

PERSECUTION AND THE CHURCH: WHY CONTINUAL STUDY OF
THE PERSECUTED CHURCH MATTERS

BY

BENJAMIN M. SCHONE

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PROF. BRADLEY WORDELL, ADVISOR

WISCONSIN LUTHERAN SEMINARY

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ABSTRACT

Persecution against the Christian church consistently appears in the news. ISIS is killing Christians, governments pass laws that do not permit any preaching of God's Word, and the media ridicules the "bigoted, closed-minded beliefs" that Christianity offers. Everywhere persecution is happening. The world is more connected than it has ever been before and, yet, many people do not know how to help. So, the question is: what does a Christian do? How do we know that our help will be most beneficial for the spread of God's kingdom? How can I, as a Christian, help those persecuted Christians in the rest of the world? This paper looks to answer those questions. By the continual study of the history of the persecuted church we find ways to help others who face persecution and we prepare to face persecution ourselves.

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INTRODUCTION

Two Chinese Christian girls waited in the Chinese prison yard for the announced execution. It was 1966 during the Red Guard Era of Mao Zedong's China. The government was trying to eradicate Christianity. A fellow prisoner who watched the scene from his prison cell described the girls' faces as pale but beautiful beyond belief; infinitely sad but sweet. The girls were terrified. But these two girls decided to face death before they would ever renounce their faith.

Their executioner came and stood before them with guards on either side of him. The girls looked up at him in disbelief. Their pastor stood before them with a revolver in his hand. He had been sentenced to die with these two girls. He had renounced his faith and was guaranteed release if he shot these two girls. He fatefully had accepted the offer. The two girls shocked and saddened bowed respectfully to their pastor. They said to him, "Before you shoot us, we wish to thank you for what you have meant to us. You baptized us, you taught us the ways of eternal life, you gave us Holy Communion with the same hand in which you now hold that gun. You taught us that Christians are sometimes weak and commit terrible sins, but they can be forgiven. When you regret what you are about to do to us, do not despair like Judas, but repent like Peter. God bless you, and remember that our last thought was not one of indignation against your failure. Everyone passes through hours of darkness. May God reward you for all the good you have done for us. We die with gratitude." The two girls bowed again. The pastor's heart was hardened. He shot the girls. Afterwards, the Communists shot him.¹

Stories like the story above sadden anyone who reads them, especially if that person is a Christian. It causes the Christian to think about what else is transpiring in the world. It may lead a Christian to ask, "What can I do? Someone needs to help these Christians. I wish I knew what I could do to help the persecuted Christians in the world." Those questions demonstrate the desire to help, support, and encourage fellow Christians who are suffering. The real issue, however, is that most people do not know what they can do to help the persecuted Christians all over the world.

¹ De Talk and The Voice of the Martyrs, comps., *Jesus Freaks: Stories of Those who Stood for Jesus* (Tulsa, OK: Albury Publishing, 1999). 109-119.

This paper will try to demonstrate the best approaches to helping Christians who face persecution. The best thing a Christian can do to help those in need is to study the history of the persecuted church. By exploring history, the Christian will know what has happened in the past. By understanding the past, the Christian can see how much of the same goes on in the present. The Christian can analyze and understand persecution all over the world. Knowing the past allows the Christian to build on what has already been accomplished, tried, or failed. By studying the history of the persecuted Church, the Christian will be able to act appropriately and in the best interests of the persecuted Church.

PART ONE: HISTORY OF PERSECUTION IN THE CHURCH

The persecution of Christians has occurred ever since the fall into sin. After Pentecost, many believers were persecuted. Simply, read through the book of Acts and persecution rears its ugly head time and time again. After Pentecost, the apostles are beaten in Acts 5. In Acts 7 the crowd of Jews stones Stephen to death. Immediately after Stephen's death, Acts 8:1-3 says,

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.²

At first, most persecution of the Christians came from the Jews. They did not want to believe that Jesus was a Spiritual Messiah. They wanted a Warrior Messiah to free them from the Romans.³

The Church and the Roman Empire

After Acts 8, Saul, who led the persecution, converted to Christianity and became an apostle of Jesus Christ. The Jews wanted to kill Paul after his conversion. In Acts 12, King Herod put the Apostle James to death. When Herod killed James, he had Peter

² All quoted Scripture in this thesis will come from: International Bible Society, *Holy Bible New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House: 2011)

³ W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church: A Study of a Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1981, 154.

arrested with the intention of imprisoning him.⁴ Paul, previously Saul, headlines the book of Acts with his missionary journeys. During these trips, Paul faced persecution, trials, and imprisonment. The church, however, still spread to Greece, to Rome, and to many other places.

After some time, the Romans began to persecute the Christians who lived in the Roman Empire. The Romans held in great esteem society and its stability. The key to their society was religion:

In the cities of the Roman Empire, religion was closely connected with social and political life. Piety toward the gods was thought to insure the well-being of the city, to promote a spirit of kinship and mutual responsibility, to bind together the citizenry . . . For the Romans, religion sustained the life of the state. In their view Christianity undermined the state.⁵

Romans were not religiously intolerant. They had accepted many deities into their pantheon from the countries they had conquered. They allowed local gods to stay in place. Religions were a national and cultural identifier.⁶ Religion pointed to a specific homeland. Christianity, however, had no homeland.

In the Roman way of thinking, because Christianity had no homeland, did not represent a specific people or nation, and was not the bearer of an ancient tradition, its way of life could make no claim on religious truth. Therefore Christians were considered nothing more than superstitious rebels. When the Romans called Christianity a superstition they meant that it promoted impiety. Superstitious practices did not contribute to the public good.⁷

Because Christianity had no homeland, the Romans sporadically persecuted the Christians in the Roman Empire. The first genuine Roman persecution against Christians occurred after a great fire devastated Rome in 64 AD.⁸ Emperor Nero blamed Christians for the great fire. This accusation “was the first official persecution and marked the first

⁴ James F. Korthals, “Lessons from the History of the Christian Church for Modern Christians Living in an Increasingly Anti-Christian Society Part 1.” *Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Online Essay File*, Accessed October 14, 2016, <http://essays.wls.wels.net/handle/123456789/4135>. 2.

⁵ Korthals Part 1, 8.

⁶ Korthals Part 1, 7.

⁷ Korthals, Part 1, 8.

⁸ Frend, 154-155.

time the government distinguished Christians from Jews.”⁹ A new capital crime arose—namely, Christianity. The Romans could and would kill Christians. Escape, however, was always a possibility “if one publicly condemned Christ and sacrificed to the gods.”¹⁰ Nero’s persecution of Christians would lead to the “first universal and organized persecution of Christians . . . In January of 250, Decius issued an edict requiring all citizens to sacrifice to the emperor in presence of a Roman official and obtain a certificate (*libellus*) proving they had done so.”¹¹

Sometimes persecution in Rome was extremely harsh as it was under Diocletian. Eusebius of Caesarea recorded the persecution:

It was the nineteenth year of the reign of Diocletian, in the month Dystrus, called March by the Romans, when the feast of the Saviour’s passion was near at hand, that royal edicts were published everywhere, commanding that the churches be leveled to the ground and the Scriptures be destroyed by fire, and ordering that those who held places of honor be degraded, and that the household servants, if they persisted in the profession of Christianity, be deprived of freedom.

Such was the first edict against us. But not long after other decrees were issued, commanding that all the rulers of the churches in every place be first thrown into the prison, and afterwards by every artifice be compelled to sacrifice.

Then truly a great many rulers of the churches eagerly endured terrible sufferings, and furnished examples of noble conflicts. But a multitude of others, benumbed in spirit by fear were easily weakened at the first onset. Of the rest, each one endured different forms of torture. The body of one was scourged with rods. Another was punished with insupportable rackings and scrapings, in which some suffered a miserable death.

