

RESPONDING TO THE PERSECUTED CHURCH

A Paper

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by

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Introduction

It is a great privilege to be presenting a paper this morning. I pray that it will be used to stimulate discussion, as I believe the benefit of these gatherings is very often in the discussion.

I would like to make it clear at the outset that I am no expert on the persecuted church. My only experience with respect to this subject is in that I have had opportunity to travel to a limited few places around the world where the church is indeed *persecuted*.

What I propose to do in this paper is to suggest three ways in which we in the West should **Respond to the Persecuted Church**. Note that my remit was to talk about *our response to the persecuted church*, rather than how persecution *has come* to the church in Canada or the West more generally, nor how we are to *prepare ourselves* for persecution that is sure to come. I may allude to such things, but in general, I don't think that we in the West have a clue as to what persecution looks like for most of our brothers and sisters around the world today, nor what it has been like since the very beginning. Therefore the title and focus of this paper are, “**Responding to the Persecuted Church.**”

My intent is to approach this topic in the style of Warren Wiersbe, and his “Be” series of commentaries on the books of the Bible. I will focus my comments in terms of three “Be s:”

The first section will be, **Be Aware**, where I will encourage us all to open our eyes to the persecution of our brothers and sisters around the world.

The second section will be, **Be Humbled**, where I will speak of the response of brothers and sisters facing persecution around the world.

And finally, the third section will be, **Be Bold**, where I will suggest some things we could

consider to support brothers and sisters suffering persecution in our day.¹

Jesus Said

Let us start where we ought, with the Word of God. Hear Jesus' words in **John 15**, in his farewell discourse with The Twelve in the Upper Room before His arrest and crucifixion:

John 15:12-21 ¹² "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³ **Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends.** ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵ No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. ¹⁶ You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. ¹⁷ These things I command you, so that you will love one another. ¹⁸ **"If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you.** ¹⁹ If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore **the world hates you.** ²⁰ Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' **If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.** If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. ²¹ But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me.²

Or again from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in **Matthew 5:11-12** (repeated in Luke's record of Jesus' Sermon on the Plain in **Luke 6:22-23**):

¹¹ "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

I start here, not only because we need to be in the Word of God, that our keys and clues and instructions as to how we are to respond to the persecuted church ought to come from the Word of God, but because I believe that Jesus' words to His disciples in general, and to the Apostles in particular concerning the **expectation of the persecution of believers** are all too often forgotten in the Western Church. Jesus clearly taught, and taught on numerous occasions, that **anyone who would follow Him should expect to suffer.**

¹ Show video clip, "Persecution Watch: Rev. Sami Dagher's Story," World Summit in Defense of Persecuted Christians, Billy Graham.org, May 16, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X8zaX7ZZ2M8>.

² Unless otherwise noted, Biblical quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001).

Here is another instance, in **Mark 8:34-37**. After asking His disciples, “Who do you say that I am,” and receiving the wonderful reply from Peter, “You are the Christ,” Jesus told them (again) that He, “the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again” (v.31). Mark tells us that Peter rebuked Jesus. We can imagine the impulsive Peter, looking now to Jesus as the expected Messiah, the Davidic King Who would rescue the Jews from the hated Roman occupiers saying to Jesus, “That will never happen to You!” But this is what is recorded in all three of the Synoptic Gospels. Here from **Mark 8:34-37**, but also in **Matthew 16** and **Luke 9**:

³⁴ And he called to him the crowd with his disciples and said to them, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. ³⁶ For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? ³⁷ For what can a man give in return for his life?"

I do not believe that is a truth often heard in our churches, generally, in Canada, in the twenty-first century. We, in the comfortable West, prefer not to talk about sin, about the blood of Jesus Christ, the Atoning Sacrifice, or about Hell. And we do not want to talk about the persecution of believers, even though that has been and is the lot of the majority of believers around the world and has been since the very beginning. And that opens the way to talking about my first point, **Be Aware**.

