

ONGOING CHRISTIAN PERSECUTION

Persecution by the world against Christians comes in many forms. But its central core is the rejection of God and the resulting attack on those who follow Christ and claim He is the supreme Lord and the only way to salvation. Persecution has been growing more prevalent in recent years. Recently we read in the news about the saga with the Essendon AFL club and their CEO Andrew Thorburn, who stood down after just one day as chief executive officer, simply because he is a member of a Christian church which rightly condemns homosexuality and abortion, which is apparently in “direct contradiction” to the values of the AFL club. The left were quick to join in with their support of Essendon. Put simply, because Thorburn is a Christian with Christian values, he could no longer serve the club. Thorburn has paid a price for being Christian. (I am disappointed though, that he did state his personal views were different than those confessed by his church).

Anyhow, Paul makes clear in Romans 1, that men will suppress the truth in unrighteousness. It is often the case that the more men suppress the truth, the more violent, antagonistic, and nasty they become. Hatred of God and God’s people become a common characteristic of such people. Persecution is on the increase, and we have to ask, “Why?” “*Why is there such hatred shown today toward those who simply wish to hear what God says about sexuality etc?*”

That’s the answer. It comes down to God and *His authoritative Word*. The truth that God’s Word is inerrant and completely authoritative must be denied and destroyed by those who suppress the truth. They must attack it in order to silence the external and internal evidence God has given mankind of Himself. The increased anger we see in atheists’ attacks demonstrates they are doing all they can to silence the voice of God. The angrier their attacks become, the more they are attempting to suppress the truth. Their anger actually becomes evidence of the truth of God and His Word.

Christians are fair game it seems. Attacks on biblical Christians are brazen and growing in number. They are vicious, slanderous, and full of lies and hatred. These attacks are classic and age-old. From our point of view, these attacks ironically scream the opposite of their intent: they clearly confirm the truth of God and His Word, which tells us what to expect from a rejecter of God.

One has to ponder how to respond to such attacks. It seems hopeless to debate these people due to their apparent lack of desire to find actual truth (Matthew 7:6; Titus 3:9-10). Aside from that lack of desire, their very view of truth is so skewed it cannot even allow them to find truth! When the post-modern mindset says there is no truth, it contradicts its very existence by saying it is true that there is no absolute truth. They state that it is an absolute truth that there is no absolute truth. Because of this lack of belief in truth, it thereby follows that there is no right or wrong, and nothing is absolute - they are left with only one possibility: they must simply allow truth to be whatever an individual wishes it to be. So by their own standard they must agree with us when we say their worldview is false! So when and if they claim to want to know the truth, we must understand what they mean by the word truth.

A good apologetic response would be to instruct Christians as to the nature of the attack and the cause of it in order to give a good defence of the faith. At the same time, the Holy Spirit may use our apologetic response to open the eyes of the antagonists to show them the unwise and incorrect basis of their accusations. But we must do it in love, so we should consider passages such as Matthew 5:44–45, Romans 12:17–18, and 2 Timothy 2:24–26 when responding to such attacks - in hopes that unbelievers will be “quickened” by the Holy Spirit and then be in a position to understand.

In Galatians 5, the Apostle Paul gives us a list of the characteristics of a person who is walking according to the flesh. Certainly, an atheist does evidence these characteristics, though he may not demonstrate all of them fully. The “flesh” Paul refers to is the nature and qualities that all men are born with in an unsaved and unregenerate state. This is what Adam and Eve passed on to each and every one of us.

First, Paul warns us that there is a war between the Spirit and the flesh and that there is no reconciliation possible between them: “*For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit desires what is contrary to the sinful nature. For these are opposed to each other*” (Galatians 5:17).

Before this though, he said, “*Walk in the Spirit, and you will not carry out what your sinful natures desire!*” (Galatians 5:16). However, this is not possible for an unsaved person and is only available to a reborn, saved person. Only a Christian can walk in the Spirit because only Christians have the Spirit (Romans 8:9).

An atheist, who denies God and exhibits his rebellion and suppression of the truth God has given, demonstrates those qualities and characteristics Paul lists as the fruit of the flesh: “*The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery; idolatry, witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambitions, strife, factions, 21 envy; drunken-ness, carousing and things like these*” (Galatians 5:19-21).

Take note of the several characteristics that would underlie any attack. Don’t we see this time and time again? Yes. The character of a God-curser - a man or woman who holds his fist up against God (the tell-tale sign of open and covert rebellion and the suppression of the truth) - is seen in the attacker’s behaviour.

We do not expect to see the fruit of the Spirit, the character of Christ, in atheists. In the same way we do not expect to see atheists affecting the culture regarding things that come from a Christian consensus (such as compassion, care, and love).

“*However, what the Spirit produces is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness and self-control. There is no law against such things*” (Galatians 5:22-23).

An atheist might argue that love, joy, peace, and even all the fruit of the Spirit could be found in non-Christians and Christians alike. But who could give a godly and true meaning of love besides the infinite, all-knowing Creator God? Love is found in God giving us His Son that we might have eternal life (1 John 4:9). Outside of Jesus Christ there is no godly love, joy, or peace.

So a word of caution! Be careful not to entangle yourself in debate with a person whose heart's desire is to deny and destroy God. It might be helpful to point out that his behaviour evidences and is exactly what we expect in the Christian worldview he so desires to destroy. However, our ultimate purpose in "debating" (speaking with) an atheist must be to share the gospel in love: "*For I am not ashamed of the Good News. For it is the power of God to save everyone who believes it*" (Romans 1:16).

The gospel is the message we have been sent to spread, and thus when we speak with unbelievers, it should be our goal to present the gospel and explain what Christ has done on the cross and in His resurrection.

It is important to remember that we must pity these fellow human beings who have not seen the light of Christ, for they cannot stop their behaviour or alter it. While unbelievers may not fully express their depravity, as a rule they fail to be civil and demonstrate the character of a God-fearer. They are in the state that we would still be in if it were not for God's grace (cf. Titus 3:1-7).

1 Peter 3:15 is given to us as a correct response to persecution - or even vehemently nasty and angry atheists (look at the context, verses 14-17). Gently, with wisdom and a godly testimony, we should prayerfully point that person to Jesus Christ: "*Rather, in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy! Always be ready to make a defence to every-one who asks you to give an account for the hope that you have but do this with gentleness and respect!*"