

Why Are Christian Persecuted?

Glenn M. Penner

1. Introduction

As we looked at in our last session, the path of following Christ is, at its roots, a path characterized by a cross. Not a sword, but a cross.

Throughout the NT, there is a curious family of phrases that are used to describe the suffering of Christians. It's so common I suspect that we miss it.

LK 6:22 Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man.

2 COR. 4:11 For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body.

PHIL. 1:29 For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him,

MARK 13:9,13 You must be on your guard. You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues. On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them....All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.

JOHN 15:21 They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the One who sent me.

ACTS 9:16 I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.

ACTS 21:13 Then Paul answered, "Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.

REV.2:3,4 You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love.

These passages imply a suffering for the sake of the cause that Jesus represents, his righteousness (Matt.5:10), His Gospel (Mark 8:35), the kingdom of God (Luke 18:29; 2Thess. 1:5).

In Mark 8:35 and 10:29 "for my sake" and "for the sake of the gospel" are set in parallel (also Matt.5:10,11).

Anyone who suffers for “His sake” thus also falls victim to affliction for reasons similar to why Jesus suffered.

Jesus was not persecuted and brought to the cross for arbitrary reasons, mere misunderstandings, or unfortunate accidents.

Instead His sufferings resulted logically and inevitably out of the very centre of his message and life. His word and his work led him into suffering, and suffering itself is an inseparable part of his message and work.

In the very same way, we share in His sufferings because we carry out his life and message. Persecution is inevitable. We are sheep among wolves. I find it interesting that in the very call of Paul to ministry, he is told how much he will suffer for the sake of Christ’s name (Acts 9:15-16). Rather than seeing persecution as an anomaly, a tragedy, or a misfortune, it is seen in the New Testament as a logical result of following the suffering Christ.

There are various reasons for this, as we will see:

2. Biblical Reasons for Persecution

1. Theological

John 16:2- *They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God*

The very message of Jesus invited persecution from the religious teachers of His day. While, He, himself, had insisted that he had not come to destroy the Law but to fulfill it, there was no mistaking that He saw Himself as at least the equal of Moses in the eyes of the religious leaders of His day. His teaching had “authority” meaning that He spoke on His own behalf, instead of teaching as was common in His day, by relying on rabbinical teaching and authority.

The Sermon on the Mount is a prime example of this.

Jesus was not above criticizing the theological presuppositions of His day when they were based on tradition rather than on the Word of God (e.g. Sabbath controversies).

He also insisted that He was the Son of God, claiming to possess divine characteristics, which did not go unnoticed, with the response in John 5:18 being the inevitable response “Therefore the Jews sought all the more to kill him because he not only violated the Sabbath, but also called God His father, and thus made himself equal with God.”

His message of God's unconditional love for all people regardless of gender or race also caused a furor. It is worth noting that it was a Hellenist, a Greek Jew, who was the first martyr, and it was probable that it was this group who were the Christians first targeted for persecution in Acts 8, and driven from Jerusalem. Stephen was arrested on the charges on blasphemy, and was killed because his teaching enraged their theological sensitivities. Saul (who later became Paul) was entirely motivated by theological reasons to persecute the church. He saw Christianity and the teachings of Jesus as a direct threat to the pillars of Judaism. And later, after he became a follower of Jesus, he, himself, was persecuted because he taught that observance of the Law was not necessary to gain acceptance with God. He was arrested in Jerusalem on the suspicion that he had slipped Gentiles into the temple. His teaching on the unity of the church (Jew & Gentile) enraged the Jews of his day, who believed that only by becoming a Jew could someone become part of the family of God. Paul was adamant in his rejection of this theological presupposition, and he was tortured and imprisoned for it, as is evident in Acts 22:19-22 as he shared of his call to ministry:

" 'Lord,' I replied, 'these men know that I went from one synagogue to another to imprison and beat those who believe in you. And when the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.'*

"Then the Lord said to me, 'Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles.' "

The crowd listened to Paul until he said this. Then they raised their voices and shouted, "Rid the earth of him! He's not fit to live!"

It is almost certain to me that the book of Hebrews was written to Christians who were undergoing persecution for primarily theological reasons, for the encouragement to stand firm is solely theological. They are tempted to give up the faith and return to their former Jewish faith. Instead, the author encourages to stand firm in their faith and commitment to Christ and the sufficiency of His once-for-all sacrifice.

