

What Persecution To Endure, To Resist, or To Flee?

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How to respond to persecution is a complex decision involving both principled and strategic considerations. In this article, two of the world's leading experts on religious persecution draw on both Scripture and their considerable experience to discuss the options comprehensively.

Persecution is inevitable. But when should persecution be accepted, endured or even embraced, and when should we fight against it or flee from it?

The 'Under Caesar's Sword' project distinguishes three main types of responses: survival, so as to preserve the activities of the community; association, or trying to build resistance or resilience by cooperating with other churches and institutions; and confrontation, or seeking to openly challenge the persecuting agent.¹ When should we do each one? There is no easy answer to this question, but all persecuted Christians must face it.

When we turn to the Bible for help, we find two relevant imperatives that may appear to contradict each other. On one hand, we are to be meek and forgiving. Jesus taught his disciples to 'turn to them the other cheek also' and 'do not resist an evil person' (Mt 5:39). We need to be willing to suffer for Christ (Phil 1:29) and to persevere in the wake of persecution (1 Thess 2:13–16). On the other hand, the Bible also frequently calls on people to combat injustice and speak out for the vulnerable (e.g. Amos 5:24).

Are these imperatives really contradictory? We believe not. They can both be valid at the same time. Yes, Christians should turn the other cheek instead of angrily and aggressively overreacting to any insult. But this does not mean that Christians should passively undergo all the pressures and tribulations they face, doing nothing

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¹ Daniel Philpott and Timothy Shah, 'Introduction', in Philpott and Shah (eds.), *Under Caesar's Sword: How Christians Respond to Persecution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 1–29.

about them. We must indeed be willing to suffer for Christ, but this does not mean apathetically accepting all the persecution that comes to us. There is no contradiction between readiness to suffer for Christ and promoting justice by standing up to persecutors; we need to do both.

Still, persecuted Christians expect guidance on how to deal with their challenges. The more appropriate question, therefore, is not *when* but *how*. How should persecution be endured and how should the persecuted be dealt with?

The Bible does not provide a simple, pre-defined answer to these questions, but the Bible and the historical and contemporary stories of persecuted Christians offer relevant guidance that we can apply to our particular contexts. In fact, we should not be surprised that the Bible does not offer easy solutions, because each situation is unique and requires a different response.

Also, we believe that God wants us to wrestle with the persecution he sends into our lives. Persecution comes to us for a reason, and if we try to get rid of it too easily, we cannot learn from it. Jesus' recommendation, 'Seek and you will find' (Lk 11:9), is applicable here. Similarly, Paul wrote to the Philippians that his imprisonment 'really served to advance the gospel ... so that it has become known throughout the whole praetorian guard' (1:12). Paul had to endure time in prison so that the gospel could spread.

In this essay, we present several biblical considerations related to how we should respond to persecution. These considerations hint at principles and proper attitudes; they are not a standard contingency plan. Some of them may overlap or may seem to guide us in opposite directions. They need to be carefully weighed and contextualized. In some cases, we also incorporate options for those endeavouring to support the persecuted from afar.

Bibles, the main tool to endure persecution

The Bible is the best support for believers undergoing persecution—if they have access to it. Some Christians can easily buy copies; others are denied this privilege. Supplying Bibles to the persecuted is, in our opinion, an essential task of the global church. Wherever possible, legal methods of importing and distributing Scripture should be used. But some governments deny the importation of Bibles or, in a more subtle approach, forbid imported Bibles in the nation's home language(s), therefore in effect permitting Bibles for expatriates but not for nationals.

Many Christian organizations arrange for the delivery of Bibles by irregular means. Some use the euphemism 'courier work' to describe people who, when visiting a country, carry a supply of Bibles hidden in a vehicle or their luggage. Most of these operate discreetly; a few act more openly. One classic example was Tom Hamblin, whose biography, *Under Their Very Eyes*, describes a selection of his exploits. One needs a clear calling from God, and the support of suppliers, to act as he did.² You could add in Brother Andrew's short book, *The Ethics of Smuggling*,

² Deborah Meroff with Tom Hamblin, *Under Their Very Eyes: The Astonishing Life of Tom Hamblin, Bible Courier to Arab Nations* (Oxford: Monarch Books, 2016).

which was a defence of sneaking Bibles into the USSR and Eastern Europe during the Cold War years.³

Modern technology has provided new opportunities for many, with downloadable Bibles in a vast number of languages. However, irrespective of this option, many still desire to have a physical copy despite the risk involved.

