

UNDERSTANDING CUBA

Study Guide

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INTRODUCTION

This week's study takes us to the Caribbean and the island nation of Cuba. Someone asked me when they heard we were doing this study of Cuba how it fits in with Christian teaching. This made me think about why we should be looking at Cuba. Israel and the Middle East is a perfect fit for Bible Study as the Biblical story revolves around this area of the world but why Cuba. Also it does not seem to fit with the theme we currently have of "Places in Conflict." The more I thought about the issues the more Cuba seems like a place we do not understand very much about and although it does not appear to be in conflict today it has been in the past and has had a profound influence on U.S. policy in the area and as a nation we continue to be in conflict with.

- [Why then does it have significance for us as American Christians?](#)

Before continuing to read think about this question and see what answers you come up with. When you have thought about this for a while and have your ideas straight turn to your Bible and read Luke 10:25-37.

- [Would you consider the Cuban nation being a neighbor of the United States and the Cuban people our neighbors? Is so what sort of neighbor should we be?](#)
- [Cuba may not currently be having internal unrest and strife as we see in many parts of the world, but the people, although they may be happy, are deprived some of the basic necessities of life, as we will see in this Study Guide. If this is the case should we as Christians be concerned about this and the actions of the Government and look for ways to help?](#)

In this study we will look at;

- The history of Cuba and the environment that led to the revolution in 1959.
- The conditions for Cubans living in Cuba today
- What the future holds for Cuba

[Before continuing think about what you know about Cuba. What images come to mind? What do you know about the political situation? What do you know about the people and how they live?](#)

HISTORY OF CUBA

The history of Cuba follows the path of many of the Caribbean Islands and Central America. The following is a brief look at what has happened to this island over the centuries.

- The indigenous people where the tribes of Taino and Ciboney whose ancestor came from North and Central America. They were farmers and may have traded in copper with other islands and the mainland. The name Cuba is from a Taino word "cubao which means "where fertile land is abundant." The island was discovered by Christopher Columbus in 1492 and inhabited by the Spanish

in 1511. The Spanish oppressed and enslaved the native people who would not convert to Christianity and the native people were virtually wiped out by infectious diseases.

- Cuba was a Spanish possession for almost 400 years from 1511 to 1898. Its importance to Spain was its exports of plantation agricultural products, mining and sugar, coffee and tobacco. The small land-owning elite of Spanish descent held the social and economic power. The island continues to have the influences from this Spanish culture.
- To work the land the Spanish land-owners need labor and so since Spain was on the Middle Passage slave route thousands of West Africans were bought to work on the plantations. The island contains priceless survivals of African cultures – Yoruba, Congo, Old Dahomey, and Efik/Efo area of Nigeria. Today over 60% of Cubans have African roots. Their creativity and determination to survive both preserved and transformed the cultural traditions they brought with them. Also during this time there was a large influx of Chinese who came as indentured servants.
- In 1868 Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, a wealthy landowner freed his slaves and mounted a rebellion for independence from Spain. This conflict continued for 10 years and eventually ended with a pact but no independence.
- Another attempt at independence followed in 1878 but failed. In 1895 a poet Jose Marti, who had lived for 10 years in exile in the United States, proclaimed Cuba an independent republic. He was killed shortly after landing in Cuba but became immortalized and has become Cuba's national hero. He inspired rebels which relied on guerilla and sabotage tactics. The Spaniards began a campaign of suppression and herded people into camps. Between 200,000 and 400,000 people died in these camps from starvation and disease. In 1897, with other European countries protesting Spanish actions, Spain agreed to a more conciliatory policy and promised self rule. The rebels rejected this offer and the war for independence continued. It was also during this time that there was a move by members of the U.S. Southern States to buy Cuba from the Spanish to bolster the case for slavery.
- As an outcome of the Spanish-American war in 1898 Spain ceded Cuba along with Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and Guam to the U.S. Theodore Roosevelt, who had fought in the Spanish-American war had sympathies for Cuban independence and in 1902 the Republic of Cuba gained independence but the U.S. retained the right to intervene in Cuban affairs and to supervise its finances and foreign relations. In 1906 there was an armed revolt and the U.S. exercised its right of intervention and placed Cuba under U.S. occupation. This lasted for 3 years and rule reverted back to Cubans. The United States continued its control of Cuba through the first half of the 20th century. By 1959 U.S. corporations controlled 40 percent of sugar production and 75 percent of arable land; they also owned more than 90 percent of electric and telephone utilities, 50 percent of the railways, 90 percent of the mines, 100 percent of oil refineries and 90 percent of cattle ranches." Cuba was such a popular tourist destination for its neighbors to the north that it was dubbed "America's playground."
- During the middle years of the 20th century Cuba went through political turmoil. In 1940 Fulgencio Batista sided with the Communist Party and took control. In 1957 and '58 a group of rebels set out to unseat the unpopular government of Batista. This was led by Fidel Castro and the Argentinean revolutionary Che Guevara. Fidel Castro became Prime Minister in February 1959. This was the beginning of the Castro regime. Through the years opposition to the Castro regime has led to imprisonment and execution.

