



# **Re-Examining Religious Persecution**

**Constructing a Theological Framework  
for Understanding Persecution**

by

**Charles L. Tieszen**

**Religious Freedom Series**

**Volume 1**

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

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Contributions to the study of religious freedom  
and persecution of Christians

**Editors:** Dr Christof Sauer & Dr Thomas Schirrmacher

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Charles L. Tieszen 2008

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Final thanks are due to Sarah, my wife. It is to her that I dedicate this book, for she, like few others, embodies the spirit of a life lived for others. I want to be more like her.

It is also my humble privilege to present this work as an offering to Jesus Christ. May those who are persecuted for his name use it as a means for theological expression and perseverance.

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# Foreword

At the end of the nineteenth century, Christians were so optimistic about the future that they christened the twentieth century ‘the Christian century,’ anticipating a world transformed by the gospel. One famous hymn chimed, “For the darkness shall turn to dawning, and the dawning to noonday bright; and Christ’s great kingdom shall come on earth, the kingdom of love and light.” Within a few short years it was apparent that things would not work out this way. World War I, the Great Depression, World War II, the rise of communism, and nuclear proliferation followed. Historian Robert Conquest called the twentieth century ‘the ravaged century,’ and it turned out to be one of the bloodiest in human history.

During that century, Christians were major victims of both persecution and martyrdom. In fact, more Christians were killed in the twentieth century than in all previous centuries combined. This is the context in which we find ourselves at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

While many have written about religious violence and persecution, Charles Tieszen here refocuses on some basic definitions and theological reflections. He deftly offers several key insights including the fact that persecution is universal in the Christian life and should be expected. He proposes a more nuanced definition of persecution, illustrating how it differs from suffering. He shows that persecution is normally the result of a complex combination of factors. And he correctly points out the need for Christians to be more reflective about the role of persecution, both in their own lives and around the world.

Although Christians today make up about one-third of the world’s population, as they did 100 years ago, the current global Christian community differs fundamentally from that of a century ago. Today, well over half of all Christians are from the Global South (Africa, Asia, and Latin America); in 1900, 81% of all Christians were European or North American. This means there is both a new opportunity for rapprochement and the same old rivalries in the realm of religious persecution. While secular or

atheistic governments did most of the persecuting in the twentieth century, it is more likely that in the future religionists will persecute each other. For example, relations between Christianity and Islam have been strained since September 11, 2001. Much of this is focused on the Western World (read Christian) against the Muslim world. It is not hard to argue that this Christendom model (where Christians were concentrated in the West) does not result in good relations between Christians and Muslims. However, in today's polycentric Christian world there is hope for the future relationship between Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists because Christianity cannot be associated with a Western political or economic agenda. On the other hand, recent research has shown that up to 86% of Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists do not personally know a Christian. This lack of personal contact impacts future persecution because ignorance is one of the major tools of intolerance and hate.

If the twenty-first century is to depart from the twentieth in relation to religious persecution, a vast new program of education and orientation is needed. Religionists and educational institutions (from pre-schools to universities) will need to provide leadership in educating their members about religion. Non-religious people (whether atheists or agnostics) also need to offer positive input into inter-religious relations. Only then will there be hope for a more harmonious world, both at the governmental as well as the communal level.

*Todd M. Johnson*

*Center for the Study of Global Christianity*

# Introduction

A group of militant Muslims in northern Nigeria recently charged themselves with the duty of stopping cars along a road and forcing their passengers to recite the *shahāda* (Islamic creed).<sup>1</sup> Those who could do so were allowed to pass on. If passengers were unable to recite the creed, however, they were beaten or killed. Given the religious climate in Nigeria, many Christians were involved and their inability and/or refusal to recite the *shahāda* precipitated many beatings and deaths. Their own response, in like manner, was to stop cars and force passengers to recite John 3:16. If these passengers were unable to recite this small portion of Scripture they too were beaten or killed. Of course, this situation involves a number of ethnic, cultural, political, and theological issues,<sup>2</sup> but it suggests that these Nigerian Christians did not have a means in which to think about and respond appropriately to the persecution that occurred in their context. Such a story not only illustrates the importance of theological reflection concerning persecution, but where none exists, it shows that misunderstandings and inappropriate reactions will often result.

As Chapter One of the present study will demonstrate, a survey and analysis of the manners in which persecution is treated in both modern scholarship and current thinking reveals similar insufficiencies as well as confusion and significant gaps in theological reflection.<sup>3</sup> In this light, we are left with an incomplete and rather

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<sup>1</sup> The story that follows was related to the author in a personal interview: Ida Glaser, interview by author, 7 August 2005, email, South Hamilton, MA. See also, Jan H. Boer, "Nigeria's Decades of Blood." *Studies in Christian & Muslim Relations* 1 (Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria: Stream Christian Publishers, 2003); Obed Minchakpu, "Eye for an Eye: Christians Avenge February Murders, Spark Muslim Retaliation," *Christianity Today* 48, no. 7 (July 2004): 17; and Richard Nyberg, "Pastors Killed, Churches Burned: New Wave of Violence Begins," *Christianity Today* 48, no. 6 (June 2004): 17. Here, Anglican archbishop of Kaduna "... acknowledged that some Christians are striking back at Muslims, fighting for power and authority ..."

<sup>2</sup> That is to say, the presence of a theology of persecution, by itself, may not have totally eliminated this situation. These Christians' discipleship (or lack thereof) and the possible identity of many of them as 'census Christians' play a significant role as well, in addition to a host of issues related to the Nigerian context. Nonetheless, as the present study seeks to demonstrate, a theological framework for understanding persecution would account for such issues and serve an important role in helping to avoid such responses.

<sup>3</sup> Excusable reasons for these gaps exist insofar as Christians who are intensely persecuted are generally not inclined to give significant theological reflection

mistreated theological puzzle. Some of the pieces are there, but many others are missing, and still others are forced to fit into places where they do not belong. Some are in fact pieces to an entirely different puzzle. The responsibility of the study that follows, then, is to disassemble this mistreated puzzle, recognize its appropriate pieces, and reassemble them into a better-formed picture. In this way, the present study acts as a counterpoint to the insufficient treatment and lack of attention religious persecution, theological reflections in particular, has received. With this in mind, the study will proceed from Chapter One to build a theological framework for understanding religious persecution.

In Chapter Two, the study will begin to connect the aforementioned gaps by setting out a comprehensive definition of the religious persecution of Christians. After defining persecution in its broadest terms, we will consider the impact of ‘religious’ as a defining factor in a socio-political definition of persecution. From here, we will examine the term ‘Christian’ in an effort to establish its distinctive role in such a definition. We will finally distinguish this definition from socio-political understandings by considering the religious persecution of Christians theologically.

After defining the religious persecution of Christians, the study will move on in Chapter Three to consider persecution’s major theological questions. In so doing, we will explore how persecution occurs as seen in its universal presence and an experience of it that is contextual. From here, we will reflect upon the theological sources of persecution, namely, Satan as persecutor and God as one who sovereignly appoints and allows persecution. With these sources in mind, we will then consider the theological purposes of persecution.

The study will culminate in Chapter Four with a discussion of what the theologically appropriate responses to persecution might be. The Conclusion will then summarize our findings and present areas worthy of further study.

In order to adequately address such an examination with clarity and efficiency, certain aspects of the study of religious persecution must, unfortunately, be left to other studies. In this light, what follows does in

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to their experiences. Others seek only to provide historical accounts rather than theological treatments of persecution. What are treated in Chapter One are those individuals and their works whose theological treatments are found lacking.

no way constitute a fully-developed biblical theology of persecution,<sup>4</sup> nor does it consider matters that are normally connected to classical topics of systematic theology. In the same way, historical and qualitative surveys of persecution fall beyond the boundaries of the present study. Thus, treatments or reflections which fall outside of such parameters are not included and are not explored in the present study. In like manner, the matter of intra-Christian persecution is considered to lie outside of the parameters of the present study. Nevertheless, these topics do, of course, have significant impact on the study of the religious persecution of Christians and so it is hoped that the present study will support the subsequent reflection upon them.

For purposes of clarity it is essential to note that when we refer to the religious persecution of Christians we do not include terms such as ‘suffering’ or ‘oppression’. When citing authors who use similar terms to specifically refer to persecution, we make special note. Otherwise, such words are thought of differently than ‘persecution’. While this may be cause for some rigidity in vocabulary, it is vital to a proper understanding of persecution, as the present study will demonstrate. At points, we will refer to periods or waves of great persecution. In doing so, we use the term ‘persecution situation’ to refer to a period of time in which there was sustained, intense persecution.<sup>5</sup> Concomitantly, when we use the term ‘intense,’ we in no way exclude other forms of persecution. Rather, we are merely noting a high level of hostility in the persecution that might be experienced in a given situation.

It is of final importance to recognize that those who might best be able to reflect theologically on religious persecution may be those who

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<sup>4</sup> For biblical theologies of persecution, see, for instance, Glenn M. Penner, *In the Shadow of the Cross: A Biblical Theology of Persecution and Discipleship* (Bartlesville, OK: Living Sacrifice Books, 2004), Scott Cunningham, “*Through Many Tribulations*”: *The Theology of Persecution in Luke-Acts* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), John S. Pobee, *Persecution and Martyrdom in the Theology of Paul* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1985), and Josef Ton, *Suffering, Martyrdom, and Rewards in Heaven* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997; reprint, Wheaton, Illinois: The Romanian Missionary Society, 2000). Ton’s work includes a full biblical theology as well as reflection on specific themes in Church history.

<sup>5</sup> Here, we follow the manner in which ‘martyrdom situation’ is defined in David B. Barrett and Todd M. Johnson, *World Christian Trends AD 30 – AD 2200* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2001), 859.

are most intimately familiar with it (i.e., various Majority World<sup>6</sup> Christians). While this may be true, very little theological reflection of this nature is evinced in widely-distributed or easily-accessed writing by such Christians. This is not entirely surprising – the intensely hostile nature of the persecution these Christians may experience often leaves them unable to devote significant time to thinking, writing, and sharing their reflections. When they do write, their reflections are most often expressed by describing their experiences rather than giving specific, extended theological reflection to them. In this light, the present study in no way assumes to place its arguments and conclusions over or against others. Rather, it is hoped that what follows will stimulate more helpful reflection from a greater representation of the global Church.

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<sup>6</sup> ‘Majority World’ refers to those areas of the world which do not include the West, that is, North America (Canada and the United States), Western Europe, and Australia. We find this term to be a better descriptive than ‘non-Western World’ and less pejorative than the terms ‘Third World’, ‘Two-Thirds World’, or ‘Developing World’.



# Chapter One

## Overcoming Misconceptions on Persecution

The amount of literature concerning itself with persecution is numerous. It is surprising however, to note the relative lack of attention it receives from a theological perspective.<sup>7</sup> As we will see below, it is often the case that when we do reflect theologically upon persecution, we tend to do so in manners which are not fully developed. The result is the rather mistreated puzzle we spoke of in the Introduction where gaps are left in between malformed thoughts. If we are to reflect accurately on religious persecution we must overcome the build-up of misconceptions and faulty thinking. These misconceptions generally fall into one of five categories where religious persecution is limited to:

- 1) an eschatological experience;
- 2) an isolated historical experience;
- 3) the experience of Majority World Christianity;
- 4) suffering in general; and
- 5) martyrdom.<sup>8</sup>

The survey that follows is by no means meant to be exhaustive. Rather, it is meant to be representative of the theological reflection found in scholarly literature and the perspectives that are common within contemporary Christianity. The analyses that are included are meant to build a foundation that will make use of the positive contributions of previous work. Ultimately, such an examination

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<sup>7</sup> With this in mind, works whose purpose it is to survey a particular persecution situation, groups who have endured persecution, or individuals who have been persecuted have been excluded unless they devote specific space to theology. This being said, various works that survey persecution inevitably make certain theological statements in their survey (usually regarding God's intentions in allowing it or his ability to sustain in spite of it). These statements notwithstanding, the purpose of such writers is not a theology of persecution *per se* and thus they are not treated here.

<sup>8</sup> Biblical theology on the subject could represent a sixth category, but falls outside the parameters of the present study. In this light, it will not be treated in the present survey.

will help to guide a fuller and more detailed theological study, for as the following paragraphs will demonstrate, these five categories represent a truncated view of persecution and one which impedes subsequent theological reflection.

## Persecution as an Eschatological Experience

This first category surveys written works that view persecution as an event only manifesting itself in the period of time nearest to the *Eschaton*. While examples of persecution at different times in history may be acknowledged, this view ultimately interprets these events as pointing to Christ's return and the events accompanying it. Such a view, of course, is often the natural result of a particular eschatological perspective, namely that of dispensational premillennialism.<sup>9</sup> It can be said that proponents of this view do not necessarily have persecution as the primary locus of their theology. To the contrary, these writers advocate for events that fulfill biblical prophecy in a literal fashion and culminate in the return of Christ. While persecution plays a role in these events, it is not the centerpiece. With this in mind, it is not our purpose here to survey or analyze this particular eschatological view.<sup>10</sup> Rather, we will focus on the theological reflection concerning persecution that arises from it.

In his book *The Coming Persecution*, Larry Poland writes,

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<sup>9</sup> See Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), 186-193. Cf. Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995) and Jeffrey J. Richards, *Contemporary Christian Options of the World's End: The Eschatology of Lewis Sperry Chafer* (Lampeter, United Kingdom: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1994).

<sup>10</sup> Likewise, we are not denying that there is a relationship between persecution and eschatology. That is to say, there is indeed a sense in which the two are connected. Biblically speaking, the hope which believers grasp onto, allowing them to persevere in times of persecution, is found in Christ's ultimate victory in the *Eschaton*. Speaking of Paul, John Pobee writes, "His endurance of persecution and suffering was rooted in his eschatological perspective, namely his conviction that he would be raised at the last, following the example of Christ who died and was raised by God." This view does not connect the event of persecution with the *Eschaton*, nor does it interpret it in terms of the timing or fulfillment of biblical prophecy. Rather, it serves, in part, to provide meaning to, and hope in the face of, persecution. See Pobee, 101, 110-118.

Here at the end of the century that is turning the corner into the twenty-first one ... there is a convergence of dynamics which, *for the first time ever*, has prepared the world for the fulfillment of the final fifth of God's revealed scenarios (emphasis in original).<sup>11</sup>

Essentially, what Scripture has foretold for the future is this generation's present.<sup>12</sup> According to Poland, evil in the world has been increasing as at no other time in human history. Along with this, the increasing presence of famine, earthquakes, warfare, false messiahs, and "uniformitarian thinking"<sup>13</sup> can only be understood as 'labor pains' which Christ himself foretold.<sup>14</sup> These 'labor pains', which include various forms of persecution, point to an imminent period of intense persecution as a part of Satan's strategy in the final phase of earthly, human history.<sup>15</sup> Under this great and intense persecution, believers in Christ will cry out to God for his deliverance, marking the advent of Christ's Second Coming.

Hal Lindsey, author of the popular work *The Late Great Planet Earth*, shares Poland's view of a world growing in evil in direct fulfillment of biblical prophecy.<sup>16</sup> These events are followed by a period known as the Great Tribulation. In a subsequent work, Lindsey details the events prior to this period, stating, "... the world seems poised on the brink of a period of bigotry and persecution unparalleled since the days of the early church."<sup>17</sup> He goes on to cite examples of persecution in the United States stemming from liberalism, humanism, Hollywood's poor treatments of religion, a biased media, and society's general hatred of traditional Christianity.<sup>18</sup> These, along with more severe circumstances around the globe, are a part of a coming

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<sup>11</sup> Larry W. Poland, *The Coming Persecution* (San Bernadino, CA: Here's Life Publishers, 1990), 41.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 43-57.

<sup>13</sup> Those who scoff at the Bible and its relation to history, science, etc. are considered to be uniformitarians. See *ibid.*, 53-56.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 43-125.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 127-143.

<sup>16</sup> Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970). According to Lindsay's website, there are over 35 million copies of the book in print and it as been translated into fifty-four languages. See <https://shop.oraclehouse.com/index.asp>; Internet (accessed 12 November 2007).

