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“The Gospel Blimp Revisited:
A Reflection on Christian Witness and Persecution”

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Many of my personal views on the complex intersection between proselytism and persecution were crystallized by an incident in 1998, when I was working for the U.S. State Department. During the summer of that year, 30 Filipino Christians were ushered off to jail for distributing Bibles in the closed Islamic state of Saudi Arabia. It doesn't require too much imagination to see how the combination of elements in this episode—Bibles, Christians, and Saudi Arabia—could have been a recipe for disaster. Fortunately a disaster was avoided. Working with both the U.S. Embassy and the Philippine Embassy, the State Department was able to get each of these earnest Filipino evangelists released (immediately deported, but released) before the summer was over.

Four months later I was in Saudi Arabia, and I stopped by the Philippine Embassy to thank the Ambassador for his help in the successful resolution of this incident. “You know,” he said to me, “under Saudi Arabian law you can bring one Bible into the country in your brief case. These people tried to smuggle 20,000 of them into the country. Then they claimed Saudi Arabia for Christ by the year 2000!” I was not unfamiliar with these kinds of bold, if unrealistic, missionary campaigns, but to the Philippine Ambassador this was nothing less than bizarre.

“They were running out of time,” he went on, “and here they still had all these Bibles. So they started to walk down the streets of Riyadh, throwing Bibles over the walls, literally hitting unsuspecting Muslims on the head. Saudi Arabia's Muttawa (religious police) stepped in immediately, of course, and 30 of my countrymen ended up in jail.”

This story reveals more than the ongoing lack of religious freedom in repressive countries like Saudi Arabia. It also captures an array of issues that Christians trying to obey the Great

Commission need to consider anew, and which I want to discuss here this evening. These issues can be summarized in “3 Ms”—message, motivation, and methodology. Too often Christian missions work has naively assumed that sincere motivation and a stripped-down message of biblical orthodoxy is all that the Lord requires of us. The truth is that our Lord wants us to follow him in his incarnational, holistic ministry—a ministry that brings the greatest honor to Him only when we are obedient in our *methodology* as well as our message and motivation.

It is difficult to overstate the urgency and the stakes for today’s Church. The end of the Cold War and the rapid advance of globalization have opened up unprecedented opportunities to spread the good news to the world that “God so loved”. Nevertheless, misguided efforts in international proselytism will at best be ineffective and unsustainable, and at worst counterproductive.

Consider just a sampling of the things that went wrong with the Filipino evangelists’ attempt to win the entire Saudi Arabian peninsula. First, they gave themselves an arbitrary, self-imposed timeline for the evangelistic process, and allowed that goal to drive them to a desperation-stage methodology. This methodology turned out to be a kind of reincarnation of “The Gospel Blimp,” a saturation bombing of the countryside with spiritual messages, a divine “psyops.” Its strategic acumen was no more sophisticated than “ready, fire, aim.”

Second, we must ask whether these Christians were so driven by the Great Commission that they gave little more than lip service to the Great Commandment. Remember the actual sequence of commands that Jesus gave us: We were commanded to *love* before we received the commission to go out and make disciples among all nations. (Note specifically the exchange between Jesus and Peter in John 21) Love builds relationships and creates a more attractive faith and a more receptive audience. The implication is clear: if you can’t love, don’t go, regardless of the weight of the spiritual monkey on your back. You will get it all wrong.

Third, we must consider more carefully the division of labor between us and the Holy Spirit. Is it enough that we throw Bibles hither and yon, and simply trust that the Holy Spirit will make sure they land in the right place? Do we really always have a safety net, such that our problematic methodologies call forth a “bless the mess” response from the Holy Spirit? We must ask whether

Christians are trivializing the awesome responsibility of introducing the God of history and the Christ of Calvary when they indulge such sloppy communication strategies.

Finally, we cannot avoid the question of foreign missionary influence on local culture, and whether or not there is a measure of cultural imperialism. To be sure, the charge of cultural imperialism is sometimes thrown around liberally by critics of all evangelistic activity. Such critiques are off to the side of our discussion here, because their objective is not to make evangelistic activity more sensitive and secure but to abolish it. Still, we must face with candor legitimate questions about culture and power that are at stake in international missions.

Indiscriminate chucking of Bibles in an Islamic country may seem a comical and unrepresentative example of cultural clumsiness, yet it is not far removed from the arrogance that many Christians bring with them into their inter-cultural engagement. If Bible throwing is not a concern, why not throw baseballs—the best of our culture to yours. Or Budweisers! “This Bud is for you—Bible to follow—right back at you.”

