

# Cornerstone Forum

*A Conversation on Religious Freedom and Its Social Implications*

No. 342. May 27, 2026

## Familiar Themes in Early Church Responses to Persecution

Miles Windsor

*Director of Strategic Campaigns, International Strategies, at the Religious Freedom Institute*

*This is the fourth in a seven-part article series based on a paper the author submitted for a Masters of Religion (MRel) programme in Middle East and North Africa Studies with the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary in Beirut entitled "Analysis of and Applications from the Writings of Tertullian about Persecution for Today."*

\*\*\*

Christians reflecting on persecution often find that many of the moral and theological tensions they wrestle with today were already present in the earliest generations of the Church. Questions about suffering, martyrdom, obedience to authority, and the proper response to enemies were debated long before the modern era. In the writings of Tertullian and his contemporaries, we encounter a Church grappling with these challenges in real time. Their reflections unveil familiar themes: the paradox of joy in suffering, the dangers of seeking martyrdom, the radical call to love persecutors, and the practical responsibility to care for suffering believers. An examination of these themes reveals how the early Christian response to persecution continues to shape the thinking and practice of the Church today.

There are a number of resonant ideas found within our source materials for modern Christian readers with an interest in, and an understanding of, the theological tensions associated with persecution. Regarding one such theme, Tertullian addresses the suggestion that Christians, if they so rejoice in their sufferings, should simply accept their treatment with gladness or gratitude to their persecutors. Following on from a section in the Apology in which he argues that those who seek to persecute Christians are self-defeating because it only leads to joy in suffering, "the very thing of our own choice", Tertullian anticipates a potential rejoinder. He imagines the reply of his audience, "You ought rather to be grateful to us for giving you the sufferings you want." In his pre-emptive response it would seem as though he wished to find a refutation to that argument, though what he presents is not his most convincing rhetoric. The line of his argument, in summary, is that Christians do not want to suffer, nevertheless when they are persecuted, they don't shrink from that calling and obtain

the victory, “the glory of pleasing God, and the spoil of life eternal... Therefore, we conquer in dying; we go forth victorious at the very time we are subdued.”[1]

There is, perhaps, more context to Tertullian’s comments around this point than we might initially observe, as it was not an uncommon phenomenon in the Church of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries for Christians to actively seek martyrdom. This act of self-sought persecution is referred to as ‘Voluntary Martyrdom’ in modern scholarship. Candida Moss defined voluntary martyrdom as “the bringing about of martyrdom either by presenting oneself to authorities or by the unsolicited disclosure of one’s Christian identity.”[2] Alan Vincelette estimated that 12 percent of martyrdoms during the Patristic Era fell into the category of voluntary martyrdoms, though his assessment is a dramatic downward revision of the estimates offered by historian Geoffrey de Ste. Croix who argued that voluntary martyrdoms represented around half of martyrdoms from the Early Church.[3] Vincelette presents a coherent and convincing case that the definition earlier historians applied for voluntary martyrdom was excessively broad.

The distinction between voluntary martyrdom and ‘authentic martyrdom’ was clearly a live topic in the North African Church at the time Tertullian was writing. Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-c. 215), the theologian who founded the Catechetical School at Alexandria, and a Church Father venerated by a number of Christian denominations, wrote in his *Stromata* (Miscellanies) perhaps only three or four years after Tertullian produced the Apology. In *Stromata*, Clement denounced “those [purported Christians] who have rushed on death” who he says “banish themselves without being martyrs” and, not knowing God, “give themselves up to a vain death, as the Gymnosophists of the Indians to useless fire.”[4]

Clement references the Book of Matthew 10:23 in an instruction to flee from persecution not “to avoid death, as if in dread of it” but so as not to be “the authors nor abettors of evil to any one, either to ourselves or the persecutor and murderer.” Clement reasons that the individual who presents himself for capture “becomes an accomplice in the crime of the persecutor.”[5]

About 50 years after Tertullian wrote the Apology, Cyprian, the Bishop of Carthage, faced persecution in that city. Writing to Carthaginian Christians, Bishop Cyprian explained that his initial evasion from capture was by no means to resist persecution at all costs, asserting that he expected and preferred to face his martyrdom in the city of Carthage rather than elsewhere. He instructed those under his spiritual care on how they should approach persecution, stating that “...according to the discipline of the commandments of the Lord which you have always received from me . . . keep peace and tranquillity, nor should any of you stir up some trouble for the brothers or offer yourselves to the gentiles voluntarily (*ultra se gentilibus offerat*). [Yet] when apprehended and delivered up you should speak.”[6]

This seems to be the prevailing wisdom from some of the most prominent Christian leaders in North Africa at that time, that Christians should not seek to bring persecution and martyrdom upon themselves through provocation of the authorities or their community, but should they be captured and questioned about their Christian faith, they should not shrink from proclaiming the Truth and associating with Christ. Whilst attitudes towards persecution will differ throughout the global Body of Christ to this day, the Scriptural and rational stance of these Church Fathers would certainly be commonly recognised and considered orthodox today.

