

Facing risk, danger and fear in mission

Combining Christian theology, science, and wise best practices

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Abstract

A theology of risk is different from a theology of suffering. Developing a holistic and comprehensive approach to risking for gospel advancement requires developing risk literacy, leading to shrewdness when ministering in circumstances hostile to the gospel.

Keywords

Theology of risk, risk literacy, shrewdness, risk assessment and management, fear management.

1. Introduction

Living in Afghanistan for a decade under the first Taliban government revealed to us that while we had a robust theology of suffering, we had no concept of a theology of risk. Our problem of how to think and live out our faith intensified when my husband became the country director of one of the largest humanitarian organizations based in Kabul in early 2006. He was responsible for stewarding the lives of 100 foreign staff, 100 Afghan staff, and millions of dollars of resources.

Developing a theology of risk has been a significant field-driven question among North American mission organizations. The visibility of this issue was heightened by several 20th-century kidnapping and killings, including the Ethnos 360 (formerly New Tribes Mission) martyrs of the 1970s and 1980s. Since then,

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awareness of the need for a theology of risk has expanded further to become a global challenge for Christ's family.

Part of risk management is seeing reality with a clear focus. Globally, the places where terrorism is more frequent and those where it is most dangerous to follow Christ tend to be the same places.² The physical world reveals the spiritual world.

A primary challenge has been to build a comprehensive theology of risk and identify its necessary components. A related secondary challenge is to synthesize a theology of risk with science and best practices to guide Christians who seek to advance the gospel in the face of threats of suffering, persecution, and even martyrdom.

My husband, Neal, wrote a two-day risk assessment and management (RAM) training program based on my book *Facing Danger: A Guide Through Risk*. The material was field-tested in Turkey with Iranian believers who had already been jailed and beaten for following Christ. Ensuing training was facilitated all over the world in person and via Zoom during the pandemic years, equipping people in over 100 different countries and as many mission organizations.

2. Misconceptions about risk

As critical questions continually emerged from the experience of living under severe threats and constant uncertainty, a pattern of unhelpful responses from the global church emerged.

2.1. Answering a risk question with a suffering answer

One roadblock to identifying a theology of risk was that a suffering answer was given in response to risk questions. Suffering poses different questions from risk and therefore requires a different answer. Risk is specific, urgent, and situational in volatile, uncertain, often complex and ambiguous (VUCA)³ circumstances. In risk, little to no suffering has been experienced yet. Risk is the *threat* of persecution, suffering, or death. Living under constant uncertainty and knowing one can lose everything, though without having lost it yet, is one of the most challenging situations to endure day in and day out, month after month, year after year. It requires developing skills of endurance, resilience, and shrewdness amid one's calling and faithfulness to Christ under severe pressure.

All Christ-followers suffer and are called to suffer, and it is wise to develop a personal theology of suffering. However, a theology of risk is different from a

2 See the University of Maryland's Global Terrorism Database which has tracked and categorized all terrorist events for the past 54 years, and the Joshua Project's graph on unreached people groups. Forty-six of the 50 countries on the World Watch List show up in both data sources. This does not imply that unreached people groups are terrorists. It is a correlation, not a statement of causation.

3 The term VUCA was coined in the mid-1980s in business applications, but it has been used in other fields and applies to Christ-followers in hostile situations.

theology of suffering. Risk is confusing – how do I know what to do? The threats are pouring in; am I supposed to stay with my family? Am I called to move toward risk or away from the danger of risk?

A common risk question involves what to do in a specific situation. Often the response is “Whatever happens, we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (Rom 8:28). But that promise does not address the practical outworking of how to know what to do, or how to make a particular decision under stressful circumstances.

We experienced cognitive, emotional, and faith dissonance because this verse was used so often in counseling settings during our service in Afghanistan, especially as twenty of our colleagues were martyred in the span of six years. How could we think rationally and coherently about our faith, acknowledging our emotions and the sacred questions that emerged when we were under threat and persecution?

3. Risk myths

Another roadblock to developing a robust theology of risk arises when situationally specific risk questions are answered with a general and often conceptual “risk myth.” A myth is a statement that is mostly true, yet how it is used, when it is used, or how the words are defined makes it a myth. From years of listening to Christ-followers from all over the world, we have found that sixteen common risk myths are repeatedly used to deal with the destabilizing impact of risk and the high probability of persecution.

