

REACTING TO PERSECUTION

by P.G.

"The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." Tertullian's statement of defiance towards the persecuting Roman authorities has perhaps become the most common Christian statement on persecution. Tertullian was accurately describing what he saw happening in North Africa in his day, and he was so impressed by the suffering Christians he saw, that it answered his doubts about the faith and he became a believer.

This study aims to show that Tertullian's defiance may not be the only way a church should react to persecution. Wisdom is required. The history of the Early Church and the church under Communism and in the Arab world shows that there are many different ways to respond to persecution. In Matthew 10 v 23, Jesus tells his disciples, "When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another." This suggests that his followers should not go out of their way to provoke persecution. At times they should escape it if possible. We also note that, although Tertullian praised the bravery of Christians who offered themselves to the authorities in solidarity when one of their number was sentenced, Cyprian, Origen and others advised against it. In their view, a Christian should not oblige anyone to persecute them and thereby commit a sin. Moreover they noted that many of the enthusiastic volunteers were not mature enough in their faith when their turn came to face the wild

beasts and denied Christ, which resulted in a negative witness.

The response to persecution, then, will depend on the circumstances in which the local church finds itself, and this changes from one country to another and from one year to another. It is hoped that the factors outlined here might help church leaders decide wisely how to respond in their situation and at a particular time. Maybe we will also find that there are some factors which are in our power to change or influence.

The unchangeable factors throughout will be that we should expect persecution and that we must hold firm to our faith (or 'Confess' Christ as the early Christians expressed it). On this there can be no compromise. Persecutors will try every means to attack and make us deny Christ. It was Tertullian who pointed out that Christianity was the only crime which the judge tried to make the defendant deny—all other criminals were tortured to make them confess! So when suffering comes, we must stand firm. (If we do fall and deny Christ, however, Peter's example shows that there can be forgiveness.)

1. The Size Of The Church

Size is a significant factor, especially when we want to use the Early Church or Eastern European churches as an example for the Arab world. When a church is already large, it wields much greater power: persecution cannot take place in secret and so governments

have to be more careful; there are more believers to encourage each other; and mass resistance could overwhelm the legal system. In short, large numbers of people cannot simply be wiped out. Or, if they are, it cannot be done in secret and so the number of martyrs may even result in church growth.

The problem we face in the Arab world is that the church is tiny in size. It could be wiped out relatively easily by a ruthless government, which is unlikely to face opposition from within the country. Volunteering for martyrdom, then, may not be appropriate. Persecution will not usually bring much benefit. Lack of support may also mean there is less incentive for believers to stand firm, since few others would know or care whether they were 'heroes' or not.

2. The Legal Status Of The Church

Persecution can happen to a legally recognised church, as it does to the Coptic Church in Egypt. Other churches could be said to be semi-legal in the sense that they may exist, but only on certain conditions, such as agreeing not to proselytise. This is a form of persecution.

In many Arab countries the church has to exist underground and so is constantly under threat of persecution. This was the status of the church in the Roman Empire until AD 313. Attack from the 'top' came in waves, but, because they were 'outlaws', Christians were always liable to be denounced by someone with a grudge against them, and the Roman governor

would be obliged to judge and condemn them, even when it was not current Imperial policy. Does this not seem familiar?

In some cases it may well be best to remain underground, even when the government invites the church to become legal. Once declared and open, the government can keep control over or manipulate the church or its leadership. The leaders may be put under pressure to compromise, may be subject to blackmail or could even be government appointees or secret agents. Lists of members could be misused to discriminate in various ways against them. Such subtle attacks could be more effective than straight oppression, while international opinion is appeased by the 'legalised' church..

An underground church is much harder for a government to watch and control. It can be de-centralised. It is not limited to a building. It is not obliged to accept anyone as a member or a leader and it does not have to sign compromises on doctrine in order to exist. On the other hand, it will remain outside the law and any protection that the law might give, so that believers will have fewer rights in the legal system. This leaves us with a dilemma: we pray and campaign for legal recognition for Christians in the Arab world, but if our prayers were answered we should welcome it with some suspicion. It may just be a sign that those in power have changed their tactics. Attack will probably continue in other ways. It would be very important to set up safeguards to prevent compromise

groups. Recent cases seem to show that international pressure is effective in many such cases and recent books on the subject all strongly support such an approach. The question arises of whether this could make matters worse for believers and the response is to ask how it could get any worse. A Russian Christian said that 'they' can only persecute in the shadows, so the best thing to do is to shine a light on what they are doing.

What about publicity in the country itself? It could give value and significance to the suffering, which might otherwise feel so pointless. However, this is asking a lot from those who might suffer, so I will only leave it as a question for each church to weigh up for itself.

When Christians are attacked by Muslim groups, and more commonly by their own families, such pressure will not be so successful. In such cases the internal strength of the church will be more important in a supportive role, but this will not come by chance. Churches need to prepare themselves to take on this role.

5. The Forms Of Persecution Being Used

Most non-Christians, including persecutors, think that death is the worst thing that can happen to you. But what about when someone is not afraid to die? Then you have the ultimate weapon, according to Romanian pastor Josef Tson. He says, "For years I wanted to save my life and was losing it (i.e. he stayed cautious and low-key). Now that I wanted to lose it, I was

winning it. Someone had said those words before, but they had not sunk in." (Schlossberg, p125). If we are able to really say and believe that we are not afraid to die, then the church would be much stronger. Perhaps we should teach believers more about the realities of heaven and hell. Consider the story of a woman who was about to give up the struggle and deny her faith under extreme torture, until she suddenly realised that what she was experiencing was a foretaste of hell itself. She reaffirmed her faith instead. (Eusebius, p197).

Threats are probably the most common form of oppression in the Arab world. One certainly gets the impression in many countries that fear is perhaps the main government policy used to control the mass of the population. The Church suffers in the same way. "The extent of the persecution has nothing to do with how many are in prison. It is the effect of the imprisonment on those who are walking around on the outside," (Schlossberg, p72). FEAR paralyses and intimidates. In giving in to fear we are giving the victory to the enemy. Jesus commanded us not to be afraid (Matt 10 v19,26,28,31). He knows of each sparrow which falls to the ground and He holds the world in His safe hands.

6. The Spiritual Maturity Of The Church

The issues already considered must be looked at in the light of the maturity of the church. We need to recognise that not all churches are mature enough to

grow under persecution. Many of the churches under communist rule seem to have shown and be showing exceptional ability to stay faithful and even grow in very hostile surroundings. They have a lot to teach us in the Arab world. However it is probably true to say that they were planted and had taken root before persecution set in, giving them a chance to become established. In many Arab countries, young believers are threatened when they have only just begun their walk with God. It is easier to trample on or pick out a new shoot than to pull up a well established bush. Schlossberg commented that, "when the quality of faith is weak or uninformed, the Church is vulnerable out of proportion to the severity of the pressure arrayed against it."

It seems that we all need to be realistic about the maturity of the church when assessing the whole situation and how to respond to it. One aspect of maturity is wisdom, and it is clear from this study that wisdom is needed in each situation, rather than rules or assumptions which have come out of quite different situations. But wisdom also seeks to learn from the past and from each other, and it is hoped that we will continue to learn and always be faithful to our Lord who died for us.

Warning: Persecution May Have Harmful Side-Effects

It is simplistic to state that persecution equals blessing, and history shows us that it can have other negative side-effects. Some of these can be listed briefly:

Intimidation and fear, leading to insularity and losing the vision to grow.

Hatred and distrust of Muslims.

Distrust and division within the church, especially between those who have and have not suffered, or who denied their faith one time. Two levels of believers may emerge.

Inability to move on and change. This may be seen as betraying those who died for their beliefs. Churches become identification as what they are not, rather than what they are. (Think of Catholics and Protestants in certain places where blood was spilled so that they feel justified in retaining attitudes from the 17th Century.)

Conclusion: What Do We Do?

There are a variety of possibilities, although not all will have the luxury of much choice in the matter.

At one extreme there is the possibility of denying Christ or saying the Shahada. There are plenty ways of compromising such as saying things with mental reservations, but a church which does not hold firm to its faith will not need much attacking to make it collapse. (This should be a warning to churches in some western countries).

Hiding, fleeing and exile have biblical backing in the words of Jesus and the actions of Paul and many Old Testament characters. These cases tended to be temporary measures. Missionaries should beware of judging Arab believers who choose exile, since most of us would leave if we were facing severe problems. The problem is that exile abroad will not help the

church to grow stronger in the country itself. Maybe we can help to change that through more publicity, literature and media seeking to bring the attention of others in the country to the reality of Muslims finding Christ and their suffering for him.

Imprisonment, torture and martyrdoms will continue. They are not to be sought, but they must be prepared for. All churches should prepare them-

selves spiritually to suffer for Christ. With wisdom and spiritual preparation, combined with the grace and power of God, the enemy's attempts to uproot the church can actually end up scattering the seed more widely.

It is hoped that this paper will help local groups a little in thinking about and preparing their response to persecution in their own situations.