Beyond Justice: Restoration & Reconciliation

In the eyes of those who simply look on as a genocide ravages a nation, justice may be served once the war or conflict has run its course and life begins anew. For many, it is enough just to see the genocide reach its end and the status quo returned. However, I would argue that the concept of ‘justice’ means different things for different people. For those directly impacted by the horrors of genocide, a viewpoint such as the above is hardly sufficient. Additionally, I believe that legal justice does not quite suffice. Reconciliation and healing must be borne out of war and genocide. To simply deny or forget the atrocities of a genocide is to stoke the fires of the hatred that caused it in the first place. After a genocide, the responsibility of reconciliation is not solely delegated to the offending party, but rather, to the entire world. Often, as was the case in the Rwandan genocide, very little was done by the major world powers to combat the injustice taking place in Rwanda; both the perpetrators of the violence and the countries of the world were to blame. Thus, to me, ‘justice’ extends past simple legal reconciliation and, instead, encompasses all of the collective efforts of humans to bring healing and restoration to a fractured populace.

Taking this distribution of responsibilities to a different level, I would argue that, as a Christian, the Church has a supreme role in the restoration of broken societies. As Christians, we have transferred the burden of caring for others onto the shoulders of our governments. Truthfully, this is contrary to the Gospel that we, as Christians, profess to believe in. If we truly are to live as Jesus commanded us to, we must care for anyone who has been victimized by their malicious aggressors.

In light of this, I do believe justice can be attained following a genocidal event. In thinking of my interpretation of what ‘justice’ means, it is my opinion that justice is being served where the law is concerned. Plenty of the architects of genocidal movements, from Saddam Hussein to Nazi war criminals, have been indicted and prosecuted in courts of law around the world. However, I do believe that we can and should work together as one human population,
indifferent of race or religion, to help build up people in broken communities and restore to them the rights promised by natural law. Restoring a community following a genocide involves several components: community development, individual development, meeting basic needs, and racial reconciliation. Only when all of these components are diligently embraced and undertaken by a collective body will justice truly be served following a genocide.

These four building blocks of reconciliation and restoration were borne out of a weeklong experience I had while serving on a church mission trip on Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. While the story of the Native Americans is one of the most tragic pieces of our history as a country, it is also one of the most politically divisive issues. Before I went to South Dakota, I ascribed to the belief that Native Americans were not murdered and forcibly relocated upon the arrival of the Europeans and the establishment of the American nation. However, after spending a week in run-down trailer homes and dilapidated community centers caring for unemployed, sick, and alcoholic natives, I revised my original position. I realized that we, as Americans, have done this to these people. In our lust for the best land the country had to offer, we corralled the Native Americans into little groups and handed them scraps of land from which to scrape a living for themselves and their families. These forced relocations, combined with the mass murder of many tribes dating back to Andrew Jackson’s administration, constitute genocide.

How have we as a nation responded to this catastrophic transgression? What can we do to remedy the damage already done? While in Pine Ridge, I began to put pieces together and realize what could be done to improve the lot of the Native Americans on the reservation. They needed help rebuilding their physical community. Destroyed homes and community buildings are not only a symptom felt on reservations: in nearly all cases of genocide, from Rwanda to the Al-Anfal campaign in Iraq, the resulting damage done to a community’s physical structures has been catastrophic and a great hindrance to a society’s ability to begin anew. We must work to restore the homes and buildings of communities ravaged by violence; without them, people will be homeless and deprived of many services necessary to their survival and independence.

It goes further than that, however, for strong societies need strong leaders. In our subduing of the Native Americans, we have offered them just enough government handouts to keep them docile. This has created a whole mass of people who have no leaders among them. No one will stand up to lead their people if they do not see a need for such leadership and action.
This is why we must encourage the development of the individual. In all instances of genocide, the oppressed people must be able to sever the ties that bind their whole beings to their governments. Reliance on such institutions, especially those at the national level, for aid and assistance at the very local level will never yield positive change. As fellow humans, we must infiltrate the ranks of the people affected by genocide, mentoring and inspiring new leaders to rise up to become positive influences in their communities.

