

IMMERSE

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What *Isn't* Persecution

By: Mark Matlock

The word *persecution* is thrown around a little too casually these days.

While the persecution of Christians globally is rising at an alarming rate (the Religious Liberty Commission World Evangelical Fellowship estimates that 200 million people in more than 60 nations are denied their human rights solely because they're Christians), claims of persecution in the United States are a bit overblown.

Protecting the meaning of words should be important. Allowing the meaning of *persecution* to diminish, especially as it relates to the torture and indignity faced by many of our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world, is a disgrace.

Whether it fuels the fervor of a rally, raises funds, or gives a group the feeling of true unity with Christ, American Christians have watered down the real meaning of persecution—what's worse is that this idea-virus is even more prevalent in youth ministry.

Spreading the Idea-Virus

In the '80s some fellow Christians in my high school and I decided to form a Christian Club on campus, but we were denied permission because of the religious purpose of our gatherings. For a few weeks it was a big deal. We sought legal counsel, had prayer meetings, and pled our case (and eventually won). We considered this struggle (and were encouraged by others much older than us to view it as) "persecution."

Similar stories have been told in relation to See You at the Pole challenges, wearing T-shirts adorned with Christian messages to school, and the like. Lately I've heard many in youth ministry describing a "war" and "attacks on the youth of this country" using similar persecution-heavy language. Terms such as "virtue terrorism" have been thrown about as well—inaccurately (and offensively) describing what's taking place in our time in history.

Many Christians believe they've been persecuted for their faith when that's not necessarily the case. There are two forms of non-persecution that we must consider.

Wrongly Associating Our Actions with Christ

Yes, Jesus did say if they persecuted him they will persecute us also. But the problem is that many of the "persecutions" we "suffer" aren't caused by our Christ-like behavior—they're caused by activities we do that we claim are in Jesus' name.

I've seen Christian leaders lack grace and mercy to guests on a talk show, and then report that they experienced persecution for Christ because of the discussion. Though these leaders claimed to represent Jesus, they weren't embodying a true representation of his message.

When we're persecuted for our generosity, love, grace, pursuit of truth, diligence, and defense of the weak and the oppressed, then we're identifying with Christ. But stupidity and foolishness "in Jesus name" doesn't count.

Considering Yourself Persecuted When You're Freedoms Are Intact

Consider the "Christian club" at my high school. Our freedom to meet and pray as Christians on our campus wasn't being denied; rather, it was our desire to become an official club and receive school funds that was opposed. Were we being persecuted? Not exactly.

How about students who're denied the right to organize prayer around their school's flagpole? While their actions are legally protected, is such denial really persecution? Is it really okay to liken such situations to the prophet Daniel? Nebuchadnezzar required everyone in his kingdom to pray only to him or face death in the lion's den—can you equate such persecution with blocking a prayer rally around a school flagpole?

What Qualifies as Persecution?

The following questions can serve as a litmus test for true persecution.

1. *Is suffering involved?* Persecution requires that some form of agony or disadvantage is occurring. Failing to make rational arguments or support your faith in Christ doesn't count as a disadvantage.

2. *Are we denied human rights because of our faith alone?* Does the label "Christian" prevent us from being fairly employed, able to own property, and raise a family?

3. *Would we be better off if we belonged to the dominant religion of our country?* Because of the religious freedom in America, this is a difficult one to understand; but for our brothers in sisters in countries where Islam or Hinduism are the national religions, being a Christian puts you in opposition to much of everyday existence. In the United States, one could argue that being a Christian represents an advantage over other (and no) religions.

For the Truly Persecuted

I'd encourage you to take a moment and pray for those in our world truly persecuted for the cause of Christ. Do a Google search and find the name and story of someone presently imprisoned for her faith and share this information with your students at your next gathering. Rather than stirring up frustrations over challenges we may have with presenting our faith and message, let's focus on the abundance of freedoms we have and use them to defend (and restore) religious freedom and human rights denied those elsewhere in the world. In doing so, we demonstrate the love of God.

If we're persecuted for that (although the chances are we won't be), then so be it.