

Preface

“For the times they are a-changin . . .”

Familiar words. Words penned over fifty years ago by musician Bob Dylan. The title song is one of the most iconic of the 1960s and became an anthem for many in that unsettled period of US history. Dylan called it “a song with a purpose.” It was meant to be more than entertaining. The tumultuous ‘60s included such cultural and societal tsunamis as the civil rights movement, the Vietnam war, and the sexual revolution.

Fast forward a little over fifty years later to this day and we all can understand the statement, “Oh, the times, they are still a a-changin!” Can I get an amen?

We can point to some obvious current flash points of change: the technological revolution, political chaos and pandemonium, or the battle over gender identity.

There is another social tsunami that has arisen in recent years, a massive change that is germane to our walk with Christ and our witness for Him. What is it? It is a wind of change that blows against the church in America, affecting all believers: increasing persecution of God’s people.

Wind. It affects all of our lives, some more than others. But make no mistake, wind, though invisible, is real. We may not see wind, but its effects are obvious.

Wind can be cataclysmic or catalytic, depending on how it blows and how it is utilized. Sometimes wind is out of control and devastating as in a hurricane or tornado. Other times, it is pleasant, useful, and welcomed, like a cool breeze in the summer.

Growing up on the west coast of Florida in the Tampa Bay area, I was keenly aware of the wind. I would regularly go sailing with my father and I learned to respect the wind. Wind is the power that fills the sails and propels the vessel through the water. In fact, a good strong wind (but not too strong) is preferable. However, in sailing, too much wind is undesirable. If the wind is blowing high enough, then it may be dangerous to raise the sails, or even be in the open water at all. Growing up on the Gulf Coast makes one attune to the fact that hurricanes are an annual threat with devastating winds.

It goes without saying, but tropical storm or hurricane conditions will keep a sailing vessel in a harbor. However, there are times when the weather, unpredictable as it sometimes can be, may sneak up and wreak unexpected havoc on a sailor in open water.

When I was around ten-years-old I was with my father and several other people on a morning sail on Tampa Bay. Tampa Bay can be volatile. It has earned the name, “Lightning Capital of the World.” Meteorologists measure lightning strikes around the world, and on a certain year, Tampa Bay has recorded more bolts than anywhere else on the planet.

On this fateful morning, we were sailing on his 39-foot Trimaran—a sailboat with one larger center hull and two outer smaller hulls. It was a very stable boat. Yet, on this occasion, the weather rocked it.

We only had the main sail up on that morning because the wind was quite brisk. Then, seemingly out of nowhere, there was a loud boom. In a split second, the mast, which holds the mainsail in place, was on the deck. Miraculously, no one on board was hurt. It turned out we hit, or rather, we were hit by a white squall.

A white squall is a sudden and violent windstorm not accompanied by the black clouds generally characteristic of a squall. On this morning, while there were some dark clouds in the sky, there was no sign of a squall line heading our way. This white squall came out of nowhere.

Wind. Mysterious in some ways, yet real and powerful. Depending on the situation and activity, the wind can work for or against us.

In the spiritual world, wind is an essential component in the Christian life. Jesus used the metaphor of wind to describe the Christian life:

“Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:5–8).

In the Hebrew, *spirit* is the word *ruach*, meaning wind. The *Holy Spirit* in Hebrew is *Ruach HaKadosh*—HaKadosh meaning *holy*,

So, in one sense, the literal movement of our Christian life is affected by the impact of the Spirit. This is exciting, powerful, and in some ways, mysterious. Yes, the impact of the Spirit is evident.

What also is evident is that in the spiritual realm there are winds that oppose our witness as followers of Jesus Christ. Those headwinds are opposition, hostility, and persecution.

For our purposes, I’ll wrap up those three terms into the word *persecution*.

