

CASE STUDY

A Christian response to the Syrian refugee crisis³⁰

As a result of the Arab unrest beginning with the Tunisian Revolution in December 2010, Syrian protesters took to the streets to protest against the torture of students who had participated in anti-government graffiti. The Syrian government responded with force and multiple demonstrations spread all over the country. President Bashar al-Assad, who inherited Syria's dictatorship from his father, Hafez al-Assad, wavered in response between a show of force and the idea of reform. In April 2011, after lifting a decade's-old state of emergency, he responded with force by mobilizing tanks and troops to suppress the protests. In the summer of 2011, escalation of violence against protestors rose, so much so that thousands of soldiers defected and began to launch attacks against the government, bringing the country to the brink of civil war. An opposition government was formed in exile, but because of internal divisions, was not recognized by the United Nations, or Western or Arab powers.

The conflict was made more complicated by Syria's ethnic divide. The Assads and much of the nation's elite, especially the military, belong to the Alawite sect of Islam, a minority in a mostly Sunni Muslim country. Alawites constituted about 12 percent of the 23 million Syrians in the country at that time; while Sunni Muslims, the opposition's backbone, made up about 75 percent of the population.³¹ Assad's government had the advantage of firepower and loyal troops, but the insurgents were highly motivated.

In February 2012, the United Nations voted to approve a resolution condemning President Bashar al-Assad. China and Russia, though, as Syria's traditional allies, blocked stronger sanctions against the country. By the summer of 2012, tensions and violence increased dramatically as the country devolved into civil war. By 2013 the United Nations,

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who stopped collecting statistical data on the conflict in mid-2014, reported over 90,000 people were killed between 2011 and 2013. By 2014, an estimated 250,000 people had died in the dispute. The Syrian Center for Policy Research estimated that at the end of 2015 more than 470,000 people had died in the struggle, representing 11.5 percent of the Syrian population, while the number of wounded was estimated at 1.9 million. A fragile nationwide ceasefire was put into effect in 2016, but, at the time of this writing, the conflict continues.

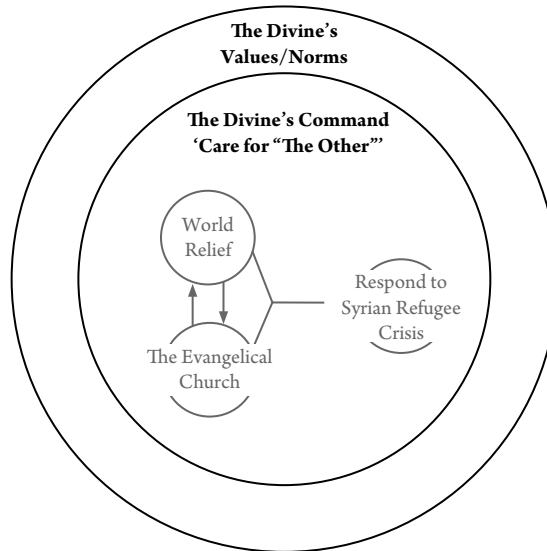
An unintended result of the Syrian Civil War was the 4.9 million Syrian refugees that fled the violence in their country and the 6.1 million internally displaced people within Syria (at least at the time this chapter went to press). It is essential in understanding this crisis to know the difference between those affected and displaced by conflict and those who are simply migrating to another country. Under both international and U.S. law, a refugee is an individual who has fled his or her country of origin because of a credible fear of persecution on account of their race, religion, political opinion, national origin, or social group. An internally displaced person is one who has fled his or her home but stays within the boundaries of their country.³² The displacement of over 4.9 million refugees and internally displaced people created one of the greatest humanitarian crises since the Second World War. The United Nations Refugee Agency reported that between 2011 and 2017 there were 50 Syrian families displaced every hour of every day.³³ Three-quarters of these refugees were women and children. They fled to numerous countries including Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Turkey, throughout Europe, and even, to a lesser degree, the United States. The need for clean water and sanitation, basic health care, food, shelter, and household and hygiene supplies was extreme, and humanitarian organizations globally mobilized to meet the growing hardship.

