

Belizean Briefs IX

November 5-15, 2007

Brethren,

Below I am sending my report on a recent trip to Belize.

My Ninth Trip: From very early November 5, 2007 to late November 15.

Lonnie Oldag and I traveled together to Belize to teach the gospel of Christ, not to build houses, hand out food or money to people to attract them to Christ, start secular schools, or otherwise participate in the social-gospel mission. This was the smoothest trip of my nine, because of the marvelous weather on flight days and for the days spent in Belize, no delays or late arrivals, or customs-immigration problems. After a two-hour trip from Huntsville to Houston and a 2 hour thirty minute flight from Houston to Belize City, we met the Dana Whislens at the airport, some 48 miles and 60 minutes from their Orange Walk Town home. I took a case of 27 copies of Mrs. Lee's Stories about God's First People covering the Book of Genesis for the families in the Orange Walk and San Narciso congregations to use in teaching their children and themselves. These were purchased by the Oakland church in Limestone County, Alabama. I do not count myself a self-appointed apostle to Belize or protector of the church in Belize, but simply desired to "go back and see how they are doing" (Acts 15:36).

Lonnie Oldag: Although this was his first trip to Belize, Lonnie has made 2 teaching trips to the country of Czechoslovakia (now the Czech Republic), where he also lived and worked for the Lord in 1992-93. In fact, his wife Amanda lived there with him, and their first son Austin was born there. Because of his study of Spanish, he has an interest in teaching in Spanish-speaking areas. Lonnie is an able, energetic sower of the seed of the kingdom, who shows advanced knowledge, wisdom, and judgment for his thirty-six years. Lonnie spoke twice at Orange Walk and twice at San Narciso, as well as helping with numerous private studies and handing out of flyers advertising the Orange Walk meeting. In many conversations and efforts to teach, he "labored much in the Lord," leaving no room for doubts about his earnest desire to save souls (Rom. 16:12).

Radio Program: The owner of a local, politically aligned radio station offered Dana free time every other week during the hour dedicated to political talk. He had done one thirty-minute program, which he and Adolfo Ramirez had done as a call-in show with one call. Soon after our arrival Dana asked me to help him on a second show, which was postponed because of a "hot political issue but was allowed to operate for 45 minutes. We also tried to encourage calls but had none. The third program was also postponed, with Dana puzzled about what course to take - buy time, drop the idea, or continue to use whatever "crumbs" fell his way. The station does reach into Mexico and Guatemala, I understand. In my judgment, such a program will probably require many weeks for an American speaking English to build an audience confident enough to call him. This is an opportunity of avenues available, sometimes at little cost, for spreading the precious message of Christ (Mt. 28:19).

Flyer Handout/Orange Walk Meeting: Considerable time was spent in handing out flyers advertising the three-night meeting at Orange Walk. Lonnie and Adolfo did this in areas beyond the immediate neighborhood of the meetinghouse, and Dana did it among his neighbors near the building. Lessons included "The Love of God," "Faith," and "The New Birth," with my teaching the first and last lessons and Lonnie teaching the second one. There was good attendance from Orange Walk and San Narciso congregations on Tuesday and Thursday nights (33 and 40, a full house) and only local brethren and two visitors on Wednesday night (24 present). It was a joy to see the Orange Walk brethren receive their brethren from San Narciso and Blue Creek and visitors so warmly.

Iron Sharpens Iron: Lonnie and I had many occasions during our time in Belize to discuss passages and their applications, mistakes sometimes made, how to handle situations, concerns, and otherwise edify each other. I certainly grew to appreciate Lonnie even more than before (Prov. 27:17).

Our Accommodations: Because the Whipples learned shortly before our trip that they would need to move to make their house available to the landlord's relatives, we chose to stay the entire time in Orange Walk in the meetinghouse across the street from the Whislens. Actually it is the house which they rent and allow the church to use for meeting. The question arises as to the scripturalness of using the meetinghouse for bed and showering. On other occasions churches have put me up in their building or in an apartment joined to the building. In reality there is no difference in their providing me a place to stay in someone's house, in a motel, or in their own facility. The determining factor is the work being done. If the work is scriptural, the church may choose to do that work wherever it is expedient for them to do so. It is interesting that first-century congregations sometimes met in people's houses, which were also used for the family's needs; Paul both lived and taught in the same rented house in Rome (Acts 28:30; Col. 4:15).

