

Reconciling God and Haiti

Scripture: Romans 8:18-25, Colossians 1:19-20

**By Pastor John H. Noordhof
Williamsburg Christian Reformed Church**

**January 31, 2010
Morning Service**

(Last week Thursday, the Ottawa Citizen printed an article entitled “Reconciling God and Haiti.” This thought provoking article, written by Andrew Potter, raised some important questions. I’ll try to answer them this morning. The article is reprinted on the backside of the sermon outline, though it is not necessary to have read it in order for this sermon to make sense.)

Dear Andrew: Thank you for your thought-provoking article in the Ottawa Citizen. It seems that every major tragedy raises the same basic question: How can Christians believe in a good and powerful God, when we see such tragedies like Haiti in our world? It’s a question raised throughout the ages, though the magnitude of the death and destruction caused by recent events like the 2004 Tsunami, Hurricane Katrina, and now this earthquake seems to raise the question to a new urgency. How can God allow these events to occur?

The question is even more intense in the case of Haiti. After all, here we have the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, a country that endured years of brutal dictatorship; a country that endured destructive hurricanes in 2008; now being flattened by an earthquake that killed up to

200,000 people and left millions homeless and destitute. Why God could you allow this to happen? It's a legitimate question.

In your article, you made mention of Pat Robertson's answer. This famous televangelist made mention of a "pact with the devil." Back in 1791, when the slaves of Haiti rebelled against the brutal French overlords, they supposedly made a deal with the devil, through their voodoo ceremonies that for their freedom, they would serve the devil. The Haitians overthrew the France and gained their freedom. Ever since, they were cursed by one thing after another. The implication is that God is punishing the Haitians for this pact with the devil. At least that is the implication you (and many others) drew from Robertson's comments. To be fair to Pat Robertson, he never said that the earthquake was God's wrath. But that's what you heard him saying. How can anyone say that?

And so, in your article, you laid down a two-fold challenge: First, do Christians really take God seriously? After all, they don't seem to have problems with their belief in a good and powerful God, yet at the same time see what is happening in the world. How they can they reconcile their faith to reality?

Second, you end your article with these words: "So here is the challenge, for all those Christians who were offended by Robertson's remarks: If God isn't punishing Haitians for their pact with the devil, what is He up to? What's your explanation?"

Well, let me begin to give you an answer. It does begin with an understanding of original sin. You quickly dismiss that answer, but I think you need to consider it some more. The doctrine of original sin emphasizes the radical impact the fall into sin had upon a good creation. Sin is far more the actual sins that you and I commit. It's even more than having a sinful

nature. It's that sin has even affected the very created order, so that even the created order will break the boundaries God set for it, causing death and destruction—like an earthquake. That's why (as Paul teaches us in Romans 8:21) the creation itself longs to be liberated from its bondage to decay.

So why are there destructive earthquakes? Because the very fabric of the created order has been affected by sin. As you say, this answer doesn't explain why some people suffer more than others or why some countries experience more disasters than others. Are some people, some nations, bearing the results of original sin more than others? Or to put the question in reverse: Am I not feeling the full effects of the fall into sin? Is Canada spared the full effects of original sin?

Perhaps the answer to that is: Yes. Thank God, the answer is yes. God has restrained the effects of original sin as well as our actual sins, so that humanity has not seen the full effects of the fall into sin. The closest humanity got to that was with Noah and the flood. If humanity would experience the full effects of the fall into sin, we would be in hell. But we're not. Because God restrains sin and its effects. And more than that, God is overcoming sin and its effects—I'll elaborate on this crucial point in a few moments.

But let's get back to the specific case of Haiti. Is Haiti being cursed more than any other country in this Hemisphere? It does seem to be cursed. Maybe you don't like that language, and it can be abused, but it is the language of Genesis 3. Humanity and the ground are cursed because of sin.

And Haiti seems to be experiencing that curse more than its neighbor, the Dominican Republic. And there are a number of reasons for this. The slave rebellion led to the nation being isolated and economically stagnant. While both countries had dictatorships, they affected the country in different

ways. As well, Haiti has become deforested leading to devastating results when a hurricane hits.

All these factors make sense—and these political, social and economic factors are also tainted by the curse. But that's getting us into a subject I don't have time for. But if it is appropriate to consider these factors (and I think it is), is it not also appropriate to consider the religious factor? If religion creates a certain worldview, if it leads to certain actions, is that not a factor to be considered?

I don't what weight I can give this "pact with the devil" episode. But I do know voodoo is very prevalent in Haiti. Is it possible that the worldview of voodoo has lead to the conditions of poverty and injustice? I think it is possible.