Let's now look at the situation that exists Cuba today after 50 years under Fidel Castro.

A CULTURE OF SHARING

The revolutionary vision that sparked the imagination of midcentury Cuba was familiar to Christians. In a January 1960 sermon, Presbyterian Rafael Cepeda queried:

It could be that Cuba will become a socialist country. . . . And, so what? What is wrong with that? If it means social justice—for which the prophet Amos pleaded—if it means equal opportunities regardless of race, religion or social position; if it means an end to abuse and exploitation; . . . then the church will applaud the economic and social measures taken by the State.

Almost fifty years later, Cuba is still a poor country. Yet, the hunger, disease, and low educational levels characteristic of poverty are largely absent from Cuba. Human well-being, measured in terms of nutrition, health, and education, is significantly higher than in neighboring Caribbean islands.

Against overwhelming odds, socialism has succeeded in improving life significantly. Even after the crisis of the early 1990s, when it seemed that the Castro regime would collapse without the support of the Soviet Union, the economy gradually regained stability.

Even so, *la vida es difícil*. What do Cubans mean when they say, “life is difficult”? What is it like to live in Cuba in 2008? The following show examples of real people and what they go through on a daily basis

While it is true that Cuba does not have a serious hunger problem, obtaining food *is* a challenge. It requires energy and ingenuity to feed a family. In Mayra's household, for example, the basic supplies provided by the government—oil, flour, sugar, rice, beans, coffee, eggs, a bit of meat, plus milk for her four-year-old daughter—are sufficient for about twelve days of the month. Mayra's entire family is involved in the daily food project. Her son checks the prices at the farmers' market he passes on his way home from school. Her retired mother buys judiciously from the persons who stop by selling food items (black market). Alberto, her husband, does odd jobs after work to earn a few extra pesos. Occasionally, Mayra's brother in the United States sends money, enabling her to purchase fresh meat.

Two currencies circulate in Cuba: the Cuban peso and the Cuban convertible peso (CUC). This creates a complex and constantly changing economic situation. Most salaries are paid in Cuban pesos, but those who work in tourism or foreign-owned business receive tips, bonuses, or even salaries in CUC, worth twenty-four times the Cuban peso. As of 2008, it is legal for foreign enterprises to pay CUC salaries, which, unlike Cuban peso salaries, are subject to an income tax. Not only does the CUC have more purchasing power than the Cuban peso, but many household items are available for purchase *only* with CUCs in the so-called dollar stores. Esther receives a good salary by Cuban standards—350 Cuban pesos and a 30 CUC bonus per month. Even so, she struggles to stick to a monthly budget.

Transportation—or the lack of it—is another huge challenge. Luis is one of the few who own a car. He is able to purchase gasoline only in CUC, and he spends an inordinate amount of time repairing his twenty-five-year old Russian-made Lada. Most Cubans rely on erratic and inadequate public transportation or on the kindness of other drivers.

Along with ingenuity and careful planning, kindness and solidarity are fundamental life skills in Cuba. When Luis has his car up and running, he goes out of his way to provide rides for those who need them. If Esther is short on food, there is always a cousin or a neighbor who stops by with a little something to put on the table. If Alberto fixes a toilet for someone who cannot pay, he knows that he will be repaid at some point either in money or a return favor. Visitors from North America are often abashed when the Cuban who repairs a broken suitcase, gives away a book, or serves a delicious supper refuses to accept money in return.

