

# Handling the Coming Persecution / COB / 10.11.15

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## InterVarsity's Persecution

- † **[Slide 1: Tufts]** During the spring semester of 2000, without a hearing, Tufts University withdrew its recognition of the campus InterVarsity Christian fellowship. The administration said the fellowship was a threat to campus safety, because the Christian message of sin and redemption could drive students to suicide.
  - That was not the real reason for their action, but the fact that they thought it was a compelling argument, to say the gospel would drive people to suicide, is shocking in its own right.
  
- † We recently read in Genesis, that God prophesied there would be hostility between those who were pursuing sin as seeds of Satan and those who were image bearers walking with God; and we saw that Cain, feeling animosity toward God, struck the image bearer of God, his brother, Abel.
  - While I was working on those sermons, my father shared with me an article in *National Review*, written by David French ["Ready Always to Give an Answer," 09.07.15]. French was on the legal team for InterVarsity, which describes itself as "an evangelical and interdenominational campus ministry." I want to share with you what happened to InterVarsity over the past fifteen years.
  
- † Coming back to Tufts, the apparent real reason for their action was the fellowship's denial of a homosexual student's application to lead the ministry. This student disagreed with InterVarsity's teachings and stated she wanted to use the leadership position to advocate for homosexual rights.
  - This biblical Christian organization wanted a biblical Christian leader; not so strange, is it? The fellowship wanted to exercise their freedom of association like any other group on campus. But Tufts administrators characterized this as hate and exclusion.
  
- † **[Slide 2: Williams]** Publicity of this conflict led to persecution elsewhere. Harvard and Williams began proceedings against their InterVarsity campus fellowships. Rutgers withdrew its recognition, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill threatened to do so, and multiple University of Wisconsin schools moved against all the Christian fellowships on their campuses.
  - All these schools argued it was inherently discriminatory for a Christian organization to reserve its leadership for Christians. They said InterVarsity was bigoted, comparable to the Ku Klux Klan.
  - It is shocking to me to hear anyone in higher learning would think this made sense, whether they agreed with Christianity or not. I am more shocked at the failure of logic and reason than I am at the trampling of rights or the rise of religious persecution.
  
- † **[Slide 3: UCLA]** The State University of New York at Buffalo also withdrew recognition of the InterVarsity fellowship when a practicing homosexual student was ineligible for leadership.
  - At many universities, InterVarsity fellowships found themselves in trouble, even though campus Muslim groups were allowed to maintain policies of exclusive membership, exclusive leadership, and gender segregated worship.
  - All twenty-three campuses of the California university system withdrew recognition of InterVarsity on their campuses. By 2014, dozens of other colleges were considering the same.

- † Things got more frightening in 2010. In the case *Christian Legal Society v. Martinez*, the US Supreme Court ruled that so long as the standard was consistent for all student groups, universities could require Christian student groups to be open to non-Christian leadership.

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### Church Problem on the Horizon

- † **[Slide 4: court]** This all actually happened over the past fifteen years. On campus, Christian groups lost their legal status; were denied the same rights as other groups, even other religious groups; were sanctioned and taken to court; were told they were the ones who were discriminating bigots; were ostracized and persecuted by peers, even supposedly Christian peers; and were told by the highest court they could be forced legally to be open to non-Christian leadership. In America!
- For a century, there has been hostility to faith in college classrooms, but now there is open hostility from campus administrators and in the supposedly tolerant, open campus culture.
  - We have to beware, because campus social movements often later affect broader society. We already have started sensing some of that increasing hostility from politicians and judges.
- † Biblical Christians in the US are facing cultural and legal adversity greater than ever before in our national history.
- Christian owned businesses have faced prosecution under labor and insurance laws if they did not recognize homosexual marriage for benefits or offer insurance covering abortions.
  - Religious organizations for adoption, foster-parenting, and other social concerns face legal prosecution, fines, even loss of licensure and closure if they are not willing to operate against their biblical beliefs about marriage and family.
  - Christian business owners who refuse work associated with homosexual weddings have faced ruinous fines in some states.
  - Employees who speak in favor of Christian religious rights and freedom of expression sometimes face social pressure, less favorable assignments, termination, and career derailment, especially in fields like media, academia, and technology, but in many other companies as well.
- † **[Slide 5: 1 John 3]** Those of you who know me understand that I am not an alarmist who sees conspiracies everywhere. I am talking about real problems that are coming against us already, these are real issues I have observed this year as I read the news.
- We are surprised because we have had it so good. The Bible itself warns us that we can expect hostility for our faith. Cain killed his brother Abel. The apostle John wrote **[1 John 3.12-13 NET]: And why did he murder him? Because his deeds were evil, but his brother's were righteous. Therefore do not be surprised, brothers and sisters [in the church], if the world hates you.**
  - All people have corrupted human natures, a vulnerability both to deception about the truth and to reacting sinfully with hate and violence. Now you come pray at the pole, you declare Jesus is the only way to peace with God, you refuse to cheat the customer or lie to protect your group, and guess what, you now are a threat to them and their way of thinking.
  - They might feel a touch of conviction, but they will interpret that as you giving them a guilt trip, which they don't want, and so they will feel hostile toward you.