Others passed through different conflicts. Thus one, while those around pressed him on by force and dragged him to the abominable and impure sacrifices, was dismissed as if he had sacrificed, though he had not. Another, though he had not approached at all, nor touched any polluted thing, when others said that he had sacrificed, went away, bearing the accusation in silence.

Another being taken up half dead, was cast aside if already dead, and again a certain one lying upon the ground was dragged a long distance by his feet and counted among those who had sacrificed. One cried out and with a loud voice testified his rejection of the sacrifice; another shouted that he was a Christian,

⁹ Korthals Part 1, 9.

¹⁰ Korthals Part 1, 9.

¹¹ Korthals Part 1, 14.

being resplendent in the confession of the saving Name. Another protested that he had not sacrificed and never would.

But they were struck in the mouth and silenced by a large band of soldiers who were drawn up for this purpose; and they were smitten on the face and cheeks and driven away by force; so important did the enemies of piety regard it, by any means, to seem to have accomplished their purpose.¹²

Persecution came against Christians in the Roman Empire like waves crashing on the beach—some being stronger than others—until Constantine issued the Edict of Milan in 313, thus establishing religious tolerance for Christians.¹³ The Church was not wiped out. The Church did not disappear. The Church spread and moved all over the world.

The Church in the East

Persecution against Christians spread wherever Christians went. For a long time Christianity was a tricontinental religion. It was in Europe, Africa, and Asia—both the Middle East and the Far East.¹⁴ While Paul traveled to Europe, the other apostles made their way to different parts of the world too. While the Middle East today can be characterized as the Muslim World, that was not always the case. The Middle East before the rise of Islam was a Christian world. The Christian faith began in Israel, went to Samaria, and then spread to the ends of the world just like Jesus told his disciples in Acts 1:8. The Apostle Thomas is said to have traveled to the East as far as India. He started churches in southern India.¹⁵ The church in the East grew significantly. When the head bishop of the East, Timothy, died in 823, hope existed in every aspect of the church. The Christians and Muslims were on friendly terms. The church worked with other cultures and people to translate the Bible and other works. Missionaries and bishops planted the roots and the church grew, but trouble lurked in the shadows. After Timothy died, the

¹² Eusebius et al., *Church History; Life of Constantine the Great; And, Oration in Praise of Constantine*, American ed., vol. I, Second (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), July 13, 2005, accessed November 22, 2016, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf201.iii.xiii.iii.html>.
<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf201.iii.xiii.iv.html>.

¹³ Korthals Part 1, 17.

¹⁴ Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia- and How It Died*, New York: HarperOne, 2008, 3.

¹⁵ Jenkins, 10.

church slowly began to crumble.¹⁶ The trouble that lurked in the shadows soon spread like a cloud over the Middle East. Islam had arrived.

Islam swept across the Middle East with violence and warfare. Bruce Shelley states:

The first Muslim dynasty, called the Umayyad Dynasty, lasted from 661 to 750. During these years the Muslim empire spread from Spain to the Indus River in present-day Pakistan. Muslims were able to remove Christianity from Arabia. In other lands, however, where Islam was imposed by the sword, Christians were too numerous to permit a similar policy. They had to be tolerated, but an oppressive economic was established in order to weary them. The intent was clear. Muslims hoped that in time Christians would capitulate and convert to Islam.¹⁷

The rivalry between the Islam and Christianity grew increasingly more after the Muslims failed in their assault on Constantinople in 717-718.¹⁸ The pressure built up until it burst in Egypt centuries later.

A stronghold of Christianity for the Eastern Church was the Coptic Church of Egypt. Like Christianity everywhere else, the Coptic Church endured outbursts of persecution. In the year 1354 AD, the intensity of persecution increased substantially and took a similar form to the persecution suffered in Rome back in the first few centuries AD. Mobs of people were shouting for Christians and Jews to recite the Muslim profession of faith upon threat of being burned alive.¹⁹ The Muslim historian Al-Maqrizi shares the remarkable escalation,

Many reports came from both Upper and Lower Egypt of Copts being converted to Islam, frequenting mosques and memorizing the Quran. . . . In all the provinces of Egypt, both north and south, no church remained that had not been razed; on many of those sites, mosques were constructed. For when the Christians' affliction grew great and their incomes small, they decided to embrace Islam. Thus Islam spread among the Christians of Egypt and in the town of Qalyub alone

¹⁶ Jenkins, 19.

¹⁷ Bruce L. Shelley, *The Cross and the Flame: Chapters in the History of Martyrdom*, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1967, 139-140.

¹⁸ Jenkins, 106.

¹⁹ Jenkins, 97.

450 persons were converted to Islam in a single day. . . . this was a momentous event in Egyptian history.²⁰

The history of the Church in the East shows the successful spread of Christianity. It also reveals Islam's influence spread over the Middle East. Islam, today, overshadows the entire Middle East.

The Church in Feudal Japan

Christianity spread not only in the Middle East and India but also to Japan. Portuguese missionaries brought the Gospel to Japan. The first missionary was Francis Xavier, who landed in Japan on August 15, 1549.²¹ The Japanese people were friendly toward the missionaries and received them well. The missionaries, however, did not understand the political situation. The Japanese government allowed the missionaries to preach; and the government permitted the Portuguese trade.²² Christianity blossomed and grew even after a civil war in 1551. The new ruler had agreed to protect the missionaries just as the previous ruler had done. At first, the priests of the Zen and Nichiren sects of Buddhism provided the greatest danger for the church in Japan.²³ That changed in 1582 when a new ruler of Japan, Hideyoshi, came into power.

Hideyoshi knew some missionaries well. He rejected Christianity because he wanted more than one wife.²⁴ Despite his rejection of Christianity, Hideyoshi tolerated it and treated Christians well. When Hideyoshi returned from a battle on July 24, 1587 everything changed. All of a sudden he was utterly enraged with the Christian missionaries. In the following days, he issued more decrees saying that the missionaries were deceitful and devilish propagandists of a subversive creed. He banished the missionaries from Japan. Strangely, Hideyoshi made no attempt to enforce this decree.²⁵

²⁰ Quoted in Donald P. Little, "Coptic conversion to Islam Under the Bahri Mamluks, 692-755/1293-1354," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 39 (1976): 568. As Quoted in Philip Jenkins 98.

²¹ Richard Henry Drummond, *A History of Christianity in Japan*, Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1971, 15.

²² Drummond, 40.

²³ Drummond, 45.

²⁴ Drummond, 77.

²⁵ Drummond, 79-81.

The event that triggered the great persecution of Japan was what Richard Drummond calls “The San Felipe Incident.”

A Spanish ship of that name, richly laden and bound for Acapulco in Mexico from Manila, was driven ashore by a storm on October 19, 1596. . . . According to Japanese law, all stranded vessels became the property of the government. The local lord, however, ordered nothing to be touched and urged the ship’s captain to send an envoy to Hideyoshi, while he himself sent word separately recommending that the ship’s cargo be confiscated. . . . In the communications between the pilot-major and Masuda, the former evidently with intent to impress if not to intimidate the Japanese, showed him on the map the colonial possessions of the king of Spain. Masuda then asked if Christian missionaries had prepared the way to obtain these possessions. The affirmative answer of the pilot was at once communicated to Hideyoshi and served to confirm his suspicions of the ultimate aims of the Christian missionaries.²⁶

The incident ended “open Christianity” in Japan and its effects lasted for over 200 years. The Church went underground and endured persecution until July 4, 1859 after Commodore Perry had negotiated a trade treaty with the Japanese. Traders could not spread the propaganda of their religion, but they could sell books. Because of that treaty the first Protestant missionaries entered the Japanese Empire.²⁷ Christianity has continued in Japan to the present day.