What is persecution? Theologian Geoffrey Bromily’s definition is excellent: “Persecution is the suffering or pressure, mental, moral, or physical which authorities, individuals, or crowds inflict on others, especially for opinions or beliefs, with a view to their subjection by recantation, silencing, or, as a last resort, execution.”¹

¹ Paul Nyquist, *Prepare: Living Your faith in an Increasingly Hostile Culture*, (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2015), 16.

Pastor, author, and former President of Moody Bible Institute, Paul Nyquist, in his tremendous book, *Prepare—Living Your Faith in an Increasingly Hostile Culture*, states: “Persecution is the societal marginalization of believers with a view to eliminating their voice and influence.”²

Persecution has a goal: To silence our voice and eliminate our influence.

Persecution doesn’t want God’s people to follow the Lord, to walk in the light and proclaim the gospel. Persecution doesn’t want us to proclaim, “Jesus died for our sins according to the Scriptures, was buried and rose again on the third day according to the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3–4). And persecution doesn’t want us to communicate to people that through faith in Christ, they can be forgiven of their sins, be reconciled to God and experience the abundant and eternal life the Lord promised to those who trust in Him.

The winds of persecution are gaining strength here in the United States. And though not a white squall in a spiritual sense, it’s part of an overall storm that appears to be growing in intensity daily.

In our nation’s history, the church has undoubtedly been blessed in unique ways. Our nation was built upon Judeo-Christian values. This foundation has provided unique freedoms and privileges for God’s people. You might say the church in America operated for much of our history in an environment of smooth sailing.

And yet, today, at seemingly blinding speed, many rights, privileges, and blessings afforded believers in America are shrinking, or are being attacked and challenged.

Many Christians are dismayed by the changing spiritual current blowing across the land. What once was a tailwind that aided the effort of the American church in fulfilling the Great Commission has become a headwind that grows stronger.

In light of the increasing opposition, hostility, and persecution to believers in America today—to borrow a phrase from Francis Schaeffer—we ask, “How then shall we live?”³ And if we use the wind analogy we ask, “How then shall we sail into the gale?”

Do we shrink up, give up, or give in to those who would silence our Christian testimony? Or is there another response to that increasing tempest blowing against us?

This book is a simple response to the increasing spiritual headwinds we as the church in America are facing. Come aboard, and let’s take a ride, keeping our eyes on Jesus, the “captain of our salvation” (Hebrews 2:10).

² Nyquist, *Prepare—Living Your Faith in an Increasingly Hostile Culture*, 16.

³ Francis A. Schaefer, *How Then Shall We Live: The Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture*, (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1976) From the title.

Introduction

“Every knock is a boost,” boasted Moishe Rosen, the founder of the Jews for Jesus ministry, an organization with which I served for eight years. This memorable phrase is a reminder of the catalytic affect of persecution. When you’re a Jewish Christian serving as a missionary to your fellow Jews, telling them Jesus is the Messiah, God in the flesh, and Savior of the world, there will be a strong response. I had to be prepared for strong, sometimes negative reactions—many of which were unpleasant.

Each time I received a negative reaction, I reminded myself of Moishe Rosen’s words: “Every knock is a boost.” My experiences reminded me of the polarizing nature of the gospel message, the spiritual war I was in, and that I was on the right track. This is nothing new. It is part of the very fabric of church history. The testimonies of the Apostle Paul, the other apostles, and first century believers also evoked a strong response. There was opposition, hostility, and physical persecution. That hasn’t changed in 2000 years. This knocking of our faith need not be catastrophic. It can be a catalyst. A catalyst is a substance that brings about a reaction but is not changed in the process. That’s the scientific definition. In life, a catalyst is a person or event that changes things. That’s what the Gospel does. It changes things. It changes people.

The challenge for the American church is acknowledging the changing cultural tide of our country. Our nation is moving away from our Judeo-Christian moorings. For nearly 250 years, believers in the United States were able to live in freedom and with little persecution. Society supported and promoted biblical values. Today, our moral free fall from biblical values is, like a receding tide, moving us into uncharted waters.

