

Expanding the Biblical Worldview of Christians in Myanmar

Don Closson, who has taught Christian worldview on several continents, recently returned from Myanmar, which has in recent years been oppressed heavily by an atheistic regime. Representing his church Christ Fellowship in McKinney (TX), he shared with pastors and students a biblical perspective on world missions and how the Church there is both historically blessed and currently in a good position to reach their own nation (formerly known as Burma) with the gospel.

Details of a trip can begin to fade even as the effects of jet lag seem to grow stronger. Fortunately, I do remember many wonderful aspects of my whirlwind eleven-day trip with friend and pastor Ken Stoneking to Myanmar (the U.S. still insists on calling it Burma), one of the poorest and most oppressed countries in Asia.

Praise God for a Fruitful Trip

This was my most successful cross-cultural teaching experience to date. I say that for several reasons. First, the topic was timely and relevant to my audience of pastors and students at the Mandalay Bible Seminary. I spoke on God's Kingdom as it relates to world missions by breaking the topic down into four parts: the theological, historical, cultural and strategic perspectives. After I finished teaching the 20 hour class over five days, my host told me that he had been struggling with this very topic, particularly how to motivate the church leaders in Myanmar to play a greater role in missions. He expressed that many churches in Myanmar have an inward perspective and needed help seeing that believers have an obligation to be a blessing to those around us. He told me

that my talks gave him a number of ideas to develop further after our visit.

Myanmar's Uniqueness

My preparation for this class increased both my own understanding and appreciation for the task of world missions. As I put the lessons together, I got more and more excited about my opportunity to share with the pastors and students. I realized that they live in a strategic place to reach a part of the world limited to Americans. Myanmar is in the global *10/40 window* that defines the least evangelized segment of the globe. In fact, its capital city Yangon is listed as one of the 100 gateway cities to this 10/40 region, the rectangular area of North Africa, the Middle East and Asia between 10 degrees and 40 degrees north latitudes, according to The Joshua Project. The population of the world is growing more Asian every year and Myanmar is centrally located to impact China, Thailand, and India!

Connecting the Dots...

A serendipity was “connecting the dots” as I researched the relationship between the Church in Myanmar and the early Reformation—going all the way back to John Wycliffe in the 1300s. Wycliffe challenged the authority of the Pope and the refusal of the Church to put the Bible in of the language of the common people. His followers were known as Lollards, and they preached anti-clerical and biblically-centered reforms.

Jon Huss read the teachings of Wycliffe in the 15th century and attempted to reform the church in Bohemia and the adjacent area called Moravia. Gaining a wide following, the Hussites influenced the region around Prague, Czech Republic, including a group which became known as the Moravian church. Huss was eventually burned at the stake in the center of Old Town Square in Prague for challenging the official doctrines of the Catholic Church. However, the Moravian Brethren continued on and became a powerful force for evangelism in the 18th and

19th centuries.

Evangelist and church leader Count Zinzendorf was at the center of this movement during the late 1700s. He traveled to America and England meeting with Jonathan Edwards and other leaders of the Great Awakening that brought revival to both England and the Colonies in the 1730s and 40s.

In 1806 a group of college students at Williams College prayed that God would again bring revival to the country, sparking a movement among college students known as the Haystack Prayer Revival. These five students would help influence a young man named Adoniram Judson to commit his life to missions. Judson set sail for India with his wife in 1812, but the East India Company would not allow them to enter because they feared that missionaries would stir up the Hindus. Taking the first boat East, Judson arrived in Rangoon (now Yangon) in 1813. After six years he had his first convert and when he died at age 62, after spending 38 years in Myanmar, it was estimated that there were over 200,000 Christians in the country. Judson was the first to translate the Bible into the Burmese language, a translation that was so good that it is still used today and preferred over recent translations because it is more theologically conservative.

More Dots

The day after I left, an earthquake hit Myanmar. Thankfully, God spared the Mandalay Bible Seminary. Then our president visited for the first time in recognition of the political changes occurring there. Please pray for the Christians in this strategic country. They are standing boldly and are ready to be used of the Lord for the Great Commission.

Myanmar Cyclone Response: Power-Lust and Lost Lives

As the world looks on to the tragedy in Myanmar and the coldhearted response of its government leaders, Byron Barlowe urges us to keep in mind that a humanitarian response is not a natural reaction.

