

HELPING VICTIMS OF ANTI-CHRISTIAN PERSECUTION

by P.G.

This study aims to raise awareness of the pastoral needs of persecuted Christians, recognizing that torture and other traumas may have long lasting effects on the victim. Human beings are able to survive terrible experiences, but few are not damaged by them. The critical question is the degree of damage and how long it lasts. More recent medical and counseling attention has been focussed on helping victims of traumas and torture and this study identifies four stages where missionaries and national Christians could be able to help minimize the damage that can be caused. My own experiences of persecution are limited to minor threats which have made me afraid. This fear has led to a kind of paralysis which gradually subsides. In my own experience I can now see how I have been through these four stages following the moment of shock. For more serious persecution it could be much worse. Missionaries and national Christians who experience persecution all need help from other members of the body. I hope that this short article may help equip people to give that help.

Hamid was involved in a relatively active Christian group linked with a much appreciated missionary. Fifteen years ago, police moved to break up the church and this man and other leaders were arrested and spent some time in prison.

Since then the church has not been re-established. Believers live in fear of the police and are reluctant to meet with each other and totally refuse to meet with new believers, who they do not trust.

(It should be stated that, as in most dictatorships, the whole population lives in fear, since it is a government policy and their main method of keeping the population under control. Secret police operate everywhere and have been known to infiltrate the churches. Human rights are not highly respected. Prisons have a terrifying reputation. Becoming a Christian is treated as a crime.)

I was privileged to have been able to help translate when a lawyer from the Jubilee Campaign came on a fact-finding tour of the country and Hamid spent an evening talking with him. Clearly he really appreciated the chance to talk to the lawyer about his experiences and views, which were full of insight and understanding. Hamid seemed to sense that the lawyer knew exactly what he was talking about and appreciated his intelligent questions. I feel that this was an important step along the road to Hamid's recovery. But it had taken twelve years and he was still not back to the level at which he had been before the persecution.

In this study, I will suggest that there are four stages in a case of persecution and that at each stage a missionary

needs to be actively, even if not always directly, involved. The aim is to help the victim survive persecution and reach re-integration as quickly as possible.

The four stages

1. Preparation and the initial shock.
2. During the Persecution itself
3. Healing Process following the Persecution
4. Integration and Further Growth

Preparation And The Initial Shock

It is interesting to note that while no modern writers appear to have written on the pastoral needs of persecuted believers, the Bible itself has a great deal to say on this very subject. Jesus continually sought to prepare his followers for the opposition they would face. He was realistic and did not hide anything. In John 16, he states that "a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God." In a Muslim context that time is here. Paul, Luke and all other New Testament writers echoed the same message, many living out these promises of Jesus in their own lives. Clearly the missionary and the local church need to be preparing people by teaching a theology of persecution.

Let us look at how this might make a difference by considering the initial reactions of three believers who begin with different levels of preparation:

When there is a high level of preparation, initial shock is inevitable, but reflection on suffering for Christ will lift the victim.

With less preparation initial shock is strong and faith may or may not survive torture or threats.

If there is very little preparation the shock will probably be too strong for faith to hold and many new believers will deny faith under pressure.

The initial shock and after shocks of any encounter with persecution will include feelings of fear of being put in prison, of 'disappearing', of giving others away under interrogation and of physical torture. Every human being must instinctively fear these things. There may be a feeling of shame at arrest, prison, humiliating treatment and so on, especially in a Muslim culture where family honour is at stake. If the family is not Christian it will be an extra pressure on them to deny their faith and so save the family name. Probably there will be a sense of regret about having done something foolish or about lack of caution. Regret may be mixed with anger at someone else. This will very quickly turn to recriminations if they believe someone else has given them away. I believe that for the believers in the case given above, this feeling of betrayal may never have been fully dealt with and has crippled the whole church in that city.

These feelings, then, will be common to all normal people. How deeply they penetrate will depend on how prepared the person is for suffering. We can see from the Bible that Paul suffered on many occasions, but his sense of privilege at sharing in the sufferings of Christ gave him great

strength. The Early Church martyrs were similarly inspired, expecting persecution and even glorifying it. Early Christian writers also noted, however, that long periods of peace dulled the churches' resistance when the next wave of persecution broke.

Others suffer more from the initial shock, but later are able to draw on resources of their own and God's strength. A Moroccan ended up in an Egyptian prison with three other Christian friends and later wrote how after some time in the terrible conditions, "We started to lose hope. We felt as if we were undergoing a slow descent towards death, as if we were dying one bit at a time. Our morale kept sinking until we began to pray together and recite Bible verses. This became the best medicine for our mental state. As we learned to rejoice in our terrible circumstances, our spiritual state improved. As we accepted our situation we learned to accept other things also, such as the food."

Many who are younger in their faith may not have these spiritual resources to draw on and may not have the luxury of friends who are with them in prison. Even the early church discouraged young believers from volunteering for persecution because many denied their faith later. Hamid said several times that all new believers deny their faith the first time they are persecuted (and for this reason he remained unwilling to trust them). The church should be wary of being too judgmental, because Peter denied his Lord three times when he was in a

state of shock and found himself put on the spot.

For someone who has denied their faith, it is probably helpful to think in terms of the four basic personality needs. Jesus accepted Peter, in spite of his denial. He gave him significance in the church and in His plans and through the Holy Spirit, gave him sustenance and a sense of achievement in delivering the message on the day of Pentecost, with so many saved as a result.

This will probably make all the difference as to whether someone who has denied their faith will regain it. The early church again provides a model, with a system whereby the 'Confessors', who had stood firm, took the cases of those who had denied their faith and presented it to the church, urging that the person be re-integrated.

The encouraging thing is that those who deny their faith once, but are re-integrated, then become highly prepared for persecution in the future and will probably stand firm. Those who avoid contact with Christians, or who face a church which disowns them—perhaps because in their weakness they betrayed other secret believers—will not have their basic needs met and will probably never recover. If this is the case, the missionary should actively try to find a way of meeting these needs. This may often be extremely difficult to do.

During Persecution

We have already begun to see how preparation can help to lead to a more rapid recovery from the initial shock. If

the persecution lasts for a period of time, such as a prison term, it is again helpful to consider the four basic personality needs of the victim, and how these can be met. In countries with terrifying prisons and no access to prisoners this is not easy, so once again one can see that preparation is vital.

A prisoner may be experiencing fear, humiliation, overcrowding, pain from tortures endured and is probably sharing his cell with dangerous criminals. He may be doubting his faith, regretting mistakes made and feeling guilty, even when he is not guilty in any way.

The foreign missionary may not be in a position to give help directly, but should assess what they can do and help the local believers to give that help as much as they are able.

Sustenance

This might literally be food, since prisoners awaiting trial may not be fed. The family is expected to bring food, so believers could make sure the family has enough, especially with the bread-winner in prison. Hamid said with some bitterness that when he had been in prison, missionaries had not thought to help out his family. But before judging them we need to realize that often missionaries have no other contact with the believer's family anyway and that the family may be hostile to them. In any case it should be the local church rather than the missionary which is seen to be helping the family.

Acceptance

The victim needs to see that the church is proud of him or her, not ashamed. This may mean some taking risks to get this message across. Where possible, those words should be said, in order to reassure and encourage.

Significance

Paul was glad to find that God considered him worthy to share in the sufferings of Christ. Here is an essential difference between most traumatic events and the terrors of persecution. Both may involve great suffering, but as Schlossberg says, "The difference between hope and despair is not in the degree of suffering, but rather in the meaning of the suffering." (p123). Those who suffer for Christ become heroes of the faith. This was certainly the attitude of the early church, which glorified martyrdom and suffering. It has also been true of some churches under Communism.

Where persecution is carried out in secret, it will be much harder for the victim to feel any significance for the stand they are taking. Nelson Mandela said he did not know if he could have resisted had he been alone in prison. This may help us to see why the isolated believers in the Arab World have so often been broken by persecution. Once again preparation is essential so that the victim alone in his cell will know that efforts are being made for his release.

Probably this will take the form of human rights publicity or diplomatic campaign abroad. It may involve hiring a defence lawyer in the country.

In other cases, letter-writing campaigns have been able to communicate significance to the prisoner. The four prisoners in the Egyptian prison had a letter passed on to them by a sympathetic fellow prisoner. He told them a huge pile of letters for them was building up in the guards' office. Terry Waite, a hostage kept in solitary confinement for years, also somehow received a post-card which indicated to him that probably thousands had been sent. Nelson Mandela wrote that "There is nothing so encouraging in prison as learning that the people outside are supporting the cause for which you are inside." (Mandela, p.471) Hamid, speaking to the human rights campaigner, said how much difference knowledge of a campaign abroad would make when facing torture and pressure to deny one's faith.

Achievement

For someone suffering alone for the first time it will be hard to feel a sense of achievement. Only the most mature will be able to see the significance of their battle on the church's long walk through the 'valley of death'. But there may be small victories, especially if backed up by knowledge that they will one day be released. Several victims have testified to opportunities to share their faith and see other prisoners come to Christ. They should be encouraged that such conversions have actually taken place. It is also known that torturers can be as badly affected psychologically by their activities as the victim is. Saul/Paul is surely an example of this.

A person's reactions to persecution will be noticed by a number of people and it will have a significant and lasting effect upon those lives. Knowing this will help someone feel a sense of achievement and victory even when isolated. Mandela testifies to this, "There are victories whose glory lies only in the fact that they are known to those who win them. This is particularly true of prison, where you must find consolation in being true to your ideals, even if no one else knows it." (p.376)

The Healing Process Following Persecution

So far the role of the missionary has been almost confined to counseling before the persecution occurs and this is indeed a vital role. After persecution has occurred, the missionary should try to ensure that there is follow up for the victim.

There should probably be some form of 'psychological de-briefing', although this may take a less formal form than that now being regularly used for all kinds of post-traumatic stresses.

Countless testimonies have now shown that people emerging from a major traumatic event have a host of feelings associated with what they have experienced. These include pain, guilt, fear, shame, anger, bitterness and so on. These are "The normal reactions of normal people to events which, for them, are unusual or abnormal." (Parkinson, p.24).

A problem arises, however, when the person who has suffered is not able to communicate their feelings and feel

that no one can understand what they have been through. A P.O.W. held by the Japanese for four years in the Second World War arrived home. His girlfriend told him how tough it had been for them in Scotland with the rationing. She had no idea about what he had been through and neither could she see beyond her own story. So he never shared his experiences with anyone. In his book 'The Railway Man', Eric Lomax describes how for forty years these experiences clouded his life until he finally received treatment. If traumatic experiences are not talked about soon after the event, "The feelings and emotions become buried away in our minds and lie there slowly affecting all around them, waiting for the opportunity to emerge and influence other areas of our lives." (Parkinson).

The Gulf War provides more such examples, with hostages who came home and appeared normal at first. Problems then began to develop. Four of the 'human shield' hostages have since committed suicide and many marriages have broken up.

The structured de-briefing session may not be appropriate without further training, but what missionaries can do is to ensure that between one and five days after release, the victim has the opportunity to talk to someone about all that they have experienced and FELT. This should include as many aspects as possible, including the worst things. Trying to be 'macho', brave or 'super-spiritual' will not help the person, so the listener must avoid being judgmental or in any way

encouraging defensiveness. Move on to how the person feels now and to how others have reacted, especially the family, after release. Listening is the key to helping the person. It may be helpful to have someone there who has been through similar persecution, but remember that the aim is to give the recent victim the chance to talk, not the experienced one a chance to lecture, so those involved need to be carefully chosen.

A structure for this one-off session could be as follows:

- Explain the aims of the de-briefing.
- Encourage the victim to talk about what happened.
- Encourage them to talk about their thoughts, reactions to what happened.
- Move on to emotional reactions, including after the event, the next day, and now
- Any symptoms during the experience or now? (e.g. sleepless nights, nightmares)

What emerges will probably be completely normal reactions, so a final part of the de-briefing is to comment on this and re-assure the victim that they and their reactions are normal. Spiritually, too, their experiences are normal and were promised by a Saviour who himself suffered for us. Put the blame for their persecution firmly on the persecutor, because that is where it belongs. The victim must never feel guilty for being caught. Re-assure them that they have done nothing which deserved such treatment.