It is issues like these that must be confronted if we are to respond more appropriately to religious persecution abroad. Again, Christians are called to evangelization. Their right to respond to that call — the right to manifest and share religious faith publicly — is protected in international law, something that secularists (and some religious groups) often do not acknowledge. However, culturally offensive and politically naïve evangelistic methodologies have unnecessarily caused conflict; in some cases such practices have needlessly exacerbated religious persecution and led to even tighter restrictions on Christian activity.

Christians have too often seen persecution merely as an opportunity to honor the blood of the martyrs and an occasion to generate activist pressure against repressive countries. This is fine as far as it goes, but what is missing is a candid look inward. Are Christians being persecuted because of their faith, or because of the methodology employed in sharing that faith? And then the most important question that almost never gets asked: What Gospel were they throwing, and was it worth the persecution that followed?

Message

When I was president of World Vision I would often make trips overseas to observe the great work being done by this evangelical-sponsored relief and development organization. Usually after such trips I would spend time reporting on the ministry to various groups around the U.S. Feeding stations, clean water, medical capacity, leadership development, micro-enterprise loans—all were discussed under the rubric of a holistic ministry. Invariably someone would ask this arresting question: “But can you give them the Gospel?”

The question was predicated on a false dichotomy that plagues a great deal of our thinking today about the essence of the Christian message. When John’s disciples came to Jesus asking, “Are you the one?” Jesus replied using words that describe His incarnational Gospel: “Tell John what you have seen and heard.” A word is proclaimed in visible deeds—through the blind that now see, cripples who are able to walk, lepers who are cleansed, the deaf who begin to hear, and the dead who have been raised. Then, in a single phrase, Jesus concludes this holistic gospel: “And the poor have *Good News* preached to them.” (Luke 7:17-22)

The simultaneously spiritual and social nature of the Gospel is also evident in Kingdom theology that pervades the New Testament. The book of Mark, for instance, uses plain language that we all need to recapture. The *Good News*, as Mark makes clear, is that “the Kingdom of God is at hand.” (Mark 1:14-15) Jesus moved through the cities and villages “preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom” (Matt. 9:35). Note that the central message of the Kingdom Gospel is immeasurably more than simply “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.” As Mortimer Arias succinctly captures in the title of one of his books, the *Good News* is the announcement of “The Reign of God.” There is a king and a kingdom, and they will forever be a part of our new reality. This is the lead story of God’s newscast to humanity. All other news—of the “social gospel” and personal gospel, of grace and works, of seeing and hearing, of justification and sanctification—flows from this one banner headline: The Kingdom of God is at hand!

So, for example, when the one lost sheep is reunited with the 99, when the search is successfully conducted for the lost coin, when the Prodigal’s confession is smothered by the adoring and

greatly relieved father—it is the work of the King! (Luke 15:3-32). The implication is clear: Jesus is not only Savior, he is Lord. And this, in my opinion, is what is missing in the soft, self-indulged Christianity of the West; a true sense of the divine kingship, the Lordship of Christ in all dimensions of life. Without this, our Gospel will never be worthy of persecution.

This loss of Kingdom focus is especially strange among those Christians who claim to take the Bible seriously, for it speaks quite clearly in this regard. As Arias points out, the phrase “Kingdom of God,” used by Mark and Luke, and Matthew’s “Kingdom of heaven”, are repeated over 122 times in these three Gospels, 90 times from the lips of Jesus himself. The overarching theme of the parables is the Kingdom of God. The Lord’s Prayer is a Kingdom prayer: “Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Mt 6:10). Likewise in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, the Kingdom is promised at the beginning of the beatitudes to the poor (vs. 3) and at the end to the persecuted (vs. 10). It is a Kingdom sermon.

Consider also the language of Passion Week, the defining moment with respect to Christ’s identity and intensions. Pontius Pilate, inexplicitly and somewhat stubbornly, attached the title of “King” to the cross. Jesus is given a “crown” while the crowd mocks him. After all, a real King would extricate himself from such a situation. The condemned thief, showing remarkable faith in one who was destined to die before him, asked to be remembered “when you come into your Kingdom” (Luke 23:42). The body is removed from the cross and wrapped in spices similar to those that were brought as gifts when the wise men came to celebrate the birth of a *King*, three decades earlier.

