

Between a Rock and a Hard Place

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The motor was silenced as the boat slid onto the bank of the river. During the three-day return trip, Arnold Green had dreaded this moment. Just as he feared, Esteban was standing on the shore, waiting for the news. "How was it resolved?" Esteban asked as the missionary disembarked. But all Arnold could hear was the report being read by the council secretary: "Esteban cannot be a member of the church. He cannot continue teaching the adult Sunday-school class. Nor can he serve on the local church board, or hold any other office in the church."

That had been the final decision, by vote, of the mission council. What was he to do? How could he tell the tribe, and especially Esteban, what the mission council had done, when he did not agree with the decision? And what would all this do to the Aguaruna church?

Missionaries had worked among the Aguaruna Indians in South America for over forty years but with very little success. There seemed to be neither a sincere commitment to Christ nor a real change in the lives of the people. Some would join the church for a short time and then leave. There was no Indian pastor and only one small congregation pastored by the resident missionary. When the missionary went to the coast for supplies and rest, the church would disappear or fall into open sin. Some missionaries thought these Indians were incapable of making lasting commitments of any kind.

As a last attempt to establish a church, the mission decided to start a Bible Training Center in the jungle for the Indians. If only a few young men could be trained as preachers, maybe a church could be planted. Arnold Green and his wife, Sarah, had volunteered to start the center. They decided that the school had to be as self-supporting and as adapted to the Indian culture as possible. They built a simple house and school, cleared land for raising crops, and began classes.

The missionaries felt they had to learn more about the beliefs of the tribe—about the spirit world, about good and evil, about God or gods—in order to better minister to the people. Their curiosity brought them in contact with Esteban, a bilingual Indian who had worked for a time with some Bible translators in a neighboring region. Because of this training, he was made director and teacher in the government school in Chippe, a few miles down the road.

Esteban had a deep interest in his people. He sat around the fire in the early mornings and listened to his grandfather and father tell the stories of their tribe and its history. Esteban knew more about the Aguaruna and their history and culture than any other young man in the area. His interest in the tribe and his friendliness had earned him the respect of the village elders. His introduction of several government projects for the betterment of the village won him the admiration of the young people.

Because of Esteban's knowledge, and the Greens' interest in knowing more about the culture of the Indians, they became good friends. As they shared together, Esteban began to show a marked interest in the things of God. They often spent long hours talking about God and comparing biblical truths to the beliefs and ways of the tribe. Esteban began to attend church services. When he came, so did nearly all the village. The Greens began to pray that Esteban would be truly converted. They felt that he could be the key to the conversion of the village, and the church could get a foothold in the tribe.

God answered their prayers. Esteban came forward and gave his heart to God. His life was so transformed that all, even his superiors, noticed the marked change in his life. He began to teach Bible classes in the high school and to help in the church services. Because of his growing Bible knowledge, the Greens offered him the adult Sunday-school class, which he took on with fervor. It seemed that God had finally made himself known to these people. At the annual church meeting, Esteban was elected chairman of the board, Sunday-school superintendent, and treasurer. He never showed any signs of wavering from his newfound faith in God.

The missionaries on the coast were elated with the news. It seemed to them that the Bible Training Center was bearing fruit. All went well until the mission director visited the Greens. He wanted to meet Esteban and his family. When the director arrived at Esteban's house,

he was shocked. Esteban had two wives! How, he asked, could Esteban be living in sin and serving God at the same time? Arnold explained that Esteban had both wives before God saved him, and he would have to stay that way until one of them died.

A few weeks later, Arnold and Sarah were called to the coast before the mission council to answer for this breach of Christian morality. Arnold explained to them the beliefs of the Indians on marriage. Esteban could not get rid of one of his wives. He had paid a good sum for them, and the father-in-law would not return the bride price. More important, if he were to put away one of the wives, she would have to commit suicide, for she would be considered a failure and a disgrace to her family, especially her father. Because her husband did not want her, it would be interpreted that she was not a good wife. Why else would her husband put her out? If she did not commit suicide, her father would most likely kill her, or she would be left to starve to death.

Arnold argued that in time God would reveal to these Indians the need for monogamy, but, for now, this was not a problem for them. They did not yet have guidance from the Holy Spirit on the matter of polygamy. He explained that the Indians were very responsive to the leading of God, who was revealing himself in many ways to them. They were growing spiritually. Could not the renunciation of polygamy be considered a part of spiritual growth rather than of conversion?

Arnold's pleading fell on seemingly deaf ears. One member said, "If the Indians are attuned to the Word of God, show them how wrong polygamy is."

"But how, then, shall I explain to them the admonitions against divorce?" the young missionary asked.

"Divorce has nothing to do with this case," said another council member. "Esteban is only straightening up his life—a kind of restitution."

"What if one of the wives commits suicide? Are we not guilty of murder?" Green asked.

"You are overreacting. Esteban told you this to get what he wants. He's just playing on your sympathy," another commented.

Arnold's final plea was, "After all, has not God saved Esteban with two wives, and could not God sustain him with two wives? Moreover, what will happen to our new church, which is just beginning to take root among the Aguaruna?" But when the vote was in, Arnold was ordered to put Esteban out of the church until he had gotten rid of one wife.

On the long journey back upriver by canoe, Arnold and Sarah had struggled with the question of loyalties. What were their respon-

sibilities to the mission agency that sent and supported them in their work? If they broke with the mission, how could they continue the work? And what were their responsibilities to the new Christians among the Aguaruna? They knew that the answer they gave Esteban would depend on how they resolved this dilemma. Now the boat had come ashore, and Esteban and the elders of the church wanted to know the answer they had brought.