

VERANO Y VIDA EN CHIAPAS 2009

EL CONTRADICCIÓN DE GRACIA

Porque por gracia ustedes han sido salvados mediante la fe; esto no procede de ustedes, sino que es el regalo de Dios, no por obras, para que nadie se jacte.

(For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-not by works, so that no one can boast)

Efesios/Ephesians 2:8-9

If grace is God's answer, the gift of Christian life, then we cannot for a moment dispense with following Christ. But if grace is the data for my Christian life, it means that I set out to live the Christian life in the world with all my sins justified beforehand. I can go and sin as much as I like, and rely on this grace to forgive me, for after all the world is justified in principal by grace. I can therefore cling to my bourgeois secular existence, and remain as I was before, but with the added assurance that the grace of God will cover me. It is under the influence of this kind of "grace" that the world has been made "Christian", but at the cost of secularizing the Christian religion as never before. The antithesis between the Christian life and the life of bourgeois respectability is at an end. The Christian life comes to mean nothing more than living in the world and as the world, in being no different from the world, in fact, in being prohibited from being different from the world for the sake of grace. The upshot of it all is that my duty as a Christian is to leave the world for an hour or so on Sunday morning and go to church to be assured that my sins are all forgiven. I need no longer try to follow Christ, for cheap grace, the bitterest foe of discipleship, which true discipleship must loathe and detest, has freed me from that. Grace as data for our calculations means grace at the cheapest price, but grace as the answer to the sum means costly grace. It is terrifying to realize what use can be made of a genuine evangelical doctrine. In both cases we have the identical formula- "justification by faith alone". Yet the misuse of the formula leads to the complete destruction of its very essence.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer: *Costly Grace* from *The Cost of Discipleship* ©1956

EL BUEN PASTOR

Ejido Campet had never had a church. The community lies just a thirty minute drive up into the mountains south of Ocosingo down a two mile gravel way winding through pastures with horses and cattle. Several years ago a woman named Silvia was listening to the Christian radio station in Ocosingo, wanted to learn more about the Jesus whom she heard discussed that day and called the station to ask someone to please come see her. After a visit from two Christians, a very small body of believers slowly developed in the community, nurtured

by the Presbyterian Spanish mission church in town. By our arrival that Monday there were several families in Campet who regularly worshiped together in someone's home, taught by a lay person from town. Today was different for Campet. Into that little community of small homes, chickens, corn and gorgeous mountain views rolled a group of people intent on making a difference in the community: ten Tzeltal brothers from Matzam, four skilled tradesmen and *el grupo americano*, seven men from suburban Chicago and three others from the East Coast. That Monday what the group found was a cleared plot of dirt into which had been dug the footings for a small church, only two sides of which had the rebar in place and the concrete poured, and an enormous pile of dirt and rock from the digging. By Thursday afternoon at three what that group dedicated with the Christians of Campet was a completed wood frame and planked church with an arched tin roof, two doors, a hand built lectern and a hard packed and leveled dirt floor. Working in unison for only four days the group had raised that church from the footings. The fresh cut boards for construction had to be carried out of the woods a mile up a narrow dirt trail by human mules. Without any equipment except hand tools, the trusses were built on site and lifted into place by the muscles of many men. No backhoe dug out the interior of the footprint and leveled the floor. *Martillo y clavo* were the tools of choice. Santiago, Chaleco, Mongo and Pascual were the skilled tradesmen. The Tzeltal brothers and *el grupo americano* were the beasts of burden. As the entire work group gathered in the church on Thursday to praise God and deliver the church to Silvia and her husband Francisco, to the others believers in Campet and to the children, every eye shined and every face had a smile. Harassed by community leaders, threatened over the years, the nascent Christian body of Ejido Campet had a new home for the worship of God. Returning two weeks later for a worship service, a different group of American travelers saw the tangible result of that construction project: small children singing Bible songs in the front of that church, homemade pews lined up on the dirt and occupied by sincere Christian people and the Word being preached from behind that new lectern, all of it under roof. If you ever get to Campet, take the first left once you enter the main part of the ejido, cross the bridge and go to the next dirt path, turn right and then right again at the "T" at the end of the community downhill to Silvia and Francisco's house: the church is next door.

