

SERVING GOD



ON THE DECLINE

Attendance has been down a bit at the Tuesday night young adults group. The Lord has called me and another brother to co-lead the gathering. Nobody wants to lead a ministry on the decline. I feel confused about what should be done to curve the trend. Is the gathering losing its relevance? Or has the newness of the whole thing worn off? Are numbers really important anyway?

I don't want to start ministry building the way the Pharisees did. I want to be in God's will. But I am just not sure what His will is regarding the young adults group. As several stated tonight, there is a definite need for what this group can do — point young adults to Christ. There are not a lot of places for young adults to go. Many churches do not have any support group for them. The only reason we have one at my church is because a few of us really wanted it. I fear it has become just another something for me to handle.

Oh, God, show me Your will in regards to this group. Should we do things differently? How? Do we need to stop and start over? There are no sacred cows. We'll change anything and everything to be in Your will. We just want more of You.

Forgive the leadership. We are not keeping in touch with those who come regularly. Who will help lead this group? Raise up others who will help carry the leadership burden. Forgive me for not always loving the people in the group the way that I should. Help me to live out the kind of love described in I Corinthians 13. Amen!

HANDS OF GOD

Hardened by years of sweat and toil,
Scarred by the adventures of life,
Each reflect a different story with the same ending.

Dipped in the Savior's blood, ransomed from the flood,
Guilt has been wiped away.
Despite wrinkles and scars, they shine — a monument of grace.

What used to do evil has been transformed.
No longer held captive to a world full of emptiness.
They are free to accomplish a perfect purpose.

United under a master plan, each does its part.
Oh, how beautiful are the hands of the laborers.
Service, love and worship are their handiwork.

No matter the origin or trespass,
The Master chooses to use them all,
For we are the hands of God.

BY WHOSE AUTHORITY?

Control and authority have been hotly contested since the foundation of the modern Church. The Jewish religious leaders questioned Jesus about who gave Him authority to perform miracles and teach in the holy places. The Pharisees

and Sadducees even accused Jesus of being the devil and speaking blasphemy. Jesus stood up to them and proclaimed the truth in love to the people while He chastised the religious leaders for their blindness. They held tightly to the rules and institutions, which provided their power base.

**When Jesus Christ spoke against
the very foundations of
their man-made traditions,
the religious leaders
did everything they could
to prop them up.**

Issues of power and authority could have torn the early Christian church apart had it not been for the Lord. Members of the early Christian church fought over whom to follow. Some clung to the teachings of Apollos, who was known for his ability to deliver eloquent speeches. Others were suspicious of the Gentiles and followed Peter. Still others claimed to be disciples of Paul. In I Corinthians 1:10-17, Paul dealt with the divisions by pointing out the obvious — Christ is the head of the Church, not any one man or group of men. Apollos, Peter and Paul were only men. Salvation only comes through Jesus Christ. As issues of authority and control sprang up, Paul pointed to the Lord.

Does this mean that apostles, prophets, evangelists, teachers and pastors are not in positions of authority? The answer is both ‘Yes’ and ‘No.’ Believers given ministry gifts are called to feed the sheep, not manipulate them for building a religious empire or legacy on earth. Are ministers the final authority for the believer? Of course not. All leadership must be tested and compared to the living Word. Paul encouraged the early Church to set aside foolish teachings and pursue the truth. If someone preaches a gospel other than salvation

through the blood of Christ, then he speaks lies and furthers the devil's cause. We should be ever vigilant in these last days against untrue doctrine. The Word says that many will be deceived in the latter days by false teachings developed by men. Establishing authority is important. Just look at the letters in the New Testament. Paul, James, Peter, Jude and others all started off their letters by identifying their position and authority base. They frequently pointed to their position in Christ and the authority that He gave them.

Concerns over power and control have gripped the Church today. In too many local churches, the leadership tries to scheme, plan and control everything. There is no freedom in many churches today. Not only is God put in a box; the church members are imprisoned by being led to think Christianity is about rules — not a living relationship with Jesus. Instead of letting the Lord lead through the Spirit of Truth, men rely on their own wisdom and plans.

We act as if God needs a little help from us at times. But Paul in I Corinthians correctly identifies the source of revelation — the Holy Spirit. Paul did not rely on the wisdom or plans of men. He let the Spirit guide him in all truth and wisdom. We need more Spirit-led churches where the members organically live out their faith daily through a deep walk with Christ. We need more churches where the leadership steps aside and lets the Lord do His work. We need local assemblies where people can freely testify, prophecy, encourage, pray and praise as guided by the Spirit. Who controls the microphone in your church? Is it the Lord or men?

