

Persecution and Mission

By Thomas Schirmmacher from the Lausanne World Pulse Magazine Issue: [11-2008](#)

Persecution has often been related to the growth and mission of the Church. Tertullian's famous words, "The blood of the martyrs is a seed of the Church," forewarned the Roman emperors that their opposition would only enlarge the Church. Jesus, when warning his disciples of future persecution, had prophesied that it would turn them into his witnesses (Luke 21:13). Paul showed clearly that his imprisonment and suffering did not hinder the gospel—but instead, furthered it (Philippians 1:12-26).

Indeed, the first organized persecution of the first congregation in Jerusalem only led to the dispersal of Christians into the whole Roman Empire and the beginning of Christian missions to the Gentiles. The first Gentiles were converted in Antioch not by the apostles, but by "normal" Christians who had fled Jerusalem (Acts 7:54-8:8). During the 1974 Lausanne International Congress on World Evangelization it was said that "persecution is a storm that is permitted to scatter the seed of the Word, and disperse the sower and reaper over many fields. It is God's way of extending his kingdom."

So persecution often accompanies missions, for "missions lead to martyrdom, and martyrdom becomes missions."¹ Jesus warned his disciples that they were going out as sheep in the midst of wolves (Matthew 10:16; Luke 10:3). The universal spread of Christ's Church has always been accompanied with the blood of the martyrs; world mission is "mission beneath the cross."

Johan Candelin rightly observed, however, that persecution does not always produce church growth, although persecution grows because some of the fastest growing churches in the world exist in countries without religious liberty.² According to Candelin, 300 million evangelicals worldwide live with the threat of physical persecution, and the vast majority belong to fast-growing evangelical communities like those found in China.

The collapse of international Communism and the fall of many dictators may have resulted in a decrease in direct persecution in some places. However, the expansion of Islamic fundamentalism, the growth of political Hinduism, and the rise of new dictatorships in Africa are all global factors giving rise to new growth in attacks on Christian churches and individuals.

Mission to Persecutors

Following Old Testament tradition (e.g., Job 31:29; 42:8-9), the New Testament exhorts us to pray for God's grace for persecutors and to give testimony to them (Matthew 5:44, Luke 6:27-28; 1 Corinthians 4:12). The most impressive testimony is Jesus' prayer that God will have mercy on his persecutors (Luke 23:34). The first Christian martyr, Stephen, prayed similarly (Acts 7:60). Both requests were heard, for some of the persecutors were later converted (the Roman officer in Luke 23:47; Paul in Acts 9:1-18). Church history contains many descriptions of dying Christians, such as Polycarp, who prayed for those tormenting them.

The modern Church has its own examples. In 1913, the Indonesian evangelist Petrus Octavianus described a missionary in the Toradya area in southern Celebes. Five tribe members wanted to kill the missionary, but permitted him to pray first. He prayed aloud that they would be saved. Three of the murderers were banned to Java, were converted in prison, and returned to Toradya, where they founded a church which later (1971) became the fourth largest church in Indonesia. Let us also not forget the five missionaries shot to death by the Aucas in Equador in the 1960s. Several of the murderers later became pillars of the Aucan church.

Many who began as persecutors of Christians later became believers themselves. The best known is Paul, who frequently referred to his former persecution of the Church (see 1 Corinthians 15:9; Galatians 1:13, 23-24; Philippians 3:6; 1 Timothy 1:13; Acts 9:4-5, 22: 4, 7-8; 16:11, 14-15).

Jesus, Mission, and Persecution

To speak of Jesus is to speak of mission, suffering, and persecution. The prediction of his death accompanies his entire earthly ministry (e.g., Matthew 16:21; 17:22-23; 10:17-19; 26:2). The details of the Passion narratives take up the longest sections of the Gospels. Paul consistently presented Jesus as the archetypal martyr and as an example for all Christians; therefore, it is not surprising that early Church documents on martyrdom considered Jesus to be the prototype of the martyr.

Jesus is the actual object of all persecution. For this reason, Jesus asked Saul, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” (Acts 9:4; 22:7; 26:14), and identified himself as “Jesus, whom you persecute” (Acts 9:5; 22: 8; 26:15). The true reason for Christians’ suffering is Christ, since it is the focus on him which justifies the opposition. Martin Luther once said, “The clearer the Church recognizes Christ and testifies of him, the more certainly it will encounter the contradiction, the confrontation, and the hatred of the Antichrist.” Jesus himself frequently reminded the disciples that they would be persecuted for his sake while preaching the gospel (see Matthew 10:22; 16:25; Luke 21:12).

