

Mission in bold humility

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Abstract

Mission theology must integrate a theology of the cross and of glory. The *Bad Urach Statement* of 2010 contributes “Towards an evangelical theology of suffering, persecution and martyrdom for the global church in mission”. The article gives an outline of a theology of suffering in mission, looks at practical applications for mission and for theological education.

Keywords Mission, martyrdom, persecution, suffering.

1. Introduction

Much of popular missiology in recent decades has been dominated by lopsided emphases, sometimes called a managerial missiology, asking “what must we organise?” or a pragmatic missiology, claiming “if it works it must be good”. Often these approaches have in common a tendency towards a “theology of glory and success”, sidelining a “theology of the cross.” The reality of suffering, persecution or martyrdom is bypassed.

By contrast the life work of famous South African missiologist David Bosch was rightly honoured with a book entitled “Mission in bold humility”, which inspired me for the title of this essay. He repeatedly highlighted that “suffering is a mode of missionary involvement” (Bosch 1991:176-177). “True mission is the weakest and least impressive human activity imaginable, the very antithesis of a theology of glory” (Bosch 1979:76).

Rarely have theologies of mission dealt in much detail with the reality of suffering, persecution and martyrdom for Christ¹ and its

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¹ For the most comprehensive descriptions of persecution of Christians see Boyd-

significance for mission. In September 2009, possibly for the first time, an international group of theologians and missiologists gathered to develop an evangelical theology of suffering, persecution and martyrdom for the global church in mission.² A major rationale for this consultation was that the church seems ill-equipped for the suffering that comes with its mission in the world (cf. WEA 1996). The participants have issued the extensive *Bad Urach Statement* “Towards an evangelical theology of suffering, persecution and martyrdom for the global church in mission”.³ As its leading editor, I have taken the liberty of presenting selected material, beginning with definitions, mostly sketching a theology of suffering as it relates to mission, and concluding with practical applications for mission and theological education.

2. Definitions

In terms of the variety of reasons for which Christians may *suffer* in their relationship with the world, we are concerned here with suffering that Christians endure *because of or by* the world, or *for* the world, in fulfilling their service. We do not mean the broader suffering of Christians *in* the world in the same way as all other people when they encounter war, natural disasters, difficult political or economic circumstances, poverty or sickness (cf. Dau 2001). Nor do we here mean the suffering of Christians *with* the world, as they have compassion for the world as God does. Suffering for Christ’s sake is a fundamental characteristic of the church that remains true to the faith (1 Thes 3:3; 2 Thes 3:12). Distinctions must be made between general suffering and persecution so that neither experience is mitigated, nor is

MacMillan 2006 and for restrictions of religious freedom see Marshall 2008 and Pew 2009. On the various approaches for researching persecution see Sauer 2008.

² The consultation was organised by the International Institute for Religious Freedom (www.iirf.eu), sponsored by the World Evangelical Alliance Religious Liberty Commission, in co-operation with a number of other commissions.

³ The *Bad Urach Statement* has been summarized in *The Bad Urach Call*, which is a short and more popular appeal. Both can be found at www.iirf.eu and are published as part of the compendium on the Bad Urach Consultation: *Suffering, persecution and martyrdom – Theological reflections*, edited by Christof Sauer and Richard Howell, (Religious Freedom Series, vol. 2), Kempton Park: AcadSA Publishing / Bonn: VKW, 2010, 360 p.

one emphasised over the other, and both get the response from the church they require as serious issues.

A definition of *persecution* should not be limited to any specific period of time or restrict persecution to any particular geographical region. It should be comprehensive and universally valid, applicable both to history and to the present, and unlimited in its geographical scope. Therefore persecution of Christians is understood as 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 (cf. Tieszen 2008). Unfortunately persecution has also been and still is to some degree even today perpetrated by people claiming to be Christians against Christians of differing convictions.

Christian *martyrdom* is voluntarily, but not intentionally (through unnecessary provocation), losing one's life to those hostile to the faith in proclamation or defence of Christian belief, for abstaining from actions that would constitute a denial of the faith, or in execution of a special prophetic commission by God (cf. Wespetal 2005). Contemporary secular usage equates martyrs with suicide bombers, who, motivated by hatred, try to kill as many innocent bystanders as possible while giving up their own lives for some cause. Our definition of martyrdom is almost precisely the opposite.

3. Outline of a theology of suffering in mission

This can merely be a sketch of the structure and a summary of the main statements of the consultation statement which is much more detailed.