Furthermore, people desire most a copy in their heart language, not just the local trade language. Having such a Bible strengthens Christ's followers. Historically, the Christian communities that survived Islamic persecution were those that had the Bible in their heart language, not only the trade language of Arabic. This implies that Bible translation is an effective means of supporting persecuted Christians. Philip Jenkins reckons that it is vital to translate the Bible into a local language because persecution often results in that language being replaced, but if the church keeps it alive liturgically it has a better chance of survival. He cites the Copts of North Africa as an example.⁴

Willingness to suffer for Christ

This is a non-negotiable principle. When we agree to follow Christ, we are invited to follow in his footsteps at any cost, even martyrdom. Jesus made this very clear to his disciples: 'If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also' (Jn 15:20). His disciples repeated this truth on numerous occasions. Paul stated, 'In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted' (2 Tim 3:12). Peter observed, 'Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. ... But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you' (1 Pet 4:12–14). Church fathers such as Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp and Justin Martyr repeatedly made the same points.

Enduring persecution is certainly not easy, but the examples of great Christians who have suffered for Christ should be a source of inspiration. Jesus obediently accepted crucifixion because he understood this to be God's command. Stephen, Paul, Peter and virtually everyone in the early church faced persecution (and sometimes martyrdom). They understood this to be part of the Christian life and most of them rejoiced in it (e.g. Acts 5:41).

Actively engage persecution

But willingness to endure persecution does not mean that we should passively undergo it. Rather, actively addressing persecution is also a non-negotiable principle. These two concepts are not contradictory; rather, one can accept hostility while at the same time actively seeking the Lord's guidance on how to respond to it. There are many possible responses to persecution,⁵ but we should not fold our arms

3 Brother Andrew, *The Ethics of Smuggling* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 1974).

4 Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa and Asia* (Oxford: Lion, 2008), 220–22.

5 Dennis P. Petri, 'Resilience to Persecution: A Practical and Methodological Investigation', *International Journal for Religious Freedom* 10, no. 1–2 (2017): 69–86, <https://worldidea.org/yourls/ert461dpprbm1>.

and wait apathetically. Even if we believe the Lord is asking us to stay where we are and accept persecution, this should be the result of a conscious, prayerful decision.

Actively engaging persecution is a direct extension of the biblical call to social transformation. The restoration of the fallen creation and all its components starts with the resurrection of Christ. It follows that all Christians are called to work towards the transformation of all spheres of life until Christ's redemptive work is completed (Rom 12:2).

Thus, Christians should not neglect their calling to speak out against social injustice that is inherent to the gospel. This role is often ignored in large portions of Western Christianity that have tended to reduce the gospel to individual salvation and ignore its potential to transform the fallen creation, of which persecution is an outgrowth. If we want to be faithful Christians and truly be salt and light in the societies where we are placed, we should speak out on behalf of the dignity of victims of persecution and engage the corrupt social structures that are at the root of persecution.

The great evangelical statesman John Stott dedicated much of his output to Bible commentaries while serving as the vicar of All Souls at Langham Place in London. But he astonished evangelicals in 1984 by releasing a book entitled *Decisive Issues Facing Christians Today*, which discussed such pressing social problems as human rights, the environment, inequality, racism and the nuclear threat. Many reacted with dismay, asking, 'Why is he not concentrating on the Bible, isn't that enough?' But as Stott wrote in his foreword, 'One of the most notable features of the worldwide evangelical movement during the last ten to fifteen years has been the recovery of our temporarily mislaid social conscience.' He admitted that a 'half century of neglect has put us far behind in this area.' As the world's second most influential evangelical statesman (after Billy Graham), he would ensure that the Lausanne Covenants of the 1980s would add social transformation to our mission as Christians, in conjunction with the verbal proclamation of the gospel.⁶

We must stress that engaging persecution should not entail the use of violence. We cannot go deeply into the complex issues of civil disobedience and self-defence here, but nowhere does the Bible approve retaliating against or killing our persecutors; it clearly leaves taking revenge to God (Rom 12:19–21).

Later we will provide some conceptual and practical suggestions on how to actively engage persecution. However, it is clear that we cannot remain passive in the face of persecution. Jesus said, 'The poor will always be with you' (Mk 14:7), but this does not mean we should neglect our service to the poor. Jesus foretold that his followers would suffer for his name, but this does not mean we should overlook advocating for the persecuted. It's our Christian duty to respond proactively to injustice.

