Winning by Losing[1]

As I write and as you read this first editorial for *Unio cum Christo*, Christians are being persecuted or even tortured because they have not hidden their faith but have let their light shine in the world. This is hard to take for those of us who are sitting comfortably, not only because of our feelings, but because it seems to contradict what we believe about the Lordship of Christ. Is Christ living and reigning, are all things under his control, and does he care for his people? How can we harmonize what we believe with reports of the fate of Christians around the world?

Christianity is the most persecuted religion, and global opposition to the Christian faith seems to be on the up, no doubt because of new geopolitical factors. Things seem to be getting more apocalyptic. We are told that in our time more Christians are under the cosh than ever before. We know the names of a good many martyrs who gave their lives in the past, because their sacrifice has been recorded and is honored by the church.They make up "the glorious company of the Apostles ... and the noble army of Martyrs" as the *Te Deum* says, those who praise the Lord and also beseech, How long? (Rev 6:10). Memory is very import- ant, and the Christian tradition reminds us that suffering for the faith has always been, in one form or another, an integral part of not being ashamed of Christ's name and bearing his cross.

We are, however, ignorant of the names of our brothers and sisters, the myriads of men, women, boys and girls who are suffering in dark places today. Such information does not retain the attention of the celebrity-obsessed West or find its way into social media's viral posts. These martyrs are the forgotten in north Korean cells, the unknown in the sixty or so other nations where oppression exists, in Islamic countries, sub-Saharan Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Vietnam, in India, under Hindu intolerance, and the list goes on. If there is a growing awareness of the dangers of religious extremism, and some action on the part of whistle-blowing organizations, little is achieved in practical terms to obtain the freedom of belief that the Reformation brought and that is our taken-for-granted legacy in theWest.

Add to this the untold anguish of the multitudes who live in fear of not knowing when the axe is going to fall, the threat of having one's husband or children taken away, of being imprisoned for having a Bible, of having to flit along in the shadows to worship with other Christians, or the horror of crossing the sea in makeshift vessels to escape religious violence. Surely we cannot remain indifferent to the terror that stalks our brethren by day, or bury our heads in a theology of prosperity that holds out unbiblical hopes to the eschatologically impatient.

Not that things are getting easier in the liberal West, where there are other forms of evil, softer and more subtle: the pressure of instant media exposure to the horrors of the world from Timbuktu to Kamchatka, the triviality of mind-softening media drivel, the invasiveness of political correctness, the pressure on private conscience and

---

[1] Editorial, *Unio cum Christo,* 1:1, 5-11

freedom of speech, the toxic lewdness of sin carried on triumphantly, the fact that over the last quarter of a century many former wrongs have become rights in the ethical and legal sense ... Next to tribulation in the majority world it's a mere trifle, but the future looks like a sunset rather than a new dawn. Many Christians feel that they are being squeezed out of public life and service; their faith is incompatible with what is socially acceptable as they are subjected to demands with which they are not willing to compromise.

Some of our more enlightened contemporaries seem to think that in a multicultural world tolerance and hospitality à la Derrida are a guiding light. The problem is that sooner or later a tolerant culture will reveal itself to be intolerant in some way or other. Claims of ultimate freedom unravel in unlimited despotisms, a paradox at the heart of the Grand Inquisitor scene in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*.Take a case in point.While claiming to be the cradle of humane tolerance, the way freedom of speech was advocated recently in France can hardly be seen as enlightened. It subtly mutated into freedom to pour scorn on others, as the scurrilous attitude of *Charlie Hebdo* showed—not free speech to enable peaceable dialogue with those of unlike mind, but entitlement to ridicule what others, rightly or wrongly, hold sacred. When the comedian Dieudonné M'Bala was condemned for anti-Semitism a little while after the *Charlie Hebdo* debacle, it is not difficult to understand why French Muslims think that secularism is blind.

That the world has become more dangerous today seems obvious: the arms trade, random terrorism that strikes anywhere, local wars that spill into other places, or individual acts of lone terrorists, all contribute to the fragile fabric of the global world. Nor has the nuclear threat gone away, and the danger of terrorists getting a nuclear arm one day cannot be discounted. Zygmunt Bauman states that fear has become "liquid."[2] It flows everywhere; even if it is not outside our door today, it may be tomorrow. The unexpected strikes even in security-monitored cities. The global crisis has become permanent and seemingly irremediable, unlike the economic crisis of the last century's Great Depression. If terrorism is uncontrollable, the global economy has its unpleasant surprises as well. Politicians may act as if they were in control, but the power of the national state is diminished. The temptation to abandon all hope is palpable, as Bauman's books illustrate.

