

EVANGELISM IN CHALLENGING SETTINGS I

The Church in Challenging Situations

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We want to remind you, brothers and sisters, of the trouble we had in Beirut, Lebanon. The burdens laid upon us were so great and so heavy that we gave up all hope of staying alive. We felt that the death sentence had been passed on us. But this happened so that we should rely, not on ourselves, but only on God, who raises the dead. From such terrible dangers of death he saved us, and will save us; and we have placed our hope in him that he will save us again, as you help us by means of your prayers for us (2 Corinthians 1:8–10, TEV—author's paraphrase).

Saturday, 5 February 1983, 2:00 P.M. A terrible explosion shook us as we were eating our lunch. I ran out of the house to see what had happened. People were going in the direction of the street where the Bible Society shops and offices are located. A car loaded with 240 kilograms of dynamite had exploded right in front of the Bible Society building. A few minutes later ambulances rushed to the building and rescue teams helped the wounded. Many were taken to the hospital.

The screams of women and children were heartbreaking. A mother and father were trying to find their eight-year-old son. The small bicycle he was riding at the time of the explosion was there, all twisted and torn, covered with rubble and blood. The little boy was never found. Fire and smoke erupted and teams of young people from several churches in the neighborhood arrived to help us save as many precious books as possible from the fire and from the water used to extinguish the fire. At the end of that terrible day, nineteen people were dead and 136 were wounded.

We knew we were not the target of this tragedy; above our shop was a research center for the Palestinians and opposite us a Libyan office. We were thankful to the Lord because no one on our staff was injured—the office had closed twenty minutes before the explosion.

It was not the first time, or the last that some of us would go through a similar experience. A few months later, the house of George, a member of the Bible Society staff, was destroyed in a similar explosion. His younger sister was killed as the balcony she was standing on collapsed. Today this young man is married and their first child was named after that sister. They repaired their home with the help of their many Christian friends. This experience of solidarity touched the rest of every member of George's family who had not previously expressed any interest in spiritual matters.

What should be our reaction in such a situation? Since the mid-1970s when civil

war broke out in Lebanon, life and work inside the country have been extremely difficult. Many have left the country, including pastors and church leaders. They felt it was no longer possible to live in a situation where the future of their lives and that of their families was threatened. Foreign missions decided to close down and evacuate their members. The last group of Baptist missionaries from the United States left in 1987 because of the new policy of their government and the feelings of their constituencies back home. All these people left the country at a critical time, seemingly abandoning us to our fate, and at the same time fulfilling the wishes of extremists who were kidnapping foreigners. Those who remained asked themselves: "Should we stay on? Should we leave? How can we have any future for ourselves and our families? Is it fair for our children to be raised in such an atmosphere?"

Others, for different reasons, can't leave Lebanon and feel very frustrated. They have been displaced from their hometowns or villages during fighting. Many have lost everything they owned. Those who have also lost loved ones are in despair. If they don't have relatives abroad who can assist them with money or tickets to leave Lebanon, they feel completely abandoned.

My personal experience has been to depend entirely upon the Lord for guidance, knowing that if he wants me in Lebanon, he can also protect me. This has been the conviction of many others, and we have encouraged each other in this decision which we made at the beginning of the war. What were the results of such a decision on our lives?

We went through many hardships, losing houses, furniture, and other personal belongings, and sometimes losing loved ones as well. At the same time, our miraculous escapes from death are a real and continuous story of divine protection for which all glory should be attributed to God.

One of the great dangers is kidnapping. The international media speak about it often because of the many westerners kept as hostages, some of them for years. But Lebanese people face the same danger. Thousands have been kidnapped. Many of us went through miraculous interventions from God who kept us or delivered us from this traumatic experience.

I was living in West Beirut, but had to cross to the other side every day because our offices are located on the East side. One afternoon, as I was preparing to go home someone told me, "Be careful, there is a group of young men who are kidnapping people trying to cross from our side."

I said, "Well, what can I do? This is the only crossing point and I'm doing this every day. We'll see what happens." When I reached the crossing point, the last Lebanese army check point, they told me, "Stop, you can't cross now." "What's going on?" I asked. "There is a sniper; someone was injured while trying to cross to the other side."

"Should I turn back? When are you going to reopen the passage?" "No, wait a little bit," they answered. "This will not take very long." After fifteen minutes they said to me, "Now you can go."

"How do you know it's safe?" I asked.

The guard shrugged and said, "Well, someone has to try."

You really get a terrible feeling when you are caught in such a situation. That is when you need special encouragement from the Lord.

But that was not the end of my experience that day. I started my car and drove toward West Beirut. There they were, these young men, a few hundred meters from the army checkpoint. They stopped me and asked me to pull over to the side of the road. I didn't like that very much because that is sometimes the first step towards disappearing

completely. I drove ahead two meters, a little bit to the right, and stopped again. A young militiaman came over to the car and said, "Show me your papers. Who are you?"

