

Mr. Andre Walks Away

Matthew 13:7-8

But when the sun rose, the seeds were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the seedlings. Still other seed fell on good soil and produced a crop—a hundredfold, sixtyfold, or thirtyfold.

Seu Andre (as they called him, Mr. Andrew as we would say) was a big man with a protruding stomach that sagged some inches below his belt buckle. He walked slowly for a man of his age, as if he always had sore feet, from prolonged gout. His wide face seemed generously creased with wrinkles from years of frowning. His cheeks sagged and he always appeared to be chewing, or at the least hiding something in his mouth. His speech was slurred through yellow-stained teeth due to years of chewing tobacco. He was a *gaucho*, the rugged masculine prototype of the pioneer cowboy of southern Brazil. His accent, his habits, his walk, his mannerisms and his attitudes all betrayed that he was long reared in the deep interior of the State and steeped in *gaucho* traditions. He had come to the big city of Porto Alegre, the capital of the south, to establish himself in some business earlier in life. But in his typical manner he refused to break any of the *gaucho* lifestyles that he had developed in his beloved town of Caçapava. His every greeting made the new acquaintance acutely aware of his heritage and he made it a conspicuous point of introducing himself as "Seu Andre, of Caçapava," not a native of this city, only a resident, a passer through, who soon proposed to return to the land of real men.

How Seu Andre came in contact with the Alliance church in Jardim das Palmeiras was a casual happenstance in his search for healing of a long-term ailment. He made it clear that the "missionary" (or divine healer) who cured his ailments would certainly have his respect and allegiance. It was through a simple black spinster with a worse speech impediment than his that he first heard of the Alliance. (She had become a Christian despite her strongly antagonistic spiritist mother, but that's another story.)

While cleaning his home one day, she mentioned the fact that her church believed in divine healing. He had no respect or time for such "blacks" in the true spirit of *gaucho* machismo and racial prejudice, but the healing question deserved investigation. He would at least hear what these evangelicals had to say and see if they had the power to heal his afflictions.

For several months he frequented the services when he felt like it. His wife, a staunch Catholic, followed along giving lip service to the Gospel, but making it quite clear she needed nothing more. She was a Christian Catholic and certainly

a better person than any in the church. Andre remained callous to the Gospel and was obviously interested in being healed more than in becoming a Christian. Or could it have been that he wanted more proof of the claims of Christ? After all, Brazil is full of religions and cults, all of them claiming to be the truth. What makes Christianity any different?

One night Andre dreamed of a great chasm between two mountains and an airplane, passing overhead that had engine trouble and went crashing into the rocks below. He awoke and thought nothing more of the dream. The following day, a missionary still in language school came to the church and was to be the speaker. Andre went as usual, speaking to the new missionary and everyone else of his desire to be healed of his gout. The service was quite normal and he enjoyed the lively music and the accordion accompaniment.

When the new missionary stepped to the platform and began in his faltering speech, Seu Andre settled himself back in his seat expecting at most to have a humorous time listening to this foreigner err in his Portuguese, and perhaps to be able to get a quick nap.

But the missionary did the unusual. He used an illustrated message and unfolded a large poster on which there was a picture of a plane flying through treacherous mountains. Andre jumped to the edge of his seat to see more clearly. It was the exact picture of what he had seen in his dream. As the missionary spoke, Andre grabbed at every word, realizing for the first time his separation from God and the necessity of the Savior, or else face certain death and eternal damnation. Tears welled up in his eyes. When the missionary closed the sermon and gave the invitation Andre was already shuffling down the wood plank floor to give his heart to Jesus. He told them of his dream and how fearful it had made him of dying. He cried out for mercy to be saved and recognized Jesus as his only Savior who could deliver his soul from death and give him peace.

Now he spoke of the church as his church. He was a Christian. He forced his wife to go with him and all but pushed her down the aisle each time an invitation was given. But she resisted stubbornly insisting on her own good deeds as proof of her genuine Catholic Christianity. Seu Andre became even more ardent in his pursuit of healing for his gout ridden legs, since now he was a Christian. Surely, God would work this miracle for him.

