

Wielding the Power of Death: Reclaiming Christian Martyrdom

Jack Wheeler

This paper seeks to reclaim the correct Christian usage of the word “martyr.” In the era of the early Church there was deep seated oppression against Christians in the Roman Empire which resulted in thousands of executions. Accepting death for Christ as a part of its nature, the early Church adopted the Greek word “μάρτυς” (martus), which meant witness, as a means of describing saints who were slain for their unwavering devotion to God. The term “martyr” was used in this way for centuries. Over time, however, and especially during the Enlightenment, martyrdom came to mean more than a Christian's death for God. Some use it to mean those who died for other gods, fallen revolutionaries, or even people who suffered without death for ideologies. The Christian meaning of martyrdom has been tragically muddied and obscured.

This paper argues that there is more to martyrdom than has been recognized in the recent past. From analyzing the history of martyrdom as well as the thoughts of great Christian writers, it is observed that martyrdom contains critical elements such as reflection of Christ, death without struggle, aversion to suicide, and the spread of the Gospel. This is an important conclusion, for if martyrdom is left in its current degraded state, then villains such as the 9/11 hijackers can be put alongside St. Stephen as great martyrs. Martyrdom has been central to Christianity for millennia, so it is deeply important to properly recognize those who achieve the glorious title.