3.1 The drama of God's history with the world (epistemological aspects)

Only a comprehensive view of God's cosmic plans as far as they are revealed to us in scripture will help us to properly interpret suffering, persecution and martyrdom and its relation to mission. A salvation-historical approach to interpreting the Bible and to doing theology seems very helpful in that regard.⁴ The suffering of the church for

⁴ In exegesis this approach was propagated by Oscar Cullmann, in missiology by Peter Beyerhaus.

Christ is so much a part of her mission in this period that suffering has been declared a mark of the church by theologians.

3.2 Old Testament models of faithfulness (typological aspects)

Suffering, persecution and martyrdom have been the lot of God's people over and over again, all through the Old Testament scriptures, beginning with the martyrdom of Abel. Job exemplifies the suffering of the righteous allowed by God, and he serves as a typology of Christ. Conflict, persecution, and martyrdom were all characteristics of true prophets (Neh 9:26; Matt 23:37). The election of Israel as the people of God brought along with it suffering for its calling at the hands of the nations, beginning with her slavery in Egypt. However, often the cause of Israel's suffering was God's punishment for Israel's unfaithfulness to Yahweh (e.g. Lev 26:14-39).

3.3 Christ, the suffering servant (Christological aspects)

The way of Jesus the Messiah through suffering to glory is exemplary for his disciples. All Christian martyrdom has its basic foundational orientation and footing in Jesus Christ, the "faithful and true witness" (Rev 1:5; 3:14; cf. 1 Pet 2:21-24; Heb 2:14-18, 5:8). Since his earliest childhood, Jesus was persecuted, and his first sermon met with bitter resistance. Finally, he stood up as a witness to the truth during his questioning before the judges (John 18:37). To Jesus the crucifixion was not at all a tragic failure of his mission, but rather its very fulfilment.

3.4 Discipleship: following in the footsteps of Christ (mimetic aspects)

The death of Jesus on the cross is both unique, compared to the cross of his followers, and at the same time serves as a model for his followers. Jesus' death on the cross as an atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world as a substitutionary act is unique, completely sufficient, irreplaceable, unrepeatable and cannot be copied. However, this does not negate that as our representative Jesus gave us a model to follow (cf. Lee 1999). Therefore Christian suffering for Christ is a continuation of the suffering of Christ, and it is from him only that it receives its characteristic mark (John 17:18; 20:21). His disciples are treated today as he once was, because Christ lives in them and they

speak and act with his authority. Their fate is united with his. The core meaning of taking up one's cross in the discipleship of Jesus (Lk 9:23) is witnessing to Jesus Christ, even in a situation of persecution and martyrdom (cf. Penner 2004).

3.5 Super-human conflict (antagonistic aspects)

From a sociological inner-worldly perspective the leading cause of persecution of Christians is social hostility against Christians, followed by state hostility and religious violence, while armed conflicts add to the suffering of Christians (Grim 2009). From a theological perspective, the world's hatred toward Christians is ultimately inspired by the even deeper hatred of Satan, who has been fighting against God ever since his primeval rebellion against him. Because Jesus totally stripped him of his power on Calvary, the anger of the dark powers is directed completely against Jesus and all who confess him.

Jesus saw his ministry as an assault on the rule of Satan in the world with the purpose of bringing in the rule of God or the kingdom of God. He confronted Satan's lies with the truth of God, Satan's evil with the goodness of God, Satan's hatred with the love of God, and Satan's violence and murder with God's self-sacrifice out of which arise new creativity, healing, and restoration. Yet Jesus understood his own ministry as simply the beginning of a very long war that he was going to fight through his followers, who share his own nature, weapons, and methods. This is the way in which Jesus fought and defeated evil, and this is the kind of conflict into which he sends his disciples. Jesus was sent as the Lamb of God to defeat the great dragon and to destroy his works (1 Jn 3:8). In the same way, he sends us as lambs to defeat the wolves by transforming them into children of God. Christ's ultimate weapon is self-sacrifice and our ultimate weapon must be the same in order to draw people to Jesus (John 12:24,26,32; cf. Ton 1997).

The church suffers because of the hatred towards Christ by the world in rebellion against God (cf. John 15:20a). It is difficult to fully explain the irrational brutality of the persecution of Christians without taking into regard a demonic component in it. The preaching of the gospel is the reason for much of Christian suffering. The more clearly the church knows and witnesses to Christ, the more certainly she will have to expect the opposition, protest, and hate of the Antichrist (Matt

24:15; 2 Thes 2; 1 Jn 2 and 4; Rev 13-19). In the midst of such a stark realism of conflict, the church can be assured that no enemy or adversity is able to separate the believer from the love of Christ (Rom 8:31-39; cf. Sauer 1994).