And then there is that all-important punctuation mark to this most amazing week. The veil of the temple, the shield that protected the holy of holies, was rent from top to bottom. Personally, I have spent most of my life looking at this phenomenon from my side of the veil, a subjective perspective interpreted in very personal terms. Like many Christians today I have tended to celebrate “what’s in it for me,” namely, the level of access to God that I now enjoy because the veil was torn. This is a direct access, with Jesus as the only required mediator between me and a holy God. In this perspective, *I* become the subject of God’s love affair with humanity, and the tearing of the veil becomes “all about me.”

But from the other side of the veil, the *Sovereign* is the subject. I am the object of the Sovereign's love. It's all so much bigger than me. God dramatically restates the obvious: all ground is holy; He is sovereign over all things. His reign extends over families, churches, denominations, ideologies, institutions, as well as individuals. This means, by extension, that all things also need to be redeemed. Planet earth is holy ground that needs to be reclaimed for the King. This is the essence of the message, and it can never be taken for granted.

When persecution comes (and it will) we need to make sure that it is "for righteousness sake," (Mt. 5:10) and not because we are preaching a redacted, truncated message whose focus has shifted from the good news of a Kingdom that has broken into history to the mere servant recipients of the coming Kingdom. We dare not forget Jesus' stern reprimand to his disciples when they began to selfishly and prematurely pre-position themselves in Glory (Mt 18:1-3).

Some may suggest that this emphasis on Christ's Kingship, while important, is not critical to a personal relationship to Christ. I strongly disagree. The problems caused by this lack of emphasis are sometimes subtle, but manifest themselves in a way that greatly diminishes our Christian witness. Consider the following, for example, and what is ultimately at risk when "it's all about me." First, we will be a sucker for "feel good" preaching that peddles the characteristically Western doctrine of seeker-friendly self-esteem. The need for so much additional self-esteem is confounding. After all, we were "known before we were formed in the womb" (Jer 1:5). We were created in the image of the God of the universe. We are heirs of God and joint heirs with Jesus (Rom 8:17), an absolutely astounding pedigree. Our hairs are numbered and our names are engraved on the palms of his hands. We are constantly being pursued by the Hound of Heaven, like the Prodigal son who is pursued by the unflagging love of his father. God doesn't stop at anything, even if he has to sacrifice his only son—while we search for health, wealth, and God's perfect will for our lives of low self esteem. "Lord, I believe. Now make me feel good."

Second, if it's "all about me," we should not be surprised that the most requested sermon in America is "How do I know God's will for *my* life?" Many times this is the depth of our spiritual curiosity. If He is the subject, however, why not know Him? Job asked the question, "Why me?"

to which God replied, “Where were you when I hung the stars?” (Job 38, 39). God as subject and man as object became immediately clear to Job, and Job stopped asking questions of the Sovereign.¹

Third, if it’s “all about me” our prayer life will be dominated by personal petition. Heavenly praise and Kingdom celebration will give way to personal desires, i.e., “protect me, heal me, guard my family,” and so on. Moses gives us a wonderful example of an alternative prayer life—one that is Kingdom-focused even though it emerged out of a long history of enduring oppression and deprivation. The Israelites were a persecuted people who experienced years of ethnic and religious violence. Egypt was an equal opportunity oppressor, from unfair labor practices to infanticide. Extrication from Egypt led to 40 years of wilderness living where preservation was a daily priority and a harsh reality.

Yet as Moses says goodbye to the Israelites at the Jordan River, reflecting on a life almost over and a heavenly land of great promise to come, Moses’ entire discourse, both his prayer and his song of praise, is focused on the Sovereign. The language used is covenantal, suzerain in nature, a covenant of unequals where the “the secret things belong to God” (De. 29:29). The “things revealed” are gifts from above. A profound understanding of power and sovereignty is amply demonstrated here. At the end of this song of worshipful adoration, Moses underscores the importance of a right relationship with the Sovereign when he says, “these are not just idle words—they are your life” (De 32:47). Let us be clear, Moses would not have missed the significance of a torn temple veil! He lived his life and received its meaning under the mantra of the Sovereign, “*I am* the Lord thy God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage” (Ex 20:2).