- † **[Slide 6: 2 Timothy 3]** After the apostle Paul reminded his disciple Timothy how he had endured persecution even to the point of being stoned, Paul warned that this was to be expected. **2 Timothy 3.12 NIV: In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.**
- Even within ourselves there is a tension, between what the Spirit calls us to do as image bearers and what the flesh calls us to do in our corruption. How much greater will be that conflict between the person who chooses Christ and the one who is not resisting corruption at all?
- † We can face hostility even from those who go to church, if in their weak theology their church has never led people to true faith in the gospel or never taught them the way of Christian life.
- In a recent poll, among those who described themselves as non-evangelical Christians, 61% have doubts about God answering specific prayers; 76% have doubts about God inspiring scripture; 52% have doubts about the Bible's account of the resurrection being accurate; 92% have doubts about the Holy Spirit being a personal entity.
  - You really are a threat to those people, because you put the lie to all the façade they have built up. We saw in Genesis that Seth's descendent Enoch prophesied about people who consider themselves believers, but do not believe in true gospel and thus remain in spiritual darkness.
  - The New Testament has many such prophecies. Jesus called the Pharisees whitewashed tombs; if you speak the truth, if you live it out, these people get angry, because you expose their decay.
- † **[Slide 7: homosexual marriage]** This church presently must wonder what legal threats it will face and the type and amount of insurance it will need.
- The federal government has started reviewing the activities of churches, looking for reasons to revoke our non-profit status. That would mean paying corporate income tax and property tax, and your gifts not being deductible. For many churches, this would bring financial ruin.
  - There are people within the federal government who want to enforce all labor laws on churches. What if they tried the same approach as the colleges did for InterVarsity, and demanded we hire without discrimination. Then we might be forced not just to have a pastor who is not fully biblical in his lifestyle, but even a pastor who was not a believer at all!
  - We also might be forced legally to allow membership to anyone who applies, a sure way to dilute what we believe and practice over time.
  - One big legal challenge already arising is about use of the facilities. If we allow one person to use our building but deny that access to someone else, they might successfully sue us. So we have bylaws that clearly state some limitations, but we need to consult with an attorney on strengthening that language.
  - We need to add language to protect the rights of pastors to decline participation in events against our moral sensibilities. In Canada, some legislators want to require churches to marry any two people who ask. This is not just about homosexuality, it's about the church and pastor having the right to represent Christ in marriages, baptisms, membership, and communion.

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### InterVarsity Results and Approach

- † **[Slide 8: chart]** That's the struggle we are facing. Here's some good news. During the past fifteen years of persecution, InterVarsity's ministry on college campuses has grown.

- In 2001, they had almost 32,000 students and faculty on 533 campuses; In 2015, they have over 40,000 students and faculty on 649 campuses! While Christianity has not remained as influential overall on campuses, InterVarsity has thrived.
  - It also has prevailed in most of its fights for religious freedom, even in California, where the state system welcomed InterVarsity back on campus this year.
- † **[Slide 9: theology]** The university attacks sought to marginalize InterVarsity, but the result was empowerment and motivation of the Christian students involved.
- InterVarsity is a collection of student-run campus fellowships bound together by their theology. One key to success was that theology matters to these students, and they were not willing to give it up under pressure. They refused to sacrifice principle for social or legal acceptance.
  - When Vanderbilt University wanted to withdraw recognition, the students took a secret ballot about whether to stand fast or find another way like reorganizing without affiliation to InterVarsity. The vote was unanimous to fight for their beliefs and rights.
  - The overall result has been greater student unity and strengthened student faith: more prayer, more unity in fellowship, more worship.
- † **[Slide 10: perspective]** Another key to success was having a historical and biblical perspective.
- InterVarsity students understood that Christians in many parts of the globe face deadly persecution; our legal and social struggles in this country are not nearly as severe.
  - Historically, the church has most often faced some cultural and legal persecution around the globe. And historically, it has thrived in those locations.
  - **[Slide 11: Acts 8]** After the crucifixion and resurrection, persecution against believers began in Jerusalem, which forced the whole church to scatter. **Acts 8.1 NET: Now on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were forced to scatter throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria.**
  - But God helped them endure, and even used this persecution for good. **Acts 11.19 NET: Now those who had been scattered because of the persecution that took place over Stephen went as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch...** God used the persecution to spread the gospel.
- † **[Slide 12: John 15]** InterVarsity has not sought out controversy or conflict, but they have not retreated either, and they have refused to conform to university demands that are counter-biblical.
- Jesus said in **John 15.18-19 NET: “If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. However, because you do not belong to the world, but I chose you out of the world, for this reason the world hates you.”**
  - InterVarsity understood they were standing for Jesus. They remained missional, gospel centered, they decided not to change or politicize the purpose of their group.
  - InterVarsity fellowships served and publically prayed for those who were persecuting them.
  - And the result? In the 2014-2015 academic year, InterVarsity reported over 4000 first time professions of faith, 21% up from the previous year, 172% up from ten years earlier. God is almighty! His will shall be done!

