

## **When the Shaking Stops: On Recovering Solidarity Against an Individualist Hermeneutic**

*The shaking stops when we stand together, when we remember that sisters and brothers linked across the world are stronger than fear.*

- Most Rev. Katharine J. Schori

Let me first say that as the news updates on the tragedy in Haiti goes on day after day, our hearts and prayers go out to our brothers and sisters there. The pain and disarray is unimaginable. In some cases, entire families have died leaving only a surviving member. Where will he or she go to? Let us pray that the Church in Haiti will serve as that place to go to, the place where the people can go to receive aid, recover, and then rebuild their lives. Let us also pray that the Church in Haiti can, in these difficult days, to be the light in the darkness, the smile in the bitterness, and the peace in the violence.

Despite the devastation and the poverty in the country, it is easy to think that there's nothing more to Haiti. Haiti, after all, is an impoverished country, and it was beset with setback after setback in its history. But it is all too easy to think that beyond these setbacks, including the recent earthquake, there's not much else. On the contrary I think the latest tragedy to befall upon the nation affords the Church a unique opportunity: one where we can see the spiritual wealth that the church in Haiti affords to us in the first-world nations. As a result, we see where we, as a church, need to improve in our journey, as one church, towards Christlikeness.

### **Lesson One: Against An Individualist Hermeneutic**

In an interview a few days after Haiti, televangelist Pat Robertson made a comment on an interview, saying that

... something happened a long time ago in Haiti, and people might not want to talk about it. They were under the heel of the French ... and they got together and swore a pact to the devil ... And so the devil said, 'O.K., it's a deal.' And they kicked the French out, the Haitians revolted, and ... they were cursed by one thing after another. The island of Hispaniola is one island that is cut down the middle, on one side is Haiti and the other is the Dominican Republic. The Dominican Republic is prosperous, wealthy, full of resorts. Haiti is in desperate poverty.<sup>1</sup>

Robertson's comments exemplify what is severely lacking in the American Protestant Church, and that is, the ability to exist as one church as a member of a global communion. This is due to an individualist hermeneutic that many ascribe to, sometimes without knowing it. Thus, Stanley Hauerwas declares that "no task is more

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<sup>1</sup> Pat Robertson, *The 700 Club*, Christian Broadcasting Network, January 13, 2010. <http://www.cbsnews.com/blogs/2010/01/13/crimesider/entry6092717.shtml> (accessed January 23, 2010).

important that for the Church to take the Bible out of the hands of individual Christians in North America.”<sup>2</sup> He says this not to encourage Christians to reject their Bibles, but instead to read it properly—not from an individualist worldview, but from an ecclesial worldview, taking into account the global community of faith that the Christian is a member of.

Such an individualism disregards truth in exchange for an individualized worldview and ethic. In a way, it is akin to philosophical relativism. In the case of the fundamentalist-dispensationalist worldview, the way history unfolds is correlated to biblical references, interpreted and applied literally. Thus, it is unsurprising that Robertson has declared not just Haiti to be a wrath of God, but also for Hurricane Katrina to be God's judgment upon a sinful city. If only New Orleans were a God-fearing city, it would experience the wealth and glamor of Chicago or New York City.

So it is with little surprise that Robertson makes a comparison between Haiti and the Dominican Republic. The Dominican Republic, which had a relatively similar history to Haiti, was not complicit, as implied by Robertson, in consorting to the devil. Thus, the Dominican Republic's "obedience" was rewarded with their relative wealth today.

The fundamentalist-dispensational hermeneutic of history is actually quite attractive. For one, it can easily make sense of the world around us from a “biblical” perspective. The danger is that historical explanations differ depending on the individual. As an example, three different theologians could interpret the situation in Haiti to be punishment for sin, God allowing Satan to test Haiti, or evidence for open theism. And biblical support can be found for all three different options, depending on each theologian’s convictions.

Secondly, the fundamentalist-dispensational theology, as historian Mark Noll notes, bypasses deep analysis of issues in preference for a simple one-to-one correlation between world events and biblical references. He writes that

Dispensationalism promoted a kind of supernaturalism that, for all of its virtues in defending the faith, failed to give proper attention to the world. The supernaturalism of dispensationalism, especially in the extreme forms that were easiest to promote among the populace at large, lacked a sufficient place for the natural realm and tended toward a kind of gnosticism in its communication of truth. Adherents were instructed *about* nature, world events, ethics, and other dimensions of human existence, but almost always without studying these matters head-on. Bible verses were quoted to explain conditions and events in the world, but with very little systematic analysis of the events and conditions themselves.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993, p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994, p. 132.

