

The Eritrean Church's Action Before Persecution And What
Should Be The Action During And After These Times Of
Persecution

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Dedication

To the heroes of faith who are paying great sacrifice in the prisons of Eritrea and who have stood on the word of God even to the point of death.

1. INTRODUCTION

The broadness of the topic of persecution can cover different levels. It can be of the Church verses the government or believers verses unbelievers. It can come from within the nuclear families, from different religions, from the society and/or from the bottom up to the top level of Governments and even from with in a local Church or denomination or among Churches. The pressure and the attempt to totally destroy the preaching of the true gospel has been coming from the top officials policy makers of governments to the bottom of the nuclear family.

The history of persecution of Christians has been evident through out history beginning form our Lord Jesus Christ, to the first Apostles, the first century Church, the Church Fathers and the Church through out all generations has been going through persecutions of all kinds. In short statement the story of Christianity is the story of suffering and persecution. The Church have suffered and triumphed under a lot of great waves of destructive powers and is living to present the saving gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ from generation to generation.

Some Churches in different countries and situations have become victims of poor unity, ineffective leadership and short sightedness. Some other Churches have become victors by ceasing the moment and turning the underground life as a great way of organizing and strategizing for effective visionary leadership and firm unity.

The Church in Eritrea has gone such a long time of suffering and has paid lots of prices for the sake of the gospel. Yet it also has suffered the luck of visionary leadership that can mobilize in times of difficulties and hardship. When the wave and storm of persecution came it did not challenge it together in unity and instead it opened the door for the enemy to infiltrate inside the core of the Church leadership.

The Church's lack of preparedness to face such challenges is one of the major points that caused a smooth way for the persecutors. The Church had no sight in preparation if not to hinder to reduce the coming of such anti-God systems. The Church never planned to organize and set long-term vision and goals in turn it let the blow of persecution to come in surprise.

When the east African country, Eritrea, got its independence from Ethiopia after the longest war in Africa, extremely costly and bitter fight of thirty years there was a great celebration in the streets of Asmara, the capital city of Eritrea. People celebrated the coming of the guerilla fighters. The celebration kept on for weeks. The people breathed the air of freedom. 1991 was the year of new hope for the people of Eritrea after so many years of hopeless repression by colonizers and opportunist leaders of Ethiopia who took over from the colonizers and suppressed the people of Eritrea. The people welcomed with high spirit of celebration and totally voted with 99 % for the leader of the guerilla fighters, Mr. Isayas Afeworki, as the president of Eritrea. He was almost worshiped by the people.

Churches celebrated so much and praised God but all these was to end when the still transitional government and without constitution begun to show signs of communism and begun another border conflict with Ethiopia in 1998 and the climax of closing the Churches in the year 2002. It was the year the government begun to close the Churches and imprison the Church leaders, who are still in prison almost for the past eleven years. Against all expectations of the Eritrean people the Eritrean government turned out to be another cruel and merciless suppressers who have no human sympathy.

The deteriorating political, social, economical, moral and religious systems are witnesses that are characterizing the Eritrean government. The failure of Self-defeating government is evident, yet the Church as the representative of God's kingdom will be much more stronger and powerful, government after government and leader after leader.

The aim at the back of this thesis is to look back, strategize today by fixing the mistakes and work for a better future of the Eritrean Church. The need of looking back to learn from the failures and the mistakes done is the way of a wise ministry. Looking back is about the failure among and with in the Churches that caused the persecutors to gain more power. It goes back to the history in connection with the major failures of the Churches. The aim of strategizing is about the need to plan and see ahead despite the current situation. It is about what can be done from Eritrean the Churches within and the once in diaspora. If our failures are turned to be our lessons and a stepping-stone to rise higher on the top of all the mountains then we can effectively play our part in the kingdom of God. Therefor the Church should gain more strength and vision ahead despite the past failures the present hardships and work effectively for the great work of God's kingdom.

2. THE ARGUMENT OF PERSECUTION

The topic of persecution of the Church has been part of the debating issues. As it is everywhere even among the Eritrean Churches the issue of persecution has been a dividing issue. The topic has been argued whether it is a consequence of the sins of believers. Others argue it to be a matter of choice that can be avoided.

According to some it is claimed to be the package of real Disciples of Christ.

According to those who claim it to be as a consequence of the sins of the Church the topic is considered as a way God uses to punish or judge the leaders or the entire body. They use the diaspora of the first Church after the killing of Stephen in Acts chapter six. It is argued from this view that the persecution came because the first Church was disobedient to fulfill the great commission of going to the rest of the world. Therefore when there is disobedience or sin God uses persecution to discipline His Church and fulfill His purpose.

The Second view, which can also be considered under the first view, is that there are those who believe the persecution that is coming from the government comes from the lack of complete compliance to what the government proposes. In this view it is argued that disobeying the government is disobeying God, for they are God's servants. "Some Christians claim the Bible "smuggling" is wrong because it dishonors scriptures concerning obedience to the government."¹

As in this point the topic will divert to the question of submitting to evil or good authorities. Should a Church do whatever is commanded from the government? When do we comply and when do we refuse to obey authorities? Or is there a limit among the two? And if there is a difference who submits to who, or who has an authority over who, the Church or the government? For the Bible does encourage submitting to all authorities. It is also recorded in the Bible that different men and women of God disobeyed evil leaders and God did approve their action by blessing them. To mention some we can refer to the Egyptian maidens, the four Israelites who refused to eat from the King's table, or who refused to bow down to the golden image or even Daniel's prayer even against the King's decree, Peter and John's refusal not to obey the command of the religious leaders more than the command

of God... and many other more. The Bible does command us to obey to all authorities yet it should be with in the circle of God's commands and not just within their own systems.

According to the third view, going through persecution is considered as a weakness of the believers in not having strong faith. This view holds that the world and kingdom of darkness will never stop standing against those who holds the truth, yet the Church has authority to stand against the gates of hell. The reason of believers going through persecution is because of the weakness of the teachings of the Church concerning the topics of suffering, persecution, and faith... According to those who support this view say that such preaching and teachings of suffering make some believers to accept sufferings and persecutions and ultimately go through it and others are coming out of such situations because of their strong faith. One of the major points that cause an argument is the lack of clear definition of the term "Persecution". We need to see if the persecution of believers is a Judgment from God to punish or discipline the believers or a matter of unavoidable part of true Christianity. Is it a situation created by God to test the faith or maturity of the believer? Or is it something that is resulted out of the behavior of this evil world. The Bible clearly gives us the definition of the terms. What Judgment, discipline and persecution means is practically and doctrinally explained for us.

2.1. Judgment –

Judgment is the final or concluding trial made. In its spiritual meaning it is "A divine sentence or decision; specifically: a calamity held to be sent by God"². It is clear in the Bible that Judgment is a result of God's anger because of the

unrepentant lifestyle of human beings. Judgment is an action God takes for the stubbornness of people to live in sinful life against the will of God.

The flood in the time of Noah was the act God's Judgment towards the wickedness and unrepentant life of the human race. Noah was a messenger to that generation. He was a preacher of repentance but he was considered as mad man who is building Ark in an empty space.

Sodom and Gomorrah was judged for their sinful lifestyle.³ They were living in an extreme life of immorality and all kinds of wickedness that brought God's Judgment. It was a place where God could not even get righteous people who could be mediators like Abraham. But their wickedness went up to heaven and made God to Judge the entire nations of Sodom and Gomorrah.

When God gave the Israelites the Promised Land He was judging those people who were living in that land. God told the Israelites to take over the Promised Land and destroy the people who are living there, because of the wicked and idolatrous life they were living. God was also warning the Israelites to keep themselves from living the same kind of life the Canaanites were living; and when the Israelites began to go against the commands and warnings of God they were also punished and taken over to another land by the Assyrians and Babylonians.

The Bible especially the book Revelation also speaks of the end times Judgment, which will come upon the entire world. It prophesies about war, famine, economic instability, natural disasters... etc.

