

The Need For Patience in Foreign Evangelism

John Smith

"He who believes and is baptized shall be saved." It just doesn't get any easier than that. Anyone can understand it. Anyone can come to believe it and act upon it. It's so simple that it shouldn't take a person very long to understand it, believe it, and act upon it. In fact, any one who can't understand, believe, and act upon a Scripture this simple, must not be very sincere or smart.

But wait a minute. Is the process of developing obedient faith really that simple? What about folks who haven't had the advantages many of us have enjoyed? In Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, we encounter people who are reading and studying the Bible for the first time in their lives. They may or may not be using a translation that is easy for them to read. If interested in Bible study, they have probably been exposed to a myriad of conflicting Bible teaching. The Word of our Lord must be preached with great patience. Given the background of most of the people we encounter in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, there is a particularly great need to heed Paul's admonition "to preach the word ... with great patience" (2 Timothy 4:2). We must be willing to give them time and space to think, study, and come to conviction apart from pressure or intimidation. Instant, mass conversions may be impressive in our reports, but how much depth and stability do they reflect? (see Matthew 13:20-21)

Events in Moldova have reinforced in my mind the blessing of patience in our teaching and the foolishness of expecting, or even desiring, instant conversions. In January of 1997, Greg Gwin and I had the opportunity to build upon work already done by Steve Brewer and James Hamilton. We were introduced to and studied with two honest, truth seekers with ties to a large group of Bible students. At the end of the month, no one had been baptized. We left a bit disappointed.

In April of 2000, Daniel Holloway and Johnny Felker worked with the same group of folks, studying many of the same truths we had taught. They forged strong ties of friendship and established their credibility as spiritually minded Bible teachers, but no one was baptized. They left a bit frustrated.

Later, Phil Morgan and Jimmy Mickells traveled to Chisinau for some intensive studies with the same people. Many of the same subjects and Scriptures that the previous two groups addressed were debated at length. During their stay a handful of folks were quietly baptized. From the way it was handled it was clear that they were not interested in impressing their American visitors, but sincerely wanted to obey what they had come to understand as Bible truth. Shortly before Phil and Jimmy came home, Larry and Linda Paden arrived in Chisinau for a two month period of labor. They found a small group of baptized believers with the potential of influencing many, many more. To the glory of our Lord, during their work a considerable number of the original group of Bible students were baptized in to Christ. After nearly seven months of intensive labor by a variety of teachers, a wondrous amount of fruit was brought forth by the power of the Gospel.

The need for patience in the Moldovan work has gone far beyond waiting for fruit to be brought forth. Our new brothers and sisters are babes in Christ. Their knowledge and understanding is incomplete. They struggle to practice what they understand to be true. They have much to learn and many changes to make. Should we expect them to learn it all and make all the needed changes quickly? Of course not! We must be patient as we continue to gently and lovingly help their assembly become more and more like the church of the New Testament. We must not bully them or come with the arrogance that so often marks the "ugly American." Step by step, little by little, truth by truth we can help nurture them, giving them time to think, study, and become convicted.

God's Word has taken root and continues to bear fruit. There are now four faithful churches in Moldova. An entire congregation has renounced institutionalism and repented of the sins associated with it. New Bible studies have begun in some out-of-the-way villages. Two of the four churches have several strong men who are good students and powerful defenders of truth. There is a talented and capable Bible teacher in Chisinau. The past decade has resulted in fruit being born to the glory of the Lord.

Are all those who initially embraced the truth faithful? No. Has everyone grown as they should have? No. Satan has been successful in luring some of our brethren back into the world. Others continue to struggle with ungodly attitudes. But truth has brought forth fruit and brethren have grown. None of this has been easy and none was accomplished "overnight." Not all of the reports from work done in Moldova have been exciting. Not all of them were filled with glowing reports of mass conversions. In fact, most contained news of hearts being "plowed," seeds of the Gospel being planted, good men and women who watered and waiting to see if any fruit would be brought forth. Without patience, this work would not have been done.

If you have any desire to travel to Eastern Europe or the former Soviet Union to teach the Bible, but aren't blessed with patience, then please stay home (preferably in your own closet, where you can do no harm while praying for patience). Working with people who have little or no Bible background and are trying to learn about the Lord and His church amidst conflicting claims requires the ability to prioritize what will be addressed and what will be, for the moment, ignored. Effective teaching demands that we give the students whatever time they require to study, think, and pray on their own. This is not to suggest it's my judgment that everyone who has worked thus far in Moldova has expressed perfect patience. I know it's not true because I was there with myself! At times I stumbled, groped, muttered, and yes, made mistakes as a result of having an imperfect patience. Through the mistakes I have made and from conversations with others who have made a similar confession, I have learned valuable lessons in the need for and development of patience.

There are a number of enemies of patience - all of which are dangerous and deadly:

- 1) Failing to deeply understand and remember where these people have come from spiritually can lead to expectations which exceed what the real possibilities are. The imparting of knowledge is hampered. Satan prevails.
- 2) A short trip may cost the brethren \$2,000 or more. This may put pressure on the person to "have something to show" for the investment. He may push too hard for closure on issues needing much more time. Selfish attitudes and carnal motives can creep in. When this happens, truth suffers and Satan rejoices.
- 3) Pride can sneak in easily making the man less patient. Prolonged studies can wear on all the people involved. Weariness can make patience and humility hard to maintain. Before you know it, under the guise of working through an important Biblical issue, what you really have is a battle of wills. Patience loses. Satan wins.

I am reminded of the agricultural truism that the seed which takes the longest to germinate often produces the strongest plant. Brethren, patience is an important fertilizer in the process of germination and growth.

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