

*To Russell Stendal and all the Stendal family.
You and the many other missionaries of Colombia have been an
inspiration to me.*



1. LET'S GET STARTED



ne Colombian man spat right in the face of John Harbeson. “Who are you, you crazies? You want to give me that devil trash?” He took the Bible and threw it down and ground his foot into it.

“The priest said you’re from the devil!” another man yelled. “You don’t honor the Virgin!” He threw a rotten tomato at Jack Thomas. Then another.

“Ha! Ha! Look at those gringos!” The whole crowd jeered and pointed. “Those evangélicos!”

It was 1935. John and Jack had come to Colombia to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to a land whose people saw themselves as Christians. But the Colombians feared the Bible—the priest told them it was dangerous to read it—so they had no idea what it said. They were told that the evangélicos were from Satan.

“We’d better get away and pray, brother,” whispered John.

“Right,” Jack answered. They dodged the crowd to head back to their small room to spend time before the

Lord. "We trust You, Lord," they prayed. "We're not afraid. We pray for the people of Colombia, that You will open their blind eyes to Your great love through Jesus Christ."

Back they went. This time, when they offered the Bibles, they did it quietly, almost secretly. One person after another, with a fearful look, sneaked up to them to say, "I want one. Don't tell anybody."

"Father in heaven," John and Jack prayed, "our goal is to see a church here, in this city. One true church, O Lord, filled with believers."

John, his new wife Rachel, and Jack kept on speaking and continued to hand out Bibles and booklets. Several years passed and finally the mayor said, "We've watched you all this time, and we know you're from God, with the true message for Colombia. You can visit the jail and tell your message there. Maybe it will help those murderers and cattle thieves."

John visited the jail every Sunday. "What have these men been jailed for?" he asked.

"Oh, murder, mostly," said the jailer. "Murderers get three years. Some of them are in for stealing cattle."

Every Sunday, John preached in the jail and handed out New Testaments and small booklets. "You've been told that you must work your way to God," he said.

“That’s a hopeless way. However, this holy book tells us that there is only one way to God, and that the true way is through faith in Jesus Christ.”

The murderers and cattle thieves were enthusiastic and took the little books and Bibles. But the jailer listened too.

“This is the true way,” he said. “I know I can’t work my way to God. I know I have to trust in Jesus Christ alone. I’ve got to tell my sisters.”

The jailer’s two sisters worked in the cathedral. When their brother came to get them, they eagerly joined the little meeting in the prison. “We could hear you preaching in the street!” they told John. “Every time you preached, we were listening behind the window curtains in the cathedral! We’ve listened to you for over a year. We knew you spoke truth, but we were afraid. Now we’re not afraid any more.”

“We’ve always known the Bible is a holy book,” said the jailer. “But we’ve also been told that it’s a dangerous book and that if we misread it, it will send our souls to hell. Some people ... well ... are confused and think it’s evil. Sometimes the priests even say that. I think they’re afraid of it.”

“We’ve never had a Bible,” said one of the sisters, “so we didn’t know what it said. Now that we do, we want you to show us where it says Jesus is the only way.”

John turned to John 14:6 and showed them. “Jesus said, ‘I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father, except through Me.’”

The sister nodded. “Jesus is the only way,” she said. “It says so right there in the Holy Bible. Is there any place in the Bible that says we should come to God through the Virgin?”

“No,” said John. “It’s not there.”

The other sister sighed. “So much time wasted in blindness,” she said. “I’ll need to read the whole thing myself, just to be sure.”

Someone else came to the jailer and said, “Did you know that the priest has put you out of the church? He excommunicated you because you no longer adore the holy Virgin, and because you read that book when he told everybody not to.”

Excommunication was the most terrible thing that could happen to a Roman Catholic. They were told that it meant they would go to hell—there was no hope for the salvation of their souls. One of the sisters put her head right down on the shoulder of the other and began to sob.

“Don’t cry, sister,” John said, trying to encourage her. “Your hope isn’t in the priest, or the Catholic church. It’s in Jesus.”

She looked up. "Do you think I weep for my own soul?" she cried. "No! I weep for those wicked priests who have deceived us all these years!"

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John, Jack, and Rachel were some of the first missionaries in the country of Colombia. But years before, others had gone ahead of them, passing out Scriptures, portions of Scriptures, and little books; all at the risk of their lives.

In 1939, another missionary, Elof Anderson, knocked on the door of a house in a small village. Elof was used to being cursed, beaten, and chased out of the town. But he knew that in every place, God had His people.

A Colombian man opened the door, looked at him, then looked at the Bible he held, and said, "When is the meeting?"

"Uh ... what are you talking about?" Elof stammered.

"You have a Bible there, don't you?" the man asked. "Are you an evangélico?"

"Yes," Elof answered. "And I have some other—"

"Come in, come in!" said the man. "I've prayed for forty years for you to come!"

"Forty years?" said Elof. "How?"

The man walked to a trunk and pulled out a big Bible, old and worn.

“I got this forty years ago from an American who came up this trail from the city.” I’ve read it and read it so many times, I’ve memorized it. I know it’s true, but I don’t understand it all. I’ve prayed for forty years for God to send me someone to teach me.

“Now, you’ve come! My family and neighbors will listen, so let’s get started.”

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Elof Anderson gave the gospel of Jesus Christ to that man, and others around him, who came to Christ. Here and there, small churches began to form, like fireflies of light around the nation of Colombia.

See Thinking Further for Chapter I on page 135.