

# DRY BONES

## The dilemma of 'weekend missionaries'

Do absolute rules become relative when you're spreading the Gospel?

By JAMIE BUCKINGHAM



On May 26, 1979, Melvin Bailey, a 32-year-old Christian pilot from Newport News, Virginia, left the USA in a rented, Piper aircraft on a mission over Cuba. Accompanying him was

a 31-year-old former schoolteacher, Tom White. They were carrying 750 pounds of Spanish-language, pro-Christian, anti-Communist leaflets sealed in plastic which they intended to scatter from the air over the island.

Things went wrong. Their plane ran out of gas and they crash-landed into a dump truck. Bailey, a computer programmer in private life whom a friend described as a "weekend missionary" was sentenced to 24 years in prison for violating Cuban airspace and dropping literature.

Efforts to obtain his release have been unsuccessful. Without formal diplomatic relations, there is little the U.S. State Department can do. Since he clearly disregarded both Cuban and international law, there is a possibility he may have to serve out his sentence in the Cuban prison.

The Bailey affair raises serious questions which Christians need to face. In our zeal to bring the Gospel to others, to expose injustice, or stamp out heresy, we sometimes resort to methods which in less serious matters we ourselves might call unethical or wrong.

For instance, some of the same people justifying the violation of Cuban airspace in order to drop tracts, condemn going through red lights in the USA in order to get to church on time.

It brings up the old question: When do absolute laws become relative?

Perhaps, some say, when it depends on carrying out the great commission to spread the Gospel. In fact, one Christian leader recently said that "any means is justified to spread the Gospel."

The debate has raged for a long time. Brother Andrew, famed Bible

smuggler, says, "Unquestioned submission to all earthly authority has never been God's intention for His people." He justifies breaking the law of man to accomplish the higher purposes of God.

On the other hand, Oswald Chambers once said, "We have an idea that God is leading us to a particular end, a desired goal. He is not. The question of getting to a particular end is merely an incident. What we call process, God calls the end . . . His end is the process."

But what does all this mean to folks like Melvin Bailey and Tom White? For one thing it means a man better not attempt something risky for God unless he is prepared to live out the consequence.

It sounds harsh, but it just could be possible that God wants some of his servants in jail.

Does this mean God cannot open prison doors any more? Not at all. It does mean that all prison doors are not meant to be opened. If God had released Paul from his prison in Rome the same way he released Peter in Jerusalem, half of our New Testament would have never been written. It's a lesson charismatics, in particular, need to learn.

I am not volunteering for prison. The idea of it frightens me. I, too, urge our government to make every effort to secure the release of Bailey and White — and thousands of other Christians in prisons behind iron and bamboo curtains.

One historian recently pointed out: "More Christians have been martyred for their faith in this generation than all other generations combined."

Yet it is just this kind of problem which brings the Christian faith into focus.

A man recently wrote saying that "America is the hope of the world." That's not so. Jesus Christ is the hope of the world. Christianity can flourish just as well under communism as it did under Rome — and maybe better than it does under God-less democracy.

Jesus said the Kingdom of God is within, and by entering that Kingdom we find true freedom.

This same man quoted Hebrews 11

saying we needed faith enough to see men released from jail. That's true. But the second half of Hebrews 11 talks of another kind of faith — the faith to remain in jail, and even die there — for the glory of God.

There Paul speaks of those who were slain, were destitute, afflicted, tormented, who wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves . . . and although commended for their faith, "yet none of them received what God had promised."

Our faith is not in the promise — but the Promiser.

In Philippians, Paul said he was content in whatsoever jail he found himself.

When Ridley and Latimer were burned at the stake, Latimer is reported to have cried out: "Be of good cheer, Ridley; and play the man. We shall this day, by God's grace, light up such a candle in England, as I trust, will never be put out." And John Bunyan, who was arrested for preaching without a license, prayed he would not be released from Bedford Prison until he had finished writing *Pilgrim's Progress*.

It is only through persecution that we are conformed to the image of Christ. In other words, it's hard to pick up a cross in a Cadillac. I mean, what if we got blood on the seat covers?

It's sad that two, sincere, "weekend missionaries" are languishing in a Cuban prison. But regardless of what personal foolishness brought them to that place, they remain God's ambassadors.

My prayer is not for them alone, but for all of us — that if such a thing happens to us we will not spend our time crying out against injustice, but will, like Paul and Silas, conduct midnight prayer meetings.

Brother Andrew once remarked that anyone can preach the Gospel behind the Iron Curtain. All you need is the willingness to spend the rest of you life there if necessary.

At least, Andrew said, you'll have a captive audience in your prison.

Let the lesson be learned by all: There is no such thing as a "weekend missionary." Those who go should be prepared to stay — perhaps for the rest of their lives. <