

4 Reflections on the Syrian Refugee Crisis

Many Christians are torn between a desire to help those in need and a desire to keep our nation secure. Perhaps these reflections will prove helpful as we seek to navigate a difficult and divisive issue.

1. The government should major on security; the church should major on compassion. I don't mean that the government should be harsh or that the church should be foolish, but it is not the primary job of the government to care for the needs of refugees, and it is not the primary job of the church to provide national security.

The government should do its very best to shut the doors on any potential terrorists, even if that means slowing down the process of absorbing refugees.

We make decisions like this when, for example, there is an Ebola plague in West Africa. We want to be sure that we don't unleash that plague on our shores even if the vast majority of West Africans are not infected.

In the same way, we must assiduously work against the plague of radical Islam, even if the vast majority of Muslim refugees are not radicals.

But there are plenty of refugees already registered with Christian relief agencies who are looking for sponsors, and that is where the church can lead the way, either opening up our homes (as many of us had the privilege of doing during the Boat People crisis in the late '70s and early '80s when Vietnamese refugees fled their country and were in dire need of help) or helping refugees get settled in our communities.

Recently, while speaking at a church in Winston-Salem, North

Carolina, I was blessed to hear how this congregation of several hundred people had sponsored two Muslim families from Syria, ministering the love of God to them in a tangible way. The families have been deeply impacted.

Since the majority of refugees that come into America are sponsored by faith-based organizations, this is a great opportunity for local churches and individual believers to step into action.

2. Priority should be given to Christian refugees. I personally do not believe that we should shut the door on all Muslim refugees from Syria, as long as we can accurately vet them, but I do believe that the church's first priority should be resettling Christian refugees, and I say this for three main reasons.

First, Christians in the Middle East are facing a genocide, with the populations of Christians in countries like Iraq and Syria going from the millions to the hundreds of thousands. They are being slaughtered and they are being barbarized, and it is sometimes the lucky ones who are fleeing for their lives. How can we ignore their plight?

A friend of mine who pastors a large church in Tennessee traveled to Jordan and spoke with Christian refugees there. Their perception was that American Christians had completely abandoned them.

Second, whereas Muslim refugees can be absorbed by Muslim countries in the Middle East (I'll return to that point shortly), Christian refugees have less options, and they do not get any special priority in "Christian" Europe.

Third, Paul wrote that "as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith" (Gal. 6:10).

This does not mean that we neglect acts of kindness and mercy

to Muslims in need, but it means that we do put our persecuted brothers and sisters first.

3. Muslim nations must step up their sponsorship of Muslim refugees. It is true that countries like Lebanon (which is predominantly Muslim) are bursting at the seams as Syrian refugees pour into their small territory, while countries like Iraq have become home to massive tent cities consisting of both Christian and Muslim refugees.

But there is no reason why the oil-rich Muslim nations in the Middle East can't do more to help their own people, by which I mean people of the same ethnicity (Arab), religion (Muslim), and language (Arabic).

While Saudi Arabia claims that it has taken in 2.5 million Syrian refugees, other Gulf State nations have been criticized for allegedly taking in none. Can this be right? And is it fair that so much pressure is being put on the West to sponsor refugees while some of Syria's closer neighbors barely lift a finger?

4. We must guard our hearts against un-Christlike attitudes. On a regular basis, I speak against the evils of radical Islam, and I plan to continue to do so. At the same time, I always call for prayer for all Muslims—including radical, murderous Muslims—believing that Jesus died for them as well and that all of them are loved by God.

And so, while I want to see ISIS destroyed, I want to see individual members of ISIS come to faith and find mercy and repentance. I also want to remember that, while some Syrian refugees are bringing terrorism with them, the great majority are fleeing from that very terror.

Recently, a colleague sent me a short audio message preached a few years ago by one of the graduates from our ministry school, FIRE School of Ministry. He was back in the States while taking a short break from his mission's work in a very

dangerous part of the Muslim world.

He mentioned that yes, groups like al-Qaida were wreaking murderous havoc there, but he was shocked to come back home and find Christians demonizing Muslims and portraying them all as killers. Worse still, he found Christians who exhibited hatred rather than love toward Muslims.

What made his message all the more profound is that, not long after delivering that word, he was gunned down in cold blood by al-Qaida terrorists after returning to serve the Muslims in that very dangerous land.

But there's more to the story. The day after his assassination, there was a large protest march in his home city, with devout Muslim men and women walking side by side, holding up his picture, carrying messages of love, and denouncing al-Qaida for killing this fine Christian man. And they wanted the world to know that al-Qaida did not represent them as Muslims.

I believe this young martyr would implore us today to love these lost Muslims just as the Lord loved us when we were lost in darkness.

In sum, our government must act wisely, refusing to make hasty, potentially dangerous decisions. At the same time, believers must rise to the occasion, as we have done so many times before, demonstrating to the whole world what the love of Jesus looks like in living color.

Do you agree?