

A reflection on the life of Ernst Christoffel

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It is always humbling to read about someone who 'turned their whole life into a sermon'. Ernst Jakob Christoffel, the founder of Christian Mission to the Blind in the Middle East - now Christian Blind Mission - is a remarkable example of God's love in action, inspired by his deep Christian faith. Just as God became flesh and dwelt among us in the person of Jesus, full of grace and truth, so sometimes it is easier for us to hear and see God's word when it is powerfully transposed into a human story.



Ernst Christoffel holding a young boy in Isfahan, Iran.

The life of Ernst Christoffel

Ernst Christoffel's life began in the Rhineland, in Germany, in 1876, born to Christian parents who opened their home to anyone in need. This clearly made a strong impression on Ernst, and as a young man he went to Basel in Switzerland to train for ministry. While he was there, news reached the seminary of riots and massacres in the Ottoman Empire against the Armenian people.



After completing his theological training in 1904, Ernst, accompanied by his sister, Hedwig, was sent to Asia Minor to run two orphanages for Armenian children whose parents had been killed in the pogroms. Their job was to find alternative care for the children, as the orphanages were to be closed down, but it was extremely difficult to find any mission that would take in blind children. Four years later, in 1908, Ernst and Hedwig decided to raise money independently as missionaries to Turkey for a year, specifically to help blind people in the Middle East. People had become blind through illness, poor hygiene, and a severe lack of eye specialists to help care for them. In this time of political unrest and famine, they set up a refuge called Bethesda, and their home quickly filled with not only blind children but those with all kinds of disabilities.

Ernst's 'house of steadfast love'

Ernst and Hedwig welcomed all the children nobody cared about: the 'nobody's children'. Unable to preach the Christian Gospel under Islamic rule, their love and hospitality spoke volumes. The name of the house itself is significant. 'Bethesda' is Aramaic for 'house of kindness' or 'house of steadfast love'. 'Hesed', or 'covenant faithfulness', is one of the characteristics of God's relationship with Israel in the Old Testament. It suggests a reciprocal relationship and a loyalty between two partners. It's not a one-way action or way of relating. When Ernst invited people to meet the orphans, he was clear that people should not pity them, but rather have compassion. Ernst always regarded them as fellow human beings with potential – with something to give and something to teach.

Isaiah 58:6-12 resonates powerfully with the living sermons of Ernst and Hedwig. Isaiah warns the people of their hypocrisy of worshipping God in the temple whilst continuing to oppress others, quarrelling and fighting with each other. God is not interested in prayer and fasting, if it is not also accompanied by actions of love towards other people. As we read in 1 John (3:16-18), **'We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth.'**

This is the kind of piety that God is interested in, Isaiah says:

"...to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; to cover the naked, to fight for justice and to set people free from what binds them." Then, God says, **"your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you; the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard."** The light

that Ernst and Hedwig shone in their work was a light of hope – the love of God made manifest to

all those who had not known love or care. Isaiah continues, **"The Lord will guide you continually and satisfy your needs in parched places... and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water whose waters never fail."**



The unswerving faith of Ernst and Hedwig Christoffel that God would provide for them was met time and again with funds and helpers to come alongside them. They were joined in their mission by a blind teacher and another pastor, and the number in Bethesda grew to 85. The children were taught to read and write, and this began to shift people's perceptions of what blind people were capable of. Ernst had by this point earned the trust of all those around – Muslims, Christians, Turks, Kurds and Armenians. I was reminded when reading this of Paul's letter to the Galatians: **"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."** All people are made in the image of God. All deserve love and care. Considering what was going on politically around them, Ernst's conviction of the value and dignity of human life and his commitment to show Christ's love to everyone was all the more striking.

Ernst wrote passionately about whether or not people are deemed worthy of support: **"What does it mean to be worthy or unworthy of support?"** He asks, **"Where would we be if God used this principle when He dealt with us?"** Where would we be indeed?. No-one can fathom the depths or abundance of God's grace or love. It is almost impossible to get our heads around, let alone to embody that love and grace ourselves in our interactions and relationships with others. We only need to pause and think for a moment about someone in our lives who has hurt us (or someone close to us) in ways that seem unforgivable, to glimpse the wideness of God's mercy. Or to think of someone who has made a series of bad life choices, never seems to learn and constantly needs bailing out. It might wear down our human patience and capacity to keep caring, but God's love and grace are boundless.

