

# The Persecuted Church

*Acts 4:5-12*

Luke, the church's first historian, records the first persecution of the church in Acts 4. Jesus predicted, "I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail." In spite of Hell attacking the church, Jesus promised, "Hell will not succeed."

From the first century of Jewish persecution there have been major onslaughts against the church. After the Jewish persecution, the Roman Empire wage war on believers. For example, Nero martyred the apostle Paul.

The next great attack on the church was the Roman Catholic Church in the Middle Ages or the Dark Ages. This was followed by Atheistic Communism. This persecution continues in Communist China.

Today the major foe of Christianity is Islam.

On November 10, 1483, Martin Luther, the great Protestant Reformer was born into a strict German Catholic family in Eisleben, Germany. His dad wanted Martin to be a lawyer which career he pursued at the University of Erfur. In 1505, at the age of 21, he was walking home from law school when in a severe thunderstorm a bolt of lightning that struck the ground near him. He cried out to patron St. Anne, "Help me and I will become a monk." At the age of 21, Luther became an Augustinian Monk at the monastery of Erfur for the next 20 years of his life.

Luther sold all his possessions and began trying to earn salvation by works just as the RCC taught and teaches. He went without sleep, endured bone-chilling cold without a blanket and beat himself. He later wrote of his attempt to earn God's righteousness, "If anyone could have earned heaven by the life of a monk, it was I."

Luther was ordained a RCC priest on April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1507 and served his first mass. By 1512, at the age of 28, Luther had earned his doctorate in the Bible and was ordered to teach at Wittenberg University. It was while he was teaching Romans 1:18 that the righteousness of God is not earned by practicing the Sacraments of the church but the righteousness of God is received as a gift by faith. "At last meditating day and night, by the mercy of God, I ... began to understand that the righteousness of God is that through which the righteous live by a gift of God, namely by faith... Here I felt as if I were entirely born again and had entered paradise itself through the gates that had been flung open."

Soon Luther began to speak against the works righteousness of the RCC. In October, 1517, Luther nailed his 95 theses or arguments against the sale of indulgence on the door of the church at Wittenberg. The RCC preacher Johann Tetzel was notorious for selling indulgences with which loved ones could buy their loved ones out of purgatory. Tetzel would preach, "As soon as the coin in the coffer or offering plate rings, a soul from purgatory heavenward springs."

In January 1521, Luther was excommunicated from the church by Pope Leo X. In April 1521, Luther was summoned to appear before an assembly of RCC officials in order to recant his teachings against the RCC and the Pope.

Luther refused and boldly stood his ground, “Unless I can be instructed and convinced with evidence from Holy Scripture or with open, clear, and distinct grounds of reasoning ... then I cannot and will not recant, ... Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me: Amen.” He was condemned a heretic and spent the next ten months in hiding.

That scene reminds us of Peter’s first stand against persecution for the Gospel in Acts 4.

In Acts 4:5, 6, Peter has been summoned to stand against a similar body of religious persecutors just as Martin Luther was. The religious inquisition before whom Peter stood was called the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin is referred to in Acts as the “council” (Acts 4:15; 5:27; 6:12; 22:30).

This is the same group of religious leaders that condemned Jesus to death (Matthew 26:57-68).

Now Peter stands before the same group. They ask him, “By what power, or by what name, have you done this (4:7)?” They unknowingly serve Peter his text from which to preach.

Peter first refers to “Exhibit A” who is the healed lame man who had been made “whole” by the resurrected Christ whom the Sanhedrin had crucified and whom God had raised from the dead (4:8-11).

Then Peter proclaimed one of the most important truths in regard to salvation ever stated in 4:12 and which is under fierce attack today: “Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.”

In His public ministry, Jesus stated this same truth:, “I am The Way, The Truth, The Life, no man comes unto the Father but by me” (John 14:16).

Tim Keller writes a book defending the faith entitled *The Reason for God*.

Keller addresses seven objections, which skeptics fire at Christianity.

*Exclusivity* is the first objections. This objection has been thrown at me when discussing religion with unbelievers. The objectors usually say, with rising blood pressure, something like: “You are arrogant and intolerant to think you are right and all other religions are wrong,” or “Your superior thinking about your religious views is dangerous and detrimental to world peace.”

Keller discusses “three approaches civil and cultural leaders around the world are using to address the divisiveness of religion.”

**The first approach is to outlaw religion.**

This has been futilely attempted by countries like Communist China, who “expelled Western missionaries after World War II,” only to see the number of Christians explode.

