The Faces of Disaster: the Faces of Christian Compassion

Wilbert R. Shenk

Abstract: "Disaster" is a constant theme in human experience. The Scriptures speak of both natural and human-caused disasters. In the modern period we observe that each new technology can be used for the benefit of humankind or for its destruction. Sin is always present. We are now facing a new generation of man-made disasters: electronic devices that detonate powerful explosions that destroy large structures, unmanned drones controlled from a center in Nevada, carrying bombs that rain down destruction and death in Yemen. The same technology may be used for constructive purposes or to destroy life and property. In this brief presentation we survey resources Christians are using to bring healing and hope to people impacted by various kinds of disaster: addressing emotional, physical, and spiritual traumas through the use of the scriptures, art, and music; restorative justice; peacemaking and reconciliation. Christians are called to be present, especially where disaster has struck, as agents of healing and restoration of life and well-being. Let us prepare to respond to these many opportunities for Christian service where people are victims of disaster.

Introduction

When the Cold War ended in 1989–90, it was widely anticipated that the world was entering a time of peace, goodwill, and improved international relations. This quickly proved to be an illusion. Events on September 11, 2001 were prophetic. The collapse of the World Trade Towers in New York City on that day impressed one word on the world's consciousness:

terrorism.

The nature of warfare continues to evolve. Cell groups, driven by ideological fervor, have learned to harness the latest technology to make powerful new weapons such as IEDs (Improvised Explosive Devices). Such groups operate throughout the world. Reports of "suicide bombers" carrying out attacks are all too frequent. These actions result in terrible destruction of life and property, injuring and killing many innocent people, and leaving the local population traumatized. While the term terror is an old word, **terrorism** as a form of war is rather new. Military experts admit they are not well prepared to engage with this form of warfare. But militant terrorism has not been the only source of social and economic upheaval.

Wars of genocide—where all the members of a particular ethnic group are targeted for destruction—have been waged throughout history. But in the past thirty years, in spite of international laws prohibiting such warfare, we have witnessed several genocidal wars. In 1994 Rwanda was torn apart by a genocidal war in which the Hutus tried to exterminate all Tutsis. The United Nations Human Rights Council estimated that 800,000 Tutsi men, women, and children—three-fourths of the Tutsi population—were killed in that war. Hutus that tried to save Tutsis were also killed.

Colonel Omar al-Bashir seized power in Sudan in 1989. He declared Sudan to be an Islamic state governed by Sharia in 1993. Sudan is made up of two ethnic groups: Arab and Africans. Al-Bashir's government is dominated by ethnic Arabs. In 2003–2006 the Sudanese Government waged war against the people of Darfur Province who are ethnic Africans. Three hundred thousand people were killed and 2.8 million civilians were displaced. Those who were able fled across the border into Chad. The Sudanese military targeted civilians and humanitarian aid workers. The world community quickly labeled this a war of genocide. The International Criminal Court, The Hague, issued two warrants for President al-Bashir's arrest, charging him with "crimes against humanity." He has evaded arrest. Many people in Darfur were killed outright; others were driven into the desert where they died of hunger and thirst.

Today there are some 20 million refugees throughout the world. According to the Geneva Convention on Refugees, a refugee "is a person who is outside their country of citizenship because they have well-founded grounds for fear of persecution because of their race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, and is unable to obtain sanctuary from their home country or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of that country, or in the case of not having a nationality and being outside their country of former habitual residence as a result of such event, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to their country of former habitual residence" (*Wikipedia*, "Refugee").

In 2015 the world witnessed an unprecedented refugee crisis as several million people from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Middle Eastern countries, and Africa attempted to reach Europe and North America to escape long-running wars, political chaos, a lack of basic necessities of life, insecurity, endemic poverty, and desperation. Turkey, which borders Syria, has become the country with the largest number of refugees, with some 2.5 million, and another million people have poured into Europe. This is a major tragedy.

It has long been recognized that vulnerable groups—women, children, and the elderly—are especially at risk in situations of armed conflict. International law has tried to address this question by forbidding the conduct of warfare in areas populated by civilians. But many of the wars fought in the past fifty years have involved heavily populated urban areas. Terrorist militias deliberately use civilian populations as "human shields" as they stage military actions. It is extremely difficult to get accurate statistics on the ratio of civilian deaths to soldiers killed. Perhaps more significant is the fact that large numbers of people are exposed directly to warfare and have suffered profound emotional wounds as a result.

The Iraq and Afghanistan wars, in which the most advanced technology has been used, resulted in a new generation of injuries, both physical and psychological. We have become familiar with the term PTSD, acronym

for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, because many soldiers who have fought in these wars have returned home with a condition that neither they nor their families understand. PTSD is the result of soldiers having experienced severe physical and psychological injury while on duty. They experience constant recall of the traumatizing experience so the person cannot sleep, is unable to relate to other people, and the environment. The Mayo Clinic defines PTSD to be "a mental health condition that is triggered by a terrifying event—either experiencing it or witnessing it. Symptoms of PTSD may include flashbacks, nightmares, and severe anxiety as well as uncontrollable thoughts about the event" (*Wikipedia*, "Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome").

