

For Persecuted, Obedience to God Is Insane. Is It Worth It?

Biblical obedience to God is insane. That's the conclusion of Nik Ripken's newest book, *The Insanity of Obedience*. His arguments, based on 15 years of research and hundreds of interviews with persecuted believers around the world, are compelling.

Why else would a man like Dmitri,* imprisoned for leading an illegal house church in communist Russia, insist on singing a praise song to Jesus every morning for 17 years, even as prison guards beat him and fellow inmates ridiculed him?

Why else would overseas Christian workers in a Muslim country closed to a gospel witness gather to share Christian communion after a Muslim extremist shot four colleagues, killing three of them?

Why else would a man like Ripken move his family from the safety and comfort of a small Kentucky town to settle in Africa, where they endured sickness and death and witnessed unspeakable suffering among their neighbors and friends?

By the world's standards, insanity is the only plausible explanation. But for Ripken and thousands of others who follow Jesus into difficult places, the reality of Christ's resurrection and the daily power of His Spirit allow them to persevere.

A Personal Journey

Ripken's first book, *The Insanity of God*, recounts his personal journey to relieve human suffering in war-torn Somalia, the appalling sorrow he experienced, and his struggles with a God who would allow His followers to endure

such pain on His behalf.

I had shied away from Ripken's first book. I knew it focused on persecuted believers, and some friends had described it as "a hard read." But late last year, as friend after friend recommended it as a "life-changing" book, I gave in. Once I picked it up, I couldn't put it down. It is a must-read for every evangelical believer living in the relative comforts of the West. Quite literally, it drove me to my knees in prayer—first for those living in persecution, and then against the apathy and shallowness of the church in America.

As I closed the cover on *The Insanity of God*, my burning questions became, "What will I do with these stories? How can I share them with fellow believers in my church? How can I see God work as Ripken describes? What do I need to do to come alongside persecuted believers and ignite the church in America to be serious about fulfilling the Great Commission?"

Practical Applications

Ripken's newest book, *The Insanity of Obedience*, answers many of those questions. Drawing from his years of experience as an international Christian worker, *The Insanity of Obedience* takes the stories shared in Ripken's first book and seeks to develop practical applications for the Western church.

A well-written and easy read, *The Insanity of Obedience* tackles difficult questions facing Christian workers in persecuted areas. A few of the issues Ripken addresses include the need for tough workers; the extent to which Western presence may hinder evangelism and church growth; the challenges of mission "tourism"; and the cultural and religious barriers that prevent the spread of the gospel.

Persecution Redefined

Most importantly, however, Ripken challenges the approach of Western discipleship and America's definition of "persecution" in what he calls a "post-Pentecost" era—an environment in

which the gospel has been preached widely, churches are present and Christian literature and education are easily accessible.

On the other hand, approximately 9,000 people groups representing nearly 4 billion people are living in a “pre-Pentecost” or “Old Testament” environment. These settings contain few believers and few, if any, churches. Many people have yet to experience the Holy Spirit’s power among them. In these very different settings, persecution and discipleship practices differ, Ripken explains.

“Persecution, it seems, is rare in a post-Pentecost setting,” Ripken writes. “Often pastors say to us, ‘Persecution is coming to the church in America.’ When asked to explain ... the response often revolves around conservative evangelical stances on homosexuality and abortion ... But the U.S. church’s stance opposing these activities and lifestyles is the same as conservative Islam!”

Ripken suggests that the Western church does not face significant persecution as it becomes less and less a threat to a lost world. However, in pre-Pentecost settings, persecution comes not from taking a stand on social and cultural issues but from making Jesus known to those who have little or no opportunity to hear otherwise.

For this reason, churches living in persecution must be “New Testament house church style,” Ripken explains. This “style” results in lifestyles of evangelism and discipleship as believers endure persecution together as the body of Christ.

“When local house churches attempt biblical discipleship in daily community, social issues are addressed in community at a local house church level, not left to the government,” Ripken says.

As a result, the church becomes relevant within the larger cultural context. As non-believers see Jesus followers meeting

human needs and alleviating suffering, the love of Christ becomes tangible, drawing those outside the group to learn more.

Ripken contrasts this approach with Western-based discipleship programs that are essentially “information transfer.”

“Increasingly we think we can disciple someone through the Internet,” Ripken writes. “Discipleship in settings of persecution is based on relationship. New believers are asked how they are treating their wife and children ... about their use of money and their time on the Internet. In the Western world, a believer can go to a denominational college and get multiple seminary degrees and never be asked these kinds of questions! Discipleship is about building character, not simply transferring information.”

The Scariest Challenge

This is a radical concept for believers like me, who have become comfortable with our highly planned, programmatic American church culture. However, two hours of discipleship on Sunday will not bring about the life changes we hope to see in new believers, and truly discipling others rarely follows our pre-packaged plans. Instead, coming alongside others in lifestyles of evangelism and discipleship is messy and inconvenient. It rarely goes according to plan. But, as Ripken relates, it is absolutely necessary to life transformation and the abundant living Christ described.

“Lost people must not be merely the focus of Western workers,” Ripken writes. “Instead, lost people must become their family.”

And that, for me, is the scariest challenge of all. To build healthy, growing Christians and churches, we must step from behind our stained glass windows and open our homes, our lives, our families and our hearts to those who don’t know Christ, who don’t live according to conservative evangelical

principles and who really have no idea why we do. To share Christ, we must share life.

Obedience That Influences

Dmitri learned this lesson in a Russian jail cell. Every morning for 17 years, he stood at attention by his bed, faced the East, lifted his hands to heaven and sang a praise song to Jesus. He was beaten by his captors and ridiculed by fellow inmates, who often threw food and human waste into his cell in attempts to stop his singing.

Then, one day, after finding a piece of paper on which Dmitri had written every Scripture reference, Bible verse, story and song he could recall, his jailers beat him severely and threatened him with execution. As they dragged him from his cell down the center corridor toward the courtyard, Dmitri heard a strange sound. The 1,500 hardened criminals who had ridiculed him for nearly two decades stood at attention by their beds. They faced the East, raised their arms and began to sing the song they had heard Dmitri sing to Jesus every morning.

That's the kind of influence among unbelievers I want in my personal life. That's the kind of influence I want for the American church.

But, it only comes through "insane" obedience to God's commands.

**Name changed.*

This article originally appeared on