

IN THE FURNACE

By

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The October issue of *The Legal Alert* from the Christian Law Association lists 9 cases of Christians being opposed or restricted in one way or another in the practice of their faith. This report is only the tip of the iceberg compared to the vast pressure to silence the Biblical truth coming from the television, the public school, and society in general. The Supreme Court has attempted to eradicate any evidence of the Christian faith from every public venue. New World Order advocates would outlaw the preaching of the Gospel in its purity. Anyone who dares speak out, as Jesus did, against sin or false religious traditions is accused of bigotry or fanaticism.

One of the biggest temptations for a Christian today is to escape criticism or persecution by not appearing different from the world. One may be tempted to agree with the media that homosexuality is an acceptable lifestyle, rather than be labeled “bigot” or “homophobic.” In the workplace we might come under pressure to hide our faith and go along with practices that are dishonest.

Many churches, in their eagerness to bring the lost into their fold have accommodated themselves to a pattern that is acceptable to the general unbelieving public. Church growth is attained through surveys and worldly marketing techniques. The heroes and heroines held up for today’s youth are professional athletes and “rock” stars, who are paraded before the church as if to say, “This is your ideal. This is the kind of person Christ wants you to be.” The effort is to attract youth through entertainment rather than to offer them a challenge to take up the cross and follow Jesus.

Churches try to accommodate themselves to the current fads in the world. They discard the hymns that are both musical and edifying and replace them with “praise choruses.” 50 years ago we used these kinds of choruses at youth camp because they were simple, easy to learn, and didn’t require a hymnal. But when the children returned to the home church they readily joined the rest of the people in singing hymns with meaning that require some thought. It is a serious mistake for church leaders to fashion the program after the ideas of untrained youth.

Jesus did not cave in to the immature concepts of youth in order to appeal to them. To the rich young ruler of Mark 10 he gave the stern command: Sell your goods and give to the poor. The message to that young man was that if he wanted to follow Christ he had to give up his worldly concepts, his ambition to be rich, and become totally dependant upon Christ. The thing he loved most he had to give up in order to follow Jesus. He failed the test. Jesus refused to alter His protocol to make it easier to believe and obey. The “easy believism” that is so popular today doesn’t resemble the gospel of the kingdom Jesus

preached. It is tragic when many take the worldly ambitions of the flesh, give them religious titles and peddle them as God-given “ministries.”

In the early days of the church the fierce opposition from the Jews and from the Roman emperors stirred believers to fervently witness to their faith, putting them in the spotlight so that their persecution gave publicity to the gospel message, After Stephen was stoned to death for boldly proclaiming the truth, “there arose great persecutions against the church which was in Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad...and they that were scattered abroad went about preaching the word” (Acts 8:1, 4).

The more they were persecuted for the faith, the more zealously they proclaimed it, with no regard for personal liberty. When Peter and John were arrested and then released under the terms that they preach no more in the name of Jesus, their answer was, “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). They took literally the words of Jesus: “Blessed are you when men shall reproach you, and persecute you, and say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven” (Matt 5:11-12).

While we in the U.S.A. may come under criticism and ridicule for the faith we believe and live by, as yet we have not had a taste of the kind of persecution suffered by believers in many other countries. Joe Garman, Director of American Rehabilitation Ministries wrote about a recent trip to the North Korean border. He found that “Christians who had successfully escaped North Korea and then captured by Chinese border guards are detained until North Korean officials can transport them back to North Korea. They are then deported with wire passed through, rather than around their wrists or secured to each other with wire passed through their noses.

“Terrifying stories abound of North Korean saints living in hand-dug tunnels beneath the earth and entire underground Churches put to death after being tried and found guilty of being “Christians” (From Restoration Herald, Nov. 2002). Totalitarian governments are always at enmity with Christians, who, like Peter and John, must always obey God and not man. This enmity is nothing new, as it was demonstrated by the emperor Nebuchadnezzar. As the ruler of Babylon he demanded from his subjects the worship that belongs only to God. Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego were given the choice of either worshipping the false gods” – or being cast into a fiery furnace. Years later, king Darius signed a decree that anyone who prayed to any god other than the king should be fed to the lions. Daniel defied the decree and was cast to the lions. In the first century Christians were tortured and killed because they worshipped God rather than the emperor.

We should not be surprised if modern bureaucrats and people in power think of the state as God, and see Christians, whose allegiance is to Christ, as enemies of the state. It was in view of this fact that Jesus said, “If the world hate you, you know that it hated me before it hated you...If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you...” (John 15:18-21).

Jesus knew what was at stake when He called people to follow him. He repeatedly said, “Whosoever will save his life shall lose it; and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it” (Matt. 16:25; 10:39; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24,17:33; John 12:25).

The world is filled with strife, injustice, sin, evil, and hate. No one should expect that because he is Christian he is to be shielded from pain and grief that surrounds him. Rather Jesus calls his followers to bear a cross and share the burden of the world’s ills. He said, “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). It is little wonder that millions would claim the benefits of His death on the cross, but never actually take up the burden of bearing a cross to follow Him. They gladly lay their burden on Jesus, but do not choose to take up His. Hence, He said, “He that does not take his cross and follow after me, is not worthy of me” (Matt 10:38).

That sounds fair to me. If Jesus bears my sins to the judgment of death, so that I might be free of sin and forever alive in eternity, the least I can do is take up my cross – my own commitment and responsibility as his disciple – and bear it daily, voluntarily and uncomplaining. This includes seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, telling others the truth of the gospel at the risk of ridicule, and all the whole business of being His disciple. It means being expendable for Him, and ready to die. Die? Yes, because we have already been buried with Jesus into death through baptism, and raised to a new life that belongs to Him (Rom 6:4).

Thousands of Muslims are so dedicated to their cause that they willingly sacrifice themselves in suicide bombings. Isn’t the cause of Christ far greater? It is time that we stop offering the world entertainment, fun, games, and a “health and wealth” gospel, and challenge both youth and aged to take seriously the call of Jesus to deny self, take up a cross, and follow Him.

When Nebuchadnezzar looked into the fiery furnace he saw not only Shadrach, Meshack, and Abed-Nego, but also an angel of God (Dan.3:25-28) When we obediently walk by faith, it might be a walk through the fire, but we can be assured that God is with us, that He will sustain us, and that He ultimately will transform us to His own image.

These men were delivered from the fire, but the soldiers who put them there were destroyed by it.

This Thanksgiving Day, when we sit down to give thanks for all the blessings that our merciful God has bestowed upon us, we can thank Him also that Christ is in the furnace with us, and pray that the fire will purify us, and destroy God’s enemies.

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