

Benin Visit and Grace Conference - February 2024

Dear Friends,

Greetings in the name of the Saviour. Thank you so much to all those who sent messages of encouragement and support. It was such a blessing to know that so many were remembering the visit to Benin in prayer. Jean-Claude and Wendy Souillot and myself were very much aware of that and give thanks to the Lord for a very rich and fruitful time. Also, the brethren in Benin were delighted to hear of brothers and sisters around the world praying for them.

The purpose of my visit was to see the impact of the French-speaking work in Benin firsthand on behalf of EPMT. This included ministry amongst some of the Grace churches and also at the Grace Conference, West Africa organised by Europresse Afrique. Also, at the Conference one of the latest Europresse publications was available for the first time - 'In Christ Alone' by Sinclair Ferguson. This has been produced in partnership with Ligonier Ministries. A full schedule saw us visit both cities and very rural settings in the country. It was remarkable to see the impact of the Gospel in the most unlikely places and the truth that grace spreads.



Jean-Claude and Wendy Souillot

The Country

I was not sure quite what to expect on arrival in Benin. Stepping off the plane I was greeted with a wall of heat and a place full of life and contrast. French is the main language but there are many other tribal languages in use. The current President is overseeing a serious program of development in the country which has seen major changes for the better. However, poverty, corruption, crime, and poor infrastructure are still common place. I was very pleased to be under the care of local brethren and with Jean-Claude who has been visiting the country for over 30 years!



The 'Gate of No Return' - Slavery Memorial in Ouidah

The influence of religion in Benin is clear. Catholicism is dominant, Islam is on the rise, and there are many churches from across the spectrum of beliefs. There are also a growing amount of cults as well as the practice of Voodoo and other tribal religions. All of this combined makes it a very needy place for the true Gospel of Christ.

The Grace Churches

It was a joy to visit a number of the Grace churches around Cotonou, Porto Novo, Bohicon, and further out into the country. Many of these churches are pastored by men who have either come through the preachers course run by Europresse or greatly helped through its ministry and resources. Over the years,



Jean-Claude preaching and being translated into a local language

Jean-Claude has been used greatly of the Lord in teaching, training, advising these men and the churches. I was encouraged with the Gospel clarity and discernment that many of the men in leadership demonstrated. There is a lot of religion amongst people, even 'Gospel-talk', but not all would be true believers. So the pastors need wisdom, understanding about what true conversion is, and courage to be faithful to the Word. I was blessed by their passion for the Lord and willingness to stand for truth even when it costs. The fellowship with these brothers was very precious.



Grace Church in Zogbo

One of the pastors, Julien Naka, is an agent for Europresse in Benin, and he also leads the Grace Church in Bohicon. He worked very hard to make sure everything was in place for the trip and it was great to have fellowship with him over the two weeks.

There is a real hunger amongst the people for the Word of God. Requests for preaching meetings were many and Jean-Claude and Paul N'Goran (Ivory Coast) were greatly helped as they preached the Gospel in churches and other settings.

There is a vibrancy amongst the believers in their walk with the Lord and their love for Christ is evident even when some have practically



Julien Naka (Bohicon), Paulin Sogbohossou (Zogbo), Vincent Dua (Ivory Coast), Jean-Claude Souillot (France)

nothing in the world's eyes. The Lord is doing a deep work in the churches and the spiritual temperature was on a different level to much of what we know here. It was profoundly humbling to experience that. This was true in worship, in fellowship between brethren, and the generous hospitality that was given throughout the time. There are those being saved and added to the churches, believers are being built up, and the churches are committed to doing things biblically. An awareness that it must be the Lord's work in the Lord's way in the power of the Spirit and not the flesh.



Breakfast with Pierre, a believer in Bohicon

The churches also have a growing understanding of their responsibilities based upon biblical principles. For example, the buildings in which the churches meet have been built and paid for by the fellowships with no financial help from outside. The churches also recognise their responsibility to support their own pastors. This was very refreshing. That said, the churches are not without challenges. There is a pressing need for a new generation of biblical leaders to be raised up to follow faithful men who are getting older. There is also a growing threat of persecution from militant groups particularly in the northern part of Benin.

Some of the churches were involved in outreach to other local villages. Very simply, one or two families connected to the churches had arranged for meetings to take place in their homes so that they could invite family, friends, neighbours to

hear the Gospel preached. And people came! These meetings were followed by the provision of a meal or refreshments by the host family - often at great cost to themselves. However, there was a desire to see people confronted with the truth of Christ and sovereign grace. On one of the mornings, we started early from Porto Novo to get a boat down the river



Village Outreach Meeting

to two villages where such meetings had been arranged. It was an amazing experience and wonderful to see these openings for the Gospel.

The Grace Conference in Ouidah

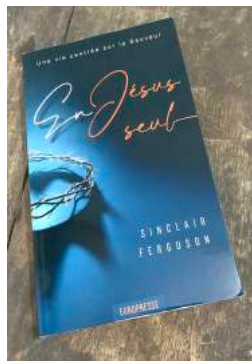
One of the main events of the visit was the annual Grace Conference. Previously, the conference was designed for men on the preachers course. However, over the years as the appetite for biblical teaching grew, the Conference was opened to a wider audience from amongst the Grace Churches and also contacts in other countries. It is easy to get a huge crowd but the Conference is for those serious about the Word and so it is by invite only via the pastors and organisers.

