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Source: *Direction* 22 (Spring 1993): 73-80

Publisher: Direction

Stable URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/11418/660>

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# MISSION AND SUFFERING: A Camouflaged Truth

*Hugo Zorrilla*

*How can one  
be a disciple of  
Christ in a  
hostile world  
without suffer-  
ing or having  
conflicts?*

One of the things that most impressed me when I was young and began to walk in the way of faith in Christ, was the spiritual capacity of missionaries to face persecution and to confront suffering, especially among those whom they served, those who suffered the oppression of unjust regimes. This capacity, however, has been disintegrating. Several years ago, when missionary development in MesoAmerica was at its peak (after 1965), I asked an American missionary if he had ever suffered in the name of Christ. He replied, "I have never had to suffer. Mama Mission has always gotten me out of any tight situation that might occur." His reply was direct and honest. It showed to me the enormous abyss between two worlds: that of the "protected" missionary and that of ordinary believers on the mission field.

## *The Mission: Imperative Suffering*

The missionary task has never been easy, yet it remains an imperative. Though many servants of God have faced conflict and even given their lives, when conflicts emerge from the missionary task itself, we try to evade and escape the demands of the gospel regarding suffering for the cause of Christ. Is suffering in missions an option? Should we continue promoting a professional missionary task which sidesteps the sad realities of the men and women we seek to serve?

*Direction  
Spring, 1993  
Vol. 22, No. 1*

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Three years ago I was in Guatemala teaching a course on the Gospel of John in which I discussed with the class the demands of being a disciple of Christ. Jesus says we should love one another and that the greatest love is that one lay down his life for his friends (John 15:13). The discussion continued around the questions, "What does it mean to lay down one's life for a friend?," "What relationship is there between laying down one's life and following Christ?," and "Can the Gospel of John be understood if one has not suffered?"

After the class that night, one of the students came to me and, to my surprise, told me what it meant to him to suffer for the cause of a brother. He and another pastor had taken the gospel from a Guatemalan mountain town to various remote villages. In their missionary visits they found a group of ten children hiding in the mountains. These children were war orphans — victims of the conflict between the Army and the guerrillas. They were starving, half-dressed, and filthy. Panic and terror filled their faces. The pastors brought the children back to their home in one of the remote villages and there cleaned, fed, dressed, and cared for them.

When the material means required to care for these children began to run short, the pastors decided to go to the larger town for social assistance from town officials. The other pastor, along with the ten children, went to seek this assistance. After three days the group had not returned. A friend went to look for them. To his sorrow, he found his fellow pastor's tortured body tossed outside the town. He was dead. No one knew what happened to the children; they had disappeared.

The student finished his story, "Now I know what it means to give one's life for a friend. My friend gave his life for me. It was common practice for local authorities to pry out of people details that might be incriminating to themselves and others connected with them. My friend died for his refusal to reveal my name in connection with the children. To this day the police still have not come looking for me. My friend suffered for the cause of Christ and for me, his friend."

Jesus never hid from his disciples the risks they would face in a hostile world. He warned them of the trials and persecution they would encounter because of the justice of God. The demands of following him include a willingness to lose one's life in order to find it, a readiness to endure a suffering discipleship, and a response of sacrificial obedience. God has not left us alone. The church received power and training from the Spirit of Christ to complete the task of proclaiming the gospel.

### **Facing a Hostile World**

First Peter is a letter with a message for today. It has a vital message for a world in which Christians are losing sensitivity toward those who

suffer for the justice of God, a society in which being a Christian means little and bothers few, and a church which has deprived the gospel of its radical prophetic message because of a fear of suffering. The situation in 1 Peter is that of Christians who were suffering in their own bodies the insults, abuses, violence, and mockery of their own families and local authorities in Asia Minor.

Not much has changed down through the years in the life of the church. The hostile world in Peter's day had marginalized Christians through violence. They responded in one of three ways — the same three ways we witness in the church's response to suffering today. Some become more anchored in their convictions because they find that this is the way of the prophets and of the apostles. They see their Christian life requiring faithfulness, even to death if that be necessary. Other Christians, fearing risk and the loss of privileges, prefer to live a reserved faith. They accommodate an unjust and homicidal society, not exposing what is really going on for fear of reprimands. And there are those Christians who feel faint and who weaken during testings. These follow the Lord only on a very personal level. They forget the demands of following Christ and the cost of discipleship. They keep it all very personal.

