



Message: “The Pattern of Persecution”

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## The Pattern of Persecution

Generally, those who bear witness to Jesus Christ unashamedly are open to persecution. The organization Open Doors defines persecution as “any hostility experienced as a result of identification with Christ.”

A helpful place to begin when trying to define persecution is to see how the term is used in the Scriptures themselves. The Greek and Hebrew words often translated as "persecute" typically carry a sense of serious violence, aggression and hostility or the threat of such.

**Cognate:** **1375** *diōgmós* (from [1377](#) /*diōkō*, "follow, pursue") – properly, pursuit (chase); *persecution* – literally, "the *hunt* to bring someone down like an animal," trying to suppress (punish) their convictions. [See 1377](#) (*diōkō*).

[1375](#) /*diōgmós* ("religious persecution") literally refers to those seeking to *punish God's messengers with a vengeance* – like a *hunter* trying to conquer (obliterate) someone as their "catch."

[[1375](#) (*diōgmós*) is used in ancient and biblical Greek for *persecution* (hostility) shown by confused, spiritual "leaders." For example, it applies to the Roman Emperor, Decius (A.D. 250-251). He killed thousands of Christians who refused to offer sacrifices in his name.

**1377** *diōkō* – properly, *aggressively* chase, like a *hunter* pursuing a catch (prize). [1377](#) (*diōkō*) is used *positively* ("earnestly pursue") and *negatively* ("zealously persecute, hunt down"). In each case, [1377](#) (*diōkō*) means *pursue with all haste* ("chasing" after), *earnestly* desiring to overtake (apprehend).

Glenn Penner had some interesting thoughts on his blog: The term “*thilipis*,” means to "oppress or afflict" (Matt. 24: 9; Acts 3:14; 2 Cor. 1:5; 4:10).

A large part of the problem of defining persecution has to do with a common misunderstanding as to what exactly it is. To many, persecution conjures up images of extreme violence, martyrdoms, imprisonments, and torture. Two points need to be made:

First, it is worth remembering that persecution on a country-wide scale has been rare both now and throughout history. In most countries, violent persecution tends to be focused in specific, often remote, areas where religious tensions have been enflamed for one reason or another. Hence, believers in one city may never experience violence for their faith, while in another location Christians are being beaten and driven from their homes.

Second, persecution as a term needs to be understood in its biblical sense. Persecution in the Bible manifests itself within a broad spectrum ranging from mildly hostile to intensely hostile

actions. These actions range from ridicule, restriction, certain kinds of harassment, or discrimination on one end of the spectrum to torture, imprisonment, ostracism, or killing on the other. (See Matthew 6:11-12, Luke 6:22; 2 Corinthians 11:23-29; James 1:2, for example.)



We need to see persecution as the Bible sees it, within a wide spectrum of hostility. We need to see the Body of Christ as one Body; not a Persecuted Church and a Free Church.

Let's listen to some Scripture:

- [Matthew 5 :12](#) Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.
- [John 15 :18](#) If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you.
- [John 15 :20](#) Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also.
- [Romans 8 :35](#) Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?
- [1-Corinthians 4 :12](#) And labor, working with our own hands: being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we suffer it:
- [2-Corinthians 12 :10](#) Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.
- [1-Thessalonians 3 :4](#) For verily, when we were with you, we told you before that we should suffer tribulation; even as it came to pass, and ye know.
- [Hebrews 10 :33](#) Partly, whilst ye were made a gazingstock both by reproaches and afflictions; and partly, whilst ye became companions of them that were so used.
- [1-Peter 4 :16](#) Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf.

### [Understanding persecution from a biblical perspective](#)

Hence, persecution might be best defined, from a scriptural perspective, as ***any unjust action by authorities, individuals, or crowds of varying levels of hostility perpetrated primarily on the basis of religion and directed at Christians, resulting in varying levels of harm (ranging from ridicule, restriction, certain kinds of harassment, or discrimination to torture, imprisonment, ostracism, murder, and execution) as it is considered from the victim's perspective.*** (See Charles Tieszen, "Towards redefining persecution" International Journal for Religious Freedom Vol 1:1 2008: 76).

Ronald Boyd-MacMillan suggests a similar (though simpler) definition: ***Christian persecution is any hostility experienced from the world, as a result of one's identification with Christ. This can include hostile feelings, attitude, words, or actions*** (from Faith That Endures. Revell, 2006: 114).

