

Persecution of Christians in America

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It is in keeping with a long tradition that after a day of heavy lifting, listening to and contemplating the End Things of this world, and after a full meal with good company, that the banquet speech to follow should be light and humorous. With that in mind, the organizers of the convocation have given me the subject of Persecution.

Here's what I propose to do this evening: I want to explain to you why I think we should be preparing for persecution and give you some thoughts on what our persecution might look like. Then I want to propose some practical things that we should be doing, not just when the persecution comes, but especially now, so that we are not caught completely off guard when it comes. Oh, and I'm going to make you sing hymns along the way.

But before I get to those two items—why we should prepare, and how—I have something more important to put before you. If you remember nothing else about this light and humorous banquet speech, I hope you remember this:

Joy

This is the time for joy. This is not the time to hang our heads, moan and groan, whine and complain about elections, or facemasks, or Big Media, or Big Tech, or any of the various outright persecutions that are coming our way. No, in fact, this is a time of unprecedented opportunity for our churches. And most importantly, this is the time for joy—fierce, confident, unassailable joy.

We must take the lead from Jesus Himself. You hear His words every All Saints Day in the Beatitudes: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad; for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Mt 5:10–12). The fundamental response to persecution for Christ’s doctrine is joy!

In Acts 5, when the apostles were arrested and imprisoned by the Sadducees, and afterwards beaten in the presence of the ruling Council, Luke records, “Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the Name” (Acts 5:41). And of course, they did not stop “teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus” (5:42).

And why? Why should there be joy when there is persecution, hardship, suffering, and loss? These things involve real pain and real sorrow. Now, it is true that you have a God who loves

you in Christ in all the circumstances of your life, including persecution. That alone is an unending source of joy for us Christians.

But we can say more. For one thing, persecution has a way of stripping away from us all the things of this life that ordinarily give us such happiness in life. All that remains is Christ's beatitude, the grace of God in Christ. You are blessed, Jesus says in the Beatitudes. Great is your reward in heaven. And what's more, there is no greater honor or heavenly fame than to be given the privilege of suffering for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

But that's putting the cart before the horse. Our joy originates in Jesus Himself. What is it that destroys our joy? Sin. Sin and guilt, an unclean conscience, "the desires of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life" (1 Jn 2:16). The shame of our sinful thoughts and deeds. The list is long. Sin and guilt and shame rob us of joy, even the possibility of joy.

God became man in order to bear our sins and the sins of all the world. He came to give joy, to restore gladness to the church. "He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. . . The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Is 53:5, 6b).

That is to say that the blood of Jesus Christ, shed once for all at His sacrifice on the cross, satisfies the wrath of God's judgment against us, thus reconciling us to God. The blood of Christ now cleanses us, first in our Baptism, then daily in the Word of forgiveness, and is applied to us body and soul in the Lord's Supper. Here is joy! "Jesus, Joy of my desiring, fount of life, my soul inspiring" (TLH 305.7; LSB 636.6). There is no greater joy, joy that leads us into heaven itself, joy that can never be taken away. We sing it every Sunday after the sermon, "Restore unto me the joy of my salvation."

This joy is the promise of Jesus before His resurrection, before His death, before the disciples tasted the bitterness of persecution in the humiliation, torture, and execution of their beloved Savior. "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy. . . So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you" (John 16:20, 22).

It is the resurrection—Christ's, and then ours—that is decisive in persecution. We who have the blood of Christ and His resurrection can never be defeated. We who no longer fear death can never be overcome. This truth inevitably provokes the world into mocking us, despising us, fearing us, hating us, but never into overcoming us. "Be of good cheer," Jesus says, "I have overcome the world" (John 16:33)

Stand

Hymn: "O Rejoice Ye Christians Loudly" LSB 897

Why and How

So, why should we be talking about the persecution of Christians in the United States of America in the Year of Our Lord 2021? Let me preface my answer by taking us back 2,000 years to John the Baptist.

