

# WORD of TRUTH

WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT PERSECUTION EDITION ONE

By RI's Theological Advisor Dr Ian Dickson

## THE Big PICTURE

I TOOK MY SEAT in an almost full cinema. The day had not gone well. So I was there to unwind. The coughing faded, the lights dimmed and the titles rolled. Half an hour later I walked out, unable to take any more. Was it tiredness or a virus? No, it was the movie.

On telling of this untimely exit to a close friend, he was horrified. 'You walked out of *The Matrix!*', he repeated with genuine astonishment. Apparently, I had missed something very special. So what was my problem? Quite simply, I didn't hang around long enough to get a sense of the bigger picture.

So where does the bigger picture lie? There is no better place to begin than with the teaching of Jesus in John 15:20<sup>1</sup>. The immediate context is the application of the truth that '*no servant is greater than his master*' (20a)<sup>2</sup>. Back in 13:16 Jesus applied this principle to humility and service, here he applies it to opposition and persecution. His disturbing statement, '*if they persecuted me, they will persecute you also*' (20b), contains the essence of the story we seek. The text is plain. The words '*persecuted*' and '*persecute*' are from the same root word in Greek, indicating identical or similar experiences. '*You*' refers to the (potentially) persecuted church. '*They*' refers to the persecuting world. '*Me*' is a statement of reason for persecution. In the words of

contemporary theologian Don A Carson, '*Those who preach Jesus' gospel and live in progressive conformity to his own life and teaching will attract the same antagonism he did.*'<sup>3</sup>

### Radical identity

Such a radical identity with Jesus Christ implies a stand against the world - a life that is different, and the difference is only explainable in terms of Jesus. The text clearly says if '*me*' then '*you*', all '*because of my name*' (21) or, as in Matthew 5:11, '*because of me*'. These words provide the church with perspective and reason. Persecution is linked to the person and work of Christ. How people react to us, positively (20b) or negatively (20c), is ultimately determined not by who we are, but who Jesus is.

The biblical story in Acts includes various Jewish antagonisms against Peter and John (4:1,17), the other Apostles (5:17), Stephen (6:9, 7:1-60) and the church in general (8:1). Herod Agrippa II killed James and imprisoned Peter (12:1). Paul's journeys are full of incidents (13:50f, 17:5f, etc.), particularly in Corinth (18:15f), Ephesus (19:24f) and Jerusalem (21:27f).

The refusal of the early church to permit emperor worship among its members aroused virulent Roman antagonism. Christian ceremonies with elements of secrecy - such as the Lord's Supper - were viewed as a threat to the State. Christianity was bad for some trades (Acts 19:23f). The believers were called 'haters of mankind' for not attending public spectacles and refusing to eat food offered to idols (1 Corinthians 8). Their moral standards made them stand out. By preaching against the sins of Paganism they made few friends!

The historical story over the earliest

Welcome to this first edition of *Word of Truth*, RI's new personal study guide which looks at persecution from a biblical perspective.

<sup>1</sup> Read also Matthew 10:16-25; Mark 13:9-13; Luke 6:40

<sup>2</sup> NIV used throughout

<sup>3</sup> Don A Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (Leicester, 1991), p.525

**Many forms of persecution have evolved over time - physical, social, psychological, economic, legal and so forth. But to biblically think 'big picture' is to think radical identity with Christ.**

centuries of Christianity offers similar but perhaps more sophisticated reasons for antagonism. For Roman ruler Marcus Aurelius (AD 163) persecution provided a useful means of enforcing unity in the Empire. For Domitian (AD 95-6), Trajan (AD 98-117) and Diocletian (AD 303) it was the calculated response to a fear of treachery, conspirators and secrecy. For Decius (AD 250-1) it offered a way to retain the Emperor's own claim for worship and to revive the religion of their old gods.

The contemporary story reflects most, if not all, of these earlier motivations for antagonism - suspicion, fear, religious and political strategy, and protection of old beliefs and customs. Thus RI's magazine *Witness* often contains graphic examples of persecution as responses to conversions to Christianity and church growth in countries such as North Korea, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Nigeria and China.

Many *forms* of persecution have evolved over time - physical, social, psychological, economic, legal and so forth. But to biblically think 'big picture' is to think radical identity with Christ.

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## *Radical servanthood*

The church may 'suffer' for many other reasons. Pride, politics, class, stupidity, distraction, fear, general rioting, anti-Western backlash to name but a few. But it is only strictly 'persecuted' when this revolutionary relationship with Jesus Christ is in play. It is part of a radical servanthood.

As young Timothy was taught, '*everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted*' (2 Timothy 3:12). In short, true persecution comes with the spiritual territory of a real and vibrant Christianity. But wait, surely, there is an unresolved tension here? For true Christianity does not require persecution. If that were so, then the Christianity of millions of quiet, godly persons serving Christ effectively throughout the world with no overt hindrance or opposition would be under question. And, clearly, it is not.

Returning to John 15.20, the question arises why did they persecute Jesus? The text implies a spiritual dimension. As in Job, God and Satan are at war. There are spiritual

realities beyond the naked eye. So, on one level, they persecuted Jesus because of His presumptuous claims and revolutionary teaching. He was different in society and dangerous to the status quo. He was a popular subversive, undermining ancient institutionalised religion.

On another level, they were, unknown to themselves, the movers of darkness against the majestic and breathless plan of God to defeat Satan and liberate believing humanity. Behind the flesh and blood detail of the stories and photographs in *Witness*, there is spiritual war. These reports are war dispatches.

In John 15.20b an extraordinary dignity is invested in the connection made between Master and people. As Peter put it, '*if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name*' (1 Peter 4:16). Importantly too, there is a stark inevitability about it all. The '*if*' clause expresses certainty not probability. It is par for the course, expect no less. '*If*' (and they did persecute Jesus), so they '*will*' (persecute the Jesus-like). So the persecuted, like the poor, shall always be with us. '*We kept telling you that we would be persecuted*' (1 Thessalonians 3:4). No surprise then that much of the history of Christianity is one of persecution and outrageous growth through persecution, as in China since the 1960s.

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## *So what?*

This biblical ground allows us to challenge several misconceptions and conventional patterns of thought that have produced a largely diminished and weak Christianity in the democratic Western world.

- Firstly, it challenges the thinking of contemporary Christians with a purely rational, two-dimensional worldview. Life in God is always more than flesh and blood. There is a spiritual dimension in the persecution of Christians, past and present. Perceive what is unseen and the picture gets bigger. Persecution is never random but linked to a visible and radical identity with Christ. So persecution is inevitable if the body of Christ is living correctly, in bold obedience to the Head.
- Secondly, it challenges the thinking of

**Behind the flesh and blood detail of the stories and photographs in *Witness*, there is spiritual war. These reports are war dispatches.**

supporters and their role in the pastoral care of the persecuted church. The ministries of persecution (lessons from believers in extremes) are invaluable to the present church on earth. They provide us with the most costly forms of discipleship known to Christianity. In this sense, they enrich the whole body of Christ. But persecution also wounds the body. So the unaffected parts (non-persecuted) are called on to minister to the affected (persecuted) parts of the body. In this sense, we are a part of the 'story' ourselves and invest in their support. So to appear apathetic, or to avoid these realities, or to be arrogant in response to such pain, sacrifice and hope is simply unthinkable.

- Thirdly, it challenges the thinking of educators within Christianity about the need to teach persecution as integral to the gospel. The immediate future of an enlarged and reinvigorated support system for Christians facing persecution lies in educating and mobilising the non-persecuted sections of the Church. Persecution is a solid discipleship teaching. We must lobby for its significant inclusion in popular courses on the Christian faith such as *Alpha* and *Christianity Explored*, and among those teachers who develop courses of theological education and Bible College training.
- Finally, it challenges the thinking of local churches engaged in ultimately unimportant matters to recognise the perils of 'losing the plot' altogether. The church can never afford to drift without a sense of eternal purpose or be distracted with trivial matters.

As I found in my brief encounter with *The Matrix*, to walk away is to miss out and never fully understand what others are getting excited about. So time spent reflecting on the 'bigger picture' is never wasted. It gives the realism, perspective, reason, motivation, and cause for hope necessary for the best of actions.