Corrupted Power

Climate of Fear and Repression

Myanmar, traditionally known as Burma, is a country where ten percent of the population lives “without enough to eat” on a normal basis.[\[1\]](#) The brutal military government is best known for the repression of a democratically elected opposition candidate, Aung San Suu Kyi, now under long-term house arrest. Burma watchers blogs and sites show grisly photos of alleged brutality (one shows the carnage of soldiers running over political dissidents with ten-wheeled trucks). Last fall, the junta put down protest marches, killing at least 13 and jailing thousands. “Since then, the regime has continued to raid homes and monasteries and arrest persons suspected of participating in the pro-democracy protests.”[\[2\]](#)

Now, a cyclone has inundated an entire region, the Irrawaddy Delta, killing tens of thousands, displacing at least a million and setting up a petri dish of putrid water and corpses where disease threatens to balloon the death toll. Within this maelstrom, the ruling generals who clutch political power at all costs refuse to allow experienced aid workers from around the world to help manage food distribution and relief efforts. The callousness of their stance has been decried on all fronts, including the often diplomatically soft United Nations (UN).

Feeding and assisting one's own countrymen seems to be such a basic value that it transcends almost all belief systems. However, the Burmese ruling junta is arrogantly defying not only this basic tenet of decency, but world opinion as well.

Failure to Allow Rendered Aid

"The United Nations said Tuesday that only a tiny portion of international aid needed for Myanmar's cyclone victims is making it into the country, amid reports that the military regime is hoarding good-quality foreign aid for itself and doling out rotten food," reports the Associated Press.

It's understandable if the government wants to lead in relieving victims of its own nation. Yet, characteristically, even in this dire situation the government is cracking down on anything not originating from its own authority while repressing its own people. Reports include:

Stockpiling of high-nutrition biscuits in government warehouses and distribution of low-quality biscuits made by the centralized Industry Ministry.

Old, tainted, low-quality rice distributed in lieu of high-quality, nutritious rice offered by aid groups.

Government demands of businesses in the capital to "donate" aid for victims to be distributed through the central government.[\[3\]](#) So much for central "planning." Were there a desire to provide relief, it could have been budgeted before now.

Video feeds of military leaders show them in neat, trim uniforms placing relief boxes away from those in need the very picture of micro-managing control, reminiscent of regimes like North Korea.

Like Cuba in its extreme isolationism, the interests of its people are at the bottom of the ruling party's priorities.

Global Chorus of Criticism

A global chorus of critics has castigated Myanmar for its delays and mixed messages regarding large-scale aid and foreign experts. In what appears to be a show of cooperation, but without the needed effect, more supply flights have been allowed, critical days after the cyclone hit. Yet at this writing, food and relief supplies continue to stack up at the capital's airport and, reportedly, in military storage facilities.

Aid offers from across the globe contrast starkly with the calculated deprivation and malfeasance exhibited by the military rulers. World leaders are simply appealing with the message, Let us help.

Another clear message to the leaders in Yangon: You are responsible for outcomes. "A natural disaster is turning into a humanitarian catastrophe of genuinely epic proportions in significant part because of the malign neglect of the regime," said British Foreign Secretary David Miliband.[\[4\]](#)

The United States has been direct in offering help. "What remains is for the Burmese government to allow the international community to help its people. It should be a simple matter. It is not a matter of politics," U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice told reporters in Washington.[\[5\]](#)

Even the UN, often accused of appeasing dictatorial regimes, refused to allow the army-government to head up distribution efforts. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has said he is deeply concerned and immensely frustrated at the unacceptably slow response. We are at a critical point. Unless more aid gets into the country very quickly, we face an outbreak of infectious diseases that could dwarf today's crisis," he said.[\[6\]](#)

The UN has learned lessons from past dictatorships' abuse of

privilege. The Oil-for-Food fiasco under Saddam Hussein provides reason enough for UN reticence. Past humanitarian disasters in Africa saw regimes mismanaging aid for political reasons as well. Good intentions of the aid-provider must meet with realistic views of human nature. The foibles and sin of men, especially those in power, tends to validate a biblical view of fallen man much like the physics of a concrete sidewalk demonstrates gravity pretty convincingly.