Harness the power of prayer

The role of prayer may seem obvious, but it cannot be stressed enough. The power of prayer cannot be underestimated. It's the most effective instrument for social

⁶ See the Manila Manifesto, adopted at the conclusion of the second Lausanne Conference on World Evangelization in 1989: <https://worldea.org/yourls/ert461dpprrbm2>.

transformation that we have at our disposal. Although this concept is debated theologically, the Bible suggests that prayer can even provoke a change in God's heart, such as when Moses convinced God not to destroy the Hebrew people for their corruption (Ex 32:14). If prayer can change God's heart, it can also impact the course of our lives and the persecution we suffer.

The commitment to prayer of Christians under strain is often remarkable. We know of countless stories of persecuted Christians who persevered under persecution because of their depth of prayer, which gave them supernatural strength to go on in the darkest of times. Similarly, Luke 22:43 notes that an angel appeared to Jesus when he was praying about the immense suffering he was about to undergo 'and strengthened him'.

When we pray, we need to know what to pray for. The Bible explicitly asks us to pray for both the persecuted (Acts 12:5; Col 4:18; Heb 13:3) and the persecutors (Mt 5:44; Rom 12:14). Prayer is also a resource to discern God's will concerning persecutors and how we should respond to them.

Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane can be taken as a template for how to pray about persecution: 'Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done' (Lk 22:42). Jesus submitted to God's will, asking for the persecution to be taken away from him, unless it was God's will for it to continue. This exact prayer has been used by generations of persecuted believers. It expresses submission to God's authority but also requests that the persecution be taken away.

The World Evangelical Alliance has highlighted the importance of prayer by initiating the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church.

When we pray for those enduring persecution elsewhere, we need to be careful about what we pray for. Are we indeed aligning with the agenda of those facing severe hostility? Here is an illustrative comment from Christians in Egypt who have suffered detention and torture:

Please don't pray *for* us. Please pray *with* us. If you pray *for* us, you will pray for the wrong things. You will pray for safety. You will pray that persecution will cease. But if you pray *with* us, you will ask God to bring millions of Egyptians to faith in Christ. You will pray that when the inevitable backlash comes because of our witness, we will be faithful, even if it costs us our lives.⁷

Aligning our prayers with the agenda of the persecuted is far from easy. For example, how should we pray for those unjustly imprisoned for their faith? In many cases, they are detained without trial. During the 2000s, a sub-Saharan Christian was imprisoned in a north African country. Other expatriate Christians were able to visit him occasionally. They learned that he had become the informal pastor in his section of the jail. Should they pray for his release or for his equipping as a pastor? Our personal practice is that when such people are married, we pray for their immediate release and return to their family, especially if they have young children. In contrast, if the imprisoned believers are single, as was this African man, then our prayer has been simply for God's will to be done in terms of when they are released. In addition,

⁷ Brother Andrew and Al Jensen, *Prayer: The Real Battle* (Witney, UK: Open Doors, 2010), chapter 7 (emphasis in original).

we always pray that they may remain faithful to God, have a clear sense of his presence, and be clear in their witness and testimony.

Furthermore, we must keep praying for such people after their release, because many face serious challenges due to changed circumstances. Maryam Rostampour and Marziyeh Amirizadeh, two Iranians who were detained for nine months in Tehran, explain in their book *Captive in Iran* that after their release, their previous Christian friends were reluctant to associate with them due to the constant surveillance to which they were subject.⁸ Sister Dianne Ortiz described how her recovery from being kidnapped and tortured while working in Guatemala took many years.⁹

Finally, genuine prayer should lead to action. If we pray earnestly for the persecuted, we will be moved to reach out and serve this suffering part of the body of Christ. If prayer is only about passively waiting for supernatural intervention, what is the point of praying? As James reminds us, ‘Faith without deeds is dead’ (2:26). Prayer should trigger us to act, as Aristarchus, Mark and Justus did when they visited Paul in prison (Col 4:10–11). What sort of actions might we be prompted to become involved with?¹⁰

Wait for God’s time

The apparent contradiction presented at the start of this essay can be observed in Jesus’ own life. Sometimes he fled from his persecutors, but in the days leading to his crucifixion, he obediently submitted to arrest and even rebuked Peter for violently confronting the people who were about to hurt him. The key difference, of course, is that it was God’s time, and Jesus accepted the persecution only after intense consultation with God through prayer.

