

Witnessing in Word and Deed in the Context of Religious Persecution

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Abstract

Witnessing in word and deed in the context of religious persecution is a challenge. The issue of “word and deed gospel” concerns not only the living of blameless lives; it also involves extending active love towards unbelievers. To show charity towards a harmless unbeliever is easier than to do the same towards a harmful one. In other words, we are asking, can we truly love a harmful unbeliever to the extent of demonstrating good deeds to him or her, or are we permitted simply to maintain a disposition of non-hatred towards that person? This question can be restated as the questions answered by this research: Is it possible to witness in love by word and deed under religious persecution? What are the theological foundations for “word and deed” evangelism in the context of persecution? What are the preconditions for effective witness under persecution? The argument for the necessity of both word and deed in evangelism is built on the Christological structures of the person and work of Christ and the specific teachings of Christ that our deeds are as critical as our words in the proclamation of the gospel, even in the current context of global religious terrorism. The purpose of this research is to deepen our understanding of the truth that witnessing in word and deed is the most comprehensive evangelistic approach, even in hostile environments. The goal of this perspective is to inspire zeal and courage for a deliberate pursuit of the mission of God until his kingdom is fully realized.

I. Introduction

Witnessing is an essential concept in the proclamation of the gospel. In the Old Testament Jewish culture, bearing witness or giving testimony was such a serious undertaking that only credible people were allowed to do so. Those who were to bear witness or testify about a matter were expected to possess a great deal of knowledge of the matter in question; otherwise, there could be severe consequences. False witnesses were liable to severe punishments. “The Sadducees held that only when the falsely accused had been executed, the false witnesses should be put to death; the Pharisees, that false witnesses were liable to be executed the moment the death sentence had been passed on the falsely accused.”¹ In the New Testament, *martyreō* means to “testify, address solemnly; insist, urge.” Christ said, *kai esesthe mou martyres* (“and you will be my witnesses”) (Acts 1:8). Matthew Henry argues that some have even translated this passage as “*And you shall be martyrs to me, or my martyrs, for they attested the truth of the gospel with their sufferings, even unto death.*”² Such a translation would follow the precedence of the KJV and GNV in Acts 22:20, which translates *martyros*, referring to Stephen, as “martyr.”

By calling on his disciples to be his witnesses, Jesus called upon their ability to testify, as they had been acquainted with his life, work, and bodily resurrection. This means Jesus’s call to his disciples to witness for him was a call to die: as subsequent events would show, those who persecuted them deemed their testimony to be false and so executed them as liars and perjurers (*martyrs*, Acts 22:20; Heb 11; 12:1; Rev 1:5; 2:13; 3:14; 11:3; 17:6; and *martyria*, Rev 1:9; 6:9; 20:4). Christians have been persecuted up to our time on the grounds that their testimony of the bodily resurrection of Christ is false. Jesus himself was persecuted and crucified on the assumption that his claims to divinity were false and blasphemous.

II. An Overview of Current Global Religious Persecution

Religious persecution is persecution by governments and other groups against adherents of one or more particular religions. Since its inception,

¹ Paul Levertoff, “Witness,” *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. James Orr (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939), <http://www.biblestudytools.com/encyclopedias/isbe/witness.html>.

² Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Salem Web Network, <http://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/matthew-henry-complete/>.

Christianity has been the most persecuted religion in the whole world.³ John Allen argues that “the world is witnessing the rise of an entire new generation of Christian martyrs. The carnage is occurring on such a vast scale that it represents not only the most dramatic Christian story of our time, but arguably the premier human rights challenge of this era as well.”⁴ However, Nelson Jones tries to water down the gory nature of the specific target of Christians as an endangered religious group, saying, “If Christians are persecuted in many parts of the world, so are Muslims, Hindus, atheists, Buddhists and Jews.”⁵ To him, “we are dealing with group rivalries, hatred of minorities, political struggles and only rarely a persecution based in the specifics of Christian theology.”⁶ This is too simplistic and falls short of explaining the nature of “rivalry” that he proposes. At least several contexts will not be compatible with such a conclusion. How is this true of Christian minorities in Iraq, Egypt, Somalia, Sudan, China, East Timor, Burma, Iran, Indonesia, Libya, Nigeria, and other places? In most cases, Muslim fundamentalists rise up against Christians with either the slightest excuse or with no provocation at all.

