

Return to Wittenberg 2021 Conference

Being Wise as Serpents, Innocent as Doves

Advice from and for the Christian Underground

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Sooner or later, following Christ in this fallen world means encountering persecution for His name's sake. "Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves." (Matthew 10:16) Christianity is illegal in one out of four nations. Persecution is widespread even in nations where Christianity is technically permitted by law. Learn what the Christian underground is doing in several parts of the world—including the Christian underground that operates soberly close to home, right here in the United States. Based on their experiences, evaluated by your knowledge of Scripture, what strategies will you have ready if persecution prevents your congregation from meeting publicly? How will you keep your children in the one true faith unto life everlasting despite the increasing hostilities in the surrounding culture? Indeed, what will God do through and among you for the blessing of many others?

Prevalent Patterns of Persecution

- Three Forms of Tyranny:
 1. A person does *not* legitimately hold an office, but exercises the powers of that office anyway. (Romans 13, a citizen rebelling)
 2. A person *does* legitimately hold an office, but exercises powers that go *beyond* that office. (Romans 13, an officer rebelling)
 3. An officer of either the Kingdom of the Left (civil government) or the Kingdom of the Right (church) exercises power within the other kingdom—thus, violating not merely the vocation of one's particular office, but also the entire established order of God's two kingdoms. (Revelation 13, two beasts establishing a grotesque caricature of God's kingdoms)
- (Pseudo-)Love Covers a Multitude of Tyrannies
 - "The language of love and the language of seduction are the same. The one who wishes a girl for a wife and the one who wishes her only for a night both say the words, 'I love you.'" (Richard Wurmbrand, *Tortured for Christ*, 15)
 - Tyranny always justifies itself with an *ad populum* appeal to public safety against the menacing status quo.
 - Churches split over the question of how to respond to tyranny.

Christianity in Russia under Soviet Communism

- Persecution Came in Three Waves:
 - 1917–1921: Separation of Church and State; Church Closures (1/3) and Compromises
 - 1928–1932: Church Closures (another 1/3 of the pre-1917 churches)
 - 1937–1939: The “Great Purge,” by which time 90+% of clergy had been imprisoned or executed and 98% of churches had been closed
- What would you have done?

Highlights from *Hitler’s First 100 Days*

- Constitutional Claim to Temporary Emergency Powers: “Federal decrees suspended civil liberties, expanded protective custody, and sanctioned the removal of state governments.” (121)
- Mass broadcasts—radio, loudspeakers on street corners: “Radio dramatically reproduced the emotional relationship between Hitler and his followers.” (108)
- Intimidation at the Polls → Narrow (52%) Coalition Victory → Simulation of a Plebiscite
- Religious Nationalism and a “German Spring”—Everything New and Fresh
- Totalitarianism:
 - “Everything within the state, nothing outside the state, nothing against the state.” (Benito Mussolini)
 - A total change in what becomes thinkable or unthinkable.

Christianity in Communist China

- China’s Bonhoeffer?
Bishop Ignatius Kung Pinmei: “If we renounce our faith, we will disappear and there will not be a resurrection. If we are faithful, we will still disappear, but there will be a resurrection.”
- CCP Ground Work, 1949–1950
 - Communist Revolution and Common Program (1949)
 - Three-Self Patriotic Movement (1950)
- CCP Tactical Advance, 1951–1954
 - Mass Media
 - Education
- CCP Triumph, 1955–1966
 - Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (1957)
 - Cultural Revolution (1966)
- CCP Legacy, 1979–Present

Soft Totalitarianism in America Today

- Rod Dreher, *Live Not by Lies*, argues that the seemingly democratic West is succumbing to a “soft” but still very dangerous totalitarianism:
 - Rather than a centralized and militarized coercive government, the big corporations set the rules for everyone.
 - Anyone who wants to communicate on social media, have a job, or obtain goods and services either does it their way, or else has to avoid mainstream social institutions.