Unlike *The Matrix* (or even the sequel *Matrix Reloaded*), the story of persecution will never break box office records or fill our multiplex theatres. For we can never expect cinema to communicate the unseen energies,

priorities and activities of the spiritual dimension. But the persecuted church forces the thinking Christian to centralise the divine plot – and so enables us to view the world ever more biblically.

Persecuted Christians are radical lives in hard places, sent to be our teachers.

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## Reflection

For further reflection and discussion:

- (1) Do you agree with the author that many forms of Western Christianity have simply 'lost the plot'? If so, give examples, comment on why, and suggest ways it can be rediscovered?
- (2) Think over these statements – 'true persecution comes with the spiritual territory of a real and vibrant Christianity' and 'true Christianity does not require persecution'. Does an unresolved tension exist here?
- (3) What are the implications if the Christian Church fails to teach its pastors and people the theology and practice of persecution?
- (4) How can a healthy consciousness of the spiritual dimension (warfare) enhance your church life?

For further reading:

Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (Penguin, Second Edition, 1986)

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## My Heart Seems Too Narrow to Contain His Joy Japan, 1622

A Christian in Omura, Japan wrote the following in a letter from prison:

*'Oh, if you taste the delights with which God fills the souls of those who serve Him, and suffer for Him, how would you condemn all that the world would promise! I now begin to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, since for His love I am in prison, where I suffer much.*

*But I assure you, that when I am fainting with hunger, God has fortified me by His sweet consolations, so that I have looked upon myself as well recompensed for His service. And though I were yet to pass many years in prison, the time would appear short, through the extreme desire which I feel of suffering for Him, who even here so repays our labours.*

*Besides other sickness, I have been afflicted with a continual fever a hundred days without any remedies or proper nourishment. Yet, all this time my heart was so full of joy that it seemed to me too narrow to contain it. I have never felt any equal to it, and thought myself at the gates of paradise.'*

Later, when he heard that he would be burned alive, he overflowed with joy. He constantly expressed his gratitude to God, for he felt himself unworthy of dying as a martyr for Jesus.

On September 2, he was taken with twenty-four others to Nangasaqui, where, only shortly before, fifty Christians had been executed for their faith. When they arrived near the city, they were taken to twenty-five stakes that were all in a row and tied to them. The wood had been set all around them with the farthest extremity about eight metres away. When the wood was lit at this point, it took about two hours for it to burn to those tied to the poles. The Christians stood all this time with their eyes toward heaven until the flames finally took them.

Not long after this, in 1623, the effort to exterminate Christians in Japan became law, and in 1629 the *fumie* was created to test whole villages to see who was Christian and who was not. *Fumie* means literally 'picture to step on' and was initially a picture of a cross or the likeness of Jesus or some other religious picture taken from the art of the churches. Those suspected of being Christians were brought before the *fumie* and told to step on the image. If they did, they were let go, if they did not, they were executed. The use of *fumies* was not stopped until 1858.

This example of the persecuted church is taken from the book *Jesus Freaks II* which is available from RI priced £9.00 including postage and packing.



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# WORD of TRUTH

WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT PERSECUTION EDITION TWO

By RI's Theological Advisor **Dr Ian Dickson**

## PUSHING THE edges OUT

IMAGINE THE HEADLINE 'Teenager turns monk to escape persecution'. It calls for a second read. But would we be impressed? Should he not have stayed to face the ordeal?

The well-educated and profoundly devout Christian from a wealthy family, Paul of Thebes, then about sixteen years old, decided not to. Instead, he fled into the mountainous Egyptian desert to avoid the horrific persecutions of Decius (AD 250). By making a virtue of necessity, he began what was to become Christian monasticism.

### The ultimate one-upmanship was to die for Christ

Others reacted differently. Jerome, writing of Paul, points out that, 'At that time Christians longed to be killed by the sword for the name of Christ'. It too calls for a second read. It seems there was a competitive edge to Christian faith. The ultimate one-upmanship was to die for Christ. Indeed, in the periods when persecutions faded interest in monasticism increased, perhaps providing a substitute means of showing dedication and commitment.

Whatever else can be said for the history of persecution, it is rarely what it seems. There are double-take moments like this,

when we ask, 'could you run that by me again?' And not least when it comes to the biblical insights. One of these double-take texts for me is Acts 9:4, with the fertile phrase '...Why do you persecute me?' It certainly calls for a second (and a third) read.

On a first reading the facts seem clear enough. 'You' refers to the persecutor, identified as Saul of Tarsus. 'Me' refers to the persecuted, identified as the one speaking, who is Jesus Christ. But run that by me again. The text says Saul is the persecutor. No problem with that, for he writes as an old man to young Timothy, 'I was once a blasphemer, a persecutor and a violent man' (1 Timothy 1:13).

However, the text also says that Jesus is the persecuted. But how can that be so? Saul did not persecute Jesus. He persecuted the followers of Jesus Christ. Telling his story, some twenty years after this event, he confessed in public, 'I persecuted the followers of the Way to their death...' (Acts 22:4). Also, in writing to the Corinthian Christians he specifies the church as his target '...For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God' (1 Corinthians 15:9). So why does Jesus so forcibly personalise persecution?

### Organic union

The answer surely lies in our Lord's own understanding of the unique and intimate relationship He has created, through His death and resurrection, with believing people.



▶ Vietnamese police demolish a church building watched by the church pastor and two members of the congregation.



It is an organic union – one body (1 Corinthians 12:27, Ephesians 1:22-23). So when Saul persecuted a Christian believer (part of the body) he was persecuting Christ Himself (head of the body). The young zealot thought he was rightfully attacking those who, in his view, were incorrectly worshipping God. This is no tyrant. Saul is an intensely devout and religious man who engages in persecution as a legitimate means to defend and advance what he believes wholeheartedly. But in attacking Christians he was attacking Christ. It was as if they were one and the same.

**The implications of this astounding connection between Christ and His people are quite revolutionary – if we let them be**

## *Implications*

The implications of this astounding connection between Christ and His people are quite revolutionary – if we let them be.

- Firstly, it brings a source of divine strength to the persecuted. This truth implies that the persecution of the Christian church can never be successfully detached from the person and work of Christ. There is no distance or distinction between Him

and His followers. What they face He faces in them. When a Christian is hurt, Christ is hurt. When a Christian is ridiculed, Christ is ridiculed. When a Christian is ostracised, Christ is ostracised. So no follower is ever alone. No suffering is ever unnoticed. No pain is ever unfelt. No separation is ever glossed over. The Lord and the disciple are one in essence (John 17) and therefore inseparable.

## **Those people who persecute the Christian church engage directly with Christ**

- Secondly, it brings home the reality facing the persecutor. Whether conscious of it or not (and I believe not), those people who persecute the Christian church engage directly with Christ. They may appear temporary victors, enormously strong and unstoppable – closing churches, burning Bibles and Christian literature, imprisoning preachers, torturing women and children – but they walk in peril. By touching one of Christ's they touch Christ. Unknowingly, they confront the Master of the Universe. They cannot mess with God's property and honour with impunity. They touch the holy (set apart) at their risk. If unrepentant, the future of the persecutor is unspeakable. They stand

alone before God *without* Christ and *against* Christ. Their actions drive us to pray for them.

*'You have heard that it was said, "Love your neighbour and hate your enemy". But I [Christ] tell you: Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.'* (Matthew 5:44).

- Thirdly, it brings a warning to all Christians. This single truth, arising from the specific context of persecution, has broader significance. The warning is not only to those outsiders who might attack the church but to church members if they deliberately hurt another Christian. In doing so, they are hurting Jesus. What a gloriously subversive teaching! It cuts through human religiosity, hypocrisy, deceit and stubbornness like a hot knife through butter. To reiterate: *'I deliberately hurt a Christian and as a result I deliberately hurt Christ'*. So where does that leave the church gossips that knowingly wreak havoc with reputations? Where does it leave the opinionated church member out to get revenge on the leadership? Where does it leave the destructive critics of the pastor? The applications are virtually endless – an indication of the importance of the truth we are exploring.

