

THE DREAM

**A Retired Pastor Reflects on
The Perfect Ministry**

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The Dream: A Retired Pastor Reflects on
The Perfect Ministry

by John King

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Dedicated to

All those who dream.

Cover: A simple looking up into the clouds.

A picture filled with the symbolism of “The Dream.”

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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing, 2017

ISBN 978-1-365-97992-7

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

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Introduction

“There are certain half-dreaming moods of mind in which we naturally steal away from noise and glare, and seek some quiet haunt where we may indulge our reveries and build our air castles undisturbed.”

— Washington Irving, *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow and Other Stories*

It took writing 7 books to bring me to this evocative moment. (All these works but one are autobiographical.) Each book brought me closer, by way of introspection, to my own feelings. Each book helped me to see the real me and to reappraise how unreasonable my contentions, my complaints and my self-justification. But it also took years of experiencing life and faith.

Oh, and it took one hot bath. Sitting in a hot bath I began to reform my perspective on the path my life took as a minister which led through 2 dismissals and considerable personal and domestic angst. It wasn't as bad as that must sound. There was much to praise God for, not the least of which is this dream I write about now, forged in the crucible of life's circumstances and pounded out on the anvil of conflicting interests.

Also, the therapeutic value of steam, warm water, and prayer should not be overlooked. I realized in that moment that slowly although not, at the time,

discernibly, through a thousand tweaks over decades in the christian church, my passions somehow changed but survived. I lived with doubt, to be sure, but also a faith whose roots held more firmly grounded in Bible Truth the more the winds of cultural change blew wildly about me.

And I still have questions. But, as the song says, my anchor holds though the sails are tattered. ...and despite the storm. I have learned to appreciate not only dreams unfulfilled but questions unanswered. This is the mind of faith if it believes ultimately in God, Who, in His time and way, if He so chooses, will supply answers. Perhaps, on a need to know basis. And, perhaps, I don't need to know anymore the analytics because ...I have this dream. And my dream satisfies my need to enquire after details, to get the answers to the mystery as to why things happened the way they happened.

My dream satisfies me in this way because it is the gleanings of those thoughts worth cherishing in a scorched field of past mistakes. My dream is the photo book of priceless moments I have rescued from a past now consumed in the flames of all the bad times I lived in.

My dream is not a night thing during rem sleep, nor is it a vision, as if God intends to bring it to pass. No, it is just a daytime meandering of a tired mind. I am a boy in the woods gathering colorful autumn leaves for a collage that will preserve for me a season of a ministry past. Mine is a collage of ideas I cherish even if the church like a tree in the forest has

discarded them. These are my dreams blown about in the winds of change. But these are mine and me! These are leaves of past ideas that have come to rest in a place of peace where through introspection I have found them. I pick them up in this work to create this collage of my perfect ministry.

It is worth mentioning: we may all need to salvage a part of our past that seemed at first thought to be a total disaster. We need to be able to re-evaluate past steps and the bridges we may have crossed on that road that was lined with more miracles of grace than we noticed at the time. We may all need to realize that the choices we made and the subsequent life offered us, though, it wasn't our vision going in, still deserves to be honored for all those ways in which God, Who does not forsake His own, taught us lessons of faith and humble reliance on Him.

I once wanted to be a bible scholar teaching at some seminary. I, then, thought that teaching God's Word in a local church was most pastoral. I finally needed to accept changes that left me dreaming, only dreaming of what might have been. It is in this state of mind, depressed and full of regret, that the dream was born—growing out of the ashes of imagined, wasted opportunities and failures. My "now" dream may not have been my "then" dream, but perhaps, it serves to show me that God's grace was not lost on me. My dream is not daydreaming of what could have been, if only. No! Nor is it the expression of remorse. No one can say that the life they wanted to

live would have been better than the life actually handed to them. It is a meaningless comparison.

When I refer to my ruminations as a “dream” it is at long last a realization that over all this time, I was becoming, I was finalizing a set of principles, I was finding a way out of the jungle of unforgiveness. I was forming—if you want to say, this is my opinion, say it—an ideology, a view of ministry that now suggests, to me, that I was on to something even while the church seemed to evolve and start to practice memes foreign to this old man’s way of thinking.

As I share, my dream in its simplicity may seem to contravene decades of church leadership. It may seem, if left unexplained, to suggest that what is happening today in the civilized christian church world is all wrong. Try not to suggest such a dichotomy of purpose.

My dream may not pass the test of reasonableness or what has a chance at working. I have no misgivings about this. My dream is just that—my dream.

None of this, however, is worthy my concern, since, my thought here is only an example of the prophecy of Joel: an old man dreaming dreams. And none of this is intended to challenge the christian church because today’s church and my dreams are not by any stretch mutually exclusive ideas. There may be, and I believe there are, other men and women of vision who may bring parts of it into the

daylight. Let the church be the church, but I still have a dream!

Maybe that's why it has become a dream, daydreamed in a hot bath on a nothing day in the middle of a retirement. Yes, my thoughts might challenge what today's church in America and Europe is all about. That is probably why such a dream should remain trapped within the pages of this work and never get out. Yet, again, it might be the dream of many already in a third world setting where Christianity has to survive on its love and faith, and not its organizational skills or financial resources.

But could this dream of mine ever survive in today's civilized world? Perhaps, the soil of time was too acidic—postmodern—for the plant to grow in. Yet, I want to believe it is growing in a third world soil.

For now, and for clarity's sake, I want to introduce an idea that has my passionate endorsement and which gives legitimacy to decades of struggles, mistakes, countless sermons and teachings, prayer meetings, and visitations. I think I have something to write about.

Visitation Rights

"Did not our heart burn within us" Luke 24:32

I was so very naive when I went into pastoral work in 1969. Bible school (The school's administration was seeking state accreditation at the time and was granted "college" status in 1975.) offered a single course in "Pastoral Counseling" which provided next to nothing of lasting value about such a calling. Rev. Bashford Bishop, whose sobriquet in the Assemblies of God was "Mr. Sunday School," cautioned us at a ministerial conference in the Poconos in 1970, *"If you can help being a pastor ... don't!"*

I either couldn't help myself or did not want to help myself find another "calling." I took my Bible along with a few important greek words, bundled up my family's apprehension and moved into the Westerland's garage on Railroad Ave in Cold Springs, New Jersey for two weeks living on jersey tomatoes before the parsonage came available. (The Westerlands were 2 of 20 people who attended our first church.) Two years later we left the frying pan for the fires of Western PA. feeling fecklessly incompetent and visionless. I not only knew next to

nothing about pastoring but I did not have the vision as yet that pastoral leadership should boast. Countless times over the years, as a believer, I had been alerted to the "Great Commission" which every christian intuit. But how to turn this into a leadership goal was another matter. It wasn't until the middle 1980's in looking back that I began to make the connection.

I needed instruction; so, I asked Rev. Harry Snook, our Home Mission's Director, "*What should I do!?*" He counseled me, "*Visit the people and the church will grow.*" So, I began a massive visitation ministry. I recall leaving my beloved bride and our one year old in the car (her choice, since I would not be long) while I spend a three hour visit with the Roys. Their teenage daughter was giving them heartburn over her interests and I tossed myself, uninvited, into the middle of it thinking: this is what pastors are for.

Every week, three times a week, I made the 7 mile ride one way from West Cape May to Wildwood, New Jersey to provide the means for half my congregation to get to church. The shocks of our 1968 chevy chevelle groaned under the burden of ministry while the salt air ate away at its undercarriage until rainy weather pooled at our feet while we rode.

Whether or not there was a less literal interpretation to Rev. Snook's advice, I, regardless, took it to heart. I think the statistics should show that today's successful pastor eats fewer tomatoes, sleeps less time in garages and probably is less inclined to make visiting around a priority. But somehow, for

me, this became a way of ministerial life. It was my first real lesson in how to pastor and I took it to heart, I never sought the scriptural framework for such a model. I just assumed that “house-to-house” in Acts 2:46 underwrote my approach and according to verse 47, there was numerical growth to the church.¹ This must be what “Snook” (we affectionately referred to him this way) must have meant.

Visiting people, home studies, bible studies in christian bookstores, greek classes in neighboring communities, hospital calls, home prayer meetings ... all became a regular feature of what I did as a pastor. I didn't concern myself with offerings, collections, and tithes as much. I wasn't into growth charts or demographic studies or the latest approach to church growth. I liked visiting people.

I even visited congregants from the Presbyterian church across the creek in the early 1970's while they were between pastors. (Not to steal people. I didn't want people, per se, I sought ministry and I saw a difference here.) When Rev. Bill Martin, nephew to Walter Martin, author of “Kingdom of the Cults” arrived to pastor the church, I was excited with his congregation and he and I became co-laborers and good friends.

After Bill arrived, I confined my visits to my own congregation which was growing—and my greek

¹ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

students from Bethel Seminary in Bethel Park, PA., south of Pittsburgh. I went through 6 cars, rolling the previous unpaid balance into the next car payment, during the 70's and early 80's—you guessed it—visiting people.

Six!?! Let's see: 1968 Chevy Chevelle, 1972 Ford Maverick , 1974 Chevy Nova, 1976 Chevy Malibu Wagon (I liked Chevys), 1979 Toyota Tercel (front wheel drive on Pennsylvania hills in the winter), and a 1984 Chevy—records say burgundy in color, but I don't remember the model) until in 1986 we purchased our Astro Van visiting family in western New York when the burgundy car quit on us. Yap! Six cars before we bought the Chevy Astro.

It turns out that after a decade doing something, right or wrong, its hard to stop. As I sat in that warm bath, I began to justify visiting people. I may have lost sight of the wisdom in other aspects of pastoral work or their relative role in everything. I should probably have done fund raisers or had more guest speakers in or researched the benefits of the coming electronic age in furthering the gospel. I should have hugged a few deacons tighter and used bolder handshakes thanking them for their support and contribution. But I didn't. Maybe I should have chopped a 3 hour visit down to 1. Maybe, fewer cookies and more fruit after a home prayer meeting. Maybe more prayer time in the church proper. Maybe skip the notes with bible studies—people might feel less trapped in a college classroom that way.

(At least I didn't do what Dr. Ashbaugh did when he was working on his doctorate in textual criticism. He brought his dissertation into the pulpit in his homilies and some people felt overwhelmed by his knowledge. He cautioned me one day, "*Never appear one up on your people.*")

And now in this comforting water, I began to think that I wasn't far removed from something biblical and something worth my effort. Paul impressed me with his testimony in Acts 20:20 [The Message] "*I taught you out in public and I taught you in your homes.*" And in verse 31 [NIV] : "*Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.*" (And crying, burdened for God's people? I did my share to be sure.)

Did I go too far? Did I misunderstand Paul or was his testimony not to be an example for me? I should mimic his theology and teaching but not his methods? Beside, a modern setting for the church requires modern means? Was I too subjective? Should tears have been a dead giveaway of an emotional problem in *me*!?

My hot bath seemed to think that there could also be such a thing as too *little* concern, too little burden, too little time spent in seeking God's Word in a timely manner for God's people where they live and what they are experiencing. Isaiah 55:11 seems to suggest—to me, anyway—that sermons and homilies need to be immediately applicable to the needs God's people live with at the time.

so is my word that goes out from my mouth:
It will not return to me empty,
but will accomplish what I desire
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. -NIV

As the water swirled while I added more hot water I began to imagine the possibility of a ministry built on visitations. Reminds me of Rev. Tommy Reid's conversation with God. It was reported that in a night vision, Tommy was elevated above his church in Orchard Park, New York, to take in the site of his achievement as it lit up the surrounding sky, a monument to a dedicated calling. He was said to have boasted to God, "*Lord, what do you think of my church?*" Whereupon God took him higher and showed him a thousand lights coming from a thousand homes, remarking, "*And what do you think of mine!?*"

True or no, the point is goose-pimplly right on! There is something to be said for believers in home settings praying together and learning God's Word together provided there is a person with calling at the head of it all.

Also, bible studies can be exciting times when God's people get to participate, ask questions, give witness to truth, get a hug in a moment of distress, not to mention the spiritual benefit that comes even in silent times when God is in the midst of His people.

I dreamt, in that moment, as the warmer water took away a creeping chill: what if this was all there was to ministry! What if we no longer could afford the

expense that accompanies the church building proper! And what if—as inspiring, undeniably, that worshipping in song is in the larger auditorium, what if—the church’s liberty to enjoy the larger setting was prohibitive by

- ◆ denominational restrictions—making believers in other affiliations feel less comfortable, even unwelcome. How emotional is too emotional; how organized is too organized?
- ◆ burdensome financial requirements that demand larger offerings. The colosseum costs to rent.
- ◆ government regulations, IRS and other laws that redefine or even deny freedoms once assumed.
- ◆ the sheer overwhelming responsibility to administrate such largeness. Few pastors I believe capable.

We are so into the vision of God’s people assembled with the angels around His throne—as awesome and beyond description this is—that we feel a need to produce that setting this side of Christ’s return. There’s nothing wrong with this. There is nothing wrong with concerts of praise with thousands gathered, but in and by themselves, there may not be enough here to sustain our christian walk. In English: we still need each other. We need fellowship over God’s Book. We need christian interaction and support on a number of levels: emotionally and as well as spiritually.

Now, what did I do with that soap!

Ministry Made Easy

"It is not what a man does that determines whether his work is sacred or secular, it is why he does it."

— A.W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*

I began to muse over the idea of a perfect, bible-based ministry—one Paul would instantly recognize were he to pay our times a visit. I wondered what would it be like to strip ministry of all the modern trappings of the electronic age and limit ministry to those particulars defined in his writings. What if the Pauline list of ministries was complete and expanding this list for the sake of modernizing church work were deemed unnecessary—even a frustration.

I have not, however, met a clergyman or clergywoman that would agree that ministry should not be expanded. Everything from church construction to taking an offering to finance it is considered a bona fide service to the Lord. But in this moment, in this tub, I allow myself to wonder if all this "other" church activity is not intended as support for what interests us as church leaders and not as humble servants of God.

What if we give inspiration credit for an astute observation in Romans 12:5-9 and limit ourselves organizationally to these verses:

5 so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. 6 We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your[a] faith; 7 if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; 8 if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

Since this is my bath, this should be my hermeneutic. What if we see these ministries in the following way:

- ◆ Prophets inspire and stir God's people to action. Prophets ignite the flame that gives God's people a sense of urgency regarding the Word we are suppose to live and proclaim. Prophets are more likely to fire us up to reach the top of the mountain more than, as a teacher, how to get there.
- ◆ Serving is the work of deacons and deaconesses visiting the sick, providing for widows and orphans (An orphan is a child without a daddy). It may include hospital calls in our world, but in the biblical world, deacons and deaconesses were more like "meals on wheels."
- ◆ Teaching is the ministry of promoting the biblical message. It includes counseling. In my dream, it is the wisdom of God applied to the conduct of life. It is less theological and more a present reality in living the Word.

- ◆ Encouraging is the ministry of a Barnabas, who has a listening heart and who knows how to address the weariness and discouragement that is a part of every believer's experience. Worship leaders are naturals here. Leading in genuine worship is providing encouragement. It is reviving a believer's enthusiasm for service. It is often thru the words of the songs that we are reminded what it is all about.
- ◆ Giving underwrites the ministry, especially for the poor. But givers must do so with "liberality." (The Wycliffe Bible says 'simpleness' ..with no string attached. Bread upon the water.) Not everyone is a giver in this way.
- ◆ Leading are for those who oversee the other ministries. They make sure the poor and widows are taken care of and the money is collected for their needs.
- ◆ Showing mercy is the work of a good nurse who cheerfully cares for those in pain, physical or emotional. They are not counselors, nor do they provide for material needs, as deacons do. They fluff our pillow. The merciful seek to lessen our pain. They are a necessary support ministry that helps us stay focused on blessings we may otherwise not recognize when distracted by our discomfort. They are often the instrument of a touch from God.

What are we missing from this list that is critical for a bible-based ministry?

I say, “Nothing.” The Bible is replete with examples everyone knows:

- ◆ I mentioned Barnabas and his ministry of encouragement to John Mark .
- ◆ Stephen was a deacon whose primary responsibility was tending to widows.
- ◆ Listed in I Timothy 3 are the qualifications for church leadership, deacons and overseers.
- ◆ Titus in his second chapter personalized Paul’s instructions to someone with a teaching ministry.
- ◆ The charisma in 1 Corinthians 12:28-30 are gifts used in these ministries—or should be.

These seven are in essence what church work should be all about. Somewhere in all this is the “pastor” whose calling may exemplify one of these ministries more than the others. Pastors are spiritual leaders and are called to lead but they may exemplify a prophetic, administrative, or teaching ministry.

I romanticize that since Peter was enjoined to “feed” the Lord’s sheep—and the words “shepherd” and “pastor” are the same (Ephesians 4:11²)—that the primary calling of all pastors is to promote by their leadership, teaching, policy, and example, the written Word of God. *This* is the vision worth keeping.

² So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers,

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To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ's sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed: 2 Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; 1 Peter 5:1-2

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Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, 1 Peter 2:2

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Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. 1 Peter 4:10

Recalling that the gospel transcends culture and has a message for all time and all peoples, extending biblical ministry in a given cultural setting, is not the same, however, as expanding ministry beyond what could be recognized by a Paul or Peter—even if it is intended as a labor of love. I daydreamed the possibility of having all types of service to God examples of these seven. All of these ministries are extendable without being expanded. They have multiple applications without any need to add an eighth service to the scripture.

Modern ministry does not see it this way, I am saddened to write. Ministry has indeed evolved through traditional and cultural influences into a religious enterprise, I maintain, that fails to honor a Pauline emphasis.

This is not true absolutely. Much of today's ministry incorporates these Pauline-endorsed services to God. It is only when church work expands—and at times eclipses—these essentials that, as God's

ambassadors, we are wasting effort, spinning in place with most of our energy and resources going into a black hole of crisis managed efforts. Much of the stress associated with so-called ministry is the result of busying ourselves with non-essentials, biblically unimportant and unsupported. His yoke, I am reminded often, is “easy.”

Organizing activity to assure that widows are prepared for a severe winter is biblical. But organizing the church picnic—not necessarily. Organizing a fund raiser to add a steeple, not so much.