I thought to myself, *What should I show them? They seem to be the young fanatic Muslims that I have been warned about. If I show my usual identity card, they may not like it that I'm a Christian coming from a Christian area. I have another card which indicates that I am an evangelical pastor. Which one is the best?* I thought, *If I have to be kidnapped let it be as a pastor on duty!* So I showed my card as a Christian worker. The young man had problems reading it. He probably had not received much education, yet, he was a fifteen-year-old boy with a machine gun! He said, "What is the meaning of *pastor*? Does this mean that you are a man of religion? Sorry, sir, we don't want you to have any inconvenience or problem. What are you doing?" I explained that we print Bibles. Then he asked, "Can we have some copies? We need the Bible here because we have only received some calendars with Scripture verses that you distribute at the beginning of the year. We have been waiting for a long time to find a copy of the whole Bible. Can we get one?"

What an experience! When I left the young men, I was shaking from tension and fear. But I was glad to discover that the Lord has a message for all and that in all situations he wants to have witnesses of his love.

Both experiences of suffering and deliverance have been beneficial, bringing us closer to the Lord. They also demonstrate to the non-Christian that evil and good are realities even in the lives of believers, but that our Lord is alive and intervening directly in the affairs of his children today.

How can witness and evangelism take place without the presence of people who live out their Christianity? I think that God wants some of us to be present, to live in this situation with the rest of the people of the country, sharing the daily experiences of people at all times.

Another incident took place in 1985. It was past midnight and two of our children woke us up saying, "Don't you hear the heavy bombardments? We can't sleep. Can we come to your bed? If we have to die, let's die together." The shelling was very hard. We decided to pray together, then after some singing the children quieted down and slept. I was not able to sleep so I got up and started to think about the many times the Lord had protected us. But this time I wondered if it was not wiser to go to the nearby shelter. I went out on the balcony of our house and looked in the direction of the shelter, not very far from us. The shelling had hit a car in front of the shelter, and the car was burning. Close to the place where our own car was parked, other cars were burning and the heavy black smoke was going in the direction of the shelter where people were caught. From the floors above the shelter people were trying to help by throwing buckets of waters on the burning cars, but it didn't help much. In my heart I thanked God for his shelter which is stronger than human-built shelters.

While I was still meditating, our non-Christian neighbors from the floors above us knocked at our door. The electricity was off because the shelling had hit wires and poles. I opened our door and asked if there was something I could do for them. "May we come and stay in your home?" they asked. "Your home is a safer place than the shelter because it is also a place of prayer and reading of the Bible."

The war situation has opened many hearts to the gospel. In spite of fanaticism which stirs up many incidents there is a real receptivity to the message of the Good News. The pressure of the events and the suffering force many to ask questions they have never asked before. When they don't find answers in human resources, they try to see if answers can be found somewhere else.

Our family has just lived through one of the worst periods of this war. Bombing and shelling around our home and office make it very unnerving. The past month has been very difficult as we could not sleep very well. For the first time we have decided to stay in the basement of our new home during the bombardments. One of our friends with whom we spent last Christmas died in his home recently because of shrapnel. Heavy artillery is used between armies and militias fighting in the middle of neighborhoods of innocent civilians who are paying a very heavy price in lives and properties. We have already lost some windows but no one has been injured. This is the sixth home in which we have lived since the beginning of the war. We have lost the previous houses so we know that we should not worry about material possessions.

Sunday, 16 April 1989. We have been unable to reach the church to worship. The services have taken place in our homes instead for the past few weeks. The noise of the bombardments gets on our nerves, but we try to use this time to make new friends. Some of our neighbors were unknown to us, after moving to this part of Beirut, but the bombing has brought us together and provided many opportunities to share the gospel. During the evenings in the shelter we also had new opportunities of witnessing to neighbors.

In talking with some of those who left Lebanon, I have discovered that those who left without clear direction from the Lord seem to be feeling more unsettled than those who have stayed. People who were sure of God's will in their remaining in the country and have stayed are content. Along with their families, they have the Lord's peace and his blessings. Those blessings do not always manifest themselves in material possessions. The severe economic chaos into which Lebanon has plunged since 1986 is forcing more people to leave the country. Those of us who have resisted all kinds of pressure before find that it is more difficult to persevere in God's guidance when our income is reduced to 10 percent of our previous income. This is one of the new challenges for Christians in our churches today.

What is our hope for the future in such a country? Will we be allowed to survive as a nation or will we become part of another country? Will we keep our freedom? The main question for the committed Christian should be, what does God want me to do *now*? What should I do? The destiny of the entire nation may rest on the decisions of these Christians.