In 1528 Don Diego de Mazariegos built a house in a high altitude valley surrounded by mountains and became the *fundador* of San Cristóbal de Las Casas. In 1545 Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, first bishop of Chiapas and *defensor de los indios*, arrived in the town that would ultimately bear a portion of his name. Over the intervening 464 years, the Indians have not benefitted from many defenders. The *ciudad* is a beautiful Spanish colonial architectural masterpiece with numerous cathedrals, shops and hotels for tourists, tile cobblestone sidewalks, European hippies and open air marketplaces. It is enjoyable to wander through the large open air market at *Templo Santo Domingo de Gúzman* where vendors sell all manner of goods from semi-permanent stalls. There are many good restaurants in town. A person would be hard pressed not to like San Cristóbal. But there is another story here as well. It is also home to hundreds of Tzotzil and Chamula women endlessly walking around town trying to hawk shirts, blankets, cheap crafts and other items. The

women range in age from young girls to old women who look as if they were here when brother Bartolomé was alive. It is also full of small children whose childhood is being robbed from them as they endlessly circle the *centro histórico* trying to sell cigarettes, candy and even cheaper trinkets. At night, the women and children spread out their wares on blankets laid on the stone of the *parque* in front of the *Catedral San Cristóbal* where they remain until well into the night. The faces tell of hard times and limited opportunities. Some of the children smile and laugh but many do not. Where this sea of humanity goes at night is unknown to me. The tourists surely play a valuable role in the lives of the Indian people for without their spending there would be no flow of pesos, no matter how minuscule the earnings from the street trade. Yet, one cannot walk the charming streets without recognition that there are two worlds colliding in San Cristóbal: the upscale Mexican tourists and residents whose lives are increasingly lived in the first world and the itinerant Indians whose lives remain trapped in the third world. A collision between the people who shop at Chedraui, Mexico's Wal-Mart, and the poor street merchants who wear the same clothes every day.

Matzam is a small village that sits at the base of two conical peaks jutting up out of the *campo* in *Los Altos de Chiapas* several miles off the main road from San Cristóbal to Tenejapa. Nowadays you turn off the highway onto a new concrete roadway that runs most of the way uphill to the village, halving the time it takes to make the journey from the highway. After you reach the village the road splits and the *Templo Filipos* complex is astride the right fork on the way to Achlum. Sitting inside the concrete compound walls are the church and the education buildings that double as dormitory rooms when American work groups are here. Across the dirt path are the dining halls and communal kitchen. For two weeks groups work alongside their Tzeltal brothers as the side walls of the new sanctuary rise around the perimeter of the existing church building. There is earth to be moved, forms to be built, block to be laid and concrete to be poured. The brothers are the skilled craftsmen who lay the block and build the forms. Americans work with *pala y pico y carretilla* to help. This is a multi-year project. Work only goes forward when the church has extra money for the construction materials and that only occurs when a mission work group is in the village. Even with extra love offerings there is not enough money to finish this year. When we leave on the last day of our stay the block and concrete walls rise above the level of the existing roof and the rebar is ready to welcome the trusses next summer. The congregation of the church is patient. Life here demands this trait. Next year or the year after the congregation will be in their new worship space. Until then the existing structure will do just fine.

When one of the men of the church sees you for the first time during the day, they extend their right hand to shake yours and greet you with "*buenos dias hermano*". Everyone is a brother or sister in Christ when they come to Matzam. Some mornings I shake thirty hands as I make the rounds of the courtyard of the church complex. The work day begins with prayer as all of the Tzeltal workman and all of the Americans gather around Pablo who prays in Tzeltal. Work begins and so does the laughter. Everyone is in a good mood and that does not change throughout the day, whether we are working in bright sunshine or, as is so often the case, working in the fog and light drizzle. The brothers are all working for free except for four paid craftsmen. The

brothers are working with glad hearts and happy spirits on their church. At nine they break for breakfast while we break for cookies. At eleven we all break for a *refresco*, usually a half liter Pepsi. Before we drink one of the brothers prays out loud. The work continues apace, not rapidly but steadily. By one o'clock the Americans are beat and retire for lunch. The brothers continue to work. While we shower and relax, they work. As you watch in the afternoon, or perhaps join in for awhile, you realize that the brothers are still in good moods, laughing and joking, despite the physical demands of the day. The building of the new church is important to these men, a labor of love, and they do not approach the project with dread but joyfully.