A healthy perspective acknowledges that historically, persecution of Christians has been a global norm. While at the same time, the American church has inhabited a safe port of sorts. Today, with increasing speed, as storm clouds of persecution and winds of change blow, our anchor is being raised and we are drifting into the open ocean, experiencing more of what our brethren worldwide have experienced—persecution becoming the norm and less the exception.

You might say, the open ocean and exposure to all its dangerous elements, including the gale of persecution, is our new normal. We have left the safe harbor of our past and are entering a whole new season. And yet, God remains the same and the Great Commission is still our mandate.

So, how then shall we live?

For first century believers, persecution certainly was catalytic. It didn’t engulf them, it galvanized them; it unified them; it crystalized the importance of their mission; it focused them; and it motivated them—the spiritual war Jesus predicted had become a reality.

For example, when the believers were run out of Jerusalem as recorded in Acts 8, their forced move turned into a means of spreading the gospel. That knock served as a boost.

This book is about our response to the rising persecution against the American church. Our being knocked may be catalytic, not catastrophic, in our efforts to fulfill the Great Commission.

Personal Experience Of The Gale

A gale is a very strong wind. We've noted wind as it pertains to sailing and the spiritual realm. When we look at the present culture war we see a spiritual gale blowing directly against the church in America—a gale that seeks to discourage, dissuade, demean and diminish our witness.

I've experienced the gale in my faith journey, both personally and in Christian vocational ministry.

Being a Jewish believer in Jesus and the first Christian in my family, my father disowned me in 1992. I came to the Lord in late 1987, but I spent the first eighteen months as a “closet Christian.” It took that long to share my faith with my entire family.

The last two people I shared with during that season of life were my father and my paternal grandmother—his mom. Having shared my faith in Jesus with my dad, he told me that was fine. He even said he was happy for me. Then he told me to never share my faith with my grandmother.

Shortly thereafter, I did share my faith with her. And although she didn't understand, she was happy for me. This began a deterioration in my relationship with my father that culminated in him cutting off all contact with me. We never spoke again. He died in 2012.

I became a vocational missionary working in New York City from 2003-2009. I have experienced the sting of persecution, hostility, and opposition to my faith. Having shared my faith in Messiah Jesus on the streets of the Big Apple and other major cities around the world, I have been kicked, spit at, threatened and called every name in the book—even some names not in the book.

Even in my personal life, I have been shunned, avoided, and have felt the pressure to remain silent.

Gale Force Rising

For most of our nation's grand history, a nation built upon Judeo-Christian values, we've been rather insulated from the wind. It's been smooth sailing. But the winds of change have risen, and they are not friendly to the cause of Christ.

For context, here's a tremendous working definition of culture by Ifte Choudhury:

Culture is a way of life for a group of people—the behaviors, beliefs, values and symbols that they accept, generally, without thinking about them, and that are passed along by communication and imitation from one generation to the next.⁴

Simply put: a culture is how and why people do things. Culture is complex and includes all human actions and institutions, such as entertainment, the arts, education, religion, law, morality, technology, and economic activity. At the same time, while culture is complex, it's also dynamic and ever-changing.

This volume is not a study of culture or our culture wars specifically. If you're a believer in America, this cultural conflict between the secular and sacred (Christianity in particular) is evident. And with this simple, yet important understanding, we strive to learn how to be salt and light amid an increasingly corrupt and perverse generation. For as our culture moves away from a Judeo-Christian foundation, it becomes increasingly hostile to the church.

I don't know your Christian experience, but if you are living in America—you no doubt are aware of the persecution that is growing in intensity. The present gale blowing against our Christian witness began swirling in the tumultuous and turbulent 1960s.

