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**“Missions in the Context of Violence: A New Testament Response”
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As the Church continues Her missionary work in the twenty-first century, the issue of violence will continue to be both a present and a growing reality. Immediately following the Apostle Paul’s reminder that “all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim 3:12),² Paul quickly notes that evil men will proceed from bad to worse, leaving readers to assume that as such men digress more and more, persecution will increase. The purpose of this paper is to develop a theological response to guide the Church during times of persecution.

John S. Pobee notes that, “Since theology emerges from the experience of a people, it would be a surprise if the experience of attack, indeed persecution, did not leave its mark and did not influence the documents of the Church. . . . It could even be argued that experiences of persecution provided the language and imagery suitable for describing Christian experience.”³ The New Testament reveals that there were at least three ways in which Jesus and Apostolic Church responded to persecution. A simple reading of the biblical text reveals that there were times when the Church responded by 1) flight; 2) avoidance; or 3) engagement. In this paper, I will trace these themes

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²Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are taken from the New American Standard Bible (1977).

³John S. Pobee, *Persecution and Martyrdom in the Theology of Paul* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1985), 13.

throughout the New Testament. Second, I will conclude with an attempt to develop a New Testament response for the Church in light of twenty-first century persecution.

Before examining the Scriptures, it is necessary to define the three themes. First, whenever the Scriptures portray Jesus or the Apostolic Church intentionally leaving an area or people because of opposition, here is an example of flight. Second, in passages where the biblical characters knew of possible persecution and avoided such areas, here is an example of avoidance. Finally, the most common response of the Church to persecution is engagement. Whenever the biblical text portrays the Church interacting with Her opponents though proclamation in the face of persecution, here is an example of engagement.

Synoptic Gospels

Each of the three themes is evident in the Synoptics. Even prior to the birth of Jesus, His family found themselves under persecution. This pattern would continue throughout His adult life resulting in His crucifixion.

Flight. A chronology of events reveals that the first synoptic example of persecution is located in Matthew's gospel. Following the departure of the magi, Joseph is warned in a dream to flee to Egypt from the persecution "for Herod is going to search for the Child to destroy Him" (Matt 2:13).⁴ The theme of flight is also witnessed in the "shake off the dust" passages in Matthew and Luke (Matt 10:14; Luke 9:5; 10:11). Jesus offers the Twelve instructions regarding their missionary work followed by a text predicting persecution (Matt 10:16-23) and thus the need for flight (Matt 10:23).

⁴Matthew clearly notes that this flight was so that prophecy could be fulfilled (Matt 2:15).

Avoidance. Mark's first record of persecution is related to the imprisoning of John the Baptist (Mark 1:14). Though he notes that after John's arrest that "Jesus came into Galilee preaching" (Matt 1:14), Matthew leads one to believe that it was appropriate for Jesus at this time to avoid tension to fulfill prophecy (Matt 4:13-14), specifically noting that He "withdrew" to Galilee (Matt 4:12).

Engagement. Though Jesus engages his opponents throughout Mark's writings (e.g., 3:6), halfway through the work He begins to teach his disciples that the Son of Man "must suffer" and "be killed" (Mark 8:31; cf. 9:12, 31). Possibly the clearest example of an attitude of engagement is Mark 10:33, "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death, and will deliver Him to the Gentiles. And they will mock Him and spit upon Him, and scourge Him, and kill *Him*, and three days later He will rise again" (Mark 10:33-34).

Ironically, in the same text advocating flight (Matt 10), Matthew and Luke record that Jesus *intentionally* sent his disciples out as "sheep in the midst of wolves" (Matt 10:16; Luke 10:3) with the warning that they should "beware of men; for they will deliver you up to *the* courts, and scourge you in their synagogues; and you shall even be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles" (Matt 10:17-18).

Fourth Gospel

Within John's Gospel, all three themes are present. Though John omits the childhood persecution narratives from his writing, he does include other passages

showing persecution. Several times throughout this work, Jesus is significantly engaged in conflict with the religious leaders.

