

Reflections on Haiti

Junior

Junior looked to be about eighteen, and I took an instant liking to him as he introduced himself to me after one of the sessions. However, his first words threw me a bit, "I'm not really a Christian. My mother is. I'm here with her." Then he went on to tell me how his mother had raised him and his brothers without a father in the home, but had seen that they all stayed in school--a rather major feat in Haiti. How came the punch line, "But all people see is a black man--a gangsta." As I took hold of Junior's hand and looked him straight in the eyes, I reassured him that I didn't see him as black and certainly not as a "gangsta." Commenting on his almost flawless English, I pointed out that it was obvious that he was determined to make more of himself than most of his peers. I then asked him if he was familiar with the SAT tests which are required for entrance into colleges in the US. When he acknowledged that he was aware of the test, I told him about a friend of mine who had racked up a perfect score--an almost impossible feat. Then I added that the young man with this incredible accomplishment just happened to be black. The punch line to my story was, "And people don't ask if he is black or white or green polka dotted when he shows them his record! Life is not determined by where we came from, but by where we are determined to go!" Next, I reminded him of part of the teaching I had shared in the service that day--grasshopper mentality. When Moses sent the twelve spies into the Promised Land on a reconnaissance mission, he picked the best and brightest from each tribe. They were superb specimens of their people; however, when these spies encountered the giants of Canaan, they reported that they saw themselves as grasshoppers before these giants. The tragic conclusion to the story is that once they saw themselves in this diminutive light, they became exactly as they perceived themselves. As Solomon would express it later, "As a man thinks in his heart, so is he." Junior listened intently and then acknowledge that it was his own perception of himself rather than how others felt of him that would determine his future. We chatted a little more, and he made one last comment before he walked away, "I am a Christian." He had already begun to change the way he thought of himself and had started at the most crucial of all issues--his relationship with Jesus. As I walked back to the missionary apartment, I thought not only of Junior but of all the believers in Haiti. In many ways, Junior seemed to be symbolic of the past and present of his whole people. I also believe that his life will prove to be symbolic of their future.

A Exploited People Ready to be Exalted

Haiti is a nation of exploited people. Its population consists primarily of decedents of African slaves who were violently uprooted from their homeland and forced into servitude in the sugar cane fields of the European colonists. Even after they gained their freedom and rose to the status of an independent state, their history continued to be marked by exploitation as one corrupt government after another siphoned off the nation's wealth to enrich a few while constraining the masses in abject poverty.

Tragically, even many of the humanitarian workers who have come to the island did so to exploit the people. Having discovered a third-world nation within a couple hours travel time of the US shore as opposed to being a couple days away as is Africa or Asia, many organizations began to send delegates to Haiti to establish nominal works which they could use in their promotions as they raised funds for themselves. Because it required an investment of only a few hundred dollars to hold a crusade or establish a work in Haiti rather than several thousand dollars it would cost to do a similar function in another part of the world, many evangelists began to frequent the country and fill their magazines with the reports of their revivals there. Crusades by American evangelists became so widespread that the campaign grounds often kept up the same banners and simply changed the name of the speaker each week. Often it was the same crowd who gathered for each preacher. They essentially became professional crusade attendees because they were given food while at the meetings. At the height of this practice, one researcher catalogued all the reported conversions and determined that the country was 150% Christians. Apparently either the numbers were being inflated or the same converts were being reported by multiple evangelists.

It may be that there is only one person who has never exploited the people of Haiti--the Lord Jesus Himself. Today, He is beginning to establish His people in the nation to a level of blessing and dignity that lifts them above their sad heritage of abuse and exploitation. As He blesses His people, the overflow splashes over to the whole nation. Just as the Lord--in order to preserve the Apostle Paul--saved the lives two hundred and seventy-six men on the prison ship which sank on its way to Rome (Acts 27:24) and as He commanded blessing upon Potiphar for Joseph's sake (Genesis 39:5) and upon Laban because of Jacob (Genesis 30:27), the nation of Haiti is positioned for blessing because of the righteous seed of the Lord there.

Fruit That Remains

My immediate impression as I arrived in Haiti for this mission was the promise of the Lord from John 15:16 that His ministry was to bear fruit that would

remain. As the delegates at the conference began to remind me of the teachings I had shared with them two years ago and then began to talk about what they learned from Fred Taylor, my student who taught at last year's conference, I realized that the ministry was indeed taking root and bearing genuine, enduring fruit in their lives. The three-day conference drew delegates from throughout the nation, almost all of whom were pastors or church leaders. In fact, attendance was limited to an invitation-only basis to insure that only leaders who were in the position to impact their communities would be present. The theme of the sessions centered around the letters to the seven churches in Revelation chapters two and three with a focus on how to avoid the pitfalls which can so easily snare pastors and entrap church leadership. The delegates were all drawn to a new level of commitment and determination to true godly leadership in caring for their flocks and evangelizing their communities.

