

A Burning Desire to Spread the Gospel An Interview With Pastor Sylvain Romain

On our last trip to East-Turkey this summer, we met Sylvain Romain, a SDA-pastor currently living in Hamburg, Germany who came to Turkey in order to meet us and travel with our group. Sylvain, a French speaking 9 languages, has worked as an evangelist in several countries.

He belongs to the 6th generation of SDA. His grand mother knew Ellen G. White and her (!) grand father used to work three days a week and then walk the rest of the week from village to village to spread the present truth, accompanying Michael B. Czéchowski and later John N. Andrews.

Since Sylvain's father, grandfather, uncle and grand uncle had been Gospel ministers, it might have been a natural choice for him to walk in their foot-steps. However he fought the Gospel's call vigorously for many years and ended up in the world far from Gods plan for his life. A Jazz musician, like the prodigal son, he experienced for a time the futility of what the world can offer.

But we asked Sylvain himself to shortly describe his way back to God.

One morning,, one of my best friends died on drugs. Suddenly I understood that life was not a game. While struggling between two worlds for months, I accepted the offer of my father when he surprised me asking: "In two weeks have baptism. Do you want to be baptized?" I said yes without hesitation, knowing this was the right choice, but without knowing how many doors God would open to lead me.

Later you worked as a missionary in many countries, in which ones?

I started in Germany, moved to Thailand, to North Africa, back to Germany and then Turkey.

Do you have any special experiences from your work in Thailand?

I came to Bangkok on vacation and met people who worked in the Cambodian, Lao and Vietnamese refugee camps. I was so moved by those thousands of desperate people hungry for hope and open to the Gospel that I came back, sold my car and furniture. I got married and we used the money we got for our marriage and worked in Thailand without any salary.

The greatest experience was to teach the Bible from morning to evening to the poorest people on earth. Everyday I was teaching hundreds of people and every Sabbath I had five Church services and, in average, 40 people to baptize.

I almost died from a sickness and was healed by prayer, I escaped by miracle a ten years prison sentence. Our job seemed to be a drop in the ocean but because of this pioneer work there are now thousands of Adventists in Cambodia and Indochinese believers all around the planet.

A tremendous experience was to walk through Chinatown in a big city and to be pin pointed: "Look, isn't this Pastor Sylvain Romain?" A foretaste of heaven when we will meet lots of people attesting that "our work has not been in vain" (1. Cor.15:58).

We understand that you previously have worked for 6 years in Turkey, and established several churches in this country. How would you describe the experience of being a Christian missionary in a country where Islam is the dominant religion? Did you meet opposition?

We met a lot of opposition, but not made of "flesh and blood (Eph.6:12). It was mainly a spiritual warfare. We were surprised to meet a lot of open-minded Muslims. Many asked for Bibles and Christian literature. The Qur'an urges Muslims to talk to Christians "in the most courteous way" (29:45) and to ask them question when they do not know something (10:94). This is what we did. People believed us because they saw that we were different. We did not do anything special except letting Jesus live in us, practicing our faith in an open but non aggressive way and respecting people as well as their faith and ways of thinking.

You are one of the few Christian ministers who claim that Islam in the beginning believed in the same God as did the Jews and the Christians. But does not Islam deny Christ?

To my opinion, the Qur'an is not the word of God but, at the beginning, was like a small light given to bring the Arabs to the Bible. This is why the Qur'an has an incomplete picture of Christ. But she does give him godly attributes, see him as the Saviour and Mediator between God and man.

The problem is that Islam has gone astray from the Qur'an, people have put question point besides these texts and this is our duty to change them into exclamation points.

You told our group that many Christians meet Muslims with a mentality of being spiritually superior to them, and they feel that they both know better and are more important than Islamic believers. But what can Muslims teach us and what attitudes can we learn from them?

Well, many Muslims are sincere and God will judge them as such. Read e.g. Mat. 11, 21-23. Like everywhere, most people consider their religion as a mere tradition and do not care about the truth. Others are secularised, dazzled by materialism or philosophy, or just disappointed by the abuses of religion. Other are fanatics, but might change some day from Saul the persecutor to Paul the giant of theology and mission. More and more people come back to the Qur'an and, by doing that, to the Bible, to the true Christians and also to a greater picture of Jesus.

