

Suffering, Persecution and Martyrdom

Theological Reflections

by

Christof Sauer and
Richard Howell (editors)

Religious Freedom Series

Volume 2

In my global travels, I encounter persecution and religious liberty issues as a prime challenge to the Christian church. The World Evangelical Alliance and the 420 million Christians it represents, welcome that the issue is examined theologically.

Dr Geoff Tunnicliffe, International Director, World Evangelical Alliance

The WEA Religious Liberty Commission was pleased to partner with the IIRF in organising the consultation on suffering, persecution and martyrdom. This subject is of great relevance to the global church at this time of history. Mission is being done in the context of suffering and persecution and to undergird it with a solid biblical and theological foundation is the need of the hour.

Rev Godfrey Yogarajah, Executive Director, Religious Liberty Commission,
World Evangelical Alliance

The International Institute for Religious Freedom plays an enabling role, networking academic research of religious liberty issues on a global level. The study process and consultation has exciting potential to both document breaches of religious liberty and progress in the same as well as to serve the global church in mission.

Dr Paul Murdoch, Chairman, International Institute for Religious Freedom

The Lausanne Theology Working group has recently explored the issue of 'Following Jesus in a world of suffering and violence'. We appreciate that this consultation has added the dimensions of persecution and martyrdom. These issues are at the heart of the biblical faith in both Testaments, and need to receive much more theological attention, such as this process and consultation did.

Rev Dr Christopher J.H. Wright, Chair, Lausanne Theology Working Group

Much of mission is taking place in a context of suffering, violence, persecution and martyrdom. At our global Mission Commission consultation (2008 Pattaya, Thailand) we dedicated special time to these themes. We are now producing a major missiological textbook on the issue for reflective practitioners in church and mission leadership. We thank God for the Bad Urach Statement as we affirm the need for solid theological foundations on the issue.

Bertil Ekström, Executive Director, WEA Mission Commission
Dr William Taylor, Global Ambassador, WEA and the Mission Commission

Religious Freedom Series

The **Religious Freedom Series** (RFS) is dedicated to the scholarly discourse on the issue of religious freedom in general and the persecution of Christians in particular.

Religious freedom is understood as the freedom to exercise any or no religion as defined by the relevant declarations of the United Nations. From a human rights perspective restrictions of religious freedom and religious persecution are understood as the denial to anyone of rights connected with practising one's religion, and the denial of rights because of the religious beliefs of those who are persecuted and/or those who persecute. The right to religious freedom is indivisible and cannot be claimed for one particular group only at the exclusion of others. In this sense this series is dedicated to religious freedom in general.

Due to the fact that Christians are the largest single group persecuted globally – an estimated 75% of those persecuted for their religious belief – and that the editors are Christians themselves, this series has a particular interest in the persecution of Christians. This adds a theological and pastoral perspective to the various disciplines such as law, politics, philosophy and sociology from which religious freedom can be examined in a scholarly way.

The Religious Freedom Series is connected to the the International Institute for Religious Freedom of the World Evangelical Alliance (Bonn, Cape Town, Colombo) through its editors who are the directors of the IIRF. Members of the International Academic Board of the IIRF serve on the Board of Reference for the Religious Freedom Series.

So this series is interdisciplinary, international, and scholarly, serving the practical interests of religious freedom. Before acceptance into this series all contributions undergo scholarly peer review according to the criteria acceptable in academia worldwide.

Different types of individual volumes expected in this series include academic theses, solidly researched documentations, legal expertise, country profiles and case studies, declarations and documents of practical relevance, conference proceedings, topical collections, curricula, textbooks, bibliographies, statistics, and reprints. Interested parties are invited to submit their manuscripts to the editors. The series is complemented by the International Journal for Religious Freedom, which is freely available online at www.iirf.eu and for purchase as a print edition.

*Prof Dr mult Thomas Schirrmacher
Dr Christof Sauer
(editors)*

Religious Freedom Series

Contributions to the study of religious freedom
and persecution of Christians

Editors: Dr Christof Sauer & Dr Thomas Schirrmacher

The **Religious Freedom Series** is dedicated to the scholarly discourse on the issue of religious freedom in general and the persecution of Christians in particular. It is an interdisciplinary, international, peer reviewed, scholarly series, serving the interests of religious freedom.

Vol 1 Re-Examining Religious Persecution
Charles L. Tieszen 2008

Vol 2 Suffering, Persecution and Martyrdom
Christof Sauer and Richard Howell (editors) 2010

Dedication

To Glenn M Penner (1962-2010)
who substantially contributed to a theology of persecution
and to all the faithful witnesses to Christ
who already completed their race

Suffering, Persecution and Martyrdom

Theological Reflections

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Christof Sauer and
Richard Howell (editors)

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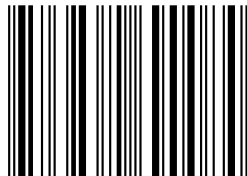
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Acknowledgements

First of all we would like to thank the Religious Liberty Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance and its Executive Secretary Godfrey Yogarajah for developing the idea of a consultation on suffering, persecution and martyrdom with us and for entrusting to us the convening of this consultation.

Then we express our appreciation to all the contributors to this compendium, to the consultation and the discussion around it. A new bond of fellowship has been formed among authors on suffering, persecution and martyrdom.

The generosity of the sponsors of the consultation and of this compendium is greatly appreciated: The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Württemberg, Germany provided the bulk of the support and we were privileged to enjoy the hospitality of its historic retreat centre Stift Urach. Our special thanks go to Canon Fritz Würschum, the mission secretary of the church, who was instrumental in facilitating this and to the chairperson of the synod, Dr. Christel Hausding, for delivering a word of welcome. Three Christian agencies, Hilfsaktion Märtyrerkirche (Voice of the Martyrs Germany), Open Doors International and the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance sponsored individual participants, and the Förderverein of Stift Urach gave us a small contribution to the accommodation fees.

We also thank all who had a part in bringing this compendium to press. Manfred Feldmann, the administrator of the International Institute for Religious Freedom, ably managed the logistics of the consultation. Barbara Felgendreher retyped one contribution and translated the word of greetings. Nan Muir ably looked after the language editing and proofreading of most of the contributions, while Dr. Margot von Beck had already edited the essays of Tieszen, Howell and Wespetal at an earlier stage. Manfred Jung of AcadSA Publications once again gave valuable advice and saw to the final layout, cover design and timely production of this volume.

May God reward all of you, including all others who were of help regarding both the consultation and the compendium, even if your names are not explicitly mentioned.

Soli Deo Gloria!

The editors

Foreword

A symbol of hope: theology under persecution inspires all theology and missiology

Many leaders and theologians living in contexts of persecution have developed a sound biblical and theological evaluation of suffering and its consequences for believers, churches and the world at large. It is time that theologians internationally, and especially Western theologians, start taking this contribution seriously as a major part of a contemporary approach to our world and of systematic and historical theology.

The persecution suffered by Christians under the Roman Empire prior to 311 AD has had a lasting influence on the theology of the church. Although the total number of victims was rather low throughout the first three centuries, the experience of persecution has had a formative influence on the theology of the emerging church. The church had from New Testament times developed its theology under the pressure of persecution and oppression. In the current contexts of varying degrees of pressure on Christians, it is worthwhile to restudy the literary heritage of the persecuted church. There is an abundant literature on martyrdom and its connection to theology proper, to christology and soteriology. Ethelbert Stauffer has noted that Eusebius' *History of the Church*, the first church history at all, was written from the perspective of martyrology.

We can observe this church developing its theology under persecution. It did not regard a theology of suffering as a threat to theology, but as central to its theology. It was such a church that reached the Roman Empire for Christ. What a pity that this fruitful dynamic fell victim to the triumphalism of the European church in the Middle Ages and was forgotten by a large portion of mission in the colonial age.

We hope that the contributions to the Bad Urach Consultation and its broad theological declaration, the *Bad Urach Statement*, help to let the whole church once again share in the theological strength of the church under persecution. We hope that it will contribute to taking down the walls between theology, theological education, missiology, and those working directly with the persecuted church, as well as the walls between theologians from the West and the Global South.

The fact that the Bad Urach Consultation has been co-sponsored by the Theological Commission, the Missions Commissions, the Religious Liberty Commission (all of the World Evangelical Alliance) in cooperation with the Theology Working Group of the Lausanne Movement is of high symbolic value!

We are more than thrilled that Bad Urach gave great theologians from countries where the church is persecuted the opportunity to inspire evangelical theology and missiology at large. Their thinking ought to be studied and discussed by theologians of all confessions across the world and wherever theology is taught.

Prof. Dr. theol. Dr. phil. Thomas Schirrmacher

Chair, Theological Commission, World Evangelical Alliance

Director, International Institute for Religious Freedom
(Bonn, Cape Town, Colombo)

Speaker for Human Rights of the World Evangelical Alliance

Rev. Godfrey Yogarajah

Executive Director, Religious Liberty Commission,
World Evangelical Alliance

Introduction

Christof Sauer and Richard Howell*

There is an urgent need for a deeper evangelical understanding of the theology of the cross with regard to suffering, persecution and martyrdom for Christ and its relevance for the global church in mission. The prevalence of certain theologies in parts of the evangelical and pentecostal movements tends to ill equip the church for the suffering that comes with its mission in the world. The danger for the church is to be like a building whose foundations have eroded and one day the whole building will suddenly collapse when persecution comes. The decade old call by evangelical Christians, particularly in the Global South, for a “theology of the pathway of the cross”, needs to be heeded on a global level. Such a theology has the potential to counterbalance an evangelical tendency towards triumphalism and to complement the views of other theological traditions.

There are different types of such theologies in liberationist, Roman Catholic, Orthodox and other streams of Christianity that have varying degrees of influence on the evangelical movement. Much can be learned from their insights and concerns. Simultaneously evangelicals need to clarify where at times they hold different paradigms and positions on particular issues in order to be better conversation partners.

Therefore 24 participants from 18 different countries of origin and residence met from 16 to 18 September 2009 in Bad Urach, Germany, for a consultation on “Developing an evangelical theology of suffering, persecution and martyrdom for the global church in mission”. More people participated in an electronic discussion forum. This was organized by the International Institute for Religious Freedom, sponsored by the World Evangelical Alliance Religious Liberty Commission, together with the Theological Commission and Mission Commission, and the Lausanne Theological Working Group in preparation towards the Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization, Cape Town 2010.

* Dr. Richard Howell and Dr. Christof Sauer were the convenors of the consultation. See their articles for more information on them.

As an outcome of their consultation the participants sent a message to the whole body of Christ and to their fellow evangelicals in particular, the *Bad Urach Statement*, which is included in this conference compendium. It comes from some of those evangelicals from different parts of the globe and various contexts who have possibly most advanced in formulating an evangelical theology of suffering, persecution and martyrdom. It is not addressed from “the West” to “the rest”, or “from traditional sending countries” to “mission fields”, nor from the “non-persecuted” to the “persecuted”. It has rather been designed by evangelicals from contexts with various levels of persecution reading the Bible together, sharing their own contextually relevant theologies, and considering some of Christian theology and tradition together.

We are writing with a global focus, particularly addressing theologians, missiologists, and Christian leaders. We are deliberately addressing “the global church in mission”, as the worldwide body of Christ fulfilling together in joint obedience the mission to which God has called us. The term “in mission” was purposefully added, because we believe there is a close relationship between the suffering of the church and its mission. Our topic can be best understood when considered within the context of God’s mission in which he involves his church.

On this basis we have conducted a global conversation of evangelical Christians from the context of various degrees of religious freedom or persecution in a spirit of learning from each other. We have particularly attempted to gather and create consensus among those evangelicals who have written books and academic works on the topic.

There were more papers circulated before or presented and discussed at the consultation than could be reproduced in this volume. The paper of Young Kee Lee, who was unable to attend, was added in order to give a further example of a non-western voice.

This compendium is structured to proceed from more general to more specific issues. It begins with suffering and the issue of theodicy, next it deals with persecution and appropriate reactions to it, then addresses martyrdom in relation to mission, and finally covers a number of specific issues, such as eschatology, advocacy, ethical questions, forgiveness and reconciliation.

Isaiah Majok Dau from Sudan addresses how to face human suffering from a biblical and theological perspective. He starts with the question of theodicy and comes to the conclusion that there is no solution to the problem of suffering. Suffering appears in many more facets than is explained by most of the various views. In his opinion, the answer to suffering and evil lies in the incarnation and the cross of Christ. In an exemplary study, he examines the response of the Bor-Dinka people in Sudan to suffering. He points out the importance of community in bearing suffering, the character forming effect of suffering and the interrelation of hope and suffering.

Rolf Hille from Germany contributes a biblical-theological response to the problem of theodicy in the context of modern criticism of religion. He deals extensively with the approaches of western philosophy and literature. In his opinion the problem is deeper than it appears at first sight. In a survey of scripture Hille emphasizes that God does not exclude himself from suffering.

Charles L. Tieszen from the United States attempts a comprehensive definition of persecution from a theological perspective which is communicable with a sociological perspective. He reevaluates the ways in which religious persecution is presently understood. After briefly demonstrating various shortcomings apparent in many considerations of the event, he sets out a comprehensive definition of the religious persecution of Christians in an effort to overcome the misunderstandings that hamper theological reflection.

Margaretha N. Adiwardana from Brazil, a Chinese-Indonesian who left her country of birth due to harassment, examines the biblical teaching on perseverance. From an eschatological perspective, suffering leads to blessing for those who endure it. Paul portrays how suffering strengthens the communion with Christ. Peter emphasizes that suffering is part of Christian life. In the book of Revelation suffering and perseverance are seen as part of God's plan for salvation. The proclamation of the Kingdom of God is done in a context of suffering. Finally this essay looks at the early church in Acts and its way of perseverance in persecution.

Josef Ton from Romania, retired in the United States, describes suffering and martyrdom as a defining and essential Christian characteristic. He maintains that the basic worldview which Jesus gave us is that we are involved in a cosmic war with a cruel and crafty

enemy and the victory is won with the price of suffering, sacrifice and death. The kind of character one develops in this life goes with him/her in the hereafter and determines his/her position in that life. A comparison of the Christian view of martyrdom with that of Islam shows how important the worldview of Jesus is for us today and how important our view of what kind of life we shall have in eternity is.

Young Kee Lee, a South Korean now living in the United States tries to trace God's mission in suffering and martyrdom. He postulates that there is a kind of suffering that is instrumental in advancing God's kingdom. He maintains this with regard to the cross of Christ and to Paul's suffering for the preaching of the gospel. According to his historical observation instrumental suffering can be discovered as a mode of witness in the Early Church and as a possible cause of the rapid growth of the church in Korean history. Therefore Lee calls for a rethinking of today's mission practice that takes seriously the principles of incarnation, the cross, and of weakness in mission.

Thomas J Wespel, a theological lecturer in Ukraine, from the United States deals with how God's plan is furthered through the martyrdom event and attempts to highlight the value of dying for the Christian faith. He examines the significance of martyrdom for all participants and observers (or later learners) of the event – namely, for the martyr himself or herself, for the persecutor, for God, for Satan, and for both believing and unbelieving observers. He demonstrates that in every case martyrdom advances God's plan by either bringing him glory, or by enhancing people's relationship with him.

Christof Sauer, a German living in South Africa, analyzes the work of the influential German mission leader Karl Hartenstein (1894-1952) who has developed a theology of mission under the cross, which has gone largely unnoticed internationally. He maintains that suffering and martyrdom characterize the mission of the church which takes place in the interim between Christ's ascension and second coming. The cross is the sign of the hidden reign of Christ during that period of hostile onslaught between the times. The church is embattled and tempted to fall away, but has the promise of triumph if it remains faithful to Christ. Scripture, the sacraments and prayer are significant means to make the church persevere as a faithful witness to the end.

Thomas Schirmacher from Germany is adding 22 theses on the theology of martyrdom which attempt to complement the other contributions. He addresses a variety of theological and ethical issues.

One outstanding contribution is his emphasis on the sustaining role of the Holy Spirit in suffering and martyrdom.

Peter Beyerhaus, also from Germany, was given the task to focus on an eschatological perspective, concerning the church of Christ in the shadow of the approaching Antichrist. The church has been facing antagonism from the very beginning through all times. This stems from the fight between Christ and the Antichrist. Therefore various aspects of the nature and appearance of the Antichrist according to the biblical texts are pointed out. Present day persecution can be regarded as a foreshadowing of the apocalyptic escalation of persecution.

Reg Reimer from Canada and with lifelong experience in advocacy in South-East Asia, shares his insights on persecution, advocacy and mission at the beginning of the 21st century. He gives a broad overview of the phenomenon of historical and current persecution of Christians to inform mission practitioners. His contribution covers the inevitability, the effects, the anatomy, the growth, and the sources or causes of persecution. It summarizes biblical and historical responses to persecution and discusses the tension between advocacy for the persecuted and biblically required readiness to suffer. Finally, Reimer suggests appropriate missiological responses to all of this.

Richard Howell from India, dealing with the recent killings of Christians in Orissa, maintains that forgiveness and reconciliation are proper Christian responses to suffering and martyrdom. The Early Church lived this by God's superhuman power and was marked by holiness. Unfortunately, from the time of the medieval church a merger between violence and holiness has led to crusades, post-Reformation religious wars, the Conquista in Latin America, and the shedding of blood of Christians by Christians elsewhere. However, there were Christians strongly objecting to this. A brief survey of other religions also shows a merger between violence and holiness. Christians must not let evil succeed by responding with violence and retribution, but must try to overcome evil with good by letting the cross of Christ shape their relationships with others. Howell asks: How should the Church remember and respond to the suffering experienced? He maintains: The memories must be interpreted within the Christian worldview, the wrongdoing must be publicly and truthfully remembered, condemned and forgiven. In the battle against

evil, even against evil in one's own culture, the Church needs inter-church community.

We are grateful to these authors for their contributions and commend their essays for scrutiny¹. We do this in acknowledging the fine work of others who were unable to participate in this consultation² or to contribute to this volume, such as Tokunboh Adeyemo, Ronald Boyd-MacMillan, Scott Cunningham, Ajith Fernando, Michael P Jensen, Peter Kuzmic, Antonia Leonora van der Meer, Edward B Muhima, Glenn M Penner, Bong Rin Ro, Vernon Jay Sterk, Paul Cheuk-Ching Szeto, Godfrey Yogarajah and others whose publications are referred to in the Bad Urach Statement. May they all equip the global church in mission to appropriately face suffering, persecution and martyrdom for Christ until he comes.

¹ The respective author's choices of English or American spelling and of reference style have been maintained.

² We invite interested readers to apply for joining a dedicated email discussion forum by sending an email to editor@iirf.eu.

Information on potential follow-up consultations will be available there and on www.iirf.eu.

Word of Greetings

Dr. Christel Hausding

Chair of Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Württemberg

A cordial welcome to all of you here at the retreat centre of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Württemberg. I also convey warm greetings from Bishop Dr. Frank July.

For many years I have been closely connected with the Evangelical Alliance and the Lausanne Movement. In 1989 I was able to participate in the Second International Congress on World Evangelization in Manila. Meeting Christians from all over the world was a formative experience for me and has greatly widened my horizon. It also gave me the opportunity to enter into conversations with Christians from the German Democratic Republic, which was particularly moving for me. One cannot imagine today how special that was for me. As my husband is a soldier, a visit to the GDR was out of bounds for us, and so the other half of Germany was further away for us than Australia. At the congress we noticed that a number of delegates from communist countries was missing, because they did not get permission to leave.

Our Synod has always kept in touch with our partner church in Thüringen in the German Democratic Republic. During our mutual visits we learned about the repressions Christians had to suffer under socialism.

While the primary responsibility of our Synod is the managing of the internal affairs of the church, we traditionally have a broad web of contacts to churches and Christians worldwide through the ministry of missionaries and we maintain an ongoing interest in their situation.

Thus in our Synod we regularly schedule reports concerning the situation of Christians who are hampered in the exercise of their faith or whose civil rights have been restricted or who are actually suffering persecution. During the last few years, the emphasis has been on countries dominated by Islam: Iraq, the Middle East, Sudan, Yemen, and Indonesia. The sessions in which these reports are presented are open to the public and media representatives are present.

Let me mention some of our further activities in order to support oppressed fellow Christians: Personal contacts and visits supply us with authentic information. In March, the Archbishop of Tur-Abin in the South-Eastern parts of Turkey and Prior of the Mar-Gabriel monastery, Saliba Oezmen, was a guest at the Synod.

In some particular cases we have asked our Bishop to lobby with the German Federal Government on behalf of a certain group or to present a special request for intervention.

This concern, to not forget oppressed Christians and to remember to pray for them, is something we are also trying to endear to our congregations. In 2007 the Synod has introduced an annual day of prayer for the persecuted church. It recommends the 26th of December, which is the day commemorating Stephen as the first Christian martyr. For this purpose the congregations are supplied with the latest information on oppression and with suggestions for an order of service.

Until recently, those of us who grew up in West Germany could have never imagined that Christians could be publicly defamed in our country. This is an entirely new experience. Some media actually engage in hate speech against committed Christians. Labelling Christians as fundamentalists, they are placing them in the same category with violent Islamists.

In his annual report before the Synod Bishop July has recently very clearly spoken out against the twisting of facts, saying: “After the regrettable killings of our Christian sisters in Yemen the right thing to do is intercessory prayer and emphasizing the right to freedom of speech and of religion and not turning victims into culprits.” (p.12)

I was very pleased to hear that the new Secretary General of the World Council of Churches, Olav Fykse Tveit from Norway, in his first interview after his election emphasized the need to strengthen our solidarity with Christians who are suffering from violence and poverty. He plans to pay special attention to the Christians in Islamic countries.

Thus, we are trying, each in his or her own place and according to our possibilities, to take a stand for our brothers and sisters who suffer oppression. I wish to thank you very much for engaging in the important theological ground-work needed for this purpose. May God bless you and your ministry and your efforts at this consultation.

The Bad Urach Call

Toward understanding suffering, persecution, and martyrdom for the global church in mission*

I. Preamble

By any definition of persecution, the worldwide Body of Christ can count many millions of Christians experiencing persecution today. Their sufferings range from violent death and martyrdom, to physical or psychological torture, to invasive rules confining their worship activities to church buildings, to lower- level forms of discrimination in countless other countries, including many with strong rules protecting religious freedom. Due to the massive rise in population and the explosion in the numbers of Christians, never in the history of the Church have so many of Christ's followers experienced persecution as today, though the number of those who die as martyrs for the faith is not often so large. This situation gives three tasks to the Body of Christ:

- 1. Remembrance:** The persecuted are not remembered, prayed for, and assisted by the general Body of Christ as well as they should be.
- 2. Understanding:** There is a complex blend of ancient cosmic antagonisms and contemporary factors that drive persecution. These are not well enough understood, which results in ineffective intervention. While the persecution of Christians is ultimately due to the enmity between Christ and the fallen spiritual realm joined with

* This is a short popularized summary of some of the points of the extensive *Bad Urach Statement* by evangelical leaders from many lands who gathered on September 16-18, 2009, in Bad Urach, Germany, on the invitation of the Religious Liberty Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance and other bodies, organized by the International Institute for Religious Freedom. The summary was edited by Pastor Dr. Thomas K. Johnson, Prague.

human rebellion, four secondary forces deliver persecution to the church: religious extremism, totalitarian insecurity, religious nationalism, and secular intolerance. Thoughtless public statements or symbolic actions by Christians in contexts with substantial freedom of speech can unleash violent reactions against Christians in other contexts.

3. Transformation: Persecuted Christians have learned truths about God that Christians under less pressure need to hear in order to experience the fullness of God. The spiritual insights of the persecuted are vital to the transformation of the lives of the rest of the Body of Christ. One of these essential insights is that we will all be – if witnessing for Christ – in some sense persecuted. There is a grander, greater narrative of God’s action underneath the stories of individual pain, suffering, deliverance, and endurance.

Our call to the Church of Jesus Christ: We must willingly, actively, and corporately take up the cross of Christ in our time.

II. Explanation

1. We need to respond to suffering appropriately.

We should distinguish between general human suffering, in which Christians partake, and the suffering of Christians for the sake of Christ. We recognize that much suffering has nothing to do with persecution, but obedience to God and allegiance to Christ lead to additional suffering. We must always respond to suffering with compassion, but suffering for Jesus requires additional responses.

The mature Christian knows that all suffering can become meaningful. No one wishes to suffer, but many Christians who have suffered do not regret it. God also suffers because the people he created suffer, and he suffers for their redemption. He suffers because he loves us. The suffering of God in Christ can shape our thinking on the suffering of the Church. Christians should suffer in sympathy with others who suffer. Because Jesus commands us to love, we should voluntarily suffer to help others who are suffering, to reduce their suffering. We suffer as part of the general human condition and also because we must take up the cross as disciples of Jesus Christ. If we participate in the sufferings of Jesus, we will also share in his glory. Some of us must choose to make sacrifices and to suffer on behalf of fellow Christians who are being persecuted.

2. We need to properly understand religious persecution of Christians.

Religious persecution is an unjust action against a believer or group of believers of a certain religion or worldview. This may be by systematic oppression, genocide, discrimination, annoyance, or other means. Persecution may not prevent victims from practising their beliefs. Religious persecution has religion (not ethnicity, gender, political persuasion, etc.) as its primary motivation, though other factors can be involved. Persecution of Christians is a form of religious persecution in which victims are targeted primarily because they are Christians. Victims may be of varying levels of commitment to Christianity and be subject to varying levels of animosity and harm.

3. We need to understand our place in history.

The persecution of Christians is rooted in our place in salvation history. A new age has been inaugurated by Christ, overcoming the age of sin and death which began with the fall. The second coming of Christ will visibly usher in God's rule and victory, making all things new. Until then the old age is still present, waging its war against the new age; the life of the Christian is marked by this tension. In this sense, suffering is a mark of the Church. This suffering of the Church was prefigured by the suffering of God's people in the Old Testament, from Abel through the prophets, leading to Herod's pursuit of Jesus, reaching its high point in the murder of Jesus on the cross. Jesus' death on the cross was as a substitute for our sins, making full payment; by his death Jesus was also our representative, calling us to follow him to suffer in order to fight against sin and the devil.

4. We need to react properly to the conflict.

The nature of the conflict in which we are involved is characterized by the nature and methods of the two leaders in the conflict. Jesus reveals the character of Satan as evil, which brings forth the weapons of hate, lies, deception, falsehood, violence, and murder to bring destruction and death. Jesus confronted Satan's lies with the truth of God, Satan's evil with the goodness of God, Satan's hatred with the love of God, and Satan's violence and murder with God's self-sacrifice, out of which arise new creativity, healing, and restoration. This is the way in which Jesus fought and defeated evil, and this is the kind of war into which he sends his disciples. They must love their enemies, do good to those who hate them, and, like their heavenly Father, show goodness, mercy, and forgiveness to those who are evil and ungrateful.

They must stop the chain of poisoning God's creation with Satan's deadly products by absorbing it in union with Christ, responding in love and goodness, thereby demonstrating God's character in the world. Jesus was sent as the Lamb of God to defeat the great dragon and to destroy his works. In the same way, he sends us as lambs to defeat wolves by transforming them into children of God. Christ's ultimate weapon is self-sacrifice, and our ultimate weapon must be the same, to draw people to Jesus.

5. We must remain faithful to Christ.

Jesus points out the seriousness of remaining faithful to him and confessing him in moments of trial. He warns his disciples that he would reciprocate their public acknowledgement or denial of him on this earth before his Father in heaven. While the love of many will grow cold, those who endure to the end and remain victorious will be saved. In order that his disciples do not fall away from him when persecution arises, Jesus has given advance warning and prays that God will keep them safe from the evil one.

6. We need to embrace suffering as part of our mission.

Jesus described suffering as a normal part of discipleship. Not all suffer equally; not all are persecuted equally, and only a relatively small proportion of Christians suffer martyrdom. In the mission that is the central purpose of the interim period in God's history of salvation, Christians must engage with their whole lives, including a readiness for suffering and martyrdom. Suffering is not just something that has to be endured passively, but it becomes a mode of mission, a mission that is done in weakness, focusing on service, and by its nature is accompanied with sorrow and affliction. The precious gospel treasure comes in perishable containers, in our weak bodies, so that everyone can see that the light that shines in us is not our own but God's. Martyrdom is the most radical form of discipleship and missionary witness. While Christians will not seek martyrdom, it is a risk of discipleship we must accept.

Witness to Christ can be a main cause of suffering, persecution, and martyrdom. The gospel certainly brings with it liberation from all kinds of slaveries and can lead to the improvement of the quality of living. This even may translate into material blessings. At the same time, it brings the hatred of the world, persecution, suffering, and martyrdom. We must keep these two aspects of the gospel in balance.

The mission of God needs to be accomplished in spite of and through suffering, persecution, and martyrdom.

7. We need to stand up for religious freedom and human rights.

As a part of our proclamation of Christ we should always mention two truths about people, that people are both sinners in need of the gospel and also created in the image of God, carrying a God-given dignity. This dignity requires that we call on governments and all in positions of public authority to protect religious freedom and all fundamental human rights. When there is severe religious persecution, there is often a government that is failing to protect justice. Like the apostle Paul, Christians should appeal to legal rights to protect themselves and their fellow Christians.

We therefore call on the Body of Christ to take up the cross of Jesus actively, willingly, and corporately, in order to implement the mission of Jesus. This will include remembrance of those persecuted (with prayer and assistance), understanding (joined with informed efforts to reduce persecution), and transformation (so that the entire Body of Christ is renewed through the insights of those who are persecuted and martyred). May the grace of the Lord Jesus be with you all!

The biblical and theological foundations, along with practical implementations, are developed in great detail in the extensive *Bad Urach Statement*, which can be found at www.iirf.eu and which is published as part of the compendium on the Bad Urach Consultation: *Suffering, persecution and martyrdom – Theological reflections*, edited by Christof Sauer and Richard Howell, (Religious Freedom Series, vol. 2), Kempton Park: AcadSA Publishing / Bonn: VKW 2010, 360 pp.

International Institute for Religious Freedom, www.iirf.eu
Religious Liberty Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance,
www.worldevangelicals.org

Bad Urach Statement

Towards an evangelical theology of suffering, persecution and martyrdom for the global church in mission

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1. Introduction

The introduction serves to ground the statement in contemporary challenges faced, explain about the conference, our hermeneutical basis and our approach, the delimitation of the topic and how we define the key terms used.

1.1 Suffering for Christ, persecution and martyrdom as a contemporary challenge

By any definition of persecution available, the worldwide body of Christ can count literally tens of millions of Christians experiencing persecution today. Their sufferings range from violent death and martyrdom, to excruciating physical and psychological torture, to invasive rules confining their worship activities to church buildings, to lower level but still traumatic forms of discrimination in countless other countries, including many with strong rules protecting religious freedom. Due to the massive rise in population and the explosion in the numbers of Christians, never before in the history of the church have so many of Christ's followers experienced persecution as they do in today's contemporary world! Even within contexts of severe persecution, the vast majority of Christians are not martyrs and never will be. The actual number of martyrs is comparatively small.¹

The plight of the world's harassed and persecuted Christians forces the body of Christ to deal with three contemporary challenges, namely those of remembrance, understanding and transformation.

The challenge of remembrance emerges from the fact that the persecuted are not remembered, prayed for, and assisted by the general body of Christ as well as they should be.

The challenge of understanding arises from the complex blend of ancient cosmic antagonisms and contemporary factors that drive the persecution of Christians today. These are not well enough understood which can result in ineffective intervention. While the persecution of Christians is ultimately due to the enmity between Christ and the fallen spiritual realm and the rebellion of human nature, nevertheless four major tangible forces are bringing persecution in all its myriad forms to the church. (1) Religious extremism makes religious

¹ For the most comprehensive descriptions of persecution of Christians see Boyd-MacMillan 2006 and for restrictions of religious freedom see Marshall 2008 and Pew 2009 and Johnson & Ross 2009 (Atlas of Global Christianity).

hardliners see Christians as an enemy and an affront to their religion which has to be attacked with lethal power in order to spread their own belief system globally. The radical nature of persecution of Christians by militants is a modern day phenomenon. (2) Totalitarian insecurity arises in states that are threatened by the existence of Christians who owe their primary allegiance to God and not to them. (3) Religious nationalism thrives where the extremists in other religions claim a territory is sacred to their religion and insist on the departure of minority religions. (4) Secular intolerance raises its head where an atheistic elite seeks to push all expressions of religion into the private sphere.

The challenge of transformation is due to deficits in the body of Christ. Persecuted Christians have learned truths about God that Christians under less pressure need to hear in order to experience the fullness of God. The spiritual insights of the persecuted are vital to the transformation of the lives of the rest of the body of Christ. One of these essential insights is that we will all be – if witnessing for Christ – in some sense persecuted. There is a grander, greater narrative of God’s action underneath the stories of individual pain, suffering, deliverance, and endurance.

1.2 The consultation, its participants and the statement

There is an urgent need for a deeper evangelical understanding of the theology of the cross with regard to suffering, persecution and martyrdom for Christ and its relevance for the global church in mission. The prevalence of certain theologies in parts of the evangelical and pentecostal movements tends to ill equip the church for the suffering that comes with its mission in the world. The danger for the church is to be like a building whose foundations have eroded and one day the whole building will suddenly collapse when persecution comes. The decade old call by evangelical Christians, particularly in the Global South, for a ‘theology of the pathway of the cross’, needs to be heeded on a global level. Such a theology has the potential to counterbalance an evangelical tendency towards triumphalism and to complement the views of other theological traditions.

There are different types of such theologies in liberationist, Roman-Catholic, Orthodox and other streams of Christianity that have

varying degrees of influence on the evangelical movement. Much can be learned from their insights and concerns. Simultaneously evangelicals need to clarify where at times they hold different paradigms and positions on particular issues in order to be better conversation partners.

Therefore 24 participants from at least 18 different countries of origin and residence met from 16-18 September 2009 in Bad Urach, Germany, for a consultation on 'Developing an evangelical theology of suffering, persecution and martyrdom for the global church in mission'. More people participated in an electronic discussion forum. This was organized by the International Institute for Religious Freedom, sponsored by the World Evangelical Alliance Religious Liberty Commission, together with the Theological Commission and Mission Commission, and the Lausanne Theological Working Group in preparation towards the Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization, Cape Town 2010.

As an outcome of their consultation the participants want to send a message to the whole body of Christ and to their fellow evangelicals in particular. It comes from some of those evangelicals from different parts of the globe and various contexts who have possibly most advanced in formulating an evangelical theology of suffering, persecution and martyrdom. It is not addressed from 'the West' to 'the rest', or 'from traditional sending countries' to 'mission fields', nor from the 'non-persecuted' to the 'persecuted'. It has rather been designed by evangelicals from contexts with various levels of persecution reading the Bible together, sharing their own contextually relevant theologies, and considering some of Christian theology and tradition together.

We are writing with a global focus, particularly addressing theologians, missiologists, and Christian leaders. We are deliberately addressing 'the global church in mission', as the worldwide body of Christ fulfilling together in joint obedience the mission to which God has called us. The term 'in mission' was purposefully added, because we believe there is a close relationship between the suffering of the church and its mission. Our topic can be best understood when considered within the context of God's mission in which he involves his church.

Consequently our statement is of a theological and systematic nature, striving for a high level of reflection without being technical.

We are trying to provide a synthesis of evangelical thinking, describing both agreement and disagreement. We hope that this statement will become a benchmark and stepping stone for future reflection on the topic. Obviously there are limitations to formulating a globally valid theology, and it has been suggested that all theology can be contextual only. If that is so, the least that might be taken from our statement are theological foundations which we consider as normative and relevant to the interpretation of our joint experiences. Theological reflection is needed in order to develop a theology to guide Christians in their response to persecution.

1.3 Our foundations and approach

We consider the Bible as our normative guideline. Our approach must be based on the whole Bible, not exclusively on the New Testament but also the Old Testament. Large parts of the Bible have been written by persecuted believers for persecuted believers. We must therefore not lose sight of the original intent of biblical text.² Ignoring this context might lead to profound deficiencies in the teaching and practice of the church.

We respect those who have followed Christ before us. We have therefore taken note of church history and Christian tradition. Some of us believe that most, if not all, lessons to be learned about following Christ in persecution and martyrdom have already been learned in the first four centuries of the Christian era and during the time of the Reformation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Some have examined this in more detail in their own works.³

We have also gathered, studied and evaluated as many contemporary evangelical statements relevant to our topic as we could find. We integrate their insights as much as possible into this statement, at times even including verbatim quotes of whole passages. These predecessor statements⁴ are, in chronological order, the *Lausanne Covenant*, agreed upon in 1974 by the International Congress for World Evangelisation, and the interpretation and expansion of its concerns in the *Manila Manifesto*, issued at the second such congress in 1989, *A letter to the churches in Asia* by the Evangelical Fellowship in Asia sent from their consultation on

² See Penner 2004 and Schirmmacher 2001 for details.

³ For example see Ton 1997 and Wespetal 2005.

⁴ The bibliography at the end gives the references for these statements.

Christian suffering in Asia in 1988, the *Statement on prosperity theology and theology of suffering* by the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) in 1994, the Lausanne Occasional Paper on *The persecuted church* drafted by an issue group at the Forum 2004 of the Lausanne Movement and WEA, a pastoral directive from the Second Ecumenical Congress of the International Christian Network in 2006 on *Readiness to Suffer for Christ*, and the *Resolution on Religious Freedom and Solidarity with the Persecuted Church* by the 12th General Assembly of the World Evangelical Alliance in 2008.

On this basis we have conducted a global conversation of evangelical Christians from contexts of various degrees of religious freedom or persecution in a spirit of learning from each other. We have particularly attempted to gather and create consensus among those evangelicals who have written books and academic works on the topic.

As some related topics were too broad to be fully covered, we explicitly state that our statement does not concentrate on the following: We are not primarily focusing on a theological interpretation of human suffering in general, nor the question how a good God can allow suffering, nor on various kinds of suffering of Christians besides suffering for Christ. We are not focusing on a theological interpretation of human rights in general nor of religious freedom in particular. But we acknowledge the importance of these issues and their interrelatedness with our topic. We therefore briefly cover them in the next paragraphs in order to put our statement in context and only refer to these issues when our theological interpretation of suffering, persecution and martyrdom for Christ calls for it.

1.4 Theologically interpreting human suffering⁵

We need to distinguish in our theological interpretation between human suffering in general, in which Christians partake, and the suffering of Christians for the sake of Christ. Of course they are related, at times intertwined, and they cannot always be neatly separated in reality or in scripture. Both are coming from the same root, but they have two faces. But it is undeniable that obedience to

⁵ For more details see the Statement on Prosperity Theology and Theology of Suffering 1994, from which much of this is taken.

God or allegiance to Christ leads to additional kinds suffering, which are often specifically addressed in scripture. We recognize that much of suffering has nothing to do with persecution and that corruption and sin have a large part in it. While this statement focuses on suffering for Christ, in order not to lose sight of the broader reality, we briefly cover human suffering in general here.

Suffering is contrary to the original will of God. Suffering is a human experience which a person usually undergoes against his or her wish, an experience which causes pain, discomfort, disharmony, sorrow, despair, anxiety etc. in material, physical, psychological, spiritual, and social dimensions of life.

1.4.1 Causes of human and divine suffering

In general, suffering is the result of the sin of Adam, and characteristic of the period of human history until the return of Jesus Christ. But this is not to say that all who are suffering are suffering as a result of their personal sins. Some suffer because of natural disasters, some because of sickness, physical deformities and limitations, some because of self inflicted pain, some because of the social sins of mankind. Also God puts his disciplinary hand upon his sinning people. On other occasions Christians suffer as a result of their foolish acceptance of Satan's temptation to turn away from the Lord's path. On the other hand Christians frequently suffer because of their resistance to Satan's temptation and their steadfast discipleship in the world. Christians suffer also when they have done nothing wrong but simply because of their faithful obedience to Jesus Christ in this sinful world. Often suffering is a mystery. The question asked through the ages "How can a good and just God allow suffering in the world?" can only be validly answered by who God in Christ is for us and what he does for us. God himself is suffering because he loves and his love is rejected. He suffers because of the earthly suffering of the people he created, for their redemption, and because of the suffering of the people he has redeemed. His suffering is the result of his love. The suffering of God in Christ is the key to all suffering. We should evaluate all suffering in the light of the suffering of God. The perception of the suffering of God will have encompassing influence on our thinking on the suffering of the church of Christ.

1.4.2 Significance of suffering

The mature Christian knows that there is no meaningless suffering; all suffering can become meaningful. No one wishes to suffer, but many

Christians who have gone through suffering do not regret this. Christian suffering is instructive and has retrospective, present and prospective purposes: it teaches us lessons from our past experience; it is a sign that we are God's faithful children (Heb 12:5-6); and it purifies us in holiness for our future life of service. Christians suffer in sympathy with others who suffer and in the cause of attempting to remove causes of suffering in response to the love command of the Lord Jesus Christ. We suffer also because of our identity as disciples of Jesus Christ. If we participate in the sufferings of Jesus Christ, we will share in his glory in the future. Thus suffering is not always detrimental but may be beneficial – to oneself, to one's neighbor, and to the cause of the kingdom of God.

1.4.3 Christian response to human suffering

We rejoice in the privilege we have in our suffering because it prepares us for the glory that is to follow (Hebr 12:2). The church is expected to complete her diaconal work with the same perspective as her Lord, who, having loved his own loved them to the full extent of giving his life for them (John 13:1-3). The reality of suffering in the world calls every Christian to the task of seeking to alleviate suffering and to remove the causes of suffering, both individually and socially. If our personal suffering is because of something that we have or have not done, or it is self-inflicted, we have to repent. If our societal suffering is a result of our negative action or neglect of God's principles of stewardship and justice, we must repent. As Christians we are called to work for justice, both individual and societal, for the preservation of the planet ecologically, for a better life for all of God's creatures – in short, for kingdom values (Heb 13:16). We need to harness all available resources in the fight against suffering until God himself removes all suffering. The church will be able to serve faithfully unto death only if she knows she is going to pass from this world to the Father and that her 'present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed ...' (Rom 8:18).

1.5 A theological understanding of religious freedom and human rights

Upholding human rights and standing up for religious freedom in our eyes is not an alternative to following the way of the cross and trusting in the power of prayer.

We are affirming and seek to develop further key statements of the Lausanne Covenant and the Manila Manifesto:

It is the God-appointed duty of every government to secure conditions of peace, justice and liberty in which the church may obey God, serve the Lord Jesus Christ, and preach the gospel without interference. We therefore pray for the leaders of nations and call upon them to guarantee freedom of thought and conscience, and freedom to practise and propagate religion in accordance with the will of God and as set forth in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We also express our deep concern for all who have been unjustly imprisoned, and especially for those who are suffering for their testimony to the Lord Jesus. We promise to pray and work for their freedom. At the same time we refuse to be intimidated by their fate. God helping us, we too will seek to stand against injustice and to remain faithful to the gospel, whatever the cost. We do not forget the warnings of Jesus that persecution is inevitable.

(Clause 13 of the Lausanne Covenant)

We affirm that the proclamation of God's kingdom of justice and peace demands the denunciation of all injustice and oppression, both personal and structural; we will not shrink from this prophetic witness.

(Affirmation 9, Manila Manifesto)

Christians earnestly desire freedom of religion for all people, not just freedom for Christianity. In predominantly Christian countries, Christians are at the forefront of those who demand freedom for religious minorities. In predominantly non-Christian countries, therefore, Christians are asking for themselves no more than they demand for others in similar circumstances. The freedom to 'profess, practise and propagate' religion, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, could and should surely be a reciprocally granted right.

(Section 12, Manila Manifesto)

1.5.1 Human rights⁶

The protection of human rights is an important part of our understanding of Christian ethics.

In the Christian tradition we have often called universal values or global standards of human behavior 'the natural moral law'. Christians have usually claimed that all sensible people know a significant amount about right and wrong, and that this knowledge is a gift of God to all people, regardless of their religion or philosophy of life. This moral knowledge is an important part of what makes a humane

⁶ For more details see Johnson 2008 and Taber 2002.

civilization possible and this moral knowledge coming from ‘the natural moral law’ should be central to public, political life together. As Christians, we think that our more distinctly religious morality which comes from the Bible is consistent with the more general moral values of the natural moral law, if they are both properly interpreted, but that the moral values and principles for public, political life are not narrowly religious. We Christians should assume that all normal people know a lot about basic moral values such as justice, fairness, and honesty (cf. Rom 13:1-7).

Human rights and the pursuit of religious freedom are founded on scripture which reveals that every human being is created in the image and likeness of God and therefore possesses an inalienable and innate dignity that no one can rightly take away on any pretext whatsoever (Gen 1:26-30; Psalms 8:4-8).

There is a biblical basis for almost all of the content of the UN Human Rights Declaration, though some sentences in this document need our qualification. While the first initiative focused on fundamental human rights, a second and a third generation of efforts seeks to elevate all sorts of wishful conditions to the status of rights influenced by secular ideologies.

Our understanding of human rights is based on the creation of humankind in the image of God. A responsible method of saying what rights people have, will correlate rights with our duties given by God to all people through creation. Jesus rejected all forms of discrimination and insisted that all human beings must be treated exactly in the same way. The church never actually practiced this teaching as radically as it might have.

A biblically informed doctrine of rights and justice will require very sensitive application in every context, with Christians thoughtfully considering how our teaching both correlates with God-given human desires and also leads to a prophetic critique of sinful practices and ideas, thereby contributing something genuinely new to public philosophy and policy.

The apostle Paul is a good example in these matters: he willingly risked his life and safety to bring the gospel to people, but he also called on the Roman government to practice justice by means of observing his rights as a Roman citizen. The problem with the Roman government was that it thought it was the source of rights and not God and therefore the Roman government could give rights to people they

liked, namely fellow Romans, not recognizing that God gives rights to all people (cf. Rom 13:1-7).

The only resources available to Christians to bring non-Christians to see human dignity as Jesus did is the intrinsic credibility and persuasiveness of the Gospel, since the truth of human dignity is a component of the Gospel and has no secure existence apart from the Gospel. The only means by which Christians can commend a truly godly vision of human rights is to incarnate them in their individual and collective lives, to announce God's actions and intentions that constitute the Gospel, and to act justly in the name of God.

A healthy society normally has at least three interdependent spheres: a political/legal sphere, a business/economic sphere, and a moral/cultural sphere. Religions should contribute to a society's thinking about government and business by means of contributing to the moral/cultural sphere of society, without preventing other religions from also contributing to public culture. This allows freedom of religion for all, with all religions contributing to public life, without the persecution of any religion.

Religious persecution, ever since Cain killed Abel, arises from a person's or a group's religious frustration; it is an attack on God that is misdirected toward the image of God. This same attack on the image of God lies behind most human rights abuses; therefore protecting freedom of religious rights leads to protecting all human rights because it protects people at the core of their being. Freedom of religion is properly called the first freedom and the mother of human rights.

1.5.2 Religious freedom

One of the fundamental aspects of the image of God in humans is the freedom to choose. God created humanity with freedom and ability to choose. Freedom of choice is essentially a natural right emanating from creation. God, who is free and acts and chooses freely is the ground for human freedom. He chooses freely without any coercion from any person. To be human is to have the freedom to choose. Freedom of choice is a fundamental right of all humanity, created in the image of God. Anybody who denies people the freedom to choose is violating the fundamental rights of people. It must be added that though humans have rights to choose, they are held accountable for their choices. All religious restrictions on any human beings are a

violation of their fundamental right to choose. We must resist such violations of religious freedom wherever they exist.

We therefore affirm religious freedom to exercise any or no religion as defined by the relevant declarations of the United Nations.

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

(United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), Article 18)

As Christians we are willing to work towards religious freedom for all people. We affirm advocacy for persecuted Christians and adherents of other faiths towards those in government. The right to religious freedom is indivisible and cannot be claimed for one particular group only to the exclusion of others. We aim to work collaboratively with all who share the goals of supporting religious freedom, be it political powers or representatives of other or no religions. We affirm the intention of Christians to live together peacefully with adherents of other or no religions and to work together for the common good and social reconciliation. We differentiate between advocating the rights of members of other or no religions and endorsing the truth of their beliefs. Advocating the freedom of others can be done without accepting the truth of what they believe.

Even if and where the right to religious freedom is denied, the Christian should seek by any means to keep his or her faith, to teach it to others, to pray in private and in fellowship with other Christians, to worship communally, and, when called, to preach the gospel openly.

1.6 Theological working definitions

There is a wide non-theological vocabulary used on the subject of suffering, persecution and martyrdom. It ranges from discrimination, hostility and oppression, to prisoner of conscience and underground church. We are here seeking to theologically define our use of the terms suffering for Christ, persecution and martyrdom. They are related to each other in multiple ways. Their relation could best be described as that of concentric circles. Suffering forms the widest circle, persecution a smaller one within it. Martyrdom forms the innermost circle. Alternatively, they could be viewed as a pyramid

with suffering as the base and martyrdom as the pinnacle. In terms of time, persecution can be represented as waves on a sea of suffering as the constant. Persecution always causes suffering and sometimes causes martyrdom.

1.6.1 Definition of suffering for Christ

When speaking about suffering, from now on we specifically mean suffering for the sake of Christ unless otherwise specified. That is suffering that a person would not encounter if he or she were not identified with Christ. In terms of the variety of reasons for which Christians may suffer in their relationship with the world, we mean suffering that Christians endure *because of* or *by* the world, or *for* the world, in fulfilling their service. We do not mean the broader suffering of Christians *in* the world in the same way as all other people when they encounter war, natural disasters, difficult political or economic circumstances, poverty or sickness. Nor do we here mean the suffering of Christians *with* the world, as they have compassion for the world as God does. Suffering for Christ's sake is a fundamental characteristic of the church that remains true to the faith (1 Thes 3:3; 2 Thes 3:12).

1.6.2 Definition of persecution⁷

A definition of persecution should not be limited to any specific period of time or restrict persecution to any particular geographical region. It should be comprehensive and universally valid, applicable both historically and presently, and unlimited in its geographical scope.

Generally speaking, *persecution* is any unjust hostile action which causes damage from the perspective of the victim(s). It manifests itself within a broad range with varying degrees of animosity and different levels of resulting harm. It also stems from multiple motivations. The relevant perspective is that of the victim since the perpetrator may feel quite justified in his or her actions. Of course claims of alleged persecution must be sustained by evidence according to above criteria. The persecution must be unjust. Evildoers are rightly prosecuted. If a Christian is prosecuted for doing evil this is no persecution.

Religious persecution is defined as an unjust action directed against a believer or group of believers of a certain religion or worldview. This may be done by means of systematic oppression,

⁷ This is based on the more extensive treatment of the issue by Tieszen 2008.

genocide, discrimination, annoyance or other means. This persecution may not necessarily prevent victims from practicing their beliefs. Religious persecution further distinguishes itself in that it has religion (not ethnicity, gender, political persuasion, etc.) as its primary motivation, though other factors can be involved.

Persecution of Christians is a form of religious persecution defined by the fact that its victims are targeted primarily because they are Christians. Victims may be of varying levels of commitment to Christianity and be subject to varying levels of animosity and harm, from mildly to intensely hostile. Persecution of Christians does not have to prevent or limit its victims from practicing or appropriately sharing their faith.

The advantage of this definition lies in that it is not limited by any epoch of church history or restricted to any one part of the world. Neither is it determined by the extent of violence, animosity, or damage that it causes. It does not limit the experience based on Christian commitment and it recognizes the multiple factors and motivations present in persecution, acknowledging that it often occurs in situations of great complexity.

Furthermore, this definition has important theological ramifications because it recognizes that the seriousness of following Christ is not determined by how violent a possible counter-reaction or consequence is, it may be limited to ridicule or discrimination just as it may be extended to systematic or intense violence. In short, then, persecution of Christians may be defined as:

Any unjust action of varying levels of hostility perpetrated primarily on the basis of religion and directed at Christians, resulting in varying levels of harm as it is considered from the victim's perspective.

1.6.3 Definition of martyrdom⁸

The term *martyr* is derived from the Greek word *martys* in the New Testament which means 'witness'. Correspondingly, *martyrdom* (Greek: *martyria*) means bearing witness to the Lord, which in later New Testament and Early Church use has seen a shift of emphasis to bearing witness even unto death. Jesus himself called his disciples to be his witnesses (Luke 24:48; Acts 1:8; see also John 15:27). Martyrs

⁸ See Wespetal 2005 and Schirmmacher 2001 (thesis 39) for an elaboration on the definition of martyrdom.

in the biblical sense are Christians who, with the Holy Spirit's help and aware of the dangers connected to it, give testimony in word and deed to their Lord and Redeemer Jesus Christ and to the truth of the Gospel proclaimed in his church in the face of the enemies of the faith and suffer death as a result. Equally included may be those Christians who have died in their willingness to fulfill God's will even under threat of death from their persecutors acting out of hatred toward God and toward the Christian church, either by being killed directly or from injuries sustained through persecution and mistreatment.

We respect that some Christians speak of martyrdom more broadly to also describe the ordeal of Christians suffering without losing their lives. However, for clarity's sake, we follow the majority usage that defines martyrdom more narrowly, making death a necessary criterion of martyrdom.

In modern times and popular usage the terms martyr and martyrdom have been secularized, broadened and disconnected from their Christian roots. Nowadays the term martyr is most commonly associated with suicide bombers who, in pursuit of their religious and political goals, seek to kill as many people as possible alongside themselves. We do not use the word in this sense, as the Christian concept of martyrdom is fundamentally opposite to such interpretations. The Christian martyr does not seek the death of others but suffers death by giving up his own life without becoming aggressively violent.

In short, our use of *martyr* and *martyrdom* are enshrined by the following two alternative definitions:

A Christian martyr is a Christian who voluntarily suffers death as the penalty for witnessing to and refusing to renounce his faith, or a tenet, principle or practice belonging to it.

Christian martyrdom is voluntarily, but not intentionally (through unnecessary provocation), losing one's life to those hostile to the faith in proclamation or defense of Christian belief, for abstaining from actions that would constitute a denial of the faith, or in execution of a special prophetic commission by God.

2. Theological consensus and disagreements

This section is the core of our statement. Here we state what we agree on, and differentiate the points on which we have different opinions.

Each subsection cuts across all three topics of suffering for Christ, persecution, and martyrdom from a different angle.

2.1 The drama of God's history with the world (epistemological aspects)

Only a comprehensive view of God's cosmic plans as far as they are revealed to us will help us to properly interpret suffering, persecution and martyrdom.

2.1.1 Understanding salvation history

A 'salvation-historical' approach to interpreting the Bible and to doing theology seems very helpful in that regard. Salvation history and world history need to be distinguished. Salvation history is what God does in world history to save the world. Not all of world history is salvation history. A prophetic view of all of world history from its end, from the perspective of God's final victory, helps to grasp the unity, the meaning and the objective of world history. The decisive turning point of history is the first coming of Christ. Salvation history can only be properly understood from this center. A new age has been inaugurated by Christ, overcoming the old age of sin and death, which began with the fall of humankind. The second focal point, which still lies in the future, is the second coming of Christ, which will visibly usher in God's rule and victory, the end of history and the making new of all things. Until then the old age is still present, waging its war against the new age, as the two are mutually exclusive. Therefore the life of the Christian is marked by this tension between the fact that the new age has already begun, but has not yet fully come to its visible consummation.

2.1.2 Understanding our place in God's history

We live in this interim between Christ's ascension and his second coming, in which the church is charged with its mission of proclaiming and living out the good news of the kingdom, as a faithful witness in life and in death. The suffering of the church for Christ is so much a part of her mission in this period that suffering has been declared a mark of the church by theologians. As the church father Augustine said: "From Abel until the end of time the pilgrimage of the church proceeds between the persecution of the world and the consolations of God."⁹

⁹ Augustine: City of God. 18.51

For our reading of the Bible in view of theologically understanding suffering, persecution and martyrdom it is essential that everything is put in perspective by the first and second coming of Christ, and that we properly assess our own place in history in between those two focal points of God's redemptive history.

2.2 Old Testament models of faithfulness (typological aspects)

Suffering, persecution and martyrdom have been the lot of God's people over and over again, all through Old Testament scriptures, beginning with the martyrdom of Abel.

2.2.1 Suffering for faithfulness and obedience to God

Frequently God's Old Testament people suffered as a result of their sin (Lev 26:14ff; Deut 28:15ff) and in punishment for their unfaithfulness to Yahweh (Isa 5; Jer 25:1-14). But there were other causes of suffering as well. The election of Israel as the people of God brought along with it suffering for its calling at the hands of the nations, beginning with her slavery in Egypt (Exod 1:13-14). Suffering developed spiritual maturity among those who were willing to be trained by it (Deut 8:2-5; Psa 94:12-14). Sometimes the reasons for suffering remained obscure, hidden in God alone. Job exemplifies the suffering of the righteous allowed by God, and serves as a typology of Christ.

Not infrequently, Old Testament saints suffered persecution for their faithfulness and obedience to Yahweh. Sometimes they suffered at the hands of Gentile rulers, like Joseph in Egypt, Daniel and his friends before Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 3 and 6), or Mordecai and the Jews before Haman (Esth 3). But they also suffered at the hands of their fellow countrymen, like David before Saul (1 Sam 20:33), or Elijah before Jezebel (1 Kgs 19:1ff).

2.2.2 Martyrdom of the prophets of God

Conflict, persecution, and martyrdom were characteristic for all true prophets. Sometimes persecution led to martyrdom. The Old Testament records two specific instances of martyrdom – Zechariah the priest is stoned by order of King Joash (2 Chr 24:19-25), and Uriah the prophet is slain by King Jehoiakim (Jer 26:20-23). Numerous others also met death in defense of their faith. We read, for example, how Jezebel killed the Lord's prophets (1 Kgs 18:4).

Nehemiah's prayer of confession acknowledges that Israel had killed God's prophets who had admonished the people (Neh 9:26). New Testament (Acts 7:51-52; Matt 23:37; Heb 11:37) as well as Rabbinic sources (Lives of the Prophets) confirm, that many prophets died in execution of their mission. Beyond the record of the canonical books the intertestamental literature testifies to the continuing suffering of God's people, this time at the hands of the Greeks (2 Macc 4-14).

2.3 Christ, the suffering servant (Christological aspects)

The way of Jesus the Messiah through suffering to glory is exemplary for his disciples.

2.3.1 Suffering and persecution in the ministry of Christ

All Christian suffering for Christ and martyrdom has its basic foundational orientation and footing in Jesus Christ, the "faithful and true witness" (Rev 1:5; 3:14). He, who lived as the eternal Son of God with his Father in perfect bliss, took upon himself torture and death as an atoning sacrifice for the sin of rebellious humanity. He did so after his incarnation out of his free volition and in unwavering obedience. In this way he suffered the depths of all human pain in order to comfort us (1 Pet 2:21-24; Heb 2:14-18) and suffering became for him a school of obedience (Heb 5:8).

Since his earliest childhood, Jesus was persecuted when Herod's pursuers sought to kill him and his parents had to flee with him to Egypt (Matt 2:13-18). In Nazareth, his first sermon in the synagogue there met with bitter resistance, and his opponents tried to kill him (Luke 4:29). He was hunted down like a criminal, betrayed by one of his inner circle, arrested, and questioned before the judges (John 18:37). In this, he reinforced the truth he preached, particularly through his courageous perseverance even to death, which God confirmed through his glorious resurrection (Phil 2:9).

2.3.2 The cross of Christ

To Jesus the crucifixion was not at all a tragic failure of his mission, but, rather its very fulfillment. This is evident from the three prophecies of suffering upon which the Lord bases his suffering with the Father's plan to save the lost (Matt 16:21; 17:22f; 20:17-19 and par.). He fulfilled the role of the suffering servant of the Lord in Isaiah

53 par excellence and that of the sacrificial lamb that is led from suffering to glory (Pss 22; 16; 110).

Martyrs in every epoch of history have received strength to endure to the end through fellowship with the Crucified One who himself endured to the end.

2.4 Discipleship: Following in the footsteps of Christ (mimetic aspects)

The death of Jesus on the cross is both unique, compared to the cross of his followers, and at the same time serves as a model for his followers.

2.4.1 The uniqueness of the cross of Christ

We have to distinguish between the meaning of the cross of Christ as a *substitutionary* act and a *representative* act. Jesus' death on the cross, as an atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world as a substitutionary act is unique, completely sufficient, irreplaceable, unrepeatable and cannot be copied. It differs from any suffering of other men and women of God through its salvific value and power, which is ascribed to Jesus self-sacrificial love by God, and which lies in his divine origin. This is the uniqueness of Jesus' redemptive mission. This distinction can also be expressed by the difference between 'saving grace' and 'enabling grace'. There is nothing to add to saving grace, the salvation worked by Christ, but we need the enabling grace, equipping us for spreading the salvation.

2.4.2 The cross of Christ as a pattern of ministry

The fact that Jesus died as our substitute on the cross does not negate that as our representative he gave us a model to follow. The substitutionary nature of the cross does not negate its representative nature. A substitute is one who acts in the place of another in such a way that renders the other's actions unnecessary, while a representative is one who acts on behalf of another in such a way that involves the other in his or her action. In its representative nature, the cross of Christ is an exemplary model or a pattern of ministry in which we are invited to participate in the sufferings of Christ for the sake of his name. In such a way, the cross of Christ can be reflected and mirrored in the life of Christians.

Therefore Christian suffering for Christ is a continuation of the suffering of Christ, and it is from him only that it receives its characteristic mark (John 17:18; 20:21).

His disciples are treated today as he once was, because Christ lives in them and they speak and act with his authority. Their fate is bound to his. In the context of the prophecies of his own suffering, Jesus announces to his disciples that they also expect a similar fate. They would be at odds with the world that opposes God, just as he himself was (John 15:18-21). For this reason, Jesus' call to discipleship is one of discipleship on the way to the cross (Luke 9:23). In it, Christ's own passage through suffering to glory finds its fulfillment and continuation (1 Pet 2:21; Rom 8:17). Christians are called to bear the disgrace of Christ (Heb 13:13). Because of this, every true disciple of Jesus is asked to be essentially prepared to suffer martyrdom in the most extreme case, though only few might be called to it.

The core meaning of taking up one's cross in the discipleship of Jesus is witnessing to Jesus Christ even in a situation of persecution and martyrdom.

2.5 Super-human conflict (antagonistic aspects)

From a sociological inner-worldly perspective the leading cause of persecution of Christians is social hostility against Christians, followed by state hostility, and religious violence, while armed conflicts add to the suffering of Christians.

2.5.1 Jesus as victor over a defeated and retreating foe

From a theological perspective, the world's hatred toward Christians is ultimately inspired by the even deeper hatred of Satan, who has been fighting against God ever since his primeval rebellion against him. With the fall of Adam, the devil tries to drag humanity down into its own destruction. In a perversion of God's plan of redemption, he pursues this plan by strengthening his kingdom on earth as the 'prince of this world'. Because Jesus totally stripped him of his power on Calvary, the anger of the dark powers is directed completely against him and all who confess him.

Jesus saw his ministry as an assault on the rule of Satan in the world with the purpose of bringing in the Rule of God or the Kingdom of God. Jesus acknowledges that Satan is currently the ruler of this world, and characterizes him as a perpetual murderer and a notorious

liar (Matt 12:26-29, John 8:44, 12:31; 14:30; 16:11; cf. 2 Cor 4:4, Eph 2:2, 6:12, 1 Jn 5:19). He sees humankind as slaves of sin imitating the sin that comes from the nature of Satan (John 8:34, 38, 44). Jesus sees himself as the one who came to liberate people from the slavery of sin and Satan. He achieves this by giving his life as a ransom (Matt 20:28), the price paid for a slave to set him or her free. As the sins of humankind were Satan's right of ownership over them, Jesus sheds his blood for the forgiveness of their sins (Matt 16:28), thereby canceling Satan's right of ownership over them.

Beside this legal victory of the Son of God over Satan there is the necessity of convincing people to come out themselves from under that slavery and to place themselves under the rule of God, thereby entering the Kingdom of God. Jesus is "sowing the word" himself and through his messengers, but Satan tries to snatch it away before it can bear fruit in the hearts of people (Matt 13:3-23). This conflict between the Son of God and Satan over the minds of men and women will last through the entire history of humanity, but since the cross of Christ we can know that Satan is a defeated foe, and while still dangerous, is only fighting a retreating battle.

2.5.2 The 'weapons' of the Christian

The nature of the conflict in which we are involved is characterized by the nature and methods of the two leaders in the conflict. Jesus reveals the character of Satan as evil, which brings forth the weapons of hate, lies, deception, falsehood, violence, and murder to bring destruction, death, and devastation. Jesus confronted Satan's lies with the truth of God, Satan's evil with the goodness of God, Satan's hatred with the love of God, and Satan's violence and murder with God's self-sacrifice out of which arise new creativity, healing, and restoration. This is the way in which Jesus fought and defeated evil, and this is the kind of war into which he sends his disciples. They must love their enemies, do good to the ones who hate them, and like their heavenly Father, show goodness, mercy, and forgiveness to the ones who are evil and ungrateful. They must stop the chain of poisoning God's creation with Satan's deadly products by absorbing it in union with Christ and giving back in exchange love and goodness, thus spreading God's character in the world.

Jesus was sent as the Lamb of God to defeat the great dragon and to destroy his works (1 Jn 3:8). In the same way, he sends us as lambs to defeat the wolves by transforming them into children of God. Most

importantly, we must see that Christ's ultimate weapon is self-sacrifice and our ultimate weapon must be the same in order to draw people to Jesus (John 12:24, 26, 32).

2.5.3 Spiritual reasons behind attacks on Christians

Satan also uses people and structures to serve his ends. This is one cause of injustice in the world. The church suffers because of the hatred towards Christ by the world in rebellion against God (cf. John 15:20a). It is difficult to fully explain the irrational brutality of the persecution of Christians without taking into regard a demonic component in it.

On a structural level, the more authoritarian and nationalistic a government, the more it fears the idea of a faith in Christ which transcends this world and its cultural and national boundaries. Naturally it will consider the preaching of a perfect kingdom and a final judgment as a challenge to its authority, which needs to be curtailed or stopped, thus causing suffering to the church.

The church suffers often at the hands of religious and well-meaning people who mistakenly think they are honoring God in persecuting Christians. Saul on the road to Damascus was such a persecutor, who was stopped in his tracks by the risen Christ (Acts 9:4ff). Sometimes even people who seriously believe they are Christians persecute Christians of differing convictions, thereby grossly misrepresenting Christ.

There are several areas of spiritual attack, which the church encounters: on truth by lies, indoctrination and deception by wolves in sheep's clothing, on unity seeking to divide families, churches and even organizations helping the persecuted, on courage by fear and discouragement as well as on integrity, resources, and physical, emotional and spiritual safety.

The preaching of the gospel is the reason for much of Christian suffering. The more clearly the church knows and witnesses to Christ, the more certainly she will have to expect the opposition, protest, and hate of the Antichrist (Matt 24:15; 2 Thes 2; 1 Jn 2 and 4; Rev 13-19). The antagonism will escalate towards the end of times (Matt 24-25). Therefore, the church of Christ will find no peace on earth before the final judgment has definitely been passed on the devil and all remaining power is taken away from him. But the church herself has an important part in this victory through her willingness to suffer

martyrdom (Rev 12:11). We miss out on reality if we ignore these truths due to an idealistic philosophy.

Possibly the most painful type of conflict is that with “false brethren”, potentially leading to persecution from within the church. Scripture depicts a scenario of a great end-time apostasy, where the Antichrist succeeds even in seducing a large portion of the Christian community (Matt 24:10-12,24; Rev 13:3-4). Thus churches will be divided between an adapted section, denying Christ and the marginalized confessing faithful, who might even be persecuted by adapted church members. The main danger arising from the Antichrist is theological. It consists in his attempt to eliminate the two central Christian credal truths: the trinity of God and the incarnation of the divine logos, and consequently the redemption wrought at the cross.

In the midst of such a stark realism of conflict, the church can be assured that no enemy or adversity is able separate the believer from the love of Christ (Rom 8:31-39).

2.6 God’s salvation and comfort (soteriological aspects)

This aspect deals with the eternal destiny of both the Christian – particularly the confessor and martyr – as well as of the persecutors. It also deals with God’s help for his messengers in this world as well as the instrumental role those suffering and martyred play in God’s plan of salvation.

2.6.1 The seriousness of confessing Christ

Jesus points out the seriousness of remaining faithful to him and confessing him in moments of trial. He warns his disciples that he would reciprocate their public acknowledgement or denial of him in front of men on this earth before his father in heaven (Matt 10:32-33). While the love of many will grow cold, those who endure to the end and remain victorious will be saved, contrary to the cowards (Matt 24:13; Rev 21:7-8).

In order that his disciples do not fall away from him when persecution arises, Jesus has given them advance warning and prays that God will keep them safe from the evil one (John 16:1, 4; 17:15). Equally, he has pleaded in prayer for Simon Peter that his faith should not fail when Satan would test his faith (Luke 22:31f). Though Peter did indeed deny him three times, Jesus gave him the opportunity to

repent, and renewed fellowship with him after his resurrection, again entrusting him with the care of his flock (John 21:15-19). This tension is reflected in the hymn quoted in 2 Timothy 2:12-13: “If we deny him, he will deny us. If we are unfaithful, he remains faithful, for he cannot deny himself”. The eternal destiny of the Christian is decided in his or her endurance and faithfulness, even at the ultimate decision point of martyrdom.

There seems to be a contradiction: If God provides supernatural grace to endure martyrdom, how can it be considered a test of the individual’s faith? One might propose that the individual’s faith and the grace of God work together in a symbiotic fashion. The individual’s personal faith provides him or her with the conviction that he or she *must* hold on to the end no matter what the cost. This is a clear demonstration of faith since the individual values the promise of God and the hope of eternal life more than earthly life or personal safety. But at the same time, in recognition of the need for grace, the martyr acknowledges that he or she *cannot* hold on without divine aid. This inner tension between the *I must* and the *I cannot* provides the environment where martyrdom can serve both as a test of faith and as a demonstration of God’s grace. The *I must* aspect drives the martyr to prayer and dependence upon God, who abundantly supplies grace to compensate for the *I cannot* aspect. God’s helping presence does not dispense one of one’s own responsibility to bear and to stand fast, which therefore is connected with faith.

2.6.2 Trinitarian divine and angelic assistance

Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as well as God’s angels comfort and help the afflicted Christian.

God, the source of all mercy, comforts us through Christ, and the more we suffer the more he showers us with his comfort (2 Cor 1:3-11). God, who has called us to eternal glory, will restore, support and strengthen us and put us on a firm foundation, while we suffer for a short while (1 Pet 5:10).

Jesus Christ himself is a faithful High Priest for the suffering Christian who understands our weaknesses. Since he himself has gone through suffering and temptation, he is able to help us when we are being tempted (Heb 2:18; 4:15). Paul confesses about one of his trials in court, that the Lord stood with him, that he might preach the Good News, and saved him from certain death (2 Tim 4:17-18, cf. Acts 18:9f; 23:11).

The Holy Spirit is most frequently mentioned as the main agent of support and comfort of the Christian in trial and martyrdom. Jesus promises his disciples as they are put on trial by those in power because they are his followers, that the Spirit of their Father would be talking through them (Matt 10:17-20; John 14:26). He would make it an opportunity to tell those in power about Jesus, even equipping Christians with such wisdom, that none of their opponents will be able to reply (Luke 21:15).

Beside the persons of the trinity, the angels of God also come to the assistance of his messengers according to the scriptures. Peter and others have been repeatedly liberated from prison by an angel, in order to be able to continue preaching (Acts 5:18, 12:11).

God is investing all in his power to assist those who confess him.¹⁰ However, God's help does not necessarily always have to consist in sparing lives. There are others, like James (Acts 12:2), whom God is helping to remain faithful despite torture and execution. Even though it might seem that those suffering and martyred are forsaken by God, we may claim in faith that in time God will support his faithful and carry them through.

2.6.3 Salvation or destruction of the persecutors

The persecutors will either be hardened further or in some instances led to repentance through the witness of the faithful confessors and martyrs. Paul is the model case of a persecutor who is converted. While still a consenting witness of the stoning of Stephen (Acts 8:1), only the confrontation with the risen Christ effects his conversion, which makes him part of the company of those who have to suffer much for his name (Acts 8:1, 9:4-5). There seems to be no other account in the New Testament of a persecutor being converted, but later historical testimonies do exist concerning individuals – including persecutors – who converted as a result of witnessing martyrdom.

However, the effect on persecutors is mostly described as negative in the New Testament. When persecuted Christians are not intimidated by their enemies, this will be a sign to the persecutors that they are going to be 'destroyed' (Phil 1:28). There remains the hope of the persecuted that God will listen to their intercession for their enemies, and that the blessing that they invoke on their persecutors

¹⁰ The body of Christ as one of his tools will be discussed next.

may indeed enter their lives and make them worthy of it (Matt 5:44, 10:15).

2.6.4 Completing the sufferings of Christ

There remains the question what the suffering and martyrdom of a Christian can contribute to the salvation of others, and specifically how Paul's statement in Colossians 1:24 is to be understood, when he says: "I am glad when I suffer for you in my body, for I am completing what remains of Christi's suffering for his body, the church." Equally he says he is "willing to endure anything if it will bring salvation and eternal glory in Christ Jesus to those God has chosen" (2 Tim 2:10) and he rejoices that his imprisonment has contributed to the spreading of the Gospel (Phil 1:12-26). We must be careful to not teach less than scripture teaches only because others might have used such verses in church history for claims that we consider going beyond scripture.

It will be of help to distinguish the three lines of martyrdom which Jesus and early Christianity have expressed. All three lines apply to Jesus, but not all apply to his followers. (1) The messianic martyr works forgiveness of sins and redemption through the sacrifice of his life. (2) The prophetic or apostolic martyr is suffering at the hands of the tyrant as the outstanding representative for his community. He is suffering vicariously for his community. (3) The community/church-martyr suffers for his confession of faith. Only Jesus is considered a messianic martyr, as only the sacrifice of his life works salvation for others. By contrast, Paul is suffering vicariously the antagonism encountered by that new community created through the work of Christ and later dies as an apostolic martyr.

So while the work of the messianic martyr Jesus is complete, Christ's suffering in the members of his body is not complete yet. The number of martyrs is not complete yet either (Rev 6:11). Thus Paul helps to complete the suffering of Christ. This is instrumental suffering, because it serves to bring the gospel to those who need to be saved, and to keep those faithful who have been saved. Thus Paul is not adding anything to the completed work of atonement of Christ, but there is a legitimate place for him to complete the suffering of Christ.

The continuation of such prophetic or apostolic suffering and martyrdom might fall on the shoulders of today's leaders and teachers of the church. And while different from the apostolic martyrs like Paul, the ordinary Christian only suffers and the community martyr

only dies for his or her individual confessing of the faith, it also serves its part in God's plan to bring the gospel to all and benefits the church through its faithful witness to Christ and example of steadfastness.