Thirdly, basic needs must be met in communities torn asunder by violence. Homes cannot be rebuilt and leaders cannot be trained in places where there is no food or medical care. Humanitarian organizations abound all across the world; they must be bold in their pursuit to care for all peoples of the world. Such endeavors require the financial support of people far removed the conflict. Just because you cannot serve on the front lines does not mean you cannot contribute in any way; ordinary citizens must realize that, no matter who they are or where they live, they can help provide the catalyst that will energize a fragmented society.

Finally, true justice and restoration involves racial and religious reconciliation. Most instances of genocide have something to do with race or ethnicity. Hitler persecuted the Jews, Hussein targeted the Kurds, and the Hutu slaughtered the Tutsis in Rwanda. Now, I do not believe that the Europeans murdered and relocated the Native Americans because they were not white. However, we as the relief force should step back and look at the scenario as seen by the affected side. Truthfully, many Native Americans harbor very hostile feelings towards ‘the white man.’ In South Dakota, I realized that this is all the more reason for people, whites especially, to act positively in the lives of the Native Americans. It takes a snowball to start an avalanche; mass racial reconciliation will never occur unless individual instances are observed and multiplied all across the world.

My experience in South Dakota was profound. I personally saw the effects of genocide, but it was also revealed to me how they could be combated against. In the case of the Native Americans, I do not believe justice has been served. Of course, in current times we do not murder and relocate additional groups of natives, so the task at hand is to restore the reservations that already exist within the macrocosm of America. We have, however, failed at this. In my view, it is only by embracing these four outlined elements of reconciliation that we can honestly say that true justice has been done.
Obviously, the plight of the Native Americans is not the only case of genocide in recorded history; other examples must be examined. From 1941 to 1945, millions of Jews were systematically murdered throughout Europe by the Nazi war machine. Often called the most horrific and flagrant genocide in history, the Holocaust was part of a larger effort to destroy various ethnic and political groups throughout the continent. When the Third Reich was dissolved, survivors of this genocide were taken in by countries all across the globe. Although the actual genocide had run its course, it was at this point that the opportunity for true justice was presented. Thankfully, the world did not disappoint; in this case, legal justice was attained and mass restoration efforts took place to help the Jews find their place in the world once again. Following World War II, a series of military tribunals called the Nuremberg trials were held. Put in place by the Allied forces, these trials saw the successful prosecution of twenty-three of the most affluent leaders in the Third Reich. The pursuit of legal justice for the Jews persists to this day. Recently, it was revealed that a ninety-five year-old Auschwitz medic will be tried with crimes committed during World War II.

However, the part that makes the Holocaust story so compelling is that the pursuit of justice did not end in the courtroom. Though some European nations still bore strong anti-Semitic feelings, the leaders of many countries offered the Jewish people rich opportunities to emigrate to their nations and integrate fully into their societies. Humanitarian organizations offered food and clothing, as well as temporary shelter, to displaced Jews while they sought out new places to call home. Finally, Holocaust memorials and museums have been constructed and implemented in order to educate and raise awareness. One of the only ways to ensure a bright future is to learn from the past; people of all ages must be made aware of the great crimes against humanity committed throughout history; they also must hear of the great efforts made by responsible and caring people to help combat genocides and restore affected communities.

My definition of justice is complex and involved; it moves beyond simple legal justice to encompass restoration and reconciliation efforts. Though it is difficult, I believe that we can attain true justice for the victims of a genocide. If we are ever in doubt as to our ability to do so, we only have to look at the past. We can learn much from the Holocaust and the ensuing humanitarian efforts to offer aid to the displaced and persecuted Jewish population. If we are looking for a good place to start pursuing real justice, we can start within our own borders. The Native American people have long been victims of genocidal actions; by rebuilding their
communities, fostering positive relationships with individuals, offering direct relief, and rebuilding racial relations, we can work to overcome the great crimes of the past and move towards a better, brighter future.

Works Cited:
