

Lesson Two: Subverting Privilege

Part I: Preparation

Bible Passage: Acts 16, 21:17-22:30

Key Verse: "But Paul replied, 'They have beaten us in public, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens and have thrown us into prison; and now are they going to discharge us in secret? Certainly not! Let them come and take us out themselves.'" (Acts 16:37)

Summary: The first century inhabitants of Palestine and Asia Minor lived under the military occupation of the Roman Empire and suffered the persecution, indignities and economic disadvantages that all people living under military occupation do. Those with official Roman citizenship had many more rights under law. The stories in Acts 16 and 21:17-22:30 show Paul using his citizenship to preach the gospel in ways that non-citizens could not.

Most members of Christian Peacemaker Teams come from North America. Soldiers and paramilitaries who would not think twice about shooting a Palestinian youth, an indigenous Mexican or a Colombian union leader, know that shooting a Canadian or American human rights observer accompanying these people will have consequences. This phenomenon is sometimes called "effective racism" and CPTers are often uncomfortable with their privilege. However, especially in Colombia and Haiti, teams have been told there are people living today who would have died if CPTers had not been with them.

Study

Acts 16 begins the account of Paul's missionary journey to Europe – possibly in the company of the writer of Luke-Acts, given the use of "we" to describe the journey. Heading to Macedonia via contemporary Syria and Turkey, they picked up Timothy in Lystra and founded a church in Philippi. From Paul's letter to Christians in that city, we know that he always regarded it with particular affection.

While visiting Philippi, Paul and Silas cast a demon out of a slave girl, thus destroying her economic potential. Beaten by both a crowd and magistrates, who use Roman law as an excuse for their behavior, Paul and Silas spend part of a night in jail until an earthquake frees them of their fetters. (Paul alludes to this incident in I Thessalonians 2:2.) Ironically, Paul does not use this divine intervention as a chance to escape. Instead, he shows concern for his jailer's life and soul by remaining with the other prisoners and preaching about Jesus.

However, when the magistrates say that Paul and Silas may be released, he refuses to go without an apology, because his rights as a Roman citizen have been violated.

Later, in Jerusalem, another mob attacks Paul, because they had heard rumors that Paul brought Gentile Christians into the temple. The Roman soldiers essentially save Paul's life by taking him into protective custody. The tribune, Claudius Lysias (Acts 23:26), orders that Paul be "examined by scourging," (i.e., whipped) until the Romans get the information they want out of him, and Paul once again claims the privileges due a Roman citizen.

Some Greek texts of Acts 22:28 have the tribune say, "I know how much it cost me to obtain the citizenship," which could have indicated that the tribune was sneering, "Roman citizen, big deal, I bought and paid for mine too." The Roman historian Dio Cassius said that during the reign of the Emperor Claudius, citizenship was sold, at the beginning for large sums of money and at the end for a pittance. (See Sidebar.) Given that people who became citizens often named themselves after the Emperor, it is possible that the tribune bought his at that time. However Paul's rejoinder that he was born a citizen (meaning his parents and maybe grandparents had been citizens) immediately grants him greater status than the tribune and makes the tribune and his men aware that they have committed a serious breach of Roman law.

Paul's claiming of Roman citizenship privileges has had historical implications for the relationship of the

church to the state. Before his final trip to Rome, he believed he had more to fear from the Jewish religious establishment than from the Roman Empire. This belief may be the basis of his controversial argument in Romans 13 that “those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.” Roman roads and Roman control over Europe, West Asia and Africa made it possible for Paul to travel on his missionary journeys. The Empire gave him an authority to appeal to when faced with mob violence.

Sadly, however, Paul probably died, as Jesus did, at the hands of the Romans for being – to quote his Roman prosecutor Tertullus – a “pestilent fellow, an agitator among all the Jews and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes” (Acts 24:25) – in other words, a seditionist.

Nearly 2,000 years later, the Empire that controls the world is American and American citizenship is a passport to rights and privileges denied to people in the Two-thirds world. Canadians and Western Europeans also travel in these countries with similar advantages.