Flight. Following Jesus' heated debate with the Pharisees when He revealed his eternality with the Father (John 8:58), His opponents attempted to stone Him, "but Jesus hid Himself, and went out of the temple" (John 8:59). Later, while walking in Solomon's Colonnade, the Jews confronted Jesus. Following another tense debate, they again attempted to seize Him. It is during this encounter John simply writes, "and He eluded their grasp. And He went away again beyond the Jordan to the place where John was first baptizing, and He was staying there" (John 10:39-40).

After the significant meeting between the chief priests and Pharisees that resulted with Caiaphas unknowingly prophesying that Jesus would die for the nation and the scattered children of God, a conspiracy was made to kill Jesus (John 11:47-53). John then notes that, "Jesus therefore no longer continued to walk publicly among the Jews, but went away from there to the country near the wilderness, into a city called Ephraim; and there He stayed with the disciples" (John 11:54).

Avoidance. John notes that the Jews began persecuting Jesus for healing a man on the Sabbath (John 5:16). The first example of avoidance in his Gospel is in chapter seven. Here John notes that Jesus "was walking in Galilee; for He was unwilling to walk in Judea, because the Jews were seeking to kill Him" (John 7:1). Though He later went into Jerusalem, He informs His brothers that He would not go to the city on their desired timetable for His time "has not yet fully come" (John 7:8).

Engagement. When Jesus does arrive in Jerusalem, He boldly engages the people, and though they try to seize Him (John 7:30; 8:20), their attempts are in vain.

Upon entering Jerusalem Jesus begins to physically engage those buying and selling in the temple complex (Mark 11:15-18), but the priests and scribes did not harm him because they feared Him since the people were astonished by His teaching (Mark 11:18). Later, John records that Jesus declares that His hour to be glorified has arrived (John 12:23; 13:1). Following this time, He quickly approaches His crucifixion (John 19:16).

Acts

The concept of persecution is found throughout Luke's second volume. What begins as opposition toward Jesus in the Gospel concludes with opposition toward the Church in Acts. All three themes are found in this work.

Flight. The first clear picture of this theme in Acts occurs in conjunction with the martyrdom of Steven in Jerusalem. On the same day of his death, a severe persecution breaks out against the Church. Luke records that the disciples, except the apostles, scatter throughout Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:1-4). The result of this scattering was at least that Philip ends up in Samaria preaching the gospel and that some anonymous believers end up preaching the gospel in Antioch (Acts 11:19-21).

Soon after Saul's conversion, a conspiracy is developed to kill him. The opposition is so strong that he has to escape Damascus by night through an opening in the wall of the city (Acts 9:25). Later, in Jerusalem, the Hellenistic Jews attempt to kill him. Luke notes, "But when the brethren learned *of it*, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him away to Tarsus" (Acts 9:30).

On the night before Herod was to bring Peter out for execution, an angel releases him from prison. Though this was a miraculous escape, the angel's words (e.g., "Get up, quickly") emphasize the flight theme (Acts 12:7-10). Upon arrival at the prayer meeting

of the Church, Peter explains the work of the Lord and then Luke notes, “And he departed and went to another place” (Acts 12:17).

Immediately, following his stoning in Lystra, Paul departs for Derbe (Acts 14:19-20). The day after his prison time in Philippi, he departs the city (Acts 16:40). Following an uprising in Thessalonica including the attack on Jason, as soon as it was night, the believers send Paul and Silas to Beorea (Acts 17: 5-10). When the persecutors in Thessalonica eventually arrive in Beorea causing a disturbance, again the believers “immediately” send Paul “out to go as far as the sea” (Acts 17:14). During the riot in Ephesus, some of the believers keep Paul from going into the amphitheater. Following the uproar, Paul then meets with the church and immediately departs for Macedonia (Acts 19:30; 20:1).

