



MIDDLE EAST Reflections



Algerian believers worship outside their locked church, 2021

CHURCH CLOSURES HOW TO RESPOND?

The enclosed Middle East Briefing includes the good news that Algeria's Association of Protestant Churches (EPA) has regained the use of one of its buildings. But since 2017 the denomination has seen more than a third of its churches closed by the authorities, and 16 buildings remain sealed to this day.

The Algerian government requires Christian worship to be conducted only in buildings approved by a national commission. But this body never meets and has issued no permits to the association, even though all its churches have the correct paperwork. They are then accused of meeting without authorisation.

In the last 18 months many other governments, including our own, have required churches to shut their doors as part of COVID-19 restrictions. Their

reasons have been different from those given in Algeria, but the closures have confronted Western Christians with questions that our brothers and sisters in Algeria face every day. Should Christians accept government restrictions on our activities? Are there circumstances in which we should disobey them?

In 1 Peter 2:13-17 we read:

"Be subordinate because of the Lord to every created human structure, whether to the king as supreme, or whether to governors as those sent through him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do good; for this is God's will, by doing good to silence the ignorance of foolish people; as free people, but not having that freedom as a pretext for evil, but as slaves of God. Honour everyone; love the brotherhood; fear God; honour the king."

This text teaches its readers to submit themselves to the civil authorities within the God-given structure of the state. Although this subordination has the pragmatic purpose of silencing accusations of social and political subversion, it is also a divine command ("because of the Lord"; "the will of God"; "as slaves of God"). This implies that there is normally no conflict between the demands of the state and those of God.

These verses also define the role of the government as the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do good. Its purpose is apparently to establish stability and harmony by commending those who promote it and executing judgment on those who disrupt it. But although governments discharge these responsibilities imperfectly and may stray beyond them, there is no suggestion that this usually relieves believers of the duty to submit.

At the same time, the passage also seems to take for granted that the authority of God overrides that of human rulers. It juxtaposes the fear that is due (only) to God with the honour properly accorded to the emperor, indicating that God has the ultimate claim on the readers. So although the state will only rarely require its citizens to do what is contrary to God's will, if it does so (such as by telling them to worship Caesar), they must refuse.

So Christians in Algeria, and elsewhere where churches are closed, may need to ask themselves questions such as these:

(Continued overleaf)

RESPONDING TO PERSECUTION

A ROMANS 12 CHALLENGE

The latest SAT-7 Middle East Briefing includes disturbing news from Afghanistan and Iran. Twenty years after 9/11 we're seeing increased terrorism and dangers for human rights defenders, media workers and especially women and Christians. In Iran, there are increased fears about human rights following the election in June of former Chief Justice Ebrahim Raisi as president.

Article 18 of the United Nations states that "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion". However, this right is denied to many across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Depending on where they live, Christians – especially those who have come from the majority religious background – can face harassment, discrimination, isolation, imprisonment, violence and even death. These facts should cause us all to reflect and respond – at a government, organisation, church, community and individual level.

SAT-7 has a unique role to play, but the issues are complicated and sensitive. For example, how can we practically and theologically reconcile the desire to uphold Article 18 for everyone, when so many Christians face persecution?

Romans 12:9-21 applies to anyone facing the above challenges, but also to those grappling with the questions of whether to, or even how to, respond. We're told to be, "joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer." There's an even more challenging command to "bless those who persecute you" – a fruit of the Spirit witnessed frequently on SAT-7 programmes and through the powerful testimonies of faith and forgiveness we receive from Christians across the MENA.

As the numbers of Christians facing threats to live out their faith in freedom increases, their brothers and sisters in other parts of the world feel compelled to respond, pray, support, advocate or even campaign – to "share with the Lord's people who are in need", to "rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn". But the passage also cautions us to not be "overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." Connecting these verses with those from Matthew 22:39 and the command to, "Love your neighbour as yourself", makes it clear. We should also not tolerate anyone else being persecuted for their religion or beliefs, even if we do not agree with them, their faith or their world view. We are urged: "as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."

Whether we live in the West or across the Middle East or North Africa, Romans 12 is a challenge for us all. ■

CHURCH CLOSURES: HOW TO RESPOND?

(Continued from p 1)

- Does the forbidding of our corporate worship by the authorities contravene the will of God?
- How far is the worship and ordering of the churches out of bounds for the state?
- Can the biblical commands to meet (e.g. Hebrews 10:25) be overridden by other concerns (e.g. the good of the church or wider community, the churches' witness)? Or can they be adequately fulfilled without our all being in the same place at the same time? And in light of our answers, what should we then do?

But the passage also offers our Algerian brothers and sisters one encouragement in the face of oppression. Verse 16 describes the readers as "free people", which means that they have been set free by God from bondage to their previous lifestyle to live for Him as their master. This freedom is entirely independent of their political and social circumstances and renders these irrelevant to their status before God. So even under the worst of governments believers can – and do – rejoice in their freedom in Christ. ■

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40 testimonies of faith

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