Be Aware

Let me begin this section by quoting from a BBC News article, dated the 3rd of May 2019. The article was titled, “Christian persecution ‘at near genocide levels’” and it quoted from a report commissioned by the United Kingdom Foreign Secretary, Jeremy Hunt. This is some of what was in the BBC article:

The persecution of Christians in parts of the world is at near “genocide” levels. The review ... estimated that one in three people suffer from religious persecution. Christians were the most persecuted religious group. ... The ... report said that the main impact of “genocidal acts against Christians is exodus” and that Christianity faced being “wiped out” from parts of the Middle East. It warned that the religion “is at risk of disappearing” in some parts of the world. ... “Evidence shows not only the geographic spread of anti-

Christian persecution, but also its increasing severity.” ... “In some regions, the level and nature of persecution is arguably coming close to meeting the international definition of genocide, according to that adopted by the UN.”

Minister Hunt, responding to questions from the BBC concerning the report, said he “thought governments had been ‘asleep’ over the persecution of Christians. ... He added: “I think there is a misplaced worry that it is somehow colonialist to talk about a religion that was associated with colonial powers rather than the countries that we marched into as colonisers. "That has perhaps created an awkwardness in talking about this issue - the role of missionaries was always a controversial one and that has, I think, also led some people to shy away from this topic.”

"What we have forgotten in that atmosphere of political correctness is actually the Christians that are being persecuted are some of the poorest people on the planet."³

That is a rather long quotation, but I think that it brings out two very significant issues. First, that Christians are being persecuted around the world, more so in the twenty-first century than at any other time in history, and secondly, that governments and news agencies in the West don't want to talk about it because it isn't politically correct. The “chattering classes,” the “cultural elite,” the “angry atheists” in the West - however you might label them, even many Christians - many now think of Christianity as a “Western” religion; the religion of the colonizers; and therefore, it would be rude to focus attention on the persecution of Christians in this day, even though, as Jeremy Hunt acknowledged, “the Christians that are being persecuted are some of the poorest people on the planet.”

What do you, what do your people, know about the persecution of Christians around the world? How do you see it?

Seeing the World through Western Christian Eyes

I believe that we all should realize that we look at the world around us through filters shaped by our culture, our beliefs and our experiences. I would like to make the case that one of the filters through which believers in the West view the persecuted church, if we view it at all, is

³ “Christian persecution 'at near genocide levels,'” BBC News, 3 May 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-48146305>.

heavily influenced by centuries of Christianity being the dominant, and in some regions for significant periods of time, the only religion.

In 2008, D.A. Carson wrote in the preface to his book, *Christ & Culture Revisited*:

Today's instantaneous communications mean that with only minimum effort Christians become aware of the extraordinarily diverse cultural settings in which other Christians find themselves. We find out about Christians in Sierra Leone, the poorest country on earth; we also find out about Christians in Hong Kong and New York City. We watch the church multiplying in Latin America, out in the open, and watch it multiplying in China, in some measure underground. We witness the remarkable loss of Christian consensus almost everywhere in Western Europe, and see the numbers of Christians exploding in the Ukraine and in Romania. We read of Christians being arrested in Iran, beheaded in Saudi Arabia, and butchered by the hundreds of thousands in southern Sudan, while observing the opulence of some Christian surroundings in Dallas and Seoul. We sit with semi-literate brothers and sisters in Christ in a village of Papua New Guinea who are learning to read for the first time, and we cannot forget that their grandparents were headhunters; we sit with presidents of Christian seminaries and universities, responsible for wisely dispensing many tens of millions of dollars every year.⁴

The scope, scale, and complexity of the information available today is overwhelming, so much so that I would suggest that the vast majority of Christians in the West are not seeking to know about brothers and sisters in Sierra Leone, China, Iran, Saudi Arabia and South Sudan. An overload of information often encourages us to be too interested in what is happening to, with and in **our** church, to, with and in **our** country, to give much attention to what is happening to believers around the world. And again, the media are not interested in exploring the persecution of Christians - stories that *do* appear fall very quickly out of our news feeds - and what we do see, we see through the filter of the lived history of the church in the West.

That 'lived history' for the church in the West, the point at which we began to diverge and diverge radically from the experience of the rest of Christ's bride, dates to the fourth century, to the reign of Roman Emperor Constantine the Great (AD 306-337). A Lumen course on the Roman Empire includes this paragraph on the transformation of Christianity from persecuted sect to state religion which happened under Constantine:

⁴ D.A. Carson, *Christ & Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), ix.