God, open the eyes of pastors, elders, deacons, teachers, evangelists, missionaries and priests all over the world to the new and living way. May churches spring to life and become the Church again. Forgive us for pursuing our own plans, which lead to ruin. Guide the leaders within the Church. May they

daily fall on their knees and seek Your face. Bring revival to our hearts! May the Spirit guide us as we delight in You!

LIBERATION: WALKING THE STREETS OF CARY TOWN

Hitting the streets, a bunch of young adults and teenagers from church went to praise the Lord, pray and witness on Cary Street, a popular shopping and hang-out spot downtown. It was the first time in a long time that I had witnessed on the streets or worshipped publicly outside of a 'religious' setting. Christ liberated me that night. The praise and worship flowed forth as I closed my eyes and focused on the Lord. Our worship was a witness to those who streamed out of the Byrd Theater. A few stopped and talked. I worshipped freely on the sidewalk as the Spirit flowed. I lost myself in the presence of God. I did not care about what anybody thought. We talked to two boys who were drawn by our worship. Although we prayed with them, they said that they were not ready to commit to Christ. *Oh, Holy Spirit, draw these two boys. Don't let them go!*

Then we went around and witnessed on the street and prayed for different things as the Spirit brought them to our attention. We prayed against evil spirits and the devil's counterfeits. We talked with several people about Christ. Many of them said that they were Christians. Even though we did not have a chance to pray with someone for salvation, I felt energized and released from fear. For I will not be ashamed of the gospel of Christ; I will no longer stand on the sidelines and let people go by me. I am going to get in the game and let the Lord use me. I will no longer ride the bench and wonder what would have happened if I would only take a chance. I saw tonight that all God desires is a willing heart. He will do the rest. He will provide the words, the direction and the power to accomplish His purpose.

Thank You, Jesus, for saving me! Thank You for setting me free. I no longer have to fear the rejection of men. For what is man compared to You? You, oh God, have accepted me as a son. I share in Your bountiful inheritance and glory. May I rejoice in the truth and Your salvation. Lord, give me a spirit of love, power and self discipline. May I not fear but step out in faith.

INTERCESSION BREAKTHROUGH

While attending a retreat with a few friends, I experienced a breakthrough in my prayer life.

**Despite God's call to be a prayer warrior,
I suffered from a
deep sense of spiritual inadequacy.
I loved to delve into the Word,
but prayer never came easy.**

At times, it felt like tough work. Similar to a grueling workout, I tried to avoid intercession at all costs. But with the sledgehammer of His love, Jesus removed the shackles of selfishness and doubt. The Lord freed me to accomplish His purpose.

The winter retreat was held at a 'Christian' camp in Virginia. One of my friends used to work on the summer camp staff. He told us stories about how he was discouraged from presenting the Gospel. Instead, the campers were taught a watered-down message about God (minus strong references to Jesus) mixed with humanist ideas. While we walked around the camp, I prayed for the summer camp kids and counselors.

Later that night, I went outside to the woods to pray. I looked up at the brilliant night's sky. The moon and stars shined brightly. As the heavens declared the glory of God, I

began to think about the many people who would never come to know God, the Creator and Author of life. Suddenly, I fell to my knees and cried out to God. I felt the weight of those who were blinded to the truth. My heart was burdened for the teenagers and the kids coming through the summer camp. While I interceded in prayer, tears flowed down my face. Extreme sorrow overtook me. I had never before felt such pain for complete strangers. The Spirit carried me into such a deep state of intercession. I felt sorrow for those who were blinded to the truth, especially the campers. The Lord made a breakthrough. He showed me His heart for the lost and shared His burden with me. God freed me to intercede in prayer, and I have never looked at prayer the same way since that starry winter night.

Thank You, Jesus, for giving me a new heart. Thank You for helping me see and experience the degree to which You care for us. May I never forget the power of prayer. Our prayers are an integral part of Your plan. Prayers are the building blocks of the kingdom. May I always desire to pray first. Please give me a heart to pray for those You have entrusted to me.

LISTEN UP

‘Hey... Chaille! Go over and talk to the guy on the pew behind you.’ Like a scene from *Field of Dreams*, a voice whispered instructions to me. I turned around to see an Asian man curiously taking in everything he saw. Having just finished praying that the Lord would use me, God suddenly gave me a chance.

Quickly the enemy flooded my mind with fear and doubt. My flesh started to make excuses. I could obey the Spirit’s direction or run away like a chicken. As soon as the pastor finished the prayer, I closed my eyes asked for strength and

turned around to speak to the Asian man. I asked him a few questions and quickly learned that he was a Chinese graduate student who was visiting the church meeting for the first time. His name was Singh, and he said that he was not a Christian. He explained that he had been raised to think of the Bible as a collection of fairy tales. The Lord gave me a few minutes to share the Gospel message and encourage Singh. Although he did not accept Jesus right away, he seemed willing to listen. Had I ignored the still small voice and walked out of the building without talking with him, he may have never been personally challenged with the Gospel.

