

## Is the Blood of the Martyrs *Really* the Seed of the Church?

By Glenn Penner

One of the most beautiful songs I have heard in recent years is Steve Green's song "The Faithful", which he dedicated to the persecuted Church. The first time I heard it, a tingle went up my spine and I confess that I still am touched by it whenever I view the music video that The Voice of the Martyrs produced together with Steve in 1998. The chorus of the song concludes with the familiar words, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church."

Some have mistakenly believed that these words can be found in the New Testament. They're not. In fact, the phrase, itself, is a paraphrase of a statement made by an early church leader called Tertullian in 197 A.D. in a book he entitled *The Apology*. In it, Tertullian writes to the Roman governor of his province, refuting various false charges being made against Christians and the Christian faith, arguing that the followers of Christ were loyal subjects of the empire, and thus, should not be persecuted. At any rate, Tertullian observes, the persecution was failing to destroy Christianity. He writes, "kill us, torture us, condemn us, grind us to dust; your injustice is the proof that we are innocent. Therefore God suffers (allows) that we thus suffer. When you recently condemned a Christian woman to the leno (pimp, i.e. accused her of being a prostitute) rather than to the leo (lion), you made confession that a taint on our purity is considered among us something more terrible than any punishment and any death. Nor does your cruelty, however exquisite, avail you; it is rather a temptation to us. The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed."

As is true with many popular statements, this phrase has been taken at face value for so long that to challenge it is, in the minds of some, paramount to challenging the very words of Scripture. The notion that persecution always causes church growth is so widespread that it is considered irrefutable by some. An accompanying assumption is that persecution typically causes the Church to be purified, and believers to walk more closely with God. Thus, persecution is often seen to have a benefit for the Church.

All of these beliefs have a measure of truth to them. We could point to the biblical witness of the book of Acts and show how the persecution of the Church pushed it out of Jerusalem and eventually caused the gospel to be spread throughout the ancient world. Samuel Lamb, the pastor of the largest house church in China states emphatically, "Persecution is good for the Church. More persecution, more growth." In a video produced by The Voice of the Martyrs, Lamb told how his church had tended to grow more whenever he had been in prison than when he had been free. "Send me back," he said, indicating his willingness to suffer imprisonment if it means the growth of the Church in China.

There is a danger, however, in assuming that persecution invariably causes church growth. As persecution takes on such a positive role, it may result in a consequent lack of awareness of and concern for the increasing persecution of Christians around the world as believers in the West feel no great need to address the issue. Why, the question may be asked, should we be concerned about something that has such positive results?

**In All Things...**

Paul's words in Romans 8:28 are enlightening, "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to the will of God" (NASB).

What are the "all things" that Paul is referring to? In the previous verses (vv. 17-23), Paul spoke of how, as heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, we share in His suffering (v.17). It is obvious from the context that Paul is not speaking primarily of the suffering that we endure as being part of the fallen creation, but the suffering that is unique to the children of God. As bad as such suffering is, Paul says, it is not worthy to compare with the glory that awaits us when Christ returns. In the meantime, we wait for this restoration, together with the rest of creation, the Spirit assisting us when we do not know what we should pray for. But rather than just leaving hope to some futuristic time and causing us to resort to a fatalistic view of having to "grin and bear it" in the here and now, Paul reminds us that suffering is not without redemptive qualities. While persecution and suffering may not be defined as "good" things, God is able to cause them to work for the good of those who love Him. Thus, church growth and personal maturity may be seen as a sign of God sustaining and working "all things together for good" – even the persecution of His children. Persecution is, therefore, not intrinsically good, but good in as much as God is able to bring good out of something evil, in the same way as Joseph could tell his brothers in Genesis 50:15, "God turned into good what you meant for evil" (NLT).

Over 150 years ago, missionaries from Great Britain and Germany traveled to northeast India to preach the gospel. I was once told the story by an Indian church leader, during this time, a man, his wife and two children were converted to Christ. Their spontaneous faith spread throughout the village, angering the leader of the community. He summoned the man before the village and demanded that he renounce his Christian faith or face execution. The man, facing this crucial decision, sang a song that I have heard sung around the world,

"I have decided to follow Jesus, I have decided to follow Jesus, I have decided to follow Jesus, no turning back, no turning back."

Enraged, the chief ordered the archers to shoot the two children. As both of the boys lay twitching on the ground, the chief asked, "Now will you renounce your faith? You have lost both of your children. You will lose your wife as well."

