



NOT THE TALK ON AFRICA YOU'RE EXPECTING.

When you hear that DR Congo is the world's largest failed nation state, you know what's coming next. If it was your society that was broken, what help would you ask for? We asked churches and NGOs in Congo what was missing and were surprised at the answer. The result is American Bible Society's "She's My Sister" initiative. This is what we've learned about Africa and how we're responding.

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Faith and Law
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INTRODUCTION

Good afternoon, and thank you for the opportunity to spend some time with you today. My name is John Walter. I am Executive Director of She's My Sister, one of four primary initiatives around the world delivered by American Bible Society. I spent many of my early years in Washington working on this very floor of Longworth for a member who just retired; it feels good and right to be here with you today.

JOHN AND DOUG

My wife — let's call her "Pam," for that is actually her name — goes on reading jags. She finds a topic or an author that grabs her attention, and she pursues it. A bit over a year ago, the thing that caught her interest was exotic, deadly diseases — like "Ebola Zaire." Some of you here might remember *The Hot Zone*, the true story of the incident at the monkey research building in Reston — across the street from my chiropractor — where this strain of Ebola nearly escaped into the public domain.

That book led her to read more deeply and terrifyingly into Congo (formerly Zaire), all of which culminated in this statement, which is now famous in our family: "No one I love will *ever* go to the Congo."

A few weeks later, her brother — let's call him "Doug," for that is actually *his* name — called her from his home in Germany. Doug is a global citizen. After law school, he

lived in Saipan for years, working for the governor and state senate as legal counsel. Doug and his growing family have lived in outposts in Romania, Slovenia, and Armenia, where he has worked on and led various USAID-funded civil society projects. To give you a sense of Doug's sense of adventure, he was ready to take an assignment in Baghdad's "Green Zone" until his wife and four young children put their collective feet down.

That's Doug. And so when he called and told his sister: "Hey — guess where *I* am going! I'm headed to the Congo!" she immediately remembered her statement — "No one *I* love." Doug would soon be headed for Kinshasa, meeting with government and business leaders as part of an assessment for the State Department, and Pam would be eating some crow.

Within a week, Pam received a call from her husband. We'll call him "John," because, yes, that's actually my name. "Guess where *I* am going," I said. "I'm headed to the Congo!" Thus ended the era of definitive statements in the Walter household, for now the two people with whom she shared the first and second parts of her life were on their way to the one place she feared the most.

Doug's trip came before mine, so I had a chance to talk with him about his experiences. The world traveler had been laid low. "It was awful," he said. "I just wanted to come back and lie in bed for two weeks because it is simply *hopeless*."

That word—hopeless—struck more terror in my heart than words like "Ebola" or "mass rape." *Those* were abstract things to me, but *depression* was something that had interfered with my life, and interrupted my relationships for many years. With it seemingly in the past, I was not eager to step into a situation where those smoldering ashes might find some fresh wind to stir them up.

Now, I have traveled a fair amount myself. I'm no "Doug" but I have stared plenty of tough situations down. So I wasn't prepared for what happened when I arrived in the Congo. Goma — a jewel of a city destroyed by the twin eruptions of the Rwandan genocide and a nearby volcano in 2002. And Dungu, a village in the north where a Lord's Resistance Army attack only weeks before had brought more death, rapes and abductions to a people who only wanted to be left alone, and had forced a colleague of mine to airlift out 24 members of his extended family and resettle them.

But those weren't the surprises. Rather, I was surprised at a church my colleague Bagudekia Alobeyo — yes, that really is his name — had planted in a northern village a decade earlier. It is surrounded by poverty and accessed only by a single "road" (though that's what it was called, I've driven faster on plowed fields). But at that church I experienced joy and worship at a power and volume I had never

experienced before. And it was then that I realized the thing I feared the most — deep despair — was being driven out of my soul by the wall of sound delivered by 1500 voices in a tin-roofed church in a little village that could not be farther from home.