I learned something important from this encounter about how God works. He creates the opportunities for ministry, and we have to choose if we will follow His leading. All too often, I ignore the spurring of the Lord and do my own thing. God has chosen to use His people to share the Gospel. Wow, what an awesome privilege and responsibility! In the book of Revelation, Jesus said to the churches, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” Why do I walk around ignoring the guidance of the Spirit? I worry about what others may think. I act as if I must have a license before I can take a risk and actually care for others. Well, I’m tired of being deaf and walking around without the sweet melody of the Spirit ringing in my ears.

Spirit, allow me to hear and recognize Your voice. May I block out the noise of the world and follow the sweet sound of Your voice. Use me to carry the love of Christ to others. Bring people across my path that need to hear about Jesus. Draw Singh to yourself that he may come to know Christ as Lord and Savior. Make the seed that was planted in Singh’s life grow.

MEETING WITH VAN

Thank you, Jesus, for answering my prayer. You gave me an opportunity to encourage two other guys in their faith this week.

One of the guys is Van. He and I met to discuss life and the Word over a pot of coffee. Van left the meeting energized about the Bible. I could literally see the light bulb go on over his head as the Spirit began to reveal meaty truths to him. Van's excitement lifted my spirits.

Van and some of the other guys are a real answer to prayer. For months, I have been concerned about the young adults group. It never really grew to a 'viable' ministry. It lacked 'critical mass.' By all worldly accounts, it would be considered a failure. Yet, I knew God wanted to use people in the group to encourage each other. Our gatherings have value. Van and I will probably gather one-on-one at least a couple of times a month to break bread, encourage each other and explore the Living Word. Although God has not given the young adults group critical mass in terms of people or activity, He has poured out His Spirit.

Oh, Father. Pour out Your Spirit on all the people in the young adults group. From the active members to the people who come only on rare occasions, may our generation take back the Church for Your glory. May we no longer play games with eternity. May we take a stand and break the curses passed down from our forefathers. Live inside of us, guide us in truth and equip us to serve. Amen!

GETTING FREAKED OUT ABOUT WITNESSING

Sometimes too much of a good thing can become a bad thing. Having come close to finishing two books *Jesus Freaks*

and *Revolution: A Call to Holy War*, I was riding high a wave of emotion. I was all psyched up about witnessing and giving it all for Christ. These books emphasized dying to self and putting it all on the line for Christ. *Jesus Freaks* gave details about martyrs while *Revolution* called Christians to mobilize for Christ and serve Him at all costs. These were pep talks, which the enemy used to try to separate me from Christ.

Although the messages of the books were right on the mark, I used them as an unhealthy measuring stick for my value in the kingdom of God. After all, I was still alive. No one had ever tried to kill me for my faith in Christ. Although I have been ridiculed and shunned from time to time, I have never experienced the level of persecution described in those two books. I began to think, ‘Something must be wrong with me.’ I started to doubt the value and genuineness of my convictions. The devil took what the Lord intended for good and turned it around to create a wedge of condemnation.

It all culminated at a McDonald’s restaurant. While drinking a cup of coffee, I read one of the last chapters in the *Revolution* book. Amid a chapter on losing my life to save it, my mind began to wander. I looked around and started to think about the famous evangelist Smith Wigglesworth who, according to stories that I have heard, used to stand up in restaurants and pray for all the patrons’ food. I thought maybe that I should step out in faith and witness to everybody in the restaurant. As people came in the restaurant, I thought about witnessing to them. Suddenly, I started to feel like a caged animal. I was almost panicked to witness to everybody in the restaurant. I saw an old man on the other side of the aisle and thought about going up and talking to him. Fear rushed in my heart. I was not sure if God was leading me to talk with him or not. I received no real green light, but I felt like I needed to prove my dedication to the Lord. Flooded by doubts and fear, I rushed out the door. When I got in the car, I felt like a failure. All I wanted to do was to hide from God.

I drove to the Sunday night Bible study confused and upset. I described my burden to the group. I was not sure what God wanted me to do.

**Was I supposed to stop everybody
that I see and talk
to them about Jesus?**

Would that be genuine or real?

Would there be anything wrong with that? Although I am a people person, I have never really felt comfortable going up to complete strangers and talking to them about anything let alone a topic as dicey as religion. Would God require me to do something completely against my nature? What did God want? I wanted to please Him so badly. But I lacked understanding. Christ desires for me to deny myself, take up my cross and follow Him. But what exactly does that mean? In less than two hours, I was burned out.