After all, we've seen how a system based upon a false ideology, namely Communism, eventually collapsed from within. Some would argue that the sexual revolution has lead to a whole hosts of societal ills, like abortion, STI's and marriage breakdown. We've seen how greed and corruption within the US banking system led to a meltdown. So if a society is deeply influenced by voodoo, a pagan belief system, is it possible that it might reap the results? I think so.

But I would be cautious in terms in spelling out what God is precisely up to in Haiti. Albert Mohler, president of one of the largest evangelical seminaries puts it this way: "The arrogance of human presumption is a real and present danger. We can trace the effects of a drunk driver to a car accident, but we cannot trace the effects of voodoo to an earthquake—at least not directly.... We are not given that knowledge."

And so, I would be cautious in stating this disaster is the result of any pact of the devil, over two hundred years ago. But, I think, Andrew, I can

say more than that this earthquake is part of the overall result of the fall into sin. That's really, just half of the answer. It's the human side. Our fall into sin has unleashed effects we can't even begin to fathom. The better part of the answer is God's response. What is God's response to this unleashing of evil?

Well, the whole story of the Bible is the story of God's response to humanity's fall into sin and the results inherent in it (and the results inherent in sin are punishment, death and destruction—in this world and in hell). So what is God's response to the evil, humanity unleashed into the good creation? It's the cross of Jesus Christ.

The promised Messiah is the answer to the curse. Yes, God did place a curse upon humanity and the creation because of the fall into sin. That curse was a necessary outcome to the act of disobedience. But more than that, God offered a solution to the curse. His answer is the promised Messiah, Jesus Christ. And in particular, the cross of Jesus.

In the death of Jesus, God took upon himself the curse of sin. He bore our sin and its guilt. Christians know that in a very personal way. He bore my sin. He bore the punishment I deserved. He endured my hell. And sometimes, as Christians, we leave it at that. But the death of Jesus also defeated the forces of sin and evil. The death of Jesus also conquered the devil, a real force in the world. In the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we have God's answer to the evil that plagues our world. In the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, sin and evil, death and the devil have been defeated. Through Jesus, this broken, sin-stained world is being restored to its original goodness.

This is not a quick and instantaneous solution to the problem of evil, but it is a lasting and ultimate solution. Because in the end, there will be the

new heavens and the new earth, where there will be no more sin or evil. There will no more earthquakes or hurricanes. There will be no more government corruption or injustice. That's the end result.

In the meantime, God's people—the church—live in that hope, implementing and anticipating it. We're not just waiting around for Jesus to return, doing nothing. Instead, we are living as those who have been forgiven, as those who are called to live out in our lives today, what it means for this creation to be restored and renewed.

That means, in terms of Haiti, we are involved in helping that country and its people. As a church, our denomination was there before the earthquake happened, and we'll be there long after the media disappears. We're there bringing the good news of Jesus that in him we have God's answer to sin and evil, and to the groaning of creation. And we're there implementing that answer through very concrete acts of love and mercy.

On a personal note, I was there in 2004, helping build a home for a widow and assisted a medical team. On the Sunday, I preached in a church, with a translator. I preached on the parable of the mustard seed. (See Mark 4:30-32) The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. It may be small, but it grows into a huge plant. That's also true for God's kingdom. It may start off small, but even in Haiti, there are glimmers of it and one day, the kingdom of God will fill the whole earth—including Haiti.

And so, Andrew, I hope I have answered your questions. I do take God seriously. I do take the problem of evil seriously. And so does God. And so, if I lost you somewhere along the way, let me summarize what I've been trying to say:

First, Haiti is bearing the effects of the curse that humanity all shares in and is responsible for. Perhaps the effects of the curse are more obvious in

Haiti than in other places, but we all bear the effects of the curse. No one and no country are exempt.

Second, there are economic, political, environmental, and even religious forces at work in world that can intensify the effects of sin. That may be one reason why Haiti has experienced such a long history of suffering.

Third, God, as a good and powerful God, has already acted to put an end to sin and evil in our world. But it is not a quick and instantaneous solution. But in Jesus Christ, God is reconciling all things. As Paul writes in Colossians 1:19-20:

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

And so in terms of the title of your article, God and Haiti will be reconciled. Through the cross of Jesus Christ.

Finally, the church, as the people of God, offers this hope of Jesus to all people, including the people of Haiti. And we seek to live it out, showing compassion and mercy in the immediate relief effort, as well as seeking to offer a long-term solution to the poverty of Haiti.

That's my explanation to what God is up to in this world. He is making all things new through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. My prayer is that you take this answer seriously and find in Jesus God's answer to the problem of evil.

Yours, Rev. John H. Noordhof

Pastor of the Williamsburg Christian Reformed Church