

## The Process of Persecution

Dr Johan Candelin, the head of the Religious Liberties Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance, studied how persecution begins and is manifest in countries around the world, and identified the following three-stage process leading to persecution becoming entrenched within a society:

- 1) Disinformation. This may be passive, and then active against Christians, often in the local media. Through various media outlets, Christians are robbed of their good reputation and their ability and right to answer accusations made against them. This deliberate disinformation leads to....
- 2) Discrimination. This may be first passive, and then active. The hostile public opinion that results from Disinformation leads naturally to Discrimination. Christians are relegated to 2<sup>nd</sup> class citizenship with inferior legal, social, political and economic status to the majority groups in society.
- 3) Persecution. This maybe first passive, and then active. Once the first two steps have taken place, persecution can be practiced without normal protective measures being taken. Persecution can arise from multiple actors, as described above, either with or without explicit consent and approval from the country's rulers. In many parts of the world, the accusations of the persecutors turn the victims into alleged "villains." If Discrimination is disseminated long enough, no-one will help when the Christians face Discrimination. Once Discrimination takes places, no-one will intervene when Persecution comes.

## Towards a theology of Christian persecution

Jesus defined persecution using 4 verbs in Luke 6.22, "Blessed are you when people **hate** you, and when they **exclude** you, **revile** you, and **defame [reject]** you on account of the Son of Man" (NRSV).

It is clear here that Christians are not persecuted randomly, but because all persecution of Christians is ultimately targeted at Jesus Christ Himself. "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 keep yours also. "But all these things they will do to you for My name's sake, because they do not know Him who sent Me" (John 15.20-21, NRSV). Persecution happens naturally for disciples of Jesus Christ, because this world has rejected Jesus Christ.

Jim Cunningham developed the "HEIR" persecution index to define persecution based on Luke 6.22.

**H** = Hate (shut us down).

Christians are hated because of what they believe, and are intimidated to derail their vision and hope. Intimidation is Satan's greatest weapon to force Christians to keep quiet, say nothing, avoid writing letters to the editors, and not speak up in the classroom or in parent-teacher meetings.

**E** = Exclude (shut us up).

Christians are excluded for what they say, to contain them and discourage their witness and their faith. The classic example in Scripture is Peter's denial of Scripture (Luke 22.60).

**I** = Insult (shut us out).

Christians are insulted for what they do, to defeat their compassion and love. Figures in society in general or the media in particular watch for Christians engaged in compassionate ministry and seek to criticize, question, impute evil motives and nullify their ministry. Many Christians experience a loss of compassion and say, "Well, if that is how they feel, I am out of here." Perseverance and faithfulness to the call of God are necessary traits to resist pressure and persecution.

**R** = Reject (shut us off).

Destruction usually follows the traditional strategies of hate, exclusion and insult, and at this stage the persecutors seek to eliminate the Christian witness and presence entirely. This normally happens through torture, imprisonment or murder.

It is important to recognize in this HEIR framework that persecution happens long before mobs attach Christian churches and pastors are slaughtered in the streets. Persecution starts whenever forces in society seek to shut down the Christian witness and voice in the public marketplace. This is happening in 2016 in countries like Canada and the USA, where "Social Justice

Warriors” are seeking to enforce unbiblical social constructs on societies through the use of bullying corporations and a sneering media environment towards Christians.

And yet, the Apostle Paul also indicated that those who are HEIRs in suffering for Christ will become HEIRs in His glorious inheritance. “The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs -- heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together” (Rom. 8.16-17, NKJV). Thus, when Christians today experience **hatred, exclusion, insults and rejection**, God promises we will become heirs with Jesus in His glory. A beautiful promise!

Jesus also spoke about persecution in the final beatitude in the Sermon on the Mount. “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven [I can choose to be joyful – anyway]. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my **account** [By God’s grace, I will make it through!]” (Matthew 5:10-11, NRSV).

A critical shift is taking place here in the Matthean Beatitudes. Up to this point, all the previous Matthean Beatitudes can be explained in OT terms, and each of these Beatitudes has their most perfect expression in the life of Jesus. We now come to the climax of the Beatitudes, and now personal loyalty to Jesus is openly introduced. That loyalty is inevitable if we understand Jesus is the model for the fulfillment of the pattern of righteousness portrayed in the Beatitudes.

Jesus was not executed because of His teachings per se, but because He lived and exemplified His teachings. At the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says that it is the ‘wise’ who build their lives on His teachings (Matt. 7.24-27). The early followers of Jesus were not persecuted because of their convictions, but because they put the teachings of Jesus into practice: they lived for justice (Matt. 5.10); they proclaimed Jesus (Matt. 5.11); and they lived as Jesus did (Matt. 5.12).

The record of the early church in Acts 2-10 shows a community in which social, gender and economic barriers were being systematically removed and men, women and children were able to live in essential harmony with one another. As a result they faced social ostracism, exclusion from the synagogue, imprisonment, flogging, stoning, execution, crucifixion, enslavement, the break-up of their families and the loss of their land and homes.

Yet, to His persecuted followers, Jesus promised that He will be with them, ‘To the end of the age’ (Matt. 28.20). And when brought to trial, He promised to speak for them, ‘When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say: for what you are to say will be given to you at that time’ (Matt. 10.19). Such persecution may come from within our own families (Matt. 10.21), from within the family of faith (Matt. 10.17), or from non-believers (Matt. 10.18).

The world’s reaction to Jesus and His faithful commitment to live and perfectly exemplify the Beatitudes will be the same response His disciples can expect from their faithful commitment to live in harmony with the Beatitudes. Our response to the rejection of the world will determine our relationship with God. “Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven” (Matt. 10.32-33).

‘If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world – therefore the world hates you....In the world you face persecution. But take courage: I have conquered the world....The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it’ (John 16.18-19, 33; 1.5).

Character is not formed in times of crisis – it is revealed for what it already is. Every decision today helps to shape our character for tomorrow. We prepare for persecution tomorrow for the sake of Christ by seeking by God’s grace to fully live and exemplify the Beatitudes and the other teachings of Jesus Christ today.