The Church and Communist Russia

During the twentieth century, Karl Marx’s ideology of Communism swept over parts of the world. This new thinking became a danger to religions, Christianity and others. Communism does not permit any religion. Kent Hill says:

Karl Marx made a virtual declaration of war against any notions of divine transcendence. Religion only exists because human beings seek compensation for what they lack materially. The illusion of religion must be fought because it prevents human beings from seeing their true source of their unhappiness. If those material needs were met, then religion would simply disappear.²⁸

The Bolshevik Revolution in Russia took place in the early 1900s. With the revolution came Communism. Religion and churches began to disappear. When Vladimir Lenin came to power, he began to plan the final demise of religion. He never

²⁶ Drummond, 85-85.

²⁷ Drummond, 144-145.

²⁸ Kent Richmond Hill, *Turbulent times for the Soviet Church: The Inside Story*, Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1991, 20.

finished the program because he died in 1924.²⁹ After Lenin, Joseph Stalin took power in 1924 and ruled until 1953. In 1928 he established totalitarianism, which had terrible implications for religion in the future. Again Kent Hill explains why:

Religion has always been a target of totalitarian rulers. A totalitarian dictator demands a citizen's absolute loyalty. Religion affirms a transcendent focus for human loyalty. Faithful believers of any religion are a constant and stubborn reminder to the totalitarian ruler that he does not enjoy absolute sovereignty. Since believers do not consider death the last reality, even the ultimate power of the state, the power to take a citizen's life, may fail to compel obedience.³⁰

When one looks at the history of the church in Russia, one must understand the different phases of the history of Russia. As stated before, Communist Russia persecuted Christians. Czarist Russia, however, allowed Christians and sponsored the Russian Orthodox Church.³¹ The first Lutherans came to Russia in the 1500s during the reign of Czar Ivan the Terrible. He invited Lutherans to come over to Russia and live because of their skills and trade.³² The Lutheran church like the state-sponsored Church faced persecution when Stalin instituted his totalitarian regime. He put pastors into prison. He put other Christians into prison. Some pastors took matters into their own hands. Despite the danger, they were teaching children in Russia to make sure that the church would continue. Matthew Heise describes two pastors who stood out among Russian Christians:

Pastors Hansen and Muss were an enterprising duo and decided to divide the children into groups of five to eight and hold classes on Sunday mornings in apartments scattered throughout the city. . . . Like believers down through the ages, some parishioners and pastors felt that accommodation with the state was the safer course to take. But taking into account the future of the Church, the pastors could not submit to the spiritual destruction of the younger generation. They urged their students to remain firm in the faith despite the atheist propaganda issuing forth daily from entities like the League of the Militant Godless.³³

²⁹ Hill, 26.

³⁰ Hill, 27.

³¹ Matthew Heise, "God's time clock never stops: persecution and martyrdom in the Lutheran church of the USSR," *Logia* 24, no. 2 (2015 2015): 27-32, ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost (accessed November 2, 2016), 27.

³² Heise, 27.

³³ Heise, 28.

These two pastors would go on to suffer imprisonment and torture. They weren't the only pastors who suffered under the Soviet regime. Another pastor during that time, Richard Wurmbrand,³⁴ also preached, was arrested, and was tortured. In his book *Tortured for Christ*, Wurmbrand describes one form of torturous persecution during his first imprisonment. He says:

We Christians were sometimes forced to stand in wooden boxes only slightly larger than we were. This left no room to move. Dozens of sharp nails were driven into every side of the box, with their razor-sharp points sticking through the wood. While we stood perfectly still, it was alright. But we were forced to stand in these boxes for endless hours; when we became fatigued and swayed with tiredness, the nails would pierce our bodies. If we moved or twitched a muscle—there were the horrible nails.³⁵

The Soviets tortured Christians in many other ways so that the Christians would abandon their beliefs.

The Church and Communist China

Christianity has been in China for many centuries. The Xi'an stele, dating back to 781 AD, states that Christians had come from Syria and preached the gospel in China.³⁶ Through the centuries the Christian church has remained in China. Like everywhere else, Chinese Christians have faced persecution throughout the centuries. Nothing, however, could prepare Chinese Christians for the persecution that would happen at the hands of Mao Zedong.

Mao Zedong attacked religions differently than the Soviets. He did not attack religions through legislation or with administrative actions. Zedong, rather, invited

³⁴ Richard Wurmbrand is a famous name among the world of persecuted Christians. Not only did he suffer and endure terrible and horrific persecutions at the hands of the Soviet regime but he also went on to start one of the most recognized organizations to promote help and support for Christians undergoing persecution. He started the magazine *The Voice of the Martyrs*. For a long time, this magazine has served as a tool to promote the knowledge of persecution happening throughout the world. It also gives stories for encouragement to those Christians who are facing persecution. This magazine is still in publication today and can be accessed online at www.persecution.com. To receive the newsletter one would need to subscribe to a mailing list. This author recommends this website to gain information about persecution all over the world. Read the website with a discerning eye. The theology is not always in agreement with Confessional Lutherans.

³⁵ Richard Wurmbrand. *Tortured for Christ*, Bartlesville, OK: Living Sacrifice Book Company, 1998, 35.

³⁶ Jean-Pierre Charbonnier, *Christians in China: A.D. 600 to 2000*, San Fransisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2007, 23-24.

people “to repeated study sessions where their faith was not directly attacked but where it was gradually replaced by faith in the people, in the results of science, in the construction of Socialism, and, finally, in the Party.”³⁷ The processes for the Christians were different. Zedong intensely tried to re-educate Christians because of their education. He wanted them to contribute to the creation of the Socialist society. Zedong also cut off links to Westerners who could influence Christians.³⁸ Christians, especially Catholics, were arrested, interrogated, and subjected to brainwashing. Many resisted and stood firm. The popes became involved. Zedong battled back by revoking freedom of worship. Persecution took this form until 1965 when the Cultural Revolution began.³⁹

The Cultural Revolution targeted Christians. Like in the days of Rome, the government saw Christians as counterrevolutionary and against the government. In the following months and years:

All the churches were closed and destroyed or turned into warehouses, prisons, workshops, or wood stores. All the bishops, the priests, and the members of religious orders, whether they were patriotic or not, were arrested, insulted, and sent to hard labor or to prison. Many suffered a miserable death as a result of ill treatment. Christian families were undermined by an odious system of mutual denunciation and lapsed into silence. Religious books were burned, although some of the Sacred Texts survived by being buried or walled up . . . the outside world was without news of Christians in China for about ten years; the Church there was effectively buried.”⁴⁰

Communism and religion do not get along. Communism will always fight against religion, including Christianity. When the state dictates the religion, persecution is sure to follow.

The Church and Persecution Today

It would be unwise to pass over the persecution that is happening today. Today, the most visible and known persecution appears in the Middle East. ISIS headlines the

³⁷ Charbonnier, 427.

³⁸ Charbonnier, 429.

³⁹ The Cultural Revolution was the movement made by Mao Zedong to reassert his authority over the Communist Party. He used radical youths to create incessant upheaval. These youths had the license to humiliate and sometimes kill representatives of the old order and to destroy all evidence of China’s ancient culture. The “Four Olds” these radical youths tried to wipe out were culture, customs, ideas, and habits. The Cultural Revolution led to severe persecution against anyone who stood in the way of Mao Zedong.

⁴⁰ Charbonnier, 443.

news day after day with violent persecution against Christians. The Coptic Church faced many attacks from Islam in the past and still faces them today. After the former Egyptian dictator Mubarak fell from power, the Muslim Brotherhood gained the presidency in Egypt. In the aftermath, young, zealous youths burned down Christian churches and houses. After the Muslim Brotherhood was ousted in 2013, more attacks against Christians ensued.⁴¹

Iran also had a revolution in which a hardline Islamic government took power. This government persecuted and terrorized Christians. Christianity was on the brink of being wiped out of Iran. “All missionaries were kicked out, evangelism was outlawed, Bibles in Persian were banned and soon became scarce, and several pastors were killed. The church came under tremendous pressure. Many feared the small Iranian church would soon wither away and die.”⁴² Iraq, a home of Christianity for almost 2,000 years, faces persecution from ISIS. From 2014 to 2015 more than 125,000 Christian men, women, and children were forced from their homes because of ISIS and its threat to wipe Christianity from the landscape. ISIS marks the property of Christians—in a fashion similar to how the Nazis marked the Jews—“the Arabic letter N - for Nasara - an early Islamic term for Christians. When ISIS puts it on your home, you either convert to Islam, pay an extortion tax or face the sword.”⁴³

While the Middle East and ISIS are a hot spot for persecution against Christians, other countries and places experience harsh persecution as well. For decades the Muslims have attacked the Christians in Nigeria. North Korea has vigorously promoted atheism and has suppressed Christianity for the past 50 years. South East Asia, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Pakistan and parts of India all have instances of persecution against

⁴¹ Rod Nordland, "Egypt's Christians Say They Are at a "Breaking Point" The New York Times, September 4, 2016, Accessed October 11, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/05/world/middleeast/egypt-middleeast-copts-christians.html>.