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## What we might face... and what we must do

- † **[Slide 13: Matthew 13]** Let's talk about what we might face and what we must do. Jesus explained part of his parable in **Matthew 13.20-21 NET: "The seed sown on rocky ground is the person who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy. But he has no root in himself and does not endure; when trouble or persecution comes because of the word, immediately he falls away.**
- As difficulties arise in our culture, we shall see who has true faith to stand with Jesus and suffer, and who returns to the world. Check yourself, see if your faith is real enough to face trials.
- † Christian college students can show us what we might experience. They have been characterized by fellow students and administrators as prejudiced, and were themselves treated as outcasts and sometimes physically intimidated. Christian students were punished for refusing to publicly take political and moral positions contrary to their beliefs.
- Missouri State University disciplined a student who would not sign a letter to a state legislator calling for the legalization of adoption by homosexual couples.
  - Eastern Michigan University dismissed a counseling student from her academic program when she refused to affirm the morality of homosexuality.
  - Whether you agree with the opinions of these students or not, don't they have the right to hold their own opinions? Yet students reported physical intimidation, rape threats, death threats.
  - Students were not allowed to attend hearings to defend their rights; campus administrators furiously hectored students to deny their faith.
  - At Rutgers, even other supposedly Christian groups turned against InterVarsity, calling them "intolerant." Are we prepared to be attacked not only by the secular world, but even by others claiming to be Christians?
- † **[Slide 14: Luke 6]** We now face an increasingly hostile government. What if the courts, the legislature, and the executive branch continue to come against us? There now is social support for enforcing the rights of others against our rights. What if the culture increasingly becomes intolerant of our message about Christ? What if even other churches speak against us for teaching biblical truth? How shall we respond? I have six suggestions.
- † One: we should consider ourselves blessed to have the opportunity to stand for Christ.
- Jesus said in **Luke 6.22-23 NET: "Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you and insult you and reject you as evil on account of the Son of Man [a title for Jesus]! Rejoice in that day, and jump for joy, because your reward is great in heaven. For their ancestors did the same things to the prophets."**
  - Nobody enjoys being persecuted; but persecution gives the opportunity to stand for Christ, to say, "Yes, I believe, and no matter what you throw at me, even bullets, I will stand with Christ."
- † **[Slide 15: Matthew 5]** Two: We should love and pray for those who hurt us. As with Cain, these people hate God and his absolute righteousness, and are attacking us because we represent God.
- Jesus said in **Matthew 5.44-45 NET: "I say to you, love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be like your Father in heaven, since he causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous."**

- Don't stop being image bearers just because you are persecuted for being image bearers. Our role is to reflect God's character and represent God; and in this dispensation, that means to shine God's light, to love unconditionally, to offer the gospel of grace even to those who hurt us.
- † **[Slide 16: Romans 12]** Three: We should respond by continuing to do the good work of Jesus among those who persecute us.
- **Romans 12.14 NET: Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse.**
  - These people need Jesus. Show them Jesus by how you respond with love and righteousness to their hate and corruption. As French says, we now have "an opportunity to demonstrate a measure of courage, an opportunity to present a faithful contrast to a secular culture."
- † **[Slide 17: Galatians 1]** Four: Let's stand firm in our faith and convictions. We cannot please the world if we stand for Christ, but we cannot please Christ if we stand with the world.
- **Galatians 1.10 NET: Am I now trying to gain the approval of people, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a slave of Christ!**
  - Will we walk on the top line, pursuing God's purposes for us, even if it means suffering; or will we take the bottom line, seeking comfort and acceptance from the world.
- † **[Slide 18: 1 Peter 4]** Five, let us rely on God to see us through. We have talked about how to do this before, but let me give you an encouragement for it here.
- **1 Peter 4.11-14 NET: Whoever speaks, let it be with God's words. Whoever serves, do so with the strength that God supplies, so that in everything God will be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen. Dear friends, do not be astonished that a trial by fire is occurring among you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice in the degree that you have shared in the sufferings of Christ, so that when his glory is revealed [when Jesus returns] you may also rejoice and be glad. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory, who is the Spirit of God, rests on you.**
- † **[Slide 19: 1 Peter 1]** Six: stay hopeful and joyful no matter how bad it gets.
- Peter wrote to people facing great persecution and said, **1 Peter 1.3-6 NET: Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he gave us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, that is, into an inheritance imperishable, undefiled, and unfading. It is reserved in heaven for you, who by God's power are protected through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. This brings you great joy, although you may have to suffer for a short time in various trials.**
  - Whatever we have to suffer, God was aware it would happen; you cannot trick God! you cannot surprise God! God knew it would happen and he allowed it to happen; there is no entity or power greater than God! nothing can thwart his will! God knew it would happen and he allowed it to happen, and he will use it for his good purposes; he always does and he promises he will. And God will empower us to endure and glorify him, if we cling to our hope of final deliverance into Heaven and eventually bodily resurrection to the new Earth, that is, if we are clinging to and depending on God and his promise of salvation through the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ! Let's pray . . .