

Session 8

A Spirit-Driven Ecclesiological Tenacity: Tested and Proven Response to Hostility and Afflictions (Joseph Dimitrov)

Abstract

The church is the spiritual community of the seeing ones. It has been called “out of darkness into his (God’s) wonderful light” (1 Pet 2:9).¹ This community consists of “children of the light and children of the day” who “do not belong to the night or to the darkness” (1 Thess 5:5) but have the obligation to “live as children of light” (Eph 5:8). The one who provides this environment of light, enabling the church to see, is the person of the Holy Spirit. In contrast with humanity’s previous state of blindness, the Spirit’s work in the believer involves his guiding, speaking, teaching of all things, reminding what was said, and revealing what is yet to come (John 14, 15, 16). Therefore, the scriptural contrast between darkness and light is not simply implying the transition from the state of unbelief to the state of belief. Instead, this enlarged perspective rather reveals the effect of a Spirit-led sight empowerment. This ability to walk with insight and discernment could be defined as pneumatological quality. Scripturally and in practice, we find this truth especially important for times when this “light-and-day” defined community goes through adversity and persecution. Ecclesiological seeing is possible through a pneumatological mindset. From its conception until modern times, this mindset has helped the church not only to survive afflictions but to thrive spiritually. This is how the three painful effects of persecution—“the split consciousness,” “the split faithfulness,” and “the split leadership”—have been and will be overcome.

Key Words: persecution, atheism, totalitarianism, pneumatology, charismata

Introduction

The church represents a spiritual community of individuals described in Scripture as those “called out of darkness into his [God’s] wonderful light” (1 Pet 2:9). This collective identity further includes “children of the light and children of the day” who are exhorted not to “belong to the night or the darkness” (1 Thess 5:5) but are instead obligated to “live as children

¹ All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the NIV.

of light” (Eph 5:8). The source of this illumination, which enables the church to perceive and navigate its spiritual journey, is rooted in the work and presence of the Holy Spirit.

In contrast to this description of the believers’ prior condition of spiritual blindness, Scripture depicts the Holy Spirit as the one who guides, instructs, and reveals. By enabling believers to recall prior teachings, comprehend the present, and discern revelation concerning the future (John 14, 15, 16), the Spirit facilitates a transformation from darkness into light that goes beyond the sphere of saving faith. That transformation involves a deeper progression of empowerment and insight brought about through the Spirit’s illumination.

This capacity for discernment, wisdom, and confident action is an essential pneumatological attribute that God means for the church to embody. Particularly under circumstances of adversity and persecution, this Spirit-enabled perspective becomes indispensable. The theological contrast between darkness and light, therefore, signifies not merely the transition from unbelief to faith but also a broader framework of spiritual empowerment.

From the church’s inception to contemporary times, this Spirit-oriented mindset has historically enabled the church to endure afflictions and achieve spiritual growth despite hostile environments. Drawing upon the understanding that the birth and early development of the church occurred under oppressive conditions, as well as employing scriptural exegesis and lessons from recent East European Pentecostal church history, this analysis examines how the phenomena of “split consciousness,” “split faithfulness,” and “split leadership”—as consequences of persecution—have been mitigated and could continue to be addressed effectively within the ecclesiological framework.

Context and Effects of Ideological Religious Hostility

The implementation of ideological strategies against the church and individual believers constitutes a central aspect of atheistic totalitarian systems' opposition to religious faith.

Historical evidence from the recent East European church experience illustrates how secular humanistic ideology was systematically employed as a means of challenging the existence of the Christian faith and church congregations. The Russian philosopher and theologian Nikolai Berdyaev, a former Marxist who later embraced Orthodox Christianity, characterized communism in his writings as a "pseudo-religion,"² thereby highlighting its attempts to emulate doctrinal elements and objectives traditionally associated with Christianity:

Communism in actual fact is the foe of every form of religion and especially of Christianity, not as a social system, but as itself a religion. It wants to be a religion itself, to take the place of Christianity. It professes to answer the religious questions of the human soul and to give a meaning to life. Communism is integrated; it embraces the whole of life; its relations are with no special section of it. On this account its conflict with other religious faiths is inevitable.³

Following the division of Europe after the Second World War, the implementation of scientific atheism and various repressive policies that had been initially pioneered within the Soviet Union were also adopted by the communist regimes of Central and Eastern Europe.

False Consciousness, Split Consciousness, and Split Faithfulness

Atheistic ideology represents a pronounced form of secularism, with its primary focus directed at influencing the emerging younger generation. Within this demographic, faith in God is perceived as being in its formative stage and is particularly vulnerable to external pressures. A critical method employed in ideological confrontation involved establishing institutions and

² Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Origin of Russian Communism* (University of Michigan Press, 1960), 158, cited in Kent R. Hill, "Christian Mission, Proselytism and Religious Liberty: A Protestant Appeal for Christian Tolerance and Unity," *Religion, State & Society* 25, no. 4 (1997): 310, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09637499708431792>.

