

REMAINING FAITHFUL IN THE MIDST OF THE GROWING DARKNESS



by Rick Wood
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Can you feel it? Can you see it spreading across the globe like a deadly plague? The hatred for and intolerance of Jesus followers and their biblical beliefs and values is growing. The barbarians of ISIS are but the most extreme example of this growing intolerance that is enveloping the world. Open Doors reports, “While the year 2014 will go down in history for having the highest level of global persecution of Christians in the modern era, current conditions suggest the worst is yet to come.”

For those in the Middle East, which this issue is focused on, the genocidal destruction of nearly 2000-year-old Christian communities by ISIS points to the worst persecution Christians in this area have ever experienced. These communities, their churches and monasteries survived the Mongol invasion of 1258 when Baghdad was destroyed and hundreds of thousands of Muslims were killed. But today, ISIS seeks to eliminate every vestige of Christianity in the Middle East.

We’ve all seen the pictures and heard the stories of murder and abuse. The suffering of these Christians is

beyond our comprehension. It breaks my heart to see such precious people that God loves be so brutally abused or viciously murdered. But God is marvelously at work in the midst of this tremendous suffering.

In this issue we tell the stories of how God is bringing hope in the midst of great darkness and the gospel is going forth with power to reach the broken-hearted. This issue of MF provides some important lessons for us as well, both in terms of how to do ministry in the midst of crisis and in how to deal with the growing intolerance to biblical faith in the West.

SUFFERING WILL NOT PASS US BY EITHER

Even if ISIS does not attack or affect the U.S. or Europe in significant ways any time soon, we still need to prepare ourselves for a changing spiritual climate. The Western church is facing cultural hostility unlike anything we have experienced before. From government to academia, the military and businesses large and small, the stories of anti-Christian bias abound. George Yancey in his just released book, *Hostile Environment* refers to this growing intolerance as Christianophobia.²

The days of culturally approved biblical Christianity are over. From now on there will be an increasing price to pay for Jesus followers who

remain true to their convictions and are not ashamed of the Word of God or the gospel.

This growing cultural hostility to biblical faith is reflected in the results of the Pew Research Center’s just released study, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape.” It got great publicity with dramatic headlines like, “Christianity is Dying in America,” but the real truth is much more nuanced than this. While those who call themselves Christians dropped from 78% to 70% over seven years, this was largely due to nominal Christians moving from the Catholic and Mainline church categories to the “nothing in particular” category. With the cultural hostility to Christianity growing, those who are not true believers are deciding to make it official that they don’t really believe. This trend will continue and accelerate. ***The true church is being refined.*** It is actually a spiritually healthy thing for the Church when it costs us something to follow Jesus. Dietrich Bonhoeffer referred to this as “costly grace.”

The question for all of us is, “What price is too high to follow Jesus? At what point does the pain get to be too much? When we start to lose our jobs, promotions, perks, savings, homes, and our freedom, the temptation to compromise both as a church and as individuals will grow. There

are already voices out there that say we must modify our doctrines and practices in order to attract the unsaved. Such compromise would be disastrous. We must never be ashamed of the Bible or the gospel and boldly proclaim the truth, no matter what opposition we face.

The only hope for the church in the West is to: 1. Remain committed to Scriptural fidelity and biblical values, 2. Get serious about obeying Jesus' command to go and make disciples who disciple others in all nations and equip God's people to do so, 3. Abide closely in Jesus and in the power of the Holy Spirit as the only sure source for the comfort and strength we will need. The Christian victims of ISIS have shown us the way. They have been faithful to Jesus, even unto death. We must do the same as we live on mission with God, carrying out His purposes in establishing his kingdom in every people on earth.

“REMEMBER WE ARE AT WAR”

Ralph Winter was once asked, “What is the one thing you would like to say to the Church?” He replied, “Remember that we are at war.” While ISIS is bringing very real physical and spiritual warfare to our world, we must develop a “wartime lifestyle and mindset” that reflects the seriousness of the mission Jesus has given to us, and the satanic opposition we face. Every pastor needs to communicate the vision of proclaiming God's glory in all of the unreached peoples to everyone who will listen. They need to give people something to live for beyond their own self-improvement and blessing that will capture their hearts and imagination for how God can use them in this cosmic struggle.

One blogger responding to the Pew Survey results describes well the spiritual battle we face.


“If the faith is to regain lost ground in this country, it will only happen when Christianity is presented and understood as what it is: a warrior's religion. A faith for fighters and soldiers. C.S. Lewis said it best (as usual):

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‘Enemy-occupied territory—that is what this world is. Christianity is the story of how the rightful king has landed, you might say landed in disguise, and is calling us all to take part in a great campaign of sabotage.’

There. There it is, explained more compellingly in two sentences than many pastors can muster in a lifetime of sermons. This is frightening, militant language, but it's exciting, it's exhilarating, and it is, most importantly, accurate. As Christians, we are fighting a war against the Devil himself. We are advancing against the darkest forces of the universe, and we march with God by our side. And all the while, all around us, on a dimension invisible to mortal eyes, angels and demons and supernatural forces, both good and evil, work to defend or destroy us. The stakes are

infinite...It's the truth that should be shouted from the rooftops of every church and proclaimed from the mouths of every Christian. That's how you stop the “decline” of Christianity in America. Tell people the truth. The truth, that's all.”

We fight this battle with all the spiritual weapons that Jesus has given to us: love, prayer, service and sacrifice—not the weapons of this world. Many of our fellow Jesus followers in the Middle East have already paid the ultimate price for their faithfulness in this war. Some of us may also be called to make similar sacrifices in the future. But no matter when or how we die, we are to faithfully carry out the mission Jesus gave us to disciple the nations with passion and perseverance. I pray that all of us will join this titanic struggle for the souls of every person in every people. 

¹ 1 Open Doors USA, January 7, 2015 “Persecution Of Christians Reaches Historic Levels, Conditions Suggest Worst Is Yet To Come”

² 2 Yancey, George, *Hostile Environment: Understanding and Responding to Anti-Christian Bias*, Intervarsity Press, 2015

³ 3 Walsh, Matt, *Maybe Christianity In America Is Dying Because It's Boring Everyone To Death*, May. 13, 2015 11:47am

⁴ http://www.theblaze.com/contributions/maybe-christianity-in-america-is-dying-because-its-boring-everyone-to-death/?utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=story&utm_campaign=ShareButtons

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