

# **GOODWILL GUERRILLAS?**

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**I**t was Sunday morning at about 11:15 A.M. on the island of Ferrengi. The leader of the church worship service had just said, "Now it is time for our sermon. May God bless us and our missionary pastor, Reverend Smith."

At that moment, six young men dressed as government soldiers entered the church. They came quickly, almost running down the main aisle, showing holstered machine guns, and sweeping their eyes from one side to the other. While the congregation sat immobilized by shock, the "soldiers" sat down in the front pew.

Then a member of the congregation shouted imprudently, "They are not soldiers; they are guerrillas—from the Blue Blazers."

The pastor cut him off sternly. "Be quiet," he said. "And nobody leave the chapel." Even as he spoke those words with full authority, an unnerving incident popped into his mind.

Only a few weeks earlier, a different pastor had had to face a similar situation. A few members of a guerrilla band had entered his church during the worship service, looking for protection. One of the church members immediately ran out of the church to look for help. After making several phone calls, the man was advised to call the national police and ask them for protection.

The police had come and surrounded the church. The guerrillas and the police began to fight. Before the day was over, more than thirty persons had been killed, including the pastor and all the guerrillas.

Pastor Smith pushed that picture from his mind and forced himself to begin the sermon. He could see that most of his congregation was praying as he preached, and a few women were sobbing quietly.

The sermon was a basic presentation of the gospel message. As he concluded, the pastor invited those to come forward who wanted to be reconciled with God by receiving Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. There was an extra measure of earnestness evident in his voice.

At first, no one responded. Suddenly two of the six guerrillas came forward, and knelt to pray. The pastor then led the congregation in audible prayer. But as he raised his eyes and prepared to dismiss the congregation, one of the guerrillas stood up and began to speak.

Standing between the pastor and the congregation, he said, "I would like to say a few words before leaving the church. I am a Christian, too. Someday I would like to be a member of your church."

Pastor Smith watched the shock wave electrify the church. What? A Christian guerrilla? Impossible!

The guerrilla continued: "As you all know, the common people on our island identify Catholic Christianity with Spain and remember how that country oppressed us during the colonial times. Now our people identify evangelical Protestants with the international politics of the United States. Some of you may know that the United States is using religion as well as sports, money, and material goods to keep control of our country. Do you know why? It's because for every dollar they give to us, they are collecting two or three more from our poor island."

The congregation was mesmerized by the man and his speech. And he was not finished. "As a Christian, I know that it is not God's will that the children of God be oppressed—to live in poverty, ignorance, and all kinds of afflictions. At the same time, our governors, who are backed by United States interests, are living in luxury and opulence. That is the real reason revolutionary movements are growing in this country and many others. We revolutionaries are using the Bible, too. We have our religious ceremonies. But we will never use the American theology that teaches submission and obedience to our corrupt governments."

The guerrilla had finished, so he sat down in the pew again. In the deep silence that followed, his words echoed loudly in the minds of all who heard. No one moved.

The missionary pastor stood looking out the window, and a rapid-fire succession of thoughts shot through his mind. He had come to this country only to preach the gospel, not to be involved in politics. But here he was, very seriously involved. He knew the government was corrupt and certainly had never wanted to be identified with it. The guerrilla's words revealed to him how much, in fact, he *was* identified with it. He had been brought up short to face what he had been trying to ignore. The close alliance between the United States, the national government, and the evangelical church was perceived as cooperation in the political affairs and practices of the country.

People on the island knew that American financial aid to the local government was used largely by the army for repression, political persecution, and—in the end—for the destruction of the country. Why should they not believe that the aid from the mission related to those purposes as well? After all, it came from the same source.

Pastor Smith realized in that moment that one of his own long-standing assumptions might be flawed. He had always believed that the church could thrive only in the "freedom" guaranteed by a government that was backed by a strong army.

What brought his mind back to the present situation was the swift realization that the police of the present government had the right to kill guerrillas any time and any place. What if a shoot-out occurred at any moment here in his church? How could he cope with the presence of the guerrillas and also ensure the safety of his congregation?