2.7 The body of Christ (ecclesiological aspects)

A Christian never suffers alone and a Christian martyr never dies alone, but is always a part of the body of Christ which sustains him or her. This section seeks to clarify the mutual relationship between the body of Christ and those suffering and dying for Christ, including the blessing they bring to the church. The body of Christ needs to be understood in three dimensions, across time, across space, and across divisions.

2.7.1 The body of Christ across time

The suffering and martyred Christians belong to the fellowship of the body of Christ throughout time and have many forerunners. The communion of saints stretches back to the beginning of time and includes the faithful of the old covenant. Jesus himself regards the confessors and martyrs of the past, including the prophets killed by Israel from Abel to Zechariah, as his own forerunners (Matt 23:34-36; Mark 12:1-12), with John the Baptist being the last martyr of the old covenant. We are exhorted to look at the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord as examples of patience and endurance in suffering (Jas 5:10). We have 'a cloud of witnesses' surrounding us, consisting of those victorious in faith, and those who were faithful in suffering and martyrdom, who are now watching our 'race' in the arena of life and are waiting to be perfected together with us (Heb 11). The souls of the martyrs 'resting under the altar' in the heavenly throne room according to the imagery of the book of Revelation are commanded to patiently await God's judgment day and to "rest a little longer until the full number of the servants of Jesus has been martyred" (Rev 6:11). While our eyes are to be focused on Jesus on whom our faith depends from start to finish (Heb 12:2), we are also exhorted to remember our Christian leaders who have taught us the word of God, particularly watching out how they have completed their lives (Heb 13:7). The lives of the first Christian leaders, with few exceptions, ended in martyrdom, and we are to follow the example of their faithfulness. The Christian confessors and martyrs of past and present need to be rightly remembered.

2.7.2 The body of Christ across space

The body of Christ throughout the world participates in the suffering of members of the body of its time, through information, prayer, support, suffering and rejoicing with them. If one part of the body suffers, all parts are affected (1 Cor 12:26). In Jesus we are ‘partners in suffering’, in the kingdom and in patient endurance (Rev 1:9).

Functioning communication is the first prerequisite for sharing in the suffering. We are challenged not to forget about those in prison and to suffer with them as though we were there ourselves and were feeling the pain of those mistreated in our own bodies (Heb 13:3). Reporting back where possible to the praying church about positive changes and releases is important (Acts 4:23; 12:12,17).

The intercession of the body of Christ is instrumental in releasing God’s rescuing power for those messengers of faith who are crushed and overwhelmed beyond their strength, thinking they would never live through their ordeal (2 Cor 1:8-11; cf. Phil 1:19). Paul is challenging the Ephesians to pray for him as an ‘ambassador in chains’ in order that he might keep on boldly preaching the gospel (Eph 6:19-20). Prayer rightly is the first reaction to opposition to the gospel and to persecution and news thereof, according to the example of the Jerusalem church. Their prayer focused on God’s power and requested that God’s servants would be given boldness in their preaching and that God may work signs of his restoring power (Acts 4:24-30). In like spirit the communal prayer of the church for all humankind and those in power according to 1 Tim 2:1-6 is to request that the faithful may be able to live “in peace and quietness, in godliness and dignity” and that all humankind might come to a saving knowledge of the truth.

Paul tells of examples of co-workers who went as far as risking their lives for him (Rom 16:3). He exhorts others far away to rejoice with him in his suffering and even in his eventual martyrdom (Phil 2:17-18) and thanks them for providing for his needs in prison (Phil 4:10-14).

Those who are suffering are to remember that Christians all over the world are going through the same kind of suffering (1 Pet 5:9). The others might heed the following warning: “A church that forsakes her martyrs, that neither prays nor fearlessly cares for them, not only disturbs the spiritual communion between all members of Christ’s

body, but will eventually betray Christ himself, the head of the body, who still suffers with his members.”¹¹

2.7.3 The body of Christ across confessional and denominational divides

There is the potential of ecumenical solidarity being built, when Christians of different confessions and denominations suffer together for Christ.

One effect of modern persecution of Christians is that it – though certainly not always and in all places – has led to a discovery: those directly affected discover that they are facing the same challenges to their faith, that they need to face them together and that there is a common basis to face them. Thereby denominational barriers, which once separated them, lose their importance. A basic Christian testimony to the truth is demanded by the immediate situation. Prisoners comfort and strengthen one another in their sufferings. They recognize in this a hopeful approach to interconfessional understanding in faith and to a spirituality of suffering for Christ that draws its strength from common roots.

The common suffering of Christians of different backgrounds can therefore be understood as a way in which Jesus’ high-priestly prayer for the visible unity of his followers, in order that the world may believe, is fulfilled (John 17:21-23). The heavenly vision of all Christian martyrs of all times and of those who have remained faithful to Christ through the great tribulation from every nation and tribe and people and language ultimately being gathered all together before the throne of God, worshipping him with one voice, is certainly an encouragement to begin with this already now (Rev 6:9-11; 7:9, 14-15). What still divides true Christians today will be overcome at the latest by then, as we will then see God face to face.

It also reminds us painfully that, in church history, and in some places still today, there have been religiously-motivated persecutions of Christians by other Christians of a different denomination. We mourn the damage caused and the divisions this has perpetuated. This traumatic strain on efforts for Christian unity needs a ‘healing of memories’ which leads to mutual requests for forgiveness and to restitution by showing active love. Equally, advocacy for persecuted Christians must never be sectarian, only focusing on those from our

¹¹ Beyerhaus 1992:179; ICN 2006.

own denomination or confession, by ignoring the plight of those with differing theological convictions.

We are also painfully aware, that churches in totalitarian states are divided in their response to administrative demands of state-registration of churches and to state attempts of creating government-controlled or aligned churches. We must all be slow in condemning each other and refuse to be divided, place nothing above God's authority and the normative guidance of his word for his church, and under all circumstances avoid denouncing each other before the world or betraying each other to authorities, lest we fall into sub-Christian patterns.

2.7.4 The building up of the body of Christ through suffering and martyrdom

Martyrdom serves to build up the church, because those suffering and martyred are blessed by God. The New Testament attests that among the persecuted a great grace prevailed, and Christians gained confidence and became more bold in telling others about Christ and followed the example of their leaders even into persecution and suffering (Acts 4:31,34; Phil 1:14; 2 Tim 3:10-11). In order for the church of Christ to really remain his church and not become shallow in its spiritual life, she might actually need a certain measure of suffering.

Christ is particularly close to his own in a situation of suffering and martyrdom (see Stephen in Acts 7:55-56). He lets them experience a measure of preserving grace which surpasses all blessings that we receive through the means of grace under normal circumstances. The life power that is activated through dying with Christ first strengthens the individual Christian who is suffering.

But beyond that, the blessings that Christ as the head of the body gives are shared with other members. Paul sees the sufferings of Christ flowing over in his and his co-workers lives, and in the same way the comfort received from Christ overflowing into the lives of others (2 Cor 1:5; cf. 4:7-15). This is true for both local congregations and the worldwide church and also across generations. In this respect, the suffering of the church is an important means of her growth, both inwardly in grace as well as outwardly. When Christ leads his church into suffering, he has a special plan for her: he not only counts her worthy of participating in his suffering but also in his glory (Col 1:24).

Thus, profound joy emanates from this kind of suffering when a person accepts it by faith (1 Pet 4:13).

2.8 God's mission for the church (missiological aspects)

Christian suffering and martyrdom are not ends in themselves but serve God's mission right to 'the end of time', and are linked to the mission of Christians by multiple relationships (Matt 24:14).

2.8.1 Suffering is a mode of missionary involvement

Suffering is described by Jesus as part and parcel of discipleship. But not all Christians suffer equally; not all are persecuted equally, and only a relatively small proportion of Christians ever suffer martyrdom. In the mission that is the central purpose of the interim period in God's history of salvation, Christians must engage with their whole lives, including a readiness for suffering and martyrdom. Suffering is not just something that has to be endured passively but it becomes a mode of mission, a mission that is done in weakness, focusing on service, and by its nature is accompanied with sorrow and affliction (2 Cor 12:9f). The precious treasure comes in perishable containers, that is, in our weak bodies, so that everybody can see that the light that shines in us, and the power that works in us, are not our own but God's (2 Cor 4:7-10). This passage ought to be seen as the classic definition of mission. Martyrdom is the most radical form of missionary witness.

2.8.2 Witness to Christ is a core cause of suffering

Witness to Christ can be a main cause of suffering, persecution and martyrdom. The gospel certainly brings with it liberation from all kinds of slaveries and can lead to the improvement of the quality of living. This can even translate into material blessings. At the same time, the gospel brings the hatred of the world and persecution, suffering and martyrdom. We always have to keep these two aspects of the gospel in balance.

While disaster relief, developmental, medical and educational work by Christians are at times accepted even in regions opposed to the Christian faith, it is the verbal witness to Christ and the turning to Christ of people who are freely choosing to leave their old religious allegiance behind, and the emergence of their own active witness to

Christ, which are each in increasing degrees countered by hostility, opposition, all sorts of persecution and the taking of lives.

The attempts of a witness without words, and of service that does not intentionally seek conversions, and the anonymity of secret believers have never been a guarantee against violent and murderous attacks, though. While we might be perfect in contextualizing our message and in avoiding any unnecessary offence, as messengers of Christ, we must face the fact that the message of the cross has been and always will be a stumbling block to those without Christ (1 Cor 1:18, 23), and will attract the hostility of the world that does not accept the light coming into the world (John 1:4, 11). Such aggression might be directed against anyone associated with Christ, Christians and Christianity, even in erroneous associations.

2.8.3 Suffering is a test for the genuineness of mission

Suffering is a test for the genuineness of mission rather than a mishap to be avoided at all cost. Mission director Karl Hartenstein once said: “Missionary work only proves its authenticity where its energies mature under suffering, where the focus is not on the success of the action but on the fruit of the passion” of the suffering. Mission with wrong and mixed motives will often quickly stop when the first signs of suffering occur. The mission of God needs to be accomplished in spite of and through suffering, persecution and martyrdom. This mission is valid for all times and no event in history can repeal it. The end of the world will only come once the mission Christ has given his church is completed, and the mission of the church is only completed when the end of the world has come (Matt 24:14). It is important to note, however, that this does not preclude wise and responsible action in the deployment of Christian workers.

2.8.4 God can use suffering, persecution and martyrdom to advance his mission

Even the catastrophes of world history can be used by God as vehicles for the progress of his mission and he seems to use them in particular. In them God’s ‘hidden grace’ is manifested. The willingness to suffer for Christ can give the message of those suffering a more convincing power. The complete devotion of the witnesses of faith and even their martyrdom are a powerful means which God can use, and particularly seems to use in situations of strong resistance to the Gospel. However, martyrdom does not automatically possess convincing power, as it

might as well be interpreted as a sign that the martyrs have been abandoned by God or that their God is powerless.

While the seed that falls into the ground will bear much fruit over time according to God's promise, martyrdom does not automatically produce visible and immediate church growth. The 'fruit' of martyrdom remains a grace from God (John 12:24). We must therefore avoid a triumphalistic use of the popular saying of church father Tertullian from North Africa that "the blood of the martyrs is the seed for new Christians" (*sanguis martyrum – semen christianorum*)¹². The element of truth in it is that, to the eyes of faith, suffering and martyrdom inherit an element of multiplication.

It is indeed noteworthy that the Early Church and other Christian communities in church history, like in Korea have not only survived the violence of heaviest persecution, but have even grown through it, owing to the Christ active in their midst in the suffering and death of Christian martyrs. At times such persecution has temporarily inhibited the growth of the church. However, the deeds and witness of the martyrs have often had long lasting and far reaching effects on the hearts of Christians and non-Christians. The fruit of their spiritual influence does not always become immediately visible in contexts of persecution and martyrdom. At times their influence remains invisible until the end of a period of persecution, but it often results in conversions to Christ later.

In some places persecution has led to the multiplication of the church, whereas sometimes heavy persecution has seemingly almost completely destroyed churches in other parts of the world. Martyrdom brings to a violent end the voice of that particular witness and might discourage the witness of others or silence the only or last witness. Persecution has led to the disappearance of ancient churches, e.g. in countries in North Africa and many Middle Eastern countries and contributes to the marginalization and exodus of any remaining historical Christian minorities. However, at the same time God is raising up followers of Christ out of the midst of the majority population.

Another observation from church history is the fact that very often in situations of the first proclamation of the Gospel, the hostile counter-reaction of opponents will martyr some of the outside witnesses or the first of their peers who have turned to Christ. Often

¹² Tertullian: *Apology*, L.

this has led to a breakthrough for the gospel and to the establishment of an indigenous church in that community over time. Therefore a routine extraction of threatened believers from situations of hostility, as often practiced in some contexts today, actually undermines the potential of the establishment of an indigenous church.

With the eyes of faith we must claim that God invisibly reigns even in situations of suffering, persecution and martyrdom, and that these adversities will come to an end when Christ returns to establish his visible rule in power and glory. Then, if not earlier, we will get to see the fruit of all suffering.

2.9 The victory of the kingdom of God (eschatological aspects)

While the suffering, persecution and martyrdom of the church occurs in the period of history before the completion of the kingdom of God, this experience must be regarded from the perspective of the victory of Christ. This period in which we live is marked by the tension between the victory of Christ that has already been accomplished and its visible consummation which has not taken place yet. God is still letting his sun rise on the evil and good (Matt 5:45), the judgment has not yet come and sheep and goats are not yet sorted. The whole creation is still groaning with mankind while waiting “for the sons of God to be revealed” (Rom 8:19-22).

2.9.1 Resurrection power

Christ was raised from death and ascended to heaven. He was seated at the right hand of God far above all authorities, powers and rulers, and he poured out the Holy Spirit on the church.

He said: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Acts 2:24-36; Phil 2:9; 1 Pet 3:22; Eph 1:20b-22a; Matt 28:18). The sovereignty of Christ above all authority gives us hope for the church in the midst of powers that threaten to wipe it out.

The Apostle Paul prayed for Christians, that they may be enlightened to know the mighty strength of God demonstrated in the resurrection of Christ which is at work in believers (Eph 1:19-20a). The resurrection of Christ and his suffering are two sides of the process of our salvation. When Christians suffer for Christ, they experience as well the power of his resurrection. The Apostle Paul has expressed that clearly in 2 Corinthians 4:7-10: as he experienced

suffering and persecution in his daily life, he also experienced the life of Christ and his all surpassing power.

Nothing that we now invest in the kingdom of God and sacrifice for it is in vain. The resurrection of Jesus is the guarantee for the future resurrection of all humankind for judgment. What is sown in weakness now will be raised in glory and power (1 Cor 15:43). The hope of the resurrection to a better life gives us reason to stand firm and immovable in affliction, and reassures us that our work for God is not in vain, though deadly forces might seemingly destroy it (1 Cor 15:58).

The resurrection perspective liberates us from a mere inner-worldly human perspective. The Christian should be bound to the coming world (2 Pet 3:13; Heb 13:14; 10:34), not the one passing away – while being fully engaged (1 Cor 7:26-31).

2.9.2 End time escalation and climax

In contrast to optimistic visions of the future dreaming of seamless transformation of the world, the prophecies of the Bible foresee clearly an altogether troubled final stage of human and church history. The prophet Daniel (Dan 7) sees a succession of world powers; brutal, atheistic, blaspheming and tormenting the saints before God disempowers those powers and establishes the eternal Kingdom of God. Jesus himself confirms this vision in his words about the end times, foretelling an escalation of hatred and love of Christ growing cold, simultaneous to a worldwide proclamation of the gospel before all ethnic groups (Matt 24:9-25 and par.). Later, Paul (1 Thes 2; 2 Tim 3:1-13) and John (Rev 13-19) place themselves within the same tradition. In this scenario the coming of the Antichrist, his false prophet and an apocalyptic woman, all play a role. There is the potential of an apostate church participating in the bloody persecution of the church that remains true to Christ. The church will suffer a severe martyrdom in the end which will cost many of her members their lives (Rev 17:6; 6:9-11). However, the church of the true worshippers of God will overcome in the end (Rev 12:7-12a).

Therefore indications are that anti-Christian persecutions will not diminish with the progression of history. On the contrary, they are likely to increase. The parable of the wheat and the weeds or tares (Matt 13:24-30; 36-43) describes that because of the growth of the kingdom of God at the end the weeds also get an opportunity to

flourish. Revival and persecution may occur and climax simultaneously.

These prophecies were not exclusively meant for the final phase of history. They rather serve as an orientation, a warning, and an encouragement to each generation to discern and to endure in preliminary forms and historically and locally restricted forms of anti-Christian persecutions of their own times. These are to be regarded as anticipations on a smaller scale of what is to follow later (1 Jn 2:18; 4:3). The memory of that apocalyptic prophecy in the course of church history in the face of an anti-Christian spirit of the times was quite legitimate, even though the perception of living really close to the end of the world was later proven to be erroneous. It is equally legitimate to try to carefully and diacritically discern in certain disturbing political, ideological, societal, and even ecclesiastical and theological trends of the present a preview of future developments.

2.9.3 Expectation of the returning Lord - as bridegroom, judge and king

Christians are not focusing on the horrors of coming end times, but are joyfully expecting their returning Lord. They are watching and waiting as a bride waits for her bridegroom. Christ who comes again will unite them to himself. When God's reign will be fully established, the "wedding banquet of the Lamb" is waiting for his bride, his church (Rev 19:6-10).

The mystery of the history of the world and its peoples does not end in darkness but before the judgment seat of the mighty God. The returning Christ is also the judge of the living and the dead. He will make everything right. In the new Jerusalem God will wipe every tear from the eyes of his children. There will be no more death or mourning, nor crying or pain, for the old order has passed away. God is making everything new (Rev 21:1-5; cf. Isa 25:8, 35:10, 49:10). God's judgments of those who have shed the blood of the saints and the prophets will be praised in heaven, as he avenges the blood of his servants (Rev 16:5-6, 19:2). God is giving rest from their labor to those who die "in the Lord" (Rev 14:13-14) and relief from their troubles (2 Thes 1:6-7). Those who remain faithful even to the point of death await the "crown of life" (Rev 2:10b, cf. Jas 1:12). Paul is certain that a "crown of righteousness" is in store for him, because he has kept the faith, and that this is true for all who long for the appearing of the rightful judge (2 Tim 4:8).

Christ will rule as king of the universe and give the members of his body part in his messianic dominion as priests and kings (Rev 1:6, 20:6; more on heavenly rewards below).

God is not in a hurry with his final victory, but this does not mean that he is slow in keeping his promise. Rather he is patient with humankind because he does not want anyone to perish, but wants to give everyone an opportunity for repentance before final judgment (2 Pet 3:4, 9). So Christians need to equip themselves with perseverant patience to endure the birth pangs of the coming kingdom, which God has already begun to establish. As a woman soon forgets the pains after giving birth to a child, our present sufferings are of no weight, compared to the glory that will be revealed to us (Rom 8:18; 2 Cor 4:17).

2.10 The honor of God and his martyrs (doxological aspects)

There are two perspectives to describe the connection between the glory of God and those suffering and martyred for his sake. The one perspective is about the honor God receives. The other is about the honor and glory God bestows on his servants in this life and in the life to come.

2.10.1 God is honored by his witnesses

God is honored both by the life and by the death of his witnesses. “If we live, it is to honor the Lord. And if we die, it is to honor the Lord. So whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord” (Rom 14:8). Our bodies are our instruments to honor God. We are to offer them to God as living sacrifices, as a spiritual worship (Rom 12:1) of a life committed to serving him, even to the ultimate point of literally laying down our lives for him. Just like Paul who trusts that his life will bring honor to Christ, whether he lives or dies (Phil 1:20; Acts 20:24, 21:13). Paul is the prime example for honoring God in weakness, insults, hardships, persecution and difficulties. For in the midst of all the weakness of his messenger, God has space to show the strength of his grace and power (2 Cor 12:9-10).

Equally God is honored by the foolishness of the gospel. God’s seemingly foolish plan that the Son of God had to suffer death at the cross and that his disciples suffer with him is wiser than men’s wise strategies, and God’s weakness is stronger than men’s strength. God has chosen the foolish and the weak so that as a result, no one can ever

boast in the presence of God, except about the Lord himself. All the honor is his (1 Cor 1:18-31).

God is equally honored by the church's confidence in his reign (Acts 4:23-30) and our trust in his provision for us in a time of need (Heb 4:16). Even the death of the martyr has the capacity to honor God. Jesus is in fact foretelling Peter "by what kind of death he would glorify God" (John 21:18-19).

In the end God must even be praised by his enemies. The unbelieving neighbors of Christians, who might falsely accuse them of doing wrong, will see their honorable behavior – if indeed they live properly – and "will give honor to God when he judges the world" (1 Pet 2:12). Paul endears to us the scenario that Jesus the Messiah who humbled himself to a criminal's death on the cross, is exalted to the highest honor by God, and as a consequence all humanity will bow down before him "in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue [will] confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:6-11). Perhaps not everyone will do this voluntarily, choosing to do so instead with gnashing teeth. But there is also the occasional persecutor by whose conversion God is honored, Paul being the prime example (Gal 1:23f; 1 Cor 15:9f).

Honoring God is the eternal destiny of God's children. John sees a vast crowd, too great to count, from every nation, people and language, worshipping God and the Lamb in front of the throne, after having come out of or having died in the great tribulation (Rev 7:9-17). He also reports of those who have been victorious over the 'beast' singing 'the song of Moses and the lamb': "Great and marvelous are your works, O Lord God, the Almighty ..." (Rev 15:2-4; cf. 19:2). The glorification of God is the ultimate goal of his mission, and everything must in the end serve his glory.

2.10.2 God honors those suffering and martyred for his sake

God bestows his glory already in this life on those who suffer for him, lets some martyrs have a glimpse of his glory in their hour of trial, and in heaven lets them share the glory of Christ.

Those who are insulted for being a Christian are called to be happy, for the glory of God, which is his Spirit rests upon them (1 Pet 4:14). Therefore the apostles rejoiced that God had counted them worthy to suffer disgrace for the name of Jesus (Acts 5:41).

Being allowed to glimpse God's glory still in this life can also be seen as a way God is honoring and strengthening some martyrs. Stephen was allowed to see the heavens open and the glory of God before his imminent stoning, with Jesus standing before God's judgment seat as the advocate of his defense (Acts 7:55). The overwhelming impression of God's glory helps the martyr to overcome the pain and agony of his afflictions, as martyrs in church history have witnessed.

But beyond the association with God's glory in this life, those suffering and martyred are led through temporal suffering to eternal glory and are honored by God. Suffering first and glory to follow is the pattern of Christ's journey (1 Pet 1:11; Heb 2:9), which is shared by his followers. They share Christ's sufferings in order that they may also share in his glory and joy (Rom 8:17-18; 1 Pet 4:13-14). The servants of Christ must be where he is, but they can rest assured that "the Father will honor anyone who serves" Christ (John 12:26b). The grief the church is now suffering in all kinds of trials, refines her faith and will bring her "much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world" (1 Pet 1:6-7).

2.10.3 God promises heavenly reward

More specifically, the Bible promises heavenly reward to the faithful. The character formation and the testing of our faithfulness accomplished in suffering, persecution or martyrdom for Christ have clear corresponding results in heaven. Jesus speaks about it in the beatitudes: "God blesses you when people mock you and persecute you and lie about you and say all sorts of evil things against you because you are my followers. Be happy about it! Be very glad! For a great reward awaits you in heaven." The risen Christ confirms that God will make those who overcome "a pillar in his temple", will have his name written on them, make them citizens of the new Jerusalem, and give them the right to sit and reign on the throne with Christ (Rev 3:12+21; 20:4). This means they will have an important role in the new structures God is establishing, are marked as belonging to God and his future, and are given leadership positions. The eleven disciples who remained with Jesus in his time of trial are promised roles as judges over the twelve tribes of Israel (Luke 22:28-30). The apostle Paul picks up this teaching from Jesus and writes even more emphatically: "momentary light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison" (2 Cor 4:17). The

content of the promise of reward for suffering and martyrdom is that “we shall be heirs with him” and “shall be glorified with him” (Rom 8:17), and “shall reign with him” (2 Tim 2:12).

These promises of Christ our Lord, confirmed and further emphasized by the apostles, are a great source of inspiration, courage and strength for the Christians who are called to face persecution and martyrdom.

We are in agreement that this is a scriptural promise that we must not neglect as a source of comfort. We also agree that the promise of a reward does not contradict salvation by grace alone. Scripture promises reward for faithfulness and Christ-likeness, for service, and for suffering for Christ. Some also suggested differentiating between involuntary and voluntary suffering for Christ or martyrdom, with the latter two incurring the greatest reward. We are not in full agreement about the nature of the reward, whether there is the same reward for all Christians or whether there are different rewards for different people, including a special reward for martyrs. But we agree that the reward is the decision of the master. We found the imagery helpful, that Jesus is filling everybody’s cup to the brim with grace, but that we might not all have the same capacity for holding it.

We were also of differing opinion what place the promise of a heavenly reward should play in our theology of suffering, persecution and martyrdom and in our motivation to faithfully follow Christ. There seem to be four different factors, motivating human beings to certain actions: fear, love, pleasing and reward. We agree that the love of Christ should be our primary motivation in the midst of suffering for him. Some maintain that reward should only be a secondary motivation.

But we all agree that suffering and martyrdom are a part of the grace of God, as Paul writes: “For you have been given not only the privilege (literally grace) of trusting in Christ but also the privilege of suffering for him” (Phil 1:29; 1 Pet 2:19-20). Suffering and martyrdom are not human achievements to boast about, but it is the grace of God that enables us to go victoriously through these sufferings. We cannot boast about our own achievement, but praise God for his work in us and through us!

2.11 Christian ethics of suffering, persecution and martyrdom (ethical aspects)

Suffering for Christ, persecution and martyrdom evoke a lot of ethical questions that current standard textbooks are not equipped to deal with. This section deals with a number of specific ethical issues which have not been covered elsewhere in this statement.

2.11.1 Pursuit of holiness and not of persecution

Persecution does not automatically lead to godliness. A persecuted Christian is not immune to temptation and must still pursue a life of holiness and love (1 Pet 1:15-17). Paul exhorts the Roman Christians: “Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Rom 12:17-18).

When Christians commit crimes, they must be punished and suffer just like everybody else. The state has the duty to punish evildoers (Rom 13:1-7). Therefore Peter warns us, only to speak of persecution, if we are accused wrongly, but not, if we are criticized for any evil committed (1 Pet 3:14, 17). We acknowledge that Christians are often falsely accused of crimes by other people or by the state, to cover up religious persecution or other evil schemes.

A Christian should not aspire after persecution or provoke it. In contrast to the occasional tendency of some Early Church believers, who were misguided to seek after martyrdom for its rewards and blessings, we must remember that it is God’s prerogative, not ours, to determine who is to suffer martyrdom. Similarly, the believer has no right to seek persecution. The Christian is to be steadfast under persecution, but to rejoice all the more when he can avoid it, or when it comes to an end.

2.11.2 Doing no harm and avoiding unethical means

Christians, following the example of Christ, abstain from persecuting others, be it adherents of other religions or other Christians of different convictions. Also Christian martyrs do not cause harm to others.

As God is gracious and puts up with the opposition of humans during the time of this world, so that humans may deny him or mock at him, we have to be willing to do the same. The intent of Jesus’ disciples of calling fire from heaven on those who disbelieve, was rejected by Jesus as a wrong attitude (Luke 9:54-55). We should also

refrain from following the bad example of Jonah in the Old Testament who did not share God's loving attitude towards the people whom he had to call to repentance and who would have preferred God's instant judgment upon them (Jonah 4:1-2).

Christian mission seeks to avoid unnecessary offence. We should apply wisdom to our behavior. Truly Christian mission does not employ unethical means and methods. Our fight against persecution should start by banning any means of practicing our faith and witness which would violate the human rights of others!

Mission is spreading the message that God so much loved the world, that he gave his only son Jesus Christ for forgiveness and salvation (John 3:16). Thus not only the message, but also the way in which this message is spread, always has to mirror God's love and our love to God and to everyone.

In our efforts to combat religious persecution we must adhere to the truth in reporting, refrain from any exaggeration, and employ the utmost care when using statistics, in order to avoid the creation of any false impressions.

2.11.3 Loyal citizenship and primary allegiance to God

Christians are loyal citizens, who seek the welfare of their state, country and people. They are to pray for those in authority, and to seek to live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness (1 Tim 2:1-2). But whenever the authorities try to force them to dishonor God, they must obey God more rather than men (Acts 5:29). The loyalty of a Christian citizen only finds its limits when the state either wants to force us to do evil, wants to forbid the fulfillment of God-given commandments or forces us to choose between the state and our higher loyalty to God. Thus, when we are forbidden to worship our God and him alone or to witness, we will obey God more than men (Acts 4:12). We therefore need a new evaluation of those who break state laws for the sake of the Gospel.

Christians do live and have lived under all kinds of political systems. While the Christian faith has contributed much to shaping modern democracies, this is not the only system under which Christians may live. While recognizing the benefits and disadvantages of different political systems, Christians do not equate democracy with the Christian faith and distinguish their God-given commission to preach the gospel from their political opinions as responsible citizens.

3. Overcoming current misconceptions and distorted terminology

3.1 Overcoming misconceptions regarding suffering

When general human suffering is used as the sole interpretational framework for all adversities Christians are experiencing in this world, including persecution and martyrdom for the sake of Christ, the specific nature and the cause of their suffering, namely their allegiance to Christ, is not sufficiently distinguished. Not all who suffer, actually suffer for Christ.

When suffering for Christ is used as the sole interpretational framework and vocabulary for all that happens to Christians because of serving Christ, religious persecution and martyrdom are not sufficiently distinguished. Not all who suffer for Christ are actually persecuted or martyred.

When scripture which in its original context and intention specifically applies to persecution for Christ, is misapplied to general suffering, the ability to properly think about and respond to persecution is crippled. It is better to make a distinction between the two and regard them on their own terms.¹³

Christian preaching that promises instant gratification and the end of all suffering here and now, actually promises too little. That would be just a better version of this corrupted world.

There have been various reactions in the religions of the world to suffering which lead to a dead end from a Christian perspective, namely ignoring the question of suffering, denouncing the question of suffering as wrong because God rules in absolute monism, or a stoical acceptance of suffering as a fate to be accepted.

3.2 Overcoming misconceptions regarding persecution

There are quite a number of pitfalls in talking and thinking about persecution.

¹³ Most of the material about misconceptions regarding suffering and persecution (3.1 and 3.2) is owed to Tieszen 2008 and developed in more detail there.

3.2.1 Overcoming ignorance and downplaying of religious persecution

In Western societies, more often than not, a lack of attention is given to religious persecution, due to apathy, lack of empathy, and cowardice, or because such reports disturb the idealistic pictures of harmonious life elsewhere, and might endanger ecumenical and inter-religious relations. This leads to conscious repression of the reality of persecution and an aversion to clear language in that regard.

There is also a tendency to negate the existence of religious persecution of Christians in certain contexts where Christians are suffering discrimination, persecution and violence by overemphasizing all other possible causes of conflict. It is then said that what is happening to the Christians is not religious persecution but has mainly social, political, ethnic or some other causes. Christians just happen to be the victims. While this might be in fact true in some circumstances, and while we acknowledge that situations are very complex and that persecution is rarely *just* religious and often mixed with other motives, we plead for taking the religious dimension of persecution seriously, as it may in fact be camouflaged by various other justifications, and may in fact play a more dominant role than commonly acknowledged.

Then there is the perception of historical guilt. In the past and in rare cases in the present, Christians have been implicated in persecution of people of other convictions, including other Christians of differing convictions. This is used by some to mitigate reports about persecutions of Christians today. To this we respond that Christians should repent of persecution they have inflicted on others and regret any wrong their forbears have done. Such deeds were contrary to the explicit teaching of the Gospel and the spirit of Christ and constitute in fact unchristian behavior and must be condemned. However, this does not make present persecution of anyone less wrong and we must still speak up against it.

3.2.2 Overcoming reductionism and distortion

Persecution has had a consistent presence in the church's life since its inception, just as Christ foretold. Yet with the ebb and flow of persecution situations, various misconceptions have arisen.

Perhaps most significant is the view that persecution is only the experience of certain Christians at certain times. Such a historical

exemption relegates persecution either to the past or the future. This view includes the distorted emphasis placed upon the persecution of the Early Church with the resulting notion that persecution is no longer an experience the modern church endures. Or the defining characteristics of persecution are reduced to its particular manifestation in that context and period of history, then coming to the logical conclusion that current reality does not measure up to that. The fallacy lies in too narrow a definition of persecution. Such distortions mitigate the present-day experience of an event that is much more widespread and frequent than at any other time in Christian history.

A related distortion is the popular attention persecution receives in some Christian circles as an eschatological event and/or as an experience that only serves as a signpost for end-time events. While Christ's return provides his followers with hope in the midst of persecution (2 Cor 4:8-9; 1 Thes 4:13-5:11), an experience of persecution should not be irretrievably tied to apocalyptic activity, nor should it be viewed as a potential future event only, which is not relevant today. Christians who view persecution solely as a future event from which they are certain to be spared, e.g. by pre-tribulational rapture, might face a hard awakening to a different reality.

Another distortion is the view that persecution today is an experience isolated to majority world¹⁴ Christians. Undergirding this flawed view, along with the distortions already mentioned, is the misconception that persecution is only manifest in violence. Hence, some Christians only acknowledge the persecution in places of the world where it often is intensely hostile. If, however, persecution is defined as an experience much broader than simply violent acts, and if we take seriously Christ's promise that all those who follow him will be persecuted, then the above views contradict the biblical message (e.g. Matt 10:22; John 15:20; 2 Tim 3:12).

3.2.3 Overcoming terminological confusion

There are two opposite fallacies of equating persecution too closely either with suffering or with martyrdom.

When religious persecution is equated too closely with martyrdom, this leads to insufficient distinction. One can be

¹⁴ This term is used to acknowledge with a positive term that nowadays the majority of Christians is living outside the western world.

persecuted without being martyred, and this needs to be treated on its own terms in order to account for the full nature of religious persecution. Equally, calling the witnesses of Christ nowadays who are experiencing persecution, ‘martyrs’ or ‘living martyrs’, is not helpful as it ignores the fact that in contemporary language the meaning of martyr has largely been associated with the fact of death.

Finally, there exists the misconception that all types of suffering – e.g. natural disasters, sickness, etc. – are to be understood as persecution. While more general types of suffering are serious issues that demand a response from the church, they cannot be equated with persecution. When they are, it is often the former which garner the attention of the church, leaving victims of persecution without the advocacy they need. Distinctions must be made between general suffering and persecution so that neither experience is mitigated, nor is one emphasized over the other.

Some Christians might think that persecution only happens to Christians, as all they have ever heard about in their circles is persecution of Christians. It is important to acknowledge that non-Christians also suffer religious persecution, sometimes by the same hands who persecute Christians. The persecution of non-Christians is as objectionable as that of Christians. It might be helpful to fully spell out when we actually mean ‘persecution of Christians’. The often used term ‘Christian persecution’ is not recommendable, as it lacks clarity as to who is persecuting whom and this term might in fact also be understood as Christians persecuting others.

3.3 Overcoming misconceptions regarding martyrdom

In the course of time several aberrant views of martyrdom have gained acceptance.¹⁵ Some in the Early Church and pre-reformation times felt that martyrdom would result in forgiveness of personal sins. A related distortion, especially prominent in rabbinic Judaism, is the conviction that the martyr’s blood has atoning power for God’s people in general. Yet we must remember that the martyrs died for the message of *Christ* as sin-bearer (1 Pet 2:24; Heb 7:27; 10:10). The idea that Christian martyrs were dying for their own sins or the sins of others contradicts the message which to defend they laid down their lives.

¹⁵ Most of the material about misconceptions regarding martyrdom is owed to Wespetal 2005 and developed in more detail there.

Another distortion, which originated in the Greek concept of the ‘noble death’, excessively glorifies the martyr’s courage and perseverance, leading to veneration of the martyr. But the nature of Christian martyrdom is such that perseverance unto death is in no way meritorious but naturally flows from faith. Persevering in suffering is simply acting consistently with one’s convictions concerning the promises of God – if they are really true, then they are worth suffering for (Heb 11:24-26; 2 Cor 4:17-18; Rom 8:18). The merit, then, is not in the martyr’s courage or fortitude, but in God’s faithfulness to his promises, which undergirds the martyr’s perseverance.

A proper attitude toward martyrdom also excludes the stoical idea that one must stand aloof from and be apathetic toward life as preparation for possible martyrdom in the future. The Bible affirms the goodness of life and man’s right to enjoy it (1 Tim 4:3-5). But when faced with the choice between compromise and death, the martyr values his or her life with God more than this present life.

In some traditions the martyr is afforded the role of a special intercessor before God or mediator of salvation’s blessings. But scripture is clear concerning the sole mediatory role of Christ concerning salvation (1 Tim 2:5; John 14:6; Acts 4:12). To ascribe an equal mediatory role to the Christian martyr would be idolatry, an act akin to that in defiance of which many martyrs died. However, some of us hold that those who have died in Christ may well be continuing in heaven a Christian intercessory ministry which they have already exercised on earth as any believer should. We agree that while we have this ‘cloud of witnesses’ and perfected martyrs around us, we should fix our eyes on Jesus, the originator and perfecter of our faith (Heb 12:1-2).

In some current theological streams Christian martyr terminology is indiscriminately applied to political martyrs and resistance fighters. The fallacy lies in making political resistance a more important criterion than Christian allegiance, and the agreement of political ideas with certain ideologies more important than with scripture. We reject such an extension of Christian martyr terminology to non-Christian political martyrs while we uphold the right of non-Christians to develop and express their own political martyr thinking. However, we acknowledge that martyrdom of Christians is at times caused by Christian ethical and political positions.

Regarding certain positions we reject, it seems desirable to enter into closer conversation with our ‘separated brethren’ and Christians of divergent opinions about what they in fact do teach about these issues lest we erroneously interpret them.

4. Practical application: responding to suffering, persecution and martyrdom

Within a sketch of a theology of suffering, persecution and martyrdom, we here focus on pastoral and ethical considerations concerning a proper individual and collective Christian response, including the responsibilities of leadership in church, mission and Christian networks and in the tasks of theological education and missionary training. Regarding practical wisdom we suggest to study the recommendations in the *Lausanne Occasional Paper* No.32 “*The Persecuted Church*”. This book deals with a myriad of practical and strategic issues, such as capacity building within and for the persecuted church, advocacy and legal issues, prayer, practical assistance for Christians, partnership, development of theological training and theological exchange, resources, and security.¹⁶

4.1 Christian response to suffering for Christ

Christians live in union with Christ. They are “in Christ” and their behavior no longer needs to be dominated by the natural human reactions to suffering and aggression. In this way suffering for Christ contributes to the character formation of the Christian. It is of utmost importance that Christ can be seen in our reaction to our suffering for his sake. The virtues needed to properly respond to suffering for Christ are none other than the virtues that God works in the disciple of Christ by means of his Holy Spirit. They are an expression of Christ living in his followers and of Christ’s own nature. “The Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal 5:22-23). “Three things will last forever – faith, hope, and love – and the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor 13:13). The Christian graces portray the Christian’s attitude to God, to other people and to himself or herself. In view of suffering and persecution one additional virtue not found in these two lists stands out in the New Testament, namely

¹⁶ See particularly chapter 5.

perseverance. Therefore we will examine perseverance before the other virtues.

4.1.1 Perseverance

Perseverance or patient endurance is the main virtue called for regarding suffering for Christ. One of the words for perseverance literally means to ‘remain under’ the burden instead of escaping it through shortcuts. In this, Christ again is our model: he reinforced the truth he preached, “particularly through his courageous perseverance even to death” (Phil 2:8). “Think of all the hostility he endured from sinful people; then you won’t become weary and give up” (Heb 12:3).

Christians need to equip themselves with that same perseverance. The nature of patient endurance consists in waiting; waiting for God to act, to fulfill his promises, and for Christ to return. This patience is based on scripture (Rom 15:4; Psa 37:7; Jas 5:7).

Such patient endurance is called for when faced with suffering, testing, temptation, trouble, hardship, calamities, abuse and unfair treatment (Rom 12:12; 2 Cor 6:4; 1 Pet 2:19-20; Jas 1:12; Rev 13:10, 14:12). Persevering means not giving up or giving in, but continuing to do God’s will, and remaining faithful to Jesus (Rev 2:3; Heb 10:36; Rev 13:10). Such is the patient endurance to which Jesus calls us (Rev 1:9) and which comes from Christ (2 Thes 3:5), and we may pray that we will be strengthened with all of God’s glorious power so we will have all the endurance and patience we need (Col 1:11).¹⁷

The source of strength for our perseverance is real union with Christ. The Christian may say: ‘he is in me, and I am in him, he walks with me, and I am his agent and he speaks through me’ (John 14:20; 15:1-8).

4.1.2 Love

Loving God with all our heart and our neighbor as ourselves (Luke 10:27) in suffering for Christ means, that nothing must surpass our love for God, and that our love for God makes us willing to suffer for his sake. Such love demands that we respond to all people according to a core message of the gospel, in obedience to Christ’s command and following Christ’s example. Such neighbor by love embraces people of other faiths, and extends especially to those who hate us, slander and persecute us, and would kill us if they could or are in fact doing so. Knowing that we are unconditionally loved by God helps us

¹⁷ See Adiwardana 1999.

maintain our self-esteem in the midst of being marginalized, rejected, ridiculed, despised, hated, oppressed, tortured, and being treated inhumanly for the sake of Christ.

4.1.3 Faith

“Faith is the confidence that what we hope for will actually happen; it gives us assurance about things we cannot see” (Heb 11:1). In the midst of suffering for Christ, we do not yet see the victory of Christ which God has promised in scripture and therefore we need to hold fast to these promises in faith. Faith means trusting God, and grasping the hand of the father like a little child, and entrusting our life into his hand and loving care (Mark 10:15). Real faith is not receiving all you want (Heb 10:52).

4.1.4 Hope

“And we believers also groan, even though we have the Holy Spirit within us as a foretaste of future glory, for we long for our bodies to be released from sin and suffering. We, too, wait with eager hope for the day when God will give us our full rights as his adopted children, including the new bodies he has promised us” (Rom 8:23, also see 2 Cor 4:8-9). Suffering can easily wear us down, and it is easy to despair and to lose all hope. When suffering for Christ carries on for generations for some of us, the hope of a better future can get lost. It will help to reassure ourselves of the basis of our hope, as well of its source, content, acquisition, form and effect.

The basis of our hope is the living God (1 Tim 4:11), who has plans for our good and wants to give us a future (Jer 29:11; see the whole book for the theme of hope in the face of adversity), and who can be trusted to keep his promises (Heb 10:23). The content of our hope is not for this life only (1 Cor 15:19), but we are looking forward “with hope to that wonderful day when the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, will be revealed” (Titus 2:13). This includes the return of Jesus Christ (1 Thes 4:13-5:11), the resurrection of the dead, a better life after the resurrection (Heb 11:35, 1 Cor 15:58), new bodies (Rom 8:23), an inheritance reserved by God for us in heaven (Col 1:5), or in one word: glory. In comparison to that, our current suffering will shrink in significance (Rom 8:18).

The source of our hope is God’s self-revelation. This manifests itself on the one hand in scripture that gives us hope and encouragement (Rom 15:4). On the other hand the power of the Holy

Spirit instills overflowing confident hope in us (Rom 15:13), and floods our hearts with light so that we “can understand the confident hope he has given to those he called” (Eph 1:18). Paul prayed for the believers that God would do this in their lives. So may we. He prayed that our hearts and minds might get their orientation from this hope. He pleaded that we may “hold on tightly without wavering to the hope we affirm” (Heb 10:23) even though all visible evidence might point to the contrary. In addition we find many prayers in the Psalms modeling a way from despair to hope. The effect of that hope is confidence and courage (Job 11:18), as “this hope is a strong and trustworthy anchor for our souls” (Heb 6:19).

4.1.5 Joy

Joy in suffering can be seen in trinitarian dimensions as the joy of God, the joy of Jesus, and the joy of the Holy Spirit. The joy of the Lord is our strength (Neh 8:10) and Jesus promises us that we will be filled with his joy in an overflowing measure that no one can rob (John 15:11, 20-24). There is also the possibility of joy from the Holy Spirit in spite of severe suffering (1 Thes 1:6).

Jesus promised: “God blesses you who weep now, for the time will come when you will laugh with joy. God blesses you who are hated and excluded and mocked and cursed because you are identified with me, the Son of Man. When that happens, rejoice! Yes, leap for joy! For a great reward awaits you in heaven” (Luke 6:23). In scripture, we find both the prospect of future joy after present suffering, and the promise of joy now in the midst of suffering as well as the command to rejoice now. Jesus also compares this situation to pains of labor which result in joy once a child is born. The joy Jesus promises is one that no one can take away and that we will receive abundantly, if we ask God in his name (John 16:21-24).

We are following the example of Jesus, who “because of the joy awaiting him, ... endured the cross, disregarding its shame” (Heb 12:2). The apostles were rejoicing that God had counted them worthy to suffer disgrace for the name of Jesus, after having been arrested, jailed, examined with malicious intent and flogged by highest religious authority (Acts 5:41). Paul and Silas sang praises to God in prison in the middle of the night despite having been stripped, severely beaten and locked up in an uncomfortable position (Acts 16:22-25). Paul was glad when he suffered for his converts (1 Col

1:24) not because of masochistic perversions, but because he knew this was part of God's plan for him.

The apostles echo Jesus' words in their teaching. Paul reminds the Thessalonians that they received the Gospel with joy in spite of the severe suffering it brought them, thereby imitating both the apostles and the Lord (1 Thes 1:6). Peter exhorts his readers to "be very glad – for these trials make you partners with Christ in his suffering, so that you will have the wonderful joy of seeing his glory when it is revealed to all the world. So be happy when you are insulted for being a Christian, for then the glorious Spirit of God rests upon you" (1 Pet 4:13-14; 1:6). Equally, James writes to scattered Jewish Christians, to consider it an opportunity for great joy when troubles come their way (Jas 1:2). The writer to the Hebrews remarks that his readers have accepted the loss of all their possessions with joy because they knew "there were better things waiting for them that will last forever" (Heb 10:34).

Such joy in the Lord is our strength in the midst of suffering for Christ. This joy is a gift from God that transcends human capacities.¹⁸

4.1.6 Peace

The deepest peace is peace with God. Such peace is a result of being made right in God's sight by faith because of what Jesus the Messiah, our Lord has done for us (Rom 5:1).

The Lord of peace is able to give us peace at all times and in every situation (2 Thes 3:16). Jesus promised his own to give them peace of mind and heart as a gift from himself and as a result of their connection with him, as it cannot be derived from human nature or the present world order and exceeds anything we can understand (John 14:27; 16:33; Phil 4:6). This peace has the capacity to guard hearts and minds (Phil 4:6) and keep Jesus' followers from being troubled or afraid. While living here on earth we have many trials and sorrows. The reason for peace in the midst of such circumstances is the fact that Jesus has overcome the world (John 16:33). We do not need to worry or fear harm, but may ask God in the name of Jesus for what we need, including the peace he promised (Phil 4:6-7; cf. Prov 1:33). While deep trauma may afflict even the most committed believer who is suffering for Christ and surviving persecution, the peace of Christ is something we may claim in faith.

¹⁸ See Fernando 2007 for more details.

If the peace that comes from Christ rules our hearts, it will also make us exhibit a peaceful attitude towards others, not repaying evil for evil, but striving, if it is possible, as far as it depends on us, to live at peace with everyone (Col 3:15; Rom 12:17-18; 1 Pet 3:11; Heb 12:14). “God blesses those who work for peace, for they will be called the children of God” (Matt 5:9).

4.1.7 Patience (longsuffering)

Patience is a social virtue, together with the two following virtues of kindness and goodness. These are directed towards fellow human beings rather than God.

God himself is very patient. He waits with his judgment of humankind. He wants to give evildoers an opportunity for change for the better (1 Pet 3:4, 9; Rom 9:22).

This same patience in the sense of longsuffering is what the Spirit of Christ enables Christians to exhibit towards abusive people and persecutors (1 Cor 4:12). The Spirit gives the strength to keep on suffering even when not seeing immediate punitive action.

4.1.8 Kindness

Kindness is a question of disposition. Even when people are malicious to us, our attitude is to be the kindness that reflects the character of Christ. The opposite to kindness would be bitterness, rage and anger, resulting in harsh words and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior which we are to avoid (Eph 4:31-32).

4.1.9 Goodness

Goodness is a matter of words and deeds. Even when others make us suffer, the call is to

“See that no one pays back evil for evil, but always try to do good to each other and to all people” (1 Thes 5:15).

4.1.10 Faithfulness

Faithfulness describes the reliability of a Christian. Faithfulness is a character trait of God himself who remains faithful to his covenant (Psa 100:5). Jesus is called the ‘faithful witness’ (*martyr*, Rev 1:5; 3:14), a name also given to a person faithful in martyrdom (Rev 2:13).

Faithfulness is a virtue praised in and expected of God’s people and is to be exhibited in the face of suffering, hardship, persecution and death (2 Thes 1:4; Heb 10:32; Rev 2:10). “God’s holy people must endure persecution patiently and remain faithful” (Rev 13:10).

Faithfulness means remaining loyal to God and Jesus, faithful to God's word and the teachings of Jesus and faithful to our testimony to Jesus, not giving up our God-given mission because of suffering (John 8:31; Rev 6:9). It also means not betraying our Christian brothers and sisters. Faithfulness means remaining loyal to Christ even when facing death and doing so until the end. Faithfulness is a virtue which Jesus promised to reward with the crown of life (Rev 2:10) and with sharing in all his possessions. "For if we are faithful to the end, trusting God just as firmly as when we first believed, we will share in all that belongs to Christ" (Heb 3:14).

4.1.11 Gentleness

Gentleness is that humble meekness which Christ exhibited (Matt 11:29; 2 Cor 10:1). The same polite attitude is to be shown by Christians to fellow Christians (Eph 4:2) and all other people alike. This is especially important in the act of witness (1 Pet 3:16) in order to avoid offence by aggressive behavior.

4.1.12 Self-control

Faithfulness and gentleness are both aspects of self-mastery. A good portion of self-mastery is needed in order to not repay abuse in kind or to retaliate for suffering others cause us.

What is said here concerning virtues in a Christian response to suffering equally applies to persecution and martyrdom for the sake of Christ. Obviously this list is not exhaustive and there are many other lists of Christian virtues (e.g. Col 3:12). The important lesson is that all these virtues which the Spirit produces in the lives of Christians can be applied in contexts of suffering, persecution and martyrdom and are often closely connected to them in scripture.

4.2 Christian responses to persecution

This section discusses Christian responses to imminent or acute persecution. An essential part of the training Jesus provided to his disciples was preparing them for persecution and their response to it (e.g. Matt 10:16-42). The natural human responses to persecution are worry and fear, leading to the dangers of which Jesus warns the believers, namely denying Christ, loving one's family or one's life more than Christ, and refusing to receive those who are wanted because of their witness (Matt 10:33-42).

As Jesus is sending out his own “as sheep among wolves”, he taught that while their disposition and actions should be as harmless as that of doves, this should be combined with shrewd wisdom (Matt 10:16-18). The key question in all of this is not how persecution can be avoided at all cost, but how the mission of proclaiming the Gospel which Christ gave his church can be faithfully accomplished.

Within this framework scripture commands several mandatory responses to persecution, namely staying faithful to Christ when enduring persecution, showing solidarity with the persecuted and praying for the persecutors. There are two additional responses permissible or called for under certain circumstances, namely avoiding or fleeing persecution and resisting persecution.

Here we mainly focus on discussing the tension between avoiding persecution and enduring persecution, and how resisting persecution may relate to them. There are grounds and examples for all these actions in scripture and the challenge lies in discerning which response or which combination is appropriate in each individual instance according to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

4.2.1 Avoiding persecution

In situations where the church of Jesus Christ is exposed to a stronger degree of persecution, it is legitimate to wisely ask whether and how it could be avoided without compromising the witness to Christ. Following the way of the cross does not mean seeking persecution. The call to endure persecution does not mean a weak apathetic or passive acceptance of the event. There are occasions in which God directs the believers to avoid or flee it. The motive behind the fleeing is critical. Primarily to avoid suffering is not sufficient. The priority is always on the mission of the kingdom of God above all else. If the mission were threatened by the persecution, withdrawal is permitted, based on scriptural precedents.

God himself instructed the prophet Elijah to avoid the persecution by King Ahab by hiding (1 Kgs 19:1-18). He equally instructed Joseph to flee to Egypt with the new born Jesus (Matt 2:13-18). Jesus himself at times went into hiding (Matt 4:12, John 8:59; Matt 12:14-15; John 7:1) “because his time had not yet come” (John 7:30; 8:20,59; 10:39). His escape from suffering and death was, however, only a postponement. Nevertheless, Jesus did not pull away from confrontation with the religious leaders of his day. His ministry was

not characterized by ‘tactical moves’, compromise, a ‘watering down’ of his message or avoidance of suffering.

When Jesus sent out his disciples on a training mission, and his instructions expanded to events in the future, he told them when they were persecuted in one town to withdraw to the next in order that the gospel may continue to spread (Matt 10:23). The Jerusalem church in fact later implemented such withdrawal (Acts 8:1). This is also a pattern in the missionary work of Paul (Acts 8:1, 9:25, 11:19, 14:5-6). The flight was not, therefore, a flight from suffering, but a flight in order to fulfill the mission of Christ. While God’s word can go out forcefully through the testimony of martyrdom, it is sometimes better that people remain alive in order to proclaim it (Acts 14:5-6).

In a few exceptional situations, believers did go to meet certain death. Jesus and Paul both returned to Jerusalem to be arrested (Acts 10:19-25). These were, however, key situations and key people in salvation history and they were commanded directly by God to do so (e.g. Acts 20:22-23).

This suggests that at times the church is meant to implement certain strategies to avoid persecution. Through wise, temporary ‘retreat’ churches in some contexts are able to resume their missionary witness at a later and quieter time. Equally, Christian converts should not seek confrontation in their families, but witness to their new found faith in patience and love. However, one must beware of the dangers of avoiding persecution to the degree of adapting to the ideology of a hostile system or of denying the Christian faith.

There are also patterns of behavior in the history of persecution that have led to emigration merely out of fear and for the purpose of finding a more peaceful and prosperous environment. What these emigrants do not realize, however, is that even if they are able to leave their homeland successfully they will never fully escape persecution and hardship. Even more, the churches they leave behind are left with an even greater burden of existing and maintaining a voice as an ever-increasing minority. Equally the phenomenon of ‘inner emigration’, where individuals isolate themselves from the surrounding society, often develop a ghetto mentality and a lifestyle that is marked by a high degree of legalism and insulation, prevents them from having a positive influence on their society or a meaningful witness for Christ among their contemporaries.¹⁹

¹⁹ See Kuzmič 1996:65-66 and Tieszen 2008:71.

A particular issue, which led to much controversy in the Early Church, was the question whether bishops and elders were also permitted to flee, as Jesus had warned of ‘hirelings’ who abandoned their flock to the wolves instead of laying their lives down for them (John 10:11-13, 15:13-14). The church finally adopted the position that a bishop may not flee out of fear or cowardice, but could do so if it served the interests of his church. Such a decision could only be made according to the Spirit’s leading in the specific situation.

In summary: flight is advised and permitted under certain circumstances, but forbidden where obedience to God’s commandments and Christ’s commission and love for others would be jeopardized. The avoidance of distress and pain is not the supreme good. Obedience is, regardless of the cost. When persecution arises, careful consideration must be given to determine whether or not remaining in a situation of suffering is necessary in order to accomplish the will of God.

4.2.2 Enduring persecution

Flight may at times be impossible, impractical or inappropriate. In these cases God’s people are called to stand firm where they are and remain faithful, even unto death. Enduring persecution as an expected event for the greater purposes of God is in fact the most broadly attested biblical directive regarding a response to persecution. This was outlined above when discussing the virtue of perseverance.

There are multiple biblical characters to follow as examples, such as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abdnego who refused to bow before King Nebuchadnezzar’s golden image, fully aware of the consequences (Dan 3:8-30). The Apostle Paul also several times demonstrated his readiness to endure the consequences of his ministry, even unto death (Phil 1:20-26; 2:17), and he was steadfast in going to Jerusalem even if it meant persecution (Acts 21:10-14).

The fact that Christians experience persecution in itself is not a mark of Christian spirituality and maturity, but the way in which they endure and choose to respond to it. Due to its internal solidarity and an ethic that is visibly friendly to people outside, the persecuted church of Jesus Christ gains credibility in its context. A Christian lifestyle which is in contrast to its antagonistic context is the more visible due to its love of the neighbor and foregoing all violence.

Practicing such a response to persecution is the difficult part. We can only do so with the power of the Holy Spirit.

4.2.3 Resisting persecution

While Christians are called to endure persecution and to avoid it in certain circumstances, there remains an option which may be a part of these responses. God may call Christians to resist persecution as well. There are times when it is appropriate to fight for one's legal rights.

Jesus defended himself at one point during his trial (John 18:23), not to protest his suffering but as a testimony to his innocence, while remaining silent throughout the rest of his trial. Paul demonstrated resistance through his appellation to Roman law (Acts 16:36-39; 22:24-29; 25:10-11). With his knowledge of the law and his own rights as a citizen of the Roman Empire, Paul was able to avoid persecution by resisting it. However, it is important to note that both Jesus and Paul exercised this choice under specific premises and for specific purposes. Like fleeing, resisting is permissible unless it hinders the furtherance of the kingdom of God.

In fact, Christians have a right to be angry about situations of persecution with a holy indignation and a righteous outrage which leads one to seek to transform such conditions. Such transformation might occur through legislative change, which itself might be expedited through civil disobedience, publications, political lobbying, or public demonstrations. However, the guidelines to which resistance must submit remain important. Christian resistance to religious persecution must not distort, diminish or contradict the gospel, God's purposes in persecution, Christ's mission in the world or the Holy Spirit's leading to respond to persecution in another manner.

We are not called at all times to be subjected to ungodly treatment, nor are we at all times to shirk such treatment. Ultimately, God himself will defend his church, but in the same way, there are times when God will lead his people to rise up in holy indignation and resist efforts to squelch his people.

4.2.4 Solidarity with the persecuted

While the other three responses to persecution necessitated seeking God's direction as to the appropriate response to persecution, no such prayer is needed here. Christians can only ask God *how* they should help their persecuted brothers and sisters, not *if*. Even Christians whose persecution is intensely hostile can show solidarity with the

experience of others through prayer. However, it remains a primary responsibility of those whose experience of persecution is presently mild to stand for and with those whose experience is intensely hostile.

Praying for the persecutors and the authorities is an additional element that should unite all responses discussed above.

These elements have been or will be spelled out elsewhere in more detail.

4.3 Christian response to martyrdom

4.3.1 Accepting martyrdom as a grace from God

“For you have been given not only the privilege (literally grace) of trusting in Christ but also the privilege of suffering for him” (Phil 1:29; 1 Pet 2:19-20). When martyrdom comes our way we should receive it as God’s grace for us out of his own hands. We can learn from Bonhoeffer who said: “Every Christian has his own cross waiting for him, a cross destined and appointed by God. Each must endure his allotted share of suffering and rejection. But each has a different share: some God deems worthy of the highest form of suffering, and gives them the grace of martyrdom, while others he does not allow to be tempted above that they are able to bear”.²⁰

But we are neither to seek martyrdom nor to glorify it.

4.3.2 Rightly remembering martyrs

The way the church is dealing with its martyrs is not a minor matter. It is rather an issue with which the church stands or falls. The differences that arose because of beliefs and practices rejected in Reformation times concerning the intercession of the saints, canonization of martyrs and the veneration of saintly relics, should not stifle our own ability to rightly remember the martyrs of the past and the present. We need to remember the “cloud of witnesses” surrounding us (Heb 12:1) and the martyrs that have gone before us to be encouraged by their example of faith and perseverance. Of course we must not lose focus on Jesus (Heb 12:2) and must not accord martyrs a role and function that they do not have according to scripture. But we must avoid the opposite pitfall of undervaluing the witnesses of the past.

²⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer: *The cost of discipleship*. Macmillan 1963, 98-99. Online: www.crossroad.to/Persecution/Bonhoeffer.html.

The commemoration of martyrs has three important dimensions. In remembering them we keep a public memory of all Christians killed for Christ, even those whose martyrdom might have happened unnoticed and whose names were never recorded. The commemoration also reminds how these acts of violence could happen, refuting the stories made up as smokescreens. And it calls us to be vigilant.

As the persecutors have learned the power of martyrdom over the course of history we are often facing a situation today where those who oppress Christians seek either to avoid their death, or avoid it being linked to their hands, or avoid it being called martyrdom. Christians have to slave away in labor camps as enemies of the state until they die of exhaustion. Others are released from prison when they are close to death so they do not die in captivity. Even others are placed in psychiatric hospitals and are administered drugs that destroy their personality, but are not physically killed. Christians are often falsely accused of all sorts of crimes and imprisoned or executed as common criminals in order to cover up the actual religious causes of their mistreatment. One of the reasons is to rob the church of its martyrs.

So, let no one steal our martyrs and let us avoid undervaluing them ourselves.

4.4 Practical applications for the individual Christian

While the previous three paragraphs (4.1-4.3) dealt with the disposition of the Christian in suffering for Christ and general responses to persecution and martyrdom specifically, the following three paragraphs (4.4-4.6) are revisiting the issue from a different perspective, differentiating between different levels of responsibility: individual, collective or in specific functions. Individual and collective responsibilities cannot always be neatly demarcated, and of course it depends on the kind of culture and society in which one lives. Usually what is said here on a more individual level is foundational and also applies to collective and functional responsibilities.

4.4.1 The practice of an ‘evangelical spirituality’

The practice of an evangelical spirituality helps to remain steadfast in suffering. It is based on the attitudes and behavior engendered in the Christian by the Holy Spirit as described above. A number of practices commanded by scripture or found helpful by Christians in the course

of church history assist in remaining steadfast in suffering and faithful in witness to Christ.

Nurturing a loving relationship with Christ keeps us close to him. By studying and memorizing the word of God diligently and regularly (Col 3:16), we are continually given orientation and encouragement (Psa 119:105), and there is substance of which the Holy Spirit can remind us in situations where we are deprived of a Bible. Keeping fellowship with other Christians will give us support and correction. Only in living out the reality of being members of the body of Christ can we fully be Christians. Expressing our loyalty to Christ through baptism and remembering our baptism by water will strengthen our resolve to stay faithful to him even to a baptism of blood (Mark 10:38; Luke 12:50).

We are specifically to pray for our persecutors, as well as to intercede in prayer for those who are persecuted. By adopting an appropriate life-style in case we live in a context where we have the choice, we will identify with the suffering church. Commemorating recent and past martyrs can be a source of strength in our own present situation. We also encourage Christians to engage actively in the pursuit of peace, justice and religious freedom, be it individually or collectively.

All of this is nothing out of the ordinary. The first place to practice it is the individual life of the believer and the believing family. The relevance of some of these practices is developed in more detail below.

4.4.2 Nurturing a loving relationship with Christ

The secret of our suffering for our faith is that it draws us even closer to Jesus Christ who suffered first for us and whose suffering continues in that of his witnesses. For Christians, suffering with Christ is the greatest sign of love for him. Jesus was thinking both of the sacrifice of his own life on the cross as well as his disciples sacrificing their lives for him when he said: “There is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13, cf. Eph 5:2). We gain strength from him, the source of true life, through this loving relationship (John 15:1-8). The Spirit of God rests upon those who are insulted for Christ’s sake (1 Pet 4:14). Since the days of early Christianity, believers have experienced again and again that Christ is never closer to his followers than at the moment when they are transformed inwardly into his likeness by their persecution. In

addition, they get to know him personally in a deeper way as the crucified and resurrected one (Phil 3:10f; Col 1:24).

4.4.3 Praying for the persecutors

Following Old Testament tradition (e.g. Job 31:29; 42:8-9), the New Testament exhorts us to pray for God's grace for persecutors. Jesus admonished the disciples, "Pray for those who persecute you!", "Pray for those who hurt you!" (Matt 5:44; Luke 6:27-28). Paul echoes this when reporting: "We bless those who curse us" (1 Cor 4:12).

The most impressive testimony of a dying martyr is Jesus' prayer that God will have mercy on his persecutors. He prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). The first Christian martyr, Stephen, emulated this in his prayer, "Lord, don't charge them with this sin!" (Acts 7:60). These prayers have been repeated by many martyrs of Christ throughout the history of the church.

4.4.4 Intercessory prayer for the persecuted

The foremost and most essential way to help persecuted Christians, which every follower of Jesus can practice, is to pray and intercede for them in Jesus' name. This is usually also the first thing that Christians under severe persecution are asking for. Jesus connected great promises to prayer (Matt 7:7-11; Luke 11:5-8; John 14:13f.), and the Epistles place great emphasis on them (Eph 6:18; Phil 1:3f; 1 Thes 5:17, Jas 5:16b-18). Such prayer has the potential to give relief, instill joy and the courage to witness in those abused and imprisoned (cf. Phil 1:13, 19). Specifically mentioning the names of those persecuted in intercessory prayer is a power even persecutors cannot ignore. Such intercessory prayer should be fervent, continuous, specific, and come with oneness of heart (Acts 12:5,12; 4:23-30). Finding out about answered prayers spurs us on and leads to giving thanks. This kind of intercession is mutual, as the more intensely persecuted parts of the church are praying for those facing less persecution and other temptations instead. In this way fellowship in the body of Christ grows out of intercessory prayer.

4.5 Practical applications for the local church

The local church, meaning any type of local gathering of Christians, is the primary manifestation of the body of Christ to which an individual Christian relates. Its leaders have a pastoral responsibility toward the

Christians entrusted to them which includes dealing with any aspect relating to suffering for Christ, persecution and martyrdom. Such local churches also have a responsibility and a capacity for action which goes beyond that of the individual Christian. Therefore this paragraph seeks to make suggestions concerning how to put into practice in a local church the ecclesiological insights stated earlier (2.7) in worship and teaching and particularly in congregational prayer, in preparing for situations of lesser persecution, restoring the weak, or equipping for future suffering and expressing local and international solidarity with the persecuted across Christian divisions.

4.5.1 Integration into worship, teaching and counseling

One could actually go through all the expressions of the life of a church and highlight their relationship to our topic. Suffice it to make a few suggestions.

Our attitude should be one of mutual learning between the parts of the body of Christ with less and more intense persecution, and to do so across Christian divisions. Those with more freedom should learn from and rejoice with the church's suffering under repressive circumstances as to how they remain steadfast in the faith and in their growth despite restrictions.

Regular prayer for peace and for the persecuted in the general intercessory prayer in Sunday worship is of such importance that it is elaborated in a section of its own. In addition, the topic should be specifically highlighted once a year in a service by following the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church of the World Evangelical Alliance or other such denominationally set days.

Whenever suffering for Christ, persecution and martyrdom appear in a biblical passage that is the basis for the Sunday sermon or any other Bible exposition, it should be expounded concerning its relevance for today and the specific context instead of being avoided. A pastor should plan to explicitly devote at least a sermon each to persecution and the cost of discipleship every year. Some suitable biblical text might be Luke 21:12-15; Heb 10:32-39; 1 Pet 2:13-17; Matt 5:10-16; 2 Thes 1:3-12; Gal 1:23-24; Mark 10:29-30; 2 Cor 2:9-10; 4:7-12; Rom 8:35-39; John 15:18-21; Acts 16:13-34.

The topic should also be anchored in religious education and confirmation classes.

A congregational offering should be taken at least once a year to support persecuted Christians and as the need arises.

When we are baptizing, we teach that baptism means sharing in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Through baptism we are immersed into the liberating death of Christ, our sin is buried, the ‘old Adam’ is crucified with Christ and the power of sin is broken. The baptized are no longer slaves to sin but free people. Completely integrated into the death of Christ, they are buried with him and are raised here and now to new life in the power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, in the certainty to be one with him in a resurrection of the dead of the same nature as his in the age to come (Rom 6:3-11; Col 2:13; Eph 2:5-6).

In that context we should remember that Jesus also talks of another baptism, the baptism of blood, for himself and some of his followers (Mark 10:38; Luke 12:50). Both baptism and martyrdom have the same origin, as they are both gifts of God and need both to be accepted in faith (Mark 16:16). While baptism of water is only a symbol of death, martyrdom means death itself and truly and physically dying with Christ. The martyrs who have been faithful witnesses unto death serve as a reminder of the duty of all those baptized in the name of the Trinitarian God to be witnesses to him (Matt 28:19f; 1 Pet 3:15; Rev 6:9).

When we are celebrating in the Lord’s Supper that the Lamb of God has shed his blood for us for the forgiveness of our sins (John 1:29; Matt 26:28; 1 Cor 11:25), this is the opportunity to offer a reminder that “by the blood of the Lamb” we are also given the strength to remain faithful in our witness and overcome suffering, persecution and even martyrdom (Rev 12:11). When we remember the passion of Christ, we should also remember that suffering for Christ is the fate he predicted for his followers, and that the servant who is there where his master is, will also experience the law of the corn of wheat, that only bears fruit when it dies (John 12:24-26).

In addition, the local church is the first place to give counseling to those who are traumatized by persecution. Many will find hope and healing through worship and prayer and through family, church and other trusted support structures. However, some survivors of persecution who have witnessed extreme violence or have experienced arrest, torture or other forms of inhumane treatment may have post-traumatic stress reactions such as nightmares, “flashbacks”, hyper-

vigilance, depression or other symptoms. Churches should receive training in how to recognize these symptoms and reactions. They should also be able to provide support and assistance to traumatized individuals and families, including grief counseling, and should know when to refer to other counseling and medical professionals when needed.

In such a way many aspects of communal worship, e.g. congregational prayer, preaching and teaching, the offering, baptism and the Lord's Supper and individual counseling all have an important relation to suffering for Christ, persecution and martyrdom, and this needs to be taught and practiced as appropriate.

4.5.2 Congregational prayer

Everything that has been said about individual intercession for the persecuted also holds true for congregational prayer. But as congregational prayer is a place where prayer is taught to the individual Christian, and where the local church stands jointly before God, it has its own special significance. There are explicit instructions on congregational prayer in scripture:

“I urge you, first of all, to pray for all people. Ask God to help them; intercede on their behalf, and give thanks for them. Pray this way for kings and all who are in authority so that we can live peaceful and quiet lives marked by godliness and dignity. This is good and pleases God our Savior” (1 Tim 2:1-3).

The context makes it clear that Paul is specifically speaking of prayer during worship. Prayer for authorities and for peace has thus always had a place in liturgy. Obviously, such prayer should not lead to a glorification of our political leaders, but should oppose the injustice and discord in society, which particularly includes persecution of Christians and hindrances to the practice of faith. This is supported by the exhortation to remember those in prison, as if we were there ourselves and to remember those being mistreated, as if we felt their pain in our own bodies (Heb 13:3). An exemplary case of the form such prayer could take in a situation of threat is that of the early Jerusalem church (Acts 4:23-31). Their prayer in another instance could include prayer for their leader to be freed from prison (Acts 12:5). Such prayer demonstrates that the church does neither rely on government or resistance to it, but on the one who rules all rulers.

4.5.3 Transitioning to situations of lesser persecution

Experience has taught that churches that have lived under intense pressure and totalitarian systems, at times for generations, are often ill equipped to face the new challenges of a situation of greater freedom and (temporarily) lesser persecution. Preparation for freedom is a vital subject, not least in preparing the church for the activities of cults. Church history must be taught in an appropriate way and cover appropriate parts of the world in order to have the desired effect of strengthening the church.

When persecution and external pressure lessen, usually some of those backslidden or fallen during times of persecution by denying their Lord and leaving the church want to return into the fellowship. The church needs to deal with them and those who have become secret disciples during that period. There is a need for the proper attitude and a spiritual process for restoring the weak. Ideally there should be a consensus under what conditions and with which procedures this is done. The Early Church intensely dealt with the fate of those who had failed under persecution, but modern Christianity has largely ignored the issue, even though it is still relevant. Let us avoid any radicalism here and be merciful towards those too weak to withstand, recognize the wisdom of avoiding persecution and accept the options of flight or silence.

Peter is perhaps the best known example of a lapsed believer, who became weak out of fear for his life (Matt 26:69-75; Mark 14:66-72; Luke 22:56-62; John 18:15-18,25-27; also see the warnings in Matt 26:31-35; Mark 14:27-31; Luke 22:31-34; John 13:36-38). Peter formally denied his Lord, swearing, “A curse on me if I’m lying – I don’t know the man!” (Matt 26:74), but repented and was received back into fellowship with the people of God. Peter also demonstrates the close connection between fear of suffering and overconfidence. Note also that Jesus had already prayed for his disciples, not asking God to take them out of the world, “but to keep them safe from the evil one” (John 17:15), and for Peter (Luke 22:31-32) that God would enable him to maintain his faith under persecution and personal failure. The contrasting example is that of Judas, who after betraying Jesus, killed himself out of remorse, instead of seeking in a repentant spirit to reestablish fellowship with Jesus (John 27:3-5).

Another area of preparation is that of categorically renouncing the temptation of power in a newly found situation of freedom.

Unfortunately much too often in church history, those who had suffered persecution before, once they had come to any influence, have become persecutors of Christians of diverging convictions or people of other worldviews themselves. Christians need to learn to live in a pluralistic society, to share public space, and to share Christ in reconciliatory language. The possibility of a coexistence of a plurality of worldviews must be accepted and Christians must defend the religious freedom of people of other convictions without sharing their claims to truth.

4.5.4 Equipping for increased future suffering

Christians in contexts of lesser persecution must equip themselves for increased future suffering. The attitude, “this will never happen here”, is treacherous. History teaches that circumstances can change quickly, and our Lord warned us of an escalation of persecution and a global period of tribulation before his triumphant return. Christians in Asia²¹ and Europe²² are encouraging the church in their respective region to take active steps in preparing for suffering, which seem globally valid:

- By fostering a deeper spirit of worship, communion and walk with the risen Lord in holiness and love (Heb 10:32-36; Rev 7:17).
- By careful attention to the Bible in learning from it in real life trouble (Jer 15:15f; Rev 3:8-9) and by developing lay leadership whose faith is based on the centrality of the word of God and whose lives are governed by its authority.
- By a vigilant discernment of the spirits to discern heresies and pseudo-Christianity inside the church and deceptive ideologies outside the church who deny the necessity of the cross of Christ and of following Christ to the cross (1 Jn 2:19; Phil 3:18-19; Rom 4:25).
- By intelligently and fervently praying for each other and fostering deeper Christian fellowship and brotherly and sisterly love locally and worldwide (1 Pet 5:9).
- By intentionally learning from church history and from Christians in current situations of more intense persecution, e.g. that the ultimate goal of our faith is not found in this world and that

²¹ Letter to the Churches in Asia 1988.

²² ICN 2006, p. 21-22.

people choosing to follow Christ immediately have to be taught about the cost of discipleship.

