

AGENTS OF CHANGE

1 Corinthians 1:26-31

Christine and I began living among the Chinantec Indians of Southern Mexico in Nov 1970. It has been interesting and challenging to learn their language and understand their outlook on life.

I recall one occasion a girl came rushing into our house to tell the young lady that was working for us to leave at once, because a man with the thunder spirit had just arrived at the airstrip and was walking up to our house. He was bald! (= has the power of the thunder spirit).

On another occasion I inadvertently pointed to the rainbow. My Chinantec friend grabbed my hand down. He warned me that my arm would go stiff if I offended the rainbow spirit!

Although we went there to translate God's word for them and give them the message of life in their own language, we have learned much from them too. New ways of worship. A quietness and gentleness of spirit. And we have learned to expect God to do great things.

1 Cor 1:26-29

²⁶ Now remember what you were, my friends, when God called you. From the human point of view few of you were wise or powerful or of high social standing. ²⁷ God purposely chose what the world considers nonsense in order to shame the wise, and he chose what the world considers weak in order to shame the powerful. ²⁸ He chose what the world looks down on and despises and thinks is nothing, in order to destroy what the world thinks is important. ²⁹ This means that no one can boast in God's presence.

Francisco and Felix were the first two believers. From the world's point of view, they were two insignificant nobodies. But God chose them to begin a work that has transformed a community.

Felix's wife had deserted him and gone off to live with another man.

By the time Francisco was 18 he was a perpetual drunk, many times having to sleep overnight in his field because he was unable to walk home. He told me how even one of the old drunks had scolded him for drinking so heavily at such a young age.

Both men were only semi-literate, having finished grade 2 of primary school – all that was available to them in their town at that time.

But God chose these two men to be His agents of change in their society.

As they studied a Spanish New Testament given to them by the new priest in town, they found that even though much was beyond their grasp, what they could understand really spoke to their hearts. They encouraged others to join in with the Bible studies that the priest was promoting, and continued them in between the priest's long absences while he visited other towns around.

A year later there were about 10 men and 2 women meeting regularly for Bible studies.

Then that priest left the area and the priest that replaced him opposed the Bible studies, saying that this book was not for the common man. When the new priest became aware that they were continuing anyway, he forced them out of the church. Because we had been along to one of the studies led by the former priest, and had Spanish NTs for sale at our house, those studying the Bible began to come to us with their questions.

By Easter 1972 there were about 14 men and 2 women meeting regularly. The town authorities became concerned about the growing interest in this radical group, and so initiated an intense persecution.

Ten of the men were put in jail from Easter Friday night through to Monday morning. Their lives were threatened. And for a long time after their release, all the believers were discriminated against in town, with those who owned stores refusing to sell to them. This meant that they had to walk 30 kilometres out to the road, and another 10 more to the nearest town where they could buy their necessities.

Both Francisco and Felix have worked as Pastor and Associate Pastor over the years, and have consistently maintained a clear testimony of their convictions, despite the costs to them personally. Felix also joined our team for translating the NT into his language, checking for naturalness & style.

Now, the church in San Pedro has about 600 teens and adults that meet regularly for worship, and they have reached out to 9 other towns in that area, with another 400 believers.

At Christmas and Easter, or other special occasions, when people return to the village from jobs in Mexico City or other large cities, the new church will have 800 or more in attendance.

Over half the voting population of San Pedro is now part of the Evangelical church, and the changes there have been astonishing. For us it has been like living in the middle of a miracle.

We have seen the shackles of alcoholism broken from dozens of men, most of whom had become alcoholics in their teenage years due to the social pressure on them to drink while doing their 6 years of obligatory town duties.

We have seen the attitudes of husbands and wives changed towards each other, so that the men no longer beat their wives or force them to fetch the majority of the firewood for their cooking fires.

Women now have an integral part in shaping their society. Once they had no voice in the town politics, even though Mexican law gave women the vote. Within the Church, they now have a regular part in the services, in song leading, organisation of services, and a regular Wed. evening meeting that they themselves lead, but which is attended by the men who simply participate in the singing and leave the rest up to the ladies. More and more women now attend the town meetings and express their viewpoints. God's word has had a profound effect on this community.

And we praise Him that we were able to present the completed Chinantec NT to them in Sept. 1986; an occasion I will never forget, with the tears and the testimonies of person after person expressing their feelings about having the word of God in their own language at last.

But how did this all come to pass?

Did God write a message in the sky?

Did He speak audibly to the town so that they bowed in awe and proclaimed allegiance to Him?

Did He appear at a town meeting and tell everyone to repent?

God used 2 men – Francisco and Felix – men who had only 2nd grade Primary School education, and were redeemed alcoholics, to be His agents of change in that society. When these men had accepted Christ into their lives, they wanted everyone to experience God's transforming love.

As we look through the Scripture, we very rarely see God stepping into the affairs of men unbidden.

The miracles that freed the Israelites from their bondage in Egypt was due to Moses' obedience.

The great prophet Samuel was born as an answer to prayer by a childless mother.

Jerusalem was reconstructed by King Artaxerxes' cupbearer, Nehemiah. Read his prayer in Nehemiah Chap 1, and you will understand why God chose this humble man to be His agent of change.

Queen Esther, wife of an unbelieving despot, was God's agent of change to frustrate the schemes of the Prime Minister.

We see a little boy giving up his lunch to Jesus, not knowing quite what to expect but, somehow, he must have felt he was going to get it back. Through the faith of a little boy and a burly fisherman, Andrew, our Lord was able to feed 5000, not counting women and children.