Push the edges out – of text, of application, of reflection – it is from there that we will escape mediocrity in our Christian faith and practice. Again the persecuted church forces us to think differently – to re-evaluate what we do and why we do it. To deliberately hurt another believer is now unthinkable.

**Persecuted Christians are radical lives in hard places, sent to change our futures.**

## Reflection

*For further reflection and thought:*

- (1) How does the organic body of Christ work?
- (2) The author asserts that 'Unknowingly, they [persecutors] confront the Master of the Universe'. Do you agree that it is unknowing? Do persecutors realise the spiritual dimensions of their activity?
- (3) Imagine two situations. One is a brutal massacre of Christians (say, in North Korea) due to their faith and practice. The other is a deliberate and bitter verbal dispute between Christians in a local church (say in London ) due to their virulent opinions? Is one 'worse' than the other?
- (4) Apply the teaching explored to your church and daily life. What differences would you expect? Give examples. Are you planning to rectify a situation or change your future behaviour? Perhaps a support group might help. If not, why has the Bible failed to convince you?
- (5) How can a consistent prayer line for persecutors be established and maintained in your church?

*For further reading:*

Carolinne White, ed., *Early Christian Lives*, Penguin, 1998

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Please detach *Word of Truth* and make as many photocopies as you need. Please feel free to circulate this to your church, Bible study and small group leaders.



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## The marriage of the Lamb is come!

James Renwick, Edinburgh, Scotland, 1688

As James Renwick sat at the dinner with his mother, sisters, and some Christian friends, a drumbeat sounded in the distance. This was the first warning to the city that the executioners were ready and it was time to gather at the Grassmarket.

At this sound James leaped to his feet: *'Let us be glad and rejoice! For the marriage of the Lamb is come!'* James then took the opportunity to give a short message on the marriage supper of the Lamb, which he would partake of that day.

Then he invited them all to come to his wedding, meaning his execution, that was to take place in a short time.

The drum had continued to beat all the while and continued as James made his way up the scaffold to the hangman.

When he reached the top, he turned and lifted his voice so that all within earshot could hear:

*'Spectators, I must tell you I am come here this day to lay down my life for adhering to the truths of Christ, for which I am neither afraid or ashamed to suffer.'*

*No, I bless the Lord that ever He counted me worthy to suffer anything for Him; and I desire to praise His grace that He has not only kept me free from being polluted by sin in the time that I have lived and in the time that I was a child, and such that I was stained with, He washed me clean with His blood ...*

*I think the truth is worth many lives, and if I had ten thousand I would think it little enough to lay them all down to preserve it ...*

*I join my testimony with all those that have been sealed by blood, shed either on the scaffolds, fields, seas, for the cause of Christ.'*

One of the guards stepped forward to silence him, but James merely turned to him politely with a winning grin and said: *'I am near done'*. Then he continued.

*'You that are the people of God, do not grow weary in maintaining the testimony of the day, in your stations and places; and whatever you do, make certain that you have a part in Christ, for the storm is coming that will shake the very foundations of your faith. And you that are strangers to God, break off your sins by repenting, or else even I will witness against you on the day of the Lord.'*

At this, they stopped him and stepped him back to put the noose around his neck; all the while he sang a song from Psalm 103 and quoted from Revelation 19. Then he prayed:

*'God, I die in faith that you will not leave Scotland, but that you will make the blood of my witness the seed of Your church here, and return again, and be glorious in this land. And now Lord, I am ready.'*

The executioner stepped forward and placed the hood over his face, but still he would not stop trying to encourage those around him. Though he could not see him, he turned to his friend who had attended him and said:

*'Farewell. Be diligent in your duty. Make your peace with God, through Christ. There is a great trial coming. As to those remaining behind me, I have committed them to God. Tell them from me not to weary, nor to be discouraged in maintaining testimony of the truth. Let them not quit nor forgo one of these despised truths. Keep your ground, and the Lord will provide teachers and ministers, and when He comes, He will make these despised truths glorious upon the earth.'*

Then, as they dropped the ladder to make the rope go taut, he died with these words on his lips: *'Lord, into your hands I commit my spirit, for you have redeemed me, Lord God of truth'*.

It is estimated that between 1660-1688 some 3,500 people were martyred for their faith in England and Scotland, when during the reign of King Charles II both Covenanters and Quakers were vehemently persecuted for their religious convictions. Some notable leaders were James Guthrie (1661), A Campbell (1661), Margaret Wilson (1661), Mary Dyre (1662), and D Cargill (1680).

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# WORD *of* TRUTH

WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT PERSECUTION EDITION THREE

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## THE insider STORY

The insider story sells! Royal butlers, Iraq's weapons' inspectors, former Cabinet Ministers, press secretaries, spin doctors, and even caterers at celebrity weddings are 'A list' people with lucrative stories to tell. The Bible is choc-a-block with insider stories with a difference. Hebrews 10:32-34 is a prime example – the insider's story of the persecuted life.

### The ultimate one-upmanship was to die for Christ

*'Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in face of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution, at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You sympathised with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions.'*

The context is one of encouragement for a suffering church. Hebrews was written for at least four reasons. (1) To help the Hebrew Christians come to terms with the past. (2) To explain how faith in the sacrifice of Jesus forgives sins (the superiority of Christianity to Judaism). (3) To strengthen those who felt vulnerable and wanted to conceal their faith (as Christianity was no longer a protected

religion under Judaism). (4) To urge those who began in faith to continue in faith (3:6; 4:11, 14; 6:1, 18).

### Overcoming persecution

Persecution is defined in 10:32 as 'a great contest' (implying physical assault) and a public exposure. It is a fight won 'in earlier days', in the first rush of spiritual adrenaline following their conversion to Christ. They stood their ground in the battle, exposed on every side. These earlier victories are now a source of strength as they face new forms of suffering. They are no longer novices in the theatre of pain but believers enriched by previous contest and overcoming. They are tasters of faithfulness, who are urged not to 'throw away' (35) their confidence and 'to persevere' (36). There are rewards at stake: 'be faithful even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life' (Revelation 2:10)

The insider's story is one of contest, overcoming, renewed attack and reward for faithfulness.

### Family solidarity

The believers not only *stood their ground* (facing insult and persecution) but also *stood side by side* with other believers (facing similar adversities). As in Acts 9:4, to deliberately hurt a Christian is to hurt Christ, but so too when a Christian is hurt (beaten, insulted, etc.) other Christians feel it. Touch my family and see what happens. They close ranks and stand together in solidarity. But who better to help?



<sup>1</sup> The NIV is used throughout

The persecuted are uniquely placed to stand with other persecuted. There is a staggering generosity and solidarity in play. Amazingly, persecution deepens the fellowship experienced with other believers. And we know it too, for those who stand by us in the hardest times tend to remain with or within us.

This close linkage of believing family and persecution is also found in the words of Jesus as he teaches on discipleship in Mark 10:29-30.

*'I tell you the truth... no-one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields – and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come eternal life.'*

A seamless balance is established between loss (what is 'left') and gain (what is to be 'received'), between now ('this present age') and then ('the age to come'), between temporal life and reward ('eternal life'). Again, persecution is understood in terms of deepening these family ties. Implicit here too is persecution as a common factor among the new family in first-century Christianity.

The insider's story is one of solidarity and support.

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## Living different lives

Returning to Hebrews 10:32-35, there has been a radical re-evaluation of life among these believers. People are the centre of their concerns – with their own experiences making it possible to sympathise *with those in prison*. Possessions were held very lightly. Indeed, to the incomprehension of twenty-first century Western society, they *'joyfully accepted'* the confiscation of their property. What they possessed materially (carts, houses, clothes, furniture, etc.) was viewed in the context of *'better and lasting possessions'*, such as eternal salvation and reward (11:10, 13-16, 26, 35, 13:14). Persecution demands a constant re-evaluation of life. It plays a part

in simplification. What matters most when you are persecuted? Surely not what we own, but what we owe – faithfulness to God, forgiveness of enemies, encouragement to fellow sufferers, and life lived in terms of eternal realities.

The insider's story is one of different values and the simplification of life.

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## A parable on the simple life

Søren Kierkegaard, the nineteenth-century Danish philosopher, wrote ten discourses on the subject of the simple life. He saw as the first and most basic principle of such a life the *attitude* in which a person holds their belongings. In these writings he constructs several parables. The one that follows I leave with you to mull over the rest of your life.