Promoting a unifying message around Jesus’ ministry, death and resurrection is very much a biblical aspect of teaching. Promoting a teaching that disparages another’s faith, never so! Promoting our own denominational distinction, as an educational tool to inform those who are drawn to our ministry because we are living the Gospel, very good. Promoting our own denominational distinction to pull someone away from another christian ministry, not a biblical idea.

We are spoiled in a civilized society. We need updated central air, have babysitters during church services, and fit productive Sunday School/ Catechism classes into a busy service schedule. We need to choreograph each worship service down to the minute in many churches. Our churches and church services have a theological component to them and must adhere to certain rules—not just guidelines

—for people to recognize the denomination and enjoy a sense of worship. We have replaced service with the service.

I often wonder how pentecostal was Paul—really! How episcopal or baptist or catholic—you get my drift—was Timothy or Titus? What denominational slot do we fit Priscilla into? And I wonder who was the overseer of the Corinthian churches! How would he categorize his troubled congregations?

The point here—while I add just a smidgen more hot water—would the early church fathers be inspired and excited to sit in our pews and participate in one of our services? In the most modern approach to ministry, might we invite them to a breakfast and to enjoy the service on a flat screen in the church cafeteria? Has the ministry morphed into a form that hides, if not removes, altogether, a Pauline approach to service to God?

Speaking of change: What about the offering which legally requires a board of trustees that follows IRS code. I will probably bring this up again, but for now, consider a ministry with no trustee board to control the money. What if genuine, bible endorsed, pastoral vision was instantly rewarded by a congregation whose giving was as liberal as his or her passion! I hate to break it to you but: trustee boards are an IRS—a government—necessity, not a biblical one. A church needs organization enough to make sure money flows in the right direction—toward the needs

the people are inspired to meet—but the monthly argument in which a number of pastoral ministries get unnecessarily squeezed for necessary resources is not only ineffective to the grow of the kingdom but is damaging to the work as well.

Talking about a Pauline approach to ministry requires a comment about burnout. This is a mistake of which I was guilty, During those decades of pastoring I was a one man show by doing ministry listed in these 7 to which I was *not* God-appointed. A pastor cannot do it all nor should they be expected to!

Others can and should be free to serve. Most believers have a heart for service but many have no direction. Some are actually living God's dream, they do serve in a totally biblical and Pauline recognized sense, but live with the discouraged notion that they are useless or not involved enough. They live with crippling guilt. They read into each sermon a scolding directed at themselves and, frustrated, pray more earnestly for God to use them. And yet they have become an essential part of the ministry without the self-recognition that would bring them peace in this matter.

Stress on these multiple levels wears on God's people, and especially the man or woman in the pulpit. We all, as christians, need to be in service to God, yes. We need to find our notch, where our cog best serves to turn the machinery of God' workings and fit there.

Now, in old age, I cling to Matthew 11:30: *For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.* Should I not limit my church activity to *my* labors, labor that God appointed *me*, individually? Shouldn't I be able to serve my Lord in a biblically endorsed way that suites my personality and profiles my emotional and spiritual makeup?

Labor and toil is work, energy draining work, but need not include that unnecessary stress that comes when we are laboring in ways we shouldn't be laboring.

Stress is emotional friction which creates heat, anxiety, without achievement. The engine of your body and your mind eventually burns out and it is time to quit and move on. It is always wise to find your own calling, your own place of excellence and passion, labor there and leave the responsibility of running the world to God. We are dependent on one another—yes—but we are not each other's micro-manager. Leave the administration of the Kingdom to the Lord, Who knows how to do just that (I Corinthians 12:5)³.

I know, there are no changes suggested here that will impact church life or the work of the christian church, but I can dream and I have only begun to explain the day the warm, swirling water seem to stimulate my thoughts.

³ There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord.

The Elephant in The Room

"...I could wish that no definitions had ever been felt to be necessary; and, still more, that none had been allowed to make divisions between churches."

— C.S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*

I have for a while now wondered the value of church organization above the local assembly. In the biblical world the local congregations were connected through a "right hand of fellowship" among its leaders. (Galatians 2:9)⁴ This idea was expanded into a more organized approach to honoring credentials to provide a built-in safeguard against "heresy". But heresy became a loosely defined term. Each denomination felt a sense of theological security and identity in its peculiar interpretation of scripture. Heresy became a secondary concern.

Pentecostalism prior to WW2 was considered heretical. Tongue speaking was a scary thing to promote since, by their own admission, the language could be demonic or made up. Catholicism is still,

⁴ James, Cephas and John, those esteemed as pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised.

erroneously, considered by some fundamentalists to be cultic.

I was dismissed from 2 churches. The first church's board thought I endorsed the doctrine foundational to the second church's theology. The second church board didn't want me when they discovered that I wouldn't disown as theologically illegitimate the doctrine of the first—even though, I didn't preach it. I was advised by denominational leadership to find an organization that believed as I—realistically, impossible.

Could we imagine an organized approach to ministry that didn't need to expand church government beyond New Testament limits? The word *denomination*: is it not the Bible word for “dissensions” in Galatians 5:20?⁵ If so, that's not a good thing. Have not denominational distinctions precipitated a spirit of separatism among the people of God? Is Christendom fractured because the unifying, single message, that identifies us as christians is lost in a theological mishmash of outdated doctrinal interests?

A unifying interest solely in the message of Calvary has implications that are frightening to church leadership because it ultimately suggests that the hand of fellowship could be—I might say, *should* be—extended to all christian pastors, even those who accept LGBTQ persons. And what about those believers whose religious experience doesn't match—

⁵ idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions

say—mine; if there is one body of Christ, are not the differences arbitrary? Shouldn't our unity be based *solely* on the Cross?

But the underlining fear is that we have compromised truth somehow by accepting those believers in Christ whose doctrine differs in some way from ours. We have built a denominational wall, a theological protection, to keep our faith pure where no such boundary should exist. We might be in different buildings but we are one body according to Scripture.

Every churchgoer must know by now that the Bible word translated church, "ecclesia," references the congregation, not the building and not the denomination or a group defined by a particular list of doctrinal distinctions. When Corinth wanted to split along perceived teachings (I Corinthians 1:12)⁶, Paul was aghast. Some Corinthians saw—and some parishioners today even see—doctrinal distinctions among Peter, Apollos and Paul, but this has been more imagined than real.

It is a very human activity to filter ideas in the process of learning and build what is taught on a more personalized foundation of one's own spiritual experiences. We then search out those of "like" understanding. But Paul was appalled at the suggestion that Peter or Apollos and he were at odds

⁶ What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ."

about the message of grace and Calvary! He was equally firmly resolved to hear no such talk—only discussions centered around the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ (I Corinthians 2:2)⁷

No doubt these three leaders had small differences of understanding on some peripheral matters that would concern this church, but it did not disallow the right hand of fellowship enjoyed among them. Paul's calling to missionary work in a non-jewish world underscored the importance of faith and grace in a different way than Peter's among his fellow Judean and Galilean brethren (Galatians 2:7)⁸.

Since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith. Romans 3:30

I must underscore the importance of allowing our faith to roam free—but!—within a boundary of christian love and unity ... and—a huge AND—first and foremost, an undeniable conviction regarding our Savior's death and resurrection for us (Romans 14:22)⁹ providing and vindicating our need for God's salvation through Christ.

The humble believer is no scholar who can diagram the Nicene Creed or the Westminster

⁷ For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

⁸ On the contrary, they recognized that I had been entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been to the circumcised.

⁹ So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who does not condemn himself by what he approves.

Catechism or a thousand variations put forth in denominational tenets of the faith.

As believers we know whether or not the name fits us, whether or not our faith is in Christ and His provision to reconcile us to our heavenly Father. We know whether or not we believe that in some sense Christ died for us. We know whether or not we love Him. Together, we comprise the church as God envisioned and He brought into existence at Pentecost (Acts 2).

I dream of a congregation whose faith can see through denominational walls and fellowship with any believer from any religious group over our most common faith and salvation without losing their way doctrinally or disowning their expression of worship. I dream of a group of people whose roots of Christian love run deep and are wrapped secure around the teachings of Christ, that know what it means to “follow peace with all men”. (Hebrews 12:14)¹⁰

I believe I am observing churches re-evaluating their identity. Many are losing the denominational label in their corporate name. But whether or not this is generally true, it only goes to show that each church has its own personality, its own fellowship, within the greater community. When the denomination decides to “close” a church, the people see it as a death sentence not a migration to another existing

¹⁰ Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.

congregation. There is something mystical about the atmosphere of their own building that made it a spiritual home and we must conclude that it wasn't in the wood and concrete. It was within themselves as a congregation.

Denominationalism is oligarchical, that is, there is a small group of persons at the top of the organizational chart who are in control. I don't mean to disparage religious organizations much less to speak against the church. I understand that organized religion needs to be presentable in this way with a well defined leadership—as does any organized endeavor requiring an outlay of responsibilities interrelated and interdependent on one another. The church has the added concern of credentialing leaders who are vetted against heresy and conflicting theological views.

It is impossible to run any enterprise any other way. It would be—picture it—the infantry going into battle without sergeants and lieutenants in charge and no general staff in some war room planning the attack. (And to the church, this *is* a spiritual warfare.)

But is God in charge of His church? I maintain that He is and always has been even though the church may appear to be run by a college of old men with other ideas. The Kingdom of God is within. (Luke

17:21)¹¹ God has “organized” the hearts of His people with a heart to worship Him and a desire to follow Him. The reality is that our salvation and relationship with God and each other has always and only been built on the foundation of Christ’s work made complete at Calvary. No organizational work can inhibit what God intends for His people.

But there is a sense in which denominationalism works for us as Christians. We discovered that organizational charts help to make this kingdom not only visible but logical to our way of thinking.

We created charts because we require a metric for growth, numerically and financially. It is the way our brains are themselves organized. It is the very definition of logic and reasonableness to perceive our environment and our experiences in charts. Science invented taxonomical charts to explain how we have evolved (even if we didn’t). We understand market behavior by viewing charts. A picture is indeed worth a thousand words. We have a better handle on our personal finances when we see a pie chart that explains why our purse or wallet is now empty.

And spiritually speaking: we need a more visible affirmation of eternal matters. How do I know I am being obedient to God? Denominationalism through its membership requirements and “spiritual”

¹¹ nor will people say, ‘Here it is,’ or ‘There it is,’ because the kingdom of God is in your midst.”

leadership offers that additional sense of spiritual security that all is well with my soul. And we can chart that because we see growth as a sign of spiritual life! More and more of us in a growing ministry testify to the importance and effectiveness of the religious system we have chosen to identify with.

For many believers, being a member reassures them that they are on God's path. Many need the structure, the traditions—in the words of Teyve in "Fiddler on the Roof:" *every one knows who he is and what is expected of him.* The church which is defined by the denomination is a sub-culture that organizes not just one's worship but one's whole life giving that sense of spirituality and assurance of salvation.

We should not see our religious affiliations as an unnecessary support but the real truth is that the humble church goer has little or no awareness of this larger picture. The denominational name might be in the title of the church or a visiting dignitary may reference or represent the denomination but on a weekly basis, God's people are simply and only *God's* people. There will always be a difference in our hearts between a heavenly Father who lives with us and a friend of the family, a Bishop or Presbyter or Overseer who visits us on occasion. I see God and my denominational affiliation this way.

In another sense, church people are aware of the elephant in the room, the larger mandate that defines what is taught and what the rituals should be that define worship. The denomination is in one way

hidden but in another it is a subtle fragrance in the spiritual atmosphere. We know it is there and we are a part of it. Denominationalism for many adds a doctrinal warmth that comforts the heart because they see the ministry as more stable in its commitment to God, more assured that the vision that defines the Christian work is true. There is safety in numbers. Denominationalism provides an infusion of peace that makes worship somehow more worshipful. We have come to expect consistency in our leadership even when we change pastors.

Our religion provides us with a sense of spiritual support in our time of need ...and this is hugely important.

This being said, denominationalism does not replace our deep devotion to God and our desire to love and be loved by God—and shouldn't. His reality is on another level. There is a sense in which our relationship to God is uniquely our own. There is a sense in which the principles we have found reliable to live by have greater value to us than the traditions of the church. Sunday morning worship isn't all there is to the christian life.

We seek a relationship with a holy God Who cannot tolerate sin. Sin, however, cannot be defined in denominational terms here. Sin is not a theological issue as much as it is anything that subtracts from that relationship.

My dream is not for the church in general but for me in my old age: I want a smaller piece of this

much larger ministry, a small corner of the kingdom to work in without any concern for the greater denominational work. I like to imagine a small congregation that understands that were they stripped of all denominational prosthetics they could still walk in the Truth. If the religious structure were lost to them through government interference or some unspeakable catastrophe, they could still keep on because their whole religious experience and sense of what is spiritually important and right for them—their faith—is built on the teaching and ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Sounds romantic and inspired but impractical? It is how third world believers under persecution and martyrdom are living now. But why must trials knock the crushes out from under us? Why can we not simply toss them aside and walk on in Christ free to worship, love, exercise faith, and fellowship with all God's people!

As long as there is religious freedom—yes—we will attend the denomination of our choosing on the weekends. No one should suggest otherwise. But on a more basic level I want to experience christian fellowship with all God's children.

The Heart of The Matter

"If we were to set out to establish a religion in polar opposition to the Beatitudes Jesus taught, it would look strikingly similar to the pop Christianity that has taken over the airwaves of North America."

— Tony Campolo

I had been accused by church leadership of preaching a more psychological rather than theological message but was this not what Jesus did the day He taught His disciples the secret to being happy? (Matthew 5:1-10 "blessed" means "happy") The Beatitudes, as we called them are not attributes of God, nor do they represent the 10 commandments, nor are they fruit of the Spirit. The Beatitudes are no theology. They profile the heart of a follower of Christ whose focus is on following Him. A true follower stripped of all other passions is possessed of no other interest. There is no scripture more psychologically revealing of a true follower of Christ than here.

What if these verses were taught once again in the spirit in which they were originally presented to encourage God's people to recognize within themselves the highest calling of having a heart after God. What if these 10 principles could be translatable into everyday life and believers could be given to see

that beyond this they need not go. All other church interests, theologies, programs, support groups, and activities are peripheral concerns.

Here is the heart of the matter. Here is a lesson in happiness that denies pleasure and self-indulgence. Here is a way of life Jesus calls blessed even though it is a path to that delight through—to use William Goldman’s phrase from his work, “The Princess Bride”—the dark forest of despair. (Psalms 37:4;¹² Romans 12:1-2)¹³

The beatitudes are the book within the book, the sum of all things spiritual, the ultimate goal in becoming like Christ. This is the image, His image, we are being made into. (Romans 8:29) There is a sense in which all other sermons find their text here. All biblical emphasis rests on this fulcrum of truth.

For years in ministry I sought to understand in some visible or recognizable way the difference between believers and non-believers. In a persecuted world, that difference is a sharp contrast in so many ways, but in a country where religious freedom reigns, the line begins to fade as material interests hold sway over believers equally as with non-believers. Even the clergy, many, own multiple

¹² Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart.

¹³ Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

properties and large bank accounts. Some credit their material blessings to God's goodness—a comment that flies in the face of these verses before us here. I now believe that the beatitudes represent that line. Here is profiled what distinguishes a child of God. Each time we read this chapter with devotion these verses should come more and more alive with meaning.

Some learn to swim quickly by being tossed into the water of persecution but in a country cited for its religious freedom the change is more subtle. For those believers who have enjoyed material blessings it seems like these verses have no relevance, but nothing could be farther from the truth. Regardless the number of bathrooms and fireplaces in the home or the acreage of the homestead or how many properties we may boast, we need to recognize that the abundance of our happiness is a function of how little we cherish these things and how readily, if called upon by God, we would without an afterthought give them up!

Notice Jesus presented them in a logical order. Stripped of all ambition, in our spiritual poverty, (*"poor in spirit"*) we prepare to become true followers. The final step (*"when men shall revile you...rejoice"*) is obtained when we have discovered a happiness that transcends the world we live in, a world that has no concept of where—or who—we are. "We have disappeared forever," as one commentary interpreted Colossians 3:3: *your life is now hidden with Christ in God.*

My dream? To have a congregation who value this sermon of Jesus above all things, that want to rehearse over and over the meanings hidden in this passage, to become more and more adapt at living this life and showing our world that Christianity is for real. There is no greater testimony or witness.

I have no intention of writing a commentary on the beatitudes nor to write a sermon but to underscore my interest—unfulfillable as it might be—to imagine a small congregation of believers who have begun the journey into spiritual poverty. It is this group that can—just by living—witness to the power of their salvation. It is this group that has found the secret of triumphing over desperate circumstances and setbacks. Life has become a spiritual not material journey. They know a heart that treasures heavenly things over what can be accumulated in this life (Matthew 6:19-20). They are living their lives in the light of eternity.

Sadly, much of a christian's interpretation of life, in our civilized world, may still reason we are entitled to a thousand blessings and advantages God's counsel never offered. We see blessings in material terms or natural terms or as something acquired in this life, not as an eternal asset (James 4:3). Our sight is fixed downward, like chickens in the barnyard, only on the moment, only on our immediate need. We may need to raise our sights higher.

There are desperate times and times when critical need takes us to the edge and as we cry unto the Lord He does hear us. But those who have a true spirit of poverty don't cry "unfair." Even when all our ducks are quacking merrily in a row and life is good, we affirm our total dependence on Him!

Poverty is destitution. Poverty of spirit is sensing our utter need of God. And this has implications for our attitude and our prayer life.

As believers we need to forget about what's fair or unfair. If God is overseeing our lives and directing our footsteps (Psalms 17:5;¹⁴ 37:23)¹⁵, to feel entitled or to assume faith should provide what we decide in our distress is appropriate, tosses the word *unfair* in God's face. Much more: it is a temper tantrum of sorts, a noise drowning out that inner small voice of peace that reassures us that God has all things in hand.

Beside, life's downside is the underside of an unfinished tapestry God is sowing. The poor in spirit realize the beauty of His work is yet to be put on display.

Poverty of spirit is, therefore, a giving spirit rather than a desire to accumulate blessings. Poor in spirit is a willingness to accept one's own need to meet another's first.

In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. 2 Corinthians 8:2

¹⁴ My steps have held to your paths; my feet have not stumbled.