Most Americans would be surprised if they spent an afternoon drinking *café con leche* while sitting at the patio restaurant of the Hotel Central or in the *parque* in the *centro* in Ocosingo. The *centro* is always bustling with commercial activity. The stores are full of consumer goods. Construction materials fly off the shelves. Everyone seems to be out shopping. The Bodega Aurora is as well stocked as any supermarket at home. Restaurants continually have patrons. The people are as well dressed as any crowd at a mall in the States would be. Mothers buy shoes for children. Teenagers look for bargains. Men buy ice cream cones for their families. Electronics, appliances, furniture and every other conceivable consumer good are displayed. On every building you see the words "*se vende...*". The majority of vehicles are fairly new. There are very few old junky rust buckets. Taxis circle looking for fares, of which there are no shortage. Cell phones are ubiquitous. People move about all around me as the bell on the *ayuntamiento* strikes four. There are a few beggars but even the Indians are participating in the Mexican consumer culture. This is not *Los Estados Unidos* but it is not wretchedly destitute either. Ocosingo is not what you are shown in video footage of Mexico on American television. When you only live somewhere a short time you need to look at it closely and with a studious eye to get past the preconceptions. Indeed, there is a vibrant middle class in the *ciudad*. In San Cristóbal and Villahermosa this is even more true.

During church services visitors always introduce themselves to the congregation *español*. One day I tell the Matzam congregation "*me llama señor concreto*", Mister Concrete. It sticks and I have a new persona. I am only half kidding. By the end of my stay in Chiapas I will have mixed, shoveled and helped carry in *botes* many tons of concrete. We have mixed all of it the old fashioned way: by shovel and hoe. Santiago has given me a personal tutorial on exactly how to use my *pala* to properly combine the *arena y cemento* before adding the *grava*. I can eyeball the pile on the ground and tell when to start turning the mixture as copious amounts of water are added. I know when to call for *más agua* and when there is enough. I can teach others the correct way to turn it dry and turn it wet. My hands are blistered and raw. My finger joints ache and I have bone bruises in my palms. I feel permanently bent at the waist from the constant turning of the mix. In short, I have become *señor concreto* and it is a wonderful feeling. None of the brothers in Matzam can doubt my commitment to building this church. Of course, the same is true for everyone else who has toiled in Matzam, in Campet and on the health clinic in Ocosingo this summer, whether making and pouring concrete or doing more skilled labor: no one can doubt the commitment of the American mission travelers to the kingdom work

underway. Tired muscles and blisters are the visible signs of doing God's work. The recognition by the people with whom we have worked that we are truly brothers and sisters in Christ, in community with them, sweating and straining and toiling elbow to elbow with them, eating with them, laughing with them, worshipping with them, is the intangible sign of God's work. Although I created *señor concreto* out of whole cloth, when one of the men addresses me by that name and then smiles, I know that I have made a difference by building a relationship in addition to pouring a wall. Everyone else who came here from their ordinary lives to build relationships has done the same. Both the tangible and the intangible are important in the kingdom of God. Not that working here gives anyone a leg up in the in kingdom for it is not by works that we are justified. It is simply a response to God for His great gifts, a following of the one we call Lord.

Manuel Luna Vasquez is a young man from Suluphuitz, a village some distance from Ocosingo. In addition to working around *Alfa y Omega* for Pablo he is also the lay worship leader in Campet and one of the warmest people you will ever meet. He thinks that I speak more Spanish than I do. Diminutive, he worked hard during the building of the church in Campet, including helping carry fresh hewn timber off the mountain. While only one of the members of *el grupo americano* was able to make it all the way down the trail with a twenty foot wet plank on his head, and I actually contemplated death after I had been left for dead, Manuel made six trips, two days in a row. "*Soy fuerte como el caballo*" he says. Strong like a horse. Juan Méndez Lopéz is sixteen and lives in Matzam. While working in Campet we called him Juan Uno. He speaks some English with excellent diction. He also is the person to whom I turned when I wanted someone to lead the teenagers on a hike up one of the conical peaks in Matzam. He would lead two more trips up the *cerro*. He asks incessantly how to say different things in English. Our joke is that he will not tell any of the older men some of the slang he has learned. *Malo h'ich* as we say in Tzeltal. Lucy is a Tzeltal graduate of *Alfa y Omega* who helps in the kitchen. She should be teaching but is not. She smiles but is very shy and reserved. At Toniná pastor Carl pays for her to ride a horse on the return to the car and she beams like a small child on Christmas. Lucy is always in her traditional long skirt and embroidered lace blouse. Pedro is the driver for Pablo. His wife gave birth to their fifth child before the last group arrived. We went to see the baby one afternoon at Pedro's home just down the gravel road from *Templo Filipos*. Chickens scurry around the courtyard. On the wall of the room where mother and baby greet us hang only two pieces of artwork: paper plate crafts made by his other children during vacation Bible school. Proud parents everywhere display the craft work of their children. Chaleco ("the vest"), one of my Indian roommates for two weeks in Matzam, is twenty-seven and a master craftsman. He knows everything there is to know about concrete and cinder block and rebar. If he lived in the U.S., he would be highly paid for his skills. In Chiapas, he hustles to find work. Even his fall off the truss in Campet does not slow him down long. The man is a workhorse who is always making a joke, often at my expense. He can build anything, which is true of most of the other men with whom we work.

"Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth" says the psalmist (Psalm 66). At the mother church in Shishintonil for the worship service on Bible Day we did just that, Tzeltal and *gringo*. The Tzeltal choir sang a

cappello. The women were resplendent in their long skirts, blue sweaters and beautiful red shawls with elaborate embroidery, long black hair pulled back, accompanied by the elders in blue slacks and blue shirts. Although none of our group understood a word of what they sang, everyone knew the conviction with which they sang it. The house band played electric guitar, electric bass, synthesizer and drums as they sang traditional sounding Mexican songs in Tzeltal. As Dylan and Denman strummed acoustic guitars and Sam kept rhythm on the djemba, the Hot Metal group and friends sang praise songs and old time hymns. I even tried singing from the hymnbook in Tzeltal with José from Matzam but the words kept throwing me. *La'me jc'ajintaytic Cristo, muc'Ajwalil cu'untic*. As rain pounded the tin roof, joyful singing complimented it in a chorus to the heavens. Throw in a New Testament dramatization and some preaching and you have a full afternoon. After the three hour service, we all line up at the doorway of the church to shake the hand of every single Tzeltal man and woman in attendance. If you are not moved by this service, few services will do so. The ladies of the church, of course, feed the visitors a thin broth with a piece of tough beef before we walk up the hill in the drizzle to load into the cattle truck for the ride back to Matzam.

Nicholas rose slowly after dinner that night as we all sat around the tables in the large dining hall. As the president of the congregation of *Templo Filipos*, it always falls to him to speak first. He tells of leaving the village as a young man to work on the large *fincas* in northern Mexico and in the coffee growing regions to pick vegetables, fruits and coffee. He tells of being away for months at a time to make money to send home to his family. He tells of long hours and backbreaking work. He tells of barely getting ahead monetarily because the cost of everything provided on the *fincas* is high. Finally, he gave up that life when he became a leader in the church. Now he stays in Matzam with his family, raises some corn and beans for family consumption, grows and buys calla lilies for sale in San Cristóbal and occasionally picks up odd jobs. "God provides" he intones. This is a paradigm shift in the life of the village when the men no longer have to leave to feed their families and provide the raw power for the oligarchs who own the large farms. A new time when the lives of the Indians are not expendable and crushed so that the rich landowners can grow richer. A second brother stands and repeats the same tale. "Now I teach in the Compassion International program and God provides enough." Nicholas' biological brother stands and the story is the same. Another brother and then another biological brother. The stories are all the same. Either work away from home for months at a time, which everyone has done in his lifetime, or work for the church building a better life for everyone in community. Manuel the worship leader uses the analogy to a bottomless well: you keep putting your work into it but you never find the money. Manuel tells of never having anything until he was given a leadership position in the church, which gave him dignity and self-worth. He also tells of going to other villages to teach the Gospel only to be confronted by men with guns who tried to turn him away. Living the Gospel is not easy he says but it is far preferable to trying to scratch out a living cut off from family and the community. These men all rely on God to provide. God provides. Not what they want perhaps but what they need. God is doing a new thing in Matzam.

