

A Place for Persecution

Many American Christians are responding in fear to the idea that we are under attack by the enemy. There is a concern that the way of life envisioned by Christians is in jeopardy, and it goes something like this: *Muslims are evil and out to get us. Gay people are out to get us. Our good, Christian people are being sidelined while our Christian nation is unduly influenced by other religions and liberalism.*

As a pastor for more than 20 years, I have seen this viewpoint up close. Unfortunately, this fear of persecution is not isolated to a few Christians in “red” states but is across the entire United States. In the book *A People’s History of Christianity*, author Dr. Diana Butler Bass speaks of “Big-C” Christianity, which is “a theological disposition that interprets Christianity as an us-against-them morality tale of a suffering church that is vindicated by God through its global victory over other worldviews, religions or political systems.”

This is the Christianity of territory and conquest—the kind of militant Christianity that “tolerates (and often encourages) schisms, crusades, inquisitions and warfare as a means—metaphorical if not actual—to the righteous end of establishing God’s will on earth.”

American Christianity has become more like this Christianity, an expression of cultural Christianity rather than kingdom of God Christianity—the kind of incarnational, loving Christianity that drew so many regular people to countercultural Jesus, to the frustration of the Pharisees, who eventually plotted to kill Him.

I have seen well-meaning Christians become more concerned with conquering America for Christ rather than loving as Christ loved, speaking truth and showing people the way to Christ

through word and deed. The Christianity the next generation longs for has existed before, but it seems so uncommon in America today.

Dr. Bass calls this kind of faith “Great Command Christianity” and talks about the power of emulating the good Samaritan, to “go and do likewise.”

With the mindset of protectionism, Christians in America end up worrying about the wrong things, or at the very least, we—and I count myself among this worried lot—spend a lot of time fretting about a few issues, while not focusing on the kind of faith lived out that could truly proclaim the kingdom of God.

I’d love it if everyone were Christian and said, “Merry Christmas,” but I realize that not everyone is Christian. Frankly, if my faith was dependent on whether someone said, “Merry Christmas,” that wouldn’t be much of a faith at all, would it? Rather than being so obsessed with keeping Christ in Christmas, shouldn’t Christians be more concerned about keeping Christ in Christian? If God extended free will to people, who am I to force my faith onto others?

Is the ultimate goal for today’s Christians to build an island for ourselves, walled off from society, with all the political protection we can muster? As we read in Mark, “What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?” (see Matt. 16:26, Mark 8:36).

If I could give one piece of advice to my fellow Christians, it would be this: We do not need to center our faith, politics or emotions on these social hot-button issues. And let’s not waste a moment with positively menial stuff, like getting up in arms about the design that appears or does not appear on Starbucks cups. The work of the kingdom is bigger than a grande macchiato. Let’s think twice before we protest graphic designs on paper cups (although I did feel persecuted once

when a barista spelled my name “Eugenie”).

I do not want to minimize the instances in which Christians are being treated unfairly in America, but when we fight about relatively minor problems here, we are doing a disservice to fellow Christian brothers and sisters who are indeed under attack in other countries, including Baptist pastor Chu Yiu-ming in Hong Kong, a brave hero of the faith.

Pastor Chu and eight other activists were convicted for crimes related to their involvement with pro-democracy groups. At the time of this writing, he faces up to seven years in prison, and others with additional convictions could spend more time behind bars. True freedom is “more than loyalty to the state,” Pastor Chu said, and he believes that each person has potential and can contribute to society.

The 75-year-old pastor told the courtroom in Cantonese:

“We have no regrets. We hold no grudges, no anger, no grievances. We do not give up,” he said, speaking on behalf of fellow activists involved in a campaign to bring universal voting rights to Hong Kong. “In the words of Jesus, ‘Happy are those who are persecuted because they do what God requires; The kingdom of heaven belongs to them!’”

He went on to say:

“The seeds of peaceful nonviolent civil disobedience action have been planted deep in the heart of Hong Kong people,” Chu said in his testimony, which led some supporters to tears. “This movement is an awakening of the civil spirit. ... Well-being, decency and peace constitute our common dream. It is also the will of God. Let us strive to make it real for our city.”

This is a dangerous time globally to be a follower of Jesus, and in terms of the number of people involved and the gravity of the crimes committed, “the persecution of Christians is

today worse than at any time in history.” The nonprofit Open Doors helps and advocates for persecuted Christians and estimates that 245 million Christians face high levels of persecution. 245 *million*. That’s 1 in 9 Christians worldwide. India and China, the two most populated nations in the world, now rank on the top 10 of the organization’s “World Watch List,” a barometer of both physical violence against Christians and the day-to-day pressure they feel while living out their faith.

The No. 1 most persecuted country for Christians on the list? North Korea. The home of my ancestors and the former “Jerusalem of the East.” My friend Pastor Kenneth Bae spent more than two years there at a labor camp, and he now runs a nonprofit called Nehemiah Global Initiative to serve North Korean refugees. The stories he tells of his time there, and the stories other men, women and children tell, if they’ve managed to find their freedom, are chilling. It’s also rare to hear an account from a Christian there, because Open Doors notes that if the authoritarian government discovers a Christian in the country, that person is sent to a labor camp or even killed on the spot.

The Catholic organization Aid to the Church in Need says North Koreans face “unspeakable atrocities,” including enforced starvation and abortion. The organization has heard reports of Christians hung on crosses over a fire and others being crushed under a steamroller. The repressive communist state fears what could happen if people learned that their hope and savior weren’t named Kim Jong-un.

Are Christians under attack in America? In some cases, yes, and we can be mindful of that. But let’s not be deceived by culture-war rhetoric that Christians are under widespread attack in America and conclude that the worst persecution is here. Often, American Christians can become so caught up in thinking people are out to get them, Christians will often root their politics and voting decisions in fear. In other

words, American Christians end up voting “against” instead of “for” candidates and issues. My last parting words to anyone of Christian faith during the 2020 election cycle: Don’t just vote for what you’re against. Show us what you’re about. Create a better story. Compel us. Invite us. Help the entire country reimagine a better story. {eoa}

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✖ *This article is excerpted from Eugene Cho’s Thou Shalt Not Be A Jerk: A Christian’s Guide to Engaging in Politics (David C Cook).*