
Biblical Truth Transforms Communities in Guatemala and the Dominican Republic

By Buck Deines

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Beginning In 1975 I worked for three years with the Peace Corps in a small community in the Guatemala highlands known as Nebaj. I was part of a livestock development project, working with a poverty-stricken indigenous group known as the Ixil people. Many days, I would hike long distances from village to village, sometimes up to 24 miles in a day. I taught animal husbandry and helped with basic agricultural training. During these trips, I would often notice that children were out in the fields or tending their livestock rather than in school. I inquired with parents about this, but was told that the children were needed for labor, and that school just wasn't that important.

I was bothered by this, realizing there would be little hope for change if the children remained uneducated. I spoke with teachers, parents and children about my concerns. I tried to impress on parents the importance of educating their children, but continually came up against the same barriers. Education was of little value. They had not been formally educated, nor had their parents. This attitude was particularly pronounced when it came to girls. The mind-set of the parents was that they were only going to get married off, so what was the point in investing in their education? The Ixil Indians are historically a very downtrodden group. They are treated as less "less than fully human" by many non-indigenous people (*mestizos*) in Guatemala and have come to believe in their hearts that they are indeed "lower" than non-indigenous people in Guatemala. As a result, they had very little hope for a better future. I tried my best to lobby and encourage the parents regarding the importance of education but for all my efforts, I never saw a change in their attitudes during the three years I lived among them.

In 1995 I returned to these same villages, this time working with Food for the Hungry International. FHI was involved in agriculture and health projects. As in the 70s, I noticed that many children were not enrolled in school. Little had changed in the 20 years since I had lived in the villages. Poverty was rampant, children were not in school, the villages were trash-strewn and disheveled, and the people continued to have very little hope for positive change. I came away from these visits very disappointed. There was so little evidence of change after so many years of well-intentioned development

efforts. I began to question the value of the work we were doing that seemingly lacked impact.

In 2002 I returned to Nebaj, again with FHI, this time as Regional Director of FHI operations in Latin America. We had returned to conduct an impact evaluation. This time, to my great astonishment, things had radically changed. New school buildings had been built. Kids all over the place were carrying books and seemed so excited about school. Before, when I asked kids about whether they wanted to go to school, a typical response was, “what’s the point? I’m only going to be a shepherd anyway.” Now, the kids were excited. “We want to go to school!”

“Why?” I asked them. I was amazed by their answer.

“We want to go to school because we were created in the image and likeness of God. Jesus grew in wisdom, stature, and favor with God and with men. We want to grow in wisdom and in knowledge too. That’s why we want to go to school. We want to be like Jesus. We want to be creative, because God is creative. We want to do great things. God has a purpose for my life. I want to be educated so I can become a teacher or a lawyer and come back here and help my people.”

These kinds of responses were coming from young children! I was amazed by what was coming out of their mouths. We spoke to their parents to try and uncover what was happening. They told how they would work extra hours and take additional jobs to earn money to put their children in the best schools they could afford. Their view of their children and the importance of education had radically changed! They too saw their children in a new light. They now saw them as image-bearers of God with lives full of dignity and purpose. I was astounded. I went back and talked to our staff, inquiring as to what they had been doing that made such a difference. They responded that they had begun teaching the parents and children the biblical worldview, and particularly a biblical understanding of human life and purpose. What we were seeing was the fruit of those efforts that had been a key focus for the past three years.

I then spoke with the community leaders and asked what FHI could do better to serve them in their positions of leadership in the communities. In the past, such a question would have been an open invitation for the leaders to come out their shopping list of what they wanted: New buildings, new roads, etc. In this case, I asked this question of leaders in village after village and universally received the same answers: “We’ve been hearing some interesting ideas that FHI staff are teaching in our villages. What we’d really like is for you to teach *us* those same ideas.” When I asked one leader for an example, he replied that FHI had been teaching children and parents that the Lord is a God of order and as a result, they needed to live in an orderly way. This prompted the children to clean up their communities. They started campaigns to clean up the garbage

around their own homes and to build cupboards for their homes to organize and protect food and clothes.

I saw the same results a few years later in communities in Nicaragua where our staff began teaching biblical principles, helping the people to understand that their lives were filled with purpose, dignity and destiny. As staff shared biblical worldview messages, the vision and then the behavior of the people in the community began to change. Pastors, parents, community leaders and teachers began to see their world in a new light, envision new and brighter possibilities for their communities and envision better lives for their children. Local school teachers began using the Bible extensively in school, as they did they found that attitudes and behaviors of children began to change radically. Not only could most of the children recite long sections of Scripture from memory, it was evident that Scripture had transformed their beliefs, behaviors, dreams and goals. Kids who otherwise would never have considered attending university now believed that doing so was not only possible, but it was God's will for their lives. Little communities where folks recently believed children had little potential were now sending their kids to college to become doctors, lawyers, teachers and nurses. Even more incredibly, the kids that were going off to university said their motivation for higher education was not profit or success, but rather a desire to learn more so they could return to their communities; to bless their communities and help them progress. As several of the children we interviewed put it, "This is part of God's plan for our lives."

