

THE BLOOD OF THE MARTYRS

By Elizabeth Kendal

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'The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.' This famous quote is actually a paraphrase of words penned by the early church father, Tertullian, in an apologetic he wrote in AD 197 for the provincial governors of the Roman Empire. In what was essentially a plea for tolerance and religious freedom, Tertullian defended Christian faith and morality while assuring the governors that the Empire's Christians were committed to being good citizens. Tertullian also pointed out that, far from destroying the Church, the cruel persecution the governors meted out to Christians actually served to facilitate its growth. "The oftener we are mown down by you," he wrote, "the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed." In truth, the reality is a little more complicated. Indeed, the Church in Tertullian's home-town of Carthage (Tunis, North Africa) might have survived the Romans, but it did not survive the Arab Islamic invasion, conquest and colonisation of the 7thC.

Ignoring his plea for religious liberty, many people today quote Tertullian to bolster their claim that persecution leads directly to church growth, and as such, is not a bad thing. But this is simply not true. Persecution *is* a bad thing! In many cases, persecution has worked and has wiped out the church for decades, even centuries, or as in the case of Carthage, a millennia!

Persecution never leads directly to Church growth. No-one ever became a Christian so they could join the ranks of the vilified, raped, beaten, tortured, homeless, destitute and grieving. What's more, persecution is sin. To champion persecution (as if it is a good thing), or to ignore it (as if it is not our problem) is to champion or ignore the kidnap and forced conversion of children, repression and cruel subjugation, and the murder, imprisonment, torture and rape of the "bride" of Christ.

The reality is: while persecution does not always lead to church growth, church growth always leads to persecution, for that is the nature of spiritual warfare.

While persecution does at times facilitate church growth, it does so indirectly. The stoning of Stephen (Acts 6:8 – 8:4) facilitated church growth because it scattered the believers. The public persecution during Tertullian's day facilitated church growth because every time the Romans tortured Christians to death for public entertainment, they broadcast not only the testimony, grace and steadfast faith of believers, but the utterly morally bankrupt nature of Roman paganism. Critical to both situations (Stephen's and Tertullian's) was the fact that the believers – and not just the martyrs, but the rank-and-file believers – were witnessing (Acts 8:4) and living radically counter-cultural lives.

In truth, the blood of the martyrs is *not* the seed of the Church; they are separate things, though they work well together. Let me explain:

Through the Parable of Sower (Matthew 13:1-23) Jesus clearly teaches that the "seed" of the Church is the Word of God. Believers are called to "scatter" that seed (Word) so it might take root in prepared, receptive soil (hearts) and ultimately produce a crop (Church).

As every gardener and farmer knows, soil preparation is absolutely critical. Rocks must be removed and weeds pulled. It might be the case that fertilizer is required; and if the region is

dry, then irrigation will have to be supplied. It is a lot of hard work. Still, no amount of preparation will suffice if we fail to scatter the seed.

The blood of the martyrs works much like the “Blood and Bone” that we add to our own gardens; and the sweat of the labourers and tears of the intercessors work much like irrigation: they prepare the soil, making it fertile and receptive, ready to sustain life and growth. But again, there will be no display, no crop without seed.

We have an amazing God who is able to redeem even the most appalling suffering resulting from the most evil deeds of humanity. Isn't that exactly what he did on the Cross?

We have seen it so many times: pioneer missionaries venture into unknown territory only to be savagely murdered. Sometimes that is the end of it; the door is closed. Other times new missionaries, fully aware of the risk, courageously follow in the footsteps of their martyred predecessors only to find that the blood of the martyrs has prepared the ground, which is now fertile: the people know this message is important. Sometimes it takes the blood of many martyrs, but ultimately, if the Church perseveres, the seed takes root as it did in Ecuador and in the New Hebrides, and as it will do in North Korea and throughout the Dar al-Islam (House of Islam).

If the blood of the martyrs enriches the “soil”, preparing it for a bumper “crop”, then how much more must we be labouring in witness and persevering in intercession in these days of escalating persecution when an abundance of blood is being spilled?

Persecution is escalating *because* the Church is growing.

This is *not* the day to despair or disengage. The days might be dark but the future is bright. Rather this is the day for courageous mission and for the serious business of intercessory prayer, for our Sovereign God, who redeems suffering and evil, is preparing the “soil” for a bumper crop.

He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him. (Psalm 126:6 ESV)

For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. (Habakkuk 2:14 ESV)

And until that day comes, it is incumbent upon the whole Church that we support and pray for the persecuted, that their faith will remain strong and that their blood be not shed in vain.

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