**The second approach to the divisiveness of exclusivity is to condemn religion.**

This strategy is more efficient than the first and goes like this: Create an environment that makes religions which claim exclusivity look unenlightened and outrageous. This brainwashing is accomplished by drilling certain axioms into the public’s thinking which gain the status of common sense. Keller analyzes four of these axioms. Perhaps you have been baffled by them in previous skirmishes with skeptics.

*“All major religions are equally valid and basically teach the same thing.”*

*“Each religion sees part of spiritual truth, but none can see the whole truth.”*

*“Religious belief is too culturally and historically conditioned to be ‘truth.’”*

*“It is arrogant to insist your religion is right and to convert others to it.”*

The proponents of these views are holding to an exclusive view of religion. They have their own alternate view and articles of faith. They arrogantly condemn other religions (Exclusivism) which do not hold to their view. They are guilty of the very charge leveled against exclusivists plus hypocrisy.

**The third approach is to keep religion completely private.**

This view states that a person can privately practice his religion and even evangelize but must keep religious beliefs out of the public. The reason given for this view is that religious views interjected into any moral debate are “conversation stoppers.” Keller argues any opposing view interjected into the argument over moral issues stops the conversation. The political debate over abortion polarizes even when argued strictly from secular views concerning choice. Again, as in the other views, the opponents of Christianity’s exclusivity are guilty of that which they are accusing us. To point out this hypocrisy is a strategy to disarm skeptics.

*The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life* reported that 52% of American Christians surveyed believe that people from some non-Christian faith can be saved.

A staggering one out of two does not believe that salvation is exclusively through Jesus Christ.

*In an interview with USA Today, Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, said “that much of this confusion can be traced to the superficiality that marks far too many evangelical pulpits. The disappearance of doctrinal understanding and evangelical demonstration can be traced directly to the decline in expository preaching and doctrinal instruction. A loss of evangelistic and missionary commitment can be fully expected as a direct result of this confusion or repudiation of the Gospel.”*

There are several versions of this rejection of Jesus Christ as the only way to salvation. The first version is **pluralism** which teaches that every person is going to heaven no matter what he believes. Pluralism says there are many paths to God who may be called either Buddha, Allah, Jehovah, or Jesus. An example of pluralism is Oprah Winfrey.

Oprah grew up in a Baptist church where she developed her speaking abilities. She now holds five one hour long services a week with an audience of 10 million. What is her message? Jesus Christ is not the only way to Heaven. One clip in *The Church of Oprah* video shows Oprah blatantly denying Jesus as the only way to God. *The New York Times* says Oprah is the leader of a worldwide cult.

*"How can there be only one way to heaven or to God?"* Oprah asked her audience in a previously taped show.

One woman in the audience asked, *"What about Jesus?"*

Oprah defiantly answered, *"What about Jesus?...There couldn't possibly be one way."*

That may be the gospel of Oprah, but that is not the Gospel of John. Jesus said that there is only one path to heaven in John 14:6 and He is that path: "I am *the* (not a) way, *the* (not a) truth, and *the* (not a) life, no man comes to the Father, but by me." This statement in the Gospel of John is significant since John wrote the Gospel to tell people that Jesus is the Son of God and believing in him you can be saved (20:31). Either Jesus is the Son of God and the only way of salvation as he said in John 14:6 or he is a liar.

The apostles followed the example of Christ in preached exclusivity: Acts 4:12 "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name [not Buddha, Mohammed, nor Moses] under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved."

In addition to pluralism there is **inclusivism** which is not as board as pluralism. Inclusivism teaches that people are saved because of the death and grace of Christ, but people from other religions will be saved who never heard of Jesus "through no fault of their own."

One form of inclusivism (sometimes called accessibility) states that salvation is through nature or general revelation. This is the view of Terrance L. Tiessen:

*"All who have ever been saved, who are now being saved, or who ever will be saved, are saved because Jesus Christ died and rose again for them.... Nevertheless, God does not require a faith that would be impossible for anyone by virtue of their ignorance. In the Day of Judgment, God will hold all people accountable for their response to the revelation that was made available to them, and only for that revelation. God may graciously save some who do not believe in Jesus as Savior if they are ignorant of him through no fault of their own."*

Does God save people who have only general revelation from nature and not the special revelation of the death, burial, and resurrection Jesus Christ? Paul answers that question in Romans 1:20: "*For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and deity: so that they are without excuse.*" If a person dies without hearing and responding to the special revelation of the gospel that person is without excuse. Instead of general revelation being sufficient to save if someone has never heard of Christ, general revelation is sufficient only to condemn.