Avoidance. Though Paul confesses that he was willing to go to Jerusalem and die for the Lord Jesus, the Church in Caesarea admonishes him to avoid Jerusalem. Luke records the details of the situation after Agabus’ arrival from Judea.

And coming to us, he [Agabus] took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands, and said, "This is what the Holy Spirit says: 'In this way the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'" ¹² And when we had heard this, we as well as the local residents *began* begging him not to go up to Jerusalem (Acts 21:11-12)

The Church finally agrees, however, to allow Paul to go. Since he would not be persuaded, they end their conversation stating that the Lord’s will be done.

Engagement. Clearly in Acts, engagement is the most popular theme regarding the Church’s response to persecution. It is within this book that the Church engages the culture with the gospel in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). For the most part, the Church engages the people around them, even in light of

persecution. There are numerous passages that reveal the disciples confronting others to take responsibility for their actions (2:22-23; 36; 3:12-18; 4:8-11; 4:25-28; 5:27-30; 7:52).

Having been ordered not to preach or teach in the name of Jesus, Peter and John declared, “for we cannot stop speaking what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20). Upon returning to meet with the other believers, rather than avoidance or flight, they petition God for boldness to speak the gospel clearly (Acts 4:29). Steven engages the religious leaders though it costs him his life (Acts 7). Luke foreshadows the fact that Paul will engage the unbelievers *and* will suffer. Recording the Lord’s words to Ananias, Luke writes, “But the Lord said to him, ‘Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake’” (Acts 9:15-16).

Pauline Literature

There are numerous references to persecution throughout the Pauline writings. In defense of his apostleship, Paul is even quick to note that he has suffered much persecution (2 Cor 11:23-25). Only one of the three themes is found in his writings.

Flight. This theme is not found in the Pauline literature. The closest one comes to locating this theme is in his first letter to the Thessalonians. Following the persecution, Paul attributed his departure from Thessalonica as something forced upon himself (1 Thess 2:17).

Avoidance. Avoidance as a legitimate option for the Church is not shown in Paul’s writings. He does speak of avoidance, but with a negative connotation. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul states that there are some people arguing in favor of

circumcision. These people are “those who desire to make a good showing in the flesh and try to compel you to be circumcised, simply that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ” (Gal 6:12). They try to avoid persecution, but sacrifice the call of Christ in the process.

Engagement. Paul did not have a martyr complex whereby suffering was something he sought. He clearly petitions the Thessalonians to pray, “that we may be delivered from perverse and evil men; for not all have faith” (2 Thess 3:2). Paul realizes that his boldness for engagement comes from the Lord. He was not hesitant to request that the Ephesians pray for him for boldness to speak the mysteries of God (Eph 6:19-20). He writes to the Corinthians noting both he and Apollos endure persecution when faced with it (1 Cor 4:12).

This endurance manifests itself in Ephesus. For Paul was willing to remain in the city until Pentecost because of a great door of opportunity for ministry had opened, in spite of much opposition (1 Cor 16:9). Paul was most definitely someone who could speak about persecution from experience (2 Cor 11:24-26). Clearly, God provides comfort for those who engage the unbelievers and experience suffering (2 Cor 1:4). Along with suffering for Christ comes comfort through Christ (2 Cor 1:5). When engagement results in persecution, the Church can know that God has not and will not abandon Her (2 Cor 4:9). Paul was able to maintain the engagement theme in his life; for it was through personal persecutions that Christ’s power was perfected (2 Cor 12:9-10).

Sometimes persecution has an indirect effect on the assumed outcome of engagement. Rather than be a hindrance to the spread of the Gospel, persecution can be beneficial. For example, Paul notes that many brothers, upon hearing of his

imprisonment, are “trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, [and] have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear” (Phil 1:14). Rather than the persecution in Philippi stifling his witness, Paul writes, “we had the boldness in our God to speak to you the gospel of God amid much opposition” (1 Thess 2:2). Though the Thessalonian believers suffered much from their own people (1 Thess 2:14), the Lord’s message rang out in Macedonia, Achaia, and a multitude of other places (1 Thess 1:6-10).