Without the offence of the cross, there would be no mission, but also no persecution (Galatians 5:11). Paul accused his opponents of being circumcised only to escape persecution (Galatians 6:12, 14). Indeed, the word of the cross is foolishness to unbelievers (1 Corinthians 1:18), an impediment to the Jews, and nonsense to the Gentiles (1 Corinthians 1:23); however, it is also the centre of salvation history (1 Corinthians 1:23; 2:2). The message of the cross is thus the glory of the gospel, as well as its foolishness (1 Corinthians 1:17-25; Galatians 6:11-14).

The Holy Spirit, the Real Missionary, and Persecution

Without the Holy Spirit, all mission is futile and comes to nothing. However, since mission and persecution are closely related, the Holy Spirit also plays a vital role in the experience of persecution. He is “the comforter” (John 16:16, 26) and gives Christians the strength to endure persecution—even to rejoice in the most difficult conditions (1 Peter 4:14). The spirit of glory, which had rested on the Messiah (Isaiah 11:2), brings his glory to those who seem to have lost all glory (e.g., Stephen, whom Luke described as “being full of the Holy Spirit” [Acts 7:55] during his defense and his execution, as he saw the glory of God in heaven).

Jesus promised wisdom to the persecuted when they stand before their judges and have to give testimony; the Holy Spirit will indeed instruct them in what to say (Luke 21:12-15; Matthew 10:19-20). William Carl Weinrich³ notes that Jesus seldom spoke of the Holy Spirit's function; however, when he did so, frequently he described the Holy Spirit as the helper and comforter in persecution (Matthew 10:17-20; Mark 13:9-11; Luke 21:12-19). No wonder Paul attributed his endurance to the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 6:6; Philippians 1:19; 1 Thessalonians 1:6-7). The early Church was constantly aware that only the Spirit of God could provide the persecuted with wisdom and strength to endure.

No Automatic Blessing from Persecution

Nowhere are Christians encouraged to seek persecution or martyrdom. This is in contrast to those who justify self-destruction (e.g., suicide bombers) on religious grounds. Neither does persecution automatically lead to church growth or to a purer, stronger faith. The experience of the German Church under the Third Reich and under Communism, for example, has led to neither a more intense reflection about persecution nor to revival or church growth. Even when persecution is fruitful, however, its results are never automatic; instead, it is always due to God's sovereign grace.

Jesus' parable of the sower (Matthew 13:3-8, 20-22) identifies wealth and egotism as just as dangerous to faith as persecution and pressure. Western Christians tend to glorify persecution, and believers under persecution tend to glorify liberty and wealth. The faith of the one suffers under persecution and pressure; the faith of the other is suffocated by worldly concerns and the deceit of wealth. Additionally, in the West persecution comes in many forms and is much wider than physical abuse. Thus, Christians are persecuted at work for upholding Christian values, and Christians who take a stand against secularism are exposing themselves to ridicule and abuse. The Church is called to help and support such Christians, as well as those suffering more obvious physical opposition.

It is an unfortunate fact of ecclesiastical history that persecution can also engender conflict and division between Christians. An appropriate, if terrifying, modern example occurred in Korea when Japanese rulers (1910-1945) required all Koreans to kowtow to Shinto shrines in order to honor the Japanese Emperor and the sun goddess. After long resistance, in 1937 and 1938, most Christian groups surrendered to the increasingly intolerable coercion, but were strongly divided (particularly Presbyterians) on the significance of the required ceremony: was it a religious rite or merely a cultural formality? Sixty years later, the issue remains unresolved, and the breach is still evident, even though the original problem is long gone.

Christians Persecuting Christians

Prophets and true believers have always been persecuted by institutional religious authorities. Israel itself persecuted the Old Testament prophets, Jesus, and the apostles. Jesus compared the spiritual leaders of his day with those who had murdered the Old Testament prophets (Matthew 5:10-12; 10:23; 23:21, 34; Luke 11:49; 13:34; 21:12; John 5:16; see also Stephen in Acts 7:52; Peter in Acts 2:23; and Paul in 1 Thessalonians 2:14-15).

Christians today also persecute both fellow Christians and others. We need only remember the forced conversions in the Middle Ages, the colonization of Latin America, the Crusades, the oppression of heretics, the Inquisition, and the Jewish pogroms. Ever since the fourth century, the term *martyr* has been expanded to include Christians killed by other “orthodox” Christians.