It is therefore appropriate that the first issue of *Unio cum Christo* deal with the global witness to the Faith in this rapidly mutating situation.The goal of this journal is to provide a means of encouragement to those who find them- selves hard-pressed as witnesses either in the majority world or elsewhere, to those who live in situations where they feel alone against the prophets of Baal, or almost. As Reformed believers, we can learn from each other, sup- port each other, and travel side by side. We have the rich heritage of those who trod the same path before us. When we forget this, we impoverish both ourselves and the witness of the church. How then are we called to witness to Christ, and what are our expectations in the light of Scripture for the

---

[2] Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Fear* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006).

context described above? In light of these questions, the subject of witness, persecution, and martyrdom is presented here in a variety of articles, from the biblical foundations for witness to historical examples in the past and the present, in a broad sweep from New Testament times to the experiences of the Korean church and the silent sufferings of many Christians today.

How should Christians live in a world that has become dangerous? Surely our witness should not be fundamentally different from that of Christians of the first century. What defines a movement is its origins, and often its founder. God moves myriad galaxies, and Jesus Christ is Lord of the world and history until its end, and beyond. Everything is therefore ours *en Christo*, and we need not fear the unexpected that might strike.We continue to live our lives, wherever we are, for him, day after day, in a spirit of faith and hope. Living one day at a time is what Jesus taught his followers to do. Without attempting to shoulder the suffering of the world, we are called to act and support those around us who suffer the misfortune that strikes— whether through unemployment, sickness, social exclusion, poverty, in- justice or oppression. Beyond our local and national communities, let's not forget our brothers and sisters by doing for them what we can as they suffer persecution and poverty, and by intercession, because the Lord hears and answers prayer for them. History shows that God brings good out of evil and bestows blessings in suffering. Believing in divine sovereignty in a Reformed way means we will know, like Joseph of old, that "God meant it for good," even when things are most adverse for us (Gen 50:20 ESV).

Surely the Reformed faith invites courage—first of all by having a tough mind and accepting that all things come to pass, even sufferings and persecution, by God's will, not in spite of it, and must be embraced as part of the mystery of providence and his love for his people. God works all things for good, even contrary experiences and evil, and trust must be the overdrive that kicks in where understanding stops.

What then will our witness be, and what are our expectations? In this number of *Unio cum Christo*, we will take heart through solid biblical theology, be edified by the example of those who have suffered following the Master, and be encouraged to follow their pattern by their brave words *in extremis*. This will lead us to look away to the Lord, who has a compassionate heart of love for his children, who is powerful to save, and to lead his chosen ones to glory.

The witness theme occupies a considerable place in Scripture, as Donald Carson's article indicates with his habitual clarity. *Martus* is a forensic term describing a person who knows the truth and can testify before a court of law, faithfully declaring what has been seen or heard. In the New Testa- ment, the witness to the truth of Christ and the power of salvation often lead to arrest, exile, and death. For this reason, the Greek word was transliterated as *martyr*, one who suffers and dies to inherit the crown of life, rather than turning back on the faith.

To witness is to testify before others. This is what the apostles did, they who had direct knowledge of Christ (Acts 1:22).Their personal witness was delivered to others

as the faith of the saints (2 Tim 2:2), the *paradosis* (1 Cor 15:1–3).The Holy Spirit divinely attests to truth in inspired apostolic revelation, and the human witness *is* the witness Christ bears to his saving power (John 15:26). So Paul calls on God as witness to the integrity and the truth- fulness of the gospel of the Son (Rom 1:9). God the Holy Spirit is the final arbitrator of the reliability and trustworthiness of this testimony. The prophetic and apostolic Scriptures are the object of the special attestation of the Spirit, but beyond that, when Scripture is preached, confessed, and witnessed to, the Spirit works with the word of truth. The hearts of those who are confronted by the truth are either softened to become hearts of flesh, receptive of the truth, or hardened to become like stone in rejecting the witness of the word. Those who bear witness to Christ have more than just good expectations; they know that the Spirit will work with the truth.

The dynamic of word and Spirit creates situations of conflict and con- frontation.The opposition may range from indifference to violent rejection, gentle ridicule to persecution. This is part of the age-old conflict between the seed of the promise and that of the serpent. What is surprising is not that the word of witness causes opposition. It was ever so—Jesus himself recognized this to be the fate of the prophets from Abel in Genesis 4 to Zechariah in 2 Chronicles 24:20, covering the range of the Old Testament canon (Luke 11:51). What is surprising is that we continue to think it shouldn't happen. "Beloved," said the apostle Peter, "do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you" (1 Pet 4:12–14).