But what is interesting is that the dispensationalist position makes Pat Robertson theological relatives with prosperity theologians such as Joel Osteen and Joseph Prince. Osteen, for example, writes in his bestselling *Your Best Life Now* that

... I'm not going to feel bad about myself. If somebody can do what I do better, fine. I'm not in a contest; I'm not comparing myself with anyone else. As far as I'm concerned, I'm number one! I know I'm doing the best I can do.

That is what the Scripture teaches. It says, 'Let each one examine his own work.' In other words, quit looking at what everybody else is doing and run your own race. You can take pride in yourself without comparing yourself to anyone else. If you run your race and be the best that *you* can be, then you can feel good about yourself.<sup>4</sup>

Note that Osteen's hermeneutic is individual-driven as well. It is about how the individual sees things in a positive light that matters. All that matters is your own race. Just do your best and don't bother about anyone else. All that matters, in summary, is that you feel good about yourself.

A fundamentalist-dispensational theology sees God as working around the individual's hermeneutic, and a prosperity-based theology sees God as working around the individual's desires.

Thus, Hauerwas calls for a wresting of the Bible away from the hands of the individual American, because theology is done in the Church and as the Church. "Outside the Church," declares St. Cyprian, "there is no salvation" precisely because of that. But the Church in America and many other first-world nations is so used to a personal, individualist hermeneutic. So, the first lesson the Church in Haiti can teach us in these times of great suffering is gift of solidarity, the gift of laying down of the self to identify and join with others in their circumstances.

This was exemplified in the witness of the Episcopal bishop of Haiti, Jean Z. Duracin. Bishop Duracin was one of the dignitaries who were offered an opportunity to be evacuated, an offer he refused, saying that he must be with his people. It was exemplified in the ecumenical mourning that took place with news that the Roman Catholic archbishop of Haiti was among the victims of the disaster. And it was exemplified in the international relief efforts that responded to the disaster.

At an ecumenical prayer service for the Haitian church, Presiding Bishop Katharine J. Schori explained, in a sermon at a prayer service for Haiti, that the

ability to suffer with, to feel compassion, is one of the gifts of being fully human. We may only be able to respond through being with, by standing

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<sup>4</sup> Joel Osteen, *Your Best Life Now: Seven Steps to Living at Your Full Potential*. New York: FaithWords, 2004, p. 95.

alongside even at a distance. We can pray with the grieving and we can reach out.<sup>5</sup>

## Lesson Two: The Confrontation of Suffering

One of the more interesting news coverages on Haiti was CNN's focus on the religious response from within. Reporter Moni Basu writes that, "some blamed themselves for drawing the ire of God. Others came to openly give thanks. Thousands together. Together in their suffering. Together in their faith." And despite the destruction, "the sound of song and 'amens' filled the square."<sup>6</sup> This was how Haiti responded to a terrible tragedy.

Perhaps the reason that an individualist hermeneutic is so ingrained into the first-world Church is because it is reassuring. We don't know how to confront, much less deal, with suffering, so the easy and reassuring way around it is to explain it away. For fundamentalist-dispensationalists, the suffering have sinned, and are working out the wages of their sins. For prosperity theologians, the suffering were resigned to their state from the beginning. If only they would think that they were prosperous to begin with! Here, the second lesson from the Haitian Church to the first world Church is for us to do just the opposite: to reject any efforts to deconstruct suffering into some manageable construct and, instead, confront it face-to-face, as it is.

How do we confront the unknown land that is suffering? In Numbers 13-14, when the Israelites first laid eyes on the Promised Land, twelve surveyors were sent out to survey it, since the land was occupied by foreign nations. The spies returned with glowing reports of the land, that it indeed "does flow with milk and honey (13:27)", although the nations occupying the Land were powerful.

The Israelite community must've then responded with despair. Unfortunately, the remaining ten spies focused on a difficulty in entering the Promised Land: the occupying foreigners. Now, Joshua and Caleb certainly saw the tall and strong occupants in the land, but they remember the all-powerful God who triumphed over Egypt's attempts to keep the Israelites in slavery. If Egypt could be held at bay, how could the Israelites *not* triumph over the various tribes living in the Land?