Some others are been led by the testimony of Christians they met, or by dreams; some are just led by the Holy Spirit.

Basically, I learnt from Turks respects for other people and their ideas, I admired their hospitality and tried to learn a little bit of their incredible patience.

Back to the present situation in Turkey. How do you view the Gospel work in this country today, what more could be done, and how could Christians in Scandinavia contribute?

Obviously, linguistic and cultural barriers, bureaucracy and many misunderstandings make it hard for Westerners to work in Turkey. But God is preparing new born Turks to witness among their people. My vision and prayer is to sponsor as many of them as possible: financially but also in prayer, training and encouragement. I dream of helping those who have no job to become self supporting, for example by teaching English, or - what would be best - to help their people by meeting their

physical needs. I imagine workers trained with the NEWSTART principles, healing like Jesus and then saying: "Follow Him".

Presently you work as a pastor in Hamburg in Germany, and are responsible for many immigrants from several countries. Before we met you, we had heard rumours that you had been permitted to preach at an Islamic meeting during the important Friday -prayer time, and that you concluded your sermon by praying in the Arabic language. How was your message received, and what made it possible for a Christian minister to preach for a large group of Muslims on their holy day in a Muslim sanctuary?

When I came to Hamburg three years ago, I prayed like in any other place that God would show me the right people, and he did. Somehow I met some influent Muslim people: doctors, diplomats, scholars and religious leaders. This was God's leading. The only thing I did was to meet them as friends. Human beings are all the same, they all have the same needs. Listen to them and respect them and they will be your friends.

Some Muslims are amazed to meet an open-minded Christian, to have their prejudices towards Christianity removed. Others are just curious and want to learn from me. I let God's word and my behaviour speak, i.e. Jesus in me!.

Indeed I was asked to preach in mosque. By the way I told them, I would preach from the Bible and they agreed. Now we study the Bible together regularly (the imam and about ten young people).

You mentioned that you have met a large group of Muslims who lived according to the true faith which they had received and preserved from the early Christians. Where did you meet them and what did they believe? How was their reaction when they met you ?

50 years ago, a Turkish soldier served in the Korean war. He met an American nurse who gave him a Bible. And 40 years long, this man read the Bible, alone and away from every church. During Gulf war I, his daughter worked in an American base, met some SDA members and told them that she had been studying the Bible with her dad for many years and wanted to know more. I went there and a group of 22 people were waiting for me. I was amazed that they knew and accepted the truth I taught them. How as this possible? Because 50 years ago an

American nurse gave a Bible to a young Turkish soldier! But also because these people belong to a Muslim sect of 10 million people (Syria and Turkey) saying that the true Qur'an is like the Bible.

Obviously those people are the descendant of the first Christians you read about in Acts 2 and 13. Their descendants were forced to become Muslims. However they kept in their hearts the message of the early Church, knowing all about the Sabbath, baptism, foot-washing etc.

Those people seem to have had no contacts with true Christians for a long time and they are mainly secularised. . It was a great privilege to help them and to establish a Church there close to Antiochia ...

Thank you very much for your response to our questions. If anyone of our readers would like to meet Sylvain, he will be in Norway this fall, and share his experiences in the Strømmen SDA -church, Sabbath (Saturday) September 13. The meetings will begin at 11:00 and last all afternoon. A free meal will be served during the gathering.

Is there any important questions which I have forgotten to ask?

Just a comment to conclude with and to encourage you: Our work is to sow the seed and let the Holy Spirit do the rest. Of course there is a time for confrontation, but we have to start with the ABC before we go into details. First build bridges, remove stones, then you sow the seed. And do you know what? If you sow an apple tree, it will bear fruits after 10-12 years. So be patient and let the seed grow (Mc.4,26-29).

Mission is everywhere, also in Norway. I am not a hero and have neither plan nor any ambition, except to be a servant in God's vineyard no matter where and for whom. I owe everything to the One who loves me and has protected me in so many ways. Being a pioneer is often a task without earthly reward. But even experiencing Job's situation, there is nothing more beautiful than to be able to say: "Before I had heard from You but now my eyes have seen You (Job 42:5).