

Days of Hope

*Passionately communicating the love of God
to hurting kids in a gentle way*

You say you love me, but... by Jon Wells

During the last week of March, I found myself in the interior of the Yucatán Peninsula! I had been invited to join a construction team from the First Assembly of God church in Rolla to help them complete the construction of a small church in a village outside of Peto, Mexico. This corner of the world is populated almost entirely by Mayan people. Many of the families who will be attending this church live in thatched-roof huts, just as the Mayan people have lived for thousands of years.

The congregation we were working with was planted as a house church. Ten years ago they began praying and working towards the construction of a building to meet in. Five years ago they were able to acquire a small piece of property, and started work to fashion a foundation from stone and concrete. Three weeks ago, our team worked alongside these local believers to pour a concrete roof, install wiring, plumbing, and construct part of the parsonage. For our team, it was a week of hard labor and learning. For the small congregation, it was the culmination of 10 years of hard work and prayer.

Before leaving Mexico, we had an opportunity to tour an ancient Mayan religious ceremonial site.

Chichen Itza is arguably the most iconic location that remains of the hundreds of Mayan religious centers that were once scattered throughout Central and South America. Restored in the twenties by Carnegie, many of the crumbling structures in this place have been returned to their original appearance. Our tour guide, Ruben, walked us through the grounds, explaining the religious ceremonies that took place on this site for hundreds of years. In one large arena, contestants would play a game with a solid rubber ball, attempting to knock it through hoop mounted in the wall. Historians still argue about the details, but at the end of the game it is apparent that one of the players would be decapitated as a sacrifice. Ancient Mayans believed that his soul would travel to commune with Popol Vuh, the deity associated with corn. In this way, perhaps the soul of the decapitated player could convince Popol Vuh to provide a good maize harvest that year.

Another temple was constructed in honor of the Mayan sun god, Kinich Ahu. Ancient Mayans believed that at sunset, the sun would travel through the underworld. To their minds, there was no guarantee that he would return for another sunrise. *Continued on page 2...*



Making it Work

by Aaron F Jeffers

One of the staff at *Great Circle* recently took it upon himself to share his passion for mountain biking with the boys in his cottage. He convinced a friend in Saint Louis to donate eight mountain bikes and helmets; soon the bikes were delivered in perfect operating condition.

Two months later, I loaded up my mountain bike in anticipation of riding with the cottage. This particular morning was beautiful, and I was envisioning nine of us guys having the time of our lives. We would soon be catching air on hills, shredding the Monkey Barrel, and gazing over an Ozark ravine. Everything was all-clear with the campus and the staff were good to go. I told the staff on the phone, "I'll see you guys at 2:30 pm, get ready for the time of your lives."

When I pulled up to the cottage I was greeted by a staff member. Pointing to the window at a couple of boys, he said, "Guess who has been standing by that window for the last two hours?"

"Are you serious? They've been waiting that long?" I poked my head in the door and called out, "You guys ready for a ride?"

"Are you kidding Pastor Aaron!? We can't wait!"

"Let's load your bikes." I was not prepared for what happened next.

All the bikes were in shambles. The damage was extensive. Flat tires, loose cables, missing seats, no seats, and brake pads not even touching the tires. As I helped the boys, I realized the horrible condition of these bikes was not their fault. Nobody had taken the time to show them how to turn a wrench, grease a hub, or even air up a tire. The basic bike maintenance that my dad showed me when I was little was foreign to these 15-16 year olds. We worked for almost an hour to piece-meal the eight bikes together. In the end we had reduced 8 broken bikes to 2 functional ones. I said, "Let's just load up what we've got and do our best."

We drove to the bike trail, unloaded the bikes, and started riding. Thirty seconds down the trail one bike threw a chain. The other bike's seat and handle bars wouldn't stop spinning. They were mismatched-sized and we didn't have the tools to fix them.

I announced my surrender, "Guys, I'm sorry, this trail is too dangerous for bad equipment. We better pack up."

"Please Pastor Aaron, can we keep riding?"

I thought, *How can you? Your bikes don't even work right!* I said, "Okay, if you guys really want to, we can continue, but this trail is four miles long."

Those boys didn't whine or complain one bit. They traded bikes without being pushy or rude. They took different shifts, alternately riding with spinning seats and floppy handlebars. We took our time and they rode as best they could. The chainless bike was totally out of service, so one of the boys walked while the other had fun. After a while, they would switch out. In this way we finished the trail and returned to the vehicles.

These boys had a better attitude than most adults I have met! When we got in the truck, you would have thought I took them to watch the Cards win a World Series game.