One of the most damaging risk myths is “You are never safer than when you are in the center of God’s will.” This presupposes that there is a “center” to God’s will, and that we must find it. It also presumes that “safety” is defined as nothing bad happening. People serving Christ in dangerous places experience plenty of suffering and persecution. This risk myth reveals a misunderstanding of both a theology of evil and the character and ways of God. Often a faith crisis ensues, which has led to far too many marriage and family implosions, impeding translation projects, church planting efforts, and the stability of the surrounding community.

4. The anecdotal approach

A third unhelpful response to risk questions is what we call the “anecdotal” biblical answer, often overlaid with a Western safety perspective. People’s risk bias is revealed in whichever Bible story they use in trying to persuade us what to do. If they thought we should flee, they might say, “Look at what Paul did when he fled over the wall.” If they were instead committed to bold faithfulness, they would say, “Be like Esther ... you are there for such a time as this.” The focus of the anecdotal

biblical answer was always on the people in the Bible, not on how they heard from God what *he* wanted. This type of answer never pointed to God's desire in the present situation; it only revealed the speaker's theological and risk bias.

The continual experience of receiving suffering-related, anecdotally biased, and dogmatic answers to our risk questions was discouraging. "In the process of thinking, an answer without a question is devoid of life. It may enter the mind; it will not penetrate the soul."⁴ We continued to explore how to discern God's voice as we faced hostility and many threats, including threats of kidnapping.

5. Outline of a theology of risk in mission

In this section, I outline key elements of a theology of risk, which are more thoroughly discussed in *Facing Danger: A Guide Through Risk*, 2nd ed. The concept of risk is defined differently in different contexts. Followers of Jesus face all types of risks. The term "witness risk" delineates the type of risk faced in gospel advancement. A witness is someone whose identity is in Christ, and they witness to their relationship with Jesus, the Son of God. This is what anyone, from any denomination, faces when living and proclaiming the gospel in adverse, dangerous circumstances. Witness risk is the potential for loss and gain when following Christ.

5.1. New Testament thought

In the early church experience of facing threats, there are three places where three different Greek words are translated with "risk" in over 20 English translations. These are found in Romans 16:3-4, Philippians 2:30, and Acts 15:25-26.

In Romans 16:3-4, Paul describes what Priscilla and Aquila did, risking their own necks for him. "They willingly and purposely [exposed themselves] to extreme danger and risk."⁵ They put their necks in harm's way and kept them there. What are they putting their necks on? In only one other place in the New Testament, in 1 Timothy 4:6, does Paul use the same Greek word in the context of pointing out sound faith and doctrine (the solid foundation of Christ's death and resurrection). Surprisingly, the authors of the Septuagint chose the same word to describe "holy placing" in several key situations, one of those being the rock placed under Moses in the battle with the Amalekites in Exodus 17. Although Aaron and Hur really did place a rock for Moses to sit upon as they held up his hands, this is just one of several intertextual connections seen in Exodus 17. The placing of the stone under Moses was symbolic of God as the foundation stone for life, in

4 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*, 1st eBook edition. (Farrar Straus and Giroux:1955), 3.

5 Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (United Bible Societies: 1996), 238.

this case a life-or-death battle. What we are resting our lives on when everything is at stake must be firm, reliable, trustworthy, and certain.

Paul states that Priscilla and Aquila risked their lives repeatedly for him and for Christ. What kind of courage was needed for them to lay their necks down and keep them there for an indeterminate length of time on behalf of Paul? What kind of loyalty, stamina, shrewdness, and discernment was needed as they went about the task of hospitality, leading a church, teaching, baptizing, probably raising their family, and changing countries at least twice? In risk, while it is best practice to include risk and crisis management strategies, this must not be done without acknowledging God as our solid and primary foundation.