A note of caution here: Medical opinion would restrict such a de-briefing to trained medical counselors. This is partly because what emerges may be so horrific that an inexperienced person could not cope with what they hear. Nevertheless, many experiences of persecution will not be as awful as, say, a genocide event and so I feel that time with a victim shortly after the event should always be sought. Obviously, the choice of the person who does the de-briefing is very important. If the horrors of the event are likely to be beyond the ability of members of the local fellowship or missionary team, then outside help from a more experienced person should be sent for.

It will be helpful to be aware of some of the stages of reaction which may occur afterwards:

Re-experiencing

The victim may experience the same feelings again, as though they are going through the same event. It can be triggered by all kinds of things such as a uniform, a noise, a threat, or an anniversary. Understanding this helps the victim realize that they are not going mad, but are quite normal. If these are very severe and continuous, however, medical help should be sought.

Avoidance

The person may avoid risks in the future. In the case of Hamid, this led to an avoidance of fellowship with other national believers. Denying fears is not the answer, so look to ways of allowing

the person to share their fears and work them through rather than quoting verses at them.

The process of healing also requires that the person's basic personality needs are met. For a believer who has endured persecution, there should be a sense of significance and achievement, but other believers may be afraid to associate with the victim. Who will take the risk? Clearly the church and the missionaries need to think seriously about what risks they can and should take, bearing in mind the needs of the victim.

Integration And Further Growth

The stage of integration is reached when the victim is no longer controlled or dominated by the effects of the persecution and they are able to move on in life. These events will remain painful and significant, but will now be acknowledged as past events. Do not put a time limit, such as six months or one year, on the process. Allow it to take its own course. During this stage counseling can be effective and support from the church is important. If the church has been broken up, we can see that full integration may not be able to happen at all, as seems to be the case with Hamid even more than ten years later. We need to look at how we can help or arrange help in such situations. The same needs apply to missionaries who have experienced persecution. Team-mates, missions and home churches have an important role to play.

We will finish with a brief look at the vital process of FORGIVENESS. This is primarily of benefit to the one who

forgives and involves giving up the right to hate. The opposite is bitterness, which will never lead to healing.

Jesus was able to forgive his persecutors whilst he was being punished. Others have been able to do the same, but for many it is a longer process. "We cannot force forgiveness. It is a choice that only the wronged person can make", says D.H. Schumm, who worked with child victims of the war in Liberia. He has identified four stages of forgiveness, seeing it as a process of 'letting go' that may take time.

1. Acknowledging the depth of the pain. It matters. (But the listener should avoid reinforcing the feelings of hatred or revenge)
2. Refusing to seek retribution or to repay the one who did you wrong.
3. Realizing that the persecutor is human too.
4. Restoration of the relationship.

The book "The Railway Man" referred to above, provides the most fascinating example of this process over more than forty years, matched only by process of repentance by his torturer, who had been so affected by the same incident that it changed the course of his life. (This shows, incidentally, that 'blessing those who persecute you' is always worthwhile.) What a pity that it took forty years or more of pain. No wonder that the Bible urges us to forgive, rather than allow hatred and feelings of revenge to destroy our lives. Christ on the cross, forgiving those who

crucified him, provides us with the best example to follow.

Conclusion

The Integration stage, for a Christian, should see the victim growing to a higher spiritual level than they were previously. This is the message of the Bible's teaching about persecution. Their suffering has a purpose, both for themselves and for the church, and so it is unlike most other forms of suffering.

But we are all human, and if others are anything like me, we are pretty weak and fearful. We all need help from each other. This includes preparation, practical help, solidarity, encouragement and counseling. It is this which can make the Church and the individuals in it strong in faith. Then our faith will endure the fire and emerge purer and stronger from it.

A plan of action for helping a victim, might begin like this:

When someone you know is persecuted, get together with others straight away and think about every possible need that the person — and all those affected — might have: practical, spiritual, physical, emotional, etc. This will enrich prayer for the person immensely. Then think about every possible way that you or others could help. Then act on it.

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