

And the Lord said unto Cain, Where is Abel, thy brother? And he said, I know not: am I my brother's keeper? And he said, What hast thou done? The voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground (Gen. 4:9-10).

On September 26, 1997, Russian President Boris Yeltsin brought the curtain back down. With a single sweep of his pen, he consorted with the darkest elements in Russian society to snuff the lamp of religious freedom that had flickered tenuously since the fall of the Evil Empire.

The kisses were symbolic. Western media film clips showed Yeltsin and robed leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church exchanging embraces in celebration of the enactment of legislation designed to curtail religious freedom. The same TV sound bites carried evidence favoring the rationale for the decision by showing a group of shaven-headed cultists in bizarre apparel shaking strange objects and otherwise doing their thing on the streets of Moscow. We were supposed to get the message. Responsible religious leaders were ridding Russia of a religious plague. Henceforth, the church and its cohorts within the government will control who has access to the hearts, minds and souls of the Russian people.

For me, the act was hauntingly reminiscent of a scene that had taken place in the Middle East a few weeks earlier. There, before the dust had settled over the carnage left by Muslim suicide bombers in the streets of Jerusalem, Yasir Arafat was publicly planting kisses on the cheeks of the monsters from Hamas who had sanctioned the attacks. I recognize that the Russians were not celebrating successes by mad bombers. They were, however, dignifying death of another kind—the death of freedom to disseminate religious faith within the boundaries of Russia.

Wolves on the Loose

We can be assured that there will be an overabundance of sheep's clothing blanketing the "tough decisions" made by Yeltsin, Russian legislators and Orthodox clerics. And, yes, there will be apologists here in the West who will plead that Russia's rulers were only acting to protect their people from religious charlatans and self-promoting demigods. However, sheep's clothing notwithstanding, the wolves are on the loose, and those opponents of freedom and faith will interpret the decision as open season on those who take propagating their beliefs seriously.

To think that evangelical Christians in minority sects in Russia will cease and desist from their activities is not worthy of serious discussion. For them, it will mean only a return to the days when the wall was up and atheism was violently in fashion. These churches will be forced to go underground and continue their worship in places beyond the gaze of the self-appointed guardians of the Russian soul.

All of this says that serious issues have been raised about what the new era of religious protectionism will mean to Russian Christians and Jews. Has the wolf-like

Dolly, the new era sheep, been cloned into a kinder, gentler animal? Don't count on it.

Shame On Us

What has taken place in Russia is, at one and the same time, a warning and a wake-up call: a warning of what's ahead; a wake-up call to something we have paid scant attention to.

Evangelicals of this generation are faced with a serious charge, one that can no longer be ignored. The charge is the virtual silence of the church in view of the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of our brothers and sisters in what is becoming an international catastrophe. And it is not because the information is not available. It is.

Donald Hodel, President of the Christian Coalition, provides chilling statistics. "More than 160,000 Christians were martyred in 1996 in a monumental escalation of religious persecution while the United States looked the other way..."

It should be noted—no, strongly emphasized—that among the most passionate voices to be heard on the issue of Christian persecution thus far have been those of Jewish writers and commentators.

They may speak other languages or have skin of a different color, but believers who suffer in the Sudan, China or at the hands of Islamic fanatics in dozens of other settings are, after all, our next of kin in the faith. Thus, as surely as it was true in the case of Abel, their blood cries out before the face of the Lord. As certainly as it does, we can be sure that He will not hold us guiltless.

Today millions of people of faith around the world are being killed, tortured, raped, maimed, sold as slaves and more for no other reason than that they are Christians, Muslims, Jews or something else. In Sudan alone, 1.5 million Christians have been attacked.

Cain's response to the Lord's inquiry should be heard. Possessed by his own estimate of what was worthy to place before the Lord, and inflamed by his own sense of pride and prominence, he replied, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Gen. 4:9). He was.

But he never seemed to grasp that fact.

It is, I think, of little importance in the eyes of God whether we lift the instruments of destruction ourselves, as Cain did, or whether they are raised by those in places far removed from us. We are our brothers' keepers. May God help us to see our brothers' blood and hear their cries before other hands are lifted against us.

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