

## SACRIFICE AND COMMITMENT II

# Commitment and Sacrifice in World Evangelization

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It is a fair assumption that all of us attending this Congress believe in world evangelization. Jesus said we should do it, and we *want* to do it. It is also a fair assumption that many of us are battling with the commitment, cost, and sacrifice involved.

Yet in the same breath, we yearn like Caleb of old, to be undiminished by the chilling winds of discouragement and say, "Let us go . . . at once, and occupy . . . for we are well able to overcome . . . (Numbers 13:30, RSV). Like John Knox, we want to cry for our respective lands, "Give me Scotland, or I die." We want to plead with Caleb, "Give me this mountain" (Joshua 14:12, KJV).

We want to say it—and pray it. And we want deep down to rise to the commitment and sacrifice required by the task. In aiming for this, great encouragement and a vital precedent can be found in the experience, example, and precept of the apostle Paul, particularly in his address to the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:17–35).

This meeting with the Ephesian elders took place during his stop at Miletus in the latter part of Paul's ministry. He was on his way to Jerusalem and the "imprisonment and afflictions" (v. 23, RSV) which awaited him there. The year was A.D. 54. Nero had just begun to rule as emperor and things were getting tense. The challenge of world evangelization was before the apostle. Commitment and sacrifice were going to be vitally important to the Ephesians, and were also marvelously in evidence in the apostle.

Paul speaks volumes in this address, but I want to highlight three things: (a) the commitment of Paul's life, (b) the sacrifice of Paul's suffering, and (c) the secrets of Paul's perseverance.

## THE COMMITMENT OF PAUL'S LIFE

### A Commitment to Holy Character

The life and character of this messenger of the gospel has been dealt with extensively in this Congress. It is clear that in Paul's commitment to world evangelization his whole life and character were on the line (v. 18).

### A Commitment to Servanthood

The apostle had a profound commitment to humble servanthood (v. 19). His entire

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evangelistic and missionary commitment flowed from the depths of a servant spirit and was grounded in humility. He was a bondsman to Jesus Christ and his agenda for the world, which made him humble before his Lord and mankind.

### A Commitment of Tears

Paul mentions tears twice in Acts 20:19–31. In the first instance, they are related to servanthood and his trials (v. 19) and in the second, to the earnestness of his admonitions to the Ephesian church (v. 31).

These are the only references in Acts which tell us of Paul weeping. Paul is usually seen as a man equal to every situation, crisis, or hardship. Clearly, the apostle knew the anguish of private discouragement, trauma, depression, and hardship, especially from the plots of the Jews (v. 19), and he was often brought to tears.

What brings us to tears? It is important to face these things and seek the Lord's healing and ointment for our wounds. When problems are not dealt with, they impair both our commitment and our capacity to carry out the task of world evangelization.

Many evangelists today, have weepings within. Some of these may be the result of:

1. *Weakness and inadequacies.* Over the years, I have often gone to the Lord to lament my weakness, sinfulness, and inadequacy in trying to evangelize Africa's cities and trying to cope with South Africa's political traumas. I have often cried, "Lord, can't you relieve me of this task and get someone stronger and more capable?" Again and again the Lord has said, "But you're the only kind of material I have ever had to do my work—frail, weak, inadequate, sinful. Besides, you volunteered for the job, so get on with it! And remember, 'My strength is made perfect in weakness'" (2 Corinthians 12:9, KJV).
2. *Strain and tension.* We can't avoid all pressure and tension, even Jesus knew that. Luke 12:50 could be paraphrased, "What tension I suffer until this is all over." But strain is excessive and destructive tension. Stress can bring us not only to tears but to evangelistic paralysis or even nervous exhaustion and emotional breakdown. Yet, it need not happen. Hudson Taylor once wrote, "As to work, mine was never so plentiful, so responsible, or so difficult: but the weight and the strain are all gone."

Sanders describes the way to obtain healing and peace so we that we may continue with the work of the Lord as:

1. *A rediscovery of God.* Nothing less than his will fulfills the deepest need of our complex personality. God himself is the answer and he will grant us a great revelation of himself when we are truly ready for what it involves. To the saints of past ages, he granted a progressive revelation of himself exactly suited to their pressing need. What we need today is a new revelation of him as *El Shaddai*, "God All-sufficient," who is immeasurably greater than our inadequacies.
2. *A recognition of self as the center and source of strain.* Do we feel that more is being asked of us than we are able to bear? God assures us that he "will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able" (1 Corinthians 10:13, KJV). He knows our limits. It may also be true that some of our numerous activities are self-imposed rather than divinely ordered, and should be discontinued.

3. *A renewal of mind.* There must be a radical change of attitude, a genuine renewal of mind, if there is to be lasting deliverance. As long as mental attitudes remain unchanged, the tension will continue. Instead of pitying and excusing ourselves because of the pressures under which we labor, we must no longer view them as a burden which crushes us but as a platform for the display of God's glorious sufficiency. We will hear him say, "Now shalt thou see what I will do" (Exodus 6:1, KJV). We need to take our eyes off ourselves and fix them on God. The greater our weakness, the greater his glory will be his as we work in his power.

