

# *Persecution: Friend or Foe?*

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*Jason Haché*

Persecute – to oppress or maltreat someone because of race or religion.<sup>1</sup>

So, given the definition above why would anyone need to pose the question as to whether persecution is good or bad? Most “normal” people do not enjoy being oppressed or maltreated; in fact, most people these days would do as much as they possibly could to avoid pain or discomfort. Why then, would something by its own definition classified as a foe ever be considered a friend – perhaps in the next few paragraphs we might gain a little more insight into this strange phenomenon.

Throughout the history of the church there has always been an opposition to its very existence. Paul may advise us that our true enemies are “powers of this dark world” and “the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms”<sup>2</sup> but they are usually expressed through very real people in very real ways. Burnt at the stake, fed to the lions, crucified, beheaded, stoned . . . these are all different ends that the church’s founding fathers met. Amongst the pagan members of society, the church and its pietism was a great threat. They openly spoke out against pagan rituals; they refused to perform its offerings, and even went so far as to try to persuade others to join them in this revolt. This was especially bothersome to the Roman Empire and its leader – Caesar.

To the Romans Caesar was god, whether they truly believed it or merely practiced Caesar worship as an outward form of political allegiance is up for debate, either way this proved to be a problem for the professing Christian. Not long after the deification of Caesar a law was passed that stated all people must come into the temple of Caesar, and while tossing a pinch of incense from their fingers utter the phrase “Caesar is Lord”<sup>3</sup>; simple enough . . . not for the Christians. For a follower of Christ to declare that Caesar was Lord would be outright heresy

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<sup>1</sup> Collins, Paperback English Dictionary; HarperCollins Publishers, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> Ephesians 6:12

<sup>3</sup> Shelley, Bruce L. Church History in Plain Language 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.; Word Publishing, 1995 (pp. 44)

because to them there was one Lord and King, Jesus of Nazareth. Yet, for all those who refused to perform this annual ritual there was only one other option – death.

Of course, it was only a matter of time before word of this rebel group spread. Before long Christians were no longer being killed for their rebellion against the deification of Caesar, they were now being killed en masse simply for the name of Christ. Even the possession of Scriptures would result in death<sup>4</sup>, anyone labeled as a Christian would surely die. Word of this flowed forth as quickly as the blood of the Christians themselves and it was only a matter of time before the term ‘Martyr’ was born.

Originally the word was defined as ‘witness’<sup>5</sup>. What an appropriate title to apply to those that died for their faith, for they truly became a witness to all who watched in horror and delight. Of course, one would think that this would have irreparable damage upon the Church as a whole. Quite the contrary! Actually, many now clamored to the forefront with the hopes of attaining martyrdom for their beliefs. This new found obsession with death was unsettling to some of their fellow Christians but through these public acts thousand upon thousands of people heard the Gospel and saw the passion in the hearts of those who were willing to die for it.

With this last piece of the puzzle we have finally reached the true heart of the situation. That which was brought upon the Church to quiet its voice and kill its members was the very agent responsible for its growth. How frustrating it must have been for the Roman Empire to strive so hard at the destruction of the Christian movement and yet only increase its numbers and the speed by which they grew. The blood of the martyrs truly paved the road by which the Gospel came to us and their voice still cries out to this day.

Persecution is still prevalent within present day society; the only major difference is those who perpetrate it have changed. By professing the Truth and holding to the Name of Christ we subject ourselves to the ‘whips and stones’ of the media, educational system, government, friends, family, and even our most loved ones. Yes, persecution is still a part of our everyday lives but through the lens of history we need not fear it any longer. Instead, we must turn and embrace it for what it really is – one of the last true friends of the Christian church.

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<sup>4</sup> Shelley, Bruce L. Church History in Plain Language 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.; Word Publishing, 1995 (pp. 57)

<sup>5</sup> Shelley, Bruce L. Church History in Plain Language 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.; Word Publishing, 1995 (pp. 36).