

How Should We Respond To Personal Intimidation?

by Ron R. Ritchie

The San Francisco Chronicle published the following news item recently:

Dozens of undercover security men watched and photo graphed a crowd of about 300 Russian Orthodox members of Moscow's Church of the Resurrection yesterday during a brief address by the Rev. Billy Graham... On Saturday night, security forces had closed off the Moscow Baptist Church, barring reporters and some invited guests during Graham's sermon to about 1500 people there. Graham's sermon of less than 20 minutes dwelt on salvation and the need for people to know Jesus Christ.

That's intimidation. The Russian authorities are so threatened by the gospel they have to watch and photograph those who want to hear it in an effort to intimidate them.

We all face intimidation of one kind or another. After the first service this morning, a young woman told me she wanted to write a term paper for college and include in it how much Jesus meant to her in her life but she was afraid of what her professor might say. We agreed that the Lord just might use her paper as the means by which her professor might come to know him. We wrestle with all kinds of intimidations--social, personal international, spiritual, etc. These are brought about by the spiritual warfare which Satan seeks to produce in our hearts. When we travel to Columbia for the prison ministry we face intimidation because of travel regulations, prison regulations, etc. In our upcoming trip to the Far East we will face various intimidations because of the powerful political and spiritual control of the Moslems in those areas. We even face intimidation in our own neighborhoods. Just when we feel we should share the gospel with our neighbors, the 'intimidator' tells us they don't need to hear about it, so why bother?

The Christians in Asia Minor to whom the apostle Peter was writing his second letter in 64 A.D. faced the same pressures. In the letter Peter set out to teach his readers how to live in a society that was totally opposed to the gospel message. They were aliens and strangers in that society, and as such they should be aware that political, personal and spiritual suffering was part of God's plan of redemption. God would use that suffering which they were undergoing--and some of that suffering came down on them even when they were doing right--to call out a people from among the gentiles for his name's sake. If we today could grasp that concept which Peter shared with the Christians of that first century we too would be set free from anxiety about intimidation.

How should we respond to personal intimidation? According to Peter, writing in chapter 3 of his letter, we should, first,

1. Keep our minds on the will of God

And who is there to harm you if you should prove zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed. And do not fear their intimidation, and do not be troubled, but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to every one who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence; and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better, if God will, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong.

Who is there to harm you? Peter is asking, 'For the eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and his ears attend to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.' The apostle had just earlier used this

quote from Psalm 34 to ask these Christians who could harm them if they had a God whose eyes were on the righteous. God sees everything that is going on in the world_including all the injustice--so Peter asks, 'Who is there to harm you?'

Further, God's 'ears attend to their prayer.' So who can harm you? Prayer is the key to life, the key that unlocks the curtain of time and space and enables us to talk to the God who controls the universe, the God who can work in and through apparently impossible circumstances, the God who will enable us by his power to cope with whatever situations we have to face. After the earlier service I had a time of prayer with a man who was facing the most ridiculous and impossible circumstances. He had tried everything he knew but there was no way out of his dilemma, so we prayed that God would help him see who is there to harm him when intimidation comes to him. Who can harm you, Peter asks, when 'the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.' Yes, you may suffer unjustly, but Jesus said, 'Do not fear those who kill the body, but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear him [Satan] who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.' (Matt. 10:28) In light of these three truths from Psalm 34, therefore, the apostle asks, 'Who is there to harm you?'

Peter goes on to encourage Christians to develop their lifestyle in four different areas in the midst of personal intimidation. First, be zealous for good (verse 13). This word 'zealous' would have been familiar to people in that day. The Zealots were fanatical Jewish patriots of the first century who pledged to liberate Israel from Roman domination by any and every means. They were willing to lose everything_position, money, family, everything_to accomplish that. They vowed to return evil for evil, insult for insult, threat for threat, abuse for abuse. But Christians, Peter says, are part of a counter-culture. They were to be zealous for good, not for tearing down the Roman Empire. Their lives were to be so filled with good that people would be drawn to Jesus Christ. Christians are the light of the world, and by their good works God will be glorified. As they do good works they will demonstrate that they have picked up the cross of Jesus and followed him. In doing so they will see the death of their own hopes and dreams and rights. That was the price tag they would have to pay. But make sure you are suffering for the sake of righteousness, Peter says, not as 'a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler; but if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not feel ashamed, but in that name let him glorify God.' (1 Peter 4:15, 16) Then you are blessed by God with power, joy, peace and righteousness.

