

A MISSION CAMEO

The Christian worker made his way round villages that had called for his help and advice. These villages had heard and responded to the Christian Gospel during the last 50 years. Like the church at the church at Thessalonica, their parents and grandparents had “turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God” (1 Thess. 1:9). The first converts had happily destroyed all the paraphernalia of traditional religion, but now a new generation were trying to revive some of the old ways and also to fit in some new ideas. They struggled with the elders who were adamant that the true God could not be worshipped using the musical instruments of traditional culture.

In the same village marriages of Christians were being severely tested as wives denied husbands conjugal rights, arguing that they were holy women and could not defile themselves. This same group of women claimed spiritual experiences transcending that of many of their contemporaries. This often led to them calling out in services and challenging things being taught by the appointed speaker who was attempting to preach from the Bible.

Church leaders had become so frustrated with certain members of the congregation who refused any form of advice or correction that they had in fact asked the civil power to deal with the rebellious element. Church members were facing each

other in civil court, because the process of church discipline had failed them.

In another village they had not celebrated communion for about 3 years, because no one had been appointed as deacon therefore there was no one to administer the elements.

Church leaders came to confess to struggles in their personal lives - and misuse of church funds. Others were so steeped in their traditional culture that even though they professed Christian faith they were not prepared to humble themselves to obey Biblical teaching. They had developed their own set of laws and these were given priority over the clear teaching of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone. Anyone breaking their rules would be put out of the church and would not be free to even enter for public worship until the leadership agreed.

In yet another village the majority of church members lived in fear of the evil spirits, seeing them simply as an evil force co-equal with God. In times of sickness and trial they often resorted to the help of the local spirit-man.

Without too much trouble it would be possible to put each of these situations into the context of either a New Testament letter or a scenario from the Book of Acts. Each however is a real situation that I have

experienced in my own ministry as a cross-cultural missionary at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The church leadership in these villages I believe had a genuine desire to do the right thing as Christian leaders, but felt totally inadequate. Some, but not all of them would own a full Bible in either English (the language of government), or the trade language. In some cases they would have the New Testament in their own mother tongue. Few if any would have formal education beyond primary school level, and theological or Biblical education would almost always amount to little more than a few months (at most 2 years) at a village Bible School.

Much contemporary missiological thinking suggests strongly that once a church is planted with its own leadership then the mission body is honour bound to move on. I am not a pioneer missionary, but have the privilege and responsibility of serving the church in PNG in the second or third generation. The needs are great. We came to PNG at the suggestion that the church needed “experienced Bible teachers who could give a few years Bible teaching to the young church.” Twelve years later we would be prepared to say we face “A need that, undiminished rebukes our slothful ease”.

“Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.” ■

Bernard Lewis