Persecution of the Christian church, especially by religious groups, mainly Islamic, has been increasing over time. In countries where Christians are minorities, the situation is exacerbated. Current global Information and Communication Technology (ICT) networks have facilitated connections between Boko Haram in Nigeria, Taliban in Afghanistan, Al Shabab in Somalia and Kenya, Al Qaeda in the Maghreb, ISIS in Syria and Iraq, and fundamentalist movements in Libya, Tunisia, Egypt, Niger, Mauritania, Mali, Sudan, Chad, and Cameroon that have spread from the Arab Spring. With these religious groups growing in strength in many regions of the world, Christians who are the primary targets have suffered irreparable losses. According to *The World Watch List 2015*, Christians in fifty countries suffer the greatest of all persecutions just for their faith in Jesus Christ.⁷

³ Prominent voices around the world have acknowledged this: Pope Benedict XVI in January 2011; Angela Merkel, German Chancellor, in November 2012; and David Cameron, British Prime Minister, on April 10, 2014. See also John L. Allen Jr., *The Global War on Christians* (Colorado Springs: Image, 2013); Rupert Shortt, *Christianophobia: A Faith under Attack* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012); and Kelly James Clark, “The Most Persecuted Religion in the World,” *The Huffington Post*, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/kelly-james-clark/christianity-most-persecuted-religion_b_2402644.html 01/04/2013.

⁴ Nelson Jones, citing John Allen’s *The Global War on Christians*, in “Belief, disbelief and beyond belief,” *New Statesman*, <http://www.newstatesman.com/lifestyle/2014/04/are-christians-really-world-s-most-persecuted-religious-group>.

⁵ Jones, “Belief, disbelief and beyond belief.”

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ “World Watch List,” *Open Doors USA*, <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/>.

Open Doors USA reports that each month at least 322 Christians are killed for their faith, 214 churches and Christians' properties are destroyed, and Christians suffer 722 incidents in the form of violence such as beatings, abductions, rapes, arrests, and forced marriages.⁸ This report shows that the growth of the extreme horror of organized religious persecution in many nations by governments and religious sects is a grand battle that the cosmic evil forces are waging against the church.

The struggle with the horror of religious persecution in our time, such as is exhibited by Boko Haram and ISIS, strikes the human emotions so deeply that it cannot be easily put aside.⁹ Modern technology avails us with the opportunity of seeing such horrors as these Islamic militants gruesomely chopping off the heads of their innocent victims. The question is whether family members of those directly affected or those of us who share in the suffering of the global Christian family will be willing to lovingly share the gospel of Christ with our persecutors.

This brings to mind the struggle that the prophet Jonah had in his time. In his own context, the Ninevites' actions were tantamount to terrorism against Israel, and they deserved condemnation under the wrath of God without being given the opportunity to hear the word of God for possible repentance from their evil ways. God demonstrated to him that his feelings and expectation of the destruction of his enemies was not appropriate.

Islamic violence in Nigeria has a history that spans three decades. It used to consist of the mobilization of mobs armed with machetes, cutlasses, and sticks who would attack and kill Christians and burn down churches. The recurrence of religious violence has reduced opportunities for evangelism in the extreme north. Today, Islamic violence against Christians in northern Nigeria has increased to a deadly level with the emergence of Boko Haram, which receives massive funding from unrevealed sources and such highly sophisticated weaponry that it has even overpowered the Nigerian armed forces. Abu Qaqa, one of the leaders of the sect, has emphasized time and again that Nigeria can only have peace if Islam becomes the state religion.¹⁰ Though Muslims too have suffered violence from the sect, Christians have been the main targets; many parents have had their daughters kidnapped, and some have even died from heart attacks as a result of the emotional

⁸ "Christian Persecution," *Open Doors USA*, <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/>.

⁹ J. Nelson Jennings, "Christian Mission and 'Glocal' Violence in 2006 A.D./1427 H," in *Missions in Contexts of Violence*, ed. Keith E. Eitel, Evangelical Missiological Society Series 15 (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2008), 20.

