

SEVEN SNARES IN RELATING TO THE PERSECUTED CHURCH

The following article is adapted from an editorial appearing on the SAT7 website, **WAZALA**¹. The original article was written by a contributor from the Middle East, and adapted for INcontext Ministries by Mike Burnard who has served persecuted believers across the globe for more than 25 years.



“Last year alone, ninety three members of my congregation were killed. The threat is particularly great for those who convert to Christianity. I baptized thirteen adults secretly last year. Eleven of them were dead within a week.”

Canon Andrew White, speaking about his church in Baghdad, Iraq

The Body of Christ is so much more than a local church that meets on Sundays – it is a global body built up of all those who call Him Lord and Saviour. We are called to be one, and it is only together that we make sense and that we function effectively. This, however, is easier said than done. Even when we sincerely want to be there for our brothers and sisters elsewhere in the world, the manner in which we help and the kind of help we should offer requires careful reflection.

It is clear that religious persecution is increasing in the world. A new study by the Pew Research Center² (January 2014) indicates that the number of countries with a high or very high level of social hostilities involving religion reached a six-year peak in 2012. One third of the 198 states included in the study experienced high levels of hostility on religious grounds. According to their previous report, ***74% of the world's population (nearly 5.1 billion people) live in countries where there are high levels of restrictions on religious freedom***³.

During the last two months, developments in Iraq and Syria have affected the situation of Christians in heartbreaking ways. We hear reports of extreme suffering almost every day, and the natural response is a desire to do our best to support, reach and encourage those affected. But responding to the suffering of the Persecuted Church brings a host of challenges and risks that, if not addressed, will continue to undermine our good intentions and bring more harm than blessing.

Below are some of the areas where we may be challenged to reflect on current practises and to develop more ethical positions:

1. DEMONISING PERSECUTION

A major obstacle to a full Biblical understanding of the divine function of persecution is a western theology that ‘demonises’, avoids and misinterprets hardship, risk, suffering and sacrifice. This attitude nullifies God’s design for the advance of His Kingdom and the making of disciples through the suffering of His saints. We really need to understand this. ***Salvation came through the cross and therefore has to be displayed through the cross.*** Persecution is not a curse.

Colossians 1:24 captures a key principle in understanding persecution: *“And now I am happy about my sufferings for you, for by means of my physical sufferings I am helping to complete what is still lacking of Christ's sufferings on behalf of his body, the church.”*

Of this scripture, John Piper says the following: “Paul’s self understanding of his mission is this: that he is called by his suffering to complete the afflictions of Christ on the cross. That’s a design. This does not mean he atones for anybody’s sin or that Christ’s atoning death was in any way deficient. It means this. That the afflictions of Christ, acted out by Him in FULLY atoning worth are meant to be displayed and portrayed by His suffering Church for the ingathering of the nations. The one thing lacking in the sufferings of Christ Jesus is that His fully atoning love offering needs to be presented in person through missionaries to the peoples for whom He died. And Paul says, “I do this in my sufferings. In my sufferings I complete what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ.” This means that Christ intends for the Great Commission to be a presentation to the nations of the sufferings of His cross through the sufferings of His people. That is the way it will be finished. If you sign up for the Great Commission, that is what you sign up for. To put it more plainly and specifically, God designs that the suffering of His ministers and missionaries is

¹ http://www.wazala.org/2014-06-testimonies-that-build-the-hearer-but-break-the-teller/?utm_source=July+2014+Wazala+Email&utm_campaign=July+2014+Wazala+Email&utm_medium=email

² <http://www.pewforum.org/2014/01/14/religious-hostilities-reach-six-year-high/>

³ <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/06/20/arab-spring-restrictions-on-religion-findings/>

one essential means in the joyful triumphant spread of the Gospel among all the peoples of the world. It is the means and the design for the Persecuted Church within the Kingdom of God, to reflect the cross to those who are longing for forgiveness and salvation.”

2. SENSATIONALISING PERSECUTION



There is always a subtle danger that compassion and anguish could be replaced by sensationalism – the sharing of stories in a way that provokes public interest, excitement or outrage at the expense of other factors like accuracy and integrity. While this mainly refers to the way in which media reports stories, it also relates the reason why – and manner in which – we share information within our own personal networks. It also impacts the way in which we personally pray and personally respond to the needs of the persecuted Church.