<sup>17</sup> Hal Lindsey, *Planet Earth – 2000 A.D.* (Palos Verdes, California: Western Front, Ltd., 1994), 269.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 272-277.

persecution – part of the ‘end-times’ activity that Scripture has foretold. Lindsay concludes,

... for those of us living in this world today as we approach an age of growing persecution, there’s something else to look forward to. For God promises that he will take His flock out of this world just before the persecution becomes most unbearable.<sup>19</sup>

For Poland, Lindsey, and others like them, the persecution of Christians is an event that ultimately finds itself in the period of time nearest to the *Eschaton*.<sup>20</sup> Persecution that is occurring presently is seen only as a signpost and as ‘labor pains’. It is a signpost marking the initiation of the end times and this generation as the final generation before Christ’s return. It acts as ‘labor pains’ in that its significance lies in what follows – the period of the Great Tribulation. So, while they may acknowledge occurrences of persecution here and there, it is ultimately an eschatological event. Persecution that occurs before the *Eschaton* merely points to this final period. Viewing persecution in this manner leaves Christians in the West, where this view is most common, unable to see and respond to their present experience of persecution. They are only able to think of it in terms of a violent event that is still yet to come. Thus, they are seemingly unaware of the nonviolent and less apparent occurrences of persecution that they themselves endure. If Christians are unwilling to acknowledge the current presence of persecution, they are often unable to appropriately respond and react to it.<sup>21</sup>

Moving beyond this, religious persecution of Christians, acknowledged, but viewed only as an eschatological experience,

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 279.

<sup>20</sup> For additional examples, among others, see Dave Hunt, *Global Peace and the Rise of Antichrist* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1990); John F. Walvoord, *Armageddon, Oil and the Middle East Crisis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979; revised, 1990); Billy Graham, *Approaching Hoofbeats* (Minneapolis, MN: Grason, 1983). The extremely popular *Left Behind* series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins contributes to the perspective surveyed in this category as well.

<sup>21</sup> Likewise, we must not assume that our experience of persecution in the present necessarily signifies Christ’s imminent return. Rather, it simply signifies the fulfillment of Christ’s promise that those who followed him would indeed be persecuted in times both near to and far from his return. See Thomas Schirrmacher, *The Persecution of Christians Concerns Us All. Towards a Theology of Martyrdom: 70 Biblical-Theological Theses Written for the German Evangelical Alliance* (Bonn: Idea/VKW, 2001), 85-86.

effectively minimizes the early Church's experience of persecution and that of the generations of believers thereafter. As the works of Poland and Lindsay demonstrate, any occurrence of persecution is equated with 'end-times' activity. Thus, even persecution occurring before the future Great Tribulation is interpreted in terms of Christ's return and the Church's place in that event.<sup>22</sup> These are merely experiences that preclude this generation's 'labor pains', which themselves point to the experience of great persecution mattering most. The fact remains, that Christians have been persecuted since the inception of the Church which has seen persecution situations of greater or lesser degrees throughout its history. One cannot deny the present and historical experience of the Church by seeing persecution only in the light of the *Eschaton*.

Adding to this misguided thinking are those whose view of eschatology allows for a pre-tribulational rapture.<sup>23</sup> Here, believers are taken up to meet Christ before the time of great persecution on earth. Paul Marshall, a leading authority on religious freedom and persecution, effectively labels this view "The Great Escape."<sup>24</sup> It contributes to the idea that there is a period of persecution coming, but not yet here. Before it comes, though, believers in Christ will be spared. Christians depending on this escape are left not only unaware of their own experience of persecution, but even worse, they are simply unaware of the intense persecution that occurs in many areas of the Majority World. For believers in these regions, where is their "Great Escape?" If persecution is an eschatological event that Christians can avoid, there is no incentive to deal with what is pre-

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<sup>22</sup> Poland, 158-174. Poland does acknowledge the presence of persecution at different periods in history. He even cites the increase of religious restrictions in the world today (including the United States). David B. Barrett, ed., *World Christian Encyclopedia* (Nairobi, Oxford University Press, 1982), 5; quoted in Poland, 146. However, in each case Poland references, persecution is placed within the *Eschaton* itself. In other words, persecution exists and is increasing only because we are within reach of Satan's "Master Strategy" and Christ's return.

<sup>23</sup> Note that variations of dispensational premillennialism (and/or the tribulational views inherent therein) affect the way one might view the period of intense persecution or the timing in which it occurs. Again, we are not criticizing pre-tribulational eschatology *per se*, but how it affects the manner in which one views persecution.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Marshall, *Their Blood Cries Out* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1997), 159.

sently occurring in any part of the world. At most, present persecution points to Christ's Second-Coming and will only hasten his return.

In the end, seeing persecution only as an eschatological event forces Christians to deny their current experience, interpret it only in terms of the Eschaton, and/or to view persecution as a future event that from which they will be spared. These, in essence, leave Christians preparing for an experience that is yet to come, instead of giving theological reflection to something that is an expected part of their Christian discipleship in the here-and-now. Christians with this perspective are effectively left without the ability to understand and respond to an experience that is a part of everyday Christian living, both in the West and the Majority World, not just something that may or may not point to the future.<sup>25</sup>

## Persecution as an Isolated Historical Experience

While various scholarship views persecution as a future event, this second category surveys points of view that see persecution as an experience occurring only within a specific period of history. Referred to by Ugandan theologian Dan Kyanda as the “historical exemption,”<sup>26</sup> this view finds its most common manifestation in the minds of Christians who believe that religious persecution was carried out only against the early Church and all but ended with Constantine and the Edict of Milan in 313 a.d.<sup>27</sup>

From the New Testament and other sources, the persecution of Christians, sometimes state-sponsored and occurring in great waves (persecution situations), is well-known.<sup>28</sup> These events began in Jerusalem and essentially followed Christians as they spread throughout the Roman Empire. As their numbers grew during and subsequent to this time, Christianity took on an increasing majority role. Following the Edict of Milan and Theodosius' rule declaring Christianity the empire's official religion in 380 a.d., persecution

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. Hoekma, 150-151.

<sup>26</sup> Referred to as the “historical exemption” in light of the opinion that persecution, “... doesn't happen anymore.” See Brother Andrew, ed., *Destined to Suffer?* (Orange, CA: Open Doors With Brother Andrew, Inc., 1979), 98.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 25-29 and Schirmacher, 25-27.

<sup>28</sup> See Dale T. Irvin and Scott W. Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement*, vol. 1, *Earliest Christianity to 1453* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 26, 77, 82-85, 109-112, 137-140.

situations became much less frequent. With the rise of Christendom, the story of Christianity as a minority and suppressed religion becomes that of a dominant force in the western world. It is this history that many Christians are most familiar with. While stories of faithful Christians who endured persecution during the Church's first three centuries are still read today, many western Christians knowledge of persecution subsequent to this time is limited. For them, persecution is only an isolated historical experience.

While the persecution of early Christians is well-known, what is less well-known is the intense persecution that continued to occur before, during, and beyond Constantine on the fringes of the Empire and outside it. As Samuel Moffett aptly states, "... the situation had been reversed. For the first three hundred years after Christ it was in the West that Christians had been persecuted. In the East they were tolerated."<sup>29</sup> This reversal is seen in Persia, for instance, where Christians who had found refuge from Roman persecution soon began to experience it from Sassanians touting Zoroastrianism as the national religion.<sup>30</sup> While these initial outbreaks were fairly minor, they soon began to grow in intensity.<sup>31</sup> What began as a sort of renewed nationalism turned into an intense hatred. The Sassanians' abhorrence of their enemy Rome was projected onto local Christians who, following Constantine's Christian conversion, were associated with Rome.<sup>32</sup> As Moffett remarks,

Faced with what seemed to be a double threat, a threat not only to national security but to the national religion as well, Persia's priests and rulers cemented their alliance of state and religion in a series of periods

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<sup>29</sup> Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, vol. 1, *Beginnings to 1500* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992), 137. This is not to say that persecution, as it is defined in the present study, ceased *in totality* in the West, but rather that the *great waves* of persecution (persecution situations) shifted from the West to the East.

<sup>30</sup> Irvin and Sunquist, 114. Cf. Moffett, 106.

<sup>31</sup> Irvin and Sunquist, 114; Moffett, 106-109. Moffett notes that this persecution situation, in its beginnings, was in large part directed towards Manichaeans. Their similarity with Christians left the Sassanians confused, and, in many ways, unable to distinguish between the two groups. In any case, the Sassanians were directing their efforts at people they assumed to be Christians in addition to orthodox Christians. Later on, the widespread nature of persecution allowed for a more focused effort on Christians, especially those converting from Zoroastrianism. See Moffett, 111-112, 141.

<sup>32</sup> Moffett, 137.

of terror that have been called the most massive persecution of Christians in history ...<sup>33</sup>

It is examples from history such as we describe above that escape the minds of many Christians, often those from the West.<sup>34</sup> For these individuals, their knowledge of history and the Church moves westward with Constantine. Accordingly, their knowledge of a Church that is intimately acquainted with persecution is minimal. Consequently, the idea that Christians continued to be persecuted after the Church's first three centuries and throughout the world today is a surprise. Nina Shea, in her book *In the Lion's Den*, concurs, writing, "Most Westerners are shocked to learn that Christians are still being persecuted throughout the world."<sup>35</sup> Paul Marshall adds that persecution,

... may in the comfortable worlds of western Christians seem more suited to biblical texts and ancient Roman history than to evening newscasts, more a product of mission-board puffery than hard fact.<sup>36</sup>

Consequently, despite a consistent presence of persecution throughout history and even today, many Christians remain unaware of it. According to Marshall, the reason for this rests primarily on ignorance which,

... is fostered by preconceptions and conventional wisdoms that lead many in the West to dismiss the fact of anti-Christian persecution as improbable, untrue, impossible. Here, as so often is the case, truth can become a victim of expectation, reality a casualty of prior beliefs.<sup>37</sup>

One of the reasons for this ignorance stems from an inadequate definition of persecution. If Christians understand persecution only to be violent, physical acts, then they tend to associate such events with a specific period of history, namely the early Church. This is because these Christians, most being from the West, do not see such violent acts in their own society. In essence,

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 138. This period, according to tradition, lasted from 339-379 A.D. See *ibid.*, 142.

<sup>34</sup> This history is merely representative of persecution after 313 A.D. Other examples could be mentioned as well.

<sup>35</sup> Nina Shea, *In the Lion's Den* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1997), 5.

<sup>36</sup> Marshall, *Their Blood Cries Out*, xxii. He admits his own initial ignorance of the subject writing, "... I was asked ... to look at the persecution of Christians around the world. I gladly agreed. At the time, I didn't think it would take much additional effort. In actual fact, I found myself entering waters whose depths I have not even begun to plumb." *Ibid.*, xvii.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, xxii.



If persecution is the experience of the church, it is that of the ancient church, of the time of Nero and Diocletian, not of today's church ...<sup>38</sup>

Marshall adds additional reasons for this ignorance, including a western theology that stresses success, prosperity, and inner-peace; a nationalist form of Christianity that confuses God and state; lack of information; and, as we note above, an obsession with end-times prophecy.<sup>39</sup> Others add that this ignorance is also the natural result of a lack of attention by influential groups such as media; the fact that many intensely persecuted Christians do not tell their story because it is a part of everyday life and/or for fear of retribution; and even an intentional disregard for acts of persecution.<sup>40</sup> Still others note a division between Western and Majority World Christians, such that Westerners are unable to identify with a faith that deals with such severe threats on a daily basis. Additionally, "The popular imagination still thinks of Christianity as a western religion."<sup>41</sup> This contributes to the ignorance of persecution by falsely assuming that it certainly cannot happen in the modern West where Christians reside.<sup>42</sup>

In the end, viewing persecution as an isolated historical experience occurring only to the early Church denies the experience of Christians living from the fourth century onward. Likewise, it denies the experience of many of those living in the Majority World, Christians who often live daily with the threat of intense forms of persecution. Stemming from this, Western Christians are themselves confused about the presence of persecution in their own societies. As a result, theological reflection is severely hampered at a time when it is greatly needed. The fact remains that the religious persecution of Christians has had a consistent presence from the first century onward to the present. In this light, religious persecution cannot be understood as merely an experience contained within one particular epoch of history.

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<sup>38</sup> Cunningham, 340.

<sup>39</sup> Marshall, *Their Blood Cries Out*, 152.

<sup>40</sup> Shea, 13-16, 17-24.

<sup>41</sup> Marshall, *Their Blood Cries Out*, 98, 151-152.

<sup>42</sup> Not only does this demonstrate an ignorance of religious persecution in the West, but an unawareness of intense religious persecution which pervades the Majority World.

## Persecution as the Experience of Majority World Christianity

Other perspectives view religious persecution as only the experience of Christians living in the Majority World. In these regions, many Christians do indeed live with the daily threat of intense persecution. This type of experience is rarely seen by Western Christians within their own societies, places which are generally tolerant of religion. Thus, due to the absence of this much more apparent type of persecution, it is said that this is not the experience of Western Christians. Rather, it only occurs within Majority World Christianity.

In his book *Called to Suffer, Called to Triumph*, Herbert Schlossberg closes his work writing,

Those who do not go through it [persecution] are part of the fortunate few. They should ... seek to ... help those whose experience is closer to the norm.<sup>43</sup>

According to Schlossberg, persecution is subject to the ebb and flow of time. It occurs in a certain place at a certain moment. Then, as conditions change, persecution will shift to another area, perhaps at a different period of time.<sup>44</sup> For Schlossberg, the history of persecution gives evidence of it, "... arising, then cooling off, and then coming to life again."<sup>45</sup> As the case-studies in Schlossberg's work illustrate, it is areas like Asia, Africa, and the former Soviet Union that are (or were) the current stage of religious persecution. Thus, for Schlossberg, religious persecution of Christians is, at the present moment, only the experience of Majority World Christianity.

Brother Andrew displays similar views in his work *Destined to Suffer?* Early on he writes, "Suffering [persecution] has already come, gradually or suddenly, upon ... half of the church of Christ, half of the Body of Christ."<sup>46</sup> He goes on to discuss the persecution that is presently occurring in areas like Asia, Africa, and Eastern Europe. Elsewhere, Brother Andrew notes that persecution has yet to come to the West. It is an experience that will confront this area eventually, but for now it is only the experience of those in the aforementioned

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<sup>43</sup> Herbert Schlossberg, *Called to Suffer, Called to Triumph* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1990), 237.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 15, 20, 21.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>46</sup> Brother Andrew, ed., 17.

regions.<sup>47</sup> Like Schlossberg, the persecution that Brother Andrew has in mind occurs in certain areas while it is absent from others. For Brother Andrew, given the current circumstances in places like Africa, persecution is now the experience of only Majority World Christians.

Scott Cunningham is yet another author whose work reveals the idea that persecution is only a Majority World experience. He demonstrates this perspective when he writes that the church of the West is quite distant from a theology and experience that has religious persecution at its core.<sup>48</sup> Accordingly, "... the North American Christian may neither experience persecution nor be aware that others do ..."<sup>49</sup> For Cunningham, persecution is the very real and everyday experience of Christians in the Majority World. Consequently, they are able to apply the lessons of the very early Church, as seen in the biblical books of Luke and Acts, to their own situations. Much more, they are better able to respond to their experience. As for the West, Cunningham is admittedly confused as to the appropriate biblical application. For him, a theology which addresses persecution must surely be "... troubling to Western believers who, perhaps because they have become culturally acceptable, know nothing of that experience."<sup>50</sup> Once again, persecution is seen as the experience of only Majority World Christianity.

This third category stems from the same viewpoints seen in the previous section. As noted earlier, Christians who see persecution only as an isolated historical experience are not only unaware of present circumstances and church history, but they are also confused concerning an appropriate definition of persecution. Some Christians, many being from the West, view persecution in this way because they associate it with violent acts. When they do not see this violence against religion in their own society, they often associate it with a specific period of history. Likewise, Christians who acknowledge the presence of persecution in the contemporary world, but operate from the same definition, often understand persecution as only the experience of Majority World Christianity, for this is where violent and physical persecution is most prevalent.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 51. According to Brother Andrew, persecution will move from Africa, where it is presently, to Latin America, and then to the entire "free world." Ibid., 4, 51-52.

<sup>48</sup> Cunningham, 340.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 341.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 342.

All three authors surveyed in this section demonstrate this confusion over defining persecution. While Schlossberg acknowledges a range in types of persecution, he only cites examples of intense persecution and/or significant religious restriction which occur in the Majority World.<sup>51</sup> In fact, he acknowledges a difference in how the term is used. In mentioning persecution to a pastor in what is now the Czech Republic, he was interrupted with the correction that Christians in that area were not persecuted. This was because these Christians did not experience "... beatings, imprisonment, and being put to death ...". However, as Schlossberg soon discovered, these Christians had to take a significant number of precautions to ensure the safety and secrecy of their worship services.<sup>52</sup> In the same manner, Brother Andrew's study defines persecution as "... the systematic attempt to suppress or to exterminate Christianity by social pressure to the point of violence."<sup>53</sup> In a similar fashion, Cunningham understands persecution largely in terms of a violent or severely oppressive act, such that Western churches know little if anything of persecution.<sup>54</sup> As the present study understands it, persecution is any unjust action of varying levels of hostility perpetrated primarily on the basis of religion and directed at Christians, resulting in varying levels of harm as it is considered from the victim's perspective. Understood theologically, the experience of Western Christians, albeit much less physically violent, is found with such a definition. Thus, their experience can be understood as religious persecution.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>51</sup> See Schlossberg, *Called to Suffer, Called to Triumph*, 17. Here he states, "Christians who suffer [are persecuted] for their faith go through an enormous range of experiences, from the mildest to the most severe. There is not one persecution, but many." Unfortunately, even within this statement, Schlossberg differentiates between those who are persecuted and those who are not. Essentially, for that section of the Church that is persecuted, they will endure a range of different types of persecution.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Merrill C. Tenney, "Persecution," in *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Everett F. Harrison (Michigan: Baker Book House, 1975), 403; quoted in Brother Andrew, 23. Cf. 29-30.