Some Worldview Implications

The heartlessness of Myanmar's leaders evokes sympathy and indignation among most people. But why? A naturalistic worldview—neo-Darwinism taken to its logical end, for example—would only be concerned with perpetuating those strong enough or “smart enough” to have survived. It might even be the case that the cyclone culled out the least-fit. This naturalistic worldview formed the basis of everything from the eugenics movement to Nazi death camps (not exactly consistent with an insistence on instant relief work).

The final goal of Theravada Buddhism, the strain claimed by 96 percent of the population of Myanmar, is complete detachment from the physical world, which is seen as illusory. Its practice is passive in nature; there is no ultimate reality, much less salvation or reward to attain. This is nothing like the practice of the Dalai Lama, well-known the world over for human rights campaigning. In his Buddhist sect, Lamaism or Tibetan Buddhism, acts of compassion make sense. Theravadic Buddhism as practiced in Burma, on the other hand, views man as an individual with no incentive for helping others. For Burmese monks and adherents alike, there is really no necessary motivation to provide aid in this or any situation.

Generally speaking, “According to Buddhist belief, man is worthless, having only temporary existence. In Christianity, man is of infinite worth, made in the image of God, and will exist eternally. Man's body is a hindrance to the Buddhist

while to the Christian it is an instrument to glorify God” {7}. While Christian missions like Food for the Hungry, Gospel for Asia, Samaritan’s Purse and others actively seek to assist the Burmese, few such wholesale efforts proceed from either Buddhist nations or in-country monks themselves.

A pantheistic view, rooted in Hinduism’s doctrine of *karma*, would only wonder what deeds were being dealt with in the recycling of life. This worldview provides no real cause for alarm or compassion at all.

Despite such competing underpinnings at a worldview level, something in the human spirit cries out for fellow humans who suffer. Unless tamped down or obliterated, natural sympathies exist. This leads to the inevitable question, “Why? From where does this universal reality spring?”

Persecution by the ruling junta in Myanmar against ethnic minorities has increased since their ascendancy in the 1960s. “The most affected ethnic minority is the mainly Christian Karen people. Large numbers have been forced to abandon their villages in the east of the country and many have fled to Thailand.” {8} Herein may lay a connection, although Christians are not alone in being oppressed there. Godless governments tend to hate or at least discriminate against Christians. Competing worldviews clash deeply.

Biblical Emphasis on Individuals, Human Dignity

“A Christian view of government should...be concerned with human rights...based on a biblical view of human dignity. A bill of rights, therefore, does not grant rights to individuals, but instead acknowledges these rights as always existing.” {9}

Of course the Myanmar government and culture does not recognize the biblical God, so this standard is not to be expected. However, such a presupposition grounds America’s reaction to Myanmar’s languid response to the cyclone. It also helps explain the rest of the world’s stance: the ideals of

democracy, rooted in a largely biblical worldview, have greatly affected world opinion on topics of relief and disaster response. One would be hard-pressed to find historical examples, I'm sure, of a consensus like that described above in centuries or even decades past. But since the Marshall Plan, Berlin airlifts, reconstruction in Japan and a parade of other compassionate rebuilding efforts, the rush to aid has become the global norm. Americas Judeo-Christian model has taken hold.

Christians in the early Church, in utter contrast to the Greco-Roman paganism that surrounded them, extended dignity to the suffering individual regardless of class status and whether or not it benefited them. This new ethic transformed the world and set the stage for the rule of law, compassionate charity and a host of other values taken for granted in Western and now other societies.

Proper View of Man, Need to Limit Power

"While the source of civil government is rooted in human responsibility, the need for government derives from the need to control human sinfulness. God ordained civil government to restrain evil.... [{10}](#) Of course, if the ruling government is corrupt, although some restraining occurs and it can look somewhat just, the evil simply becomes concentrated at the top while it leaks out naturally elsewhere despite external restrictions. We saw this in spades in Communist dictatorships like the USSR, which spawned the gulags, and Albania, where repression and elite privilege reached monumental proportions. And the military leaders of Myanmar continue this traditioninevitably, given the fallen nature of man.

Government based on a proper understanding of man is the hallmark of American representative democracy. Unlike Myanmar's concentration of power into the hands of a few powerful elite, the American system makes room for the human dignity and rationality of the people while controlling human

sin and depravity. Neither utopian schemes, which are based on man's supposed innate goodness, nor controlling systems, which are built on sheer power, do right by human nature. Myanmar's example of an unworkable government is all too clear in its tragic reaction to a devastating natural disaster.