You know that John was imprisoned and then executed by Herod Antipas, as it is recorded in the Gospels. This Herod was the son of Herod the Great, who had tried to kill Jesus some 30 years before. Herod Antipas served for some 40 years as a Roman tetrarch appointed by Caesar Augustus. He was of Idumean, or Edomite, descent, though he sometimes stylized himself as the King of the Jews.

Herod's persecution of John the Baptist was not provoked by preaching the Gospel in the narrow sense—preaching the arrival of the Lord Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Rather he was persecuted, imprisoned, and executed for preaching the Law of God, specifically, God's Law concerning marriage.

I want you to appreciate how instructive this is for us today, and how comforting it is that we are so beautifully warned about what's important to the world and what they will hate in our preaching and confession. And I want all of us to gather courage and boldness of speech from John's example.

Here was the problem. Herod's marriage to Herodias was incest on two counts: first that she was his niece, and second that she was his brother's wife. It was also initiated by an unlawful divorce, and completed by an unlawful marriage to this unlawfully divorced woman. To put it in our terms today, this marriage violated divine law—both what we call natural law and what is clearly taught in God's Word. John the Baptist, forerunner of the incarnate Son of God, was persecuted and martyred because he preached against these violations of the natural, divine law of marriage.

I'm sure you see the parallels to today. Like you, I was quite distressed when the Supreme Court's Obergefell ruling in June 2015 forced so-called "same-sex marriage" upon all 50 states in the Union. The Court's narrow 5-4 ruling thereby overturned the biological, familial, cultural, legal, historic, and Scriptural norm of marriage as the conjugal union of a man and a woman for life. It is an unspeakable abomination that sodomy should receive the name marriage.

We were all hopeful that replacing liberals with conservatives on the Supreme Court would lead to salutary change. But I didn't think too much about widespread persecution until the Bostock ruling. On June 15, 2020, the Supreme Court by judicial fiat redefined the word "sex"—that is, male and female—to include sexual orientation and gender identity. That is, all the alphabet soup of sexually disoriented and gender-misidentified people, together with their lawyers and

politicians, will be able to persecute Christians for holding to natural law and the teaching of Holy Scriptures.

This act of defiance against God and His creation was passed 6-3 by a supposedly conservative Supreme Court majority. There will be no salvation in the Supreme Court. For now, the ruling applies only to employment practices under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act. That will change, of course. President Biden has already begun signing orders to extend legal “rights” into all kinds of unnatural evils.

For now, the ruling has emphasized exceptions for religious organizations, but I counsel you that we should put no faith in these exceptions. They won’t last. Churches may still be protected for a while, but Christians generally will not be. The House of Representatives has pushed through a bill called the Equality Act, which, if passed through the Senate and signed into law, would not only enshrine the Supreme Court’s ruling throughout the laws of the land, but would also explicitly deny all the religious freedom protections guaranteed in the Constitution and ensconced in the Religious Freedom Restoration Act. Persecution of both Christians and Christian churches will be sure to follow.

The Bostock ruling, however, combined with a second event that made me see the coming, and even the immediate presence, of persecution in this past year. I’m referring to the federal, state, and local government responses to the COVID disease. Most of our churches were understandably cautious in the first week or two of the disease, not yet knowing what we were dealing with. But as the weeks wore into months, it became clear to me that most of our nation had accepted the closure of churches as the new and obvious norm, in fact, as the morally required and acceptable response to a notorious virus. I am still shocked by how easily the government accomplished it.

As I set this response to government orders in the light of Holy Scriptures, I came to regard the closing of our churches as an unmitigated spiritual disaster, and a horrible tragedy for our nation. The public preaching of God’s Word is the only reason God does not immediately visit this nation with the wrath of His just judgment. It is only through our prayers that God has any mercy on us at all as a nation. The closing of churches is a tragedy greater than 9/11, Pearl Harbor, the Great Depression, or the Civil War. This is no exaggeration. I’m not doing a body count, of course; I’m looking at the matter theologically, in the light of Scriptures. The Bible makes it very clear that only God defends a nation from its enemies. At the time we most needed to turn to Him, we closed our churches. The Bible also clearly teaches us how great the wrath of God is toward a people that once had the pure doctrine and use of His Word and then rejected it. We have yet to see what devastation is in store for the churches that stayed closed.

