

The Persecution of Christians in the Early Church and Its Theological Implications for Mission Today

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ABSTRACT — *The experience of Christians in the first few centuries of the Christian church was characterized by great persecutions. The Roman government's attitude to the early church may be understood as a continuum: there was a measure of toleration or indifference at first, but then the distinctiveness of Christian worship and loyalty soon put the Christians on a collision course with the Roman authorities. Christianity was declared by the Romans as religio illicita, which implies that the Christian religion was illegal. One cardinal reason for this was Christians' refusal to worship the emperor as deity. Many faithful Christians who were unwilling to compromise their faith were martyred in the process in a most horrible manner. While some were burnt at the stake, others were thrown to hungry lions.*

Contemporary Christians may benefit a great deal from the early church's response to persecution. They may learn the lessons of the power of non-violent action, suffering for Christ and unfeigned love in the face of persecution. Persecution may indeed be a painful experience but it helps to purify the church and emboldens her to carry out its mission.

Key words: early church, religio illicita, persecution, non-violence, love, mission.

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I. Introduction

A survey of the early church reveals that it was characterized by stories of Christians who went through harrowing experiences. As the church grew, the fire of persecution raged. It appears the adversary was determined to root out the new sect, Christianity, before it had opportunity to gain a firm footing on the Roman soil. The cause of persecution was basically two-pronged: some of the Jewish leaders on one hand saw the new religion (that is, Christianity) as a rival to Judaism and they did not hide their disdain for the popularity it was gaining. On the other hand, the Roman Empire was at first tolerant of the new sect; but then it soon dawned upon it that the Christians were not only unwilling to worship the Roman gods and goddesses, they were actually proselytizing (Boer, 2003, p.46). Soon the fire of persecution was lit and by A.D.249 it had become a conflagration, devouring hundreds of faithful Christians (Cairns, 1996, pp. 90-91).

It is the purpose of this study to explore the precipitating factors that led to the persecution of the early church as well as the indomitable faith demonstrated by many of the suffering Christians. There is no doubt that Christians are still facing persecutions in certain parts of the world in contemporary times. Insights that may be gained from the way the early church responded to their traducers would certainly be of immeasurable help to those who are facing similar situations, today. Even where Christians are not undergoing persecution at the present time there are still one or two lessons that could be gained. After all, a proper understanding of the eschatological realities that the church must experience leaves no one in doubt that at one point or the other Christians would still pass through the same trials, which the early church experienced, before the *Parousia*.

II. Early Christianity

As observed by Doukhan (2002, p.8) the original followers of Jesus, who founded Christianity, were all Jews. Jesus himself was also a Jew whose historicity is well documented in world history. Indeed, historical evidence shows that he lived under the reign of Tiberius Caesar, a Roman emperor, when Pilate was governor in Judea. The teachings of Christ and his person and claims are

inseparable. Thus, one may say that Christianity is Christ (Wolff, 2007, p.233).

Perhaps the first Disciples of Christ did not have any intention of taking their faith to others than the Jews like themselves. This attitude may explain the reason why they were loathed to leave the precincts of Jerusalem and propagate the message of love and reconciliation. After the crucifixion of Christ they continued to worship in Jerusalem. It was not until the resurrection of Christ that a dramatic transformation took place in their lives. Needham (1998, p.44) correctly describes the sudden change using the following words:

When Jesus was executed, despair had engulfed his followers; they seemed to have a dead leader and a lost cause. It was Jesus' resurrection from the dead that transformed these broken and despairing people into the fiery apostles and martyrs of a new faith – a faith which, within three centuries, and despite vigorous persecution would conquer the whole Roman Empire.

The resurrection therefore served as a vindication of all that Jesus claimed to be. Had he failed to resurrect, Christianity would have had a still birth or it would have died inchoate, not able to survive its infancy. Paul expressed this reality in his epistle to the Corinthians. He says, “And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins!” (1 Cor. 15:17, NKJV).

