



## **Bad Urach Statement**

Towards an evangelical theology of suffering, persecution and martyrdom  
for the global church in mission

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## 1 Introduction

*The introduction serves to ground the statement in contemporary challenges faced, explain about the conference, our hermeneutical basis and our approach, the delimitation of the topic and how we define the key terms used.*

### 1.1 Suffering for Christ, persecution and martyrdom as a contemporary challenge

By any definition of persecution available, the worldwide body of Christ can count literally tens of millions of Christians experiencing persecution today. Their sufferings range from violent death and martyrdom, to excruciating physical and psychological torture, to invasive rules confining their worship activities to church buildings, to lower level but still traumatic forms of discrimination in countless other countries, including many with strong rules protecting religious freedom. Due to the massive rise in population and the explosion in the numbers of Christians, never before in the history of the church have so many of Christ's followers experienced persecution as they do in today's contemporary world! Even within contexts of severe persecution, the vast majority of Christians are not martyrs and never will be. The actual number of martyrs is comparatively small.<sup>1</sup>

The plight of the world's harassed and persecuted Christians forces the body of Christ to deal with three contemporary challenges, namely those of remembrance, understanding and transformation.

The challenge of remembrance emerges from the fact that the persecuted are not remembered, prayed for, and assisted by the general body of Christ as well as they should be.

The challenge of understanding arises from the complex blend of ancient cosmic antagonisms and contemporary factors that drive the persecution of Christians today. These are not well enough understood which can result in ineffective intervention. While the persecution of Christians is ultimately due to the enmity between Christ and the fallen spiritual realm and the rebellion of human nature, nevertheless four major tangible forces are bringing persecution in all its myriad forms to the church. (1) Religious extremism makes religious hardliners see Christians as an enemy and an affront to their religion which has to be attacked with lethal power in order to spread their own belief system globally. The radical nature of persecution of Christians by militants is a modern day phenomenon. (2) Totalitarian insecurity arises in states that are threatened by the existence of Christians who owe their primary allegiance to God and not to them. (3) Religious nationalism thrives where the extremists in other religions claim a territory is sacred to their religion and insist on the departure of minority religions. (4) Secular intolerance raises its head where an atheistic elite seeks to push all expressions of religion into the private sphere.

The challenge of transformation is due to deficits in the body of Christ. Persecuted Christians have learned truths about God that Christians under less pressure need to hear in order to experience the fullness of God. The spiritual insights of the persecuted are vital to the transformation of the lives of the rest of the body of Christ. One of these essential insights is that we will all be – if witnessing for Christ – in some sense persecuted. There is a grander, greater narrative of God's action underneath the stories of individual pain, suffering, deliverance, and endurance.

### 1.2 The consultation, its participants and the statement

There is an urgent need for a deeper evangelical understanding of the theology of the cross

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<sup>1</sup> For the most comprehensive descriptions of persecution of Christians see Boyd-MacMillan 2006 and for restrictions of religious freedom see Marshall 2008 and Pew 2009 and Johnson & Ross 2009 (Atlas of Global Christianity).

with regard to suffering, persecution and martyrdom for Christ and its relevance for the global church in mission. The prevalence of certain theologies in parts of the evangelical and pentecostal movements tends to ill equip the church for the suffering that comes with its mission in the world. The danger for the church is to be like a building whose foundations have eroded and one day the whole building will suddenly collapse when persecution comes. The decade old call by evangelical Christians, particularly in the Global South, for a ‘theology of the pathway of the cross’, needs to be heeded on a global level. Such a theology has the potential to counterbalance an evangelical tendency towards triumphalism and to complement the views of other theological traditions.

There are different types of such theologies in liberationist, Roman-Catholic, Orthodox and other streams of Christianity that have varying degrees of influence on the evangelical movement. Much can be learned from their insights and concerns. Simultaneously evangelicals need to clarify where at times they hold different paradigms and positions on particular issues in order to be better conversation partners.

Therefore 24 participants from at least 18 different countries of origin and residence met from 16-18 September 2009 in Bad Urach, Germany, for a consultation on ‘Developing an evangelical theology of suffering, persecution and martyrdom for the global church in mission’. More people participated in an electronic discussion forum. This was organized by the International Institute for Religious Freedom, sponsored by the World Evangelical Alliance Religious Liberty Commission, together with the Theological Commission and Mission Commission, and the Lausanne Theological Working Group in preparation towards the Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization, Cape Town 2010.

As an outcome of their consultation the participants want to send a message to the whole body of Christ and to their fellow evangelicals in particular. It comes from some of those evangelicals from different parts of the globe and various contexts who have possibly most advanced in formulating an evangelical theology of suffering, persecution and martyrdom. It is not addressed from ‘the West’ to ‘the rest’, or ‘from traditional sending countries’ to ‘mission fields’, nor from the ‘non-persecuted’ to the ‘persecuted’. It has rather been designed by evangelicals from contexts with various levels of persecution reading the Bible together, sharing their own contextually relevant theologies, and considering some of Christian theology and tradition together.

We are writing with a global focus, particularly addressing theologians, missiologists, and Christian leaders. We are deliberately addressing ‘the global church in mission’, as the worldwide body of Christ fulfilling together in joint obedience the mission to which God has called us. The term ‘in mission’ was purposefully added, because we believe there is a close relationship between the suffering of the church and its mission. Our topic can be best understood when considered within the context of God’s mission in which he involves his church.

Consequently our statement is of a theological and systematic nature, striving for a high level of reflection without being technical. We are trying to provide a synthesis of evangelical thinking, describing both agreement and disagreement. We hope that this statement will become a benchmark and stepping stone for future reflection on the topic. Obviously there are limitations to formulating a globally valid theology, and it has been suggested that all theology can be contextual only. If that is so, the least that might be taken from our statement are theological foundations which we consider as normative and relevant to the interpretation of our joint experiences. Theological reflection is needed in order to develop a theology to guide Christians in their response to persecution.

### **1.3 Our foundations and approach**

We consider the Bible as our normative guideline. Our approach must be based on the whole

Bible, not exclusively on the New Testament but also the Old Testament. Large parts of the Bible have been written by persecuted believers for persecuted believers. We must therefore not lose sight of the original intent of biblical text.<sup>2</sup> Ignoring this context might lead to profound deficiencies in the teaching and practice of the church.

We respect those who have followed Christ before us. We have therefore taken note of church history and Christian tradition. Some of us believe that most, if not all, lessons to be learned about following Christ in persecution and martyrdom have already been learned in the first four centuries of the Christian era and during the time of the Reformation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Some have examined this in more detail in their own works.<sup>3</sup>

We have also gathered, studied and evaluated as many contemporary evangelical statements relevant to our topic as we could find. We integrate their insights as much as possible into this statement, at times even including verbatim quotes of whole passages. These predecessor statements<sup>4</sup> are, in chronological order, the *Lausanne Covenant*, agreed upon in 1974 by the International Congress for World Evangelisation, and the interpretation and expansion of its concerns in the *Manila Manifesto*, issued at the second such congress in 1989, *A letter to the churches in Asia* by the Evangelical Fellowship in Asia sent from their consultation on Christian suffering in Asia in 1988, the *Statement on prosperity theology and theology of suffering* by the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) in 1994, the Lausanne Occasional Paper on *The persecuted church* drafted by an issue group at the Forum 2004 of the Lausanne Movement and WEA, a pastoral directive from the Second Ecumenical Congress of the International Christian Network in 2006 on *Readiness to Suffer for Christ*, and the *Resolution on Religious Freedom and Solidarity with the Persecuted Church* by the 12th General Assembly of the World Evangelical Alliance in 2008.

On this basis we have conducted a global conversation of evangelical Christians from contexts of various degrees of religious freedom or persecution in a spirit of learning from each other. We have particularly attempted to gather and create consensus among those evangelicals who have written books and academic works on the topic.

As some related topics were too broad to be fully covered, we explicitly state that our statement does not concentrate on the following: We are not primarily focusing on a theological interpretation of human suffering in general, nor the question how a good God can allow suffering, nor on various kinds of suffering of Christians besides suffering for Christ. We are not focusing on a theological interpretation of human rights in general nor of religious freedom in particular. But we acknowledge the importance of these issues and their interrelatedness with our topic. We therefore briefly cover them in the next paragraphs in order to put our statement in context and only refer to these issues when our theological interpretation of suffering, persecution and martyrdom for Christ calls for it.

#### **1.4 Theologically interpreting human suffering<sup>5</sup>**

We need to distinguish in our theological interpretation between human suffering in general, in which Christians partake, and the suffering of Christians for the sake of Christ. Of course they are related, at times intertwined, and they cannot always be neatly separated in reality or in scripture. Both are coming from the same root, but they have two faces. But it is undeniable that obedience to God or allegiance to Christ leads to additional kinds suffering, which are often specifically addressed in scripture. We recognize that much of suffering has nothing to

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<sup>2</sup> See Penner 2004 and Schirrmacher 2001 for details.

<sup>3</sup> For example see Ton 1997 and Wespelal 2005.

<sup>4</sup> The bibliography at the end gives the references for these statements.

<sup>5</sup> For more details see the Statement on Prosperity Theology and Theology of Suffering 1994, from which much of this is taken.

do with persecution and that corruption and sin have a large part in it. While this statement focuses on suffering for Christ, in order not to lose sight of the broader reality, we briefly cover human suffering in general here.

Suffering is contrary to the original will of God. Suffering is a human experience which a person usually undergoes against his or her wish, an experience which causes pain, discomfort, disharmony, sorrow, despair, anxiety etc. in material, physical, psychological, spiritual, and social dimensions of life.

#### ***1.4.1 Causes of human and divine suffering***

In general, suffering is the result of the sin of Adam, and characteristic of the period of human history until the return of Jesus Christ. But this is not to say that all who are suffering are suffering as a result of their personal sins. Some suffer because of natural disasters, some because of sickness, physical deformities and limitations, some because of self inflicted pain, some because of the social sins of mankind. Also God puts his disciplinary hand upon his sinning people. On other occasions Christians suffer as a result of their foolish acceptance of Satan's temptation to turn away from the Lord's path. On the other hand Christians frequently suffer because of their resistance to Satan's temptation and their steadfast discipleship in the world. Christians suffer also when they have done nothing wrong but simply because of their faithful obedience to Jesus Christ in this sinful world. Often suffering is a mystery. The question asked through the ages "How can a good and just God allow suffering in the world?" can only be validly answered by who God in Christ is for us and what he does for us. God himself is suffering because he loves and his love is rejected. He suffers because of the earthly suffering of the people he created, for their redemption, and because of the suffering of the people he has redeemed. His suffering is the result of his love. The suffering of God in Christ is the key to all suffering. We should evaluate all suffering in the light of the suffering of God. The perception of the suffering of God will have encompassing influence on our thinking on the suffering of the church of Christ.

#### ***1.4.2 Significance of suffering***

The mature Christian knows that there is no meaningless suffering; all suffering can become meaningful. No one wishes to suffer, but many Christians who have gone through suffering do not regret this. Christian suffering is instructive and has retrospective, present and prospective purposes: it teaches us lessons from our past experience; it is a sign that we are God's faithful children (Heb 12:5-6); and it purifies us in holiness for our future life of service. Christians suffer in sympathy with others who suffer and in the cause of attempting to remove causes of suffering in response to the love command of the Lord Jesus Christ. We suffer also because of our identity as disciples of Jesus Christ. If we participate in the sufferings of Jesus Christ, we will share in his glory in the future. Thus suffering is not always detrimental but may be beneficial – to oneself, to one's neighbor, and to the cause of the kingdom of God.

#### ***1.4.3 Christian response to human suffering***

We rejoice in the privilege we have in our suffering because it prepares us for the glory that is to follow (Hebr 12:2). The church is expected to complete her diaconal work with the same perspective as her Lord, who, having loved his own loved them to the full extent of giving his life for them (John 13:1-3). The reality of suffering in the world calls every Christian to the task of seeking to alleviate suffering and to remove the causes of suffering, both individually and socially. If our personal suffering is because of something that we have or have not done, or it is self-inflicted, we have to repent. If our societal suffering is a result of our negative action or neglect of God's principles of stewardship and justice, we must repent. As Chris-

tians we are called to work for justice, both individual and societal, for the preservation of the planet ecologically, for a better life for all of God's creatures – in short, for kingdom values (Heb 13:16). We need to harness all available resources in the fight against suffering until God himself removes all suffering. The church will be able to serve faithfully unto death only if she knows she is going to pass from this world to the Father and that her 'present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed ...' (Rom 8:18).

### **1.5 A theological understanding of religious freedom and human rights**

Upholding human rights and standing up for religious freedom in our eyes is not an alternative to following the way of the cross and trusting in the power of prayer.

We are affirming and seek to develop further key statements of the Lausanne Covenant and the Manila Manifesto:

It is the God-appointed duty of every government to secure conditions of peace, justice and liberty in which the church may obey God, serve the Lord Jesus Christ, and preach the gospel without interference. We therefore pray for the leaders of nations and call upon them to guarantee freedom of thought and conscience, and freedom to practise and propagate religion in accordance with the will of God and as set forth in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We also express our deep concern for all who have been unjustly imprisoned, and especially for those who are suffering for their testimony to the Lord Jesus. We promise to pray and work for their freedom. At the same time we refuse to be intimidated by their fate. God helping us, we too will seek to stand against injustice and to remain faithful to the gospel, whatever the cost. We do not forget the warnings of Jesus that persecution is inevitable.

(Clause 13 of the Lausanne Covenant)

We affirm that the proclamation of God's kingdom of justice and peace demands the denunciation of all injustice and oppression, both personal and structural; we will not shrink from this prophetic witness.

(Affirmation 9, Manila Manifesto)

Christians earnestly desire freedom of religion for all people, not just freedom for Christianity. In predominantly Christian countries, Christians are at the forefront of those who demand freedom for religious minorities. In predominantly non-Christian countries, therefore, Christians are asking for themselves no more than they demand for others in similar circumstances. The freedom to 'profess, practise and propagate' religion, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, could and should surely be a reciprocally granted right.

(Section 12, Manila Manifesto)

#### **1.5.1 Human rights<sup>6</sup>**

The protection of human rights is an important part of our understanding of Christian ethics.

In the Christian tradition we have often called universal values or global standards of human behavior 'the natural moral law'. Christians have usually claimed that all sensible people know a significant amount about right and wrong, and that this knowledge is a gift of God to all people, regardless of their religion or philosophy of life. This moral knowledge is an important part of what makes a humane civilization possible and this moral knowledge coming from 'the natural moral law' should be central to public, political life together. As Christians,

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<sup>6</sup> For more details see Johnson 2008 and Taber 2002.



we think that our more distinctly religious morality which comes from the Bible is consistent with the more general moral values of the natural moral law, if they are both properly interpreted, but that the moral values and principles for public, political life are not narrowly religious. We Christians should assume that all normal people know a lot about basic moral values such as justice, fairness, and honesty (cf. Rom 13:1-7).

Human rights and the pursuit of religious freedom are founded on scripture which reveals that every human being is created in the image and likeness of God and therefore possesses an inalienable and innate dignity that no one can rightly take away on any pretext whatever (Gen 1:26-30; Psa 8:4-8).

There is a biblical basis for almost all of the content of the UN Human Rights Declaration, though some sentences in this document need our qualification. While the first initiative focused on fundamental human rights, a second and a third generation of efforts seeks to elevate all sorts of wishful conditions to the status of rights influenced by secular ideologies.

Our understanding of human rights is based on the creation of humankind in the image of God. A responsible method of saying what rights people have, will correlate rights with our duties given by God to all people through creation. Jesus rejected all forms of discrimination and insisted that all human beings must be treated exactly in the same way. The church never actually practiced this teaching as radically as it might have.

A biblically informed doctrine of rights and justice will require very sensitive application in every context, with Christians thoughtfully considering how our teaching both correlates with God-given human desires and also leads to a prophetic critique of sinful practices and ideas, thereby contributing something genuinely new to public philosophy and policy.

The apostle Paul is a good example in these matters: he willingly risked his life and safety to bring the gospel to people, but he also called on the Roman government to practice justice by means of observing his rights as a Roman citizen. The problem with the Roman government was that it thought it was the source of rights and not God and therefore the Roman government could give rights to people they liked, namely fellow Romans, not recognizing God gives rights to all people (cf. Rom 13:1-7).

The only resources available to Christians to bring non-Christians to see human dignity as Jesus did is the intrinsic credibility and persuasiveness of the Gospel, since the truth of human dignity is a component of the Gospel and has no secure existence apart from the Gospel. The only means by which Christians can commend a truly godly vision of human rights is to incarnate them in their individual and collective lives, to announce God's actions and intentions that constitute the Gospel, and to act justly in the name of God.

A healthy society normally has at least three interdependent spheres: a political/legal sphere, a business/economic sphere, and a moral/cultural sphere. Religions should contribute to a society's thinking about government and business by means of contributing to the moral/cultural sphere of society, without preventing other religions from also contributing to public culture. This allows freedom of religion for all, with all religions contributing to public life, without the persecution of any religion.

Religious persecution, ever since Cain killed Abel, arises from a person's or a group's religious frustration; it is an attack on God that is misdirected toward the image of God. This same attack on the image of God lies behind most human rights abuses; therefore protecting freedom of religious rights leads to protecting all human rights because it protects people at the core of their being. Freedom of religion is properly called the first freedom and the mother of human rights.

