

Christian Community and Constructive Ministry in Violent Contexts: A Reformed Proposal

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Abstract

Humanity has always had to deal with wars and violence, which throw millions of people into crisis. While this is a critical problem for Christian and non-Christian intervention agencies due to the need to expend resources and the risks associated with such expenditures, it also creates an opportunity for the gospel. The Reformed tradition has a history of charity ministry. However, as dangerous crises are multiplying, with security implications for interventions and the involvement of a huge amount of resources, the question turns on what basic principles should be followed and what is the most effective strategy for ministry in such contexts. This article explores the harmony between war and grace and constructs strategies that can effectively impact ministry and resilience to victims of war or small-scale violence.

Keywords

War and violence, charity, remaking worlds, christocentric, ministry, resilience

Introduction

Humanity is bedeviled by war and destruction. While we can make efforts to reduce wars and violence in the world, we cannot totally do away with them because sinful human nature combusts at the slightest provocation. God originally called humans in the cultural mandate to govern the entire universe and be accountable in every situation (cf. Gen 1:26–28; 2:15), and he now accuses them of breaking his everlasting covenant, both originally in Adam and in the present by their actions (Isa 24:5).

Humans are imbued by nature with empathy toward others, so the problem of war and other forms of violence has elicited responses from well-meaning groups, Christian and non-Christian. While non-Christian groups try to respond to victims of violence in laudable ways, the difference for Christians lies in their motive and ultimate goal. The question that believers must face is how to respond in a way that is uniquely transformative in affecting the whole person (body, soul, and spirit) and not just the physical or material aspects. What is the most effective way of ministering Christ to these victims with an enduring impact?

Our goal in this article is to help victims of violence or war develop resilience and be able to stand strong in difficult times. Many researchers have written on the concept of resilience, focusing primarily on African situations,¹ defining it as “a process of adapting successfully in the context of a threatening situation” or “the ability to bounce back and learn from an adverse experience to such an extent that the ability is gained to reach out to others in adverse experiences and comfort them to deal with their challenges in a positive way facilitating forgiveness, reconciliation and healing”² or a “process of adjusting well to major challenges commonly associated with negative outcomes.”³ These definitions emphasize one important reality,

¹ Linda C. Theron, “The Resilience Processes of Black South African Young People: A Contextualised Perspective,” in *The Routledge International Handbook of Psychosocial Resilience*, ed. Updesh Kumar (Routledge: Taylor & Francis, 2017): 136–47; Laura May Ward and Carola Eyber, “Resiliency of Children in Child-Headed Households in Rwanda Intervention: Implications for Community-Based Psychosocial Interventions,” *War Trauma Foundation* 7.1 (2009): 17–33; P. J. Buys, “Building Resilient Communities in the Midst of Shame, Guilt, Fear, Witchcraft, and HIV/AIDS,” *KOERS—Bulletin for Christian Scholarship* 85.1 (2020), doi.org/10.19108/KOERS.85.1.2464.

² Stefan E. Germann, “I Am a Hero—Orphans in Child-Headed Households and Resilience,” *Commonwealth Youth and Development* 3.2 (2005): 42, <https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC30853>.

³ Linda C. Theron, “Resilience Research with South African Youth: Caveats and Ethical Complexities,” *South African Journal of Psychology* 42.3 (2012): 333, doi:10.1177/008124631204200305.

which is to help victims overcome their traumatic emotional, physical, and social experiences. The Christian perspective aligns with these views especially well. Paul writes,

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. (2 Cor 1:3–4 ESV)

Here, God is the foundation of all resilience as he comforts and strengthens his people to overcome, and he gives a ministry to those he strengthens so they in turn can help others struggling in their various conditions. Elsewhere, Paul teaches what a resilient life looks like: “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair, persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed” (2 Cor 4:8). This is a deliberate attitude of seeing things beyond the uncomfortable experiences in the hope that God will bring victory and refreshing times in believers’ lives to confirm that even “the poor have hope” (Job 5:16) on account of divine sovereignty.

1. The Humanitarianism of Practical Humanism?

Recently, Roxani Krystalli and Philipp Schulz conducted an elaborate study on interventions in war contexts for the purpose of “remaking a world” for the victims “in the wake of violence.”⁴ This study builds on research that draws on the work of specialists such as psychologists, psychiatrists, anthropologists, and ethnographers for the purpose of helping victims of violence to rise up with new hope within their various cultural and social contexts.⁵ This concept is interesting because it implies that something good can come out of the pain and rubble of war; the central concern is how to change the situation during and after a war or conflict. The research question they pose is, “How can centering practices of love and care illuminate different pathways for understanding the remaking of worlds in the wake of violence?”⁶ The principal framework for their research is political,

⁴ Roxani Krystalli and Philipp Schulz, “Taking Love and Care Seriously: An Emergent Research Agenda for Remaking Worlds in the Wake of Violence,” *International Studies Review* 24.1 (2022): 3.