To refer to some as Christian in Chiapas is not so much a description of what they believe as it is of who they are. It means that you are Reformed in your theology. It also means that you live in a tight knit community where everyone looks after the welfare of everyone else. It means that you do not drink alcohol or dance or smoke. It means that when there is a church service you are in attendance. It means that you are intentional about your evangelism and actively participate in the process of planting new congregations where there are none. It means tithing and sharing. It means working in and for the church. It means raising your children to be believers, teaching them the faith and instilling in them the same behavior patterns that you demonstrate. You welcome strangers. You feed the hungry. There are undoubtedly aspects of Christian life among the Tzeltal that are wanting but they are mostly hidden from view. The most visible is that women are relegated to secondary roles although in Ocosingo you find women playing much more active leadership roles than in Matzam. Nonetheless, to spend time in and around this community of faith can do nothing except strengthen your own faith. Faith is always on the surface. God is always part of the conversation. Prayers are shared and repeated often. Perhaps it is easier for people with less material wealth to walk with faith as a constant companion. Whatever it is that allows the people with whom I spent time to live more like the early believers described in the Acts of the Apostles, the result is real and measurable and making a huge difference in lives.

The term Catholic is a much harder term to define in Chiapas and does not seem to mean what it means to my friends who attend the Roman Catholic Church in the States. Most Mexicans are nominally Catholic but do not participate in worship. Cathedrals and churches are everywhere but there are many mixed symbols and practices. Indeed, for many the cross itself is a symbol of the conquest and repression of the *indigenos* by the Spanish long ago. At the temples dedicated to the Virgen del Carmen and the Virgen de Guadalupe in San Cristóbal, it is statues of these women that dominate the altar and push Jesus aside. In the *catedrals* in Ocosingo, Villahermosa and San Cristóbal the statues of various virgins and long dead saints and padres outnumber those of *el Señor Jesucristo*. One evening in the *catedral* in San Cristóbal I watched as a shaman spread out his candles, whisk broom, cola and alcohol in front of the Virgin Mary and then began to cleanse a young Indian man of who knows what with heated hands and broom. No one seemed to pay this ritual any attention. At the *catedral* in Tenejapa a man approached us from a gathering in the front of the sanctuary smelling like a distillery. Shaking my hand, he suddenly kissed my knuckle and then asked for money. Another drunk followed us out into the street and throughout the *ciudad*. Reformed Christians do not drink or dance because much of so-called Catholic life revolves around festivals during which drunkenness and dancing are the principle activities along with sacrifices and exorcisms. Yet, I also walked into a mass one Sunday morning in Villahermosa where people were singing responsorial psalms and another mass one Saturday night in San Cristóbal where the priest was praying in a manner befitting any Reformed church. The bulletin for Sunday worship in Ocosingo that I found one day included the Apostles Creed and the Lord's Prayer. It seems fair only to say that there are many practices that I do not understand and that do not seem Biblically based but

these are not the faith practices of all. I did find comfort one morning at the little Catholic church in Matzam after the prior night's storm had blown one door off the hinges and did accept it for what it purported to be: sacred space.

Before I drove to Chiapas in April, many people questioned the safety of doing so in light of the violence so heavily reported by the American media. They questioned my sanity for doing so accompanied by Stephanie, my oldest daughter. As Stephanie and I drove through the mountains of Chiapas one spring night to Tuxtla Gutierrez, when I expressed some reservations about doing so well after dark, she said something extremely important to me. "Dad, how can you hope to help people if you are afraid of them?" These words cut to the bone for I was afraid. Never again did I fear for my safety. Never again did I feel uncomfortable around people that I could barely understand even when they were speaking Spanish. Frequently alone on the highway or in Ocosingo, San Cristóbal or Villahermosa, I always felt at home, not only with the Tzeltal brothers and sisters but around strangers as well. Although I stuck out like a tall white sore thumb in a short brown world, never once did I find myself in a situation that caused me concern. This also is part of the charm and beauty of Chiapas.

I felt called to be in Chiapas. I always had trouble explaining that to people. There were plenty of snickers. I never heard a heavenly voice nor any word spoken out loud. Yet, I understood exactly what I was being called to do and the call was every inch as real as if it had been spoken to me. It was like seeing a ray of early morning sunlight through the branches of a tree. A certainty overtook me. Why God would call me to participate in the lives of the Tzeltal and live in Mexico is beyond me. I don't concern myself with that matter any longer. "*Sígueme*" le dijo Jesús to the early disciples and it is no less so today. *Nada más pero nada menos*. Nothing more but nothing less.

H'ich. Mero lek. Lek aye.

I know. I was there.

July 16-August 23, 2009.

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Week one: First Presbyterian, River Forest, Illinois.

Week two: First Presbyterian, Virginia Beach.

Week three: Salem Presbytery, North Carolina.

Week four: Salem Presbytery, North Carolina.

Week five: Hot Metal Bridge Faith Community, Pittsburgh.