⁴² Mark Howard, "The Story of Iran's Church in Two Sentences," The Gospel Coalition, July 30, 2016, accessed October 11, 2016, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-story-of-the-irans-church-in-two-sentences>.

⁴³ Lara Logan, "Iraq's Christians Persecuted by ISIS," CBSNews, March 22, 2015, accessed October 11, 2016, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/iraq-christians-persecuted-by-isis-60-minutes/>.

Christians.⁴⁴ Because all this persecution is happening throughout the entire world, it may lead someone to ask the question, “Why does persecution happen?” The next section will look to answer that question. It will also reveal other benefits from studying persecutions.

PART TWO: THE BENEFITS OF STUDYING PERSECUTION

Reading the stories of persecution may cause someone to feel sorrow and despair over these terrible situations. They uncover the sober reality of the world. Studying persecution pushes the student outside of their comfort zone. It causes the student to wrestle with the reality of a hostile world and forces them to see why persecution arises.

Studying Persecution Reveals Its Evilness

When a Christian reads the stories of persecution, they may wonder, “This should not be. How could God allow those who are called by his name to suffer in this way? And yet, Jesus tells me to expect persecution and will reward me for it.”⁴⁵ These two thoughts, when set beside each other, bring valid questions to the Christian mind. “Why does persecution happen? Where did it come from?” Persecution has an origin. Its history contains its beginning. Don Carson says in a panel discussion about the persecuted church,

It would be a huge mistake to think that persecution is an intrinsic good. It is always a mark of the fall, of hatred to God, hatred toward other human beings, beings made in the image of God. There is a danger that Christians then start to think that this is where the devil’s winning one and God is taking a walk or maybe snoozing.⁴⁶

Carson explains persecution’s origin. It started after the fall into sin. It is and will always be a sign of the fall. The fall led to hatred of God and hatred of other people. Look at the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4. Cain hated God and Abel because God accepted

⁴⁴ Gregory C. Cochran, “What Kind of Persecution Is Happening to Christians Around the World? — Resources,” *SBTS Journal of Theology*, August 2, 2014, accessed October 11, 2016, <http://www.sbts.edu/resources/journal-of-theology/sbjt-181-spring-2014/what-kind-of-persecution-is-happening-to-christians-around-the-world/>.

⁴⁵ Nancy Guthrie, “Western Christian, Meet the Persecuted Church,” Interview, *The Gospel Coalition* (audio blog), August 1, 2016, Accessed August 2, 2016, www.thegospelcoalition.org.

⁴⁶ D. A. Carson, “Western Christian, Meet the Persecuted Church,” Interview, *The Gospel Coalition* (audio blog), August 1, 2016, Accessed August 2, 2016, www.thegospelcoalition.org

Abel's offering and did not accept Cain's offering. Cain murdered his brother out of anger and hatred. Hatred toward God and others happened immediately after the fall. Persecution, in itself, cannot be a good thing.

Vernon J. Sterk, a missionary among the Tzotzil Maya people of Chiapas, Mexico, agrees with Carson. He does not believe persecution is good. He says,

A complicated factor [of the limited involvement of the worldwide church in support for persecuted Christians] is the widespread assumption that persecution is, in itself, a positive element in causing the growth of the church. Many contemporary authors and church leaders continue to assume that where there is persecution, the growth of the church will inevitably follow, reflecting Tertullian's well-known statement "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."⁴⁷

Sterk later in his essay explains the adverse effects of persecution. Persecution brings human suffering. Persecution can cause inoculation and immunity against further spread of the gospel. Persecution disrupts family life and dislocates people. Persecution tends to produce a weak and division-prone church. Persecution can cause believers, old and new, to turn away from Christ. Persecution can halt the growth of the church through discouragement, displacement, and death.⁴⁸

Knowing persecution's evilness helps us to understand persecution. Studying the persecuted church reveals the same pattern that started back in Genesis 4—hatred of one's brother and hatred of God.

Studying Persecution Reveals Its Unique Reasons

While the primary cause behind persecution is the fall into sin, each case of persecution against the church has its unique reasons. Understanding past occurrences of persecution will help shape responses to future incidents of persecution.

The situation in Japan back in the sixteenth century shows how a leader of a nation can switch his view toward Christianity and missionaries. The Portuguese missionaries were allowed to preach, to teach, to convert many Japanese to Christianity. Until the missionaries came in the sixteenth century, Japan was an isolated nation. The

⁴⁷ Vernon J. Sterk, "You Can Help the Persecuted Church: Lessons from Chiapas, Mexico," *International Bulletin Of Missionary Research* 23, no. 1 (January 1999): 15-18, *ATLA Religion Database with ATLA Serials*, EBSCOhost (accessed November 2, 2016), 15.

⁴⁸ Sterk, 16.

Western world had not influenced them at all. The first reports of the Japanese to the Western World came from Marco Polo. He only knew about Japan from his dealings with Kublai Khan.⁴⁹

Before the missionaries came to Japan, the Japanese government had been imperial with provincial knights and landlords wielding great power in place of the aristocracy in Kyōto. These provincial knights and landlords were military leaders called shoguns.⁵⁰ The nation was stable for a century and a half. Near the end of the sixteenth century, war broke out over all the land. When the Christian missionaries came to Japan for the first time, they came toward “the end of the longest period of sustained military strife and general disorder in the known history of Japan.”⁵¹

The turmoil caused by the war brought forth a desire for unification. The next few rulers of Japan strained hard to unify Japan. They welcomed the Portuguese missionaries because they wanted to trade with their ships. The leaders enjoyed speaking with these foreigners because they did not like the Buddhist clergy. They felt at ease conversing with people who would not betray them or cause them to lose prestige.⁵²

The ruler of Japan turned on the Portuguese missionaries after the *San Felipe Incident* in which the Spanish captain foolishly showed the local Japanese lord all of Spain’s colonies and at the same time admitted to using the missionaries to gain a foothold in colonizing the country. Hideyoshi, who strove to unify Japan after the significant period of war and turmoil, felt the Portuguese missionaries had betrayed him. He had no intention of becoming a Western colony, of losing his power, and of losing everything he strove to protect. Christianity had become a deceitful and dangerous enemy of the state. Immediately, Hideyoshi had twenty-six missionaries executed near Nagasaki in 1597.⁵³

⁴⁹ Drummond, 16.

⁵⁰ Drummond, 20.

⁵¹ Drummond, 20-21.

⁵² Translator’s note, Shūsaku Endō, *Silence*, New York: Taplinger Pub, 1979, xiii.

⁵³ Translator’s note, *Silence*, xiv.

When studied, the situation in Japan shows the cause for the persecution of those Christians. The Japanese government saw the missionaries as liars and no longer trusted them. The Japanese leaders took severe actions against the Christians and missionaries in a fearful outburst over the idea of losing power over the country. For Japanese Christians, duplicity was the unique spark that started the persecution. Hideyoshi and the Portuguese missionaries still teach Christians today. Their story teaches Christians today to be transparent in all things, particularly in mission fields. Ulterior motives hinder the spread of the gospel. The people may think that Christianity has two faces—a face of outward religion and a face of commercial gain.

