



## Dealing with Judas:

Opportunity for Fear or Invitation to Faith? *by Dr. Nik Ripken*

*"I know that you can do all things;  
no plan of yours can be thwarted."*

*Job 42:2*

Expectations were high. After years of struggle and prayer, a house church was emerging among a resistant Muslim people group. Lives had been spent with this precious moment in view. Seeds had been sown and those seeds were now bearing fruit. Fervent prayers were being answered. Bold witness was being blessed. It was an exciting time. A church was being born.

Almost immediately, it seemed, a Judas arose from within the group, exposing the inner circle of leaders. The small core of believers fled in disarray and fear. In an instant, the infant church seemed to disappear.

And now, more than a year later, these believers wait in hiding for the birth of the first house church among their people.

In another place, a trusted "believer" from a Muslim background watched as his country descended into civil war and anarchy. Chased from his homeland, he was forced to flee into the desert region of a neighboring country. Intense persecution pursued this man and his family over the next five years. Starving and isolated, this man and his family were miraculously found in that desert territory and rescued by western believers working for a local relief organization. But, sadly, their rescue had come too late; the man's young son died of starvation the following day.

Over time, life improved greatly for this leader of the emerging house church; he soon found himself with food, a job, and a rented home, complete with a battery operated television and a maid.

Months later, now with much to lose, this believer who had shown such potential and promise, much like the first Judas, became yet another Judas. To the dismay of his Christian colleagues, he returned to the local mosque, denied his faith, and delivered to the persecutors the

names of all the believers he knew in the area and within his house group. Widespread panic ensued among these believers. Fourteen years later, they have yet to recover their zeal for evangelism and their desire to live as church.

After two decades in yet another Muslim country, it appeared that a church planting movement was on the horizon. Significant sacrifices had been made to proclaim the gospel – and the gospel had been received. A new generation of leaders had emerged; these were established community leaders – older, married, and employed. Amazingly, many had shared their faith with their children, making it possible for the gospel to be planted in succeeding generations. Western believers were deeply encouraged and were leading these mature believers in increasingly deeper levels of leadership training.

But once again, sitting in the meeting was a Judas who was daily – before, during, and after the training – betraying the fellowship. He was blogging about those in the room, naming both local and western believers by name on a Muslim website. How will the believers respond to this cyber Judas?

And how might we all respond to the Judas who arises in our midst? In light of the biblical record – and in light of Jesus' response to His own Judas – let us consider some truths about Judas – and let us consider what our response might mean for the growth and health of the gospel.

### **1 We can expect to find Judas within our inner circle.**

The presence of Judas within Jesus' inner circle is a rather troubling part of the gospel story. Candidly, if Jesus Himself did not exclude Judas within his inner circle of twelve disciples, what chance do we have of avoiding a similar relational nightmare? History would suggest that Judas has immaculate timing. He often emerges at a critical moment – perhaps when a church is being planted or when significant growth seems possible. At that moment, Judas tends to arise from within the body of first generation believers in a people group, a major city, or a population center. When Judas makes himself known, our typical response is to ask, "What went wrong?" But that may

be the wrong question. In fact, Judas' presence is often a clear indication that the Holy Spirit is working, that our missiology is sound, and that widespread seed sowing has been effective. Judas appears when there is growth. Judas is likely to be found when there is a new movement of God's Spirit. Ironically, the presence of Judas may be an indication of something good. If there is little growth and little challenge to the lord of darkness, then there is little need for Judas to expose himself or place himself at risk.

**2** *We can expect Judas to grow up within the movement-do not import him.* Jesus did not inherit Judas from another movement. Apparently Jesus saw potential in this would-be disciple; He invited him to become one of His closest followers. Yet the fact remains that Jesus did choose and call Judas to follow Him as one among an intimate twelve disciples. He grew Judas Himself. He did not recruit him away from another organization with larger offers of funding or better accredited theological education. Jesus did not naively accept Judas at face value after Judas had bounced from movement to movement. Judas was Jesus' responsibility – and Jesus owned that responsibility.

In recent interviews, Chinese house church leaders relate numerous arrests after importing Judas from the outside. Someone would arrive from the outside, seek out the house church, speak the language of Zion, and drop a name or two from other house churches. Soon this outsider would be granted access and membership to the broader body of Christ. It would then take a short time for government authorities to arrive, knowing exactly who to threaten, question, and arrest as they been informed by the Judas they had deliberately sent to infiltrate the local house church.

Since learning this difficult lesson, house church leaders now refuse to offer immediate fellowship when someone they do not know seeks to join their local house church. These experienced house church leaders may suggest to the outsider, "There are two million non-believing Chinese in this area. Go start your own house church." This strategic denial of fellowship is simply a wise tool to gauge the depth and reality of the new person's faith. These house church leaders suggest that it is wiser to be arrested for sharing one's faith boldly and appropriately to lost people than to be persecuted because Judas was imported blindly and prematurely into the fold.

