

Contents and limits of assistance and self-help for persecuted Christians

An exegetic-theological examination in a field
of New Testament and early Christian ethics

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From the beginnings of Christianity until the present time “suffering for the sake of belief” has been an integral component of being a Christian. For many Christians it belongs quite often to their everyday experience. If harassment and persecution are one side of the coin, assistance and self-help to their benefit form the other side. These emanate from the persecuted themselves or from non-persecuted third parties. Their interventions include preventative measures.

The general practice of the churches reflects a multitude of mostly pragmatic responses to the said challenge. These responses are characterized by deep love and a connection of solidarity with the suffering church, and as such deserve our proper respect.

While we commend the advocacy for persecuted Christians – it is necessary and mandated in the Bible – we see several problems in the activism: We observe some problematic oversimplifications, a limited systematic theological penetration, as well as a lack of precision in determining the contents and limits of such assistance and self-help. A systematic and holistic assessment from the perspective of biblical testimony seems to be largely lacking.

To our knowledge, there does not exist any detailed academic and coherent work on this theme. By contrast it is possible to identify more than 400 New Testament references related to this issue. This study proposes to examine a selection of these. In so doing this dissertation project has the potential to lead to a deeper understanding of Christian solidarity in its inner workings. It can help both to better understand the biblical testimony and to find appropriate and qualified responses to the contemporary challenges.

The primary sources examined are the New Testament and the Apostolic Fathers. In so doing, the various forms and actors of assistance and self-help will be identified, described and examined exegetically-theologically. One interest lies in their functionality as examples for the present. The other interest consists in exploring the limits for such activities. This also includes misguided and criticized activities

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of some individuals. While the more general topics of “suffering” and “martyrdom” are not the focus of this project, it rather concentrates on the portrayal and examination of the reactive and preventive strategies of action concerning persecution, as they are reflected in the sources used.

Abbreviated Table of Contents

Part 2: Assistance and self-help for persecuted Christians

A: *Physical dimension*

- Prevention and security (Dealing with dangerous situations and behaviour in concrete situations of persecution)
- Care for material needs
- Apologetics, legal means and advocacy
- Use and abstinence from violence
- Posthumous care

B: *Psychological and spiritual dimension*

- Communication, interest and pastoral care (Communication with and care for the persecuted, especially prisoners; consolation for the persecuted)
- Prayer and intercession
- Conversion of persecutors and of their entourage (Persecution and prison as “mission field”, i.e. as opportunity for mission and confession of Christ)
- Love of neighbours, Christians and enemies
- Confession, apostasy and repentance
- Summary and conclusions

Part 3: Ethical orientation and possible fields of application for the contemporary church



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