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God of the Earthquake

The Prime Minister, John Key, in speaking to the world about the Christchurch earthquake, declared, “We are witnessing the havoc caused by a violent and ruthless act of nature.” Here we have a pithy description of the contemporary worldview: No longer are such events designated an “act of God” but rather, an “act of nature”.

Nature, with its immutable laws, ruthlessly indifferent to the plight of its human inhabitants. We are indeed “witnesses”—but silent and helpless before the “havoc” and “violence” of the world in which we live.

“Is the earthquake an act of God?” This was the question put to Church leaders by journalists in the earthquake’s after-math. And the reply generally given, “No, God was not in the earthquake!” Instead, God is in the love and compassion that people were sharing among each other in the earthquake’s wake. A positive message, maybe, that points people to the source of all love and compassion. Perhaps it was the only message that could adequately be communicated given the limitations of the modern media and the pastoral need to offer some immediate comfort. But such answers prompted one letter writer to the Christchurch Press to complain, “How come God is allowed to take credit for all the good things but then be exonerated from any responsibility for the disaster itself!” Later, a columnist in the same paper wondered whether Church leaders had forgotten the Nicene creed and its declaration that God was “Maker of heaven and earth”!

One bizarre counter-example happened at my Church on the Sunday morning immediately after the quake. My congregation were meeting outside in the church grounds, as we were still unsure of the safety of our buildings. We were fortunate that it was a sunny morning, though the chill of late summer was still in the air. Before the Service, I was approached by a German visitor who introduced himself and wanted to bring a greeting to the congregation. I imagined that here was a German tourist caught up in the earthquake, who was seeking out the fellowship with other Christians and wanted to encourage and assure us of the prayers of his home fellowship. No, in this I was completely mistaken. In reality, he and his team had been sent to Christchurch by his church, but only after the earthquake had occurred, and in order to announce that the earthquake was indeed an

“act of God”. It was, according to him, an act of judgment on the churches of Christchurch for their disunity. He then started to quote from the Old Testament prophet, Malachi! By this stage, I recovered the microphone from him and publicly rebuked him and his message, whereupon he high-tailed it down the road toward the next church in the area. Members of my congregation sent text messages ahead of him in the hope of warning others as to what was coming their way. Not something I would plan, but it did make for a rather vivid sermon illustration!

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In rebuking this German ‘prophet’, I did not wish to imply in any way that God, in his sovereign providence over creation, was powerless or unwilling to become involved with the forces of nature. I too wished to uphold the all powerful God of which the Bible speaks and which our Prayer Book (1662) addresses in the midst of the storm as: “[God] how terrible thou art in all thy works of wonder; the great God to be feared above all.” My rebuke was rather for his failure to hold together as one the Creator God, to whom we must all give an account, and the God who has given us redemption through Jesus Christ.

If through the cross of Christ we are truly reconciled to God (Romans 5:9–11), then to naively speak of ‘judgment’ on God’s people (particularly in Old Testament terms), is to undermine the very redemption that comes through Christ’s atoning death. God is both Creator and Redeemer: to insist on the one without adequately doing justice to the other is to diminish the glory of God shown to us in the cross of Christ.

In addition, we must affirm that God redeems his people within this present age, subject as it is to "futility" and "decay", yet brings that redemption to fulfilment in the age to come. So, the response of God's faithful people to the suffering they experience in this world is not simply to "groan inwardly" (though they do, with all their heart!), it is also to wait patiently for the

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"redemption of our bodies" (Romans 8:18-25). Our faith compels us to maintain that God is both the God of the earthquake, and the God of resurrection hope! The one without the other simply won't do.

So, the hope that we hold out to the world is based on the finished work of Christ on the cross and the hope of resurrection through faith in him. Such a faith is only possible if the same God who is truly sovereign over creation and human history is also the God who is working out his sovereign plan of redemption through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Only then can we affirm, in the midst of tragedies beyond our comprehension, that "all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). Only then are we able to affirm with the Apostle Paul: "Who will separate us from the love of Christ?"—will earthquake?—"No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." (Romans 8:35-39)

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