Doug spent his time in Congo going from one government ministry to another — and came back depressed. I spent my time in Congo going from one Christian ministry to another — churches, orphanages, centers for the displaced — and came back healed from depression and, for the first time, fully connected to the strength of this strange thing called “life” and people’s ability to be the hands and feet, the body and the face of Christ in situations that by all appearances are irredeemable.

Since that first trip last January, I have been in Africa six times. My wife doesn’t mind those trips anymore, and though my children wish they could travel with me, they don’t object too strongly to my absences. For they have seen in *me* what I witnessed “over there”: the visible power of God working through his people everywhere to create a glimpse of heaven — even in the dark, lava-lined streets of Goma.

In my talk today, I want to try to convey three messages Africa has for us. For me, these are prophetic voices for Americans, voices crying out not for *help* but for us to *hear*.

MESSAGE ONE: ‘OVER THERE’ IS NOT FAR FROM ‘RIGHT HERE’

The first message is that “over there” is not that far from “right here.”

THE THIN VENEER OF CIVILIZATION

A few years back, a researcher at Queen’s University in Belfast was pondering why — after centuries of “rational” thought and enlightenment — religion still existed and held such powerful sway over people. His theory was that religion provides some sort of “evolutionary advantage,” and that it gives those tribes who adhere to it some sort of leg up in the great “Darwinian winnowing.” To test his theory, he assembled a group of children and had them play a game that almost required them to cheat to win.

He divided the test subjects into three rooms. The first room was unsupervised, and the kids cheated. The second room was supervised by adults, and the kids mostly did *not* cheat. In the third room, he told the kids that an invisible Princess was watching them. And those kids did *not* cheat at essentially the same rate as those in the second room with an adult present.

He concluded from this experiment that belief in a supernatural being, that like an adult can exercise judgment and retribution, provided tribes with the underpinnings for evolutionary success: namely behavior that is *not* narrowly rational and only self-interested. Religious beliefs that include an omnipotent deity, he concludes, promote cooperative behavior — we might call it “adherence to the rule of law” — that increases a group’s collective strength and ability to survive. We could call it a “survival of the nicest” theory.

There is a significant lesson in this for us, for what we see taking place on the ground in Congo, or Ivory Coast, or Yemen is not only a matter of “them” and their problems “over there.” No. When you scratch just beneath the surface, “over there,” bears a lot of similarity to “right here.”

Whether or not you believe in God — a divine, omnipotent, omnipresent, omnibenevolent creative force or person — you *cannot* deny the benefits that belief in God has brought to us in what we call the “civilized” world.

But as many elements in our culture seek to drive out seemingly *irrational* faith and replace that with rational behavior, we need to realize that “rational self-interest” ends up looking a lot like the mortgage brokers who bundled subprime loans, pocketed the commissions and passed the dirty lot off on others.

Rational self-interest really means that, when the opportunity presents itself, I will *take* and you will *lose*. Ethics that are situational are not ethics at all. When we wash God out of the picture — in the gold and mineral-laden provinces of Congo, or the wood-paneled offices of Countrywide Mortgage — we plant the seeds of cultural destruction.

THE VISION OF HARMONY AND THE MYTH OF PROGRESS

Our culture likes to think that human beings are “progressing.” We think of the past as the dark ages, as backward, as “other,” as “then.” As not to be repeated. Even after a century whose sheer scale of atrocities should prove otherwise, we look to the future as a time when we will get beyond selfishness and all live together peacefully. This is the myth of progress, and Americans are — with good reason — infatuated with it.

But that myth is based on a truth—the truth that one day the world will be at peace, one day there will be no tears, where there will only be harmony, *shalom*.

Let me read to you from Isaiah, where this vision for a peaceful and harmonious future originally came from. [Isaiah 11.1-9a]

The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them.

The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox.

The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest.

They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain,

That's quite a vision the prophet paints, isn't it? Fast forward the metaphor and imagery three thousand years to the streets and halls of Washington and let that soak over you every morning.

The prophecy continues with a simple, conditional statement that makes this *imagined* world *real*: [Isaiah 11.9b]

for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the *waters* cover the sea.