The mental health profession has been under pressure to find ways of treating patients suffering the "psychological injuries" of war. The scale of the problem is enormous, both because of the number of soldiers suffering from PTSD and the long-term treatment these people require. It is appropriate for a government to provide medical care for soldiers wounded in war; but thousands of civilians who have been wounded physically and psychologically because they simply could not escape the conflict receive little, if any, treatment and rehabilitation from war injuries. Imagine all the Iraqi and Syrian women, children and elderly people who could not escape the war being fought all around them. They, too, may suffer PTSD, but they will never have access to medical services that might help them recover a measure of good health again.

This presentation focuses on these human crises that we as Christians cannot ignore. We are called to respond with compassion and expertise that will help bring healing. My goal is to challenge you to prepare for ministry by getting the training that will equip you to respond to these situations effectively.

A theme running through this presentation is "trauma," which is defined as (a) injury or wound to living tissue; (b) a disordered psychic or behavioral state resulting from mental or behavioral stress or physical injury.[1] As the definition indicates, trauma can take both physical and

psychological forms; it may be a combination of both. Trauma seriously interrupts the normal order of life and well-being. The scale of need to help people traumatized by war, state violence, and natural disasters is greater than ever. This is both an opportunity and responsibility to which Christians ought to respond.[2]

Haiti 2010 Earthquake[3]

Not long after the earthquake in Haiti in January 2010, a medical team from the University of Miami arrived at a tent hospital in Port-au-Prince to provide medical care for the injured. This team of three surgeons and a physical therapist reported what they experienced:

- "It was like a war zone," they said. "There were four large tents with rows and rows of cots with patients. . . 125 patients in each tent, all injured, mostly crush injuries, open wounds, broken bones. . ."
- "The temperature was 90 degrees (F), mosquitoes everywhere, and the smell of rotting flesh. . ."
- "No running water, no toilets". . . we all felt overwhelmed with worthlessness as physicians, and realized that this was a catastrophe beyond anything we had ever imagined."

A surgeon in the group picks up the narrative: "Then something happened. It was 9 o'clock in the evening . . . and we had been up for the last 36 hours . . . cleaning infected wounds . . ."

- A man walks into the tent with his guitar, sits down, and starts to sing.
- Row by row, people lying on the cots join and harmonize. The swell gets louder and louder, and soon everyone—the entire tent—is singing.
- All the sound of trauma just went away. The singing sounded like it consumed all of Port-au-Prince, it was so loud.

- People stood up in the center of the tent, some were dancing. Even people that couldn't get up still were singing—the entire tent—is singing.
- One little boy wouldn't get up because it was too painful, so his mother helped him stand up so he could dance on one leg.
- "We turned to one of the translators and asked: 'What are they singing?'" He said, "They're singing, 'Jesus, thank you for loving us. Jesus, thank you for loving us."
- "It was like a knife hit us! After all we had seen—this joy and happiness! It was a tipping point. Things changed after that. It's extremely humbling to be around people who in the worst of their lives have it in their hearts to give gratitude for what they have left."

The physical therapist adds: "I decided at that moment that what I had witnessed was such a beautiful example of human courage that I would do anything in my power to help Haiti rebuild."

- "The people in that tent gave us an opportunity to understand their pain, and their strength, and their belief."
- "I don't think anyone who was there will ever be the same."
- "I quit my job, I left my home, and I am now living in Haiti. I took a position with Partners in Health."

Even in the midst of suffering, for people of faith there comes a time to sing the Lord's song in a strange new world. To be able to sing, we may need a tent full of believers, and someone to help us stand on one leg. And we may need to hold the Christ light for one another.

Los Angeles[4]

In the early 1970s, ten days after graduating from college, Mary joined a group of people working in a violent and impoverished neighborhood in

Los Angeles. Not long after arriving in inner-city Los Angeles, one evening Mary and her fellow workers were disturbed by noises in their garage. Mary's first response was to call the police. The neighbors quickly became angry with Mary. It was their children who broke into Mary's garage, but because she called the police she was now an enemy. They threatened Mary and her friends with violence. They demanded that Mary and her friends leave their neighborhood.

Learning to live in inner-city Los Angeles was a deeply challenging experience in culture shock. Mary didn't know where to turn. In her fear and confusion she told God that she could not continue living in Los Angeles. She must return to her home in Alberta, Canada. Then she heard God say: "They can't touch the real you." God also said to her, "You can't create peace. It's a gift, a fruit of the Spirit." Mary eagerly claimed this for herself. It became her anchor. Gradually, she learned what it means to practice and extend peace to other people, but she could never create peace in another person. Only the Holy Spirit could instill peace. For the next eighteen years this insight would sustain her ministry.