Translators: While all teachers would prefer not having to use translators, I do not view them as a "necessary evil." During the apostolic age the divine arrangement precluded the possibility of translation errors (1 Cor. 2; 12). Inspired translation was available in the gift of interpreting tongues. Every foreign worker could relate interesting and humorous stories about translating the gospel. During my nine trips to Belize I have worked with five different translators. The most competent ones study both the Bible and the languages with which they work. They discuss the upcoming lessons and particular words they might need to use, to assure accuracy in message. Not even a translator has the right to alter the divine message; a poorly translated lesson might mislead one to believe and practice error. Simple and standard words are always the easiest for translators; colloquialisms and slang present problems. Translated lessons require close to twice the time. This was my second trip when Adolfo served as my primary translator, though Geovanni helped in this capacity a couple of nights. Because of his influence in speaking the gospel and the need for accuracy, it is best for a translator to be a devoted disciple of Jesus. Their former biases and misunderstandings can distort the truth. I am thankful that we have the Bible in our language, and I also am thankful to have Christians able to translate in various countries of the world.

A Very Sick Infant: Word reached Carol Whisler of the grave condition of infant Dionelli, a great granddaughter of sister Idalee in the Orange Walk church. Resulting from the rape of her mother, she was anemic, was dehydrated, was not passing urine, and had a mass showing up in an x-ray. The local hospital was unable to perform the needed tests and was failing to do anything for a few days, even to give the screaming baby Tylenol or transfuse the blood given by a family friend. When we learned that the tests could be done in Belize City for \$450 Belizean (\$225 US), I gave just under half of the amount from funds various Christians had handed me before leaving and Dana used money similarly supplied him for the rest. Those tests showed that the kidneys were healthy, the baby was anemic and dehydrated, and the unidentified tumor was not restricting urine flow. With no oncologist in the entire country of Belize, further work with the tumor must take place in Mexico or by a Belizean surgeon biopsying it for testing elsewhere. An energy fund is set up in the country to pay for such medical work and travel. What a blessing we enjoy to have the care and facilities we need in our country! Frequent prayers went up to the Great Physician for this little one.

Bible Studies: Daily efforts are made to conduct current studies or to initiate new ones. It is easy for two studies to be carried on at the same time with four of us doing them (Dana, Lonnie, Adolfo, and Bobby). Some groups from the US go only to set up and begin studies, which then fall into the hands of the men working there and keep them busy for weeks and even months. When nightly preaching is taking place, the one doing the speaking does not usually have quite as much time for these studies, but he also participates in them. The notable difference between our trips and the "mission trips" of many groups is that teaching the gospel is what we do, not a sideline or something that we slip in covertly. Most of these other trips are consumed with building houses, repairing roofs, taking children on outings, etc., with little attention to the Bible. Our entire focus is on teaching the Bible, converting people to Christ, edifying Christians, and building up local churches. The religious doctrines/groups most commonly encountered are the Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Roman Catholics, and Evangelicals (generic Protestants).

The first two of these groups know what they believe and why they believe; they stoutly defend their beliefs. Catholics lack the dedication of the others and often are such only in name. Many Belizeans surprise you with their general knowledge of the Bible: they can easily locate the different books in a study and know something of the Bible story. Progress in leading people to Christ, however, is often slow. Bible Correspondence Courses in both Spanish and English are commonly used. Making disciples and teaching disciples to live obediently to Christ must continue till the Lord returns (Mt. 28:19-20).

San Narciso Meeting: Located close to the Northern Highway leading from Orange Walk to Corozal some 20 miles north of Orange Walk Town, San Narciso is the location of the congregation which originally began in Corozal during the work of Jesse Hightower approximately in 1997. Greg and Christine Whipple live here with their children, but they have already begun their move north to Corozal, some 15 miles away. The brethren here had also asked that I speak for them three nights and twice on Sunday. Lonnie agreed to speak once at night and once on Sunday in both meetings. The church has experienced several big problems over the years, but there seems to be a strong core of members, a number of whom are sisters in the Lord. The lessons here included "Some Things in Torment That Ought to Be in the Church,"

"Self-Control," "What Sin Is and What It Will Do to Me," "Becoming like Jesus," and "Winning the Victory over Sin." Our purpose in these lessons was to instruct the brethren, remind them of what they already knew, and encourage them to grow stronger to overcome the evil one (1 Tim. 4:6; 2 Tim. 2:14). It is always a joy to see these warm-hearted people and to worship with them.

