

FIT FOR THE KINGDOM?

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Fit for the Kingdom? Robert D. Newton

Missionary, what do you think? Should Sabado keep the vow he made before he became a Christian out of respect for his father? Or should he postpone his baptism?" The question had caught Eric by surprise. A special service had been planned for the following day, during which twenty-two of the thirty-five families of the village would be baptized. Eric had visited the village of Bicol (Papua New Guinea) many times in preparation for the event, but until today he was unaware that there was a problem.

Earlier, after arriving at Bicol, Eric and five others had seated themselves quietly around the fire while they sipped hot coffee from tin cups. It felt good to be out of the cold wind, relaxing with friends after a long day of hiking. Three of the men were elders of the village. The other three, two lay evangelists and Eric, had come from the Christian village of Tanu, a five-hour hike downriver. For the past six months they had faithfully come to meet with village leaders and their families, sharing with them about Jesus Christ. Particularly fascinating to these animistic people were the stories of Christ's power over spirits and the natural forces of wind, rain, thunder, and lightning. Though all of the people were pagans when the evangelistic team first came to Bicol, many now believed in the Lord Jesus and wanted to be baptized.

Finally, Dante, one of the village elders, had broken the silence. "Missionary, it is good that you brought us the gospel about Jesus. We are happy to know him and be a part of his clan. We also hope that soon all our village will follow with us so that we are like your families in Tanu. All of them are in God's clan. Isn't that so?"

"Yes, it is true. All of the families in Tanu are Christian. It brings strength and peace to the village when everyone walks together. At least that is what the people of Tanu tell me. But, Ama Dante, I am a little ashamed that you thank me for bringing God's love to you. I have done little to teach you. You know how hard it is for me to speak in your language. If my brothers here had not shared the message with you, I think you would still be in darkness."

"Missionary, what you say is true. So perhaps all of you will again help us with our problem. You have given sound advice before."

"Ama," Felipe, one of the evangelists, answered, using a term of high respect, "Our advice comes from the Book that God's servants wrote. We will look in the Book to help you with your problem if you want."

"Yes, that is what we want. The problem we have is hard. It concerns one of the elders in our village who wants to follow with us. The problem has to do with Sabado and his father, the *mabonong* [pagan priest]. What is your opinion of Sabado?"

"Wasn't he one of the first men in Bicol to believe the gospel?"

"Yes," Ama Dante answered. "He was the first to believe. He was also the one who told many of us about the gospel and explained some things that were too deep for us to understand the first time. It was his joy and faith that caused many of us to want to learn more about Christ. He has been looking forward to baptism for a long time. His wife and five children are also ready to be baptized. That is why this problem is so hard."

"Tell us the problem, Ama Dante," Eric answered. "We, too, have a burden in our hearts if Sabado is having a hard time. He was the first to open his house to us and encouraged us more than anyone else to continue to teach about Christ. We have met very few people who thirst to learn about God's Word the way Sabado does."

"Yes, he has been an example to all of us who want to be Christians," Ama Dante replied. "So I think you will understand that this is a problem we are all facing. I will tell you the story about this problem, and then you will give us good advice about what to do."

"The problem with Sabado started over one year ago, before you came and brought us the Good News. Sabado was sick with a high fever, and the hospital medicine could not help him. His father knew that it was a spirit that was causing the sickness, so he divined to find out the exact problem. It came out that Sabado's uncle, who had died during the war, was in need of a new blanket. His place in the other world was cold, and his blanket had become thin with age. Sabado's father called a feast, and they butchered fifteen pigs, two cows and a carabao. The day after the last pig was butchered, the fever left Sabado and did not come back. In thanksgiving, Sabado butchered a pig, and

made a vow to his father that he would butcher another pig on the anniversary of his healing. The anniversary has come, and now Sabado's father is insisting that Sabado finish his vow. The father believes that if Sabado does not finish his vow, the uncle will bring sickness again, not only on Sabado, but also to him. He knows that he is accountable to the uncle to ensure that Sabado will butcher another pig.

"Sabado is stuck in the middle. He does not want to do this pagan thing. He does not believe that the uncle's spirit has power over him, because Jesus is stronger. But he is also afraid for his father. His father is afraid of the spirits and rightly so—he is not under the protection of Jesus. Sabado sometimes thinks he should postpone his baptism, finish the vow he made to his father, and then reapply for baptism. Other times he thinks that postponing his baptism will put a stumbling block in front of the young Christians.

"We have discussed this problem over and over, but we still do not have a satisfactory answer. We believe that if Sabado butchers the animal, he is going against Jesus. If he refuses to butcher the animal, he will go against his father. Both of those ways are not good to us. Does God want us to spit on our fathers in order to become his followers?"

"Sometimes we must go against our fathers in order to be Christians," Felipe answered quickly. "It says in the Book that we must be willing to forsake all, even our fathers, if we want to be fit for the kingdom."

Ama Geteb, the other evangelist, responded next: "Yes, you speak correctly, Felipe, when you say we must forsake all for Jesus. But the problem is not so easy. The Book also says that we must honor our fathers and fulfill our vows. That is what is troubling Sabado. Because he loves Jesus, he also wants to show love by honoring his father's request that he finish his vow. Anyway, Sabado does not have to be the one to butcher the pig. He only has to give the pig to his father to butcher. Maybe that is not wrong for a Christian to do."

"What do the other families in the village think about this problem?" Eric asked. "Maybe they can give us an idea."

"That is also a problem," Ama Dante answered. "The families who follow the ways of Jesus are divided. Some say that he should obey his father, and the others say he should push ahead and be baptized with them tomorrow. The pagan families are not divided. They all know that Sabado must follow the ways of our people and honor his father. The pagan families are mocking us because they are of one mind, but we are not. They say that Jesus has come to destroy our village, not to make it strong."

It was then that Ama Dante had asked Eric the troubling question: "Missionary, should Sabado keep the vow he made before he became a Christian out of respect for his father? Or should he postpone his baptism?"

"Let's spend tonight praying about this problem," suggested Eric. "God will show us a good way to follow."

"Yes, this is true," answered Ama Dante. "We have tonight. Sabado will not come for our decision until the morning. But we must be ready to give him an answer when he comes."

Now, as he lay quietly on his mat, Eric wondered what was God's guidance in this matter.