These landmark Supreme Court decisions are illustrative of the growing gale assaulting the church:

- The attack against the Bible and prayer. The Supreme Court—in a series of three decisions in 1962 and 1963—removed the Bible and prayer from our public schools.
- The attack on life. The destructive *Roe v Wade* Supreme Court ruling in 1973, legalizing abortion, is responsible for the death of over 55 million human lives, while harming millions of women and men whose “choice” has caused death, regret, and shame.
- The attack on the family. The Supreme Court's decision to redefine marriage in 2015, made gay marriage the law of the land and placed it on the same footing as traditional marriage. The family is the fundamental building block of all human civilizations., and marriage—the marriage between a man and woman—is the foundation of the family.

Additionally, the gale is not only institutional, it's personal, as these recent headlines illustrate:

- “Air Force Veteran Faces A Court Martial For Opposing Gay Marriage,” John Hawkins; townhall.com; Sep 17, 2013
- “Court: Christian Baker Must Provide Wedding Cakes for Same-Sex Couples,” Todd Starnes, FoxNews.com; August 13, 2015
- “Christian Nurse Fired for Offering Prayer Before Surgery,” wnd.com Dec. 12, 2016

⁴ Ifte Choudhury, “Cultural Definition,” Texas A & M faculty website, quoted from *Prepare: Living Your Faith In An Increasingly Hostile Culture* by J. Paul Nyquist, 43.

James Emory White articulates well the gale that blows in America today:

Compared to the violence against Christians in many places around the world, the answer is no. Christians in America experience nothing compared to the persecution of Christians in such places as Nigeria, Iran, Pakistan, Egypt or Syria.

What is happening in America is an increasing hostility and intolerance toward Christian beliefs and values that many perceive to be an attack on religious freedom. In current American culture, you are free to be a Christian as long as you don't actually live out your faith, vote your faith, take a stand in relation to your faith, or believe others should embrace your faith.

In other words, it can be privately engaging, but must remain socially irrelevant.⁵

But there's more.

A real concern is the growing insistence that faith be private has now become a demand for faith to be compromised. It's not enough that your beliefs can't influence society; you must also embrace society's beliefs. As Jonah Goldberg noted in *USA Today*, the opposition to many Christian values has become an "if you're not with us, you're against us" mentality."⁶

In so many words, "Christians beware." In contrast, we need to be aware, awakened to, and enter this reality—being the salt and light that God calls us to be—in face of the gale.

In the last fifty plus years we could also highlight the rise of post-modernism, secularism, humanism, and in recent years a rise in what some call "militant atheism," a worldview that is ardent in its effort to stamp out all things religious, including Christianity.

Yes, the gale is growing in strength and the American church is standing directly in its crosshairs. This trend is troubling and discouraging, but it is our reality. And what do we do with such circumstances? Will we seek shelter or fight the good fight? Will we walk in fear or walk by faith?

Nothing New Under The Sun

Although the rising spiritual headwinds in America may appear relatively recent, the dynamic is nothing new for the church. In fact, Jesus taught His first followers they would experience the gale of opposition, persecution and hostility.

⁵ James Emory White, "Are Christians In America Under Attack?" by [christianity.com](http://www.christianity.com/white)—<http://www.christianity.com/christian-life/political-and-social-issues/are-christians-in-america-under-attack.html>, October, 2012

⁶ Jonah Goldberg, "Liberals are the True Aggressors in Culture Wars," *USA Today*, (February 6, 2012).

For example, He said, “Remember the word that I said to you, “The servant is not greater than his lord.” If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:20). The Lord also stated, “And you will be hated by everyone because of My name” (Luke 21:17).

Two-thousand years later, the church is still opposed by the world. Two-thousand years later, God is still moving mightily through His people. Yes, Jesus is building His church and “the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18).

In fact, headlines from the first century church would read like today’s, both negatively and positively.

Negative Headlines:

- “Believers Beaten and Threatened for Speaking the name of Jesus” (Acts 4).
- “Follower of Jesus stoned to death following public sermon” (Acts 7).
- “Christians kicked out of Jerusalem” (Acts 8).
- “Well-known Missionary On Trial For Evangelism Activities” (Acts 22-26).