⁵ See Veena Das, Arthur Kleinman, Margaret Lock, Mamphela Ramphele, and Pamela Reynolds, *Remaking a World: Violence, Social Suffering, and Recovery* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 1, 3.

⁶ Krystalli and Schulz, “Taking Love and Care Seriously,” 1.

and it draws on “how people survive and make sense of violence as well as imagine and enact lives in its wake.”⁷ They report that “in the midst and wake of violence, people [victims] also fall in love, forge social and intimate relationships, and extend different forms of care to one another.”⁸ This practical humanism is built on the ethics of care and love, especially on the caring aspect; its goal is entirely human centered: “The ethics of care sees people as relational, connected, interdependent, and inherently vulnerable, recognizing the moral value and importance of relations and the inescapable reality that care is universally required for all human beings to survive.”⁹

The case that their research presents is highly laudable, as it underscores the human need for care and love in any crisis, and it also unpacks the internal creativity of the victims as they devise means of survival in the aftermath of war and conflict through supportive care and love. The question, however, is the foundation upon which this can stand sustainably, not only materially but also spiritually. All social actions for the good of human beings should be consistent with the origins and destiny of humanity.¹⁰ That is, the mercies that we extend toward our fellow humans in their critical conditions should flow from the mercies that we receive from the source of our origin, namely God. Despite human failure, God has consistently stated that he will save humanity for his own sake (e.g., Ezek 20:44). He has therefore formulated and is executing a redemptive plan, and his agenda for reconciliation provides the mandate and framework for humanitarian engagement. The church needs to remember that as it becomes involved in humanitarian needs, its ultimate goal is unique. Karen Ellis captures this sense in the most profound way:

Organizations can provide comfort, they can provide aid, they can provide relief, they can provide hospitality. But only the body of Christ can provide the hope that’s found in Christ. ... And so, [you need] to be able to have enough of your mind left in a difficult situation to continue to point people to Christ, the Provider, the Sustainer, the One who gives strength and courage, and to look for those opportunities and to watch God’s hand in the middle of it, because only his hand and his plan and his sovereignty make sense out of such a senseless thing like war.¹¹

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 2.

⁹ Ibid., 8.

¹⁰ Herman Bavinck, *Essays on Religion, Science, and Society*, ed. John Bolt, trans. Harry Boonstra and Gerrit Sheeres (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 122.

¹¹ Karen Ellis, “How Can I Best Care for the Church in Crisis?,” Reformed Theological Seminary, March 22, 2022, <https://rts.edu/resources/how-can-i-care-for-the-church-in-crisis/>.

The International Red Cross has provided insight into the massive humanitarian crisis around the world as a result of wars and conflicts: “Malnutrition, illness, wounds, torture, harassment of specific groups within the population, disappearances, extra-judicial executions and the forcible displacement of people are all found in many armed conflicts.”¹² Therefore, it issues a clarion call for global intervention to assuage the pains of wars and to “prevent the deterioration of health care, agricultural or other local systems.”¹³ It has proposed short-term, medium-term, and long-term measures, with the ultimate goal being “to save lives, relieve suffering, improve health, maintain health-care systems, place the victims’ economy back on a sound footing and also restore people’s dignity.”¹⁴ While this is laudable, the emphasis is on caring for the material, whereas the complete person needs material and spiritual help navigating this kind of situation to make sense of life. This is where Christian faith-action takes its place and gives care a special meaning. The brokenness of humanity encompasses the material and the spiritual. The gospel is God’s comprehensive response to the totality of the human personality, which speaks to the inner recesses of the person beyond what the material response can accomplish.

That said, one important lesson to draw from the Red Cross is that “a framework within which we can study the extent to which humanitarian aid influences the dynamic of armed conflict” needs to be established.¹⁵ This element is critical because the presence of aid can either escalate or decrease violence. Pierre Perrin has enumerated the many ways in which humanitarian aid can be abused.¹⁶ For instance, while aid is intended for the victims of violence, there is the danger that the “beneficiaries of the aid” or those delivering the materials can “become the target of armed groups trying to get their hands on relief supplies.”¹⁷

Another important insight is to consider the “principle of impartiality and neutrality,” according to which the intervening party is required not to take “part in the hostilities, nor in the disputes underlying them.”¹⁸ The nature of the complexity that conflicts impose upon any attempt to reach victims requires strategic planning. On this, too, Perrin makes a good point: “To lessen the negative effects of humanitarian aid, each situation needs to