Tiessen continues, "*All people meet Jesus Christ personally at the moment of death, and they respond to him in a manner consistent with the response they had been giving to God and His revelation during their lifetime. At that moment, those who had received forms of revelation less complete than the gospel but who had responded in faith, by a work of the Holy Spirit, will joyfully find in Christ the fulfillment of all their hopes and longings*" (Terrance L. Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved? Reassessing Salvation in Christ and World Religions*, Downers Grove, IVP, 2004, 478).

Can people be saved after death? In Luke 16:26, Jesus told the story of the rich man in Hell. The rich man in Hell asked Abraham to send Lazarus to dip his finger in water and just put one drop of water on his tongue. Abraham responded: "*Between me and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from here to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from there.*" There is no purgatory, postmortem like second chance.

Some are agnostic concerning the fate of those who die never having heard the special revelation of the gospel.

John Stott, the famous British pastor and widely read author, expressed his agnosticism: "*The fact is that God, alongside the most solemn warnings about our responsibility to respond to the gospel, has not revealed how he will deal with those who have never heard it*" (David Edwards and John Stott, *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue*, Downers Grove, IVP, 1988, 327).

The Scriptures have declared with certainty the eternal future of those who are not reached with the gospel. Romans 3:23 says that "all have sinned" because they were born sinners (Romans 5:12). The result of those who die in this universal sin condition (including those who never heard) is eternal separation from God (Romans 6:23a); unless that sinner places faith in Christ and receives the gift of eternal salvation (Romans 6:23b). How can sinners be saved by faith in Christ? Not by nature's outstretched hand pointing to a higher power. Someone has to give them the gospel (Romans 10:13-15). If you have any doubts about this subject take the time to carefully read and study these verses.

Because Paul believed he inspired by God Words in Romans 10:13-15, he traveled on three missionary journeys in Acts. Paul did not qualify these verses in Romans 10:13-15 saying, "*If you missionaries cannot make it to the field, don't worry about it all religions*

*are equal or at death they can receive Christ."* Pluralism and inclusivism are not the Scriptural views on salvation.

***Exclusivism*** is the clear teaching of Scripture. There is only one way of salvation, and that is exclusively through faith in Christ. Does this mean that the person who has never heard the gospel is without hope?

While general revelation is insufficient to save it does point to God as Psalm 19:1 says: *"The heavens declare the glory of God."* If a person responds to the light in nature, because God is just, He will give more light or make sure the gospel gets to that person.

Cornelius is an example in Acts 10. Inclusivists believe that Cornelius was a believer before Peter preached the gospel to him. They say that 10:2 describes him as *"devout."* Also, inclusivism is heard in 10:34-35, when Peter preached that *"God is no respecter of persons: but in every nation he that fears him, and works righteousness, is accepted with him."* This is John Sanders' view: *"Cornelius was already a saved believer before Peter arrived but he was not a Christian believer"* (John Sanders, *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1992, 254).

This conclusion is incorrect for several reasons. First, in Acts 2:5, Luke describes the Dispersion Jews who were in Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost as *"devout."* After Peter preached, 3000 of them got saved. *"Devout"* as used by Luke only means a person is religious. Also, after Peter preached the gospel to Cornelius and the Gentiles were saved, Peter returned to Jerusalem and related this groundbreaking event to the Jewish leaders. He recounted how the angel told Cornelius that a man named Peter would come to his house and he *"shall tell you words, whereby you and all your house shall be saved"* (11:14). The angel used the future tense concerning Cornelius' salvation. When Peter arrived at Cornelius' house, Cornelius was not saved; when Peter left, Cornelius was. So Cornelius was not saved apart from or before he heard the gospel.

When Peter preached that God is no respecter of persons and that *"in every nation"* God accepts persons, Peter was referring to examples like Cornelius. Peter did not mean every person in every nation is accepted by God no matter which religion he was in. In Acts 4:12, Peter said Jesus is the only way. Cornelius is an example of a person who responded to the light he had in general revelation and God in His justice and fairness gave him more light (the special revelation of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ). There is hope for those who have never heard. God providently leads missionaries or believers here in America to those responding to the insufficient light of general revelation to give them the sufficient light of the special revelation of the gospel.

God is not only just and fair but God is love. God's concern for the lost has been demonstrated when He gave His Son to die for the sins of all people, including those who have not heard. *"It is not His will that any should perish but that all should come to repentance"* (2 Peter 3:9). The love of God and the death of Christ are inclusive of all sinners. His salvation is exclusive for only those who receive Christ as Savior.