I know that this is hotly debated subject in places. But I need to address it here because there is evidence that the response to COVID will be used as a template for dealing with other social

issues. There is precedence now, and we have been trained to accept it. It has already been proposed to use the social health and wellbeing rationale for enforcing LGBTQ “equality” on all sectors of our society, including churches. Imagine our public teaching on man, woman, and marriage being construed as a threat to people’s health, or as a national threat to public safety, or as being insurrectionist or terrorist. Our churches would be portrayed as public enemy number one. It still seems like a stretch to me. But then, so did same-sex marriage and the redefinition of sex.

Let me close this section of my light and humorous banquet speech with a few other signs of persecution on this day. Although ours won’t necessarily look like Communist China’s, the American version of a Social Credit system is already in place. It only waits to be activated. In time we will be at the bottom of the Social Credit Score, meaning restrictions on all kinds of freedoms and activities. In fact, all the mechanisms for a totalitarian government are in place. The only thing that restrains the use of these mechanisms is the grace of God, ultimately, and the good will of men who still believe in natural law, the rule of truth over power, and the dignity of every man. Those men are few, who love the truth over their prosperity, their devices, their entertainment lifestyle, their acceptability in our cancel culture. How long will good men prevail?

Here’s some further evidence of persecution, which you probably know better than I do. Censorship is already taking place. Not the censorship of immorality, and not merely the censorship of insurrection and violence. Big Tech and Government have conspired to silence all public speech that does not favor the social and political agenda of those in technological and political power. The public media have gone from the public shaming of disfavored views to what one commentator called “the propaganda of silence”—simply not reporting any news that undermines the favored narrative.

We know about the ongoing retaliation visited upon those who seek to defend traditional morality and religion. Remember, for example, the State of Indiana’s Religious Freedom and Restoration Act, which was repealed under media and business pressure by then-governor Mike Pence. Remember Jack Phillips and Barronelle Stutzman and the Little Sisters of the Poor. The list is growing.

To be complete, we should enumerate the long list of legal and cultural judgments that have been a direct assault—a persecution—of divine law and those who promote it: no-fault divorce, legalized abortion, euthanasia and suicide, unrestrained adultery and fornication, a culture of cohabitation, sodomy as a moral right, now the violation of basic natural law norms such as the created difference of male and female and the divine institution of marriage. These are acts of persecution, dear Christians. They are anti-Christian. They are designed to destroy Christianity. Now our culture—note, not just our government—our culture accepts and justifies imposing

these evils upon Christians and the Christian church. It remains to be seen how local government, local school boards, or even our next-door neighbors will be persuaded to act.

So, what are the first and most immediate targets of persecution? The list I give here is not my creation, but simply a summary of what you can find in organizations like the Secular Democrats of America. It is the published agenda. For the sake of time I'll be brief, though you may want to go back and do more research on your own (e.g. *The Atlantic*, Dec. 3, 2020, Ronald Brownstein, "The Supreme Court is Colliding with a Less-Religious America"; Secular Democrats of America at secular Dems.org).

