



More regarding the refugees...

In the aftermath of the Paris attacks, one question on the mind of many is whether, by caring for and serving the refugees, we are unwittingly aiding terrorists among their number.

Of course we need to remember that for most people this discussion is more or less hypothetical in nature. For us here in Greece, however, it is not hypothetical at all. Every day thousands of refugees land on our shores. Here in Athens, where I live and minister, the Afghan refugees are usually held back here for a few days, but even they eventually find a way to continue their journey up north to the border. Our churches, both here in Athens and in the north of Greece are involved in providing meals and emergency supplies to them. Through a small drop-in centre, near Victoria Square in downtown Athens, we are also offering services especially for women and children. For us, then, we are no longer dealing just with “the refugee crisis” but with actual people with names, concerns, stories and dreams. It is from this standpoint that I would like to share a few thoughts, as I attempt to answer the question I brought up at the beginning.

I will try to answer this question in three ways. The first is based on common sense, the second on the Reformed tradition and the third on Biblical values and principles.

First of all, then, the common sense approach. Very often we make the mistake of associating the part with the whole, making generalisations and thinking in terms of stereotypes. So, for instance, the fact that some Greek workers are lazy is taken to mean that all Greeks are lazy. This is a classic example of a generalisation that unjustly casts aspersions on an entire group and simply doesn't stand up to investigation. To give another example, this past week I spotted a news item on Facebook regarding a Baptist minister who claimed that those who were attending the concert at the Bataclan got what they deserved. Just imagine now saying that ‘all’ evangelicals believe that those victims at the Bataclan got what they deserved. Would we really want to say that just because there exists one fanatic in evangelical circles that ‘all’ evangelicals should be lumped together in the same category? Of course there are some who wouldn't make this argument specifically but would still claim that since there is always the chance that a few terrorists might come over amongst the rest, the best policy is to keep them all out of our countries. One common sense reply to this is to say that amongst the 9 terrorists of the Paris attacks, only one appeared to have come over amongst the refugees. So while terrorist cells might ostensibly gain a few extra “imported” members through the waves of refugees, it is obvious that these cells already

existed and don't in any way depend on the refugees. Of course this is by no means to imply that we should simply open our borders without recourse to checks and security measures. It is of utmost importance for Europe to find ways to check and filter the refugees as best it can as they enter the continent.

The second approach I would like to take to this question relates to the Reformed tradition. Luther's "two kingdoms" and Calvin's more developed "one kingdom with two administrations" is instructive on this point. There are some things which we are called to leave to the judgement and care of the worldly powers and authorities. Our safety and security is something that has been entrusted to the care of our governments. The church, on the other hand, has 'other' responsibilities and interests to take care of — specifically, those things which the government does not concern itself with. For example, we are interested in the eternal destiny of these people. We are called to use every opportunity that brings us into contact with Muslim-background people to show them the love of God and the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. The church would do well, therefore, to busy itself with these issues and leave the press and the government to analyse the question of our national security.

The third approach has to do with the Bible and the principles we may derive from its teaching. We often speak of compassion as the most pertinent principle in situations such as these (e.g. such as in the parable of the Good Samaritan). We may, however, also invoke the principle of 'audacity'. Kevin DeYoung, in a recent article of his, showed us how Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa* pointed to the opposite of fear is being daring and audacity (audacia in Latin) — which inspires us to face danger head-on with the hope that we will not be overcome (Summa Theologica 1a1a,45). I would therefore like to commend this virtue, as we find it laid out in the Epistle to the Hebrews 13:1-2.

"Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares."

Hospitality, the love shown towards the stranger, is always something that brings with it fear of the unknown and therefore risk. It requires daring and courage. There is no way to know who this stranger is that you are entertaining; there is no way to know what he or she plans on doing next. That is what it means to be a stranger; they are not only different from you, they are also an unknown entity. It is the very reason why the argument is made that by helping the refugees we might unwittingly be helping terrorists — something we are hearing more and more in the light of the Paris attacks.

Yet it is also precisely for this reason that we need to take special care to note how the Bible handles this issue. Rather than succumbing to the negative spin, it portrays it in a positive light, emphasising that in this way some people have 'unwittingly' entertained 'angels'. So while the current narrative winning the day in our society is that we should take care 'lest we entertain terrorists unawares', the challenge of the Bible is to consider that we might actually be entertaining 'angels unawares'.

Once again, I emphasise that it is the task of the government to find and hinder the terrorists. Our mission as the church is to look after any and all of our fellow human beings who happen to cross our path with the hope that we might even have the privilege of entertaining some 'angels' amongst them. In other words, God-sent opportunities and blessings which are not necessarily easily discerned at first glance.