Jesus underwent crucifixion only after he became convinced ‘that the time was right’ (Jn 17:4). On previous occasions when his life was threatened, he avoided martyrdom, ‘because his hour had not yet come’ (Jn 7:30). In Philippians 1:20–26, Paul did not accept martyrdom because his mission to the Philippian church had not yet been completed. Years later, he realized that his ministry was complete—‘I have finished the race’ (2 Tim 4:7)—and could accept martyrdom. The life stories of both Jesus and Paul indicate that our response to persecution should include praying about it and waiting for God’s time. There are God-mandated times to avoid or resist some forms of persecution and times to accept it.

When to flee

Whether Christians should stay where they are or flee when persecution erupts is among the most important questions many Christians struggle with. It’s rarely if ever simple. Fleeing might mean abandoning your church and your calling. Staying

8 Maryam Rostampour and Marziyeh Amirizadeh, *Captive in Iran* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2013), 282.

9 Sister Dianna Ortiz, *The Blindfold’s Eyes* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002).

10 See also ‘The Role of Prayer/Intercession’, in Ronald Boyd-MacMillan, *Faith That Endures: The Essential Guide to the Persecuted Church* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 2006), 255–60.

might put you and your family at great risk of being killed. Feelings of guilt may haunt you either way.

Every situation is different and will inevitably require prayerful examination of God's direction for your life. If possible, this should take place alongside close supporters, since there should always be a corporate element in a Christian's consideration of major decisions.

Fleeing persecution has a biblical mandate. Jesus instructed his disciples, 'When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. Truly I tell you, you will not finish going through the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes' (Mt 10:23).

Many biblical characters followed this mandate. God instructed Elijah to hide from King Ahab (1 Kgs 19:1–18). God told Joseph to flee to Egypt with Jesus to avoid Herod's persecution (Mt 2:13–18). On numerous occasions, Jesus went into hiding (Mt 4:12; 12:14–15; Jn 7:1; 8:59). Paul fled Damascus in a basket (Acts 9:23–25) and later went to Tarsus (Acts 9:29–30). He frequently left a city when persecution erupted, usually after consulting or meeting with local Christians (e.g. Acts 17:10–14).

An interesting thread in most biblical stories of flight or hiding is that they served a ministerial purpose. The flights were not to run away from suffering, but to fulfil a mission. God wanted Jesus and Paul to flee persecution when they were still conducting their ministry, because he needed them to be alive to accomplish his purpose. In Acts 8, when persecution hit the church in Jerusalem, all believers except the apostles fled to neighbouring provinces, an event the Lord used to take the gospel to unreached territories (Acts 8:4). Although these believers fled persecution, they did not compromise their faith or cease to preach the gospel.

Therefore, fleeing persecution can be the preferred response when it enables ministry. You are not a coward when you flee; you may be aiding the spread of the gospel. Your goal is not to become a hero. In one of his sermons, Charles Spurgeon cited Matthew 10:23 and concluded, 'A Christian man is not bound to endure persecution if he can help it.'¹¹

However, in some situations, the Lord told people not to flee. We may feel a calling to stay because leaving our church behind would greatly weaken it and our presence continues to be required, as with the apostles in Acts 8:1.

Avoiding persecution is not the same thing as denying one's faith or watering down one's message to prevent suffering. It is sometimes necessary to retreat temporarily so as to survive and retain some level of influence for the gospel.

Many practical considerations are involved in a decision to flee. Jonathan Andrews provides details in *Last Resort: Migration and the Middle East*. Similar principles will apply elsewhere. Here is a brief summary.¹²

First, how long does one expect to be away for? Can one simply leave for a short period while the situation calms down? Andrews cites one case of an Egyptian

11 C. H. Spurgeon, 'Among Lions' (sermon, 4 September 1879), 7, <https://worldia.org/yourls/ert461dpprbm3>.

12 Jonathan Andrews, *Last Resort: Migration and the Middle East* (Malton: Gilead Books, 2017). See also Stephen Carter, 'Staying for Good: 113 Middle Eastern Christians and the Challenge to Remain', in Sam George and Miriam Adenay (eds.), *Refugee Diasporas: Missions Amid the Greatest Humanitarian Crisis of Our Times* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Publishing, 2018).