- By developing church models and leadership structures which can withstand pressure and continue to fulfill their spiritual functions under persecution, such as cell groups and churches without traditional church buildings.
- By praying for wisdom, grace and boldness in carrying out the Great Commission in the midst of persecution.

4.5.5 Expressing Christian unity and solidarity

In all its expressions the local church must act as a member of the wider body of Christ across time, across space and across divides (see 2.7 and 4.2.4).

The worship and teaching of the local church must provide appropriate space to remember the martyrs and confessors of the past, in order to take seriously the communion of saints (see 4.3.2).

Christian solidarity, particularly with those suffering more intense persecution must be expressed in the life of the local church. This suffering with the other members of the body of Christ must go beyond one's own congregation, denomination and nation; it should be worldwide and cut across Christian divisions. The members of the body have mutual responsibility for each other.

In addition, it is important to seek as much Christian unity as possible under the circumstances in responding to persecution on the local church level. It strengthens the witness and position of the church in a given place when the different local churches speak up together, in one voice, and for each other, when one of them is under pressure or attacked, instead of isolating the victims further by silence or public criticism. If there is disagreement or need for criticism it should be voiced among Christians only, and not vented publicly, particularly not in order to save one's own skin. Otherwise the persecutors can exploit the apparent or real isolation of their victims' suffering for their faith in order to further humiliate them.

When local churches, particularly those in situations of milder persecution express their solidarity with Christians and churches in situations of intense persecution, they should seek to do this in unity with other churches in their locality as far as possible. This is especially important when their solidarity reaches out to suffering Christians in other denominations and confessions, which are also

represented locally. Local disagreements and divisions must not stifle the show of solidarity with suffering Christians elsewhere in the world.

While affirming this, we must recognize that very often the active participation of Christians and churches in the suffering of persecuted brothers and sisters outside of one's own narrow perspective is dysfunctional. This cannot be excused by a presumed lack of information as this is readily available. In reality, our feelings of religious self-sufficiency or even cowardice as well as the narrow local patriotism of our churches are all partly to blame. It is the responsibility of the leaders in the local church to overcome this and to set a positive example by showing courage and decisiveness in this matter. Solidarity with those who suffer is a Christian imperative. Indifference or apathy is sin. All of this equally applies on a wider level, to which we turn next.

4.6 Practical applications for Christian networks and the church worldwide

There are various levels of responsibility and structures beyond the local church level. Ecclesiastical hierarchies, denominational unions, and other Christian networks on a sub-national, national, international, regional, continental or global level, all have the responsibility to maintain Christian unity and to serve the church in functions which go beyond the capacity of the respective smaller organizational units. They are assisted and served by specialized ministries and networks focusing on mission and/or advocacy for the persecuted.

In the New Testament period these responsibilities were taken care of by people with a task and calling beyond the local level, such as the apostles, elders, overseers, itinerant teachers and prophets and other people equipped and gifted by the Holy Spirit. The concern for other members of the body of Christ could be expressed by encouraging letters, visits and special collections. For example when Paul recognizes that the church in Thessalonica was in danger of being shaken by the troubles they were going through, he sent his co-worker Timothy there for a visit (1 Thess 3:1-3).

Nowadays the most important single initiative has been identified as “capacity building within and for the persecuted church. This should be primarily in terms of training”.²³

²³ Sookhdeo 2005, p.62.

Christians in Asia have highlighted the following objectives and responsibilities:²⁴

- Create worldwide awareness of how certain parts of the church are functioning under varied types of restriction.
- Learn from and rejoice with the church's suffering under repressive regimes as to how they remain steadfast in the faith and in their growth despite restrictions.
- Encourage local churches experiencing difficulties through prayer support and other practical forms of help.
- Equip local churches to convert their present times of trouble into occasions for testimony to Jesus Christ, the Lord of the church.
- Prepare local churches to face possible adverse times in years ahead, by affirming the oneness of the Body of Christ and cultivating a deeper measure of active global cooperation and by creating effective avenues of contact and communication directly or indirectly with churches suffering persecution.

A fruitful cooperation between specialized ministries and church structures is of utmost importance. Specialized ministries are to serve the church and should assist the church in ministering to the world. Both churches and ministries, rather than being focused on themselves, should be focused on the kingdom of God and on glorifying God.

4.7 Practical applications for mission

This section deals with the responsibility of those being sent or sending others to preach the Good News of Christ in word and deed. We have in mind here, missionaries, sending churches, mission organizations and missionary training. They need to avoid and expose the corruption of mission, avoid unethical means in mission praxis, be aware of the challenges, and adequately train and support missionaries.

4.7.1 Avoiding and exposing the corruption of mission

The international *Lausanne Covenant* of 1974, probably the most influential evangelical document in existence, contains a very self critical article 12:

At other times, desirous to ensure a response to the gospel, we have compromised our message, manipulated our hearers through pressure

²⁴ Ro 1989, p.3-5.

techniques, and become unduly preoccupied with statistics or even dishonest in our use of them. All this is worldly. The church must be in the world; the world must not be in the church.

The guideline for uncorrupted mission can be found in 1 Peter 3:15-17:

If someone asks about your Christian hope, always be ready to explain it. But do this in a gentle and respectful way. Keep your conscience clear. Then if people speak against you, they will be ashamed when they see what a good life you live because you belong to Christ. Remember, it is better to suffer for doing good, if that is what God wants, than to suffer for doing wrong!

Christian faith is very self-critical and asks: Are we gentle and full of respect to our fellow human beings, to whom we try to explain our hope and faith?

4.7.2 Avoiding the use of unethical means in mission praxis

If we want to fight the persecution of Christians, and if we want to fight for the right to witness to our faith and practice it in public, we should start by banning among ourselves any means of practicing our faith and witness that would violate the human rights of others.

We consider as unethical means:

- Offering people non-spiritual rewards for conversion, such as money, goods, medical treatment, opportunities or offices.
- Threatening people with civil consequences, putting undue psychological pressure on them or pressing them for decisions they cannot oversee, e.g. because they are too young or mentally ill.
- Using the authority of a state function while in office, e.g. as police or state school teacher.
- Giving or refusing financial advantages, e.g. regarding credits by banks or discriminating against adherents of other religions through inheritance laws.
- Preaching to ‘captive audiences’, who cannot freely leave, e.g. as army officers to their soldiers or as prison director to inmates.

We condemn the use of violence, coercion, threat, harassment, enticement, lies or pretenses to win people for Christ, who otherwise would not follow him. Ethics and mission belong together.²⁵

²⁵ Look out for an evangelical ethics code on mission which is in preparation.

4.7.3 Awareness in sending churches and missionary organizations

The reality of suffering, violence, persecution and martyrdom must be clearly understood by sending churches and missionary organizations.

- The local church must be the place where teaching about suffering, persecution and martyrdom is begun and done.
- The primary teachers on suffering, violence, persecution and martyrdom should be those who have gone through it; but the entire church globally has a responsibility to teach and prepare. Teaching must go beyond individual experience and must be informed by thorough biblical and theological understanding.
- Sending churches and missionary agencies should stay up to date on the major current forces causing persecution and the most common kinds of persecution (see 1.1).
- In view of the requirements stated below, they should be particularly seeking out candidates who are ready for long term or life time ministry, willing to sacrifice prosperous lives and to go to the hard places.

4.7.4 Adequate training of missionaries

The reality of suffering, violence, persecution and martyrdom in the contemporary world, especially the inevitability of suffering for Christ's sake, must form a key part of training for missionaries. They must be prepared mentally, spiritually and practically.

- The missionaries' message should include the dimensions of a costly gospel.
- Missionaries' training must include the reality that ultimately a call to mission is not a call to personal safety, but rather a call to identify with the suffering and to take up one's cross and possibly lay down one's life to bring life to others. Missionaries should know that carrying the gospel to people and places where Christ is not known, can easily invite violent opposition. Clear biblical teaching is needed on how to persevere in times of trials.
- Missionaries must learn that people are not necessarily impressed by their being decent people. They are impressed by Christians who make Christ the greatest treasure and value Christ above money, education, work, people, children, spouse – even their own life.

- This must be balanced by teaching on caution and care for one's personal safety in missionary training, by learning to analyze contexts, conditions and possible development of high risk situations, and knowing what to do in the event of kidnapping, imprisonment and other eventualities.
- Missionary training should include consideration of how to prepare believers for suffering, violence, persecution and martyrdom, for example on methods of how to assist believers in their response to persecution, whether it is to flee, to resist by advocacy, or simply endure.
- A key principle in this must be to carefully take into account the views and reality of Christians indigenous to the context of suffering.

4.7.5 Appropriate support for missionaries (member care)

Missionary agencies and sending churches need to be very aware, and have a strong commitment to support and be alongside their missionaries serving in contexts of suffering. Actually agencies and churches need to be taught as well. Such support includes:

- Developing continuous communication with the missionaries, rapid communication channels and plans for support ready for emergency.
- Learning how to keep contact with their missionaries and not unintentionally creating danger for them by sending letters or books, which can be seen by local authorities and cause even their expulsion from the country.
- Awareness when missionaries need a time of respite from intense suffering and the offer of debriefing by the mission agency, and of rest and restoration.
- Special awareness about the needs of missionary children in such contexts and offering care, support and orientation to the families.
- Visits to such missionaries may be very important and encouraging, if they are made by people who have the necessary wisdom, understanding and sensibility to serve well in encouraging them, and not causing them extra stress.

4.8 Practical applications for theological education

Theological education has the potential of shaping the faith and life of current and future Christian generations. This section discusses the place of this topic in theological curricula, domains to be included and steps for implementation.

4.8.1 The place of the topic in theological curricula

It is imperative that biblical teaching on persecution and martyrdom becomes an essential element in our curricula of theological education. This should include both the theoretical reflection on this topic as well as practical and pastoral application in training of future trainers for the body of Christ.

The integration of this topic into presently used curricula could be advanced by either creating new courses and seminars, which deal concretely and specifically with this topic, or by permeating the existing courses on broader topics with references and applications to this topic.

In the case of the first option, it is suggested that such a course description might be formulated in the future, in order to facilitate the creation and implementation of such courses in existing theological curricula. This is not the intention of this present section of the statement, but it is a proposal for future development.

4.8.2 Domains to be included

The theological studies on this subject should include the following domains:

- In-depth study of the persecution of the church throughout history, including the cultural surroundings, concrete events, and the response of the church to this persecution in preparing the believers for a walk of faith.
- Training for pastoral care and counseling for the persecuted, including post-trauma recovery. This should encompass preparation of the entire church to both suffer and assist the suffering.
- Studies on the role of the state and international relations in situations of persecution. This should deal with the God-ordained role of the government and standards of justice for this authority, as well as human rights and the role of the international community in advancing and protecting such rights.

- Reflection on the role of the church vis-à-vis the government concerning persecution, e.g. the options of exercising pressure for transformation, the role of prayer and spiritual battle, passivity and civil disobedience, etc.
- Teaching solidarity of the entire body of Christ with those suffering for his sake throughout the world and across denominations. This could incorporate travels to regions of rampant persecution, exchange of ideas, and building of lines of communication and fellowship for mutual encouragement.
- The option of self-defense should be examined and compared critically with the alternative of pacifistic resistance. These choices have been insufficiently studied and researched, in particular the hermeneutical questions concerning violence, justice, retribution in the Old Testament. This is particularly relevant in light of religious violence and extremism in the present context.

4.8.3 Steps for implementation

In each and all of these models, concrete steps could be implemented to enrich our theological education. These could incorporate the following:

- Designing specific courses to deal with the areas enumerated above.
- Initiating a dedicated teaching position for this subject, possibly for someone with practical and personal experience and exposure to persecution. This person, if personally involved, should dispose of sufficient distance to the persecution, in order to assist and equip others.
- Holding faculty seminars in view of sensitizing teachers and professors to this need of the church.
- Preparing and executing short-term involvement of students and faculty in the church suffering more intense persecution.
- Assigning appropriate literature to required reading, leading to research projects in this field.

Realizing the intrinsic value of theological education in influencing the entire body of Christ throughout the world by adequate preparation of its future leaders, we encourage those involved in training and teaching to integrate this subject matter into all aspects of curricula.

5. Conclusion

This is the message we are sending to ‘the global church in mission’, the worldwide body of Christ, and to our fellow evangelicals in particular. We are specifically calling on theologians, missiologists, and Christian leaders to consider this message in view of fulfilling together in joint obedience the mission to which God has called us. We encourage you to:

- study it personally in the light of scripture,
- assess what relevance it has for you and your ministry,
- reflect how this statement could be used at your level of responsibility,
- discuss it in your group,
- respond to the editors in view of a revision and improvement of this document, and in view of further consultations,
- implement what is relevant in your context and position of responsibility.

We refuse to be discouraged and defeated in the midst of suffering, because of our faith in the Lord of history. We are looking forward “with hope to that wonderful day when the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, will be revealed” (Titus 2:13).

“May the Lord of peace himself give you his peace at all times
and in every situation. The Lord be with you all”
(2 Thes 3:16).

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Facing human suffering:

a biblical and theological perspective

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Abstract

Dau addresses the issue how to face human suffering from a biblical and theological perspective. He starts with the question of theodicy and comes to the conclusion that there is no solution to the problem of suffering. Suffering appears in many more facets than is explained by most of the various views. In his opinion, the answer to suffering and evil lies in the incarnation and the cross of Christ. In an exemplary study, he examines the response to suffering of the Bor-Dinka people in the Sudan. He points out the importance of community in bearing suffering, the character forming effect of suffering and the interrelation of hope and suffering.

Keywords Problem of evil, incarnation, mystery of suffering, cross of Christ, community, character formation, hope.

1. Introduction

We attempt to construct a biblical and theological response to the problem of evil and suffering. This problem understandably generates various theological and philosophical explanations, which in our view, do not provide the solution or answer to the problem of evil and suffering. In the final analysis the problem of suffering is insoluble if by solution we mean total and absolute elimination of suffering and pain in this life. However, in the cross of Christ, we find a distinctively Christian answer to suffering in the sense that God has done something about human suffering and has thus provided a framework in which we can respond to suffering and transform it into some higher good in this life. The basic assumption of this response is

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that God does not cause or will our suffering. Instead, he identifies with our suffering and he works faithfully, everlastingly and infallibly to transform it into the highest good possible or into a life lived within the realm of Jesus' resurrection (Inbody 1997:188). Consequently, this response is anchored on the biblical and theological images of the cross, community, character¹ and comfort of hope. These images, we propose, are the framework in which a distinctively Christian response to suffering may be constructed. We must note that this response does not discard traditional explanations and views on the problems of suffering, but it tries to build on them and perhaps goes beyond them. Before we turn to these images, we will first attempt to restate these traditional views.

2. Grappling with suffering and evil

2.1 Restating the problem

Why does God permit suffering and other forms of evil in the world if he is omnipotent, wholly good and loving? This is the all crucial question that sets in motion the so-called problem of evil and suffering. The basic assumption in this line of thought seems to be that evil and suffering in the world are irreconcilable with the existence of and belief in a good, all-powerful God. If that was the case, then the problem would essentially concern those who believe in a personal, loving and caring God. For others who do not, the problem of evil would not be a problem at all since everything is but a manifestation of deity. To provide a solution, those who believe in a personal, relational God make various attempts to justify the ways of God and to make sense of their experience of suffering in relation to their faith. Generally, four attempts at a solution are made.

First, evil is seen as non-being or absence of good. The contention of this view is on the one hand, that God is the absolute reality and absolute perfection and on the other, evil is the absolute imperfection and therefore absolutely non-existent (Richardson 1983:193). Since evil is nothing in itself, there is therefore no problem of evil. Alan Richardson notes that the perennial philosophy from

¹ My use of character is different from John Hick's "vale of soul-making" which he uses as a reason suffering is permitted for, that is to make character, but my argument is that suffering does something to character, not necessarily as the reason for which suffering is permitted but as an aftermath of suffering (cf. his *Evil and the God of love*, p. 289-97).

Plato through Neoplatonism to Thomas Aquinas held this view. Here, God is the source of all perfection and below him evil exists only as fullness necessary for the perfection of the whole, not as an entity on its own. Thus, according to this view, also known as monism, only God is real; evil is nothing less than an illusion. However, the difficulty with it is that it undermines itself by denying the problem that it tries to solve. Furthermore, it disregards concrete accounts of evil and suffering and real victims. For them evil is a tangible reality, not an illusion.

Second, evil is seen as a result of a bitter struggle between two principles of reality, good and evil, light and darkness, matter and spirit or God and Satan. The good comes from God and evil comes from Satan and other powers of darkness. In this struggle human beings are not neutral. They are either on God's side or on the devil's side. Although this view maintains that the good principle or God will win ultimately, the battle seems to be undecided now, with the belligerents apparently on equal terms. That the struggle between these principles is on equal terms is underscored by the fact that it still continues with no outright winner. If the first view inflates the power of God, this view deflates it; it reduces God to the level of his creation. Consequently, God is a limited God, who himself is in the process of overcoming the disorder of the universe of which he is a part (Richardson 1983:194). The other difficulty with this view, also referred to as dualism, is that its apparent denial of the omnipotence of God does not offer a convincing solution to the problem at hand. However, the biblical or Judeo-Christian tradition seems to affirm both dualism and monism. On the one hand God is the sole and sovereign controller or ruler of the universe. As such evil must only exist in the world either with his permission or for his purposes or both. But on the other hand, he seems to be in continual warfare with the forces of evil. Consequently, Jesus Christ had to come to destroy the works of the evil one and establish the kingdom of God. During his earthly ministry, Jesus fought injustice, greed, cruelty, disease and sickness, suffering and pain and granted relief and deliverance to its victims. By these actions Jesus declared his hostility and enmity to evil or the devil as his and his Father's enemy. Thus, God is not the source of evil and it is difficult not to conclude that Satan is.

Third, evil is regarded as firmly under the sovereignty of God, forming part of his eternal decrees. This view contends that God in his wisdom made righteous decrees and made things the way they are.

Since God is God, the human person who is his creature has no right to dispute his wisdom. For Karl Barth, discussing evil on the same footing with God elevates it to a level it does not deserve. Nevertheless, his treatment of evil remains outstanding and voluminous. The difficulty with this view is how human responsibility meaningfully relates to God's sovereignty to the point that God is absolutely sovereign without impinging on human responsibility and freedom. There remains a perpetual tension between God's sovereignty and human responsibility that this view does not adequately deal with and of which the mystery of God's grace and of human suffering is a part.

Finally, the moral view states that God is powerful to remove evil and suffering. But his love and righteousness limit him. This view contends that God cannot will the irrational because his character is truth and righteousness. God created humanity with the freedom to choose the true, the beautiful, the good and above all, to reciprocate the love he so generously lavished on him (Richardson 1983:195). But humanity did not and pain, suffering and moral evil resulted. Thus, the problem of evil and suffering is ultimately a problem of human existence; a problem of his being endowed with the power of choice. But there are still problems such as the origin of the power to choose and the question of haphazard suffering or innocent suffering. However, the advocates of this view would still contend that there is no such a thing as innocent suffering because all have sinned. As Emil Brunner puts it, we stand before the cross not as innocent or neutral spectators, who gaze into an abyss outside ourselves, but we ourselves stand in the midst of an abyss. For the rift, which cuts through the world passes through us, leaving us with no claim of innocence whatsoever and with the knowledge that the only suffering which can be truly called "innocent" is the suffering Jesus bore for us (Brunner 1952:182). Furthermore, we live in a fallen world, a world ruined by sin, whose consequences are borne by all people. On the power of choice, they would say man could have chosen good if he wanted.

The problem of evil and suffering is much more intricate than we can ever fathom or explain. For even as believers, when we look honestly into our own hearts we see both the reality of evil and our own need for the mercy and the grace of God. Deep down within us we know we are part of the problem of evil, as we also know the grace of God working in us and through us. Because of this, we believe, the Reformers building on salvation history and creation had their focal

point of theology in justification by faith as their answer to the theodicy question. Brunner essentially agrees with the Reformers' position when he writes:

The right answer [to the problem of theodicy] is certainly one in which the problem is not *solved*², but it disappears, because we see that the real solution lies in the acknowledgement of guilt and in the hope of redemption (Brunner 1952:180,184).

Echoing the same sentiments, Alan Richardson has succinctly concluded this position when he says:

The ultimate solution to the problem of evil must lie in the fact that the God who created the world is also the God who has redeemed it; the creator is himself in Christ the bearer of all creation's sin and suffering as he is the bringer of the redemption that shall be. But only the Christian can know that Christ has explained evil in the act of defeating it (Richardson 1983:196).

2.2 The incarnation as the Christian answer

The above views attempt to give a rational explanation of the problem of evil and suffering. They endeavour to understand evil, to try to shut it out or even to master it (Peterson 1982:11). But one theologian has suggested that since suffering is an inseparable part of the problem of evil, it cannot be abolished or explained; it must be faced (Tilley 1987:362). However, even if that is granted, the believers still have to battle with how suffering relates to their faith. What is the point in suffering? Is it God's will for us to suffer? If Christ in his death on the cross took our sins and sicknesses, why do we still suffer? These questions spring from seeking hearts, trying to come to grips with both the reality of God and of suffering in a dangerous world.

Frances Young (1983:555-556) has aptly summarised some possible answers to these questions in two diverse views³: The first is the acceptance of suffering, either as a disciplinary measure on God's part, or as the highest way of following or imitating Christ. This view asserts that suffering ennobles. Again, this view continues, suffering is

² Italics are Brunner's. See his *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, p. 184.

³ Whatever and however the modifications may be, all the views that we have examined fit in very general terms into this summary. So Augustine, the Reformers, the Enlightenment, Barth, Moltmann, Berkouwer and Liberation theology all fit in one way or another into these two views. But as we have tried to show, specific details remain diverse and irreconcilable among these views.

good since its fundamental purpose is to act as a warning so that preventative action is taken before some irreparable damage is done. Furthermore, according to this view, pain and suffering have an important role in the overall purpose of life, which is to produce free, mature persons able to overcome obstacles and foster moral qualities of the highest order. Above all this view concludes, suffering stimulates love and compassion of a deeper quality both in those who suffer and those who try to alleviate suffering.

The second is a sense of outrage and anger that there should be suffering at all and efforts to eliminate it on the ground that its removal is God's redemptive will. This view strongly objects to the first view for its failure to explain irrational pain such as extreme nerve pain, mass suffering as distinct from individual suffering, haphazard and innocent suffering such as earthquakes, epidemics, birth defects, etc. It also argues that the outcome of suffering is both ambiguous and unpredictable – suffering may ennoble, but it sometimes embitters. More seriously, says this view, the first view does not do justice to the central focus of the Christian faith – the suffering of Christ on the cross for the purpose of taking away our suffering and pain.

As it may be evident, these two opposite views tend to put one in an “either/or situation”. Their inadequacy lies in their attempt to address a complex problem as the problem of evil and suffering in black and white. They assume too much as they try to explain everything on a problem about which too little can be surely pinned down. They seem to ignore particular contexts and victims of suffering by trying to provide for everyone straightjacket solutions to a complex problem. Consider someone who holds the first view, for instance, in a particular situation of suffering, telling the victims that it is God's will for them to suffer and that suffering has come upon them for the purpose of being ennobled so that they may acquire and foster high moral qualities. Or that they are suffering because suffering is the highest way of following and imitating Christ. It would still be very insensitive and absurd to tell them that their suffering is intended to stimulate love and compassion in them and in others. All these may well be true, but it is a very simplistic and an unfortunate way of explaining their complex circumstances. The advocate of the second view also treads on dangerous grounds by assuming that suffering has ceased to be because it was taken care of at Calvary. It is true that Christ in his death on the cross took our sin, suffering and sickness. It

is true that he took our infirmities and weaknesses on the tree and that by his wounds we are healed. But that does not mean we will never face suffering in this world. As the experiences of Paul, Timothy and Epaphroditus show (2 Cor 11:16-12:10, Phil 2:25-27, 1 Tim 5:23), we are not spared the heartaches and tragedies of life, but we are given mercy and grace on account of Calvary to triumph through them, not apart from them. Thus in being so categorical these two views run the risk of causing pain and alienating sufferers from God, especially when what they promise does not come about. As Harold Kushner has argued such answers, when what they promise fails to come about, lead us to blame ourselves to spare God's reputation. They implicitly require us to either deny reality or repress our feelings. In other cases, they either leave us hating ourselves for deserving it or hating God for allowing it to come upon us (Kushner 1981:29).

2.3 The incarnation and the mystery of suffering and evil

To do justice, as Young suggests, it is necessary for these views to admit that there is much more to suffering that we do not know or cannot explain so neatly and categorically. Suffering is a real, not an imaginary problem; it is shrouded in mystery of which our redemption and existence are a part. In our existence as limited, finite beings, suffering and evil will always remain a mystery. In spite of our best theological and philosophical explications, this mystery continually eludes us. We may want answers and explanations, but in the end we cannot find any. A deep mystery surrounds the origin of evil and suffering, a mystery from which the complexity of our existence and life on earth are inseparable. We live in a fallen world where suffering and evil will unfortunately continue to be a part of life. At one point or another in this life, each one of us will have to go through some measure of suffering. The degree may vary and the circumstances may be different but we will all have to face suffering. There are no guarantees, as far as recent events in our world are concerned, that holocaust or genocide will not recur. Maybe not in the same fashion as it did in Nazi Germany or Rwanda or the Balkans or Sudan, but the potential is always there in us, in our hearts⁴. Thus a fundamental part

⁴ I will never forget standing in one of the genocide sites in Ntarama, near Kigali in May this year. Here more than five thousand people were murdered in the sanctuary of a church, in the house of God. One of the survivors tried to console us not to cry. This was difficult to heed as we stood staring in dead

of this admission is that sin and suffering are indicators of what is radically wrong with our world and that God's saving action involves confronting it (Young 1983:356). In Christ the transformation and transcending of suffering can be effected and therefore a framework of responding to, not solving, the problem of suffering and evil. Consequently, the Christian response to the tragedy of sin and suffering arises from a personal experience of the power of Jesus' resurrection to heal the alienating, self-centred forces in every human heart. This power enables the Christian to respond positively to suffering in his/her own life and that of others (Fatula 1987:991). God in Christ identifies with us in our suffering, assuring us that suffering can be faced and overcome, even if it is not fully comprehended. Furthermore, the Christian answer to the problem of suffering and evil is not only the identification of God with us in our suffering, but also the power of the resurrection, which transforms us and gives us hope in the place of despair, new life in the midst of death (Inbody 1997:178). The incarnation is the Christian answer to the problem of suffering. Tyron Inbody captures the sense of what we are trying to put across when he writes:

The answer (to the problem of suffering and evil) is Christmas, where God's power hits us with all the force of a hint; the cross, where God's power of identification endures all pain to the end; Easter, where life in all its travail is transformed into new life through the power of resurrection; and the kingdom of God, where the reign of God in the midst of suffering and evil is accomplished. If the cross and resurrection of Jesus is God's final answer to our travail, then suffering is surmounted by going through it to new possibilities of new life, and not around it. The courage that is given to faith in the presence of the crucified and resurrected Christ is the courage of acceptance, endurance, and transformation (Inbody 1997:179).

The incarnation is therefore the ground on which suffering can be overcome and transcended. But it does not guarantee that the Christian will not suffer. Rather, it gives the promise of ultimate triumph over suffering through the power of Jesus' resurrection. It provides the believer with a powerful framework of responding to suffering now, not resigning to its inevitability but to the grace and transformation of Jesus' cross and resurrection. In that sense, the incarnation permits the believer to see in the cross the very presence of God in the midst of

silence at the skulls and the bones of the dead, still lying there more than six years after the massacre. The reality of evil and suffering was present with us and in us since the people who did this were just people like us.

suffering and sin of the world as well as his redemptive entering into and bearing of the consequences of evil in his creation (Young 1983:556). This is what the cross entails as we examine below.

3. Suffering and the cross

3.1 The paradox of the cross

Martin Luther King powerfully portrays the paradox of the cross when he writes:

Every time I look at the cross I am reminded of the greatness of God and the redemptive power of Jesus Christ. I am reminded of the beauty of sacrificial love and the majesty of unswerving devotion to truth. It causes me to say with John Bowring: In the cross of Christ I glory, towering o'er the wrecks of time, all the light of sacred story gathers round its head sublime. It would be wonderful were I to look at the cross and sense only such a sublime reaction. But somehow I can never turn my eyes from that cross without also realizing that it symbolizes a strange mixture of greatness and smallness, of good and evil. As I behold that uplifted cross I am reminded not only of the unlimited power of God, but also of the sordid weakness of man. I think not only of the radiance of the divine, but also of the tang of the human. I am reminded not only of Christ at his best, but also of man at his worst (King 1963:45-46).

Brunner also observes that if there were ever an event in which evil, innocent suffering, malice and human pain reach climax, it is the cross of Christ. For at the cross both the wrath of God on the one hand and his love and righteousness in the other are revealed. At the cross, it becomes evident that evil is that which God does not will and yet at the same time that which he has the power over to turn into an instrument of his saving work. In the cross, the mercy of God, his righteousness unite with his omnipotence and omniscience. The crucifixion of Christ is in one sense the act of God upon which the whole Christian faith rests and in another the most terrible scandal in the whole history of the human race. At the cross we are granted a glimpse into God's government of the world and into the impenetrable darkness which otherwise lies upon it (Brunner 1952:180-183). The theology of the cross is thus a paradox that the Christian gladly accepts and lives with. The cross is both a symbol of suffering and deliverance. It reveals both the wisdom and foolishness of God. To the ancient Greeks and the Romans, the cross constituted the weakness and the inability of the Christian God. They rejected the Christian

message, precisely, because of the cross. They could not perceive how an almighty God could die on a cross like a common criminal. But for the Christian⁵, as Paul writes, the cross is the power and the wisdom of God. Consequently, the theology of the cross is not a theology of impotence. Its apparent powerlessness is God's paradigm of a different mode of power. In the cross, God's power is the power of identification, participation, endurance and transformation. The theology of the cross is central to the Christian interpretation of and response to suffering. The cross is God's way of overcoming the destructive powers of evil in our world (Inbody 1997:180).

How does the cross relate to suffering? First, the cross speaks of God's presence and participation in our suffering. Luther King notes that God does not leave us in our agonies and struggles, but he seeks us in dark places and suffers with us and for us in our tragic prodigality (King 1963:16). God does not observe our suffering from a safe distance; he comes down to us and participates in it. The cross is the supreme demonstration of God's solidarity with us in this world of suffering. Thus the cross of Christ always stands as a solemn and powerful reminder that God was prepared to suffer in order to redeem the world and that he expects his people to share the same commitment and pain as they participate in the task of restoring this fallen world to its former glory (McGrath 1995:15,26). Second, the cross directs our gaze⁶ from our lonely and morbid contemplation of our own anguish and suffering to the suffering and transforming God, who shares in our suffering (Inbody 1997:180). The cross shows us how much God loves us. When we look at the cross, we realise at once that God gave his very best so that we may live. The death of Jesus Christ on the cross brings us face to face with the wonder of God's love for us so much that we are strengthened to face our

⁵ D A Carson notes that Paul in the Corinthians passage on the cross sets forth the only polarity of ultimate importance by saying that the message of the cross divides humanity into those who are perishing and those who are being saved (Carson 1993:14).

⁶ That our gaze should be directed to the cross and not to evil has been powerfully dramatised by Walter Lowe using an illustration of a cobra and a rabbit. Lowe writes, "Remarkably, the cobra can devour a rabbit, even though the rabbit is faster. It does so because the moment they make eye contact, the rabbit is paralyzed. Trembling with fear, the victim stands frozen with fear as the snake slowly, rhythmically, closes the distance, and then, at its leisure, strikes" Lowe's point is that we too become paralyzed if we stare at evil too long (Lowe 1994:211).

suffering with courage and determination. Suffering, as Alister McGrath has observed, possesses a double cutting edge: the sheer pain of experiencing it and the unbearable intensity of what it may mean or imply (McGrath 1995:68). Consequently, the prospect of facing or encountering it freezes and intimidates us. For all sorts of reasons, suffering frightens us even as what it may mean in terms of our relationship with God and others intensely causes us to fear. But the cross reminds us that its power has been broken and its sting has been blunted. So when we look at the cross, we are reassured that suffering does not possess the power we think it has and that after all, it has some meaning in God's plan of salvation. In that regard, as Brunner rightly asserts, it loses its negative character; it becomes a means by which God draws us to himself although via some paternal severity. This, says Brunner, is the greatest transformation possible in the sphere of human experience (Brunner 1952:183). The cross is God's victory over suffering and evil. Third, the cross tells us that since God suffers with us and takes part in our suffering, we need to alleviate the suffering of others. By seeking to relieve the hardships of others in this harsh world, we are working to ease the suffering and the pain of God (McGrath 1995:62). As we meet practical needs of those who suffer, we demonstrate the message of the cross to them. When we keep company with those who suffer and provide their needs, we assure them, that God is with them and identifies with them in their misery and pain. Thus in the cross, we experience the practical love of God and work to express it to those who suffer. That God shares and participates in our suffering is a comforting and encouraging message, considering that suffering is a lonely experience. In suffering, we feel abandoned by God and human beings. But the cross reminds us, that God is not only with us in suffering but he also knows suffering. He is the God, who abides with the suffering and the weak.

Finally, the cross vividly reminds us that there is suffering in being Jesus' followers. For the followers of Jesus there is such a thing as 'the fellowship of his suffering' in this world. Both joy and suffering are integral parts of the Christian experience in the same manner as summer and winter are seasons of the year (Smith 1971:92). The Bible clearly tells the believer, that he/she is not excused from suffering with the rest of humanity just because he/she is a follower of Christ. As a matter of fact, Christians are promised additional suffering just for being Christians. There is a strong sense in which the Bible has always insisted, that the cross we bear precedes

the crown we wear and that being a Christian involves taking up one's cross with all the suffering and difficulties that go with it and carry it until it leaves its marks on oneself and redeems one to that more excellent way, which comes only through suffering (King 1963:25). For in the cross lies the Christian overwhelming and ultimate victory.

3.2 The victory of the cross

Furthermore, the cross conveys to us the message that God has done something about suffering: he has acted to defeat it. On the cross, Christ won the victory over evil and suffering. He conquered the kingdom of this world and inaugurated the kingdom of the father. Yet the full consummation of his victory still awaits the future. Meanwhile, living in the "time between the times", we shall continue to face suffering as that which is defeated but is still here; evil as conquered but still plaguing us now. We shall continue to live under the power of the cross as those who are saved and are still being saved. In this tension of the "already and the not yet", both the present and the future are very real to us. In the cross, therefore, God has done something about suffering in the present and will do something about it in the future. The cross is thus a symbol of God's ultimate victory over sin and suffering. We therefore, "see the cross as the magnificent symbol of love conquering hate and of light overcoming darkness" (King 1963:46). Suffering may overtake us, persist in our situations, but it is a defeated evil, which, paradoxically, is still present with us. However, the cross of Christ will always stand as a powerful reminder that although suffering is still here with us, it is and will be defeated and that our God is present with us in our sordid circumstances. Thus a genuine response to the presence and the love of God as mediated by the cross has the power to release humanity from its chains and produce healing in suffering (Young 1983:556). In addition, the scriptures teach us that the suffering we now face prepares us for the glory which awaits us when suffering and evil shall ultimately be defeated (2 Cor 4:16-17). For now, however, "we must each share in Calvary and the cross, for only so can we share the glorious victory of the resurrection" (Tutu 1983:74).

3.3 The victory of the cross over suffering in the experience of the *Bor Dinka* of Sudan

In the experience of the *Bor Dinka*⁷ people, the cross has become not only a symbol of regeneration, but also a tangible affirmation of Christ's presence in the midst of war and suffering. Emerging and evolving from traditional *Dinka* emblems of beauty and sophistication, social and spiritual authority, the *Dinka* cross appears in various shapes and designs with different uses and functions. It is used as a flag, as a symbol of Christian initiation, as a weapon against evil powers, as memorial to sacrifice and significantly as a concrete affirmation of Christ's presence in turbulent times (Nikkel 1997:86). The *Dinka* cross as portrayed in the new *Dinka* songs combines, on the one hand, integral aspects of a highly Christocentric, biblical and evangelical theology, with messianic and eschatological emphasis, and on the other, concepts and imagery rooted in the *Dinka* traditional religious values. The cross, as the *Dinka* now understand it, speaks both of Christ's person and of his sacrificial death for us. There is therefore a little distinction between Christ and his cross. The cross is seen as Christ himself. For many *Dinka* Christians in the recently concluded Sudanese war, the cross embodies Christ and Christ embodies the cross (Nikkel 1997:96). The cross is the presence of Christ amidst pain and suffering. In addition, as Marc Nikkel observes, the cross is seen as a source of protection and encouragement and as a proclamation of salvation and judgement. But the sphere in which the cross evokes the greatest exhilaration and even trepidation is its use as an invincible weapon against the *Jak*⁸ or evil forces. In this sphere, the cross has become for the *Dinka* Christian community a tool and an emblem of religious, social and cultural evolution (Nikkel 1997:97-99). In the face of radical Islamic fundamentalism, the *Dinka* Christians have used the cross as a symbol of defiance and opposition. In the midst of the immense losses and challenges of post-war environment, the cross has become the most important emblem of hope and faith for the Christian community. During the destruction of the *Dinka* ancestral homelands following the split in the ranks of the Southern liberation forces in 1991, the cross was the only item that the believers carried along with them wherever

⁷ The *Dinka* are the largest people group in Sudan and live in the Upper Nile Province in Southern Sudan. The *Bor Dinka* live around the city of Bor.

⁸ *Jak* is the *Dinka* concept of a personal evil.

they went. In their most trying moment of loss, deprivation and suffering, the cross stood as a symbol of the presence of *Nhialic* (the one above), of the God who never abandons his people even in suffering and death. Amidst cultural fragmentation and socio-economic degeneration, the cross of Christ is virtually the only symbol of hope and unity, which draws disparate groups together, providing a solid basis for healing, regeneration and rebuilding of the war-torn communities of Sudan.

Suffering and the cross are thus inseparably related. Only within the context of the cross is the basis of our response to suffering provided. As Ravi Zacharias correctly notes, when we come to Jesus at the cross, where love, holiness and suffering combine, we find both the answer to why we suffer and the strength to live in this mortal frame for him. As we come to the cross and from there live our lives for him; we make the extraordinary discovery that the cross and the resurrection go together (Zacharias 1998:216-217). In the community of the cross we face suffering in the light of the cross and the resurrection. Consequently, a community that experiences the cross of Christ in suffering is capable of absorbing the suffering of its own. We therefore turn to community below as a framework in which we respond to suffering.

4. Suffering and community

4.1 Our basic need for community

If the cross provides the basis of a distinctively Christian response to suffering, the community provides the environment, the place for that same response to be genuinely Christian. In our view, both are inseparable in the context in which we are discussing them. There is a community because there is a cross and vice versa. The cross embodies the community and the community embodies the cross. The community, in its corporate life, is called to embody an alternative order that stands as a sign of God's redemptive purposes in the world. It points to a concrete social manifestation of the people of God. The community expresses and experiences the presence of the kingdom of God by participating in the '*koinonia* of the suffering of Christ' (Hays 1997:196-197). The cross may be said to be the sign of God's redemptive purposes in the world. There would be no Christian

community without the cross⁹ but community in a non-Christian context can be without the cross. The Christian community is only capable of absorbing suffering because it draws from the cross. Suffering would be unbearable without both. We all become vulnerable when we suffer and it is only the love, the sympathy and encouragement of God through others that may strengthen and help us to go through our predicament. "Suffering allows the afflicted person to experience the compassionate love of God through other believers. It allows the sufferers to understand experientially what it means to have one's burdens borne" (Feinberg 1994:431). This is the task of a biblically functioning community, a community that knows what it means to share in the *koinonia* of Christ's sufferings.

However, the rise of individualism in our world today is undermining the community spirit. In Africa where traditional community values were jealously held, we are witnessing a colossal growth of individualism. We are constantly asserting our rights, sometimes at the expense of our duties in the community. We hardly remember that "in the context of the community we have not only the claims to our rights, but we also accept our duties" (Amaladoss 1994:113). We rarely hear of duties, because the spirit of individualism is more of a guiding principle today than the spirit of community (Amaladoss 1994:114). The church must guard against this if it is to remain a community capable of absorbing the suffering of God's people.

4.2 The role of the community in suffering

We all need to be a part of such a community for our own good and that of others. But we hardly take note of this when everything is going well in our life. However, when tragedy strikes us, we realise that we need a community. Anyone, who has ever fallen sick or has been bereaved or has lost property through some misfortune, knows

⁹ Richard Hays has argued to the effect that placing the community, the cross and the new creation in that order is theologically significant. He maintains that the community must precede the cross as God's design for covenant people, put in place before the New Testament writings. He places the cross in the middle as the pivot point of the eschatological drama. The new creation is placed last as a reminder of the future redemption of God. We argue to the contrary that the cross precedes the community as the basis on which the new creation and therefore community is built. It seems to us that the New Testament has it in that order (See Hays' *Moral Vision of the New Testament*, p. 198-199).

how uplifting it is to have the community come to their assistance and encourage them. How may a community do this? What are some practical ways in which the community may absorb suffering? First, the community provides encouragement from God's word. The scripture is undoubtedly a great source of encouragement when it is used with love and compassion. It is God's word of comfort and assurance in the midst of loss and suffering. It is God's voice of love and grace, assuring the sufferer of God's very presence¹⁰. Of special help among many may be the psalms, the book of Job, some prophets and the New Testament, particularly the passion narratives. In these, the struggle with God and with the reality of suffering and anguish is evident.

Obviously, special care and a great measure of sensitivity must be applied when we use the scripture to encourage those in suffering. Pitfalls to watch include forcing the scripture down the throat of the sufferer, drawing hasty conclusions, and giving prophetic words from the Lord as to why what happened, happened. These run the risk of bringing more pain rather than the encouragement intended. Having already been severely afflicted, this is the least that the sufferers will need from the community. Second, the community prays incessantly with and for those who suffer. At the time of suffering, prayer is immensely important. There is no substitute to prayer as an outpouring of needs, emotions and feelings. The community needs to pray specifically that God will comfort, strengthen and help those caught in misfortune. Sometimes, the miracle may not happen immediately after such a prayer. But those in suffering, as Harold Kushner notes, will discover people (community) around them, God beside them and strength within themselves to help them survive through the tragedy (Kushner 1981:131). At times, it may be very difficult even to pray when much suffering is being experienced and both the community and those who suffer are overwhelmed, but there still remains no other

¹⁰ Robert Randall tells of the importance of being spoken to when one is in pain. He tells of how he and his wife in vain expected to hear a word of encouragement from their minister when their first daughter was born with brain damage. With good intentions, the minister just wanted to be with them in their pain but they expected him to tell them "you are going to be okay. Things will work out fine. God will look after you". However, there is a delicate tension between when to speak and when not to speak or between what to say or not say and hence the need for the guidance of the Holy Spirit (See Randall's *What People Expect From Church*, p. 37).

viable substitute for prayer. For prayer, however feebly it is offered, changes situations otherwise unchangeable. Third, the community provides and maintains company and presence in suffering with those who suffer. One of the most difficult aspects of suffering is feeling abandoned by God and fellow human beings. Sometimes, the sense of being alone in it all actually aggravates suffering. When no one from the community comes to see or be with the sufferer, loneliness and abandonment set in. Rightly or wrongly, the absence of the community in the time of bereavement and suffering speaks to the sufferer of rejection instead of love and care. People may have valid reasons for failing to visit the sufferer. But the suffering person may not know this. All he/she may know is that nobody came to see or visit him or her in hard times. For someone to be with them in their suffering is all important.

It is more valuable for them that someone is there even if they have nothing or little to say. Job's friends said to him all the wrong things imaginable at the time of his suffering and pain. They misunderstood, misrepresented and accused him of wrongdoing that might have led to his misfortune and suffering. But at least they were there and that must be appreciated. Had they not been present, Job might not have expressed his feelings or made his wisest theological statements on suffering. The book of Job would be poorer without these sayings, which came about in Job's dialogue with his friends. We are saying that we should be careful in our talk. We are saying that as a community we need to be available and present with those who suffer. For our availability and presence speak to them of our love, sympathy and care. Finally, the community provides material assistance for those who suffer. Providing encouragement from the word, praying for and with those who suffer and being present and available for the suffering have their place but practical actions must accompany them. As the old adage goes, "actions speak louder than words". This is very much applicable in the situation of suffering more than in any other. The suffering person may very well hear more clearly the language of our actions than that of our words. Is this not what the Bible alludes to when it says: "suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you (plural, referring to community) says to him, go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed, but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?" (James 2:15). It is not any good. Words cannot be eaten or wrapped around a cold naked body. Acting in a situation of suffering is an expression of

God's love. For indeed, "if anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?" (1 John 3:17). That is the big question which calls for actions rather than mere words. The love of God is clearly shown by actions, since God so loved the world and gave his son (John 3:16). Wise words may greatly encourage and comfort sufferers but they will do much more when practical actions accompany them. The two seem to be inseparable.

What form should the material assistance of the community take? This should be left to the generosity and discretion of individual members of the community who offer to help. The needy will appreciate it. It is the meaning behind it, not the form it takes that encourages and comforts the sufferer and alleviates the pain.

5. Suffering and character

5.1 The effect of suffering on character

If the cross is the basis of a distinctively Christian answer to the problem of suffering and evil and if the community is the context in which a genuinely Christian response may be constructed, then the result of that response is a distinctively Christian character. Character, as the sub-total of the mental and moral qualities that make a person who he/she is and as the ability and moral strength to handle difficulty and dangerous situations¹¹, is closely related to suffering and to community. While suffering may not be pleasant, there is no doubt that it leaves indelible marks on our character. It either embitters or ennoble us. Hence, suffering shapes character, either positively or negatively. In the context of the cross and the community, the pertinent question is how we respond to suffering, not why we suffer. Because our response to suffering is almost always naturally negative, we shall articulate in what follows a positive response, bearing in mind the forming of our character and its effects on our life.

5.2 Suffering and character formation

We cannot gainsay the importance of character in the Christian walk and ministry. L. Gregory Jones observes in that regard that Christians are called to be people of character, nurtured by the word that journeys

¹¹ Here, I am trying to paraphrase the definition of character as rendered in the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*.

with us throughout the diverse contexts and experiences of life (Jones 1998:69-76)¹². One of such life experiences is suffering.

Suffering touches our character deeply. But how does it do this? What does suffering do to character? How does it shape character? To respond, let us consider the following:

First, suffering refines character. The scripture likens our life or character to silver or gold containing dross, whose true and precious value is only revealed after being refined in a furnace (1 Pet 1:6-7). The gist of this biblical teaching is that suffering leads to perseverance and perseverance to character and character to hope (Rom 5:3-5). In the words of Alister McGrath, suffering “gets rid of the dross of all the worldly supports we foolishly invent for our faith” (McGrath 1995:73). After being through the fires of suffering, our self-sufficiency, our self-independence and selfishness are replaced with love, compassion and concern for others. We come to learn that God is our source of strength, sustenance and life and not what we have or who we are. We come to a place where we feel and understand the pain and the agony of those who suffer since we ourselves have been through it. Suffering brings us to the realisation that we live not in our own world, but in the world of God and other human beings. As suffering renews and refines our character, we admit and accept that we cannot explain life and its complex realities. We realize that by God’s grace we can face life one day at a time. Thus suffering shatters our notion that we are in control of the world around us; reminding us of our vulnerability and fragility as human beings. Sometimes when we suffer we gain a new perspective on life and we learn to appreciate so much that we take for granted. Desmond Tutu, after being diagnosed with prostate cancer and going through the suffering that the disease brings, sheds some light on this thought. He explains:

Suffering from a life-threatening disease...helped me to have a different attitude and perspective. It has given a new intensity to life, for I realise that there is much that I used to take for granted – the devotion of my wife Leah, the laughter and playfulness of my grandchildren, the glory of a splendid sunset, the dedication of colleagues, the beauty of a dew-covered rose. I responded to the disease not morbidly but with a greater appreciation of that which I might not see and experience again. It

¹² For more on the importance of character as addressed in the context of scripture and ethics see Stanley Haurwas’ *A Community of Character*, Jones and Fowl, *Reading in Communion* and Rasmusson and Birch, *Bible and Christian Ethics*.

helped me to acknowledge my own mortality, with thanksgiving for the extraordinary things that have happened in my life, not least in the recent times (Tutu 1999:233).

Suffering may thus become a sort of character school, at least for those whose character it has formed or refined. Suffering may not be necessary for character formation, but when it touches character it does not leave it unchanged. Persons who have gone through one form of suffering or another have something unique about their character.

Second, suffering disciplines and trains character. That life is sometimes tough and brutal makes it necessary for character to undergo some discipline and training. Out of training and discipline develop courage and determination to face suffering solidly and firmly. The scripture and life experience make it clear that we will sometimes face tough times. Without training and discipline of character, these tough times can easily push us off the highway of life altogether. However, in Christ's footsteps, it may sometimes become necessary for us to learn obedience through what we suffer. As F. F. Bruce notes Christ set out from the start on the path of obedience to God, and learned by the sufferings which came his way in consequence just what obedience to God involved in practice in the conditions of human life on earth (Bruce 1994:103). He did not, of course, have to suffer for his own sake, but the things that came his way as a human being resulted in his training and discipline as the perfect Saviour. It will be nothing less for us in the battle and the struggle for life. For us to win the battles of life, we need discipline and training of character. A disciplined and trained character has a unique ability to face the difficult situations of life. Exposed to and honed by these difficulties, character develops the tenacity and the resilience to tread the risky road of life without succumbing or retreating or resigning. McGrath has pointed out that suffering and afflictions hone our defences and strengthen our resolve to fight on against all the forces raged against us, forces which attempt to drag us back into the dusk of unbelief and lostness (McGrath 1995:74). Patience, perseverance, compassion, self-control, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and kindness are all character qualities, which come about mainly through training and discipline. Consequently, suffering refines and trains character, preparing it to face up to and stand under the many challenges and threats of life without crumbling.

Third, suffering breeds humility. Suffering is one human experience that humbles us greatly, reminding us that we are weak

human beings. When we suffer, we are made to realise that all we have, all we are, and all that we aspire to be or become are undeserved graces of God.

Suffering realistically reminds us that our gifts, our talents, our achievements, our wealth or even our very lives are not really rights but privileges that God graciously grants us for the purpose of serving him and humanity. Suffering also reminds us that our destiny is in God's hands, not in ours. This perspective escapes our attention when we are well and strong. We naively think, we can cope on our own and are able in the same capacity to turn our life into whatever we want it to be. But when suffering invades our supposedly safe territory, we are forced to retreat and accept the inevitable reality that we are actually weak, feeble and in need of someone or something greater than ourselves. Thus, as McGrath correctly notes, "suffering humbles us. It reminds us that we do not have full control over our own situation" (McGrath 1995:76). Suffering, in that sense, shatters our pride and self-dependence. It brings home to us the bitter truth that life is much more than we can handle on our own. We need God's help. No one understands this better than the apostle Paul. During one of his missionary journeys in Asia Minor, he faced a great deal of suffering to the point of despairing even of his life. He writes:

We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life itself. Indeed, in our own hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not depend on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead (2 Cor 1:8-9).

For Paul, the point of despair is the beginning of faith and trust in God. Suffering and the threat of death push us into reliance on God, as it were, they bring us to the end of the rope. It is an unfortunate truth for human beings that faith and reliance on God come about when suffering and death threaten. As it were, human experience is such that human beings run to God for refuge only when in trouble but forget him when in peace and prosperity. One Sudanese war-affected woman said of her experience and faith: "in a situation in which nothing is certain except death and suffering, we have learned that God is the only foundation on which we can rest our hopes and expectations."¹³ She only came to this realisation after the war had displaced and separated her from her husband and two sons, to say nothing of the loss of her wealth and property. A youngster, who has not been in

¹³ Related in a conversation with Mary Acol Deng, Narus, Sudan, August 1998.

touch with his parents for nearly ten years, expressed the same sentiments rather stoically. He said, “I have been through much hardship and suffering well beyond my age and I have learned that faith in God can sustain you in the most horrible situations imaginable. It gives you incredible strength and resilience to endure and survive. Without this, I would not be here today.”¹⁴ Although we cannot explain our tendency to seek God when we are in trouble but not when in peace and in prosperity, it seems that suffering and death remind us of our fragility and our need for God. “Probably, more than anything else, suffering often brings home to us how powerless and helpless we are in the face of illness and death” (McGrath 1995:77). Anyone who has ever been taken ill or has experienced loss of a loved one or a friend understands what this means. Suffering humbles us and painfully reminds us that we are mortal beings, always needing God’s help in the rough and turbulent waters of life.

Fourth, suffering avails for our character to be an example and encouragement to others who suffer or may suffer. Suffering is rarely a private occurrence. People watch and notice the way we react to hardship, illness, death or any other form of suffering (McGrath 1995:78). Depending on how we react, people choose to follow or not follow our example when their turn to suffer comes. Consciously or unconsciously, people observe us in our suffering with the hope of finding something to imitate when suffering strikes. That is one reason we love stories of resilience, survival, endurance and suffering; they capture our imagination. We want to hear these stories if only to find something to imitate, identify or measure our resolve with so that we know how to manage in case what happened to them happens to us. This is why biographies are best sellers. Who would not want to read or hear the story of Terry Waite and his five-year detention and subsequent release from Lebanon or of Nelson Mandela’s long walk from prison to the palace and many other examples?

We greatly admire these mortals for the example of courage, perseverance and determination they provide. In scripture, it is said of Christ that he suffered for us, leaving an example that we should follow in his steps (1 Pet 2:21). Thus with this cloud of witnesses surrounding us, suffering is rarely a private matter. In that sense, it provides those who suffer with a unique opportunity to set examples

¹⁴ An interview conducted with John Deng Garang in 1995 at the Sudanese Refugee Camp, Kakuma, Kenya.

of endurance, resilience, patience and faith. The church of Christ in the world has always recognised that both life and death provide opportunities to declare faith. In that regard, suffering rather than hindering the affirmation and declaration of faith, actually promotes it.

6. Suffering and the comfort of hope

6.1 The basis of the comfort of our hope

The framework of a distinctively Christian response to suffering is based on the cross, worked out in the community, resulting in character formation and it is lived out in a glorious hope. This hope with love and faith form modalities, which essentially describe Christian existence. This existence is built on Jesus Christ, the hope of glory. It is only in him that hope can be realistic. Such hope alone, as Jürgen Moltmann observes, takes seriously the possibilities with which reality is fraught. It does not take things as they happen to stand or to lie, but as progressing, moving things with possibilities of change. It sees all reality, including the reality of suffering, and humankind in the hand of him, whose voice calls into history from its end, saying loud and clear, “Behold, I make all things new”. From this word of promise hope acquires the freedom to renew life here and change the face of the world (Moltmann 1965:25-26). Without hope, suffering would paralyse us and inhibit our desire to be. Having hope as such presupposes that life is somehow worthwhile in the face of evil and suffering, despite evidence to the contrary. Hope tells us that something good will come out of our suffering in the end; that for us there is reason to live.

For life – especially Christian life – is virtually almost impossible without hope. In hope we are saved (Rom 8:24), hope does not disappoint us (Rom 5:5), when everything else disappears into oblivion, only hope remains, with faith and love (1 Cor 13:13). We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure (Heb 6:19). Robert Jewett points out that hope is an anchor of the soul, not in the sense of guaranteeing the immortality of the soul but in the sense of providing a stabilising effect on the whole person; being a basis for mental health in a world that seems to defy sanity. It holds firm and safe when everything else deteriorates (Jewett 1981:112)¹⁵. Because

¹⁵ Jewett relates from the work of Viktor Frankl in the German concentration camp that the prisoners who gave up hope in the future or in some goal easily became subject to mental and physical decay. Thus, hope has a significant role

we hope in the Lord, we will renew our strength, soar on wings like eagles, run and not grow weary, walk and not faint (Isa 40:31). This blessed hope spurs us on to live a pure life as we wait for its fulfilment (Tit 2:13; 1 Jn 3:3). As believers, we are called upon to be joyful in this hope and patient in affliction (Rom 12:12). Our God is the God of all hope and Christ is the hope of glory (Rom 15:13; Col 1:27). Additionally, hope is a central and fundamental aspect of the gospel of the kingdom of God. John de Gruchy tells us that the gospel holds out to the promise of eternal life to believers, a life that both death and suffering cannot destroy (de Gruchy 1986:228). Thus, in the face of suffering, the Christian lives in the hope that God's will shall ultimately be done on earth as it is in heaven, that the kingdom of God will be established as new earth and new heaven shall be ushered in, that the hope of the kingdom is a promise of peace, which God alone gives and that suffering itself and all that it inflicts will be defeated (de Gruchy 1986:229). Furthermore, living in this hope also entails the promise of God's ultimate victory over the forces of estrangement, enmity and death. Such conviction of faith as well entails that the suffering will not ultimately triumph over us (Lorenzen 1995:274).

6.2 Relating hope to suffering

Suffering and hope are interrelated. McGrath observes that there is a strong sense in which it is true that the only way that leads to hope passes through suffering (McGrath 1995:80). Hope is sensible in the light of suffering and suffering meaningful and enduring in the light of hope. It is only those who suffer who can truly hope and only those who truly hope who can truly and realistically face suffering. Hence, suffering and hope are inseparably interconnected. But what is the foundation on which our hope is built? How does it relate to suffering as we now face it? As already noted, our hope is built on Jesus Christ and all that he did on the cross; it is based on Christ and his finished work. The cross tells us that suffering has been dealt with and that God does not abandon us in our suffering, but is present and suffering with us. Our hope concurs and realistically maintains that although suffering is still a pertinent reality at present, it is and will ultimately be defeated. Thus, hope lives between the "already and the not yet" or "in time between the times" as some theologians have suggested (Hays 1997, Fee 1995). How does hope maintain itself, existing as it does in the tension of the "already and the not yet"? With its apparent

in suffering and without it, suffering will be unbearable.

eschatological overtones, how does hope face suffering in the now even as it anticipates the future? How does hope know what it looks forward to will come to pass? To respond, we first suggest that hope is inseparably connected to the unfailing promises of God. It is solidly based on the promises of God, validated by his oath (Bruce 1994:131). Just as suffering is painfully real, so reliably real are the promises of God and the hope of eternal life. God promises that there will come a time when the dwelling of God shall be with men and he will live with them. They will be his people and he will be their God. A new order of things shall be ushered in; God will wipe every tear from the eyes of his people. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or suffering. God will make everything new (Rev 21:3-5). Our hope is thus fixed in the eternal order of things, where the promises of God will be made good to his people in perpetuity (Bruce 1994:130-31). Meanwhile, it still gives the believer unshakeable hope to know that God has promised to be with us when we pass through the raging fires and through the deep waters of trials and afflictions (Isa 43:2-3).

It is his promise too that he will not forsake us but remain with us to the very end of time (Heb 13:5; Matt 28:20) and that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that awaits us (Rom 8:18). Has there been precedence in time and history that God will do what he has promised? The answer is thankfully yes. In the words of McGrath:

the death and the resurrection of Jesus, linked with the giving of the Holy Spirit, are pledges, sureties, and guarantees that what has been promised will one day be brought to glorious realisation (McGrath 1995:92)

Thus if Abraham rested his hope on the promise and oath of God, we have that and more to rest our hope upon: we have the fulfilment of God's promise in the exaltation of Jesus Christ and hence our hope is both sure and steadfast (Bruce 1994:131).

Furthermore, and in relation to the above, hope participates in the present as it anticipates the future. Because hope now lives in the reality of the sure promises of God, it does not ignore the future. It participates in the present as it also anticipates the future. It is based on faith in the promises of God as linked to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Richard Hays underlines the absolute necessity of keeping the two together when he writes:

there is no authentic Christian faith without fervent eschatological hope and there is no eschatological hope without the resurrection of the dead (Hays 1997:262).

Hope lives in that expectation as it does its best to face and challenge present difficulties. It does not hide its head in the sand like the proverbial ostrich; it fights and struggles with suffering. Again, McGrath provides some insights here when he writes:

The Christian hope ought to be a stimulus, rather than a sedative. It should spur us into action within the world, rather than encourage us to neglect it. By working to lessen the suffering of God's world and his people, we are easing his heartache over their pain (McGrath 1995:91).

Hope fails the test of being Christian when it remains passive and indifferent to the present and its realities. Equally, it fails the same test, when it only becomes consumed with the present at the expense of the future. To be truly Christian, hope must participate in the present even as it anticipates the future. K.R. Ross explains:

Without any compromise of the ultimate object of our hope in the resurrection of the dead, we may take the hopefulness engendered by the raising of Jesus Christ to the business of transforming the world now in the direction of its promised future (Ross 1990:197-212).

In that sense, hope in suffering sees the present in the light of the future and the future in the light of the present. As it were, it accepts the present without rejecting the future. At the same time, hope is here and also there; it is a present reality as well as a future reality. Paul Tillich remarks:

Past and future meet in the present, and both are included in the "eternal now". But they are not swallowed by the present; they (still) have their independent and different functions (Tillich 1963:395-396).

Truly, such hope does not disappoint us but it sustains us in suffering in Sudan. The optimism of faith gives us hope and peace now and in the future. For "however dismal and catastrophic may be the present circumstances, we know that we are not alone, for God dwells with us in life's most confining and oppressive cells" (King 1963:95). That is our sure foundation and hope.

7. Conclusion

While the various theological and philosophical explications of the problem of evil and suffering may be retained, it turns out in the last analysis that the problem of human suffering is actually insoluble. There is no solution to it if what that means is the total and complete

elimination of evil and suffering, so that we do not suffer or even die in this life. In that sense the incarnation, which is the Christian answer, will not be a solution since we still suffer and die. However, the incarnation still provides the only framework in which suffering is dealt with and the hope of its complete and total elimination is held out. Therefore, the incarnation as an answer provides the milieu in which suffering in spite of its insolubility may be faced to or used for the highest possible good in this life. Thus, the incarnation is the basis of an appropriate Christian response to suffering.

This response anchors on the biblical and theological images of the cross, the community, character and the comfort of our hope. The cross tells us that although suffering is still very much a present reality, God has done something about it and he will completely and totally eliminate it in the future. When in the severity of suffering we perceive God absent and distant from us, the cross reminds us that he is present with us and suffering with us. The cross reminds us that God is actively and lovingly working through our suffering for our good and for his glory.

The community absorbs our suffering and surrounds us with love and compassion in our pain and loss. In the community we practically experience what it means to have our burdens borne by others. Suffering is a lonely experience and we need the warmth and company of others in the community to face this. Part of the feeling of loneliness in that regard comes from a terrible sense of having been abandoned by God and people. By providing spiritual, emotional, material and social support to the suffering, the community reassures the suffering ones that they are not alone in their pain. Consequently, within the sanctity of a caring community, suffering will not quickly dispatch its victims to their untimely end.

In regard to character, we note that suffering shapes it negatively or positively. In that sense, suffering is somehow related to the process of human maturity and character development. Suffering may not be the only ingredient in this process, but it undoubtedly plays a major role in it. Without suffering, human beings cannot grow or mature.

In facing the obvious mystery and cruelty of suffering and evil, the believer stands in the hope that they will ultimately be defeated in Christ. Suffering is not and will not always be the way God wanted things to be. In hope, we are reminded that there comes a time in which our tears shall be wiped from our eyes and all our pain and

suffering completely eliminated. God will usher in a new order of things, as the current order of things shall have disappeared. The absolute surety of this hope is solidly based on the promises of the God who is ever present with us in our suffering. For the people of God, this hope participates in the present realities of life as it anticipates the glorious future that God promises. With this bright hope amazingly shining in our hearts, we can courageously face the thick darkness of evil and suffering and overcome the gloomy uncertainties of the present life. On the basis of this hope therefore we shall not fear, for he/she who fears suffering is already suffering from what he/she fears. This hope, which “neither bodily or psychological suffering can destroy”¹⁶, spurs us on to put our trust in God while we participate in and work through our pain and suffering, knowing that he will ultimately deliver us from our predicament.

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A biblical-theological response to the problem of theodicy in the context of the modern criticism of religion

Rolf Hille *

Abstract

This essay discusses the philosophical question of theodicy. Firstly from a philosophical point of view and then from a biblical point of view. It is pointed out, that the problem goes deeper than it may look like from the surface. In the biblical overview Hille emphasizes the fact, that God does not exclude himself from suffering.

Keywords Selfcontradiction of human life, fortune, misfortune, justification of God, denial of God, cry of man, cause of evil, man's relationship to God, sin, judgement, sacrifice.

When Eugen Gerstenmaier, former president of the German parliament, theologian, and passionate game hunter, returned to Bonn, Konrad Adenauer, former German chancellor, asked him, 'Where have you been this time?' The reply: 'In Africa'. 'And what did you do there?' The answer: 'Hunted lions'. 'How many did you take down?' 'None', to which Adenauer responded: 'Well, that's quite a lot for lions.' In a similar way, one could ask me: 'What are you working on?' The answer: 'On the problem of theodicy'. 'How many answers have you found so far?' The answer: 'None'. Then, 'Well, that's a lot for theodicy.'¹

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¹ Related by Odo Marquard in Oelmüller, Willi (ed.), *Theodizee – Gott vor Gericht?* Munich, 1990, p. 102 (a free translation from German).

Certain problems are apparently of such a nature that fewer definitive answers are expected for them, but rather they have the function of holding open a fundamental and irrefutable question. In these contexts then it is quite a lot if one doesn't simply settle for the existent status quo of the reality, but rather has become more deeply aware of the problem, which the self-contradiction of human life includes in itself *coram deo* (before God).

One can state what the problem is, frame the question of justifying God, intensifying it in different ways, such as: "How can a good and just God allow suffering in the world?", or, on a different note, "Why do evil people prosper?" The critical point in each lies in the empirically obvious disparity of morality on the one hand, and the experience of fortune or misfortune on the other hand. The imbalance shown can of course also be interpreted as an anthropodicy if, in the context of relating human activity and one's resultant condition, the connection to God is negated. But, the problem of theodicy gets its full weight, historically as well as systematically, in pointing to those attributes which are associated with God in the Jewish-Christian tradition and which are apparently not compatible with reality as it is experienced.

The criticism of religion, then, which began in Europe with the Enlightenment era, produced a wide spectrum of very different bases for atheism: denial of God in the name of the autonomy of reason, or the empirical sciences. Then there is atheism which appeals to psychology or political-economic emancipation. Yet, no form of the denial of God has worked as effectively even until the present as the insolvable conflict between God's goodness and omnipotence, on the one hand, and the evils of the world, on the other hand. Man's complaint against God's seeming failure in the world has been taken up before the forum of critical reason in philosophy and literature under the topic "theodicy" since the publication in Amsterdam in 1710 of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz' work, "*Essai de theodicée sur la bonté de Dieu, la liberté de l'homme et l'origine du mal*". The process ends his work for modern man to a large extent with the acquittal of the accused, on account of his supposed non-existence. Thus, in his work, "*Angeklagt Gott* (God on Trial)", published in 1997, Bernhard Gesang comes to the following conclusion: "The complaint lodged against God is proven to be baseless in the truest sense of the word, as there is

every indication that the accused has been absent during our entire trial proceedings.”²

With this, then, the question of theodicy necessarily flows into an anthropodicy, which is taken up no less passionately and intensely and which can be brought to just as unsatisfactory an answer/conclusion. Yet, because man is proven to be of a hopelessly religious nature, the supposedly overcome problem of theodicy arises again and again despite modernity’s inherent fall to atheism. In a pointed turn on the phrase about the future of boxing champions: “They never come back”, one must say, then, in view of the theodicy question, “They ever come back”.

1. Human existence as the “cry” in the face of evil

The theodicy problem is sparked like a terrible thunderstorm by the collision time and again of human longing for happiness on the one hand with the reality of evil in the world on the other hand. It is articulated in a very basic manner in the cry of man before God and against God.

The Norwegian artist Edvard Munch gave clear expression to this primeval anthropological moment in his painting “The Cry”: a young woman is standing on a bridge on a sunny day and some pedestrians are leisurely walking around close by her. All in all, it would be a harmonic world of colours and light if it weren’t for this very deep cry which tears into the picture with sheer horror. The oversized disfigured face of the young woman develops into one single cry which dominates the entire scene, the cause of which remains hidden from the observer and possibly even from the affected herself.

As perplexingly distant and undefined as the cry seems in this radical threat to the individual, it confronts us concretely as a cry which rings throughout world history. The slaves of the Egyptian pharaohs let it out like the peoples who were laid low by the chariots of the Assyrians. One hears this cry in the Medieval torture chambers as well as in the concentration camps of Auschwitz and from the victims of Hiroshima. In view of the cry which resounds throughout history, the present generation is simply left with the relieved feeling of having just barely escaped and survived.

² Bernhard Gesang, *Angeklagt Gott*, 1997, p. 180 (a free translation from the German).

Yet Munch's impressively depicted cry is becoming increasingly ominous in that it prevails all over the world today. Our globally networked media society is constantly confronted with this cry in the form of natural disasters, accidents, wars, expulsions, etc. In this way, a highly problematic apathy arises towards suffering. Personal distance to the misery conveyed by the media is the only apparent escape from the massive amount of suffering. Of course, the cry then becomes unavoidable if it meets the individual in direct interpersonal communication and thereby either penetrates one's ear as the suffering of one's neighbour, or as suffering affecting one personally, which pierces one's own heart.

As long as the cry is articulated and not muffled out of despair or apathy, the question arises concerning the reason for evil in the form of the "why" question. As soon as this cry is experienced as an existential crisis, it provokes the question of meaning in the form of the "wherefore" question. Both ways of looking at the problem lie at the heart of the question of theodicy. In this way the forms which evil takes concretely in the world, which must be looked at and carefully distinguished philosophically, overlap one another in daily life. Classical philosophy has defined evil in a threefold form: first as physical pain and emotional hurt, then as suffering from wickedness, that is, as moral evil, and, finally, as the all-encompassing event of the radical finality of all existence, that is, as metaphysical evil. In Munch's painting, it is not simply the artistic openness and the frightening undefined nature of the cry that makes one uneasy. In its deep dimension, the cry doesn't allow itself to be defined by philosophical terms, that is, "defined or limited" here in the literal sense, and thus controlled.

2. The cause of evil in western tradition

In Western philosophical tradition one can find two quite different understandings of the origin of evil: the one is the Greek idealistic weakening of the power of evil by reason of metaphysical-ontological dualism; the other is the Jewish-Christian radicalizing of the morally evil in the theological contradiction between divine holiness and human sin, or, the omnipotence of God and human freedom.

Greek idealism sees the essential cause of all evil in material reality. On the basis of a theoretical system of dualism of soul and spirit, on the one hand, and body, on the other hand, Greek philosophy

influenced by Platonism presumes that good befits the intellectual being in the actual sense, while the material world is bad in and of itself. The soul is bound in the prison of the body and is only freed by death, that is, by the decay of the body. Materialism is then not only the sickness that leads to death physically, but, even more so, metaphysically, in that in it and through it all the bad in life and in the world arises and becomes active.

Because being according to Plato, and especially, according to Plotin's understanding, is structured in a hierarchy, the world of ideas possesses a qualitatively high degree of being, while the material world suffers from a lack of being. Evil (the bad) can thus be described as a "*privatio boni*" (a lack or deficiency of the good); it has no independent reality of its own. Evil is thus defeated morally through contempt for the physical, i.e., through asceticism and apathy, and, in some instances, through a libertinism which disregards the body. Metaphysical evil is thereby ultimately overcome when the soul or the spirit itself has a part in the ideas because participation (*methexis*) in the divine makes the soul immortal as an indivisible entity of being. In terms of ideas, the philosophical approach of idealism manifests a great number of parallels to the Buddhist understanding of the world and its way of religious, psychological self-redemption.

In fundamental contradiction to this philosophical concept is the view of Jewish-Christian tradition regarding the explanation for evil, which primarily argues in a theological way. It sees the dualism of good and evil not ontologically, as the creation as a material reality is originally and essentially good. The contrast, however, is more of a theological nature because evil stands in the form of the Satanic and the sinful in absolute opposition to the holy and just God. The roots of evil lie thus in the "moral"; physical and metaphysical evil grows, then, out of the morally evil. In order to understand the mystery of evil, personal and not ontological categories are therefore needed. What is the relationship of anthropological freedom to the sin of man? And how should one relate theologically the omnipotence and providence of God to the self-responsibility of man? Evil is understood as the proud rebellion of the creature against his Creator. Because of man's sinful rebellion God has put not only man, but also the entire natural order under a state of curse and decay. Creation, which was very good, has become the fallen world (Gen 3). Overcoming evil and therefore, the plan of salvation, must then also

begin with overcoming sin in order to bring God and man into renewed personal fellowship. Salvation can neither come from the intellectual or moral capacity of man because man is totally corrupted by sin. Salvation is, rather, an external act of the grace of God which has come to man through Christ. This is the reason why the problem of theodicy, neither according to ancient nor according to a modern understanding of it, for Christian theology is not the question of the acquittal of God before the tribunal of human reason, but rather the theological problem of the justification of the sinner *coram deo* (before God) according to basic Biblical teaching.

3. Theodicy in the course of a syllogistic process and philosophical speculation

Philosophically, the problem of theodicy first becomes pressing when the idea of a personal God who by definition embodies absolute good, must be communicated rationally with the evils of the world we find ourselves in. The first precise statement of the problem of theodicy is found in the writings of Epicureus, who presents specific premises and conclusions in syllogistic variants. “God either wants to do away with evil and cannot, or, he can and does not want to, or he cannot and does not want to, or he can and wants to do so. So, if he wants to and cannot, he is then weak, which is not true of God. If he can and does not want to, then he is mean, which is also alien to God. If he does not want to and cannot, then he is weak as well as mean and is therefore not God. Yet, if he wants to and can, which alone is fitting for God, where then, does evil come from, why does he not take it away?” (Quote of Epicureus, *Overcoming Fear*, p. 80 – German translation, *Von der Überwindung der Furcht*, Zurich, 1949).³ The existential cry of the sufferer has developed into simply the logical problem of the philosophy of religion.

With the 18th century European Enlightenment, the conflict over the righteousness of God sharpened through the complete emancipation of philosophy from theology, or, reason becoming autonomous from revelation’s claim to authority. It is not surprising that, with the changes brought about by the Enlightenment, the topic of theodicy gained increasingly explosive force in the context of the criticism of religions. If, for Western Christendom, the question of the

³ Epicureus, *Overcoming Fear*, (quoted and translated freely from the German translation, Zurich, 1949, p. 80)

justification of man before God had become the central challenge, at the latest by the Reformation, so the tables of the court proceedings are now turned with God being charged before the judgment seat of reason.