Whereas the resurrection of Christ helped the early church to shed the toga of unbelief it was the Pentecostal out-pouring of the Holy Spirit that galvanized the largely vacillating believers into a dynamic force to be reckoned with. It was at the Pentecost that power was given to the church to witness, effectively (Acts 2: 1-4, 41). Because of the effect of the Pentecostal experience the gospel spread rapidly, taking roots in far-flung places like Syria, Asia minor, Greece, and Italy (Boer, 2003, p.18). The gospel was also early planted on the African continent. In fact, Mbiti (1985, p.229) boldly said that “Christianity in Africa is so old that it can rightly be described as an indigenous, traditional and African religion. Long before the start of Islam in the seventh century, Christianity was well established all over north Africa, Egypt, parts of the Sudan and Ethiopia.” It had produced great scholars and theologians like Tertullian, Origen, Clement of Alexandria and Augustine. In Africa, as in other places,

the rapid growth of the church in the early centuries was not without a cost; it became visible to its adversaries who were determined to wipe it out of existence.

III. Apostle Paul, a Persecutor

It is intriguing to note that one who had been described as having “had the greatest historical impact on the life and thought of the Christian church” was once a persecutor (Needham, 1997, p.49). In fact, besides Jesus Christ himself, nobody perhaps has had greater influence on the Christian church as Apostle Paul. Moynahan (2002, p.25) refers to Paul as “the colossus of the church, the most striking and powerful human being in its history.” As a prominent leader in the apostolic church Paul also has been described in the following manner: “Religiously, he was a Jew, culturally a Greek, and politically a Roman” (Eckman, 2002, p.12).

Paul’s educational background was solidly rooted in pharisaism. Indeed he studied in the rabbinic school in Jerusalem headed by the revered Gamaliel (Acts 22:3; Phil. 3:5). The Pharisees were generally intolerant of new religious movements. Thus it was not difficult for Paul to obtain a mandate from the religious hegemony of the Sanhedrin to extradite Jewish Christians to Jerusalem. Paul was particularly determined to stop the spread of the new movement which he believed was propagating heresy. He deplored his learning and enormous energy to accomplish this purpose until he got converted on his way to Damascus (Acts 9:3-6).

Earlier, Paul consented to Stephen’s martyrdom by stoning (Acts 7:58). Obviously, the rapid growth of this new group, of followers of “The Way” incensed the Jewish leaders. They thought they had put an end to a virulent movement when they crucified Jesus. But alas, the new movement was growing and waxing stronger by the day. This resulted in persecution: threats were issued, Peter was imprisoned, they stoned Stephen, and James the brother of John was beheaded by King Herod (Young, 2003, p.225). Because of the great persecution that swept the church at this early stage, many of the believers were forced to leave Jerusalem for other places. This development was a blessing in disguise, and it helped the gospel spread far and wide (Acts 8:4). It, however, did not extinguish the fire of persecution.

IV. Christianity as Religio Illicita

It is worthy to note that at the very beginning, the Roman government was indifferent to Christianity as a religious movement. The reason for this may not be far-fetched. Christianity was generally regarded as an offshoot or sect of Judaism. And since Judaism was not considered a threat to the Roman authorities at this time, Christianity was left alone. But this period of toleration was for a while. It did not take long before the Jews drew a line of demarcation between the adherents of Judaism and those of Christianity. They pointed out to the Roman government that Judaism and Christianity were not one and the same (Boer, 2003, p.44).

Their arguments were given credence because a greater number of the Gentiles were becoming Christians. Judaism was a religion of the Jews and they were not ready to compromise that identity. The Roman authorities began to see the new sect, that is, Christianity, as totally different from Judaism. In addition, the Jews were numerous, wealthy and influential whereas Christians were few and inconsequential, many of them belonging to the lowest rung of social strata in the society.

The general perception of Christians by the Roman government was also negatively impacted by their stubborn refusal to offer sacrifices to the emperor (Boer, 2003, p.44). All these factors combined caused the government to declare Christianity as *religio illicita*, meaning unlawful religion. As rightly pointed out by Price and Collins (1999, p.44), as long as Christianity remained illegal, Christians “were at the mercy of imperial disfavor and popular enmity.” The declaration of Christianity as *religio illicita* by the Roman government had great implications. It meant that Christians were at risk — their goods could be confiscated under any guise. Even their lives were imperiled as they were forbidden to confess the name of Christ.

It must be pointed out that while the Jews, who practiced Judaism, were still protected by the Roman government to practice their religion, the Christians lost that privilege the moment Christianity was declared *religio illicita*. Since they no longer had a legal footing to practice their religion, Christians became a fair game for the Romans. They were no longer free to practice their religion, openly. Most of their meetings had to be clandestine. This scenario provided the stage for the great persecution of Christians under Emperor Nero.

