

THE GOSPEL WITH SIGNS AND WONDERS

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Operation Auca was an attempt by five Evangelical Christian missionaries from the United States to make contact with the Huaorani people of the rainforest of Ecuador. The Huaorani, also known as the Aucas (the Quechua word for “naked savages”), were an isolated tribe known for their violence, against both their own people and outsiders who entered their territory. With the intention of being the first Protestants to evangelize the previously unreached Huaorani, the missionaries began making regular flights over Huaorani settlements in September 1955, dropping gifts. After several months of exchanging gifts, on January 2, 1956 the missionaries established a camp at “Palm Beach,” a sandbar along the Curaray River, a few miles from Huaorani settlements. Their efforts came to an end on January 8, 1956, when all five—Jim Elliot, Nate Saint, Ed McCully, Peter Fleming, and Roger Youderian—were attacked and speared by a group of Huaorani warriors. The news of their deaths was broadcast around the world, and *Life* magazine covered the event with a photo essay.

The deaths of the men galvanized the missionary effort in the United States, sparking an outpouring of funding for evangelization efforts around the world. Several years after the death of the men, the widow of Jim Elliot, Elisabeth, and the sister of Nate Saint, Rachel, returned to Ecuador as missionaries with the Summer Institute of Linguistics to live among the Huaorani. This eventually led to the conversion of many, including some of those involved in the killing.

Having been booted out of Pisidian Antioch, Paul and Barnabas now headed elsewhere. They went southeast some eighty miles on the famous *Via Sebaste* through rolling countryside, then past the snow-capped peaks of Sultan Dag, until they came to a beautiful plateau surrounded by fertile plains and verdant forests—Iconium. It ordinarily would have taken Paul, Barnabas and the others the better part of a week to make the journey along the well-traveled Roman trade route.

Iconium was an ancient city that claimed to be older than Damascus. In the dim past it had a king named Nannacus, and the phrase “since the days of Nannacus” was proverbial for “from the beginning of time.” There were no large Roman garrisons in Iconium, so it remained more Greek in attitude and was somewhat resistant to

Roman authority. They were governed by an assembly of citizens called the *Demos*, which held itself aloof from the Roman representative.

Barnabas and Paul followed their normal pattern of locating the Jewish quarter, establishing themselves there among their own kind of people and attending the synagogue on the Sabbath. It might have been a while before they were actually invited to preach on the Sabbath.

Plutonium, an artificially created element, contains some of the most powerful capabilities of all the radioactive materials at our disposal. A product of Uranium and scientific intervention, it contains within its properties both immense power to fuel things such as naval vessels and power plants and a destructive ability to kill organic beings or plants up to and including us. In short, it is an element to be treated with great respect and fear. The introduction of the gospel to Iconium represented the same kind of respect and fear.

Here the missionaries met with immediate success and immediate opposition. We see the success in Acts 14:1: "And it came to pass in Iconium, that they went both together into the synagogue of the Jews, and so spake, that a great multitude both of the Jews and also of the Greeks believed." The Greeks here are God-fearers or proselytes, since they respond at the synagogue. This was no bland, empty gospel. It hit the locals like a ton of bricks, and many believed! But trouble followed.

"But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles, and made their minds evil affected against the brethren." Acts 14:2. The Jews poisoned the minds of the Gentiles with their unbelief. The Jews normally had nothing to do with the Gentiles, but here when it suited their purposes they instigated trouble for the missionaries with the Gentiles.

"Long time therefore abode they speaking boldly in the Lord. . . ." Acts 14:3. When their enemies stirred up hatred against them, what did Paul and Barnabas do? They stayed around for a long time and continued to speak boldly. They had just been run out of Pisidian Antioch, but they were not about to run at the first sign of trouble.

Such pluck and spunk has always been true of God's warriors. John Wesley once encountered a village bully when their carriages met upon a narrow road. The bully knew Wesley and disliked him and would not give him any leeway, staying in the middle of the road. John Wesley cheerfully gave the man the entire road, even though he

had to turn into the ditch. As they passed, the bully said, “I never turn out for fools,” and Wesley—all five foot two of him—retorted, “I always do.”