**3** *With God's help, we can choose to deal with Judas ourselves-do not export him.* Jesus did not leave Judas for Peter or Paul to deal with. He wisely recognized the betrayer's presence early and used Judas' actions and failings to carry out the Father's will

for His life. He announced to the larger group that there was a betrayer among them, He confronted Judas appropriately, He told him to do quickly whatever it was he was planning (in harmony with Jesus' timing), and He pronounced judgment over him saying that it would have been better if "he had never been born" (Matthew 26:24). Jesus set an example for us to follow. Dealing with a disciple's failings is perhaps the most dangerous – and difficult – issue a mentor will ever face. Confronting and dealing appropriately (while your heart is breaking) with "my believer, my disciple, my convert, and my investment of years" will often precipitate Judas pointing a finger at you in the presence of the opposition. His kiss is an act of betrayal.

This, though, is at the heart of biblical disciple-making. Knowing and loving one's sheep never exempts us from making the hard call of confronting a brother or sister held dear for a season. Ultimately, when Judas arises and threatens the very existence of the emerging body of Christ there may be nothing left to do than to hand him over to the judgment of the Holy Spirit. If not an actual death sentence, this holy judgment places Judas outside of the intimate fellowship he has known. Often he is scorned by the very ones who bought him with the forty pieces of silver. He becomes a non-person. A broken heart should always proceed giving a Judas over to the judgment of the Holy Spirit.

**4** *We can learn to recognize Judas early.* Though Judas was intentionally and personally chosen by Jesus, Jesus was not unaware of the evil that was present within His inner circle. It may be puzzling to many that Jesus refused to dismiss Judas quickly, before his betrayal became so destructive. Perhaps Jesus thought that He could redeem Judas. Or perhaps Judas was allowed to stay as a fulfillment of prophecy. Regardless of His thinking, Jesus understood the old adage, "Keep your friends close and your enemies closer." By recognizing Judas early, and keeping him close, Jesus could better discern this betrayer's heart, intent, and methods. Consequently, Jesus was able to use Judas to fulfill His godly plans rather than being manipulated by Judas for earthly treasures.

Jesus was able to recognize Judas early because they were constantly together. They lived with the other eleven disciples in community. They had a 24/7 relationship where Shepherd and sheep knew each other thoroughly. Jesus knew His sheep so intimately that he addressed their thoughts before they became actions. Sadly, in the world of western missionaries, "our sheep" can stumble, deny, divorce their wives, deny their faith, and betray others – and it may literally be months before we are aware of the missteps. Jesus,

recognizing Judas and predicting his actions, initiated ministry. Typically, Judas is exposed early when discipleship is based on an intimate relationship more than on the superficial exchange of information.

**5** *We can be aware that Judas often has money issues.* This could be called the “Jesus-plus syndrome,” especially where westerners and western largesse is present. There is little unique about those first forty pieces of silver. Often interest is shown in a kingdom relationship when that relationship seems to entail receiving Jesus plus a job, an apartment, a wife, an education, or even a ticket to a western, Christian country. The more prolific the expectations for these Jesus-plus additions, the more likely it will be that one’s Judases will multiply far beyond the ratio of only one out of twelve!

Judas can arise when he is refused funding to attend a western degree program. Job loss due to poor performance can cause a betrayal. Not funding an immature seeker to attend an international consortium could become the opportunity for Judas to show his true colors.

One believer from a Muslim background stated it this way, “When a seeker after Jesus comes to me, I ask them, ‘what is it that you want: a car, a house, a wife, or to go to America?’ I tell them that I cannot even give them an aspirin. All I have is a cross. Do you want to pick up your cross and follow Jesus?”

He then continued, “Everyone who followed Jesus in the New Testament gave up something. Everyone who comes to Jesus through a westerner gets something.”

We need to filter such comments carefully and candidly, but the truth remains that Judas is often dealing with Jesus-plus desires.

**6** *Finally, we can reveal Christ in our midst by the way that we deal with Judas.* Clearly, Judas’ betrayal is frightening and heartbreaking. It hurts. It is devastating. The activity of Judas ushers in a dangerous time spiritually and physically. Judas can determine whether the emerging church marches forward into greater faith toward the coming Pentecost or if believers return for a decade as those who are scattered, alone, and afraid. Judas is an historical Tipping Point. It is precisely when Judas shows up that believers are called to make that history-altering decision to focus on Jesus and the resurrection more so than on Judas and his betrayal. Running and hiding for a few nights and days are to be expected. Widespread denial by all the other disciples is also common. At that moment, the reality of “counting the cost” becomes more real.

But, after those few nights and days, the more important question rises to the surface: will we choose fear or faith?

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