General Epistles

There is nothing in the General Epistles that seem to advocate the themes of flight or avoidance. Engagement, however, is clearly present. The author of Hebrews and Peter address persecution in several passages.

Engagement. The writer of Hebrews notes that there was a divine intentionality to the suffering of Christ (Heb 2:9-10). Moses was intentional about the engagement with Pharaoh and “choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God, than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin; considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward” (Heb 11:25-26).

Peter seems to advocate that the Church should not go looking for persecution but be prepared to engage it when it arrives. While discussing suffering for righteousness, he reminds his readers that they should always be prepared to give a defense for the Lord, but to do so with gentleness and respect (1 Pet 3:15). He notes that believers should not be surprised by suffering (1 Pet 4:12), should not be ashamed (1 Peter 4:16), and should entrust themselves to God (1 Pet 4:19).

Apocalypse

The notion of suffering and persecution is woven throughout Revelation. Not only is suffering at times expected of believers, but also death (Rev 6:11). While discussing martyrdom in Judaism, Pobe writes, “Persecutions and martyrdom are part of the evil that goes to complete that full sum of sins necessary for the arrival of the Day of the Lord.”⁵ At least two of the three themes are found in Revelation.

Flight. Soon after the woman gives birth to her son, she flees into the wilderness to escape the great fiery red dragon. It is here the Lord cares for her (Rev 12:6; 13-14). Instead of her son being devoured by the dragon (Rev 12:4), he is caught up to God and His throne (Rev 12:5).

Avoidance. The theme of avoidance is not found in Revelation.

Engagement. The two witnesses of the Lord engage unbelievers and bring judgment upon the earth (Rev 11:6). John notes that he saw the souls of many who had engaged unbelievers and had been killed because of their testimony, their refusal to worship the beast or his image, and their refusal to accept the mark of the beast (Rev 20:4).

Theological Significance of Persecution

Before concluding with a theology of response, it is necessary to ask what is the theological significance of persecution? For the sake of brevity, I am not able to discuss this issue in great detail. An entire paper could be developed on this topic alone. In this section, however, I will offer a few brief statements by scholars noting the theological significance of persecution particularly in the theologies of Luke and Paul.

⁵Pobe, 39.

Persecution is never to be taken lightly, according to Joel F. Williams in general its effects are destructive, yet the Church should remember that the Lord is able to work through such acts of evil:

Persecution is intended to be damaging to the church and it sometimes is. Persecution may impede growth, rob the church of its leaders, and leave the faithful with the difficult task of restoring those who have denied their commitment. Yet God is able to make even persecution work out for good, by producing a stronger, more sincere community of believers. Although persecution may be difficult, faithfulness to Christ is necessary regardless of the cost. Ultimately, Christians maintain their conviction concerning the truth of the gospel not to gain power or prestige but to preserve for themselves the opportunity, if necessary, to suffer for the sake of Christ. Then in our weakness, God displays his power. Jesus himself came not to be served but to serve and to give his life, and Christianity functions best when it follows its master. Believers fulfill their mission most effectively when they go the way of the cross and live with sacrificial love toward others.⁶

Luke clearly understands that the persecution of the Church is equivalent to the persecution of Christ (Acts 9:5). Scott Cunningham, in his work, *‘Through Many Tribulations:’ The Theology of Persecution in Luke-Acts* writes, “Persecution is an undeniable significant element in the author’s development of plot in Luke-Acts. It is the frequent and sometimes climactic manifestation of conflict between the characters and is particularly directed against Jesus (in the Gospel) and his disciples (primarily in Acts).”⁷ According to Cunningham, there are at least six theological functions of persecution in the writings of Luke:⁸

Persecution is Part of the Plan of God. Commenting on the differing persecutors found in the Scriptures, Beverly Roberts Gaventa wrote, “While both groups

⁶Joel F. Williams, “Conclusion,” in *Mission in the New Testament: An Evangelical Approach* (William J. Larkin, Jr. and Joel F. Williams, eds., (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 2246.