As Probe's *Mind Games* curriculum puts it, "In essence, a republic [like that of the United States] limits government, while a totalitarian government [like Myanmar's] limits citizens." And often, as with the estimated 170 million killed by regimes like those of Stalin, Hitler, Mao, Pol Pot and others who fly in the face of a right understanding of man, the limits to citizens includes their very lives.[\[11\]](#)

Sanctity of Human Life

What officials do during a crisis exposes their worldview. Do authorities do all within their means to save lives? What about prevention? Do investments in infrastructure belie a preoccupation with commerce, power or prestige as in the case of China's razing of entire neighborhoods to clear the way for the PR coup of the Olympics while political and religious dissidents are jailed? Are well-equipped fire and rescue, police, disaster recovery and even military personnel standing by to help at all costs to save even a few human lives? It seems obvious when certain governments act out of political peer pressure rather than a philosophy rooted in the value of every human being. And that value originates in the God in whose image humans are made. Without this doctrine as a basis for policy, people become mere workers, expendable state property and pawns for despots.

Nothing in Myanmar's delayed, heartless response to the storm's effects shows value of human life. In fact, the meager efforts of the regime in Rangoon (the capital, also called Yangon) have so far not only been ineffective in the immediate and for the future, but are insulting to human dignity.

Again, we can invoke first century parallels to help make the case that today's outcry stems from a Christian heritage. Whereas callous Roman elite threw babies into the Tiber River, Christians rescued and raised them as their own. So committed were they to the notion that all people have value as God's image-bearers, that ancient Christ-followers risked deadly disease to treat strangers. Ancient pagans, not entirely unlike the Myanmar government, left even their own kin to die during plagues.

Biblical Imitation of a Giving God

Hurricane Katrina evoked not only an immediate and massive response however incompetent it may have been from the local, state and federal governments in the U.S. Expectations for relief were sky-high. And the groundswell of private and religious response left a worthy legacy.

So why, we may ask, were expectations so great? Some may say expectations grew from a sense of entitlement. Some folks just think a handout is due them, so in dire circumstances, it goes without saying. After all, the ambulance always comes when called.

A strong case can be made that people have grown to expect help due to a residue of Christian care and compassion that lingers on in what many call post-Christian times. The Church's centuries-long heritage of innovating institutions like hospitals, orphanages and eldercare has overhauled the way people are treated.

That is, the biblical worldview has so saturated the culture of the West and has since so affected the rest of the world, that it would be unthinkable for most civilized societies not to respond to catastrophes with aid. Yet, this was not the case in ancient cultures unaffected by the radical ethic of Jesus Christ, who took Old Testament compassion for the stranger, widow and orphan to new extremes. (See my radio

transcript on the topic of *Compassion and Charity: Two More Reasons to Believe that Christianity is Good for Society* and listen online at *Probe.org* soon.)

As the world looks on to the tragedy in Myanmar and the coldhearted response of its government leaders, keep in mind that a humanitarian response is not a natural reaction. It is something introduced and modeled by the caring Creator of all men, Jesus Christ. A truly biblical worldview not only works, it works compassionately.

Notes

1. Reuters Foundation Alertnet, May 12, 2008, www.alertnet.org/db/crisisprofiles/MY_DIS.htm.
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3. AP report via tinyurl.com/4cas2g.
4. Houston Chronicle, May 11, 2008, www.chron.com/dispatch/story.mpl/headline/world/5770860.html
5. Reuters Foundation Alertnet, Myanmar under pressure, death toll may rise sharply, May 7, 2008, <http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/SP306038.htm>
6. Reuters Foundation Alertnet, May 13, 2008, www.alertnet.org/db/crisisprofiles/MM_ST0.htm
7. Josh McDowell and Don Stewart, *Handbook of Today's Religions*, Here's Life Publishers, San Bernardino, CA 1983, pps. 308-309.
8. Ibid, May 12, 2008, www.alertnet.org/db/crisisprofiles/MY_DIS.htm
9. Christian View of Politics, Government and Social Action, *Mind Games College Survival Course*, 1996, Probe Ministries.
10. Ibid, based on [Romans 13: 1-7](#), NIV.
11. R. J. Rummel, *Death by Government*, Transaction Publishers, 1994, quoted in The Truth Project DVD-based curriculum, Focus on the Family, 2006. For partial online reading: tinyurl.com/3efqjr

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