³ Hill, "Christian Mission," 310.

promoting activities designed to foster scientific ideologies to directly challenge both the intellectual and emotional convictions of individuals influenced by religious beliefs. These efforts were diligently designed to displace the life of faith with a secular intellectual framework, operating under the presumption that religious conviction and scientific reasoning are fundamentally incompatible. Educators and academic professionals were encouraged to adopt the outlook of militant atheists, firmly committed to the notion that ideological compromise is untenable.⁴

Children and youth residing in regions governed by atheistic and totalitarian regimes navigated a daily life shaped by family, schooling, and engagement with social or athletic organisations specifically structured for them. A central goal of these initiatives was to turn away the younger generation not only from religion broadly but also from the foundational concept of faith in God. Intellectuals were entrusted with advancing this faith-eroding agenda through training programmes implemented within local educational institutions and through the national youth communist league, or *Komsomol*, which targeted individuals aged fourteen to twenty-eight. These young individuals already had prior experience in the *National Children's Pioneer Organisation*, which served as a formative experience.⁵ This long-lasting exposure to educational doctrines and activities aimed to shape the cognitive and ethical prospects of the children, guiding their future political engagement. Their expected political activism and ethical perceptions as youth would be based on the presented dichotomy, namely that the bourgeoisie is inherently evil while the proletariat is always morally right.⁶ Textbooks, higher education

⁴ This was Lenin's fundamental formulation.

⁵ Barrington Moore, *The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt* (MacMillan, 1978), 88, cited in Bohumil Melichar and Jakub Rákosník, "The Communist Organization of Children and its Discourse in Czechoslovakia between Two Wars," *Histoire et Politique* 33 (2017), <https://journals.openedition.org/histoirepolitique/9991#ftn26>.

⁶ Moore, *Social Bases*, 88.

curricula, and various media outlets were utilized as key instruments for disseminating ideological narratives, predominantly critiquing Western societies and analysing global suffering. The conclusions drawn from these analyses regarded the prevailing conditions of suffering as morally indefensible.⁷ Such statistical data and reports provided atheistic activists with opportunities to not only broaden public discourse but also assert their interpretative authority over reality, using ideological narratives as tools to reshape societal perceptions and norms. Consequently, the discourse about suffering evolved into a mechanism to legitimize atheistic ideology, reinforcing its claims on intellectual and practical grounds.⁸

The most intense manifestations of ideological persecution occurred under totalitarian regimes. Religious totalitarianism, for example, was noted for its comprehensive ambition to dominate every aspect of an individual's existence, extending control even to their thoughts.⁹ Within the framework of atheistic ideology, religion was identified as an issue of false consciousness and was systematically countered through force, persecution, persuasive rhetoric, and propaganda. The youth leagues dedicated themselves to illustrating the detrimental effects of religious superstitions and prejudices, organising specialized groups and lectures to propagate anti-religious sentiments.¹⁰ Christian youth faced significant adversity in affiliating with these organisations, encountering widespread social stigmatisation. This provoked an ongoing ideological battle for the minds of young individuals, with Christian youth frequently branded as “withdrawn, uncommunicative,” or socially inept.¹¹ To atheistic authorities, such traits

⁷ Moore, *Social Bases*, 88.

⁸ Moore, *Social Bases*, 88.

⁹ Daniel Mark, “Religious Totalitarianism, Secular Totalitarianism, and Other Threats to International Religious Freedom,” Public Discourse, April 1, 2018, <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2018/04/21172/>.

¹⁰ Program of the Komsomol, *Pravda*, April 23, 1936, <https://soviethistory.msu.edu/1936-2/childhood-under-stalin/childhood-under-stalin-texts/program-of-the-komsomol/>.

¹¹ “Children and Atheism in the Soviet Union,” *Documents* (n.d.): 47, https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/rcl/04-2_46.pdf. (Article was originally published as “Save the Children” in the newspaper, *Soviet Belorussia*, January 31, 1976, by a lecturer at a pedagogical institute in Minsk.)

represented the destructive consequences of religious influence within the family unit.¹² Since the task of winning a Christian youth through atheistic education generally turned out to be challenging, the main objective was to shake the established religious feelings and move the person to an unstable condition of “split consciousness.”¹³ Educational institutions and youth organisations were tasked with preventing nascent religious feelings from developing into steadfast religious convictions.

While fear represents a critical factor in the development of split consciousness, it would be quite simplistic to attribute this phenomenon solely to fear. For the Early Church, “dealing with the lapsed was predominantly a spiritual matter.”¹⁴ The unbelief in God’s promises and Jesus’ warning that “the one who stands firm to the end will be saved” (Matt 10:22) was identified as holding greater significance than mere fear. Unbelief was conceived as the precursor to fear itself.

