



A MORE PERFECT LOVE

CASTING OUT FEAR TO BECOME COURAGEOUS CHRISTIANS

BY KURT A. VER BEEK

More than a dozen people were killed and dozens more robbed in my neighborhood during a three-month period, and I did nothing.

That is the short version. Depending on which details I highlight, I can make it sound better or worse.

Let's start with worse. One of the first killed in a robbery was the father of two boys, classmates of my children. He was leaving his house early in the morning in his beat-up pickup truck to buy vegetables to sell at his small produce stand. Another man was killed in front of his whole family when he didn't hand over his belongings quickly enough. While I did not know who the killers were, I knew several people who could identify them, including a group of young people from my church who had seen them take off their masks and recognized them as neighbors. What's more, the widow of the first victim came to me and a friend of mine asking for help; she said she was willing to testify against her husband's murderers. We contacted a lawyer who said she would try to talk to a trusted friend who held an influential position with the police. But over three months went by,

and I did not follow up. In fact, I didn't do much of anything in spite of the fact that more people were robbed and at least 13 were killed during those months. I wonder how much guilt I share for all this death and suffering.

That all sounds pretty bad, I know. Does this sound better? I live in a poor neighborhood in the Honduran capital of Tegucigalpa, in what most North Americans would call a slum. My neighbors and I didn't know if we could trust the police, and we even suspected some of them might be involved in the crimes. These thieves haunted the community at night, wearing ski masks and preying on easy targets. They were willing to kill to get what they wanted. So going to the police could have gotten some of us or, worse yet, some of our family members, killed. Neither I, my friend, the young people at my church, nor the many witnesses to the crimes were willing to take that risk—no one beyond the widow who had already lost so much that she was willing to risk her life to seek justice. In our fear, we rationalized that we were powerless and sought to delegate the task of actually doing something about the situation to a friend of a friend. I think about this a lot. What should I have done?

COWARDLY CHRISTIANS

When my wife, Jo Ann, and I arrived in Honduras in 1988, about five percent of the population considered themselves to be Protestant or evangelical Christians. In the 22 years since, that number has risen to nearly 40 percent. At the same time, the Catholic Church, in which much of the rest of the population claims membership, has experienced a revival, encouraging discipleship groups and Bible studies, and a charismatic Catholic movement has emerged. Visits from short-term missions teams from US churches have surged.

Tens of thousands of North Americans fly to Honduras every year to help build churches, hand out medical supplies, and more. You would think this revival of spirituality and this influx of good-hearted aid would result in the reduction of the poverty, corruption, and violence plaguing Honduras. But you would be wrong.

In 1988, Honduras was among the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere. Twenty-two years later, it's still at the bottom of the lists: literacy, life-expectancy, infant mortality, per capita income, etc. In the last five years, the annual murder rate has more than doubled, from 2,416 in 2005 to 5,265 in 2009. Honduras now has one of the highest murder rates in the world, about 10 times that of the United States. It's not uncommon to hear Hondurans talking wistfully of the days of Tiburcio Carías, an iron-fisted dictator who in the 1940s ruthlessly oppressed the opposition—but also kept the city so crime-free that you could sleep on the streets of downtown Tegucigalpa with no fear of being robbed.

Corruption, too, is on the rise. In the most recent Transparency International poll, Honduras was ranked 130th out of 180 countries, worse than neighbors like Guatemala and El Salvador, but also far worse than Rwanda and Liberia—countries which, not to belittle them in any way, would seem to have better excuses than Honduras for having shaky holds on the rule of law.

How can it be that as Honduras has become more “Christian,” things have gotten worse instead of better? Some may write it off as simply a sign of the end-times. But I think the fault lies closer to home: Honduras is full of Christians, but our faith hasn't made us very brave. It's no accident that while literally hundreds, if not thousands, of Christian groups run orphanages, schools, health clinics, and micro-enterprise funds, you would be hard-pressed to find a dozen that seek to expose politicians who divert aid meant for the poor into their own pockets, or that stand up for victims of violent crime like my grieving neighbor.

THE COST OF FOLLOWING CHRIST

Before you start shaking your head at this sad situation in Honduras, let me say that I don't think we North Americans are doing any better. When is the last time most of us even associated the idea of being “brave” with our day-to-day walk with Christ? We look up to soldiers, police officers, and firefighters for facing danger on a daily basis, but we often

Opposite: The author's neighborhood.

Photo by Katie Hommes

Right: Two AJS investigators on the job.

Photo by Läkaramissionen

seem to think the rest of us are off the hook.