Around 100 people gathered in Ouidah for four days of ministry. Some brethren also came from Togo and Ivory Coast.



Part of the Conference Complex at Ouidah

A recurring theme during the conference was 'La Vie Transformée' - 'The Transformed Life'. It was so important for the truth to be emphasised that not only does sovereign grace save but also shows itself in a changed life to the glory of God. The messages were



delivered by Jean-Claude, Paul N'Goran and Vincent Dua from Ivory Coast, a number of local men, and myself. It was a blessing to hear the local men rightly divide the Word and with heart. Each day there were four

preaching meetings, additional Bible studies, men's and women's meetings, prayer times and discussions. The Lord was pleased to make the Conference a special time, the fellowship was rich, and many were deeply impacted. There was also a book stall with many of the Europresse titles available including the new release! It was wonderful to see the enthusiasm for the books and many went away with additions to their library!



Some of the delegates at the Grace Conference



Europresse Afrique -
Paul N'Goran (Ivory Coast), Julien Naka (Benin),
Vincent Dua (Ivory Coast), Jean-Claude Souillot (France)

It was also a great blessing for me to meet the men who have been so faithful in the Europresse Afrique work over the years and continue to serve in that way. They are a wonderful group of brothers who evidently love the Lord, have a heart for His cause, and desire to see the Gospel of grace proclaimed. However, it is often the best men who are the busiest. They can feel weary at times with all the demands upon them. Please pray that the Lord will continue to give them the vision and strength to do the work.

Lisette's Story

There are so many wonderful testimonies of what the Lord is doing in people's lives, but I will only mention one here - Lisette. From a Catholic background, Lisette had faced many things in her life and at a young age was left to raise her two children. Religion was part of her routine but nothing deeper.

Eventually she got a job in the government administration for finance. In the Lord's purposes, a man called Guillaume arrived in her office. Guillaume had been deeply impacted himself by the ministry of Europresse (another amazing story for another time). He had been brought to the truth of sovereign grace at one of the camps where Jean-Claude was preaching and also impacted by the radio programmes called 'Les Échos de la Vérité' (Echoes of Truth).

Whilst working in the office, Guillaume would listen to the radio programmes and it would just be loud enough for Lisette to hear. She did not like the message of sovereign grace at all and would often tell Guillaume to turn it down, or better, turn it off! He had to listen through headphones instead! Over time they had conversations about the Gospel but she continued to resent the idea that salvation was a work of God, all of grace. She even tried to manoeuvre Guillaume to another office! But God was working in her heart and she could not escape the truth of Christ and His saving work on the cross.



Lisette, Wendy, Jean-Claude, Guillaume

Eventually, Guillaume invited her to go to a Gospel retreat organised by the church at Zogbo and where Jean-Claude was preaching. Lisette could not find a reason not to go and so to her own surprise, she politely agreed. Guillaume's wife Bellaou, an unbeliever at the time, had also reluctantly agreed to go. When arrangements were made, it was decided that Lisette would drive up with Bellaou. All the way they tried to come up with reasons not to go or to get away fast! However, they went and in the very first meeting the first hymn sung was a rendition of 'When peace like a river' - 'Quel repos céleste'. During that hymn Lisette's resistance was finally overcome and she trusted in the Lord Jesus Christ. She was able to say that it was well with her soul because her sins were forgiven and she knew the Saviour for herself. On returning to the office, she asked Guillaume to take out his headphones and turn the messages up so she could listen! Lisette goes to the same church as Guillaume in Zogbo along with Bellaou who has also been wonderfully converted. Lisette is full of gratitude to the God of all grace for drawing her to Himself and is so thankful for the ongoing ministry of Europresse. She is going on with the Lord and eager to see others come to the Saviour, not least her Muslim boss at her work.

Prayer Points

- Give thanks for the Lord's overruling throughout the visit and the many encouragements known through the preaching of the Word and fellowship with the Lord's people.
- Give thanks for the ongoing ministries of Europresse and Jean-Claude's faithful ministry in French-speaking Africa. Pray that many would continue to hear the message of sovereign grace and that God will be glorified in the salvation of souls and the building up of His people!
- Please pray for the Lord to provide a successor to Jean-Claude in the Europresse work.
- Give thanks for Julien Naka (Bohicon, Benin) and Vincent Dua (Gagnoa, Ivory Coast) as they continue to promote the literature and resources of Europresse in West Africa. Pray that they would be strengthened in their ministries in their local churches as well as in their wider labours.
- Remember the Grace Churches in Benin. Please pray:
 - that they would continue to be faithful to the Scriptures and that the spiritual appetite and hunger for the Word in the churches would continue.
 - for a new generation of faithful leaders to be raised up in the churches.
 - for courage to persevere under an increasing threat of persecution and protection from others who would want to do the churches harm.

It is hard to convey just how thrilling it was to see firsthand what the Lord is doing in Benin and beyond. There is so much more that could have been said! If you or your church would be interested hearing more of the work in person, please do let me know.

Also, a new website for EPMT is currently under construction, but there is a place to sign up for updates on the cover page found at www.evangelicalpressmissionarytrust.com Thank you again for your prayerful support.

Yours warmly in Christ,

Jonathan Stobbs