### Tears of Spiritual Concern

As the Lord helps us do these things, our tears over the destructive struggles of our lives will diminish as healing comes. But there are other tears—healthy tears—which flow naturally and freely. These are tears of spiritual concern and passionate intercession for spiritual and other needs of the people in our lives.

Several young Salvation Army officers wrote and asked General Booth, "How can we win the lost?" Booth's return letter simply said: "Try tears."

When I saw the movie *Cry Freedom* about Steve Biko and the South African situation, I went before the Lord for nearly half an hour, weeping in intercession for my country and its needs. When preparing for my address in SACLA in 1979, I had a similar experience which lasted nearly three hours. This can't be artificially induced, and at times we may have to ask the Lord to help us weep even more for our situations and for those within them.

The apostle Paul brought an immense commitment to the task of mission and evangelism. It was a commitment of his entire life and lifestyle—a commitment of utterly self-effacing and humble servanthood. He also demonstrated the commitment of perseverance—sometimes with tears—through trials of ruthless opposition, personal difficulty, and spiritual anguish over those whom he wanted to reach for the Lord. But the apostle's commitment did not end there. It extended into unswerving faithfulness and courage in resolute and actual proclamation of the gospel message in faithfulness to its kerygmatic content. Paul also remained steadfast in setting forth the whole counsel of God with all its implications.

The apostle manifested not just the moral and spiritual courage of "declaring the whole counsel of God" in his evangelism, but also the physical and emotional courage of coping sacrificially with the imminent suffering of "imprisonment and afflictions" in Jerusalem (v. 23). In other words, Paul was ready to face the sacrifice of suffering.

## THE SACRIFICE OF PAUL'S SUFFERING

### Going to Jerusalem

Paul is "going to Jerusalem, . . . not knowing" what should befall him there except imprisonment and afflictions (Acts 20:22–23, RSV). An effective ministry of evangelism should take evangelists and his colleagues "to Jerusalem" regularly.

In 1980, I went through a "Jerusalem crisis" about returning to South Africa. When my wife Carol and I decided God was leading us to return, she said, "We are setting our face to Jerusalem." South Africa is our Jerusalem, not so much in the sense of being our home base, but as our place of pain and affliction.

Jerusalem is inescapably there, wherever we are, if we are committed to fulfill the Great Commission, complete the task of world evangelization, and to honor the Lord's demands of justice for the poor and oppressed. Certainly for Jesus there was no way

around it. His face was set throughout his ministry. Nor was there any way around it for James who was stoned, or for Paul and Peter who were imprisoned and martyred, or for John who was exiled to Patmos.

One of the perils of the church in our time is the idea that we can have "all this, and heaven too" (i.e., popularity, prosperity, success, acclaim, the praise of man). Mighty evangelistic achievements for the Lord are desired, and heaven too, but without going through Jerusalem en route! If it has been possible in the past, I seriously doubt it will be possible in the future during what may turn out to be the last days of history.

Matthew 24 describes the last days' events of "wars and rumors of wars" (v. 6), nation rising against nation, famines and earthquakes (v. 7), hatred of believers (v. 9), betrayal within the church (v. 10), false prophets (v. 11), the increase of wickedness, and Christian love growing cold (v. 12). In the midst of that the "gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations" (v. 14).

That is a challenging prospect and we can only cry out, "Lord, who is adequate for these things?" In such a context of social and political upheaval and spiritual hostility, we will not easily minister unscathed.

### Going to Prison

For Paul, going to Jerusalem also meant going to prison. Most of us have never faced imprisonment. Perhaps it is time for a new theology of imprisonment. In these last months, this has become quite real to our family. My nephew, an evangelical believer and devout youth of eighteen, was sentenced in South Africa to six years imprisonment. His faith would not allow him to join the South African Defence Force, so he languishes in prison.

Frank Chikane, an evangelical and Pentecostal brother is currently secretary of the South African Council of Churches. He once commented on his prison experiences,

At times I struggle sitting in a cell, and say "Lord, help me." I want to make sure I am still on the right track, because the theology that is dominant in this country says that you can't go to prison if you are a Christian. But for a person in Soweto who has landed in prison, reading about Peter in prison means something completely different.

In our own African Enterprise ministry in East Africa, our chairman, Janani Luwum, was put in prison by Idi Amin and martyred for his stand in Christ's name.

I am not trying to urge Christians to rush out and try to get thrown in prison. But in the decades ahead, our commitment should include extending our spirit of sacrifice to include the willingness, like Paul's, to face "imprisonment and afflictions."

As for my own nephew, Charles, in his first letter from prison he could say,

Through it all I know God's unfailing presence. . . . Be assured I'm well and full of hope. In my weakness and God's strength I persevere. . . . It is imperative that I continue to trust and grow in trusting God, for he alone can keep me and bring me to triumph over this experience and be more than a conqueror. I do feel the pain of separation so much . . . but I rest in the knowledge that the distance between us isn't great enough, nor the walls here thick enough, to keep your love and prayers out, nor mine in!