Positive Headlines:

- “New Religious Movement Exploding Despite Intense Opposition” (Acts 9).
- “Jewish Sect Reaching Out To Gentiles With Message Of Faith, Hope, and Love” (Acts 11-15).
- “Jesus Followers Committed And United Amidst Persecution” (Acts 11).
- “Believer in Jesus says people’s salvation more important than His safety” (Acts 22-26).

Amidst the gale, Jesus’ words from the Sermon on the Mount did and still should greatly encourage His people: “Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matthew 5:11-12).

I would be remiss not to mention that the spiritual gale that opposes our Christian testimony is only part of the narrative—a challenging part. What we need to keep front and center in our minds is that we have the wind of the Holy Spirit, who propels us forward. So be encouraged.

When we walk by faith, we walk in the power of the Holy Spirit, and in Him is victory—“For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith” (1 John 5:4).

Ancient Example, Contemporary Application

This project flows from a series of weekly evangelistically-oriented, online devotions I wrote in 2015 and 2016. I took my inspiration directly from the book of Acts.

I undertook writing this book to encourage and inspire believers in the United States to fight the good fight of faith, specifically in our personal evangelistic efforts—by understanding and applying foundational principles found in the book of Acts.

Why Acts? First and foremost, because this powerful New Testament book chronicles the birth and expansion of the early church. As we'll see, for our first century brothers and sisters, following Jesus was difficult and dangerous. At the same time, this challenging context for ministry was not catastrophic. Rather, in many ways, it was catalytic. And this is the thesis for our brief study.

Acts is a historical book about early Christian missionary work. The key word in the book is *witness*, which is found twenty times. As such, the bent of this book leans toward our becoming effective witnesses as we press on in the faith into the gale. With this in mind, Acts 1:8 is perhaps the key verse from the entire book of Acts. And my hope is that through the power of the Holy Spirit, the Lord will use this book as a tool in growing your witness for His glory. This book is not academic—it's practical. The lessons elucidated herein are meant to be understood, internalized and applied to our daily witness.

And this book is certainly not exhaustive—we're only briefly touching upon twelve important principles I trust the Lord will use to inspire, instruct, and perhaps challenge you to be more intentional in your Christian walk, and in your personal witness to others.

This book will not chronicle the culture wars. There are many tremendous works on that topic written by people much smarter and more well-equipped than me. Rather, I hope you'll simply see our current context for ministry is not much different than it was for our first century brethren—the gale of persecution is blowing. Humanly speaking, they faced stormy waters. But the difficulty and challenges they faced were in many ways catalytic, not catastrophic.

Yes, our historical bubble here in America has burst to some degree. And humanly speaking, this is not desirable. Yet in the spiritual realm, it may be a catalyst for a healthy environment in a new season of growth for God's people. I pray we would grow—in trusting God, in trusting in each other, and becoming a more distinct light for Christ in the midst of an increasingly corrupt and perverse generation.

Yes, the gale is growing. The power of God's Spirit is also blowing. Still, we remember that "He who is in us is greater than he who is in the world" (1 John 4:4).

My hope is that these twelve lessons will provide instruction, inspiration and will help us grow, for "faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God" (Romans 10:17). Ultimately, I hope these lessons will encourage and equip you to be a more effective witness for Jesus. Sharing our faith is the one

thing we can't do in heaven. Additionally, I pray that this study will entice you into a deeper study of the book of Acts and the Word of God in general.

May this book be an encouragement, exhortation, inspiration, and a challenge to God's people here and elsewhere. May we see our emerging cultural context as an opportunity, not an obstacle. How? By walking by faith, not sight—while fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith.

I once heard someone say, "You don't choose your reality. You do choose to enter your reality."

May these lessons instruct and inspire us to faithfully enter our present reality and fulfill the Great Commission...for Jesus' glory and for the building of His church.