Similar teachings are found in the Catechetical School of Alexandria, under the leadership of Clement of Alexandria. In his *Stromata* (c.200) Clement complains that some heretics, having a cowardly love of life, redefine martyrdom as simply having knowledge of the true God, in order to denounce those who confess to being Christians and are hence put to death as being self-murderers and guilty of suicide. At the opposite end of the spectrum, says Clement, are those who eagerly hand themselves over to authorities, thereby showing hatred for the Creator and not preserving the mark of an authentic martyrdom.[7]

### **Love and Prayer for Persecutors**

The counter-intuitive Christian response to “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” is a timeless principle drawn from Christ’s teachings (Matthew 5:44, Luke 6:27-28). It is a way in which Christians are distinct from the world and bear witness to Christ by following His example. Tertullian makes clear that these are principles at work in the responses of Christians in 3<sup>rd</sup> Century Carthage.

Tertullian demonstrates the comparative virtue of Christianity and its adherents, and the cruel absurdity of persecuting them as though they were dangerous enemies. He quotes the aforementioned text in the Book of Matthew, stating that, “This is the rule of our faith, that we love those who hate us, and that we beseech God to bless those who afflict us.” Drawing further from chapter six in the Book of Luke, Tertullian makes the point that “All men love those who love them, Christians alone those who hate them.”[8]

Tertullian makes the point that those who are passing judgement on his fellow believers are doing so on the basis of false assumptions, in a state of ignorance. He calls on the Church’s persecutors to investigate the Christian Scriptures, encouraging them to, “Learn from them [our sacred books] that a large benevolence is enjoined upon us, even so far as to supplicate God for our enemies, and to beseech blessings on our persecutors.”[9] Making clear that Christians are not a rebellious sect, seeking to undermine the State, he discloses the prayers of the Christians “for the emperors, their ministers and for all in authority, for the welfare of the world, for the prevalence of peace, for the delay of the final consummation.”[10]

In these insights we find commonality between the Early Church and churches around the world today that likewise offer prayers for those in authority, praying for their persecuted spiritual kinfolk along with the persecutors. In so doing they are obeying God's instruction in the Scriptures and modelling Christ.

### **Practical Support for Persecuted Christians**

An additional characteristic that has lasted since the time of the Early Church to the present day is the importance of Christian provision for poor and oppressed brothers and sisters in the Faith. Perhaps this is obvious and unsurprising given that God is clear in the Scriptures that this should be a mark of His people. However, it is still worthwhile to find inspiration in the example of Christians in the earliest centuries, often themselves living under the threat of persecution. Explaining the voluntary nature of the church's giving, Tertullian writes that, "if there happen to be any in the mines, or banished to the islands, or shut up in the prisons, for nothing but their fidelity to the cause of God's Church, they become the nurslings of their confession." [11]

There are hints at this fraternal care in the account of the Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas. In the section in which Perpetua writes of her prison experience, she states that Tertius and Pomponius, church deacons who were not amongst the imprisoned, "who were ministering to us, settled on a bribe that we might be sent for a few hours into a better part of the prison to refresh ourselves." [12]

Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage during the mid-3<sup>rd</sup> Century, references care for persecuted brethren on several occasions in his letters. In his letter (12) to the priests and deacons, he encourages them that, "every attention is to be given to those who have confessed the Lord with a glorious voice and have been put in prison... that nothing be wanting for the care of those to whom nothing is wanting in glory." [13]

Not just a man of words but of actions too, Cyprian raised one hundred thousand sesterces from members of his Christian community, and sent the gift to Numidian clergy to redeem Christian captives from their slavery in the mines. From his epistles one can tell how steeped Cyprian is in the Scriptures. He relates in his letter (62) to the Numidian bishops (Januarius, Maximus, Proculus, Victor, Modianus, Nemesianus, Nampulus, and Honoratus) the deep sorrow and compassion they felt for the Christians enduring suffering as captive slaves in the Numidian mines and the prompt, free and generous collection of funds that followed. He writes, "For since the Lord in His Gospel says, 'I was sick and you visited me,' with how much greater reward for our work will He say: 'I was captive and you redeemed me.'" [14]

The tradition of fraternal Christian aid for those suffering persecution continues to this day, no doubt in large part because of the Biblical instruction to do so. Cyprian referenced Matthew 25:34-36 to qualify the generous response of the Carthaginian Believers to the plight of their

Numidian brethren. There are a variety of other passages that can and have been drawn upon to ground financial assistance to Christians with Scriptural foundations.