In the Middle East, persecution happens for a different reason. It does not happen because of trade issues. Persecution happens in the Middle East because Islam is in the Middle East. Islam is both a religion and an ideology. Islam is different from Christianity. Geert Wilders⁵⁴ describes Islam: “Islam is not a religion preaching that we must do unto others as we would have them do unto us. Instead, it is a totalitarian system aiming for political domination of the world.”⁵⁵ Islam teaches its followers to pursue conversion by force. Wilders backs this: “Others, however, were terrified into submission. ‘I shall cast terror into the hearts of the infidels. Strike off their heads, maim them in every limb!’”⁵⁶ Wilders also points out what the Koran teaches concerning the non-Muslims:

In fact, the Koran states explicitly that non-Muslims are to be treated much worse than Muslims. “Believers, take neither Jews nor Christians for your friends,” it says. It further commands, “When the sacred months are over slay the idolaters wherever you find them. Arrest them, besiege them, and lie in ambush everywhere for them.” This is consistent with Muhammad’s infamous order to his followers, so often repeated throughout the Islamic world today, “You will fight with the Jews till some of them will hide behind stones. The stones will betray

⁵⁴ Geert Wilders is a member of Dutch Parliament who spoke out against Islam for their beliefs, especially the beliefs that teach violence. He has seen Islam take over his country and sympathizes with anyone who lives under Islamic rule. After he spoke out against Islam, he received many death threats and now lives under constant security. In his book he speaks out against Islam not so much as a religion but because Islam’s ideology promotes violence and hatred of all others.

⁵⁵ Geert Wilders, *Marked for Death: Islam’s War Against the West and Me*, Washington DC: Regnery Publishing, 2012. Kindle Edition, 42.

⁵⁶ Wilders, 37. Wilders here quotes the Koran again. The passage is Koran 8:12.

them saying, ‘O Abdullah [slave of Allah]! There is a Jew behind me; so kill him.’⁵⁷

While these phrases speak against Jews, they do not single out Jews only. These apply to all other religions. For the Muslim, Christianity presents an opposing force that stands in the way of fulfilling the devotion to Allah.

In an interview with Dr. Jordan Patrick, a Pakistani Christian doctor, he described what persecution looks like in India and Pakistan. He said that in India and Pakistan Christians face a double persecution. The first persecution happens because Christians are often in the lowest caste of society. Christians do not have an education. They have no skills to help the community. The Muslims do not like them because they are poor. They make the Christians live outside the city in a separate group. The Muslims also persecute the Christians because of their religion. The Muslims try to convert Christians. If a Christian does not do what a Muslim says, then the Muslim can kill him because a Christian is like a slave. The persecution becomes worse when a Christian converts a Muslim to Christianity. Muslims see this as apostasy. The punishment for apostasy is death. So, the Christian faces both societal persecution and religious persecution. The latter persecution is harder to endure.⁵⁸

Sometimes persecution happens because the government sees the church as a revolutionary institution. Sometimes it comes as the religion of the state tries to run out all other religions. Another reason, however, is when the local peoples do not want to lose their ethnic traditions with which they have grown up. An example occurs in Chiapas, Mexico. When the conquistadors came over in the 1500s, they oppressed the indigenous people. When the gospel came to the area, persecution against Christians came not from foreign invaders, but from the tribal leaders. The transfer occurred due to a “counter-reaction to the changes that are caused by new freedom in Christ.”⁵⁹ Missionaries still serve these indigenous people in Chiapas. Vernon Sterk served as a

⁵⁷ Wilders, 44. Also, Wilders here is quoting from the Koran and from the Hadith, which is the oral tradition of the history of Mohammed the prophet. The locations of the verse in the Koran is Koran 9:5. The locations of the Hadith are Hadith Sahih Bukhari 4:52:177 and Hadith Sahih Muslim 41:6985.

⁵⁸ Dr. Jordan Patrick, “An Interview with Dr. Jordan Patrick,” Interviewed by author, November 1, 2016. The list of questions will be found in the Appendix.

⁵⁹ Sterk, 16.

missionary for thirty years and has worked with an indigenous tribe. During this time, he faced persecution and threats firsthand.⁶⁰ Sterk and his wife witnessed persecution from the moment they arrived in Chiapas. “Since 1969,” Sterk says, “more than 25,000 indigenous Christians have been forcibly expelled.”⁶¹ He gives several reasons why persecution came against the Christians in Chiapas:

In communication of the Gospel we are involved in spiritual warfare, and the threat to Satan’s power is the root cause of persecution. On a sociological level, the general cause of persecution in Chiapas is the perceived threat to traditional tribal leaders and power structures. We can enumerate several factors that help explain what has happened in Chiapas in areas where the indigenous population has responded to the Gospel. There is (1) a change of religious allegiance, which in animistic cultures is perceived as a threat to ethnic cohesion and the welfare of the entire society; (2) a threat to the position and power of the shaman or priest; (3) an increase of social and economic problems related to shortages of land and

⁶⁰ Sterk tells a story, “My personal involvement in persecution arose out of living with first-generation Christians in an indigenous tribe in Chiapas. After a long period of warnings, we knew that the situation had reached a volatile phase when expulsions threats were issued to the Protestant evangelicals. One Sunday morning a Christian leader from the Zinacanteco tribe arrived breathlessly at our door. He reported that several of the believers from the village of Nabenchauc had been forced onto a truck and were on their way to be executed by order of the tribal president.

My response to this was to jump into a vehicle and try to meet the leaders from Nabenchauc, with whom I had worked for years. With the Zinacanteco brother that had come to notify me, I headed out to the road where the assassins would reportedly be passing. As the truck carrying the condemned believers approached, I recognized it as belonging to the man from Nabenchauc with whom my family had lived for two years. Considering him my friend, I flagged down the truck. Before I was able to negotiate anything, however, five other large trucks loaded with about 250 enraged and drunken Zinacanteco men surrounded us. A man named Antun, who had been the captain of the village basketball team that I had organized and coached a few years earlier, shouted, “Let’s kill René (my name in the tribe) and put an end to all the evangelicals!”

Before I knew what was happening, I was struck in the face, sending my glasses flying. Because I am half-blind without my glasses, I moved to retrieve them. As I picked them up in one hand, someone shouted: “He has a gun!” Evidently the way I was holding my glasses gave the appearance of having a pistol, and through a miracle of the Lord, the mob suddenly split, opening a clear path for my escape on foot. When the crowd saw me running full speed, they threw rocks that zipped past my head. I didn’t stop running until I reached the outskirts of the city, over a mile away.

The Zinacanteco Christians, including the man who had brought the news to our house, were immediately taken back to the tribal center and were beaten severely on the way. But since the tribal president feared that I would have reported him to the city police, he canceled the death sentence and expelled them from their tribal homes. They appeared at our door late that night, badly beaten but thankful to be alive.

I relate this story to illustrate a kind of personal involvement that can be helpful to persecuted Christians. To this day, the believers affirm that they surely would have been killed if someone had not been willing to risk getting involved. This involvement formed a foundation upon which I could identify with and encourage others who would face persecution.

⁶¹ Sterk, 16.

the unequal distribution of wealth; and (4) the challenge to tribal political leaders and structures.⁶²

Studying Persecution Reveals Other Christian Responses

The Christian Church throughout time has faced persecution. Thankfully, the Church has recorded what has transpired. Historical records serve as great resources for today's Christians. Like Eusebius said:

[I]t is not our place to describe the sad misfortunes which finally came upon them, as we do not think it proper, moreover, to record their divisions and unnatural conduct to each other before the persecution. Wherefore we have decided to relate nothing concerning them except the things in which we can vindicate the Divine judgment. Hence we shall not mention those who were shaken by the persecution, nor those who in everything pertaining to salvation were shipwrecked, and by their own will were sunk in the depths of the flood. But we shall introduce into this history in general only those events which may be useful first to ourselves and afterwards to posterity. Let us therefore proceed to describe briefly the sacred conflicts of the witnesses of the Divine Word.⁶³

Eusebius' words display the proper emphasis that one needs when recording the history of persecution. One ought not to focus on those who did not endure in the faith. Instead, focus on what is useful for generations to come. Sometimes, relating a sad story about a lost brother or sister in the faith will be helpful to those who face persecution. In either case, the histories provide excellent resources to form possible plans of action for the present and to prepare for the future.

