Martyrdom and the furtherance of God's plan

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Abstract

This work deals with how God's plan is furthered through the martyrdom event. It examines the significance of martyrdom for all participants and observers (or later learners) of the event – namely, for the martyr himself or herself, for the persecutor, for God, for Satan, and for both believing and unbelieving observers. It can be demonstrated that in every case martyrdom advances God's plan by either bringing Him glory, or by enhancing people's relationship with Him.

Keywords Martyrdom, theology of martyrdom, theology of suffering, persecution.

1. Introduction

In this article we will take a glimpse at an integral but little understood aspect of Christian faith and life – the experience of martyrdom. Particularly, we hope to discover what goals God is pursuing in allowing martyrdom, and how to conceptualize His purposes in a way that would enable believers today to grasp the significance of the event.

The word "martyrdom" usually conjures up grotesque images of sufferers impaled on stakes, stretched out on the rack, crucified upside down, or given over to some other unimaginable torture. Martyrdom has been graphically described as "a word full of pain and blood, of the smell of death" (de Silva 1994:287). Such a perception of martyrdom generally causes the average believer to shun the topic altogether and thus miss out on the positive contribution, a proper understanding of martyrdom makes to a total Christian worldview. Without denying the reality of suffering in martyrdom, a need exists to further develop a biblically based model of martyrdom by which the believer, by embracing such a model, can grasp the essential nature of

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the event. The believer who associates "martyrdom" simply with "pain and blood" does not have a healthy or proper perception of the experience.

It can be demonstrated that martyrdom has very specific repercussions in respect to the furtherance of God's plan, that is, how martyrdom glorifies God or enhances relationship with Him. In the conclusion of this article, after a brief analysis of how martyrdom affects the participants in and observers of the event, I will suggest a general construal for viewing martyrdom's contribution to the plan of God.

2. Defining martyrdom

Before attempting to contribute toward a biblical theology of martyrdom we must define the concept in question. We may begin preliminarily with the conventional definition of martyrdom expressed by David Barrett: "A Christian martyr is a believer in Christ who loses his or her life, prematurely, in a situation of witness, as a result of human hostility" (Barrett 2001, vol. 2:665). Upon closer examination we discover that there are three aspects of the definition of martyrdom: a fatal aspect – the martyr actually dies, a confessional aspect – the martyr dies for Christian faith and a voluntary aspect – the martyr does not unnecessarily provoke the incident or die in armed resistance.

Today, every aspect of this definition is under discussion. First of all, it has been debated whether martyrdom requires death or not. Also, authors discuss whether death must be for confession of Christian faith, or whether it can be solely for moral acts. Also, is only passive acceptance of death considered martyrdom, or does active resistance of evil leading to a violent death also count?

Although a comprehensive historical investigation is beyond the scope of this article, several references will demonstrate that the conventional conception of martyrdom, as outlined by Barrett, has been the one most commonly employed throughout church history. Such a traditional definition is preferable in order to preserve a consistent use of the term over time.

In respect to the fatal aspect of martyrdom, Eusebius (Ecc. Hist. 5.2.2-3) records a letter from the saints of Vienne and Lyons to the

churches of Asia and Phrygia, in which the former describe the attitude of persecuted believers:

> Though they had attained such honour, and had borne witness, not once or twice, but many times, – having been brought back to prison from the wild beasts, covered with burns and scars and wounds, – yet they did not proclaim themselves witnesses (μαρτυρία), nor did they suffer us to address them by this name. If any one of us, in letter or conversation, spoke of them as witnesses, they rebuked him sharply... they reminded us of the witnesses who had already departed, and said, 'They are already witnesses whom Christ has deemed worthy to be taken up in their confession, having sealed their testimony by their departure; but we are lowly and humble confessors.'

In respect to the confessional aspect of martyrdom Figura writes that one of "the essential aspects of the theology of martyrdom in the early church" was that "they die for the truth of the Christian faith" (Figura 1996:103, italics mine). In light of the objection that death for non-confessional causes, like civil rights, is also meritorious, a moderating suggestion might be made to reserve the term "Christian" martyr for those dying in defence of Christian faith, and use other qualifiers to designate martyrdom for other causes.[1] This approach can also apply in situations where confessing Christians killed confessing Christians. Thus it may be appropriate at times to refer to "Protestant martyrs," "Catholic martyrs," or "Anabaptist martyrs." Additionally, those who died in defence of Old Testament faith merit the designation "Old Testament martyrs."

One must also take into consideration that in numerous biblical examples (such as Zechariah, son of Jehoiada, Uriah, son of Shemaiah, John the Baptist and even Stephen) individuals died not so much for a confession of faith as for delivering a prophetic word of rebuke. In church history others died not for confessing Christ per se, but for refusing to perform acts contrary to Christian faith, such as burning incense to the Emperor. Thus some flexibility needs to be shown in defining the confessional aspect of martyrdom so as to include such instances.

In regard to the voluntary nature of martyrdom, the early Fathers condemned the practice of seeking martyrdom and, with the exception of Tertullian, also condemned suicide to avoid persecution

[1] Suggested by Dr. John Feinberg.

(Bowersock 1995:62-65). Luther wisely counsels that a person does not need to seek martyrdom, "it comes to them if God so wills" (noted by Stange 1966:642). Concerning death in armed resistance to evil, Jesus taught the principle of non-resistance to personal enemies (Matt 5:39-41), and demonstrated that principle when He rebuked Peter for trying to defend Him with force at Gethsemane (John 18:10-11). Also, no cases exist in Scripture where violence was advocated or used against antagonists to the gospel.

In light of the considerations above I propose the following modified version of the conventional definition of martyrdom: 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.