Those are the words of a young man who knows what commitment and sacrifice in Christian witness are all about.

The irrepressible Paul knew this spirit and wrote from Herod's prison:

I want you to know . . . that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ" (Philippians 1:12–13, RSV).

But what were the inner secrets of Paul's ability to persevere under all these circumstances?

## THE SECRETS OF PAUL'S PERSEVERANCE

### "Bound in the Spirit"

Paul was under the control of the Holy Spirit—a full captive to the Spirit's work and ways (Acts 20:22, RSV).

Our need has never been greater to know within us the person, work, fruit, gifts, and guidance of the Holy Spirit. We need to be utterly bound to him for whatever he has for us.

### "I Do Not Account My Life of Any Value"

In this self-sacrificial posture (Acts 20:24, RSV), the apostle was initiating a tradition of Christian spirit of self-sacrifice and willingness to lose and give all.

In Blantyre, Malawi during a citywide evangelistic campaign, I walked through a graveyard with tombstones of many who had come to preach the gospel in the aftermath of David Livingstone's exploration. Within eighteen months, one by one, they all died. Even as they died, still others came—not counting their lives of any value or as precious to themselves.

### "Accomplish My Course"

The apostle was determined and resolved in mind and spirit that there would be no turning back (v. 24, RSV). In 1976, I spoke with Billy Graham in private during the PACLA (Pan-African Christian Leaders' Assembly) Conference in Nairobi about my temptation to leave South Africa for some easier context of ministry. I'll never forget his answer: "Michael, I believe there is a strange blessedness for those who persevere unto the end—even unto death."

That is still true, and is relevant for each one of us.

### "Taking Heed to Yourselves"

Paul preached to the Ephesian elders, "Take heed to yourselves" (v. 28, RSV) and to Timothy, "Take heed to yourself" (1 Timothy 4:16, RSV). But he also practiced what he preached and carefully monitored his own spiritual life before the Lord. He knew that if he failed, then both his commitment and his remarkable spirit of sacrifice in the cause of world evangelization would be silently and secretly sabotaged.

### "And to All the Flock"

Paul was an overseer to the Ephesian elders as they were to the flock of the church at Ephesus (v. 28, RSV). Sometimes the only thing which holds a man or woman to evangelistic or pastoral service is a sense of deep responsibility for those entrusted to their charge or located in their context of ministry.

How can we leave when there are precious souls who are dependent upon us or in need of our gospel proclamation, pastoral care, and fellowship? If we leave, who will guard or rescue the flock when the "fierce wolves will come in" (v. 29) to devour and devastate?

## The Word of His Grace

No other anchor for sacrificial evangelistic commitment can match the inspired Word of God (v. 32). Paul knew this; may we know this as well.

When my nephew was heading into prison, I urged him, "Memorize the Word and hold on to it for dear life!" Thankfully, his last letter from prison said: "I read my Bible a lot and memorize one verse per day." How that warmed my heart! The Word of God will hold us when nothing else can.

Again and again when David Livingstone was tempted to give up, he turned to the Scriptures and was fed and held. It has always been that way for all who have persevered for Christ at their place of divine appointment.

### "I Coveted No One's Silver"

One of today's major destroyers of men and women in ministry is money-love or materialism. Unlike Paul, we *do* covet the silver, gold, and apparel of the world around us (v. 32–33, RSV). We let ourselves become rich on the gospel, with all the consequent extravagances this can sometimes breed. Financial and fiscal integrity becomes a major casualty and eventually we are exposed and bring shattering discredit on the gospel. When that happens, commitment and sacrifice in world evangelization is devoted. There is disgrace, shame, Christian embarrassment, the end of otherwise good ministries, and then public glee—which is the most painful of all.

### "More Blessed to Give"

Paul was committed to toiling to help the weak. He found tremendous blessing in this because he could help others in greater need than himself. Quoting one of the few authentic sayings of our Lord not recorded in the Gospels, Paul reminds his listeners, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (v. 35, RSV).

Our Lord has commissioned us to evangelize the world. To do so, we need commitment and sacrifice. Therefore, may we stand by one another in the work of world evangelization with deep commitment of life, with utter faithfulness to the gospel, and with the willingness to suffer if it is necessary. May the Lord bind us as captives to the Holy Spirit. May he give us the determination to finish the task and the humility to continually take stock of our lives. May we be marked by responsibility for the flock and be alert to the dangers of divisive influences, covetousness, and lack of generosity. In all this, may the Lord give us a deep sense of responsibility for the task and privilege that is ours.

There is a story of an imaginary conversation when Jesus returned to heaven after his earthly ministry. Seemingly, the angels gathered around him and said, "But, Lord, you have left your great work of mission on earth with a very weak group of inadequate people. What if they fail? What is your Plan B?"

The Lord replied, "It is true, but I have no Plan B. I am depending on them!"