Entitled or Enlightened Christianity? **[1]**

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The world is in a tumult. It appears as if tolerance among people is becoming less, and that there is less of a willingness to dialogue and understand or engage with others. As the world has become polarised, Christians have not been immune.

Christianity became mainstream in the year 312, after Constantine's victory at the Battle of the Milvian bridge. Before then, Christians were sporadically (but not constantly) persecuted in the Roman Empire. Life as a Christian was uncertain: tomorrow one may well loose their property, one's employment, or even one's life. There was genuine cost and risk in the decision to follow Christ. After 312, persecution of Christians summarily ended, and in time Christianity would become the "official" religion of the Roman Empire.

This was a double-edged sword. Christians would now no longer be prone to being persecuted at the whim of the authorities1. They could be more open about their faith. These are good things. But, over time, many people became Christian who sought positions within the church, because it would better their image, give them power and prestige, or simply to be in vogue. Christianity, for some, became cultural, and has largely remained so in the West until today. Over time, Christians in the West, and the church, became removed from the persecutions of the first two centuries 2.

Living in a Christian culture has also been a double-edged sword. For one thing, Christians have been able to affect society in a genuinely positive way3. That is objectively good, and should be celebrated (even if the work is ongoing and not yet complete).

The other edge of the sword, has, unfortunately, been entitlement. When Christian values became enshrined in laws and constitutions, people quickly became indignant when those laws and values were violated. There is a degree of being frustrated over such violations which is legitimate. But when people become indignant, there is a danger. It is far removed from the attitudes of the very earliest Christians.

As I am writing this, it is fresh in my memory how Christians riled against governments for temporarily banning physical church gatherings during the COVID-19 pandemic, and for having face masks and so-called "social distancing" enforced on them. Christians in the West were still allowed to meet virtually and had all other religious liberties in place. But some Christians were all too eager to cry "persecution!" and indulge in unhelpful conspiracy theories rather than accept the obvious reason that states were trying to curb the spread of the virus.

What has also been happening is a debate around Black Lives Matter; a movement which has divided the Christians themselves, let alone non-Christians with whom they discuss this matter. From a bird's eye view, some Christians quickly fell into "conservative" or "woke" camps on the matter, each side calling theirs the "correct Christian" response and disavowing the others. And, then, of course, there are continuing discussions around transgenderism, where a recent US Supreme Court

ruling banned workplace discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals [2], which has ruffled the feathers of many conservatives and Christians.

There are two major differences between how Christians in the West view the world today, and how the earliest Christians viewed it. Firstly, the first Christians would not be surprised if a government adopted laws, or individuals embraced a culture, which is contrary to Christian values. They lived in a world dominated by pagans. They spoke out against pagan immorality, but did so because they were advocating the "better way" of the Christian worldview. But they were very much aware that they were in the minority, and very much (physically) at the mercy of a culture opposed to their own.

Despite the West having "converted" to Christianity a long time ago (and having been influenced by, and holding on to, many Christian values), the current situation is not much different to that of the first Christians. We live in a post-Christian world, where much of the West has rejected, and even become hostile towards, Christianity. The pendulum has come full swing. As Christians, we need to stop imagining ourselves as living similarly to the Christians two or five hundred years ago at the height of Christendom. Instead, we need to look at, and recognise as familiar, the Christians who live and live in hostile countries and cultures.

The second difference between Christians today and the early Christians, is that the latter would not recognise the attitude of many of the former. They would outright rebuke modern Christians for their indignation and entitlement. I have recently been reading the apostolic fathers (the generation of church leaders who lived after the apostles; those who still knew the apostles and were taught by them). Many of these writings came directly from the context of persecution. For example, Ignatius wrote many of his letters while he was under arrest and travelling to Rome after he was sentenced by the Roman emperor to be thrown to the beasts there. He writes to various churches to encourage them. One theme which keeps coming up over and over, is to love their enemies and pray for them:

> But I forewarn you against beasts in human shape; these you must not only not admit to your society, but if possible, not even come in their way. Only, pray for them, if by any means they may repent; … Let no one be puffed up by rank. For Faith and Love, to which nothing is preferable, are all in all. But consider those who hold other doctrines than the grace of God which has come unto us, how contrary they are to the will of God; who have no care for brotherly love, who take no thought for the widow, the orphan, or the oppressed, bond, or free, hungry, or thirsty.
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> Ignatius, Epistle to the Smyrnians chapters IV and VI

Ignatius is saying here not to get caught up with people who reject the Christian worldview, but to instead pray for such people for their ultimate well-being. Meanwhile, Christians should busy themselves with looking after the poor and oppressed. Saying this may draw a nod of agreement from a Christian reading this, but how are you or your church *actually* doing these two things? Honest and humble reflection before the Lord is essential.

Ignatius also wrote:

> And pray ye without ceasing in behalf of other men. For there is in them hope of repentance that they may attain to God. See, then, that they be instructed by your works, if in no other way. Be ye meek in response to their wrath, humble in opposition to their boasting: to their blasphemies return your prayers; in contrast to their error, be ye steadfast in the faith; and for their cruelty, manifest your gentleness. While we take care not to imitate their conduct, let us be found their brethren in all true kindness; and let us seek to be followers of the Lord (who ever more unjustly treated, more destitute, more condemned?), that so no plant of the devil may be found in you, but ye may remain in all holiness and sobriety in Jesus Christ, both with respect to the flesh and spirit.
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> Ignatius, 1 Ephesians 10

Perhaps my favourite is from the epistle which Ignatius wrote to Polycarp[4]:

> Endure all men, as the Lord has also endured thee; continue, as thou dost, to bear with all men in love; devote thyself to prayer without ceasing; seek for more understanding than thou hast; watch with an unwearied spirit; speak unto every one as God shall enable thee: as a practised combatant, endure the weaknesses of all; for where labour abounds, there also abounds gain.
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> For in that thou lovest the good disciples, what thank hast thou? yea, rather with mildness bring into subjection the more mischievous. For every wound is not treated with the same application; but sharp pains are to be treated by soothing medicines. Be in all things "wise as the serpent, and harmless as the dove." For this end art thou formed of flesh and spirit, that thou mayest soften the things which are in thy sight: but pray that the things which are invisible may be revealed unto thee, that thou mayest want in nothing, but abound in every gift of God. The present season demands thee, as sailors the wind, as the storm-tossed mariner his desired haven, that thou attain unto God. Be temperate, as God’s Champion; the reward is incorruption, and eternal life: in which also thy faith is firm.
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> Ignatius, Epistle to Polycarp

Polycarp wrote to the Philippians:

> But He who raised [Jesus] up from the dead will raise up us also, if we do His will, and walk in His commandments, and love what He loved, keeping ourselves from all unrighteousness, covetousness, love of money, evil-speaking, false-witness; "not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing," or blow for blow, or cursing for cursing, but being mindful of what the Lord said in His teaching: "Judge not, that ye be not judged; forgive, and it shall be forgiven unto you; be merciful, that ye may obtain mercy; with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again;" and once more, "Blessed are the poor, and those that are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of God." …
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> And let the elders be compassionate and merciful to all, bringing back those that wander, visiting all the sick, and not neglecting the widow, the orphan, or the poor, but always "providing for that which is becoming in the sight of God and men;" abstaining from all wrath, respect of persons, and unjust judgement; keeping far off from all covetousness, not quickly crediting [an evil report] against any one, not severe in judgement, as knowing that we are all under a debt of sin. If then we entreat the Lord to forgive us, we ought also ourselves to forgive; for we are before the eyes of our Lord and God, and "we must all appear at the judgement seat of Christ, and must every one give an account of himself." …
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> Stand fast, therefore, in these things, and follow the example of the Lord, being firm and unchangeable in the faith, loving the brotherhood, and being attached to one another, joined together in the truth, exhibiting the meekness of the Lord in your intercourse with one another, and despising no one. When you can do good, defer it not, because "alms delivers from death." Be all of you subject one to another, "having your conduct blameless among the Gentiles," that ye may both receive praise for your good works, and the Lord may not be blasphemed through you. But woe to him by whom the name of the Lord is blasphemed! Teach, therefore, sobriety to all, and manifest it also in your own conduct. …
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> Pray for all the saints. Pray also for kings, and potentates, and princes, and for those that persecute and hate you, and for the enemies of the cross, that your fruit may be manifest to all, and that ye may be perfect in Him.
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> Polycarp, Epistle to the Philippians

I hope that the theme is clear: while Ignatius was travelling to Rome to be executed (something which he did not resent, but joyfully anticipated as his final duty and privilege as a follower of Jesus), he had a major concern to encourage other Christians to continue in love and patience: to pray for those who were not Christian, to be humble, and to look after the poor and oppressed.

Reading this is jarring when I see so much on social media of Christians throwing themselves completely at fighting against anything which smells of socialism, or advocating gun rights, or denouncing Black Lives Matter. It's not love or the gospel: it's an us-versus-the-awful-enemy mentality.

Throughout this article I referred to Christianity in the West. It is true that Christianity is (by the grace of God) growing rapidly in the East. But the experiences there have often been quite different than in the West, even in recent times. I end this article with a quote from Brother Yun, writing about the terrible persecution he and his countrymen suffer in China, yet how that persecution is far preferred above the comforts which have swallowed up the Western church:

> Before I travelled to the West, I had absolutely no idea that so many churches were spiritually asleep. … In the West many Christians have an abundance of material possessions, yet live in a backslidden state. They have silver and gold, but they don't rise up and walk in Jesus' name. In China we have no possessions to hold us down, so there's nothing preventing us from moving out for the Lord. … It's almost impossible for the church in China to go to sleep in its present situation. There's always something to keep us on the run, and it's very difficult to sleep while you're running. If persecution stops, I fear we'll become complacent and fall asleep. …
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> Whenever I hear a house church Christian has been imprisoned for Christ in China I don't advise people to pray for his or her release unless the Lord clearly reveals we pray this way. … There is always a purpose behind why God allows His children to go to prison. Perhaps it's so they can witness to the other prisoners, or perhaps God wants to develop more character in their lives. …
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> I'm often asked about the rights of pastors in China. A pastor has no rights, except the rights of a slave! Everyone in this world is a slave. They're either slaves to sin, or slaves of Christ. Our "rights" are in the hands of Jesus. We must fall on our knees in complete dependence on Him.
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> Brother Yun, The Heavenly Man

- 1. Except for a brief period under Julian the Apostate (361–363).
- 2. There were, of course, still people being persecuted for their faith, even by other Christians. Examples are the Waldensians, John Huss, and those caught up in the religious wars and persecutions in Europe after the Reformation (for example, the French Wars of Religion).
- 3. This may be a pill which is hard for some people to swallow, but it it true. For anyone who is sceptical of this claim, I would like to point them to what atheist Tom Holland had to say [3] after he was forced to reevaluate his views on Christianity after examining the historical evidence. See also the book which he subsequently wrote on the subject, Dominion [4].
- 4. Both Ignatius and Polycarp were bishops, and has been disciples of the apostle John.

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