In the modern era, Christian charities such as Open Doors, Release International, Voice of the Martyrs, and International Christian Concern have a heavy focus on providing practical and financial support to persecuted Christians. These similarly explain their motivation referencing Scripture. Open Doors points to 1 Corinthians 12:26, insisting that as the Body of Christ we should care what happens to all the different parts of that body.[15] Release International references the Book of Hebrews 13:3 and the call to “remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.”[16]

In a direct parallel with the charitable support offered by Cyprian and his church, Barnabas Aid[17] and Global Christian Relief[18] have invested their supporters’ money in redeeming large numbers of Pakistani Christians enslaved in bonded labour, working in brick kilns.

The provision of aid is a well-established and entirely Biblical form of support to persecuted Christians. It is a vital service to suffering Believers, their families and communities, and it is not an activity that anyone would want to criticise or see diminished. The one question that could be raised, in a context in which donors are understandably eager to link their giving to concrete outcomes, a return on their investment, is whether direct aid as a response to persecution is adopted as a method, wittingly or unwitting, because it is significantly simpler to present measurable outcomes over shorter timeframes to donors. It is more straightforward to justify dollars converted to food parcels or even individuals redeemed from slavery, than to seek support for advocacy or other strategic efforts. The latter, while often designed to address the underlying systemic issues driving persecution to improve the religious freedom of Christians, is far harder to quantify with ‘deliverables’ and might not bear fruit for many years. It is important that attention, and funding, should also be channelled to worthwhile and strategic efforts to reduce persecution with the aim of achieving sustainable, long-lasting peace and justice, and freedom for the proclamation of the Gospel.

In the next article, we get to the most widely quoted, or misquoted, phrase from Tertullian’s writings, “*the blood of Christians is seed.*” We will investigate context and consider the validity of this statement and its relevance for today.

---

[1] Tertullian, *The Apology*, 81.

[2] Candida R. Moss, ‘The Discourse of Voluntary Martyrdom: Ancient and Modern’, *Church History* 81, no. 3 (2012): 532.

[3] Alan Vincelette, ‘On the Frequency of Voluntary Martyrdom in the Patristic Era’, *The Journal of Theological Studies*, 70, no. 2 (2019): 652.

[4] Peter Thompson, trans., *The Stromata of Clement of Alexandria*, vol. 4 (n.d.), sect. 4.

[5] Thompson, *The Stromata of Clement of Alexandria*, vol. 4, sect. 10.

- [6] Vincelette, 'On the Frequency of Voluntary Martyrdom in the Patristic Era', 673.
- [7] Thompson, *The Stromata of Clement of Alexandria*, 4:675.
- [8] Tertullian, *The Address of Q. Sept. Tertullian to Scapula Tertullus, Proconsul of Africa*.
- [9] Tertullian, *The Apology*, 55.
- [10] Tertullian, *The Apology*, 63.
- [11] Tertullian, *The Apology*, 64.
- [12] L Stephanie Cobb, ed., *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas in Late Antiquity*, trans. L Stephanie Cobb and Andrew S Jacobs (University of California Press, 2021), 25.
- [13] Saint Cyprian of Carthage and Sister Rose Bernard Donna, *Letters (1-81)*, The Fathers of the Church (Catholic University of America Press, n.d.), 51:34.
- [14] Saint Cyprian of Carthage and Donna, *Letters (1-81)*, 51:201.
- [15] 'Open Doors International', Charity website, *Values and Purpose*, n.d., <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/about/statement-faith/>.
- [16] 'Release International', Charity website, *Home Page*, n.d., <https://releaseinternational.org/>.
- [17] 'Easter Appeal 2025: Release Christian Families from Bonded Labour', Charity website, *Barnabas Aid*, n.d., <https://www.barnabasaid.org/gb/latest-needs/easter-appeal-2025-release-christian-families-from-bonded-labour/>.
- [18] Tobin Perry, 'Global Christian Relief', Charity website, *200 Families Freed: Your Generosity Doubled the Impact*, 30 September 2025, <https://globalchristianrelief.org/stories/pakistan-200-families-freed/>.

*Miles Windsor serves as Director of Strategic Campaigns, International Strategies, at the Religious Freedom Institute. The article series is based on a paper that Windsor submitted for his Masters of Religion (MRel) programme in Middle East and North Africa Studies, with the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary (ABTS Lebanon) in Beirut entitled "Analysis of and Applications from the Writings of Tertullian about Persecution for Today." The original paper focused on the writings of Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus (Tertullian of Carthage), identifying parallels between historic and contemporary persecution experiences and responses, with analysis.*



All views and opinions presented in this essay are solely those of the author and publication on Cornerstone does not represent an endorsement or agreement from the Religious Freedom Institute or its leadership.

**Permanent Link:**

<https://religiousfreedominstitute.org/familiar-themes-in-early-church-responses-to-persecution/>

The Religious Freedom Institute (RFI) is committed to achieving broad acceptance of religious liberty as a fundamental human right, a source of individual and social flourishing, the cornerstone of a successful society, and a driver of national and international security

**Religious Freedom Institute**  
2011 Pennsylvania Ave. NW | Suite 300  
Washington, D.C. 20006  
202.838.7734 | [rfi.org](https://rfi.org)