<sup>54</sup> Cunningham, 340-342. This is no doubt due, at least in part, to Cunningham's experiences in Nigeria which he writes of and bases his experiences on. See *ibid.*, 8.

<sup>55</sup> For more on how western Christians may experience religious persecution such as ridicule, discrimination, etc., see, among other sources, David Limbaugh, *Persecution* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 2003; reprint, New York: Perennial, 2004); Herbert Schlossberg, *A Fragrance of Oppression: the Church and Its Persecutors* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway

The inadequacy of this third category is further demonstrated in qualitative statements that contradict biblical evidence. As Schlossberg states, “Persecution is part of the normal Christian experience, a consequence of the desire to follow Christ with faithfulness.”<sup>56</sup> Brother Andrew agrees, citing Scripture throughout that assures those who truly seek to follow Christ in the experience of religious persecution.<sup>57</sup> Cunningham writes, “Christians should expect persecution as an integral part of discipleship,” based on his biblical theology of the event.<sup>58</sup> Yet, elsewhere, he is insistent that the Church of the West knows nothing of this experience. In fact, he ponders the relationship of a lack of discipleship with a lack of persecution.<sup>59</sup> So, even though each author acknowledges the biblical perspective that every Christian will experience persecution, they see only a specific population of the Church enduring it. In essence, each author raises contradictory issues when it comes to their view that persecution only occurs in the Majority World.

In the end, it seems clear that seeing persecution as the experience of only Majority World Christians is not justifiable in light of a proper definition of persecution. The authors surveyed above see persecution as occurring only within one specific context at a time. A complete definition suggests that, while persecution occurs in different ways depending on its context, it is the consistent experience of Christians throughout the world. Furthermore, it seems clear that there is a need to balance biblical statements with the experience of the worldwide Church throughout history. If we are able to reconcile these with a clear and comprehensive definition of persecution, then our theological reflection on the topic will be much more thorough and robust.

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Books, 1991), 93-113; Dick Arme, “American Bigotry,” *World* (October 16, 2000) : 32-33; Marvin Olasky, *Prodigal Press: The Anti-Christian Bias of the American News Media* (Westchester, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1988); and Josh McDowell and Bob Hostetler, *The New Tolerance: How a Cultural Movement Threatens to Destroy You, Your Faith, and Your Children* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1998).

<sup>56</sup> Schlossberg, *Called to Suffer, Called to Triumph*, 237.

<sup>57</sup> Brother Andrew, ed., 3. Here he cites 2 Tim. 3:12: “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”

<sup>58</sup> Cunningham, 341.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 342.

## Persecution as Suffering in General

Regarding the way persecution is thought of and written about, a fourth category exists in terms of how individuals view the relationship of persecution and suffering. Here, death or sicknesses are seen as persecutory acts just as the experience of being socially ostracized for one's faith might be. As a result, religious persecution is equated with the experience of general suffering.

The authors of *Joy through the Night* demonstrate just such an attitude. Early on, they outline four biblical categories in which suffering is explained. Persecution, an aspect of "advancing God's reign," is one of them.<sup>60</sup> In this light, persecution is understood to occur as a result of "... further[ing] God's rule over this wicked and rebellious world."<sup>61</sup> Going into further detail, the authors note that persecution stems from evil, and thus, the death of one of the author's family members is seen as a type of persecution.<sup>62</sup> The authors go on to distinguish between "life-threatening" persecution, which they attribute to the early Church, and "everyday" persecution. This, the authors connect with such experiences as losing one's car to theft, being harassed by motorists on the street, and being treated as second-class citizens based on the location of one's residence.<sup>63</sup> For these authors, there seems to be no major distinction between intense religious persecution and unfortunate circumstances, other than the level of threat it imposes.<sup>64</sup> They mistake their suffering for religious persecution.

In a similar fashion, there are those who set out to treat the subject of suffering, but in doing so, misinterpret what is actually meant to be religious persecution. Douglas John Hall, in his book *God and Human Suffering*, does an excellent job of discussing the subject of suffering and how we as Christians can respond and interact with it. However, he displays the attitude described above when he writes,

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<sup>60</sup> Aída Besançon Spencer and William David Spencer, *Joy through the Night: Biblical Resources for Suffering People* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 19.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 77-78.

<sup>64</sup> Schlossberg makes the same error in his suggestion that Israel experienced persecution as judgment from God when in fact what they experienced was suffering of a different kind. See Schlossberg, *A Fragrance of Oppression*, 117-118.

There is more about the suffering of the church in the newer Testament's writings than about any other single ecclesiastical theme. Not only is the suffering of the church the specific motif of whole documents ... but it looms large in all the literature of the newer Testament.<sup>65</sup>

It seems more appropriate, however, especially in light of the biblical passages Hall provides, to interpret these themes in terms of religious persecution.<sup>66</sup> Joel Williams is perhaps more accurate when he writes, "*Persecution* is an aspect ... that is a prominent theme in the New Testament ..." (emphasis added).<sup>67</sup> Here, Hall mistakes religious persecution for suffering in general.

With these two examples we see confusion over the exact nature of suffering and persecution. Clearly, there is a difference and a need to distinguish between the two. If we understand general suffering as pain or distress brought on by human or non-human factors, then there is a difference between this and how we understand religious persecution – any unjust action of varying levels of hostility perpetrated primarily on the basis of religion and directed at Christians, resulting in varying levels of harm as it is considered from the victim's perspective.<sup>68</sup> Thus, while those who are persecuted suffer, those who suffer are not necessarily persecuted. While in a sense it is true that the source of religious persecution is evil and the

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<sup>65</sup> Douglas John Hall, *God and Human Suffering* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), 123. Cf. Hall, *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 138-139.

<sup>66</sup> For instance, letters written by Paul to churches experiencing suffering are viewed better when it is noted that these churches were enduring religious persecution, not merely the general type of suffering that befalls all humanity regardless of one's religious devotion.

<sup>67</sup> William J. Larkin Jr. and Joel F. Williams, eds., *Mission in the New Testament* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1998), 245. Cf. Scott Hafemann, "'Because of Weakness' (Galatians 4:13): the role of suffering in the mission of Paul," in *The Gospel to the Nations*, eds. Peter Bolt and Mark Thompson (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 131-146 and Ernst Baasland, "Persecution: A Neglected Feature in the Letter to the Galatians," *Studia Theologica* 38, no. 2 (1984): 135-150. Both authors point out the significance of suffering and persecution in the letters of Paul and distinguish between persecution and suffering. Hafemann points out the significance of suffering as seen in Paul's physical weakness; Baasland points out the significance of religious persecution as experienced by Paul. What is important is that they distinguish between the two.

<sup>68</sup> As it concerns a definition of suffering, cf. Paul J. Achtemeier, ed., *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), 1069.

Evil One, it is also true that the source of suffering for all humankind is ultimately the Evil One in a fallen world. In other words, Satan directs his evil at all of humankind, regardless of their religious devotion. So, to think of suffering and persecution as the same event merely because they originate from the same source is not fully correct.<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, attributing to suffering what is best understood as persecution effectively downplays the presence of persecution. In societies where religious persecution is less apparent there is a tendency to view it, or apply biblical texts relating to it, to situations that in reality should not be understood in such terms.<sup>70</sup> As Glenn Penner points out,

Because the biblical texts on persecution cannot be readily applied to a setting where there is little [less apparent] ... persecution, the tendency seems to be ... to misapply these passages to situations of general physical, psychological, and spiritual suffering.<sup>71</sup>

Thus, in situations where the nature and definition of persecution are confused, its significance, and the ability of Christians to appropriately respond to it are minimized.

Once again, in this fourth category, we see confusion over the exact nature and definition of persecution. Where general suffering is misunderstood for religious persecution, as the first authors surveyed do, we see a minimization of the role of persecution and its significance. Where persecution is misunderstood as suffering, we see a misapplication of biblical texts and situations that may otherwise assist Christians in their ability to think about and respond to religious persecution. If we make a distinction between the two, neither event is mitigated, but rather, those who endure religious persecution are able to see it in its own terms as opposed to merely suffering in general.

## Persecution as Martyrdom

Our final category consists of individuals and scholarly works whose views connect martyrdom and religious persecution so closely that one is effectively overrun by the other.<sup>72</sup> To be true, there is indeed a

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Spencer and Spencer, 75.

<sup>70</sup> See Penner, 8-9. He also cites a "... misunderstanding or neglect of the scriptural link between persecution and discipleship." See, *ibid.*, 9.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 8. See also, Schirrmacher, 29ff.

<sup>72</sup> Here, a martyr is understood as "... a believer in Christ, who loses his or her life prematurely, in a situation of witness, as a result of human hostility." See David B. Barrett and Todd M. Johnson, *World Christian Trends AD 30 – AD*



close relationship between the two. If one is martyred, it is because they were persecuted in such a way as to result in death. In other words, a martyr's experience preceding his or her death is understood as religious persecution. It is the actual death of an individual that qualifies them as a martyr. Thus, one cannot experience martyrdom apart from his or her experience of persecution.

This close connection is helpful in a variety of ways. For instance, martyrdom is usually a specific event in time that is often recorded, or at least has the potential to be easily recordable. In this light, martyrdom provides the simplest way in which to quantify not only martyrs, but the presence of persecution as well. Such statistics are helpful in providing a fuller understanding of the Church's experience of persecution and martyrdom. These statistics help us realize that Christian martyrdom has seen a steady increase since the Church's beginning – it is not just the experience of one particular era.<sup>73</sup> From this we can make similar conclusions regarding the persecution of Christians as a direct result of its close relationship with martyrdom.

These positive contributions notwithstanding, the fact remains that, even though one cannot be martyred without being persecuted, one can be persecuted without being martyred. Consequently, if focus is given only to martyrdom, without setting any specific parameters,<sup>74</sup> the experience of those who are persecuted, but not killed, is neglected. It is this aspect of persecution that is often overrun by overemphasizing the close relationship between martyrdom and persecution.<sup>75</sup>

This often occurs in efforts to survey the presence of persecution. For example, the authors of *By Their Blood*, a book meant to extend

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2200 (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2001), 234. Cf. *ibid.*, 227-229, 231-234.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>74</sup> This statement acknowledges the fact that there are numerous works that survey the lives of specific martyrs with no intention of addressing persecution. Thus, it is works and/or viewpoints without clear parameters that deliberately confuse the two events that are being addressed here.

<sup>75</sup> Ronald Boyd-MacMillan, though he appreciates the ability martyrdom has to draw attention to matters of persecution (as do martyrdom statistics which he seemingly under-appreciates), laments this oversight as well in his *Faith That Endures: The Essential Guide to the Persecuted Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Revell, 2006), 21-22.

the work of Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, seems to equate persecution with martyrdom when they wrote before the close of the twentieth century,

... another edition of this book may include martyrs in the 1980's and 1990's from countries which have not yet been torn by religious persecution. Christians in nations which have religious freedom now should thank God every day for this blessing which is denied their brothers and sisters elsewhere.<sup>76</sup>

They continue, "Persecution may increase and more martyrs fall."<sup>77</sup> From this it seems that where there is persecution there is, or will be, martyrdom. As has been set out earlier, this is simply not always the case.

In the end, persecution is more than just martyrdom, and while this may represent trivial details, this final category demonstrates the complexity and varied nature of persecution. This means that while martyrdom is closely connected with religious persecution and can help in understanding and illustrating its significance, it is important also to treat the latter on its own terms. Doing so will account for the full nature of religious persecution, including its forms which do not result in death.

## Conclusion

A number of issues have emerged from the preceding survey and analysis. While viewing persecution as an eschatological experience does draw attention to the hope found in Christ's return, it does not adequately deal with the consistent experience of Christians in every era of the Church's history. Viewing persecution as an isolated historical experience, particularly that of the early Church, acknowledges the events of the past, but it does not acknowledge the persecution that occurs in the present. Furthermore, where persecution is viewed as only occurring within the Church's first three centuries, we see an ignorance of the exact nature of persecution. Acknowledging the experience of Majority World Christians brings the presence of persecution out from the confines of early Christianity to the place and time when it is at its worst. This awareness is greatly needed, but not at the expense of confusing the nature of persecution that also exists in the West in addition to contradicting biblical

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<sup>76</sup> James and Marty Hefley, *By Their Blood* (Milford, MI: Mott Media, 1979), 589.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 590.

statements. If persecution is viewed alongside or within general human suffering, we see additional confusion and minimization of the experience of religious persecution. Finally, viewing persecution as martyrdom effectively minimizes the experience of Christians who do not die for their faith, but live with persecution. Using martyrdom to illustrate the presence of persecution or to quantify it does not justify an inappropriate conjoining of the two experiences.

The five categories presented above, then, illustrate gaps and truncated thinking when it comes to theological treatments of religious persecution. More than this, they illustrate that where such gaps exist, our theological reflections are misguided and severely hampered. With this in mind, our recognition set out in the Introduction bears repeating: it can indeed be said that those who might best be able to fill in such gaps in theology are those whose experience of persecution is most intimate. However, because of the intensely hostile nature of persecution which such Christians experience, they can often be unable to devote significant time to thinking, writing, and sharing their reflections. In this light, perhaps these Christians can be excused for the lack of theological attention persecution receives. The rest of the Church, however, cannot be excused even if their experience, whether they acknowledge it or not, is of only mildly hostile forms of persecution. In any case, no study or viewpoint in this survey has sought to examine persecution in its fullest sense or in such a way that acknowledges its consistent and global presence. If we are to appropriately and theologically understand and respond to persecution, a framework must be set in place which allows us to do so. Thus, it is the goal of the remainder of this study to fill in the gaps left by inadequate scholarship and thinking by constructing a theological framework for understanding persecution. This begins in Chapter Two with the need to adequately define the religious persecution of Christians. Such a definition will set the foundations for a proper way in which to answer the major theological questions of persecution, which in turn will affect the way Christians ought to respond to it. The following pages will seek to build this framework.



# Chapter Two

## Defining Persecution

Regarding religious persecution, Croatian scholar Peter Kuzmič aptly writes, “Contemporary reference works on religion move remarkably easily from ‘Perfectionism’ to ‘Perseverance.’”<sup>78</sup> Penner agrees, remarking, “There is, unfortunately, no universally accepted legal or theological definition of the word [persecution].”<sup>79</sup> Indeed, even where attempts are made, current definitions all too commonly focus only on certain manifestations of persecution<sup>80</sup> or only its presence in a certain period of time.<sup>81</sup>

A proper theological framework for understanding persecution cannot be built on a definition that is poor or completely absent. In this light, it is the responsibility of the present chapter to offer a thorough definition of the religious persecution of Christians. Doing so involves three levels. On the first level, we begin by defining the term persecution in its most basic form without reference to religion or to Christians, for confusion lies primarily at this level. Further, persecution is driven by a number of different motivations, be they

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<sup>78</sup> Peter Kuzmič, “To Suffer with Our Lord: Christian Responses to Religious Persecution,” *The Brandywine Review of Faith and International Affairs* 2, no. 3 (Winter 2004-2005) : 35.” Such reference works where definitions are completely absent include Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2d edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2001); Jean-Yves Lacoste, ed., *Encyclopedia of Christian Theology*, vol. 3 (New York: Routledge, 2005); Millard J. Erickson, *The Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology*, revised edition (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2001). It should also be noted that certain biblical reference works define persecution as it is treated only within the Bible. In this way, they set appropriate limits for their definition. For example, see Walter A. Elwell, ed., “Persecution,” in *Baker Theological Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1996), 599.

<sup>79</sup> Penner, 163.

<sup>80</sup> For example, see the definition cited in Brother Andrew’s work, Brother Andrew, ed., 23.

<sup>81</sup> For example, under ‘persecution’, Taylor directs his readers to ‘tribulation’, the eschatological event. See Richard S. Taylor, ed., *Beacon Dictionary of Theology* (Kansas City, Missouri: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1983). As Kuzmič observes, many others apply their definition to only the early Church. Kuzmič, “To Suffer with Our Lord,” 35.

religious, ethnic, political, and so on. Thus, we must first define persecution by itself. On the second level, the importance of religion as a factor in determining the type of persecution involved in a given situation will be examined. This level is important because it continues to help us understand the myriad of different and overlapping motivations behind persecution. It also helps us to establish a socio-political definition of religious persecution. On the third level, we must combine the elements of persecution and religion together with a definition of ‘Christian’ in order to most accurately define the type of persecution the present study is most concerned with. Further, we must understand this definition theologically in order to distinguish it from other socio-political definitions. These pieces, taken together, will result in a comprehensive, theological definition of the religious persecution of Christians.