The second word Paul used for risk is used only once in the New Testament and is a word for gambling. It appears to be a word that Paul coined to refer to Epaphroditus risking his life for him. Paul was saying that Epaphroditus gambled his life! Epaphroditus faced at least two major risks when going to visit Paul. The first involved his health, as he became extremely sick and almost died. In the ancient world, sickness and disease, often a death sentence, were greatly feared. Many Christ-followers also risk health by remaining in dangerous circumstances where the government and community are hostile to Christ.

The second risk Epaphroditus took was in the act of visiting Paul. He identified himself with a prisoner of the mighty Roman Empire. This required courage and a willingness to embrace the short-term and long-term consequences of being seen with him.

In Philippians 4, Paul used language to describe the actions of Epaphroditus and the sending church as sacrifices or fragrant offerings. Paul associated risk with the voluntary sacrifice in the Levitical system as an act of worship. Risk is an act of worship when done out of obedience and calling by God.

The third New Testament reference to risk is in Acts 15:25-26. Here, a selection process occurs, similar to Joshua selecting men for the battle with the Amalekites in Exodus 17. Specific men were chosen to take a letter from the leaders of the church in Jerusalem to the Gentile church in Antioch, carrying the message about practices of eating and circumcision.

One of the selection criteria was whether people had risked their lives. The word used for risk means “to give over to,” and the tense used implies that the men had actively chosen to deliver their whole being over to danger for an indeterminate time. They decisively chose to live in a difficult place where persecution was a high probability. Whom has God selected to embrace risk for a specific task?

What decreases endurance and firmness of faith in persecution is when people experience one or both of the following: the sense of isolation (feeling all alone) or the temptation to resignation (an overwhelming sense of powerlessness

that nothing can be done to change the situation). In contrast, having a comprehensive theology of risk will increase resiliency in the face of danger and persecution, because one has reoriented one's inner self on God as the firm and certain rock (foundation), and because of the confirmation of one's calling to that risk situation (selection) and the gentle invitation to risk as worship.

These three elements of a theology of risk – foundation, selection, and worship – may be seen in many stories of risk in the Bible. The challenge is to pay attention to which story or verse the Holy Spirit is pointing to for each person in the specific risk situation. The goal of theology is not to know about God but to know God, and if we do not engage in what he is doing and wanting to do in the moment of risk, a sacred moment of transformation into his likeness may be missed. Hearing his voice and responding with obedience out of a heart of love for him results in fruitful gospel advancement.

5.2. Theological relationships, science, and emotions when facing risk and persecution

Figure 1 shows theologies related to a theology of risk. None of these are in isolation from each other. When we provide pastoral care to persecuted believers, it is critical to listen to the person and to the ways the Holy Spirit brings guidance to specific Scriptures to that person. Additionally, equipping discipleship includes focus in three specific theological areas: evil, failure, and uncertainty.

In terms of a theology of evil, we need the inner strength to affirm the reality of personally targeted malevolence, trust in the goodness of God, and the battle for hope in Christ at the same time. What does it mean to battle for hope when immersed in situations where evil seemingly prevails? These simple questions become crucial in contexts where brutal violence is the norm and one's senses are constantly assaulted. Simplistic, pithy answers to complex problems must be rejected. Often, silence and lament must be embraced first.

Kenneth Bailey discusses how Jesus taught a theology of failure in Mark 6:6-13 (see also Matt 10:1-16; Luke 9:1-6) before ever sending his disciples out.⁶ Jesus sent his disciples out in a position of need, not a position of power. In any place and occasion where they were not welcomed, accepted, and listened to, he instructed his disciples to “shake the dust off their feet” as a testimony against them. Jesus gave both a kinesthetic lesson on how to deal with rejection and a clear framing of how to view rejection. Defining success and failure in mission is a critical aspect of faithful endurance when facing persecution. However, the tendency to-

6 Kenneth E. Bailey, *The Good Shepherd: A Thousand-Year Journey from Psalm 23 to the New Testament* (InterVarsity Press, 2015), 157.

