

See How Great a Flame Aspires

Charles Wesley (1707–1788)

See how great a flame aspires,
Kindled by a spark of grace.
Jesus' love the nations fires,
Sets the kingdoms on a blaze:
To bring fire on earth He came;
Kindled in some hearts it is;
O that all might catch the flame,
All partake the glorious bliss!

When He first the work begun,
Small and feeble was His day;
Now the word doth swiftly run;
Now it wins its widening way:
More and more it spread and grows,
Ever mighty to prevail;
Sin's strongholds it now o'erthrows,
Shakes the trembling gates of hell.

Sons of God, your Savior praise,
who the door hath opened wide;
He hath given the word of grace,
Jesus' word is glorified;
Jesus, mighty to redeem,
He alone the work hath wrought;
Worthy is the work of Him,
Him Who spake a world from naught.

Saw ye not the cloud arise,
Little as a human hand?
Now it spreads along the skies,
Hangs o'er all the thirsty land.
Lo! the promise of a shower
Drops already from above;
But the Lord will shortly pour
All the spirit of His love.



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ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

Missionary Martyrs: Are We Paying Too High a Price to Evangelize the World?

Jeff Straub

Two fresh missionary deaths have made the news in recent weeks. The first was the unexpected death of missionary Charles Trumann Wesco (1974–2018), an independent Baptist missionary from Indiana. Charles, a father of eight, was accidentally caught in the crossfire of civil unrest in Bamenda, Cameroon, having been in the hostile northern part of the country for less than two weeks. The shooting was accidental (in the providence of God) in that while Wesco was working in a potentially dangerous place, he joined an established missionary group that had had a gospel presence there for thirty years. The death, while lamentable, is the kind of hazard that countless missionaries since the New Testament era have encountered with the advance of the Christian message. The apostle Paul apparently found himself in similar situations on numerous occasions (1 Cor 11:26).

The second tragic death is more recent. John Allen Chau, a twenty-six-year-old graduate of Oral Roberts University, managed to obtain illegal passage to a remote part of India, North Sentinel Island, in the Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal. This is home to a small primitive tribe of people (with an estimated population of less than fifty) who still live in pre-Neolithic conditions and have no contact with the outside world. India has forbidden anyone from visiting the island, placing a five-nautical-mile restriction around it, partly out of concern for the survival of the tribe due to exposure to illnesses with which they have no natural immunity, and partly to preserve their way of life.

Chau felt the call of God to take the gospel to this unreached people group. He left a hand-written record of his contacts, including the life-threatening reception he received from the tribe. The last entry in his journal was dated November 16. The fisherman who helped him get to the island claims to have seen the locals burying a body on the beach the following day. Efforts by Indian authorities have thus far been unsuccessful at recovering his body, and it appears at the time of this writing that his remains may never be retrieved. Because of the primitive nature of the people and their forced isolation on the part of the Indian government, there are no plans, according to reports, for murder charges to be laid, even if the perpetrators could be identified.

Both of these deaths, while tragic from a human viewpoint, are a part of a growing roster of men and women who have paid the ultimate price for the advance of the gospel. Even as I write about these two men, I am reminded of one of the most well-known stories of missionary martyrdom, the deaths of the Auca five in January 1956—Jim Elliot, Nate Saint, Roger Youderian, Ed McCully, and Pete Fleming. Elizabeth Elliot's *Through Gates of Splendor*, which I read in my early years in Bible college, had a formative influence on my journey as I considered a life of service to Christ. Would God require me to make the ultimate sacrifice?

With these two current deaths so close together and apparently so similar, it behooves the Church to ponder the lives of these men and reflect on the sacrifices made for gospel advance. Is this kind of sacrifice really necessary? Wouldn't more have been gained for the cause of Christ if they had chosen different, less dangerous paths of service and lived out their earthly journeys in places where they could preach the gospel either unhindered or at least without the kind of physical dangers they knew they might face otherwise? Why run the risk of death when there is so much gospel need in less perilous places? Should the lives of these men serve as examples of personal dedication or as models of foolish choices?

There is no doubt that unbelievers and, sadly, some faint-hearted Christians, will argue that they gave their lives in vain and need not have made the choices they did. In Charles Wesco's case, he not only imperiled his own life but that of his wife Stephanie and their eight children by taking them to a part of Africa where civil unrest was a common occurrence. Surely, he could have found another place to serve Christ, some might argue.

As I have family in Zambia, in sub-Saharan east Africa, this story hits close to home. My oldest son Benjamin, his wife Amy, and all of my grandchildren (Simon, Isaac, Casper, and Ada Jane) are serving at the Central Africa Baptist College in Kitwe. Among the opportunities that Ben has had is teaching pastors in other countries (Malawi, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo). While they do not deliberately go into hostile areas, some of the spots have had a history of turmoil. In light of these two recent deaths, should I warn my son not to be foolish? To stay closer to "home" and to not take any unnecessary chances?

Of course, this is a tempting option. Who of us wants to hold the next missionary funeral? Rebecca and I gave our children to the Lord long ago and with that commitment came the possibility of one of our children laying down their life for Christ. Zambia is a fairly safe place, to be sure, but Africa itself has been known to be a difficult place at times in her history. Moreover, even if their country of residence is relatively free from civil unrest, there are any number of diseases and personal calamities that could befall them so far from "home."

How then should we view the lives and deaths of these two recent missionary martyrs—Charles and John? With gratitude to God for lives well-lived or with a sense of profound loss for lives lived in vain, or a little of both? For my part, I actually think that Charles Wesco's story and John Chau's story, while similar, are also strikingly different. That difference is worth exploring in another *Nick* essay next week. But for now, there is much to appreciate about these two brothers whom God in His sovereign plan allowed to come to the violent end that they experienced.

Much should be made of their dedication to Christ and their willingness to follow Him at great personal sacrifice. More importantly, much should be made of the Lord Jesus Christ, the King of kings and Lord of lords who left heaven's glory to die on a cross, one of the most violent of deaths, at the hands of wicked men, so that human redemption was not only possible but actually effected. In following Christ by laying down their lives, Charles and John did no more than follow the example of Jesus. Is the servant better than the master? Whatever else we can say about their lives and deaths, we can be profoundly grateful for this kind of dedication and sacrifice. They certainly aren't the first missionaries to perish in gospel advance, and most assuredly they will not be the last to be called upon to lay down their lives for the sake of Christ.

I can think of no human words more fitting than some of the final words of Jim Elliott, contained in his diary, recovered in the jungle of Ecuador: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." May God raise up many others to fill the void left by these servants of Christ. *Soli Deo Gloria!*



This essay is by Jeff Straub, Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