¹⁵ The LORD makes firm the steps of the one who delights in him;

Give me these people to pastor! Just a few is all I or any pastor would require. Their spirit is a great influence, a powerful influence on others. If most of the congregation is a watered down version of something “christian” with a sprinkling of the unconverted among them—still—these, who are poor in spirit, will bring a message of love that will shout from the rafters and be heard! The heart not the mouth speaks loudest!

Poverty of spirit is a worldview, a way of seeing life—if I can be so bold to say—*through God’s eyes*. “Mourning” takes on a different meaning and value to these believers.

Scholarship defines mourning: A grief that so possesses one’s entire being that it cannot be hid. Mourning is an activity of the heart—to be sure.

“This state of mind is explained by the poverty in spirit from which it springs.” John Peter Lange

Give me a congregation who mourns for the lost not shouts praises at the thought of the final judgment. Give me a congregation that has a heart that cries for others, that helps carry the divine burden for His creation.

Now that I have that out, let’s look more closely at this “blessing.”

Grief cannot be hid, we really mean to say, “should not be hid.” Persons who live with unresolved bitterness and those who see themselves boastfully above tears, will suppress grief to their own psychological harm. The poor in spirit know

how and when to allow the tears to flow. (John 11:35)¹⁶ They know the value of expressed grief.

Those who mourn are not professional mourners nor are they living a mournful life. They are burden bearers who know that grief must be expressed, not hidden or suppressed, who know the value of tears. (Acts 20:31;¹⁷ 2 Corinthians 2:4)¹⁸ There is such a thing as *godly sorrow* (2 Corinthians 7:10)¹⁹.

When the scripture calls them blessed, it is a blessing in mourning, not a blessing that is anticipated once the tears cease. The blessing is not eschatological or referring to when God will wipe the tears away. There is an immediate value in being able to express tears, healing tears, tears that come with pray, tears that begin to release us from burdens otherwise too heavy to bear, tears that move the heart of God. (Psalms 51:17; Isaiah 66:2)

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. Romans 8:26

There is a blessing when one is expressing *God's* heart. Mourning in this sense is foundational to any calling. Without knowing the heart of God, we only know the mechanics of ministry. (Ezekiel 19:1)

¹⁶ Jesus wept

¹⁷ So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.

¹⁸ For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you.

¹⁹ Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.

In a civilized world ministry has become more—to use C.M.Ward’s phrase from the “Revival Time” broadcast from years gone by—“*too much administrated, too little led.*” Following a divine vision is following a divine burden, something Ezekiel’s prophetic work could not make clearer. We want a more direct voice in the decision process and we want reason and logic more than faith to energize the vision. But God’s way has always led through a valley of sorrow, as the Psalmist reminds us (Psalms 23) , because this world is a sorrowful place since Adam and Eve left Eden and it is impossible to intellectualize pain. ..nor should we.

Give me a small group of those who know how to carry God’s burden with Him, who know how to pray, who are at liberty to cry, who know that grief is inevitable and the healing process begins when we learn that mourning is a part of it. Give me a small group with whom praying is not just words but tears as well, not just a public display but at times burdens which cannot be uttered, not the mechanics of chosen phrases or just rote repetition but real heart. Give me a small group of those whose poverty of spirit is in tune with God’s great heart of love. Give me a small group of believers who prioritize a time to pray together for the needs of others and for whom “*pray without ceasing*” (I Thessalonians 5:17) is not a riddle but a way of life.

Why mourn when the age of science has replaced the dark ages of ignorance? Before there was science, there was always God. Science is

nothing more than the reader's manual of His creative genius. And God never proposed that science replace prayer because the reasons for prayer, for God wanting to commune with us and share His heart, remain undiscoverable by the laws of science. The burden remains for the poor in spirit to mourn the lost of Eden until the seraphim lower their flaming swords and God once again opens the way for our return. We call it a new heaven and a new earth (Revelation 21:1), and until then our happiness as believers will remain the benefit of a prayer life that mourning has called us to.

Knowingly or not, a believer's desire through prayer to empathize with God—impassioned about the very things that are on His great heart—is the first sign of meekness. But there is another quality that needs the spotlight first: humility, because there is no meekness without humility.

Meekness in scripture presumes a humility that scholarship teaches

"is an acknowledgment not merely of sinfulness but of creatureliness, of absolute dependence, of having nothing, but receiving all things of God."²⁰

And adds,

"it is only the humble heart which is also the meek"²¹

These 2 terms, humility and meekness, are not just words and I might venture to say, they are not

²⁰ Richard Trench, *Synonyms of the The New Testament* (London) 1880. p. 153.

²¹ *ibid.*

words whose meanings come easy to us. They join a treasury of Bible terms that, as we learn:

“Revelation has given ... a depth, a richness, a fulness of significance which they were very far from possessing before.”²²

Meekness is a gentle spirit, to be sure. Wives are enjoined to converse with their non-believing husbands in a gentler tone as the expression of a quiet spirit, an inner calmness, a heart at rest, in the knowledge that God alone can draw them to Himself.

Rather, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight. I Peter 3:4

But we must dig deeper: If humility betokens a total dependence on God, meekness is the passion to be all that, a disposition to rely absolutely on God's wisdom and strength. (Ephesians. 4:2; Colossians 3:12; cf. Zephaniah. 3:12) . The meek are resigned to follow Christ. It is in their spiritual DNA to do so, to submit to His voice and leading. We are, after all, the sheep of *His* pasture.

“[meekness]... is an inwrought grace of the soul; and the exercises of it are first and chiefly towards God (Matt. xi. 29; Jam. i. 21). It is that temper of spirit in which we accept his dealings with us as good, and therefore without disputing or resisting;”²³

There is in meekness an intentional desire to follow Christ. The one possessing it proceeds with spontaneous abandonment to His will. It becomes a natural interest of the meek to serve the higher cause of God, either through insight into His Word, or simply by the peaceful acceptance of who they are

²² *ibid.*

²³ *ibid.*

becoming in Christ. They are in love with Him and want to follow.

Sadly, many christians show a wild side to their nature, a militancy which they justify as an apologetic defense of the gospel. The Gospel is empowered to represent itself, simply in the sharing of it. One thing is sure: wild is not meek.

Give me a small congregation of those whose poverty of spirit and mourning for the lost reflect a gentler conviction that does not feel the work of God needs swords and battle cries. Give me a small congregation of believers who do not boast of victories against other believers, who do not think that love must be hard and uncompromising. Give me a small congregation that can forgive offense with such spontaneity and immediacy that their acceptance of one another is unassailable and their unity indisputable.

Give me a small congregation that instead cherishes peace over all other virtues, that knows that a soft answer turns away wrath (Proverbs 15:1) especially among fellow believers. Give me a congregation that foremost realizes that in prayer victory is achieved. Give me a congregation that unreservedly wills to follow our Savior even in the hard decisions: to carry a cross or turn the other cheek or go the extra mile or sell all first, because it is the natural thing to do, because it is the christian thing to do, because it is the only thing to do. (John 6:63, 68)

There is an old hymn, now long forgotten. Rumor has it was written by a young man who died

soon after he penned it: "The Vision." It was found in an old Assembly of God Hymnal. The chorus captures the meek heart best:

Take me, Master, break me, use me. I am leaning on Thy breast. All ambitions fast are dying; from their pain now give me rest.

These are persons passionate about learning, but it's not about studying the Bible as an intellectual exercise or being schooled in theology. These are persons in a hurry to be like Christ, to follow Him. They hunger and thirst to be righteous; they desire to live the Word of God. And it makes sense to find these persons described here because they are, indeed, the meek.

Just a close walk with Him.

Grant it Jesus is my plea.

Daily walking close to Thee.

Let it be, dear Lord, let it be!

It is one thing to theologize over the Word of God and still another to apply it to life. It is one thing to debate the message with people whose beliefs differ from our own and still another, together with them, to discover the Bible as a life changing message.

Hunger and thirst means wanting to take in more than give out. These words describe someone who is doing the listening far more than the talking.

I daydream of a congregation who will allow themselves to see the Word from this perspective as instructions for living. I want a small group of persons with whom I can find meaning to life as we hunger together, as we ask our Lord the questions

through our dialog and await the move of His Spirit through group sharing for a scriptural reply.

I daydream about the end of theological discussions that disrupt harmony. I daydream of a Bible study that is a spiritual support group. I daydream of a fellowship that answers a joint passion to apply God's Word to life's situations and watch it present solutions.

I tire of people who already know what I need before I do. I want to be with people who allow me room to discover for myself how God's Word answers my quest to be closer to my Lord and closer to His people. I want to be part of a fellowship whose faith feeds mine and I, theirs, as we reread and restudy and rehearse the message.

I want to be a part of a group that would never think of arguing down the Word or explaining it away as something culturally out of date or unscientific or part of an ignorant past. Together we see the relevance of God's instructions and commands. We see learning in biblical history. We see today in an ancient record.

I want to be part of a group that has no theology to feature, no denomination to promote. I want to be in a group that will take a chance at a possibility that we do not know yet all that is to be known, that we need to stay hungry and thirsty. I want to share with a people who are open to new interpretations of truth, open to change, open to hard lessons, and open to challenges. I want to be with

people who are open to being wrong and open to correction.

I want to be in a group where we all recognize from the start that we are all at different places in the journey and our Lord alone is leading. It is a group that does not criticize or analyze one another's shortfalls, mistakes, or missteps.

I want to be with people who are sensing their own spiritual poverty and are carrying a burden to get back to full, Eden-level, fellowship with God. These are persons predisposed to follow, which is what meekness is, wherever He leads and are now desperate—nothing is more important to them than—to learn Christ and to be like Him. (Philippians 3:10)

These are a giving folk. They don't give advice. They don't seek to be in charge. What they give is of themselves. They want to share the love of Christ in tangible ways.

The force of the New Testament word for *mercy* is the *act* of showing it. It is more than compassion or a feeling of pity. Showing mercy in Jesus's day included alms giving with the Savior's caution that it be done anonymously not for public recognition—if we want the act entered in the Divine record or chronicled with angelic applause. (Matthew 6:1-4) These believers do not need this advice; it comes naturally to them. These are my kind of people. They find a way to assuage the suffering of

others. (Jesus would heal the sick, as an example. Matthew 20:30)

There is nothing in the word that suggests attached conditions. It is not our place to say who is in and who is out. God decides, which makes *mercy* another word for *grace*. (Romans 9:15-16) In our Old Testament, as a matter of fact, the word *grace* leaned too far toward showing favor and could be seen as a quid-pro-quo; so, the prophets and later writers under inspiration replaced the Old Testament word for *grace* with the word *mercy*. It is that big a word!

So, I dream about making it bigger and biggest in ministry. Take the offerings and aside from a designated amount to pay rent on the building and some utility bills, give it all away to the poor and to missions in a no frills approach to service. Trustees are no longer needed because I envision a ministry that doesn't finance steeples and all the features we pay for to identify us as "christian." This approach isn't really working so well for us anyway. Let the community know who we are by our giving, by our service to lessen the suffering of others in ways we can contribute. They'll know we are here and they'll know who we are—christians!

In my warm bath, this is a main part of my daydream. I must allot an entire chapter to what I call: *The Allelous Foundation*. *Allelous* is a greek term, found throughout our New Testament, translated "one another." The *Allelous* principle embodies New Testament christianity: Love one another, submit to another, receive one another, etc. If I could I would

set up a foundation supported by offerings that would support the poor and missions.

More later, but here we are exposing the heart behind the idea. It isn't possible to hunger for righteousness, to desire to live the Word and to be like Christ without wanting in the next moment to show mercy! Mercy, in the Biblical sense, *is* a righteous act. Think of Jesus's life and ministry which climaxed in that final breathe on Golgotha with the supreme act of mercy. I don't need to tell you other than to point out the next size in an enlarging Christian heart of love is mercy in action.

Give me a small congregation of people quick to share their resources—not just money—with those less fortunate and in need. Give me a small congregation that puts such a value on giving that they fail to see the benefit of enlarging their own borders, of spending time or energy on personal comfort—beyond what is reasonable for life and safety. Give me a group that prioritizes others, who empathize and weep with those who weep, who want to be God's instrument of mercy. It's as simple and straightforward as that! Give me a congregation that takes no ownership of things we all know belong to God, who abhor greed and repulse hoarding what can be distributed to others in need of those things. Give me a congregation that cannot imagine a "blessing" or being happy in the acquiring of things. Give me a congregation whose individual and collective happiness hinges on giving to others as God's Word enjoins them.

Luke 6:20-26²⁴ is said to be a second account of this sermon on the mount but with some marked differences. Luke's record is more naturalistic. He does not speak of the poor in spirit, just the poor. And those who hunger, they do not hunger after righteousness; they simply hunger. Reference to a pure heart is missing from Luke's account. What are we to make of this?

Matthew was there that day; so, perhaps, his recollection is more complete. And maybe Luke's source is interpreting Jesus's words in a more temporal setting—this should remind us of Jesus's warning to his disciples to beware the leaven of the pharisees. They thought He was talking about bread

²⁴ **20** Looking at his disciples, he said:

“Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.

21 Blessed are you who hunger now,
for you will be satisfied.

Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.

22 Blessed are you when people hate you,
when they exclude you and insult you
and reject your name as evil,
because of the Son of Man.

23 “Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets.

24 “But woe to you who are rich,
for you have already received your comfort.

25 Woe to you who are well fed now,
for you will go hungry.

Woe to you who laugh now,
for you will mourn and weep.

26 Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you,
for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.

not doctrine. Is it possible Luke's account is how Jesus began His comments and Matthew saw them in a spiritual sense? Possibly Jesus's mentioning the poor led to a discussion of being poor *in spirit*. It opened the door for the Savior to reveal the spiritual side of a follower's life. And now Jesus mentions *purity of heart*.

Purity of heart, by scholarly reckoning refers to moral purity. If this is saying that our happiness as believers is directly related to our living free from sin—and that rings true—it is more logical than instructive, more future than now (I John 3:2)²⁵, since we are not there yet.

I am asking: is a pure heart possible in this life?

Jesus's thoughts seem to be future (eschatological). In this life we are poor and persecuted and hungry (well, some of us) but our happiness is on the way. Christ is bringing it with Him. This sounds a reasonable interpretation but I have been maintaining—and I am not alone—that our happiness can be found *in* the poverty and *in* the hunger and even *in* the persecution. (Acts 16:25)²⁶ It is not simply poverty but poverty *of spirit*. It is not hunger for food but hunger for *righteousness* we seek which holds the secret to a believer's happiness. All this should be happening in *this* life for reasons, I

²⁵ Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.

²⁶ About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.

hope, I delineated. With a *pure heart* we have arrived at a secret to our happiness as followers of Jesus that might be overlooked if we conclude that our happiness is only future on Christ's return. Purity of heart necessarily does follow being merciful. It is explained in this context.

According to the scholars:

"It [a pure heart] consists of full and unreserved self-offering to God"²⁷

Pure in heart is pure in motive. It is transparently altruistic. A pure heart is a pure conscience without ulterior interests or hidden intentions. And to be this pure, they must be doing what they're doing "as unto the Lord,"²⁸ The merciful are not giving to others for personal recognition or praise. There is a sense in which their gifts are not primarily to the beneficiary of their benevolence; they are giving of themselves and resources *to God*. (Matthew 25:40)²⁹ Jesus is taking us 1 step beyond the natural expression of alms giving. He is uncovering the hidden reality that for His followers no act of mercy is just an isolated act of kindness. It is always done *to*—not just *for*—Him and that is how it is a pure, unselfish, "*separated-unto-God*" act of the *heart*. It has to be said or done from the

²⁷ Kittel, Gerhard. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol III, Pg 425

²⁸ Colossians 3:23 Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters,

²⁹ "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'

heart, not through duty or coercion. (But you knew that.)

It follows, therefore, that in talking about giving to the needy Jesus should indelibly impress upon His followers that no expression of christian love goes unnoticed and unrewarded if it is done unto Him, if it is the outward sign of who we are becoming in Him, if it is "Christ in us" (Colossians 1:27)³⁰.

Mary was a loving christian lady whose love for her husband was challenged by his seeming neglect of her interests and needs. She debated within herself whether or not it was worth the relationship, now, decades old and a long time unattended. Somehow love can become ordinary or go stale, but she craved the deepening relationship, the vibrancy of days long gone. Then in prayer she found the secret how to revive what seemed ready for burial. She shared with me her find: she learned to love him *as unto the Lord*. She knew the scriptures encouraged her to be what God wanted her to be toward him even if he seemingly lacked the ability to be what God wanted him to be toward her. (The golden rule?) And it worked to uplift her heart and return a smile to a beautiful christian countenance.

Give me a few people who perceive the hidden reality behind everything they do and say. They

³⁰ To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

understand that it is Jesus to whom they are saying it. It is Jesus for Whom they are doing it.

Give me a few people who have figured it out that the spoils of Egypt were taken for God's service, the Tabernacle, and not as personal gain. So, contributing their gold and silver to overlay an altar or build a Menorah, was the most sensible and reasonable thing they could do. It made sense at last why they carried such things in a wilderness. They gave to the Lord. Give me a few persons who see the New Testament, the new covenant, the christian, application of this truth. Give me those followers of Christ who know with an unshakeable conviction that what they possess (even their ability to love?) is not theirs but God's property held in trust (Luke 16:12)³¹ Give me those who know that to give to others is to give back to the Lord with interest what He has invested in them.

Give me a few persons who have learned the secret of happily focusing on Jesus as the recipient of their love, He who loves us in return. Give me those who rest in the truth that they are giving to Him who has given them all things necessary to live for Him (2 Peter 1:3)³². They realize that they are not asked to love others but to let Christ love others through them.

³¹ And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own?

³² His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.

If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. Romans 14:8

Believers who see their blessing in terms of every opportunity to give of themselves in service to God, are believers who know the value of reconciliation, forgiveness, unity, and making peace. There is no part of Christ or His mission that calls for dividing God's people into opposing liturgical or doctrinal camps. To prove this statement wrong, one must find 1 scripture that supports disunity. But the New Testament is replete with references on unity. (John 17:23;³³Ephesians 4:3)³⁴ instead. Peacemakers are called "*sons of God*" because, as scholarship explains: "*they are like Him.*"³⁵

The word *peacemaker* is only found here in this beatitude, recalled by Matthew, and nowhere else in our New Testament. And although *peace making* is not used here as a euphemism for personal evangelism—that would be a ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18)³⁶—Paul used the term to describe

³³ I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

³⁴ Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

³⁵ Kittel, Gerhard. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol II, Pg 419

³⁶ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation:

Jesus's ministry (Colossians 1:19³⁷; Ephesians 2:14-15³⁸) which we herald when we evangelize. We have so few verses for such an important truth, but do we need anymore emphasis?

