

# “Agonizing for you:” Christian responses to religious persecution

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## Abstract

The purpose of the present study is to outline the biblically and theologically appropriate responses to the religious persecution of Christians. The responses of enduring, avoiding and resisting persecution as well as solidarity with the persecuted are discussed.

**Keywords** Persecution, responses, endurance, avoidance, resistance, solidarity.

## Introduction

A group of Muslims in northern Nigeria recently stopped cars along a road and forced the passengers inside to recite the shahāda (Islamic creed). Those who could do so were allowed to continue on their way. Those who could not recite the creed however, were beaten or killed. Given the religious demography of 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 the small portion of Scripture, as a number Muslims were unable to do, they too were beaten or killed (Glaser 2005; Boer 2003).

This situation, as do inter-religious tensions in Nigeria to this day, involves a number of ethnic, cultural, political, and theological issues. Theology alone may not eliminate conflicts like these, but the

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horrifying example recounted above does suggest 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 demonstrates that misunderstandings and inappropriate reactions will often result.

In other places (Tieszen 2008), we have examined in detail a theology of persecution. In the study that follows, and as a part of this theology, we wish to give special attention to the ways in which we might appropriately respond to religious persecution.

## **Enduring persecution**

The most important and clearest biblical directive concerning a response to persecution is perhaps that of enduring an expected event for the greater purposes of God. In this light, Christians are at times called to boldly persevere in the midst of persecution. At other times, God calls Christians to willingly face persecution. Biblical examples may help us understand responses like these, responses that might otherwise seem unnatural. With this in mind, consider the example of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego who refused to bow before King Nebuchadnezzar's golden image (Dan 3:8-30). These men 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 inevitably come as a consequence whether God spared them from it or not (Dan 3:16-18). Similarly, Paul, having been told by a prophet that he would be arrested and imprisoned if he chose to go to Jerusalem, was steadfast in his decision to travel to the city even if it meant persecution (Acts 21:10-13). Likewise, the church of Smyrna was warned in John's Revelation that they were to endure persecution. Yet, Christ instructs them to, "Be faithful, even to the point of death" (Rev 2:10).

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 (Matt 5:10-12; 1 Thes 1:6; Jas 1:2; 1 Pet 3:14a, 4:13-14, 16). Since Christians will experience and often must endure persecution, they are also instructed to not worry about or be afraid of it (Luke 12:11-12; 1 Pet 3:14b). The Holy Spirit

will protect them and help them to stand strong. In this light, enduring persecution, when it is considered biblically and while it should not be considered separately from other responses, is “... by far, the most common response to persecution ...” (Penner 2004:133). This is perhaps best understood in light of a theological expectation of the event whereby Christians are directed to expect persecution as a part of following Christ (2 Tim 3:12; John 15:20).

While the most frequent biblical directive may be to endure persecution, it by no means points to an attitude whereby Christians should seek persecution out. While we see such efforts historically (Ignatius 1999; Latourette 2000:86, 149; Tucker 1983:57; Schirrmacher 2001: 57-59), it is difficult to reconcile them with the biblical message and it seems instead that there should be no macabre or brazen pursuit of persecution in order to elevate or glorify oneself. Persecution is meant to glorify God. In this sense, we have no biblical instruction 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 it is not at all times a mark of Christian spirituality or maturity. Examples in which Christians react to persecution with their own brands of violence illustrate, as our introduction above shows, a lack of discipleship, spirituality, and maturity in their ungodly response. 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. Even so, practising 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**

A theological expectation of persecution and a call to endure it notwithstanding, there are occasions and means in which God directs believers to avoid it as well. In this way, a call to endure persecution does not mean a weak, apathetic, and/or passive acceptance of the event. Biblically, the avoidance of religious persecution 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 to, “Leave here, turn eastward and hide in the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan” (1 Kgs 17:3). By obeying God 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 (Acts 9:23-25; 2 Cor 11:32-33). Jesus, too, avoided some persecution until it was his appointed time (Matt 12:14-15; John 7:30, 8:20, 8:59). In Matthew 10:23, he directs his disciples to flee to one city when they are persecuted in another. Though he was ultimately submitted to the will of the Father, he even prays in Luke 22:42 that he might be allowed to avoid his impending persecution and death. In the case of the Early Church, the very fact that it scattered as a result of persecution (i.e., Christians avoided it) demonstrates, not merely that such a response took place, but that it was warranted and directed by God (Acts 8:1, 11:19ff, 14:5-6).