Although during the hardest times of fighting the priority is for survival, Christians need to be present as a witness of God's grace to people living around them. They have to be the "salt of the earth" both to give flavor to life and to prevent the decay of the society in which they live. They have to "stand before God for their country" in prayer and fasting. In the presence of God the course of history can be changed and nations can turn back to the Lord in repentance and new life.

Areas of the world living in war, violence, and other disturbances are on the increase. This is another challenge for the church of Jesus Christ today. Are we to go on the offensive, or will we restrict ourselves to affluent nations where people are hardening their hearts to the gospel? Evangelization there is becoming difficult also in the midst of materialism and indifference.

For Paul the questions of life and death had a clear answer. He wanted to please God, his Master, and do his will. He said to the Philippians:

My deep desire and hope is that I shall never fail in my duty, but that at all times, and especially right now, I shall be full of courage, so that with my whole being I shall bring honor to Christ, whether I live or die. For what is life? To me, it is Christ (Philippians 1:20-21 TEV)

Paul also knew that his presence with the believers was important so he added in verse 24, “for your sake it is much more important that I remain alive.”

Christianity and Christian ministry is not mainly a set of activities or a successful program. It is a maturing relationship of the individual with the Lord, based on faith. Out of this relationship comes a sense of community with fellow believers—a feeling of responsibility in helping each other, sharing what we have, and encouraging each other.

A Paradox Regarding the Church

Because our church building was hit twice last week, we are not able to meet in that building for the time being. The damage caused by the explosion of the bombs gives a sense of loss to our community. It is not the first time our members have lost property. Most of us are refugees from other parts of the country. But this physical rallying point has been a symbol for us in recent months and in many ways a unifying factor. Several other churches have gone through the same experience. Yet, the struggle reminds us that the real church is its people, the community of believers. In fact, the services are often held in the shelters during the bombardments.

It is easy to get lost in the day-to-day struggle of politics and survival and to be swayed by the ups and downs of public moods. We get caught up in trying to “solve the country’s problems.” To a certain extent we should become involved, but we should not put our trust in certain leaders, plans, or power. Our only real trust is in our Lord, who can change the hearts of people and start a new community. With his help we can rise above the situation and lead people to Christ.

It is also easy to get attached to material things—home, money, furniture, cars. We are learning that relationships with people are more important than things. We need to put into practice our theories to *love people more than things*. This should apply to people who are causing us harm as well as those who are close to us.

At times I feel I’m carrying a burden too heavy to bear for a man. I’m living in a country torn apart by a war that has claimed tens of thousands of victims throughout the last fourteen years. With my own eyes I’ve seen the devastation, and at times I’ve “touched evil” as people attack others made of the same flesh and blood and created in the likeness of God.

My home is in a country which, strategically speaking, hundreds of people like you and me have considered “ripe” for reaching out to all parts of the Middle East. In Lebanon, about one hundred missionary agencies issued papers, did research, printed books, and told everybody how to evangelize, yet, did very little in practice. In Lebanon, all the different religious communities were living side-by-side without too many obvious tensions. More than ten different Christian communities exist in Lebanon—of which six are Catholic. The others are Orthodox groups, and the Protestants (evangelicals) are only a very small minority (around 1.6 percent of the population). While we were researching and writing our papers most of our communities were left without the proper leaders, and we are reaping what we’ve sown. We certainly never carried out Jesus’ call to present the gospel to all Lebanese.

The cause for such a variety of communities in Lebanon is the geography of the country. Formed of three main mountain ridges, it has been a safe place in the Middle East for persecuted groups. Christians that suffered persecutions through several centuries, found refuge in those hills. Later the country developed politically into the only democratic state of the region. Christian communities and churches lived side-by-side with Muslim communities, exchanging cultures and resources. Christian communities have always had an element of *entente*, and this coexistence was unique in the

Middle East. In this context, new channels of collaboration have also started to develop in recent years between the different Christian groups.

Evangelical church members represent a small minority that is being decimated year by year. We often lose members as our leaders are offered lucrative positions in the West, while the local churches cannot produce good leadership at the pace needed. Today there are more Armenian and Arab pastors in America than in Lebanon, and those who are still here are also being lured to leave their flocks for security.

We need committed Christians willing to stay in Lebanon and other troubled areas of the world to share the gospel. At times we watch the news and are relieved that the violence and suffering in the world is far away from our own quiet little corner. We need to react adamantly when we hear of twenty-six hundred Chinese slaughtered as the madness of militarism takes its toll. We must respond with compassion when thousands of people in Sudan die from starvation or a quarter of a million people lose their homes. If we get together and enjoy the luxury of a holiday in Manila and then decide that our budget can’t pay for Scriptures or any other evangelistic effort in Sudan or China, then we need to get back to the Cross of Jesus—with the compassion of Jesus.