### **1.5.2 Religious freedom**

One of the fundamental aspects of the image of God in humans is the freedom to choose. God created humanity with freedom and ability to choose. Freedom of choice is essentially a creaturely right. God, who is free and acts and chooses freely is the ground for human freedom. He chooses freely without any coercion from any person. To be human is to have the freedom to choose. Freedom of choice is a fundamental right of all humanity, created in the image of God. Anybody who denies people the freedom to choose is violating the fundamental rights of people. It must be added that though humans have rights to choose, they are held accountable for their choices. All religious restrictions on any human beings are a violation of their fundamental right to choose. We must resist such violations of religious freedom where ever they exist.

We therefore affirm religious freedom to exercise any or no religion as defined by the relevant declarations of the United Nations.

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

(United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), Article 18)

As Christians we are willing to work towards religious freedom for all people. We affirm advocacy for persecuted Christians and adherents of other faiths towards those in government. The right to religious freedom is indivisible and cannot be claimed for one particular group only to the exclusion of others. We aim to work collaboratively with all who share the goals of supporting religious freedom, be it political powers or representatives of other or no religions. We affirm the intention of Christians to live together peacefully with adherents of other or no religions and to work together for the common good and social reconciliation. We differentiate between advocating the rights of members of other or no religions and endorsing the truth of their beliefs. Advocating the freedom of others can be done without accepting the truth of what they believe.

Even if and where the right to religious freedom is denied, the Christian should seek by any means to keep his or her faith, to teach it to others, to pray in private and in fellowship with other Christians, to worship communally, and, when called, to preach the gospel openly.

## **1.6 Theological working definitions**

There is a wide non-theological vocabulary used on the subject of suffering, persecution and martyrdom. It ranges from discrimination, hostility and oppression, to prisoner of conscience and underground church. We are here seeking to theologically define our use of the terms suffering for Christ, persecution and martyrdom. They are related to each other in multiple ways. Their relation could best be described as that of concentric circles. Suffering forms the widest circle, persecution a smaller one within it. Martyrdom forms the innermost circle. Alternatively, they could be viewed as a pyramid with suffering as the base and martyrdom as the pinnacle. In terms of time, persecution can be represented as waves on a sea of suffering as the constant. Persecution always causes suffering and sometimes causes martyrdom.

### **1.6.1 Definition of suffering for Christ**

When speaking about suffering, from now on we specifically mean suffering for the sake of Christ unless otherwise specified. That is suffering that a person would not encounter if he or she were not identified with Christ. In terms of the variety of reasons for which Christians may suffer in their relationship with the world, we mean suffering that Christians endure *be-*

*cause of* or *by* the world, or *for* the world, in fulfilling their service. We do not mean the broader suffering of Christians *in* the world in the same way as all other people when they encounter war, natural disasters, difficult political or economic circumstances, poverty or sickness. Nor do we here mean the suffering of Christians *with* the world, as they have compassion for the world as God does. Suffering for Christ's sake is a fundamental characteristic of the church that remains true to the faith (1 Thes 3:3; 2 Thes 3:12).

### ***1.6.2 Definition of persecution<sup>7</sup>***

A definition of persecution should not be limited to any specific period of time or restrict persecution to any particular geographical region. It should be comprehensive and universally valid, applicable both historically and presently, and unlimited in its geographical scope.

Generally speaking, *persecution* is any unjust hostile action which causes damage from the perspective of the victim(s). It manifests itself within a broad range with varying degrees of animosity and different levels of resulting harm. It also stems from multiple motivations. The relevant perspective is that of the victim since the perpetrator may feel quite justified in his or her actions. Of course claims of alleged persecution must be sustained by evidence according to above criteria. The persecution must be unjust. Evildoers are rightly prosecuted. If a Christian is prosecuted for doing evil this is no persecution.

*Religious persecution* is defined as an unjust action directed against a believer or group of believers of a certain religion or worldview. This may be done by means of systematic oppression, genocide, discrimination, annoyance or other means. This persecution may not necessarily prevent victims from practicing their beliefs. Religious persecution further distinguishes itself in that it has religion (not ethnicity, gender, political persuasion, etc.) as its primary motivation, though other factors can be involved.

*Persecution of Christians* is a form of religious persecution defined by the fact that its victims are targeted primarily because they are Christians. Victims may be of varying levels of commitment to Christianity and be subject to varying levels of animosity and harm, from mildly to intensely hostile. Persecution of Christians does not have to prevent or limit its victims from practicing or appropriately sharing their faith.

The advantage of this definition lies in that it is not limited by any epoch of church history or restricted to any one part of the world. Neither is it determined by the extent of violence, animosity, or damage that it causes. It does not limit the experience based on Christian commitment and it recognizes the multiple factors and motivations present in persecution, acknowledging that it often occurs in situations of great complexity.

Furthermore, this definition has important theological ramifications because it recognizes that the seriousness of following Christ is not determined by how violent a possible counter reaction or consequence is, it may be limited to ridicule or discrimination just as it may be extended to systematic or intense violence. In short, then, persecution of Christians may be defined as:

*Any unjust action of varying levels of hostility perpetrated primarily on the basis of religion and directed at Christians, resulting in varying levels of harm as it is considered from the victim's perspective.*

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<sup>7</sup> This is based on the more extensive treatment of the issue by Tieszen 2008.

### 1.6.3 *Definition of martyrdom*<sup>8</sup>

The term *martyr* is derived from the Greek word *martys* in the New Testament which means ‘witness’. Correspondingly, *martyrdom* (Greek: *martyria*) means bearing witness to the Lord, which in later New Testament and Early Church use has seen a shift of emphasis to bearing witness even unto death. Jesus himself called his disciples to be his witnesses (Luke 24:48; Acts 1:8; see also John 15:27). Martyrs in the biblical sense are Christians who, with the Holy Spirit's help and aware of the dangers connected to it, give testimony in word and deed to their Lord and Redeemer Jesus Christ and to the truth of the Gospel proclaimed in his church in the face of the enemies of the faith and suffer death as a result. Equally included may be those Christians who have died in their willingness to fulfill God's will even under threat of death from their persecutors acting out of hatred toward God and toward the Christian church, either by being killed directly or from injuries sustained through persecution and mistreatment.

We respect that some Christians speak of martyrdom more broadly to also describe the ordeal of Christians suffering without losing their lives. However for clarity's sake, we follow the majority usage that defines martyrdom more narrowly, making death a necessary criterion of martyrdom.

In modern times and popular usage the terms martyr and martyrdom have been secularized, broadened and disconnected from their Christian roots. Nowadays the term martyr is most commonly associated with suicide bombers who, in pursuit of their religious and political goals, seek to kill as many people as possible alongside themselves. We do not use the word in this sense, as the Christian concept of martyrdom is fundamentally opposite to such interpretations. The Christian martyr does not seek the death of others but suffers death by giving up his own life without becoming aggressively violent.

In short, our use of *martyr* and *martyrdom* are enshrined by the following two alternative definitions:

A Christian martyr is a Christian who voluntarily suffers death as the penalty for witnessing to and refusing to renounce his faith, or a tenet, principle or practice belonging to it.

Christian martyrdom is voluntarily, but not intentionally (through unnecessary provocation), losing one's life to those hostile to the faith in proclamation or defense of Christian belief, for abstaining from actions that would constitute a denial of the faith, or in execution of a special prophetic commission by God.

## 2 Theological consensus and disagreements

*This section is the core of our statement. Here we state what we agree on, and differentiate the points on which we have different opinions. Each subsection cuts across all three topics of suffering for Christ, persecution, and martyrdom from a different angle.*

### 2.1 The drama of God's history with the world (epistemological aspects)

Only a comprehensive view of God's cosmic plans as far as they are revealed to us will help us to properly interpret suffering, persecution and martyrdom.

#### 2.1.1 *Understanding salvation history*

A ‘salvation historical’ approach to interpreting the Bible and to doing theology seems very helpful in that regard. Salvation history and world history need to be distinguished. Salvation

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<sup>8</sup> See Wespetal 2005 and Schirmacher 2001 (thesis 39) for an elaboration on the definition of martyrdom.

history is what God does in world history to save the world. Not all of world history is salvation history. A prophetic view of all of world history from its end, from the perspective of God's final victory, helps to grasp the unity, the meaning and the objective of world history. The decisive turning point of history is the first coming of Christ. Salvation history can only be properly understood from this center. A new age has been inaugurated by Christ, overcoming the old age of sin and death, which began with the fall of humankind. The second focal point, which still lies in the future, is the second coming of Christ, which will visibly usher in God's rule and victory, the end of history and the making new of all things. Until then the old age is still present, waging its war against the new age, as the two are mutually exclusive. Therefore the life of the Christian is marked by this tension between the fact that the new age has already begun, but has not yet fully come to its visible consummation.

### ***2.1.2 Understanding our place in God's history***

We live in this interim between Christ's ascension and his second coming, in which the church is charged with its mission of proclaiming and living out the good news of the kingdom, as a faithful witness in life and in death. The suffering of the church for Christ is so much a part of her mission in this period that suffering has been declared a mark of the church by theologians. As the church father Augustine said: "From Abel until the end of time the pilgrimage of the church proceeds between the persecution of the world and the consolations of God."<sup>9</sup>

For our reading of the Bible in view of theologically understanding suffering, persecution and martyrdom it is essential that everything is put in perspective by the first and second coming of Christ, and that we properly assess our own place in history in between those two focal points of God's redemptive history.

## **2.2 Old Testament models of faithfulness (typological aspects)**

Suffering, persecution and martyrdom have been the lot of God's people over and over again, all through Old Testament scriptures, beginning with the martyrdom of Abel.

### ***2.2.1 Suffering for faithfulness and obedience to God***

Frequently God's Old Testament people suffered as a result of their sin (Lev 26:14ff; Deut 28:15ff) and in punishment for their unfaithfulness to Yahweh (Isa 5; Jer 25:1-14). But there were other causes of suffering as well. The election of Israel as the people of God brought along with it suffering for its calling at the hands of the nations, beginning with her slavery in Egypt (Exod 1:13-14). Suffering developed spiritual maturity among those who were willing to be trained by it (Deut 8:2-5; Psa 94:12-14). Sometimes the reasons for suffering remained obscure, hidden in God alone. Job exemplifies the suffering of the righteous allowed by God, and serves as a typology of Christ.

Not infrequently, Old Testament saints suffered persecution for their faithfulness and obedience to Yahweh. Sometimes they suffered at the hands of Gentile rulers, like Joseph in Egypt, Daniel and his friends before Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 3 and 6), or Mordecai and the Jews before Haman (Esth 3). But they also suffered at the hands of their fellow countrymen, like David before Saul (1 Sam 20:33), or Elijah before Jezebel (1 Kgs 19:1ff).

### ***2.2.2 Martyrdom of the prophets of God***

Conflict, persecution, and martyrdom were characteristic for all true prophets. Sometimes persecution led to martyrdom. The Old Testament records two specific instances of martyr-

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<sup>9</sup> Augustine: City of God. 18.51

dom – Zechariah the priest is stoned by order of King Joash (2 Chr 24:19-25), and Uriah the prophet is slain by King Jehoiakim (Jer 26:20-23). Numerous others also met death in defense of their faith. We read, for example, how Jezebel killed the Lord's prophets (1 Kgs 18:4). Nehemiah's prayer of confession acknowledges that Israel had killed God's prophets who had admonished the people (Neh 9:26). New Testament (Acts 7:51-52; Matt 23:37; Heb 11:37) as well as Rabbinic sources (Lives of the Prophets) confirm, that many prophets died in execution of their mission. Beyond the record of the canonical books the intertestamental literature testifies of the continuing suffering of God's people, this time at the hands of the Greeks (2 Macc 4-14).

### **2.3 Christ, the suffering servant (Christological aspects)**

The way of Jesus the Messiah through suffering to glory is exemplary for his disciples.

#### ***2.3.1 Suffering and persecution in the ministry of Christ***

All Christian suffering for Christ and martyrdom has its basic foundational orientation and footing in Jesus Christ, the "faithful and true witness" (Rev 1:5; 3:14). He, who lived as the eternal Son of God with his Father in perfect bliss, took upon himself torture and death as an atoning sacrifice for the sin of rebellious humanity. He did so after his incarnation out of his free volition and in unwavering obedience. In this way he suffered the depths of all human pain in order to comfort us (1 Pet 2:21-24; Heb 2:14-18) and suffering became for him a school of obedience (Heb 5:8).

Since his earliest childhood, Jesus was persecuted when Herod's pursuers sought to kill him and his parents had to flee with him to Egypt (Matt 2:13-18). In Nazareth, his first sermon in the synagogue there met with bitter resistance, and his opponents tried to kill him (Luke 4:29). He was hunted down like a criminal, betrayed by one of his inner circle, arrested, and was questioned before the judges (John 18:37). In this, he reinforced the truth he preached, particularly through his courageous perseverance even to death, which God confirmed through his glorious resurrection (Phil 2:9).

#### ***2.3.2 The cross of Christ***

To Jesus the crucifixion was not at all a tragic failure of his mission, but, rather its very fulfillment. This is evident from the three prophecies of suffering upon which the Lord bases his suffering with the Father's plan to save the lost (Matt 16:21; 17:22f; 20:17-19 and par.). He fulfilled the role of the suffering servant of the Lord in Isaiah 53 par excellence and that of the sacrificial lamb that is led from suffering to glory (Pss 22; 16; 110).

Martyrs in every epoch of history have received strength to endure to the end through fellowship with the Crucified One, who himself endured to the end.

### **2.4 Discipleship: Following in the footsteps of Christ (mimetic aspects)**

The death of Jesus on the cross is both unique, compared to the cross of his followers, and at the same time serves as a model for his followers.

#### ***2.4.1 The uniqueness of the cross of Christ***

We have to distinguish between the meaning of the cross of Christ as a *substitutionary* act and a *representative* act. Jesus' death on the cross, as an atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world as a substitutionary act is unique, completely sufficient, unreplaceable, unrepeatable and cannot be copied. It differs from any suffering of other men and women of God through its salvific value and power, which is ascribed to Jesus self-sacrificial love by God, and which lies in his divine origin. This is the uniqueness of Jesus' redemptive mission. This distinction can

also be expressed by the difference between ‘saving grace’ and ‘enabling grace’. There is nothing to add to saving grace, the salvation worked by Christ, but we need the enabling grace, equipping us for spreading the salvation.

#### ***2.4.2 The cross of Christ as a pattern of ministry***

The fact that Jesus died as our substitute on the cross does not negate that as our representative he gave us a model to follow. The substitutionary nature of the cross does not negate its representative nature. A substitute is one who acts in the place of another in such a way that renders the other’s actions unnecessary, while a representative is one who acts on behalf of another in such a way that involves the other in his or her action. In its representative nature, the cross of Christ is an exemplary model or a pattern of ministry in which we are invited to participate in the sufferings of Christ for the sake of his name. In such a way, the cross of Christ can be reflected and mirrored in the life of Christians.

Therefore Christian suffering for Christ is a continuation of the suffering of Christ, and it is from him only that it receives its characteristic mark (John 17:18; 20:21).

His disciples are treated today as he once was, because Christ lives in them and they speak and act with his authority. Their fate is united with his. In the context of the prophecies of his own suffering, Jesus announces to his disciples that they also expect a similar fate. They would be at odds with the world that opposes God, just as he himself was (John 15:18-21). For this reason, Jesus’ call to discipleship is one of discipleship on the way to the cross (Luke 9:23). In it, Christ’s own passage through suffering to glory finds its fulfillment and continuation (1 Pet 2:21; Rom 8:17). Christians are called to bear the disgrace of Christ (Heb 13:13). Because of this, every true disciple of Jesus is asked to be essentially prepared to suffer martyrdom in the most extreme case, though only few might be called to it.

The core meaning of taking up one’s cross in the discipleship of Jesus is witnessing to Jesus Christ even in a situation of persecution and martyrdom.

### **2.5 Super-human conflict (antagonistic aspects)**

From a sociological inner-worldly perspective the leading cause of persecution of Christians is social hostility against Christians, followed by state hostility, and religious violence, while armed conflicts add to the suffering of Christians.

#### ***2.5.1 Jesus as victor over a defeated and retreating foe***

From a theological perspective, the world’s hatred toward Christians is ultimately inspired by the even deeper hatred of Satan, who has been fighting against God ever since his primeval rebellion against him. With the fall of Adam, the devil tries to drag humanity down into its own destruction. In a perversion of God’s plan of redemption, he pursues this plan by strengthening his kingdom on earth as the ‘prince of this world’. Because Jesus totally stripped him of his power on Calvary, the anger of the dark powers is directed completely against him and all who confess him.

Jesus saw his ministry as an assault on the rule of Satan in the world with the purpose of bringing in the Rule of God or the Kingdom of God. Jesus acknowledges that Satan is currently the ruler of this world, and characterizes him as a perpetual murderer and a notorious liar (Matt 12:26-29, John 8:44, 12:31; 14:30; 16:11; cf. 2 Cor 4:4, Eph 2:2, 6:12, 1 Jn 5:19). He sees humankind as slaves of sin imitating the sin that comes from the nature of Satan (John 8:34, 38, 44). Jesus sees himself as the one who came to liberate people from the slavery of sin and Satan. He achieves this by giving his life as a ransom (Matt 20:28), the price paid for a slave to set him or her free. As the sins of humankind were Satan’s right of ownership over them, Jesus sheds his blood for the forgiveness of their sins (Matt 16:28), thereby

canceling Satan's right of ownership over them.