We are not. Courageous faith is exactly what Jesus calls us to—all of us. Where did we get the idea that following Christ mainly meant driving a comfortable, air-conditioned car to a comfortable, air-conditioned church to which we are able to give semi-generously but usually semi-painlessly, because of our comfortable, steady, secure job? Following Christ has always been dangerous. The Israelites braved hunger, thirst, and marauding armies in following God out of Egypt and back to the Promised Land. Joseph and Jeremiah were both thrown into deep wells; Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were locked in a fiery furnace; and Daniel was tossed into a den of lions—all of them for following God when it was not popular to do so. Stephen was killed, Peter and Paul were frequently flogged and imprisoned, and the apostle John was exiled to an isolated island for spreading the gospel.

Jesus, our ultimate role model, angered authorities by throwing over money-changing tables and calling them nasty names (I wonder what the modern-day equivalent of “white-washed tombs” would be?). Then he humbly let himself be tortured and murdered in one of the most barbaric ways humans have ever invented. And he made it clear that we, his followers, can expect the same: “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,” Jesus tells us, and then goes on to say, “You will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me.”

LOVE VS FEAR

Now, many of us are able to be brave and willing to take risks to protect and help those we love. But we are far more cautious for a stranger. If an armed man attacks my daughter, I will likely do everything I can to stop him, but I may not do the same for a stranger's daughter. What happens when this caution becomes the norm? What happens is that the forces





An AJS psychologist (background, in focus) with a rape survivor she has counseled. Photo by Läkaramissionen

of evil are empowered to do what they want with impunity. What happens is that you get a situation like the one in Honduras where as more people flock to church things get more violent in the streets every day.

Jesus calls me to go beyond defending just that which and those who are “mine”; he calls me to defend my neighbor, both literally and figuratively, as if she too were my daughter, sister, or mother. Jesus summarized the whole of God’s desire for how we should treat each other as “Love you neighbor as yourself,” and he made it clear that our neighbor is anyone in need of mercy and care. Christ told the story of the good Samaritan to show that our neighbor includes even those who we view as our enemies.

Is it contradictory that Christ called us to turn the other cheek but then made a whip and overturned the money changers’ tables at the temple? That he walked toward the cross without a fight but defended the woman caught in adultery and saved her from being stoned? There is no contradiction in Christ; rather he shows us by example how we need to be slow to defend our own “rights” but quick to defend others—especially those who are marginalized and weak—and how we must be willing even to suffer for it.

How can we cultivate the courage needed to love so radically? I keep coming back to this passage in 1 John: “There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear” (4:18). The more we focus our eyes, our hearts, and our actions on the love of Christ—the more we allow that love to grow into love for our neighbors, coming to see them as our own brothers and sisters—the less room we leave for fear to outmaneuver us and divert us from the path Christ calls us to.

STEPPING OUT OF OUR COMFORT ZONE

Let’s get back to my neighborhood. Eventually the ski-masked gang was broken up, when one member was killed and another arrested in a shoot-out with the police, but soon

a new gang rose up to fill the void. A dozen teenagers from the roughest corner of the neighborhood began extorting local bus drivers and businesses and eventually obtained enough weapons to launch a reign of terror—robbing, raping, and killing. Again, 35,000 neighborhood residents were at the mercy of a handful because they did not trust the police to do anything about the criminal behavior or to protect them from the perpetrators if they made complaints.

This time, however, God stirred our hearts and tugged at our consciences so insistently that we could not ignore him. In 1998 my wife and I, along with a friend and several colleagues, had started an organization called the *Asociacion para una Sociedad mas Justa* (Association for a More Just Society). Up to this point, the focus of our organization had been on structural injustices. We performed journalistic investigations of government corruption, advocated for more just laws, and eventually took on individual casework in areas such as labor rights, land rights, and domestic violence. Given the situation in our neighborhood at this time, however, we decided to expand the work of ASJ. But tackling the gang violence issue head-on was a major departure for us, not only because of the level of danger involved but also because, as a Christian human rights organization accustomed to helping unjustly accused people get out of prison, we were initially uncomfortable with the idea of helping to put people in prison. What’s more, we had few if any models of Christian NGOs working alongside law enforcement officials to investigate, arrest, and prosecute perpetrators of gang-related crimes. We had to wrestle with some difficult questions and deepen our vision of justice in order to address the street violence.

We took what in retrospect appears a small enough step. We hired a lawyer and a private investigator and introduced them to some neighbors who had been victimized by the gang. We had hoped to hire Christians, but each of the three Christian lawyers we asked turned us down: They were too scared. But an agnostic lawyer and a lapsed-Mormon investigator were willing to take the risk, and God used them to help change our neighborhood.

In our neighborhood, as in most of Honduras, some police officers are involved in everything from extortion to drug trafficking and even moonlight as hit men, and unfortunately they tend to tarnish the reputation of the entire police force, even though many other officers are honest. On the other hand, experience has shown us that gang members hardly ever show mercy to those they suspect of having turned them in. Thus, in a survey AJS did in my neighborhood in 2005, over half of respondents said they’d been a victim of crime in the last year—but only four percent reported those crimes to the police. While this skepticism towards law

enforcement authorities is understandable, it also becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. If no one testifies about crimes they've seen, police and prosecutors are left without a legal basis to incarcerate and convict criminals. And knowing they're unlikely to receive adequate cooperation from survivors and witnesses saps the motivation of law enforcement officials to solve crimes.