I go out every Sunday morning to preach to these youth, but on Sunday afternoon, they preach to me. I guess what really ministered to me was the Christ-like humility, attitude, and perspective that the two of them demonstrated. They grabbed hold of the full life God had for them that day! First Timothy 6:6 says, "Godliness with contentment is great gain." Isn't that the wisdom of God? It was a gift to be able to see godly contentment lived out by two spirit-filled boys; living away from their homes in a place called "residential", riding down hills on two junky bikes.

Go figure.

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On cloudy days, they worried that a weak sun would not be able to make the passage and return for another day. On such days, it was common for the priests to take a prisoner, lay him across a sacrificial table, and cut his heart out as an offering to the sun. The Mayans believed that



the heart of a mighty warrior would give strength to Kinich Ahu and help him return for another dawn.

The oldest ceremonial structure on the site is not man-made at all. It is an ancient 'cenote,' a large sinkhole filled with water. The Yucatán is dotted with these geologic features, but this cenote was special. The sinkhole was believed to be the home of Chaac, the Mayan god of rain. During times of drought, or when a hurricane pounded the Yucatán, Mayans would cast their own children into this deep pool, and watch them drown. Such sacrifices were given in the hopes of appeasing Chaac, and returning the climate to a more suitable level of rainfall. Ruben told us that the parents might be proud to have the honor of sending their small children to commune with Chaac.

At some point on our tour, it occurred to me that I was surveying the site of a mass genocide. Thousands had been murdered in this place over the centuries in an attempt to appease the fickle gods of the Mayan people. This ancient Mayan logic is not a novelty, however. Pagan religious systems all across the planet embrace this idea that the gods must be appeased. At the same time that Chichen Itza was active, the Greeks were developing a pantheon of false gods on the other side of the world. Based on personalities like Zeus and Dionysius, temples of worship were erected throughout the Mediterranean and beyond. The Greeks, and later the Romans endeavored to find a way to somehow please these gods of their own making.

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If you unpack the mysticism in the native religious beliefs on the African continent, or dig into the thousands of gods recognized and honored in the Hindu system, this same thread seems to run through all:

The gods must be satisfied.

The gods must be appeased.

I must do something, somehow to make them happy.

The gods are angry with me.

What sacrifice must I make to earn their good will?

To this end, generations of Mayan people built

grandiose structures, spilled blood on a massive scale, and even sacrificed their own children.

Enter Jesus. Stage right.

In light of ancient pagan thought, the gospel is the most ridiculous, impossible spiritual notion ever suggested. It is so far removed from religious systems like that of the Mayans, it seems that there is no way it could have been invented by man.

God is for you, not against you.

While you were still a sinner, God loved you and gave you his Son.

If you want peace with God, your sacrifice will not move the needle.

It is God who brings the sacrifice that will set things right.

The great living God did indeed demand a sacrifice, and seeing none that would suffice, He became the sacrifice himself.

It is His Son who was taken to the top of a remote hill, and butchered in brutal and inhumane ways.

Your religious gestures are futile.

It is by grace that you are saved, through your belief in the work of the cross.

Can you imagine trying to explain the gospel of Jesus to an ancient Mayan priest?



The first week of April, I found myself in a more familiar setting, playing my guitar and sharing a song with a group of girls on a unit at the Piney Ridge Treatment Center. After the song, I spoke with the girls, and pushed hard to drive the concept home.

“You don’t have to get your life straight first. There’s not a long list of stuff you have to figure out. God loves you already. His love for you is not tempered by your behavior. His love for you is not smaller than your sin. His love for you is not erased by your choices. God is love, and He was ‘for you’ before you ever could respond to Him. God loves you, and simply waits for you to respond to his love.”

Finally one young lady was courageous enough to give voice to a sentiment that all of them were feeling.

“You say that God loves me, but I’m gay. Does He still love me?”

This is the universal response of the human heart when we encounter the unconditional love of God.

You say you love me, but . . . It seems that ancient pagan thought is not quite as ancient as I thought!

Deep down, many of us suspect that God is angry. We know how deeply we are flawed. We somehow sense that a price must be paid to ‘appease the gods.’

Love Me/JJ Heller

Who will love me for me?

Not for what I’ve done

or what I will become?

Who will love me for me?

Because no one has shown me what love, what love really means.

[youtube.com/watch?v=fUM86eL6fVw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fUM86eL6fVw)

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I spent a good half hour pressing in on this one issue. *God is a loving Father who is seeking out His lost kids.* The girls spent the hour stating their objections, listing the reasons why God couldn't possibly love them. My intent for that session was to try to challenge these girls. In the end I left the unit wondering if I really accept this notion myself. Do I truly understand how deep, how wide, how long and how high the love of Christ is? Do I really get it? Have I completely rejected the ancient notion of a fickle, angry deity? Do I live as a person who has totally internalized the radical truth of the gospel?

What about you?

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