Here are the immediate targets:

- **Private religious education.** They hate our Classical Lutheran Schools. I can only assume that homeschools will soon be the target also.
- **Crisis pregnancy centers:** Yes, they hate the pro-Life movement that much.
- **Abstinence-only sex education:** It sounds like Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*.
- **Religious adoption and foster-care services:** Again, they will be allowed to be religious as long as they follow the religious tenets of the prevailing secular religion, that is, imposing sodomites and transgenderites on little children.
- **Vaccination exemptions:** That's right, you are not to have control over your own body either.
- **Religious freedom, religious justice, religious free speech:** These basic legal rights are now seen as legalized forms of opposition to the secular social religion of our day. They will seek to end them. Religious freedom will be restricted to what goes on in your head, until that also is taken away. The only alternative they will give is conformity.
- **Religious exemptions regarding public health and safety, LGBTQ laws, denial of health care:** This one has already been in the news for some time. Expect them to double down.
- **Religious entities with tax breaks:** I'm guessing they will start with religious organizations and eventually make their way down to church bodies and individual congregations. Their proposal is to make the religious entities accountable to secular entities for conforming to LGBTQ and other so-called "equality" standards.

I should make something clear here. The American situation is unique, and history does not, strictly speaking, repeat itself without changes. I don't expect Soviet-style persecution to be our future, at least not for a good while. I could be wrong. The fact is, those who hate Christianity today do not hate all the churches. Many of our mainline churches, parts of Roman Catholicism, and others have already conformed themselves to the secular religion of our day. They will be left unmolested because they do not oppose the doctrine and practice of the persecutors.

What I think will take place will be an ironic imitation of the situation that has existed in the European church scene for over 200 years now, dating back to the Prussian Union of 1817. There will be State Churches and Free Churches, though they will certainly not be called that. In Europe, State Churches are under the control and funding of the Government, while Free Churches are the small remnants of confessional fellowships that have had to survive on their own resources, sometimes without legal status. What I expect will happen in the American version of this situation is that some churches—the liberal ones—will continue to enjoy all the present privileges we enjoy today such as tax exemption, freedom to gather, and so on. They will have these privileges because they conform their doctrine and practice to the prevailing secular religion of the day, expressed publicly in moral judgments regarding environmental, social, and governmental (ESG) doctrines.

And what about those that do not conform? Like the Free Churches of the European tradition, the non-conformist, confessional churches may or may not receive official recognition. They could have their tax-exempt status removed. They could lose their legal status entirely, which means all their property, buildings, and funds could be forfeited to the government. They and their members could have restrictions placed upon their ability to use the internet, or specific computer programs that are internet-linked. Their members may lose their jobs or businesses because they refuse to obey the language and ethics of the latest secular morality. They could be forbidden to gather or associate. Their speech, at least on certain topics, will become illegal and subject to fines and imprisonment. If the government doesn't impose these persecutions, the pressures of coordinated media and social threats will do so.

And why is there such vitriol toward Biblical Christianity? We have to understand that it is the truth that they hate the most, the truth of Holy Scriptures, beginning with the truth about the incarnate God Himself. Jesus taught us this in John 8(:43–47), “Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God.”

The heart of all truth is the doctrine so clearly taught in Holy Scriptures, correctly expounded and exhibited in the Confessions of the Lutheran Church, and taught in our dear Lutheran congregations by faithful pastors. But we who do not fear death are filled with joy by this truth that will never be confounded.

Stand

Hymn: “O Little Flock, Fear Not the Foe” LSB 666

What Shall We Do?

So, persecution is here, more is coming, and things could get really intense. Well, what should we do? What can we do now? I recognize that it is possible that the picture I have painted will not come to fruition for a long time, that God will work some miracle in our culture or government, contrary to what our nation deserves. But I consider it prudent to prepare for what I consider to be some very realistic scenarios. And even if persecution does not come to us, what I propose here will be a great blessing to us anyway.

The following seven proposals are meant to be practical and to be quite accessible to you, your congregation, and for the church in general. You will, of course, continue to gather to worship, as our Lord commands and invites. “Do not neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encourage one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (Heb 10:25). Let no form of threat, intimidation, cancellation, or persecution ever stop the church from gathering, as our Lord commands us.

Proposal One: Preserve and promote sound doctrine. Right doctrine is truth. Truth is paramount. Nothing else I say matters if you do not attend to this item. It is simply not true that in times of persecution you may drop or tone down the pursuit of pure doctrine. The earliest and worst heresies were fought in the Church in times of vicious persecution. False doctrine and sin are the things that weaken us, destroy our zeal for Christ, make us vulnerable to temptation and the deceit of the devil. Lies are poisonous. They are like a cancer, killing the body. As Jesus taught, lies are the murder-weapon.