Over the last several decades North American and European activists have sought to turn this privilege on its head by using their status to protect people whose lives are considered less valuable by the status quo. European American freedom riders accompanied African Americans in their struggles for civil rights in the American South. White South Africans accompanied black South Africans in the struggle against apartheid. Volunteers for Peace Brigades International and Witness for Peace have accompanied Guatemalans targeted by death squads and Nicaraguan villagers targeted by the U.S.-backed Contra mercenaries.

Accompaniment has been a central part of CPT's work in most of its projects. Haitians, Palestinians, Mexicans and Colombians have avoided death or injury because various armed groups were reluctant to attack them in the presence of North Americans and Europeans, or because CPTers were actually standing between the armed groups and their intended victims. This protection is sometimes called “effective racism” and causes moral dilemmas for CPTers, because by accompanying targeted people, they are acknowledging that the world considers the lives of CPTers more valuable than the lives of the people they accompany.

Colombian partners of CPT have frequently told team members that their accompaniment has saved lives and made it possible for refugees to return home. The team's accompaniment work has forced them to deal with grisly realities. CPTers in Colombia have pulled bodies and parts of bodies out of the river and identified the bodies of friends and acquaintances slain by paramilitaries, because Colombians who do these things become paramilitary targets themselves. CPTers Erin Kindy and Pierre Shantz even transported the body of a fifteen year old victim in the team's motor canoe back to his family's home along the river, because the Red Cross felt that transporting the body was too dangerous for its workers.

CPT STORIES

January 10, 1999

Hebron: CPTers Arrested for "Getting in the Way" at Nonviolent Palestinian Protest

by Mark Frey (adapted by Kathleen Kern)

CPTers Pierre Shantz, 24, and Sara Reschly, 26, were arrested today by Israeli police after "getting in the way" of soldiers about to shoot at a Palestinian nonviolent demonstration in Hebron. The demonstration protested the closure of the Abraham Mosque and the curfew placed on the 30,000 Palestinians living under military occupation in the 20 percent of Hebron still under Israeli control. The curfew was imposed last Monday after Israeli settler women were injured, one seriously, when their van was shot at near the Mosque.

Holding long banners reading, "No to Closure of Ibrahimi Mosque," and "No to Collective Punishment," a group of 70-100 Palestinians marched from the Hebron municipal offices to the border that separates the Palestinian and Israeli-controlled areas. As the marchers approached the border, soldiers – armed with rubber-coated metal bullets, tear gas and sound grenades – took positions behind large cement barriers, ready to fire at the people.

CPTers Shantz, Reschly and Joanne Kaufman jumped in front of the soldiers and their guns. They cried, "This is a nonviolent demonstration! Don't shoot! They are not throwing rocks!" The soldiers, not knowing how to respond, lowered their M-16s and tried to push the CPTers away. Then, some soldiers threw sound grenades which sent the crowd scurrying. The demonstration leadership quickly calmed the Palestinians and the crowd returned, standing face to face with the soldiers.

Palestinian leaders worked to keep the demonstration peaceful, circulating among the youth and telling them not to throw rocks. After about thirty minutes of this face-off, soldiers began pushing the people. The marchers started to run away and some threatened to throw rocks. Soldiers quickly moved into firing positions and CPTers again got in the way, standing in front of the rifles and saying, "This is a nonviolent demonstration!" Only a couple of rocks were thrown before the Palestinian leaders restrained the youth.

One of the military officers, furious with the CPTers for interfering, began shouting in the faces of CPTers Mark Frey and Shantz, telling them to leave the area. Shantz retorted that the demonstration was nonviolent, and was slapped twice in the face by the officer for refusing to be quiet. At another point, Kaufman was physically restrained by a soldier as she tried to stand in front of soldiers taking aim.

When the civilian Israeli police arrived, the angered officer took Shantz and Reschly to be arrested. Israeli police detained Sydney Stigge-Kaufman for a short time on location, and then released her. The remaining CPTers and two internationals present circulated among the crowd or positioned themselves between soldiers and Palestinians.

About an hour and a half after the demonstration began, the Palestinian leadership called for everyone to pray in the street to defuse mounting tension. The older men lined up on rugs to pray, calling for the younger ones to join them. An Israeli officer circulated among soldiers, telling them to stay calm and also, in Arabic, encouraged Palestinian youth to join the prayers. After the prayers, the leaders declared the demonstration finished and called for everyone to return to the Palestinian area, although many people remained. No shots were fired, no clashes developed after the demonstration ended, no one was injured.