3. The historico-theological backdrop of martyrdom

Having defined martyrdom, our next step is to paint the historico-theological backdrop of martyrdom, that is, to describe the spiritual conflict which provides the context for these martyrdom events. In continuity with many classic martyriologies I propose that the historico-theological backdrop of martyrdom can be described as an age-old conflict between what Augustine termed the City of God and the City of This World. That is, humanity is and always has been polarized between allegiance to God and allegiance to Satan.

Such a dichotomy can be traced through the biblical record as well. Beginning with Cain and Abel, the prototypes of future persecutors and persecuted (1 Jn 3:12-13), Scripture sequentially highlights notorious persecutors of God's people of old and new testament times: (1) Ham's descendents (Egypt, Canaan, Philistia) opposed the descendents of Shem (Israel); (2) backslidden Israel persecuted her prophets; (3) subjugated Israel suffered under pagan Gentile empires; and (4) unbelieving Jews persecuted the New Testament Church. In church history as well one can highlight prominent persecutors in almost every period of history: pagan Rome, medieval Roman Catholicism and in modern time atheistic communism and radical Islamic fundamentalism. This conflict sees its culmination in the appearance of Antichrist and his war against the saints.

Thus the people of God have typically been set in contrast to and persecuted by the City of This World. The "World" is represented in Scripture and history by various prominent oppressors, who are not to be seen in isolation from the whole, but as representatives of the world system, whose opposition to the church sometimes results in martyrdom.

4. Martyrdom and the martyr

Thus far we have attempted to define martyrdom and have described the historico-theological backdrop in which martyrdom takes place. This now prepares us for a more direct examination of God's purpose in martyrdom. Martyrdom contributes to the plan of God in relation to the martyr by enhancing his or her relationship with God. This is accomplished in the following ways: (1) by providing opportunity to demonstrate genuine faith toward God; (2) by providing opportunity to demonstrate devotion in discipleship; and (3) by allowing the martyr to experience intimate identification with Christ.

The theme of martyrdom as a test of faith is frequently encountered in martyriological passages, of which only a few will be mentioned here. After predicting that "brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and cause them to be put to death," Jesus declares, "But it is the one who has endured to the end who will be saved" (Matt 10:21-22).[2] In John's Apocalypse Jesus warns the church in Smyrna that the devil is about to "cast some of you into prison," calling for faithfulness "until death." The motif of testing is explicit: "so that you may be tested" (Rev 2:10). In chapter 12 of the book of Revelation we read of those who overcame Satan, in part, because "they did not love their life even when faced with death" (v. 11). This is a picture of a test of faith, a contest with Satan, a battle of wills in which the saints, though slain, came away victorious.

In regard to martyrdom as an expression of devotion in discipleship we note Jesus' call to His disciples to "take up their cross" and "follow Him." Although the phrase "take up the cross" likely refers to all the demands of discipleship, one can certainly not miss the martyrological connotation here as well. Martyrdom as an expression of devotion is pictorially displayed as making an offering

[2] All Scripture quotations are taken from the New American Standard Version.

to God. In 2 Tim 4:6 we encounter an interesting expression where Paul compares his impending martyrdom to a "drink offering." In Rev 6:9-11 we observe the martyrs' position beneath the altar, implying the sacrificial nature of their devotion in discipleship.

Finally, the martyr experiences an intimate identification with Christ. Identification with Christ as well as devotion to Him is seen in Jesus' call to "follow Him" to death (Mark 8:34-38; John 21:19). The call to "take up the cross" of discipleship (and possible martyrdom) is an act of identification with the One who bore the cross for all. Also, John draws a parallel between Christ's experience of martyrdom (Rev 1:18) as the "the faithful witness" (Rev 1:5) and the experience of the martyr Antipas, who is called "My witness, My faithful one." (Rev 2:12). It is also interesting to note that Saul of Tarsus, who persecuted believers to the death, was in fact persecuting Christ Himself (Acts 9:4).

Unfortunately many aberrant views of the value of martyrdom in respect to the martyr have arisen that have no Scriptural substantiation. For example, a martyrological theme found frequently in the rabbis and to some degree in early and medieval Christianity is that martyrdom provides atonement for personal sins. Tertullian claimed that through martyrdom one "may obtain from God complete forgiveness, by giving in exchange his blood... For that secures the remission of all offences" (Apology 50). This thinking persisted even in the mind of John Hus, for whom martyrdom would serve for "the blotting out of my sins" (cited in eds. Workman & Pope, 1904:184-85). Yet we must remember that martyrs died for the message of Christ as sin-bearer – the idea that they were bearing their own sins contradicts the message they died for.

Another distortion is the Greco-Roman concept of the "noble death." In this approach, martyrdom's value is found in the demonstration of the personal integrity and courage of the martyr. Seneca wrote, "I should prefer to be free from torture; but if the time comes when it must be endured, I shall desire that I may conduct myself therein with bravery, honour, and courage" (Epistles 67.4). Similarly, in Catholic theology, "Martyrdom is treated by moral theologians as the chief act of the virtue of fortitude" (Gilby 1967, vol. 6:315). Ignatius regarded his martyrdom as the means to "become a disciple" (To the Ephesians 1), become "perfect in Jesus Christ" (To the Ephesians 3) and "attain to God" (To the Romans 1, 2, 4).

But the nature of Christian martyrdom is such that perseverance unto death is in no way meritorious but naturally flow from faith. Persevering in suffering is simply acting consistently with one's convictions concerning the promises of God – if they are really true, then they are worth suffering for. The merit, then, is not in the martyr's courage or fortitude, but in God's faithfulness to His promises, which undergirds the martyr's perseverance.

5. Martyrdom and the persecutor

The other direct participant in the martyrdom event is the persecutor. How does his involvement contribute to God's plan? It can be demonstrated that, in respect to the persecutor, martyrdom contributes to the plan of God in providing a further basis for God's judgement of sin.

