

Responding to Earthquakes: Cooperatives in Chile

by Richard Higginson



Earthquakes kill people and do serious damage to businesses as well as leading some to question the love or existence of God. A recent trip to visit fair trade cooperatives in Chile provoked this reflection from Richard Higginson. He saw a shared experience of suffering bringing out the best in workers and giving rise to hope.

We are all familiar with the phenomenon of natural disaster: the periodic eruption of earthquakes, volcanoes, hurricanes and floods, which cause incalculable suffering to the human and animal creation. Although we inhabit a wonderful world which overall is congenial to the survival and flourishing of life, that is not the whole story. In some respects it is a very fragile world; it contains ragged edges and imperfections. For many people in the West, the extremities of physical and mental suffering caused by events like natural disasters pose the biggest obstacle to belief in a loving and omnipotent God. If God exists, why did he create a world of this type?

Christians who have grappled with this issue usually link occurrences like earthquakes to the doctrine of the Fall. Sometimes they do this very crudely, interpreting specific events as judgments on the people of a particular place. While the moral decay of a city or country may occasionally make that plausible, it will not suffice as a general explanation; on the whole, the victims of natural disasters appear to be no better or worse



Toppled tanks at a brewery in Sendai, Miyagi Prefecture, northeastern Japan, March 11, 2011

than anyone else. In addition, we have become more knowledgeable about the scientific causes of these events. Earthquakes are the result of sudden releases of energy in the earth's crust that create seismic waves; this energy is released by the clash of tectonic plates deep below the earth's surface. Around the world are seven major plates, subdivided into a number of smaller plates. Most earthquakes are confined to comparatively narrow belts where these fault lines occur, with the collision of oceanic and continental plates often producing the most devastating earthquakes, because they set off tsunamis – as in the 2011 earthquake just off the coast of northern Japan.

So our understanding of the mechanics of earthquakes has increased, and with that a readiness to accept that the identity of the victims are decided by their proximity to a fault line, not the wickedness of their behaviour. Nevertheless, many Christians believe that the fact we live in a world where such events occur is a more general judgment of God upon human sinfulness. If human beings had not sinned, the physical world would function more smoothly. Because it is a fallen world, it shows clear signs of 'bondage to decay', a phrase used by St Paul in Romans 8:21. However, it still needs to be noted that if one accepts an evolutionary understanding of human developments (i.e. if human beings emerged billions of years after the creation of the world) then physical decay and geophysical shake-ups occurred long before *homo sapiens* came on the scene. Could the way



▶▶ that the world *is* therefore be a *prospective* judgment on human sinfulness? In other words, physical suffering may have always existed, but the long shadow cast by the fall leads human beings to recognise that this is a fate they deserve for their rebellion against God. It is a possible theological interpretation.

Another approach is grounded more in the love of God. Just as God in his love gives human beings freedom, so he allows the world that he has made freedom to develop according to the physical laws he has put within it.

In relation to earthquakes, this bubbly, ragged, exuberant, seemingly out-of-control universe has been allowed by God to perform its equivalent of 'go forth and multiply', pushing out its boundaries or doing its thing without being constantly under God's miniscule control. This results in both tragedy and triumph. The movement of tectonic plates brings destruction and loss of life in its wake, but it also creates magnificent mountains and splendid volcanoes.

A country that suffers an exceptional number of earthquakes is Chile. This long, thin country runs parallel to the fault line known as the Peru-Chile or Atacama Trench, 5900 kilometres long and 180 kilometres off the South American coast. Chile experiences minor tremors on a regular basis but every 20 or 25 years is subject to an earthquake of massive proportions. Which city or part of the country is the centre of devastation varies. In 1939 it was Chillán, with an estimated 30,000 killed; in 1960 the most powerful earthquake ever recorded (9.5 on the Richter scale) hit the southern city of Valdivia; in 1985 it was the turn of the capital, Santiago; and most recently the earthquake of 27 February 2010 struck the seaport city of Concepción, with its devastating impact extending far across Chile's Central Valley.