For 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. 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 (Penner 2004:132).

These examples suggest that at times the Church is meant to implement certain strategies that might aid it in its ability to avoid persecution. We see such godly strategies in a further example from the Early Church. Writing to those who questioned the avoidance of persecution, Tertullian, the second–third century African theologian, encouraged believers to be shrewd in the way in which they chose to worship. Groups of small numbers and night meetings may be in order if they wished to avoid persecution (Tertullian 1999:125). In other contexts, this sort of divinely appointed avoidance of persecution may require other types of secret worship services or certain efforts in contextualization – matters dependent upon context. There may even be occasions in which fleeing persecution or the threat of it is divinely warranted.

Furthermore, as Vernon Sterk points out, our efforts to appropriately propagate the gospel and ensure that conversion is not restricted to certain cultural and/or foreign parameters can perhaps be seen as an indirect method for avoiding what might otherwise be unnecessary persecution. With this in mind, there may in fact be times where our own misguided actions are the cause of persecution. As Sterk encourages, if 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, then they may be better able to withstand persecution when it comes. This might further help Christians to avoid persecution that might result from unnecessary cultural misunderstandings. In other words, “wester-nizing” people, for example, 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 as well (Sterk 1999:16).

In the end, what is important to note is that Christians must not avoid persecution out of fear or merely with thoughts of finding a more peaceful or tolerant 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 or scattered, this is not a constant directive. This was a major issue for the churches in communist Eastern Europe (Kuzmič 1996:65–66). For Christians in these countries, their emigration was often carried out internally. In this case, individuals, “... isolate[d] themselves from the surrounding secular society ...” (:66). 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 (:66).

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” (:66).

More traditionally, physical or external emigration has been a consistent issue facing the churches of Western Asia and Northern Africa. Christians here, historically and presently, emigrate towards regions that they perceive to be more tolerant of their faith. While a

number of various issues stimulate this movement, persecution has often been a central motivation driving their desire to move to the perceived comfort and safety of another country. What these emigrants do not always realize however, is that even if they are able to successfully leave their homeland they will never fully escape persecution and hardship. Moreover, the churches they leave behind are left with an even greater burden of existing and maintaining a voice as an ever-increasing minority (Bailey and Bailey 2003:13-14; Sabella 1998:127-154). Thus, while emigration is understandable and may even be an entirely warranted response to religious persecution, it clearly requires the wisdom of God.

With this in mind, we see quite plainly a tension between the boldness required in enduring persecution and the creativity and wisdom required in avoiding it. Hence, there is a balance between a Spirit-led embrace and a Spirit-led avoidance of the event. While there is biblical evidence in support of the latter 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 summarizes,

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 (Penner 2004:134).

## **Resisting persecution**

Putting aside the tension between endurance and avoidance we describe above, there remain options which may be a part of these responses. In other words, as Christians endure and/or avoid persecution, they may also be called by God to resist it at the same time. This resistance of persecution indicates neither an acceptance nor an avoidance of persecution, but rather an action that seeks to stop the event. In this light, Glenn Penner writes, "There are times when it is appropriate to fight for one's legal rights" (:133). Thomas Schirrmacher adds, "Christians are loyal citizens who seek the welfare of their state, country and people, but whenever the State tries to force them to dishonour God, they must obey God rather than man" (Schirrmacher 2001:90).

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 (Acts 16:36-39). He questions the legality of scourging him, a Roman citizen, when he has not yet been convicted of a crime (Acts 22:24-29). Facing persecution, Paul once again uses the law and his Roman citizenship to appeal to Caesar, knowing that doing so afforded him the right to a legal trial (Acts 25:10-11). With his knowledge of the law and his rights as a citizen of the Roman Empire, Paul is thus able to avoid persecution by resisting it. In fact, Jesus demonstrates this same concept by defending himself before his own tribunal (John 18:23). What these examples demonstrate is 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, [resisting persecution] 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” (Penner 2004:133). In the same way, Jesus defended himself, “... not to protest his [persecution] but as a testimony of his innocence” (:133).

