

STANDING AS ONE

K. A. Ellis

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I'm often asked why I prioritize the global persecuted church when there's so much suffering in our own backyard. I understand the question. I serve a local community with pressing needs and issues. How should we regard the global persecution of Christians alongside our local pressing social, cultural, doctrinal, and personal matters?

Let's crunch some numbers.

The story of global Christian suffering is often reported numerically. In just the last few weeks, grisly statistics have filtered into our homes and social media feeds:

30 — the number of Ethiopian Christians in Libya publicly executed on video by ISIS.

371 — the number of days (as of this writing) since more than 250 schoolgirls in Chibok, Nigeria, were kidnapped by the insurgent group Boko Haram from their mostly Christian families.

148 — the number massacred by Al Shabaab in a 15-hour siege on Garissa University, a predominately Christian college in Kenya; an additional 104 were injured.

21 — the number of Copts publicly beheaded by ISIS earlier this year, many of whom cried out to Jesus with their final breath.

Numbers tend to draw media attention. Mainstream media, however, rarely discuss the numerous Christian populations who suffer systemic discrimination, economic pressure, cultural oppression, forced exile, reputational ruin, international human rights violations, and the like due to their Christian faith. We have seen rampant church bombings. By some estimates, the number of Christian refugees forcibly removed from their homes in Southeast Asian, African, and Middle Eastern countries is now inching toward seven digits.

Each number we hear about represents a life with a story. Each number also represents rising degrees in the thermometer of global hostility toward people of the Christian faith.

Make Them One

For Christians the most significant number in approaching persecution is "one." And "one" is no mere number or statistic, it is a state of being. We are one because Christ has determined that we should be so. On the eve of Christ's greatest trial, we find him offering his heavenly Father a three-fold prayer for himself, his disciples, and for future generations of believers who will bear his name.

This prayer in [John 17](#) offers three striking clues to the significance of "one." First, after cautioning his disciples in the preceding chapters that the world would hate them as it has hated him, Christ's prayer is framed by reflection on the enmity set in motion in the first garden between him and the dark forces at work against him. He further frames his prayer with his victory over that force and the shared enmity and victory his disciples and followers will likewise experience through their union with him.

The second observation is more broad. There are no other temporal relationships, either on earth or in relation to God the Father, based on

physical and spiritual union with the entire person of Christ. Because Adam fell in the flesh and severed humanity's relationship with the Father, humanity lives under that curse in the flesh likewise alienated. In the fullness of Christ's human flesh and the fullness of his divine holiness, he bridges the chasm between Adam and the Father. His full humanity and full divinity make this bridge not only possible, but also intimate. The apostle Paul elaborates on Christ as our flesh-and-Spirit bridge, writing that while we were once dead in Adam, we are now made alive in Christ.

Finally, we can observe that while our other earthly relationships and concerns may have temporal significance, they are not Christ's primary focus at this hour. Christ's prayer for unity and endurance is formed, uttered, and accomplished at the greatest hour of trial in all of redemptive history. At this critical juncture there is one relationship on his mind, and it is ours.

In our union with Christ, we have a relationship that is intimate, Christ-centered, physical, and distinct. No other earthly relationship is bound up in our union with Christ. While we know that in his presence nations, tribes, and tongues will be recognizable and harmonized, this particular prayer does not distinguish us in terms of these categories. Therefore, while our unity in Christ's body does not necessarily cancel out our ethnic, tribal, or societal associations, or even our familial and blood relations, our union with Christ's person carries a strong suggestion of Spirit-wrought uniqueness centered only in him. There is no comparison to any other earthly alliances.

There is need everywhere. We can (and should) be a prophetic voice regarding cultural and social concerns, whether they take the form of mercy ministry, addressing poverty, justice, the right to life, racial issues, trafficking, immigration, human rights, traditional marriage, arts, politics, and so on. It is our

privilege to bring God's transformative Word to bear in these areas.

Yet even as the apostle Paul exhorts us to good works, he qualifies the primacy of our unique relationship in Christ: do good to all, "especially those who are of the household of faith" ([Gal. 6:10](#)). Making room for pressing social and cultural issues and for the concerns of the persecuted should be a both/and proposition, not one of either/or.

