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FINDING HOPE IN A BROKEN WORLD*

The Response of the Church to Human Trafficking

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A fifteen-year-old girl desperate to help her family recover from the devastation of Typhoon Haiyan is promised a waitressing job in Manila.[1] Instead, she finds herself trafficked and sold for sex in a bar, subject to a daily ritual of abuse and exploitation. When not with customers, she and other girls sleep in a room crowded with bunk beds. They are denied food if they refuse customers, and, with no way to return home, they fear being cast out onto the streets. Trapped in a strange place and subjected to sexual abuse by strangers who pay to use her body, she becomes resigned to the new reality of life.

Fortunately, for this young girl and three other survivors, the Philippine Anti-Transnational Crime Unit (ATCU) and International Justice Mission (IJM) heard about their abuse and conducted a rescue operation on January 29, 2014. Two managers and the bar owner were arrested, and the girls were taken to aftercare shelters where they will receive the long-term care and support that they will need to heal from

*This article is a revised version of Abraham George, "Hope in a Hurting World," *Evangelicals Today* 39:4 (2013): 22–27.

[1]International Justice Mission, "IJM Brings Rescue to Manila Bar, Survivors from Province Destroyed in Typhoon Haiyan" (February 7, 2014), http://www.ijmuk.org/node/703 (accessed February 11, 2014).

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their abuse and rebuild their lives. In addition, IJM will provide legal assistance to ensure they receive the justice they deserve.

For these girls, their painful stories end in hope. But this is not the case for countless other young women and girls who are victims of human trafficking, a crime that affects nearly all countries in every region of the world. The statistics[2] are simply overwhelming:

- There are an estimated 27 million people trapped in slavery today, whether in bonded labor or forced prostitution.
- Between 2007 and 2010, victims of 136 different nationalities were detected in 118 countries across the world.
- Trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation accounts for 58 percent of all cases detected globally, while trafficking for forced labor accounts for 36 percent. Incidentally, the share of detected cases of trafficking for forced labor has doubled since 2008.
- 27 percent of all victims detected globally are children. Of every three child victims, two are girls and one is a boy.

In the Philippines:

- There are between 60,000–75,000 Filipino children trapped in the sex trade, where they are repeatedly sold to pedophiles for the explicit purposes of rape and abuse.[3]

[2]United Nations, *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2012* (New York: 2012).

[3]Ecpat Global Monitoring, *Report on the Status of Action Against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children: Philippines, 2006*, http://www.ecpat.net/sites/default/files/global_monitoring_report-philippines.pdf (accessed February 8, 2014).

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- The Philippines, and particularly cities like Cebu, are popular destinations for sex tourism, where unrestricted, illegal sexual practices are rife.[4]
- In a study conducted in 2004, every taxi driver interviewed in Cebu confirmed that he or she had at one point witnessed a foreign tourist accompanied by a Filipino minor.[5]

Human trafficking is just one instance of violent injustice, where the weak and vulnerable are preyed upon by the strong and powerful who see an opportunity to take advantage of them in brutal and greedy ways. It happens when people are recruited in their community and exploited by traffickers using deception and/or some form of coercion to lure and control them. Gary Haugen of International Justice Mission defines this, and injustice in general, as the abuse of power and exploitation of the weak by the strong.[6]

As Christians, this has to be something that registers rather loudly in our hearts and minds. Such crimes against innocent human beings, especially those that are least capable of standing up for themselves, clearly violate God's plan for *shalom,* and this must elicit an instinctual reaction from us.

But What Does the Bible Say?

The Scriptures really are chock-full of rather explicit commands to "do justice" (Micah 6:8) and to "seek justice, defend the oppressed, take up the cause of the fatherless, [and] plead the case of the

[4]Ecpat Global Monitoring, *Report on the Status of Action Against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children*.

[5]Ecpat Global Monitoring, *Report on the Status of Action Against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children*, 11.

[6]Gary A. Haugen, *Just Courage: God's Great Expedition for the Restless Christian* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2008), 46.

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widow" (Isaiah 1:17). These are not incidental references; instead, they constitute the central sweep of the Bible. Concern for the oppressed and the abused is a constant theme throughout the Scriptures. It is deeply embedded in Israel's history, and dominates the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In the Pentateuch, or the first five books of the Bible, Yahweh delivers the Israelites from oppression in Egypt and now expects them to be liberators as well. The Mosaic Law is replete with calls for his people to live justly in the land he has given them. Every three years, for example, the Israelites are required to bring a tenth of their produce for those that did not have an inheritance, the foreigners, the fatherless, and the widows (Deuteronomy 14:28–29).