3.6 God's salvation and comfort (soteriological aspects)

This aspect deals with the eternal destiny of both the Christian, particularly the confessor and martyr, as well as of the persecutors. It also deals with God's help for his messengers in this world as well as the instrumental role those suffering and martyred play in God's plan of salvation.

Jesus points out the seriousness of remaining faithful to him and confessing him in moments of trial. He warns his disciples that he would reciprocate their public acknowledgement or denial of him in front of men on this earth before his father in heaven (Matt 10:32-33). While the love of many will grow cold, those who endure to the end and remain victorious will be saved, contrary to the fate of the cowards (Matt 24:13, Rev 21:7-8).

While Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as well as God's angels, comfort and help the afflicted Christian (2 Cor 1:3-11; Heb 2:18; Matt 10:17; Acts 5:18), God's helping presence does not dispense one of one's own responsibility to bear and to stand fast. God's help does not necessarily always have to consist of sparing lives. Some, like James (Acts 12:2) receive God's help to remain faithful, despite torture and execution.

The persecutors will either be hardened further or in some instances led to repentance through the witness of the faithful confessors and martyrs (Acts 8:1; Phil 1:28; Matt 5:44; 10:55).

There remains the question what the suffering and martyrdom of a Christian can contribute to the salvation of others (Col 1:24; 2 Tim 2:10; Phil 1:12-26). While the work of the messianic martyr Jesus is complete, Christ's suffering in the members of his body is not yet complete (Rev 6:11). Paul's apostolic suffering is instrumental suffering, because it serves to bring the gospel to those who need to be saved, and to keep faithful those who have been saved.

3.7 The body of Christ (ecclesiological aspects)

A Christian never suffers alone and a Christian martyr never dies alone, but is always a part of the body of Christ which sustains him or her. The body of Christ needs to be understood in three dimensions, across time, across space, and across divides. The Christian confessors and martyrs of past and present need to be rightly remembered. Those who are currently suffering, are to remember that Christians all over the world are going through the same kind of suffering (1 Pet 5:9). The body of Christ throughout the world participates in the suffering of members of the body of its time, through information, prayer, support, suffering and rejoicing with them. If one part of the body suffers, all parts are equally concerned (1 Cor 12:26). There is the potential of ecumenical solidarity being built, when Christians of different confessions and denominations suffer together for Christ. In addition, a healing of memories is necessary concerning persecution and martyrdoms caused by other Christians in history. Equally, advocacy for persecuted Christians must never be sectarian, only focussing on those from one's own denomination or confession, by ignoring the plight of those with differing theological convictions. Martyrdom serves to build up the church because those suffering and martyred are blessed by God (cf. ICN 2006, Beyerhaus 1992).

3.8 God's mission for the church (missiological aspects)

Suffering and martyrdom are not ends in themselves, but serve God's mission right to "the end of time", and are linked to mission by multiple relationships (Matt 24:14). Suffering and the weakness of the witness are a mode of mission (2 Cor 12:9f; 4:7-10) and martyrdom becomes the most radical form of witness. Witness to Christ is a core cause of suffering. While we might be perfect in contextualising our message and in avoiding any unnecessary offence, as messengers of Christ, we must face the fact that the message of the cross has been and always will be a stumbling block to those without Christ (1 Cor 1:18,23), and will attract the hostility of the world that does not accept the light coming into the world (John 1:4,11).

Suffering is also a test for the genuineness of our mission rather than a mishap to be avoided at all cost. Even the catastrophes of world history can be used by God as vehicles for the progress of his kingdom and he seems to use them in particular. The willingness to suffer for Christ can give the message of those suffering a more

convincing power. While the seed that falls into the ground will bear much fruit over time according to God's promise, martyrdom does not automatically produce visible and immediate church growth. The "fruit" of martyrdom remains a grace from God (John 12:24). While in some places persecution has led to the multiplication of the church, sometimes heavy persecution has completely destroyed or marginalised churches in other parts of the world. Martyrdom brings to a violent end the voice of that particular witness and might discourage the witness of others, or have the potential to silence the last and only witness.