⁷Scott Cunningham, *‘Through Many Tribulations:’ The Theology of Persecution in Luke-Acts* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 337.

⁸See Cunningham, pages 296-327 for a more extensive treatment of these functions.

act against God's people and are responsible for their actions, both serve to fulfill God's will. Even the resistance to the gospel stems from God's plan and eventually leads to the church's growth."⁹ Throughout Luke's writings, persecution does not happen by chance nor is it understood as a surprise to God. What happens to the Messiah is included in God's sovereign plan. Numerous times the English word "must" is used in conjunction with suffering to communicate necessity (Luke 2:49; 4:43; 9:22; 13:33; 17:25; 19:5; 22:37; 24:7, 26, 44, 46). In Acts, Paul is one who "must suffer" for Christ (Acts 9:16). Later, Paul informs the Lycaonians "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22).

Persecution is the Rejection of God's Agents by Those Who are Supposedly God's People. Throughout Luke's writings, the Jews are the primary source of opposition toward Jesus and the Church. In both the Gospel and Acts, those who persecute the believers begin by displaying personal frustration toward God's agents but soon that frustration becomes hostility and finally climaxes in destructive acts.

Cunningham commented:

In the Gospel the only Gentile participation is at the trial of Jesus, where Pilate and Herod are involved by the Jewish leadership. In Acts, there are only three incidents of purely Gentile persecution: at Philippi, Athens and Ephesus. In all other cases of Gentile persecution it is in conjunction with and at the instigation of the Jews. Remarkably, even as the mission moves into Gentile areas, it is not the Gentiles, but still primarily the Jews who reject the message and persecute the missionaries.¹⁰

Following most Jewish uprisings, the missionaries turn more and more of their attentions toward the more receptive Gentiles (Acts 13:46-47; 18:6; 28:25-28).

⁹Beverly Roberts Gaventa, "To Speak Thy Word with All Boldness Acts 4:23-31," in *Faith and Mission* 3 (Spring 1986): 80.

¹⁰Cunningham, 303.

The Persecuted People of God Stand in Continuity with God's Prophets. A reading of the New Testament quickly brings to mind the infamous Old Testament Jewish legacy that God's chosen people are those who persecute God's messengers. According to Luke-Acts, those who continue in the ways of the Lord will also continue in the ways of persecution that came upon the Lord's prophets (Matt 23:31). Cunningham writes, "Thus, the persecution of Jesus and his disciples are clearly presented by the narrative in terms of a continuation of the pattern of the rejection of God's messengers typical of Israel's salvation-history."¹¹

Persecution is an Integral Consequence of Following Jesus. Acts continues the theme of persecution that Luke established in the life of Jesus in his Gospel. Since Jesus experienced persecution, his followers will continue in the pattern. Numerous parallels exist between the opposition experienced by Jesus in the Gospels and the Church in Acts.¹² Persecution comes to the followers of the Way because they *are* followers of the Way.

Persecution is the Occasion of the Christian's Perseverance. Not only will true believers experience persecution, but they will also persevere under such persecution (Luke 12:1-9). Paul is described as admonishing and encouraging the believers to continue in the faith despite their present opposition (Acts 14:22). He sets forth his own life as an example of perseverance while under persecution (Acts 20:22-24). Cunningham writes, "But even in the case of martyrdom, Luke reassures the Christian

¹¹Ibid., 311.

¹²For example, compare the Passion narrative with the account of the martyrdom of Steven.

community that this is not the end, that there is an eternal reward for the one who confesses Jesus.”¹³

Persecution is the Occasion of Divine Triumph. Nothing stops the growth of the Church. In fact, according to Cunningham, persecution “is used in the providence of God actually to stimulate the spread of the message of salvation.”¹⁴ Luke clearly portrays the Sovereign Lord as triumphant. Following the death of Stephen (Acts 7), the gospel spreads to Samaria and Antioch (Acts 8; 11). Though in prison, the missionaries are able to see the gospel spread to the jailer and his household (Acts 16:25-34). Even under house arrest, Paul continues to preach and teach “with all openness, unhindered” (Acts 28:31).