V. The Persecution under Nero and Others.

The persecution of Christians under Emperor Nero in A.D.64 has been regarded as the first great official persecution of Christians by the Roman government (Needham, 1998, p.49). In this particular year a mysterious fire incidence took place in Rome, the worst experienced by the empire. The fire swept through the city and destroyed a larger portion of it. Nero may have started the fire, but he denied it. Instead, he blamed the Christians for it and made them the scapegoat for the tragedy. Christians were persecuted by Emperor Nero in a most gruesome manner. Some were set on fire while others were thrown to the dogs (Needham, 1998, p.50).

Even though the persecution of Christians during the time of Emperor Nero was limited in scope to the city of Rome, it most probably claimed the lives of both Apostles Peter and Paul. Tradition, however, says that Paul was beheaded while Peter was crucified upside-down. There is no doubt that it was a terrible time of trial for the young church during the reign of Emperor Nero.

For most of the time, from the reign of Emperor Nero (A.D.54-68) to Emperor Diocletian (A.D.284-305) Christians suffered sporadic persecutions, mostly on a local level. It was under Emperor Diocletian that the most merciless persecutions occurred. Emperor Diocletian was ruthless in his dealings with Christians. In fact, he “ordered the destruction of church buildings, the burning of the scriptures, the closing of church meetings, and the imprisonment of Christians. Later, he made the refusal to sacrifice to the gods a capital crime” (Eckman, 2002, p.24). Diocletian stoked the fire of persecution to different levels of intensity until 313 when Emperor Constantine decreed freedom of worship in the empire.

It is instructive to point out that Christians were persecuted for various reasons. Perhaps foremost among the reasons was a mandate to worship the emperor, dead or alive. Christians regarded this as a sacrilege; they disobeyed the imperial edict. To the Roman authorities, the failure of Christians to worship the emperors was a serious political offence that should attract grave penalties. Secondly, Christians were variously accused of practicing cannibalism or indulging in incestuous relationships (Young, 2003, p.115). At other times they were charged with the offence of practicing witchcraft or belonging to secret cults. They were still punished even though there was no legitimate basis for the accusations. Finally, they were persecuted for fear of revolt. The threat was considered real,

especially as the Christians would like to refer to themselves as “soldiers of Christ” (Boer, 2003, p.47).

VI. Pockets of Persecution in Modern Times

Whereas Africa may be perceived as experiencing phenomenal growth in accessions to Christianity, today, the incidence of persecution is still a present reality, at least in certain parts of the continent. A case in point is that of Nigeria where religious violence has for about a decade unleashed untold sufferings on practitioners of the Christian faith, particularly in the Northern part of the country. The northern part of Nigeria is predominantly populated with Moslems. Many have had horrendous experiences simply because they identify with the group called Christians. Indeed it has been a litany of woes for some of the Christian adherents: properties lost or damaged and bodies maimed for life. For others they had to pay the supreme price with their lives. Lately, the incidence that took place in Jos, a hitherto peaceful state in the middle belt of Nigeria, could be replicated in many other states in northern Nigeria. Lateju and Adebayo (2006) succinctly describe the sickening display of violence by religious extremists: People who were not blown up by bullets were simply hacked down and their throat slit in the manner of slaughtering of animals. Many others were sprayed with petrol and then set ablaze. Several buildings and vehicles were razed in the mayhem.

Some Christian leaders who feel that they are at the receiving end of this orgy of violence are beginning to think that what is happening in that part of the country is a systematic attempt by Muslim extremists and their sponsors to eliminate the Christians. The incessant bloody clashes between Christians and Muslims in the north may have helped to reinforce this perception, which probably informed the following comment made by the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN): “CAN deems it proper to bring to the notice of both government and the general public that it can no longer continue to embrace peace when its members are being embarrassed, intimidated, maimed and killed by intolerant and fanatical Muslim faithful”(cited in Isiramen, 2010, p.334). CAN is an apex body of Christians in Nigeria.

Rightly or wrongly, Christians in the north believe that they are being persecuted by the Muslim majority in that part of the country.

This feeling seems to have found justification by a new wave of violence mainly targeted at Christians in many of the northern states.

VII. The Boko Haram Phenomenon

The term *Boko Haram* (which literally means “Western or non-Islamic education is a sin”) has become a vocabulary which has been added to the lexicon of violence in the African context. As commented by Bwala (2011): “The fear of Boko Haram is, to state the fact, the beginning of wisdom in some states of the northern part of Nigeria.” This extremist Islamic sect operates with obscene brutality. They target men and women, young and old, without discrimination in their diabolical mission. Even little children have been gruesomely murdered by these religious bigots.

