

Macedonia Primitive Baptist Church

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December, 2010

A Review of My Trip to Africa

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“Then Peter said, Silver and gold have I none; but such as I have give I thee: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk.” Acts 3:6

I was blessed to accompany Elder Vernon Johnson on a trip to Kenya & Uganda, 10/11/10 to 10/29/10. Our purpose in making the trip was to strengthen the brethren and to spend some time studying the doctrines of grace with several who are “asking the way to Zion”.

On our last night in Uganda, Elders Johnson, Martin and I were joined for dinner by the only American we had seen in two and one-half weeks. The subsequent conversation we had provides a good context in which to summarize my experience in Kenya and Uganda.

This 35 year-old veterinarian from Wisconsin was working for the United Nations on a humanitarian aid project. Her husband had returned to the States two weeks prior to attend to business and she was anxious for conversation with someone from home. After she asked a couple of leading questions about the menu, we asked if she would like to join us at our table.

She explained to us that her particular U.N. position involved both animal & plant husbandry. Together with her husband, she helped to “set up” poor Ugandan communities with poultry farms and row crops. She also bought cattle from various places for the U.N. World Food Program, which activity explained her visit to Mbale on this occasion.

We learned that she was a graduate of Dartmouth University, a prestigious Ivy League institution. Whatever her views might have been when she finished school, a decade of real-life experience on the ground, some of it in Africa, had taught her to appreciate the blessings we enjoy in America and to appreciate the impact Christianity has had on Western civilization. She talked freely about the blessings of living in a free republic, her concerns for the overtures toward a collectivist and socialist political paradigm in America over the past several years, and her faith in God.

The conversation soon turned to us. Br. Vernon explained that we were Primitive Baptist ministers and that we were here to visit some of our Primitive Baptist brethren and to instruct several inquirers in “the way of the Lord more perfectly”. She asked about the difference between Primitive and Southern Baptists and we explained our concern to emulate the simplicity and content of apostolic Christianity and to be as thoroughly Biblical in doctrine and practice as possible. Br. Vernon added that we believe in the doctrines of grace. She nodded in understanding and inquired if we were similar to Orthodox Presbyterians. We explained that we do, in fact, affirm Total Depravity, Unconditional Election and other doctrines popularly associated with Calvinistic traditions, but were not “Calvinists”. Br. Vernon clearly defined that we do not believe in “Gospel Regeneration” like Calvinists do, but that the Gospel is for God’s people who have already been born again. She seemed to understand the explanation.

Her next comment surprised me. She said, “I wish you could come to my area. Truth is what these people need.” She went on to explain how superstition was keeping tribal people in bondage. She told how one man’s cow would die and instead of tracing the event to some disease or contaminant, he would explain it in terms of a neighbor’s hex. She talked about the cheap value many of them place on human life, the fact that many women tend to measure a husband’s love by how frequently they are beaten, the prevalence of polygamy, and the habit of measuring a man’s importance by how many wives and children he has. Personal superstition and government corruption keeps these people locked in a vicious cycle of poverty. She said “Truth is what these people need.”

I wonder how many modern people would agree with her perspective. I get the feeling sometimes that folks today place a higher premium on humanitarian efforts to feed the hungry, care for orphans, provide medical care, build houses, and attempt to eliminate poverty than they do the preaching and teaching of the word of God. The popular attitude seems to be that the person who has only the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ to give is not really providing much real help.

Indeed, the church of God should do all that it can to relieve human misery and alleviate human suffering. But that sort of humanitarian aid is not the *primary* business of the church. The *main* business of the church of our Lord Jesus Christ is to proclaim gospel truth, not to provide relief for economic and social ills. Our message is “Silver and gold have I none, but such as I have give I unto thee: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk.”

You see, it is only the gospel of grace that truly explains the condition of the world and the cause of every societal ill. The gospel message begins with the premise that man is hopelessly fallen and inherently depraved. Because of Adam’s transgression, the world in which we live is under the curse of sin. Poverty, disease, war, crime, violence, human exploitation and every other problem may only be explained in terms of the native sinfulness of fallen human nature. Perplexity over the cause of suffering and pain vanishes in light of the clear Biblical doctrine of total depravity.

Further, the gospel points to the only solution for the miseries spawned by sin – the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ. It affirms that man cannot save himself from the curse of sin and that his only hope is in a covenant-keeping God. How wonderful it is to see the light turn on in someone’s mind as they begin to see themselves in terms of the big picture of God’s covenant plan of redemption! How encouraging to see a person discover the rest that remains for the people of God in the church of our Lord Jesus Christ!