Some “Third Use” Encouragement

- Stand firm on your holy ground at home:
 - Start a family library with just three books—and wear the pages thin.
 - Stockpile weapons on your kitchen table (but mostly the spiritual kinds).
 - Fill laundry baskets with petitions for redress of grievances, like Norwegian mothers.
 - Learn to make friends like Sudanese Christian refugees.
 - Turn your basement into a community theatre, like Poles behind the Iron Curtain.
- When it’s too risky to go to *this* church ... or when it’s suspiciously safe to go to *that* church:
 - Stop *going* to church, and start *bringing* the marks of the church wherever you go.
 - Be cautious about patriotic, nationalist churches—particularly when civil government has usurped authority over ecclesiastical matters, or when ecclesiastical leaders have identified the nation’s cause as their own.
 - Expect visible churches to split visibly but the invisible church to split invisibly—and train your eyes to see the difference.
 - Find the tip of the iceberg and then dive deeper.
- When indoctrination is forced upon you and your children:
 - Avoid it “with” the plague—or at least get a bad case of the measles like the Norwegian youth.
 - Teach children to out-catechize the adult counter-catechists, like the Catholic Youth in China.
 - Read epic stories of heroic deeds aloud to your children, like Czech moms.*
- When Bibles are taken away:
 - Meditate, preach, and pray from memory.
 - Bible, Hymnal, and Catechism (recall the “Hiding God’s Word in Our Hearts” session)
 - Plots and characters*
 - Buy atheists’ books that refute the Bible—like Christians did in communist Romania—in order to reclaim the sacred words from the atheists’ block quotations!

*See “Literature for Training the Christian Underground,” p. 5, below.

- When people who don't have ears to hear might be listening anyway:
 - Email an announcement of a birthday celebration for your best friend.
 - Type your message in reply to someone else's message.
 - Speak in parables (like you-know-Who), or write medieval fantasy or science fiction—it worked for JRR and CS.
 - Update your wife about Maria, like Paul Gerhardt Braune, who lived to tell about it.
- Don't ever consider your conscience a personal matter—but recognize it as the strongest organ.
 - Luther: “Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason ... my conscience is captive to the Word of God.”
 - Bonhoeffer and Berggrav: studying the Scriptures, sharpening their consciences, and exercising clear reasoning in order to arise above the level of personal opinion and take a stand against tyranny.
- Lawfully resist unlawful authority.
 - Romans 13 is God's command not only for citizens to submit to civil government but also for civil rulers to submit to God's ordinance:
 - God has established two distinct kingdoms with two distinct means to fulfill two distinct commissions.
 - God's establishment includes a civil constitution outlining the office of each officeholder.
 - Review the “4 Levels” outlined in the Magdeburg Confession and the proper responses within each vocation. (p. 3 of the “Standing on the Shore” handout)
 - Exercise your First Amendment rights.
 - Start a freedom school, holding the political horseshoe in the middle.
- Sing hymns—theologically instructive, memorable, teachable, and tested by history!
- Finally, remember your confirmation vow, and especially the “grace of God” in which you confirmed your trust: “Do you intend to live according to the Word of God, and in faith, word, and deed to remain true to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, even to death? *I do, by the grace of God.* Do you intend to continue steadfast in this confession and Church and to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it? *I do, by the grace of God.*” (LSB, p. 273)
- Therefore: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My [Christ's] sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven.” (Matthew 5:11–12a)

Literature for Training the Christian Underground

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More important than the suggestions listed below, Christians should read the Bible daily in their homes. In the Scriptures, both patient perseverance and God-fearing political resistance are exemplified among God's people and exhorted by His prophets and apostles during times of persecution. See especially: Genesis 37–50, Exodus 1–14, 1 and 2 Kings, Esther, Psalms, Daniel, Acts, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 2 Peter, Jude, and Revelation.

Extra-biblical literature also can have a powerful influence in developing and maintaining a person's worldview, which means literature is a tool that can be used either for good or for evil. Christian children need Christian parents, pastors, and teachers to guide them with discernment as they read materials from beyond the Bible. Christian adults similarly should rely on their pastors and their brothers and sisters in Christ, seeking to emulate the Bereans by evaluating all that they read or hear on the basis of Scripture (Acts 17:10–15).

With those caveats in mind, the following books have been selected not necessarily for orthodox biblical theology (though some of them are solidly biblical) but especially for the orientation of their narratives. These books draw the reader's mind toward clear discernment of good vs. evil, exemplify acts of courage, and instill a sense of hope in that which is higher than humanity. For some books, God is properly identified, but for other books Christ-centered conversations will be necessary in order to fill in the gaps or correct the errors.

