

Culture Shock

November 2006

These musings were sent from Joanne Beckley who, along with her husband, David, live and teach the gospel in South Africa.

Thinking back on Sunday, worshiping at Tshiredzheni (South Africa), I couldn't help but reflect on the trend I see in our increasingly desired larger congregations in America, with their well-dressed worshipers in their beautiful buildings -- and making comparisons . . .

Here I was sitting in a building, being built little by little as money becomes available, (three years so far). The roof is finally on, but no windows yet and the dirt floor is awaiting cement. Backless benches had been wiped off with sweaty palms and were standing on the uneven ground, while the dust was floating in the air as everyone arrived and found seating. But what caused my thoughts to turn toward my original comment was the arrival of a barefoot woman who sat down beside me. Her clothing smelled of her cooking fire and it wasn't long before I began to notice fleas were trying to find a home on me. When the singing began, she was given a songbook which she held upside down while she sang.

So, here's my question -- how many of us could offer a venue that would encourage this poor woman to attend, be willing to sit beside her, or help her "read" from her songbook? I have long been fearful of our American snobbery toward the poor, albeit, unintentional and unaware -- or is it? Yes, we like our comforts that a nice building brings, the ease of being able to worship and teach, the evermore colorful bulletin boards, and even the security that "belonging" to a large well-heeled group provides. Even those we choose to reach with the gospel must be able to offer us a certain level of ability to "belong." But I fear we are missing the whole point as Jesus said, "They that are whole need not a physician; but they that are sick" (Mt 9:12). I'm asking myself, am I possibly unaware of wrongfully thinking I am "whole"? For you see, I am STILL having a problem because those fleas found a home. . . .

The part that bothered me most about Joanne's observations was not that I, as an American, live in luxurious surroundings. For those who have not traveled much outside of the U.S., it is hard to imagine the surpassing wealth and flood of conveniences that we enjoy relative to the abject poverty of the majority of the world's population. To a large degree, we have what we have by accident of birth; we are fortunate to be 21st century Americans.

What bothers me is her acknowledged recognition of thinking herself whole when she -- and we -- are not. Our accident of birth is not unalloyed good fortune, for our prosperity deceives us into thinking that our "style" of Christianity is the standard. It is so easy to be distracted by the "window dressing," the things that are not essential but which come to define us -- perhaps even spiritually.

The insidiousness of materialism is not merely that we want an HD-TV that we cannot afford. It is that we feel a sense of spiritual superiority because of our building, our classes, our "administration" (elders, deacons, preachers who meet certain select standards), even our worship: the quality of our singing, the pace of our schedule; or our work: we support "x" number of preachers, etc. Satan can use our prosperity in so many subtle ways to either take our minds off what is really important, or promote what is relatively unimportant to prominence.

The truth: we are sick and in need of a physician. We are not "whole," no matter how slick our Powerpoint production or stout our weekly contribution. And what we all need is the healing of the pure and simple gospel, not a gospel propped up by our sophistication, efficiency and appealing presentation.

Joanne Beckley's observations upset me because I see myself in her words. I see the skewing of my own attitudes and values by my cultural surroundings. How does her "goad" make you feel? If you are offended or feel she is munching on sour grapes, perhaps you are more affected than you realize.