

# GLOBAL CHRISTIANS

Weekly Edition

No. 56

## Can mission be carried on in times of conflict?

*They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, ill-treated--of whom the world was not worthy. (Heb. 11:37-38)*

This is a strange mission text. We are not used to thinking of carrying on mission in times of conflict and war or of people being killed for their faith. We think of mission as a peacetime activity. We place a high priority on personal security and comfort and expect our government to protect us.

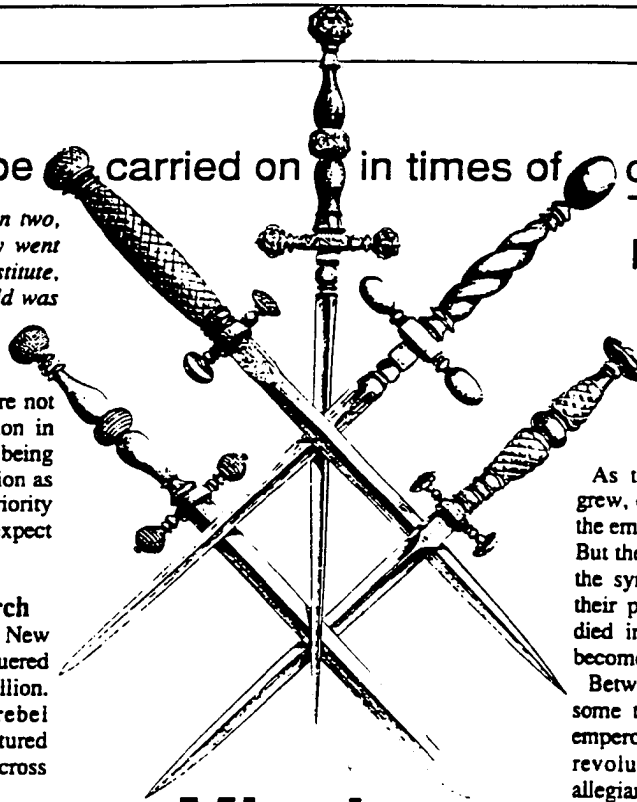
### 1. Conflict and the Early Church

The picture was far different in the New Testament. The Roman Empire had conquered the Jews, but they were in constant rebellion. Roman secret agents infiltrated rebel movements, and those who were captured were crucified outside Jerusalem. The cross was a sign of political execution.

It was into this world of conflict that Jesus came. Jesus himself was considered a potential threat to the nation when he was born, so Herod sent troops to kill him. To make certain they succeeded, the troops slaughtered every baby boy in the village. Jesus spent his first years as a refugee in Egypt. After he began his ministry, Jesus was accused of being an anti-national and a subversive. Enemies tried to trap him. In the end, he was accused of treason and brought to trial on false charges. He was brutally beaten, publicly shamed and crucified between two political criminals as a terrorist and an enemy of the state. They killed God's first missionary.



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## Mission in times of conflict

The same thing is recorded in Acts. Peter and John healed a lame man and ended up in jail. Stephen, a layman, began to preach and was stoned to death. Paul wrote:

Five times I was lashed, three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brethren; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. (2 Cor. 11:25-27)

The early church had no other choice.

Paul Hiebert

As the Christians spread and the church grew, opposition increased. In A.D.64 Nero, the emperor, began the first great persecution. But the godly suffering of the Christians won the sympathy of the people. They blessed their persecutors; they praised God as they died in the fires. Many believed, only to become martyrs themselves.

Between A.D.64 and A.D.312 there were some ten major persecutions. The Roman emperors feared Christianity because it was revolutionary--it demanded the ultimate allegiance of the people.

What lessons can we learn from this? First, the early church grew rapidly in a time of social and political conflict. It grew because the early Christians had a passion for evangelism--a passion that was stronger than their fear of suffering and death.

Second, the Christians found extraordinary ways to evangelize. Paul and Silas led their jailer to Christ. Thomas was sold as a slave to a king in South India. He won the favor of the king and planted a church.

Can mission be carried on in times of conflict? The early church had no other choice.

### 2. The Wedding of Church and State

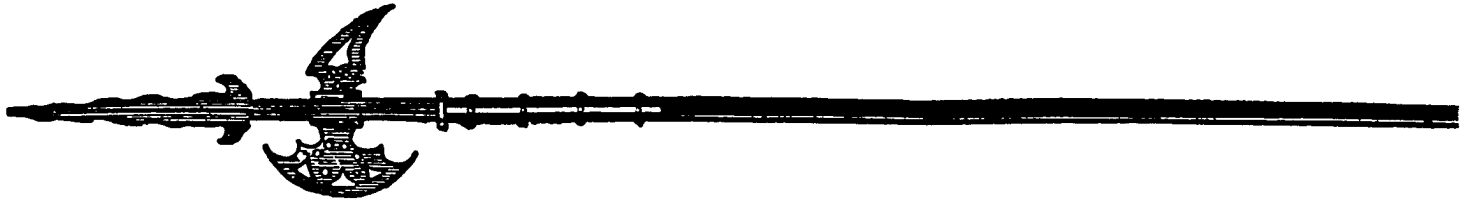
The picture changed after A.D.312. Constantine, the Roman Emperor, was converted, and he made Christianity the official religion of the state. For the next fifteen hundred years the church looked to the state for protection, support and finances. Missionaries followed the soldiers who conquered Europe, and troops often marched the vanquished to the river for baptism.