Often in Scripture killing the saints is connected with God's judgement. Ahab's house, for example, is indicted especially for killing the prophets (2 Kgs 9:7), and in the penitential prayer of Nehemiah 9 instigating martyrdom is mentioned in a final, climatic position just before God's judgement is described (Neh 9:26). This feature is especially prominent in the book of Revelation, where martyrdom and judgement are often directly linked (Rev 6:10, 16:6, 18:20, 24, 19:2). Also notable is that the book of Revelation, again, places martyrdom in a final, climactic position among other indictments, accentuating the severity of the offence (Rev 17:6; 18:24; 19:2). This crescendo effect confirms the suspicion that end-time martyrdoms significantly contribute to the completion of the so-called "messianic woes" and the ushering in of God's eschatological judgement.[3] This "quota of suffering" designated for the church is completed by the death of the final martyrs (Rev 6:10-11).

Also significant is how Scripture describes the vile character of martyrdom's instigators. The Synoptics class such individuals with a

[3] According to this conception, prior to the final judgement the people of God must endure a certain amount of suffering and rejection, which will usher in God's end time retribution. Dunn (1996:115; 1998:486) lists numerous biblical and extra-biblical passages that support this concept: Dan 7:21-27, 12:1-3; Jub 23:22-31; 1QH 3.28-36; *Test. of Moses* 5-10; 4 Ezra 4:33-43; Mark 10:38, 13:8; Mt 3:11/Lk 3:16; John 16:21; Acts 14:22; Rom 8:18-23; Rev 6:9-11. This is related to the Old Testament concept "the cup of wrath," which slowly fills over time and, when full, overflows in divine judgement. See Job 21:20; Ps 75:8; Isa 51:17, 22; Jer 25:15.

brood of vipers (Matthew 23), with those who kill innocent messengers (Matthew 21 and 22) and even with those who would betray their own family members (Mt 10:21). The vicious nature of their activity is graphically described in Heb 11:35b-38, where they tortured, mocked, scourged, imprisoned, stoned, sawed in two, killed and ill-treated "men of whom the world was not worthy." Persecutors of the faith take company with such eschatological fiends as the beast, the false prophet and Mystery Babylon. The "would-be" murderers of Daniel and his three friends demonstrate an extreme egomania that seeks to displace faith in the only true God (Daniel 3 and 6). Herodias reveals the quality of her character by asking for John the Baptist's head on a platter (Matt 14:8). The deranged character of Stephen's persecutors is noted in Acts 7, where they "began gnashing their teeth at him... cried out with a loud voice, covered their ears and rushed at him with one impulse (Acts 7:54-57).

Although the typical biblical portrayal of the instigator of martyrdom is one of cruel hatred of God and church, exceptional cases can be cited. The Scriptures give us the examples of both Nebuchadnezzar, who repented under God's discipline (Dan 4), and Saul of Tarsus, who was "shown mercy" because he "acted ignorantly in unbelief" (1 Tim 1:13). Thus we must refrain from claiming that instigators of martyrdom are beyond the reach of God's grace, or unable to repent. Also, by way of qualification, we must note the Scriptures testify to a worse spiritual state that is beyond repentance (Heb 6:4-6), which is usually equated with the "blasphemy of the Holy Spirit" (Matt 12:31).

6. Martyrdom and God

Behind the direct participants in the martyrdom event stand the spiritual forces that support and inspire them – God and Satan. Martyrdom provides God, for example, a unique opportunity to manifest His grace in the exemplary conduct of the martyr, thereby furthering His plan by bringing Himself glory. Let us examine how Scripture confirms this claim.

Paul, for example, deemed God's grace necessary to face death for Christ, relating how he depended on the "provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ" (Phil 1:19) when threatened with martyrdom (see also 2 Tim 4:18). John's gospel places martyrdom in the greater context of

the helping ministry of the Holy Spirit (see John 16:2 in the context of John 15:26-16:15). The martyrdom of Stephen is remarkable for the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit: at his hour of need he was filled the Holy Spirit (Acts 7:55) and was granted a heavenly vision (Acts 7:56).

The witness of church history of the working of God's grace in martyrdom is equally impressive. The Martyrdom of Polycarp gives this fitting summary of martyrdoms of the early second century:

> (The martyrs), when they were so torn with scourges, that the frame of their bodies, even to the very inward veins and arteries, was laid open, still patiently endured, while even those that stood by pitied and bewailed them. But they reached such a pitch of magnanimity, that not one of them let a sigh or a groan escape them; thus proving to us all that those holy martyrs of Christ, at the very time when they suffered such torments, were absent from the body, or rather, that the Lord then stood by them, and communed with them. And, looking to the grace of Christ, they despised all the torments of this world (Martyrdom of Polycarp 2).

The testimony of Reformation martyrdoms is the same. Schaff (1910, vol. 8:84), commenting on Anabaptist martyrdoms, reports, "Hundreds of them of all ages and both sexes suffered the pangs of torture without a murmur, despised to buy their lives by recantation, and went to the place of execution joyfully and singing psalms."

In light of these considerations we must affirm with Workman (1906:303-4) that the martyrs were granted "a grace of God which dulled the pain, turning agony into victory."

This principle of God's power manifest in human weakness allows us to correct a common misconception about suffering and martyrdom – that the Christian must adopt a stoical attitude toward suffering and life in general. Adherents of stoicism purposely develop their resolve and emotional stamina, and take pride in their ability to withstand pressure.[4] Paul's attitude toward suffering is totally opposite to that of the Stoics. Schrage (1980:212) writes, "What sustains Paul is not his own ultimate will to resist; instead, the one who preserves him from falling into the ultimate depths is God alone." Similarly, Calvin was especially outspoken against stoicism. He held that God allows suffering "so that we might turn from our 'perverse confidence'

[4] See Philo's description of the philosopher's lifestyle in Philo, *Every Good Man Is Free* 106-107. Also see Plato, *Phaedo* 67c-68b.

in ourselves" (noted by ed. Leithart 1993:202). In contrast, "The Stoic sage, when faced with adversity, relies on the inner strength of his own character. While the Christian cries out in prayer, the Stoic clenches his teeth and refuses to beg" (Leithart 1993:203).