¹⁰ Abu Qaqa, *Punch*, July 11, 2012, 2.

trauma. In the city of Jos, it is extremely difficult for many Christians to have anything in common with Muslims again. The situation in the politically, economically, ethnically, and religiously complex Plateau region of Nigeria has always been explosive, and Muslims have exploited the religious angle to achieve domination of the northern region.¹¹ The problem has not always been purely religious; rather, the complex ethnic and political situation in Nigeria has made achieving peaceful co-existence between Christians and Muslims an arduous task. Many believe that “beyond poverty and social injustice, the group has a parochial interest which they spiced with religion because they knew how sensitive the religious issue in Nigeria is and moreover they knew that it is the only way to get cheap solidarity among average Northern Moslems who cherish his [*sic*] religion.”¹²

III. *Some Christian Reactions*

If the gospel is to be preached by word alone, some may venture to oblige, perhaps in the manner of Jonah, but when it also involves employing one’s personal resources for the benefit of Muslims, it becomes a struggle; it will take the special grace of God for many Christians to view contributing their physical resources as part of the preaching task.

For instance, in my university in Lagos, we have a Christian fellowship with weekly prayer meetings. The majority of the fellowship members come from Pentecostal backgrounds, and they believe that it is right to call for “Holy Ghost fire” to consume their enemies, mainly Boko Haram. Some of these prayers for “Holy Ghost fire” have even been directed against some of their colleagues, whom they deemed to be their enemies in the university. The result they expect from this “Holy Ghost fire” is the literal death of their enemies.

In a number of places, the issue of witnessing to Muslims has been overshadowed by anger and the desire to retaliate. In the states of Kaduna, Plateau, Adamawa, Kano, and the city of Onitsha, some Christians have indeed retaliated by killing Muslims.¹³ This view is also prevalent in the

¹¹ Jennings, “Christian Mission and ‘Glocal’ Violence in 2006 A.D./1427H.” 25. See also Sunday Bobai Agang, *The Impact of Ethnic, Political, and Religious Violence on Northern Nigeria, and a Theological Reflection on Its Healing* (Carlisle, PA: Langham Monographs, 2011), 37–58.

¹² Babatunde O. Oyekanmi and Christian C. Ubani, “Chronological Analysis of Boko Haram Insurgency in Nigeria—July 2009 to July 2012: Implication for National Security and Development,” *Nationalities, Identities and Terrorism*, ed. V. Adefemi Isumonah, Musibau Olabamiji Oyebode, and Adeola Adams (Ibadan: John Archers, 2013), 224.

¹³ Ibrahim Garba (*Christian Science Monitor*, [June 17, 2012]) reports retaliation in Kaduna; <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Africa/2012/0617/Christians-retaliate-after-three-more-churches-bombed-in-Nigeria>. Cristina Silva [April 8, 2015] also culled reports from the *International*

Central African Republic, where Christians have turned into a hostile militia.

Statements from Islamic fundamentalists are highly provocative, and the temptation to retaliate to their unprovoked destruction of lives and property cannot be overstated. Some prominent Christian leaders in Nigeria have indeed been provoked to respond.

Peter Akinola, an Anglican Archbishop, has been quoted as saying, “May we at this stage remind our Muslim brothers that they do not have the monopoly of violence in this nation.”¹⁴ He has also been accused of refusing “to condemn the retaliatory killings of 700 Muslims following the deaths of 75 Christians in sectarian violence” in 2004.¹⁵ Similarly, Pastor Ayo Oritsejafor, President of the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN), said,

I will be surprised if the Supreme Council for Sharia in Nigeria thinks the best way to find a solution to a problem and to bring peace to Nigeria is to declare war. Violence is not the preserve of one person; anybody can be violent, and we don't advocate that. I will never come out to say we are prepared for war, but you are hearing it now. Let me settle down, you will hear our response and they will also get our response. We love Nigeria.¹⁶

Such statements by prominent Christian leaders in Nigeria imply that they see Islamic religious violence not as persecution in the sense that requires Christian endurance but rather as deliberate lawless criminality that must be met with stiff resistance or even retaliation. If persecution in our time is to be understood this way and reacted to in ways different from those of the past saints, this will amount to a compromise of the unique Christian life. Muslims are now quick to label Christianity also as a violent religion.

I have confronted some of the organizers of our prayer meetings, telling them that praying for the death of our enemies was contrary to the Spirit of Christ, who urged us to forgive and pray for our enemies. The question is whether Christians who have fallen into the temptation of hostility can approach Muslims or their enemies with the gospel of Jesus in true love. How can Christians honor Christ in their actions or reactions towards religious persecution against them?

