

Kingdom Kernels:

Death: the Spiritual Triggering Effect

I had just flown in from the middle of the Church-Planting Movement (CPM) we helped catalyze in the mountains of a highly restrictive country in Asia. I landed in a world very different from my mission experience—a traditional field with over 100 years of mission work, churches of all denominations and mature seminaries. Yet, despite the large number of indigenous Christians, it was a field in which the kingdom had plateaued and was now in decline.

« **In Asia, persecution was not fueling our movement; boldness and perseverance in the face of persecution were.** »

Describing our case study of explosive Spirit-empowered growth in Asia, I encouraged the brothers and sisters that God could do the same in their countries. One missionary objected. “Well! If we just had persecution like you have in Asia, we too would have movements.”

Coming from a world of interrogations, imprisonments, ostracization and beatings, I grew livid at such a comment as if we desired persecution. What this brother failed to recognize is that persecution can either fuel or quench a budding movement. In the Parable of the Sower, Jesus described the second soil:

...*When tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away.* (Matt. 13:21, ESV)

Jesus warned that persecution can easily stop any growth that has occurred. In Asia, persecution was not fueling our movement; *boldness* and *perseverance* in the face of persecution were. I have yet to see a CPM emerge on any of the six continents where persecution in some form did not have to be overcome by Christians.

In my *Mission Frontiers* articles over the last few years, I’ve dealt with many principles related to cooperating with the Spirit of God in launching CPMs. I have alluded to the element I call “death” which is an essential for movements, but have not dedicated an article to it. I take this term “death” directly from Jesus:

“*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and **dies**, it remains alone; but if it **dies**, it bears much fruit.*” (John 12:24, ESV, emphasis added)

Jesus was describing His upcoming death which would make way for the fruit of salvation among the nations. He chose not to shy away from the cross despite the immense cost. Again, **boldness and perseverance in the face of persecution.**

Jesus was also describing the path that every disciple must walk—the way of the cross—if we are going to bear lasting fruit. As Paul said, it is costly to do God’s bidding—dying to self, beatings, ridicule, shipwrecks,

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imprisonment, betrayal, even physical death. Paul described this endurance by the same term:

*We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the **death** of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to **death** for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So **death** is at work in us, but life in you.*
(2 Cor. 4:8-12, ESV, emphasis added)

Paul, with the other apostles, chose not to be intimidated by difficulty. Again, **boldness and perseverance in the face of persecution**.

The elements of disciple-making movements are not unlike a rocket ready upon the launchpad. The rocket is fully assembled (e.g. all of the mechanics of the strategy). The right trajectory is loaded into the ship-board computer (e.g. vision). The fuel tanks are topped up (e.g. the spiritual dynamics of abiding in Christ and prayer). Even so, the rocket will not take off; it is just ready to take off.

What takes it from “ready” to “take-off”? Ignition. Someone must push the triggering button to ignite the engines to hurl the rocket into space. *“Death” is the spiritual triggering effect of every movement of God.* Until a servant of God is willing to pay the price, CPM elements remain a theory in the laboratory. Until a servant of God takes the time to hit the streets, meet with ridicule, endure false accusations, sacrifice personal priorities, joyfully receive imprisonment and even pay with his or her physical life, a movement is only *ready* to ignite. But in reality, it *slumbers* on the launchpad.

« **“Death” is the spiritual triggering effect of every movement of God.** »

When I train disciples around the world, I always take time to focus on persecution and difficulty. I ask this critical question: “Do you *really* want a movement of God knowing what it will cost?”

To help them have a biblical perspective, we study the gospels and the book of Acts examining the price disciples paid to launch movements all over the Roman empire. In those movements, the *evangelistic teams* suffered. Their *families* suffered. Their *new disciples* suffered.

Before reading any further (or for additional study) I invite you to examine the following ten passages. Take ten sheets of paper and divide them into four quadrants. Answer the following questions, spread them out side-by-side and look for patterns.