These words underpin the Bible Society. When our founders — many of whom are familiar names from our country's founding — addressed the nation nearly 200 years ago from the steps of City Hall in New York, they closed their proclamation and declared: "We shall do our part, until the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea."

We modern people only carry part of that vision. That's the part where everyone gets along. Increasingly we ignore the *condition* that brings about the peaceable kingdom. We think we can do it ourselves. We're really good people underneath, you know. We just need to be freed from the chains of the past. Freed from convention. Freed from religion. Freed from the knowledge of the Glory of the Lord.

Well, the people of Congo are free from government. You cannot drive from Kinshasa, the capital in the west, to Goma, the provincial capital in the east. It's like driving from St. Louis to Boston, except there is no road. There, government is unable to provide *any* significant constraint on its populace — or foreign elements within it — acting as they see fit. Small wonder local officials with no oversight are corrupt. Just one of many factors contributing to the description of Congo as "the world's largest failed nation state."

Or take tradition. The militias certainly have. They've taken tradition away. In many local languages there is no word for rape. Their languages have yet to catch up with this new, grim reality of a culture permeated by the law of the strongest, not the law

of the Bible. People are free to act as they like — in their own, rational self-interest, so that those with power simply take from and feed on those without. Which makes it the world's most dangerous place to be a woman. Or a child. Or any other sort of vulnerable person.

The situation in our country is different only in degree. For despite our wishes to the contrary, civilization is only a thin veneer over our human nature. Cooperation, driven by knowledge of justice, *is* our only protection against impunity.

MESSAGE 2: COOPERATIVE BEHAVIOR TAKES COURAGE.

In the face of what seems to be our own culture's message lately of everyone for themselves, "I'll take what I can get before it all goes south," we need to hear a second message from Africa. And that is "cooperative behavior takes courage."

Remember the Queen's University researcher: cooperative behavior motivated by knowledge of the divine provides an evolutionary advantage for a tribe. Whether you believe in God or not, we know both intuitively and empirically there is truth in this statement.

But cooperative behavior takes courage. Turning a sword into a plow? That takes *courage*. Loving your enemy — or your counterpart across the aisle — that takes courage.

Courage is one of the things that knowledge of the glory of the Lord equips us for.

I have many stories I could tell of the courageous people I know in Congo. I could talk about the women who survived brutal rape and torture and are now rebuilding their lives. But I will mention just three people.

I know Dr. Ahuka Longombe, a Congolese surgeon who cares for raped women, girls, men and boys, while knowing the limits of his tools and techniques. His operating conviction is that surgeons can *repair*, but only God can *heal*.

I am in awe of Mama Jeanne Banyele, who has *nothing*, but who gives out of that *abundant* nothing to hundreds of widows and orphans.

I love Sister Alvera, whose Flame of Love compound is alive with hope and the laughter of children.

These three people have encountered the Bible themselves. They have an intimate knowledge of the glory of the Lord. They have encountered the love of Jesus. And in response they have become courageous faces of Christ, his hands and feet for their

place and time. They are bringing in the Kingdom of God despite dangers and situations and obstacles that would have us in despair.

Many of us know of heroes in these regions like Sister Alvera or Dr. Ahuka. But what is the real meaning of a hero? Is it what they do, or what they inspire *us* to do? Unsung heroism is sufficient in God's sight, but the rest of us need this inspiration. The true impact of a hero is measured both by what *she* says and by how *he* models life for us. Heroes show us that courage can be contagious.

MESSAGE 3: AN ENCOUNTER WITH SCRIPTURE MAKES RESTORATION POSSIBLE FOR ANY CULTURE.

A FRAMEWORK FOR JUSTICE

As we made our initial assessment visits in eastern Congo, we asked church and community leaders what they needed most. I mean, if *you* lived in the world's largest failed nation-state, what kind of help would you ask from the international community? Food? Medicine? Education? Justice?

