

Purpose: To connect with those who have an active relationship with Church Doctor Ministries as peers in ministry, clients, and partners in prayer and support.

The Church Doctor® Report provides a quick read of strategic and influential information. This information is free to share as long as the source is respected: *The Church Doctor® Report*, www.churchdoctor.org. (To sign up: e-mail johnwargowsky@churchdoctor.org)

Persecution: One Step Closer to Renewal and Revival!

"It's one thing to talk to Jesus. It's another thing when Jesus talks to you. That's called mental illness, if I'm not correct. Hearing voices." (Original source: Joy Behar, talking about Vice President Mike Pence on *The View*.)

The U.S. is a nation deeply divided, politically. That in itself can be healthy, or it can be a sign of sickness. Debate, based on real values and convictions can be healthy for any individual, family, or nation. Yet there is an unhealthy cynicism that generalizes and judges without looking at the facts. Along with that, every time we send a blasting e-mail of disagreement to another, we make the situation worse. Why? Because the One who had divine wisdom — the Jesus discussed in the above quote — has given us a way to disagree without being disagreeable. It is summarized in Matthew 18. It focuses on speaking to a person face to face and having a *conversation*. E-mails or television "opinion dumps" provide more heat than light.

In a conversation we learn from one another.

Why? Why would Jesus recommend that you go to the person and see him or her face to face and have a meaningful conversation? In a conversation we learn from one another. Has the

Kent R. Hunter is founder of Church Doctor Ministries. He is the author of 31 books, including the



bestselling *Who Broke My Church? 7 Proven Strategies for Renewal and Revival*. The group discussion guide for *Who Broke My Church?* is now available at Amazon.com. Kent has consulted 1,600 churches from 67 denominations, networks, and fellowships. His passion is to help Christians become more effective ambassadors for the King of the Universe.

www.churchdoctor.org

E-mail Kent: kenthunter@churchdoctor.org

MULTIPLYING MINISTRY

- ▶ The *Church Doctor® Report* is provided at no cost. Forward it to those in your network of influence and add value to their lives!
- ▶ Forward it to staff and leaders in your church, denomination, network, or fellowship.

misuse of e-mail, television, and other one-sided platforms tempted us to go by opinion rather than discussion? Yes, our world is increasingly immersed in the tension of division.

Have you noticed the creeping rise of persecution against Christ-followers, the church? Perhaps even against you? If not, this issue of *The Church Doctor Report* may persuade you to consider reality from a new perspective. Persecution, properly handled, can wake up Christians. God can use it to fuel spiritual renewal among believers. It can refuel the local church. Spiritual renewal is often followed by revival.

Israel Under Roman Rule

It was predictable, based on Old Testament prophecies, that the promised Messiah would come to Israel. It was unthinkable that the Son of God would arrive in Egypt, Greece, Italy, or Los Angeles.

However, the people of God had few clues as to **when** Jesus would come. The timing was somewhat difficult to predict. From the human point of view, it might be unthinkable that Jesus would be born when Roman occupation had spread throughout the Promised Land. Yet, it is precisely what occurred. Did you ever consider why?

Put yourself in the shoes (sandals!) of a first-century Israelite. You live in the land that God Himself promised to you. God gave this land to His covenant people. This land is a gift from God — truly a Promised land. Yet, now, this divinely gifted land is under the rule of the hated, fearful Romans. Soldiers are everywhere. Foreign leaders rule. They tax you and send your hard-earned money to fuel a pagan emperor from another land. For what? To be used to build monuments and live indulgent lifestyles. This emperor pays mercenaries to conquer new lands and tax even more people. Rome became a brutal machine! How would you feel, living under that tyranny? For most Jews, it felt hopeless. The land God gave you was overrun with pagans.

God knows when people become hopeless. Hopeless people become receptive to divine intervention. Someone once said, “When you hit bottom, there’s nowhere else to look but up.” No wonder Jesus is called in the New Testament “the *hope* of the world” (1 Timothy 1:1). It should be no surprise that 1 Peter 3:15 says, “Be ready at all times to share the *hope* that is within you” (emphasis mine).

Does Anyone Like Persecution?

When Israel was overrun by the Romans, hopelessness generated receptivity. Persecution, division, and discomfort can generate humility, even anger — sometimes called righteous indignation. Persecution cultivates disrupted ground for the seed of the Gospel. God gets our attention. He softens hard hearts and grows miraculous receptivity.