In preparation for this light and humorous banquet speech I skimmed through the entire New Testament to take a survey of what Jesus and the Apostles teach us about persecution. One notes immediately that persecution is a given for the Church. It’s the background to much that is taught, without being the main point. And the main point is often that in time of persecution, the watchmen of the church must ever be on guard.

Acts 20, the sermon of Paul to the pastors of the church in Ephesus, gives us an example. Paul tells them that the Holy Spirit has testified to him concerning the “imprisonment and afflictions” (23) that await him in Jerusalem, and that he does not expect to see them again. In that light he reminds them of his ministry in their midst, “Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God” (26–27). Persecution is answered with teaching “the whole counsel of God.”

Paul then applies it to the Ephesian pastors: “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he purchased with his own blood” (28). Why such care about doctrine and life? He continues, “I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and

from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert. . .” (29–31a).

Our greatest danger is always the corruption of our doctrine. But I would remind you that a pure faith is always accompanied by a fervent love for one another. Lovelessness in the church also leads to destruction. I would not have our Church body or congregations or pastors descend into constant internecine wrangling and the insatiable spirit of dissention. Even in persecution, pure doctrine must inform life itself. Doctrine is life. Doctrine is lived out in bearing the fruit of good works and love. Love is expressed in the unity of brothers. Brothers in the church are bound together in the truth. Their lives should be truthful and always bear testimony to the truth. To quote Solzhenitsyn’s essay, “Live not by lies,” neither by what we teach, nor by how we live.

The revelation of the truth, first, and then also true love and unity among brothers, are gifts of the Most High God. As long as we have God’s Word pure in our midst, no persecution can destroy His Church. “The gates of hell shall not prevail against Her” (Mt 16:18).

Stand

“O Lord, Look Down from Heaven, Behold” TLH 260

Proposal Two: Let your church be dearer to you than life itself. I’m not talking about buildings or land, which will also pass away or be taken away. I’m talking about congregation, the people who gather with you to be taught God’s Word, receive His sacraments, pray, praise, and give thanks. They are your family. Encourage and strengthen them. Build your commitment to one another. I have come to realize that the New Testament exhortations to mutual love and kindness in the church are given in the context of persecution. Prepare your hearts to open your homes and freely share your possessions with them when persecution takes these things away from them.

Furthermore, I urge you all, especially pastors and congregation leaders, to consider how to renew your attention to the discipline of our congregations. Mercy should not be confused with license. We must always be merciful and eager to forgive the repentant sinner. But persecution will either require a stern and sound Christian discipline of heart and life, or it must provoke one. Public sin must be put away. I fear that those who still love their worldly lives, their sins, and their vain luxuries will be easy prey for the devil and the world when the persecution comes. A tacit antinomianism that gives silent assent to public sin and unrepentance will be devastating when we find ourselves in the fire of persecution. We must redouble our attention to the commandments, honoring authority, loving and forgiving our brother and defending his life, upholding the sanctity of marriage, the marriage union, the bearing and rearing of children, and the like.

As you attend to your own piety and to the spiritual wellbeing of your brothers and sisters in the congregation, learn also to care for those who fall. Love them; don't ignore them. Remove those who will not repent and change their lives after persistent admonition from Scriptures. Forgive and restore those who repent. Restoration may need to be more deliberate, more intentionally loving, perhaps even taking some time, as the early, persecuted church did.

It also occurs to me that when persecution intensifies, our congregations may begin to see Lutheran refugees from other parts of the country. They will often have a different view of doctrine and practice, or a different discipline of life. We will be challenged to meet them with love, to strengthen them in doctrine and practice, and to incorporate them into the body of our congregations. Be prepared.