The fact that Christians themselves are martyred in the name of the Christian God, as dreadful as it is, is not foreign to scripture. The holy books of no other religion depict their followers so negatively as the Bible does the people of Israel and Christians. This honest and sometimes severe self-criticism is integral to both Judaism and Christianity, in contrast to other religions.

The State, Politics, and Persecution

We must avoid defining persecution in merely pious terms, since it can arise when Christians take certain ethical or political positions. Recent Catholic theology, particularly liberation theology, sometimes has applied martyr terminology to political martyrs and resistance fighters.

It is indeed proper that persecution sometimes has a concrete political aspect, especially when criticism of rulers initiates the persecution. There is a long tradition of political critique giving rise to persecution, from Old Testament prophets to people such as Athanasius, Thomas Becket, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, and Archbishop Oscar Romero. Christians are normally loyal citizens who seek the welfare of their state, country, and people; however, whenever the state tries to force them to dishonor God, and especially seeks to suppress their mission, they must obey God rather than humans (Acts 5:29; 4:19).

It is, of course, difficult to conjecture in advance to what extent we can cooperate with governments during periods of persecution, and when we must begin to resist. In world mission, this question has to be decided anew by Christians in each context. We certainly need a new evaluation of the possibility of breaking state laws and resisting the powers for the sake of the gospel.

Peter and the apostles preached the gospel in spite of the state’s prohibition (Acts 4:19-20; 5:29) and were frequently arrested and punished as a result (Acts 12:1-2). In the face of Roman opposition, Christians referred to Jesus as “Lord” (Greek: “kyrios”) and king (in opposition to an imperial edict, see Acts 17:6-7; 4:12). They followed Old Testament examples (e.g., Daniel in Daniel 3; priests in 2 Chronicles 26:18; the Egyptian midwives in Exodus 1:15-20; Rahab in Joshua 2). Rather than condemning their dishonesty, the New Testament presents them as role models of faith (Hebrews 11:31; James 2:25). Note that these examples do not concern only idolatry or a recantation of the gospel, but any infringement of God’s law (murder, etc.). Such resistance assumes, however, that the state has required us to transgress against God’s law.

There has never been a persecution solely on religious grounds, since there is always a confusing blend of religious concerns with cultural and social problems. Political, national, economic, and personal motives may also play a role. In Revelation, hatred for the Church is augmented by political and economic issues. Another example is the Ephesian craftsmen who instigate a riot because they consider Paul’s mission work a threat to their welfare (Acts 19:23-29). In Acts 16, Paul and Silas are imprisoned after exorcising a fortune-telling demon out of a slave girl because her owners are angry at the loss of their profit (Acts 16:16-24).

There is actually no difference between those “persecuted because of their faith” and those persecuted for their “active support of justice.” In Revelation, the anti-Christian government (the Beast) oppresses the saints (“...they that keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus”; Revelation 14:12; 12:17). Both obedience to principles of justice and truth, as well as loyalty to Jesus, equally incite hatred. And as world mission is a primary commandment (Matthew 28:18-20) and includes teaching all aspects of God’s commandments (Matthew 28:20), oppressors may name social or ethical issues as the reason for their opposition; however, the real reason is our faithfulness to the mission mandate. Christians know the true reason for persecution: the world hates them as it hates their Lord (John 15:18ff), and therefore persecution will always be closely associated with missionary obedience.

Endnotes

1. von Campenhausen, Hans. 1974. “Das Martyrium in der Mission.” In *Heinzgünter Frohnes*. Ed. Uwe W. Knorr, 71-85. *Die Alte Kirche. Kirchengeschichte als Missionsgeschichte 1. Chr. Kaiser: München.*
2. Candelin, Joseph. 1999. “Persecution of Christians Today.” In *Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (Hg.). Persecution of Christian Today: Christian Life in African, Asian, Near East and Latin American Countries.* 16-24. October 28, 1999 conference in Berlin.
3. Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung: Berlin. 1981. *Spirit and Martyrdom.* Washington D.C.: University Press of America.



Dr. Thomas Schirmacher is professor of ethics and sociology of religion in Germany and Turkey. He is also president of Martin Bucer Theological Seminary, spokesman for human rights of the [World Evangelical Alliance](#), and director of the International Institute for Religious Freedom (Bonn, Cape Town, Colombo). Schirmacher has four doctorates (theology, cultural anthropology, ethics, and sociology of religions).