Theology matters. To this day, Christians are persecuted throughout the world for their beliefs.

- Our insistence that salvation cannot be found in any other name marks us out as intolerant.
- The acceptance of all people regardless of social standing, gender or race makes Christians targets of attacks in India by Hindu radicals who believe that we are disturbing the natural order of things by accepting "untouchables".

- Muslim families sometimes kill their own children who become Christians and the reason is strictly theological; according to Islamic teaching, apostates are to be killed in order to stop the spread of their blasphemy. And when they attack Christians, they are not deemed responsible; they believe that the demon inside the Christian incites people to attack them

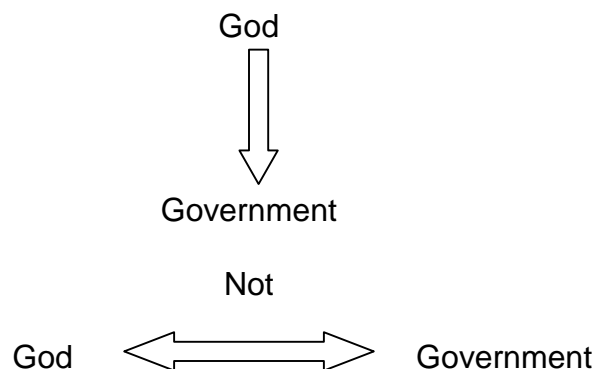
2. Political

Of course, Jesus was not crucified by the Jews but by the Romans, and it is not accidental that the Apostles Creed says he “suffered under Pontius Pilate.” He was crucified for political reasons (admittedly trumped up), but the charge of sedition or stirring up trouble, disturbing the peace is one that Christians continue to be accused of.

Jesus knew that his disciples would run into trouble with political authorities (cf. Mark 13:9; Matt.10: 17-18). One of the things that is worth noting is that for the early church, just like Jesus, theological reasons often start persecution, but political reasons are needed to sustain it (Acts 17:5-7; 18:12ff).

By and large, scripture views civil authority not primarily as a threat but a God ordained restraint on evil. Thus we have words like Judges 21:25, “In those days, Israel had no king, everyone did what was right in his own eyes” which is repeated throughout the book to describe the chaotic and increasingly lawless period of the judges. The Bible has no place for the romantic view that the source of all evil is civil authority or that individuals on their own can solve society’s problems.

This is why in Romans 13:1-5, Paul can trace the hand of God in the government of his day. The Christian is to be a law abiding citizen because behind the government is the authority of God. Yet, Bible also has no illusions that the government will always act in a God honouring fashion. It is made up of people and people are fallen. Early in the church’s history, the church had to make the choice as to whether it would obey a governmental degree that violated biblical absolutes. When told to stop preaching Jesus, the disciples replied, “We must obey God rather than man.” (Acts 5:29). The relationship between the government and God is thus:



In his first epistle, Peter tells slaves how to live under a system that was intrinsically dehumanizing. Certainly the first century church held no romantic notions about the integrity of the state. They had seen what it had done to their Master. And by the end of the century, they had experienced enough outbreaks of persecution by local magistrates that the state could be described most unfavorably in the book of Revelation: it is a whore, a beast, when it claimed an allegiance that rightfully belonged to God alone.

Thus while the Bible insists that both ideally and in practice the state restrains wickedness, it fully recognizes that the state can also be the perpetrator of wickedness. It means that the state can protect us from suffering, but it can also be the cause of it. In other words, it is assumed in scripture that the sword of the state only affects those who do wrong, yet the actual experience of God's people also points in another direction, as we see in Acts 12:1-2, when James was beheaded by Herod.

It is with the book of Revelation that we see the real conflict arising between the church and the state that would bloom into the intense persecution for political reasons. The book was composed during the reign of Domitian (AD81-96), when the Christian faith collided with the Roman imperium and its cult of the emperor. Domitian claimed that he was "lord and god" and thus was to be venerated as such. The veneration of the emperor became the official state religion, the thing that brought unity to the empire ideologically and religiously. Ancient Rome was incredibly pluralistic; one could worship whoever or whatever, or nothing at all if one so wished, but the imperial cult became was the one thing that brought unity to this diversity. The state, through the emperor, demanded primary loyalty. Loyal citizens were expected to declare their allegiance and offer sacrifices to the emperor as a sign of their loyalty. The emperor was Lord and God, above all else, and the source of all Rome's power and strength. He brought unity to the cultural and religious diversity that was ancient Rome. He was Rome, and all loyal subjects were expected to acknowledge this and worship him accordingly.