Beside this legal victory of the Son of God over Satan there is the necessity of convincing people to come out themselves from under that slavery and to place themselves under the rule of God, thereby entering the Kingdom of God. Jesus is "sowing the word" himself and through his messengers, but Satan tries to snatch it away before it can bear fruit in the hearts of people (Matt 13:3-23). This conflict between the Son of God and Satan over the minds of men and women will last through the entire history of humanity, but since the cross of Christ we can know that Satan is a defeated foe, and while still dangerous, is only fighting a retreating battle.

### ***2.5.2 The 'weapons' of the Christian***

The nature of the conflict in which we are involved is characterized by the nature and methods of the two leaders in the conflict. Jesus reveals the character of Satan as evil, which brings forth the weapons of hate, lies, deception, falsehood, violence, and murder to bring destruction, death, and devastation. Jesus confronted Satan's lies with the truth of God, Satan's evil with the goodness of God, Satan's hatred with the love of God, and Satan's violence and murder with God's self-sacrifice out of which arise new creativity, healing, and restoration. This is the way in which Jesus fought and defeated evil, and this is the kind of war into which he sends his disciples. They must love their enemies, do good to the ones who hate them, and like their heavenly Father, show goodness, mercy, and forgiveness to the ones who are evil and ungrateful. They must stop the chain of poisoning God's creation with Satan's deadly products by absorbing it in union with Christ and giving back in exchange love and goodness, thus spreading God's character in the world.

Jesus was sent as the Lamb of God to defeat the great dragon and to destroy his works (1 Jn 3:8). In the same way, he sends us as lambs to defeat the wolves by transforming them into children of God. Most importantly, we must see that Christ's ultimate weapon is self-sacrifice and our ultimate weapon must be the same in order to draw people to Jesus (John 12:24, 26, 32).

### ***2.5.3 Spiritual reasons behind attacks on Christians***

Satan also uses people and structures to serve his ends. This is one cause of injustice in the world. The church suffers because of the hatred towards Christ by the world in rebellion against God (cf. John 15:20a). It is difficult to fully explain the irrational brutality of the persecution of Christians without taking into regard a demonic component in it.

On a structural level, the more authoritarian and nationalistic a government, the more it fears the idea of a faith in Christ which transcends this world and its cultural and national boundaries. Naturally it will consider the preaching of a perfect kingdom and a final judgment as a challenge to its authority, which needs to be curtailed or stopped, thus causing suffering to the church.

The church suffers often at the hands of religious and well-meaning people who mistakenly think they are honoring God in persecuting Christians. Saul on the road to Damascus was such a persecutor, who was stopped in his tracks by the risen Christ (Acts 9:4ff). Sometimes even people who seriously believe they are Christians persecute Christians of differing convictions, thereby grossly misrepresenting Christ.

There are several areas of spiritual attack, which the church encounters: on truth by lies, indoctrination and deception by wolves in sheep's clothing, on unity seeking to divide families, churches and even organizations helping the persecuted, on courage by fear and discouragement as well as on integrity, resources, and physical, emotional and spiritual safety.



The preaching of the gospel is the reason for much of Christian suffering. The more clearly the church knows and witnesses to Christ, the more certainly she will have to expect the opposition, protest, and hate of the Antichrist (Matt 24:15; 2 Thes 2; 1 Jn 2 and 4; Rev 13-19). The antagonism will escalate towards the end of times (Matt 24-25). Therefore, the church of Christ will find no peace on earth before the final judgment has definitely been passed on the devil and all remaining power is taken away from him. But the church herself has an important part in this victory through her willingness to suffer martyrdom (Rev 12:11). We miss out on reality if we ignore these truths due to an idealistic philosophy.

Possibly the most painful type of conflict is that with “false brethren”, potentially leading to persecution from within the church. Scripture depicts a scenario of a great end-time apostasy, where the Antichrist succeeds even in seducing a large portion of the Christian community (Matt 24:10-12,24; Rev 13:3-4). Thus churches will be divided between an adapted section, denying Christ and the marginalized confessing faithful, who might even be persecuted by adapted church members. The main danger arising from the Antichrist is theological. It consists in his attempt to eliminate the two central Christian credal truths: the trinity of God and the incarnation of the divine logos, and consequently the redemption wrought at the cross.

In the midst of such a stark realism of conflict, the church can be assured that no enemy or adversity is able to separate the believer from the love of Christ (Rom 8:31-39).

## **2.6 God’s salvation and comfort (soteriological aspects)**

This aspect deals with the eternal destiny of both the Christian – particularly the confessor and martyr – as well as of the persecutors. It also deals with God’s help for his messengers in this world as well as the instrumental role those suffering and martyred play in God’s plan of salvation.

### ***2.6.1 The seriousness of confessing Christ***

Jesus points out the seriousness of remaining faithful to him and confessing him in moments of trial. He warns his disciples that he would reciprocate their public acknowledgement or denial of him in front of men on this earth before his father in heaven (Matt 10:32-33). While the love of many will grow cold, those who endure to the end and remain victorious will be saved, contrary to the cowards (Matt 24:13; Rev 21:7-8).

In order that his disciples do not fall away from him when persecution arises, Jesus has given them advance warning and prays that God will keep them safe from the evil one (John 16:1, 4; 17:15). Equally, he has pleaded in prayer for Simon Peter that his faith should not fail when Satan would test his faith (Luke 22:31f). Though Peter did indeed deny him three times, Jesus gave him the opportunity to repent, and renewed fellowship with him after his resurrection, again entrusting him with the care of his flock (John 21:15-19). This tension is reflected in the hymn quoted in 2 Timothy 2:12-13: “If we deny him, he will deny us. If we are unfaithful, he remains faithful, for he cannot deny himself”. The eternal destiny of the Christian is decided in his or her endurance and faithfulness, even at the ultimate decision point of martyrdom.

There seems to be a contradiction: If God provides supernatural grace to endure martyrdom, how can it be considered a test of the individual’s faith? One might propose that the individual’s faith and the grace of God work together in a symbiotic fashion. The individual’s personal faith provides him or her with the conviction that he or she *must* hold on to the end no matter what the cost. This is a clear demonstration of faith since the individual values the promise of God and the hope of eternal life more than earthly life or personal safety. But at the same time, in recognition of the need for grace, the martyr acknowledges that he or she *cannot* hold on without divine aid. This inner tension between the *I must* and the *I cannot* provides the environment where martyrdom can serve both as a test of faith and as a demon-

stration of God's grace. The *I must* aspect drives the martyr to prayer and dependence upon God, who abundantly supplies grace to compensate for the *I cannot* aspect. God's helping presence does not dispense one of one's own responsibility to bear and to stand fast, which therefore is connected with faith.

### **2.6.2 *Trinitarian divine and angelic assistance***

Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as well as God's angels comfort and help the afflicted Christian. God the source of all mercy comforts us through Christ, and the more we suffer the more he showers us with his comfort (2 Cor 1:3-11). God, who has called us to eternal glory, will restore, support and strengthen us and put us on a firm foundation, while we suffer for a short while (1 Pt 5:10). Jesus Christ himself is a faithful High Priest of the suffering Christian who understands our weaknesses. Since he himself has gone through suffering and temptation, he is able to help us when we are being tempted (Heb 2:18; 4:15). Paul confesses about one of his trials in court, that the Lord stood with him, that he might preach the Good News, and saved him from certain death (2 Tim 4:17-18, cf. Acts 18:9f; 23:11). The Holy Spirit is most frequently mentioned as the main agent of support and comfort of the Christian in trial and martyrdom. Jesus promises his disciples as they are put on trial by those in power because they are his followers, that the Spirit of their Father would be talking through them (Matt 10:17-20; John 14:26). He would make it an opportunity to tell those in power about Jesus, even equipping Christians with such wisdom, that none of their opponents will be able to reply (Luke 21:15). Beside the persons of the trinity, the angels of God also come to the assistance of his messengers according to the scriptures. Peter and others have been repeatedly liberated from prison by an angel, in order to be able to continue preaching (Acts 5:18, 12:11). God is investing all in his power to assist those who confess him.<sup>10</sup> However God's help does not necessarily always have to consist in sparing lives. There are others, like James (Acts 12:2), whom God is helping to remain faithful despite torture and execution. Even though it might seem that those suffering and martyred are be forsaken by God, we may claim in faith that in time God will support his faithful and carry them through.

### **2.6.3 *Salvation or destruction of the persecutors***

The persecutors will either be hardened further or in some instances led to repentance through the witness of the faithful confessors and martyrs. Paul is the model case of a persecutor who is converted. While still a consenting witness of the stoning of Stephen (Acts 8:1), only the confrontation with the risen Christ effects his conversion, which makes him part of the company of those who have to suffer much for his name (Acts 8:1, 9:4-5). There seems to be no other account in the New Testament of a persecutor being converted, but later historical testimonies do exist concerning individuals – including persecutors – who converted as a result of witnessing martyrdom. However the effect on persecutors is mostly described as negative in the New Testament. When persecuted Christians are not intimidated by their enemies, this will be a sign to the persecutors that they are going to be 'destroyed' (Phil 1:28). There remains the hope of the persecuted that God will listen to their intercession for their enemies, and that the blessing that they invoke on their persecutors may indeed enter their lives and make them worthy of it (Matt 5:44, 10:15).

### **2.6.4 *Completing the sufferings of Christ***

There remains the question what the suffering and martyrdom of a Christian can contribute to the salvation of others, and specifically how Paul's statement in Colossians 1:24 is to be understood, when he says: "I am glad when I suffer for you in my body, for I am completing

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<sup>10</sup> The body of Christ as one of his tools will be discussed next.

what remains of Christ's suffering for his body, the church." Equally he says he is "willing to endure anything if it will bring salvation and eternal glory in Christ Jesus to those God has chosen" (2 Tim 2:10) and he rejoices that his imprisonment has contributed to the spreading of the Gospel (Phil 1:12-26). We must be careful to not teach less than scripture teaches only because others might have used such verses in church history for claims that we consider going beyond scripture. It will be of help to distinguish the three lines of martyrdom which Jesus and early Christianity have expressed. All three lines apply to Jesus, but not all apply to his followers. (1) The messianic martyr works forgiveness of sins and redemption through the sacrifice of his life. (2) The prophetic or apostolic martyr is suffering at the hands of the tyrant as the outstanding representative for his community. He is suffering vicariously for his community. (3) The community/church-martyr suffers for his confession of faith. Only Jesus is considered a messianic martyr, as only the sacrifice of his life works salvation for others. By contrast, Paul is suffering vicariously the antagonism encountered by that new community created through the work of Christ and later dies as an apostolic martyr. So while the work of the messianic martyr Jesus is complete, Christ's suffering in the members of his body is not complete yet. The number of martyrs is not complete yet either (Rev 6:11).

Thus Paul helps to complete the suffering of Christ. This is instrumental suffering, because it serves to bring the gospel to those who need to be saved, and to keep those faithful who have been saved. Thus Paul is not adding anything to the completed work of atonement of Christ, but there is a legitimate place for him to complete the suffering of Christ. The continuation of such prophetic or apostolic suffering and martyrdom might fall on the shoulders of today's leaders and teachers of the church. And while different from the apostolic martyrs like Paul, the ordinary Christian only suffers and the community martyr only dies for his or her individual confessing of the faith, it also serves its part in God's plan to bring the gospel to all and benefits the church through its faithful witness to Christ and example of steadfastness.

## **2.7 The body of Christ (ecclesiological aspects)**

A Christian never suffers alone and a Christian martyr never dies alone, but is always a part of the body of Christ which sustains him or her. This section seeks to clarify the mutual relationship between the body of Christ and those suffering and dying for Christ, including the blessing they bring to the church. The body of Christ needs to be understood in three dimensions, across time, across space, and across divisions.

### **2.7.1 *The body of Christ across time***

The suffering and martyred Christians belong to the fellowship of the body of Christ throughout time and have many forerunners. The communion of saints stretches back to the beginning of time and includes the faithful of the old covenant. Jesus himself regards the confessors and martyrs of the past, including the prophets killed by Israel from Abel to Sacharja, as his own forerunners (Matt 23:34-36, Mark 12:1-12), with John the Baptist being the last martyr of the old covenant. We are exhorted to look at the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord as examples of patience and endurance in suffering (Jas 5:10). We have 'a cloud of witnesses' surrounding us, consisting of those victorious in faith, and those who were faithful in suffering and martyrdom, who are now watching our 'race' in the arena of life and are waiting to be perfected together with us (Heb 11). The souls of the martyrs 'resting under the altar' in the heavenly throne room according to the imagery of the book of Revelation are commanded to patiently await God's judgment day and to "rest a little longer until the full number of the servants of Jesus has been martyred" (Rev 6:11). While our eyes are to be focused on Jesus on whom our faith depends from start to finish (Heb 12:2), we are also exhorted to remember our Christian leaders who have taught us the word of God, particularly watching out how they have completed their lives (Heb 13:7). The lives of the first Christian leaders, with few excep-

tions, ended in martyrdom, and we are to follow the example of their faithfulness. The Christian confessors and martyrs of past and present need to be rightly remembered.

### ***2.7.2 The body of Christ across space***

The body of Christ throughout the world participates in the suffering of members of the body of its time, through information, prayer, support, suffering and rejoicing with them. If one part of the body suffers, all parts are equally concerned (1 Cor 12:26). In Jesus we are ‘partners in suffering’, in the kingdom and in patient endurance (Rev 1:9). Functioning communication is the first prerequisite for sharing in the suffering. We are challenged not to forget about those in prison and to suffer with them as though we were there ourselves and were feeling the pain of those mistreated in our own bodies (Heb 13:3). Reporting back where possible to the praying church about positive changes and releases is important (Acts 4:23; 12:12,17). The intercession of the body of Christ is instrumental in releasing God’s rescuing power for those messengers of faith who are crushed and overwhelmed beyond their strength, thinking they would never live through their ordeal (2 Cor 1:8-11; cf. Phil 1:19). Paul is challenging the Ephesians to pray for him as an ‘ambassador in chains’ in order that he might keep on boldly preaching the gospel (Eph 6:19-20). Prayer rightly is the first reaction to opposition to the gospel and to persecution and news thereof, according to the example of the Jerusalem church. Their prayer focused on God’s power and requested that God’s servants would be given boldness in their preaching and that God may work signs of his restoring power (Acts 4:24-30). In a similar vein the communal prayer of the church for all humankind and those in power according to 1 Tim 2:1-6 is to request that the faithful may be able to live “in peace and quietness, in godliness and dignity” and that all humankind might come to a saving knowledge of the truth.

Paul tells of examples of co-workers who went as far as risking their lives for him (Rom 16:3). He exhorts others far away to rejoice with him in his suffering and even an eventual martyrdom (Phil 2:17-18) and thanks them for providing for his needs in prison (Phil 4:10-14).

Those who are suffering are to remember that Christians all over the world are going through the same kind of suffering as they are (1 Pet 5:9). The others might heed the following warning: “A church that forsakes her martyrs, that neither prays nor fearlessly cares for them, not only disturbs the spiritual communion between all members of Christ’s body, but will eventually betray Christ himself, the head of the body, who still suffers with his members.”<sup>11</sup>

### ***2.7.3 The body of Christ across confessional and denominational divides***

There is the potential of ecumenical solidarity being built, when Christians of different confessions and denominations suffer together for Christ.

One effect of modern persecution of Christians is that it – though certainly not always and in all places – has led to a discovery: those directly affected discover that they are facing the same challenges to their faith, that they need to face them together and that there is a common basis to face them. Thereby denominational barriers, which once separated them, lose their importance. A basic Christian testimony to the truth is demanded by the immediate situation. Prisoners comfort and strengthen one another in their sufferings. They recognize in this a hopeful approach to interconfessional understanding in faith and to a spirituality of suffering for Christ that draws its strength from common roots.

The common suffering of Christians of different backgrounds can therefore be understood as a way in which Jesus’ high priestly prayer for the visible unity of his followers, in order that the world may believe, is fulfilled (John 17:21-23). The heavenly vision of all Christian mar-

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<sup>11</sup> Beyerhaus 1992:179; ICN 2006.

tyrs of all times and of those who have remained faithful to Christ through the great tribulation from every nation and tribe and people and language ultimately being gathered all together before the throne of God, worshipping him with one voice, is certainly an encouragement to begin with this already now (Rev 6:9-11; 7:9,14-15). What still divides true Christians today will be overcome latest by then, as we will then see God face to face.

It also reminds us painfully that, in church history, and in some places still today, there unfortunately have been religiously-motivated persecutions of Christians by other Christians of a different denomination. We mourn together over the damage caused and the divisions this has perpetuated. This traumatic strain on efforts for Christian unity needs a 'healing of memories' which leads to mutual requests for forgiveness and to restitution by showing love in action. Equally, advocacy for persecuted Christians must never be sectarian, only focusing on those from our own denomination or confession, by ignoring the plight of those with differing theological convictions.

