

The persecuted

Keeping missional focus in adverse circumstances

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Abstract

Throughout history, believers have faced ostracism, imprisonment, and other persecution when their only punishable activity was to give their allegiance to God priority over other gods or earthly powers. Present-day believers face similar injustices when the powers of their context force them to adhere to systems that violate their allegiance to God. This paper considers a current dilemma in Southeast Asia, looks at three examples from Scripture where believers similarly faced trials of faith, highlights three encounters that test a believer's missional focus, and closes by suggesting a theological framework that is foundational for responding to adversity in ways that honor God.

Keywords

Southeast Asia, sickness, healing, crisis, shaman, allegiance, power encounter, truth encounter.

1. Introduction

Persecution tests a believer's allegiance to God. Those tests are the most unrelenting and powerful when extended over time or when a person encounters a crisis. Believers in all cultures face critical decisions under extreme pressure to compromise their primary allegiance in order to solve a problem. Those who refuse to acquiesce are mocked, ostracized, imprisoned, and even severely persecuted.² How do people respond when they are the object of such persecution? What would help them maintain a missional focus and retain their primary allegiance to God when encountering adverse circumstances?³

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2 Numerous examples are detailed in Sauer and Häde 2017:290-408.

3 For the purposes of this paper, I define "missional focus" as having a singular focus on honoring God and thereby pointing a watching world to Him.

In this paper, I explore a complex problem with accompanying pressures that plagues a group of pastors in Southeast Asia, along with the believers in their congregations. Then I look at examples from Scripture where followers of God faced similarly threatening situations and yet kept their missional focus. Like those followers of God, present-day believers face tests in the three strategic areas of allegiance, power and truth. A solid theological framework is necessary to equip them to retain a missional focus, especially in adversity.

2. Allegiance to God will be tested

The group of pastors explained their dilemma: when a member of their congregation encountered a sickness that neither doctors nor intense prayer cured, the family often felt compelled to seek out their last known power for healing – the shaman. The shaman, however, would refuse to treat them unless they would first obtain a letter from their pastor releasing them from being a Christian for two weeks. Out of desperation, the congregant would ask the pastor for such a letter.⁴

2.1. The role of assumptions in decision making

Desperate situations such as a sickness that is not healed bring to the surface one's often-unrecognized assumptions. Those assumptions spring from the context in which the person has been socialized and are foundational to that person's decision making. Consequently, if they are not identified and brought to the surface, they lead to decisions that undermine the person's faith. In the situation of those asking for the letter, the pastors identified and verbalized the following assumptions:

- that all illnesses can be cured if one treats them properly;
- that the shaman must be the one who has the ultimate power to heal this particular illness;
- that the pastor holds the seal to their membership in the family of God and therefore is the one who can release them. (One member of the group described allegiance to God as being like a revolving door where one can simply go in and out when they feel it is necessary.)

2.2. Pressures that accompany desperate situations

In addition to the assumptions that influence decision making, families are also influenced by the pressures of desperation to find a solution for their dilemma. Families deeply desire that their loved one be healed. When neither natural-world

⁴ This present-day problem was faced by a group of pastors in a table group at a "Culture meets Scripture" course, Sabah Theological Seminary, April 2016.

medicine nor the prayers of the pastor have produced healing power, families become desperate and feel they must turn to the only other option they know – the shaman. The family's desperation and the added pressures from non-believers, and sometimes even from other believers, to try the shaman's rituals, can result in a complicated predicament for believers. If they refuse to participate in the shaman's ritual and the sick one dies, blame will be focused on them. Alternatively, if they do participate, other believers will accuse them of being "loose in their faith." And the powerhouse pressure of gossip will abound.

Meanwhile, the pastors also face extreme pressure. The families who come to them for that letter of "temporary release" from the faith are distressed. They tell the pastors that if they refuse to provide the necessary letter and the sick one dies, they will accuse the pastor of causing the death. And additionally, they will threaten the pastor with "Remember who pays your salary." Thus, the pastors feel that if they refuse to acquiesce and give the letter, their well-being is at risk as well as their ministry.