Our Body in Motion

For the believer, the issue of Christian persecution is far more than a social concern—it is a body-and-blood issue, with associated life-and-death priorities. Our reaction to assaults against the body of Christ should be the same as if our own physical bodies were being injured. We would:

- Cry out when our body is threatened or has suffered horrific loss.
- Pray with urgency.
- Support those actively involved in "doctoring" the injured parts.

In the midst of tragic news about "our body," we might also display the redemptive purpose of suffering as the body of Christ. This is the climax of Christ's prayer, that the nations may know him and that the Godhead be glorified. These light and momentary hardships are preparing us all for even greater things, to the ultimate glory of God. Individual members of our body may be assaulted in the flesh, but no one can touch the body in the Spirit held together in Christ. For this reason we endure and do not lose heart.

As believers joined literally and spiritually to the whole person of Christ, we cannot divorce ourselves from other members of Christ's body any more than Adam could leave the woman in the first garden; they, too, were one, albeit in a temporal sense. We are a single organism

referred to as “Christ’s body” because Christ has given us his life-giving breath and body to share. When mindful of anti-Christian hostility, we cannot remain numb or indifferent to the pain or loss of Christ’s legs, hands, and feet, which are our own.

We may see more alarming numbers in the coming days. So we take comfort knowing that as we navigate these days of grisly statistics together, “one” is the only number necessary to stir us to action.

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ARE TATTOOS WORSE THAN ADULTERY

By Trevin Wax

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Disagreements in the church discourage me these days. Not the existence of disagreements—those are to be expected. We’ve been living with disagreement since the days of the early church. I’m talking about the way we handle debate.

Debates arise whenever we encounter Bible-believing Christians who agree on the essentials of the faith yet disagree on how to rank the biggest dangers facing the church today, or how to be the best stewards of our resources, or how to “do church,” or how to interact with secular sources of knowledge, or how to determine political priorities, or how to respond to pastoral failings. These debates often degenerate into quarrels when we assume these areas of disagreement represent compromise at the fundamental level of Christian conviction.

What if there’s a better way to explore these disagreements? We can learn something by looking to cross-cultural mission work when biblical convictions and core values come to the forefront of cultural clashes.

Tattoos and Adultery

In their timely book *Winsome Conviction: Disagreeing Without Dividing the Church*, Tim Muehlhoff and Richard Langer offer an example of culture clash. They recount the story of Amy Medina, an American missionary in Tanzania, whose husband was teaching a class on developing a biblical worldview. Somehow, the subject of tattoos arose, and the class reacted so negatively to the idea of a Christian getting a tattoo that the missionary asked: “Which would bother you more: if your pastor got a tattoo, or

if he committed adultery?” The class was unanimous. The tattoo would be more disturbing!

What’s going on? At first glance, if you’re an American Christian (particularly one with tats to show off), you may find it hard to comprehend the reasons these students would conclude that the tattoo is worse than adultery. You may write off the debate as an expression of syncretism, or a strange new form of legalism. Even worse, you might reinforce a subtle ethnocentrism, in which you assume the response of the Tanzanian believers to be “backward” in comparison with the more “enlightened” views you hold as a Westerner.

Similarly, when you come across believers with different convictions on a wide range of topics, you may at first feel shocked at the disagreement. (I know many Christians who were appalled at the thought that any genuine believer could cast a vote for Donald Trump, and I know many Christians who were equally flabbergasted at the thought that any genuine believer wouldn’t vote for him.) You can jump to the conclusion that your disagreement is due to the other person’s compromise, or syncretism, or legalism, or self-righteousness. Or you can—as this missionary in Tanzania did—probe deeper to see the underlying roots, where the students’ passion about tattoos comes from.