Interrelationships of Witness-Risk

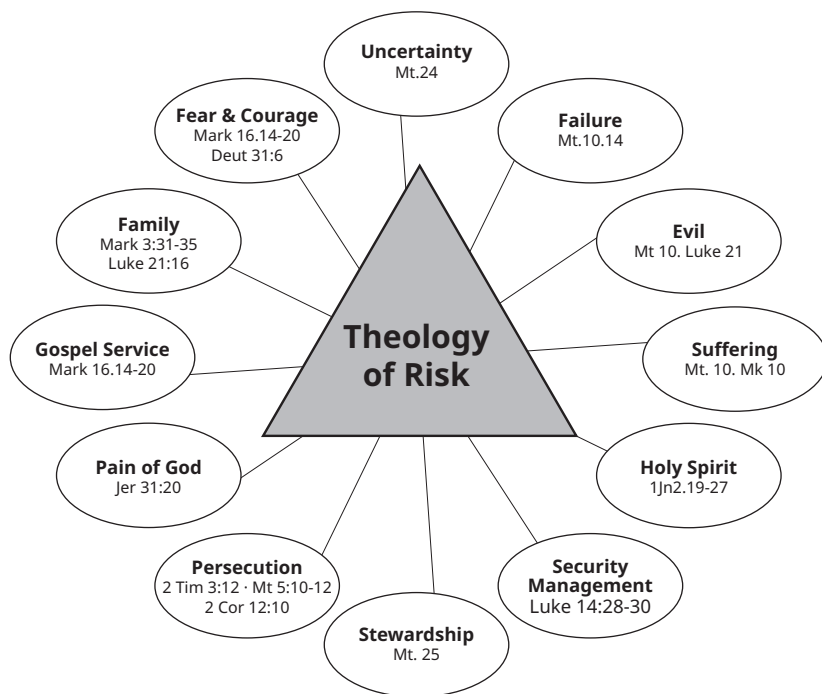


Figure 1. Theological relationships to witness risk

ward a theology of victory and the lack of a meaningful theology of failure leave no sacred space to reflect on the physical and spiritual realities encountered.

How humans respond to uncertainty and risk has been well researched in secular literature. There are well over a thousand academic studies on the psychology of risk, decision making in risk, and how fear influences risk taking, among many other related subtopics. However, there are few references to this body of research within theological and specifically missiological writings. Knowing the normal human response provides pointers to effective discipleship and training for those sharing the gospel in hostile and dangerous circumstances.

5.3. *Theology of risk and fear management*

Even when a disciple develops a robust theology of risk and theology of suffering, fear still often creeps in when one is facing a violent reality for the sake of Christ.

Church teaching seems to vacillate between three positions: (1) ignore your fear, (2) fear is from the devil, and (3) feeling fear means lacking faith. In contrast, fear management is the process in which one acknowledges feeling fear and names the object of fear so that courageous action may be recognized and chosen. Ignoring fear increases its power over us. While I believe demons of fear do exist, this is not typically a daily experience for most disciples. Finally, one can feel fear and have faith at the same time, but reorientation is required in that moment so that one can make a better decision. A critical aspect of endurance training for persecuted believers and those choosing to enter hostile circumstances for the purposes of gospel advancement is to learn how to recognize and respond to fear in a way that acknowledges our humanity and glorifies God.

To understand the Hebrew and Greek of Bible verses often translated with “do not fear” (or similar words), we must examine several aspects of the original texts: (1) type of speech (noun, verb, or adjective), (2) which Hebrew or Greek negative form is used,⁷ (3) who is speaking, and (4) who is being addressed. In the verses where fear is a verb in the Greek or Hebrew, the text says, “do not do the action of fear.” In the Hebrew Bible, Moses and Joshua are commanded not to fear, using the strongest possible terms, but the people are requested not to let fear paralyze them. In the New Testament, the imperative command not to fear is found on the lips of Jesus. In the entire Bible, it is assumed that humans will feel fear, but they are not condemned for this. On the other hand, disciples sin when they allow fear to paralyze them and keep them from obeying God.

Because both the Hebrew and Greek reveal awareness of the scale of human fear from mild anxiety to terror,⁸ this seems to be a normal human emotion that must be responded to and dealt with, not ignored. Fear is a natural reaction ranging from mild anxiety to great dread of the unknown, the uncertain, and the uncontrollable danger that threatens to overwhelm us. Those who engage in fear mongering both within the church and in the world know how to distort reality and elicit fear. Human perception of reality is distorted by fear and the things that are linked to fear. Fear, like hope, always has an object. Here are three key observations: fear is a prerequisite for courage; fear is contagious, but so is courage; and courage is harder in isolation. Fear can overwhelm the person who is all alone or feels alone. Courage is easier in community with others.