This contrast with stoicism brings out still another factor dramatizing the miraculous nature of Christian martyrdom. The Stoics (and Cynics) develop an indifference to and detachment from earthly things, which eases somewhat the emotional pain of losing one's life.[5] In contrast, I affirm with Straw (1999:252) that "precisely because the martyrs loved this sweet life, they needed God's grace to be able to despise it... Victory now focuses on God's grace, so magnificent and encompassing that it can overcome the most natural human disposition." Wright (1992:364-65) shares this view, "The Stoic was fairly cynical about life anyway. The Christian affirmed its goodness, but was ready to leave it in obedience to an even greater good."

We must here address an apparent contradiction between two elements of our discussion: martyrdom as a test of faith and martyrdom as a manifestation of God's grace. If God provides supernatural grace to endure martyrdom, how can it be considered a test of the individual's faith? One might propose that the individual's faith and the grace of God work together in a symbiotic fashion. The individual's personal faith provides him or her with the conviction that he or she must hold on to the end no matter what the cost. This is a clear demonstration of faith since the individual values the promise of God and the hope of eternal life more than earthly life or personal safety. But at the same time, in recognition of the need for grace, the martyr acknowledges that he or she cannot hold on without divine aid. This inner tension between the I must and the I cannot provides the environment where martyrdom can serve both as a test of faith and as a demonstration of God's grace. The I must aspect drives the martyr to prayer and dependence upon God, who abundantly supplies grace to compensate for the I cannot aspect. Schrage (1980:215) reconciles

[5] An extreme example of detachment is seen in the account of Anaxarhus, who, when his body was being beaten, cried out, "Pound, pound, the pouch containing Anaxarchus; ye pound not Anaxarchus" (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 9.59, cited by ed. Hicks 1985). Clement of Alexandria considered some degree of detachment an asset in preparing for martyrdom. He regarded Stoics as "objects for admiration" in attaining a life "free from passion" (*Stromata* 4.3-5).

these aspects of martyrdom in a similar way: "God's helping presence does not dispense one of his own responsibility to bear and to stand fast, which therefore is connected with faith."

7. Martyrdom and Satan

The second indirect participant in the martyrdom event is Satan. It can be demonstrated that God's purpose is furthered as, in His wisdom and power, He frustrates Satan's agenda and defeats him through the endurance of the saints. We have already discovered that God's grace is demonstrated in and responsible for the martyr's endurance. In turn, the martyr's endurance defeats Satan's purpose to lead him or her into apostasy and to destroy his or her testimony – the martyr's testimony is, in fact, enhanced. In this way the believer's victory over Satan in martyrdom is, in truth, God's victory, bringing Him glory and inspiring faith in others.

Scripture is clear, especially in the book of Revelation, about who instigates the persecution of Christians. Behind the human persecutors, whether unbelieving Jews or eschatological fiends, stands Satan, the archenemy of the church. When unbelieving Jews plan to persecute the saints in Smyrna they are identified as a "synagogue of Satan" (2:9). Antipas is killed "where Satan dwells" (2:13). The dragon, who is identified as "the devil and Satan" (12:9), wages war against those who "hold to the testimony of Jesus" (12:17). The beast from the sea, instigator of the great end-time persecution, receives his power and authority from the dragon (13:2). The contest in the book of Revelation is clearly between God and Satan, with human participants acting as their agents.

The irrational behaviour of persecutors also points to a demonic source. Tertullian insightfully notes how philosophers of his day, who advanced some of the same moral principles for which Christians were suspected of sedition, were for some reason immune from persecution:

> These are the very things, it says, the philosophers counsel and profess – innocence, justice, patience, sobriety, chastity. Why, then, are we not permitted an equal liberty and impunity for our doctrines,... they (the philosophers) openly overthrow your gods, and in their writings they attack your superstitions; and you applaud them for it (Apology 46).

When Christians display the bravery demonstrated by earlier pagan martyrs, it is regarded as recklessness:

> The rest of your charge of obstinacy against us you sum up in this indictment, that we boldly refuse neither your swords, nor your crosses, nor your wild beasts, nor fire, nor tortures, such is our obduracy and contempt of death. But (you are inconsistent in your charges); for in former times amongst your own ancestors all these terrors have come in men's intrepidity not only to be despised, but even to be held in great praise... But in your own instance you account such deeds glorious, in ours obstinate (To the Nations 1.18).[6]

Furthermore Tertullian argues that even if Christianity does introduce distortions, the penalty is outrageous compared to the offence:

> For they are just (in that case) like many other things on which you inflict no penalties – foolish and fabulous things, I mean, which, as quite innocuous, are never charged as crimes or punished. But in a thing of this kind, if this be so indeed, we should be adjudged to ridicule, not to swords, and flames, and crosses, and wild beasts (Apology 49).

Such widespread, irrational behaviour on the part of numerous individuals over time excludes the explanation that we are dealing here with acts of isolated, mentally unstable individuals. More probable is that a common supernatural force whose goal was to exterminate Christianity influenced them all. In the Christian worldview no one else fits that description better than Satan.

Yet ironically victory over Satan is gained by submitting to his power to kill. This theme of "triumph" is apparent in the strong militaristic motif of the book of Revelation. In this "war motif" the martyrs at first appear to be casualties, whom the beast "overcomes" (notice the term nikavw in 11:7 and 13:7). This "overcoming" by the beast is answered politically by Christ's coming to wage war and "overcome" (nikavw) the beast and his allies (17:14). Superimposed on this military campaign, though, is a spiritual conflict, expressed by the same nikavw terminology. Christ has "overcome" sin (5:5), and now the martyrs become spiritual "overcomers" by not compromising their faith (12:11, 15:2). Thus, while the martyrs are being "overcome" (nikavw) physically by their enemies, they are themselves "overcoming" (nikavw) spiritually through their endurance.[7] Rev

[6] Parenthetical insertion mine.

