

Thinking of Those in Prison Number 15

“Remember the prisoners as if chained with them- those who are mistreated- since you yourselves are in the body also.” -Hebrews 13:3

Recently I downloaded and read the Annual Report of the United States Commission on Religious Freedom, May 2005. Every year the commission recommends to the State Department Countries of Particular Concern in the area of Human Rights. I have listed them below, along with information added from the CIA World Fact Book and the 2001 Operation World Prayer Guide.

| CPC's: | Government: | Majority Religion: |
|---------------|------------------------|--|
| Burma | Military Junta | 89 % Buddhist |
| China | Communist | 50 % Nonreligious* |
| North Korea | Communist Dictatorship | 64 % Nonreligious* |
| Eritrea | Transitional | 48 % Muslim*/ 47 % Orthodox Christian* |
| Iran | Theocratic Republic | 98 % Muslim (Mostly Shi'a) |
| Saudi Arabia | Monarchy | 99 % Muslim (Mostly Wahhabi Sunni) |
| Sudan | Authoritarian Regime | 70 % Muslim (Mostly Sunni) |
| Vietnam | Communist | 81 % Nonreligious |
| Pakistan | Federal Republic | 97 % Muslim (Mostly Sunni) |
| Turkmenistan | Authoritarian Republic | 89 % Muslim |
| Uzbekistan | Authoritarian Republic | 88 % Muslim (Mostly Sunni) |

*Taken from 2001 Operation World

When I read the Annual Report, I was saddened at the religious persecution happening around the world. As a Baptist Pastor it's important for me to say that I am not just saddened about the persecution of Christians in particular, but for all of those who are persecuted physically for having and sharing ideas different than the ones promoted by the government or its allies.

I believe the world is a better place when people who have strong faith have the freedom to discuss and promote those beliefs with others. Converts to all religions should be won through the use of words, not the use of weapons. In most of the countries above citizens simply do not have freedom of religion in any meaningful sense. Insecure leaders try to keep people believing as they do by physical coercion rather than meaningful conversation.

Although the majority of the persecution happening around the world right now is not done by professing Christians, history has often shown that when there has been a state affiliated church, persecution of dissenters has followed. Thank God for the other reformation in Europe: I speak of the radical reformers who insisted that churches should not be tied to the state and should return to the simple principles of the early church. Among them were Mennonites, Brethren, and later Baptists who withstood persecution by Catholic and Protestant state churches alike simply for following their faith.

Thank God for our own first amendment in America; it guaranteed our own freedom to worship according to conscience, not state coercion. That concern for freedom of religion has become the model the world would do well to follow. Many of us are not big fans of the American Civil Liberties Union, but we must always be big fans of civil liberties!

Every day instances of religious persecution are happening around the world. Take the time to educate yourself about it. Download the report I mentioned above. On our website, www.whbc.net, we help Christians obey Hebrews 13:3 to remember their Christian friends imprisoned for their faith. On the bottom left of the front page, we give updated information about the persecuted church around the world so believers can pray for them! It has become one of my favorite parts of our church web site!

That brings me back to Prison Number 15. According to the Annual Report, there are as many as 6,000 Christians imprisoned for their faith in one North Korean prison alone. When I ponder what they must be going through it really gives me perspective on the things I face. Please join me in praying for them to remain strong in their faith, and to be comforted in their fellowship with the Lord and with one another. And for God's grace to abound in their midst!

Danny Campbell <><