When Meriam Ibrahim⁴ was recently sentenced to death for apostasy in Sudan, there was a global outcry that spanned cultures and nations. On one hand, this response was wonderful, but on the other, there was something sad about it. It was encouraging to see how awareness of Meriam’s situation grew, and how the global body of Christ expressed their solidarity with her and her family. Her case brought about a new wave of awareness of the persecution that many Christians face, and the global outcry helped towards securing her release on 25 June 2014. Sadly, however, the dust seemed to settle immediately after her release. The response to Meriam’s situation did not result in further action against the wider issue of Christian persecution, and few voices have been heard since in support of other prisoners like Asia Bibi⁵ (who has spent the past four years of her life in a prison in Pakistan) and Behnam Irani⁶ and

Saeed Abedini⁷ (who are both suffering severe torture in Iranian prisons). What made Meriam’s case different? Much had to do with the fact that she was pregnant and gave birth in prison, which played in perfectly to the global media’s sensationalist tendencies.

Was the response of the body of Christ rooted in anguish or in concern? The two emotions may seem similar, but there is a subtle yet marked difference. **Christians in the ‘free world’ are increasingly immersed in a culture that constantly draws our attentions and emotions from one thing to another, and anguish will be the difference that allows Christians to respond in a godly manner, rather than a worldly one.** The media can be accused of pursuing sensationalist stories that play on human emotions in order to generate a temporary public response, but the reality is that our human nature is drawn to the ‘big stories’ until something else claims our attention and emotion and concern. Only when we actively ask God to move us from a place of concern to a place of anguish will we be able to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17) for people like Meriam Ibrahim, Asia Bibi, Behnam Irani, Saeed Abedini and the countless, nameless other members of the body of Christ who are suffering and in need of support.

3. “CLICKTIVATING” PERSECUTION

“Clicktivism” – the act of engaging with a cause via online petitions or social media – is closely related to human leaning towards sensationalism and has become a conscience-soothing alternative for “activism”. Clicktivism offers **the appearance of ‘doing something’**, and is a very common modern day danger when it comes to responding to Christian persecution.

When the 200-plus schoolgirls were kidnapped from Chibok in April 2014, it drew international outrage in the early days after the news hit the global media. In a short space of time, the social media Twitter hashtag #BringBackOurGirls became a top trend among international leaders like Michelle Obama as well as numerous celebrities – by 11 May it had attracted 2.3 million tweets, and it has been described as one of the world’s biggest social media campaigns. But Boko Haram did not bring back the girls, and the unresolved kidnapping saw a massive decline on social media platforms as well as mainstream news media reports.

Dan Hodges, in an opinion piece for *The Telegraph*, comments on the problem of social media when it comes to the global response to things like the Nigerian schoolgirl kidnapping: “[Facebook and Twitter can] bring to people’s attention vital issues that would previously have been ignored, or if communicated via traditional media outlets, [would have] resulted in a giant global shrug. “That’s terrible. But what can we do?” But as we’ve seen, what Twitter and Facebook give with one hand, they take with the other. As soon as their focus shifts, so does ours. And the very nature of the medium – fast, transient, superficial – means that focus never stays in the same place for long.”

Awareness is good, and the signing of online petitions is not a bad thing. If, however, that is where the engagement of the global body of Christ stops – then it is a problem.

⁴ <http://incontextministries.org/index.php/investigate/heroes-of-faith/10-heroes-of-faith/413-meriam-yahia-ibrahim>

⁵ <http://incontextministries.org/index.php/investigate/heroes-of-faith/10-heroes-of-faith/44-asia-bibi>

⁶ <http://incontextministries.org/index.php/investigate/heroes-of-faith/10-heroes-of-faith/62-benham-irani>

⁷ <http://incontextministries.org/index.php/investigate/heroes-of-faith/10-heroes-of-faith/64-saeed-abedini>

4. CONSUMING PERSECUTION



A concerning trend in the publications, conferences and media reports on persecution is that very often there is a self-centred approach that ultimately benefits the readers/listeners more than the persecuted. A significant proportion of ‘persecuted news’ tends to focus on personal testimonies, which is understandable since abstract numbers and analysis are rarely as engaging as human stories.