Other scholars have commented on the theological significance of persecution in the writings of Paul. For example, in his work, *Persecution and Martyrdom in the Theology of Paul*, Pobee suggests several issues of theological significance for sufferings and persecution.¹⁵ According to him

persecution and sufferings were a *sine qua non* of Paul’s apostolic ministry. Indeed, it could be said that the more he was persecuted the more he demonstrated his zeal for the Lord and through that authenticated his apostolic authority. For that same reason he became an example to other Christians. Moreover, his own sufferings constitute a part of the cosmic battle between the forces of God and the forces of Satan. Finally, his sufferings are put in an eschatological frame of reference; for not only is his endurance of persecution rooted in the eschatological hope but also his persecution is seen as part of the filling up of the full score of sins predestined to precede the coming of the Parousia. One striking point is the absence of any ideas of vicarious atoning efficacy attaching to his sufferings because that had been achieved once for all by the martyrdom of Christ. Paul is a

¹³Cunningham, 341.

¹⁴Ibid., 321.

¹⁵See Pobee, for a detailed examination of these issues.

confessor and may yet be a martyr. But Christ is the martyr *par excellence* and whatever Paul experiences is in imitation of Christ.¹⁶

While addressing the theology of 1 Thessalonians, Karl Paul Donfried states, “for Paul, suffering is part of the cosmic struggle which is leading to God’s triumphant victory. . . . Thus, on the one hand, accepting persecution is a sign of obedience to the gospel; on the other hand, accepting it with joy is a gift of God given through the Holy Spirit.”¹⁷

A Theology of Response

In view of the themes of flight, avoidance, and engagement, along with the theological significance of persecution, how should the twenty-first century Church respond to its Commission in an age of violence? During a discussion of such themes, questions arise such as, when should missionaries flee, avoid, or engage their persecutors? Is there ever a time when flight or avoidance actually becomes sinful acts? Is there ever a time when engagement is foolish? What is the relationship of flight or avoidance to Christ’s command for His disciples to take up their crosses and follow Him (Matt 16:24)?

It is a great conundrum that some believers are severely persecuted while others are not. For example, Johnny V. Miller observes this tension in the book of Revelation when he writes, “Some witnesses are protected throughout their mission, while others die

¹⁶Pobee, 106. Though Pobee’s comments provide insight into Paul’s theology, I disagree with Pobee that the Apostolic Church saw Jesus as a martyr. Unfortunately, space will not permit me to address this concern.

¹⁷Karl Paul Donfried, *Paul, Thessalonica, and Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 244.

for their boldness ([Rev] 6:9-11; 12:11).”¹⁸ God only knows why James was killed and Peter was set free (Acts 12:1-17). The mystery has not been revealed to us in the detail that we may desire.

Whether one lives or dies, it is clear that the believer will not be separated from the Lord (Rom 8:35-39). Reflecting on Luke 21:16-19, Cunningham states, “There is a promise that God will physically protect, but in his providence, if the disciple endures to death, he has assurance that he is eternally secure.”¹⁹ Continuing on, he notes that in Luke-Acts, “Although the divine protection and aid given to the messengers of God illustrates the inability of persecution to stop the message they proclaim, ultimately it is not the *messengers* who cannot be defeated . . . but the *Word of God* that is triumphant.”²⁰

Is Flight Still an Option? Though there were times in the Scriptures when Jesus and the Apostolic Church could have engaged their oppressors, there are examples of them taking advantage of the flight option. With Jesus, many times we read that He is in flight to fulfill prophecies and because it was not time for Him to die. The Apostolic Church is seen taking to flight following an outbreak of persecution (Acts 8) and as an option for Paul as desired by the believers (Acts 21:12).