Constantine's decision to cease the persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire was a turning point for early Christianity, sometimes referred to as the Triumph of the Church, the Peace of the Church, or the Constantinian Shift. In 313, Constantine and Licinius issued the Edict of Milan, decriminalizing Christian worship. The emperor became a great patron of the Church and set a precedent for the position of the Christian emperor within the Church, and the notion of orthodoxy, Christendom, ecumenical councils, and the state church of the Roman Empire, declared by edict in 380. He is revered as a saint and isapostolos [meaning "equal to or contemporaneous with the apostles"⁵] in the Eastern Orthodox Church and Oriental Orthodox Church for his example as a "Christian monarch."⁶

The point is not whether Constantine was truly converted or just an opportunist. The point is that from this era forward, Christianity was favoured in the West, Christianity was established as the state religion in the countries of the West, Christians, at least those who remained within the favour of the religious and political leaders in the West, were no longer persecuted. Indeed, this is where the notion, which only began to die in the West in the past century, that merely by being born in or living in one of the countries of the West means that you *are* a Christian. Yes, the "Constantinian Shift" freed the Gospel to be propagated throughout the West; yes, Christian morals, ethics and beliefs form the political and legal foundations of most, if not all modern countries in the West; but no, we know for certain, that not everyone who calls him or herself a Christian is indeed saved by the grace of God in Christ Jesus. Even as Jesus said, also in the Sermon on the Mount,

²¹ "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ²² On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' ²³ And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness' (**Matthew 7:21-23**).

Real Persecution

Many Christian organizations, including The Voice of the Martyrs and Open Doors, seek to help persecuted Christians around the world, but very often, when I have given a presentation

⁵ "Isapostolos," Merriam Webster Dictionary, accessed 3 December, 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/isapostolic>.

⁶ "Western Civilization, Chapter 6, The Roman Empire, Constantine," Lumen Learning, accessed 1 December 2020, <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/suny-hccc-worldhistory/chapter/constantine/>.

to believers in Canada and suggested that we here know nothing of persecution, I am challenged with stories, often apocryphal, of this pastor or that church or another believer who was treated with disrespect for speaking openly about Jesus. What should be considered as “persecution,” and what should be considered as relatively benign disrespect?

Ed Stetzer, writing in 2018, decried an uninformed and ignorant complacency in the Western church in these terms:

In consideration of the plight of ... thousands of believers around the world, those of us in the U.S. must recognize something: the occasional discomfort we feel as believers here in the States is wholly undeserving of the term ‘persecution’ as we use it today.

Our lives here as Christians, in comparison to those of believers living in the aforementioned countries, are comfortable. Some of us have certainly been treated poorly or unfairly because of our faith—I get that. But truthfully, today, the term *persecution* must be reserved for our brothers and sisters whose lives and livelihoods are constantly placed on the line for the sake of their allegiance to Christ.⁷

Defining what constitutes “persecution” is more difficult than it might at first seem, and there have been a wide range of estimates as to how many Christians are martyred for the faith every year. Quoting from Open Doors 2018 World Watch List report in that article, Stetzer pointed out that “during this most recent reporting period, Open Doors found that 3,066 Christians were killed, 1,252 abducted, 1,020 raped or sexually harassed, and 793 churches attacked because of their expressed faith in Christ.”⁸

In his article Stetzer only listed numbers of Christians suffering direct violence, but Open Doors’ World Watch Lists, published each year, include many different types of ‘pressure’ in addition to direct violence in their definitions and assessments of the level of persecution of Christians in countries around the world.

⁷ Ed Stetzer, “What Persecution Is, and Isn’t, and How to Respond to Open Doors’ 2018 World Watch List,” January 16, 2018, The Exchange with Ed Stetzer, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2018/january/what-persecution-is-and-isnt-and-how-to-respond-to-open-doo.html>.

⁸ Ed Stetzer, “What Persecution Is.”