## Origins and Definition of Persecution

The English word ‘persecution’ or ‘persecute’ is derived from the Latin *persequor*. In English, this word carries the meaning ‘to pursue’, ‘follow constantly’, or ‘to follow with hostile intent’. Even within biblical usage, where much of our understanding of the term comes from, the word means ‘to pursue’, ‘to oppress’, or ‘to afflict’.<sup>82</sup>

On this first level then, it is understood that persecution is an action. In this light, one cannot merely have, for instance, hateful attitudes and be qualified as a persecutor. Rather, they must act on these attitudes. It is only when there is action that persecution occurs. Further, this action should be viewed as unjust and as manifesting itself in a myriad of different ways. With this in mind, persecution occurs within a broad spectrum ranging from unjust actions that are intensely hostile to those that are mildly hostile. Intensely hostile actions, lying at one end of the spectrum, can be carried out physically, psychologically (mental or emotional), or socially. These could encompass such actions as beating, torture, isolation, imprisonment, or ostracism. Such actions often strike closely at an individual’s basic needs. This is often best understood in light of physical persecution, such as torture, which strikes at physical well-being and has a high level of hostility. However, persecution that adversely affects social well-being can also be intensely hostile, for it, too, strikes at basic needs. For instance, consider the hypothetical

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<sup>82</sup> In Hebrew, *radap*; and in Greek, *diōkō* or *thlipsis*.

example of a Muslim woman who takes as her husband a non-Muslim man. Upon doing so this woman's parents ostracize her and her new husband from her immediate and extended family as well as their entire community. This is done due to the religion of the husband. This action is not physically violent, but it is still intense, for it deprives this particular couple of social and emotional needs found in family and community. The marriage may even lead to other forms of persecution, some being physical. In any case, this example illustrates an action which may not be violent, yet it is still intensely hostile.<sup>83</sup>

Mildly hostile actions lie at the opposite end of this spectrum. These actions are less intense, not violent, and can also be carried out psychologically or socially.<sup>84</sup> These would include ridicule, restriction, certain kinds of harassment, or discrimination. Unjust actions that are mildly hostile are no less significant and should still be considered as persecution. In this light, we cannot define persecution based on the level of pain it might cause or the level of intensity in which it occurs. On the contrary, it must be understood to encompass actions spanning the full range of hostility whether they are physical, psychological, or social. The Muslim woman mentioned above, for instance, would experience persecution of a higher intensity if she were beaten subsequent to her marriage. This same woman might also be the object of persecution if someone subsequently restricted her from employment as a result of her marriage to a non-Muslim man. This action is much lower in intensity, but it still represents a matter of persecution. In this light, persecution places an emphasis on unjust action manifesting itself within a spectrum of hostility.

Beyond this spectrum, persecution may be carried out on the basis of a number of motivations. In this way, persecution rarely has a single impetus. Instead, there is usually an overlap of motivations.<sup>85</sup> Consider the example of a Hindu who marries outside of his or her

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<sup>83</sup> Note that under international standards families are allowed to make decisions regarding the marriage of their children. Thus, not allowing a child to marry a certain individual, even if it is for religious reasons, does not constitute religious persecution. Persecution, religious or otherwise, may occur, however, if the child chooses to go against his or her family's wishes. In the example above, physical harm done to the married child constitutes religious persecution as understood by international law; ostracism is not forbidden by law, but as we argue below, considered theologically, it can be understood as persecution. See Marshall, ed., *Religious Freedom in the World*, 16.

<sup>84</sup> We do not include physical here because it can generally be understood as violent (intensely hostile).

caste. Doing so may require the parents to ostracize the couple from their entire community. This however, may not just be an issue of religion, in this case Hinduism, but an issue of ethnicity as well in that one's caste may be tied to his or her particular indigenous group. Other situations could also represent a mix of "... political, territorial, and economic concerns."<sup>86</sup>

That being said, it must be understood that the action of persecution is accompanied with results that are negative and persecutory when viewed from the perspective of the victim. We might understand these negative results as harmful as long as we recognize harm to encompass the same span of intensity that our understanding of hostility does. Thus, harm can be physical, psychological, or social and can manifest itself in a spectrum ranging from mildly to intensely hostile. With this in mind, it is imperative that such a definition is produced from the perspective of the victim, not that of the perpetrator. The significance of this is best seen in cases of nationalism. For nineteenth and early twentieth century Turks, for example, their nationalistic 'Turkey for the Turks' provided a basis for the expulsion of Armenians. While the situation was complex, the deportation, genocide, and other horrific events that followed were justified for many Turks in terms of nationalism. They were protecting or ridding their country of what to them were foreign and evil influences. For many Turks, their actions were just and their results were positive. For Armenians however, this was a clear case of persecution. It was an unjust action perpetrated on the basis of, in this case, ethnicity, politics, and religion. The results were in fact negative and persecutory. As Marshall states, "The *motive* is not, per se, the issue; the key question is, what is the result?" (emphasis in original).<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Paul Marshall, "Persecution of Christians in the Contemporary World," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 22, no. 1 (January 1998) : 2. Cf. Paul Marshall, "Patterns and Contexts of Religious Freedom and Persecution" *The Brandywine Review of Faith and International Affairs* 2, no. 3 (Winter 2004-2005) : 27.

<sup>86</sup> Marshall, "Persecution of Christians in the Contemporary World," 2. This further underscores the need to define persecution in its most basic form. We cannot merely assume that persecution refers to religion in all cases. Rather, it may be motivated by a myriad of other factors such as race, gender, sex, age, political persuasion, etc.

<sup>87</sup> Marshall, ed., *Religious Freedom in the World*, 17. Cf. Marshall, "Persecution of Christians in the Contemporary World," 7. The persecution of Eastern Christians by Sabaeans cited in Chapter One above began as nationalism and



Summarily then, a definition of persecution, in its broadest sense, must consider the elements of unjust action; a spectrum of hostility ranging from mild to intense; the motivations behind persecution; and the resulting effect of harm. Most importantly, all of these elements must be considered from the victim's perspective. With this in mind, we might define persecution in its most basic form as:

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

## A Definition of Religious Persecution

Keeping the above paragraphs in mind, we cannot assume on this second level that being subjected to persecution must always indicate religious persecution. Even more, religious people who are persecuted are not necessarily the victims of religious persecution. Marshall cites the conflict in Rwanda in the mid-1990's as illustrative of the need to make such a distinction.<sup>88</sup> This conflict pitted Hutus and Tutsis against each other. Tutsis experienced much persecution and even death, but even so, this was an ethnic conflict. Religious people of various convictions made up parts of both sides and so the nature and motivation of this persecution situation cannot be understood in religious terms. In other words, Tutsis were persecuted regardless of their religion. In this light, a victim's religious identity is not the sole factor used in determining a type of persecution. As Marshall insightfully states,

A possible demarcation point of religious persecution is to ask whether, if the persons had other religious beliefs, they [sic] would they still be treated in the same way. If the answer is yes, we probably should not call it specifically religious persecution, though not for a second should we forget that it is real persecution and that it is real people who suffer it.<sup>89</sup>

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thus could illustrate this point as well. This is equally true in cases where persecutors may have had no intent to persecute. The question is what was the result for the victim? For more on the matter of nationalism, see Schirmacher, 97-99.

<sup>88</sup> Paul Marshall, ed., *Religious Freedom in the World: a Global Report on Freedom and Persecution* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2000), 9. See also, Schirmacher, 28.

<sup>89</sup> Marshall, "Persecution of Christians in the Contemporary World," 5.

The clarification noted in the previous section applies here as well. Rarely is religion, or any other single motivation, the only issue involved. Rather, other factors usually overlap. What distinguishes certain cases as religious persecution is the primacy of religion as the leading factor. Although religious people were certainly involved in the Rwandan conflict, religion itself was far from being a primary motivation of extremist Hutus. Given the removal of religious factors, Tutsis would have still been subjected to persecution. Thus, their experience cannot be seen as religious persecution. Conversely, the religious persecution of Christians in early twentieth century communist Russia, while also involving political issues, centered on religion of victims. Applying Marshall's 'demarcation', one can surmise that these individuals might certainly be spared the experience of persecution if it were not for their identity as Christians. Thus, we can conclude that this is an example of religious persecution.

In defining religious persecution, however, we must go beyond establishing religion's role in the event. With this in mind, most definitions of religious persecution operate on socio-political standards. Accordingly, religious persecution is "... in general, the denial of any of the rights of religious freedom."<sup>90</sup> Religious freedom can be considered under the United Nations' 'Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, 1981'. In this light, individuals must be free not only to worship in accordance with the fundamentals of their religion, but they must also be free to change their religion and to appropriately propagate their faith.<sup>91</sup> Further, socio-political definitions of religious persecution include, at the very least, genocide, but also focus on the *systematic* violation of religious freedoms. So, to supplement this understanding Marshall includes the terms 'harassment' and 'discrimination'.<sup>92</sup> Accordingly, in reference to faith, harassment indicates, "... a situation where people, although perhaps *not systematically* imprisoned or denied the basic possibility of following their faith, nevertheless suffer from legal impediments and are interfered with by the authorities or others and face arbitrary arrest

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<sup>90</sup> Paul Marshall, "Present Day Persecution of Christians," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 24, no. 1 (January 2000) : 21.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-21. Cf. Lausanne Covenant, Article 13 in John Stott, *The Lausanne Covenant: Exposition and Commentary* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: World Wide Publications, 1975), 50.

<sup>92</sup> Marshall, "Persecution of Christians in the Contemporary World," 5.

and possible physical assault” (emphasis added).<sup>93</sup> Discrimination, also in reference to faith, refers to “... a situation where people, although perhaps being guaranteed basic freedom[s] ... nevertheless suffer consistent civil and economic disadvantage under the law for exercising such freedoms.”<sup>94</sup> In this way, religious persecution includes systematic violations of religious freedom, but only in general. It must also include actions which may not be systematic, but irregular (harassment). Additionally, including discriminatory acts of persecution acknowledges actions which do not violate religious freedom, but may consistently occur in an environment that guarantees religious freedom.<sup>95</sup>

Marshall’s socio-political definition is important both for the Christian and international communities. In many cases, individuals deny that they experience persecution, because they see no cases of brutality or systematic persecution.<sup>96</sup> If victims of persecution are not aware of their own environment, then it can be very difficult for those who seek to spiritually or politically advocate on their behalf.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Such actions can be seen in places like Turkey where Christians have the right to live and assemble as Christians, yet may face consistent discrimination as religious minorities. See Marshall, ed., *Religious Freedom in the World*, 298-302. Marshall provides further specificity by adding the terms ‘state persecution’, ‘communal persecution’, and ‘legal control’ to his understanding of religious persecution. See Marshall, “Present Day Persecution of Christians,” 21. Cf. Marshall, “Persecution of Christians in the Contemporary World,” 4.

<sup>96</sup> For example, the Czech pastor discussed above denied the presence of religious persecution because he saw no cases of physical brutality, even though his church, under a religiously oppressive government, was forced to worship in secret. See also, Lancy Lobo, “Persecution of Indian Christians,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 41, no. 2 (Summer 2002) : 114-122; Monica Melanchthon, “Persecution of Indian Christians,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 41, no. 2 (Summer 2002) : 109. Melanchthon is hesitant to describe the situation of Indian Christians as persecution due their own hesitancy to do so. Cf. Herbert Hofer, “Why are Christians Persecuted in India? Roots, Reasons, Responses,” *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2001) : 7-13.

<sup>97</sup> This is true for Christian organizations who operate from a similar socio-political definition in which persecution is “a situation where Christians are repetitively, persistently and systematically inflicted with grave or serious suffering or harm and deprived of (or significantly threatened with deprivation of) their basic human rights because of a difference that comes from being a

Further, such circumstances make it difficult for the international community's work to eradicate such actions. In such instances, standards of religious freedom are important because violations of these standards act as proof of persecution where manifestations such as brutal beatings are not necessarily present. Socio-political definitions are also helpful in providing tangible ways in which to quantify persecution. Actions such as those described by Marshall are often easily identifiable. Consequently, quantifying these actions allows areas where they are a pervading problem to be ranked. This supports the Church and the international community in their efforts to focus prayer and/or physical efforts in opposition to religious persecution.

With these points in mind, we can apply the implications of religion as a factor to bring greater specificity and accuracy to our definition. Accordingly, religious persecution should be understood as an unjust action of varying levels of hostility directed at *a believer or believers of a particular religion or belief-system through systematic oppression or genocide, or through harassment or discrimination which may not necessarily limit these believers' ability to practice their faith*, resulting in varying levels of harm as it is considered from the victim's perspective, *each action having religion as its primary motivator*.

## **A Theological Definition of the Religious Persecution of Christians**

The needed specificity of religion notwithstanding, on this third level it must be understood that Christians are not the only individuals of religious devotion who are persecuted for their faith. Muslims in India are persecuted by radical Hindu groups just as much, if not worse, than Indian Christians. Baha'i communities are religiously persecuted in Iran. Tibetan Buddhists and Muslim Uighurs are persecuted in China.<sup>98</sup> Similar examples are numerous. Thus, we cannot describe the experience of Christians using only the term 'religious persecution'. 'Christian' must be added in order to most accurately describe the expression of persecution that the present study is most concerned

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Christian that a persecutor will not tolerate." See Penner, 163; Penner is associated with *The Voice of the Martyrs* in Canada, an organization dedicated to advocacy on behalf of persecuted and martyred Christians.

<sup>98</sup> Marshall, "Patterns and Contexts of Religious Freedom and Persecution," 27.

with.<sup>99</sup> Doing so requires a definition of the term, and one which goes beyond a general understanding of ‘Christian’.<sup>100</sup> In this light, Marshall distinguishes between ‘census Christians’, ‘member Christians’, ‘practicing Christians’, and ‘committed believers’.<sup>101</sup> The difference between these groups centers on the individual’s level of commitment. ‘Census believers’ are Christian in name only, but may never attend a church or actively practice their faith. ‘Member Christians’ may claim membership in a certain church, but this designation may not indicate any level of involvement or attendance. ‘Practicing Christians’ include those who involve themselves in the rites and rituals of Christianity. ‘Committed believers’ are those Christians whose “... faith is a central aspect of their life and who are committed as much as possible to living out their faith and communicating it to others.”<sup>102</sup> For the purposes of the present study, our use of the term ‘Christian’ includes each of these four distinctives.

Perhaps more importantly, however, these four categories of ‘Christian’ each have a significant effect on the extent to which one is subjected to persecution. For ‘committed believers’, their devotion and commitment to the fundamentals of Christianity may make them easily

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<sup>99</sup> By no means does this indicate a mitigation of the persecution of other faiths. Nor does it advocate that issues of persecution and/or religious freedom are only Christian interests or Western values. See Shea’s point in Sheryl Henderson Blunt, “The Daniel of Religious Rights,” *Christianity Today* 49, no. 9 (September 2005) : 54. See also Yousef K. El-Hage, “Human Rights: A Western, Christian Invention?” *The Near East School of Theology Theological Review* XXV, no. 2 (November 2004) : 3-19.

<sup>100</sup> In this general sense, Christian can be defined as “one who believes in, or professes or confesses Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, or is assumed to believe Jesus Christ ...” See David B. Barrett, George T. Kurian, and Todd M. Johnson, eds., *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., vol. II (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 655.

<sup>101</sup> Marshall, “Persecution of Christians in the Contemporary World,” 4. Cf. ‘Christians of all kinds’, ‘affiliated Christians’, ‘church attenders’, and ‘Great Commission Christians’ in Barrett et al, 655, 651, 655 and 662 respectively. If we include the category of ‘crypto-Christian’ we add considerable difficulty. Are such Christians secret due to personal choice for specific reasons? Are they secret due to efforts in contextualization? Such questions take this category beyond the scope of the present study. The same can be said regarding other groups who may fall into the category of ‘marginal Christians’. Such Christians may have different theological views of persecution in direct correlation with their marginality. Thus, this issue will also not be examined in the present study.