At first though, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz approaches the topic in his work on theodicy from the viewpoint of the “pious Enlightenment” prevalent in Germany. That is, Leibniz, on the rational basis of the critical case against God, tries to decide in God’s favour. Leibniz’ understanding of theodicy is based on the conviction that two true statements cannot contradict one another. Scientific knowledge and philosophical insights are, as truth, compatible with the revelatory truths of Christianity. Therefore God’s foreknowledge could be in agreement with the spontaneous, yet not arbitrary freedom of man, as well as the fact of the creation of the world with the ills of the world. For this our world would not exist as the best of all possible worlds if God had not created any world at all. God intended the good and only permitted evil. The fact is worth mentioning that, in view of the further discussion of the problem in the 18th and 19th centuries which used Leibniz as a starting point, the problem of theodicy is even treated by Leibniz himself from two contrasting positional perspectives: namely, first of all, as criticism of the traditional theistic question: “*Etsi deus est, unde malum?*” (If God exists, where does evil come from?), and then also as atheism’s query: “*Etsi deus non est, unde bonum?*” (If God does not exist, where does the good come from?) The last-mentioned aspect, which, however, is very essential to the matter at hand, was largely replaced in later philosophical discussion by the momentum of the critical approach to religion.

While Voltaire only satirically ridiculed the line of argument posited by Leibniz, Immanuel Kant took Leibniz’ position seriously in his work “Concerning the Failure of All Philosophical Attempts to Solve the Theodicy Problem” (*Über das Mißlingen aller philosophischen Versuche in der Theodizee*). However, he came to the conclusion:

The outcome of this legal case before the court of reason is the following: That all previous attempts at solving the theodicy problem do not achieve what they promise, namely, to justify moral wisdom in the world government against the doubts which can be made against it from that which experience in this world lets one know.⁴

⁴ Translated freely from the German edition of Kant’s Works, (Immanuel Kant, *Werke*, ed. By W. Weischedel, Darmstadt, 1983, vol. 9, A 210”.

In his “A Critical Exposition of the Philosophy of Leibniz”, Bertrand Russell points out importantly that, in view of his attempt at the theodicy question, Leibniz had fallen into a self-contradiction between his own logic on the one hand, and his metaphysical presuppositions on the other hand.⁵

The Hegelian system presents a final solution to theodicy which has been highly effective and positive in the history of philosophy. In the dialectic self-development of the absolute spirit, God, as the dynamic principle of all reality in a universal synthesis, is the eschatological completion of the immanent process of history. Therefore, the necessary evils at work in the process of history are justified in view of the goal of the apotheosis of the world. Yet the leftist Hegelians, Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx, have already negated the theodicy of the great idealist in their efforts to “turn (Hegel) upside down from head to toe”, and given it up to radical atheistic criticism of religion.

4. The heightening and intensification of the theodicy problem in modern literature

The course which the theodicy question has taken in the history of Western philosophy and literature, however, makes one thing quite clear: the topic gains its relevance and power not so much from rational discourse on it, but, rather from the very acute experience of suffering in each case. In view of its contingency, it provokes again and again (in increasingly intensified form in the bold advancement of modern history) the question of the why and wherefore of evil. Because a satisfactory answer, coherent in itself, to the case of the justice of God is not recognizable in view of the rational unsolvable questions of philosophy and theology (aporia), the literary and artistic portrayal of the problem has gained in power, intensity, and influence. Yet, in 1713, Leibniz was still able to respond to Duke Anton Ulrich in boundless optimism: “Nobody can imitate our Lord better than a writer of beautiful novels.” God is the brilliant writer and world history is His literary work. The contingency of world events arises from an artistic spirit which the human reader can only understand in part at first, yet, who, according to his brilliant idea, is necessarily beautiful. That the worldly novel, instead of being beautiful, could

⁵ Bertrand Russell, *A Critical Exposition of the Philosophy of Leibniz*, London, 1900.

also become a horror story, is clear in the change during the Modern Age from Enlightenment optimism, especially in view of the catastrophes of the 20th century. The suffering experiences of the modern world with its technologically-based wars of annihilation, mass escapes, and expulsions, as well as the mass liquidation of ideological opponents, have allowed the purely intellectual quest for a philosophically-based theodicy to become a bloodless abstract idea. Instead, a literary solution to the problem in the form of tragedy has increasingly been pushed into the foreground. Examples for the intensification of the theodicy problem in literature can be given by referring to a few titles which have contributed much to the understanding of human suffering based on their excellent ability to leave a lasting impression: F.M. Dostoyevsky's "The Brothers Karamasov" with the key statement that the tears of a single innocent child are enough to "shake the universe".⁶ Georg Büchner's question in "Danton's Death" has become a classic: "Why do I suffer? This is the rock of atheism."⁷ In the post-war period, Wolfgang Borchert's play "Standing Outside the Door"⁸ became extremely effective as an atheistic charge levelled at the "storybook loving God" of theology. Finally, Albert Camus' novel "The Pest"⁹ should be listed in this very brief listing as a prime example in which Dr. Rieux does battle against growing accustomed to suffering and despair because of suffering. The theological drama sparked by the outbreak of a pestilence is fought out in the dialogues between Dr. Rieux and Father Paneloux.

In fact, the literary form of the problem in poetry and prose texts not only makes it clear that the theodicy problem has continually intensified in the Modern Age, but, also that the sensitivity of contemporary man has grown with respect to any kind of experience of suffering. Odo Marquard talks about a princess on the pea syndrome in this context, i.e., in spite of a real minimalization of suffering through modern medicine and technology, the remaining real "rest" of suffering is experienced as even more difficult and more

⁶ F.M. Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamasov*, translated freely here from the German translation, Munich, 8. edit. 1987, p. 330.

⁷ Georg Büchner, *Dantons Tod, Werke und Briefe*, München 7. Ed. 1973, (a free translation from this work) p. 40.

⁸ Wolfgang Borchert, *Draußen vor der Tür*, Reinbeck 30. Ed. 1967 (also freely translated).

⁹ Albert Camus, *The Pest*, Hamburg 1995, a free translation from the German translation.

painful. With the ideals of the French Revolution of 1789, which were put into practice the first time in the New World, i.e., in the United States of America, man began to understand himself no longer primarily in terms of his duties and obligations, but in terms of his rights. And so the “pursuit of happiness” is declared and demanded as a self-evident human right in the American Declaration of Independence.

5. A biblical-theological discussion of the theodicy problem

Corresponding to the philosophical and literary attempts to solve the problem of theodicy, there is an in every bit as intensive and comprehensive effort in theology to deal with this very unwieldy topic. Some elementary lines of Biblical theology will be presented in what follows, after which exegetical findings can be fruitful for the discussion of theodicy within the horizon of systematic approaches at solving it.

According to Biblical understanding, the condition of man's relationship to God is mirrored in the physical reality of the world. The reality of original fellowship with God, as was given in the protological condition of man, corresponds to the paradisiacal condition of the world. With the fall of man, not only his inner condition was changed, but sin also affected a curse-laden upheaval in the entire condition of the cosmos. The world becomes a place of trouble, pain, and death. Out of moral evil grows the physical and the metaphysical as a result. Ethics and physis (nature) stand in a fundamental relationship of correspondence. With the fact of the fall, the announcement of punishment by the Creator: “but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die” (Gen 2:17) becomes world defining reality, which Paul later sums up in the statement: “For the wages of sin is death...” (Rom 6:23).

Every theologically meaningful discussion of the theodicy problem must start from this context. Therefore, the simple philosophical syllogisms which conclude with atheism as a logically proven fact from the failure of theodicy are too short-sighted. At first glance, the adjacent concluding processes of philosophical logic seem to be compelling: God is good, but the world is bad. Therefore, God

cannot be omnipotent, etc. God is omnipotent, yet the world is bad. Therefore, God cannot be good.

In the tradition of Jewish-Christian theism, the attributes “good and omnipotent” are indispensable for the doctrine of God. Because they do not allow themselves to be brought into harmony with the badness of the world in the sense of philosophical reason, God’s nonexistence is concluded. The flaw in the reasoning of this philosophical process lies not in the formal completion of syllogisms, but in the theologically inadequate premises. Goodness and omnipotence are indeed indispensable characteristics of God, yet, the problem of theodicy deals more essentially with the attributes of God’s holiness, his wrath upon sin, and thus, his judgement of the world. From a Christian standpoint, the theodicy question can only start from the problem of the so-called moral evil. As soon as one takes physical or metaphysical evil as the starting point, one ends up only with the inner logic of an aporia or atheism. The facts presented here do not in any way mean a simple theological solution to the problem, but simply a change of the circumstances before which the entire complex of the topic stands.

At the beginning of Israel’s history, the revelation of the Law stands centrally with the formation of the people through the Exodus as well as the wilderness wandering and the possession of the land. The Torah as good instruction is, at first, a gift, then a task:

Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers. (Ps 1:1-3)

Life is successful when man remains in the covenant of the Law. Blessing and curse are decided by faithful obedience:

See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse – the blessing if you obey the commands of the LORD your God that I am giving you today; the curse if you disobey the commands of the LORD your God and turn from the way that I command you today by following other gods, which you have not known. (Deut 11:26-28)

Even the promise of land has the Garden of Eden in view in its full of life specificity. Israel is to be a place and a fellowship of blessing in the midst of the peoples. An essential characteristic of the covenant is the unbroken connection of Israel’s personal fellowship with her God

and the fullness of life and joy which grows out of it. The inner holiness of this relationship to God is reflected on (at the same time as a divine confirmation) in the successful life and external happiness. The wisdom of the heart places the feet upon a wide area:

For the LORD gives wisdom, and from his mouth comes knowledge and understanding. He holds victory in store for the upright, he is a shield to those whose walk is blameless, for he guards the course of the just and protects the way of his faithful ones. Then you will understand what is right and just and fair – every good path. (Prov 2:6-9)

Israel is tempted where this Torah-oriented certainty and wisdom on life fall apart. Job, the righteous man of God, suffers unimaginable misery and is therefore deeply called into question by his friends. Does some deep sin lie concealed beneath his apparent piety? Asaph asks a similar question in Psalm 73 with just a bit of a different angle. Why do the ungodly prosper?

For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. They are free from the burdens common to man; they are not plagued by human ills. Therefore pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence...This is what the wicked are like – always carefree, they increase in wealth. Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence. All day long I have been plagued; I have been punished every morning. (Ps 73:3-6; 12-14)

The absurdity of the world's situations seems to lead faith in God's justice and faithfulness to His covenant *ad absurdum*. Just how deeply Israel is shaken by this irritation of the connection between conduct and welfare even into the time of the New Testament is made clear by the portrayal of the catastrophic events reported on in Luke:

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, 'Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them – do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.' (Luke 13:1-5)

Noteworthy here is the sceptical inquiry about the guilt of the victims. Even today, the charge against those responsible remains indisputably necessary. Who is the architect responsible, whose tower collapsed and caused such a terrible accident? Doubtless Pilate, who had praying pilgrims cut down, was a corrupt powerful politician who

really ought to have been tried for war crimes. This way of dealing with guilt needs no special justification. But, even among the victims, who first appear innocent prey to an accident, it must be asked, by reason of the inner logic of the connection between conduct and welfare, why these particularly were affected by disaster and death. Moreover, in characteristic fashion, the question of guilt (sin) is even raised there in an inquisitorial sense where the individual quite obviously is incapable of any sin (guilt). This aspect is talked about in detail in the meeting between Jesus and the man born blind:

As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned,' said Jesus, 'but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.' (John 9:1-3)

It is clear from these Biblical passages that Israel understood there to be an unswervingly valid correlation between piety and happiness in life, on the one hand, and sin and destruction, on the other hand. If this divinely ordered framework was disturbed, these kinds of events not only provoked the question of the guilt of the evildoers, but also of the victims. If the victim was incapable of guilt, then one looked for the deed which brought curse upon the parents or other relatives. If the connection between sin and suffering could not be made clear and evident, then the form of the theodicy problem typical for Job grew up in its Old Testament fashion. One held fast to the God faithful to the covenant, whose "*emunah*" (faithfulness) was kept in faith and obedience. Therein lay, though, the temptation and, on the contrary, also the way to overcome it.

The unsolvable problem for Old Testament faith lies in the question of divine justice in view of the suffering of the righteous and the good fortune of the ungodly. Jesus takes here a fundamentally different position, when he says:

I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. (Luke 13:5)

Beside this intensification of the problem of guilt is the other side of the same coin in the answer to the problem of the man born blind, namely, the assuring promise:

'Neither this man nor his parents sinned,' said Jesus, 'but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.' (John 9:3)

Paul brings Jesus' completely revolutionary way of looking at it into the context of a strict systematic form of argument. With very legal

precision, the apostle makes clear in the first three chapters of Romans that Jews and Gentiles have both fallen short of God's righteousness. Therefore, every human being, without exception, stands under the curse of the Law and has been given over to the wrath of God's judgment, which brings death.

This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God... (Rom 3:22-23)

Even very high moral achievements are not able to break through this connection between guilt and ultimate welfare. The classic starting point for the Old Testament question of theodicy is placed into a completely new light by the absolute radicalization of sin in the New Testament. For there is not a more righteous person who has to suffer innocently. All the good fortune of the ungodly turns out to be a terrible deception in view of coming eternal damnation. The only thing meaningful for time and eternity is salvation in Christ which is offered to the sinner as a free gift of grace through the preaching of the Gospel. From this perspective, the demand of theodicy, i.e., the acquittal of God before the tribunal of man, is a manifestation in itself of the total godlessness of the sinner. For the sinner cannot claim any special rights before God, but, rather, is totally dependent on God's pardon and justification. The New Testament's call to repentance is ultimately about turning away from theodicy to the justification of the sinner *coram deo* (before God).

The modern demand for theodicy implies yet another aspect which is worthy and needs discussion in the context of the radicalization and universalization of sin. The attempt undertaken by theodicy to justify (or acquit) God *coram homine* (before man) contains, namely, the conviction, among others, that man would like and is willing to accept the rule of God over his life if God were proven to be good and omnipotent in allowing life to go well for man. According to this, then, the happy and fortunate person would be the believer who would not be tempted by atheism. Good fortune in life on this earth is, according to this understanding, the precondition for faith.

Yet, this hypothesis, which is so often held, especially in the Modern Age, is already flawed by the fact that people who are outwardly happy and wealthy are in no way more open for faith than

those who have to struggle with the miseries of the world and terrible situations in life.

However, this fact does not only agree with general observations of the world, it is also firmly anchored in the basic framework of the Bible regarding the history of salvation. The requirement of happiness as a precondition of a spontaneously positive experience of God was already given protologically in the Garden of Eden as the starting point for humanity. Every kind of forced theodicy thus appeared to be completely erroneous and unfounded for the pre-lapsed state. Yet, even under the conditions of the paradisiacal bliss, the creature is seen as receptive towards the Tempter and rebellious against His Creator. A corresponding mirror image of this is true for the eschatological announcement of the millennium. The Revelation to John depicts a situation in which the conditions and effects of the Fall are limited and the Law of Christ is valid for humanity. The basis is thus taken away from the problem of theodicy. Yet, even this ideal establishment of the world, including knowledge of all the negative historical experience of predeceasant human history without God, is not able to immunize man against renewed Satanic temptations, but, instead, leads to new suffering on the way to a new fall.

And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time...When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth – Gog and Magog – to gather them for battle. In number they are like the sand on the seashore. (Rev 20:1-3; 7-8)

Overcoming disaster and thereby coping with the problem of theodicy cannot, therefore, begin with man's right to happiness, but must, rather, do away with the actual cause of the harm, namely, man's theoretical fallibility and the fact of his sin. All remedy of external damage and hindrances to human existence, even through special divine miraculous deeds, can only have temporary significance over against the fundamental restoration of the relationship to God. The portrayal of the healing of the paralytic in Mark 2:1-12 is instructive in connection with this. The expectations of the sick man as well as those of his four friends and all present are directed in anxious

excitement towards the miracle worker from Nazareth. Yet, instead of speaking the healing words: “I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home”, Jesus says to him: “Son, your sins are forgiven” (v. 5). Jesus’ priorities are quite obviously different from the horizon of expectations of his hearers. First, the basic cause of sin must be removed, and only then does the healing of physical handicap make any sense. The reversal of the theodicy question is likewise emphasized in this Gospel story in the question of the justification before God by the forgiveness of sins. The solution of the “question of guilt” is clearly placed before the “question of power”, as Karl Heim briefly explained in his theological work “Jesus, Culminator of the World”.¹⁰

If one considers that, according to the Biblical understanding, *hybris* (pride) is the fatal root of sin, then the demand for theodicy moves Biblical understanding once again into a completely different light, in view of the sovereignty of God. Only the Creator is absolute in His will, the creature, even with his gift of reason, remains completely dependent on and in relation to Him. Man cannot claim any “rights by nature” for happiness from his Creator, but, rather, is invited to entrust himself to God’s goodness and to respect therein God’s lordship and affirm it in trust. Despite the anthropological privilege of being created in the image of God, the infinite difference between the Creator and the creature is firmly held to throughout the Bible. Theodicy as a legal entitlement against God is *superbia* (arrogance) and is thereby the sin of *katexochen* (willfulness, the very nature and origin of sin). It is no surprise, then, that the conflict of Eve with the serpent bears all the basic marks of an attempted theodicy. Still, on the other hand, the exalted self-revelation of God to Job, sorely confronted by the theodicy question, is not given simply as an argumentative self-justification by God, that is, as a theodicy made good by God, but, rather, as the sovereign claim to rule made by the autonomous Creator.

Then the LORD answered Job out of the storm. He said: ‘Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation? Tell me, if you understand.’ (Job 38:1-4)

¹⁰ Karl Heim, *Jesus der Weltvollender*, Hamburg, 3rd. ed. 1952, pp. 35-52 (a free translation from the German).

At the end of the dialogue it is not the theodicy of God which is stated, but Job's confession of sin and his humbling before God.

Then Job replied to the LORD: 'I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted. You asked, Who is this that obscures my counsel without knowledge? Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. You said, Listen now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you shall answer me. My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.' (Job 42:1-6)

The historical-theological basis for God's autonomous freedom, which finds its expression in the free selective action of God, stands in a direct analogy to that based on the theology of Creation. The history of Israel is the permanent model and theological paradigm for this fact, which Paul briefly develops in Romans 9-11:

What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! For he says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.' (Rom 9:14f.)

Although Israel's path is marked by divine punishments and visitations and cries for theodicy long before Auschwitz, the Apostle emphasizes with Isaiah 1:9:

It is just as Isaiah said previously: 'Unless the Lord Almighty had left us descendants, we would have become like Sodom, we would have been like Gomorrah.' (Rom 9:29)

Even for Israel as a whole repentance, not theodicy, is called for. Theodicy will take place first at the end of all of Israel's ways in history in the sense of an eschatological doxology, in same way as a *donum super additum* (a gift beyond what one might expect).

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! (Rom 11:33)

Theodicy, understood Biblically, is shown as an act of grace of God's sovereign lordship of history, which is never charged against, but is granted as a gift.

This eschatological perspective of divine grace is thus now valid beyond Israel for all of world history inasmuch as this allows itself to be brought into the covenant of God as the history of salvation for all peoples.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God,

prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.' (Rev 21:1-4)

In the scope of this hope this longing for theodicy becomes the motivating factor of the question: "How much longer?" This moving power can be seen in Job and also among the martyrs depicted in the book of Revelation. In this sense, the theodicy question, as healing unrest in view of the eschatological expectancy ("not yet"), gains a positive and legitimate task. By reason of the salvation which has occurred and the forgiveness of sins which has been received, faith waits for the culmination of salvation. Put in philosophical terms, after moral evil has been overcome by God's free sovereign act, the definitive ending of physical and metaphysical evil must also begin by virtue of the promise. Yet this eschatological resolution of theodicy is not defied by man, but, rather, freely granted by God. The lasting and rationally untraceable sovereignty of God is shown in this connection, indeed, in view of the twofold judgment of the world.

6. Practical theological perspectives with the framework of christology

The dogmatic treatment of the theodicy question shown with the words of Scripture is foundational for the apologetic and doctrinal discussion, yet it needs practical-theological deepening. Even as a believer to whom redemption has been granted, the person who is suffering is still tempted and he therefore should receive consolatory help in a special way.

Therefore, in conclusion there are still some essential spiritual aspects to this virulent topic.

First of all, the Bible takes up the cry of the person who is suffering and takes it seriously. While it rejects the cool distant discourse of a purely intellectual case against God by pointing to God's sovereignty and man's sin, it still opens up a wide open space to the person who is pleading his case before God. Temptation is not brushed aside, complaint is not prohibited, doubt is not suppressed. The believer is, instead, invited to pour out his heart before God. It is in this speechlessness of suffering that Job, the Psalms, the Fathers,

and the prophets are able to grant one necessary speech. The confession and insight of Asaph is especially worthy of our attention in this regard: "When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny." (Ps 73:16f.)

There are two aspects which Asaph believes have helped him to find solid ground again in view of the depths of theodicy questions: besides the fact that Asaph is an excellent example of an honest complaint before God, he first points to the congregation assembled for worship. The fellowship of believers and persons praying gives the one in doubt strength and support. For the *homo incurvatus in se ipsum* (man bent over inwardly into himself) is not simply a theoretical construct of theological anthropology, but, rather, it has to do with the very relevant counseling situation and the danger of the person who is tempted by doubt. It is because of this very crisis of faith and the unsolved question of life that this person is in danger of isolating himself and falling out of the supportive fellowship of the people of God. Asaph's experience of faith stands against this as an invitation to celebrate the worship of God and to experience the presence of God in the assembly (church), even in spite of the seeming good fortune of the ungodly.

The other help that Asaph has received is the eschatological perspective which fundamentally relativizes the good fortune or misfortune in this world: "...and he saw their end." Ultimately, the problem of theodicy with its apparent irregularities is not solved in a conduct and resultant welfare context. It is only the view of the end, that is, of the eschatological fate, which reveals the evidence of God's justice. The relativization of all earthly situations and the orientation on the eschatological goal of life gives one the consolation of overcoming suffering and holding onto hope, as Paul writes: "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us." (Rom 8:18)

The reason for such hope, as far as Christians are concerned, has to do with the fact of salvation history that the new Creation, beyond the evil of this world, has already begun with the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and has already been set in motion.

With the opening of the christological horizon, we have touched on the specific access of Christian theology which is of central importance for the response to the question of theodicy, and which

connects both the systematic-theological and the practical-theological together.

Ancient Greek teaching about God started from the apathy of the blessed gods towards all human conditions. Islam means submission to the destiny placed on one by Allah, i.e., the kismet. Hinduism and Buddhism seek to overcome the thirst for life in order then to be able to enter Nirvana. An individual's right to personal welfare is negated in this. Therefore, Buddhism has neither the prerequisite nor the serious occasion for the theodicy question in its intensity or the struggle that goes with it.

In a unique way, God's personal assurance as a declaration of love for His people and as the promise of reliable faithfulness to His covenant is found in the Old Testament. The longing for theodicy in a specific sense first emerges through the good fortune of the ungodly and the suffering of the righteous. Within an anthropological framework, the New Testament not only points to the radicalness and universality of sin, it even emphasizes first and foremost the solidarity of the Triune God with sinful, suffering man in the context of the doctrine of God. In order to understand this, one has to take a careful look at the whole Biblical context. The ominous thundering threat of the theodicy problem takes on a no more blacker and powerful garb in hardly any other place in Old Testament history than in God's command to the patriarch of faith, namely, to Abraham:

Then God said, 'Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about.' (Gen 22:2)

Here the word of God's promise is pitted against the command of God to sacrifice Isaac, done as a rationally unsolvable mystery which is as unfathomable as the problem of theodicy. In the end, God Himself solves the conflict with the promise:

and said, 'I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.' (Gen 22:16f.)

This sparing of one's only beloved son is taken up by Paul in his theological summary of salvation in Christ: "He who did not spare his

own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” (Rom 8:32)

God remains as sovereign Creator and Lord of history not apathetic to the world and to man; He is also not simply a transcendent power of destiny to whom one must submit; He is also not an impersonal sphere of all being in the sense of pantheism, in which the individual, forgetting joy and suffering, is lost to himself, but, rather, He is the loving father who offers Himself in the Son. God in Christ is a sympathetic God who suffers along with us. He bears our pains, suffers our sickness, and dies our death. In Christ, the theodicy question arises between the Father and the Son as the inner tension within the Trinity: “And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ‘*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*’- which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’” (Mark 15:34).

In the resurrection of the righteous when the one who dies in place of the sinner and who makes the ungodly righteous, the theodicy between the Father and Son is finally then completed. God in Christ is, in terms of dogma and in terms of counseling, the only possible answer to theodicy. *Crux probat omnia* (the cross proves everything). In it, the Christian, as a disciple of Jesus, has participation in His cross and lives from the power of His resurrection. Christian faith stands against the temptation and doubt active in this world with the prayer and certainty of Paul Gerhardt, who penned the following hymn:

Lord, be my consolation; shield me when I must die; remind me of thy
passion when my last hour draws nigh. These eyes, new faith receiving,
from thee shall never move; for he who dies believing dies safely in thy
love. (fourth stanza to “O Sacred Head, Now Wounded”)

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Towards redefining persecution

Charles L Tieszen*

Abstract

This study is a re-evaluation of the ways in which religious persecution is presently understood. After briefly demonstrating various shortcomings apparent in many considerations of the event, the author will set out a comprehensive definition of the religious persecution of Christians in an effort to overcome the misunderstandings that hamper theological reflection.

Keywords Persecution, theology of persecution, martyrdom.

1. Introduction

Since the Church's founding, nearly 70 million Christians have been killed for their faith (Barrett and Johnson 2001:227). Even more remarkable than this statistic is that the great majority of these – nearly sixty-five percent – were martyred in the twentieth century alone (229). While the historical forces behind these deaths change, the trend unfortunately has not, for at the mid-point of the present year, Christian martyrs were already estimated to have reached well over 150,000 (Barrett, Johnson and Crossing 2008:30).

These numbers are startling, yet how does one assess forms of persecution that may not be so violent or easily observable? How does one enumerate, for instance, ridicule, ostracism, or harassment? Consideration of acts such as these would surely exacerbate the numbers given above. It is perhaps as a result of persecution's elusive nature that the event lacks the reflection it so direly needs. While we do not lack for personal accounts of persecution experiences, and while these stories are helpful for those who must endure them, and

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helpful for those whose support might be rallied by reading them, this neglect is most apparent when it comes to the way the term is understood, and the attention it receives in *theological* reflection.

Regrettably, much of the theological reflection on persecution that is available to Christians today simply falls short of a thorough understanding of the event. This is evident in studies that limit religious persecution to the experience of the Early Church, and assert that it simply no longer occurs. Likewise, various studies limit the experience of persecution to only eschatological events, thinking that troubling times will only occur in the future as signposts for Christ's imminent return. Other studies reflect a misunderstanding of persecution insofar as they consider it to be a strictly violent act that may end in martyrdom. Thus, such experiences are mistakenly thought to be found only in the Majority World, not in the West, where freedom of religion is thought to be a widely accepted value. Still others extend the experience of persecution to all forms of suffering. Any unfortunate occurrence a Christian might endure, therefore, is thought to be persecution (Tieszen 2008:17-35).

Clearly, these reflections are simply not satisfactory, and contribute to our inability to adequately respond to and reflect upon genuine experiences of religious persecution. Moreover, it is these shortcomings that form the underpinnings of a tendency to rely on insufficient definitions of the term. To that end, the remainder of this study will strive to contribute towards a more complete definition of persecution.

2. Defining the religious persecution of Christians

Croatian theologian Peter Kuzmič laments, "Contemporary reference works on religion move remarkably easily from 'Perfectionism' to 'Perseverance'" (Kuzmič 2004-2005:35). Glenn Penner observes this absence of a definition as well, and remarks, "There is, unfortunately, no universally accepted legal or theological definition of [persecution]" (Penner 2004:163). Indeed, even where attempts are made, current definitions all too commonly reflect some of the misgivings noted above, choosing to define the event based on a period in which it may occur (applying it to the Early Church or as an end-times event), or to a manner in which it may manifest itself (violent acts).

Understanding persecution correctly cannot occur when definitions of the term are restricted or completely absent. In our study, a thorough definition is offered instead on three levels. On the first level, we begin by defining the term persecution in its most basic form, without reference to religion or to Christians, for confusion lies primarily at this level. On the second level, the importance of religion as a factor in determining the type of persecution involved in a given situation will be considered. It is here that we are also able to establish a socio-political definition of religious persecution. On the third level, we must combine the elements of persecution and religion with a definition of “Christian” in order to most accurately define the type of persecution we are reflecting on presently. Finally, we must understand this definition theologically in order to distinguish it from other socio-political definitions. These pieces, taken together, might possibly represent a more robust theological definition and understanding of the religious persecution of Christians.

2.1 Level one: Persecution

On this first level, persecution must be understood as an action. Consequently, one cannot merely have, for example, discriminatory attitudes and be a persecutor. Rather, persecutors act on these attitudes. When they do, persecution occurs. Further, this action should be viewed as unjust.

With this in mind, persecution occurs within a broad spectrum ranging from unjust actions that are intensely hostile, to those that are mildly hostile. Intensely hostile actions, lying at one end of the spectrum, can be carried out physically, psychologically (mentally or emotionally), or socially. These could encompass such actions as beating, torture, isolation, or imprisonment.

Mildly hostile actions lie at the opposite end of this spectrum. These actions are less intense, not violent, and can also be carried out psychologically or socially. These would include ridicule, restriction, certain kinds of harassment, or discrimination. Unjust actions that are mildly hostile are no less significant, and should still be considered as persecution. As a result, we cannot define persecution based on the level of pain it might cause, or the level of intensity in which it occurs. Instead, it must be understood to encompass actions spanning the full range of hostility, be they physical, psychological, or social. In this

light, a thorough definition of persecution will place an emphasis on unjust action manifesting itself within a spectrum of hostility.

Beyond this spectrum, we must remember that persecution may be carried out with a number of different motivations. Furthermore, these motivations often overlap, since persecution rarely has a single impetus (Marshall 1998:2; Marshall 2004-2005:27). Consider the example of a Hindu who marries outside of his or her caste. Doing so may require the parents to ostracise the couple from their entire community. This however, may not just be an issue of religion, but an issue of ethnicity as well, in that one's caste may be tied to one's particular indigenous group. Other situations could also represent a mix of "... political, territorial, and economic concerns" (Marshall 1998:2).

Finally, it is important, on this first level, to understand that the results of persecution are negative and persecutory when viewed from the victim's perspective. In this, negative results are harmful as long as we recognize that harm encompasses the same span of intensity as our understanding of hostility does. Harm, then, can be physical, psychological, or social, and occurs within a spectrum ranging from mildly to intensely hostile. Most important, however, is the recognition that such a definition is produced from the perspective of the victim, not that of the perpetrator.

Cases of nationalism may be helpful illustrations of this vital point. For nineteenth and early-twentieth century Turks, for example, their nationalistic "Turkey for the Turks" provided a basis for the expulsion of Armenians. While the situation was complex, and national security may originally have been a genuine concern, the deportation, genocide, and other horrific events that eventually followed were justified for many Turks in terms of nationalism. They were protecting or ridding their country of what to them were foreign and evil influences. For many Turks, their actions were just, and their results were positive. For Armenians, however, this was a clear case of persecution. It was an unjust action perpetrated on the basis of, in this case, ethnicity, politics, and religion. The results were in fact negative and persecutory. Other examples could include instances in which there was no intention of persecuting, yet persecution occurred nevertheless. As Paul Marshall makes clear: "The motive is not, per se, the issue; the key question is, what is the result?" (Marshall 2000b:17; Marshall 1998:7; Schirmacher 2001:97-99).

On this first level, then, a definition of persecution must consider the elements of unjust action, a spectrum of hostility ranging from mild to intense, the motivations behind persecution, and the resulting effect of harm, all of which are considered from the victim's perspective. In its most basic form, we might define persecution as:

An unjust action of varying levels of hostility with one or more motivations, directed at a specific individual or a specific group of individuals, resulting in varying levels of harm as it is considered from the victim's perspective.

2.2 Level two: Religious persecution

Keeping this basic definition in mind, we cannot assume that all persecution is always religious persecution. More specifically, religious people who are persecuted are not necessarily the victims of religious persecution. As Marshall observes, the conflicts occurring in Rwanda in the mid-1990's are illustrative of this important distinction (Marshall 2000b:9). In this case, Tutsis experienced much persecution, and even death, at the hands of Hutus, but even so, this was primarily an ethnic conflict. Religious people of various convictions made up parts of both sides, and so the nature and motivation of this persecution situation cannot be understood in religious terms. In short, Tutsis were persecuted regardless of their religion. With such examples in mind, we note that a victim's religious identity cannot be the sole factor that determines the type of persecution. Marshall helps us here once again:

A possible demarcation point of religious persecution is to ask whether, if the persons had other religious beliefs, they [sic] would they still be treated in the same way. If the answer is yes, we probably should not call it specifically religious persecution, though not for a second should we forget that it is real persecution and that it is real people who suffer it (Marshall 1998:5).

The clarification we note on the first level applies here as well – rarely is religion, or any other single motivation, the only one involved. Other factors often overlap. What distinguishes certain cases as religious persecution is the primacy of religion as the leading factor. In our example from Rwanda, although religious people were certainly involved, religion itself was far from being a primary motivation of extremist Hutus. If we remove religious factors, Tutsis would still have been subjected to persecution, and so their experience cannot be seen as religious persecution. Conversely, the experience of Christians

in early-twentieth century communist Russia, while also involving political issues, centred on the religion of its victims. If we ask Marshall's question, we might conclude that these individuals could certainly have been spared if it had not been for their identity as Christians. Thus we can conclude that this is an example of religious persecution.

We must do more on this second level, however, than establish religion's role in persecution. With this in mind, most definitions of religious persecution operate on socio-political standards. Accordingly, religious persecution is "... in general, the denial of any of the rights of religious freedom" (Marshall 2000a:21). More specifically, religious freedom can be considered under the United Nations' "Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, 1981." Therein, individuals must be free not only to worship in accordance with the fundamentals of their religion, but they must also be free to change their religion, and to appropriately propagate their faith (20-21; Stott 1975:50). Socio-political definitions of religious persecution like these include, at the very least, genocide, but also focus on the *systematic* violation of religious freedoms. So, to supplement this understanding, Marshall includes the terms "harassment" and "discrimination" (Marshall 1998:5). In reference to religion and faith, then, harassment indicates "... a situation where people, although perhaps not systematically imprisoned or denied the basic possibility of following their faith, nevertheless suffer from legal impediments and are interfered with by the authorities or others and face arbitrary arrest and possible physical assault" (5). In the same way, discrimination refers to "... a situation where people, although perhaps being guaranteed basic freedom[s], nevertheless suffer consistent civil and economic disadvantage under the law for exercising such freedoms" (5).

In this way, religious persecution includes systematic violations of religious freedom, but only in general. It must also include actions which may not be systematic, but occur irregularly (harassment). For example, this may occur if a state does not systematically prohibit the gathering of believers for worship, but arbitrarily disrupts them. Additionally, religious persecution may not always violate religious freedoms, and may occur in an environment that might otherwise guarantee religious freedom (discrimination). Religious minorities, for instance, may have the right to live and assemble in certain countries,

but may still face civic or economic disadvantages as members of their minority faith.

This socio-political definition, along with Marshall's additions, is important for both Christian and secular communities. In many cases, individuals deny that they experience persecution, because they see no cases of brutality or systematic persecution. For instance, some Christians deny the experience of persecution, because they have not been the victims of torture, yet they are forced to worship in secret (Schlossberg 1990:17). When victims of persecution are not aware of their own environment, others might find it difficult to advocate spiritually or politically on their behalf (Marshall 2004-2005:27). Similarly, such unawareness makes it difficult for the international community's efforts to eradicate religious persecution. In cases like these, standards of religious freedom are important, because violations of these standards act as proof of persecution where manifestations such as brutal beatings are not necessarily present. Socio-political definitions are also helpful in providing tangible ways in which to quantify persecution. As a result, quantifying the presence of these actions allows areas where they are a pervading problem to be ranked. This supports the Church and the international community in their efforts to focus prayer and/or action in opposition to religious persecution.

On this second level, then, religious persecution should be understood as:

An unjust action of varying levels of hostility directed at a believer or believers of a particular religion or belief system through systematic oppression or genocide, or through harassment or discrimination which may not necessarily limit these believers' ability to practice their faith, resulting in varying levels of harm as it is considered from the victim's perspective, each action having religion as its primary motivator.

2.3 Level three: Religious persecution of Christians, theologically speaking

On this third level it must be understood that Christians are not the only religious victims who are persecuted for their beliefs. Muslims in India are persecuted by radical Hindu groups just as much, if not worse, than Indian Christians. Baha'i communities are religiously persecuted in Iran. Tibetan Buddhists and Muslim Uighurs are persecuted in China (27). We could easily list many other examples. Thus, without mitigating the persecution of non-Christians, and without suggesting that matters of religious freedom are only

Christian interests (Blunt 2005:54; El-Hage 2004:3-19), we cannot describe the experience of Christians using only the term “religious persecution.” Obviously, “Christian” must be added in order to most accurately describe the expression of persecution on which the present study focuses.

More than this, we must understand “Christian” to mean “one who believes in, or professes or confesses Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, or is assumed to believe in Jesus Christ ...” (Barrett, Kurian, and Johnson 2001:655). This includes “Christians of all kinds” (“census Christians”), “affiliated Christians” (“member Christians”), “church attenders” (“practicing Christians”), and “Great Commission Christians” (“committed believers”) (655, 651, 655, 662; Marshall 1998:4). The difference between these groups centres on the individual’s level of commitment, and ranges from those who are Christian in name only to those who are actively involved in, and share their faith with, others. This understanding of “Christian” is important, for a perceived lack of commitment by a Christian (“Christians of all kinds”) should not disqualify their experience of religious persecution. Neither should the perceived commitment of a Christian (“Great Commission Christian”) necessarily glorify or substantiate their experience of persecution.

Finally, it is important to distinguish our definition of the religious persecution of Christians from socio-political definitions, like those described above. This is done by understanding our definition theologically (Boyd-MacMillan 2006:85ff). A theological definition of the religious persecution of Christians distinguishes itself by operating, in part, on a theological expectation of persecution. This expectation is a biblical principle whereby all Christians must anticipate persecution. We see this, for instance, in statements from Jesus and the Apostle Paul whereby those who choose to follow Christ must expect persecution (Jn 15:20; 2 Tm 3:12). Biblical statements like these are only accounted for in a theological definition.

Furthermore, on this third level, such a theological definition must also consider aspects of persecution that socio-political definitions, like those discussed above, do not. In this light, genocide, a socio-political part of persecution, becomes martyrdom in a theological definition. Theologically, we must also go beyond the systematic or irregular presence of any violations of religious freedoms. We must even go beyond the presence of consistent

discrimination. Thus a theological definition will also consider actions such as ostracism or ridicule as a part of persecution, and as an expected consequence of following Christ. These actions are not consistently discriminatory, and do not violate religious freedoms, yet when considered theologically, they are religious persecution. In this way, a theological definition of the religious persecution of Christians cannot separate actions of systematic violations from irregular ones, or from actions that do not violate religious freedoms at all.

To illustrate this point, consider the example of a young man who converts from the religion of his parents and family heritage to Christianity (Marshall 2000b:16). Upon doing so, this young man's parents ostracise him from his community and effectively disinherit him from his family. Considered from a socio-political perspective, however unfortunate this situation may be, it does not represent religious persecution. According to international standards, families are allowed to exercise such rights, unless the young man experienced any subsequent physical attack. Such would also be the case for a young girl who is ridiculed by schoolmates for being a Christian. Ridiculing someone is not illegal. Considered theologically, however, these actions do constitute religious persecution, regardless of whether they violate religious freedom or not. The actions of these hypothetical persecutors come as part of an expected consequence of following Christ. While their actions may not necessitate a reaction from the international community, when considered theologically, they require a response from the Church. Such a response may not be directed at the persecutors, but in support of, in these examples, the young man and the school girl. Likewise, these actions demand a theological understanding, and they demand a response from these Christians that may not be required in a socio-political understanding. Thus, the significance of a theological definition of the religious persecution of Christians forces certain examples of persecution to be considered, and to be responded to theologically, that a socio-political definition may not require.

Such a theological definition is important, because it acknowledges the full range in which persecution occurs, be it a systematic violation of religious freedom, an irregular violation, or an irregular, unjust action that violates no religious freedoms (Boyd-MacMillan 2006:114, 115-116).

This theological consideration, its importance notwithstanding, does however make it nearly impossible to clearly identify areas where religious persecution may be a pervasive problem, and/or to classify areas in which religious freedoms are violated. For this reason, a socio-political definition of religious persecution can accompany a theological definition. While this may be helpful in terms of advocacy, awareness, and support, the presence of a theological definition on this third level must not be forgotten, for only when such a definition is present can we fully understand the religious persecution of Christians, and appropriately reflect on it theologically.

To this end, a theological definition of the religious persecution of Christians follows (“expanded definition”):

Any unjust action of mild to intense levels of hostility, directed at Christians of varying levels of commitment, resulting in varying levels of harm, which may not necessarily prevent or limit these Christians’ ability to practice their faith or appropriately propagate their faith as it is considered from the victim’s perspective, each motivation having religion, namely the identification of its victims as “Christian,” as its primary motivator.

For purposes of brevity, a “standard definition” understands the religious persecution of Christians to be:

Any unjust action of varying levels of hostility, perpetrated primarily on the basis of religion, and directed at Christians, resulting in varying levels of harm as it is considered from the victim’s perspective.

3. Testing the definition

3.1 A helpful tension

This theological definition accounts for the full range in which persecution occurs. Yet this range can be difficult to accept, especially for those whose experience of persecution is frequent and intensely hostile. From their perspective, the rather comfortable position of some followers of Christ is hardly a testament of a persecuted Christian. With this in mind, we must clarify that the definition offered above is not meant to cheapen or glorify the experience of those who endure intensely hostile forms of persecution. Neither is it meant to deny the experience of those who endure mildly hostile forms of persecution. A tension exists, then, that may go some way towards filling in what appear to some as gaps between Christian discipleship and the promised experience of persecution. With this in mind, we can observe that the presence of persecution is universal for all those who

seek to follow Jesus Christ. However, even though the presence of persecution may be universal, it seems to be experienced differently by Christians, depending upon their context. In this way, persecution is experienced contextually, insofar as it takes place in different ways, depending on where it occurs and to whom.

3.2 The universal presence of persecution

As we noted in our theological definition of the religious persecution of Christians, the New Testament sets forth a theological expectation whereby Christians can anticipate persecution as a part of Christian living. This is what Jesus has in mind when he says, “All men will hate you because of me ...” (Mt 10:22). In the same way, he warns, “If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also” (Jn 15:20). Paul echoes these sentiments when he tells Timothy, “... everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted ...” (2 Tm 3:12). Peter, too, writes, “Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you” (1 Pt 4:12). For Peter, expecting persecution meant not being surprised by its presence. Surely these words can apply to believers today, in the same way that they did to their biblical audiences. In fact, we are told that the Church and the Apostles before it stand in continuity with each other and with the Old Testament prophets, through the presence of persecution in their lives (Mt 5:11-12). Consequently, not only was persecution present in the lives of God’s prophets, but it extends through time, as a promise and expectation for all those who seek to follow Christ. From this, we can surmise that the presence of the religious persecution of Christians is universal and ever-present. It cannot be relegated to a specific period, isolated to a specific location, or consigned to a certain group of people. Instead, its presence must be understood as universal not just chronologically, but geographically as well.

If this is so, then the question of normativity arises. If all Christians are persecuted, or are to expect persecution, how often will this occur? Do the biblical statements above indicate a daily experience? Surely, as Christ’s own life, or that of any of the biblical characters illustrates, persecution is not necessarily a day-to-day experience. By not enduring it at any given moment, one need not question the validity of one’s discipleship. Persecution is to be an expected part of every Christian’s life, not necessarily an expected part of every Christian’s day.

This question of normativity may, however, be posed in a different manner. The late Jonathan Chao, like other Majority World Christians, wondered: “If [persecution] is an essential part of Christian union with Christ, which he intends us to experience, how do we explain the relative lack of [persecution] in churches in the rest of the world [the West]?” He continues: “... has the church in the West and the rest of the ‘free world’ been deprived of a training course on the way to glory?” (Chao 1984:88). In other words, is the idea of persecution as universally present, however biblical this might be, believable in today’s world – a world divided by West and non-West; a culturally-conditioned church on one side, and one that seeks to exist amid tumultuousness on the other? If Scripture understands persecution as an integral part of Christian living and discipleship, are we then to think that the experience of the West and the Majority World is of comparable value? Such questions can only be answered – the universal presence of persecution can only be fully understood – by exploring the contextual experience of persecution.

3.3 The contextual experience of persecution

Even if the presence of persecution is universal, the experience of it takes place within a broad, albeit well defined spectrum of manifestations. So, while there may be many shared experiences of persecution throughout the world, persecution ultimately happens differently, depending on where it occurs and to whom. That is, persecution occurs in all areas, but how it is experienced becomes a matter of context. So, Chao’s question, quoted above, might better be asked not by wondering *why* persecution apparently does not occur in an area like the West, but by inquiring, “If persecution is an expected part of the Christian life, *how* does it occur in contexts where it does not appear to be as obvious as in other areas like the Majority World?” In other words, the answer to Chao’s question may not be found in the presence or absence of persecution, but in reflecting upon the type of persecution endured in a specific context. If we apply the present study’s theological definition of religious persecution to a context like the West, a critical eye can see that this context does indeed experience persecution, even if it is almost entirely mildly hostile and less apparent. Similarly, an examination of any cultural context should reveal a certain experience of persecution. In this light, the contextual experience of persecution – the fact that it occurs differently in different areas – supports the concept that the presence of persecution is universal, and that it occurs to all Christians, however complex or diverse the experience of it might be.

Recognition of persecution as an experience occurring within specific contexts is important if we are to bring further recognition to the universal presence of persecution. In contexts where Christians are under significant pressure, or where it may even be illegal to fully practice their faith, persecution will often manifest itself in intensely hostile ways. Such is often not the case for Christians whose context looks more favorably on religion, specifically Christianity. In these contexts, persecution will most often manifest itself in mildly hostile ways. This is the case for many Christians in the West, where persecution is frequently a matter of discrimination or ridicule, which, understood theologically, can be seen as religious persecution. In this light, the experience of persecution is contextual, but the presence of persecution is universal.

4. Conclusion

If we are honest about the current state of theological reflection on religious persecution, we shall have to admit that, with few exceptions, the shortcomings we briefly describe at the beginning of our study suffer from malformed definitions of persecution. By offering a reconsidered definition of the event, we hope to correct these previous limitations.

In closing, it is perhaps worth reiterating here the care we hope to have demonstrated in placing religious persecution – intense and frequent for many, mild and infrequent for others – in the context of a theological expectation and a spectrum of hostility. In the same way, it is important to recognize here that those who might best be able to reflect theologically on religious persecution, and might best be able to fill in some of the gaps that do exist, may be the Majority World Christians who are most intimately familiar with persecution. It is often the case, though, that Christians in this position are unable, or, understandably, are unwilling to give reflection to their painful experiences. Nevertheless, may our study here stimulate more helpful reflection from a greater representation of the global Church. May it help those who experience persecution most frequently and intensely to respond to it with greater clarity and Christ-likeness, and may their cause be given more attention and support by those whose experience of persecution is infrequent and mild.

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Biblical teaching on perseverance

Margaretha N Adiwardana*

Abstract

Perseverance is explained by examining the original Greek and Hebrew terms in the biblical texts and viewing them in eschatological context. Suffering leads to blessing for those who endure it. Paul portrays how suffering strengthens the communion with Christ. Peter emphasises that suffering is part of Christian life and reliance. In the book of Revelation suffering and perseverance are seen as part of God's plan for salvation. The proclamation of the Kingdom of God is done in contexts of suffering. The book of Acts portrays how the Early Church persevered in persecution.

Keywords Suffering, perseverance, eschatological context, God's purpose, participation in Christ's suffering, trust, blessing, sovereignty of God, defamation, proclamation, overcomers, God's reward.

As this paper deals with perseverance in situations of adversity in missionary work, one needs to go back to the Bible for solid and absolute principles, especially as perseverance in suffering runs counter to the contemporary culture. Most books of the Bible were written in a context where the servants of God were suffering, specifically from rejection by the people to whom they were sent, (e.g. Isaiah, Jeremiah and even Jesus himself), and from persecution (e.g. Elijah, Paul, Peter and John). This serves as a kind of warning of what is to be expected by those who serve God and an example of how they should react to persecution and suffering.

Biblical teaching on perseverance is considered in the following passages: Matt 24:13, where Jesus warned the disciples about the coming tribulations and suffering and told them to persevere; 2 Cor 11:23-33, where Paul wrote about the suffering he underwent as missionary; 1 Pet 2:4; 12-16, where Peter exhorted Christians to rejoice in suffering; the book of Revelation where suffering is endured within the context of God's wider purpose; Acts 2:42-47, where the life-style of the early Christians led to a cultural transformation, which resulted both in admiration and persecution.

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1. Perseverance in the teaching of Jesus - Matt 24:13

“But he who stands firm to the end will be saved.” (NIV) “But he who endures to the end will be saved.” (RSV) “But whoever holds out to the end will be saved.” (TEV) “Holds out” means “remains faithful”, “does not give up.”¹

The disciples were asking about when and what would be the signs of the imminent destruction of Jerusalem, the second coming of Jesus and the end of the world. In reply Jesus warned them that tribulations and persecution are to be expected by His followers and that those who stand firm in the midst of them will be saved. The Vida Nova Bible comments on the passage that,

The three subjects pertain one to another, the judgement of Jerusalem being just one step towards the final destruction. Jesus’ second coming marks the end of the worldly order. But before this happens, deceivers and false Christs will appear, wars, famine and earthquakes, tribulations, false prophets, and increase of wickedness, the growing cold of love to God will occur. All these signs create an environment for the manifestation of the great sign, the preaching of the Gospel till the ends of the earth (v. 14; cf. Matt 28:18-20). Then the end will come.²

All kinds of tribulations, natural disasters and persecution are bound to happen and Jesus warned the disciples that they would also be hated by all nations and even put to death because of His name. In such situations Jesus declared that the ones who will be saved are those who persevere and the Gospel will be preached in the whole world as a witness to all nations. This precedes the end of the world, the consummation of the age. Today Christians are preaching the Gospel throughout the whole world.

“To persevere” in the original Greek language *hypomenein* (preposition *hypo* and verb *menein*) means to remain, to stay behind, to be firm, to survive, to remain constant, to be patient, to bear, to wait, to expect. It is used in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew verb *qawah*, to wait and to trust, *yahal* to expect, *hakah* to wait patiently, especially in relation to waiting for God, the hope of Israel. *Hypomone* the noun means patience, constancy, perseverance. It expresses the attitude of those who live in the light of the last days

¹ Bratcher, R.G. *A translator’s guide to the Gospel of Matthew*. NY: United Bible Societies 1981, 301.

² *Bíblia Vida Nova*, São Paulo: Vida Nova, 1989 footnote 35-36.

(*eschatos* – Hab. 2:3; Soph. 3:18; Dan. 12:12) and is used as such in the Synoptic Gospels. In Job it is used in the sense of being constant, stay firm, persevering in afflictions (Jb. 6:10). In Matt 24:13 *ho the hypomeneinas eis telos sothesetai* (cf Mark 13:13) may be translated as “he who stands firm to the end will be saved.” In Luke 21:19 the noun is used instead of the verb. It reads: *en te hypomone humon katesesthe tas psychas bymon* (“In your perseverance you will win your souls”). The context is eschatological. Jesus warned the disciples to persevere in spite of the many tribulations. The severity of the situation demands perseverance. In the parable of the sower, perseverance is linked to productivity (Luke 8:15; cf. Matt 13:23; Mark 4:20). Whereas the parable mentions that cares, riches and pleasures can hinder fruitfulness, the eschatological discourse bears in mind tests and tribulations. In both cases patient persistence is a pre-requirement. In the former it will result in salvation. In the latter it will lead to fruit of the Word. The warning to persevere is quoted in Matt 10:22 in the context of the missionary instructions to the twelve. They would be hated by all. There are eschatological implications in the passage and the twelve are encouraged to appreciate the eternal blessing that is the outcome of perseverance.³

Suffering is beatitude (Matt 5:4ff). Mounce wrote that insult, opposition and lies are all to be expected by Christ’s followers and that when this happens, they are to be happy and glad (lit.: to leap exceedingly or unbridled joy).⁴ Those who suffer persecution because of righteousness and for the sake of Jesus will be rewarded in heaven. The Kingdom of God belongs to those who are persecuted. It happened to the prophets, they were hated (Matt 10:22). Those who lose their life will find it (Matt 10:39). Death begets life, as Jesus demonstrated. In John 12:24-26 serving Jesus, following Him, to be with Him is to be like Him. The context is the moment before betrayal and crucifixion of Jesus. Suffering involves giving up earthly things in Matt 19:29, one’s family, parents, siblings, children and renouncing of possessions, homes and professions, fields. Suffering can be losing one’s reputation as in 1 Cor 4:10 when Paul said he was called a fool, weak and worthless. In Luke 6:20-23 sufferings which bring blessings

³ *Dicionário Internacional Teológico do Novo Testamento*. São Paulo: Vida Nova, 1985. Vol. III, 378ff.

⁴ Mounce, R.H. *Matthew, A Good News Commentary*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985, 39.

are listed by Jesus as poverty, hunger, mourning, being hated and isolated, being falsely accused and rejected.

Morris comments on Mark 4:17 that “Christians are to expect and accept tribulation and persecution which will occur because of the Word. It is part of the Christians’ lot, the cost and essence of discipleship is renunciation.”⁵ In Mark 10:41 Jesus said that He came to serve, to suffer and to die for many, which is the way to His being glorified. “Christ’s attitude towards suffering is that it is for the Christians’ good – a blessing”.⁶

Conclusion: As Christ suffered, those who follow Him should expect to suffer. Suffering as His followers involves renouncing one’s own rights to family, possessions, fame and even life. It is part of the proclamation of the Gospel to the world and of the eschatological plan of God. The Christian attitude towards suffering is to endure, to persevere, to remain firm, to expect and to trust in God. Suffering can be a source of blessing if Christians persevere, because it will be greatly rewarded with fruitfulness and eternal salvation.

In the light of the persecution of the Church which is happening at present in many countries, it is interesting to note that R.T. France wrote that persecution will come from all nations. It will take its toll, in that many will “be tripped up”. Lawlessness will lead to the cooling off of love, giving a sombre picture of a church in decline. The context indicates that this is part of the history which must take place before “the end” comes. Endurance is a prominent apocalyptic theme (cf. e.g. Dan 12:12-13). Only those who endure right through to the end will be saved.⁷ Gundry comments on Matt 24:13 that for Matthew endurance till the end included resisting the temptation to escape persecution by withdrawal from carrying out the great commission (Matt 28:18-20)⁸

Persecution and tribulation have come for the followers of Christ, and especially to those who proclaim the Gospel. Christians must resist the temptation to stop preaching the good news to the world in trying to avoid suffering. They should persevere right through till the

⁵ Morris, L. *The cross in the New Testament*. Carlisle Paternoster, 1995, 26.

⁶ Ibid. 25.

⁷ France, R.T. *New Testament commentaries – Matthew*. Grand Rapids: IVP Eerdmans 1985, 338-339.

⁸ Gundry, R.H. *Matthew – A commentary on his literary and theological art*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1983, 380.

end. By so doing they will be saved and will bring many others to salvation.

2. Perseverance in the life and teaching of Paul - 2 Cor 11:23-33

From the very beginning of his calling Paul was warned that he would suffer as he preached the Gospel (Acts 9:15). Towards the end of his ministry he said that if he had to boast of anything about himself, he would boast of being a servant of Christ who had gone through much suffering. He lived in constant danger: Danger in travels included travelling through rivers, enduring shipwreck, facing the risk of being robbed. Dangers caused by man included opposition from fellow countrymen, gentiles, false Christians and the Roman government. Deprivations he faced involved physical labour, tiredness, and hunger.⁹ Paul had “often gone without sleep” not because it was deliberately shunned, but because sleep was impossible. He also faced hunger and thirst, cold and nakedness through lack of money.¹⁰ Furthermore He was worn down by his emotional concerns in pastoral caring for the church. He faced death on many occasions (e.g. in Iconium – Acts 14:5, Lystra – Acts 14:19, Philippi – Acts 16:22, Thessalonica – Acts 17:5, and Ephesus – Acts 19:26f), and eventually died in Rome.

In Rom 8:17 Paul describes Christians as children of God who are fellow sufferers with Christ and co-heirs of His glory and in sufferings. In v. 35-39 he affirms that no kind of suffering can separate us from Christ. From this one might conclude that suffering could be used to try to separate us from God, but it need not prevail. In 2 Cor 1:3-11 Paul asserts that suffering makes us experience the comfort of God. Then we are able to comfort others when they are going through the same sufferings as we do. “Comfort” translates a Greek word which means not only consoling someone in trouble, but also helping and encouraging him. In v. 3-7 this word occurs ten times, which indicates the importance given to “comforting in trouble” in this

⁹ Bratcher mentions that toil and hardship implies working hard to make a living and to preach the gospel. In Bratcher, R.G. *A translator's guide to Paul's second letter to the Corinthians*. NY: United Bible Societies, 1983, 126.

¹⁰ Barrett, C.K. *The second epistle to the Corinthians*. London: A.C.Black, 1986, 300.

letter.¹¹ V. 6 mentions that patience and the comfort of God in suffering is of equal measure. As fellow sufferers with Christ, Christians experience the comfort of God. Verse 8 warns them not to be ignorant of the real reason and nature of hardships, even when it seems to be more than human strength can bear. The aim of suffering is to encourage Christians not to rely on themselves but on God, who gives life (resurrection) even after death. God who delivered Jesus will deliver them by faith.

Paul suffered even as he warned others. He was stoned, lashed, imprisoned (Acts 21:13; 20:23; 16:22ff; 14:19; 21:31ff; 22:22; 23:21). Finally the brethren realized that it was God's will for him (Acts 21:14). Morris writes that Paul understands suffering as not aimless, nor inflicted by fate. Suffering comes only as God Almighty permits and God's purpose is accomplished in the suffering of His servants.¹² Perseverance in Paul's writing is a characteristic which is demanded of those who wish to live their lives pleasing to God. "To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honour and immortality, he will give eternal life" (NIV Rom 2:7) The active meaning of firm persistence in doing good as well as the passive or patient resignation in difficulties may be included here.

Paul shows in Rom 5 how suffering can be used to transform the character of the righteous. V. 3-5 state that suffering produces perseverance and experience and hope. Hope is waiting patiently for what one does not see yet (Rom 8:25). There is a relationship between suffering/affliction (*thlipsis*) and perseverance (*hypomone*) (Rom 12:12-13). *Thlipsis* has the meaning of "pressure" in the physical sense and "oppression" in the figurative sense. According to the International Dictionary of NT Theology "the aim of the Scriptures is to promote *hypomone* which furthermore reflects the very character of God."¹³ Paul wrote:

For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Rom 15:3-6)

¹¹ Op.cit. p.7.

¹² Morris, op. cit. 268-269.

¹³ *Dicionário Internacional do Novo Testamento*, p.380.

In 1 Corinthians *hypomone* is a characteristic of love, “It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres (*Panta hypomenei*).” (1 Cor 13:7) In 2 Corinthians Paul develops the theme of perseverance specially in the service of Christ for the sake of the church (2 Cor 1:6). Paul mentions his own perseverance as a quality demanded of the Christian workers (1 Tim 6:1; 2 Tim 3:10) and older men (Tit 2:2). Out of love for the elect it is necessary to endure all things (2 Tim 2:10).¹⁴ In 2 Cor 1:8-9 Paul says that “this happened that we might not rely on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead.” Clements writes:

Paul is convinced that his descent into abject despair was deliberately engineered by God’s providence... Doubt, uncertainty and intellectual insecurity are experiences we have to pass through to discover faith. The opposite of faith, according to Paul, is not doubt but confidence “in the flesh”... that one can cope on one’s own; ... that one does not need the grace of God... The people who are farthest from faith are ... those who are all too sure of themselves. ... God had to teach even him the great apostle, not to rely on himself, but “on God who raises the dead”.¹⁵

Conclusion: Paul is an example of a missionary whose suffering is a consequence of his desire to serve Christ in bringing the Gospel to people. Persecution from man and suffering from poverty and dangers were to be expected. Yet Paul persevered. He recognized that troubles are part of the whole process whereby a Christian is conformed to Christ’s image, the suffering Servant. In his suffering he experienced God’s comfort and grew in hope of sharing in Christ’s glory. Barnett concludes that while Paul had money problems, health problems and relationship conflicts as do other people, faithfulness to Christ and to the ministry were the chief source of his trouble.¹⁶ As Hauck asserts, Paul considered that Christians showed their faith by persevering in suffering (cf. 2 Tim 2:10). The ability to endure is given by God (Rom 15:5), and it is closely related to faith and love (1 Tim 6:11; 2 Tim 3:10), and in Tit 2:2 steadfastness in hoping. If hope focuses on the future, the steadfastness of hope is during the present affliction. Hope is based on the promise that those who die with Christ, if they endure, shall also reign with him (2 Tim 2:11-12).¹⁷

¹⁴ Op.cit, p. 380-381.

¹⁵ Clements, R. *The strength of weakness*. Guernsey: Christian Focus, 1994, 24-25.

¹⁶ Barnett, P. *The message of 2 Corinthians*. Downers Grove: IVP 1988, 30.

The implication for today is, if our society nowadays is triumphalist, as Carson says was the case of the church in Corinth, then Paul was saying that when miracles, which were typical of apostolic ministry, appeared, it was in the context of great endurance. The “endurance” in Paul’s case refers to the beatings, the privations, and the thorn in the flesh.¹⁸ Belleville applies this to the current church, affirming that the central theme of 2 Corinthians is divine power in weakness, a theme much neglected by the church in the West. It is considered appropriate only for Christians under oppressive political regimes. “Health, wealth and prosperity” is a popular theme in many contemporary sermons. But Paul defines the role of the gospel preacher in terms of the trials and hardships. There God’s power is seen and appropriated, His comfort experienced in suffering (2 Cor 1:6-7).¹⁹ The model set by Paul before the church is pastoral care and self-sacrifice and a lifestyle of weakness.²⁰ Paul maintained that God’s power is seen most effectively in ministerial hardship and distress. “Dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed ... having nothing, and yet possessing everything.” (2 Cor 6:9-10) In the very weakness of the ministers Jesus is revealed. This is difficult to accept in the current mindset. People frequently want to be in control of their circumstances. And yet in Paul’s opinion weakness authenticates the true gospel minister.²¹

Suffering is often part of missionary life. It brings God’s comfort. With the experience of God’s comfort, character is transformed, self-reliance is changed to dependence on God. This is the mark of real faith and true gospel. It results in endurance, persevering in good works, love and steadfastness in faith. In the missionary’s weakness, God’s power is displayed. It shows human weakness and displays divine strength and human dependence on God. A missionary should endure in producing good works, with trustful hope, not necessarily for deliverance, but hope in God’s promise that in the end God will give him eternal life. When Christians remain faithful amidst

¹⁷ Hauck F. in *Theological dictionary of the NT*. Kittel G. & F., (ed.), Grand Rapids: Paternoster, 1985, 583.

¹⁸ Carson, D.A. *From triumphalism to maturity*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984, 157.

¹⁹ Belleville, L.L. *2 Corinthians*. Downers Grove: IVP 1996, 36.

²⁰ Ibid. 45.

²¹ Ibid. 123.

suffering, God, who gives endurance, comfort and encouragement, is glorified.

3. Perseverance as response to suffering in the teaching of Peter - 1 Pet 4:12-19

According to Clowney, the heart of Peter's concern in writing his first letter is to assure Christians of their hope as they face trials.²² Ramsey Michaels considers this passage as an opportunity to reflect on the themes of 2:11-4; 6, which show how one should "respond to one's enemies and how to face hostility and the prospect of suffering".²³

Peter considered suffering for Christ as quite normal. There is nothing special in it. It is not strange or extraordinary. The clear message conveyed in this passage is that suffering is part of the natural experience of Christians; it is not something foreign to them. It would be strange and unusual if they did not suffer because of their faith.²⁴ Christ suffered and it is an indication of identification with Him when His followers suffer as He did. Verse 13 says that: "participation in Christ's suffering is a reason to rejoice, because those who share in his suffering will participate in his glory." Cranfield says:

...this sharing is a two-way sharing. We share in his sufferings, and he shares in ours. We share his reproach, ... To share Christ's shame is a glorious privilege, to have his fellowship though it be in the midst of the flames – is to have fullness of joy, and to partake of his humiliation in this world is the pledge of participation in his glory in the world to come.²⁵

To suffer on behalf of Jesus' name is a blessing, because it is the sign that the Spirit of glory is present in this person (cf. Matt 5:10-12). The Christian has to glorify God in suffering (v. 16). Marshall comments: "Rather we should recognize that suffering because of our faith is a way of bringing glory to God. ... He is glorified by the faithful witness of His people."²⁶

The Spirit of Christ is in the person who suffers. From the point of view of the world, it is strange and uncommon when man has to

²² Clowney, E. *The message of 1 Peter*. Downers Grove: IVP, 1988, 51.

²³ Michaels, J. R. *1 Peter*. Waco: Word Books 1988, 258.

²⁴ Arichea, D.C. & Nida E.A. *A translator's handbook on the first letter from Peter*. NY: United Bible Societies 1980, 145-146.

²⁵ Cranfield, C.E.B. *1 & 2 Peter and Jude*. London: SCM Press, 1960, 120.

²⁶ Marshall I.H. *1 Peter*. Downers Grove: IVP 1991, 155.

suffer as it is painful and human beings seek a comfortable life. But persecution and rejection are to be expected by those who follow Christ's way of life, which is against the world and the flesh. It is "against the characteristic of our age", according to Morris.²⁷ Man has to force himself to appreciate suffering.

Suffering is part of the purifying process of the Christian life for those who obey the Gospel of God. The "painful trial" in verse 12 is also translated as "the fiery ordeal" (cf. Prov 27:21) As Grudem comments: "The image of a refiner's fire suggests that such suffering purifies and strengthens Christians."²⁸ They should not be ashamed of suffering or shy away from it. Judgment is the sign of the end of times (cf. 'The Great Tribulation', Mark 13:20), which starts with the persecution of the Church and ends with the divine fury against the rebellious (Rev 6:15,17; Isa 10:12; Jer 25:29; Ezek 9:6; Mal 3:1-6).²⁹ It is God's own will which allows the Christian to suffer. "According to God's will" in v. 19 may be rendered as "because this is what God desires that they should experience" (cf. 2:15; 3:17). Christians should also "commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good". They should also "do good to others, and in this way entrust themselves completely to their Creator."³⁰ Marshall's conclusion on the passage is as follows:

Are we to say that God intends his people to suffer? Hard though it may seem, the answer to this question is affirmative. It was God's will that Christ should suffer to redeem His people, and Christ was obedient to that will. To be sure, the need arose only because of the evil in the world, but in a world where evil exists its defeat is possible only through suffering... it is right to say that God's will for us is suffering because there is no other way that evil can be overcome. When we suffer, it is not a sign of God's lack of love or concern for us...Those who suffer can confidently place themselves in the care of God.³¹

The Christian who suffers has to trust God, rely on His perfect will, entrust his life to his Master and Creator. Michaels translates "commit themselves" as "let [them] entrust their lives" and comments that "This phrase... defines rather the attitude of mind that makes the glorification of God in a time of crisis possible."

²⁷ Morris, op.cit. 330.

²⁸ Grudem, W. *1 Peter*. Downers Grove: IVP/ Eerdmans 1988, 178.

²⁹ *Biblia Vida Nova*, footnote p.280.

³⁰ Arichea & Nida, op.cit. 153.

³¹ Marshall, op.cit. 157.

He compares it with Ps. 30:6 “into your hands I entrust my spirit”, and concludes that Peter wants his readers to entrust themselves continually to God’s protecting care, whatever the circumstances. “Lives” (or “souls”) is a favourite term in 1 Peter, either in connection with salvation (1:9, 22; 3:20) or (as here) with divine care and guidance (cf. 2:25). *Psyche* is used throughout not for an immaterial “soul” in distinction from the body, but for the whole person, especially with reference to the person’s ultimate physical and spiritual well-being.³² The attitude is of trust, “handing over something of value to the care of another”, which “in our context is of handing over one’s most valuable possession, one’s very own self, to God.”³³

The Christian is to rejoice in suffering as when it is on behalf of Christ’s name it means participating with Him and in His glory. Rejoice in v. 13, *chairete*, is present tense, which according to Stibbs indicates the demand not for a single isolated response, but for a continuous attitude and activity: “For it means that they have a privileged share in the outworking of God’s age-long purpose, according to which His Christ enters His glory, through suffering (cf. 1:10,11; Luke 24:26).”³⁴ Verses 14 and 16 refer to the sufferings that Christ endured and those we endure in his name. “As we suffer for Christ, we are linked to him. Our sufferings witness to his. Because he suffered for us, we can rejoice when we are counted worthy to suffer for him.”³⁵

We have to continue living virtuously and practising good works. This is contrary to the normally acceptable human reaction towards suffering. Our first reaction in suffering is “Why me?” and after a prolonged period of suffering “Where is God?” Thus Peter had to exhort Christians to persevere and even be joyful in suffering instead of the normal automatic human reaction of aversion and bafflement. Clowney affirms: “Suffering for Christ leads to glory and tastes of glory; it also gives glory to God. When believers suffer because they are Christians, God is glorified.”³⁶

In 1 Pet 5:9 Peter mentioned that sufferings are being borne by Christians all over the world and that they should resist the devil, standing firm in the faith. Verse 10 says, after they have suffered for a

³² Michaels op. cit. 273.

³³ David P.H.L. *The first epistle of Peter*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1990, 173.

³⁴ Stibbs A.M. *1 Peter*. London: Tyndale Press, 1966, 159.

³⁵ Clowney, op.cit. 191.

³⁶ Ibid. 192.

little while, Christ himself will restore them making them strong, firm and steadfast. Suffering is a blessing, when it results from righteous action or persecution. In such circumstances, the Christian need not be afraid of the danger of suffering (1 Pet 3:14). 1 Pet 1:6 says, one has to rejoice in suffering because the final revelation is salvation. It is God's power which keeps the righteous through faith. Many tribulations sadden the believers, but their faith is proved to be more precious than gold which perishes. The aim of suffering is to redound to the praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ will be revealed. Peter exhorts those who suffer to follow Jesus' example, an example of patience and perseverance on the cross, as a rebuke of unrighteousness (1 Pet 2:21). Morris says, we need to try to reproduce this attitude in our experience.³⁷ Perseverance, *hypomone* is mentioned twice in 2 Pet 1:6 as a virtue, producing Christian character (cf. Rom 5:3, Jas 1:3-4).³⁸

Conclusion: Peter, the apostle who denied Jesus three times from fear of imprisonment, when Jesus was being taken away for the crucifixion, later understood that suffering for doing what is righteous is part of the Christian life. One has to expect it and should not think it strange. It is a blessing and a reason to rejoice, as it means that he is taking part in Christ's suffering and therefore will also take part in His glory. The response towards suffering is to persevere. That will bring blessing. It will finally bring glory to God when by faith it is proven that God keeps him steadfast in suffering. To suffer because of evil-doing is a shame, but to suffer because of righteousness is a blessing. It is an identification and participation with Christ, both in His suffering and in His glory.

Peter understood our human fears: "Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened. But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord." (1 Pet 3:14-15a, quoting Isa 8:12) As Cranfield comments on 1 Pet 3:13: "If we do not have to fear persecution, there is still fear of illness, of bereavement, of failure, of getting old, of the next war, and so on."

He further comments on 1 Pet 3:14-15 with reference to Isa 8:12ff:

"According to the Hebrew text, the prophet and his disciples are warned not to conform to the ideas of the people, nor to fear what the people are afraid of, but to fear the Lord God alone... Christians must let the true

³⁷ Morris, op.cit. 322.

³⁸ *Dicionário Internacional Teológico do Novo Testamento*, 381.

fear – the fear of Christ their Lord – banish all false fears from their hearts.”³⁹

The Sovereignty and initiative of God even in the suffering of His own people is considered to be the most striking feature of the passage by Michaels. Faithfulness and doing good makes it possible to rejoice even under slander and oppression, and to experience now in advance, through the Spirit of God, the glory of Christ for which we wait.⁴⁰

4. Perseverance and suffering in God’s plan in the Book of Revelation

One of the main themes of the book of Revelation is the absolute authority and supreme sovereignty of God over the whole creation.⁴¹ God is in control of history. John perceives the plan of history. He shared this perception in the book of Revelation.

Wilcock says that the practical result of knowing this fact makes Christians view suffering in the light of the ultimate reign of Christ. It enables John to face tribulation because he knew about the coming of the kingdom.⁴²

Another theme much mentioned in the book of Revelation is suffering and perseverance in relationship to God’s plan for salvation. In the book of Revelation suffering and death are seen as glorification and not as a problem, because God is at the centre of history, as Morris suggests. The emphasis in the book is on victory and suffering is viewed merely as a means of the carrying out of God’s plan. God allows suffering from the perspective of the cross. Christians should understand suffering from this perspective. They undergo suffering as Christ suffered on the cross, and thereby brought salvation. This transforms the understanding of suffering and the values of Christ’s followers. Suffering is not seen as mere evil, because when it is correctly borne, it will bear fruit for good.⁴³ Following Christ is to become like Him, to bear the cross (Luke 9:23). Christian service is

³⁹ Cranfield, op.cit 99.

⁴⁰ Michaels, op. cit. 274-275.

⁴¹ Hughes P.E. *The book of Revelation, a commentary*, Grand Rapids: IVP/Eerdmans 1990, 52.

⁴² Wilcock, M. *The message of Revelation, I saw Heaven opened*. Leicester: IVP 1991, 42.

⁴³ Morris, op.cit. 359.

sacrificial and therefore costly. To bring the Gospel to others is to walk the path of the cross.⁴⁴

John refers to himself as the companion and brother, who suffers for the Kingdom and patiently endures for the sake of God's word and testimony of Jesus (Rev 1:9). Patient endurance is the ability to endure persecution and suffering.⁴⁵ He partakes with the readers "in the costliness of personal affliction which is inseparable from the true brotherhood of the faith, [or as John puts it here], in the tribulation and kingdom and patience, in Jesus."⁴⁶ Suffering is part of the calling of those, who belong to God's Kingdom, who preach God's Word and are witnesses of Jesus (Acts 1:8). Tribulation and the kingdom are closely connected and Sweet says: "the tension between them is expressed by endurance, a keyword (Rev 2:2,19; 3:10; 13:10; 14:12), with a flavour of expectancy, not stoicism."⁴⁷

Jesus knew those who persevered and endured hardships for His name in the church in Ephesus (Rev 2:2-3). He says: "You have not grown weary", which means they had not given up or become discouraged.⁴⁸ Perseverance in hardship for the Ephesian Christians was not easy. It required hard work, toil and patience. Hughes writes that they did not abandon the struggle under the stress of painful opposition and affliction, because they were Christ-centered, not self-centered. In so doing, they were expressing gratitude, and not accumulating merit. They learned this way that there was blessing in the endurance of hardship and indignity for the Lord's sake. (Matt 5:11) It is a hard path to follow, but it is a path that leads to incomparable glory (Phil 2:8; Rom 8:18; 2 Cor 4:17).⁴⁹

God declared to the church in Smyrna that He knew their tribulation and poverty, and the coming imprisonment, trials, even death (Rev 2:9-11). It was a poor church located in a rich city. Mounce suggests that there is a close connection here between tribulation and poverty. This might be due to the antagonistic environment, which made it difficult for the Christians there to make a living, or they may

⁴⁴ Ibid., 393.