EDUCATION AND HEALTH CARE

Equal access to education is one of the major achievements of the Cuban revolution. The following anecdote is illustrative:

More than thirty years had passed when, in the summer of 1993, a white, upper-class Cuban-American woman from Miami returned to the island for a visit. She was greeted there by her former maid, now retired, a black woman who is the mother of two children: an engineer and a medical doctor. It was an emotional encounter, full of common memories and mutual happiness. But when the unavoidable issue of a post-Communist Cuba came up during the conversation, the black ex-maid asked, “Will my children be maids again?”

One of the first successes of the revolutionary government was an island wide campaign to teach reading. Within a year, the literacy rate in Cuba rose from some 70 percent to well over 90 percent. Ensuring that all Cubans have access to education has been a top priority ever since. Educational facilities exist throughout the country, and education is free at all levels.

Cuba’s health care system is another significant accomplishment. Health care is free, and medicines are subsidized. The system includes preventive and primary care on the neighborhood level, with free transportation to clinics and hospitals when needed. When Jorge was diagnosed with cancer, he was confident that he would receive good medical care, and he did not have to worry about the expense.

During his treatment, Jorge *did* encounter a problem that is prevalent in today’s Cuba: a shortage of medicines. His doctor prescribed a monthly injection of an anticancer drug. After several months of treatment, the drug became unavailable in Cuba. Fortunately, Jorge’s network of family and friends was able to obtain it elsewhere. For the duration of his treatment, there was monthly uncertainty as to whether the medication would be on hand.

RELIGION IN CUBA

Pope John Paul II’s 1998 visit to Cuba is often viewed as the beginning of a new attitude toward religion. Christians on the island see it differently. They believe that the pope was able to come *because* of a new openness, not the other way around. A Baptist leader explained, “We had been working for years to dialogue with the government; to convince our leaders that we are both faithful Christians *and* loyal citizens.”⁷ In 1990, seventy five Protestant leaders spoke with Fidel Castro for six hours “about the negative effects on the population of the official state atheism, the issue of double standards, the need for access to the mass media for the proclamation of the gospel, the construction of new sanctuaries” and other issues.⁸ In 1992, after three decades as a Marxist state, Cuba officially became a secular state when the constitution was revised. In the past fifteen years, there has been a huge resurgence of religious activity, not only among Christians but also by Jews and practitioners of the various Afro-Cuban religions.

The Roman Catholic Church arrived with the Spanish conquistadors and became the dominant religious institution in Cuba. African religious traditions have also played a major, if less institutional, role in Cuban history and culture. The Amerindian religious culture virtually disappeared as the indigenous population died out as the result of European violence and diseases. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, encounters with North America brought Protestantism to the island, and the first Jewish synagogue was founded in 1906.

For most of Cuba's history, Roman Catholicism was the only legal religion, and the Roman Catholic Church was a powerful institution. Not only was the Cuban church a historic product of Spain, but it remained closely tied to the mother country until the 1959 revolution brought radical changes to the country. Priests were typically Spanish, and their views reflected loyalty to Spain. The Roman Catholic Church opposed the independence movements of the late nineteenth century and the revolutionary movement of the mid-twentieth century.

Despite its power and its influence among the elite in urban areas, Roman Catholicism did not play a significant role in the life of many Cubans. There was a chronic shortage of priests, and rural inhabitants received little pastoral attention. A 1957 survey of agricultural workers revealed that 52.1 percent of the total called themselves Roman Catholic, and 27.3 per cent of those had never seen a priest.

Santeria is the term widely used to refer to Afro-Cuban religious beliefs and practices that “originated when the Yoruba were brought from Africa to colonial Cuba as slaves and forced to adopt Catholicism.”¹⁰ Miguel De La Torre writes about Santeria from the unique perspective of a Christian theologian who “grew up as a believer in Santeria, in a home where both parents ministered to the needs of our faith community.” He explains that those who believe in Santeria “worship African gods [*orishas*], masked as Catholic saints, by observing their feast days, ‘feeding’ and caring for them, carefully following their commands, and faithfully obeying their mandates.” For many reasons, it is very difficult for outsiders to understand Santeria, and Miguel De La Torre’s book *Santeria* provides us with a unique and invaluable guide.

