

The Bad Urach Call

Toward understanding suffering, persecution, and martyrdom for the global church in mission¹

I. Preamble

By any definition of persecution, the worldwide Body of Christ can count many millions of Christians experiencing persecution today. Their sufferings range from violent death and martyrdom, to physical or psychological torture, to invasive rules confining their worship activities to church buildings, to lower-level forms of discrimination in countless other countries, including many with strong rules protecting religious freedom. Due to the massive rise in population and the explosion in the numbers of Christians, never in the history of the Church have so many of Christ's followers experienced persecution as today, though the number of those who die as martyrs for the faith is not often so large. This situation gives three tasks to the Body of Christ:

- **Remembrance:** The persecuted are not remembered, prayed for, and assisted by the general Body of Christ as well as they should be.
- **Understanding:** There is a complex blend of ancient cosmic antagonisms and contemporary factors that drive persecution. These are not well enough understood, which results in ineffective intervention. While the persecution of Christians is ultimately due to the enmity between Christ and the fallen spiritual realm joined with human rebellion, four secondary forces deliver persecution to the church: religious extremism, totalitarian insecurity, religious nationalism, and secular intolerance. Thoughtless public statements or symbolic actions

¹ This is a short popularized summary of some of the points of the extensive *Bad Urach Statement* by evangelical leaders from many lands who gathered on September 16-18, 2009, in Bad Urach, Germany, on the invitation of the Religious Liberty Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance and other bodies, organized by the International Institute for Religious Freedom. The summary was edited by Pastor Dr Thomas K Johnson, Prague.

by Christians in contexts with substantial freedom of speech can unleash violent reactions against Christians in other contexts.

- **Transformation:** Persecuted Christians have learned truths about God that Christians under less pressure need to hear in order to experience the fullness of God. The spiritual insights of the persecuted are vital to the transformation of the lives of the rest of the Body of Christ. One of these essential insights is that we will all be – if witnessing for Christ – in some sense persecuted. There is a grander, greater narrative of God’s action underneath the stories of individual pain, suffering, deliverance, and endurance.

**Our *call* to the Church of Jesus Christ:
We must willingly, actively, and corporately
take up the cross of Christ in our time.**

II. Explanation

1. We need to respond to suffering appropriately.

We should distinguish between general human suffering, in which Christians partake, and the suffering of Christians for the sake of Christ. We recognize that much suffering has nothing to do with persecution, but obedience to God and allegiance to Christ lead to additional suffering. We must always respond to suffering with compassion, but suffering for Jesus requires additional responses.

The mature Christian knows that all suffering can become meaningful. No one wishes to suffer, but many Christians who have suffered do not regret it. God also suffers because the people he created suffer, and he suffers for their redemption. He suffers because he loves us. The suffering of God in Christ can shape our thinking on the suffering of the Church. Christians should suffer in sympathy with others who suffer. Because Jesus commands us to love, we should voluntarily suffer to help others who are suffering, to reduce their suffering. We suffer as part of the general human condition and also because we must take up the cross as disciples of Jesus Christ. If we participate in the sufferings of Jesus, we will also share in his glory. Some of us must choose to make sacrifices and to suffer on behalf of fellow Christians who are being persecuted.

2. We need to properly understand religious persecution of Christians.

Religious persecution is an unjust action against a believer or group of believers of a certain religion or worldview. This may be by systematic oppression, genocide, discrimination, annoyance, or other means. Persecution may not prevent victims from practicing their beliefs. Religious persecution has religion (not ethnicity, gender, political persuasion, etc.) as its primary motivation, though other factors can be involved. Persecution of Christians is a form of religious persecution in which victims are targeted primarily because they are Christians. Victims may be of varying levels of commitment to Christianity and be subject to varying levels of animosity and harm.