Many of God’s children in this world are in the same condition as the lame man at the temple gate called Beautiful (Acts 3:2). Crippled by the carnal nature with which they were born, they have no strength to walk a godly walk. Indeed, like this lame man, they possess life, but have not yet found the strength to “Walk in the Spirit” so that they do not fulfill the lusts of the flesh (Gal. 5:19).

Like this lame man, again, many of the Lord’s born-again people have settled for a beggar’s pension in life (Acts 3:2, 5). They do not even realize that a better life is available. They expect and hope for nothing more than a nickel of entertainment here and a dime of recreation there to go along with the dollar of material possessions they have managed to accumulate. They are children of the King but live like panhandlers and beggars in this world (Is. 55:1-2; Jno. 10:10).

Furthermore, like this lame man, they are oblivious to their *real* need. They think that they need a handout, but what they really need is to be turned toward the Lord and taught how to walk. They need to be saved from ignorance (Rom. 10:1-3).

It is to such people that we bring a gospel message that may initially disappoint them: “Silver and gold have I none.” The Church of our Lord Jesus Christ is not primarily a charitable institution, but a herald of the name of Jesus. We traffic in real remedies, not mere band-aids—in real-life, long-term help, not mere temporary assistance. We are interested first and foremost not to remedy the poverty in someone’s pockets, but the poverty of understanding in his mind, the poverty of emptiness in his soul, and the poverty of aimlessness in his life.

Whether or not a child of God is conscious of the fact, his greatest need is the truth of the gospel, not an extra coin or two in his pensioner’s cup. So our message is, “Silver and gold have I none, but such as I have give I thee: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk.” To give a man the truth of the gospel of grace is true humanitarian aid. Never underestimate the profound effect that an understanding of the truth may have on a person’s entire lifestyle.

It is important to note that the truth of the gospel will only help the child of God who believes it (Acts 3:16). Gospel seed that falls by the wayside where the devil can snatch it quickly away (the prejudicial hearer), on shallow ground where elation is only momentary (the emotional hearer), or on briar-infested

ground where the cares of this world choke the benefit of the word (the distracted hearer) will bring forth no fruit unto perfection (cf. Mt. 13). I have no doubt that some of the gospel seed sown in Africa fell into one of these categories. Some had preconceived ideas that made them reluctant to embrace the true gospel of grace. Others were caught up in the emotion of the moment but later reassessed their decision to unite with our people. And some were too involved in the affairs of this life to really concentrate on the truths we proclaimed.

Nevertheless, some gospel seed will fall on the good ground of a receptive and responsive heart. In Africa, only God's born-again people who believed and embraced the message experienced the humanitarian assistance we had to give. I pray that it will truly help them to walk in the old paths, to walk humbly with the Lord, to walk in the light as He is in the light, and to walk in close fellowship with Christ.

How does the truth of the gospel help God's children that believe it? Like the lame man, it tends to transform a person's entire attitude toward life. It fills him with joy, peace & hope (Acts 3:8; Rom. 15:13). It opens wide the door to new opportunities. He now realizes that he is not predestined to subsist on a beggar's pension, but has the resources necessary to live victoriously, like his Savior, overcoming the world (1 Jno. 5:4; Jno. 16:33). His heart is now filled with gratitude and love for the brethren (Acts 3:11). He treats his wife and children better; he becomes a more diligent employee; he practices honesty in his business dealings; in every sense, the truth he embraces has the potential to transform his daily walk.

Also, the transformation in one person's life opens doors of opportunity to a larger audience (Acts 3:9-12). That prospect, in turn, has potential for doing even wider good in an entire community and culture.

Contrary to the secular idea that those who preach and teach the truth of the gospel are providing no real help to poverty-stricken people, I claim that they are the only ones who actually do something to remedy the malady. The gospel enables the born-again children of God who believes it to walk a truly Christian walk. It is true humanitarian aid! The old adage puts it well: "Give a man a fish and feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and feed him for a lifetime."

It was the eagerness with which our African brethren wanted Gospel truth that impressed me. I didn't get the impression that these good men were motivated by material concerns. Though there are exceptions to every rule, the overwhelming majority of these folks are sincere seekers of the true Gospel, not demagogues using religion to line their pockets. They value truth more than silver and gold. I'm thankful we have ministers and faithful church members who are willing to make the sacrifices necessary to make sure that those who value truth so highly might have the opportunity to be exposed to it.

May God bless Elders Johnson, Bryant, Ivey, Kitchens, Blair, McCool, Crawford, Hasenmyer and others who carry and broadcast the precious seed of the Gospel of grace to come again with rejoicing, bringing their sheaves with them. Such truth to inquiring children of God is, indeed, what people really need.

Thank you to everyone who prayed, encouraged, and assisted me to be able to make this journey. May the Lord abundantly bless you, each and every one.