**Persecution cultivates
disrupted ground for the
seed of the Gospel.**

In one aspect of our work with churches, we guide Christians with “holy discontent” through the 36-month spiritual growth movement called *Healthy Churches Thrive!* One of the experiential exercises deals with the reality of hopelessness among those who are without Christ. This is a learning exercise, just like Jesus sending out the 12 to proclaim the Kingdom door to door, or asking them to help feed the 5,000.

We ask Christians to consider those in their social network who are *functionally* unchurched. They show no signs of worshiping God. (Most everyone has several acquaintances in their

social network who are functionally unchurched.) We ask Christians to reach out to them by asking a simple question: “What do you think it will be like for your grandchildren?” (If it’s an older couple who already have married grandchildren, we encourage them to change their question slightly: “What do you think it will be like for your great-grandchildren?” The idea is to project out 15-20 years.) If you do this, you will learn that those without faith in Christ reflect abject hopelessness. Further, if you don’t say anything in response, they will list the gnawing challenges that gobble up their hope. They are demonstrating receptivity!

If you are a “God-watcher,” you read the headlines through the lens of expectation: You ask the question, “What will God do with this?” Those who study the history of mission movements know this: When things are at their worst, God is at His best. The seed of the gospel can penetrate soil softened by discouragement and hopelessness.

**Persecution
lights a fire in
your gut.**

Persecution softens arrogance into humility. It ignites mediocrity and disrupts complacency. Persecution lights a fire in your gut. It energizes God’s people to action. How often have you seen someone who has drifted from church suffer a severe tragedy, only to return to their spiritual path in search of hope?

Persecution challenges tired churches. It focuses ministry. It empowers those caught in the routine of religion and rekindles the fire of faith. It wakes up sleepy Christians. It becomes a wake-up call that infuses spiritual energy in churches that have fallen into the rut of religiosity.

At the risk of sounding like a fanatic, I am excited about the growing persecution, even though I don’t like it. As history has shown, persecution will nudge complacent Christians to new levels of humility. Only those who are humble are ready, even eager, to learn from God. They set aside some of the myriad of self-indulgent religious activities. Persecution lights the spiritual fire that renews our churches for meaningful mission. If you actually like persecution, you are neurotic. However, recognize this: Sometimes God allows increased chaos to get the attention of lethargic individuals — and nations — to look to Him.

**Persecution
challenges tired
churches.**

**Persecution lights the
spiritual fire that
renews our churches
for meaningful
mission.**

God does not create persecution, but He allows it. While Christians squirm in discomfort, even anger — God rekindles hunger for Scriptural truth. It’s like Jesus is saying, loud and clear, “When all else fails, read the Manual.” When your church feels impotent to reach the lost, your brokenness overcomes your arrogance. You are finally ready to grow, to change worn-out practices, to innovate, to speak up, to reach out, to disciple. When all else fails, read the directions!

Persecution on the Rise

The University of Minnesota prepared for Christmas by distributing a paper during a “Respecting Religious Diversity” event. Instead of Christian practices, students were told to call them “Winter Celebrations.” Items that were listed as inappropriate included bows, angels, Christmas trees, nativity scenes, Santa Claus, and the Star of Bethlehem. The document was a “conversation piece” to facilitate and challenge students at a voluntary, internal, college event so that students would respect religious diversity in the workplace, according to university spokesperson Emma Bauer.

At the University of California, Irvine, departments were encouraged to “focus on celebrating a

special occasion, instead of a public holiday,” suggesting that students have a “year-end celebration.” The rationale? “The holiday season should be considered an opportunity to demonstrate cultural sensitivity and inclusivity.”

The State University of New York at Brockport issued a similar guidance on “culturally sensitive holiday decorations.” Several communities have annual “tree-lighting” ceremonies but have just recently omitted the word “Christmas.”

The Howard University’s student newspaper ran an editorial attacking President Trump for returning a nativity scene to the White House grounds, calling the move “disrespectful.” The newspaper said, “Placing a nativity scene on the grounds of the most important house in the United States is sending a message that their President forgets those who do not practice Christianity.” One might question, “Who invented the Christmas holiday, anyway?” Wouldn’t it be similarly rational to say, “There are many immigrants in our country who were not born here, so out of respectful inclusivity, we should dump July 4 and label it ‘a summer party with fireworks’”?