In the midst of their godly zeal for what is good, non-Christians would seek to intimidate them. Responding to that, Peter says, secondly, 'Do not fear their intimidation, and do not be troubled.' (Isaiah 8:12) Here the apostle illustrates his point by pointing to the prophet Isaiah, who feared that King Ahaz would lead Judah into captivity by making alliances with Assyria after his father King Uzziah had turned the kingdom over to him. Following the death of Uzziah, God appeared to Isaiah and told him that he was the real King of Judah, he was the King of kings, and that he should tell King Ahaz to not make alliances with Assyria but to trust in him. But the king rejected God's word and instead charged Isaiah with treason. Isaiah certainly felt intimidation, but God again appeared to him and said these words which Peter quotes in verse 14: 'Do not fear their intimidation, and do not be troubled.' So the apostle brings to the fore this great truth: God is in charge. Don't worry about what is happening in your life. God is God. God is Lord. God is in charge. Don't be intimidated and don't be troubled.

Thirdly, Peter says, 'Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts.' By his resurrection, Jesus has demonstrated that he is Lord of lords and King of kings. He is over all creation, he is above and beyond the universe. Thus we need to turn our world and our lives over to him and allow him to be King of those also. We need to live a lifestyle that proclaims, 'Not my will but thine be done.' We must make him Lord of our lives on a day-by-day basis, turning over to him our hearts, our spirits, every area of our lives. For the rest of our lives he will be asking us, Can I be Lord of your family, your finances, your sexual life? He wants to be Lord because he created us to reflect his glory in mankind. If you agree to his Lordship you will find yourself in places you never planned to be; you will find yourself talking to people you don't even know. So, Peter says, you must be 'always ready to make a defense to every one who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you...' 'Defense' is a legal term which means 'to be able to pick up where your opponent leaves off.' In other words, be ready to share the hope that you have, that living hope. Know what you believe. That's why I appreciate people like Josh McDowell, Walter Martin, Paul Little and C.S. Lewis who teach us how to think through questions about our faith.

Non-Christians are always asking what is the basis for the hope that we have. When Philip the evangelist met the Ethiopian eunuch in the desert he was able to explain to him the meaning of Isaiah 53, which the Ethiopian was reading. At Pentecost, Peter preached the gospel message to thousands of people in the temple area and 3000 people came to know the Lord. He knew the Old Testament and by the Spirit he was able to explain That Jesus was the Messiah. In the same way, Stephen in Acts 7 explained the history of the nation and the coming of the Messiah to the council of the Jews so that they 'could not cope with his wisdom.' That was what the apostle Paul's ministry was about—he was constantly appearing before kings and governors, before Jews and Gentiles explaining that Jesus was the Messiah. Christians need to spend time in the Word of God so that they will understand the basis for their living hope. We are not whistling in the dark. We are not saying we believe in faith, we have a hope in hope, etc. We have facts, truth and reality on our side, thus we can 'always be ready to make a defense to every one who asks...

My wife and I and another couple in the body at PBC have the joy of being involved in a Bible class with people who want to know more about Jesus and the Bible. Through that class we have seen the Lord bring some 10 people to faith in him. One of the most fulfilling things about that study is the number of questions these people have about the Bible and about Jesus Christ. Today I just heard that a Jewish man wants to come to the class to hear some answers to questions he has about the Messiah. I felt a little intimidated when I heard that because I know I'm going to have to study even more so I will be able to answer his questions. Sometimes, of course, Christians will have to say, 'I don't know the answer to your question, but I'll find out.'