"The reference," says scholarship, *"is to those who disinterestedly come between two contending parties and try to make peace."*³⁹ This is an amazing statement I have never heard preached, at least not to my recollection. And I think this sad.

I have been through congregational wars in which well intentioned believers contented for the faith, as they saw it. Congregations were torn apart and this is nothing new or even strange in church and denominational history.

If I interpret correctly what Matthew recalls about Jesus's sermon on the mount:

1. *Poor in spirit:* True happiness begins when a believer realizes how destitute they are without God. They realize that this life is a passage way to the next and all things have a spiritual significance. True happiness, for a believer, is a readiness to surrender all for Him.

³⁷ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

³⁸ For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace,

³⁹ Kittel, Gerhard. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol II, Pg 419

2. *Those who mourn*: They have taken to heart God's concerns and burdens realizing that carrying these is true communion with Him.
3. *The meek*: They find themselves more and more desirous of giving God His way in their lives.
4. *Who hunger and thirst to be righteous*: They are passionate about living and experiencing God's Word.
5. *Who are merciful*: They find themselves growing closer to the Savior's heart toward all need: physical as well as spiritual. It is better to give than to receive.
6. *Who are pure in heart*: Which leads to the revelation that anything they do in God's will for others, they are really doing for Jesus. True altruism without hidden motive or personal gain is only done for Christ.
7. *Who are peacemakers*: ... Not peacekeepers. They realize that Jesus's prayer for oneness among them is now their prayer which releases the power of the Gospel in their lives for effective witness. They believe in and promote reconciliation and fellowship among God's people.

My dream, my daytime thought wanderings imagine being part of a group where peace is an indelible principle printed on each heart, where reconciliation with each other when necessary is prioritized over every other concern, where revival means true repentance and unity is diamond hard

and uncrackable by any circumstance, hardship, or being. My dream is to be a part of a congregation that knows with clarity of conviction how satan devises wedges of doctrine and ritual between believers and our love for unity is far too strong for him. I dream of a congregation that cannot be coerced or lead or deceived or driven or made in any other way to go to war against any other lover of Jesus. No weapon formed, means *no* weapon (Isaiah 54:17)⁴⁰, no word, no dogma, no denominational position, no disagreement, no argument, no belligerence will be sufficient to even suggest disunity. Our hearts are chained together by the strongest, unbreakable, bond of christian love.

The word *persecuted* means actually to be *hunted* — like a deer on the first Monday after Thanksgiving in the woods of Pennsylvania. It doesn't imply being ridiculed or belittled but speaks of the *pursuit* by those who are relentless in their quest to destroy our ministry and silence our message.

And we should be happy about this!?

Absolutely, but on a higher level of enthusiasm that sees another reality at work behind this scene. In verse 12 we are encouraged to “jump for joy” but we will get there when we get there. Here, let us see what is really happening on a spiritual plain above

⁴⁰ no weapon forged against you will prevail, and you will refute every tongue that accuses you. This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD, and this is their vindication from me,” declares the LORD.

the faltering plans of those who would put out our fire by pouring oil on it. (Acts 8:4)⁴¹

It is the peacemaker that is being pursued—a critical point to make up front. God’s peacemakers are “in” the world but not “of” it (John 15:19⁴²). Peace has given the peacemaker a different worldview, a different perspective on their circumstances that reveals the true and unseen battle (Ephesians 6:12;⁴³ John 16:33⁴⁴) that is on a spiritual level in a spiritual realm.

We must be aware that the first person a peacemaker has made peace with is *themselves* and that peace stems from their peace with God (John 14:27⁴⁵). Peacemakers don’t blame themselves or past sins for their “woes.” They do not see persecution as a result of a thousand mistakes. They *know* they are forgiven. They are at rest, at peace, within their world, within themselves, and with the people of God. And this peace is foundational. Without peace, their woes are painfully magnified. Persecution

⁴¹ Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.

⁴² If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.

⁴³ For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

⁴⁴ I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.

⁴⁵ Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

would increase the stress level and not give them a sense of God's blessing in it.

Without peace among God's people, they are all alone. But there is strength in numbers, in fellowship, in unity and faith is made stronger. Persecution supports this unity because God's people tend to circle the wagons (called prayer: Acts 4:29⁴⁶) when they share a common threat to their peace. When the stress of the pursuit is elevated, believers at peace will have a song in the night like Paul and Silas had in a prison cell—and at midnight. (Acts 13:50-52⁴⁷; 16:25⁴⁸) Being blessed or happy takes on new meaning.

Because God's grace is God's grace, persecuted believers are brought to a deeper conviction about the Truth they hold in trust. The spiritual message was once a confusing sermon note and hard to believe in a cacophony of materialistic and hedonistic worldly voices. Now, through persecutions, Christ's instructions make more sense because now they are learning the "fellowship of His sufferings." (Philippians 3:10) God's people when

⁴⁶ Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.

⁴⁷ But the Jewish leaders incited the God-fearing women of high standing and the leading men of the city. They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region. So they shook the dust off their feet as a warning to them and went to Iconium. And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.

⁴⁸ About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.

persecuted can see beyond the trial (Hebrews 12:2)⁴⁹. And those worldly noises begin to fade into unimportance, no longer a temptation to discard the cross they bear.

What believers in a “free” society need to see is that the society is not as free as the word suggests. The world is the world and persecution comes in many shapes and sizes. Believers live among non-believers who can and have redefined the norms of the societies they share. Issues arise that inflame the difference between them, so that, in one form or another, believers find themselves under verbal, if not physical, attack for what they believe. And because society is evolving, the children and grandchildren are affected in ways the older generations never were.

Persecution is real, but so is the blessing!

I dream of a small congregation of believers whose hearts are at peace with God’s will for their lives, who as a result, when persecuted, do not fight fire with fire but with silent prayer and a powerful witness. I daydream about a small nucleus of believers who are not influenced by social pressures, who are immune to cultural changes that would compromise their message or commitment to God’s Word. I daydream about a small nucleus of believers who have been through hard times and whose faith has not only survived but flourished, who have learned to sing God’s praises and worship Him

⁴⁹ fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

through adversity. I daydream joining a small band of David's warriors—only, men and women who know how to fight spiritual battles in prayer. I daydream of a small group that knows how to hold each other's arms up—in a spiritual sense—while the battle rages, who cannot be tempted to retreat into socially comfortable and acceptable lives, just because the armor of God seems heavier or the opposition frightening or the battle too long.

Persecution is not the only attack on our vision. We are falsely ridiculed as well—as was Jesus (Matthew 27:44)⁵⁰. While on the cross, His enemies accused Him of false claims and not living up to his promises. The word *revile* means they *cast it in his teeth*. The constant stress of the hunt has been elevated now to verbal assaults and we are to count this a blessing!?

Well, yes. As long as they hear the gospel message and as long as this assault is due to following Jesus. (Matthew 10:24⁵¹) An assault on us, the servants of Christ is an assault on our Lord, Himself.

What isn't obvious is that verbal abuse as a consequence of our witness in the Gospel message is intrinsic to a believer's happiness. It isn't the ridicule, sarcasm, contumely, mockery, derision or insolence, poking fun at our faith, that makes us happy. It is seeing the advancement of the gospel on which our

⁵⁰ In the same way the rebels who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him.

⁵¹ The student is not above the teacher, nor a servant above his master.

happiness hinges. We need to settle the matter in our understanding that in a postmodern world we are going to be laughed at. Our message seems unscientific, a fantastic piece of insane hope, when we claim Jesus is alive again after a cruel death for our sins. Secular minds have built a worldview based on evolution and science that leaves no room for miracles. Our Bible is picked apart by scholarly minds that have called the scriptural narrative a myth and our theology a compartmentalized ideology to support our religious ritual but with no bases in reality. And we are not educated enough—most of God’s people—to debate these matters.

I dream of being a part of a small group of believers whose faith is unmoved by the gainsayers. I dream of being a part of a group of believers who live the gospel message, who wear the condemnation of modern society as a badge of courage, and whose commitment to following Christ is not a compartmentalized or ritualized belief but a way of life.

At an installation service for a young pastor, the speaker referred to a pastor as “the keeper of the vision.” I dream of a congregation that in like manner holds tightly to the Truth. I dream of a church group that does not evolve. I dream of a congregation that can make the gospel message relevant without socializing away its power. I dream of being among a group of believers whose outreach is a practical expression of who they are and what really drives their priorities. I dream of being in a group whose

witness has not lost its dynamic influence and its ability to impress their world and who worry the postmodernists that, just maybe, there is something to this christian thing. It is not just ritual.

Persecution and verbal assaults invite us to be alumni in good standing in a very special class. Among us are Paul, Moses, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, all the prophets and apostles. ..and, of course, Jesus.

Think about it this way: have we ever been jealous? Jealousy and envy are the result of craving the status another enjoys as a member of some group we want in—and we have no such membership. We want to be millionaires! We want our PHD. We want promotions that demand a greater commitment in time and energy, but we may not have the resources to invest, or be willing to invest. We are proud social creatures that need group identity and we have picked the group we wish to be invited into. If that group has a membership requirement we may be looking from the outside in until we qualify.

Persecuted and martyred saints are members of the most prestigious roll call ever assembled. And when I, for one, read about the “cloud of witnesses” the writer to the Hebrews listed (Hebrews 12) I want to associate with them; I want to relate to them; I dream of my membership in that society. Such a membership would make me the happiest!

I want to hear Jesus say, *“Well done, my good and faithful servant.”* (Matthew 25:21)

The group we are members in as believers? We are the children of God which is something we should value above any induction into any other society.

"If you can't get happy about being saved [as a believer] your happiness is out of gear" — Jimmy Swaggart

We are indeed blessed! We indeed should be happy.

Happiness is a feeling and feelings should not be driving. They are passengers. A search for happiness will never be successful because happiness is incidental to right decisions and wise choices. For the believer, happiness comes because we are following Christ.

When we seek happiness for itself, we are really seeking the pleasure of the moment. Happiness as a goal has no future because pleasure like all feelings are tied to a present adventure. Pleasure is exhausted in the happening. But the appetite for pleasure, now confused as a search for happiness, craves a heightened experience which can, but does not have to, lead to addiction.

Feelings are "in-the-moment" creatures (and this is not unknown by the tempter). And we tend not to think beyond them at consequences. This is a problem a good conscience and good life-decisions can help us with. For believers, a solid prayer life and Bible reading should help us see warning signs when we are tempted to rush into the moment without thinking things through.

For the believer, following the sermon on the mount as Matthew outlined our Savior's teaching works to engender a happiness that is satisfying and makes praise and worship genuine even when we express these in religious ritual. (The word "glad" in Matthew 5:10 means to leap on the inside with joy.)

There are eternal benefits attached to each beatitude—to be sure: theirs is the kingdom of heaven; they shall see God and be comforted and shown mercy, etc. But looking forward to these promises is not the source of happiness. Spiritual poverty and the rest of the beautiful attitudes profile the follower of Jesus and their happiness .

If I were to pastor again—and I am not getting that sense of calling—I would ask the Lord to grant me a small nucleus of believers who see their happiness as the product of their piety and service to Christ.

The Widow's Mite

Even when I am old and gray, do not forsake me, my God, till I declare your power to the next generation, your mighty acts to all who are to come.

Psalms 71:18

Dreaming allows me the privilege of imagining a ministry that is built purely on a New Testament premise stripped of its modern advancements. I picture a church out of time, an anachronism, like the Amish, stripped of those embellishments that today's church has adorned itself with to be more attractive to crowds. Nothing, however, in my daydreaming is intended to disparage today's church or today's ministries. This is a retired old clergyman's daydream for himself that may not work for others.

Nor is my dreaming intended to suggest that today's church has not dreamed the same dream—at least in part—and where practical and considered wise built ministry on that dream. I must assume, however, from my experience and observation within evangelicalism that this idea—as I see it—is what church leadership would say is outside the scope of their vision.

In dreamland I have stripped the church of its denominationalism for one. Oh, there might be a few

independent ministries that can appreciate such a radical concept, but the majority of churches are ensconced in denominational dogma and its theological rhetoric. The majority of churches in a civilized world where freedom of religion suggests some relationship with government are under a legal umbrella of denominational oversight. And many smaller denominational works are financially interdependent. There is nothing here that I desire to write against, but I dream for myself something small and condensed down into a bible study/prayer meeting/support group that represents one small cell in the hive, one tiny flame in a forest fire of ministry.

Retirement becomes ministry without the stress associated with growth or the vision for growth. Why must every ministry be in the thousands? Why must a pastor spend the majority of his or her time in board and administrative meetings, organizing fundraisers and harping on money? Why can't a retired pastor spend his or her closing days, before meeting the Caller of their calling, by sharing years of experience and study with a few friends, a few people who clearly and dearly love them and have no desire or reason to control them or to jostle for that position of power that seems to come with money?

Whew!

Church leaders aren't that way! You say.
....they would never! You say.

Okay. Whatever! But retirement should be a time for respect to rule the day, a time of life when a minister's brain and heart can be picked without being picked on.

In discarding the retired clergy, we are retiring a treasure house of wisdom. We are discarding years of experience in God's work in old folks' homes—and that is exactly what their home has become! We are failing to see the pearl of great price buried in a field of mundanity and doctor visits.

What's more is that retired clergy by reason of age are more transparent, more open, more spontaneous. They don't say things out of political expedience or because they are under denominational pressure to tow some line or because they are afraid of upsetting the money people in the congregation. They should not need to concern themselves with apologies and misunderstandings. They are less mechanical because what they say—all of it—comes from the heart. And here is where old age benefits the most. Recent memory is not as vivid as all those yesterday's where they learned faith and humility and trusting God. They have a testimony very much worth the hearing. Millennials should be listening.

And they cry more easily because nothing they say is designed as an argument. I like to say: young men discuss things; middle age men argue, but old men simply share. And that kind-of says it all. What they have to share (both old men and old women, of course) is worth the listening!

We should want to keep them talking but without burdening them with the weight of responsibilities associated with modern-day ministry.

I might be ranting but the retired minister can testify to miracles that seem no longer relevant to modern life. Our children and grandchildren will probably not witness the out-of-the-ordinary ways in which God, in our generation, necessarily worked to advance His kingdom among men. Millennials may never need to pray for such support because modern discoveries in science and technology have taken center stage in our awareness of how ministry is done. Even the altar rail has been removed from today's church. The mourner's bench is missing because the miracle of science has made it impractical. This is a civilized world, not a third world, phenomenon.

The story was told by one pastor of a time now past when he and a colleague were driving on a lone country road and ran out of gas. After praying about their situation, miles from civilization, he decided to walk ahead where he found deserted by the side of the road a gas canand it was not empty. He brought it back and they made it to a gas station. True story. He was my wife's pastor before I took her on the journey of her life in another sense into ministry. Now we call triple A on a smart phone which knows where we are. And we wait for help to arrive.

A bible college professor told the story how he was impressed within his soul to visit Europe (he was a world traveler, anyway); so, he took a plane to visit his mother. He was delayed on a layover flight in Amsterdam until a fog lifted. During the delay, he got into a conversation with an African businessman who was searching world religions to satisfy an inner hunger for peace. My teacher led him to Christ after which the fog lifted and he was on his way. He learned later that the fog only descended on the Amsterdam airport. True.

A minister, who was well known on the west coast—I might say, “famous”—told the story of getting lost on the backend of a hospital attempting to exit the building after a visit. He ran into one of his parishioners who was in tears over a family member at that moment going under the knife for a brain tumor. He prayed with them and later learned that the tumor fell out into the surgeon’s hands. He was ecstatic, as he told us, that he was so unexpectedly used by God in such a phenomenal way.

I abbreviate here but tell the full story in my book “Challenged”—of the atheist brother of a friend, who, after being invited to join us for church, actually showed up. That’s not the amazing part. What was awe inspiring was that that evening there was no church as usual (the only time this ever happened in memory) but the congregation was sitting quietly in their seats or kneeling at the altar when my soon-to-be friend walked in. He wanted to argue the existence of God with the pastor and the

pastor was available. An hour later after much debate between them which remained confidential, my friend's brother left, went home and spent the next week reading through the New Testament. By week's end he was asking me to join him in witnessing on the downtown city streets while the crowds were leaving the theaters. When I met up with him years later he was a pastor himself and still excited about his new found realities in a very alive Savior.

We have stories to tell. We are the primary source for them. We lived through times when God's hand in things was more evident. And now this narrative, which should be a legacy of ministry passed on, sadly is destined to die when the last of our generation exits the church for that final time.

We retire in our seventies but are still very much alive well into old age. Our usefulness is not exhausted. Our energy level might be a bit lower, our singing voice tires quickly, but our heart still throbs to minister, to love God's people, to be involved, to share.

Meanwhile—and I say this gently—some of us take advantage of Facebook blogging hoping to get a dozen likes to some devotional thought—thoughts, incidentally, that are very much worth the read.

How many retired ministers still feel they could be useful for God? They wonder why the Lord would have them linger in this life and be so unproductive, feeling so useless. How many retired ministers would cherish a small ministry where they

could lead in a bible study, join a few friends in prayer, or raise some local support for the poor.

I thought of collecting pennies, another discarded, once important, part of our world (we are on the verge of retiring them, too). One wheelbarrow with 10,000 pennies is only a Ben Franklin but how many of these pennies are being tossed in jars or in wishing wells because they are considered of no value—even though they are *money*.

My point is that the Lord's work has always been supported by the little things, the little people, the forgotten prayer warriors, the foot soldiers, the pennies of our world. Ministry is more about the widow's mite than the rich man's bankroll.

The "penny" represents such humble ministry. The penny allows us to see God past the finances. The penny represents the poor, for whom a large part of ministry was instituted in the first place—by Jesus Himself (Matthew 19:21)⁵². The penny is the widow's mite. The widow's mite (Mark 12:43⁵³) in an offering represents total commitment, total surrender, total submission to God (Mark 12:43⁵⁴).

