

Priscillian



Georg Schepps was working at the library in the University of Würzburg in Germany.¹ He found a book made of leathery stuff called parchment. Books like this are called codices. Georg was surprised by what he found in the book. The library had a list of all its books. The book Georg had found was on the list. “The Works of an Old Church Author” was what the list called the book. Georg could read the book because he was good at Latin. He knew who that old author was. His name was Priscillian.

“But everything Priscillian wrote is supposed to have been destroyed,” thought Georg. “What have I found?”

He asked some other experts to look at the codex he had found. “Yes!” they said, “this is by Priscillian. At last we can read what he wrote. Just this one copy of his work has been kept safe all these hundreds of years.”

Who was Priscillian?

Priscillian lived long, long ago in Spain. He was rich and well educated. All around him were people who believed in the old pagan gods. There were people who believed in Christ too, although they had some strange ideas about him. Priscillian did not like either of these ways of life. He tried to think things out for himself.

I do not know how it happened but Priscillian became a true Christian. Perhaps someone showed him a Bible. Now he studied hard to understand the Scriptures.

What did he find in the Bible? He found that Jesus Christ died to save us from our sins. That is the message of the Bible and we too can read it today. No one where Priscillian lived seemed to understand this. The pagans did not. Those in the church did not either. They thought the church saved them and that being baptised made them Christians. Is that what the Bible says? No! The Bible tells us that Christians should be baptised. But being baptised does not make someone a Christian. Faith in Jesus Christ

¹ Image of the University: By Robert Emmerich - photo taken by Robert Emmerich, CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=484157>

makes someone a Christian. Priscillian understood this. He began to hold meetings and tell everyone about it.

Bishop Hy-da-ti-us of Lu-si-tan-i-a in Portugal heard about what Priscillian said. He did not like it. "People must only come to God through us priests and bishops," he said. "They cannot come just on their own." The bishop wanted to be more powerful than ordinary people. He tried to have Priscillian stopped but he could not – at first. Then something happened that helped him.

At this time Spain was part of the Roman Empire. The ruler of the Roman Empire was the Emperor Max-i-mus. He had fought the old Emperor and won. He needed help to keep his place as Emperor. "Who will help me?" he thought to himself. "I will ask the Spanish bishops, they will help me."

"Yes," said the Spanish bishops, "we will help you but only if you help us too."

"How can I help you?" asked the Emperor.

"We have a man in Spain who is making a lot of trouble for us," said the bishops. "His name is Priscillian."

Another bishop joined in too. He was an evil man called Ithacus. "Priscillian and his Priscillianists tell people to ask witches to help them," he said, "they live wicked lives."

This was not true. But Priscillian and other Christians who believed the Bible were sent to the town of Trier in Germany and told they were wicked by the church authorities though they had done nothing wrong. Did everyone believe the lies about them? No. There were two good bishops, Martin of Tours and Ambrose of Milan. They told everyone that Priscillian and his friends were good people. No one listened to them. Priscillian and his friends were put to death.

After this Martin and Ambrose would have nothing to do with the evil bishop Hydatius. Later on the Emperor Maximus lost his throne. Then they made a record of what had happened and Ithacus was not allowed to be a bishop any more.

The bodies of Priscillian and his friends were brought to Spain. The Spanish people

said they were martyrs. But at Trier a Church meeting said it was quite right that they had been put to death and so did another Church meeting long afterwards.

Now the Church leaders were on the look out for what they called Priscillianists. Anyone who had the same ideas as Priscillian was called wicked and put to death. "Priscillian was evil," they kept on saying. They destroyed every writing of Priscillian and his friends that they could find.

Gradually everyone forgot the truth. In every history book it was written "Priscillian was wicked." No one could find out the truth now for all Priscillian's writings were destroyed. All his writings that is except one codex. There it was for hundreds of years waiting for good Georg Schepps to come along and find it.

Now we know the truth. Priscillian had been called an evil man but he was not! He had been put to death and his writings burned. His friends were put to death too. Why? Because Priscillian was a Bible believing Christian and those in power in the church and in the land were not.