*When the prosperous man on a dark but star-lit night drives comfortably in his carriage and has the lanterns lighted, aye, then he is safe, he fears no difficulty, he carries his light with him, and it is not dark close around him. But precisely because he has the lanterns lighted, and has a strong light close to him, precisely for this reason he cannot see the stars, for his lights obscure the stars, which the poor peasant driving without lights can see gloriously in the dark but starry night. So those deceived ones live in the temporal existence: either, occupied with the necessities of life, they are too busy to avail themselves of the view, or in their prosperity and good days they have, as it were, lanterns lighted, and close about them everything is so satisfactory, so pleasant, so comfortable--but the view is lacking, the prospect, the view of the stars.<sup>2</sup>*

By *'the view of the stars'* he means a person's awareness of, inner relationship with, and enjoyment of God. By *'lanterns'* he has in mind concerns over how little is owned, what is not owned, and what a person would like to own. My only comment here– if the *'lanterns'* of worldly interest obscure the view, what is the way of life that best reveals the stars?

<sup>2</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, (The Gospel of Suffering).

## Implications

- Firstly, isn't the idea of persecution as strength-maker crucial? Many contemporary believers having overcome insult and persecution attest as to how it made them stronger. Faith is built up. Prayer is cried out. Hope in God is clung to. Clearly, the usefulness of hard experiences can never be exaggerated.
- Secondly, isn't the idea of solidarity in family powerful? What better picture than this - to stand together, side by side, supporting each one through trials, holding the fragile, and facing new challenges. Apart from persecution, what binds the spiritual family together?
- Thirdly, isn't the idea of a simpler life attractive? A life in which the quest to collect, to have, and to outdo is no longer important. A life in which the concentration of our time and energy is wrapped up with people not things. But I have strayed too far into your personal concerns. For who am I to tell you how to live? I am just as trapped as you are by modern complexities and cares. But there is something powerfully energetic in the simplification of life. Even the thought of it releases and liberates. But how can such aspirations become realities in a 24-hour Western society? Even asking the question is progress.

**Persecuted Christians are radical lives in hard places, sent to challenge our received ideas and models of normality.**

## Reflection

*For further reflection and thought:*

- (1) Bring to your study group examples from the history of Christianity of overcoming persecution, family solidarity in persecution and living different lives because of persecution. This requires a little reading or exploring relevant Internet sites, but it will be worth the effort! Can you find similar examples within the contemporary world in this copy of *Witness* (or in recent back copies)?
- (2) How can Christians *stand their ground* when persecuted, and *stand side by side* with the persecuted church?
- (3) Do all persecuted lives experience a radical simplification of life, and what role does persecution actually play?
- (4) What is your definition of simple life? How can simplicity of life be practised today? What 'measures' are required to simplify your life? Or is it all a matter of 'attitude'?

*For further reading:*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, SCM London, 1992

Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (Study Guide Edition), Hodder & Stoughton, 2000 – see especially pages 99–119

*Dr Ian Dickson is a teacher, preacher and writer, currently living in Linlithgow. After a settled pastoral ministry in urban Scotland, he engaged in historical research, Bible College and University teaching, primarily related to preaching, evangelicalism and the history of Christianity.*



## We were with Christ

*Richard Wurmbrand, Founder of Release International, Romania 1945*

One by one, the priests and pastors of Romania stood and offered words of praise for Communism and declared their loyalty to the new regime. Their statements of unity, propaganda for the Communists, were broadcast to the world over the radio, direct from the Parliament buildings.

It was a year after the Communists had seized power in Romania. The government had invited all religious leaders to attend a congress at the Parliament building – over 4,000 attended. First, they chose Joseph Stalin as honorary president of the congress. Then the speeches began. It was absurd and horrible. Communism was dedicated to the destruction of religion, as had already been shown in Russia.

It was as if they spat in Jesus Christ's face.

Sabina Wurmbrand could stand it no longer. She whispered to her husband: *'Richard, stand up and wash away this shame from the face of Christ.'*

Richard knew what would happen: *'If I speak, you will lose your husband.'*

Sabina replied: *'I do not wish to have a coward for a husband.'*

Pastor Wurmbrand took the stage. To everyone's surprise, he began to preach. Immediately, a great silence fell on the hall.

*'Delegates, it is our duty not to praise earthly powers that come and go, but to glorify God the Creator and Christ the Saviour, who died for us on the cross.'*

A Communist official jumped to his feet. This would not do! The whole country was hearing the message of Christ proclaimed from the rostrum of the Communist Parliament. *'Your right to speak is withdrawn!'* he shouted.

Wurmbrand ignored him and went on. The atmosphere began to change. The audience began to applaud. He was saying what they had all wanted to say, but were afraid to.

The official bellowed: *'Cut that microphone!'* The crowd shouted him down. *'The Pastor; the Pastor; the Pastor!'* they chanted. The shouting and clapping went on long after the microphone wires were severed and Wurmbrand had stepped down. The Congress was ended for the day.

After this, Richard Wurmbrand was a marked man.

On Sunday February 29 1948, Pastor Wurmbrand was on his way to church when he was kidnapped by a small group of secret police. He tells what happened next:

*'I was led to prison thirty feet beneath the earth where I was kept in solitary confinement. For years, I was kept alone in a cell. Never did I see sun, moon, stars, flowers. Never did I see a man except the interrogators who beat and tortured me. Never did I have a book, never a bit of paper. When after many years I had to write again, I could not even remember how to write a capital D.'*

*'It was in prison that we found the hope of salvation for the Communists. It was there that we developed a sense of responsibility towards them. In Communist prisons the idea of a Christian mission to the Communists was born. We asked ourselves: "What can we do to win these men to Christ?"'*

*'The gates of heaven are not closed for the Communists. Neither is the light quenched for them. They can repent like everyone else. And we must call them to repentance. Only love can change the Communist and the terrorist.'*



Pastor Richard Wurmbrand, after his release from prison.

When Pastor Wurmbrand was released in 1956, he resumed his work with the underground church. In 1959, he was turned over to the authorities again, this time by one of his own co-workers. He was released the second time in 1964, and again resumed his work.

In 1965 friends paid the Romanian government a ransom of \$10,000 so the Wurmbrand family could leave the country. They travelled to Scandinavia and England before settling in the USA.

In 1967 the Wurmbrands formally started their mission to the Communists, known as Jesus to the Communist World, which grew into a network of likeminded organisations around the world. The organisation Pastor Wurmbrand founded in the UK, Christian Mission to the Communist World, is now known as Release International.

Through our international network of missions, RI serves persecuted Christians in 30 countries around the world, by supporting pastors and their families, supplying Christian literature and Bibles and working for justice. Copyright © 2003 Release International



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This example of the persecuted church is taken from the book *Jesus Freaks*, which is packed with inspiring stories of 'those who stood for Jesus' throughout history. It is available from RI priced £9.00 including postage and packing, along with its sequel *Jesus Freaks II* (priced £11 including postage and packing).

# WORD of TRUTH

WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT PERSECUTION EDITION FOUR

By RI's Theological Advisor Dr Ian Dickson

## USE THE difficulty

*'Not a lotta people know that'*

Film buffs will immediately recognise this as the famous catch phrase of British actor Sir Michael Caine. His cinematic CV over forty years is impressive – from *Alfie* and *The Italian Job* to *Cider House Rules* and *The Quiet American*. In a recent interview he spoke of how he overcame unexpected adversities and problems in his life and career. His philosophy was, in his own phrase, to 'use the difficulty'. Not to 'fight the difficulty', but to accept it as present and discover how best to use it for his advantage. I found his homespun wisdom enormously appealing, personally helpful and remarkably biblical!

Consider the situation in Acts 11:19-21:

*'Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them, and great numbers of people believed and turned to the Lord.'*<sup>1</sup>

## Scattered

The words 'scattered by the persecution' point to an involuntary relocation of Christian believers. The idea of 'scattering' (dispersion)

conveys notions of chaos and relatively spontaneous movements out of the path of intense suffering. There is a sense of being blown by the winds of anger against God and his church. Persecution loosened the tent pegs – travel to new places was necessary and urgent.