¹² Pierre Perrin, “The Impact of Humanitarian Aid on Conflict Development,” *International Review of the Red Cross* 323 (1998): 1.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 10, 12.

be analyzed in detail, with due account taken of the socio-economic and cultural context, to provide a response specifically tailored to the needs while minimizing the undesirable effects of the aid.”¹⁹ These views are evidence of divine grace in unbelievers’ systems of thought and action, which Christians can adapt and improve. While applauding the immense resourcefulness of unbelievers’ systems, Cornelius Van Til observes that their knowledge and actions are “borrowed capital,”²⁰ which must be retrieved and set in a proper theocentric and christocentric context. Instead of Reformed churches waxing stronger in the calling for global evangelism through humanitarian aid, some have closed up. For instance, the Christian Reformed Church announced the closure of its agency International Aid on July 8, 2009.²¹ Our evangelical calling abides as long as the church lives, and the church moving and having its being in God should demonstrate the living power of God in it.

II. War as a Problem and an Opportunity: God’s Grace in a War Situation

The compelling question for Christians as we contemplate ministry in war contexts is how we can present the care, love, and power of God to victims.²² The most basic stance for believers is to consciously align with God’s mission in the world, especially where there is so much affliction. The goal of God’s mission to the world in its brokenness is the restoration of humanity amid all its dimensions of suffering.²³ The biblical good news that draws on the power of the cross should make a comprehensive impact on the whole person, which covers the physical, mental, spiritual, and social facets.²⁴ If our biblical Reformed foundation in Calvinism has comprehensively affected the entirety of life, then we should heighten our realization that we are called to be responsible in respect to those four facets in our ailing twenty-first century. The social facet is as important as the other three

¹⁹ Ibid., 12.

²⁰ John Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1995), 42.

²¹ Chris Meehan, “International Aid Closes,” Christian Reformed Church, July 8, 2009, <https://www.crcna.org/news-and-events/news/international-aid-closes>.

²² See a similar question in Jean Lasserre, *War and the Gospel* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1962), 10.

²³ For an elaborate reading on this, see Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 289–90.

²⁴ Ibid., 315, 318. Wright also appeals to Jean-Paul Helch, “Revisiting the Whole Gospel: Toward a Biblical Model of Holistic Mission in the 21st Century,” *Missiology* 32 (2004): 157.

because it affects them: by being “socially responsible, the Church can provide answers to the sufferings of the world in at least two ways: by offering direct assistance to the needy and by participating in changing and building a better, more just, or at least less unjust, society.”²⁵ The gospel calls us to partner with Christ in re-creating life that sin, with its consequences, has de-created. Since war has become an almost unavoidable evil in human existence, the question now remains: How can believers turn war or conflict into an opportunity to demonstrate the love of Christ in the most effective way to those who are affected?

The text of Jeremiah 39:10–12 (cf. 2 Kgs 25:22) provides an interesting insight and a theological springboard for our agenda.

Nebuzaradan, the captain of the guard, left in the land of Judah some of the poor people who owned nothing, and gave them vineyards and fields at the same time.

Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon gave command concerning Jeremiah through Nebuzaradan, the captain of the guard, saying, “Take him, look after him well, and do him no harm, but deal with him as he tells you.”²⁶

Though the destruction of Judah came as a result of divine judgment, God equally gave room for his mercy and grace by providentially controlling the way that Nebuchadnezzar’s commander demonstrated compassion for the downtrodden, whose situation had been compounded by the war. God’s grace came alongside his judgment, bringing healing and restoration to those who were broken by injustice at the hands of the most powerful.

While the Babylonian army abandoned the poor, probably because they were a liability, God’s providence created a new lease of life for the remnant victims of this violence.²⁷ Nothing in Nebuzaradan’s nature made him show this kindness, which may have undone injustices committed by the leaders of Judah against these victims, and direct the same kindness to Jeremiah; the prompting had to have come from God’s divine providence.²⁸ So, if God had raised up the Babylonians for this project (Jer 12:12; 20–22; 24–32;

²⁵ Antal Balog, *Toward an Evangelical Missiology of Humanitarian Aid Ministry*, ed. Anne Harper, trans. Julijana Tesija (Osijek, Croatia: Evangelical Theological Seminary, 2007), 59.

²⁶ Reputable scholarship has confirmed the historicity of this event; see Iain Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman, *A Biblical History of Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 283.

²⁷ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1960), 1006–1007 (on Jer 39:1–18); Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary: Practical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1961), 644 (on Jer 39:10); and John Gill, *John Gill’s Exposition on the Entire Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 627–28 (on Jer 39:10–12).

²⁸ Matthew Poole, *Matthew Poole’s Commentary on the Holy Bible*, 3 vols. (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1853), 2:611–12 (on Jer 39:9–10).