We are also painfully aware, that churches in totalitarian states are divided in their response to administrative demands of state-registration of churches and to state attempts of creating government-controlled or aligned churches. We must all be slow in condemning each other and refuse to be divided, place nothing above God's authority and the normative guidance of his word for his church, and under all circumstances avoid denouncing each other before the world or betraying each other to authorities, lest we fall into sub-Christian patterns.

#### ***2.7.4 The building up of the body of Christ through suffering and martyrdom***

Martyrdom serves to build up the church, because those suffering and martyred are blessed by God. The New Testament witnesses that among the persecuted great grace abounded, and Christians gained confidence and became more bold in telling others about Christ and followed the example of their leaders even into persecution and suffering (Acts 4:31,34; Phil 1:14; 2 Tim 3:10-11). In order for the church of Christ to really remain his church and not become shallow in its spiritual life, she might actually need a certain measure of suffering.

Christ is particularly close to his own in a situation of suffering and martyrdom (see Stephen in Acts 7:55-56). He lets them experience a measure of preserving grace which surpasses all blessings that we receive through the means of grace under normal circumstances. The life power that is activated through dying with Christ first strengthens the individual Christian who is suffering. But beyond that, the blessings that Christ as the head of the body gives are shared with other members. Paul sees the sufferings of Christ flowing over in his and his co-workers lives, and in the same way the comfort received from Christ overflowing into the lives of others (2 Cor 1:5; cf. 4:7-15). This is true for both local congregations and the worldwide church and also across generations. In this respect, the suffering of the church is an important means of her growth, both inwardly in grace as well as outwardly. When Christ leads his church into suffering, he has a special plan for her: he counts her worthy of participating in his suffering and then also in his glory (Col 1:24). Thus, profound joy grows out of this kind of suffering when a person accepts it in faith (1 Pet 4:13).

### **2.8 God's mission for the church (missiological aspects)**

Christian suffering and martyrdom are not ends in themselves but serve God's mission right to 'the end of time', and are linked to the mission of Christians by multiple relationships (Matt 24:14).

#### ***2.8.1 Suffering is a mode of missionary involvement***

Suffering is described by Jesus as part and parcel of discipleship. But not all Christians suffer equally; not all are persecuted equally, and only a relatively small proportion of Christians

ever suffer martyrdom. In the mission that is the central purpose of the interim period in God's history of salvation, Christians must engage with their whole lives, including a readiness for suffering and martyrdom. Suffering is not just something that has to be endured passively but it becomes a mode of mission, a mission that is done in weakness, focusing on service, and by its nature is accompanied with sorrow and affliction (2 Cor 12:9f). The precious treasure comes in perishable containers, that is, in our weak bodies, so that everybody can see that the light that shines in us, and the power that works in us, are not our own but God's (2 Cor 4:7-10). This passage ought to be seen as the classic definition of mission. Martyrdom is the most radical form of missionary witness.

### ***2.8.2 Witness to Christ is a core cause of suffering***

Witness to Christ can be a main cause of suffering, persecution and martyrdom. The gospel certainly brings with it liberation from all kinds of slaveries and can lead to the improvement of the quality of living. This can even translate into material blessings. At the same time, the gospel brings the hatred of the world and persecution, suffering and martyrdom. We always have to keep these two aspects of the gospel in balance. While disaster relief, developmental, medical and educational work by Christians are at times accepted even in regions opposed to the Christian faith, it is the verbal witness to Christ and the turning to Christ of people who are freely choosing to leave their old religious allegiance behind, and the emergence of their own active witness to Christ, which are each in increasing degrees countered by hostility, opposition, all sorts of persecution and the taking of lives. The attempts of a witness without words, and of service that does not intentionally seek conversions, and the anonymity of secret believers have never been a guarantee against violent and murderous attacks, though. While we might be perfect in contextualizing our message and in avoiding any unnecessary offence, as messengers of Christ, we must face the fact that the message of the cross has been and always will be a stumbling block to those without Christ (1 Cor 1:18,23), and will attract the hostility of the world that does not accept the light coming into the world (John 1:4,11). Such aggression might be directed against anyone associated with Christ, Christians and Christianity, even in erroneous associations.

### ***2.8.3 Suffering is an acid test for the genuineness of mission***

Suffering is an acid test for the genuineness of mission rather than a mishap to be avoided at all cost. Mission director Karl Hartenstein once said: "Missionary work only proves its authenticity where its energies mature under suffering, where the focus is not on the success of the action but on the fruit of the passion" of the suffering. Mission with wrong and mixed motives will often quickly stop when the first signs of suffering occur. The mission of God needs to be accomplished in spite of and through suffering, persecution and martyrdom. This mission is valid for all times and no event in history can repeal it. The end of the world will only come once the mission Christ has given his church is completed, and the mission of the church is only completed when the end of the world has come (Matt 24:14). It is important to note however that this does not preclude wise and responsible action in the deployment of Christian workers.

### ***2.8.4 God can use suffering, persecution and martyrdom to advance his mission***

Even the catastrophes of world history can be used by God as vehicles for the progress of his mission and he seems to use them in particular. In them God's 'hidden grace' is manifested. The willingness to suffer for Christ can give the message of those suffering a more convincing power. The complete devotion of the witnesses of faith and even their martyrdom are a powerful means which God can use, and particularly seems to use in situations of strong resistance to the Gospel. However martyrdom does not automatically possess convincing power,

as it might as well be interpreted as a sign that the martyrs have been abandoned by God or that their God is powerless.

While the seed that falls into the ground will bear much fruit over time according to God's promise, martyrdom does not automatically produce visible and immediate church growth. The 'fruit' of martyrdom remains a grace from God (John 12:24). We must therefore avoid a triumphalistic use of the popular saying of church father Tertullian from North Africa that "the blood of the martyrs is the seed for new Christians" (*sanguis martyrum – semen christianorum*)<sup>12</sup>. The element of truth in it is that, to the eyes of faith, suffering and martyrdom inherit an element of multiplication. It is indeed noteworthy that the Early Church and other Christian communities in church history, like in Korea have not only survived the violence of heaviest persecution, but have even grown through it, owing to the Christ active in their midst in the suffering and death of Christian martyrs. At times such persecution has temporarily inhibited the growth of the church. However the deeds and witness of the martyrs often led to long lasting and far reaching effects on the hearts of Christians and non-Christians. The fruit of their spiritual influence does not always become immediately visible in contexts of persecution and martyrdom. At times their influence remains invisible until the end of a period of persecution. But often after that it leads to conversions to Christ.

In some places persecution has led to the multiplication of the church, whereas sometimes heavy persecution has seemingly almost completely destroyed churches in other parts of the world. Martyrdom brings to a violent end the voice of that particular witness and might discourage the witness of others or silence the only or last witness. Persecution has led to the disappearance of historical churches, e.g. in countries in North Africa and many Middle Eastern countries in history and contributes to the marginalization and exodus of any remaining historical Christian minorities. However at the same time God is raising up followers of Christ out of the midst of the majority population.

Another observation from church history is the fact that very often in situations of the first proclamation of the Gospel, the hostile counter reaction of opponents will martyr some of the outside witnesses or the first of their peers who have turned to Christ. Often this has led over time to a breakthrough for the gospel and to the establishment of an indigenous church in that community. Therefore a routine extraction of threatened believers from situations of hostility, as often practiced in some contexts today, actually undermines the potential of the establishment of an indigenous church.

With the eyes of faith we must claim that God invisibly reigns even in situations of suffering, persecution and martyrdom, and that these adversities will come to an end when Christ returns to establish his visible rule in power and glory. Then, if not earlier, we will get to see the fruit of all suffering.

## **2.9 The victory of the kingdom of God (eschatological aspects)**

While the suffering, persecution and martyrdom of the church occurs in the period of history before the completion of the kingdom of God, this experience must be regarded from the perspective of the victory of Christ. This period in which we live is marked by the tension between the victory of Christ that has already been accomplished and its visible consummation which has not taken place yet. God is still letting his sun rise on the evil and good (Matt 5:45), the judgment has not yet come and sheep and goats are not yet sorted. The whole creation is still groaning with mankind while waiting "for the sons of God to be revealed" (Rom 8:19-22).

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<sup>12</sup> Tertullian: *Apology*, L.

### **2.9.1 Resurrection power**

Christ was raised from death and ascended to heaven. He was seated at the right hand of God far above all authorities, powers and rulers, and he poured out the Holy Spirit on the church.

He said: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Acts 2:24-36; Phil 2:9; 1 Pet 3:22; Eph 1:20b-22a; Matt 28:18). The sovereignty of Christ above all authority gives us hope for the church in the midst of powers that threaten to wipe it out.

The Apostle Paul prayed for Christians, that they may be enlightened to know the mighty strength of God demonstrated in the resurrection of Christ which is at work in believers. Eph 1:19-20a). The resurrection of Christ and his suffering are two sides of the process of our salvation. When Christians suffer for Christ, they experience as well the power of his resurrection. The Apostle Paul has expressed that clearly in 2 Corinthians 4:7-10: as he experienced suffering and persecution in his daily life, he also experienced the life of Christ and his all surpassing power.

Nothing that we now invest into the kingdom of God and sacrifice for it is in vain. The resurrection of Jesus is the guarantee for the outstanding general resurrection of all humankind for judgment. What is sown in weakness now will be raised in glory and power (1 Cor 15:43). The hope of the resurrection to a better life gives us reason to stand firm and immovable in affliction, and reassures us that our work for God is not in vain, though deadly forces might seemingly destroy it (1 Cor 15:58).

The resurrection perspective liberates us from a mere inner-worldly human perspective. The Christian should be bound to the coming world (2 Pet 3:13; Heb 13:14; 10:34), not the one passing away – while being fully engaged (1 Cor 7:26-31).

### **2.9.2 End time escalation and climax**

In contrast to optimistic visions of the future dreaming of seamless transformation of the world, the prophecies of the Bible foresee clearly an altogether troubled final stage of human and church history. The prophet Daniel (Dan 7) sees a succession of world powers; brutal, atheistic, blaspheming and tormenting the saints before God dis-empowers those powers and establishes the eternal Kingdom of God. Jesus himself confirms this vision in his words about the end times, foretelling an escalation of hatred and love of Christ growing cold, simultaneous to a worldwide proclamation of the gospel before all ethnic groups (Matt 24:9-25 and par.). Later, Paul (1 Thes 2; 2 Tim 3:1-13) and John (Rev 13-19) place themselves within the same tradition. In this scenario the coming of the Antichrist, his false prophet and an apocalyptic woman, all play a role. There is the potential of an apostate church participating in the bloody persecution of the church that remains true to Christ. The church will suffer a severe martyrdom in the end which will cost many of her members their lives (Rev 17:6; 6:9-11). However, the church of the true worshippers of God will overcome in the end (Rev 12:7-12a).

Therefore indications are that anti-Christian persecutions will not diminish with the progression of history. On the contrary, they are likely to increase. The parable of the wheat and the weeds (Matt 13:24-30; 36-43) describes that because of the growth of the kingdom of God at the end the weeds also get an opportunity to flourish. Revival and persecution may occur and climax simultaneously.

These prophecies were not exclusively meant for the final phase of history. They rather serve as an orientation, a warning, and an encouragement to each generation to discern and to endure in preliminary forms and historically and locally restricted forms of anti-Christian persecutions of their own times. These are to be regarded as anticipations on a smaller scale of what is later to follow (1 Jn 2:18; 4:3). The memory of that apocalyptic prophecy in the course of church history in the face of an anti-Christian spirit of the times was quite legiti-



mate, even though the perception of living really close to the end of the world was later proven to be false. It is equally legitimate to try to carefully and diacritically discern in certain disturbing political, ideological, societal, and even ecclesiastical and theological trends of the present a preview of future developments.

### ***2.9.3 Expectation of the returning Lord – as bridegroom, judge and king***

Christians are not focusing on the horrors of coming end times, but are joyfully expecting their returning Lord. They are watching and waiting as a bride waits for her bridegroom. Christ who comes again will unite them to himself. When God's reign will be fully established, the "wedding banquet of the Lamb" is waiting for his bride, his church (Rev 19:6-10).

The mystery of the history of the world and its peoples does not end in darkness but before the judgment seat of the mighty God. The returning Christ is also the judge of the living and the dead. He will make everything right. In the new Jerusalem God will wipe every tear from the eyes of his children. There will be no more death or mourning, nor crying or pain, for the old order has passed away. God is making everything new (Rev 21:1-5; cf. Isa 25:8, 35:10, 49:10). God's judgments of those who have shed the blood of the saints and the prophets will be praised in heaven, as he avenges the blood of his servants (Rev 16:5-6, 19:2). God is giving rest from their labor to those who die "in the Lord" (Rev 14:13-14) and relief from their troubles (2 Thes 1:6-7). Those who remain faithful even to the point of death await the "crown of life" (Rev 2:10b, cf. Jas 1:12). Paul is certain that a "crown of righteousness" is in store for him, because he has kept the faith, and that this is true for all who long for the appearing of the rightful judge (2 Tim 4:8).

Christ will rule as king of the universe and give the members of his body part in his messianic dominion as priests and kings (Rev 1:6, 20:6) (More on heavenly rewards below).

God is not in a hurry with his final victory, but this does not mean that he is slow in keeping his promise. Rather he is patient with humankind because he does not want anyone to perish, but wants to give everyone an opportunity for repentance before final judgment (2 Pet 3:4, 9). So Christians need to equip themselves with perseverant patience to endure the birth pains of the coming kingdom, which God has already begun to establish. As a woman soon forgets the birth pains after giving birth to a child, our present sufferings are of no weight, compared to the glory that will be revealed to us (Rom 8:18; 2 Cor 4:17).

## **2.10 The honor of God and his martyrs (doxological aspects)**

There are two perspectives to describe the connection between the glory of God and those suffering and martyred for his sake. The one perspective is about the honor God receives. The other is about the honor and glory God bestows on his servants in this life and in the life to come.

### ***2.10.1 God is honored by his witnesses***

God is honored both by the life and by the death of his witnesses. "If we live, it is to honor the Lord. And if we die, it is to honor the Lord. So whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord" (Rom 14:8). Our bodies are our instruments to honor God. We are to offer them to God as living sacrifices, as a spiritual worship (Rom 12:1) of a life committed to serving him, even to the ultimate point of literally laying down our lives for him. Just like Paul who trusts that his life will bring honor to Christ, whether he lives or dies (Phil 1:20; Acts 20:24, 21:13). Paul is the prime example for honoring God in weakness, insults, hardships, persecution and difficulties. For in the midst of all the weakness of his messenger, God has space to show the strength of his grace and power (2 Cor 12:9-10). Equally God is honored by the foolishness of the gospel. God's seemingly foolish plan that the Son of God had to suffer death at the cross and

that his disciples suffer with him is wiser than men's wise strategies, and God's weakness is stronger than men's strength. God has chosen the foolish and the weak so that as a result, no one can ever boast in the presence of God, except about the Lord himself. All the honor is his (1 Cor 1:18-31). God is equally honored by the church's confidence in his reign (Acts 4:23-30) and our trust in his provision for us in a time of need (Heb 4:16). Even the death of the martyr has the capacity to honor God. Jesus is in fact foretelling Peter "by what kind of death he would glorify God" (John 21:18-19).

In the end God must even be praised by his enemies. The unbelieving neighbors of Christians, who might falsely accuse them of doing wrong, will see their honorable behavior – if indeed they live properly – and "will give honor to God when he judges the world" (1 Pet 2:12). Paul endears to us the scenario that Jesus the Messiah who humbled himself to a criminal's death on the cross, is exalted to the highest honor by God, and as a consequence all humanity will bow before him "in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue [will] confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:6-11). Perhaps not everyone will do this from free will, choosing to do so instead with gnashing teeth. But there is also the occasional persecutor by whose conversion God is honored, Paul being the prime example (Gal 1:23f; 1 Cor 15:9f). Honoring God is the eternal destiny of God's children. John sees a vast crowd, too great to count, from every nation and tribe and people and language, worshipping God and the Lamb in front of the throne, after having come out of or having died in the great tribulation (Rev 7:9-17). He also reports of those who have been victorious over the 'beast' singing 'the song of Moses and the lamb': "Great and marvelous are your works, O Lord God, the Almighty ..." (Rev 15:2-4; cf. 19:2). The glorification of God is the ultimate goal of his mission, and everything must in the end serve his glory.

### ***2.10.2 God honors those suffering and martyred for his sake***

God bestows his glory already in this life on those who suffer for him, lets some martyrs have a glimpse of his glory in their hour of trial, and in heaven lets them share the glory of Christ.

Those who are insulted for being a Christian are called to be happy, for the glory of God, which is his Spirit rests upon them (1 Pet 4:14). Therefore the apostles rejoiced that

God had counted them worthy to suffer disgrace for the name of Jesus (Acts 5:41).

Being allowed to glimpse God's glory still in this life can also be seen as a way God is honoring and strengthening some martyrs. Stephen was allowed to see the heavens open and the glory of God before his imminent stoning, with Jesus standing before God's judgment seat as the advocate of his defense (Acts 7:55). The overwhelming impression of God's glory helps the martyr to overcome the pain and agony of his afflictions, as martyrs in church history have witnessed.