Sure. But before all that, they asked for this [holds up the *Poverty & Justice Bible*]. *This* is the collection of books we call "the Bible." *This* is where they get *their* courage. Mama Jeanne told us she was helping provide medical care to women who were attacked by the militias: "But," she said, "I found there was something lacking — the *spiritual* dimension. That's why we asked the Bible Society to bring Bibles to us. The Bible makes us strong."

This particular edition helps us experience God's heart for victims of cruelty, injustice, poverty, pain. If you haven't picked up this ancient discourse on justice for a while, I commend it to you. Look at the highlights — this book is permeated with the cry of a Father in deep anguish about the choices some of his children have made, about the pain they inflict on others.

When viewed in totality, this collection of books — the Bible — is a narrative arc of our own lives, lived individually and corporately. It begins with Creation and Order and Peace. Then there is a disquieting end to that peaceful state. It is like a sleeping child ripped from its mother's breast, and the story is then marred by disorder and violence and despair.

These verses from Psalm 10 are typical of the lament of injustice at loose:

[The wicked] sits in ambush in the villages;
in hiding places he murders the innocent.

His eyes stealthily watch for the helpless;
he lurks in ambush like a lion in his thicket;
he lurks that he may seize the poor [Psalm 10.8-9]

Language like that isn't from 3000 years ago to the girl who was just raped outside her village — seized by someone lurking in “the bush.” Those words are real for her, real for anyone who must travel those roads.

We need to stay at this level for a moment. The Bible's realism debunks the modern myth of progress. It lays bare the thinness of our “civilization” and the thickness of our underlying disorder. *This* is where we would live if we did not have the hope of restoration from Isaiah — this is how our lives would mirror those of the victims and perpetrators of abject and terrible violence in the place that *New York Times* writer Nick Kristof describes as “hell on earth.”

ABOUT SHE'S MY SISTER

I have not yet explained why I first went to such a place, and why American Bible Society is there now. But it is related to hope of restoration. For the third message I bring from Africa is this: An encounter with Scripture makes restoration possible for *any* culture.

American Bible Society has nearly two hundred years of experience in bringing the Bible to places of conflict, and we are answering a call from people like Mama Jeanne and Sister Alvera to do our part now to bring restoration, to help them birth a restored society from the ashes of national trauma.

After sixteen years of vicious conflict, the local churches are basically the only social institutions still functioning. They are overwhelmed with the needs of literally millions of people displaced and hurting — and those are just the survivors. Repeatedly, they told us “We don't know what to do to help these people.” In particular, they are unprepared to help women and children, the primary victims of sexual violence.

I was at a donor conference last month with representatives from many of the NGOs at work in central Africa—US Institute for Peace, Invisible Children, Oxfam, and others. As we were waiting to tell our story, we noticed a theme emerging. One presenter after another said that the big missing piece in Congo is the availability of psycho-social counseling. Traumatized kids *cannot* learn in school. Food does not take the death out of their eyes.

This is the role of She's My Sister. Our proven Scripture-based programs for trauma healing help women and men move from victim to survivor, and beyond to full restoration — to the point where they can, if they choose, become agents of renewal and restoration.

We work in harness with indigenous national Bible Societies, 147 of them at work in 200 countries. In many countries, the national Bible Society is the only place where all the local church — Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant — works together. So we partner with the national Bible Society in DR Congo and several other countries. *They* coordinate local churches who deliver the trauma programs on the ground. We train local leaders, who then train and serve others.

It would not be appropriate for Bible Societies to get involved in food distribution or medical care. But we are leading an innovative partnership with a wide consortium of faith-based groups to bring coordinated holistic care to this region.

All these pieces have come together in barely a year. It's amazing. One might even say providential.

This strategic approach addresses the *symptoms*, the real, individual hurting people. We and the Sister Consortium are also speaking out against the *systems* of evil with public advocacy. This summer, for example, we have eight volunteer cyclists heading up the East Coast to carry the stories of the women in DRC and to inspire people they meet to find out what the Bible has to say about all of this.

CIRCLES OF GREEN

"Over there" is not so far from "right here." Cooperative behavior takes courage. And an encounter with the Bible makes restoration possible for any culture.