34–45; 52; Hab 1:6), then he certainly had a definite plan that included control of the details of the fate of everyone, including the remnant and the prophet Jeremiah. In this case, Nebuzaradan represented two trajectories: one that brought suffering to the people and another that showed humanitarian compassion to those who faced double jeopardy. We can see the same situation in modern warfare; it is uncommon for aggressors to show mercy to their victims since they cannot expect to find friends among their enemies. And, while the Geneva Convention stipulates that military offensives should spare civilian targets, this has most times been neglected, which usually results in civilian casualties.²⁹

John Calvin explains how this story demonstrates that in our worst situations, such as that of the poor that the captors left behind, God cares for our salvation.³⁰ While Nebuchadnezzar’s motivation for giving the land of the wealthy to the poor may have had nothing to do with his original intentions to take over the land, God in his providence used this invasion to change the situation of the poor. Apart from the war, this swap of economic status and freedom would probably not have occurred. In this case, there was a “remaking” of a new world for these people, who were previously referred to as the poor, but at this point, God reversed the situation. Though war is bad in itself, it also provides an opportunity for service and, more pointedly, an opportunity for the love of Christ to be shown to those who are victims. This development has set an evangelistic template for our commitment to the Reformed trajectory of Christianity being a comprehensive life system that responds to all the deepest structures of the human personality.³¹ If Nebuchadnezzar became God’s extraordinary instrument of hope and restoration to these people, we are to be much more instrumental, having been re-created in Christ for good works and given the

²⁹ For instance, Russia has been accused of causing civilian casualties in Ukraine; see Daniel Victor and Ivan Nechepurenko, “Russia Repeatedly Strikes Ukraine’s Civilians: There’s Always an Excuse,” *The New York Times*, July 15, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/russian-civilian-attacks-ukraine.html>; see also, Keith Collins, Danielle Ivory, Jon Huang, Cierra S. Queen, Lauryn Higgins, Jess Ruderman, Kristine White, and Bonnie G. Wong, “Russia’s Attacks on Civilian Targets Have Obliterated Everyday Life in Ukraine,” *The New York Times*, March 23, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/03/23/world/europe/ukraine-civilian-attacks.html>. This sad reality of targeting civilians was just repeated at the start of the Israeli-Hamas war, where Hamas targeted and killed over 260 civilians during a festival on October 7, 2023.

³⁰ John Calvin, *Commentary on Jeremiah and Lamentations*, trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1999), 4:469.

³¹ See Charles Colson and Nancy Pearcey, *How Now Shall We Live?* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1999), xi–xii.; Abraham Kuyper, *Christianity: A Total World and Life System* (Marlborough, NH: Plymouth Rock Foundation, 1996), 46, and *Lectures on Calvinism: Six Stone Lectures Delivered at Princeton University* (1899; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1899), 79.

ministry of reconciling the broken world to God (Eph 2:10; 2 Cor 5:18–19). The message of reconciliation that God has given us is not only verbal but also tangible.

III. *The Reformed Christocentric Principle of Ministry in the Context of War*

We begin with a question here: What would Jesus’s social response to today’s wars and violence be? Surely, his life and teachings are opposed to violence and war,³² but where war has happened, in the aftermath of “pain and need,” would he not see it as an opportunity to share the gospel?³³ Jesus’s ministry recognized the physical, social, and spiritual dimensions and addressed them by healing the sick and feeding the hungry (Matt 8:1–16; 14:13–21), restoring the outcast (Luke 17:12–19), and preaching repentance and acceptance of the gospel of the kingdom of God (Matt 4:17, 23; 9:35; Mark 1:14; Luke 8:1). His forgiveness of his attackers and the confession or repentance of the centurion also attest to this gospel package (Matt 27:54; Mark 15:39; Luke 23:47). Therefore, Christ is the prime example for our ministry.

Calvin teaches that we can only be productive in our ministry to others when we cultivate the right attitude, which is self-denial.³⁴ He would consider our ministry in this case to be works that show love to the victims of war or conflict. This attitude requires that we look away from our comfort to the comfort of others and serve them graciously—not because of any meritorious deeds on their part but because they are image bearers of God to whom we owe “honor and love.”³⁵ And it is the true love of God that can provoke one’s love for the neighbor: “The word neighbor extends indiscriminately to every man, because the whole human race is united by a sacred bond of fellowship.”³⁶ Calvin’s theology of the neighbor became a springboard for the development of a solid theory of Reformed

³² H. Leo Boles, *The New Testament Teaching on War* (1923; repr., Abilene, TX: Stone-Campbell Books, 2017), 24, https://digitalcommons.acu.edu/crs_books/444.