My mind had short-circuited. I started to think that every person who went by me in the restaurant had been a missed opportunity. All of those people were going to hell because of me. I felt very far from God. The devil sure played me like a fool. He took zeal for the Lord and used it against me. At the Bible study, two friends pointed out the error in my reasoning. They brought me back to the crux of the situation. Christ does not love me for what I do for Him. He simply wants me to love Him with all of my heart, soul and mind. God does not expect me to evangelize the entire city by myself. Apart from Jesus I can do nothing of lasting importance. The Lord wants me to listen to His voice and obey.

**Most of the people I will reach
with the Gospel
will be people I already know.**

They are the people the Lord wants me to reach. Although He will use me to reach out to strangers on some occasions, He mainly wants me to press further into Him and let my light shine before men. Once again, I fell in the trap of trying to do instead of just being in the presence of God. For the Lord's yoke is easy and His burden is light. He will give me a real desire and the strength to do whatever He asks of me. Confusion, doubt, fear, and condemnation come from the devil, not Jesus.

SAYING GOODBYE

“Friends come in and out of our life like a busboy in a restaurant.” — *Stand by Me*

This sure seems to be true sometimes. One day I met with Ted, a good friend, and it appeared that he would be moving to Birmingham, Alabama. I knew that he has been unhappy at work and looking for a change. But I never really expected him to leave so soon. Just when we started to get close, he moved on. Although I was full of joy and happy to see him leave for greener pastures, I knew that I would miss him. While Ted lived in Richmond, I had the pleasure to be his friend and encourage him in his walk with Christ. I saw tremendous growth. The Lord brought him a long way. But I said goodbye with confidence because I knew he was in the Lord's hands. I hoped to keep up via e-mail and travel down to see him on occasions.

I am comforted in knowing that God is in control. The Lord is sovereign. He knows what is going on, and He will

protect His people. I shall continue to pray for my brothers in Christ. No matter where we live, we only lose touch if we let it happen. The Lord will provide new friends and people to disciple.

Father, forgive me for worrying about the future. I trust my friends to You. Please keep them in the palm of Your hand. Watch over them and protect them from getting too busy to seek You. May they never fall away from You. May they grow closer to You each year. I ask that You will provide them believers in their settings. People who love You and will encourage them. Help me to find new friends. Amen!

RUSH TO JUDGMENT

If anyone had the right to judge, it was Jesus. Yet more often than not, He offered forgiveness and acceptance to the repentant sinner. Consider the woman who washed Jesus' feet, she was known as a sinner, yet Jesus did not reject her. He offered her forgiveness and accepted her act of repentance. On many occasions, Jesus celebrated with tax collectors and prostitutes. He never rejected people because of past sins or their social status.

**Unfortunately, Christians today
are known more for
having a judgmental attitude
than loving others.**

Christians can be particularly judgmental about the most ridiculous things from hairstyles and clothes to body piercings and even music. I once met a brother who was a Jesus hippie. His name was Ivan. He loved the psychedelic music scene including Phish and The Grateful Dead. He followed the bands

around the country in his drug heyday. After Ivan accepted Jesus as savior, he dumped his addictions but kept the psychedelic music. I saw the band stickers on the back of his truck and asked him about them. He asked me what I thought. I told him that I did not care for the music played by either of the bands. Despite my own convictions to avoid most ‘secular’ rock music, I told him that I did not judge him based on the bands’ connection to the drug scene. After all, there are many Phish fans who do not use drugs or alcohol. Yet, these fans are just as crazy about the group as any pot smoker. Ivan was surprised by my response. He said that most Christians (Pentecostals are among the worst) would try to convince him to stop listening to ‘devil’ music. Some people would even go as far as trying to cast the demons off his truck. I guess they thought the stickers offered temporary housing for demons.

My response to Ivan was based on Romans 14. Paul wrote, “Who are you to judge someone else’s servant” (Romans 14:4)? Paul asked a very good question and made a great point in the process. Ultimately, I am responsible only to the Lord for my actions. I am not perfect, and I have no right to judge others on matters of personal conscience. Jesus will judge the nations not me. The Spirit also reminded me of Jesus talking about trying to remove the speck from our brother’s eye when we have a big plank in our own eye.

I can discern what is right for me based upon the Living Word and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. However, I have no right to beat my brother or sister over the head with my convictions. This does not destroy the foundation for strong church discipline. For just as we are separate, we are one through Christ. When one believer hurts, we all hurt. We should admonish one another toward a closer walk with Christ. And we are to submit to the leaders that God has ordained in our lives.

