

This Man is Dangerous

Kevin Turner is no ordinary missionary. He takes his message of compassion to the world's war zones.

Missionary Kevin Turner seems unstoppable. He has distributed humanitarian aid in a war zone while bombs were still dropping. He has had a gun pointed to his head. He has even preached before a crowd of armed Islamic fundamentalists.

But as he sits behind his desk, the 38-year-old founder of Strategic World Impact (SWI) is unsuccessfully fighting back tears. Large drops roll from beneath his glasses and down his face before splashing onto some paper he's holding in his trembling, clasped hands.

"I have been on the verge of snapping," Turner says. "I say that very truthfully. I have seen some things that I wish I had never seen."

He wipes his eyes with his sleeve and pauses for a moment. "I guess what breaks my heart is, I see or imagine what it must be like for God to look down on that, to see what's happening to those children, to see what's happening to innocence," he says.

"I've just sat and wondered how He even lets it go on. And I can tell you that I've been at the end of myself with righteous indignation, anger, despair.

"Justice is an interesting thing," he continues. "Justice in a world that is consumed by sin—well, we don't often find it. But as Christians we're supposed to give it and labor in the light of Genesis 18:25 that says the judge of all the earth will do right."

If you listen to Turner, who founded SWI in 1998, you might get an image of Chuck Norris taking on the Viet Cong or Indiana Jones tracking down the ark of the covenant. But there's nothing glamorous about anything SWI does.

It's tiresome, challenging and very precarious work. Yet for the better part of 15 years, Turner has been going into the most dangerous regions to provide aid and comfort to victims of war, disaster and persecution.

"The economy that I see and what we try to stand for is about radical self-denial," Turner says. "When all hell is breaking loose, it's our job to bring a little piece of heaven back in.

"That's what puts us in Bosnia. That's what put us in Kosovo. That's what puts us in Chechnya, Pakistan, Afghanistan or Iraq during the war."

Running to the Battle

Going into its eighth year of operation, SWI () is firmly committed to the call to which it first responded. Unlike many other humanitarian organizations, Turner's group rarely gets into long-term development projects such as building bridges or putting in roads—although SWI did build a school in Pakistan in 2005. Instead, Turner describes it as a "lightweight organization that's capable of rapid, mobile response."

SWI focuses primarily on disaster relief, war zones and Christian persecution. "It's not so much that we work in those three areas," Turner says. "It's when we work in those three areas and how or where.

"Our whole focus is tip-of-the-spear stuff. I've been shelled. I've been shot at. I've run for my life through the deserts. I've had AK-47s on my temple while I was being pushed down a road.

"We want to be the tip of the spear in the midst of a disaster, in the midst of a war or persecution. So much so that we're willing to lay our lives down for what we believe."

For Turner, it hasn't come to that yet, but he's seen his fair share of death and destruction. SWI was the first relief organization to go into Indonesia after the 2004 tsunami.

Turner's group was also in Afghanistan when U.S. planes were still dropping bombs on the mountains of Tora Bora. He has personally found himself in the middle of many dangerous conflicts in such hostile lands as Bosnia, Eritrea and Chechnya, a place he describes as "without a doubt one of the worst places" he's ever been in the world.

One of Turner's most surreal—if not most hazardous—moments came on a trip deep into northeastern Sudan when he infiltrated an Islamic training center where SWI provided humanitarian aid to Muslim extremists. While there, Turner asked if he could show the people a film. They agreed. And when he let them know it was the Jesus film, the Muslims stood firm on their approval.

Turner and his confidants used the wall of a nearby home that ironically once served as the residence for Osama bin Laden for their movie screen. "We hung the sheet right off the roof of his house, draped down the wall and showed the Jesus film

right there,” he says. “The next day, we had eight Muslims who came to us secretly [saying they] wanted to pray to receive Christ.”

Turner was also able to speak to a large group of Muslims at the training camp. His translator was reluctant to use the name of Jesus, fearing it could trigger a violent response from the crowd.

Turner insisted that his translator not water down the message with the word “Lord,” despite his own misgivings.

“I stood there and preached the gospel in front of 300 fundamentalists with machine guns and swords,” Turner says. “I literally said to the Lord, ‘Well, I guess this is as good a place to die as any,’ before I started preaching, fully aware that not only could I, but I probably would die.”

Still alive to tell the amazing story, Turner believes the Holy Spirit prepared the hearts of many Muslims long before he arrived. This led to even more conversions, and eventually a church was built with stones taken from bin Laden’s compound.

“Our purpose wasn’t to go in there and upset them,” Turner says. “It was to tell them the truth. But since that time, we’ve had incredible access. We’ve been able to go back again and again, and continue to show the Jesus film and continue to reach out to people.”

At the Feet of Jesus

Turner hasn’t always taken such a radical approach to life. In

January 1989, the Michigan native was newly married and working the night shift in a computer control room. At the time, he was addicted to drugs and alcohol. But on Super Bowl Sunday, everything changed.