Judicial records from the early Christian era illustrate the devastating impact of split-consciousness dilemmas. Governor Pliny’s perspective, for instance, viewed the mere admission of being Christian as sufficient grounds for guilt. Consequently, numerous Christians disavowed their faith, asserting either that they had never been Christians or that they had renounced Christianity. Such individuals succumbed to imposed practices, such as emperor worship and the cursing of Christ. These actions, born of internal conflict, undermined the Christian faith’s capacity for vindication.¹⁵

Pneumatological Mindset

¹² “Children and Atheism,” 47.

¹³ “Children and Atheism,” 47.

¹⁴ D. H. Williams, “The Tradition of Christian Persecution,” *Pro Ecclesia: A Journal of Catholic and Evangelical Theology* 28, no. 4 (2019): 412.

¹⁵ Williams, “Tradition,” 410–13.

To endure the challenges posed by persecution, numerous churches, both historically and in contemporary settings, have anchored their doctrines and practices in Pentecostal charismatic spirituality. This foundation has been instrumental in fostering resilience during periods of hostility.

The retrieval of biblical, ancient, and historical Christianity for the purpose of contemporary spiritual renewal reveals a profound commitment to facing the grave consequences of belonging to a spiritual community perceived as incompatible with broader societal norms. Such commitment is rooted in the understanding of the church as a prophetic body, which subsequently informs its actions.

Maintaining devotion to God is inherently a spiritual endeavour in contexts of persecution. Therefore, “churches cannot be worshipping communities alone: only prophetic communities can truly worship, and only worshipping communities can be truly prophetic.”¹⁶ Churches have embraced a holistic interpretation that integrates worship with prophetic mission, focusing on the empowering presence of the Spirit as a sign of hope within their communities.¹⁷

Early in the history of the church, persecution was understood as a test of the believer’s relationship with the Holy Spirit. This is how, for example, Tertullian exhorted the imprisoned Christians: “O blessed, grieve not the Holy Spirit, who entered prison with you.”¹⁸ He then reminded them that they were anointed with and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, which is sufficient to drive all fear away.¹⁹

¹⁶ Miroslav Volf, “The Church as a Prophetic Community and a Sign of Hope,” *European Journal of Theology* 2, no. 1 (1993): 13.

¹⁷ Volf, “Church as Prophetic Community,” 26. Rom 15:13 declares that the Spirit enables the Church with hope: “Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

¹⁸ Tertullian, “*Ad Martyras*,” *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3, 693, cited in Williams, “Tradition,” 413.

¹⁹ Williams, “Tradition,” 413.

The persecuted church has consistently adopted a pneumatological framework to interpret and navigate adverse circumstances. This theological position finds strong biblical support in Jesus's farewell discourse with his disciples, as documented in the Gospel of John. Within this discourse, Jesus explains the pivotal role of the Holy Spirit amid the animosity between his followers and the world. The Spirit, referred to as the *Paraclete*, provides divine presence that would accompany and empower believers, enabling them to testify about Jesus amidst the anticipated hatred and persecution from the world. Jesus further clarifies this hostility, attributing it to the world's guilt of sin and its rejection of his works (John 15:18–26). The farewell discourse functions as both a preparatory framework for the Johannine community and as a timeless call for all subsequent Christian communities to anticipate and endure tribulations. The Spirit's mission, as articulated by Jesus, underscores the Spirit's dual role: to testify about Jesus and to empower the disciples to bear witness to His teachings (John 15:26–27). This theological insight highlights the Spirit's indispensable role in sustaining faith during persecution, reinforcing the Spirit's significance for both the original disciples and contemporary believers navigating crises of faith.²⁰

In John 16:1, “Jesus reveals that the reason for this discourse is to prevent the disciples from stumbling.”²¹ Certainly,

when Jesus exhorts the disciples to remember and know the reason why they are being hated by the world, his statements are an attempt to prevent the disciples and the Johannine community from falling away from the faith in the same manner that other disciples abandoned him when they were scandalized about his teaching on eating and drinking his flesh and blood ... According to the Fourth Gospel, we notice that knowledge or remembrance of Jesus' words does not occur without the aid of the Paraclete. When Jesus exhorts the disciples to know, remember, and recognize that his life will help them understand the coming persecution in 15.18-16.4, the Paraclete is the

²⁰ Rodolfo Galvan Estrada III, “The Spirit as an Inner Witness in John 15.26,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 22, no. 1 (2013): 81, DOI:10.1163/17455251-02201008.

²¹ Estrada, “Spirit as Inner Witness,” 81. “All this I have told you so that you will not fall away” (John 16:1).

testifier that enables the disciple to perceive the significance of the coming or past events.²²

The church's resilience during periods of adversity is intrinsically linked to the presence and ministry of the Paraclete, as promised and sent by Jesus. The verbs attributed to the Paraclete constitute the various activities he performs within the church and the lives of individual believers.

