

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE
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PERSPECTIVE NUMBER ONE

THINKING BIBLICALLY ABOUT THE HAITI DISASTER

The earthquake and subsequent human devastation in Haiti are almost unimaginable. How do we think about this as Christians? How do we process something on such a scale of human tragedy? In this *Perspective*, I hope to provide a framework for thinking biblically about this disaster.

- First, it is important to understand the geology of earthquakes. As professor of science journalism, Deborah Blum, reports: Haiti is situated along a strike-slip fault between two great plates of the earth's crust, just like the San Andreas of California. "Beneath the outer skin on which we stake our lives, our planet flexes its muscles. The hot magma that lies below, the liquid minerals and metals that swirl around the earth's core, conspire to keep the surface moving. The crustal plates, which cover the planet's surface like a great rocky jigsaw puzzle, push against, under and over one another. All with the slowness and the inevitability of geologic time. The great continental and oceanic plates of crust are always moving, rubbing, rearranging the bedrock of our lives. The motion is too slow to catch our attention except when it becomes erratic. Strike-slip faults tend to get stuck as they slide against each other, one jagged section catching one another. They grind slowly onward though, moved relentlessly by that underground current, eventually breaking the hold, setting off the reverberations of a quake. It's been more than 100 years since the San Andreas broke in a spectacular way, more than 200 years since Enriquillo-Plantain Garden Fault, the one adjacent to Haiti, did so." One of the major points of the Haitian tragedy is a simple fact of this world. As historian Will Durant argued, "Civilization exists by geological consent, subject to change without notice." When humans build cities and civilized communities on or near a huge geological fault line, catastrophe will at some point occur. This is a fact of the earth that God has created.
- Second, columnist David Brooks has made a series of astute observations that are worth summarizing. He contrasts two earthquakes: On 17 October 1989, a 7.0 earthquake struck the Bay Area in Northern California. Sixty-three people were killed. In early January 2010, a 7.0 earthquake struck Port-au-Prince, Haiti, and the estimate is that over 50,000 were killed. Why the difference? Brooks contends that it is a story of poverty. He draws four major conclusions, which he calls "truths." (1) The first truth is that we do not know how to use aid to reduce poverty. Over the past few decades, the world community has spent trillions of dollars to generate growth in the developing world. The countries that have not received much aid (e.g., China) have seen tremendous growth and tremendous poverty

reductions. Haiti has received a huge amount of aid but has not grown or reduced poverty. A recent report that Brooks cites demonstrates that there are no policy levers that consistently correlate to increased growth. There is no consistently proven way to reduce corruption. Even improving government institutions does not seem to produce expected results. Perhaps making economic growth happen is beyond our control. (2) More than 10,000 organizations perform missions focusing on microprojects in Haiti. By some estimates, Haiti has more nongovernmental organizations per capita than any other place on earth. The amount of financial aid Haiti has received over the last three decades is staggering. (3) Brooks suggests that “it is time to put the thorny issue of culture at the center of efforts to tackle global poverty.” Why is Haiti so poor? It is doubtful that it is simply a matter of oppression, slavery and colonialism. Barbados experienced the same levels of all these horrors and is doing very well. Haiti has endured ruthless dictators, corruption and foreign invasion. But so has the Dominican Republic right next door. The difference between the Dominican Republic and Haiti, which together comprise the same island, “offers one of the starkest contrasts on earth—with trees and progress on one side, and deforestation and poverty and early death on the other.” Brooks cites Lawrence E. Harrison’s book, *The Central Liberal Truth*, which argues that “Haiti, like most of the world’s poorest nations, suffers from a complex web of progress-resistant cultural influences. There is the influence of the voodoo religion, which spreads the message that life is capricious and planning futile. There are high levels of social mistrust. Responsibility is often not internalized. Child-rearing practices often involve neglect in the early years and harsh retribution when kids hit 9 or 10.” (4) It is time to conclude that just throwing great deals of money at a country like Haiti for development and growth purposes will not work. We have tried that! Brooks suggests that the world try “locally led paternalism” and offers examples such as the Harlem Children’s Zone or the No Excuse Schools. These movements are led by people who replace parts of the local culture with a highly demanding, highly intensive culture of achievement— involving everything from new child-rearing practices to stricter schools to better job performance. It is time to find self-confident local leaders who will create a No Excuse counterculture in Haiti that focuses on building an achievement ethos with tough, measurable demands. Once the tragedy has passed and the rebuilding has begun, perhaps the US should lead the way and consider this tough, new approach. We have spent a phenomenal amount of money in Haiti to no avail. If we are truly going to help Haiti, it is time to learn from our mistakes.

- Third, how should we as Christians respond to this monumental tragedy? Pat Robertson explained that this earthquake was a judgment from God because Haiti had turned its back on God. He argued that when Haiti was a French colony rebels “swore a pact to the devil,” saying, “We will serve you if you will get us free from the French.” Presumably, Robertson is arguing that Satan caused the earthquake or that God sent it to judge the people of Haiti for an event that occurred in 1791. Robertson is making a very serious charge and a serious theological argument. My fundamental problem with what he is suggesting is that he has no biblical basis for making such a claim. I draw your attention to one of the most perplexing passages on disasters in the New Testament—Luke 13:1-5. “Now on the same occasion there were some present who reported to Him about the Galileans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And He answered and said to them, “Do you suppose that these Galileans were greater sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered this fate?”