Ten Passages from Acts	Four Questions
1. 3:1-4:31 Peter & John arrested	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What started the persecution? • Who did the persecuting? • How did the evangelists respond? • What were the results of the persecution (good or bad)?
2. 5:12-42 Apostles arrested	
3. 6:8 – 8:4 Stephen martyred	
4. 12:1-24 James killed; Peter in prison	
5. 13:13-52 Paul & Barnabas in Pisidian Antioch	
6. 14:1-28 Paul & Barnabas in Iconium, Lystra, Derbe	
7. 16:16-40 Paul & Silas in Philippi	
8. 17:1-15 Paul & Silas in Thessalonica & Berea	
9. 18:1-17 Paul & Silas in Corinth	
10. 19:8 – 20:1 Paul & team in Ephesus	

What started the persecution?

Invariably persecution arose because ordinary disciples opened their mouths in difficult environments to proclaim the gospel boldly. Sometimes miracles were associated with their proclamation. But always there was a clear, culturally understandable, verbal presentation about Jesus. This happened even in harsh environments with opposition from Jewish leaders, government leaders, citizens, businesses, and demonic powers.

It was not just the proclamation of the gospel that started the persecution, but the fact that dozens, hundreds and even thousands of new disciples were attracted from the old way of life to a new life in Christ. This frequently sparked jealousy among those of the status quo.

There is an important lesson we can learn from this: if you don't want to be persecuted, don't boldly proclaim the gospel or make loving, Bible-obeying disciples of those who believe. Yet, according to the Great Commission,

this is not an option! Persecution hounds real Christianity.

Paul wrote:

*You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra—which persecutions I endured; yet from them all the Lord rescued me. **Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.***
(2 Tim. 3:10-12, ESV, emphasis added)

Who did the persecuting?

Typically, three major groups were the sources of persecution, sometimes coordinating their efforts. The first group was the *religious community*. In a great number of these passages, the Jewish leaders (believers in the Scriptures) were incensed about the proclamation of Jesus as Lord, often inciting riots or government arrest of the evangelists.

It is not uncommon today for religious leaders to incite persecution. It's one thing for Hindu fundamentalists or Muslim radicals to do so. But imagine the great pain when CPM initiators find themselves attacked by respected Christian leaders of well-established churches! In our work in Asia, leaders of government-sanctioned churches frequently turned in house churches to the local authorities.

Even in the West, church leaders often lead the charge in ridiculing movement efforts. Rather than biblically going in private to meet with those they ridicule to try to love, understand and build unity, they publicly malign hard-working servants of God. At the same time, CPM initiators must guard themselves from becoming proud or divisive, and justly inviting criticism.

In Acts, the second group that persecuted was the *government*. Just as Pilate worried about his appearance and control, thus condemning Jesus, so also these government leaders became nervous as a new kingdom—though not a political one—spread under their watch.

Especially under authoritarian regimes, government persecution is quite common and sometimes tipped off by religious leaders or local citizens in the community. Government persecution frequently results in interrogations, imprisonment and even martyrdom. Though it may not make the news, in two thousand years of church history, persecution has never been greater than it is today.

In Acts, the third group to persecute were *local citizens* that were concerned about the impact of the spread of the gospel. Sometimes they were business leaders like the Ephesian silversmiths or Philippian fortune-tellers who were losing business. At other times, they were ordinary people who were stirred to riot over concern about their way of life being jeopardized.

In many places around the world, neighbors are the ones to turn house churches in to the police. At other times, mobs form to attack the homes of those who have left the local religion. Sometimes, families ostracize a new believing family member and after beatings, they then hold a funeral over this one who is now dead to them. At other times, believing family members are locked up and put through a deluge of weeks of re-indoctrination.

