The recent earthquake in Mexico, the drought and famine in Africa, the floods and drownings in Bangladesh—were these natural disasters?

Any homeowner (and not just a lawyer) who has read his insurance policy knows that certain “eventualities” either cannot be covered by insurance or must be covered by special riders (usually at additional expense). Hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, and other destructive dangers are still frequently referred to as “acts of God,” “or as some people now say, acts of nature.” And one would have a difficult time trying to sue God or nature for damages.

But how “natural” is the destruction suffered by so many people under these circumstances? If I told you that I found a dead man in the street outside my office who had died from the freezing cold, would you say, “Oh, what a tragic natural disaster?” If it were discovered that the reason someone’s roof fell in during a serious storm, killing some of the family members, was that the building contractor had not followed the building code, would you say, “Oh, what a tragic natural disaster?”

No, in these cases you would undoubtedly recognize the important interconnection between human responsibility and the vagaries of nature. Cold may have killed the man, but we his neighbors must have failed in our responsibilities to take him in. The storm might have “triggered” the roof cave-in, but the builder is at fault.

Now there is a book on this subject that raises all these questions on a global scale. Every Christian, including the Christian lawyer, should consider its evidence and argument. The book is: Natural Disasters: Acts of God or Acts of Man? Its authors are Anders Wijkman and Lloyd Timberlake, representing the two organizations that collaborated in publishing it: The Swedish Red Cross and the International Institute for Environment and Development (Earthscan, 1717 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington, D.C., 20036).

In a mere 148 pages the authors bring together an impressive array of statistics and evidence to show the degree to which social, political, and economic decisions of human beings determine the outcome of “natural” disasters.

The chapters on droughts (the greatest killer), floods (next greatest), cyclones and winds, earthquakes, tsunami, and volcanoes, the authors argue that although disasters are “triggered by natural events,” they “are increasingly manmade.”

One of their statistics is especially condemning: the poor suffer much more than the rich all over the world, with the poorer countries suffering more than the rich countries. For example, the only land that most Third World city dweller can afford (or gain illegal access to) is dangerous land. Pictured on page 20, for example, is a canal/latrine in Jakarta, Indonesia, along which live thousands of poor people in dilapidated shanties. When the floods come and the canal overflows, the houses of the poor are filled with foul water. In the background of the picture, however, are the high-rise office buildings of banks and the UN headquarters, which are left untouched by the flooding canal.

“When one compares the number of people killed per disaster against the income of the country involved . . . , one finds a steep rise in mortality with decreasing income. There are over 3,000 deaths per disaster in low-income countries and less than 500 per event in high-income countries” (p.27). “The poor countries which suffer such disastrous disasters are the same countries in which environmental degradation is proceeding most rapidly. Countries with severe deforestation, erosion, overcultivation and overgrazing tend to be hardest hit by disasters” (p.29).

In much of South America, for example, on both sides of the Andes mountain range, more and more people are experiencing flooding as the highlands are deforested (p.61). In Africa the contemporary visible problem is starvation due to drought. But, as the authors indicate, the fact of drought and hunger has deeper roots. “The loss of topsoil in Africa, largely as a result of the removal of tree and shrub cover, is the highest in the world. It is no wonder that per capita food production on that continent has slumped in the last decade. People are hungry; they starve, and ultimately a famine emerges. A disaster is declared, and the relief agencies swing into action. How much wiser if we could teach people to conserve their soil in the first place” (p. 9).
The book’s conclusion is not that we might someday find a way to end tornadoes or earthquakes, but rather, that “most disaster problems,” especially in the Third World, “are unsolved development problems. Disaster prevention and mitigation is thus primarily an aspect of development” (p.233).

The next time you discover water in your basement or see starving children on the evening news, don’t ask God, “Why?” as if he were solely responsible. As in faith what God would have us do to alleviate suffering, to redesign housing codes, to enforce zoning laws, to improve international development efforts, and to end both legal carelessness and illegal fraudulence so that the “acts of man” can become “acts of mercy” rather than “acts of negligence and injustice.”

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