

About the Massacres in Turkey

\*A letter to the Global Church from The Protestant Church of Smyrna\*

Dear friends,

This past week has been filled with much sorrow. Many of you have heard by now of our devastating loss here in an event that took place in Malatya, a Turkish province 300 miles northeast of Antioch, the city where believers were first called Christians (Acts 11:26).

On Wednesday morning, April 18, 2007, 46 year old German missionary and father of three Tilman Geske prepared to go to his office, kissing his wife goodbye taking a moment to hug his son and give him the priceless memory, "Goodbye, son. I love you."

Tilman rented an office space from Zirve Publishing where he was preparing notes for the new Turkish Study Bible. Zirve was also the location of the Malatya Evangelist Church office. A ministry of the church, Zirve prints and distributes Christian literature to Malatya and nearby cities in Eastern Turkey. In another area of town, 35 year old Pastor Necati Aydin, father of two, said goodbye to his wife, leaving for the office as well. They had a morning Bible Study and prayer meeting that some other believers in town would also be attending. Ugur Yuksel likewise made his way to the Bible study.

None of these three men knew that what awaited them at the Bible study was the ultimate testing and application of their faith, which would conclude with their entrance into glory to receive their crown of righteousness from Christ and honor from all the saints awaiting them in the Lord's presence.

On the other side of town, ten young men all under 20 years old put into place final arrangements for their ultimate act of faith, living out their love for Allah and hatred of infidels who they felt undermined Islam. On Resurrection Sunday, five of these men had been to a by-invitation-only evangelistic service that Pastor Necati and his men had arranged at a hotel conference room in the city. The men were known to the believers as "seekers." No one knows what happened in the hearts of those men as they listened to the gospel. Were they touched by the Holy Spirit? Were they convicted of sin? Did they hear the gospel in their heart of hearts? Today we only have the beginning of their story.

These young men, one of whom is the son of a mayor in the Province of Malatya, are part of a tarikat, or a group of "faithful believers" in Islam. Tarikat membership is highly respected here; it's like a fraternity membership. In fact, it is said that no one can get into public office without membership in a tarikat. These young men all lived in the same dorm, all preparing for university entrance exams.

The young men got guns, breadknives, ropes and towels ready for their final act of service to Allah. They knew there would be a lot of blood. They arrived in time for the Bible Study, around 10 o'clock.

They arrived, and apparently the Bible Study began. Reportedly, after Necati read a chapter from the Bible the assault began. The boys tied Ugur, Necati, and Tilman's hands and feet to chairs and as they videoed their work on their cellphones, they tortured our brothers for almost three hours

\*\*\* [The following paragraph contains details of the torture—reader discretion advised]\*\*\*

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Tilman was stabbed 156 times, Necati 99 times and Ugur's stabs were too numerous to count. They were disemboweled, and their intestines sliced up in front of their eyes. They were emasculated and watched as those body parts were destroyed. Fingers were chopped off, their noses and mouths and anuses were sliced open. Possibly the worst part was watching as their brothers were likewise tortured. Finally, their throats were sliced from ear to ear, heads practically decapitated.

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Neighbors in workplaces near the print house said later they had heard yelling, but assumed the owners were having a domestic argument so they did not respond.

Meanwhile, another believer Gokhan and his wife had a leisurely morning. He slept in till 10, ate a long breakfast and finally around 12:30 he and his wife arrived at the office. The door was locked from the inside, and his key would not work. He phoned and though it had connection on his end he did not hear the phone ringing inside. He called cell phones of his brothers and finally Ugur answered his phone. "We are not at the office. Go to the hotel meeting. We are there. We will come there," he said cryptically. As Ugur spoke Gokhan heard in the telephone's background weeping and a strange snarling sound.

He phoned the police, and the nearest officer arrived in about five minutes. He pounded on the door, "Police, open up!" Initially the officer thought it was a domestic disturbance. At that point they heard another snarl and a gurgling moan. The police understood that sound as human suffering, prepared the clip in his gun and tried over and over again to burst through the door. One of the frightened assailants unlocked the door for the policeman, who entered to find a grisly scene. Tilman and Necati had been slaughtered, practically decapitated with their necks slit from ear to ear. Ugur's throat was likewise slit and he was barely alive.

Three assailants in front of the policeman dropped their weapons. Meanwhile Gokhan heard a sound of yelling in the street. Someone had fallen from their third story office. Running down, he found a man on the ground, whom he later recognized, named Emre Gunaydin. He had massive head trauma and, strangely, was snarling. He had tried to climb down the drainpipe to escape, and losing his balance had plummeted to the ground. It seems that he was the main leader of the attackers. Another assailant was found hiding on a lower balcony.

To untangle the web we need to back up six years. In April 2001, the National Security Council of Turkey (Milli Guvenlik Kurulu) began to consider evangelical Christians as a threat to national security, on equal footing as Al Quaida and PKK terrorism. Statements made in the press by political leaders, columnists and commentators have fueled a hatred against missionaries who they claim bribe young people to change their religion.

After that decision in 2001, attacks and threats on churches, pastors and Christians began. Bombings, physical attacks, verbal and written abuse are only some of the ways Christians are being targeted. Most significant is the use of media propaganda.

From December 2005, after having a long meeting regarding the Christian threat, the wife of Former Prime Minister Ecevit, historian Ilber Ortayli, Professor Hasan Unsal, Politician Ahmet Tan and writer/propogandist Aytunc Altindal, each in their own profession began a campaign to bring the public's attention to the looming threat of Christians who sought to "buy

their children's souls". Hidden cameras in churches have taken church service footage and used it sensationally to promote fear and antagonism toward Christianity.