Proposal Three: Teach persecution. There are many places in Scripture that teach us about persecution, the help God promises to give us, and how we should believe and live under persecution. There are, of course, many examples in Scriptures, the "great cloud of witnesses" (Heb 12:1). There are also many salutary examples of Christians, both ancient and recent, who have endured great trials. A very few recent examples have found their way into the media from Communist China or Muslim countries. See the movie about Richard Wurmbrand, *Tortured for Christ* (2018), or read his accounts. Read the collection of Kurt Marquart's articles on Communism from the 1960s and 1970s. Don't let the suffocating silence of the popular media keep you ignorant of the ongoing persecution of Christians. Don't let ignorance of their faithful suffering and death leave you intimidated and dispirited.

Proposal Four: Decentralize, disperse, and duplicate. When persecution comes, they will target what they perceive to be our most important and valuable resources: leadership (pastors, DP), education, church buildings, the ability to gather, the ability to communicate. Now is the time to create duplication in the things we rely on now.

For example, under the Soviet oppression, many Christians instituted their own secret, underground universities. Because they had educated people, they could duplicate the historic task of passing on the wisdom and knowledge of civilization. Also in the Soviet regime, the communist party either imprisoned and murdered their pastors, or they inserted their own party members as pastors to subvert, spy upon, and control the church and its leadership. Churches were effectively deprived of their pastors. What did they do? They would secretly take a man who knew enough of the pastoral task and ordain him. These new pastors would wander from village to village to carry on the ministry of the church, often until they were caught and killed. We have to be prepared to do that.

So we should teach especially our young men to know the Bible well, the liturgy of the church, our Confessions and doctrine. They should learn Greek, perhaps even Hebrew. They should be taught to think well, to have a good working knowledge of history, especially church history.

They should be able to enter the great conversation in philosophy and theology, literature and poetry, life and living, that has been going on since Moses, the Greeks, the Romans, the Ancient Church (when persecution was a way of life), the rich period of the Middle Ages, and so on. They don't all have to become pastors. We will need all kinds of vocations, with men who possess that kind of education. But I agree with Luther that some of these young men may need to be reserve candidates for the pastoral office. The future wellbeing of the Church may depend upon it.

We should labor to preserve and pass on useful knowledge in general. I'm not talking about the ability to work a computer. I'm talking about preserving the treasures of the ancient and Christian world and passing them on in times of persecution. Christianity has endured persecutions, barbarian invasions, the Muslim threat coming in through Spain and threatening the walls of Constantinople, pestilences like the Black Plague. Much that would have been lost was preserved in churches and especially in monasteries. I'm not suggesting that we return to monasticism. For one thing, we need our young men and women to marry, bear lots of children, and raise these children to be faithful, pious, and virtuous Lutheran adults. But here's what we learned from the Medieval monasteries: We need communities of learning and teaching—schools. We need communities of preaching and prayer, where the Word of God fills and permeates all of life. We need libraries.

Here especially is a place for duplication. Every home should have at least a small library. Actual books, not electronic books, which Big Tech or the Government can take away from you by disabling your app. Books. Bibles, of course, for everyone in the family, in Greek or Latin or German or Spanish also for those who can use them. Same thing for hymnals, catechisms, the Book of Concord, Pieper's Christian Dogmatics, Walther. Every parish should have more than one family that has a set of Luther's Works, Gerhard's Dogmatics, and the like. To that you might add the great classic literature of civilized Christianity from the last 3,000 years, and the language resources that go with them. Much more could be said here.

Proposal Five: Build communities of personal and family relationships—not Facebook, not email, not texts, not even phone—personal time spent eating, drinking, visiting, celebrating together, grieving together, working together. When the world falls apart and anarchy follows, or when persecution comes, these little communities will preserve so much that would otherwise be lost or destroyed. Build now.