Muslim-background believer who moved to another suburb of Cairo after being beaten up near his home and was welcomed back to his neighbourhood with a few months.

Second, where will you flee to? Is there a viable local option or must one travel farther?

Third, what will you do with your time in the new location? Can those who flee support themselves, or will they become dependent on the support of others? If they become dependent, for how long can that be sustained?

Fourth, if one is crossing a national border, what is the visa situation? Will international travel be problematic? Is it safe to travel via an airport, seaport or land crossing? Some people have become enmeshed in serious persecution because they tried to leave their country.

The title of Andrews' book reflects his view that fleeing one's country should be the last resort for those facing severe persecution. It is difficult, legally and culturally, and has long-term consequences. Yet where staying is likely to lead to loss of life, liberty or custody of children, flight may be the only option. Moreover, not everyone who migrates becomes effectively settled in their new country.

We recommend the Religious Liberty Partnership's helpful 2017 policy statement on flight as a response to persecution, available at its website.¹³

Some forms of persecution can be avoided

In some cases, persecution can be avoided by fleeing, hiding or adapting our behaviour. Jesus accepted his arrest in Gethsemane, even rebuking Peter for his attempt to provide a diversion so he could escape (Jn 18:10–11), but earlier, Jesus paused his public ministry when his arrest was ordered (Jn 11:53–54). Whether to avoid persecution depends on God's specific direction, but there is no point in looking for persecution or actively provoking it through outright disrespectful behaviour. Many forms of persecution can and should be avoided by wise and culturally appropriate behaviour. Some persecution might be alleviated over time by positive engagement and dialogue. Persecution or martyrdom should not be a goal in itself.

There have been several incidents in the Gulf States of inappropriate outreach activities by teams making short visits. In one case, a team from India was arrested and swiftly deported after attempting to openly distribute tracts. On arriving home, they reportedly boasted about being persecuted. Nonsense. They had simply been totally disrespectful of their context. Such activities are invariably condemned by long-term expatriate Christians who know well how to be effective witnesses without alienating anyone.

There is nothing wrong with pragmatically adapting to circumstances to prevent hostilities, so long as this does not compromise one's Christian witness. Based on extensive field research on Christians' responses to persecution, the Under Caesar's Sword project offers these recommendations:

¹³ Religious Liberty Partnership, 'Relocation as a Response to Persecution: RLP Policy and Commitment', April 2017, <https://worlddea.org/yourls/ert461dpprrbm4>.

Persecuted churches should avoid giving unnecessary offense and bringing on 'avoidable' persecution by adopting (where possible) culturally sensitive measures to avoid community tensions. For example, churches can monitor sound levels during worship, avoid staging events on other religions' festival days, rely as much as possible on indigenous leadership, and avoid disrespectful public comments about other religions.¹⁴

Going around telling non-Christians that they are pagans and will burn in hell is rarely a successful evangelistic strategy and will give them a good reason to get angry at you. You will suffer persecution, not for Christ's sake, but because you were rude. This is not courage, it's simply stupidity. Generally, seeking confrontation is not a good way to witness to Christ. An attitude of patience and love often has a more lasting impact than the judgemental and proud attitude Christians sometimes display.

The Under Caesar's Sword project further recommends, 'Christians should consider keeping local festivals, dress codes, customs, and cultural symbols where these do not conflict with their faith. Local styles of worship can also be retained so long as they are supportive of, and do not undermine, Christian beliefs and teachings.' Again, adapting to cultural norms can avoid unnecessary persecution without compromising Christian witness.

Paul Estabrooks and James Cunningham offer additional practical suggestions on how the church can function under persecution so as not to invite trouble:¹⁵

- Integrate into the village without alienating the community.
- Be culturally sensitive to your community in matters of conduct—especially the youth.
- Do not use relief or social programmes as 'bait' for evangelism but rather for relationship and opportunity.
- Adopt a simple lifestyle consistent with that of the local people in the community.
- Encourage unity among Christian leaders in the area.
- Gather in smaller congregations if hostility persists.
- Avoid putting outsiders in a prominent role in the community.
- Always avoid disrespectful comments about other religions.
- Communicate with religious leaders before persecution takes hold.

If you unnecessarily provoke non-Christians around you, you may forever lose the opportunity to be salt and light in your community. At times, adapting may even be the only alternative to flight.

14 Philpott and Shah, *Under Caesar's Sword*, 48. Spurgeon 'Among Lions', 6, makes a similar point: 'If you dwell among lions, *do not irritate them*' (emphasis in original).