Fourth, when it is all about us, we find it difficult for our faith to transcend our ideology. Once the hard edge of ideology is wedded to faith, faith and ideology inevitably gravitate towards power, a power that excludes. Truth becomes a hammer; power becomes a sword that divides. In America the effect has been political polarization, something Washington calls a “red/blue

¹ As an important aside, our belief in absolutes does not necessarily mean that we know them absolutely! We get closer to these absolutes, however, as we get closer to the mind of God. Know Him, and that knowledge will lead to a more directed vision of our own lives.

divide,” referring to the ubiquitous red-state (Republican) and blue-state (Democrat) electoral maps used in coverage of recent elections. Most often Christians are “red,” a political stripe that gives far too much power to Caesar. A theology co-opted by ideology, at least in principle, has the same potential for theocracy and the same theocratic abuse that we worry about in other faiths. The irony is palpable. Why is there so much focus on “our man in the White House” when we already have “our father, who art in heaven”?

Fifth, Kingdom ignorance jeopardizes effective Christian witness overseas. If it is “all about us” there is a sense that nothing can happen until *we* get there. Like a tree falling in the woods, we behave as though the Church abroad isn’t real until “our” progress is reported back “home.” Funding sources want to “keep score”, American style, using a Wall Street model that foolishly attempts to track God’s sovereign work on a QuickBooks spreadsheet. It’s the kind of attitude that leads us to forget the significance of someone like William Carey, who labored in India for seven years before he experienced his first convert (who is going to hire that guy!), or Noah, who proclaimed his faith for 100 years without adding a single person to the human cargo aboard the ark. Too often we use canned formulas, evangelistic “cliff notes”, demonstrating the worst of “drive by” Christianity, rather than the richness of a holistic Gospel.

Sadly, Bible throwers—like those arrested in Saudi Arabia—are growing in number, and their mistakes play into the hands of a vulnerable religious freedom abroad. When the walls came down in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s, the Christian West saw an evangelistic opportunity. It was nothing short of the great Oklahoma land rush for proselytizers. Bibles were placed into the proverbial Conestoga wagon and the race was on. Western Christians tossed Bibles indiscriminately at Russia’s Orthodox community, a group that had received the Word about 1,000 years earlier! The Orthodox felt threatened, and predictably they pushed back: in partnership with the Russian government and the Islamic faith, they fashioned a new religious law in 1997 that tore up the welcome mat for many Western missionaries and increased the potential for Christian persecution within the country.

Finally, a faith “all about me” is a superficial faith, at best narcissistic, at worst privatized to the point of irrelevancy. Highly individualistic faith is rarely incarnated in culturally appropriate

ways, and never adds to sustainable solutions in difficult contexts. We need to integrate the best of our holistic faith with the intricacies of a given culture—not as compromise or spiritual syncretism, but in a way that makes our faith more attractive. Culture, by definition, is pervasive and can be negatively so. Yet culture should not be summarily dismissed as the corrupt realm of “worldly” affairs. It is the rich particularities of human cultures that provide the context for faith, societal boundaries, and the environment in which faith is exercised. Without cultural engagement “faith” becomes totally personalized, a mere hobby or a form of therapy — or, perhaps worst of all, a kind of special-interest politics. Faith that isn’t incarnated authentically in a cultural context is a selfish faith, which makes it difficult for others to relate to and which precludes the opportunity for a larger impact.

The bottom line is this. A Christian message that isn’t Kingdom focused isn’t the full Christian message at all. If it is “all about me”, Jesus can still be my Savior, but he never becomes my Lord. A partial Gospel, a truncated message, is presented to the world. Make no mistake, a partial Gospel is not benign. It is a counterfeit that is unworthy of the persecution it often unwittingly exacerbates.

Motivation

Getting the gospel message right is therefore obviously important, but we must also probe deeper to consider our underlying *motivation* for sharing the message. Why do we really care? What is our motivation?

Faithfulness is certainly part of the answer. We want to be faithful to the whole Gospel. By extension, we want to avoid merely “a form of godliness, denying the power thereof” (2 Ti 3:5). We wish to preclude the wishy-washy state of luke-warmness, a condition that we are graphically reminded gets “vomited out of the mouth” (Re 3:16) of a holy God. More positively, the richness of a holistic Gospel is infinitely more attractive than a counterfeit that only dissipates the strength of the original message.

There is also an anthropological dimension to missionary motivations. When a person or group of people is evangelized and experiences the joy of conversion, they naturally want to share that same joyful experience with others. How we receive the faith determines, to a large degree, how we share the faith. This can be good, but also carries risks if the convert-turned-evangelizer uses his or her own experience to form cookie-cutter expectations. Nations, for example, often evangelize other nations as a function of how they were evangelized. Should we be surprised when 30 Filipino Christians are thrown into a Saudi jail for throwing Bibles when such tactics can be traced to the influence of Western missions in the Philippines? Unfortunately the answer is “no.” Good intentions are not enough; it may take generations for faulty mission seeds to be leached from foreign soil. By contrast, a holistic faith, based in love and presented through the prism of the Lordship of Jesus Christ, (including the enabling ability of a Sovereign to dispense such traits as forgiveness, mercy, justice, grace and peace) will demonstrate a positive staying power for generations to come.