[7] Bauckham makes the same observation and writes, "The same event – the martyrdom of Christians – is described both as the beast's victory over them

12:11 directly speaks of martyrs overcoming Satan through death, "And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even when faced with death" (Rev 12:11).

8. Martyrdom and the believing community

Scripture is clear about the value of martyrdom for the believing community. According to Daniel 11, martyrdom serves to test the faithful and purge true from false devotees of Yahweh. The first part of chapter 11 speaks of the future oppression and persecution of Judah by Antiochus Epiphanes. During this time, according to verse 33, "those who have insight among the people" will "fall by sword and by flame, by captivity and by plunder." The purpose for which "some will fall" is stated in verse 35, "in order to refine them, purge, and make them pure until the time of the end."

Of immediate interest is identifying the antecedent of the pronoun "them," that is, the ones being purified. The nearest possible antecedent is the word "some" in verse 35, that is, the martyrs themselves. Yet it is difficult to see how the martyrs are "refined, purged and made pure" through martyrdom. We recognize that martyrdom is a test of faith, but the implication here is a purging that will lead to greater sanctification in this life. Another possible antecedent is "those who have insight" in verse 33. Support for this option is found in verse 34, where "those who have insight" are joined by many "in hypocrisy," thus creating a need for purging false from true devotees of Yahweh. According to this scenario, the death of "some" of Judah's teachers purified the rest, causing each to count the cost of their confession of Yahweh.[8]

The same theme is echoed in the book of Revelation. Rev 2:10 reads, "the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested." The implication is that, even though only some will be imprisoned (and possibly martyred), all will be tested. This is similar

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and as their victory over the beast. In this way John poses the question: who are the real victors?" (Bauckham 1993:90).

[8] As Baldwin (1978:195) writes, "Persecution eliminates the waverers." Leupold (1949:508-9) comments, "Facing the issue of death and bringing the supreme sacrifice would serve the purpose of 'smelting' and 'sifting' and 'purifying' the teachers."

to what we observed in Daniel 11, where "some" of those with insight fell (died) in order to test the others.

Other passages may also be considered. In 2 Timothy 4 Paul's impending martyrdom will inspire Timothy to personal steadfastness in Christian life and ministry. Hebrews 11-12 cites Old Testament martyrs as sources of inspiration for suffering New Testament believers. It is very plausible that Stephen's martyrdom had a marked effect on stirring the church to evangelism. It was those "who had been scattered" by the persecution initiated by Stephen's martyrdom who "went about preaching the word" (Acts 8:4).

In essence, martyrdom provides the church with a radical challenge to all-out commitment. It provides a test for the entire church and forces believers to clearly define their faith by identifying the issues they are willing to die for. Those who positively respond to the challenge will be inspired and encouraged by the example of the martyr, deepened spiritually and stirred to action in providing assistance to others still suffering for the faith. Those who negatively respond to the challenge, however, may fall away. Yet even this benefits the church by purging and purifying it.

In connection with the effect of martyrdom on believers, many unscriptural conceptions have arisen and now enjoy widespread acceptance in some circles. A frequently encountered theme, especially among liberal authors, is that early Christians (and Christ Himself) understood martyrdom as a means of atonement for the sins of God's people (Fretheim 1984:163-64, Sanders n.d.:116). According to this approach, the concept of vicarious suffering blossomed in the intertestamental literature, particularity in 2 and 4 Maccabees. Several writers (Frend 1965:182; Grayston 1996:260; Rist 1945:279) see an atoning significance in the martyrdoms of the book of Revelation, especially in connection with the martyrs beneath the altar (Rev 6:9-11). Certain Church Fathers, such as Origen (Exhortation to Martyrdom 5.172) and Gregory of Nazianzus (noted by Winslow 1974:84), also saw the blood of Christian martyrs as atoning. Similarly, in Judaism death by martyrdom can atone for corporate sins of the nation, as seen in the tradition of the "Ten Martyrs" and in the Maccabean literature (2 Macc 6:12-17, 7:18). This conviction was and continues to be held in Catholic theology (Figura 1996:103; Gregory 1999:283). Yet we must again remember that martyrs died for the

message of Christ as sin-bearer – the idea that they were bearing the sins of others contradicts the message they died for.

Another pretension concerning martyrdom and the church that lacks scriptural warrant is the martyr's role as intercessor. As early as the mid-second century A.D., Christians began yearly commemorations of a martyr's death, celebrated at his or her tomb (Martyrdom of Polycarp 18). Later, relics were transferred to local churches and venerated there. Such eminent fathers as Origen (Exhortation to Martyrdom 7.195), Jerome (Against Vigilantius 1-12), Ambrose (noted by Kemp 1948:3-4) and Augustine (noted by Bavel 1995:361) promoted their veneration. Eventually a martyr was thought to have the "prerogative to intercede with God" and that his or her death was atoning; the martyr "was said to win by his death the capacity to forgive sins" (Ton 1997:366).

Calvin (Institutes 3.5.2), appealing to New Testament teaching, refutes such ideas: (1) remission of sins is given only in Christ's name, not in the names of saints or martyrs (Acts 10:43); (2) the blood of Christ, not of martyrs, cleanses from sin (1 John 1:7; 2 Cor 5:21) and purchases us for God (Acts 20:28); (3) Christ, not the martyrs, died for the Church (1 Cor 1:13); (4) Christ provides sanctification for believers – it is not "perfected by martyrs" (Heb 10:14). Additionally, this teaching robs Christ of his unique function as mediator (1 Tim 2:5) and violates the universal principle of Scripture, that prayer is to be directed to God alone. Besides these discrepancies with Scripture, this doctrine also introduces a logical inconsistency. The church, in venerating the martyrs, commits an act akin to that which the martyrs themselves died in defiance of – idolatry.