Young Adults (or parents may read these aloud to younger children)

Nonfiction

- Brother Andrew, *God's Smuggler*
- Corrie ten Boom, *The Hiding Place*
- Nelly S. Toll, *Behind the Secret Window: A Memoir of Hidden Childhood during World War II*

Historical Fiction

- Claire Huchet Bishop, *Twenty and Ten*
- James DeMille, *Martyr of the Catacombs: A Tale of Ancient Rome*
- Eva Lecomte, *Paula the Waldensian*
- Marie McSwigan, *Snow Treasure*
- Johanna Reiss, *The Upstairs Room*

Fiction

- Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*
- Jeanne DuPrau, *The City of Ember*
- Mathew Christian Harding, *The Peleg Chronicles* (trilogy)
- C.S. Lewis, *Chronicles of Narnia* (series)
- George McDonald, *The Gray Wolf and Other Stories*
- George Orwell, *Animal Farm* and also *1984*
- J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit* and also *The Lord of the Rings* (trilogy)

Adults

Nonfiction

- Søren Dosenrode, ed., *Christianity and Resistance in the 20th Century*
- Rod Dreher, *Live Not by Lies: A Manual for Christian Dissidents*
- Peter Fritzsche, *Hitler's First Hundred Days: When Germans Embraced the Third Reich*
- Lowell C. Green, *Lutherans Against Hitler: The Untold Story*
- Arne Hassing, *Church Resistance to Nazism in Norway, 1940–1945*
- Paul P. Mariani, *Church Militant: Bishop Kung and Catholic Resistance in Communist Shanghai*
- Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*
- Edwin Robertson, *Bishop of the Resistance: The Life of Eivind Berggrav, Bishop of Oslo, Norway*
- Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*
- Elie Wiesel, *Night*
- Richard Wurmbrand, *Tortured for Christ*

Fiction

- Randy Alcorn, *Deadline* (trilogy) and *Safely Home*
- Georgia Briggs, *Icon*
- Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*
- C.S. Lewis, *Space Trilogy: Out of the Silent Planet; Perelandra; That Hideous Strength*
- Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*

Theological Guidance

Works by or concerning Confessional Lutherans

- F. Bente, *Historical Introduction to the Book of Concord*
- Matthew Colvin, translator, *The Magdeburg Confession*
- Michael P. DeJonge, *Bonhoeffer on Resistance: The Word against the Wheel* and also *Bonhoeffer's Reception of Luther*
- Cameron MacKenzie, "The Challenge of History: Luther's Two Kingdoms Theology as a Test Case," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 71 (2007): 3–28.
- David Mark Whitford, *Tyranny and Resistance: The Magdeburg Confession and the Lutheran Tradition*
- William J. Wright, *Martin Luther's Understanding of God's Two Kingdoms: A Response to the Challenge of Skepticism*
- Jesse Yow, *Standing Firm: A Christian Response to Hostility and Persecution*

Additional Works by Ryan MacPherson

- **Book Chapter:** "Political Resistance in Lutheran Theology: The Lawful Authority of Romans 13 versus the Two Beasts of Revelation 13," in *My Savior's Guest* (2021), ed. Thomas Rank
- **Video:** Ottawa Circuit COVID Convocation, "Part I: The Magdeburg Confession of 1550" and "Part II: How to Avoid Reading Romans 13 like a Nazi," October 5–6, 2020, www.lccottawacircuit.ca/covid-convocation-series-church-and-government
- **Video:** "The Distinction between Rendering to Caesar and Resisting Tyranny," Chicago Worldview Conference, September 26, 2020, www.blc.edu/2020/08/the-christian-church-amid-seismic-shifts
- **Article:** "Rendering to Caesar and to God: Pandemic Health Codes and Religious Liberty," *Lutheran Sentinel*, July-Aug. 2020, lutheransentinel.els.org/pdf-archive; also as a blog at www.in-toyourhandsllc.com/blog/213
- **Article:** "The Magdeburg Interpretation of Romans 13: A Lutheran Justification for Political Resistance," July 2016, www.hausvater.org/articles/336