In an official televised response from Ankara, the Interior Minister of Turkey smirked as he spoke of the attacks on our brothers. Amid public outrage and protests against the event and in favor of freedom of religion and freedom of thought, media and official comments ring with the same message, "We hope you have learned your lesson. We do not want Christians here."

It appears that this was an organized attack initiated by an unknown adult tarikat leader. As in the Hrant Dink murder in January 2007, and a Catholic priest Andrea Santoro in February 2006, minors are being used to commit religious murders because public sympathy for youth is strong and they face lower penalties than an adult convicted of the same crime. Even the parents of these children are in favor of the acts. The mother of the 16 year old boy who killed the Catholic priest Andrea Santoro looked at the cameras as her son was going to prison and said, "he will serve time for Allah."

The young men involved in the killing are currently in custody. Today news reported that they would be tried as terrorists, so their age would not affect the strict penalty. Assailant Emre Gunaydin is still in intensive care. The investigation centers around him and his contacts and they say will fall apart if he does not recover.

The Church in Turkey responded in a way that honored God as hundreds of believers and dozens of pastors flew in as fast as they could to stand by the small church of Malatya and encourage the believers, take care of legal issues, and represent Christians to the media.

When Susanne Tilman expressed her wish to bury her husband in Malatya, the Governor tried to stop it, and when he realized he could not stop it, a rumor was spread that "it is a sin to dig a grave for a Christian." In the end, in an undertaking that should be remembered in Christian history forever, the men from the church in Adana (near Tarsus), grabbed shovels and dug a grave for their slain brother in an un-tended hundred year old Armenian graveyard.

Ugur was buried by his family in an Alevi Muslim ceremony in his hometown of Elazig, his believing fiancé watching from the shadows as his family and friends refused to accept in death the faith Ugur had so long professed and died for.

Necati's funeral took place in his hometown of Izmir, the city where he came to faith. The darkness does not understand the light. Though the churches expressed their forgiveness for the event, Christians were not to be trusted. Before they would load the coffin onto the plane from Malatya, it went through two separate xray exams to make sure it was not loaded with explosives. This is not a usual procedure for Muslim coffins.

Necati's funeral was a beautiful event. Like a glimpse of heaven, thousands of Turkish Christians and missionaries came to show their love for Christ, and their honor for this man chosen to die for Christ. Necati's wife Shemsa told the world, "His death was full of meaning, because he died for Christ and he lived for Christ Necati was a gift from God. I feel honored that he was in my life, I feel crowned with honor. I want to be worthy of that honor."

Boldly the believers took their stand at Necati's funeral, facing the risks of being seen publicly and likewise becoming targets. As expected, the anti-terror police attended and videotaped everyone attending the funeral for their future use. The service took place outside at Buca Baptist church, and he was buried in a small Christian graveyard in the outskirts of Izmir.

Two assistant Governors of Izmir were there solemnly watching the event from the front row. Dozens of news agencies were there documenting the events with live news and photographs. Who knows the impact the funeral had on those watching? This is the beginning of their story as well. Pray for them.

In an act that hit front pages in the largest newspapers in Turkey, Susanne Tilman in a television interview expressed her forgiveness. She did not want revenge, she told reporters. "Oh God, forgive them for they know not what they do," she said, wholeheartedly agreeing with the words of Christ on Calvary (Luke 23:34). In a country where blood-for-blood revenge is as normal as breathing, many many reports have come to the attention of the church of how this comment of Susanne Tilman has changed lives. One columnist wrote of her comment, "She said in one sentence what 1000 missionaries in 1000 years could never do."

The missionaries in Malatya will most likely move out, as their families and children have become publicly identified as targets to the hostile city. The remaining 10 believers are in hiding. What will happen to this church, this light in the darkness? Most likely it will go underground. Pray for wisdom, that Turkish brothers from other cities will go to lead the leaderless church. Should we not be concerned for that great city of Malatya, a city that does not know what it is doing? (Jonah 4:11)

When our Pastor Fikret Bocek went with a brother to give a statement to the Security Directorate on Monday they were ushered into the Anti-Terror Department. On the wall was a huge chart covering the whole wall listing all the terrorist cells in Izmir, categorized. In one prominent column were listed all the evangelical churches in Izmir. The darkness does not understand the light. "These that have turned the world upside down are come here also." Acts 17:6)

Please pray for the Church in Turkey. "Don't pray against persecution, pray for perseverance," urges Pastor Fikret Bocek. The Church is better having lost our brothers; the fruit in our lives, the renewed faith, the burning desire to spread the gospel to quench more darkness in Malatya all these are not to be regretted. Pray that we stand strong against external opposition and especially pray that we stand strong against internal struggles with sin, our true debilitating weakness.

This we know. Christ Jesus was there when our brothers were giving their lives for Him. He was there, like He was when Stephen was being stoned in the sight of Saul of Tarsus.

Someday the video of the deaths of our brothers may reveal more to us about the strength that we know Christ gave them to endure their last cross, about the peace the Spirit of God endowed them with to suffer for their beloved Savior. But we know He did not leave their side. We know their minds were full of Scripture strengthening them to endure, as darkness tried to subdue the unsubduable Light of the Gospel. We know, in whatever way they were able, with a look or a word, they encouraged one another to stand strong. We know they knew they would soon be with Christ.

We don't know the details. We don't know the kind of justice that will or will not be served on this earth.

But we pray-- and urge you to pray-- that someday at least one of those five boys will come to faith because of the testimony in death of Tilman Geske, who gave his life as a missionary to his beloved Turks, and the testimonies in death of Necati Aydin and Ugur Yuksel, the first martyrs for Christ out of the Turkish Church.

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