To this day, Turner still can't remember who was playing in the big game, much less who won it. A series of personal events that day culminated with Turner lying face down in his living room the next morning.

He looked up to see a pair of bloody feet in front of him. Turner raised his head some more and saw a man standing there, bloodied and beaten.

As the man turned and walked away, Turner saw his flesh-torn back with muscle fully exposed. He was carrying a wooden beam over his shoulder.

At that time, Turner had little to no experience in church and knew nothing of the story of Jesus and the crucifixion. There in his home, he says, Jesus' ultimate sacrifice of love was revealed to him with a voice audibly spoken to confirm it.

Turner prayed a lengthy prayer of forgiveness and dumped out all the junk that had been stockpiled inside his heart.

"I came up with no evangelist there," Turner says. "Nobody told me to check a box. I came up off that floor a new creature in Christ Jesus. I knew I was born again."

Soon after, Turner went on a 40-day fast in an effort to get a clearer direction from God. After 27 days, Turner says, God

called him to preach and simultaneously birthed the entire vision for “assisting the church in a strategic response for a strategic harvest.”

Turner, whose journey to SWI included stints with New Frontiers and The Voice of the Martyrs, migrated southward and is now based in Bartlesville, Oklahoma. His mission has always been crystal clear. Perhaps that’s why he is so disappointed in many other Christian ministries that perform similar work.

“We never do humanitarian relief without proclaiming the gospel,” Turner says. “We won’t do it. We’re solidly evangelical, committed to a proclamation of the gospel.

“I see so many Christian humanitarian organizations that won’t share the gospel. I’m incredulous. Why go?”

He jokingly ponders how a Muslim in Indonesia knows the difference between meals distributed by the United Nations or the Red Cross and free food handed out by a group of believers. “Maybe the Christians give out bigger portions,” he chuckles.

“By the fact that we’re showing love and concern, it gives us the platform to share why. I actually think it’s exploitative to tell Christians that they are helping support the gospel by helping do this humanitarian outreach, yet these organizations aren’t sharing the gospel.”

Sounding the Alarm

Turner’s open-ended honesty doesn’t end there. For years he

has been very concerned about the mind-set the church has toward missions and evangelistic outreach. "There's a doctrine that's infected the church, especially in America," Turner says. "I call it the doctrine of expendability.

"We're no longer expendable for the kingdom of God. You do something. You go out and you achieve some notoriety or success and then you're too important to the kingdom of God to actually die for it. I reject that lie wholeheartedly.

"The Christianity that we promote doesn't demand loss," he explains. "It doesn't demand sacrifice. It's a bloodless cross. It's not really about capacity for pain, capacity for suffering."

Turner, who was discipled by the late revivalist Leonard Ravenhill, sees SWI as a parachurch organization that functions for two primary purposes: education and facilitation. "The church is God's chosen instrument," Turner says. "As messed up as she is at some times, as foul as she is, as broken and all of that other stuff, the church is Jesus' bride. The church is His vessel for the world.

"The only reason we exist is because the church does not do what it should do, or isn't willing to take the risks necessary. We exist for the church. We come alongside of her, assist her to go out and fulfill the Great Commission when all hell is breaking loose."

When Turner isn't overseas or preparing for his next international venture, he's usually traveling throughout the United States in an effort to educate the Christian community about what SWI does and how the church can get more involved.

He has also testified before Congress and worked with various government agencies to inform the public of the atrocities taking place across the globe.

SWI organizes Disaster Assistance Response Teams, or DARTs, made up of volunteers who go as teams into war-torn areas and conduct disaster assessments while searching for ways to get the gospel to the people in a “culturally appropriate way.” They go through basic military training to learn about hazards they could face, such as improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and terrorism, and are trained in disaster medicine and the codes of proper cultural conduct.

Ultimately, Turner puts his trust in God based on Isaiah 9:6, which states that “the government will be upon His shoulder” (NKJV). In the meantime, Turner continues to implore the church to do what it has always been called to do.

“I think as Christians, we should walk with the love of justice and a desire to see it fulfilled in people’s lives,” Turner says. “God is just and because God is just, we need to emulate the character of God.”

Turner lives out that precept in more ways than one. His family is intimately involved with SWI, and many times they have traveled alongside him into some dangerous regions. Emily, 15, is the oldest of Turner’s three children. She has traveled to Eritrea and Sudan with her father.

Other times, Turner has been on a satellite phone telling his wife goodbye, knowing that it might be the last time they speak. At those times, Turner has been at the end of himself.

That's what happens to those who have been to the ends of the earth, exposed to the most unspeakable of atrocities ever committed against mankind. But even in moments of significant doubt, he has been reminded of the truth he encountered 17 years ago when he received Christ.

"If you're wondering about the benevolence and the love of God, you only need to look to the cross," Turner says. "What happened is, at that moment in time, it was settled forever as a demonstration of God's love for us. For me, that question has been answered for eternity."

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