Several years later Mary was with twelve young women with whom she had become friends. Life had been difficult for all of them. The group sat in a circle around a large sheet of paper. On that sheet Mary had drawn a cross. She began by reading Isaiah 53, which describes the Suffering Servant as:

- Despised and rejected
- Familiar with suffering and infirmities
- Considered unattractive

As Mary watched the expressions on the women's faces she noticed they were intensely identifying with Isaiah's description of the Messiah. She continued reading, emphasizing "that this Suffering Servant had borne our infirmities, had carried our diseases, was wounded for our transgressions."[(5)] Then she read 1 Peter 2:24 where Jesus is identified as this

Suffering Servant. Mary recalled, "I encouraged the women to let Jesus carry their suffering and sorrow, to let him heal the wounds of the sins they had committed and the sins that had been committed against them."[6] The women were then invited to write any of these sins on the cross. All quickly knelt down and began to write on the paper cross:

- "KKK burned crosses in our front yard"[7]
- "raped by stepfather"
- "molested by uncle"
- "not protected"
- "mother didn't believe me"
- "falsely accused by teachers"
- "watched suspiciously in stores"
- "not invited to the parties by white students"
- "brother murdered"
- "abandoned," "rejected," "mocked," "told I was ugly," "not welcomed," "ignored"

"That group of twelve young women wrote over three hundred comments on that cross," Mary noted.[8] The women admitted these experiences made them angry and bitter. Several of them dared to believe that they could indeed leave their bad experiences at the Cross and trust Jesus to take away their burdens, bitterness, and suffering. "They sensed that the extreme suffering of Christ was strong enough to address the unbearable suffering they had experienced."[9] They were now on the path leading to salvation.

Mary was surprised when neighbors who came into her home would remark that this was the first time they felt "peace." Their homes and community were dominated by the darkness of violence and fear. In Mary's home they felt live-giving peace. Experiencing peace in this way marked the beginning of their journey into new life with Jesus.

Using scriptures to heal the traumas of war

In the 1990s Bible translators in several African countries saw firsthand the suffering of thousands of people because of war. These people were victims of inter-ethnic and international conflicts. But hardly any suitable scripture-based materials were available that pastors and community leaders could use in helping heal the traumas of violence and war. Rhiannon Lloyd's book, *Healing the Wounds of Ethnic Conflict: The Role of the Church in Healing, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation*,[10] provided a starting point.

A Bible translator (SIL) team developed two basic books: *Healing the Wounds of Trauma and Healing Children's Wounds of Trauma*. These two manuals have been widely used to help children and adults overcome the terrible things they have experienced because of war. These small books draw on the rich resources found in the Scriptures and Christian practices in addressing the most basic questions victims of violence face: Why do bad things happen to us? How can I be sure God really loves me? How can I forgive people who have done bad things to me? How should Christians respond to conflict? The Bible offers outstanding resources in dealing with all these questions. For example, sixty-seven of the Psalms are laments, in many cases in response to having been victimized or mistreated. Everyone who has had traumatic experiences needs to have opportunity to face their grief, loss, and anger so they can be released from this burden and renewed to live in freedom.

The contribution of music to trauma healing

The role of music and other art-forms in healing trauma is being increasingly recognized. Wendy Aitkens observes, "Combining the power of the performing and visual arts with the Word of God provides an important tool to facilitate the healing of the emotional and spiritual wounds

received when people experience trauma."[11] Aitkins reports that in 2009 many Congolese fled from the brutal attacks by Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army, escaping into the Central African Republic to the north. The entire group was traumatized by what they had suffered.

But when these Congolese refugees realized they had successfully escaped into freedom, their artistic impulses were awakened. "Men began carving mortars, used for centuries by the women . . . to husk rice and pound dried cassava into flour. Artistic lines and wood-burned designs were incorporated into the carving of these ordinary domestic utensils. Young Congolese men started weaving [traditional] straw hats . . . Music also played an integral role in helping the Congolese refugees deal with the trauma they had experienced. The musical practices of the evangelical church people within the refugee population continued to be an important part of their church life . . . Two weeks after the majority of the refugees arrived, a Sunday morning church service of thanksgiving was held in the refugee camp. Throughout the three-hour long service, musical expressions of grief mingled with hope infused the experience . . . The power of song set to biblical texts helped those who attended focus their thoughts on the protection and provision of God as a way of dealing with the immediate trauma they were facing."[12] Several months later a song-writing workshop was conducted. Each evening the participants composed songs based on scriptural texts that highlighted grieving loss of the lives of loved ones, lamenting sins and wrong actions, thanksgiving for deliverance, and praise for God's grace and faithfulness. Worship renewed the people's hope and gave them fresh energy for the tasks of rebuilding their lives in a new land.