9. Martyrdom and the unbeliever

Finally, the effect of martyrdom on the unbeliever will be investigated, that is, its value for evangelism. In Scripture we see that persecution and martyrdom are sometimes consequences of evangelistic gospel preaching. But we find no direct scriptural evidence to support that martyrdom itself moves people to conversion.

Some contend that martyrdom leads to conversion in Rev 11:11-13, where, as a result of the resuscitation of the two witnesses, "the rest were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven." Some assert

that this refers to a mass conversion of the nations (Bauckham 1993:84; Considine 1946:392; Sweet 1981:109; Ton 1997:285-90; Trites 1997:169-70). I find the arguments for this position unconvincing, especially in light of the character of the Apocalypse – evangelism and conversion are scarcely if at all mentioned except for a few angelic warnings of judgement (14:7, 9-12) which appear to go unheeded. But even if this interpretation of Rev 11:11-13 is correct, it does not directly address our question, since it was not the martyrdom event per se that turned the nations to God, but rather a miraculous demonstration of resurrection power.

Also, one often hears the suggestion that the martyrdom of Stephen contributed to Saul's later conversion. But the text gives no support for this view. Immediately after Stephen's death Acts 8 records that "Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death" (v. 1), and later that "Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house; and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison" (v. 3).[9] The only indication that Saul may have been somehow moved by the event is the reference to Saul's "kicking against the goads" in Acts 26:14, if that is to be understood as a guilty conscience.[10] But the reference here is too vague to build a conclusion on it alone. The unanimous witness of Acts is that Saul's conversion resulted from his Damascus Road experience (see Acts 9, 22, 26).

Sweet (1981:108) makes a similar assessment of the exegetical evidence (or rather, lack of it) in the New Testament for the value of martyrdom for evangelism:

It is no doubt true that undeserved suffering and death, lovingly borne, works on men's consciences and turns their hearts, but in the book of Revelation, and in the rest of the New Testament, just as the suffering of the μάρτυρες is not the content of the μαρτυρία, so it is nowhere said that the awareness of their suffering brings men to repentance. Even in 1 Peter, where there are more references to suffering for righteousness' sake than anywhere else, this is nowhere inculcated for its saving effects on the persecutor – it is simply what

[9] Also note the δε in verse 3, which contrasts Saul's actions with those of "devout men," who responded to Stephen's death by burying him. Saul's reaction was the opposite.

[10] Rapske's understanding of the phrase is more plausible – it refers to Saul's growing awareness that opposing the gospel is futile (see Rapske 1998:239).

Christians are called to, in imitation of Christ; the prelude of judgement on the persecutors and of glory for the Christians.

Historical testimonies do exist concerning individuals who converted as a result of witnessing martyrdom. Delehaye specifically lists nearly a dozen converts from martyrdom gleaned from martyrological literature (noted by Ramos-Lissón 1997:104, footnote 12). Eusebius mentions an additional two: the soldiers who led James the Just and Potamiaena to execution (Ecc. Hist. 2.9.2-3; 6.5.4-6). The celebrated church fathers Justin Martyr and Tertullian were converted due to the influence of martyrs (Justin, Apology II 12; Ton 1997:349). Speaking more generally, Ramos-Lissón (1997:104) feels conversion through martyrdom must have been common because such accounts became "commonplace in the hagiographic literature."

At the same time, Christian martyrs have been negatively assessed. Frend (1965:13) feels that often from an unbeliever's perspective the martyrs "appeared to gain nothing. Their God did not rescue them. The gods whom they had insulted were vindicated. Outwardly, in the minds of their contemporaries, the pagan cults had triumphed." This finds confirmation in the letter from the churches of Vienne and Lyons recounting the persecutions among them:

> Others laughed and mocked at them, magnifying their own idols, and imputed to them the punishment of the Christians. Even the more reasonable, and those who had seemed to sympathize somewhat, reproached them often, saying, 'Where is their God, and what has their religion, which they have chosen rather than life, profited them?' (Eusebius, Ecc.Hist. 5.1.60).

According to Bowersock (1993:66), the martyr's behaviour was not always seen as exceptional; rather "pagans could to some degree understand the role of martyrs since they fill the role of the sophist in their life and the agonist in their death... besides, the Greco Roman world had always taken a lively interest in freakish behaviour." The most classic example of distain for Christian martyrdom comes from the pen of Marcus Aurelius,

> What a soul that is which is ready, if at any moment it must be separated from the body, and ready either to be extinguished or dispersed or continue to exist; but so that this readiness comes from a man's own judgement, not from mere obstinacy, as with the Christians, but considerately and with dignity and in a way to persuade another, without tragic show (Meditations, 11.3).

The oft-quoted phrase, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church," traces back to Tertullian, who wrote, "The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed" (Apology 50). Before Tertullian, Justin expressed the same:

> For it is plain that, though beheaded, and crucified, and thrown to wild beasts, and chains, and fire, and all other kinds of torture, we do not give up our confession; but the more such things happen, the more do others and in larger numbers become faithful, and worshippers of God through the name of Jesus. For just as if one should cut away the fruit-bearing parts of a vine, it grows up again, and yields other branches flourishing and fruitful; even so the same thing happens with us (Dialogue 110).

Reformation writers echo this thought as well. Luther says, "The church has always grown by blood; she has been irrigated and planted by blood," and, "The more people oppress it, the more it spreads and prospers" (cited in ed. Plass 1959, vol. 1:282, 396).

