

# New Roots Review

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## *Diamonds in the Rough*

by Fred Wilgenburg



**NEW ROOTS  
MINISTRY**

Do you ever get caught up in a conversation, or within your own thoughts, of “us” vs. “them”? We usually start by having a more positive view of “us” in comparison to “them,” until we learn some things that are different from our understanding, or we hear alternative perspectives. This can be confusing. Maybe our built-up comfort zones feel threatened, especially in arenas like politics, religion, theological positions, morality, and racial & ethnic tensions, among other things.

Our ultimate responses are what are most important. Do we mostly hold on tighter, become louder, and raise our defenses higher, with an of-this-world perspective, OR do we seek a Kingdom of God citizen’s posture that is teachable, humble, and at peace, like the Apostle Paul, even within “a crooked and depraved generation, (still) shin(-ing) like stars in the universe,” and having done that, to, no matter what, be able to be “glad and rejoice” (Philippians 2:15-18)?

I’m not sure that a lack of Kingdom of God perspective was the main cause of the following, but I think it played its part:

From 1992-1995, there was a terrible war between some of the six republics of the former Yugoslavia. The main aggressors were Serbs, who mostly identify ethnically and spiritually as Orthodox Christians. The main victims were Bosniaks, who mostly identify ethnically and spiritually as Muslims. The war largely involved ethnic cleansing, including much loss of life, systematic rape of women and girls, and the forced relocation of civilian populations. During a one-month campaign outside the town of Srebrenica, Bosnia, 8000 local men and boys were killed in what some describe as a genocide.

I write about that war because Bosnians (Bosniaks) came to Sioux Falls as refugees, and they work at Smithfield Foods where New Roots Ministry provides chaplaincy. From my experience, most Bosnians do not like to talk much about spirituality, including with me as a chaplain, in part because there are many mixed marriages between Bosnians and Serbs, and maybe also because I am a Christian. I wonder, how could that—genocide and systematic rape—have been done largely by Christians!? I know, many were probably not sincere Jesus-followers, but rather, just identified as Christian. But, I wonder, too, did they hold to an of-this-world perspective in carrying out those unimaginable evils?

After two years of a devastating war in Ethiopia, including some involvement by neighboring Eritrea, an official cease-fire was recently attained. These countries, including both sides in the war, are roughly 65% Christian. Efforts to top the enemy resulted in the death of at least 50,000 people caused directly by the fighting, death by starvation of over 150,000 people, and the systematic rape of countless women and girls.

Many Ethiopians and Eritreans live in Sioux Falls; it’s possibly the biggest combined group of people at Smithfield Foods, which has 3700 employees. How could that happen, largely at the hands of, or under the watch of, those who identify as Christian? Unlike for Serbs described above, in the case of Ethiopia and Eritrea, the Christians are often devout people of God. Again, how could those horrific numbers of deaths have come about? In part, I think, because they identified foremost as of a certain tribe, or of a certain political party, rather than as a citizen of a greater Kingdom, with standards-of-conduct are set by a perfect King.

South Sudan can relate to Ethiopia, at least in the way of a civil war between warring tribes, most of whom are Christians. Southern Sudanese, in the past, could blame their hardships on the more powerful, Muslim north. But after 2011, South Sudan became an independent country from Sudan. Sadly, the troubles have continued, but this time in the way of tribal warfare within their own country.



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in three months during 1994, about 800,000 people, mostly of the minority Tutsis, were slaughtered, systematically, one village after another by the Hutu-led government and Hutu militias. Both Hutus and Tutsis largely identify as Christians.

Since then, with painstaking efforts at all levels, Rwanda has become a model for reconciliation. Much has involved listening, learning, humbleness, confession, and forgiveness. They are finding where their first allegiance needs to be—with God and within His Kingdom—in order to have a peaceful country.

Fortunately, atrocities like those don't happen in the U.S., right? Well, the west African country of Liberia got its name from the word "freedom." Some American slaves, who's ancestors were originally taken forcefully from Africa, were allowed to return to what became "Liberia" in 1822. It's capital city is Monrovia, named after the U.S. president of that time, James Monroe.

There are 3000+ Liberians in Sioux Falls, and interestingly, even with the contentious history, they love and are thankful for the U.S. Many of them are happy Jesus-followers. I haven't asked many how, and why. Perhaps in part, it's because their citizenship is understood as beyond this world, where it will last a lot longer, and where they can sing out the truth of an African-American spiritual like "All God's Children Got Shoes." Thankfully, racism and its related tensions are a thing of the past here, right? No, . . . . .

It's right to acknowledge that ugly things happen, to "us" and by "us," as well as "them." In conversations with a Somali Muslim friend, he has brought up the Crusades of the 11th—13th centuries. They were ugly and bloody on all sides, including largely at the hands of Christians. That's still remembered by some Muslims. With a God-Kingdom point of view, we can get beyond "Christian" and "Muslim" labels, admitting and sorrowing over sin, and, if possible, making things right. We can also gently encourage that each person is made in God's beautiful image, that we can have a sense of peace that God is in the active process of creating a new order of peace and righteousness, and that we each have the capacity to help Him in that.

*(Some may wonder why I didn't write about the devastating situation in Ukraine. I will commit extra to that in December, partially in appreciation of the numerous Ukrainians in our city.)*

Continued...

South Sudanese may be the biggest African group in Sioux Falls, and quite a few struggle with PTSD and its effects, due to what they've experienced. I wonder if, in part, a big cause of conflict among the Christian tribes is a lack of focus on "God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation." I know, the problems are complicated and they have history, but again, has some of it been with a tribal perspective rather than viewing ourselves as reconciling representatives of God?

Maybe the most atrocious account here, but with the best ultimate response, has been in Rwanda. With-



*With some friends, we co-led a Gospel Conversation Training event for 32 people, all formerly of Nepal. How energizing to get out there and talk the Gospel for the last hour. Interested? Please let me know (605-376-6330).*

### What is New Roots Ministry?

**It's "a springboard for new Americans & their churches." This is done through workplace chaplaincy (we provide chaplaincy at Smithfield Foods & we train & place bi-lingual chaplains on commercial farms), through Timothy Leadership Training, through hosting special educational events, through empowering new American pastors, leaders, and their churches, through offering unique Service Opportunities—serve in, or visit, stores owned by new Americans, then hear their stories, through helping people navigate the American system and achieve their goals, like education, and through driver training for new Americans.**