Luke describes Paul and Barnabas’s ministry in word as speaking boldly in the Lord. This effective preaching did not come about because Paul and Barnabas were extraordinary human orators. We are told of one occasion when a man fell asleep while Paul was preaching. Nor was it because of their personal magnetism. Indeed, the most detailed physical description we have of Paul comes not from Acts, but from later history when an eyewitness resident of this city of Iconium, names Onesiphorus, is said to describe Paul; as follows: “A man small of stature, with a bald head and crooked legs, in a good state of body, with eyebrows meeting and nose somewhat hooked.”

The reason Paul’s message made such an impression was that he, along with Barnabas, preached “in the Lord.” This was the power of God through the spoken word, to the extent that the same Onesiphorus also says of Paul: “Now he appeared like a man, and now he had the face of an angel.” This is another way of saying that the anointing of the Holy Spirit on Paul was at times so powerful, it could be seen as a tangible change in his facial countenance. I have Christian friends today who, like Onesiphorus, have a special ability to see with their physical eyes the power of the Holy Spirit resting on certain people. It is so evident to them, some have a difficult time realizing that not everyone else in the room can see the same evidence. I usually find myself in this latter company, much to the dismay and sometimes irritation of my friends who are seeing it clearly.

But even stronger evidence of the power of their preaching is that the apostles “gave testimony unto the word of His grace.” Acts 14:3. This is synonymous with the gospel. In fact, Paul refers specifically to it when he says: “I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God” when addressing the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:20). Grace is God’s initiative to save the citizens of Iconium. Grace is God’s sending these missionaries to their city to proclaim the good news that Jesus died for their sins upon the cross. Grace is all that God does to save sinners. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to convict folks of their sin and of their need for a Saviour.

A large sum of money was given to Rowland Hill to dispense to a poor pastor. Thinking that the amount was too much to send all at

once, Hill forwarded just a portion along with a note that said simply, "More to follow." In a few days the man received another envelope containing the same amount and with the same message, "More to follow." At regular intervals, there came a third, and a fourth. In fact, they continued, along with those cheering words, until the entire sum had been received.

C. H. Spurgeon used this story to illustrate that the good things we receive from God always come with the same prospect of more to follow. He said: "When God forgives our sins, there's more forgiveness to follow. He justifies us in the righteousness of Christ, but there's more to follow. He adopts us into His family, but there's more to follow. He prepares us for heaven, but there's more to follow. He gives us grace, but there's more to follow. He helps us to old age, but there's still more to follow."

Spurgeon concluded, "Even when we arrive in the world to come, there will still be more to follow."

But Paul and Barnabas also ministered in deed. The same Lord who was anointing them with powerful speech was granting "signs and wonders to be done by their hands." Acts 14:3. How was it that so many pagan Gentiles who were not God-fearers were saved? Ministry in the word would have been sufficient for the conversion of many of the God-fearers because Paul and Barnabas brought just the good news they had been waiting for. It is not that signs and wonders have power to save, but the signs and wonders—the deeds—were "bearing witness to the word of His grace." Without the signs and wonders the unbelievers would not have listened so readily to the word, through which they were saved. It is unfortunate that many of today's preachers and missionaries have turned their backs on this clear biblical dynamic for evangelism.

Looking at the work of Christ, we find that this is exactly what He did. He touched men, and restored their bodies to health and strength; He restored the insane to their right mind, and He gave power to as many as believed on Him to become the sons of God, free from the bondage of sin. And this is the work to which He commissioned His disciples; for when He sent them forth He said, "As ye go, preach, saying, The kingdom of heaven is at hand. Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils; freely ye have received, freely give." Matt. 10:7, 8.

This is the work done by the Gospel, wherever it has gone. This is what the Gospel does today; and therefore it is the one thing which all

men need. Man at his best estate, without the Gospel, is a slave. Men count liberty as a most valuable thing, even when it means no more than freedom to come and go, to think and act, without arbitrary restriction from their fellows,—liberty merely in that which concerns the temporal things of this life. But how much more valuable is that liberty through which we lay hold on things eternal,—which unfetters the soul and gives man access to the highest sphere of existence. This liberty comes through the Gospel alone; and without the Gospel all liberty of every kind must eventually be lost. But with the Gospel we are sure of all,—that which is highest and most valuable now, and the rest after we have for God's glory suffered awhile, and been made perfect.