Listen to this from Open Doors' 2020 World Watch List: "Pressure" is measured "in five spheres of Christian life" including church life, community life, national life, family life and private life. The assessment of pressure, combined with the "amount of violent incidents" recorded produces a score and ultimately a ranked list of "the top 50 countries where Christians are persecuted for their faith." In the 2020 World Watch List, the top ten countries are North Korea, Afghanistan, Somalia, Libya, Pakistan, Eritrea, Sudan, Yemen, Iran and India. The numbers of Christians "experience[ing] high levels of persecution in the top 50 countries" was given as 260 million, a "6% increase from 2019." No Western countries appear in Open Doors' World Watch List.⁹

What can Western Churches do to Be Aware?

I will conclude this section with some suggestions as to what we in the Western church, or more particularly, what Western churches could do to "**Be Aware.**"

As we have seen, the scope and scale of the persecution of Christians around the world seems to produce two unhelpful effects. Some Western believers are **overwhelmed by the statistics** and **some are ignorant** of what brothers and sisters in Christ are suffering. Rather than try to maintain a broad picture, I would suggest that churches narrow their focus. Smaller churches might choose one country upon which to focus their attention, learning about the situation in that one country and praying in a more focused way for brothers and sisters in that one country. Larger churches might select more countries, perhaps care groups, home fellowship groups or Bible Study groups could each choose a country.

I would suggest choosing countries with some local connection to the church. Perhaps there are families or individuals in the church with connections to a particular country. Perhaps there is a community of recent immigrants, even refugees, in the church's locale from countries

⁹ "2020 World Watch List," Open Doors, accessed 1 December 2020, https://www.opendoorsusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/2020_World_Watch_List.pdf.

where Christians are suffering persecution. Learn as much as you can about that country and the Christian community there, from Open Doors' World Watch List, from the CIA's World Factbook,¹⁰ from church history or any number of other resources. Pray for believers in that country, consistently and fervently. Perhaps the Lord will lead you into some personal and direct connections with believers there.

I believe the only thing **not** to do is to remain ignorant and complacent. Let me conclude this section with another short passage from Paul's second letter to the believers in Corinth, **2**

Corinthians 1:3-6:

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. ⁵ **For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.** ⁶ If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer.

Be Humbled

We have discussed the first "Be," "Be Aware," and I would like to move on to the second, "**Be Humbled.**" Now, I don't want to overwhelm with stories about persecuted believers around the world, because I would be contributing to that flood of information that too often causes us to shut down and shut it out. I think that the video clip of Rev. Sami Dagher is in itself quite powerful. I will mention a couple more situations and stories, but I want to emphasize two things.

These persecuted believers preach the Gospel and forgive their enemies

First, I believe that we need to know that these believers of whom we hear are not super-human. They are flesh and blood, like us, with fears and sorrows like us. None of us know how

¹⁰ "World Factbook," Central intelligence Agency, accessed 1 December 2020, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>.

we will respond if and when persecution comes to us. We need to rest in and trust that God Holy Spirit will give us the words to say, will show us what we ought or ought not to do. Our Lord Jesus promised that He will be with us. As “the LORD said to Joshua, the son of Nun, Moses’ assistant” as he was charged to lead the children of Israel into the Promised Land:

“Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go” (**Joshua 1:9**).

What does God call them to do? We need to **Be Humbled**. We need to see that persecuted believers continue to preach Christ, and Him crucified, even in the face of persecution, that they even forgive their enemies.

This is something that I read in an article from the Catholic News Agency earlier this year, speaking of Christians being killed in central and northeastern Nigeria by Boko Haram and Militant Fulani Herdsmen. The article was dated the 18th of May, 2020, and reported that “in the first four months of 2020, 620 Nigerian Christians had been killed. One was an “18-year-old seminarian” who had been abducted along with three others who survived. His name was Nnadi. The “leader of the gang which [had] abducted” the four was later captured and interviewed in prison. He “took credit for his killing, telling local media that [Nnadi] ‘continued preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ,’ and ‘told [his killer] to his face to change his evil ways or perish.’”¹¹

Maybe you recall hearing about the Coptic Christians taken captive and executed by Islamic State militants in Libya in 2015. Twenty were “beheaded on a beach in Islamic State’s former Libyan stronghold of Sirte, wearing orange jumpsuits,” deliberately reminiscent of the attire given to Iraqi prisoners by US forces after the second war against Iraq.¹² One of the most

¹¹ “More than 600 Nigerian Christians killed in 2020, new report says,” Catholic News Agency, May 18, 2020, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/more-than-600-nigerian-christians-killed-in-2020-new-report-says-65880?fbclid=IwAR0eKQnbdhkSNHSNeMQeqJZjNMO2Ce3MhncCf7z3Nzuh9LMNtF1dK0DEI60>.