Many national, international, and faith-based humanitarian organizations mobilized to meet the needs of these refugees. One of these parties was World Relief, a Christian relief organization based in Baltimore, Maryland with offices in fourteen different states and over a dozen countries. The National Association of Evangelicals established World Relief in 1944 as a response to the humanitarian crisis following the Second World War. They partner with local churches around the world to help provide aid for families and communities in times of tragedy, sickness, conflict, and poverty.³⁴ Over their 70-year history, World Relief has provided aid and relief through disaster response, health and child development, refugee and immigration services, economic development, and peace building. They desire to 'work holistically with the local church to stand for the sick, the widowed, the orphaned, the alienated, the displaced, the devastated, the marginalized and the disenfranchised.'³⁵

World Relief worked in providing help, temporary shelters, hygiene items, and psychosocial counseling to the displaced Syrian families, as well as sponsoring child-friendly spaces for mothers and children. This was done in relationship with local churches, both in the United States and internationally. Over the course of the crisis, World Relief dedicated tens of millions of dollars in aid and provisions to help Syrian refugees.³⁶

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Figure 8.3 Five Components of Leadership Model applied to the World Relief case study



Divine command theory and the Syrian refugee crisis

So, how does World Relief's work demonstrate a leadership expression of divine command theory? Why would this Christian relief organization dedicate effort, time, and money to those who are desperate and in need? Why would a Christian organization be willing to help those of another faith, in this case Muslims, which might appear illogical in light of some of the strictest interpretations of selected divine commands? What are the motivating factors that contribute to their efforts to stand with the most vulnerable people in the world? Why provide resources to someone who can give nothing in return? The divine command theory of moral obligation helps to answer these questions.

World Relief leadership identifies three responses to the Syrian refugee crisis: a compassionate response, a fearful response, and a response of confusion.³⁷ People can respond compassionately, like when the lifeless body of Aylan Kurdi, a small Syrian refugee boy, washed up on a Turkish beach. The world mourned for this boy and his family as pictures of his lifeless body were broadcast around the world.³⁸ Another possible response is one of fear. Following multiple terrorist attacks throughout the world at this time, much attention was drawn to the danger of open borders and the threat of terrorists using them as conduits to fulfill their violent agendas. An example of this was seen when then U.S. Presidential candidate Donald J. Trump promised to ban Muslims from entering the United States if elected.³⁹ A third possible reaction to the Syrian refugee crisis is one of confusion. It is easy

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to see this crisis as a political issue and not one of compassion and humanity and become confused as to what an appropriate response to this situation would be.

World Relief chose to respond with compassion. Their justification for this response was a belief that God commands them to respond in this way. The Old and New Testaments are rich in imagery regarding refugees. In fact, the Hebrew word *ger*, translated in English as a foreigner, resident alien, stranger, sojourner, or immigrant, appears 92 times in the Old Testament alone.⁴⁰ The Old Testament admonishes its readers about their obligations to aliens, widows and orphans no fewer than 36 times.⁴¹ In fact, the most repeated commandment in the Old Testament, other than worshiping the one true God, is to welcome the stranger.⁴² Some examples of God's commands include Leviticus 19:33–34:

Do not take advantage of foreigners who live among you in your land. Treat them like native-born Israelites, and love them as you love yourself. Remember that you were once foreigners living in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God.

Deuteronomy 10:18–19 declares:

[God] ensures that orphans and widows receive justice. [God] shows love to the foreigners living among you and gives them food and clothing. So you, too, must show love to foreigners, for you yourselves were once foreigners in the land of Egypt.

Exodus 23:9 reminds the Israelites that they too were once refugees and they should respond as God responded to them, with mercy and compassion. Moses writes, 'You must not oppress foreigners. You know what it's like to be a foreigner, for you yourselves were once foreigners in the land of Egypt.'⁴³ Therefore, based on the commands in the Old Testament, those reading the Bible as the word of God are obligated to obey divine commands and demonstrate compassion to the foreigner, alien, and refugee.

The New Testament continues to emphasize this idea. The Gospel writers are quick to remind Jesus of Nazareth's followers that he too was a refugee. Jesus, whom Christians believe to be the Son of God, joins a long line of biblical characters that had to flee their home under persecution including Esau,⁴⁴ Moses,⁴⁵ King David,⁴⁶ and the prophet Elijah.⁴⁷ Jesus' story of exile came at his birth with King Herod the Great who ruled Judea from approximately 37 BCE to 4 CE. Herod, who had heard that a new king of the Jews had been born, commissioned troops to murder all boys two years old and younger in the vicinity of the village of Bethlehem in Judea, where Jesus was born. Joseph, whom the New Testament writers refer to as Jesus' earthly father, took Jesus and his mother Mary and fled to Egypt where they lived as foreigners and refugees for several years before returning home.⁴⁸

Jesus also taught his followers how to respond to those around them. His chief command was an extension of the Jewish *Shema*, the central commandment of God in the Old Testament to all faithful Jews. Jesus said, 'You must love the Lord your God with all your