In the presence of unfaithfulness and discouragement, Peter helped Christians maintain their faith. Peter presents himself and Silas as brothers who jointly suffer with others who are suffering. They encourage Christians in the true grace of God (1 Pet. 5:12). In solidarity with all who suffer for the sake of the gospel, Peter and Silas maintain their Christian commitment and so present a radical and powerful message to their oppressors.

Peter presents himself as an example of what it is to be a co-participant in the sufferings of Christ (1 Pet. 5:1-4). Christ himself is the pastor: the model bishop and the head of all authorities and powers (1 Pet. 2:25; 5:4; 3:22). Without authoritarianism, but depending on the power of the Lord, the apostle shows his interest in the destiny of the brethren, and with love encourages them to be faithful. But this does not come about in some abstract way. The solidarity of the testimony and the radicality of the message is in direct proportion to the commitment of the community of believers.

### **Signs of Good and Obedient Practices**

Evidently, if missionaries and their converts follow the teachings of 1 Peter, their lives are not going to get better. The situation will take a turn for the worse if in their discipleship they practice radical love, including love for their enemies. The question arises, "How can one be a disciple of Christ in a hostile world without suffering or having conflicts?"

Were Peter to answer this question he certainly would not suggest that believers isolate themselves. Nowhere does Peter tell them to flee conflict. There will always be conflict in the world. Believers should live in the world, persevering without violence and without compromising the demands of the gospel. Above all, he repeatedly encourages them to continue doing good, avoiding compromises with anyone.

Here we find the center of a militant discipleship in a homicidal world: to do good. This is the basic tactic for all ministry. Believers must continue doing good even though the conflict becomes extreme and one's own life is threatened. Before the creators of every kind of dehumanization, it is necessary to continue faithfully in the task of announcing the Kingdom and denouncing injustice.

It is striking how often in 1 Peter faithfulness in doing good, even to enemies, is mentioned, not because wrong had been done, but rather, because good had been done. Behavior before the world has to be good (1 Pet. 2:12, 14, 15, 20). Such conduct exemplifies a lifestyle that is persevering and constant in discipleship until the future glorious manifestation of the Lord.

For the disciples, to do good had implications of a social character. One could not hide the gospel in the face of obligations to one's neighbor and fellow human beings. To practice good shows the human impossibility of neutrality before the world. In other words, with our pastoral and missionary task, we publicly put ourselves in the service of the cause of Christ. We do not want to serve other lords of this world. We are either on the side of Christ, who is always on the side of suffering, or we are against him. We have no alternative. Often we as missionaries want to be impartial and so we pretend to be with those and then with these. We want to be with everyone but we make it clear the we are really with no one. We prefer "the easy life" of bourgeois missionaries. We try to serve those who suffer misery and marginalization, but we are not ready to unmask the diabolic causes that create this dehumanizing marginalization. Doing good within the missionary task also signifies just practices. To do the justice of God in an unjust existing order is a denunciatory expression of non-conformity.

To do good ironically produces suffering and perseverance in the obedient disciple. It is not because of the disciple's own facilities, nor because of the backing of missionary structures, but because the disciple receives sufficient grace from God.

### **Signs of Sacrificial Spirituality**

The "calling" is the starting point in living together as a community facing a violent world. That is why Peter establishes that the believers have

been reborn in Christ. Conversion and living together with the Heavenly Pastor establish the solidarity that is then tested.

The spirituality of the pilgrim people, who depend only on the grace of God, surfaces in a suffering, exiled refugee community. They are the spiritual Israel, the true people of God who find their identity in Christ and consequently in his mission of proclamation. They are a people in constant exodus, pilgrims in the world (1 Pet. 2:9-12) with neither the securities nor the illusions that the tempting system of the world offers them.

