

Chapter 1

How Badly We're Broken

A World and a Church Gone Wrong

I feel like I'm watching a movie. As I look out the window of the Toyota Land Cruiser, driving through Kabul streets, the scenes of a war-torn country are far beyond my version of "normal." Building after bombed out apartment building, bullet ridden telephone poles, and mortar shells embedded in a destroyed movie theater; all look like something Hollywood might bring into my living room whenever I ask it to. However, this is no movie and none of the people are actors. As I watch Afghans carry out their daily business of buying bread, getting in and out of taxis, and just walking to who knows where, it is hard to fathom that they have all lived through this destruction and devastation.

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As we drive down a busy street on our way to visit another needy project site, I see a father sitting on a small piece of tattered cardboard – his only protection from the hot pavement – holding three of his children. All three children look barely conscious. Their clothes are smoggy grey, they wear no shoes, their hair is matted and caked with mud, and their father holds out his hat at anyone who passes by, hoping that the next person might be able to provide the smallest amount of food for his family. My eyes are fixed on him as we drive by and I wonder, “What lottery did I win that that isn’t me and my children? What prevents that reality from being the lot that I drew?”

Earlier that same year I traveled in another Toyota Land Cruiser, this time in Santa Cruz, Bolivia. We stopped at a stoplight late one evening coming back from visiting another under-funded project as a very small girl, no more than three or four years old, approaches the vehicle in front of ours begging for anything that might come from inside. My eye catches hers as I sit in the safety of the vehicle and she wanders through the danger of busy traffic. Again, the same painful thought goes through my soul, “What prevents my four year old daughter from being that child? Why is it that I am not living in a slum somewhere forcing my preschool princess to walk through city traffic after dark to beg for coins?” The risk of exploitation and danger is worth the potential that she might come home with a few coins from an ashtray. The stark realities of these painfully wrong situations

caused me to ask deeper, more systemic questions: questions that at first shines the spotlight into the dark places of evil and of organized religion's atrophy and apparent inability to respond, but also questions that, if answered and addressed, could bring incredible hope that screams to the world that maybe our news really is good news and just maybe we *can* actually affect global change.

Does God love children from developed nations more than children from developing countries? No! Is the God of the Bible the type of deity that requires a fatalistic response to injustice? Not the One I know. How can a benevolent, loving God condone this type of suffering and injustice?

While my theological training can provide me with a moderately acceptable theological answer to the nature and character of a loving God and humanity's fallen condition, the attractive descriptions of God's love and compassion cause an even greater anger and frustration. The more I understand the incredible compassion and compulsion of God to demonstrate an incomprehensible love for His creation, the more incensed I get that this love doesn't seem to be understood by a world so desperate for its understanding.

For the past century our evangelistic efforts have included statements about "*for God so loved the world*" (John 3:16), yet the world suffers from an embarrassingly gross imbalance of basic

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resources. Inevitably, questions about the reality of God's love become questions about our inability to demonstrate that love.

Why is it that the Christian religion is not making a difference in the world proportionate to the love we claim to understand and commensurate to the resources that we currently have been "blessed" with? Why, at a time in church history where the organized Christian religion possesses the greatest accumulation of resources ever, is it also true that thousands of children needlessly die each and every day from hunger?

To the ever-growing crowd of religious critics and antagonists, I have an increasingly hard time disagreeing with their observations and conclusions. Looking from the outside in at organized religion would cause even the most gracious observer to move to that of a hostile opponent. We quickly preach a Jesus who fed the hungry multitudes, healed the sick, and revealed the value of the marginalized, yet at the same time we demonstrate a religious system that condones global injustice by our silence and materialistic participation. Instead of being known as a force of love and compassion, as was our founder, we are instead known more by our fractured stance against a handful of moral issues.

Although these issues are not insignificant, my point is that the whole council of Scripture deals much more with concerns over poverty, injustice, and a lack of compassion than it does with the issues that Christians are known today for championing. Why is it that we have so quickly flung the flag of a few moral questions

while we have ignored the most pressing global issues of our time, issues that Jesus embraced as responsibilities contained in His own job description? Understanding Isaiah 61 as a prophetic job description for Christ himself, the passage says, “*The LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to comfort the brokenhearted, and to proclaim that captives will be released and prisoners will be freed*” (Isaiah 61:1). The Gospels are filled with stories of Jesus living out this prophetic picture of His work.