³³ Vladimir Kuzmin, “Building the Church in a War Zone,” *Christian Vision* (CV), July 9, 2019, <https://www.cvglobal.co/building-the-church-in-a-war-zone/>.

³⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1:695 (3.7.5); Denis R. Janz, ed., *A Reformation Reader* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 256.

³⁵ Janz, *A Reformation Reader*, 258; see also, Alvin J. Schmidt, *How Christianity Changed the World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 127.

³⁶ John Calvin, *Commentary on Matthew, Mark and Luke* (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library), 3:45–46.

philanthropy, providing a framework for action in special circumstances.³⁷ This task is not devoid of complex issues in its implementation, as David Hall and Matthew Burton attest: “Calvin’s challenge was to arrive at practical protocols that would use the mechanisms already provided by God to maximize the efforts of these ministers of mercy.”³⁸ Since global violence is on the increase, the global Reformed faith can critically review its existing interventions and set up ministries to deal with global crises in which churches can raise funds through their deacons and deposit them to be stored and used for evangelistic interventions in the affected places.

Christian philanthropy has three definite purposes and goals: to proclaim the gospel of the love and care of Christ, to strengthen believers in their critical moments, and to persuade unbelievers to turn to God through Christ, who cares for them. While unbelievers also carry the sparks of God’s love in them by which they engage in humanitarian services, believers are called not merely to replicate the same but to do even better, since they have been transformed by the Spirit of Christ so they can excel (1 Pet 2:9; Matt 5:14–16; Dan 6; Titus 2:7–8). We are called to excellence as we exemplify the character of our Lord, who is the fountain of all excellence: “Working with excellence demonstrates gratitude to our Maker for how he made us and for the opportunities he presents to us.”³⁹

An anonymous reviewer who attended a conference in Windhoek, Namibia, in 2003, explains the effectiveness of building resilience by enlightening people to adopt the biblical worldview and shape their behavior thus:

In their involvement in development aid programs in various countries around the world for decades, the *Disciple Nations Alliance* became increasingly convinced that the most sustainable community development has taken place where a biblical worldview and Christian stewardship became part of people’s outlook on life. His big emphasis was: Change will not come by dumping more money into poor areas, but transforming thought patterns has the most powerful effect on life change.⁴⁰

³⁷ David W. Hall and Matthew D. Burton, *Calvin and Commerce: The Transforming Power of Calvinism in Market Economies* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 149.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 123.

³⁹ Jeremy W. Johnston, “In Pursuit of Excellence: ‘Why We Need to Be Excellent’: Part 1,” H&E Publishing, February 19, 2020, <https://hesedandemet.com/in-pursuit-of-excellence-why-we-need-to-be-excellent-part-1/>.

⁴⁰ Anonymous, “Review comments on ‘Christian Community and Constructive Ministry in Violent Context,’” 2023 (unpublished).

Christian ministry supports the cogency of the gospel when it not only supports ailing communities but also, beyond that, helps in the transformation of their worldview and character so that they can become more productive even in the midst of adversity.

The motivation for Christian charity is a recognition of the grace and mercies we have freely received from God to help those in need.⁴¹ We are to be like an active conduit through which the mercies of God flow to the world. The necessity and fact of charity are occasioned by hostile conditions that God calls us to take responsibility for and change. Alvin Schmidt rightly observes, “In short, every time charity and compassion are seen in operation, the credit goes to Jesus Christ. It was he who inspired his early followers to give and go to help the unfortunate, regardless of their race, religion, class, or nationality.”⁴²

In Calvin’s day, the surge of refugees in Geneva prompted the church there to be increasingly responsive, and this drew the sympathy of churches in other European countries to collaboratively meet the refugees’ needs.⁴³ This action became essential, as the minority churches in the predominantly Catholic countries “could not have survived without this financial infrastructure.”⁴⁴ This set a pattern for believers in safe places to form a global network and proactively plan to intervene in the situations of believers whose lives are under the threat of violence.

How, then, can we minister effectively in our time of global terrorism and wars in places like Nigeria and Ukraine? Timothy Beougher argues that the challenge of evangelism today is in terms of not only the dangers that we might encounter in the contexts of war and violence but also such attitudes as our selfishness that hinder our commitment to the cause of the gospel.⁴⁵ This selfishness arises from our fear of losing our comfort—or perhaps from the love of castigating certain groups that cause such situations.

Harvie Conn has developed an excellent book on “holistic evangelism,” a combination of the gospel and social Christian action: *Evangelism: Doing Justice and Preaching Grace*.⁴⁶ The book is an attempt to balance the biblical

⁴¹ Schmidt, *How Christianity Changed the World*, 126.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 148.