However, this brings a serious ethical challenge. The most popular stories are often ones that include supernatural accounts and heroic resolutions, and not all stories do. Publications often present these events to the reader as an encouragement or challenge to greater faith. ***This reduces reports of persecution to objects of consumption by the Western Church for our own encouragement or spiritual journey, whereas our encouragement should only be a by-product, not the main focus.*** We report stories of persecution because the body of Christ is suffering and asking for us to be with them, to help them, to pray, to lobby and to share their suffering.

This consumer attitude has also resulted in a trade that can simply be described as a “Persecuted-Route” travel industry. Countless Christians going on ‘short term outreaches’ to the Persecuted Church that result in little action but much ‘personal growth’. Personal testimonies become more important than post-visit involvement and the strengthening of those who are at the point of death.

5. ROMANTICISING PERSECUTION

The same consumer-based approach to reporting stories of persecution often ‘romanticises’ suffering. The storyline follows like this: there is suffering but in the thick of it Christians are happy and full of faith – even though it is bad, the Church grows under persecution. Sadly, this is only true sometimes and in some places. Many Christians lose their faith or suffer to such a level that they carry the scars and pain for a lifetime. There are more incidents of churches being wiped out through persecution than those that see church growth. ***There is nothing romantic about Christians being jailed, tortured and raped.*** And those that suffer such horrendous persecution may also feel the pressure to fit their experiences into *our storyline* and what we expect of them. Their psychological suffering, doubts, questions and walking away from the faith are hardly mentioned in our reporting. This raises serious questions about how genuine our care for the people actually is, beyond their ‘story’.

6. EMPLOYING PERSECUTION

Sadly, raising funds for the Persecuted Church has also become a lucrative ‘business’, with some organisations and individuals enriching themselves through the needs of those who suffer extreme hardships and suffering.

A Jewish Rabbi was once asked to comment after watching a video showing how a TV evangelist visited Nigeria to pray for the sick. Before and after praying, the evangelist took up an offering from the poor to “secure their healing”. He arrived at the meeting in a helicopter, dressed in a fancy suit, and returned to his 5-star hotel after the meeting in the same fashion, just a little richer. The sick left in the same way that they arrived – destitute, poor and desperate. The only words the Rabbi said after watching the video were the following: ***“I pray to God in heaven that there will be a special place in hell for those who enrich themselves through the needs of others.”***

This should be a caution for all who dare to speak on behalf of those who carry the cross of Christ. May our actions always be in service of those of whom we speak or write, and may our sharing of their suffering always be to their benefit, not ours.

7. ‘RELATIVISING’ PERSECUTION

Another problematic trend is the growing belief that while Christians are persecuted elsewhere in the world, believers suffer equally in the West too. Some suggest that it can be more difficult to be a ‘faithful Christian’ in the developed world with all its freedoms and wealth and social opposition than in a poor country with active persecution. Yes, it is true that Christianity is losing its privileged position in countries like the US and UK, but while Western Christians in some contexts may feel under

pressure to compromise or deny their faith, we cannot say we are persecuted or are facing the levels of hostility experienced by millions of Christians around the world.



To argue that materialism and wealth somehow make it more difficult to follow Christ than when living in circumstances of daily fear or desperate poverty is deeply problematic, both theologically and ethically. *It dismisses or diminishes the actual sufferings of our fellow believers and turns us into victims.* This results in apathy towards the suffering of the global Church and encourages us to be insular and self-obsessed. It is empirically wrong (following Christ is *not* normally difficult in the West) and ethically corrupt (they, not we, are being victimised and we are the ones in a position to help).

CONCLUSION

These seven 'danger areas' challenge us to consider honestly how we relate to the Persecuted Church, what motivates us to share about their suffering, and the manner in which we go about speaking or writing on their behalf. They are important questions to ask, too, of the speakers, publishers and charities that bring us reports on persecution, so that we can truly stand alongside our suffering brothers and sisters with genuine anguish, prayer and action (1 Corinthians 12:26, Hebrews 13:3).



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