

Persecution?

I often hear unbelievers complain that Christians in America have a persecution complex. They say we imagine the world is out to get us, we imagine society hates us. But in America, no one is stopping us from going to church or preaching the gospel. Nobody is dying for the faith. Not like in China or Muslim countries, where Christians face outright punishment for worshipping Jesus.

So the world says, "You Christians do whatever you want in your own corner, but leave the rest of us alone." In America, they say, Christians and conservatives are using the persecution story to gain leverage in a polarized political debate. They say legalizing same sex marriage and abortion are not persecution. In fact, if we were allowed to force our personal beliefs on others by making laws against these things, that would be persecution of non-Christians.

Of course, the church responds that we want to stop same sex marriage because we care about families. We want to stop abortion because we love children. We are not trying to force our beliefs on anyone, we are simply trying to uphold God's word and love those who cannot protect themselves.

A close-to-home example is the ongoing debate about the Hampton public library. Can books that promote an LGBTQ+ agenda be prominently displayed in the children's section? Can Christians call on the library to remove them from display or ban them? And are the county supervisors persecuting the library over this book issue by cutting funding?

In our case, the library funding cuts are totally unrelated to the books. These cuts were forced by state budget changes. If anything, the library staff has a persecution complex of their own. But Christians should be concerned about what the children of our community are reading, in order to protect them from evil. And we should speak out, at least to make parents aware of such books so they can avoid them. Separation of church and state was originally designed to protect the church from the state, to prevent the state from telling the church what to do. But the church has always been free to criticize the state.

Not so close to home, what about Bishop Pohjola in Finland who was indicted (later acquitted) of hate speech for publishing a book on the biblical view of marriage? What about Robert Hoogland in Canada who went to jail for opposing his daughter's gender transition hormone therapy and refusing to call her by her preferred pronouns? These are examples of real persecution, and they are becoming more and more common.

To be reviled and slandered and accused of bad intent on account of Jesus is real persecution. Jesus includes them all together in Matthew 5:11, "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account."

But the more important question is, how should we respond? What does Jesus say? "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven." Rejoice that we are counted worthy to suffer scorn and slander for the name of Jesus, like the prophets of old.

So we should not make a fuss about being persecuted. That is the way of the world. The world cries out, "Help, help, I'm being repressed!" But we will not. Trying to publicly draw attention to our

mistreatment will only backfire. No, Jesus said in Matthew 5, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven."

To be sons of our heavenly Father is to imitate how the only begotten Son responded when he was mocked, spit upon, reviled, and crucified. It is to take up our cross and follow him in humble silence. To pray, "Thy will be done." And to pray, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

May God grant us such love and humility all our lives. For these last days of great distress will not grow easier. But we can rejoice, for we are sons of the Father in heaven, and he knows what we endure. His yoke is easy, and his burden is light.

Yours in Christ,

Pastor Wagner