

# JUST FAITH AND ACTION:

## A BI-MONTHLY THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION FROM THE WASHINGTON OFFICE ON AFRICA

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### *Seeing things*

*Phil Reed, of the Missionaries of Africa and a member of our Board, ends his e-mails with a quote from the Indian author Arundhati Roy: "Once you've seen certain things," she writes, "you can't un-see them, and seeing nothing is as political an act as seeing something." It's reminiscent to me of the writings of a key character in Alan Paton's Cry the Beloved Country, essentially saying that "it was permissible when we did not know, but now that we know, it is no longer permissible."*

*(It also reminds me of that argument in church circles that seems never to go away, namely that the Church should not be involved in "politics." When Roy says that "seeing nothing is as political an act as seeing something," she is paralleling the response that those of us who believe in a faithful calling to be engaged in "politics" have provided – often ineffectively – for years: Silence in the face of injustice, we say, is not a sign that the Church is keeping out of "politics." Rather it is very much a political decision, and a political act.)*

*But that's not where I want to go with this reflection. Rather I've been thinking, this past week or so, of what I have been seeing, and what it means to see things as a political act. Perhaps it's the vividness of the war images – even though we see little of the destruction our bombs are causing – that has set me on this course. Perhaps it's my coming across my photos from a church building in Rwanda taken not long after the genocide, with skulls stacked in a corner. Perhaps it's the more hopeful image of the Sinikithemba Choir from South Africa, women living with AIDS, singing on Capitol Hill. Or the enthusiasm of folks throughout the country who came to our recent Africa Advocacy Days.*

*What I've also been seeing is a nation's leaders engaging in business as usual. If massive tax cuts can be justified in peace-time prosperity and peace-time recession, I suppose we might as well consider them in the midst of war and deficits. If AIDS is likely to kill a fourth of the population of Africa in the next decade, I suppose we might as well phase in our support slowly, or delay our support for awhile in order to talk about abortion. And even if the IMF itself is reporting that there is "little evidence" that policies of economic liberalization – imposed upon Africa by the US, the IMF and the World Bank – encourage economic growth in poor countries, I suppose we might as well press on with that same economic agenda for a continent mired in poverty. Or should we? Maybe we just aren't looking.*

*"Once you've seen certain things, you can't un-see them, and seeing nothing is as political an act as seeing something," Roy reminds us. "It was permissible when we did not know, but now that we know, it is no longer permissible," Paton echoes.*

*In one manner or another we have seen the tragedy – not an imagined future threat, but a real threat now – of HIV/AIDS throughout Africa. In one manner or another we know the tragedy of war. Perhaps we see less vividly – perhaps not – the images of much of the world, trying to live with hope and dignity on less than two dollars a day. Perhaps we know less clearly – perhaps not – how our economic decisions in the United States help to sustain the inequities in the world economic order. Whichever, we need to open our eyes and see. It is no longer permissible not to, if it ever had been.*

Yours faithfully,  
Leon Spencer

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*If there are others you would like us to send these reflections to, please pass their names and addresses on to us. Alternatively, if these reflections are unhelpful, just let us know and we'll remove you from our list.  
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