¹² “Bodies of 20 Egyptian Christians beheaded in Libya arrive in Egypt,” Reuters, May 14, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-egypt-idUSKCN1IF0J4>.

challenging things to me about that terrible incident came on its first anniversary. An article in Christian Today, quoting Bishop Angaelos, General Bishop of the Coptic Church, reported the “inconceivable message of forgiveness [which] came from [the] families and communities” of those slain:

They rejected the temptation to become bitter, angry and vengeful, and inspired the world with their gracious and courageous sentiment. Speaking proudly of the resilience of their fathers, brothers, and sons, who had captured the attention of the whole world, they also uttered their forgiveness for those who had so brutally and needlessly taken their lives, and who sought to rob them of their dignity.¹³

Again, I want to emphasize that these brothers were flesh and blood, fearful but courageous Christians. They had not known ahead of time how they would respond in the face of real persecution, but now their testimony lives on, like all those recorded in Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs*, like John the Baptist, like “those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands,” whose souls the Apostle John sees in his vision in **Revelation 20:4**.

Persecution is happening today

The **second** thing that I would like to emphasize in this “**Be Humbled**” section is that **these things are happening today, and everywhere, it seems, outside the West**.

The brothers in **Cuba** told me that Fidel Castro was particularly conscious of and brutal towards Christians who hold to Reformed theology. Castro knew about Calvin, and the theocracy in Geneva, and saw that as a threat to his revolution. So Reformed pastors were subjected to particular attention, being arrested, beaten and imprisoned, their families left to fend for themselves.

¹³ Harry Farley, “Beheadings in Libya: One year on forgiveness trumps hatred,” Christian Today, 15 February 2016, <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/beheadings-in-libya-one-year-on-forgiveness-trumps-hatred/79487.htm>.

In **India**, number ten in Open Doors' 2020 World Watch List of countries where Christians are persecuted, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party promote Hindu nationalism, believing that India is for Hindus and Hindus should be in India. An article in The New Arab, dated 23 July, 2020 reported that "vigilante mobs" enjoy "widespread immunity." The article quoted

The United Christian Forum (UCF), an organisation that tracks and documents attacks on Indian Christians, says there were at least 121 incidents of violence in the first six months of 2020. Many simply go unreported. Hundreds of Christians have been injured in these attacks, including 66 women and 16 children, while two have been killed. ... The majority of attacks occurred in the state of Chhattisgarh, in central India, where Christians constitute less than two percent of the population. The majority of incidents include social ostracism whereby Christian families are threatened into renouncing their faith. "Those who resist are denied basic public facilities including drinking water. Some are even thrown out of their own houses," the UCF report said.¹⁴

A friend has told me of meeting three Christian brothers in **China**, one of whom spent 18 years in prison, under sentence of hard labour. The other two each spent 21 years doing hard labour. This occurred during a period when Chairman Mao was demanding that Christians sign documents affirming allegiance to the Three-Self Church. Many Christians refused to sign. Some fled to Hong Kong or elsewhere as and if they could. Many others suffered in prison.

One of these brothers was assigned, for ten years, to spend his working day up to his waste in the sewer trench attending to constant blockages. One was assigned the duty of jumping between moving rail stock to couple trains and cars. The wife of one of these brothers was also imprisoned and forced to quarry rock, by hand, carrying the rock up and out of the quarry in a basket on her back. All of these Christian believers reported despair, attempted suicides, but then and also of crying out to God, being strengthened and sustained by God. The wife, upon crying out to God, could thereafter not even feel the weight of the stones that she carried.