Going Deeper

In this case, as the conversation progressed, the missionary acknowledged that the Scriptures explicitly forbid both tattoos and adultery (Lev. 19:28; Deut. 5:18). The majority of American Bible-readers believe the tattoo prohibition to be irrelevant today, but the Tanzanians believe both commands are binding, and surprisingly, the tattoo represents something even worse than adultery. Muehlhoff and Langer explain the students’ mindset:

“Tattoos are associated with witchcraft and evil spirits. A tattoo, regardless of personal intentions, is a mark of ownership placed on your body that either confirms the influence of a witch doctor or an evil spirit over your life, or at the very least implies or invites such influence. Adultery is wrong, but surely even Americans think it is worse for a pastor to publicly identify with an evil spirit.” (69)

To be clear, the students were not pro-adultery. They did believe, however, that because adultery happens out of the public eye and would be handled in private, the sin of adultery wouldn’t bring the same level of shame to the family or church.

“Tattoos, on the other hand, are visible signs of allegiance to evil spirits or tribal witch doctors. Culturally, the tattoo proclaims that Jesus is not really my Lord—some other person or spirit is.” (69)

The Common Ground

It would be wrong for the Tanzanian students who recoil from the American fondness for tattoos to write off as “apostate” their Western brothers and sisters who see this issue differently. It would also be wrong for the American missionary who finds it hard to understand the way these students rank the seriousness of sins to dismiss their concerns. A better way, Muehlhoff and Langer point out, is to explore the spectrum of conviction to better clarify the nature of the disagreement.

How should we think about this conflict? The students and the missionary agree that the inspired Word of God is their final authority. It may look to the students like the Americans don’t take God’s Word seriously because they seem to be okay with tattoos, but a wiser approach would be to assume the best of their Christian siblings and find common ground to work from.

Clarifying the Real Disagreements

Beginning with common ground helps us find greater clarity on where the real disagreement lies. One area presents itself quickly: the principles we use in applying biblical commands across historical and cultural contexts, as well as the difference between the covenants. As the discussion unfolds, it becomes clear that the debate isn’t over the authority of Scripture, but how we interpret this Old Testament command.

A second takeaway is the emphasis the students give to spiritual warfare. Faithfulness to one’s spouse is a moral mandate, for sure, and to break one’s covenantal vows is to fail morally. The tattoo, however (at least in this culture), is a public sign of allegiance to a witch doctor, evil spirit, or something supernatural. The Americans may object that we shouldn’t read African cultural concerns into every tattoo, while the Tanzanians may object that Americans too often underestimate or neglect the dynamics of spiritual warfare. (This cross-cultural discussion of how much or how little we should emphasize the powers and principalities is a subject I devoted several columns to last year.)

A third area of disagreement arises from the difference between living in a guilt/innocence culture versus an honor/shame culture. That’s the primary reason the students believed the tattoo was a greater scandal than the adultery. “Guilt before the law as opposed to shame before the community is valued differently in the two cultures,” Muehlhoff and Langer write (71).

Debating Better

How should Americans and Tanzanians proceed with this debate? Well, a substantive discussion would require both sides to identify where the conflict is actually located. You start with common ground, and then move from there to clarify the nature of the differences. In this case,

the disagreement stems from the principle of how we interpret and apply Old and New Testament commands, and from certain core values: how we lift up the importance of spiritual warfare and sexual fidelity and honor and shame within a community.

Muehlhoff and Langer conclude:

“The conviction spectrum does not eliminate disagreements but rather locates and clarifies our disagreements. The goal is that appreciating the common ground lays a foundation for respecting differing convictions. This opens the door to further conversation and hopefully to respectful compromises along the lines which Paul suggests when he exhorts those who are stronger in faith not to flaunt their freedom and those who are weaker in faith not to judge their brothers.” (72)

Why shouldn't Christians here in the United States follow the same approach when we disagree? Instead of lobbing grenades, making accusations, and assuming the worst about brothers and sisters who see things differently, step back. Build upon the common ground you share regarding the essentials of the Christian faith. Take the time to explore the underlying root issues, so you're able to better clarify where the real disagreement is: in the area of principles and core values. It's there you can have a fruitful discussion and debate because you will actually debate the issue and not rush to dismiss those with whom you differ.

Will this approach resolve all our differences and disagreements? Of course not. But maybe we'd be better equipped to disagree without dividing the church.

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