As I close, imagine that you are gaining altitude as you fly out of Goma, the provincial capital of eastern Congo up against the border with Rwanda. As you do, you see land turned black by the 2002 eruption of Mount Nyiragongo. Go to Google Earth and search for Goma Airport — you can still see the lava covering one-third of the runway a decade later. As you fly over this bleak landscape, you also see circles of green amid the devastation, circles where people are working to bring life and order. Green spots in the blackness.

The blackness in eastern Congo is like life in Room #1 — remember the kids in the Belfast study who act only in their self-interest? As we consider our life and work "over here" please remember the thin veneer of civilization: for what distinguishes between "green spots" and "lava" is cooperative behavior.

In January I met Dr. Charles Villa-Vicencio, the first chairman of South Africa's truth and reconciliation commission—which everyone credits for keeping that country from falling apart after the end of Apartheid—say something that I continue to savor. “What really causes so many of our problems,” he said, “is seeing another human being as the Other, as somehow not in the image of our Creator.”

Have you ever read a Jane Austen novel and wondered where the wealth came from that powered the lives of the idle rich? Her books are set during the Regency period in England — and PBS costume dramas mask the source of that wealth. This was an era that *looked* civilized — it *looked* like Rooms 2 or 3. But it was built on the back of millions of “the other,” dependent on the practice of slavery and the global trade of slaves — the economic engine of the Empire. During that period 80 percent of foreign income derived from this source — all those manor houses and spare time, all the scheming, empty intrigues that seem so innocent and harmless: they are actually “Room 1” in drag.

If we can compare Congo to Jane Austen's England and to twenty-first century Washington, are there *any* green spots? I don't mean to suggest that all we have is hell on earth — Room 1 everywhere. I *do* mean to caution us against thinking that “over there” can't happen — or isn't already happening — over here, and to offer a doorway out of room 1 and into rooms 2 or 3.

In Regency England, men and women of power and influence — just like you — engaged with Scripture. They learned about the presence of “Another” (capital “A”) in the room. They stopped seeing slaves as “the other” and started calling them “brother” — and sister.

I am, of course, referring to William Wilberforce and other leading members of English society and Parliament. Made aware of God's vision of an ordered society, they committed their lives to the elimination of the abomination. Along the way, Wilberforce and others formed the British & Foreign Bible Society — the granddaddy of most Bible Societies around the world — as an essential plank in their “green spot” movement.

As you fly out of Goma, you see the green spots. You also see tenuous paths between some of those circles, broader swaths connecting others. Wilberforce and the others met often. They connected the green spots amidst the lava rubble. They encouraged each other. They met *new* others and made new paths. They hewed new circles of friends and converts to the cause by the relentless call on their lives. They gave voice to the slave who asked, “Am I not a man and a brother? A woman and a sister?”

My work is to support the green spots in Congo — the Mama Jeannes and the Dr. Ahukas of that world. *Your* job might be to stay right here, being green spots, connecting to others, and hewing new circles out of the hardened stone of volcanoes past.

Where my brother-in-law saw only hopelessness, I enjoyed and experienced hope. Where the characters of Jane Austen’s novels engaged in caustic banter, Wilberforce and others saw the essence of God in “the others” on the slave ships.

This is a critical time in the life of our nation, but I am encouraged that we have begun the debate about the future. Take heart: though it took Wilberforce and the others a lifetime to end slavery and the slave trade, end it they did.

And they did it through legislation, not through a bloody war like the one that started here one hundred and fifty years ago this week. It is because they committed themselves— in the words of the Lord’s Prayer — to “his kingdom coming to earth, just like it is in heaven,” to that kingdom where the lion lies down with the lamb, and no harm will come to any on all his holy mountain.

In faith they adhered to the law of the Bible, committing themselves in service to *the other* on the slave ships and in the halls of Parliament alike.

Their example rings down through the ages. It is picked up and amplified by the voices of Africa today. And it says this:

Know that there is “Another” in the room. Find the courage to stop looking at “the other” and start to see “your brother.” And your sister.

Godspeed in your journeys, and thank you.