"The judgment of God is also described in the Bible as a process, not strictly the rendering of a verdict or passing of a sentence. For example, Peter tells us

"the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God"⁴ From this we can see that judgment is an evaluation process that has already begun for those who are a part of God's Church - "the house of God." This evaluation ultimately leads to a rendering of a decision or verdict."⁵

2.2. Discipline –

Discipline is a chastisement made to correct or train in an intended way of behavior character or lifestyle. "To punish or penalize for the sake of enforcing obedience and perfecting moral character."⁶ When God was dealing with the nation of Israel by sending the Assyrians and the Babylonians against them He was punishing them with the target to discipline them for the sinful life they were practicing in worshipping other idols and going against the Lord's commands and counsel. He was not aiming to utterly destroy them but to remove the wrong act and behavior out of their life. That is the major content of the prophecies of the Prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah and the rest of the prophets of the Old Testament. Judgment comes to utterly destroy and blot out, but discipline gives a second chance and its purpose is to bring an improvement in character and lifestyle. Jeremiah in his prophecy affirms that God will surely return His people back from the land of captivity and even from all places they got scattered after the appointed seventy years of discipline are over.

We should be careful to note that there is a difference between the persecution that comes for the name of Christ and the consequence of suffering for one's own guilt or foolish mistakes. This is what Apostle Peter wants us to

differentiate between when he said “But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or [as] a thief, or [as] an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men’s matters. Yet if [any man suffer] as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf.”⁷

2.3. Persecution –

Persecution is “to harass or punish in a manner designed to injure, grieve, or afflict; specifically: to cause to suffer because of belief; to annoy with persistent or urgent approaches (as attacks, pleas, or importunities): pester” – it is the condition of being harassed or annoyed.

“Persecution may be defined in general as the unlawful coercion of another’s liberty or his unlawful punishment, for not every kind of punishment can be regarded as persecution. For our purpose it must be still further limited to the sphere of religion, and in that sense persecution means unlawful coercion or punishment for religion’s sake.”⁸

The “Open Doors” ministry when explaining about persecution it is defined that “Christian Persecution is any hostility, experienced from the world, as a result of one’s identification with Christ. From verbal harassment to hostile feelings, attitudes and actions, believers in areas with severe religious restrictions pay a heavy price for their faith. Beatings, physical torture, confinement, isolation, rape, severe punishment, imprisonment, slavery, discrimination in education and in employment, and even death are just few examples they experience on the daily basis.”⁹

The Greek word “Dioko” is used in the New Testament 44 times and is

translated as: - “to make to run or flee, put to flight, drive away; to run swiftly in order to catch a person or thing, to run after; to press on: figuratively of one who in a race runs swiftly to reach the goal; to pursue (in a hostile manner); in any way whatever to harass, trouble, molest one; to persecute; to be mistreated, suffer persecution on account of something; without the idea of hostility, to run after, follow after: someone; metaph., to pursue; to seek after eagerly, earnestly endeavor to acquire.”¹⁰

In comparison between the two we can say that, first, judgment and discipline comes as an act of God’s justice and righteousness toward people yet persecution is an act of the injustice and evil ways of people against God and his people. Secondly, judgment and discipline are connected and come as a result of removing or correcting sin and sinfulness yet persecution is connected and comes against those who live according the way of Christ. Thirdly, while judgment and discipline can come from God directly or indirectly yet persecution do not come from God. Actually God will bring to justice those who are persecuting the people of God.

While we can assert that persecution is not God’s act of discipline but through it there can be God’s work of Purification. “Yet if [any man suffer] as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf. For the time [is come] that judgment must begin at the house of God: and if [it] first [begin] at us, what shall the end [be] of them that obey not the gospel of God? And if the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?”¹²

It is sure that Suffering in itself cannot refine or purify. For if one goes through

persecution can turn out to be proud, bitter, unforgiving and murmuring. It is only by the Grace of God that the saved can be refined and purified; instead when suffering comes it can cause to recognize our need. It can show our character and push us to decide the path we should take in determining our defining character. Hardships and suffering can help the believer to depend on the Holy Spirit and trust our life to God “But when they shall lead [you], and deliver you up, take no thought beforehand what ye shall speak, neither do ye premeditate: but whatsoever shall be given you in that hour, that speak ye: for it is not ye that speak, but the Holy Ghost.” When believers go through persecution it can be used to clean and purify and it can cause us to judge ourselves and helps us to be sensitive to sin and God’s voice.

3. History of persecution –

When we start to go through the history of the Church in the New Testament, starting from the teaching and the suffering of Jesus Christ and scan through the history of the Church through out generations, we learn that persecution of all kinds and forms has never ceased were ever the gospel got preached. This might be because of the prayer of Jesus Christ in John 17:15 when He said “I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil.”

3.1. History and teachings of persecution in the Bible –

3.1.1. Jesus’ teachings and life -

The Old Testament prophets and the gospels prophesy and narrate the details of Christ's great suffering to save the lost mankind. In the beginning of His ministry Jesus taught His disciples in two of the Beatitudes, that they are blessed when they are persecuted for the sake of His name. He said "Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man."¹⁴ He was clear in preparing the disciples for their future ministry that they should expect great suffering because of Him. Unlike His parabolic teachings He taught His disciples with direct instructions and told them, "You must be on your guard. You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues. On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them.... All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved."¹⁵

Jesus taught that the world did not know, accept and recognize Him or the one who sent Him and for this reason there will also be rejection and great persecution to those who believe in Him. "They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the One who sent me."¹⁶

The gospels speak of the suffering Lord who died for the sins of the entire human race. His message and charge to His disciples was a message of steadfastness in all situations.¹⁷

Even if the main purpose of His coming was to save through the way of the cross, the hatred and the evil intention of human was revealed through the religious and political leaders of that time. The Lord was

denied and abandoned by His disciples, He was hated, bitten, harassed and tortured and even to the point of the death on the cross.¹⁸ The Lord had no one to defend Him when He was falsely accused and betrayed to the point of death.

3.1.2. The Apostles' teachings and life

Following the footsteps of Jesus the Apostles did not hesitate to pay the price even to the point of death. The letters of first Apostles' repeatedly focus in addressing their message to the Christians who are facing extreme harassment and persecution. "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? [shall] tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."¹⁹ Their messages were full of exhortations and encouragement for the believers to remain firm in their faith in the Risen Lord. When they were persecuted and prisoned and bitten not to preach again they were very happy for they were convinced that to suffer for Christ is a great privilege and honor. "The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of

suffering disgrace for the Name.”²⁰ “Yet if [any man suffer] as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf.”²¹

The Apostles taught that true Christianity and the mark of true disciple is to withstand suffering or pain and they encouraged believers for steadfastness. The major message we get from the book of revelations is that Jesus who will come back soon in majestic glory and as a King will expect his Church to be strong in her faith even in the difficult times of persecution. “You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.”²²

The entire teaching of the Apostles focused on how to be an authentic disciple in all times. They taught that to live for Christ is to die for self and suffer for His cause. “For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that His life may be revealed in our mortal body.”²³

One of the cruel and merciless persecutor, who on his way to destroy the believers in Damascus, was Paul but at the encounter with the Lord Jesus got converted. In his dramatic conversion we also see that his calling is also about suffering for the sake of Christ. The Lord sent Ananias to Paul and told him that the Lord will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of the Lord's name.²⁴ Paul's determination to preach the gospel wherever the Lord sent him made him to face lots of hardships. Yet, he kept on preaching the gospel despite the stoning, the beating, imprisonment, rejections, the riots and the threatening words he heard from all sides. Paul stressed that believers are saved not only to

believe in Jesus but also to pay all the necessary prices even to the point of death. "For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him."²⁵ By the time he set to go to Jerusalem he clearly and boldly answered to those who begged him not to go to Jerusalem, "Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus."²⁶

3.2. Persecution under roman empire –

In the first centuries of the Christian Era, for almost 300 years, the infant Church was subjected to hostile pressures by the Roman civil authority. Especially from the time Nero burnt Rome with fire (64 AD) and blamed the believers for it up to the time Constantine made it a state religion, the Church was going through a time of merciless suffering by brutal emperors. Despite this wherever Christianity was preached in the entire Roman Empire, many were getting converted taught the word of God and went all over planting Churches. The article "Persecution in the Early Church" from Religion Facts lists the major ten emperors who persecuted the early Church:

3.2.1 Persecution under Nero (c. 64-68). Traditionally it is believed that martyrdoms of Apostle Peter and Paul happened in Nero's time. History also shows that Nero was the one who officially begun the persecution of believers after he falsely accused them as the cause of the burning of the city of Rome.

