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“You May Kill Us, but You Can Never Hurt Us:” The Witness of Modern Martyrs

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When Pastor Al Meredith entered the pulpit of Wedgwood Baptist Church September 19, he addressed the question nearly everyone was asking: “Where is God in all this?” And the “all this” was almost too horrible to remember.

Just four days before, the church’s sanctuary had been a place of horror and carnage as Larry Gene Ashbrook opened fire on a youth evangelism rally, killing seven participants and wounding others. He then calmly sat down in a pew and shot himself to death. In an instant, a place of worship had been reduced to a crime scene.

Once again, young people lay dead and wounded from an act of inexplicable violence. But this time the scene wasn’t a high school, but a church building. What the youth first thought was a dramatic skit turned out to be a matter of life and death. Larry Ashbrook entered the sanctuary, shouted anti-Christian curses at the young people, and then shot with cold-blooded accuracy.

The youth had met that morning around school flagpoles as a part of the national “See You at the Pole” prayer and evangelism movement. Little did they know that their witness would soon reach around the world.

How could God have let this happen? How do we explain this evil? A tragedy like this sets loose a torrent of theological questions. The response to these questions is a true test of any theology—and any Christian.

Far too many Christians—theologians and preachers included—crack or cave in the face of the question of evil. The temptation is to compromise either the power or the character of God, presenting God as powerless to prevent the evil, or unwilling to protect His own. Pastor Meredith refused either option, and he also refused the cowardly response that surrenders the question to meaningless “mystery.”

Preaching from Romans 8:28, Pastor Meredith told his people that God is in control, and he assured them of God’s love. He emphasized the active sense in which the Apostle Paul affirms that “God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.”

The pastor refused to hide behind the limited God of modern theology. “God is sovereign over every molecule in the universe,” Pastor Meredith declared. Without depreciating his congregation’s grief, he explained that he had “lived long enough to see what I thought was bad work for good. This tragedy that the devil wanted to use to stop the people of the Lord has ended up strengthening us.”

The tragedy also took the witness of those young people across the globe. Within hours the media had turned full attention upon the Ft. Worth, Texas church and its grief. Young people and their adult leaders were honest about their shock and sorrow, but through the tears they shared the gospel with a watching world.

The bold witness of these young people is shocking to a culture accustomed to timid Christianity and churches in retreat. As the century closes, the martyrdom of young persons such as Cassie Bernal (killed at Columbine High School), and now the Wedgwood seven, may awaken American Christians from their complacent slumber.

The age of Christian martyrs is not over. More than 100 million persons have been killed for their Christian faith in this century alone. The early church quickly came to know the pain of the sword and the teeth of the lions. "We conquer in dying," explained one early church leader. Another would write that the church is "watered by the blood of the martyrs."

Where is God in the midst of this? He is causing all things to work for good to those who love God, and are called according to His eternal purposes. Even in this great evil, God was glorifying himself in the multiplied witness of these young people. They were safe in the eternal purpose of God. As the Wedgwood Baptist Church web site declared: "We have not 'lost' our loved ones. We know exactly where they are."

An entire generation of American evangelicals was profoundly shaped by the 1956 murder of Jim Eliot and four other young missionaries. Will this generation of evangelical youth be inspired by these latest martyrs? Will they take up unapologetic witness and cultural confrontation? What about their parents?

We cannot expect a compromised church preaching a diluted gospel to produce this kind of conviction. Such faith is found only among those who know the transforming power of Jesus Christ and have received pardon from sin and the gift of everlasting life.

Only those who claim the assurance of Romans 8:28 can look death in the face and say, with a famous martyr of the early church, "You may kill us, but you can never hurt us."

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