Proposal Six: Begin to wean yourself free of electronic communication. Remember, Government and Big Tech already have the ability to monitor everything you say or do in the presence of your cell phone, what you communicate on almost any electronic medium, and what you type into your computer. They can identify and target you by means of their facial and voice-recognition technology, interface with the Internet and Cloud, and the use of

algorithms. And once targeted, they can follow everything you do or say, together with all your “friends”. We may need to live without these things some day.

But actually, there is a more important reason to free yourself of these things. When the pressures and temptations of persecution increase, your dependence on your electronic drugs is going to weaken you, perhaps even disable you, in your fight for the Christian faith—your faith. I’m not saying that you should drop everything now and become a Luddite, at least not yet. These are tools that can still be used for good, at least for now. But free yourself from the addiction, from the slavery, and from all the dehumanizing tendencies provoked by the electronic media. Go spend the day with your family or a friend, electronics-free. Go do something in nature, in your garden, in the mountains. Go pick up a book and read it.

Proposal Seven: Memorize! Commit all the most important things to memory. Memorize both deep and wide. Here’s what I mean.

There are some things that should be memorized so deeply that they are locked into your subconscious. They become well-worn ruts in the deepest part of your mind and your heart and your soul. These are the things that should be repeated daily or weekly as part of your Christian devotion and piety: the Invocation, the Lord’s Prayer, the Apostles’ Creed, Luther’s morning and evening prayer. The Small Catechism belongs here. Select passages of Scripture—Psalm 23, Luke 2, for example, should be known that well. Certain hymns likewise. The liturgy of the Divine Service, Matins, and Vespers are included here. The Litany. Some of you know that Matins is my daily default for prayer as a pastor. I’m convinced that if I’m tortured Soviet-style in body or mind, the liturgy of Matins will begin to run through my mind and body by default, over and over and over again, to my everlasting comfort. Memorize that deeply.

In addition, go wide if you are able. Of course, commit especially Scriptures and hymns to memory, also sections of our Confessions. Memorize the Athanasian Creed. If you are young and your mind still has the flexibility to memorize more, you can memorize great speeches, poetry, songs. What you memorize is not only yours to keep and use, but is also a gift that you may give to others.

Conclusion

More could be said. You will note that I have not directed you to judicial or political remedies for the persecution of confessional Lutherans. I do not reject the use of such lawful and God-ordained means. St. Paul certainly used them when he could. And the rest of the time he just suffered for the name of Christ. We should find legitimate ways to defend our brothers and sisters in the church, our families, and even ourselves, as we are able. It is the duty of brotherly love. My task, however, has been to teach you to prepare for suffering, that you may endure persecution, loss, even death, rather than fall away or deny the Lord Jesus who bought you with His own blood.

If you are like me, you may have rehearsed in your mind what you would do if such-and-such would happen. What if...? What if I were deprived of access to phone and internet? What if it was made illegal to hire me for anything? What if I were taken from church and family? What if I were imprisoned? What if I were tortured? Humanly speaking, we don't know the answer. We don't know the limits of our own flesh nor what help God will provide His own in such a dark hour. What we do know is God's good and gracious will for us and toward us in Christ. This is reliable and sure, unfailing. He will never fail.

When you read through the Acts of the Apostles to learn what the Holy Spirit teaches about the persecution of Christians, one of the things that must stand out is how those who were persecuted reacted. It made them bold. The Greek word, pastors, is *parresia*, or its verb form. It means to speak boldly or with freedom of speech. In Hebrews 10 it describes how sinners dare to come into the presence of the Most Holy God: "Therefore, brothers, since we have *parresia*—confidence, boldness, freedom of speech—to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful" (Heb 10:19–23).

Parresia: boldness of speech. This is the prayer of the persecuted Church, Acts 4:29, "And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness—*parresia*." And this also is the deed of the persecuted Church: "And they continue to speak the Word of God with boldness" (Acts 4:31).

Joy and boldness of speech and faith that endures in affliction and persecution. God grant these gifts to you and to all His Church in these last days.

Stand

"A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" LSB 656

Compline, LSB 253, Psalm 3, 880