In a sense we have tossed our retired clergy, like so many pennies, into the wishing well of

⁵² Jesus answered, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

⁵³ Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others.

⁵⁴ Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others.

ministries no longer important. In an age of big dollars and big churches, they have become the widow's mite.

There was an Old Testament word for old age: *sav*.⁵⁵ It was a cultural crown honoring the elderly for their wisdom and experience. (Leviticus 19:32;⁵⁶ Proverbs 16:31⁵⁷) But times have changed.

Logic has become more the glue that binds relationships together since the days of the Greek philosopher. This generation rationalizes any commitment to parental concern based on a reasoning that may be more culturally acceptable, more academic, more in line with a modern worldview. But in ancient biblical times, parental authority passed down traditions and principles for living which children adhered to unquestioning.

Old age is no longer a source of knowledge. We discard in nursing home hallways the legacy of a generation who laid the foundation upon which our world is built. But because we have evolved past the limits of those humbler times, their knowledge does not serve any longer.

We fail to find a niche for the elderly to contribute in a very technical, scientific, evolutionary

⁵⁵ pronounced like our word: SAVE meaning *grayheaded*.

⁵⁶ Stand up in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly and revere your God. I am the LORD.

⁵⁷ Gray hair is a crown of splendor; it is attained in the way of righteousness.

thinking time. Their old fashion ideas are in opposition to what society now holds as the norm.

We live in a transgender, gay marriage, no fault divorce, casual relations world—ideas most of my generation cannot begin to understand. The aged minister rambles out platitudes that are politically incorrect and culturally vague—the words may not go together to inspire. Our theology, our doctrinal stance, may make less and less sense to the generations following. We, the outdated preachers of a bygone era, have become the penny in the well.

The rub is that retired ministers are innately threatening because they represent a vision now out of touch with the times. They had their way of doing things and the modern pastor has his or hers. Some modern pastors protect their ministries by appointing people who are sympathetic to their own vision and who have proven their support. Nothing here is debatable, but it limits when, where and how a retired pastor can be involved in some humble way in the work.

I accepted the apology of one former pastor who lingered in a church I pastored and later was part of a plan to oust me. He felt he had no choice because of the pressure put upon him not because he wanted me out. I forgave him.

The retired minister risks becoming offensive sharing their understanding of scripture. Their thoughts are too traditional, too “old school.” Their concepts of how ministry works is too small minded

and too unrealistic for the modern church which is incorporated for rapid growth.

“Times have changed.” I heard tell. But at the same time we claim that the Word of God is unchanging. This is where the aged can serve because personal experience in living in the Word of God should be a common experience for all believers. My dream is to be able to share experiences without theologizing, analyzing or judging others.

The Allelous Foundation

I want a Church that is poor and for the poor. ...in their difficulties they know the suffering Christ. We need to let ourselves be evangelized by them.

— Pope Francis, *The Church of Mercy*

My bath began here, thinking about the poor and the needy. With hundreds of biblical references behind me, I concluded that addressing these needs was important to our Lord. (Matthew 25:36)⁵⁸ So, I thought of seeding The *Allelous* Foundation with enough funds for a humble beginning. I would need to win a lottery—to be sure—to make it work, but my dream started with this foundation to help support the real needs of the poor. It is just a dream, but a bible based one.

The *Allelous* (Greek for “one another”) Foundation would be set up, as the name implies, to help others in need of financial assistance for the basics: rent, heat, light, a phone, and medical expenses they cannot afford through no fault of their own.

There is nothing more I can say here since I cannot depend on winning a lottery I cannot yet in clear

⁵⁸ I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

conscience play, but I can dream. On the other hand, we fool ourselves when we imagine that we cannot help others until we are rich.

A small group of believers collectively have enough to begin. It is simply necessary to trim the fat off what we think we need to afford as a ministry.

The story is told of a congregation the split over whether or not to build a new church with a steeple. Half the congregation went across the road and built a new church edifice, same as the one they left, except it came with—you guessed it—a steeple.

The steeple represents the fat, an outward, theologically appropriate feature of the building with no practical value except to identify the church as a church. Architects have given churches such artistic designs to, in a sense, distinguish church buildings as inspirational works of religious art. One “feels” spiritual just being in such a building, but maintenance requires large sums of money and a large congregation to support it.

Steeple symbolize all pork barrel expenses that take funds away from true ministry to missions and the poor. The tithe is tossed in with the temple treasury to beautify a building instead of meeting real need. This was never the biblical prescription.

As a retiree supported by a pension, a few dollars saved and social security, I imagined being in a small study/prayer group where most of the entire offering would be benevolence (We might need some

for rent for the building we met in). I call this a “boardless” ministry.

This is why my ruminating can now suggest a boardless ministry. That is to say, offerings are taken but not for steeples. They are designated by the congregation for real need. A ministry in which the congregation’s personal comfort is realistically efficient and safe offerings go to meet the needs clearly delineated in New Testament scripture. (James 2:15-16)⁵⁹

I have always wondered what if we lost cable and satellite connections? What if we lost all electricity—even for a week? What if the ministry went bankrupt—it wouldn’t be the first! What if the government turned against the church and we needed to go underground to survive—now stripped of all external trimmings that would identify us as a church? We wouldn’t erect a steeple—to be sure. What would churched people give if contributions were no longer tax deductible or if tax deductible were put into a charitable foundation instead of remodeling the building or buying the leadership a summer home?

Money has become an important part of ministry even though in the New Testament church, it seemed only useful for feeding the poor. Paul, as busy as he

⁵⁹ Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?

was in full time ministry built tents for a living (Acts 18:3⁶⁰) and bragged of it in Corinth—a church from which he refused taking support. (2 Corinthians 11:9⁶¹) Paul did take support from other ministries, however. He called it *robbery* (2 Corinthians 11:8⁶²)—a word today’s ministry would never use.

Again, I do not want to suggest ministry should not be supported or the tithe is not biblical. The tithe is a biblical idea God came up with to support the minister, the persons whose callings are full time and need this income. It is not a get rich quick scheme nor was it designed to built steeples but that’s a chapter in another book.

I enjoy watching some TV preachers whose ministries require large sums of money and I do not suggest we stop supporting them financially. But I ponder the possibility in my retirement because my income is social security, a couple pensions and a small savings account that a boardless ministry might work.

Since the IRS codes and laws have been instituted to protect us from robbing church people, a boardless ministry means no government intervention or

⁶⁰ and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them.

⁶¹ And when I was with you and needed something, I was not a burden to anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied what I needed. I have kept myself from being a burden to you in any way, and will continue to do so.

⁶² I robbed other churches by receiving support from them so as to serve you.

interference. When I retired, I didn't want to retire from prayer or bible study or even teaching, I really wanted to retire the IRS from their involvement in my minister. I retired from trustee meetings and fund raisers (the two ideas are somehow interconnected). I retired from the conflict between my vision and my board's for the church. The board saw pie charts. The board counted people and income. They worried that a CD (not the music kind) might need to be redeemed to meet some debt. I retired from all this. A boardless approach to ministry makes all this moot.

You're dreaming, John!

I know. I said that already. My point is that we could take offerings for the poor and pass that money to some church's benevolence fund or even to a government subsidized outreach to the homeless. We could make our own foundation set up independent from our ministry. The particulars of the idea are the burden of another hot bath.

But offerings would be primarily for the poor because that's how I read scriptures. If we need to pay rent somewhere—as a necessary evil—we will but maybe we could meet somewhere in someone's garage or living room or a church basement for free. Maybe the church would allow this if we supported *their* benevolence fund.

These crazy ideas are not intended to start a home mission's work or as a seed ministry to begin

another large church. We would never outgrow such humble beginnings. After all, I am retired!

A retirement ministry on this level could be part of the larger church. I thought of that, too.

What if the ministry numerically outgrows their location? Find a bigger place but the vision is offerings only for the poor and to pay rent and utilities. The vision is no IRS and no trustees. I am retired, after all.

A little help from a seminary grad might be welcomed but if that necessitates a spin off ministry with the people's blessing, let them start another ministry and let the young minister's vision and ministry lead. (They can welcome IRS regulations and church boards. Their call.)

The young minister might join a denomination or already be a part of a denomination. I am retired! Not my concern nor would I counsel him or her one way or the other. That's the beauty of being retired—I would be nothing but supportive.

Such talk is a bit boring—as dreams go—yet not for the dreamer. I now realize where my ministry and, in effect, my career, took a left turn away from the expectations of my board members. I recall one board member questioning what my vision or purpose in ministry was. He couldn't identify what it was and I couldn't seem to communicate it, even though, I produced a weekly bulletin laying it all out

in detail. (I must assume he never read it.) We seemed to be speaking different languages at each other. I see this now.

Board members, especially trustees, tend to think in terms of funds and not faith. As I said: I see that now. Vision to them is tied to the building, either a new one or a bigger one or an improved one. The tithe is a mechanism for enlarging collections and since bigger and better means more funds are needed, more people are needed.

And here I was wanting only a nucleus of Jesus-followers to welcome the world into our ministry. to introduced them to the Savior.

No church-goer would discredit my idea. They just would not call it "vision." And they would argue that my idea for evangelism is better served in the bigger and better world of church growth.

They saw the mechanics: buildings and money. I wanted to believe there was such a thing as a pastor's heart that had nothing to do with these.

The Pastor's Heart

"We are weak Christians simply because we have refused to be bondservants of Christ"

— Paul Gitwaza

I seemed incapable of worrying about money. In one ministry I lost a major contributor, thousands of dollars lost, because my heart for once overruled the political correctness that would have kept them and their money. On 2 other occasions, large sums of money were returned because they had been given under false pretenses.

I had no interest in a number of details of church work. Though important enough, I didn't want to be the person to do them. I didn't organize picnics which symbolized so many other things I cared not to do. I was the maid who didn't wash windows. And I saw systematic theology—not as a tool for discipling, but—as a waste of my time. (Even seminarians are now seeing the value of a more down-to-earth approach to studying theology.)

I simply didn't have the heart for these things. I did want to visit people. I did want to pray for and with people. I did see a connection between the needs of people and the message of Scripture. I did not see Sunday morning as a well choreographed

presentation just to give people some sense that they had been in church, but a time of worship and to learn more about the promises of God to help us live a holy life. I loved to teach. It came out in everything important to me. (One trustee, after I was dismissed from one church, advised I think about teaching in a Bible school or seminary instead of pastoring.)

I didn't see it as clearly then as I do now: I had a dream, that's all. And that dream required a certain "heart" for it.

I remember Earl. He was a Bible school classmate. At his funeral in 2005 I wanted to share a few thoughts but, at the time, I was so unprepared and I feared a spontaneous outburst to be inappropriate at such an occasion. Earl's pastoral ministry was cut short when the church he pastored saw little value in keeping him. The extend of the trauma he and his family experienced goes unsaid although many pastors know of it. He consequently spent a large part of his adult life in the book-binding business.

But to me he had a pastor's heart that in an age of post graduate degrees and growth seminars was a forgotten blessing. Pastors have become administrators, organizers, trained in the seminary art of using demographics to target a community and create a seeker-friendly church. I don't disparage such things—and probably should in some regards. The church didn't seem to want Earl. It had little respect for so many of us, who, like Earl, had a heart for the work but seemingly little else.

Some of us were a passionate group of graduates from some unimportant, no-name, school.⁶³ But we were in love with God and His Word. We loved the people of God, a love that brought us humbly to our knees in an honest effort to hear from God on their behalf. We never thought there was more to it than that.

Earl, like so many others, was pastoring during a period of transition for the church. The institutional church was searching for meaning, for an identity, that extended beyond denominationalism, creed and ritual. The church wanted to identify the life signs that renewed hope that their candle was not extinguished in a postmodern age that argues it has gone out. The church seeks to be relevant and fails to understand that no one is more relevant to the hive than that single bee and the cell she works on. The church needs Earl and does not see it.

I had no trouble believing that I deserved my fate as an outcast from church work, but I never thought that of Earl and others whose days in the pulpit were sadly cut short. This is an argument in defense of their calling because they had “heart” and the church needs to better value this aspect of leadership. While profiling a candidate for ministry, the pulpit committee tends to look on the surface: how many degrees the candidate has or what school they graduated from. They ask questions about the

⁶³ I found this out when I wanted to apply to Pittsburgh theological Seminary in the 70's.

youth because teens are tomorrow's church and they seem difficult to keep interested. They might be impressed with the music talent a candidate brings with them. On average within four years most ministers move on because tensions between them and their board recommends it. The congregation fails to understand that pastoring is a matter of heart not just head. Vision without a love for God's people is pure mechanics. It is robotic rather than alive. Every pastor worth his or her salt must have a love for God's people. Every church worth theirs must recognize this.

No one knows how to ask questions that allow a candidate to speak to their heart for God's work. There are only three reasons to dismiss a pastor: He or she has been immoral; they have turned heretical; or they have lost the heart for the work. Rearranging sanctuary furniture or asking for money to pay their taxes or preaching on sin (in a relevant context) is no reason.

Here's my belated eulogy for a dear, dear friend. For Earl friendship wasn't a political expedient to gain favor. His heart was in every relationship. With Earl prayer wasn't a public display of his Bible knowledge or out of necessity to satisfy a guilt that required him to keep a promise. Prayer was always a genuine burden, an impassioned and urgent cry for God to hear and heal. Earl was a listener who sought to understand real need. And his listening extended in prayer to God. His pulpit ministry was always an opportunity to expound on what He had

learned in life to be a promise of God kept and the way of life in Christ that can expect that promise fulfilled. Earl was no theologian as much as he was a pastor whose heart sought after God. (Psalms 42:1⁶⁴)

I guess that's my problem. I became very involved in people's needs, even to where I took no day off and was going until late at night, counseling and praying with people I saw in need of my ministry. In a time before smart phones, we had two landlines in the house and there were times I was on both phones at once. I recall being on calls while, unknown to the caller, I was nursing a severe headache, lying on my bed. Okay "over the top"?!

I remember Gizella who lived with a single kidney. I visited her in the hospital at a time that kidney seemed threatened by stones. I remember weeping before the Lord at 2 AM seeking God's healing for her when the peace of God spoke to my heart, "Go to bed! She will be alright!" So I did; and so she was.

I didn't know how to do both: caring for God's people and rolling my burdens at the Savior's feet, but I knew there was a secret to it and I needed to find out that secret. I still maintain that a pastor must have a heart for the people and work of God. He or she must, however, learn how to submit concerns to God that God alone can deal with.

⁶⁴ As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God.

I came to realize that my approach to ministry was far too subjective. I believed in empathizing with people in need but there were far too many tears on my part. I needed to ratchet it down a bit, without depersonalizing the very persons I claim to care about.

I also needed to transfer more to God in prayer. Some burdens were legitimate. There was (and is) a sense in which God gives us those burdens to bear. He delegates to us the responsibility of praying for some but not for everyone.

I needed to also transfer some of my counseling into a more generic framework. It's called preaching. Many needs were common to many in the christian community which gave pastors, as myself, an opportunity to address them from the pulpit. I needed to filter off some counseling in this way.

Some needs had to be referred. I received a late night call from a gentleman who begged for an immediate visit from me. Realizing he had been drinking, I demurred and told him I would be out first thing in the morning. When I went to his place I found an ambulance parked in the driveway. My phone caller was deceased on some form of denatured alcohol.

I cannot change, nor do I want to. I dream of having a small group of believers who are not so needy because they have discovered the value of depending on the Lord more than the preacher. Additionally,

they would be available as deacons and deaconesses to visit the sick and pray with them. I could appreciate a congregation that did not assume a visit but would cherish one. I would treasure a congregation that knew when and how I might benefit them in terms of their needs and value the relationship enough to honor the boundary that relationship defined.

It is not strange to observe some saints who seem to know when it is God's intention to have a pastor at their bedside and when Jesus's presence and His peace is more than sufficient. Other believers are enabled by constant attention. These do not make a good nucleus for ministry. But we love them all.

Modern day ministry has changed the formula for caring. I know that today's pastor is less likely to make house calls or hospital visits. The modern pastorate encourages texting prayer requests. Phone calls are less likely and when they are made, most times the secretary will filter the pastor's calls. He or she does not pick up.

It all makes the pastor's role sound more diplomatic, more elite, and more important in a corporate sense. He or she is in so much demand, only the elder's immediately under him or her in the chain of command see them on a regular basis. They are often in meetings or out of town. It is all so different and so unlike what I dream of as a retired minister.

Transcending Culture

“Transcendent knowledge is seeing reality in utter simplicity.”
— Jean-Yves Leloup, *Compassion and Meditation*

The story was told of an anthropologist visiting the tent of an Amazonian chieftain with a gift of a T-shirt for his wife. When the anthropologist entered the tent, the chief's wife was standing there embarrassed to see him. The anthropologist noticed she had no shirt on. She disappeared quickly into an inner chamber. The anthropologist apologetically presented to the chief the gift to give to his wife. A few minutes later she returned having cut two large holes in the shirt for her breasts to be freed from the shirt's restrictions. But she was no longer ashamed to be in his company because now she was wearing her nose ring.

If this had been a missionary instead, would he or she have preached chastity? Or does the gospel message, which is the missionary's main interest, have nothing to say about the cultural conscience that motivated the chieftain's wife? Pictures of modern African church groups show everyone beautifully clothed even though we have probably all seen photos of African tribesmen in the National

Geographic. (Or is this a teenage boy thing?) Have we christianize them? Have we civilized them?

What changes when christianity impacts an individual's cultural identity? Is it necessary that christian teaching take a new convert out of their cultural setting and place them in another defined more by some interpretation of scripture, some church creed?

It is the message that transcends culture. It is a message of the Cross that applies to all peoples completely independent of culture. When Paul seemingly condoned slavery, he was simply keeping the vision of Calvary, his commission as a minister of reconciliation, pure and on point. It is a message that stands unaltered throughout the ages as well as throughout the world.