**Discipline occurs to bring repentance
and restoration
not guilt and shame.
It does not exist to simply empower leaders.**

Some things are blatantly against God's righteous standard and His Word. We must work to purge such sin from the body by tough love at times. Look at the example Paul gave in 1 Corinthians about the man sleeping with his mother. Paul encouraged the church to intervene and if necessary to expel the immoral brother. There is a foundational need for church discipline. Notice that Paul excludes non-believers from scrutiny because God will judge them. Frequently, Christians make an issue out of a particular action to puff up themselves, not because they are concerned about a brother or sister.

When we correct out of love for the other person, we are following a Biblical mandate. James said in his letter to the early Church, "My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins" (James 5:19-20). We are not supposed to 'mind our own business' when we see another Christian in trouble, yet we must always check our motives. Is this really a matter of personal conscience or behavior strictly prohibited by the Word?

Many Christians today act like a bunch of spoiled children arguing over who owns the ocean. We are petty. There is more that unites us than divides us. Yet, we focus on the smallest differences. Instead of condemning one another, we should love one another and encourage each other to live unto the Lord. I find myself frequently making spiritual comparisons with others. Usually, I pass judgment on them and walk away feeling good about myself. The Bible warns us to be careful

not to judge because we will be judged based on the same criteria we use for others. Ouch, I guess I better go a bit easier on others in the future. What would happen if we in the body started acting in love and unity? Would the world take notice? I believe it would be shocked right to its knees. The only time Jesus ever rushed to judgment was to condemn the ‘religious’ people of His day. He accused them of focusing on how clean the outside of the cup was when the inside was filthy.

Father, forgive me for having a judgmental spirit. Help me to love others and esteem my brothers and sisters higher than myself. Forgive me for slandering others behind their backs and even to their faces. Open my eyes to my own sin and depravity. Give me words to encourage and build up the Body of Christ. Help me to discern moments when words of correction are necessary. May I always speak to encourage others in their walk with You, never to feed my ego or make me look good. Amen!

DON'T START ANYTHING; BECOME SOMETHING!

Every day I hear about another ministry starting up in my city or around the world. With all these “ministries” being launched, why do Christians struggle to evangelize and disciple the world? Islam seems to have its act together and continues to grow at an alarming rate. Is God asleep? Why do so many ministries lack God’s fire and anointing? What does it take for God to send his fire to consume the altar just like He did when Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal?

Although God inspires some of these ministry ideas, others come from our own desires to please God or justify ourselves to Him. Sometimes we jump into a struggling ministry and try to help revive it. As King David discovered, God does not care about buildings or what we want to do for

Him. Instead, the Lord focuses on what He wants to do in and through us. In II Samuel 7, King David proposes to build a temple for the Lord. The idea even sounds good at first to the prophet Nathan. However, God had different plans. The Lord revealed to Nathan that God had not asked for any ruler to build Him a house. God announced that He would establish David's kingdom forever and would provide Israel peace and a homeland. David's son Solomon would be the one to erect a temple in honor of God. David responded in humility by rejoicing in the Lord's promises.

King David made the mistake of believing that God needed a temple built by human hands. But God had a better plan in mind. He desired to reside within His people – something David could have never thought of on his own. According to Acts 17:24-25, “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.”

The apostle Paul wrote about Christ living in His people (Galatians 2:20). The Lord calls Christians to be living temples. We are to impact the world by radiating God's glory.

Today, churches tend to focus on constructing larger buildings or pioneering the latest ministry craze. When Jesus gave the great commission, He never mentioned buildings, Sunday services or programs. Jesus called His followers to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them, and teaching them to obey all of the Lord's commands (Matthew 28: 18-20).

**While there is nothing wrong
with Sunday services
or programs,
they are a poor substitute
for spiritual intimacy with the Lord
and other believers.
Large groups exist to foster
the development of small groups.**

Yet in the process of doing ‘ministry’ today, many baby Christians are left starving for nourishment. Discipleship is noticeably missing in the Church today. But isn’t discipleship Christ’s first directive?

Call me skeptical, but I am a bit leery of people wanting to build a ministry. I thought Christ called us to make disciples. Ministry flows out of a life dedicated to God’s glory, not a slick plan or program. Don’t get me wrong. Many organized ministries are doing fruitful service to God. But leaders must be held accountable to ensure that they have proper motives and aspirations.

**Just because there is a need
does not mean there is a call.**

Solomon, the builder of the temple in Jerusalem, eventually discovered, “Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain” (Psalms 127:1).

SO DID YOU BRING ME ANYTHING TO EAT?