The Scriptures allow for times of flight from persecution. As the Church makes disciples, She is a part of the fulfillment of prophecy. She is given wisdom to discern Her present situations. If the heart of the missionary is right before the Lord, then it seems likely that when faced with persecution, he or she can prayerfully discern if flight

¹⁸Johnny V. Miller, “Mission in Revelation,” in *Mission in the New Testament: An Evangelical Approach*, William J. Larkin, Jr. and Joel F. Williams, eds., (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 235.

¹⁹Cunningham, 323.

²⁰Ibid., 325.

is an option. At times Paul chose the flight option (Acts 9:25); however, on other occasions, he refused the same option (Acts 21:13-14).

Is there ever a time when flight or avoidance becomes sinful? The immediate answer is that there are times when flight or avoidance are sinful acts. It is difficult, however, to answer at what time these options become ungodly acts. Much of the answer to this question is found within the hearts of believers. Clearly, there were times in the New Testament when flight was an option to save one from harm. Again, the missionary must keep his or her heart in fellowship with the Lord. If self-preservation, rather than God's glory, is the desire behind flight or avoidance, then this would be a sinful situation. Sometimes the flight option allows a person to walk by sight and not by faith.

Is there ever a time when engagement becomes foolish? Nowhere does the New Testament encourage a martyr complex, nor does it advocate that the Church should go into the world looking for persecution or even attempt to cause persecution for Herself. Engagement becomes a foolish option when it is an outcome of a martyr complex. Both Jesus and the Church never intentionally sought persecution. As they continued on their mission, whenever they encountered such opposition, they dealt with it and continued on their mission or died.

As already mentioned, the most prominent of the three New Testament themes is engagement. Despite opposition and even the possible reality of martyrdom, the Church continued to take the gospel to the world. There were times, however, when the Apostle Paul refrained from engagement at the urging of other believers (e.g. in Ephesus).

What is the relationship between flight or avoidance and Matthew 16:24?

All believers are called to die physically for the sake of the Gospel if necessary. One is

required to take up his or her cross and follow God's will. Some missionaries will die for the spread of the gospel; other missionaries will avoid such persecution. Though Stephen was killed, others fled the city and planted the Church in Antioch.

For example, though the Apostle Paul was not looking for imprisonment, he was arrested. He was no longer allowed to travel freely (his area for missionary activity changed), but continued to engage his persecutors with the gospel. By the time he writes to the Philippian Church, the gospel has already entered into Caesar's household (Phil 4:22). Paul would also attribute the further the spread of the gospel to his arrest (Phil 1:12-13).

For the missionary who is walking in the light, when persecution comes, (if time and circumstances allow) wisdom and counsel are needed before the next step is taken. In certain situations for some missionaries, flight may be appropriate and consistent with Matthew 16:24, but given the same situation, for other missionaries it is not an option. For the latter, flight or avoidance may be disobedience to Matthew 16:24.

Divine sovereignty and the complexity of persecution, along with the three themes in the New Testament, do not allow for a single simple answer to the aforementioned question. What may be a perfectly legitimate response to persecution for one person may not be appropriate for another person because much depends on the Spirit's leading and the present fellowship with the Lord.

Conclusion

Though there is no simple New Testament response to persecution in every situation, the Scriptures do offer at least three acceptable practices: flight, avoidance, and engagement. These practices are not always equally appropriate for any given situation;

hence, the missionary must remain prayerful and if possible, seek the council of other believers to determine the best response. Flight or avoidance (and engagement) is sin to those not walking by faith. Individuals not directly involved in the persecution, however, should not be quick to judge the hearts of those who are forced to make life and death decisions during such opposition.

Though there are several passages that support flight or avoidance, by far the majority of the persecution passages portray Jesus and the Church in engagement. Flight or avoidance were never understood to be a failure on the part of the believers, but rather resulted in a change of their missionary contexts. If they were prevented from preaching in one area, then they would travel to another location to fulfill the Great Commission.

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