If we understand transcendency this way a question of culture is answered. Culture has nothing to do with the message, even though, the message challenges much that is culturally defined and condoned. The message does not seek cultural approval. The Gospel message does not require alteration to be contemporary. It is timeless or as the scripture says, "*it is written.*"⁶⁵

Transcendency speaks to a Gospel message that is beyond the reach of social norms, religious memes, denominational creeds, and cultural

⁶⁵ For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."

identities. The Gospel is the Gospel and Paul cursed anyone who would tamper with it or misrepresent it or claim to herald it while preaching another. (Galatians 1:8⁶⁶)

If the Gospel transcends culture—and it does—does it matter what culture we are in? Does it matter whether or not we blend into a society, to accept as normal its practices, and the conscience that accompanies them?

And what about those practices that scriptures frown upon? (*Frown* might be too mild a term.) But how can we be sure if a socially accepted way of life is sinful or simply disallowed within an ancient culture narrated in the Scriptures? Hermeneutics, interpreting Scripture, is not an exact science.

Should each one who claims to love the Savior be left alone to decide these matters for themselves? If conscience is not enough, can the preacher be trusted to represent the message to help us hone our sense of piety and have a realistic assurance of our salvation?

The church has traditionally made “sinful” anything they saw as challenging what distinguished them—not as christian—but as a church. Often this produced a list of sins that included practices not

⁶⁶ But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God’s curse!

sinful and excluded others that our Bible listed with emphasis as abhorrent. (Job 1:1⁶⁷)

Some “sins” lost their status as the church “evolved” and yielded to social pressure. Divorce was once anathema for the clergy. Not anymore. Smoking cigarettes, drinking alcohol, wearing jewelry—to name a few—are now common among church goers, even in evangelical circles.

So, despite the fact that the Gospel message is empowered to lead us to a salvation that includes a changed life, the true value of the Cross can be lost in a menagerie of dogmas or can be oversimplified as a single penitent prayer with no call to holiness.

Another concern is: if sin is the enemy at the gate, does this not make the church the watchman? Should not the church champion her holiness, parade it before the masses and rescue a few souls as the mark of a true and faithful sentry of Truth? Should not the church heroically run into the burning building of heathendom to rescue the victims of a corrupt society? And the gospel that transcends culture is it not a moral gospel that needs to be heralded loudly until the sinner hears—boundaries by damned.

Is it not our role as church-goers to instruct the wayward until they walk straight? Does the chieftain’s wife need a new T-shirt?

⁶⁷ In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job. This man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil.

The question of whether or not long-standing believers and faith-warriors should be acting as counselor and disciplinarian over young converts is a philosophical one. Should God be given time to make course corrections for the young in Christ? Should time be given for them to discover how faith works, what following Jesus is all about? (This presupposes that disciplining in a New Testament sense is ongoing.)

And if time is needed, how obvious does their “sin” have to be for the saints to speak up and correct it? Or should they be in prayer while the young learn to walk and talk christianity?

I am inclined not to think in terms of judging but teaching—and there is a marked difference. Judging is all verbal but teachers also show by example.

Who should do the teaching?

Those who follow the sermon on the mount.
Those who live the beatitudes.

There is no better teacher than one who shows through their actions and their passion what following Christ is all about.

Disciples of Christ accordingly hunger for righteousness. They have a passion to learn Christ, not seek biblical support to condone old habits and ways. They see the Bible as a storehouse of new things to know, uncovered treasures of divine wisdom. And even when these are difficult lessons, they are sought after.

We should at least have a desire to want to follow the Word. No one is perfect except Christ—a well know truism. But all who are poor in spirit know this. That's the "poor" part. We want to learn, to walk, to follow.

My ramblings brought me here and it took a couple more hot baths to see that a lot of what we learn in Christ, we learn by experience and that is only possible as we grow in Christ. We use the term "progressive." Sanctified is a *process*. And even those communities of the faith that teach a more instant approach to sanctification understand that much of the christian life is still a learning experience.

So, what do we say when someone attends our fellowship from the other side of the spiritual tracks? Back in the 90's the people across the tracks were AIDS sufferers, call girls, drug addicts, alcoholics, and others whose behavior was not identified as culturally acceptable. These people were ostracized by old ladies and the senior men in power as unwelcome unless they cleaned up their act and adopted the behavior commonly approved on this side of the tracks.

But through U.S. court decisions abortions and same-sex marriage have been recognized as culturally acceptable—practices once considered anathema in Christian thought. This is on a whole other level. Some forms of behavior, also, which the church had been labeling "sinful" are now medically diagnosed as illnesses. These are challenges of another kind for

the church because they have social legitimacy. They are no longer “sin.” The church no longer has the government as an unintended supporter. On the contrary: the church and the government, at least in the U.S.A. are not in sync and the church is heading for a showdown with the very authorities that once guaranteed their freedom in the Bill of Rights.

Millennials are also living in a culture that endorses casual relationships and using “weed.”

The church’s challenge is to know where to draw the line in the sand. how to approach ministry in a postmodern age. To be honest, I am glad to be retired, but I would love to have a small group of believers who recognized that souls are souls and no one is more sinful than another in God’s eyes. Shouldn’t God be the judge of these matters? Certain guidelines suggest themselves:

- ◆ Our commission—which we call “great”—is promoting the Gospel message and the work of Christ only. (1 Corinthians 2:2⁶⁸)
- ◆ We can lead others to the well of living water but we cannot make them drink.
- ◆ It would be hypocritical of christians to condone divorce, which God hates, (Malachi 2:16⁶⁹) and turn a blind eye to promiscuity but

⁶⁸ For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

⁶⁹ “The man who hates and divorces his wife,” says the LORD, the God of Israel, “does violence to the one he should protect,” says the LORD Almighty. So be on your guard, and do not be unfaithful.

at the same time choose to categorize other non-monogamous, non-heterosexual forms of behavior as depraved. It might do us well to remember:

- ◆ God convicts; we cannot.

Some gays that are married with the blessing of the state seek also the blessing of the Lord through His people and this is admittedly impossible to give, not because it is new but because it is not easily read in Scripture as an acceptable relationship. But it's part of the modern culture; so, it has become part of the world the church is in.

Some churches choose to accept gays without comment; others actually endorse them—the pastor, him or herself, might be in a gay relationship—something I find difficult to imagine. But do I need to? Probably most christian churches are outspoken that marriage with God's blessing is one man and one woman.

In retirement, I would accept anyone who walked into our small group, but I need the liberty to encourage a hunger to learn the message of Scripture without a desire to defend any form of behavior. I dream of having a small congregation or study group that is stripped of all defensiveness, that is disarmed and ready to accept what interpretation of the scripture they sense God is sharing with them. I dream of a nucleus that allows free and open discussion of all truth, even those parts that are hardest to embrace. I dream of a nucleus of believers

that give God credit for His Word without disparaging the text . Give me a small group with the beautiful attitudes Jesus outlined in His mountain sermon to His disciples.

And what about membership? We can't in clear conscience take some persons into membership even though they profess Christ because their lifestyle runs counter to our understanding of scripture.

One of the benefits of a bible study that doesn't need trustees because they are not raising funds for future projects is that membership is not needed either.

We started down this road of requiring membership when we joined hands with government IRS code regulations, when we began to raise a budget for personal benefit as a church. Churches may need to continue these relationships but the beauty of retirement and a singular emphasis on learning and living the Word of God is that membership is no longer a requirement. Let God keep membership records in His book of life. Nothing else should matter to us.

What church boards fail to consider is the makeup of a congregation. They focus inevitably on size—quantity not quality. The quality congregation is one made of a nucleus of followers of Christ, those whose lives reflect the sermon on the mount, and the

majority desperate to find the happiness this sermon promotes.

We want the people from across the tracks, those whose behavior we are prone to filter out by what we say and how proudly we wear our religion as a badge of false holiness. We fail to realize that the congregation we have become is an expanded version of the choir. Preaching is unchallenged because the sermon is tailor made for a group whose creed gives it an identity. When they sing, the sound is heavenly for they are trained in the harmonic sounds of worship and all the songs have been committed to memory. But the people who need to hear these sounds may be absent because we filtered them out.

But what about worship? We come from a thousand different rituals, how can unity be acknowledged here or do we admit our diversity and remaining separate?

Worship without Form

"Has it ever occurred to you that one hundred pianos all tuned to the same fork are automatically tuned to each other?"

— A.W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*

There is no prescription under the new covenant for the type of worship we should be celebrating. Jewish believers maintained the festivals and the ceremonial law—as best they could under Roman law—while gentile believers exercised the freedom to wander into their own cultural expressions of praise—provided, of course, nothing was brought over from pagan practices.

I recognize that we are distinguishable in part by the way we express worship. Some congregations generate a more vocal praise. Some sing most of the service. Some a more ritualized expression of dedication to our Lord. These are distinctions without a difference because they are not intended to divide us.

I dream of being a part of a small congregation that allows for such individual expressions of worship. Some weep, others laugh. Some kneel; some sit; some stand; some lie prostrate on the ground. Some raise hands; others do not.

The language of worship is known and yet unknown. It is like the tears of grief or the smile of a joyous heart. We all know it but yet our experiences are our own. Speaking of language: should it matter what language we speak, known or unknown?

No, it shouldn't matter. Let me be with those who find that whatever the language it is more beautiful when the heart is worshipping "*in spirit and in truth.*" than a litany of words without heart. (John 4:24⁷⁰) Let me share in a ministry in which we all have a freedom to express our passion and love for the Lord, yes, even, in inventive ways. Love is not crazy and worship need not be confined to known patterns of socially or denominationally acceptable forms.

When I am free to be me and all I want to do is to worship my Lord, I may sit quietly or I may not. But as long as I recognize that there is a boundary I shall not cross that would deny another the same privilege, I am safe to express my love to my Lord. This sounds dangerous, but only to those who have another agenda than worship, only to those who seek unwarranted attention, only to those who sadly imagine themselves in charge, only to those whose thoughts are not focused on worshipping God.

There is a sense here in which we are all pentecostal because pentecostalism has more to do with freedom in the Spirit than with shouting or tongue speaking. There is a sense in which we are all Baptist because we are intending here to conduct

⁷⁰ God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth

ourselves according to the counsel of the Word of God. There is a sense in which we are all catholic because the entire church service like the Mass is celebrating Calvary through our worship. The freedom to worship in spirit and from the heart knows no denominational boundaries nor can any one religious group alone claim it theirs. We share a common faith (2 Peter 1:1⁷¹) and that speaks to a common worship.

If unity of worship under these conditions were impossible, what must happen to gather the countless saints from among the nations around the Throne of God to bring about such spiritual harmonics? (Revelation 7:9-11⁷²) How should it be possible then but not now!

I waited outside Our Lady of Lourds in the small town of Burgettstown, Pennsylvania while my mother and her lifelong friend attended Mass. As I sat in my car in the parking lot I heard them singing

⁷¹ Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ have received a faith as precious as ours:

⁷² After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice:

“Salvation belongs to our God,
who sits on the throne,
and to the Lamb.”

All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God,

our songs. In the 1970's at the height of the neo-pentecostal movement within the catholic church praise choruses began to float over denominational boundaries. These songs were sung to guitar accompaniment in the catholic church. We, however, across the creek stayed with the piano, but the choruses were the same. The differences so often emphasized in our theologies faded while congregants had a common melodic expression of their love to God.

Is this not worth pursuing? I dream of having a church that sees no reason to argue down the creed of another believer when their faith is strengthened in a common expression of worship. A common heart of worship, a common love for the Savior, and a common faith in God and His promises begs a common worship. Is it not up to church leadership to find that common ground? Millennials have discovered this commonality of worship attending christian concerts.⁷³ Even though a "Jesusfest" is a thousand or so in attendance, the spirit is the same among a few.

But there is a caveat.

Worship requires worship leaders who know what to sing. They know when to sing and when not to sing.

⁷³ An example might be Christy Nockels singing "Let It Be Jesus" (https://youtu.be/S_Zsiz0xbxE) or in Spanish: Christine D'clario singing No Hay Lugar Más Alto (<https://youtu.be/eyxSh4fxilM>)

They are ministers of encouragement. (Romans 12:8⁷⁴)

It isn't enough to arrange a few specials or sing all 4 stanzas or decide a week ahead of time which choruses best emphasize the preacher's text. And it isn't as necessary as we suppose that a choir or an orchestra practice to near perfection before God can use them.

A song leader must know when a course correction is prompted by the Spirit—as spiritual as that sounds. As a pastor over the course of years I learned the importance of reading faces. God's people know whether or not true worship is happening. If you can't lead, step out of the way and let them. It takes discernment and sensitivity and a personal involvement in worship to make what sounds mystical a natural flow of a congregation's desire to worship God.

Worship is not just music; it's words. It is praise in *chorus* and the *message* of Calvary in song. Granted, some of us ruined our vocal chords on 4 sharps but the songs were about the blood of Christ, His suffering and Calvary. They were worth the price. Kumbaya and other ditties, though easier to sing, could not vibrate the soul in sync with the melody. It never fostered praise.

My dream here is not anything new. I long for a return to a simpler time when a few believers and a guitar was all it took to give us that undeniable

⁷⁴ if it is to encourage, then give encouragement

awareness of our Lord's presence among His people. I miss—not the choruses so much, but—the spirit in which we joined in and harmonized and sang each line with heartfelt meaning. I miss worshipful singing that led into prayer for some while others continued to accompany them in song. I miss a worship time that was off the clock, offline, as they say in today's lingo.

There are many Sundays when we experience such a move of God which means this dream can come true.

Individual but harmonious is the way God orchestrates our worship. Man ritualizes it in an interest in keeping everyone on the same page, confined to a designed timeframe, or to feature our many talents. But God often breaks out of these restrictions as, for example, the time a group of 15 year olds sang one chorus over 250 times (one of them was counting) while many wept before God and allowed camp counselors to drift among them praying with them.

Previous generations have had stories to tell of those occasions when God commandeered a church service to do something special for them. And He never disappointed. These were stories now too fantastic to tell. These are stories that now in the age of science would make eyes roll and faces cringe in disbelief.

Today's church world is programmed for multiple services and this puts restraints on the

schedule that often precludes God's opportunity to do something special. God has to work within these constraints.

I miss the freedom to keep going when it seemed appropriate to those who wanted to linger in His Presence. I miss the occasional surprise when things were different, changed by God's direction and a pastor's sensitivity to that change.

But I also dream of being part of a group of believers that sees no lack of spirituality in an early dismissal or if I wanted to head out while others are still praying or weeping before the Lord.

I know, we hear tales of groups of third world pilgrims walking long distances and even for days to attend a meeting in which the preacher preaches way into the night. These are tales of a spiritual hunger that makes our snacking on God's Word seem like something we need to apologize for. I will be the first to admit that there have been times when I couldn't get enough of whatever God was offering and I simply wanted to linger forever in His presence. But then there are times when I seem perfectly content without even a tinge of conscience to return home to watch my favorite show.

But whatever the length of our worship I want it to be real and in spirit. It is a hunger for more of His presence that provides opportunity for genuine prayer or fulfilling fellowship. It is a hunger once satisfied that lifts us out of our morose, recharges our enthusiasm for God, strengthens our faith, and gives

us a far deeper and lasting awareness of a reality in God that before now we only theologized about.

But it provides for one more thing: a unity in love that makes even the most discordant sounds part of the harmony.

I made a mistake once of trying to handpick a group for a church choir being careful to bypass those I thought couldn't sing in tune. It was one of the most offensive things I ever thought to do.

Worship from the heart and in truth is all-inclusive. No person will be given a side bench to wait on while the throngs in glory sing His praises. We will all join in.

Even the person to your right who cannot seem to carry a note in a bucket will still be in harmony because there is no such thing as discordant praise if it is true worship.

I was reminded of the poem "*Trouble in the Amen Corner*."⁷⁵ Here's a few lines of this memorable work about old Brother Eyer singing in the Choir:

#

His voice was cracked and broken; age had touched his vocal cords.

And nearly every Sunday he would mispronounce the words
Of the hymns, and 'twas no wonder; he was old and nearly
blind,

And the choir rattling onward always left him far behind.

#

The chorus stormed and blustered, Brother Eyer sang too
slow,

⁷⁵ *Trouble in the Amen Corner* by Thomas Chalmers Harbaugh. Cp. <http://www.cp-sk.org/teachingpage38.htm>

And then he used the tunes in vogue a hundred years ago;
At last the storm cloud burst and the church was told, in fine,
That the brother must stop singing, or the choir would resign.

#

Bro Eyer's response?

#

"I've sung the Psalms of David for nearly eighty years;
They've been my staff and comfort and calmed life's many
fears;
I'm sorry I disturb the choir, perhaps I'm doing wrong,
But when my heart is filled with praise I can't keep back a
song.

"I wonder if beyond the tide that's breaking at my feet,
In the far off heavenly temple, where the Master I shall greet-
Yes, I wonder when I try to sing the songs of God up higher
If the angel band will chide me for disturbing Heaven's choir."

#

No, Brother Eyer, no one will be excluded then and
no one should be excluded now from singing His
praises!

I like fashionable choirs. I enjoy good voices in
harmony—and especially with a subtle but clear base
section. I love acapella singing. I think choirs with
good conducting are an asset to worship, but Brother
Eyer sitting in his seat or standing near it wants to
join in.

Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living
water will flow from within them. John 7:38

I dream of having a congregation who will let
that river flow. Let the Brother Eyers sing alone.

My mind goes back to a chapel service in Bible
college when I stood next to an individual who sang
off tune which was a bit disturbing. On one occasion

suddenly, his singing snapped in place and the sound of his accompanying voice invoked praise rather than hindered it. We were genuinely moving into a moment of worship—heartfelt, in the spirit, worship. I think the miracle was not in his voice as much as it was with my ears. My desire to join in began to appreciate the sevenths and minor key sounds that no longer were discordant but became the lovely sound of united worship.

The larger matter is the spiritual discord that results when we are listening with critical ears instead of a worshipful heart. Unity as an idea is ultimately inseparable from a spirit of worship. We have both or we have neither. The reason for that is not only anecdotal or observable but, as Paul teaches: worship and service in many respects coalesce into one act of reverence to God.

Paul seemed to avoid the term “worship” since it emphasized the expression of kneeling in homage to God in worship more than the passion or heart behind it. When we have the heart for genuine worship, when we respect God’s sovereignty in our lives enough to honor Him through obedience, we serve His interests. We serve *Him*.