But beyond the association with God's glory in this life, those suffering and martyred are led through temporal suffering to eternal glory and are honored by God. Suffering first and glory to follow is the pattern of Christ's path (1 Pet 1:11; Heb 2:9), which is shared by his followers. They share Christ's sufferings in order that they may also share in his glory and joy (Rom 8:17-18; 1 Pet 4:13-14). The servants of Christ must be where he is, but they can rest assured that "the Father will honor anyone who serves" Christ (John 12:26b). The grief the church is now suffering in all kinds of trials, refines her faith and will bring her "much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world" (1 Pet 1:6-7).

### ***2.10.3 God promises heavenly reward***

More specifically, the Bible promises heavenly reward to the faithful. The character formation and the testing of our faithfulness accomplished in suffering, persecution or martyrdom for

Christ have clear corresponding results in heaven. Jesus speaks about it in the beatitudes: “God blesses you when people mock you and persecute you and lie about you and say all sorts of evil things against you because you are my followers. Be happy about it! Be very glad! For a great reward awaits you in heaven.” The risen Christ confirms that God will make those who overcome “a pillar in his temple”, will have his name written on them, make them citizens of the new Jerusalem, and give them the right to sit and reign on the throne with Christ (Rev 3:12+21; 20:4). This means they will have an important role in the new structures God is establishing, are marked as belonging to God and his future, and are given leadership positions. The eleven disciples who remained with Jesus in his time of trial are promised roles as judges over the twelve tribes of Israel (Luke 22:28-30). The apostle Paul picks up this teaching from Jesus and writes even more emphatically: “momentary light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison” (2 Cor 4:17). The content of the promise of reward for suffering and martyrdom is that “we shall be heirs with him” and “shall be glorified with him” (Rom 8:17), and “shall reign with him” (2 Tim 2:12).

These promises of Christ our Lord, confirmed and further emphasized by the apostles, are a great source of inspiration, courage and strength for the Christians who are called to face persecution and martyrdom.

We are in agreement that this is a scriptural promise that we must not neglect as a source of comfort. We also agree that the promise of a reward does not contradict salvation by grace alone. We have discerned in scripture reward for faithfulness and Christ-likeness, for service, and for suffering for Christ. Some also suggested differentiating between involuntary and voluntary suffering for Christ or martyrdom, with the latter two incurring the greatest reward. We are not in full agreement about the nature of the reward, whether there is the same reward for all Christians or whether there are different rewards for different people, including a special reward for martyrs. But we agree that the reward is the decision of the master. We found the imagery helpful, that Jesus is filling everybody’s cup to the brim with grace, but that we might not all have the same capacity for holding it.

We were also of differing opinion what place the promise of a heavenly reward should play in our theology of suffering, persecution and martyrdom and in our motivation to faithfully follow Christ. There seem to be four different factors, motivating human beings to certain actions: fear, love, pleasing and reward. We agree that the love of Christ should be our primary motivation in the midst of suffering for him. Some maintain that reward should only be a secondary motivation.

But we all agree that suffering and martyrdom are a part of the grace of God, as Paul writes: “For you have been given not only the privilege (literally grace) of trusting in Christ but also the privilege of suffering for him” (Phil 1:29; 1 Pet 2:19-20). Suffering and martyrdom are not human achievements to boast about, but it is the grace of God that enables us to go victoriously through these sufferings. We cannot boast about our own achievement, but praise God for his work in us and through us!

## **2.11 Christian ethics of suffering, persecution and martyrdom (ethical aspects)**

Suffering for Christ, persecution and martyrdom evoke a lot of ethical questions that current standard textbooks are not equipped to deal with. This section deals with a number of specific ethical issues which have not been covered elsewhere in this statement.

### ***2.11.1 Pursuit of holiness and not of persecution***

Persecution does not automatically lead to godliness. A persecuted Christian is not immune to temptation and must still pursue a life of holiness and love (1 Pet 1:15-17). Paul exhorts the Roman Christians: “Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the

eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Rom 12:17-18).

When Christians commit crimes, they must be punished and suffer just like everybody else. The state has the duty to punish evildoers (Rom 13:1-7). Therefore Peter warns us, only to speak of persecution, if we are accused wrongly, but not, if we are criticized for any evil committed (1 Pet 3:14, 17). We acknowledge that Christians are often falsely accused of crimes by other people or by the state, to cover up religious persecution or other evil schemes.

A Christian should not aspire after persecution or provoke it. In contrast to the occasional tendency of some Early Church believers, who were misguided to seek after martyrdom for its rewards and blessings, we must remember that it is God’s prerogative, not ours, to determine who is to suffer martyrdom. Similarly, the believer has no right to seek persecution. The Christian is to be steadfast under persecution, but to rejoice all the more when he can avoid it, or when it comes to an end.

### ***2.11.2 Doing no harm and avoiding unethical means***

Christians, following the example of Christ, abstain from persecuting others, be it adherents of other religions or other Christians of different convictions. Also Christian martyrs do not cause harm to others.

As God is gracious and puts up with the opposition of humans during the time of this world, so that humans may deny him or mock at him, we have to be willing to do the same. The intent of Jesus’ disciples of calling fire from heaven on those who disbelieve, was rejected by Jesus as a wrong attitude (Luke 9:54-55). We should also refrain from following the bad example of Jonah in the Old Testament who did not share God’s loving attitude towards the people whom he had to call to repentance and who would have preferred God’s instant judgment upon them (Jonah 4:1-2).

Christian mission seeks to avoid unnecessary offence. We should apply wisdom to our behavior. Truly Christian mission does not employ unethical means and methods. Our fight against persecution should start by banning any means of practicing our faith and witness which would violate the human rights of others!

Mission is spreading the message that God so much loved the world, that he gave his only son Jesus Christ for forgiveness and salvation (John 3:16). Thus not only the message, but also the way in which this message is spread, always has to mirror God’s love and our love to God and to everyone.

In our efforts to combat religious persecution we must adhere to the truth in reporting, refrain from any exaggeration, and employ the utmost care when using statistics, in order to avoid the creation of any false impressions.

### ***2.11.3 Loyal citizenship and primary allegiance to God***

Christians are loyal citizens, who seek the welfare of their state, country and people. They are to pray for those in authority, and to seek to live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness (1 Tim 2:1-2). But whenever the authorities try to force them to dishonor God, they must obey God more rather than men (Acts 5:29). The loyalty of a Christian citizen only finds its limits when the state either wants to force us to do evil, wants do forbid the fulfillment of God-given commandments or forces us to choose between the state and our higher loyalty to God. Thus, when we are forbidden to worship our God and him alone or to witness, we will obey God more than men (Acts 4:12). We therefore need a new evaluation of those who break state laws for the sake of the Gospel.

Christians do live and have lived under all kinds of political systems. While the Christian faith

has contributed much to shaping modern democracies, this is not the only system under which Christians may live. While recognizing the benefits and disadvantages of different political systems, Christians do not equate democracy with the Christian faith and distinguish their God-given commission to preach the gospel from their political opinions as responsible citizens.

### **3 Overcoming current misconceptions and distorted terminology**

#### **3.1 Overcoming misconceptions regarding suffering**

When general human suffering is used as the sole interpretational framework for all adversities Christians are experiencing in this world, including persecution and martyrdom for the sake of Christ, the specific nature and the cause of their suffering, namely their allegiance to Christ, is not sufficiently distinguished. Not all who suffer, actually suffer for Christ.

When suffering for Christ is used as the sole interpretational framework and vocabulary for all that happens to Christians because of serving Christ, religious persecution and martyrdom are not sufficiently distinguished. Not all who suffer for Christ are actually persecuted or martyred.

When scripture which in its original context and intention specifically applies to persecution for Christ, is misapplied to general suffering, the ability to properly think about and respond to persecution is crippled. It is better to make a distinction between the two and regard them on their own terms.<sup>13</sup>

Christian preaching that promises instant gratification and the end of all suffering here and now, actually promises too little. That would be just a better version of this corrupted world.

There have been various reactions in the religions of the world to suffering which lead to a dead end from a Christian perspective, namely ignoring the question of suffering, denouncing the question of suffering as wrong because God rules in absolute monism, or a stoical acceptance of suffering as a fate to be accepted.

#### **3.2 Overcoming misconceptions regarding persecution**

There are quite a number of pitfalls in talking and thinking about persecution.

##### ***3.2.1 Overcoming ignorance and downplaying of religious persecution***

In Western societies, more often than not, a lack of attention is given to religious persecution, due to apathy, lack of empathy, and cowardice, or because such reports disturb the idealistic pictures of harmonious life elsewhere, and might endanger ecumenical and inter-religious relations. This leads to conscious repression of the reality of persecution and an aversion to clear language in that regard.

There is also a tendency to negate the existence of religious persecution of Christians in certain contexts where Christians are suffering discrimination, persecution and violence by over-emphasizing all other possible causes of conflict. It is then said that what is happening to the Christians is not religious persecution but has mainly social, political, ethnic or some other causes. Christians just happen to be the victims. While this might be in fact true in some circumstances, and while we acknowledge that situations are very complex and that persecution is rarely *just* religious and often mixed with other motives, we plead for taking the religious dimension of persecution seriously, as it may in fact be camouflaged by various other justifi-

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<sup>13</sup> Most of the material in about misconceptions regarding suffering and persecution (3.1 and 3.2) is owed to Tieszen 2008 and developed in more detail there.

cations, and may in fact play a more dominant factor than commonly acknowledged.

Then there is the perception of historical guilt. In the past and in rare cases in the present, Christians have been implicated in persecution of people of other convictions, including other Christians of differing convictions. This is used by some to mitigate reports about persecutions of Christians today. To this we respond that Christians should repent of persecution they have inflicted on others and regret any wrong their forbears have done. Such deeds were contrary to the explicit teaching of the Gospel and the spirit of Christ and constitute in fact unchristian behavior and must be condemned. However this does not make present persecution of anyone less wrong and we must still speak up against it.

### ***3.2.2 Overcoming reductionism and distortion***

Persecution has had a consistent presence in the church's life since its inception, just as Christ foretold. Yet with the ebb and flow of persecution situations, various misconceptions have arisen.

Perhaps most significant is the view that persecution is only the experience of certain Christians at certain times. Such a historical exemption relegates persecution either to the past or the future. This view includes the distorted emphasis placed upon the persecution of the Early Church with the resulting notion that persecution is no longer an experience the modern church endures. Or the defining characteristics of persecution are reduced to its particular manifestation in that context and period of history, then coming to the logical conclusion that current reality does not measure up to that. The fallacy lies in too narrow a definition of persecution. Such distortions mitigate the present-day experience of an event that is much more widespread and frequent than at any other time in Christian history.

A related distortion is the popular attention persecution receives in some Christian circles as an eschatological event and/or as an experience that only serves as a signpost for end-time events. While Christ's return provides his followers with hope in the midst of persecution (2 Cor 4:8-9; 1 Thes 4:13-5:11), an experience of persecution should not be irretrievably tied to apocalyptic activity, nor should it be viewed as a potential future event only, which is not relevant today. Christians who view persecution solely as a future event from which they are certain to be spared, e.g. by pre-tribulational rapture, might face a hard awakening to a different reality.

Another distortion is the view that persecution today is an experience isolated to majority world<sup>14</sup> Christians. Undergirding this flawed view, along with the distortions already mentioned, is the misconception that persecution is only manifest in violence. Hence, some Christians only acknowledge the persecution in places of the world where it often is intensely hostile. If, however, persecution is defined as an experience much broader than simply violent acts, and if we take seriously Christ's promise that all those who follow him will be persecuted, then the above views contradict the biblical message (e.g. Matt 10:22; John 15:20; 2 Tim 3:12).

### ***3.2.3 Overcoming terminological confusion***

There are two opposite fallacies of equating persecution too closely either with suffering or with martyrdom.

When religious persecution is equated too closely with martyrdom, this leads to insufficient distinction. One can be persecuted without being martyred, and this needs to be treated on its own terms in order to account for the full nature of religious persecution. Equally, calling the

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<sup>14</sup> This term is used to acknowledge with a positive term that nowadays the majority of Christians is living outside the western world.

witnesses of Christ nowadays who are experiencing persecution, ‘martyrs’ or ‘living martyrs’, is not helpful as it ignores the fact that in contemporary language the meaning of martyr has largely been associated with the fact of death.

Finally, there exists the misconception that all types of suffering – e.g. natural disasters, sickness, etc. – are to be understood as persecution. While more general types of suffering are serious issues that demand a response from the church, they cannot be equated with persecution. When they are, it is often the former which garner the attention of the church, leaving victims of persecution without the advocacy they need. Distinctions must be made between general suffering and persecution so that neither experience is mitigated, nor is one emphasized over the other.

Some Christians might think that persecution only happens to Christians, as all they have ever heard about in their circles is persecution of Christians. It is important to acknowledge that non-Christians also suffer religious persecution, sometimes by the same hands who persecute Christians. The persecution of non-Christians is as objectionable as that of Christians. It might be helpful to fully spell out when we actually mean ‘persecution of Christians’. The often used term ‘Christian persecution’ is not recommendable, as it lacks clarity as to who is persecuting whom and this term might in fact also be understood as Christians persecuting others.

### 3.3 Overcoming misconceptions regarding martyrdom

In the course of time several aberrant views of martyrdom have gained acceptance.<sup>15</sup> Some in the Early Church and pre-reformation times felt that martyrdom would result in forgiveness of personal sins. A related distortion, especially prominent in rabbinic Judaism, is the conviction that the martyr’s blood has atoning power for God’s people in general. Yet we must remember that the martyrs died for the message of *Christ* as sin-bearer (1 Pet 2:24; Heb 7:27; 10:10). The idea that Christian martyrs were dying for their own sins or the sins of others contradicts the message which to defend they laid down their lives.

Another distortion, which originated in the Greek concept of the ‘noble death’, excessively glorifies the martyr’s courage and perseverance, leading to veneration of the martyr. But the nature of Christian martyrdom is such that perseverance unto death is in no way meritorious but naturally flows from faith. Persevering in suffering is simply acting consistently with one’s convictions concerning the promises of God – if they are really true, then they are worth suffering for (Heb 11:24-26; 2 Cor 4:17-18; Rom 8:18). The merit, then, is not in the martyr’s courage or fortitude, but in God’s faithfulness to his promises, which undergirds the martyr’s perseverance.

A proper attitude toward martyrdom also excludes the stoical idea that one must stand aloof from and be apathetic toward life as preparation for possible martyrdom in the future. The Bible affirms the goodness of life and man’s right to enjoy it (1 Tim 4:3-5). But when faced with the choice between compromise and death, the martyr values his or her life with God more than this present life.

In some traditions the martyr is afforded the role of a special intercessor before God or mediator of salvation’s blessings. But scripture is clear concerning the sole mediatory role of Christ concerning salvation (1 Tim 2:5; John 14:6; Acts 4:12). To ascribe an equal mediatory role to the Christian martyr would be idolatry, an act akin to that in defiance of which many martyrs died. However some of us hold that those who have died in Christ may well be continuing in heaven a Christian intercessory ministry which they have already exercised on earth as any believer should. We agree that while we have this ‘cloud of witnesses’ and perfected martyrs

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<sup>15</sup> Most of the material about misconceptions regarding martyrdom is owed to Wespetal 2005 and developed in more detail there.

around us, we should fix our eyes on Jesus, the originator and perfecter of our faith (Heb 12:1-2).

In some current theological streams Christian martyr terminology is indiscriminately applied to political martyrs and resistance fighters. The fallacy lies in making political resistance a more important criterion than Christian allegiance, and the agreement of political ideas with certain ideologies more important than with scripture. We reject such an extension of Christian martyr terminology to non-Christian political martyrs while we uphold the right of non-Christians to develop and express their own political martyr thinking. However we acknowledge that martyrdom of Christians is at times caused by Christian ethical and political positions.

Regarding certain positions we reject, it seems desirable to enter into closer conversation with our ‘separated brethren’ and Christians of divergent opinions about what they in fact do teach about these issues lest we erroneously interpret them.

#### **4 Practical application: responding to suffering, persecution and martyrdom**

Within a sketch of a theology of suffering, persecution and martyrdom, we here focus on pastoral and ethical considerations concerning a proper individual and collective Christian response, including the responsibilities of leadership in church, mission and Christian networks and in the tasks of theological education and missionary training. Regarding practical wisdom we suggest to study the recommendations in the *Lausanne Occasional Paper* No.32 “*The Persecuted Church*”. This book deals with a myriad of practical and strategic issues, such as capacity building within and for the persecuted church, advocacy and legal issues, prayer, practical assistance for Christians, partnership, development of theological training and theological exchange, resources, and security.<sup>16</sup>

##### **4.1 Christian response to suffering for Christ**

Christians live in union with Christ. They are “in Christ” and their behavior no longer needs to be dominated by the natural human reactions to suffering and aggression. In this way suffering for Christ contributes to the character formation of the Christian. It is of utmost importance that Christ can be seen in our reaction to our suffering for his sake. The virtues needed to properly respond to suffering for Christ are none other than the virtues that God works in the disciple of Christ by means of his Holy Spirit. They are an expression of Christ living in his followers and of Christ’s own nature. “The Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal 5:22-23). “Three things will last forever – faith, hope, and love – and the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor 13:13). The Christian graces portray the Christian’s attitude to God, to other people and to himself or herself. In view of suffering and persecution one additional virtue not found in these two lists stands out in the New Testament, namely perseverance. Therefore we will examine perseverance before the other virtues.