Writing about the origin and history of *Boko Haram*, Shehu Sanni, who is a Muslim as well as a human rights advocate, states that it not clear whether the group actually called itself by that name. Thus he reveals that some people called “them *Yesufuya* sect but some called them *Jamaatu Ahlissunnah Lidda’awatiwal Jihad*, which they approved of” (Sanni, 2011, p.34). Despite the fact that they may prefer to be called by the latter, the appellation *Boko Haram* seems to have stuck and it sends jitters down the spine of many people. *Boko Haram* has a philosophy and an ideology: they consider anything western as an aberration or completely *unislamic*. In the same vein the group views the western influence on Islamic society as the basis of the religious weakness. Hence, their declaration that western education and indeed all western institutions is infidel. And the church is perceived by them as one of the most visible and corrupting agencies of western civilization.

It is little wonder then that the church has often been an object of attack in their unholy zeal to rid the society of western influence. Fanning the embers of fanaticism, *Boko Haram* has rendered many of the states in the north uninhabitable because of the fear of attacks. *Boko Haram* activities are entrenched in Borno, Yobe, Katsina, Kaduna, Bauchi, Gombe and Kano states – all in the north. Jos, particularly, has been a theatre of war. Predominantly Christian, Jos is no longer a “home of peace and tourism” (according to its state’s slogan). The activities of rampaging religious extremists have made many of its inhabitants (who incidentally are Christians) widows, widowers or orphans. The tell-tale signs of intolerance are seen

everywhere, especially in religious institutions which are either demolished or razed by fire. Even though the phenomenon of *Boko Haram* has been variously described as politically motivated or a symptom of ethnic rivalry, there seems to be more to it. Philip Dafes, who is the chairman of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), Plateau State chapter, opines that the crisis in Jos and in other states in the north is more of religion. He justifies his position by pointing out that there has been no political party office burnt or destroyed in the crisis. And that he knew “the names of churches that were burnt and pastors that were killed. There is also an undertone of territorial expansion” (Dafes, 2011, p.52).

For some of the Christian leaders in Nigeria the phenomenon of *Boko Haram* is but a tip of an orchestrated plan to islamize Nigeria. Therefore, this anarchist religious sect should be resisted, even if it means Christians resorting to the use of violence. The call to abandon peace by some of the Christian leaders in the face of intimidation, destruction of property and lives has definitely contributed little or nothing to the efforts to douse the incessant crisis in many of the northern states in Nigeria. It has probably made the crisis snowball. The situation is quite testing. But can Christians legitimately employ violence as a strategy for defending their turf? Or is it ever proper for Christians to resort to violence even when provoked and still be able to fulfill the gospel mandate of evangelizing the world?

VIII. Implications for the Church Today

It is interesting to observe that despite the great persecution that the early church experienced it continued to wax strong and grow numerically. As a result of the phenomenal growth of the early church, Tertullian had exclaimed triumphantly: “We are but of yesterday, and we have filled every place among you – cities, islands, fortresses, towns, market places, the very camp, tribes, companies, palace, senate, forum – and we have left nothing to you but the temples of your gods” (cited in Wolff, 2007, p.236). This is quite amazing: the suffering church waxing strong in the face of severe persecutions. Tertullian was talking about the fledgling Christian church which had spread to practically everywhere, despite all odds. Several implications could be drawn from this for the contemporary church.

A. The Power of Non-Violent Action

Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. have been described as two giants of non-violent struggle (King, 1999). Gandhi, on one hand, led a kind of liberation movement to free India from British imperialism through non-violence. On the other hand King Jr., a civil rights advocate, adopted the same method as a form of social protests and mobilization for legal reforms. Insightfully, Gandhi realized that to win a lasting victory over the myriads of evils bedeviling the society, one should fight the aggression, not the aggressor. In other words, hate the sin, not the sinner; or simply put, hate suppression but not the suppressor. Gandhi (1993, p.276) perceptively concluded that failure to understand this precept is what causes the “poison of hatred” to spread.