Expect the Unexpected

When I take first-time missionaries with me on trips to locations around the world, one of the first things I share with them is the missionaries' beatitude: "Blessed is he who is flexible for he shall not be bent out of shape." There is probably no place on earth where this little truism is more true than in Haiti where the mission experience is truly a mission experience of the first order. Sometimes there is water; sometimes, not. Usually, there is no electricity. When there is electricity, there may or may not be a bulb in the light fixture. When there is no electricity, there may be a candle stand but no candle. Such was the case on the morning I was to leave to return home after the mission. Since I had an early flight, I had to shower, shave, and pack before daylight. Wisely, I had filled a bucket of water the night before in anticipation that the water would not be working. Unfortunately, I had made only one provision for light in those pre-dawn hours--my flashlight. I stress that this was an unfortunate decision because the batteries went dead almost as soon as I crawled out of bed. After stumbling around in the dark, crashing into the door, and banging my toe against the step-up between the bedroom and the bath, I attempted to use lighted matches to find my way around. This, of course, was not a very functional solution since I could not shower while holding a match and I wound up burning my fingers before I could collect more than two items to pack into my duffle bag. Eventually, the ingenuity of a true missionary kicked in and I flipped on my laptop computer and used the glow from its screen to illuminate the room so I could wash, shave, and pack.

All week long, I was puzzled as to what the Lord had in store for the Thursday afternoon session. No matter how much time I spent in prayer and study, I had no clear direction for the meeting. I had prepared a message; but I was uneasy, feeling that it wasn't the message for the session. Still filled with questions,

I walked into the tabernacle at the appointed time for the session and noticed immediately that the room was being decorated for some formal event and that there was a different group of folks gathering, all of whom were dressed, as they say, “to the 9s.” My guess was that there must be a wedding about to happen. I waited until someone who could speak English showed up. When he explained that there was to be a wedding and that we would have our session afterwards, I decided to excuse myself and come back after the wedding. As I started toward the door, he grabbed me and added that I was supposed to speak at the wedding! It was an elegant affair with extravagant pomp and elaborate choreography as the bridal attendants entered the hall. I’m not sure if the bride and groom were even aware that this unknown foreigner was to take part in their ceremony, but I gladly added my insights to their nuptials. By the time the ceremony was over, I realized that it was too late for an afternoon meeting; so I headed back to the missionary apartment for dinner and a little rest before the evening session. A few minutes later, I answered a knock at my door to find my interpreter insisting that I hurry back to the church. There was another wedding going on, and I was requested to speak at it also! I hastily finished my dinner and rushed back to the sanctuary to address the second couple. This wedding was less extravagant but was plagued with all the customary Haitian delays such as failures with the sound system. Finally, just as the couple was just about to be officially declared legally united, the lights went out. By this time, the sun had set; so we were engulfed in total blackness except for a few random blue and green glows from cell phones which the guests throughout the audience flipped on. Eventually someone found a candle and finally a kerosene lantern in order to light the sanctuary sufficiently for the marriage certificate to be signed. At long last, the generator was restarted so everyone could witness the couple’s first kiss and wish them well as they exited the church and entered their new life together.

The Place Where People Sing

On one of my missions to Nepal, we held a conference in a remote location far from any paved road or apparent major landmark to pinpoint the venue. When the tabernacle filled with people coming from all directions, I curiously asked how in the world everyone knew how to find this isolated location. The answer was simple and straightforward, “They all come to the place where people sing.” Well, that doesn’t sound all that simple and straightforward until you realize that the people of Nepal are not naturally singers. It is only after they receive the Lord and are filled with joy that they begin to worship and sing. In that case, it is easy to locate the Christian gathering places by simply asking the locals where it is that people go to sing.

Well, if it works in Nepal; it is doubly true in Haiti. The Christian gatherings are certainly song fests. Some of their enthusiasm for singing is a cultural result of their slavery heritage. During the colonial days, the slaves used music as their way of communing to one another. Fearing that the slaves might instigate a revolt, the masters forbade them from gathering in groups to be addressed by a speaker. To get around these restrictions, they passed messages through hidden meaning in the songs that they sang while they worked and in the evenings when back in their compounds. In addition to this natural propensity toward musical communication, they simply believe in speaking to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs as commanded in Ephesians 5:19. The joy of their salvation erupts in song every time they gather. Their melodies of worship echo all through night and from their pre-dawn prayer vigils. Their jubilant harmonies burst forth every time people meet. At least half of every gathering consists of singing as each one volunteers to sing a special number, apparently their cultural substitute for sharing testimonies and prophetic teachings. Even though some of the time you may feel as if you are at an “un-talent show” and you might wonder exactly how these performers would survive the American Idol judges and you want to applaud simply because the song is over rather than because it was such a good presentation, you can’t help but appreciate the way that they all want to take part in the service--not perform out of a desire of being seen but from a true expression of the gratitude for the work that God has done in their lives.

Such are believers in Haiti--a nation of joyous worshipers in spite of their abusive heritage and history of exploitation. They sing to the One who has never abused or exploited them!