##### **4.1.1 Perseverance**

Perseverance or patient endurance is the main virtue called for regarding suffering for Christ. One of the words for perseverance literally means to ‘remain under’ the burden instead of escaping it through shortcuts. In this, Christ again is our model: he reinforced the truth he preached, “particularly through his courageous perseverance even to death” (Phil 2:8). “Think of all the hostility he endured from sinful people; then you won’t become weary and give up”

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<sup>16</sup> See particularly chapter 5.



(Heb 12:3).

Christians need to equip themselves with that same perseverance. The nature of patient endurance consists in waiting; waiting for God to act, to fulfill his promises, and for Christ to return. This patience is based on scripture (Rom 15:4; Psa 37:7; Jas 5:7).

Such patient endurance is called for when faced with suffering, testing, temptation, trouble, hardship, calamities, abuse and unfair treatment (Rom 12:12; 2 Cor 6:4; 1 Pet 2:19-20; Jas 1:12; Rev 13:10, 14:12). Persevering means not giving up or giving in, but continuing to do God's will, and remaining faithful to Jesus (Rev 2:3; Heb 10:36; Rev 13:10). Such is the patient endurance to which Jesus calls us (Rev 1:9) and which comes from Christ (2 Thes 3:5), and we may pray that we will be strengthened with all of God's glorious power so we will have all the endurance and patience we need (Col 1:11).<sup>17</sup>

The source of strength for our perseverance is real union with Christ. The Christian may say: he is in me, and I am in him, he walks with me, and I am his agent and he speaks through me (John 14:20; 15:1-8).

#### **4.1.2 Love**

Loving God with all our heart and our neighbor as ourselves (Luke 10:27) in suffering for Christ means, that nothing must surpass our love for God, and that our love for God makes us willing to suffer for his sake. Such love demands that we respond to all people according to a core message of the gospel, in obedience to Christ's command and following Christ's example. Such neighbor love embraces people of other faiths, and extends especially to those who hate us, slander and persecute us, and would kill us if they could or are in fact doing so. Knowing that we are unconditionally loved by God helps us maintain our self-esteem in the midst of being marginalized, rejected, ridiculed, despised, hated, oppressed, tortured, and being treated like less than human for the sake of Christ.

#### **4.1.3 Faith**

"Faith is the confidence that what we hope for will actually happen; it gives us assurance about things we cannot see" (Heb 11:1). In the midst of suffering for Christ, we do not yet see the victory of Christ which God has promised in scripture and therefore we need to hold fast to these promises in faith. Faith means trusting God, and grasping the hand of the father like a little child, and entrusting our life into his hand and loving care (Mark 10:15). Real faith is not receiving all you want (Heb 10:52).

#### **4.1.4 Hope**

"And we believers also groan, even though we have the Holy Spirit within us as a foretaste of future glory, for we long for our bodies to be released from sin and suffering. We, too, wait with eager hope for the day when God will give us our full rights as his adopted children, including the new bodies he has promised us" (Rom 8:23, also see 2 Cor 4:8-9). Suffering can easily wear us down, and it is easy to despair and to lose all hope. When suffering for Christ carries on for generations for some of us, the hope of a better future can get lost. It will help to reassure ourselves of the basis of our hope, as well of its source, content, acquisition, form and effect. The basis of our hope is the living God (1 Tim 4:11), who has plans for our good and wants to give us a future (Jer 29:11; see the whole book for the theme of hope in the face of adversity), and who can be trusted to keep his promises (Heb 10:23). The content of our hope is not for this life only (1 Cor 15:19), but we are looking forward "with hope to that wonderful day when the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, will be revealed"

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<sup>17</sup> See Adiwardana 1999.

(Titus 2:13). This includes the return of Jesus Christ (1 Thes 4:13-5:11), the resurrection of the dead, a better life after the resurrection (Heb 11:35, 1 Cor 15:58), new bodies (Rom 8:23), an inheritance reserved by God for us in heaven (Col 1:5), or in one word: glory. In comparison to that, our current suffering will shrink in significance (Rom 8:18). The source of our hope is God's self-revelation. This manifests itself on the one hand in scripture that gives us hope and encouragement (Rom 15:4). On the other hand the power of the Holy Spirit instills overflowing confident hope in us (Rom 15:13), and floods our hearts with light so that we "can understand the confident hope he has given to those he called" (Eph 1:18). Paul prayed for the believers that God would do this in their lives. So may we. He prayed that our hearts and minds might get their orientation from this hope. He pleaded that we may "hold on tightly without wavering to the hope we affirm" (Heb 10:23) even though all visible evidence might point to the contrary. In addition we find many prayers in the Psalms modeling a way from despair to hope. The effect of that hope is confidence and courage (Job 11:18), as "this hope is a strong and trustworthy anchor for our souls" (Heb 6:19).

#### 4.1.5 Joy

Joy in suffering can be seen in trinitarian dimensions as the joy of God, the joy of Jesus, and the joy of the Holy Spirit. The joy of the Lord is our strength (Neh 8:10) and Jesus promises us that we will be filled with his joy in an overflowing measure that no one can rob (John 15:11,20-24). There is also the possibility of joy from the Holy Spirit in spite of severe suffering (1 Thes 1:6).

Jesus promised: "God blesses you who weep now, for the time will come when you will laugh with joy. God blesses you who are hated and excluded and mocked and cursed because you are identified with me, the Son of Man. When that happens, rejoice! Yes, leap for joy! For a great reward awaits you in heaven" (Luke 6:23). In scripture, we find both the prospect of future joy after present suffering, and the promise of joy now in the midst of suffering as well as the command to rejoice now. Jesus also compares this situation to pains of labor which result in joy once a child is born. The joy Jesus promises is one that no one can take away and that we will receive abundantly, if we ask God in his name (John 16:21-24).

We are following the example of Jesus, who "because of the joy awaiting him, ... endured the cross, disregarding its shame" (Heb 12:2). The apostles were rejoicing that God had counted them worthy to suffer disgrace for the name of Jesus, after having been arrested, jailed, examined with malicious intent and flogged by highest religious authority (Acts 5:41.) Paul and Silas sang praises to God in prison in the middle of the night despite having been stripped, severely beaten and locked up in an uncomfortable position (Acts 16:22-25). Paul was glad when he suffered for his converts (1 Cor 1:24) not because of masochistic perversions, but because he knew this was part of God's plan for him.

The apostles echo Jesus' words in their teaching. Paul reminds the Thessalonians that they received the Gospel with joy in spite of the severe suffering it brought them, thereby imitating both the apostles and the Lord (1 Thes 1:6). Peter exhorts his readers to "be very glad – for these trials make you partners with Christ in his suffering, so that you will have the wonderful joy of seeing his glory when it is revealed to all the world. So be happy when you are insulted for being a Christian, for then the glorious Spirit of God rests upon you" (1 Pet 4:13-14; 1:6). Equally, James writes to scattered Jewish Christians, to consider it an opportunity for great joy when troubles come their way (Jas 1:2). The writer to the Hebrews remarks that his readers have accepted the loss of all their possessions with joy because they knew "there were better things waiting for them that will last forever" (Heb 10:34).

Such joy in the Lord is our strength in the midst of suffering for Christ. This joy is a gift from

God that transcends human capacities.<sup>18</sup>

#### **4.1.6 Peace**

The deepest peace is peace with God. Such peace is a result of being made right in God's sight by faith because of what Jesus the Messiah, our Lord has done for us (Rom 5:1).

The Lord of peace is able to give us peace at all times and in every situation (2 Thes 3:16). Jesus promised his own to give them peace of mind and heart as a gift from himself and as a result of their connection with him, as it cannot be derived from human nature or the present world order and exceeds anything we can understand (John 14:27; 16:33; Phil 4:6). This peace has the capacity to guard hearts and minds (Phil 4:6) and keep Jesus' followers from being troubled or afraid. While living here on earth we have many trials and sorrows. The reason for peace in the midst of such circumstances is the fact that Jesus has overcome the world (John 16:33). We do not need to worry or fear harm, but may ask God in the name of Jesus for what we need, including the peace he promised (Phil 4:6-7; cf. Prov 1:33). While deep trauma may afflict even the most committed believer who is suffering for Christ and surviving persecution, the peace of Christ is something we may claim in faith.

If the peace that comes from Christ rules our hearts, it will also make us exhibit a peaceful attitude towards others, not repaying evil for evil, but striving, if it is possible, as far as it depends on us, to live at peace with everyone (Col 3:15; Rom 12:17-18; 1 Pet 3:11; Heb 12:14). "God blesses those who work for peace, for they will be called the children of God" (Matt 5:9).

#### **4.1.7 Patience (longsuffering)**

Patience is a social virtue, together with the two following virtues of kindness and goodness. These are directed towards fellow human beings rather than God.

God himself is very patient. He waits with his judgment of humankind. He wants to give evil-doers an opportunity for change for the better (1 Pet 3:4,9; Rom 9:22).

This same patience in the sense of longsuffering is what the Spirit of Christ enables Christians to exhibit towards abusive people and persecutors (1 Cor 4:12). The Spirit gives the strength to keep on suffering even when not seeing immediate punitive action.

#### **4.1.8 Kindness**

Kindness is a question of disposition. Even when people are malicious to us, our attitude is to be the kindness that reflects the character of Christ. The opposite to kindness would be bitterness, rage and anger, resulting in harsh words and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior which we are to avoid (Eph 4:31-32).

#### **4.1.9 Goodness**

Goodness is a matter of words and deeds. Even when others make us suffer, the call is to "See that no one pays back evil for evil, but always try to do good to each other and to all people" (1 Thes 5:15).

#### **4.1.10 Faithfulness**

Faithfulness describes the reliability of a Christian. Faithfulness is a character trait of God himself who remains faithful to his covenant (Psa 100:5). Jesus is called the "faithful witness" (martyr, Rev 1:5; 3:14), a name also given to a person faithful in martyrdom (Rev 2:13).

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<sup>18</sup> See Fernando 2007 for more details.

Faithfulness is a virtue praised in and expected of God's people and is to be exhibited in the face of suffering, hardship, persecution and death (2 Thes 1:4; Heb 10:32; Rev 2:10). "God's holy people must endure persecution patiently and remain faithful" (Rev 13:10).

Faithfulness means remaining loyal to God and Jesus, faithful to God's word and the teachings of Jesus and faithful to our testimony to Jesus, not giving up our God-given mission because of suffering (John 8:31; Rev 6:9). It also means not betraying our Christian brothers and sisters. Faithfulness means remaining loyal to Christ even when facing death and doing so until the end. Faithfulness is a virtue which Jesus promised to reward with the crown of life (Rev 2:10) and with sharing in all his possessions. "For if we are faithful to the end, trusting God just as firmly as when we first believed, we will share in all that belongs to Christ" (Heb 3:14).

#### ***4.1.11 Gentleness***

Gentleness is that humble meekness which Christ exhibited (Matt 11:29; 2 Cor 10:1). The same polite attitude is to be shown by Christians to fellow Christians (Eph 4:2) and all other people alike. This is especially important in the act of witness (1 Pet 3:16) in order to avoid offence by aggressive behavior.

#### ***4.1.12 Self-control***

Faithfulness and gentleness are both aspects of self-mastery. A good portion of self-mastery is needed in order to not repay abuse in kind or to retaliate for suffering others cause us.

What is said here concerning virtues in a Christian response to suffering equally applies to persecution and martyrdom for the sake of Christ. Obviously this list is not exhaustive and there are many other lists of Christian virtues (e.g. Col 3:12). The important lesson is that all these virtues which the Spirit produces in the lives of Christians can be applied in contexts of suffering, persecution and martyrdom and are often closely connected to them in scripture.

### **4.2 Christian responses to persecution**

This section discusses Christian responses to imminent or acute persecution. An essential part of the training Jesus provided to his disciples was preparing them for persecution and their response to it (e.g. Matt 10:16-42). The natural human responses to persecution are worry and fear, leading to the dangers of which Jesus warns the believers, namely denying Christ, loving one's family or one's life more than Christ, and refusing to receive those who are wanted because of their witness (Matt 10:33-42).

As Jesus is sending out his own "as sheep among wolves", he taught that while their disposition and actions should be as harmless as that of doves, this should be combined with shrewd wisdom (Matt 10:16-18). The key question in all of this is not how persecution can be avoided at all cost, but how the mission of proclaiming the Gospel which Christ gave his church can be faithfully accomplished.

Within this framework scripture commands several mandatory responses to persecution, namely staying faithful to Christ when enduring persecution, showing solidarity with the persecuted and praying for the persecutors. There are two additional responses permissible or called for under certain circumstances, namely avoiding or fleeing persecution and resisting persecution.

Here we mainly focus on discussing the tension between avoiding persecution and enduring persecution, and how resisting persecution may relate to them. There are grounds and examples for all these actions in scripture and the challenge lies in discerning which response or

which combination is appropriate in each individual instance according to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

#### ***4.2.1 Avoiding persecution***

In situations where the church of Jesus Christ is exposed to a stronger degree of persecution, it is legitimate to wisely ask whether and how it could be avoided without compromising the witness to Christ. Following the way of the cross does not mean seeking persecution. The call to endure persecution does not mean a weak apathetic or passive acceptance of the event. There are occasions in which God directs the believers to avoid or flee it. The motive behind the fleeing is critical. Primarily to avoid suffering is not sufficient. The priority is always on the mission of the kingdom of God above all else. If the mission were threatened by the persecution, withdrawal is permitted, based on scriptural precedents.

God himself instructed the prophet Elijah to avoid the persecution by King Ahab by hiding (1 Kgs 19:1-18). He equally instructed Joseph to flee to Egypt with the new born Jesus (Matt 2:13-18). Jesus himself at times went into hiding (Matt 4:12, John 8:59; Matt 12:14-15; John 7:1) “because his time had not yet come” (John 7:30; 8:20,59; 10:39). His escape from suffering and death was, however, only a postponement. Nevertheless, Jesus did not pull away from confrontation with the religious leaders of his day. His ministry was not characterized by ‘tactical moves’, compromise, a ‘watering down’ of his message or avoidance of suffering.

When Jesus sent out his disciples on a training mission, and his instructions expanded to events in the future, he told them when they were persecuted in one town to withdraw to the next in order that the gospel may continue to spread (Matt 10:23). The Jerusalem church in fact later implemented such withdrawal (Acts 8:1). This is also a pattern in the missionary work of Paul (Acts 8:1, 9:25, 11:19, 14:5-6). The flight was not, therefore, a flight from suffering, but a flight in order to fulfill the mission of Christ. While God’s word can go out forcefully through the testimony of martyrdom, it is sometimes better that people remain alive in order to proclaim it (Acts 14:5-6).

In a few exceptional situations, believers did go to meet certain death. Jesus and Paul both returned to Jerusalem to be arrested (Acts 10:19-25). These were, however, key situations and key people in salvation history and they were commanded directly by God to do so (e.g. Acts 20:22-23).

This suggests that at times the church is meant to implement certain strategies to avoid persecution. Through wise, temporary ‘retreat’ churches in some contexts are able to resume their missionary witness at a later and quieter time. Equally, Christian converts should not seek confrontation in their families, but witness to their new found faith in patience and love. However, one must beware of the dangers of avoiding persecution to the degree of adapting to the ideology of a hostile system or of denying the Christian faith.

There are also patterns of behavior in the history of persecution that have led to emigration merely out of fear and for the purpose of finding a more peaceful and prosperous environment. What these emigrants do not realize, however, is that even if they are able to leave their homeland successfully they will never fully escape persecution and hardship. Even more, the churches they leave behind are left with an even greater burden of existing and maintaining a voice as an ever-increasing minority. Equally the phenomenon of ‘inner emigration’, where individuals isolate themselves from the surrounding society, often develop a ghetto mentality and a lifestyle that is marked by a high degree of legalism and insulation, prevents them from having a positive influence on their society or a meaningful witness for Christ among their

contemporaries.<sup>19</sup>

A particular issue, which led to much controversy in the Early Church, was the question whether bishops and elders were also permitted to flee, as Jesus had warned of ‘hirelings’ who abandoned their flock to the wolves instead of laying their lives down for them (John 10:11-13, 15:13-14). The church finally adopted the position that a bishop may not flee out of fear or cowardice, but could do so if it served the interests of his church. Such a decision could only be made according to the Spirit’s leading in the specific situation.

In summary: flight is advised and permitted under certain circumstances, but forbidden where obedience to God’s commandments and Christ’s commission and love for others would be jeopardized. The avoidance of distress and pain is not the supreme good. Obedience is, regardless of the cost. When persecution arises, careful consideration must be given to determine whether or not remaining in a situation of suffering is necessary in order to accomplish the will of God.

#### **4.2.2 *Enduring persecution***

Flight may at times be impossible, impractical or inappropriate. In these cases God’s people are called to stand firm where they are and remain faithful, even unto death. Enduring persecution as an expected event for the greater purposes of God is in fact the most broadly attested biblical directive regarding a response to persecution. This was outlined above when discussing the virtue of perseverance.