15 Paul Estabrooks and James Cunningham, *Standing Strong Through the Storm* (Santa Ana, CA: Open Doors, 2004), 197.

Stand up for your principles, no matter the consequences

Although it is generally wise to avoid outright confrontation and provocation, Christians should never renounce their principles, regardless of the consequences. The prophet Daniel is a good example. On two occasions, he remained true to his principles under severe testing. First, when young, he refused to eat food that had been sacrificed to the gods, thereby remaining true to the dietary injunctions that he believed he should follow (Dan 1). Much later (probably around age 70 or 80, based on the rulers named), he refused to halt his daily prayers to God and was thrown into the lion's den (Dan 6). Each time, God honoured him for his obedience.

Daniel's friends were also tested. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to bow before King Nebuchadnezzar's golden image, fully aware of the consequences. They were miraculously preserved (Dan 3:8–30).

This consideration is, in a way, a counterpart to the previous one. Some issues are simply not worth suffering for, such as ludicrous cultural customs or unnecessary acts of provocation. But when it comes to bowing before idols or renouncing prayer, we are called to stay faithful to our biblical principles no matter what the consequences may be.

Paul was willing to endure the consequences of faithfulness, even death (Phil 1:20–26; 2:17). Despite knowing the risks, Paul believed he needed to go to Jerusalem and obeyed what he understood to be God's will (Acts 21:10–14). Jesus also set an example of fulfilling the will of God even at the cost of life itself.

There is a place for legal and political action

Some persecution can and should be opposed through legal and political action, whether this means pressing charges, litigation, advocacy, campaigning or the use of any other instrument. However, legal action is appropriate only if a demonstrable crime or human rights violation has been committed.

We must distinguish clearly between our theological and our legal-political understandings of persecution. In some communities, social exclusion may qualify as a form of persecution, but it is not a punishable crime or a human rights violation and thereby does not justify legal action. Political action should be taken against policies and legislation that are demonstrably unjust. To fight forms of persecution that do not constitute criminal activity or human rights violations, other tactics should be considered.

Moreover, legal and political action works only if there is at least some degree of respect for the rule of law, either by state institutions or by the international legal system. Media publicity or international pressure may influence authoritarian governments, but such systems tend to lack the political will or state capacity to enforce respect for human rights, making legal or political advocacy relatively ineffective.

The Bible contains numerous stories in which persecution is resisted through the ancient equivalent of legal and political resources. The overall message expressed by these stories is that we should not be afraid of political engagement. If done for God's glory, political engagement can be a great vehicle for social transformation and a witness to God's power.

At one point in Jesus' trial, he broke his silence to testify to his innocence (Jn 18:23). Paul famously exercised his legal privileges as a Roman citizen on at least three occasions: in Acts 16:36–39 to request an apology from the judges for being jailed without trial; in Acts 22:24–29 to avoid being flogged; and in Acts 25:10–11 to escape from angry, murderous religious leaders by appealing to Caesar.

Paul's extensive knowledge of his legal rights is an example to all of us. Indeed, an essential dimension of our resilience to persecution involves knowing and claiming our rights, as well as how to file charges, deal with the police, document harassment and build trust. Legal knowledge and a profound understanding of the institutional processes of the justice system can greatly help us avoid or mitigate persecution.

Interestingly, Paul did not always choose to exercise his legal right as a Roman citizen. When Paul and Silas were arrested in Philippi (Acts 16:19), they did not declare their citizenship at first, although this could have prevented flogging and imprisonment. We are not told why they remained quiet on this occasion (one suggestion is that it was to protect their companions Timothy and Luke, who did not have Roman citizenship). From this information, we can deduce an important hint regarding the use of political and legal action: depending on the circumstances, it may be appropriate at some times and not at other times.

Also, invariably in the Bible, legal and political action is used to serve a ministerial purpose. For example, Paul's request to be taken to Caesar enabled him to continue his ministry of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles and ultimately to reach believers in the emperor's household. When Paul chose to mention his Roman citizenship in Acts 16, doing so was instrumental in affirming his witness to the jailer and his family. Legal and political action should serve a higher purpose than solely a motivation to preserve personal safety. It is not justified when it contradicts the gospel. Political engagement must be for God's glory, and it must benefit the persecuted.