We are also motivated (or at least *should* be motivated) by the first rule of any global engagement: do no harm. One of the more frequent ways we can harm the Church, for example, is to stay too long. The country of Laos in Southeast Asia illustrates the point. On the one hand, Laos has been influenced positively by the historic presence of foreign missionaries. Their stories reflect courage, perseverance, and faithfulness in the face of incredible dangers. Literally, the seeds of the Laotian church have sprung from the blood of martyrs. Today there is an indigenous Church that has been tried and tested and “the gates of hell have not prevailed” (Mt 16:18).

On the other hand, there are also problems. While some of these problems are internal² (for example, different ethnic and ecclesial bodies vying for institutional control), some issues are unambiguously related to foreign influence. One of the most significant and insidious is secretiveness—a tendency to keep faith underground encouraged by “tentmakers” from the outside, missionaries in disguise. Interestingly, government officials almost always know who these missionaries are and where they operate. Such officials are often offended by the false

² These issues must be solved but the solutions need to come from within. Outsiders cannot impose solutions. That would be unworkable and unacceptable.

“cover” of these ministries. There may come a time when this element is forced to leave Laos. This will bring the inevitable cries of persecution from the international community, and a still nascent, indigenous church will feel more fragile and alone. The indigenous church has made great strides in numbers, visibility, and legal protection. We need to keep faith with this now very public member of the Body of Christ, and avoid the unnecessarily secretive nature of an imported religion. If we fail to do so, we may irreparably harm the church.

Methodology

Ultimately, then, if we are to follow Jesus’ directive to be innocent and shrewd at the same time, we need to be holistic and nuanced about our *message* and *motivation*. Running through all these considerations, however, is a third “M”—*methodology*. My thesis is this: bad methodology will undermine a good message and a sincere motivation every time. Now more than ever, the Church needs to take a fresh look at the issues and candidly assess methodologies of evangelism. There is an urgent need for sophisticated methodologies that ensure the message endures yet minimize unnecessary persecution.

In this regard, the place to begin is with the incarnational model of Christ himself. How well we mirror that model will determine our effectiveness as Christ’s agents in the world today. First and foremost, his was a ministry of presence. “The Word became flesh and *dwelled among us*” (John 1:14, emphasis added). Literally, he “pitched his tent” with the people. Very little of importance gets properly shared at a distance.

In intimate proximity—in relationship—our own lives get to be revealed. We will be living testimonies to the message we are sharing. This is especially important in some parts of the world today, where verbal proclamation is precluded. In such contexts the worth of the Gospel will have to be established before the truth of that Gospel can emerge. In some closed countries we need to live our lives in such a way that our behavior provokes the questions for which Christ is the answer. This is the corollary to the famous quote from St. Francis of Assisi: “Preach the Gospel always. If necessary, use words.”

This is not to suggest, of course, abandoning verbal proclamation of the Gospel. Far from it. As Jesus explained to John's disciples, the Gospel needs to be *both* seen and heard. There will always be a role for verbal proclamation. Preaching, teaching, discipling are all critical components of the process of evangelism. The point is that none can effectively be done at a distance.

Christian evangelism should, where possible, walk through the front door. We need to be clear with authorities, both government and church, as to how we can help and what we will do. Like Jesus, we need to be crystal clear concerning our identity. At World Vision, for example, we would explain our various humanitarian interventions, our areas of expertise, but we always followed by saying, "if you want our *best* product...we will need to work with the church."

An effective model of evangelism will always maintain the highest level of respect for the people in a country. At the Institute for Global Engagement, our mantra for this behavior is "to know your own faith at its deepest and richest best and enough about your neighbor's in order to show it respect." Mere tolerance is not enough. "Tolerance" inevitably will take us to a lower common denominator— forbearance but not necessarily equality. "Respect", on the other hand, keeps the emphasis on the King, in whose image all of us were made. This we can celebrate as our common humanity, and respect helps to get us there.

