

## A Good Debate

Ethiopia March 2018



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*“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5).*

Jesus' mysterious and shocking words to Nicodemus became the source of a good debate in my class in Ethiopia this month. When I asked these Lutheran pastors what 'born of water' meant, it was no surprise that they said baptism. “Prove it from the text,” I replied. They couldn't. “What are some other possible meanings?” After a few moments of silence, a younger evangelist in Bible college named Beki said he thought it meant physical birth. Again, I asked him to prove it. He responded that 'born again' implied more than one birth and that Jesus' answer was in response to Nicodemus' question about physical

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birth – clues gathered from the text. The two senior pastors shook their heads adamantly and the other younger ministers respectfully took up the same position. Later, to my joy, I learned that a few lively conversations broke out at the morning tea break. After tea we took a tally of the positions. Beki and I were outnumbered. You may say we lost the battle about baptism and John 3. Perhaps. But by God's grace, it was an opportunity to make a point about the authority of Scripture. We have no authority to believe an interpretation is correct unless we can prove it from the details of the text, according to the author's intent. They seemed to get it. That's victory in my book.

*Commentators debate the passage.* Born of water and Spirit could be referring to two things that must happen to enter Heaven – both natural and spiritual birth. Given that Jesus is responding to Nicodemus' questions about natural birth, it seems to follow. However, Jesus could have been referring to the spiritual cleansing and renewal prophesied about in Ezekiel 36 (also taught in Titus 3:5). There is good reason for that as well. But perhaps, as John often likes to do, he meant both. Whatever the interpretation, it was encouraging to see Beki break from his tradition because he could find no support for it in the text.

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Emmanuel, team member from Chicago, was born in Ethiopia and is fluent in Amharic. He was an instant success among the brothers and helped our team get an insider's perspective on the culture.

## The Class

There were a total of 12 trainees throughout the week. Most are evangelists, 2 are senior pastors, 3 are leaders in training who regularly preach the word and 1 is on the prayer team. My translator, *Nadia*, who was also with me in Hawassa, did an excellent job. She's an evangelist with a great desire for the spiritual growth of the youth of Ethiopia.

Our Lord gave me much help in the preparation on short notice. The Spirit enabled me to teach boldly and gave fresh affections for many of John's deep, exciting truths. Our focus in class was practicing the hermeneutical skills they have been learning over the last 2+ years and 6 courses. So we made time for them to get in groups and

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practice interpreting key passages together. Then each group presented while the others evaluated.



The students spent time each day digging into the text to answer the 4 Interpretive Questions that help them understand the meaning of the text and how it applies to their context.

## Their Preaching

At the end of the week, everyone gave their short sermonette from the passage I assigned earlier in the week. One missed the main point of his text but most did well. *Rev. Jira* (a senior pastor), in his text on the feeding of the five thousand in John 6, made a striking reference to Jesus fulfilling the prophecy of a prophet like Moses who was to come (see Deut. 18). Nadia taught on Jesus washing the disciples' feet from John 13. Drawing on the fact that Jesus lovingly washed Judas' feet even though he knew he was about to betray him, she made specific

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The makeshift whiteboard and the Bible Project overview of John. Many snapped photos of the poster with their phones or sat and studied it during a lunch break. I was able to leave it with pastor Berhanu for his ministry.

*"It was encouraging to see Beki break from his tradition because he could find no support for it in the text."*



In the closing ceremony, they honored us with gifts. The decorative stick is a symbol of the father's authority in the home and displays the colors of their flag. Our wives were given beautiful scarves. What warm, hospitable people.

## Current and Upcoming Ministry

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## **Immigrant Training in Minneapolis**

**(April 6-7, last weekend)**

TLI began training immigrants in the Minneapolis area last year. A second cohort has now started using our brand new curriculum. I got the opportunity to teach course 1 to this group alongside of Jonathan Worthington, the Director of Curriculum. We had 16 hours with Hmong and Hispanic ministry leaders soaking in *Knowing God, His Word and Ourselves*. God really blessed this training. A few people were even moved to tears by aspects of God's sovereign, wise and good character demonstrated in the gospel and in the course of redemptive history. What a rewarding experience! The new course is easier to teach and lends itself to more interaction, incorporating elements of worship over the truths being discovered. I am looking forward to future ministry using this new curriculum. Pray for its impact on the field with new sites this Fall.

## **T4G (April 11-13)**

Our family is currently in Louisville. I have been serving at our booth at times during the conference. Come by and say hello. We look forward to worshipping at Immanuel on Sunday morning.

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The training location in Bishoftu is an age old missionary school being revived as a Bible college.

## Upcoming Trips in 2018

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### Dubai Project

**May 31 - June 9.** Training continues for the 10 brothers from a closed country in partnership with a group of churches. We will be switching to our new curriculum, which I am very excited about. I will be taking our new pastor from Cross of Grace, Scott Crook.

### South Asia

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**Sept. 19-30** teaching Galatians. There are 10-12 leaders in this closed country that we train in the evenings in a believer's home. They will graduate in November this year. One passionate preacher wants to take the gospel to unbelievers in the dangerous eastern portion of the country.



Mimi, my substitute daughter. She followed me around and even sat in my class one afternoon.

## Family

Many of you already know the amazing news we got concerning Rebekah's cancer. **No More Active Disease!** Thank you all for praying and walking with us through this. Continue following [CaringBridge](#) for updates

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