Sleep Interferences: Ecclesiastes 12 describes the increasing problems associated with advancing age, among which he mentioned "rising up at the voice of a bird," probably pointing to one's inability to sleep without interruptions. Preventing any hasty conclusion concerning my own age, I am consoled by the fact that thirty-six year old Lonnie also had difficulty sleeping because of the noises often coming from the neighborhood-cars, loud music, talking, and, yes, even the early morning rooster's crowing. The wooden shutters on the windows where we slept were closed on some rather cool nights, helping also with noises. Electric fans, quite useful during the day, also proved their worth at night by muffling the noise level, allowing us to sleep better. Early morning wake-up usually came about 5:30, when we prepared for our early morning walk of almost an hour. For whatever toll those noises and early wake-up time exacted, early afternoon brief siestas offered compensation.

Belizean Work Habits: Some laziness and begging dot the landscape, encouraged by government dole and American handouts, even by religious groups. Some American Christians even thought it would be "nice" to supply a family already consumed by worldliness (Belizean style) with a television set. Many Belizeans work hard, because life is hard for them. The forty-hour workweek is not the standard here; it often is more like sixty hours, with seasonal workers in sugar cane sometimes working even more. The seasonal nature of much work requires many of them to fill out their income with other "pick up" jobs like chopping grass or weeds, selling fruit, and making wood products for sale as souvenirs. Many now are able to work in construction because of the many buildings being put up, and many others are working in the free zone along the Belize-Mexico border. Christians have been taught in recent years to work, not to develop a dependency on American brethren (Eph. 4:28; 2 Thes. 3:8-9, 12). That is good!

Caleb Whisler's Health: This six-year old son has had many health problems in his short lifetime, necessitating his birth take place in the U.S. and his lengthy hospitalization in Baltimore earlier this year. Numerous American Christians prayerfully followed his progress and shared in the family's needs during that time. A liver problem, producing intolerance for sugar, wheat gluten, and dairy products and requiring a very restricted diet, is also accompanied by celiac's disease which he shares with his mother. Brown rice has become the grain source for their bread/pasta and rice milk his only milk. Affected by his health problems, all of Caleb's baby teeth have been capped except one. Nevertheless, Caleb is very thankful for what he is able to enjoy, manifesting a positive attitude practically all the time. Carol works tirelessly to provide what he needs, even using a small electric mill to grind the brown rice into flour for his use and hers (Prov. 31:25).

Needy Brethren: While poverty is not desirable (Prov. 30:7-9), it is not fatal! Sometimes it is the result of personal habits, family sickness/injury, economic disaster, job loss, etc. Some of the immature Christians used to ask visiting Americans for help, but good teaching has largely changed this practice. Three Christians needed help this trip, including a paraplegic unable to work and one who had been laid off from a job at the papaya plant because of Hurricane Dean's recent destruction of the crop. I left money with Greg and Dana for future needs of some of these same people. Various local brethren usually hand me money to take for varied expenses, including these needs (Tit. 3:14). I left an exceptionally good air mattress, which I bought three years ago and have taken each year to get a better night's sleep, for the brother without hands or feet, who was having problems with bed sores. Carol Whisler informed me that such sores are much less a problem on this kind of bed.

One for the Record Book: Readers of my Belizean Briefs are probably aware that, by request of the brethren in Belize, I make my trips now shortly before the wet season/hurricane season ends and the sugar cane harvest resumes. On this particular trip the weather was superior to any I have witnessed in Belize-less humid, cooler, and breezy. Only two days were rainy and humid. Mild days and pleasant nights were the norm, with a blanket necessary some nights. Even November can see a combination of oppressive heat and humidity. Two Alabama preachers were able to appreciate the good weather and to work more efficiently as a result. For this good gift we thank God (Jas. 1:17).

Best Regards,

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