The Prophetic books simply echo and reiterate such requirements. God employs a whole host of prophets to constantly show the Israelites how they are grieving him by letting injustice permeate their societies. Through the prophets, God cries out to the Israelites to remember his heart for the broken:

> Is this not the fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the chords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not turn away from your own flesh and blood? (Isaiah 58:6–7)

In the Gospels, Jesus makes it very clear that he did not come to start a religion, but instead to announce a new "kingdom," a new way of life. The good news of Jesus was not just to address the question of sin and the spiritual fall of man, or how to get to heaven and avoid hell. It was about the coming of God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. This kingdom that Jesus spoke of was not a future state of being, or some distant place. No! He was speaking about something that was happening on this earth *here* and *now*.

Admonishing the Pharisees for their lack of justice and mercy, Jesus says: "You have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness" (Matthew 23:23). God's priority

for justice over religiosity is made clear throughout the Gospels as Jesus continually challenges the hearts and attitudes of religious leaders.

Do We Have a Responsibility?

Most of us reading this would agree that if we were in positions of authority, we would be completely responsible for following the clear commands of Scripture in executing justice on behalf of the poor and the oppressed. However, the simple fact is that much of the Church has very little or no direct proximity to such issues. Do we, then, have any responsibility?

Perhaps the best answer to the question is found in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37). Jesus recognizes in the lawyer's question the human tendency to attempt to absolve ourselves of responsibility by claiming that certain people are not our responsibility. With his final command, "go and do likewise," Jesus erases the boundaries the lawyer attempted to draw and drives home the point that those who truly participate in the Kingdom fully live out the Law by "being neighbors"—bringing *shalom* to bear on all who experience brokenness around them. To do nothing, Jesus seems to imply, would effectively be collusion with the brokenness of Creation by allowing the man to continue suffering and dying.

The Church is God's vehicle to usher *shalom* into the brokenness and oppression in the world. We are his "hands and feet" (1 Corinthians 12). For the Church to announce credibly that God is God and that his new world has begun, it has to be, as N. T. Wright helpfully reminds us, "actively involved in seeking justice in the world, both globally and locally, and cheerfully celebrating God's good creation and its rescue from corruption …."[7] Without this active interaction with the brokenness around us, our proclamation remains merely a shadow of the glorious Gospel which we have been tasked with sharing.

[7]N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 227.

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What Must the Church Do?

As church leaders, we have a responsibility to shepherd our congregations into a life that is pleasing to God, and the Scriptures make it clear that part of pleasing God is engaging in the work of justice. There are some very important and tangible things that church leaders can do:

1. Speak up.

The Church in the Philippines, like the rest of the global Church, is a significant portion of the population, and as such has a strong voice that can lobby local and federal governments for allocation of resources to combat trafficking, raise awareness of such crimes, and create social demand for justice.

2. Teach congregations.

There is much to be done inside the Church as well. We need to teach our congregations about the Biblical foundations for justice and God's view of women and children, discuss pornography and the objectification of women, encourage men's groups to talk about exploitation and violence and how it affects women and children, and encourage them to become protectors of, and advocates for, vulnerable women and children. Bible colleges and seminaries must incorporate a robust analysis of the theology of justice into curricula so that future pastors and leaders of the Church will have the passion, vision, and know-how to stand up for those that are oppressed.

3. Get your hands dirty.

Engage with these victims as if they were part of your own family. Watch for signs of such crimes in your own communities—report them to authorities and reach out to organizations like the International Justice Mission and others who might have operations in the area to intervene on behalf of these victims. Volunteer time, skills, and resources with shelters and other facilities in your area that care for rescued victims of such abuse. On behalf of these victims, be willing to risk reputations, bank accounts, and personal safety—that is what Jesus would have us do "to the least of these."

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There are only two things that are required of us all. Jesus, responding to the Pharisee (Matthew 22), spells it out clearly: love the Lord our God and our neighbor! While we largely attempt to follow the first, we are often guilty of not giving the latter the same attention, and yet the simple fact is that the Scriptures also make it abundantly clear that if we do not love our fellow human beings, we simply cannot love God. In other words, "anyone who loves God *must* also love his brother and sister" (1 John 4:21).

The body of Christ in the Philippines, as in the rest of the world, desperately needs to believe that it can truly be an agent of transformation in this broken and hurting world. If it does, it will become an unmistakable part of the process of God birthing something beautiful in this world—his perfect *Shalom*!

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