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Survival of the Church

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-- Commentaries from past newsletters --

In my last newsletter I wrote to you about our individual survival in a crooked and depraved world. In this letter I wish to speak to the survival of the church in the same world.

Jesus said to Peter, *"And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."* He also said, *"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me,"* and *"I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven."* More emphatically He said, *". . . before all this, they will lay hands on you and persecute you. They will deliver you to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name."*

The Apostle Paul did not de-emphasize the possibility of persecution. He said, *"Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse."* The entire history of the church has been one of persecution. There was never a time when somewhere Christians were not being persecuted. It is equally true today. All we have to do is to read in the papers and magazines about the destruction of churches, the murder of pastors and missionaries, the imprisonment of Christians in China and the genocidal activities of Islamics in the Sudan and in Indonesia, as well as in their own countries.

As I have said before, we, in this country, are coming under increasing attack. The difference is that in our country the forces of evil are trying to destroy the church by legal means. Distorting the constitution, they are trying to eradicate Christianity from public life by banning prayer in schools, the display of the Ten Commandments in public buildings, the banning of creches and other Christian displays from public property at Christmas. They have tried to ban creationism from textbooks and even tried to restrict the freedom of assembly of Christians in public institutions of education. These forces of persecution have also tried to refuse support funds to Christian campus groups in high schools and colleges even though the students have paid their extracurricular fees just like the gays and lesbians, Marxists and others who are allowed to meet and are funded.

I just recently received mailings from different organizations defending Christianity in the courts. One really caught my attention. In Oregon they are trying to keep a Presbyterian church from holding weddings and funerals in their

church building. The governing council is trying to keep them from building a new church that seats 400 people. They also passed an ordinance that prohibited them from having more than 40 cars in their parking lot. It is happening here in our country.

Why is Christianity so objectionable in almost every part of the world? We know it does not preach overthrow of governments. It preaches cooperation. It does not preach persecution of other religious groups, instead it preaches peace. It does not tell lies, it only presents the truth. Its message is not one of anger and hate, it is of love. It has the best interests and welfare of mankind as a major concern. Although it speaks of dominion over nature, it is quite aware of our stewardship over the environment. We do not preach the exploitation of the poor and helpless in our society, instead we teach that we are responsible for their welfare. We do not exploit widows and orphans, we care for their needs. We do not want people to be lost in their sins, we want all of them to be saved. We do not condemn people to Hell. We want that all should have eternal life. Why is it then that we are persecuted?

One answer is that the unrighteous do not want to ascend to the level of the righteous. They want only to drag them down to their own level. They think we feel superior when we point out to them the benefits of being a Christian even though we are being loving and caring while we do so. Another reason people persecute us is that they have had some bad experiences with some persons who call themselves Christians, but live as pagans live. We thought the Nazis lived in a Christian nation and that they were Christians. They were not! The SS worshiped their Teutonic pagan gods. Woden was their supreme being. Still the Holocaust is said to have arisen out of a Christian culture. Many of the things that Christians are accused of doing were not perpetrated by real Christians. Those who did these things were not Christians for they had never really let Jesus be the Lord and Master of their lives. They were Christians in name only. Many Jews have animosity toward Christians because some of us blame them for executing Jesus. To be sure, it was the Jews who were responsible for His crucifixion. Jesus even told them their father was the devil. He said they had always killed their prophets just as they were going to kill Him.

Unrighteous people also don't like to face up to the truth that they are sinners. Even though we may not confront them, they can see their behavior is bringing them pain and causing us pain while ours is bringing us happiness. This bothers them. Their own conscience convicts them of their wrongdoing. People do not like to be told or realize their behavior is wrong. I have seen this so many times in my life when I was working with alcoholics and drug addicts. They are guilty of wrong behavior and they cannot stop. When we tell them they can stop, they either don't believe us, or they have no desire to stop. I recently talked to a man who had used marijuana and cocaine for 15 years. He had two epileptic seizures several weeks before he saw me. When I told him that the long term use of cocaine had probably caused his seizures, he got angry and said I did not know

what I was talking about. He certainly did not want to admit his wrongdoing or its after effects. In the past he had gone to prison for three years for selling marijuana. He emphatically said that he would use it now if it were not for the fact that he would have to go back to prison if he was caught with drugs.

Much persecution of Christians occurs because other religions tell their followers they should do so. In Islam Christians are considered infidels. If an Islamic kills an infidel they earn merit and extra pleasure in Paradise. It was for this reason that they murdered over a million Armenians and millions of others. It is for this same reason they are killing Christians in the Sudan and Iran today. Interestingly, the communists had the same strategy. Their belief system is a religion, and they think that if they can wipe out opposing religious groups they will have purity of belief and behavior in their country and their society will operate more efficiently. It is hard to believe that their religion sent over 20,000,000 people to their death in Russia alone. No one knows how many people have been killed in Cambodia, China, Ethiopia, Cuba and other communist countries, but they were in the millions. Persons who are enslaved by sin and/or their religion do not like to see freedom in others. Christians have been truly set free and are not enslaved by sin so they are persecuted.