This incredible transformation didn't happen suddenly. It was a process that, in some cases, took several years of teaching. But as the spokesman for one group of community leaders informed us, "While many development programs in this area have failed in the past, the key to success here has been the impact of the Word of God and the way it has changed the way we understand God, ourselves and our world."

As we listened to leaders, teachers, pastors and children in these remote rural communities I could only marvel at their many testimonies of ways in which biblical truth has transformed both individual lives and community life.

Regarding the question on the scope of the impact, my observations as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Nebaj in the 1970s were qualitative, not quantitative, so I have no statistical baseline. Likewise, our evaluation was primarily qualitative, so again, I cannot statistically defend my observations. That said, my opinion and that of others on the evaluation team was that the impact was wide spread rather than limited to a few isolated cases. Why?

A) Methodology (Numerous interviews and diverse points of view – very convincing testimonies.)

- 1) The Participatory VOC Evaluation was conducted for FHI programs in Nebaj, Guatemala, February 4-8, 2002. Dwight Vogt and I represented the International office during the evaluation...looking both for what was working and not working well. Phil Sandahl and two of his senior staff members (Angelica, Jewel Anita) also key roles in the evaluation and were admirably self-critical.
- 2) During the evaluation (a four day process) we visited communities of Tzalbal, Batzuchil, La Laguna, Kanaquil. Focus group interviews were conducted in each community with four groups: church leaders, community leaders (primarily political leaders and teachers), parents, and children; with 8-15 individuals in each of the focus groups. . As necessary we were able to follow-up on the focus group discussions with a number of individual (key informant) interviews. Additionally we interviewed the community level staff in Nebaj, evaluated their teaching skills and administered an exam to gauge their knowledge of the VOC and process.
- 3) The findings of the evaluation were far from entirely positive. Here are just a few examples of the findings from the final evaluation report (written by Dwight) to give you an idea of the extent to which the evaluation team was willing to call a spade a spade during the evaluation:

a) What has FHI taught church Leaders?

Finding: Very little. What they have learned, they have learned from their children.

b) How has your church changed due to the work of FHI?

Finding: No significant changes. But interviewees said some people have come to know God through FHI, but also noted that some have converted as rice Christians.

However, with regards to the impact on children and families, we found a very different situation. FHI staff in Nebaj had focused primarily on providing training to children and their parents on the Development Ethic worldview materials and their impact was determined through repeated testimonies of people interviewed in focus groups. Again, from Dwight's evaluation report:

Focus Group -- Families

Findings

The most important findings of the review team with regard to the family focus group interviews were:

1. Parents reported seeing a clear change in the motivation and behavior of their children. These included increased motivation to attend school and learn, increased cleanliness and order, and more obedient and respectful.
2. Parents credited FHI staff and the ideas they shared and the modeling they gave as the reasons for changes in their children.
3. Parents commented that they were keeping their homes cleaner, were more aware of health issues, and were more supportive of their children going to school. When asked why these changes, they said we learned from our children.

Focus Group – Responses of Children

What do you think are God's intentions for you? His purpose for your life? (At no prompting, many important development ethic points were shared by the children)

- We are made in his image.
- We are useful to him.
- He wants us to take care of the earth.
- Obey him and do his will
- Learn and develop
- Work hard
- Take care of our families
- Help our parents and obey them.
- To treat our neighbor as ourselves.
- To praise God and he will bless us.
- To live well and enjoy what God provides
- To do good
- To make things better. People are different from animals and we can live better than animals.
- To work for our community

What do you want to be when you are an adult?

- Policeman - in order to fight against wrong doers. To be a good example to others.
- Nurse -- in order to help others in my community who are sick
- Tailor
- Many want to be teachers- in order to help other children and people and earn a living. Because what we learn we should share with others.

B) **Subjective Testimony:** My testimony is subjective. It is simply a testimony of what struck me as someone who lived in Nebaj for 3 years in the 70s, was extremely disappointed with what I saw in returning to find little changed in 1995 (even among FHI beneficiaries), and what I saw in 2002 when I returned to hear and witness tremendous change in the beliefs, attitudes and behaviors of FHI beneficiaries. I do not have scientific proof, not by any means (although I wish we could provide it). However, from what I have observed in Nebaj over the years, and from the testimonies I heard, I need no further proof. I have no doubt that many many lives were radically transformed by the worldview messages of staff in Nebaj and the work of the Holy Spirit on the hearts of children and their parents. I praise God for those changes in Nebaj. That we heard very similar testimonies in several communities that we visited in Nicaragua has further helped to convince me of the impact of worldview level change.

C) I have seen many other examples of the importance of incorporating biblical worldview into all FHI programs over the years, including some from a more negative nature. For example:

- A story from not so many years ago in Mozambique when we discovered that our very successful Title II program which increased incomes also increased incidences of alcoholism, drug abuse and rape in one of the communities we served.
- A story from Guatemala where a woman who had FHI staff members in her home almost daily over a period of 7 years did not know who was more powerful, the devil or Jesus.

Understanding the mistakes we've made, as well as building on our successes within FHI are both critical to releasing the as yet unrealized potential that lies within FHI. The problem in both of the cases above is that FHI staff involved with project design and implementation failed to recognize the importance of worldview as a factor of development. (I was largely responsible for the project in Moz mentioned above, I'll never forget how my heart sank when I heard of the negative impact of our work.)

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