Three early Christian documents, discovered in 1945, provide different viewpoints on dealing with persecution.⁶⁴ The first document is "The Testimony of Truth," the second is "The Letter of Peter to Philip," and the third is "The First Apocalypse of James." "The Testimony of Truth" "is the most overtly polemical of the

⁶² Sterk, 16.

⁶³ Eusebius et al., *Church History; Life of Constantine the Great; And, Oration in Praise of Constantine*, American ed., vol. I, Second (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), July 13, 2005, accessed November 22, 2016, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf201.iii.xiii.iii.html>.

⁶⁴ These documents were discovered in Nag Hammadi, Upper Egypt in 1945. These documents are part of the Gnostic Library in Nag Hammadi today. Thus, these three documents contain Gnostic theology. I am using these three documents not for their theology but, rather, for a different view of persecution. These documents are not meant to be authoritative on the subject but show different reactions to persecution in the early Christian church. Each of these documents can be read in English (as much as was translated because some lines were unreadable) at <http://gnosis.org/naghamm/nhlcodex.html>

three, exhibiting a scathing rhetoric against those whom it regards as mortally foolish.”⁶⁵ It ultimately promotes a life of asceticism and encourages believers to flee from persecution and from the world. Karen King sums up “The Testimony’s” response, “The core of the strategy appears to be a refusal to participate at all in social systems of injustice and violence, and instead to cultivate alternative forms of social relations and personal holiness.”⁶⁶

The second document is “The Letter of Peter to Philip.” This letter tells a story about Jesus appearing to the disciples on the Mount of Olives. The disciples were facing persecution and asked Jesus how to respond. Jesus tells them that they should not attack the outer man, meaning they should not respond to violence with violence, but the disciples should attack the inner man, meaning they should preach the message of salvation and attack the sinful hearts of mankind.⁶⁷ “The Letter of Peter to Philip” provides a different outlook that encourages Christians to endure and to suffer under persecution so that they may preach to others who do not know Christ.

The third document is “The First Apocalypse of James.”⁶⁸ It is a set of dialogues between Jesus and his brother James both before and after the death of Jesus. It ends with the stoning of James. The document ends differently than one would expect. James was not executed for being a Christian, but his accusers had confused him for another James. James never confesses Christ during his trial. Despite a divided opinion over his sentence, the judge sentences him to execution.⁶⁹ The question comes: If there is no persecution, what’s the point of this document? Karen King answers this well when she says that “The First Apocalypse of James” gives violent death in persecution no special importance; for, all death is unjust; and the patient suffering and death is not what brings

⁶⁵ Karen L. King, “Engaging Diverse Early Christian Responses to Violence in Persecution,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 42, no. 3 (September 2015): 307-317. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost accessed November 2, 2016), 311.

⁶⁶ King, 311.

⁶⁷ Willis Barnstone and Marvin W. Meyer, *The Gnostic Bible* (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 2003). 233-238.

⁶⁸ There are two documents called “The Apocalypse of James.” Scholars identify one as the “first” and the other as the “second” for clarity and identification.

⁶⁹ Peter Kirby, “The First Apocalypse of James,” *Early Christian Writings, 2001-2016*, accessed November 2, 2016, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/apocalypsejames1st.html>.

salvation, although it does signal that a person has truly understood the teaching of Jesus.⁷⁰ Each of these three documents encourages something a little different. They show some early Christian thought on the issue of persecution.

The *Epistle of Diognetus* offers a slightly different perspective on how to respond to persecution. Christians confessed their faith and responded to persecution by the way they lived their daily lives. The unbelievers could see this different morality. “They marry like all other men and they beget children; but they do not cast away their offspring. They have their meals in common, but not their wives. They find themselves in the flesh, and yet they live not after the flesh.”⁷¹ The Christian lifestyle showed when Christians were on trial. During trials, they confessed beautifully the faith they had in Christ. One of the more famous accounts of a beautiful confession when facing death is from Polycarp.

Polycarp, a disciple of the Apostle John, was a leader in the Christian church. Polycarp was on trial for preaching the gospel, as the Romans considered him an atheist because he did not believe in the Roman gods. Polycarp wanted to stay in the city, but his friends and other Christians persuaded him to leave. He, then, would go from farm to farm trying to hide from the Roman persecution. The Romans captured and tortured a couple of young men until they confessed Polycarp’s location.⁷² The Romans captured Polycarp and put him on trial.

As Polycarp was being taken into the arena, a voice came to him from heaven: “Be strong, Polycarp and play the man!” No one saw who had spoken, but our brothers who were there heard the voice. When the crowd heard that Polycarp had been captured, there was an uproar. The Proconsul asked him whether he was Polycarp. On hearing that he was, he tried to persuade him to apostatize, saying, “Have respect for your old age, swear by the fortune of Caesar. Repent, and say, ‘Down with the Atheists!’” Polycarp looked grimly at the wicked heathen multitude in the stadium, and gesturing towards them, he said, “Down with the Atheists!” “Swear,” urged the Proconsul, “reproach Christ, and I will set you free.” “86 years have I have served him,” Polycarp declared, “and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?”

⁷⁰ King, 314.

⁷¹ *Epistle to Diognetus*, 5:6-8. <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/diognetus-lightfoot.html>.

⁷² "Polycarp's Martyrdom," Christian History Institute, accessed November 3, 2016, <https://www.christianhistoryinstitute.org/study/module/polycarp/>, The Introduction, Sections 5-7.

“I have wild animals here,” the Proconsul said. “I will throw you to them if you do not repent.” “Call them,” Polycarp replied. “It is unthinkable for me to repent from what is good to turn to what is evil. I will be glad though to be changed from evil to righteousness.” “If you despise the animals, I will have you burned.” “You threaten me with fire which burns for an hour, and is then extinguished, but you know nothing of the fire of the coming judgment and eternal punishment, reserved for the ungodly. Why are you waiting? Bring on whatever you want.”⁷³

Polycarp’s martyrdom shows the beautiful confession someone can make in the midst of hundreds of unbelievers. Martyrdom is not something to be sought. Polycarp wanted to stay in the city. He was ready to die but his friends changed his mind. He traveled about and hid until the Romans captured him. Only then did he make his final stand and boldly confess his faith, knowing he faced certain death.

There are benefits to studying persecution, but as we will see in the next section, caution is in order. Detailed study of this topic can lead to an improper, unhealthy, even obsessive mindset about martyrdom.

PART THREE: PERSECUTION AND MARTYRDOM: A MARK OF THE CHURCH

Martin Luther in his work *On the Councils and the Church* writes about the seven marks of the church. The seventh mark of the church is persecution. Luther says,

Mark VII: These Christian, holy people are recognized by holy possession of the sacred cross. They must endure every misfortune and persecution, all kinds of trials and evil from the devil, the world, and the flesh (as the Lord’s Prayer indicates) by inward sadness, timidity, fear, outward poverty, contempt, illness, and weakness, in order to become like their head, Christ.⁷⁴

Persecution will always be where the Church is.

Martyrdom Misinterpreted

Martyrdom presents a tricky problem. Throughout the centuries Christians have wrongly perceived martyrdom. They look to martyrdom as the glorious end, the way to guarantee salvation, and the greatest form of evangelism. That is quite wrong. More so, that attitude is dangerous. Salvation cannot be guaranteed by the way someone dies.

⁷³ “Polycarp’s Martyrdom,” Sections 9 and 11.