It seems that today there is a serious need for a Christian spirituality that is neither evasive nor alienating. It has to be a spirituality that is based in service, in spite of risks, and that is committed to solidarity with those who suffer pain and anguish. The question then is not so much whether we should evade suffering or if we should minister where there are few risks and little grief. The basic questions are, "What kind of missionary practice do we assume?", "What kind of spirituality enables me to suffer in solidarity with those who suffer?", "Who benefits from my spirituality?", "Do the weak or the strong benefit more by my practice and my lifestyle?", and "Do the oppressors become more powerful?" It is not enough to know how to incarnate the suffering of the weak. We must live out our spirituality in pain. That is to say, "good intentions" are not enough. Neither are "Christian projects" that remain on paper. Christian spirituality only has a practical side in the cause of Christ.

### ***The Mission: Indicative Pain***

Knowing the gracious goodness of God, one of the most sticky questions in the Christian life is, "Where is God when there is suffering?" God comes near to human suffering in the person of the Suffering Servant. It is in the cross of Christ where all doubts are removed and the mystery of life is revealed. That is why those who suffer have their point of convergence in the Christ of Calvary. In Christ, the trial of pain, the suffering that comes from doing good, is transformed into personal and communal blessing.

### **Suffering as a Christian**

Announcing the gospel demands that one live prepared to give one's life because in announcing the gospel one is denouncing injustices. As history records, however, atrocities have been and continue to be committed in the name of Christ. In recent Latin American history, we have seen how authorities and governments, who falsely call themselves Christian, have killed believers seeking justice and dignity. The name of Christ is used to perpetuate oppressive situations.

“In the name of Christ” and “in this name” frame the text of 1 Peter 4:14, opening and closing the discussion of Christian suffering. There is no other reason in heaven or on earth to favor martyrdom. Martyrdom is valid only when it is not sought but occurs as and because the demands of the Kingdom are being lived. This observation clarifies that not all suffering arises from following Christ. In the missionary task, following Christ leads us in discovering several important points. (1) To suffer for others is to be on Christ’s side and to be on Christ’s side is to accept suffering in order to alleviate the suffering of others. (2) To suffer for others is to be a victim of the wickedness of one’s fellow human beings, a wickedness that is itself caused by leaving Christ. (3) To suffer with others is to personally walk on the path with other weak instruments of the *magnalia Dei* (God of majesty) in the *via crucis* (the way of the cross).

When Christians purpose to live the demands of the gospel, it is not surprising that they will experience persecution, rejection, ridicule, torture, and all kinds of injustice and violence. These have their origin in those who enjoy abusing power and those who love to live in wickedness.

The sad reality of suffering has accompanied Christians throughout history. It is not something that only the primitive church experienced. Even in recent Latin American history the convictions of faithful Christians have forced them to give their lives for the justice of the Kingdom in situations of cruel violence and fanaticism. There is a long list of men and women of God - pastors, priests, church leaders, Sunday school teachers, catechists - who have been terrorized, tortured, massacred, and have disappeared because of death squads, guerrillas, or members of the Army acting in submission to their authorities. Suffering, therefore, is consubstantial with being a faithful Christian. This is especially evident in contexts of notable violence such as that of Guatemala, El Salvador, and South Africa but it is also pervasive in the marginal areas of the large cities of the United States where twenty- seven persons die violently every minute.

### **Misguided Tactics**

Today many Christians and missionary organizations give the impression that they desire persecution or that they wish the church would continue to be persecuted. It appears that such people look to persecution as a tactic for church growth or as a hook for securing economic support and sympathy for “evangelical heroism.” It is fair to question the attitude of some leaders of Christian institutions who are silent accomplices in the face of exploitation, torture, violence, and extreme poverty which originate and are fomented by the authorities in power. For some Christian leaders, these atrocities are seen as a “good means” because they come

from authority and “all authority comes from God.” So if there is torture, the victim probably did something wrong and deserves it. It is detestable that crime and violence are supported for propagandistic reasons or on the basis of a twisted reading of the Scriptures. For some, the important thing is that the church grows, irrespective of the cost and human sacrifice.