- 3.2.2 Persecution under Domitian (r. 81-96).
- 3.2.3 Persecution under Trajan (112-117). In time of emperor Trajan Christianity is outlawed but Christians were not sought out.
- 3.2.4 Persecution under Marcus Aurelius (r. 161-180). It was under the time of Emperor Marcus that the martyrdom of Polycarp, the disciple of Apostle John, occurred.
- 3.2.5 Persecution under Septimus Severus (202-210). Martyrdom of Perpetua.
- 3.2.6 Persecution under Decius (250-251). Christians are actively sought out by requiring public sacrifice. But they are allowed to do so if they could buy certificates (libelli) instead of sacrificing. This was the time of the Martyrdoms of bishops of Rome, Jerusalem and Antioch.
- 3.2.7 Persecution under Valerian (257-59). Martyrdoms of Cyprian of Carthage and Sixtus II of Rome.
- 3.2.8 Persecution under Maximinus the Thracian (235-38).
- 3.2.9 Persecution under Aurelian (r. 270–275).
- 3.2.10 Severe persecution under Diocletian and Galerius (303-324).²⁷

“Of the 249 years from the first persecution under Nero (64) to the year 313, when Constantine established lasting peace, it is calculated that the Christians suffered persecution about 129 years and enjoyed a certain degree of toleration about 120 years. Yet it must be borne in mind that even in the years of comparative tranquility Christians were at all times at the mercy of every person ill-disposed towards them or their religion in the empire.”²⁸

The persecution in the Roman Empire was much more personal and connected with as the cause of all weakness of Rome and the natural calamities of the

empire. The persecution in the Roman Empire can be grouped in three categories.

The first was the persecution from the people. The Romans blamed the Christians as the major cause of curse because the preaching against polytheism was considered to be atheism. The Lord's Supper was taken to be cannibalism. The teaching against immorality and lust was considered to be a heresy that disables the feelings of the youth. The baptism and the Lord's Supper were also considered as witchcraft and sorcery. Because of these reasons the Romans persecuted the Christians considering them to be the causes of the curse to the nation. Besides this paganism was so essential to the economy of the Romans. It was a means of gain by selling and buying the different kind of gods and the icons.

The second was the psychological persecution. The philosophers and the poets were writing against Christianity. By writing such materials they tried to present to the people especially to the educated society that Christianity is a baseless philosophical ideology. But the apostolic letters and the writings of the Church fathers and the creeds helped to present the Christian view by proving that Christianity is a real and logical truth. The Christian apologists helped to prove some points about life, death, heaven, hell, God, sin, truth, resurrection and the different biblical doctrines.

The third type was physical persecution. The climax of mentality of the totalitarian leadership, the hatred of the people and the different philosophical writings grew up to be the causes for the government to persecute Christianity as a policy.

For these reasons the Roman Empire considers Christianity as a political movement. The submission they get from the people is a pure political thing. Whenever Rome conquers a nation they register and legalize the idols of that nation and imposes the Emperor's worship to be part of the gods of that particular nation.

3.3. The Reasons of Persecution the early Church

The Bible gives us some of the major reasons for the persecution of Christians in the New testament Church. Even though so many of the accusations are presented, it should be noted that all the reasons could be summarized as spiritual battle caused by the kingdom of Darkness and the world system and the corrupt nature of the fallen man. The alleged allegations presented are only the excuses used to cover up the selfish interests and evil intentions.

The accusations we get in the Bible are also the same pattern we see recurring through out history. To bring to attention some of these might help to encourage and move wisely for the current Churches, which are going through the season of persecutions.

3.3.1. Persecution because of Religious zeal –

Apostle Paul when narrating his own conversion story, he has clearly said that his zeal compelled by ignorance has made him to persecute the believers of that time even to the point of death. He continued the threatening prisoning and even killing of believers, with an official authority

from the chief leaders, to the day he encountered Jesus through a bright light on the road to Damascus.²⁹

3.3.2. Persecution because of the envy of the religious leaders – when we look back at the death of Jesus, the main leaders of Judaism were the major initiators for His death and for the persecution of the first Church.

3.3.3. Persecution because of the fear of the rich businessmen of losing the source of their income. In the Acts of the Apostles we see that some of the businessmen who used to gain from selling the images of their gods and those who used to make money from sorcery and witchcraft were one of the causes of the persecution. The book of Acts records that the ministry of Paul in Ephesus was effective that it had an impact all over Asia. His ministry and the Church in Ephesus had a great persecution caused by a rich businessman called Demetrius, who owned a silver business and a making of images of the goddess Artemis. When they saw that the gospel of Jesus Christ is converting people from Idol worship and as a result stopped people from buying the images of the gods, Demetrius lead the uproar against Apostle Paul and caused all the business people on that line to stand against.³⁰ We also find some others who used to make money through owning a business of witchcraft. Acts Chapter 16 records the deliverance of the Witch woman turned out to be the reason for the persecution of Apostle Paul and Silas. The Bible says “...when her masters

saw that the hope of their gains was gone, they caught Paul and Silas, and drew them into the marketplace unto the rulers”³¹

3.3.4. Persecution because of the fear of the leaders to lose their popularity

and their religious or political positions. The religious leaders of Jesus’ time lived in a way they could please and gain the favor of the people.

According to the gospels the major reason of the persecution from the religious leaders was because their popularity was getting diminished.

Pilate handed Jesus over to the Pharisees to be hanged on the cross just to please the people and gain their acceptance.³² We also see the reason

Apostle Paul appealed to Caesar was because he was left to be under bondage by Governor Felix and latter Porcius Festus who also wanted to

give him up over to the Jews and wanted to send him to be judged in Jerusalem, just because they wanted to gain favor from the people.³³

3.3.5. There was also the reason of corruption that kept Paul to be under prison.

Judah betrayed Jesus just for the gain of 30 pieces of silver. “And said unto them, What will ye give me, and I will deliver him unto you? And they covenanted with him for thirty pieces of silver”.³⁴ We also see that

Governor Felix kept Paul under prison because he wanted to get some money. “He hoped also that money should have been given him of Paul, that he might loose him: wherefore he sent for him the oftener, and communed with him.”³⁵

3.3.6. Persecution because of associating Christianity with political movements.

When the Pharisees wanted to bring accusations against Jesus some of the questions they were bringing are political questions, like paying tax to Caesar. At the climax of their accusations one of the reasons the Pharisees' brought Jesus before Pilate was that He has raised Himself to be the king of the Jews.

3.3.7. Persecution because of the assumption that Christianity does not obey the government. Through out the Bible history we see the principle that obedience to the government is conditional as long as it does not contradict the laws of God. That is illustrated through the Egyptian midwives who did not obey Pharaoh in killing the Hebrew baby boys which was confirmed by God's blessings, Daniel and his three colleagues in not eating from the food that defiles them, they were also disobedient in not bowing down to the image the king has made for all his subjects to bow down, and Daniel's consistency in praying three times a day despite the king's decree not to bow down to any other god except to king Darius, the three Maggic's who disobeyed king Herod in informing where Jesus was born, when they told them not to preach again in the name of Jesus, Peter and John's answered the religious leaders " But Peter and John answered and said unto them, Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye."³⁶ The Roman kingdom begun to consider the believers as a treat to the existence of the government and at the time the persecution officially begun by Emperor Nero, they were

blamed as the causes of the burning of Rome in 64 AD, and also as the causes of the division within the kingdom for the disobedience, on things like bowing down to and acknowledging the Emperors as gods and preaching against polytheism.

3.3.8. Persecution because of the demand of the Roman Emperors to be worshiped. In Apocalyptic book of Revelation symbolically encourages the believers to stand strong and know that it is Jesus who is still alive and sitting at the throne and not Caesar, and that they should not give up or grow cold.

Through out Bible history and world History one can notice that state religion was a common thing among different kingdoms and emperors. It was demanded of every citizen to follow not only the political change but also the religious demands that are given by kings and Emperors who are coming in. Even though the Romans tolerate the worship of different gods they used the worship of emperors as a way to unite the entire empire and demand an unwavering submission to Caesar. Therefore it was demanded from all the citizens and subjects to worship and sacrifice in the name of the Emperors. In the Emperor cult, religion and patriotism were closely associated. "The state, through the emperor, demanded primary loyalty. Loyal citizens were expected to declare their allegiance and offer sacrifices to the emperor as a sign of their loyalty. The emperor was Lord and god, above all else, and the source of all Rome's power and strength. He brought unity to the cultural and religious diversity that was ancient Rome.