A simple fear management process that is effective when facing danger or persecution can be taught with the acrostic NAME.⁹

7 For example, there is a Hebrew form of “no” meaning “never,” such as is found in the Ten Commandments, and a different “no” form for a request not to do something, i.e., “do not fear.”

8 There are too many different Hebrew and Greek words for fear to list here. The table in my book *Facing Fear* lists many of the Hebrew and Greek words but is not comprehensive.

9 Kitty Crenshaw and Catherine Snapp, *The Hidden Life Awakened*, (Cairns, 2016), 36-37.

- 1) Name your fears:
 - Fear has an object. “I’m fearful of,” or “I fear” ... what comes to mind? Write them down.
 - Order your fears from least to greatest.
- 2) Ask yourself:
 - If the thing you fear happened, what’s the worst thing about it?
 - What does that cause you to feel?
 - When you start to feel ____, where does that take you? (List your emotions and physical responses.)
- 3) Meaning and imagination:
 - Meaning: If it happened, imagine where God would be in the situation. How could he work? What purpose would he assign to your pain and fear?
 - Imagine: We trust the person we know, so what is he like? Imagine Jesus telling his Father about your fear. What would his countenance be like? What would he be saying? Imagine him interceding with the Father about your fear.
- 4) Entrust:
 - Entrust the fear to God and ask him to help you with it and give you the courage to obey him.

Look to God by telling him about the fear being experienced and ask for his help to respond with courage, recognizing that no matter what, he loves his children and is a compassionate, faithful, merciful, sovereign God. He always provides a responsive, sufficient light to know what to do next, even if it’s just a household task. This moves the disciple step by step to mature hope and mature courage.

6. Theology of risk and practical shrewdness

Once a holistic and comprehensive theology of risk has been developed, the next step is to develop risk literacy and mature risk decision making. In Matthew 10:16, Jesus taught, “Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves.” The Greek word used for “shrewd” in Matthew 10:16 is the same word used in the Septuagint for “cunning” to describe the serpent in Genesis 3:1.

However, English commentaries and English Bibles often treat shrewdness and cunning as negative characteristics and replace “cunning” with “prudent.” The modern meaning of “prudent” diminishes the force of the original Hebrew and Greek text. One definition of “prudent” is “careful and avoiding risks.”¹⁰ This is definitely *not* what our Lord meant when he said to be shrewd. While “cun-

¹⁰ Cambridge Dictionary. Available at <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/prudent>.

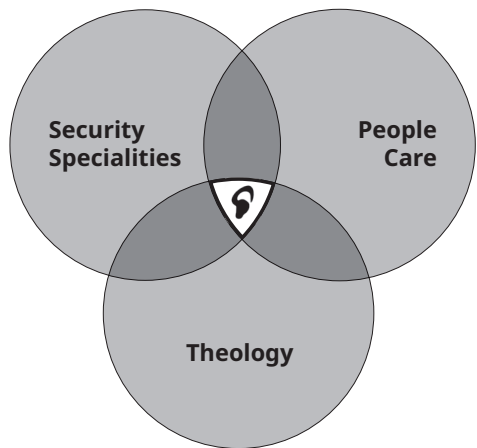


Figure 2. Core Specialties

ning” and “shrewd” often do have negative connotations in modern English, this is what our Lord said his disciples should be when facing hostility because of his name. Therefore, how does a Christ-follower develop a Christo-centric shrewdness (cunning) that is as innocent as a dove?

There are at least twelve elements of practical shrewdness when engaging in gospel advancement in hostile circumstances that are likely aspects of what our Lord envisioned. These aspects are critical in saving lives and enduring well under severe threats and persecution. In the following section, I will briefly address three of these twelve elements of shrewdness (cunning) that would bring him glory and contribute to effectiveness in bringing his Kingdom to dark places.

