

Christians in Culture—

Redefining Martyrdom

Militant forms of Islam have proliferated around the world after a perceived “success” on 9/11/2001. Since then a great public relations coup has taken place. Major media outlets have changed the way most of us, including Christians, view martyrdom.

We should probably begin with a general definition and history of the term *martyrdom*. One who is a martyr is a “witness” or “one who testifies/gives testimony.” The word derives its meaning from the Greek verb *martyreo*—□“to bear witness.” The same meaning is attached to the Arabic word *shaheed*. Over the centuries, both Christianity and Islam have come to attach death as an element of most important significance to the concept of martyrdom. To be a martyr, we’ve come to believe, is to die for the sake of one’s faith.

These days, when we watch the news or read our newspapers and hear or see stories of martyrdom, it is usually associated with the cowardly act of murder/suicide. In militant Islam, to attach a bomb to one’s self and ignite it in the middle of a busy street or a crowded marketplace killing as many people as possible, including women and children, is “martyrdom”. I suppose, if it was the person’s Islamic faith that compelled them to do such a thing, technically one could say this was martyrdom: they gave testimony to their faith.

Contrast this to the story of Stephen in the book of *Acts* (see chapter 7). Stephen testified to Christ being the chosen Messiah. Those who rejected his message killed him with stones. Instead of returning hatred for hatred, fighting back, and killing as many people as he could before he took his last breath, Stephen actually prayed for their forgiveness. “Lord, Jesus do not hold this sin against them,” he cried. He did not die killing the self-declared enemies of Christ and His Church. He died emulating the sacrificial love of Christ on His cross. In doing so, he gave testimony to the One True Faith. The same can be said of virtually every other person that the Christian Church refers to as a martyr even up to the present day.

The next time you see or hear a news story that refers to someone who has committed murder/suicide as a “martyr”, remember Jesus on His cross and what a great contrast He presents. Also, remember Stephen, that you may always be reminded that for those who follow Jesus Christ, real martyrdom emulates His sacrificial love.

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May 2008