Interestingly, Gandhi was partly influenced by his contact with Christianity to adopt the non-violent approach. He read the Sermon on the Mount in the Bible. Long before Gandhi and King Jr., the early church had already realized that there is potency in the biblical principle of non-violence to disarm the aggressor. If the early church had taken up arms against imperial Rome, the church properly would have been destroyed at infancy. But on the contrary, it adopted the non-violent approach and surprisingly conquered in apparent weakness. That is what is probably needed in northern Nigeria and in other areas where Christians are suffering one form of persecution or the other.

The experience of two Adventist pastors in two of the most crisis-ridden states in northern Nigeria is worth considering.¹ David Onowah had been a pastor in Jos metropolis before he was recently transferred to Keffi District in Nasarawa state. He witnessed the mayhem and the wanton destruction of properties (mostly churches) and lives by religious extremists. There were reprisal attacks by Christians too. In all of this the Adventist churches were spared. Somehow there was the perception that Adventists were peace-loving people. Thus they were bracketed out of the circle of violence and the series of attacks and counterattacks by Muslims and Christians. Ezekiel Luka Zakiri had a similar story to share. He pastors in Lafia district, also in Nasarawa state. He says that the Muslims in Kano, a hotbed of religious extremism, feel free to share food with some of their Adventist neighbors because of the perception that they are pacifists.

It is a truism that violence begets violence. For the Christian, whatever may be the perceived injustice, physical violence will scarcely produce the desired resolution of the matter. It would rather aggravate the evil. The non-violent method for stymieing hatred and evil possesses a potency that is least realized in contemporary Christianity. The early Christians probably understood it, hence they were willing to sacrifice their lives in the face of persecutions. Indeed true evangelism is impossible where hatred and violence hold sway. But adopting the non-violent approach to persecution will prevent the “poison of hatred” to spread, thus paving the way for effective mission efforts.

B. Suffering for Christ

The words that Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in his celebrated book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, set the tone of his life, generally. He perceptively reveals that “cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, *grace without the cross...*” (Bonhoeffer, 1995, pp.44-45, italics added). Of course, Bonhoeffer, who suffered the fate of a martyr during the despotic reign of Adolf Hitler in Germany, believed in grace, but not the caricatured type of grace that justifies the sin without justifying the sinner. He lived his life (especially the later part) in line with the belief that grace is not cheap. Hence, he could say “grace is costly because it cost God the life of his Son: ‘Ye were bought at a price,’ and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us” (Bonhoeffer, 1995, p.45). And following the tradition of the martyrs in the early church, Bonhoeffer was willing to pay the ultimate price for the triumph of the gospel in Germany. He was willing to suffer for Christ. The call to martyrdom is certainly not a call to every Christian today; but no true follower of the crucified Christ is immune to suffering because “all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution” (2 Tim.3:12).

With the advent of Pentecostalism on the religious terrain, mission and ministry have experienced a shift in paradigm. The emphasis appears to have shifted from taking up the cross to the wearing of the crown as a present reality. So much is being preached about material comfort and prosperity that the cross, a symbol of suffering and self-denial, is either totally lost in the scramble for worldly pleasures or

relegated to the position of a footnote. Metaphorically, the martyrs would squirm in their graves were they to see how, to a large extent, the cross has been reduced to a relic that is marginally relevant to many professing Christians. Perhaps this may be the reason why the gospel seems to have lost its power to impact positively the secular world. The potency of the cross nevertheless remains intact. As Paul rightly pointed out “the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Cor. 1:18).

C. Unfeigned Love

It is quite paradoxical that the incidence of splinters and schisms seems to be more pronounced in territories where there is relative freedom of worship. One would expect the congenial environment provided by freedom of worship to naturally promote love and understanding among the religious faithful. On the contrary, there has been a kind of intra-faith rivalry among adherents of Christianity. The churches are more interested in “defending their turf” than reflecting the love of Christ that knows no barriers. The proliferation of churches in Africa is perhaps not so much because of theological differences as it is a way of laying claim to ownership of all assorted types of ministry or religious institutions. This has not augured well for Christian mission on the continent. It has led to the balkanization of the church with the attendant problem of undermining true Christian witness. One of the negative fallouts of this scenario is the gradual disappearance of unfeigned love. There may be a semblance of it, but the type of love described by Paul, which “suffers long and is kind...does not seek its own...bears all things...endures all things” (1 Cor.13:4-7) is in the wane.

