

The New Church

As church violence in the U.S. increases, a new breed of believers is emerging.

By the time this issue goes to print, the sting of December's Colorado shootings will have subsided for many. Not so for me. Because I recently moved from Colorado Springs, the sadistic rampage of 24-year-old Matthew Murray hit close to home—literally.

Although my family didn't regularly attend New Life Church, we have several friends who do. I've seen firsthand how the church's members, through the shootings and the scandal involving founding pastor Ted Haggard a year earlier, have become shining examples of what it means to persevere through trials.

"God has placed an assignment on this church," senior pastor Brady Boyd told his congregation the Sunday following the killings. "There is an anointing of favor on New Life Church that the enemy hates and despises. That's why it's under attack. ... We're going through a test—but we're passing the test."

Barely three months into his new assignment as pastor, Boyd proved he was passing with flying colors. With national media cameras rolling live, he shared the gospel and declared God's goodness to millions of viewers following the tragedy. He comforted his own flock, grieving with the family who lost two teenage daughters. He also issued a prophetic warning seldom heard in the American church: "Expect more of this."

More senseless violence in church? More persecution? That's a thorny message to preach to the plush, comfortable suburban megachurches of this country. We'd prefer to keep our crowds happy with more upbeat messages—a teaching on prosperity, an "I can do all things in Christ" pep talk, even a charge to

help fight the worldwide AIDS epidemic. Anything but a gloomy foretelling of stateside Christians being persecuted for their faith.

Boyd's sentiment reflects a new day for the American church. For generations, we have thanked God for keeping us safe, for blessing us with abundance and for allowing us to live in a country where religious freedom is a "God-given" right. Yet when I look at the power and cultural impact of the persecuted church around the world, I'm not so sure we're praying the right prayer.

In John 16:33, Jesus warned His followers that "in the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (NKJV). Suffering for the gospel's sake was a regular part of Christ's ongoing dialogue with His disciples. And any study of Acts will reveal that the measure of persecution endured by the early church was often in direct proportion to its power in proclaiming Jesus Christ. The darker the church's surroundings, the brighter its light shone.

I want that kind of light. I want the Holy Spirit to so permeate my life that even my shadow heals people. I want to see the church multiply daily, even when the sign-up card includes an assurance of suffering and hardship.

Don't get me wrong: Persecution itself does not make us any holier or worthier to be used by God. It's foolish to seek out opposition for the purpose of bulking up our spiritual résumés.

Yet Christ assured us that if we truly follow Him, it will come: "You will be hated by all for My name's sake" (Matt. 10:22). I don't believe those words were exclusively for the 12 with Him that day; they apply to a new breed of believers in this country. The truth is, Christians in the United States are far from being hated by all for our faith. Obviously,

there are some who loathe what we stand for—to the point of tainting our churches with bullets and blood.

Yet the natural progression of a society ruled by secular humanism is intolerance for and eventual oppression of those who carry God's name. Whether that culminates months, years or decades from now, I believe the emerging American church will recognize persecution as a blessing. God's power and glory will be revealed through our testimonies that stand unto death.

We're far from the standard set by the early church. We don't look like our sister congregations overseas whose members are regularly tortured, thrown in prison or killed for their faith.

We are, for the most part, a glamorous, comfortable people who are finally getting our makeup smeared through recent tears. Yet wouldn't it be like God to continue to use persecution to reshape us into the church He wants?

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