

June 20, 2015

As this week began, we were still making long trips of 1-3 hours on dirt roads. each way. This makes for long days as the roads are bumpy and dusty and several days back to back leaves me feeling weary along with allergy symptoms. What is also difficult are the scheduling problems. Everywhere we go they are asking for the lesson on the family, but to do it well, I need between 1.25 and 1.5 hours to teach it. Yet no matter how early we arrive, brethren never arrive in good numbers until 10:00-11:00am. This often leads to my final class on the family beginning at 3:00 or later and we seldom leave before 4:00-5:00pm. With a 2 hour drive back home, we don't arrive until after dark and with no electricity and the need to be in bed by 8:30-9:00 it doesn't give much relaxing time.

I have again been faced with a problem in Malawi regarding the office of the evangelist/preacher. The problem is multilayered and thus difficult to unravel. First, there are no located preachers in rural Malawi. This has resulted because not only have the congregations never been taught proper giving in their worship(most give \$0.50 or less), but they have also been taught it is wrong to pay a preacher for his work. They use Jesus words in John about the hireling:

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep. 12 But a hireling, he who is not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them. 13 The hireling flees because he is a hireling and does not care about the sheep." Jn. 10:11-14

Many use this passage to prove that any preacher who wants to be paid for his work is this hireling and is not even worthy to be a preacher. So I must first prove that Jesus was not speaking of gospel preachers here, but only continuing the contrast between Jesus as the good shepherd, the false prophets and teachers who had come before him, and the false leaders they had at that time who did not care about them as Jesus did.

To resolve this issue requires at least three lessons of over an hour each. First I have to teach them how to give. This is not a popular lesson as I am asking them to give more like Abraham(Gen. 14:18-19), Jacob(Gen. 28:20-22), and Israel(using the tithe as a template for our own giving). I am always asked if I bind the tithe and I tell them no, the tithe is just the starting point. I believe early Christians gave more than just the tithe(10%). I reason like this. Those in Israel were giving the tithe(10%) **AND** freewill offerings, sacrifices, and firstfruits. When they were commanded to give liberally and bountifully would they cut back that 10% or give even more? I use the 10% as a guideline, a starting point, not a binding command. But it takes time to convince them that something they have always believed is actually error.

Yet even after that lesson, I must preach a second lesson to deal with the dishonesty here leads many Christians to doubt the wisdom of allowing their elders or treasurer to have such funds. They would be sorely tempted to use this money for fertilizer or seed, thinking they could repay it later. I have been cheated several times myself by this reasoning. So it requires careful thought. I generally tell them if they can't find trustworthy men then they must give their collection directly to the preacher, needy saint, or materials for the Lord's Supper. It is a thorny problem requiring the wisdom of Solomon.

In the final lesson, I must to prove to them that God intended for the preacher/evangelist to be paid. This too requires careful preparation because the prejudice is very strong against it. I heard a sermon about 12 years ago on paying preachers here that created such an uproar that he could not finish the lesson. It was the first time I really understood what murmuring can become if everyone in the church does it at the same time while a preacher is preaching. You just couldn't hear him anymore and he had to stop.

So I must begin carefully and build my case before I ever broach the subject. I use Paul's illustrations to prove to them that it is normal for anyone working in any endeavor to be paid for his work.

Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working? 7 Who ever goes to war at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its fruit? Or who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk of the flock? 8 Do I say these things as a mere man? Or does not the law say the same also? 9 For it is written in the law of Moses, "You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain." Is it oxen God is concerned about? 10 Or does He say it altogether for our sakes? For our sakes, no doubt, this is written,

that he who plows should plow in hope, and he who threshes in hope should be partaker of his hope. 11 If we have sown spiritual things for you, is it a great thing if we reap your material things? 12 If others are partakers of this right over you, are we not even more? 1 Cor 9:6-12

After spending some time making sure they understand all these illustrations, I give them the one verse that evidently they have not been aware of that clearly proves that preachers and evangelists can be paid:

Do you not know that those who minister the holy things eat of the things of the temple, and those who serve at the altar partake of the offerings of the altar? 14 Even so the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel. 1 Cor 9:13-14

Just as the priests(Num 18:8-20) and Levites(Num 18:21-24) in the Old Covenant were paid for their work by the rest of Israel, so also should the preacher in the new covenant.

All preachers in rural Malawi must farm 6 months out of each year and go from congregation to congregation the rest of the year with no hope of any help from them. This has led to the preachers being poorly educated since those with a good education either become teachers or some other “paying” career.

There is also a lot of ignorance and error regarding the work and role of the evangelist/preacher here. In Mchinji, this ignorance led to the doctrine that there is no office of evangelist today. Only elders who teach the flock. I had an opportunity to preach in a large meeting in Mchinji last year to address this issue and I was asked to speak on it again this year in Mchinji-Boma(the capital city of the district). In Nkota-kota it has led to several preachers taking a role similar to the denominational bishop who goes from church to church with the authority of an elder. I will address this issue when I go to Nkota-kota on the last three days of the trip.