A central objective of persecution is to induce crises of faith. Scholarly analysis suggests that "by the time the Fourth Gospel was in its final form, persecution and the expulsion of Jewish Christians from synagogues had moved far beyond the realm of gloomy predictions into the realm of an ever-present living reality for the Johannine community."²³ While it remains uncertain whether the original disciples served as the audience for the Gospel text, the linguistic and thematic content implies its relevance to both the disciples and subsequent readers. Notably, the theological principles and language described within chapters 14, 15, and 16 imply text validity not only for the early Christian community under immediate threat but also for the successive persecuted Christian communities throughout history. Central to this connection is the experience of the Holy Spirit as an "inner testifier," a concept that unites unrelated Christian communities in their shared theological framework.²⁴ The Johannine perspective suggests that "the Paraclete will testify to the disciples,"²⁵ and, by extension, to all future readers of the text who belong to "the difficult future."²⁶

²² Estrada, "Spirit as Inner Witness," 82.

²³ Raymond Brown, *The Gospel according to John 13-21* (Doubleday, 1970), 695, cited in Estrada, "Spirit as Inner Witness," 82.

²⁴ Brown, *Gospel according to John 13-21*, 82.

²⁵ Brown, *Gospel according to John 13-21*, 82.

²⁶ Brown, *Gospel according to John 13-21*, 83.

The Holy Spirit, functioning as an internal witness, engages the believer's conscience while simultaneously testifying "within the believer and through the believer."²⁷ Thus, the Holy Spirit serves as an internal and external voice. Through processes of teaching, reminding, and witnessing the truth, the Holy Spirit assists with divine revelation (illumination), designed not only to advance the gospel's proclamation to the world but also to provide spiritual guidance within Christian communities themselves. This dynamic was systematically targeted by totalitarian atheistic ideologies, which employed rigorous indoctrination techniques and strategic interventions to undermine the ability of the Spirit-filled and Spirit-led youth and adults to fulfil these functions.

The forensic role of the Holy Spirit has been extensively analysed, particularly focusing on its prosecutorial functions towards the world as described in John 16:8–11.²⁸ Similarly, scholarly interpretations have emphasised the Spirit's role as a "supporter or sponsor,"²⁹ a "prophetic teacher,"³⁰ and a "guarantor of continuity."³¹ These perspectives align with the functions attributed to the Spirit in the farewell discourse, which include "comforting, encouraging, reproving, exhorting, teaching, and preaching" while operating within and among the disciples.³² Such roles emphasise how believers have been enabled to confront crises of faith provoked by persecution.

²⁷ Brown, *Gospel according to John 13-21*, 90.

²⁸ This comes from multiple word studies of the Spirit's designation as παράκλητος or the corresponding verb παρακληῖν.

²⁹ Kenneth Grayston, "The Meaning of *Paraklētos*," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* (1981): 67, cited in Estrada, "Spirit as Inner Witness," 92.

³⁰ George Johnston, *The Spirit Paraclete in the Gospel of John* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 80-81, cited in Estrada, "Spirit as Inner Witness," 92.

³¹ Eskil Franck, *Revelation Taught: The Paraclete in the Gospel of John*, (Philadelphia: Coronet Books, 1985), 17-29, cited in Estrada, "Spirit as Inner Witness," 92.

³² Franck, *Revelation Taught*, 92.

A genuine Christian existence, particularly under conditions of mistreatment and oppression, is considered impossible without the presence and work of the Paraclete. This theological perspective suggests that the guidance of the Holy Spirit should be normative for all times, and persecuted Christians extended this truth by emphasizing the charismatic dimensions of the Spirit's activities. The manifestation of spiritual gifts, visions, dreams, and other phenomena attributed to the Spirit emerged as integral elements of the Paraclete's ministry, encompassing guidance, comfort, defence, exhortation, encouragement, and preservation of the church. These functions, alongside teaching and preaching, constituted the prophetic voice of the Spirit, enabling the church to discern contemporary challenges and anticipate future developments. This interpretative framework concerning suffering demanded the cultivation of a mindset that prioritised reliance on the Spirit and anticipated divine accompaniment and empowerment.³³ Consequently, persecution and the Paraclete-given *charismata* have proven to be quite compatible biblical concepts.

Pneumatological Conduct and Leadership Dilemma

This pneumatological interpretation of persecution significantly influenced the conduct of the church. For instance, during the era of oppressive totalitarian regimes, this perspective contributed to the portrayal of East European churches as “communities of living hope”³⁴ within the oppressed societies of these nations. The primary responsibility of their leaders involved guiding the church to discern the voice of the Holy Spirit amidst efforts aimed at silencing its presence. This continuous rediscovery of God's proximity and active presence fostered a

³³ Paul A. Pomerville, *The Third Force in Mission: A Pentecostal Contribution to Contemporary Mission Theology* (Hendrickson, 1985), 63–78, cited in Keith Warrington, *Pentecostal Theology: A Theology of Encounter* (T&T Clark, 2008), 251.