So, then, why is it that so much of the developing world understands the “Christian” Church of the West to condone and support a war perceived to be about securing our place over Muslims as economic superpowers; to turn a blind eye to sexual immortality and promiscuity; to sell out to materialistic priorities, while so much of the rest of the world suffers? Simply put, why don’t we act like the Jesus we say we follow? Why is it that the world can’t see Jesus through our institutional religious system?

Against the backdrop of a global crisis we are perceived as powerless to address comes a hope and an anticipation of a revolution. Out of our comatose hypocrisy, the Spirit of God is awakening His body to move out into a suffering world to be the hands and feet of Jesus. We live in an age where a humiliated Church combined with strategic possibilities, where information about the world’s suffering combined with unprecedented resources, and where a spiritual bankruptcy combined with

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a physical bankruptcy has positioned the followers of Jesus to renovate His Church and reclaim an Acts 2 picture as a force of love and compassion in this world: “*A deep sense of awe came over them all, and the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders. And all the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had. They sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need*” (Acts 2:43-45).

It is toward this hope for change that this book confronts the injustice of the global imbalance of resources and then compares it to a Biblical vision of a compassionate Church. After looking at what I believe is idealistically and wonderfully possible we will then examine what I believe are the core value changes that must take place if we are to see a renovated Church that can affect the unprecedented alleviation of needless suffering.

Out of This Crazy World

Humor me. Imagine for a few minutes that the Mars exploration projects discovered that there was actually intelligent life on the red planet. Let’s pretend that the Mars rover bumped into a little green man or woman (because we’re not sure how to tell them apart yet). Lo and behold we then find out that Martians are advanced in space travel, and we invite them to come to Earth to learn about humans and life on our planet. We would be proud to show them what we have accomplished in the past few thousand years and why Earth is the best place in the solar system to live.

The big day finally comes. After an unprecedented reception at NASA, the leader of the Martian team is welcomed by the President of the United States and the two have a meeting at the White House. (Stay with me here.)

Shortly into the conversation the Martian leader comments, “Life on your planet must be very good if you have the ability to explore other planets and the far away galaxies.”

“Yes,” comments the President with great pride, “Western civilization is the most advanced it has ever been. So much so that we are exploring new galaxies and making incredible achievements in space travel. In fact, I have just budgeted over 18 billion dollars to continue our work in seeking intelligent life on other planets, looking further and further into space.”⁹ The Martian is very impressed and says to the President, “I assume, then, that everyone on your planet must have enough food to eat every day?” The President pauses for a moment, confused by the sudden switch in topic. “Well, not quite. Actually about 6 million children die each year of starvation.”¹⁰

“Oh,” says the Martian, “then you must not have enough food on your planet to feed all of your people.”

“No. Actually we have more than enough food. In fact just 2% of the world’s grain harvest would be enough, if shared, to feed the entire planet.”¹¹

“Oh, I see,” the Martian replies, a bit more confused, “then I assume you don’t have the ability to get food to all of the people who are hungry.”

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“No,” says the President. His demeanor is now a little more modest. “In reality, we have great railways, vast transportation systems, huge ships, and cargo planes.”

“Oh...” says the Martian, even more perplexed. This time the little green man remains quiet with a pensive and furrowed look on his face. He is obviously trying to make sense of what the President is saying. After a few uncomfortable moments, the President speaks up with a distinct air of defensiveness. “Well, you see, the issues of global poverty are complex. It takes great amounts of cooperation and determination and large amounts of funding to address the global imbalance of resources.”

“Let me get this straight,” replies the Martian, “just today, and every day, about 16,000 of your most vulnerable inhabitants died just because they don’t have enough food to eat. Yet you grow enough food to feed the entire population of your planet hundreds of times over and you even have the ability to get the food to those who need it. But instead, you choose to spend billions of dollars working on what I can only assume is the incredibly complex and coordinated job of sending your people and equipment into space to see what is out there?”