Still, other historical evidence contradicts the thesis that persecution and martyrdom advance church growth. Gregory (1999:249) attributes the small number of Anabaptists to their political vulnerability and severe persecution. Shea (1997:15) notes the decline of Christianity in the Middle East.[11] Galli (1997:16-19) relates several disturbing reports. During the 1500's and early 1600's the 300,000-member church of Japan was reduced to a handful due to martyrdom and apostasy. In the Maghrib (Northwest Africa) the number of bishoprics declined from over thirty in 780 to six in 1015. By 1400 there were none. The expansion of the evangelistically active Eastern Orthodox Church was limited from the mid-fifteenth century on due to pressure from Muslims and Tartars. Galli (1997:16) summarizes,

> These are not the kinds of martyr stories we love to hear about or talk about... To be sure, at times and places, each of those principles can be seen at work in history of the church. But just as often our utilitarian grid for understanding the worth of martyrdom has shown to be forced and contrived.

[11] She notes the following: Iraq, from 35 percent to 5 percent; Iran, from 15 to 2; Syria, from 40 to 10; Turkey, from 32 to 0.2. The time period of this decline apparently was not noted by the author, but likely refers to the period from the beginning of the Moslem conquests until the present time.

The fact that testimonies exist ascribing conversion to martyrdom directly confirms that it does add a degree of persuasiveness to evangelism. Unfortunately, historical evidence is too inconclusive to claim that it is a major factor in church growth. Also, in contrast to the other facets of martyrdom we have investigated in this article, we lack explicit scriptural testimony that witnessing martyrdom directly stirs the heart and moves people to conversion.

All this leaves us with somewhat tentative conclusions regarding martyrdom's effectiveness in regard to evangelism – a curiosity in light of the fact that of all the aspects of martyrdom discussed, conversion through martyrdom is likely the one most firmly held in the popular mind.

10. Conclusions

As previously stated the goal of this paper is to determine the specific ways that martyrdom furthers the plan of God in route to developing a general construal or biblical model concerning the value of martyrdom. This will require attempting a synthesis of our findings. In seeking such a synthesis, one must determine what common feature or features appear in the experiences of all the participants or observers of the martyrdom event. Upon surveying our separate investigations, the features that appear most evident are the related ideas of climax and clarification. We will begin with the idea of climax.

The experiences of all the primary and secondary participants in the martyrdom event, namely the martyr, the persecutor, God and Satan, can be characterized as exceptional or climactic. It can be shown that the martyr, for example, undergoes the ultimate test of faith, has an ultimate experience of identification with Christ and shows ultimate devotion to Him. The act of dying is arguably the most intense of all human experiences, and voluntary death involves overcoming the most basic human instinct of self-preservation. Martyrdom is rightly called "the highest renunciation" (Workman 1906:3).

I am not alone in this conclusion. Concerning the test of faith, the fathers of early Christianity considered martyrdom "the supreme manifestation of... patience" (Halton 1985:102). Nothing else could so well "test the reality of faith as the call to the great renunciation"

(Workman 1906:338). In the Reformation it was also considered "the supreme test" (Gregory 1999:158; Matheson 1989:155). Concerning identification with Christ, Bonhoeffer (1959:38) calls the experience "the supreme fellowship of martyrdom." Concerning devotion to Christ, it has been called "the ultimate loving gift" (Robeck 1999:5) "the highest form of love for God" (Sobrino 1999:203) and an "ultimate and final confession of love for Christ" (Gilby 1967, vol. 6:315).

Applying the idea of "climax" to the participation of the persecutor one may note, that the persecutor, although not displaying the most radical rejection of God possible (in comparison, for example, with blasphemy against the Holy Spirit), nonetheless demonstrates extremely depraved behaviour, and provokes God's judgement to an extreme degree.

Concerning God's participation, He displays His grace in a remarkable way in the life of the martyr, arguably surpassed only by the demonstration of His grace through Christ. As Luther said, through martyrdom God has "provided us with fresh and new examples of His own life" (cited in ed. Plass 1959, vol. 2:1036). Since, in Jesus' words, one can show no greater love than to lay down his or her life (John 15:13), the martyr's death is arguably the greatest outward demonstration of the grace of God, which inspires that love, in the life of a human individual. We note the statement from Vatican II, that martyrdom is the "greatest testimony of love" (cited in ed. Flannery 1987:401). Similarly, Beyerhaus (1992:170-71) feels God imparts to victims of martyrdom "a degree of sustaining grace which surpasses all blessings we receive through the means of grace under normal conditions." Ton (1997:56) adds, "The glory of God shines through the beauty and splendor of self-sacrifice as nowhere else."

Finally, Satan's defeat in martyrdom is probably unparalleled in this present age since, in spite of the great freedom he is granted to oppress the martyr, he is unable to overcome the latter's perseverance.

In viewing martyrdom from the point of view of climax, what next becomes apparent is the contrast between the climactic experiences of the participants in the martyrdom event. God and the martyr, on the one hand, demonstrate such positive virtues as devotion, faithfulness and victory through grace. Satan and the persecutor, on the other hand, display the contrasting qualities of

cruelty, injustice and ineptitude. Since these features are demonstrated to an extreme degree on both sides of the contrast, the climax becomes a polarization between God and the representatives of His kingdom on one side, and Satan and the representatives of his domain on the other. This is the same polarization that was independently demonstrated in the section "The Historico-Theological Backdrop of Martyrdom," where the age-old conflict between the "City of God" and the "City of This World" was highlighted. Martyrdom sets God's kingdom in sharp contrast to its rival realm and makes the combatants in this cosmic struggle more distinctly recognizable.

