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Caring about the Persecuted Church: Balancing the Lessons of Romans 13 and Revelation 13

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In 2007 a young Turkish man, the father of two children, was planning to take a theology class that I was scheduled to teach when he was brutally martyred. Two other Christians, one Turkish and one German, were also murdered with him in the office of their Bible printing shop in Turkey. All three were cut up with knives.

Shocked and angry, I became deeply involved in reporting on and drawing attention to this terrible incident. Afterwards, I felt compelled (by God, I think) to reflect more deeply on how Christians continue to experience discrimination, persecution and sometimes even martyrdom in many countries around the world. This reflection included thinking about the different types of governments that exist around the world, since governments usually have some important role in relation to discrimination and persecution and are often the direct perpetrators. I also contemplated our international duties within the body of Christ, since we live in a globalized world in which we can learn almost instantly about—and also try to influence—events happening in distant places.

I. Two New Testament Passages about Governments

The New Testament has much to say about these issues. In the New Testament we can find two complementary views of the state or of government, and we must keep both of them always in mind as we practice Christian discipleship and seek to aid our brothers and sisters who live in difficult and dangerous situations.

On one hand, Romans 13:1–7 describes what a state *should* be and do:

Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They

are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience. This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honour, then honour.

In this passage, Paul instructs Christians that they should generally obey the law and pay our taxes. His message might have been somewhat disconcerting amidst the unstable and often capricious governance of the Roman Empire, but it is usually not hard to obey for those who live in free countries, where we have official protection of human rights and where the rule of law prevails.

On the other hand, Revelation 13:1–10 depicts what a state or a government can become when everything goes wrong:

The dragon stood on the shore of the sea. And I saw a beast coming out of the sea. It had ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on its horns, and on each head a blasphemous name. The beast I saw resembled a leopard, but had feet like those of a bear and a mouth like that of a lion. The dragon gave the beast his power and his throne and great authority. One of the heads of the beast seemed to have had a fatal wound, but the fatal wound had been healed. The whole world was filled with wonder and followed the beast. People worshiped the dragon because he had given authority to the beast,

and they also worshiped the beast and asked, 'Who is like the beast? Who can wage war against it?' The beast was given a mouth to utter proud words and blasphemies and to exercise its authority for forty-two months. It opened its mouth to blaspheme God, and to slander his name and his dwelling place and those who live in heaven. It was given power to wage war against God's holy people and to conquer them. And it was given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation. All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast—all whose names have not been written in the Lamb's book of life, the Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world. Whoever has ears, let them hear. 'If anyone is to go into captivity, into captivity they will go. If anyone is to be killed with the sword, with the sword they will be killed.' This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of God's people.

Revelation tells us that a state can become a devouring beast, destroying everything in its path and attacking Christians with especially demonic hatred. This was not only the experience of the church in the first century, under the persecutions by Nero in the sixties and Domitian in the eighties; it is also the experience of tens of millions of Christians today.

In 2015, I was actively involved in the preparations for, and I then attended, the historic global consultation in Tirana, Albania on the persecution of Christians. When someone at the consultation claimed that the slaughter of Christians then taking place in Syria and Iraq should be called genocide, no one disagreed. On the contrary, Christians from other

countries responded by saying that what was happening in their nations should be considered genocide too! As recently as 2015, multiple Christian genocides were occurring at the hands of beastly governments.

Today, Christians in many countries are under direct attack, or facing the imminent threat of attack, by either oppressive governments or unrestrained religious extremists. The beast of Revelation 13 is not just a reality from ancient history; *the beast is with us!*

In this light, those of us who are not under threat—those who live in nations where the government generally fulfils Paul's vision in Romans 13—need to carefully consider the challenging words of Jesus in John 13:34–35: 'A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.'

A generation ago, the great Christian philosopher Francis Schaeffer taught us that visible love is the mark of a Christian, basing his teaching on these words of Jesus in John 13.¹ Jesus has given our unbelieving neighbours, called 'everyone' here, the astonishing right to evaluate our claim to be disciples of Jesus. They are to make this evaluation on the basis of our love for fellow Christians. Therefore, this love must be more than a feeling; it must become visible through sacrificial action for fellow Christians in need. In our globalized society, we need to consider very deeply what it means for Christians everywhere to

honestly love fellow Christians who live under a variety of beasts. We have a lot to learn.