And He used another fisherman, Peter, to be the one to proclaim that Jesus is alive, first to the Jews in Jerusalem at the time of Pentecost, when 3000 were added to the Church, then to the Gentiles at the centurion Cornelius' home.

God chose a scholar and religious fanatic, Saul, to become the great apostle Paul, and establish churches where no-one else had yet gone with the message of peace with God through the shed blood of Christ.

He used a cobbler from England, William Carey, to be the founder of the modern missionary movement. Under Carey's supervision the NT/Bible was translated into 40 of India's languages.

You see, God's method is you!

God's method is me!

God's method is people!

I would like us to listen in on Jesus talking to his Father just before he was apprehended and crucified.

John 17:1-4

After Jesus finished saying this, he looked up to heaven and said, "Father, the hour has come. Give glory to your Son, so that the Son may give glory to you. ² For you gave him authority over all people, so that he might give eternal life to all those you gave him. ³ And eternal life means to know you, the only true God, and to know Jesus Christ, whom you sent. ⁴ I have shown your glory on earth; I have finished the work you gave me to do.

John 17:14-20

¹⁴ I gave them your message, and the world hated them, because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. ¹⁵ I do not ask you to take them out of the world, but I do ask you to keep them safe from the Evil One. ¹⁶ Just as I do not belong to the world, they do not belong to the world. ¹⁷ Dedicate them to yourself by means of the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸ I sent them into the world, just as you sent me into the world. ¹⁹ And for their sake I dedicate myself to you, in order that they, too, may be truly dedicated to you.

²⁰ I pray not only for them, but also for those who believe in me because of their message.

In verse 14, Jesus says: *they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.*

When you put your faith in Jesus, your citizenship changed. You have become a son or daughter of the living God!

God, our Father, has bestowed upon us the awesome privilege of being involved in the purposes of eternity. Our Lord has placed the responsibility of changing our society and this world in our hands.

God is looking for men and women, and young people, who are willing to see the potential that is in our society, and in the people we meet, and then be His agent to effect a change.

Our Lord wants you to make a difference in people's lives! In John 17:20 Jesus says: *"I pray not only for them, but also for those who believe in me because of their message.*

One person can make a difference for either good or bad.

For the bad, we are aware of the impact of Mao Tse Tung, and Hitler; and many other such despots.

A difference for the good we can nominate people such as...

Norman Borlaug, the Green Agronomist whose work created the Green revolution. His work is credited with saving over a billion people from starvation.

Marie Curie discovered polonium and radium. She showed us how to treat tumours with radiation and helped create one of the machines that changed the world – the x-ray.

Tired from a full day's work, **Rosa Parks** boarded a Montgomery, Alabama, bus on Dec. 1, 1955. When she refused to obey the driver's order to give up her seat and move to the back of the bus so a white person could sit there, she was arrested for civil disobedience. Parks' act of defiance and the Montgomery Bus Boycott that followed are recognized as pivotal moments in the Civil Rights Movement.

As a 20 year old, **Cameron Townsend**, decided to obey Jesus' command to take the gospel to the nations. He stated **"The greater need is where the greatest darkness is."**

Initially he tried selling Spanish Bibles to the Cakchiquel Indians of Guatemala, but when one of them said “If your God is so great, why doesn’t he speak my language?” Townsend decided to translate the NT into Cakchiquel. Seeing the impact of the translated Word on the Cakchiquel people, He decided that all people deserve the right to hear the Good News in their own language. And so was born Wycliffe Bible Translators. In 2000, Wycliffe completed the 500th translation of the NT. Since 2000, Wycliffe has actively formed partnerships with many other mission organisations, such as The Bible League and The Bible Society to translate the Scriptures.

- Of the 7,391 spoken languages in the world, work is currently in progress in 4,447 languages. Work has yet to be started in **561** languages – spoken by 38.9 million people. This means that there are still at least 561 languages where no one is yet learning the language in preparation for translating Scripture.

The good news is: Each and every one of us acting as God’s representatives can influence our society and establish God’s kingdom in the hearts of mankind.

Remember Jesus’ words in John 17:20 *“I pray not only for them, but also for those who believe in me because of their message.”*

Praying “Thy Kingdom come” is not meant to imply a passive attitude, a relaxing in our easy chairs, waiting for God to do His thing. It is a commitment to participation in God’s programme for changing people, our community and the world.

We see some of God’s agents backing down from their calling, such as King Saul, and Demas in the NT, of whom Paul writes “Demas has forsaken me, having loved this world.”

We see some of God’s agents who have slipped, but were reinstated to do His work; such as King David and the apostle Peter.

But what we find as a common ingredient in every one of God’s most effective agents is that they are people who spend time getting to know Him.

Francisco and Felix had a hunger to understand God’s word even though they had to struggle with a foreign language, Spanish. And God used them mightily in their society, along with those who joined them in their spiritual odyssey. They had a goal, a vision of all their townspeople trusting in Christ. And now, more than half of their community are followers of Christ.

What is your vision, your desire for this nation, for its governmental system, its educational system, its morality, its social, financial and judicial systems?

Are you willing to be God’s agent and make a difference in our society? His power is available to all who will honour Him.

And always take courage through Jesus’ words in John 17:20: *“I pray not only for them, but also for those who believe in me because of their message.”*

And what about the many language groups around the world that to date have never heard the message of God’s love in their own language because so few of God’s children have been willing to leave the comforts of home, learn a new language, and be God’s agent that will bring them the message of hope and new life in Christ?

Just a few minutes ago we sang that wonderful old hymn “Stand up, stand up for Jesus...”

By God’s grace, and through the power of the Holy Spirit, may you and I be God’s agents of change!