⁴³ Jeannine E. Olson, “Calvin and Social-Ethical Issues,” in *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 166–67.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁴⁵ Timothy K. Beougher, “Challenges and Encouragements for Evangelism Today,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 23.3 (2019): 27.

⁴⁶ Harvie Conn, *Evangelism: Doing Justice and Preaching Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982).

view of the gospel through evangelism over against both evangelicals and liberals, who go to the extreme ways of either the gospel in words only or the gospel in deeds only, respectively. The divide between the cultural and the evangelistic mandates has affected the force and impact that the Christian gospel could achieve in its mission to the world. In his review of the book, Greg Gilbert raises some fundamental questions: “The difficulty comes when we try to explain exactly how works of compassion relate to the task of evangelism. Are those works part of evangelism itself? Signs of it? Means to it? Does ‘evangelism’ mean—at its heart—‘telling’ only, or is it ultimately some combination of ‘telling and doing?’”⁴⁷

Conflicts and war situations provide opportunities for emotional healing that will give birth to forgiveness between victims of warring nations such as Russia and Ukraine. Such opportunities were opened in such African countries as South Sudan, Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo when the Reformed churches not only worked on building resilience in the victims but moved the warring ethnic groups to forgive one another, and more people were converted to Christ.⁴⁸ Similarly, the Christian Reformed Church has done an excellent job in Sierra Leone with the indigenous people there sharing their testimony: “We’ve learned not to look at our differences anymore, but what do we have in common and work for a common goal together.”⁴⁹

Calvin disapproves of any excuse for withholding our ministry to those in need, including those who might offend us:

Now if he has not only deserved no good at your hand, but has also provoked you by unjust acts and curses, not even this is just reason why you should cease to embrace him in love and to perform the duties of love on his behalf [Matt 6:14; 18:35; Luke 17:31].⁵⁰

We can deal with the human sentiments of reacting to offense only if we embrace humility and resist the temptation to harbor malice. Again, this is possible only where the operation of the Holy Spirit is effective in believers’ lives.

⁴⁷ Greg Gilbert, “Book Review: *Evangelism: Doing Justice and Preaching Grace* by Harvie Conn,” 9Marks, September 2, 2002, <https://www.9marks.org/review/evangelism/>.

⁴⁸ Anonymous, “Review comments on ‘Christian Community and Constructive Ministry in Violent Context.’”

⁴⁹ Kristen deRoo Vanderberg, “One Church, One Country: CRC Ministry in Sierra Leone,” reliefweb, January 30, 2012, <https://reliefweb.int/report/sierra-leone/one-church-one-country-crc-ministry-sierra-leone>.

⁵⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:696 (3.7.6).

The spirit of Calvinism saw the refugee crisis in the sixteenth century not merely as a problem but also as an opportunity for compassionate ministry to the victims and to the poor. As Robert Kingdom notes, “The almsgiver ... [sees] the face of Christ in the beggar,” who bears the image of God.⁵¹ While Rubén Rodríguez develops Calvin’s unique teaching and action in human compassion toward the refugees in Geneva as a means of advocating that immigrants fleeing persecution in their countries be accepted in America,⁵² this has similar implications in other contemporary war and conflict situations that have put thousands of victims into various forms of affliction. Calvin generated an enduring, comprehensive worldview that continues to impact our contemporary times, including his compassionate affection for the poor and needy.⁵³ For Calvin, diakonia has a wider application than merely distributing alms and taking care of the poor or serving them.⁵⁴ In contrast to non-Christian humanitarian philanthropy, this diaconate stands on religious and ideological principles that center on the kingdom-rule of God.⁵⁵ Calvin’s principle in all matters of faith and conduct is for every believer to “serve as the servants of God and not as the servants of men.”⁵⁶ He preeminently places the glory of God or “honour of God” first, while the “utility of this Council”⁵⁷ and its wider application to believers universally follow second. This emphasis is because we must recognize that we are not our own but belong to God, which should hold us tight to this calling.⁵⁸ The magnitude of the importance of serving the afflicted in Calvin’s mind was expressed in a letter of appreciation to

⁵¹ Robert McCune Kingdom, “Calvinism and Social Welfare,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 17.2 (1982): 213; see also, Rubén Rosario Rodríguez, “Calvin’s Legacy of Compassion: A Reformed Theological Perspective on Immigration,” in *Immigrant Neighbors among Us: Immigration across Theological Traditions*, ed. M. Daniel Carroll R. and Leopoldo A. Sánchez M. (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2015), 50.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ David W. Hall, *The Legacy of John Calvin: His Influence on the Modern World* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 16; David W. Hall and Marvin Padgett, *Calvin and Culture: Exploring a Worldview* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2010), 294.