In Islamic countries when a child converts to Christianity the family may put out a contract on him to have him killed. Jesus even prophetically told us that such would happen. *"Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved."*

As you can see, there are many irrational reasons why people persecute Christians, and because the church is made up of individual Christians it, too, will come under persecution. When I was teaching at the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston, Texas, I had a Hispanic patient admitted to my service who was very depressed. She was a member of a Baptist church down in the Rio Grande Valley. Her illness was precipitated by the persecution of her church. When they had services, the local hoodlums would throw rocks through the windows and would shout obscenities as the people went into church. Finally, on a Sunday morning they set fire to the church during the service. It was this event that had precipitated her depression. Such actions against the church are quite common. Over six churches the New Directions have built in Nepal have been burned down and several pastors murdered by "Maoists" (communists). Hindu militants have been active in India both in burning churches and in killing pastors and missionaries. The "Voice of the Martyrs" magazine provides evidence of the persecution in China, Iran, Pakistan and Indonesia. On their web site are graphic evidences of what is happening. It is no small thing, this persecution. It is widespread and intense. You may read about it on the Internet at www.persecution.com.

In theological circles we have for years had debate about the theological proposition that has to do with whether the tribulation is to come or is here already. The recent series of books that began with *Left Behind*, has told people that Christians will be raptured before the tribulation. This has reactivated the debate in the theological world. There is no debate in India, Sudan, Indonesia or China. For them, the tribulation is now. It is here, and they are suffering because of it.

Still there are those who say it cannot and will not happen here. To that I reply, "Oh yes it can." It has happened before, and it will happen again. When I reflect on the origins of the Protestant churches, especially the Anabaptist, Huguenot and Methodist churches, I realize that all of them were terribly persecuted. The Methodist church began in the midst of persecution. John Wesley and his followers were persecuted. On one occasion several men had plotted to kill him. They were going to waylay him on the highway. Knowing that they were waiting for him, he rode up behind them and asked them if they were looking for him. They were so flabbergasted that they could not carry out their plot. On other occasions he was stoned by persecutors. There were many instances of persecution for many years. The great Welsh revival began when a group of Christians were praying for revival. Outside their church there was a hostile mob who were throwing stones and taunting those inside. Suddenly a ball of fire appeared above the church and tongues of flame reached down, penetrating the roof and touching those inside. They were filled with the Holy Spirit. The mob fled in terror, and the revival spread over the entire Welsh countryside.

There are plenty of examples of the church growing in the midst of persecution. Even though our persecution these days is more subtle than overt, is it likely to grow worse? The answer is yes. We are now in the third generation of persons who are post modernists. God died in Europe in the 1800's and in our country in the 1900's. He really was laid to rest in the 1960's, and his moral influence went with Him. I know God is still alive for those of us who know him, but for most of the population he is dead. They have other gods. They do not chase after Baal, Jupiter, Aphrodite (Astarte), or any other false gods. They are being their own god or are chasing after Mammon (Money). We have become a materialist society. It is the idol of the bulk of the population. People today are found buying lottery tickets, betting at the race track, frequenting the gambling casinos, or filling Wal Mart and K-Mart or the malls on Saturdays and Sundays. Their Bibles are the ad sections of the newspapers, or the catalogues they receive in the mail. They are buying fancy cars, boats, sumptuous homes, buying designer clothes, and eating in the gourmet restaurants. They are building up enormous debt. The people of Israel did the same things, and God condemned them. God said, "*But these people have stubborn and rebellious hearts; they have turned aside and gone away. They do not say to themselves, 'Let us fear the LORD our God, who gives autumn and spring rains in season, who assures us of the regular weeks of harvest.'* Your wrongdoings have kept these away; your sins have deprived you of good. Among my people are wicked men who lie in wait like men who snare

birds and like those who set traps to catch men. Like cages full of birds, their houses are full of deceit; they have become rich and powerful and have grown fat and sleek. Their evil deeds have no limit; they do not plead the case of the fatherless to win it, they do not defend the rights of the poor (Jer. 5:23-28)." Those of us who live in the US are just like them. When I go into a restaurant and survey the scene, the people are for the most part fat and sleek. They do not fear the Lord our God. They do not obey His laws and ordinances, they do not plead the case of the fatherless to win it, and they do not defend the rights of the poor.