I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or do you suppose that those eighteen on whom the tower of Siloam fell and killed them were worse culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem? I tell you, no, unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” What is clear here is that Jesus is rejecting a popular notion of His day [and our day] that tragedies and physical ailments were due to personal sin. His response in both instances is a categorical rejection of such a connection. Jesus always exuded great compassion for those who suffer or experience tragedy, but His words were a reminder that in a fallen world, judgment and death are inevitable. Final judgment is coming to the entire world if it does not repent. So, I wholeheartedly reject Pat Robertson’s argument. He has no authority or basis for his claims. Instead, I believe we must, as Christ’s disciples, demonstrate compassion and generosity to meet the overwhelming human needs of this monstrous tragedy. We cannot explain it theologically, but we must act and do the loving, compassionate thing! May the world see the love, compassion and grace of the Savior through us!

See Deborah Blum and David Brooks, both in the *New York Times* (15 January 2010); Kathleen Parker in the *Washington Post* (17 January 2010).

PERSPECTIVE NUMBER TWO

THE FAILURE OF COPENHAGEN: WHAT’S NEXT?

Few would argue that the December 2009 Copenhagen conference on global warming was a success; in fact, the strong case could be made that it was a dismal failure. Bjorn Lomborg, director of the Copenhagen Consensus Center, argues that “the summiteers did the planet a favor by refusing to endorse a binding agreement to drastically reduce carbon emissions. That’s because their inability to make progress may be the nudge the international community needs to face the real inconvenient truth: that after nearly two decades of fruitless efforts, its time to give up our Rio-Kyoto-Copenhagen fantasy and get real about combating global warming.” There are at least two conclusions one can reach after Copenhagen: (1) the developing nations have no intention of letting the developed world force them to stop using carbon-emitting fuels. They are understandably wary of any policy that might curtail the domestic economic growth that is allowing their populations to climb out of poverty. (2) Trying to force drastic cuts in carbon emissions makes no economic sense. Lomborg argues that “all the major climate economic models show that to achieve the much-discussed goal of keeping temperature increase to 2 degrees Celsius, we would need to institute a global tax on carbon emissions that would start at \$102 per ton (or about 90 cents per gallon of gasoline)—and increase to \$4,000 per ton (or \$35.51 per gallon of gasoline) by the end of the century. In all, this would cost the world \$40 trillion per year. Most mainstream calculations conclude that this is 50 times more expensive than the climate damage it seeks to prevent.” Forcing cuts in carbon emissions is a solution that will cost far more than the problem it is meant to solve.

For that reason, Lomborg, among others, is arguing that the world has been putting the cart before the horse. We have bought the lie that we should cut carbon emissions now and solve the technology problems later. We should turn this around. Instead of condemning billions of people to continued poverty by trying to make fossil fuels more expensive, we should make green energy cheaper. Our focus should be on developing the technology through significant

increases in research and development. Lomborg writes that “Devoting just 0.2 % of global domestic product—roughly \$100 billion (70 billion Euros) a year—to green energy R and D would produce the kind of game-changing breakthroughs needed to fuel a carbon-free future.” Lomborg also suggests that the world has its priorities wrong. As I demonstrated above, to reduce carbon emissions to pre-industrial levels would cost \$40 trillion per year through 2100. By contrast, we could spend \$3 billion a year on mosquito nets, environmentally safe indoor DDT sprays and subsidies for new therapies—and within 10 years cut the number of malaria infections by half. “In other words, for the money it would take to save one life with carbon cuts, smarter policies could save 78,000.” The silliness of the carbon reduction efforts is demonstrated by this fact: “Spending \$50 billion on Kyoto-style carbon-emissions cuts would reduce temperatures by all of one-thousandth of one degree Fahrenheit over the next hundred years. Money spent on carbon cuts is money we can’t use for effective investments in food aid, micronutrients, HIV/AIDS prevention, health and education infrastructure and clean water and sanitation. . . [It] does raise serious questions about our dogmatic pursuit of a strategy that can only be described as breathtakingly expensive and woefully ineffective.”

The 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro announced carbon-reduction targets that were in fact economically, technically and politically impossible to achieve. The same thing was done a decade later at Kyoto, Japan. Fortunately, this insanity was rejected at Copenhagen. This model does not and will not work. Bjorn Lomborg, in my judgment, is providing an alternative model for addressing the matter of climate change. Our stewardship responsibility over God’s world is broad and complex, but it is nonetheless real and significant. We cannot ignore that we are God’s theocratic stewards and He expects us to care for His world and the inhabitants of His world. The Rio-Kyoto-Copenhagen model is not working. We must find another way, one with realistic priorities and realistic, achievable goals.

See Lomborg’s two essays: *Wall Street Journal* (15 December 2009) and the *Washington Post* (15 January 2010).