

June 2008

From Killer to Elder

I must admit that when I sat down to have the final negotiation with the tribal chief of the Lacandon people in Chiapas, Mexico, I was a bit nervous. It was six years ago, but it seems like yesterday.

The Lacandon are one of the last, truly unreached people groups in the Western Hemisphere; these people have had little to no exposure to Jesus during the last 2000 years. The Lacandon speak a dialect of the ancient Mayan language.



Before I sat down with the chief and one of his wives inside a little, thatched-roof hut, I had only seen photographs of the Lacandon; the males never cut their long, black hair; and they wear long, white smocks. The Lacandon have no village center or town; each family lives alone in the jungle.

The tribal chief agreed to meet with me because a Tzeltal man, Dario Lopez, from a neighboring area, had won the respect and trust of the Lacandon people over an eight-year period. Dario was determined to share his faith in Jesus with them. But to win the trust of the Lacandon, he had to go through an initiation. As a part of his initiation, Dario was thrown from cliffs into rivers, blind-folded and left alone in the jungle, and forced to eat raw pig. He was tested endlessly to see if he had the guts and stamina to endure the Lacandon way of life. Finally, Dario asked if he could live among the Lacandon and share more wisdom about Jesus. Because Dario had passed the Lacandon test of trust, the chief agreed to discuss the matter.

So there I sat six years ago with Dario Lopez, the chief, one of his wives, and three other leaders from the Tzeltal Presbyterian Church of Chiapas. Before the meeting, I was informed that this particular chief was one of the most vicious Lacandon and he had killed many other Lacandon who had gotten in his way. Killing was a way of life with the Lacandon; murder, or the threat of murder, was one of the few methods they had to govern themselves.

After a lengthy discussion through an interpreter, the chief turned to me and said, "I have one last request before I allow Dario Lopez to live among us." With a bit of hesitation, I asked the chief what it was he had in mind. He turned to the man sitting next to me, and said, "I want that man's watch." We all gasped because that particular watch was expensive and very valuable to the man wearing it. Another Tzeltal man and I jumped up and pleaded for the chief to take our watches instead; I even got a bucket of water and showed the chief how my watch floated.

The chief would have none of it; he wanted nothing less than the man's gold watch. Reluctantly, but bravely, the man took off the watch and handed it to the chief. Our deal was done; Dario Lopez was given permission to live among the Lacandon with support from my organization, Presbyterian Frontier Fellowship.

Dario Lopez lived with the Lacandon for four years, during which time he had the privilege of watching the Holy Spirit bring four Lacandon into the kingdom of God. A small congregation was established and it was the first time in history that the Lacandon had established a common meeting place, let alone a church. Later, a church building and

community center for Christian education were built. Dario served and loved the Lacandon with all his heart.

Eventually, however, Dario's health was affected and he asked his nephew, Manuel Lopez Perez, to assume missionary responsibilities among the Lacandon. Manuel was put through many of the same trials as his uncle, but eventually he was accepted and allowed to live among the Lacandon, too.

Last week, I had the privilege of revisiting this area of Chiapas and met face-to-face with Manuel; his eyes were beaming as he told how the Lacandon were continuing to respond to the call of Christ in their lives.



Dan reuniting last week with Manuel Lopez Perez, missionary to the Lacandon, and Pablo Feliciano, a Presbyterian leader of the Tzeltal people, in Ocosingo, Chiapas, Mexico.



Bride and Groom

There are now 14 believers among the Lacandon with double that number attending worship services regularly. In fact, Manuel showed me photographs of the first-ever Lacandon Christian wedding. But, what warmed my heart the most was hearing how the Gospel was transforming the lives of these people.

The Lacandon are a tough, independent people. They need no help from anyone.

It was painful for me to hear about the many murders among them, the practice of polygamy, nearly 100 percent illiteracy and the total lack of community. But what pained my heart most was hearing how often suicide was used as the honorable solution to unsolvable problems for the Lacandon people. Men often drink alcohol excessively and hang themselves from trees; women quietly drink poison to end their lives.

The work of Manuel is helping to break these cycles of self-inflicted pain and loneliness.

Faith in Jesus is giving these people hope and a motivation to love one another beyond their wildest dreams and capabilities.

As I was sitting quietly with Manuel and discussing these developments, my eyes became glued to one of Manuel's photographs. There sitting in the front row of one of Manuel's worship services was the chief. He looked completely different! He was smiling from ear to ear. His shoulders seemed so soft and huggable. He no longer looked like a killer. Manuel told me that yes, indeed, the chief had become a follower of Jesus. In fact, he was an elder in the church.

Right before Jesus ascended into heaven nearly two thousand years ago, he left his disciples with one very important set of instructions; "I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the

commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”(Matthew 28: 18-20)

In this passage, the word “nations” comes from the Greek word, “ethne,” from which we get our English word, “ethnicity.” What Jesus was saying to his disciples and to us today was to go out into the world, baptizing all ethnic groups in the world in the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The Church worldwide is getting closer to the day when all the people groups of the world will have their own indigenous church. Missiologists and anthropologists tell us that of about 24,000 people groups in the world, only 8,000 of them today remain unreached, having never heard about Jesus.

As I was ending my time with Manuel, I asked him what his goal was for the coming year. His face beamed as he told me he hoped to share the Good News of Christ with all 1,000 Lacandon in his area. I asked him if he ever felt frightened when approaching some of the more aggressive Lacandon. He turned to me and said, “I have the Lord in me, before me, and behind me, and they are lost. What is there to fear?”

I was embarrassed that I had asked the question. I am one of the most fortunate people in the world to be able to know and support the work of grace-filled people like Manuel Lopez Perez.

Inch by inch, day by day, we are getting closer to the time when the Good News of Jesus Christ will take root within the last, remaining, unreached people groups of the world; when the “Good News about the Kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, so that all the nations will hear it, and then the end will come”(Matthew 24:14).
Come, Lord, Jesus, come.