3.9 The victory of the kingdom of God (eschatological aspects)

The period in which we live is marked by the tension between the victory of Christ that has already been accomplished and its visible consummation which has not yet taken place (Matt 5:45; Rom 8:19-22). Because Christ was raised from death, ascended to heaven and was installed as sovereign, we may rightly hope for a resurrection to a better life which gives us reason to stand firm and immovable in affliction, and reassures us that our work for God is not in vain, though deadly forces might seemingly destroy it (1 Cor 15:58).

In contrast to optimistic visions of the future dreaming of seamless transformation, the prophecies of the Bible foresee clearly an altogether troubled final stage of human and church history (Deut 7; 1 Thes 2; 2 Tim 3:1-13; Rev 13-19). Both the worldwide proclamation of the gospel to all ethnic groups and distress reach a climax with the passing away of the old world and the completion of the new (Matt 24:9-25; Rev 17:6; 6:9-11). This encourages each generation to discern and endure historically and locally-restricted preliminary forms of persecution in their own times as anticipations on a smaller scale of what is to follow later (1 Jn 2:18; cf. ICN 2006).

Christians should not focus on the horrors of the coming end times, but they should joyfully⁵ expect their returning Lord, as bridegroom, judge and king (Rev 19:6-10; 21:1-5; 16:5-6). God is not in a hurry with his final victory. Rather he is patient with humankind because he does not want anyone to perish, but wants to give everyone an opportunity for repentance (2 Pet 3:4,9).

⁵ Cf. Fernando 2007.

3.10 The honour of God and his martyrs (doxological aspects)

There are two perspectives to describe the connection between the glory of God and those suffering and martyred for his sake. The one perspective is about the honour God receives. The other is about the honour and glory God bestows on his servants in this life and in the life to come.

God is honoured both by the life and by the death of his witnesses (Rom 14:8; 12:1; Phil 1:20; Ac 20:24). God is honoured by the witness in weakness (2 Cor 12:9-10) to a foolish gospel (1 Cor 1:18:31) and the faithfulness of the martyrs (John 21:18-19), as well as by the church's confidence in his reign (Acts 4:23-30) and the occasional conversion of persecutors (1 Pet 2:12; Phil 2:6-11). Honouring God is the eternal destiny of God's children (Rev 7:9-17; 15:2-4; 19:2). The glorification of God is the ultimate goal of mission, and everything must in the end serve his glory.

God bestows his glory already in this life on those who suffer for him, lets some martyrs have a glimpse of his glory in their hour of trial, and in heaven lets them share the glory of Christ (1 Pet 4:14; Acts 7:55). But beyond the association with God's glory in this life, those suffering and martyred are led through temporal suffering to eternal glory and are honoured by God (1 Pet 1:11; Heb 2:9; Rom 8:17-18; 1 Pet 4:13-14).

More specifically, the Bible promises a heavenly reward to the faithful (cf. Ton 1997). The character formation and the testing of our faithfulness accomplished in suffering, persecution or martyrdom for Christ have clear corresponding results in heaven (Rev 3:12,21; 20:4; Lk 22:28-30; 2 Cor 4:17). The content of the promised reward is being heirs with Christ, being glorified with him (Rom 8:17) and reigning with him (2 Tim 2:12). These promises are a great source of inspiration, courage and strength for the Christians who are called to face persecution and martyrdom. Suffering and martyrdom are not human achievements to boast about, but it is the grace of God that enables us to go victoriously through these sufferings.

4. Practical applications for mission

Skipping important practical applications for the individual Christian, the local and the global church, mission⁶ and Christian networks (cf. Sookhdeo 2005) developed in the document, I will here focus on the practical applications for mission and theological education.

4.1 Avoiding and exposing the corruption of mission

The international *Lausanne Covenant* of 1974, probably the most influential Evangelical document in existence, says in a very self-critical article 12:

At other times, desirous to ensure a response to the gospel, we have compromised our message, manipulated our hearers through pressure techniques, and become unduly preoccupied with statistics or even dishonest in our use of them. All this is worldly. The Church must be in the world; the world must not be in the Church.

The guideline for uncorrupted mission can be found in 1 Peter 3:15-17:

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak badly against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. It is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. (NLT)

Christian mission seeks to avoid unnecessary offence. We should apply wisdom to our behaviour. Mission is spreading the message that God loved the world so much, that he gave his only son Jesus Christ for forgiveness and salvation (John 3:16). Thus not only the message, but also the way in which this message is spread, always has to mirror God's love and our love for God and to everyone.

4.2 Avoiding the use of unethical means in mission

If we want to fight for the right to witness to our faith and practice it in public, we should start by banning among ourselves any means of practising our faith and witness that would violate the human rights of others.