My meeting with Seu Andre came just after I was appointed to serve in Porto Alegre, but before I had finished language school. I was invited to be the officiating ordained minister at his baptism. Since no one in the church had room for visitors, I stayed in his home for three days. He was eager to please the missionary and perhaps this one would be able to heal his legs.

This was my first experience actually being cut off from English and having no one to help fill in where I lacked knowledge of the Portuguese language. Their hospitality was exceptional, treating me as royalty, serving me the most delicious delicacies of their cuisine, and standing close alongside me watching my every reaction to the strange new tastes, waiting for my first words of praise. Often it was all I could do to smile and say it was good, as I gagged to make it go down. Since I liked it so well, Mrs. Andre heaped another serving onto my plate, to be sure I had enough and watched carefully to see if I downed it all. If I was unable to clean it up, she eyed me suspiciously, saying, "You didn't really like it, did you?" I responded politely that it was good, but I was full. "Well, why didn't you say so," she retorted, "I'll just save you a plateful for later!" How often I was tempted to retreat to the bathroom or outside with the hope that I'd get sick and regurgitate it all. At least the bathroom was a comforting solitude from this island paradise on which I was stranded.

Throughout those days they pumped me with questions about Christianity, the Bible, the church, and America. I had the impression that to them, those four things were inseparably intertwined, and to become a Christian was somehow to become an American ally. (Many Brazilians believe evangelical Christianity or Protestantism to be an American product, a religion invented by Americans.)

While speaking to the question of divine healing and God's will, I mentioned in passing that our daughter Aimee had asthmatic bronchitis and although she had prayed, trusted and been anointed for healing, God in His sovereignty had not seen fit to heal her yet. Andre could not conceive of such a thing and instead of being edified by this example, he pitied me. This poor ignorant suffering American missionary didn't know the cure for asthma. He hurried to his room saying he had the cure for Aimee. A few minutes later he returned with a typewritten sheet and declared in his wrinkled grin, "Here is how to rid her of asthma. I guarantee it. It worked for my son." I took the piece of paper and read it slowly in my imperfect Portuguese. Here is what it said:

Cure for Asthma

*If thou art plagued with Asthma
In the secret of thy closet
Prepare thyself a vessel.
Half full of milk you should fill it
Upon the first full moon
Thou shalt make thy way stealthily
to the nearest fig tree
(Be sure no eyes see thee)*

*There at the foot of the fig tree
Bury the bottle bottom side up
(So as to drain it completely).*

*Thence thou shalt say these words:
"Away with thee oh asthma
Away with thee forever
As this milk that disappears
So shalt thou ne'er reappear
In the name of Jesus Christ our Savior,
God the Father. Son and the Holy Ghost,
And the blessed Virgin Mary. Amen."*

Do this for three consecutive nights with seven "Hail Marys" and your asthma will be gone.

I immediately responded that I could not do something like this because it is non-Biblical and un-Christian and it was clearly a spiritist magical incantation. He became very indignant and said he would not do something spiritist either. He was a Christian. Then he pointed out that it used Jesus' name, just as any of our prayers. "It can't be wrong, it's done in Jesus' name, and after all, the padre (the Catholic priest) was the one who gave it to me!" I insisted on it being nothing like anything we find in the Bible for healing and it was more like superstitious magic. He refused to see it as anything but God given and I heard him mumble as he walked away. "What does a young preacher like you know anyway, it worked didn't it?"

Shortly after moving to Porto Alegre the church received a mission loan of \$12,000 to purchase land in a more visible location. (They had been meeting in a back yard where a plywood portable chapel had been built.) The church was facing serious financial difficulties and needed to have each member tithing. The lay pastor asked me to come and preach on tithing in relation to the church's needs because he felt if he would speak on the subject they would misunderstand his motives. I did so laying out clearly the Biblical command and promises for tithers and the national church's statement on it and the obvious necessity of the church. Seu Andre took this as a personal offense since he was dead set against giving regularly to the church.

From there he left the church and moved. The last we heard he had turned spiritist, seeking again the cure for his gout from Satanic sources.

*As when a dog goes to his own vomit,
and becomes abominable, so is a fool who
returns in his wickedness to his own sin.*
Proverbs 26:11 & 2 Peter 2:2