⁴⁵ Bratcher, R.G. *A translator's guide to the Revelation of John*, NY: United Bible Societies, 1984, 13.

⁴⁶ Hughes, op.cit. 23.

⁴⁷ Sweet, J.P.M. *Revelation*. Philadelphia: Westminster 1979, 67.

⁴⁸ Bratcher, op.cit. 20.

⁴⁹ Hughes, op.cit. 34-35.

have been the victims of mob violence and looting (cf. 1 Heb 10:34).⁵⁰ They suffered slander (v.9). The Greek word is *blasphemia*, meaning defamation. On this, Sweet comments that Christians were considered as members of an unauthorized cult and therefore vulnerable to charges of anti-social behaviour. Even when the charges were false, the magistrate might order them to renounce their Christianity, and refusal would mean execution (cf. 1 Pet 4:12-16).⁵¹ In the face of this, Jesus exhorted them not to be afraid of the suffering which was to come, but to be faithful even unto death. V. 10 says, “of what you are about to suffer”. “About to”, *mellein*, implies God’s foreknowledge, sovereignty, and permission. Thus Sweet says this declaration has overtones of destiny, that their suffering and the devil’s attack were both within the divine plan.⁵² To those who overcome the tribulations, the crown of life will be given and they will not suffer from the second death (cf. Matt 24:13). Overcomers throughout the book of Revelation are the ones who remain faithful to the Lord despite temptations and persecution. Overcoming may be through death. By being faithful unto death, the martyrs overcome the beast (Rev 15:2). They are winners and are given the crown of life. A crown was given to the winners in games and in wars (1 Cor 9:25). Here it symbolizes eternal life given to the overcomers (Rev 4:4; 14:14; Jas 1: 12; 1 Pet 5:4).⁵³

The church in Thyatira exhibits deeds, love, faith, service and perseverance, which were known to God (Rev 2:19). Deeds or works are defined by Beasley-Murray as the criterion of genuine faith, both in the last judgment and present judgment. Hence the persistent demand for works worthy of faith. In this context works are related to the toil in maintaining true faith.⁵⁴

Rev 2:24 affirms that the Lord knows the believers’ strength in enduring suffering. He will not allow them to suffer more than they can bear. V. 25 exhorts believers to preserve what has been given them until the end, when Jesus will return. The overcomer is the one who

⁵⁰ Mounce, R.H. *The book of Revelation*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1977, 92.

⁵¹ Sweet, op.cit. 85.

⁵² Ibid. 85.

⁵³ Biblia Vida Nova, footnote p. 292.

⁵⁴ Beasley-Murray, G.R. *The book of Revelation*. London: Oliphants 1978, 73-74.

does God's will until the end comes (v. 26).⁵⁵ As a reward they will receive authority, rule and the power to destroy over nations (v. 27).

Those who keep Jesus' command to endure patiently will be kept from the hour of trial that is to come upon the whole world (Rev 3:10). To those who obeyed Jesus' command (or, teaching) to patiently endure their difficulties is given the promise that they will be able to go through the period of distress and hardship. The promise is not that they will be exempted from those sufferings.⁵⁶

It is God's plan and sovereignty that allows Christians to be martyrs. The number of martyrs is known to Him (Rev 6:9-11). It was happening when the book of Revelation was written. It still happens today and, according to the book of Revelation, it will continue to happen "until the number will be complete." To this, Sweet comments:

There the point is the fixity of the divine programme – delay is not slackness or weakness. Here it is the divine programme as embodied in Christ's sacrifice in which his people must share; cf. Colossians 1:24. Protection from 'the hour of trial' (3:10) does not give bodily immunity, as the Lord had warned (Mt 10:28; 24:9).⁵⁷

They were martyred because of *marturid*, maintaining the witness of God's Word, being faithful, refusing to deny God, preaching God's Word. Now they rest, waiting for God's final judgment on the evil one, who put them to death. White robes are given to the martyrs after the Great Tribulation (Rev 2:13-17). The Lamb Himself will finally keep them from all suffering, be their shepherd, give them eternal life and wipe their tears away (Rev 21:4,7). On this Hughes comments that the book of Revelation shows that martyrs are of special importance in the mind and the plan of God (cf. Rev 1:9; 2:13; 3:8; 7:14; 11:3ff; 12:11; 14:12f; 20:4). He states that a martyrdom silences by death one of the Lord's faithful witnesses. This looks like a defeat for God and a setback for the church. But it has been proven to lead to the progress of the gospel and power and blessing for God's people.⁵⁸ Ladd links the passage with Jesus' teaching that his disciple must take up his cross, which means not self-denial nor the bearing of heavy burdens, but the willingness to suffer martyrdom:

⁵⁵ Bratcher, op.cit. 31.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 36.

⁵⁷ Sweet, op.cit. 142.

⁵⁸ Hughes, op.cit. 90.

the proclamation of the kingdom will be carried out effectively, but in a hostile environment which in spite of the presence of the gospel of the kingdom will be characterized by war, suffering caused by material and economic need, and death. ... (a) fact that the church must face as it pursues its mission of proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom is persecution and martyrdom... The souls of the martyrs are seen under the altar as though they had been sacrificed... Thus Christian martyrs are viewed as sacrifices offered to God ... One of the repeated emphases of the New Testament is that it is the very nature of the church to be a martyr people.⁵⁹

The means whereby the martyrs overcome Satan and his angels is by the blood of the Lamb, by the word of their testimony (the witness of the Gospel) and by not loving their lives so much as to shrink from death (Rev 12:11). As Ladd writes, their very martyrdom was their victory over Satan, not a physical victory preserving their lives or saving them from persecution, but a spiritual victory which proved that the accusations against the brethren were empty.⁶⁰

The saints need to persevere and be faithful, heeding the warning about the beast which is to come (Rev 13:10). It encourages believers to obey God, even when imprisonment and death are the result. Hughes comments, the reference here is to God's assurance to the faithful servants that nothing happens to them that is not under God's control or contrary to his will:

In all things God rides and overrules... in accord with his plan. It is in the acceptance of affliction that the endurance and faith of the saints are triumphantly demonstrated. Such testing gives proof of the genuineness of their faith and the unshakability of their hope in Christ. The suggestion of inevitability implies the supremacy of the divine will, which is always directed to the good and the blessing of the redeemed community.⁶¹

Rev 14:12 once more emphasizes that to persevere is to keep God's commandment and faith in Jesus. V. 13 declares that those who die in the Lord are blessed, as their works will follow them (cf. John 15:16) and finally they will rest. Mounce connects the two verses, pointing out that faithfulness to Christ issues in martyrdom, but they are blessed as they have entered victoriously into their rest.⁶²

⁵⁹ Ladd, G.E. *A commentary on the Revelation of John*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1972, 102f.

⁶⁰ Ibid. 173.

⁶¹ Op.cit. 150.

⁶² Mounce, op.cit. 277.

God's judgement will come. In Rev 16:5-7 the Lord God, Almighty, is seen as true and just in His judgement. He will judge those who persecute and kill His prophets and saints (cf. Rev 18:24), all those from every nation who have been seduced by sorcery (Rev 19:2). God's reward will also be given. He will clothe the saints in white robes as a symbol of their righteousness (Rev 19:7). This reward will be given to those who are slain because of their witness of Jesus and of God's Word, who do not worship the beast nor his image and do not receive his mark. They will reign with Christ and live forever as God's and Christ's priests (Rev 20:4). Morris comments to this as follows:

None less than God will be the Consoler of His people. He will wipe away every tear. His concern is infinite... Death has no final triumph and it is well that God's people see that it will ultimately cease to be. ... So also sorrow and wailing and pain will cease. John sees a reason for this, namely that 'the first things passed away.' ... Life as we know it is completely replaced by the new order. John had wept at the thought that there was no-one worthy to open the seals (v.4). Is there no answer to the problem of earth's evil? His visions have answered that question. The Lamb has conquered. Now he finds that tears, too, have gone forever.⁶³

Conclusion: The book of Revelation reveals the design of God's plan for the salvation of man and history of this world. In chapter 5 John describes the vision of the Lamb opening the seven seals of the scroll. The Lamb is the only one worthy to open the seals because He was slain and with His blood He purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. In John 14:6-7 John writes that he saw an angel with the eternal gospel to proclaim to every nation, tribe, language and people. The angel announced that the hour of God's judgement has come. The good news that salvation has come through the blood of the Lamb has to be proclaimed because the judgment of God will come on all who do not know nor believe in it. In John 7:9 John saw a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. These are the people who have been saved, delivered from the judgement, because they believe that salvation belongs to God and to the Lamb.

In the middle of the history of salvation, John observes in John 6:9 that he saw under the altar the souls of those who have been slain

⁶³ Morris, *op.cit.* 245.

because of the word of God and the testimony they maintained, asking when they will be avenged. God's reply was: until the number of the martyrs will be completed. In John 12:10-12 John hears a voice telling that the accuser has been overcome by those who did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death, by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony. And that the devil, the accuser, is filled with fury because he knows that his time is short until he will be hurled down.

This is the design which John presents: Salvation has come through the death of Jesus. This needs to be preached to all peoples, or else they are under the judgement of God. The end is the salvation of many from every people. But in between, the devil shows his fury. Martyrdom will happen to those who witness to the Lamb. But they overcome by maintaining their testimony of the Word of God.

John brings a warning of suffering, trial and tribulation, which include deprivation, slander and even death. He also brings the assurance that God is in control. God is the one who is carrying out the divine plan of salvation for the whole creation. Wilcock aptly applies John's warning to the Church today, where some Christians suffer while others live in relative comfort:

The immediate prospect was one of suffering and even death. This was a certainty – a fact which has lessons for those of us who live in comparative ease. Would we be taken aback to find persecution knocking at our door tomorrow? Many a church has had to learn to live with that prospect and so ought we. For the great tribulation that John sees bringing this age to an end he also sees in miniature, recurring constantly in the experience of God's people. And it is a test. It is the devil's action, but God's intention.⁶⁴

The Church today needs to take heed of John's warnings and encouragement. Beasley-Murray understands the emphasis John has laid is more on the worth of the Church to God and its destiny in history and in the eternal ages. He states that it is in the context of the Church's witness to the world that the Church is to suffer, as a kind of passion with its Lord. Taking note of John's warning, the Church will not be surprised by opposition as it carries out its mission to the nations. God knows about this situation, but He refrains from intervening. He simply encourages Christians to endure. Suffering with its Lord, the Church will share His glory in the kingdom to come.

⁶⁴ Wilcock, op.cit. 45.

“Suffering is permitted to ensure the being approved of those for whom the kingdom is prepared.”⁶⁵

The book of Revelation shows the whole eternal plan of God: salvation, judgment, preaching of the Gospel to all peoples, the battle between Jesus’ followers and Satan, and God’s final victory. In between, during the course of the fulfilment of God’s purpose, Jesus’ followers to whom the preaching of the Gospel has been entrusted, will suffer. This is allowed by God. Somehow suffering is part of His plan for the salvation of the believers. The exhortation and encouragement repeated over and over is to persevere in order to overcome. Even unto death.

5. Perseverance and persecution in the Early Church - Acts 2:42-47

The book of Acts registers the early beginnings of the Church. The focus of the book is the spread of the Gospel from Jerusalem to Rome. Another strong theme which comes up through the book is the persecution of the believers. The impressive reaction of the believers is that they continued to preach the Gospel wherever they went. As we study the steadfastness of the believers in the face of opposition, persecution and suffering, we observe their “togetherness” in everything. They lived in unity, spiritually and socially.

Persecution began from the very beginning of the church. The reasons were various. At first it was because of the new and radical teaching, which contradicted the belief of the influential Sadducees. Peter and John were jailed for preaching about the resurrection of the dead, which the Sadducees denied. But the persecutors “saw courage in Peter” and witnessed the miraculous healing of the lame man. When prohibited to preach by the religious leaders, Peter’s reaction was to obey God rather than man. The community of the believers prayed and praised God together, asking for more boldness in preaching (v. 29). They were filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word boldly.

As the number of believers continued to increase, jealousy made the priests and Sadducees persecute the apostles. Peter was jailed (Acts 5:17-18). He was freed by an angel and commanded to tell the people “the full message of this new life” (v. 20). The apostles continued to preach and were again arrested. Gamaliel’s intervention

⁶⁵ Beasley-Murray, op.cit. 44-45, 81.

freed them but they were flogged and ordered not to speak. Their reaction to the punishment was that they rejoiced for being counted worthy to suffer disgrace for Jesus (v. 41). They never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news daily (v. 42).

The first martyrdom in the history of the Church was the death of Stephen (Acts 6:8f). He was a man full of God's grace and power, who performed wonders and miraculous signs. He was opposed by religious leaders. They stirred up the people against Stephen. False witnesses were brought in and he was condemned to death. As Stephen was stoned, he saw heaven opened. He died asking God's forgiveness for his persecutors. Great persecution followed Stephen's death (Acts 8:1f). The believers were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria while the apostles remained in Jerusalem. Those scattered preached the Lord wherever they went (v. 4). When the word reached Samaria there was great joy among the Samaritans (v. 8).

Some believers fleeing persecution went to farther regions – Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch – preaching to Jews (Acts 11:19f). But those who came from Cyprus and Cyrene started preaching to the Greeks (v. 20). Thus the gospel was spread to Gentiles. Again persecution came. Herod the king, wanting to please the Jews, had James killed and Peter arrested (Acts 12:1f). Peter was freed by an angel while the church prayed. The church continued to preach the word of God, which “continued to increase and spread” (v. 24).

Paul, formerly Saul, the persecutor of Christians, was persecuted as soon as he preached the word after his conversion. There were many reasons provoking his persecution. Firstly the jealousy of the Jews as Paul preached to many people and gathered them to be followers of Christ (Acts 13:45; 14:19; 17:5). Secondly, fear of losing profitable business, as happened in Philippi when Paul cast out the demon from the fortune-telling slave girl (Acts 16:16f), and in Ephesus (Acts 19:23) when the craftsmen were scared of losing their trade when those who believed in Christ left idolatry. Thirdly, false accusations which were made against Paul by the Jews such as when he was accused of defiling the temple in Jerusalem (Acts 21:27).

Paul was abused, sneered at, opposed, jailed, stoned to near death, flogged, brought to trials by both Jewish and Roman authorities (Acts 13:45; 14:19; 16:16f.; 17:5f.; 18:6,12; 19:23f.; 21:33; 23:6f).

The persecutions resulted in Paul preaching to the Gentiles (Acts 13:47); salvation of many people (Acts 13:48); the spread of the

Gospel to farther regions (Acts 13:49-51; 14:19); the strengthening and encouragement of the believers (Acts 14:22).

Throughout the whole period of persecution, the believers continued to preach. The gospel was preached in many regions and to Samaritans and Gentiles. Finally the good news reached Rome, centre of power at that time, in the person of Paul, by then a Roman prisoner. Chained in Rome “because of the hope of Israel”, Paul boldly preached and taught without hindrance.

One wonders how the first Christians managed to continue to be faithful to God and to be witnesses of the Gospel as they had to go through such persecution. It is instructive to look at the way they were disciplined and nurtured, for that enabled them to withstand persecution and to persevere in preaching the word.

Acts 2 records the birthday of the church when Peter preached and 3000 were added to the believers. Acts 2:42-47 explains how they were nurtured and transformed.

The new converts devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching (v. 42). This teaching presumably included all that Jesus had taught and referred to the way the Scriptures were fulfilled in Him (Matt 28:20). Gordon Keddie understands that this would “strengthen and equip them to be faithful witnesses for Christ wherever he sent them.”⁶⁶ Harrison suggests that the teachings would include the Old Testament, moral demands or ethics in relationships, and warning on persecution.

It must have included the high points of Jesus’ life and work; His ethical teaching, such as is enshrined in the Sermon on the Mount; an appreciation of the Old Testament prophetic background for His ministry, such as He imparted to the eleven after the resurrection; a digest of obligations toward one another, especially in the family relationship, and toward those outside the fold; and a warning about the possibility of persecution and the inroads of false teaching.⁶⁷

“Devoted themselves” implies that they spent much effort and serious commitment in their study and observance of those things. Rackham refers to it as a continuous effort, a persevering adherence.⁶⁸

They also devoted themselves to the fellowship (v. 42). They spent time together and had everything in common (v. 44). They also sold their possessions and goods, and gave to anyone as he had need.

⁶⁶ Keddie, G.J. *You are My witnesses*. Durham: Evangelical Press, 1993, 43.

⁶⁷ Harrison, K.R. *Acts: the expanding church*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1978, 65.

⁶⁸ Rackham, I.B. *The Acts of the apostles*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1964, 33.

It was a caring community. Each who had possessions looked around him whether any brother lacked something. Then they would give up their material possessions and share with the one in need. This is voluntary love in action. Lingenfelter considers this giving up as action which results from the transformation of values, as they committed themselves to the new teachings and the new community they had joined.

These same people also committed themselves to new social relationships, which produced a significant transformation of values... Many relinquished control over their material resources, selling possessions and properties to share with one another in ways unusual and different from their economic behaviours prior to their conversions. There was a significant restructuring of their social environment as they formed a new body, the Church of Jesus Christ... At the same time, they also committed themselves to learn and live under the authority of the apostles, to surrender control of their resources to the Holy Spirit, and to embrace new kingdom principles that governed their priorities and their relationships with one another and with (those) outside.⁶⁹

This represents a transformation in their attitude from human natural selfishness to a self-giving and caring lifestyle.

V. 46 says that every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. Again the word “continued” implies a continuous effort to worship God as a community, together. Stagg states that fellowship or community is the most vital idea found in the New Testament on the unity of those who are in Christ. Based on profound principles of life in Christ, it is constituted by the participation of a life in common.⁷⁰

The third activity to which they devoted themselves was the breaking of bread. Luke explained further in v. 46 “they broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts”. Walker notes this as a transformation of the community and connected the breaking of bread with the Lord’s Supper.

It was not in the temple but in their own homes that they gathered for those united meals, in connection with which they commemorated the ‘Lord’s Supper’. How naturally those early Christians passed from the secular to the sacred.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Lingenfelter, S. *Transforming culture*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992, 209.

⁷⁰ Stagg, F. *Atos*. Rio de Janeiro: JUERP 1958, 100.

⁷¹ Walker, T. *The Acts of the apostles*. Chicago: Moody, 1965, 61.

Rackham sees this breaking of bread as the seal of fellowship, an exercise of charity, of sharing, thus it is called the *agape* or love-feast. He considers this common eating as a cultivation of brotherly love, of unity, where there was unselfishness as individuals. The success of the community depended on this unity.⁷² “With glad and sincere hearts” is explained by Williams as “a condition in which deeds and thoughts alike are controlled by one motive, namely, a desire to please God ... It is a gift of the Spirit, ... grounded in the recipient’s wholehearted obedience.”⁷³

The believers also devoted themselves to prayer together. The apostles had been praying together since Jesus told them to remain in Jerusalem till they would be empowered by the Holy Spirit. The new believers joined them in continuous prayer. V. 43 says there were many wonders and miraculous signs done by the apostles. The power of the Holy Spirit was manifested in these signs. God was glorified, “Everyone was filled with awe”, fear and love for God. Their prayers were also praises to God (v. 47). Thus the community built up their resistance to persecution by studying the word, breaking of bread, and prayer, in fellowship.

Conclusion: The book of Acts recounts the beginning of the community of Christians. They were commanded by Jesus to be His witnesses to the ends of the earth. In obeying His command, they faced continuous persecution and adversity. Yet they persevered in the task of preaching the Gospel. They were enabled to persevere from the very first day of their conversion. They lived in fellowship, as they learned the teaching from the apostles, worshipping together and living together. John Stott comments that the first Christian community was a learning church, a loving church, a worshipping church and an evangelistic church.⁷⁴ They persevered together in learning, loving, worshipping and reaching out. Ajith Fernando says that the entire Christian life, including spiritual growth, resisting sin and Satan, and serving God, is intended to be lived in the context of and with the support of the community. He also mentions that Satan will do all he can to ensnare new believers through doubts, temptations, fear, persecution, as well as cares and attractions of the

⁷² Rackham, op.cit. 33f.

⁷³ Williams, D.J. *Acts*. Peabody: Hendrickson, 1990, 61.

⁷⁴ Stott, J.R.W. *The message of Acts*. Leicester: IVP, 1990, 82f.

world. That is why they need the care that can be provided by the Christians in community living.⁷⁵

The new converts were transformed in their way of thinking and actions through the teaching and practice of perseverance in learning, sharing, worshipping, and prayer, in fellowship and by the presence of the Holy Spirit. Those who saw them favoured them and were in awe of them. They were strengthened to cope with the temptations that come from Satan and the persecution that comes from the world.

6. Conclusion

Suffering is to be expected by Christians especially by those who preach the Gospel. Sometimes God allows suffering in order to fulfil His divine plan of redemption, thereby moulding His people and demonstrating His glory when they persevere and are triumphant by being faithful to Him. Self-denial, the bearing of our cross, relinquishing our comfort and possessions, putting God even before our own family and home, facing hatred, rejection and persecution, are all part of the cost of true discipleship.

Perseverance is needed when we are faced by trials and suffering. Human beings are averse to suffering, yet Christians should not think it strange nor shy away from it. They are to rejoice in the certainty of God's final victory. They should consider themselves blessed when they suffer for Christ's name and for righteousness. Perseverance can be cultivated by understanding God's Word, by remaining within the Christian community, and by following Jesus' example as the Suffering Servant.

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⁷⁵ Fernando, A. *The NIV application commentary: Acts*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1998, 129.

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Suffering and martyrdom:

A defining and essential Christian characteristic

Josef Ton*

Abstract

The basic worldview which Jesus gave us is that we are involved in a cosmic war with a cruel and crafty enemy and the victory is won with the price of suffering, sacrifice and death. The kind of character one develops in this life goes with him/her in the hereafter and determines his/her position in that life. A comparison of the Christian view of martyrdom with that of Islam shows us how important the worldview of Jesus is for us today and how important is our view of what kind of life we shall have in eternity.

Keywords Suffering, martyrdom, cosmic war, reward in heaven, Islamic martyrdom.

According to the World Evangelical Alliance's Religious Liberty Commission, 200 million Christians today live under serious persecution – threatened with prison, violence, and other actions – for their faith. Another 400 million face “non-trivial restrictions on their freedom and loss of basic human rights, simply because they choose to love and follow Jesus Christ” (*Christianity Today*, June, 2009). There is no other religion that can “boast” of such a situation. Is this just a strange phenomenon at the beginning of the 21st century, or is it something more akin to its essential nature?

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1. Jesus' predictions of suffering and martyrdom for his followers

The founder of Christianity, our Lord Jesus Christ, predicted right from the beginning of the training of His disciples that they were going to be persecuted and eventually killed. He taught them to be happy when persecuted (Matt 5:11-12). When He first sent them on a training mission, He did it with these defining words: "Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves. But beware of men; for they will deliver you up to the courts, and scourge you in their synagogues; and you shall even be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles.... And you will be hated by all on account of My name, but it is the one who has endured to the end who will be saved" (Matt 10:16-18, 22; all Scripture references are from the NASB). And here are some further programmatic statements:

Therefore, everyone who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven... He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me: and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow Me is not worthy of Me. He who has found his life will lose it, and he who has lost his life for My sake will find it (Matt 10:32-33, 37-39).

Towards the end of His own ministry, when He was adding the last touches to the training of His disciples, Jesus said this to them:

But before all these things happen, they will lay their hands on you and will persecute you, delivering you to the synagogues and prisons, bringing you before kings and governors for My name's sake. It will lead to an opportunity for your testimony... But you will be betrayed even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends and they will put some of you to death, and you will be hated by all because of My name. Yet not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives (Luke 21:12-13 and 16-19).

He further clarifies their position, similar to His own, just before He is arrested, tortured, and crucified:

If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would have loved its own, but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you (John 15:18-19).

Why these predictions? How did Jesus understand the world and His own mission and the mission of His followers, causing Him to predict such a situation for Himself and for them in the world? Peter, Jesus' disciple, tells us that "since Jesus suffered," we should equip ourselves with the same "mind" or way of thinking (1 Pet 4:1). What was Jesus' mind about suffering? We find the answer to this question when we come to understand Jesus' worldview. In the time of Jesus of Nazareth, the Jews believed that the problem of the world and of their own lives was the power and brutal dominance of Rome. If the Messiah would come and overthrow the Roman sovereignty, he would replace it with their own Jewish rule, and the world's problem would be solved. However, Jesus saw that humanity's problem was Satan and his dominance over the minds and hearts of all people, including the Jews themselves.

2. Jesus' worldview of a cosmic war

It is significant to point out that the Old Testament has very little to say about Satan. It is Jesus who reveals Satan to us, just as He is the one who reveals God the Father to us in the most plenary way (John 1:18; 17:6). What does Jesus teach us about Satan? First of all, Satan is "the ruler of this world" (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11. See also Paul's teaching in 2 Cor 4:4 and Eph 2:2, 6:12, and John's teaching in 1 John 5:19). Jesus' most comprehensive description of Satan, or the devil, is this: "He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44).

Jesus sees this world as the kingdom of Satan in which He, the Son of God, came to bind "the strong man" and plunder his house (Matt 12:26-29). As He brings the Kingdom of God to this planet, a new situation is created, and He describes it in these words: "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man, and the field is the world; and as for the good seed, these are the sons of the kingdom; and the tares are the sons of the evil one; and the enemy who sows them is the devil..." (Matt 13:37-39). Jesus explains to the Jews that "everyone who commits sin is a slave of sin" (John 8:34). Then, He further intimates that sin is what comes from the nature of Satan, when He tells them: "you do the things which you heard from your father" and "you are doing the deeds of your father" and "you want to do the desires of your father" (John 8:34, 38, 44).

It is clear from these and other sayings of Jesus that He sees Himself as the one who came to liberate people from the slavery of Satan. But how does He conceive this battle for mankind's liberation from the slavery of sin and Satan? We can see the mind of Christ on this issue if we put together two relevant sayings. The first is in Matthew 20:28, where he says that he came "to give His life a ransom for many." At that time, "ransom" was the price paid for a slave in order to set him/her free. The second is Matthew 26:28: "This is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins." The sins of mankind were Satan's right of ownership over them. When Jesus washed away their sins by His own blood, He cancelled Satan's right of ownership over them. This is how they were ransomed, redeemed, and liberated from Satan's slavery.

But this is only a legal victory of the Son of God over Satan. Jesus understood that besides that legal victory there was the necessity of convincing people to come out themselves from under that slavery and to place themselves under the rule of God, thereby entering the Kingdom of God. A clear indication of this is given by Jesus in the parable of the sower: "When one hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart." Jesus is the One who speaks "the word of the kingdom" and Satan is "the evil one" who snatches away that word. That is, there is a war going on between the Son of God and Satan over the minds of men and women. This, however, is a war which will last through the entire history of humanity!

It is at this stage in the story that Jesus' disciples come into the picture. Jesus trained them in order to send them to all the nations of the world in order to spread "the word of the kingdom," or the Gospel, in order to bring the nations into the kingdom of God.

In order to understand the nature of the war in which we are involved, we must know the nature and the methods of the two leaders in the war. Let us start by seeing the fact that Jesus gives Satan a new name, "the evil one," in order to show us his essential nature. Then He tells us that Satan is the liar, the deceiver, and he is the murderer, the one using violence to bring destruction, death, and devastation. It is over against these character traits of Satan that we have to understand the instructions given by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Plain. His disciples are not to use violence ("an eye for an eye," or "a tooth for a tooth"). They must love their enemies, do

good to the ones who hate them, and like their heavenly Father, show goodness, mercy, and forgiveness to the ones who are evil and ungrateful. When Jesus tells them not to resist the evil done to them, He says in effect: When you respond to hate with hate and to evil with evil, you are thereby multiplying the hate and evil in the world. You are poisoning God’s creation with Satan’s deadly products. There is only one way to stop that poisoning: by absorbing it in your own being and giving back in exchange love and goodness, thus spreading God’s character in the world. Jesus Himself did this on the cross of Calvary.

This is the way in which Jesus fought and defeated evil, and this is the kind of war into which He sends His disciples. Now we can understand the meaning of His commission: “As My Father sent Me, so send I you” (John 20:21). Jesus was sent as the Lamb of God to defeat the great dragon and to destroy his works (1 John 3:8). In the same way, He sends us as lambs to defeat the wolves by transforming them into children of God. Most importantly, we must see that Christ’s ultimate weapon is self-sacrifice and our ultimate weapon must be the same.

At this juncture, we must see the clear connection between nature and weapons. Satan has a certain nature, and he uses weapons that are the direct outpouring of that nature, just as Christ has a certain nature, and He uses weapons that come directly out of that nature.

<u>Satan’s nature and weapons</u>	<u>Christ’s nature and weapons</u>
evil, wickedness	goodness, kindness
hate	love
lies, deception, falsehood	truth
violence, murder	self-sacrifice
destruction	creativity, restoration, healing

Jesus defines His method of conquest and the disciples’ method of conquest in these words: “unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit... If anyone serves Me, he must follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also” (John 12:24 and 26). And He puts the result of His own death in these words: “And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself” (v.32).

To summarize, Jesus saw His ministry as an assault on the rule of Satan in the world with the purpose of bringing in the Rule of God or

the Kingdom of God. He confronted Satan's lies with the truth of God, Satan's evil with the goodness of God, Satan's hatred with the love of God, and Satan's violence and murder with God's self-sacrifice out of which arise new creativity, healing, and restoration. Yet Jesus understood His own ministry as simply the beginning of a very long war that He was going to fight through His followers, who share His own nature, weapons, and methods.

3. Apostolic concepts of suffering and martyrdom

Christ's disciples captured His vision, embarking on its fulfilment and explaining it in their own words. Thus, the Apostle Peter dedicates his first letter to the issue of suffering. He writes to those "who reside as aliens" in this world (1 Pet 1:1): "you have been distressed by various trials so that the proof of your faith... may be found to result in praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1:6-7). We must emphasize that Peter considers "suffering unjustly" for the sake of conscience towards God to be grace. Twice in 2:19 and 20, he writes that in the sight of God such suffering is grace, translated in English as "favour" or "commendable," but we should know that the word used by Peter is *haris*, which is the Greek word meaning *grace*. At the end of the epistle, Peter writes that the purpose of writing it was to confirm to them "that this (i.e., suffering) is the true grace of God" (5:12).

The essence of what Peter writes about Christian suffering is expressed in these words: "to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revealing of His glory you may rejoice with exultation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because of the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you" (4:13-14), and especially in these words: "For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps" (2:21).

For Peter, suffering as a Christian, or because one is a Christian, means to share in the sufferings of Christ and represents the essence of the Christian's calling. This participation in the sufferings of Christ results in "praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (2:7).

The apostle Paul gives us the most extensive discussions about suffering for the cause of Christ, obviously because he suffered more

than anybody else in his time for this cause. I start by pointing out this explanation of Paul's sufferings: "But if we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation" (2 Cor 1:6). How could Paul say that he suffers *for the salvation* of the Corinthians? Did not Christ suffer for their salvation? Did Paul mean that Christ's suffering was not enough for their salvation? I shall hurry to point out that Paul explains himself in writing to Timothy: "For this reason I endure all things for the elect, so that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim 2:10). Here the picture is complete: The salvation is in Christ, and only in Him, but the issue now is *how* people – even the elect – *obtain it!* Paul travels from city to city preaching the gospel of salvation, and he suffers hardship and dangers and beatings in the process. But people hear the gospel and are saved with the price of his sufferings!

It is in his Second Epistle to the Corinthians that Paul gives us the most extensive descriptions of his sufferings and the most elaborate reasons for them. At the beginning of the fourth chapter, Paul defines humanity's problem: "the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving." (This is the problem as Jesus saw it, but it is expressed in different words!). The answer to humanity's problem is "the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." Then Paul says that our job is to give this blinded world "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ." In other words, we lift up Christ or portray Christ in such a way that people begin seeing the beauty of God in the Person of Christ. When they see it, beholding it in awe, they are transformed into the same image by the Holy Spirit (3:18). Paul reformulates our job later in the epistle, when he says that we must demolish all the prejudices and falsehoods that are in the minds of people, which hinder their knowledge of God, and in so doing, we bring these minds under the rule of Christ (2 Cor 10:5).

Are we capable of such an unspeakably enormous task? Are we as strong as our enemy is? The irony for Paul is that "we have this treasure in earthen vessels," and he certainly means to say that we are weak, with fragile bodies. The enemy takes advantage of this and inflicts horrible sufferings on our bodies. But just before he embarks on the detailed description of these sufferings, Paul trumpets to us the glorious fact that "the surpassing greatness of the power" (v.7) belongs to God, and it is He who lives in us, fighting through us. The following are Paul's most wonderful words regarding this issue: "We

are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted but not forsaken; struck down but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. *So death works in us, but life works in you*" (2 Cor 4:8-12; emphasis mine).

Those last words, which I emphasized, are some of the most noble and generous words ever written. We must study the entire paragraph in order to get their full force. Paul sees himself as being one with Christ. Therefore, his sufferings are the sufferings of Christ. After enduring so many beatings, many of which brought him near death, Paul affirmed that death works in him and that this is the death of Christ. But the consequence of him living this kind of life, which is like a constant death, is the fact that so many people are converted. In other words, the life of Christ flows in them! Paul says in effect, death works in me and as a consequence, life eternal is present in you! I accept to constantly die so that you may eternally live! Were more noble words than these ever written?

At this point, Paul must have sensed our question: "Why do you involve yourself in so much suffering?" Paul continues his discussion by giving us a list of reasons for his sufferings:

1. Due to my sufferings grace is spreading to more and more people (v.15);
2. This spreading of the grace causes more people to give glory to God (v.15);
3. My own benefit from this is that my momentary light affliction is producing for me an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison (v.17);
4. We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ so that we may receive the recompense for what we did while in the body, and I am simply terrified by that judgment event (5:10-11);
5. This kind of life and mindset might look like madness, but it is in fact the only sound mindset (5:13);
6. It is the love of Christ that gives me no other choice but to live such a life (5:14);
7. Meditating on the cross of Christ, I came to understand that He died for me so that I would stop living for myself and may be

transformed into a person who lives for Him. He died to kill the selfish man I used to be and make me a new creature (5:15-17);

8. I am an ambassador for Christ, and God works through me and speaks through me – I am a co-worker with God (5:20 and 6:1).

Paul also explains his sufferings for Christ in Colossians 1:24, “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church, in filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions.” Everything becomes clear in this text if we make the distinction between the sufferings of Christ for the sins of the world (the atonement) and the sufferings of Christ for His body, the church. The first sufferings, for our salvation, were once and for all, never to be repeated and having nothing to which to add. But Christ continues to suffer for His body, the church. Whenever one of His little ones suffers, He suffers (Matt 25:35-45). These are also His sufferings for the perfection of His church (Eph 5:25-32). It is in these sufferings that Paul participates and shares, considering it a great privilege to do so.

4. Suffering and rewards in heaven

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul spoke of “the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I suffered the loss of all things,” and added that his ultimate goal is to “know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death” (Phil 3:10). Today, many Christians “spiritualize” these statements, especially the last one – “being conformed to His death” – but when Paul wrote these words, he meant exactly that. He wanted to be like his beloved Lord not only in life, but also in death. He wanted to die as a martyr.

What is even more significant is the reason for which Paul wanted to die as his Lord died: “in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead” (3:11). What is Paul saying here? Does he not know for certain that he will be resurrected to eternal life? The problem, indeed, with this phrase as it is usually translated is that everyone – good and bad – will come to the resurrection from the dead. However, the clue to the proper understanding of this verse is found in the original Greek text. The word for resurrection is *anastasia*. However, in verse 11, Paul added a prefix to this word, thereby rendering it as *exanastasia*, which can be translated as the “extra-resurrection,” or we may say, as a “special resurrection.” By

this, we understand that Paul was referring to the special resurrection of the martyrs.

A similar idea is expressed by the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews in a passage that relates the experience of a number of Christians who had been arrested but were offered release if they accepted to worship Caesar. This offer they refused, “so that they may obtain *a better resurrection*” (11:35; emphasis mine).

The resurrection of the martyrs is most clearly shown in the book of Revelation, where “the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God,... came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years” (20:4).

On the basis of these Scriptures, Christians throughout the first three centuries believed that the witnesses of Christ who were given the privilege to die as martyrs would be raised immediately after their death to reign in heaven with Christ. Now, whatever our own interpretation of these texts might be, the fact is that *the first Christians understood these Scriptures as depicting the special reward given to those who follow Christ to the point of the ultimate sacrifice, and this reward was one of the reasons that martyrdom was regarded as supremely desirable!*

In the first three centuries of Christian history, a clear distinction was made between the ones who endured all manner of torture for their confession of the Lordship of Christ but were not actually put to death, and the ones who paid the ultimate price for their faith. The first category of persons were referred to as “confessors” and the second category of persons were called “martyrs.” Although we can see in the New Testament a special place given to the ones who actually give their lives for Christ, we should not make too sharp a distinction between those who die for their faith and those who suffer persecution for their faith. After all, spending twenty years in a labour camp is a much more painful experience than being killed in an instant. And what about the ones who were placed in psychiatric hospitals and were administered drugs that destroyed their personality, but were not physically killed? As Jesus appreciates even the giving of a cup of cold water to one of His little ones, emphasizing that the giver “shall not lose his reward,” He certainly appreciates every *kind* of suffering and every *degree* of suffering for Himself and His cause. For example, Jesus mentions enduring insults and all kinds of evil being spoken of

you because of Him as having great reward in heaven (Matt 10:42; 5:11).

Suffering and dying do not have spiritual value in themselves. They only get their value from the fact that goodness and love for others involve one in suffering and even in dying for them. The Christians do not seek suffering or martyrdom. They seek the benefit of others even by involving themselves in pain and in death.

Indeed, we must point out that the spreading of the Gospel *always* involves giving up certain comforts and enduring some type of suffering. This is how we should understand Paul's invitation to Timothy: "Join with me in suffering for the gospel" (2 Tim 1:8).

We should always have in mind the basic worldview that Jesus gave us: We are involved in a cosmic war with a cruel and crafty enemy, and the victory is won only with the price of suffering, sacrifice and death.

5. Why the Christian concept of martyrdom differs from Islam

The greatest conflict Christianity faces today – whether we like it or not – is the conflict with Islam. We cannot talk about suffering and martyrdom without looking at the deep passion for martyrdom in the Islamic way of life. While I am not an expert of Islam, this assessment is validated by detailed studies which are referred to. My purpose here is only to highlight the contrast of Christ's model and teaching to that of Muhammad and the Qur'an for a better understanding the issue of martyrdom.

We must start with the basic historical fact that when Mohammed formulated this new faith, he took much from the Old and the New Testaments and from the practice of Christianity during his time, when martyrdom was greatly valued. Therefore, he took the idea of martyrdom from Christianity, but he completely perverted it.

The essence of Islamic martyrdom is in the fact that according to the Qur'an and the Hadith, the rule of Islam must be spread and imposed at all cost, even by force and the sword. Whoever does not accept Islam should either be killed or enslaved or, as a Christian or Jew has the option of buying his/her life by paying a perpetual tax and

submitting to second class citizenship.¹ If a fighter for Islam dies in battle with the “infidel,” he is promised a heaven in which he will have 70 virgins at his pleasure, and life in heaven will be an eternal carnal bliss suiting male fantasies.² What is most shocking is the widespread contemporary form of Islamic martyrdom: a boy or a girl, a man or a woman, is wrapped with explosives and sent to explode himself or herself in enemy territory in an attempt to kill as many “infidels” as possible, and he or she is afterwards revered as a martyr.³

One can easily detect here the desire for violence and murder, and one can feel the hatred that dominates such a suicidal enterprise. It is over against these facts, feelings, and attitudes that we can better understand the strategy of Christ, who sends us equipped with the truth, loving the ones to whom we are sent. They may hate us, but we offer them the goodness of God and accept to die for their illumination and salvation. A sharper contrast cannot ever be imagined!

However, while we can clearly see the contrast in the present attitudes between Christianity and Islam, the most vital element is the concept of heaven. Only when we understand that contrast can we really grasp the importance and value of Christianity. In order to understand the Biblical view of heaven or of eternal life, we must start with the purpose for which God created man.

6. A biblical view of heaven and eternal life

Genesis 1:26-28 tells us that God made man in His image and likeness with the final purpose of giving him dominion, that is, the position of ruling over all creation. Psalm 8 develops this idea, and later, the author of the letter to the Hebrews, quoting Psalm 8, says that the first

¹ Mark Durie: *The third choice – Islam, dhimmitude and freedom* (Melbourne: Deror 2010).

² The Islamic concept of martyrdom has been discussed recently in many books, often in comparison with Christianity among others in the book by Brian Wicker: *Witnesses to faith?: martyrdom in Christianity and Islam* (Aldershot: Ashgate 2006).

³ This is neither the only nor the dominating historical understanding of martyrdom in Islam. While many contemporary Muslims would reject and condemn suicidal attacks, it is hard to deny that this form of martyrdom is equally inspired by the origins of Islam. cf. Kenneth Cragg: *Faith at suicide – lives forfeit – violent religion, human despair* (Portland: Sussex Academic Press 2005). The topic is put into the wider perspective by Patrick Sookhdeo: *Global jihad: the future in the face of militant Islam* (McLean, VA: Isaac 2007).

man who came to fulfil that final purpose of God was Jesus. After His suffering, death, and resurrection, Jesus was given the position of sitting at the right hand of Majesty on high and everything was placed under His authority (2:6-10). Paul picks up on this in 1 Corinthians 15 and writes that Christ is “the first fruit” of this majestic plan of God and the One in whose steps we shall follow. We shall be changed, and we shall obtain His heavenly body or, as he dramatically writes in Philippians 3:21, Jesus Christ “will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory.”

With all these amazing promises in mind, let us return to the teaching of Jesus. Some theologians advise us not to build our doctrines on the parables of Jesus, but we must stress that Jesus intends His parables to convey true information. They tell us about what will happen to us when we cross over to the other side, into eternal life, and very importantly, His parables teach us that the life we live here determines what sort of life we shall have there. When Christ says that He will tell one of His faithful servants, “Be in authority over ten cities,” and to another one, “you be over five cities” (Luke 19:17, 19), and when He says about His faithful servant, “Truly I say to you that He (God!) will make him ruler over all His goods” (Matt 24:47), Christ really means what He says!

In the life to come, Jesus teaches, the purpose of creation will be fulfilled: God will put His children in positions of authority over everything He has ever made! Let us stretch our imagination a bit based on this information. We shall have a life of responsibility in heaven. We shall have creative jobs there with our Father and with Christ. Who knows, maybe a former chemist or a physicist might work in a department of heaven where new forms of matter or new forms of reality will be created. Perhaps a former biologist might work in the heavenly department where new forms of life will be conceived and produced. A former musician might work in the music department of heaven, creating new heavenly compositions!

One fact should be clear: We shall not have a lazy existence in heaven. We shall not simply sing eternally in a heavenly choir or walk eternally on streets of gold or eternally pick fruit from the tree of life. We shall have lives that will bring to a divine fulfilment the creative impulses with which the Creator endowed us right from the very beginning of our existence.

However, let us not miss the other piece of vital information that Christ conveys to us in His parables. In this life, we were put in charge of or given authority over things that are not our own. Our talents, our spouse, our children, our money (etc.) are not our own. God has entrusted them to us, and we are meant to be God's stewards over them. If we do not prove to be faithful stewards here, we shall not be faithful stewards there (Luke 16:9-13 and 19:11-28). God the Father desires to entrust us with all that He has, but shall we be reliable? In other words, the character ("faithfulness" spoken about in these parables is a character trait) we develop and demonstrate here on earth will go with us into heaven, and that character will determine the position of responsibility that God will give us in our heavenly existence.

If we look carefully at the usage of the word "reward" in the New Testament, we will notice that it always appears in the singular. If we further look carefully, we will discover that the reward is always the same, that is, *the inheritance*. By inheritance, Jesus refers to everything God has, the entire cosmos, which he intends to entrust to His children. Now, like every good father, God the Father does not call His children to "earn" the inheritance. The issue is not having to earn it. The issue is one of reliability. Are we reliable sons and daughters? Can He – in a world of total freedom – entrust us with divine authority? Shall we be faithful in that situation? The frightening information Christ imparts to us is that the faithfulness we are developing and demonstrating in our earthly existence becomes an inseparable part of our person, not to be left behind when we enter our eternal existence.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, two issues stand out from all our discussion. The first issue is how God tackles the problems of falsehood, evil, violence, and destruction produced by Satan in humanity. We saw that He responds by sending His Son and then His other sons and daughters equipped with His truth, goodness, and love to spread the light of His knowledge. Their acceptance to go into the world in this way involves them inevitably in sufferings, in many forms of self-sacrifice, and ultimately, for some of them, in martyrdom. The second issue is the way in which God fulfils the purpose of creation, which is the raising and the training of His children for ruling over all His creation. He entrusts them with stewardship in this life, a stewardship which

demands obedience and faithfulness, and transformation of character, by building up the image of God in them. In this process of character building, suffering and self-sacrifice are part and parcel of that preparation, and they are the testing for reliability for ruling over God's creation.

A final question might still be burning painfully in our minds: Will such an approach to the darkness and evil of this world actually work? Do we have any chance to win just by truth, goodness, love and self-sacrifice, in the face of the brutal and powerful forces of darkness in this world? Meditating on this question, in 1 Corinthians 1:18-30, Paul recognizes the fact that in the eyes of the world, the idea that God's solution to the problem of the world is a crucified Son is an absurdity and a folly. These are the meanings of the word *moria* which he uses here. But just because it looks like this to the unbelieving world, it does not mean it is so. In fact, says Paul, the crucified Son of God is "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1:24).

The Apostle John picks up this issue and writes an entire book about it. The book of Revelation is addressed to people who go through an unspeakably harsh and often fatal persecution. Where is Christ during this time? He is in the middle of the lampstands representing the persecuted churches (Rev 1:12-13)! He is right there in their midst, leading them in the war with Satan, the Old Dragon. But He is the Lamb, and he fights with the weapons of a lamb. And just as He Himself conquered by dying, they – the martyrs – defeat Satan by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, because they do not love their lives to keep them, but put them on God's altar (Rev 12:9-11). Right to the end of the book and of history, the Lamb uses only one weapon, which is the sharp sword that comes out of His mouth, the word of God (Rev 19:11-15). Of course, His lambs also use only that weapon!

Now, whoever might be the beast and the ten horns (Rev. 13 through 17), they are those who join forces and wage war against the Lamb. John gives us the assurance that "the lamb will overcome them, because He is the Lord of lords and the King of kings, and those who are with Him, the called, the chosen and the faithful" (Rev 17:14). The elliptical structure of the sentence clearly says that they also conquer!

Finally, verse 17 tells us that it is God who puts it in the hearts of the ten horns and of the beast what to do, because ultimately they only fulfil His purposes. With such a Sovereign God who uses even His

enemies for the fulfilment of His purposes and with such a Son of God who is consistent to the end in His methods of doing battle, we are sure of the final outcome of the war and of human history. In the words of Jesus: “The meek will inherit the earth!”

God's mission in suffering and martyrdom

Young Kee Lee*

Abstract

This essay postulates that there is a kind of suffering that is instrumental in advancing God's kingdom. This is maintained with regard to the cross of Christ and to Paul's suffering for the preaching of the gospel. In historical observation instrumental suffering can be discovered as a mode of witness in the Early Church and as a possible cause of the rapid growth of the church in Korean history. Therefore Lee calls for a rethinking of today's mission practice that takes seriously the principles of incarnation, the cross and of weakness in mission.

Keywords Instrumental meaning of suffering, cross of Christ, mission.

1. Missiological understanding of the cross of Christ

The crucifixion of Jesus Christ was not occasioned by chance or by a helpless victim of the evil forces in the world, but it was the hidden wisdom and power of God for the redemption of the world. The suffering and death of Jesus Christ on the cross was therefore not only a political and religious event with the schemes of the devil on the human level, but also a divine necessity for the reconciliation of humanity with the Father on the divine level.

The suffering of the cross of Jesus Christ was instrumental for the advancement of God's mission in three ways. Jesus stood in the prophetic traditions of Israel as he delivered the message of the gospel of the kingdom of God. In fact, the proclamation of God's message without any compromise was the major theological reason why Jesus was persecuted by the Jews. The suffering and death of Jesus Christ

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on the cross was instrumental, however, for reaching out to the nations with God's salvation. Before the cross Jesus' ministry was limited to one nation, Israel, but after the cross Jesus' ministry was extended to all nations.

Jesus' ministry was multiplied in the ministry of His disciples with the empowerment of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. The gospel of Jesus Christ was advanced in the dynamics of persecution rather than restricted by it. There was also a missiological dimension of spiritual warfare in the cross of Jesus Christ. The cross was a tremendous victory which resulted in the judgment of the world and the condemnation of the devil, called "the prince of this world", so that "all men" would be drawn to Jesus Christ (John 12:31-32).

2. Paul's suffering for the preaching of the gospel

Paul's apostolic calling was connected to suffering for the sake of Jesus' name from the very beginning. Paul's apostolic calling to suffer can be understood on the same level as the cross of Jesus' disciples in God's mission. As a confirmation of this calling to suffer, I have discussed the pattern of suffering in Paul's missionary work. This pattern of suffering was apparent in his missionary journeys and especially in Paul's journey from Jerusalem to Rome in chains.

Paul's apostolic suffering was instrumental for God's mission. In order to understand the divine necessity of Paul's apostolic suffering in God's mission, I have explored the theme of the suffering Servant of Yahweh in Isaiah 40-55, which is the most comprehensive model of instrumental suffering in God's redemptive mission. In this regard, I have shown that Paul accepted Jesus Christ as the suffering Servant of Yahweh *par excellence* and himself as the servant of Jesus Christ, whose mission was founded in the role of the suffering Servant of Yahweh. Therefore, Paul's suffering found a place for itself in the mission of the suffering Servant of Yahweh to the nations. On the basis of the instrumentality of suffering in God's mission Paul defended the validity of his apostolic ministry, which was under attack from his opponents.

Paul's apostolic suffering was instrumental for the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ in two ways. First, it was instrumental for the advancement of the gospel because often times it opened up remarkable opportunities for the preaching and the defense of the

gospel. Second, Paul's suffering was instrumental for displaying God's supernatural power in the weakness of humanity. Paul found the secret of Christ's power resting in the weakness of his suffering. This was how Paul's apostolic ministry in suffering is connected to the supernatural manifestations of "signs, wonders and miracles" (cf. 2 Cor 12:9-10,12).

3. The mode of Christian witness in the Early Church

The historical obstacles and challenges to the Christian faith were overwhelming when the Roman Empire turned to persecuting the infant Christian church. The first imperial persecution of early Christians was launched with the mad emperor Nero who made them scapegoats for the fire in Rome. Early Christians were already misunderstood and treated as social outcasts, religious atheists and moral wretches. Besides, sooner or later, their existence would be perceived as a threat to the security and tranquility of the State since they refused to offer sacrifices to the Roman gods. So they had to go through the valley of suffering and martyrdom under the persecution of the Roman Empire.

In such an era of persecution, early Christians developed a mode of Christian witness that was quite different from the one in times of tolerance or freedom. They knew that there was a close connection between Christian witness and suffering. The making of the term "martyrdom" in the Roman Empire is convincing proof that Christian witness was closely connected to suffering and martyrdom. But what is remarkable in the Christian witness of the Early Church is that they saw the suffering and death of the Christian martyrs not as a defeat or failure in their ministry, but as a great victory over the enemy and as witnessing opportunities to the world.

The meaning of Christian martyrdom is to be found in the faithful witness to Jesus Christ and the gospel. In this understanding both the positions of Clement and Tertullian are held together in one. When the Christian martyr suffers martyrdom in suffering and death, he or she is a witness to the suffering and death of Jesus Christ crucified. When the Christian martyr witnesses to the truth and defends the gospel, he or she is witnessing to Jesus Christ and His gospel. One good example of being a witness to Jesus Christ in suffering and death was the

martyrdom of Polycarp who represented the reality of the cross of Jesus Christ to all, whether to believers or non-believers.

4. The rapid growth of the church in Korean history

In the Korean church, the growth of the church in the midst of persecution and martyrdom is an observable phenomenon. When Ro identifies four major periods in Korean history in which we can see the exceptional growth of the church, he finds that those periods were closely related to national crisis and suffering (1995:16). What do all these indications of exceptional church growth in Korea mean?

First of all, it means that the national security crisis and the individual suffering experience have functioned to help the Korean people rely on God alone in repentance and faith. Facing such historical obstacles and challenges, the Korean people learned to trust in God for help in times of trouble and need. A Korean-style prayer movement developed in such a historical context.

Second, the Christian act of faith and endurance in suffering and martyrdom had a deep spiritual impact upon the people. At least, part of the reason for the growth of the Korean church can be found in the spiritual influence of the Christian martyrs upon the people. Sometimes it is not possible to trace an immediate and visible result from such spiritual impact, but the Christian churches are strengthened and rooted deeply in their historical and cultural contexts because of the faith and endurance of the Christian martyrs.

Third, the national tragedy of the Korean War was instrumental for the advancement of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the dynamics of persecution and martyrdom. The Christian exodus from the north to the south because of the persecution of the North Korean Communists was a significant movement from a missiological point of view. At that time the Christian churches were prospering largely in the north/west part of the country, but through the tragic event of the Korean War many North Korean Christians moved to the south and started preaching the gospel, multiplying their numbers. This explains a significant part of the reason for the rapid growth of the South Korean churches after the Korean War.

I do not mean to deny other factors in the rapid growth of the Korean church. What I am suggesting here is that the suffering experiences of the Korean church were not negative factors, but rather

positive factors for the growth of the church. I would further maintain that the suffering and martyrdom of the Korean church through their response of faith and repentance were instrumental in the growth of the church, even in the midst of religious persecution and national tragedy.

5. Missiological implications for ministry today

Persecution and martyrdom should be considered an instrument or a vehicle through which we can actively involve ourselves in God's mission in the world. This is shown most clearly in the life and ministry of the apostle Paul. Bosch has put it:

For Paul, suffering is not just something that has to be endured passively because of the onslaughts and opposition of the powers of this world but also, and perhaps primarily, as an expression of the church's active engagement with the world for the sake of the world's redemption (cf. Becker 1984:41). Suffering is therefore a mode of missionary involvement (cf. Meyer 1986:111) (Bosch 1991:177).

From this study of instrumental suffering and martyrdom in Christ, we can draw some missiological implications for today's mission.

First, we need to learn the uncompromising attitude from the suffering and death of the Christian martyrs in the past. They suffered and died for the sake of Jesus' name because they did not compromise the truth of the gospel. In fact, persecution and martyrdom were considered a consequence of the uncompromising message of the Christian martyrs. These days many Christian ministers compromise the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ in many ways to accommodate the pattern of the world, sometimes in the name of communicating the gospel relevantly in diverse cultures.

Second, we need to recognize the willingness to suffer and die in the Christian martyrs because we tend to avoid persecution and martyrdom or escape from them as much as possible, not considering "the things of God" which are hidden in the suffering of the cross in Jesus Christ. But the biblical witness along with the historical evidences clearly shows us that there is something more in the cross-bearing of Jesus' discipleship than just enduring the suffering of the cross. The Christian martyrs denied the broad way of saving their lives, but accepted the narrow way of losing their lives, thus witnessing to the cross of Jesus Christ and to His message of the gospel.

In the discipline of missiology today there is little concern for this area of study. There is more of a humanitarian concern in that some theologians try to stop the reality of religious persecution today. Others who have some missiological concern argue the matter around the issue of the growth of the church. Their major concern tends to be with the question how they can stop the practice of persecution or minimize the damaging effects of persecution as they try to help the persecuted churches (Sterk 1999:15-18). But the major concern of the church of the martyrs was not the growth of the church, rather their maintaining the Christian faith without compromise. I do not mean to deny the validity of their effort, but what I see in them is the lack of understanding of the divine necessity of suffering and martyrdom and their instrumentality in a witnessing situation.

We need to recover the missiological significance of the cross of Jesus' discipleship in the present historical context. Not all Christians today are called to suffer and/or even to die for the sake of Jesus Christ and his gospel. However, if we are truly called to suffering and martyrdom and if it is confirmed through the ministry of the Holy Spirit in that way, we must follow Jesus Christ in the suffering of the cross which is instrumental in God's mission. In fact, this is a matter of the willingness of the heart to suffer and die for the sake of Jesus Christ. Paul E. Pierson points out the tendency of "impatience" in contemporary American culture that expects quick results in everything (1998:147). We need to overcome this tendency of "impatience" in Christian mission today.

We need a major adjustment in our attitude toward persecution and martyrdom today. We need to accept the truth of bearing much fruit in instrumental suffering and death by faith: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains by itself alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24, NASB). With this verse in mind, Stott correctly points out the secret of effective ministry in Christian mission:

The place of suffering in service and of passion in mission is hardly ever taught today. But the greatest single secret of evangelistic or missionary effectiveness is the willingness to suffer and die... But the servant must suffer if he is to bring light to the nations, and the seed must die if it is to multiply (1986:322).

Third, we need to learn the secret of Christ's power, which is made perfect in the weakness of humanity. Paul knew this paradoxical truth, and could say:

Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong (2 Cor 12:9-10).

One of the most interesting things in this study was the fact that in Christ God's miraculous power is multiplied in the midst of Christian suffering and martyrdom. We are hearing the same story from the Chinese church today, which is still under persecution.

My argument is that God's power is released or manifested in the instrumental weakness of suffering and martyrdom. We may call this kind of suffering the suffering loaded with the power of God (cf. 2 Tim 1:7/8). This shows another dimension of spiritual warfare involved in suffering and martyrdom. In fact, I have shown that on the cosmic level spiritual warfare was fought at the cross through Jesus' suffering and death. The crucifixion of Jesus Christ was a tremendous victory over the enemy and was instrumental in releasing God's power for salvation of others. Even though the ultimate victory was to come with the glory of the subsequent resurrection, Jesus already won the victory over the enemy right there on the cross.

Fourth, we need to develop a mission theology that can address the issue of Christian suffering and martyrdom in God's mission. In this study, I have suggested that we discover a missionary paradigm for Christian ministry in self-sacrificial suffering and death in the concept of Christian priesthood. The priesthood of all believers was a slogan among Reformation leaders. Their major argument was that Christian individuals could have direct access to God with no need of any other human mediation. However, they lacked the missiological dimension of the Christian priesthood that could address the issue of ministering to the people.

For a biblical model of doing ministry in suffering and martyrdom I have suggested the development of the ministry of Christian priesthood, which derives its meaning and existence from the one priesthood of Jesus Christ who is presented as our High Priest. I have presented the priestly ministry of Christians in three categories:

1. the task of proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ;
2. the task of offering spiritual sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ, and
3. the task of making intercession for the people.

All these priestly tasks of Christians are to be found in the ministry of Jesus' discipleship in the New Testament, which is seen as corresponding to the priesthood of the Old Testament. The essence of the ministry of Christian priesthood is found in the ministry of life-giving, in the instrumentality of sacrificial suffering and death in Christ. However, more careful research is required in the concept of the Christian priesthood and its ministry.

6. Rethinking the present mission practice

The Bible reveals the mystery of the incarnation of Jesus Christ: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). The apostle Paul spoke about the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor 8:9). Considering affluence a Western missionary problem (1991), Jonathan J. Bonk suggests a biblical model of mission for today in three modes: the principle of incarnation, the principle of the cross and the principle of weakness in mission practice.

6.1 The principle of incarnation in mission

Even though the principle of incarnation is biblically sound in mission theology, the affluence in sending agencies makes it increasingly difficult to regard the incarnation as a model for personal action. But our attitude should be the same as that of Jesus Christ (Phil 2:5). This means giving up our rights in the principle of the cross, which is the important mark of Jesus' discipleship. In other words, we must put aside our power, our prestige, our social status which we enjoy at home. This is not an easy task. It is a kind of spiritual battle, as Bonk strongly contends:

Christ's mission done in Christ's way must always begin, proceed and end with the great renunciation. There is no room for the power-generating, ego-inflating, career-building, self-protecting approach so characteristic of much that is called mission. Those who are really serious about making any headway against the enemy must return to this "foolishness" of our Lord. No matter how enlightened the techniques, how sophisticated the technology, or how numerous, how dedicated, and how well qualified the personnel, nothing but God's incarnational strategy will prevail against either "the powers of this dark world" or "the spiritual forces of evil in heavenly realms" (Eph 6:10-

18). However strange or inappropriate this weapon must seem to natural man, without it there can be no hope of victory (1993:302-303).

6.2 The principle of the cross in mission

The cross of Christ has two sides: the life-giving side and the life-taking side. We need both sides in living out the Christian life in this world. We need salvation and life through the cross. However, the cross of Christ also demands our suffering and death for the sake of Jesus Christ and His gospel. Bonk puts it as follows:

For Christ's followers, the cross is not only the power of God unto salvation, it is the guarantee of misunderstanding, persecution, and suffering at the hands of those to whom it is a foolish and obnoxious stumbling block (1993:303).

When we are crucified with Christ on the cross, we experience our salvation and transformation into a new life of resurrection in Christ. But when we suffer on behalf of others in Christ, we are sharing the sufferings of Christ (cf. Col 1:24). This does not mean that the sufferings Jesus suffered on the cross were not sufficient for the redemption of the world. Rather, it means that we bear one another's burden in order to fulfill the law of Christ (Sheets 1996:66-67). In this connection, A.E. Harvey helps us understand how the apostle Paul fills up the cup of his suffering until it overflows for the benefit of others (1996:121-122, 129).

There is still another aspect in the principle of the cross in mission. That is what Daniélou calls "the missionary spirituality", which he defines as follows: "The missionary spirituality is a participation in the continuing Mysteries of Christ, a confrontation with the world of sin, and a penetration of this world in a battle destined to bring the world to completion" (1996:107). Thus mission appears as a conflict with the forces of evil, and in this battle even failure plays a part in the plan of God's redemption through the mystery of the cross of Christ (1996:110-111).

6.3 The principle of weakness in mission

In our discussion so far we have seen that the power of God displayed in Jesus Christ is a different kind of power from that of the world. Kraft talked about the power of God wrapped in divine love, which is different in motive and operation from that of the devil (1992:224; see also 1997:78-81). But it seems to me that sometimes the Third Wave

tradition people are likely to use the power in the same manner as that of the enemy, as Thomas H. McAlpine points out (1991:53-56).

Jesus Christ was crucified in weakness by the standards of the world, though he was not a weakling. However, Jesus made himself available through the instrumentality of weakness and suffering to redeem the weak and suffering people to whom he ministered. The apostle Paul was a good example of one who followed Jesus Christ in ministering to people in weakness and suffering (cf. 2 Cor 11:29). Bonk comments on Paul's life as a missionary:

What was it that distinguished Paul as a missionary? Not his strength, but his weakness, not his honor, but his humiliation... not the flattering accolades of the powerful, but curses, slander, and persecution at the hands of the powerful. In short, according to Paul, to be a missionary meant to become "the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world" (1993:305).

As he sums up his argument, Bonk warns the Western churches:

If the Western church is really serious about doing Christ's mission in Christ's way, in making some headway against the enemy forces under whose domination all creation groans, it must return to those weapons which God has designed to defeat the enemy: the incarnation, the cross, and weakness. Missiological plans, policies, practices, and ambitions must move away from their essentially self-serving character to reflect once again the incarnation. Self-preservation must no longer serve as the bottom line governing mission principles and practices; rather, method and message alike must manifest the cross. The poor must no longer be impressed chiefly by the wealth and power of Western missions, but by their weakness and vulnerability (1993:305).

7. A prophetic vision for future ministry

At this particular point in history, persecution is not prevailing all over the world. However, the Bible predicts in the book of Revelation that a time is coming for worldwide persecution. In the Roman Empire there came first the local and sporadic persecutions and then the official and empire-wide persecution, which was called the great persecution before the coming of the new era. At the present time, we do not see any worldwide persecution going on in this world except some localized persecutions in various parts of the world. But the book of Revelation reveals that there will be a worldwide persecution called "the great tribulation" (Rev 7:14). Supporting verses for this are many. For one, the risen Lord Jesus spoke about "the hour of trial that is

going to come upon the whole earth to test those who live on the earth" (Rev 3:10).

But my concern is not so much with "the great tribulation" as the possible form of ministry in suffering and martyrdom. What kind of ministry are we going to have in the future when worldwide persecution becomes a reality? In the Bible the possibility of worldwide persecution is connected to the coming of the Antichrist in human history (Rev 11-13). A vision of the future ministry in suffering and martyrdom, I believe, is significantly presented in the ministry of the two witnesses:

And I will give power to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth. These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth. If anyone tries to harm them, fire comes from their mouths and devours their enemies. This is how anyone who wants to harm them must die. These men have power to shut up the sky so that it will not rain during the time they are prophesying; and they have power to turn the waters into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague as often as they want. Now when they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the Abyss will attack them, and overpower and kill them. Their bodies will lie in the street of the great city, which is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified. For three and a half days men from every people, tribe, language and nation will gaze on their bodies and refuse them burial (Rev 11:3-9).

A variety of interpretations are found in biblical scholarship, especially in relation to the identity of the two witnesses. I agree with the interpretation that the two witnesses are ministers of the gospels of the church community who are supposed to be witnesses to Jesus Christ in the last days of history (D.W. Lee 1993:264-265). We can see in this passage a model of the future ministry. What are the characteristics of the model ministry of the two witnesses then? Some important characteristics of our future ministry according to the model of the two witnesses can be outlined as follows:

First, they will do power ministries in their witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. They will begin their ministries with divine power given to them. They will speak the word of God, calling for repentance as John the Baptist did in the Judean desert. This is expressed in their clothing: "clothed in sackcloth" like the prophets of long ago in the Old Testament times when calling for repentance.

Second, they will be delivered over to death by the sovereign will of God. During their ministry nobody can harm them because God's protection is given to them (Rev 11:5). But when they have finished their testimony, they will be handed over to "the beast that comes up from the Abyss" who "will attack them, and overpower and kill them" (11:7). In other words, they will be handed over to the enemy in the same manner as Jesus was handed over to the enemy, because the place of their death is spoken figuratively as "Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified" (11:8). But we need to see God's sovereignty operating even in handing them over to the enemy.

Here we see the ministry of the two witnesses in suffering and martyrdom. The suffering ministry of the two witnesses reminds us of the picture of the two cows that carried the ark of the Lord to Beth Shemesh and at the end of the journey were sacrificed to become a burnt offering to the Lord (1 Sam 6:7-14). The ministry of the two witnesses is directed by the guidance of the Holy Spirit and they most resemble the Lord Jesus in their suffering ministry as well as in their power ministry.

Third, they will be raised to life from the dead and ascend to heaven. Death was not the end for them, but just a passage through which they went up to God. The ultimate victory is reserved for them by God's power. This is another example of the great power of God displayed in suffering and death in Christ. The great persecution of the last days of human history will not last forever. It will be limited in period – for forty-two months or symbolically three and a half days. They will be more than conquerors through their suffering and martyrdom, sharing the glory of their Lord in the resurrection.

What does the passage of the two witnesses mean in terms of our future ministry in suffering and martyrdom? I believe it means that in the last days of human history we need to accept the validity of a suffering ministry for the sake of Jesus Christ and his gospel, as well as to be properly equipped to do power ministry.

8. Recommendation for further study

There are two areas of research which are not dealt with properly because of the nature of the study and also due to limited time and space. The first area of research deserving more careful analysis is the negative effect of persecution and martyrdom on the survival and growth of the church. The second area of research deserving further

study is the development of the concept of Christian priesthood in terms of an ideal model of Christian ministry in self-sacrificial love and suffering.

8.1 Reasons for failure under persecution and martyrdom

I did not enter into detailed discussion in terms of the non-growth or the disappearance of the churches in an era of persecution because I believe in that era the issue is not a matter of church growth, but a matter of faithful witness to the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. However, in the scope of my study there are two cases of failure in terms of the survival and growth of the church: the North Korean church and the North African church.

In North Korea from the rise of the Communist regime until 1980 there was a long-persistent and systematic persecution of remnant Christians. However, these days we hear the news about the gradual process of opening the doors of the Christian churches in North Korea (S.B. Kim 1990:443-446).¹ We have limited sources of the news about the Christian churches in North Korea today. We hear about the underground churches in North Korea, but we do not know exactly how many Christians survived the systematic persecution by the totalitarian Communist regime.

At this point, it is simply not proper to consider the matter of the growth of the church in North Korea, because the same persecuting party is still controlling its religious policy toward Christianity. We need to look at the issue of the survival and growth of the church under persecution from a long-term perspective and with an eye of faith. Who knows if God will grant a great harvest in North Korea when the persecution of the Communist regime is gone forever?

The North African church was once flourishing, but died away in church history. This church deserves more careful research in terms of the reasons for its collapse and disappearance. A few reasons can be noted briefly. There was a serious consequence of persecution: division among Christian leaders around the issue of forgiving and restoring the lapses during the persecution in the North African church. The Donatist church, which was developed in that historical context, ran into conflict with the Roman Catholic church around the

¹ According to Sang-Bok Kim, since 1980 North Korea has been more open about their religious policies than ever before.

issue of the leadership of the Donatist movement. Besides, the Donatist church responded radically, sometimes with violence, to the persecution by the Roman Catholic church (Norris 1990:213).² Finally the Donatist movement was destroyed with the remainder of the Christian heritage in North Africa by the Arab invasions and the success of Islam (Frend 1990:276).

The reasons for the disappearance of the North African church aroused keen interest in the circle of missiology. The lack of Bible translation into the native language is noted as one factor for the disappearance of the church (Sterk 1999:16).³ However, this issue needs to be examined in terms of spiritual warfare with the right response to persecution and martyrdom.

8.2 Christian priesthood: A model of Christian ministry

As he discusses the concept of *martyria* in the Old and New Testament, Bosch indicates that the possibility of mission finds expression not in national triumph but in national adversity (1980:71). Completely contrary to what Israel always imagined, the Servant of Yahweh became God's witness in the world, not in national triumph but in national suffering. Bosch therefore considers that Isaiah 53 reveals both the highest and deepest dimensions of mission in the Old Testament:

Isaiah 53 thus reveals both the highest and deepest dimensions of mission in the Old Testament. In Exodus 19:6 Israel was called a 'kingdom of priests' and with that assigned a priestly function in the midst of the nations. The priest does not rule, he serves. Isaiah 53 shows that, on occasion, this service may take the form of innocent suffering for the sake of others. The priest, as it were, becomes himself the sacrifice which he lays on the altar (1980:71).

In Bosch's words, two important missiological themes are found: the priesthood of Israel as a whole for the nations and the idea of innocent suffering for the sake of others. The Christian priesthood in terms of

² In the Donatist church, there were members called "Circumcellions" who were fanatical Christians noted for martyrdom and for violence to others as well.

³ Sterk considers this lack of Bible translation into the indigenous language a major reason for the non-survival of the church. He observes the same thing in the case of the extinction of the Japanese church established by the Jesuit mission.

Christian suffering and martyrdom is not dealt with properly in this study because of limited time and space, even though I have discussed it briefly in Chapter 9. It deserves more careful research from a missiological point of view. The issue of holiness and righteousness needs to be integrated into the life and ministry of the Christian martyrs in terms of the ministry of Christian priesthood. I believe that an ideal of Christian ministry today can be found in this concept of the Christian priesthood in the principle of the cross according to the model of Jesus' ministry in self-sacrificial love.

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Martyrdom and the furtherance of God's plan:

The value of dying for the Christian faith

Thomas J Wespetal*

Abstract

This work deals with how God's plan is furthered through the martyrdom event. It examines the significance of martyrdom for all participants and observers (or later learners) of the event - namely, for the martyr himself or herself, for the persecutor, for God, for Satan, and for both believing and unbelieving observers. It can be demonstrated that in every case martyrdom advances God's plan by either bringing Him glory, or by enhancing people's relationship with Him.

Keywords Martyrdom, theology of martyrdom, theology of suffering, persecution.

1. Introduction

In this article we will take a glimpse at an integral but little understood aspect of Christian faith and life – the experience of martyrdom. Particularly, we hope to discover what goals God is pursuing in allowing martyrdom, and how to conceptualize His purposes in a way that would enable believers today to grasp the significance of the event.

The word “martyrdom” usually conjures up grotesque images of sufferers impaled on stakes, stretched out on the rack, crucified upside down, or given over to some other unimaginable torture. Martyrdom has been graphically described as “a word full of pain and blood, of the smell of death” (de Silva 1994:287). Such a perception of

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martyrdom generally causes the average believer to shun the topic altogether and thus miss out on the positive contribution a proper understanding of martyrdom makes to a total Christian worldview. Without denying the reality of suffering in martyrdom, a need exists to further develop a biblically based model of martyrdom by which the believer, by embracing such a model, can grasp the essential nature of the event. The believer who associates “martyrdom” simply with “pain and blood” does not have a healthy or proper perception of the experience.

It can be demonstrated that martyrdom has very specific repercussions in respect to the furtherance of God’s plan, that is, how martyrdom glorifies God or enhances relationship with Him. In the conclusion of this article, after a brief analysis of how martyrdom affects the participants in and observers of the event, I will suggest a general construal for viewing martyrdom’s contribution to the plan of God.

2. Defining martyrdom

Before attempting to contribute toward a biblical theology of martyrdom we must define the concept in question. We may begin preliminarily with the conventional definition of martyrdom expressed by David Barrett: “A Christian martyr is a believer in Christ who loses his or her life, prematurely, in a situation of witness, as a result of human hostility” (Barrett 2001, vol. 2:665). Upon closer examination we discover that there are three aspects of the definition of martyrdom: a fatal aspect – the martyr actually dies, a confessional aspect – the martyr dies for Christian faith and a voluntary aspect – the martyr does not unnecessarily provoke the incident or die in armed resistance.

Today, every aspect of this definition is under discussion. First of all, it has been debated whether martyrdom requires death or not. Also, authors discuss whether death must be for confession of Christian faith, or whether it can be solely for moral acts. Also, is only passive acceptance of death considered martyrdom, or does active resistance of evil leading to a violent death also count?

Although a comprehensive historical investigation is beyond the scope of this article, several references will demonstrate that the conventional conception of martyrdom, as outlined by Barrett, has been the one most commonly employed throughout church history.

Such a traditional definition is preferable in order to preserve a consistent use of the term over time.