Just before Christmas, a billboard costing \$20,000 was sponsored by American Atheists. It was placed by the Lincoln Tunnel, which connects New Jersey and New York. Complete with a nativity scene, it read, “You know it’s a myth. This season, celebrate reason.” David Silverman, the president of a New-Jersey-based atheist advocacy group, told CNN that the group erected the sign in a high-traffic area in an effort to challenge drivers to “think hard about whether or not they actually believe in what is, in reality, an invisible magic man in the sky.” In response, the New-York-based Catholic advocacy group erected a billboard nearby that read, “You know it’s real: This season celebrate Jesus.”

This billboard war is a symbol of the spiritual battle occurring in our nation. Has God got your attention? Can the leaders of your church become adaptive and recognize that “what got your

TEN ISSUES TO CONSIDER ABOUT PERSECUTION

1. If someone tried to jail you for your faith, would there be enough evidence to convict you?
2. In what ways do you feel persecuted for your faith?
3. Faith in God is often called a conviction. Are you surprised that your conviction brings persecution? If you have conviction, does that make you a convict?
4. Do you think God might allow persecution to get your attention? Why or why not?
5. Do you think there is just cause for the divisions that are seemingly escalating in our world? What cause(s) do you think might be behind these issues?
6. When someone offends you, what do you do? Nothing? Fight back? How well do you know and practice Matthew 18:15?
7. In Ephesians 4:15, the apostle Paul, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, says: “Speak the truth in love.” Do you speak the truth? Do you do it in love?
8. When there are hurtful and hateful events in our society, I hear preachers focus on the evil and remind people about work of Satan. I often wonder, “Is this always the work of Satan, or does the church have a negligent responsibility, as well?”
9. The church, generally, has lost most of our nation. Why? What is your church doing about it? What are you doing about it?
10. Do you pray, “Lord, bring revival, beginning with me” every day? Would you start? How bad does it have to get before you stand up to be counted?

church here won't get you there"? Can your church retool from self-indulgent activities and recapture the mission Jesus gave His followers in the Great Commission? Can you reorient your faith life to this post-Christian nation?

“What got your church here won't get you there.”

Churches have lost favor with most municipalities. Congregations trying to

erect signs for their churches have increasingly faced strict opposition. The Supreme Court has agreed to hear an appeal offered by Good News Presbyterian Church. It claims officials in Gilbert, Arizona, discriminated against the church by forcing the removal of signs informing the public about worship services.

You are likely familiar with the Supreme Court's Hobby Lobby ruling. The Christian owner fought the requirement to provide health care that included contraceptive and abortion resources to employees. Courts and Christians continue to clash.

Courts and Christians continue to clash.

Some years ago, I served as an expert witness in a trial for a church in Peoria, Illinois. I consulted the church and recommended they purchase

the adjacent building so they could tear it down and use the land for added parking space — which they desperately needed. They bought the building, which was previously rented by a group that was using the facility for prostitution. The Peoria Historical Society was suing the church because the building had a “unique balcony.”

A Little Persecution is Good

By nature, when everything is comfortable, human beings get complacent. This includes many Christians. In some churches, members are busy “doing church” with activities primarily focused on consumer appetites. Increasingly, that complacency is being challenged through attacks from the outside.

During the years when Communism unraveled in the Former Soviet Union, many young adults had been imprisoned for “proselytizing.” In fact, they were evangelical Christians with enthusiasm far beyond most Orthodox church members.

KEY RESOURCES

Cochran, Gregory C. *Christians in the Crosshairs: Persecution in the Bible and Around the World Today*. Wooster, OH: Weaver Book Company, 2016.

Dias, Elizabeth. “Making Prayer Safe.” *Time Magazine*. Volume 190, No. 21. November 20, 2017, p. 40.

Dolan, Laura. “Dueling Billboards Face Off in Christmas Controversy.” CNN. November 30, 2010. <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2010/11/30/dueling-billboards-face-off-in-christmas-controversy/>.

Doyle, Tom, and Greg Webster. *Killing Christians: Living the Faith Where It's Not Safe to Believe*. Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, an imprint of Thomas Nelson, 2015.