There are multiple biblical characters to follow as examples, such as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abdnego who refused to bow before King Nebuchadnezzar’s golden image, fully aware of the consequences (Dan 3:8-30). The Apostle Paul also several times demonstrated his readiness to endure the consequences of his ministry, even unto death (Phil 1:20-26; 2:17), and he was steadfast in going to Jerusalem even if it meant persecution (Acts 21:10-14).

The fact that Christians experience persecution in itself is not a mark of Christian spirituality and maturity, but the way in which they endure and choose to respond to it. Due to its internal solidarity and an ethic that is visibly friendly to people outside, the persecuted church of Jesus Christ gains credibility in its context. A Christian lifestyle standing in contrast to its antagonistic context is the more visible due to its love of the neighbor and foregoing all violence.

Practicing such a response to persecution is the difficult part. We can only do so with the power of the Holy Spirit.

#### **4.2.3 *Resisting persecution***

While Christians are called to endure persecution and to avoid it in certain circumstances, there remains an option which may be a part of these responses. God may call Christians to resist persecution as well. There are times when it is appropriate to fight for one’s legal rights.

Jesus defended himself at one point during his trial (John 18:23), not to protest his suffering but as a testimony to his innocence, while remaining silent throughout the rest of his trial. Paul demonstrated resistance through his appellation to Roman law (Acts 16:36-39; 22:24-29; 25:10-11). With his knowledge of the law and his own rights as a citizen of the Roman Empire, Paul was able to avoid persecution by resisting it. However it is important to note that both Jesus and Paul exercised this choice under specific premises and for specific purposes. Like fleeing, resisting is permissible unless it hinders the furtherance of the kingdom of God.

In fact, Christians have a right to be angry about situations of persecution with a holy indignation and a righteous outrage which leads one to seek to transform such conditions. Such trans-

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<sup>19</sup> See Kuzmič 1996:65-66 and Tieszen 2008:71.

formation might occur through legislative change, which itself might be expedited through civil disobedience, publications, political lobbying, or public demonstrations. However, the guidelines to which resistance must submit remain important. Christian resistance to religious persecution must not distort, diminish or contradict the gospel, God's purposes in persecution, Christ's mission in the world or the Holy Spirit's leading to respond to persecution in another manner.

We are not called at all times to be subjected to ungodly treatment, nor are we at all times to shirk such treatment. Ultimately, God himself will defend his church, but in the same way, there are times when God will lead his people to rise up in holy indignation and resist efforts to squelch his people.

#### ***4.2.4 Solidarity with the persecuted***

While the other three responses to persecution necessitated seeking God's direction as to the appropriate response to persecution, no such prayer is needed here. Christians can only ask God *how* they should help their persecuted brothers and sisters, not *if*. Even Christians whose persecution is intensely hostile can show solidarity with the experience of others through prayer. However it remains a primary responsibility of those whose experience of persecution is presently mild to stand for and with those whose experience is intensely hostile.

Praying for the persecutors and the authorities is an additional element that should unite all responses discussed above.

These elements have been or will be spelled out elsewhere in more detail.

### **4.3 Christian response to martyrdom**

#### ***4.3.1 Accepting martyrdom as a grace from God***

“For you have been given not only the privilege (literally grace) of trusting in Christ but also the privilege of suffering for him” (Phil 1:29; 1 Pet 2:19-20). When martyrdom comes our way we should receive it as God's grace for us out of his own hands. We can learn from Bonhoeffer who said: “Every Christian has his own cross waiting for him, a cross destined and appointed by God. Each must endure his allotted share of suffering and rejection. But each has a different share: some God deems worthy of the highest form of suffering, and gives them the grace of martyrdom, while others he does not allow to be tempted above that they are able to bear”.<sup>20</sup>

But we are neither to seek martyrdom nor to glorify it.

#### ***4.3.2 Rightly remembering martyrs***

The way the church is dealing with its martyrs is not a minor matter. It is rather an issue with which the church stands or falls. The differences that arose because of beliefs and practices rejected in Reformation times concerning the intercession of the saints, canonization of martyrs and the veneration of saintly relics, should not stifle our own ability to rightly remember the martyrs of the past and the present. We need to remember the “cloud of witnesses” surrounding us (Heb 12:1) and the martyrs that have gone before us to be encouraged by their example of faith and perseverance. Of course we must not lose focus on Jesus (Heb 12:2) and must not accord martyrs a role and function that they do not have according to scripture. But we must avoid the opposite pitfall of undervaluing the witnesses of the past.

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<sup>20</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer: The cost of discipleship. Macmillan 1963, 98-99. Online: [www.crossroad.to/Persecution/Bonhoffer.html](http://www.crossroad.to/Persecution/Bonhoffer.html)

The commemoration of martyrs has three important dimensions. In remembering them we keep a public memory of all Christians killed for Christ, even those whose martyrdom might have happened unnoticed and whose names were never recorded. The commemoration also reminds how these acts of violence could happen, refuting the stories made up as smoke-screens. And it calls us to be vigilant.

As the persecutors have learned the power of martyrdom over the course of history we are often facing a situation today where those who oppress Christians seek either to avoid their death, or avoid it being linked to their hands, or avoid it being called martyrdom. Christians have to slave away in labor camps as enemies of the state until they die of exhaustion. Others are released from prison when they are close to death so they do not die in captivity. Even others are placed in psychiatric hospitals and are administered drugs that destroy their personality, but are not physically killed. Christians are often falsely accused of all sorts of crimes and imprisoned or executed as common criminals in order to cover up the actual religious causes of their mistreatment. One of the reasons is to rob the church of its martyrs.

So, let no one steal our martyrs and let us avoid undervaluing them ourselves.

#### **4.4 Practical applications for the individual Christian**

While the previous three paragraphs (4.1-4.3) dealt with the disposition of the Christian in suffering for Christ and general responses to persecution and martyrdom specifically, the following three paragraphs (4.4-4.6) are revisiting the issue from a different perspective, differentiating between different levels of responsibility: individual, collective or in specific functions. Individual and collective responsibilities cannot always be neatly demarcated, and of course it depends on the kind of culture and society in which one lives. Usually what is said here on a more individual level is foundational and also applies to collective and functional responsibilities.

##### ***4.4.1 The practice of an 'evangelical spirituality'***

The practice of an evangelical spirituality helps to remain steadfast in suffering. It is based on the attitudes and behavior engendered in the Christian by the Holy Spirit as described above. A number of practices commanded by scripture or found helpful by Christians in the course of church history assist in remaining steadfast in suffering and faithful in witness to Christ.

Nurturing a loving relationship with Christ keeps us close to him. By studying and memorizing the word of God diligently and regularly (Col 3:16), we are continually given orientation and encouragement (Psa 119:105), and there is substance of which the Holy Spirit can remind us in situations where we are deprived of a Bible. Keeping fellowship with other Christians will give us support and correction. Only in living out the reality of being members of the body of Christ can we fully be Christians. Expressing our loyalty to Christ through baptism and remembering our baptism by water will strengthen our resolve to stay faithful to him even to a baptism of blood (Mark 10:38; Luke 12:50).

We are specifically to pray for our persecutors, as well as to intercede in prayer for those who are persecuted. By adopting an appropriate life-style in case we live in a context where we have the choice, we will identify with the suffering church. Commemorating recent and past martyrs can be a source of strength in our own present situation. We also encourage Christians to engage actively in the pursuit of peace, justice and religious freedom, be it individually or collectively.

All of this is nothing out of the ordinary. The first place to practice it is the individual life of the believer and the believing family. The relevance of some of these practices is developed in more detail below.



#### ***4.4.2 Nurturing a loving relationship with Christ***

The secret of our suffering for our faith is that it draws us even closer to Jesus Christ who suffered first for us and whose suffering continues in that of his witnesses. For Christians, suffering with Christ is the greatest sign of love for him. Jesus was thinking both of the sacrifice of his own life on the cross as well as his disciples sacrificing their lives for him when he said: “There is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13, cf. Eph 5:2). We gain strength from him, the source of true life, through this loving relationship (John 15:1-8). The Spirit of God rests upon those who are insulted for Christ’s sake (1 Pet 4:14). Since the days of early Christianity, believers have experienced again and again that Christ is never closer to his followers than at the moment when they are transformed inwardly into his likeness by their persecution. In addition, they get to know him personally in a deeper way as the crucified and resurrected one (Phil 3:10f; Col 1:24).

#### ***4.4.3 Praying for the persecutors***

Following Old Testament tradition (e.g. Job 31:29; 42:8-9), the New Testament exhorts us to pray for God’s grace for persecutors. Jesus admonished the disciples, “Pray for those who persecute you!”, “Pray for those who hurt you!” (Matt 5:44; Luke 6:27-28). Paul echoes this when reporting: “We bless those who curse us” (1 Cor 4:12).

The most impressive testimony of a dying martyr is Jesus’ prayer that God will have mercy on his persecutors. He prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). The first Christian martyr, Stephen, emulated this in his prayer, “Lord, don’t charge them with this sin!” (Acts 7:60). These prayers have been repeated by many martyrs of Christ throughout the history of the church.

#### ***4.4.4 Intercessory prayer for the persecuted***

The foremost and most essential way to help persecuted Christians, which every follower of Jesus can practice, is to pray and intercede for them in Jesus’ name. This is usually also the first thing that Christians under severe persecution are asking for. Jesus connected great promises to prayer (Matt 7:7-11; Luke 11:5-8; John 14:13f.), and the Epistles place great emphasis on them (Eph 6:18; Phil 1:3f; 1 Thes 5:17, Jas 5:16b-18). Such prayer has the potential to give relief, instill joy and the courage to witness in those abused and imprisoned (cf. Phil 1:13, 19). Specifically mentioning the names of those persecuted in intercessory prayer is a power even persecutors cannot ignore. Such intercessory prayer should be fervent, continuous, specific, and come with oneness of heart (Acts 12:5,12; 4:23-30). Finding out about answered prayers spurs us on and leads to giving thanks. This kind of intercession is mutual, as the more intensely persecuted parts of the church are praying for those facing less persecution and other temptations instead. In this way fellowship in the body of Christ grows out of intercessory prayer.

### **4.5 Practical applications for the local church**

The local church, meaning any type of local gathering of Christians, is the primary manifestation of the body of Christ to which an individual Christian relates. Its leaders have a pastoral responsibility toward the Christians entrusted to them which includes dealing with any aspect relating to suffering for Christ, persecution and martyrdom. Such local churches also have a responsibility and a capacity for action which goes beyond that of the individual Christian. Therefore this paragraph seeks to make suggestions concerning how to put into practice in a local church the ecclesiological insights stated earlier (2.7) in worship and teaching and particularly in congregational prayer, in preparing for situations of lesser persecution, restoring the weak, or equipping for future suffering and expressing local and international solidarity

with the persecuted across Christian divisions.

#### ***4.5.1 Integration into worship, teaching and counseling***

One could actually go through all the expressions of the life of a church and highlight their relationship to our topic. Suffice it to make a few suggestions.

Our attitude should be one of mutual learning between the parts of the body of Christ with less and more intense persecution, and to do so across Christian divisions. Those with more freedom should learn from and rejoice with the church's suffering under repressive circumstances as to how they remain steadfast in the faith and in their growth despite restrictions.

Regular prayer for peace and for the persecuted in the general intercessory prayer in Sunday worship is of such importance that it is elaborated in a section of its own. In addition, the topic should be specifically highlighted once a year in a service by following the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church of the World Evangelical Alliance or other such denominationally set days.

Whenever suffering for Christ, persecution and martyrdom appear in a biblical passage that is the basis for the Sunday sermon or any other Bible exposition, it should be expounded concerning its relevance for today and the specific context instead of being avoided. A pastor should plan to explicitly devote at least a sermon each to persecution and the cost of discipleship every year. Some suitable biblical text might be Luke 21:12-15; Heb 10:32-39; 1 Pet 2:13-17; Matt 5:10-16; 2 Thes 1:3-12; Gal 1:23-24; Mark 10:29-30; 2 Cor 2:9-10; 4:7-12; Rom 8:35-39; John 15:18-21; Acts 16:13-34.

The topic should also be anchored in religious education and confirmation classes.

A congregational offering should be taken at least once a year to support persecuted Christians and as the need arises.

When we are baptizing, we teach that baptism means sharing in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Through baptism we are immersed into the liberating death of Christ, our sin is buried, the 'old Adam' is crucified with Christ and the power of sin is broken. The baptized are no longer slaves to sin but free people. Completely integrated into the death of Christ, they are buried with him and are raised here and now to new life in the power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, in the certainty to be one with him in a resurrection of the dead of the same nature as his in the age to come (Rom 6:3-11; Col 2:13; Eph 2:5-6). In that context we should remember that Jesus also talks of another baptism, the baptism of blood, for himself and some of his followers (Mark 10:38; Luke 12:50). Both baptism and martyrdom have the same origin, as they are both gifts of God and need both to be accepted in faith (Mark 16:16). While baptism of water is only a symbol of death, martyrdom means death itself and truly and physically dying with Christ. The martyrs who have been faithful witnesses unto death serve as a reminder of the duty of all those baptized in the name of the Trinitarian God to be witnesses to him (Matt 28:19f; 1 Pet 3:15; Rev 6:9).

When we are celebrating in the Lord's Supper that the Lamb of God has shed his blood for us for the forgiveness of our sins (John 1:29; Matt 26:28; 1 Cor 11:25), this is the opportunity to offer a reminder that "by the blood of the Lamb" we are also given the strength to remain faithful in our witness and overcome suffering, persecution and even martyrdom (Rev 12:11). When we remember the passion of Christ, we should also remember that suffering for Christ is the fate he predicted for his followers, and that the servant who is there where his master is, will also experience the law of the corn of wheat, that only bears fruit when it dies (John 12:24-26).

In addition, the local church is the first place to give counseling to those who are traumatized

by persecution. Many will find hope and healing through worship and prayer and through family, church and other trusted support structures. However, some survivors of persecution who have witnessed extreme violence or have experienced arrest, torture or other forms of inhumane treatment may have post-traumatic stress reactions such as nightmares, “flashbacks”, hyper-vigilance, depression or other symptoms. Churches should receive training in how to recognize these symptoms and reactions. They should also be able to provide support and assistance to traumatized individuals and families, including grief counseling, and should know when to refer to other counseling and medical professionals when needed.

In such a way many aspects of communal worship, e.g. congregational prayer, preaching and teaching, the offering, baptism and the Lord’s Supper and individual counseling all have an important relation to suffering for Christ, persecution and martyrdom, and this needs to be taught and practiced as appropriate.

#### ***4.5.2 Congregational prayer***

Everything that has been said about individual intercession for the persecuted also holds true for congregational prayer. But as congregational prayer is a place where prayer is taught to the individual Christian, and where the local church stands jointly before God, it has its own special significance. There are explicit instructions on congregational prayer in scripture:

“I urge you, first of all, to pray for all people. Ask God to help them; intercede on their behalf, and give thanks for them. Pray this way for kings and all who are in authority so that we can live peaceful and quiet lives marked by godliness and dignity. This is good and pleases God our Savior” (1 Tim 2:1-3).

The context makes it clear that Paul is specifically speaking of prayer during worship. Prayer for authorities and for peace has thus always had a place in liturgy. Obviously, such prayer should not lead to a glorification of our political leaders, but should oppose the injustice and discord in society, which particularly includes persecution of Christians and hindrances to the practice of faith. This is supported by the exhortation to remember those in prison, as if we were there ourselves and to remember those being mistreated, as if we felt their pain in our own bodies (Heb 13:3). An exemplary case of the form such prayer could take in a situation of threat is that of the early Jerusalem church (Acts 4:23-31). Their prayer in another instance could include prayer for their leader to be freed from prison (Acts 12:5). Such prayer demonstrates that the church does neither rely on government or resistance to it, but on the one who rules all rulers.

#### ***4.5.3 Transitioning to situations of lesser persecution***

Experience has taught that churches that have lived under intense pressure and totalitarian systems, at times for generations, are often ill equipped to face the new challenges of a situation of greater freedom and (temporarily) lesser persecution. Preparation for freedom is a vital subject, not least in preparing the church for the activities of cults. Church history must be taught in an appropriate way and cover appropriate parts of the world in order to have the desired effect of strengthening the church.

When persecution and external pressure lessen, usually some of those backslidden or fallen during times of persecution by denying their Lord and leaving the church want to return into the fellowship. The church needs to deal with them and those who have become secret disciples during that period. There is a need for the proper attitude and a spiritual process for restoring the weak. Ideally there should be a consensus under what conditions and with which procedures this is done. The Early Church intensely dealt with the fate of those who had failed under persecution, but modern Christianity has largely ignored the issue, even though it is still relevant. Let us avoid any radicalism here and be merciful towards those too weak to

withstand, recognize the wisdom of avoiding persecution and accept the options of flight or silence.

Peter is perhaps the best known example of a lapsed believer, who became weak out of fear for his life (Matt 26:69-75; Mark 14:66-72; Luke 22:56-62; John 18:15-18,25-27; also see the warnings in Matt 26:31-35; Mark 14:27-31; Luke 22:31-34; John 13:36-38). Peter formally denied his Lord, swearing, “A curse on me if I’m lying – don’t know the man!” (Matt 26:74), but repented and was received back into fellowship with the people of God. Peter also demonstrates the close connection between fear of suffering and overconfidence. Note also that Jesus had already prayed for his disciples, not asking God to take them out of the world, “but to keep them safe from the evil one” (John 17:15), and for Peter (Luke 22:31-32) that God would enable him to maintain his faith under persecution and personal failure. The contrasting example is that of Judas, who after betraying Jesus, killed himself out of remorse, instead of seeking in a repentant spirit to reestablish fellowship with Jesus (John 27:3-5).