In respect to the fatal aspect of martyrdom, Eusebius (Ecc. Hist. 5.2.2-3) records a letter from the saints of Vienne and Lyons to the churches of Asia and Phrygia, in which the former describe the attitude of persecuted believers:

Though they had attained such honour, and had borne witness, not once or twice, but many times, – having been brought back to prison from the wild beasts, covered with burns and scars and wounds, – yet they did not proclaim themselves witnesses (μάρτυρες), nor did they suffer us to address them by this name. If any one of us, in letter or conversation, spoke of them as witnesses, they rebuked him sharply... they reminded us of the witnesses who had already departed, and said, ‘They are already witnesses whom Christ has deemed worthy to be taken up in their confession, having sealed their testimony by their departure; but we are lowly and humble confessors.’

In respect to the confessional aspect of martyrdom Figura writes that one of “the essential aspects of the theology of martyrdom in the early church” was that “they die for the truth of the Christian faith” (Figura 1996:103, italics mine). In light of the objection that death for non-confessional causes, like civil rights, is also meritorious, a moderating suggestion might be made to reserve the term “Christian” martyr for those dying in defence of Christian faith, and use other qualifiers to designate martyrdom for other causes.¹ This approach can also apply in situations where confessing Christians killed confessing Christians. Thus it may be appropriate at times to refer to “Protestant martyrs,” “Catholic martyrs,” or “Anabaptist martyrs.” Additionally, those who died in defence of Old Testament faith merit the designation “Old Testament martyrs.”

One must also take into consideration that in numerous biblical examples (such as Zechariah, son of Jehoiada, Uriah, son of Shemaiah, John the Baptist and even Stephen) individuals died not so much for a confession of faith as for delivering a prophetic word of rebuke. In church history others died not for confessing Christ per se, but for refusing to perform acts contrary to Christian faith, such as burning incense to the Emperor. Thus some flexibility needs to be shown in defining the confessional aspect of martyrdom so as to include such instances.

¹ Suggested by Dr. John Feinberg.

In regard to the voluntary nature of martyrdom, the early Fathers condemned the practice of seeking martyrdom and, with the exception of Tertullian, also condemned suicide to avoid persecution (Bowersock 1995:62-65). Luther wisely counsels that a person does not need to seek martyrdom, “it comes to them if God so wills” (noted by Stange 1966:642). Concerning death in armed resistance to evil, Jesus taught the principle of non-resistance to personal enemies (Matt 5:39-41), and demonstrated that principle when He rebuked Peter for trying to defend Him with force at Gethsemane (John 18:10-11). Also, no cases exist in Scripture where violence was advocated or used against antagonists to the gospel.

In light of the considerations above I propose the following modified version of the conventional definition of martyrdom: Christian martyrdom is voluntarily, but not intentionally (through unnecessary provocation), losing one’s life to those hostile to the faith in proclamation or defence of Christian belief, for abstaining from actions that would constitute a denial of the faith, or in execution of a special prophetic commission by God.

3. The historico-theological backdrop of martyrdom

Having defined martyrdom, our next step is to paint the historico-theological backdrop of martyrdom, that is, to describe the spiritual conflict which provides the context for these martyrdom events. In continuity with many classic martyriologies I propose that the historico-theological backdrop of martyrdom can be described as an age-old conflict between what Augustine termed the City of God and the City of This World. That is, humanity is and always has been polarized between allegiance to God and allegiance to Satan.

Such a dichotomy can be traced through the biblical record as well. Beginning with Cain and Abel, the prototypes of future persecutors and persecuted (1 Jn 3:12-13), Scripture sequentially highlights notorious persecutors of God’s people of old and new testament times: (1) Ham’s descendents (Egypt, Canaan, Philistia) opposed the descendents of Shem (Israel); (2) backslidden Israel persecuted her prophets; (3) subjugated Israel suffered under pagan Gentile empires; and (4) unbelieving Jews persecuted the New Testament Church. In church history as well one can highlight prominent persecutors in almost every period of history: pagan Rome, medieval Roman Catholicism and in modern time atheistic

communism and radical Islamic fundamentalism. This conflict sees its culmination in the appearance of Antichrist and his war with the saints.

Thus the people of God have typically been set in contrast to and persecuted by the City of This World. The "World" is represented in Scripture and history by various prominent oppressors, who are not to be seen in isolation from the whole, but as representatives of the world system, whose opposition to the church sometimes results in martyrdom.

4. Martyrdom and the martyr

Thus far we have attempted to define martyrdom and have described the historico-theological backdrop in which martyrdom takes place. This now prepares us for a more direct examination of God's purpose in martyrdom. Martyrdom contributes to the plan of God in relation to the martyr by enhancing his or her relationship with God. This is accomplished in the following ways: (1) by providing opportunity to demonstrate genuine faith toward God; (2) by providing opportunity to demonstrate devotion in discipleship; and (3) by allowing the martyr to experience intimate identification with Christ.

The theme of martyrdom as a test of faith is frequently encountered in martyriological passages, of which only a few will be mentioned here. After predicting that "brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and cause them to be put to death," Jesus declares, "But it is the one who has endured to the end who will be saved" (Matt 10:21-22).² In John's Apocalypse Jesus warns the church in Smyrna that the devil is about to "cast some of you into prison," calling for faithfulness "until death." The motif of testing is explicit: "so that you may be tested" (Rev 2:10). In chapter 12 of the book of Revelation we read of those who overcame Satan, in part, because "they did not love their life even when faced with death" (v. 11). This is a picture of a test of faith, a contest with Satan, a battle of wills in which the saints, though slain, came away victorious.

In regard to martyrdom as an expression of devotion in discipleship we note Jesus call to His disciples to "take up their cross" and "follow Him." Although the phrase "take up the cross" likely refers to all the demands of discipleship, one can certainly not miss

² All Scripture quotations are taken from the New American Standard Version.

the martyrological connotation here as well. Martyrdom as an expression of devotion is pictorially displayed as making an offering to God. In 2 Tim 4:6 we encounter an interesting expression where Paul compares his impending martyrdom to a “drink offering.” In Rev 6:9-11 we observe the martyrs’ position beneath the altar, implying the sacrificial nature of their devotion in discipleship.

Finally, the martyr experiences an intimate identification with Christ. Identification with Christ as well as devotion to Him is seen in Jesus’ call to “follow Him” to death (Mark 8:34-38; John 21:19). The call to “take up the cross” of discipleship (and possible martyrdom) is an act of identification with the One who bore the cross for all. Also, John draws a parallel between Christ’s experience of martyrdom (Rev 1:18) as the “the faithful witness” (Rev 1:5) and the experience of the martyr Antipas, who is called “My witness, My faithful one. (Rev 2:12).” It is also interesting to note that Saul of Tarsus, who persecuted believers to the death, was in fact persecuting Christ Himself (Acts 9:4).

Unfortunately many aberrant views of the value of martyrdom in respect to the martyr have arisen that have no Scriptural substantiation. For example, a martyrological theme found frequently in the rabbis and to some degree in early and medieval Christianity is that martyrdom provides atonement for personal sins. Tertullian claimed that through martyrdom one “may obtain from God complete forgiveness, by giving in exchange his blood... For that secures the remission of all offences” (Apology 50). This thinking persisted even in the mind of John Hus, for whom martyrdom would serve for “the blotting out of my sins” (cited in eds. Workman & Pope, 1904:184-85). Yet we must remember that martyrs died for the message of Christ as sin-bearer – the idea that they were bearing their own sins contradicts the message they died for.

Another distortion is the Greco-Roman concept of the “noble death.” In this approach, martyrdom’s value is found in the demonstration of the personal integrity and courage of the martyr. Seneca wrote, “I should prefer to be free from torture; but if the time comes when it must be endured, I shall desire that I may conduct myself therein with bravery, honour, and courage” (Epistles 67.4). Similarly, in Catholic theology, “Martyrdom is treated by moral theologians as the chief act of the virtue of fortitude” (Gilby 1967, vol. 6:315). Ignatius regarded his martyrdom as the means to “become a

disciple" (To the Ephesians 1), become "perfect in Jesus Christ" (To the Ephesians 3) and "attain to God" (To the Romans 1, 2, 4).

But the nature of Christian martyrdom is such that perseverance unto death is in no way meritorious but naturally flow from faith. Persevering in suffering is simply acting consistently with one's convictions concerning the promises of God – if they are really true, then they are worth suffering for. The merit, then, is not in the martyr's courage or fortitude, but in God's faithfulness to His promises, which undergirds the martyr's perseverance.

5. Martyrdom and the persecutor

The other direct participant in the martyrdom event is the persecutor. How does his involvement contribute to God's plan? It can be demonstrated that, in respect to the persecutor, martyrdom contributes to the plan of God in providing further basis for God's judgement of sin.

Often in Scripture killing the saints is connected with God's judgement. Ahab's house, for example, is indicted especially for killing the prophets (2 Kgs 9:7), and in the penitential prayer of Nehemiah 9 instigating martyrdom is mentioned in a final, climatic position just before God's judgement is described (Neh 9:26). This feature is especially prominent in the book of Revelation, where martyrdom and judgement are often directly linked (Rev 6:10, 16:6, 18:20, 24, 19:2). Also notable is that the book of Revelation, again, places martyrdom in a final, climactic position among other indictments, accentuating the severity of the offence (Rev 17:6; 18:24; 19:2). This crescendo effect confirms the suspicion that end-time martyrdoms significantly contribute to the completion of the so-called "messianic woes" and the ushering in of God's eschatological judgement.³ This "quota of suffering" designated for the church is completed by the death of the final martyrs (Rev 6:10-11).

³ According to this conception, prior to the final judgement the people of God must endure a certain amount of suffering and rejection, which will usher in God's end time retribution. Dunn (1996:115; 1998:486) lists numerous biblical and extra-biblical passages that support this concept: Dan 7:21-27, 12:1-3; Jub 23:22-31; 1QH 3.28-36; *Test. of Moses* 5-10; 4 Ezra 4:33-43; Mark 10:38, 13:8; Mt 3:11/Lk 3:16; John 16:21; Acts 14:22; Rom 8:18-23; Rev 6:9-11. This is related to the Old Testament concept "the cup of wrath," which slowly fills over time and, when full, overflows in divine judgement. See Job 21:20; Ps 75:8; Isa 51:17, 22; Jer 25:15.

Also significant is how Scripture describes the vile character of martyrdom's instigators. The Synoptics class such individuals with a brood of vipers (Matthew 23), with those who kill innocent messengers (Matthew 21 and 22) and even with those who would betray their own family members (Matt 10:21). The vicious nature of their activity is graphically described in Heb 11:35b-38, where they tortured, mocked, scourged, imprisoned, stoned, sawed in two, killed and ill-treated "men of whom the world was not worthy." Persecutors of the faith take company with such eschatological fiends as the beast, the false prophet and Mystery Babylon. The "would-be" murderers of Daniel and his three friends demonstrate an extreme egomania that seeks to displace faith in the only true God (Daniel 3 and 6). Herodias reveals the quality of her character by asking for John the Baptist's head on a platter (Matt 14:8). The deranged character of Stephen's persecutors is noted in Acts 7, where they "began gnashing their teeth at him... cried out with a loud voice, covered their ears and rushed at him with one impulse (Acts 7:54-57).

Although the typical biblical portrayal of the instigator of martyrdom is one of cruel hatred of God and church, exceptional cases can be cited. The Scriptures give us the examples of both Nebuchadnezzar, who repented under God's discipline (Dan 4), and Saul of Tarsus, who was "shown mercy" because he "acted ignorantly in unbelief" (1 Tim 1:13). Thus we must refrain from claiming that instigators of martyrdom are beyond the reach of God's grace, or unable to repent. Also, by way of qualification, we must note the Scriptures testify to a worse spiritual state that is beyond repentance (Heb 6:4-6), which is usually equated with the "blasphemy of the Holy Spirit" (Matt 12:31).

6. Martyrdom and God

Behind the direct participants in the martyrdom event stand the spiritual forces that support and inspire them – God and Satan. Martyrdom provides God, for example, a unique opportunity to manifest His grace in the exemplary conduct of the martyr, thereby furthering His plan by bringing Himself glory. Let us examine how Scripture confirms this claim.

Paul, for example, deemed God's grace necessary to face death for Christ, relating how he depended on the "provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ" (Phil 1:19) when threatened with martyrdom (see also 2 Tim 4:18). John's gospel places martyrdom in the greater context of

the helping ministry of the Holy Spirit (see John 16:2 in the context of John 15:26-16:15). The martyrdom of Stephen is remarkable for the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit: at his hour of need he was filled the Holy Spirit (Acts 7:55) and was granted a heavenly vision (Acts 7:56).

The witness of church history of the working of God's grace in martyrdom is equally impressive. The Martyrdom of Polycarp gives this fitting summary of martyrdoms of the early second century:

(The martyrs), when they were so torn with scourges, that the frame of their bodies, even to the very inward veins and arteries, was laid open, still patiently endured, while even those that stood by pitied and bewailed them. But they reached such a pitch of magnanimity, that not one of them let a sigh or a groan escape them; thus proving to us all that those holy martyrs of Christ, at the very time when they suffered such torments, were absent from the body, or rather, that the Lord then stood by them, and communed with them. And, looking to the grace of Christ, they despised all the torments of this world (Martyrdom of Polycarp 2).

The testimony of Reformation martyrdoms is the same. Schaff (1910, vol. 8:84), commenting on Anabaptist martyrdoms, reports, "Hundreds of them of all ages and both sexes suffered the pangs of torture without a murmur, despised to buy their lives by recantation, and went to the place of execution joyfully and singing psalms."

In light of these considerations we must affirm with Workman (1906:303-4) that the martyrs were granted "a grace of God which dulled the pain, turning agony into victory."

This principle of God's power manifest in human weakness allows us to correct a common misconception about suffering and martyrdom – that the Christian must adopt a stoical attitude toward suffering and life in general. Adherents of stoicism purposely develop their resolve and emotional stamina, and take pride in their ability to withstand pressure.⁴ Paul's attitude toward suffering is totally opposite to that of the Stoics. Schrage (1980:212) writes, "What sustains Paul is not his own ultimate will to resist; instead, the one who preserves him from falling into the ultimate depths is God alone." Similarly, Calvin was especially outspoken against stoicism. He held that God allows suffering "so that we might turn from our 'perverse confidence' in ourselves" (noted by ed. Leithart 1993:202). In contrast, "The Stoic sage, when faced with adversity, relies on the inner strength of his

⁴ See Philo's description of the philosopher's lifestyle in Philo, *Every Good Man Is Free* 106-107. Also see Plato, *Phaedo* 67c-68b.

own character. While the Christian cries out in prayer, the Stoic clenches his teeth and refuses to beg" (Leithart 1993:203).

This contrast with stoicism brings out still another factor dramatizing the miraculous nature of Christian martyrdom. The Stoics (and Cynics) develop an indifference to and detachment from earthly things, which eases somewhat the emotional pain of losing one's life.⁵ In contrast, I affirm with Straw (1999:252) that "precisely because the martyrs loved this sweet life, they needed God's grace to be able to despise it... Victory now focuses on God's grace, so magnificent and encompassing that it can overcome the most natural human disposition." Wright (1992:364-65) shares this view, "The Stoic was fairly cynical about life anyway. The Christian affirmed its goodness, but was ready to leave it in obedience to an even greater good."

We must here address an apparent contradiction between two elements of our discussion: martyrdom as a test of faith and martyrdom as a manifestation of God's grace. If God provides supernatural grace to endure martyrdom, how can it be considered a test of the individual's faith? One might propose that the individual's faith and the grace of God work together in a symbiotic fashion. The individual's personal faith provides him or her with the conviction that he or she must hold on to the end no matter what the cost. This is a clear demonstration of faith since the individual values the promise of God and the hope of eternal life more than earthly life or personal safety. But at the same time, in recognition of the need for grace, the martyr acknowledges that he or she cannot hold on without divine aid. This inner tension between the I must and the I cannot provides the environment where martyrdom can serve both as a test of faith and as a demonstration of God's grace. The I must aspect drives the martyr to prayer and dependence upon God, who abundantly supplies grace to compensate for the I cannot aspect. Schrage (1980:215) reconciles these aspects of martyrdom in a similar way: "God's helping presence does not dispense one of his own responsibility to bear and to stand fast, which therefore is connected with faith."

⁵ An extreme example of detachment is seen in the account of Anaxarchus, who, when his body was being beaten, cried out, "Pound, pound, the pouch containing Anaxarchus; ye pound not Anaxarchus" (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 9.59, cited by ed. Hicks 1985). Clement of Alexandria considered some degree of detachment an asset in preparing for martyrdom. He regarded Stoics as "objects for admiration" in attaining a life "free from passion" (*Stromata* 4.3-5).

7. Martyrdom and Satan

The second indirect participant in the martyrdom event is Satan. It can be demonstrated that God's purpose is furthered as, in His wisdom and power, He frustrates Satan's agenda and defeats him through the endurance of the saints. We have already discovered that God's grace is demonstrated in and responsible for the martyr's endurance. In turn, the martyr's endurance defeats Satan's purpose to lead him or her into apostasy and to destroy his or her testimony – the martyr's testimony is, in fact, enhanced. In this way the believer's victory over Satan in martyrdom is, in truth, God's victory, bringing Him glory and inspiring faith in others.

Scripture is clear, especially in the book of Revelation, about who instigates the persecution of Christians. Behind the human persecutors, whether unbelieving Jews or eschatological fiends, stands Satan, the archenemy of the church. When unbelieving Jews plan to persecute the saints in Smyrna they are identified as a "synagogue of Satan" (2:9). Antipas is killed "where Satan dwells" (2:13). The dragon, who is identified as "the devil and Satan" (12:9), wages war against those who "hold to the testimony of Jesus" (12:17). The beast from the sea, instigator of the great end-time persecution, receives his power and authority from the dragon (13:2). The contest in the book of Revelation is clearly between God and Satan, with human participants acting as their agents.

The irrational behaviour of persecutors also points to a demonic source. Tertullian insightfully notes how philosophers of his day, who advanced some of the same moral principles for which Christians were suspected of sedition, were for some reason immune from persecution:

These are the very things, it says, the philosophers counsel and profess – innocence, justice, patience, sobriety, chastity. Why, then, are we not permitted an equal liberty and impunity for our doctrines,... they (the philosophers) openly overthrow your gods, and in their writings they attack your superstitions; and you applaud them for it (Apology 46).

When Christians display the bravery demonstrated by earlier pagan martyrs, it is regarded as recklessness:

The rest of your charge of obstinacy against us you sum up in this indictment, that we boldly refuse neither your swords, nor your crosses, nor your wild beasts, nor fire, nor tortures, such is our obduracy and contempt of death. But (you are inconsistent in your charges); for in

former times amongst your own ancestors all these terrors have come in men's intrepidity not only to be despised, but even to be held in great praise... But in your own instance you account such deeds glorious, in ours obstinate (To the Nations 1.18).⁶

Furthermore Tertullian argues that even if Christianity does introduce distortions, the penalty is outrageous compared to the offence:

For they are just (in that case) like many other things on which you inflict no penalties – foolish and fabulous things, I mean, which, as quite innocuous, are never charged as crimes or punished. But in a thing of this kind, if this be so indeed, we should be adjudged to ridicule, not to swords, and flames, and crosses, and wild beasts (Apology 49).

Such widespread, irrational behaviour on the part of numerous individuals over time excludes the explanation that we are dealing here with acts of isolated, mentally unstable individuals. More probable is that a common supernatural force whose goal was to exterminate Christianity influenced them all. In the Christian worldview no one else fits that description better than Satan.

Yet ironically victory over Satan is gained by submitting to his power to kill. This theme of “triumph” is apparent in the strong militaristic motif of the book of Revelation. In this “war motif” the martyrs at first appear to be casualties, whom the beast “overcomes” (notice the term *nikavw* in 11:7 and 13:7). This “overcoming” by the beast is answered politically by Christ’s coming to wage war and “overcome” (*nikavw*) the beast and his allies (17:14). Superimposed on this military campaign, though, is a spiritual conflict, expressed by the same *nikavw* terminology. Christ has “overcome” sin (5:5), and now the martyrs become spiritual “overcomers” by not compromising their faith (12:11, 15:2). Thus, while the martyrs are being “overcome” (*nikavw*) physically by their enemies, they are themselves “overcoming” (*nikavw*) spiritually through their endurance.⁷ Rev 12:11 directly speaks of martyrs overcoming Satan through death, “And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even when faced with death” (Rev 12:11).

⁶ Parenthetical insertion mine.

⁷ Bauckham makes the same observation and writes, “The same event – the martyrdom of Christians – is described both as the beast’s victory over them and as their victory over the beast. In this way John poses the question: who are the real victors?” (Bauckham 1993:90).

8. Martyrdom and the believing community

Scripture is clear about the value of martyrdom for the believing community. According to Daniel 11, martyrdom serves to test the faithful and purge true from false devotees of Yahweh. The first part of chapter 11 speaks of the future oppression and persecution of Judah by Antiochus Epiphanies. During this time, according to verse 33, “those who have insight among the people” will “fall by sword and by flame, by captivity and by plunder.” The purpose for which “some will fall” is stated in verse 35, “in order to refine them, purge, and make them pure until the end time.”

Of immediate interest is identifying the antecedent of the pronoun “them,” that is, the ones being purified. The nearest possible antecedent is the word “some” in verse 35, that is, the martyrs themselves. Yet it is difficult to see how the martyrs are “refined, purged and made pure” through martyrdom. We recognize that martyrdom is a test of faith, but the implication here is a purging that will lead to greater sanctification in this life. Another possible antecedent is “those who have insight” in verse 33. Support for this option is found in verse 34, where “those who have insight” are joined by many “in hypocrisy,” thus creating a need for purging false from true devotees of Yahweh. According to this scenario, the death of “some” of Judah’s teachers purified the rest, causing each to count the cost of their confession of Yahweh.⁸

The same theme is echoed in the book of Revelation. Rev 2:10 reads, “the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested.” The implication is that, even though only some will be imprisoned (and possibly martyred), all will be tested. This is similar to what we observed in Daniel 11, where “some” of those with insight fell (died) in order to test the others.

Other passages may also be considered. In 2 Timothy 4 Paul’s impending martyrdom will inspire Timothy to personal steadfastness in Christian life and ministry. Hebrews 11-12 cites Old Testament martyrs as sources of inspiration for suffering New Testament believers. It is very plausible that Stephen’s martyrdom had a marked effect on stirring the church to evangelism. It was those “who had

⁸ As Baldwin (1978:195) writes, “Persecution eliminates the waverers.” Leupold (1949:508-9) comments, “Facing the issue of death and bringing the supreme sacrifice would serve the purpose of ‘smelting’ and ‘sifting’ and ‘purifying’ the teachers.”

been scattered” by the persecution initiated by Stephen’s martyrdom who “went about preaching the word” (Acts 8:4).

In essence, martyrdom provides the church with a radical challenge to all out commitment. It provides a test for the entire church and forces believers to clearly define their faith by identifying the issues they are willing to die for. Those who positively respond to the challenge will be inspired and encouraged by the example of the martyr, deepened spiritually and stirred to action in providing assistance to others still suffering for the faith. Those who negatively respond to the challenge, however, may fall away. Yet even this benefits the church by purging and purifying it.

In connection with the effect of martyrdom on believers, many unscriptural conceptions have arisen and now enjoy widespread acceptance in some circles. A frequently encountered theme, especially among liberal authors, is that early Christians (and Christ Himself) understood martyrdom as a means of atonement for the sins of God’s people (Fretheim 1984:163-64, Sanders n.d.:116). According to this approach, the concept of vicarious suffering blossomed in the intertestamental literature, particularly in 2 and 4 Maccabees. Several writers (Frend 1965:182; Grayston 1996:260; Rist 1945:279) see an atoning significance in the martyrdoms of the book of Revelation, especially in connection with the martyrs beneath the altar (Rev 6:9-11). Certain Church Fathers, such as Origen (*Exhortation to Martyrdom* 5.172) and Gregory of Nazianzus (noted by Winslow 1974:84), also saw the blood of Christian martyrs as atoning. Similarly, in Judaism death by martyrdom can atone for corporate sins of the nation, as seen in the tradition of the “Ten Martyrs” and in the Maccabean literature (2 Macc 6:12-17, 7:18). This conviction was and continues to be held in Catholic theology (Figura 1996:103; Gregory 1999:283). Yet we must again remember that martyrs died for the message of Christ as sin-bearer – the idea that they were bearing the sins of others contradicts the message they died for.

Another pretension concerning martyrdom and the church that lacks scriptural warrant is the martyr’s role as intercessor. As early as the mid-second century A.D., Christians began yearly commemorations of a martyr’s death, celebrated at his or her tomb (*Martyrdom of Polycarp* 18). Later, relics were transferred to local churches and venerated there. Such eminent fathers as Origen (*Exhortation to Martyrdom* 7.195), Jerome (*Against Vigilantius* 1-12),

Ambrose (noted by Kemp 1948:3-4) and Augustine (noted by Bavel 1995:361) promoted their veneration. Eventually a martyr was thought to have the “prerogative to intercede with God” and that his or her death was atoning; the martyr “was said to win by his death the capacity to forgive sins” (Ton 1997:366).

Calvin (Institutes 3.5.2), appealing to New Testament teaching, refutes such ideas: (1) remission of sins is given only in Christ's name, not in the names of saints or martyrs (Acts 10:43); (2) the blood of Christ, not of martyrs, cleanses from sin (1 John 1:7; 2 Cor 5:21) and purchases us for God (Acts 20:28); (3) Christ, not the martyrs, died for the Church (1 Cor 1:13); (4) Christ provides sanctification for believers – it is not “perfected by martyrs” (Heb 10:14). Additionally, this teaching robs Christ of his unique function as mediator (1 Tim 2:5) and violates the universal principle of Scripture, that prayer is to be directed to God alone. Besides these discrepancies with Scripture, this doctrine also introduces a logical inconsistency. The church, in venerating the martyrs, commits an act akin to that which the martyrs themselves died in defiance of – idolatry.

9. Martyrdom and the unbeliever

Finally, the effect of martyrdom on the unbeliever will be investigated, that is, its value for evangelism. In Scripture we see that persecution and martyrdom are sometimes consequences of evangelistic gospel preaching. But we find no direct scriptural evidence to support that martyrdom itself moves people to conversion.

Some contend that martyrdom leads to conversion in Rev 11:11-13, where, as a result of the resuscitation of the two witnesses, “the rest were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven.” Some assert that this refers to a mass conversion of the nations (Bauckham 1993:84; Considine 1946:392; Sweet 1981:109; Ton 1997:285-90; Trites 1997:169-70). I find the arguments for this position unconvincing, especially in light of the character of the Apocalypse – evangelism and conversion are scarcely if at all mentioned except for a few angelic warnings of judgement (14:7, 9-12) which appear to go unheeded. But even if this interpretation of Rev 11:11-13 is correct, it does not directly address our question, since it was not the martyrdom event per se that turned the nations to God, but rather a miraculous demonstration of resurrection power.

Also, one often hears the suggestion that the martyrdom of Stephen contributed to Saul's later conversion. But the text gives no

support for this view. Immediately after Stephen's death Acts 8 records that "Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death" (v. 1), and later that "Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house; and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison" (v. 3).⁹ The only indication that Saul may have been somehow moved by the event is the reference to Saul's "kicking against the goads" in Acts 26:14, if that is to be understood as a guilty conscience.¹⁰ But the reference here is too vague to build a conclusion on it alone. The unanimous witness of Acts is that Saul's conversion resulted from his Damascus Road experience (see Acts 9, 22, 26).

Sweet (1981:108) makes a similar assessment of the exegetical evidence (or rather, lack of it) in the New Testament for the value of martyrdom for evangelism:

It is no doubt true that undeserved suffering and death, lovingly borne, works on men's consciences and turns their hearts, but in the book of Revelation, and in the rest of the New Testament, just as the suffering of the *μάρτυρες* is not the content of the *μαρτυρία*, so it is nowhere said that the awareness of their suffering brings men to repentance. Even in 1 Peter, where there are more references to suffering for righteousness' sake than anywhere else, this is nowhere inculcated for its saving effects on the persecutor – it is simply what Christians are called to, in imitation of Christ; the prelude of judgement on the persecutors and of glory for the Christians.

Historical testimonies do exist concerning individuals who converted as a result of witnessing martyrdom. Delehayé specifically lists nearly a dozen converts from martyrdom gleaned from martyrological literature (noted by Ramos-Lissón 1997:104, footnote 12). Eusebius mentions an additional two: the soldiers who led James the Just and Potamiaena to execution (Ecc. Hist. 2.9.2-3; 6.5.4-6). The celebrated church fathers Justin Martyr and Tertullian were converted due to the influence of martyrs (Justin, Apology II 12; Ton 1997:349). Speaking more generally, Ramos-Lissón (1997:104) feels conversion through martyrdom must have been common because such accounts became "commonplace in the hagiographic literature."

⁹ Also note the *ὁ* in verse 3, which contrasts Saul's actions with those of "devout men," who responded to Stephen's death by burying him. Saul's reaction was the opposite.

¹⁰ Rapske's understanding of the phrase is more plausible – it refers to Saul's growing awareness that opposing the gospel is futile (see Rapske 1998:239).

At the same time, Christian martyrs have been negatively assessed. Friend (1965:13) feels that often from an unbeliever's perspective the martyrs "appeared to gain nothing. Their God did not rescue them. The gods whom they had insulted were vindicated. Outwardly, in the minds of their contemporaries, the pagan cults had triumphed." This finds confirmation in the letter from the churches of Vienne and Lyons recounting the persecutions among them:

Others laughed and mocked at them, magnifying their own idols, and imputed to them the punishment of the Christians. Even the more reasonable, and those who had seemed to sympathize somewhat, reproached them often, saying, 'Where is their God, and what has their religion, which they have chosen rather than life, profited them?' (Eusebius, *Ecc.Hist.* 5.1.60).

According to Bowersock (1993:66), the martyr's behaviour was not always seen as exceptional; rather "pagans could to some degree understand the role of martyrs since they fill the role of the sophist in their life and the agonist in their death... besides, the Greco Roman world had always taken a lively interest in freakish behaviour." The most classic example of disdain for Christian martyrdom comes from the pen of Marcus Aurelius,

What a soul that is which is ready, if at any moment it must be separated from the body, and ready either to be extinguished or dispersed or continue to exist; but so that this readiness comes from a man's own judgement, not from mere obstinacy, as with the Christians, but considerately and with dignity and in a way to persuade another, without tragic show (*Meditations*, 11.3).

The oft-quoted phrase, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church," traces back to Tertullian, who wrote, "The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed" (*Apology* 50). Before Tertullian, Justin expressed the same:

For it is plain that, though beheaded, and crucified, and thrown to wild beasts, and chains, and fire, and all other kinds of torture, we do not give up our confession; but the more such things happen, the more do others and in larger numbers become faithful, and worshippers of God through the name of Jesus. For just as if one should cut away the fruit-bearing parts of a vine, it grows up again, and yields other branches flourishing and fruitful; even so the same thing happens with us (*Dialogue* 110).

Reformation writers echo this thought as well. Luther says, "The church has always grown by blood; she has been irrigated and planted

by blood,” and, “The more people oppress it, the more it spreads and prospers” (cited in ed. Plass 1959, vol. 1:282, 396).

Still, other historical evidence contradicts the thesis that persecution and martyrdom advance church growth. Gregory (1999:249) attributes the small number of Anabaptists to their political vulnerability and severe persecution. Shea (1997:15) notes the decline of Christianity in the Middle East.¹¹ Galli (1997:16-19) relates several disturbing reports. During the 1500’s and early 1600’s the 300,000-member church of Japan was reduced to a handful due to martyrdom and apostasy. In the Maghrib (Northwest Africa) the number of bishoprics declined from over thirty in 780 to six in 1015. By 1400 there were none. The expansion of the evangelistically active Eastern Orthodox Church was limited from the mid-fifteenth century on due to pressure from Muslims and Tartars. Galli (1997:16) summarizes,

These are not the kinds of martyr stories we love to hear about or talk about... To be sure, at times and places, each of those principles can be seen at work in history of the church. But just as often our utilitarian grid for understanding the worth of martyrdom has shown to be forced and contrived.

The fact that testimonies exist ascribing conversion to martyrdom directly confirms that it does add a degree of persuasiveness to evangelism. Unfortunately, historical evidence is too inconclusive to claim that it is a major factor in church growth. Also, in contrast to the other facets of martyrdom we have investigated in this article, we lack explicit scriptural testimony that witnessing martyrdom directly stirs the heart and moves people to conversion.

All this leaves us with somewhat tentative conclusions regarding martyrdom’s effectiveness in regard to evangelism – a curiosity in light of the fact that of all the aspects of martyrdom discussed, conversion through martyrdom is likely the one most firmly held in the popular mind.

10. Conclusions

As previously stated the goal of this paper is to determine the specific ways that martyrdom furthers the plan of God in route to developing a general construal or biblical model concerning the value of

¹¹ She notes the following: Iraq, from 35 percent to 5 percent; Iran, from 15 to 2; Syria, from 40 to 10; Turkey, from 32 to 0.2. The time period of this decline apparently was not noted by the author, but likely refers to the period from the beginning of the Moslem conquests until the present time.

martyrdom. This will require attempting a synthesis of our findings. In seeking such a synthesis, one must determine what common feature or features appear in the experiences of all the participants or observers of the martyrdom event. Upon surveying our separate investigations, the features that appear most evident are the related ideas of climax and clarification. We will begin with the idea of climax.

The experiences of all the primary and secondary participants in the martyrdom event, namely the martyr, the persecutor, God and Satan, can be characterized as exceptional or climactic. It can be shown that the martyr, for example, undergoes the ultimate test of faith, has an ultimate experience of identification with Christ and shows ultimate devotion to Him. The act of dying is arguably the most intense of all human experiences, and voluntary death involves overcoming the most basic human instinct of self-preservation. Martyrdom is rightly called "the highest renunciation" (Workman 1906:3).

I am not alone in this conclusion. Concerning the test of faith, the fathers of early Christianity considered martyrdom the "the supreme manifestation of... patience" (Halton 1985:102). Nothing else could so well "test the reality of faith as the call to the great renunciation" (Workman 1906:338). In the Reformation it was also considered "the supreme test" (Gregory 1999:158; Matheson 1989:155). Concerning identification with Christ, Bonhoeffer (1959:38) calls the experience "the supreme fellowship of martyrdom." Concerning devotion to Christ, it has been called "the ultimate loving gift" (Robeck 1999:5) "the highest form of love for God" (Sobrino 1999:203) and an "ultimate and final confession of love for Christ" (Gilby 1967, vol. 6:315).

Applying the idea of "climax" to the participation of the persecutor one may note, that the persecutor, although not displaying the most radical rejection of God possible (in comparison, for example, with blasphemy against the Holy Spirit), nonetheless demonstrates extremely depraved behaviour, and provokes God's judgement to an extreme degree.

Concerning God's participation, He displays His grace in a remarkable way in the life of the martyr, arguably surpassed only by the demonstration of His grace through Christ. As Luther said, through martyrdom God has "provided us with fresh and new examples of His own life" (cited in ed. Plass 1959, vol. 2:1036). Since, in Jesus' words,

one can show no greater love than to lay down his or her life (John 15:13), the martyr's death is arguably the greatest outward demonstration of the grace of God, which inspires that love, in the life of a human individual. We note the statement from Vatican II, that martyrdom is the "greatest testimony of love" (cited in ed. Flannery 1987:401). Similarly, Beyerhaus (1992:170-71) feels God imparts to victims of martyrdom "a degree of sustaining grace which surpasses all blessings we receive through the means of grace under normal conditions." Ton (1997:56) adds, "The glory of God shines through the beauty and splendor of self-sacrifice as nowhere else."

Finally, Satan's defeat in martyrdom is likely unparalleled in this present age since, in spite of the great freedom he is granted to oppress the martyr, he is unable to overcome the latter's perseverance.

In viewing martyrdom from the point of view of climax, what next becomes apparent is the contrast between the climactic experiences of the participants in the martyrdom event. God and the martyr, on the one hand, demonstrate such positive virtues as devotion, faithfulness and victory through grace. Satan and the persecutor, on the other hand, display the contrasting qualities of cruelty, injustice and ineptitude. Since these features are demonstrated to an extreme degree on both sides of the contrast, the climax becomes a polarization between God and the representatives of His kingdom on one side, and Satan and the representatives of his domain on the other. This is the same polarization that was independently demonstrated in the section "The Historico-Theological Backdrop of Martyrdom," where the age-old conflict between the "City of God" and the "City of This World" was highlighted. Martyrdom sets God's kingdom in sharp contrast to its rival realm and makes the combatants in this cosmic struggle more distinctly recognizable.

Thus, the climactic nature of the martyrdom event demonstrates the polarization that exists between the kingdom of God and the domain of darkness. This observation leads to the final feature of martyrdom useful for our general construal – martyrdom not only as a moment of climax, but also as a moment of clarification. As shown earlier, the example of the martyr challenges other believers to re-examine their commitment to Christ and deepen their dedication to Him. In light of our discussion above, martyrdom likely produces such an effect because believers perceive in the martyrdom event the stark contrast between good and evil, between darkness and light.

Consequently they are compelled to recognize the cosmic conflict underway and side with God in opposition to Satan and the world. Thus, all “gray zones” are removed, and areas of compromise with the world are revealed. In this way, the moment of climax becomes a moment of clarification for the believing observer – in the light of the martyrdom event he or she is able to better understand the nature of the cosmic conflict and his or her proper relation to it.

Martyrdom may benefit unbelieving observers in a similar way. They, too, can observe the bravery, integrity and virtue of the martyr, who is supernaturally enabled by God, in distinction to the cruelty, injustice and ineptitude of the persecutor. Thus, this moment of climax can serve as a moment of clarification for them as well. How effectively this experience turns their hearts to God, however, is more difficult to establish. Our examination failed to establish a solid connection between martyrdom and conversion. It appears that, although martyrdom provides a moment of clarification for saint and sinner alike, it is potentially more efficacious for the former than the latter.

In light of the material presented in this article I contend that the following construal can be helpful for grasping the essential nature of martyrdom: Martyrdom, in respect to its contribution to the plan of God, can be described as a moment of pre-eschatological climax or clarification in the ongoing struggle between the kingdoms of God and Satan, where the best and worst are brought out of participants in the event; as a point of crescendo in the musical score of salvation history, where the full vibrancy of each instrument is clearly heard; as a foretaste of the so-called “Great Divide,” where the dramatic polarization between good and evil takes place; and, consequently, as a “reality check” for observers or hearers of the event, reminding them that there is no middle ground between the kingdom of God and the domain of darkness.

11. Applications

The remaining matter to consider is the relevance of these findings for the contemporary evangelical church. Certainly, for those segments of the Body of Christ presently suffering persecution and undergoing martyrdom the application of this study is straightforward. Such believers can benefit from a biblical model of martyrdom for interpreting their experience, giving meaning to their suffering, inspiring endurance and appreciating the beauty of God's plan.

For the church that is suffering less, however, different applications can be suggested. Reflection on martyrdom has a multiplicity of benefits. It can inspire endurance not only for the ultimate sacrifice, but for the many smaller sacrifices Christians are called to make each day. It can forge unity between rival evangelical groups as we appreciate our common doctrinal heritage won and preserved for us by the martyrs' blood.

Martyrdom also plays a useful role in the perpetual tension between what one might call the "theology of creation" and the "theology of redemption." The "theology of creation" emphasizes unity and mutual respect between all people as creatures of one Creator, whereas the "theology of redemption" recognizes the dichotomy and inevitable conflict between the regenerate and unregenerate. The contemporary evangelical church appears at the present time to be moving toward a renewed emphasis on the doctrine of creation. This can be viewed as a welcome trend, since the doctrine of creation has not received sufficient attention in past generations. Yet a balance between the doctrines of creation and redemption must be maintained. Although believers may have much in common with the world at large, martyrdom reminds us that we are also engaged in an intense spiritual struggle with the forces of darkness that control this present world system and unregenerate people. No event more dramatically portrays this conflict than the martyr's death.

Possibly the most significant benefit is the check martyrdom provides on the relativistic tendencies prevailing in many societies today, and in certain segments of Christendom. In today's relativistic milieu, where flexibility, compromise and toleration are championed, martyrdom appears, at best, as an oddity and, at worst, as pathological rigidity. Eugene and Anita Weiner (1990:1) provide valuable insight into how martyrdom is likely perceived by many today:

In the modern Western world, the psychological climate discourages total commitment and martyrdom. Individuals willing to martyr themselves for a cause strike us as irrational and motivated by psychological problems... the individual who is irrevocably committed to particular convictions seems needlessly inflexible.

They relate the concern by some that behaviour patterns exhibited by martyrs are "dangerous to the democratic process which is based on a rational give and take and on a process of compromise" (1990:21).

In an interesting article in *Mennonite Life*, Melvin Goering (1992:9-15) expresses an opinion radically divergent from original Mennonite (Anabaptist) thinking about martyrdom during the Reformation period. He relates that in the past Mennonites staunchly held to a "two kingdoms" view, similar to what was described earlier in this article. Their proclamation and defence of the "truth" was uncompromising. Goering attributes this earlier dogmatic attitude to social/psychological factors such as social isolation, suspicion of authority and passion for personal piety at the expense of the greater social concern. He feels such thinking is outdated and inappropriate for today's Mennonite. There is a greater need now to learn how to be faithful "in the *midst of culture*" (1992:9). Goering feels that in the future martyrologies should promote "obedience with flexibility, beliefs without dogmatism, faithfulness within culture, ethical leadership within institutions, love and justice within social structures, conviction in the midst of ambiguity, dialogue without arrogance, care without condensation, openness without disintegration" (1992:14-15). Although there are positive elements in Goering's proposal, a concern arises about how far "beliefs without dogmatism" and "faithfulness within cultural" might be taken.

The dangers of relativism to conservative evangelical faith are clear: the compromise of essential truth and abandonment of vigorous evangelization for the sake of peaceful coexistence with dissenting groups. The attitude of believers in the Reformation period provides a stark contrast. Gregory (1999:436) notes that Reformation theologians were "horrified and disgusted" at the concept of religious toleration: "They *preferred* a world in which truth did battle... It is mistaken to think then they might have shelved their competing commitments to Christian truth for the sake of peaceful coexistence." Theologians of that time did not give "peaceful coexistence priority over God's truth" (1999:437).

Martyrdom, as traditionally understood and defended in this article, is antithetical to relativism. Martyrdom asserts, in the most dramatic way humanly possible, that absolute standards do exist, and that one can have the assurance of truth to such a degree that death appears a small price to pay in its defence.

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Towards a theology of “mission under the cross”:

A contribution from Germany by Karl Hartenstein

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Abstract

The influential German mission leader Karl Hartenstein (1894-1952) has developed a theology of mission under the cross which has gone largely unnoticed internationally. Suffering and martyrdom characterise the mission of the church which takes place in the interim between Christ's ascension and second coming. The cross is the sign of the hidden reign of Christ during that period of hostile onslaught between the times. The church is embattled and tempted to fall away, but has the promise of triumph if it remains faithful to Christ. Scripture, the sacraments and prayer are significant means to make the church persevere as a faithful witness to the end.

Keywords Mission theology, suffering, martyrdom, cross, salvation history, Christology, ecclesiology, Karl Hartenstein.

“There is a need in the Asian church to develop a ‘theology of suffering’ which the affluent western world does not fully understand,” the Korean Bong Rin Ro (1989:73) stated after a conference on “Christian Suffering in Asia”. Similarly the Romanian Josef Ton (1990:4) deplored the lack of a protestant theology of martyrdom. I agree that contemporary western theology and missiology show a glaring deficit on these issues. However, there are and were some “voices in the wilderness” (e.g. Vicedom 1963, Seitz 1965, Triebel 1988, Beyerhaus 1992, Penner 2004). Due to language barriers Ro and Ton were certainly not familiar with the German

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missiologist Karl Hartenstein (H 1952c:57), who had similarly called for “finding new forms of mission under the cross” and called it “the great task of mission at this time.”

In this essay I would like to describe the theological heritage of Hartenstein regarding suffering, persecution and martyrdom as a contribution to an ongoing discussion. Could it be that there is something to discover?

I will start with the significance of Hartenstein as a mission leader and missiologist, followed by six sections on his theology of martyrdom, closing with a section on the significance of this theology.

1. The significance of Hartenstein

Karl Hartenstein (1894-1952), once director of the Basel Mission (1926-1939), was one of the leaders in church and mission in the 20th century.¹ Together with his friend, professor Walter Freytag, he had a formative influence on a whole epoch of German missiology. His popular writings were widely read. He gained influence in the International Missionary Council (IMC) and the Ecumenical Movement through his participation in international mission conferences (1928-1952) and his travels as mission director to India, China and Ghana. Indications of his influence may be gained from the essential role he played in averting the state domination (*Gleichschaltung*) of protestant missions in Germany in 1933 after Nazi takeover, in the submission of a minority vote at the IMC Conference in Madras in 1938 and his influence on the “Stuttgart Confession of Guilt” in 1945.

“Salvation history” (*Heilsgeschichte*) is the foundation, the content and the overarching perspective of Hartenstein’s theology. In his early years he had focused on making Karl Barth’s dialectical theology for mission fruitful. After 1933, Hartenstein leaned more strongly towards his teacher Karl Heim, and thereby towards his spiritual heritage in the pietism of the province of Württemberg in Germany. He developed his theology of “mission with a view of the end”, building on salvation historical theology from Bengel to Auberlen. This theology is characterized by regarding the time between Jesus’ ascension and return as an “Interim” in which the church will witness and suffer. Hartenstein found himself encouraged

¹ See Sauer 1994:18-23 and Schwarz 1980:19-68 for sources and secondary literature to part 1.

exegetically mainly by Oscar Cullmann and also by Ethelberth Stauffer's New Testament Theology. The influence of Hartenstein's teacher Adolph Schlatter has not yet been sufficiently examined.

Hartenstein's literary work bears a fragmentary character. One reason was his early death at the age of 58. Then he always focused on the tasks at hand, which were preaching and counselling most of the time, and this only produced literary short forms. Hartenstein never found time to put in writing comprehensively his salvation historical mission theology. Its basic structure, however, remained the same throughout his ministry.

1.1 The place of martyrdom in the theology of Hartenstein

Suffering is the red thread throughout Hartenstein's theology. It is one of the signs of the church during the Interim, along with mission and unity (*passio, missio, unio*). Hartenstein speaks more often about “suffering” than about “martyrdom”. However, most of the time, martyrdom as the pinnacle of suffering is in view. Hartenstein's theology of martyrdom has its basis in scripture. The various contexts, such as the situation of the Third Reich in Germany and the realities of the worldwide church only provided the occasions to voice his thoughts repeatedly. There is only one publication by Hartenstein that includes the term “suffering” in its title, and it reads translated: “The mystery of the suffering of the church” (H 1936a). It is a popular booklet and does not exhaust the width of Hartenstein's thinking on the subject. Other essential statements on the subject can be found in various writings: in his published sermons and Bible studies on the prophetic passages of the Bible, foremost of the book of Revelation, the Prophet Daniel, and Matthew 24-25. Suffering in missionary work finds mention in Hartenstein's contribution on missionary ethics and in conference reports. When writing for churches he focuses on warning against an unrealistic view of the endtimes, which would claim an escape from suffering for the church. Thus, suffering and martyrdom have a foundational place in the theology of Hartenstein and are far more than marginal issues.²

² See the 38 writings in the list of references, selected from the body of his 400 publications.

1.2 The reception of Hartenstein's thoughts in mission theology

Hartenstein's colleagues and students loyally held to the salvation historical theology which he had conveyed to them. However, after the death in 1959 of his friend Walter Freytag, who had promoted this theological approach in the academic world, a paradigm shift occurred in Germany as well as in the ecumenical movement. It was particularly disciples of Freytag who universalised salvation historical theology contrary to the intentions of Hartenstein and Freytag (Bosch 1991:392). Thus the leading paradigm in mission theology of the time became outmoded almost overnight and was largely forgotten.

However, a line of tradition remained which embraced Hartenstein's heritage and positively developed it (Beyerhaus, Schwarz, Rennstich). Particularly the evangelical missionary movement emerging after the abovementioned paradigm shift has in a way carried on the salvation historical tradition. Concerning the significance of suffering in the theology of Hartenstein there is great unity in secondary literature. However, hardly anyone has dealt with it. It is only Schwarz (1980) who relatively briefly deals with the subject in his comprehensive presentation of Hartenstein's theology and then Rennstich (1991) who largely emphasises the context of "*Kirchenkampf*" (the theological power struggle with a heretic theology in line with Nazism).

The present study thus forms the first independent systematical examination on suffering and martyrdom according to Hartenstein.

Why now do I think it is justified to remind of Hartenstein in view of the evangelical search for a theology of martyrdom? There are several reasons. Firstly it is because Hartenstein has proven himself in the midst of adversity and suffering and in missionary work. Moreover it is because Hartenstein gives suffering a central place in his theology. Finally – and this is most important for the acceptance of his input – it is the wide convergence in paradigms between Hartenstein and the evangelical movement today.

1.3 Aspects of a theology of martyrdom according to Hartenstein

In the following, Hartenstein's theology of suffering and martyrdom will be developed under six aspects: (1) the framework of salvation history; (2) its formation by christology; (3) the antagonistic

background; (4) the relation to mission; (5) the link with ecclesiology; and (6) the pastoral responsibility. Some overlapping is unavoidable as the same reality is regarded from different angles. I will, however, try to focus on the essentials of each aspect. To some degree, Hartenstein will also be positioned in the concert of other voices on martyrdom.

2. The framework of salvation history

It is essential to understand Hartenstein’s view of salvation history in order to properly interpret his theology of martyrdom. All further aspects operate within this framework. One initial question tackled in this section will be: “Why does God allow martyrdom?”.

2.1 Salvation history and world history

Hartenstein differentiates salvation history and world history. Salvation history is what God does in world history to save the world. Not all of world history is salvation history. A prophetic view of all of world history from its end, from the perspective of God’s victory, enables us to grasp the unity, the meaning and the objective of world history. The decisive turning point of history is the first coming of Christ. According to the New Testament salvation history can only be properly understood from this its centre.

What is the place of the church in salvation history? The period between Christ’s ascension and the second coming is an “Interim”. This Interim is “the period of the passion of the church, during which it enters the peoples and is ejected by them step by step up to the last great tribulation” (H 1951a:7-8).

The Interim after the period of the revelation in Jesus and the apostles is a time poor in revelation. By way of analogy, a period rich in revelation “from Abraham up to the exile of the people of Israel” was followed by a time of little revelation up to the coming of Jesus. Similarly, a third period of revelation will be ushered in by his second coming. This time of revelation is in evidence in John’s book of Revelation and in the book of Daniel, both of which were written for a time destitute of revelation, and therefore are valid for us too (H 1936b:17). Hartenstein now endeavours to periodise this Interim in terms of a theology of history, an undertaking that takes him beyond the generally accepted views found in the salvation-historical school of Cullmann (Schwarz 1980:121).

Hartenstein divides church history into three periods using the criterion of the relationship between church and state: (1) the lack of power of the early church as it battled with the different powers of its time, (2) the Constantinian convergence of state and church, and (3) the dis-entanglement of this synthesis, which began with the Reformation (Schwarz 1980:114). For this philosophy of history Hartenstein is indebted to the Swabian Pietists and their interpretation of Revelation 13:3 which tells of a fatal wound of the beast, which is healed. To the world powers Christianisation constitutes a severe wound; when it is healed the church will “once again, as in its earliest existence, become the suffering, hated and ostracised church.” The suffering of the early church was only a “limited preview and demonstration” of what was to come at the end of time. For this reason Hartenstein can recognise his own time in the scriptural references to the persecuted church (H 1937a:10,4; cf. Beyerhaus 1975:12,45,52).

All the “maturing of the political powers is in accordance with God’s will.” Since they also are in his hands he can stop the times of harassment from following one another seamlessly in the last epoch.” Time and again God delays the terrible happenings for a moment, so that the believers are given time to catch their breath, so to speak” (H 1954:128f,80). This interesting insight on the part of Hartenstein would explain why times of persecution come in waves.

2.2 The interim period as a time of suffering

According to Revelation 12-19 the real purpose of the interim period between ascension and second coming is to be found in *martyria*, “the testimony of the church in life and in death” (H 1951b:12). In my view, Hartenstein’s conviction that the Interim has “its own purpose in salvation history” (H 1952a:48) must be extended to include the martyrdom that takes place in that time. In fact he says, “it (i.e., martyrdom, CS) advances God’s plan ... Even today having martyrs in her midst constitutes the deepest strength of the church” (H 1954:74-75). The church is led through deep valleys because the Interim is characterised by the “hidden dominion of Christ”. The Lord, the head, is in heaven; his body, the church, however, is on earth. Up to the time of his coming in power, he will remain “Lord of the poor and defenceless church, just as he himself was poor and defenceless in his life and suffering” (H 1951b:13-14; cf. Beyerhaus 1975:10).

On the basis of his salvation history paradigm, Hartenstein does not tire to take a position over against the teaching of a rapture of the believers before the tribulation based on Revelation 12:5, by emphasising, “The church will not be spared by being carried off, but will have to battle and persevere right to the end, it will have to undergo all the labour pains for the new world and the kingdom of God, to drink the cup of tribulation to the last dregs” (H 1951a:19; cf. 1952b; 1952d). According to the rejected rapture teaching the church will be carried away already at the first invisible return of Christ before the great tribulation, while it is the second coming of Christ which is visible and leads to judgement. According to Hartenstein this teaching is contrary to Scripture and the mainstream of church tradition and leads to “an enthusiastic by-passing of the cross,” a criticism which can also be levelled against some of contemporary literature about the end times such as Hal Lindsey’s works (H 1952b:13,21; cf. Bosch 1991:141).

2.3 The eschatological culmination of salvation history

In Hartenstein’s view eschatology and salvation history are not synonymous. Rather, eschatology is the last chapter of salvation history, in which suffering escalates, the Lord returns for judgement and establishes his kingdom visibly. Hartenstein complains that the no-man’s land of eschatology has become the playground for enthusiasts, since the main-line churches have “in no way fully appropriated the testimony concerning the *eschatos*, the returning Lord, which we find in the New Testament” (H 1952d:18).³

The more the development of the world progresses, and the closer the hour of the anti-Christ approaches, the more the church is hated and persecuted (H 1954:74; 1936b:71). However, the church does not stare in a mesmerized freeze at the terrors of the end time, but awaits the coming of the Lord. Hartenstein takes on the task, for which he had called when commenting on a statement of the World Council of Churches, that is, to elaborate more thoroughly what the returning Lord means to the persecuted church (H 1952:52). According to his view of the end, the church is carried off towards him in his second coming, so as to parade into the world with him and establish the

³ The mainline churches usually limit their teaching to the articles on judgement, the resurrection of the dead and the completion of all things.

visible dominion of Christ with him. As a result “the church of Christ, persecuted, downtrodden, hated and burnt ... throughout the millennia” becomes “the great, last blessing of God for his world” (H 1954:179f). Just as the returning Lord is the consolation of his church, so, inversely, he is also the cause of its persecution. In as far as Christian faith is not a faith in the returning Lord, the church will not be persecuted either (H 1951a:18).

All those who, like the souls of the martyrs of Revelation 6:9-11, cry out “for God’s just retribution for the excessive injustice that has been meted out to the church” are called upon to patiently await God’s judgement (H 1954:74). This is so because “we cannot endure suffering and affliction except by learning once more ... that the mystery of the history of the world and its peoples does not end in darkness but before the judgement seat of the mighty God” (H 1935c:10). Those who are persecuted for his name’s sake are consoled by Jesus in Matthew 10:42: “Your reward in heaven is great.” Here the word reward refers to something quite different from what is criticised in self-righteous legalistic religions. Reward out of the hands of God is a sign of his faithfulness, and is given out of grace for the sake of Christ; it is not earned (H 1935a:7; cf. Ton 1997).

2.4 Conclusion

By means of the above insight Hartenstein has answered the question concerning the reward for suffering within the understanding of the Reformation. At the same time he remains silent on the issue of the place of the martyrs in heaven. Why does God permit martyrdom? Following on the above train of thought the answer could be: Because at this moment in time Christ’s reign is hidden. Moreover, God allows martyrdom in order to promote his plan and in order for his church to witness to him in it. A critical reflection is in order here, namely that Hartenstein sometimes tends to link salvation history “a nuance too directly to the end” (Freytag 1953:3), and perhaps to reduce history too quickly to a history of decline and disaster. However, his thinking is not oriented to the gnostic and speculative, but oriented towards affording comfort and giving direction (Schwarz 1980:110;87). For this reason one cannot simply dismiss his whole design as “extreme eschatologization”, as Bosch (1991:504) has endeavoured to do in the case of Freytag.

3. Christology - the most formative factor

Now that the salvation-historical framework has been sketched, the discussion must necessarily focus on the christological aspect on account of its formative importance. This aspect includes the questions how the suffering of Christians is linked to that of their Lord, or, in to what extent it is different. In reflecting on this, the place of martyrdom in discipleship can be ascertained. Continuity between the suffering of Christ and the church will be traced on three counts; then, in a fourth section, the discontinuity will be reflected upon.

3.1 Christ as the real cause for the suffering

Although on occasion Hartenstein uses the concept “suffering” for all creaturely suffering, he almost exclusively narrows it down to suffering “only for the sake of Jesus Christ.” Christ is the real trigger of all hostility. “The clearer the church’s knowledge of Christ and testimony to him, the more sure will it need to reckon with the opposition, contradiction and hatred of the Antichrist” (H 1951a:15). That means that for Hartenstein, suffering and martyrdom are clearly christologically focussed, and this cause and motivation for suffering and martyrdom must be clearly distinguished from other causes or motivations.

3.2 Conformity with Christ

Christ’s prayer in John 17:18 (alternatively John 20:21), “As you have sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world” are, to Hartenstein, “the *Magna Charta* of the passion of the church on her journey from the cross to the kingdom” (H 1936a:3; Schwarz 1980:198). However, this conformity with Christ does not refer only to his way to the cross, but also to his exaltation. “To suffer with Christ means to be exalted to glory with him” (H 1936a:4). The statement that “The path of the body and the members is no other than that of the head” (H 1948a:45) can be elaborated both in terms of *theologia crucis* (theology of the cross) and *theologia gloriae* (theology of glory). Indeed, the unity of the two is the hallmark of Hartenstein’s missiological thinking (H 1952c:61). Being conformed to Christ in a process of sanctification is what Hartenstein sees as the purpose of suffering for the individual. It leads to a deepened relationship with Christ (H 1936a:13). Beside the similarity between the modes of sending, the words of John 17:18 “just as” also point to

similarity of intention (Schwarz 1980:199). In the end the task of mission as a whole is nothing other “than a continuation” of the work of Christ “in the medium of his messengers” (H 1933:32).

3.3 The cross as sign of the hidden reign of Christ

Since Christ’s reign remains hidden in the time of the Interim, the cross remains the sign for conformity with Christ. Provided that the more encompassing conformity with Christ is not lost sight of one can speak of a *missiologia crucis* in Hartenstein’s work (Schwarz 1980:198). The report which Hartenstein gave on the International Mission Conference in 1954 is based on the theme, “The Lord will reign from the tree (cross)”. The cross is the “sign of the seeming victory of the world over the suffering and dying God.” However, “it is really the sign that the real victory is God’s,” just as, “in reality God reigns over the powers of history which are pitted against him, although this is not visible yet ... The kingdom is there, but it is still ‘*tectum sub cruce*’ (hidden under the cross)”. Seen in this way, the cross is “simultaneously the sign of God’s coming victory” (H 1952c:67;61-62). However, the cross may not be enthusiastically bypassed in the way in which this happens in the teaching on the rapture (H 1952b:21).

3.4 Differentiation between Christ and the church

Having established the link between the suffering of Christ and his followers, the difficult task of differentiating between the two must be tackled. Following Peter Beyerhaus, the suffering that generates salvation must be clearly distinguished from suffering that mediates salvation. Here Beyerhaus develops clearer concepts than Hartenstein. He draws a distinction between events that are primary, once-for-all, non-recurrent, and constitutive for salvation, and those that are secondary, always new, without being constitutive but mediating salvation. Within these limits the Christian martyr’s death could be seen to have a vicarious function (Beyerhaus 1996:715). While Christ’s suffering creates salvation, the suffering of his servant can only pass on and witness to this salvation. That is also how Hartenstein sees it: in their affliction the members of the church of Christ “witness to the suffering of Jesus Christ for their sake but in their own bodies, and for him” (H 1941:348). Mainly on the strength of the key reference in Colossians 1:24 Hartenstein retains the possibility of vicarious suffering (cf. Beyerhaus 1987:170). He says,

“We may not give in to the pressure ... Only in this manner can the terrible burden of suffering, which still has to be borne for Christ, be borne vicariously by the church as expiation” (H 1951a:20)⁴. From this exceptional insight, bridges can be drawn to Bonhoeffer (1956:66).

3.5 Conclusion

Hartenstein’s approach is characterised by a differentiated christological understanding of suffering and martyrdom. The suffering and martyrdom of the Christian is substantially shaped by the suffering of Christ; it is differentiated from it solely by the fact that only the suffering of Christ can create salvation.⁵ In following Christ, suffering has its definite place; there is no such thing as following Christ without suffering. Concepts and terminology helpful to achieve this differentiation have been more precisely developed by Beyerhaus.

4. The antagonistic background

From this point onwards the sequence in which the different aspects are taken up does not indicate their priority. However, they have been arranged as moving “from the outside to the inside”, from the enemies, to the mission, to the equipping of the church. The antagonistic aspect includes the question concerning the reasons for suffering and persecution and their origin. Here we must also take cognisance of the role of the invisible world.

4.1 The basic antagonistic trend of history⁶

Besides mission and passion, the great theme of church history is battle: “The battle between light and darkness, between faith and unbelief, between Christ and the antichrist” (H 1954:124). Hartenstein has deduced this view of history from the book of Revelation and takes it to be the view of the whole Bible. In as far as it is heathen and fallen, the world stands under the judgement of God. It is in the hands of an Evil One, who hates God. Consequently the world decides

⁴ The German original reads: “Nur so kann die entsetzliche Leidenslast, die noch zu tragen ist für Christus, von der Gemeinde stellvertretend als Sühne getragen werden.”

⁵ This might be the point where Hartenstein’s position is most clearly distinguished from the understanding of martyrdom in liberation theology, which is in danger of reducing Christ to simply a model to follow.

⁶ This terminology is used by Schwarz 1980:117.

against God ever more strongly and openly. In his time God will put an end to the dominions and powers that oppose him, and display his new world as the victor (H 1940:50ff). Of particular interest is the characterisation of the Interim as a “time of maturing of evil.” “The gospel always elicits both, the Yes and the No to Christ” (H 1951b:19). Because of this, history becomes a “desert” to the church, by which all churches today are equally challenged (H 1954:155f). “Missionary work in Asia and Africa, in its young churches, is confronted politically and culturally with exactly the same questions as the West is, namely the questions of church and state, the question of nationalism, and the question of an emerging, militant anti-Christianity” (H 1951b:8+6). The de-Christianisation, particularly that of the West, shows up the same trends everywhere although its escalation varies.

4.2 The ones fighting in the battle

In the battle against the church “more is at stake than bad thoughts or confused people ... whom one can enlighten and educate” (H 1940:51). Rather, everything that happens on earth has its “counter-image and effect in heaven.” The Evil One, in whose hands the world is clasped, hates God and his Christ. According to Revelation 12:12 because of his inability to prevent the success of Christ’s mission, Satan is obsessed with only one aim and that is to destroy the church of Jesus Christ on earth completely in the Interim. However, he does not succeed, as he is a “vanquished enemy”. Although he employs “deep guile and great might” (Luther), he is really fighting a losing battle since the victory has already been won (H 1954:117,119,123). Still, the missionary, above all others, has to be highly alert and prepared for battle, because he is the “favourite target for attack by the demonic powers” (H 1934:231). This observation prompts the question concerning the causes of suffering.

4.3 Reasons for hostility

A difference should be made between the confusingly many reasons which do not have a specific Christian content, and those that are really theological. The first named will only be mentioned in passing.

When the churches utilise worldly forms of power, blame for offence aroused must remain with them (H 1937c:6f). However, the accusation that all human misery can be attributed to the church is unjustifiable (H 1951a:18). Christians share the suffering caused by

illness and wars with all humans, and this suffering missionaries are prepared to take upon themselves for the sake of their commission (H 1936a:5). Equally, religious absolutism does not hit Christians only, but they are always part of its victims.

There are two theological reasons for the suffering of Christians in the world which Hartenstein examines most intensely. In the first place he cites the worldwide Christian brotherhood. "If a nation considers itself to be the pinnacle of all that is worthwhile in humanity and worships itself, the fact that there is a people drawn from all nations, a brotherhood that explodes the boundaries of the totalitarian state and confesses the unity of the church of Christ in all nations is unbearable." Secondly, there is intolerable offence in the eschatological message concerning the "last judgement and the return of the Lord" as well as in the testimony that "Jesus Christ is the one and only Lord of his church", since they are linked to the question of power. The state finds itself confronted with a different authority, and one that hedges in and relativises its own claim to power and reminds it of its transience (H 1948a:50).

In the end, all reasons for hostility can be reduced to the one, namely the testimony to truth. "It is precisely this, being a witness, that the world cannot stomach. It cannot endure the eminence of the witnessing person, who comes with the authority of eternity. No less can it endure the lowliness of the witnessing person, who displays nothing that can impress the world of religions" (H 1949:227).

4.4 The weapons

In order not to steal the thunder of the last section, a sketch of an evangelical spirituality, only a few indications will be given here. Christians do not respond to the "abysmal hatred" of the powers of this world that find expression in persecution, boycott and even slaughter with the same means (H 1954:126,133). Their weapons are of a spiritual kind. Besides an overcoming love and intercession for its persecutors, its principal weapon is willingness to suffer. The church can only survive "if, in determined opposition to these powers, it is prepared to carry all of the suffering" (H 1936c:20). At the IMC conference in Willingen, Norman Goodall (1953:60) pinpointed the reason in that the totalitarian state makes provision for every kind of opposition, except the readiness to suffer. This creates space in their system for Christians. A point from francophone missiologist Marc

Spindler (1967:188-194) could be added here: “Suffering and martyrdom unmask the true nature of the world.”⁷

4.5 Summary

Hartenstein agrees with Evangelicals on the demonological realism with which he views the world. The power encounter takes place on two levels: the visible and the invisible. Different reasons for the persecution of Christians are profoundly determined by the antagonistic basic tendency of history. Therefore it is no surprise that today, just as in days gone by, nationalism, religions and ideologies are identified as opponents of Christians. In the end, the issue is that of truth. The weapon of Christians is their willingness to endure suffering. Schwarz (1980:122) criticised Hartenstein’s strong emphasis on the antagonistic aspect as being “nothing less than an apocalyptic oversimplification.” In response the question could be asked, “Does a situation of persecution not in fact call for an interpretation of the hostility which is experienced with such vehemence?”

5. The relation to mission

The question of the link between Christian witness and suffering, and also the question concerning the fruit of martyrdom, takes us to the fourth dimension, that is, the relation of the above to mission. Hartenstein sees mission as an act of witness in the world, and as “the advance guard of the church of God in the world”, and is in its mission that the church must particularly be prepared to suffer and to die. On the mission field the suffering church preempts what will be true for the church in the sending country (H 1935b:3; 1937d:193; 1951b:24; 1936c:21).

5.1 The link between mission and suffering

For Hartenstein mission and suffering have several links which stem from salvation history. Since mission is “the central salvation-historical purpose” of the Interim, mission must be “engaged in with one’s whole life, even martyrdom” (H 1951b:18). It follows that suffering is the *modus* of mission (cf. Bosch 1991:121). Secondly, witness itself, the *martyria*, can be a cause of martyrdom (Beyerhaus

⁷ In his description of mission as a battle for the salvation of the world, Spindler gives space for the topic of martyrdom.

1975:53). In the third place suffering is the acid test for the genuineness of mission. “Missionary work only proves its authenticity where its energies mature under suffering, where the focus is not on the success of the action but on the fruit of the passion” (H1932:8; 1951a:20; cf. Beyerhaus 1975:135). In the fourth instance suffering and martyrdom can advance mission. “It is the catastrophes of world history, in particular, that supply vehicles for the progress of mission.” It is here that God’s “hidden grace” is shown (H 1952c:64). The fifth link is that mission is carried out in spite of suffering. “The mission is valid for all times ... no event in history can repeal it.” The reason for this is that the coming of the end is linked to the completion of the mission (Matt 24:14) (H 1952c:64; 1951a:20). The sixth variant is that mission can come to a violent end through martyrdom. According to Revelation 11:1-14 the antichrist terminates missionary activity “in the final hour of decision” by killing the witnesses. However, with the second coming of Christ mission and suffering enter into a seventh relationship: mission can go on free of suffering. Hartenstein believes: “The millennium is the hour of the great mission of God’s church and of its Lord ... Now it has an unimpeded access to all peoples of the earth.” (H1954:174). This point is probably the most contested,⁸ but to Hartenstein it is an incentive to remain faithful to mission in the difficult time of the Interim. Even without this last point the aforementioned have their own significance.

5.2 Limits to missionary methods

Christ sends his messengers “to carry the cross behind him on the roads of the heathen” (1936a:6). The fact that mission is shaped by the cross limits the methods it will use: “Only defenceless mission can evangelise successfully” (H 198a:15). Hartenstein offers several points to bear this out. First and foremost, for us the cross has become the sign of complete defencelessness. In the second place the “inviting, pleading request of the servant for the master precludes any attempt at violent conversion” (H 1933:38). Thirdly, mission today is in essence similar to the ministry of the early church in the first century, “which was an unassuming inroad” (H 1936c:7). In the fourth place the great misery surrounding the conversion of the Germanic tribes teaches us that the commission must be carried out “without it being mingled in any way with state power” if it is to be accorded

⁸ Hartenstein himself used to reject the millenium in his earlier exposition of Revelation (1940).

credence (H 1938a:7). Finally, witness to Christ towards adherents of Islam in particular, as a post- and anti-Christian religion, demands willingness to suffer. Here Hartenstein follows Luther, who recognised that Islam cannot “be overcome by means of human power.” For this reason “Christ needs martyrs” (H 1937b:79,18f). It follows that mission work must prepare the “young churches” for suffering (1952e:29ff). For the missionary this means that he/she must share even the deepest suffering with the local church (H 1939:42).

5.3 Contours of a missionary ethic

Carefully and repeatedly Hartenstein endeavoured to establish a “missionary ethic”, a description of missionary service from a spiritual perspective. Besides faith and obedience, suffering or the readiness to suffer is “an essential mark of missionary lifestyle” (H 1932:105). This is because the witnesses are not postmen who, having delivered a message which does not touch them, simply disappear from the scene. Instead, they identify with their Lord, whose message they are called to proclaim, in the whole of their being to the extent of even risking their lives (H 1948a:44). The indissoluble bond between “word and walk” is demonstrated by the New Testament concept of *martyrein* in its dual reference to witnessing or confessing on the one hand, and suffering on the other. The walk of the missionary in its widest connotation is not only a “precondition and fruit of the proclamation of the word”, but can in itself become a medium of proclamation (H 1934:237,243). When defining the relationship between “walk” and “talk” in this manner martyrdom can be considered a possible medium of proclamation.

The decisive “master image of all Christian witnessing” is the apostle Paul. His conversion and calling were linked with an announcement of his coming suffering. His suffering “is a means by which Christ, whom he preaches, reveals himself” (H 1949:225,227,238f). He had come to accept fully that “precisely in his weakness he was strong” (H 1948a:45). In the same way the missionary is not “a hero, but a weak servant, upheld only by the word and by grace” (H 1933:34). The specific suffering of the missionary of having to do without many things and people, is a preparation for possible martyrdom. Further details of an “evangelical spirituality”, in which Hartenstein (1934:229f) qualifies missionary service with terminology of military service, will be elaborated below.

5.4 The missionary fruit of martyrdom

Tertullian’s words “*semen est sanguis christianorum*” (Apology §50) are often popularly cited as “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church”, sometimes even with a slightly triumphalistic undertone. However, is that assertion generally true? Is it always the case that the church grows when Christians meet a martyr’s death?

Hartenstein would probably respond by citing the word about the dying of the grain of wheat which only through its death produces fruit (John 12:24) (H 1936c:21; 1932:7; 1938b:10). This “mysterious saying which Jesus gave us about himself is, in the first instance, concerned with Jesus himself.” However, “it is also valid as a model for his church, and in particular for the messengers, called to go and sow the seed” (H 1941:2). Whether fruit will grow from that seed is not our doing. “Whether word and walk become signposts and witness to Christ is his doing, dependent completely and exclusively on his justifying and graceful action” (H 1934:240). Hartenstein is making this statement with clear reference to the Lutheran Augsburg Confession. This statement can be understood to include martyrdom too. Through God’s grace it becomes seed, not through the working of some natural law.⁹

It is only in the hindsight of history that fruit can be discerned, something that Hartenstein does several times. “If a church, closely knit together under a totalitarian regime, held fast to the word, and in its witness remained valiant and unyielding in discipleship even at the price of life itself, then a generation that has been deeply shaken senses that, in truth, a power is at work here, that cannot be acquired by human means nor be overcome by any temptation” (H 1948a:49; cf. 1939:36; 1936c:21). At the end of his life Hartenstein again made a pointed summary of this matter: “The church will have to tread the path of passion, but in this way gain its unconquerable spiritual power, possibly the only authority in this world. This is because in the kingdom of God the dead are more powerful than the living. All those

⁹ He refers to the phrase of the Augsburg Confession “*ubi et quando deo visum est*” (§5). When it comes to the hope that the world might be transformed directly by the witness of suffering of the church, as voiced in the World Council of Churches in 1952, Hartenstein is even more critical. He emphasises that in comparison to the early church, martyrdom has “become invisible” and put “in a leveling twilight”, which makes it hard to distinguish it from political resistance (H 1952a:43,52). The same development has been diagnosed by Moltmann (1989:220).

who become subjected to the hatred of the world and endure prison, agony, torture and death for the sake of Christ are the most fruitful witnesses of Christ. This is so since from their lives, most of all, the flame of faith and the searing light of hope will be lit” (H 1951a:19; cf. Beyerhaus 1992 emphasising the fruit of martyrdom).

5.5 Summary

Beyond the evangelical assertion that suffering is bound to arise as a result of Christian witness and that the faith must be confessed in suffering (Rom 1989:48), Hartenstein finds further linkages between mission and suffering. Among others, suffering can be a mode of mission, a means for establishing its authenticity, and a vehicle of mission, but suffering can also prevent mission. Consequently Hartenstein emphasises that mission is defenceless, and points to the insoluble relationship between life and witness of the missionary. Hartenstein does not understand the missionary fruit of martyrdom as coming about by an automatic mechanism, but as grace from God. We can discern it in history time and again. Once again, Hartenstein’s responses are formed by his view of salvation history and gain perspective by means of it.

