a foreign country. They marry as all men, they bear children, but they do not expose their offspring. They offer free hospitality, but guard their purity. Their lot is cast 'in the flesh,' but they do not live 'after the flesh.' They pass their time upon the earth, but they have their citizenship in heaven. They obey the appointed laws, and they surpass the laws in their own lives. They love all men and are persecuted by all men. . . . They are warred upon by the Jews as foreigners and are persecuted by the Greeks, and those who hate them cannot state the cause of their enmity.

### Forms of Worship

Greeks and Romans characteristically worshipped outwardly and individually. One might have his own idol in a niche to which he would

bring a small offering maybe once a day. Or at a town temple he might present a few grains of wheat or light a candle as he journeyed.

Christians in contrast gathered in groups for meetings characterized by singing and Scripture reading and long preaching. Christians spent much time in personal fellowship with other believers. The accusation of the pagans was that the Christian love feasts must be incestuous orgies, even cannibalism. Romans could not comprehend the purpose for congregational gatherings.

A H Strong noted:

The true Christian feels the need of being with and among his brethren. The Romans could not understand why 'this new sect' must be holding meetings all the time -- even daily meetings. Why could they not go singly, or in families, to the temples, and make offerings to their God, and then come away, as the pagans did? It was this meeting together which exposed them to persecution and martyrdom.

Among Christians personal devotions were without idol or outward prayer reminder. Family devotions centered around a book, but that book was not the object of worship, only a message.

Worship of a Greek god was quite different from one town to another. Christianity was the same throughout the empire. It had one source, the resurrected Jesus of Nazareth. It had one loyalty, to the God of the Scriptures. It had an inner enablement radically different from anything else in the world, a born-again conversion experience.

### Today

America manifests many traits of Roman society of the first century. At times little value is placed on human life. Evolution would judge man to be only slightly different from animal antecedents. Abortions take life. Sexual sins, use of alcohol and dope, cheating and lying, various forms of immorality abound and increase.

The proud are honored in politics and theater and sports. Men strive for power, wealth and pleasure. Family life suffers from public events and TV. Doing seems more important than being.

Many call themselves Christians who have not been born again. Many who are saved are not the consistent separatists that early believers were.

Some would impress the world by politics or organization. One historian of the early church wrote with great surprise, "These

Nazarenes propose to beat the world with two impotent weapons -- love and a blameless life."

Christ did not command conquest but did command us clearly, consistently to shine as lights of the world (Matt 5:14-16). America today needs the witness of born-again separatists similar to those of the first three centuries.