Paul’s word for *worship* in Romans 12:1⁷⁶ is best translated *service*—but they are the same. Worship to him had this nuance. Worship for a

⁷⁶ Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship (service).

believer is more than the rituals we use to express our devotion to God.⁷⁷ Worship happens in service and not just *the* service.

The marriage of these two words becoming one is evident regardless which one we look at first. Worshipping God in spirit and truth in a church service encourages our desire to serve God and serving God in ministry or living Christlike lives makes worship come alive when we do gather together.

⁷⁷ There are 21 occurrences of the word λατρεύω in the New Testament. It means to perform sacred service to God which is where it may be translated "to worship". cp. Philippians 3:3 "*For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh*"

Fifty People

"We might be wise to follow the insight of the enraptured heart rather than the more cautious reasoning of the theological mind."

— A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*

Ever hear of Dunbar's number?

Dunbar's number⁷⁸, according to Wiki, is a suggested cognitive limit to the number of people with whom one can maintain stable social relationships—relationships in which an individual knows who each person is and how each person relates to every other person.⁷⁹

Group relationships begin to breakdown into vague acquaintances easily forgotten if the number of friendships for each one in the circle exceeds this number. If a congregation desires closeness across all persons in the group—if they desire to be knit together in a bond of unity and caring that brings them together in a spontaneous show of prayer support when a need among them arises, the group should not exceed this humble number of people.

⁷⁸ Dunbar R. I. M. (1992). "Neocortex size as a constraint on group size in primates". *Journal of Human Evolution*. **22** (6): 469–493.

⁷⁹ Gladwell, Malcolm (2000). *The Tipping Point – How Little Things Make a Big Difference*. Little, Brown and Company. pp. 177–181, 185–186.

How many are we talking about? As Dunbar maintained, “...*humans can comfortably maintain only 150 stable relationships.*”⁸⁰

I have even reached my limit on Facebook with about 100 FB friends. Many of the daily postings go unnoticed because they are buried in the scroll. In larger groups, we, understandably, tend to search for that smaller sub-group to relate to. Many of us are content with as few as 2 or 3 genuine friendships in which secrets can be shared without repercussion.

There is also in economics the “*law of diminishing returns*”⁸¹ which applies here as well. At some point we begin to lose more than gain if we continue adding beyond that point. For example, when I work I get my best production in the first 2 hours before a break and after 12 hours I am useless unless I get a good night’s sleep. When I study, those early morning hours are best. Cramming until midnight is counter-productive.

Relationships are a bell curve of sorts in which at some point we can have too many, depending on the type of relationship. The apogee of that curve in a marriage relationship, I maintain, is *one*. Within the church fellowship, it might be 150. After that, we

⁸⁰ Purves, D. (2008). Principles of cognitive neuroscience. Sinauer Associates Inc.

⁸¹ Diminishing returns, according to Wiki, is the decrease in the marginal (incremental) output of a production process as the amount of a single factor of production is incrementally increased, while the amounts of all other factors of production stay constant.

begin to lose concern about the needs and problems of the individuals in the group.

As a pastor, I had opportunity to test my limits when I befriended church people. I could only enjoy so many invites to dinner and go on so many hospital calls with any degree of passion and interest. And to properly consider praying for all the needs that come to our attention, it was a burden only the Pastor of all souls, our Lord, could carry.

I fancied myself, if I were a leader during our civil war in the 1860's (studying the Civil War was a favorite past time of mine once), a battalion leader or at most a regimental commander is as high as I, personally, would want to go. I would like fighting along side the soldiers—something a corp commander, a brigadier general and on up in rank, could never hope to do.

I couldn't pretend to pastor a church of a thousand because it seems to me to be run more by organizational skill than heart. And I am not an administrator—much less so, now that I am retired. So, I dream of being a pastor of just 50 adults.

We were in our first pastorate, 1969-71, and I was not particularly happy. The beatitudes were not yet for me principles of a holy life that one should live. I was in my "everything-is-a-theology" phase of ministerial life. I don't believe I taught on the 5th chapter of Matthew during those early years.

I was disappointed—to say it mildly—when I arranged for a special week of services with an evangelist (we used to do that sort of thing) and only a hand full of church members showed.

I wanted to resign the church on the spot when a gentleman whom I never met before—nor since—introduced himself to me as a minister who had just taken a small pastorate in retirement. He was then my age now.

He was thrilled to be back in the pulpit and very pleased to think God blessed him with the few folk he now had that didn't overtax his energies. I never forgot his enthusiasm and how it contrasted night and day with my defeatist attitude. He shared with me this verse:

Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. - Galatians 6:9

Our brief conversation was not a woe-is-me counseling session but he knew how I was feeling. (Amazing how pastors can do that!)

That was almost 48 years ago. And now it is my turn to see what he saw back then and to appreciate God's largesse in the little blessings. I have since learned to cherish the little things. I would be honored to work for our Lord in a small pastorate.

I didn't know then that the very thing I was running from almost 50 years ago would become my dream someday. Young minister take heart!

Perhaps, I need to underscore that I do not want to trivialize the value of larger groups for other, mostly, younger ministers. This is my dream for me

not a treatise on what is perfect for all the clergy. There are, again, a number of retirees in their seventies who have perhaps a decade or so of health left to serve our Lord in more meaningful ways than just posting comments on Facebook.

Ever read the poem: The Preacher's Mistake by Brewer Mattocks?

#

The parish priest of Austerity
climbed up in a high church steeple
to be nearer God, so that he might hand
His word down to His people.

#

When the sun was high, when the sun was low,
the good man sat unheeding
sublunary things. From transcendency
was he forever reading

#

and now and again he heard the creak
of the weather vane a-turning,
he closed his eyes and said, "Of a truth
from God I now am learning."

#

And in sermon script he daily wrote
what he thought was sent down from heaven
and he dropped this down on his people's heads
two times one day in seven.

#

In his age God said, "Come down and die!"
And he cried out from the steeple,
"Where art thou, Lord?" And the Lord replied,
"Down here among my people."

#

I want a small congregation so I can be down among the people, praying with them and for them, fellowshiping with them, visiting them, learning God's Word with them. I need no other reason.

If I were blessed with my dream retirement ministry, where would the teenagers end up. They generally do not enjoy sitting around in a geriatric ward.

This is what organizations like "Young Life"⁸² are for—caring for teenagers, not geriatrics. They have the energy, the programs, and the training to offer them insight into truth in a youthful setting. It is the perfect solution for all those young people who prefer not to hang out with their parents and grandparents.

When I campaigned—yes, campaigned (tell me the church isn't political.)—for one church, the interviewer was primarily concerned about my possible ministry to the teens. I have observed on a few occasions families hopping from church to church trying to find the perfect church ...for their *teens*. Parents are concerned about the hormone driven little people living in their homes but not in their world.

My first ministry upon graduating from Bible School was as a youth leader to a Jersey congregation. I still cringe when I visit family and drive by the roller skating rink where I used to teen-sit. It's a depressing memory because humoring kids is not my thing.

⁸² <http://www.younglife.org>

But Young Life is great at this. Their energy level, vine-swinging, mountain-climbing, egg-tossing energy (I tire thinking about it!) is a necessary part of keeping teens involved and providing the opportunity to let them know that Jesus wants an introduction.

It should be obvious I am not your man when it comes to teens. I am not like one minister whose ministry inspired me in other ways, who started a small church and used to play baseball with the kids on weekends. I need loving parents who understandingly get involved with the younger residents in their homes and decide the best approach to sharing Christ with them.

“And what about Sunday School or religious catechism?” You ask. (This should be part of the solution to teen ministry.)

S.S. is not in the Bible; so, a retired minister could tuck these terms away in the same circular file where he put the “church picnic.”

But if the congregation wants Sunday School or a catechism class for any age group of children, *teaching* the children *is* a biblical idea. (Deuteronomy 11:19⁸³)

I have enjoyed over the years every opportunity to teach any and every age group (even

⁸³ Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.

pre-schoolers with puppets. I had the puppets.) I have just enough energy for this and I have a heart for it.

We are accused in this post-modern world of brainwashing our children, but the stark truth is that that is what is happening in the secular schools and universities; so, any opportunity to balance those scales will be worth the effort.

This is my dream and I dream of having an opportunity to discuss with young adults all the postmodern lies and deceptions that have gone unchallenged. I have a passionate interest in giving them a chance to see life from a christian perspective and worldview. As God makes Himself real to them through conviction and faith, they will follow.

It's heart-washing, not brain-washing. It's providing teens with a real choice, an intelligent choice, a christian choice, if they want to choose it. It is refusing to sit back and ignore what is going on sight-unseen while our kids are under the tutelage of an instructor, from grammar school through college, that we need to vet before we trust—but can't.

And what about the babies?!

Rotate the moms to watch them in a nursery setting or get someone else responsible to watch them? If moms want to carry them into the study or prayer meeting, God would understand; so, I would, too.

The little tikes are pure joy and they should
never be seen in any other way.

#

Children are a heritage from the Lord,
offspring a reward from him.
Like arrows in the hands of a warrior
are children born in one's youth.
Blessed is the man
whose quiver is full of them.
They will not be put to shame
when they contend with their opponents in court.

- Psalms 127:3-5

#

I welcome all the arrows you have, just bring your
quiver with you. I will leave this to you to exegete.

My Dream

“A garden to walk in --what more could he ask? A few flowers at his feet and above him the stars.”

— Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*

Everyone dreams and retired ministers are still feeling the ministry in their souls. I did not find it strange to learn that one retired clergyman, well into his nineties, was given a seat on the platform during the church service. Many retired ministers aware of a denominationally based ethic to leave the church from which they are retiring, find themselves drifting about looking for a new church “home” ...or is it something else they are missing!?

To say it in a more grammatical way: it was said of John-the-Baptist that he was sent⁸⁴ from God. (John 1:6⁸⁵) The text actually reads “had been” not “was,” was and still continued to be. I used to think this implied: once a baptizer, always a baptizer—until his death. (That happened that way for John-the-Baptist but that’s not the main emphasis.) What this actually means is that John’s calling spoke to who he *was* not what he did.

⁸⁴ The tense is perfect expressing permanency and more correct translated by a present perfect in English.

⁸⁵ There was a man sent from God whose name was John.

This is less a job description and more a *lifestyle* with him ...and with all callings. How else can I say this?

A calling is a call to *become* not to do.

For the retired minister or priest, fishing and golf are not in and of themselves satisfying enough to occupy the heart. Pastoring and loving God's people was not a "job" with us. It was more, much more. It was our *life*.

It makes sense to dream. Add a warm bath (with or without bubbles—we won't tell) and the mind starts to wander back into a lifetime of memories worth thinking on.

My daydream, as quixotic as it is, is to pastor a small nucleus who exemplify the beautiful attitudes Jesus shared with His disciples. This reduces the dream to a 10-fold profile for a congregation that would give a retired minister opportunity to serve without wasting those golden days on the unworthy cause of uninspiring church-work:

#

1. *More sacrificial, less demanding, (Mt 5:3)⁸⁶*
2. *More prayerful, less critical (Mt 5:4)⁸⁷*
3. *More servile, less entitled (Mt 5:5)⁸⁸*
4. *More of the Word, less self-promoting, (Mt 5:6)⁸⁹*

⁸⁶ ΟΙ ΠΠΩΧΟΙ ΤΩ ΠΝΕΥΜΑΤ

⁸⁷ ΟΙ ΠΕΝΘΟΥΝΤΕΣ

⁸⁸ ΟΙ ΠΡΑΕΙΣ

⁸⁹ ΟΙ ΠΕΙΝΩΝΤΕΣ

5. *More for others, less for me, (Mt 5:7)*⁹⁰
6. *More truthful, less self-deceived (Mt 5:8)*⁹¹
7. *More united, less divisive, (Mt 5:9)*⁹²
8. *More courageous, less fearful, (Mt 5:10)*⁹³
9. *More Christlike less worldly (Mt 5:11)*⁹⁴
10. *More joyous, less grumbling(Mt 5:12)*⁹⁵

#

(See, not so crazy.)

There are as many applications of these 10 principles as there are christian experiences but my mind races forward to highlight a few from my own past. This is, again, not a theological study much less an open forum for venting. It is my dream of the perfect ministry ...*for me.*

I recall Bishop Fulton Sheen's description of the Beatitudes. It is a classic worth studying. I won't plagiarize, piggyback off, his timeless commentary but the temptation to do so is real.

"If we live the Beatitudes, as we are called to do, then you and I have also chosen the Cross."⁹⁶

⁹⁰ οι ελεημονες

⁹¹ οι καθαροι τη καρδια

⁹² οι ειρηνοποιοι

⁹³ οι δεδιωγμενοι ενεκεν δικαιοσυνης

⁹⁴ οταν ονειδισωσιν υμας

⁹⁵ χαιρετε και αγαλλιασθε

⁹⁶ I recommend reading in Bishop Fulton J. Sheen's "Life of Christ," the Beatitudes. cp. <https://www.ewtn.com/library/PROLIFE/BO18.TXT>
[Provided courtesy of:

The Catholic Resource Network
Trinity Communications 703-791-4336]

The good bishop's comparison is between true holiness and a world that argues it down as unreasonable and nonsensical. To take the beatitudes seriously to heart is to understand how we, as believers, should live with a Christlike holiness. The beatitudes empower us to speak with our lives the gospel message that distinguishes us from everything worldly. The beatitudes are the key to interpreting Scripture because they speak of the Cross. They are, themselves, a pastoral hermeneutic that is the scriptwriter for every sermon and the voice of all biblical counsel.

"The Beatitudes cannot be taken alone: they are not ideals; they are hard facts and realities inseparable from the Cross of Calvary. What He [Jesus] taught was self-crucifixion" - Bishop Fulton J. Sheen⁹⁷

A thousand theologians would have a thousand different views on this dynamic text and all would be right. In a thousand sermons and homilies we have not begun to uncover the secrets contained here for living a holy life. The way of holiness is locked away in these verses—even though Jesus gave us the key, "*follow me*" (John 12:26⁹⁸)

Again, let me underline it: this work is not an indictment on the modern church in our civilized world. But it behooves each pastor to introduce these dynamic principles on what it means to bear our cross for Him, Who loved us enough to bear His Cross for us. ...even at the risk of losing a few dissidents.

⁹⁷ *ibid.*

⁹⁸ Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.

All that remains is an introduction of the most beautiful souls on the planet, saints all. These are the few over the years whose faith and faithfulness have given me hope that the church is more than an institution, more than a social gathering.

Perhaps, I had not been observant or discerning enough. Perhaps, there are many. Perhaps I was like the prophet Elijah, who in his despondency lost sight of how many of the faithful were actually out there in the hill country of old Israel. (I Kings 19:18⁹⁹) Over the years I met a few of David's modern day warriors. (1 Samuel 22:1-2¹⁰⁰) I had been privileged to know a few like Hur and Aaron who held up the arms of Moses while the battle raged on. (Exodus 17:12¹⁰¹) There are still those who hold up the tired arms of their pastors while the spiritual battle for the souls of men rages on.

These to me represent the living church, the living ministry, the true body of Christ that is Christ walking among us. These are a few of those who speak with their lives the true message of love and grace that will not be silenced.

⁹⁹ Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and whose mouths have not kissed him.

¹⁰⁰ David left Gath and escaped to the cave of Adullam. When his brothers and his father's household heard about it, they went down to him there. All those who were in distress or in debt or discontented gathered around him, and he became their commander. About four hundred men were with him.

¹⁰¹ When Moses' hands grew tired, they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it. Aaron and Hur held his hands up—one on one side, one on the other—so that his hands remained steady till sunset.

Let me commend to you the church¹⁰² of my dreams.

Few believers in memory were mindful that everything they had and were was on loan from God and held in trust until He needed these resources, until God wanted to use them. (Luke 16:12¹⁰³) Most christians sees God's gifts as personal possessions bequeathed them on Jesus's death. Some pentecostals mistakenly see the gifts of the Spirit not as the Spirit's opportunity to use them but as a calling in which they have been empowered. (Ephesians 3:7¹⁰⁴)

But there is that missionary spirit we meet now and then in someone whose entire life is dedicated to the work of God, to ministry and to giving of their resources in whatever way the Lord has need. They have vowed to themselves a poverty that knows that their blessings are God's means to bless others.

I remember the Browns. Their doors were open to all who, to their knowledge, passed through their world hungry. They were first to welcome missionaries to their home. When I visited, I was one of a small group of first time strangers who sat at their table. But the ultimate gift was their young son, Bobby, who became a short-term missionary to Africa. I met them through Bobby at Bible School.

¹⁰² The names are for the sake of narration only. They have been changed out of respect for their privacy.

¹⁰³ And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own?

¹⁰⁴ I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power

Bobby never passed the church they attended without going in and spending time in prayer. The family was very involved in God's work at home and abroad.

This same generous spirit I have met in my own mother, who took in strangers and clothed impoverished neighborhood children.

And there was Rene who invited the world to church only after inviting them to her home first. She, too, fed the poor, spoke kindness and understanding to the weary and then brought them my way for the larger message of God's love that only comes through ongoing fellowship with believers. We kept the baptismal tank full—or so it seemed.

The world hurts its own more than it persecutes us and a few sacrificial souls realizing this open their lives up to embrace the emotionally injured and spiritually damaged who are receptive to christian love.

Vera's husband used to say of her, "If you want someone to worry for you, tell my wife." Vera prayed. On my last day in that church, she held me tightly weeping and not without cause. I was kayaking down the rapids and unknowingly heading toward an unseen waterfall.

Vera didn't worry as her husband interpreted things but she was receptive to the Lord's burdens. She was in sympathies with the Divine heart and God

found another Abraham to talk to about His Lots. (Genesis 18:17¹⁰⁵)

Every congregation needs their Veras, the prayer warriors, who do not need to be organized to go to their Lord with real need. Vera always wore a quiet smile that hid the heaviness of soul she must have carried at times. Her prayer life was done in secret.

There was also Louisa. What impressed me most about Louisa was her undying hope in God. While her heart ached for one son who unlike his christian brothers was into some “very bad” stuff. Suffice it to say that while the rest of the Christian community wrote him off as irredeemable, Louisa’s praying was relentless. (Luke 18:1¹⁰⁶)

These are the kind of prayer warriors every ministry must have to plow ahead through unanticipated impossibilities. (Ephesians 6:18¹⁰⁷)

If spiritual warfare is best fought “on our knees” these are the soldiers of the Cross who are most valiant on that field. They know no retreat¹⁰⁸
How can we assume to pastor without them?