Sadly, we do not attribute this to Satan who, as I said in part one of this essay, is out to destroy Christianity. Therefore, we are not fighting the battle we should be fighting. We are not in spiritual warfare. The problem is that most of us do not know how to do spiritual warfare. In the remainder of this writing I want to tell you some basic things you should be doing if you are not already fighting the good fight. Here they are:

1. We all should be praying regularly. Our prayers should regularly include praise and thanksgiving. Remember that songs of praise are also prayers. Terry Law says they are ICBM's in Gods arsenal.
2. Prayer should include petitions for God's will to be done in our lives and our society.
3. Pray for God to put people in power who love him and will do his will.
4. Pray for your church, its leaders and the congregation's needs.
5. Pray for the leaders of those organizations and religions that are persecuting Christians and promoting immorality. Ask God to open their eyes to the truth.
 - A. The leaders of the ACLU
 - B. The leaders of Planned Parenthood
 - C. For Hugh Hefner and Larry Flynt and other purveyors of pornography
 - D. For the leaders of People for the American Way
 - E. That the leaders of the Mafia and drug cartels will be brought to justice.
6. In your prayers bind Satan and his minions, and ask God to thwart their evil plans.
7. Above all pray for revival in this country and in Western Europe.

8. Pray that God will raise up an army of evangelists who are absolutely fearless in the face of persecution.

9. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide and direct your prayers to God's ends.

10. Ask God to use you to further his Kingdom.

11. Finally, we should do as Paul asked the Corinthians to do, *"Aim for perfection, listen to my appeal, be of one mind and live in peace"* (2 Cor. 13:11).

If we do these things, I am convinced that our church and our country will prosper and survive.

Why have I emphasized prayer so? The reason is that everything happens with prayer and nothing without it. We do not pray. I have written before that the average churchgoer in the US prays one minute a day. The average pastor prays three minutes a day. This is true in spite of the fact that God said, *"If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land."* Our land desperately needs healing. We are murdering children, using drugs and alcohol hoping to find happiness, making and spending money frivolously with no regard for the poor both in our country and in the third world who have little housing or adequate food. Sexual promiscuousness and perversion is rife. Verbal, emotional, physical and sexual abuse is common. The latter is so common that one in four children will be sexually abused by the time they reach adulthood.

We need to pray, but we don't. We know that the only persons who can pray and get results are Christians, but we are silent. I have been to at least four prayer and healing camps. The concentration there is on healing. There is some prayer, but not enough. I have tried to get people in my church to pray, and they won't. I try to pray for two hours a day, but I cannot find others who do among my circle of Christian friends. On occasions when I feel the need, I spend a day in prayer. I realize that most of the people I know rarely, if ever, do the same thing. I have to admit that it is a hard thing to do, but it is possible. Even though our Lord could spend the night in prayer, we cannot even pray for one hour. Corporately, it is a rare church that has a prayer meeting, and in our small groups we do not pray other than for a few minutes at the end. In other churches, both denominational and non-denominational, the same is true. I only know of one church that has practiced prayer in the way it should be practiced. It is Teri Tekyl's (God's) Methodist Church in College Station, Texas.

To relate how efficacious corporate prayer can be, I relate the story of an experience I had at a national Contact Teleministry meeting in Hamilton, Ontario. Contact was a Christian telephone counseling ministry. I was on their national board. There was a movement among a few liberal theologians in our group to

jettison our requirement that all counselors be Christian. It became common knowledge that a resolution was going to be made at the business meeting to do just that. I was very disturbed by the idea that we would no longer have the distinctive purpose to counsel in the love of Christ. I felt moved of the Holy Spirit to call a prayer meeting during the lunch hour to ask the Lord what we should do. I thought that only a few people would show up, but instead over 3/4 of the delegates came. We spent two hours in prayer and went back to attend the business meeting. When it came time to introduce the resolution, its spokesman got up and said that the proponents had decided to withdraw the resolution. I am quite sure that God intervened to stop the movement in its tracks. Eventually, Contact did drop its requirement, and it has since lost its Christian zeal. Although it still exists it is not the movement it was.

Another example of the effect of prayer was illustrated in the movie Patton. When the German army attacked during a snow storm and was winning in the Ardennes, the tenacious defense of the 101st airborne division temporarily stopped them at Bastogne. Patton knew he had to rely on his superior air power to relieve them, so he called his army chaplain and told him to write a prayer that would ask God to change the weather. This was distributed to the troops to pray. They did, God did, and the Germans were driven back and were, thereafter, unable to mount another offensive.

In a lecture by Leslie Davidson, I learned that every great revival began with a major prayer effort. Because of the prayers of the people, God acted and fire spread across the land. All authors who have written about revival have noted that prayer is the stimulus for revival. We talk about wanting revival, but are we willing to pray for it? I don't think we do, because we are not praying like we should singly or corporately