Believers in every culture face similar situations. How does a believer resist when pressured to make a decision that fundamentally contradicts their allegiance to the one true God? Believers have dealt with these kinds of predicaments through the ages and in every generation.

3. Three examples in Scripture where missional focus was tested

Keeping a missional focus is not easy when one is confronted with vicious threats, unjust imprisonment, and unmerciful persecution. Scripture gives examples of believers who refused, in similar situations, to obey the commands of those holding power. The following three examples provide models to follow when one's allegiance to God is challenged.

3.1. *Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego (Daniel 1-3)*

Taken to Babylon when Judah fell, these young men were subjected to reprogramming intended to "disconnect them from their ancestors, their covenant relationship with Jehovah and their collective destiny as a people" (Adeyemo 2010:1017). They negotiated each aspect of that process with their allegiance to God still intact. Their ultimate challenge came when the king commanded all his subjects to worship a golden image he had erected. Any who refused would be thrown immediately into a fiercely burning furnace. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, even knowing the consequences, did not bow down. They resolutely adhered to their allegiance to the one true God. The king even gave them a second chance, but they remained steadfast; they would not compromise. Consequently, they were bound and cast into the super-heated furnace.

3.2. *Daniel in Babylon (Daniel 6)*

Daniel's allegiance to God was also challenged in Babylon. He too had been taken captive in his youth and trained extensively in Babylonian culture and values. Early on, King Darius had noted his remarkable abilities, his grasp of the knowledge of Babylon, and his record of integrity. Before long, the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom. By this time, he was 84 years old and had amassed 60 years of public service (Adeyemo 2010:1025).

Jealous political enemies concluded that the only way to ensnare Daniel was to attack his commitment to God. They convinced King Darius to establish a royal decree that for 30 days no one was to petition any god or man for anything, only the king. Any decree the king signed according to the law of the Medes and Persians could never be changed. And the consequence of not obeying that decree was to be thrown into a den of lions.

As his enemies had presumed, Daniel remained steadfast in his devotion to God and continued his daily practice of prayer three times a day. His enemies pointed out Daniel's behavior to King Darius, reminding him of his signed decree. Though the king desperately looked for a way to rescue his loyal servant Daniel, he found none. Reluctantly, he gave the command and Daniel was thrown into the lions' den.

3.3. *Peter and John (Acts 3-4)*

Generations later, the apostles Peter and John were on their way to the temple at the time of prayer. As they approached, a man known to be lame from birth started begging them for money. Peter told him he had no money, "but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk" (Acts 3:1-6). Immediately, the man jumped up, shouting praises to God! People rushed to where they were, astounded that the lame man was now walking. Peter sought to turn their attention to the true healer, Jesus. When the religious leaders arrived and heard Peter talking about Jesus, they immediately had both him and John arrested (Acts 4:1-3).

In spite of profound pressure to obey decrees that violated their fidelity to God, these examples in Scripture chose life-threatening consequences over rejecting their primary allegiance. Their missional focus made the difference during their time of adversity. The strength of their convictions lay in the beliefs and assumptions they held. With an overriding mindset to honor God, they chose to trust Him with the dire consequences of standing firm.

4. Three ways in which missional focus is tested

Since the strength of people's convictions resides in the beliefs and assumptions they hold, that is precisely where believers can expect to incur the greatest temp-

tations and meet the strongest trials. Kraft (1996:452-454) asserts that these challenges can often come in the form of three encounters: the encounter of allegiance, the encounter of power and the encounter of truth.

4.1. *Allegiance encounter*

Kraft points out that when one switches their primary allegiance to the Creator God, they must of necessity allow it to replace their former primary relationships with “other gods, spirits, people, material objects, organizations” (1996:453). Consequently, making God one’s main allegiance necessarily affects their core identity. This faith makes them a part of the family of God, belonging to Him. As Lorein states, “Faith is not a loose facet of our being that we can put aside, but is identity-defining” (2020:15). There remains a certain kind of continuing identity with the family and community into which they were born. However, their new allegiance to God creates a discontinuity with those who are not believers. Processing that change of primary commitment and all the implications of being “in Christ” often forces believers to navigate very challenging situations, especially in a crisis or in culturally required ceremonies where identities are highlighted (Greenlee 2013:9).

