Mourning Man’s Inhumanity Toward Man

By Richard Land, The Christian Post, April 12, 2010

It was 65 years ago, as World War II shuddered to an end in the European theatre, that the Allies began liberating the Nazi death camps.

In recognition of that particularly shameful period in world history, Congress established the Days of Remembrance as the nation’s annual commemoration of the Holocaust in the United States, beginning in 1982.

This year, Holocaust Remembrance Days began Sunday, April 11. The internationally recognized date comes from the Hebrew calendar and corresponds to the 27th day of Nisan on that calendar. Each year it marks the anniversary of the Warsaw ghetto uprising, where an outnumbered and out-armed remnant of Jews resisted for a time the Germans’ attempts to transport them out of the Polish city to Nazi extermination camps (Grossaktion).

I have had the sobering privilege of touring the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. To visit the Holocaust Museum is to be changed in important and painful ways. To see, hear and feel the horror of man’s inhumanity to his fellow human beings is to experience in a new and deeper way in one’s soul and spirit the biblical truth that “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?” (Jeremiah 17:9).

It was this same response — magnified greatly by his personal witness of the carnage — that compelled Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, supreme commander of the Allied Forces in Europe, to urge members of Congress and others to travel to Germany to see for themselves the unrestrained brutality of man against man evidenced in the country’s concentration camps.

Ohrdruf, a subcamp of one of the largest death concentration camps, Buchenwald, was the first active Nazi camp liberated by U.S. troops.

When the soldiers of the 4th Armored Division entered Ohrdruf on April 4, 1945, they discovered piles of bodies, many of them partially incinerated — a failed attempt by retreating German soldiers to cover their crimes. On April 12, Eisenhower visited the camp with Gens. George S. Patton and Omar Bradley. After his visit, Eisenhower directed a cable be sent to the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington which read in part:

... the most interesting — although horrible — sight that I encountered during the trip was a visit to a German internment camp near Gotha. The things I saw beggar description. While I was touring the camp I encountered three men who had been inmates and by one ruse or another had made their escape. I interviewed them through an interpreter. The visual evidence and the verbal testimony of starvation, cruelty and bestiality were so overpowering as to leave me a bit sick. In one room, where they were piled up twenty or thirty naked men, killed by starvation, George Patton would not even enter. He said that he would get sick if he did so. I made the visit deliberately, in order to be in a position to give first-hand evidence of these things if ever, in the future, there develops a tendency to charge these allegations merely to ‘propaganda.’

The Holocaust Museum memorializes the 6 million Jews and 5 million others who were murdered in the Nazi death camps strewn across the Third Reich. How could this educated, most scientifically advanced nation of its time have sunk to such monstrous barbarity?
To answer that question is to understand perhaps the Holocaust’s greatest and most terrifying lesson — that its explanation lies not in some flaw in the German character but in the human character in its fallen, sinful state. That such sickening barbarism broke out in Germany magnifies the fact that culture, education and scientific expertise do not inoculate societies against mind-numbing evil.

Germany was the most scientifically, technologically, educationally and culturally advanced culture in the world — and all that did was make their barbarism more heinous and more efficient once they severed themselves from Judeo-Christian absolutes and descended into Nazi tyranny. Education and scientific expertise are no inoculation against the darkness of the human heart.

The most extreme case of national idolatry or self-worship in modern times is Germany under Nazism. Germany largely abandoned its historic understanding of God many, many years earlier. Many of the late 19th and early 20th century theologically liberal Bible scholars were Germans. As the German people’s confidence in the God of Scripture eroded, they began to worship themselves. They became their own god, presuming they were a master race, with disastrous consequences for themselves and for the whole world.

The complicity of large numbers of German church leaders and ordinary German church members in the horror of what transpired in Germany under National Socialism (Nazism) between 1933 and 1945 should serve as a sobering warning and a timeless cautionary tale of what can happen when Christians of any era, confession or nationality lose their Christocentric focus of authority.

The dark tragedy of German Christianity under Hitler underscores dramatically what can happen when Christians allow their religious faith to be eviscerated by liberal theology or elevate their nationalism to the level of idolatry.

Unfettered by an orthodox and genuine faith in Christ, human beings are capable of horrific, if not unimaginable, deeds of evil against other men, evidence of the corruption of human nature (Ephesians 4:18-19).

We must resolve to remember the ugly lessons of the Holocaust and to do everything in our power to insure that such savagery never take place unchecked again. Yet remembrance without commitment to action in the present is inadequate.

We must commit afresh to raise our voices against anti-Semitism wherever and whenever it occurs. Jesus commands us to love our neighbors (Matthew 22:39). In God’s sight there is neither Jew nor Gentile, enslaved or free, male or female, for we are “all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). Each human being is of unique and inestimable value to God. Indeed, anti-Semitism is perhaps the most irrational of prejudices for followers of Jesus, Himself a Jew.

We must commit to express our deep condolences to our Jewish friends in their time of grief and personal loss, as the bitter memory of the Holocaust is forever etched on the Jewish psyche. And we express our solidarity with them, resolving to do all within our power to ensure such mayhem and bloodshed will never happen again, anywhere, to anyone.

We must commit to preach on the scriptural lesson of the unique dignity and worth of all human beings, regardless of race or creed, promising to teach our children that every person is crafted in the image of God, deserving love and respect.

We must commit ourselves to never forget and to never remain silent when the lives of innocent human beings are threatened.