<sup>102</sup> Marshall, “Persecution of Christians in the Contemporary World,” 4.

identifiable as Christians. Thus, religious persecution for ‘committed Christians’ may take on highly intense forms or may at least be more consistent. For those closer to the category of ‘census believers’, they too may be subjected to different types of persecution, but, by virtue of their lack of commitment, may avoid certain types as well.<sup>103</sup>

It is of final importance to distinguish our definition of the religious persecution of Christians from a socio-political definition. This is done by understanding our definition theologically.<sup>104</sup> A theological definition of the religious persecution of Christians distinguishes itself by operating in part on a theological expectation of persecution. This expectation is a biblical principle whereby all Christians must anticipate persecution. We see this, for instance, in statements from Jesus and the Apostle Paul whereby those who choose to follow Christ must expect persecution.<sup>105</sup> Biblical statements like these are only accounted for in a theological definition. Furthermore, such a theological definition must also consider aspects of persecution that socio-political definitions, Marshall’s included, do not. In this light, genocide, a socio-political part of persecution, becomes something different, if not much more, in a theological definition. Theologically, Christians murdered as part of genocide become martyrs within a martyrdom situation.<sup>106</sup> Theologically, we must also go beyond the systematic or irregular presence of any religious freedom violations. We must even go beyond the presence of consistent discrimination. Thus, a theological definition will also consider actions such as ostracism, isolation, or ridicule as a part of persecution and an expected consequence of following Christ. These actions are not consistently discriminatory and do not violate religious freedom, yet theologically, they are religious persecution. In this way, a theological definition of the persecution of Christians cannot

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Though Boyd-MacMillan’s own definition is not specific enough (“Christian persecution is any hostility, experienced from the world, as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile feelings, attitudes, words, and actions” [p. 114]). He, too, recognizes the need to move beyond socio-political definitions by adding biblical-theological reflections. See *ibid.*, 85ff. Cf. Boyd-MacMillan’s discussion (p. 113) of the work by Paul Estabrooks and Jim Cunningham, *Standing Strong through the Storm* (Anaheim, CA: Open Doors International, 2004).

<sup>105</sup> See, for instance, Jn. 15:20 and 2 Tim. 3:12.

<sup>106</sup> Such a distinction also takes martyrdom outside of the parameters of the present study.

separate actions that systematically violate religious freedoms from those that are irregular violations or from actions that do not violate religious freedoms at all.<sup>107</sup> To illustrate this point, consider the example of a young man who converts from the religion of his parents and upbringing to Christianity.<sup>108</sup> Upon doing so, this young man's parents ostracize him from his community as well as effectively disinherit him from his family. This situation, considered from a socio-political perspective, does not represent religious persecution, since families are allowed to exercise such rights (according to international standards), unless the young man were to experience any subsequent physical attack. Considered theologically, however, this family's act does constitute religious persecution regardless of whether or not it violates their son's religious freedom. This distinction may not require a different reaction from the international community, but considered theologically, it requires reaction from the Church, not to the parents, but in support of the young man.<sup>109</sup> In like manner, it requires a theological understanding and response from this new Christian that may not be required in a socio-political understanding. Thus, the significance of a theological definition of the religious persecution of Christians forces occurrences of persecution to be considered and theologically responded to that a socio-political definition may not require.

Such a theological definition is important because it acknowledges the full range in which persecution occurs, be it a systematic violation of religious freedom, an irregular violation, or an irregular,

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<sup>107</sup> Cf. Johan Candelin, "The Message of the Cross and the Cross of the Message," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 24, no. 1 (January 2000) : 6-7. Candelin, separates these elements, noting that actions pass through two phases before becoming persecution in a third and final phase. For him, persecution begins as disinformation, becomes discrimination, and finally turns into persecution. He notes, "If no action is taken against discrimination, the fine line to *persecution* is easily crossed" (italics in original). Consequently, discrimination has a rather marginal place in Candelin's definition of persecution, to mention nothing of 'lesser' actions such as ridicule or ostracism.

<sup>108</sup> Portions of this example, as well as its ramifications, are taken from Marshall, ed. *Religious Freedom in the World*, 16.

<sup>109</sup> Violations of religious freedom or human rights in general call for action from the international community even if they do not actually result in action. While the situation described above is unfortunate from any perspective, it requires no secular reaction as described, given the absence of any denial of religious freedom.

unjust action that violates no religious freedoms.<sup>110</sup> This importance notwithstanding, such a definition makes it nearly impossible to identify areas where religious persecution is a pervading problem. Altering a theological understanding to accommodate this point sacrifices comprehensiveness and a full ability to understand persecution theologically. Similarly, it can be said that a theological understanding makes it nearly impossible to quantify believers who currently endure persecution. How does one count ridicule, for instance?<sup>111</sup> While such quantitative analyses help to shape our theology, altering our theological understanding to accommodate this point damages its comprehensive nature as well. In this light, a separate, socio-political definition is helpful insofar as it acknowledges its parameters while at the same time allowing individuals to classify areas in which religious freedoms are violated and to quantify Christians who are persecuted. Even so, a theological definition of religious persecution is also required, in order to allow for proper theological reflection that accounts for a full range of persecution.

With this in mind, a theological definition of the religious persecution of Christians is as follows ('expanded definition'):

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

For purposes of brevity, a 'standard definition', as mentioned earlier in the present study, understands the religious persecution of Christians to be:

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

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<sup>110</sup> See also Boyd-MacMillan, 114 where he observes the New Testament's consideration of persecution as not simply physical suffering and *ibid.*, 115-116 where he acknowledges that persecution "embraces all types of hostility."

<sup>111</sup> See also Schirrmacher's statements to the same effect in Schirrmacher, 17.



## Conclusion

A theological framework for understanding persecution begins with a thorough theological definition of the religious persecution of Christians. To that end, the present chapter has sought to provide a definition that will cover persecution's full range of hostility and manifestations from the perspective of its victims. In so doing, persecution was defined at its most basic level, placing an emphasis on unjust action. It accounted for a spectrum ranging from mildly to intensely hostile forms of persecution, and it acknowledged the place of different, possibly overlapping, motivations. Most importantly, such a definition was formed from the victim's perspective. On a second level, by adding 'religious' to this definition, we noted that persecution is perpetrated for a number of reasons. The addition of 'religious,' then, not only brings further clarity, but brings focus on a specific motivation of persecutors. Further, religious persecution was considered in light of Marshall's socio-political definition. This definition sought to incorporate systematic violations of religious freedom, irregular violations of religious freedom and consistent persecutory actions that do not violate religious freedom at all. On a third level, the addition of 'Christian' added further specificity, noting that there are situations where religious persecution involves devotees of any number of religious backgrounds. At this level we distinguished a theological definition from a socio-political definition. With this in mind, persecutory actions not considered within Marshall's socio-political definition, such as ostracism and ridicule, are considered in the same light as all other persecutory actions. Without the elements of each level involved, we are left unable to accurately and theologically account for any actual manifestation of persecution. Beyond this, if we are unable to adequately and theologically define persecution, we are unable to bring proper theological expression to our experience of it.

The result is the 'expanded' and 'standard' definitions offered above. It focuses neither on a specific type, style, region, or period of persecution. Rather, it accounts for persecution's full depth and span. It is not meant to cheapen or glorify the experience of those who endure intensely hostile forms of persecution. Nor is it meant to deny the experience of those who endure mildly hostile forms of

persecution.<sup>112</sup> Instead, its comprehensive nature corrects misguided thinking of the past, and much more, it forms the foundation of a theological framework for understanding persecution in which further and more specific theological reflection can be pursued. Chapter Three builds on this definition by exploring the major theological questions of persecution, namely, how it occurs, who causes it, and why it occurs.

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<sup>112</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 50 where Schirmacher states, “Some ‘less-serious’ types [of religious persecution] such as mockery, ostracism, mobbing and the public disparagement of Christians and their symbols and teachings are universal. These forms, although related to martyrdom in nature, must be distinguished from more serious methods such as physical injury, torture and execution, especially when the State is involved.” Although related specifically to martyrdom, Schirmacher’s observation is noteworthy. Even so, the distinctions we must make between *different* types of persecution must not occur at the expense of recognizing *all* types of persecution. In this light, the present study’s distinction between different types of persecution strives for more precision. As we note above, it is our desire to acknowledge the full spectrum in which persecution occurs, without denigrating more intensely hostile forms and therefore ‘thinning’ theological reflection or ignoring less intensely hostile forms and therefore truncating theological reflection.

# Chapter Three

## Answering Theological Questions about Persecution

Building on our definition offered in Chapter Two, a framework for understanding persecution continues in the present chapter with an examination of the major theological questions of persecution. We begin by considering the question of how persecution occurs. This is seen in the universal presence of persecution and the experience of it which is contextual. This is followed by an examination of who the theological sources of persecution are, namely, the roles which Satan and God play in the event. With these sources in mind, we will then explore, theologically, why persecution occurs.

### How Does Persecution Occur?

According to a full theological definition, persecution will be experienced by all Christians. In this way, the presence of persecution is universal for all those who seek to follow Jesus Christ. However, even though the presence of persecution may be universal, it seems to be experienced differently by Christians, depending upon their context. In this way, persecution is experienced contextually insofar as it takes place in different ways, depending on where it occurs and to whom. In other words, persecution's presence is static, but its attributes are dynamic. The following paragraphs will explore these two dimensions. Both find their basis in Scripture, and contribute to a fuller theological understanding of the religious persecution of Christians.

### The Universal Presence of Persecution

As we noted in our theological definition of the religious persecution of Christians, the New Testament sets forth a theological expectation of persecution whereby Christians are to anticipate the event as a part of Christian discipleship. In reference to this idea, Jesus states, "All men will hate you because of me ..." <sup>113</sup> In the same light, he warns, "If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also." <sup>114</sup> Paul applies this same principle when he tells Timothy, "... everyone who wants to live a

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<sup>113</sup> Matt. 10:22. Cf. Mk. 10:29-30, 13:13; Lk. 21:12.

<sup>114</sup> Jn. 15:20.

godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted ...”<sup>115</sup> Peter, echoing these statements, writes, “Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you.”<sup>116</sup> For Peter, expecting persecution meant not being surprised by its presence. Although Jesus, Paul, and Peter each spoke to specific individuals, these words apply equally to subsequent believers. In fact, the Church and the Apostles stand in continuity with each other and with the Old Testament prophets through the presence of persecution in their lives.<sup>117</sup> So, not only is persecution present in the lives of God’s prophets, but it extends through time as a promise and expectation for all those who seek to follow Christ. From this we can surmise that the presence of the religious persecution of Christians is ubiquitous. Persecution cannot be relegated to a specific period, nor can it be consigned to a specific location or group of people. Rather, its presence must be understood as universal, not just chronologically, but geographically as well.<sup>118</sup>

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

The question of normativity may, however, be asked in a different manner. Jonathan Chao, like many Majority World Christians, poses the question, “If suffering [persecution] is an essential part of Christian union with Christ, which he intends us to experience, how do we explain the relative lack of suffering in churches in the rest of the world [the West]?” He continues, “... has the church in the West and the rest of the ‘free world’ been deprived of a training course on the way to glory?”<sup>119</sup> In other words, is the idea of persecution as universally

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<sup>115</sup> 2 Tim. 3:12.

<sup>116</sup> 1 Pt. 4:12.

<sup>117</sup> Matt. 5:11-12.

<sup>118</sup> Similarly, see Boyd-MacMillan, 114-116.

<sup>119</sup> Jonathan Chao, “Witness of a Suffering Church: The Chinese Experience,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 8, no. 1 (April 1984) : 88. Cf. Cunningham, 340-342.

present, however biblical it might be, believable in today's world – a world divided by West and non-West; a culturally-conditioned church on one side and one which seeks to exist amid tumultuousness on the other? If Scripture understands persecution as drawing Christians closer to Christ as a consequence of conversion, do we think that the experience of the West and the Majority World is of comparative or equal value? Such questions can only be answered – the universal presence of persecution can only be fully understood – by exploring the contextual experience of persecution.

### **The Contextual Experience of Persecution**

While the presence of persecution is universal, even as the previous chapter argued, the experience of persecution takes place within a broad, but well-defined spectrum of manifestations. So, while there may be many shared experiences of persecution throughout the world, persecution ultimately happens differently depending upon where it occurs and to whom. That is, persecution occurs in all areas, but how it is experienced is a matter of context. So, Chao's question quoted above might be better asked not by wondering why it does not occur in a particular area (i.e., the West), but by inquiring, "If persecution is an expected part of the Christian life, how does it occur in contexts where it does not appear to be as obvious as in other areas like the Majority World?" In other words, the answer to Chao's question may not be found in the presence or absence of persecution, but in reflecting upon the type of persecution endured in a specific context. By applying the present study's definition of religious persecution to a context such as that found in the West, one can see that this context does indeed experience persecution, albeit mildly hostile and less apparent. In like manner, an examination of any cultural context should reveal a certain experience of persecution. In this light, the contextual experience of persecution, the fact that it occurs differently in different areas, supports the concept that the presence of persecution is universal, the fact that it occurs to all Christians, however complex or diverse the experience of it might be.

Recognition of persecution as an experience occurring within specific contexts is important if we are to bring further recognition to the universal presence of persecution. In contexts where Christians are under significant pressure, or where it may even be illegal to fully practice their faith, persecution will often manifest itself in intensely hostile manners. Christians in Sudan or China, for instance, live in such

circumstances, and daily face the threat of imprisonment, enslavement, and/or torture. Such is often not the case for Christians whose context looks more favorably upon religion, specifically Christianity. In these contexts, persecution will most often manifest itself in mildly hostile ways. This is the case for many Christians in the West, where persecution is frequently a matter of discrimination, isolation, or ridicule, which, understood theologically, can be seen as religious persecution. In this light, the experience of persecution is contextual, but the presence of persecution is universal.

## Summary

Our goal here is not to defend the presence of persecution in the West over and against the experience of Majority World Christians. Instead, we hope to bring an appreciation of the universal presence and contextual experience of persecution. This is important for a thorough theological understanding of religious persecution. As it concerns normativity, the universal presence of persecution says nothing of an experience that is to be daily. Rather, it indicates that persecution is simply to be expected by all Christians. Additionally, when broaching the relative differences of persecution in different areas, we must not begin by asking why persecution supposedly does not occur in a certain context, but how it may in fact occur. If, after careful reflection, one concludes that it does not occur in a certain context like the West, then he or she may proceed to inquire if Western discipleship is of comparative value to that of Christians in the Majority World, given the supposed lack of an experience that is, biblically, an expected part of Christian living. However, as the present study understands and has defined persecution, asking the latter question (how?) will lead one to conclusions that will validate the presence and experience of persecution found in the West. Such conclusions will not mitigate the experience of Majority World Christians whose persecution is often much worse than that in the West. In like manner, it will not deny the fact that Christians can learn spiritual values from the intensely hostile experiences of Majority World Christians.<sup>120</sup> Rather, it will

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<sup>120</sup> Cf. Kuzmič, “To Suffer with Our Lord,” 36. Here Kuzmič writes in reference to Christians whose theology may give greater emphasis to persecution, as opposed to those, often from the West, who place greater emphasis on ‘prosperity gospel’. The universal presence and contextual experience of persecution notwithstanding, the West can indeed learn from the Majority World in this regard.

acknowledge the universal presence of a Christian experience that is contextually unique.<sup>121</sup>

## Who are the Sources of Persecution?

In understanding religious persecution, we must discuss its sources. When we consider this, we seek to answer the question, who is responsible for persecution? On a sociological level we can place responsibility with governments, proponents of certain ideologies, or individuals with specific, sometimes religious, motivations. Although this has implications for a theological understanding of persecution, we must also consider the role of the spiritual realm. In this light, although the aforementioned groups or individuals act as tools in persecution, it is ultimately a spiritual struggle.<sup>122</sup> As the Apostle Paul notes, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”<sup>123</sup> Accordingly, we can understand religious persecution as originating from two sources: 1) persecution from Satan; and 2) persecution allowed by God. These elements are important to a theological understanding of persecution. They demonstrate that persecution is more than the hatred of humankind directed at one another. It is in fact the representation of Satan’s rejection of God’s people, yet at the same time it is the occasion of God’s victory over sin and the Devil.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> A deeper issue lies in the question of why some Christians experience persecution more frequently and in higher levels of hostility. This is “... an enigma that cannot be fully understood or resolved. Even firm believers must admit some ignorance amidst the sea of divinely orchestrated mysteries and ambiguities inherent to human nature and behavior.” See Kuzmič, “To Suffer with Our Lord,” 28.

<sup>122</sup> Schlossberg, *A Fragrance of Oppression*, 116.

<sup>123</sup> Eph. 6:12.