Speaking out against injustice is a valid ministerial purpose and very much a biblical mandate (e.g. Prov 31:9; Is 1:17; Jer 22:3; Mic 6:8). The Bible contains many examples of leaders who decried injustice, often at great risk to themselves. In perhaps the most dramatic instance, Esther, assisted by her uncle Mordecai, advocated for the rights of her people and prevented a genocide. To do so, she had to overcome her fear and approach the king without being summoned, potentially a capital offence. The prophet Nathan rebuked King David for his adultery with Bathsheba and arranging to have her husband killed on the battlefield, even though he knew full well that giving this message from God could have resulted in his own death. John the Baptist told Herod a very inconvenient truth about him taking his brother's wife, for which John was jailed and subsequently beheaded.

These are biblical characters whose examples of obedience to God and commitment to justice we are invited to follow. They remind us that speaking out against persecution (and injustice in general) can be risky, both for the advocates and for the people they advocate for. If not done with great care and strategy, it can backfire, causing more harm than good. This leads us to another very important consideration: What is the likely impact of my effort? What unintended outcomes are possible? Will our efforts help the persecuted or make things worse for them?

Two brief stories, both from Arab-majority countries, illustrate the risks. During the 2000s, an indigenous disciple of Christ was arrested. The expatriate couple discipling him contacted a Western Christian group to discuss advocacy seeking his release. ‘Gladly’, the organization replied, ‘and we would expect it to be effective in this case. However, there is likely to be a backlash, possibly the non-renewal of your residency.’ The couple decided to proceed anyhow. Their friend was duly released shortly after a Western government that provided aid to the country contacted the government about the detained believer. Several months later, the couple’s annual residency renewal was refused. One cannot prove a causal link, but it seems likely that the authorities realized who had informed a Western government about the arrest.

The second example comes from Egypt. Terrence (Terry) Ascott acknowledges in his autobiography that he was deported from Egypt in April 1989 when the authorities discovered that he had been supplying details about a persecuted Egyptian to a well-known human rights organization. In this case, the organization committed a serious breach of protocol which allowed him to be identified.¹⁶

In these examples, the costs were borne by the expatriate Christians informing Western organizations with the express intent of applying pressure on the offending governments.

Appealing to public opinion

Finally, we consider the value of using the media. The benefits of appealing to public opinion to prevent persecution are evident in a number of New Testament stories. On several occasions, people did not arrest Jesus because of their concern about the possible effect on the crowds (Mt 21:46). King Herod did not kill John the Baptist at first because ‘he was afraid of the people’ (Mt 14:5). Thus, there is biblical precedent for the strategic use of public opinion in advocacy.

In modern practice, publicizing a story requires engaging with mainstream media. This is a specialized skill that requires understanding of how the media operate, proper terminology, what is likely to get attention, and professional journalistic ability.

Second, a subtle variation on appealing to public opinion is the tactical use of threatening publicity within discreet advocacy. One could imagine privately telling a persecutor, ‘At present, very few people are aware of this injustice that you are perpetrating, and it will remain like this if you choose to act justly.’ This amounts to threatening to embarrass or shame the persecutor before an audience whose opinion they care about.

Third, the use of media for discipleship and teaching can support and strengthen the persecuted. One approach is broadcast media such as radio and television. Radio messages can be transmitted over long distances. In more recent years, targeted use of FM frequencies has allowed programming in specific dialects. Similarly, television can be terrestrial or via satellite, with the latter allowing broadcasts to large audiences that circumvent terrestrial censorship. In some parts of the world, international television is more trusted by audiences because local media sources are heavily

16 Terrence Ascott, *Dare to Believe* (Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2021), 5, 12.

censored by the authorities. Terry Ascott, in *Dare to Believe*, describes the professionalism required for such work and its potential effects. He endorses its value in letting indigenous Christians express their faith to their communities.

Fourth, online broadcasting is an exciting new development that allows broadcast media to operate globally, making content available to diaspora communities as well as the original in-country audience. Chat rooms and social media offer excellent ways for Christians worldwide to support the severely persecuted. To be effective, such efforts should be undertaken by people who are very close in language and culture to the target audience.¹⁷

In summary, there are many ways of support to support our brothers and sisters undergoing persecution. But if we are going to be effective activists challenging injustice, we should carefully consider what commitments, knowledge and persistence will be required of us.

¹⁷ Jonathan Andrews (ed.), *The Missiology behind the Story: Voice from the Arab World* (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2019), 111–12.