

The Day That Changed the Church

Measuring the effect 9/11 has had on the American—and global—church



Where were you ... ?”

You probably remember where you were when the horrific events on that epochal day unfolded. Life got more fragile. Worldviews were altered. Innocence was lost. The terrorists who carried out these atrocities were driven—not by money or fame—but by a destructive belief system. Don’t ever think personal theology doesn’t have public consequences. While the terrorists’ misguided beliefs forced a brave new world of greater peril, their hideous acts also released greater possibilities.

Three measurable realities for the church worldwide are rooted in the fallout from 9/11:

1. In the ensuing decade, persecution against Christians has intensified. Paul Marshall of the Hudson Institute estimates that at least 600 million—and maybe closer to 700 million—Christians worldwide are experiencing some level of persecution. That means roughly one in every three people who profess the name of Christ is suffering for his or her devotion to Him.

Until 9/11 most American Christians saw persecution as an advanced course for super saints. But in much of the world it’s just part of Discipleship 101. An increasingly diverse population, more radicalized terrorists, and a newly vocal, venomous atheism indicate that from now on America’s church may join millions of other Christians in the fellowship of His

suffering.

Scripture assumes true believers will feel the world's backlash: "All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution" (2 Tim. 3:12).

Historically the church thrives under pressure. During the oppressive regime of Nicolae Ceausescu, the despotic Romanian communist ruler, pastor Josif Ton told how communist authorities threatened to kill him. He responded: "Your supreme weapon is killing. My supreme weapon is dying."

Unlike Muslims, we do not court martyrdom, but neither should we shrink from it. As the early church father Tertullian observed, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."

Paul taught that we are to lovingly and firmly stand our ground. We're called to bear one another's burdens and pray earnestly for persecuted believers (see Gal. 6:2; Heb. 13:3).

Pastor Dishan Wickramaratne in Sri Lanka explains: "Sometimes persecution is the best thing that could have happened to us. We're on the edge of what God is doing. So don't pray that we won't have persecution. Instead, pray that God will keep us strong and faithful in the midst of persecution."

We're to stand firm, as Phil. 1:27-28 says, "striving together as one for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God" (NIV).

2. The 9/11 attacks fomented a deep-seated malcontentedness in millions of Muslims. While many Muslims—especially the disenfranchised—have been radicalized since 9/11, millions of other Muslims are embarrassed and conflicted. Consequently, more Muslims are coming to Christ than ever.

The Holy Spirit is going to exceptional lengths to reveal God's love to Muslim truth-seekers. It's of more than casual interest that almost all the Christophanies today are appearances to Muslims. Jesus is appearing to Muslim housewives, businessmen and even influential imams. A study conducted at Fuller Seminary found that more than one-fourth of Muslim-background believers surveyed stated that dreams and visions were pivotal in drawing them to Christ.

This year we have witnessed historic uprisings throughout the Islamic world. In their inception most of these revolts were simply a cry for dignity, change and freedom. Although these grassroots movements can be commandeered quickly by radicals with money, it is still a hopeful time for the spread of the gospel throughout the Muslim world. One of the most vigorous evangelistic, church-planting movements in the world is in Iran.

Some missiologists say literally millions of Muslims are coming to faith in Christ. One reason for this ripe harvest is that vast numbers of Christians worldwide pray specifically for the Muslim world throughout the Ramadan season.

3. The 9/11 attacks have made the church more missional. The spiritual result is always positive when we're torn loose from the temporal and required to embrace the eternal. Something shifted in the spiritual world on 9/11.

While some Christians cowered and circled the wagons, others realized they had "come to the kingdom for such a time as this" (Esth. 4:14, NKJV). Any church today that is not seriously committed to helping fulfill the Great Commission has forfeited its biblical right to exist.

We must juxtapose our message—the gospel—in dramatic contrast to the pernicious message of religious terrorists. Ideologies that are weak at their core often resort to violence for their propagation.

Seventy years ago the dogma that threatened the world was fascism. Just three decades ago the dogma that threatened the world was communism. These ideologies failed because their weak core eventually imploded. Current anti-Christian ideologies will fail too, and for the same reason. Ultimately, truth triumphs.

Sold-out Jesus followers would do well to view the present in the context of both history and biblical prophecy. From history we learn that the church is fortified when persecuted. From the prophetic promises of Scripture we're assured that Jesus gets the final word. His global glory will extend to every tribe, people and nation. He will subdue all things to Himself and make His enemies His footstool (see Phil. 3:21; Heb. 10:12-13).

In his last letter, written from prison, Paul wrote triumphantly—even defiantly, “The word of God is not chained” (2 Tim. 2:9). The gospel will prevail; Jesus shall reign.

In a prayer vigil the day after the 9/11 attacks, Lloyd Ogilvie, then the chaplain of the U.S. Senate, quoted the verse that follows. As you process how to bring glory to Jesus in the post-9/11 era, remember and rejoice in this truth: “Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations; I will be exalted in the earth” (Ps. 46:10).

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