

Reflections and Impressions from Turkey

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Each issue of the Haddington House Journal includes one article highlighting mission activity. These articles are written in a journalistic news fashion.



On Friday evening, January 30th, 2004, I felt I was truly living the history of a modern mission movement. We were listening to a first hand account of the developments of the evangelical movement in Turkey from 1980 to the present. One will not find this in any book, at least as far as I know, so I have decided to provide an article to inform our *Journal* readers.

I had been teaching at a conference for evangelical pastors and Christian workers in Turkey, organized by the team of Christian workers from Izmir (ancient Smyrna) and the surrounding region. This was a first and in itself a milestone for the evangelical movement in the country. Our purpose, in part, was to help lead the way to develop more of a national Turkish leadership in the Church in Turkey. We had about 30 in attendance, drinking in deeply the messages of the Gospel and the training. It was a wonderful international effort; these folks were Turks, Americans, Mexicans, Koreans, and one Canadian. The site was Kusadasi, not far from Miletus and Ephesus. During the evening session of January 30th, the most senior worker, a brother with over twenty years of Turkish ministry experience, was asked to tell about the work of God in the Church in Turkey in the last two decades. I found the two to three hours that he spoke and answered questions quite simply one of those quiet times in one's life from which you can never go backwards. I hope you know what I mean. For almost three hours we sat spellbound listening to him tell about Turkey and Armenia. What follows is just a synopsis from this evening.

Turkey Through the Eyes of One Who Has Lived There

Our brother missionary to Turkey, whom we will call Johann¹, prefaced his comments with two remarks. First, it was his experience in reading reports on the work in Turkey that home or foreign missionary newsletters generally convey an exaggerated perception of what their mission impact has been. And, to be fair, a true picture is difficult to portray, as impact is not always tangible. Second, we as missionaries are "God's little foot soldiers." It is all too easy to forget that we are not the centre in the nations. Rather, God only knows and is in charge of the big picture, namely, the large political affairs and movements of peoples and His purpose in these. It is good to step back and see that there is a greater ordering of nations, and we fit in as "God's

¹ Readers will understand that for safety reasons I have changed the names of the Christians I met in Turkey.

little foot soldiers” within that context. I really appreciated what our brother was saying.

In 1980 Turkey was a land with a population of approximately 68 million. At that time the evangelical believers in Turkey were singing and praying Wesley’s hymn, “O for a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer’s praise,” but the words were slightly different. They were singing and praying, “O for a thousand *Turks* to sing my great Redeemer’s praise.” Why? They estimated that in 1980 there were less than one thousand evangelical Christians in all of Turkey and very few churches or workers. Praise God, today that hymn of praise and prayer has been answered!

In the early 1980’s Johann, an American of German heritage, had been burdened for some time for Turkey. Since at that time he could not enter Turkey as a missionary, he went to Germany to begin his study of Turkish and to commence work with the large Turkish diaspora there through Operation Mobilization. (The Turkish diaspora is very large in Germany, the Netherlands, and in the city of London.) During the next two to three years he mastered Turkish, preaching and teaching in their native language to the Turks there. Then the door opened for Johann, together with his wife and two children, to proceed to Turkey. They were committed to the language, the people, and the gospel, yet found their task of evangelization and discipleship very difficult. Not only did the entire family have to exit the country every three months to renew their tourist visas (a routine which continued with his growing family – now six children – until this past year!), but also life was always uncertain in Turkey in these early years because of the persecution of Christians.

When they arrived in Izmir, there was not one evangelical church in that city of 2.5 million. Indeed, there was almost nothing across all of eastern Turkey. They did find some Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and high Anglican churches, but none preaching an evangelical gospel with an outreach to the Muslim Turks, and at least some resenting Johann’s presence as a “fundamentalist preacher” and a “Bible thumper.” (I pause to add that though we look at Turkey as one land mass on the map, we need to remember that Turkey is the bridge between two

continents, Europe and Asia, and this and a host of other factors makes for the reality of a western Turkey [Thrace] and an eastern Turkey [Anatolia]. Thus, by saying that there was nothing in eastern Turkey, we are speaking of a very large population and landmass, comprising most of the country.)

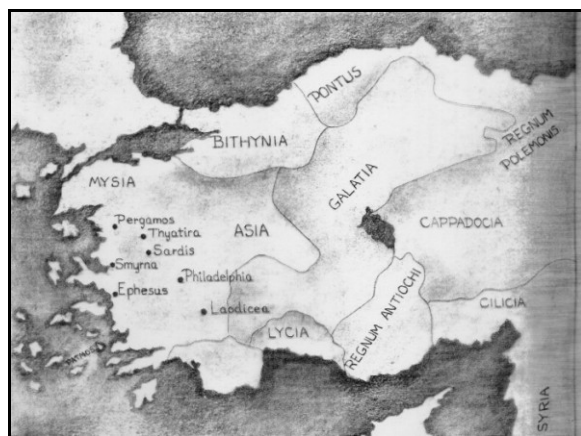
Johann and his family remained in Izmir for two to three years, sowing the Gospel seeds, from which emerged a small core group of Christians. He then felt called to move to the city of Diyarbakir on the Tigris River of eastern Turkey, a city of over one million. The year they arrived, there was one other believer working to spread the Gospel in the neighbouring town of Adana, who is believed to have been poisoned by the Muslim family he was visiting. He was invited to eat with them and the following morning was found dead – mysteriously. Although Johann pressed for investigations into the man's death, he could get no cooperation, yet it was known these citizens wanted to be rid of the Christian worker and this is a centuries-old method. "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."

