

## Article of the Month – September 2008

### Theology of Suffering (2) – The Cost of Apostleship

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In last month's article I promised to look deeper into the aspect of suffering in this article. As we thought about discipleship suffering last time, we look into apostleship suffering this time. The latter is heavier but of a higher order, and based on a higher vocation. Christ has many disciples nowadays, but only few of them have been called to apostolic ministry, or to use the simple contemporary idiom: few have been called to be missionaries.

Before we go on we may have to re-define the word 'missionary', because too many people call themselves by that name that are not. I would like to mention a few biblical standards:

- contrary to what some believe, missionaries do have a special vocation<sup>1</sup>;
- missionaries usually work cross-culturally, otherwise they would be mono-cultural local evangelists;
- a missionary's life is accompanied by signs, wonders and miracles<sup>2</sup>;
- a missionary's ministry is not a static form of settlement: he or she is on the move regularly;
- a missionary gives priority to the unreached<sup>3</sup>;
- a missionary mobilizes the church and recruits more missionaries<sup>4</sup>;
- a missionary *may* be residential among a people group, but can just as well be non-residential because his or her ministry is wider than just one people group;
- some missionaries have to do secular work in order to make their ministry happen<sup>5</sup>.

Obviously many more characteristics could be mentioned, but the above make clear that these people have a frontline ministry. Below we will see that they receive the beatings for it too! This does not mean of course, that only missionaries suffer for the sake of the Gospel; many others do too, often because they live under totalitarian regimes.

So, we distinguish two levels of suffering: the *first* is the non-negotiable self-denial and cross-carrying of the disciple (which mere converts will try to avoid or escape); the *second* is the suffering by choice, that an apostle undergoes once he has decided to be obedient to his missionary vocation and therefore infiltrates the devil's domain. Sometimes it is hard to distinguish the two, especially when suffering may be meant as preparation for a future task.

The best and most convincing example of apostolic suffering we see in the life of Paul, to whom was 'revealed how much he would suffer for Christ's name'<sup>6</sup>. Apart from the many

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<sup>1</sup> Not every believer 'is a missionary', just like not every believer is a pastor, teacher, prophet or evangelist

<sup>2</sup> 2 Cor. 12:12

<sup>3</sup> Rom. 15:20

<sup>4</sup> Paul reported his mission endeavors in churches he visited and along the way recruited a long list of co-workers

<sup>5</sup> Acts 18:3; 1Thess. 2:9

stories in the book of Acts, we read Paul's summing up in his 2<sup>nd</sup> letter to the Corinthians<sup>7</sup>. His great pressures felt like a death sentence and further on he specifies these, mentioning 'troubles, hardships, distresses, beatings, imprisonments, riots, hard work, sleepless nights, hunger, thirst, stoning, shipwrecks, all sorts of dangers, cold and nakedness'. Paul coped with suffering because he learned to deny himself: 'I beat my body and make it my slave'<sup>8</sup>. This was the requirement, in order to see the Gospel spread among the nations.

Of course there was none that suffered more than Jesus did, and Paul was a faithful follower of Christ by his own suffering. None bore more fruit than Jesus did, and again, Paul was a good follower. We may therefore come to formulate a spiritual principle: the more suffering, the more fruit – and consequently: less suffering brings less fruit, and who escapes suffering altogether may not bear fruit at all. This principle can help the missionary rejoice and give the disciple an incentive to persevere.

No one wants suffering, but in a sinful world suffering is inevitable and reclaiming it for the rightful Owner will bring even more suffering. That is what world missions is about: it costs. Before becoming a missionary one must evaluate whether he or she is willing to pay the price for it. Complaining or trying to escape suffering may indicate the opposite.

Joseph had to learn that there is no such thing as a throne without suffering. His steps on the way to God's purpose for him included rejection by his brothers, a murder attempt, being sold as a slave, and being falsely accused and imprisoned, to mention just a few. But all that 'went wrong' in his life made him look more like Jesus, and like Him, his persecutions earned him a place on the throne. He could save countless people because of two things: he kept his eyes at the end of his suffering: the throne, and he accepted suffering and did not try to escape it.

Paul said that 'our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us'<sup>9</sup>. Our glory is sharing the Throne of God with Him. The book of Revelation teaches us three steps: the *first* is about overcoming ourselves and about our success in self-denial<sup>10</sup>, the *second* is about suffering for the nations as our missionary responsibility<sup>11</sup> and the *third* speaks about the clear connection with preceding suffering<sup>12</sup>.

Will we accept persecution and suffering as our (missionary) price to pay for the salvation of all nations? Or are we trying to escape discomfort? C.T. Studd said: "If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for Him". Yes, missions cost, as he reminds us even with his little poem: "Some like to live near church and chapel bell; I like to run a rescue shop within a yard from hell". That's the spirit. Let's go for it!

Living near church and chapel bell? Next month we'll look at the comforts of what has become the 21<sup>st</sup> century version of what Paul called 'the other gospel'...

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<sup>6</sup> Acts 9:16

<sup>7</sup> Especially chapters 1, 6 and 11

<sup>8</sup> 1 Cor. 9:27

<sup>9</sup> Rom. 8:18

<sup>10</sup> Rev. 3:21

<sup>11</sup> Rev. 7:9

<sup>12</sup> Rev. 20:4,6b