

Hedonists and Martyrs

by Anton Bosch

The speaker challenges the idea that Christianity is a faith that promises carnal happiness and popularity, arguing that the true Christian faith is one that expects suffering and persecution.

Scripture: 2 Timothy 3:12

Topics: "Persecution", "Suffering"

Description

Anton Bosch delves into the lessons we can learn from church history, emphasizing the presence of true believers and churches throughout the darkest times, their small numbers and persecution. He highlights the various sources of persecution faced by believers over the centuries, from the Jews to the Roman government, the Roman church, Reformation leaders, and modern-day persecutors like Muslims and Communists. Despite the historical evidence and biblical warnings about persecution, many Christians in the 'Free World' still expect popularity and comfort, contrasting sharply with the suffering endured by true believers throughout history.

Transcript

While reviewing church history recently I was reminded of some of the things we should learn from history. But before I share those with you, I want to remind you that what normally passes for church history is the history of the apostate church (lower case "c"). The history of the true Church is not normally taught in Bible schools and seminaries except for a passing mention to the little groups of true believers that were a thorn in the side of the institutional churches.

The following are the central truths we learn from Church history:

Even in the darkest hours of the last 2,000 years there have always been true believers and true Churches in this world.

The real Church has always been small in numbers and poor in political power, finances and popularity.

True churches and believers have always been persecuted.

It is on this third point I want to dwell for a few minutes: Persecution has come from many different sources, even though the ultimate source remains Satan and his forces.

The Jews, initially under the leadership of Saul of Tarsus, persecuted and killed believers beginning with Stephen. Of course Jesus was the first "Christian" martyr, and before the New Testament many prophets were also brutally killed by Israel because of their message.

The Roman government persecuted and brutally martyred the believers for almost 300 years until Constantine in 312AD.

Immediately after 312 the Roman church took over from the Roman government and began to persecute believers who did not submit to their authority. Persecution under the Church of Rome continued for the next 1700 years right up to the present, reaching its peak during the inquisition (c. 1200 to c. 1600). It is very difficult to find an accurate estimate of the numbers of people killed by the Roman church but the best studies indicate a number of around 80 million Christians in addition to witches and others killed by Rome!¹

Even while Rome was killing Protestants, the Reformation leaders were torturing and killing Anabaptists and other believers who disagreed with them. Just one of many to die at the hand of the Reformers was Michael Sattler, a true believer. "He was shamefully mutilated in different parts of the town, then brought to the gate, and what remained of him thrown on the fire, His wife and some other Christian women were drowned, and a number of brethren who were with him in prison were beheaded."² Most of the Protestant leaders, including Luther and Zwingli, engaged in the most severe and cruel torture and murder of anyone who disagreed with them but the most vicious of all was Calvin. In Geneva he institutionalized torture and death as a legitimate means to change people's views and purge the "church" of dissenters.

In addition there are the massive persecutions of Christians, many still ongoing, by Muslims, Chinese Governments, Communists and all sorts of other unbelievers right across the world. Just recently I was shocked to hear that a friend, and former colleague, as well as two women, were brutally killed and mutilated by Satanists in South Africa, making them (as far as I know) the first martyrs to die for the faith in South Africa. It is estimated that today³, more Christians in the world are being persecuted than are free to worship the true God. A comprehensive Pew Forum study last year found that Christians are persecuted in 131 countries containing 70 percent of the world's population. Other studies indicate that between 100,000 and 200,000 Christians are being martyred for their faith every year⁴ and that around 200 million Christians are denied fundamental human rights because of their faith.

All this should not come as a surprise since the New Testament is replete with statements that persecution would be the norm for Christians. In Jesus' first mention about the Church he spoke of the war that would be brought against His Church. "...on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it." (Matthew 16:18). Paul said: "Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution." (2 Timothy 3:12). And Peter said "Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you" (1 Peter 4:12).

In spite of the evidence of history and the plain teaching of the Bible, the vast majority of Christians in the so-called "Free World", still believe that it is the right of Christians to be popular, fairly treated and respected and that a "happy" life should be the norm for believers.

But as I read again about how most true Christians have been mistreated and how they lived as vagabonds and fugitives throughout the last two millennia, I began to think about my own life and how easily I complain about the relatively minor inconveniences and rejection I experience because of the truth. I felt ashamed that I dare complain when thousands, right now, are experiencing the most extreme

physical pain, emotional anguish and death for the sake of the Gospel. Who am I to grumble when I am free to come and go, live in relative comfort and enjoy the company of my wife while others are in prison, being tortured and killed?

But I also thought about how easily many stay away from the gathering of believers because it is too hot, too cold, or they are too tired because of watching TV or partying too late on Saturday night. I struggle to reconcile this picture with the one of men and women being torn apart by dogs, their limbs pulled from their bodies on the rack and the smell of burning human flesh on the fires of the persecutors. I struggle to understand how some are unwilling to give up their sinful pleasures when millions have to give up their very lives.

I struggle to understand how the pleasure-centered and self-centered "Christian" of the West can claim to share a common faith with the martyrs. I struggle to understand how preachers who preach a gospel of happiness, prosperity and popularity believe that their message is the same message that was preached by the faithful minority of the last 2,000 years, who like the prophets of old: "...had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented - of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth." (Hebrews 11:36-38).

Can the faith that results in persecution, torture, and death be the same faith that promises carnal happiness, a new Mercedes and popularity? Can the faith that pursues pleasure, comfort and earthly happiness be the same faith that counts it a privilege to suffer for His name? Will the hedonist⁵ and the martyr share the same heaven?

1. David A Plaisted. Estimates of the Number Killed by the Papacy in the Middle Ages and Later. 2006.
2. E. H. Broadbent. The Pilgrim Church. Gospel Folio Press. Grand Rapids, MI. 1999. p182.
3. October 2012
4. David B. Barrett, Todd M. Johnson, and Peter F. Crossing in their 2009 report in the International Bulletin of Missionary Research (Vol. 33, No. 1: 32) say the figure is about 200,000 per year and rising.
5. Hedonist = a person whose life is devoted to the pursuit of pleasure and self-gratification.

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