We should also contemplate what learning to love Christians who live under the beast will do for us. I suppose that many of us who do not encounter persecution on a regular basis are a bit lukewarm about the gospel. We take the gospel and the church for granted, as if they are not so special. One benefit of honestly engaging with persecuted Christians is that it may break us out of our spiritual lethargy. How can one remain unmoved when hearing or reading stories of martyrdom, or of tens of thousands of our brothers and sisters in Christ fleeing for their lives? And actually responding to their plight by seeking to change the situation for persecuted believers could have an even greater effect on us!

An additional benefit is that such engagement with persecuted Christians may prepare us to deal more effectively with emerging problems in our own countries. In stable democracies, we do not have thousands of people fleeing for their lives, but we do sometimes face real and serious discrimination on account of our faith.²

And none of us know what the future may hold for those who enjoy freedom of religion today. Many Christians now facing severe persecution did not expect it in their coun-

¹ See Francis Schaeffer, *The Mark of the Christian* (LAfri Fellowship, 1970), now available from InterVarsity Press.

² An example would be the way the radical gay rights movement has challenged the legal status of some Christian institutions because they teach traditional values. Discrimination against Christians in the free world is usually because of the application of Christian ethics to public questions, not because of attending a worship service.

tries just a short time ago. In some parts of the world, discrimination has evolved into persecution, which leads to martyrdom. So getting involved with Christians who face persecution may equip us for future uncomfortable events in our own settings. Moreover, this love in action, demonstrated by Christians for their brothers and sisters in other lands, will be noticed by a watching world, leading some to consider Jesus whose disciples we have proved to be.

II. Analysing the Biblical Texts

In Romans 13, Paul presents a very compressed version of a political theory that merits extensive explanation beyond what I can give here. Let me note simply that Paul assumed several other themes and texts in the Bible. For example, he assumed what Jesus said in Matthew 22:21: 'So give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.' Paul also assumed what Jesus said to Pilate in John 19:11: 'You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above.' And Paul clearly thought that most people serving in government can distinguish between good and evil, so that usually states can punish the evil and reward the good in a meaningful, reliable fashion, even if very imperfectly. Still other biblical assumptions underpin what both Jesus and Paul said about government: the fact that we are created in God's image, the fallen nature of each human being, the existence of an objective moral law, and the authority of written documents.

When we consider where in the world today Christians and others enjoy a significant level of freedom of religion and other basic human rights

protections, I believe we can see a general pattern. I see the influence of the biblical themes that were assumed in Romans 13 as upstream influences in the cultures and education systems of these countries, helping to produce the current experience of freedom and human rights protection. It is not by accident that some countries enjoy freedom and other countries do not. In the countries where the people enjoy freedom, even if the populace does not widely acknowledge Jesus as their Saviour, there has usually been some significant influence of a few key ideas from the Bible within the last few hundred years. This is the cultural influence of the Bible being felt in the political sphere.

I refer to this part of the world as 'the Romans 13 world'. People in these lands believe that there is a realm of life that does not belong to Caesar. They may believe that those who govern them—the modern equivalents of Pontius Pilate—are accountable to God for their actions. They may believe that people have a special dignity, even if they do not know where this dignity comes from. They believe that even top government officials should obey written laws.³

³ In a report prepared by Thomas Schirrmacher for the WEA's Religious Liberty Commission, I read a fascinating account of an official from Communist China who had heard that Christians prayed the communists out of power in East Germany in the 1980. This official was afraid that Christians would also pray the Chinese communists out of power! I see this as an example of the influence of a biblical theme, the direct accountability of all people to God, even among people who do not yet acknowledge that they believe in God—in this case, a Chinese communist official who was probably obligated to profess atheism.