4.2. *Power encounter*

Much of the world is aware of and lives in fear of spiritual powers. Innately, they assume that those spiritual beings have great power and are often considered the source of their hardships, although some understand that the spiritual beings also have power to help them. Mature believers reject turning to those powers in lieu of God’s greater power. However, should God not perform in the way the believer assumes He should, desperation can easily arise. In that distress, they either align even more strongly with God, trusting His power, or are tempted to revert to their default sources of power, resorting to traditional priests, shamans, diviners, or medicine men for help (Kraft 1996:453). Experiencing the efficacy of spiritual power has a strong impact on people’s choices. Whole people groups have encountered dramatic shifts of allegiance when God’s power is displayed in their contexts.⁵

4.3. *Truth encounter*

Believers who are minimally grounded in the Scriptures are highly susceptible to deception and often tempted to relapse back into their culture’s valued default

5 The Balangao in the Philippines are one such group. Their testimony is told by Shetler and Purvis in *And the Word Came With Power* (1992).

assumptions. Switching allegiance to God begins the process of learning how to live out that commitment in their sociocultural context. That will mean overtly committing to God's truth, which will inevitably cause conflict between their long-held cultural "truths" (actually assumptions) and the absolute truths found in Scripture.

Believers invariably find themselves in complex circumstances where one or more of these three encounters can arise. God often uses power encounters to demonstrate His greater power. Such an encounter raises the question of the source of that greater power. It is crucial to verbalize the true source of this greater power, so as to accentuate the contrast between God as power source and their core assumptions. This in turn creates a truth encounter with the culture's belief system. The Gospel will be most powerfully clear when it directly speaks into that belief system. People will then need to consider with whom they want to identify, which will result in an allegiance encounter.⁶ And since allegiance is about relationship, one's choices, as Kraft points out, will confirm and deepen their primary relationship (1996:453).

5. Necessary theological framework

For believers to keep a missional mindset and remain steadfast in adverse circumstances, their thinking must align with Scripture. One needs a solid theological understanding of how Scripture addresses their default beliefs and assumptions, including their immediate problems. In the Southeast Asia situation, where believers were asking the pastors for letters releasing them from being a Christian, their assumption was that their physical well-being was more valuable and important than their allegiance to God and His truth. Without clear theologies of allegiance, of power and of truth, they default to their better-known cultural framework. When those frameworks are verbalized and overtly compared to Scripture, the believer has solid ground to form a new scriptural theology. Shetler models this with her template of *We always thought that* (verbalize specific assumption and its cultural requirement). *But what we did not know is* (verbalize specific Scripture passages speaking to the assumption and the cultural requirement).⁷ Believers are equipped to make decisions that honor God when they have a theological framework that helps navigate their context, especially in times of personal crisis.

Foundational to a theological framework, believers need to know the meta-narrative of who God is, who they are "in Christ," who the angels are, who the evil

6 The supernatural healing in Lystra of the man known to be crippled from birth and Paul's subsequent attempt to focus the people's attention on the true healer, the living God, represent one example of this need. See Acts 14:6-18.

7 Shetler presented this paper at the Evangelical Missiological Society Southeast Regional Meeting, March 2011.

spirits are, and their origin and ultimate goal. Warner provides helpful guidance toward developing a holistic approach by focusing on the realm of the Creator and the realms He created, i.e. the realm of the unseen supernatural and the realm of humans (1991:9-32).⁸

In the Southeast Asia case, the families' situations and misguided theology of power hindered them from honoring God. They lacked a foundational theology of allegiance, which left them without an underpinning for God-honoring decision making. As believers, they needed a theology of truth to counter the deceptions that provoked their request for the letter.