He was Rome, and all loyal subjects were expected to acknowledge this and worship him accordingly.”³⁷

Anyone who did not participate in the cult was considered as endangering the unity of the state and treason. Thus, refusal to participate meant that a person was not loyal and obedient to the state and must be executed by death penalty. Despite all the decrees and threatening words and actions the uncompromising stand and their total devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ made the Christians to be an easy target to the persecutors.

3.3.9. Persecution because of the assumption of cannibalism – Based on the biblical teachings the secrecy of the Lord’s supper only to the believers and its teaching as the blood and flesh of Jesus Christ was extremely misunderstood and made the Christian worship as cannibalistic worship. The Christian terms for the Lord’s Supper, words like "love feast" and talk of "eating Christ's flesh and blood" sounded understandably suspicious to the pagans and its limited ministry to the believers only created the Christians to be suspected of cannibalism, incest, orgies, and all sorts of immorality.

3.3.10. Persecution because of the preaching against polytheism was also considered to be atheism. Side to side with the false claims there was fear among idol worshippers or in the polytheistic ideology that calamity and natural disasters are the results of the improper homage to the gods. “As Porphyry's argument indicates, hatred of Christians also arose from the

belief that proper "piety" to the Roman gods helped to sustain the well being of the cities and their people."³⁸

People like Saint Augustine's opus argued against the view that calamity and disasters happen because of forsaking the worship of the Greek and Roman gods on the book *The City of God*.

3.4. Persecution in the modern time Church

From the political persecution of the communist regimes, to the religious persecution from Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism and to social hostility even in the present day abusing, insulting, harassing, imprisoning even to the point of killing Christians and demolishing or burning of Churches has not stopped. The stories and the incidents in Nigeria, Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, China, North Korea, India and so on are the recent news. "It has been estimated that more Christians have been martyred in the last 50 years than in the Church's first 300 years."³⁹

"Today, around the world, more than 480 Christians will die. Not because they live in war-torn countries. Not because our brothers and sisters do not have enough food, and not because believers face natural disasters. Instead, Christians are raped, beaten, beheaded and cut down because of what they believe. Totalitarian governments and regimes of hatred persecute and kill Christians in more than 60 countries worldwide simply because they follow Christ."⁴⁰

"Throughout history, the persecution of Christians and the Church has been overwhelming. It started with the Romans during the time of the early Church.

Some research today says that more than 200 million Christians are suffering from misinformation, discrimination, and persecution. All simply because they are Christians.”⁴¹

“In the last year, an estimated 165,000 Christians were put to death because of their identification with and witness for Jesus Christ. No other religious group can claim numbers anywhere near this amount. In 1998, 82% of those killed worldwide because of their religious convictions were Christians. World Evangelical Fellowship estimates that around 200,000,000 Christians worldwide live under the daily threat of imprisonment, torture, or execution because of their faith. An additional 400,000,000 live in societies with laws that specifically discriminate against Christians.”⁴²

In the former Soviet Union, and the same communist countries where persecution of believers were like China, Cuba, Ethiopia, North Korea, for example, they were accused of being cannibals, for the Lord’s Supper, child killers, for Child dedication, immoral or love feasts, for preaching the message of Love of God, lazy, for spending much time on the spiritual things, uneducated, for believing in the existence of God, not good citizens, for setting God first, and even to the point of punishing the entire work team if a Christian was on it was a common practice.

The subtle and “modern way of persecution” in the name of human right has become the order of the day even in so-called Christian countries. In the article for International Christian Concern Ryan Morgan reports “On July 1, 2013, American street preacher Tony Miano was arrested by London police for making “homophobic” remarks. He was preaching on sexual immorality and

pointedly condemned all forms of “immoral sexual conduct.” This was too much for passers-by, and the police were called. After seven hours under arrest, police decided against pressing charges and Tony was released. Last year, four Christians in Western Europe who were fired from their jobs for either wearing crosses or refusing to endorse homosexual partnerships took their cases to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, France. The court ruled against three of the four, saying that only one, a British Airways employee, had a right to wear her cross necklace because the airline had made earlier provisions for employees of other faiths to wear religious items.”⁴³

When Church leaders speak against major issues of morality and their biblical stand it is getting interpreted as interfering with the right and freedom of a person. The attempt to silence the Church from being the conscience of a society and the representative of God is under heavy battle. Under the modern mind the preaching of the gospel is being pictured interfering in the belief of individuals.

“Consequently, if you morally object to homosexuality, society labels you as a “homophobe” and a bigot. If you advocate creationism, you are castigated as a back-woods, superstitious individual, who likely was abused at Church camp. If you allude to the divine references in the Declaration of Independence, you are characterized as ignorant of the original intent. The abortion of unborn children is labeled choice not murder and those who are pro-life are called anti-abortion.”⁴⁴

3.5. Persecution in Eritrea –

The history of the coming of the gospel to Africa and specifically to North and East Africa is connected with the Ethiopian Eunuch who got saved and baptized by the ministry of Philip in Acts Chapter 8:36-39. Even though the growth and the impact of the gospel is not recorded in the Bible it is clear that the gospel in Africa particularly the land of the ancient Ethiopia, which consists of the lower parts of Egypt including Sudan, Eritrea, northern part of the present Ethiopia and some parts of Yemen, had a connection with the first Apostolic age.

“Eritrea along with its southern neighbor Ethiopia was one of the first Christian countries in the world having officially adopted Christianity as the state religion in the 4th century. At the same time, it was also one of the first Muslim settlements in Africa, where a group of Muslims facing persecution in Mecca travelled to Abyssinia, now Ethiopia, through modern day Eritrea.”⁴⁵ Even though there are the many historical facts that show Eritrea’s great history of ancient Christianity, it will be out of the scope of this thesis.

Even if the coming of the gospel to Eritrea had been facing a lot of challenges and persecutions from the early kings of 4th century up to the Ethiopian communist regime of the nineteen century, yet it is nothing compared to the pain and suffering of present time. The ancient emperors of the region with an intent to isolate the people from outside influence has done their best to hinder the gospel. When it gets out of their control to persecute the converts was the usual ways.

With the growing strength of the Ethiopian empire the deceptive association of the kings with the Solomonic dynasty and connecting their kingship as

assigned by divine authority was the way they used to control the people. This is a recent memory up to the reign of king Haile Selassie (His original name was Tafari Makonnen Woldemikael which he change it to be the name Haile Selassie which means Power of Trinity). This trend, which was used almost by all ancient kings and emperors, has been used to unify the people under one religion. Just like the Roman Empire and even worse was the way the emperors of Ethiopia to any new religion. Which was the reason Islam was blocked from coming down from the northern to the eastern and southern parts of Africa.

In an attempt to use the Eritrean port and land the Ethiopian king conspired with the British colonizers and after assassinating the then representatives of Eritrea the country was left to be a federation under Ethiopia. This has lead to the repression and brutal destruction of the countries resources and the attempt to control and destroy other religious movements through the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Even though the believers were going through heavy persecution and considered to be spies from Ethiopia and the westerners, it was the time Christianity in Eritrea was growing and the underground Church begun to have its root deeper into the society. Even after king Haile Selassie the repressive communist Dirge regime in Ethiopia was the next inline. After King Haile Selassie the dictatorial leadership of Mengestu Hailemariam kept on exerting their political economical and religious powers on the people of Eritrea. The bitter-hearted people fought these massive governments for over thirty years. Yet even these guerilla fighters while rebelling against the Ethiopian governments for the freedom of the Eritrean people at the back of their policy

making they worked for communist ideology that works against the Evangelical and all other religious systems except the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Catholic Church, the Lutheran Church and Sunni Islam, which they practically implemented after religious freedom of Eritrea and after nine years of unaccountable power hold without constitution and any formal governmental system.

Torture, arbitrary detention, and severe restrictions on freedom of expression, association, and religious freedom remain routine in Eritrea. Elections have not been held since Eritrea gained independence in 1993, the constitution has never been implemented, and political parties are not allowed. There are no institutional constraints on President Isaias Afewerki, in power now for twenty years. In addition to ongoing serious human rights abuses, forced labor and indefinite military service prompt thousands of Eritreans to flee the country every year. Access to the country for international humanitarian and human rights organizations is almost impossible and the country has no independent media.