One day while trying to get away from everybody and everything, God created an incredible witnessing opportunity.

I had taken off the day from work to hike around the Blue Ridge Mountains and to seek the Lord. Hiking a couple of different peaks and driving along the Skyline Drive, I enjoyed being alone with God — my friend, my savior and my love.

The day consisted of hiking, praying, singing praises, reading the Word, taking in God's creation, meditating on God's love for me and witnessing to a stranger on the side of a mountain. Through beautiful scenery, the truth of God's Word, a gentle breeze and a miracle, God showed his sovereignty and love. The miracle came in the form of a witnessing opportunity. It started as one of the strangest encounters of my life and ended with God being glorified.

While sitting on the ground at an overlook eating lunch, a man named Scott drove his car up to where I sat. He got out looked around for a second and walked straight to me. He pointed to my lunch and asked, "Did you bring me anything to eat." Stunned by his question, I thought for a second and replied, "No, not really. I did not know you were coming." Then he sat down on the ground and began to talk about the view. I offered him some chips and fruit. He declined the food. We talked for a while about where we lived and what we do for a living. Scott suffered from the spirit of depression. His words expressed a negative worldview where pain, not joy, consumes his life. While looking out on the Albemarle County wine valley, I commented about the beauty of nature and how it reflects the glory of God. I then told Scott the purpose for my trip. He seemed intrigued and told me his 'religious' beliefs.

Scott said that he believed in God. But he did not consider himself a real religious man. Scott said that he had personally experienced God. He admitted trying to commit suicide more than once. The most recent time, Scott said that God told him not to do it. Shocked by his honesty, I asked Scott what he thought the purpose to life was. He candidly responded that he did not really know.

I went on to share with Scott that I believe the purpose to life is to have a close relationship with God. I told Scott that is the reason why God tried to stop him from killing himself. I explained how we need the blood of Jesus to remove our sin, which allows us to have a relationship with God and be with Him forever. As I talked more and more about Jesus, he began to get agitated. He told me that he had enjoyed talking with me but he had to go. He did not want to accept Jesus on the spot. Regardless, the seed had been planted.

Before Scott left, I asked if I could pray with him. He consented. I prayed for healing for his bad arthritis and back pain (earlier in the conversation he told me about his health problems — a contributing cause to his depression). Then, I proceeded to pray that Scott would accept the love offered by God. I asked that his eyes would be opened to the truths outlined in the Bible. As Scott got up to leave, I told him to consider why he had stopped at that particular overlook and talked to me. I said that it was a divinely inspired encounter set up especially by God. I told Scott that God wanted to get his attention. God desires to love him if he would only open his heart. If Scott would seek God, I said that he would find the answers to his questions. Scott turned around and looked at me and said that maybe I was right. He waved goodbye, jumped in his car and sped away down the road. I never saw Scott again. But I frequently think about and pray for him.

Is the above encounter God's model for ministry? Are we wasting our time with our campaigns, strategy sessions, seeker-friendly services and programs? It can't be as simple as seek God and He will do the rest?

**I feel like I have to win the battle
on my own. Yet the Bible
is full of stories where God,
not man, is the primary actor
in accomplishing God's will.**

Just look at the history of Israel where in battle after battle God routed Israel's enemies through divine acts. For example, Jehoshaphat defeated Moab and Ammon when God sent a spirit of confusion into their camps (II Chronicles 20). Moab and Ammon slaughtered each other without the Israelites ever having to raise their swords. God said to Jehoshaphat, "Ye shall not need to fight in this battle: set yourselves, stand ye still, and see the salvation of the Lord with you, O Judah and Jerusalem: fear not, nor be dismayed; tomorrow go out against them: for the Lord will be with you" (II Corinthians 20:17 - KJV).

Consider the encounter between Phillip and the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:26-40. An angel of the Lord told Phillip to travel a particular road. While on the road, the Spirit directed Phillip to walk to a chariot and stay near it. Phillip kept his ears open for an opportunity to do the Lord's work. He heard an Ethiopian eunuch (official) in the chariot reading from the book of Isaiah. Phillip asked the official if he wanted help understanding the ancient text. The eunuch agreed, and Phillip explained the gospel to him. Convinced by Phillip's words, the eunuch accepted Christ and was baptized on the spot. God set up the appointment although he never fully outlined Phillip's mission. When presented an opportunity, Phillip simply spoke out of love and offered to serve. Having been grounded in the Scripture, Phillip helped the eunuch understand the mystery of the Gospel. God even handled the transportation to Phillip's next destination.

According to the Bible, the Spirit of God picked Phillip up and carried him away.