This is the defining point for the distinctiveness that we have been called to and set apart for so that our exemplar, Christ, may not be lost from our

Business Times (<http://www.ibtimes.com/boko-haram-violence-christians-take-revenge-against-muslims-nigeria-1874995>) of the attacks of Christians upon Muslims in Adamawa state for inviting Boko Haram to come and destroy them.

¹⁴ “Peter Akinola,” *Internet Encyclopedia Britannica*, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1373391/Peter-Akinola>.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ “No One Has Monopoly of Violence, Oritsejafor Tells Shariah,” *Nairaland Forum*, <http://www.nairaland.com/722081/no-one-monopoly-violence-oritsejafor>.

spiritual direction. In the thick of persecution, we must rightly perceive the importance of that persecution from the biblical point of view before we can appropriately respond to it. Therefore, nothing is so offensive that it should make us relinquish our call to a holistic gospel that meets the spiritual and physical needs of people. The Christian life is a definite life system that is extraordinary in its response to the natural environment and to hostility.

IV. *The Christological Paradigm for Witnessing in Word and Deed*

There has been a tendency in liberal scholarship to take the functional aspect of Christology and ignore the ontological aspect for the purpose of denying the deity of Christ. A lopsided Christology is fallacious. Total Christology or Christology proper insists that the person of Christ is as important as his work. This total Christology, a proper understanding of who Christ was and what he did, is necessary for an accurate grasp of what the whole gospel is about. God the Redeemer was made manifest in human nature. If only as God could he save man because of the infinite distance between divinity and humanity and the requirement of sacrifice, as our Redeemer he came with our humanity, which was necessary for the full redemption of mankind.¹⁷ The being of God and his actions were inseparable in this redemptive act. All great works on Christology have maintained this balance. Christ did not just proclaim to the people that he was the Messiah or the Son of God and stop at that; his divine works evidenced him.

Though God attested Jesus's identity at his baptism and transfiguration with words, Peter points to the function of deeds in the proclamation of the divine work of God among us in very strong terms when he says that the divinity of Jesus was attested by his mighty deeds (Acts 2:22). Apart from preaching and teaching, Jesus, clothed with power by the Holy Spirit, "went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him" (Acts 10:38 ESV). Christ demonstrated in actions what and who he was and why he came so that even if his words were not enough to convince the people, his works might: "If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me; but if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father" (John 10:37–38 ESV). Christ's point is that words and deeds are mutually complementary in demonstrating the

¹⁷ John Calvin adduces several reasons for both the divinity of Christ and his humanity in his redemptive work. See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 2.12.1–3; 464–67.

presence of God's kingdom for human good. The power of Jesus's teaching was unequalled (Matt 7:29), but his deeds spoke much more, as multitudes came to him with various physical needs (Matt 9:26, 31; Mark 1:28; Luke 4:37). His words were not without works, nor his works without words; Christian witness must be in word and deed as well. It is with this understanding that Christ taught, "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matt 5:16 ESV). This statement, which commands our active obedience, presumes that believers are already proclaiming the new kingdom verbally and adds that their actions must match their words. It means that when we claim to be Christians, our actions can glorify God or insult God, provoke faith in others or shut their minds to God.

The contemporary church needs to listen to the instructions that Jesus gave. Her witness is to be word and deed at the same time. "And proclaim as you go, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. You received without paying; give without pay" (Matt 10:7–8 ESV). The early church understood this clearly, and as believers complied with it, the result was remarkable and has become a reference point: "And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need" (Acts 4:33–35 ESV). This may sound too altruistic for some in our time, yet it can give the contemporary church a helpful paradigm for creatively articulating a workable spiritual and social transformative platform in a way that is consistent with the realities of our time.

The proclamation of the gospel in word and deed is truly the whole gospel to the whole person. This approach intrinsically involves the idea of self-denial. Though word and deed are two distinct modes of sharing the gospel, they are not mutually exclusive. Word ministry may be lighter in some cases, as it only involves verbal declaration of the message or truth: those who tell others what to do may not themselves share in the burden of doing it, and they may even fail to live what they preach. Deed ministry involves personal demonstration in faith and life as well as the commitment of resources. To combine word and deed requires that one give much in self-denial, so that when the love and care of Christ are preached, those qualities are expressed in practical ways. Such a person also denies himself or herself the pleasures of the world system that is contrary to God's kingdom lifestyle.

If the reign of God is to ensure justice for the oppressed, give peace to the nations, end poverty, satisfy human souls, and rectify moral values in accordance with his character, then we must not use our imagination to carve out attitudes that suit our own convenience and interests.¹⁸ Since we are not our own in our ministry but are called to witness to Christ in the world, we should “forget ourselves and our own interests as far as possible.”¹⁹ Without self-denial it is impossible to connect word and deed in our gospel proclamation. It is this self-denial that can make a Christian willing to forgive his persecutor and even offer help when there is need. We must give all that God has equipped us with to meet the needs of others.

Calvin knew that the gospel can be relevant to those in need if the church moves to meet those needs. He lamented specifically how the poor in his time received only insignificant alms and how the church mocked the recipients of its diaconal action.²⁰ He was thinking that the power of the cross to bring complete redemption includes not only palliatives but specific programs and investments that transform lives. It was as a result of this understanding that Calvinism combined word and deed at its most sophisticated level in the work ethic that produced the socio-economic system of which capitalism is the major fruit.²¹ Herman Bavinck emphasizes “works of mercy,” strongly recommending the following among other points: “that love and mercy be recognized and practiced as the most outstanding Christians virtues”; “that the ministry of mercy be given much larger place on the agenda of all ecclesiastical assemblies than has been the case up and until now”; “that for general needs it be undertaken communally and expanded by asking the local church to assist other churches and further by assisting poor and oppressed fellow believers abroad.”²² This tallies with Calvin’s thinking. Contemporary Reformed assemblies in nations that are more economically advanced should reorganize their global outreach. Bavinck indicts the Reformed church in his time for performing below expectation on works of mercy, giving the passing grade to the Roman Catholics.²³

¹⁸ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 309.

¹⁹ John Calvin, *Golden Booklet of the True Christian Life*, trans. Henry J. Van Andel (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 21.

²⁰ Calvin, *Institutes* 4.5.15.

²¹ Herman Bavinck, *Essays on Religion, Science and Society*, ed. John Bolt, trans. Harry Boonstra and Gerrit Sheeres (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 119. See also Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Routledge, 2001); “John Calvin,” *New World Encyclopedia*, http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/p/index.php?title=John_Calvin&oldid=968165.

²² Bavinck, *Essays on Religion, Science and Society*, 428–29.

²³ *Ibid.*

Abraham Kuyper reminds us that the sovereignty of Christ covers all aspects of life.²⁴ Presenting Calvinism as a life-transforming system, he says that it seeks the complete transformation of society by first looking to God and then to the neighbor.²⁵ Therefore, rather than becoming intimidated, the church needs to evaluate her witness in word and deed in compliance with the prevailing global challenges of our time. This indeed is love, biblical love, which is “not naive, guilt-provoked sentiment. Biblical love is not a feeling. Biblical love is the compulsion to do things God’s way, living in obedience to His unchanging, unerring purposes.”²⁶ This is the uniqueness of Christianity, namely, that the religion we profess “demands not a mere profession of the truth, but principally the practice of piety and love (Rom 2:28–29).”²⁷ George Grant asserts this point in very strong terms: “Welfare is not essentially or primarily the government’s job. Welfare is our job. It is the job of Christians.”²⁸ If this is true, then the church needs to do more in the prevailing global circumstances of economic hardship and in places of natural disasters.

V. How Then Should We Respond in the Context of Persecution?

When we consider how we should respond in the context of persecution, we need to ask whether or not persecution of Christians is done by those who are drunk with the desire to unleash violence on the innocent. In some cases, persecution against Christians may be due to our unjust or hurtful attitude towards others, and this may have caused them to develop hatred and indignation against us. In such situations, we need to correct our actions, since they constitute the witness to what we represent. Sometimes, however, it may be simply the raging of Satan against the growth of the church. In this case too, we need to employ all our spiritual resources to stand firm in truth, love, righteousness, faith and the faithful declaration of the word of God, through which we can effect the change that Christ has called us to accomplish in our fallen world. J. D. Payne has made some important observations, arguing that persecution fits properly into the plan of God, as the Lukan tradition portrays it. As a continuation of the redemptive history of the rejection and persecution of the Old Testament messengers of God into

²⁴ Abraham Kuyper, “Sphere Sovereignty,” in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 488.

²⁵ Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931), 28.

²⁶ George Grant, “Authentic Christianity: Word and Deed,” *Jubilee* (Summer 2014): 14.

²⁷ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison, trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1994), 2:704 (17.3.3).

²⁸ Grant, “Authentic Christianity,” 15.

the age of the church, it is essentially a consequence of following Jesus.²⁹ If Christ is the compass of our spiritual voyage, then his life and teachings clearly tell us that we should not expect persecution to be absent from our lives. When he rebuked the disciples who did not understand the necessity of persecution in the scheme of God, he queried, “Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” (Luke 24:26 ESV). Before his crucifixion, he reiterated what he had earlier told them: “Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours” (John 15:20 ESV). Paul and Barnabas, who understood the necessity of Christian suffering, encouraged believers saying, “Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22 ESV). The force of the argument is compelling, as tribulation apparently has become a gateway to heaven when God deems it fit for believers. Paul reminded Timothy that “everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim 3:12 NIV). This will happen because “evildoers and impostors will go from bad to worse” (2 Tim 3:13 NIV).

Paul Tripp has argued that our suffering belongs not only to God; rather, it is “an instrument of his purpose in us and for others” that demands that we “put Christ on the center stage” as we bring “the full range of our suffering to him.”³⁰ This means that as we try to decide whether we should give our love to those who hate us or make life difficult for us, we must remember that “God is the key Actor” in what we face on a daily basis; then we will resist the prideful impulse to develop resentment towards others.³¹ Calvin argues that our love in deeds for others should be based not on whether they deserve it but on our life principle, which is to be consistent with the kingdom principle: “Now if he has not only deserved no good at your hand, but has also provoked you by unjust acts and curses, not even this is just reason why you should cease to embrace him in love and to perform duties of love on his behalf (Matt 6:14; 18:35; Luke 17:3).”³²

In the ministry of the gospel, it is not difficult to reach out to those who do things well or act nicely towards us. The challenge of loving actions is

²⁹ J. D. Payne, “Missions in the Context of Violence: A New Testament Response,” *Missions in Contexts of Violence*, 66–67. He appeals to Scott Cunningham, *Through Many Tribulations: The Theology of Persecution in Luke-Acts*, JSNTSup 142 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997), 337.

³⁰ Paul David Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer’s Hands* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 153–54.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 156.

³² Calvin, cited in Denis R. Janz, ed., *A Reformation Reader* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 258. Elsewhere Calvin extensively discusses the unconditional service that Christians are to render in society (Calvin, *Golden Booklet*, 33–34).

how to face someone who viciously hurts us. In this respect, one encounters those who are “undeserving” of benevolence, “the stranger,” the “despicable,” and the “worthless.”³³ Calvin strongly supports engaging such people with deed evangelism. “If he has deserved no kindness, but just the opposite, because he has maddened you with his injuries and insults, even this is no reason why you should not surround him with your affection, and show him all sorts of favors.”³⁴ In Calvin’s thought, hostility should not quench the fire of our love in this context. The gospel in deed has no boundaries. To be able to rise above those limits is “the only way to attain that which is not only difficult, but utterly repugnant to man’s nature: to love those who hate us, to requite injuries with kindness, and to return blessings for curses.”³⁵ The requirement to overcome this and assert the influence of the gospel is to consider the image of God in such people. The goal of the gospel is the renewal of the image of God that was smeared by sin. Though the natural impulse is to resent the wicked, Calvin avers that though God himself sometimes punishes the wicked, we are not required to emulate him and judge them; that is his prerogative. We are rather to “imitate his fatherly goodness and liberality,” and Christ “proves from the effect, that none are the children of God, but those who resemble him in gentleness and kindness.”³⁶

Though some believe that deed witnessing is not a critical aspect of the gospel, Christopher Wright raises an important question that makes it inescapable: “How does the power of the cross impinge on each of the evils that are at work here?”³⁷ This draws heavily on the centrality of the cross in the task of mission and evangelism. “The kingdom does not only address the spiritual and moral needs of a person, but his material, physical, social, cultural and political needs as well.”³⁸ Many evangelical scholars uphold the “relationship between evangelism and social action as inseparable.”³⁹ Grant has even argued that authentic Christianity is defined by the combination of word and deed as anchored upon the model of Christ and the apostolic practice.⁴⁰

While this may seem too ideal because of our natural human inclination to react negatively towards those who hurt us, it is real because Christ, the

³³ Calvin, *Golden Booklet*, 33–34.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 34.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to Matthew* (Albany: Ages Digital Library, 1998), 259.

³⁷ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 318.

