

How Apostolic Courage Is Transforming the Peruvian Jungle

A humble missionary couple in Peru, Jaime and Telma Gomez, showed me this week what it means to be passionate for Christ.

Peruvian schoolteacher Jaime Gomez and his wife, Telma, gave their hearts to Jesus in 1969 through the influence of Baptist missionaries who came from the United States to the Amazon town of Yurimaguas. After Jaime's conversion, he felt a strong call to ministry, yet he knew he did not have the power to be a witness. Without any exposure to Pentecostals, he felt God showed him he would be baptized in the Holy Spirit. A few days later, after seeing a vision of God touching his mouth, Jaime was overcome by heavenly power. "He spoke in tongues for six straight days," his wife told me this week in an interview in Tarapoto, a city in north Peru where the Gomezes began their church planting ministry.

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Today, the Smyrna of Peru Christian Mission Association has 160 churches, many in hard-to-reach villages in Peru's

Amazon jungle. The Gomezes, now in their 60s, offer us a South American example of authentic apostolic courage at a time when we in North America seem to lack such zeal.

Jaime, a slight, almost frail-looking man with a tender smile, doesn't brag about any of the hardships he has faced in ministry—including two arrests by Marxist terrorists in the 1980s. (Guerrillas held a gun to his head both times, but decided not to kill him.) After those close calls with death, he and his wife began to systematically disciple believers in Tarapoto because they realized that most evangelicals had shallow faith and weren't fulfilling the Great Commission. After they built one strong church they began to reach out to nearby cities. They often faced demonic opposition because of the entrenched witchcraft in mountain areas. They also had to overcome insurmountable obstacles in reaching Indian villages that have no roads.

To reach the town of Santa Sofia, for example, the Gomezes and their team had to take a two-day boat ride through jungles infested with tarantulas, alligators, snakes, piranhas, giant bats and swarms of mosquitoes. When the river narrowed at one point, the group had to move into canoes.

When they arrived in the indigenous settlement, the residents were totally open to the gospel and embraced evangelical faith. "Today the whole town is Christian," says

Telma, who still preaches passionately when she is not doting on her grandchildren or feeding the numerous visitors who pass through her modest home in Tarapoto.

In 1998 the Gomezes set their sights on a distant Indian settlement led by a patriarchal chief who had seven wives. Like many other Peruvian villages in that area, Parinari was dominated by a strange alcoholic drink called *masato*. It is made by women who chew chunks of yucca root, spit the juice into bowls and then ferment the liquid for days. (Think of it as a form of beer made with saliva.)

"When we came there we were expected to drink the *masato*. It is considered rude if you don't," Telma explained.

Today, because the Gomezes and their team from Smyrna were willing to invade the jungle with the gospel—often preaching with crude megaphones—the town's entire population of 383 attends church, and the local pastor Jaime and Telma trained has broken the cycle of polygamy by modeling Christian marriage to one wife.

I spent several hours with the Gomezes this week, listening to their stories of mass conversions and miraculous protection. They are true generals in the faith, with a depth of character that matches their spiritual authority. They don't carry the sense of entitlement or egotism that is sometimes displayed by Americans who print the title "APOSTLE" on their business cards.

Jaime and Telma Gomez are the real thing.

After my visit with them, I was stirred to fast and pray about

my own level of
commitment to the cause of evangelism. And I asked Brother
Jaime if he had any
advice for Americans who seem more enamored with a trendy,
camera-ready, 21st century
faith than with the authentic 1st century version.
The gentle apostle said, "The American
church has received a talent, but you have buried it,"
referring to Jesus'
parable of the unfaithful steward.

"The power we found to have this strength
came from the infilling of the Holy Spirit," Jaime continued.

"When men and
women are filled with the Spirit they have no choice but to go
out and share
Christ. After you are filled with the Spirit you are filled
with a passion to
fulfill the Great Commission."

After meeting these true spiritual
generals, and seeing the lasting fruit of their ministry in
Peru, I am asking
the Lord to give us all a fresh dose of the apostolic fire
that ignited their
hearts more than 40 years ago.

*J. Lee Grady is contributing editor of Charisma. He was
preaching in the
Peruvian cities of Lima and Tarapoto this past week. Follow
him on Twitter at leegrady.*