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Persecution and Submission

Scripture: Acts 4:1–7

Code: B141119

Is persecution *good* for the church? We've seen the blessings and fruit of persecution for individual believers—that it proves the quality of our faith and directs our focus to eternity. But what about the church?

Church-Wide Benefits of Persecution

There are at least two corporate benefits persecution brings to local churches and the church at large. First, persecution narrows the focus of the church. There's no time to chase trends and cater to worldly "seekers" when you live under the threat of violent persecution. In fact, there's no point in trying to make the church attractive to the world, since no amount of pomp and misdirection can entice a person to intentionally invite persecution. All pseudo-evangelistic trickery immediately goes out the window—it can't hold up under the weight of fierce oppression and suffering.

Second, persecution purges the church of easy-believism, nominal Christianity, the prosperity gospel, and all sorts of other worldly influences and distractions. When it's no longer convenient or lucrative to call yourself a Christian, many false believers will abandon the church. What's left will be a purer body of believers, more useful and more effective for the sake of God's life-transforming gospel.

That's because when persecution comes to the church, true believers don't flee. Nor do they fight back against the persecution, or try to protest or legislate it away. Instead, authentic Christians *submit* to persecution.

The Pattern of the Persecuted

Beginning today, we're going to discuss the biblical model for dealing with persecution. Specifically, we're going to consider the example of the early church in Acts, and how they responded to the persecution they faced within the first weeks of the church's existence.

Acts 4 begins with the arrest of Peter and John for preaching the gospel and the resurrection of Christ, and healing a crippled man outside the temple in Jerusalem.

As they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to them, being greatly disturbed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. And they laid hands on them and put them in jail until the next day, for it was already evening. (Acts 4:1-3)

In verse five, the story picks up the following morning as they were brought up for trial.

On the next day, their rulers and elders and scribes were gathered together in Jerusalem; and Annas the high priest was there, and Caiaphas and John and Alexander, and all who were of high-priestly descent. When they had placed them in the center, they began to inquire, “By what power, or in what name, have you done this?” (Acts 4:5-7)

In a sense, pointing out the apostles’ submission in that passage is an argument from silence. Nowhere does Scripture indicate that they struggled against their captors or fought against their detention. But in that silence is a notable lack of resistance, especially from Peter, who just weeks earlier lopped off a Roman soldier’s ear in a misguided attempt to protect Christ from arrest. It’s clear that in the intervening days, his attitudes about submission and self-defense changed significantly.

That pattern of submission repeats throughout the New Testament. The apostles frequently faced legal and physical repercussions for their ministries. Many of them suffered long imprisonments, vicious beatings, and ultimately martyrdom. Yet in every instance, they faithfully submitted to wicked authorities and their unjust punishments. The pattern in the early church was not to avoid or fight persecution, but to submit to it, trusting in God to sovereignly work through it to accomplish His purposes.

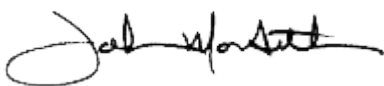
Submitting to the Sanhedrin

For their trial, Peter and John were brought before Israel’s ruling body, the Sanhedrin. It was a group of the most influential Jewish leaders—priests, scribes, elders, and other officers. Luke (the author of Acts) gives us some indication of the makeup of the Sanhedrin in the names he recorded. Each of those men likely belonged to the same ruling family, related by blood or by marriage. By singling them out, Luke emphasizes the corrupt power structure of the Sanhedrin’s oligarchy.

It’s important to remember this is the same group of dignitaries, rulers, and VIPs who condemned Christ to death at the hands of the Romans just weeks earlier. The same wickedness that led them to reject and crucify Jesus was now leading them to stamp out the influence of His followers. In fact, they knew that the apostles were telling the truth when they preached Christ’s resurrection, and yet they were prepared to go to great lengths to silence that truth.

Perhaps no other group in Israel was in greater need of hearing the clear call of the gospel. And through their submission, Peter and John were perfectly positioned to preach the truth to this kangaroo court. Their quiet confidence in God’s sovereignty provided them with an important gospel opportunity before the Sanhedrin.

What did Peter and John do with that opportunity? We’ll look at that next time, and how it illustrates another key aspect of biblically responding to persecution.



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