Peter goes on to say Christians are to respond to questions about their faith with, first, 'gentleness.' We're not to act like the fictitious TV lawyer, Perry Mason, who wins every case by cross-examining and seeking to gain the upper hand in an argument. We are to respond with gentleness, which is strength under the control of the Holy Spirit. Those we are responding to are 'dead in their trespasses and sins.' They are not the enemy, Satan is; they are the victims. Further, Peter says, we are to respond with 'reverence.' We are to see that they are valuable and saveable. Colossians 4:5-6 says so: 'Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned, as it were, with salt, so that you may know how you should respond to each person.'

Fourthly, Peter says, 'Keep a good conscience.' In other words, live in such a way that you won't have to keep looking behind you hoping the wrong you have done won't catch up with you. Lead a life that is pure before the Lord. Confess your sins to God and live rightly with all your neighbors. I recently found out from my son that my neighbor didn't like where I placed my garbage cans on my property. One night last week I got up and moved them because I didn't want anything to come between him and me, anything about my life that would cause a hindrance to the gospel.

Realize also that you will be slandered, but those who revile your good behavior may be put to shame. A great example of this truth occurred a few weeks ago when I married a young Christian couple who told me that 70 percent of the guests at the wedding would be non-Christians. I later heard that one guest said to his friend, 'This is the weirdest wedding I've ever been to. I can't believe that Christians believe all that guy is saying. They're really off-base.' But his friend said to him, 'Maybe we're the ones who are off-base.' 'Keep a good conscience,' understanding that you'll be slandered, but in time God will take care of that

Peter continues, 'For it is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong.' To summarize, it is clear from chapter 2, verse 11 through chapter 3, verse 17, that it was God's will that the Christian community in Asia Minor would suffer unjustly for his honor and glory. The key was not to focus on unjust suffering but to focus on the salvation of the foolish, unreasonable men and women, the salvation of those who were slandering, those who were filled with malice, and those who sought to intimidate them. Christians were to walk in such a way that people like that would see God at work in them.

How should we respond to personal intimidation? Keep your minds on the will of God; be zealous for good; fear not; sanctify Christ as Lord and, keep a good conscience.

Secondly, Peter says,

2. Keep our faith in the Risen Lord

For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust in order that he might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; in which also he went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison, who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water. And corresponding to that, baptism now saves you not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, after angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to him.

Ever since the fall, man has been in rebellion against God. Every child who has ever been born is born in such a state. That's his nature; he can't stop it. But God is not rebelling against man: 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever would believe in him would not perish but have eternal life.' Jesus was willing to die for man_ 'once for all, the just for the unjust.' Sin is no longer the issue. God has opened up a way for man to return to him: 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them.' That is why the gospel is such good news. Sin has been dealt with; all man has to do is accept the free gift of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. If man will by faith accept that, all his sins will be forgiven. I talked to a woman last week who was involved in adultery. When we prayed together, I saw the tears stream down her face as she realized that the sin of adultery was forgiven, as she accepted Jesus Christ as Lord of her life. That happened because she placed her faith in the One who had saved her.

Peter is telling the Christians in Asia Minor that Jesus suffered unjustly on their behalf so that he might bring them to God. In the same way, God would allow unjust suffering in their lives so that others might come to know him, as Christ expressed himself through that suffering. Don't focus on the suffering, in other words, rather focus on what God is doing through it. I was once involved in a head-on collision. As I was thrown out of my car my hands skidding on the roadway trying to break my fall, my first thought was, 'Now what are you doing, God? What does this have to do with eternity?' When you are facing unjust suffering you have to ask God, 'Who am I supposed to talk to? How can this situation reflect your honor and glory? Will you give me the power to cope with this because it hurts?' Jesus allowed wicked men to put him to death, but just when it looked like they had got rid of him he was 'made alive in the spirit,' and he entered his body of glory. So the good news is that Jesus was raised from the dead so all who place their faith in him as Lord and Savior can be born again to a living hope.