If I were the Martian, I would get back into my flying saucer and go back to Mars and never let an Earthling step foot onto my planet.

Have I oversimplified the problem? Maybe I have. The issue of poverty, and its causes, *are* very complex. However, it is clear

that whether we are talking about the choices of a person or of a country, the global imbalance of the most fundamental life-sustaining resources tells us that we act out and express to the world that our comfort and our interests are more important than the basic survival of other people. We would never admit it in so many words, but those in the developing world have heard that message loud and clear.

Now to a real life story. A few of years ago, I was in Nigeria helping to establish a rural hospital. We had the privilege of working with a group of people in Western Canada, who had a vision to open a hospital in Nigeria that would prevent mothers from unnecessarily dying during childbirth. This group had donated funds to build some buildings, but needed some assistance in getting their health center up and running. We spent a lot of time consulting and involving health care professionals, and working with the rural community leaders and local health authorities in Nigeria. Our plan was to slowly begin out-patient primary care services, building on those services with a maternity program as funds became available. As with most international development projects, our plans included community consultations in order to, among other purposes, manage the expectations of the people. Many women and children were dying because of either poor or inadequate maternal health care. In fact, the initial vision of the hospital was to address the devastation of maternal and infant death in the surrounding communities.

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Shortly after we had established out-patient services, I traveled back to Nigeria to evaluate the project and plan for the next phase. During the two-week trip, one of the local pastors comes on his motorbike to visit with us one evening. I had gotten to know this pastor very well on previous trips. He constantly has a smile on his face that reveals a joy that eludes most; knowing him and the challenges he faces in caring for his people, it is an encouragement just to spend time around him. We start talking about the hospital project and the expectations of his community. At the time, I'm thinking it's a strategic opportunity to reinforce the realities of the challenges of fundraising in Canada and the principle that donor groups need to see the results of the initial out-patient services before we could raise the funds for maternity services. As I talk he keeps smiling and nodding. I think I'm doing a commendable job in cross-cultural expectation management.

As I finish talking, the pastor, with that same magical smile on his face, asks me a question I will never forget: "Brother, in your country do you have hospitals for your pets?" After a long pause and some quick thinking I am only left with the truth. "Yes," I reply, "we do." Still smiling, my African friend goes on to say, "We cannot understand such a thing. We cannot understand why you can so easily have hospitals for your dogs, yet it is such a difficult thing for you to raise funds to help us with a place to safely deliver our children."

HUNGRY FOR LIFE

Without going down the possibly defensible rabbit trail of animal rights (no pun intended) and the benefits of owning pets, the value contrast was painful and the lesson sobering. My friend's comments didn't make the challenges of fundraising any less daunting; however, his observations were, at the very least, an incredibly helpful perspective on the difficulty in managing the expectations of his people. More so, his comments became a moment that has been burned in my mind and heart to help me begin to understand the injustice of the global imbalance of resources and Western priorities.

Maybe like the President in the fictional story of the Martian, the very real story of the conversation with my African friend caused me to stand embarrassed at the reality of what his illustration was pointing out. And even worse was the veracity that I stood before him as another Christian leader, representing a Western Church with access to unprecedented resources and opportunities to meet this most basic, yet unmet, need.

Chapter 1 - So now what?

1. Which statements about a world and a Church gone wrong do you agree with or disagree with?
2. How do people around you view the Church or religion?
3. What do you think the Western Church (Western Europe and North America) is known for today and why?
4. What thoughts or feelings emerged as you read the fictitious story of the Martian coming to Earth?
5. What did you think of the questions the Martian had for the President?

6. What thoughts or feelings emerged as you read the real story of my discussion with the Nigerian pastor? Do you think it was fair or legitimate for the Nigerian pastor to question me the way he did?

7. What are some of the parallels between the stories of the Martian and the Nigerian pastor?

8. Why do you think that North Americans are generally ambivalent toward the degree of suffering that is the reality for half of the world's population?