However, the same year there were other more positive developments. It marked the beginning of Korean missionary work in Turkey, which continues to this day. One of these Korean workers, a single woman, built a retreat centre outside of Ephesus, then called for Korean pastors to come and preach! A few of the local tradesmen who helped build the facility were converted and from that grew a small congregation in Ephesus, where there had not been a congregation for several hundred years. It was wonderful to meet several of these Korean Christian workers who attended the conference.

Also in 1988, an evangelical Christian church was born out of a mini-revival among some young people within the Greek Orthodox Church in Istanbul. This group of young adults was meeting for prayer and Bible reading in the Greek Orthodox cathedral there until ejected by the patriarch. They then moved to a large apartment and continued in prayer and study. Convicted that they were not true Christians, they found repentance and true conversion. As they were barred from entering the cathedral, they formed the Turkish Protestant Church of Istanbul. This church over the years has moved into the Presbyterian fold and is

now a thriving Christian center – in essence, an “independent” Presbyterian Church. It has begun a seminary type school under the leadership of Turgay Ucal in connection with a distance education facility in Florida.

The year 1994 proved important in the development of evangelical Christianity in Turkey. That year we find the real beginnings of “evangelical churches” or “house churches” in the country, a mark of a growing base of converts. There also emerged three international churches – in Ankara, the capital, in Izmir, and in Istanbul. These were English-speaking translation churches, like those found in many places throughout Europe. (Francis Schaeffer was involved in founding several international Presbyterian churches in Europe. This is a fascinating movement in recent mission history of which little has been written.) Although not the same as the planting of indigenous Turkish-speaking churches, in that they tend to minister to the expatriated English speaking community rather than reaching out to the Turks, nevertheless their commencement in 1994 was a real encouragement for some, providing fellowship and support for the emerging national Turkish evangelical leadership. A major source of workers in Turkey since 1980 has been the Brethren. Again, documentation is difficult not only of the history of missions in Turkey, but also of the Brethren movement, which does not have centralized structures.



The Provinces of Asia Minor and the Seven Churches of Asia

In 1997, another significant move forward was the start of the Tyrannus Bible School (named for its model in Acts 19:1-10) in Selchuk, near the ancient city of Ephesus. It was moving for me to be at this small storefront and see Gospel Light amidst paganism, falsehoods, and the ancient church sites. It is located in a small building almost directly across from the famous Temple of Artemis. A few blocks from Tyrannus is a large historic mosque, Isa Beg, built in the 14th century, and above the hill stands the ruins of the ancient Byzantine Church of Saint John, where tradition says John the Apostle was buried. A kilometer away is the site where two famous church councils met in Ephesus.

The Tyrannus Bible School was the first such school in recent times in Turkey. This school has one full-time staff worker – Camel – and the other teachers/tutors are pastors in Turkey or foreign instructors who periodically come to teach a modular intensive course. We were told that one student has gone out from here to Tarsus and has begun a “meeting place” there.

Another emerging “school” is what is known as the “Bitinya Church Seminars”, another work of evangelical and Protestant churches to develop leaders, pastors, and mature church leaders in Turkey. Bitinya started in 1989 as Bible study group; however, in the 1990’s it started to move towards periodic seminars and continues in this format today.

A new ethnic element was introduced into Turkey in 1991 when half a million Kurds crossed the border into Turkey. This is something which I found absolutely challenging, as the Kurds are Muslim and very much unreached and hostile to the Gospel.

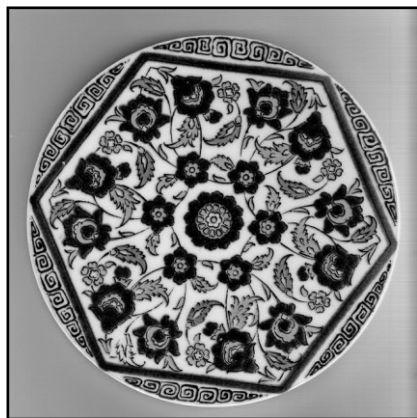
(It is interesting that some Kurds have been shown the Jesus film. No resulting conversions are known of, but it has been used to warm and soften the hearts of some.) I was indeed blessed to meet a new Kurdish Christian who attended the Sunday morning service in Izmir where I preached. This



*“I am the Way...”
Jesus*

young man of twenty-seven had found one of the small cards with a Bible verse and on the back the name of the church and pastor. He had made contact and, in the course of time, became a Christian. He has a Muslim wife and four year old son and faces great hostility at home – even beatings from his wife or her family! However, on this day he had managed to be at the service, along with his young son, probably permitted because of the novelty of a “foreign preacher.”