¹⁴ Hanan Zaffar, "In Modi's Hindu nationalist India, anti-Christian violence is on the rise," The New Arab, 23 July, 2020, <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2020/7/23/the-violent-toll-of-hindu-nationalism-on-indias-christians-1>.

Chinese Christians ask the West not to pray that persecution be lifted.

And we know that the church in China grew and continues to grow despite the persecution. I have heard it reported that Chinese Christians ask believers in the West not to pray that persecution be lifted. They believe that the persecution is God's refining fire, keeping the church pure. Certainly, if you want to follow Christ in China, you *will be* persecuted, and the persecution seems to be particularly aggressive in this day.

Would we remain faithful here? How many would fall away, deny Christ? How many be like those of whom John writes in **1 John 2:19**:

They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.

How many might be graciously restored by our loving Saviour who brought the Apostle Peter back after his three-fold denial of Christ with a three-fold restoration: "Feed my lambs ... Tend my sheep ... Feed my sheep" (**John 21:15-17**).

We must remember that Jesus said persecution would be the "normal" experience of believers, and that we in the West have been experiencing a very long lasting "bubble" since the time of Constantine which has made us both blind to the persecution being experienced by our brothers and sisters around the world, and soft when it comes to the strength of our Christian convictions. Jesus gave this warning of one aspect of the the times of the end in **Matthew 24:9-14**:

⁹ "Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake. ¹⁰ And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. ¹¹ And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. ¹² And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. ¹³ But the one who endures to the end will be saved. ¹⁴ And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

And so we should in the West should be humbled when we think of our brothers and sisters experiencing persecution **today**; we should be in much prayer for them, being focused and specific in our attentions; and we should carefully consider how to strengthen one another to be faithful in the face of the persecution which it seems will intensify as the time of Christ's return

approaches.

Be Bold

In this last section, “Be Bold,” I would like to suggest some things that churches can do to honour our brothers and sisters for their faith in the face of persecution, and perhaps, in small ways, help to prepare ourselves and others as persecution becomes real and increases in our culture.

Be Confident

I feel rather hypocritical in titling the section, “Be Bold,” and encouraging us all to speak and to act, as it has not been in my nature to “be bold” in political discussion, but inevitably, that is what it becomes, as persecution is perpetrated by people in power, and that power is very often derived from political structures, whether authoritarian or democratic. Nevertheless, here are some thoughts, beginning with this passage from Second Peter, **2 Peter 3:9-15**:

⁹ The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. ¹⁰ But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. ¹¹ Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, ¹² waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! ¹³ But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. ¹⁴ Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace. ¹⁵ And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him,.

Here Peter is speaking about “scoffers [who] will come in the last days with scoffing ... [saying ‘Where is the promise of his coming?’]” The word from God through Peter is, “Don’t worry. Christ is coming again to judge with perfect righteousness and justice, and your place with Him in heaven is already assured, believer, so speak up with patience, with grace, with mercy and with love, but speak up. **Be Confident. Be Bold.**”

In fact, once you start reading Scripture with the expectation that it will speak to you of the reality of persecution, you will find it everywhere. First and Second Peter and Hebrews are

certainly written to believers facing persecution, as are the Gospels, the Prison Epistles, and I'm sure that we could all name more and more books and passages. Just one more passage at this point to illustrate that point, these verses from the Apostle Paul to the church in Colossae,

Colossians 4:2-6:

² Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. ³ At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison- ⁴ that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak. ⁵ Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. ⁶ Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.

Speak to Key People

The second thing that I might suggest is that we focus on speaking to key people. There are Christian politicians, in Ottawa as well as in provincial capitals. They have small voices, but they do have voices, and they have the ability to remind leaders and governments of what is good and right, not only for Christians around the world, but for Christians and for our whole country and culture here at home.

Do you remember that under the Stephen Harper government established an "Office of Religious Freedom" within the department now known as "Global Affairs Canada" in 2013?

This is a brief summary found on Wikipedia

Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced the Office of Religious Freedom as part of his political campaign during the 2011 federal election. A closed-door meeting about the office was criticized when it was discovered that of the six panellists consulted, four were Christian, one Jewish, and one Bahá'í. Harper denied the office would have a Christian bias. In response to claims of such a bias at the similar Office of International Religious Freedom in the United States, Harper stated that Canada is "a very different country".

