

TRINITY FELLOWSHIP CHURCH

Cardiphonia

Sounds of the Heart: Reflections on the Christian Life

Of Spirits, Yawns, and Gathering Clouds: Trouble and Persecution in the Church

Timothy M. Shorey
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**“Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be
persecuted.”
(2 Timothy 3:12)**

Series Introduction

This *Cardiphonia* series is presented to provide *pastoral counsel with pastoral heart* for today's Christian. This is part of my intentional pastoral commitment to serve more effectively the theological and character growth of those in my care. I've created this medium to help shine more of *the whole counsel of God* into your hearts.

With its title derived from two Greek words—one meaning *heart* and the other *sounds*—our *Cardiphonia* series expresses the *heart sounds* of the pastoral leadership of Trinity Fellowship Church. In the course of life and ministry, pastors hear God speak through Word and circumstance, and gain perspective for the lives of those entrusted to their care. As they meditate on God's Word and care for God's people, God places within their hearts passions, burdens and joys that are intended for God's church. The *Cardiphonia* booklets attempt to serve both the pastoral team and the congregation of TFC by transferring such joys and concerns from our hearts to yours.

I offer this series in *faith* that God will bless any truth it expresses *and* will guard His church from any error that might creep in. I present it with the prayer that it will help provide more spiritual food for the Lord's flock in ways that will bless and strengthen those I love. May the blessing of God rest upon you as you hear these heart sounds expressed.

Yours in Christ,

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Of Spirits, Yawns, and Gathering Clouds: Trouble and Persecution in the Church

If you have ever seen Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* probably you will recall that Scrooge has a series of spirit visitations. As he is escorted by the spirits to review his past, see his present and preview his future Ebenezer sees people from all phases of his life and tries to speak with them. But each time the spirit tells him that *the people can neither see him nor hear him*. He can observe them but they have no awareness that he is even there.

His was an experience of being invisible and unnoticed; totally unseen and unheard by others. As I think about the state of the Church in the early years of the 21st century, and as I think about the state of the Church at the end of my first 25 years of pastoral care and service, I am saddened by how similar are the circumstances we face to those faced by Mr. Scrooge.

Gathering Clouds

There are two forms of trouble that I see in the American Church today. First, the trouble and persecution that I've long believed to be coming upon the American church are knocking on the door; they are in some measure already here. The clouds are gathering. To be sure we are only seeing the first glimpses of overt, organized, legal and systematic persecution against the church. The dark clouds of lawsuits, imprisonments, slander and more are only now taking shape on the horizon, but they are visible enough for any observant Christian to see.

But there is another sort of trouble for the Church which is a storm already gathered, a sorrow already borne by all who care deeply about the things of God. This sorrow is a trial, not so much of overt social persecution, but of pervasive cultural apathy.

Yawning Indifference

The affliction that grieves sensitive Christians today is that we live in a land which God seems to have turned over to sin and unbelief, and the dullness of heart this produces. It is not society's overt hatred of the Church that

presently grieves us so much as society's utter disregard and indifference. The world does not mock us so much with sneers and jeers as with yawns and snores. The great sorrow of many Christians today is not the hateful glare, but the blank stare of the world.

Our witness falls on deaf ears. Our preaching and gospel proclamation is heard as no more than a whisper in the face of a hundred-mile-an-hour gale. Few listen. Few care. Most walk by us—like characters in Scrooge's visions—all unaware that we are even here. They do not hear a word we say though we speak to them time and again. The caring Christian weeps over this, as if suffering death itself; for it is a sorrow worse than death for those who know the truth of God and care about a fallen humanity.

Real and Radical

How can this be changed? How can we once again see the church mighty in the land and triumphant in the world? How can we once again be our Lord's city on a hill (Matthew 5:14), either joined or attacked, but never ignored? How can we once again command the attention of a lost and dying world, and see converts—real and radical converts—won to Jesus Christ?

The answer is in being real and radical ourselves. This has always been God's model for effective witness and global mission. He grows the Church as the Church faithfully pours out its life even unto death. The witness of the Church has always been anemic when the way and walk of the Church has been complacent and compromised. On the other hand, the Church has always been the power of God to change the world when it has lost itself in self-denial and faithful commitment even to the point of martyrdom.

When the Church lives like the world: believing the same lies; cherishing the same dreams; hoarding the same treasures; craving the same pleasures; ignoring (along with the world) the laws and words of God; saying with its lips that Jesus is all it desires and needs, but then showing in life that He is anything but what it really pursues; calling out for the world to believe in the invisible God, but living as if the visible realm is all that matters; professing to desire holiness, but failing to practice it; telling the world to stop being what the world is, but then, being *itself* what the world is—when the Church lives

like the world, the Church ceases to have any credibility. As a result, its voice becomes tedious, tired and irrelevant to all around.

If we would see the Church revived and restored in our land as it is being revived in other places, then we must be the Church in selfless and radical conformity to the ways and will of God. But we must also be forewarned: the attention we gain will be two-edged. There will be both favor *and* fury. Along with many converts there will be much abuse.