6. The link with ecclesiology

In evangelical statements on suffering, persecution and martyrdom, ecclesiology usually is not well developed, which is a traditional weakness in many evangelical documents. The connection forged by Hartenstein between ecclesiology and missiology makes it desirable to devote a section of its own to this aspect. This will also facilitate a better understanding of the following section concerning the responsibility of church leadership.

According to Hartenstein the church of Jesus Christ is “the centre of his reign on earth,” the agency of his continuing mission (H 1951b:14). He emphasises that the individual witness does not stand there alone in suffering, but always suffers as a member of the body of Christ and is strengthened by the body (H 1948a:48; 1947:12).¹⁰ In his interpretation of the book of Revelation Hartenstein’s view of the church is focused on suffering. It is suitable for structuring this section: (1) The *ecclesia militans* is kept safe in

¹⁰ Beyerhaus (1992:169) adds a complementary truth: The blessing bestowed on the one suffering benefit the whole body.

suffering, and (2) is one with the *ecclesia triumphans*. (3) While a part of the church falls away; (4) triumph has been promised to the persecuted church (H 1940:47-50).

6.1 The church as *ecclesia militans* - the church in battle

In this matter two statements need to be made. The first is: “There is no church apart from the *ecclesia militans*.” A church that does not “fight” is dead (H 1951a:14). Now that the era of the state church has irrevocably come to an end, the minority character of the church such as in the times of primitive Christianity must again be understood. I think Hartenstein’s description of the church as “a colony of the new world in the old, transient world” (H 1951b:6) is a suitable definition of their relation. Secondly, this embattled church is kept safe on its “path through the depths” by its head (H 1936b:131; cf. section 5). “He is with her in all her fear” (H 1952b:21,29). The book of Revelation counts on the fact that “the church of Christ will not be overcome, even by the gates of hell” (H 1940:47). Looking back in 1948, Hartenstein can say: Some individuals became unfaithful, “but the church as a whole has been kept and carried through safely by the presence of her Lord” (H 1948a:48).

6.2 The unity of *ecclesia militans* and *ecclesia triumphans*

The *ecclesia militans* has its place in the world “but she has a hidden door to eternity.” Not only believers who are currently alive are members of the church of Jesus Christ, “but also the martyrs and those who have already completed the race.” The Apocalypse envisions that simultaneously with the terrifying events on earth “the song of praise of those who have been made perfect (Heb 12:23) rings out ... The church down here on earth and the church of those made perfect beyond” belong together inseparably (H 1940:48f). *Ecclesia militans* and *ecclesia triumphans* are an indivisible unity.

6.3 *Ecclesia apostata* - the church that has fallen away

However, the book of Revelation also knows the church as “rotten and degenerate”, as “prostitute or whore,” which, in biblical imagery stands for “falling away and unfaithfulness to the true God”

(H 1940:49; 1954:158). Similarly, Hartenstein interprets this to be “Christianity that has again reverted to the world, the church that is totally immersed in the ways of the world.” He does this with trembling, and without immediately identifying this fallen-away church with some concrete institution. Instead, this leads him to a self-critical and penitent attitude and an alertness to the dangers of falling away.

Hartenstein holds that the church in its history has twice chosen paths that lead it astray, namely the state church in the East and the Roman Catholic church state in the West. Since the Protestant church has also developed into a state church and one of the civic institutions, it is also exposed to the fatal danger of mixing up the kingdoms. This is a danger threatening even the smallest sect. This insight does not lead Hartenstein to leave the state church (*Volkskirche*), whose days he regards as numbered anyway, but to remain on high alert on the road to the alternative, namely a church of believers. “As soon as the state or the powers that be want her to surrender everything, body, soul and spirit, she must continue on her own path silently, alone under the cross with her Lord and trusting in the promise that she will be shown the way home” (H 1954:157-164).¹¹

6.4 Promises made to the *ecclesia triumphans*

While judgement awaits the apostate church, the suffering church receives the “promise that today and even more tomorrow it will be the triumphant church” (H 1940:50). However, over her “ministry of tears and suffering, joy and glory shine out, such as the world does not know” (H 1936c:22). Further promises of triumph, such as the expectation of the returning Lord, the prospect of reigning with him and the promised reward have already been dealt with in connection with eschatology.

¹¹ This could be developed further, in interpreting Revelation 17,6 and 18,24 in Hartenstein’s spirit, even though he does not do so in his exposition. The “whore drunk by the blood of the saints” then could be interpreted as a worldly church which in union with the global power has herself becomes a persecutor of true believers. But even then God is not losing control of the reigns. The schism of the church is ordered by God for its sifting (H 1936b:132).

7. The pastoral responsibility

Finally, questions that arise out of the responsibilities of pastoral care and church leadership are taken up: How can churches be armed for suffering theologically and in practice? Why should suffering be endured? Hartenstein’s exposition of scripture is firmly oriented towards pastoral concerns (Schwarz 1980:27,76ff). For instance, his response to the doctrine of the rapture is quite pastoral, as he rightly recognises that it is an important task for our preaching “to take up the real concerns of the church querying the meaning of [our] time and the purpose of history. In this way the church will be put in a position to bear and overcome even the most horrendous events that may come” (H 1948b:128).

Hartenstein’s call for an “evangelical spirituality” supplies headings for this section. “There is a need for ‘an evangelical spirituality’, in which an attitude of prayer and of daily dialogue with scripture determines the inner person and all of his or her doings, which is not their own achievement but the obedience of faith” (H 1934:244).

7.1 Comfort afforded by scripture and the sacraments

Foremost among the pastoral tasks, in Hartenstein’s view, stands an interpretation of scripture, which prepares and strengthens the church “in the battle between the spirits and in the suffering, which awaits us all” (H 1954:28). For him the book of Revelation, in particular, is a “book of preparation”, because it deals with the Interim (:30,37). Specially in the second part one finds “the really strong, mighty, comforting thoughts and insights for the church of God” (:113). He is pained that “throughout the centuries this book, Revelation, has been hidden.” This justifies his impatience: “Out into the open with this book. The church is to be sustained by it on its long journey” (:192). At the same time Hartenstein deliberately abstains from all interpretation of the book of Revelation in terms of the present, because it is not “an apocalyptic timetable” (H 1940:9; 1954:26). Whoever wishes to do as he does, that is, to try to understand this book in the overall context of the Bible, “will also learn how to see the present in its light – without any further comment” (H 1940:9). For him, in the Old Testament it is particularly the book of Daniel that contains “important insights for the present hour of the church”

(H 1936b:8). Over against this the book of Job does not yet say the last word concerning the puzzling affliction of suffering; rather it points to what the New Testament church now knows (H 1942b:18ff). By way of contrast, the Psalms are a useful school of prayer, a contention taken up in the section on prayer (H 1957:70). Hartenstein's preference for the prophetic books differs from an enthusiastic interpretation of the scriptures in that he reads the biblical books within the context of the Bible as a whole (H 1952b:28). He places individual verses into the context of the salvation history of the whole Bible. If one were to ask Hartenstein for that basic ration of scriptural teaching for times of suffering that every Christian should have internalised he could well enumerate the following: "The coming of the Lord, victory over the demons, the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth, judgement and the new heaven and earth" (H 1954:168).

Another tonic to invigorate one in times of suffering are the sacraments, according to Hartenstein. Equipping the "younger churches" includes particularly "how to live and survive on the word of God and the sacraments even under a totalitarian regime" (H 1952e:31). The regular celebration of Holy Communion grew to be of particular importance to Hartenstein. As a member of the hierarchy in the church in Württemberg he took pains to evoke a deeper understanding of Holy Communion and helped to introduce a new liturgy for its celebration. In his exposition of the book of Revelation he reminds us that the one who overcomes in Revelation 12:11 does so "by the blood of the Lamb," in other words "due to the forgiveness of him who was crucified" (H 1954:118). This train of thought can easily be understood to refer to Holy Communion in which forgiveness is brought before our eyes. Hartenstein's reference to Holy Communion touches a painful deficiency among evangelicals, when it comes to equipping the faithful for suffering, and should absolutely be taken up (cf. Beyerhaus 1987:212).

7.2 Prayer as refuge and intercession as solidarity

It goes without saying that prayer is a concern for all spirituality, and it carries special weight for a situation of harassment. Prayer is the weapon of the harassed church, which "has no other means of defending itself and making itself heard apart from crying, calling and praying" (H 1954:92). In this regard Hartenstein's reference to the Psalms is very useful: "We are in good company when, in times of

suffering, we enter the school of prayer offered by the Psalms, and learn how prayer overcomes the pressures that we experience by means of the Psalms.” Corresponding to the situation of his times Hartenstein tends to select the Psalms that deal with the plight of the servant of God and his salvation (H 1957:70). Equally, the “multitude from every nation” of Revelation 7, 9-17 serves Hartenstein as an example, because it neither laments nor accuses. “When experiencing this difficult path, everything we would need to say falls silent and becomes absorbed in the adoration and praise of God” (H 1954:85).¹² Even Hartenstein’s own prayer exemplifies the aspects presented above, such as the preparation, intercession, obedience and readiness to witness and to suffer: “Grant us that we prepare ourselves for the time of suffering, that we bring our brothers in (communist) East Germany, in Russia, and wherever they are being persecuted for the sake of your name, before you in intercession. Grant us that we do not relish this time of respite too quickly and too lightly, rather to brace ourselves in obedience to your word for the day when you will call on us again to confess you, to fight and to suffer” (:134). To Hartenstein an important goal in mission work is to lead the church to intercession in solidarity with the church under the cross, an issue that is often neglected, even today (H 1952e:31; cf. Beyerhaus 1992:176).

In intercession love finds its expression – towards both the persecutors as well as the persecuted Christians (H 1936c:20).¹³ An important purpose of suffering is to be found in the vicarious struggle in prayer, according to Hartenstein. “In a mysterious way mission is the continuation of Jesus’ wrestling in prayer for the world, which culminated on the cross” (H 1936a:13; cf. Spindler 1967:194-204).

7.3 The strength of patience¹⁴

Further aspects of an “evangelical spirituality” regarding suffering can be summarized by means of the “key apocalyptic concept”: “This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints” (Rev 13:10) (H 1954:130). “In the strength of this patience, which makes a

¹² This is a hint towards the doxological aspect of martyrdom, which regrettably is not fully developed by Hartenstein.

¹³ The solidarity with persecuted Christians, or the ecumenical aspect of a theology of suffering does not appear strongly enough in the work of Hartenstein as to warrant a section of its own.

¹⁴ This was the title of one of his essays (H 1942a). cf. Michel 1932:39: Having patience is a “characteristic word of the theology of martyrdom”.

person assured and even joyful in the midst of suffering, mission will survive the odds against it, both in the sending country and abroad. Patience gives evidence of its strength also in watching and waiting, without becoming involved in calculating the date of the end. In reply to his disciples' question, "When will this happen?" (Matt 24:3), Jesus calls them to "watch and wait" for his promised return. His response has not been given "for arithmetic speculations" (H 1951a:9). A second proof of patience can be found in a readiness to suffer (H 1954:47), which steers clear of both the temptation to shy away from suffering and to hanker after martyrdom. Neither is martyrdom to be sought for the sake of its reward (H 1938a:8), nor is it to be shunned out of fear of suffering (H 1952d:19). Finally, discipleship of Christ becomes evident in fearless witness to Christ. "It must be the most normal and natural thing that everyone is prepared to confess his or her faith joyfully and boldly, assured and without timidity, and give testimony of what Christ has done" (H 1948a:41). The Spirit wants to empower us to do just that.

7.4 Summary

Hartenstein answers the question concerning preparation for future times of suffering by means of an evangelical spirituality. To answer the question why suffering should be endured Hartenstein names a three-fold purpose of suffering. For the individual, firstly, the purpose is sanctification, secondly fellowship with Christ. The third purpose can be found in the struggle in prayer which is caused by suffering (H 1936a:13).

8. The significance of Hartenstein's "theology of martyrdom"

In essence the significance of Hartenstein's "theology of martyrdom" is found in the way it is interwoven with his salvation-historical paradigm. The reasons Beyerhaus proffered for continuing this line of thought¹⁵ could equally be advanced in favour of building on Hartenstein's understanding of martyrdom. First of all it is enjoined by scripture, secondly it represents a well-tested tradition, and thirdly it offers a relevant reason, an adequate rationale, interpretation and purpose for martyrdom within the framework of a salvation-historical mission theology.

¹⁵ Beyerhaus 1996:385ff.

Hartenstein’s theology of martyrdom is limited in some way by the limited exegetical basis and the fragmentary character of his work. For instance, biblical statements outside the prophetic literature are generally not dwelt on. Also, the theology of martyrdom of the early church has hardly been incorporated, with the result that virtually no mention was made of the doxological aspect of martyrdom.¹⁶

However, none of these deficiencies takes away from Hartenstein’s basic outline, which is a pioneering achievement in more recent mission theology. It is to Hartenstein’s credit that he has highlighted significant themes and passages of scripture which could afford the basic structure for a “theology of martyrdom”.

8.1 A basic structure for a theology of martyrdom

The themes and passages can be summarised in a few theses:

1. The suffering of the church is so much a part of her mission in the time between ascension and the second coming of Christ that it can be identified by means of it.
2. Christian suffering is a continuation of the suffering of Christ, and it is from him only that it receives its characteristic stamp (John 17:18; 20:21).
3. Christian suffering can have a vicarious impact and can pass on salvation (Col 1:24), while suffering that brings about salvation is restricted to the work of Christ.
4. History has an antagonistic trend and provokes an eschatological escalation of suffering and of related witness (Matt 24-25).
5. Suffering and martyrdom are not ends in themselves but serve mission right to “the end of time”, and are linked to mission by multiple relationships (Matt 24:14).
6. Martyrdom does not automatically produce church growth. Its “fruit” remains a grace from God (John 12:24).
7. A Christian never suffers alone, but is always a part of the body of Christ which sustains him or her.
8. The church and mission need an “evangelical spirituality” in order to remain steadfast in suffering.

¹⁶ The ‘doxological aspect of martyrdom’ means that “God is glorified through martyrdom” (Vicedom 1963:29; cf. Beyerhaus 1987:248).

8.2 The particular significance of Hartenstein for the evangelical movement

Over and above his basic importance, this paper established the special relevance of Hartenstein for the evangelical search for a theology of martyrdom. To begin with there is basic agreement of the axioms concerning the normative authority of scripture, the understanding of salvation and the eschatological orientation of world evangelisation. Beyond his generally satisfying responses to the questions raised, Hartenstein raises important further issues which evangelicals should contemplate. In the first place he emphasises the ecclesiological aspect of suffering, a point that is often neglected. Secondly he reminds the reader that Holy Communion is important for the strengthening of the suffering church. Above all, however, his salvation historical perspective takes one further than viewing world evangelisation only as “AD 2025 and beyond”. By these insights Hartenstein offers the evangelical search for a theology of martyrdom not only a proven and basic plan that can be accepted without difficulty, but also a biblical-reformational orientation towards answers that the evangelicals need to find for themselves.

Publications and manuscripts by Hartenstein

Abbreviations

EMM = Evangelisches Missions-Magazin

EMZ = Evangelische Missions-Zeitschrift

LKA = Landeskirchliches Archiv, Stuttgart

H 1928. *Was hat die Theologie Karl Barths der Mission zu sagen?* München.

H 1930. *Die Augsburgische Konfession und ihre Bedeutung für die Mission.* EMM 74: 353-365.

H 1932. Welche Anforderungen stellt die gegenwärtige Lage auf unsern Missionsfeldern an den Missionar? *Evangelisches Kirchenblatt für Württemberg* 92:103-107.

H 1933. *Die Mission als theologisches Problem.* Beiträge zum grundsätzlichen Verständnis der Mission. Berlin.

H 1934. Wort und Wandel im Leben des Missionars. In: Köberle, Adolf u.a. (Hg.): *Wort und Geist. Festgabe für K. Heim.* Berlin:229-245.

H 1935a. Lohn und Dienst im Neuen Testament. Manuscript (LKA).

H 1935b. *Mission als Bekenntnis und das Bekenntnis der Mission.* Stuttgart/Basel.

- H 1935c. Was haben wir für Mission und Gemeinde heute neu zu lernen? In: *"Was er dir Gutes getan hat."* Vom Jahresfest der Basler Mission 120:5-10.
- H 1936a. *Das Geheimnis des Leidens in der Mission*. Stuttgart/Basel.
- H 1936b. *Der Prophet Daniel*. Basel. (3. Aufl. Stuttgart/Basel 1938.)
- H 1936c. *Was schuldet die Kirche der Welt?* München 1936.
- H 1937a. *Christus der Wiederkommende*. Stuttgart/Basel.
- H 1937b. Der Islam als theologisches Problem. Vorlesung. Manuscript. (LKA unsortiert Bund 26/27)
- H 1937c. *Der Kampf um Christus im Fernen Osten*. Stuttgart/Basel.
- H 1937d. Die Mission unter den Zeichen der Zeit. *EMM* 81:193-200.
- H 1938a. *Die Frühmission unter den Germanen und unser Missionsauftrag heute*. Stuttgart/ Basel.
- H 1938b. *Gottes Wege mit der Weltmission*. Stuttgart/Basel.
- H 1939. Tambaram 1938. *EMM* 83:35-46.
- H 1940. *Der wiederkommende Herr. Eine Auslegung der Offenbarung des Johannes*. Stuttgart.
- H 1941. Ver sacrum. *EMZ* 2:1-4. – [on Ps 126,5-6].
- H 1942a. Die Kraft der Geduld. *EMZ* 3:1-4. – [on James 5,7-6]
- H 1942b. Hiob. 9.-11. April, Manuscript. (LKA)
- H 1947. *Die Weltmissionskonferenz in Whitby-Toronto*. Stuttgart.
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- H 1948b. Entrückung vor der großen Trübsal? In: *Für Arbeit und Besinnung* 2:123-129.
- H 1949. Der Beruf des Zeugen. *EMZ* 1:225-228.
- H 1951a. Wann wird das geschehen? *Der Versuch einer Auslegung von Matthäus 24 und 25*. Stuttgart.
- H 1951b. Zur Neubesinnung über das Wesen der Mission. In: *Deutsche Evangelische Weltmission*, 5-24.
- H 1952a. Der gekreuzigte Herr – die Hoffnung für die Welt. Einführung in den "Ersten Bericht der beratenden Kommission für das Thema der 2. Vollversammlung des Ökumenischen Rates". *Ökumenische Rundschau* 1:43-52.
- H 1952b. *Entrückung oder Bewahrung. Eine biblische Antwort*. 2. verb. Aufl. Stuttgart.
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Theses on a theology of martyrdom

Thomas Schirrmacher*

Abstract

Schirrmacher develops 22 theses on the theology of martyrdom which attempt to complement the other contributions. He addresses a variety of theological and ethical issues. One outstanding contribution is his emphasis on the sustaining role of the Holy Spirit in suffering and martyrdom.

1. The first human being to die was a martyr

*Proposition: New Testament definitions declare Abel, the first human being who ever died or was ever murdered, a martyr for his faith.*¹

Jesus considered Abel the first martyr of history (Matt 23:35; Luke 11:51) and his murder the first in the long line of persecution of the prophets by those who taught the Law but obeyed it only in outward

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These theses are taken from his book written for the German Evangelical Alliance and the World Evangelical Alliance in 1999 and 2001, now in the 2008 edition: *The Persecution of Christians Concerns Us All: Towards a Theology of Martyrdom*. The WEA Global Issues Series 5. VKW: Bonn, 2008. ISBN 978-3-938116-65-4, Download: <http://telecommuting/WEA-GIS-005>. Email: drthschirrmacher@me.com.

¹ Tokunboh Adeyemo. "Persecution: A Permanent Feature of the Church". p. 23-36 in: Brother Andrew (Ed.). *Destined to Suffer? African Christians Face the Future*. Open Doors: Orange (CA), 1979. p. 24. Compare the Title of George Fox. *Cain against Abel: Representing New-England's Church-Hierarchy in Opposition to Her Christian Protestant Dissenters*. no publisher. London (?), 1675. 48 pp.

piety (Luke 11:50). The Church Father Aurelius Augustinus wrote, "From Abel to the end of this world, the pilgrim Church strides forward between the world's persecution and God's consolation."²

Cain's sacrifice was just as proper in its external form as Abel's, but Abel sacrificed "by faith" (Heb 11:4), while Cain's sacrifice was invalidated by his jealousy and his rebellion against God (Gen 4:6-7). Enraged at God's acceptance of Abel's sacrifice and the rejection of his own, Cain then murdered his brother: "Thus the Old Testament begins with the testimony that sacrifices meant to satisfy God by their external contents are reprehensible, that only a reverent attitude makes the sacrifice acceptable."³

The writer of the Book of Hebrews is quite aware that the blood of Jesus "...speaks of forgiveness instead of crying out for vengeance like the blood of Abel." (Heb 12:24), but draws a parallel between the two. In Hebrews 11:4, he relates the death of Abel to the testimony (martyrdom) that he understands to be the testimony of righteousness given by God:

It was by faith that Abel brought a more acceptable offering to God than Cain did. Abel's offering gave evidence that he was a righteous man, and God showed his approval of his gifts. Although Abel is long dead, he still speaks to us by his example of faith.

Persecution, by the way, is frequently triggered by jealousy and envy. Paul once noted, "They preach because they love me, for they know I have been appointed to defend the Good News." (Phil 1:16). In order to illustrate the ideal of martyrdom, Clemens of Rome⁴ adds a long section on envy to his letter and, writing about Paul, Peter and other apostles, says, "Because of envy and jealousy, the greatest and most righteous pillars were persecuted and fought to the death."⁵

² Cited in: Peter Beyerhaus. *Die Bedeutung des Martyriums für den Aufbau des Leibes Christi. op. cit.* 131

³ Gustav Friedrich Oehler. *Theologie des Alten Testaments*. J. F. Steinkopf: Stuttgart, 1891³. p. 81

⁴ The 1st Letter of Clement 5,1-6,2, reproduced in "Der Klemensbrief". p. 1-107 in: Joseph A. Fischer (Ed). *Die Apostolischen Väter*. Kösel: München, 1981⁸ p. 30-33 and Theofried Baumeister. *Genese und Entfaltung der altkirchlichen Theologie des Martyriums. op. cit.* pp. 42-47 (Nr. 21).

⁵ 1st Letter of Clement 5,2, "Der Klemensbrief". S. 1-107 in: Joseph A. Fischer (Ed.). *Die Apostolischen Väter*. Kösel: München, 1981⁸ p. 31.

2. The Old Testament prophets were persecuted

Proposition: Persecution is not just a New Testament issue, but permeates the Old. God-fearing people were persecuted in the Old Testament at all times as well.

According to Jesus, Abel was the first martyr (Matt 23:35; Luke 11:51). The last martyr of the Old Covenant was John the Baptist (Matt 14:1-12; see also 11:11-13).

Struggle, conflict, persecution and martyrdom are characteristic of true prophets. David once noted, "The righteous person faces many troubles, but the LORD comes to the rescue each time." (Psa 34:19). Since only a few of the Old Testament prophets were spared persecution, they are prototypes of martyrdom (Heb 11:35-38+12:1; Acts 7:51-53; Matt 5:12; 23:31; James 5:10; 1 Thess 2:15). Stephen challenges the Pharisees: "Name one prophet your ancestors didn't persecute!" (Acts 7:52). In 1 Thessalonians 2:15, persecution comes from "...the Jews (who) killed the prophets, and some even killed the Lord Jesus. Now they have persecuted us, too. They fail to please God and work against all humanity". Jesus reminds His disciples, "Be happy about it! Be very glad! For a great reward awaits you in heaven. And remember, the ancient prophets were persecuted in the same way." (Matt 5:12), and warns the Pharisees and Sadducees that they testify against themselves, "... that you are indeed the descendants of those who murdered the prophets." (Matt 23:31).

Stauffer describes the martyrdom of the Old Testament prophets as the "Prologue to the Passion of Christ,"⁶ and the parable of the Unjust Winegrowers (Mark 12:1-12) a "martyrdom-theological summary of Salvation History",⁷ in which the prophets are Jesus' "predecessors".⁸

3. God's people persecute God's people

Proposition: Beginning with the Old Testament, the prophets and the true believers have been persecuted not only by the Jewish or heathen states, but by the organized people of God.

⁶ Ethelbert Stauffer. *Theologie des Neuen Testamentes*. Bertelsmann: Gütersloh, 1941¹. p. 81.

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 80.

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 81.

Israel itself persecuted the Old Testament prophets, Jesus and the apostles⁹ (James was the first martyr among the apostles.¹⁰ Acts 2:12. Jesus excepted only John from martyrdom. John 21:15-21¹¹). The Lord constantly reminded His contemporaries of the fact whenever he compared the spiritual leaders of His day with those who had murdered the Old Testament prophets (Matt 5:10-12; 10:23; 23:34; Luke 11:49; 13:34; 21:12; John 5:16; See also Stephen's defence in Acts 7:52 and Peter in Acts 2:23). The Pharisees and the scribes "testify" against themselves, that they "...are indeed the descendants of those who murdered the prophets." (Matt 23:31).¹² Paul declares the Jews to be the source of persecution:

And then, dear brothers and sisters, you suffered persecution from your own countrymen. In this way, you imitated the believers in God's churches in Judea who, because of their belief in Christ Jesus, suffered from their own people, the Jews. For some of the Jews killed the prophets, and some even killed the Lord Jesus. Now they have persecuted us, too. They fail to please God and work against all humanity. (1 Thess 2:14-15),

and concludes "you are now being persecuted by those who want you to keep the law, just as Ishmael, the child born by human effort, persecuted Isaac, the child born by the power of the Spirit." (Gal 4:29).

In the New Testament, Christians are persecuted not only by the Gentile state, but also by the oblivious visible Church, which oppresses true believers in the name of God. Both the Gentile government and the Jewish leaders torture, mistreat and murder Jesus. Acts and the Pauline literature also relate persecution with the Jewish people of God,¹³ which is clearly demonstrated in the book of Revelation, where the religious institution which persecutes the Church is identified with the Whore of Babylon. Jesus' pithy statement is, "the time is coming when those who kill you will think they are doing a holy service for God." (John 16:2).

⁹ See: Otto Michel. Prophet und Märtyrer. *op. cit.*

¹⁰ On the martyrdom of James, see: Hans-Werner Surkau. Martyrien in jüdischer und frühchristlicher Zeit. *op. cit.* pp. 119-126 based on biblical and extrabiblical sources.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 27.

¹² See: Johannes Beutler. "martyreo", "martyria", "martyrs". *op. cit.* p. 959.

¹³ Scott Cunningham. Through Many Tribulations. *op. cit.* 301-307.

4. Christians also persecute both fellow Christians and others

*Proposition: “No theology of martyrdom can deny the often proven fact that Christians themselves have spread death and persecution ‘in the name of the Christian faith.’”*¹⁴

We need only remember the forced conversions in the Middle Ages, the colonization of Latin America, the Crusades, the oppression of heretics, the Inquisition and the Jewish pogroms.¹⁵ Ever since the 4th century, the term “martyr” has been expanded to include Christians killed by other “orthodox” Christians.¹⁶

During the Reformation, martyrdom and martyr books took on an ugly confessionalistic character. Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants, Anglicans, Lutherans, Calvinists and Puritans all produced collections of martyr histories, but each included only martyrs from its own group, denying the ugly truth that all denominations had their own victims but also persecuted Christians of other persuasions¹⁷. The Roman Catholic Church, for example, had approximately 6,850,000 martyrs since the year 1000, but has executed some 4,534,000 non-Catholic Christians during the same period.¹⁸ The Anabaptists,¹⁹ the Quakers and other groups are no different.²⁰ This mutual oppression

¹⁴ Eduard Christen. “Martyrium III/2.”. *op. cit.* p. 218; see the whole article and Gerhard Ruhbach. “Christenverfolgung/-en”. *op. cit.* p. 370.

¹⁵ See: Ephraim Kanarfogel. “Martyrium II: Judentum”. *op. cit.* p. 204-205.

¹⁶ Michael Slusser. “Martyrium III/1.”. *op. cit.* p. 210 and Hans von Campenhausen. *Die Idee des Martyriums in der Alten Kirche. op. cit.* 1936¹; 1964². pp. 164-172.

¹⁷ An objective example is: James C. Hefley, Marti Hefley, James Hefley. *By Their Blood: Christian Martyrs of the Twentieth Century* 1994. Grand Rapids (MI): Baker Book House.

¹⁸ Bong Rin Ro (Ed.). *Christian Suffering in Asia*. Evangelical Fellowship of Asia: Taichung (Taiwan), 1989 and David B. Barrett. *Our Globe and How to Reach it*. New Hope: Birmingham (AL), 1990. p. 18.

¹⁹ See: Ethelbert Stauffer. “Martyrertheologie und Täuferbewegung”. *op. cit.* .On the Anabaptist Martyr books, see especially pp. 557ff.

²⁰ This begins very early. See: Thielemann J. (= Janszoon) Braght 1625-1664. *Der blutige Schauplatz oder martyrer Spiegel der Tauffsgesinnten oder wehrlosen Christen*. Drucks und Verlags der Brüderschaft: Ephrata (PA), 1748/49 (Anabaptists till 1660) = Thielemann J. (= Janszoon) Van Bragt. *The Bloody Theater of Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians*. Scottdale (USA): Mennonite Publ. House. 1951^{6.engl.}; Scottdale (USA): Herald Press 1987¹⁵, 1998^{geb} [Dutch Original: Bloedig tooneel, ca. 1660]; Isaac Ienington.

has continued into modern times. The Orthodox Church in Russia, for example, persecuted members of other churches.²¹ In this context, the fact that Christians themselves are martyred in the name of the Christian God, as dreadful as it is, is not foreign to scripture. The Bible gives us two reasons:

1. Both Testaments make it clear that in spite of external obedience to Jewish or Christian forms, the organized people of God can become God's enemy and can both persecute prophets and commit the terrible sin of killing others "in God's name" but in its own cause (cf. 2 Tim 3:5: "They will act religious, but they will reject the power that could make them godly"). Jesus said, "For you will be expelled from the synagogues, and the time is coming when those who kill you will think they are doing a holy service for God" (John 16:2). If Satan can take on the form of an angel of light, how much more can his servants take on the form of ministers of righteousness (2 Cor 11:13-14).

2. The holy books of no other religion depict their followers so negatively as the Bible does the Jews and the Christians. Scripture describes very graphically the doctrine that Jews and Christians are also sinners and capable of the most dreadful sins, and denounces not only the atrocities carried out by the Gentiles, but also those of the supposed (or true) people of God.

This pitiless self-criticism is integral to Judaism and Christianity, in contrast to other religions. No other faith criticizes itself so severely as Old Testament Judaism or New Testament Christianity. Scripture exposes the errors of the leaders very clearly, and God often employs outsiders to recall His people to obedience. The Jewish author, Hannes Stein, writes,

In contrast to the holy writings of Mohammed, the Hebrew Bible is not a book, but a library, a colorful patchwork of stories, woven by a whole people over a period of centuries. None of Israel's misdeeds is omitted,

Concerning Persecution. Robert Wilson: London, 1661. 31 pp. (on the Quakers), but also in the present. See: Dave Jackson, Neta Jackson. *On Fire for Christ: Stories of Anabaptist Martyrs, Retold from Martyrs Mirror*. Scottdale (USA): Herald Press, 1989 On the 20th century. See: Aron A. Toews. *Mennonite Martyrs: People Who Suffered for Their Faith: 1920-1940*. Winnipeg (CAN) & Hillsboro (KS): Kindred Press, 1990. (Mennonites in the Soviet Union).

²¹ Paul A. Marshall. *Their Blood Cries Out*. op. cit. S. 119-143 "Christen gegen Christen".

no royal crime concealed. Paul Badde writes, ‘Practically every book of the Bible up to the New Testament can be seen as a contradiction, objection or critical commentary of earlier or contemporary history.’ As the result of this honest self-portrayal, Judeo-Christian society values self-criticism as a virtue, a characteristic of strength, not an admission of weakness. In Islamic culture the situation is radically different: to criticize one’s own history is an unthinkable blasphemy, a danger to the very basis of revelation and an insult to the Prophet! Thus, Muslim countries can allow neither freedom of speech nor debates in freely elected parliaments.²²

The Bible never classifies faith or unbelief according to race or nation, but describes Gentiles and unbelieving Jews with the same terms. During the Exodus from Egypt, not only did Egyptians harass the Israelites, but unbelieving Egyptians and Israelites both opposed the believing Egyptians and Israelites.²³ For this reason, those of the Egyptians who heed Moses’ warnings were permitted to join the Israelites (Exod 12:38. See also Num 11:4; Lev 24:10), while the unbelieving Israelites were destroyed after worshipping the Golden Calf (Exod 32).

Christianity becomes a monstrosity when it denies the true power of faith (2 Tim 3:5, “They will act religious, but they will reject the power...”) or substitutes human laws and commandments for divine revelation (Mark 7:1-3; Isa 28:13-14). The New Testament criticizes the Jews because, when they studied Scripture, they disregarded the essential element, Jesus (John 5:39) and failed to submit themselves to Him (Rom 10:2-3). They appealed to the Word of God, but did not live according to it (Rom 2).

In identifying the Roman Catholic Church with the Whore of Babylon, Martin Luther and other Protestant scholars understood the Biblical principle, that the true Church is persecuted by the false one, although, 450 years later on, we question the idea that the Catholic Church of the Reformation period has been the only historical fulfillment of that symbol.

²² Hannes Stein. *Moses und die Offenbarung der Demokratie*. Rowohlt Berlin Verlag; Berlin, 1998. p. 47.

²³ See Jonathan Magonet. “*Die Einstellung des Buches Exodus gegenüber Ägypten*”. *Concilium* 24 (1988): 439-445, hier pp. 439+441. Exodus distinguishes between the hardened Pharaoh and those of his officers and people who listened to God (*Ibid.* p. 442). Since some Egyptians brought in their herds after hearing of the coming judgment (Exodus 9:20), they must have believed Moses.

5. Persecution is an ecumenical topic

Proposition: Persecution is an ecumenical issue, but unfortunately engenders no deeper unity among Christians.

Brother Andrew, a Dutch pioneer in serving persecuted Christians, once saw himself forced to admit that, “Much of the suffering in the universal Church is instigated by the erroneous idea that the ‘Body of Christ’ is identical with ‘my church’ (congregation, denomination, dogma).”²⁴

It is an unfortunate fact of ecclesiastical history that persecution can also engender conflict and division between Christians.²⁵ We have already seen that almost all the ruptures in the first centuries were due to persecution and the results of the Church’s dealing with it. An appropriate, if terrifying, modern example occurred in Korea, when the Japanese rulers (1910-1945) required all Koreans to kowtow to Shinto shrines in order to honour the Japanese Emperor and the sun goddess. After long resistance, in 1937 and 1938, most Christian groups surrendered to the increasingly intolerable coercion, but were strongly divided (particularly the Presbyterians) on the significance of the required ceremony; was it a religious rite or merely a cultural formality? Sixty years later, the issue remains unresolved and the breach is still evident, even though the original problem has been gone for a long time.²⁶

²⁴ Brother Andrew. *Preparing Believers for Suffering and Persecution: A Manual for Christian Workers*. Bulawayo (Zimbabwe): Hope, n. d. (ca. 1979). 15 pp. p. 7+8.

²⁵ See: Albert Ehrhard. *Die Kirche der Märtyrer*. pp. 122-267. Erhard demonstrates that many early dogmatic controversies and conflicts arose out of sects and heretic movements in the Early Church, and often were involved with persecution.

²⁶ See: “Der geistliche Kampf um Korea”. Supplement to HMK-Kurier M 11403. Xeroxed. *Hilfsaktion Märtyrer Kirche*: Uhldingen, 1997. 4 pp. and Peter Pattison. *Crisis Unaware: A Doctor Examines the Korean Church*. Sevenoaks (GB): OMF Books, 1981.

6. The first Christian martyr

Proposition: Not by chance, the book of Acts relates the martyrdom of the first martyr of the New Covenant, Stephen²⁷ (Acts 6:8-8:3²⁸), in great detail.

This event is, not by chance, also the first appearance of Saul of Tarsus (Acts 7:58; 8:1+3; 9:1), who began as a persecutor of the Christians, but later became a persecuted missionary himself and played such a decisive role in missionary history. Typically, 1. Stephen sees himself as the successor of the Old Testament prophets (Acts 7:51-52), and 2. his persecution comes not from the state, but from the misguided people of God, in the person of their leaders, the high priests and the leading theologians, the Pharisees (such as Saul. Acts 6:12; 8:1). As in Peter's sermon at Pentecost (Acts 2:14-36), Stephen accuses God's people of crucifying their Messiah.

7. Jesus is the prototype of the martyr

Proposition: Jesus is the archetype of the martyr.

"Early Christianity defined the work of Christ in the categories of martyr theology, and interpreted the fate of the martyrs according to the fate of Christ."²⁹ A letter written to the churches in Vienne and Lyon in 177 AD calls Him, "Christ the faithful and true martyr."³⁰ The prediction of His martyrdom accompanies His whole earthly ministry from the very beginning (e.g.; Matt: 16:21; 17:22-23; 10:17-19; 26:2). The Passion takes up the longest part of the Gospels and relates in

²⁷ See: Hans-Werner Surkau. *Martyrien in jüdischer und frühchristlicher Zeit. op. cit.* pp. 105-119; Hans von Campenhausen. *Die Idee des Martyriums in der Alten Kirche.* Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht: Göttingen, 1936¹; 1964². pp. 57-59; Theofried Baumeister. *Die Anfänge der Theologie des Martyriums. op. cit.* pp. 123-132; William Carl Weinreich. *Spirit and Martyrdom. op. cit.* pp. 36-43.

²⁸ According to William Carl Weinreich. *Spirit and Martyrdom. op. cit.* p. 38, Luke pays so much attention to Stephen, not because he was the first martyr, but because of the consequences of his martyrdom (Acts 8:1), but even under this aspect, the issue of martyrdom is central to the text. Besides, Luke need not have been so explicit; he mentions the death of James in a single sentence (Acts 12:2), and could have abbreviated Stephen's discourse, as he did others in Acts.

²⁹ Ethelbert Stauffer. "Martyrertheologie und Täuferbewegung". *op. cit.* p. 547-548.

³⁰ In Theofried Baumeister. *Genese und Entfaltung der altkirchlichen Theologie des Martyriums. op. cit.* p. 91; See also Eusebius von Caesarea. *Kirchengeschichte. op. cit.* pp. 233-245 [Book 5, Ch. 2-3].

great detail Judas' betrayal, the false accusations, the illegal trial, torture and the excruciating execution at the hands of Israel's leaders and the Roman government.³¹ Paul consistently presented Jesus as the archetype of the martyr and as an example for all Christians.³² The Early Church's documents on martyrdom³³ thus considered Jesus to be the prototype of the martyr, Who could not be excelled by any other.³⁴

8. To die for friends is the highest form of love

Proposition: To give one's life for others is the highest form of love in this world.

Because Jesus teaches clearly: "This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you. There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends." (John 15:12-13), a Christian's love is continually oriented towards Jesus' greatest sacrifice of all, His death on the Cross: "Live a life filled with love, following the example of Christ. He loved us and offered himself as a sacrifice for us, a pleasing aroma to God." (Eph 5:2). For this reason, the husband should be willing to die for his wife; a denial of any dictatorial ideas of "headship"! "For husbands, this means love your wives, just as Christ loved the church. He gave up his life for her" (Eph 5:25). The Early Church did well to consider martyrdom for Jesus' sake the highest proof of one's love for God.

9. All persecution is actually directed towards Jesus

Proposition: Jesus is the actual object of all persecution.

³¹ See: Hans-Werner Surkau. *Martyrien in jüdischer und frühchristlicher Zeit. op. cit.* pp. 82-104. Surkau presents the Passion as a martyr report. On the idea of martyrdom in the Gospels, see; Theofried Baumeister. *Die Anfänge der Theologie des Martyriums. op. cit.* pp. 66-119+137-150; on Luke, see; Lukas Scott Cunningham. *Through Many Tribulations: The Theology of Persecution in Luke-Acts. op. cit.* pp. 23-185 + 295-342.

³² See: John S. Pobee. *Persecution and Martyrdom in the Theology of Paul. op. cit.* 74-92.

³³ See the details in further theses.

³⁴ Leonardo Boff. "Martyrdom: An Attempt at Systematic Reflection". pp. 12-17 in: Johannes Baptist Metz, Edward Schillebeeckx (Ed). *Martyrdom Today. op. cit.*

For this reason, Jesus asks Saul, “Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?” (Acts 9:4; 22:7; 26:14), and identifies Himself as, “...Jesus, the one you are persecuting!” (Acts 9:5; 22; 8; 26:15).

The true reason for Christians’ suffering is Christ, who justifies the contradiction, “The clearer the Church recognizes Christ and testifies of Him, the more certain it will encounter the contradiction, the confrontation and the hatred of the Antichrist.”³⁵ Jesus Himself frequently reminded the disciples, that they would be persecuted for His sake (for example: Matt 10:22 and Luke 21:17. “And everyone will hate you because you are my followers.”; Matt 16:25 “If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it.”; Luke 21:12 “But before all this occurs, there will be a time of great persecution. You will be dragged into synagogues and prisons, and you will stand trial before kings and governors because you are my followers.”)

10. Continuation of the suffering of Christ

Proposition: The suffering of the Christian is distinctive because it continues Christ’s sufferings.

The recollection of Golgotha is essential to an understanding of the Church’s sufferings. Howard A. Snyder describes the Cross as the guarantee of the Church’s suffering, not its escape from persecution.³⁶ Paul did not regard his own suffering as redemptive, but still describes it as “Fellowship with the suffering of Christ.”³⁷ In 2 Corinthians 1:5 (“For the more we suffer for Christ, the more God will shower us with his comfort through Christ.”), Paul relates suffering under persecution with the sufferings of Christ. He repeats the idea more explicitly³⁸ in Colossians 1:24: “I am glad when I suffer for you in my body, for I am participating in the sufferings of Christ that continue for his body, the church.” Again, in Galatians 6:17, he writes, “From now on, don’t let anyone trouble me with these things. For I bear on my body the scars that show I belong to Jesus.”, and in Philippians 3:10, he wishes to “... know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from

³⁵ Martin Luthers Sämtliche Schriften. Ed. by Joh. Georg Walch. Verlag der Lutherischen Buchhandlung H. Harms: Groß Oesingen, 1986 (repr. of 1910²). Vol. V, p. 106.

³⁶ Howard A. Snyder. *The Community of the King*. Downers Grove (IL): IVP 1977.

³⁷ Otto Michel. *Prophet und Märtyrer*. *op. cit.* pp. 31-33.

³⁸ Harry W. Tajra. *The Martyrdom of St. Paul*. *op. cit.* pp. 52-54.

the dead. I want to suffer with him, sharing in his death.” In 2 Corinthians 4:8-10, he adds, “We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but not driven to despair. We are hunted down, but never abandoned by God. We get knocked down, but we are not destroyed. Through suffering, our bodies continue to share in the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be seen in our bodies.”³⁹

In his words about “fire” and “testing”, Peter shared Paul’s view, and writes, “Instead, be very glad – for these trials make you partners with Christ in his suffering, so that you will have the wonderful joy of seeing his glory when it is revealed to all the world.” (1 Pet. 4:13).

11. Jesus as role model - the martyrs as role models

Proposition: Jesus’ martyrdom makes Him our role model when we suffer persecution.

Jesus Himself suffered just as much as the martyrs of His Church, and more. “Since he himself has gone through suffering and testing, he is able to help us when we are being tested.” (Heb 2:18; Heb 4:15). Martin Luther wrote, “The Lord Christ had to suffer persecution at the hands of the devil and the world: we should not desire anything better.”⁴⁰ Jesus reminds His disciples, “Do you remember what I told you? ‘A slave is not greater than the master.’ Since they persecuted me, naturally they will persecute you. And if they had listened to me, they would listen to you.” (John 15:20. For the context, read 18-21). When we read His words, “Look, I am sending you out as sheep among wolves. So be as shrewd as snakes and harmless as doves.” (Matt 10:16), we must remember that He is the Lamb of God sent among the wolves to suffer and die peacefully for others.

His own example, which plays such an important role in the New Testament,⁴¹ includes His suffering and His dealing with persecution. Paul knew that the reality of his own sufferings had taught Timothy to handle such situations:

But you, Timothy, certainly know what I teach, and how I live, and what my purpose in life is. You know my faith, my patience, my love,

³⁹ See: William Carl Weinreich. *Spirit and Martyrdom. op. cit.* p. 51-52.

⁴⁰ Martin Luthers Sämtliche Schriften. *op. cit.* Vol. III, p. 691.

⁴¹ See: Thomas Schirrmacher. “Jesus as Master Educator and Trainer”. *Training for Crosscultural Ministries (World Evangelical Fellowship)* 2/2000: 1-4.

and my endurance. You know how much persecution and suffering I have endured. You know all about how I was persecuted in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra—but the Lord rescued me from all of it. Yes, and everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. But evil people and impostors will flourish. They will deceive others and will themselves be deceived. (2 Tim 3:10-12).

The Thessalonians also became not only imitators of Paul, Silas and Timothy under persecution, but also role models for the believers in neighbouring provinces.

So you received the message with joy from the Holy Spirit in spite of the severe suffering it brought you. In this way, you imitated both us and the Lord. 7 As a result, you have become an example to all the believers in Greece – throughout both Macedonia and Achaia.” (1 Thess 1:6-7). “And then, dear brothers and sisters, you suffered persecution from your own countrymen. In this way, you imitated the believers in God’s churches in Judea who, because of their belief in Christ Jesus, suffered from their own people, the Jews. For some of the Jews killed the prophets, and some even killed the Lord Jesus. Now they have persecuted us, too. They fail to please God and work against all humanity. (1 Thess 2:14-15).

12. No church without martyrdom

Proposition: “Martyrdom is a part of the Church, part of its very essence, and suffering is the mark of missions” and the Church between Christ’s ascension and His return,⁴² for “...we must suffer many hardships to enter the Kingdom of God.” (Acts 14:22). Paul writes, “Yes, and everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.” (2 Tim 3:12). From the Old Testament, he derives the doctrine, “...just as Ishmael, the child born by human effort, persecuted Isaac, the child born by the power of the Spirit.” (Gal 4:29). Jesus Himself warned the disciples, “Do you remember what I told you? ‘A slave is not greater than the master.’ Since they persecuted me, naturally they will persecute you...” (John 15:20). Before sending the disciples out to preach (Matt 10:16-42) He spoke almost exclusively about the impending persecution which is closely bound to their fate in His “Martyrapocalypse”⁴³ (Mark 13). Peter

⁴² Tokunboh Adeyemo. “Persecution: A Permanent Feature of the Church”. Evangelical Ministries/Ministères Évangélique (Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar) Mar-Aug 1985: 3-9.

⁴³ Otto Michel. Prophet und Märtyrer. *op. cit.* p. 30.

describes persecution not as an oddity contradictory to faith, but, on the contrary, something to be anticipated and even valued:

Dear friends, don't be surprised at the fiery trials you are going through, as if something strange were happening to you. Instead, be very glad – for these trials make you partners with Christ in his suffering, so that you will have the wonderful joy of seeing his glory when it is revealed to all the world. (1 Pet 4:12-13).

Martin Luther emphasized this point by saying, “Even if he only teaches the Word of Christ, every sincere Christian must have his persecutors.”⁴⁴ The believer is to take up the “struggle with sufferings” (Heb 10:32), the cross (Heb 12:2), the opposition of unbelievers (Heb 12:3), persecution (Mark 10:30; Acts 8:1; 13:50; Rom 8:35; 2 Cor 12:10; 2 Tim 3:11; 2 Thess 1:4) – that is “all”, together with Paul (2 Tim 2:10), for his faith.

13. The Holy Spirit - consolation in persecution

Proposition: The Holy Spirit, “the Comforter” (John 16:16+26) gives Christians the strength to endure persecution,⁴⁵ even to rejoice in the most difficult conditions.

“So be happy when you are insulted for being a Christian, for then the glorious Spirit of God rests upon you.” (1 Pet 4:14).⁴⁶ The Spirit of Glory, which had rested on the Messiah (Isa 11:2) brings His glory to those who seem to have lost all glory, such as Stephen, whom Luke describes as “... full of the Holy Spirit...” (Acts 7:55) during his defence and his execution,⁴⁷ as he saw the Glory of God in Heaven.

The Holy Spirit is the “He is the Holy Spirit, who leads into all truth. The world cannot receive him, because it isn't looking for him and doesn't recognize him. But you know him, because he lives with you now and later will be in you.” (John 14:17; See also 15:26 and 16:7). He is the difference between Christians and our rebellious world, and the only person Who can overcome the world (John 16:8). He testifies that Satan is already defeated (John 16:11).

⁴⁴ Martin Luthers Sämtliche Schriften. *op. cit.* Vol. IV, p. 263.

⁴⁵ For the most thorough study, see: William Carl Weinreich. *Spirit and Martyrdom*. Washington D.C.: University Press of America 1981 [Diss. Basel, 1977].

⁴⁶ On 1 Pet. 4:14, see: William Carl Weinreich. *Spirit and Martyrdom*, *op. cit.* pp. 64-65.

⁴⁷ Ibid. pp. 36-43. Acts 6:5 also describes Stephen as a man full of faith and the Spirit (Acts 6:8).

In Luke 21:12-15, Jesus announces that He will give wisdom to the persecuted when they stand before their judges, wisdom that will become a testimony. Who will provide this wisdom if not the Holy Spirit? The parallel text in Matthew 10:19-20 speaks of the “Spirit of your Father”, Who will testify before our judges. William Carl Weinrich notes that Jesus spoke seldom of the Holy Spirit’s function, but when He did so, frequently described Him as helper and comforter in persecution (Matt 10:17-20; Mark 13:9-11; Luke 21:12-19).⁴⁸ No wonder that Paul follows the Lord’s example in his catalogue of his sufferings by attributing his endurance to the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 6:6). In Philippians 1:19, he writes, “For I know that as you pray for me and the Spirit of Jesus Christ helps me, this will lead to my deliverance.” He reminds the Thessalonians, that “So you received the message with joy from the Holy Spirit in spite of the severe suffering it brought you. In this way, you imitated both us and the Lord.” (1 Thess 1:6).⁴⁹

The Early Church was constantly aware that only the Spirit of God could provide the persecuted with wisdom and strength to endure. According to Tertullian,⁵⁰ the Spirit accompanies us into prison;⁵¹ the “Holy Spirit, the Instructor”⁵² prepares the believers for their sufferings. A letter written in 177 A.D. from the churches of Lyon and Vienne mentions a leading Roman citizen in Gaul, who sprang to the assistance of the Christians and was himself condemned for his interference: “He, the comforter of the Christians, who had the Comforter, the Spirit of Zacharias, in himself, as the fullness of his love clearly shows ...”⁵³ The Ecclesiastical Directions of Hippolyt (early 3rd c. A.D.), advises the church not to lay hands on believers who are to be ordained as deacons or presbyters, if they had been imprisoned or tortured, for they have already received the honour of presbyter through their testimony: they are to be considered Charismatics, since the Holy Spirit had given them their testimony in court.⁵⁴

⁴⁸ Ibid. pp. 55-56.

⁴⁹ Ibid. pp. 57-58.

⁵⁰ After he had become a Catholic.

⁵¹ Tertullian, *An die Märtyrer* 1,3, in: Theofried Baumeister. *Genese und Entfaltung der altkirchlichen Theologie des Martyriums. op. cit.* pp. 104-107.

⁵² Ibid. pp. 113.

⁵³ Letter of the Churches of Vienne and Lyon, in: Eusebius von Caesarea. *Kirchengeschichte. op. cit.* p. 235 [5th Book, Ch. 1, V.10].

⁵⁴ Theofried Baumeister. “Märtyrer und Verfolgte im frühen Christentum”. *Concilium* 19 (1983) 3: 169-173, here p. 170; Text Theofried Baumeister.

14. Joy in persecution

*Proposition: The presence of the Holy Spirit and the comfort of God enable the believer to rejoice even under persecution.*⁵⁵

“But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ’s sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy” (1 Pet 4:13; see also: 1 Pet 1:6). Peter had learned this from his Master, who said, “God blesses you when people mock you and persecute you and lie about you and say all sorts of evil things against you because you are my followers.” (Matt 5:11). Martin Luther, writing in a similar vein, says, “We have no reason to complain, when the world persecutes us and kills us, but rather to rejoice and to be glad.”⁵⁶ This advice is quite practical – doesn’t Luke tell us that Paul and Silas prayed and sang praises to God in prison (Acts 16:25)? Have you ever noticed that the Epistle to the Philippians, the New Testament letter which deals with persecution more than all the others, is also the most joyful letter? “Always be full of joy in the Lord. I say it again – rejoice!” (Phil 4:4).⁵⁷

15. Never aspire to persecution

Proposition: A Christian should not seek after persecution.

In contrast to the occasional tendency of some Early Church believers, to seek after martyrdom for its rewards and blessings, we must remember that it is God’s prerogative, not ours, to determine who is to suffer martyrdom. The believer has no right to pursue persecution.

The tendency to seek after martyrdom became prevalent by about 107-108 A.D. as Ignatius, Church Father and the Bishop of Antioch,⁵⁸

Genese und Entfaltung der altkirchlichen Theologie des Martyriums. *op. cit.* p. 135 (Hippolyt, Apostolische Tradition, Absatz 9).

⁵⁵ Wolfgang Nauck. “Freude im Leiden”. *Zeitschrift für neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 46 (1955): 68-80; Werner Stoy. *Mut für Morgen. op. cit.* pp. 74-76.

⁵⁶ Martin Luthers Sämtliche Schriften. *op. cit.* Vol. IX, p. 758.

⁵⁷ On the subject of persecution in the Epistle to the Philippians, see: Theofried Baumeister. *Die Anfänge der Theologie des Martyriums. op. cit.* pp. 176-182; Harry W. Tjara. *The Martyrdom of St. Paul. op. cit.* pp. 58-72; William Carl Weinreich. *Spirit and Martyrdom. op. cit.* pp. 55-56 n. d.

⁵⁸ Theofried Baumeister. *Die Anfänge der Theologie des Martyriums. op. cit.* pp. 262-263+272-274 (on Ignatius, see pp. 260-289); Theofried Baumeister. *Genese und Entfaltung der altkirchlichen Theologie des Martyriums. op. cit.* pp. 49-55. The older opinion, that Ignatius had not distinguished his own

executed under the Emperor Trajan, admonished the Roman believers not to hinder his martyrdom, which they apparently could have done.⁵⁹ Other Church Fathers, such as Cyprian⁶⁰ and the opponents of the Donatists, thought differently and endorsed the flight from martyrdom.⁶¹ The earliest extant description of martyrdom,⁶² “The Martyrdom of Polycarp” (ca. 155-157 A.D.) assumes that the Church Father died against his will, as it was in Jesus’ case.⁶³ Clemens of Alexandria writes, “We rebuke those who throw their lives away,”⁶⁴ and adds explicitly, “We say of them that, having chosen to depart from this life in this way, they do not die as martyrs ...”⁶⁵

In this respect, the issue is similar to slavery. Paul, who enjoined slaves to work hard and to prove their faith as slaves, could also write, “Yes, each of you should remain as you were when God called you. Are you a slave? Don’t let that worry you – but if you get a chance to be free, take it.” (1 Cor 7:20-21).

The Bible portrays man as a slave of sin, entangled in his rebellion against God. When he accepts divine judgement and the

martyrdom from that of Jesus or believed his death to be atonement for the sins of others, must be rejected: see; William Carl Weinreich. *Spirit and Martyrdom. op. cit.* pp. 111-115.

⁵⁹ See his letter to the Romans: “Die Sieben Ignatius-Briefe”. pp. 111-225 in: Joseph A. Fischer (Ed.). *Die Apostolischen Väter*. Kösel: München, 1981⁸. pp. 182-193, especially. 7,2 (p. 191): “and in love is eager for death”, as well as 2,1-4,3 + 6,1-3; and “An die Trallianer” 1,1 (p. 179).

⁶⁰ See the excerpts of Cyprian’s letter to Fortunatus in: Theofried Baumeister. *Genese und Entfaltung der altkirchlichen Theologie des Martyriums. op. cit.* pp 152-161 (Nr. 57); more complete in: Edelhard L. Hummel. *The Concept of Martyrdom According to Saint Cyprian of Carthage*. Washington: The Catholic University of America, 1946.

⁶¹ On the rejection of deliberate martyrdom, see: Bernhard Kriegbaum. *Kirche der Traditionen oder Kirche der Märtyrer? Die Vorgeschichte des Donatismus*. Innsbrucker theologische Studien 16. Tyrolia-Verlag: Innsbruck, 1986. pp. 77-81 n. d. and Donald W. Riddle. “From Apocalypse to Martyrology”: *Anglican Theological Review* 9 (1926/27): 260-280, here, p. 271.

⁶² Albert Ehrhard. *Die Kirche der Märtyrer. op. cit.* p. 37.

⁶³ Martyrdom of Polycarp 1,2 = p. 2-5 in: Herbert Musurillo (Ed.). *The Acts of Christian Martyrs*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972, “Martyrdom of Polycarp” pp. 2-21; William Carl Weinreich. *Spirit and Martyrdom. op. cit.* pp.166-167.

⁶⁴ Clement of Alexandria, *Teppiche IV*, 4, 17, 1-4, in: Theofried Baumeister. *Genese und Entfaltung der altkirchlichen Theologie des Martyriums. op. cit.* p. 131 (Nr. 47).

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* (*Teppiche IV*, 4, 17, 1).

sacrificial death of Christ on the Cross, he is called by God to a new life. Forgiveness of sin liberates him to a new life, but this new life with God does not automatically improve all conditions immediately. Even when still a slave, he can serve God fully (which has nothing to do with approving slavery – Paul combats slavery and recommends Christians to release their slaves in 1 Corinthians 7:21 and in Philemon⁶⁶), but faith in Christ corrects our values. It is not labour which makes life worthwhile, but the Creator and Saviour, who gives us our work. The power of Christianity lies in the demand for justice from others on the basis of God's justice, but, independent of external conditions, continues to thank and glorify God even when justice is denied. Inner liberty precedes external freedom.

In the same way, the Christian is to be steadfast under persecution, but to rejoice all the more when he can avoid it, or when it comes to an end – which is the justification for our commitment to combat the persecution of our brothers and sisters. We can take action to avoid, end or point out persecution. Besides, in His first address on persecution, Jesus said, “Look, I am sending you out as sheep among wolves. So be as shrewd as snakes and harmless as doves.” (Matt 10:16). Christians may not deny their Lord, but they certainly may look for clever ways to avoid persecution!

16. It is legitimate to flee persecution

*Proposition: Both the Old Testament and the New make it clear that a believer may flee immanent persecution.*⁶⁷

Jesus left Judea for Galilee when John the Baptist was arrested (Matt 4:12), and later remained there when the Jews wanted to kill Him (John 7:1). He hid when the Jews tried to stone Him (John 8:59; 10:39). God had also commanded His parents to flee to Egypt in order to protect Him from Herod (Matt 2:13-18). The Christians in the first church fled Jerusalem (Acts 8:1) and Paul escaped from Damascus (Acts 9:25; 2 Cor 11:32-33) and from Antioch (Acts 14:5-7).⁶⁸ In the book of Revelation 12:6, the church flees from the Devil into the wilderness. Jesus even instructs the disciples to flee, “When you are persecuted in one town, flee to the next. I tell you the truth, the Son of

⁶⁶ Herbert M. Carson. *The Epistle of Paul to the Colossians and Philemon. The Tyndale New Testament Commentary*. Grand Rapids (MI): Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979 (repr. from 1960). especially pp. 21-24.

⁶⁷ Werner Stoy. *Mut für Morgen. op. cit.* pp. 40-42.

⁶⁸ Acts 20:3 may also indicate that Paul was avoiding a difficult situation.

Man will return before you have reached all the towns of Israel.” (Matt 10:23), which Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage later cites.

The Old Testament also describes many similar situations.⁶⁹ Obadiah hid 100 prophets from Queen Jezebel in two caves (1 Kings 18:4+13); 7000 other believers were also hidden in 1 Kings 19:1-18; Rom 11:3-4). Elijah also fled from the same queen to Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19:1-18) and the Prophet Uria tried to flee from King Joiakim (Jer 26:20).

In a few exceptional situations, believers did go to meet certain death. Jesus and Paul both returned to Jerusalem to be arrested (Acts 10:19-25), and, according to the earliest church traditions, Peter, who had left Rome, returned to be executed, after he had been called back by a vision.⁷⁰ These are, however, (1) key persons in salvation history and (2) key situations in salvation history, (3) commanded directly by God (for example, Acts 20:22-23).

A particular issue in the Early Church was the liberty of bishops and elders to flee,⁷¹ a question which led to much controversy.⁷² Jesus’ warning against the “hireling” who abandoned his flock to the wolves (John 10:11-13)⁷³ was understood to forbid such flight, but Jesus’ instructions to flee (see above) were to permit it. Cyprian referred to Matthew 10:23 when he fled from Rome, leading his church from his hiding place, which brought him intense criticism from the Roman congregation.⁷⁴ The most prominent bishop who remained and was executed, was Polycarp, whose example long carried weight in the argument against flight,⁷⁵ whereas Cyprian and Athanasius were the

⁶⁹ William Carl Weinreich. *Spirit and Martyrdom. op. cit.* p. 1.

⁷⁰ Carsten Peter Thiede. *Simon Peter. The Paternoster Press: Exeter (GB), 1986.* p. 185-194.

⁷¹ See: Bernhard Kötting. “Darf ein Bischof in der Verfolgung die Flucht ergreifen?”. pp. 220-228 in: Ernst Dassmann (Ed.). *Vivarium: Festschrift Theodor Klauser zum 90. Geburtstag. Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum, Ergänzungsband 11.* Aschendorff: Münster, 1984, for the best summary.

⁷² *Ibid.* p. 221-222.

⁷³ *Ibid.* p. 221.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 223-224 and Adolf von Harnack. *Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten.* VMA-Verlag: Wiesbaden, n. d.(repr. from 1924). p. 215; See also Cyprian’s letter to Fortunatus; excerpts in Theofried Baumeister. *Genese und Entfaltung der altkirchlichen Theologie des Martyriums. op. cit.* pp. 152-161 (Nr. 57).

⁷⁵ Alwyn Pettersen. “‘To Flee or not to Flee’: An Assessment of Athanasius’s *De Fuga Suda*”. pp. 29-42 in: W. J. Sheils (Ed.). *Persecution and Toleration. Papers*

most prominent bishops who did flee.⁷⁶ The Church finally adopted the position that a bishop might not flee out of fear or cowardice, but could do so if it served the interest of his church, the classical “conflict of duty”,⁷⁷ as justified by Cyprian, Athanasius and Augustine,⁷⁸ who taught that the decision could only be made according to the Spirit’s leading in the concrete situation.⁷⁹

17. Not all suffering is for Christ’s sake

Proposition: Not all suffering is for Christ’s sake: when Christians commit crimes, they must be punished and suffer just like all others.

Jesus’ promise, “God blesses you when people mock you and persecute you and lie about you and say all sorts of evil things against you...” (Matt 5:11) is restricted by the words “because you are my followers”. Paul reminds us that the State is to punish us as it does other offenders (Rom 13:4). And Peter admonishes us,

“But do this in a gentle and respectful way. Keep your conscience clear. Then if people speak against you, they will be ashamed when they see what a good life you live because you belong to Christ. Remember, it is better to suffer for doing good, if that is what God wants, than to suffer for doing wrong!” (1 Pet 3:16-17). “If you suffer, however, it must not be for murder, stealing, making trouble, or prying into other people’s affairs. But it is no shame to suffer for being a Christian. Praise God for the privilege of being called by his name!” (1 Pet 4:15-16; see the reference to persecution in verses 12-14).

Read at the Ecclesiastical History Society. Oxford: B. Blackwell 1984. p. 29.

⁷⁶ Ibid. and Bernhard Kötting. “Darf ein Bischof in der Verfolgung die Flucht ergreifen?”. *op. cit.* pp. 221-226. Ibid also mentions further examples.

⁷⁷ Ibid. p. 224 and Alwyn Pettersen. “‘To Flee or not to Flee’: An Assessment of Athanasius’s *De Fuga Sua*”. *op. cit.* Athanasius had political and theological reasons for his flight from the Arians (pp. 31-33) and gave biblical examples for his theological considerations. He did, however, consider flight to be sometimes wrong. On his rethinking of the issue, see his article, “*De Vita Antonii*” and his “Letter at the Feast”, Ibid. pp. 37-40.

⁷⁸ Bernhard Kötting. “Darf ein Bischof in der Verfolgung die Flucht ergreifen?”. *op. cit.* pp. 221+226-227.

⁷⁹ See Adolf von Harnack. *Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten.* *op. cit.* pp. 214-216; Michael Slusser. “Martyrium III/1”. *op. cit.* p. 209.

18. Praying for the persecutor

Proposition: Following Old Testament tradition (for example, Job 31:29; 42:8-9), the New Testament exhorts us to pray for God's grace for persecutors.

Jesus admonished the disciples, "But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you!" (Matt 5:44, see also v. 45-48); "But to you who are willing to listen, I say, love your enemies! Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who hurt you." (Luke 6:27-28). Paul expresses the same commandment in similar words, "...We bless those who curse us. We are patient with those who abuse us." (1 Cor 4:12).

The most impressive testimony of a dying martyr is Jesus' prayer that God will have mercy on his persecutors. He prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing." (Luke 23:34). The first Christian martyr, Stephen, prayed, "Lord, don't charge them with this sin!" (Acts 7:60). Both requests were heard, for some of the persecutors were later converted (the Roman officer in Luke 23:47; Paul in Acts 9:1-18). The history of the Church⁸⁰ contains many descriptions of dying martyrs such as Polycarp,⁸¹ who pray for those who are tormenting them.⁸²

The modern Church has its own examples. In 1913, the Indonesian evangelist, Petrus Octavianus,⁸³ described a missionary in the Toradya area in Southern Celebes. Five tribe members wanted to kill him, but permitted him to pray first. He prayed aloud that they would be saved. Three of the murderers were banned to Java, were converted in prison and returned to Toradya, where they founded a church which later (1971) became the fourth largest church in Indonesia with over 200,000 members. Let us also not forget the five missionaries shot to death by the Aucas. Several of the murderers later became pillars of the Aucan church.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ See: Eusebius von Caesarea. Kirchengeschichte. *op. cit.* p. 245 [5th Book, Ch. 4, V.5].

⁸¹ See: Martyrdom of Polycarp 14,1-3 + 15,1 = pp. 12-15 in: Herbert Musurillo (Ed.). The Acts of Christian Martyrs. Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1972.

⁸² See: Eusebius, Kirchengeschichte, 5, 2, 5-7 (Letter to the churches in Vienne and Lyon), in *Ibid.* pp. 90-93 and in Eusebius von Caesarea. Kirchengeschichte. *op. cit.* p. 246.

⁸³ Petrus Oktavianus. "Die Narde ausschütten". pp. 120-128 in: Otto Riecker (Ed.). Ruf aus Indonesien, Hänssler: Neuhausen, 1973³ [1971¹]. p. 126.

19. Persecutors become converts

Proposition: Many who began as persecutors of Christians have later become believers themselves.

We have already seen two examples. The best known is, of course, Paul, who frequently referred to his former persecution of the church. (1 Cor 15:9; Gal 1:13+23; Phil 3:6; 1 Tim 1:13. See also Acts 9:4-5; 22:4+7-8; 16:11+14-15). He describes himself as having been a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious (1 Tim 1:13), and writing about the reaction of Christians who had heard of his conversion, “All they knew was that people were saying, ‘The one who used to persecute us is now preaching the very faith he tried to destroy!’ And they praised God because of me.” (Gal 1:23-24). *When we pray for persecuted believers, we must include the persecutors*, who will either be converted or hardened because of the martyr’s testimony. They will not be untouched.

20. The fruit of martyrdom

Proposition: The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.

This well-known quotation from the Church Father Tertullian⁸⁵ has been passed down to us in the writings of Augustine and the Reformers. It forewarns the Roman emperors that their opposition will only enlarge the Church:⁸⁶ “The more you mow us down, the more we increase: the blood of Christians is a seed.” (“*semen est sanguis Christianorum*”; *Apologia* 50:12ff. “A seed of the church is the blood of the martyrs” is actually the more correct translation.⁸⁷)

Jesus, when warning His disciples of future persecution (Luke 21:12-21), had prophesied, “...this will be your opportunity to tell them about me.”⁸⁸ (Luke 21:13).⁸⁹ In the Epistle to the Philippians,

⁸⁴ Elisabeth Elliot. *Die Mörder – meine Freunde*. CLV: Bielefeld, 1999 (Mrs. Elliot is the widow of one of the martyred missionaries).

⁸⁵ On Tertullian’s theology of martyrdom, see: William Carl Weinreich. *Spirit and Martyrdom*. *op. cit.* pp. 223-272.

⁸⁶ Adolf von Harnack. *Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten*. *op. cit.* pp. 506-510.

⁸⁷ Hans von Campenhausen. “Das Martyrium in der Mission”. *op. cit.* pp. 79-80.

⁸⁸ This opportunity for testimony does not necessarily mean that people will be converted, but can also indicate an explicit testimony against the persecutor, even proof of his opposition to God.

⁸⁹ F. Kattenbusch. “Der Märtyrertitel”. *Zeitschrift für neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 4 (1903): 111-127, explicitly p. 112.

Paul shows clearly that his imprisonment and suffering do not hinder the Gospel but further it (Phil 1:12-26). “And I want you to know, my dear brothers and sisters, that everything that has happened to me here has helped to spread the Good News.” (Phil 1:12).

The Early Church often referred to Jesus’ words about His own death in John 12:24: “I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat is planted in the soil and dies, it remains alone. But its death will produce many new kernels – a plentiful harvest of new lives.” One writer, for example, says, “Don’t you see, that the more are executed, the more are added? This is not the work of man, but the power of God; these are the signs of His presence.”⁹⁰ Martin Luther expressed the same idea in the following words, “Under persecution, Christianity grows, but where peace and quiet abound, Christians became lazy and apathetic.”⁹¹

And indeed, the first organized persecution of the first congregation in Jerusalem only led to the dispersal of Christians into the whole Roman Empire! The first Gentiles were converted in Antioch, not by the apostles but by “normal” Christians who had fled Jerusalem (Acts 7:54-8:8).⁹² The International Congress on World Evangelization Lausanne (1974) noted, “Persecution is a storm that is permitted to scatter the seed of the Word, disperse the sower and reaper over many fields. It is God’s way of extending his kingdom.”⁹³ Persecution has been one of the greatest factors in the spread of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.⁹⁴

The fruit of persecution shows itself in different ways. Sometimes, believers are strengthened (Phil 1:12), and sometimes, the Gospel can be preached to people who might not hear it otherwise (for example, Phil 1:13 “the whole palace guard”). The dispersal of Christians spreads the Gospel into new areas (See Acts 11:19-21 and 8:1). Sometimes persecution makes the sermons and the witness of the

⁹⁰ Letter to Diognet 7,8-9, repr. in: Theofried Baumeister. *Genese und Entfaltung der altkirchlichen Theologie des Martyriums. op. cit.* p. 103 (Nr. 40).

⁹¹ Martin Luthers Sämtliche Schriften. *op. cit.* Vol. XIII, pp. 1078-1079.

⁹² See especially Billy Kim. “God at Work in Times of Persecution (Acts 7:54-8:8)”. pp. 57-59 in J. D. Douglas (Ed.). *Let the Earth Hear His Voice: International Congress on World Evangelization Lausanne, Switzerland. Minneapolis (MN): World Wide Publ, 1975.*

⁹³ *Ibid.* p. 57.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 58; See also B. Dyck. “Verfolgung fördert Gemeindegewachstum”. *Dein Reich komme (Licht im Osten)* 2/1983: 5 on Ethiopia, as an example.

believers more effective. In the first three centuries soldiers and officers who became Christians were often in danger, but the number of believers in the military grew dramatically (beginning in the New Testament!).⁹⁵

China is a modern example. We cannot compute the number of Christians in China accurately, since government and official-church sources intentionally falsify the numbers. There is no census, and we have no registers of the home churches. In his German language newsletter, “China Insight”, Tony Lambert of the Overseas Mission Fellowship (former China Inland Mission), considered an expert on the statistics of Chinese Christianity,⁹⁶ came to the conclusion that his own figures are too low. After studying new state sources in 1997, he believes that the 18.7 to 39 million he had assumed for the year before, should be increased to 33 million, of whom 20 to 30 million are Evangelicals.⁹⁷ This would mean that China has the second largest Evangelical population in the world, after the USA (49 million). Brazil (13 million), Nigeria (5 million), Kenya (4 million) and South Korea (almost 4 million) have fewer – reason enough for Evangelical Christians to take more interest in that silent giant, the Chinese Church.⁹⁸ *Idea* projects the number of Christians even higher for 1999.⁹⁹ Whereas there were approximately one million Protestants and three million Catholics in China in 1949, there are about 13 million Protestants in registered churches, 40-60 million Protestants in home churches, 4 million Catholics in the official Catholic church and 8 million underground Catholics.

Johan Candelin rightly said concerning the present situation worldwide, that it is not always true that persecution produces church growth, but in many countries in the world persecution grows because the fastest growing churches in the world exist in countries without religious liberty.¹⁰⁰ This has to be kept in mind also.

⁹⁵ Adolf von Harnack. *Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten*. *op. cit.* p. 580.

⁹⁶ See also: Tony Lambert. *The Resurrection of the Chinese Church: A Unique Study of the Miraculous Survival of the Church in China*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1991.

⁹⁷ See: Global Chinese Ministries. June 1999. pp. 1-2, distributed by ÜMG, 35325 Mücke, for more detailed statistics on the individual provinces.

⁹⁸ See: Bruder David, Dan Wooding, Sara Bruce. *Gottes Schmuggler in China*. R. Brockhaus: Wuppertal, 1981.

⁹⁹ *Idea Spektrum* 40/1999: 9.

21. Fruit is not automatic

Proposition: Persecution does not automatically lead to church growth or to a purer, stronger faith.

The experience of the German Church under the Third Reich and under Communism, for example, has led to neither a more intense reflection about persecution, nor to revival or church growth. Even when martyrdom is fruitful, however, its results are never automatic, but always due to God's mercy.