⁵⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2:1061 (4.3.9); see also Elsie A. McKee, *John Calvin on the Diaconate and Liturgical Almsgiving* (Geneva: Droz, 1984).

⁵⁵ David W. Hall, *Calvin in the Public Square: Liberal Democracies, Rights and Civil Liberties* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 106; Hall and Burton, *Calvin and Commerce*, 123–24.

⁵⁶ John Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, vol. 3, *Tracts, Part 3*, ed. and trans. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), 28. Note that Calvin seems to be drawing some insights from the Acts of the Council of Trent as his grounds for reforming the church, a tactic his attackers misunderstood.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* Calvin’s reference to “the glory of God and the good of the church” as the focus of ministry is characteristic of him (*ibid.*, 19). See Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:52–53 (1.5.1–2).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 1:690 (3.7.1).

Heinrich Bullinger, in which he speaks of such duties as a “remarkable office of humanity” that was “discharged towards exiled and afflicted brethren.”⁵⁹ This task of ministering the love and care of Christ to victims of war is a “bright and singular example of piety.”⁶⁰

IV. Ministry-Strategic Planning in Contexts of War

Terrorists of various groups carry out violence in Nigeria: religious terrorists such as Boko Haram and the Islamic State of West Africa (ISWA) and ethnic terrorists such as the armed Fulani bandits.⁶¹ When Boko Haram started its violent actions in northeastern Nigeria, Christians were their immediate targets, and they made their message very clear: anything that originates in the West, such as education and the Christian religion, is sinful—but as these terrorists grew in strength, many Muslims also suffered destruction. By attacking even some Muslim communities, the terrorists were most probably expressing their anger against the Muslim elite responsible for their impoverished conditions. One possible important way of addressing that problem would be to improve their livelihoods and grant them access to political participation.⁶²

While the religious terrorist groups in Nigeria pursue a religious agenda, the agenda of the violent Fulani armed bandits seems to be ethnic and economic: they kill farmers, rustle their cattle, or kidnap for ransom. These groups have created a terrifying situation for millions of people who either are in camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs) or have fled to other safe places and live under difficult conditions.⁶³

Similarly, according to reports for the period from February 2022 through September 2023, the Russia–Ukraine war accounted for nearly 500,000 people killed or injured,⁶⁴ though the figures are sometimes politicized. The

⁵⁹ John Calvin, *Tracts and Letters, Part 3, 1554–1558*, ed. Jules Bonnet, trans. Marcus Robert Gilchrist (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), 131.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ John Paden, *Religion and Conflict in Nigeria* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2015), <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR359-Religion-and-Conflict-in-Nigeria.pdf>.

⁶² Andrew Walker, *What Is Boko Haram?* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2012), <https://www.usip.org/publications/2012/05/what-boko-haram>.

⁶³ Doris Dokua Sasu has put the figure at 2.7 million affected people; see Doris Dokua Sasu, “Number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) in Nigeria from 2013 to 2020,” Statista, February 1, 2022, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1237374/number-of-internally-displaced-persons-in-nigeria/>.

⁶⁴ Helene Cooper, Thomas Gibbons-Neff, Eric Schmitt, and Julian E. Barnes, “Troop Deaths and Injuries in Ukraine War Near 500,000, U.S. Officials Say,” *The New York Times*,

conditions in which the survivors find themselves are inhumane, with crises of homelessness, health hazards, and a lack of food. The Middle East has also been in turmoil over the years, with similar consequences.

What, then, should we do? Global terrorism, threats of wars by the superpowers, and armed banditry are increasing, with terrifying consequences. However, believers who are given the power to be God's children (John 1:12) and a spirit that is not prone to fear and timidity (2 Tim 1:7) should not "acquiesce in the general mood of helplessness."⁶⁵ As the forces of darkness push for a more uncomfortable life for humanity and the entire creation, our challenge is to rise up to the challenge, knowing that God's providential presence is with us. Along this line, John Stott makes a strong call to action:

We are called to engage with our contemporary culture rather than be indifferent to it, and to be an example of hope in a culture of despair where people have become cynical about any possibility of change for the better. It is important for the voice of the Christian church to be heard not only locally but nationally and internationally, and this means making our points clearly in the media and by lobbying the government when change is necessary.⁶⁶

The call to be an "example of hope in a culture of despair" is a call to go against a force that has engulfed the world and brought about its miserable predicament. It is a call for a unique agenda for ameliorating the human situation in a way that brings hope to those affected. This can be possible by planning a complete package for the gospel in Nigeria and in Ukraine, and our gospel in deeds should target Christians, Muslims, and nonreligious victims. And if our position is not that of withdrawal and isolation from sinners, as others think,⁶⁷ but to relate with them to witness Christ to