The Spanish colonial government first allowed Protestant preaching in 1871 but only to expatriates living in Cuba. During the 1880s, Cubans who had converted to Protestantism while living abroad returned and began preaching to their neighbors and friends. It is significant that it was these Cubans—not foreign missionaries—who established the first Protestant congregations on the island.

U.S. missionaries arrived soon after U.S. troops occupied Cuba in 1898. Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist, and Quaker missionaries preached the gospel and established schools that primarily served middle-class students and barred attendance by Afro-Cubans, following the U.S. pattern of segregated schools. In subsequent decades, many additional U.S. churches sent missionaries to Cuba.

Gradually the leadership of Protestant churches shifted from the U.S. missionaries to the Cuban Christians. By 1959, most Protestant churches were pastored by Cubans, a large percentage of whom were being trained at Cuban seminaries. Today there are approximately fifty Protestant denominations in Cuba, about half of which are members of the Cuban Council of Churches (established in 1941).

From 1961, when Cuba’s leaders announced that the country would be governed according to a Marxist-Leninist ideology, until 1992, when Cuba became a secular state, all forms of religious expression were discouraged. There was very little persecution per se, but there was widespread discrimination. Christian schoolchildren were singled out by teachers for disapproval; Christians were barred from teaching and other professions and were routinely viewed with suspicion. Churches of all denominations—and the Jewish

community as well—lost a large percentage of their members and leaders as people left the country or chose to leave the church in order to escape discrimination.

As difficult as those decades were for the churches in Cuba, the churches experienced many blessings as well. A Presbyterian pastor, the Rev. Dora Arce, explains, “We learned that displacement and discouragement can give birth to greater understanding of God’s will for the church; and greater commitment to being the body of Christ in the world.”

Church growth has taken place at a breathtaking pace since the early 1990s. Protestant leaders estimate that new Christians comprise as much as 80 percent of congregational worship attendance. Seminaries, Bible institutes, and lay training courses are growing rapidly. Young people are flocking to the churches. Both Roman Catholic and Protestant churches are experiencing renewal.

Some point to the economic crisis of the early 1990s to explain the revival of religious practice in Cuba. Others speak about a growing realization that no ideology is sufficient to satisfy the human heart. Young people convey a need for meaning in their lives. Finally, after the various theories are voiced, Cuban Christians shrug and conclude, “It’s the Holy Spirit at work. Christ is alive in Cuba!”

WHAT’S NEXT?

There is a joke in which a foreigner asks, “What will happen when Fidel Castro dies?” and a Cuban calmly answers, “Well, we’ll bury him.” There is no doubt that there is more speculation about a post-Castro Cuba in the United States than there is in Cuba. In fact, the transition to a post-Fidel era has been under way in Cuba for some time. The decision of Fidel to step down in February 2008 and the immediate transfer of authority to his brother Raul and half a dozen loyalists had been under way for quite some time. It has been smooth and stable so far. The question remains as to how the United States will react in the short and long term.

Just as Protestants moved in along with U.S. military and political power at the beginning of the twentieth century, there are now many Christian groups eagerly awaiting an expected moment when Cuba is open to receive foreign Christian groups wanting to spread their version of the gospel. In fact, churches with long-established relationships in Cuba—United Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and others that work alongside autonomous partner churches in Cuba—are in a position to introduce other U.S. Christians to the strong and vital church that already exists in Cuba, a church with faith tested and strengthened by years of isolation from outside Cuba and intolerance from discrimination within Cuba. We have the opportunity to travel to Cuba¹⁷ that few in the United States are privileged to have. We have connections with communities of faith that offer us firsthand knowledge of life in Cuba. The open letter from Cuban church leaders not only asked for respect but also challenged U.S. Christians to find out more about Cuba, to become educated about the island nation just ninety miles away. Perhaps *now* is the time to act.