Earthquake damage on main plaza Curico, Chile, February 2010

On a recent visit to Chile to meet fair trade producers, I both witnessed the effects of the 2010 earthquake and discussed what it was like living in a country so vulnerable to seismic activity. Compared to many other countries in the world today, Chile is a strongly Christian country: about 60% of its population are practising Catholics and 15% practising Protestants. When I went into churches and cathedrals I saw clear evidence of the depth of this piety: people on their knees praying with real fervour. Among many friendly, helpful Chileans that I met, Chino

Henríquez, the Managing Director of Apicoop, a large honey producers' cooperative, was especially engaging. As he drove me through the streets of Valdivia I asked him if the frequency and severity of earthquakes caused Chileans to question belief in God. His answer was no, he thought not: it was more likely that they would be led to pray to God for help. In addition, Chileans have both a philosophical and a resourceful attitude to earthquakes, accepting that they live in a part of

the world where they will happen on a regular basis, taking sensible precautionary measures such as fleeing to higher ground in the hour's time-lapse between an earthquake and the tsunami which follows, and building houses with increasingly strong materials. As a result, the loss of human life in Chilean earthquakes of recent years has been relatively small.

However, in any disaster certain individuals, families and companies prove to be the unlucky ones. In the central town of Curico, at the heart of Chile's burgeoning wine-growing area, I visited Lautaro Wines, a wine producers' cooperative with 22 members. Four farmers lost their houses in the 2010 earthquake, with seven others being seriously damaged; some have now been rebuilt and improved. One poor man, José, lost no less



▶▶ than eight relatives including his wife and two children; I spoke to him in the café run by his one surviving adult daughter. He himself was dragged from the wreckage of his home three hours after the earthquake occurred. Oddly, even more shocking than the carnage of ruined buildings was the damage caused to the vats in which the wine is stored. These are huge steel containers that look impregnable, but such was the strength of the tremor that many had been battered, twisted and mangled to a point where they were unusable and the wine had been lost. Irrigation systems were also badly damaged. The earthquake actually happened at the worst possible time, right in the middle of the harvesting season; Lautaro Wines lost around \$200,000 in wine they already had in stock.

In the face of this suffering, the solidarity shown by the wine producers was truly impressive. The value of belonging to a cooperative was evident. Members rallied round to support those who had been most severely affected, especially José. Grants had been made available for funeral expenses, medical care and the rebuilding of houses. Two of Lautaro's European fair trade partners, the UK organisation Traidcraft and the Belgian organisation Oxfam, made significant financial contributions. The wine producers have certainly been through a sobering and chastening experience, but I found them in surprisingly buoyant spirits. With a good harvest in 2011 they hope to get the business back on track.¹ My experience with Lautaro, Apicoop and Fundación Solidaridad (a crafts producer in Santiago) was that I saw producers' cooperatives working more effectively in Chile than in other parts of the world I have visited. I found myself reflecting that their capacity for human solidarity – for working together rather than operating in an individualistic way – is probably borne out of a shared experience of suffering: surviving and resisting the oppressive Pinochet regime of the 1970s and 1980s, and the recurrent problem of earthquakes.



Vineyards with the Andes in the distance

Suffering of an extreme kind can provoke the worst in human behaviour (as in the looting and pillage that follow some disasters) and may therefore lead to despair. But a shared experience of suffering can also bring out the best in people, in which case it gives rise to hope. Hope and suffering are not necessarily in contradiction. Curiously, the passage in which Paul talks about the earth being in bondage to decay is a profoundly hopeful one: the word 'hope' occurs six times. The creation's bondage lies within the overall purpose of God and will not last for ever.

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from the bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. (Rom 8:19-23) ■



¹ Lautaro Wines' Sauvignon Blanc and Merlot Reserve can be ordered from Traidcraft online see www.traidcraftshop.co.uk/c-178-fair-trade-and-organic-wine.aspx.