

Turkey



A land of Christian turmoil

by C.P. Hallihan

'To confess Christ in Turkey, and to endure there, needs much grace.'

So began the last short paragraph of the article on Turkey in *Quarterly Record* no. 561, October to December 2002. Five years on, in the midst of a marked lack of attention to Turkey in the general media, my e-mail inbox is filling with accounts from Christians in several countries of the atrocity perpetrated in Malatya on April 18th this year.

Malatya is a town (and a province) in the south-east of Turkey, east of the Taurus

Mountains, just west of the Euphrates. It is the beginning of a region still labeled, in faint print, as Kurdistan on my desk atlas.¹ The town is some two hundred miles north-east of Tarsus, and about the same distance north of Antakya, site of the ancient town of Antioch, where the disciples were first called Christians. On Bible maps of Paul's journeys the province approximates to the region of Cilicia.

In Malatya is a thirty-strong evangelical church where Necati Aydin was pastor. On Easter Sunday Pastor Aydin had arranged an evangelistic meeting for an invited

congregation in a local hotel conference room, which five young men known and accepted as 'seekers' attended. On Wednesday April 18th² the same young men attended a further Bible Study in the hotel. After the reading of Scripture these young men assaulted, tormented and slaughtered Necati Aydin, a fellow labourer Ugur Yuksel, and a German missionary translator Tilmann Geske.³ The assailants were members of a *tarik*, an association of 'faithful believers' in Islam. On present information all are in custody, and will be brought to trial as terrorists.

A Christian missionary in Ankara wrote:

This was a significant event for the church in Turkey. We've known this country is difficult and we've known it was dangerous, but this was a new thing for us. A friend who used to work in Pakistan was surprised that this was the first case of martyrdom for the modern Protestant church in Turkey and that reaction made me realize how fortunate we really have been. But that doesn't change the shock or pain of it all. After all, we are a minuscule community of less than 3,000 people.

In the past we have had believers beaten up and nearly killed. We've had people threatened and held at knife point. We've had lots of rocks thrown at church buildings along with bomb threats and some more violent protests. There was even a small bomb at a Christian stand in

a book fair a number of years ago. All of this had made me realize that one day there would be something uglier—that the church will spill blood one day. So on one level at least this wasn't a surprise.

Even though we were aware of the dangers and could predict that there would one day be killings, it still came as a shock when it happened.

Malatya is a small town and the believers there have had threats. It's a town known for its over-weening nationalism so it's a logical place for something like this to happen. But the manner in which it was done and the ugly reality of it still caught us all off guard.

The church here has responded very well and with great maturity.⁴

The testimony of the wounded church and families receives much commendation, as believers and pastors from elsewhere gathered to share the burden and the sorrow and to relieve the families of some of the legal and media issues. In



Necati Aydin



Ugur Yuksel



Tilmann Geske

face of an attempt to block the funeral of Tilmann Geske in Malatya with the rumoured ‘impropriety’ of any Muslim digging such a grave, the men of the church in Adana (just by Tarsus) came with shovels and accomplished the task, publicly. Necati Aydin was buried in his home town of Izmir (New Testament Smyrna, and 19th-century birthplace of Dean John Burgon); Ugur was buried by his Muslim family in his hometown of Elazig, across the Euphrates from Malatya.⁵

Before going further along the path of testimony it may help to consider the context of this anti-Christian violence. In 2002 I wrote:

Although Ottoman Turkey was never a thoroughgoing religious state, the reforms of the 1920s declared the new republic officially to be a secular state. More recently Islam has become much more of a factor, and freedom for non-Muslims, though supposedly guaranteed, has become an uncertain thing. Certainly there is the deep rooted cultural expectation that to be Turkish is to be Muslim.

And then again:

The UK-based Barnabas Fund reported in February of this year [2002] that as many as forty different churches had been threatened with closure since December. Christians believe that anti-Christian television and radio

programmes prompted the crackdown. Evangelicals are not distinguished from cults and terrorists in the Turkish media or mind.

Since 2001, and stepped up in 2005, there has been a steady campaign of high-placed and high-powered anti-Christian influence, so much so that one Turkish Newspaper, *Radikal*, calls it hypocrisy on the part of the authorities to denounce these slayings, which have been fomented by the subtle and poisonous affirmations made by politicians across the political divide. Other (brave) journalists query whether the sale of a few Bibles and the conversion of a few hundred Turks to Christianity really justifies the climate of fear which prepared the way for the Malatya slaughter. Some have drawn attention to the fact that in Europe, and Germany in particular, Turks are not hindered in their observance of Islam, and are allowed to build mosques.

Many newspapers apparently put the testimony of Tilmann Geske’s widow Susan on front pages; none of the accounts that I have read are identical, but the firm reference to Luke 23.34—‘forgive them; for they know not what they do’—is plain to see. One columnist wrote ‘She said in one sentence what 1,000 missionaries in 1,000 years could not’.⁶ However, it must be acknowledged that the greater part of media coverage has scarcely moved away from the ‘red-alert missionary-hunt’ of recent years. The funerals in Malatya and Izmir were videotaped by security forces, who parcel evangelicalism with terrorist

groups such as Al Qaida and would be glad of such an identity parade!

Why address this in our *Quarterly Record*? Tilmann Geske was working on the preparation of a Turkish study Bible there in Malatya⁷—how difficult will this make Scripture distribution in Turkey generally; how hard to find the right people to do more work in getting our own project beyond the Gospel of John? Perhaps, though, it will mean more help, even refugees from Turkey coming to the UK and offering to help. 'There is a lot of sorrow and a lot of anger still in the church [in Turkey]. Some are afraid, but they are the minority. Most have been filled with a renewed courage and determination to see the church grow.'⁸

We drew attention to the growing distress and great need in 2002, and asked for your prayers—

To confess Christ in Turkey, and to endure there, needs much grace. Brethren, pray for them, and for the abundant provision of reliable Scriptures so that saints may grow, and that preachers may gain wisdom and authority in their ministry.

May this event stir up much prayer for the churches and Scriptures in Turkey! Think of the places named with active churches, such as Malatya with thirty in the church. When I first met a Turkish brother some years ago he remembered a time when there were not that many believers known in all Turkey! Pray that the

water of the tears and the blood of the martyrs in Malatya shall be owned of the Living God to bring forth fruit a hundredfold to His glory and praise and the saving of souls through faith in Jesus Christ His Son, and the rewarding of the suffering saints in Turkey. Pastor Fikret Bocek of the Izmir church says, 'Please pray for the church in Turkey. Don't pray against persecution, pray for perseverance'.

Endnotes:

1. Kurdistan, as recent troubles have brought to world attention, runs on east through Iraq and Iran.
2. Golden Thoughts verse for that day—Fight the good fight of faith!
3. Several e-mails give unnecessarily graphic accounts, and there is some question as to what exactly happened, so these details will not be repeated here.
4. Owing to the current difficulties, this missionary must remain unidentified.
5. He was given a Muslim burial, which his Christian friends were not allowed to attend. The missionary wrote: 'One of the newspapers commented that even in death Ugur's family wouldn't even allow him to be a Christian. The good news is that the family really has nothing to do with it now—Ugur is in a much better place today'.
6. Quoted by Bob Unruh, 'Faith Under Fire', *WorldNetDaily*, www.wnd.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=55426, 28 April 2007.
7. Nothing is known of its provenance at this time
8. Again, from the missionary in Ankara.