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. This attitude of righteous indignation should motivate them to work for change. As Peter Kuzmič implores,

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 (Kuzmič 2004-2005:39).

Resistance like this might occur through legislative change which itself might occur through civil disobedience, publications, political lobbying, or public demonstrations (Penner 2004:133; Schlossberg 1991:166-168). The guidelines under which resistance must submit, however, 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. Our unwillingness to submit to Christ’s will may even bear physical ramifications. Sometimes this is seen in secular venues 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 inappropriately align the Church with a particular state or

designate it as a “mission–protectorate” (Scherer 1998:66-67; Marshall 1998:67). Thus, just as inappropriately enduring or 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 under certain guidelines remains a viable option for Christians. 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**

Finally, like resistance, showing solidarity with others in their experience of persecution can be done in congruence with avoiding or enduring persecution. At times, this is the divinely ordained responsibility of those already in the midst of intense persecution. At other times, perhaps most of the time in fact, it is the responsibility and call of those whose experience of persecution is less hostile who are thus in a better position to serve as advocates for others. Often, these are the ones who must respond to persecution by showing solidarity with fellow believers and advocating for them in prayer and resistance. As Kuzmič writes, “... solidarity with those who suffer is a Christian imperative” (Kuzmič 2004–2005:42). Schirmacher 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” (Schirmacher 2001:14).

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, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you all; he is always agonizing (*agōnizomenos*) for you in prayer, in order that you might stand perfect and fully assured in all the will of God” (author’s translation of Col 4:12). In essence, as Epaphras prayed for his fellow believers and a church that was experiencing persecution, he agonized with their own experiences. He struggled in prayer on their behalf so that they might achieve the best that God had for them. This illustrates not only



prayer’s power, but the importance of showing solidarity with others through prayer so that they might persevere in persecution and might even be lead by God to respond to their experiences in other, more specific ways. So it was for the Galatian church, too, when Paul urged them to “bear one another’s burdens” (Gal 6:2). Similarly, the writer of Hebrews encouraged his readers to think of themselves as sharing in the literal persecution of those who were actually enduring it (Heb 13:3). By following these examples, so Christians might show solidarity with those experiencing persecution (Penner 2004:91-99).

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 centre, Indian students were asked to share their experiences and receive prayer. In this way, American instructors could begin to prayerfully stand alongside their Indian brothers and sisters in their experiences of persecution. 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 Christians so that they might show solidarity with them in their experience of persecution. While all those present were aware of the differences in persecution between the two groups represented, both stood alongside each other regardless of the varying degrees of hostility each Christian may have faced. 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. Additionally, 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 ...” (Kuzmič 2004–2005:42). This, we might add, should be carried out not just within the Christian community, but “... for any other human beings whose freedom of conscience is violated” (:42; Boyd-MacMillan 2006:116). This means that Christians,

especially those whose experience of persecution may be mildly hostile and intermittent, cannot be willing to kneel in the quietness and relative safety of their homes. They must spiritually and *physically* show solidarity with others who are persecuted.<sup>1</sup>

## Conclusion

Christians remain in a state where the presence of persecution is inevitable and thus the necessity to respond to it with endurance is a must. As we observe above, however, there are occasions when God may call his people to avoid persecution and instances where he may wish them to resist it as well. As Kuzmič concludes:

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 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 (Kuzmič 2004–2005:39).

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 ask, "How might we always be agonizing for you?" and in turn stand with, for, and alongside those who are persecuted.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on how to be involved in such efforts, go to the International Institute for Religious Freedom at [www.iirf.eu](http://www.iirf.eu) or the World Evangelical Alliance's Religious Liberty Commission at [www.worldevangelicals.org/commissions/rlc](http://www.worldevangelicals.org/commissions/rlc).

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