Our lawyer and investigator worked tirelessly to build a circle of trust between neighborhood residents (crime victims, witnesses, and informants) and law enforcement officials (police detectives, prosecutors, and judges). The support of AJS staff and the special witness-protection measures they implemented emboldened a few witnesses to testify about the murders and robberies they had seen. Combined with other evidence our investigator gathered and shared with the authorities, this resulted in the arrest and conviction of the most vicious of the gang leaders. As these first collaborators saw their testimony resulting in positive action by law-enforcement officials, they began to put our staff in touch with friends and relatives of theirs who had also been attacked by the gang. We also assigned an AJS psychologist to help these crime survivors work through the emotional damage they had suffered.

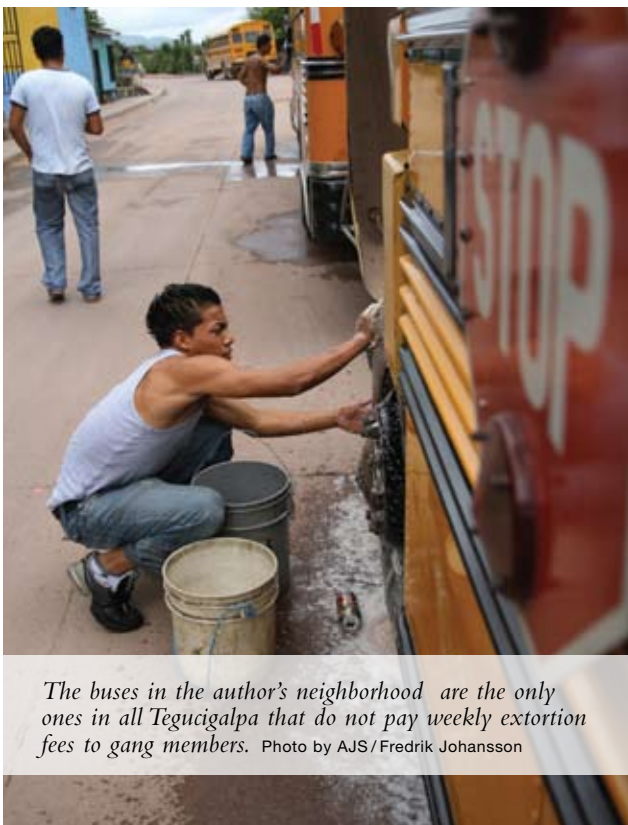
A TRANSFORMED NEIGHBORHOOD

As a result, over the last five years, 100 of our neighborhood's most violent gang members have been tried and convicted. Our staff also worked with neighborhood residents to arrest and convict the members of a self-appointed vigilante group that had tried to deal with the gang problem by brutally executing 15 of the youngest (most were 12 or 13) and weakest gang members. Today, robbery, rape, and murder rates are down by as much as 80 percent in my neighborhood compared to 2005, even as the murder rate has more than doubled in Honduras as a whole during the same time. If my neighborhood's murder rate had just kept pace with the national average, this year 77 of my neighbors would have died violently. Instead, only seven have—that's seven more than we hoped for, but 70 less than we would have had good reason to expect if no one had stepped up to change things. Today in my neighborhood, our local bus drivers are the only ones in all of Tegucigalpa who do not pay a weekly "war tax" to local gang members. Children now play in the street until bedtime, and those striving to break the cycle of poverty through education dare to attend night school. Churches that had moved up their services so that people could get home before dark are once again worshipping into the night.

And the "courageous" step Carlos, Jo Ann, and I took? All we did was risk hiring a lawyer and an investigator. But God used the tiny sparks of courage in our hearts to ignite much more daring acts by our staff and our neighbors, which had the result of transforming our neighborhood.

This small act on my part does not now let me off the hook. Every day I must ask myself, "Will I act out of fear today, or love?" This is a call to all of us to seek a way to live out a radical and perfect love, a love that casts out all fear. We cannot be ruled by fear of what others will think, what might happen to us, or what we might miss. We must love those who are victimized, those who could be future victims, and even those who commit injustices (which sometimes means ourselves). If I love my neighbor as myself, if I seek to love my neighbor's children as I would want them to love mine, even when—perhaps especially when—that requires sacrifice, then I will be well on the road to being the courageous, loving Christian Jesus calls me to be. ■

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The buses in the author's neighborhood are the only ones in all Tegucigalpa that do not pay weekly extortion fees to gang members. Photo by AJS / Fredrik Johansson