When the present persecution in Eritrea begun it started with putting limitations in evangelism. Since the government had in mind to close the Churches, any religious meetings outside of Church buildings were not allowed. Government infiltrators or spies were present in all services to secretly record and give to the government. Such documents gathered by the spies and some false allegations were used with political interpretations as a case against the ministers and the Church, labeling it to be a political movement initiated and funded by the western world.

After approving, the Lutherans which are known by the name Evangelical Church, the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Catholic Church and Sunni Islam as the only recognized religions the government delayed all other applications of licensing a Church. Not giving a license to the Churches in the name of waiting for the new constitution was the way to label the Churches as illegal. Because of these the evangelical Pentecostal and all other Churches and their leaders were not approved by the state.

Amnesty international reports that “Members of banned religious groups remained at risk of harassment, arrest and incommunicado detention. Only four religious institutions are officially recognized in Eritrea since 2002, namely the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Catholic Church, Lutheran Church and Islam. Some 3,000 Christians from non-state sanctioned religions remained in detention.”⁴⁶

When the persecution started with full power the Church leaders were threatened and severely discriminated. Some of the officials summoned the Church leaders for questioning and to present the list of their members and their financial report to the government. Churches are forced to register under Orthodox Church or the Lutheran Church, which are the right hand of the government in such matters. By forcing different denominations to unite the government was trying to get some of the Churches to be closed. When almost all the Churches refuse to present their members list nor the financial status, the government issued a warranty to close all the Churches who did not comply and for all the Pastors to be arrested, tortured, some have been put to open shame, false accusation and untrue testimony given against them. The Students movement especially the leaders became major targets and some got

arrested and others run out of the country. Presently more than 50 Churches are closed which includes the branches. Most of the buildings are converted to other governmental uses. The number of Christians who are “assigned” to remote or other areas so as to isolate them is not few. Many foreign missionaries are expelled from the country, by laws limiting clergy to local nationals and by direct threats and violence against foreigners.

Beginning from 2002 holding a Bible became a reason to be incarcerated.

There were places where they burned Bibles. People who buy Bibles from the Bible Society are followed up and some are arrested for it. People especially in the national military service, which has no determined time, read parts of the Bible inside a newspaper or in a hidden place. Each one after reading it put it in a plastic bag and hid it underground. Presently Bibles especially the sixty-six books and Christian literature are totally prohibited. The Bible Society presently is controlled by Eritrean Orthodox Church, which is now controlled and used by the government to persecute believers. Religious literatures and gospel music are considered political agitation and listening to gospel music or carrying a Bible is considered a crime.

Since the Churches are closed and the major leaders got incarcerated the Church shifted its meeting system into house fellowships. If any believer who are meeting in houses or any other places with more than three or four are found they will be taken to jail without any charge for an unlimited time. In order to avoid being noticed the house fellowship goes round in different places without a fixed date, time or place.

If one is known to be a believer he is considered to be a traitor and traitor to the country. There are lots of students who are not allowed to attend schools, colleges or any kind of education, there are also cases where some Christians who could not get a chance to get their own vocation or have no choice in their vocation or employment. There is also a case of believers who were not able to renew their business license for almost two years just because they are believers. If they went to inquire the reason of not renewing the license one of the officials showed them the reason and on the top of the file there was hand written that says “Menfes” which means “Spirit” or “Spiritual” which is a term used in Eritrea to identify believers.

Christians are being prohibited from giving aid to each other. Especially when one member of a family is arrested, some of the family loses certain “rights” or “privileges” to visit or have any kind of contact. There are cases where those who came to inquire and assist their family members or pastors also got arrested and released later after being threatened not to make any visit to the believers.

What makes the Eritrean persecution of believers hard is that the persecution comes from all sides of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the government, and even from the family. Which categorizes Eritrea to be an extreme hostile nation. Even before the government officially started the persecution believers are used to suffer for Christ. For there are many who are chased out of their houses, excommunicated from the Eritrean Orthodox Churches and even work places.

According to Amnesty international, Eritrea violates the major human right laws and policies in religious freedom, prisoners of conscience and other political prisoners, freedom of expression – journalists, refugees and asylum-seekers, military conscription, arbitrary detention, forced labor and other abuses in “national service”, torture and cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment. The government believes that the religious groups especially the evangelical Churches that are not allowed by the government including the nongovernmental organizations are instruments of western politics and undercover espionage. The President of Eritrea “Isaias told Eritreans in May 2011 that international nongovernmental organizations harbor “a pathological compulsion for espionage.””

The Human right watch reported “the number of Eritreans jailed for such (for explicit or inferred opposition to President Isaias Afwerki and his policies) opposition is difficult to confirm, but ranges from 5,000 to 10,000, excluding national service evaders and deserters, who may number tens of thousands more.” Human Rights Watch continues, “Thousands of Eritreans, mostly of younger generations, flee the country because of the harsh conditions in national service, which is indefinitely prolonged, extending for much of a citizen’s working life. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported in early 2011 that 220,000 Eritreans, about 5 percent of the population, have fled.”

Human Rights Without Frontiers International “Eritrea is on top of the list but it should arguably concede its first place ranking to North Korea if access to information about possible Freedom of Religion or Belief prisoners in North

Korea was not almost inexistent. In practice, there is no religious freedom in this country, yet no data is made available about arrests, detention and imprisonment of North Koreans on the ground of freedom of religion or belief.”⁴⁷

In the 2012 Annual report of Amnesty international records that “UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, estimated that 3,000 Eritreans fled the country every month, mostly to Ethiopia or Sudan, despite a “shoot to kill” policy for anyone caught attempting to cross the border. Many of those fleeing were young people escaping indefinite national service conscription. Families of those who fled faced reprisals, including harassment, fines and imprisonment.”⁴⁸

Many devoted Christians remain detained for their faith in prison facilities ranging from shipping containers, to military prison camps and other facilities, some for years. Some sources say the figure may be over 2,000 Christians, though some have been released while several Christians are known to have died during their imprisonment.

The reported crackdown began in May, 2002 when all Churches except those belonging to the Orthodox, Catholic and Lutheran denominations were effectively banned members of independent Evangelical, Charismatic and Pentecostal Churches are particularly singled out, according to local Christians and international rights groups.

However even within the established Churches, leaders and devoted Christians have reported harassment. The Orthodox patriarch Abune Antonios, has been under house arrest since 2006 for resisting government interference in Church affairs, and priests seen as sympathizing with him are reportedly

detained and harassed. Instead the government has appointed its own leader, despite the resistance from the international Orthodox Churches especially Egypt Coptic Church who has been active in the activities of the Eritrean Orthodox Church.

The Catholic Church is not also left out of the persecution as it has been reported that some of the missionary Priests has been deported out and the movement of the Church was restricted with in some parts of Eritrea.

International Christian concern in its Saturday, November 17th, 2007 news reported that in "November 13, 2007 Eritrea -The Eritrean government has thrown the Catholic Church into tension by expelling 13 missionaries in unclear circumstances."⁴⁹

The Eritrean president Isayas Afewerki believes that the policies are aimed at religious groups who are "duped by foreigners", seeking to "distract from the unity of the Eritrean people and distort the true meaning of religion." The government sees these Churches as political sects supported by and work for the western politics.

The African nation of Eritrea has come under international pressure to allow more religious freedom. In a recent report, the United States, State Department noted that, "The government continued to harass and detain thousands of members of registered and unregistered religious groups and retained substantial control over the four registered religious groups." Additionally, "The government subjected religious prisoners to harsh conditions and held them for long periods of time, without due process. There continued to be reports of forced renunciations of faith, torture, and deaths while in custody," it said.

Over the past year, Open Doors reported that 31 Christians have died in prison camps. "Once arrested, religious prisoners cannot appeal in court for official hearings because they are never officially charged and are not allowed to be represented by a lawyer," Open Doors USA Media Relations Director Jerry Dykstra explained. "The moment a prisoner is taken to court one is guilty even before he or she is charged because being a member of the underground Church or attending religious meetings is an automatic crime. In other words, there is no justice for most independent Christians."

For the past 20 years plus physical and verbal abuse; imprisonment; kidnappings; bribes; deportation; destruction of property; fines; torture; murder has become the usual nonstop life of the Eritrean government towards believers.

4. RESULTS OF PERSECUTION

Persecution can turn out to be a blessing especially if it is compared with all kind of mess and the things that are done for granted with in the Churches in "freedom". Even if it is clear that suffering does not change or improve a person or even a Church, but in persecution the Church can be preserved from some of the internal enemies which are the worst kind of enemies to give a way to the enemy or to stumble oneself down.

