

The Last Resort

by Dr. John Koessler

In the days that followed Haiti's terrible earthquake, I could not help being struck by the speed with which Americans responded to this tragic event. One of the things that impressed me most was how widespread the response was. Hollywood stars, local businesses, and religious organizations mobilized within what seemed like a matter of hours to give people concrete opportunities to help, usually by giving them some convenient way to donate money. Television stations hosted telethons, web sites posted links to relief organizations, cell phone companies invited you to send text messages or make phone calls. From high tech to low, the only thing more impressive than the number of choices offered for donating to the cause was the degree of personal responsibility people seemed to feel.

There was a day not so long ago when such a tragedy would have been greeted with widespread dismay and probably a round of national prayer, but most people would not have felt any sense of personal responsibility about it. Some of this is a result of access of information. The world is no smaller than it was 100 years ago but our sense of it is. When a tragedy occurs on the other side of the planet, most of us can find out about it in a matter of minutes. Response time, too, has been shortened. While it took days to begin staging significant relief operations in Haiti, it was only a matter of hours before the world's media outlets began posting opportunities for individual's to do something.

And foremost among those who mounted a response, not surprisingly, was the church. Last Tuesday the *Christian Post* reported that Mark Driscoll, pastor of Mars Hill Church in Seattle and Pastor James MacDonald of Harvest Bible Chapel in the Chicago-area personally visited Haiti's capital, not only to deliver relief supplies but to assess the situation and needs of Haitian churches. Such language suggests, not only a level of responsibility that was previously unimaginable, but a degree of empowerment and control that we would not have thought possible even a decade ago.

This is, of course, a good thing. One cannot help feeling a measure of pride at seeing Christian organizations in the forefront of relief operations in Haiti. They are in the forefront, not because they were the quickest to respond, but because they were already there. American evangelicals, it would seem, have learned to be comfortable with social action and to accept it as part of their mission.

Fifty years ago conservative evangelical churches would certainly have prayed for the situation. Twenty years ago they would have sent money and perhaps supplies. Today the church sends its pastors, not primarily to preach or to pray but deliver aid and to "assess" the situation on the ground.

Yet the sight of thousands of bodies being pulled from the rubble offer a blunt reminder, not only of our limitations, but of the church's true power. As impressive and as necessary as the aid which the has offered to Haiti has been, it is really no more than many others have offered. When it comes to physical aid, there are many who can offer what the church has offered. Hollywood starlets, atheists, civil governments, Muslims, Jews, Hindus and Buddhists can do and have done just as much just as well. This of course, does not negate the value of the help that the church has to offer. But it should prompt us to ask what it is that we can do that no one else can do. We can pray in a way that no one else can pray, because we can pray in the name of Jesus. And we can offer the hope of the gospel. We should not let the scope of the tragedy cause us to lose sight of magnitude of these two privileges. Because in the end, the help of God is still the only real help the church has to offer. For Prime Time America, this is John Koessler.