³⁸ John Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 211. For emphasis, see also Wright, *The Mission of God*, 318.

³⁹ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 316.

⁴⁰ Grant, “Authentic Christianity,” 11–15.

apostles, and many believers afterwards were able to do it by the grace of him who causes his people to be able to do all things. Paul and Peter argue that the divine power has granted us the virtues that are required for our advancement in godliness, which can only grow through practice. It is this that can make the church today effective in a holistic approach to witnessing. Paul says, “Let our people learn to devote themselves to good works, so as to help cases of urgent need, and not be unfruitful” (Titus 3:14 ESV). Peter says, “If these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Pet 1:8 ESV).

The question of reconciling our unique Christian life of love and the brutality of religious persecution by showing “humanitarian compassion” even to those who persecute us is a critical one. We need to realize that despite the suffering (mainly from those who follow Islam), “Jesus Christ has defined our agenda, and because we love him we are constrained to embrace as well the mandate he has given the Church to evangelize the Muslim world.”⁴¹ Jennings believes strongly that evangelizing the Muslim world is our distinctive way of dealing with violence and suffering.⁴² As we agonize over our victimization, we should be careful not to become persecutors ourselves by wishing for the destruction of our enemies in our hearts. Persecution is part of the process of spiritual advancement to eternal glory: again, Paul says that all godly people “will be persecuted” (2 Tim 3:12). Our life system is shared only by those who know the new spiritual birth, and it is offensive to those who have no experience of it. But our gospel has the power of renewal, when “Christianity comes in contact with evil and persecution, it goes beyond non-resistance to active benevolence. It does not destroy its enemies by violence but instead converts them by love.”⁴³ All this is embedded in our actions, through which God draws people to himself in Christ Jesus.

In the context of violence against the gospel and the struggle over how best to respond, we need to consider the larger picture of the sovereignty of God, who is “aware, concerned, and involved,” and our consequent victory over suffering and death, which is in his hand.⁴⁴ If the contemporary church understands that persecution against Christians is a part of our “spirituality and mission” in accordance with the eternal *missio Dei*, then our response

⁴¹ Jennings, “Christian Mission and ‘Glocal’ Violence in 2006 A.D./1427H.,” 21.

⁴² Jennings (ibid., 22) follows the position of the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 1978, on Muslim Evangelization.

⁴³ Omar Miranda, “Jonah Meets ISIS,” *The Compass Magazine* (November 21, 2014), <https://www.thecompassmagazine.com/blog/jonah-meets-isis>.

⁴⁴ Jennings, “Christian Mission and ‘Glocal’ Violence in 2006 A.D./1427H.,” 22.

will be more constructive and productive in our efforts to reach even the restricted parts of the world.⁴⁵

How then do we respond appropriately to our enemies? Christ began his ministry with basic teachings about the radical uniqueness of the kingdom rules and the Christian life. It is a life system that is strange in the context of a sinful world. Sunday Bobai Agang is right to argue that “the Sermon on the Mount calls Christians into a path which responds to evil through a departure from the use of violence.”⁴⁶ But it is more than just a departure from violence and violent reaction against those who persecute us. It entails positive actions that can effect change in the enemy. Hence, Christ says, “Let your light shine” (Matt 5:16 ESV). More profoundly, he says, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt 5:44), and furthermore, “If you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?” (Matt 5:47 NIV). While the gospel in all its glory and goodness is to be ministered primarily to the victims of persecution, there should also be a strategic plan to reach persecutors who also need to change their lives and ways. Through this, we can turn many to righteousness as well as create a better world.

VI. *Practical and Effective Approach*

In order for our witness to have an effective impact, we must understand contemporary factors that lead to religious terrorism and persecution against Christians and be better informed as to the approach that will yield a positive impact. In Nigeria, apart from the political dimension of access to power and economic resources, factors such as poverty, marginalization, exclusion, deprivation, social insecurity, and unjust distribution of resources have been instrumental in persuading young people to join Islamic fundamentalism.⁴⁷ Failed governments have created grounds for the development of various crimes, including dangerous religious reactions. Jabbour argues that for witnessing among Muslims to be effective (especially in the Middle East), the personal, socioeconomic, and political conditions that make young people turn to fundamentalism and terrorism need to be understood.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Charles L. Tieszen, “Mission in Contexts of Violence: Forging Theologies of Persecution and Martyrdom,” *Missions in Contexts of Violence*, 76, 78.