Gockowski, Anthony. “Universities strive for Christmas-free campuses.” *Campus Reform*. December 7, 2017. <https://www.campusreform.org/?ID=10242>.

Hallowell, Billy. “Gov't Officials Clash With Church Over Signs Advertising Worship Services - and the Case Could Become the Next Important Religious Freedom Battle.” *TheBlaze*. July 2, 2014. <https://www.theblaze.com/news/2014/07/02/govt-officials-clash-with-church-over-worship-services-signs-and-the-case-could-become-the-nations-next-important-religious-freedom-battle>.

Communism allowed Orthodox churches because they didn't operate as spiritual missions. They were more community centers with artwork. The on-fire Christians evangelized others. Under Communism, the persecution challenged many believers to become strong and relentless witnesses for Jesus Christ. Most were jailed.

When everything is comfortable, human beings get complacent.

After Communism, they were released from prisons and allowed to plant evangelical churches. During those years, Church Doctor Ministries trained thousands of energetic, emerging pastors gathered in large conferences. Most of them rented theaters. They launched worship services. Our U.S. training teams, under the leadership of Church Doctor Ministries, attended many of these services. We experienced "white-hot" worship, frequent spiritual warfare, and committed outreach to those who were unbelievers.

Sadly, the movement lost steam over the following decade. Why? There were many reasons, but one was the sudden absence of persecution! This has occurred earlier in history. The Reformation was all about biblical abuses by the Roman Catholic Church. The early days of the Reformation reflect many Christians with evangelical zeal. However, when the heat of the battle with the Pope subsided, the Reformation movement was "free and clear" to operate. Yet, many of the reformed churches settled down to "business as usual."

Many churches in Europe and North America are filled with loving, faithful Christians. Most are safe and satisfied to simply exist, while secularization continues on the march. Shall we thank God for the secularization and resulting marginalization of the church today? I hope not. Should we thank God for persecution? No — it's not a "gift." More likely, it is the consequence of Christians who have lost their mission zeal. They have also lost, or are losing, the nation around them.

Do you have the fire in your gut? What is God saying to you? And, what are you going to do about it?

KEY RESOURCES

Kinnaman, David, and Aly Hawkins. *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians are Leaving Church ... and Rethinking Faith*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2016.

Liu, Joseph. "'Nones' on the Rise." Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project. October 8, 2012. <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>.

Parke, Caleb. "Santa, Christmas trees 'not appropriate' for holidays, students told at University event." Fox News. December 15, 2017. <http://www.foxnews.com/us/2017/12/15/santa-christmas-trees-not-appropriate-for-holidays-students-told-at-university-event.print.html>.

Tickle, Phyllis, and Danielle Shroyer. *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012.

Timpf, Katherine. "Universities: Avoid Basically Anything Holiday-Related to Be 'Inclusive'." National Review. December 4, 2015. <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/428044/universities-asking-students-avoid-basically-anything-holiday-related-be-inclusive>.

**THE LORD'S PRAYER IS NOT ALLOWED IN
MOST U.S. PUBLIC SCHOOLS ANYMORE.**

**The following is a prayer penned by an anonymous
student that has been widely circulated online.**

Now I sit me down in school
Where praying is against the rule.
For this great nation under God
Finds mention of Him very odd.

If Scripture now the class recites,
It violates the Bill of Rights.
And anytime my head I bow
Becomes a Federal matter now.

Our hair can be purple, orange or green,
That's no offense; it's a freedom scene.
The law is specific, the law is precise.
Prayers spoken aloud are a serious vice.

For praying in a public hall
Might offend someone with no faith at all.
In silence alone we must meditate,
God's name is prohibited by the State.

We're allowed to cuss and dress like freaks,
And pierce our noses, tongues and cheeks.
They've outlawed guns, but first the Bible.
To quote the Good Book makes me liable.

We can elect a pregnant Senior Queen,
And the "unwed daddy," our Senior King.
It's "inappropriate" to teach right from wrong.
We're taught that such "judgments" do not belong.

We can get our condoms and birth controls,
Study witchcraft, vampires and totem poles.
But the Ten Commandments are not allowed,
No word of God must reach this crowd.

It's scary here I must confess,
When chaos reigns the school's a mess.
So, Lord, this silent plea I make:
Should I be shot, my soul please take!

Amen