Are you suggesting that I simply lock myself in my prayer closet and let God bring people to me? No, not exactly. Above all, we should seek to know and worship God. Witnessing to the world will flow out of our walk with the Lord. Remember that an empty jar offers no life-giving water to the person that goes to drink from it. Simply seek God; live in a constant state of abiding in His presence. Then go out in the world and live as the aroma of Christ. Whether it be a person in the checkout line at a store, a neighbor, a co-worker or a workout partner at the gym, your life will emanate a bright light to a dark world.

There have been many times where people like Scott came into my life, and I remained silent.

**Although God will bring along
the opportunities,
we can choose to speak out
or keep quiet.**

Had Phillip never approached the Ethiopian eunuch, he may never have accepted Christ as his savior. Thus, we all play a vital role in God's plan. Although I did not give Scott physical food, I did offer him spiritual food to nourish the soul.

REACHING AN ORGANIC MINDED GENERATION

What does it mean to be a 'seeker friendly' church? When church planting experts talk about reaching the postmodern generation, what exactly do they mean? What is post modernism? I tend to view it as a nebulous concept – a buzzword tossed around by dreamers. People who want to be

on the cutting edge use it as a badge of cultural honor. Simply attaching ‘seeker friendly’ or ‘postmodern’ does little to tear down the roadblocks facing the church today. We must really seek to understand and engage this new culture while preserving the heart of the Gospel message.

Many outsiders in the world have rejected the established, mainstream church for good reason. All they see are a room full of hypocrites that rush to judge them and then push them into a mold. They feel left out unless they conform to certain standards, most of which have nothing to do with Christ or His commandments. If we are truly saved by grace, I have yet to see what someone’s hairstyle or attire has to do with their acceptance in the Church. Christians can be among the toughest critics in the world. Sure, a person will likely change over time and drop sinful behavior as Christ transforms the individual. But unfortunately, too many outsiders think they must have everything together and be perfect before they turn to the Christ.

Those raised inside the ‘mainstream’ church and converts that have been assimilated into the ‘Christian’ culture, do very little to tear down the barriers created by the enemy. Non-Christians do not fit and many times are not welcome in many churches. From the starchy Sunday clothes to the stained glass windows to the strict code of conduct and formal practices, non-churched people would feel like aliens on a foreign planet if they went to many church services. What would happen in your fellowship if a man in raggy clothes came in and lit a cigarette? What would happen if teenagers wearing punk or gothic clothing came in and sat down on the front row? Would these people be greeted with the love of Christ?

Let’s face it — the majority of American churches are designed to serve and appeal to suburban, middle class Christians. Oddly, the focus tends to be man, not God. Non-Christians are welcomed as long as they conform or stay quiet in the back row. Tons of programs are offered to appeal to the

baby boomers and their children. Order and planning take the place of organic worship, teaching and fellowship. Everything appears nice and tidy — a picture of perfection.

**Some churches put on a good show
and run like a
well-oiled machine.
Yet people pile through the doors
week after week
and leave unchanged.**

An entertaining program or a good speech is a poor substitute for the authentic work of the Holy Spirit. Many of these dead churches think they are doing such a good job on their own that they fail to call upon the Lord. Am I being too harsh? What about the plank stuck in my eye? I am only pointing out the problem as I see it. I am complicit in the crime just like the rest of the established church.

There seem to be several major reasons why the church today has failed to connect with postmoderns, especially non-churched youth.

1.) It's a Culture Thing: We Are Obviously Not of the Same Tribe — Most people are attracted to people of similar background, attitude, passion and culture. It all starts with appearance and goes from there. Unfortunately, many people cannot get beyond the appearance, no matter what they say to your face. Others will use culture as a shield against 'religion.'

Dress, decor and location play a small part in helping to create a connection. But if this is as far as you go, you will fail in the long run to reach postmoderns. Going beyond the shell, we must meet them where they are. Simply creating an alternative service at a church building will likely flop.

Instead, we must take Christ to them. Where do these people live, work and play? That's where the outreach should take place.

The enemy, with a substantial amount of help from nutty Christians, has done a good job stereotyping God as a killjoy. Outsiders think that the Christian life is dull and no fun. God is thought to be a harsh taskmaster who demands perfection. All non-Christians hear about are rules and rituals. Very few people tell them about the peace and joy experienced in a relationship with God. No wonder most people go running for their lives when someone starts to talk about Christ. Any outreach to postmoderns must destroy these lies while providing them outlets to discover God in a way fitting with their culture.

2.) Dead Religion — Postmoderns do not understand the typical 'Christian' culture. From the clothes to the language, they feel like aliens on a foreign planet. But most of this Christian culture has little or nothing to do with God and everything to do with decades of tradition and learned behavior. Sing, laugh, stand, sit, shake hands — we play our role to perfection every week. People sing songs about joy with stone-cold faces. Going through the motions, we punch our timecard and live a life without God.