³⁴ Volf, “The Church as a Prophetic Community and a Sign of Hope,” 13.

dynamic relationship with the divine, which, in turn, necessitated a mode of existence defined as “prophetic.”³⁵ Seeking deeper spirituality, the persecuted church understood that

the prophetic model of the relation between the church and the world assumes that the mission of the church in the world can be sustained only by the same Spirit of the new creation whose presence makes the church to be the church. To be a prophetic community the church needs the Spirit, who will make its sons and daughters prophesy, its young men see visions, and its old men dream dreams (cf. Acts 2:17ff.). To be a sign of hope the church needs the Spirit who will cause flesh to come upon its dry bones, put breath into it, and make it live (cf. Ezek. 37:6).³⁶

The historical trace of the persecuted church provides a clear indication of its eschatological focus and anticipation of ultimate salvation. Such a church bears witness to this salvation not solely through the proclamation of the Word but also through its deeply ingrained prayer and worship practices. The cyclical experiences of religious hostility and persecution often revitalise the theological understanding that the church exists in this world as a community in exile. This reality prompts an eschatological mode of existence and reflects the notion that “being a stranger is not simply a posture which the church adopts in relation to the world; it is founded in the very essence of the church as a foretaste of the new creation.”³⁷ Furthermore, the New Testament provides ample evidence supporting the assertion that “the church was born into a tradition of persecution and suffering that shaped its earliest identity.”³⁸ The perpetual tension between the spiritual statuses of the church and the world underlines an inherent conflict. Martyrdom emerges as the ultimate manifestation of this tension, with biblical Scripture affirming that the existence of the church is inseparable from martyrdom.³⁹

³⁵ Volf, “The Church as a Prophetic Community and a Sign of Hope,” 24.

³⁶ Volf, “The Church as a Prophetic Community and a Sign of Hope,” 26.

³⁷ Volf, “The Church as a Prophetic Community and a Sign of Hope,” 20.

³⁸ Williams, “Tradition,” 403.

³⁹ Volf, “The Church as a Prophetic Community and a Sign of Hope,” 20.

Churches that avoid afflictions and persecution by compromising and exchanging their eschatological identity for organisational identity according to the models of this world “will at best be able to give the world lessons about ideological and institutional survival, possibly even about success.”⁴⁰ Such churches, however, miss the opportunity to be a “sign of living hope,” and “hope is born where the Spirit of the new creation is seen at work in the conflicts of the church with the spirits of this world.”⁴¹ The persecuted church may never have articulated its experience using this last theological definition, but it consistently lived out this spiritual reality, as Jesus had foreseen and predicted.

During the centuries-long history of the Eastern Orthodox Church, its conservative doctrine and traditions fostered a strong belief in miraculous events and supernatural phenomena. This influence significantly shaped the national identities and cultural frameworks of various East European Pentecostal churches. Consequently, alongside their Pentecostal and charismatic theological foundations, these communities demonstrated a pronounced openness to supernatural occurrences. The Orthodox tradition emphasised that “genuine miracles occurred not only in the first century but have continued through the lives of many saints, martyrs, and confessors of the faith up to today.”⁴² Furthermore, unlike developments in the free world, where Christian theology became increasingly integrated with secular philosophy, Pentecostal Christians in these regions regarded the prophetic and charismatic aspects of church life as essential and out of question.

⁴⁰ Volf, “The Church as a Prophetic Community and a Sign of Hope,” 20.

⁴¹ Volf, “The Church as a Prophetic Community and a Sign of Hope,” 20.

⁴² Michael J. McClymond, “Charismatic Gifts: Healing, Tongue-Speaking, Prophecy, and Exorcism,” *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to World Christianity*, ed. Lamin Sanneh and Michael J. McClymond (John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 402.

Deprived of any form of dignified status in society, pressured by educational state organisations and activities whose goal was to eliminate their faith, forbidden to possess any Christian literature or offer formal or informal theological training, and forced to hold a vulnerable organisational system with untrained leaders, many Pentecostal communities in most of the former communist countries focused on the spiritual dimension of church life and leadership. Prayer played an essential role in these communities, conducted both within state-monitored churches and within underground house churches. This delicate environment of external oppression and internal spiritual engagement fostered an intensified expectation for and reception of spiritual manifestations. This grassroots spiritual awakening challenged the leadership of government-recognized churches, compelling them either to align themselves with the Spirit-filled practices of their congregations or to face isolation within their ministries due to concessions made to the authorities.

This aspect of Pentecostal spirituality and the examples of faithful spiritual leaders strongly influenced the younger generation of the church. Youth meetings often served as the catalyst for local church revivals, where experiences such as the baptism in the Holy Spirit became central to the worship and testimony of young believers. These spiritual phenomena frequently included manifestations of gifts such as prophecy, interpretation of tongues, and words of knowledge and wisdom. For older Pentecostal believers, these events served as confirmations of their prayers and steadfast commitment to the gospel.