John Rutherford in The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (1915)

writes the three results of persecution:

- (1) It raised up witnesses, true witnesses, for the Christian faith.
- (2) Persecution showed that the Christian faith is immortal even in this world

(3) Persecution became, to a large extent, an important means of preserving the true doctrines of the person and of the work of Christ.

4.1. From the current situation in Eritrea the first thing persecution does is that, it clearly separates the true, strong and dedicated convert from the false, weak and betraying once. It was so much amazing to see some people who just claimed to be Christians and became part of the Church leadership just because they have a notable social status or because of their financial power or even because of their educational background, but when the turning point of persecution comes such people are the once found to be against the Church. Even though this has been a problem of the Church all over the world but when it comes to the persecuted Church it is one of the things you cannot live with since it will be a matter of life or death. Those who live a double life have been the internal enemies of the Church.

4.2. Effective Discipleship process is witnessed. Within the persecuted Church mass ministry gives its way out to home-cell and one to one ministry. Making sure who is who matters if the Church wants to be secured and grow in quality. In the past few years the Eritrean Church have been improving and growing in working on discipleship through home fellowships and one to one ministry. Those who used to be fed once a week just through the Sunday sermons and preaching were able to be followed up and learn the major doctrines and teachings of the Bible.

4.3. Multiplication of leaders has to be the norm. One of the major challenges of the persecuted Church is reproducing and multiplying leaders. The government officials continually target the Church leaders and some are imprisoned and others hid themselves or flee out of the country. To keep the ministry going with out interruption the need of replacing the leadership vacancies has to be fast and smooth. In the process, the Church in suffering has more, young, new and effective leaders, who will also pass on the mantle to others and duplicate themselves before being noticed and targeted by the officials.

4.4. The Churches are small and in the houses of the simple and unnoticed believers. This makes it easy for the Church to follow up the members and difficult for the persecutors to get the believers. When the Church is small it is easy to follow up and to manage, when it is in the houses it is easy to bring up effective and mature families, when it is in the houses of the simple it is the way to get great men and women of God.

4.5. Social occasions like birthdays, weddings and funerals become great opportunities to meet as a body. Even though the government has been stubborn even to disperse weddings and incarcerate so many people including the grooms, believers has been using such occasions as a blessing. From time to time such opportunities have been a way to change how the society thinks and it has been a great way to lead many to salvation.

4.6. Bible studies in the home fellowships are growing effective. Before the persecution came the Eritrean Christianity was much more based on fellowships and not deeply rooted in the Word of God. A balanced knowledge of the Word of God was not seen in the lives of the believers. Poor feeding of the Churches was normal to hear from the pulpits of more than half percent of the Churches. Pulpits have been used to show denominational differences and a reflection of weak leadership. In the overall view from the evangelical Churches except one Church, that is the Faith Mission Church, the rest of the Churches did not have a follow-up system or even simple Bible studies. Since approximately less than eighty percent of the ministers have at least a certificate or Diploma level in simple Theological studies, and approximately less than fifteen up to twenty percent has a degree level, it has been hard to pass on effective and established biblical teachings. An approximate number of trained ministers from the mainline Churches - Faith mission 20 persons, Full Gospel Church 30, Kale Hewot 40, The Lutheran 60. Because of these the vulnerability for heretical Bible interpretations, erroneous teachings or the deception in misuse of the gifts of the Holy Spirit were major challenges to the leadership before the persecution begun. Even if it can be said that these has reduced by large percent yet it is still a major challenge to the suffering Church. In suffering the believers have learned to pray together, to study the Bible together and to look for the fellowship of believers. As a way to establish and keep the believers from falling back in such a testing times the Churches are fully committed in providing materials to study the word and bring the believers to maturity.

4.7. Working for unity of Churches and denominations. One of the ways the government subtly closed the Churches was by using the weakness the Churches had, that is a growing division among the Churches and the lack of unity within the denominations. The government carefully informed that the intention was to close down the rampantly springing “small and new Churches” and let the mainliners get their registration license. Which the mainline Churches accepted happily and even tried to sue the small Churches to get under their covering. These brought major conflict and even gave the government a way to close the Churches and arrest the leaders one by one. With a new and young leadership on ground who had a less information and involvement of the past conflict the Churches have a closer relation and a sense of partnership rather than the former denominational fight.

4.8. Remembering the poor and the prisoners. The numbers of families who are suffering for the sake of the gospel are numerous. It is totally another kind of risky ministry starting from knowing the exact whereabouts of the prisoners and after getting the location the risk of visiting and getting the access to identify the conditions, the need and the way to smuggle in to the prison cells the necessities.

Usually the government wants it hard for the families of the prisoners to know where one is. Depending on the place one is arrested, the believers who work within the government intelligence are the best means to get the whereabouts. If one is arrested alone in the streets or in one of the city corners it might be

hard to get the exact location of the prison he or she is taken, but if there are a group of believers caught as in house fellowships it might be easy to track the police or the government officers. Sometimes the officers give some information on where one will be taken or what procedures to follow.

After getting the information where one is taken visiting is also another risky matter that can end up putting the visitors into the prison cells. Therefore it is wise to use a means that can reduce the risks. Knowing the right officers who can assist you, starting from a normal police officer up to the chief officer in charge or using people who have a relation with them, especially identifying the believers is the way to getting the right access with the prisoners in Christ.

In most of the occasions there is no way to see and talk with the prisoners. If the condition is so it is necessary to get and send information and any possible assistance through the officers. If there is a way to get access all kinds of means are used to pass tracts part of a Bible and other necessary things.

To add on, in a country where the GDP is between 566 up to 800 ranking Eritrea as one of the worst ten countries of the world, giving a hand to the poor and the needy is a way of Christ.⁵⁰ The Church that has a sense of freedom to preach the gospel has a great responsibility to stand on the gap to be on the side of the body of Christ that is suffering greatly.

4.9. The spreading of the gospel and the opening of Churches even in the most difficult and unimaginable countries out side Eritrea is a blessing in disguise.

With unsettled political economical social and religious conditions in the homeland of Eritrea almost five present of the nation have gone and is still

moving out of the country. In a continues and dangerous flow thousands and thousands of Eritreans are moving out of the country to the neighboring countries like Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Libya, Egypt through the Sinai desert into Israel, and through Libya through the Mediterranean sea to Italy and into the rest of the European countries. Wherever these people are traced there are also the footprint of Churches. In the Islamic countries like Sudan, United Arab Emirates, Yemen, there are growing Eritrean Churches worshipping in freedom and preaching the gospel to the nations. In Northern Sudan in the city of Khartoum there are about nine Churches, in Southern Sudan, Juba there are two Churches, in Uganda one, in Kenya two, in Republic of South Africa two, in the United Arab Emirates five, in Egypt two, in the refugee camps of Ethiopia more than five, in Angola one, in Libya one, There are also much more Eritrean Congregations all over Europe, In different states of Canada and north America. These are Churches particularly for Eritreans in Tigrinya language. Their impact with the local people were they are residing is potentially great and despite the enormous challenges some are making great impacts.

Despite all kinds of tragedies that are happening on the believers and even the nation in general God is doing major things in the lives of the believers. Even though many points can be pointed out to sum up the main ones we can say that; Individual believers are being made strong through physical suffering. Eritrean believers are being educated in many skills with which to lead a nation. Eritreans are being exposed to all parts of the world. Eritreans are living among

people who also need the Gospel. God is preparing a people to: become a holy nation, become a vibrant Church, and become a missionary force.

5. THE WEAK SIDE OF THE CHURCH IN PERSECUTION

Even though there are numerous and extremely painful and difficult situations that weakens the Church in times of persecution, there are some issues that are challenging the persecuted Church to be self-defeating.

5.1. Trusting one another in a place where everyone is spied is extremely a hard matter. Trust has been a difficult matter in a place where one can easily betray to save his or her own life. Trust is difficult after hearing someone from the center of the leadership has backslidden and betrayed the entire Church by giving out the list of the names of the members to the government. The “kiss betrayal” has been a pattern of those who love themselves and money. With the economical situation, with the fear of going to military army, and trying to save oneself from getting prisoned there are a lot of them who betray their brothers and sisters to the government.