Another area of preparation is that of categorically renouncing the temptation of power in a newly found situation of freedom. Unfortunately much too often in church history, those who had suffered persecution before, once they had come to any influence, have become persecutors of Christians of diverging convictions or people of other worldviews themselves. Christians need to learn to live in a pluralistic society, to share public space, and to share Christ in reconciliatory language. The possibility of a coexistence of a plurality of worldviews must be accepted and Christians must defend the religious freedom of people of other convictions without sharing their claims to truth.

#### ***4.5.4 Equipping for increased future suffering***

Christians in contexts of lesser persecution must equip themselves for increased future suffering. The attitude, “this will never happen here”, is treacherous. History teaches that circumstances can change quickly, and our Lord warned us of an escalation of persecution and a global period of tribulation before his triumphant return. Christians in Asia<sup>21</sup> and Europe<sup>22</sup> are encouraging the church in their respective region to take active steps in preparing for suffering, which seem globally valid:

- By fostering a deeper spirit of worship, communion and walk with the risen Lord in holiness and love (Heb 10:32-36; Rev 7:17).
- By careful attention to the Bible in learning from it in real life trouble (Jer 15:15f; Rev 3:8-9) and by developing lay leadership whose faith is based on the centrality of the word of God and whose lives are governed by its authority.
- By a vigilant discernment of the spirits to discern heresies and pseudo-Christianity inside the church and deceptive ideologies outside the church who deny the necessity of the cross of Christ and of following Christ to the cross (1 Jn 2:19; Phil 3:18-19; Rom 4:25).
- By intelligently and fervently praying for each other and fostering deeper Christian fellowship and brotherly and sisterly love locally and worldwide (1 Pet 5:9).
- By intentionally learning from church history and from Christians in current situations of more intense persecution, e.g. that the ultimate goal of our faith is not found in this world and that people choosing to follow Christ immediately have to be taught about the cost of discipleship.
- By developing church models and leadership structures which can withstand pressure and

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<sup>21</sup> Letter to the Churches in Asia 1988.

<sup>22</sup> Readiness to Suffer for Christ 2006:21-22.

continue to fulfill their spiritual functions under persecution, such as cell groups and churches without traditional church buildings.

- By praying for wisdom, grace and boldness in carrying out the Great Commission in the midst of persecution.

#### ***4.5.5 Expressing Christian unity and solidarity***

In all its expressions the local church must act as a member of the wider body of Christ across time, across space and across divisions (see 2.7 and 4.2.4).

The worship and teaching of the local church must provide appropriate space to remember the martyrs and confessors of the past, in order to take seriously the communion of saints (see 4.3.2).

Christian solidarity, particularly with those suffering more intense persecution must be expressed in the life of the local church. This suffering with the other members of the body of Christ must go beyond one's own congregation, denomination and nation; it should be worldwide and cut across Christian divisions. The members of the body have mutual responsibility for each other.

In addition, it is important to seek as much Christian unity as possible under the circumstances in responding to persecution on the local church level. It strengthens the witness and position of the church in a given place when the different local churches speak up together, in one voice, and for each other, when one of them is under pressure or attacked, instead of isolating the victims further by silence or public criticism. If there is disagreement or need for criticism it should be voiced among Christians only, and not vented publicly, particularly not in order to save one's own skin. Otherwise the persecutors can exploit the apparent or real isolation of their victims suffering for their faith in order to further humiliate them.

When local churches, particularly those in situations of milder persecution express their solidarity with Christians and churches in situations of intense persecution, they should seek to do this in unity with other churches in their locality as far as possible. This is especially important when their solidarity reaches out to suffering Christians in other denominations and confessions, which are also represented locally. Local disagreements and divisions must not stifle the show of solidarity with suffering Christians elsewhere in the world.

While affirming this, we must recognize that very often the active participation of Christians and churches in the suffering of persecuted brothers and sisters outside of one's own narrow perspective is dysfunctional. This cannot be excused by a presumed lack of information as this is readily available. In reality, our feelings of religious self-sufficiency or even cowardice as well as the narrow local patriotism of our churches are all partly to blame. It is the responsibility of the leaders in the local church to overcome this and to set a positive example by showing courage and decisiveness in this matter. Solidarity with those who suffer is a Christian imperative. Indifference or apathy is sin. All of this equally applies on a wider level, to which we turn next.

#### **4.6 Practical applications for Christian networks and the church worldwide**

There are various levels of responsibility and structures beyond the local church level. Ecclesiastical hierarchies, denominational unions, and other Christian networks on a sub-national, national, international, regional, continental or global level, all have the responsibility to maintain Christian unity and to serve the church in functions which go beyond the capacity of the respective smaller organizational units. They are assisted and served by specialized ministries and networks focusing on mission and/or advocacy for the persecuted.

In the New Testament period these responsibilities were taken care of by people with a task

and calling beyond the local level, such as the apostles, elders, overseers, itinerant teachers and prophets and other people equipped and gifted by the Holy Spirit. The concern for other members of the body of Christ could be expressed by encouraging letters, visits and special collections. For example when Paul recognizes that the church in Thessalonica was in danger of being shaken by the troubles they were going through, he sent his co-worker Timothy there for a visit (1 Thes 3:1-3).

Nowadays the most important single initiative has been identified as “capacity building within and for the persecuted church. This should be primarily in terms of training”.<sup>23</sup>

Christians in Asia have highlighted the following objectives and responsibilities:<sup>24</sup>

Create worldwide awareness of how certain parts of the church are functioning under varied types of restriction.

Learn from and rejoice with the church’s suffering under repressive regimes as to how they remain steadfast in the faith and in their growth despite restrictions.

Encourage local churches experiencing difficulties through prayer support and other practical forms of help.

Equip local churches to convert their present times of trouble into occasions for testimony to Jesus Christ, the Lord of the church.

Prepare local churches to face possible adverse times in years ahead, by affirming the oneness of the Body of Christ and cultivating a deeper measure of active global cooperation and by creating effective avenues of contact and communication directly or indirectly with churches suffering persecution.

A fruitful cooperation between specialized ministries and church structures is of utmost importance. Specialized ministries are to serve the church and should assist the church in ministering to the world. Both churches and ministries, rather than being focused on themselves, should be focused on the kingdom of God and on glorifying God.

#### **4.7 Practical applications for mission**

This section deals with the responsibility of those being sent or sending others to preach the Good News of Christ in word and deed. We have in mind here, missionaries, sending churches, mission organizations and missionary training. They need to avoid and expose the corruption of mission, avoid unethical means in mission praxis, be aware of the challenges, and adequately train and support missionaries.

##### **4.7.1 *Avoiding and exposing the corruption of mission***

The international *Lausanne Covenant* of 1974, probably the most influential evangelical document in existence, contains a very self critical article 12:

“At other times, desirous to ensure a response to the gospel, we have compromised our message, manipulated our hearers through pressure techniques, and become unduly preoccupied with statistics or even dishonest in our use of them. All this is worldly. The church must be in the world; the world must not be in the church.”

The guideline for uncorrupted mission can be found in 1 Peter 3:15-17:

“If someone asks about your Christian hope, always be ready to explain it. But do this in a gentle and respectful way. Keep your conscience clear. Then if people speak against you, they

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<sup>23</sup> LOP 32, p.62.

<sup>24</sup> Ro 1989, p.3-5.

will be ashamed when they see what a good life you live because you belong to Christ. Remember, it is better to suffer for doing good, if that is what God wants, than to suffer for doing wrong!”

Christian faith is very self-critical and asks: Are we gentle and full of respect to our fellow human beings, to whom we try to explain our hope and faith?

#### ***4.7.2 Avoiding the use of unethical means in mission praxis***

If we want to fight the persecution of Christians, and if we want to fight for the right to witness to our faith and practice it in public, we should start by banning among ourselves any means of practicing our faith and witness that would violate the human rights of others.

We consider as unethical means:

- Offering people non-spiritual rewards for conversion, such as money, goods, medical treatment, opportunities or offices.
- Threatening people with civil consequences, putting undue psychological pressure on them or pressing them for decisions they cannot oversee, e.g. because they are too young or mentally ill.
- Using the authority of a state function while in office, e.g. as police or state school teacher.
- Giving or refusing financial advantages, e.g. regarding credits by banks or discriminating against adherents of other religions through inheritance laws.
- Preaching to ‘captive audiences’, who cannot freely leave, e.g. as army officers to their soldiers or as prison director to inmates.

We condemn the use of violence, coercion, threat, harassment, enticement, lies or pretenses to win people for Christ, who otherwise would not follow him. Ethics and mission belong together.<sup>25</sup>

#### ***4.7.3 Awareness in sending churches and missionary organizations***

The reality of suffering, violence, persecution and martyrdom must be clearly understood by sending churches and missionary organizations.

The local church must be the place where teaching about suffering, persecution and martyrdom is begun and done.

The primary teachers on suffering, violence, persecution and martyrdom should be those who have gone through it; but the entire church globally has a responsibility to teach and prepare. Teaching must go beyond individual experience and must be informed by thorough biblical and theological understanding.

- Sending churches and missionary agencies should stay up to date on the major current forces causing persecution and the most common kinds of persecution (see 1.1).
- In view of the requirements stated below, they should be particularly seeking out candidates who are ready for long term or life time ministry, willing to sacrifice prosperous lives and to go to the hard places.

#### ***4.7.4 Adequate training of missionaries***

The reality of suffering, violence, persecution and martyrdom in the contemporary world,

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<sup>25</sup> Look out for an evangelical ethics code on mission which is in preparation.

especially the inevitability of suffering for Christ's sake, must form a key part of training for missionaries. They must be prepared mentally, spiritually and practically.

The missionaries' message should include the dimensions of a costly gospel.

Missionaries' training must include the reality that ultimately a call to mission is not a call to personal safety, but rather a call to identify with the suffering and to take up one's cross and possibly lay down one's life to bring life to others. Missionaries should know that carrying the gospel to people and places where Christ is not known, can easily invite violent opposition. Clear biblical teaching is needed on how to persevere in times of trials.

Missionaries must learn that people are not necessarily impressed by their being decent people. They are impressed by Christians who make Christ the greatest treasure and value Christ above money, education, work, people, children, spouse – even their own life.

This must be balanced by teaching on caution and care for one's personal safety in missionary training, by learning to analyze contexts, conditions and possible development of high risk situations, and knowing what to do in the event of kidnapping, imprisonment and other eventualities.

Missionary training should include consideration of how to prepare believers for suffering, violence, persecution and martyrdom, for example on methods of how to assist believers in their response to persecution, whether it is to flee, to resist by advocacy, or simply endure.

A key principle in this must be to carefully take into account the views and reality of Christians indigenous to the context of suffering.

#### ***4.7.5 Appropriate support for missionaries (member care)***

Missionary agencies and sending churches need to be very aware, and have a strong commitment to support and be alongside their missionaries serving in contexts of suffering. Actually agencies and churches need to be taught as well. Such support includes:

Developing continuous communication with the missionaries, rapid communication channels and plans for support ready for emergency.

Learning how to keep contact with their missionaries and not unintentionally creating danger for them by sending letters or books, which can be seen by local authorities and cause even their expulsion from the country.

Awareness when missionaries need a time of respite from intense suffering and the offer of debriefing by the mission agency, and of rest and restoration.

Special awareness about the needs of missionary children in such contexts and offer care, support and orientation to the families.

Visits to such missionaries may be very important and encouraging, if they are made by people who have the necessary wisdom, understanding and sensibility to serve well in encouraging them, and not causing them extra stress.

### **4.8 Practical applications for theological education**

Theological education has the potential of shaping the faith and life of current and future Christian generations. This section discusses the place of this topic in theological curricula, domains to be included and steps for implementation.

#### ***4.8.1 The place of the topic in theological curricula***

It is imperative that biblical teaching on persecution and martyrdom becomes an essential element in our curricula of theological education. This should include both the theoretical



reflection on this topic as well as practical and pastoral application in training of future trainers for the body of Christ.

The integration of this topic into presently used curricula could be advanced by either creating new courses and seminars, which deal concretely and specifically with this topic, or by permeating the existing courses on broader topics with references and applications to this topic.

In the case of the first option, it is suggested that such a course description might be formulated in the future, in order to facilitate the creation and implementation of such courses in existing theological curricula. This is not the intention of this present section of the statement, but it is a proposal for future development.

#### ***4.8.2 Domains to be included***

The theological studies on this subject should include the following domains:

- In-depth study of the persecution of the church throughout history, including the cultural surroundings, concrete events, and the response of the church to this persecution in preparing the believers for a walk of faith.
- Training for pastoral care and counseling for the persecuted, including post-trauma recovery. This should encompass preparation of the entire church to both suffer and assist the suffering.
- Studies on the role of the state and international relations in situations of persecution. This should deal with the God-ordained role of the government and standards of justice for this authority, as well as human rights and the role of the international community in advancing and protecting such rights.
- Reflection on the role of the church vis-à-vis the government concerning persecution, e.g. the options of exercising pressure for transformation, the role of prayer and spiritual battle, passivity and civil disobedience, etc.
- Teaching solidarity of the entire body of Christ with those suffering for his sake throughout the world and across denominations. This could incorporate travels to regions of rampant persecution, exchange of ideas, and building of lines of communication and fellowship for mutual encouragement.
- The option of self-defense should be examined and compared critically with the alternative of pacifistic resistance. These choices have been insufficiently studied and researched, in particular the hermeneutical questions concerning violence, justice, retribution in the Old Testament. This is particularly relevant in light of religious violence and extremism in the present context.

#### ***4.8.3 Steps for implementation***

In each and all of these models, concrete steps could be implemented to enrich our theological education. These could incorporate the following:

- Designing specific courses to deal with the areas enumerated above.
- Initiate a dedicated teaching position for this subject, possibly for someone with practical and personal experience and exposure to persecution. This person, if personally involved, should dispose of sufficient distance to the persecution, in order to assist and equip others.
- Holding faculty seminars in view of sensitizing teachers and professors to this need of the church.
- Preparing and executing short-term involvement of students and faculty in the church suf-

fering more intense persecution.

- Assign appropriate literature to required reading, leading to research projects in this field.

Realizing the intrinsic value of theological education in influencing the entire body of Christ throughout the world by adequate preparation of its future leaders, we encourage those involved in training and teaching to integrate this subject matter into all aspects of curricula.

## 5 Conclusion

This is the message we are sending to ‘the global church in mission’, the worldwide body of Christ, and to our fellow evangelicals in particular. We are specifically calling on theologians, missiologists, and Christian leaders to consider this message in view of fulfilling together in joint obedience the mission to which God has called us. We encourage you to:

- study it personally in the light of scripture,
- assess what relevance it has for you and your ministry,
- reflect how this statement could be used at your level of responsibility,
- discuss it in your group,
- respond to the editors in view of a revision and improvement of this document, and in view of further consultations,
- implement what is relevant in your context and position of responsibility.

We refuse to be discouraged and defeated in the midst of suffering, because of our faith in the Lord of history. We are looking forward “with hope to that wonderful day when the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, will be revealed” (Titus 2:13).

“May the Lord of peace himself give you his peace at all times and in every situation. The Lord be with you all” (2 Thes 3:16).

## 6 Signatories

### Editorial group

Rev Dr Christof Sauer (chair), Dr Richard Howell, Prof. Dr Bernhard J G Reitsma, Prof. Dr Thomas Schirmacher

### Participants in the consultative process and contributors to the drafting of this message

Margaretha Adiwardana  
 Asaf Augusto  
 Prof. Dr Peter Beyerhaus  
 George Bolder  
 Dr Ronald Boyd-MacMillan  
 Kamal Fahmi  
 Dr Isaiah Majok Dau  
 Manfred Feldmann (administrator)  
 Rev Drs Ekkehard Graf  
 Rev Jiries Habash  
 Dr Rolf Hille  
 Rev Drs Maximilian Hölzl  
 Paul Joshua  
 Dr James Nkansah  
 Dr Robert Miner  
 Dr Paul Murdoch

Rev Glenn M Penner †  
Reg Reimer  
Dr Bong Rin Ro  
Dr Mirjam Scarborough  
Dr Evert Schut  
Dr William Taylor  
Mervyn Thomas  
Dr Charles L Tieszen  
Elisabeth Ton  
Dr Josef Ton  
Dr Antonia Leonora van der Meer  
Dr Thomas J Wespetal  
Canon Fritz Würschum  
Rev Godfrey Yogarajah

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The *Bad Urach Statement* is also published as part of the compendium on the Bad Urach Consultation: *Suffering, persecution and martyrdom – Theological reflections*, edited by Christof Sauer and Richard Howell, (Religious Freedom Series, vol. 2), Kempton Park: AcadSA Publishing / Bonn: VKW 2010, 360 pp.

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Religious Liberty Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance,  
[www.worldevangelicals.org](http://www.worldevangelicals.org)