Slowly the foundations of a church have emerged over these last 20 years. How impossible it all looked in 1980! Johann, our Christian brother who went to Turkey in the 1980’s, is still there with his wife and his family. After seven years in Diyarbakir, they moved back to Izmir, where they have been used as a sweet offering of blessing, strength, and encouragement both in Izmir and Selchuk. It was a special evening to hear his oral history of evangelicalism in Turkey over the past twenty years. There is really no way of adequately portraying what they have seen.



A ceramic trivet hand-painted in Kütahya, Turkey, near Ankara. The Ottomans brought ceramic painters to Kütahya from Persia to teach the locals the trade. For generations now Kütahya has been the Turkish centre of the ceramic trade.

Perhaps some perceive that Turkey is being ‘westernized’; yet there is a considerable Turkish element that wants it to move eastward and return to Islam. Evangelical Christianity is seen as a threat and resistance to it is real. There are several court cases against the evangelical Christian communities, mostly at the harassment level (not allowing the evangelicals to have church buildings or rent properties), and at this point the outcome of these cases is uncertain. In contrast, the

Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches often have historic buildings and are tolerated and not viewed as a threat. Bribery and corruption are part of the “system.”

Many missionaries have come and gone since the mid-80's. Few have stayed beyond two or three years, the time it takes to master basic Turkish. We must pray for the grace of the Lord for perseverance and “permanence” of God's workers in this old land. Our brother emphasized that workers must “know who they are” and be aware of what is going on around them. Many Christians come to run a “company,” but the Turks know what that means – they are disguised Christian evangelists. There are really no illusions in the land of Turkey about the foreigner.

It caused me to ponder... how much have I really sought the Kingdom of God? .

Armenia

On my Sunday evening while in Turkey (February 1, 2004), believers and mission workers gathered in a large apartment for a time of fellowship and prayer. This turned out to be one of the most enlightening evenings I have ever had. An ardent young Armenian missionary, whom we will call Mary, told her story of how the Lord moved her with a burden for the Turkish people, a true work of grace for an Armenian, as you will understand from the following background!

On April 24, 1915, during World War I, while Europe and the Allies were totally focused on their own battles, the Turks began a systematic genocide of the Armenian population in their land. These were not the Muslims Armenians, but mainly those identified with the Armenian Apostolic Church. The massacre began stealthily in Istanbul. Officials invited all the Armenian intellectuals together for “reconciliation talks”. Once assembled, this treacherous meeting turned into a mass execution. Following that, for the next six months the Turks moved systematically out through the villages separating the men from the women and children and slaying them en masse. The results were staggering – the massacre of up to 1.5 million Armenians – the ethnic cleansing of Turkey. Anyone familiar with the life of Rousas Rushdoony will have already heard of much of this. It is an

absolutely chilling story to hear the accounts that for weeks the Tigris River ran red with Armenian blood. One of the great questions of history has been: “Where was the western world to oppose such atrocities?” In fact, Adolf Hitler gained confidence from this for conducting the Holocaust, openly stating to his generals in August, 1939, at the time of the Polish invasion, that no one recalled the Armenian genocide, and his measures would be similarly ignored.

Armenia has not been a nation that has attracted Presbyterian missionary support. In about 1875, an evangelical movement established itself as a separate Armenian Church from the Armenian Apostolic Church. Many pastors were lost during the genocide and the church limped along with mainly the elderly bearing witness for the faith. Recently a small evangelical seminary has been formed; however, the country’s population continues to emigrate at an alarming rate. This is creating a leadership crisis for the church as Armenians continue to move to key diaspora sites. In Canada the two chief Armenian centres are Montreal and Toronto, both of which have Armenian Evangelical and Armenian Apostolic Churches. The Apostolic Churches, both in Armenia and amongst the diaspora have links to the Brotherhood, the evangelical wing of the Apostolic Church. They are a highly organized unit in Armenia and supportive of evangelical causes in Armenia.

Against this backdrop, we find a young Armenian with a gospel burden for the oppressors of her people! Mary told us about being raised and nurtured in the faith in the Armenian dispersion population in America. Led to serve her people, Mary went to Armenia to pioneer the work of Inter-Varsity in that nation. However, she found her heart moved for the Turks, but her horrified parents forbade her to go to Turkey. In time, however, the Lord opened the way for her to undertake what has become a fruitful ministry in Turkey. I wish I could tell you all that I saw Mary doing, but discretion in print is truly the better part of valour here.

On Monday morning, my plane lifted off the runway from the airport in Istanbul and I found myself homeward bound, but with many profound impressions from my time in Turkey.

Perhaps the deepest was the realization that I had met and found family bonds with true brothers and sisters in Christ. How did I know? By their prayers, by their hymns, by their love of Jesus.

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