In order to illustrate that they were not the first people to undergo suffering, Peter now takes his readers back to the story of Noah in the Old Testament. Noah, a righteous man, and his family lived in a wicked society. Noah was blameless, he walked with God and God used him as a preacher of righteousness for 120 years as he built the ark and warned of coming judgment. He was mocked and slandered by a disobedient people, but he was preserved when the righteous Judge allowed the flood to come. Verses 19 and 20 have been argued about by biblical scholars for the past 2000 years. Peter knew what he was talking about, but people have been confused over these verses ever since. Augustine in the 3rd century thought he knew what Peter meant here, but Luther in the 15th century confessed that he had no idea. what the apostle meant. As I have indicated, scholars have spent their lives trying to figure out what these verses mean.

What I propose to do is tell you the three most common views, as to the meaning of verses 19 and 20. We find the background in Genesis 6:

Now it came about, when men began to multiply on the face of the land, and daughters were born to them, that the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were beautiful: and they took wives for themselves, whomever they chose. Then the Lord said, 'My Spirit shall not strive with man forever, because he also is flesh; nevertheless his days shall be one hundred and twenty years.' The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came unto the daughters of men, and they bore children to them. Those were the mighty men who were of old, men of renown. Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually And the Lord was sorry that he had made

man on the earth, and he was grieved in his heart. And the Lord said, 'I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, from man to animals to creeping things and to birds of the sky; for I am sorry that I have made them.' But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord.

The issue is this: did Jesus Christ (as verse 19 seems to say) go to hell between his death and his resurrection? If he did, who are these 'spirits' whom he talked to? And if he did talk to them, what was his message?

Here is the first of the three most popular viewpoints. After Jesus died on the cross he was placed in a tomb for three days. Before the resurrection of his body his Spirit went to Hades, the place of the wicked dead from all the ages who are waiting for final judgment. There Jesus preached to the spirits of all those who for 120 years had rejected Noah's message on earth, and also those who had never heard it. That means we have a gospel of second chance. According to this view, Hades was the prison, the holding area for the spirits of those who were drowned in the flood; the message was the gospel of second chance. I personally disagree with that view.

The second viewpoint is more popular. After Jesus died physically on the cross his body lay in the grave for three days. His Spirit went to Hades and preached the message of victory, demonstrated by his resurrection, to the spirits held there. Based on Genesis 6, this viewpoint holds that the spirits held there were the fallen sons of God, fallen angels, who came to earth in the days of Noah and cohabited with women to produce distorted humanity--giants--all of whom were killed in the flood. (2 Peter 2:4, Jude 6) The message which Jesus preached was a victory song over Satan, sin, death, demons and powers. Those who hold this view support their argument from Ephesians 4:8-10, and 1 Peter 4:22. This is a very popular view of what these verses mean, one I grew up with.

So both of these views hold that Jesus went to Hades between his death and his resurrection. But does the scripture support that? In Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost, the apostle quoted Psalm 16, '... Thou wilt not abandon my soul to Hades...' (Acts 2:27) Those who hold either of the first two views say that Jesus did in fact go to Hades but didn't stay there. Others hold that Jesus did not go to Hades at all, pointing to the verse I just quoted from Psalm 16. In the Greek the word abandon means 'to desert or forsake', while in the Hebrew the word means 'to loose or permit.' Combining these two meanings, those who say that Christ never went to Hades hold that Jesus was saying, 'You will not permit, forsake or leave my soul to Hades.' For proof they offer what Jesus said to the thief on the cross after he had repented: 'Today you will be with me in paradise.' Jesus never went to Hades, in other words. Those who hold that Jesus did go to Hades, however, respond by quoting Ephesians 4:8,9: 'When he ascended on high he led captive a host of captives. (Now this expression, "He ascended," what does it mean except that he also had descended into the lower parts of the earth?...)' Then Christ ascended to the Father as conqueror, and his train of captives from Hades included Satan, principalities and powers whom he had defeated and disarmed. To this, the other side would respond that to say that Jesus descended into the lower parts of the earth is to speak of Christ's incarnation, his humiliation at the cross, his burial in the grave ('lower parts of the earth') and his exaltation as the One who has universal authority and power.