Today, not so many Christians want to bear many things, let alone all things for the sake of the gospel. There seems to be a strong spirit of self-seeking that expresses itself in self-aggrandizement. The early church was actuated by a different spirit. Little wonder her impact was felt in the early centuries of the Christian church. The pagan emperor Julian (c.331-363) was moved to pay a glowing tribute to the power of Christian love. Erroneously referring to Christian believers as “atheists” and “godless Galileans”, he opined that “Atheism (i.e. Christian faith) has been specially advanced through the loving service rendered to strangers and through their care for the burial of the dead” (cited in Young, 2003, p.205). He was surprised that there

was hardly a single Jew who lived as a beggar. They were adequately catered for by their fellow Jews who were Christians. But that was not the case among the Romans who looked with disdain at the poor.

The selfless loving character of the early church was so compelling that the pagan Emperor had to admit its uniqueness. The early Christians did not confine their loving deeds to those within their ranks; they extended their labor of love to strangers and even to “enemies”. This kind of love, which indeed is *agape*, has the potential to break down walls of prejudice; it conquers the object to which it is directed. That was what happened in the early church; even the pagan emperors found it irresistible.

Christian apologist, Tertullian, captured the mood of many pagans in Rome, who declared, “See how these Christians love one another!” (cited in Price and Collins, 1999, p.39). This was a heartwarming testimony about the Christians of the early church, especially coming from the lips of pagans. They were certainly impressed by the charitable deeds of the early church, which extended to the widows, the aged, the orphans, the sick and the ostracized. The early church was intimately involved in activities that would alleviate the suffering of humanity.

It is true that the story of Christianity has often been marred by selfishness but the fact remains that the hallmark of the true church is the demonstration of unfeigned love to both friend and foe. It has been recognized that this type of love (*agape*) – self-giving, sacrificial love – is the unique contribution of Christianity to the world (Young, 2003, p.165). Tony Bridge drew a sharp contrast between *agape* love and other ideals worshipped by their votaries in other religions. He says, “Other civilizations have assumed no such thing. Courage, stoic endurance, the search for wisdom, intellectual integrity, strength, detachment – these are the virtues normally worshipped by mankind and preached by his many religions. And love is a contradiction of many of them” (cited in Young, 2003, p.166). The contemporary Christian church will do well to know the difference. Unselfish love conquered the world of the early centuries of the Christian church; it is still capable of doing same in the world of today.

Indeed, Richard Wurmbrand, who spent fourteen grueling years of torture and suffering in a Communist prison, reports the power of selfless love. He writes: “A flower, if you bruise it under your feet, rewards you by giving you its perfume” (Wurmbrand, 1989, p.69). Wurmbrand’s experience with the communists is revealing. By rewarding their torturers with love they were able to conquer them.

Indeed they were able to bring many of their jailers to Christ. Perhaps what the world needs most is this type of revolutionary love to detoxify the poison of hatred that has made life, for many, an unbearable burden.

IX. Conclusion

To many Christian adherents, today, the idea of martyrdom and a suffering church is nauseating. It resonates with a feeling of abhorrence. The reason for this attitude is not farfetched. Like Jackson admittedly pointed out: “We often shy away from martyr stories because we are troubled by suffering” (Jackson, 2005, p.xiv). The truth of the matter is that not many Christians would gladly embrace the torture that is involved in being tied to a stake or relish being consumed by leaping tongues of fire amidst a jeering crowd of onlookers. Seldom would one encounter any believer whose death wish is to be thrown into the mouth of hungry lions. These are nightmarish scenes that many of the martyrs in the early church actually experienced!

Human nature naturally recoils from such inhuman treatment. Fortunately, not every believer would be called to suffer the martyr’s death. But there is the salutary aspect of suffering, especially when believers are “persecuted for righteousness sake” (Matt.5:10). Suffering impacts the church positively because “God uses the persecution of Christians ...to purify His bride, to refine them as gold” (Jackson, 2005, p.xiv). Persecution eliminates complacency or lukewarmness. One may indeed conceive trial as “part of the education given in the school of Christ, to purify God’s children from the dross of earthliness” (White, 1970, p.554). Thus Christians should neither shy away nor court persecution. The radiance of Christ’s glory shines never so much, with undiminished luster, as it does in the suffering church.

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¹This experience was relayed to me on August 2, 2011 by Pastors David Onowah and Ezekiel Luka Zakiri. Both of them have ministered in some of the most combustible states in northern Nigeria. Jos and Nasarawa states are prone to religious intolerance and violence. Their experience indicates that the pacifist approach is more effective in resolving religious conflict by Christians.