As you can see there is always another challenge here helping these brethren to know the truth.

On a personal note, after three weeks of working every day, I finally got a entire day to relax, begin my report and even climb one of the nearby hills. It was wonderful and truly refreshing. I have one more day off in the final three weeks here. That evening, I got the opportunity to speak with a man who had been my translator two years ago, but is no longer attending services. As we talked last night I found a troubled soul who had endured his wife leaving him and was dealing with the struggle of living alone with two sons. From his story, I could see that both he and his wife were at fault, but the wife had left home to go back to her parents and does not intend to ever return. I asked him if God had any responsibility in his wife’s leaving. He agreed that it was not God’s fault. I then asked if he thought he could continue to live without God’s help. Again, he did not think that he could. Finally I asked him if he wanted God to hear his prayers and help him in his attempts to reconcile with his wife and bless him. By the end of the conversation, he had promised to be at services on Sunday morning and would repent at that time. He is a good man and the church will be greatly blessed to have him in their midst again.

My days of working with Chimkande came to an end on Friday. I always feel a pang of sorrow since he is such a good man, and we have grown to become very good friends. He was one of my students in 1999 so we have a long history with each other.

I am now working with William Chitsulo and Billiatt for the final two weeks of the trip. We will be traveling much longer distances, but they will be on the regular roads with (hopefully) only short distances on dirt roads to arrive at the building.

I heard a sad story about one of the preachers in Mchinji who had been asked to schedule them as one of the places where I would preach last week. We had heard at Mchinji Boma that another congregation was expecting us the next day, but we were already scheduled in Dowa so we had to politely refuse. When they found out the man they had entrusted with that job had waited until my schedule was already done they were not happy. They wanted to discipline and withdraw from him because he had failed to get me to come there. This too is Malawi.

Personal Events

These are not part of the report and I include them for those of you who know me and want to know about the personal interesting events of this trip.

The first night in Mchinji, I felt that I could not get my breath because of some smell in the room. At 4:00am the rooster kept in the next room with only a hanging cloth for a door began crowing every 30 seconds for about half an hour. Then the rest of the hens began clucking. There must have been 15 to 20 by the sound of it. I pleaded with him to find a new home for them for the next morning which he graciously did.

On the way to Mtalimanja, the bracket that holds the transmission in place came loose from the frame, dropping and twisting the transmission. At that point, it would only shift into 1st and 2nd. Of more concern it kept dragging on the ground when the tires dropped into a pot hole. It took an extra half hour to get to the classes.

In Mtalimanja, my trips into the outhouse reached a new low. As I walked in a bat quickly flew down the hole in the floor to his perch under the concrete. Then, I noticed hundreds of mosquitos up and down all the walls in the outhouse. Although I was assured they do not bite during the day, it was an eerie experience to stand there looking at all the mosquitoes, hoping they were not anopheles and that they would not bite. Added to that was the concern that bat might come out at any moment. This is Malawi.

After leaving Mkwichi on motorcycles, we had just enough time to make the 45 minute ride before dark. About ten minutes into the trip, my bike ran out of fuel(fuel gauge doesn't work) and I coasted to a stop. It took Chimkande a few minutes to realize I wasn't behind him anymore. I waited while he drove back to get a container, siphoned some fuel out of his tank and then we rode to the nearest trading center to buy fuel. It was long after dark when we again started riding home. It is amazing how much harder it is to ride on dirt roads with major potholes and occasional deep sand when you can't see it coming. We developed a system where he would use his left turn indicator for sand and the right for potholes. Still, in the dark, I had to ride much closer to him and the dust was terrible. This too is Malawi.

When we got up in the morning I tried to start the fourth car we had been allowed to use since arriving and the battery was dead. Fortunately this was a standard transmission and a gas engine so we were able to push start the vehicle. After a long day, we again left just in time for me to drive back to Lilongwe before dark. But again the fuel was low and I had to stop for fuel. By the time I reached Lilongwe it was fully dark and the lights were no longer working. So I drove the last 20 minutes without lights(no one to call to help). It was actually quite stressful. With the windshield covered with dust, riding on a dusty dirt road without lights, the oncoming traffic (they like to drive with high beams and won't dim them) was blinding. I missed my turn, had to turn around and then reached the final dirt road to take me to the house. It is a dangerous road where it would be easy to tip the car on it side so I had to stop, get out my flashlight and hold it out the window to see. I was happy to arrive, but the horn would not work so I could not alert the watchmen to unlock the gate. He must have been called because he soon opened it. I was never happier to reach home.