We consider as unethical means:

⁶ Cf. Adiwardana 1999 and van der Meer 2005, and look out for Taylor et al 2011.

- Offering people non-spiritual rewards for conversion, such as money, goods, medical treatment, opportunities or offices.
- Threatening people with civil consequences, putting undue psychological pressure on them or pressing them for decisions, consequences of which they cannot foresee, e.g. because they are too young or mentally ill.
- Using the authority of a state function while in office, e.g. as police or state school teacher.
- Preaching to “captive audiences”, who cannot freely leave, e.g. as army officers to their soldiers or as prison director to inmates.

We condemn the use of violence, coercion, threat, harassment, enticement, lies or pretences to win people for Christ, who otherwise would not follow him. A forced conversion would be of no use. Ethics and mission belong together (Schirmacher 2001).⁷

5. Practical applications for theological education

Theological education has the potential of shaping the faith and life of current and future Christian generations. This section discusses the place of this topic in theological curricula, domains to be included and steps for implementation.

5.1 The place of the topic in theological curricula

It is imperative that biblical teaching on persecution and martyrdom becomes an essential element in our curricula of theological education. This should include both the theoretical reflection on this topic as well as practical and pastoral application in training of future trainers for the body of Christ.

The integration of this topic into presently used curricula could be advanced by either creating new courses and seminars, which deal concretely and specifically with this topic, or by permeating the existing courses on broader topics with references and applications to this topic.

⁷ Look out for an evangelical ethics code on mission/evangelism by the World Evangelical Alliance.

5.2 Domains to be included

The theological studies on this subject should include the following domains:

- In-depth study of the persecution of the church throughout history, including the cultural surroundings, concrete events, and the response of the church to this persecution in preparing the believers for a walk of faith.
- Training for pastoral care and counselling for the persecuted, including post-trauma recovery. This should encompass preparation of the entire church both for suffering and assisting the suffering.
- Studies on the role of the state and international relations in situations of persecution. This should deal with the God-ordained role of the government and standards of justice for this authority, as well as human rights and the role of the international community in advancing and protecting such rights.
- Reflection on the role of the church vis-à-vis the government concerning persecution, e.g. the options of exercising pressure for transformation, the role of prayer and spiritual battle, passivity and civil disobedience, etc.
- Teaching solidarity of the entire body of Christ with those suffering for his sake throughout the world and across denominations. This could incorporate travels to regions of rampant persecution, exchange of ideas, and building of lines of communication and fellowship for mutual encouragement.
- The option of self-defence should be examined and compared critically with the alternative of pacifistic resistance. These choices have been insufficiently studied and researched, in particular the hermeneutical questions concerning violence, justice and retribution in the Old Testament. This is particularly relevant in the light of religious violence and extremism in the present context.

5.3 Steps for implementation

In each and all of these models, concrete steps could be implemented to enrich our theological education. These could incorporate the following:

- Designing specific courses to deal with the areas enumerated above.
- Initiating a dedicated teaching position for this subject, possibly for someone with practical and personal experience and exposure to persecution. This person, if personally involved, should dispose of sufficient distance to the persecution, in order to assist and equip others.
- Holding faculty seminars with a view of sensitising teachers and professors to this need of the church.
- Preparing and executing short-term involvement of students and faculty in the church suffering more intense persecution.
- Assigning appropriate literature to required reading lists, leading to research projects in this field.

Realising the intrinsic value of theological education in influencing the entire body of Christ throughout the world by adequate preparation of its future leaders, we encourage those involved in training and teaching to integrate this subject matter into all aspects of curricula.

6. Conclusion

The authors of the statement are specifically calling on theologians, missiologists and Christian leaders to consider this message in view of fulfilling together in joint obedience the mission to which God has called us. They encourage you to:

- study it personally in the light of scripture,
- assess what relevance it has for you and your ministry,
- reflect how this statement could be used at your level of responsibility,
- discuss it in your group,
- respond to the editors,
- implement what is relevant in your context and position of responsibility.

In presenting these thoughts on a theology of suffering and mission in bold humility, I personally want to encourage all readers to boldly pursue the witness to the crucified and risen Christ, even in the face of

suffering, persecution and martyrdom. Boldly, but not triumphalistically. And doing so humbly, inspired and enabled by Christ to loving sacrifice.

“May the Lord of peace himself give you his peace at all times and in every situation. The Lord be with you all” (2 Thes 3:16 NLT).

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