Are We Gnats or Are We Lions

Because we are living like the world we are troubling no one and are easily ignored. Because we are troubling no one and are easily ignored, we are left alone. Nobody cares so nobody glares. The world rarely actively despises, persecutes, imprisons, slanders or kills that which is no more than a mild nuisance, any more than you or I take any serious action against a gnat.

Only when people sense a real threat do they strike back. Consider the different reactions you'd have in the face of a pesky gnat vs. a raging lion. For the first you might casually wave at the air to *shoo* the thing away; for the second you'd pull out a gun and *shoot* the thing to death. People react differently based on the perceived threat to life or well-being.

So it is with the world. The Bible and history show that Christians are rarely persecuted overtly until they are perceived as a real threat to the existing cultural order of the day. When our lifestyle, witness and convictions are such that they cannot be ignored, they *won't* be. And once noticed they will also be opposed. This is what Paul meant when he said: "Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:12). It is also what Jesus had in mind when he said, "If they persecuted me they will also persecute you" (John 15:18-25).

Not Peace, but a Sword

Brothers and sisters, we must put off all illusions of an easy, comfortable, culturally-tolerated faith. True Christianity cannot co-exist peacefully with a fallen world. This is not because godly Christians are violent or intolerant or

offensive or would ever use force or coercion¹. Rather, peaceful co-existence cannot exist for the same reason that darkness cannot co-exist with light. The kingdom of darkness will tolerate anything but the light of truth and holiness. This was Jesus' meaning when He said, "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Matthew 10:34-39). Persecution is never presented in the Bible as a possibility; it is always assumed as a certainty. The faithful Church will be a suffering Church.

We Have Not Suffered because We Have Shined

The hope of the true Church living in perpetual freedom and social acceptance has always been a pipe dream. Light and darkness cannot stand together. Contrary to what many Christian proponents of a "Christian America" have proclaimed, the Church and the world cannot hold hands in peace for long. Religious freedom is largely a myth. The world will never tolerate true faith and religion for long when authentic faith is lived. The last 230 years of American history and nearly 400 years of Christian presence on this soil prove my point.

American history has shown that in order to enjoy prosperity and freedom in this land the church has consistently muted its message and compromised its integrity. Here are some examples of its compromise:

- The silence and even complicity of the Church in the face of slavery, segregation and ongoing racism
- The silence and even complicity of the Church in the ill-treatment of the Native Americans
- The failure of the Church to mount up a true and sacrificial challenge to abortion, euthanasia and today's culture of death
- An insidious acceptance within the Church of moral relativism and all-inclusivism (the idea that everyone can get to God in his or her own way)
- The shocking moral compromise of today's American Church. Studies show that American churchgoers today are nearly as likely to lie, cheat, have pre-marital sex, abort their babies, watch television trash,

¹ *Godly* is the operative word here: I regret that many *ungodly* people, some real but unloving and unwise believers, and some counterfeit Christian pretenders have resorted to such measures.

view pornography and commit adultery as are their contemporaries in the world.

- The fact that countless Christians can go weeks and months without engaging in significant evangelism, on the one hand, and moral rebuke of sinful neighbors on the other.
- The paralyzing fear the average Christian has that he or she might say or do something that will offend an unsaved family member or friend.

In order to enjoy freedom from persecution the church has chosen to cease being the church. In truth, the world and the church have not *lived* together. In reality, only the world has lived. The church has slowly but surely died. If we were the living Church, being *in* the world without being *of* the world, the world would not long tolerate our presence. It's a spiritual as well as natural law: either darkness is dispelled or light is quenched. So far, in this country, the light has been quenched.

Double Trouble

So trouble is here and trouble is coming. If we stay as we are—being both in the world *and* of the world—we will suffer the enduring trouble of being ignored, irrelevant and marginalized. On the other hand, if we repent of our worldliness, carnality and American-style Christianity, becoming instead, Christians who really love Christ more than life, holiness more than indulgence, heaven more than earth, sinners' salvation more than sinners' approval, the Church's mission more than our dreams, then we will face the trouble of a very angry world.

Inevitably it will follow that some will be slandered, mocked, and persecuted. Soon property will be confiscated and freedom will be lost. Instead of deserved raises we will receive dismissal slips. We will be sued in court and harassed everywhere. And some of us will die. But lest any despair, remember what Jesus tells us in John 12:23-25:

“And Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him.”

Come and Die

How does a seed bare fruit? By falling into the ground and dying. Such is how our Lord harvested the fruit of our atonement and salvation: by being killed and buried that He might rise to harvest all grace in our lives. Dear Church: we must follow to that place where He has gone. We too must die if we would see the church fruitful and glorious once again. Dietrich Bonhoeffer has rightly said: “When Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die.”

The need of our generation is for a believing Church to be sold out to Jesus Christ. We need lives marked by: sacrificial love for saint and sinner alike; living hope in the face of all trials; principled and conscientious obedience; daily bold witness; fearless and outspoken rebuke of a nation and culture gone bad; impassioned, fervent worship everywhere we are. Let us so live unto God and die unto self, that people will either follow us in faith or pursue us in hatred. Let us never settle down in the comfort zone in between.

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