Within the persecuted Pentecostal communities, the revelatory spiritual gifts described in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10, particularly prophecy, knowledge, and wisdom, were integral to worship services and prayer meetings. These gifts, while subject to congregational discernment and pastoral oversight, were intended to provide divine guidance where “neither scripture, nor

gospel, nor tradition could do so.”⁴³ They also indicated “how the risen Lord perceived the church’s condition”⁴⁴ and often provided spiritual direction. Tongue-interpretations, prophetic utterances, or words of knowledge and wisdom would either reinforce already existing thoughts, plans, and ideas, or the individual and the group of believers would receive illumination over what to do in their particular circumstances. In essence, *charismata* manifestations were words of encouragement, prophetic promises of approaching victory, divine warnings of impending dangers, or appeals to stand firm amid some fiery trial. Under the close supervision of the pastor or the elder in charge, these revelatory gifts enabled “the Christian church to function as a community of healing.”⁴⁵ Collectively, these practices exemplified the persecuted church’s commitment to the apostolic exhortation to “earnestly desire spiritual gifts,” and they received what they prayed for.

The unique characteristics of Pentecostal spirituality posed significant challenges for communist authorities attempting to suppress religious practices. The distinctively charismatic nature of Pentecostal worship heightened their resilience during persecution. Communist ideologists, in their attempts to discredit Pentecostal practices, often cited critical perspectives from other Christian traditions and labelled the churches as belonging to a “Holy Spirit cult.” Pentecostal spirituality, characterized by its emphasis on Spirit baptism and charismatic manifestations, was perceived as a form of “spiritual microclimate” that provided communal religious fulfilment. Unlike traditional Catholic and Orthodox practices, which were seen as offering religious experiences to select individuals, Pentecostalism was interpreted as empowering the entire congregation. This led communist analysts to label Pentecostalism as one

⁴³ Max Turner, “Spiritual Gifts Then and Now,” *Vox Evangelica* 15 (1985): 55.

⁴⁴ Turner, “Spiritual Gifts,” 55.

⁴⁵ McClymond, “Charismatic Gifts,” 415.

of the most resilient religious movements within atheistic societies. Their inability to fully comprehend phenomena like *glossolalia* resulted in interpretations that framed these practices as psychological mechanisms that transform “human energy into mental experiences,” leading to a sense of optimism.⁴⁶ Ultimately, Pentecostal spirituality was recognized by its opponents as a formidable source of strength and perseverance within these marginalised communities.⁴⁷

Conclusion

Years ago, a Chinese house church leader observed, “When Chinese believers read the book of Acts, we see in it our *own experience*; when foreign Christians read the book of Acts, they see in it *inspiring stories*.”⁴⁸ This observation aptly captures how the persecuted church interprets and applies New Testament pneumatology. Numerous scholars and church historians agree that “searching before God for personalized spiritual experiences, including the more spectacular gifts, is characteristically a phenomenon of the church in periods of insecurity, introspection, and historical instability, rather than in those of consolidation and self-confidence.”⁴⁹ The latter half of the twentieth-century East European church history confirmed the validity of this assertion. During this period, the church, through the adversity of persecution, became less sociologically integrated with its environment and more attuned to its connection with the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, who, among other roles, provides spiritual insight and direction. Consequently, significant segments of the church in these regions of spiritual oppression and hostility experienced the “charismatisation” of their theological perception and

⁴⁶ Nikolai Mizov and Jordan Nikolov, *Protestant Sects in Bulgaria* (Partizdat, 1972), 194, 198.

⁴⁷ Mizov and Nikolov, *Protestant Sects*, 202.

⁴⁸ Robert Menzies, “Luke’s Understanding of Baptism in the Holy Spirit: A Pentecostal Perspective,” *PentecoStudies* 6, no. 2 (2007): 108.

⁴⁹ Turner, “Spiritual Gifts,” 43.

behaviour. This process mitigated the development of a mentality of helplessness and enabled members of the persecuted Pentecostal communities to cultivate a more self-assured identity.

Following the fall of communism in 1989, after forty-five years of severe persecution and intense atheistic ideological indoctrination, the East European Pentecostal churches emerged from this dark period invigorated, especially with a youthful demographic. These young people, the primary targets of the state atheistic ideologists' systematic doctrinal efforts, were expected to align with the state-promoted narrative. Instead, they embraced the narrative of the Paraclete, as revealed and reiterated within the prophetic community of hope. An analysis of such ecclesiological endurance would be incomplete without acknowledging that "the promise of supernatural power, as reflected in Acts 1:8,^[50] is a fundamental consequence of the presence of the Spirit."⁵¹ Similarly to the Apostle Paul, the persecuted church "trusted in the gifts the Spirit gave for the common good (1 Cor. 12)."⁵² The *parakletos* provided the *dunamis* enablement through spiritual *charismata* for *ecclesial* tenacity. The dark did not hinder the church from seeing!

⁵⁰ "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

⁵¹ Warrington, *Pentecostal Theology*, 250.