5.2. Even if this is not true for the real believers who are ready to sacrifice themselves for the truth they have believed, fear, has been a big matter to the weak, backsliding and double-life believer. Fear of being prisoned and tortured in the worst prison cells just for believing in the Lord Jesus Christ has been a challenge for the weak believers. These are the ones who will give way to the enemy. Fear can overcome even some of the strong believers when thinking of

how your little children and spouse or parents will survive in one of the poorest countries, if you are put in to prison for an unknown time with out any conviction or trial.

5.3. The tragedy of backsliding is a heart-breaking situation. The Church has lost many new believers at the time the Church was closed and in the process of building system of house fellowships. Some also backslide after they are released out from the prisons because of fear or if they have signed not to join any Christian gathering or some have even denied Christ just to save their lives. Such people are the major tools for the government to hunt after the Christian gatherings and believers. One can say this is the way God purifies His Church, but it is also a disaster for the Church to loose even a single soul especially in such a way.

5.4. Some have the daring to get money in the name of the persecuted and use it for personal gain. For some years it has been said that, getting the reports and giving the details of how the donations that has come from outside of the country were used, were difficult. Some have taken these advantages to use the money that was sent for their personal gain. If there is no clear accountability system and a clear working goal and team to work with the matter can fail to be a way of prospering greedy individuals.

5.5. In connection with the fourth point there is a great shortage of financial support to the ministers and the families of the prisoners. With the ever increasing

poverty and a system that is hard to collect offering and tithe to sustain the activities of the underground Church it is a difficult thing to support the hard working ministers who are busy all over the country.

5.6. The difficulty to control false teachings is a hard thing to the persecuted Church.

The number of upcoming new and many house fellowships are increasing continuously. The shortage of ministers and the non stop imprisonment of the Church leaders has become the reason for those who are not mentored and who have become undisciplined to just go on misinterpreting the word of God and misusing the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Even if this is the problem of the Church everywhere it is a double problem for those Churches where the leaders are working underground or some are in prisons.

5.7. When the heart is gripped by bitterness instead of forgiveness and Love to

wards the persecutors. Jesus' message to the disciples concerning the attitude they should have to ward the persecutors is to love, bless, do good and pray for them. "But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you".⁵¹ This is a real Christian challenge in persecution. When a father or a mother a son or a daughter gets in prison because of his or her faith and as a result a family is dispersed. For many families there is a great lack of source of income. Lots of babies children fathers and mothers brothers and sisters has lost love communication, guidance and all the necessities that can be found from a family. There are so many kids who could not concentrate their

studies... and there are so many points to list even to point of losing a loved one, just because of the faith in Christ. When such things happen one can easily get bitter and unforgiving.

6. THE PROPOSAL FOR THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ERITREAN CHURCH DURING AND AFTER THE PERSECUTION

The Eritrean Church needs to see beyond now in to the future and strategize to be able to challenge all kind of systems and bring an impact upon the entire nation. To do this seven major points are proposed in this thesis. Even though this is not an all-inclusive proposal it can encourage and pave a way for Church leaders and believers who can bring an impact and see the future together. Unless the Church is organized to set goals and objectives that can bring the glory of the Church above any kind of system we will always live under suppressive world system even when we are able to overpower it.

The major objectives to pursue are:

6.1. Institutional Developments and Strengthening:

6.1.1. The Church should rise to develop a structured Leadership Development Program for those appointed into the leadership of the Church like elders, deacons, pastors, lay-ministers, and those involved in ministries as volunteers. Unless we rise to develop leaders in their perspective posts poor leadership administration and management will pave a way for quick fall, which is evidenced in the Eritrean Church weather in home or out in the diaspora for the past several years.

- 6.1.2. Develop a comprehensive human resource plan with projections of manpower and development needs over the plan period. Next to the leadership development the development of human resource should be considered in all proposed development needs. When Churches consider the projects and structures undermining the needed human resources, first, we miss the central aim of the Church, which is human resource and secondly we lose or paralyze the best and top able people because of not considering in their natural or professional gifts and talents,
- 6.1.3. Develop and implement an effective leadership recruitment programs. The Church should be about developing people to the maximum ability so that the gospel will have an impact a person and a nation in a holistic way. One of the ways is to recruit people for leadership positions be it spiritual economical social or political,
- 6.1.4. Consolidate all ministry and operational policies and undertake periodic reviews after every three years. The Church should draft and implement effective ministerial and operational policies that can enable the follow up and guidance for the accomplishment of the desired destination.
- 6.1.5. Enhance Information and communication Technology (ICT) capacity through Internet and integrate ICT in all systems of the Church and Para-Church ministries and organizations. One of the major things that affected the Eritrean Church before and during the time of persecution is its lack of connection with the outside world. When the government was closing the Churches and arresting the ministers all over the country the information did not reach to the rest of the world at the desired speed. The delay and

the disconnection gave the government to abuse the right of the people and continue in breaking all kinds of human right laws.

The Technology of Information and communication is now the system of the century is the means the Church should use effectively to reach the generation with the saving gospel of Jesus Christ.

6.1.6. Develop systematic mechanisms for utilization of the wide resource base within the Churches, Para-Church ministries and organizations. The strength of unity is when everybody brings his or her strong side and uses it to accomplish a common goal. As mentioned above what strengthened the government in easily closing the Churches was the lack of unity among the Churches. Some government officials said that the government did not expect it to be that easy to close the Churches. When the small Churches got closed the mainline Churches were clapping their hands and when the bigger Churches got closed one by one the others were thinking the government would not come to them. Lack of unity denominationalism and poor communication systems disconnected the Churches to let the enemy intrude and do whatever he wants.

There is a need to exchange experiences and effective human and any other kind of resources and work in unity to bring the best governance system and strong organizations.

6.1.7. Strengthen the research function within the Christian Education Departments. The Church should invest and work on building up a strong community of believers and impact the nation with the gospel. One of the powerful ways to do these is to build up and work on a Christian research

and education systems. Schools, colleges seminaries and universities are the way forward to impact the country with intellectual elites that can be trusted to be the policy makers and voices of the Christian ethics and values.

6.2. Enhanced Children and Youth Ministries:

The focus on children and youth ministry should be there to develop, mentor and upgrade the upcoming youth leaders and the next generation in general, with a life changing gospel, Christian ethics and biblical moral standards. The Church should not only be about now but also work with a mind to pave a way for the next generation.

The persecution and the unlimited military service in Eritrea have made many to be orphans and a reason for many families to be separated. Besides, the government's aim to indoctrinate and bring up Children who are totally far away from Biblical ethics with a godless mentality and filled with communist ideology is working hard on the little children and the youth. We also have to put in mind that 41 percent of the population of Eritrea is under the age of 15.⁵² The Church has a lot of responsibilities and extra miles to go if we are to redeem the next generation.

These is about the need for the development of a comprehensive curriculum for emerging youth leaders, children, youth, young adults and professionals,

6.2.1. The need for the development of a comprehensive program for children and youth ministries that provides for adequate transition through the stages (children-teens-youth-young adults),

- 6.2.2. The need for the development of a practical and sustainable mentoring program for the youth and young adults,
- 6.2.3. The need for the development of incorporate facilities for children and youth and upgrade facilities for children and youth,
- 6.2.4. The need for the development of a program for enhancing human resource capacity (number, skills and competencies) of children and youth pastors and workers;
- 6.2.5. The need for creating a platform for information sharing with members and congregants, and active engagement on lobbying and advocacy on issues affecting children and youth,
- 6.2.6. The need for the development of a program for integration of parents, guardians and congregations into programs and activities of children and youth ministries and equipping them with skills for effective parenting;
- 6.2.7. The need for the development of a program for children and youth with special needs.

6.3. Discipleship (Christian nurture, growth, multiplication and service): The Church in Eritrea should seek to the making of the disciples of Jesus Christ. Church split and transfers cannot be the measuring standard for the growth of the Church, which has been the character of the Church in Eritrea for so many years. Despite the painful part of persecution it has definitely brought a blessing of real discipleship that can carry the cross. When people are saved by the preaching of the gospel and grow in the knowledge and doing of the Word of God, consistent prayer life and healthy fellowship with believers, that is

when we say there is a real growth in a believer's life. This can only be done when the Church is able to nurture, feed, send and allow believers to practice their gifts and talents.

6.3.1. Effective Discipleship will enable to equip Members for ministry through teaching and training for service in specific areas of ministry and to counter the onslaught of other religions, cults, and negative cultural practices,

6.3.2. Effective Discipleship will seek to develop and ensure availability of relevant and contextualized Bible Study and Discipleship materials.