**Ask a typical non-believer
what he sees
on Sunday morning
and he would respond a collection
of fake people
putting on a show
out of a sense of obligation.**

Just to make sure everyone is happy, the church offers tons of programs and activities, each with a dash of Jesus thrown in to appease God. Running from ministry to ministry, Christians keep busy — too busy. Then, we make the mistake of trying to offer all these programs to attract the non-believer. But postmoderns are not seeking programs or entertainment. They want to experience an organic relationship with God. It is the death in the modern church that has kept people away.

3.) Seeking a Direct Link to God — Many of the modern day churches are still working under the principles of the old covenant. Pastors and teachers are elevated into a position where God alone should be. Under the new covenant, God offers a direct relationship without the use of an intermediary. We individually receive direction from God, not an earthly priest. The old matrix leaves people locked in chains. They never grow because their faith has no roots of its own. Postmoderns want a direct connection with God. Unfortunately, all they see modeled in the established church is a system where the preacher ‘speaks for God’ and tightly holds control over the congregation.

In too many local churches, the leadership tries to scheme, plan and control everything. There is no freedom in many churches today for the Holy Spirit to do His thing. The pastor holds a tight grip on the microphone. Church members are not allowed to testify, worship and use their gifts freely. This results because pastors are afraid to administer Biblical discipline and avoid the whole issue by stifling the Spirit.

**Postmoderns want freedom —
something that is missing
in most churches today.**

4.) Real Community Not Superficial Relationships — One of the greatest desires for post moderns is to feel accepted by a group while preserving their individuality. Yet most Christian churches provide very little in the area of true fellowship. After service, we greet people and make polite conversation. We pretend to be interested and always say that everything is going well in our lives even when our house just burned down and our dog got run over by a truck. We feign interest in the lives of others and commit to pray for others even though we usually do not. Christians are not taught how to develop close, accountable relationships. Discipleship is almost a lost art in the Church. Vibrant small groups do not exist in many local churches. Yet authentic relationships are the one thing that churches should be able to offer outsiders. We know Jesus, the only source of true love. We have a wonderful how-to handbook in the Bible. Non-Christians, especially the younger generations, desire acceptance by a group. Many want role models and mentors but are too prideful to admit it. Instead of rushing to love those outside the Church, we frequently judge them first and offer kindness later.

A spirit of pride imprisons many in churches today. People are hurting in the Church but keep it to themselves. They do not want to be judged by the rumor mill. All too often we rush to judge, not to love.

**Very few are willing
to offer others
the same level of grace
that God gave them.**

WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN ‘YOUR’ MINISTRY CRUMBLES AROUND YOU?

Just consider the scenario, you are sitting in prison on the verge of being executed. Most of your friends have abandoned you except for a couple of loyal fellas. Your life’s work has begun to crumble as people and groups squabble among themselves. False doctrine has enticed some to fall away from the faith. How would you react?

Toward the end of his life, the Apostle Paul faced this dire situation while in Rome. Paul could have felt bitter, depressed or disillusioned. By the world’s perspective, Paul’s life was about to end in tragic failure. Dedicated to serving God, Paul gave up everything for God. Paul abandoned his earthly position of authority and power to travel around and preach the Gospel. Angry mobs tried to kill him on more than one occasion. He never settled down and had a ‘normal’ life. During his missionary journeys, Paul started many churches and led many people to Christ. Yet, the cares of the world had begun to influence these churches. They started to lose loyalty to Paul and fall away from the apostolic faith. Had Paul’s ministry to the Gentiles ended in failure? As he approached execution under the wicked ruler Nero, many of Paul’s friends had abandoned him. Only Luke remained by his side.

Paul wrote to his protégé, Timothy, “For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day — and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing” (I Timothy 4:6-8). Paul proclaimed victory. He did not allow the distress of his current circumstances to destroy his joy. It was never ‘Paul’s ministry.’ Paul understood that the battle belonged to the Lord. As Paul approached the end of his life, he focused his attention

on the Lord. He stood on the promises of God and believed in the reward promised to the faithful.

Almost 2,000 years later, Paul's letters stand as a central part of God's Word. Paul's influence cannot be measured. Just like Paul, if you have been faithful to God's call, He will take your efforts, even in death, and multiply them to accomplish a divine purpose. Do not despair but rejoice as Paul did.

**Even apparent failures
may birth revival
in a dry and weary land. God
tends to move through our efforts
one person at a time.**

May the Lord fill you with His Spirit and may His grace rest upon you.