⁵² Andy Lord, "Incarnational Partnership in Mission: A Response to Questionable Assumptions," *JEPTA* 26, no. 2 (2006): 117.

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**Response to Joseph Dimitrov’s “A Spirit-Driven Ecclesiological Tenacity:
Tested and Proven Response to Hostility and Afflictions”
(Julie Ma)**

Joseph Dimitrov structures his paper primarily in three parts: Context and Effects of Ideological Religious Hostility, Pneumatological Mindset, and Pneumatological Conduct and Leadership Dilemma. As I read the paper, I sensed his burden and concern for the Eastern European Church.

Context and Effects of Ideological Religious Hostility

In the first part of the paper, the three agonising consequences of persecution that have been and may be overcome are “the split consciousness,” “the split faithfulness,” and “the split leadership.” Dimitrov outlines the consequences of secularism and atheistic philosophy, expressing his grave concern about its significant influence on the next generation—the main target of such ideological indoctrination. This group of Christians believes faith in God is still in its infancy and is especially vulnerable.

Dimitrov further notes that every effort was purposefully directed toward a process in which a well-established kind of secular intellectualism progressively supplanted the life of faith, with the assumption that science and religion could not co-exist. Because schoolteachers and university professors in Eastern Europe during the communist era believed that there could be no ideological compromise, they were urged to take up the cause of militant atheism.

The Church worldwide faces similar problems as Dimitrov has described. Secularistic and materialistic ideology has become deeply ingrained in the lives of all generations, both in secular societies and even in the church. Secularism and atheistic ideology have affected not only the European Church but also churches in North and South America, Africa, and Asia though its impact varies.

The Eastern European Church, however, added a heavier element—communist ideology. Throughout the twentieth century, communism significantly impacted Eastern Europe’s political, economic, and social systems. The Soviet Union expanded its sway over the area following World War II by establishing one-party communist governments that persisted until the late 1980s. Thus, leaders and scholars must consider this noteworthy and essential topic for the upcoming generation.

Dimitrov makes a powerful comment that according to Governor Pliny in the early Christian era, someone was guilty just by admitting they were a Christian. As a result, Dimitrov notes, an unspecified percentage of Christians “asserted “either that they had never been Christians or that they had renounced Christianity.”¹ They even agreed to the emperor’s statues being worshipped and the curse of Christ being placed upon them. The Christian religion was robbed of validation due to the mental and emotional conflict that culminated in the denial of Christian confession. Under communist governments in Eastern Europe, which aimed to stifle Christian influence, churches encountered numerous difficulties. Several churches used calculated tactics to preserve their independence and stave off ideological intrusion.

Pneumatological Mindset

In the second part of the paper, Dimitrov aptly explains the pneumatological notion and the work of the Holy Spirit in Christians’ lives from John chapters 15 and 16. He describes how the final discourse of Jesus served as a call for the Johannine community and future Christian

¹ Joseph Dimitrov, “A Spirit-Driven Ecclesiological Tenacity: Tested and Proven Response to Hostility and Afflictions,” in *Pentecostal Voices Across the Continents*, ed. Kong Hee et al., Regnum Studies in Mission (Regnum, 2026), 187.

disciples to foresee and prepare for their troubles with the world. Dimitrov, quoting Raymond Brown, then stresses the importance of having the Holy Spirit as “one’s inner testifier.”²

Dimitrov further notes that the Holy Spirit bestows revelation (illumination) to believers through the study and teaching of Scripture, helping them to see the truth. This revelation is intended to for proclamation of the gospel to the world and as a message of instruction for the Christian community. These make up the prophetic voice of the Spirit, allowing the church to discern the present and look to the future, along with the ministry of teaching and preaching. Believers who adopting a view of suffering that helped them remain tenacious required having a mindset properly focused on the Spirit, expecting that he would empower and accompany them.

Pneumatological Conduct and Leadership Dilemma

In the third section, “Pneumatological Conduct and Leadership Dilemma,” Dimitrov discusses the significance of leadership in regions like Eastern Europe. I conjecture that only dedicated individuals may assume leadership roles. Dimitrov notes that church leaders during hostile totalitarian rule played a significant role. Their job was to assist the church in hearing the voice of God’s Spirit in the face of circumstances that sought to silence it. Dimitrov also emphasises how communities of believers serve as a source of hope for these nations’ subjugated societies. The nearness and presence of God were constantly being discovered in new ways, and such a dynamic relationship with God “necessitated a mode of existence defined as ‘prophetic.’”³ A prophetic model of the relationship between the church and the world assumes that the

² Raymond Brown, *The Gospel according to John 13-21* (Doubleday, 1970), 695, cited in Rodolfo Galvan Estrada III, “The Spirit as an Inner Witness in John 15.26,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 22, no. 1 (2013): 81, DOI:10.1163/17455251-02201008.