6.3.3. Effective Discipleship will seek to develop a systematic one-on-one and enhance group discipleship mentorship program for all Church members,

6.3.4. For effective Discipleship the Church need to seek to Establish a specialized ministry to empower and support members in political, executive and professional leadership for effective witness in the market place;

6.3.5. For effective Discipleship the Church needs to establish a Church based Training and Resource Centre and establish Libraries;

6.3.6. For effective Discipleship the Church needs to develop a program to equip members with leadership skills.

6.3.7. For effective Discipleship the Church needs to enhance the recruitment process to ensure that people in different assemblies or country are registered members and are actively involved in the ministries and programs of the Church.

6.4. Strengthened Christian Cell group and Fellowship:

As it is mentioned above despite the pain and suffering that came because of the persecution the Church in Eritrea has now learned to change the strategy to home fellowships as the means for believers to meet together for prayer study the word of God and fellowship as believers. Home fellowships have not been part of the Church ministry until persecution came to force it in.

Persecution has defiantly brought a change and growth in the life of believers and kept the Churches to organize teachings and train leaders for such ministries. If strengthened Christian Cell group and Fellowship are needed we as a Church should pursue the following objectives,

6.4.1. Strengthen neighborhood Bible study and home care or cell groups and encourage people to belong and participate consistently and actively in a group,

6.4.2. Enhance ministry support by developing a pool of trained and equipped lay ministers,

6.4.3. Develop mechanisms for providing support to fellowship and service ministries and special support groups,

6.4.4. Develop mechanisms for catering for disadvantaged within the congregations (widows, orphans and the very poor) such as to establish an endowment fund and by developing partnership with donor or funding agencies,

6.4.5. Strengthen the family through establishment of married couples care groups in all Assemblies,

6.4.6. Develop mechanisms for providing counseling support

6.4.7. Develop mechanisms for providing care, fellowship and ministering to pastors and their families.

6.4.8. Develop cell group for different group of professionals in their perspective field

6.5. Church Planting, Missions and Outreach:

When we see the cultural social and presently the political positioning of Eritrea we can confidently say Eritrea is strategically positioned to reach the Middle East with the Gospel. To see some of the facts:

- The third official language of Eritrea is Arabic,
- Eritrea is bordered with Sudan Djibouti, Ethiopia and through the red sea with Saudi Arabia and Yemen,
- Presently Eritrea is one of the four observer states in the Arab League
- The percentage of the religion in Eritrea is said to be, 48% Eritrean Orthodox, 47% Muslim and 5% Catholic, Evangelical and Other religions

There are many indicators that show that God has given the Middle East to Eritrea. There are Eritrean Churches that freely worship with in the Arab countries like Sudan, Yemen, Saudi Arabia (underground Church) and United Arab Emirates. There are a lot of people flooding into these countries because of the political, economical and religious instability. There are a high number of women who are going to these countries as housemaids and for any job opportunity they could get. There are some ministers who run out of Eritrea and gone to the Arab countries and able to establish Churches and house fellowships. It is no doubt if the Eritrean believers were to ask

God to give them the Middle East as their inheritance we do have a reason to believe that He would definitely answer that request. If we are to plant Churches, make an outreach to reach our unreached people groups and send missionaries to other nations we need to pursue the following objectives in each of these areas:

6.5.1. Church Planting:

6.5.1.1. Undertake a comprehensive study to be completed, to guide where and what type of assemblies to be established and the most cost effective way of developing sanctuaries,

6.5.1.2. Build a land bank by acquiring land in at least one strategic urban area each year.

6.5.2. Missions:

6.5.2.1. Facilitate establishment of indigenous led vibrant Churches among indigenous communities,

6.5.2.2. Establish a mission station in different allocations

6.5.2.3. Develop a support and cell/care program for missionaries internationally

6.5.2.4. Establish a functional urban Mission station based in major cities, to reach the un-reached people groups in urban centers,

6.5.2.5. Design a system that will effectively utilize Church members in Diaspora by equipping them to reach out to the people in those communities,

6.5.2.6. Develop mechanisms to equip, motivate and develop Church members for effective out-reach,

6.5.2.7. Develop and implement a strategy of countering the onslaught of other religions.

6.5.3. Outreach

Outreach through the Church Media:

6.5.3.1. Enhance media outreach and coverage by establishing modern digital radio coverage and Establish e-tube broadcasting and a modern digital TV station to cover all over the region,

6.5.3.2. Establish a fully equipped professional counseling center that can give service for 24 hours,

6.5.3.3. Establish a virtual (pod casting and web streaming) broadcasting,

6.5.3.4. Enhance discipleship by addressing spiritual and contemporary issues through the media (video, audio, web...).

Outreach through Schools:

6.5.3.5. Review and develop a model and curriculum that will integrate Christian values into the formation of boys and girls that go through our schools,

6.5.3.6. Develop an outreach program to the parents,

6.5.3.7. Establish a Scholarship Fund to support the disadvantaged children in our Institutions,

6.5.3.8. Establish kindergartens and day care centers and

6.5.3.9. Establish an Academy that can cover colleges, Universities, Seminaries and Training centers

Outreach through Social Action and Advocacy:

6.5.3.10 Develop a program that addresses chronic illnesses affecting members and congregants,

6.5.3.11 Establish a rehabilitation centers for those addicted through substance abuse,

6.5.3.12 Establish a Justice and Peace Commission of the Church for rapid response to issues,

6.5.3.13 Establish a Disaster and Emergency Response Team,

6.5.3.14 Establish a Relief Agency to work with other organizations to support relief and benevolence,

6.5.3.15 Develop a curriculum that will facilitate the molding of character of children into responsible citizens with strong Christian impact in the society and equip the children with skills that will enable them to be self reliant and

6.5.3.16 Develop re-integration program and mechanisms that encourage the active involvement of key stakeholders including families and communities.

6.6 Infrastructure Development:

The development of structures can be a difficult thing to think within such time of persecution yet strategizing and connecting with able and potential believers is necessary. Building of Headquarters, new Churches, academic

centers, health centers and all necessary centers to meet the needs of ministers and the ministry are essential. To do these we need to work towards

6.6.1 Building the Church's and the fellowship's Head Office,

6.6.2 Building sanctuaries, universities,

6.6.3 Enhancing facilities in the existing Assemblies on a phased basis,

6.6.4 Building and enhancing facilities in the academic institutions with advanced Libraries, Classrooms, Kitchen, Dining hall, Multipurpose hall, laboratory, Play ground, Kindergarten block...) and

6.6.5 Enhancing facilities of staffs and Ministers

6.7 Development of Supplementary Revenue Streams:

The growth and self-supportiveness of the Church comes when the believers are committed to support the Lord's work and when the Church is able to utilize the resources within and around it. If we are to seek to reach to such levels we are expected to:

6.7.1 Develop a business cases for all Church departments, institutions and units with the aim of being self-supporting and establishing their viability,

6.7.2 Develop campsites,

6.7.3 Establish and grow the Church's Development Fund, and

6.7.4 Establishing Retreat Centers, Guest Houses and prayer camps

7. CONCLUSION

As a concluding point of the matter there is a great need for the Eritrean Church to come together for arguing together and work together in unity for reaching the nation with the saving gospel and pass the mantle for the upcoming generations of believers. The Church need to see the uniting factors instead of dividing differences and fulfill the great commission in united spirit. A call should go out to all Eritrean Churches both back in home country and in diaspora to assemble a congregation of Church leaders and influential believers who can reposition the Church in its rightful biblical place. If the Church cannot come together to fight all kinds of battles together repeating the same mistakes and letting the enemy overpower the Church is inevitable.

The call should not only be to the Eritrean Churches but also to the entire body of Christ. The pain and suffering the Eritrean Church is facing now is the pain of the Church all over. One cannot isolate self in the comfort of religious freedom when the Church is not about a physical place but a spiritual body of Christ. As mentioned above the modern time persecution is much more subtle and worse than the early Church's challenge and difficulties. When evil is advancing through grace the power of Holiness also advances much more. The Church in the entirety has that responsibility for the advancement of God's kingdom work. Therefore, Bible scholars, Church leaders, business people and Christian policy makers should team up to build the kingdom together, speak for the weak, confront the injustice, encourage and assist the believers and those who are sacrificially ministering.

Let us learn from the past and build a better future now.

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