The difficulties created were obvious: leaving homeland, businesses, education, cultural security and so forth. The words 'as far as' indicate distance ('Phoenicia' was some 150 miles north from Jerusalem) but also imply the passage of time. In other words, persecution had a legacy running into subsequent generations now parted from the region of their upbringing. Comforting ideas of place (and presumably possessions) were instantly removed. The gospel mindset of 'no place of one's own' came dramatically into play. So how would they 'use the difficulty'?

## Telling their story

The text is plain. They began 'telling' their story ('the message', 'the good news about the Lord Jesus'). The push of persecution had overt evangelistic impact. The locations for witness increased – Phoenicia (now Lebanon), a coastal strip with the important towns of Ptolemais, Tyre, and Sidon, Cyprus (clearly indicating that Christians were present before Barnabas and Paul arrived in Acts 13:4-12) and Cyrene. No doubt the fervour by which the believers now voiced their tested faith intensified as a result of persecution. What mattered most in the post-persecution period was others discovering salvation in Jesus. Note how Jesus is presented as Lord ('the Lord Jesus'), not as Christ, to these gentile audiences ('Greeks').



<sup>1</sup> The NIV is used throughout

So persecution results in these Christians being pushed to the geographical edges of early evangelistic enterprise – *Antioch*, the capital city of the Roman Province of Syria, and the third largest city in the Empire (after Rome and Alexandria), with a population of around half a million. The context is the movement of the gospel towards the heart of the Empire.

Without this persecution, it is reasonable to assume that they would have simply stayed where they were in Jerusalem, living honest, holy Christian lives but without the dynamic generated by the refiner's fire and the kick of suffering. Persecution acted as a catalyst for advancement of the Kingdom of God and the believing community responded by '*telling*' their story. It was the beginning of significant cross-cultural mission. Some told the gospel to Jews, others extended it to Gentiles. These were pivotal moments in the history of Christianity – the gospel was reaching to the world. They 'used the difficulty' to honour God.

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## Church growth

Persecution was a positive experience. These Christians had been persecuted, they had scattered to live in new places and situations, they had told their story there, and now they saw the church grow in leaps and bounds.

News of this growth travelled fast, soon reaching Jerusalem itself (v22); and, presumably, Antioch became the place to be (similar I suppose to the interest shown in Willow Creek, Saddleback and other rapidly growing modern churches). We are not told if they employed more innovative and creative ways of impacting these new communities. Nevertheless, their presentation of the gospel could only have been enriched and authenticated by their personal experiences of persecution and resultant sacrifices. The text merely records that '*great numbers of people believed and turned to the Lord*'. A fact attested by subsequent events in the history of Christianity, where there is a recurrent connection between the persecution of Christians and significant church growth.

## The Divine hand

Without the phrase in verse 21 '*the Lord's hand was with them*' (or power, sometimes used as a metaphor for the Holy Spirit), we might be tempted to think incorrectly. We might imagine, for example, that it was solely by human effort and evangelistic events that the church grew. This was not the case. Even the fertile witness of these believers, borne of suffering and sacrifice, was not enough. The movement of the divine hand was needed.

Equally, we might imagine that these refugee believers (and their descendents) were merely opportunists, and there was no grand design at work – no providential touch! This was not the case. The movement of the divine hand was present throughout. They were persecuted but survived with faith and life intact. They were dispossessed from homeland but led to new places of service. They were witnessing among very different types of people, but it worked! Somehow (and I am sure they did not know how), these things had happened to them to advance the kingdom of God. Not like pawns in a divine chess game, but more like principal participants in a divine drama, they were moving, living and witnessing with the hand of God on them. By actively 'using the difficulty' they honoured God, and God honoured them. What better way to live?

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## Implications

- *Firstly, persecution can be intensely creative. Much of this creativity is generated by the uncertainty that persecution produces, irrespective of place or time. Here I write of external uncertainty – when a person is driven from home, neighbourhood, job, school, and so forth. When a person worships in fear of arrest, beating and even death. When a person leaves childhood friends behind to escape or sees trusted family members betray them to brutal authorities.*

*The relationships with our enemies (and the uncertainty they bring) require us to think and act more creatively than the relationships with our friends. It is when a Christian or the church community as a*

whole is thrown on its back that it has to find new resources to stand up again. So vaulted into new places and situations, with new cultures and communities to tell our story to, we are forced to think and act more creatively.

Conversely, by staying in safe environments (where no such threats or evictions are part of everyday life) there is less demand for creative thinking. We all too readily accept the status quo.

We suppress our revolutionary energy. We allow certainty to become, in the words of Booker Prize-winning author Ben Okri, 'the enemy of creativity'.<sup>2</sup>

But persecution keeps creative uncertainty alive and acts a counterbalance to complacency.

The persecuted Christians are forced to think more innovatively and depend on God more actively because they are less certain of their physical and material well-being. Therefore, the church serving in more certain circumstances (probably most of Western Europe and the North America) has a responsibility to consistently ditch any uncreative policies of certainty in their decisions. I would count as uncreative, for example, the kind of decisions that could equally be made in a board room among non-Christian executives, with no requirement of faith and reliance on God.

- Secondly, if persecution has such positive effects, then teaching and writing on it must reflect this. To suggest that persecution will harm the church is misleading. The evidence from the biblical sources, history and contemporary experience is that there is direct relationship between vigorous church growth and the persecution of Christians. So many reports of persecution follow the pattern of, 'This is happening to us... but the church is growing (stronger, wiser, bigger, etc).'

Exactly how this relationship works is unknown. But somewhere deep at its heart are the mysteries of sacrifice and suffering for the sake of God. So *Witness* and similar publications have an enormous responsibility to convey to the Christian church at large a balanced picture of contemporary persecution.

Persecuted Christians are radical lives in hard places, sent to challenge our devotion to the external certainties that suffocate our creativeness in advancing the gospel to the heart of contemporary empires.

## Reflection

For further reflection and thought:

- (1) As you read this edition of *Witness* note down references or allusions to uncertainty in the reports. Do all forms of uncertainty have the potential to be creative?
- (2) Do you agree that external certainty can become an enemy of a creative and vibrant Christianity? Explain your answer, and, as appropriate, give examples.
- (3) The author writes, 'there is direct relationship between vigorous church growth and the persecution of Christians'. What is the danger in such a comment?
- (4) Describe a number of ways in which external uncertainty (as defined above) can become the opportunity for new adventures, discoveries and possibilities?
- (5) What do you understand by the word 'telling' in the text? Will your evangelism change as a result?
- (6) How might we perceive if 'the Lord's hand' is with us? Here you might like to select some of the numerous biblical references to 'the hand of God' by using a concordance. Then discuss the contexts in which they appear and apply your finding to your own lives and church setting.
- (7) How can you 'use the difficulty' in your (individual or church community) present circumstances?

For further reading:

David W Smith, *Transforming the World*, Paternoster, 1998

Dr Ian Dickson is a teacher, preacher and writer, currently living in Linlithgow. After a settled pastoral ministry in urban Scotland, he engaged in historical research, Bible College and University teaching, primarily related to preaching, evangelicalism and the history of Christianity.



<sup>2</sup> Ben Okri, *A Way of Being Free*, London, 1997.

## A Merry Supper with the Lord

John Bradford, England, 1555

John Bradford stood boldly before the Lord Chancellor. 'I urge you,' the young man said, 'don't condemn the innocent. If you believe I am guilty, you should pass sentence on me. If not, you should set me free.'

Bradford, the well-loved pastor of St Paul's in London, was thrown in prison for his beliefs that differed from the state church during Queen Mary's reign. While in prison, so many of his congregation came to visit him that he continued to preach twice a day. He also preached weekly to the other men in prison, the thieves and common criminals, exhorting them from the Word of God and often giving them money to buy food.

Bradford's keepers trusted him so much, he was often allowed to leave the prison unescorted to visit sick members of his congregation. All he had to do was to promise that he would return by a certain hour. He was so careful about keeping his word that he was usually back well before his curfew.

After a year and a half, Bradford was offered a pardon if he would deny his beliefs, but he would not. Then, after six more months in prison, the offer was repeated. Again he refused.