A Palestinian leader formally thanked CPTers after the march, saying, "Thank you. You have done your work."

"The success of the intervention was due to three things," Shantz said, "the discipline of the men on their way to pray, the efforts of the Druze Border Police officer and our standing between the soldiers and the demonstrators. If any one of those three things had been missing, someone would have gotten shot. There was one officer there who obviously wanted to shoot someone."

The authorities charged Shantz with "pushing two border police and hitting one on the helmet" and "interfering with police doing their duty. They charged Reschly with "yelling 'don't shoot' at soldiers," and "assaulting a soldier, i.e. pushing him in the chest two feet back."

Both told the court their commitment to nonviolence would prohibit them from doing these things. A third charge, by a Russian-speaking soldier, that Reschly called him a Nazi, was dropped after it was discovered that he didn't speak English. Video footage of the event later shown on Israeli TV clearly showed that Reschly and Shantz had intervened nonviolently.

The court told Shantz and Reschly to hand in their passports and 2,000 shekels bail each while the police investigated the incident for two weeks. After that time, the police returned the passports and money (which had been raised on the spot by Israeli and international supporters), and dropped all charges.

October 7, 2001

COLOMBIA: Building Peace One Game at a Time.
by Scott Kerr

Soccer is very important to the people of Colombia. Cease-fires have been negotiated around soccer games. More recently the spirits of Colombians were lifted as the National Selection team won the Americas Cup, the equivalent of the Super Bowl in Latin America.

A few weeks ago, CPTers Pierre Shantz and Scott Kerr visited a community a hour and a half upstream from Ñeques where the team stays in the campo (rural area). This community is occupied by the AUC paramilitary group (United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia). Community members are obliged to pay taxes to this group or face reprisals. It was with some apprehension that the team traveled to this community with our partners to explain what CPT is doing in the area.

There on the river banks, team members conversed about the ongoing violence. They heard stories of mutilated bodies and continued conflicts between the guerilla and the paramilitary in the area. They had a very good talk with community leaders, and set up another meeting later in the month.

On the way out, the team met with the sports director of Puente Opón and talked about the possibility of a soccer game with the community of Los Ñeques. "We can't go there. The guerrilla will kill us," he said.

The Ñeques representatives said the same thing: "No way! It's too dangerous for us to travel there alone. The paras [paramilitary] will kill us." Then someone said, "but if CPT can accompany us, we might be able to play." And with that began the talk of playing soccer together for the first time in years.

Shantz explains, "It's so important for people to get to know the faces again of the people up and down the river. Right now the people think that everyone in this community are paras, and that everyone in that community are guerillas, but that's just not true."

It is CPT's hope that by beginning to play soccer games together (with CPT's accompaniment) the communities can put a human face on the conflict. Building peace takes time, but the small hope that a soccer ball can bring is a good start, and it is something concrete to build on in the future. Now they just need to find the jerseys.

Sidebars

1) Picture of Sara in Hallelujah position with caption, "Note that the Palestinian man standing beside her doing the same thing was not named in the AP photo that went out about this event. Another example of 'Effective Racism.'"

2) When Claudius became consul again, for the third time, he abolished many days of thanksgiving and many holidays. . . . He reduced the Lycians to servitude because they had revolted and slain some Romans, and he incorporated them in the prefecture of Pamphylia. During the investigation of this affair, which was conducted in the senate, he put a question in Latin to one of the envoys who had originally been a Lycian, but had been made a Roman citizen; and when the man failed to understand what was said, he took away his citizenship, saying that it was not proper for a man to be a Roman who had no knowledge of the Romans' language. A great many other persons unworthy of citizenship were also deprived of it, whereas he granted citizenship to others quite indiscriminately, sometimes to individuals and sometimes to whole groups. For inasmuch as Romans had the advantage over foreigners in practically all respects, many sought the franchise by personal application to the emperor, and many bought it from Messalina and the imperial freedmen. For this reason, though the privilege was at first sold only for large sums, it later became so cheapened by the facility with which it could be obtained that it came to be a common saying that a man could become a citizen by giving the right person some bits of broken glass. *(Roman History Book LX; www.ku.edu/history/index/europe/ancientrome/E/Roman/Texts/Cassius_Dio/60*.html)*

