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**The Proper Christian Response to Persecution**

By Freddy Davis

There are certain people who laugh at me when I make the assertion that Christians are being persecuted in America. Primarily this comes from people who are not sympathetic to Christians and Christianity, and who would like to see Christian values pushed out of the public square.

**How Do We Define Persecution?**

Before we go any further, though, we need to define what we mean by persecution. This is important because there are those who assert that the persecution of Christians in America is a silly notion and is not happening. So, let's look at this a little more deeply.

According to Miriam-Webster, persecution is to harass or punish in a manner designed to injure, grieve, or afflict. Additionally, it is to cause a person or group to suffer because of their beliefs. As we look at the actual occurrences of persecution against Christians in the world, we can identify different levels.

Probably the most egregious persecution is what we see happening to Christians in Muslim dominated locations. There are, literally, efforts to exterminate Christians and Christianity in certain parts of the world. There are constant reports of mass murders, crucifixions, and the beheading of Christians – just because they will not renounce their faith in Christ.

Another level is also found primarily in Muslim dominated locales, but is also seen in places which are under the thumb of ideological communists, Hindus and other groups which may domi-

nate particular areas of the world. In these situations, Christians may be allowed to exist, but they are relegated to the fringes of society. They are not allowed to acquire education beyond a certain level, are prevented from entering professions which have a prospect for advancement, and even taxed because of their faith.

A third level relates to other kinds of punishment and harassment. At this level we see Christians being taxed, fined, and even jailed because they are not willing to renounce particular expressions of their belief which certain groups have deemed to be improper, or even illegal.

In American society, we have increasingly seen isolated expressions of the second level where a person(s) has specifically identified Christians in order to kill them. This has occurred in the form of "honor killings" by some Muslims and in some hostage situations. But the primary kind of persecution we now see in America is the third kind. Some fairly recent news stories illustrate how this is happening.

- High School football coach has been placed on administrative leave for praying after games.
- Bakers and photographers have been forced out of business for not participating in homosexual weddings based on their conscientious objections.
- Christian themes have been eliminated from school, and other, Christmas programs.
- A school district has been taken to court for a principle posting "God bless you" on a website.

Those who promote this kind of persecution of Christians rationalize it based on two primary precepts.

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First, they argue that it is not persecution when the Christian's offense is some illegal or discriminatory activity. They then go on to define the issues which constitute a Christian value as illegal or some form of discrimination. As such, in their minds, Christians are not being persecuted, they are being taken to task for illegal activities. The second precept is that their own definition of discrimination is secular, and thus neutral. The only problem with this is that there is no such thing as "neutral" values. All values are an expression of some faith system.

### How Should Christians Respond

There are many possible ways to react to persecution. But in dealing with this, there is a uniquely Christian response. And Christians need to respond rightly in order to allow even this kind of situation to be used by God to accomplish his purposes.

#### **1. Your relationship with God must be vital and alive.**

The first response should be to check your own heart. It is impossible to accomplish God's purposes using the world's methods. This does not mean that a Christian has to be passive in responding to persecution. It does mean, though, that whatever response is made, the motivation for making it should be based on God's leading, not on mere personal reaction. In some situations, a passive response will best express God's purpose. In other situations, a more active response will be right. But it is not the particular response that is most important, it is what God wants to do with the individual Christian that situation. As such, each Christian must have a heart that is in tune with God and respond based on his leading.

#### **2. You have to know your faith (why it is the truth) and be able to articulate it.**

It is very difficult for many people to be totally confident in something that they do not understand. When it comes to our Christian faith, the bedrock foundation is not intellectual prowess but our personal relationship with Jesus Christ. As such, it is possible to have a firm grasp on our relationship with God based completely on the experience of knowing him – and many people hold onto their faith purely on that basis. That said, when one lives in an environment where some non-Christian worldview is dominant, many people truly struggle with their faith because they don't have a logical component to their understanding.

When it comes to the Christian faith, in spite of the naysayers who try to put down the faith by saying it is not logical, logic is part and parcel of the package. Of course we come to know Christ by faith, but it is not blind faith. We don't have to dismiss reason to hold onto belief in Christ. The Christian faith represents the actual truth about the nature of reality, and the world only makes sense when our understanding of reality is based on its precepts. In fact, it is those who don't know God who are really having to live by blind faith.

Since we do have a reasonable faith, it is quite possible to not only know it based on the experience of our relationship with Christ and his revelation to us, but based on logic as well. And when we make the effort to grasp this intellectual component, it gives us not only the ability to refute wrong beliefs and also to share our faith.

#### **3. Don't back down, but put the attacker on the defensive with your love and knowledge.**

A third response to persecution should take the knowledge of our faith and use it in a practical way. Rather than be defensive and fall back into a help-

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less posture, we need to use our knowledge to express the actual truth. Since the Christian faith is the actual truth about reality, the significant weaknesses of other beliefs are exposed when we are able to share the real truth. This serves the purpose of putting our attacker on defense.

It is important, though, to recognize a couple of points. First of all, this does not mean that the attacker will back off. In fact, it may even mean that they intensify their attacks in order to try and overcome the inadequacy of their own beliefs. The second point is that the purpose of exposing the false beliefs of an attacker is not to beat them in battle. Rather, it is to share a witness for Christ. As such, it is extremely important to be sure one enters this skirmish with a godly attitude.

### **4. Put yourself in God's hands no matter the outcome.**

Another important response to persecution is to truly put ourselves in God's hands. This is the place where we must be willing to trust God no matter what we face. The problem most people have in this regard is that we only see temporal outcomes. All too many see an issue or problem and evaluate it based on how much they personally like or dislike what is happening, or on the prospects for their temporal future.

But Christians are not citizens of this world. We are first and foremost citizens of God's kingdom which goes on into eternity. As God guides us, he allows us to experience many things in this life. Some of those things we evaluate as good and some as bad. But the truth is, we don't have the perspective to make that evaluation from the viewpoint of eternity. God may want to use something we evaluate as bad for some larger cause. Or he may want to use some difficult circumstance to help us grow and

mature beyond what is possible in "easy" life situations.

As we live life, we need to do the best we can to evaluate our life circumstances based on God's eternal perspective. Because he has revealed some things to us in Scripture, it is possible to do that in a limited sense. But there is also much we don't know. Thus, when we can't see the big picture, we must trust God that he is working in us for our own ultimate good and the good of his kingdom.

### **5. Use the persecution as a witness.**

Finally, we need to use persecution situations as a witness. God's ultimate purpose for every human being is that they know him in a personal relationship. By his grace, he has commissioned believers to carry that message to those who don't know him. For many who are of a mind to persecute Christians, the only way they will ever come to have a personal interaction with someone who is able to share the love of Christ with them is to interact with believers they are trying to persecute. This gives persecuted Christians an opportunity to use that persecution as a tool for witness. There are incidents throughout history where God has used faithful persecuted, and even martyred, Christians to break through the hardened hearts of non-believers which, then, became the platform for a movement of God. We should count it a privilege to be used by God in this way.

### **In the End**

Persecution is not something that anyone wants to endure. Yet here we are. We find ourselves increasingly in situations where various sorts of persecution are inevitable. As we live our lives, we have a choice. We can cower down from those who would oppose our faith, or we can stand strong in the face of it. And if we

choose to stand strong, we also get to choose the means by which we resist.

God has called us to know and serve him. Additionally, he has called us to share the gospel with those who don't know him – including those who would persecute us. It is our calling to not only stand strong against persecution, but to use it as an opportunity to share the gospel message.

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