

# How To Conduct Ourselves As Ambassadors For Christ

by David F. Maas

*Forerunner, January 2004*

To the members of God's church in Philippi, the apostle Paul writes, "For our citizenship is in heaven" (Philippians 3:20). While some may spiritualize this fact away, Paul's words come across as literal and real to those who understand that God has called us out of this world (John 15:19) and transferred us into His Kingdom (Colossians 1:13).

Having our citizenship in the Kingdom of God by definition makes us aliens in the physical country in which we live. Like ambassadors of a foreign government, we cannot participate in the politics of another country, a practice that would distract us from our real spiritual goal. However, we realize that the apostle Paul has challenged us to be ambassadors for Christ: "Therefore we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God" (II Corinthians 5:20).

Do we have what it takes to be ambassadors of Jesus Christ? Do any of us know what an ambassador is supposed to do, or how an ambassador should behave? Do we know how an ambassador is expected to interface with the various publics with which he comes into contact?

## A Real Ambassador

I met my first ambassador about seventeen years ago in Pasadena, California, when a fellow Ambassador College faculty member introduced me to the Press and Cultural Consulate of Finland, Mr. Jaako Bergquist. I struck up an informal conversation with him, mentioning I had lived and taught in a Finnish community up in Moose Lake, Minnesota. Since the faculty member had previously told Ambassador Bergquist that I hosted a classical music program on KBAC, the college radio station, I also informed him that Jean Sibelius—a Finn—was my favorite composer.

A week later, my colleague and I were invited to a get-together at the consulate's home in Beverly Hills. I had no idea what to expect, but I counted it as an opportunity to learn a little bit more about the diplomatic community. Through this, as well as other later encounters, I gained a better insight on what an ambassador does. Subsequently, I have had several opportunities to talk with Dr. Zion Evrony, the Israeli Consul General to the Southwest Region, when he visited Longview and Tyler, Texas.

A consulate, incidentally, is a branch embassy headed by a Consul General and many junior consuls. The Israeli Consulate for the American Southwest region, for example, is based in Houston. Its service area includes Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas, Oklahoma, and New Mexico. It does not have the same kind of diplomatic immunity as the main embassy in the nation's capital, but it is a real branch of an embassy, carrying on the same business that an embassy does.

Consulates are found in every major city, conducting the business of the countries they represent within the regional spheres of influence of those cities. We might draw a parallel between the embassy of a foreign country and the churches of God (whose real citizenship and headquarters are in

heaven). The main embassies of Finland and Israel are located in Washington, DC, but consulates are found in New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles, Houston, and a number of other major metropolitan areas.

We could consider one of God's embassies to be the headquarters of one the churches of God with the leading pastor or evangelist serving as the Chargé d'Affaires or the Consul General. The branch consulates are the individual, outlying congregations with its members serving as junior consuls. Every baptized church member's home could be designated as a branch consulate for the Kingdom of God. Realizing that we are members of God's diplomatic corps, it is important to know how to behave as a diplomat.

The first thing that impressed me at the get-together was the humble and gracious attitude and manner of our host, Jaako Bergquist. Mr. Bergquist assumed the position of a humble servant or steward, looking after the interests of his country, as well as serving and helping people like me to learn more about his country and its culture. For example, when he learned about my classical music radio program, he asked me if I would like to receive some musical recordings. Later that week, I received a package of fifteen long-playing records containing the complete symphonic works of Jean Sibelius. We played these recordings many times over KBAC and KBAU.

Jaako Bergquist was not a glad-handed super-salesman for his country, but more of an accommodating steward practicing what the apostle Paul counsels us to observe in Philippians 2:4: "Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others." Accordingly, the Finnish diplomat did not seem to be self-interested in the least, but was always interested in supplying the needs of others, actively esteeming others more than himself (verse 3).

## **A Cultural Representative**

A member of the diplomatic community realizes his extreme vulnerability as a minority member of a majority alien culture. Whether we like it or not, that role fits all of us. In such a position, a diplomat must be circumspect in all his words and activities, careful not to offend his hosts or bring disrepute upon his homeland.

I was amazed at how many of the qualifications of an elder or overseer Paul lists in I Timothy 3:1-7 that Jaako Bergquist possessed, including hospitality, the ability to teach, having his home in tip-top order, and exercising temperance and self-control. Like a busy switch engine in the Union Pacific freight yard, the industrious ambassador constantly moved from guest to guest, linking people together with common interests. At one point during the evening, he made sure I became acquainted with the Program Director of KUSC, a classical music station run by the University of Southern California. Later, he introduced to me an elderly couple from Esko, Minnesota, who had lived close to the community where I used to teach.

He made available, but did not push, the culture of Finland, somewhat like the philosophy of the Hershey Chocolate Company, which at one time relied largely on goodwill and word of mouth to advertise its products.

Occasionally, we may be afforded opportunities to assist other church of God groups with a special need. Not long ago, a local minister was somewhat vexed by intruders from other groups attempting to persuade members of his flock about the Nisan 15 Passover. Sabbath.org—one of our church's websites—contains a series of abstracts on sermons that thoroughly examines the subject. After

downloading and printing these sermon abstracts, I dropped them off at the local minister's office on my way home from work. I reassured him that I did not want to proselytize or steal sheep, but only wanted to provide resources to help him defend his flock. To what extent he used those documents or how deeply his curiosity was piqued, I do not know, but he expressed a great deal of gratitude for those resources, promising that he would bookmark our site.

Another of our websites, BibleTools.org, provides another non-threatening resource to the greater church of God and the world at large, providing a lavish smorgasbord of truth and choice spiritual meat for those starving for understanding. Just pointing people to these resources can be a diplomatic way of availing others of the culture of the Kingdom of God.

