

WHY IS TUNISIA SO HARD: A PERSONAL VIEW

by I. L.

In a recent article, Robin Daniel presented the lessons of history as he saw it, as to why the church of Christ which flourished in North Africa in the early Christian centuries failed to survive after the Muslim invasion (SEEDBED IX, No. 2). This article presents a contrasting personal viewpoint.

Obviously, anyone working in a resistant country wants to know why the country is so resistant. We need to learn from the past and avoid repeating the mistakes of the past. The history of the church, both remote and recent, therefore becomes very important. A related question asks why there is a church in other Arab countries, but not in Tunisia? This is not a question that is asked only by those of us who work here. Others elsewhere with a real concern for the church are also asking why Tunisia is so resistant. We hear of various ideas and solutions along the way, such as the need to engage in more "spiritual warfare," or to identify and defeat "the enemy."

It is fundamental to recognize, on the one hand, that we who live in the present are not responsible for the sins of the past; while it is appropriate to acknowledge the evident sins of believers of the past, and even "confess" them, it is not for us to "repent" of sins we ourselves have not committed. On the other hand, while we are not responsible for the past, we are responsible *to learn* from the past. We also need to recognize that *certain factors* make the Middle East different from North Africa, and distinguish Tunisia from the rest of North Africa even today.

First of all, it is too simplistic to speak as if there were one Islamic invasion during which Christianity was wiped out. There was a complicated series of invasions, culminating in the occasion in 1152 AD when the last Christians and Jews were given the choice: martyrdom or conversion to Islam.

As I understand history (expert readers may wish to add a note of clarification here), the Christians of the Middle East were offered the status of "*Dhimmi*," as one of the options open to them. They were allowed to exist provided they paid the *djizya*, a special tribute levied on Christians and Jews, and were made a 'subject' people. In 1152 AD the Christian population of Tunisia were not given the options of emigration, or of paying tribute (Cuoq 1984).

Again, in North Africa today it is the Berbers who are the most open to the gospel. Tunisia, however, is 99% Arab, so this country cannot benefit from the greater receptiveness of the Berbers.

Third, the Scriptures were probably not translated into Arabic until about 720 AD (Geisler 1983, p.326), whereas Mohammed died in 632. Moreover, the early church in Tunisia was not rooted in the indigenous local population; it was a Latin church, and Latin was the preferred language and the language of Scriptures then in use. Today, by

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contrast, with the relatively wide availability of Scripture in more than one Arabic translation, radio broadcasts and various videos in Arabic, that is no longer a problem.

Finally, we note that the great waves of missionaries in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries appear to have largely passed by North Africa.

In view of the fact that Tunisia may never in history have had a vibrant indigenous church of any size, we who work here are faced with the exciting prospect of being among the first to bring the gospel. True, others have laboured during this century, but the task has really only begun. We can enter into the spirit of Romans 15:20; there is plenty of scope for someone to work "where the gospel has never been proclaimed before." While such a view easily falls into unbiblical elitism and pride, it can also be a source of joy and encouragement.

So what about today. Why is it that after over one hundred years of work in this country the results are so few: one small group and a few scattered believers?

The human factors are that we are limited to friendship evangelism, and to radio, for the foreseeable future. Literature distribution is problematic and can have unpleasant consequences for those here long term, even when done by tourist groups; this was done extensively in the past, and we are still waiting for the harvest from such efforts.

The government viewpoint needs to be understood. It is watching events in nearby countries very closely; it cannot afford to tolerate anything that decreases the stability of the country. Religion is closely monitored, therefore, especially any form that could become a destabilizing factor. One result is that no one has the right to publicize anything without prior official permission. If the Muslim groups are not permitted to distribute literature, how much less Christians! Whereas in the West we are used to frequently finding unasked-for literature and advertising, etc., in our postbox, the attitude here is that unasked for mail is against our freedoms, against civil rights.

Friendship evangelism is at best slow work and is not likely to touch many people, and the response from radio has likewise been disappointing. What is happening? I believe that the way forward involves recognizing that we are not up against pure Islam here; people in Tunisia are Islamic but they are also materialistic. There is a great indifference to religion. The population is very young, and very influenced by French and Italian television and music. One would think that the materialism would lead to a greater willingness to question the values of the past, but in fact it generally only makes for disinterest in eternal issues. In my view, the biggest single hindrance to the spread of the gospel is a lack of hunger for God. For that we must cry out to God to move sovereignly.

Some argue that child sacrifice in the pre-Christian past means that there are spiritual bondages to be broken. I myself know people who have sacrificed animals, and have put blood on their children when they were unwell. Certainly, if and when such people move towards Christ, some form of renunciation of evil practices such as these will have to take place. I personally am not convinced, however, that child sacrifice in the past is THE reason results are so poor.