Persecution typically arises because of a difference that comes from being a Christian that the persecutor will not tolerate. When faced with situations where it is difficult to determine whether this is a situation of persecution or general suffering, it is often helpful to ask, "If a person had other religious beliefs or would change their religion to the majority religion of the country,

would things get better for them? Is this persecution or group specifically suffering because they are Christians?" If the answer is "yes," then it seems that this would be a situation where persecution is taking place. If the answer is "no" and that they would be suffering regardless of what they believe in, then the situation is likely one where persecution is not taking place.

Posted by Glenn Penner at [Saturday, December 27, 2008](http://theologyofpersecution.blogspot.com/2008/12/understanding-persecution-from-biblical.html)

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Today, we might consider those controlling culture by force and people gradually giving up their freedoms either by acquiescing or voting them away. We must always be on guard against losing freedom by suicide.

Now let's consider JESUS. He was reproached, rejected, falsely accused, conspired against by those who would entrap Him; pursued, hated, betrayed, denied (Peter), interrogated, spit upon, beaten, whipped, put on trial, crucified, died, and was buried.

Let's consider the cost of following Jesus: Read Matthew 10:16-33; Acts 1:8. A witness is something we are. Witnessing is something we do. We are witnesses before a watching world. We testify by our lives and character. We proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ unashamedly.

The word is "martureo." It means to bear witness. Stephen was stoned; James the brother of John was killed. We read of Paul in 2 Corinthians 11:16-33.

The stereotypical martyr is a hero, a somewhat known person devoted to a cause, who encounters people opposing that cause. The risk is foreseeable due to commitment to the cause. In spite of this, the person continues out of his/her courage and commitment. Opponents kill the person because of their refusal to repent of their commitment. People respond by calling the person a hero or martyr; these people become inspired to their own personal courage and commitment to the cause. Characteristics of a martyr: patient, perseverant, loyal, joyful in suffering, and bold in witness; willing to endure torture and suffer death; die for faith in Jesus Christ and not necessarily for a social cause, though a just cause.

**"In the Early Church, persecution included exclusion from certain areas, reproach, and torture. "And first they nobly endured the evils...hootings and blows, draggings, plunderings, stonings, and confinements, and everything that an infuriated mob is wont to perpetrate against those whom they deem bitter enemies. And at length, being brought to the forum by the tribune of the soldiers, and the magistrates that had charge of the city, they were examined in presence of the whole multitude; and having confessed, they were shut up in prison until the arrival of the governor... the proto-martyrs were decided and ready, and accomplished the confession of their testimony." (The Letter of the Churches of Vienna and Lugdunum to the Churches of Asia and Phrygia) *Martyrs of the Faith*. © 2013 Mary Craig Ministries, Inc.**

**We can make some comparisons between the life of Jesus and Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, disciple of the Apostle John:**

- (7.2-3) Polycarp serving as a host for a final meal and agonizing in Prayer before his arrest (Matthew 26:36-46)
- (8.1) Escorted back to Smyrna on a donkey (Matthew 21:1-11)
- (9.2-10.1) Interrogation by a high Roman authority (John 18: 28)