At the Consulate's get-together in Beverly Hills, there were gentle but ubiquitous reminders that we guests were at a Finnish party: abundant Finnish food, Finnish vodka, Finnish artwork, murals and paintings of Finnish lakes and forests—reminding me of northern Minnesota and of northern Wisconsin—Finnish books, and Finnish symphonic and folk music playing over speakers throughout the residence. I became extremely homesick for Suomi or Finland—and I am not even Finnish!

### **Gracious Speech**

Besides humility and hospitality, Mr. Bergquist demonstrated diplomacy and wisdom, speaking very circumspectly, carefully considering the consequences of what he said, extremely careful not to injure the feelings of others needlessly. Later, while comparing notes, my colleague mentioned that he never heard Jaako Bergquist or any other member of the diplomatic community let his personal feelings enter the discussion. He merely repeated the official position of his country.

Likewise, we junior consuls of the government of God need to keep our pet opinions to ourselves (or at least qualify them as our own pet opinions). However, we must be knowledgeable of God's Word on any given subject, being ready to give an answer (I Peter 3:15). In addition, our words must model the gracious speech of our Elder Brother, who in John 14:10 says, "The words that I speak to you I do not speak on my own authority; but the Father who dwells in Me does the works."

Without scriptural backing, our own opinions are largely useless hot air. Consequently, as diplomats of God's government, we must learn to submerge our own feelings, being quick to listen and slow to speak, reflecting Jesus' half-brother's admonition in James 1:19.

The apostle Paul was perhaps one of the most skillful diplomats the world has ever seen. In I Corinthians 10:32-33, he explains his task when he meets diverse peoples and cultures:

Give no offense, either to the Jews or to the Greeks or to the church of God [perhaps during the current scattering the most difficult task of all], just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit, but the profit of many, that they may be saved.

Paul's mentor in diplomatic skills, Jesus Christ, had earlier proclaimed, "Woe to that man by whom the offense comes!" (Matthew 18:7). Some of us have been past masters at creating offenses, being wise as doves and harmless as serpents! As Christ's ambassadors, we must repent of such behavior.

If we want to follow the example of the master diplomat, the apostle Paul, schooled under both Jesus Christ and Gamaliel, we should look at a significant encounter he had with the philosophers at Athens in Acts 17. To begin, Paul paid the Athenians a compliment: "Then Paul stood in the midst of

the Areopagus and said, 'Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious'" (Acts 17:22).

If we were to read between the lines, Paul might be saying, "You Athenians are to be commended for your devotion to spiritual things." The King James' rendering of "religious" as "superstitious" exposes the latter word as having undergone what linguists call semantic drift. In Shakespeare's day and King James' time, this word did not have the negative connotation as it does now.

From the context of this account, it is plain that the apostle Paul was not, as some theologians like to characterize him, a feisty, wrangling, argumentative hothead. The men of Athens, who vastly outnumbered Paul and loved a good philosophical debate, could have made short work out of any know-it-all smart aleck. The apostle Paul was thus lavish in his compliments.

Throughout his ministry, he frequently resorted to diplomatic language. At one point, he acknowledged a cultural debt both to the Greeks and to barbarians (Romans 1:14). In addition to complimenting strangers, Paul continually sought out similarities he shared between him and other groups. In a conflict in which both the Sadducees and the Pharisees were breathing fire down his neck, Paul masterfully ingratiated himself to the Pharisees, reminding them that he and they shared the same view on the resurrection (Acts 23:6-8). Paul, to the right people, let it be known that he was a Roman citizen (Acts 16:37-39; 22:25-29).

### **Common Ground**

We also need to find common ground, not only with people in the other groups of the church of God, but with the world at large, emphasizing (like mountains) the things we agree upon and de-emphasizing (like molehills) the things we disagree upon.

In the process of finding common ground, we dare not compromise our core values or syncretize them with the world. We should instead practice more of what the late church of God minister, Sherwin McMichael, counseled, "You don't have to tell all you know." Oftentimes, keeping our traps shut is the most diplomatic behavior of all (Ecclesiastes 3:7; Lamentations 3:28-29; Amos 5:13).

In Acts 17:23, the apostle Paul deliberately builds a bridge of common understanding and similarity, referring to something the Athenians already understood:

For as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Therefore, the one whom you worship without knowing [a more proper rendering than "ignorantly," another word that has also undergone semantic drift] Him I proclaim to you."

Later, in verse 28, Paul again seeks common ground by quoting from their own literature: "For in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also His offspring.'"

The important thing to remember is that the apostle Paul started at the Athenians' current level of understanding, continually finding commonalities between himself and his audience upon which to build mutual understanding and foster growth. An ambassador skillfully demonstrates how his country and another's country share similar interests. As the late Rabbi Meir Kahane pointed out, an alliance is not so much built on friendship as on common interests.

To summarize, in successful diplomatic negotiating, points we agree upon must be stressed and any disagreements must be de-emphasized. An ambassador should never be a pushy salesman or a glad-handed public relations man. Whatever his rank in the diplomatic community, Ambassador, Consul General, Chargé d'Affaires, junior consul, envoy, or diplomat, he has the following characteristics:

1. He is a representative of another culture, another way of life.
2. In this capacity, he does not give his own opinions, but advances the positions of his home country.
3. He functions as a servant or steward, representing his country faithfully.
4. As such, he practices hospitality, courtesy, and graciousness.

Proverbs 13:17 reads, "A wicked messenger falls into trouble, but a faithful ambassador brings health." As faithful ambassadors of Christ, we ought to bring health, refreshment, and comfort to the people with whom we come into contact.