3. We need to understand our place in history.

The persecution of Christians is rooted in our place in salvation history. A new age has been inaugurated by Christ, overcoming the age of sin and death which began with the fall. The second coming of Christ will visibly usher in God's rule and victory, making all things new. Until then the old age is still present, waging its war against the new age; the life of the Christian is marked by this tension. In this sense, suffering is a mark of the Church. This suffering of the Church was prefigured by the suffering of God's people in the Old Testament, from Abel through the prophets, leading to Herod's pursuit of Jesus, reaching its high point in the murder of Jesus on the cross. Jesus' death on the cross was as a substitute for our sins, making full payment; by his death Jesus was also our representative, calling us to follow him to suffer in order to fight against sin and the devil.

4. We need to react properly to the conflict.

The nature of the conflict in which we are involved is characterized by the nature and methods of the two leaders in the conflict. Jesus reveals the character of Satan as evil, which brings forth the weapons of hate, lies, deception, falsehood, violence, and murder to bring destruction and death. Jesus 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. This is the way in which Jesus fought and defeated evil, and this is the kind of war into which he sends his disciples. They must love their enemies, do good

to those who hate them, and, like their heavenly Father, show goodness, mercy, and forgiveness to those who are evil and ungrateful. They must stop the chain of poisoning God's creation with Satan's deadly products by absorbing it in union with Christ, responding in love and goodness, thereby demonstrating God's character in the world. Jesus was sent as the Lamb of God to defeat the great dragon and to destroy his works. In the same way, he sends us as lambs to defeat wolves by transforming them into children of God. Christ's ultimate weapon is self-sacrifice, and our ultimate weapon must be the same, to draw people to Jesus.

5. We must remain faithful to Christ.

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 on this earth before his Father in heaven. While the love of many will grow cold, those who endure to the end and remain victorious will be saved. In order that his disciples do not fall away from him when persecution arises, Jesus has given advance warning and prays that God will keep them safe from the evil one.

6. We need to embrace suffering as part of our mission.

Jesus described suffering as a normal part of discipleship. Not all suffer equally; not all are persecuted equally, and only a relatively small proportion of Christians suffer martyrdom. In the mission that is the central purpose of the interim period in God's history of salvation, Christians must engage with their whole lives, including a readiness for suffering and martyrdom. Suffering is not just something that has to be endured passively, but it becomes a mode of mission, a mission that is done in weakness, focusing on service, and by its nature is accompanied with sorrow and affliction. The precious gospel treasure comes in perishable containers, in our weak bodies, so that everyone can see that the light that shines in us is not our own but God's. Martyrdom is the most radical form of discipleship and missionary witness. While Christians will not seek martyrdom, it is a risk of discipleship we must accept.

Witness to Christ can be a main cause of suffering, persecution, and martyrdom. The gospel certainly brings with it liberation from all kinds of slaveries and can lead to the improvement of the quality of

living. This even may translate into material blessings. At the same time, it brings the hatred of the world, persecution, suffering, and martyrdom. We must keep these two aspects of the gospel in balance. The mission of God needs to be accomplished in spite of and through suffering, persecution, and martyrdom.

7. We need to stand up for religious freedom and human rights.

As a part of our proclamation of Christ we should always mention two truths about people, that people are both sinners in need of the gospel and also created in the image of God, carrying a God-given dignity. This dignity requires that we call on governments and all in positions of public authority to protect religious freedom and all fundamental human rights. When there is severe religious persecution, there is often a government that is failing to protect justice. Like the apostle Paul, Christians should appeal to legal rights to protect themselves and their fellow Christians.

We therefore call on the Body of Christ to take up the cross of Jesus actively, willingly, and corporately, in order to implement the mission of Jesus. This will include remembrance of those persecuted (with prayer and assistance), understanding (joined with informed efforts to reduce persecution), and transformation (so that the entire Body of Christ is renewed through the insights of those who are persecuted and martyred). May the grace of the Lord Jesus be with you all!

The biblical and theological foundations, along with practical implementations, are developed in great detail in the extensive *Bad Urach Statement*, which can be found at www.iirf.eu and which is 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 pp.

International Institute for Religious Freedom, www.iirf.eu
Religious Liberty Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance,
www.worldevangelicals.org