<sup>124</sup> Penner, 164-165. Cf. Cunningham, 338; Se Yoon Kim, “Jesus’ Teaching on Salvation and Suffering,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 20, no. 1 (January 1996) : 49-50. The cosmic element described by Paul and used to support the idea of persecution as ‘Satan’s rejection’ is an important theological point. Its significance notwithstanding, it is important to note that persecution occurs in two spheres; the heavenly and the earthly. In the heavenly sphere, persecution is a cosmic battle against the ‘dark powers’ that reject Christians. This places utmost importance on prayer and intercession as a response to persecution (treated more fully in Chapter Four). However, persecution occurs in the earthly sphere as well. In this light, victims of persecution must understand and respond, theologically and practically, to the persecution that is

## Persecution from Satan

Writing to the church in Thessalonica, Paul states, “For we wanted to come to you – certainly I, Paul, did, again and again – but Satan stopped us.”<sup>125</sup> Here, Paul makes it clear that Satan deliberately interfered with an action that he meant to carry out. In this sense, Satan is a source of persecution.<sup>126</sup> This is perhaps more lucidly illustrated in the latter portions of the book of Daniel.<sup>127</sup> Here, Daniel describes a vision in which an angel appears to him stating that the message he had for Daniel was delayed due to a spiritual conflict. Even though Daniel’s initial prayers had been heard immediately, the angel who carried God’s response was engaged in a spiritual battle with the ‘prince of the Persian kingdom’ for twenty-one days. In the end, it is the archangel Michael who intercedes, allowing the angel to successfully deliver his message. This vision illustrates not only a cosmic battle associated with persecution, but that Satan is active in the world and sometimes is responsible for things that cause us to suffer, including persecution. We see this once again in the book of Job. In this case, Satan initiates a series of actions against Job as a test of his spiritual commitment.<sup>128</sup> Privy to the heavenly interaction between Satan and God, we know that these actions originated directly from Satan. Thus, we can say that he is responsible for persecution. He may use as his tools governments, individuals, groups, or ideologies, but ultimately, it is Satan who perpetrates such actions.<sup>129</sup>

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perpetrated by human ‘tools’. This means that we cannot condense a theological understanding of persecution into a single source with a single purpose, i.e., Satan and his rejection. We must understand the human, earthly elements as well which add complexity to the nature and purpose of persecution. Additionally, the mere fact that God allows and appoints persecution adds further impetus to provide greater treatment of persecution in spite of the fact that we can understand the role of Satan and humanity.

<sup>125</sup> 1 Thess. 2:18.

<sup>126</sup> Schirmacher, 52-54.

<sup>127</sup> Dan. 10:1-21.

<sup>128</sup> Jb. 1:13-19, 2:7.

<sup>129</sup> The story of Job raises a complex question: if this evil ultimately stems from Satan, might we not consider all evil befalling Christians as persecution? We do not know the specific motivation of the Sabaeans and the Chaldeans who killed Job’s children and servants, but we know that they, along with fire and wind, were used by Satan to afflict Job. Earlier, we noted that the suffering Satan inflicts on humankind befalls both the religious and the non-religious alike. In this light, we should not be quick to identify every evil act as



## Persecution Allowed by God

While Job's life illustrates Satan's involvement in persecution, his story is illustrative of a greater concept, namely the fact that God is in ultimate control, and his sovereignty pervades the realms of persecution just as it does all else.<sup>130</sup> It was Satan who persecuted Job, but he did so only by the permission of God himself.<sup>131</sup> As Tokunboh Adeyemo notes, "Failure to see God's hand in the persecution of His saints ... will amount to an imbalanced theological perspective."<sup>132</sup> In this light, we can understand God to have responsibility in persecution in that he chooses to allow it at times, and is in ultimate control over it. Adeyemo adds that we might at times also see persecution as "... the appointment of the Lord ..."<sup>133</sup> With this in mind, it is important to note that God is not to be seen as persecutor. He allows persecution; he governs its occurrence; and he shapes its outcomes, but even so, he does not carry it out.<sup>134</sup> God's sovereignty places him in control over persecution in such a way that he allows it in order to use it for his purposes.

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persecution, merely because it may have Satan as its ultimate source. Additionally, the book of Job provides details beyond the actions of Sabaeans, fire, Chaldeans, and wind that assure us of Satan's direct involvement. In this light, Satan being the originator of evil cannot be used as a guide for demarcating evil or unfortunate acts against Christians as religious persecution. Cf. Chapter One, "Persecution as Suffering in General."

<sup>130</sup> Cf. Schlossberg, *A Fragrance of Oppression*, 130-133.

<sup>131</sup> Jb. 1:12, 2:6.

<sup>132</sup> Tokunboh Adeyemo, "Persecution: A Permanent Feature of the Church," in *Destined to Suffer?* ed. Brother Andrew, 24.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 25. Cf. John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad! The Supremacy of God in Missions* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1993). See also Ac. 5:16-41. Here, the Apostles are arrested for healing the sick in Jesus' name. They are put in prison, but are supernaturally released by an angel. The angel commands them to go proclaim the gospel in the temple courts (v. 20), the very thing the Apostles were imprisoned for in the first place. They obey and naturally are persecuted (flogged) once again. In this way, God essentially appointed their persecution for his divine purpose.

<sup>134</sup> It is perhaps more than interesting to note that Satan is referred to as "... accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night ..." (Rev. 12:10). This describes Satan's presence before God in the book of Job (Jb. 1:6-12, 2:1-7). He was there as an accuser and subsequent persecutor. This connection properly identifies Satan as persecutor, not God. Similarly, from Ac. 9:4-5 we see that when Christians are subjected to persecution, Christ himself is subjected as well. Thus, it is not God who persecutes, but Satan.

## Summary

While not overly complex, the importance of the preceding paragraphs is seen in placing responsibility for persecution with its true sources. Theologically, humans are tools used by Satan in his rejection of God's reign.<sup>135</sup> Even more, persecution, and Satan himself, can be understood to be under the rule of almighty God. In this light, Satan is seen as a source of persecution. These spiritual sources do not take away from the responsibility of human sources of persecution. Rather, they help us understand a greater responsibility behind human persecutors, and provide deeper understanding of the purposes of persecution. In like manner, while God is not to be seen as a persecutor, his responsibility in the event is seen in his control over it and in his purposes for allowing it.<sup>136</sup> With this in mind, the question of why persecution is carried out is often the first of those who are enduring it. For this reason, we turn to the purposes for which persecution occurs.

## Why are We Persecuted?

The reasons why persecution occurs are directly related, theologically, to its two sources. As stated earlier, this does not exonerate human perpetrators of persecution, nor does it confuse their own purposes in it. Rather, recognizing God's and Satan's goals for persecution provides an understanding of the greater purposes behind it. To that end, while it is clear that Satan has his own goals in persecution, God, in his sovereignty, is able to use these events for his own higher purposes. Thus, persecution that is allowed and appointed by God is ultimately a part of his plan and strategy in the world.<sup>137</sup> Accordingly, this section will examine God's purposes in persecution in the following categories: 1) the sanctification of believers; 2) glorifying Christ; 3) as a means for mission and evangelism; and 4) we will explore what role, if any, God's judgment plays in persecution.

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<sup>135</sup> Penner, 164.

<sup>136</sup> Cf. Piper, 85-87.

<sup>137</sup> Penner, 163; Joseph Tson, "Towards a Modern Protestant Theology of Martyrdom," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 24, no. 1 (January 2000) : 52-54; Josef Ton, *Suffering, Martyrdom, and Rewards in Heaven*, 423-426. The latter two works are by the same author despite the difference in the spelling of the author's name. The article is based on the larger work.

## The Sanctification of Believers

If we understand sanctification to be the process whereby God draws his followers closer to himself, we see this in reference to persecution in the writings of the Apostle Paul. In a letter to the Corinthian church, Paul writes:

We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.<sup>138</sup>

In reference to these statements John Piper notes, “Paul does not concede his suffering [persecution] to the hand of Satan but says that God ordained it for the increase of his faith.”<sup>139</sup> In this same way, Chao further notes that persecution becomes God’s cleansing agent used to train Christians in obedience and ministry.<sup>140</sup> In equal fashion, persecution “... may be part of God’s pedagogy as he provides those whom he has created in his image with opportunities to grow in love and goodness.”<sup>141</sup> It is in persecution that Christians grow in faith and in Christian maturity. As Christ illustrated in his parable of the sower,<sup>142</sup> those with weak commitments are unable to stand such tests, but those who are steadfast not only persevere, but grow in their ability to remain steadfast and follow Christ.<sup>143</sup>

Thus, persecution is part of God’s sanctifying work in his people. Furthermore, in being sanctified through persecution we are not only drawn closer to Christ, but we are made more like him as well. In this way, we stand in continuity with Christ and the prophets, but much more, we imitate him.<sup>144</sup> As we partake in the suffering of Christ and are persecuted for his name, we stand in union with him.<sup>145</sup> In these ways, persecution is central to God’s plan in redemptive history and in the sanctification of his believers. It is an integral part and a primary

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<sup>138</sup> 2 Cor. 1:8-9.

<sup>139</sup> Piper, 87.

<sup>140</sup> Chao, 81-85. Cf. Adeyemo, 31-33; Tson, “Towards a Modern Protestant Theology of Martyrdom,” 56-62; Ton, *Suffering, Martyrdom, and Rewards in Heaven*, 429-436.

<sup>141</sup> Kuzmič, “To Suffer with Our Lord,” 38.

<sup>142</sup> Matt. 13:1-24; Mk. 4:1-20; Lk. 8:4-15.

<sup>143</sup> Jam. 1:2-4.

<sup>144</sup> Pobee, 107-110. Cf. 1 Thess. 1:5-6.

<sup>145</sup> Chao, 85-86. Cf. Adeyemo, 33.

purpose of God's strategy in persecution. Through persecution, Christians take part in a process of spiritual maturation, purification, character formation, and perseverance in which they are made more like Christ and brought into a union with him.

## Glorifying Christ

In a classic juxtaposition of strength and weakness, Paul relates God's message to him to the Corinthians:

But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.<sup>146</sup>

In this way, not only is Paul made strong through Christ when enduring persecution, but because of Paul's weakness, Christ is given ultimate glory. In fact, persecution magnifies the very name of Christ. Through this same glorification, believers are also able to experience the abundance of God's endless grace.<sup>147</sup> Even more, through persecution Christ demonstrates his victory and the immortality of the Christian faith.<sup>148</sup> This victory is but a foretaste of Christ's ultimate victory in the *Eschaton*. Here, Satan and evil are ultimately defeated, unable to torment God's people any longer. It is at this moment that persecution represents the believers' heavenly reward.<sup>149</sup> In these ways, persecution is a part of God's plan in effecting the glorification of his name, strengthening believers through his own power, and demonstrating his superiority and victory both in the present kingdoms and in the Kingdom to come.

## A Means for Mission and Evangelism

Writing to the church in Philippi, Paul shares the effects of his persecution, stating:

Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord

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<sup>146</sup> 2 Cor. 12:9-10.

<sup>147</sup> Adeyemo, 33. Cf. Rom. 8:35-39.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 32. Cf. Matt 16:12.

<sup>149</sup> Piper, 88-91; Ton, *Suffering, Martyrdom, and Rewards in Heaven*, 103-104, 409-419.

have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.<sup>150</sup>

From these verses, God's purposes in persecution are underscored. Here, God uses the event, Paul's imprisonment in this case, as a witness to everyone around Paul. In this way, persecution "... ministers to those they [God's messengers] are trying to reach, and may open them to the gospel."<sup>151</sup> In other words, those who might otherwise be opposed to the proclamation of the gospel are made aware of it through the witness of persecution. These same verses also demonstrate that God uses persecution to "... awaken others out of their slumber of indifference and make them bold." Here, Christians who might otherwise be indifferent or timid in proclaiming the gospel of Christ are encouraged to do so with courage and strength.

In this same way, the religious persecution of Christians fosters missionary outreach.<sup>152</sup> This is true not only in the strengthening of proclamation, but in the effects of persecution on the spread of the Church. The book of Acts demonstrates this when early Christians were scattered throughout the Roman Empire as a result of persecution.<sup>153</sup> As they were scattered though, they preached the gospel and were witnesses of Christ. In retrospect, we see this ultimately as God's plan to spread his truth. In effect, "... Christ's Church not only grows in spite of persecution, but it even spreads because of it."<sup>154</sup> Here, the Church's ability to grow as a result of persecution and subsequent scattering is seen as God's divine triumph, in that he is able to turn to good what Satan meant for bad.<sup>155</sup> Piper acknowledges this concept, citing the recent example of the Chinese church. For Chinese Christians in the mid-twentieth century, the future seemed bleak with the onset of communism and its stranglehold on the church. In spite of their persecution however, Chinese Christians

<sup>150</sup> Phil. 1:12-14. Cf. Richard J. Cassidy, *Paul in Chains* (New York: Herder and Herder, 2001) for a fuller treatment of Paul's imprisonment and its witness.

<sup>151</sup> Piper, 93-94.

<sup>152</sup> Adeyemo, 33.

<sup>153</sup> Ac. 11:19ff.

<sup>154</sup> Penner, 165.

<sup>155</sup> Cf. Cunningham, 293-294. This is reminiscent of Tertullian's own statement, "The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; *the blood of martyrs is seed*" (emphasis in original translation). See Tertullian *Apology* L. Cf. Clement of Alexandria *The Stromata, or Miscellanies* 6.18; Cyprian *The Treatises of Cyprian* 11.10; and Lactantius *The Divine Institutes* 5.13, 5.23.

emerged forty years later fifty million strong.<sup>156</sup> Piper notes that this has occurred in other areas throughout history.<sup>157</sup> From this we see that God can use persecution to grow and spread his Church.

It is important to note, however, that this occurrence is in no way a normative, expected result of persecution. There is no such equation in which religious persecution equals the growth of the Church. This is demonstrated historically. At times, the Church did grow in response to or because of persecution, but in other places it all but died out. The churches of South-central Asia as well as Western Asia and Northern Africa (the Middle East) are examples where persecution effectively divided or weakened the Church and stunted its growth.<sup>158</sup> In light of this, are we to suppose that, by embracing or enduring persecution we add some sort of fertile quality to it? In our human perspective we cannot think this. In time, the churches that once represented a bastion of Christian strength in the aforementioned areas may be revived, perhaps as a result of the continued persecution Christians, to this day, experience there. This is a matter, like persecution itself, that is subject to the will of God. What is important to note is that no precedent can be set. At times, persecution results in church growth. At other times, it has the opposite effect. In cases where the Church does diminish, we can see examples of Satan's purpose in persecution, even though this does not indicate that such matters have reached the end of God's sovereign control. Satan may succeed temporarily, but he is still subject to the ultimate and divine triumph of God. In these ways, God uses persecution to embolden the witness of his people and open the hearts of those he calls to himself. While Satan may use persecution in an attempt to stunt the growth of the Church, God is able to use it to stimulate growth and/or vitality. Ultimately, persecution and its effects align with God's purposes irrespective of Satan's wishes.

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<sup>156</sup> Piper, 65.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid. 71-112.

<sup>158</sup> Consider also various Christians in Chiapas, Mexico, which has experienced suffering, "disruption," "dislocation," and a sort of "inoculation and immunity" to the gospel as a result of persecution. These, in addition to division, weakening, and a stunt in church growth. See Vernon J. Sterk, "You Can Help the Persecuted Church: Lessons from Chiapas, Mexico," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 23, no. 1 (January 1999), 16-17.

## Judgment

Early Church writers, although acknowledging it as a satanic attack, viewed persecution as God's method of judging and testing the Church. In fact, William Tabbernee notes a shift in their views, moving from persecution as Satan's attempt to destroy the gospel, to God's use of emperors in judgment of a Church in need of correction.<sup>159</sup> These views culminate with the rise of Christendom under Constantine I. Here, writers observe that God can put his hand against the Church in judgment or take it away in blessing.<sup>160</sup> In similar fashion, Tertullian viewed persecution as God's judgment, and a tool for sifting approved believers from rejected ones, with Satan being credited with the injustice of persecution.<sup>161</sup> In this way, persecution was a divine contest, initiated by God, in which God serves in both refereeing (judging) and rewarding.<sup>162</sup> Various modern scholars have taken similar views, noting that God causes or allows certain things to happen to his people as a direct result of their disobedience and/or apostasy. Such views often cite Old Testament Israel as an example.<sup>163</sup>

The citation of Old Testament examples, however, calls this view into question. While we do see God judging his people in the Old Testament, including allowing the demise of Israel as a nation, such actions do not constitute persecution. In fact, much of the harm and violence ancient Israel endured was not directed at their Judaism. In this light, what God allowed them to experience as judgment and discipline was certainly suffering, but we cannot view their experience as religious persecution.<sup>164</sup> The New Testament, while often referring to clear cases of persecution, provides no clarity as to the relationship

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<sup>159</sup> William Tabbernee, "Eusebius' 'Theology of Persecution': As Seen in Various Editions of his Church History," *Journal of Christian Studies* 5, no. 3 (Fall 1997) : 334.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 329. See also Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* 10.4.28-31, 59-60; Origen *Origen Against Celsus* 8.70; Cyprian 3.5; and Lactantius *Of the Manner in Which the Persecutors Died*.

<sup>161</sup> Tertullian *De Fuga in Persecutione* 2.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 1. Cf. Cyprian 5.17.

<sup>163</sup> See Schlossberg, *A Fragrance of Oppression*, 117-118; Piper, 87.