- (6.1-2) Betrayal by a friend, Judas figure (Matthew 26: 47-49)
  - (8.2-3) Interrogation by Herod (Luke 23: 6-12)
  - (7.2) Host at a final meal (Matthew 26: 17-29)
  - (12.2-13.1) Jews inciting death of Polycarp (John 19:12-16)
  - (5.1) Prayer for churches (John 17: 1-26) Ibid. page 16
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- One of John's spiritual sons, Polycarp, was born about 69 A.D. He lived in Smyrna and learned much by listening to John. Polycarp became a leader of the church at Smyrna, and in many ways his character reflected that of his teacher. He had the same noble Christian spirit, full of gentleness, yet inflexible in speaking out against error.
  - The Church at Smyrna, of which Polycarp was the bishop, was one of those addressed by Christ in the *Revelation*. Christ told them that persecution was about to come upon them and promised a crown of life to those who were faithful unto death. The promise was undoubtedly repeated by Polycarp to many in his flock to encourage them as the Romans hauled them off to face wild beasts or death by fire.
  - When the authorities searched for Polycarp, friends persuaded him to leave the city and hide in a farm-house. There he spent his time in prayer. A letter written by the Church of Smyrna told that: "while praying he fell into a trance three days before his capture; and he saw his pillow burning with fire. And he turned and said to those that were with him, 'it must be that I shall be burned alive'
  - "When his pursuers were on his track he went to another farm-house. Finding him gone they put two slave boys to the torture, and one of them betrayed his place of concealment. Herod, head of the police, sent a body of men to arrest him on Friday evening. Escape was still possible, but the old man refused to flee, saying, "the will of God be done". He came down to meet his pursuers, conversed affably with them, and ordered food to be set before them. While they were eating he prayed, 'remembering all, high and low, who at any time had come in his way, and the Catholic Church throughout the world.' Then he was led away."
  - The proconsul (an important magistrate) ordered Polycarp to renounce Christ and give obedience to Caesar as Lord. Polycarp answered: "Eighty and six years have I served Christ, nor has He ever done me any harm. How, then, could I blaspheme my King who saved me? You threaten the fire that burns for an hour and then is quenched; but you know not of the fire of the judgment to come, and the fire of eternal punishment. Bring what you will."
  - Polycarp, the last one of those personally taught by the apostles, was burned at the stake on this day, February 23, 155. As the Lord required, Polycarp was faithful unto death; he did so in expectation that he would receive a crown of life from Christ."  
(<http://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1-300/old-bishop-polycarp-11629599.html>) Dan Graves author Ibid. pages 16, 17.
  - In the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, it says of him that his was a martyrdom becoming the gospel. Here is a small portion of the account:
  - But when they were about also to fix him with nails, he said, "Leave me as I am; for He that gives me strength to endure the fire, will also enable me, without your securing me by nails, to remain without moving in the pile." They did not nail him then, but simply bound him. And he, placing his hands behind him, and being bound like a distinguished ram [taken] out of a great flock for sacrifice, and prepared to be an acceptable burnt-offering unto God, looked up to heaven, and said, "O Lord God Almighty, the Father of your beloved and blessed Son Jesus Christ, by whom we have received the knowledge of You, the God of angels and powers, and of every creature, and of the whole race of the righteous who live before you, I give You thanks that You have counted me, worthy of

this day and this hour, that I should have a part in the number of Your martyrs, in the cup of your Christ, to the resurrection of eternal life, both of soul and body, through the incorruption [imparted] by the Holy Ghost. Among whom may I be accepted this day before You as a fat and acceptable sacrifice, according as You, the ever-truthful God, hast foreordained, hast revealed beforehand to me, and now hast fulfilled. Wherefore also I praise You for all things, I bless You, I glorify You, along with the everlasting and heavenly Jesus Christ, Your beloved Son, with whom, to You, and the Holy Ghost, be glory both now and to all coming ages. Amen."

- When he had pronounced this *amen*, and so finished his prayer, those who were appointed for the purpose kindled the fire. And as the flame blazed forth in great fury, we, to whom it was given to witness it, beheld a great miracle, and have been preserved that we might report to others what then took place. For the fire, shaping itself into the form of an arch, like the sail of a ship when filled with the wind, encompassed as by a circle the body of the martyr. And he appeared within not like flesh which is burnt, but as bread that is baked, or as gold and silver glowing in a furnace. Moreover, we perceived such a sweet odour [coming from the pile], as if frankincense or some such precious spices had been smoking there.
- At length, when those wicked men perceived that his body could not be consumed by the fire, they commanded an executioner to go near and pierce him through with a dagger. And on his doing this, there came forth a dove, and a great quantity of blood, so that the fire was extinguished; and all the people wondered that there should be such a difference between the unbelievers and the elect, of whom this most admirable Polycarp was one, having in our own times been an apostolic and prophetic teacher, and bishop of the Catholic Church which is in Smyrna. For every word that went out of his mouth either has been or shall yet be accomplished.
- ...For, having through patience overcome the unjust governor, and thus acquired the crown of immortality, he now, with the apostles and all the righteous [in heaven], rejoicingly glorifies God, even the Father, and blesses our Lord Jesus Christ, the Saviour of our souls, the Governor of our bodies, and the Shepherd of the Catholic Church throughout the world. Ibid. p.19, 20

We are not to be surprised by backlash whenever we bear testimony of Jesus Christ—who He is, what He came to do, that He is coming back. We are to be shrewd yet innocent. The Holy Spirit will give us what to speak. Don't be surprised by hatred; focus on enduring to the end. Prepare for persecution but there is no need for a "persecution complex." Fear God more. Know that confessing Christ before people means being confessed before the Father and holy elect angels by Jesus. Also know that whoever denies Jesus before people will likewise be denied. Be loyal to Jesus and attached supremely to Him. Persecution promotes the witness. We confess without mouth what we believe in our hearts. Let's keep our focus. With our eyes on the prize, and as God gives grace and power, let's rejoice. When we confess Christ, we are bearing Him witness.

Are we a threat to the Devil? If not, then maybe we have stopped talking.

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