Christ “gave Himself for our sins.” He “gave Himself for us.” He “loved me, and gave Himself for me.”

The Gospel consists in giving. The Christian life is a life of service, of giving to others. “Freely ye have received, freely give.” The living waters flow from the throne, and he who believes and receives, from him shall flow rivers of living water.

What shall we give?—There is only one thing to give, namely, ourselves. First of all give ourselves to the Lord; and since He gives away everything He has, it follows that we must give ourselves to our fellowmen.

“My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue, but in deed and in truth.” So-called Christian work that is not the giving of self, is not Christian work at all. Mere talk will never suffice to convert anybody; the life must be given.

It was not merely when Jesus hung on the cross of Calvary that He gave Himself. His whole life was a gift. He gave His life all His life long, and still He gives us Himself. When He healed disease, it was His Divine life that gave the renewing. When He spoke, His own life was in the words. “The Word was made flesh.” He was what He spoke, and therein lay the power of His words.

Jesus spoke with authority, because He spoke from His life. Whatever one says, that is not fresh from his own experience, that is not his own life in articulate form, is of no value. You wish to help somebody? Good! give him yourself, and the thing is done. You may say that you are of not enough importance or value to do anybody any good. That is all right; Christ gives us Himself, that it may be no more ourselves but Himself. Receive Him; then give yourself; and His presence will make the gift valuable and helpful.

Sin is weakness, degeneration, lack of Divine power; but the Gospel is “the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth.” The cross of Christ is the power of God. Jesus Christ is our strength and our Redeemer; and He gave Himself, for us; therefore strength, endurance, must characterize the subjects of His kingdom. This He indicated in the command, “As ye go, preach, saying, the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils; freely ye have received, freely give.” The word rendered “sick” in this text is literally, “without strength,” so that the command is really to heal those who have no strength. “Strengthen ye the weak hands, and confirm the feeble knees.” Isa. 35:3. This shows Christ’s true followers to be indeed partners, workers together, with God, who “giveth power to the faint, and to them that have no might He increaseth strength.” Isa. 40:29.

In our service ministering to the needs of others let us learn to work alone Christ’s lines. Perhaps a contrast would help to solidify the thought in our minds. Said an evangelist, I remember hosting a revival in an Iowa church one time. The revival speaker was from another Iowa church. He was a good preacher and on fire for the Lord. And I had asked the people in the church to give me names of people whom they considered to be possible prospects for Christ. The evangelist and I went calling on these people. And I remember calling on one particular farmer. My preacher friend asked him if he knew what was going to happen to him when he died. I don’t remember what the farmer said but I do remember that the preacher told him in plain words that if he didn’t give his life to Christ then when he died he would go to hell.

That farmer did not attend our revival, not even one evening. Is there any wonder why he didn’t attend? It is my personal opinion that you just don’t go around telling people that they are going to hell. That is not how you win friends and influence people for Christ!

There they (Paul and Barnabas) spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Gentiles believed.

How can we learn to speak more effectively for Christ? First of all, we just need to think before we speak. And before that we need to pray, “Lord, give me the words. . .”

When God’s people truly believe the gospel and are emptied of self, signs and wonders will accompany their proclamation. “Servants of God, with their faces lighted up and shining with holy consecration, will hasten from place to place to proclaim the message from Heaven.