<sup>164</sup> Cases cited to support the view that persecution is divine judgment make this same error – confusing the general suffering of judgment and discipline for persecution. God may use or allow persecution in order to teach his people valuable lessons. In doing so he is not judging, but using evil for his greater good. Cf. *ibid.*

between judgment and persecution.<sup>165</sup> As it concerns the early Church, it is beyond our ability to identify the exact purpose of their experience of persecution. We do know that much of what is written about concerning the event does indeed refer to religious persecution, but it seems more appropriate to relegate this experience to exactly what Christ predicted (following him would mean experiencing persecution) instead of connecting their experiences with judgment.

Consequently, without a clear biblical precedent we are only able to say that God allows and uses persecution for his purposes, which include the sanctification of believers and the glorification and extension of his name. Further, if the Christian attitude towards persecution is one of joy, blessing, and boldness, how is one to see the event as judgment?<sup>166</sup> Perhaps most importantly, we must not associate judgment and persecution in such a way as to place God in the position of persecutor.<sup>167</sup> When this occurs, we have misunderstood both persecution and God's purposes in it. In other words, God may allow persecution to act as a part of sanctification or even instruction,<sup>168</sup> but he does not persecute in order to judge.

## Summary

This section has sought to outline the theological reasons why persecution occurs. Examining this aspect of persecution in no way denies that human persecutors have their own agendas in persecuting. Such a study does, however, acknowledge that persecution is a part of God's plan, in which he is able to use the evil of Satan and humanity for his greater good. What Satan might intend as a method to arrest the growth of the Church, God is able to use to spurn it on in number, maturity, and/or strength. As it concerns judgment, there is no biblical

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<sup>165</sup> The closest connection we have lies in Christ's command to disburse in Acts 1:8 and religious persecution in Acts 8:1, 4. Was the Church being persecuted as a direct result of not disbursing earlier to Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth? Such a supposition requires too much theological guesswork. The same is seen in Christ's messages to the seven churches of John's Revelation (Rev. 2:1-3:22). Christ warns them of impending persecution; he chastises their sin; and he threatens the pagans around them. However, there is no clear connection between their experience of persecution and the warning of judgment. Any connection seems unwarranted by the text and the information given.

<sup>166</sup> See Matt. 5:10-12; Lk. 12:11-12; Jam. 1:2.

<sup>167</sup> Referring to persecution, Adeyemo writes, "... its ministry is the injustice of the devil ..." Adeyemo, 25.

<sup>168</sup> See Jb.; 2 Cor. 1:8-11.



precedent which allows for a connection between it and persecution. To that end, we see God using persecution to sanctify those who seek to follow him, to glorify his name in a demonstration of his strength and superiority, and to embolden mission and evangelism efforts that will draw individuals to him.

## Conclusion

With a thorough theological definition of persecution in mind, the present chapter has sought to examine the key theological questions of persecution. Supplementing a theological definition of persecution, a treatment of the universal presence and contextual experience of the event suggests that the religious persecution of Christians is a global phenomenon, while at the same time manifesting itself in contextually different ways. Additionally, recognizing the theological sources of persecution, while not acquitting human sources, brings to light a higher and/or deeper level at play. Here, Satan is seen as persecutor while God demonstrates his role through his sovereign control over persecution. Similarly, this recognition acknowledges the greater purposes of persecution – Satan’s desire to squelch the Church and God’s desire to sanctify believers, glorify his name, and call people to himself in mission and evangelism.

Taken together, these three essential questions and their answers form a significant portion of a theological framework for understanding persecution. Further, this understanding grants strength to appropriately respond to persecution when it occurs. Such responses are integral to a full, theological understanding of persecution, and are treated in the following chapter.



# Chapter Four

## Responding to Persecution

A theological framework for understanding persecution is completed with an examination of appropriate ways in which to respond to persecution. The significance of such a study is seen in the choices one has in which to respond, and in the biblical or theological appropriateness of such responses. Where an understanding of persecution is lacking, or where no theology is present in which to inform Christians as to how to respond to persecution, confusion ensues and often times results in inappropriate reactions. Furthermore, an event in which God has sovereign purposes requires specific types of responses. In this light, the present chapter will focus on responding to religious persecution by:

1. enduring persecution;
2. avoiding persecution;
3. resisting persecution; and
4. showing solidarity with the persecuted.

### Enduring Persecution

Perhaps the most important and clearest biblical directive regarding a response to persecution is that of enduring an expected event for the greater purposes of God. In light of the purposes treated in the previous chapter, Christians are often called to persevere boldly in the midst of persecution. Even more, there are times when God calls Christians to face persecution willingly. Biblically, we have the example of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego who refused to bow before King Nebuchadnezzar's golden image.<sup>169</sup> They were fully aware of what would befall them if they chose not to abide by the king's wishes. Even so, they chose to face the persecution that would come as a consequence, whether God spared them from it or not.<sup>170</sup> Similarly, Paul, having been told by a prophet that he would be arrested and imprisoned, was steadfast in his decision to go to

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<sup>169</sup> Dan. 3:8-30.

<sup>170</sup> Dan. 3:16-18.

Jerusalem even if it meant persecution.<sup>171</sup> In this same manner, the church of Smyrna was warned in John's Revelation that they were to endure persecution. Accordingly, Christ instructs them to "Be faithful, even to the point of death ..."<sup>172</sup> Examples such as these demonstrate that there are times when it is God's will that his people face and endure persecution. For this reason, God tells Christians to respond with joy, and consider themselves blessed when they experience it.<sup>173</sup> Since Christians will experience and often must endure persecution, they are also instructed not to worry about or be afraid of it.<sup>174</sup> The Holy Spirit will protect them and help them to stand strong. In this light, enduring persecution, while it should not be considered separately from other responses, is "... by far, the most common response to persecution ..."<sup>175</sup> This is perhaps best understood in light of a theological expectation of the event.

While enduring persecution is most often the Christian response, this does not point to an attitude whereby Christians should seek it out.<sup>176</sup> There is no macabre or brazen acceptance of persecution in order to elevate or glorify oneself. Persecution is meant to glorify God. In this sense, we have no biblical directive or theological basis in which to pursue persecution as if our own spiritual agenda were at stake. In like manner, although Christians are to consider themselves blessed when they must endure persecution, the mere experience of persecution is not at all times a mark of Christian spirituality or maturity. Examples in which Christians react to persecution with their own brand of violence illustrate, among other things, a lack of

<sup>171</sup> Ac. 21:10-13.

<sup>172</sup> Rev. 2:10. Cf. Brother Andrew, ed., 34.

<sup>173</sup> Matt. 5:10-12; 1 Thess. 1:6; Jam. 1:2; 1 Pt. 3:14a, 4:13-14, 16.

<sup>174</sup> Lk. 12:11-12; 1 Pt. 3:14b.

<sup>175</sup> Penner, 133. Its commonality is seen in its biblical support, not necessarily in its frequency. Cf. Tertullian *De Fuga in Persecutione*.

<sup>176</sup> For instance, Ignatius, second century Bishop of Antioch, seems to seek after persecution and ultimate martyrdom when he writes, "Let me be food for the wild beasts, through whom I can reach God." *Romans* 4. He further requests that no one interfere with this quest. *Romans* 6. Others sought a similar fate, like Origen, the third century Christian scholar, who desired to mimic his father's death. See Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, vol. 1, *Beginnings to 1500*, rev. ed. (Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 2000), 86, 149. In like manner, it is said that Ramon Lull, a thirteenth century Spanish Christian, publicly proclaimed Christ in Islamic Tunis, resulting in his goal of martyrdom. See Ruth Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983), 57. See also, Schirrmacher, 57-59.

discipleship, spirituality, and maturity in their ungodly response.<sup>177</sup> The mark of Christian spirituality and maturity is seen, not in the fact that a Christian might experience persecution, but in the way in which they endure and choose to respond to it.

With this in mind, the concept of enduring persecution is largely clear. We have a biblical precedent and at times a divine directive to do so. Therefore, under God's direction and with his strength, Christians are to endure and persevere in the midst of persecution for God's greater purposes. Even so, *practicing* such a response is the difficult part. We can only do so under the power of the Holy Spirit, knowing that such experiences are to be expected and that heavenly rewards await those who endure persecution with strength and godly dignity.

## Avoiding Persecution

The Christian expectation of persecution and their call to endure it notwithstanding, there are occasions and means in which God directs believers to avoid it. In this way, a call to endure persecution does not mean a weak, apathetic, and/or passive acceptance of the event. Biblically, the concept of responding to persecution by avoiding it is seen as early as the book of 1 Kings. Here, Elijah predicts a drought that will occur in Israel as judgment from God. Knowing that King Ahab will react negatively to this prophecy, God instructs Elijah, "Leave here, turn eastward and hide in the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan."<sup>178</sup> In this way, Elijah avoided persecution. In like manner, the Apostle Paul escaped persecution and possible martyrdom by being lowered from a city wall in a basket.<sup>179</sup> Jesus himself avoided some persecution until it was his appointed time.<sup>180</sup> The very fact that the early Church

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<sup>177</sup> Cf. Candelin, 5. Here he states that "Suffering [being persecuted] for one's faith is ... a proven sign that that faith is genuine and penetrating." Obviously, it is context that will tell if this is true or not. As the example of Nigerian Christians in our Introduction illustrates, the fact that they experienced persecution did not mean that they were spiritually mature. In light of their violent, un-Christian, and ungodly response, it can be said that they were not spiritually mature.

<sup>178</sup> 1 Kgs. 17:3.

<sup>179</sup> Ac. 9:23-25; 2 Cor. 11:32-33.

<sup>180</sup> Matt. 12:14-15; Jn. 7:30, 8:20, 8:59, 10:39. In Lk. 22:42 he prays that he might be allowed to avoid it, but is ultimately submitted to the will of the Father for the sake of his divine mission.

scattered as a result of persecution demonstrates not merely that such a response took place, but that it was warranted and directed by God. In the case of Elijah, it was God himself who told him to leave the area immediately and seek safety in the desert. Likewise, Jesus found it appropriate to hide or flee in order to avoid persecution at times. We also know in retrospect that the scattering of Christians in response to persecution was used by God to spread and grow the Church, just as Paul saw his own fleeing as a part of fulfilling his God-given mission.<sup>181</sup> In essence, there are certain times when God directs his people to avoid persecution. They do not do so out of fear, but because God leads them to do so.

This suggests that, at times, the Church is meant to implement certain strategies in which to avoid persecution. We see this response used in a godly way by the early Church. Writing to those who questioned the avoidance of persecution, Tertullian encourages believers to be shrewd in the way in which they choose to worship. Groups of small numbers and night meetings may be in order.<sup>182</sup> Additionally, the divinely appointed avoidance of persecution may require other types of secret worship services or certain efforts in contextualization – matters dependent upon context.<sup>183</sup> Further, there

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<sup>181</sup> Acts 8:1, 11:19ff, 14:5-6. Cf. Penner, 132. See also Jesus' command to his disciples in Matt. 10:23 and Athanasius *Apologia De Fuga* 11-22 where he defends his own flight from persecution.

<sup>182</sup> Tertullian *De Fuga in Persecutione* 14. This is an example of the early Church's godly use of avoidance. In other portions of the document, Tertullian is vehemently opposed to avoiding persecution out of fear, or by purchasing ones' safety.

<sup>183</sup> In this light, Christians are not meant to act in such a way that invites unnecessary persecution. This is seen when Christians naïvely pursue persecution for their own purposes. Also, we see this with the effects of inappropriate means of sharing one's faith or forcing conversion to occur within certain cultural and/or foreign parameters. With this in mind, Vernon Sterk emphasizes "indigenization" in avoiding unnecessary persecution. Using this, the gospel and methods of outreach, mission, evangelism, and witness are contextualized, allowing seekers and converts to fully accept the gospel in their own culture. This makes them better able to withstand persecution when it comes, and it helps Christians avoid persecution that might result from unnecessary cultural misunderstandings. In other words, 'westernizing' people may result in persecution as a reaction to foreign and forced ideals. Contextualizing the gospel within a specific culture meets individuals at their own cultural level and may help to avoid unnecessary outbreaks of persecution. See Sterk, 16.

may be occasions in which fleeing persecution or the threat of it is divinely warranted.

What is important to note is that Christians cannot avoid persecution out of fear, or merely with thoughts of finding a more peaceful environment. This is illustrated best when emigration is considered as a response and method of avoiding persecution. While in a sense the book of Acts shows the early Church's 'emigration' as a way in which the Church spread, this is not a constant directive. This was a major issue for the churches in communist Eastern Europe.<sup>184</sup> For these Christians, their emigration was often carried out internally. In this case, individuals, "...isolate[d] themselves from the surrounding secular society ..."<sup>185</sup> Additionally, those who emigrate internally "... very often develop a ghetto mentality with a reactionary lifestyle. They are marked by a high degree of legalism and insulation that prevents them from having a positive 'salt and light' influence on their society."<sup>186</sup> In the case of Eastern Europe, responding to persecution through internal emigration was even used in "... anti-Christian propaganda to prove the socially and mentally harmful effects of Christian faith."<sup>187</sup> More traditionally, physical or external emigration has been a consistent issue facing the churches of Western Asia and Northern Africa.<sup>188</sup> Christians here, historically and presently, emigrate to regions which they perceive to be more tolerant of their faith. While a number of various issues stimulate this movement, persecution has often been a central reason for their emigration. What these emigrants do not realize, however, is that even if they are able to leave their homeland successfully they will never fully escape persecution and hardship.<sup>189</sup> Even more, the churches they leave behind are left with an even greater burden of existing and maintaining a voice as an ever-increasing minority.<sup>190</sup>

<sup>184</sup> Peter Kuzmič, "The Communist Impact on the Church in Eastern Europe," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 20, no. 1 (January 1996) : 65-66. Cf. Kuzmič, "To Suffer With Our Lord," 40.

<sup>185</sup> Kuzmič, "The Communist Impact on the Church in Eastern Europe," 66.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>188</sup> Middle East Concern, "Middle East Concern, June 2004," TD (photocopy), pp. 7-8, Center for the Study of Global Christianity Library, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, South Hamilton, MA.

<sup>189</sup> Middle East Concern, 7.

<sup>190</sup> Betty Jane Bailey and J. Martin Bailey, *Who Are the Christians in the Middle East?* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company,

With this in mind, we see a tension between the boldness required in enduring persecution and the creativity and wisdom required in seeking to avoid it. Hence, there is a balance between a Spirit-led embrace and Spirit-led avoidance of the event. Responding to persecution by seeking to avoid it is an issue requiring the utmost care. While there is biblical evidence in support of such an action, it is clear that it must be God who initiates such a response. While there are those who feel they can be of greater use if they are free from danger, they must ultimately submit to the will of God and his sovereign purposes in persecution. As Penner states, “Flight is forbidden where obedience to God’s commandments and Christ’s commission and love for others would be jeopardized. The avoidance of distress and pain is not the supreme good. Obedience is, regardless of the cost.”<sup>191</sup>

## Resisting Persecution

The tension between enduring and avoiding persecution aside, there remain options which may be a part of these responses. In other words, Christians are called to endure persecution and avoid certain instances of it. As they do this, God may call them to resist persecution as well. Such a response indicates neither an acceptance nor an avoidance of persecution, but rather an action that seeks to stop the event. In this light, Penner writes, “There are times when it is appropriate to fight for one’s legal rights.”<sup>192</sup>

Biblically, the apostle Paul demonstrates resistance through his appellation to and use of Roman law. In this way, he questions the actions of city magistrates who publicly beat him without a trial.<sup>193</sup> He questions the legality of scourging him, a Roman citizen, when he has not yet been convicted of a crime.<sup>194</sup> Facing persecution, Paul once again uses the law and his Roman citizenship to appeal to Caesar.<sup>195</sup>

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2003), 13-14; Andrea Pacini, ed., *Christian Communities in the Arab Middle East* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 132.

<sup>191</sup> Penner, 134.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, 133. Schirmacher adds and clarifies, “Christians are loyal citizens who seek the welfare of their state, country and people, but whenever the State tries to force them to dishonor God, they must obey God rather than man.” Schirmacher, 90.

<sup>193</sup> Ac. 16:36-39.

<sup>194</sup> Ac. 22:24-29.

<sup>195</sup> Ac. 25:10-11.