An incarnational model also calls on common sense for implementation. Put differently, this is the virtue of shrewdness that Jesus explicitly invokes in Mt 10:16. In addition to modeling the sensitivity, compassion, humility, and gentleness of the dove, we also need to be shrewd as the snake, which is to say, streetwise, practical, and pragmatic.

When I was in the State Department there was a Western missionary couple briefly put in jail in Laos. Their "crime"?—criticizing the government. While attempting to teach about the access we have to a holy God, the missionaries made a comparison between the freedom we enjoy through Christ and the difficulty Laotian Christians had in meeting the Lao Prime Minister. An innocent enough comparison, perhaps, but not very shrewd. The authorities reacted to criticism

of their government and the missionaries were quickly deported. But the deportation was not the most significant ramification, for 13 Laotian Christians who were at the meeting with the missionaries would spend the next year in jail. Again, poor methodology and persecution are more closely related than is popularly understood.

Finally, an incarnational approach to evangelism will always mean that we “bear witness to hope” (I Peter 3:15). In fact, this should be our core competency as Christians. Hope, of course, is future-oriented, but it is always made more real when we see tangible action today that points with credibility to the possibility of a better tomorrow.

In the darkest days of the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem, Jeremiah was asked by God to go out and buy a piece of real estate—complete with witnesses, a deed, and monies exchanged (Jer 32:6-15). A tangible act and one that seemingly made no sense. But in 70 years, as God reminds Jeremiah, a captive people would be set free and returned to the land, rebuilding homes and reconstituting vineyards. Shelter and food; there is nothing more tangible, and Jeremiah’s purchase of land was designed to provide a beacon of hope during the long years of captivity.

My father, at the age of 75, planted a number of very small fruit trees. “What an optimist,” I said to him, somewhat mockingly. Dad passed away a few years ago, and now when I return to the old homestead, I have an option. I can go to the grassy cemetery on top of the hill and brood over his grave, or I can eat the fruit of his trees and reflect on a man who knew a great deal about hope.

Our King understood the role of hope. The announcement of the reign of God by the incarnate Son of God was a tangible act in the present. The Kingdom and the King had come. And someday he is coming back! The “already and the not yet” will ultimately become one. In the meantime, our hopes for the future are credible and legitimate given what has already been done. And while we await his return, we can say on this day that God is *still* sovereign, the grave is still empty, and the gates of hell have not prevailed against his Church. We not only have a secure future, we have elevated the most attractive component of our faith, a faith that works in the hard places, today.

Let me conclude this talk by quoting from a Chinese house church leader as he responded to Western Bible smugglers who came to China to saturate various villages with the scriptures as a means of direct evangelism—another variation of “punt, pass, and kick,” using a Bible!

The smugglers “bomb” a town in China during the night with scriptures, stuffing tracts into bicycle baskets and mail boxes so that, in the words of the smugglers, “when the people woke up the next morning, there was Jesus everywhere.”

The Christian leader goes on with some passion to contradict this assumption.

No, Jesus was not everywhere; because Jesus is not a book... the Bible is not Jesus. There must be a context to make sense of the Bible; otherwise it can cause heresy and heartache.

Then the language gets very direct as he addresses the repercussions that followed from one of these “Bible bombardments.”

The police realize that this is not the work of local Chinese Christians—they would not be this stupid. So they round up all the foreign Christians they know—many of them will be teachers or businessmen. They assume these believers are the ones responsible. They harass them and on some cases...deport them.

The Chinese leader then suggests an alternative methodology, and this is key:

If you really want to spread Jesus, then come and spread the Gospel his way—live here, learn Chinese, love the people, incarnate into the culture as Christ incarnated himself into humanity.

And then, speaking to the tremendous interest in spirituality in China, our leader gives a caution:

Like all kinds of organic growth, you can't hurry it. People take time to grow up as Christians. There is no fast track. There is no technology to speed up discipleship, and no quick-fix method.

Our leader's final comment cuts right to the heart of the issue, and should be the watchwords of all our discussion about proselytism and persecution:

I want to suggest to those brothers and sisters [the Bible smugglers], you might be smuggling for yourselves, not for Jesus. Be careful your desire to smuggle is not merely a wish to have an adventure, to be James Bond for Jesus. Jesus does not need James Bond. He needs servants.

He just as well might have said, "It is not about you." We need to be servants, humble stewards of the *Good News* entrusted to us. Our Lord will most certainly continue to be sovereign. And therein lies our hope for a future that avoids unnecessary and counterproductive persecution while bringing honor to his growing Kingdom.