6.1. Duty of care

The duty of care includes developing care in three primary areas: security specialties, theology of risk, and people care (see Figure 2). These are three core areas of a practically applied theology of risk.

The concept of security specialties refers to all the security training topics relevant to Christ-followers who are ministering in dangerous situations. It includes learning such things as detecting and mitigating hostile surveillance, avoiding and surviving kidnapping, handling government questioning and interrogation, and technology and communication management.

People care includes counseling, critical incident stress debriefing, trauma resolution counseling, and pastoral counseling. Organizational policies, stan-

dards of care, pre-field preparation, and training are also significant parts of people care and of how well people are prepared for risk and persecution. Engaging in trauma counseling has been shown to reduce the potential for PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) and increase the potential for PTSG (post-traumatic stress growth).

The theology circle includes all aspects of a theology of risk that were shown above in Figure 1. It includes books, courses at the university and seminary level, and online resources addressing theological aspects related to risk. Those who have developed a comprehensive and concise statement on the theology of risk and theology of suffering are likely to demonstrate more effective risk decision-making skills under severe stress.

Because one size does not fit all, risk assessment and management (RAM) training equips Christ-followers with skills and knowledge from each of these areas, so that they can recognize which of the three areas they need more training and resourcing in to prepare for their calling more effectively. These three areas of care will dramatically increase resiliency and endurance.

The Global Risk Resource document¹¹ provides information in each of these three areas, reflecting resources available to the global church in many different languages. Globally, God has been raising up Christ-followers in numerous countries with experience as former military or police and the ability to train Christ-followers in how to deal practically with danger, as well as those able to provide the trauma counseling necessary to assist those recovering from persecution. Additionally, the Risk Management Network in North America and parallel networks in Asia and Europe provide networking, information sharing, training resources, and often assistance in crisis related to persecution of missionaries and local Christ-followers.

6.2. *Witness risk literacy*

A second critical element of practical shrewdness is cultivating risk literacy. The opposite is risk illiteracy: “For the simple are killed by their turning away, and the complacency of fools destroys them” (Prov 1:32). In contrast, risk literacy involves the basic attitudes, knowledge, and skills required to assess various witness risks and mitigate them based on a mature discernment of Holy Spirit-led stewardship.¹²

Risk literacy includes developing skills in risk assessment (what could happen?), risk mitigation (how can I decrease the impact if it happens?), how to engage in threat assessment (including evaluating the veracity of a death threat),

¹¹ Available at <https://theologyofrisk.com/risk-resources>.

¹² Hampton, *Facing Fear*, 228.

information analysis, hearing the Holy Spirit's leading under severe threat of persecution, and how to do all this while stewarding the numerous opportunities arising in risk to share Christ's love.

6.3. *Systems thinking*

A third element of shrewdness is to develop systems thinking instead of staying stuck in linear thinking. Most people have been taught to see things linearly and to solve problems through analysis only – cause and effect, problem and solution – without considering the interrelationships and interconnections of the whole. Often, problems are simplified to fit into this model of thinking with only two variables. Linear thinking is too narrow. It ignores the complex system and instead focuses on just one element of a system. However, each element is connected to other elements of the system. Adjusting one element means change throughout the system. In contrast, “Systems thinking involves an enhanced ability to hold the one and the many in one’s mind at the same time and to perceive the interrelatedness.”¹³

Often risk and danger are approached as problems to solve, rather than as a tension to manage.¹⁴ Most of the time, there are competing values in risk, and these values are in tension. These include values such as one’s calling, the need for safety, and the invitation from the Holy Spirit to risk one’s life.

7. **Conclusion**

Men, women, and young people are risking their lives for Christ, and pastoral care and training must develop keen awareness that any pastoral word given may be the last word heard before someone faces death the next day. The answers given to persecuted believers must not be fossilized religious dogma, or verses taken out of context. The world does not need more Christians with adolescent faith, but rather believers with mature, sound faith that works in the fires of persecution.

¹³ “Systems Thinking Marin.” Available at: <https://www.systemsthinkingmarin.org/about/what-is-systems-thinking/>.

¹⁴ See also Tim Arnold, *The Power of Healthy Tension: Overcoming Chronic Issues and Conflicting Values* (HRD Press, 2017).