

EDITORIAL

THAT IS WHY THE WORLD HATES YOU.

by Roger Lamb

"If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you" (John 15:18-19).

What a joy to even need to report and teach on modern-day persecution in the church! God's people are proclaiming the clear message of the cross so boldly that it is producing New Testament responses of opposition. In this issue you will find an exposition of New Testament persecution, a history of persecution through the ages and actual accounts of persecution among disciples today. There are three crucial conclusions to be drawn.

Persecution Is a Sign of a Disciple

Just as Jesus declared that holding to his teachings, loving as he loved, bearing fruit and unity were signs of his disciples, he also said, "If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also... They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the One who sent me" (John 15:20-21). It is not only a promise that we will be persecuted, it is an identifying trait of true followers of Jesus. How can we claim to be true followers of Jesus in any culture and not cause an intense reaction by the dark side? Obviously, not everyone who is persecuted is a disciple of Jesus, but Jesus and Paul are clear that every disciple will be persecuted (2 Timothy 3:12). In today's religious environment it is sad how many churches have sold out their commitment to Jesus for their pursuit of "respectability." These people would have been very uncomfortable companions of Jesus—even ashamed. He certainly would never have been tolerated as a preacher or an elder in the mainstream or mainline churches that have now become sideline spectators. They would have felt that if he had just used more wisdom about how he presented himself, he would never have caused such a stir. Incredibly, these spiritual pacifists are claiming to be loyal to the most effective, powerful spiritual activist who ever lived. Their high sounding appeals to peacemaking are excuses for people pleasing. The greatest conviction to any church should come from how little they bother anyone. Corpses and clinically dead bodies rarely bother

anyone. "Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets" (Luke 6:26). Acceptance by the world is a sure sign of not being true disciples.

No one, including Jesus, likes being hated. It is not a sign of being a disciple to enjoy someone else's sin. Yet to follow Jesus means that some will hate you. The dark side plants the suspicion and mistrust that spark this hate: "Where there's smoke, there's fire." If this many people feel this strongly against these people, then something must be wrong. There must be a reason for all this hate to be generated. To his critics, Jesus said, "He who hates me hates my Father as well. If I had not done among them what no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin. But now they have seen these miracles, and yet they have hated both me and my Father. But this is to fulfill what is written in their Law: 'They hated me without reason'" (John 15:23-25). Where there was smoke there was fire—the fire of the Holy Spirit. True disciples will set a lot of fires because their Lord came to bring fire on the earth.

For Righteousness' Sake

Jesus delivered the Magna Carta of his ministry in the famed Sermon on the Mount. The "beatitudes" stand among the riches of prose in literature. Yet at the end of his beautiful list of blessings and at the very beginning of his ministry, he says, "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me" (Matthew 5:10-11). Persecution for righteousness brings a blessing according to Jesus. How sad that for so many who claim to be Christians, their worst persecution is sitting through sermons. The blessings come to those who through deep conviction about Jesus and his words, convict the world of guilt in regards to sin, righteousness and judgment.

However, we must remember that the blessing comes to those who suffer because of righteousness. There is neither glory nor blessing in suffering for our own unrighteousness. Sometimes persecution happens because we are reaping what we have sown in our own sin and lack of wisdom. Ignorance and foolishness are not virtuous excuses for clubbing people with the word of God. Correctly handling the

word of truth is righteousness. Many of the relationship sins in Galatians 5:19-21 will also produce persecution, i.e. hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy. But perhaps the greatest deceiver is pride and its twin, self-righteousness. While these may evoke strong reactions, we must set our minds to exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees or we will not enter the Kingdom of God according to Jesus. In order for persecution and suffering to be righteous, they must always be because of him, not because of our sin.

One acid test of our heart is what we view as persecution. After reading stories of our brothers and sisters in other countries in this issue, let us reexamine our definition of suffering in our cultures. We often mislabel discomfort, inconvenience and diligence as suffering. Jesus is the standard of persecution and our brothers and sisters are the contemporary challenge.

Rejoice to Be Counted Worthy

It is an honor to be treated like Jesus. Not because I seek honor, but because I seek to be like him. When persecuted Jesus said to rejoice and be glad because our reward is great in heaven. In Luke's account he said, "*Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their fathers treated the prophets*" (Luke 6:22-23). This confirms our faith, deepens our convictions and puts us in a category of great honor. I must confess I have felt all those in intense times of persecution. The most difficult part of his words is to rejoice in those times your name is smeared, your parents are told lies about you or your life and family are threatened. During those times, the one thought I could not shake was how do I rejoice in this?

The testimony of the apostles cried out that after they had been jailed, tried, threatened and flogged, they "*left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name*" (Acts 5:41). Their own blood-stained stripes confirmed their salvation, their deep convictions and their discipleship. Why shouldn't they rejoice? They had earlier fled like scared prey when their Lord was arrested without his rights being read, ramrodded through a sham trial and crucified in place of a condemned

murderer. Now they finally had enough conviction about him and his message to be persecuted for it. How well do we remember our years of people pleasing and lukewarmness to be grateful now for opposition to our testimony?

History tells us that many disciples were martyred in Carthage around 200 A.D. for refusing to worship the prince and offer sacrifice to the pagan gods. One such group included people of prominence. The day before they were fed to wild animals at a public festival, "they talked to the people, and warned them to flee from the wrath to come: they pointed to them their own happy lot, and smiled at the curiosity of those who ran to see them. . . The Spirit of God was much with them on the day of trial: joy, rather than fear was painted on their looks."

Cyprian later wrote to some imprisoned brothers in that same town, "That you have been grievously beaten with clubs, and have been initiated, by that punishment, in Christian confession, is a thing not to be lamented.

"The body of a Christian trembles not on account of clubs: all hope is in wood. The servant of Christ acknowledges the emblem of his salvation: redeemed by a cross of wood to eternal life, by this wood he is advanced to his crown" (Fleetwood, John. *Historical Notices of the Church of Christ and of the Most Celebrated Fathers and Martyrs*, Glasgow, 1841). Surely a few rejections from sharing our faith will not rob us of our joy!

Every cause for good will produce persecution. The generation of assassinated Kennedys, Kings and Ghandis should surely understand this. So, with Peter, we should not be surprised as though something strange were happening to us. In fact, persecution is a testimony of our discipleship if it is for righteousness and if we rejoice in being counted worthy to suffer like our Lord and Savior. We will not conquer the world with the gospel without intense opposition and martyrdom. "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my life, my soul, my all." **D**

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