Restorative justice

Although seldom reported in the news media, a disaster to be found in many countries is the corruption and dysfunction of the criminal justice system. Today millions of people across the world are incarcerated in inhumane conditions and often unjustly. The increasingly adversarial

approach to prosecution and sentencing has encouraged a narrow focus on retribution.[13]

Since the early 1970s the "Restorative Justice" movement has been challenging the principles by which modern society deals with those people that deviate from the legal and social norms. Indeed, the penal systems in most societies have as their goal punishing the wrongdoer rather than focusing on what steps might be taken to restore these individuals to responsible and productive roles in society.

The call to embrace *restorative justice* comes to us from the Christian Scriptures. Chris Marshall, a New Testament scholar who has written extensively on the biblical view of justice, points out that justice is found throughout the Bible. Whereas "the main vocabulary items for sexual sin appear about 90 times in the Bible . . . the major Hebrew and Greek words for justice . . . occur over 1000 times."[14] This rich and complex concept is based on a foundation that includes shalom, covenant, Torah, deed-consequences, and atonement-forgiveness. The goal of God's work of salvation is to restore God's creation, to put right what sin has caused to go wrong. By contrast, human justice focuses on punishing the wrongdoer, that is, on retribution.

The vision for an alternative to the secular criminal justice system, a vision based on the biblical vision for restorative justice, resulted in the Victim Offender Reconciliation Program (VORP) developed in the mid-1970s in the United States. Subsequently, VORP has been introduced in other countries to provide an alternative to the official criminal justice system. A court that is sympathetic to the goals of VORP may assign responsibility to VORP to supervise the process of reconciliation and restitution. The goal is that through such intervention, both the victim and the offender who committed the crime will benefit. The victim will receive the sincere apology of the offender; the offender will acknowledge the crime of which he is guilty and commit to a process of making restitution. For example, if a robbery was committed, the offender will repay whatever was stolen. The VORP agent supervises the process until restitution is

completed. The result of this process, when it is faithfully completed, is that both victim and offender have benefitted. But society has also benefitted by restoring an offender to useful and responsible participation in the life of the community.

VORP has gained the approval of courts in the United States to serve as an agent, under court jurisdiction, to bring together the victim of a crime and the person who perpetrated the act. Of course, this requires the agreement of all parties to participate. VORP continues to demonstrate the validity of "restorative" justice. But the scope of need is much greater than what can be done with the limited number of people currently engaged in this work worldwide.

Restorative Justice has provided new trajectories for victims of serious crimes, such as the murder of a family member, to find healing and hope for themselves. The family of a victim understandably struggles with profound questions: Can we honestly forgive the perpetrator? How can we deal with our grief and memories? In the collection *Transcending: Reflections of Crime Victims*, one finds moving accounts of the journeys of mothers, fathers, brothers, and sisters who have lost a beloved family member to violent death. Forgiveness is not cheap or easy; it does not come quickly. One mother speaks eloquently of her own struggle: "I had tremendous rage. But when I got in touch with my own violence, I also realized I didn't want to perpetrate 'an eye for an eye,' because, as trite as the saying goes, everyone would be blind. It's got to stop. That's the mission of love—to be able to transcend our own hurts and create more love. Otherwise we're going to continue the cycle of violence."[15] This is what God has done for us in the crucifixion of God the Son. God never withdrew the divine love from us in spite of our rejection of God's loving compassion. Our mission is to bear witness in word and deed wherever disaster happens to that compassion.

Notes

(1) *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*.
(2) See, C. Yoder, *Trauma Healing*.
(3) Transcribed from audio by J. Nelson Kraybill.
(4) Mary Thiessen Nation, "Jesus Our Peace," in eds. Krabill and Shenk. Pp. 171–83.
(5) P. 174.
(6) Ibid.
(7) KKK = Ku Klux Klan, a white supremacist group.
(8) Ibid.
(9) P. 175.
(10) Rhiannon Lloyd, *Healing the Wounds*.
(11) W. Aitkins, "Song Writing."
(12) Ibid. Two other examples of the therapeutic power of music are described briefly in these pieces: Laurie Williams, "Haiti's Unending Song," p. 330, and Roger W. Lowther, "The Aroma of Beauty: Music in Disaster Relief," pp. 281–82 in Krabill, ed., *Worship and Mission*.
(13) For an up-to-date account, see H. Zehr, *Changing Lenses*, ch. 1–6. Zehr is one of the pioneers in the restorative justice movement. Also: Zehr, *The Little Book of Restorative Justice*.
(14) C. Marshall, *The Little Book of Biblical Justice*, 10–11. Also, Marshall, *Beyond Retribution*, and, *Compassionate Justice*.
(15) Zehr, *Transcending*, 119.

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