Resilience through dark times

In 1914, everything changed. Ernst had travelled back home to Germany to acquire a braille printing press, but was then called to serve in a military hospital during the First World War. Meanwhile, in the Ottoman Empire, genocide of over one million Armenian Christians and mass deportations were carried out. Bethesda house became a Turk-run military hospital, and half of the former refuge community had died. With special permission, Ernst Christoffel returned to the Bethesda house in Turkey and was able to re-establish the house as a place of refuge for blind and disabled children. The end of the First World War and Germany's defeat meant an end to his missionary work in Turkey, as all Germans were ordered home.



Ernst returned to Turkey once more in 1924, but was refused a work permit. He set his sights instead on setting up a similar mission to blind children in Persia and settled in Azerbaijan. It's incredible to think of his friends in Germany raising money to support him in this, considering the conditions of post-war poverty and unemployment. As Ernst had done in Turkey, so here he also learnt the local languages and set about creating Persian and Armenian braille textbooks and parts of the Bible in braille for the children. He taught both men and women, using animals to teach zoology, a scented garden to teach botany, as well as crafts and sports. He established yet another home in Isfahan in Iran in 1928 and the same pattern emerged: blind, disabled, and deaf-mute children found refuge, a life-changing education and independence.

Disaster struck again with the Second World War. Iran was occupied by Russian and British forces, and the two blind mission homes were closed down. Ernst was arrested and transferred to a number of successive prison camps for three years. He wrote that in this time of darkness he held on to the words of Psalm 42: **"Why are you so downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God."** His co-worker, Johanna Harms, who had taken over the home in Azerbaijan, had also been arrested by the Russians accused of being a spy, and spent a gruelling ten years in a labour camp.

What struck me, reading this story, is not just the sheer courage, tireless hope and determination that characterised Ernst and his family and friends who set up this mission, but the resilience of their faith in God. Ernst Christoffel seems to have been exactly as Isaiah described to Israel – 'like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.' Again, his story reminded me of St Paul, when he wrote in 2 Corinthians 4: **"Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart... For it is the God who said, 'Light will shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the**

face of Christ. But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way but not crushed, perplexed but not driven to despair, persecuted but not forsaken, struck down but not destroyed..."

Aged 73, Ernst campaigned once more for funds to help those in need, and established a home in Nümbrecht in West Germany for those who had lost their sight in the war. Incredibly, two years later, aged 75, Ernst returned to Isfahan in Iran to find his home in ruins, and started his mission again in a basic mud house. He died a few years later in 1955, having established yet another refuge for those in need.

Despite the traces of his work being destroyed by the Islamic Republic 24 years later, his mission in the Middle East continues today in the work of Christian Blind Mission. CBM continue to reach out to people whom others leave behind, treating and preventing conditions that lead to blindness and disability, and transform the lives of people with disabilities in the world's poorest places. By delivering sight-saving cataract surgeries and other eye health projects, as well as disability-inclusive healthcare, mental health support, education, and economic empowerment, CBM are working to break the cycle of poverty and disability and build a more inclusive world.

Conclusion: sermons without words

Let us hear then the cries of our brothers and sisters around the world who do not have access to adequate healthcare, or sufficient food or community support, or education, and do what we can to support those helping them.

Let us hear Ernst's warnings against judging who is worthy of our care and support them.

And let us hear the challenge from Ernst Christoffel's life to think about how to give sermons without words, showing in our actions and lives the love of God revealed to us in Christ and sustained by the Holy Spirit.

When the risen Christ met with his disciples in the upper room, he says two things.

The first is 'peace be with you'.

The second is 'receive the Holy Spirit'.

And it is the work of the Holy Spirit, to teach us and remind us of all that Jesus taught and commanded. **'Love one another as I have loved you.'**

Amen.

Front cover: Ernst Christoffel in Isfahan, Iran. © CBM

Page 2: Velena, 76, embraces her grandchildren after successful cataract surgery through CBM's See the Way project in Rwanda, East Africa. © CBM UK/Habimana

Page 3: Meghnath, 6, and his father, Gopinath, following successful cataract surgery at Biratnagar Eye Hospital, Nepal, East Asia. © CBM Global

Page 4: Cataract patient Batwel, 85, prays at home in Malawi, East Africa. © CBM UK/Hayduk

All of these images tell the story of the enduring legacy of Ernst Christoffel, and CBM's ongoing work to build an inclusive world in which all people with disabilities enjoy their human rights and achieve their full potential.



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