



Persecution

It is hard to grasp that the mere act of reading this column could get you ostracized, arrested, tortured, or killed. But the reality is, in parts of the world the persecution of Christians is fact. And it is increasing. A new report by Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion and Public Life has revealed a disturbing pattern: nearly a third of the globe’s population—2.2 billion people—live in countries where religious persecution is increasing, including that of an estimated 200 million Christians.

Indeed, according to the International Journal of Missionary Research, more Christians were martyred in the twentieth century than in all previous centuries combined. The estimate among missiologists is that up to 100,000 people a year lose their lives because of their faith, some quite visibly and violently, most quite invisibly and insidiously, through deprivation of basic human needs and imprisonment.

What is persecution? According to Release International, it is a situation where people are repetitively, persistently, and systematically inflicted with grave or serious suffering or harm and deprived of their basic human rights because of a difference (race, religion, nationality, political opinion, membership in a particular social group) that the persecutor will not tolerate.

And so Christian persecution is that situation where Christians are repetitively, persistently, and systematically inflicted with grave or serious suffering or harm and deprived of their basic human rights because of a difference that comes from being a follower of Christ that the persecutor will not tolerate. To distinguish religious persecution from other types, it is helpful to ask, “If a person had other religious beliefs or would change their religion to the majority religion of the country, would things get better for them?” If the answer is “yes,” then it seems that the persecution is on religious grounds.

Yes, religious liberties here at home are under more pressure than ever. For example, New York City has tried to deny churches the same access to public schools as any other organization. Several universities have banned campus groups which have theological and lifestyle requirements of their group leaders. Zoning

laws are used to prevent the free exercise of religion for Christian and other groups. As Alejandro Gonzalez has said, “Placing religious groups under special legal disadvantages, and forbidding them from operating according to their own beliefs, is certainly not what the Founders had in mind when they banned an ‘establishment of religion’ in the First Amendment.”

These attempts to nibble away at rights is disconcerting and alarming to be sure, but it is not persecution. Around the world, literally hundreds of thousands of people today are being killed, brutalized, sold as slaves, imprisoned, tortured, threatened, discriminated against, and arrested solely because they refuse to renounce or hide their faith in Jesus Christ. This is leading to the exodus of Christians from countries where safety is an ever-present concern. Christian presence and witness is being rapidly decimated in certain hot spots.

Indeed, we have refugees in our churches here in the United States and Canada who, because of their faith, have lost fingers. Lost virginity. Lost loved ones. We have missionaries serving in places where we do not list the country because we are concerned for their safety.

There are no quick fixes, but there are things we can do. Let’s not live in a self-absorbed, self-limiting reality that magnifies our own petty circumstances to the obscurity of the very real plight of brothers and sisters in Christ around the world who are looking for people to act and speak up on their behalf. Several organizations, such as Release International and the Persecuted Church, have good materials to orient you and which provide practical suggestions, beginning with prayer.

Oscar Romero gave his life in following Christ. He ministered among the poor in El Salvador, who were being exploited and brutalized in a time of unrest in the country thirty-two years ago. In the name of Jesus he dared to speak up and challenge death squads that would kidnap and kill those who would speak up against injustice, a disproportionate number of whom were people of faith.

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COMPASS BEARINGS

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He wasn't kidnapped. He was assassinated while officiating at communion.

Before his death he wrote a poem, excerpted here:

This is what we are about.

*We plant seeds that one day will
grow.*

*We water seeds already planted,
knowing that they hold future
promise....*

*We may never see the end results,
but that is the difference between the
master builder and the worker.*

*We are workers, not master builders,
ministers, not messiahs.*

*We are prophets of a future not
our own.*

The persecuted hold firm to the hope within that God is building his kingdom against the powers. May we be as confident. ■