The man replied by singing, "Though no one joins me, still will I follow. Though no one joins me, still will I follow. Though no one joins me, still will I follow. No turning back, no turning back."

The chief was beside himself with rage and he ordered the wife put to death. Now he asked for the final time, "Now I will give you one more opportunity to deny your faith and live. There is no one for you in the world."

The man then sang, "The cross before me, the world behind me. The cross before me, the world behind me. The cross before me, the world behind me. No turning back, no turning back."

Eventually the courage of this man and his family would lead to the conversion of this chief and the entire village, but he didn't know that at that time. His call was simply to be unashamed of the gospel. Their death (as is the death of all His saints) was a tragedy and not something that God allows lightly (see Psalm 116:15). Yet, God was able to cause something beautiful to come out of it.

Every week we receive numerous reports of brutal attacks on Christians, churches, and schools in India. Yet, the believers in India testify that the dramatic increase in persecution over the last few years continues to be used by God to bring large numbers of Indians to Himself. Is the persecution a good thing? No, but “God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God.”

### **The Godly Will Be Persecuted**

I find it interesting that the Apostle Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 3:12 that “everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” Paul did not see the suffering he endures as exceptional, but rather typical for anyone who wants to live a godly life. So I’m forced to ask myself, is there a reason why we have it so easy here in Canada?

Will persecution make us better Christians? Perhaps. It seems to me, however, that the witness of scripture and the testimony of today’s persecuted Church is better reflected in the phrase, “Better Christians tend to produce persecution.”

In the same vein, does persecution always cause church growth? Not always. In 1993, I did considerable research on the history of the Church in Russia and, to my surprise, I learned that the membership of the Evangelical Christian Baptists (registered and unregistered) in the Soviet Union had dropped from approximately 1,000,000 in 1926 to just under 249,000 in 1993. In Albania, the Church was virtually wiped out during the rule of Enver Hoxha. Only a dozen or so Christians were found to have survived Albania’s attempt to create a completely atheistic state when religious liberty was restored a decade ago. The Communists almost succeeded. I can show other cases today and in church history where the witness of the gospel has been snuffed out or is flickering due to sustained persecution. It would be naïve to say, then, that persecution always leads to church growth or an openness to the gospel.

### **A Different Perspective**

So, what is the relationship between church growth and persecution? The truth may be found in simply changing our perspective. Rather than saying that persecution leads to church growth, it may be more accurate to say that, as we look at the world today, we find that church growth almost always leads to persecution of some sort. The church is growing worldwide at an amazing rate, often most rapidly in the very countries where persecution is the most severe. Very often, as in the case in Vietnam, Laos, Ethiopia, China, and India, the persecution is a direct result of the Church’s expansion. Seeing the growth of Christianity, governments and/or leaders of traditional religious groups feel threatened and deliberately (and sometimes forcibly) attempt to control or stop the growth of Christ’s Church.

So when people ask me, “Do you think we will ever have persecution here in Canada?” recently I’ve been inclined to answer, “Why should we be persecuted? In what way is the average Canadian Christian making such a difference for the kingdom of God that he/she warrants being persecuted? In what way does the average Canadian Christian stand out from his/her society in such a way that the offense of the cross that Paul speaks of in Galatians 5:11 is exhibited?”

Is not the tendency today to make the gospel as attractive as possible? To make Christianity the panacea for all of life’s problems or troubles? We want our churches to be seeker friendly, not a stumbling block, something that the world keeps tripping over, stubbing their toes on and cursing because it seems out of place.

A few years ago, when I was in Nicaragua teaching at a pastor's conference, I was staying in a home where the door way to the washroom was just under 6'4". I'm 6'5" tall and for the four days that I was there I kept hitting head on the top of the doorway. Did it hurt! How I wish I could say that my consistent response to smacking the top of my head was to utter gently, "Oh, my. That hurts."

That doorway reminded me, however, of what the Church is supposed be like in the world. In 1 Peter 2 we read: "As you come to him, the living Stone--rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him-- you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ...Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone, a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall." (NIV)

Peter points out that the Church is a house built on this rejected cornerstone, a rock that the world keeps tripping over and cursing. That's how the Church is viewed in much of the world today. Daily, we at The Voice of the Martyrs receive reports of how Christians are being mistreated, cursed, discriminated against, tortured, even killed simply because they don't fit into their society's mould. They stick out, and they are rejected, just as their Lord was.

I wonder what would happen if more of us here in Canada met Paul's criteria of "wanting to live godly in Christ Jesus."