¹⁰⁵ Then the LORD said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?”

¹⁰⁶ Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.

¹⁰⁷ And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people.

¹⁰⁸ One word for “patience” is the word meaning not to retreat from the battle. 2 Corinthians 6:4 [NKJV] “But in all *things* we commend ourselves as ministers of God: in much patience, in tribulations, in needs, in distresses,”

These are the saints who seek no audience to expose their deepest burdens except with God who sees in secret. These are those who can keep confidence and not because they have forgotten but because they know that prayer meetings were never intended to share stories about the hurting and those who have gone astray. Prayer is the battle for the souls of men not fought in gossip sessions and tea parties but waged in the privacy of an undying faith in God's omnipotent grace and love.

Service—like Submission a relative idea— is less popular in modern times. In a democracy, we vote our entitlements. We assert our rights, We defend our freedoms. Even believers see ministry as a prerogative not as the privilege of serving. But this is the best definition of meekness:¹⁰⁹ a passion for service to God.

Every ministry, every church, needs those who want to be spiritual servants for life. (Deuteronomy 15:17¹¹⁰) We need fewer board members, those who crave authority and power, those who control budgets and pastors. We need more servants of God who would prefer to hold open sanctuary doors

¹⁰⁹ 2 Timothy 2:24-25: And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Opponents must be gently instructed [KJV: In meekness instructing], in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth.

¹¹⁰ then take an awl and push it through his earlobe into the door, and he will become your servant for life.

(Psalms 84:10¹¹¹) in His honor than win a thousand accolades on their own. The church needs the humblest doer of small and forgotten deeds whom God can call on to accomplish acts of kindness and thoughtfulness that only He knows about. While all eyes are on someone else's sense of greatness, these are those who serve God in the truest sense unnoticed. They pray in secret, They slip in and out of our memories like a small favor soon lost to the record of all things important. But they are God's servants, the salt of the earth and the candle glowing in the dark of a world of hurt and evil.

I met the servant's servant before. They have a humble passion for letting God direct them in the simplest ways. Their homes are open for the stranger in need, Their prayer life and faithfulness in ministry, to me, is renown. They are cupbearers. (Matthew 10:42¹¹²)

I have friends who are ministers and who are among these true servants of God. But I have not thought to highlight their service no more than I would think to emphasize the great singing of a well-prepared church choir. It is the angelic voices in the congregation that draw my ear, the singers whose harmony blends into a single note of praise without the applause. I have names from among those whose

¹¹¹ Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked.

¹¹² And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward.

paths crossed mine but I am disinclined to give them the recognition they never wanted. I will leave that privilege to God.

These are the servants who serve *with* the pastor and identify with his or her heart. There is no greater support.

Prayer meetings reach heaven with them in attendance whose desire is only service to the Lord.

I cherish a plaque made for me by a group of former students:

The Lord GOD has given me
the tongue of those who are taught,
that I may know how to sustain with a word
him who is weary.
- [ESV] Isaiah 50:4

#

I preferred the ESV here over the NIV for clarity.¹¹³ It is not the tongue of the educated as much as it speaks of a heart to learn from God how to speak to the weary. Pat was such a brother in Christ.

Let me lovingly tell you first about Sue, a lady in her sixties who complained I was preaching at her. Such subjects as the works of the flesh in Galatians were off limits. I wonder how many sermons have the sharp edge of truth ground down to a suggestion preached for those *not* in attendance to keep the congregation for jumping ship. I wonder how many

¹¹³ The Sovereign LORD has given me a well-instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary. He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being instructed.

pastors are like one pastor who envied my freedom in the pulpit to say anything I wanted. How little did he realize that the same politics that muzzled him, muzzled me.

Not Pat! I seldom met a brother as ravenous as he for *all* truth from God's Word. There is a freedom in the pulpit with a church full of Pats. I could see the hunger in their eyes. I used to say, "They pull it out of me!" There need be no extra special gentle touch of Truth—apart from love—in promoting the emphasis of the Word. Pat never wanted to be coddled and cuddled with soften phrases of support when the message needed to be more outspoken warning God's people and giving them a heads up about the evil Satan intends to perpetrate upon us as believers.

And Pat appreciated learning the Word in depth. Helen once complained that in my sermons I made it sound like ordinary, average, uneducated believers couldn't understand the Word simply by reading it. She was overwhelmed. I needed to get simpler and I can appreciate that. All study of the Bible on a sermon level is devotional and all believers can glean equally from reading it on a Monday morning as they can receive from a sermon on Sunday. It is God's Spirit that does the actual teaching. (John 16:13¹¹⁴)

But Pat. I could read it in his eyes, "*Bring it on, pastor!*" He read one book I wrote 3 times in a spirit

¹¹⁴ But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come.

of learning. It is this spirit that brings any pastor to life and it would be sad to think that this were something any pastor should only dream about.

Altruism is a lost word. Being merciful, my observations suggest, is more a ministry of the few rather than a christian trait of the many. The many appear less into giving and more into collecting to add another convenience to their experience.

But mercy is giving. It is a gift given to another in need of that gift from one who is in a position to offer it—even sacrificially! God’s gift of His Son comes to mind.

Back in 1975, my wife and I purchased a ringer washer (out of necessity having moved to a small farm house that used well-water). We were there a few months only before moving on and in 1976 we gave that all-but brand new washing machine to Anne, a single elderly lady who couldn’t afford one on her own. She had no other way to wash clothes unless she would use a scrub board. It felt so good to be used of God this way. I came to believe that was the real reason we bought the thing.

Showing mercy in scripture is more often than not an act of giving alms to the poor who are destitute and dangerously close to life-threatening need.

Some are emotionally destitute. Some are weary with the war fighting—not just spiritual issues and sin, but—debt, poor health, breakups, career changes, and all the other challenges in life. And they

need someone to be merciful giving them love, a listening ear, and prayer.

When I think of the merciful, I must mention Coradalia, an elderly christian lady whose testimony is easily misplaced in the hustle and bustle of our busy lives. Coradalia might at first introduction appear a strange choice for such an honorable recognition. She lived in a one room trailer on very limited funds but nonetheless—or perhaps because she knew need—she was faithful giving her widow’s mite to the ministry. She used to clean the sanctuary in our tiny church. And when we collected money that eventually went to support another needy family, she gave out of her poverty. The abundance of her joy and deep poverty abounded unto the riches of her liberality. (2 Corinthians 8:2¹¹⁵)

I was warned as a young pastor not to befriend parishioners—make friends of fellow colleagues, only. The fear of preaching do’s and don’t’s to people who are friends sounds dangerous to the friendship—like selling one of them your old junker. But true believers know the responsibility of an anointed pastoral ministry is to speak raw biblical truth with a prophetic zeal that could shake the chandeliers loose.

Pastors cannot sidestep issues simply because people want affirmation. The trick is to always discover in prayer what love—what God—wants

¹¹⁵ In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.

brought to light. (I never consciously or intentionally preached at anyone, but I knew I loved them.)

There are times a gentler touch is required and this, too, angers some whose tough love approach demands stronger language, a sermon on hell with ultimatums. When we fail in this expectation, there follows board discussions which ought not be.

A sermon, perhaps, may need to be stuck with a “for-effect” thermometer so we can know how hot to make it? In lieu of such a device, we will depend on prayer, pastoral love and one more thing—a congregation that can listen with their hearts and accept the content even if the delivery is boringly predictable.

Ralph and his wife, Mary Ellen, were 2 of the most transparent people I met in my journeys. Do you want honesty? I cannot effectively pastor without them. I need them in my retirement dream.

They loved to get to the bottom of truth even if the small print at that bottom affirmed, “Thou are the man.” (2 Samuel 12:7¹¹⁶) I hold our friendship in strictest confidence and cherish it as unusually close for congregants.

(There were many others like them, with all of whom I look forward to that grand reunion in our Lord’s presence at His return.)

They became family to me. And this released me to preach louder and longer. This spurred me on

¹¹⁶ Then Nathan said to David, “You are the man! This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says...

to herald the whole counsel of God, most of which is the record of God's embrace not his discipline.

The counsel of God is still counsel and as such it may be difficult at first for any believer to accept. There is nothing untoward here. It is the older saints, the Ralphs and Mary Ellens, that help the discouraged to embrace their future in Christ by letting God's Word change them. This is possible because, no matter a believer's circumstance, their happiness can bubble up to the surface. It is the conclusion of a pure heart that makes it so.

I remember Bob. I suppose every ministry has a "Bob." If he is in charge of things, he is probably known by his last name. If he is widely unknown he is a "Robert." Family calls him "Rob" If he is young and has a lot of growing to do, he is probably a "Bobby."

Mine was a "Bob," my Barnabas, a brother stable in his faith whose wisdom was always timely and encouraging. Bob was asked on more than one occasion to join this board or that one and he refused. He didn't want authority. He was a helper in spirit and I discovered that having his counsel and friendship gave me the emotional strength to endure some severe criticism to my ministry.

Every pastor needs a "Bob" who remains supportive even after all other persons in authority turn against the pastor but for reasons that are not biblically correct. Bob maintained—I mentioned this already, but again for emphasis—that there are 3

reasons only to dismiss a pastor: he has committed an immoral act of conscience; he has turned heretical; or he has lost his passion for the Word and the ministry.

None of these were true but the church board saw something in my leadership that suggested instability, a gentle spirit that was too gentle, a benevolent spirit that seemed capable of giving—they feared—the worst of the worst a second chance. Private counsel became grapevine buzz and I was no longer respected by the persons in charge.

But there was Bob who never left my side. He was not choosing sides; he choose unity and making peace. No rumor could change him. No convincing could override this deep and settled conviction that peace within the body of Christ was the sine qua non of every other blessing and all ministry.¹¹⁷ A desire by some to dissuade the congregation from supporting their pastor, dividing the church, was absolutely wrong.

Bob was a peacemaker.

The ministry seems at times to be volatile and as unstable as nitro glycerin ready to go boom! Add a little heated argument and even christians will do things regrettable. Every ministry needs a Bob who will want to cool down this explosive mixture of emotions. Bob knows that through listening and

¹¹⁷ Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them: "Any kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and a house divided against itself will fall. - Luke 11:17

sharing sound counsel we can diffuse what is eventually otherwise going to explode. We need the Bobs in ministry who love everyone and who above all cherish christian unity as an absolute principle of God's Word.

Every pastor needs these voices speaking out for an unconditional christian unity among all true believers.

Bob cannot understand how believers fail to value what Jesus, Himself, was burdened for:

I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one. - John 17:11

And what Paul admonished us to strive for:

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. - Ephesians 4:3

God, give us peacemakers. Give us Bobs.

Persecution in a country with religious freedom usually boils down to some form of verbal abuse. With some christians it is the threat of being disowned by the family. A parent might fear you have gone off some deep end into a cult. These family eruptions hurt. It is a painful introduction to a young believer's new found joy in Christ.

Believers often feel social pressure to hide or even misrepresent their faith. Teenagers deal with peer pressure from high school classmates. College years are characterized by an academic pressure from teachers that argue against Bible principles. We live in a politically correct age that finds the Bible

offensive. When it comes to parading their faith before the masses avoidance might seem better than confrontation but believers discover in time that this is far from true.. Ultimately it is as wrong as it is impossible to deny who we are in Christ even though this brings social and domestic conflict.

Inevitably a young Christian's love for God will implicate them in the Savior's sufferings. Paul wanted to be an alumnus of this elite society. He wanted to fill up what was lacking regarding Christ's afflictions. (Colossians 1:24¹¹⁸) Paul knew there was a political price to pay for following Christ. He was willing to endure any form of suffering but this is not a conclusion easily reached by most believers. We choose to be part of an accepting society if possible where everyone thinks like we do rather than charging into the fray, climbing Mar's Hill to take on the accusers, the debaters, and the world.

But we need believers who are willing to plow ahead not by taking on every debate presented to them but by affirming their faith by simply living it. Believers are on display because a city on a hill can't be hid. (Matthew 5:14¹¹⁹) We have to be who we are, who we are becoming, in Christ because hypocrisy or suppressing our true feelings and desires is a heavier

¹¹⁸ Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church

¹¹⁹ You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden.

burden, a higher emotional price to pay, than simply getting in the yoke with Christ. (Matthew 11:29¹²⁰)

For Mary this meant going to a worship service even though it meant a painful rebuke from her husband when she returned home. (He once set her winter coat on fire to prevent her from going back.)

For Laquita it was her mom who was demonstrating in front of the church calling me a communist, not to mention the scolding Laquita endured. But she kept coming to Bible study.

Bernie was told that the church would collapse on her if she dared step across the threshold. It didn't and she kept coming, although she confessed staring at the ceiling for a number of Sundays before she knew in her heart the sky wouldn't fall.

We need to affirm the message of God's love and the Cross by how we present ourselves to our world. My dream congregation are believers who recognize that their worldview and, therefore, their faith doesn't fit the paradigm of a postmodern mindset. They are not polished apologists; they don't need to be because it isn't their debating skills that makes them good witnesses. It isn't a "bring-em-on" attitude—they may not have one—that has angered the world they are in. It is their lives, the way they present themselves and the way they talk normally, their message, their forgiving spirit, their "turn-the-other-cheek" approach to dealing with things. Every

¹²⁰ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

aspect of a true believer yells “Christ.” And the world is enraged.¹²¹

God’s people are accused of not recognizing personal boundaries—of proselytizing and pushing their message on the unwelcoming—and there is a sense in which that is inevitably true because their lives are contradictions to the principles and the conscience of the world around them.

Where is the joy in all this? Apart from having their names listed in God’s honor roll and being part of a fellowship with others with whom they have faith in common and having that faith strengthened through conflict (1 Peter 1:7¹²²) they are finding that loving God is now who they are.

I will never forget Daisy! The inspiration of her conversion and christian walk impact what I think and how I feel about life, now years after Jesus called her home.

I never met George Bailey, but I am glad I met Daisy. She grew up in a small town with 11 saloons and a brothel, and in time she would get involved in all this going through 4 marriages, two divorces and widowed twice before one day she walked into our little church. There was no service ongoing and it

¹²¹ Mark 1:24 (NLT) Why are you interfering with us, Jesus of Nazareth? ... I know who you are....

¹²² These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

was just Daisy and I when she told me she didn't know why she was there. So began her journey into Christ and one final, now, loving relationship with her fifth husband until Jesus confirmed to her in a hospital bed that it was time to go home.

The impression embossed on my faith by what our Lord did for and with her is a permanent image tattooed upon the heart. It wasn't George Bailey but the heavenly Father who lassoed the son (with an 'o') and let the warm beams of the living Word shine through her life for all her friendships to witness how awesome and miraculous our God's love.

Life wasn't suddenly perfect for Daisy. One old man-friend pursued her—not appreciating the change God made in her life. I often wondered what her four daughters thought of the changes. And there were other sorrows and life-lessons. There were no doubt the spoken disapprovals from an old life that sought to get her back ... but now she belonged to Jesus.

These are my kind of people, the Daisy's, whose lives were rescued from the abuse of an old life—from memories now worth forgetting and a past that needs to be reconciled and forgiven.

Daisys are street-wise. They expect the insults and verbal slurs, the mocking and sarcasm. What Jesus did for them has eclipsed it all. There is a strange sense in which the ridicule is a confession by those who are speaking it that Christ within Daisy is

indeed real. Daisy's happiness is a blessed awareness of this reality.

There is a Greek word in our New Testament that means to grumble or complain. It means to *speak in a low tone*, our word *murmuring*.¹²³ The word represents the buzzing chatter vibrating through a group of discontents. Among God's people this should never be.

Do everything without grumbling or arguing - Philippians 2:14

There are people who spin the explanation for what a pastor does in a way that has nothing to do with what the pastor was thinking, meaning, or feeling. Their complaint misrepresents the pastor's motives and vision, but this negative recycling of pastoral objectives is legendary. Do I really need to say it, "*These people are not in my dream.*"

Pete went into the hospital hoping I would not find out. Later, he could complain that I never visited him. He once claimed that he played the devil's advocate only for the sake of discussion.

Quite the opposite: Gizella used to inform me by phone of her scheduled hospital visits to set my mind at ease with her absence from church. She knew how busy I was and reassured me that she anticipated a return to health. I always visited her.

¹²³ *gogguzo*: You can hear the word in some circles. You can imagine it being spoken in a home gathering misrepresenting a prayer meeting. It is too low to make out but if you listen you hear, "gogogouuuuzzzzzzoo." The word to me is an onomatopoeia: the formation of a word from a sound associated with what is named, like our word "sizzle".

I never recall her complaining. She was not part of the gossip circle.

She was a gentle spirit, her soothing conversation always swaddled my worried mind in peaceful reassurance. To me, she represented those few believers who would thank God for the eye of the hurricane, whose faith remains anchored secure in a sea of anxiety. They reflect the Savior's calm when He slept beside a dozen panicked fisherman in a Galilean storm.

Believers like Gizella find the blessing in the haystack of pain. They cherish every divine touch and seem to discredit a thousand misfortunes for the sake of one chance for God to show His love for them through it all. (2 Corinthians 4:18¹²⁴)

There were others whose contribution to my life is a treasured legacy of how much God loves me.

But it is time to pull the stopper on this bath and get ready for my day.

#

My dream introduced me to a view of ministry that suggests another approach to living free in a postmodern world. No government needs to provide my freedom if I am indeed free in my conscience and

¹²⁴ So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

my heart to follow Christ and not man. (Galatians 1:10¹²⁵)

I do not speak of a militant approach to evangelism nor do I suggest civil disobedience. Our trust is in Christ for we realize that governments evolve but He is the same yesterday, today and forever. (Hebrews 13:8) So, in my dream, I decided to forgo all the benefits of working with the government, such as, tax exemption, a board of trustees and membership cards.

I do not need to upgrade my theological position on social change because my dream has no such denominational codicil to defend. I dream simply of the right:

- ◆ To love and welcome all people in and into Christ,
- ◆ To preach an unchanging gospel of salvation,
- ◆ To refrain from judgment but commit all to prayer.
- ◆ To openly teach *only* the entire counsel of God.

And to leave the governing of the Kingdom of Heaven to God.

It feels great to be retired!

¹²⁵ Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ.