This is not the same faith that Joel Osteen describes in his book. His "faith" is simply a belief in a God that works to the agenda and circumstance of the individual. It is the same "faith" that motivated the Israelites in Num. 14:40 to begin their invasion of the Promised Land, even as Moses tried to dissuade them from doing so. The faith of Joshua and Caleb was a theological faith, which is the present being driven by a remembrance of the past.

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<sup>5</sup> Katharine J. Schori, *Our Hearts Are Broken*. 11 min., 33 sec.; From Washington National Cathedral: *Strength through Unity: A Service of Prayer for Haiti*. Microsoft Silverlight, [http://www.nationalcathedral.org/webcasts/Haiti\\_KJS.shtml](http://www.nationalcathedral.org/webcasts/Haiti_KJS.shtml) (accessed January 23, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Moni Basu, "Burial, prayers, and a miracle on 11<sup>th</sup> day after quake," CNN.com, January 23, 2010, <http://www.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/americas/01/23/haiti.burial.faith/index.html>.

This remembrance is critical. We in the first-world need to remember that the wealthy, developed, and relatively suffering-free environment was not of our own doing, but a position that was blessed to us from God. Wealth, development, and security are gracious blessings, indeed, but they were not meant to be exclusively reserved for the blessed. Instead, it was meant to be shared as a witness of how in the Church the excesses of the wealthy cover the poverty of the poor.

How could we have forgotten that the wealth, development, and security that generally exists in the first-world nations is from God? Here, we must return to the discussion of the individualist hermeneutic, because by having an individualist hermeneutic, we easily forget that the Church is more than only America, the first-world, or some categorization. Worse, without any remote idea of suffering, we forget our humanity. As Presiding Bishop Schori explained, "God is present and known more intimately in the midst of suffering. Above all, we become more human through our broken hearts."<sup>7</sup>

Thus, comments such as that from Pat Robertson sound so heartless and insensitive because he, and we in the first-world as well, are so distanced from suffering that we forget that suffering is a part of regular, even daily, life in many parts of the world. Exhortations from Joel Osteen sound so out-of-touch and even incredulous for that same reason as well.

But it is not enough to say that the solution to this is to just focus on God alone. As theologian Miroslav Volf notes, it underestimates our ability to simply spin the Word of God differently so as to match our own individualist worldview. To avoid that, he exhorts us to

nurture commitment to the multicultural community of Christian churches. We need to see ourselves and our own understanding of God's future with the eyes of Christian from other cultures, listen to voices of Christians from other cultures so as to make sure that the voice of our culture has not drowned out the voice of Jesus Christ.<sup>8</sup>

And it is here that we understand that, in order to confront suffering, we can't do it alone. Thus, we return to the first lesson from the Haitian Church on solidarity. We can only confront suffering as one Church because the Church is the vicar of Christ's hope. In other words, the Church is the hope of the world because Christ is Hope. Thus, as a Church, we already have the means to confront suffering already. The question is whether those of us in the first-world remember the God who gives and takes away (Job 1:21), and if we are willing to join with our global brothers and sisters in meeting suffering as it is.

## **The Future?**

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996, p. 53-54.

So how to move forward? Hauerwas suggests for us to look to the crucified Christ, who

does not promise that by being his follower we will be made safe. Rather, this savior offers to free us from our self-inflicted fears and anxieties. Jesus does so not by making our lives 'more meaningful'... but by making us members of his body and blood so that we can share in the goods of a community that is an alternative to the world.

Thus, despite the hopelessness and despair on the streets of Port-au-Prince, news outlets note that people still can lift up hands of worship to God, because God is hope. News outlets are reporting that despite the devastation, people still come to God in worship, and in some cases even miracles have occurred! When we run into times of suffering, we should look no further than our brothers and sisters in Haiti, who in their suffering and pain still can gather together in worship, and who as a Church confront suffering day after day because of their solidarity.

Yes, Haiti remains an impoverished country. Even after life returns to normal, if it can ever be so, the crushing poverty remains an issue that must be confronted with the same vigor as the earthquake. But Haiti, contrary to the suggestions of the fundamentalist-dispensational or prosperity theology, is not a spiritual wasteland. Evangelization efforts should continue in Haiti, of course, but as a friend shared to me regarding the earthquake, "Have you considered that maybe the earthquake in Haiti wasn't to show that only the Haitians need the Lord Jesus, but that the rest of us do – and on a much larger scale?"<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> My gratitude goes to Ray Low of New York University, who shared with me the quote. Ray also made valuable and constructive comments on this article. The responsibility for any errors, however, remains solely mine.