As for Revelation 13, there have been so many wildly speculative theories about the beast, the dragon, and the antichrist that responsible theologians may hesitate to address these themes at all. That would be a mistake. I cannot offer a complete interpretation of the book of Revelation here, but I think that the apostle John was giving us a pictorial interpretation of the events of his time, with the goal of helping believers throughout history to respond to similar events.

In the 30 years before John wrote this text around 95 AD, as already noted, Christians had endured two waves of persecution, under the emperors Nero and Domitian.⁴ Though there were probably differences between the two, in both cases the Roman Empire became beast-like. The first period of persecution, under Nero, probably lasted about forty-two months, until his death and a change of government. Tradition claims that both Peter and Paul were martyred under Nero, making it an especially painful time for Christians. I think the apostle John lost trusted friends during Nero's persecution. John viewed both persecutions as ultimately instigated by Satan, who is represented by the dragon. The beasts of Revelation were not part of the author's prophetic vision of some mysterious time in the future; they were his depiction of what the churches had already expe-

rienced, but presented in such a manner as to prepare future Christians for what would happen again.

John also mentions a false prophet later in Revelation; I think this refers to the redevelopment of emperor worship at his time in history. Some people within the Roman Empire were afraid that the empire would completely fall apart, leading to chaos and poverty. They thought that the religion of emperor worship, along with a very powerful emperor, would unify and save their society. The religion of emperor worship served as an ideological justification for having an all-powerful emperor. Those who coveted social stability hoped that the Roman Empire would take control of everything external in society while the religion of emperor worship would get inside people's hearts and minds, leaving no place that belonged only to God and not to Caesar. In this way, the false prophet, representing false religion, gave spiritual support to a beastly government.

In this context, the central creed of the early Christians, their profession that 'Jesus is Lord', was precisely the opposite of and an explicit denial of the central creed of emperor worship, 'Caesar is lord'. Both figures claimed to be lord of everything in life; both were foundations of a complete worldview and approach to life. When the combination of the Roman Empire and emperor worship became totalitarian, claiming the people's whole heart, mind, and life, it came into complete spiritual and moral conflict with Christians and the biblical message.

4 Some have proposed that John wrote the book of Revelation not around AD 95 but in about AD 68, before the destruction of Jerusalem. Following what I take to be the view of Irenaeus (AD 132–202), I think that the later date is more likely, but this question has little effect on the theme of this message, except that John would not yet have experienced Domitian's persecution.

III. Contemporary Examples

At the 2015 Tirana consultation, I heard a Christian woman from Syria, Rosangela Jarjour, describe what she had undergone and observed in the preceding few years. Her heart-wrenching message on the horrors she had experienced there reminds us that the beast of Revelation 13 is not only ancient history; rather, a state (or supposed state) acting like a devouring beast is the daily experience of many Christians today.

As I listened to Rosangela, I wished I could tell her that the persecution of her group of Christians would last only another few months, because it would not exceed the forty-two-month period referred to in the book of Revelation. But I do not find in Revelation a promise that all severe persecutions will end in forty-two months. Maybe John was referring to the length of the period of intense persecution that occurred under Nero in the first century; maybe the reference is symbolic (perhaps recalling similar language in the book of Daniel). But I don't think we can promise any specific group of suffering Christians that their time of tribulation will end after three and a half years.

What I am sure of is that today millions of Christians are living under the beast, in a Revelation 13 world that is overtly hostile to Christianity, while others live in a Romans 13 world, enjoying freedoms that are partly the result of the Bible's influence. And Jesus has told us that the watching world will know that we are disciples of Jesus by the way in which we Christians—including those two groups of Christians with very different life experiences—love each other.

In 2013, I participated in an international consultation on religious

freedom research in Istanbul, Turkey. Many had perceived that the persecution of Christians in many countries was getting worse, so about fifty researchers and activists gathered to discuss the problems. We quickly realized that Christians from around the world and across traditions within Christendom needed to cooperate much more extensively in responding to growing persecution. So the World Evangelical Alliance, working with the Vatican, the World Council of Churches, and the Pentecostal World Fellowship, called for a meeting of representatives of persecuted churches, which became the 2015 Tirana consultation. Because we were concerned about an ISIS attack, we held this meeting secretly in Albania. About seventy representatives from countries where the church is under strain and about seventy-five representatives of churches in the free world attended.