⁷⁴ Chaplain Mike, "Luther on the Marks of the Church," Internet Monk, August 7, 2011, accessed October 11, 2016, <http://www.internetmonk.com/archive/luther-on-the-marks-of-the-church>

Salvation is not the result of the martyr's death, but not because Christians are saved from having to become martyrs. Rather, martyrdom is possible only for a people who have been saved through a death other than their own. Christian martyrs do not try to become martyrs, as if there were anything at stake that could be caused or effected in their deaths. This would only perpetuate the most pervasive human delusion: *that we can save ourselves*. (emphasis added)⁷⁵

Martyrdom will never be a way to save oneself or a way to guarantee eternal life, to think so feeds the *opinio legis* and builds up the desire to save oneself by works. Martyrdom only testifies about Someone who has already suffered more than any human could suffer, died for all humanity, and rose from the dead.

Western Christians may not perceive this attitude because they do not see much martyrdom or persecution in the West. Most likely, Western Christians will not face the violent persecution that seems to pervade the rest of the world. And yet the Western Christian must realize that martyrdom is a possibility for every Christian. Martyrdom can be such a visible and public confession, but that does not make it the best way to evangelize.

The deaths of martyrs are not somehow an evangelistic strategy. With this awareness Christians are released from the thought that persecution is necessary for the church's witness. They are promised that persecution may be an empirical reality but that the salvation of the world does not rely on and depend on the opposition of the world to the kingdom of God⁷⁶

The obsession with martyrdom and glorification of martyrdom comes from Tertullian's well-known phrase, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." His statement has value but cannot be used to prove the ultimate way to grow the church. To assume that would be foolishness. Persecution and martyrdom are marks of the church. Christians should not be surprised by persecution or, even, martyrdom because Jesus has said the world hates Christians in John 15:18-21:

If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember what I told you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.

The Apostle Peter told Christians who were suffering in Asia Minor:

⁷⁵ Craig Hovey, *To Share in the Body*, Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008, 93-94.

⁷⁶ Hovey, 37.

¹² Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³ But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴ If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. ¹⁵ If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. ¹⁶ However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.⁷⁷

A Christian will face persecution. It is part of the Christian's call as Christ says in Mark 8:34-36:

Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?

This verse is a key verse to understanding why people seek martyrdom. They read, "take up your cross and follow me." They want certainty about the meaning of their death. So, they seek it. They want glory and honor. They desire to lose their life to save it. That is not real martyrdom because it is self-seeking. It forgets about "follow me" which is a life of *selfless* sacrifice and not a life ended in *selfish* sacrifice. True martyrdom will not seek itself.

The Proper Martyrdom Mindset

Martyrdom can be a self-seeking attitude, but it does not have to be. The Bible gives us the proper attitude one should have about martyrdom. The Apostle Paul was a man who knew persecution. He knew what it was like to be the persecutor. He knew what it was like to be persecuted.⁷⁸ He was beaten, put in jail, lashed, mocked, ridiculed, and one time left for dead. Paul wrote to the Philippians when he was in prison for preaching the gospel. He shows the proper attitude concerning martyrdom and death:

²⁰I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. ²¹ For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. ²² If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! ²³ I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; ²⁴ but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. ²⁵ Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and

⁷⁷ 1 Peter 4:12-16

⁷⁸ See Acts 7:54-8:3, 2 Timothy 3:10-11

I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, ²⁶ so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me.⁷⁹

The key verse is verse 21, “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” It sums up the proper attitude that a Christian has concerning martyrdom and persecution. The Christian in no way seeks death. There is no reason to seek death. In fact, it is against God’s wishes to actively seek death. Living is for Christ. Life is the time of grace allotted to each person on earth. This is the mission of the Christian: in life or in death to proclaim Christ crucified to the glory of God.

One way we proclaim Christ crucified is how we respond to persecution. In-depth study of persecution allows us to see what are good and helpful ways to respond to persecution. The next section gives biblical examples of responses to persecution.

PART FOUR: RESPONDING TO PERSECUTION

Christians know that they will face hatred and persecution from the devil and the world because the devil and the world hated and still hate Christ. Jesus and other writers in the Bible relate this to Christians.

The Scriptures on Responding to Persecution

The best place to find out how to respond to persecution is the Bible. Throughout the entire Bible, believers face violence, oppression, and abuse. Often, the first instinct is to go to the New Testament, which is perfectly fine. The New Testament offers great lessons for facing persecution. The Old Testament, however, also provides great stories to learn how to respond to persecution. Take the story of Elijah the Prophet in 1 Kings. The Prophet Elijah lived during the reign of King Ahab, “who did more evil in the eyes of the LORD than any of those before him.”⁸⁰ Ahab had set up false idols. He followed his pagan wife, Jezebel, in her idolatry. When Elijah went and confronted King Ahab about his idolatry, Ahab became furious and wanted to kill Elijah. Then, Elijah ran and hid. He did not wait around to be captured or killed. While Elijah was hiding, Jezebel hunted down and killed the other prophets of the Lord. In the face of certain death, Elijah went

⁷⁹ Philippians 1:21-26

⁸⁰ 1 Kings 16:30

to meet Ahab. Elijah challenged Ahab's false gods. He had Ahab summon 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah to Mount Carmel.⁸¹ The prophets and Elijah met on Mount Carmel and set up two altars—one for the LORD and one for Baal. The challenge was to see whose god would send fire to burn up the sacrifice. The prophets of Baal called out to their god but nothing happened. Elijah called out to the one true God. God sent fire and consumed the altar and the sacrifice. After this, Elijah and the people seized the false prophets and killed them. Ahab told all that had happened to Jezebel. She swore to kill Elijah the next day. Elijah, once again, ran for his life. He fled. He was afraid. Depressed, he hid in a cave. The Lord encouraged Elijah and comforted him in this cave. Some time later, Elijah went to confront Ahab again. Ahab had once again done evil. Elijah faced certain death but confronted Ahab despite of the danger. Elijah was proclaiming the glory of God in what he did.

The story of Elijah teaches a Christian how to respond to persecution. Elijah was afraid. He faced death every day. He knew what it meant to be hunted. He understood persecution and the effect it has on someone. He faced harm and danger and also depression, anxiety, and loneliness. Many times Elijah fled when he faced persecution. He teaches the Christian that is acceptable and reasonable to flee from persecution. Fleeing gives the Christian more time to spread the Gospel. Elijah, in a sense, did not fight back. He only did what the LORD told him to do. He trusted God's promises. He acted in order to glorify God. This is a good attitude toward fighting against persecution. Taking the fight into one's own hands does not trust in the promises of God.

[M]artyrs do not die because they fight for what is right but precisely because they *refuse* to fight for what is true. A fighter fundamentally doubts whether his truth is true and anxiously grasps at it, preferring secure knowledge to uncertain promise made certain only through faith.⁸²

Jesus teaches Christians what to do when they face persecution. He says in Matthew 10:23a, "When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another." Jesus does not command that a Christian should remain in place when persecution comes. Jesus told his

⁸¹ Baal and Asherah were two Canaanite fertility gods. The Israelites often turned from the Lord and turned to these two false gods.

⁸² Hovey, 148.

disciples to flee to another place. The disciples fled so that they could preach to every village in Israel. They fled so that they could spread the gospel

The Apostle Paul models this response to persecution in his missionary journeys.⁸³ When Paul faced persecution, he would stay and preach until he became ineffective in that town. Paul would flee from intense persecution. Paul also knew how to use his rights as a Roman citizen. Sometimes Paul would escape from persecution not by running but by appealing to his Roman citizenship. Paul's quote to the Philippians, "to live is Christ and to die is gain" explains why he fled. He still had work to do, souls to save, places to preach.