Part II: Session

Focus (10 minutes)

Identify the privileges with which you grew up in North America, (e.g., the right to public education, the right to hold opinions different from the status quo). Have the members of the group write down the privileges they identify on pieces of paper. You may wish to reflect upon other countries who do not confer these benefits upon their citizens and then discuss, as a group, the difference between a "right"

and a “privilege.” You may wish to discuss more subtle forms of privilege, such as the fellowship of a close-knit community, speaking English, or the ability not to have people pass judgments based on the color of your skin.

Transition: Perhaps it is a function of human nature that people tend to focus more on their disadvantages than their privileges. People who grow up in wealthy families with all their physical needs and recreational desires met, can still live with misery and depression because they cannot have something they want.

North Americans often take their privileges for granted. Even in countries where speaking out against governmental policies can result in arrest and imprisonment, North Americans in trouble can call their embassy representatives who will ensure they have a lawyer and relatively humane prison conditions. This valuing of North American life over the lives of Palestinians, Filipinos, members of indigenous groups etc. can be used to protect people of other nationalities. A North American standing in between a soldier about to fire on a less valued life can prevent violence.

Engage the Text (20 minutes)

Option A: After summarizing Paul’s use of privilege in the texts for today, discuss as a group examples of times that “privileged” people intervened on your behalf (e.g. times a parent or an adult intervened with a teacher or principal at your school or a friend got you into an organization or group of which you wanted to be a part). Were these interventions largely positive? Next, discuss as a group times you used privilege to intervene on someone else’s behalf.

Discuss times that members of your group used Canadian or American citizenship to their advantage. Do these advantages affect how we regard Paul’s use of Roman citizenship to get him out of a dangerous situation? How do these advantages affect how we regard the work of CPT and other groups who accompany at-risk populations? What are some examples of how American or Canadian citizenship might backfire in another country or culture?

Next skim through the releases about the team’s work in Hebron and Colombia. How did the presence of North Americans change the course of events in Hebron and Colombia?

Option B:

Hold a round-table discussion between Paul and a member of Christian Peacemaker Teams about how they used their citizenship privileges to help others. The CPTer and Paul should feel free to disagree with each other about their respective missions. The person playing Paul has the option of knowing or not knowing that he was eventually executed under Roman law – probably for sedition. After Paul and the CPTer have spoken for five minutes, the other members of your class may ask questions (See “*Tips for Leading*”).

Respond

Discuss issues that arise from CPT’s use of “effective racism” to accompany people living under oppression. What are the dangers inherent in using one’s status as a North American or European to protect others? How would you feel in an accompaniment situation if you knew that your life was considered more important than the people you were protecting? What are some ways that people can give up privilege.

Closing

Bring the pieces of paper on which you have written your privileges to a central point in the class and close in prayer, offering these privileges to God to use as God sees fit. If it is safe to do so, you may wish to burn

the papers in a fire-proof receptacle to symbolize both the giving up of privilege and the offering of these privileges to God.

Part III: Leader Guidelines

Items Needed and Advance Preparation

If you choose to do the panel discussion (Option B) you may wish to set up a table or some other arrangements that will help you get into the spirit of the drama.

Resources

www.cpt.org

Tips for Leading

- As the group discusses privileges, you may wish to have a list of privileges that most white North Americans do not think about often. Examples could include 1) speaking English as a native language in a world where English is the official language of commerce; 2) not having to worry that their land will be confiscated; 3) expecting the support of the police if they are in trouble rather than expecting harassment.
- If your group decides it wants to do the roundtable discussion with Paul and the CPTer, make sure that these people read the appropriate passages in Acts and various CPTNet releases during the week.

For Next Session

If you want to do the dramatic reading, you will want to photocopy "scripts" of Acts 3-4, 5:12-42, highlighting the spoken parts. You will also want to summarize some of the narration and Peter's sermons for the sake of time.

You and/or the rest of the group may wish to watch a video of the PBS series, *A Force More Powerful*, in the course of the week to gain an understanding of the place of civil disobedience in nonviolent movements for social change.