In preparation for Tirana, I edited materials for distribution to the delegates. As part of this effort, we combed through information and analysis from evangelical and Roman Catholic researchers (primarily the evangelical organization Open Doors and the Catholic agency Aid to the Church in Need) on the status and causes of persecution in countries around the world. Some of the stories I read made me sick. One day I quickly reminded myself of where my wastebasket was, in case I began vomiting at my desk. But I also became much more deeply aware of important patterns in global persecution. At that time, in thirty-nine of the countries on the Open Doors World Watch List (which ranks the fifty nations where it is most dangerous to be a Christian), some type of Islamic extremism

was one of the main sources of persecution. In several other countries, the leading cause was some type of Hindu or Buddhist nationalism. In a few places, organized crime or simple corruption was the primary problem. The country rated as engaging in the worst persecution of Christians at that time was a communist state, North Korea.

In the past few years, I have met representatives of persecuted Christians from some surprising places—surprising in the sense that I did not expect those people to be able to travel so freely: Syria, Iraq, Iran, Nepal, Kurdistan, Kazakhstan, Vietnam, Cambodia and China. But I have never met a Christian from North Korea. Not many Christians from North Korea are able to travel to tell their story, but the reports I have heard suggest that the combination of communism with a personality cult makes a ferocious beast.

What should we do about these situations? What is the duty of love that Christians in the Romans 13 world owe to Christians in the Revelation 13 world? One of the purposes of the meeting in Albania was to enable leaders of the persecuted church to address Christians from the rest of the world directly, helping them to develop better to-do lists and express their love and concern in visible, practical, effective ways.

The Tirana conferees eventually developed two to-do lists, one oriented towards churches and the other towards the world. I think these lists are extremely valuable and must be implemented in our circles. But two matters seemed to be of preeminent importance.

Our first duty is to pray for the persecuted churches. Even if we do

not know much about their theology, ethics, and worship, we can pray for them. Praying for them—and letting them know, where possible, that we are praying for them—responds to the two requests that persecuted Christians communicated most passionately and consistently at the Tirana conference. The first of these themes is the fear that they will be forgotten or abandoned by other Christians. They do not want to die for their faith without other Christians knowing about their martyrdom. The second theme is their prayer request for boldness in witness and proclamation while many of their members are being killed. I have heard people say, ‘Pray that we would be bold till we die, so that there will still be a church in our country to bring the gospel to our neighbors after this time of persecution is past.’ I think it is appropriate to include prayer for persecuted Christians in private, in our families, and in our regular congregational prayers, as well as to have special Lord’s days dedicated to prayer for the persecuted churches.

The second matter of urgency that confronted us in Tirana was to address our tragic Christian history of internal intra-Christian persecution. All too often, we Christians have been not just the persecuted but the persecutors as well! At the suggestion of Pope Francis, our Roman Catholic colleagues took the lead in asking us to affirm, ‘We repent of having at times persecuted each other and other religious communities in history, and ask forgiveness from each other and pray for new ways of following Christ together.’

The evangelicals and Protestants present at Tirana readily accepted this repentance while also confess-

ing their own failings. I see this as a result of the work of the Holy Spirit. This achievement was of extreme value, and by itself it made the time and treasure invested in the meetings worthwhile. The message may not yet have reached every local community yet, but in principle, internal Christian persecution should be finished!

Some other themes in our Tirana to-do lists are important and must be implemented. With regard to our relationships with fellow Christians, we said:

In communion with Christ we commit ourselves:

- a) To listen more to the experiences of Christians, Churches, and of all those who are discriminated against and persecuted, and deepen our engagement with suffering communities.
- b) To pray more for Churches, Christians, and for all those suffering discrimination and persecution, as well as for the transformation of those who discriminate and persecute.
- c) To speak up more with respect and dignity, with a clear and strong voice together, on behalf of those who are suffering.
- d) To do more in mutual understanding to find effective ways of solidarity and support for healing, reconciliation, and for the religious freedom of all oppressed and persecuted people.