By thousands of voices, all over the earth, the warning will be given. Miracles will be wrought, the sick will be healed, and signs and wonders will follow the believers.”¹

“Miracles,” it is said, “are supernatural occurrences sent to authenticate the divine character of a messenger.” But it is well to remember that none of Christ’s miracles *seem* to have been performed for this purpose. There is nothing forced or unnatural about them. There was always a want to be supplied, some distress to be relieved. All of Christ’s miracles of healing were done as though they were the natural service of one who sees suffering, and puts forth his power to alleviate it. The idea of the pity and compassion of Christ is the most prominent in all his miracles. It is true that these miracles attested his divinity, and constrained the people to say “That God hath visited his people,” yet nowhere does the humanity of Christ appear more plainly than in his contact with the afflicted. At the tomb of Lazarus he wept; he had compassion on the widow of Nain, and on the multitudes who were ready to perish through hunger and fatigue. He “went about doing good,” not with parade and ceremony, as though to call attention to himself, but as one whose compassionate nature was touched by the sight of pain. Now we cannot believe that Jesus is any less tender and compassionate now than when he was on earth. Although we cannot see him with our eyes, he is as truly present, “beholding the evil and the good,” as when he walked with man; we read that he is “touched with the feeling of our infirmities,” and that he cares for us. We might reasonably expect, then, that his power would at times be put forth to help his creatures, even if we had not been assured that such would be the case.

Heart compassion for suffering humanity—that’s a gift we can all experience if we will open our hearts to the teaching of the Holy Spirit. That is where Jesus and we have a close bond of fellowship together—a bond that can never be broken.

The love of Christ (*agape* in the New Testament) brings with it the same compassion that Jesus felt for suffering humanity. Our prayers for the Lord to do something to help suffering people do not move Him to compassion He has not already felt for them; but seeing that we have that compassion makes the Lord happy. The Psalmist says, “Bless the Lord, O my soul ...” The word “bless” means to make

¹ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 612.

happy; but how can we make the Lord to be happy? When we share His compassion for suffering, it does!

Iconium was split with a schism: some were for the Jews and others were for the apostles. Luke's statement that "a great multitude . . . believed," and the subsequent description of the division of the population of Iconium, give the impression that the percentage of the city that had become Christian before Paul and Barnabas left was significant.

Nevertheless, their enemies divided the *Demos*, the town council and an effort was made to physically assault and stone them. They were harassed and physically intimidated. There was a desire to stone them either as false teachers or for teaching blasphemy, since that was what stoning indicated in a Jewish context. Both populace and rulers were involved, so the opposition spanned the whole society.

Such violent resistance to Christianity persists to this day in Turkey. One year ago in April, 2007, Christian missionaries were conducting a worship service in the city of Malatya, in which some young seekers were present. The following day these Muslims on the pretense of desiring Bible studies lured three Christian missionaries. They had gathered guns, breadknives, ropes and towels. They knew there would be a lot of blood. The missionaries were tortured for three hours before their throats were slit from ear to ear.

Paul and Barnabas were brave but not foolish. They were born-again, not born yesterday. The Lord protects his children, but he wants us to use common sense. So the missionaries departed.

They had now been booted out of two cities back-to-back, but they kept serving Christ and proclaiming his gospel. Undoubtedly they felt some discouragement. Some of the things that were said to them hurt. They may have worried about leaving some baby Christians behind. Yet, Paul anticipated future prospects with joy in his heart. Paul was a realist but also an optimist.

One preacher described an optimist as an eighty-five year-old man who marries a thirty-five year old woman and moves into a twelve-room house next to an elementary school. An optimist does not allow the facts that surround him to take away his belief that great things can happen.

Years ago in London there was a large gathering of notables for a concert. One of the invited guests was a famous preacher, Caesar Milan. A young lady charmed the audience that night with her singing.

After the concert Milan went up to her and graciously, but boldly, said to her, "I thought as I listened to you tonight how tremendously the cause of Christ would be benefited if your talents were dedicated to His cause. You know, young lady, you are a sinner in the sight of God, but I am glad to tell you that the blood of Jesus Christ can cleanse you from all sin."

The lady became so angry at the preacher that she stomped her feet and walked away. As she was leaving he said, "I mean no offense. I will pray that God's Spirit will convict you."

The young lady went home, but she couldn't sleep. The face of the preacher appeared before her, and his words rang through her mind. About two o'clock in the morning she got out of bed, took a pencil and piece of paper, and with tears rolling down her face, Charlotte Elliot wrote:

Just as I am, without one plea,
But that Thy blood was shed for me,
And that Thou bidst me come to Thee,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.