Jesus' parable of the sower (Matt 13:3-8+20-22) identifies persecution and pressure as just as dangerous to faith as wealth and egotism. Which is more hazardous to faith: persecution or wealth? Western Christians tend to glorify persecution, and believers under persecution tend to glorify liberty and wealth. Besides those who accept the Word of God and those who reject it, Jesus' parable identifies two further groups of people, who are both open to the Word, but fall away:

He told many stories in the form of parables, such as this one: Listen! A farmer went out to plant some seeds. As he scattered them across his field, some seeds fell on a footpath, and the birds came and ate them. Other seeds fell on shallow soil with underlying rock. The seeds sprouted quickly because the soil was shallow. But the plants soon wilted under the hot sun, and since they didn't have deep roots, they died. Other seeds fell among thorns that grew up and choked out the tender plants. Still other seeds fell on fertile soil, and they produced a crop that was thirty, sixty, and even a hundred times as much as had been planted!" (Matt 13:3-8). The seed on the rocky soil represents those who hear the message and immediately receive it with joy. But since they don't have deep roots, they don't last long. They fall away as soon as they have problems or are persecuted for believing God's word. The seed that fell among the thorns represents those who hear God's word, but all too quickly the message is crowded out by the worries of this life and the lure of wealth, so no fruit is produced. (Matt 13:20-22)

The faith of the one suffers under persecution and pressure, the faith of the other is suffocated by worldly concerns and the deceit of wealth. That applies to us, as if it had been spoken in 2000, not 2000

¹⁰⁰ Johan Candelin. "Persecution of Christians Today". S. 16-24 in: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (Hg.). *Persecution of Christians Today: Christian Life in African, Asian, Near East and Latin American Countries*. Documentation October 28, 1999 Conference Venue. Berlin. Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung: Berlin, 1999

years ago! Jesus neither glorifies persecution with its fears nor wealth with its worries. Both are serious trials for our faith. In both situations, we need to keep God's word and bring forth fruit.

Let us not become envious of others, but learn from them. We who enjoy liberty must learn from those who suffer, that Christianity is no "fine weather" religion, but that we can endure under the most dreadful circumstances. Besides, we can also employ our wealth and our time to serve the suffering family of faith. On the other hand, Christians under persecution can learn from us that peace and wealth alone do not bring happiness or make it easier to live biblical truth. Our faith does not depend on conditions, but only on the faithfulness of God, who fills us with His Holy Spirit, Who gives us the power to serve Him and to become more like Christ.

22. Martyrdom accompanies world missions

*Proposition: Martyrdom is a part of world missions, for "Missions lead to martyrdom, and martyrdom becomes missions."*¹⁰¹

Hans Campenhausen comes to this conclusion in his study of the Early Church. Jesus sent out the Seventy¹⁰² and the Twelve with the words, "Look, I am sending you out as sheep¹⁰³ among wolves. So be as shrewd as snakes and harmless as doves." (Matt 10:16; Luke 10:3. See the whole address on persecution¹⁰⁴; Matt 10:16-42.) Karl Rahner uses a similar formulation, "Church and missions affirm each other."¹⁰⁵ The universal spread of Christ's Church has always been accompanied with the blood of the martyrs and world missions are "missions beneath the cross."¹⁰⁶ Even more obvious are the less grievous forms of persecution. "As long as it preaches the Gospel, the

¹⁰¹ Hans von Campenhausen. "Das Martyrium in der Mission". *op. cit.* p. 71.

¹⁰² See Theofried Baumeister. "Märtyrer und Verfolgte im frühen Christentum" *op. cit.* p. 172.

¹⁰³ Luke even refers to them as lambs.

¹⁰⁴ Peter Mayer. "Zeugnis und Leiden des Jüngers Jesu – nach Matth. 10". pp. 2-16 in: Urgemeinde und Endzeitgemeinde – Missionarische Existenz in Zeugnis und Leiden: Vier Referate der Jahrestagung des Arbeitskreises für evangelikale Missiologie (AfeM). Idea Dokumentation 3/1988.

¹⁰⁵ Karl Rahner. Zur Theologie des Todes, *op. cit.* p. 93.

¹⁰⁶ Bruno Herm, cited in: Ingrid Kastelan. "Verfolgung ist letztendlich Verheißung". idea 45/1977 (7.11.). pp. I-II, here p. I (on the AEM conference, "Gemeinde in Bedrängnis" 2.-6. Nov. 1977 in Burbach-Holzhausen).

Church will always confront rejection, persecution and death.”¹⁰⁷ No wonder that, after leading him to Christ and calling him to become an evangelist, Ananias warned Paul that his ministry would have an immense outcome, but would also bring the apostles immense suffering: “But the Lord said, ‘Go, for Saul is my chosen instrument to take my message to the Gentiles and to kings, as well as to the people of Israel. And I will show him how much he must suffer for my name’s sake.’” (Acts 9:15-16). Missiology must, therefore, pay more attention to the issue of persecution than it has done in the past, taking as our role models missiologists such as Karl Hartenstein¹⁰⁸ and Georg Vicedom,¹⁰⁹ who considered the suffering of missionaries and of the emerging church an integral element of their theology of missions.

¹⁰⁷ I. Bria. *op. cit.* 268.

¹⁰⁸ See: Christof Sauer. *Mission und Martyrium: Studien zu Karl Hartenstein und zur Lausanner Bewegung.* *op. cit.* Karl Rennstich. “Urgemeinde und Endzeitgemeinde: Missionarische Existenz in Zeugnis und Leiden.” pp. 17-27 in: *Urgemeinde und Endzeitgemeinde – Missionarische Existenz in Zeugnis und Leiden: Idea Dokumentation* 3/1988. pp. 20-25.

¹⁰⁹ See: Georg Vicedom. *Das Geheimnis des Leidens der Kirche. Theologische Existenz heute* NF 111. Chr. Kaiser: München, 1963; Johannes Triebel. “Leiden als Thema der Missionstheologie”: *Der Beitrag Georg Vicedoms zum Thema im Kontext gegenwärtiger Stimmen. Jahrbuch für Mission* 20 (1988): 1-20.

The church of Christ under the shadow of Antichrist

Peter P J Beyerhaus*

Abstract

The church faces antagonism from the very beginning through all times. This stems from the fight between Christ and the Antichrist. Various aspects of the nature and appearance of the Antichrist based on biblical texts are pointed out. The relation between apocalyptic prophecy and present day persecution is discussed.

Keywords Church history, theology of history, eschatology, Antichrist, persecution, martyrdom.

1. The antagonistic character of the church's history

When Jesus in response to the messianic confession of Peter in Matthew 16:18 for the first time mentions the word *ἐκκλησία*. He immediately proceeds to speak about the dark counter force whom the disciples are going to meet; “and the gates of hell ...”. The Church in her earthly existence is placed into a situation of battle: Is she going to stick to the confession of Jesus Christ, her divine Saviour and Lord as her one foundation, or will she betray him under the pressure of anti-Christian seduction and persecution?

That cannot be otherwise; because Jesus himself from his birth onwards (Matt 2:13) is engaged in a controversy with his opponent. Before he commences his messianic ministry the Devil in the desert tries to induce him to exchange his divine commission with the inner-worldly role of the Antichrist (Matt 4:1-11 par.). His mission then leads him into the exorcistic struggle with the demons (Luke 11:20). Thus John can determine the goal of Christ's coming “For this

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purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8b, AV).

The duel is marked by three dramatic climaxes: The temptation of Jesus in the desert – his victory over Satan by his Cross and Resurrection – Satan’s final disarmament at the Second Coming of Christ. Thus the great theme of world and church history is: “Christ or Antichrist?”

The Devil wants to prevent the atoning work of Christ from taking place or – since this attempt fails – to thwart its results. For Christ’s victory is Satan’s own defeat and it is a signal of his inescapable end. This generates his hatred of the Church. He pursues a double strategy. External persecution – internal seduction; consequently his two main weapons are murder and lies.

In the ambivalent meaning of the preposition *αντι* (against or instead) the Antichrist places himself either as an open enemy against Jesus Christ and his Church, or he appears as a fascinating pseudo-Christ; but as soon as he sees that his opportunity has come, he drops his mask in order to proceed to a violent attack.

The history of salvation accordingly does not lead through an organic evolution to the establishment of the messianic kingdom on earth. Rather it has to win through against the alternative plan of the adversary. Both opponents pursue their own analogous *telos*: Jesus aims at the final, visible establishment of his peaceful rule at his return – Satan aims at his presumptuous grasping of power in the figure of the Antichrist and his world dominion.

As St. Augustine has described it classically, already within the history of the present eon *Civitas Dei* and *Civitas Diaboli* are engaged in a constant battle in which all human beings are participating either on one side or the other. This fact excludes any form of inner-worldly progressive philosophy of theology of history.

2. The rise and downfall of Antichrist as the eschatological climax of the drama of redemption

According to the biblical view the Devil is going to gain a final world historical triumph by the appearance and the seizing of power of Antichrist, his demonically inspired human deputy.

In the early Church this forthcoming event formed an important doctrinal lesson which also later on could be referred to by the catechetical and congregational instruction:

“... as you have heard that antichrist shall come” (1 John 2:18)

“... which you have heard from the beginning” (v. 24)

“Surely you recall that I used to tell you these things while I was still with you?” (2 Thess 2:5).

According to Paul one inseparable element of God’s revealed plan of salvation is constituted by “the appearance of the man of sin ..., the son of destruction, he who opposes and exalts himself against all that is called God or that is worshiped; so that he sits as God in the temple of God, setting himself up as God.”

This will precede the parusia of Christ – therefore it is introduced by the phrase: “For it will not be, unless ...” (2 Thess 2:3). Jesus himself in a veiling expression predicted the coming of Antichrist, since it forms an essentially element in the Old Testament and New Testament apocalyptic from the book of Daniel onwards to which Jesus referred explicitly in the “synoptic apocalypse” (Matt 24:15)

The New Testament authors Paul and John picked it up and inserted it christologically in their own concept of salvation history (2 Thess 2; 1 John 2 and 4; Rev 13-19). To them here both divine truth and divine redemption were at stake, since salvation is found in Christ alone. Until St. Augustine many church fathers have dedicated themselves to this delicate topic. According to Cyril of Jerusalem (350 AD) the person and work of Antichrist belongs to the basic teaching of his baptismal catecheses. This knowledge is vital for every Christian, therefore serious warnings against seduction and apostasy are tied to it from the observation of which man’s eternal destiny is dependant (Rev 14:9-12). The expectation of Antichrist is by no means a mere subject for speculation; on the contrary it is integral to dogmatics, preaching and religious instruction. In view of the manifold manifestations of religious and ethical deviation from the truth in our time, it must not become demythologized or concealed in the Church’s teaching.

I am stating this in clear opposition to a widespread consensus amongst modern theologians which pertains not only to the Antichrist, but to the personality of the Devil himself.

2.1 Historical observations

How deeply the topic of the coming Antichrist was rooted in the teaching of the Ancient Church is documented by the fact that in the seventh century Islam could integrate it in its own eschatology, with evident references to the statements in John's book of Revelation.

Martin Luther in his dramatic situation believed that the person and work of Antichrist could clearly be discerned in two contemporary figures: The Pope in Rome and the false prophet Mohammed whose belief was spread by the Turkish invaders. The two had in common their denial of Christ's atoning work as implied in their teaching that salvation is to be merited by the works of the Law. Today, however, Lutheran and other Protestant churches regard the medieval identification of the papal ministry with the Antichrist as an imagination which has been outdated by the contemporary ecumenical dialogue. It is noteworthy, however, that prominent evangelical and Catholic theologians occasionally refer to the "Short Account of the Antichrist" by Russian philosopher *Wladimir Solowjew* (1900). They think that it has significance for the modern Ecumenical Movement.

The peculiar contribution of Solowjew lies in the fact that he – unlike his friend *Fj. Dostojewskij* – did not associate Antichrist with one of the great confessions, but rather attributed an inter-confessional role to him. His seductive imperial unification program is going to cause a trans-confessional polarization within Christianity, which on either side is followed by its own ecumenical alignment: On the one hand the conforming majorities in each confessional church join into the *Oikumene* of Antichrist, on the other hand the minorities of faithful believers unite into the loyal eschatological flock of Jesus Christ, being led by the three re-appearing chief apostles, Peter, John and Paul – presented as symbols of the catholic, orthodox and evangelical types of Christianity.

2.2 Theological problems

Exegetical questions which have been debated for a long time are particularly the following two:

Firstly: Is the biblical figure of Antichrist to be interpreted as an individual person to be expected in the future, or is he a corporative entity?

Secondly: Is this apocalyptic phenomenon to be understood symbolically or as the representative of a political or religious system?

We cannot possibly enter into a discussion about such varied hypotheses. Rather we shall concentrate on the main elements within the biblical statements. By doing so we first have to take note of a threefold distinction that is founded in the exegetical material:

1. The word *αντιχριστοι* (or even *πсевδοχριστοι* Matt 24:24) appears in plural and is pointing to christological heretics that pose as teachers or prophets in the churches (1 John 2:18-26; 2 John 7).
2. In 1 John 4:2-5 we find the expression “spirit of Antichrist” (*πνευμα του αντιχριστου*), which is working presently but at the same time prefigures the eschatological appearance of the personal Antichrist. Psychologically and verbally one can observe a deceptive similarity between the working and talking of God’s Holy Spirit and the spirit of Antichrist, between the spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood. Therefore it is important for the Church carefully to test and discern the spirits.
3. The Antichrist appears either under this name or alternative terms and images in singular as the demonic adversary of Christ and the Church who will arise as powerful ruler at the end of history. Until then his coming is withheld by a historical force, the *κατεχων* (or *κατεχον* in the neuter gender). The church fathers related this term to the Roman state.

We conclude: The two first mentioned entities, the numerous anti-Christian heretics and the spirit of Antichrist, are to be seen as preliminary appearances which are already at work in history. They prepare the final ascendance of the one personal Antichrist and are essentially attached to him.

2.3 Biblical notions of the coming Antichrist

In an overarching perspective the following elements are essential for the apocalyptic figure of the one personal Antichrist. He is the final embodiment of the world historical development as envisaged prophetically by Daniel (Dan 2:7; and 9). In this vision consecutively one mundane world empire replaces the previous one in order finally to find its consummation in the *Imperium Romanum* and its personal peak in the last monarchy.

- It is a satanically inspired figure standing in rivalry to the authentic Christ and his kingship and trying to push it away either

subtly or brutally. It is thus a matter of the decisive final act in the age-old battle of the Devil with God about the universal rule.

- His two main motives are the massive desire for self-realization and in connection with it, hatred against God and his ordinances. He is going to blaspheme him (Dan 7:20.25; Rev 13:5) and to dissolve his commandments. As the great deceiver he will spread atheism and immorality.
- The historical precondition for the appearance of the Antichrist is the great apostasy from the faith as predicted by Jesus in Matthew 24:12 and the spread of ethical licentiousness in mankind. It is significant that Jesus defines this situation as the abounding of *ανομία* (lawlessness), whilst Paul in 2 Thessalonians identifies the Antichrist as the *ανθρωπος της ανομίας* (= man of lawlessness).
- He poses with a self deifying claim of rule and demands of all people absolute loyalty and veneration that expresses itself in the adoration of an idol and in accepting the number 666 as sign of loyalty.
- He deceptively assumes the position of the returning Christ. He resembles him to the extent that he bears a head that looks as if it had been fatally wounded. His fatal wound was healed (Rev 13:3f). He imitates Christ's works and in the first phase of the three and a half year's of his activity he poses under the mask of the benefactor of humanity.
- In that way – supported by demonic miracles (Matt 24,24; 2 Thess 2:9) – he will succeed in seducing a large portion of even the Christian community to fall away. He will be seated in the temple of God and be worshiped by all mankind (2 Thess 2:4; Rev 13:3-4).
- One could regard him as the fulfillment of the expectation of a universal saviour introducing the Golden Age as found in many religions under different names like *Maitreya*, *Krishna* or *Madhi*.
- He makes himself become the head of a political system of unity, achieved by a global accumulation of power – a federation of 10 states. Finally his rule will be transformed into a tyranny of terror.
- His particular wrath is directed against the faithful community of Christ. On the one hand he attempts to make her submissive by means of seduction; on the other hand he will persecute her cruelly whenever she resists him by an uncompromising witness

to Christ. Now the final phase of her history will be entered into the great tribulation (Matt 24:1f.; Dan 12,1). In external perspective Antichrist will overcome the Church of Christ (Rev 13:7).

- But on account of her union with Jesus, the Lamb, in her defeat she is going to win the final victory (Rev 17:14). Christ at his return will slay Antichrist “by the breath of his mouth” (2 Thess 2:8) and deliver him and his followers to the fire of hell (Rev 19:20).
- Antichrist in his claim to rule is assisted by two additional apocalyptic figures: the False Prophet and the Babylonian whore (Rev 17:1-6).
- The former one like a similar beast will be closely associated with Antichrist. He will help him to universal recognition of his authority by performing spectacular miracles in his name and interest (Rev 13:14f). These are meant to prove the divinity of himself and of the idol made for him. The False Prophet embodies the transcended or occult aspect of the person and system of Antichrist.
- The latter one, the “the mystery Babylon” is even more difficult to identify. For in the respective chapters of the Apocalypsis she is depicted in a twofold role: On the one hand (Rev 18) she represents a metropolis that as commercial center has command over global influence. On the other hand she rather appears as a religious-cultural entity that stands in an erotic servile relation to the Antichrist. She rides the beast and lends religious unity and cultic consecration to his reign.
- These two aspects can be connected by the fact that “Babylon” as a political and commercial metropolis also hosts the hierarchic center of the united anti-Christian world religion. In historical perspective, Babylon is also the code name for Rome during the first three centuries after Christ and also the symbol of its totalitarian claim with which the Ancient Church was confronted.
- In getting friendly with the imperial state authority the whore Babylon spreads her immoral power in this-worldly ways. At the same time she persecutes the true followers of Jesus and makes martyrs of them.

- But finally the regents of the anti-Christian dominion turn even against her and bring her to terrible destruction (Rev 17:16). The Antichrist, his prophet and the woman jointly form an ominous Triad. In it the atheistic development of mankind in all spheres of life will find its rebellious climax. For a while apostate mankind will enjoy its inner worldly triumph which will bring the Church of Christ to her final harassment.
- But she is comforted by the promise that the days of this phase are counted. At his return Christ will demolish the anti-Christian dominion and execute the well deserved doom on its representatives. This insurance enables the Church to hold fast to her faith even under the severest afflictions she has to suffer from Antichrist and his helpers. For even his terrible power is a limited one. It is counteracted by the double victory of Christ won at his cross and his glorious return. Being aware of this, the Antichrist must retreat when this double victory is witnessed to undauntedly.
- One important element in the prophetic description of the tyranny of Antichrist is the appearance of the two witnesses (Rev: 3-14) which in the Church's tradition were identified with the Old Testament men of God *Henok* and *Elijah*. By their forceful prophetic preaching, endorsed by miraculous deeds they will stand up against the Antichrist and be untouchable because of a fire emanating from them. This will last until Antichrist after 1 260 days will win a short-lived victory over them. But the Spirit of God will revive them after three and a half days and in the face of all enemies rapture them into heaven. That event will publicly manifest the impending downfall of Antichrist.
- It is important for a true salvation-historical understanding of the Church's eschatological road to notice that according to the book of Revelation 12:10 she will not experience the overcoming of the Devil in a merely passive posture. On the contrary she will contribute herself actively to this victory. By her undaunted testimony for Christ, by her patient endurance of martyrdom and by clinging to the joyful expectation of Christ's triumphant Second Coming she will gain an amount of spiritual power which will bring to naught the destructive plan of Satan. This assurance does not pertain only to the final act of the salvific drama. Rather it characterizes the permanent anti-Christian conflict of the Church in general.

3. The anticipation of the apocalyptic conflict in the present torments of the church

The biblical doctrine of the Antichrist and his satanic system must not be treated only in the final chapter of biblical theology or dogmatics. The ultimate appearance of the personal Antichrist throws its demonic shadow on each generation of Christians, and it happens in actual variations in every historical context. Therefore it is the task of the Church in her preaching to point out the relevance of the biblical witness about the Antichrist and to motivate her members to react accordingly. This is confirmed biblically by the fact that John in his first and second letters expressly warns the churches against a plurality of “antichrists”. Their appearance verifies the prophecy of an eschatological Antichrist and anticipates him. By their teaching activities the present time is qualified as the “final hour”. John writes:

Little children, these are the end times, and as you heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have arisen. By this we know that it is the final hour ... (1 John 2:18 ff).

The main danger arising from the antichrists within the churches obviously is of theological nature. It is the elimination of two central Christian creedal truths: the Trinity of God and the Incarnation of the divine logos. Consequently the redemption from sin wrought at the cross of Christ is also nullified.

Now we must remind that the Gnostic dissolution and reinterpretation of the biblical gospel is not a phenomenon confined to the first three centuries. On the contrary: Gnostic currents have accompanied the Church in her entire history. Today neo-gnostic tendencies leave the Church without protection against the danger of creedal relativism and syncretism. Christianity’s claim to present the ultimate truth when proclaiming the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and the universality of his salvation is discarded principally.

Indeed since the time of Enlightenment until today we are meeting modernistic theologies infected by contemporary thought that in varying degrees resemble those marks of dissolution which are inherent to Gnosticism: the denial of Jesus’ divinity, the abhorring of his atoning sacrifice on his cross, more recently an ethical libertinism particularly with regard to the sacredness of the human life from conception until death, the sanctity of matrimony, the replacement of biblical revelation by subjective mystic experiences through syncretistic experiments, the openness for other religions’ claims of

truth and salvation, and connected with this, the demand to show tolerance to all of them. But a church that allows her doctrine, preaching and practice to be hollowed out dogmatically and ethically will lose its identity founded in the confession of Christ. That makes her unable to resist totalitarian claims made in the name of an ideology or a non-Christian religion, especially when their recognition is violently enforced.

But what happens when a minority within such a compromising church body does not follow the trend of the majority? To which threat will it be exposed when its members raise their assertion of the exclusive validity of the biblical message against the claim of self-deifying rulers to receive absolute submission to their ideologically based dominions? In that case steadfast Christians must be prepared to face increasing pressure, marginalization even by the majority of the church's members, who adapted to the ruling system, and finally even persecution until martyrdom. This is what happens in our days under the regime of *Kim Jong-Il* in North Korea. In extreme radicalism this will be the lot of the entire faithful flock of Christ when one day Antichrist will establish his united empire universally. There are prefigurations of such fate in the experiences of confessing Christians at present. Just take note of the situation in Islamic states. The Koran's law that defectors from Islam must be executed – if necessary even by their own relative – in principle is still valid universally.

If, however, the theory is correct that the eschatological dominion of Antichrist will be based on the Roman Empire, which after several centuries now finds a new political shape in European Union, we should hesitate to state that the greatest anti-Christian danger emerges from the rapidly expanding Islam. Surely in view of the Near East conflict and of the Islamist terrorism spreading since the 11th of September 2002 we have to be prepared for serious conflicts in many parts of the world.

But at the same time we should be alert to a development that takes its starting base in the West and which is spreading world wide in the wake of our expansive secularist civilization. Since the Renaissance and the French Revolution, Europe has emancipated itself from the Christian foundation of its culture and opened itself to the spirit of an ungodly humanism. This is manifest in a series of emerging ideologies, in the relativistic attitude to all normative claims of truth, in pseudoscientific Darwinism and in moral libertinism. In

addition there is openness to the manifold offers of non-Christian religions which propose the establishment of an intercultural brotherhood in the interest of peace. Connected with this is the demand for tolerance towards all spiritual attitudes and lifestyles. But such “tolerance” is switching into a new intolerance over against the Christian assertion of a universally valid truth founded in biblical revelation.²

In the long run we may see the foundation of international political or legal institutions with the task of securing the survival of a world community in a protected environment and an order of peace guaranteed by religious sanctions.

Plans with such targets have been conceived by secret societies during the last two centuries, and influential members of them have introduced them into international organisations. With imploring references to the global dangers their spokesmen imperatively ask for a world government with far-reaching authority. Although such utopian proposals cannot be realized at present they bestow plausibility to the biblical prophecies of a coming world dominion of Antichrist.

4. Conclusion

Being aware of her fragile existence under the shadow of the coming Antichrist, a church who wants to remain faithful to her crucified Lord cannot self-complacently establish herself in peace with this world. Instead in her eschatological situation she must strive to become fortified against her double threat from inside and outside.

This implies *firstly* that she can rely on the ministry of her leaders whom Christ has installed as ministers and elders as watchmen and shepherds of his flock. Their particular task is in due time to discern all anti-Christian temptations of ideological, religious or theological nature, and to refute them.

² In Germany this is experienced by some confessing (and highly conservative) Christians who dissociate themselves from unreasonable demands which their children are exposed to in schools, when they get compulsory instructions that are incompatible with their faith. These include shameless forms of sex-education and mystic or magic experiences in non-Christian spirituality, and evolutionary theories clashing with the biblical belief in creation. When keeping their children from compulsory school attendance these Christian parents are placed before the alternative either to conform or to be punished by heavy financial penalties or even get arrested and put in jail.

Secondly it implies that Christians prepare themselves to face persecutions and to endure them as a suffering for Christ's sake who on his cross has suffered for us. The confessing Church will regard such martyrdom not as an extraordinary event, but rather as the normal situation of her existence in this hostile world which, on account of her eschatological hope, she accepts joyfully. For having suffered in union with him she once will rejoice, when He will reveal his glory and let her share in it (1 Pet 4:12-14).

Thirdly it implies remaining aware that suffering for the sake of the gospel even in its severest forms up to martyrdom for many parts of worldwide Christendom is already a reality. Here we are called to sympathy in the true sense of the word: spiritually to share such suffering as if it were one's own, being mindful of the Pauline word: "If one member is suffering, all the members suffer with it" (1 Cor 12:26). We are to identify ourselves with our suffering brethren and sisters both with heart and soul and even bodily, as it is put in Hebrews: "Remember those who are in bonds, as bound with them; and those who are ill-treated, since you are also in the body" (Heb 13:3). For we can relieve our fellow Christians in their suffering by means of faithful intercession and physical support.

If the harassed Church really lives in spiritual communion with Christ, her heavenly head, her basic mood is marked neither by self-pitying nor by anxiety or fatalism. Rather it is a joyful assurance of victory, generated by the Holy Spirit. We are fortified by the "spiritual armour" in which we can resist the evil attacks of the Devil and even proceed to a counter-attack (Eph 6:10-20).

The anointment of the Spirit clarifies our sight and teaches us to discern the saving message from the seductive lies of anti-Christian teachers. In spite of all warnings against the Antichrist and his companion and the description of the terror exercised by them, John, the prophetic apostle, does not emphasize their superhuman power. The decisive biblical testimony is rather that the days of his rule are counted. In the decisive moment as foreseen by God he will fall down, and his demonic system will collapse. This is true not only for the final Antichrist but also of his forerunners and their tyrannical systems.

History provides impressive examples – beginning with the downfall of the pagan Roman Empire which persecuted the ancient

Christians, and just recently by the unexpected collapse of the Soviet bloc in 1989.

For the harassed Church it is especially encouraging to learn that in spite of her external feebleness by her enduring persecution unto martyrdom she is able to render her own contribution to the ultimate defeat of Antichrist (Rev 12:11).

Therefore her returning Lord promises to her that after her painful trials He will lift her up to himself to let her participate in his divine life and his eternal royal rule (Matt 24:30f).

The more her agony is increasing the nearer comes the day of her redemption (Luke 21:28). All the seven letters addressed to the harassed Churches in Asia Minor are marked by the assurance given to the persecuted Church in Smyrna:

“Be faithful unto death and I shall give you the crown of life”

(Rev 2:10b)

Persecution, advocacy and mission at the beginning of the 21st century

Reg Reimer*

Abstract

This article, given as a plenary presentation of the WEA Missions Commission conference at Goudini Springs in South Africa in 2006, is a broad overview of the phenomenon of historical and current persecution of Christians to inform mission practitioners in the 21st Century. It covers the inevitability, the effects, the anatomy, the growth, and the sources or causes of persecution. It summarizes the biblical and historical responses to persecution and discusses the tension between advocacy for the persecuted and biblically required readiness to suffer. Finally, the article suggests appropriate missiological responses to all of this.

Keywords Inevitability of persecution, growth of persecution, sources of persecution, biblical responses to persecution, historical responses to persecution.

“Wait a little longer” (Rev 6:11)

“I appeal to Caesar!” (Acts 25:11)

There could hardly be a clearer statement of the inevitability of persecution, and martyrdom for some, past and ongoing, than Revelation 6:11. The quota of martyrs is not yet filled.

While the souls of the martyrs wait, longing for justice, and their number is being increased, how are we, the living followers of Jesus, to understand persecution, suffering for righteousness’ sake, and martyrdom? Especially, how does the certainty of persecution, suffering, and martyrdom inform our apostolic mission to advance the frontiers of the kingdom of God?

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1. The inevitability of persecution

Jesus in John 15:20 says, “Remember the words I spoke to you, ‘No servant is greater than his master’. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.” And Paul in 2 Timothy 3:12 states: “In fact everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” These unqualified statements make clear that persecution for the followers of Jesus is both inevitable and normative.

Mysteriously, it is sometimes through persecution, suffering, and martyrdom that God spreads his glory and his name, making them expressions of both Christian spirituality and mission.

To understand this better we need to overcome misguided thinking about persecution, suffering, and martyrdom.¹ First, the recent *Left Behind* series by LaHaye and Jenkins illustrates one popular idea that intense persecution is in the unpredictable future. While this may fit an eschatological scheme, it has the negative effect of minimizing the persecution that is an ongoing present reality for many.

Others, mistaken in the opposite direction, relegate persecution, suffering, and martyrdom to some ancient time, considering them isolated historical events. However, the truth is that followers of Jesus – now embracing a third of the human race by some counts – are experiencing more persecution and martyrdom than at any time in history.

A third fallacy, primarily Western, confuses the “suffering for righteousness sake” of the New Testament for general human suffering. Glenn Penner explains: “Because the biblical texts on persecution cannot readily apply to a setting where there is little persecution, the tendency seems to be to misapply these passages to situations of general physical, psychological and spiritual suffering.”² While illness and natural disasters are serious issues, they must not be equated with persecution and martyrdom.

¹ Charles Tieszen’s article “Mission in Contexts of Violence: Forging Theologies of Persecution and Martyrdom”. It is based on his Master’s thesis at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 2005, entitled “A Theological Framework for Understanding Persecution”.

² Glenn M. Penner, *In the Shadow of the Cross: A Biblical Theology of Persecution and Discipleship* (Bartlesville, OK: Living Sacrifice Books, 2004), 8-9.

Another challenge is the issue of “proportion”. For example, ridicule suffered by a Christian student in a university is not the same as, and cannot be equated with, the intense persecution suffered by Christians in the oppressive nation of North Korea.

2. The effects of persecution

There is a tendency, especially among those who have not experienced it, to romanticize persecution and to conclude that only good can come from it. Because there are times and places where intense persecution coincides with the rapid growth of the church, it is often concluded that there is a causal effect (the church in the book of Acts and today’s China come to mind). But it does not necessarily follow that the church grew *because of* persecution and that persecution must, therefore, be good. The church grows not because of persecution but by the power of God and the faithfulness of God’s people regardless of their circumstances.

Tertullian, the North African church father, was at times right when he said, “The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow, *in blood of martyrs is seed*.”³ But it is also true that harsh persecution through the centuries has crushed many Christians and decimated churches – in the Middle East and North Africa, for example. Some individual Christians and churches flourish under fire, while others falter and fail.

The deprivation, cruelty, and dehumanization suffered by victims of persecution are not “good”! These are of the enemy! In Vietnam, for example, it is well documented that in the past 30 years Christians have been harassed, discriminated against, arrested without cause, starved, beaten, imprisoned, raped, dispossessed and chased from home and fields, and even killed for Christ’s sake. Only the Evil One takes pleasure in inflicting these injustices on those made in the image of God!

In September 2005 a Vietnamese pastor was released from a terrifying 15-month imprisonment. He had been rotated to five different prisons, was sometimes in rooms with 100 criminals and other times in a solitary cell. He had been attacked by prisoners with HIV/AIDS. He confessed to feeling alienated from his family and his church after his release. The feeling worsened. Six months after release he uttered the words, “I only discovered real loneliness when I

³ See Tertullian, *Apology* L.

got out of prison. My colleagues, my own brother and even my wife don't understand and won't believe what I tell them". Persecution is not good!

People much prefer the more positive reports of those who seem to flourish in persecution. It is truly amazing that *for many, the persecution they suffer becomes a means of receiving grace!* They testify of God's strengthening presence in the harshest conditions. They report on God's miraculous provisions in times of extreme need. And so persecution and suffering become an occasion for God's comfort, often through others. Prison can become an opportunity to witness. One Vietnamese pastor led 69 people to faith during a six-year prison term, discipling some through the sewer pipes!

Persecution and suffering can also be an opportunity of sanctification. James writes, "Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial" (James 1:12). Persecution also restores focus on Christ and can generate Christian unity through solidarity. For some, persecution and suffering lead to martyrdom, becoming a doorway to eternal glory.

3. The anatomy of persecution

The recently circulated *Servants in the Crucible*⁴ is a significant 10-year global study on persecution which seeks to identify the implications of persecution for sending agencies and sending churches.

The study identifies two major kinds of persecution. *Top-down persecution* occurs where the church has been established and where thousands of believers are gathered in church communities. The Christian community is seen as a threat to the prevailing state ideology, as in communism. The state enacts top-down, severely oppressive efforts to abuse, imprison, kill and even eliminate Christianity.

In situations where there are few Christians, as in Saudi Arabia and North Africa, *persecution is better described as bottom-up*. In such places it is a combination of government, society, and family who partner to suppress even nascent manifestations of Christianity, giving few opportunities for Christian belief to root and grow.

⁴ Mohit Gupta, *Servants in the Crucible: Findings from a Global Study on Persecution and the Implications for Sending Agencies and Sending Churches* (soon to be published manuscript, 2005).

And there are other helpful taxonomies of persecution. For example, one researcher has identified seven sources of persecution in China in that context. Persecution may come from the Communist Party, the government, the family, neighbours in the community, from other churches, from corrupt officials, or from over-boldness or self-invitation.⁵

Johan Candelin of the WEA Religious Liberty Commission describes the evolution of persecution as often originating with disinformation, then moving to discrimination and finally to full-blown persecution.

Penner helpfully points out that the persecution of Christians is not purely *religious*, even in the New Testament. Sometimes it was *religious* (Acts 8), with Christians seen as a threat to the prevailing religious system. In other instances the reason is *political*, as Christians are perceived as a threat to the civil order (Acts 12:1,2; 17:5-7; 18:12ff). The reason may be *social* as when the acceptance of Jesus is seen as rejecting societal and family norms (Matt 10:36 and John 15:18-20). Acts 16:16-24 gives a clear illustration of an *economic* reason for persecution. The jealousy of the Jewish leaders who are challenged in Acts 5:16-18 and 17:5-7 is perhaps an *emotional* cause for persecution.⁶

4. General definitions - religious freedom / liberty and persecution

The broadest and most universally accepted definition of religious freedom is found in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change one's religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

Implicit in this, is the notion that this “right” for one cannot infringe upon this same right of another.

⁵ “Seven Dimensions of Persecution in China Today” in *China Development Brief*, No 53, May-July 1997.

⁶ Penner, 162.

Our discussion is more narrowly focussed on the persecution of Christians, for which there is no universally accepted definition. A recent attempt by Charles Tieszen is helpful:

*Any unjust action of varying levels of hostility, perpetrated primarily on the basis of religion and directed at Christians, resulting in varying degrees of harm as it is considered from the victim's perspective.*⁷

The word “martyr” has recently been devalued since terrorists use it for themselves. The word martyr is now best qualified by the adjective “Christian”. A Christian martyr, following David Barrett, is a Christian who voluntarily suffers death as a penalty for witnessing to or refusing to denounce faith, or a tenet, principles or practice belonging to it.⁸

5. The growing phenomenon of persecution

Some of the very high figures on the number of Christians being persecuted and martyred, sometimes published these days as firm and unqualified, cannot be substantiated. A responsible estimate is Paul Marshall's contribution on “persecution” in Eerdmans' *Encyclopaedia of Christianity*.⁹ He says that while it is impossible to total the number of Christians who suffer violent persecution, the Christian communities in countries and areas where such persecution occurs number at least 230 million. Several hundreds of million more suffer from widespread discrimination.

Hundreds of millions of Christians! And yet the secular world and even many Evangelical Christians remain abysmally unaware of what is happening.

6. Sources of persecution

There are at the beginning of this 21st century *four main engines driving the persecution phenomenon*.¹⁰

⁷ Tieszen, 5.

⁸ David B. Barrett, *World Christian Encyclopedia*, First Edition (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1982) 8.

⁹ *Encyclopedia of Christianity*, Vol. 4, (Eerdmans, 2005) 163. Cited by the *Library Journal* as probably the best encyclopedic reference on Christianity. See also *Religious Freedom in the World: A Global Report on Freedom and Persecution*, a Freedom House publication edited by Paul Marshall, (Nashville, TN: Broadman Publishers, 2000).

¹⁰ These are well developed by Ron Boyd-MacMillan in *Faith that Endures: The Essential Guide to the Persecuted Church Today*, Baker 2006.

1. The first is *communism* in the countries of China, Vietnam, Laos and Cuba – and North Korea in a negative category all its own. The residual effects of communism also affect religious freedom significantly in the countries of the erstwhile Soviet Union, especially Central Asia.¹¹

“Religious freedom” in communist countries generally means that religious organizations must be under the state’s administrative control. The objective and common result is that religious organizations are co-opted by the state. To accommodate the pressure from the West to improve human rights and religious liberty China (in 2005)¹² and Vietnam (in 2004)¹³ promulgated new religion legislation intended to create the impression at least, that there is more space for religion. But so far there has been no movement among the numerous house churches to register, and with good reason.

Religious leaders would prefer laws that protect the democratic rights of believers, though communist states are not ready for this. It is very clear that the ideological basis for these states’ religion policy is unrealistic. As long as they remain “illegal”, house churches will be subject to reprisals based on unfounded fears and arbitrary whims of anti-Christian communist authorities.

Communist states have shown flexibility in adapting their repression methods. Orthodox communism long considered all religious expression to be useless superstition. However, in the mid-1990’s, realizing it had an ally in the traditional animistic practitioners, Vietnam began to promote “beautiful indigenous culture and historic beliefs and customs” as an antidote to rapidly growing Christianity among its ethnic minorities.

2. A second major engine of persecution is *the rise of religious nationalism* centred chiefly in South Asia. Where country and religion have been identified with a state (e.g. Buddhism in Sri Lanka and Hinduism in India), Christians have more and more been treated as second-class citizens and subjected to violent communal attacks.

¹¹ Forum 18 News Service of Oslo, Norway provides extensive coverage of this issue. Go to www.forum18.org.

¹² See “New wine in old wineskins – an Appraisal of China’s Legislations” and the “Regulations on religious affairs” (by YING Fuk-tsang of the Divinity School of Chung Chi College, the Chinese University of Hong Kong).

¹³ The Religious Liberty Commission of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada has published a series of monographs on the Vietnam situation. Go to www.evangelicalfellowship.ca.

Churches in India and Sri Lanka are regularly documenting church burnings and other violent attacks on Christian communities. These countries, some with democratic traditions, are adding anti-conversion laws to their repertoire of anti-Christian weapons.

In Burma (Myanmar), the military regime that completely lacks popular support, wraps itself in the cloak of Buddhism in its war against Burma's mainly Christian ethnic minorities.

3. The third and now most alarming engine of Christian persecution is the Muslim world increasingly influenced by *growing Islamic extremism*. From Morocco in Northwest Africa to the easternmost islands of the Indonesian archipelago three types of Islamic persecution are spreading.¹⁴

The first type is *direct state persecution*, such as in Saudi Arabia, where non-Islamic expressions of religion are simply forbidden. Saudi enforces *sharia law* which requires the killing of anyone who converts away from Islam. This extreme measure is also part of the legal code in Mauritania, Sudan, and Iran. A major component of the costly civil war in southern Sudan has been the attempt of the Khartoum government to impose its brand of Islam on Christians and animists.

A second type of Islamic persecution is *the violence of mobs and radical groups*, often at the instigation of radical Islamic leaders. The Coptic church in Egypt for example is subject to such violence. A third type of persecution comes *directly from Islamic terrorist organizations*. The Laskar Jihad group, for example, has massacred thousands of Christians in the Mulukas and Sulawesi in Indonesia.

4. The fourth engine of persecution which is planting itself in the West is *secular intolerance*.¹⁵ Secularism has a belief system similar to some traditional religions in that it has an exclusive claim to truth and hostility toward alien belief systems. Freedom of expression (freedom to evangelize) and the autonomy of churches are areas of concern. Also with the rise of sexual libertarianism (promiscuity, homosexuality, abortion), teaching on morality and ethics is being

¹⁴ *Encyclopedia of Christianity*, Vol. 4, (Eerdmans, 2005) 162, 163.

¹⁵ See pages 28-30 in Lausanne Occasional Paper No. 32 entitled "The Persecuted Church" edited by Patrick Sookhdeo, a summary of the findings of the Persecuted Church Interest Group at the LCOWE 2004 forum held in Pattaya, Thailand. This small volume is filled with material on this topic and contains an excellent, annotated bibliography as well.

restricted. There have been prominent cases prosecuting Christians in Canada and Sweden.

A major threat also lies in the promulgation of so-called “hate laws”. Ostensibly put forward to reduce religious friction, they sadly result in limiting free speech and religious expression. There is a case of Christian pastors being charged in Australia for violating hate laws by giving a seminar on Islam. The Australian law became a tool in the hands of Muslims to prosecute Christians in a liberal western democracy!

7. Biblical and historical responses to persecution

With the New Testament as a guide, the early church as the first example, and the experience of Christians through the centuries, we can observe that the followers of Jesus have responded to persecution in one of three main ways. They flee it, they endure it or they resist it.¹⁶

Flight. The New Testament instructs (Matt 10:23) and describes (Acts 8:1 and 9:25) fleeing from persecution. It is significant that in the biblical record, however, flight is not primarily to escape harm, but rather it is strategic in the context of mission. When danger threatens, strategic withdrawal is permitted. Even Jesus hid himself (John 8:59) because “his time had not yet come”. But Jesus continued relentlessly on his mission which he knew included great suffering before the glorious resurrection.

Countless waves of followers of Jesus have fled persecution and gratuitous suffering through the centuries and, like the church in Acts, have carried the Good News of the Kingdom with them and helped it flourish on new ground.

Fortitude. The weight of New Testament scriptures, especially the Pauline letters, calls on Christ’s followers to stand firm in the face of all adversity, and to remain faithful even unto death. For many persecuted people and communities through the centuries, flight has not been an option – so they have had to endure!

Fight. There are clearly times when it is appropriate to stand up for one’s right to worship and to serve God and his church. St. Paul

¹⁶ Penner, 132, 133. A similar paradigm is widely found in other persecuted church literature.

provides clear examples on several occasions during his tumultuous missions (Acts 16:37, 22:24ff and 25:10 and 11). In the trial before Festus, Paul says, “I appeal to Caesar!” thereby seeking his rights under existing law. Further, on his release from prison in Acts 16, Paul is not content with mere freedom. He says in effect, “They knocked us around and stuck us in jail without a trial even though we are Roman citizens, and now you just want us to slip away. Don’t you think the persecutors should face the legal consequences?” And so it is today. Many Christians are today persecuted in contravention of their own national laws and international treaties signed by their governments.

8. Advocating for the persecuted

Biblical permission to advocate against the injustices of the persecutors by legal means forms part of our mandate to advocate for the persecuted. Missionaries have historically stood against injustices such as suttee, infanticide and slavery, and can do so against religious persecution, based on the dignity God himself gave humankind by creating us in his own image!

Charles Taber’s “In the Image of God: The Gospel and Human Rights”, is a landmark article in this regard¹⁷. He says that the idea of universal, panhuman and non-discriminatory rights is of quite recent origin. He argues convincingly that while this idea may have some roots in ancient Greece and in the Hebrew Scriptures, it was Jesus who set the benchmark.

(Jesus) alone among all religious founders and leaders rejected all forms of discrimination and insisted that all human beings ought to be treated in exactly the same way. His own dealings with women, with children, with lepers, and other ritually polluted people, and with foreigners radically undermined all the distinctions that human societies of his day unanimously institutionalized. He extended the category of “neighbour” to all humankind and insisted that the two Great Commandments applied to all.¹⁸

Likely the most valiant human attempt to capture human dignity is the United Nations 1948 Declaration of Human Rights. While it, and numerous elaborations are admirable, they are all too often impotent. Many a nation violating religious freedom and other human rights is a signatory. Taber concludes:

¹⁷ By Charles R. Taber in the July 2002 issue of the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 98-102.

¹⁸ Ibid. 99.

When all is said and done, there is only one resource available to Christians to bring non-Christians to see human dignity as Jesus did. It is the intrinsic credibility and persuasiveness of the Gospel, since the truth of human dignity is a component of the Gospel and has no secure existence apart from the Gospel.

9. Missiological work required

The reality of the situation in the world today confirms with unmistakable clarity the certainty of persecution, suffering for righteousness sake, and martyrdom predicted by Jesus for his faithful followers. What then shall we do?

9.1 Communicate the liberating Gospel

And do this in the full way just described. This is not formulaic evangelism, but a mandate to call Christians to costly discipleship.

9.2 Advocate for the persecuted

This is at once a highly spiritual and practical response. We must intercede in prayer with perseverance for those who are persecuted. We must take risks to come alongside those who suffer for His name's sake. We must stand with them in their response – whether flight, endurance, or fight.

Part of the prophetic denunciation of the principalities and powers which demean and desecrate God's children through persecution, involves shining the light on evil, appealing to laws, national and international, and providing information for engaging world opinion on the side of justice.

The role of front line missionaries in this advocacy is sometimes considered controversial. But missionaries may choose to share discreetly the information they often uniquely possess and allow others to do the public work.

Ron Boyd-MacMillan has helpfully summarized and evaluated seven “intervention tactics”.¹⁹ He calls them (1) prayer/intercession, (2) truth-telling/publicity, (3) private representation, (4) legal intervention, (5) illegal intervention, (6) political pressure, and (7) positive contribution. I would add another (8), “constructive

¹⁹ Ibid. 16-33.

engagement” – building relationships with the persecutors and appealing to their self-interest to stop repressing believers.²⁰

Advocacy for religious liberty will inevitably pull us into the larger human rights cause. Though religious liberty has been called the mother of all human rights, rights are ultimately a seamless whole.²¹

9.3 Materially aid the persecuted and their dependants

We must give sacrificially to sustain the persecuted and those dependent on them. Appropriate aid may also help the persecuted decide to stay put rather than flee and further deplete a suffering church.²²

9.4 Prepare for persecution

An indispensable tool in combating persecution is mature disciples. Ambassador Robert Seiple, citing Rwanda, once remarked that the biggest threat to successful intervention of Christians today is the superficial faith of many.²³ Too much of what is called evangelism and mission recently has bordered on the Pharisaism of quantifying so-called first-time decisions. Let us in the 21st century recapture the 1st century example of calling people to daily decisions to follow Christ in costly discipleship.

Our movement has done embarrassingly little to help Christians prepare for persecution. Many organizations are anxious to help Christian prisoners of conscience, but few do the hard work of engaging Christians in persecuted or threatening situations to prepare for the inevitable. Preparation for persecution is on the agenda of some persecuted church organizations but the topic requires much more attention.²⁴ There are too few seminary courses on persecution

²⁰ The Institute of Global Engagement, founded by Ambassador Robert Seiple, is a rare example.

²¹ See the outstanding analysis “Religious Liberty: From 2005 into 2006” by Elizabeth Kendall, analyst for the World Evangelical Alliance Religious Liberty Commission at www.worldevangelical.net.

²² A number of persecuted church organizations have in recent years moved beyond the charity approach and sought creative ways to support poor and marginalized Christians so they might stay put instead of flee or migrate.

²³ Personal conversation with Robert Seiple, first US Ambassador for International Religious Freedom, October 2002.

and on doing mission in contexts of violence. Such emphasis must increase.

9.5 Formulate theologies to guide our mission and the Church

9.5.1 A theology of persecution, suffering for righteousness sake and martyrdom

It is a useful first endeavour to rediscover what persecuted saints through the ages thought and did in their circumstances. But it is also true that theologizing is a never-ending task and must be done anew in each generation. A call for more theological reflection on these matters also emerged at the Persecuted Church Interest Group (PCIG) at the LCOWE gathering in Pattaya, Thailand in 2004. Among the topics the study suggested were the relationship between the contemporary struggle for human rights and the way of the cross, and the sovereignty of God in persecution and suffering and the growth of the church.²⁵

9.5.2 A theology of religious freedom and advocacy

Ironically, those coming out from under generations of communism, also found themselves unprepared for “freedom”. They still reaped the bitter fruits of repression.²⁶ Is there sufficient theological reflection on how to live obedient to Christ in a pluralistic, free society? And surely we could benefit from deeper theological reflection on advocating for religious freedom.

9.6 Create appropriate strategies for sending churches and sending agencies

Missionaries, whatever their origin, must be willing to embrace a lifestyle that reflects a biblical view of persecution, suffering and martyrdom. Personal security is not the goal of mission. Christians in persecuted contexts are also greatly encouraged and challenged when

²⁴ Open Doors has published *Standing Strong Through the Storm* (Santa Ana, CA, Open Doors International, 2004) compiled by Paul Estabrooks and Jim Cunningham. This 400-page book is a substantial course widely tried and tested in persecution contexts.

²⁵ In *Lausanne Occasional Paper* No 32, cited above, 8.

²⁶ Danut Manastireanu of Romania is one the few I know who has done clear thinking and reflecting on lessons learned from the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc. He has some excellent seminars on “Post-communism”.

they see missionary families sharing their vulnerability. Such boldness does much to authenticate the Gospel message.²⁷

Persecuted contexts also dictate that missionaries must, even sooner than they otherwise might, remove themselves from visible leadership and work through intermediaries, new converts and local Christians.

Finally, the church in parts of the world now exempted from persecution, suffering and martyrdom desperately needs to experience the fellowship of the suffering. Missionaries working in contexts of persecution have an important role here. They can mediate the experiences and spiritual lessons of the suffering to their sending churches.

9.7 “Consider the Body” - the call to unity and partnership

A chief strategy of the enemy in contexts of persecution is to divide and isolate the followers of Jesus. On the other hand, every report of victory testifies of Christian solidarity! This is true of the personal relationships of the persecuted. But is it also true of mission organizations in contexts of persecution. We must learn better to demonstrate that we share the same spiritual DNA!

The situation of increasing worldwide persecution makes doubly urgent the call for kingdom collaboration among all of God’s people and organizations. Ironically it seems the barriers to partnership and collaboration are often highest in persecuted contexts. Working to overcome obstacles and opposition as we minister with and to those who share the sufferings of Christ today is not an option.²⁸

10. A final word

While the souls of the martyrs wait, and are being added to, we, the living followers of Jesus pursue his mission. This includes learning and sharing the hard but necessary spiritual lessons of persecution and suffering for righteousness sake, in the way of the cross, especially when justice is not at hand. But it also includes appealing to Caesar, that is to human instruments of justice, on behalf of God’s persecuted children made in His image. This is a paradox, but not a contradiction.

²⁷ Mohit Gupta develops this idea in *Servants in the Crucible*, 69-73.

²⁸ An outcome of the 2004 Lausanne Forum is the Religious Liberty Partnership, a collaboration initiative among persecuted church organizations. It has encountered significant resistance from organizations that should be part of it.

Christian suffering and martyrdom: An opportunity for forgiveness and reconciliation

Richard Howell*

Abstract

Dealing with the recent killings of Christians in Orissa, the Indian author maintains that forgiveness and reconciliation are proper Christian responses to suffering and martyrdom. The Early Church lived this by God's superhuman power and was marked by holiness. Unfortunately, from the time of the medieval church a merger between violence and holiness has led to crusades, post-Reformation religious wars, the Conquista in Latin America and the shedding of blood of Christians by Christians eg. in Rwanda. However, there were Christians strongly objecting this. A brief survey of other religions also shows a merger between violence and holiness. Christians must not let evil succeed by responding with violence and retribution but must try to overcome evil with good by letting the cross of Christ shape their relationships with others. How should the Church remember and respond to the suffering experienced? The memories must be interpreted within the Christian world view, the wrongdoing must be publicly and truthfully remembered, condemned and forgiven. In the battle against evil, even against evil in one's own culture, the Church needs inter-church community.

Keywords Forgiveness, reconciliation, suffering, martyrdom, violence, remembrance, Orissa, India.

The Church is called by God to witness to the gospel of forgiveness and reconciliation even in the face of suffering and martyrdom. It is imperative that the Church's response to violence is formulated in the light of Jesus' response to his cruel and barbaric crucifixion, designed by the Roman authorities as a deterrent for all to see and be warned. In the midst of this awful experience and extreme situation Jesus demonstrates love for his enemies. He offers forgiveness to those responsible for his execution (Luke 23:34). The Church is redeemed by God who in Christ dies for the redemption of the ungodly. The

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message of the cross then is that when we serve and even suffer for others, we are in the company of Jesus Christ. The cross opens us to grace giving us the kind of love Christ showed when he washed the disciples' feet and cared for the unlovable and died for the ungodly.

How was this model of Christ pursued or neglected in church history?

1. Obedience to Christ

The emphasis in the early Church was that every Christian should live in obedience to Christ. Clement (A.D. 30-100) gives the examples of the martyrdom of Peter and Paul “who spent their lives in the practice of holiness” and urges Christians “to give up vain and fruitless cares, and approach to the glorious and venerable rule of our holy calling” (Donalds & Robertson 1985:15).

The “Letter to Diognetus,” was written by an anonymous apologist (about 129) to present a case for Christianity. The argument is set in the context of the transcendent God who made himself known in history in the person of Jesus Christ, ‘destroying the divinities of human imagination’. The character of Christian life is a primary piece of evidence for the supernatural basis of Christian religion. ‘Christians are different and mysterious, because they live by a superhuman power.’ Christian faith brings vitality and grace and love to a world full of hatred. This illustrates the early church’s conviction that every believer is so to live in obedience to Christ that others, seeing their exemplary lives, will want to follow Christ also (Letter to Diognetus:205-224).

In the Christian tradition, Cecilia was the daughter of a noble Roman family, and was the only Christian of her family, who lived during the reign of the emperor Septimus Severus (A.D. 193-211). She suffered martyrdom for her absolute devotion to Christ. Now in the catacomb of Rome lies her statue, on one hand she had three fingers outstretched and on the other hand just one finger, denoting her belief in the triune God.

In 284 when Diocletian became Roman Emperor the persecution of Christians intensified. Though Christians never presented a political problem to the state, for they remained aloof from politics to a remarkable degree, the church was rapidly growing in numbers and strength. Two options were available to the ruler, either to force submission and break its power, or to enter into alliance with it and

thus secure political control of the growing church. The latter as we will see later was adopted by Constantine; the former was adopted by Diocletian. The growth of Christianity was perceived as a threat and thus united worshippers of local deities against it, while Diocletian was disposed to emperor-worship and the service of old gods. Diocletian moved cautiously. He first got rid of Christians in the army and then the imperial service of Christians, beginning in February 303, by three great edicts of persecution in rapid succession. Churches were ordered destroyed, sacred books taken away; church leaders imprisoned and forced to sacrifice by torture. In 304 a fourth edict required all Christians to offer sacrifices. It was a time of intense persecution. There were many martyrs and many who gave up their faith (Walker 1970:100).

How then did the Gospel spread to every corner of the Roman Empire within two centuries? The Christians were ablaze with the power of the risen Christ, the threats of persecution did not dampen down their passion to spread the gospel. The first great church historian Eusebius of Caesarea (260-340) wrote that many unnamed charismatic evangelists travelled widely, “scattering the saving seeds of the kingdom of heaven far and wide throughout the whole world... a great many marvellous miracles of divine spirit were still being worked by them” (Thomas 1995:4-7).

Mission for most Christians in the early Church was defined primarily in terms of being rather than doing. This became a recurring theme of Orthodox mission theology.

In his book *The Rise of Christianity* American sociologist Rodney Stark writes: “The total number of Christians martyred by the Romans probably was fewer than a thousand. But their steadfastness greatly strengthened the faith of other Christians and impressed many pagans” (Stark 1997:164). He documents how the church lived during the first three centuries of the Christian era in the Roman Empire. Abortion, infanticide, adultery, demeaning treatment of women and plague were all common in the Roman Empire, with negative consequences on the Empire. The Roman population barely reproduced itself because of frequent abortions. Female infanticide produced a serious shortage of women for marriage. Adultery, abortion, and forced pre-adolescent marriage destroyed the fertility of many women. Plagues killed a high percentage of the population. Stark demonstrates that Roman Christians behaved differently. They did not practise abortion. They

treated women with dignity and respect and cared for others instead of fleeing when plagues hit. The impact was tremendous. The Emperor Constantine legalised Christianity in AD 313. Stark writes: “Rather than cause of triumph of Christianity, the emperor Constantine’s “Edict of Milan” was an astute response to rapid Christian growth that had actually made them a major political force” (:2). Unfortunately making Christianity the state religion of the Roman Empire weakened the faithfulness of the Christian community by bringing in people who did not really believe or had a weaker belief.

2. Merger between violence and holiness

The crusades are the most obvious example of the merger between violence and holiness which took place in the medieval Church. Catholic Popes combined religious authority and political power for centuries. The crusades beginning from 1096 which dominated the life of both the Church and state in Western Europe for over two centuries, had their roots in the teaching of Gregory the Great that it was the duty of Christian rulers to defend and extend the Christian faith. Since salvation came by obedience and participation in the life of the Church, conversion by force seemed logical. In 1095 Pope Urban II (Riley-Smith 1981:37-40) urged his listeners to undertake a holy war to free the Holy Land from pagan control. The appeal succeeded, and the first crusade was launched. The crusades were a tragic distortion of Christian mission, for which the Church is still criticised.

However, the early 13th-century friar Francis of Assisi joined the Fifth Crusade not as a warrior but as a peacemaker. He was not amused by the Crusaders, whose sacrilegious brutality horrified him. In his view, judgement was the exclusive province of the all-merciful God; it was none of a Christian’s concern. True Christians were to befriend all yet condemn no one. Give to others, and it shall be given to you, forgive and you shall be forgiven, was Francis’ constant preaching. Francis sailed across the Mediterranean to the Egyptian court of al-Malik al-Kamil, nephew of the great Saladin who had defeated the forces of the hapless Third Crusade. Francis was admitted to the august presence of the sultan himself and spoke to him of Christ. Francis went back to the Crusader camp on the Egyptian shore and desperately tried to convince Cardinal Pelagius Galvani, whom Pope Honorius III had put in charge of the Crusade, that he should make peace with the sultan, who, despite far greater force on his side, was all too ready to do so. But the cardinal had dreams of military

glory and would not listen. His eventual failure, amid terrible loss of life, brought the age of the crusades to its inglorious end (Cahill 2006). Donald Spoto, Francis of Assisi's recent biographer, accurately calls Francis "the first person from the West to travel to another continent with the revolutionary idea of peacemaking."

Another dissenting voice against crusades was that of Ramon Lull who in the early 14th century visited North Africa on an investigation mission for a crusade being planned by the Pope. He returned in 1308, reporting that the conquest should be achieved through prayer, not through military force (Ramon Lull).

The comments of Scott Peck on the nature of crusades are wisely stated:

Crusades and inquisitions have nothing to do with Christ. War, torture, and persecution have nothing to do with Christ. Arrogance and revenge have nothing to do with Christ. When he gave his one recorded sermon, the first words out of Jesus' mouth were, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit.' Not the arrogant. And as he was dying he asked that his murderers be forgiven (Peck 1983:11).

The religious wars that followed the Reformation were some of the most violent in all of European history. The Thirty Years' War (1618-1648) was initially fought largely as a religious conflict between Protestants and Catholics in the Holy Roman Empire, although disputes over the internal politics and balance of power within the Empire played a significant part. Walker writes:

Little evidence of spiritual life was manifested in this frightful time of war; yet to it, in large part, and reflecting the trust of heartfelt piety in its stress, belongs the work of perhaps the greatest of Lutheran hymn-writers, Paul Gerhardt (1607-1676). In its earlier years, also, lie the chief activities of that strange and deep Protestant mystic, Jakob Böhme (1575-1624), of Görlitz (Walker 1970:396).

The Roman Catholic mission in the sixteenth century continued many of the characteristics of the crusades especially in Latin America. The Society of Jesus saw itself as an army whose members were soldiers of God. They vowed to fight under the direction of the pope for the good of souls, and the propagation of faith in whatever countries he might wish to send them. The order produced some of the most attractive and effective missionaries, among them, Xavier, who wished to "bring natives into the fold of Jesus Christ" (Thomas 1995:29). The tragic side of Roman Catholic mission in this period

was seen in the colonisation of Latin America, with mass baptisms, exploitation, and often extermination of the native populations.

But why is religious language exploited by people betrothed to inhuman violent struggles? Mark Juergensmeyer observes, “By identifying an earthly worldly struggle with the cosmic struggle of order and disorder, good and evil, light and darkness, justice and injustice, political actors and religious leaders utilize the readily available way of thinking that justifies the use of violent means” (Juergensmeyer 1991:386). The social scientists research to discover primarily the social and political aspects of the problem, but as Juergensmeyer states some ‘have tried to trace the patterns in religion’s own logic’. David Rapoport (1984:658-77), for instance ‘has identified several features of Messianic movements that he believes lead to violence, most of which are characterise by a desire for an antinomian liberation from oppression.’

For religious language to lead to violence it is essential for the pious to believe that the cosmic struggle is realizable in human terms. Juergensmeyer writes:

If the war between good and evil, order and chaos, is conceived as taking place in historical time, in a real geographical location, and among actual contestants, it is more likely that those who are prone to violent acts will associate religion with their struggles (Juergensmeyer 1991:386).

With millions of Christians killing Christians in Europe and not so long ago in Rwanda and Kenya in Africa and also in India in Asia, history shows much blood of Christians has been shed by Christians. However, both sides of confessing Christians consider their dead as martyrs and the others as perpetrators of crime. Can such killings be considered martyrdom?

3. Merger between violence and holiness in other religions

Democratising societies in Asia and Africa display a disturbing common tendency towards ethnic and religious violence. The reason is simple. As societies open up and politicians scramble for power, they appeal to the public for votes using what ends up being the most direct, effective religious language, which cements group solidarity in opposition to some other group. Religious language is most effective in adding fuel to the fires of ethnic or religious conflict. Sometimes

the conflict turns into a full-scale war. The warfare religious language is often used as a motivational tool for political ends, for nothing better unites and mobilises people and resources for action than war.

Religious intolerance is not alien to *Hinduism*, as Romila Thapar writes, “despite the nineteenth century myth that the Hindus are by instinct and religion a non-violent people. The genesis of this myth was partly in the romantic image of the Indian past projected, for example, by scholars such as Max Müller” (Thapar 1994:19ff; see Müller 1983:101ff). History bears witness to ample religious conflicts in the Indian society. “In Hindu tradition, for instance, the mythical battles in Mahabharata and Ramayana epics are frequently used as metaphors for present day struggles, just as are the actual battles in Sikh and Islamic history and in biblical Judaism and Christianity” (Juergensmeyer 1991:386). Romila Thapar questions, “One is often struck by how different the message of the Gita would have been and how very much closer to non-violence if Gautama Buddha had been the charioteer of Arjuna instead of Krishna” (Thapar 1997:71).

Writing about “The Mahabharata Legacy, and the Gita’s Intent” Rajmohan Gandhi says:

Proud as we are of the epic’s codes of chivalry, we cannot be proud, I suggest in all humility, of the story, or history, it reveals. In particular, we cannot be proud of the epic’s acquiescence in triumph of revenge over reconciliation. I suggest, further, that we cannot be glad that the epic is reproduced in varied forms in our history (Gandhi 1999: 34).

The concept of soldier-saint is inherent in *Sikh religion*. Before his death, Guru Arjan, (1581-1606) seeing the war-clouds gathering, advised his son Hargobind (1606-1645) to sit fully armed on his throne, and he asked Bhai Buddha to make a soldier-saint out of him (Loehlin 1964:7). Sikhs are independent and democratic; they are equal members of a Brotherhood, the Khalsa. It was this spirit of independence that drove them to revolt against the Brahman-dominated caste system in the first place; and it was this same spirit that led them to organize the Khalsa as a militant brotherhood to oppose domination by Islam. “The warrior strain appeared in their ancestors of old. Their Aryan forbearers conquered all Northern India, singing the hymns of the Vedas as they went. A devout appreciation of Nature went along with the ruthless dispossession of the *Dasyus* (Dalits). These Vedic Aryans were the original warrior saints, and the ideal of the soldier-saint dominates the Sikhs to this day” (:7).

Certainly the *qur'anic model* of leadership is authoritarian. Starting with the eleventh century AD over a span of eight centuries, conquerors flying the flag of Islam raced down the passes of Hindu Kush, and down the plains and deserts of India, killing those in their way, smashing numberless idols in temples, including images of the Buddha, plundering gold and other precious booty. Sometimes they returned from where they came with their treasures. Occasionally they remained and ruled. Islam teaches it is the duty of Muslims to exert themselves strenuously "in the cause of God" against both personal ungodliness and the enemies of Islam. *Jihad* can mean 'holy war,' but the struggle for uprightness of life and propagation of the faith prefers peaceful means such as persuasion and example. Muslims consider themselves as comprising the *Dar al-Islam*, 'the Household of submission,' and the rest of the world's peoples as the *Dar al-Harb*, 'the Household of warfare.' It is the duty of Muslims to extend the *Dar al-Islam* by means of missionary activities and in some cases even by military jihad, if necessary, toward the ultimate goal of a worldwide Islamic community embracing all. However, the Qur'an explicitly admonishes that there shall be "no compulsion in religion" (Sura 2:256). *Jihad* is the only form of armed conflict sanctioned by the religion, and those who fall "in the cause of Allah" are martyrs who will immediately taste the joys of salvation (Sura 2:154; 3:169, 195). Muslims distinguish between the 'greater *jihad*,' which is the constant struggle of the individual believers against his own evil tendencies, and the 'lesser *jihad*,' which is actual armed conflict in defence of the faith or its propagation (Denny 1981:382).

The established leadership usually does not resort to violence; rather the second level of leadership, a younger and more marginalised group for whom the acts of violence are enormously empowering. The psychological dimension of power may be even more effective. Even a small display of violence can have immense symbolic power: the power to awaken the masses into realization of their potency. This was best illustrated, when on December 6, 1992, the Ayodha's Babri Masjid mosque, built in 1528 by Mir Baqi under the authority of Babar, the first Mughal emperor of India, was demolished in revenge by a mob of more than 300,000 Hindus, most of whom wore the saffron colour of Hindu nationalism. Ashis Nandy aptly puts it, "there is now a peculiar double-bind in Indian politics: the ills of religion have found political expression but the strengths of it have not been

available for checking corruption and violence in public life” (Nandy 1985:14-24).

Our brief survey of religious violence sufficiently attests the fact that a community of human beings can be thoroughly blind, corrupt, and incapable of recognizing what is good, just, liberating, and corresponding with God. Very few people would deny that violence with utterly false orientations in which the very powers providing orientation are employed, is a conspiracy against life itself. Religious language always becomes a handy tool to mobilise violence by merging violence and holiness.

Ruthless power politics that rules the world, at times reflects itself in various religions, and eliminates people who are perceived as threat to personal or institutional power. For evil to totally succeed requires that when an evil action is committed it is responded to with violence and retribution. This continues the spiral of evil. Instead of returning evil for evil, we must heed the scripture and try to overcome evil with good (Rom 12:21).

The Christian community in India does not have a history of involvement in religious violence, even though we are victims of violence. They have practiced with honour and respect from all communities, their rights and duties as citizens to work for social progress and promote the ideals, which seem true and right. They work to alleviate human misery and injustice because they believe God loves all people equally and desires justice for all.

4. The cross defines our relationship with others

How should we then relate to others? The cross defines this. Jesus Christ “died for the ungodly” is the central assertion of the New Testament. The message of the cross is that when we serve and even suffer for others, we are in the company of Jesus Christ.

An exemplary witness to the gospel of reconciliation is demonstrated in the testimony of Gladys Staines. When Graham Staines and his two innocent children Philip and Timothy were burnt alive, in Manoharpur in Orissa, India on 23 January 1999, his widow Gladys Staines commented, “I have no hatred. I forgive.”

When, the victim, Gladys forgave the perpetrators of the crime she changed the nature of discourse. Forgiveness does not allow

perpetrators to decide the terms of discourse, nor to determine under what terms the social conflict is carried out, or the values around which the dispute is rampant. Forgiveness empowers the victims and disempowers the oppressors. The world media was at her doorstep questioning her, “How could you forgive?” Gladys writes:

God did not leave us alone. The whole community rallied around us. We were being upheld through prayer, phone calls and surrounded by not only friends from the local community but of the whole of India. People, whom we had never met, came to comfort and console us. I am overwhelmed and so thankful for many people who prayed and are still praying for us daily. God enabled us to forgive immediately. Jesus Christ has forgiven me and commanded us to forgive. Paul taught us to forgive as Christ has forgiven us. Ephesians 4:32. Forgiveness has brought healing into our lives and become a part of my life. God continues to encourage me to share the message of forgiveness and grace that He has given me. This message from God’s Word the Bible is for each one of us (Gladys Staines 2009).

However, Orissa continues to witness waves of persecution against Christians.

5. Remembering the pain of Orissa truthfully

The Church condemned the painful and barbaric act of killing the 84 year-old religio-political leader Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati and four of his followers on 23 August 2008 by 30 masked Maoist Liberation Guerrilla Army. His killing resulted in the killings of Christians by the sections of Sangh Parivar in Kandhmal and in other parts of Orissa, although the local Maoists owned responsibility for the killing of the Swami. The analysis of the militant section of Sangh Parivar stands shockingly on a simplistic syllogism. Premise 1: The Christians killed the Swami. Premise 2: Those who kill should be killed or at least punished. Conclusion: We are justified in mistreating and killing of Christians.

When on 24 August they came for Narmada Digal in Kandhmal, she wasn’t there. She had fled, five children and mother-in-law in tow, to the safety of the jungles a kilometre away. So, they set about what she left behind; a framed picture of Jesus, a Bible in Oriya, utensils in the kitchen, some clothes, and linen. By the time Narmada sneaked back, her home was gone. What was left was still hot from the ashes, and smoking. The neighbours came to sympathize. Narmada took a good look, stood erect, and pulled her sari over her head. She began to

pray. “Lord, forgive us our sins. Jesus, you are the only one. Save us from our misfortune. Free us, Lord.” Narmada’s children join her. She is weeping as she pleads for deliverance. So is everybody else. It is a solid bond between her and the crucified and resurrected Lord which no human violence can split. “I will die. But I won’t stop being a Christian,” Narmada says (Simha 2008).

The militant section of the Sangh Parivar burned, killed, beat, raped and forced conversion to Hinduism on Christian believers in Orissa. They systematically destroyed homes, churches, orphanages, Bible schools, even burning entire villages throughout the state of Orissa. The Sangh has assumed the role of jury, judge and executioner. The atrocities against Christians in Orissa are the worst ever in the recorded history of Christianity in India. The state government has totally failed in its duty to protect innocent Christians who are unable to defend themselves. The police have stood by, and occasionally joined the Sangh mobs in the violence.

How should the Church remember and respond to the recent killings of Christians in Orissa? Should we harbour cold and enduring anger, thirst for revenge and react like a wounded animal? In order to respond as free human beings we must value feelings, even the desire for revenge, but it also implies following moral requirements implanted by God into the framework of our humanity. As the Church we must be determined not to lose sight of the command to love one’s neighbour, even if the other acts as our enemy.

The victim might question, shouldn’t the perpetrators who are truly guilty be dealt with as they deserve to be treated with the strict enforcement of retributive justice? The state is a gift of God’s common grace and is granted authority to maintain law and order and restrain evil in society (Rom 13:1-7). However, it needs to be stated that Christian love of the enemy does not exclude the concerns for justice but goes beyond it, to forgiveness and reconciliation.

5.1 Suffering as part of Christian identity

The Church must integrate the humiliation and pain as part of the Church’s life story. Those traumatised and wounded by violence require healing of their memories. Healing is accomplished not so much by remembering traumatic events and their accompanying emotions, as by interpreting memories within the Christian world view and inscribing them into a larger pattern of meaning making them part

of our identity. The means of healing and reconciliation is the interpretative work the Church does with the memory of suffering and martyrdom. Suffering can make us better persons; it can draw us closer to God or make us more empathetic with other sufferers. Pain can cause us to grow in righteousness and Christlike character.

5.2 Public remembering

If no one remembers the Orissa violence and names it publicly, it remains invisible. To the outside observer, the suffering of victims and the violence of the perpetrators go unseen. Public remembering of wrongs is an act that acknowledges them and is therefore also an act of justice. Acknowledgement is essential to personal and social healing. The remembrance must be truthful.

To remember the wrongdoing truthfully is a process of condemning it. The biblical message of condemning the perpetrator and loving the wrongdoer form part of the Christian story. The message of the Bible is that condemnation is part of reconciliation, not an isolated independent judgement even when reconciliation cannot be achieved (cf Volf 2006). We forgive even when the perpetrator has not asked for forgiveness and work for reconciliation, fully realising reconciliation can only be attained if both parties are willing to be reconciled.

6. Need for inter-church community

In the battle against evil, in particular against evil in one's own culture, we need inter-church community. The Church has taken roots universally in many cultures, changing them as well as being profoundly shaped by them. Nevertheless all the Churches in diverse cultures are one just as the triune God is one. No Church in a given culture must commit the sin of self-sufficiency thereby isolating itself. Every Church must be open to all other Churches. Every local church is indeed part of the universal Church but the inverse is equally true that the universal Church is also part of the local church. This makes every local church a truly universal community of the Spirit. This is evident in the life of Christians who overcome national and ethnic rivalries as a result of transformation in Christ. This positions the Church as the multicultural community of the Spirit bound together by the power of the cross of Christ. The moral and social transformation shapes the Church as a transcultural community ordered toward purity of life and adoration of God.

Our commitment to the Lordship of Jesus Christ who is the Word of God must be supreme so that we hear, trust and obey him in life and death. Yet, lest we drown the voice of Christ we need to see ourselves and our own understanding of God's kingdom with the eyes of Christians from other cultures.

We should not underestimate our ability to twist the Word of God to serve our own communal ideologies and national strategies. The desire for our community survival and prosperity of our culture can easily overpower us all and obscure our vision of God's new creation. If we are unaware that our culture has sabotaged our faith we will lose a platform from which to judge our own culture. In order to keep our allegiance to Jesus Christ pure we are duty-bound to nurture commitment to a multicultural community of Christian churches. Our commitment to the Lordship of Jesus Christ and our commitment to the inter-church community of Christ must go together. You cannot have Christ and reject his universal multicultural body.

The Church is the actual historical bearer of the reconciling message of Jesus Christ. The disciples of Christ are creative catalysts, they are the preserving and illuminating¹ elements in the world without which the earth cannot survive and remains in darkness. Their light thus becomes the hope of the world. The disciples are indispensable for the accomplishment of God's purpose in the world. Their mission is accomplished not only in word but in the deeds of their daily existence.

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¹ "You are the salt of the earth"; "You are the light of the world" (Matt 5:13-14).

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