Our second to-do list emerging from the Tirana consultation was oriented towards the world, calling for the types of actions that should, in my opinion, help gradually—over the very long term—to change Revelation 13 countries into Romans 13 coun-

tries. The consultation called on:

All persecutors who discriminate against and oppress Christians and violate human rights to cease their abuse, and to affirm the right of all human beings to life and dignity.

All governments to respect and protect the freedom of religion and belief of all people as a fundamental human right. We also appeal to governments and international organisations to respect and protect Christians and all other people of goodwill from threats and violence committed in the name of religion. In addition, we ask them to work for peace and reconciliation, to seek the settlement of on-going conflicts, and to stop the flow of arms, especially to violators of human rights. *All media* to report in an appropriate and unbiased way on violations of religious freedom, including the discrimination and persecution of Christians as well as of other faith communities.

All educational institutions to develop opportunities and tools to teach young people in particular about human rights, religious tolerance, healing of memories and hostilities of the past, and peaceful means of conflict resolution and reconciliation.

These words are very significant. Representatives of almost all the organizations in the world that call themselves Christian churches were calling on the other main institutions in society, government, media, and education to take up their proper roles to reduce the persecution of Christians and related human rights abuses. This is not something we can do in five minutes after church. This

requires serious long-term efforts by people responsible for our churches, government, media and educational institutions. And, I believe, these duties fall especially on those Christians and church groups who have a rich intellectual and educational history on which they can draw to strategize how to express effective love for persecuted Christians in the fields of government, media and education.

As I said earlier, the governments in the Romans 13 world usually have some important moral influences upstream that continue to influence what they decide to do today. In many or most countries with religious freedom, somewhere in the last 200 years, biblical themes made a significant impact on discussions of human dignity or of freedom of conscience. We have to use the realms of church, government, media and education to try to make that happen for Christians in the Revelation 13 world. Many researchers think that the persecution of Christians around the world has become worse than at any time in recent history. Multiple beasts are rearing their heads. We must use all legitimate means to respond.

IV. You Can Do Something

The global persecution of Christians feels like such a big problem that one may wonder how to make a meaningful impact. Just what can you or your church do? Let me give some suggestions:

1. Pray!
2. Start to read about the problem. My favourite source for reliable information is the World Watch List (accessible via www.opendoorsusa.org), which provides both shorter

and longer reports about the countries where religious persecution is extreme. Also, the International Institute for Religious Freedom (<http://iirf.eu>) contains a substantial and growing body of serious literature that addresses many dimensions of the problem.

3. Learn more about human rights documents and principles and what they say about religious freedom. At least since the United Nations endorsed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), freedom of religion has been regarded as an important human right, even if many nations ignore it. It would be a worthwhile step if all Christians knew something about human rights.
4. Find out what your government says and does with regard to religious freedom and persecution. Do not be surprised if your government is not completely consistent with its own principles. Ask your public officials if they are implementing their own principles in both domestic and foreign policy.
5. If you are associated with a school or university, encourage your institution to hold an educational event and/or encourage advocacy activities on behalf of human rights and religious freedom.
6. Ask your church to develop a partnership with a particular persecuted church.

The very location of our 2015 Tirana consultation on discrimination, persecution, and martyrdom should

be a source of encouragement to everyone who thinks the plight of persecuted Christians is beyond our ability to have an impact. We came to Albania partly for security reasons, but also to celebrate the wonderful change that has occurred there. Under its former communist regime, Albania would have been near the top of the list of persecuting countries. For many years during that country's totalitarian period, it was essentially illegal not to be an atheist. But this

changed with the end of communism, and now Albania enjoys a good level of freedom of religion. Severe persecution eventually comes to an end, and freedom often returns.

Please take a moment now to pray for the persecuted church and ask God what he would have you do about this issue, which should be a high priority for any Christian who is concerned for the welfare of the whole body of Christ.