6. Keeping a missional focus in adversity

Adverse circumstances challenge a believer's well-being, as noted in the three scriptural examples. Those followers of God kept their missional focus and stood firm in their allegiance, irrespective of the threat and danger. They had decided to totally trust God with their lives and well-being. Their steadfastness brought honor to God and provided a powerful witness to those watching.

When Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to bow down to King Nebuchadnezzar's golden image, the king arrogantly demanded, "Who is the god who will deliver you from my hands?" (Daniel 3:15). Though facing certain death, they were unmoved and answered:

If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up (Daniel 3:17-18).

The result was a power encounter in which God's power nullified the powers of the fire and the three remained unsinged. The awed king acknowledged their fidelity to God alone: "Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego! He sent his angel to rescue his servants who trusted in him. They defied the king's command and were willing to die rather than serve or worship any god except their own God" (Daniel 3:28 NLT). He conceded that "there is no other God who can deliver like this" (Daniel 3:29).

When Daniel's enemies triumphed and Daniel was thrown into the lions' den, King Darius told him, "Your God, whom you serve continually, He will deliver

⁸ Warner also discusses this in his book with Neil Anderson, *The Beginner's Guide to Spiritual Warfare* (2000:57-75).

you” (Daniel 6:16). And early the next morning, the king found Daniel alive and unhurt (Daniel 6:21-22). Daniel kept a missional focus in the face of certain death and God was honored, even by the king, who made a new decree, “that in every dominion of my kingdom men must tremble and fear before the God of Daniel” (Daniel 6:26).

The authorities who arrested Peter and John put them on trial, demanding, “By what power or by what name have you done this?” (Acts 4:7). Peter responded clearly and with courage that the power originated totally from Jesus Christ. The authorities, unable to refute what had happened, finally released the two after severely threatening them, leaving them with the command “not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus” (Acts 4:18). Peter and John went back to their companions, turning to God for help and asking Him in prayer to “consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness” (Acts 4:29 NIV).

When believers in any generation choose to honor God, there is no guarantee that they will escape all difficulties or, in some cases, even death. While Scripture contains many examples of God rescuing His people, it also relates how others endured mistreatment, torture, and death for refusing to waver in their allegiance to God (Hebrews 11:35-38). Preserving life at any price has temporary gain, but physical death eventually comes to all. However, giving up that life while honoring God has eternal consequences and is of infinite value.

7. Application for present-day believers in adverse circumstances

Anyone who chooses to give their allegiance to God priority will invariably experience tests of that commitment. The consequences of holding to that primary loyalty can be costly. Tienou reiterates that the way in which persecuted believers live, suffer and die for holding firmly to their allegiance to God provides a powerful witness (2015:449). He suggests that when believers accept the reality of suffering as normal rather than exceptional, it helps them create a “healthier mindset” (2015:450). I propose that believers would additionally be aided in that endeavor by developing a biblical theology of power, truth, and the war against our souls (Ephesians 6:12), along with a strong allegiance to God. With that foundational theological framework, believers would be equipped to consistently keep a missional focus in their every circumstance. And the manner in which they endure any suffering that results would give a powerful witness of the God they serve to those watching (Tienou 2015:451).

Part of living with a missional focus involves understanding the assumptions and pressures connected to important events in one’s context. When one’s underlying assumptions and related pressures are verbalized, the believer can more

objectively evaluate them with Scripture. Knowing truths from the Scriptures will in turn provide that person with a strong foundation for inevitable challenges, equipping them to face those encounters with resolute allegiance to God.

As those pastors in Southeast Asia returned home, their prayer request was for courage to refuse to give the requested letters releasing families from their faith and to trust God whatever the outcome. In doing so, like many before them, they would testify to the truth that “though this world with devils filled should threaten to undo us, we will not fear for God hath willed His truth to triumph through us.”⁹

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9 First part of the third stanza of the hymn “A Mighty Fortress is Our God” by Martin Luther.

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