The Bible promotes neither masochism (the delight in suffering), nor sadism (the pleasure of causing someone else pain). To suffer, or to put someone in inhuman conditions of torture and repression, is not godly. If persecution comes, it is for the benefit of those who do not fear God. God uses persecution to purify the faith of believers and to unmask those in authority that are not serving the people. On the other hand, the Christian with the power of the Spirit of God may find that suffering keeps him or her from the shallowness of this life. Suffering may give meaning to what is really important in this life as one is separated from the wicked workings of human beings and forced to experience the reality of weeping with those who weep. Suffering with those who suffer for the justice of God purifies and brings harmony with Him who suffered for all. The church continues being the body of Christ and in that condition is ready to suffer the cross. If the church is the living and suffering community for all who find in Jesus their Lord and Savior, the Spirit of Christ locates this group of believers as a place of adoration and exhortation, of testimony and solidarity, of giving and receiving healing. The community of believers thus becomes a place of reflection and of pilgrimage.

### **The Blessing of Jointly Suffering**

From Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil, Paraguay, Peru, Colombia, and the Central American isthmus, the number of refugee believers from various denominations is large. These are part of the world’s thirteen million refugees. In MesoAmerica alone there are two million refugees whose future is uncertain and whose pain cries out to heaven.

There is no justification for so much cruelty, misery, and exploitation in Latin America, a region historically known for its religion. What has been inherited is a European Christianity that manipulates faith and consecrates unjust institutions. Christianity, whether Catholic or Protestant, has imposed values that are far from the values of the Kingdom of God. Persons have succumbed to the values of materialism and have laid aside the fundamental values of a healthy and biblical Christian faith. They have preferred to hear the “gospel” of comfort and well being.

The amassing of human beings in large cities, where people live and grow in social structures often devoid of communication, dialogue, understanding, solidarity, and support, has dehumanized people. Often, as witnesses of the gospel, we are also witnesses of a crazy world where social



groups incarnate the verse of the celebrated Latin poet of the third century B.C., Plautus: "Homo homini lupus" (man is the wolf of man). In this modern society, with cities of nice neighborhoods and ghettos of misery, with high-rise buildings and cardboard shacks, people live wall to wall with neighbors without getting to know them well enough to say, "Good morning." Everyone runs about frantically occupied with something, yet unemployment increases. Multitudes conglomerate for diversions and for conspicuous spending. Still, in spite of so vast material goods, many experience deep loneliness and tremendous insecurity. We are faced with rising delinquency and wickedness in all its manifestations. In that sense, the missionary task in Bogota, Mexico City, or Rio de Janeiro is not very different from, or harder than, the task in Los Angeles, Miami, or Chicago.

We Christians have learned to survive in this kind of society. This is where we must give our testimony to the gospel. We are an inseparable part of society. We are part of the problems but also part of the solutions. Our Christian understanding and evangelical support makes us more human, and in this case, more Christian. As another Latin poet, Terence of the second century B.C., said after having lived through the misfortunes of slavery, "I am a man: nothing that is human is strange to me."

On the other hand, missionary triumphalism, cultural pride, discrimination, and ethnic racism, especially against marginalized populations, continue to asphyxiate the gospel and discredit the Christian witness as an agent of life. On occasion, persecution is not caused by Christian witness, but rather, by the superficial and mercenary way of mistaking the gospel with an ideology that has power. Generally, the Christian testimony is identified with economic prosperity and neo-pagan lifestyles, especially those which are imposed from North Atlantic countries. That is why today in places of privilege, in order to reach certain goals, they can torture and kill with the blessing of religious structures without knowing or even wanting to evaluate the means or the cost of human life. This modern manifestation of Constantinianism (the church enjoying privileges from the powerful) has removed the prophetic testimony from the Christian, whose challenge is one of simplicity and hope.

It is the Christian pilgrims, those who look for simplicity of life, who will have to reinvent the church as a prophetic community. They will need to remove from the powerful the luxury of calling themselves Christians and at the same time exploiting, torturing, and ignoring the urgent needs of people. They will need to denounce and expose the error of the "official" Christian message that has served to maintain the "order" of the system, the "peace" of terror, and the "intelligence" of military force. It is more comfortable and less committing, of course, to follow an understanding of the gospel where all that those in power do is for the good of the people. In this context, "to do good" is reason enough to be persecuted.