

Theological Musings from Dave's Laptop

November 27, 2018

The first Sunday of November is the Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church, and before the month is out, I want to invite your attention to just three nations (among MANY) where persecution is both rampant and rising.

BURMA. The first of these nations is Burma (Myanmar), first evangelized by Baptist Adoniram Judson. You're probably aware that the Rohingya Muslims have recently been systematically murdered, raped, and driven from Myanmar into neighboring countries. You may not be aware that the same things are happening to the Christians, many of them Baptists.



While recent persecution dates to the 1960's when Buddhism was declared the state religion, in recent years, many of the ethnic minorities in Myanmar have been subjected to forced closures of churches and mosques and of forced conversion to Buddhism. Many have fled to neighboring Bangladesh, Thailand, Malaysia, and India.



Once a village is attacked—sometimes with fighter jets, helicopters, and artillery as well as by terroristic ground troops—and its people are forced out, the government then reaps all the revenue from natural resources such as banana plantations and jade mines. One pastor noted that “The same army units that slaughtered and raped the Rohingya are now in Kachin state doing the same thing to the Christians, and the persecution is picking up.”

Another lamented, **“I understand if the secular world has no interest in us, but where is the Body of Christ? We are the fruit and labor of American missionaries. So where are the Christians?”**

CHINA: As with the Rohingya's and the Burmese Christians, so the world watched and resisted Chinese oppression as a courageous man faced down a tank in Tiananmen Square, but few noticed in 2016 when Pastor Li Jiangong and his wife, Ding Cuimei blocked a bulldozer the government had sent to demolish their church. The demolition leader told the dozer driver to “Bury them alive for me,” and the bulldozer did.

For the past thirty years, religious repression in China had been lessening somewhat . . . until Xi Jinping took over and began to close some churches and tear down others. The government is removing crosses from steeples and replacing them with the Chinese flag. Crosses in sanctuaries are



replaced with pictures of President Xi. Congregations must sing patriotic songs in worship, and children are forbidden to attend church. As in Burma, the brutal repression of the Church is gaining momentum in China.

NIGERIA: In what was once a bastion of Christian culture, believers in Nigeria face increasing and deadly persecution both from Boko Haram and from the Fulani. Not far from Jos, 483 Christians were murdered in 2010, now entombed three rows deep under the inscription,



*They shouted in a loud voice,
“Almighty Lord, holy and true,
how long will it be until you judge
them on earth and punish them
for killing us?”*

*Each of them was given a white robe,
and they were told to rest a little while
longer, until the complete number of the
fellow servants and fellow Christians
had been killed as they had been
(Revelation 6:10-11).*

During the peak of ISIS atrocities, the world paid attention to those horrors; but Boko Haram and the Fulani were killing nearly as many Christians in Nigeria, and the world paid little notice. More than 1,300 were killed in the first six months of this year, in 314 villages.

Nigeria is currently listed as **the 14th worst country in the world in which to be a Christian**, and many experts think it should rank much higher (worse). The Nigerian government is led by a Fulani politician, and his sympathies appear to be encouraging the violence.

The Fulani are largely Muslim cattle herders, and the Christians are largely settled farmers. As the desert encroaches on grazing land from the north, the herders are moving south and taking land by force and terror. When one couple went back to their land to see how things were faring after such encroachment, the husband was killed in front of his wife and she was told to “Tell the others. We have taken over. Don’t come back.”

One pastor worries that **“If Nigeria falls into civil war, all of West Africa is gone.”**

In reflecting on these sad stories, Mark Galli, Editor of *Christianity Today*, offered these words:

The Scottish theologian T. F. Torrance put it this way in his commentary on Revelation: “The prayers of the saints and the fire of God move the whole course of the world. They are the most potent, most disturbing, most revolutionary, most terrifying powers that the world knows. . . . **All history moves at the impulse of prayer.** The real initiative is not held by the riders on the white, red, black, and pale horses, but by the saints under the altar, by the prayers of the saints and the fire of God.”

Eugene Peterson, in *Reversed Thunder*, knows this sounds crazy to most Christians. So some “desert the place of worship with the best of motives, in order to *do* something about the world’s condition.” Others “turn [worship] into a platform for launching good works, shooting rockets of righteousness behind enemy lines. Attention is subverted from what God is doing to what we are doing.” But according to Peterson, God’s repeated assurance is this: “**Nothing that we do has more effect in heaven or on earth.**”

Of course, we don’t have to pit social action against prayer, as if they are mutually exclusive ways of fighting injustice. They come together in a unique way in prayer vigils, one of the most moving and effective strategies of the pro-life movement, the civil rights movement, and other calls for justice.

What if Christians started gathering at Chinese, [Burmese, and Nigerian] consulates, state capitals, and the White House, vowing to stand and pray together? And beyond such dramatic gestures, **what if we prayed individually and in small groups, regularly and with fervent hope, for our brothers and sisters across the oceans—** might we see once more “the fire of God move the whole course of the world”?

WHAT IF?

