

Reformation Christian Ministries

April 2004



*(Suriname River Bridge, Paramaribo, Suriname,
South America)*

Building Bridges for the Gospel



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The Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, Behold a man gluttonous, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners. But wisdom is justified of her children. [Matthew 11:16-19]

During the life of Christ, Jesus welcomed the unwanted, unloved, those who were the recipients of great prejudice in His day. He was constantly accused by Jewish elitists of associating with the wrong kinds of people: eating with Jewish publicans who collected taxes for the Romans and meeting with all kinds of sinners (Matthew 10:3, Luke 7:37-38; 19:2; Mark 2:15-16). He even had unlearned and ignorant Galilaean fishermen, tax-collectors and Zealots amongst His apostles. He built bridges even to the "Gentiles" and said to some of them, *"I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel."*

To put this in perspective, if He had been around today, he would probably have been castigated for associating with the Pharisees (after all they are Jews and some Jews are international conspirators): He went to dinner in their houses, (Luke 11:37; 14:1) spoke with some in private (John 3:1) and even supported some of their teachings (Matthew 23:23). Prior to the adoption of Christianity as the religion of the Roman Empire, Christians were persecuted. Within years of this event, Christianity had moved from *persecuted* to *persecutor*. It grew powerful and greedy and forgot that its kingdom was not of this world. As a result, its method of outreach and evangelism changed from building bridges into the various non-Christian communities as a means to the end of bringing the Gospel. Instead of bridges, barriers were built which have lasted to this day. As was the case with Christ

then, so should the case be today that the Church (the Body of Jesus Christ) must seek to build bridges and bring the Gospel to all kinds of people not only in Jerusalem, but Samaria (social outcasts to Jews) as well as around the world. However, those who seek to build those bridges are often confronted by those who prefer barriers.

My missionary field experience took place from 1978 to 1986 in Suriname, South America. In February of

1980 Suriname a military dictatorship was set up. As popular discontent with the military grew over the next few years, the military sought to distract from this public relations disaster by expelling many Guyanese (from the neighboring country of Guyana) from the country in late 1984. They played this game well and soon even Surinamese Christians were speaking towards Guyanese like German Christians spoke against the Jews in 1939 Germany. Our small church plant had a large contingent of Guyanese members who were affected by the expulsions during which many human rights abuses took place. These, coupled with the deep-seated prejudice of even some Surinamese evangelical



pastors, led me to preach a biblical message on the treatment of aliens. I detailed some of these abuses, which included the death of several infants whose mothers were forced to give birth while in detention awaiting deportation without access to any medical assistance. The sermon was circulated to many Surinamese pastors and fell into the hands of a Jesuit priest who published (anonymously) some of the human rights abuses I had mentioned. He was arrested by the military and during interrogation revealed that I had been one of the sources of information from which he quoted. In short order the matter was released in the news by the military. Instead of being supported by the foreign evangelicals, I was separated from by most of them for standing up for those who could not speak for themselves. In contrast, I was supported by the liberal Suriname Council of Churches. After some questioning by the police, the matter was dropped by the military, but the stigma placed on me for speaking out in this way was never forgiven me by the evangelicals, with a few rare exceptions.

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Fields: Albania, Italy, Russia, U.K., Congo, Zambia, and Suriname.

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During our time working in Nicaragua when it was controlled by the Sandinistas, I found a similar attitude expressed toward me from strong supporters of the Contras in the U.S. By working with churches inside Nicaragua who were not raising up arms against the Sandinistas, that I must somehow be playing into the hands of the Sandinistas and be a leftist.



Contras in Honduras



Ortega in Nicaragua

Dr. Franco Maggiotto in Italy was perhaps one of the master bridge-builders across many different barriers (Roman Catholic, Judaism, and Islam). Yet, he was castigated regularly by narrow-minded Protestants who considered his continued contact with Roman Catholics as a compromise, though this has gave him a number of converts to Christ and even some defections from that apostate church. The bridges he built into the Jewish community in Italy, elsewhere in Europe and even in Israel gave him a platform for sharing the Gospel. But these bridges also created suspicions on the part of others. His contacts amongst the Islamic community in Italy have opened doors, but this gave some the concern that he might have been compromising the Gospel like the liberals.

In Russia, our colleagues there are necessarily quiet about the fact that some people with Jewish blood are in membership and positions of leadership in their churches. Anti-Semitism runs high in that land, and thus the many Russian Jews in Israel. In France, our colleague there, a converted Jew suffers tremendously because of being Jewish and Reformed. In Suriname, we still have remnants of the racial problems that are reminders of the massacre of East Indians by Blacks in the MacKenzie Massacres in Guyana (May 24-26, 1964).

We must learn to be like Christ, counted among those that condemn the sins while reaching out to the sinners. We must not let those who hate Christ show a false love that deceives while Christians erect barriers against sin to keep it out.

Not unlike the Roman Catholic Church, many Protestants and Evangelicals have become the Christian

Pharisees of our day in many ways. We must repent of this or Jesus may say to us, *"Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent."*

Because of what I have written over the past few months on Roman Catholicism (January, February and March 2004 newsletters), I want to make clear that despite the apostate condition of that "church", we must be most careful not to translate our legitimate despising of the institution (as Jesus had for much of the structure of the Pharisees and Sadducees), into a hatred for its people. Without a doubt there will be wolves in its midst who (like the Pharisees) must be resisted. But we must think of each group as the Apostle Paul was instructed to think of the Corinthians when God said, *"I have yet much people in this city."* This is not only true of Roman Catholics, but also of almost every other group including Muslims and Jews. We must be bridge builders into the various groups (be they racial, language, cultural, political or otherwise) and seek to understand how the Gospel applies to their situation and how God would have us to apply it. We cannot leave this to the government, the liberals or the secularists. These principles are of Christ. Therefore, the church should be at the forefront of such efforts. That concept on the part of every individual (in their respective callings) and every Reformed and Presbyterian Church over a period of years, would change the complexion of our nations and even the world. Missions takes far more than money, it takes these bridge-building relationships and attitudes on the part of each member of Christ's church, especially those who have a great corner on the truth of Scripture: *For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required...* Please make this a matter of prayer for our RCM Team as we struggle to build bridges within our various fields into groups where much prejudice exists, and as we seek to live Christ before the watching world. Pray also for yourselves and the churches in North America, that we may reach beyond our own prejudices in our own churches and live as Christ before the watching world, building bridges into the groups of "sinners" and "publicans" of our day.

 Geoffrey Donnan

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