

Dear Pastors, Beheaded Christians Are Not Marketing Props

Last week the world watched in horror as another group of Christians in bright orange prison uniforms were paraded out against the muted backdrop of the Mediterranean to be beheaded. The images were horrifying. No one who has seen them will ever forget them.

These precious believers remain nameless to most of the world, but to someone else they are known much more personally. These men had families. They were dads, brothers and husbands to someone who at this moment is grieving their loss much deeper than we can appreciate.

As fellow brothers and sisters in Christ we owe it to these men and their families to honor their lives and sacrifice with the utmost dignity and respect. Heaven received them as heroes of the faith. We must esteem them likewise. We should be interceding on behalf of their families while offering what support we can. (Last week I shared three ways you can do just that).

Though we are appalled by the way they were killed, we applaud the way they faced death. Their relentless faith inspires us all. That is why it comes as no surprise that ministers across the nation would endeavor to share the story of their sacrifice. However we must take great care in how we go about doing so.

Just days after the video from ISIS hit the Internet I began to see pictures, posts and videos of various churches and ministries who chose to re-enact the beheadings as an illustration for a message. One video that sickened me plugged an upcoming youth service. In it two adult actors dressed in

orange uniforms, covered in fake blood shared their excitement about the upcoming event. It came off more as commercial one might see for The Walking Dead rather than a fitting tribute to martyrs.

I wonder have we considered how appropriate this is?

ISIS used these precious Ethiopian believers as mere props to communicate their message. The beheadings themselves were not about executing Islamic judgment upon Christians who refused to embrace Islam. It was about sending a message throughout the Middle East and to the rest of the world. ISIS knew the graphic images of severed heads provides enough punch to make their propaganda go viral. Sadly ISIS used real lives as disposable objects.

It is shocking to see how quickly their deaths became a sermon illustration. Is their martyrdom truly real to us?

Please understand I am not writing to rebuke anyone, but to ask that each of us consider carefully how and why we tell their story. To reenact their beheadings in order to make our own message more potent diminishes the memory of these men to props used for our own purposes. How is this honoring?

Consider this ... it is Wednesday Sept. 12, 2001. Our nation is still in shock over the horrific tragedy of the day before. Though it is the middle of the week every sanctuary in the nation sees a spike in attendance. Imagine the pastor chooses to present a message that night where the lights go out, the sound of jet engines are blasted through the loud speakers followed by an explosion that shakes the building. Suddenly a stream of actors dressed as emergency personnel storm the building searching for bodies.

Would you cry foul? How many would walk out disgusted by what they witnessed? Would that have been appropriate? Why not?

It wouldn't have been appropriate because the events of the

day before would be too fresh. The impact was still felt and the event was too real—which is precisely my point.

These modern martyrs are not real to us. They are nameless. It is the other side of the world. It's a different culture in a foreign land. We feel helpless to respond. Their deaths grabbed our attention for a moment, but in the end haven't truly impacted us.

The events of the past few weeks caused many to gasp but very few have grieved. I don't know how you can speak of their deaths and not be brought to tears. The very fact we are so quick to dramatize their martyrdom and no one questions the appropriateness is telling.

ISIS objectified these men by turning them into props for a message. They didn't treat them as real. We must do the opposite. Their tragedy has to be real to us and their testimonies must be shared—but with great care.

Their deaths are a wake up call. Hundreds of thousands of Christian believers are facing very real persecution at this moment. That sobering reality must move us to action. Now is not the time for silly plays in church, it's the time for serious prayer.

Daniel K. Norris *is an evangelist who worked alongside Steve Hill bringing the message of revival and repentance to the nations. Together, they co-hosted a broadcast called "From the Frontlines." Norris also hosts the Collision Youth Conference that is broadcast all over the world. He can be contacted at .*