

Biblical 'Man of Peace' Approach is Key to Effective Outreach

by Erich Bridges, Baptist Press

Missionaries have unearthed a scriptural approach to evangelism that's often been ignored: find a "man of peace."

When Jesus sent out the 70 to preach the good news, he commanded, "When you enter a house, first say, 'Peace to this house.' If a man of peace is there, your peace will rest on him. ... Stay in that house, eating and drinking whatever they give you. ... Do not move around from house to house. ... Heal the sick who are there and tell them, 'The kingdom of God is near you,'" (Luke 10:5-9, NIV).

A missionary in Asia discovered the power of that advice when he entered a potentially hostile unreached village with a co-worker:

"We prayed, 'God we know you're at work here or we wouldn't be here. We need a man of peace who will take care of us until we can feel our way around this village and know if it's safe or unsafe.'

"I started my stopwatch. We walked into the center of the village where the well was. A person approached me out of nowhere and said, 'Have you eaten?' We said, 'Not yet.' He said, 'Well, come to my home.' His name was Li, and he was the person of peace we wanted. I stopped my watch: three minutes, 21 seconds." Li fed them, then properly introduced them to the village's hard-faced leader -- who might otherwise have ordered the strangers killed with long knives. Li told the village [leader], who was ill, that the newcomers' God "is a great God, and they will pray for you." They prayed; the leader got better. He soon became a man of peace in his own right, opening his heart -- and the whole village -- to the Gospel. Who is a man -- or woman -- of peace? You can identify him or her by three R's, according to Thom Wolf, a leading proponent of the concept who teaches at Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary. The person of peace (1) is receptive to the Gospel; (2) possesses a reputation to gain attention for the message among family and community; and (3) effectively refers the bearers of good news to that larger group.

The Roman centurion Cornelius was such a person, "a righteous and God-fearing man ... respected by all the Jewish people," (Acts 10:22 NIV). Encouraged by a divine vision, he invited Peter into his home, warmly welcomed him and called together his family and friends to hear the apostle's words. [As a] result, Cornelius, his family and many others believed and were baptized.

Wolf contends that Cornelius' "sphere of influence" -- his "oikos," as the Greek New Testament calls it -- was the normal focus for the first evangelists. Michael Green, author of "Evangelism in the Early Church," agrees that the oikos, "consisting of blood relations, slaves, clients and friends, was one of the bastions of Graeco-Roman society. Christian missionaries made a deliberate point of gaining whatever

households they could as lighthouses ... from which the Gospel could illuminate the surrounding darkness."

Today, such lighthouses shine in many places. One group's region in India was long known as a "graveyard for missions" -- and the literal grave of at least six Christian martyrs in recent years. Instead of giving up, a mission team trained workers to quietly enter villages, pray and seek men of peace. If they didn't find one, they were to leave the village. If they did, they were to build relationships and share Christ with that person's natural network of family and friends. Hundreds of churches have been planted among the people in the years since.

Not every "friend of the Gospel" becomes a believer, however. Wolf also identifies "men of goodwill." A man of peace is prepared to receive the Gospel and follow Christ as Lord. In contrast, a man of goodwill "does not now and may not ever receive Christ," Wolf explains. But he usually is an influential person who recognizes the great value of what believers bring and becomes their "protector, promoter and pathway finder" in his "area of jurisdiction."

[For example], Chief Some Emmanuel, an important leader of the Dagaari people in Africa, invited Southern Baptist missionary Lynn Kennedy into the 20 villages under his influence to share the Gospel. He hasn't made a personal commitment to Christ yet, but he gathers his people to listen to one who "speaks the truth."

Either way, the good news spreads through the community. Psalm 37:37 promises:

"Mark the blameless man, and behold the upright; For the man of peace will have a posterity."

That posterity may include the salvation of many peoples.

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