In our Asian CPM, neighbors in the village came to two believing families to collect a 75-cent annual fee to purchase and kill a pig to sacrifice to demons. As the believers examined the Scriptures, they felt convicted not to pay for food offered to idols. A mob damaged their homes and tore down the walls on their centuries-old rice terraces. Without home or livelihood, both families were forced to flee for their lives.

« **They were willing to die in order to live for their faith.** »

Yet in all of the cases cited, the new disciples faced these persecutions with boldness and perseverance. They were willing to die in order to live for their faith.

This has always been the secret of disciples of Jesus overcoming difficulty and becoming movements of God—they love not their lives even unto death:

*And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives **even unto death.***
(Rev. 12:11, ESV, emphasis added)

How did the evangelists respond?

In the ten passages in Acts, the evangelists refused to be quieted.

But Peter and John answered them, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.” (Acts 4:19-20, ESV)

Jesus had taught the disciples to share the gospel and make disciples, and to expect difficulty in doing so (Matt. 10:16ff). Because they expected it, persecution did not quench the zeal for their work.

In addition, the evangelists frequently responded with rejoicing in the midst of persecution, bearing witness to their tormentors, encouraging local believers to remain steadfast, and sometimes fleeing to the next places to continue preaching the good news.

For them, persecution was part and parcel of normal Great Commission work. The religious freedom we have experienced in the West over the last 250 years has been a brief blip on the timeline of church history. Normal church history involves persecution for believers who are serious about their faith. Let us not bemoan the fact that even in the West persecution is rising. Though we don't relish it (and can sometimes pass laws to minimize it), this is normal and to be expected.

What were the results of the persecution (good or bad)?

In all cases in Acts, the Word of the Lord continued to spread relentlessly. There was no promise that the evangelists would be delivered from persecution in this life. They were imprisoned, interrogated, beaten and even killed (both Stephen and James the Apostle). Though not always delivered physically, they were always delivered eternally:

*I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ **this will turn out for my deliverance**, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, **whether by life or by death**. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.*

(Phil. 1:19-21, ESV, emphasis added)

At times the evangelists were miraculously delivered from their situation. They were filled with joy when it made no sense. They were guided clearly by the Holy Spirit as God's presence rested heavily upon them. Whether physically delivered or not, they stood up to persecution with boldness and perseverance.

Only "death" produces fruit. When disciples of Jesus joyfully endure difficulty, the kingdom of God multiplies. When disciples withdraw under the pressure, the kingdom wanes in that area. Most of us will not die, but

all of us must pay some price. We must die to ourselves to fulfill God's agendas. Only then does the Spirit rest heavily upon us:


If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.
(1 Pet. 4:14, ESV)

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We must prepare ourselves and disciples we train to prepare to boldly and joyfully endure persecution. This Acts study is one resource to help do that. And prepare you must, for no movement occurs until the spiritual triggering effect of death is activated.

In the early days of African evangelization, missionaries packed their belongings in a wooden coffin for the long ship ride. With disease and opposition, they knew they would likely only have a few months or years to proclaim the good news. We must live with the same spirit.

I recall an evening in Asia where my wife and I called our three young sons into the bedroom to ask them this question: "If it cost Mommy or Daddy our lives so that our people group could receive the gospel, would it be worth it?" We all agreed that it would, and the gospel eventually spread like wildfire. We did not die during that time (though we experienced many other difficulties), but the life-threatening cancer I now carry in my body apparently came through the parasites I picked up in those remote mountains.

We would all say it was worth it because Jesus Christ is worthy of praise from every tongue, tribe, people and nation. Knowing the cost, do you want God to start a movement through you? 

¹ Steffen, Tom 1974 *Passing the Baton: Church Planting that Empowers*. La Habra, CA: Center for Organizational & Ministry Development, 4.

² Johnson, Jean 2012 *We Are Not The Hero: A Missionary's Guide For Sharing Christ, Not A Culture of Dependency*, Sisters, Oregon: DeepRiver Books, 175.