

Student Work

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Persecution: Necessary or Inevitable?

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Persecution: Necessary or Inevitable?

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Tim Martin

This article was first written as a paper for a senior level capstone course called, “Calling, Task, and Culture” where a group of students wrestled with the awareness and response to persecuted Christians around the world.

Questions involving how we as Christians should respond to persecution are difficult ones to address. The first step, of course, is to lay the problem out on the table rather than ignoring; to that end, our group was called not “Persecuted Christians”, but rather “Forgotten Christians”. Although such a title may not be completely accurate, given the Christian organizations already dedicated to helping the persecuted, the money sent to help persecuted Christians, and the increased news coverage on persecution as late, it is nevertheless true that persecution still gets less attention than it should. Even when persecution is addressed, the usual responses are either “give money” or “pray”. Although neither of these responses is bad, they fail to look broadly enough at the problem of persecution or to ask the difficult questions, such as “Is persecution necessary?” and “What is the value of persecution for the Church?” Asking such questions in our mentor group helped me to think about persecution in a more serious way and to not simply find easy answers; although I did not always agree others in the class or even my working group, debating with my classmates and confronting the tension between the evils of persecution and the its value for Christian growth helped to clarify my own views on persecution and my reasons for them, as well as to see persecution as more than an evil thing.

If there was one moment that elucidated my own view on persecution, it was when someone asked during our presentation to the diversity group “Should we say that persecution is necessary or rather that it is inevitable?” This small shift in nuance expressed exactly what I felt on persecution, but until then had been unable to articulate effectively. Yes, God allows persecution; yes, the Scripture says that we can expect persecution if we are truly following Christ; yes, persecution can build the Church and strengthen our own Christian character. But that does not mean we ought to be afraid to truly try to eliminate persecution. We will never completely succeed because persecution is inevitable in a sinful world, where there are many who are enemies of Christ. But it is only impossible because this is a sinful world. Persecution is inevitable only in the same sense that disease, famine, and human trafficking are inevitable. And although, like all those things, God can use it for good, we still have a responsibility to stop it if we can.

Yet, although persecution is an evil and needs to be addressed, we must still make sure we address it on God’s term. Although I disagree with the majority of our sub-group that we should focus on reducing the injustice associated with persecution rather than the persecution itself (given that persecution is by definition unjust and this injustice can’t just be separated out from the persecution), I would nevertheless admit that intervention – especially military intervention – is not always the best (or even a God-honoring) approach. We are told to love our enemies and pray for our persecutors, not to kill them. Although there may be times when military intervention by a government is necessary in order to restore justice (which is the government’s role), it is important to weigh the costs before military intervention is used and to see if there are better, perhaps more Christ-like, ways of handling the situation.

It is also important to recognize that, while persecution is an evil, God does indeed work through it, and in fact, seems to use it as one of his greatest tools for building the Church. Although persecution is an evil and we need not fear stopping it out of some misguided belief that we are hurting the Church by doing so,

nevertheless, we need not make ending persecution our main or only goal in helping forgotten Christians. As our sub-group discussed, sometimes by just being there for them and showing solidarity, we can help Christians overseas to get through persecution and grow in their faith through it, even if we have no good way to stop the persecution. Likewise, prayer can leave room for God's work in using (or stopping) persecution, rather than giving us a feeling that the ultimate burden is on us and that we can address persecution on our own. Proper prayer can guide our actions in response to persecution, so that they are in line with God's will.

In sum, then, I believe that a proper response to persecution should seek to eliminate it, while recognizing that this goal will never be reached on this earth. Many times, we may not be able to reduce the persecution itself, simply due to practical difficulties and moral boundaries that we must follow in our response to persecution. This needs not concern us; if God has put barriers in our path, then perhaps it is because he is using persecution to strengthen and sanctify the church in that instance; whatever the case is, we are simply called to serve, helping the persecuted in every way possible and being there for them. Any response we make must take into consideration not just physical needs, but the spiritual building of the church and the growth of God's kingdom. Through prayerful consideration of the situation and our response, we should let God guide us into appropriate action that will look different for each one of us.

Dig Deeper

Throughout this week, iAt has been focusing on persecuted Christians and how we are called to respond. On Monday, Charles Veenstra started the discussion with "[My Brother, My Sister](#)" in asking how Christians should respond to persecuted Christians. Joel Veldkamp continued the discussion with an insightful and in depth article, "[Seeing the World Through the Eyes of Persecuted Christians.](#)" Tomorrow Donald Roth will ask the question, "What is Religious Liberty?"