Christians, of course, could not abide by this, and were thus viewed upon as rebels by the Roman authorities and society in large. They were viewed as traitors, disloyal to the state. Make no mistake; the Romans did not persecute the early church because they believed in Jesus. Anyone could believe in whatever he wished. The early Christians were persecuted because they were perceived to be rebels, refusing to acknowledge any other authority as equal or superior to God. The confession that Jesus was Lord was a direct challenge to the sovereignty of Caesar and, ultimately, to the Roman state. To have members of their society declare ultimate allegiance to another king was unacceptable to the Roman authorities, who insisted that Rome must be made preeminent.

To this day, Christians continue to suffer persecution because they are perceived as a threat to national security or national stability. Communist countries, in particular, find it difficult to accept a group of people who will not give unconditional allegiance to the interests of the state or the party. Our loyalty to each other and to another society will inevitably threaten those who insist on a loyalty that belongs only to God.

3. Economic

In the New Testament, we also see where Christians are persecuted because they have an adverse effect on the economy.

*Can any one think of an example where Christians ruined the economic well being of a society and thus incurred the wrath of those around them?

Acts 16:16ff. This is actually the first recorded persecution of Christians by pagans

Acts 19:23-41 (cf. 20:17 where he calls the elder to him, rather than venturing into the city itself)

The persecution of Christians in India can sometimes be traced back to economic reasons, as can the persecution of Christian leaders by local mafia bosses or terrorist groups who see the spread of Christianity as a threat to the economic climate that benefits them.

4. Social

Still another cause of Christian persecution is the perception that Christians are different from the world (or the rest of society). Societies rarely welcome those who are perceived to be different.

Jesus pointed this out that those who became his followers would even find resistance from members of his own household (Matt.10:36; Mark 13:12-13).

The gospel of John is most clear about the animosity that would arise between the world and the followers of the very one whom the world resisted (John 1:11, 15:18-20). Because the disciples are no longer of the world, and therefore reject conformity to the world, the world hates them. Put another way, while the church is *for* the world in its mission to reconcile the world to God through Jesus Christ, yet the church is also *against* the world, because the powers of sin and idolatry oppose the gospel of Jesus Christ, and the incarnation of God's peace and reconciliation as evidenced in the church.

Peter picks this theme up in his letter in 1 Peter 4:1-4:

Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because he who has suffered in his body is done with sin. As a result, he does not live the rest of his earthly life for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God. For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do--living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. They think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you.

Earlier in the book, he spoke about Jesus being a stone of stumbling, a rock of offense (2:8). But that we are a temple built off of this stone (2:5); the idea of a building built out of line with the rest of the world, something people keep stumbling over and cursing.

Because we are different, scripture says, we will be defamed (1Peter 2:12; 3:16), and viewed with suspicion (Acts 17:7; 21:38; 24:5).

Our response, however, is not to respond as the world treats us (1Peter 2:21-23; 3:9; Matt.5:44; 1Cor.4:12)

Modern day examples are numerous.

In the former Soviet Union, for example, Baptists were accused of being cannibals, child killers, immoral (love feasts), lazy, uneducated, not good citizens, entire work team punished if a Christian was on it.

In its ministry of serving the Persecuted Church, The Voice of the Martyrs has typically tended to restrict its assistance to those who are kept from obtaining Bibles or other Christian literature by government policy or practice or where believers, through government sanctioned circumstances, are harassed, imprisoned, killed, or deprived of their possessions. The emphasis has been on "government" sanction or policy. While individual missions may wish to continue with this policy, it is our concern that Christians who are persecuted in other ways tend to be neglected in our ministry of service. It is our intention to remind the Body of Christ that in scripture (and mirrored in today's world) Christians are persecuted for more than just political reasons.

It is our belief that we must consider all forms of discrimination and persecution of Christians as equally valid and worthy of our aid and recognition. In all of these cases, the persecution would end if one would deny their faith or stop their Christian witness.

This, in our opinion, is an important criterion in determining the difference between those who suffer persecution as opposed to poverty.