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heart, all your soul, and all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'⁴⁹ In Luke's Gospel, Jesus goes on to define who our neighbor is in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. In this story, Jesus responds to a question from a lawyer who asked him who his neighbor was. He says that a man was traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho when a group of robbers ambushed him. They stripped the man, beat him, and left him to die. A priest happened by, but because the man was ceremonially unclean, he passed by on the other side of the road. Another man, who assisted the priests in the Temple, saw the traveler and also passed by on the other side of the road. Finally, a Samaritan, who was despised by many for their ethnicity and religious practices, had compassion on the traveler, bound his wounds, took him to a local inn, and paid for his care. Jesus then asks, 'Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who was beaten by the robbers?' The lawyer replied, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'You go, and do likewise.' The point of Jesus' story is that everyone is our neighbor, not just the people we like or who happen to look like us.⁵⁰

Therefore, a Christian response to others, especially those in need, is to obey God's command to offer them hospitality and kindness. God's love for humankind, and the Christian's subsequent obligation to love all people, is made clear in Jesus' command, 'You have heard the law that says, "Love your neighbor" and hate your enemy. But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven.'⁵¹ He also shares the greatest two of God's commandments, 'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'⁵² As we can see, those who view the Bible as the word of God, as Christians do, are to obey its commands in response to their neighbors – whomever or wherever they may be.

We see now that World Relief's response to the Syrian refugee crisis centers on obedience to the commands of God as dictated by both the Old and New Testaments. One group of religious scholars apply these commands as a practical and ethical response specifically to the current refugee crisis:

The application to the present refugee crisis is clear: by Jesus' standard, the Refugee – whether from Syria, Somalia, or Burma, whether living one mile or ten thousand miles from us, whether Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, or an atheist, and whatever else might distinguish them, is our neighbor. The command of Jesus is to love them. That there may be risk or cost involved is not relevant to the mandate to love.⁵³

As a result, World Relief, according to the divine command theory of moral obligation, demonstrated an ethically correct response to the needs of millions who suffered as a result of the Syrian Civil War. As this organization lives out the commands and actions of God toward those who are in desperate need, by providing supplies, nutrition and hygiene programs, safe places for children, and psychosocial counseling for victims of violence, they are obeying God's command to love their neighbor as themselves.

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The Five Components of Leadership Model applied to World Relief and the Syrian refugees

The World Relief case shows the dependence upon the leader–follower relationship to the broader environment and culture for the greater good. Because divine command theory establishes the overarching cultural values and norms as articulated in a religion's holy texts, the leader and follower work to facilitate the goal through obedience to God's commands – even in a hostile environment. Since God has commanded a life of love, compassion, and justice towards others, World Relief works to provide the organizational vision, education, structure, and on-the-ground resources to accomplish this goal. Through partnerships with local churches, empowering local leaders, and providing opportunities for others around the world to help with the refugee crisis, World Relief allows others to join them as they lead out in meeting the needs of those in crisis. Some specific ways they challenge others to join them in this mission of compassion in the United States and abroad is through advocacy, volunteerism, and donations. World Relief provides numerous international touch points where followers and leaders can work together to support the goal, which is based on divine command theory. This transcendence is what makes divine command theory so powerful.

In our case study, the goal is the result of the overarching cultural values and norms and context that led to the symbiotic relationship between the leader and follower. While the goal of meeting the needs of those affected by the Syrian Civil War is the defined mission, it acts as secondary to the cultural values and norms and the context. The goal is the application of a much larger divine command into a particular situation. Though there are other humanitarian agencies – such as Syrian Medical Relief Society, UNICEF, Save the Children, and Doctors Without Borders – that share similar goals for helping refugees, World Relief is different in that the motive for the goal is obedience to a divine command. In doing so, they empower the leaders and followers by encouraging them to be obedient to God's commands to love their neighbor and to provide for those in need.

The context and culture of World Relief are driven by a belief in God and a conviction that divine commands are good for those who obey them. This faith forms the outermost cultural values and norms in which World Relief operates. The context in this instance is the divine command to 'love your neighbor' and extend compassion and hospitality to Syrian refugees. In this context, leaders and followers work together to accomplish desired goals based on God's commands as the higher, overarching values and norms that drive their personal life and the life of the organization.

Divine command theory rests on the presupposition that there is a God, who is good, whose commands are the basis for moral rightness and beneficial for those who follow them. Adherents of this theory have an objective moral framework in which to live ethically moral lives as they obey God's command. Divine command theory, then, provides a model for leaders in fostering moral and ethical conduct in their followers and the organizations in which they lead.