

Do they deliberately persecute Jesus?

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By Dave Havir

BIG SANDY, Texas—From time to time people ask: How can I help my friends (who are considered leaders) to see that their approach toward saints is violating Scripture?

My answer is not very encouraging to those who sincerely want to help them right now.

- People who persecute Jesus the Christ are not usually aware they are doing it.
- People who persecute Jesus will not usually listen to your efforts to help them.
- People who persecute Jesus will probably learn only when He personally confronts them.

Zealous Pharisee

Saul of Tarsus was a zealous Pharisee (Acts 22:3). In his zeal for God he persecuted saints.

(Understand that leaders of today do *not* hurt the saints with the same severity with which Saul persecuted the saints in his day. But that does not change the fact that leaders are indeed hurting saints.)

Jesus the Lord decided to get Saul's attention. Saul was on the road to Damascus to punish more saints when Jesus confronted him (Acts 9:1-3).

- A voice said, "Why do you persecute me?" (verse 4).
- When Saul asked who was speaking, the voice said, "I am Jesus, whom you persecuted" (verse 5).
- How did Saul persecute Jesus? From Jesus' perspective, when rulers persecute saints they persecute Jesus Himself.

Who empowered Saul?

Why did Saul persecute Jesus? Did you ever notice who empowered Saul to misuse authority?

Saul received authority from the high priest to threaten and punish saints (Acts 9:1-2).

Yet it wasn't just the high priest who empowered Saul. He received authority from the high priest and "the estate of the elders" (the council) to punish the saints (Acts 22:5).

In fact, Saul headed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests (Acts 26:12).

Saul was empowered by the religious leaders to persecute saints. Saul was empowered by a religious class system.

- Religious councils often have interesting dynamics that can perpetuate wrong approaches. Sometimes a council member will make strong statements of conviction in private, but he will not express them in a group environment. Or worse yet, he may abandon his personal convictions to conform to the group.

- Religious departments (often called church administrations or ministerial services) claim to serve the saints. Yet such departments are often used by groups to control the saints. Their policies regularly favor the corporation instead of the people. Their appeal processes generally support their employees instead of the people they are supposed to be serving.

Misguided zeal

Prophecy reveals that saints will be hurt by shepherds (Ezekiel 34:1-5).

It is true that some authority figures among the Churches of God are ravening wolves in sheep's clothing (Matthew 7:15).

However, it is also true that many of the authority figures among the Churches of God are misguided zealots (Romans 10:2-3).

Saul was a zealous Pharisee who didn't realize he was persecuting Jesus.

- Zealous people who exalt themselves over other people through the use of titles and ranks (Matthew 23:6-12) are persecuting Jesus.

- Zealous people who act as doorkeepers to the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 23:13) are persecuting Jesus.

- Zealous people who devour saints behind a religious facade (Matthew 23:14) are persecuting Jesus.

- Zealous people who bring proselytes into an environment of bondage (Matthew 23:15) are persecuting Jesus.

Avoiding and praying

Sometimes people among the Churches of God feel trapped when enduring continual persecution from religious leaders.

What does the Bible say?

- David wisely avoided a civil-authority figure who was trying to hurt him (1 Samuel 26:21-24).
- Joseph avoided a civil-authority figure who was trying to hurt his family (Matthew 2:12-23).
- Jesus set an example of avoiding religious-authority figures who were trying to hurt Him. Read John 8:59, John 11:47-54 and John 12:36. He got away from them, until it was time for Him to be martyred.
- Paul instructed people that there was a time to avoid religious-authority figures (Romans 16:17-18 and 1 Timothy 6:3-5).
- John instructed people who were pushed away from a congregation by a man of preeminence named Diotrephes to look for a servant named Demetrius (3 John 9-12).

On the road again

If you ever put distance between yourself and religious-authority figures, don't stop praying for them.

Although you may not be able to help them at this time, realize that someday they will see the light.

Jesus the Apostle will confront them on their road to Damascus.