This, then, is the expectation of believers: suffering and persecution in the new covenant. It is the eschatological suffering with Christ in the end time that will reach a paroxysm before his return in glory. On a global scale, the New Testament does not promise us that things will get better and better; they may well get worse as opposition to Christ and his witness grows, but he will be with his ambassadors to the end of the age. Jesus's words about the vine and the branches portray union with Christ as productive of fruit that abides, as his life flows into those grafted into him (John 15:16). In what follows, Jesus states that the world hated him and it will do the same with his disciples, because they are not of the world: "If they persecuted me they will also persecute you. ... on account of my name" (vv. 20–21). The world hated both the Son and the Father, and will not treat witnesses to the truth in any other way. So "blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 5:10–12).

The words of Jesus do not apply to his listeners alone. Paul continues in the same vein about the present evil age, dominated by those whose minds are blinded by Satan (Gal 1:4; 2 Cor 4:4).There will be terrible times in the last days, the interim period when the church, under the cross, awaits the return of the Lord in glory. In fact, "all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil

people and impostors go from bad to worse" (2 Tim 3:1–5, 12–13). Christ's witnesses will share the fellowship of sufferings with their Head (Phil 3:10). Suffering with Christ is fundamental to Christian identity, because it is the consequence of witness to the truth. The danger for believers is to be pulled off course by compromise, through the devil's temptation tactics, and to become false witnesses with regard to the truth.

Writing on eschatology and suffering, Richard Gaffin states:

> the eschatology of the New Testament is an "eschatology of victory"—victory presently being realized by and for the church, through the eschatological kingship of the exalted Christ (Eph 1:22). But any outlook that fails to grasp that, short of Christ's return, this eschatology of victory is an eschatology of suffering—an eschatology of (Christ's) "power made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9)—confuses the identity of the church. ... Until Jesus comes again, the church "wins" by "losing." [3]

So a profound paradox runs through the New Testament and on from there throughout the church age. It is part of the paradox of the gospel and of Christ's own person and work. The Lord was despised and rejected, put to death in weakness, but raised in glory. The gospel is foolish ignorance for those who are perishing, the wise of this world, but for those who believe, it is the power of God for salvation and the wisdom of God, against all conventions and appearances. It is something to be proud of (Rom 1:16–17); losing in the world's terms is winning by the power of the gospel in the light of eternity. Pascal got it right in his famous wager (*pari*): winning everything in this life is nothing next to losing eternity. By losing in this world in God's service, we win for eternity, just as Christ lost his life in obedience to the Father but took it up again as the first fruits of the new creation.

Persecution and opposition seem to be the bane of the church, which is weak in terms of the powers of this age. It often seems that she will come to nought and be wiped out completely, but God raises up his people and snatches them from the dragon's jaws. "When I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor 12:10) is the witness of the church as well as the apostle. This is no beggarly *apologia pro vita ecclesiae*, but simply what the eye of faith sees: that out of human weakness comes divine strength, out of death comes new life, and out of suffering glory. The old creation is in labor pains delivering the new (Rom 8:22). The world will never see it, nor did the world see it in the Lord. Only the eye of faith sees it, and this truth will strengthen any knees that tremble in the heat of opposition, and renew hope for those who are down-trodden to the point of despair. Moreover, all that we do here in this passing world will not be done out of secular concerns, but for Christ's kingdom.

Dying we live, losing we win, because the way of the cross is the way of victory. God's people should learn in bad times, or in better, that the good times will be

---

[3] Richard B. Gaffin Jr., "Theonomy and Eschatology: Reflections on Postmillenialism," in *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique*, ed. William S. Barker and W. Robert Godfrey (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 216.

eternal because Christ won the victory. He is winning, and will win, in spite of the adversary, our sinfulness, and many failings. United with Christ, the church wins; divided from him by worldly power and compromise, she falls.

Those who pass through fiery trial know this all too well, because they know that the way of the cross is the only hope possible.We in theWest are at a certain disadvantage here. Because of the heritage of the Reformation, we have come to take freedom and the good life for granted, and too often we act as if we were "at ease in Zion" (Amos 6:1). But it was not always so; these privileges were hard won through affliction and martyrdom. At present they seem to be eroding gradually, and who knows what the future will hold if our nations persist in turning their backs on the gospel?Who can say that tribulation will not be ours one day, if a godless church and radical secularistic autonomy rule the roost?

When and if this happens, our question should not be *why* but rather *why not*? Is this not the lot of all who are faithful to the Lord Jesus? If that should be the case, we too will have the joy of winning by faith in Christ, even though everything may disintegrate all around. As the old hymn goes, after the "night of weeping will come the morn of song." We may lose every battle, but the final war will end in Christ's victory. Such faith is hope for the hopeless and comfort for the downtrodden.