

In The Real World They Say "Identification" - Not Persecution By Betty Crouse

Classic Christian Writings:

Have you ever sat in a crowded room where more than half the people have been imprisoned because of their faith in Jesus Christ? Having been held in stark prison conditions and dark, backbreaking labor for two to twelve years, Chinese itinerant evangelists traveled, some for hours, to meet with us during our trip to China. They sat on every available space including windowsills, the bed, and the floor in the back room of a tiny apartment tucked away down a cobblestone alley in an isolated Chinese city. However, even the isolation had not allowed them to move about freely. One-by-one or two-by-two to escape police surveillance, they arrived at the apartment.

We also had traveled for hours across "heart-stopping" dangerous, mountainous roads, arriving at our destination at 2 a.m. After many maneuverings the next morning because a co-worker had been taken to the police station for questioning, we arrived at the apartment. One hour later, the room was filled with the evangelists. As they shared their stories, the place truly became hallowed ground for me. I wept as they related their experiences, though they were certainly not asking for sympathy. Their emphasis was on God's triumphant grace. We learned that they do not use our word for persecution in Chinese because it has a negative connotation. They use our word for identification and were quick to point out that identifying with the sufferings of Christ is what they do with JOY!

One of the evangelists was in prison at the time but was able to get a message out. "Don't pray for my release. The police aren't bothering me in here. Already I have led 40 to Christ!"

A husband and wife were among the evangelists. Giving up the opportunity to travel together, in order to reach more people with the Gospel message and spiritual nurture, they only see each other every six months. This small and humble group was itinerating among thousands of people who otherwise would not hear the Gospel. Every testimony was worthy of a gold medal. My tears flowed freely as I pictured these friends and co-workers standing before God's throne and receiving His reward. We left the room as we had come, one-by-one and very carefully to avoid attracting attention. For us it was a rare experience, but for them it was a lifestyle of risking their lives daily for their Lord and Savior.

We learned of others. Just recently in one province alone, 100 pastors were arrested. There is no word of their whereabouts.

We traveled to other groups hidden away in woods or caves in high mountain areas. In the pitch-blackness of night with only stars giving light, we went to the highest mountain ranges I have ever seen. A little Chinese lady helped me put one foot in front of the other and kept me from falling as we made our way up to the top. We went through an iron gate to a stone courtyard leading to five large caves. One cave was the kitchen, another the eating area, two were dormitories, and another was the classroom or workroom. There we found teenagers studying God's Word for five to six hours in the middle of every night. During the daytime, they work in home industry. There weren't any athletic events, TV, or the usual teenage pastimes for them. They were immersing themselves in God's Word. I wondered—are they part of the final generation which will have opportunity to reach their generation for Christ?

On and on, the journey and the experience went like ever-changing scenes etched on my heart. After hearing one young pastor's stories, we asked him if he thought conditions might improve and there might be less surveillance. He said, "Possibly." He thought for a moment and then quickly replied, "But God may choose to purify His people through suffering. We're ready for that."

When we left that part of the world, I gathered in my mind the kaleidoscope of experiences from sightseeing at the famed Tiennamen Square and Forbidden City to visiting seminary students cloistered from inspectors to become biblically trained, to being spiritually and emotionally touched by incredible stories of Chinese co-workers. The piercing revelation came like a lightning bolt—the persecuted are not lists of names in books or on police records. They are real people with faces, families, emotions, hopes, dreams, and LOVE for Jesus that extends beyond all earthly ties to the eternal vision of His glory, when they will see Him face to face.

As we returned to Indiana, I knew I was leaving a part of the real world where people are imprisoned for their faith, pastors are beaten, families are separated, churches are burned, Bibles are confiscated, living conditions are Spartan, food is for survival—not luxury, economic and political unrest exists, and police surveillance is common. But I saw the political and geographical walls not as boundaries but as borders to be crossed by the power of the Holy Spirit flowing through cleansed, unselfish vessels.