Thus, the climactic nature of the martyrdom event demonstrates the polarization that exists between the kingdom of God and the domain of darkness. This observation leads to the final feature of martyrdom useful for our general construal – martyrdom not only as a moment of climax, but also as a moment of clarification. As shown earlier, the example of the martyr challenges other believers to re-examine their commitment to Christ and deepen their dedication to Him. In light of our discussion above, martyrdom probably produces such an effect because believers perceive in the martyrdom event the stark contrast between good and evil, between darkness and light. Consequently they are compelled to recognize the cosmic conflict underway and side with God in opposition to Satan and the world. Thus, all "gray zones" are removed, and areas of compromise with the world are revealed. In this way, the moment of climax becomes a moment of clarification for the believing observer – in the light of the martyrdom event he or she is able to better understand the nature of the cosmic conflict and his or her proper relation to it.

Martyrdom may benefit unbelieving observers in a similar way. They, too, can observe the bravery, integrity and virtue of the martyr, who is supernaturally enabled by God, in contrast to the cruelty, injustice and ineptitude of the persecutor. Thus, this moment of climax can serve as a moment of clarification for them as well. How effectively this experience turns their hearts to God, however, is more difficult to establish. Our examination failed to establish a solid connection between martyrdom and conversion. It appears that, although martyrdom provides a moment of clarification for saint and sinner alike, it is potentially more efficacious for the former than the latter.

In light of the material presented in this article I contend that the following construal can be helpful for grasping the essential nature of martyrdom: Martyrdom, in respect to its contribution to the plan of God, can be described as a moment of pre-eschatological climax or clarification in the ongoing struggle between the kingdoms of God and Satan, where the best and worst are brought out of participants in the event; as a point of crescendo in the musical score of salvation history, where the full vibrancy of each instrument is clearly heard; as a foretaste of the so-called "Great Divide," where the dramatic polarization between good and evil takes place; and, consequently, as a "reality check" for observers or hearers of the event, reminding them that there is no middle ground between the kingdom of God and the domain of darkness.

11. Applications

The remaining matter to consider is the relevance of these findings for the contemporary evangelical church. Certainly, for those segments of the Body of Christ presently suffering persecution and undergoing martyrdom the application of this study is straightforward. Such believers can benefit from a biblical model of martyrdom for interpreting their experience, giving meaning to their suffering, inspiring endurance and appreciating the beauty of God's plan.

For the church that is suffering less, however, different applications can be suggested. Reflection on martyrdom has a multiplicity of benefits. It can inspire endurance not only for the ultimate sacrifice, but for the many smaller sacrifices Christians are called to make each day. It can forge unity between rival evangelical groups as we appreciate our common doctrinal heritage won and preserved for us by the martyrs' blood.

Martyrdom also plays a useful role in the perpetual tension between what one might call the "theology of creation" and the "theology of redemption." The "theology of creation" emphasizes unity and mutual respect between all people as creatures of one Creator, whereas the "theology of redemption" recognizes the dichotomy and inevitable conflict between the regenerate and unregenerate. The contemporary evangelical church appears at the present time to be moving toward a renewed emphasis on the doctrine of creation. This can be viewed as a welcome trend, since the doctrine

of creation has not received sufficient attention in past generations. Yet a balance between the doctrines of creation and redemption must be maintained. Although believers may have much in common with the world at large, martyrdom reminds us that we are also engaged in an intense spiritual struggle with the forces of darkness that control this present world system and unregenerate people. No event more dramatically portrays this conflict than the martyr's death.

Possibly the most significant benefit is the check martyrdom provides on the relativistic tendencies prevailing in many societies today, and in certain segments of Christendom. In today's relativistic milieu, where flexibility, compromise and toleration are championed, martyrdom appears, at best, as an oddity and, at worst, as pathological rigidity. Eugene and Anita Weiner (1990:1) provide valuable insight into how martyrdom is likely perceived by many today:

> In the modern Western world, the psychological climate discourages total commitment and martyrdom. Individuals willing to martyr themselves for a cause strike us as irrational and motivated by psychological problems... the individual who is irrevocably committed to particular convictions seems needlessly inflexible.

They relate the concern by some that behaviour patterns exhibited by martyrs are "dangerous to the democratic process which is based on a rational give and take and on a process of compromise" (1990:21).

In an interesting article in *Mennonite Life*, Melvin Goering (1992:9-15) expresses an opinion radically divergent from original Mennonite (Anabaptist) thinking about martyrdom during the Reformation period. He relates that in the past Mennonites staunchly held to a "two kingdoms" view, similar to what was described earlier in this article. Their proclamation and defence of the "truth" was uncompromising. Goering attributes this earlier dogmatic attitude to social/psychological factors such as social isolation, suspicion of authority and passion for personal piety at the expense of the greater social concern. He feels such thinking is outdated and inappropriate for today's Mennonite. There is a greater need now to learn how to be faithful "in the *midst of culture*" (1992:9). Goering feels that in the future martyrologies should promote "obedience with flexibility, beliefs without dogmatism, faithfulness within culture, ethical leadership within institutions, love and justice within social structures, conviction in the midst of ambiguity, dialogue without arrogance, care

without condensation, openness without disintegration" (1992:14-15). Although there are positive elements in Goering's proposal, a concern arises about how far "beliefs without dogmatism" and "faithfulness within cultural" might be taken.

The dangers of relativism to conservative evangelical faith are clear: the compromise of essential truth and abandonment of vigorous evangelization for the sake of peaceful coexistence with dissenting groups. The attitude of believers in the Reformation period provides a stark contrast. Gregory (1999:436) notes that Reformation theologians were "horrified and disgusted" at the concept of religious toleration: "They *preferred* a world in which truth did battle... It is mistaken to think then they might have shelved their competing commitments to Christian truth for the sake of peaceful coexistence." Theologians of that time did not give "peaceful coexistence priority over God's truth" (1999:437).

Martyrdom, as traditionally understood and defended in this article, is antithetical to relativism. Martyrdom asserts, in the most dramatic way humanly possible, that absolute standards do exist, and that one can have the assurance of truth to such a degree that death appears a small price to pay in its defence.

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