It is easy to look at the Apostle Paul and shrug off his persecution because he was an apostle. He knew what to say. He was sent by Jesus personally to preach. Jesus did not only give special promises to his apostles. Jesus also gave words of comfort and promise to his followers. He does not want his followers to worry when they face persecution. He gives them this promise:

¹⁷ Be on your guard; you will be handed over to the local councils and be flogged in the synagogues. ¹⁸ On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. ¹⁹ But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, ²⁰ for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.⁸⁴

This again correlates with the biblical response of endurance and trust in God's promises when facing persecution. One need not worry that he will say the wrong thing or will freeze up. The Lord is still with his people. He will never leave them or forsake them even in the face of persecution. He takes care of them by giving them the right words to say.

A time may come in the Christian's life where he cannot run from persecution but must face trial and even death. The Old Testament has two famous stories to help in a time when a Christian cannot run from persecution. They both are from the book of Daniel. One is Daniel and the Lion's Den⁸⁵ and the other story is the Three Men and the

⁸³ Acts 12-14, 17

⁸⁴ Matthew 10:17-20

⁸⁵ Daniel 6

Fiery Furnace⁸⁶. Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego faced situations where they were commanded to worship another god. They did not. Even though they faced certain death, they proclaimed their faith in God. Not because they wanted to make a point, but they trusted God and his promises of salvation and deliverance. They had the promise that is found in Revelation chapter 2, “Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life” (ESV). These two stories show that facing martyrdom is not something new. It has gone on for centuries. The persecuted Christian is not alone as he or she faces terrible trials and persecutions.

These are only a few of the sections about persecution that are in the Scriptures. The Bible offers comfort after comfort, promise after promise, and encouragement after encouragement to those who are facing persecution.

Helping Others Who Face Persecution

Figuring out what to do when facing persecution personally can be extremely difficult. Helping someone who is facing persecution can leave someone just as perplexed about what to do.

Pray for those who face persecution. The first, best, and most helpful action is prayer. Prayer is powerful and effective.⁸⁷ One will never go wrong casting up one’s concerns and anxieties to the Lord in prayer. After all, he does tell Christians to do so. Peter tells persecuted Christians, “Cast all your anxieties on [God] because he cares for you.”⁸⁸ Prayer rests completely on the Lord’s will and trusts the Lord to do what is best for the spread of his kingdom. Prayer trusts that Jesus is bigger than any situation, person, or trial in the world.

Educate oneself about the persecution happening in the world. There are many sources today to educate the Christian on persecution in the world.⁸⁹ One of the most popular sources is *The Voice of the Martyrs*, which is a website that provides a newsletter

⁸⁶ Daniel 3

⁸⁷ James 5:16

⁸⁸ 1 Peter 5:17

⁸⁹ This author only looks to give information about these two organizations. This author has not looked into their theology and, therefore, cannot say for sure that these organizations are doctrinally sound. However, both these organizations are Christian and want to help persecuted Christians all over the world—a sentiment that every Christian can understand.

that has articles on persecution in the world. The organization Open Doors serves persecuted Christians all over the world.⁹⁰ Its website, much like *The Voice of the Martyrs*, shares many stories from persecuted Christians and keeps the reader up to date on different places where persecution occurs. These two organizations are great starting places to learn about persecution. Both these organizations offer resources to find out how best to help Christians facing persecution.

Provide Scripture in the persecuted Christian's own language. Vernon Sterk claims the most important thing for the survival of the church in an area facing persecution is the Bible in the local languages. He says,

The clearest example of an established church that completely disappeared when assaulted by persistent persecution is that of the church in North Africa. Historians record that a principal factor in the demise of this church was that the Bible was never translated into indigenous languages. . . . Bible translation is essential for preparation to face persecution because it facilitates the penetration of the Gospel at the worldview level.⁹¹

Sterk also advocates memorization of the Scriptures.⁹² Memorization of Scripture provides access to God's Word when persecution limits or denies access to God's Word. It also gets God's Word into the head and the heart of the Christian so that they will carry it with them forever.

Besides providing the Scripture for the Christians to learn, one significant action still needs to take place: Creating an education process for the persecuted Christian in the Scriptures. The hostile world constantly bombards them with messages to give up their faith. If they are not learning and studying the Scriptures every day, whether as a family or individually, then they are more likely to fall away. This is a saddening thought and the worst-case situation for fellow Christians to witness.

Help the church become independent from outside sources. Looking back at the case of the Japanese church, one can see that the Japanese rulers feared foreign imperialism. The Japanese government nearly destroyed the Christian church because they saw the missionaries as agents of a foreign government and not as religious men.

⁹⁰ Their website is www.opendoorsusa.org.

⁹¹ Sterk, 16.

⁹² Sterk, 16.

The church needs to become indigenous so that the government, locally and nationwide, does not see the church as something from the outside, but rather something from the inside. Establishing leadership, financial stability, and a process to pass the Word from generation to generation will significantly increase the survival of the church in that area of the world.

Educate the persecuted Christians in skilled labor. The history of persecution of the church reveals a pattern: communities and governments have always valued skilled workers despite their beliefs. Helping the persecuted Christians become skilled workers will improve their standing and reputation in the community. As a skilled laborer, the Christian will contribute to the community and build it up. In the interview with Dr. Jordan he presented an interesting idea to help with persecuted Christians in Pakistan. He suggested the idea of sponsorship. Western Christians, who generally are wealthier than the rest of the world, would sponsor Christian children to learn a skilled labor in whatever country they reside. As educated and skilled laborers these Christians would then have more standing and respect in the community. The community will respect them. They could use their position to show Christian love to all people.⁹³

Study the History of the Persecuted Church. Studying the history of the persecuted church is one of the most important actions a Christian can take to help other persecuted Christians. All the previous ideas came from studying the history of the persecuted church. These are only a few ideas. History shows what has and has not worked in each scenario of persecution. The history of the persecuted Church gives the Christian the best ability to analyze each situation. After the analyzing the situation, one will know what will work best and what would not appear to be the best option.

CONCLUSION

The past, the present, and the future: what do these all have in common? There was always something before them that happened and created the next event, the next decision, or the next course of actions. Deeper, more serious study of these events shows why they happened. This author hopes that by now the reader has seen what persecution

⁹³ Dr. Jordan, “An interview with Dr. Jordan Patrick.”

has occurred in the past and why the persecution happened. This author hopes that the reader has seen the many ways to help persecuted Christians. Most of all, this author hopes that the reader sees that the continual study of persecution best helps the persecuted Christian.

Studying the history of persecution—what it looked like and why it happened—reveals the patterns that occur in persecution. Many of the reasons for the persecution that happened centuries ago still appear in today's world. The Romans thought the Christians were revolutionary. The Japanese thought the Christians wanted to create an empire for Spain. Islam and Christianity clash and will never be in agreement. The newness and change of Christianity created a dangerous fear over the possible loss of ethnic traditions in Chiapas, Mexico. Over and over again these patterns are repeated. New lessons will be learned. New methods to help persecuted Christians will develop. More history is recorded for future generations to use and from which to benefit.

History repeats itself, as the writer of Ecclesiastes said, “What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:9). Valuable lessons and strategies can and must be learned from the histories of those who came and suffered before the present day. Persecution has been present ever since the fall into sin. Persecution will never cease until the Lord Jesus returns in glory and judgment. Until that day, Christians will put their trust in Jesus and share his promises, even in the face of the fiercest persecution.

APPENDIX

Interview Questions with Dr. Jordan

What is persecution like for Christians in Pakistan?

What have you seen for Christians all over the Middle East?

Can you help describe the internal battle that goes on when facing persecution?

What do we, American Christians, need to know about persecution of Christians in other countries?

What are the difficulties that Christians face? Is it hard to get the Bible even though it is on the internet?

Is there a way to help these churches be better equipped for the persecution they would face?

What is something you would like to tell people who haven't experienced persecution?

Do you think it is important to know the history of the persecuted church? Why or why not?

In such a connected world, what can we do to help Christians who face persecution?

What do Muslims think about the persecution of Christians?

Does the government in Pakistan come to the aid of those being persecuted?

Do radical Muslims persecute other groups besides Christians?

Are some Muslims being persecuted by other Muslims or other religious groups?

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