³ Miroslav Volf, “The Church as a Prophetic Community and a Sign of Hope,” *European Journal of Theology* 2, no. 1 (1993): 13, cited in Dimitrov, “Spirit-Driven Ecclesiological Tenacity”, 187.

Church's mission can be sustained only by the same Spirit of the new creation whose presence makes the church the church.

Four Questions in Response

In response to Dimitrov's article, I would like to pose four questions to East European leaders:

1. In a voiceless church, how do the leaders assist the members in understanding the activity of the Holy Spirit and hearing God's voice?
2. How do church leaders foster a more profound spirituality within the persecuted Church?
3. How can church leaders encourage individuals to encounter consistently God's presence and deepen their relationship with him?
4. How can the Church increase young people's faith and safeguard them against ideological brainwashing?

Eastern European churches and churches in other parts of the world can wrestle with these questions and find answers from God and Christian communities who have had various spiritual experiences. This is the only thing that will enable the Church to believe in God and develop into a vibrant, spiritual community is the Spirit.

The Church and Persecution

The New Testament stories unequivocally attest that the Church was born into a tradition of persecution and suffering that formed its earliest identity. Because the Church and the outer world have distinct spiritual statuses, conflict and friction on a spiritual level will always exist. Martyrdom is the expression of this truth. The biblical perspective holds that a church cannot exist without martyrdom.

I will briefly reflect here on the Christian movement in North Korea to reinforce the experiences of the Eastern European Church. According to a historical study, the church in Pyongyang, North Korea, was very interested in evangelising people; its activities included prayer meetings, Bible studies, and spreading the gospel, particularly following the Pyongyang revival in 1907. Church members' evangelism saved hundreds of unbelievers within a few years. When North Korea's capital had so many Christians, it was called the "Jerusalem of the East."⁴ In 1948, North Korea became a communist nation, which affected the Church enormously. The government believed that the North Korean Church should be silenced, inert, and subjected to ongoing persecution. Churchgoers were tortured physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. However, with the help of the Holy Spirit, they spiritually triumphed over all the trials and persecution though of course, persecution still continues.

A Chinese student from China at a Philippine seminary where I served testified in chapel service that she praised God more after being assaulted in prison. She thanked God for allowing her to participate in persecution for the Almighty God. Her testimony was quite poignant. Such Christians who face extreme persecution grow more devoted to their faith. No faithful Christian betrays their unwavering faith. This was the case with me personally as well. My parents persecuted me for becoming a Christian. God sustained me to remain strong during the challenging period.

Despite its geographical division and differences into Central, East, and West Europe, Europe was historically highly developed both theologically and missiologically. For critical reasons, Martin Luther and John Calvin undertook the theological reformation in Germany in 1517 and

⁴ Ray Cavanaugh, "When North Korea's Capital Had So Many Christians It Was Called the 'Jerusalem of the East,'" Christianity Today, April 19, 2017, <https://www.christiantoday.com/news/when-north-koreas-capital-had-so-many-christians-it-was-called-the-jerusalem-of-the-east>.

Geneva, Switzerland, in 1541, respectively. Four mission movements began throughout Europe, including Pietism in Germany in the seventeenth century, Moravians in Germany in the eighteenth century, Methodists in England in the eighteenth century, and Puritanism in England in the seventeenth century. God made great use of the Church throughout Europe resulting in both immense theological progress and the establishment and flourishing of mission movements. I hope that churches on this continent, including Eastern Europe, experience tremendous revitalisation and a restoration of their spiritual condition through the power of the Holy Spirit and go on to accomplish what their forefathers did.

Conclusion

As a conclusion to my response, I would like to mention spiritual resilience through faith practices to provide some historical reflection on Pentecostal spiritual resilience. Pentecostals in Eastern Europe have consistently drawn strength from their charismatic worship, which includes fervent prayer, speaking in tongues, and a profound sense of the Holy Spirit's presence. These spiritual experiences have been particularly vital during periods of persecution. For instance, during Romania's communist era, believers often gathered clandestinely, yet their worship was marked by an intensity and joy that transcended their circumstances. This joy beyond understanding was seen as a manifestation of the Holy Spirit, giving them the strength to endure and resist oppression.

With the help of the Holy Spirit, I trust that the churches in Eastern Europe will experience the restoration of perfect leadership instead of any "split leadership," full consciousness instead of any "split consciousness," and entire fidelity instead of any "split faithfulness." Regardless of their circumstances or temptations, the Spirit will fill, guide, and

enable church members. As the Spirit does this work, the churches will develop theologically and biblically to keep secular and communist ideologies from infiltrating the lives of Christians.

As the Holy Spirit strengthens believers, this has the potential to transform politics, culture, and even secular and communist beliefs. Thus, I urge Eastern European churches to have more faith in God and in the work of his Spirit. Our enabling God can perform the supernatural miracles mentioned in the Bible. Countless children of God have witnessed his marvels and miraculous occurrences. As the saying goes, suffering is the school where we learn to pray and gain the strength to conquer.

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