

## **In The Lonely Mission Field**

I invite you to imagine this as happening in the congregation of which you are a part. Your group is concerned about spreading the gospel where it has not gone. Much attention is called to the efforts of others in mission fields. That's great! A young couple, Mark and Kelly, becomes seriously interested in dedicating themselves to taking the gospel to Africa.

They confer with others who have served there. In addition to much other useful information, they are advised of the culture shock and the loneliness that can depress them due to the lack of association of Christians about them. It can be terribly lonely. After full orientation, your congregation sends them on their way with great admiration for their courage and dedication.

The couple writes back to report on their safe arrival and their busy schedule in getting settled. After a few weeks, however, the church receives a letter like this: "Dear brothers and sisters, we are well into our work here now. We have felt no culture shock due to being alone. Many local Christians have welcomed us and helped us in many ways. Contrary to what we had been led to think, the gospel is widely spread in Africa. In fact, there are 368,244,000 Christians in Africa while there are only 261,752,000 in all of North America! We are over-joyed to work with so many millions of others who are proclaiming salvation in Christ!"

How will your congregation react to that letter? Will those assembled break their rule against clapping by a spontaneous applause and standing ovation? Or will it more likely be a discussion as to whether to pay their fare back home or just to leave them stranded in Africa?

And are you ready to cast your vote in favor of hastening my departure into the nether regions of the unseen world for even proposing such a situation?

If you have not read my first book, *Free In Christ* or my latest *Freedom's Ring* articles (FR 268-274), please read them before continuing with this essay. By doing that, you may be able to judge my conclusions drawn from my reasons rather than from your own. All of my reasons cannot be repeated and enlarged upon in this short discourse.

In most of our mission efforts we have not sent persons to work with Baptists, Anglicans, Nazarenes, Adventists, or even those of other splinter groups of the Church of Christ. If any contact is made with any of those, it is more likely to try to convert them to our doctrinal stance. Reports from the missionaries seldom mention the presence of any others there who are not of their persuasion. No wonder that our missionaries may feel lonely! Am I being too harsh in my assessment?

Am I suggesting that we should work with people in error? Well, what other kind is there? You have to do that in the good ol' USA. Is there no one in error in your home congregation? Some errors are worse than others, you may insist. That is true. We have discussed essential of unity already in other lessons.

In which climate may your work be more successful – where many others are upholding Christ as our savior, or where you must combat those who are proclaiming Christ, or yet where few others are proclaiming Christ at all? It is more productive to work the tilled soil than to plant among the weeds. Have you noticed that fast food places and other restaurants often are located close together? Although we may think of them as competitors, they find that they help each other by their proximity. The popular talk radio host, Michael Medved, is a devout practicing Jew. In his book, “Right Turns,” he shocks his own Jewish people by declaring, “A more Christian America is good for the Jews.” He appreciates the religious climate in which Jews may thrive better.

Why, then, do we not work with others in areas of common interest who are proclaiming the same Christ we preach – whether in Africa, America, or any other place on earth? This does not mean that we must endorse or promote practices that violate our consciences. You work in the general framework of your congregation with persons with whom you disagree without endorsing or promoting their practices. Why can that not be extended to others who do not wear our denominational name as well?

For most of my career I have had to plow around this stump in my field: *“John said to him, ‘Teacher, we saw a man casting out demons in your name, and we forbade him, because he was not following us.’ But Jesus said, ‘Do not forbid him; for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon after to speak evil of me. For he that is not against us is for us. For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ, will by no means lose his reward’”* (Mark 9:38-41). If those “other people” give you the least encouragement, God rewards them!

Our isolationist inbreeding fosters the discouraging feelings of loneliness in Asia, Latin America, and elsewhere. The New York Times’ “The World Almanac – 2003” gives these statistics of Christians: Africa – 368,244,000; Asia – 317,759,000; Europe – 559,359,000; Latin America – 486,591,000; Northern America – 361,752,000; Oceania – 25,343,000. We will not vouch for the dedication or “correctness” of all these who are listed. If the figures are 98% wrong, however, that still leaves millions with the same mission of proclaiming and serving Christ.

In discouragement, Elijah thought he was the only one left in Israel who served God, but God told him he had seven thousand in Israel who had not bowed the knee to Baal (1 Kings 19:18 in context). He might well multiply the number of those who serve a common God by millions in various countries today. Why isolate ourselves from them?

Have you been reading this critically to detect how many points you disagree with me about, or have you been looking for how many points we agree upon? My early indoctrination was to look for disagreement that would justify rejection. It was not a matter of my seeing the glass half empty but of seeing the glass as totally empty if it was not full to the brim according to my judgment! One error by others emptied the glass for me! I called for perfection – in other people! After fighting that diseased attitude for a lifetime, I am still plagued by it! It is like politicians looking for nit-picking things they can magnify into issues or the hurling of an accumulation of petty accusations of a husband and wife in a bitter divorce trial. Yes, we must stand fast on the basics of the gospel, but there is much room for difference of interpretation and practice among the apostolic teachings.

With much trepidation I joined a ministerial alliance many years ago for promotion of things of common interest to all who professed Christ in the city. I greatly feared being pressured to compromise; however, I feared repercussions from the brethren worse. I was surprised to learn that each minister in the group was deeply sensitive to the feelings and convictions of each other. And they each had their own convictions. More recently, I attended Bible Study Fellowship in which I learned a lot more than doctrine. I saw rooms full of men from various denominations who were there to discuss and learn without mentioning their particular churches or promoting their denominational slants. It was exploratory rather than confrontational. I gained from it without having to condone damning error. Many others from our Churches of Christ have had similar experiences.

Should Churches of Christ extend fellowship to other churches? Such a question reveals two common misconceptions. Churches, either as local units or organized systems, do not have fellowship with other churches. Fellowship, unity, and acceptance are individual matters. Individuals may enjoy these relationships with other persons. Fellowship is not extended; it is the result or state of being in Christ. If I have been baptized into Christ, having fellowship with both the Father and the Son (1 John 1:3), then I am in fellowship and unity with every other person who has been baptized into Christ, *“For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body* (1 Cor. 12:13). I do not have the privilege or responsibility of choosing whomever else is saved, in the body, united with me in Christ, or is a brother or sister. My role is to accept rather than to choose. The Father is the only one who can disinherit a child of his. If I try to take that role from him by rejecting others he has accepted, I will be the one he rejects. Yet, often with seeming delight, we have rushed into that forbidden zone where angels fear to tread!

In an effort to justify our rejection others, some have declared that their baptism was invalid because of insufficient understanding. Such an objector implies that he or she knew all about baptism at the time of submission to it! That presumably qualifies the objector to take the place of God in judging the case!

Many have testified to me of the joy they share with their religious neighbors since recognizing that our unity and fellowship is in Christ rather than agreement on all doctrinal interpretations. They gave up their self-imposed isolation and loneliness, whether at home or abroad. []

(Cecil Hook: August 2005)

Talkin’ Texas: The stereotypical reputation Texas has for being hot is sorta encouraged by Texans for it helps to keep the weak-willed and complainers out of the state! (-:-)

“I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24).