⁴⁶ Agang, *The Impact of Ethnic, Political, and Religious Violence on Northern Nigeria*, 234.

⁴⁷ Eghosa E. Osaghae, “Coming to Grips with Terrorism in Nigeria,” *Nationalities, Identities and Terrorism*, 5, 10.

⁴⁸ Nabeel T. Jabbour, “Islamic Fundamentalism: An Arab Evangelical Offers a Surprising Perspective,” *The Plain Truth Online* [July-August 1999], <http://www.ptm.org/99PT/JulAug/Islam.htm>.

The task of the gospel is extensive and intensive. It is co-extensive with the scope of Christ's rule over "the whole world as a testimony to all nations," "to the whole creation," and "to the end of the earth" (Matt 24:14; cf. Matt 28:18–19; Mark 16:15; Acts 1:8 ESV). The gospel has the power to penetrate hardened souls (Heb 4:12), but it must be presented in less sophisticated environments to those who are struggling to find meaning where socio-economic and political conditions are unjust. It has to address the conditions that lead to fragility in social relations so that people can learn not only to endure and tolerate but also to seek peaceful ways of solving conflicts.

In such situations, there is hostility to everything, not just the gospel, but these situations provide an opportunity for Christian witness in word and deed. All of human life, both the physical and the spiritual, lacks wholeness. In many third world nations, the failure of government accounts for the breakdown of law and order. The gospel of Jesus Christ is a comprehensive, life-transforming system that does not leave out any aspect of life. Since Calvinism follows this, as ably argued by Kuyper, armed with our scriptural and theological knowledge, we should begin to chart new ways that can break through all kinds of barriers. In situations in which neither physical, social, nor spiritual needs have been met, Christian witness can include cross-centered social action that points believers and unbelievers to what Christ's life and work did for them.

VII. Conclusion

What preconditions must be met before we can witness in love to our persecutors? Considering the unpredictable consequences of witnessing in hostile contexts, and given that the natural man sees the things of God as foolishness and opposes them (1 Cor 2:14; Rom 7–8), it is necessary in every age for believers to be regenerated and equipped with divine power to face the challenges. Jesus knew the enormity of the mission to which he called his disciples. There will be sufferings of all kinds, including persecution, torture, and death. Jesus instructed them to "stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:49 ESV), and again, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you" (Acts 1:8 ESV). The fear factor was the background of the promise of power to become witnesses. Prior to being equipped with this power, the disciples fled at the arrest of Jesus, and Peter lost his integrity when he denied Christ because of the danger. Henry explains what this promise of power involves for believers: "You shall be animated and actuated by a better spirit than your own; you shall have power to preach the gospel, and to prove it out of the

scriptures of the Old Testament ... and to confirm it both by miracles and by sufferings.”⁴⁹ Elsewhere, Jesus encouraged the disciples not to give in to fear or to have hearts troubled about their lives and the ministry they would be entrusted with because they would not be left on their own (John 14:27). They would be empowered.

When Paul says, “God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control” (2 Tim 1:7 ESV), he makes clear the contrast between the timidity that is characteristic of the natural man and the courage of the regenerate, by which one is able to face the opponents of the cross. Even Jesus needed such power from God for the great task that he came to do before he embarked on it. He acknowledged the receipt of the anointing of the Holy Spirit that would empower him to proclaim good news to the poor and deliver the sick and demon possessed (Luke 4:18–19). The extraordinary boldness and clarity that Peter and John demonstrated when they were filled with the Holy Spirit puzzled the authorities and mitigated their original intention to deal brutally with them (Acts 4:13–21). Their testimony is our source of encouragement: “With great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all” (Acts 4:33 ESV). Proclamation of the gospel in word and deed is challenging because there are several layers of difficulty to deal with, including socio-economic, political, physical and even health issues. Behind these is Satan, the greatest antithesis of the good news of Jesus. The church depends entirely on the grace and power of God to fulfill her calling.

The current global turmoil is an expression of the vacuum in human souls. It portends great danger for humanity. Only the church can provide the answer, but she can only do so if she is willing to chart a program of holistic gospel as the agenda for the global church. The Reformed church should as a matter of urgency go back to the basics of Christ and the apostles and endeavor to recover the heart of Calvin for the transformation of human society. This should be done through building genuine relationships across cultures and especially with those who currently persecute the church.

⁴⁹ Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*.