With his knowledge of the law and his own rights as a citizen of the Roman Empire, Paul is able to avoid persecution by resisting it. In fact, Jesus demonstrates this same concept by defending himself before his own tribunal.<sup>196</sup> These examples demonstrate a biblical option to resist persecution. However, it is important to note that both Jesus and Paul exercised this choice under specific premises and for specific purposes. As Penner notes, “Like fleeing, fighting [resisting] is permissible unless it hinders the furtherance of the kingdom of God ... In Paul’s case, it could be argued that he defended his legal rights in order to further the kingdom of God.”<sup>197</sup> Similarly, Jesus defended himself, “... not to protest his suffering [persecution] but as a testimony of his innocence.”<sup>198</sup>

In this light, Christians have a biblical precedent to resist persecution within certain parameters. In fact, Christians have a right to be angry with conditions of persecution and this attitude should motivate them to work for change. As Kuzmič states,

There is a place for anger – not sighing negative litanies and being unhappy and destructive, but biblical holy indignation, a righteous outrage which, under the Lordship of Christ and motivated by Christian love, leads one to seek to transform the conditions which made one angry in the first place.<sup>199</sup>

This might occur through legislative change, which itself might occur through civil disobedience, publications, political lobbying, or public demonstrations.<sup>200</sup> However, the guidelines to which resistance must submit remain important. As we saw in the example of Jesus and Paul, Christian resistance of religious persecution must not distort, diminish, or contradict the gospel; God’s purposes in persecution, Christ’s mission in the world, or the Holy Spirit’s leading to respond to persecution in another manner.<sup>201</sup> Just as inappropriately enduring or

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<sup>196</sup> Jn. 18:23.

<sup>197</sup> Penner, 133.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> Kuzmič, “To Suffer With Our Lord,” 39.

<sup>200</sup> Penner, 133; Schlossberg, *A Fragrance of Oppression*, 166-168.

<sup>201</sup> This is seen in secular venues as well, where resisting persecution through state-funded or controlled departments can sometimes result in a policing of areas of religious restriction in such a way as to align the Church with a particular state or designate it as a “mission-protectorate.” See James A. Scherer’s response to Marshall’s “Persecution of Christians in the Contemporary World” in “To the Editor,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 22, no. 2 (April 1998) : 66-67. Marshall agrees. See his response to

avoiding persecution can damage the name of Christ or one's witness of him, so can inappropriately resisting persecution.

With these points in mind, resisting persecution is a viable option for Christians, but only under certain guidelines. Once again we see the importance of wisdom and discernment under the direction of the Holy Spirit. We are not called at all times to be subjected to ungodly treatment, nor are we at all times to shirk such treatment. Ultimately, God himself will defend his Church, but in the same way, there are times when God will lead his people to rise up in holy indignation and resist efforts to squelch his people.

## Solidarity with the Persecuted

When we consider showing solidarity with others in their persecution, we consider a response that, like resistance, can be done in congruence with avoiding or enduring persecution. Like Paul and Jesus, who resisted persecution as they were being subjected to it, showing solidarity with the persecuted may be required from those in the midst of intense persecution. At other times, in fact most of the time, it is the responsibility and call of those whose experience is less hostile who are thus in a better position to serve as advocates. Often, these are the ones who must respond to persecution by showing solidarity with fellow believers and fighting for them in prayer and resistance. As Kuzmič writes, "... solidarity with those who suffer is a Christian imperative."<sup>202</sup> Thomas Schirmmacher adds,

"... committed efforts to aid persecuted Christians cannot be left up to a few enthusiasts, but, according [sic] the New Testament, is a central duty of the Christian Church."<sup>203</sup>

This concept is perhaps best illustrated by a companion of the Apostle Paul and a member of the Colossian church. In a letter to these believers, Paul writes, "Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always *wrestling in prayer for you*, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured" (emphasis added).<sup>204</sup> Epaphras' wrestling might better be

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Scherer in "To the Editor," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 22, no. 2 (April 1998) : 67.

<sup>202</sup> Kuzmič, "To Suffer With Our Lord," 42.

<sup>203</sup> Schirmmacher, 14.

<sup>204</sup> Col. 4:12. See a similar concept in Gal. 6:2 and Heb. 13:3. Cf. the example of Jesus in Penner, 91-99.

thought of as agonizing.<sup>205</sup> As this man prayed for his fellow believers and a church that was experiencing persecution, he agonized with their own experiences. This illustrates not only prayer's power, but the importance of showing solidarity with others through prayer so that they might persevere in persecution. Additionally, praying for persecuted Christians might even lead them to respond to their persecution in other specific ways.

While this response is important for those who most often experience mildly hostile persecution, it does not exclude other Christians from seeking solidarity through persecution. Christians whose persecution is intensely hostile can also show solidarity in the experience of others through prayer. This is best illustrated by the author's own experience in northern India. After exploring some of the biblical theology of persecution at a local Christian training center, Indian students were asked to share their experiences and receive prayer. In this way, American teachers could begin to prayerfully stand alongside others in their struggles. After doing so, these same Indian Christians, whose experience of persecution was far worse than that of those who taught them, asked if they could in turn pray for the American teachers and their experience of persecution. Aware of the differences in persecution for Westerners, Indian Christians stood alongside American Christians in their experience of mildly hostile persecution. The result was one of true community and reciprocal solidarity.

This point notwithstanding, it remains a primary responsibility of those whose experience of persecution is presently mild to stand for and with those whose experience is intensely hostile. It is these Christians who are better able to take action for and on behalf of those with more intense experiences. Without mitigating the power of prayer, Christians are in this way called to "... wherever and whenever possible ... engage in political advocacy and the pursuit of international justice ..."<sup>206</sup> This means that Christians, especially those whose experience of persecution may be mildly hostile and intermittent, cannot be willing to kneel in the

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<sup>205</sup> What the New International Version translates as "wrestling" is literally *agonizōmenos*, 'to struggle', 'fight', or 'compete', from which the word agonize is derived.

<sup>206</sup> Kuzmič, 42. While the present study focuses on the religious persecution of Christians, it should be added, as Kuzmič notes, that such action is required by Christians "... for any other human beings whose freedom of conscience is violated." Ibid. See also, Boyd-MacMillan, 116.

quietness and relative safety of their homes. They must spiritually and *physically* show solidarity with others in such a way as to demonstrate Christian unity.<sup>207</sup>

With this in mind, showing solidarity with others is an appropriate Christian response to persecution. Like resistance, it is a response which can be carried out separately or alongside enduring and/or avoiding persecution. In fact, by standing alongside those being persecuted, one might necessarily make oneself vulnerable to situations requiring some of the other responses outlined above.<sup>208</sup> Beyond this, solidarity with persecuted Christians is a required response of all believers on some level, be it through prayer or physical action. Where one might otherwise need to seek God's direction as to the appropriate response to persecution, no such prayer is needed here. Christians can only ask God *how* they should help their persecuted brothers and sisters, not *if*. Christians, as members of one body, must join in solidarity with those persecuted and share in the lives of all those that make-up the worldwide Church.<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>207</sup> Examples whereby Christians might become more involved in efforts on behalf of those who are intensely persecuted are given in Marshall, *Their Blood Cries Out*, 211-240; Schlossberg, *A Fragrance of Oppression*, 217-218; and Shea, 85-106.

<sup>208</sup> As Chapter Three suggests, the seemingly imbalanced experience of persecution experienced by the West and the Majority World is better understood in light of a juxtaposition of persecution's universal presence and an experience of it which is contextual. If this recognition begins to bring understanding to a type of persecution that may not be so obvious (as in the West), then partaking in a type that is obvious (as in the Majority World) may bring completion to our understanding. In other words, when Christians expose themselves to the experiences of others, they make themselves vulnerable to that very same experience. Such partaking exists when Christians seek to be in solidarity with one another and their experiences of persecution.

<sup>209</sup> As Schirmacher insightfully observes, even though persecution "... is an ecumenical issue," and should therefore demand Christian solidarity, it "unfortunately engenders no deeper unity among Christians." Citing Brother Andrew, he further notes that many Christians understand the body of Christ to be simply their church instead of the global Church. In this light, the road to deep and widespread Christian solidarity, though a biblical mandate of great necessity, may be a long and troubled one. Schirmacher adds that solidarity through prayer should be shown for the persecuted, but should be extended towards the persecutor as well. This does not condone the persecutor's actions, but rather becomes a plea for God's grace. Moreover, our solidarity must not be demonstrated at the cost of exacerbating the experience of other

## Conclusion

An examination of the appropriate responses to persecution completes a theological framework for understanding persecution. With this portion of the framework in mind, Christians can devise specific responses and strategies to react to persecution.<sup>210</sup> In this light, Christians must respond to persecution by avoiding it, enduring it, resisting it, and/or by showing solidarity with those who are persecuted. Where a tension exists between avoiding and enduring persecution, resisting it and seeking solidarity in the experience of other persecuted Christians are responses which interact with each other and the aforementioned responses. In other words, Christians remain in a state where the presence of persecution is inevitable, and thus the necessity to respond with endurance is a must. This being said, there are times when God may call individuals to avoid specific cases of persecution in certain ways. Resisting persecution and standing alongside others in their experience of it may overlap a response of enduring or avoiding. One could refer to the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer as an example. He resisted an oppressive and persecuting regime through writing and public addresses, all the while avoiding certain outbreaks of persecution through trips abroad, secrecy, and underground seminaries. At the same time, he endured the persecution of threats, restrictions, and imprisonment, and joined in the same experience of many other Germans of the Confessing Church. There were times when all four responses to persecution were at work in Bonhoeffer's life. Kuzmič summarizes this interaction well:

While there are times for anger and insistence that injustice and persecution must cease, there are also times for acceptance, perseverance, patient waiting, and prayer. Christian theology teaches the ability to discern the times and to live under pressure and with unresolved tension. A balance of outrage and acceptance is necessary: if one prevails, the dialectical tension is lost. Those in positions of power

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Christians. In this, there is a tension between our spiritual solidarity (prayer) and our wise use of physical solidarity. See Schirmmacher, 44, 63-64, 90-92, and 99-100.

<sup>210</sup> For example, see United States Catholic Mission Association, "Crisis management in the Event of Arrest, Disappearance, or Death of Mission Personnel" *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 9, no. 3 (July 1985) : 115-116; Brother Andrew, ed., 113-120; Middle East Concern, 1-6; Bro. Ch. Suvarna Raju, "Persecuted Church – India," TD (photocopy), pp. 8-9, Center for the Study of Global Christianity Library, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, South Hamilton, MA.

have greater responsibility to act against injustice than the victims themselves, who rarely have any public influence. However, embracing apathy or playing the role of a passive spectator is never a Christian option.<sup>211</sup>

In this light, Christians are faced with a choice: is God's directive in a given situation avoidance or endurance or is any measure of resistance called for? While this requires wisdom and discernment, the solidarity found in Christian community is never an option. As the body of Christ, Christians must stand with, for, and alongside their brothers and sisters as they are persecuted. Ultimately, it is God's direction in a given context that will shed light on an appropriate response.

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<sup>211</sup> Kuzmič, "To Suffer With Our Lord," 39.

# Conclusion

We began this study with the true but unfortunate story of a group of Christians in northern Nigeria, and their response to the persecution dealt them by local Muslims. As we noted, this situation was complex, as the Nigerian context remains to this day, but the story is still illustrative of the incomplete and mistreated puzzle that lies before us regarding a theological understanding of religious persecution. Our survey of scholarship and thinking in Chapter One demonstrated that the ways in which many understand, think about, and theologically reflect upon persecution is indeed as insufficient as the example of these Nigerian Christians suggests. In order to bring stability to how we understand persecution, and strength to subsequent theological reflection, the remaining portions of the present study carefully crafted a theological framework in which to understand persecution.

In this light, we sought in Chapter Two to build this framework on a comprehensive and theological definition of the religious persecution of Christians. In so doing, we found it necessary first to define the term ‘persecution’ by itself. Building from this, we explored the implications of adding ‘religious’ to such a definition and concluded that this is necessary if we are to adequately define an experience that might otherwise have numerous motivations. Further, we discovered that a definition of religious persecution is largely socio-political. Such a definition aids the Church and the international community in their endeavors to analyze persecution and serve as advocates on behalf of persecuted people. To complete our definition, though, we sought to distinguish this definition from a theological definition. By doing so, we included certain persecutory acts such as ostracism and ridicule that neither systematically, nor irregularly, violate religious freedoms. Seen theologically, such acts can be considered as religious persecution, and require similar theological reflection and possible response that are more consistent/and or intense.

In Chapter Three, we examined the major theological questions of persecution. In exploring the ways in which persecution occurs, we saw that, according to a theological expectation, the presence of persecution is universal. Alongside this, the experience of persecution is contextual, that is, it occurs in different ways which are dependent upon where it occurs and to whom. From here, we explored the theological sources of persecution and noted that it is primarily Satan

who is the persecutor. Ultimately however, we saw that it is God himself who sovereignly controls persecution, allowing and at times appointing it for his purposes. With these sources in mind, we further explored the theological reasons for which persecution occurs. In doing so, we noted that Satan, as persecutor, wishes to use persecution as a rejection of God's people. In keeping with God's sovereignty, however, we noted that God uses persecution for his purposes, namely, to sanctify his people, glorify his name, and as a means for mission and evangelism. Here, we also clarified that there is no clear precedent in which we can connect the religious persecution of Christians with God's judgment. God is not a persecutor and thus, while he controls the event, he does not use it to judge.

In Chapter Four, we considered what the theologically appropriate responses might be to an event that Christians must expect. In light of such an expectation, we concluded that Christians are ultimately called to endure persecution. This being said, Christians must not proudly seek persecution, nor are they to passively accept it as their lot. Rather, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, they must discern what God might call them to do in a specific situation. At times, God will call his people to avoid persecution, not out of fear, but through actions such as flight, secrecy, or methods of contextualization. As a third option, Christians are at times called to resist persecution. Here, Christians publicly label certain acts as unjust, and work in such a way as to ensure that they are not allowed to occur or to continue. As a final response, we noted that all Christians are meant to seek solidarity with one another. This means that the Church must join their brothers and sisters in their persecution by agonizing (Col. 4:12) with and for them in both prayer and physical action. In light of these responses, as well as the concepts laid out in Chapters Two and Three, a theological framework for understanding persecution is in place.

## **Suggestions for Further Study**

Two areas readily suggest themselves for further study. First, as our study intimates, Christians who make up the world's many varied cultures and contexts must seek to put our theological framework to work in contextually specific theological reflection. Such studies and the theologies that result from them will help to strengthen local churches in their ability to respond to persecution. Additionally, it will



continue to bring global awareness and understanding to persecution. With a theological framework in place, perhaps such a study may be easier, and significantly more focused.

Second, the present study, given its scope, was unable to give any space to an understanding of intra-Christian persecution.<sup>212</sup> Such an issue emerged from the dominance of Christendom, but was present in earlier forms as Christians struggled to understand their faith. While this type of persecution may have been more prevalent in the past, such an environment still exists within the worldwide Church today. There is tension between different Coptic groups in Egypt, between Protestants and Roman Catholics in Latin America, and more examples could certainly be added to this list. Each situation carries with it its own cultural and theological complexities. Even more complex, how might one consider the role of persecution between Christians and marginal Christian groups? Many of the former claim that the latter groups do not represent historic and orthodox Christian faith. Yet, many marginal Christians long to be considered as a true expression of this flock and often claim to actually be so. For them, where such an environment exists, there is persecution. In the same light, how might we consider the position of ‘crypto-Christians’ and their desire, in part, to remain ‘cryptic’ to avoid persecution from Christians and non-Christians alike? The theological ramifications of this and other types of intra-Christian persecution – actual or potential – are significant. In this light, while the present study shares some of the same issues, there is perhaps more at risk here theologically. Such studies may help to clarify a host of ecclesiological and missiological issues that are a part of, but nonetheless beyond the scope of the present study. In any case, with a theological framework for understanding persecution in place, it is hoped that what was once a confused puzzle is now clear, its pieces ordered in such a way as to allow for further theological reflection.

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<sup>212</sup> See Schirrmacher, 40-44 for some very helpful reflections on this.



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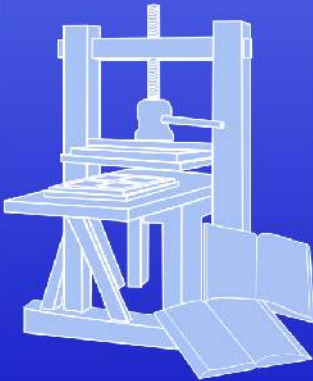
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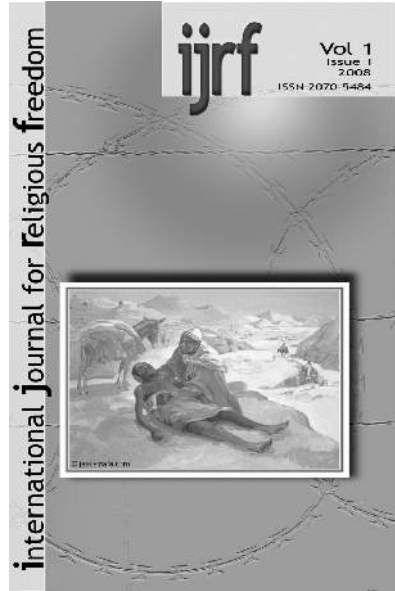
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