The Office of Religious Freedom was officially opened on 19 February 2013 and Harper announced that Andrew P. W. Bennett, dean of Augustine College and a former civil servant, would be its first Ambassador for Religious Freedom.

On 31 March 2016 the Office of Religious Freedom was closed by the newly elected

government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.¹⁵

This is what the Liberal Government announced in closing the Office of Religious Freedom. Foreign Affairs Minister Stéphane Dion stated that::

“Our government shares the same conviction as the previous government, but it assesses the consequences of its chosen method of promoting this conviction differently. I am referring to freedom of religion or belief, which we will defend tooth and nail, but not through the office that the Harper government specifically set up for this purpose.”¹⁶

So if our government is committed to “defend tooth and nail” religious freedom, what action should we expect from our government when atrocities occur, or in the face of blatant and ongoing persecution of religious minorities around the world?

If you look at the United Nations Charter¹⁷, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms¹⁸ (where “freedom of conscience, religion, thought, belief, opinion, expression, peaceful assembly and association” is listed as a “fundamental freedom), or any one of a number of international and national documents, you will see many, many references to religious freedom. How is that being reflected in the actions of national and international institutions? I think that we have a right and a responsibility to ask; to ask with respect, with humility, with love and grace, but to ask.

Answer in Love from the Word of God

The last thing that I will say in this paper that we need to address every issue, and answer every question from the Word of God and not from our own opinions. That is perhaps the very

¹⁵ “Office of Religious Freedom (Canada),” Wikipedia, accessed 2 December, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Office_of_Religious_Freedom_\(Canada\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Office_of_Religious_Freedom_(Canada)).

¹⁶ Mr. Dion was quoted in an article in the Globe and Mail. Michelle Carbert, “Liberals to close Office of Religious Freedom, Dion says,” The Globe and Mail, March 29, 2016, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/liberals-to-let-religious-freedom-office-expire-on-march-31/article29416476/>.

¹⁷ “United Nations Charter,” United Nations, accessed 2 December 2021, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/full-text>.

¹⁸ “The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms,” Department of Justice Canada, accessed 2 December 2021, <https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/csj-sjc/rfc-dlc/ccrf-cddl/>.

best reminder that I could give to myself no less than to us all. We are facing very many issues where our culture is racing away from what is good and right in the eyes of God as declared to us in His Word.

The latest bill to pass in our Parliament (1 December, 2021) is Bill C-4. “If passed in the Senate [an article on iPolitics.ca states], the bill will make it illegal to subject either adults or children to any practice meant to change their sexual orientation or gender identity.”¹⁹ Now, we know that the bill is not designed to prohibit parents, teachers, counselors, psychotherapists, or anyone else from encouraging children and adults to “transition” from their God-given male or female gender, but rather, it is directed towards anyone, including pastors, from counselling against such a change.

I would strongly encourage pastors and churches to make it clear, when speaking to the press, to activists who will certainly challenge us, to anyone else, that we speak not from personal opinion, but when we speak on these issues, including gender, sexuality, abortion, euthanasia, or any other issue, we are speaking from the Bible, we are relaying what God, the Creator and Sustainer of all life has to say about the issue.

We must answer with respect, with humility, with love and grace, but we must answer as Martin Luther answered at the Diet of Worms:

Since your most serene majesty and your lordships require of me a simple, clear and direct answer, I will give one, and it is this: Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures and by clear reason (for I do not trust in the pope or councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted. My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen.²⁰

¹⁹ Aidan Chamandy, “House passes bill to ban conversion therapy,” 1 December 2021, iPolitics, accessed 2 December 2021, <https://ipolitics.ca/2021/12/01/house-passes-bill-to-ban-conversion-therapy/>.

²⁰ David Bahn, “Martin Luther’s ‘Here I stand’ speech,” David Bahn – Reflections, 31 October, 2017, accessed 2 December, 2021, <https://davidbahn-reflections.com/2017/10/31/martin-luthers-here-i-stand-speech/>.

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