There were exceptions--people who depended on God and not the state. Columba went with twelve companions as a missionary to evangelize the unconquered tribes of Scotland and England; Willibrord evangelized Holland; and Wynfrith evangelized Germany.

The faithfulness of these mission-minded people was not strong enough, however, to keep the world from identifying Christianity with Western power and colonialism.

What lessons can we learn from this period

(continued)



in history? First, because it was wedded to the state. Christianity came to be seen as a Western religion. To become Christian was to become Western in dress and thought. This has done great damage to the missionary outreach of the church.

Second, the church in the West increasingly depended upon Western governments for protection and security. Sending churches came to put their trust in their governments rather than in God.

### 3. The Modern Church and Conflict

Today the picture is changing again. We are entering the third era in the life of the church. Two facts illustrate the transition. First, the West is losing its dominance. Japan, China, India, Latin America, and Africa are emerging as new centers of world power. This realignment is creating great tensions on the world scene.

## The real question is, Can we retain a vital commitment to mission when we live in peace, plenty and security?

There are also religious conflicts due to the rise of Muslim and Hindu fundamentalism. One consequence of this is that almost 87 percent of the world's people live in lands closed to mission work.

Another cause of conflict is the rapid move of people to the cities, bringing a marked rise in conflict between rich and poor, between ethnic groups, and between religious communities forced to live next to each other. Urban riots and gangs have become ways of life in many parts of the world.

The second fact pointing to a new era in church history is the internationalization of the church. Today whites are a minority in the world church. The largest Mennonite Brethren churches are now in Zaire and India.

This internationalization of the church has been accompanied by persecution and suffering. Most Christians live in countries where they cannot turn to the government for protection.

What lessons can we learn from these churches living in conflict and opposition? First, it is clear that conflicts shake peoples' faith foundations and make them more responsive to the gospel.

In 1960 the church in Indonesia was small and struggling. Then a civil war erupted in which more than 300,000 were killed. The Christians showed nonviolent love and hospitality and provided a refuge for many who were fleeing for their lives. Since then some three to four million Muslims have become Christians; they were won by the faithful, loving witness of the Christians.

Another example is Afghanistan. In 1970 Afghan Christians numbered a few dozen. Then the war began and the Afghans fled to Pakistan by the tens of thousands. There many of them heard the gospel in refugee camps and came to Christ. Today there are an estimated ten thousand Afghan Christians—many times more than there would have been had there been no war.

The second lesson we learn is that persecution brings new life to the church. We should not pray for persecution. But when suffering comes, it often purifies the church and gives it new life.

This was certainly true of the early Anabaptists. They committed themselves to radical obedience to Christ in a time of wars and social instability. Many of them were burned, drowned, and killed by the sword.

We think of China. The Cultural Revolution of 1966 to 1976 brought a reign of terror and persecution. Bibles were burned, religious meetings were banned, and church buildings were converted into warehouses and factories. Most pastors and elders were put in jail, but their wives carried on the work in secret. Out of this persecution came a living church that has grown rapidly. Today there are possibly as many as 30 million Chinese Christians—seven times as many as in 1950.

These are general stories, each of which is made of thousands of stories of individual faith and heroism. One such story has to do with our Mennonite Brethren church in Pedda Danvada, India. Some years ago forty families of untouchables in Pedda Danvada became Christians. They sent their children to school and their economic conditions improved. The high caste-village leaders became angry because these untouchables were no longer subservient to them. They warned the Christians to return to Hinduism and finally organized a riot in which the Christians were beaten. The elders also forbade the Christians to draw water at the only village well located a half mile outside of town. The Christian women had to go an additional half mile to the river for all their water.

The church gathered to pray. It raised money for a well and got a government loan. The Christians began digging in the middle of the village where many others had failed before. Twice they struck rock and were forced to try again. Again they hit rock, and in desperation they decided to blast until their money ran out.

After a few feet of granite, they struck sand, and at thirty feet they found a good supply of water. God had answered their prayers. But then an amazing thing happened. The church sent a delegation to the high caste people saying, "Come and draw water at our well. There is enough for all of us. Why should your women go so far for water?" This was a powerful testimony to many who saw how Christ had transformed the lives of the Christians.

Today, the persecution of Christians is increasing in many parts of the world. David Barrett estimates that 300,000 Christians die for their faith each year—the highest number in all of history!

### 4. Mission in Times of Conflict

Can we do mission in times of conflict? That is not the real question. The real question is, Can we retain a vital commitment to mission when we live in peace, plenty and security? Can we retain a passion to minister to the lost and needy that takes priority over our own security and comfort? The world expects its soldiers to die in battle in defense of the nation. We must expect no less of ourselves in mission.

Closely related to this is a second question: Do we as Mennonite Brethren have a particular responsibility to minister in places of conflict? Given our history of suffering, our concern for the whole gospel, peace, reconciliation and nonviolence, and our view of the church as a counter-national community, are we in a unique position to minister to those caught up in wars, racial tensions and class hatred? Or have we in North America forgotten in two generations the lessons our forefathers learned in Europe? Should we mobilize special teams to live and minister in the great urban slums, in places of racial conflict?

Ultimately, the question is whether we are willing to witness in season and out of season, in times of war and in times of peace, in jail as well as out of jail, when we are rich and when we are poor, in our deaths as well as in our lives.

Paul Hiebert is Professor of World Mission at the Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Ill. This article is excerpted from a text of a presentation he made at the Mennonite Brethren World Mission Consultation in Curitiba, Brazil, in February 1988. Reprinted from *Witness*, September-October 1991 issue, with permission from Paul Hiebert.