Some say that there must be an identification and defeat of demonic strongholds. Tourists have sometimes been known to say that they 'feel' the 'oppression' in my city, whereas, strangely, as a resident I do not feel this oppression. Are they spiritually more sensitive than I? How is it that streets they find oppressive are the very ones I love? They are full of life and character even though I can sometimes see signs of the occult (symbols, etc.) that my friends know nothing about. Could it be that such feelings are a commendable but misguided simplification? We are completely agreed that prayer is needed, so if such feelings lead to regular sustained prayer for my city, then we can expect some results! I would prefer to talk about 'strongholds' within the *person*, and to see Satan defeated as *individuals* reject and renounce his power, and turn to Christ. I do however agree with focusing prayer on named functionaries—in departments of the government for instance. One good effect of the international days of prayer has been that locally we have been encouraged to focus prayer in an intelligent manner on all those in authority, and thus fulfill the command to pray for them.

What is God doing? We have some clues from scripture. In Judges 3:2 it is recorded that some of the peoples were left unconquered so that later generations might learn war. But here we see a peculiar kind of 'warfare' where the progress of a few years is often reversed, and one is back to having seemingly made no progress at all. This then becomes a real test of faith: to avoid skepticism ("nothing will ever change") and press on again, not just out of perseverance but out of a real expectation that God will bring a harvest. It is *faith* that pleases God; He is pleased when His people keep faith despite contrary circumstances. The harvest may delay, but God brings good out of it. It is clear that in the division of labour appointed by the Holy Spirit, some sow and labour without seeing results, while others harvest. The challenge to us today is to sow in hope, to sow believing in eternal benefits and results, to expect results in God's own time.

There is another clue here in the meaning of the term 'glory.' The scriptural picture of 'success' is not of something that takes place in this life; it doesn't contain one hint of triumphalism (despite recent popular songs that encourage this trend). Rather, Christ brought glory to God by going to the Cross. *We* are to take up *our* cross and follow Christ. We can expect that the path forward will take us through suffering. The perseverance of God's servants brings godly character, and proves that His people will continue to serve Him, even when humanly speaking we should give up. Similarly, the meaning of the term 'power' in the Scriptures is linked with "endurance and patience" (Col. 1:11). God has not failed! The accomplishment of God's word is only delayed.

The promise "I will build my church" (Mt. 16:18) is a difficult one. Clearly there was once a vibrant church here, but it has not existed since 1152 AD. Has God's word failed? I have lived that question. I have allowed it to penetrate my being to such an extent that I was ready to believe He *had* failed. I lived Psalms 73 and 77 for months: "Will the Lord reject for ever? Will he never show his favour again? Has his unfailing love vanished for ever? Has His promise failed for all time?" (Ps 77:7-8)

So questioned the Israelites when they were sent into exile. It was *God* who had sent them there. Today, Christ is likewise well able to remove a church from existence (Rev 2:5). Could it be that there never was an indigenous Church in Tunisia? Could it be that the church of the occupying power was so sinful, so full of divisions, that Christ simply

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removed it? God's word has not failed, but His people did fail Him. We have yet to see the church built according to God's promise. The promise cannot mean that Christ will establish His church in a region and it will never be wiped out.

As I have turned over and over the reasons for the spiritual poverty of this land, I keep coming back to three questions: what is God's responsibility, what is my responsibility, and what is the responsibility of my Tunisian friends.

FROM GOD we await a sovereign move that brings more labourers into the harvest, and that creates a hunger for God in the lives of Tunisians.

FROM OUR TUNISIAN FRIENDS we await a hunger for God, a seeking for God, a willingness to consider that they might have been wrong in what they believe, a readiness to read the Scriptures for themselves.

FROM US God expects that we will study the situation well, and that we will act wisely. It is for us to seek out and use better strategies. In particular, we have to become competent in languages; we have to be ready to explain, teach, and question. We must seek to stay fresh, to be ever in prayer, and become much bolder in our personal witness. It is for us to ask how we can be prepared in view of the fact that the harvest is promised. When God starts to move, what will our approach be? Will we know what scriptures to teach, how to disciple not just individuals but whole families and groups? Will we have worked sufficiently on relationships that we know how to be examples of love and trust to the believers (probably the weakest points among believers in North Africa today)? Beyond that we must not seek to go; we must not ask why God in his sovereignty has not yet moved, or why so few hunger for God. We need to clearly understand our responsibilities and our part, and fulfill them, and leave the rest to God.

To stimulate us, let me put forward one vision of the future. I see multitudes of small groups springing up. When God moves we can expect to see, almost overnight, not just a second home group started, but many, maybe within a few months of each other. Every worker could be involved in at least one of them!

With this, I dream of the day when Tunisia will once again have numerous believers, indigenous Christians who are willing to suffer, even to die for Christ and His church. I dream of Christ giving teachers, pastors and evangelists to His church. I dream of people in high places testifying to Christ, people like Daniel, who are competent, without fault, who love God, and administer the country wisely.

Until then, we struggle and work, seeing the harvest from afar, and getting ready for the time when the floodgates will open, and Christ will build the church He died to bring to birth.

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