August 8, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/18/us/politics/ukraine-russia-war-casualties.html>; Erika Kinetz, "How Many Russians Have Died in Ukraine? Data Shows What Moscow Hides," The Associated Press, July 10, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-war-military-deaths-facd75c2311ed7be660342698cf6a409>; Rami Ayyub and David Ljunggren, "Troop Deaths, Injuries in Ukraine War Nearing 500,000 – NYT citing US officials," Reuters, August 8, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/troop-deaths-injuries-ukraine-war-nearing-500000-nyt-citing-us-officials-2023-08-18/>; Andrew Roth, "Battlefield Deaths in Ukraine Have Risen Sharply This Year, Say US Officials," *The Guardian*, August 18, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/aug/18/ukraine-russia-war-battlefield-deaths-rise>. The Russian version accounts for 43,000 casualties but only on the side of Ukraine without mentioning the effect on the Russian side; see "Moscow Issues Update on Estimated Ukrainian Casualties during Counteroffensive," RT, August 4, 2023, <https://www.rt.com/russia/580823-ukraine-counter-offensive-casualties/>.

⁶⁵ John Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 129.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Beougher, "Challenges and Encouragements," 27.

them, then the war situation presents an opportunity for ministry through charity and other ways of bringing hope and renewal to people's lives.

Drawing from these insights, the church needs to consciously draw up special evangelism and ministry programs to support those who have been called and given the courage to evangelize in such risky environments. Such programs are special because they deal with extraordinary and complex situations that require strategic approaches that can protect those engaged in evangelism.

In this regard, such a strategic approach and special program may be summarized as follows.

First, the Reformed family should be able to identify with the victims in their cultural contexts of suffering while holding firmly to the truth without compromising Christian ethical standards, instead presenting the Christ who has suffered for our sins that we might have the hope of a better earthly life and a future eternal life.⁶⁸ Christ's identity with those who suffer is the message that needs to be given to people in this context (Isa 53:4; Matt 8:17; 1 Pet 3:18).

Second, evangelistic materials should be constructed to articulately address contemporary issues facing believers in places where there is violence, explaining God's will and sovereign control in circumstances like this.

Third, given that the surge in global violence will continue for the foreseeable future, the Reformed church should consciously prepare itself by setting up a global networking body that can coordinate prayers and support to respond to the challenges of war and violence.

Fourth, the Reformed church and seminaries should also set up special training programs for those who would minister in war situations. This training should emphasize emotional resilience, which they can inculcate into victims through Bible study programs for solid faith and survival. Resource persons can be identified in the various contexts of war and trained for this purpose.

Fifth, a special team can be set up to perform a needs assessment in the affected places for intervention within short-term, medium-term, and long-term frameworks in a way that enables outcomes to be easily measured. This may require the development of community health projects that can save lives in the aftermath of wars.

Sixth, the global Reformed Churches in stronger economies need to replicate the Hungarian Reformed Church by setting up special ministries for refugees that have a global scope.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

Paul's idea of the inspiration and authority of Scripture (2 Tim 3:16) gives us a foundation upon which we can be "complete" and "thoroughly equipped for every good work" in our theological and practical vocations (2 Tim 2:21; 3:17). This thorough preparation for the gospel is to be taken into consideration; believers should envisage convenient and inconvenient times as they engage the hostile world (2 Tim 4:2). As the word of God is timeless, and as it instructs us about our present precarious global situation, it is expedient that theological seminaries should consider some inter- or multidisciplinary theological, missiological, and psychological curricula that will produce strong and supple graduates who can boldly face the harsh, unpredictable challenges of our world.

Conclusion

While war and violence are some of the worst phenomena affecting human well-being, they also present an opportunity for the gospel. As non-Christian philanthropists have been making great efforts to reach out to victims with their own gospel of secularism, believers should note that these situations present special opportunities that God has opened to us to bring him closer to the victims and to express his care and love for them. Christ is the principle of life and the hope of life in our ashes, and he is the center of our humanitarian actions.

Situations like the terrorist events in Nigeria and the Russia–Ukraine war pose big challenges, so the Reformed church needs a creative approach to fulfill its divine mandate to minister to the victims in keeping with Calvin's tradition first established in the sixteenth century. The church should be willing to improve its mission and scale up its resources. The church has been redeemed to partner with God in his mission to bring healing and hope. We are called to active obedience, and we are not our own but God's, so we cannot choose what we will obey and what we will not obey. Having been called to be the light and salt of the world (cf. Matt 5:13–16), our willingness to obey in deeds demonstrates our true piety, as all our being is to radiate his glory. On this note, the Reformed church can constructively and creatively plan strategic approaches and special training programs to equip believers for the good work of the Lord for which we have been created in Christ (Eph 2:10).