All of this demonstrates that we just don't fully understand certain mysteries in the scriptures. I don't have any problem understanding 2 Peter 2:4 and Jude 6, which say that God has judged fallen angels. But I don't know what the first two views have to do with the context of 1 Peter; thus I have to agree with those who hold the third view. Here is what I think Peter is saying in these verses. The Christians to whom he was writing were suffering unjustly through a variety of distressing trials. Where is the God of justice? they cried out to God and to Peter. Why doesn't he step in and judge the wicked, mocking, unreasonable world all around us? Peter's answer to that question is to illustrate what God was doing by using the Old Testament story we have quoted. Wicked men put the just Man Jesus to death, but the Holy Spirit quickened him and raised him from the dead. That is the same Holy Spirit who was available through the prophets, talked about in chapter 1, verses 10 and 11, as well as the same Holy Spirit who spoke in and through Noah a message of hope and redemption to his generation, a message that was rejected. Then the patience of God wore out and the flood came because man refused to listen. Mankind except for Noah and his family, was destroyed in the flood and their spirits held in prison to await the final judgment. Justice was served by a righteous God in God's terms and in God's time.

So Peter is telling these suffering Christians in Asia Minor, 'Wait, rest. God is in charge. In his good time he will judge those who are persecuting you.' (How right Peter was! The great Roman Empire, the cause of so much unjust suffering, was later to be so thoroughly judged by this righteous God that it broke apart in 395 A.D.) Meanwhile, Christians were to continue to proclaim the good news by the power of the Holy Spirit. They were not to worry about the intimidators, the slanderers, the threats. God would deal with all of that. They were to continue, like Noah, to preach the gospel. Christians were to keep their faith in the resurrected Lord who suffered unjustly but who was vindicated by the righteous Judge, the only One who could provide them with eternal security. That really was the issue for these Christians: how could they know that God would take care of them in the midst of threats and intimidations?

Now, Peter says in verse 21, 'corresponding to that...' As the waters of judgment, which were held back 120 years while Noah preached righteousness, were finally released, Noah and his family who had placed their faith in God were placed by him into the ark and saved from destruction. 'Corresponding to that...' as the ark saved Noah and his family, so baptism saves you. How could baptism save them? It can't be due to the water because that was what was destroying everybody; the ark was what saved Noah. It's 'not the removal of dirt from the flesh [it's not water], but an appeal to God for a good conscience...' A spiritual baptism, in other words, is what produces a good conscience before God.

This spiritual reality which Peter is talking about is discussed in Romans 6:3-7:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him through baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life For if we have become united with him in the likeness of his death, certainly we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection, knowing this, that our old self was crucified with him, that our body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is freed from sin.

That is the baptism that Peter is talking about, When Christians identify with Christ's death, burial and resurrection they are spiritually placed into Christ as Noah was physically placed into the ark. Water baptism is simply an outward expression of an inward reality in which they were already resting. Once they were placed into Christ they had an eternal, secure position in him. So when pressures, slanders, malice and intimidations come upon Christians, they are to rest in the resurrected Jesus Christ.

How should we respond to personal intimidation? (1) keep our minds on the will of God; be zealous for good; fear not; sanctify Christ as Lord; keep a good conscience; and (2) keep our faith on the risen Lord: he also suffered unjustly, but he has been resurrected as Lord of lords, the only One who can provide eternal security for us.

Are you really placing your faith in Jesus Christ? If you are troubled and intimidated you are trusting in yourself. He wants to set us free from that and trust him instead. In the midst of unjust suffering he is calling out a people for his name's sake. If you understand that you will understand unjust suffering. Rest your case with the King of Kings and Lord of Lords whose face is against evil. No one can harm you.

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Ron R. Ritchie
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