

Committed to Justice: A Christian Response to Russian Genocide in Ukraine

Warning: The images and descriptions from Ukraine used in this story are graphic. Viewer discretion is advised.

The images of murdered Ukrainian civilians in the streets of the village of Bucha, their hands bound behind them and bullet wounds to the back of their heads, evokes the horror of Jews murdered by the Nazis in World War II and of more recent scenes in Saddam Hussein's Iraq and Slobodan Milosevic's Yugoslavia.

The retreat of the Russian army has pulled back the curtain on what appears to be genocide, the systematic elimination of a people on the basis of their race, religion or national origin.

Genocide is not a new story or an isolated incident in Russian history. It is a recurring pattern. Stalin killed between 5 and 7 million Ukrainians in the 1930s when he engineered what has been called the "Hunger Famine." Putin himself ordered similar atrocities in Chechnya in 1999, Eastern Ukraine in 2014 and Syria since 2015.

How should the followers of Jesus respond to genocide?

Certainly, we should "mourn with those who mourn" (Rom. 12:15), feed the hungry, clothe the naked and pray for our brothers and sisters. The response of believers around the world to the devastation of Ukraine has been overwhelming. Scores of Christian organizations mobilized in the first days of the war to relieve the suffering of the Ukrainian people.

I would suggest that more is required of believers, whether

their sphere of influence is the local congregation, the marketplace or government.

First, and foremost, we must commit to justice. This imperative is as old as the prophets. Micah put the issue to Israel 700 years before Christ, "He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Mic. 6:8, NIV). Justice is not a political value. It is neither Republican nor Democrat; it is the biblical value of giving every person their due, of fairness and equity. The psalmist tells us that "righteousness and justice are the foundation of [his] throne" (Ps. 89:14). The prophets cried out against the abuse of justice in ancient Israel, against bribery, extortion and the abuse of the poor. The Old Testament is clear that Israel went into captivity as much for the abuse of justice as for worshipping other gods. Jesus told the story of a rich man who went to hell because he ignored the cries of the beggar for food (Luke 16:19-31).

Committing to justice also requires that we call for justice. We must appeal to our senators and congressmen to call on our government to hold President Vladimir Putin and his inner circle accountable for the depredations of Russian military personnel and the intelligence services. Crimes against humanity occur in every conflict. It happens whenever young people are conditioned to kill on instinct. The manner and scope of Russian atrocities in Ukraine make it clear enough that the murder of Ukrainian citizens is state policy.

Not only must Putin and his gang of thugs be held responsible for these crimes against humanity, the soldiers who pull the trigger must also be called to account. We must insist that the International Criminal Court, which was established to address the crimes committed in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, try the guilty and punish them to the full extent of the law.

The state of Israel provides the supreme example of how to bring war criminals to justice. They pursued those responsible for the Holocaust to the ends of the earth and until the last of them died. The Torah is clear: There is no statute of limitations on murder. Everyone is responsible for their actions.

The call for justice must also include a call to seize Russian assets in the U.S. Seized Russian assets should be used to help the Ukrainian people rebuild their shattered lives and country. Justice requires that we immediately stop the flow of Russian oil into the United States and the outflow of American dollars to Moscow. Every dollar that goes to Moscow fuels the Russian war machine. If we do not do all that we can to stop the horror, we become responsible for the blood of the murdered. It is time to turn off the spigot.

Finally, we must call for restitution. Restitution lay at the foundation of biblical justice. In ancient Israel it was not enough for the thief to say, "Sorry," as so many people do when they inadvertently bump into someone in line at the supermarket. Torah called for perpetrators to restore what they stole, damaged or destroyed—with twenty percent interest.

Vladimir Putin must not be allowed a mulligan for his crimes in Ukraine. The Western democracies in general, and successive US administrations, have failed to hold Putin accountable or make him pay for any crime that he has committed since he flattened Grozny and murdered tens of thousands of Chechens. That failure of nerve and moral fortitude has emboldened him to greater crimes. The time has come to hit the world's richest man where he will feel it the most—in his pocketbook.

If righteousness and justice are the foundations of God's throne, and we as God's people have a particular call to model His life and His government in the world, we must be as committed to justice as He is. {eoa}

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