'John,' his friends warned, 'you need to do something to stall for more time. Ask to discuss your religious beliefs with Queen Mary's learned men. That will take you out of immediate danger.'

John replied, 'If I did that, the people would think I have begun to doubt the doctrine I confess. I don't doubt it at all.'

'Then they will probably kill you very soon,' his friends said sadly.

The very next day John was sentenced to death and the keeper's wife came to him with the news: 'Tomorrow you will be burned.'

Bradford looked to heaven and said, 'I thank God for it. I have waited for this for a long time. Lord, make me worthy of this.'

Hoping to keep the crowds from knowing what was going on, the guards transferred him to another prison in the middle of the night. But somehow the word got out, and a great multitude came to bid him farewell. Many wept openly as they prayed for him. Bradford, in return, gently said farewell and prayed fervently for them and their future.

At four o'clock the next morning, a large crowd had gathered at the place where Bradford was to be burned. Finally, at nine o'clock, an unusually large number of heavily armed men brought Bradford out to the stake. With him was John Leaf, a teenager, who also refused to deny his faith. Both men fell flat to the ground and prayed for an hour.

Bradford got up, kissed a piece of firewood and then kissed the stake itself. In a loud voice he spoke to the crowd: 'England, repent of your sins! Beware of idolatry. Beware of false teachers. See they don't deceive you!' Then he forgave his persecutors and asked the crowd to pray for him.

Turning his head towards John Leaf, he said, 'Be of good comfort, brother, for we shall have a merry supper with the Lord tonight!'

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# WORD *of* TRUTH

WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT PERSECUTION EDITION FIVE

By RI's Theological Advisor Dr Ian Dickson

## mystery PLAYS ITS PART

'Keep York's Mystery Plays Alive!'

Following the report that the plays would not be staged in 2004, and that no major production was in prospect until at least 2010, and quite possibly not even then, a vigorous campaign was launched to retain the world-famous plays. How could this historic city<sup>1</sup> contemplate abandoning an artistic, spiritual and community tradition which stretches back to 1511 and attracts visitors from all over the world?

Expressions of shock and support came from such theatrical notables as Dame Judi Dench. The whole York community was called on to pull together to ensure that the Mysteries are once more performed in 2005, and the tradition safeguarded for future years. Hopefully, by the time you read this, the outcome of their cries of outrage may have had a positive result.

The modern tradition in York dates back to 1511, but Mystery plays – that is, medieval dramatisations of biblical stories performed at religious or church festivals – were most common in the 15th and 16th centuries. A collection of Mystery plays running from the Creation to the Last Judgment performed together form the 'Mystery Cycle'. In medieval times, these Mystery Cycles were the foci of popular day-long festivals. The plays were performed by local craftsman's guilds – or 'mysteries' – that would compete with each other to produce the best play.

That is one meaning and use of the word 'mystery'. Mystery defined and used as puzzle is another. I must admit that puzzles bring me no pleasure, comfort or enlightenment, but mysteries do. So what's the difference? What meaning and use am I

attributing to the word 'mystery? The Methodist Minister and Christian author Colin Morris adds some clarity:

*'A puzzle is a faulty way of looking at something and can be corrected by altering one's perspective. A mystery can never be solved, only described, and always inadequately.'*<sup>2</sup>

**'Persecution defies neat quantification, easy answers and the demand (in some evangelical circles) for quick solutions'**

Persecution defies neat quantification, easy answers and the demand (in some evangelical circles) for quick solutions. When Christians are persecuted there is a mystery in play at different levels. Why does God allow it? How can God be glorified through it? Why do some Christians never face persecution and others face it every day? How can weakness be strength (2 Corinthians 12:9-10)?

So what is needed is a theology of divine mystery and its role in helping us serve our persecuted family. To value the mystery of God in our lives is to enrich the whole Christian community. Without such mystery God is downsized. The biggest challenge to Christian faith in our day comes not from atheists who deny God, but from believers who diminish God by believing they know what God thinks about everything. The call to re-discover the mystery of God is urgent; no more so than among those whose heart interest and practical Christian service lie in ministering to the persecuted world.

## Liberation and counter-balance

In Job 38:4 God answers Job *'Tell me, if you understand'*<sup>3</sup>. After months of unexplained pain and suffering, God chooses to make known to Job (38:4-18) some of the mysteries of His own divine being, thought and action. Only God can know

<sup>1</sup> Mystery plays are also performed in Chester and Lichfield. <sup>2</sup> C. Morris, *Starting from Scratch* (London, 1990), p56.

<sup>3</sup> The NIV is used throughout.

God. Others can only know God if He chooses to be known. God is not complete mystery but chooses to shroud Himself in mysteries. Why? One reason might be that humanity could not share the world with Him if He did not.

In other words, the mystery of God is a mercy. It is an act of mercy that I do not know God fully or understand His dealings, timings, greater purposes and so on. If I did, I simply could not function. It's all too much. Didn't Jesus tell his disciples: *'I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear'* (John 16:12). So perhaps, daily mysteries, for example, in the form of unanswered questions and events without clear explanation, are expressions of divine mercy, for which praise is due.

But more than this – it is in this encounter that Job's perceptions of God have the opportunity to expand. In other words, Job is being freed from the limited theological insights of his peers by exposure to divine mystery and majesty. Indeed, Job is being offered a counter-balance, a corrective to wrong ideas about his self-worth, situation, or God's present interest in him (which is immense).

It counter-balances our human egos. I am creature. I am finite. I do not hold the answers. I would become proud if I did. In Job 38:18 God says: *'Tell me, if you know all this'*. Up to this point in the text, Job has been questioning God, but now God questions Job. One purpose of this questioning is to state the majestic power of God. In doing so, mysteries to the human mind are simply piled up.

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## Principle for adventure

Job is facing the utter radicalism of God's actions in his life. A principle for adventure is established. This is your God, shrouded in mysteries. This is how God works – in ways you do not understand. This is how you must live the rest of your life – trusting your future to this God.

Job's future rests with this God of mystery, majesty and power – with a God who holds the heavens and the earth, and his single

hurting life caught up in a spiritual war, with all its physical and emotional repercussions. In other words, the mystery of God infuses our living on earth with a true radicalism. It provides a catalyst to faith.

*'By faith Abraham, when called to go to place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going'* (Hebrews 11:8). We do not really know what God is going to do with us. Also, it realigns our expectations: for I only see part of the picture now (1 Corinthians 13:12), the rest is veiled.

Ultimately, it characterises the end of all our faith journeys: *'I tell you a mystery, we will not all sleep'* (1 Corinthians 15:51). Until then: *'When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly'* (1 Corinthians 4:12-13). But to endure requires us not only to draw strength from Jesus, who 'for the joy set before him endured the cross' (Hebrews 12:2), but also to protect and nourish our appreciation of the mystery of God.

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## Implications

- Firstly, encounter with divine mystery frees our perception of God from a limited theological mindset. That means we think of God as *more than* the subject of a systematic, historical, philosophical, pastoral or applied theology. Indeed, such neatly packaged forms of theology inadvertently diminish God. They are at best human teaching tools. God is interdisciplinary. God is de-compartmentalised. Our persecuted family deserve a ministry that maximises God; that frees God from the confines of an over-intellectualised Western faith by re-introducing the wonders and liberation of divine mystery. So too, forms of evangelicalism that purport to provide all the answers for life today are diminishing God. You enter places of worship and find activity, song, impressive preaching performance, and even excitement but where is the sense of mystery – that awe moment?

'It is an act of mercy that I do not know God fully or understand His dealings, timings, greater purposes and so on'

## 'Reflection on the mystery of God opens up the heart to our persecuted family in new ways'

- Secondly, encounter with divine mystery forces us to re-think our relentless chase for proof. We are no longer slaves to the partial answers of rational thought. In the context of Job, there are other dimensions – spiritual, unseen, otherworldly dimensions. It frees our spirituality from a limited rationalism. Reflection on the mystery of God opens up the heart to our persecuted family in new ways. For example, it couches our prayers for them in a totally new spiritual environment – a bigger space – whereas previously we struggled to get their experiences to fit into our small world of rational thinking.
- Thirdly, encounter with divine mystery throws into sharp relief those factors in Western society that reduce the sense of wonder and awe at the unexplained and unexplainable. If our education systems exalt fact and proof as the ultimate goal of learning, ignoring or fearing realities beyond the limitations of fact and proof, then mystery becomes something to be solved not relished. If our sense of the past is dominated by our understanding of the present, creating a false impression that 'this is the way it always has been' – a misread history – then we miss out. For example, what can we learn from the church in periods when Christians were acutely aware of the mystery of the divine being? If we demand that our preachers construct sermons with a spiritual rationalism designed for approval in a scientific age – driven by the notion that people need answers and proof – then preaching has no risk, no heart, it is without the indescribable, it is without the mystical. We have the invention of a form of biblical preaching without the magnetism of divine mystery to draw people.

Persecuted Christians are radical lives in hard places, sent to challenge our de-mystified Christianity, forcing us to think outside what

has been pre-defined for us as orthodox.

What a tragedy if we rational thinkers strip God of His mystery and can only offer the hurting family worldwide little more than intellectual doctrine and our spiritualised 'best wishes'. To reflect in silence and solitude on the mystery of God takes guts. To learn its value in serving the persecuted church takes a lifetime.

## Reflection

*For further reflection and thought:*

1. Does the author overstate the case for mystery? After all, another way to look at all this is that mystery can be misused as a cop out for not pursuing hard answers. Is it too much of a soft option to introduce the elements of divine mystery into our dealings with persecuted Christians? What do you think?
2. List and talk about the factors in Western society that have the potential to rob us of this priceless sense of divine mystery and wonder? How might these be counter-acted?
3. Why not resolve over this Easter period to think about (even preach about) the resurrection of Christ not as a fact to prove, but as a mystery to praise God for.
4. What does Christianity look like without the elements of mystery? Consider, for example, aspects of the biblical story such as the trinity, the creation, the crucifixion and the ascension. Or the experience of personal forgiveness, community reconciliation, and eternal hope.
5. How might a sense of the mystery of God counter-balance our Christian service? You might like to think through the idea that Christian service is made up of what we can and cannot do.
6. Pray for a re-discovering of the mystery of God in your own heart. What matters more?

### *For further reading:*

Henri Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 1999.

*Dr Ian Dickson is a teacher, preacher and writer. After a settled pastoral ministry in Scotland, he engaged in historical research and teaching. He is now a Tutor and Director of Postgraduate Studies at Belfast Bible College, part of the Institute of Theology at Queen's University. His academic interests and lecturing are primarily relating to the history of Christianity, spirituality and preaching.*



## More Love to Thee

*Pastor Kim and his congregation  
North Korea, 1950s*

For years, Pastor Kim and 27 of his flock of Korean saints had lived in hand-dug tunnels beneath the earth. Then, as the Communists were building a road, they discovered the Christians living underground.

The officials brought them out before a crowd of 30,000 in the village of Gok San for a public trial and execution. They were told: *'Deny Christ, or you will die'*. But they refused.

At this point the head Communist officer ordered four children from the group seized and had them prepared for hanging. With ropes tied around their small necks, the officer again commanded the parents to deny Christ.

Not one of the believers would deny their faith. They told the children: *'We will soon see you in heaven'*. The children died quietly.

The officer then called for a steamroller to be brought in. He forced the Christians to lie on the ground in its path. As its engine revved, they were given one last chance to recant their faith in Jesus. Again they refused.

As the steamroller began to inch forward, the Christians began to sing a song they had often sung together. As their bones and bodies were crushed under the pressure of the massive rollers, their lips uttered the words:

*'More love to Thee, O Christ, more love to Thee  
Thee alone I seek, more love to Thee  
Let sorrow do its work, more love to Thee  
Then shall my latest breath whisper Thy praise  
This be the parting cry my heart shall raise;  
More love, O Christ, to Thee.'*

The execution was reported in the North Korean press as an act of suppressing superstition.

Please detach *Word of Truth* and make as many photocopies as you need. Please feel free to circulate this to your church, Bible study and small group leaders.



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# WORD *of* TRUTH

WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT PERSECUTION EDITION SIX

By RI's Theological Advisor Dr Ian Dickson

## mentor AND BOSS

Mentoring is big business today! Bookstores bulge with manuals on mentoring. The Web has mentor gateways for setting yourself up as a serious contender in this field of personal human encouragement. Mentors operate in the worlds of media, business, education, politics, the arts, medicine, and, increasingly, religion.

Of course, mentoring isn't something new. Indeed, mentoring is as old as civilisation itself. The encouraging of fellow Christians to run the race, to win the prize, to persevere to the end, to seek the Kingdom of God first, to face hardships and come through – it's all there in the Bible.

The mentoring relationships of Eli and Samuel, and Elijah and Elisha, Moses and Joshua, and Paul and Timothy stand out in the biblical story. Devotional writers advocating spiritual exercises, the imitation of Christ, the practice of the presence of God, and the way of the heart – it's all there in the history of Christianity. Throughout human history mentoring has been a primary means of passing on knowledge and skills.

### 'Who mentors the persecuted church?'

This got me thinking. Who mentors (disciples, spiritually guides, coaches) the persecuted Christian church? No glitz, no fee, no abstract philosophising, and no easy answers. Some job, who would take it on? Meet Peter.

### *Meet Peter*

*'Dear Friends, this is now my second letter to you. I have written both of them as reminders to stimulate you to wholesome thinking. I want you to recall the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Saviour through your apostles.'* 2 Peter 3:1-2<sup>1</sup>

A friend of mine talks about 'boss verses' in the Bible. This is a boss verse. It is the verse that takes charge as the boss. It does not crowd out the other verses, but it stands as an overarching verse or thesis for the passage or book. It is a general statement, not a particular one.

This boss verse has the air of whole-church mentoring – the letters are not only examples of persecution literature, but also intentionally general; that is, they are not addressed to a church in a specific location (for example, to Corinth, Rome or Thessalonica) but to the full scattered community. Peter wrote them 'by the hand of Silas', from Rome ('Babylon': 1 Peter 5:13) about AD 67; in the period following the persecution of Christians by Nero.

The words quoted above summarise why Peter wrote them. These words also contain the seeds of exceptionally good mentoring (I use the term in the broadest sense of relational experience in which one person empowers another - here the general church - using a range of God-given resources, such as wisdom, patterns, disciplines, principles and so forth).

### *Time investment*

Peter has to set aside time to write. One letter isn't enough; they need to be told about a range of temporal and eternal themes: inheritance, holiness, suffering, divine sovereignty, grace, the church as the new



<sup>1</sup> The NIV is used throughout.

people of God, the unseen spiritual world, submission, daily trust in God, and the return of Jesus. But this time investment reflects belief in those he writes to.

They can actually make it through these difficult times in these hard places. They do not have to deny Jesus. Indeed, who better than the apostle Peter to mentor the church now emerging out of the protection it enjoyed under Judaism? People need time. People need to be believed in. Your personal time investment in the lives of persecuted Christians is never wasted.

Some of us may be tired. Isn't one letter enough (1 Peter), do they need another one (2 Peter)? The work of RI seems heavy just now, endless stories of hurting lives due to persecution gnaw away at our sensitivities, nothing more to give, we think; the 'old-before-their-time' faces stare out, and the task merely enlarges with each year.

Yet we can never disengage from these lives any more than we can erase family: we must write what we can, say what we can, give what we can, and then do it a second time, a third time. They, like us, need others to point out the big picture, the mysteries of God, the biblical rationale for what they face, and the colossal future with Jesus.

Peter wrote with unique confidence to this suffering church-at-large. There was an authenticity about Peter stemming from his experience in the Christian life, especially when he had faced pressure from society to conform and deny his relationship with the Master. He could believe in them because Jesus had believed in him. Believe in those you mentor.

'Even the persecuted ... need mentoring towards the goal of *'wholesome thinking'*

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## *Spiritual formation*

These early Christians needed to hear something to build them up and re-align their view of life. The key thought here is to stimulate *'wholesome thinking'* among these scattered and persecuted Christian communities. The Greek word used by Peter can mean either 'chaff sifted of impurities' or 'something flawless when held up to the light of the sun'.

There are several senses fusing together here. There is the sense of the effort

required. It is hard work, for they have come through so much. There is a sense of continuation or an on-going process; and we sense that Peter is not the only contributor (but clearly an important one). It is hard work, for things will need to be said again and again, each time with sincerity of purpose and fresh expectation. There is a sense of opposition, for they will naturally think the opposite to this. It is hard work, for the mind plays tricks, and a persecuted person is not immune.

Some of us may be realising that over time the focused objectives of our task have become unclear. The 'what we do' (in and for the Kingdom of God) has gradually become more important than 'who we are' (children and servants of the King). The persecuted church (or any church for that matter) will not be enriched by empty husks of lives; punctual and active, but barren and unaccustomed to spiritual enlargement.

The job of a mentor then is to re-focus attention on the things that will aid spiritual formation. There is nothing to guarantee that the persecution experience itself will result in the automatic deepening of spirituality. Nor that the supporters of RI, by their very interest in these vital support ministries, are deepened spiritually. It may be we are – for we are one body – but I suspect it is not always so.

Even the persecuted (with their faith being so sorely tested in battle) need mentoring towards the goal of *'wholesome thinking'*. No matter how important we feel our ministries are, no matter how dramatic the experiences we go through, no matter how painful the onslaught, we still need others to make sure we are spiritually receptive and growing up (1 Peter 2:1-3). Welcome those who may act as mentors.

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## *Affirmation*

The church communities addressed by Peter do not need to hear something new. They need to be reminded of biblical truths they already know. They need to rest on those truths, to mulch them into their lives. They need to re-apply those teachings to their volatile daily situations, to replant them in different ground.

Where they learnt them in the first place may now seem a million miles away. People need the affirmation of Bible truth. The communication and teaching device of repetition has always been, and remains, important in Christian ministry. Often words and truths assimilated in one setting may require radically re-learning and re-applying in another very different situation.

These are Christian lives scattered following persecution. They are 'strangers' (exiles, forcibly removed: read 1 Peter 1:1, 1:17, and 2:11), which they know only too well. Peter reminds them that they are simultaneously saints of God with their spiritual origins, resources and priorities in God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (1:2).

### **'The letters simply burst with example after example of affirming truth for Christians living under the threat and reality of persecution'**

This immediate reminder of their dual identity as strangers and saints goes some way to adding strength and courage to their lives. The new situation calls for such a ministry of affirmation – in the realities the mentor re-focuses the faith eye. Their hearts are caught up with human fears, so Peter reminds them of their *inheritance*, their secure possession (as opposed to the goods of earthly life which can be destroyed). The letters simply burst with example after example of affirming truth for Christians living under the threat and reality of persecution.

Some of us may be losing confidence, thinking that things will never change. After all, regular readers of *Witness* read story after story of pain, separation, and injustice in each issue. It would be understandable if we soon became de-sensitised or lost hope in the eventual outcome of the biblical story. Just how much can we take? All of us stand in need of affirmation, biblically and personally, in the sense of our own worth. Some may glibly use the notion of affirming, similar to the cheery 'have a nice day' at the supermarket checkout, but not us. Affirm strongly those you mentor.

## *Scripture balance*

One reason for the current obsession with spiritual mentoring in Christian communities is the consciousness of so many finishing badly – of not sticking it out, of turning back. The mentor's concern, therefore, is for the equipping of Christians to finish well. Peter is no exception. But in order to do so he feels the need to use Scripture directly.

For example, when he writes of the *living stone* (Christ) and *living stones* (the church) in 2:4-8, he uses direct quotation from the Old Testament – Isaiah 28:16, Psalm 118:22 and Isaiah 8:13-14. These persecuted Christians of Peter's day needed a forceful reminder of their position in Christ, of their role as community, of their ministries as a *holy priesthood*, of their reversed lives – once no people, now the people of God.

There are greater things to say than for Peter to simply recount his own personal experiences. His story, for all its drama and lessons for the discerning listener, would only go part way to give the quality of encouragement these Christians needed as they daily faced the pressure to turn back. The mentor needs to teach the Bible if the mentored are to finish well.

Some of us may be tempted to drop the Bible from conversation, assuring ourselves that our lives speak for God anyway. But to finish well, we all need Bible mentoring. Notice in our 'boss verse' how the words relating to the Bible are almost 50% of the text – '*words spoken in the past by the holy prophets [OT] and the command given by our Lord and Saviour [Gospels] through your apostles [Acts]*'.

Notice too, how Peter views Bible use – there is an intended balance. Whilst news of the persecuted church is often released and told in stories (testimonies, reports, eye witness accounts etc), which are often published in narrative form, and rightly so, we must not be deluded into thinking that is all that is needed. RI and those who support it must constantly raise the issue of Bible mentoring if these precious lives are to finish well.

*Persecuted Christians are radical lives in hard places, but they are not super humans nor spiritual icons. They are only the most ordinary kinds of people entrusted to the care of the whole church for an affirming ministry – ideally from lives experiencing their own continuing spiritual growth.*

*For further reading:*

Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, Study Guide Edition, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 2000.

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## Reflection *For further reflection and thought:*

1. How might we foster a whole-church mentality and strategy – as the inheritors of a divided Christianity?
2. Does the mentoring of persecuted Christians require unique skills and approaches? If you agree, what are they? How might RI be best equipped to advance such mentoring?
3. Has affirmation played a significant part in your spiritual formation? How did it work for you?
4. Over these six editions of Word of Truth, what stands out for you as the most memorable perspective? What actual changes in your life and support for the persecuted church has it resulted in?

## Like Gold in the Fire

*Polycarp, Smyrna (now Izmar, Turkey) AD 168*

The kindly old bishop entered the arena under armed guard. The stands were filled with an angry mob; their shouts filled the air.

Suddenly, a voice from heaven spoke to the bishop, saying, *'Be strong, Polycarp, and play the man'*. Despite the noise from the crowd, many of those who stood nearby also heard the heavenly voice.

Once inside the arena, the soldiers quickly brought Polycarp before the Roman proconsul. Polycarp, the well-known Bishop of Smyrna, was the last living link with the twelve apostles, as he had studied under John. As soon as the crowd learned that this famous bishop had been arrested, a great cheer went up.

The proconsul tried to get Polycarp to deny Jesus Christ: *'Swear by the fortune of Caesar. Take the oath and I will release you. Curse Christ!'*

The bishop stood firm. *'Eighty-six years have I served the Lord Jesus Christ, and He never once wronged me. How can I blaspheme my King who has saved me!'* The proconsul threatened, *'I have wild beasts ready, and I will throw you to them if you do not change your mind.'*

*'Let them come, for my purpose is unchangeable,'* replied Polycarp.

*'If the wild beasts don't scare you, then I will burn you with fire,'* said the proconsul.

*'You threaten me with a fire which will burn for an hour and then will go out, but you are ignorant of the fire of the future judgment of God reserved for the everlasting torment of the ungodly. But why do you delay? Bring on the beasts, or the fire, or whatever you choose; you shall not move me to deny Christ, my Lord and Saviour.'*

When the proconsul saw that Polycarp would not recant, he sent the herald to proclaim three times in the middle of the stadium, *'Polycarp has professed himself a Christian.'*

As soon as they heard these words, the whole multitude of Gentiles and Jews furiously demanded that he be burned alive. Immediately dry wood was brought out and heaped in the centre of the arena for a bonfire.

When they were about to nail him to the stake, Polycarp said, *'Leave me as I am; He who gives me strength to endure the fire will enable me to remain still within the fire.'* They agreed to this and simply tied his hands behind his back with a rope.

In his final prayer, he prayed, *'O Father, I thank You, that You have called me to this day and hour and have counted me worthy to receive my place among the number of the holy martyrs. Amen.'*

As soon as he uttered the word, *'Amen,'* the officers lit the fire. The flames rose high above his body, but miraculously, he was not burned. Those who watched said, *'He was in the midst of the fire, not as burning flesh but as gold and silver refined in a furnace. And we smelled such a sweet aroma as of incense or some other precious spice.'*

Since the fire did not hurt him, the executioner was ordered to stab him with a sword. As soon as he did, so much blood flowed from the wound that it put out the fire.

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